

Roinnt Scéalta: Some stories about Irish people

by

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Abstract

Fintan O'Toole proposes that Irish modernist writers could afford to be “opaque, allusive, densely textured” (410). Contrastingly, he posits that contemporary Irish writers, who engage in the simple ritual of words, believe that “the accumulation of potent and precise detail, if it is sufficiently thoroughly imagined, will call the universe into being” (412). The later microcosmic approach to storytelling has the power to speak to the same philosophical ideas, falling away from “the high ambition of Irish modernism” (412). “Roinnt Scéalta: Some Stories about Irish People” examines financial globalization and social progress in Ireland through careful observation of daily life, simple fragments of Irish characters’ lives, stripped-down to small moments that stand for larger public truths: Irish wives still want holidays to Europe, Irish men still wish to gamble and be independent of authority in their work, young adults still emigrate to America. Yet there are new truths: Black children speak Irish in Gael scoils, children of Polish and Chinese immigrants play hurling and Gaelic football in Croke Park, and African men set up window-washing services in small Irish towns. These stories evoke the voices of the displaced to convey the ways in which Ireland is shifting, socially and economically: Frank has lost his job as a painter, and the strain it causes on his marriage forces him into a job for a large corporation; Peo, having demolished his way through Dublin to pave space for apartments he could never afford and businesses he would never patron, finds work providing simple comfort to Buffalo, who is at the mercy of state-supported healthcare and monthly welfare checks; Iarla is convinced by Seán that moving to America will remedy his sense of deflation toward the Irish job market. While the progression of social norms is queried in these stories, they still reinforce and embody many of the sweeping generalizations associated with Irish fiction. This collection delves into the minds and morals of the displaced Irish working class, focusing oftentimes on the pub and the inner-workings of local, social politics in a fictional small town on the skirt of Dublin’s southside.

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Dedication

To my grandparents: Frank, Maire, Jim, and Maureen.

Chapter 1 - Buffalo

Buffalo was *sick*. He told me so himself, but the bastard talked constantly, I couldn't remember half of what he said. He was sixty-four years-old, but he looked ninety. Grey whiskers and fluffy tufts sprouted from his nose and ears, and bushy black eyebrows flapped above his eyes like crow's wings. I'd seen an ad in the paper: *Special Needs Assistant needed. Experience preferred.* He gave his address with instructions to *just come in*. He only lived a few stops-away on the 66 bus—handy enough. So, I went. I needed the work.

He lived in a bottom-floor flat just outside The Bonds called St. Michael's Square. Rounding the back of the Guinness factory, I tasted the malt and barley in my mouth. Smokestacks towered like tall pints of plain over the quays, and fumes and steam gamboled into the heavens. Steel kegs clanked behind the lofty black and ivory gates like guns booming. It could've been a war zone.

He told me that after his sister died, there was nowhere to go for men like him, so he needed, as he called it, *a little help*. The bit of welfare he collected on the last Tuesday of the month scarcely paid his rent and utilities. That's why he ate the way he did: cheap. Just hot dogs and cereal with fictional animals on the box—breakfast lunch and dinner. He should have been twenty-stone, but he was a bag of bones there in his wheelchair.

Number 8—Buffalo's flat—was modest. The door was metal painted white, stained brown and yellow in the bottom corners from muck and mold. Someone had dumped cat litter on the welcome mat—clumps of piss and shite, the smell of which made me itchy; the hairs under my nose squirmed to get away but fuck it I needed a job. I *really* needed a job—I'd lost my last one a couple of weeks previous, laboring on a site where a new "Educate Together" school was being built, and the little savings I had were dwindling on rent. No men saved money in Dublin anymore. No men I knew anyway. Lots of other blokes my age had moved to Australia and Scotland to work the oil rigs

and the mines. But you needed a degree for that. And what with homeopathic health food shops and yoga studios sprouting up around the city, rent was getting expensive.

