



# SILVER APPLES MAGAZINE

Creativity Worth Consuming



Issue Twelve | Winter 2019

## REDEMPTION



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# Silver Apples Magazine

## *Redemption*

Issue Twelve, December 2019

*Creativity Worth Consuming*

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## Letter from the Editors:

*“A writer? You’ll need a thick skin....Tough business that. Sure didn’t JK Rowling get a hundred and fifty thousand rejections.... You’ll need a backup.”  
-random shit people say*

Dear fellow rejection junkies:

Rejection is a part of our world. From the day that we decide to commit ourselves to this life, as writers, we are dealt blow after blow. It chips away at our self-confidence, our self-worth and our self-esteem. Rejection is lonely. Rejection is a finite answer that asks a thousand more questions.

And yet we keep going. We keep writing. We keep editing. We keep dreaming.

With this in mind, we decided that for our twelfth issue we would issue a challenge to our artists and to ourselves. We ran a short story competition. The theme was Redemption. To enter the competition there was only one stipulation—the piece had to have been rejected from somewhere else. It was thrilling, those months we watched submissions roll in. To watch people take a breath, dust off rejection, and try again. What was even more incredible was to discover how much we loved what someone else had cast aside. More than once we found ourselves asking “how could someone reject this?” That these pieces have found a home with us at Silver Apples is as much a joy for us as it is to the bruised and tender writers who sent them to us. We want to take this chance to thank all of you for trusting us and for having the courage to try again.

Fear of rejection will always be a part of our lives. It will take many forms. Nos from agents. No responses to submissions. Bad book reviews. Disappointing sales. Not getting picked for the Oprah Book Club.

But without rejection, there cannot be redemption.

Silver Apples is thrilled to present the shortlist and winners of our recent competition.

Gráinne, Alex, and Melissa.

## The Fetcher

Iva Yates

*Iva Yates is currently a doctoral candidate at the University of Limerick. Her interdisciplinary PhD project is titled The Golden Comb: A Novel and Critical Analysis. She holds a bachelor's in English from Boston College, a master's in English Literary Studies from the University of York, and a master's in Creative Writing from the University of the Sacred Heart. She is the author of an artist's book Algunas aberraciones y un orgasmo (Some perversions and an orgasm). "Ídem" won the first place at the Polytechnic University of Puerto Rico's short story contest in 2012. She was chosen in 2018 to be part of the XBorders: Transitions project sponsored by the Irish Writers Centre. One of the personal essays resulting from the project was recently published in The Corridor. Her fiction has been published in The Ogham Stone, Contratiempo, and Letras Salvajes.*

"Get your ass down here, mija. I need help bathing your grandmother. She's a mess. And Nelly's not here yet."

"I'll be right down," I say and wonder why Grandma's nurse is late almost every single day. I look for an excuse to linger in my room a bit longer. The windows are still closed to keep the cool air in, everything's in its place. I can't find anything to do aside from getting back into bed. I step into the hallway and go down the stairs.

"Mija, it was about time you got down here," she says when I show my face. My aunt fusses over everything. The Easter yellow kitchen is already in tip top shape at eight o'clock in the morning. She cleans the already spotless stove top with a metallic pad, the water running in the sink. The bamboo countertops are free of clutter and debris, the laminate cupboard doors sparkle, the table is set for breakfast even though no one eats there.

"Where's Abuelo?" The inquiry is more out of habit than real interest.

"Where do you think? Already gone. He's supposed to be visiting his sister. Or so he says. Never mind, don't get me started on him."

I get my big mug from the cupboard and pour the coffee from the pot on the stove, where it has been made the old-fashioned way — by bringing the coffee to a boil and then straining it with a cloth into the already heated milk. That's how Titi likes it. Another carafe with American-style drip coffee is made for Grandma in the electric coffee maker. She likes hers a lot weaker than the rest of us.

“Are you saying hi to your grandmother?”

“Can I at least drink my coffee first? I’m not even awake yet,” I say as I put the mug in the microwave and set it for 1:30 minutes.

“Well, I’ve been up since five o’clock this morning. You’re about three hours late.”

“I know,” I sigh. “Where’s the newspaper?” The microwave beeps to let me know the coffee is ready.

“In the living room.”

Without another word, I walk past the formal dining room towards the sofa. The newspaper has been discarded on one of the cushions, the TV left on at loud volume so that Titi Esther can hear it in the kitchen. I turn it down a bit and proceed to flip the pages of the paper from the back to the front, reading only the headlines. Boxer loses match due to knockout. Hollywood takes over Escambrón beach. I don’t even know why I bother. I go straight to the horoscope. Even though I don’t really believe what it says, and I will have forgotten what I read by the end of the day, it’s a tradition dating back to high school. Leo: Today is your day. Dress provocatively and you will meet the man or woman of your dreams. But be careful! He or she might be after your wallet.

Flip. Flip. Flip. The front cover is some ridiculous politician claiming to be able to fix the island’s economic crisis. Typical. Abuelo says that they have been trying to “fix things” since the Americans were welcomed as saviors after the Spanish American War. Nothing has changed in over one hundred years.

“Why did you marry an American, then?” I asked him once when we were having a philosophical discussion after dinner.

“Because she was the most beautiful and the smartest woman I’d even met.”

I drink what’s left of coffee and spit it back into the mug when I realize it’s cold. Nothing worse than that, in my opinion. I head back to the kitchen and my aunt has now progressed from the stovetop to the floor.

“You’re sweeping now?” The floor looks clean to me.

“Can’t you see all the crumbs from breakfast? Are you having any? I’m throwing it out if you don’t.”

“I’ll eat after helping out with Grandma.” I look beyond the window towards the backyard. One of the banana trees has a bunch almost ready to pick. The mango tree is heavy with fruit; the avocado as well. I must tell Abuelo so he can pick them before the birds do.

“Um, am I going to have to wait until you finish cleaning? Because then I’ll have breakfast.”

“No, no, no. Let’s go.” We head towards the back room adjacent

to the house, a leftover from when the whole family used to live here.

She picks up the almost empty dustpan, flings its contents onto the grass in the backyard, and leans it against a pillar.

The tiny anteroom is humid. There is no circulation other than that coming from the screen door Titi Esther and I just opened. The door to Grandma's room is closed. We're rescued from the heat as soon as we step into her nicely air-conditioned room. After a deep breath, the fetid smell strikes me.

"Darling, how are you this morning?" she says. Grandma smiles at me; her teeth yellowed from years of smoking and drinking six cups of coffee a day. She tries to pull herself up, but her fragile arms can't hold her weight.

"Sleepy. How are you?" I move towards the bed and kiss her on the cheek. I crinkle my nose a bit. "Sleep well?"

"Yes. I had a dream about Mar, you know?"

"Did you? And what happened?" I hold her wrinkled, bony hand to distract her from Titi, who's going around the room preparing the necessary items.

"We were with her old boyfriend, Beau, in the farm in New Jersey. And he was taking care of her horse, a beautiful bay mare. Mar was about to go for a ride and then... I don't remember much else. I guess I must have woken up."

"Mija, hold on to the sheet on your side. We need to pull her up."

"Stop, Titi. I can do that. You get the water ready. Where's Nelly?"

"Who knows? We'll have to hold down the fort until she gets here."

I lower Grandma's hospital bed, move to the top and look at her body from above; her arms and legs thin like cobwebs. I hold the sheet in my hands and tug, then tug a little more, until Grandma's head is close to the headboard.

"There you are. Now your feet don't hang from the edge of the mattress."

"That's much better, dear. Thank you."

Titi comes in and places the half-filled tub on the table next to the bed. She squirts the terrycloth towel with baby lavender soap and places it on Grandma's chest. She coos like a little girl, enjoying the warm, refreshing water on her skin after a long night's sleep.

I stare out the window while my aunt jokes around with Grandma to make the bath a game of sorts. I think about how lucky Mami is that she gets to go to work every morning, my sister leaves for university, my grandfather visits "his brother" every single day of the week. But I work from home. I don't get to leave.



It's my turn to hold on to Grandma's side so Titi can wash her back. Grandma touches my cotton shorts. I look down in between my arms.

"Soft, right?"

"This is a nice pair. Can you get me some in khaki?"

"Sure. I'll do it later today." The false promise is heavy on my tongue. Grandma will be none the wiser. Never upset. Just a happy little honeybee.

We roll her over and now I push instead of holding her toward me. I can't avoid her nakedness.

"Titi, did you see that bedsore?"

"Oh, no. Another one?" she says while stepping around.

"Yeah. On her tailbone. Looks nasty." I continue to push Grandma forward. She tries to lay down. I don't let her.

"Hm. Get the triple antibiotic cream and sulphur powder." Titi and I switch places.

I move around the room with purpose. Cream, powder, gauze, tape. A magical combination. My aunt is the medicine woman.

"We have to remind Nelly to put her on her side every hour. Get the housecoat, will you? It's on that chair," she says, pointing with her lips.

I'm such a good fetcher. I fetch whatever anyone needs in this house. Grandma's clothes, groceries, detergents to wash the endless loads of laundry. It's the only thing I know how to do. And I do it well. I fetch and I hold and I hold on.

Now dressed, Grandma is all smiles.

"I feel so much better."

"Of course! You are fresh and clean and nice smelling," I say. I switch the channel to one of the local judge shows. She doesn't understand much Spanish anymore but still likes to watch the TV. I hand her the remote control. She holds it loosely and it touches the side of her leg.

"Are you all set?"

"Yes, dear. I think I'll go to the kitchen later and get a cup of coffee."

"Sounds like a good idea. You know there's always some ready. Okay, I'm going to eat breakfast." I look around the room full of adult diapers, baby wipes, body lotion, and bed pads before leaving and do

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my best to ignore them all. "I'll be back in a bit."

"Buen provecho," she says in her accented Spanish. It makes me smile a little.

I take my food to the living room. In need of further distraction, I head over to the pile of newspapers on top of the dusty piano. Grandma was the only one who knew how to play it. She taught me the scales and Happy Birthday, but I never became the musician she wanted me to be. I rifle through them until I find the Sunday travel section. I sit on the couch and daydream of Iceland and its Blue Lagoon; a cruise in Alaska where I could see the aurora borealis.

Titi interrupts my musings. "Mija, can you go to the supermarket? We need milk and some other things."

"I'm busy."

"Is that how you work? Spread out on the sofa like a manatee, reading the newspaper?"

*Is that how you work?  
Spread out on the sofa  
like a manatee, read-  
ing the newspaper?*

"I have a routine. You know this." I can read her mind. She doesn't think my job is real work. No one in this family does.

"Well, you can get in the mood there if you want to eat lunch. Unless you're cooking—"

"Fine. I'll go dress more appropriately."

The trip up the stairs is slow and tedious. The heat has intensified since I woke up an hour and a half ago. I'm assailed by the kind of humidity that sticks to skin like fast-drying glue. I reach the top, look into my office. It used to be Grandma's library. My own books are mixed in with hers now; a desk is next to the door, and bookcases line the rest of the walls.

I decide to check my email in case any of my clients have written. I hit the on button, then head over to the window to open it wider. The dinosaur of a computer whirrs to life as if it were a slow waking animal. I turn the ceiling fan on, sit on my cracked leather chair, and wait for the operating system to load, the browser to open. I take an old travel guidebook from Grandma and Abuelo's European tour many years ago from the bookshelf and browse through it. How I wish I could —.

An email demands my attention.

Dear Amanda,

Thank you for your message. We at Transparent Language are sorry to hear that you will be unable to take the Senior Web Designer position. We'd like to invite you to contact us again if your circum-

stances change. Thank you for your interest in our company and we wish you the best in all your future endeavors.

Sincerely,  
Andrew Miller  
Transparent Language  
211 Commonwealth Ave.  
Boston, MA 02116

I stare at the screen. After several minutes, I put the machine on sleep mode. My legs have stuck to the chair and, for a few seconds after I stand up, they hurt.

My room on the other side of the floor is still cool. I change into jean shorts and a sleeveless T-shirt, put on some flip flops, grab my purse, and head back downstairs.

“Titi, where’s the list?”

“What’re you talking about?”

“For the groceries. Duh.”

“I don’t need one. It’s all in here,” she says as she points to her head.

“Good for you. I do.”

I look in the formal dining room. Abuelo sometimes sits there to read. Sure enough, the yellow notepad—flipped back to the last page used—and the pen, which I wasn’t looking for, are both there. I bring both items back to the kitchen.

“So, what do we need?” I ask Titi.

She rattles off the usual things — bread, ham, cheese. I add others she doesn’t mention: Hershey’s almond chocolate bar for me, Häagen Dazs vanilla ice cream for Grandma, Fig Newtons for Abuelo. Nothing for Titi. She can get her own treats.

“How much money did Abuelo leave?” I say.

“He left his ATM card,” she says; takes it out from inside one of the cupboards. Abuelo used to hide spending money and an extra pack of cigarettes in that same spot for Grandma so she wouldn’t have to leave the house.

I get in her old Grand Marquis and drive down the road five minutes, enjoying the air conditioner while I can. Once there, the cell phone in my pocket vibrates. I take it out and glance at the screen. “Home,” it says. I don’t pick up but continue my winding path through the aisles. I think about the travel section. There was an article about people who’d made it, abroad, who had left the island behind. Grandma always said, “Honey, don’t get married young. Travel. Enjoy your life. Once you have children, everything’s over.” And don’t

I always follow her advice?

The buzzing brings me out of my reverie. Two missed calls and a text message from Titi: Grandma's cigarettes! I don't really smoke and hardly find them a priority. It wouldn't be the first time I leave without them. After I pay and put the bags in the trunk, I head back home.

I sing along to a Muse song on the radio while waiting at the crossroads. The light changes to green and I make a right instead of going straight ahead. Ten minutes, just ten minutes, and I'll be able to breathe. I reach my destination, park under a palm tree, grab the cigarettes, and head for the water.

This is not a nice beach. The petrochemical plant is too close and it pollutes the ocean. Every once in a while, the breeze carries the true scent of the sea, its salty yet bitter aroma. I inhale it, hoping it can cleanse my soul. The sand is beige, littered with plastic bottles, used condoms, and shards of glass. I take my flip flops off and walk along the shore. The waves caress my feet. I smoke one of Grandma's cigarettes.

Far into the Atlantic Ocean, a cruise heads towards the port in Old San Juan. I see myself board the ship, going far away from here. I take the pack of cigarettes out of my pocket, throw them into the water, and watch them float away.

# Damascus Street

Eoin Devereux

I lived on Damascus Street for almost a year and a half, sharing a rented house with three student nurses named Pauline, Sadie and Majella. Our landlord, Mossie Clarke called to the front door every Friday night, just after the ninth Angelus bell; a pork butcher by trade, his white-pudding fingers were still flecked with animal blood and sawn bone as he twice counted the rent on the kitchen table. Clarke charged us by the room and cared little for the run-down property inherited from Josie, his spinster aunt. According to Teeny Bolger, the town's *News of the World*, Mossie helped ease his tormented aunt out of this vale of tears by feeding her bottles and bottles of *Twelve Year Old Special Reserve Jameson*. Josie's liver and kidneys just couldn't take any more.

A stunted *cul-de-sac*, Damascus Street was built in 1954 on land reclaimed from the sea. With the exception of Chez Clarke and a boarded up ruin at the very end of the terrace, the remaining eight houses were occupied by the widowed and elderly. Starved of callers, save for the Meals on Wheels crowd, the odd public health nurse or Minister of the Eucharist, on Saturdays and Sundays, rushed visits were endured from sons, daughters, grandchildren or other relatives, always on their way to somewhere else, arriving with shop-bought cakes, quarters of hard-boiled sweets,

*Eoin Devereux writes short fiction and poetry. His poem 'The Bodhi Tree' was shortlisted for a Hennessy Award in 2018.*

*His flash fiction piece 'Mrs Flood' came second in the Bookshook Show On One's '100 Words, 100 Books' competition and was broadcast by RTE Radio 1. He has published in a variety of journals and publications including Southwords, The Ogham Stone, The HCE Review and The Irish Times. RTE's Sunday Miscellany broadcast his short memoir piece 'Three Bicycles' in 2018. A noise-maker with the art-rock band Section 17, Eoin's other experimental musical project (with David Meagher) - Frigid Stars - recorded a new version of The Fall's song 'Slates, Slags Etc' in collaboration with Singer, Actor and Painter Gavin Friday (ex Virgin Prunes).*

cellophaned bunches of wilting forecourt flowers, plated dinners wrapped in tinfoil or swaddled in starched tea-towels. Grandchildren were given money to buy ice cream and told don't spend it all in the one shop, sons and daughters in law waiting outside, engines running, like getaway drivers in a bank robbery.

I moved in with Pauline, Sadie and Majella after I failed my Archaeology finals for the third time. Their card on the noticeboard in the Railway Stores offered a box room in Number Four with all mod cons, ESB and Oil costs would be split. They P.S.'d they were great craic. I hated living with students and decided that a life scraping and digging for skeletons, coins and shards of pottery in shallow trenches down on my hands and knees in the mud just wasn't for me. What I needed was time to think and work out what the fuck I was going to do with the rest of my life. Of course, I thought that nurses would be easier to live with, but after a short while the constant hum of their chatter and their need to label their diet yogurts, Special K and cheese really got on my nerves. From the box-room overhead the kitchen I'd hear Pauline say, is that your yogurt Sadie? Majella, did someone eat my Calvita? Jesus, don't tell me that Mammy's brown bread is all gone? And, then, to add insult to injury, the three of them left an awful lot of knickers and bras and nurse's uniforms to dry over the backs of kitchen chairs in front of the range. They were incapable of switching the immersion off, the lights were always left on, it was like Ardnacrusha.

My hard-working parents had other mouths to feed and washed their hands of me so I signed on and occasionally worked on the lump for the Fantastic Discount Furniture Store on Lower Bridge Street. Standing at sixteen and a half stone and six foot two in my stocking vamps, I was paid under the counter with dirty pound notes. Repossessions and emptying forty foot containers was my forte.

Brian Murnane, the store's owner, was despised in equal measure by his staff and customers. Reeking of cheap aftershave and B.O., he'd hitch his fawn Magee suit trousers over his swollen belly and greet customers as Sir or Madam as if they were long lost friends or people of substance. Credit is never a problem for our best customers, he'd declare, flashing one of his mock smiles, while pulling out

the sheaves of hire-purchase paperwork from the drawer. The store sold cheap imported shite made from boxwood, chipboard and formica. The pine effect furniture was glued, nailed and stapled together by child labourers in the sweatshops of Ho Chi Minh City.

Murnane specialised in kitting out entire houses for £999. His shop's slogans were just fucking awful — *“Kitting Out Your Home? There's No Need to Roam!”*; *“Can't Afford To Buy It? We'll Supply It!”*; *“Furnish Your Home for £999, You'll Feel Just Fine!”* An odious creature, he also sweated. A lot. He was dripping so much by half past ten in the morning, his powder blue shirt collar and cuffs were already ridged with black tide-marks and the female employees warned each other to mind themselves if he asked them into the back office or storeroom, just for a minute. You wouldn't know which was worse, Tessie McMahon, the cashier, said to me one time, that manky shitty nappy smell coming off a him or his big ape's hands going walkabout. And although we never saw her next or near the store, he was constantly referring to his wife. Oh Jesus, Mrs M will kill me, he'd say to a customer if he agreed to a further discount. I'll have to 'axe' Mrs M was his stock response if he didn't want to answer a question straight away. Ken O'Connor, who drove the yellow forklift in the storeroom, used to say Mrs M? Mrs M? I'd say the only wife in that fellah's house is a blow up doll called Helga. She came by special delivery in a brown parcel saying, Helga never says no.

