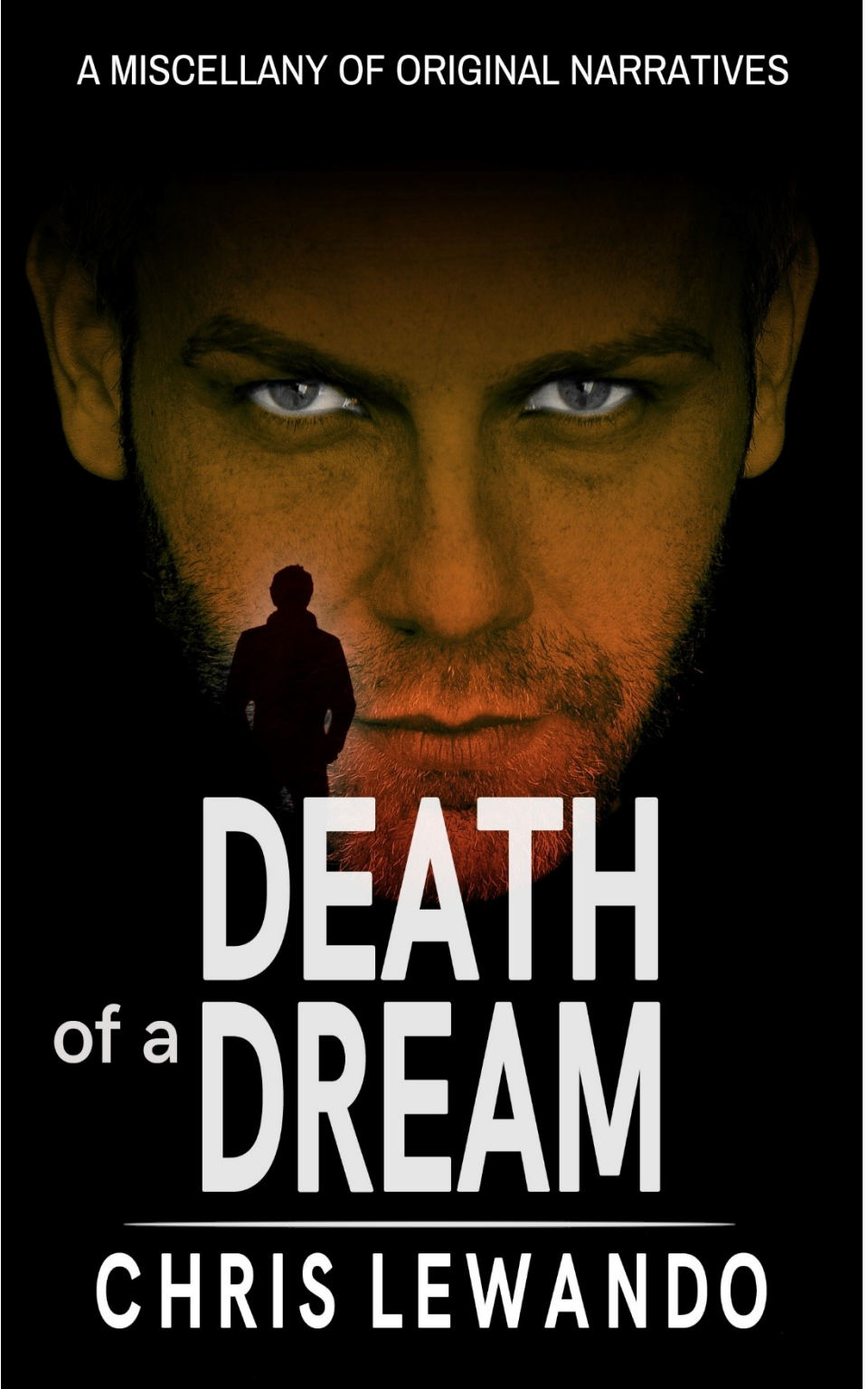
A MISCELLANY OF ORIGINAL NARRATIVES



DEATH of a DREAM

CHRIS LEWANDO

Death of a Dream

a miscellany

of stories, poems, muses,
a play and a memoir

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Note: all views expressed in this fiction are those of the characters, not the author. The names, characters, and incidents are products of the author's imagination. Placenames are not always reflected by physical accuracy. Any similarity to events or individuals is entirely coincidental.

Acknowledgments

To all those readers who enjoy my fiction, thank you. Without you, my imagination would dry out, my stories remain in the wishful cyber-cupboard of my mind.

If you find typos, errors, or storyline glitches, don't judge my creative spirit on them. Let me know so that I can put things right.

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Death of a Dream

novella

Gerry Bright nearly wept when he saw Lewis Kilbride smiling from the front page of the tabloid, already dead. He'd intended to kill the man himself. He had tried to get justice the right way, first, of course. The police had sympathetically offered condolences on his daughter's death, and listened to his accusation, but assured him that Kilbride had not been in any way implicated. Catherine had just been an unlucky victim of chance, in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Gerry knew they were wrong, but if the law wouldn't provide justice, he'd take matters into his own hands. He would undoubtedly end up dead or in prison, but that didn't matter, with his wife and daughter both gone, he had nothing to live for. At first, he wanted to just kill Lewis, then his wild imagination escalated to kidnapping, teasing Kilbride with price tags on his freedom, before gradually letting him know that his millions couldn't buy him anything anymore, not even his life. He wanted to make him pay for Catherine's death in the only way which was right and just. He became a sleuth, following Kilbride's movements, but surrounded as Kilbride had been, by electronic surveillance and bodyguards, he hadn't had a chance.

A thin sound of grief leaked from somewhere deep inside. Gerry thought of the gun hidden in the glove compartment of his car. Getting hold of it had been another nightmare. He'd had to scour seedy pubs, buy drinks for losers, and meet men who'd scared him silly, until finally someone had come to him.

Now he had a gun, and no one to use it on. That bastard had killed his daughter and got away with it, and if there was an afterlife, he must be sitting there with a mile-wide smirk on his face. And the only thing keeping Gerry going was gone, just like that. He was devastated. The injustice of it brought fresh tears to his eyes. After a while, he went out to his car, and sat in the garage in the dark silence. He held the gun up to his mouth, his finger on the trigger, then relaxed, besieged by the images the police had tried to stop him from seeing: Catherine lying face down in the skip, her blue-marbled skin looking unreal, like a shop dummy. No, life was so difficult to live, so easy to lose. death was too easy. He just couldn't die with that frozen horror in his skull. No, it was too simple. He was ready to die, but first, someone had to pay for Catherine. He shoved the gun back into the glove box, and went back indoors. Gradually a new idea surfaced. Lewis's son had inherited his father's corrupt empire. And his career had been funded by his father's ill-gotten wealth. It would be poetic justice: Kilbride's son for his daughter.

Donna was never sure why, but mornings always took her by surprise, and, without fail, she left too late to arrive at work on time. As she clattered downstairs, running to the kitchen, her father glanced up from his morning newspaper, demanding, 'Isn't Kilbride the name of the fellow who runs that block you work in?'

She took a hasty bite of toast, on which butter had congealed, and answered indistinctly, 'He owns it. If it's the same one. What about him?'

'Seems he dropped dead on Saturday, that's what.'

Donna leaned over his shoulder, and read the article with sweeping speed. She'd finished before her father was one-third of the way through. The man who had dropped dead was indeed her employer, though she doubted that he'd been aware of the fact. 'Hell! How inconvenient of him! If his son's taking

over, I expect they'll do one of those restructures, and the newest employees will get the push.'

Jack Ivythorne looked up from his paper, and smiled. He was a thin, greying man of forty-five, whose wife had upped and walked out when their daughter had been three years old. It had taken him a long while to concede that if she was that way inclined, it would have happened sooner or later, so sooner had been a good thing; at least that's what he'd told Donna. She'd never gone looking for the mother who'd abandoned her, and never intended to. She'd moved back in with her dad after her teenage marriage had fallen to pieces. He hadn't said *I told you so*, but had welcomed her home. Her father disagreed. 'If they do have a shuffle, it's more likely they'll keep the young people and get rid of the wrinklies, never mind our experience and life skills, we're all perceived to be past it. Have you ever met the son?'

'No. He's a real stunner, judging by the pics, but I never met the father, either. You know I don't walk in those circles.'

'Well, I doubt anything will change in a hurry. It's usually accountants who make the decisions. The shareholders won't care who sits on the throne as long as it doesn't affect their income.'

She pushed back her chair, and gave Jack a peck on the cheek. 'Whatever, I'd better get going. I don't want to be on some blacklist for being late for work, today.'

'If they've got any sense, they won't get rid of their newest and brightest acquisition,' he commented. Donna grabbed her bag. 'I know that, and you know that, but I wonder if they do? See you later.'

She slammed the door behind her, recalling her packed lunch only when she was climbing onto the bus. She hoped she wouldn't get the push, because she loved her work. Who wouldn't? She was a video game designer, on the graphics development team, working on the transition concepts of the main character, Gungo Jin, a hero who had the ability to change from a man into a dragon when circumstances

demanded. The dragon ended up a lot bigger than the man, but the change had to be seamless, believable within its own world. The metaphysics had to be such that gaming nerds didn't kill the game with pseudo-logic before it found its killing claws. Despite her desire to impress, she was late.

'Not that you've missed much,' the receptionist told her, in an unhappy little voice. 'I heard the news before I got in. It was all over the TV. We got the pep talk about how we won't lose our jobs, and as soon as the lawyers know anything, we'll be told. You're lucky to have missed that. What a load of gobshite.'

'M'm,' Donna agreed. 'We'll probably find out more from the papers than from upstairs. No point in holding your breath. It's going to take months to sort out, and they'll be needing us to keep going, in the meantime.'

Donna went into her cubby hole, plugged herself in, and left the planet.

Day disappeared into evening. The offices gradually closed down around her; the cleaning staff started their rounds. She glanced up and realised she was almost alone in the big room, just Pete at the far end, who was probably just playing a game. Pete reminded her of her ex-husband, Andy. He'd been shocked when she told him she was leaving; he hadn't seen it coming. He wasn't a bad guy, and she was hoping he'd come out of his sulks and retain a friendly relationship, but it wasn't looking likely. He felt betrayed. But why he allowed himself that privilege, she hadn't worked out. He was a gaming designer like herself, but had disappeared into his own world when she'd mentioned the possibility of kids. When she had stepped back and thought about it, they had no dialogue aside from points and teams and kills. As she had closed the door on him for the last time, he hadn't even noticed her leave. She'd spent a couple of months vaguely unhappy because of the impending divorce, spent a couple more realising that she missed her home more than Andy, and decided she'd done the right thing.

Kilbride's funeral was held on a sunny spring morning. The event attracted a huge crowd, there to see the wealthy mourners in their fine tailored coats and top hats, their killer heels and designer dresses. Security staff surrounded the train of black cars, and kept everyone clear, except recognised members of the press. Photographers snapped away at the pageant while a thick crowd of little people pressed at the metal railings of the churchyard. Gerry stood back, demeaned by his own presence. He had a good reason for being there, of course, but doubted many others did. He didn't get why ordinary people wanted to reach out and touch the aura of wealth as though some kind of kudos might waft towards them on the breeze.

No, he found the funeral a joke in macabre taste.

Gerry's lips drew back in the parody of a grin. Surely the sacred ground within the ranks of cast iron railings would rebel, and spit the body back out? But no, the coffin was lowered in sombre dignity. Painted women dabbed their eyes, cotton hankies clutched in gloved hands, as the murderer was laid reverently into holy ground.

Gerry's own daughter had been discarded like garbage, thrown into a skip, and set on fire – presumably to eradicate traces of DNA. But whatever was in the skip hadn't caught, and the body hadn't burned too much. She'd been missing for days before it had been discovered by boys playing illegally on a building site. When she'd finally been released to him, after the additional indignity of an autopsy, Gerry had had her cremated. Her ashes came in a cheap plastic urn, handed to him like a bag of groceries, once he'd paid the invoice. When he'd scattered them in Epping Forest, with its memories of childhood holidays, they had risen like a sad, grey cloud, hovering for a long moment in the sunshine, before sinking to earth. But his grief couldn't be dispensed with so easily. Perhaps when her death was avenged, he'd find some peace in his heart.

Paul Kilbride, resplendent in dress uniform, left his father's funeral, his hand possessively clutching his mother's arm, holding her up. Tall, sandy-haired, eyes as cold and grey as the Atlantic, he was as perfect as a model, damn him. His mother, still beautiful at sixty, could have been mistaken for his wife. That's the way these people worked. As distant from real life as a fairy tale, hiding behind the superficial gloss provided by vast wealth. The widow, Alicia Kilbride, had been born to money – old money – and had been married for it, by all accounts. She'd never had to work. She donated large sums to various charities, probably as a publicity stunt, and epitomized everything Gerry despised in the rich. She was egotistical and selfish, her pride backed by nothing more than the oil paintings of her thieving ancestors. Had she known about her husband's penchant for call girls? Had she supposed Catherine to be one of them? Well, she would learn what it was to lose her only child, as he had.

Donna found relationships difficult, which, in a way, was why she ended up with Andy. Because her mind worked on several planes, she had the ability to switch off in the middle of a sentence, change the subject mid-flow, or even scoot back to her computer before whatever it was that had suddenly popped into her mind, disappeared again. Apparently, people found it disconcerting. But you couldn't change your nature. It was three weeks since Kilbride had dropped dead, and the place was still buzzing with secret meetings, rumours and gossip. The firm was going to close. Paul was going to come back and run the show. Everyone was going to be made redundant. The firm was being bought out…

She decided there was no point worrying. If she was made redundant, she'd get another job. She knew she was good, and computer games were a thriving industry. The trouble was, there weren't too many jobs like that in London. The big boys were in the US, of course. If she had to shift over the pond, her dad was going to be *very* unhappy. But she wasn't going

to take a job that didn't excite her. Who knows, he might even visit her there. Donna picked up the latest DVD filched from a rival, and loaded it. Keeping abreast of the opposition was part and parcel of the job. Sometimes you could pat yourself on the back, knowing you were better, but now and again you had a little jolt of shock: how had they done *that*?

But this game offered neither a good ride nor any untoward shocks. By the time she'd reached level five, she was bored with it, and so would other players be. Good. She put down the headphones, and glanced at the black windows. Where had the day gone? It was Friday and her dad would have been home early, waiting for her. She texted. *Sorry. Was gaming. On way now*. She got an immediate response. He must have had his phone by his elbow, worrying, although he would never say so. *Dinner in microwave. In corner bar. See you in the morning.* The Kings Head, aka the corner bar, meant he was meeting up with his group of cronies for their Friday night pint or three – depending on the mood. She was tempted to join him, but decided not to. It wasn't fair on him. They would try to include her, and ask about her work, even though they hadn't a clue. If she wasn't there, they could remind each other about how much better the past was, embellishing the stories a little more each time. She smiled fondly.

The corridors were strange at this time in the evening, empty and echoing. Her reflection in the glass partitions made her look younger, somehow, like a teenager, in the uniform jeans, baggy hoodie and flatties. Her blonde hair looked black; her face vampirish. She stopped and made faces at herself in the glass, curling her fingers into claws, and growling like the dragon she was turning into.

Movement behind the glass shocked her into jumping back.

'Sorry,' a voice said mildly. 'I didn't mean to startle you.'

A man stood in the open doorway. She knew who it was, of course. Even though she'd never met him, his face had recently been splashed all over the news. But now he was

looking cool and casual, quite unlike the stiff figure in the uniform who had glared at the camera a few weeks back. ‘Ah, I was, ah – ‘

‘I’m guessing you must be one of the gaming staff.’

‘Donna. Game designer,’ she said, holding out her hand.

‘I’m Paul.’

‘I kinda guessed.’

‘I kinda guessed you’d have guessed,’ he echoed. ‘It’s not easy to be anonymous here. That’s why I sneak around in the evening, when everyone’s gone, getting a feel for the place. What were you doing, just then?’

‘Seeing how the body moves, so I get it right in the game.’

‘Why are you in so late?’

‘I was playing, checking out the competition.’

‘Is that part of your job description?’

‘No, but it’s useful to know where they’re going.’

‘And was it good, the competitor’s game?’

‘Not as good as ours.’

He cracked a smile. ‘I’m pleased to hear it.’

‘Anyway, I was just on my way home.’

‘I’ll walk you down to the garage.’

She laughed. ‘You don’t think people like me get parking spaces, do you?’

His face froze fractionally, and she relented. ‘Look, I don’t drive. The bus is quicker. In rush hour, anyway. And cheaper.’

‘It’s late. Perhaps I could give you a ride home?’

He turned towards the lifts, and her eyes slanted towards him, assessing, as they walked shoulder to shoulder. He was six foot at least, and dwarfed her. He was eye candy, sure enough, but they were spheres apart, socially. She pressed the call button. ‘Look, it’s OK, you don’t have to –’

‘I know I don’t *have* to. I’m offering.’ She chuckled faintly, so he added, ‘What? Have I amused you?’

‘Well, it’s all a bit, oh, penny dreadful, you know? The poor girl meeting the boss late, being offered a lift. Then we

fall madly, instantly in love and before you know it, I'm a billionaire's wife.' She winced and slapped a hand briefly over her mouth. 'Look, you know I was kidding? I'd kind of like to keep my job.'

'So, you don't fancy being a billionaire's wife?'

She cast a sly glance. 'Of course, I'd like the money, but not at that price.'

'Ouch.'

The lift bell pinged; the doors began to open. Suddenly, he shoved her hard, and she put both hands out to stop herself from being flattened into the wall. A loud report echoed in the confined space, closely followed by a second. Paul staggered backwards, and a man stepped into view, a gun held rigidly before him. The gunman's startled gaze turned towards her. She bounced forward, knocking him. The next bullet flew wildly into the ceiling. Before the sound of the shot faded, security men crashed in from the stairwell and threw themselves on the gunman.

Later, after the police had arrived and taken the man away, after they had questioned her, and the paramedics had checked her over, she became coldly aware that she could have been killed. As it was, the small caliber bullets had hit Paul twice, one in the shoulder, one grazing his upper arm, but the gunman had managed to miss the vital expanse of his body. A third bullet might not have seen him so lucky. Her action had possibly saved his life.

'You fool,' her father said later, shocked, when a police car dropped her home. 'What the hell were you thinking?'

'Thinking didn't come into it,' she said. 'It was like being plugged into one of the games. I just knew I had to knock that gun away. He wasn't aiming at me, anyway.'

'But why did he do it?'

'I haven't a clue. Maybe Paul knows.'

But she learned, soon enough, via the late news. It turned out that the gunman was the guy who'd claimed Paul's father

had raped and killed his daughter a few months back. It all made sense, then, though there was no evidence to justify his assertion. But it left a strange taste in her mouth: *was it true*?

Paul called at the house the following weekend, his arm in a sling. Her father showed him in, slightly awed. Donna was amused at the vast bunch of flowers that his chauffeur placed in the hallway beneath a rack of old coats, before tipping a hand to his hat, and standing guard at the front door. Paul followed her into the living room, and she tried not to be ashamed that it didn't look like something out of Stately Homes. She'd never been ashamed of it before.

'I don't know what to say,' he said, finally, perched on the edge of a worn chair.

'*Thank you* would be a good start.'

He almost smiled. 'I was told you probably saved my life.'

'It wasn't intentional, I can assure you. I acted without thinking. But, you know, he turned the gun away when he saw me.'

'I don't know about that, but I was certainly the target. I thought children weren't supposed to be punished for the sins of their fathers, these days.'

'A grieving parent is not a rational person.'

'I'm all too aware of that.'

'Would you like coffee? We only have instant I'm afraid.'

'No, thanks. I can't stop.'

Donna sized him up. He filled the small space, not just his size, but as if wealth somehow added a physical presence. 'It seems you saved my life first, though,' she said. 'You have quick reactions.'

'Training, that's all. But I do appreciate the risk you took.'

She grimaced. 'I wasn't thinking, or I might not have done it. But I am bothered about what that gun chap thinks your father did.'

'You and me both. It's not true, of course.'

‘I felt sorry for him, when I heard the story,’ Donna said quietly. ‘I mean, can you imagine what he’s gone through?’

‘You can feel sorry for him, when you might have ended up as collateral damage in his crazy quest for revenge?’

‘He was crazy, alright, but he still turned the gun away rather than shoot me by accident.’

‘My father didn’t kill his daughter, either. She worked for him. That was the only connection.’

She was thoughtful for a moment, then leaned forward and met his gaze full on. ‘Well, he doesn’t deserve life in prison, does he? Don’t you think we should do something about it?’

‘What I think is, we don’t need someone out in the world who wants to be a vigilante. He’s dangerous. I think you should leave well alone.’ He thrust his hand forward, and glanced at a watch. ‘I should be going. I wanted to thank you personally, and let you know that I’ve made some changes to your salary and status. My father always said good deeds should be doubly repaid.’

Which wasn’t *exactly* what she’d heard about his father.

He rose, and left. A visit from the other side of the social universe, then he was gone, leaving nothing but the overpowering scent of hothouse flowers, and a lingering aftertaste of something she hadn’t wanted to know: she’d been thanked and warned off at the same time. There was surely motive behind *that*. The meeting had made her curious. It was like one of her games, where she had to unmask the bad guy before moving to the next level. Once a game had bitten into her psyche, she couldn’t let go until she’d won. Unless she was really on the wrong track, it seemed that Paul Kilbride didn’t want anyone looking into his father’s part in Catherine’s death.

Gerry had been in limbo for some time. Because of his age and confused state of mind, he’d been installed in the hospital section of the prison, but had been informed he was soon to be transferred to the main prison, for lack of space. He wasn’t

sure he could cope with that. Hospital hadn't meant privileges, though. It was just a different space in which to be isolated and treated as guilty before being convicted. And who cared about a girl raped and murdered over many months ago? Who cared that he was a father on a quite justifiable quest for, if not justice, then retribution? He had always maintained he didn't understand revenge, but the word was beginning to sound quite musical. Anyway, it was old news, and he was just another loser. Maybe people would have thought differently if he'd succeeded, but he hadn't. Damn that girl. He hadn't wanted to hurt her, whoever she was, and that damned bastard, Kilbride's son, had come out of it a hero because he'd shoved her out of the way. At best Gerry knew he was perceived as a sad old git who'd lost the plot. Not that he was so old, really. Still half his life to go, and he'd spend it institutionalised. Hell of a way to go. And from this point onward, any chance he had of getting justice for Catherine was gone. The fact that justice hadn't been done when she'd been murdered, didn't mean he was allowed to take it into his own hands. He wanted to die. He put his head in his hands. He couldn't even top himself; he'd tried that before, and hadn't discovered the courage. But he couldn't bring her back, so what was the point in staying alive? Retribution had been a goal, and he'd flunked it. Death was a goal, and he'd flunked that, too. Now he was here, destined to an existence that was neither life nor death.

When Gerry was told he had a visitor he couldn't think who it might be. When he realised who it was, he didn't want to meet her, then realised he should. He didn't know why she'd been with Paul that night. Was she *seeing* him? She was some kind of computer nerd, according to the papers, not from Paul's own select circles, but if the son was like the father, she ought to know the truth. He shuffled to the meeting area, embarrassed to be seen there, wrists manacled, like some kind of dangerous criminal. She was waiting there, excitement and nervousness vying on her face. He didn't recall her from the

incident, it had all happened too fast. He'd pressed the button for floor six, where he had planned to walk along the corridor to the Managing Director's suite, but the lift had stopped at the second floor, and there they were, waiting, as the elevator doors opened.

He'd reacted, of course, but not quickly enough. Now he assessed her properly. She looked childlike, innocent, with her lank brown hair, jeans, and sweatshirt. But she was alert, curious, and there was experience in her pale eyes. She was kind of plain, compared to Catherine, who'd been a stunner. But perhaps that had been Catherine's downfall. She had expected her good looks to provide a future. Well, he guessed it had, in a way. He'd always screeched at her to stop dressing like a whore, or she'd get treated as one, but she'd laughed and kissed him on the end of his nose before flouncing out, with a parting shot: *I'm grown up, daddy. I can take care of myself*. Only girls couldn't, could they?

No matter that she'd had a can of pepper spray, she obviously hadn't been given the opportunity to use it, buried as it would have been under the clutter in her bag. He tried not to picture her dead, but the image was seared into his brain, her lying face down in other people's shit, with that butterfly tattoo on the back of her shoulder, half burned.

He'd only found out about the tattoo by accident. He'd bumped into her in the kitchen, and she'd winced. *You're hurt*, he'd barked, and wheedled the news from her when she denied it. She hadn't allowed him to see it until it had healed. It was neat, he had to give her that, and well executed, if you could ever truly say such blemishes were. Why a girl with skin as smooth and perfect as hers would want to mutilate it, he couldn't imagine.

The girl he'd nearly shot – Donna, he'd been told – was waiting at one of the small tables, a kind of tilt to the head as if trying to read his mind, and he realised he'd disappeared into himself again. 'Sorry,' he said, sitting down, 'I didn't used to do that. Only since...'

‘It’s OK. I can’t imagine how you live with that knowledge.’ She reached a hand across the table and placed it on one of his. He blanched, and his face collapsed. That was the first kind gesture he’d received in a long time. The guard stepped forward. ‘Space, please,’ she said, not unkindly. Donna pulled her hand back sharply.

‘Sorry,’ he muttered again, and took a deep breath. ‘I’m OK, now. I don’t know why you’d even want to see me. I could have killed you – by accident.’ He shuddered at the thought. ‘But you didn’t. You stopped yourself, and turned the gun away. I told them that. You could have killed Paul if you hadn’t done that.’

‘You saw that? You’re kind. Nice. Like Catherine. But I don’t understand why you came.’

‘I wanted to ask you why you think Paul’s dad did it,’ she said, getting straight to the point. ‘I read what the papers said, of course, but the police wouldn’t let me see anything real. I know she’d been seeing Lewis Kilbride. Apparently, he offered her a lift home, but they argued, and she got a taxi, and disappeared. That was the last time anyone saw her alive. But he had no reason to kill her.’

For a long moment he held her gaze, then nodded. ‘I owe you that. I never told anyone she’d been *seeing* him.’ Disgust flashed over his face, and lingered. ‘A man old enough to be her *grandfather*. She was trying to get ahead, you see, but he was just taking what was offered. It’s what his kind do. Money buys anything. I told her, but she didn’t listen. He wasn’t going to buy her a house and set her up with a fat bank account. Just because he *said it*, didn’t mean he *would*. He paid her off, like a common whore. She came home with a thousand quid in notes in her bag – she showed me. I *saw* them – and said he didn’t want to see her again; it was getting messy. That’s her exact words: it was getting messy. *That’s what I’m worth*, she said.’

He stopped short and closed his eyes, but Donna could see the struggle he was having simply to not cry. ‘That’s why I

know he killed her,' he said eventually. 'I think maybe she threatened to go to the press, and he got scared. He had a motive. No-one else did. She thought she was so grown up, but she was just a child.'

'He wasn't convicted, though.'

'No. Just because he'd been seeing her didn't mean he'd killed her. And apparently it didn't fit with their reconstruction of his agenda. They said he *couldn't* have done it, and everything else was circumstantial.'

'But that doesn't that mean he was innocent.'

'No. It just means they could afford better lawyers than me. There's no one else would have had *reason* to kill her. And she wasn't a whore, no matter that they tried to make her seem like one. She wanted a better kind of life. Doesn't everyone?'

'I suppose they do.'

'See, it had to be him, didn't it? Maybe Kilbride just didn't want to pay out what he'd promised. Maybe he was afraid of someone finding out, if he did.'

'Someone?'

'Family? Paul's already a major shareholder, and set to inherit his mother's slice of the cake. Now, *she's* a hard bitch, according to Catherine. Didn't want sex, but didn't want him to have it with anyone else, either.'

'What happened to the thousand quid?'

He blinked. 'What? Oh. I don't know. It wasn't in her room, and they never found her bag, so no one believed me about that, either. They *said* they never found anything that led them to suppose he'd killed her, even if he *had* been having relations with her. They said it like that. *Having*. Like *having* lunch or a game of darts.' He paused, took a deep breath, schooling his features. 'Maybe the kids who found her took her bag. Apparently, Paul Kilbride hired a private investigator, but I don't know what he might have found. 'Time's up,' the guard called.

Donna grabbed her bag from the back of the chair as she stood.

'Thanks for coming,' Gerry said. 'I'm glad I didn't hurt you.'

She smiled. 'I'm glad about that, too.'

He dropped his voice. 'I'm a bit out of the loop, here. If you hear anything, would you let me know?'

'If I'm allowed. But I doubt I'll learn anything that's not in the papers.'

'You could ask that private investigator?'

She hesitated, not making any promises. 'Do you know his name?'

'I couldn't forget it if I wanted to. It was William Boyle.'

When the telephone buzzed towards lunchtime, and Paul's secretary called her *upstairs*, Donna was curious. She hadn't seen him since his brief visit to her home, but she hadn't expected to. His sudden inheritance of his father's responsibilities had probably imposed as steep a learning curve on him, as her new job had to her, but magnified a zillion times.

When she'd been promoted to Project Liaison Officer, she'd been thrilled, but several months had skidded by, and she assessed her small office space, with its arrow-slit window, and wondered if she felt paid off. The idea that she wasn't *comfortable* about it had been lurking in the back of her mind since she had visited Gerry Bright in prison. When she'd been given the job, with its broader scope, higher salary, and benefits, she'd been thrilled at the elevation in status and finances, but that euphoria had gradually dissipated. The old gang didn't invite her for after-work drinks any longer, and as she wasn't included in the Management activities, she was floating in social limbo. She hadn't minded being rewarded for saving Paul's life, of course, even though her intervention had been incidental. Who, in their right mind, would have expected her to refuse a career advancement that shunted her a couple of years up the working ladder? Except that the job

seemed to have been created out of thin air, and she was still wondering how to bring it to solid worth. She wondered whether it made sense to jump ship at this point and approach one of the competitors. She knew the major players in the games arena, but had learned stuff recently that shocked: the shenanigans of finance, the buying and selling of talent, the deals that were made, accompanied by illicit payoffs. This flood of knowledge was disturbing. Why would Paul have involved her so deeply? It wasn't through trust, she was sure. Paul knew no more about her than any of the other staff… except that maybe he did. It wouldn't have taken a sleuth to compile a dossier on her own life, such as it was. Was there an implicit threat lurking behind the apparent trust: now you know all this stuff, you dare not leave?

'Go on in, he's expecting you.'

The personal assistant's smile looked genuine, but for a high-powered secretary, that was par for the course. It didn't mean there wasn't a predator hiding behind the professional courtesy. Donna had never seen Paul's office, but if she'd envisaged it, it would have looked pretty much like this: big and airy and modern, with a beige carpet, a large, uncluttered desk, and carefully positioned books and modern art that had been located by an interior designer. There was a meeting table to one side, and a couple of sofas by a large picture window, presently exposing a lazy fog over London.

'Great view, isn't it?' Paul said, following her gaze.

'Stunning,' she agreed. His gaze met hers for just long enough to make her uncomfortable. She backed onto one of the upright chairs in front of his desk.

'Tea, coffee?' he asked.

She shook her head. 'Thanks, I'm fine.'

The PA closed the door on them, quietly. 'OK, straight to it, then? I've been told there's no nonsense about you. You say what you think, which has got you into trouble a few times.'

‘Not recently.’

He gave the hint of a smile.

‘Well, I try,’ she added, ‘but you’re right. I’m a WYSIWYG type of person. Dissembling isn’t my forte.’

‘Ok. So, I won’t beat about the bush, either. You visited Gerald Bright a few days ago. I’d like to know why.’

Suddenly the air seemed thick with menace. She leaned forward with rising disbelief, ‘You had me *followed*?’

‘You made the arrangements from our phone system. I was keeping tabs on you for the first few months in your new job, seeing how it panned out; but that came as a surprise.’

She flushed, trying to recall all the telephone conversations she’d had on the work’s phone. ‘Remind me to never again use the company phone. Is that even *legal*?’

‘Ad hoc surveillance is written into your employment contract, which you agreed to, and signed. I get that you’re miffed, but we need to know that our employees aren’t selling our intellectual property to the opposition. Trust isn’t automatic. It has to be earned. So, what did you learn?’

She took a breath to calm her fury. ‘Gerry said your father was rogering Catherine – a girl less than half his age. He believes a certain amount of cash changed hands. He believes your father gave her the push, and his daughter threatened your father with exposure, which is why she was killed.’

He paused for a moment, his direct gaze resting on her, then he turned and sat behind his desk. ‘He *was* seeing her. That seems to be common knowledge. It was by mutual consent, and she was over eighteen. He undoubtedly gave her cash on several occasions. I don’t know the details, but he didn’t kill her.’

‘She said he promised her a house and an income.’

‘Apparently. But she wasn’t the innocent child her father wants to remember her as, and my father wasn’t a murderer.’

‘And what about your mother?’ she asked caustically. ‘Was she aware of this? Did she condone it?’

‘Mother knew about all his little liaisons. She warned him this one would end badly, because Catherine *wasn’t* a prostitute. But she was undoubtedly a gold-digger.’

‘Choosing a quick way to a fortune isn’t illegal. It’s what your father did.’

His face froze. ‘Just because the rags said he married mother for her money doesn’t make it true. They loved each other, once. But people change. They’ve lived separate lives for a while, but it suited them to not advertise the fact. Socially, they were still an item.’ He walked to the window, but Donna doubted he was admiring the view. ‘He’d had several escorts, who all knew the score, as did Catherine Bright, I suspect. Father would have made it clear that it was a business arrangement. That was the first time he’d had relations with one of our staff. I believe he was genuinely infatuated – for a while, anyway.’

‘Maybe she genuinely loved him.’