The outside of the peephole was spray-painted black, and the word *capper* was written in a thick-tipped blue marker. The Bonds wasn't a forgiving place, and you'd wonder how someone like Buffalo ended up here. He said he had grown up near Merseyside in England and could see Anfield from his window and that that little fact was his saving grace when he moved to Ireland because everyone in Dublin supported Liverpool, so they overlooked the fact of him being a Protestant. He wore an English accent that suggested he might have had money to his name once, which doesn't do a man favors around The Bonds. I imagined the men down the pub forgave him when he told them that he grew up next door to Steven Gerard, telling them stories of a young Stevie G playing in the back garden and breaking rear windows of cars on the road with that wicked right peg. Even if none of it was true, they'd sop it up with a bag of salt and vinegar crisps and offer to buy him a pint.

Everyone else in the square seemed to need no forgiveness at all or had so much trust in forgiveness that it didn't matter what in god's name they did. Two elderly women toddled along the main street, wheeling tartan-covered trollies behind them like children, stuffed with milk, bread, butter, and pride that only a morning at mass with Fr. Phillip could buy—he was the American priest who'd come a couple of years ago and loved to tell people that he *knew* Jesus and that they could know him too. The women did a collection in the spring to pay for Fr. Phillip's ticket to Lourdes for the healing.

The nuns didn't care for Fr. Phillip, driving a nice American car, wearing those bright American colors to the pub, and wearing those square American sunglasses, while they rotted away up there in Mount Sackville teaching the girls about dressing modestly, and about boys who tell them that they've been praying to St. Anthony.

One little boy in a monkey cap was dousing the only bench—only bench left—beside the car park in petrol, like he was sousing the hood of a car in soap. The plastic bottle was in the shape of a pregnant cow above his head and bleeding a bright orange liquid onto the wood, probably splattering onto his shoes and trousers, the dopey bastard.

The inside of Buffalo's flat looked little better than the decrepit exterior, but it smelled far worse, like old socks and burnt vinegar at the bottom of a bag of chips. Chopped-up newspapers and glossy magazines with celebrities on the covers cluttered the carpet, and the cabinet doors hung ajar, empty except for a stack of paper plates and a bottle of Coleman's mustard and half-eaten boxes of cereal. Buffalo needed everything within arm's reach. I said hello when I entered in that polite way that posh cunts do, careful to avoid the cat litter by the door. He turned his wheelchair from the telly and rolled over to me, wiped his right hand vigorously on his trouser leg and stuck it out. The tips of his fingers blazed orange, matching the bag of Mighty Munch on the coffee table. Scraps of food and grease stained his navy polo shirt, and the ends of his trousers stuck out like soldiers saluting their superior, exposing his odd socks: one sock white, the other brown. Peace and shit if you're into symbolism. Ireland had none of the first, and a lot of the latter. He reached down to fix his ends when he saw my eyes fall.

The flat certainly wasn't built for a man in a wheelchair. Most flats in Dublin aren't of course; I'd labored on the building of them around the city for years. Buffalo could barely see over the counter. He slapped his hand like a salmon, searching for a lime to go with the bottle of gin he'd unearthed from under the sink. We drank—he didn't even ask if I wanted a drink and at first, I thought it was a trap to see if I was too quick on the drink. I lied about my "previous experience" as I made myself comfortable on his red canvas futon—I had the same one at my place I told him, from *IKEA*. We laughed about how cheap it was.

"The fuckin' Swedish wha?" I said.

He asked me if I played guitar, gesturing to the black guitar case behind the telly, and I said no. He said that was sad, that everyone should have a bit of music about them, but that he wasn't much into playing music anymore himself, so it wouldn't matter.

After half a bottle of Seagrams, we were langered and he offered me the job. It sounded handy enough. Handier than my last couple of gigs: laboring on the new flats—flats I could never even dream of affording—being built in Rathmines with all the Polish fuckers who would never go for a pint at the Workman's at the end of the day, let alone speak a lick of English to you on the site, and working the door on Friday's at The Moore but at least I got a free pint there to numb the digs I'd taken by the end of the night. All I had to do was help Buffalo in and out of bed, wipe his arse, sponge him every couple of weeks or so in the bath, microwave some hot dogs, and feed Charles every morning.