*Brian Murnane, the store's owner, was despised in equal measure by his staff and customers.”*

I was called in early one Saturday morning and instructed by Sweatarse to drive to the Threadneedle Estate to repossess furniture from a woman who hadn't been making her HP payments. Take the unmarked Hi Ace, he said, worrying about his reputation. I was at her front door within minutes. Its bell was broken, dangling on a thin wire so I began battering the crimson door with my big fists. The door was chipped, dirty, scraped and scratched from dog paws, but it was also beautifully festooned with childish graffiti. Someone had scrawled Man U and Mervue Don't Bodder Us in blue marker. There was a line

drawing of a house, flower garden and dogs in the beaming sunshine. Lowry would've been proud.

Inside the cramped council house kitchen, bleary red eyed children were eating their cereal and watching *Lolek and Bolek* on TV while their young mother pleaded with me. Wearing a Jesus and Mary Chain T-Shirt, hair dyed jet black, she was petite and very pretty but the grinding wear and tear of poverty was already lining her face with crow's feet and frown lines. For Jesus' sake, can you not see that the children are having their breakfast? she pleaded. I'm only doing my job, I said, looking away, unable to make contact with her beautiful hazel eyes or to acknowledge the fear in her children's faces. Will you just please leave us alone? We can pay something on Tuesday. The Children's Allowance. You've had loads of chances, I barked and dragged their table out to the van. One corner was still warm from the breakfast teapot. Sugar grains, toast crumbs and stray yellow-pack Rice Krispies fell from the table's summit as I horsed it into the back of the Hi Ace. I left the family terrified, without a stick of kitchen furniture and drove back to the

*It's their own fuckin' fault.  
That crowd on the dole  
have awful notions about  
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never, never.*

shop.

Sweatyboy met me outside the store and went off on one of his rants. It's their own fuckin' fault. That crowd on the dole have awful notions about themselves, wantin' the best of everythin' on the never, never. But they never want to pay what they owe me. Who do they think I am? The fuckin' Vincent De

Paul? They've enough money for fags and booze though. You should see them on Mickey Money Day. The pubs and chippers do a great trade and the single parents are the worst. Some of them are right fucking hoors. As he spoke, I couldn't make up my mind as to whether he was really angry or just jealous of his truant customers. And for all my Che Guevara guff, I was really no better than Murnane selling my brawn and earning my crust from other people's misery and mis-



fortune doing repossession after repossession.

When I wasn't wanted as Murnane's Mr T, I either took to the bed for days on end or went for long walks by the sea, out past the yellow diving boards, the golf course and the empty caravan parks. I grew a long scraggly beard and shaved my head to the bone. I rarely spoke to Pauline, Sadie and Majella. They were on the night shift in the Regional and more often than not I was usually asleep when they came in at breakfast time. My meals were eaten in the box room watching television on a snowy black and white portable which sat at the bottom of the wardrobe.

I lived on half nothing. I bought day old bread and made stews with bones I got from the butchers, pretending they were for the neighbour's dog. I stole carrots, onions and cabbage from the allotments near the university. On Fridays I'd buy freshly caught mackerel on the quays. The fish were sold for drinking money by hard chaws who went out to sea in borrowed paper-thin currachs after curing their shakes in the early houses. Other times, when I was in the mood, I'd trawl the beaches and gather mussels, periwinkles and dulse for my dinner. As much as I tried, I never managed to catch the dead-eyed grey mullet that scavenged next to the lichen-covered limestone dock wall. They were more interested in gobbling the waste that flowed out of the town's raw sewage pipe than the lumps of stale bread I tried to trap them with. As a fellow parasite, I felt a strange affinity with them.

I fell apart so gradually that I didn't really notice the changes at first, but by January I didn't leave the house in Damascus Street a whole lot. I couldn't record messages on telephone answering machines if I was ringing to inquire about a job. I wouldn't throw out newspapers. If I did go out and was posting a letter home, I'd re-open the letter seven times just to be sure that I hadn't said anything bad or upsetting. New Order played a surprise concert in the Warwick Hotel and I was so anxious I couldn't go. I was sure I was going mad and I'd end my days locked up in Ballinasloe.

By St Bridget's Day I'd left Number Four and moved into a tiny bedsit at the far end of the prom. I stayed under the blankets for days on end. I never opened the curtains. I'd eat boxes of Dunnes' Corn

flakes to keep the hunger at bay. I began to talk to myself and talk back to the radio. Murnane didn't bother contacting me anymore. To go outside I wrote the word 'calm' backwards on my right palm. It was a sort of talisman. I fixed on the permanent black marker lettering to stop the wave of panic that usually swamped me when I went ventured out. It was a few weeks before I realised that I'd actually written MALC, but it didn't matter.

I waited until after 7 o'clock to go out and buy food. Vesta Boil in the Bag Chicken Curry & Rice was easiest. Boil the kettle, drop the two bags in the water, slice the bags with a scissors, dump the contents on to a plate. Add stale bread if hungry. I'd wait for the queue to die down in the Railway Stores before I could face paying. I began to believe what was happening to me was as a result of some kind of curse for my awful deeds earning dirty money as Murnane's fixer or because I'd pissed away my parents' hard earned savings. I felt cursed by all the people I repossessed from and even by the slave labourers in Vietnam. And to think that I'd laughed at the very idea of piseogs when I was growing up near Gort. Curses were cast on neighbours by burying rotten eggs or meat in a haystack or in a ploughed field and even though Number Four didn't have a front garden to bury anything in, I was somehow paying the price for bringing terror into people's lives.

The sea became my one true companion. I began to swim every single day. I bought a booklet in Duffys which set out the tides for the whole year. Grattan Road was my favourite beach. Usually, it was just me and the sea. The very odd time an old man walking his dog at the edge of the shore would shout, what's the water like, fat lad? as I thrashed around in the waves. I'd no interest in swimming at the diving boards with the early morning zipper club pensioners or with the ladies who lunch and kick the prom wall. That crowd were all swimming hats and flasks and hot water bottles and flip flops and wet suits and Christmas get-togethers. I wanted the sounds and smells and ebb and flow of the briny water all to myself. I needed to taste the salt on my lip, to kick the sand and search under the fronds of bladderwrack to find unusual pebbles and shells.

I began to do things I hadn't bothered with for years. I planted

herbs, lettuces and tomatoes in small pots on my windowsill. Albums and cassettes returned like long lost friends. Like the sea, there were songs that saved my life. Joy Division, Echo and the Bunnymen, The Waterboys, The Fall. I saluted people warmly and offered my help to older people crossing the road or carried their shopping bags. I began drinking once a week in the Strand Bar. It was one of those places that you could either be left on your own or you could make small talk with other drinkers or with Jimmy the barman who'd a gusset sewn into the seat of his trousers.

Late one Thursday having had a few pints of stout I found myself drawn back to Damascus Street.

When I turned down the narrow lane-way I stopped for a few minutes to look up and down the silent street. I remembered things about the people who lived in each of the houses.

Number One, lived on her nerves;

Number Three's husband had run

away with another man; Number Sev-

en played indoor golf in his living room seven days a week. No-one ever visited Number Nine. Number Ten stood out because it was the only house on the terrace to have a garden. Derelict since 1979, It had been burnt to the ground by street drinkers. The garden had run wild but its rockery had maintained its good looks. I remembered I'd planked a spare key under an oblong stone. The charcoal stone was riddled with holes made millions of years ago by strange clam like creatures called piddocks.

I walked slowly to Number Four. I turned the rusty key and opened the door. The house was silent, the narrow hall in darkness. I treaded carefully and quietly past the coat stand and opened the door of the windowless sitting room. I switched on the lights. There were no obvious changes, the dirty fawn carpet, the heavy Dutch three piece, the Take Courage pub mirror over the empty fireplace and the warped formica shelves groaning with nursing books and Maeve Binchys. Majella's red racing bike was parked in the far corner of the room next to the television set.

*Late one Thursday  
having had a few  
pints of stout I found  
myself drawn back  
to Damascus Street.*

I moved to the kitchen and opened the fridge. The yoghurts, cheese, milk and sliced ham were still labelled by the Florence Nightingale Trio. Jesus. There was an apple tart dusted with caster sugar on the middle shelf. I cut myself a generous slice and savoured every single bite.

Now I don't really know why, but I went back into the sitting room and started to rearrange the furniture. It took at least an hour and a half. I hung the picture frames upside down. I put the television in the fireplace. I moved the chairs so they now faced the wall. I placed the racing bike upside down on the couch. I rearranged the contents of the bookshelves in reverse alphabetical order. I turned the pub mirror back to front. I found crayons and drew three large windows on the walls. In one of the windows I drew two large flower pots complete with smiling sunflowers and Pom-Pom Dahlias.

I padded silently like a sly fox to the front door. As I stepped out into the night lit by a full moon I could hear the waves calling me as they pounded the promenade. Duffy's booklet had promised a Spring Tide at half past four. I knew I'd no choice but to go and watch the boiling high waves as they washed over the boulders and threw up seaweed, pebbles, sand and shells on to the prom and the carpark. I also knew I had to move on from the bind I found myself in. I went back to Number Ten and pushed my way in through the kitchen door. I didn't waste any time looking around. I dropped the key through a gaping hole in the rotting timber floor. It seemed to fall forever until I heard a faint splash. Remembering that the houses were built on reclaimed land, I imagined that the rusty key had returned to the sea and would in time be eroded by the salt water. I offered the key to the sea as a kind of sacrifice, as a way of saying thanks and as a sign of moving on, hoping against hope that it would be my salvation.

## QG — An Evaluation

Jack Fennell

**Referral:** “QG,” a somewhat lazy undergraduate student at a small but respectable university, had gotten into the habit of inventing sources for his assignments, quoting non-existent scholars in support of ad-hoc arguments. This in itself is not an uncommon practice, but QG managed to get away with it for quite a long time, for quite an unusual reason.

Recently, quite by accident, he discovered that these invented sources had somehow appeared in the college library. After experimenting with writing prompts, QG realised that he was indeed causing items to become manifest in the physical world, just by writing about them. He sought psychiatric counselling of his own volition soon after.

This added another layer of complexity to the situation. Rather than go to a ‘real’ psychiatrist for help, he decided to write his own mental hospital, staffed by professionals who would not reveal his secret. I myself am one of the fictional psychiatrists he created. In fact, I am the Head of Psychiatric Medicine, as well as being the hospital’s general administrator – the fact that I perform both roles here is indicative of QG’s lack of real-world knowledge of how such institutions operate. Luckily, my creator’s insistence on secrecy is satisfied by the standard ethical conventions regarding patient anonymity, allowing me to

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publish this analysis for the benefit of future researchers.

#

**Assessment:** I began with an informal interview, during which I discovered that I was named after a lecturer in English Literature whom my patient particularly despised. When I asked what this lecturer had done to earn this hatred, QG responded with a frankly unbelievable account of the man's vindictiveness and jealousy. The only material accusation in the whole diatribe, once the elaboration and invective had been stripped away, was that he had given QG poor grades. I was puzzled as to why QG would name me after him, having created me to provide guidance on a sensitive matter.

Because I was created specifically to advise QG on this 'god-writing' phenomenon, I found that I possessed detailed knowledge of previous instances. Most of these cases ended in tragedy, and a few of them subtly altered the fabric of the physical universe: the prime example of this is the Mpemba Effect, by which hot water sometimes freezes faster than cold. God-writers (for lack of a better term) invariably start to tend towards expediency, changing the world around them to make things easier for themselves in the short term and bypass life's various minor inconveniences. This is the point at which they realise that they are limited only by their imaginations, and following this realisation, they can become very dangerous indeed.

My knowledge of past cases leads me to suspect that this phenomenon mostly manifests in people with narcissistic personality disorders. In QG's case, this accounted for both his arrogant demeanour and his decision to name me after a teacher he regarded as an enemy: in many variants of NPD, grandiosity compensates for feelings of inferiority. This made his voluntary presentation for assessment all the more significant, since he could have just written himself into a position of wealth, fame or political power instead. This case thus represented a unique opportunity to study the phenomenon under controlled conditions.

At this point, QG attempted to leave the hospital, prompting our team to restrain him safely inside a padded cell.

#

**Review of Records:** An examination of QG's student transcript (which we found in a filing cabinet, with no indication of how it got

there) revealed that he had just been suspended, pending the outcome of a criminal investigation. In the interests of preserving my patient's anonymity, I cannot give specific details of the crime other than to note that it involved a physical assault, and the police report which mysteriously showed up on my desk confirmed that drastic action was called for. My colleague Dr. Jerboa immediately amputated QG's hands to impede his writing ability. Following this surgical intervention, I began to worry that our actions were, in fact, projections of QG's repressed self-loathing, rather than necessary precautions based on objective medical reasoning.

The hospital building, I noticed, sported intimidating Gothic architecture on the outside, while inside it was musty and filthy, with leaking pipes and heavy iron doors.

Rats skittered in the shadows and there were ominous scrawls on the walls of the cells, treatment rooms and common areas. I observed that I myself felt little empathy towards QG, and that I somewhat resembled the actor Christopher Plummer. All the nurses on the staff were bitter

*My colleague Dr. Jerboa immediately amputated QG's hands to impede his writing ability.*

and sadistic, and all the orderlies were perverts who made no secret of their predilections. I consulted the hospital records, and intuited that a great many of our inmates were perfectly sane, or had been up until very recently. I tried to find them by following their screams of anguish, but to no avail: those characters were invisible, present only as background noise that kept receding as I got closer.

It was difficult to discern what they were saying, but they seemed to be crying out a woman's name - a name which I had earlier noted in the police report.

#

**Background:** There was nothing extraordinary in QG's family history or his medical history, all of which was available to me through the same mysterious channels that had provided his student transcript and the police report. I did glean, however, that my mannerisms were derived from his father; I must confess that I felt a great deal of an-

noyance and disappointment with the boy when this mediocre Freudian subtext came to light. QG was clearly not a very creative thinker. As indicated by the state of the hospital, he resorted to cliché, and left many aspects of his creation undefined. So, how did this half-baked imaginary world assume material existence? I believe that the answer lies within the vagaries of language itself.

Because of the possibility that we might be misunderstood, whenever we say something we unconsciously address our message to an invisible third party: a hypothetical 'ideal listener' who never gets things wrong. In QG's case, that Invisible Listener was actively helping him; when he required a psychiatrist, even though he knew nothing of psychiatric medicine, the Invisible Listener filled in the

*To deter him from any rash alterations to history, we subjected him to a round of electroconvulsive therapy - which, of course, was far more barbaric and painful in our hospital than in the so-called 'real world.'*

gaps to help create me, and it supplied all the documentation from the outside world, as required. Something in this arrangement calls to mind the notion that our world is merely a computer simulation, which would simplify things greatly by establishing that QG is no less fictional than I am. This still did not answer the question of how he was able to do what he did: I was sure that the Invisible Listen-

er was the key to it all, but I could not determine how he was communicating with it, or if he was consciously communicating with it at all. I gave serious thought to removing his brain for analysis, in the hope that I might find some aberrant structure within that might explain everything.

At this point, QG offered to use his abilities to re-write history, changing things to ensure that he would never discover his power. Noble though this gesture was, it would have erased me from existence, and I could not help but notice that he did not offer to actually give up his power altogether. To deter him from any rash alterations to history, we subjected him to a round of electroconvulsive therapy - which, of course, was far more barbaric and painful in our hospital



than in the so-called 'real world.' There was a point during this procedure when I worried that we had gone too far and killed him, but thankfully, we were able to defibrillate him in time. This moment of panic raised the question of whether we could survive the death of our creator.

The unseen inmates continued to scream while he was unconscious, though. If anything, their outbursts became louder, harsher, and more pointed. They called him by name and howled accusations of murder. The scrawled messages on the walls appeared to answer the screams, denying culpability at first, and then (if one looked away and then looked back) asserting that the killing was justified or deserved.

There is a general tendency to see a writer's work as an extension of their being, and so, literary critics often assume that this work is best understood with reference to that writer's own life. This seems reductive to me: after all, two people can read the same thing and come to completely different conclusions. It was also quite obvious that QG had lost control of his creation, quite contrary to his intention. Considering this with reference to the conceit of the Invisible Listener, it seemed to me that QG was more a co-creator than a single all-powerful author, and that it was likely we could carry on without him - for a short while, at least. What we needed was a reader: someone to give us meaning and continually re-create us in the event of the death of our writer.

While QG was locked up and straitjacketed, I set out to find some other human habitation. Of course, the surrounding countryside was a desolate, lightning-blasted heath covered in impenetrable fog. I could see the lights of houses in the middle-distance, but no matter how straight a line I walked in their direction, I could never stray more than a couple of yards from the hospital grounds before finding myself returned to my office. I realised that I was not three-dimensional enough to leave: I was an underdeveloped character, lacking any kind of life outside my job.

When I returned, I found that Dr. Jerboa was trying to lobotomise QG with a rusty ice-pick. I arrived just in time to intervene, but in preventing Dr. Jerboa's impulsive action, I ended up stabbing him

to death with the ice-pick on the floor of QG's cell. I summoned an orderly to clean the cell and dispose of the body, but found out later that it had been left where it was for hours, much to my patient's dismay.

#

**Test Results:** Testing showed that QG was possessed of average intelligence; he was an underachiever, his emotional intelligence was below-average, and he had an inflated sense of entitlement.

After seeing these results, I believed that QG might be open to an exchange: if he would flesh out my backstory with sufficient detail, I would testify on his behalf with regards to his legal difficulty – and because I was as insightful and convincing as only a fictional doctor could be, I could make that problem go away forever. He agreed, and by tapping on a keyboard with a pencil held between his teeth, he typed out a detailed history for me, while I held a gun to his head to ensure he would not write anything that might help him escape.

Two hours later, I had political beliefs and moral convictions, ambitions and personality flaws, existential fears and unrealisable dreams. After securing QG in his cell I sallied forth again, and I discovered that I was now able to approach the lights I had previously struggled in vain to reach.

#

**Interpretation:** Malignant narcissists, for the most part, interpret psychotherapy as a contest of wills, seeing the psychiatrist as an enemy to be defeated. I should have anticipated that he would figure out a way to turn my new-found freedom against me.

When I called at the first house, the family inside screamed and tried to lock the door. I felt compelled to force my way inside and demand an explanation. They tried to barricade themselves in the kitchen while they called the police, but I broke down that door with an ease that surprised me. As they cowered in front of me, I caught sight of a newspaper on the table.

There I was on the front page, snarling like an animal and wielding a cleaver. The headline read, 'PSYCHO DOC ON THE LOOSE AGAIN: DEATH TOLL RISES TO 103.'

The figure shocked me. QG had chosen a high number off the

top of his head, like a child trying to shock his parents, but the Invisible Listener had still obliged him. This was not an intelligent force that he was engaging with, but a mindless 'enabler' devoid of judgement. I could not deny what he had made me into, but my characterisation was inconsistent, and thus my self-awareness was not compromised. I knew then that he could not be allowed to return to society.