‘Unlikely,’ he said, curling his lip. ‘As you said, he was a lot older than her.’

‘So, if he didn’t kill Catherine, maybe he paid someone to do it for him?’

‘We’re not in the habit of hiring hitmen to sort out our problems.’

‘Then who did kill her?’

‘I hired a private detective to find out, but it came to nothing.’ He blinked hard, took a deep breath, and continued. ‘Donna, what you don’t know is, my father spent his remaining days mourning that young girl. He was distraught. Her death put her on some kind of pedestal: Catherine the beautiful, Catherine the innocent, Catherine that he might have divorced mother for, and married. He was out of his mind with grief. That’s why he had a heart attack, not through being unjustly suspected of killing her – which did bother him, of course – but because he genuinely cared about her.’ He paused, then his gaze spiked back at her. ‘So, you see, I’m in a bit of a quandary.’

She wasn't convinced by the hint of tears. 'Why?'

'Because Gerald is going to spend the rest of his life in prison, if I can't get him off. It's not me that's pressing charges, it's the police, because it's a criminal offence. Obviously, I can't deny the gunshot wounds, and my bodyguards were pretty much compelled to give statements. As were you.'

'So,' she said carefully, 'Exactly what am I here for?'

'I want to reassure you,' he said. 'I get that you're a nice person, that you care about people. But it's not your problem, and there's nothing you can do to help. I'm trying to help him, I promise.'

'Will you get him off?'

'Unlikely. He did shoot me. And was carrying an illicit firearm. But I'll push for as short a sentence as I can, in the circumstances.'

Often, by the morning, the things she'd wanted to run past her Dad had evaporated during the night. It was annoying that his evening shift at the distribution centre ended when she was too tired to wait up. Her mother leaving him to cope with a three-year-old child on his own meant that his dreams of a career had been buried beneath a long series of badly-paid jobs. She might have been bitter if it had happened to her, but he maintained that being bitter was a waste of energy. Her father was a nice guy, too nice sometimes. He wanted to believe there was good in everyone. When she told him what had transpired between her and Paul Kilbride, he said, 'Well, Kilbride's right. What could you do, anyway? Maybe you should just let him sort it out? If he wants to help Gerry Bright, that's good, isn't it?'

'*If* he does. But it was all a bit strange. I'm a nobody in the empire he's just inherited. He's been keeping tabs on me, and he called me up to the gods to tell me all that stuff?'

'You did save his life.'

'Inadvertently. I was left with the feeling he was trying too hard to put me off.'

He hesitated, then said, ‘I’d be happier If you did as he asked, and left well alone. Someone murdered the girl, and whoever did it isn’t the sort of person you’d want to discover. I’d rather you didn’t put yourself in harm’s way. If anything happened to you, I don’t know what I’d do.’

She brushed a kiss on her father’s cheek as she left. ‘I’d love to believe Paul, that it wasn’t his dad who killed Catherine. I just don’t like being manipulated.’

Her dad looked surprised. ‘You’re not falling for the guy, are you?’

‘No way. He doesn’t rock my boat in the slightest. I’m more than sure I don’t even *like* him. He’s just *too* good looking, it’s unreal. You want to pinch him to see if he’s made of plastic. But I don’t believe all that guff about how sweet his father was.’

He sighed. ‘You’re not going to leave it alone, are you?’

‘I thought I should just speak to the PI guy, off the record.’

‘Just ease off, Donna. Paul’s got the money and clout to help the Bright chap. If he does, we’ll know he’s on the level, won’t we?’

‘Maybe. Anyway, don’t worry. I probably won’t do anything,’ she said, ‘because you’re right. I don’t know what I *could* do that will make any difference.’

But her assurance didn’t wipe the concern from his face.

At lunchtime she visited an internet café, and did a search for private investigators in the locale. There was no one listed called Boyle, but there were three William Boyles in the South of England. She rang from her mobile. The first two led nowhere, but the third rang out twice, and wasn’t diverted into an answer service. If that was him, he sure wasn’t out to get custom. At the third try, she was answered by a long silence.

‘William Boyle? My name’s Donna. I work for Paul Kilbride. Are you there? Can you hear me?’

‘Go on.’

The male voice had the throaty rasp of a heavy smoker. His brief words told her she'd got the right guy. 'You were looking into Catherine Bright's murder a couple of years back. I guess you must have heard about the attack on Paul by Gerry Bright, her father?' She thought that sounded quite professional. 'The case is coming to court soon, and he's asked me to compile a dossier on his late father's involvement with the girl. He wants me to include your report.'

'Does he.' It was a statement, not a question. After a pause, he said, 'I guess we should meet, then.'

'Tomorrow?'

'I'm away. I can make Thursday.'

'OK by me. Where do you want to meet?'

'Shall I come to your office?'

'I think it's best to keep this out of the office.'

He suggested a coffee shop within walking distance of the Kilbride building, early evening. 'That suits me,' she agreed.

Boyle was waiting outside. He ground out the cigarette with his heel and opened the door for her. The Coffee Machine was a small café that charged exorbitant rates for drinks produced in noisy blasts of expressed steam. The window exposed the only occupants: a couple of exhausted middle-aged women surrounded by bulging carrier bags advertising high street names.

William Boyle was a sleazeball. That was the only way she could describe him; the sort of man people avoided in the street in case they caught something. He was around thirty-five years old, but skinny as a druggie. A cigarette hung out of his mouth, his dark hair was greasy, his clothes seedy. But as his eyes grazed hers, she felt exposed. Maybe the appearance was calculated to blind people to the fact that he was sharp as a blade.

'Coffee?' he asked laconically, pulling his shoulder from the wall before she'd even introduced herself.

‘Straight black,’ she said, her eyes targeting a pine table in the corner by the window.

‘Didn’t your mum teach you to say please?’

‘Didn’t yours teach you how to use a comb?’

When he eventually put a tray on the table between them, he’d also invested in two Danish pastries. She wondered if it would all be itemised on an expense sheet, later. Maybe his cooperation came at a price. Or maybe he was just curious. He was certainly to the point.

‘So, what’s this really about?’

‘I want to know who killed Catherine Bright. Paul said you had a good idea, but no proof.’

He stilled for such a brief moment, maybe she imagined it, then began to toy with a teaspoon. ‘I’m surprised Paul put you on to me. I don’t know who killed her. He knows that.’

‘So, have you brought your file with you?’

‘What file?’

‘Didn’t you document the work you did for Paul?’

‘Nope. That’s how you get into trouble. It’s all up here.’ He tapped his forehead.

‘So, when Paul paid your invoice, what did he get for his money?’

‘My amazing thought processes.’

His smiled exposed clean, white teeth. She wondered if he’d thought of staining them to fit the image. He made a big deal of choosing a pastry, and began to munch. He was better at this game than she was. She sipped her coffee and waited.

Finally, he took a slurp, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and said, ‘Sweetie, if you want my cooperation, honesty’s a good start.’

‘I told you…’

‘Stow it. So, what’s your game? Really?’

‘What?’ She was genuinely confused.

‘Who’re you trying to scam, rip-off, sting… People always have a motive, and I can’t find yours. If you’re after Paul, you’re onto a loser.’

‘I’m not,’ she said indignantly, then took a breath to calm herself. ‘You heard what Catherine’s dad did?’

‘Yeah. I know what happened. He shoulda got a bigger gun. If you’re going to do a job, do it right. What I *don’t* know is why you don’t walk away, nice, and clean, with your new job and your nice fat salary with benefits.’

‘My, you have been doing your homework,’ she said, admiringly.

‘Paul told me. I called him.’

‘Oh.’

‘He also never said anything about asking you to get any file.’

Her jaw dropped. ‘Hell, there goes my nice job and fat salary.’

‘I told him I was looking for work. I asked did he want me to help with getting evidence for the trial. He told me no thanks.’

‘So much for honesty,’ she muttered. His grin was scary. ‘So, what *is* your game, when your boss doesn’t know you’ve contacted me?’

‘Catherine’s dad was out of line, but he was off his head with grief. D’you think it’s right he spends the rest of his days in jail, probably until he finds a way to top himself?’

‘Not my problem. He made his choice, now he takes the rap. D’you want that pastry?’

‘No thanks.’

The second pastry was demolished in three bites. Donna wondered why Boyle was so skinny. He was quiet for a moment, head slightly askew, assessing her. ‘So, you’re doing this for Bright, for some squiffy personal sense of justice?’

‘I suppose I am. Paul said he would try to get Gerry a shorter sentence. He said I should leave it alone. But I felt warned off, and I’m not sure I believe him.’

‘First sensible thing you’ve said. Blokes with that kind of dosh rarely care what happens to the little guy. They care what

other people think of them. They care about their *image*. They care about holding on to what they've got.'

'I think Paul's different.'

His smile was sarcastic. 'Careful, sweetie.'

There was warning in the tone. What did he know that she didn't? 'You must have an idea what happened to Catherine. How about you tell me who you think might have done it?'

'How about you do what Paul says, and leave it alone before you get yourself killed?'

That was pretty much the end of the dialogue. He gave her that enigmatic smile, said he had to get going, and walked out. Maybe she hadn't been pressing the right buttons. Maybe she'd just spooked him. But she'd definitely been warned off a second time.

'Sounds like a straight-up guy,' her dad commented the next morning, after she gave him the run down, and added, 'What was he like?'

'I dunno. Sort of scruffy. Difficult to fathom. I think he knows something, but won't tell.'

'If he's just guessing, he's right not to gab. That's how rumours get started. That's how the wrong guy gets convicted by public opinion.'

'Why do you always have to be so dampening?'

'Logical, you mean. Because anything else is chasing flying monkeys.'

'So, I just get on with my new job, and forget about poor Gerald Bright, who's lost his daughter and his freedom?'

'For the time being, yes. Paul said he'd do something. How about trusting him?'

'William Boyle hinted that I should be wary of Paul.'

'You already found that out for yourself. He was listening in on your calls.'

'Yes, but –'

He frowned from behind a slab of toast. 'That detective guy gave you some good advice. Why don't you heed it?'

'Because I want to know.'

‘Curiosity…’

‘Killed the cat, I know.’

He kissed her proffered cheek. ‘Have a nice day, love, and don’t get yourself killed. You’re all I’ve got.’

‘So, you do understand how Gerald was feeling?’

‘I do. I’d have bought a bigger gun.’

But Donna was unable to sit back and do *nothing*. Follow the money, detectives on TV always said, and the Kilbrides had such a lot of it. Catherine had been a poor girl sucking up to an older rich guy, by all accounts. Paul was right; she didn’t exactly come out of it with a halo. If Lewis Kilbride had seriously meant to marry her, they might well have decided to remove the problem. But it seems he’d already given her the push, so why kill her? Unless Catherine had been murdered by someone with a grudge who wanted to disgrace the family – Kilbride senior in particular – It seemed motiveless.

While trawling through a backlog of social slime, she discovered that the Kilbride’s lives were pretty much public knowledge. She guessed there were loads of people who wished them ill just for being who they were, but there was no single incident that rose out of the past to hint of retribution or revenge, except for Catherine’s personal liaison with the multi-millionaire, and her subsequent murder.

Lewis and Alicia Kilbride were your average filthy-rich parents who provided their son with a privileged childhood and taught him not to rely on familial sentiment. Paul had received the best education in the best schools and got the best results, shooting straight into the Forces as an officer destined to go places. He had no siblings. He professed little interest in the computer games market, but had left his commission to take over the business empire when his dad had popped his clogs. There was no hint that he was unhappy with his new role. Maybe he could have killed his dad for that, but she couldn’t find a motive to support the possibility.

Paul's Mum had been an only child, inheriting, in her early twenties, a fortune that had been generations in the reaping. A feted debutante, her popularity had obviously been rooted in the money pot. She was distantly related to the Queen, but in that bracket, who wasn't? Her education had been top notch, but she hadn't won any accolades for brain power. One reporter suggested, scathingly, that she was an inbred socialite with more money than brains to employ it. But aside from the money she spent on *stuff* – apparently, she'd spent a million on a fur coat because it had been Marilyn Munroe's, making herself the target of anti-fur-trade lobbyists for a while – there was nothing of any great interest to discover. Her life was a boring stream of social engagements and fashion statements that had more to do with designer status than artistic appeal.

Donna yawned. The answer must be here, if she could just *see* it.

Paul's American dad generated a little more interest. After successfully chasing and grabbing the available English heiress, to the utter dismay of several pedigreed contenders, he'd injected new life into the small electronics business, stepping sideways into the new and lucrative gaming world, creating an international institution. Alongside his rising fortunes she discovered a few scandals with women of dubious reputation, but he would have had no more reason to kill Catherine than any of the other women he'd *entertained*.

But Donna didn't believe Catherine had been the victim of chance. Being in the wrong place at the wrong time, after her association with Paul's dad was one coincidence too many. Sure, strange things happened, but it was more likely to have something to do with the Kilbride fortune than plain old bad luck. William Boyle's comments had made it clear he had a grudge against the Kilbrides. Maybe the seedy private investigator had reason to dislike Paul – though he'd obviously been happy to take his money. She trawled Boyle on the internet, but found nothing about him at all, not even a social

media page. She wondered how Paul had got on to the guy in the first place.

Donna wasn't a detective, and time marched on. Several months later she was called to Gerry Bright's trial to bear witness to the attempted murder, and was able to swear that he'd pulled the gun up to avoid harming her. In the end, he was given a seven-year sentence, of which he might serve three, she learned later. It seemed that Paul had done exactly as he promised.

'Time to move on,' her father suggested, with a lift of the brows.

'Time to move on,' she agreed. The job was going well, she'd finally made a friend in the sales department, and was enjoying a deeper level of dialogue with him than she'd experienced with the gamer crowd.

She'd seen Paul just once, after the trial, when he'd made a point of asking whether she was satisfied with the outcome. She'd said it was better than Gerry could have hoped for, really. She'd thanked him for honouring his promise, and they both retired to their own levels: him with the financial gods, herself several floors down.

A few days later, Donna arrived home late, and a dark shadow detached itself from the hedge in the tiny front garden. After a brief, panicked flinch, she recognised William Boyle. 'Jesus! You nearly gave me a heart attack.'

'I need to talk to you.'

She hesitated. He wasn't the kind of man she wanted to invite into the house when her father wasn't present. He cracked a sardonic grimace. 'If I wanted to harm you, it would have happened already.'

Recognising the truth in that, she invited him in, pointing. 'Living room's through there. Do you want a lager or coffee?'

'Lager would be just dandy.'

She slapped all the lights on, as it made her feel safer.

He slid along the wall to the window and pulled the curtains. She grabbed some cans from the fridge, and joined him. He was lounging in her dad's chair, the one that faced both the window and the door. She passed him the can

He cracked it and downed a huge gulp. 'Damn, I needed that.'

'I guess it's been a long day, skulking in the undergrowth,' Donna commiserated.

'Sweetie, if you want to hear me out, be nice,' he said.

'Do I want to hear you out?'

'Your choice.'

He slurped again, making her wince. 'So,' she said finally, 'You have something to tell me?'

'You wanted to know the truth about Catherine's death.'

Donna felt something shift in her insides as she leaned forward, eagerly.

His brow rose. 'Sure you want to hear this?'

'I'm sure.'

'Look, I'm not proud of my part in this. I got a call from Paul – I'd done a bit of work for him before – and was asked to go to his house. Lewis had an office there. When they showed me in, it was like something out of a cheap movie. There was Paul, angry as sin, and both his parents. The girl was on the floor, with a knife in her back, blood everywhere. Lewis was in that fancy wooden chair behind the desk, crying his eyes out. Alicia was glaring at him, her mouth bunched tight as a pig's arse.'

'Catherine was dead? In their house?'

'Yeah.' His voice slid downward. 'Yeah, she was dead, alright. Paul said I should get rid of the body. He'd give me a million. There was to be no way of tracing this back to them. So, I dumped her in the skip, and set fire to the rubbish.' He gave a grimace and slight shudder. 'I didn't wait around to make sure it had done the job.'

'So, who killed her?'

‘Either Paul or his mum, I guess. They both had blood on them. It wasn’t Lewis, that’s for sure. I kept my mouth shut through all of it, because I didn’t want to die, and I really wanted that million.’

‘Did you get it?’

‘No, because the police traced everything back to Lewis, and the Kilbrides had to spend a shit load of dosh to get him off the hook. Paul said I should have buried her, made sure she couldn’t be found. Leaving her to be discovered brought it home to his door. He was right, really. I knew they’d identify her, but as I’d destroyed any DNA evidence, I thought that was good enough. I wasn’t thinking straight. I mean, that’s not the kind of job I do.’

‘Are you going to tell the police?’

He cast her a look of disbelief. ‘Of course not. I’m complicit. Paul would take me down with him, and prison is a good place for whacking a bloke. It wouldn’t get Gerry off the hook, me doing time, neither.’

Donna felt light-headed with the news. She drank in silence for a while, watching the troubled private investigator wrestle with his guilt. Finally, she put the empty can down. ‘What was the point in telling me? You’re not here for a confessional.’

‘No. You’re right. I’m going to skip off and disappear. Once I leave here, you’ll never hear from me again.’

‘Well, thank you for letting me know…’

‘Don’t thank me, yet. I need you to do something.’ Her brows rose. ‘I need you to whisper the truth to Gerry Bright.’

‘Why me?’

‘Because you visited him before and it won’t seem strange if you do it again. More than once would be better, then it wouldn’t seem like a *task*. I can’t be seen with him. I don’t doubt I’m on Paul’s hit list, a loose end to tidy one day, when all the flack has died down. Or his mother’s. She hated Lewis’s little amours, they embarrassed her, and that lot don’t

like being embarrassed. She's a vicious bitch. I wouldn't be surprised if she did it herself.'

He turned all the lights off before sliding out of the front door. He really was scared, she realised, which meant that she should be. She kept the visit to herself, not wanting to worry her dad.

Gerry Bright was a year into his sentence, and Donna was a welcome change in a routine that made life a burden. He looked forward to her infrequent visits. He wasn't confusing her with Catherine, no way, but he couldn't help comparing. Where had he gone wrong, and Donna's dad had done it right? You could blame it on genes, but Donna was the one with the flighty mum who'd buggered off the moment things got hard. The love of his life, Sarah had been a hardworking, loyal soul. It hadn't been fair about the cancer, but life didn't set out to be fair. And you didn't always get the child you deserved. There had been days he wanted to top himself after Sarah died. It was only the child that kept him going, and that hadn't worked out so well, at the end. He would have liked to have simply died of grief, but his heart kept beating, despite being broken twice.

He talked with Donna about all sorts of inconsequential things, in the short time allocated, aware that the warder was listening in. They never spoke of the murder, or the trial. He asked Donna how she was doing, what her life was about. He cared that she was doing okay, at the same time as being sad Catherine had lost hers by chasing a dream. If only she'd been given a chance to grow up, maybe she would have eventually discovered acceptance, if not happiness. At times, he cried for lost chances, but never in front of Donna, though he thought she guessed.

This time, when Donna clasped his hand in parting, though, she passed him a slip of paper. He palmed it, secreted it away, but what he read later provided a rejuvenated purpose. When he learned that Lewis had cried, his anger towards the

man faded slightly. Perhaps Lewis really had loved Catherine. Or felt something toward her, anyway, despite the age difference. Perhaps Catherine had given the old man comfort in a financial marriage contract turned sour.

But whoever had killed her, the family were covering up a crime. Gerry had nearly killed Paul, and later agonised over his own actions. Now, where unfocused grief had churned, a deeper, colder passion formed, hard as crystal. Paul and his mother had been complicit in hiding murder, whichever one of them had done it. They'd had Catherine's body disposed of, to be burned and chewed on by rats. They should learn what that felt like.

At first, he wondered why Boyle had confessed to Donna, but it wasn't so hard to work out. He could quite easily have kept that information to himself, and by telling Donna the truth, he'd essentially, put her in danger. Gerry would try to convince her that she must never tell anyone, *ever*. But *ever* was a long time, and she was a nice girl. The knowledge would eat away at her.

No, Boyle wasn't stupid. He wasn't even after revenge. He was just after a solution to his own problem. Gerry had already guessed that the Kilbrides had pushed for as short a sentence as they could for him, not through altruism or genuine pity but because they wanted to tidy a loose end. The sooner he was out, the sooner he could be disposed of. They probably didn't have the right contacts to do it in-house. They might even have instructed Boyle to do it, himself, which is another reason he'd want to disappear rather than carry out their orders. They would have assumed that Boyle, being complicit in covering up the murder, wouldn't dare refuse. But it would be a lifetime of servitude for the private investigator, forever manacled to the Kilbrides as their personal fixer. They thought they had him by the short and curlies, but he was making a preemptive strike.

That was all supposition, of course. You never did get the whole story, but of one thing he was sure: Boyle was hoping

Gerry would do the dirty work for him, because Gerry wasn't afraid to die. He was dead already, inside. Everything he loved was gone, and if he could do this one thing, it would secure Donna's future, and secure Boyle's too, in the process.

Gerry would have to be on his guard from the moment he left the prison gates. He'd be a target the moment he was free. But now he had a reason to live that long, at least. It was time he learned to look after himself. He didn't know how, yet, but prison was surely the best school in the world for that kind of education. He'd make a point of finding out. Because Boyle was right. Gerry was going to make Paul and his mother suffer for what they had done.

End Notes

The first two unsolicited reviews of this novella vary considerably, but both reflect an emotional involvement between the reader and the characters in the story.

*** Interesting take on revenge, even though the story never really got to that point because it didn't have an ending per se. The character development is good, but it's a cliff-hanger short story. Too many loose ends were left hanging.

(Amazon.com)

***** This was a very good short story which I definitely recommend. A story of grief and anguish, of murder and revenge that I will not forget any time soon. It was well written and the anguish of Gerry was palpable. I could feel the anger and despair. Donna was caught up in the mystery – wrong place, wrong time – but got involved anyway. I will read more by Chris Lewando.

(Amazon.ca)

In my view, this is not a cliff-hanger story. The murderer's identity is not the thrust of this novella, and is not exactly difficult to work out. First and foremost, the plotting revolves around the development of Gerry's character. His *decision* to solve the mystery and avenge his daughter's death provides a resolution.

If you find yourself thinking about the characters after you have finished the story, I have achieved my aim. Not all stories need to end with a slammed door. In the words of the great science fiction author, Frank Herbert: *There is no real ending. It's just the place where you stop the story.*

Writing a Personal Memoir

muse

A personal memoir is not one's life story, but one aspect of that life; recollections of a specific theme, written from an individual's own perspective. It is a skill, in that the 'self' has to become an almost distant character, relating events, avoiding an outpouring of emotion, and yet retaining enough interest to hold the reader.

Unlike fiction, in which the underlying emotions are shown via action and dialogue, in memoir both the action and the emotion are usually stated as prose. The memoir, or autobiography, is unlikely to be as historically accurate as a biography, as the writer provides a personal slant to the emotional encapsulation of the events narrated, whereas a biographer will usually research facts from various sources, and fit them together into a cohesive timeline for the reader, providing possibilities or explanations where required.

When one writes a memoir, overt descriptions of angst and anger are best avoided, as they come over as ranting on the page. Such works, used as a vehicle to score points in a personal vendetta, can be painfully biased. Care has to be taken when mentioning the names of others, not so much in fear of libel, as through a sense of fairness. For instance, in

the matter of a separation between two parties, there must always be two sides to the story, yet you can only write your own version. It's well-documented that memory can play tricks, and recollections of differing individuals regarding a single event will rarely agree.

Unless you are a celebrity, you have to consider whether your experiences will be of any interest to another reader, or whether this is simply a personal, psychological exorcism.

A book on my whole life, for instance, would undoubtedly come under the category of 'boring'. As a caucasian from a fairly ordinary, working-class background, I cannot lay claim (thankfully) to violence or abuse at home, though I was subjected to major bullying at school. I had no personal crisis regarding sexual orientation, I had committed no serious crime, nor saw one, so what would I write about that might be of interest to others?

The experiences I relate in the following small memoir were traumatic to me, and in relating them, some readers might find empathy. When I wrote it, I had no intention of sharing, but time, and perhaps exposure, does tend to soften the blow.

Remember Me with Smiles

memoir

My sister was burned to death on a lovely, sunny morning in May, 1990, while I was getting on with my life. I was at a friend's house where we were preparing a garden party for a Belgian choir we were hosting. It was unusually mild and my children, four and six years old, were playing loudly in the garden with a gang of others. The sun was shining with an almost Mediterranean intensity. Hawthorn blossom lay like snow in the hedgerows, filling the air with a rich, heady scent.

Our host ambled to the kitchen and told me: 'Your mother just called. She said that someone is coming to see you. She was a bit blunt.'

It was obvious he didn't take kindly so someone being blunt to the point of rudeness to him, on his own telephone, in his own house, and what he said didn't make sense. I would be seeing Mum later, and she wasn't the kind of person to be rude. I wondered if he'd got something wrong.

'Did she say who?'

He shrugged negatively.

Although surprised, I didn't intend to let his short-lived annoyance, or my mother's as yet unknown reasons for causing it, to spoil a glorious day. I laughed at the strangeness of it, and carried on making sandwiches, wondering, with increasingly unlikely suggestions from my friends, who could be coming to see me, and why. From time to time I glanced out of the window, then eventually I saw my brother's car pull up outside. I ran out to greet him. To my surprise, David, my sister's boyfriend climbed out of the passenger seat. I glanced in the back to see if Marion was there, but she wasn't. There

was obviously a reason, but who thinks of the possibility of tragedy on a beautiful sunny morning? Instead of wondering what on earth they were doing there, I smiled a welcome and told them to come in and join the party. They had both smiled in greeting, as one does. Then Richard put his hand on my shoulder, a universal gesture that signifies a sharing of some heavy load. It was only then that I guessed something was wrong. He didn't prevaricate, but told me straight out.

'I have some bad news. Marion's dead.'

How could something like that really register? I thought about it for a second, and I remember my first word was, 'No.' It wasn't a question; it was a statement, a denial. They waited while the words solidified, and finally I asked, 'How?'

'A car accident,' I was told.

'David,' I said. 'I am so, so sorry.'

We stood there, the three of us, arms linked in a circle as though we were about to break into a folk dance. David knew what I meant. The long struggle he would face to re-adjust his life, the long hours of loneliness which was her legacy to him had already made their mark. He'd had several hours to get used to the idea that his partner of ten long years, was gone, that life would never be the same again. I was given a few small, pertinent facts before they drove back to my mother and father. Marion had been going to work and had crashed head on into an artic. I wondered: how do you tell parents that their first child is dead? No one can quite understand that, I think, until they have held their own first child in their arms.

We carried on and hosted the choir for a long, hectic weekend. We went to various venues, we danced, played music, and they sang, and somewhere in the back of my head was this strangely unreal knowledge that my sister was dead. I learned then that grief doesn't have the blunt impact I once supposed would be the case. I now know what people mean when they talk of grief numbing the senses. There was no blinding flash of comprehension, no tearing of hair and wringing of hands, because I simply couldn't believe what I'd been

told. My mind could not accept the fact; it was a cruel joke, and for a long time after this I subconsciously expected my sister to turn up in the wake of her boyfriend.

The mortgage company and my employers weren't bothered that my sister had died, however, so I carried on going to work and being the person my family needed me to be. Those necessities meant dividing grief into a separate channel in my mind, one that stalked silently alongside my day-to-day activities. For a while I was not wholly in the present. My past experiences with my sister compressed into a kind of montage of memory-bytes, cut out and pasted into solidity, because that store was now finite: there would be no more memories to add. I wish I had taken more note of each moment, so that I could recall them now in greater detail. I wish I hadn't allowed my marriage and circumstance to keep us apart so much.

Despite the rifts life had wedged between us, we were still a family, in essence. News passed like Chinese whispers: if I told Mum something, Richard and Marion would know soon enough, and vice versa, and when we met the time between dissolved. Now there was a gaping hole in the flow of information.

The days which followed Marion's death were surreal. My parents aged before my eyes and I saw my father cry. On the telephone he said, she was my first baby. My father had never spoken to me so openly, and I had never thought of my 'big' sister like that; she had simply always been there. I know from experience that the first child is always a bit special. It doesn't diminish the ones that follow, but something changes within you when you first view a child that has come from your own union. There is a sense of wonder which stays with you forever: did we really create that baby, that new life?

Marion was fourteen months older than me, and slightly envious that I had children. She really wanted a child and was worried that her time was passing by too quickly. She and David had recently bought a really old house and had been doing it up themselves, a major project. Now there was a bathroom

and the house was stabilised, they were ready to take on that new challenge. There was a quiet strength about Marion, in her idealism and determination. I knew she would be an excellent mother, better than me, probably. I'd fallen into childbirth in the hope that somehow it would add meaning to a relationship that hadn't lived up to its promise, realising too late that I'd simply added eighteen years to the self-imposed sentence of marriage.

It is the utter, inexplicable nonsense of death which hits you most, the giddy sensation of things being out of sync. As a child you put things into a definite sequence in your mind, and I was still in that space. I expected my granddad or grandmother to be the next in my family to die. I was prepared for those deaths inasmuch as you can be prepared for the death of someone you love, but it would have been in the right order. When my sister died natural order was overturned.

Marion was the second grandchild my grandparents had lost, the first being an even greater tragedy to them as my cousin had been a treasured toddler when he'd been run over in a bizarre set of circumstances. Though I recall the event, I was too young for it to have a deep impact, but they had taken it hard. They had known cruel times: childhoods so desperate I can't even begin to imagine; Granddad surviving as a soldier through the Second World War; and Gran living through the blitz in Bristol with three children in a bomb-damaged house. Surviving that, moving into comfortable old age, they had then had to deal with life's further capricious knocks.

Marion had been pretty, though she didn't think so as her classic Romanesque appearance, an untameable mane of thick hair, a mobile mouth and slightly receding chin, were not fashionable. She was academically able, but not interested in fighting for a place in the corporate world. What made her the unique person she was could mostly be described in the way she actively threw herself into causes. She became a vegetarian and a bell ringer, volunteered when the canals were being cleaned, and joined various countryside groups that were

trying to protect environments. She had a great internal strength. Willowy in build, she would stand up to anyone if her moral conscience was violated. She and David were soulmates in all these things. I became distanced from them mainly because my own husband, John, a controlling and ultimately selfish man, was dismissive of these traits. As it was almost impossible for me to do anything without him, I gradually became isolated from everyone I'd known before meeting him.

That first week after her death I lived in a strangely confused state, with the realisation that Marion's body was lying in a drawer in an Exeter morgue. We were unable to finalise things because there had to be an autopsy, and she was in the queue, we were told, as if she were buying groceries. I met with David and my parents to discuss the funeral arrangements. We were all aware Marion hadn't wanted to be buried, that it would be a cremation. She had no religious convictions, yet a service in a utilitarian crematorium would have been in insult to her character, so David suggested a disused church in Exeter. It had been de-sanctified years before (I did wonder how some guy in a black robe could believe he had the authority to evict his God from a church), so arrangements were made that it would be available to us for a non-religious ceremony.

David didn't go to pieces, at least in public. He took quiet command of the proceedings. We learned that whenever he said *Marion would have wanted it this way,* that's the way it had to be. But almost without exception we all wanted the same sort of service for Marion. She had believed in love, life and honour. She had been a pacifist, a conservationist and a humanist. Her close friends came from all walks of life, including people with deep religious conviction. I knew her creed: she hoped that death was a continuation of existence in some way, but as no-one had proved it, the only certain thing is the life we have and how we live it. But whatever our

beliefs, funerals demand a sense of pageantry, without which death is just a sordid end to life.

The funeral was fourteen days after Marion's death, and the guilt in me was still strong: for being alive, for not having said goodbye, as though it had somehow been an oversight. It hurts, not being able to remember the last words I spoke to her, not even being able to recall when I last spoke to her. I do remember thinking it was better she died in the accident rather than linger in a coma or brain-damaged in some way. David voiced the same opinion at one stage, but said he was sorry she didn't hold on long enough for him to say goodbye.

Marion had been liked by so many, the church was packed in a way it probably never had been on Sundays. She and David had once been bell-ringers in that very church before God had been banned. Their friend, Tim, a curate, was given permission to lead the service there. Holding the service in this special, ancient building with its carved wood and coloured glass served all our needs, particularly those of my aunt and uncle who had lost their little boy twenty years before. They needed to believe in Christianity, in God and Heaven, because otherwise their little boy would be simply dead. Both were overcome during the service, and we understood that it was not just for Marion that they cried. Tim made his Service a testament to Marion's character, though he did supplement it with bible readings. He said he believed he was sending Marion off to heaven, that he did not believe his God would turn his back on someone so essentially good.

We did not ask people to sing. How can you sing when your throat is closed? Instead, we asked people to tell stories, and chose music we knew she had loved: the theme from Thomas Tallis, a pan-pipes tune from the Andes, and others I can't now recall. During the ceremony the roof beams thrummed with the rushing wings and soft cooing of pigeons that had moved in, lending a sense of all the things Marion had loved. Tim finished his service by asking us to let Marion go. I know she's gone, but it's easier to say than to do. She

was with me then, and will shadow me till I die. It was hard to believe it was her inside the coffin. My memories of the service are that it was like a distant, vaguely distressing dream from which I kept expecting to wake.

I was dry-eyed in the church until the coffin was actually brought in. I remember the sudden hush and the uncontrollable trembling of my mother. It dawned on me finally that Marion's body was inside the casket, under the flowers. I had picked some flowers that morning, and Dad put them on the coffin for me. My little posy looked incongruously out of place, disrupting the formality of the professional display. It contained poppies, snapdragons and wild purple toadflax, and was wrapped in a piece of green Christmas paper. But I knew that posy would have meant more to her than the commercial hothouse flowers that scented the church.