"Charles is some name for a cat," I said. The hairy prick was always up in my face, rubbing his gums against my chin.

"Well if you don't like him, you can fuck off," Buffalo said.

"No it's grand."

Buffalo said that I could move in with him if that was easier and not to worry about paying rent because the government paid that for him. I moved in the next day.

He only lived a few streets away from the bus stop, so it wasn't much bother to walk. I only had a small brown leather suitcase with me: some clothes, a box of teabags since he only drank Earl Grey the English fuck, my *nice* shoes, and an oil painting my Ma had done of a man in a Biro-blue suit with a tangerine for a head behind an oaky brown desk, and a naked man who danced in the corner of the painting by a red telephone. She called it "Demagogue." I never got much out of it, but it was the only thing she'd given me since my eighteenth birthday, so I had to keep it after she left with the black fella from Birmingham—he was handsome enough and got her a job doing the

phones at his law firm while she went back to school, so fair play to her. I hung it up in the bathroom above the vase on the back of the toilet and Buffalo said he liked it and that it was all about sex. He said all art was about sex.

#

It was a Tuesday morning and six weeks had passed. I had pulled dingle berries from Buffalo's arse, scrubbed his mangy feet, dragged him in and out of bed, and had gone to pick up his welfare from the Post Office. The bastard insisted on sleeping naked, so I had to contend with his twigs and berries too—the easiest nights were when Buffalo fell asleep in front of the telly watching the news or History Channel. We spent the nights getting so drunk that both of us could fall asleep over the noise of the factory and the buses and those cunts next door shoutin' and roarin' at each other.

“Time for a sundowner,” he would say, muting the telly, and turning his eye to the bottle of gin.

On Sunday morning I wheeled him down to St. James'. He didn't care that it was a Catholic church and huffed at me when I passed on the collection basket without adding anything.

“Cheap cunt,” he hissed.

The church had enough money as far as I was concerned, and it was about time they started paying the Irish back, sure didn't we give the Pope a fine showin' of music and gargle when he came there a few years ago. He also made me pay my own way at the pub, so I made him carry his tray on his lap, the prick.

Then we headed to The Moore for a carvery lunch. Mockser was in there with Frank and Mr. McNamara playing the darts and skulling pints. When we got home, Buffalo plonked fell asleep in his chair, neck twisted over his boney shoulder. So, I tucked a pillow under his ear and headed back to The Moore to throw a few arrows with Mockser.

#

We watched the news constantly, and on Tuesday evenings we watched David Attenborough on the BCC—I was a prisoner in that fucking flat. I flicked through Facebook while Buffalo scribbled shite into the margins of newspapers and on the backs of envelopes, murmuring to himself, every now and again booming something about Bertie Ahearn or Michael Martin.

We smoked ourselves to sleep. David Attenborough had been on about the Empire Penguins or some shite. I dissolved into the crease of the sofa, and Buffalo melted into the leather of his chair like a candle, neck sinking into his collarbone. Then after a few minutes of bone silence, Buffalo giggled, a girly little snicker.

“Did you know that for your whole life, your skeleton is wet?” he said.

“Wha’?” I said.

“It’s mad isn’t it?”

“What’s mad?”

“Nothing.”

We heard the mother next-door slapping her sons with the wooden spoon, where the brothers who wrote *capper* on the door lived. Anything was better than David Attenborough. I felt bad sometimes listening to it all get out of hand on the other side of the wall. Whichever boy it was though, he probably deserved it. I made Buffalo’s hot dogs just the way he liked them: tepid and sopped in mustard. I put a glass of water in the microwave with them, so they wouldn’t go all rubbery. He thanked me for that and said that it was like being in Anfield whenever we’d watch Liverpool games on the telly.