I evaded the police effortlessly (because slasher-movie antagonists always do), and returned to the hospital, where I discovered that QG had bitten his bottom lip open and used his own blood to scrawl a few sentences on the wall of his cell. Luckily, his focus on defeating me had kept him from simply writing himself an escape route.

#

**Summary:** Unlike most malignant narcissists, QG seems to harbour a desire to be punished. While low self-esteem may account for this to a degree, context-specific clues

(such as the messages on the walls, and the screams of the unseen inmates) point towards repressed guilt struggling to surface. On the whole, this entire hospital construction seems to be his subconscious attempt to invoke the guilt he does not want to acknowledge, so that he can attempt to 'kill' that guilt by destroying me. I would argue that my interpretation is supported by the timing of the events leading up to this episode.

*I could not deny what he had made me into, but my characterisation was inconsistent...*

By giving him poor grades, the lecturer after whom I was named not only inflicted a narcissistic injury on QG, but impeded his future plans by forcing him to repeat a semester, delaying his graduation. His father, on the other hand, had belittled him and mocked his intention to get a basic liberal-arts degree before entering the workforce. QG's academic hiccup had essentially proven his father right, and this was the stressor that caused him to commit the violent assault detailed in the police report. It took a number of months for the police to identify him as a suspect, by which time he had just discovered his

god-writing ability and the charge had been upgraded from assault to manslaughter. I believe that we were created in the midst of a very brief moment in which QG acknowledged his responsibility: had he waited for just a couple of hours, his narcissism could have overcome his guilt, and he might not have created this hospital at all.

#

**Recommendations:** I recommend that QG be confined to this hospital indefinitely, unable to write, for the sake of every living creature on Earth, be they imaginary or not.

Someone could, in theory, try to rescue him, but the secrecy stipulation means that there is no record of the hospital's existence on any database, nor any clue to its whereabouts, nor any means to determine its general geographic area. My god has created his own oubliette, and I intend to keep him sealed up inside it.

Forever.

# The Eleventh Hour

Alexis Wolfe

As the pale blue curtains were jerkily drawn apart, it sank in. This was happening. Nothing could prevent it and I would watch it.

The audience in the dusk of the witness area only had one direction to look, through the illuminated rectangle of the large window, into the starkly lit execution chamber. Centre stage, a man on a gurney, accompanied by two prison staff.

Right up until this moment, it hadn't seemed real. I only knew that now. Now as the people around me stiffened in their seats, and the air in the room grew more stifling.

Oscar lay with thick straps buckled across his body at intervals. Intravenous lines snaked into both arms. Sitting next to me, our thighs touching, I felt Charlie, his daughter, shiver. Wordlessly, she linked her arm through mine.

An elderly couple and perhaps their adult son, sat silently, mere metres away. The family of the victim, I wondered. Us and them, divided by the presence of the prison chaplain. I'd met Pastor Graham yesterday; this would be his eighth. I questioned how he found the strength to keep returning. I'd expected him to reference his faith, but instead said, "Well, someone's gotta be here for these guys. We're all human. We all mess up. And their bad stuff, just a hell of a lot worse than yours or mine."

Two days earlier, at Immigration, they'd

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asked the purpose of my visit. After hesitating, I settled on 'visiting a friend,' stopping short of *on death row*. Although true, it didn't seem likely to ensure a smooth and speedy entrance into Texas.

Awaiting my luggage beside the carousel, I wondered, would 'vacation' have been better? I planned a short holiday after meeting my friend. My friend Oscar, the murderer on death row.

I'd seen an advert in the classifieds near the back of *The Big Issue*. I always stopped to buy a copy from a woman outside the race-course. It said 'LifeWriters was seeking pen pals for incarcerated inmates in American jails'.

Isolated, as a young mother of two preschoolers, my initial thought was how much I missed letter writing, now an almost extinct pastime, and also, no word of a lie, that some adult conversation might be nice. That this conversation might be with a convicted murderer did not appear to cross my mind.

Within a month, I'd been assigned Oscar and we began exchanging letters. This had continued over the last twelve years, through two house moves, a three-year serious illness (mine), four failed appeals to commute the death sentence to life without parole (his), my kids completing primary school and my amicable divorce from their father.

Oscar's first letter described him as a reformed character. A forty-year-old African-American, born again Christian, remorseful for the crime committed as a young, dumb (his words) twenty-six-year-old. Oscar had shot a man during an armed robbery.

In prison he'd taken literacy classes and often his letters critiqued novels, giving opinions on plot and characters. I'd been persuaded by his reviews to borrow several books from the library. We shared similar reading tastes.

In return, I wrote about life with two children in suburbia, always conscious my letters must read like some fantasy novel, so far removed were my daily routines and concerns from his.

Oscar also documented life inside, which fascinated me. A letter on my doormat, franked with the Penitentiary stamp, was saved on the mantelpiece until after dark. Once the kids were asleep it was savoured with a cuppa and a biscuit.

Even though this moment, here in the chamber, this ending to

his story had always been on the cards, I'd pretty much forgotten the evergreen threat hanging over Oscar, right until the moment I opened that final envelope.

His last letter, short and blunt, said his time was up. His lawyer had exhausted appeal options and despite three previous dates resulting in stays of execution granted, Oscar knew this time it would proceed. This letter thanked me for my friendship and above all, for engineering a reunion between him and his daughter.

I looked across at Charlie now. Her eyes were unblinking, staring at her restrained father. I couldn't believe she was holding it together. My palms were clammy, a surge of adrenaline urging me to rise and run from the room or bang on the glass demanding they stop. I bit my lip hard to distract myself. I mustn't break down, I was here to support Charlie not the other way round.

It was Charlie I'd contacted for advice about whether to travel. Oscar had never actually asked me to visit. But he'd often said he hoped we'd meet in person one day.

His final letter expressed sadness that this would now never happen.

*Please come!* Charlie replied immediately. *My father will be delighted, and I'd love to thank you for bringing us together after all those years.*

Next, my ex-husband and his new wife announced a trip with our daughters, departing four days before the execution. That was it. No one needed me. I booked flights. After arrival there was only one day left to visit Oscar, the day before his scheduled execution.

Yesterday's visit had been awkward and lovely combined. With less than 36 hours until the appointed midnight execution, Oscar was moved to a new location, allowed multiple visitors at a time and for longer than usual. He made a big deal of how this was the best possible time to meet, because had I come sooner, we'd have been impeded by glass or limited time or by other inmate noise or uncomfortable plastic chairs in the visiting room. But by waiting until this last possible moment, the eleventh hour, I'd done him a great service. Giving

*My palms were clammy, a surge of adrenaline urging me to rise and run...*

him extra time with me. I smiled at Oscar's ability to find silver linings.

I remembered him saying, early in our correspondence, how regular visits from friends and gang acquaintances steadily dropped off over the years, as those friends were themselves jailed, killed or simply stopped bothering. For Oscar, visits remained precious, a kind of currency.

"Sorry, Dad," Charlie said, "Morbid, but I gotta know. Did you request a last meal?"

Oscar laughed.

"Oh yeah."

"And?"

"Guess." He looked at us both.

*"Been eating here for twenty-six years, and no offence..." he glanced over at the guard who didn't respond. "But for once I wanted take-out."*

"Medium-rare fillet steak and fries?" I said. It's what I would have requested for my last supper.

"Nope."

"Ice cream?" Charlie's guess.

"Nah. Although, good idea."

"Dad, tell," Charlie said.

"Big Mac Meal."

"Noooo! Dad."

"I didn't want anything they'd cook here." Oscar said. "Been eating here for twenty-six years, and no offence ..." he glanced over at the guard who didn't respond. "But for once I wanted take-out."

Charlie shook her head.

"You're crazy."

"And not just one." Oscar grinned. "A Big Mac for every two years I've been in here. So that's thirteen Big Mac's."

Charlie and I groaned.

"With large fries," he added.

"Just one drink though, right?" Charlie said.

"Yeah, just one large soda."

We all nodded.

"How many do you think you'll actually eat?" I asked.



“Dunno,” said Oscar, “but if they taste as good as I remember ...” We laughed. “I’ll hold up fingers tomorrow,” Oscar said, “show you how many.”

Seeing them together felt life-affirming. I’d explained to Oscar, several times, how little effort finding Charlie had taken on my behalf. All to no avail, because he didn’t understand the first thing about social media.

There had only been ten Charlize Niemantsverdriets on Facebook and I narrowed down to those living in Texas, I only messaged two before finding his daughter—then a 26-year old single mom. Resulting from a brief romance with a Dutch woman, Oscar saw his daughter every second weekend until he was jailed. Charlie was six. Her mother cut contact, he admitted he didn’t blame her, and he never heard from them again. Charlie’s mother died of cancer when Charlie was twenty, and when I approached her, she’d been intrigued and happily started writing to Oscar straight away. So, just a few weeks after asking if there was any chance of locating his daughter “using that internet thing” he’d re-connected with her and gained a granddaughter, whose photos papered his cell walls.

By the time our three-hour visit finished, Charlie and Oscar felt like family. The guard didn’t stop me giving Oscar a hug, intervening only when Charlie and her father made no motion to end their prolonged embrace.

Now, sitting with Charlie in the viewing area, I couldn’t imagine her feelings, losing another parent. I’d been injected with a swirling mixture of emotions: sadness, fear, of what I would witness and whether it would traumatise me, anxiety for Charlie, an urge to maintain dignity, not to shout or make a scene, show respect to the victim’s family.

Oscar inclined his head towards the window, there was no time left for working out how anyone felt. He was looking at the glass, we’d been told it was tinted on his side so he wouldn’t be able to see us, but he’d know we were there. His hands were tethered at the wrists, but he pointed all ten fingers towards the ceiling and then carefully lowered one thumb.

“Nine,” Charlie whispered. “Holy hell. Nine burgers.”

Oscar lowered both hands. The guards, who’d been making

preparations, stopped moving and looked down at their prisoner. One held a syringe of clear liquid in a latex gloved hand. The other guard was speaking to Oscar.

“Last words,” Charlie murmured. Oscar looked towards the viewing window again.

*I’m sorry*, he said. *I’m sorry*. We couldn’t hear his voice through the glass, but it was easy enough to lipread. I assumed the apology was for the victim’s family, but later wondered if it was also for Charlie.

To my surprise, the victim’s mother stood up and tapped her nails on the glass, slowly, once, twice. An acceptance of Oscar’s apology or a rebuttal? The gentleness of her tapping made me think the former.

“I forgive you,” the woman said aloud, her mouth centimetres from the glass. It was impossible to tell if Oscar heard her. “I forgive him,” she said, glancing over towards Charlie.

“Thank you,” Charlie said. “On behalf of my father, thank you.” The woman nodded and sank back down. Her husband placed his arm protectively around her shoulders. Tears escaped Charlie’s eyes, droplets landing on her shirt. I rummaged in my handbag for tissues. Niemantsverdriet meant ‘never caused harm’, Oscar once told me. I sensed the glowing pride in that letter, he’d written about asking for and receiving Charlie’s forgiveness. Once more, I felt glad my tiny intervention benefitted Oscar so much, bringing six years of monthly visits from Charlie.

No further words were exchanged in the witness room or execution chamber. Oscar, motionless on the gurney, stared at the ceiling. As the guards closed in, my vision blurred. Cowardly of me, but I closed my eyes. Tears fell, I didn’t move to wipe them. I listened to people breathing, Charlie, the other family, selected media representatives. A stifled cough, the creak of someone shifting in their plastic seat.

I pictured Oscar’s handwriting, the yellow lined paper of his letters, the small neat font on the envelopes. There would be no more envelopes, interesting stamps, postmarks.

I kept my eyes shut until Charlie squeezed my elbow.

“It’s over, he’s gone.”

There were three days before my return flight departed. I kept busy shopping and reading. Walking the mall for hours, I chose gifts - bracelets, jeans - for my girls. Room Service each evening. I didn't see Charlie again and what I had (not) witnessed in Fairfax Penitentiary seemed far removed from malls and hotels. Almost like it never happened.

In the local newspaper I found a four-line report about the execution on page nine. *It did happen*, I said to myself. *This happened*.

On the return flight, I diluted white wine with ice. Not wanting a hangover when the girls returned from holidaying with their father. How would I explain my trip? Would they even notice the absence of Oscar's letters?

I sighed and tried to stop clenching my jaw. It ached, probably from teeth grinding.

Such a waste. Even life without parole, the best Oscar ever dared hope for, would've been a waste. If he'd committed his crime somewhere different, he'd have been out by now, probably educating boys about gangs and trouble.

Prison had worked. He'd become useful. He'd been supporting me for years. Giving back more than I'd ever given. His advice was good. His judgment, perhaps with the exception of the Big Mac meals, was sound. I would miss his letters. Most of all, I'd miss his voice. I raised my airline mock wine glass. The ice chinked. *To Oscar*.

*How would I explain my trip? Would they even notice the absence of Oscar's letters?*

# Just a Cup of Tea

Kathy Hoyle

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“I’m not going,” she says, curling herself deeper into the chair.

He sighs.

He places the plate of toasted crumpets on the small side-table next to her.

“Put it there,” she says, impatient.

She taps at the table with her forefinger. He puts down the cup of tea he’s holding next to the crumpets. She fiddles with the plate and cup, lining them up just so.

She frowns at him.

“I can’t find my glasses.”

He leans over, feels a tug at his back. He stuffs his hand down the side of the chair cushion and smiles.

“Here they are.”

He hands her the glasses and she puts them on. She picks up the newspaper from the arm of the chair.

He moves to the sofa and lowers himself down gingerly. He can’t afford the hassle of a bad back. He dreads to think what would happen to her if...

She fusses with the paper, turning the pages angrily, taking her glasses on and off again, until his patience wears thin.

He stands up. He’ll go in the garden, just ten minutes. The tomatoes need watering and he could have a stab at that rose bush. He remembers the hot tea and sits back down.

She folds the paper, lays it on the arm of the chair again, takes off her glasses and places them on top. She fiddles with the buttons on her blue woollen cardigan.

“Have your crumpets,” he says.

“I just want a cup of tea,” she replies.

“It’s there,” he says stabbing the air with his finger.

“It’s cold, it’s been there ages,” she says.

“No, I just made it. Be careful, blow, it’s still hot.”

“Blow,” she mimics, eyes squinting, “I’m not a child. I know how to drink a cup of fucking tea.”

He winces. The bad language is a new thing. That, and the glasses.

She lifts the cup. He resists the urge to jump up as the liquid spills. She blows. Then slurps, flinching as the hot liquid stings her lip.

“It’s too hot!”

She slams the cup onto the table. More tea spills, soaking into the crumpets. They’ll taste like wet cardboard now.

She puts on her glasses and picks up the paper.

He flicks his eyes heavenward then picks up his phone from the coffee table and reads the text.

*One o’clock, St. John’s Hall. It will be good for both of you. Just let me know. Helen. x*

He tests the water.

“Shall we try and make the meeting this afternoon? Helen said you’ll enjoy it.”

“Helen!” she spits, throwing the paper into her lap. “She just wants me out of the way. She’s after you, anyone can see.”

Ha! Helen is twenty-six with a handsome fiancé called Dave.

He stands and stretches his back. The tweak makes him grit his teeth.

“Are you making tea?” she asks.

He sighs and points to the cup on her side table. She turns and picks it up.

She slurps at the hot liquid.

“Thank you, that’s lovely,” she smiles.

He sits back down on the sofa, waits a moment, then tries again.

“There’s a meeting today, at St. John’s. Do you fancy it?”

She puts the cup down on the table.

“Will you stay?” Her eyes are wide, fearful.

“Of course, sweetheart,” he stands up and pats her hand, “but best we go now, or we’ll be late.”

He goes to the hall, gathers up their coats from the coat rack and comes back into the lounge. She is standing in the centre of the room, fiddling with her glasses, her black handbag tucked over one arm.

“Put this on,” he says, “there’s a chilly wind.”

He takes her handbag and glasses from her and places them carefully on the chair then helps fold her into her coat. He puts on his puts on his own coat and zips himself in. He takes his checked cap from his pocket and plants it firmly on his head.

“I need my glasses,” she says. He takes them from the chair, carefully opens her handbag and puts them inside.

“There, love, they’re in there,” he smiles, tapping the bag as he hands it to her. She links his arm and he walks her carefully out to the car.

She watches the outside world pulse and spin through the car window. He keeps turning to check on her. He has the child lock on, but still...

He flicks his eyes to the door handle on her side. A woman, with a pram, steps out onto the crossing at the last minute. He whips his head around toward the windscreen and slams a foot on the brake, cursing. His back twinges.

“Keep your fucking eyes on the road, idiot!” she hisses.

She opens her handbag, delves inside, finds her glasses and puts them on.

“I’ll drive,” she states.

The woman with the pram saunters off, not giving them a backward glance.

“No need, it’s just around the corner,” he says. His heart settles back into his chest as he searches for a parking spot.

The walls of the entrance way are painted cream, there is a smell of fresh paint. There is a notice board advertising Monday night Tai Kwon Do and Thursday night Pilates.

Voices echo towards them, laughter and shrieks. His hand is on her back. He feels her stiffen as he opens the glass doors and bundles her inside. The hall hums with mustiness and long forgotten hymns. The floor is shiny, wooden, like the one in his old school assembly hall.

“What’s this lot?” she says, stopping dead in her tracks.

Before he can answer, a woman waves at them.

“Hi, come on in,” she shouts. The others are in sitting in a circle on black plastic chairs. There is a yellow sponge ball. They are throwing it to one another, shouting out names, laughing each time the ball slips from someone’s hand.

“I’m Joan,” says the woman approaching them. She is apple-cheeked, with hips as wide as her smile. Her eyes crinkle, like a favourite aunt. He wants to hug her hello.

“Helen sent us,” he says, removing his checked cap.

“Lovely, lovely. There’s tea and biscuits there.” She points to a table with various mugs, a metal hot water boiler, a white ceramic jug of milk and a plate of biscuits.

“You can have some now, or after, whenever you like. I’ll get a chair. Don’t worry we’ve only just started.”

Joan waddles off to get a chair from the stack at the side of the hall.

He takes her hand. She snatches it back.

“No!”

“It’ll be fun,” he cajoles. “I’ll stay if you like.”

“No. They’re like gormless kids. Laughing at a bloody ball. I haven’t lost my bloody marbles you know.”

He sighs. Joan looks over, expectantly.

“Are you sure?”

“Course I’m bloody sure. Take me home.”

*The hall hums with  
mustiness and long  
forgotten hymns.*

She takes her glasses off and opens her handbag. She stuffs them inside and slams it shut.

"Sorry," he mouths to Joan. He takes her arm to lead her back outside.

"Sure you won't stay for a cuppa?" shouts Joan.

She stops.

"Ooh, I'd love a cup of tea," she says, "I'm parched."

She wanders over to the trestle table. He follows behind.

"I'll do it for you," he says, gently. Joan collects her from the table, takes her arm, and steers her towards the group.

"Come and have a seat love, while he does the honours. They're useful for summat these fellas, eh?"

*"Come and have a seat love, while he does the honours. They're useful for summat these fellas, eh?"*

He watches her throw the ball. She's getting better. She's laughing. A memory of her drifts by, carefree, windswept. A beach he thinks, Devon or Cornwall, the memory slips away as he picks out a biscuit. For a second, he can't figure out which one he likes best. Cream filled or choco-

late? It'll come to him, in a sec.

He hears his name and looks up.

"Here she is," says Joan. His wife gives him a thin smile.