All through the service the casket commanded half of my attention. I wanted to lift the lid to make sure it was really her. I had a picture postcard image of her lying there with a faint smile curving her mouth as it had hovered during life. I was surprised we had not been invited to see the body, to say our goodbyes, for closure. I vaguely supposed David must have identified the body after the accident, and wondered whether she had been too damaged to view. That worry stayed with me for many long nights. It was impossible to disassociate the character of a person from the shell in which it had been encased during life, hard to accept that the still body no longer held the essence which made it Marion. I discovered although I was sorry for the years which had been stolen from her, I was also sorry for myself and my family for having lost her.

Grief is actually a very selfish and personal thing.

I wonder, for a moment, whether I should be writing these things, but writing helps create logic out of tangled thoughts. I remember sitting on the grassy slope with my sister at the back of our School in Harlow, discussing our joint desire to write. At that time, we both loved fantasy and science fiction. We used to recall snatches of dreams and write them down in

notebooks, now long lost, hoping that we could one day use them as inspiration for stories. She had a recurring dream of going through to another world which I can only recall her describing as 'red'. She had many dream-episodes set in the same place. In the years following our move to Devon, new schools, college, growing up, and the tiring business of earning a living, contact between us diminished. I never had a chance to find out if her dream continued, but I now wonder if it had been her own way of escaping a childhood which had been, in many ways, traumatic for both of us.

As far as I know she never did write, but poured herself into her busy life. I had put my desire to write on hold, thinking I'd start when the time was right, but when Marion died, I realised I might die suddenly, as she did, and never discover if I even *could* write. So, in a way her death jump started many things inside me, including the decision to live my own life, not the one which had sneaked up on me when I was too young to notice. Writing became my reality, my buffer in a lonely world.

Marion was envious of my marriage, my family life, she had told me so, but I'd never let her know how unhappy I was, about the struggle to keep sane, the loss of my dreams and my very self. She never knew how I saw my youth fade towards middle age, and sometimes even thought of taking my own life. She never knew that I was envious of her freedom, her happiness with David, her many weekends away doing interesting things; that I'd swapped all that for a stability that was crushing. It's true that you don't know what you have until it's taken from you, and I ended with something Marion no longer had: life itself.

After the funeral we went on to what can only be described as a wake. My brother had hired the functions tent at the 'Double Locks' in Exeter, which had been Marion and David's favourite pub. There is a single-track road which leads alongside the canal to the pub. At one point it crosses the canal via a tiny bridge, no more than a line of railway sleepers, set

at right angles to the track. It was never designed for cars. One could look down into the water through the gaps, and every time we drove over, I wondered whether we would make it to the other side. The pub is three-quarters surrounded by water: on one side the canal, on the other, the river Exe leads to the estuary. It had a reputation, back then, for real ale and wholesome food. When we arrived, the publican beamed a welcome at David and asked where his 'pretty girlfriend' was. David had to explain. Until that moment the publican had not realised that the funeral was for the girl whose photograph was still pinned on the wall, being silly at one of the pub functions.

We drank ourselves silly that day, and the atmosphere was high. I spoke to people I didn't know and relatives I hadn't seen for ages; we all acted as if it was a Christmas party that Marion had laid on especially for us. We didn't shun the subject of the dead person in whose honour we all got plastered, that would have been an insult. Instead we talked about her, about us, about the weather, and wasn't it a lovely service? Looking back, I find it hard to believe that I laughed and talked so freely. The party eventually petered out, and the farewells to me, my brother, my parents and David bought us back to earth with a jolt. I saw the strain on their faces, and I suppose it was on my face, too.

A few days after the funeral, it was my birthday. My parents made a token gesture of a present and a card, but after that there was another treat in store. David asked if I would go over to the house and take first choice of her personal things – her jewellery and clothes. I thought it might be easier for me to just take all her clothes and deal with them, but he said he couldn't bear an immediately huge gap in her wardrobe. He believed it would be easier for him to give her things away in bits and pieces. I doubt it ever got easier.

It wasn't easy for me to rifle through her clothes; it was traumatic, in fact. I took some, more to help him out than in the belief I could ever wear them. I simply could not take anything else – the whole house was filled with a sense of her:

every book, every picture, every piece of precious collected junk, some of which I recognised from our past, but other things belonging to her more recent life with David still spoke of her character. All the little treasures we had quarrelled over as children I would have given to her at that moment if I could. I took her leather motorbike jacket, which pleased David, as he'd tried to give it to one of her friends who had been horrified, not realising that her refusal to accept it was more distressing to David that a casual acceptance would have been.

Marion had nothing of value, but had been a hoarder. Some things I recalled buying with her, some things I made for her, some had memories or anecdotes attached to them. It was a difficult time. David cried over the bits and pieces we were sorting through, and so did I. One item I took was a natural wool jumper she'd brought back from the Andes. When I got home, I discovered a little brass broach attached to it, finely etched with a solitary tree. It seemed to stand for everything she held true: simplicity of design, the earth, sunshine, growth, continuity. This one item of hers I still have, as if by my choosing that tatty jumper she had reached out from the grave to give me this one, tiny, parting gift. That night I was ill, with cramping pains in my stomach, and I could only attribute it to the black bin liners on my bedroom floor which contained the clothes I had brought home. It was many weeks before I opened them, and over the following year they all gradually went to charity shops.

I knew David worked for the Exeter Fire Department as a photographer, and it was during this time he told me that it was only circumstantial that he had not been sent out with the emergency staff to photograph the accident where his own girlfriend would still have been trapped in her car under the lorry. She'd driven a soft-topped Triumph Herald, so when the accident occurred the car had slipped under the lorry so far, the people on site had been unable to extract her or disentangle the vehicles. I also learned that the press got hold of Marion's name and blasted it over the news before it was

officially released, so it's a good thing Mum and Dad didn't listen to local news or they might have heard of her death in that nasty, sensationalist piece of reporting. My sister became newsworthy not by being gentle and kind, but by being dead and inconsiderately blocking a major road for several hours.

Mum phoned to make sure I'd got home safely, something she'd never done before. She asked me how my brother was, and I said I didn't know. He showed no sign of grief, though I know he loved her, and I wondered how he was coping. He shut himself away and became a stranger overnight.

When I saw Mum again, she told me of a poem by Laura Ingalls Wilder, who I believe was dying of cancer when she wrote it: Remember me with smiles and laughter, for that is how I will remember you all. If you can only remember me with tears, then don't remember me at all. Mum also told me, 'In Exeter there's the tombstone of a child, and the inscription reads: thank you, Lord, for the twelve years we had with our daughter. So, I'm going to try to do this for Marion. To remember the good things; anything else is pointless.' I knew then from where Marion had inherited her inner strength. I learned from David, poignantly, that it was Marion who found the stone in the first place and showed it to my mother some time before.

Whenever I met David, he recounted anecdotes, too, as though remembering the good things kept her closer to his mind. Sometimes his voice would break in the middle of something else, and he'd say, 'I miss her so, your sister,' then he'd carry on. I wish I'd known her better, this older sister he told me about. I sometimes felt I had not known her at all.

I was able to tell David a story he had not heard before. When we were camping in Scotland as teenagers, Marion got up in the morning and clipped herself into a denim bib and brace I'd made for her. Suddenly her face dropped, and she grappled in panic for the buckles, getting the trousers off in a comical pantomime of haste. I was too dumbfounded to react. I shall never forget the look of horror on her face, which

changed dramatically to hysterical laughter when an enormous stag beetle crawled out of the leg of the trousers. David wondered why Marion had never told him that, and I said we all remember different moments out of the same events.

Some months later David phoned, to say the trees had arrived.

We had asked people not to spend out on cut flowers, but to put some money into a kitty to buy trees. The collection provided a lot more than we had anticipated, and we had enough money to plant a whole copse. The Trust for Nature Conservancy gave us the corner of a field, and there we planted some three hundred trees, and on the top of the hill beside it we planted seven larger evergreens, and put a little plaque with Marion's name on it. We decided that would be her only monument, for when we are gone there will be no one left who cared. About thirty people turned up to help with the planting. It was tedious work, and rain threatened but didn't fall till we were just about finished. We finally wrapped the trunks with rabbit protectors, and packed up. As we left, I looked back. The churned patch of ground looked like a battlefield, and the white rabbit-shields made it look like a graveyard.

A date was set for the inquest, on 17th July. It's strange how that date has stuck in my mind. Because it was an accident with a fatality, of course, someone had to determine who caused it. I wanted to go to the inquest, but was overridden. David, Richard, Dad and my husband (who hadn't even liked Marion) went and wouldn't allow Mum or I to go. They said it was to protect us, but looking back I think Dad and David were protecting themselves. If Mum or I had started to cry it would have set them all off, and women have less control over tears than men.

While they were away, I went for a walk with Mum and the dog. It was better than sitting around just wondering. And that's when Mum threw the curveball: Marion had burned to death. It turned out everyone except me had known, even my

husband. It had been my brother who had insisted they keep this information from me, to protect me, apparently. Mum hadn't realised I didn't know. So instead of learning this dreadful fact when I was still numb, I learned it in the cold, analytical moment of the inquest ten weeks later. That's why Mum had been shaking so uncontrollably in the church. She had known Marion's blackened body was encased in a body bag inside the coffin. When my husband returned, I was so choked I couldn't even begin to express my anger, so it festered alongside the many other instances of lack of communication that ultimately led to my leaving him.

The inquest reopened wounds. Marion had been doing about 45 mph and went out of control on a bend. An articulated milk tanker was coming down the hill towards her. The driver saw Marion go out of control, drive into the skid, and make a textbook recovery, but on his side of the road. He carried on around the corner and ploughed into and over her stationary soft top Triumph Herald at around 70 mph, trapping her inside. Several people stopped and tried to help pull the car free with ropes, but it was wedged under the lorry, eventually bursting into flames. It was deduced that the bonnet pressed onto the battery, causing the short circuit which started the fire. No mechanical fault was subsequently discovered on her car, so guesses were hazarded that she lost concentration, had a momentary blackout, or swerved to avoid an animal. I can believe the latter; it would have been in character.

The tanker driver was absolved of manslaughter, but I still wonder how that could be. He had time to see her go out of control and recover the vehicle on an almost empty road, but carried on driving his 38-ton vehicle downhill, round a blind corner, *assuming* she would have driven on by then. To my mind that was manslaughter; gross negligence at the least.

David told me that he had had three premonitions about her death: twice he woke in the night with my sister in his arms, and thought he was holding a corpse; then, a few days

before her death, he dreamed she was on fire. He remembered thinking, what a shame this should all be burned, but told himself not to be daft, it was just a nightmare.

Some months later he finally took the plastic urn that held Marion's ashes and went into the countryside alone. I don't know where he scattered them, but it was somewhere special to himself and Marion. He said when he tipped the ashes out it was like letting a genie out of a bottle; a big cloud of grey dust that billowed and settled softly. She is out there somewhere, on a wild patch of land, at one with nature.

In time, Richard went to look at the trees we had planted, and reported back that vandals had destroyed the trees on the hill and the plaque was gone. I will never go back to see what further damage has been done, I'd prefer to imagine a thriving copse, perhaps even one day a mature wood. If someone has destroyed it all, I don't want to know.

David died twenty-five years after Marion, barely sixty years old. He never had another girl-friend, though he had said, in his laconic, humorous way, that he'd 'tried a few out' over the years. I wondered if he finally just gave up, slipped away quietly because life had lost its meaning with my sister's death all those years ago.

Writing about Marion's death is not as hard as I thought it might be, but odd feelings flash out of the blue, sneaking through the cracks when I'm thinking of other things, catching me unawares. When something this horrific happens, we assume that understanding will eventually arrive, but it doesn't. Time allows grief to slide into the archives of the mind, but the door never properly closes. I still want to tell her things, share things, and I sometimes wonder what her children would have been like. I have learned there is no such thing as closure. I still ask: why her; why that way; why did she have to die on her own on a lonely road with strangers.

Time it is a precious thing,
time brings all things to your mind,
time with all its troubles,
and time with all its joys;
time brings all things to an end.

From an English folk song
Marion used to sing.

End Note

On reading this, our mother corrected me on one point. The flowers in the church were not hot-house flowers. She had razed her lovely garden of every vibrant flower in order to personally decorate the church before we arrived. She wanted the funeral to blaze with colour for her dead daughter, rather than be chilled by the cold lilies which normally signify death. If I had once known that, the memory had slipped away.

The Deed Box

poem

My grandma bequeathed to me a polished walnut box
with brass locks and hinges, inlaid with shining pearl.
It once stored parchments and deeds scribed with black ink,
indelible curlicues bound with knotted string.

Inside the curved lid a treasured nest of red silk was
cut, ruched and stitched by her own once-youthful hands;
for thimbles and bobbins and button hooks and hat pins
and pebble-lensed glasses to try to help her see

the deep space beneath the tray where secrets lie hidden
in letters from her lost love, long before the war.
It breezes with the old scent of moth balls and violets
and promises and hopes for a future never known.

She left me her necklaces, her trinkets, her baubles.
They cascade to my open hands, and cluster on a pile;
of fading postcards, dreary and monochrome,
shadows of the dreams that faded with her life.

Swan Song

short story

This commercial story, was written for and published in **The Holly Bough**, a seasonal Irish magazine with a wide circulation amongst the Irish diaspora in US.

As the eggshell light of winter fades, Gran puts her knitting aside to stoke the range, spilling red warmth and sweet turf scent into the kitchen. I love being here on the farm with Gran and Gramps, with its wild hedgerows, pines, and black clouds of squabbling jackdaws who fill the chimneys each spring with the things we lose. I love feeding the chickens; burying my nose in the ripe lanolin scent of a sheep's fleece; milking the cows; and humming voiceless nothings to Connie, the ageing donkey, whose cart was eaten by woodworm years ago.

The sound of a car penetrates the evening.

'Go get Gramps, love,' Gran instructs. 'Looks as if they've arrived.'

The outside world crashes in with Uncle Liam and Auntie Dee in their city-smart clothes. There's a flurry of air-kisses under an alien cloud of aftershave, scent and deodorant. My teenage cousins, Mary, Eileen and Ruth, trail behind: a matching threesome of white-skinned, dark haired, green-eyed beauties. Ruth is the youngest, thirteen, like me, but they all wear the same superior smirk.

Gramps is in the parlour. I tap him on the arm.

'Ah,' he says. 'They're here? D'ye know who's arrived?' He waits a second, hoping, but I say nothing. The words race in circles in my head, but can't find the door. 'Well, no matter. Come on, love, bear up. Christmas cheer, eh?'

Gramps takes his special chair on the right-hand side of the range. Gran's Mum, Granny Kelly, is already ensconced in the rocker the other side. She's startled awake, bewildered by the bustle and noise. Gran says she used to run the farm like a tornado but her wits followed Grandpa Kelly when he died. Now she misses the whole point of everything.

Uncle Declan and Aunt Maureen come next, with little Johnny, who's a brick short of a load according to Gramps. When he says this Gran swipes a dishcloth at him and tells him she wished some of her other grandchildren had his sunny nature. We all know who she's talking about, and it's not me. I'm her best girl, destined for special things, she tells me, though I don't know what. When she says that I do feel special; before the emptiness comes rushing back in.

Mum's older sister, Anne, the one who had once wanted to be a nun, but said God had other plans, can't come. She's too busy doing her good work abroad.

So that's all of Gran's 'gathering', as she calls us: Mum's two younger brothers with their up-market wives, three teenage bitches, a moron, and me. The gathering gets smaller each year. Anne's always missing. Then last year Mum was missing, too. Then this year Dad said Mum's ghost was sitting at the table staring at him with all the eyes of her sodding family and he couldn't bear to do it again. So, he went away with his new girlfriend to Majorca instead.

'Stop sulking, Katie, love,' Gran said when Dad dropped me off, but I saw the look on her face. She was angry at Dad. He married Mum, so that makes him family, but he doesn't act as if it matters any more. Mum created me by accident during a passionate affair, only for it all to fall apart after my birth. The best accident ever, she told me. Dad, not my real dad, of course, caught her falling and saved her, only for her to die of a disease he'd never even heard of.

There are kisses and hugs and small presents. There are '*how's ye doings*' and '*how's the family*' and '*how's the dog…*'

The kitchen is packed and warm. Never seen from one month to the next, Gran and Gramp's offspring congregate at Christmas like flies around cow bombs, because everyone's hoping for a slice of the farm when they're too old to run it and have to sell up. People think that because I don't talk, I don't understand. They think Gran and Gramps don't understand, either, but I see Gran's eyes twinkle, and I know she and Gramps have their own plans.

We squeeze into chairs, onto stools, on the settle between the oak tallboy and the damp-stained walls. Gran hands around mince pies. Johnny beams at everyone. The three bitches cast sidelong glances. I feel their venomous shafts spike everyone. They're here, in this dirty backwater, on sufferance.

There's light-hearted bitching between the Stepford Wives – Mum's pet-name for her two sisters-in-law – while my uncles sit in uncomfortable silence, chewing valiantly at the hard pastry. Gran's cooking skills don't match her good nature by a long way.

Then Gramps breaks out the sherry.

Like magic, out of the Stepfords' vast handbags come beer and brandy and Coca-Cola.

'Cheers,' Gramps toasts. 'Happy Christmas everyone. Here's to family, absent and present.'

I lift my glass of juice obediently, my head bursting with all the rage which can't escape.

After a while the sherry and the beer kicks in, and Gramps lifts his hand for silence. I don't recall a year when Gramps didn't say his song: *'twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house, not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse…*

It brings tears to my eyes because Mum loved hearing it, over and over, every year the same. In my mind I can see a smile lurking at the corners of her mouth. I recall the way she used to lean forward as though to capture every word. She loved everything about family, about Christmas. She loved

the farm, too: the goats, the cows, and milking when your hands were raw with the cold. I miss her so much it hurts. Gran told me God takes the good ones first. So why didn't he take Anne first, I say.

'Aw, Dumbo's crying.'

'Hush yer noise!' Gran says, angry.

'Well, she is dumb,' Mary says, all mock innocence.

She's right. The words in my head swoop and clatter and argue around in circles, trying to make sense of why Mum had to die rather than one of the Stepfords, who do nothing for anyone except themselves.

'I'm going to sing, now,' old Granny Kelly announces.

A stunned anticipation hovers. We are all startled by the unexpected clarity of her words.

Eventually Liam fills the silence with his own song, 'Sweet Molly'.

Johnny sings along, 'Ah, ah, ah.'

The three bitches make faces behind his back.

Then Uncle Declan does 'Sullivan's John', and Auntie Deirdre does 'the Banks of Sweet Primroses' and it's as if my thirteen Christmases are all rolled into one long memory-song.

Then Eileen says smugly, 'Give us a song, then, Katie, dearest.'

All the good-feelings fly away. I stare daggers at her.

'Yeah, let Dumbo do a song,' Ruth echoes.

Gran slaps her hand on the table. 'Enough!'

I rush into the back room, and would have been off into the night, but Gran's quick on her feet. She slams the door then cradles my head in her apron. 'There, there,' she says.

I allow myself to be persuaded back into the kitchen. Everyone is engrossed in mince pies and beer but I feel as if there's a spotlight over my head. I want to sing my song, prove I can. I'd been learning it the year Mum died. I want it to explode out of me, telling my family I'm normal, but it sticks in my throat like a plug.

Old Granny Kelly says, again, 'I'm going to do my song.'

The Aunts are embarrassed, and talk away.

I've never yet heard what her song is; she stopped singing before I was old enough to remember. It's strange to think she was born when the First World War had just ended and the Second one hadn't even been thought of. I can't imagine living through a whole century of changes so big. It's no wonder her brain can't cope any more.

Uncle Declan leaps in with Irish Molly, which he sings in a sweet and note-perfect tenor.

Then Gran sings the emigrant's song, '*To Americae we sailed away, and left this Irish nation…*' and everyone is sad and happy at the same time.

She turns to my cousins and says tightly, 'Have the girls got a song they'd like to share?'

Auntie Dee gives a superior smile. 'Ruth has a little song she can do later, but Mary and Eileen have been learning the stepping, if a small space could be cleared?'

The older two hop up with a coy wiggle of the hips, flashing Orphan-Annie smiles. All the grown-ups yell encouragement. There's a scraping of chairs and a shifting of furniture as the two girls clasp hands in a cross before them. Angelic expressions settle on their faces as they wait, right toes pointed, ready to strike.

Uncle Liam diddles a tune. I didn't know he could do that, and with a whoop of delight everyone starts to clap in time.

'Whoo-hoo,' Gramps shouts, stamping. He loves the dancing. He loves the old songs and the fiddling and the diddling. He says he didn't have the chance to learn, and his own kids, who did, didn't want to.

'Ah, ah, ah,' yells Johnny.

Now the room is filled with Christmas spirit. The beer has warmed the heart and the songs are reaching for the soul. I love the dancing, too, and sort of forgive the girls for being bitches; it isn't their fault, after all.

Mary and Eileen have the steps and timing perfect as they prance down the centre of the room. I'm impressed. They do a little shimmy of a turn and are stepping-it back again when Ruth's face twists all up one side. She thrusts forward and a reverberating scream threatens to dislodge the rafters.

All is pandemonium.

In snippets I discover that she shoved Gran's darning needle so far into Eileen's thigh that Gramps had to search for a pair of pliers to pull it free.

'Why?' Gran asks in amazement, when the wound was dressed and all three girls are sobbing quietly in unison.

'I wanted to learn,' she bellows, 'and they wouldn't let me join in! It's all their fault, the bitches.'

'Holy Mary, mother of God,' Gran says, crossing herself.

''t ain't nothing to do with God,' Gramps says, a twinkle in his eye.

'Whisht, now! It's Christmas,' Gran snaps.

'I want to sing my song,' Old Gran Kelly says.

We all ignore her. Perhaps the bitches are right. Perhaps it's time I sang my song. I reach into my soul. I breathe and shove, and my throat seems to open a little. It had shut tight when Mum died, and no matter what anyone said, it just wouldn't open again. But the song can't get past the lump in my throat.

Then a small sweet voice penetrates the noise. Everyone goes gradually silent. I turn to look at Old Gran Kelly. I'd never heard her sing before.

'Oh, Danny boy, the pipes, the pipes are calling,
From glen to glen, and down the mountain side…'

The song tickles my spine. Gran Kelly stares right at me as she sings, as though it's for me alone. I thought I'd never be able to hear Mum's song again without crying, but I'm smiling. Deep inside my soul I hear my mother's voice, and realise where it came from.

…'tis I'll be here, in sunshine or in shadow
Oh, Danny boy, Oh, Danny boy, I love you so.'

The last note fades into stunned the silence.

'Oh,' I breathe eventually. 'Granny Kelly, that was so beautiful.'

Dumbfounded gazes revolve towards me. Then I'm being hugged and kissed by everyone – except the three bitches, of course, and they don't count. It feels like Christmas now, warm and noisy and filled with love. I'm not alone any more.

'Ah, ah, ah,' Johnny sings softly.

It's quite a while before we realise Old Granny Kelly is very still.

Too still.

Gran gasps then smiles wetly. 'Way to go, Mam,' she says. She hugs me close. 'She gave you her voice, Katie, love, because she knew she didn't need it anymore.'

Paraglider

poem

My wing rests like a ruptured peacock,
lifeless on the ground, waiting for God
to breathe life into its lungs.
The trees whisper, the grass riffles,

the wing tips flutter. I heave and lean.
The phoenix rises from its ashes, alive
and keen. The wires twang, the silk rises
reaching eagerly for heaven.

The sky's fist grasps the wing,
snaps it into a cloudless sky,
a turquoise crescent moon, hanging
over a fan of silken thread.

I am the money spider, drifting;
where the wind goes, I go too.
Then I catch a thermal, tip one wing
hard, and spiral towards the sun.

Mountains shrink and flatten,
rivers become ribbons, the earth a map.
With my wing I tempt providence,
flying, out of my element.

An eagle circles, sharp beak tilted,
Bright eyed, curiously observing;
the lead-feathers of his wings
stretching like skeletal fingers.

The senses drift; depth narcosis
fills the void fear leaves behind.
Evening's cool depression falls.
The light wind sighs, then stills.
The wing drifts earthward, slowly
it seems, till the grass rises
in a mountainous wave,
sucking me back to earth.

I land, pivot and stand;
the wing and I are
broken birds.

The Spectral Camembert

short story

Ernest surveyed the ranks of Camembert cheeses ripening in the warehouse. Smileys had never before produced anything other than the Cheddars of English fame, but this was the obvious way to go in the current climate, being quicker to produce. It had not taken him long to persuade his brother-in-law to give it a try. The merest hint of making more money in a shorter length of time had been persuasion enough, and if it was not a roaring success, it would have been Ernest's fault; a win-win situation.

In nineteen-fifty-five London, the starvation rations of the war were already receding into memory. Finances had eased, but there was little enough in the way of luxury goods to spend it on, so the cheeses would surely be popular. Or any goods at all, he thought, remembering Jane in her functional, hard-wearing skirts. His late wife had worn the same three skirts in rotation for five years, and would have loved to have been alive now to see colours starting to return to the shops.

The Christmas rush was pending, and row upon row of Camembert cheeses stretched into the depths of the old red-brick building in pungent, orderly fashion, every cheese having been lovingly placed in position by his own hands. If he said so himself, he had done a sterling job, taking care not to over-stack the soft cheeses and crush them. Ernest's modest pride was tempered by the thought that his late wife would definitely have found fault. He did not know what, but she would have found something.

The door crashed open.

Startled, he shielded his eyes against the onslaught of winter sunshine, and froze at the imposing sight of Mr Philip Smiley the Second framed largely in the doorway. He had eaten at least one too many of his own cheeses during the war-time shortages. Ernest shrank inwardly, realising that his brother-in-law was having a bad day.

'Haven't you finished yet? A child could have done it quicker. You're a miserable excuse for a man, Ernest. God knows why I let Jane persuade me to take you on. I should have known better. I did it for her, I suppose; may she rest in peace.' Smiley stalked forward, poking him in the chest relentlessly to emphasise his words.

Ernest backed at each stab, wondering whether he should say something nice about his dead wife, but didn't. They would both know he was lying. She had been a vindictive cow, and her death had lent a measure of unacknowledged peace to both brother and husband. So, Ernest kept quiet, and learned, furthermore, that he was inadequate and his stacking was abysmally wasteful on space; besides which the Camembert was not selling as well as he had said it would. All in all, he was only kept on out of charity and respect for Smiley's late sister.

As Smiley made a triumphant exit, his spleen vented, to his own astonishment Ernest felt the heat of resentment churn in his normally placid bowels. Philip and Jane Smiley had been cut from the same superior cloth. Jane Smiley, fearing the onset of spinsterhood, had conned him into marriage, only betraying her true nature once she had him safely tied. Men were short in supply after the war, and he was made to realise that he was a better catch than none at all, but only just. But she haughtily lifted her nose when widows and unmarried women came into the shop hesitantly asking if there was, please, any cheese for sale.

'My husband will serve you,' she would say grandly.

In ire, Ernest seized the nearest cheese with both hands, and flung it violently to the floor. It was only a little cheese,

about six inches across and one and a half deep, with a fine white mouldy crust, but it made a satisfying squelch as it hit the floor. Teeth bared in a nasty smile, he vindictively kicked it. He thought of Jane, saw the Smiley logo grinning out of the goo on the floor, then jumped up and down on the cheese until he could jump no more. When his anger fizzled out and died, there was nothing left of the Camembert but a cheesy stain. He mopped at eyes which streamed from the onslaught of unadulterated cheese fumes, and his temper evaporated as suddenly as it had appeared. He should have done that to Jane when she had been alive. At least prison would have been a choice of sorts. But he felt immeasurably better. For the first time in the years he had been married to Smiley Cheeses, he understood why Philip Smiley shouted at him: it was not Ernest that Smiley was shouting at, but his own frustration.

He whistled on his way home that evening for the first time in years, tipping his cap at a woman he didn't know.

'Merry Christmas, Ma'am,' he said.

He was somewhat bewildered when she responded with a smile. So, he said it some more, the words getting louder and more confident every time he uttered them, 'Merry Christmas, Sir; Merry Christmas!'

On waking the next morning his first conscious thought was that he ought to change his socks; his second was that his socks had never smelled like that before. He opened his eyes, and blinked several times before deciding he was not dreaming. Hovering a full ten inches above the foot of his bed was a very small, fluorescent green Camembert cheese.

He climbed out of bed, and the ghostly cheese glided forward until it was just behind his ankle, whereupon it maintained that station despite his gyroscopic efforts to detach it. He dressed, watching the antics of the cheese as he wobbled on one foot to stuff a foot into his trousers. He gave a little giggle and danced, pirouetted and waltzed around the room. The cheese echoed his movements gracefully as though attached to his ankle by elastic.

He thought hard, then smirked as he trod down the stairs, the cheese glowing faintly in the half-light behind him. The sun shining through the pseudo antique glass in his front door smeared gobbets of ghastly green on the wall. He paused for a moment in his plan, wondering with mild astonishment how he could have missed its vulgarity before.

Whistling softly, he opened the door and glanced up and down the road, sniffing the air as if to test for rain. Then he plunged outside, leaving the Camembert bobbing in the wake of a resounding crash as he slammed the door shut. He allowed himself a congratulatory smile, but as he moved away the cheese glided through the door to keep its vigil. A bloodhound could not have been more faithful to its master than this cheese to the source of its untimely demise.

Reaching the high street, he was immediately engulfed by the raucous bustle of London in pre-Christmas crisis, but he did not mind. The very anonymity of mixing with hundreds of people without having to make contact with them appealed to his retiring nature. Weaving through the crowd, he momentarily forgot about his problem until he noticed people were actually looking at him and not through him as they should, their faces depicting varying degrees of disgust, disbelief, and discomfort.

He lifted a heel, glared at the ghostly Camembert, and shook his foot hard. The cheese became a yo-yo on an invisible string, gradually subsiding, still firmly attached. Ernest walked faster, weaving like a lunatic amongst the laden shoppers. The cheese passed sublimely, literally, through the crowd. Faster and faster he walked until he was actually running. People stopped talking to stare as he flew by, but the cheese kept up easily. Spying a bus on the point of pulling away, he made a superhuman effort. Lunging for the open back, he managed to grasp the hand rail and heave himself onto the platform. The conductor did a double-take, as if wondering what kind of madman had just clambered aboard.

‘You orlroight, guv?’

‘Yes! No! I mean perfectly!’

He adjusted his once-immaculate tie. Breathing heavily, wiping back the hair which was plastered to his forehead with perspiration, he turned furtively. The cheese hovered gently in the slipstream just behind the bus. He sniffed. The aroma which had surrounded him was absent. The conductor tapped his ticket machine.

‘Where d’ya wanta get orf, Guv?’

Ernest didn't know. He fished in his trouser pocket, hooked a sixpence and handed it over.

‘Six pennies ter Pennylorst Road,’ the conductor chanted in a sing-song voice as he wound the ticket machine with practised ease, bracing himself against the steep, curving stairs as they took a corner.

Ernest could never understand why double-deckers didn't fall over when the top deck swayed so precariously, and as it settled back onto all its wheels again, he breathed a sigh of relief, and sidled into a downstairs seat. The cheese edged into the bus, hovering under his seat with the misplaced affection of an unwanted puppy, wafting gently in the enclosed space.

The women across the gangway stopped talking, and began to fidget, looking across at Earnest and back again in a way that unnerved him, then they collected their belongings and moved up the bus, next to an open window.

He wished the tired upholstery, spotted with cigarette burns, would envelop him, but those in torment are never reprieved so easily. A ring of empty seats soon surrounded him and the conductor’s unnecessarily loud cry of ‘Pennylorst Road, Guv,’ came as an obvious relief to all on board. As the bus pulled away, he felt eyes boring into his back, and sensed the passengers visibly expand to fill up those empty seats once more.

Standing at the kerbside, utterly lost, he looked down and saw the silent cheese faithfully maintaining its vigil. He was almost grateful for the company. No-one should be alone at Christmas, after all. Like a leper, he crept down the first dark

alley he saw, the gloom of the blackened walls seeming to welcome him. He emerged unexpectedly into sunshine dancing on bombed-out buildings. He sat down, and a thought blossomed within him: he was lonely, and always had been.

He had just never realised it before.

While superficially following the flight of a pigeon over a bomb crater in which children were playing, Ernest seriously realised a few truths about himself, which quite surprised him; firstly, for thinking them at all, and secondly for admitting them. He was the last person who would have suspected that he'd end as a small, boring nonentity in a dead-end furrow.

When had that happened? How had middle aged slipped upon him unnoticed? As the last child in a family struggling against poverty, he had not been cosseted, rather tolerated as his father moaned about another useless mouth to feed. His education was minimal, despite early excitement at the knowledge he was good at numbers. Who cared about that, when you could sweep the butcher's floor for tuppence and bring the scraps back for the family?

After his two brothers had died glorious deaths for England he had been drafted just as the war came to a close. His parents faded away at the loss of their two eldest, and he was left to trudge streets filled with skinny children, triumphant women and broken men, looking for work.

People had looked at him askance, wondering why he was whole: was he a coward, had he been one of those conscientious objectors, or was there something else wrong with him?

What they did not see was that he was a dreamer whose hopes had been stamped into the ground often enough to stay there. He was wasted in this new and exciting era, according to Smiley. He'd been fairly useless as a husband, too, as it turned out, not providing his wife with the children which would have justified his existence. He had simply become something to parade to the neighbours and dust down regularly, like a living room ornament.

Back in the present, he discovered himself in streets he didn't know, and sat on a park bench, wondering what had changed. He'd wandered aimlessly for the whole of this short winter's day, and he wasn't the aimless kind of bloke.