#

It was awful living next door to those boys. They must’ve never gone to school. They terrorized Buffalo, left dead rats outside his door, threw eggs and sausages and blood pudding at the

windows in the middle of the night, and even sprayed lighter fluid on the door and lit it on fire one Sunday morning—the door was metal, so it didn't matter much, but the smell of burnt paint wafted in under the door for over a week. When I asked Buffalo why we didn't just call the police, he said that the blue wouldn't do nothing and that it wouldn't be worth it because everyone would know it was him.

He'd told me about his last bit of help. A woman named Jo—a Northie bird—whose boyfriend had stayed over sometimes, which was fine by Buffalo. But then one Tuesday, when Buffalo sent Jo to the post office to pick up his welfare check, then to pick up some messages from the Tesco, they never came back, and he said that he couldn't go on a manhunt for a few hundred quid.

On Tuesday mornings, after I'd been to the post office to pick up his welfare, a nurse named Cynthia came to check Buffalo's blood pressure, heart rate, and all that—he had MS. Buffalo said I needed to remember that if anything ever happened I could explain it to the paramedics. When I told him that he should get it tattooed on his chest he said that tattoos were heinous and best left to the Aborigines.

Cynthia had moved to Ireland about eleven years ago from Nigeria to become a nurse because at the time, there was a big strike in the universities in Lagos and none of the professors were getting paid.

"I meant to go back after I got my degree, but then dad fell ill, and I had to stay and work at a hospital here, so I could send money home for his treatment," she said.

"Jesus that's very sad," Buffalo said.

"After he died," she said, "I had no reason to go back—my mother died when I was eight. So, I built a life here instead."

"I'll tell ye what, Cynthia, you're very welcome here with us," Buffalo said. "Isn't she Peo?"

It wasn't Buffalo's country to be letting people in and out of, giving them permission for this and that. But I supposed he was right about Cynthia at least.

"Absolutely. Any time," I said.

Cynthia liked that Irish people talked about the weather constantly and gambled on sunny mornings, not taking a coat with them on the bus, even though they knew it was going to rain—it always rained in Ireland. When she asked Buffalo how he was feeling he always said he was tickety-boo but he could do with a bit of How's your father? if she was offering. Sometimes she stuck around for the whole morning, getting high with me and Buffalo—when she would she slipped off her shoes and told us stories of grand parties she attended at home in Lagos and about how Nigeria was in fact quite different than what people thought.

She held the stethoscope to Buffalo. he leaned in to smell her chest, so close that I thought his crooked nose was going to dive into it and he'd fall arse over tit. He looked at me and mouthed something, eyebrows bobbing up and down and a cheeky smile cracking under his moustache. Cynthia watched him the whole time over her glasses, then getting up from her hunkered position between Buffalo's legs, she pushed her palms against the back of the chair, brushed her chest against the tip of his curious nose—that made Buffalo throw his head back. His eyes flipped in their sockets. She told Buffalo that he would never get a woman into bed if he couldn't handle a bit of tit. When she was finished with her work she always said, "Bob's you're uncle," and Buffalo said that if his Uncle Bob had a pair of knackers, she'd be his Aunty Betty.

Buffalo told me that if we got married that I could claim him as a beneficiary and make his medical expenses something called tax-deductible. It made sense for both of us I told him: I'd been divorced once already so I didn't care for the *sanctity* of marriage. And he sure wasn't going to get a woman—it was a mess *down there*. He did like the ladies though. I caught him once, masturbating to a Facebook profile photo of one of his sister's friends hugging her husband and kid. I told him that

was fucked up and that he should at least zoom in to block out the kid. He didn't know how to zoom, so I showed him then I didn't feel so bad about picking up the crusty polos around the flat. We never got married.