"Are you taking me home?" she asks.

"Yes, love."

He pushes the biscuit into one pocket and retrieves his cap from the other and fixes it on his head. She looks worried and turns to Joan. She whispers in Joan's ear.

"I've no money for a taxi."

Joan pats her arm.

"It's okay, love, it's all paid up."

"Sorry," mouths Joan. He shrugs, some days she won't even get in the car.

He drives them home; the spring sunshine blinds him. The traffic lights change to green and he brakes to a stop. A loud horn beeps from behind, making him jump.



He pauses a second, then shame floods him. It's green for go, not stop.

At home he helps her into her chair. His back tweaks as he takes the weight of her.

"I'd love a cup of tea," she says.

He goes into the kitchen. The cups are there, he laid them out earlier. He lifts the lid off the tin marked 'tea bags first' in felt pen. He pops the bags into the cups. There is a glass bowl with a sticker on it. 'One sugar each, second'. He puts a sugar into each cup then pours boiling water carefully over the tea bags. He stirs the cups and lifts out the tea bags, he thinks there should be something else. He shakes the thought away and takes the cups into the lounge and places hers on the little table by her chair.

"Blow," she says.

He sits down on the sofa, brings his cup to his lips, blows, and takes a sip. It doesn't taste right. His back hurts. He hates taking tablets. It's enough trying to keep her right. Plastic boxes, coloured pills, days of the week stickers. But it's getting worse. He might take something before bed.

He picks up the newspaper from the coffee table. He needs his glasses to read. He feels around on the top of his head, looks on the table. He gets up.

"The baby's crying, will you see to her?" she says.

He'll see to her in a minute. He just needs to find his glasses. Maybe they can take her out in the pram later. She loves the park.

There is a knock at the door.

If he had his bloody glasses, he might be able to see, through the glass, who it was.

He opens the door. A young woman is standing there. She is smiling, expectantly. He thinks he knows her from somewhere.

"Are you going to let me in?" she asks, laughing.

"I, I"

He doesn't know how to say 'no' without appearing rude.

He stands to one side as she bustles inside, shaking the rain from her brolly then folding it up.

"How's she been? Eating, drinking ok?" the woman asks. She's

young, cheerful. He likes her.

He realises she must be a nurse, come to visit the baby. She probably came last time. That's where he knows her from. The woman bustles past him and heads toward the lounge.

He goes into the kitchen.

"Would you like a cup of tea?" he shouts.

"Yes, lovely," comes the faint reply.

He lifts the kettle to the tap, fills it up and then puts it down and presses the switch. He squints. There is writing on the tin in front of him. He needs his glasses to read it. He somehow finds himself in the hallway. The young woman has her hand on his arm.

"Are you ok, chick?" she asks.

"I can't find my glasses," he says. He is horrified to feel himself welling up with tears.

The woman leads him into the lounge and sits him down on the sofa.

There is another person in the waiting room. A woman. She is reading the paper. The younger woman is on the phone.

"Yes, I'd like an urgent assessment visit, please."

He feels sick with worry. He wonders what on earth is wrong with the baby.

# Ice Cold in London

Martin Blayney

Lenny couldn't sleep. Drunken merriment from the flat upstairs had turned into an all out war, a ping-pong battle of bitter abuse. She was a selfish frigid bitch. He was a sneaky two-timing bastard. Chair legs dragged and screeched and empty bottles rattled across the floor. Lenny hoped there would be a truce. He prayed it would be soon; tears of reconciliation, white flags of surrender, insults morphing contritely into amorous moans, peace restored...once the fighting foreplay had finished.

His hand shot out and snapped the switch on the bedside lamp. The light from the naked bulb stabbed his eyes. Kicking off the blankets he swung his feet onto the cold floor and swore at the ceiling. The Che Guevara poster, a shabby relic of the previous tenant, stared down at him. He glared at the poster and raised a clenched fist. Che remained impassive.

"Up yours," Lenny muttered and whipped a blanket from his bed, wrapped it around his shoulders and stepped down into the kitchen. The floor felt sticky and dank. He sparked a ring on the gas cooker and turned up the flame. It offered a little warmth and the softness of its light soothed his eyes. He looked around and sighed. Dirty dishes filled the sink and a stale, carry-out odour hung in the air. Sitting down in the shadowy half-light

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he lit a cigarette and blasted a bad tempered jet of smoke through tight lips as a fresh barrage of battle sounds erupted from above.

“Jesus give it a rest,” he appealed to the ceiling but the fighting continued. Squinting at his watch he saw that it was three o’clock. Four hours before the van came to whisk him across London, past palaces and magnificent colonial monuments and glassy high-rise office buildings. The van would be ripe with beer fart and morning breath from sleep deprived yawning workers clutching biscuit tins full of overstuffed baps and door-step sandwiches.

They’d be sporting hi-viz jackets with rolled up tea-break newspapers, cargo trousers dusty and cement spattered, and steel-toed boots mud stained and work-scarred. There’d be no talk at first just grunts and phlegm snorts and smokers’ coughs. Hammersmith

*He stood up and  
prayed the war up-  
stairs would end soon  
so the lovemaking  
could begin.”*

Broadway would see them slowly come alive like sluggish lizards warmed by the heat of the sun. Football banter and page three leering would take them as far as Regent’s Park.

A fresh shiver shook his body reminding him of the time.

He stood up and prayed the war upstairs would end soon so the love-making could begin. He groaned and plopped his cigarette into the dregs of a coffee cup and turned towards the bedroom.

There was an uneasy stillness from upstairs. He gave Che a hopeful glance. “Make love not war,” he whispered and, curling up beneath the blankets, held his breath and listened. The rattle of a headboard against a wall, a clickety-clack rhythm of a slow train signalled that peace had been restored. “Thank you God,” he said and released his breath with a grateful sigh. Sleep made a brief visit.

He woke again at six. The warring lovers had fallen asleep and battle sounds had been replaced with an afterglow of deafening silence. He flicked the switch on the bedside lamp and stared at the ceiling. Then, gathering his courage, he threw back the blankets, plunged himself into the coldness of the morning air and headed for the kitchen. His eyes rested on the pile of greasy dishes. “Later,” he muttered. He scooped them from the sink, turned on the taps and

began to wash. The icy water shocked his brain. He rubbed his face and neck hard then cupped his hands and sluiced handfuls of water over his head. The sleepiness left his eyes.

The van arrived at six. Lenny was already on the street, his biscuit tin loaded and secured with a broad rubber band. He pulled open the back door and climbed inside. The men moved up to make room for him and he squeezed himself into the tight space they had made. The air felt warm after the chill of the street. The man next to him grunted and drifted back to sleep, his lolling head bumping against Lenny's shoulder as the van moved off. Lenny could smell last night's whiskey and yesterday's sweat. He clutched the lunchbox tightly against his chest and closed his eyes.

The hum of the engine and the fummy heater made him drowsy. His head nodded and dreams came in flashes. He was at home on the farm. Frost had covered the fields and ice had filled the hoof prints of cattle making glassy white circles in the churned up mud. He could see the byre and his father, standing at the door. Sad tears were welling up in his eyes. He was shouting at Lenny to go, GO. The van braked and Lenny's head lurched forward. "Go," he heard himself say. He sat up and rubbed his eyes and peered through the breath-steamed windows.

The traffic was already at a slow frantic crawl. Buses with their loads of reluctant travellers overshadowed the van then slid away only to be caught up again. A lone cyclist leaned against the window leaving his handprint as he steadied himself for his next weave through the thin corridor of morning traffic. The crew were more awake now. Dirty joke laughs and exaggerated yawns breached the hum of the engine.

Big Dave was eating from a bag of potato crisps and loudly predicting a two-one win for Arsenal on Saturday. Half chewed fragments sprayed from his mouth as he boasted about their chances. "Two-one, easy, no danger." Lenny closed his eyes once more and returned to his own dreamy retreat.

The building site was in darkness when they arrived. Its naked bones seemed to shiver in the morning chill. Red girders stretched toward the sky and cement mixers with their hungry, gaping mouths waiting to be fed. Stacks of bricks crouched neatly, ready for the off

and a cold yellow light struggled through the dirty window of the work hut. The crew baled from the van, reluctant déjà vu masks fleshing each face. Lenny stretched his back and massaged his sleepy eyes back to life. Big Dave placed his lunchbox on top of a silent mixer and began to roll a cigarette, his sausage fingers surprisingly dextrous. He licked the paper with an expert sweep of his tongue and turned his gaze toward Lenny.

“Hey Paddy, d’you support Arsenal?”

Lenny shook his head. “Liverpool,” he said. He knew Big Dave would never have heard of Kilmore Rangers.

“Liverpool... Scouse wankers.”

Lenny said nothing.

“I hate Scousers,” Dave said. “Thieving bastards.”

A fine mist of snow had started to fall. Delicate downy feathers fluttered from the sky. The site was suddenly transformed into a snow globe. Lenny looked up and watched, mesmerised, as the flakes floated to the ground. He opened his mouth and felt the soft coldness on his tongue like an icy communion.

“It’s looking like a white Christmas,” Lenny said.

“Fucking hate Christmas,” Big Dave answered.

Lenny noticed the LOVE-HATE tattoos on Big Dave’s fingers and wondered if he loved anything.

“If I’d the money I’d piss off to Tenerife, spend Christmas there,” Big Dave said brushing the fine snow from his shoulders. Lenny nodded.

“Sounds good. I’d ...”

“Drinking San Miguel. Watching Arsenal on the big screen...” He took a long drag from his cigarette and eyed Lenny. “What would you do?” he said pointing with the end of his cigarette, “You know, say you won the Lottery?” Lenny blew through his lips, staring at the sky and wondered for a moment.

“It sounds stupid but, I’d probably buy me Da a horse,” he said.

“A horse... what, a racehorse?”

“No, no. A plough horse, you know for ploughing.”

“A horse? Don’t you have tractors over there?”

“Yeah of course. But a horse for competitions, you know?”

Ploughing competitions. He's crazy about ploughing with horses. He's won prizes all over the place." Lenny looked at Big Dave. He was smirking. Lenny suddenly felt stupid. He wished he hadn't said anything to Big Dave.

"A horse?" big Dave said, "you'd buy a horse?"

"Yeah, but it'd be a real good one, you know? A Rolls Royce of a horse," he said trying to sound clever. Big Dave screwed up his face.

"A horse?" he said. "Fuck me, all the money in the world and you'd buy a horse." Big Dave headed for the shed shaking his head as he went.

The snow had begun to fall more heavily, covering everything in a soft, fluffy coat. Lenny loved the silence it brought, loved the way it made everything look new and clean and spotless. He gathered his gear and followed Big Dave into the shed. Men stood around, talking and laughing, mugs of tea cradled in strong hands, hard hats and lunch boxes lying side by side on the wooden table. Geordie the site foreman came in behind them.

*"Yeah, but it'd be a real good one, you know? A Rolls Royce of a horse," he said trying to sound clever.*

The men stopped their chatter and turned to listen.

"Looks like we're going to be snowed off," he said.

Someone began to sing "Jingle Bells". Big Dave joined in, a tuneless terrace-like chant that rasped the ears. Lenny looked about him and found a space on the wooden bench. Big Dave stopped his singing.

"Do we still get paid?" he said.

"As long as you stay on site," Geordie said.

"Sweet," said Big Dave.

Lenny grabbed a newspaper from the table and pretended to read wishing he could be invisible. Big Dave pushed in beside him. Lenny prayed he'd go away and leave him alone.

"You'd buy a horse then?" Big Dave said.

"Yeah." Lenny could feel his face redden.

"D'you hear that?" Big Dave's booming voice silenced the men's

chatter. "Paddy here reckons he'd buy a horse if he won the lottery." Lenny looked up. All eyes were staring at him. One man spoke.

"A horse? Naw. I'd buy a big Harley Davidson ... do Route Sixty Six."

"I'd buy a vineyard in the south of France."

Lenny felt himself drifting into the background. He was relieved that the talk had shifted from his father's horse to other people's dreams. He wished the snow would stop and he could go to work and not have to talk to Big Dave or the rest of them.

The men's talk had become a background murmur. He was deep in his thoughts when Big Dave slammed his fist on the table and shouted, "Snowman."

He grabbed Lenny by the arm and pulled him out through the door of the shed. The ground was already covered in a thick carpet of snow. Big Dave bent down and scooped a ball of snow and began to roll it. Lenny stood staring as the ball grew bigger and bigger. The rest of the men had gathered at the door of the shed curious to see what Big Dave was up to. They began to laugh as he wrestled with the growing body of the snowman.

*"Up the Gunners," he roared then knelt down in the snow and moved his outstretched arms up and down in mock adoration.*

"Don't just stand there, give us a hand," he said to Lenny panting with exertion, his eyes dancing with childish excitement.

Lenny slowly made his way across the yard and joined Big Dave as the others cheered him on. He tried to ignore their shouts and whistles as the body of the snowman grew bigger and bigger. It was becoming impossible to move the huge ball of snow and a few of the men ran over to help. Then others, caught up in the excitement, joined in and started on the head. When the head was large enough they hunched together and heaved it onto the snowman's body then stood back for a moment to admire their work. A fresh frenzy began as they decorated it with arms and eyes and a mouth and nose. Big Dave ran into the shed and returned with a bright yellow hard hat and placed it on the snowman's head then, with a proud flourish, re-



moved his Arsenal scarf and draped it around the neck of the snowman.

“Up the Gunners,” he roared then knelt down in the snow and moved his outstretched arms up and down in mock adoration.

Lenny found himself clapping his hands and cheering. The others joined in. Cheers and whistles and wild whoops bounced around the steel girders. Geordie came out to investigate the commotion. Unimpressed, he returned to his office. The men stood for a few moments then drifted back to the shed. Lenny lingered behind. Big Dave stood up and brushed the snow from his knees and grinned at Lenny. “Merry Christmas Paddy,” he said reaching out his hand.

Lenny thought he saw tears in Big Dave’s eyes. Probably just the cold air.

“Merry Christmas Dave.” He said.

“Up the Gunners Paddy,” said Big Dave punching the air with his fists.

“Yeah... up the Gunners,” said Lenny.

Geordie sent them home at 12 o’clock. The city had turned into a winter wonderland. Traffic was at a standstill so Lenny took the train. As he emerged from the Tube station at Shepherd’s Bush he found a post box. It had already collected a thick hat of snow. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a long red envelope. Through the flimsy paper he could feel the embossed figure of a horse. He pushed the envelope into the mouth of the post box.

“Merry Christmas Da,” he whispered as the card dropped down into its waiting belly.

# The Light Between Rain Showers

Rosemary Hennigan

*Rosemary Hennigan was shortlisted for the Benedict Kiely Short Story Award in 2018 and longlisted for the Colm Tóibín International Short Story Award in 2016. She has been published in the Dublin Review of Books and the Journal. Rosemary currently lives in Dublin with her husband and a lot of books.*

“Just leave it, darling, it's not alive. It's gone. It's gone somewhere else.”

Eva was squatting over the dead sparrow, her two chubby hands on her two chubby cheeks. The bird lay just off the path – cause of death unknown – and seemed for all the world like a Christmas decoration that had slipped off the tree. Lying unnaturally on its side, eyes closed, feet tucked under it. The other sparrows twittering over their heads, unfazed by the loss of their compatriot, stood in cruel contrast to the dead bird in its expired state.

“Gone somewhere else, eh? Where do you suppose it's *gone*, then, Miriam?”

Her mother's voice was harsh, her eyebrow raised, standing over Eva to take a cursory look at the dead creature. Miriam flashed a warning look her way, but it was too late: Eva always heard the things she wasn't supposed to.

“Where's it gone, Mammy?” Her small voice was insistent, her eyes still taking in the dead bird like an inquisitive sponge.

Miriam blinked rather slowly. “It's gone away to another place,” she said.

“Another place?” Dolores said, walking on ahead of them. “I suppose your father went to *another place* too, did he? Would it kill you to say, Heaven? Or is that too *religious* these

days, is it?"

"Well you hardly think the bird is in heaven, now, do you?" Miriam shot back, speaking quickly and quietly in the hopes that Eva wouldn't hear. But, of course, she did.

"Is the bird in heaven, Mammy?"

Miriam shot a furious look at the back of her mother's head.

"Yeah," she said, with a small sigh. "The bird is in heaven, love." The concern on Eva's small face didn't ease at this new piece of information.

"Come on, love," Miriam said, holding her hand out towards her daughter, who reluctantly stood up and placed her small hand in Miriam's.

"I'm sad for the bird, Mammy," Eva said.

"Everything dies," Dolores called back over her shoulder.

She was limping ahead on her umbrella. You'd think she was on her last legs but hadn't she the wit to spot any opportunity to stir the pot?

"That's not helping anything," Miriam said.

Dolores practised selective deafness and seemed not have heard.

"Will I die, Mammy?"

"When you're very, very old," Miriam said.

"Old like Granny?" Eva said.

A small grin of mischief formed on Miriam's face. "Much older," she said. "Sure, Granny is young yet, aren't you Granny?"

Dolores let out some class of a grunt. "I'll go when I'm called. I'm ready when He wants me," she said.

They were walking alongside her again, the path on this part of the cliff walk being wide enough to accommodate the three of them.

"Will *you* die, Mammy?" Eva said.

"Yes. We all die eventually. When we're very old," Miriam replied. Her eyes were on the rain clouds - deep grey and rancorous with rain.

"Was the bird old?" Eva said.

"Very. Very old," Miriam said.

Dolores gave her another derisory look but to Miriam's relief, chose not to comment on it this time.

"It's raining," Eva said.

Miriam held her hand out and felt the soft tap of raindrops against her skin.

"Not again," she said. "We'd better hurry, Mam. We'll be drenched out here."

Dolores was in no hurry at all. "It's only a bit of rain. Never did anyone any harm."

"Not sure that's strictly true," Miriam muttered. She was trying to pull Eva's hood up over her head when her eye caught on a feathery mound poking out of Eva's fist. "What's that in your hand?"

Eva whipped her hand behind her back. "Nothing!"

Miriam felt a wave of disgust. "Are you holding the bird in your hand? Eva, don't lie to me now."

Dolores snorted, leaning hard on her umbrella.

Eva's eyes were on the ground in front of her, her lip wobbling and her eyes growing wet with tears. She said nothing, lest she incriminate herself.

Miriam reached for her arm and drew it around to the front. "Now, Eva, don't lie to me. Put the bird down. It's filthy!"

Eva opened her fist reluctantly and the dead bird rolled out of her hand and onto the path. Miriam, trying unsuccessfully to hide the revolt on her face, kicked it over towards the gorse bushes at the edge of the path next to them.

Dolores laughed aloud. "Where were you going with that, love?"

"I was going to bury it in the garden," Eva said, rubbing at her tears with the hand that had moments before been carrying the carcass.

Miriam snatched Eva's hand away from her soft, pink face and then bent down to wipe the tears rushing down her cheeks with an old bit of tissue.

"You haven't any hand gel, have you, Mam?" she said.

Dolores shook her head. "We'll get her home and you can throw her in the bath."

She was watching Eva cry, great sobs that wracked her small body. "Come on now," she said. "It's alright. Your Mammy brought much worse than that home when she was small."

Eva looked up at her grandmother, pleased to have an ally.

"It's not a good idea, though, is it Granny?" Miriam said, zipping up Eva's coat. The raindrops were growing heavier.