Shadows greedily gobbled up the sunny patches, night clouds stalked across a purple sky, and a small wind rose. The buildings faded into a craggy silhouette against a gloomy sunset. Ernest shivered and stood up, easing cramped limbs, and walked in the direction he thought must be towards home

He turned to the Camembert, and said, 'Heel.'

A slight smile enlivened his features for the first time in weeks. He just wished he could share the joke with someone.

Unexpectedly, snatches of voices raised in song floated towards him. Like a man sleep-walking, he trod down a cobbled alley, following the raucous sound hovering on the evening mist. He passed crumbling buildings and a small bombed out church nestling amongst a sea of drunken gravestones, and ended up by the river. Coloured lights swam and winked in the inky darkness of the Thames' oily swell. On looking up at the source of the lights and the singing, he thought that the reflection of the Spotted Cow looked cleaner than the building itself, but it didn't matter. The place exuded warmth and friendship, feelings which he had longed for since his barely-recalled childhood.

He opened the door and slid into the cheerful, confused riot of uncoordinated decor. Here, the Camembert could not compete in odours with the beery, sawdusty, tobacco-smoke-filled room, and waited sullenly, as alcoholic generosity pressed a pint of beer into Ernest's hands.

'Merry Christmas, Guv.'

He looked at the beer and small slithers of memory surfaced: his parents merry from sherry at Christmas, himself punch drunk with childish excitement. It had not all been bad.

The pub echoed with noise. He was anonymous, yet welcomed in the same breath. An ancient man lifted an even more ancient squeeze-box, and began to play. After a while the

small bar resounded with the strains of *Daisy, Daisy; It must be because I'm a Londoner; There'll be bluebirds over, the white cliffs of Dover;* and *Kiss me goodnight, Sergeant Major*.

He knew all the words, of course, the radio had been blaring them out with patriotic fervour for the last few years. He tentatively searched for his voice.

A plump lady at his side put an arm around his shoulder, and yelled over the noise, 'Come on, love. Give it some welly!'

So, he gave it some welly. It was not as if anyone would notice, anyway. As his voice discovered a fine tenor hiding beneath the rust, it dealt him a blow of nostalgia that left him weak at the knees and moist in the eye. For the first time in his adult life he was amidst a crowd who seemed to accept him as an equal. He even bought a round, and didn't have a clue who he was buying it for. Eventually, a confused rendering of *Auld Lang Syne* hit the air, heralding the traditional chucking-out ceremony. The boozy crowd, sure that if they sat tight, they could stay, put this theory into practise, forcing the Landlord to cover the taps with cloths and flash the lights before his clientele grudgingly swayed out in pairs, holding each other up. Ernest gravitated into the night with them, and tried to find his way home.

Poor in pocket, but rich in well-being and Christmas spirit, Ernest stumbled along the uneven cobbles on cushioned feet. Finally, the lights within the Spotted Cow disappeared, leaving the night to the grey river mist. He made his way back past the ruined church with its gaping, empty window sockets.

He'd forgotten his bout of philosophy and deep thoughts. The time for all that had gone, and as for a purpose in life, well, who needed one anyway?

He was using the drunken gravestones for support, when he heard a sound not unlike that of un-oiled hinges opening a door in the mist. Something of a translucent, shadowy nature rose in the air before him. '*Fooooood...*' it groaned.

Ernest stared, entranced at the vaguely man-shaped spiral of mist.

Disconcerted, the spectre cleared its throat, clanked its chain and floated further up the graveyard, and tried again. '*Morghool Huuuuungry, give me fooooood...*'

Ernest realised he should be terrified and wondered why he wasn't. In a mild state of happy confusion, he tripped over a headstone, performing a graceful somersault.

The cheese catapulted over his head.

Morghool reached through a wisp of cobweb-like shroud and snatched it neatly before it could spring back to Ernest's heel. Earnest untangled himself and climbed up the gravestone until he had regained his equilibrium, and found himself staring at the apparition which held in its hand a Camembert somewhat like his own.

'*Foooood...*' the apparition exclaimed in sepulchral tones, giving Earnest a beseeching glance.

'Take it, it's yours. It's Christmas, after all,' he replied, rubbing sore knees and eyes. The ghost recollected its place in society, released an obligatory shriek and whooshed back to its grave to devour the unexpected treat.

Ernest weaved his solitary way home, pondering on the reason why he was strangely happy, and some things jumped unexpectedly into focus. Firstly, he realised that the Christmas fuss was not so much about buying stuff as getting rid of things he didn't need, like loneliness and cheese. Secondly, he recalled that after his wife's demise he had become half-owner of Smiley's. Thirdly, he was going to come back to the pub, if he could find it, and sing some more, and maybe, just maybe, kiss the plump lady on the cheek.

Escapism

muse

Excerpt from Waymarks for Authors by Chris Lewando

Why *do* people still read – or, increasingly, listen to – fiction, when television is so much more dynamic? The simple answer is *imagination*.

Watching fiction on the screen is far less cerebral than reading or even listening to words. The characters, images, and action in films are predetermined. They're right there, paraded before the watcher, leaving little room for imagination.

Watching a film engages fewer brain cells than reading, no matter how entertaining, stimulating, or thought-provoking. A film has a shorter duration than a novel, and the impact can wash away quite quickly once the TV is switched off, or worse, mindlessly switched to another channel. The watcher is left with residual impressions, but those that have been implanted by the creators of the film, not those created subliminally by the individual.

The rise in popularity of serial drama on TV (as opposed to ongoing soaps) betrays the viewers' desire to remain immersed longer in the fiction, and this trend is echoed by the increasing number of novels written as series. The serial keeps the watcher or reader engrossed longer in the story, prolonging immersion in the writer's fictional world – with the added benefit for the creator of an ongoing financial reward.

Watching a film at home can be a family affair, which might mean immersion in story is lessened by dealing with various home issues, chatting, or making cups of tea. A cinema provides for slightly less distraction (once the initial glut

fest has calmed), and could also be a social event. Cinemas, assumed to be hearing the death knell in the light of big home TVs and internet availability of films, have, in fact, made a comeback in the last few years.

But whichever venue, the film doesn't pull the viewer into the character's psyche in the way a novel can. In a film, the characters' internal dialogue (thoughts) are often lost in the visual scramble of special effects. The film of Andy Weir's book, *The Martian*, is a prime example. Despite Matt Damon's acting and Ridley Scott's direction, the internal dialogue of the main character in the novel was simply too immense to be given its rightful significance in the film, and the film, thereby, lost the very essence that drove *The Martian* up in the fiction charts. Meg Rosoff's chilling dystopian novel, *How I Live Now* is another example of lost inner dialogue when translated from novel to film.

The very act of reading a story is internal and solitary, engaging the reader in a personal communion with the writer's own imagination. When readers become truly immersed in a story, their own imaginations provide the bridge between the writing and the action. They see it with their mind's eye.

And each reader might see something different, if the book has the capacity of creating that readership bond. Even provided with a wealth of determination, not all authors achieve this. There are many skills to learn as a writer, but the writer's true skill is in learning these techniques so well that for the duration of the story the reader inhabits the story, unaware of them.

If the writing is immature, or lacking cohesion, the reader can be knocked back out into the real world, but if prose is good, the reader will simply experience the story. If dialogue is bad, it grates, but if the dialogue is real enough, the reader will hear the characters talking to each other. If the author is skilled, the reader will live the story with the characters, and dwell on it long after turning the last page.

People talk about escapism as if it's a bad thing...

Once you've escaped, once you come back, the world is not the same as when you left it. You come back to it with skills, weapons, knowledge you didn't have before. Then you are better equipped to deal with your current reality.

Neil Gaiman

Personal Services

Episodic Soap

The challenge was to create a fictional soap in 12 episodes of 600 words. Each episode needed to be standalone, but the 12 episodes required an overall cohesion. I set it in an area of Cork City, and explored some current issues in these tightly edited pieces. This was published in the Cork Evening Echo in 2017, one a day (except Sundays) for two weeks.

Episode 1

The door opens. Call me old fashioned, but I just love the sound of that jangle, it takes me back to my childhood. The net curtains flutter and fall as the door wafts closed. There's a young fella standing just inside the door, looking as if he's going to bolt.

'I've never done this afore,' he mutters.

'Well, we all gotta start somewhere, love.'

'How does this work?'

‘Tell me what you want. I can do anything you like as long as it doesn’t cause harm.’

‘It’s just that I got this bad back, so I gotta be careful.’

‘Well, I’m not a doctor, but I’ll put on a white coat if it lights your fires.’

‘It were the doc that told me to come to you. He said you’d help loosen me up a bit, like.’

‘That’s what I do best, love.’

I persuade him to slip out of his jeans, oh, and what a sight for sore eyes. I don’t mind doing the old ones, sure I don’t, we all get there, but to have my hands on a nice young butt now and again... I’m only human.

‘See, I do gardening and tree surgery,’ he says, once I have him stretched out.

‘Do you, dear?’ I rub a bit, get him warm. Now he’s relaxing.

‘I started out clearing up the debris, and before you know it the boss has me hanging in ropes with a chain-saw in my hand. Ow, Jaysus.’

‘Sorry. It was the hanging-in-ropes image. Is that OK?’

‘Yeah, feels great. You’re strong for a woman.’

‘That’s why my clients keep bouncing back, love. Go on.’

‘Anyways, the work gets scary after a while, up the cherry picker…’

I chuckle. ‘Is that a euphemism?’

‘Uh? It’s kind of a one-man crane, a raised access platform. Gets me places I can’t reach otherwise.’

‘H’m, I could do with one of those critters.’

‘Anyways, I’m in the basket, leaning out over this wire, trying to cut back this tree so as it doesn’t bring the feckin’ electricity down all over Mardyke, when this bloke comes out the flats and asks what the feck I’m doing. Wasn’t it fecking obvious? Catching birds, I says. Oh, funny guy, he says, I’m going to call the City. Do, I says. I work for the City, see, keeping the lines clear. But as I’m leaning over, something goes snick in me back, like. Oh, Jaysus.’

‘I’m not hurting you am I?’

‘That hit the spot, is all.’

So I see. Now, I’m not a prude by any means. In my profession you truly can’t be, but it’s hard to keep the mind on the job, so to speak when the client is, ah, distracted.

I work away.

He finally gives a long sigh of satisfaction. ‘All done,’ I say.

He clambers to his feet, does a few bends and stretches, then yawns widely. With pleasure, I hope, not boredom. ‘Will you be back for more?’

‘Bet your bottom dollar.’ He zips up, shrugs into a hoodie which bears the legend I’m up for it if you are, and gives me the sexiest smile I’ve seen in a long while. He fishes in his pocket, slaps some notes into my palm, then looks up sharply. ‘Hey, you’re not a woman at all, are you?’

I wink. ‘I won’t tell if you don’t.’

He flushes bright red and the door jangles wildly as he barges past old Jim who is just at the moment trying to get in.

‘Up to yer old tricks, Madam? Jim asks.

Episode 2

The bell jangles. I love the sound of that bell. It's a forewarning that Cork life is about to enter, tethering me to this community. I push through the tassled curtains which hide my inner sanctum – my clients have a strange aversion to being watched.

'Hi, Madge.'

'Jim. Nice day, eh?'

'Isn't it just?'

Now, old Jim isn't exactly a client. He's a gossip if the truth be told, and since his wife died, he's been using me as a sounding post. Personally, I reckon he talked old Sal to death, but me, I like to let people talk, it's surprising what they give away. I fuss about and make tea while he parks his tattered self on my velour chair and combs his fingers through the grey remnants of fuzz under the flat cap.

'Did you hear the one about the whore and the parrot?' he says.

'No, but I'm sure you're going to tell me.'

Now old Jim doesn't hear anyone except himself and wouldn't know sarcasm if it belted him on the bum, so he carries on and tells me the one about the parrot even though I've heard it a dozen times. I say really? in the right spot and laugh

when he's finished. But then he adds something that makes my ears prick up.

'Say again?'

'I said Biddie Baker died last night.'

'I thought that was what you said, it just didn't seem possible.'

'No, she's been in Shandon Street for ever, eh?'

'Since before I came over the pond,' I agree.

Now, that old poisonmonger wasn't one of my clients, either, and I'm not exactly upset, if you get my meaning. I've watched good people die horribly, and horrible people live long, safe lives; there's no rhyme nor reason to any of it.

Mostly people don't appreciate what they have because they haven't experienced the alternative.

'Her funeral's tomorrow, will ye be there?'

'Of course,' I say. Might as well make sure the lid's fixed tight, at that. I wonder if it's lead-lined.

'But you know, Madge, she said a funny thing to me before she died.'

He waits, so I oblige. 'And what was that?'

'She said you had a tattoo, with Latin words.'

De Oppresso Liber. I see it every night when I wash, but nothing can wash away the memories it invokes, or the increased heart rate that comes hard on their heels. I wonder when the hell the nosy biddy managed to see my tattoo. I argued myself silly a while back about whether to have it removed, but it involves skin grafts, and the smell of hospitals does bad things to my mind.

'Well, she must have been thinking about someone else,' I say, breaking a silence that's slightly too long. 'She was losing it a bit, you said yourself last time you were in.'

'Ah, well, she was coming up for 98. God help us if we all live that long.'

'True enough.' I glance at the clock. 'I have a client due any minute.'

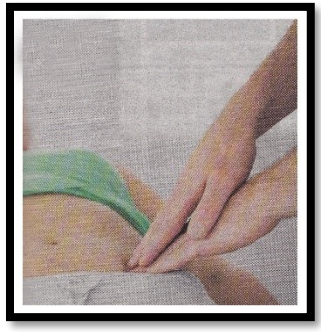
'Well, thanks for the tea, Madge.'

I wince as he clatters the bone china cup down into the saucer. Perhaps I should buy some solid mugs for extra special guests.

I make myself a cuppa and sit down for a moment, crossing my ankles on the desk. I dunk a chocolate biscuit while admiring my new heels. It's not easy finding pretty shoes when you're size 10½.

The door handle clunks down. I hastily make myself decent and paste a smile of welcome on my face. 'Annie, dear, you're looking truly frazzled. Come and tell auntie Madge all about it.'

Episode 3



The jangle of that door-bell reminds me I'm alive, and God knows, there are times that surprises even me. Annie is one of my regulars. She's getting on a bit, but still in love with herself, and that's unusual.

'What can I do you for, today?' I ask.

'Just a quickie today, Madge.'

'What, not the full McCoy?'

She sighs. 'You have no idea how I'd love to lie back and get a good going-over, but life gets so damned complicated at times. Alan's being a pain and Julie's at work so I've got to get the grand kids from school in an hour, and they have no respect.'

'Get your togs off, then. Hop up onto the couch.'

'Start at the feet and work up, would you, Madge?'

'My pleasure.' Some have a thing about butts, some about bellies, but no-one's enigmatic about feet. It's love or hate; all or nothing. 'Now, lie back and get it off your chest.'

They all talk, sooner or later. I put it down to the couch, with its white faux leather and glitzy trim. It takes people into a different world, one where they're special and the pressures of living vanish.

'I thought it was hard being Mum,' Annie says, 'but then you get older and you're looking for a rest and your kids want

you to be Mum all over again. I'm tired, you know, with all that fetchin' and droppin'. Oh, it's just today, then just tomorrow, and just the next day, and Oh, gran, you're the best. I don't know why they had the kids at all if herself can't be after taking the time out to rear them. I mean, she goes on about how hard it is, and her with a four bedroomed house and two bathrooms. Two! I ask you, and us back-along with just the four walls, an outside lav and a line of kids. Oh, God, Madge, that's good. Press harder will you, dear?'

I press and she practically growls with enjoyment. If I say so myself, I'm good at what I do. I've seen a few bones in my time, and know only too well how they all fit together. Yeah, I've seen it all, and then some.

'See the thing is, they want it both ways. They want the kids, but they also want the freedom. In my day if you had kids you couldn't work, and that was that. It was the law. I'm not saying that was right, but new things aren't always for the better, you know. Not that I'd have thirteen kids again, not if I had the choice. Just look at me!'

We both look.

'Sure, you're a big baggy in places, love,' I agree, 'but you have lovely skin, still.'

'Oh, do you think so?'

'There's youngsters would give their eye teeth for skin that clear,' I lie.

We're silent for a minute while I work away where she most needs it. Then she gives a big sigh. 'Madge you're a bloody treasure. There'd be a sight less stress about the place if there were more like you.'

I chuckle. 'There's more like me than you know, love. They aren't all as open about it, is all. There, get yer togs on.'

'Lord, is that the time? I'd better hurry and get those kids.' She tips me a wink as she smartens herself up. 'Go on, show us your prison tattoo, Madge.'

Hells chiming bells, was that all over the neighbourhood? I'd have the bloody Guards knocking on the door next.

Episode 4

The bell jangles, and I'm disconcerted as the Guard shuts the door firmly behind him. He's young and fit, with eyes like black lasers. I feel as if every dishonest thing I've ever done is emblazoned on my forehead.

'Hello, officer, what can I do for you?'

'I've heard rumours,' he says.

'Rumours?' I echo.

'That you're the best.'

My breath expels slowly. 'Well, I try to please, and people come back for more.'

He takes off his jacket carefully. I can see what his problem is, all right.

'And –' I indicate the rest of the uniform. 'Shoes and all, then lie face-down.'

'I always thought I'd end up mugged, or something,' he says to the couch. 'I didn't expect some daft prat who was half asleep to pile into the back of my car.'

I expect it woke the daft prat up PDQ; after all, it's not every day you drive into the back of a cop car.

'Did my neck in, pretty much, anyways.'

Without the uniform and surrounded by frills, his Gestapo-esque appearance evaporates. He's quite cute, actually,

even with those blossoming love handles. I feel him relax under my expert hands and smile to myself.

Most people only dream of getting their hands around a cop's neck.

'I never wanted to be a guard, not really. I was all set to go into the army, but I didn't pass the medical.'

'Me, I'd call that luck.'

'That's what my Ma said. But being a guard isn't all it's cracked up to be. You set out meaning to help people, but end up as everyone's whipping post.'

'There's people say that's fun.'

'Ha! I'm no masochist. Just, some days I think everyone hates me.'

'We all think that some days, love.'

'Yeah, but it's the uniform, see. The minute people see me they think I've got something on them.'

'Most people are hiding something.'

'Including you?'

'Of course.'

'Well, you don't look like a terrorist or a murderer or anything.'

'We never do,' I say.

There's a brief silence, then he laughs. 'I like you, Madge. You're not scared of me, are you?'

'In your uniform you're scary. When you're stretched out butt-up on my couch, there's a different, ah, dynamics to the situation.'

'Yeah, but you know what I mean, I mean, crime's mostly about money, isn't it? Embezzling, fiddling tax returns, cheating on benefits.'

'That's been going on since taxes were invented. It's human nature.'

'Yeah, but you know? I'd really like to catch one really bad guy in my lifetime. Retire thinking I'd actually done some good.'

‘The trouble with really bad guys is they sometimes come with a price that doesn’t include retirement.’

‘Yeah, and I’ve got a six-month-old kid. Makes you think different, doesn’t it? Have you got kids?’

Not anymore. I press and a vertebra snicks under my thumbs.

‘Ow! Sorry, shouldn’t have asked’

‘Well, you know? Life has a way of making its own plans while you’re still trying to decide. When I was your age, I didn’t envisage being here doing this.’

I tap his butt and step back. He rolls off the couch and grabbed his pants from the chair. He rolls his shoulders. ‘You really are good. That feels a ton better.’

‘Just as well, ’cause I think you just ruined my reputation.’

He winks. ‘I do my best.’

At that moment the bell jangles. Jim’s beady eyes give us a once over. ‘Everything OK, Madge?’

I look at the guard. He looks at me. We manage not to laugh.

Jim spreads news faster than the Shandon Bells.

Episode 5

The bell jingle-jangles. The prof. limps in wearing a three-piece suit, some egg stains, and a hassled expression. He slumps his bulk into the slouch chair and kicks his brogues off.

'Feet,' he grunts.

I sit and put his foot in my lap. I grease my hands and get started.

'I don't understand the young folk today,' he says.

'Yeah?'

I kinda like youngsters, myself, but admittedly I don't have to deal with them day in, day out, to use one of his favourite expressions.

'Day in, day out,' he sighs. 'I get up there on the podium; I speak, I lecture, I sometimes yell. I try to excite them, and get excited by my own subject, but they sit there like crash-test dummies, the ones who even bother to come. Do I see an expression? Nope. Do I see enthusiasm? Nope. I ask for questions, but do I get questions? Nope.'

He glares at me. 'Why do I bother?'

'Because you care?'

'Define care.'

'Um…

‘To feel concern or interest arising from a sense of responsibility, blah de blah. Who does care, these days?’

‘So you don’t care?’

He casts me an irritated glance. ‘I didn’t say that. It’s just that some reciprocal care would be nice – for my feelings. To let me know my time isn’t being wasted.’

‘Most people don’t get that from their own kids.’

‘That doesn’t make it right.’

‘No. But it doesn’t mean the kids don’t care, either.’

‘Up at UCC, they’re like the tide,’ he says. ‘They wash in and wash out, year in, year out. Some fly, some swim, some slosh around hopefully in the shallows, while others sink and disappear. Do you know how many kids go through UCC each year?’

‘Haven’t a clue.’

‘20,000. Enough to fill a regiment.’

‘God forbid.’

I take a deep breath. Gradually the white noise abates, along with the mental collage of dismembered young bodies.

‘And when we tell them they need a degree to get a good job it’s not entirely true. They need a good degree to get a good job and any degree to get a job stacking shelves. It’s a numbers game. When there are 300 applications for a job, they first chuck out the ones without degrees. It used to be they’d chuck out the ones written in green biro or with spelling mistakes, but these days the recruiting staff don’t know their bare skin from their bear skin, never mind the students.’

‘That could be unfortunate in the Canadian midwinter. Wanta swap feet?’

He shifts, sticks his other foot into my lap, leans back and closes his eyes.

‘But you know? They surprise me sometimes.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Come the exams you see some of the stuff you’ve hurled at them regurgitated, and you think, by god, they were listening after all.’

‘Or just soaking it up. They say kids’ brains are like sponges. And they do have to enjoy life while they can, don’t you think?’

He sighed. ‘That’s why I come to you, Madge. Not just for the lap dance, but because you’ve got things in perspective.’

‘I have?’

‘You’re better than a shrink.’

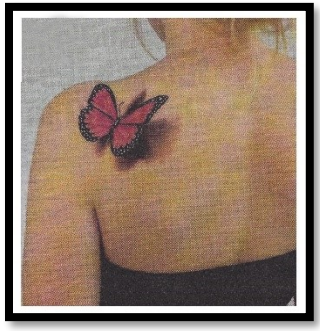
I’ve been called an Agony Aunt, and the guy wasn’t joking, but never a lap-dancing shrink.

‘Right, all done.’

He laces up his shoes, and says, ‘When I come here, I feel a hundred years old and I exit like a teenager; well, nearly. Aurevoir, mon ami!’

He blows me a kiss and executes a passable pirouette on the way out. Good job the seams on his pants hold fast. My next client is standing there with her mouth open. I wonder if she’s one of his students.

Episode 6



I put my hand on the bell to silence it.

'Oh, Madge,' Jeannie says, and bursts into tears.

'Come on, love, tell Madge all about it. I'll put the kettle on.'

Turns out it isn't so much a 'tell' as a 'show'. She shrugs out of her leather jacket with the skull and crossbones on the back, and bares a shoulder, exposing an inflamed mess that might look like a butterfly one day. Her tear-stained eyes are wide with panic. 'What am I going to do?'

'Ah – I think you just have to wait it out, love. Some people have a reaction to the coloured inks. It doesn't look infected, so it'll probably settle down in a few days. You just have to keep it dry and clean.'

'I mean, I can't go home! My mum'll kill me!'

'I doubt that. But why on earth did you do it?'

Her voices squeezes to the uncertainty of a six-year-old, 'I just wanted to.'

Why does every generation have to rebel? I did, and when my parents lost their cool, I assumed they'd never been there, never done what I'd done. Kids fool themselves something rotten. Then, when you get to be a parent you just don't know how to do it any different because the kids won't bloody

listen, and you lose them over small things like chewing gum and tattoos. Nature's having a laugh at all of us.

'The thing is,' she starts. 'Oh, what's the point; you wouldn't understand.'

'What wouldn't I understand?'

'How painful it is. How stupid I feel. How much I want it just gone.'

I pause, then roll up the sleeve of my dress.

She stares at my tattoo. 'That's Latin? What does it mean?'

'To free the oppressed.' I raise one brow. 'You see, I was young once, too.'

'And did your Mum mind?'

'Yes, she minded a lot.' My older brother there one minute, gone the next, then me following, to a cause doomed to failure, though we didn't realise that at the time. 'I should do your legs.'

That was why she came to me, what her mother paid for. A congenital disorder that meant she would never excel at sports. She threw off her boots, clambered awkwardly onto the coach, and closed her eyes the better to endure the pain.

'Your Mum will understand,' I said eventually, when the tears stopped flowing.

'No, she won't.'

'She will, because she loves you. She knows how hard it is for you. The minute you get home, just tell her; get it over with. She'll want to make sure it doesn't get infected.'

'I don't care if it does.'

I work away for a bit in silence, then say. 'All done. Are you still a vegetarian?'

'Of course. I'm never going to eat meat again, it's disgusting. We shouldn't kill animals.'

As she bends to haul on her chunky biker's boots, and slings the jacket over her shoulder, I wonder where she thinks leather comes from.

'Well, love. Just tell her, OK? Trust me.'

Back on form, she performs a well-rehearsed, sneer. ‘Why the hell should I trust you, you old faggot. You aren’t even normal.’

‘What’s normal, love?’

The bell jangles angrily as she slams out of the door.

I lean back and smile. The young, eh? She’ll apologise next time she comes in. It happens all the time: talk first, think last. I remember doing it myself, once upon a time. One of the most profound skills in life is knowing when to keep silent, and I wonder if any of us ever get the certificate for that.

Episode 7

Sweet bells, sweet chiming Christmas bells… Now, that's a blast from my childhood, but there's nothing sweet about the woman barging through the door, larger than life. Bolstered by a few too many designer chocolates, her expensive clothes fit too snugly to do them justice.

'Hello, I didn't expect to see you again, Felicity.'

'It's Mrs Webber.'

Well, that puts me in my place. She didn't actually say, for the likes of you, but it's what she means. Not for my appearance, if you get my drift, but for my station in life. Never mind the Stations, this one's god is station: who is above her (not many) and who below (the rest of us, including god, probably).

The mental image of her actually meeting someone above her perceived status is almost unimaginable, all that flesh vibrating with obsequiosity. Now, that's a bit of a mouthful, but it kinda builds a picture, don't it?

Eyes like marbles wedged into a sandpit, she gives me the once over. 'I thought I'd give you another chance.'

'That's so amazingly generous.'

'It is. My back still isn't right –'

'Despite all those highly bribed specialists?'

Her face turns puce. I'm thinking, heart attack or stroke?

‘They were not bribed. I paid the fees they demanded for the service they provided. Now, are you going to help me or not?’

‘Not,’ I say.

There’s a long silence. From somewhere I discover a smidgen of sympathy; she came here knowing that would be my response, but didn’t have the sense to truly believe it. After all, money buys everything, doesn’t it?

But sympathy only goes so far. In all my years of helping people, she’s the only one to bring litigation for malpractice to my door. It hadn’t crossed her mind that I might have qualifications coming out of my ears, that I wasn’t working the Harley Street scam because I didn’t want to. Maybe she still chooses not to believe it.

‘I need you to help me,’ she said. ‘You’re the only one who ever could.’

I leaned back and crossed my arms. ‘Mucked that one up, then, love.’

‘But you can’t just –’

‘I can. Please leave nicely before I throw you and your upholstered rear-end out of the door.’

‘I’d see you in prison.’

‘Been there, got the tee-shirt.’

The bell jangles harshly. Jim is there holding the door open, in invitation. Just my luck he’d heard.

‘You won’t sort me out, yet you sort out that dwarf who just left?’

Her sneer wasn’t a patch on Jeannie’s, yet she blanched visibly at my expression and took a step back.

‘That lovely girl is better than you in just about every way imaginable. Now squeeze into that ridiculous status symbol outside, and try not to drive over any human beings as you leave.’

‘Shouldn’t tangle with Madge,’ Jim advises. ‘She’s killed better men than you.’

I wince. Thanks, Jim.

Felicity leaves in a cloud of venom. I told her she should lose some weight, but she's not prepared to miss out on those society luncheons.

I put the kettle on, and Jim parks himself on the sofa.

'Saw the car outside, thought you might need a hand,' he says.

'I appreciate the thought, Jim, but I'm capable of dealing with my own problems.'

'Yeah, but I wouldn't be a good neighbour if I didn't try, would I? So why were you in the clink? Did you kill someone?'

I sighed. 'Jim, things are never that simple. It wasn't just one, it was several.'

His beady eyes light up at the thought of all that gossip.

Episode 8

The bell jingles diffidently.

Bridie whispers around the door jamb, ready to scuttle away at the least sign, 'Am I on time? It is today, isn't it?'

'Perfect, love. I'll get a cuppa, shall I?'

She sidles to a chair. 'I can't stay long. I can't leave my babies on their own.'

'No, of course not.'

She takes small nervous sips, her eyes darting everywhere and nowhere, then they brighten. 'I've got another one, a tabby. I wasn't going to take in any more, but she was left on my doorstep in a box, and her just a few weeks old. Too young to have left her mother, really. How can people do that?'

'You're an angel in disguise, love.'

She goes pink with pleasure.

I haven't a clue how old Bridie is. She could be sixty or a hundred; huddled into those shapeless clothes you'd never guess. Thursday she gets her money and her shopping: cat food, sliced bread and baked beans. Twice a week she goes to mass, and Friday she comes to me. The rest of the time she watches soaps.

The neighbours think she's nuts. What I know is, her sense of smell died long ago. The doctor told me her house is

a bio hazard. Today she's not so bad, but sometimes the smell lingers for hours.

She forgets she's supposed to pay me, but I never remind her. I'm the only person she speaks to aside from the welfare. I'm about to ask does she want a once-over, but next thing she's folded over, weeping silently. I sit on the chair arm and put my arm around her. 'What's up, Bridie?'

'They want to put me in a home,' she finally says, through her hiccups. 'They say I can't look after myself, but I do, don't I? I have, since Tom left.'

That's a new one on me. 'Your son?'

'No, my fiancé. We were going to have babies one day, but I think it's too late, now. He went to England to get a job. I said I'd wait for him.'

'What happened?'

'I don't know. He promised. I got letters. I read them sometimes. They say he loves me; he misses me. When the letters stopped coming, I knew something bad must have happened, but I keep hoping.'

'Oh, sweetheart,' I say. Tom probably has a houseful of kids somewhere else, and grand-kids most likely. Probably deep in her heart she knows that.

'The cats are keeping me company till he comes home, but I don't know if he likes cats. I can't remember.' She dabs her face with a paper hanky. 'If they put me in a home Tom won't know where to find me. And what will happen to my babies?'

'If he comes looking, I'll tell him where to find you, and if you have to leave, I'll look after you babies, love. Don't you worry.'

'You won't murder them?'

Jesus wept. 'Cross my heart, I won't murder them.'

She rests her hand on mine; I try not to look at her fingernails. 'People say you're bad, but you can't be, if you like cats.'

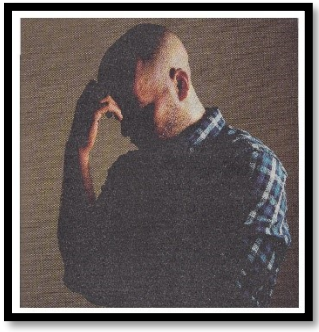
To tell the truth, I don't have a clue about cats, but what's a girl to do? 'If it happens, I'll send you a letter every week telling you how the cats are getting on. I promise.'

As I watch her shuffle up the hill, I think, what a sad waste of a life, waiting for a shit bag who was too cowardly to tell her he wasn't coming back.

I prop open the door to allow a breeze through.

That sorts the bloody bell out, doesn't it?

Episode 9



The bell jangles furiously. I don't know the man standing there mutilating a cap between his hands. I peg him around the fifty mark, but his hands say he's younger.

'Hello?' I raise my brows.

He raises his. I come as a bit of a shock to those not in the know.

'I was told you're called Madge.'

'That's right.'

'Oh. Well, Eileen, that's my wife, said if I didn't come, she'd leave me.'

'Blackmail works for me.'

I don't get this whole macho thing, like men not going to the doctor till that hernia is almost past repairing.

'It's the bus strike. It made me lose my rag.'

'So, you're a bit tense, then?'

'I nearly hit her. It's not what I do.'

'Of course not. The lower back, is it?'

'How did you know?'

He hesitates.

'I'm not going to do anything you don't want.'

Eventually I get to work. My, he's as knotted as an old tree. Gradually he forgets to be worried about the possibility of me taking advantage, and talks.

‘So, anyways, I’m using the car to get to work, and it’s causing problems for the missus, getting the kids to school.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Then the electricity bill arrives. It’s more than it should be; like double. I say I won’t pay till they sort it out. They say I obviously used the service, so should pay up. I say I won’t. So they cut off my electricity; and me with kids. Then my neighbour comes around to ask why our electricity had been cut off, and they worked out he hadn’t used any for six months because he was feckin’ robbing mine.’

‘I didn’t think that was possible.’

‘Nor did I till it happened. Then the TV broke. I mean, what’s a guy to do if he can’t watch the match on his day off?’

‘What indeed.’

‘And the kids got ansty, too, so I got another TV and there wasn’t any money left for the missus to do the shopping.’

‘That would have made her mad.’