#

One morning after Cynthia left, Buffalo asked me, with a mouthful of mustard, bread, and hot dog—breakfast—if I would kill those fucking brothers next door. The ones who'd written capper on his door and cracked the window with the blood pudding. He told me he didn't care *how* I did it, just that it couldn't be traced back to me or him. He wanted the little one to go quick, but the older one he didn't seem to care much for his suffering. His face twisted as he spoke, and he began to sweat across his forehead. He was as mad as a bag of spiders.

I told him I couldn't do it. How *could* I? Literally, how could I, without getting caught I asked him. He told me I was a bright fellow and that I could figure that out for myself. No, I couldn't I said and went to leave to go to The Moore for a pint, the evil bastard, but he shouted at me to wait. I'd never heard him shout before. His voice got thinner the louder it got, like he never raised his voice before. He told me he would pay me well and gave me the same look he'd given Cynthia's chest: a hungry one.

"I *have* the money," he said.

"You're a sick bastard," I said.

Then he showed me the money in the guitar case. He asked me to pull it from behind the telly, throw it up on the sofa, and open it. There were wads of cash piled on top of the red velvet inlay, tossed in there in no order at all—I was half-disappointed that it wasn't lined neatly like in the gangster films. It was a lot of dough, and he told me it was all mine if I'd do it.

"Ten-thousand euro," he said.

He must have seen my eyes when I first opened the case, the green and blue bills beaming back at me like babies.

Later that evening, Buffalo told me the full story of why Jo and her boyfriend had done a runner: He had asked them to do the same thing, for twice the money mind. He had offered them half the money upfront and the other half when they'd gone the Full Monty. But after he gave them the first half, they ran off, taking his credit card and all. He had never shown them the rest in the guitar case thanks god. When I asked him why he wouldn't just move—he had the money—he said that his home was his home and that it just wouldn't be right. I expected him to say that he shouldn't have to move because of some fuckin' brothers next door. But he didn't. He just said that he had been living in that flat for thirty fuckin' years and looked at me as if that was enough. And I suppose it was. He'd been rotting in the flat for years, filling every corner with bits and bobs that he'd never look at again and falling off his trolley watching the news and David fuckin' Attenborough. He claimed he knew more about what was going on in the country than most of the politicians. He clipped statements from the minister for health about privatizing hospitals in the city to counter the overage of patients sitting on trollies. I don't know what he did with them after that. Maybe he did nothing at all with them.

#

Drunk one night on gin and David Attenborough—I was beginning to hear the fucker's celestial voice in my dreams—I told him I would do it; I'd never see money like that again in my life. And he was right—those brothers were pricks, bastards, and would never do any good in the world anyway.

“Their mother'll be glad to be rid of them,” Buffalo said.

“I can't rush it,” I said. “I'll have to plan it.”

Buffalo turned off the telly and sat for a moment, staring at the crack in the living room window.

“You’ll have to get them both together, at the same time.”

“Of course, I’m not stupid.”

“Now I don’t want to know anything more about it, the money is yours when you want it. And if the police came knocking on this door I’ll say I never knew anyone named Peo Brangan.”

“And what about me? Sure, I’d be fucked up in Mount Joy. Literally.” If they ever locked Buffalo up for being an accessory, life wouldn’t be too bad up there in the Joy: He’d have a few square meals a day, a bit of company, and maybe he could catch the news on one of the radios in the evenings. No one would be trying to ride him. They’d probably serve him a hot dog or two for good behavior.

I think he knew I’d do it the first time I’d laid eyes on that pile of money. I would do it. What had *I* to lose? My job? My life? *Some life*: Picking shite out of another man’s arse and microwaving him his meals because he couldn’t reach over the counter. The government would be wasting money sending them to school and putting a roof over their heads and food in their bellies. Their prick of a mother would probably be glad to be rid of them too.

Buffalo switched the telly on and turned it to the nine o’clock news. He took a rolling case from the drawer in the coffee table and began to roll a spliff, sprinkling marijuana onto the bed of Amber Leaf tobacco. By the time he was finished mauling it with his tongue it looked like a wet sock.