"No," Dolores conceded. "No, these things are better left where they belong. The birds have their home and we have ours."

Miriam looked to the sky. "Come on," she said, "we'll get soaked if we dither here."

She reached for Eva's clean hand but Eva moved away, towards Dolores, and slipped her hand into her grandmother's instead.

Dolores didn't seem to mind that it was the tainted – possibly now diseased – hand. Miriam cast a sidelong glance at the two of them: her mother and daughter, teaming up against her.

She shoved her hands in her pockets. "Alright then," she said. "Come on, you two."

They were near the end of the walk, where the path turned past Mikey's turnip field and an old beech tree offered them some brief shelter. Its leaves had turned the colour of rust and the raindrops pattered against them in the silence that enveloped the three huddling underneath. Eva was unusually quiet, seemingly content to hold Dolores's hand. Miriam's eyes turned towards the turnips. They used to steal them when they were young; just for the hell of it. It had passed for fun in those days. She couldn't see Eva doing something like that, although the sudden interest in dead bird carcasses suggested it was possible.

As the rain began to ease slightly, the sound diminishing against the foliage overhead, Miriam said: "Will we make a break for it?" Dolores gave a curt nod and opened her umbrella, under which Miriam and Eva huddled as they set off the short distance down the hill towards the house.

They didn't get far before Eva pulled sharply on Dolores's hand, jumping up and down, pointing to a sparrow that was sitting on a nearby wall. "Mammy, is that the bird? Is it alive?"

*Its leaves had turned the colour of rust and the raindrops pattered against them in the silence that enveloped the three huddling underneath.*

Miriam glanced at Dolores. "What are your thoughts on reincarnation?" she said.

"I don't remember reading about it in the Catechism," Dolores replied.

"Mammy, look! Look, the bird is alive. Granny, it's alive!" Eva said.

The bird had hopped closer to them, turning its head this way and that to get a better look at them.

"It's Lazarus! Stay back, Eva, or he'll fly away," Dolores said as Eva reached towards it but the small movement had already given the bird reason for fright.

It took to the air and they watched it disappear into a crop of bushes at the edge of Mikey's field.

*"Bye-bye, Lazy-us,"  
Eva said, waving  
happily as it van-  
ished from sight.*

"Bye-bye, Lazy-us," Eva said, waving happily as it vanished from sight.

"Maybe it was Dad," Miriam said, with a small smile.

Dolores's eyes were firmly on the road ahead. "Your father wouldn't be seen dead reincarnating as a sparrow," she said. After a moment's reflection, she added: "A raven. Or a hawk, maybe."

The drops of rain were sliding off the umbrella and onto Miriam's shoulder; she stepped in closer to Dolores - her head almost on her shoulder - and let the smell of rosewater rise up from her mother's skin and fill her nose.

\*\*\*\*\*

Dolores took Eva up to the bathroom and scrubbed her hands in the sink while the bath filled behind them.

"Will you grab me a couple of towels from the hot press?" she asked Miriam, who stood watching them at the door.

Eva splashed the water while Dolores tried to dunk her hands into the basin of steaming suds.

"Have you that towel, Miriam? Don't be splashing now, Eva, you'll make a mess!"

When Miriam didn't reply, Dolores looked up, catching her own reflection in the mirror in front of her. An old woman she didn't rec-

ognise. She looked away quickly: "Miriam? The towel?"

Nothing but silence, so Dolores stepped out to the hallway looking for her daughter. Miriam stood frozen at the hot press, her head in her hands.

"Oh. What's the matter, love?"

She opened her arms and Miriam collapsed limply into her mother's embrace. She made no reply, her head pressed down on Dolores's shoulder, but Dolores could see the shirts hanging over the water tank. Five of them. All white. Like ghosts in the dark of the hot press. She had taken them out after the funeral and ironed them, as she had always done. It was an act of defiance: two fingers to death. She let out an audible sigh, her grief suddenly exposed by their dangling presence.

"I don't know why they're still there," Dolorous said with a wave of her hand. "I keep forgetting them. There's no need to be upset." Miriam sniffed, wiping her wet face with the edge of her sleeve. "I wasn't expecting to see them. I forget, sometimes, you know? That he's gone."

Her mother reached out with her thumbs and slowly wiped the tears from under her eyes, sweeping them away towards her hairline.

"It's alright. It happens," she said quietly. "But life is for the living. There's no use crying for the dead."

Miriam wiped her nose with the back of her hand and fixed her hair back behind her ears.

"I don't know why I'm so teary," she said. "It's stupid. Sorry, Mam."

Dolores laid her hands on Miriam's shoulders, her face set. "It's not stupid." She would have liked to say more, to say something comforting, but there was nothing that could take away the absence and the keen pain of loss. She preferred silence to lies.

Miriam sniffed, her attention drawn to the small face peeking out from behind the bathroom door. Eva was watching her, and the look of shock on the child's face sent a stab of guilt shooting through Miriam's gut.

"It's alright, Eva," she said, bending down to pick her up. "It's all ok. Mammy's fine - see?"

The tears began to flow as soon as Miriam spoke and Eva bur-

rowed her face into the soft skin of her mother's neck. She didn't really know why she was crying, which seemed to make Eva even more upset.

"She's alright," Dolores said. "She just got a fright. Come on and we'll put her in the bath. That'll cheer her up."

Miriam carried Eva into the bathroom while Dolores shut the hot press behind her. The five shirts went into hiding again; five white ghosts consigned to their place in the dark.

Miriam tested the water and then lifted Eva into the bath. The tears had stopped, but Dolores was watching them both anxiously and they were struggling to perform for her.

"You go downstairs," Dolores said. "I'll give Eva her bath."

"It's fine, Mam - I'll do it," Miriam said, taking the towel from her.

"Am I useless, is it? Is that why you won't let me help you?" Dolores asked, one hand on her hip, one eyebrow raised.

"Of course not," Miriam said, examining the frayed edges of the towel with her finger. "Go on downstairs. We'll be down in a bit."

Dolores paused at the door, watching while Miriam poured water over Eva's small chest. Mother and daughter were absorbed in each other again, wrapped up in the warm feeling of mutual need: Dolores could still remember how that felt.

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Downstairs, the sitting room was dark and cold; the heating hadn't come on yet. She made a mental note to fix the timer now the clocks had gone back. That was always something he had done. She sighed. His absence was in small things. His absence meant she was no longer needed. Who had she to look after now?

Dolores walked to the window and watched the dark clouds engulf the last of the light. The cry of a raven sounded from nearby and her eyes watched the sky for sight of its dark silhouette, but all she saw was the first few drops of the next rain shower.



# Hot Masseur

Eva Sandoval

The women never did it properly; Renata would say *thumbs, harder, deeper*, but the most they ever delivered were flaccid rub downs, as though she were a holiday bird to be basted with butter, and she always walked out feeling worse than when she went in; every muscle still aching and out 60 dollars to boot.

Her friends didn't understand – *My last one was too rough, I just want to relax* – and they certainly wouldn't understand if she said what she had only recently admitted to herself: *It has to be a man. I need a man.*

It was wrong to need a man, especially these days. Renata had liked men so very much, before. Sanding floors. Making you laugh. Holding you tight. They had been good for so many things.

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“Massage + Rockport” – up came the unthreatening female ex-therapists that had filled her with hope, only to be stricken from her list.

Today she boldly clicked on a new name: Jonas Nikolaidis.

Jonas Nikolaidis's Holistic Massage Clinic had hundreds of glowing reviews on his fan page; he and Renata even had friends in common. Renata knew the face; it was that guy, the one she saw downtown sometimes, maybe at Houlihan's. She'd never thought to wonder what he did for a living, and if she had, she'd

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never have thought “massage therapist”. The fan page showed his studio; gray and burgundy tones and geometric lines, no flowers in sight.

He had a personal page, too; in his profile photo, his muscles strained against black T-shirt sleeves and his thick arms were covered with tribal tattoos. More photos: Jonas’s sea turtle abs surfing in the turquoise waters of Acapulco, Jonas’s bulging shoulders threatening to Hulk smash through his button down at someone’s wedding, Jonas’s massive hands rubbing down some athlete’s hairy hamstrings. Jonas painting someone’s kitchen yellow. Renata’s throat closed.

She booked an appointment. They’d see each other Monday the 12th at 6:30 for what was listed on his site as a “therapeutic massage”.

*Once again, Renata had, without meaning to, said something wrong, and Peema thought she was a bad feminist.*

And Renata went back to her blueprints. The white lines of the Rossler Development seemed to buzz like a neon diner sign. Too much pain. Not enough sleep.

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Never enough sleep. Renata messaged her friend Peema: *LOOK AT MY NEW MASSEUSE*. She sent a link to Jonas’s profile photo. *Look at those arms! I didn’t even know they made masseuses this hot. That’s going to be my treat for the week – a massage with hot Jonas.*

Peema wrote back: *You mean poor objectified Jonas.*

Renata felt ashamed. She so often felt ashamed these days. Once again, Renata had, without meaning to, said something wrong, and Peema thought she was a bad feminist. Everyone thought so. That hadn’t been the plan; the men were supposed to be put in their place, not the women, but now, somehow, if she called her ex-husband’s latest 21-year-old “teenage trash” she was the sexist asshole because what had the poor girl ever done wrong? If she complained to Vicky about her saddlebags that was wrong, too, because Vicky was a Generously-Girthed Goddess while Renata was at her goal weight; that was body shaming now. That time she linked to the roast of Ann Coulter; the shitshow! *Um, you just posted a meme calling on*

“good men” to stand by women and now you mock another woman? Some #wokefemale. Only the men taking issue that time, though. Of course.

And Renata had felt desperate. She so often felt desperate these days. Because what did feminism have to do with denouncing a white supremacist? Nothing. But Renata knew why they were really upset. They hated the new order; that they couldn't do what they'd always done; use the words they'd always used. *If we can't, neither can you. You took them from us, and you shall pay.*

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Hot Jonas on a motorcycle zooming through the Grand Canyon; Hot Jonas frolicking with someone's fluffy brown puppy; Hot Jonas building a log cabin in the Canadian wild!

~~Didn't sleep a wink but only two days until my tasty treat!~~ No, not allowed.

~~Didn't sleep a wink but only two days until my massage with Hot Jonas. Hubba!~~ Wrong.

~~Didn't sleep a wink but only two days until my massage. HOW does he know Anita Ramos? How dare she hide him from us? Greedy slut.~~ Even Renata knew that was terrible.

So to answer Joyce's message: *Morning, honey. How you doing?*

Try: *Didn't sleep a wink but it's ok because I am strong and have a massage booked with a new therapist who seems very competent. Thanks for asking. You're such a thoughtful friend!*

Sent. Approved. Three forty-seven p.m.; no lectures yet.

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It was the muscles crowding her shoulders, holding those five jig sawed ribs together. She'd lived with the pain for so long, it was almost part of her; waking her up in the morning and tormenting her at night. She'd bought mattress after mattress, pillow after pillow, but sleeping was always high misery. Left side, right side, the foot of the bed, the head of the bed. Dark circles scored under her eyes, lines etched around her mouth as if to proclaim, like a tattoo: *This woman is in pain. This woman doesn't sleep.*

Sometimes Renata thought about pain; how something could hurt for years, almost like you were clinging to it for dear life. The Chemistry teacher who had complimented her “hot ass” and her

mother who had sneered: *That's just how men talk to girls, dummy. Don't think so well of yourself; you're not that much to look at.* The clients who only addressed the male architects at her firm, the heel of a hand, the underside of a boot; the tiny knit caps never worn. So many things to hold on to. So many precious pains.

But last spring she had gone for a massage in Istanbul and for the first time in years, forgotten to be protective of her right shoulder. She usually recoiled when anyone so much as looked at it, barking orders at new massage therapists: *Use as MUCH PRESSURE as possible EXCEPT for my right shoulder; I had an injury there years ago.* But the therapist in Istanbul hadn't spoken much English, and maybe it was the foreign setting, maybe it was just time to forget, because Renata had simply forgotten. She hadn't noticed until the woman was already rubbing her shoulder that she'd forgotten to warn her, and then she'd been shocked: the touch didn't hurt. She wasn't afraid.

And Renata had thought: *I guess it's true; eventually, all pain must have an end.*

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Jonas Nikolaidis's Massage Therapy Clinic was only a seven-minute walk from her house; smaller in real life than in the Facebook photos. Hot Jonas, on the other hand, was even hotter than the photos. A photo snapped of him today would show him wearing a navy T-shirt that barely contained his swollen biceps. Renata tried to look anywhere else, anywhere except his face, which was dangerous; when he'd smiled at her, two deep dimples had darted in and out of his cheeks. Hot Jonas was adorable, and, of course, at least fifteen years younger than her; anyone attractive seemed to be much younger than Renata these days.

*Good afternoon,* she said.

*Hi,* he said. A stiff laugh. *Welcome. Come right this way.*

*Wait,* she said. *First I need to explain. I've had a lot of... injuries.* She drew in her breath, shut her eyes, and rattled them off in a desperate blurt: *Cervical leaks. Slipped discs. Broken ribs, a dislocated shoulder. I have chronic muscle pain. My bones are okay, though. I have a very high pain tolerance so please don't hold back.*

Renata unscrewed her eyes shut and peeked at him; if he was suspicious of her injuries he didn't show it. *Okay,* he said instead,

with another laugh.

*Feel free, really,* said Renata. *I've never had a massage that was deep enough.*

*I'll do my best,* said Jonas. *Other problems? Fatigue, nausea, headaches...?*

*Yes, yes, and yes. But the worst thing is that I don't sleep. I can't get comfortable.*

He laughed again. *Let's see what we can do. You can go get ready. Knock on the door when you're done.*

Renata went to the changing cabin. A white towel, gauze slippers, and a gauze thong in a plastic pouch had been placed on a chair. The initials JN were stamped on every item, and Renata couldn't help but think: *How just like a man.*

She tried not to notice the flash of her reflection in the mirror, the faint shadows of cellulite rippling on her thighs, the white, fleshy scars that spattered her torso like a fit of Pollockian pique. The clinic was dimly lit, thank goodness. Hot Jonas wouldn't see her very well, if he even cared. The beautiful young female bodies he must

have access to. Renata was surely an old lady to him, white noise from the neck down, fit only for tenderizing like a shapeless cut of meat.

She wrapped herself in the towel and knocked on the door. Jonas turned the knob immediately. *You can get on the table now. Face down.*

Renata climbed onto the table and eased the towel out from underneath her. She was a pro at this; disrobing without letting anyone see. Even with her female massage therapists, even living with her sisters and female roommates she'd never been one to let it all hang out; perhaps some dirty trace of Catholic guilt that she couldn't rinse away. Even her lovers or her ex-husband had rarely seen her naked. And none of them had ever looked like Jonas.

The warm drizzle of oil on her back. The faint whiff of jasmine. Her mouth watered as it always did, anxious for that first touch; a ten-

*The warm drizzle of oil on her back. The faint whiff of jasmine. Her mouth watered as it always did, anxious for that first touch...*

sion like the fraught moment a conductor raises his bow, that split second before the orchestra plays.

And the first touch came. It was, at first, whisper light, and for the briefest instant, Renata panicked: *Oh no*. But then Jonas's thumbs dug into her back, running up and down the length of her spine. A sharp gasp escaped her, and then a deep, shuddering sigh, like the hiss of a release valve on a heater.

*Too much?*

Renata could barely speak: *It's perfect. Just like that.*

Jonas laughed. How was it possible that everything she said elicited a laugh? Renata wasn't known to be a particularly funny person. Jonas's fingers scored into her shoulders and Renata bit her tongue to hold back a moan. She had been right; a woman couldn't

*She had been right; a woman couldn't do this, a woman wouldn't gouge her sore spots, especially once she knew about Renata's troubles.*

do this, a woman wouldn't gouge her sore spots, especially once she knew about Renata's troubles. A woman had to nurture, to protect. But Renata knew all too well that men felt a thrill when they caused pain.

And how different was it with a man, with a hot man.

When the women massaged her

breasts or gluteal muscles, it was never any more exciting than being rubbed by a piece of soap. But when Jonas touched her, she was aware of every stroke, could sense him in every pore. He avoided her intimate areas, his fingertips only working the muscles nearby. Renata thought: *You could go there. I wouldn't mind.*

What would it be like to sleep with Jonas? Someone who knew just where and how to touch you, like her ex-husband, who now touched little girls. The really good liars made you feel special. Jonas was probably a ladies' man, too. A grin like that. Muscles like those. The hot girls his age would be all over him and why should he refuse?

Jonas dug into the muscles low on her back; Renata sighed.

*Wow*, Jonas said. *Most of my clients would scream if I did this to them. I find that very lean people tend to have a high pain tolerance.*

*I love it*, Renata muttered, and hoped he wouldn't see that she was blushing: very lean, oh my! Renata felt near tears, full of childlike gratitude. She wondered if he could tell, if he were part therapist, part detective; if he could read the lives of women; if he could lay his hands on her and simply know: *This woman has suffered extensive back and shoulder injuries almost certainly due to physical abuse, has never had children, has been pregnant once, had the baby kicked out of her, has not had sex in approximately fifty-eight months, is relishing my touch, slightly too much.*

Renata felt ashamed – again – and then she felt angry – again. There was a whole culture of massage fetish for men; happy endings; all the live long day. And the women providing that service were never to be judged anymore, because women could do whatever they wanted. But somehow, Renata knew it was wrong to wish Jonas's hand would drift below her towel. Jonas was a professional. He had taken years of classes to get his license, was successful enough to open his own studio. He was helping her. He was the only one who had, who could.

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And, oh, an hour of pure bliss she'd been so desperate for; then, the words she'd been dreading.

*Was that all right, Renata?*

*Wonderful. Thank you.* She opened her eyes for the first time in an hour and saw Jonas grinning down at her. The dimples were back, and Renata felt a sweet tug in her stomach.

*Good*, he said. *Take as much time as you need to get dressed.*

Renata's clothes slid on over the jasmine-scented oil, and she saw her face in the mirror – flushed and almost pretty, if women her age could still be called pretty.

Jonas was waiting for her at the desk. Renata opened her purse to fish out the cash, plus 40%, rolling all the bills together tightly before handing them to him. He bowed his head slightly.

*That was exactly what I was looking for*, said Renata.

*I'm happy I could help*, said Jonas. *I'd seen you around town before.*

*I'd seen you around, too*, said Renata. *Houlihan's? Maybe. I go there sometimes.*

*Yes, I'm sure. Naturally, I had no idea you were such a – she paused – capable massage therapist. Or I'd have come over to say hello a long time ago.*

Jonas blushed. *And I didn't know you were an architect. Did I tell you that?*

Jonas shifted his weight. *No... I...someone told me. Once. He laughed. You've done some important buildings in town.*

*I did the Promenade Shopping Plaza, she said. That's the most important one around here. The Science wing at the library. The Nova apartment complex, the... – Careful. Their egos were always fragile; that was one thing that hadn't changed – I don't want to bore you.*

*I'm not bored, Jonas said. My sister lives in The Nova. It's a beautiful building.* He was shy, Renata realized; that was why all the laughs and the blushing. Someone like him! Renata suddenly felt protective of Jonas; if she could give him some advice, if she could shield him from the women who would take advantage of his sweetness. If she could keep him from becoming desperate, ashamed, and angry all the time, like her.