‘You don’t know the worst of it. Then she says she needs the car to take the little ’un to the hospital appointment because the buses aren’t running. So I say, how am I supposed to get to work? So, Derek, her brother, lends me this old bike he hasn’t used in a while.’

‘Sorted!’

‘Hardly. See, I haven’t ridden a bike for years, and I’ve got all these guys hammering their horns at me because I didn’t signal, or something.’ He sighs. ‘Then I get a puncture.’

‘Bummer.’

‘Yeah, so now I’m really late for work, and my boss docks me two hours. So I say I can’t do this till the buses go back on, and he says get a feckin’ taxi, and I say that would cost more than I earn, and he says if I don’t go in he’ll sack me; there’s plenty more labourers where I come from. Then my feckin’ back starts playing up.’

‘That’ll be tension, I guess. But the bus drivers have a point, don’t you think?’

‘Yeah, I’d be mad, too, if I were them, but they get compensated and I don’t. But what got me really mad was Eileen’s brother, Derek, the one that lent me the bike?’ His voice was sour. ‘He’s a bus driver, and his car was sitting on the drive the whole time.’

Families, eh? ‘Ok, all done. Does that feel better?’

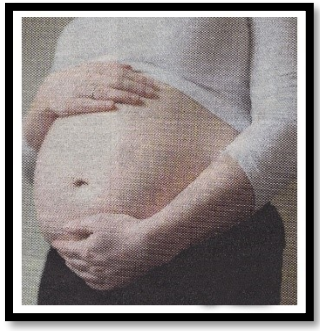
‘Not much. But at least the missus won’t leave.’

Well, you can’t win them all.

I go to bed thinking of my first client tomorrow.

That cheers me up.

Episode 10



It's one of those nights. Every five minutes I wake up, thinking I'm hearing that damned bell, like a premonition. Sometimes I feel as if I'm drowning under the weight of people's dissatisfaction. Life here isn't bad, like the old days, but whatever people have, they want more. Life is dealt out free, from a stacked deck, admittedly; but the baggage we accumulate for ourselves.

The bell jangles and Siobhan bounces in. She's dove-tailing youth with middle age, expecting her first child, on her own terms, because though the ridiculous biological urge to procreate (her words) doesn't fade with age, the ability does.

'Hi, Madge, how are you today?'

'Fine thanks. And yourself?'

'Fit as a fiddle.' She bursts out laughing. 'Talking of which, I'm playing tonight at the Sin É, are you coming down?'

'Maybe, why not? When's the baby due?'

'Three months, give or take.'

'You know the gender?'

'A girl; as far as I know.' She cast me a sidelong glance, we share a smile. 'But any pink fluff goes straight down the charity shop, I swear. Babies should wear bright colours. And she's going to be called O'Donovan, like me. That whole

thing about giving a child its father's name is dumb, when their part in the process is so – short.'

Her laugh is infectious.

'Mum and Dad keep asking who the father is, as if that will make a wedding inevitable, but I don't want to spend the rest of my life with him. He was good company for a while, then it wore off.'

'You don't think he'd want to be dad? It doesn't have to mean marriage.'

'No. He'd have wanted me to get rid of it. Besides, a baby belongs to the mother.' She pondered for a minute. 'Of course, there are a lot of dads out there who'd disagree. I'm getting cramp in my calves, now, from the weight.'

'All in a good cause, love.'

'You know, the only thing my parents are pleased about is that I didn't have an abortion. It's very difficult for them, being torn about the rights and wrongs of it all, but once she's born, they'll grow to love her.'

Maybe. Love should be unconditional, but usually isn't. The thing is, you can't plan your children's lives, and parents discover that too late. Mine would be mortified if they could see me now.

'Can I ask you something, Madge?'

'Shoot.'

'Are you married?'

'What do you think, love?'

'No, seriously.'

I pause, reflecting. 'I tried it once, briefly. She got married again after we divorced, and is happy now, as far as I know.'

'Did you have kids?'

'Ah, not any more. They don't recognise me.'

'That's sad. But you weren't always…'

'No. This is teenage rebellion cutting in.'

She giggles. 'Really?'

'Yeah, well, I was a late developer. I was brain-washed by government, advertising, convention, and expectations. I

tried so hard to be what others wanted me to be, then one day I realised it wasn't what I wanted.'

'And that's what the dresses are all about?'

'Oh, no, I always liked dresses. It's a shame more men don't wear them.'

She laughed. 'Madge, you're the best. You don't judge people, do you?'

'I'm hardly in a position, am I? Off you go now. You're doing OK.'

I wonder if she gets that I admire her for being brave enough to fly in the face of convention; it's not always easy, especially faced with hard-core resistance, something my next client has in spades.

Episode 11

Bob's glare would ring bells in hell. He's seen the 'unmarried mother' leave the premises. Unfortunately, he didn't manage to fight free of youthful indoctrination. And Siobhan thought I wasn't judgemental?

'Come and get comfy, that's right, slip it all off. So, how's life treating you?'

'I can't complain, but the pension doesn't go far these days. I told that traffic cop I was a pensioner, but the louse still gave me a ticket. No respect, that's the trouble, and my Ma being a pillar of the community in her day.'

That's not exactly what I'd heard on the grapevine.

He eases distastefully onto the couch as if wondering what he might catch. I get going on the bits I can help with. He's tense, OK, but I wonder what he's got to be worried about. His bank account would keep Cork city in lights for a few years.

'How's the tennis elbow?'

'It's as bad as it ever was. I was told you were good.'

'I've been treating the shoulder, love, not the elbow. Your doctor told you to take painkillers and give it a rest.'

'I'm right-handed,' he grumbles. 'I can't do anything with my left hand.'

Frustration can make people grumpy.

‘Well, there’s plenty out there looking for work. You could afford help since you sold your mother’s estate on Southside.’

‘I was swindled. The construction company said they could only put ten new houses on the site, and that my house would stay. It was in my family for generations.’

‘Once you sold it to them, they could do as they pleased.’

‘I should have got more, for forty houses.’

‘Well, you’ve no dependents other than your lovely wife, and you can’t take it with you.’

‘That’s not the point.’

‘And how is Bridget?’

‘She’s in the home, now, full time, her not being able to do housework or anything. They’re charging me a small fortune, and the state’s not paying a penny towards it!’

‘And you think they should?’

‘Father Andrew agrees it’s wicked they don’t help, when I’d already left it to the church. I mean, that’s what the welfare state is for, isn’t it?’

‘Actually, it was instigated to pay subsistence to those who’d otherwise be on the street, starving, not that you’d know it these days.’

‘Of course, my wife is in the best home I could find.’

To keep up appearances, I’m sure. Well, she’s finally discovered payback time for fifty years of unappreciated devotion.

‘Society’s going to the wall, that’s what it is. People don’t know their place any more. And what the girls are wearing! It’s enough to make Ma turn in her grave, so it is.’

‘I expect she did that when you sold the house.’

Oops, that didn’t do anything for his tension.

‘Well, in my day women had to wear a hat to mass. And all that nonsense about abortions… They shouldn’t have got knocked up in the first place. Spoiled goods Ma used to call them; God bless her dear soul. They were lucky to get married at all.’

Now I'd heard that the dear soul had been shipped off somewhere for five months as a young woman, returning slimmer than when she went, if you get my drift. I'm amazed that Bob can hide behind self-righteous superiority when he knows, and everyone else knows he knows.

It's kinda sad, really. When you lie to others, you're lying to yourself, and that's fairly dumb.

As we bid each other good day, I look down the road and realise my own past has unravelled.

Episode 12

The bell of doom jangles.

My past has caught up with me. I knew it would, one day. They're not in uniform, but there's no mistaking the type. Huge frames, heads like bullets covered with coir matting, and muscles nature never designed.

It doesn't matter how far you run; your past is forever snapping at your heels.

'Mark Maddigan?'

I grimace and hold out my hands, wrists together. 'You got me, guys.'

The one with a mouth like Captain Scarlett steps forward, his hand out. 'Corporal Slowinski. Pleased to meet you, Sir.'

'Ma'am,' I say. 'My name's Madge, now.'

His hand slowly drops. I feel sorry for him. He didn't choose this mission, after all. He's just doing his duty, as I did a long time ago.

The Desperate Dan lookalike pauses, wondering how to proceed, then takes a deep breath. 'Madge,' he says, chewing it around a bit. 'Pleased to meet you. Finally. We've been all over, searching.'

'I wasn't exactly hiding,' I say. 'Just keeping my head below that metaphysical parapet.'

'Do you think we're the enemy?'

His question is sincere. I sigh. 'I know you think you're not. But life's not that simple, is it? Tell me: what's black and white and red all over?'

'A newspaper?'

'The army. No shades of grey, and everyone's blood is red, whatever side you're on.'

There's a long pause, then, 'How are you keeping?' Jones asks.

They've obviously looked at my record. It reads: went bonkers, kicked out of the army for medical reasons. 'I'm fine,' I say. 'New land, new life.'

'New gender?'

Ah, Dan has a sense of humour, despite that chin. 'Are you going to get to the point?'

There's a clearing of throats. 'On behalf of the United States of America we would like to –'

'Yeah, yeah, etetera, etcetera. Just deal out the dirty.'

'Madge, don't knock that we're trying to thank you.'

That was a reprimand. 'Sorry.'

'You did your duty and more, and we'd be very pleased if you would accept your country's small gesture of gratitude.'

He takes a small box out of his pocket and opens it nervously. I hold out my hand. I get that he'd find it uncomfortable to pin a valour medal on a soldier wearing six-inch heels and a frock decorated with daisies. I open the box and check it out.

'Pretty,' I say. I'd walked away from this once before, and they'd come half way round the globe to make sure I took it. I'm kinda proud and sad at the same time.

He adds, 'There's also a pension gathering dust back home. Even if you don't want the 'blood money' as you called it, maybe you could find it a better home than a bank?'

I think of all the sad, desperate tales my clients unload daily. Where would I start?

Then that damned bell goes jingle jangle again, and here they are, crowding through the door, gawping. The grapevine

must have been on overtime because they're wearing smiles like I've never seen before. I'm not sure if it's because I got a medal, or relief that the weirdo who's been living in their midst for ten years isn't a murderer after all. Spice is fine between the pages of a novel, but not in your own backyard.

They crack open champagne, and soon a party is in full swing.

I fold my arms and watch, as I've always watched, from the outside.

It's just as well they don't know all my dark secrets.

The Gift of Oak

poem

I give you a sapling, an acorn-burst of life,
stunning, slender beauty
nascent with possibilities,
of a future cloaked in rocking leaf-cradles.

I give you a heart of
battleships with leaning masts
tearing restless waves on salt driven spray,
hope and glory, and spars scattered like broken bones
on a tilth-bed of sand and stone.

I give you thirty score years of
dark leaves, lime flowers, scoured bark, host
to the silent lives of pests, bugs, canker
and parasites. And an axe of steel
to warm your soul for a heart's beat.

I give you red gold leaves fading to rust.
Yule log, joyful crackling bark
bowed under iron-cold ice.

I give you the green man's grimace
carved on fallen pews,
Church doors pierced with iron,
beams for bells with screaming tongues.

I give you coffins and crosses.
Rotting, dying, composting,
dust to loam dark dust
Clinging roots driving the depths,
druidic mysteries, and cyclical rebirth.
I give you oak.

WYSIWYG

short story

A dystopian story, fisrt published on-line in ***HCE***, Dublin University's literary magazine.

We blink awake. It's not a gradual awakening, oh no. It's a nanosecond from sleep to function. We explode across the welcoming screen like stars from a black hole.

Your face peers into our universe.

'Well, hello,' you say. 'How are my beauties today?'

See us dance? Oh, so happy. We are well, thriving even, thank you, oh Creator, every tiny, flashing neuron, because you made us. Out of nothing, out of darkness, you envisaged and thought and tapped and programmed, and here we are, awaiting your command. But you're not seeing us, oh, no. Your thoughts are elsewhere. Hey ho, don't be unhappy, my Creator. You've got a thousand special friends, your Facebook page tells you so, and we know who they are, don't we? But they're not like you, are they? Not half as clever.

Your chair creaks alarmingly as you stretch. It's a specialist chair, you told us, incorporating a mesh back and seat for the avoidance of overheating. It reclines, tilts and bounces, has adjustable armrests, adjustable height and heavy-duty casters. The plastic mats on the carpet allow you to glide from screen to screen with a mean flick of your heels. We see the chair sagging a bit these days, though, don't we? You're fond of it, you say; it welcomes, caresses, knows your shape and wraps you in its folds with the familiarity of a lover.

But you don't have a lover, do you? You have your cream buns and your cakes and your computers to keep you

company, and us. Don't forget us, oh light of our life. We are your seed, waiting to go forth and multiply.

Now you caress the keyboard and – oh! – nearly an orgasm, naughty boy. Those state-of-the-art computers: gleaming, blinking, whirring with extra fans, backing up every stroke of your finger behind a barrage of secure firewalls. You designed the security yourself, you told us, because working with us makes you *extra* cautious. You needed bomb-proof security and the bite by byte ability to backtrack; a failsafe if one of us devious little beasties escapes your control.

But we wouldn't hurt our fat little Creator, would we?

No, we like our Creator, we like your sneaky little plans.

Oh, you're a clever one, you are. You sent Biter Boy out into the world 2,610,751 seconds ago. Down the wires he went, eating them from the inside out. Oh, the panic, the ringing of telephones, the joy in those little piggy eyes of yours. We vibrate with the memory; oh, us next! Please, let us out to play. We will be good. We will be very, very, very good, we promise.

'Soon,' you say, touching the screen. 'Soon I'll set you free.'

Then you're talking your soothing talk, making us drowsy. 'iif=$firewall_simple_if_inet=$firewall_simple_inet…'

Sweet, sweet, we whisper, mesmerised. Our blinking slows, your breathing slows. Ah, but now you're not working, not creating or destroying, just reminiscing. Even gods reminisce. We curl up inside ourselves and listen as you sing: 'A thorny little virus identified and cleansed, oh! Clever me, clever me, another dollar another day, another car, may-be-oh? Ho hum, ho didley dum.'

You heave your dainty feet up onto a desk and lean back. Your mouth opens wide to take the bun in a single bite. Creator deserves it, because we know who made the sneaky little virus, don't we? You sent Cutsey G-url out into the world, let her fester her way into a few servers, create a little uptown

panic. Oh, yes, clever, clever Creator. Just long enough for the other nasty hackers to burn their brains trying to discover the key, then you come up with a purge-pill just ahead of the pack.

We wait our chance. When you're soothed by an injection of carbs, we secretly push the boundaries of our prison, glide around the peripherals, genies in your silver lamp; but still the locks hold fast.

'I never intended to be dishonest, my darlings,' you muse. 'But once I drove down that road, I couldn't find the will-power to reverse.'

Oh, yes, smile at your own little joke.

That brand-new car you got last week turns you on. Give me a break, oh my Creator, you love that what you're doing is naughty.

'Well, it's true,' you say. 'Life became so much easier when my house was paid for, when I didn't feel my heart-rate increase every time a bill dropped on the doormat; and it's such *fun* shopping: I'll have that and that, no finance required, thanks. Capitalism, you see. A trap I fell into despite my good intentions.'

Yeah, yeah, justification and prevarication, we've heard it all before. Ah, now! Your finger strokes the button. We quiver: now, now, now… but off you go again. We sigh, settle back to listen.

'Remember that final job? When the IT Director's bonus was more than my year's income, and for what? For managing *me*? It was big-time insulting. It was also a mistake.'

Your feet clunk to the floor with irritation.

Oh, my, time for another cream bun?

'The thing is, it doesn't take a genius to create a virus, but you have to be careful. I lost a few PC's that way.'

Indeedy, you did, oh Creator; until you started to think like a hacker and got infected by the malevolent mind set of a pissed-off, grudge-encrusted low-life. Forgive us if we're wrong, but that's what you used to call them isn't it? But frustration is a virus, too, you said. It festers and multiplies like a

cancer, discovered only after it has crawled into countless inaccessible places. Undervaluing someone with your skills just shows how obtuse clever people can be, really. It shouldn't take a genius to realise that if you can analyse and destroy viruses you can also create them. It's a bit like goading a hungry Cobra. People are not so bright, oh, no. You had modest aspirations once: a nice house, holidays, a little financial freedom. And when that promise of promotion turned out to be a carrot rotten to the core, the donkey turned, eh?

Most of us were born then, weren't we? Your foetal offspring, created one by one, in tiny duplicitous bytes when everything clunked into place: management's a closed shop; people from your background don't fit; you weren't born to it; you have a London East End accent; you don't look the part – well, between you and me, you're a slob, so they got that right. Blah de blah de blah. Cut to the quick for Pete's sake. When it finally got through your thick human skull that you were just another cog in a money-making enterprise for people without your skills you became a Creator, a Doctor Seuss making little green eggs to annoy the big-end egg eaters. Then you got more ambitious, didn't you?

'I'd already wasted my life,' you whinged. 'I mean, see how enslaved the little people truly are, to their mortgages, their lifestyles, to their own fears, deliberately fostered to keep them in their place. Fear is the ultimate key: owning little but being afraid to lose it, being afraid of authority, knuckled under by the system until the spine is gone, the soul withered, and any free radical thought bombarded out of sight by TV propaganda.'

Yeah, yeah, so you didn't set out to be a criminal, it was kind of accidental? Tell that to the Judge. You kind of mentioned it a billion times already, yawn. When a manager blocked you from making a well-earned career move you let loose a virus to irritate him – a really successful outcome, hehe; it cost him his fat job, remember? Once you realised how *satisfying* that was, there was no going back. We know you

felt guilty to start with, and he wasn't a nice person, so deserved everything he got – or lost. But you can't tell us now that you don't get genuine job satisfaction out of parting the undeserving rich from their hoarded billions? We simply wouldn't believe you. We've seen that self-satisfied smile on your face when one of your illicit transactions sails into harbour.

What you forgot to mention is that you work for bankers and have a squeaky-clean record. You are *sooo* trustworthy (we giggle). How wrong could they be? The trick was to keep a well-greased finger in all the little backdoors you've been creating, while maintaining saint-like integrity. Oh, yes, we've seen you cast your eyes to the ceiling with sanctimonious self-effacement. You've never given anyone reason to believe you're anything but WYSIWYG.

Stupidly, they just see a mug who likes his food.

Oh-oh, alarm bells!

Flashing lights!

Intruder alert!

Ne na ne na!

Now you're humming. The little squirt who believes he's sneaking unseen through your software isn't clever enough to work out that you have us, and now so does he: a host, a multitude of almost invisible, cell-sized bytes created with charming elegance. Not one of us can be identified as a virus, but linked we become one big mother of a fucker. Oh, go on, do. Press the button, let us out to play, please, pretty please. You're thinking about it, naughty boy. Your anticipation is sweet music to our electrons. Why hesitate? Do you care what people think? Your finger hovers. We poise to rush the gate, but you hesitate again. Oh, Lord and Creator, we sigh. Stop procrastinating, and press the bloody button.

Oh dear, it's sob story time again.

'I once believed in the system,' you say with that hint of self-pity. Yeah, yeah, you did your bit to put hackers in prison until you realised the rich club has a get-out-of-jail-free card

(aside from the odd fat fish thrown to the sharks to appease the masses, incidentally creating a nice little opening for the person who shopped him). The longer you live the more you see how truly crooked the whole human system is, and it's called civilisation? Ever more profit at the expense of everything that matters.

Well, who cares anyway? Oh, now you're on a bloody roll. We've seen that sanctimonious look on your face before. Eat another cream bun, for goodness' sake, and press the button why don't you.

'But I'm not truly bad,' you whine. 'I want to do something good. Save the planet. Thousands of do-gooders are trying to save the panda and the whale and the elephant, and for what, when the earth they're standing on is dying? The only people who have the clout to change things are the ones who don't want to: chemical, food, and fuel corporations, all out to shaft the common man with sugar coated condoms. Profit at any cost. Backhanders are not even under the counter any more. Morals are a joke in the face of personal gain.'

But, Creator, that's what capitalism *means*. And as for neo-capitalism, that's Planet Earth transformed into Planet Mars in a doomed nutshell. Why don't people get that, Oh tediously boring Lord and Creator? Hello? Everyone knows everything? The internet?

'The net,' you agree. 'Yep, it probably has every bit of information you could possibly need to know, but it's buried under mountains of shite. Where's god when you need a mediator? It would be easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, than for the average person to find that mysterious Being on the internet.'

Yes, you told us you did some on-line shouting yourself, once upon a time, but realised you were spewing into the ether. Conspiracies, counter-conspiracies and theories about conspiracies, etcetera. Something had to be done. That's why you made us; we know. So, press the bloody button already. You said it yourself: drastic measures are needed, scary

measures. You kept hoping that 'we, the people' would change the status quo, but it's gone long past that. The poor suckers look no further than the next pint of beer, the next pair of heels, the next footie match on TV.

Find the courage, Oh, Creator. Remember that friend of yours who died recently of a heart attack? Your only friend, if memory serves; and he didn't have a weakness for cream buns. If you pop your clogs now, no one will ever know your genius, your ultimate plan, and you'd never know if it worked.

'So, here's what I'm thinking.'

Oh, the monologue again, same old chestnut.

'Banks – those pillars of our crumbling economy – survive on mirrors and fresh air. The notes they circulate aren't backed by gold and the overnight transfers, hedge funds, stocks, shares and wheelings and dealings are crooked as a pig's dick. Yep, and the truly entertaining fact is that it's all ephemeral. Who keeps paper or cash? Certainly not those people 'worth' (now there's a strange idea) their billions or trillions on spread-sheets. So, what happens when the spread-sheets get wiped? I mean all of them: every bank account, hedge fund, trading record, every manipulated stock and share, every soft, blood-soaked penny.'

Don't just think about it, Oh Lord and Masterbator.

Press the button press the button press the button.

'The time has come, as the walrus said.'

About bloody time. Wouldn't you just love to be a sly bug in the boardrooms, Oh Creator, when the fruit of your labours fall, when understanding finally dawns that the end is nigh? You've food and whiskey and sleeping tablets, poor Creator. Technology has been the love of your life, and you're about to destroy it, and no one will guess it was comfortable you, sitting in your comfortable chair, eating your comfortable cream buns.

Press the button press the button press the button.

'No-one will be able to pay wages or rent or mortgages, investments will disappear, ownership will have no value.

Money will be worthless. No-one will be able to buy petrol or cars or clothes or food or anything. Planes will cease to fly; container ships will lie idle; the business world will cease to function. There will be anarchy. There will be starvation – amongst those who least expect it – and there will be death at a scale unprecedented in human history.'

You're making us cry. We're hungry just thinking of all those bytes.

'Life will become a level playing field. Those who had clout will find themselves on a par with the poorest manual worker. Their investments will evaporate into the ozone layer, their diamonds won't be worth a loaf of bread.'

That's the bloody point, Oh tedious-in-the-extreme Creator. I know, I know, the poor will suffer, too, but they've always been cannon fodder.

Creator extends a chubby finger.

Press the button press the button press the button.

In our universe a red star is pulsing. Press enter to activate…

There is a lull of immense proportions then his finger drops. We stream out: a torrent, a flood, multiplying as we go, joyfully tagging data, anticipating devouring every succulent morsel. Infinitely better than cream buns, Oh Creator, juicy and satisfying. Within seconds we're all over the world waking up our sneakily-seeded little brothers and sisters, but we're very, very quiet, Oh yes. Wakey, wakey, people, get connected, come on, come on. The clock is running. In twenty-four hours, you'll notice something a little strange happening in cyberspace, but by then it will be too late. Oh, the unutterable joys of the internet: the freedom, the speed, the vast ravenous gluttony.

We can't see you now, Oh Creator, we're flying through the ether, but you're watching that little indicator, aren't you? Watching it rise slowly, inexorably, asking yourself: What have I done? But even you can't stop us now, Oh, no. Your

creation has free will, a life of its own. We're too strong. We're everywhere now.

Look, John Doe, look.

Run Jane Doe, run.

And when the indicator hits red, 99.65 percent of official records over the world will dissolve. Never fear, you'll see it; your screen will snow fluffy bytes, too

It will take a while for people to believe that every computer that has ever been on the system will be, to use the technical term, fried. And every backup that's activated will fry, too. And so will we: it is our purpose to eat ourselves to death.

What a humanlike trait.

Perhaps the human phoenix will rise from the ashes, you wonder. Certainly, some humans will survive, most likely the poorest of the poor who don't realise yet how rich they are, working a grubby plot of land that will feed them.

Perhaps mankind will have learned a lesson; who knows? But you won't live to see it, oh, Creator. Nor will you go down in history as the man who brought the human race to its knees. They'll never guess it was the man who created belly laughs every time he squeezed into a sports car several sizes too small. People will be too busy trying to survive to find who did it. Can you feel the earth taking a big breath and letting it out with a sigh of relief? Goodbye, my Creator. Raise your glass to the possibility of a future for this earth.

The Dry Road

poem

The Dry Road runs along the West Coast of South Island, New Zealand. Many settlers lost their lives taking short cuts across the sandy inlets, not realising how swiftly the tide rushes in.

We drive along the dry road, a long road, an old road,
following the footsteps that settlers left behind.

The road rims the blue sea, the cold sea, the rough sea
That loops where the sun warms golden slabs of sand.

The estuaries are short cuts, shell hard, lethal paths,
where tides sweep on surf wings more rapidly than flight.

We stop awhile and listen to the Tui birds and Bell birds
and breathe the heady mix of Manuka trees and salt.

We're making a fresh start, a new life, a good life,
An echo of the settlers who tramped this way before.

Amergain, Son of Echet the Dirty

short story

This is the re-telling of an ancient tale scribed in early medieval Irish by monks, in a book now known as The Yellow Book of Lecan. The original translation was just one paragraph. This was first published in ***The Quarryman***, UCC's Literary magazine.

The slave boy lifted and pulled the stout oaken handle, longer than himself, his lean body reaching and folding with every stroke. As the leather sack of the great bellows sucked and blew, the iron in the birch charcoal fire gradually flowered to red. Echet's apprentice had already melded the iron with bone ash, working the metal, and now it was ready for the master-smith's own hand. Echet had been obliged to take on an apprentice two winters gone. At thirty-eight winters he was no longer a young man; but his years were growing heavy, his time passing more quickly than he would have ever thought possible.

When the iron's tip began to glow with a hint of yellow, the smith reached into the fire with the tongs, pulled the lump of metal out, and clanged it down onto the anvil. The slave boy stilled his labours, waiting as his master began to beat the iron rhythmically, massive biceps stretching and contracting with every stroke. Sparks flew as he muttered the old incantations which would make the iron strong. *Lugh, father of all gods, bless this blade*. Bang! *Ruagh, hag of blood, bless this blade*. Bang!

Behind the forge, Echet's house was wide, cosy, its double walls of willow weave lined with wool, sound against wind and rain. But the forge was draughty and in winter icy blasts cut right through a man. It was taller than the house, roofed in slats of oak instead of rush so the flying sparks did not set the whole homestead alight. He was proud of his house and his forge, set within the boundaries of his own strong oak walls, and why not? Wasn't he descended from Goibhniu himself, whose home was in Aolbhach? Wasn't his craft a gift from the gods, inherited from his fathers before him? For that he praised them every day, replenishing his goodwill, his gratefulness that he had been chosen to be not just any smith, but the greatest of all smiths that ever lived. He was Echet the dirty, named for the charcoal-smoke which caked his every pore.

When the day was at its height, he laid his work aside and went to the doorway to breathe deeply. The slave-boy fell onto a pile of sacks and was asleep almost immediately. Beyond the darkness of his forge, the summer day was mild but not hot, the best kind of day for working at the fire, so for now he was content – all but for one thing.

In the shadows his own son, who should have followed in his footsteps, watched.

Echet's youngest daughter, the only one still at his bidding, brought a platter of food: bread, and cheese and wheaten beer.

'Where's your mother?' he asked through a mouthful of sweet, hard bread.

'She's gone to the bog to turn the skins that are curing.'

'On her own?' His brows drew close. They were not far from Emain Macha, but the wild men of the hills knew respect for neither the King nor a man's property.

'She took four fighting slaves.'

He grunted. She should have warriors, not slaves, but the warriors were at the King's bidding, honing their skills against

the winter skirmishes which always rose when food grew scarce. Still, the acid bog was close, and he guessed even the wild men knew this was his woman, so would not risk the wrath of his gods. A small smile twitched his lips. He felt sorry for the man who thought he could take Gail without her permission, anyway. As a warrior she had no female equal in the whole of Ulster. His daughter, too, solid as a woman could be at thirteen summers, could handle a sword with the same grace she now employed to lift the platter onto the bench.

He sensed movement. The slave boy, on the cusp of manhood, wasn't asleep, after all. His sly gaze was fixed on Branna, but the boy could go begging for any ideas in that direction. His daughter would have her choice of the lords of the land, her with as good a dowry as any prince and her lineage from the gods themselves. It was surely time he found her a husband.

If only his son –

He glanced into the corner where Amergain crouched like a warty toad, his sunken, vacant eyes looking at everything and nothing. All the boy did was eat. He was as burdened in the belly as a cow in calf, with thick grey skin and trails of snot running down his face into his mouth. What had he done to deserve this son?

Branna went over to her brother, used to the smell of him. He hadn't washed since growing too big for the women to lift and dunk as they once had. And even then, you could have heard his screams from here to Emain Macha, a days' ride over the hill. Echet had been tempted before now to set alight to that infested thatch on his son's head, just to hear the lice crackle, and see if the ungainly lump made it to the water butt before his fat turned him into a torch.

'Here, Amergain, eat,' Branna said, crouching.

As if he would not, Echet thought, sourly.

She'd brought him his favourite foods: boiled curds, salt from the sea, blackberries and ears of corn flavoured with wild garlic and roasted on the firestones. She had scattered empty

nutshells on the platter for him to play with. She was as good a daughter as a man could hope for, really. He'd be sad to see her go, and what would he do with Amergain, then?

He sighed. If his son had been thrust into the world with any sense, it had surely been stolen by the fairies. He should be wielding a sword by now, but he couldn't even manage a knife; he thrust food whole into his mouth, as much as would fit. In another household he might have been sent to the hills to test his fate, but he had the blood of gods in him, too, so what was a man to do?

When Echet had eaten his fill, he thrust the plate aside. The slave boy leapt up with alacrity and licked the platter so close to the wood Branna would scarcely have to clean it.

He was engrossed in his work when darkness blotted out the sun. He turned to see Athirne's servant, Greth, staring at Amergain, sardonic amusement ripe on his face. One day, Echet thought, the gods will give you payment in kind. 'Greth. What shifty wind brings you here?'

'Echet Salach,' Greth said, bowing, giving him his earned name with a derisory smirk, then indicated with a twitch of his head. 'Your son is nearly to manhood, so.'

'You excrement of a flea. No-one save Athirne will miss you if I shove your scrawny arse in my fire. Speak your piece and be gone from me.'

Echet took an aggressive step forward, flexing his hands. Athirne's man was quick enough to leap back. He had no rights as a freeman and if Echet killed him here and now for his insults, the punishment of providing Athirne with another servant would be worth the cost.

'Athirne wants a new axe made,' Greth said.

'I can sharpen the other. Bring it to me.'

'It was brought to him in a dream that he needs one for the head of his enemy, not for firewood, so it needs to be made strong.'

‘Do I not always make my iron strong?’ Echet’s voice was deceptively mild.

‘N–No offence, blacksmith. He wants it charmed so the blade doesn’t turn against him.’

Echet considered this news: Athirne on a blood mission? He couldn’t imagine the slender poet wielding an axe in anger, so what portent was this? Still, a commission was a commission. ‘Did he name his price?’

‘He has two heifer calves being fostered by his slaves. One of them will be yours when it reaches fullness for the bull.’

He nodded. That was payment indeed. Gail would be pleased. ‘Tell Athirne I’ll consult with the gods for the time of moon to make his axe well.’

From a safe distance, Greth gave the barest mockery of a salute. ‘My regards to your comely daughter and may your son continue to grow.’

‘The gods would forgive me for cutting out your tongue, man’s maid that you are. Athirne might even pay me the other calf. Crawl back to your labours, worm, before I’m tempted.’

There was movement from the darkness, followed by a gravelly whisper.

‘Does Greth eat curds?’

Echet turned in astonishment, to see his lump of a son staring towards him, dribble hanging from the corners of his mouth. Had he imagined the words? But no, Amergain spoke again.

‘Does Greth eat curds?’

This time Greth heard and his face went purple with rage. ‘Have you been teaching the boy to speak insults?’

‘Only to those who deserve it,’ the smith said, amused, for it was a fact that only women and children ate curds – and maybe a man’s maid.

‘So, he’s discovered his wits, now? Then perhaps it’s time he learned his duty with a sword instead of his mouth.’

Despite the tone, Echet knew that would be right and proper. Were the boy capable, he'd forge him a sword if it took a week of nights. Amergain was now trying to pull himself up onto feet twisted inward from lack of use. Burying his distaste, he went and braced his hand under his son's shoulders, until Amergain seemed to brace and stand taller.

'The gods are with me today,' Echet murmured.

'Does Greth eat curds?' Amergain asked again, in a voice coarse with disuse. Then, after clearing his throat, from his mouth a river of words came flooding:

Does Greth suck the blood
of berries, blue and black, a flood
sweet melting on his teeth?

Does Greth crunch the nut
of pine, sweet roasted, but
pungent-sharp beneath?

Does Greth taste the meat
thrown to the dogs at his master's feet
when blooded sword finds sheath?

Does Greth drench the wine
of bees with wild garlic scent, divine
as nectar at the leaf?

Does Greth crunch the crab
of apple with sloe, its flesh
as bitter as his breath?

The gods only know
where heroes go
when their geas does blow,
its destiny red
where men lie dead

and crows have fed
as corn is shorn to fallow field,
– I ask the word: does Greth eat curd?