“Nice one wha?” he said, holding it in front of his nose like a trophy.

“Like fuckin’ Snoop Dog,” I said.

#

Most teenagers are shitebags: I had caused a fair amount of trouble for some neighbors growing up, but I didn't have a mouth or a mind on me like those boys—blood puddin' in the window are you serious? The Christian Brothers had beaten at least *that* out of me. I'd have a better life in jail if I was caught, they might even toss me in with Buffalo after I ratted him out and tell me that I had to continue taking care of him for punishment. And if I wasn't caught, life would be rosy for a few years. I'd take a holiday to Lanzarote or Costa del Sol while things settled down and people forgot who I was as they do. I thought I might even stay there by the beach and get a job in an Irish bar; Mockser from down The Moore said they're crying out for Irish barmen in all those touristy spots—he'd just won a few euro on the horses and was saying he was going to take a holiday soon. I could get a reference from Moore himself saying I was a general manager or something, Mockser said. He'd lied for the lads going away to Australia.

#

I was watching the news, taking notes for Buffalo since he was at the hospital at his physical therapy session. He'd be a moody prick for the rest of the day if I didn't and I wasn't in the humor for him. Cynthia thought he should get some exercise instead of watching telly all day and Buffalo was glad to be hanging off her for a couple of hours. She said that British television drove people mad, that a friend from home had started a website called Nollywood that hosted all the best Nigerian films. I never got into any of the films she recommended, but it was nice to have Buffalo out of the flat for a while. It would have been great if Fr. Phillip and the women down the church brought him to Lourdes for the week. I was getting sick of the prick and his moaning about the fuckin' news every evening and wanking over photos of his friends' grandkids.

#

I was in the bath, soaking up some peace. I threw salt and pepper in there because I'd read something in one of Buffalo's magazines that salt in the bath is good for your skin. And I figured

you couldn't have salt without pepper unless it was a bag of chips. I had a bit of Oasis playing from my phone in the sink to pick up the acoustics or something—I'd read that too. Then I heard a crash: a window breaking in the bedroom. I thought maybe the brothers were throwing blood pudding again. I hopped up out of the bath, my skin seasoned in black and white speckles, and dried myself off. Any damage had already been done so I figured I should be dry before going out to clean up the glass. A whisper from the living room slithered under the bathroom door. Then another higher-pitched one. It was the brothers, I knew it. I swung the towel and rolled it down around my waist, still wet from Buffalo this morning—all his towels were in the wash, the dirtbag—and grabbed the vase from on top of the back of the toilet and ran out to catch them.

The younger one was riffling through the guitar case, packing wads of money into his cap and coat pockets, and the older one was squeezing a bottle of mustard like there was no tomorrow, twirling in the kitchen like Swan fuckin' Lake. I ran at the older one and slammed the vase against the back of his head, smashing it in my hand. He dropped to the ground like a box of bricks. The younger one screamed "Petty" and ran for the broken window where they'd come in, green and blue notes fluttering to the ground behind him like butterflies. I went after him, the towel falling off my hips when I lunged—I left it behind, draped over the unconscious youngfella's face. I caught the little prick with a leg out the window and reefed him back inside, covering his mouth with my hand. I pulled down the blinds, so no one could see in. He bit down on my hand, so I pushed my hand so that he couldn't bite anymore. I trapped his flailing arms with my spare arm and held him there until he stopped squirming. I could have snapped his neck right there; it would've been easy. But I couldn't. I felt his skinny wrists in my hands like carrots and his narrow chest under my arm. He was a kid—Just a fucking kid. Whatever about his brother was one thing, he looked at least eighteen, but this lad was just a skrog. He began rabbiting, muttering to himself. A hole opened in my stomach. I told him to shut up and shook him at the shoulders until he did. Then I pinned him to the ground,

his elbows tucked into his ribs. I pushed my knee across his waist to cover up my bits and I asked him his name. He glared back at me. Brave little fucker.