*Well, thank you again, she said. I'll definitely be back.*

*I would definitely appreciate that. Jonas said. And maybe you'll sleep tonight.*

As Renata buckled her seat belt, she was aware of something. The complete absence of her pain; like the sudden, golden silence of a screaming child.

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So Peema wanted to know: And how was the big massage?

It was a trap! Renata didn't care: *WONDERFUL!* She typed with the vigor of a concert pianist. *FINALLY the right pressure. I feel like I've been put back in order. And it was true. Renata wiggled her neck and shoulders: still light, still free. He was lovely, too. SO sweet and shy. How often do you get hot and shy together? And the way he uses his hands.... my god how many women must he get? A different one every night.*

*He could say the same about you.*

Renata was angry. She was always angry these days. If just once, if just one of her thoughts weren't wrong.

And later, Jonas posted a video on his fan page of one of his



massages. The woman was prone, her face turned away from the camera. Her blonde hair, more or less the same shade as Renata's, was pulled back into a knot, as Renata's would have been, but the woman was young, with a smooth, shapely back like Renata had once had. It was a bird's eye perspective of what Renata had experienced; here, she saw Jonas standing up, those tribal tattoos winking from under his shirtsleeves as he slid his hands over the woman's glistening muscles. His dark brows were knit in reverent concentration, his full lips taut. Renata saw how studied and graceful his movements were, like a potter caressing a wet lump of clay. She thought: That's *what he did to me*. That's what it looked like. She "liked" the video. Jonas "liked" her like and - ding! - sent her a Facebook message: ☺ *Thank you for your patronage, Renata! I hope you're feeling better.*

Renata went to bed. Renata didn't sleep.

## A New York Morning

Susan Bowditch

*Susan Bowditch is a Welsh/Australian writer of historical fiction, cozy mysteries, and short stories. She is currently completing a master's degree in Writing and Literature and is writing a new historical novel, based around a witch.*

"I like my coffee rich and dark," Roland said. "The taste of actual coffee beans sends me into a tailspin."

"Really?" Fiona replied, sitting down next to him. "This is news to me. What about the creamy milky stuff?"

She darted him a sideways glance, her mouth pursed ready to sip from her own cup. This sudden revelation, from someone she thought she knew. Inside and out, that was their bond. Now this. A new diversity of taste that threatened their very existence. This took their relationship to another dimension. What other secrets was he keeping from her?

"Nope, I've changed to this one." He held the polystyrene cup up to the early morning sunlight as if it were a precious jewel. A coil of steam rose from inside. "Yes, Aldo's come up trumps this morning," he added, without a hint of irony on his weathered features.

Fiona rolled her eyes, sipping her lemon tea. Her fingerless gloves clutched the plastic, but she was careful not to spill a drop. Stupid polystyrene! She thought. The drinks were either scalding hot or stone-cold. Beggars couldn't be choosers. She took another sip, feeling the sugar granules roll on her tongue, the sharp aftertaste of lemon on her lips.

"What are the plans for today?" Roland looked up sharply as a pigeon flew near their

bench. The bird pecked at the worn paving stones, its claws clipping the smooth surface. Fiona wished she'd kept that bag of cakes from last night's dinner. Almost wished, but not quite.

The sun streaked through the skyscrapers beyond the park. Then a police siren wailed down the narrow streets of the city.

"That's heading north," Roland noted. "I can always tell by the sound the siren makes."

Really? It just sounds the same as all the others, she thought, but kept quiet. Roland had been a car mechanic in another life, so maybe he was right about this.

Instead she said, "I've no plans," shifting her bum on the chilly bench. Her fingers absentmindedly rubbed a knotted part of the wood, covered over by layers of chipped paint. This was her side of the bench, away from the smell of the rubbish bin. She felt guilty as Roland handed her the cider bottle, but she took it off him, tipping it back to allow the warm liquid to comfort her inside.

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The sun was now a pale yellow orb in the sky. Fiona squinted her eyes against its brightness, and stretched, mouth as dry as a dusty desert. She ran a tongue over her teeth, tasted the aftermath of dry apples in her mouth. The pigeon was still there, cooing and pecking. Fiona lifted her head as the striped awning of Aldo's Café flapped in the summer breeze, a golden streak of sunshine amongst the drab structured greys. She noted the absence of coffee fiends outside his café and realised it was nearly lunchtime. Most people had dispersed into the office blocks that towered around them, leaving a few overweight tourists to trail the shops around this part of town. Behind her, the Perspex glass surrounds were the only indication that the World Trade Towers had once stood there – that, and the hundreds of tourists that milled around, their cameras poised at the gates to Hell. Once, a man had climbed over, tried to swim in the shallow, rippling water. Fiona remembered it causing quite a stir; she had witnessed the spectacle for herself.

Aldo's son Frankie appeared on the sidewalk. Fiona smiled as he waved at them from across the busy intersection. He stopped to speak to Mary, heading down Liberty with her heavy-laden trolley. Mary seemed perkier today, gesticulating wildly with her hands so

that a passer-by – an Asian man in a navy jacket and cargo pants – had to hurry past. Fiona pulled her coat closer, suddenly feeling an icy wind around her. Winter was not the easiest of seasons. The cold can wrap itself around your bones, stick to your heart, Roland had said, once. Just remember that.

Roland smelled of spice this morning, not his usual muskiness. She knew he'd pilfered that aftershave from Armie, but he'd tell her he'd borrowed it off him if she asked; that was his way. It was not up to her to question it; her way was just to survive.

Perhaps he had a date? The idea formed in her mind, stayed there. She looked at Roland's large bulk, snoring under his precious newspapers as if they were ancient Biblical tomes. Was that another of his secrets? Fiona prodded him with her foot. He wobbled a bit, sending out more aftershave fumes. Still, it was better than his usual odour of food stains or damp fur coming off his overcoat collar. Her sensitive nose would probably had been horrified at that, in another life.

"Get off," he moaned, rubbing at dark streaked eyes. He grunted then sat up, yawning as he swirled the last dregs of cider around his mouth before placing the bottle on his trolley. "You going up Central Park later?"

"Maybe."

The cider bottle gave a pop, then deflated. Roland had squeezed it between layers of rugs and piles of used newspapers. She noticed he loved to collect *The New York Times*, as if keeping up with the New York news kept him on the pulse of city life. He'd told her once, a long time ago, that he'd wanted to be an accountant. She'd been warming her hands on the bonfire under the bridge at the time.

"That's a boring dream for a young kid, I know," he'd said, blowing on icy hands. "But I'd always liked figures."

That had sealed their friendship, that one snippet of conversation.

"Maybe I will take a trip uptown," she said, lightly touching his battered corduroys. "You going up there?"

He nodded. "Been a while for you," he replied. "Think you can handle it?"

"I know I can," she said.

Roland's eyes widened as a jogger puffed past. A heavy-set man with damp hair and a dark patch under his armpits. He gave them a wide berth, jogging past a small triangular patch of greenery. His avoidance unnerved her for a moment. But that was the city for you - no eye contact, no warm greeting - nothing.

Fiona suddenly longed to get out of here, go to the suburbs. Her grandma's house was upstate. It had oodles of space, with horses and fields and wholesome food. If she could just muster the bus fare....

"We'll see." Roland broke through her thoughts.

"Don't nag so," she bristled, back in the moment. "I'm always fine, aren't I?"

"Not nagging."

"Are so."

It was his turn to sigh. "You have to face it; he ain't coming back. They got him, fair and square."

"I know," she started, hackles rising. "Have I said anything?"

"You don't have to, it's written on your face."

It was out there; he'd said it. The memory of Jack was uppermost in her mind now. Her baby boy in her arms, the smell of shampoo in his golden hair, his face a mass of freckles. What would he be doing today? Tomorrow? Was he missing her?

She hoped they'd placed him somewhere safe, somewhere she could find him again. Her heart swelled, filling her chest. She sat up straighter, ran a hand through her hair. Must be respectable. Roland noticed her mood change and shook his head, saying nothing.

"Come on, we can't stay here all day." He shuffled to his feet, his old bones cracking as he stood up. "Cops will be over shortly, looking for that pervert in the park. He strolls around the daytime now, so Armie told me. Paedo bastard."

"What does he know?" Fiona replied, thinking of that weasel, Armie. Her boots slid on the smooth marbled pavestones as she and Roland fell into step with each other, trolleys facing front. All her worldly goods, in one square foot of mesh, wheels spinning precari-

*Her baby boy in her arms, the smell of shampoo in his golden hair, his face a mass of freckles."*

ously.

A young woman hurried past, pushing a baby buggy. She looked the other way as she pulled the hood down of the buggy and the toddler inside gave a startled yelp. Fiona felt the tears cloud her vision; she would never get over their rejection of her. It will be better one day, she thought, tucking her scarf under her chin, feeling the warmth of the soft wool. She smoothed down her faded pink mohair jacket, and the woollen dress underneath, covering her thick leggings. Her lifeline. At least this mohair looked better than the last one and scratched less. It would last another winter at least. Her stomach rumbled as she walked, making a tune with the squeak of the trolley wheels. She followed Roland to the sidewalk. Perhaps Aldo was feeling generous today.

Her life had been this way for - how long?

*This was her life now  
— her trolley and  
Roland's kindness. She  
would have been lost  
without him.*

Weeks had become months; she wasn't sure anymore. Only the seasons changed.

She'd lived a normal life, once upon a time. Just the two of them; her and Jack. The thought of her son gave rise to fresh tears. She'd been a single mum, alone in the city, but she'd

worked all hours; at a laundrette in the evening, in the office during the day. Hadn't she made a home for them both?

Fiona stood with her back away from the memorial. It was a gaping reminder. She couldn't imagine them there, not now. Her memories were too painful. This was her life now - her trolley and Roland's kindness. She would have been lost without him.

Sleek limos rushed past as they waited for the lights to change. She saw the flash of a business suit in the back of a car. No doubt heading to Wall Street. A pristine white shirt, dark sunglasses. Maybe she'd worked for the passenger of that car, once. The Trade Centres had seemed invincible then, filling the skyline, the beating hub of the city. She'd filed and typed, then typed again. Took calls from London, New York, Tokyo. Once.

Roland shuffled across the intersection. The park was suddenly

quiet, as if the ghosts of the past were silently watching her. She wasn't going to be one of them, not yet.

Those people she had worked with, every day. Smiled at, nodded a greeting to. Gone. Just an empty space where once she'd taken phone calls, arranged business meetings. The trauma had put an end to her job and almost her life.

Fiona ran a hand across her wrist, felt a tingle coming off the scars; she'd been one of the lucky ones. But the explosions had left her deaf in one ear, and the nightmares wouldn't leave. Who wanted to employ a secretary that couldn't answer the telephone, and had spent months in therapy?

Roland's trolley stumbled over a dip in the road. It veered to the right, spilling some newspapers. Someone hit the horn. Roland chucked a finger up to the car, then waited for her to cross. People brushed past, intent on their day. But she didn't mind. One day she'd be right again, one of the workers. When the nightmares faded, and her mind was clear once more. She would make a home for herself and Jack. Then they could be together once more.

# Shrapnel

Sam Windrim

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The priest closes his book and offers his condolences. For a second, I'm relieved that it's all over and done with. Then I remember that it's not. That it's all only gathering momentum again.

Seconds out, for yet another round of compassionate handshaking and concerned hugging. Sympathisers are tentatively jostling to try and engage with members of the family. Deep down, I know that they all mean well and they're doing this for me but just the same, I can't help but be a little preoccupied at how casually they're walking over people's graves to offer their commiserations. It's like facing a who's who of my life so far. There are childhood friends among them, as well as old neighbours, new neighbours, ex-workmates, people that I only know from the pub, people that I wouldn't really know at all, and some that I'd almost forgotten about entirely.

Most importantly, my ex has been standing nearby, all along. I've long since noticed her, waiting patiently with our son on her hip. When I get the chance to walk over, Kevin puts his arms up to me. I pick him up, hold him close, kiss him tenderly, tell him he's great, remind him of how dearly his nana loved him. There's something in the way he lays his head onto my shoulder that suggests he seems to sense my sadness.



“Thanks for bringing him, Mary.”

The way it sounds, you’d swear it was some giant of a favour instead of simply being the right thing to do. She goes to say something but as if she suddenly seems to think differently, she visibly changes her mind. Instead, she shrugs and offers that familiar smile. It’s exactly the kind of movement that first attracted me to her. Generous and unconsciously sexy... and now, I’ve gone and shocked myself again. My mother’s not even quite buried and already, here I am, thinking with my mickey. There must be something wrong with me, I think to myself.

“I’ll see ye below in Hartigan’s, later on?” she says, as she reaches out to take Kevin back from me.

I nod and offer her a clenched smile. I’m getting shit hot at that. For the last few days, I could have nodded and clench-smiled for Ireland. I kiss Kevin goodbye and watch them both walk away. The child waves back at me but Mary makes no such concession.

After an eternity of seconds spent staring, I feel a hand on my shoulder. The touch is warm and familiar. I don’t even need to look around to recognise that it’s my brother, Patrick.

“Would you look at your man?” he says pointing out a figure, walking amongst the headstones, in the distance. I think that I recognise him as an auld pig of a neighbour from our childhood.

“Is that Paul Kenny?”

“Yeah!” he nudges me on the shoulder as he speaks. “It wouldn’t surprise me if he had a metal detector and a shovel hidden in that umbrella he’s carrying.”

A laugh snorts out and immediately I reproach myself for it having happened. I pray nobody else noticed. You’d be the talk of the town for laughing at your own mother’s funeral.

“Fancy a quick one in the Tavern before we head down to Hartigan’s?”

Thoughtfully, he looks over at Jessica, his wife. She is deep in conversation with our sisters and two or three of our many, many mad aunts.

“Fleck it,” he grins, turning back to me. “Why not, sure?”

Already, I feel better because it’s like there’s a pair of us in it, now. We slink off before any of the girls notice.

In the pub, I wonder if we might have made a mistake coming in. There's no other sinner in the place and silence hangs around, gnawing at us. I study the clouds that are swirling in our settling pints. So does he. I'm trying desperately to find something to say - something that doesn't concern death and funeral arrangements, that is - but nothing will come. At last, he rescues the moment.

"Did you stay long after I left you, last night?"

"Ah, I didn't," I lie, hoping that he won't start into me about my drinking again.

There follows another brittle pause before, eventually, he tries again.

"It was good of Mary to bring little Kevin. She was telling me how they were giving her a hard time at work about getting the time off."

*I wonder if we might have made a mistake coming in. There's no other sinner in the place and silence hangs around, gnawing at us."*

"Mmmm..." I agree, not really wanting to talk about the fuck up I've made of that side of my life, either. Today's bad enough besides shovelling that shit in on top of it.

When the pints are served, we pretend to squabble about who is going to pay for them. It's no surprise when he wins, though. Oh well, I'm thinking, you're the one on the big bucks, Patrick. We're both thinking that, probably.

He nudges my shoulder again as he asks the next question.

"Do you remember that day that she got our ball back off of Pig-Face Kenny?"

The memory brings a smile.

"Do I? That and the time she caught us skipping Mass..."

Patrick laughs out loud.

"Naw," he says. "The best one was the night she caught us making tea up in our room with the water out of the hot water bottle."

"I remember! She dragged us downstairs and force-fed us for about an hour."

"*Did I ever send ye to bed hungry?*" Patrick is mimicking my

mother's voice. "All ye ever have to do is open your mouths and talk..."

His words die away and there's the silence again, right where it always is at every funeral. Lurching around in the background, like an unwelcome guest.

"Come on," I say, jumping off my stool and trying to gloss over it. "That wife of yours will be wondering where you are - not to mention, Mary and Kevin."

Patrick says nothing at all. Doesn't even look up.

He doesn't need to talk, though. I already know what he's thinking. About how Mary and I aren't like him and Jessica. Not together, that is. Maybe, never likely to be, the way things are going. How much that state of affairs so deeply upset our ultra-Catholic mother that she cried to me about it - even on her deathbed for fuck's sake.

I wait for him, hoping he'll say anything at all but he just sips from his pint.

"Come on," I say again and this time, I drain my glass. He rouses to follow on and I can't help noticing that he leaves half of his drink behind.

We're only three steps into Hartigan's Bar but Jessica is already spitting balls of fire.

"Oh ye stopped for a pint, did ye? That's lovely! Whilst I'm stuck here, entertaining your crazy aunts..?"

"Listen, Jessica," I interrupt, "you haven't seen Mary and Kevin, have you?"

Patrick glares at me and I suddenly realise that I have no place in this conversation.

"I'll go to the bar," I say.

"Do," Jessica snaps. The way she put it, she may as well have told me to go to Hell. I don't know why but I'm gutted that Patrick doesn't say something in my defence. I try to catch his eye but he's too busy counting his feet like some scolded, little boy.

The whole thing gathers momentum again. More mourners approach to offer their sympathies. The entire experience unspools into an exercise of show and ceremony. It's like you're a concerned observer in one of the most important moments of your own life. You find yourself going through the motions; caught in a loop of shaking hands, nods of acknowledgement and endless, polite conversations

that mean well but mean nothing really. You buy drinks like they're going to be rationed in the morning. You drink hard but you never feel drunk. And all the time, you have to keep reminding yourself that it would be wrong and pathetic for a grown man to be seen to curl up in a public place and howl like a child.

Some time later - I don't know what time - Mary has come in to the bar. I'm sickened that Kevin isn't with her. I call her over and ask her to sit down beside me. All I want to do is talk to her, one on one, just the two of us like, but two of my mad aunts suddenly decide that this is the perfect time to impose themselves upon us. Worse again, Mary doesn't seem to mind.

They bang on about my parents' wedding day, the day Patrick broke a tooth at someone's communion, how I slipped my mother's disc when I 'came galloping into the world' and, of course, they mustn't forget to fill me in on all the wonderful news of the incredible successes of our unerringly fabulous cousins. One old woman launches into the vagaries of her own aches and pains and why her last doctor simply wasn't good enough but the new fellow is a only a topper. Then, the other is back to firing off little family tales that I'd either happily forgotten or had never heard at all. And for all they have to say, there isn't a damn thing that anyone in their right mind would honestly give two continental shits about.

It's nearly a relief when the bell rings and the lights blink for closing.

'Mary..? Mary, why didn't you bring Kevin?' I hear myself asking, a few minutes later.

Out of nowhere, the words came. We are standing outside the pub and some feckless urge made me abandon a promise I had made earlier to myself, not to make a big deal out of it.

"Ah, not to the pub, love..."

"But it's his grandmother's wake, Mary. You should have brought him."

"He wouldn't be comfortable. He's too young."

"Jesus, Mary...' I know she's right and I hate it when she's right but still... 'Look, can I go back to your place? Just to see him? I'm not angling for anything else, Mary. Just to see him..?'"

I'm only half telling the truth though and we both know it. A

car pulls up. She opens its door.

“Here. Here’s your cab, love.”

“Please? I just want to see him.”

“Ah, you’d only wake him up, love.”

She bundles me into the back of the car. For a brief second, I hold on to a hope that she’s getting in beside me but she doesn’t. She slams the door.

“Where to?” the driver asks.

I ignore him and roll down the window.

She speaks before I can even open my mouth.

“I’ll bring him round tomorrow, love.”

“But you said that before and-”

“Tomorrow, love.”

She tells the driver where my flat is and the car takes off.

“Long day?”