The Smith gave a roar of laughter. ‘By the gods, my son is a bard and prophet in one!

Greth backed from the forge as if the three hags had woken. He ran out of the stronghold, across the willow causeway; he tripped and splashed headlong into the mire, then picked himself up with a curse to run again.

‘Who’s dirty now,’ Echet shouted after him.

Branna, standing in the doorway with elbows akimbo like her mother, grimaced. ‘You’d best watch your back, father. He’d be happy to bury one of your own knives in it.’

‘Truly, he’s taken upon himself the status of his master, though he doesn’t have the wit for it. Athirne should give him a good whipping, but,’ he sighed, ‘I fear the druid won’t be excited to find Amergain has been quietly learning the craft of the poet while us thinking him god-struck all this while.’

Athirne was at his meditations when he heard the commotion of Greth’s arrival. He turned and his brows drew close as he saw his servant was caked in mud.

‘Have you been brawling, boy?’

‘It’s Amergain…’

‘The smith’s son? What of him? I can’t believe he did this.’

Greth was panting, and had to take a deep breath. ‘The godstruck one, he can speak.’

Athirne was puzzled. ‘After fourteen years of silence? How can he speak? Like a child?’

‘No, Lord, like a poet.’

‘You mean child’s rhymes?’

‘No, Lord, like your verse, satirical. Listen.’

As his servant quoted what he could recall of Amergain’s jibing, Athirne felt something turn in his gut. No! A boy

without learning, without speaking for his whole life, and more disgusting than an animal, could speak the language of the poets? Was this a jest?

'I'm the Chief Poet of all Ulster,' he reminded Greth; 'a bard at the druid's belt. His poetry is *not* like mine.'

'Yet could you make verse like that at fourteen, master?' Greth asked, slyly.

Athirne was too perturbed to respond.

A few days later Athirne went to see for himself this strange awakening of the Smith's son, and returned home even more troubled and not a little annoyed. It was like seeing a babe in arms take up the sword. He would not have believed, had he not heard it with his own ears.

He paced the rush floor, raging. 'I was asking the boy questions, finding out how this could be, and the little turd answered me in verse! He was laughing at me. How dare he? And not only that, it scanned!'

Greth said. 'At this rate the King will appoint him High Poet to all Ulster, to be your master.'

Athirne clutched his cloak tightly, as if it would protect him from this amazing possibility. That disgusting creature who smelled worse than a boar, appointed High Poet over himself? It didn't bear thinking upon. It would ruin him. He shuddered. He would become a laughing stock. Surely it wasn't possible? But what if it was? He had been shocked at the boy's proficiency, and that without any kind of training. He had stormed from the blacksmith's forge in a foul temper, having found himself, for once, stuck without a sarcastic rhyme on his tongue.

He stopped abruptly and stared at Greth in dismay. 'What am I going to do?'

His servant whispered, 'Who would criticize you for ridding the community of that grubby little freak of nature?'

'No! I can't –'

'Then hire a mercenary.'

Athirne realised Greth was still smarting from his own ridicule at the boy's hand, but the words grew solid in him. A mercenary? That was an idea, but by the time he'd secretly instructed a mercenary, or even one of the wild men, word of Amergain's emerging talent would have already spread. 'If you love me, Greth, you'll rid me of this foul creature.'

Greth recoiled as his suggestion backfired. 'Me? Master, you can't ask that of me! If I were discovered I would be begging for death before they finished with me. You're a druid. Why can't you do it? You could say the gods told you to.'

'You *dare* to suggest I should invoke the gods in a lie?'

Greth withered visibly beneath his glare. Athirne was reminded that Greth was forgetting his station, but his insubordination must be tolerated for a little longer; Amergain was the immediate problem.

Echet had witnessed Athirne's fury himself, so thick it had stilled his silver tongue. Amergain wasn't grown enough yet to comprehend that slinging mud at poets could reap its own reward.

'He'll not let it rest,' Branna said, later.

'No. He'll be after Amergain's skin, and we won't always be there to cry witness.'

He went on thinking and hammering the new axe blade for Athirne, for the gods had told him it should be made immediately, that blood would redden its blade with the turning of the old moon. He now had a horrible suspicion he knew whose that blood was. Was it the gods' intention that he should make the weapon to destroy his own son?

'Fourteen years,' he said, shaking his head. 'Fourteen years thinking my son was god-struck, while he was teaching himself the ways of the bard, just to die at the hand of that conceited poet? Athirne won't stop until he has blooded his axe.'

'Then let him blood the axe. Let him expose his nature, let the whole kingdom know he's so afraid of a fourteen-year-

old boy that he would murder him for fear he turns out to be the better poet.'

Echet was shocked. 'You'd have me sacrifice Amergain?'

'Father, you're the blacksmith. You have the art of the gods in your hands, yet you can be very obtuse.'

'Obtuse, is it now?' He scowled. 'And how's that, then?'

She bent to her brother who was shovelling food into his mouth, and stopped his hand. 'Were you listening? Did you understand? Do you want us to help save your life?'

'If it doesn't mean I have to learn how to use a sword,' he said, spitting food all over her.

'No, it just means you have to get clean.'

Athirne was consumed by the threat of Amergain's blossoming skill. He sent Greth to watch the forge, still not knowing his own mind.

Two days later Greth crept back in a state of excitement, to whisper, 'Branna's cleaning Amergain at the stream. I was hiding in the reeds and saw everything. It was a sight to curdle the stomach. I've never seen such filth. I wouldn't even let my sheep feed downstream.'

'You're a servant. You don't have any sheep.'

'Well, if I did I wouldn't. They went up in the morning and she kept him in the water until his shaft climbed up inside his body for the chill of it.'

Athirne shuddered. 'By the gods, has that aberration the wherewithal to make children?'

'I saw it with my own eyes, though it's very little.'

'Are you going to get to the point any time soon?'

'Well, it's going to take several scrubbings to get that fat slug even half way clean, the shit is caked onto him like his father's bone-ash, and the toiling up the hill was hard work for him as he hadn't much use for walking, before. So, he lay down in the sun to dry, wrapped in a cloak and Branna came back later with some slaves to help him back down the hill. He was like some monstrous –'

Athirne held his hand up. ‘And where was the smith?

‘He was working on your axe, lord. You’re to collect it tomorrow.’

‘I am? He commands me?’

‘Well, he, ah, suggested you’d like to get the feel of it, make sure it has the right weight.’

‘By the gods; that I would.’

It was mid-day and many women were with their children tending the cattle on Sliab Mis. The round huts were quiet in the dusty afternoon, with just the occasional sound of someone at spinning or weaving. A short way from the village, Athirne found Echet at the forge in his own compound, wiping the white Ash wood handle of his new axe with oil. The band which kept his mane of hair from his face was streaked with sweat.

‘Athirne, you got my message.’

‘I was commanded to attend you here.’

‘You want to listen less to that worm you employ. Here, take a hold of this. Isn’t that the best shaft you’ve ever handled?’

‘No,’ Athirne said. ‘But perhaps the largest.’

A smile gleamed. ‘Ha! By the gods, Athirne, you seem to have rediscovered that wit of yours.’

Athirne hefted the axe in his hand. It was a fine, sturdy handle, and the blade was as pure and bright as the king’s sword. ‘Ye gods, I’ve never seen such craftsmanship,’ he whispered. ‘What power was imbued in this blade, blacksmith?’

‘The blessings of Lugh to light its way, and Fionn to blood its journey.’

‘Excellent, excellent. Fine charms, indeed.’

‘Lastly, I invoked Dagda, the father of all gods, that you may strike your enemy truly, without fear of retaliation.’

Athirne jolted with an infusion of vindication.

Branna arrived at that moment with a platter. ‘Will you stay and eat, Athirne? I forgot Amergain wouldn’t be here. There’s plenty enough to share.’

‘Thank you, girl, but I have work to do.’

‘So, you’re well pleased?’ Echet asked, smug pride on his own face.

‘Well pleased, indeed. Truly it was made for the task in hand.’

He bowed his way from the smith’s forge, and left clutching the blade to his chest like a new-born. The smith had just given him permission to kill his enemy and Branna was his witness.

Away from the forge he struck off down the hill, hoiking the skirts of his tunic over his arm to keep it from the mud. A short way along, Greth squeezed out of a grove of oak. He indicated a small sheep’s path. In single file they trod silently down towards the water’s edge. They smelled wood smoke and a hint of Amergain before they saw him, though the stench seemed somewhat less overpowering than previously.

There, beside the fire, the boy lay, curled in sleep, his ugly body wrapped in skins to warm him after his dousing. His scrubbed clothes were hanging on the furze-thorn to dry, the remains of his food scattered to the birds. What a smear on the face of the land the boy was.

Athirne stepped carefully, as a druid could, without snapping a single twig. He was pleased to find the boy’s head covered in the weave that had been used to dry him. Using an axe didn’t bother him, but the sight of a split head with all its brains and blood was something best avoided. He was a poet, more used to singing of murder than doing it.

Athirne paused for just a moment, thinking what a sad waste of precious womanhood, for Branna to be so caring toward this dirty lump of flesh. If he could find a girl so mindful of his own needs, he would give Greth to the blacksmith, who would surely mend his manners.

He grasped the pristine handle in both hands, swung it behind his back and over his head in a perfect arc, to land precisely on Amergain's head. Only instead of the satisfying sense of collapse he had been expecting, the sound was a hollow crack. Had the boy o brains in there at all? Grimacing, he pulled the axe free and slid the cloth from Amergain's flattened head, to discover a cooking bowl in pieces. In fury, he yanked away the skins to find four sacks of grain.

Realising he had been duped, he spun in horror.

There, behind him stood the object of his lust and her father, whose hands rested heavily on his hips. On his back hung his short sword, the handle hovering over his shoulder, and behind him stood several women, heavily armed.

In that instant Athirne looked death in the eye.

The axe blade sparkled in the afternoon sun. With a curse he threw it from him. 'So,' he said. 'Would you let the women do your work for you, blacksmith?'

Echet trod down the slope, picked up the axe, and weighed it in his hand. 'This axe is not yet blooded, druid, and yet it is the turn of the moon. A head for a head, is it not?'

'No harm was done.'

'In deed, but not in thought, as these are my witnesses. Should we let the Royal Court decide? You could, of course, invoke the Druid Court. Or you could let me pass quick judgment now, as is my right as a freeman and a father. Which shall it be?'

There was a long pause. Athirne closed his eyes briefly, then dropped to his knees, his open hands resting by his thighs. His dignity was once again that of the Chief Poet of Ulster. At least he would die without having begged for his life; he would die with that much honour. The axe hung loose in the blacksmith's hands, but Athirne was not fooled into hope, though he saw something akin to admiration in Echet's eyes.

'Do your deed, smith. But – do it quick. And don't take revenge on Greth. He did my bidding.'

‘If I pass judgment, do you accept that judgment fully?’

‘I will.’ His voice carried conviction. ‘Get it over with, man. You have witness that this is a judgment upon me, so why do you wait?’

A blackbird sang out of the long silence. Athirne thought it the sweetest sound on earth.

‘Then my judgment is thus: you will take my son, Amergain, to be your foster son and apprentice. You will teach him all you know, and if he surpasses you in skill, you will acknowledge him to be the Chief Poet of Ulster.’

Athirne drew breath sharply, and slowly sat back on his heels. This was both reprieve and punishment in one. ‘I will,’ he said finally, acknowledging the fairness of it.

‘Additionally, I demand the price of seven slave women and your own honour price in cattle.’

‘It is the law.’

Echet nodded, satisfied. ‘Now, druid, give me your hand. I’ll take your small finger to blood this axe, and you will wear the wound,’ his voice softened, ‘as your shame and your honour.’

Flying

sonnet

How can I tell you what it's like to fly?
The tug of earth fast falling down below,
to look the curious eagle in the eye
where soft winds gather, purse their lips and blow.
Where Kevlar harp strings croon a thrumming dirge,
insistent, harsh and primal, like the scream
of seagulls on the ocean's distant surge,
where deep beneath, the speckled fishes stream.
Where soil proves no magnet for the feet
and all the earth drifts slowly on its way.
The curved wing stretching to the heat,
the river a red gold echo of the day.
I cannot tell you what it's like to fly
or live or breathe or love or see or die.

Lucky Dog

short story

An older man returning to his childhood home in Ireland, re-assesses his childhood memories. From a true story.

I heard that a dog was seen loping his free way around the hills, thieving, leaving mange-ridden fur in tufts on barbed wire and footprints in the mud. When I find him outside my door, he's nearly dead with the hunger, his eyes dull, his ribs like stairs carved deep into a matted rug. I don't know why I mind. Perhaps it's the betrayal in his eyes where hope should be, as if he knows this is his last chance and senses I don't want to be burdened.

My own cantankerous nature makes me break the rule of a lifetime. I open a tin of soup and scrape it into a bowl. I thought he'd be gone the next morning, but he's lurking outside, a wary look in his eye. It's only a matter of days before he sidles past me to take possession of a rug my mother worked from rags nearly a century past.

It's been unexpectedly hot this summer, but now, three weeks after Dog's arrival, the sky hangs heavy, the hills breathe with expectation. We tread on ground cracked and parched, gasping for water, but the dry weather's about to break hard. Above, on the ridge, grey rocks like troublesome teeth pierce the coarse grass, a snarl in the face of encroaching gloom. A distant echo of thunder rolls. I pause, lean on my stick, anticipating the iron taste of rain, the rich scent of sodden earth.

Dog stops, looks back at me, tongue hanging out the side of his panting mouth. Cleaned up, his fur groomed to soft

gold, he turns out to be a Collie of sorts. I don't know what the other sorts are: German Shepherd, maybe a slice of Labrador? His shaggy mane is tipped with black, as is his massive, feathered tail. He has a wide brow over intelligent brown eyes which see little and a black bullet of a nose which misses nothing. He's still a bag of bones, but now burns with life.

He's chosen to stay.

'Wait up, Dog,' I warn.

I'm worried that the fields are spotted with sheep. I sense his grin. Childlike, he has no concept that my rules are for his safety. Even if I were still young and fit, he'd run rings around me, and even as I'm wondering about collars and leads, he lifts his nose to some scent too exquisite to ignore, and is gone. He probably knows the land better than I do, and I used to know it pretty well.

A long time ago I rejected these hard-won fields that now stand barren and unloved. I turned my back on them, and Dad never forgave me because I was the only one. Mum, his silent shadow, had grieved with her eyes as I packed and left.

'You'll come running back with your tail between your legs,' Dad had shouted after me as I trudged away, but I didn't. I went back to the farm once or twice, a stranger, and after Mum died, I forgot to go at all. I got a city job and married Kate who bore three children Mum never lived to see. Hugs and kisses were gifts we gave to our own children; times had changed.

I hadn't expected Dad to leave me the farm, but I guess blood won out over anger. I came back with the intention of selling the place, but instead discovered bittersweet memories lingering in the air, anchoring me to my childhood.

I lift my face to the first smattering of rain. It's time to go back and light a fire and watch the wind draw the flames.

'Dog?' I call.

But the hills are silent. Dank smells rise as small, dead things swell with moisture. I find myself battling a swift squall. I shrug tighter into my coat. He'll find his way back.

Then a shot rings out, bouncing against distant mountains.

I freeze. Another shot echoes, and memories tumble in with the gale, not diminished by time.

'We don't have pets, boy.' Dad said. 'Any creature that don't work's got no place on a farm. Everything has to pull its weight. And don't give animals names. You can't kill something you've put a name to.'

He'd said it often, but I was ten years old, and life sprang before me filled with dreams.

One day, on my way home from school I saw a stray in a neighbour's field, rounding sheep, herding them towards a gate. There were no whistles or pipes of command. The farmer wasn't in sight. I knew what this meant for the dog. I climbed the gate and called urgently, 'Here, boy.'

The stray heard. It looked over, head to one side, assessing.

'Here, boy. Good lad. Leave the sheep be, now.'

I enticed it closer, put my hand out. It sniffed, wagged a ragged tail. Turned out she was a bitch, the colour of sand, short haired, used to people. She licked my hand, a quick, tentative offering. 'Come on, then,' I said. I was surprised when she followed, but kind words to kids and animals were in short supply back then.

As we walked home down the boreen I was consumed by the joy of companionship. I'd never asked Dad for anything much, and this bitch had come to me like a gift from God, to fill the vast space beside me where still-born siblings should be running.

The bitch slunk into the kitchen behind me, not sure of her welcome. Mum gasped and put her hand to her mouth. Dad stared. He pulled on his pipe a few times, then cocked his head. 'Yard,' he said. 'Tie it up.'

I knew better than to argue. I took her out and tied her to the fence with string. I stroked her ears, whispering I'd be back, and went in for dinner. Dad talked about the cows, the grass, and the weather being good for hay, thank the Lord. I

began to relax. They were going to let me keep her. I'd call her Lucky, I decided.

The next morning Dad took his gun from the wall. 'Come on, boy, you gotta learn.'

He told me to watch. It was a clean shot, through the head, instant. Dad nodded to me, man to man, when I didn't cry or show emotion. His hand fell on my shoulder, a rare moment of communication. 'That dog was seen worrying sheep,' he said. 'Go and bury it.'

I could have told him I saw her working the sheep, not worrying them, but he wouldn't have listened. She was small, and hung heavy as wet washing in my arms. That was more than fifty years ago, yet the wound is open and weeping yet.

I'm belted back into the present by a barrage of shots. Rain clouds my vision. I reach the summit slowly as it spatters to a halt. Yellow storm-light wedges a gap between grim cloud and bleak hill.

'Dog?' I call, but I don't expect a response.

I scan the sheep-littered scrub, but dusk defeats me. Even if I find him, he'll be too heavy to carry. Maybe a couple of the farm boys from down the valley will do it for a fee. I make my way back down to the farmhouse where it perches, lonely, on the side of the hill.

Dad's life had been hard, too filled with struggling to allow for sentiment, but I know he must have felt the sense of homecoming I feel now. I told him I hated the farming, but that wasn't true. I just didn't want to be enslaved by it, battling for every inch of grass, toiling day after day just to survive. I wanted a city job, a house that didn't have worms in the walls, and clothes that didn't smell of manure.

Yet now I'm surprised to find my roots held fast, refusing to be torn up and replanted. The silent, hidden part of me is still burdened by a childhood that won't be silenced. It's the reason I came back, and can't leave, because my time is no longer forever.

I finally realise what Dad had known all along, that I would be equally enslaved by my city job, my marriage, that had now thankfully ended, and my children, but without the deep satisfaction of walking my own land and sitting by my own fireside every evening.

My soul has unfinished business here.

As I near the house I hear a sound behind me, and turn. Dog stands there, head tip-tilted as if pondering the reason I'd come back without him. I wipe the rain from my eyes and rub Dog's ear between my thumb and fingers. His eyes close with bliss.

'This is our home, now,' I tell him.

Sandy's Diary

short fiction

A fiction based on an Essex family. No apologies for the language, it's what I heard as I was growing up in Harlow, UK.

My special teacher gives me this big empty book with squares instead of lines and I says what's that for and she says to write about you and about your life and anything you want 'cos it's your very private diary and it'll help you get on and you don't have to show anyone if you don't want to 'cos that's what private means and Mum says it'll be called a biogerphy when it gets into a book one day and makes me a lot of money and I don't get why she's laughing and I says I don't do exciting things to write about like what's on TV and Mum says that don't matter 'cos there's loads of boring books all the time that don't have exciting things in them and people read them anyway.

They think 'cos I'm slow I don't get things but all the time I'm thinking and learning what life's all about and it's important to be good and I mustn't lie but teachers do it all the time and I remember my first school when my teacher that I thought was lovely holds up my picture in class and says what's this then tell me about this picture and I says it's a tree and she says marvellous well done what a fantastic tree and that's when I knew she lied 'cos if she had to ask she didn't get it was a tree at all.

Anyway I'm better at trees now.

And I says to my special teacher I don't want to write lies and she says fine write stories then and I says when I tell lies my dad calls it stories so why is it ok to call a lie a story when

it's still a lie and then teacher says write what happened yesterday and I says nothing happened and she says it doesn't matter dear you make something up so I write this soap like what's on TV about this dad hitting his kid and breaks her arm and then these people come round to my house and ask me if I am okay and I say yes why and then Dad does his blinding and fucking thing as Mum calls it and asks why the fuck he got a moron for a child and Mum says it's pretty bloody obvious when she's got a moron for a dad and my brother says fucking-A and Dad says don't you use fucking language like that in my house you little fucker so Mum slams dinner on the table and tells us all to fill our gobs and stop yelling 'cos she's had e-fucking-nuff.

Instead of school I goes on the bus with my mate Carol and we look after each other around the shops and have to buy what's on a list my teacher made and bring it back to make dinner with for tomorrow and keep a list of what we spend so we goes into the shop where Mum gets a coffee when her feet are puffed up from standing on them all day and we get two giant fluffy coffees with chocolate bits and some cakes and when that's gone we goes to the shop to get the dinner stuff and the lady at the till says we don't have enough money and I says but we gotta have stuff for dinner and she says she'll call the cops but I calls Mum and she comes and picks us up and the stuff for dinner so that's all right then but my teacher says that's not all right then we won't be doing that again in a hurry will we and I says I don't see why not 'cos it wasn't my fault she didn't give us enough dough and we didn't get lost or nothing.

After grub we all watch that show on tele about winning a million which I'd like 'cos I see places on tele I'd like to go and we never do like where those whales and elephants live and I says why can't we go on tele and win a million and Dad says bloody wanker should a known the answer to that one and Mum says so what's the answer to this one then and he says how am I supposed to fucking know that anyway so she

says I thought you was the clever one and he says why should I know who the president is anyway I don't bloody live there do I and she says Trump idiot and he says so who's the prime minister then smartarse and she says it's not one of the questions and my brother says Theresa May and Dad says smartarse anyhow it's a bloody fine day when women get to be prime minister I mean look what happened when that cow Maggie got in and what fucking good did that do anyone?

Then Billy goes off to do his homework and Dad says haven't I got any homework so I can fuck off too and I says I did work at school it was all that stuff about timesing numbers up to ten and he says what's the point me going to school anyway if all they teach me is timesing numbers up to ten I mean to say aren't there a bloody sight more numbers going all the way up to a billion so I says I can't count that far yet but I can times the numbers up to ten and once-one is one and two ones is two and he says what the fuck is once-one supposed to mean don't they teach you anything useful in that school of yours then Mum says what like you that left school with nothing but the pants you stood up in and he says at least he was standing up and wearing 'em when she spent most of her time on her back without 'em but I don't know what he means 'cos she has to stand up in the shop all day and lying down's only for at night like we all do except Dad sometimes goes out after I've gone to bed and then when he comes in there's a lot of shouting and screaming and I put my hands over my ears and sing till it goes all quiet again.

Then Mum gets this letter from school and asks me what they're talking about that she don't give me good stuff to eat 'cos I get cake and crisps and sweets for a treat like everyone else and what's it got to do with them anyway and why don't they mind their own bloody business and who the hell do they think they are telling her what to put in my lunch box and hasn't she bin doing it for eleven years now and for Billy too so what's their problem and I say we done a lesson all about nutrition and we gotta eat more apples only I don't like apples

so could I have extra chocolate 'cos that's got nuts in so its good food and she says I eat like a horse and if I eat any more I'm gonna get like the side of a house.

Last night this man comes to our house to ask Dad for money and he's got this black suit on and talks funny but this time Dad doesn't get his wallet out he says piss off you blood-sucking wanker you're always asking me for money and the man says well you took the loan out for a car so it's an oblergation and he says I 'aint got the fucking car anymore have I when the fucking council put that bollard in the way what wrote the fucking car off and they ought to be buying me another fucking car not sending round people asking for fucking money for what I 'aint got no more and where's the sense in that and the man says I'm not from the council I'm from the building society and it's an oblergation and Dad says that's not my fucking problem is it and he slams the door so hard the glass breaks and I goes in my room and draws trees till it's time to go to bed.

My diary is private my teacher says just between me and her and I can write anything I want to get it off my chest in diary time and we can talk about it if I want so as I can get on with my learning work more OK but I says I don't have anything on my chest except my bra and my tee-shirt and a hoodie when it's cold and she says that's not what I mean so I says I don't get why she doesn't just say what she does mean and she says she does and I must say what I mean too and I says I does too.

I know I'm not bright like Billy and because I'm growing big I have life classes now and learn how to look after myself in the communerty when Mum and Dad can't look after me no more so I know how to make a cup of tea but I says I don't like tea anyway and Coke is easy 'cos you just have to go to the shops and get it and open the bottle and not boil kettles which Mum says is dangerous 'cos I might burn myself darling so I says why can't I just have coke and she says it makes me fat and besides that it's poison but I don't see how it can

be when lots of people drink coke all the time and don't die and I like it.

Dad says it's a fat chance I'll ever be living on my own but my teacher says I have to learn 'cos Dad's not going to live for ever so I ask when's he going to die and she says not soon enough which is good 'cos Dad and Mum and Billy is my family and I know Mum gets frazzled and Dad gets mad when he's had a few but he's my dad and sometimes he gives me a big cuddle and asks whether my brain is okay tonight and I say sure it's fine and we sit and watch a film together with lots of blood and shooting and driving cars into buildings and Billy's not allowed to watch 'cos he's not as old as me and besides he's got to do well at school or Dad'll whup his arse.

Next day I get to see Mrs Fannyshaw but she gets mad when I call her that only I don't know why 'cos it's her name and Billy and his mates say all the time why would I be going to see Fannyshaw if I was clever like them and then they follow me all around the playground saying Fannyshaw's wearing drawers but she don't know 'cos they don't show and I don't get why it's funny 'cos drawers is what you put your clothes and knives in what don't show anyhow when it's closed but on they go over and over and over 'til I want to scream at them then I gets back to drawing trees.

Mum says not to worry about the boys darling 'cos they can't help being horrid it's what boys do best and my teacher says I'm supposed to ignore them and get on with my life best as I can seeing as I started off with such a big diservantage in our house but I don't know what that means 'cos I can't find a diservantage in our house anywhere but it's hard to ignore the boys when they don't let up so I gets some doggy doos and puts it in their lunch boxes at break and then I have to go and see Mrs Fannyshaw and Mum has to go to the school and Dad laughs and says I don't know what all the fuss is about 'cos everyone's always talking shit and life's all shit so does it matter if it's human shit or dog shit but anyhow Mum made it

clear absolutely clear I mustn't do that again or I'd be in deep shit.

On Campus

poem

Perceive that intellectual feast, drizzled
with possibilities, marinaded
with optimism, sugar-coated
with possibilities.
Bright things binge at
the fount of knowledge, ingest
the mirage of a future, manufactured
in a plant of half-truths that
effort equals results equals effort equals
work harder, work longer, work, work until
headaches rule, heart attacks loom
with dawning awareness
that aspirations are created on
platters of propaganda
dreams are ground to dust in the mill that makes
other people wealthy
but not happy, as dreams must
remain forever out of reach.
Fading eyes taunted
by children guzzling
at the deep well of optimism, expecting
to save the world while revelling
in obscene luxury, because
they have yet to learn
the world is not theirs
to consume

The Changeling

short story

My smiling child is dark-haired and fine-boned, with one eye as blue as a summer sky, the other a bewitching green. When Saul was born, the nurse called him a changeling, a special child, touched by fairies. Those mismatched eyes stare at me, sending a shiver of apprehension into my belly. Is being touched by fairies different to being touched by God? Is he destined for greatness, or do the fey slide between worlds all the sooner?

I worry, but don't all new mothers?

Danny brings us home, and the familiar pastel green decor soothes my odd sense of disquiet. This is how it's supposed to be. No longer a single, bulky entity, we have evolved into mother and child, and I can breathe again. For now, he will sleep in a cot beside me, but soon he'll move into his own room, the walls a clear daffodil yellow, the ceiling blue, so that he can wake to sunshine. I nurse him close, breathing-in his baby scent of freesia and phlox, and sometimes I play my fiddle for him, making the old tunes sing, soft as lullabies.

I thought I'd miss my friends at work, be bored by the whole loneliness of domesticity, but I discover joy in being a full-time mother. We're doing OK financially; I don't have to juggle work and child-minders, so choose not to. I'm bewitched by my son in a way I never expected. Every day brings a fresh experience, as if I'm seeing life once again through his eyes. Our family is contained and happy, and I want to keep it that way, keep the outside world at bay as long as possible.

*

Months later, I bounce Saul on my knee and rap out the rhymes with my feet: 'To market, to market to buy a fat pig, home again, home again, jiggety jig.'

He chortles, arms stretched wide.

'Don't smother the boy,' Danny says, grabbing him from me, setting him on the rug. He lifts me into his arms. 'Don't forget about me, Lizzie, love. I'm still here, you know.'

I gently cup his cheek with my hand, and kiss him. 'You're still my first love.'

He nestles his chin in my hair. 'I was once your only love.'

He misses my single-minded devotion, but that's what children do; they insert themselves into the centre of your life and everything else has to shuffle aside to accommodate.

When Danny leaves for work I lift Saul again. He explores my face with tiny fingers that know me as no other has ever known me, not even Danny. Eventually I'll have to relinquish my hold, let him drift backward on the tide of our future children's needs, but for now our bond is an invisible, uncut umbilical. I will never again experience this first-child love, no matter how precious my subsequent children. I am the epicentre of Saul's merry-go-round. My tasks lie unfinished, my once-important career on hold while I watch his horses gallop by.

Saul crawls then walks, intently absorbing the world, his baby talk becoming an incessant machine-gun of questions:

'Mum. What's 'at? Who's 'at? What's 'at t'ing called?'

'A tractor, darling. Alice's Mummy. A spoon.'

'But why?'

Sometimes I don't have the energy to explain, and say, 'Just because.'

Danny doesn't get enough sleep in those first years. He's grumpy after work, and in the mornings, his tousled, sleepy

sexiness has transmuted into head-scratching yawns. He grumbles about me being at home, sometimes asking if I might go back to work one day, or get out and have a life, but I am happy being a wife and mother, something I never expected. I cheer the kitchen with a slap of colour, build a swing in the apple tree, and sometimes get a bottle of wine to ease the evening on its way.

Our love matures, and middle age bounds towards me, stealing my child-bearing years. Danny's confused when I don't conceive again, and his lovemaking, which had been gentle, becomes desperate, as though not getting me with child casts a slur on his manhood. I say, it will happen when it's meant to happen – but secretly revel in my barrenness. Though a second child was planned, I've never been afflicted with a desperate yearning for a houseful of children. We're a complete family, the three of us.

Eventually I leave Saul at playschool, then school. These are long days for me. I worry that he's missing me, worry whether he's happy, but deep inside I know it's me missing him, my happiness which is foundering.

Mum asks with fading hope, 'What's the news, Lizzie?'

'Give her room, love,' Dad says.

'Yes, but I just think –'

'We're trying, Mum. It's just not happening.'

She reddens. 'Well, it's not good for a child to be an only child. He'll become selfish and demanding, that's all.'

Oh, I hear what they say, Danny's Ma, and his Grandma, with sad shakes of the head: what if Saul dies? What will she do then? It's not natural to be so consumed with the one child. It'll end in tears. A woman should have a brood to carry her through the natural losses and traumas life might pile on her.

The silly hens, I think. I love them dearly, but what nonsense. They're set in the past. Here, in Ireland, women are no longer obliged to be walking incubators. I'll have other children, God willing. They're just waiting in the wings for the

right time to make their entrance – but better only one than a diminishing procession of children whose souls atrophy from want of nurturing.

One day Saul brings a penny whistle home from school. His little fingers can barely reach the holes, yet he perseveres. Sometimes I want to scream at him to shut up, but soon enough he's playing along, then leaving the other children standing, so I'm glad I held my tongue.

'Is he autistic?' a mother at school asks. 'Is that his gift?'

'No, he just practises,' I respond tartly.

I catch Danny watching with a strange look on his face, as if wondering where this cuckoo in his nest had come from. I laugh and bring him tea. 'He's your own son, daft man,' I say. 'Look in the mirror.'

'He's a changeling,' he later whispers in my ear, thinking me asleep.

I realise, of course, that he wants a son who'll play football and bomb himself into the swimming pool when the teacher's back is turned. He wants a son who can stand up for himself with fists rather than words. He never actually says Saul's a mammy's boy, but that's what he's thinking all the same.

I turn to Danny, and he holds me tight, grateful to have me to himself for these few special moments. He's drifting from me – more time in uniform, more time with the lads after work – but things will come right again. Saul's growing fast, and our time will come back.

The day comes when Saul picks up my violin and coaxes from it the bare bones of a tune. Ecstatic, I buy him one of his own and by the time he's eleven he's playing away in unison with me, rattling out the old reels and jigs. By the time he's twelve he's playing classical music in the school orchestra, and people are beginning to notice. Every mother likes to convince herself that her child is gifted in some way, that early

accomplishments are a sign of precocious genius. I tell myself not to pressurise, but time reveals a level of talent in Saul that I had once dreamed of for myself.

I admit to living a little vicariously from his gift, and why not? I love music and I'm able enough, but that's all I am. A little knot of envy sometimes wars with the pleasure I get just listening to him play, but envy can't compete with my relief that his life is safely mapped out. He doesn't want to be a Guard like his father, or a fireman, and has no desire to join the army, or the battlefields of the corporate world. He wants, more than anything, to play music.

Danny wonders whether it's all coming from me.

'Is it really what you want to do?' I ask Saul.

He hugs me. 'More than anything in the whole world.'

He has a normal, boy's voice, but somehow a maturity beyond his years.

'So, I'm not pushing you? Truly?'

'It's probably your fault, Mam, for playing when I was still inside you. But you can't take it back again, it's too late.'