I don’t know what to say to him, so I say nothing at all. Anyway, I’m too busy rooting through my pockets for my keys. I pull them out but, as I do, a ball of loose change clatters all around the floor of the vehicle.

“Shrapnel’s a curse alright,” the driver half-jokes but I’m not paying him any great attention.

I’m too busy examining the keyring in my hand. It’s one of those stupid, novelty things. A little gift from Mary, in happier times. There’s a picture of Kevin on one side and another of the three of us, back when we were still together, on the reverse. I ponder it for some time. Squeeze it in my fist.

I can’t help myself. After the first tear slips out, the rest just flow too easily. Even the driver gets embarrassed and starts to stare straight ahead. Still trying to stem my tears, I gaze out the window at the passing lights. Now and then, the radio might crackle to life with some anonymous voice, offering destinations but mostly, our journey is made in silence.

*For a brief second, I hold on to a hope that she’s getting in beside me but she doesn’t and slams the door.*

# Trains

Margaret Cahill

*Margaret Cahill grew up in Offaly and now lives in Limerick. Her fiction has featured in the Autonomy anthology (New Binary Press 2018), The Incubator Journal, Crannog Magazine, The Galway Review, The Limerick Magazine, Wordlegs, Boyne Berries, and The Linnet's Wings. Her competition listings for fiction include Cuirt New Writing Prize, Over the Edge New Writer of the Year, Allingham Arts Flash Fiction, UCC's Carried on Waves and the Hungry Hill Short Short Story Competition. She also dabbles in non-fiction writing about art and music, with articles published on Head-Stuff.org, circaartmagazine.net and goldenplec.com.*

Tommy doesn't know where his Mam is taking him. He was about to leave for school this morning but she stopped him at the front door and said they were going out together instead. She is holding his hand as they walk down the street and her skin feels lovely and warm against his.

He feels bad now that he sometimes wishes Shane Phelan's Mam was his instead. Shane's mother brings him fun places and gives him cake in his lunchbox and she always smiles at him. Tommy's Mam doesn't bake or smile any more. She doesn't do much of anything except lie on the sofa and watch TV.

When his Dad rang last week, Tommy told him about going to the shop after school and cooking dinner all by himself. He didn't correct his Dad when he said that must have been a nice break for his Mam. Tommy doesn't mind doing the cooking, and besides, he likes having potato waffles and chicken nuggets most days. Sometimes he buys sausages instead but never fish fingers. He hates fish. It'd be nice to have Pizza every now and then but the oven has been broken for months.

He hasn't seen his Dad since last Christmas. They were used to him disappearing for weeks at a time, so at first they didn't think anything of him not being around. He'd usual-

ly walk in the back door unannounced when they'd least expect it and they'd never know how long he would be around for. Tommy loved having his Dad there, for those first few days anyway. His Mam would be all cheered up and happy but then they'd start saying mean things to each other and get crosser and crosser until the two of them would be shouting all the time. Then his Dad would pack his bags, walk out the front door and they'd not hear from him until the next time. It had been like that for as long as Tommy could remember - in the back door and out the front. Except, now there wasn't going to be a next time. His Dad sent them a letter from Scotland, just before school finished up for the summer, to say that he was living there now and wouldn't be back. He said he'd ring Tommy, when he had the time. It was around then his Mam stopped going to work and everything changed at home.

They turn right at the church on to Patrick Street.

"Where are we going Mam?"

he asks, even though she didn't answer his question the first time.

"For a walk. We might go see some trains."

Tommy loves trains. The bright red engine his Dad bought him still sits on his bedside table and it is the first thing he sees every morning when he opens his eyes. He doesn't play with it that much even though he loves it. He wants to keep it bright and shiny so he can show his Dad how well he has looked after it next time he sees him, whenever that will be.

"But the station's that way," Tommy says, pointing in the opposite direction.

"I know," she says, gently pulling him onwards. "We're not going to the station."

They stop at the Centra and his Mam buys him a ninety-nine, even though it isn't sunny out. He follows her slowly, licking the ice-cream as he walks. She turns off the street towards the trail that runs between the graveyard and the train tracks. Tommy doesn't like the graveyard. It always makes his Mam sad when they go there. It kind of

*It had been like that for as long as Tommy could remember—in the back door and out the front.*

makes him sad too, though he thinks that's silly, since he can't remember his sister. He was just one when she died. Their Dad used to live with them all the time back then but Tommy can't remember that either. Sometimes, he lies in bed at night and imagines what it would be like to have a big sister to play with and a Mam and Dad that live together and don't fight. He plays through scenes in his mind over and over of walking to school with his sister who laughs at all his jokes, his Dad tucking him in at night and reading him stories, his Mam smiling all the time and a trip to the beach where they build huge sandcastles together and swim in the sea.

"There's no trains, Mam," Tommy moans as they reach the train tracks.

*"You're a good boy Tommy," she says, leaning down and putting her hand on his shoulder. "You're the best little boy anyone could ask for."*

"There will be soon," his mother answers, glancing at her watch.

"Come on slow coach, we can watch from the bridge."

They continue on until they come to the stone bridge that rises steeply over the railway track. Tommy stands on his toes to look over the thick stone wall of the bridge but there is still no sign of any trains.

"Tommy," his Mam calls him.

Her voice is a bit wobbly. Tommy hopes she isn't going to cry.

"You're a good boy Tommy," she says, leaning down and putting her hand on his shoulder. "You're the best little boy anyone could ever ask for."

As her eyes fill with tears Tommy looks at his shoes. She wraps her arms around him and squeezes him tight.

"The best little boy," she repeats.

He wonders why she is always crying so much if he really is the best little boy. When she finally lets him go, he has a big wet patch on his left shoulder. She wipes her tears away with her hands before bending down to kiss his forehead.

She looks at her watch again and then lifts him up onto the



bridge wall. He can see the train tracks stretching far off into the distance in both directions. His Mam pulls herself up onto the bridge beside him and swings around so that her legs are dangling over the edge.

“Come on,” she says, holding her hand out to him.

Tommy doesn’t want to move any closer. He can see the tracks fine from where he is but her face crumples up and her eyes are getting glassy again, so he takes her hand and shuffles over beside her. He feels a bit shaky if he looks down so he tries to concentrate on what’s ahead instead. Suddenly, there is a small pin-prick of light in the distance.

“Look, Tommy!” his Mam calls out, sounding both excited and teary at the same time. “It’s the train. Right on time.”

The light gets bigger and bigger as the train gets closer to them. He can hear its engine now and the rhythmic clatter as it speeds across the tracks. The train horn blasts out in bursts. The noise of the engine, and the now constant roar of the horn, is deafening as the train comes hurtling towards them. His Mam is leaning over, looking right down at the train tracks. Then she looks up at the oncoming train. Tommy tries to move back but his Mam’s grip tightens around his wrist. He is dizzy and scared.

“Mam...Mam,” he yells but he can’t hear his own voice above the noise.

It is like one of those awful dreams where he is screaming for help but no sound comes out of his mouth.

“Mam, I wanna get down,” he pleads, even though she probably won’t hear him.

Then suddenly with a whoosh of wind that whips across his face, the train passes through the bridge below them and is gone. Tommy doesn’t realise he is crying until the quietness returns. He can’t catch his breath through the force of the sobs that wrench his body.

“Oh Jesus, Tommy. I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” his Mam says, with the same look on her face that she has when she forgets to wake him up in time for school or when there is no money in her purse for food. She jumps down onto the road and pulls him down from the bridge. He vomits up a milky white puddle of melted ice-cream. It gets all

over the sleeve of his jumper even though he tries to aim for the ground. He looks around for his Mam but she is crumpled up on the road, her bare knees grazed by the rough tarmac, her hands covering her face.

Tommy wipes his mouth with his clean sleeve. He watches a drop of blood as it trickles slowly from his Mam's left knee onto her delicate cream-coloured skirt. It is the same colour red as the train beside his bed, the one his Dad gave him. Tommy doesn't think he likes that train much anymore. He thinks that maybe he'll put it in big black bin out the back when he gets home.

## Q & A

with Margaret Cahill

**Where are you from, where are you now, and how did you get from A to B? How did you arrive at writing short stories?**

I'm originally from Tullamore in Co. Offaly. I came to Limerick for a year to do a Masters but got a job teaching in the University afterwards and twenty two years later I'm still living here. way.

I had an idea that I wanted to write but didn't know how to get started so I did a couple of evening courses in creative writing in the University ten years ago. After that, I joined a Writers' Group that grew out of one of those courses and we've been meeting every month since for the past eight years to critique each other's short stories and novels. Having a regular deadline every month, seeing my work improve through their input and subsequently getting some publications and some competition listings has kept me going.

**All three winning stories have very prominent mother characters. What does "mother" mean to you and how did this play a role in writing "Trains"?**

My own personal meaning of "mother" has no relationship to my story at all. To me, my mother is a security blanket, the person who I always come back to, to feel centred and grounded and a source of unconditional love. But I know that isn't everyone's experience of a mother. The family provides the most important relationships in our lives. It moulds us emotionally and psychologically as people but that can be in a positive or negative way.

Although the mother is a prominent character in my story, it's told by the child in first-person and so it's really their story and about how their life is affected by the actions of their mother and the mental health crisis she is going through.

**Do you let your mom read your stuff?**

Sometimes. She doesn't generally read fiction, so if I do, it would be a fairly straightforward story and nothing too experimental or risqué.

**If you could elicit one thing from your reader, what would it be?**

I want the reader to identify with the characters I create, to be drawn into their world, to have an affinity with them and to be invested in what happens to them. That may teach them something about themselves in the process but I want to find homes for all of the characters I have created so that other people can meet and feel for them, as I do.

**Describe the road from rejection to publication in Silver Apples Magazine.**

I started this story back in 2013. Over the years it has been rejected by competitions three times and literary journals six times. I would have reviewed and edited it quite a few times in the 2-3 years after starting it. I bring all of my work to my Writers' Group and it would have been reviewed by them a couple of times also. I had just about given up on it and dug it out for one last edit to submit it to Silver Apples Magazine. This is the fifteenth edit of the story, though a lot of those last ones were small changes as I tried to tweak the ending to pull the story together.

**Any advice for those who were not selected for the shortlist in this competition?**

It's hard to be objective about a story you've been working on for a long time. There are two main things that can help at that stage. The first is to put it away for six months and don't look about it or think about it. You can then come back to it with fresh eyes and read it objectively as you would someone else's work and it's easier to see what works and what doesn't and what needs to be cut.

The other alternative is to give it to readers/writers you trust to be completely honest with you. You do need to be careful about who you entrust your work to through. They need to be people who can really analyse the writing to tell you why a character's actions aren't believable, why your use of language supports or interrupts the atmosphere, if the point of view or tense it's written in isn't working etc. You need

to make the story the best possible story you can before sending it out.

Ultimately, not all stories that you write are going to be good enough to be published in an already saturated market and knowing when to give up on one, put in in the bottom drawer and move on is one of the hardest things to figure out as a writer. Kevin Barry writes something like twelve stories a year. He knows himself that there will only be two or three good stories out of that but he finishes every story because that's how he learns and hones his craft. Sometimes a story will have served its purpose in teaching you how to write and can act as a catalyst for better stories to come.

**What does it look like where you write? What can you tolerate/not tolerate about that space?**

I do all of my editing sitting on my sofa with my laptop on my knee. That's what I consider the real work of writing. The worst thing about it is the distraction of the internet. It's all too easy to open up a browser 'just for a minute' and to end up down an internet rabbit hole for an hour.

I find that I come up with new stories from scratch most often when I'm away from home. If I'm somewhere new, with different people around me, new things, in a different environment and out of the regular routine of everyday life, that's when I tend to get my best ideas. I always bring a notebook with me on trips and scribble down phrases or scraps of dialogue or a page of an idea that comes to me and some of those turn into stories later. I also have a text app on my phone that I use when I'm out and about and an idea comes to me.

**Are you working on anything now? What?**

I'm never working on just one thing. I consider all of my unpublished stories works in progress so there is always plenty of work to do in editing them. I have a bunch of stories that are nearly there, others that are in progress, a bunch of first drafts and a whole load of sketches, scenes and false starts that never went anywhere.

I turned one of my stories into a radio play earlier this year, wrote

some creative non-fiction, have written some short flash fiction pieces and have had some music and art pieces published. I'm trying to be open to whatever new writing possibilities present themselves and to give new things a go.

**What book do you wish you could erase from your mind so you could enjoy it for the first time all over again? Why?**

Julian Gough's *Jude* books. I came home from a trip to Galway a number of years ago with a bag full of discounted books I'd bought in Charlie Byrne's bookshop. *Jude in London* was one of them. I couldn't get my head around it at all at the start. I'd come from an academic background and was used to reading straightforward realist fiction. The story began with two people floating across the Irish sea on a grand piano and I thought it was nonsense at first. Eventually, I relaxed my expectations that the story had to make sense, got into the flow of it and ended the book thinking it was the funniest thing I'd ever read. I went back to the first *Jude* book then (*Jude: Level 1*) and from there it led me to all sorts of other surrealist books, from Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*, to Gunter Grass's *The Tin Drum*, David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, *Ulysses* and Alisdair Gray's *Lanark*. Each in turn stretched my reading brain and opened my mind up to the possibilities available to the fiction writer. They changed my style of writing and I'm only just starting to see that now as I move away from the more traditional stories I used to write, of which "Trains" is a good example, to madder, more adventurous, fun stories where anything can happen and where the bounds of reality can be played with. Now that I'm more tuned in to reading this sort of fiction, I'd love to be able to go back and read Julian's two books fresh for the first time. I know I'd find them even funnier now.

# The Machine

Aingeala Flannery

Marcus Mackey was doing me a favour. He knew it and I knew it. He was about ten years older than me, with rust brown eyes and a soft belly that hung out over his jeans. He wore his hair in a mouse-grey ponytail, tucked under the collar of his biker jacket. I'd watch out for him on rent day, pulling up on the kerb in his third or fourth hand Toyota Estate, always checking his reflection in the car window before he came to the door and rang the bell.

"It's fifty a week—cash—on top of the rent cheque," he said when we moved in. "Can you stretch to that?"

"Sure," I said, handing him a Biro and the rent allowance form to sign.

"And it's just yourself and your daughter?"

I nodded. Saoirse was stomping around upstairs, already Blu-tacking posters to the bedroom wall—the bassline of whatever she was listening to thumping on the kitchen ceiling.

"Are you into music yourself?" he asked.

"A bit."

He gave me the once over, not caring that I noticed when his eyes stalled on my breasts.

"I play a bit meself," he said. "In the hotel at the weekends."

"Right."

*Aingeala Flannery is a writer based in Dublin, Ireland. Her work has been shortlisted for awards including the RTÉ Francis MacManus Short Story Competition, the Sunday Business Post/Penguin Ireland Short Story Competition, the Bath International Short Story Award, and the Mairtín Crawford Award. She was a finalist in the Irish Writers' Centre Novel Fair 2018, and was the winner of the 2019 Harper's Bazaar Short Story Competition. Aingeala completed an MFA in Creative Writing at UCD in 2019. She is working on a novel.*

“Classics mostly. Don Henley, The Eagles, a bit of Zeppelin, and The Doors. I can put your name on the door,” he said.

“Thanks.”

“If there’s a problem—with the house—or anything, I’m on the mobile.”

I asked him to get rid of the black recliner that was pocked with cigarette burns—it had sponge the colour of rancid cheddar bursting through the ripped vinyl.

“Put it out in the yard,” he said.

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I got a job cleaning at one of the guesthouses. So long as I showed up on time and the work was done right, the owner, Muriel, was willing to pay me off the books.

“I know how it is girl,” she said.

Awkward as I felt asking, I didn’t want to bump into her signing on in the post office. You couldn’t get away with that sort of thing in a small town like Tramore.

We had been living in Waterford the previous year when Saoirse turned twelve. Suddenly she was all legs and I’d to go into Shaw’s to have her fitted for a bra. She was getting looks, not from lads her own age, but from teenagers, and older men in cars. I watched them watching her, in her school jumper and skirt, the weight of her books dragging her back as we walked up the hill to our estate, keyrings and bag charms jangling with each bouncy step she took. I knew then I’d never let my daughter walk up that road alone from school.

We only moved seven miles out the road to the coast, but it feels like another country here. The morning sky is bright and filled with gulls. When you step out into it the air it tastes salty. Before I go to work, I put a ham and coleslaw roll into Saoirse’s bag, I leave a bowl of cornflakes and a banana on the kitchen table, and I call up the stairs to her that it’s time to get up for school.

At work, I turn around the rooms for the early check-ins, stripping the beds and putting on fresh sheets and pillow cases. I run a duster along the wood, Hoover the carpet, empty the bathroom bin—there’s normally only a plastic razor or a couple of cotton buds in it. Sometimes a guest leaves a bloody sanitary towel, unwrapped. What kind of person does that?



When I'm finished Muriel offers me a cup of tea. It's nice of her, but I don't take it. On Monday and Wednesday there's a Zumba class I go to in Seascape Health and Fitness. On Tuesdays I sign on. On Fridays Muriel pays me two-hundred Euro for the week. I buy pizzas in Lidl and a bottle of red wine that I'll drink watching the TV with Saoirse.

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The washing machine broke five months after we moved in. It was in the middle of the spin cycle when the innards came undone, for a couple of minutes it appeared to be having a seizure, jumping up and down on the lino. The noise was unbelievable. It let off an almighty shudder, then a groan before spluttering water from its undercarriage, and stopping dead. After a few minutes I opened the door, and water gushed out, soaking my feet. I reached into the buckled metal drum and hauled the clothes out, Saoirse's school uniform landing black and heavy as a seal on the kitchen floor.

*It was in the middle of the spin cycle with the innards came undone...*

*The washing machine is broken.*

Marcus Mackey did not reply to my text. Not that evening, or for the rest of the week.

I remember thinking at the time that it must be great to live in America, like in *Friends*, where there's a laundromat on every corner. Clean smelling places with industrial sized machines that wash and dry your clothes with futuristic power and speed. I would sit there reading a magazine or look out the window at the city buzzing by, while my neighbours folded their t-shirts and pyjamas and duvet covers into warm neat piles. There is community in laundromats, I thought. In Ireland, people had their own washing machines in their own houses. Own. I didn't own anything. I texted Marcus again.

*Tied up. Drop down to the hotel tomorrow nite?* He replied.

I told Muriel my machine was broken and could I wash Saoirse's uniform in hers until the replacement arrived. She looked at me kind of slant-eyed and said alright. Then she informed me there were public machines outside the big petrol station on the way into the town.

"The Maxol?"

“Indeed,” she said, “isn’t the world gone half-cracked.”

The machines at the Maxol are on the forecourt beside the Air Vacuum and Water station. Inside is a café, a rectangle of parquet flooring laid out with brushed steel tables and chairs, where you can drink coffee from the self-serve *Frank and Honest* machine as you watch the freefall of your clothes in the giant portholes outside. If you get bored counting down the digits as you wait for your cycle to end, you can check out the car registration plates at the petrol pumps, to see who is local and who is not.

Waterford. Waterford. Dublin.

Wexford. Waterford, again.

Cork.

It costs ten Euro to wash and dry a load at the garage. I suppose

it’s handy enough, and I might have given up on asking Marcus to replace our machine, until I noticed the dank aroma that seemed to attach itself aggressively to the synthetic fibres of Saoirse’s school jumper.

“You smell like a wet dog.”