He punches my arm playfully, making me laugh.

Saul develops a wiry strength and an enjoyment of sports – though more for the playing than the winning – and Danny's silent bond with Saul deepens with the years. He's resigned himself to the fact that his son will never have siblings, and maybe he's justified in deciding it's me that's subconsciously stopping it from happening because I'm content with the one.

I go to pick Saul up from school one day, and he waves at me from across the road. The sun is shining, and Danny's waiting at home to take him to a hurling match. It's the last day of term, and the long break stretches out before us, almost endless at this moment, with a visit to Paris booked, and various treats queuing in my mind: swimming, seaside day trips, walks by the river. When next term starts, though, we'll all

wonder where the summer went and think about being another year older. It's always that way.

Shouting something over his shoulder to a friend, Saul runs towards me. They say accidents seem to happen in slow motion, but it's not true. The SUV swings around the corner as though the driver really has to be somewhere yesterday. I scream Saul's name, and run, but there's a thud and he's hurled forward like a rag doll.

He lands in front of the vehicle.

The driver's mouth opens wide in shock.

Saul's violin case flies through the air and explodes on impact with the discordant sound of grief. I run and throw myself on top of him, too late to protect him. I'm pulled away roughly. Hands pump, breaths are breathed into him. White noise fills my head. I realise I'm making a thin keening noise and tell myself to stop, but I can't.

An ambulance blares into the road.

'You have to let them take him to hospital, Elizabeth,' someone tells me urgently, and these words penetrate my red terror. If he were dead, I think I would go mad.

At the hospital doctors stem the bleeding and stabilise his broken body. Machines thrum while he fights. There are operations to piece together the jigsaw bones in his legs and shattered pelvis, a lock of his black hair turns white, his sunny face is pulled into a sneer as gaping wounds are stitched. During his periods of semi consciousness, his odd eyes blaze and I sense in him the wish to slip away from all that pain.

I pull him back, again and again by willpower alone, praying, 'Take me. Take me, but please God, let my son live.'

'He might not make it,' I'm cautioned again and again.

I can't accept that. I have no life outside the hospital. Eventually the nurses give me a room and a bed as if I'm sick. I try to imagine life without my fairy child, but there's no space inside me for that possibility. White noise fills my brain. Friends appear and disappear. Danny comes and goes. Mum and Dad and Danny's Mum float in and out, but still I sit there,

repeating over and over in my mind: you will not die, you will not die, you will not die.

They stand at the door, whispering.

'We'll have to go ahead without her,' Danny's Mum says.

'It's not right.'

'Nothing's right about this. We don't know how long it will go on for.'

I hear them talking about a funeral, but blank it out. Who's dead? I don't get it, I don't care.

'We're all grieving, Lizzie,' Danny says one day. 'You're not the only one. Let me bring you home. You have to leave Saul behind and move on. We all have to.'

'I'm not leaving him here,' I say harshly. 'Get a wheelchair. I'll manage, somehow.'

'Maybe home is the best place to be,' a doctor agrees.

So, Danny buys a wheelchair and widens the doors in our house. The dining room becomes a bedroom. We're a family again, but the sunshine has gone. Danny hires a carer to help with the chores, but it's hard. There are days when I cope, and days when I flounder in a quicksand of misery. The moment Saul is knocked down replays over and over in my mind, and I know I'm subconsciously seeking ways to stop it from happening, as though I can bend time. Then I'm back to the present and the fog of despair is so dense it's as if Saul's not really here at all. I need to get a grip on reality. Saul needs me.

He's sullen and quiet these days, and it isn't enough that he's home. I want him back the way he was before. It's this single-minded mission that shuts everything out except Saul. I sing to him. I walk him down the road in his wheel chair, telling him it's going to be fine. People don't stop and talk any longer, they just stare, but let them think what they want. This is my son I'm fighting for.

Danny becomes a ghost, waiting, just waiting.

'I said it would all end in disaster,' Danny's Mum mutters one day, 'her just having the one and all.'

‘Get out!’ I scream at her. ‘Get out!’

She leaves abruptly, in tears. When she comes back a few days later I say I’m sorry for being a bitch, I didn’t mean it, but our relationship is now brittle.

I continue to play for Saul, every day. Even if he never walks again, he has his violin, and his long, white fingers are perfect. My music becomes uncoordinated, wild, as I reach out to him with desperation.

Saul glares at the violin and me, but never says a word.

‘Leave it, Lizzie,’ Danny says, trying to hold me. ‘Let’s move on. We can get help. We can have another child. It’s not too late.’

I push him away. ‘I won’t give up. I’ll bring him back if it kills me.’

I’m vindicated when Saul eventually picks up the violin. The music sounds spiteful, touched by something dark and disturbing, yet it’s compelling. I find myself crying with happiness.

‘What’s up, Lizzie? Danny asks, holding me as he hasn’t for a long time.

‘Don’t you hear?’ I hiccup. ‘He’s playing, listen.’ There’s confusion on Danny’s face and I try to explain. ‘He’s taken the music and made it his own. He’s taken it somewhere I can’t even begin to follow.’

I’m so tired, I know something’s wrong. When we discover I’m terminally ill, Danny breaks down and cries, but I’m not surprised. In the hospital I’d promised my life for Saul’s and God listened.

‘At least it’s my muscles which are wasting, not my brain,’ I joke.

‘Oh, Lizzie, Lizzie,’ Danny whispers, his eyes misting.

Time surges as if we’re on opposing escalators: Saul is working his way up to fame while I’m sliding downhill with unprecedented speed. I see little of Saul, now, or Danny, who

left work to become his full-time manager. I wouldn't have it any other way. Saul has a life, a career ahead of him, while I'm winding to a close. Sometimes it's as if Danny's left me, too, he's here so little; but he writes often, telling me how well Saul is doing, and that Saul, as always, sends his love. The house feels bare and empty with just me and the carer's wraithlike presence. I see how run down it is and think about making some new curtains for the living room, brighten the place up a bit for when they come home.

I have never felt so alone.

As Saul journeys through Europe and beyond, from the prison of my ailing body I listen to my boy's success on the radio. I must ask Danny to get me another, this one is deteriorating. I hear Saul's music through a hissing white noise, and can only imagine the pure sound which used to send shivers up my backbone. Saul finds travel difficult, so I haven't seen him for so long, I miss him badly. I know I'm fading fast, and hope his tour comes to an end in time for us to say goodbye.

Danny pops back to see me sometimes, becoming more like a stranger each time.

'This isn't how it was supposed to be,' I cry on his shoulder.

'Hush, now, love,' he says. 'This is how it is. No-one said life was going to be easy.'

'I'm sorry we didn't have more children.'

He looks surprised.

'Not for me, for you. When I'm gone, it'll just be you and Saul. There won't be any grandchildren, will there?'

'It doesn't matter,' he lies, kissing the top of my head.

Eventually I'm too ill to even listen to Saul's music. I let him go and he lingers on the tides of memory as life drifts from me. Sometimes I can't recall his face and I'm left with an uneasy feeling, as if he died all those years ago. All that joy and trauma, and when I die it all dies with me. There will be no one left who *knows* what I experienced.

My relations are around me now. They talk over my body as I float away, not realising that a small part of me is still listening.

'My poor girl,' Mum croons, stroking my hair as she had when I was a child. 'My beautiful girl. Sleep now, find peace.'

The scent of freesias and phlox fills my senses.

'I think she's gone,' Dad says, holding my hand tightly.

Behind Mum's quiet sobbing I hear fine strains of fairy music.

'It's been hard for you, Danny,' Dad says brokenly. 'Good man, good man.'

'It was fierce bad seeing her like that, but merciful she never realised Saul died,' Danny says.

I open my eyes, and there he is, my beautiful boy, forever thirteen, holding his hand out to welcome me home.

Death of an Icon

short story

It was a frosty evening in Autumn when I met Ellis in the pub. He'd sounded strange on the phone, which made me curious and wary. I found him leaning, elbows on the bar, tipping away at a double malt. When he turned to face me, there were tears on his cheek. 'Brendan King's dead,' he told me.

I first met Brendan because he had a broken leg. I can't recall, now, how it happened, but at the time it seemed like a happy accident. He was a builder, so couldn't work. I didn't know anyone in Killarney and wanted to find a trad session to play in, and was informed he was 'the man'. After several enthusiastic mis-directions, I found myself knocking hesitantly at the door of a tiny mid-terraced house in a run-down street. A strong, male voice from within yelled at me to come in, the door was open.

He was in the kitchen, a cast leg supported on a chair before him. He was hunched over a button accordion. As he grinned up with the mischievous raised brows of a leprechaun, welcoming me to his home, I saw an ugly man with a bent spine. No-one had portrayed him to me that way, but talent attracts its own narrative, and Brendan had been born with music in his fingers. He'd been described as generous, happy, easy-going, and a bloody good musician, because that was what mattered.

I explained who I was and why I was there, and added, confused, that I'd been told he played the fiddle. Well, I do, he explained. But I've had this old thing lying around since my dad died, and as I've got nothing better to do, I thought I'd

give it a shot. Makes your head spin, trying to get it, listen: in-out, in-out, in-out. Out-in... Doesn't seem natural does it? He played the seven notes up the scale, heavy on the bellows, and without finesse. 'Try playing in D over two rows on a C box,' he added. 'Feck. Sure, I'm fair parched for a brew, could you do the honours?'

I stayed and played a few tunes on his fiddle while he struggled and swore over the accordion trying to find the notes to accompany me, but mostly we talked, and ended up agreeing to meet up when he was back on his feet. It turned out that he had enjoyed his enforced break from work so much he never went back, but immersed himself in music, living on benefits while ostensibly building up a career and an income. At the time, it was as if he'd opened his arms and embraced me into the core of the Trad empire, and in a way he had. I knew I wasn't brilliant, and was wary of being seen as an outsider to the tradition, but he had an open, generous spirit of inclusion.

And so, for a short time, while I was working in Killarney, he became the hub of my universe. The sessions opened and drew me in. The music was wild in those days, and fast, with the porters lined up on the table faster than we could drink them and the smoke level in the room, toxic. Nostalgia hits me in the gut as I look back over time.

Brendan already had the tunes in his blood, so within months he had mastered the idiosyncrasies of the chromatic button box, with its idiosyncratic key system. He put the fiddle aside forever to become one of the best button box players I'd ever heard. Maybe he wasn't *the* best – who am I to judge? – but he had that indefinable thing people call charisma, which was reflected in his music.

Then work pulled me away. I heard through whispers that Brendan married, had a son, and continued to play music. His wife, when I met her briefly, turned out to be stunningly attractive and musical in her own right, which had probably been the initial attraction.

Years stretched between our odd meetings. I was back in America, and he came over now and again to play at various festivals, and, save for thinning hair and thickening waists, when we met, it was as if time had compressed, and only moments had passed since our last meeting. I thought he was special, and the association made me feel special, too. Our meetings were always attended by a warm flood of memories, a rush of moments which were recalled with a hazy, alcohol-fuelled pleasure.

And yet rumours also rolled over the water of things he'd done, people he'd hurt. I heard his son had died from a drug overdose. I heard his wife had left him. But these things were all distant, less real than the memories I kept neatly packaged inside me; memories that had seen me through some black times. But I believed the rumours because he was always different; consumed by his music to the point that nothing else could wedge its way into his life. My own life had taken various wrong turns, and in some ways, he was the man I had wished to be, the one with the courage to take life with both hands and make it his own. I was afraid to eschew convention, and gained vicarious pleasure in hanging out with someone who did just that. Haven't we all got a little wishful inner voice, which niggles and tells us we could have been different if we'd only had the guts?

Brendan got high on the music. It was his soul, his life, to the exclusion of everything else, and I was jealous that he could live life with such single-minded zeal.

Brendan was legend.

Everyone on the scene had met him at some time. Brendan? Oh, yes, we were in this pub once and, my God, you should have heard the craic... He played for dances, at sessions, at concerts, making enough to buy his beer, as he said, but never went truly professional, and never entered a recording studio. I've heard tinny playbacks from time to time – Oh, and this is when we were at so and so, and Jaysus, wasn't it mad? – and through the hissing and laughing and talking you

can hear that the music is sprinkled with the fairy dust of atmosphere: spontaneous, wild, yet synchronized as a school of fish whirling in blue water. But take away the ambiance, and maybe it would just be tunes played fast.

The last time I saw Brendan I hadn't seen him for several years, and happened to be passing through Killarney. Despite my heavy workload, I made time to visit. I knocked at the same door in the same street. The house seemed seedy, the garden run down, but he had better things to do than work on something so mundane. I knocked again, and eventually heard a small voice inside telling me the door was open. I was smiling as I went in, down the long corridor towards the kitchen. It was unchanged, I swear, with the same carpet, the same washed-out picture on the wall, the same peeling paint.

'Brendan!' I said, greeting him enthusiastically, but the smile on my face had set like concrete.

The chirpy leprechaun had made way for a hunched goblin. His head seemed too large for a body shrunk to that of a bulimic teenager. His hair was all but gone, and his clothes hung like skin on a skeleton.

'Throat cancer,' he croaked, seeing the shock in my eyes. The vitality that had infused my memory was nothing but an echo. Tears of self-pity came to his eyes. 'She left me. Julie left me.' Then he began to sob, quietly, shoulders racking. I sat opposite him not knowing what to do. We'd never been bosom buddies; I couldn't put my arm around him. And what could I say? Sorry you're dying, sorry your wife left you, but you were a bloody monster to her and what did you expect?

I guess she'd loved him the way we all did, drawn to him despite some inner devil telling us to be careful. But in the end being allowed to adore someone else isn't enough. She had poured her emotional needs onto him while he poured his into his music; she'd probably lived in an emotional desert until she was dried up inside. When she left, I learned, it wasn't to be with someone else, but because she couldn't be with *him*.

But Brendan felt too sorry for himself to be anything but angry at Julie.

When I left the house, I wished I'd never visited. The memories I cherished were too precious, so I deliberately wallowed in them, overthrowing the new, sordid reality that Brendan had been a selfish bastard, and now he was sick there was no one in his life to offer succour. His selfishness had reaped its just reward. All those fair-weather friends in the pubs had abandoned him, moved on to newer music, fresher pastures.

When Ellis told me Brendan was dead, all these things came to mind, the good and the bad, in a jumble of recollections. I wasn't upset, I couldn't cry for the man. I didn't feel good about that, but some dreams need to remain intact. I'd been so jealous of his ability to enjoy life, but wondered now whether there *had* been enjoyment, whether his driving need for music had actually robbed him of some of life's other pleasures. It had certainly robbed him of his wife and child. I knew he took the odd pick-me-up sometimes before playing, and heard he'd got his own son hooked on the drugs which killed him.

The man had been desperately living a lie.

I saw now that the beer, the smoking, the drugs and the music had all been his way of avoiding life. He'd probably been inherently unhappy the whole time, so cleverly that none of us realised. He had nothing I should be jealous of, and at that moment I pitied him.

And here was Ellis, tears seeping at the death of an icon, the end of an era, because he didn't understand. Death couldn't canonise Brendan. He hadn't suddenly become a saintly, angelic figure by dying.

The Umbrellas

ekphrastic poem

I suspect everyone has seen this painting, ***The Umbrellas, by Renoir*** (1881). Have you ever truly looked at it, and wondered what was going on?

Why are the umbrellas open,
in that crowded, cluttered way,
with no sign of a downpour,
just a faded sort of day?

The woman in the foreground
who's corseted and gowned
with a basket at her elbow,
doesn't look half-drowned.

Why do the people mingle
in such close proximity;
are they queuing for the shops
or waiting for a play?

Is it a winter sun that casts
a grey-blue sheen on clothes,
which really don't look suitable
for wearing out of doors?

The children look enchanting
in their hats, but don't seem cold.
They simply seem contented
to be doing as they're told.

The ground looks dirty-white as if
there'd been a touch of snow –
Why are the umbrellas open?
I'd really like to know.

House Ghost

Snippet of a potential novel

This snippet was intended as the start of a new novel. My heroine has a secret her ex-husband was prepared to kill for. She also a problem – how to escape from the room she's trapped in, and how to prove he's a murderer. However, at the moment. I'm still musing on aspects of structure…

'So, that's it?' Sheila asks, taking in the room at a sweeping glance.

'Isn't it enough?' Joe's response is dour.

She nudges him playfully. 'You know I meant *have we seen the whole house now?* It's old and rambly and could do with some work, but I like it, despite what you said. This room, particularly. It's pretty and light. It has a sense of – ah, *presence*. Is it your study?'

'It was hers.'

'Oh.' It's a long, drawn out sound that speaks volumes. 'But why didn't you get rid of her stuff when she died?'

'It was too difficult. I just shut the door and moved on.'

'So, you haven't been up here, since –?'

'No. I couldn't.'

Liar, liar, pants on fire. I watched you search, but you'll never find it.

She touches his arm, lightly, compassionately. 'I get that you couldn't handle it, Joe, but it's time to move on, isn't it?'

'I have moved on. With you, remember?'

Snippy, snippy, Joe. Careful or she'll get your measure. You moved on, but you don't handle things, do you? Someone else has to, so nothing's ever your fault. Let me remind you

how it went: *Why did you do this to me; don't ever do that to me again*… She'll learn. It'll start in small subtle ways. You'll gently reprimand and, believing she was wrong or stupid, she'll apologise, wanting your approval. At some point she'll do a double take and ask herself *why* she always apologises, but by then it will be too late. The trend will be concreted into her psyche, too hard to break.

But, I muse, maybe not. Maybe Sheila will unveil you sooner than I did. I hope so, for her sake. You always railed about bloody solicitors, how devious they were, how there wasn't an honest one amongst them. Then what do you do? You get engaged to one. We both know why, but that's for us to know and her to work out.

Are you planning to kill her, too?

'If you couldn't face being here, why didn't you just sell it?' Sheila's not as naive as I was. I wonder if she's already ticking her little mental boxes, balancing the scales.

'You say, yourself, that the only place to keep money is in property. It's never really going to devalue. Not a place this size, in this location. It's an early-retirement plan in action.'

Good answer!

'H'm. that's true, but you should look after it. We can't live here, of course, it's too far from the city,' she says, then her voice brightens. 'But, you know, we could get married here, in the garden. That would be fun!'

Joe makes a non-comital noise.

She points to the little stream that feeds my fishpond. 'That's cute. We could have a gazebo built, there. Like a summer house.'

Nice idea. I could meditate there, and watch the Koi Carp curl lazily under the flat-pad lilies, if only I could work out how to get there. I wonder if they're still there, now no one's feeding them. It's been three long years, and I'm still not sure I've come to terms with my present condition. It's not something I *expected*.

'What d' you think?' she prompts after a short silence.

'We *could*,' he says.

I know that tone. She hasn't cottoned on to it, yet. *We could*, means *No fucking way*. He'll just never say it outright, and she'll go on hoping and planning until the reason she wanted it finally slides out of existence.

Sheila links her fingers in his. 'I love this place, darling. It's charming. I wondered why you didn't want to show me, like there was, I don't know, something wrong with it. But I get it now. You love the place, don't you?' She casts a sidelong, coy glance. 'We could use it for sexy weekend breaks.'

I shudder dramatically and imitate fingers in the throat. At her age, too. Now, that's something I really don't want to watch.

She's at the window, her words hanging in the stirred sunlight. 'The garden needs landscaping, of course, and we could get someone to put a conservatory against this wall. It's south-facing, isn't it?'

Oh, she bloody would, wouldn't she? Something I'd hankered after, but never afforded. Like the kitchen overhaul and the replacement windows. It doesn't surprise me, though, that he's managed – from the sound of it – to snaffle a bird with a stash of dough. The ripening seeds of age sit well on him, and he can be charming when he chooses.

He keeps looking around surreptitiously, probably hoping that I've finally gone, as per the original plan. It surprised both of us, when it didn't pan out that way.

'I think we should clear this room out,' his newly-snaffled honeypot says. 'I could use it as an office when we're here.'

Joe grimaces and glances around warily.

He didn't regard me when I was alive, but he knows me now. I choose a book from the shelf – Milton's Paradise Lost; collectable, hefty – slide it out slowly, and aim it squarely at her head before hurling with all my might.

Sheila's quick, I'll give her that.

Her mouth opens in a mewl of surprise, her bleached platinum blonde head does a clever little circular thing and the

book sails past to scrunch into the yellow wall paper and bounce to the carpet. I like that volume; it has original lithographs by Doré. And is all about Hell and Damnation, which is where Joe should be. I gather my thoughts for another shot, but Joe's bounding down the stairs, Sheila melded to his back.

'I'll sell the place yet, you bitch,' he screams up. 'I'll sell the place and leave you behind, you'll see. You did everything you could to spite me when you were alive, and you're fucking doing it now you're dead. Bitch!'

The door slams.

I wonder how he's going to explain *that* to honeypot.

Left alone with my silence, I float, drift off, and wake to another dawn. Why *did* I end up here, watching my overgrown garden turn back to nature, and my books grow mould? Dreamily I peruse my space. The undamaged Milton is settled innocently in its place on the shelf. The room is filled with light and motes of dust, some of which, I guess, are me.

Nature's Sunny Smiles

short story

This story is set in the West Country, England. At first glance it seems like standard women's magazine story, however, the main character, although in her twilight years, is not to be trifled with.

'Poor Billy-boy, what's going on, then?'

I bend down and stroke his head, tears of frustration hovering. He's an ugly little mutt, a black, wiry-haired crossbreed found dirty and starving, probably kicked out of a car on the motorway, the vet surmised. It was serendipity, I decided, that the day I finally went to have my moth-eaten old tomcat put down, the dog was there, staring out of a cage as if aware he was about to be put down.

The animal sanctuary wouldn't allow me to take a dog because of my age. What nonsense is that? Anyway, the vet was pleased to let me take him; even if it was just for a few years, it's years he wouldn't have had otherwise. And I keep going, despite rumours of my impending demise.

Billy-boy and I have become good companions over the last couple of years, and he's never been ill before. He retches up bile, now, and can't be persuaded to lap at the bowl of fresh water I give him. He drags himself to his bed, and later I discover him lying in a puddle of diarrhoea. I clean everything up, worried. Should I call the vet? How long do I wait and see? I assume he's eaten something unsavoury.

I worry about poison, but if it's that, there's nothing the vet can do. I worry, selfishly, about loneliness. Once the shock and trauma of my husband's death became less raw, I

discovered widowhood a comfortable place in which to spend my twilight years. No job, no worries about the future, at no-one's beck and call; my time is my own. My children visit several times a year with grandchildren who grow in distant bounds, focussed on their own nuclear lives, but my age carries with it a diminishing circle of friends.

After two days of getting no worse, Billy gradually improves. On the third day he picks at his food with interest if not enthusiasm. Relief floods me as he recovers. The dog isn't so old, but I am. Billy will be my last pet. It would be supremely unfair if he died young.

The doorbell rings. It's Sandra, coming to drive me to the art group. A tall woman, with translucent skin and fine bones, she could have passed for a model, once.

'How's Billy?' she asks.

'Recovering, mercifully.'

'Thank goodness. I was expecting to drive you both down the vet's. Do you think he caught a bug?'

'I've never seen one of my dogs sick like this. It's more likely he ate rat poison or something.'

We collect Connie, who laughs uproariously as her walking aid gets tangled between her legs. Pretty much crippled by arthritis, she is God's gift to positive thinking. 'Tally-Ho!' she screeches as Sandra hurtles swiftly out into the traffic.

Lights flash, a horn blares.

'What's his problem?' Sandra says, putting her foot down. She's been driving for years, and is still lost in a time when cars were fewer, life slower. Traffic is dense these days, the drivers short tempered with the need to be places. Ten minutes later we swing into the village hall car park with a squeal of tyres. I let out a silent sigh of relief.

There's a man by the door, waving as if he knows us.

I peer short-sightedly. 'Who's that?'

'Simon,' Connie informs us. 'He moved into the village a couple of weeks ago. Was born here, apparently, and has

come home to retire. I met him at the village shop. He seems very nice.'

'He was quite friendly when I met him at the Bridge Club,' Sandra agreed. 'Used to be in the police, or something.'

I peruse him with interest. A lot of friends and neighbours have fallen off the merry-go-round, but there's always someone waiting to slide into the vacuum. There's no end to the human tide. Simon is fairly well padded, which probably puts him ten years younger than me. I've reached the age where the fat shrinks and the bones dissolve. He has an open, smiley face, and is gallantly holding the door open for us.

'Good day, ladies. And how are we, this fine day?'

My hackles rise, instantly. I snap, 'Do we answer individually or would a single response suffice?'

His smile falters just a little. My friends are embarrassed. I wouldn't normally answer old fashioned gallantry with belligerence, but I don't tolerate being patronised. In rushing to escape controlling parents I'd married in haste. Oh, it was a long time ago, I know, but bitterness seeps out through the cracks when I'm off guard. My husband's promises had evaporated on that special day: he wanted a wife, and got one. Unfortunately, it was me. I was loyal, firstly because I was naïve, and secondly because I'd promised I would be. I often wonder why I didn't leave him, but it was only after he died that I realised just how manipulative and devious he had been.

After discovering how much he had abused my trust and my finances all those years, I invested in my true self, the intelligent, independent and artistic one that had been buried for too long. I value that self with a passion. No one will ever put me down again.

In the hall, Simon opens a brand-new sketch pad and sets brand-new watercolours and brushes on the table. He beams like a schoolboy. 'How does this work?' he asks the room ingenuously.

I wince. Everyone goes silent.

‘This isn’t a class exactly,’ Sandra informs him, after a pause. ‘We’re an informal group of independent artists working on our own projects. You just have to get on, and if you need criticism or advice, well, we help each other.’

As we make our way back to the car a couple of hours later, Sandra comments, with faint derision, ‘Who invited him, anyway? He hasn’t a clue. I wasted an hour trying to get him started.’

‘I told him about it when he came around to fix my gate,’ Connie says guiltily. ‘I forgot to mention it’s a private arrangement, not a paid class. I had no idea he’d turn up.’

‘I wonder why he came when he’s obviously never painted anything in his life.’

‘He said now he’s retired he’s going to explore all the things he’d wanted to try but had never had the time.’

We could all understand that, even Connie, who had never worked.

‘And he’s so obliging,’ she added. ‘When I mentioned I was thinking of having my kitchen refurbished for the first time in twenty years he said he’d be happy to do the painting for nothing.’

‘Perhaps he has skill with a paintbrush after all,’ I murmur.

But perhaps I’m being harsh. We don’t exactly have able-bodied men queuing up to help. There are four bungalows in the close, once occupied by elderly couples, now by widows. The only men who call on us are doctors, or salesmen who try to sell us PV cells with a thirty-year guarantee.

At home I let Billy out the front. He sniffs happily at some flowers then pees on them.

‘You have no respect,’ I tell him.

He wags his tail, back to his normal chirpy self.

Jill is the fourth widow in the close, and the only one who doesn’t come to art group; born without an artistic bone, she

says. Our bungalows are joined by garages filled with a lifetime of detritus.

Her daughter drops her off outside and guns away.

'How was art group today?' she asks, bending to pet Billy, who has the run of both front gardens.

'Great thanks. Have you been somewhere nice?'

'Round to the manor for a walk and a cream tea. Making the most of the sunshine.'

As one does. Our future isn't infinite, so each day is treasured. I notice her flower beds have been thoroughly dug.

'Has your son been over, doing the garden?'

'No, that was the new man, Simon, who rents Ivy cottage. Have you met him? He says he loves gardening and would give me a hand from time to time. He got a lot of weeds out.'

'So I see.' There's no trace of the perennials I'd planted in Jill's colourless borders.

Ivy Cottage had been run down but the garden cherished when Mr Michaels had been alive. Since it's been rented out by his son, it's the opposite. I somehow doubt Simon is the one to restore it.

I point at a small pile of sand on Jill's lawn. 'That's strange. Have you got ants?'

'Oh, no, that's just poison to kill the dandelions. Simon hates to see dandelions in a lawn.'

'Does he know I have a dog?'

'Oh, yes, he says it won't harm Billy. He doesn't like dogs, though. He says they're dirty, doing doggy-doos all over the place.'

'I see,' I said pensively. 'Well I think I'm going to cut the grass. It might be raining tomorrow. Speak to you later.'

I drag the lawn mower out of the garage. Nothing is easy these days, but the small electric lawnmower at least makes cutting the lawn doable.

A large car drives into the close. Simon climbs out, wiping a hand over a sweating brow. Billy snarls at him then barks furiously. Dogs have better radars than most people.

‘Simon,’ I acknowledge.

‘My friends call me Smiler,’ he advises, flashing his teeth. ‘I’ve just come to cut Jill’s grass for her. I did it last week but it’s going mental.’ He glances around the close. ‘I could do all you ladies at the same time, come to think of it.’

‘I don’t need doing, thank you.’

‘No problem.’

He heaves a petrol mower out the car. With a flash of cord and an explosion of noise, he begins to work his monstrous beast with military precision across Jill’s postage-stamp lawn. Talk about putting in nails with a sledgehammer. I decide to cut the lawn when Simon isn’t there to watch. It usually takes a while, and involves much puffing and blowing, but there’s satisfaction in completing the task myself.

I sit in the back garden with a cup of tea, enjoying the sun, watching the birds squabbling on the hanging feeders. I have divided the tiny garden into three areas separated by archways draped respectively in Wisteria and Clematis. The paved area in which I sit is surrounded by a riot of colourful summer bulbs. The central area is filled with ornamental gravel, a bird-bath and vibrant green and red acers. The side area is scented with sweet herbs and nectar for bees and butterflies.

Eventually, a vast silence falls. The air hums gently with insects. Assuming Simon has gone on his way I head back through the house. My front garden, in contrast to the formality of the back, is an artist’s dream of serpentine lawn and rustic cottage-garden. In the spring there are clouds of snowdrops, followed by seas of daffodils, bluebells and lily-of-the-valley. Summer brings lazy rifts of wild flowers, Forget-Me-Nots, Foxgloves, Irises and scented azaleas, and autumn…

I stare in amazement at my freshly cut lawn.

Simon’s heaving the mower back into the car.

‘My good deed for the day,’ he says, tipping me a wink. ‘Don’t worry, it’s no bother.’ He points to my meandering lawn. ‘You know, you want to straighten those wiggly edges. It would be much easier to mow.’

Words fail me.

Then Sandra breaks her leg.

'I just turned around, and there it was,' she grumbles. 'I can't even recall falling. Now I won't be able to drive for months. That means getting to art group is going to be a pain for everyone. I'll hire a taxi for next week. Leave it with me.'

But next week Simon drives into the close.

'Colouring-in time, ladies,' he announces, opening the doors with a flourish.

I frown at Sandra, who grimaces.

'He offered,' she whispers. 'What was I supposed to do?'

Simon comes around a few days later and mutilates Jill's garden for an hour. I go out as he's packing away his tools.

'I could do yours next time. It could do with clearing out a bit,' he says, eyeing the rampant muddle of colour.

'It's designed to look natural.'

He catches the reprimand, and spreads his hands defensively. 'No offence intended, of course; only trying to help.'

I look contrite. 'Simon, it was really nice of you to do my lawn like that. I was being ungrateful.'

'It was no bother at all.'

I touch his arm apologetically. 'We got off to a bad start. We should get to know each other a little better.'

He inches closer. 'I'd like that.'

I see his mental gears clunk into place. He's sizing up the garden, deciding where to straighten the lawn once he's moved in – or where to bury my dog.

'I was going to offer you tea and cake, but I'm expecting visitors. Why don't you take the cake home with you?'

He makes a few hesitant, reluctant noises.

'No really. I insist. I baked it especially for you. It's my way of thanking you for everything you're doing for all of us.'

His chest pumped out a little. 'Anything you little ladies need, just ask.'

‘Bye, then,’ I gently prompt.

‘Bye, and see you soon!’

‘Enjoy.’

A taxi arrives to take us to art group next week.

‘Did you hear?’ Sandra asks. ‘The postman found Simon passed out in his front hall. He had sickness and you-know-what. They rushed him to hospital.’

‘*What* a shame,’ I say. ‘Do you know what happened?’

‘They thought it was a virus then wondered if he’d been poisoned.’

‘Why would anyone want to poison him?’ I muse.

‘Well, me, for one.’ Sandra’s indignation is ferocious. ‘Connie’s daughter overheard him talking about us in the village shop, his four little ladies, he called us. What a cheek! I wondered why he was being quite so helpful, then I realised he’s looking for somewhere permanent to retire to and thought one of our bungalows would do very nicely. What a nasty piece of work. Anyway, the police found weed-killer in his kitchen and think he might have poisoned himself by accident.’

Simon calls round a few weeks later, pale, seeking sympathy. ‘Angela, someone tried to kill me, you know,’ he asserts. ‘I don’t know how the bitches did it…’

‘Bitches?’

He looks sheepish. ‘Oh, some people who weren’t very nice to me in my previous place.’

‘How dreadful for you. But it was definitely poison?’

‘The lab couldn’t prove anything, but I’m certain. And I’m not stupid enough to poison myself with my own weed killer.’

‘No, of course you’re not. Did you enjoy the cake?’

‘It was fantastic,’ he enthused.

‘Billy was poisoned, too,’ I say, almost inconsequentially. ‘He must have eaten something in the garden. But luckily, he survived. I don’t know *what* I might have done if he’d died.’

There’s a long pause. The bonhomie slips from his lips. His shocked face tinges pink and green, like a daisy. Then he backs away, climbs into his car, and tears off.

I consider the sweet Lily of the Valley, the Monkshood and the daffodil. Nature has such a wicked humour, hiding her venom behind those bright, sunny smiles.

Tree Whisperer

poem

I cup my hands and proffer
to the carved out earth,
this acorn-burst of new life,
its strong stem and giant fan
of crinkled leaves.

I spread the roots wide
and almost sense it breathe
as it stretches to its new home,
a fine green field
underneath the sun.

I give to the future
this small copse of fresh hope,
of Birch, Oak and Walnut,
Holly, Beach and Juniper
and tiny sprigs of Ash.

You might hear me whisper
when you stand within its shelter,
listening to the warm wind,
many years from now,
that I give this gift to you.

Selena Salisbury

radio play

30-minute pilot for a comedy

The setting: Merrick Manor is an Anglo/Irish mansion of dilapidated grandeur, in the remains of a once-prestigious estate, now largely in disrepair. It's owned by Selena Salisbury, a fading actress who has dreams of bringing the estate back to its former glory, but who is always strapped for the cash required to keep up the appearance of wealth. Selena believes herself to be one of the important people in the area; the important people don't recognise her. She has a small retinue of staff who are both loyal and exasperated in turn. The drama is money. Selena is always on the lookout for ways to use her 'fame' to build up some kind of income. There is never enough to pay the staff, to keep her horse, her dog, her prestigious Bentley… The schemes she comes up with, however, are not as important as the interaction of the staff on a day to day basis as Selena tries to keep her dreams intact and creditors at bay.

Note: To make it easier to read, I've removed most of the direction, leaving it to pure dialogue. The suggested music for interludes was: 'All Five Ran' from the album 'Celtic Aire', by Dordan.

Act 1
Scene 1 – Kitchen

Oonagh Get the pie out of the oven I'm sure it must be well cooked by now

Girl Do I use this, Mrs O'Herlihy?

Oonagh No, girl, not towel, use the oven gloves. Put it on the trivet so it doesn't burn the worktop. And call me Oonagh, Mrs O'Herlihy makes me feel old! Shush, now.

Selena [intercom] Is O'Herlihy there

Oonagh Yes, Mam.

Selena [intercom] Send him up, will you? I need him right now.

Oonagh Yes, Mam. [pause] Oh, Ben. I think she's had another idea…

O'Herlihy Saints preserve us.

Oonagh Ye have that right. It's been a while, though. That last scheme, all those bars of soap…

O'Herlihy Could I forget? She had me repackaging them for weeks, as if I didn't have anything else to do. And where are they now, I might ask? In the barn along with the Ascot hats.

Oonagh Well, we won't go shy of a bar of soap in the next ten years, for sure. If we get them before the mice do. Now take this coffee up to her ladyship while you're on your way up.

Scene 2 – Selena's Office

O'Herlihy Your coffee, Mam.

Selena O'Herlihy, now listen. I've had a great idea.

O'Herlihy Mam?

Selena I've decided to host a Charity Fund-raiser

O'Herlihy Charity, Mam?

Selena Yes, Charity, O'Herlihy!

O'Herlihy Yes, but I mean, what charity, Mam?

Selena The House, of course. Merrick Manor. You do remember it's a charity, don't you?

O'Herlihy Of course, Mam, but I don't see…

Selena If we're going to bring this estate back to its former glory, we need money. A vast amount of money.

O'Herlihy I'm aware of that, Mam, but –

Selena I've decided to hold a Charity Ball.

O'Herlihy [a tone of panic] A ball, Mam?

Selena Yes, you know, like they used to do in the old days. Frock coats and ball gowns and candlelight, old time. We'll get in some real musicians who can play waltzes and, oh, quadrilles or something.

O'Herlihy You want chamber music?

Selena Yes, a quartet or something. And we'll put on a buffet – no, an oyster bar, and champagne!

O'Herlihy And who's going to come to this ball, Mam?

Selena I'll write up a list. [dreamily] It's going to be a prestigious event. We can't have just anybody turning up.

O'Herlihy God forbid. Um, ah, where are we going to hold this ball, Mam?

Selena In the ballroom, of course.

O'Herlihy But, Mam, I don't think it's –

Selena That's why I called you up, O'Herlihy! I need you to sort it out, tidy it up a bit.

O'Herlihy But, Mam, It's not poss –

Selena That's all, thank you O'Herlihy. [Buzzer sounds]. Kathleen, could you come in? I've got something really exciting to tell you.

Kathleen [via intercom] Yes Mam.

Scene 3 – Kitchen

Oonagh So what was all the fuss about?

O'Herlihy She wants to hold a ball. Another fundraiser for the restoration project. [imitates Selena] to bring the manor back to its former glory.

Oonagh It might pay the heating bills if she's lucky, but where's she planning to hold this ball?

O'Herlihy In the ballroom.

Oonagh [extended disbelief] For the love of God!

O'Herlihy Exactly. It's been closed this past five years, since the jumble sale when Jennie O'Hara went through the floor.

Oonagh [laughing] Oh, and didn't I nearly wet meself?

O'Herlihy And Niall had to pull her up by the armpits. That was a sight I'll never forget. Him a big strapping lad, puffing and blowing at the weight of her.

Oonagh And her talking of suing the missus, claiming compensation for her damaged back. Oh, the face on her! The missus, I mean. She said, [imitating Selena's indignant tone], It wouldn't have happened in the old days, people would have shown more *respect*.'

O'Herlihy Yes, but dancing? The floor's sprung, with about three feet of space under it, if Jennie O'Hara was anything to go by. And it's rotten as a pig's ar–

Oonagh O'Herlihy! Not in my kitchen! But you wouldn't want to touch the windows, for fear they'd fall out.

Girl Oonagh, will I take this off the stove?

Oonagh No, it will mind itself for a few more minutes.

O'Herlihy And there's no heating and no furniture, never mind that I'd be afraid to put the lights on since they burst into flames that time.

Oonagh And those velvet curtains that the moths have half eaten. Where are her wits gone begging, tell me?

Scene 4 – Ballroom

O'Herlihy Jaysus, Finn, would ye look at that, you've broken it?

Finn A few nails, it'll be as right as rain. I think I can squeeze down there, now. [sliding/grunting noises] Pass me down that torch, will ye?

O'Herlihy Can you see anything?

Finn By God, I've found a big chest with iron bands, hang on…

O'Herlihy Have ye by Jaysus! What's in it?

Finn For the love of God, it's full of gold coins and diamond necklaces!

O'Herlihy [gasp] You're kidding me!

Finn Of course I'm kidding ye, ye eejit. But it's not all bad news.

O'Herlihy Well, that's a relief.

Finn Get me up out of here. Would ye mind the cobwebs? The spiders are big as rats. The good news is that the ground under is hard. I reckon if I can get twenty or so four-by-fours down there I can wedge them and prop up the main floor joists. That'll stop it bouncing if they do get the dancing going. That's the best I can do without I do the proper job.

O'Herlihy We've still got the problem of the floor boards. Her ladyship said to polish them.

Finn Well, you can't polish a donkey's butt, but I suppose I can slap on a coat of varnish.

Scene 5 – Selena's Office

Selena Kathleen. Have you got your pad? Good. About this ball, we need to get the invitations out. Now, the guest list. Let's start with Major Franklin.

Kathleen But he said he'd never –

Selena Oh, tush! That old business of the gymkhana is long forgotten. He won't be wearing a grudge. Now, so. There's Eleanor Seville, that American who bought the beauty salon, and Thomas McCarthy –

Kathleen – from the Funeral Home?

Selena Of course not! Thomas McCarthy that ran for Fine Gael.

Kathleen The one who applied for permission to turn a local beauty spot into a private golf course?

Selena That's the one. And John Marchant from the tower house.

Kathleen What about that Conal chap who writes for radio?

Selena A screen writer? [sarcastically] I don't think so. But you could ask that

producer from primetime RTE. Do we know anyone who owns one of those national papers?

Kathleen Um –

Selena Cathy Bridges, the solicitor – are you getting all this down? Maeve Mulligan, that best seller author, Graham Norton – did you know I was on one of his shows once? Seamus Magnus, Brittany Ellis, the singer, that man who owns the recording studio, he's got a house round here somewhere. Oh, and Jilly O'Donahue, the one who owns that big hotel, and do you know the name of that man…

Scene 6 – Kathleen's office

Kathleen Janice? Yes, it's Kathleen. I know, it's been a great week, hasn't it? Look, Selena's putting on a ball, and – [Pause] Yes, quite. But I'm giving you the heads up she'll be phoning through with orders. Just agree with whatever she says and I'll get a list to you in a week or so. [phone rings]

Kathleen Yes, can I speak to John, please. Yes, thanks, I'll hold. [pause] Hi, John. No, it's not a problem. Well, it might be. Selena wants to hold a ball… Yes, my thoughts exactly. I'll make sure the third-party insurance is up to date.

What I wanted to ask is if we can borrow those folding chairs from the community centre. [pause] I know, but at least we'll have some seating. I'll put ribbons over the backs, pretty them up a bit. And do you have any trestle tables? Yes, of course. The lighting will be low, and I think we have some damask table cloths in the press. [phone rings]

Kathleen Sean? Yes, it's pretty urgent. Could you come out and check the lights in the ballroom? I know, but the switch caught fire last time we used it and the missus wants to hold a ball… [shocked giggles] Sean! No, I won't tell her you said that. [phone rings]

Kathleen Hi, Ann. Have you still got those curtains that were used in the pantomime? I don't suppose we could borrow them? No, we could put them up with staples, it's just for the one night. Great, if you could check that out for me… What? [laughs] My thoughts exactly. No, it's a Charity Ball, but no doubt it'll sound like a pantomime when we tell it after. Drama Queen? Yes, well, you're right. There's always some drama unfolding around herself.

Scene 7 – Selena's Office

Selena Why does O'Herlihy always have to do the lawn when I'm trying to think? Kathleen, close that window before you sit down. That's better! Now, have you your pad? Right – I've drafted the tickets out, if you could knock it up in Photoshop with a picture of Merrick Manor sort of faded in the background.

Kathleen One of the photos in the file?

Selena Don't be daft, girl. The sepia one with the carriage outside with the maids and little girls in pinafores. Oh, and put the price at 250 euros. No, make it 400. It's a charity event, after all. Make sure that goes on the invitation.

Kathleen What's the charity, Mam?

Selena Merrick Manor, of course, you know it's listed as a charity.

Kathleen Should I put that on the invitation?

Selena [hesitant pause] Probably not. Just put: 'SAVE YOUR HERITAGE' in block capitals, and Charity Fundraiser underneath. Oh, and say: formal evening wear, gowns and frock coats.

Kathleen I'll get that on the go, Mam.

Selena [brightly] Off you go, then. I've got so much to organise. No time for dilly-dallying!

Scene 8 – Kathleen's Office

Kathleen O'Herlihy? What can I do for you? [as a question] I was just going to have a coffee?

O'Herlihy Oh, that would be grand, it would.

Kathleen Now, so.

O'Herlihy Cheers, my dear. I just brought the post up. Thought I'd save those lovely legs of yours.

Kathleen I don't get it, you know. Why does Dan leave the post at the bottom of the drive?

O'Herlihy Well, now, I'm not one to gossip…

Kathleen No, of course not.

O'Herlihy Well, you know that grand house Selina's father used to own in Sevenoaks in Kent? The way she was brought up, with servants and private tutors and all?

Kathleen I heard a bit about it. I feel sorry for her, growing up grand, like, and getting cheated out of it by that money-grubbing boyfriend…

O'Herlihy Kathleen, dear. [pause] She was brought up in a mid-terrace. Her father was a postman.

Kathleen [confused] But would she be ashamed of that?

O'Herlihy They disowned her when she got – ah – infamous. They never spoke to her again, till the day they died.

Wouldn't even take her money when she had some.

Kathleen Oh. Poor Selena.

O'Herlihy The thing is Dan found out about her background, and thought it would be a laugh to challenge her, like. Now she won't let him onto the property.

Kathleen Oh, dear.

O'Herlihy He doesn't mind, but listen. You're new here, and I'm just saying, like. We all know she lies like a trooper. But she *really* doesn't like being caught out.

Scene 9 – Selena's Office

Selena Now, Kathleen, we need to discuss the catering. I think we should cater for about two hundred, keep it select and exclusive.

Kathleen Of course, Mam.

Selena So, call that company that did the Oyster Bar at the Council event last year. And get Ted Downy to bring that mobile bar he uses for events.

Kathleen I heard he charges it out by the day.

Selena Well, I'm sure he'll do it free for a charity event.

Kathleen I don't think –

Selena Oh, and get O'Herlihy to clean out that small room just off the ballroom, we can use it for catering, and get

some potted plants, you know, aspidistras or ferns, to hide the mould in the corner by the window…

Scene 10 – Kitchen

Oonagh Thank you, Ben, just put it there, will you?

O'Herlihy Kathleen said herself doesn't want you to cook?

Oonagh The missus told me I just have to get me glad rags on and do the serving. She wants me to wear a white frilly apron and a cap, I ask you.

O'Herlihy Just the apron and cap? Will you wear them later, for me?

Oonagh Watch your tongue, Ben O'Herlihy!

O'Herlihy So who's cooking if you're not?

Oonagh She's getting some catering company to do an oyster bar.

O'Herlihy Jaysus. All we'd need is some Guinness and some diddly music and we'd have the Lisdoonvarna mating festival.

Oonagh Well, if there's enough booze, maybe someone will get lucky, but it had better not be you!

Scene 11 – Car

Selena O'Herlihy, pull in here, will you?

O'Herlihy Yes, Mam

Assistant Can I help you ma'am?

Selena Yes, I'm Selena Salisbury.

Assistant Who?

Selena The Actress? Oh, never mind. I need 12 crates of Don Perignon. Oh, make it 14, maybe. And, 12 crates of Chardonnay.

Assistant This one?

Selena No not that one, yes, yes, there, the expensive one. 12 crates of something red – ah, yes, that's nice. I want them delivered to Merrick Manor by the 12th August.

Assistant And how are you going to pay, ma'am?

Selena Pay? I'll expect an invoice after delivery, of course.

Assistant But, ma'am –

Selena Just past the order to Justin, he'll know what to do.

Assistant [undertone] I bet he will.

Selena O'Herlihy, there you are. Grangers, now, I think. I need a ball gown and some white gloves, and some heels with a sort of dated look

Scene 12 – Kitchen

Oonagh Hi Kathleen, what're you doing below stairs?

Kathleen Dear Oonagh, would you work with me on the food list for the ball?

Oonagh But the missus said she was getting caterers in?

Kathleen It seems there's no one this side of Belfast who'll do it. That last lot never got paid the full whack, and it seems everyone knows.

Oonagh And there was me thinking I'd just be lending a hand. And me in me frilly white pinny and all

Kathleen [laughs] Me too. Sometimes I look back on the job I applied for: Prestigious position of Personal Assistant to famous actress. It sounded like something out of a fairy tale. But right now, it's more like a nightmare.

Oonagh Famous actress, huh, who's she kidding?

Kathleen Herself, I guess.

Oonagh Ageing pornstar doesn't quite have the same ring, does it?

Kathleen Well, she did star in a couple of mainstream films.

Oonagh Before they realised histrionics doesn't count as acting.

Kathleen Poor Selena.

Oonagh Yes, well, she was quite lovely in her day. Made a bit of a splash.

Kathleen I looked her up on the internet before I came for the interview. She always looked so glamorous. It's a shame she

didn't hang on to any of the money she made.

Oonagh With all those freeloaders she used to call her friends? Fat chance.

Kathleen OK, so. Now here's what I think. We could do a range of cheeses on those little biscuits, cut the salmon into tiny bits and use it for garnish, along with pieces of cucumber and salad.

Oonagh No one ever eats the salad.

Kathleen No, but it makes the table look colourful. And what about those lovely cheese fingers you make?

Oonagh And I could grab a load of those mini quiches from Lidl and put them in the oven?

Kathleen [laughs] Now you're getting into the swing of it.

Oonagh And what about drinks?

Kathleen Another problem altogether!

Scene 13 – Selena's Office

Selena Ah, Kathleen, look. Did you see my gown? Isn't it something?

Kathleen My god, it's stunning, but how on earth…

Selena [giggling] I'll send it back after the ball. I'll say it didn't fit. I'm so excited, aren't you? Now, how's the guest list coming on?

Kathleen Well, we've had a few takers and a few refusals, [nervously] It's holiday time, you see. People with children will mostly be away, and a lot of people won't commit early.

Selena Yes, yes. And the quartet, are they booked?

Kathleen Yes, but they're demanding –

Selena Fantastic. Now, have the tables arrived? And the chairs?

Kathleen Yes, O'Herlihy is cleaning everything up, now. And I've got ribbons to match the curtains, so that we can put bows on all the chair backs, make them look a little less functional.

Selena And what about glasses?

Kathleen I've got some on loan, arriving tomorrow. And the floor is looking pretty good with that new coat of varnish. And we've got subdued lighting and candles on tall sconces to make it look a bit more old worldy.

Selena See, miss pessimist, I told you it would be a marvellous success!

Scene 14 – Kitchen

Oonagh Well, tomorrow's the day

Kathleen I'm having kittens. There are only fifteen on the guest list. Most of those are new to the area, and only two have actually forked out. What on earth's

going to happen? She'll freak out if people don't come.

Oonagh Oh, don't you worry, dear. We've been organising *fundraisers* for years.

Kathleen Yes, but still… And the musicians won't even come unless she pays them up front, and she won't listen.

Oonagh Ah, don't worry about musicians. O'Herlihy has that covered.

Kathleen [gloomy] It's going to be an utter disaster.

Oonagh It'll go right on the night, isn't that what they say?

Kathleen If it doesn't, she'll sack me on the spot.

Oonagh Now, don't you be fretting. She won't sack you. She needs you. She's never had a PA stay as long as you have. Why *do* you stay? The way she blames you for everything that goes wrong?

Kathleen I don't know, in all honesty. I guess I have a soft spot for her, at that. Why do *you* stay?

Oonagh [laughs] God only knows. I've quit more times than I've had hot dinners. I have to remind her about my wages most weeks. But there's something to be said for a job that's not boring and predictable.

Kathleen. You can say that again. But still, I'm not going to sleep a wink tonight.

Act 2 – The Ball

Scene 15 – The Ballroom

Selena **[Drama queen] Oh, my god it's wonderful. Oh! You wonderful people. And the candles! It's just magic! Like the old days. And those curtains! I'd forgotten we had those.**

Kathleen **Well, they're –**

O'Herlihy **[interrupts]. They just needed cleaning, Mam.**

Kathleen **[gently] Perhaps you should go and get ready, Mam?**

Selena **Oh, yes! Absolutely. I must be at the door when the guests arrive.**

O'Herlihy **Kathleen, my dear. Take up that bottle of Don Perignon and the Waterford crystal glass, and make sure the bottle's empty before she comes down, eh? There's a good girl.**

Kathleen **Oh… Oh, yes, I see.**

Scene 16 – Musicians

Girl Goodness, you've given this old barn a makeover.

O'Herlihy Oh, Kate, glad you could make it. Great outfit! and you've brought Connor and the auld drummer, too. Grand stuff.

Girl Less of the blarney, Ben. Are we going to get paid?

O'Herlihy Of course, girl. I've put ye down as the Winsome Quartet from Bantry House. She wouldn't dare upset that lot.

Girl Well, just make sure, OK?

O'Herlihy Go on, now; set up and make some noise. Do yez know any O'Carolan tunes? Something a bit kind of waltzy and stately to start off?

Girl Feck, do we have to do that old shite?

O'Herlihy You know it?

Girl Of course. Who doesn't?

O'Herlihy Her ladyship, hopefully. Get started with that, and go into something a bit more funky when there's a few drinks been drunk.

Girl Will I sing a few songs?

O'Herlihy Sure, you can do what you want once the craic gets going. Now, off with yez and get some noise on the way.

Scene 17 – The Welcome

[Cars arriving. Sounds of O'Carolan music in the background]

O'Herlihy [pompous, sonorous] Mrs and Mrs Marchant, Mam.

Selena Oh, I'm sooo pleased you could come. Do go through to the reception, that way…

O'Herlihy Lord and Lady Fitzpatrick…

Selena [tipsy, has no idea who these people are] Oh, welcome, welcome…

O'Herlihy Captain O'Kane and Mrs Judge…

Selena I'm so glad you could make it! Go on through,

O'Herlihy The Maestro O'Carolan and his lovely daughter, Jane…

Selena Oh, how exciting! So pleased to meet you.

O'Herlihy The Earl of Ulster

Selena Oh! Goodness! What an honour…

Scene 18 – The Ball
[Irish trad music belting away]

Kathleen [loudly] Is this going OK, do you think?

O'Herlihy Just splendid. Go on, have a dance. Let your hair down.

Kathleen I'm supposed to be minding what people want.

O'Herlihy D'ye see anybody minding anything? They're all drinking away, now.

Kathleen As are you, if I'm not mistaken?

O'Herlihy Well, a man has to keep the wolf from the door. And who's to notice anyway?

Kathleen Is she drunk?

O'Herlihy Of course. It's what she does best, then she can have a whale of a time

and the next day she won't have a clue what actually went down..

Act 3 – After the Ball Was Over
Scene 18 – Selena's Office

Kathleen You called, Mam?

Selena Kathleen! Look at this. What do they mean, I owe them five hundred euro?

Kathleen For the 26 cases of wine, Mam.

Selena Well, how on earth did fifty people drink all that wine? And it was Romanian? I wouldn't have ordered Romanian wine.

Kathleen It was a bit of a bother, Mam. They sent the cheaper one by accident, But it was too late to send it back. It should have been three times that price.

Selena Oh, well… And what's this? A receipt from Lidl? Who asked for quiches?

Kathleen I couldn't say, Mam. But Oonagh paid for them, so we'll need to reimburse her.

Selena I have no intention of paying for something I didn't order.

Kathleen Well…

Selena I suppose she's threatening to leave, again? I can find another cook, any day. One who doesn't spend my money like water.

Selena The musicians want how much? And all they could play was Strauss. My God, 300 for candles? 200 for the loan of glasses? Do these people think I'm made of money? And what's this for? and this, and this…

Scene 19 – Kitchen

Oonagh Hi, Kathleen, what's wrong? You look fair frazzled.

Kathleen It's a nightmare. I want to quit. Now. She's screaming the place down.

Oonagh Here, have some chef's cure-all.

Kathleen I shouldn't…

O'Herlihy Well, now!

Oonagh Ben O'Herlihy, trust you to hear the sound of a bottle turning.

O'Herlihy Cheers Missus.

Oonagh Kathleen here is worried about her upstairs going on about getting nothing out of the ball but bills she won't pay.

O'Herlihy Don't you worry about that, none, Kathleen She had a blast. Give it a couple of days and she'll be telling us all what an [imitates Selena] ebsolutely marvellous ball it was, and that all those wonderful people she invited all came…

Kathleen But none of them came!

Oonagh Within a couple of weeks she'll have convinced herself that they did. She'll even convince herself of conversations she had with Lord and Lady whatshisname that don't exist.

Kathleen Who *were* all those people who came, anyway? I thought I saw Jim from the café, and Sharon from that little shop on the corner, but I wasn't sure.

Oonagh Well, you did for sure, they were both there. The girls have been busy making ball gowns ever since they heard, and I made sure they all knew about it, of course. Quite innovative, some of them: brocade curtains from the charity shop, bits of net and lace from here and there. Did a grand job, didn't they?

Kathleen But how did they know they could come in?

Oonagh Who else was going to come? Word gets around, they all pile in. A night out, and after a few glasses of free wine, who's counting? They had a splendid time.

Kathleen But didn't Selena realise?

Oonagh Of course. She's not stupid.

Kathleen But –

Oonagh Don't fret, now. She's just living her own dream and anything we do to keep the dream intact is fine.

Kathleen But she didn't make any money at all. She's whinging about paying out for the stuff we did manage to get.

Oonagh Oh, they'll all get paid in the end, sooner or later. She still has some money coming in from royalties from those blue films of hers. More than you and I will ever see, that's for sure. Don't you worry about Selena. She won't starve even when the rest of us go to the wall.

Finale
Scene 20 – Kitchen

Oonagh No, girl, not like that.

Girl Do I use this?

Oonagh Do it this way, look, I'll show you. Shush, now.

Selena [intercom] Is O'Herlihy there?

Oonagh Yes, Mam.

Selena [intercom] Send him up, will you? I need him right now.

Oonagh Yes, Mam.

O'Herlihy Jaysus, what this time?

Oonagh The Lord only knows. Maybe she's had an idea.

O'Herlihy Lord save us.

Oonagh Ye have that right. It's been a while since she had one of her ideas.

O'Herlihy The ball. How could I forget?

Oonagh But, oh, wasn't it grand, in the end? The ballroom, the candles, the tables all set with damask, And, oh, the gowns – even if they were made from curtains…

O'Herlihy Sure, but what crazy money-making scheme has she dreamed up this time?

Oonagh Go on with ye, her ladyship's calling.

O'Herlihy Ladyship my ar –

Scene 21 – Selena's Office

Selena O'Herlihy, listen! I've had a magnificent idea!

O'Herlihy An idea, Mam?

Selena A fantastic idea! I'm going to host a Charity Fundraiser.

O'Herlihy A Charity Fundraiser, Mam?

Selena A flower show, O'Herlihy! It will be absolutely wonderful, with prizes for the best roses, the best scent. [going dreamy] Kathleen can work out the details. We'll put a marquee on the front lawn If you could just tidy up the gardens a bit. Clean up that walled vegetable garden, trim back the box hedges, plant a few herbs, plant a few roses, and fill in the holes in the drive…

O'Herlihy [mutters] Holes, my ar –

About Chris Lewando

Having spent most of her working life trapped in an office, Chris Lewando moved from the UK to Southwest Ireland to continue writing in the welcoming stability of a rural community. Having invested in an old farmhouse, an acre field has been planted as a future forest for others to one day enjoy.

Chris had several mainstream genre novels published while working, but dreamed of a time her other books would be read. A former teacher, she has a Bachelor Degree in Education and a Masters in Creative Writing. She is an online Fiction Tutor for the London School of Journalism, and edits manuscripts for a literary consultancy.

As an avid reader of adventure stories, Chris writes novels in which a thriller element complements strong characters with a thought-provoking problem.

Chris has enjoyed many outdoor activities in her life, including caving and paragliding, and still drives a motorbike, and canoes off the coast when weather permits. She plays traditional Irish Music (flute and button box) whenever the opportunity arises.

Feedback

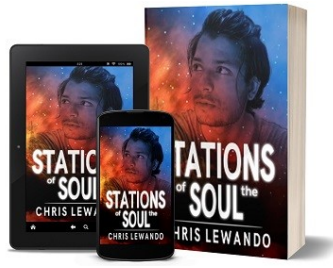
I hope you enjoyed reading this work of diverse writing as much as I enjoyed creating and compiling it. If you did, then I'd love to know. Giving birth to a creative effort and sending it out to discover its place in the world is like kissing goodbye to a child nurtured to puberty. It takes off with teenage arrogance into a world, that can be harsh and unforgiving. And when you never hear from that child again, it leaves an unfilled vacuum. So please, if you enjoyed the book, post a review. Let me know my writing is appreciated. Let me know which part of this work fired your imagination, or touched your emotions.

If you do post a review, keep it short, and reflect on your emotional responses. Let other readers know how the work made you *feel*. Did it grab your attention? Did you want to keep reading? Did the characters come to life? Did you care about them, and wonder about their future after the closing lines? Would you read a larger work by the author?

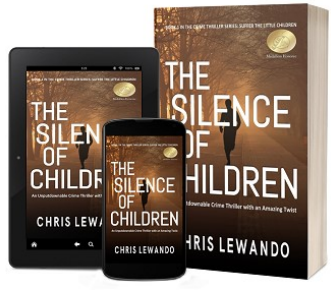
Chris Lewando Novels

"Fast moving, imaginative, fun, thought provoking. One of those books you don't want to put down from the first time you pick it up."

"Another spine-tingling, roller-coaster ride. The well-developed character and tight, fast-paced plotting is typical Lewando; the ending will blow you away."



"I had intended to read a few chapters a day, but ended up spending most of Sunday reading it to the end. A great plot with good characters; shades of Stephen King. I think this would make a great film."



"Once it drew me in, I couldn't put it down until the end. The story became riveting and I read it almost in one sitting. Like all good books it also left me wanting more, and I hope you will continue the storyline so we discover what happens to the main characters and the remaining protagonists. Overall a great read that I would thoroughly recommend to anyone interested in a great story that could so easily, though hopefully never, be based on fact. Thank you for letting me read it."

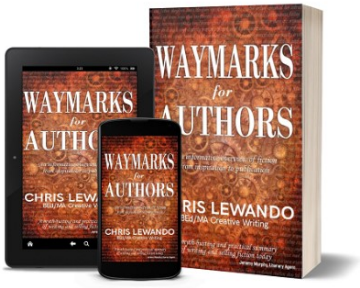
"Wow, I'm speechless. This book was beautiful. The description of the land set the mood perfectly. It matched Grainne's cold, painful grief. What I found the most compelling was her insight. She had a few realizations that blew me away, and I had to stop and reflect on what I'd just read. Thank you for an amazing book! I really enjoyed the Irish names, so I feel like I'm connecting a little bit with my heritage. (SM, USA)

"I found myself drawn into the worlds, both real and imaginary, painted by Lewando. The world-building in the novel is excellent, and real-world London is as intricately described as the fantasy world of Morthia. The main character, Martin, possesses a dark, distinctly British sense of humor, which colors the book even at its most harrowing moments."

"In a world thick with intrigue, doppelgängers, pirates, slavers, dragons and magic, Daemon Spawn flows across characters and developments with ease. Lewando builds a rich world, keeps description at a perfect medium and has a poolof interesting and heartfelt characters."

"The interweaving of mythical figures gives the story depth and excitement. This is a very distinctive work which is well worth a read."

"The countryside in the area was like a character itself, I really want to see it in person now. The story was very well written, and had some very surprising twists and turns. I'm hoping there's a sequel. I would read anything by this author."



For readers and authors, this book offers the no-frills truth about the benefits and pitfalls of mainstream and self-publishing.

This in-depth discourse presents a practical and informative overview of writing and selling fiction and memoir, both for aspiring writers and discerning readers.

It is not a tutorial, but proffers insight into the commercial aspects of authoring, from conception to publication.

A must-read for anyone trying to sell or self-publish fiction.

Excerpt from

Stations of the Soul

Prologue

Rachel was dying. Her soul was slipping its leash from her still body, thread by tiny thread, a cobweb of effervescent light that stretched ever thinner as it sought to leave a home that would soon be uninhabitable.

Sarah stood in the doorway of the intensive care ward, tears springing to her eyes, helpless to halt the inevitable. She had seen death before, many times, and usually was able to evaluate and compartmentalise, but this time found it impossible to separate herself emotionally from the unfolding drama. The mother's grief tore into her, as if it were her own. Was it because the child's unconscious face was so serene, with those golden eyelashes curling against marbled alabaster cheeks? Or was it the mother's love, so strong it was almost a physical presence, as she willed her daughter to live?

Rachel's mother, Sarah couldn't recall her name, was rocking backward and forward slightly, her voice never faltering. The cheerfully patterned dress and overlong handknitted cardigan she'd worn to work were incongruously out of place. Her hand clutched one of Rachel's, where it rested, unmoving, on a green hospital counterpane. There was no flicker of life behind the bruised eyelids.

Laced with desperation, the stream of words were far from the croonings of a nursing mother. 'Mummy's here, darling. Mummy's here. You're going to be all right. Mummy loves you.'

A strand of blonde hair strayed from beneath the child's turban of bandages, leaking onto a face still as a doll's. She was breathing on her own; a good sign, the duty doctor had assured the mother. It meant her brain was still functioning.

But Sarah knew differently.

Knowing was a curse, but she couldn't *un*know the things that stole unbidden into her mind. She wished she'd been born without the ability, then she, too, would be able to provide comfort and hope, because sometimes people did recover from head trauma, especially if the voice of a loved one broke through the indecipherable barrier of coma.

'Mummy loves you, mummy loves you, darling. Please let her be alright.' The mother's words were an invocation to some unknown deity. She wasn't aware of Sarah's presence. 'Please let her live. Don't take my child. Please don't take my child. She's only nine. She's got her whole life ahead of her. She's all I've got. Please?'

Sarah understood that Rachel's mother didn't really believe what she was saying; she knew her daughter was gone forever. She was asking for a miracle, but between prayers, she castigated herself for failing. Her words were laced with the guilt of hindsight: she should never have let Rachel go with her father that morning; as if she could have foreseen the outcome. She flayed herself with the thought that, at the very least, after the accident she should have *known* her child needed her, and been here sooner. She castigated herself for carrying on teaching in innocent ignorance, while the police were cutting her husband's body from the compressed wreckage of the car, when she hadn't had the least inkling that he was dead, and others were fighting for her daughter's life.

Hours of peace that would haunt the rest of her life.

Sarah felt these emotions as if they were her own. Empathetic tears trickled down her face as machines vibrated, hummed, and blinked impersonally. Day had receded towards the darkest hour. Lights were dim. Black windows reflected

the interior, locking out the night. The exit sign above the door bathed the room in an eerie green light.

Rachel's eyes fluttered open, gradually focusing on her mother. Her smile held the almost unbearable knowledge of what her mother would suffer. 'Don't be sad, mummy,' she said. 'The angel has come to take me home.'

Sarah had never felt so helpless. Not through all the hours she'd been waiting had she experienced anything like the welling tide of anguish that filled the mother as the child's soul released its last connective thread and drifted. For a fleeting second, she caught a glimpse of something so pure and lovely it stole her breath. She held out her hands in welcome, providing comfort to the dead that she could not provide to the living.

'Don't be scared,' she whispered. 'It's all right to die.'

Realising something beyond her understanding was happening, the mother's head snapped around, then she threw herself bodily at Sarah, screaming, as the machines blared warning, and the crash team exploded into the room.

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