She jumped up from her homework, and stormed out of the room, roaring “don’t you start on me too.”

*I would’ve bought it myself if I had a credit card, but then the stinky creep would inherit it when he kicked us out. We’d go as we arrived, with everything we own in the boot of a taxi.*

After a couple of hours she came downstairs, all red and puffy from crying. They’d been barking and whistling at her in school, she said.

“Maddie Kenny told me I smell like a bitch in heat.”

“You tell that bibe I’ll break her face if she starts on you again.”

Saoirse wore her blouse and skirt to school the next day and I walked up to the Maxol to complain about the smell off her jumper. The girl on the counter shrugged.

“People put dog beds in the machine,” she said.

“That shouldn’t be allowed.”

“It isn’t,” she replied.

“You should put up a sign.”

She cast a jaded glance over my shoulder at the queue forming behind me.

I got a text from Marcus, saying he'd be down to look at the machine during the week. He never came.

*Marcus, can you fix the machine?*

*Marcus, will I get a new machine out of the rent?*

When I told Muriel about the dog beds in the Maxol she wasn't one bit surprised.

"Get that landlord of yours to fix the machine," she said.

I did our washing in the guesthouse again that weekend, but I knew I was pushing my luck. It wouldn't be easy to come by another under the counter job, never mind work that I could do while Saoirse was at school, or sleeping until midday at the weekend. I bought Muriel a bunch of Oriental lilies to assure her I wasn't the sort to take advantage.

*Marcus, Harvey Norman have a machine on sale for 149 Euros (plus delivery).*

I would've bought it myself if I had a credit card, but then the stingy creep would inherit it when he kicked us out. We'd go as we'd arrived, with everything we own in the boot of a taxi.

I took to washing our clothes by hand in the bath, then I hung them dripping on a clothes horse by the double radiator in the kitchen. The heat came on for an hour in the morning, and three in the evening. Our washing started to smell before it started to dry, the window fogged up with condensation and a rash of black mould appeared on the ceiling. One evening, as I spooned pasta into bowls for our tea, I glanced over at Saoirse and the look on her face was one of pure disappointment: at the state of the place, at the cheap spaghetti, at me.

"The house is damp," was all she said.

\*\*\*\*\*

It occurred to me that I had been very unlucky with the Maxol machines—that I had stuffed our clothes in just after somebody else had pulled their dog beds out. I decided to give the place another go. I'd eaten a jam doughnut and was almost finished my coffee, counting down the digits on my tumble dryer when a silver SUV pulled up in front of the machines and blocked my view. A man got out. He was carrying a pair of fleece dog beds, each the size of a child's paddling

pool. He tossed them into the machine, inserted his coinage and was walking back around his massive car by the time I intercepted him.

“You’re not allowed put dog beds in the machines,” I said.

He looked stunned.

“Who are you?” Then giving me the once over, he added: “go fuck yourself.”

He got into the driver’s seat. I threw the dregs of my coffee at his side window. As it dripped in milky rivulets down the glass I noticed a child’s face inside the car staring out at me. A little boy of about two, his mouth clamped around a bottle teat and a halo of curls so wild they looked like a wig.

His father lowered his window and as he drove away, he shouted, “Y’know, you’re only a knacker.”

Behind me, the Maxol dryer beeped loudly. I took our clothes out. I held them to my nose before I folded them into the laundry bag. They smelled okay.

## Q & A

with Aingeala Flannery

**Where are you from, where are you now, and how did you get from A to B? How did you arrive at writing short stories?**

My background is in journalism, which is full of people who aspire to write more than news and features. I made the leap about three years ago. Now, I only write four or five columns a year as a journalist. I had a few scraps of short stories written over the years, and once I moved on from media these stories became my writing outlet. I felt liberated... until the self-doubt and imposter syndrome set in.

**All three winning stories have very prominent mother characters. What does “mother” mean to you and how did this play a role in writing “The Machine”?**

I don't think of *The Machine* as a story about motherhood, it's a story about class and injustice. The narrator is doing her best, as a mother, as a person, as an employee, as a tenant, but the odds are stacked against her at every turn.

**If you could elicit one thing from your reader, what would it be?**

The urge to read more.

**Do you let your mom read your stuff?**

If she wants to.

**Describe the road from rejection to publication in *Silver Apples Magazine*.**

It was rejected once. I don't think I changed it much. I wrote the story in early 2019 during an MFA in Creative Writing at UCD, so it got quite a going over by my supervisor and my classmates.

**Any advice for those who were not selected for the shortlist in this competition?**

Go again.

**What does it look like where you write? What can you tolerate/not tolerate about that space?**

I write in the box-room of my house, looking out the upstairs window at trees and cranes. The room has a high ceiling and a pencil drawing by PJ Lynch on the wall. My writing table is lovely and old, but I have yet to find the perfect chair.

**Are you working on anything now? What?**

There's a novel bouncing around in my head. I have the characters and know where I'm beginning the story. I'm off to the University of Limerick Winter School in Doolin in a few weeks to make a start on it.

**What would your first question after waking up be if you had been cryogenically frozen for the last 100 years?**

Where's the coffee?

# Mother's Nature

Eoin Madigan

Mam went missing on Paddy's Day. She'd it planned weeks, they reckoned, on a day she knew everyone would be out, painting the town green. Dad found the note when he came home that night. Sobered him up like an ice bath, it did. Her many grievances were distilled, in the end, into one sorrowful word: *Goodbye.*

The official consensus was that she's thrown herself in the river. The tide was high at the time and going out. Her body could be anywhere in or along the miles of estuary between the last bridge and the sea. Two weeks searching revealed nothing.

\*\*\*\*\*

The tomatoes I'd been planting over the few years did ache my heart something awful. No matter where I stuck them - in the soil, in planters, in the polytunnel - the bastards wouldn't grow for me. No manure or fertiliser would do it. I consulted every horticultural and agricultural book in my little library, to no avail.

The government had enacted legislation to force farmers to grow food instead of fuel, crops instead of livestock. There wasn't an idle pair of hands for years for the power of work to be done. Meat all but disappeared from the diet for a while, you'd be lucky even to get a scrawny chicken every other month.

Still you'd be fair shook after a night on

*Eoin Madigan is a tall, bald, bearded Limerickman. He's a freelance translator who's been writing poetry and short stories since he woke up one morning as a teenager convinced this was a good idea. When not working or reading he can be found, pint in hand, shouting at his beloved Munster Rugby in the flesh or on a screen. He speaks fluent French and holds an MA in French & Comparative Literature from the University of Kent.*

*His short story, Mother's Nature, bubbled up from his belief that the world is utterly screwed, and he figured that planetary misery surely deserves some personal company.*

the *poitín*, or any of the homebrew ciders or beers. Public houses went by the wayside for a time and everyone just did the rounds to the neighbours with a few barrels and kegs or their own produce. Fine old times.

\*\*\*\*\*

The mother is always the keystone in the family, shatter her and the arch collapses. This thing was more of a crumble, though, a slow crumble while the other stones grew plump with moss and melded together. Now it had finally found its speed and the whole thing was falling apart.

Mam's mind had started to go around the same time as the oil, a cute little confluence of catastrophe. Myself and anyone who listened to the world's rhythms

*The mother is always  
the keystone in the  
family, shatter her and  
the arch collapses.*

had been growing our own veg for years, out our back gardens. We put broken glass on the high walls because hunger would make people climb, you see, make them steal; I saw bloody handprints on the wall more than once. Hundreds and hun-

dreds of cans of tinned food had we in the attics, under the stairs, in dead spaces of our homes.

The collapse of civilisation wasn't too harsh on us on our little island, all told. Mam's end, though... ah no. That's another tale entirely. At least the way the world fell apart was linear, you know, not hopping and lurching back and forth through time. Make you awful nauseous, it would.

\*\*\*\*\*

I'm of the lucky few in that I was never mad about tea or coffee. It's a staple of conversation in every shebeen nowadays: "Remember your last cup of coffee? Your last mug of scald?" It's one of the only tangible things, really; no one ever asks where you were when the last sup of oil was sucked from the ground. Though you might remember when the pumps ran dry, alright, or hearing the rumble of this distant war or that.

It was a long, drawn-out thing was the end, years of gradual



and heaving decline. Just like mam.

\*\*\*\*\*

Then came the last explosion when the mother finally went atomic. It was myself, the two sisters, the father, and my eldest sister's little fella, he must have been nine at the time. Christmas Day. As was often the way, what started out as an innocuous conversation mushroom-clouded into a new world war.

My mother let fly every scream and curse in her, calling my father a fucking mute for not answering her, and the eldest daughter a stupid bitch for Christ knows what. Grievances forty and fifty years passed were thrown at my father's feet, and ones twenty and thirty years passed fucked in my sister's face.

Nonsense, all of it nonsense.

*And he in hospital he said tell no one* [flaring nostrils]

*There he's in the gate now* [indignant]

*She came into the house like she owned the place* [pacing]

*But. She. Told. Marie.* [eyes wide]

*To take me away* [standing up]

*Rooting through his things* [hands flailing]

*Marie. Told. Louise* [betrayed]

*I don't want to be here* [crying]

*And she never once there and he alive* [screaming]

*Louise didn't call, and she his sister* [slamming fist]

*I'm not going back out to that fucking place* [resolute]

*And he barely cold in the ground* [tears]

It was as if there were a few different personalities talking across each other in mam's head, a novel from multiple viewpoints put through a shredder, and she tried to put it back together again.

She never quite managed it.

\*\*\*\*\*

The sister's little fella was silent at the start, frozen to his chair. Came a lull in the shouting and he slid off his perch and ambled over to his grandmother. He stretched out his arms to her and she raised a hand to him and raked her nails across his cheek. He let out an unmerciful screech and fell, clutching his face. Blood trickled down his left cheek. The sister leapt up and put herself between grandmother and child.

She turned to mam with the words, "You're a fucking monster."

She scooped up her boy and hurried out the door.

After three hours of the most vitriolic roaring and venomous insults, the mother eventually calmed down. She stared at the hand that had struck the little fella. By then the doctor was on his way but all he got out of her, as she sobbed and rattled in her dining room chair, was, "I don't want to be here, I just don't want to be here."

"You're a very sad person," he said as he scribbled a prescription for a few horse tranquilisers. Later, he cranked up the dosage on whatever other decoctions he had her taking, then on his merry way was he.

Some fucking use.

\*\*\*\*\*

"You need that... that chemical fertiliser," she said, leaning on the blackthorn cane she didn't need.

"I know, mam, but there's hardly any around."

"What about carcasses?"

"I've no animals, sure. No one near does."

She shrugged then hobbled out of the polytunnel, leaving me to contemplate the empty space where my tomatoes should have been.

\*\*\*\*\*

In the new year the father started angling his dining room chair out to the left, not to leave a blind spot for herself, you know? In and out she'd patter, fag hanging from her mouth like hope from a cliff, and you never knew what was going on behind the eyes. All seemed fine, but we knew too well her powers of illusion to dream that an end had come.

We knew the fallout festered.

It had only taken two and a half decades for it all to come to a head, which is short enough in Irish terms of repressed trauma. The uncle - the mother's brother, that is - passed away all those years ago of a sudden with some undiagnosed heart defect. Well mam fell out with God over that and they never reconciled and that was the start of it.

Antidepressants for years on end; occasional episodes, psychosis maybe, sure who knows? The three of us, her children, and the auld fella were in denial all the while, dumbstruck in the face of these breakdowns, these lash-outs. Not at all unlike - I can see the cogs

turning in your head there – the world’s paralysis in the face of the approaching edge.

\*\*\*\*\*

The social contract held, albeit after a fair bit of bending. Everyone had to become a farmer, a grower, a doer, for a time. If you didn’t graft, you didn’t eat.

I don’t recall now in what order it all started to wither away, like a crowd leaving a funeral. The electricity held for a while, until the day you’d flick a switch and nothing would happen. Before that, even, there were tales of people ringing for an ambulance and a recorded message saying there was no petrol to run them anymore, look for your nearest doctor.

All of this was to be expected, you see, but people didn’t listen.

They died up and down the country in manners that a smidgen of preparation or cop-on might have prevented. Infected cuts and the like. A biochemist friend of mine made himself indispensable growing

batches of penicillin and other simple antibiotics. Any knowledge at all like that was enough to make a petty king of a man.

When the universities began to collapse, doctors and chemists and the like found themselves taking apprentices so their know-how wouldn’t slink with them into the grave. People fought and died over libraries and any other repositories of knowledge, for they were the stuff of survival now.

Soon enough came the day when I couldn’t afford petrol for the drive across town to work. Public transport rumbled on for a while but that too eventually ground to a halt. I hung on for a bit of redundancy, but even the corporate behemoth I worked for could offer only a fraction of the statutory.

It bothered me little enough. I’d the house paid off and had odd jobs to keep the roof over my head and food in my belly. The growing was going well by this stage – save for the tomatoes – and I’d never had so much free time in my life to relax and to read and to converse. Never had I been leaner.

*Everyone had to become a farmer, a grower, a doer, for a time. If you didn’t graft, you didn’t eat.*

I was quite enjoying the end of civilisation, all told.

\*\*\*\*\*

Mam didn't make noise anymore, it was the noise that made her. She'd drop fuck knows what onto the bedroom floor above then move it about in erratic thunderclaps. Downstairs, the screeching of chair on tile, pots and pans and plates a-clatter. Needless. Then there was the smoker's cough, as infuriating as it was inevitable. I longed for the day the tobacco was deemed surplus to the ships' cargo, but there was a savage mark-up on it, you see.

She'd no other way to remind us that she was still alive but the coughing and the noise. No other means to impress upon us how frail and close to death she always seemed to be. It was a grim dance she'd talked us all into, whose steps we knew well and never failed to

repeat. Just because she led,  
were we blameless in the follow?

\*\*\*\*\*

*It was a grim dance  
she'd talked us all into,  
whose steps we knew  
well and never failed  
to repeat. Just because  
she led, were we  
blameless to follow?*

"You're sure you want to do  
this?"

Her eyes watered and all  
the memories to ever cause her  
pain started streaming down her  
face. I'd never seen her blue eyes  
so clear. "I'm ready, love."

I gulped back some bile  
and handed her the bottle of pills. "The expiry date is long gone but  
the doctor said they'll still work." My voice was small to me and far  
away. I went to the press and got her out a full bottle of *poitin*. "The  
bath would be best, I think." I had wood burning in the range a few  
hours at that stage to heat the water.

She drew in a ragged breath and nodded. I'd rarely seen her  
face so intent on anything, the lines etched like prophetic runes. She  
stood up and staggered over to me and enveloped me in a strangling  
hug. "Thank you," she said, breathy. "You're the only one..."

"I know. I know." She looked into my eyes for a trace of tears;  
no joy. "I love you, mam." I didn't know if this was still true. "I hope  
there's no pain where you go." That, I did mean.

She smiled, sniffled. "There's nothing, love, don't worry. Noth-

ing.”

She took the bottle of pills and the poitín and shuffled to the bathroom. That was the last time I ever heard her footsteps on the stairs.

\*\*\*\*\*

Remorse? Ah, not really. See that would imply I'd done something wrong. I do feel a twist of something sharp in the heart, though, every now and then when I see the auld fella staring off into the space above the dining room chair where she used to sit. But in the end mam got exactly what she wanted out of our little deal.

And sure haven't my tomatoes been growing something fierce since she passed.

## Q & A with Eoin Madigan

**Where are you from, where are you now, and how did you get from A to B? How did you arrive at writing short stories?**

Born and bred in Limerick, I'm still in Limerick now, but by way of stints in Spain, France, the UK, and the States. I've been scribbling away since my early teens and every now and again a decent short story will take shape.

**All three winning stories have very prominent mother characters. What does "mother" mean to you and how did this play a role in writing "Mother's Nature"?**

"Mother" to me means strength, though a strength that's not always turned towards the best uses.

**If you could elicit one thing from your reader, what would it be?**

If I pour some emotion into a work, ideally, I'd like to elicit that from the reader, or some interpretation of it.

**Do you let your mom read your stuff?**

Jesus no!

**Describe the road from rejection to publication in Silver Apples Magazine.**

It was rejected once before Silver Apples. I didn't make any major changes, just polished it up and got feedback from a few close friends for small tweaks here and there.

**Any advice for those who were not selected for the shortlist in this competition?**

Keep plugging away. I've been writing over 15 years and this is the first win/publication I've managed. Take subjects or themes that are close to you and pull them apart, twist them, mix them up with something else. That's what worked for me here in any case!

**What does it look like where you write? What can you tolerate/not tolerate about that space?**

I write anywhere it's relatively quiet and I know I won't be disturbed for a while. This could be at home or in a café in town.

**Are you working on anything now? What?**

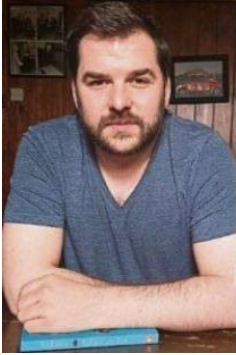
A fantastical tale involving Constantine, the last Emperor of Byzantium, and a pack of dogs that save clueless tourists from honey traps.

**What book do you wish you could erase from your mind so you could enjoy it for the first time all over again? Why?**

*Shogun* by James Clavell. It's the first great sweeping epic I read and it absolutely bowled me over. In fact, I've almost forgotten it all - five more years and it'll be like a new book to me!

**If you could choose any activity as an Olympic sport, what would you have the best chance at winning a medal for?**

Napping.



DAN MOONEY IS A WRITER AND AIR TRAFFIC CONTROLLER, AND AN AMATEUR FILMMAKER WITH ONE OF HIS SHORT FILMS BROADCAST ON NATIONAL TV. DAN IS ALSO A FAN OF AMATEUR DRAMATICS, RUGBY AND IS A FRIEND TO MANY CATS. HE WROTE HIS FIRST PIECE OF FICTION FOR A CHILD-OPERATED LOCAL NEWSPAPER AT AGE TEN AND HAS BEEN WRITING EVER SINCE. FOLLOW DAN ON TWITTER @DANIELMOONBAGS HE LIVES IN LIMERICK, IRELAND.



SILVER APPLES  
MAGAZINE

Creativity Worth Consuming

The Silver Apples Team especially wants to shout out our “Redemption” Short Story competition judges:

**Dan Mooney**

**&**

**Sarah Moore Fitzgerald**

We couldn't have done it without you!



SARAH MOORE FITZGERALD WAS BORN IN NEW YORK, GREW UP IN DUBLIN AND LIVES NEAR LIMERICK WHERE SHE WORKS AS AN ACADEMIC AND TEACHES CREATIVE WRITING ON THE HIGHLY RESPECTED MA IN CREATIVE WRITING PROGRAM AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LIMERICK. SHE IS A PROUD FOUNDING MEMBER OF 'WRITEPACE' A LIMERICK BASED WRITERS' GROUP. SHE IS ABOUT TO PUBLISH HER FIFTH CHILDREN'S NOVEL. FOLLOW HER @SMOOREFITZ



SILVER APPLES  
MAGAZINE

Creativity Worth Consuming



Thank you for reading Issue Twelve:  
“Redemption”

Submissions for Issue Thirteen:  
“Very Superstitious” will open February  
2nd.

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# SILVER APPLES MAGAZINE

Creativity Worth Consuming

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*Creativity Worth Consuming*

***Confessions from the back page:***

*Throw on a Garth Brooks song and I'll sing you every word.*