“Go fuck yourself, ye pervert,” he said and spat at my face.

Then I slapped the back of my hand against his boney cheek. His eyes swelled, and his lips trembled.

“What’s your name?” I asked again, picking him up and slamming him back down into the carpet. He was light as a pint in my hands.

“*Davie.*” He was panting.

“And *his,*” nodding to his brother, still cold on the linoleum kitchen-floor.

“Petty.”

“Righ’,” I said. “Here’s what’s going to happen.”

I told him that he would help me tie up Petty and not try any fuckery unless he wanted to see his brother’s ears cut off. I told him about Buffalo, the poor prick, offering me all that money to kill him and his brother, that I could if I wanted to; That no one cared about little shitebags like them; That his mother wouldn’t notice him or his bastard brother for at least a couple of days, long enough for me to cover my tracks and get the fuck out of Ireland.

I tied Petty’s hands behind his back with Zip ties and Davie watched. He even handed me them from under the sink. Petty came to a moment later, after I’d tied the third cable tie. He rattled and slapped the floor like a fish on hot sand. I gagged his mouth with a pair of Buffalo’s socks. Those things could’ve knocked him out again, the bang off them. When he spat the socks out of his mouth, I grabbed Davie and held a breadknife—dripping with mustard—to his neck and told Petty that I’d hold his brother upside down over his face and let him drown in blood if he did anything stupid. The whole in my stomach grew again saying that out loud.

“You’re a fucking psycho,” Petty whispered, quiet enough to keep me from reacting in any kind of way. “You better not touch him.”

I was naked. Bare bollock. I can imagine how the whole thing looked. I’d been thinking about ways to catch both of them for almost a week, yet here they were, tied-up and ready for a slaughterin’. But I couldn’t do it. I just couldn’t. They were just boys. They both were. I looked closer at Petty. His chin barely grew any hair and his freckles decorated the bridge of his nose generously. His fat head and ginger mop made him look a bit like Rodge and Podge from the telly. I pushed Davie back into the pantry and got down to Petty’s face.

“How old are you, son?”

“Fifteen,” he coughed out.

Fuck.

Just boys—I couldn’t do it. I needed the money, but I couldn’t do it. I imagined what my Ma wouldn’t think if she heard about me on the news—she’d be mortified. And they might kill me if I let them go now. At least Petty would. He was fifteen, but he was built like an ox; he’d broader shoulders than I had and arms the size of salmons. He’d mince me. I had to get out of there and take them with me. But first I needed to get some fucking clothes on. It was one thing to kidnap a couple of kids, another thing to do it naked.

I grabbed Davie’s arm. “Come with me,” I said.

Then I hunkered down to Petty’s face. “You say a word and I’ll rip your fingernails off, do you hear me? And *his* too.”

I dragged Davie with me into the bedroom and told him to sit on the bed while I got dressed.

“I didn’t mean to be so rough with you,” I said. “I really don’t.”

“You’re a bleedin’ pedophile, that’s what y’are. Grab arsing little boys in the nip.”

I pulled on my tracksuit bottoms—didn't bother with a pair of jocks.

"If you little fucks hadn't been sneaking into the flat while I was in the bath—"

"Big dirty balls on ye!"

He was getting brave again. So, I slapped him again.

"Have you never seen you father in the bronze no?" I said.

That shut him up—the question about his father, not the slap. He looked like he was used to a receiving a few digs. He said he had never met his Da, and that Petty said he had been a prick anyway. I hadn't known mine either: He went missing walking home from the pub a few nights before my Ma went into labor she told me. She said that there was no way he was dead, that if it was the end of the world he'd still be sitting on top of a barstool somewhere like The Moore screaming *Lash him* at the horses on the telly and licking the inside of a crisp bag. We'd been better off without him. They're just boys, I reminded myself, and took a breath.

I pulled over my Liverpool jersey—Petty was wearing the same one—and pulled Davie up off the bed and back out to the kitchen. Petty looked up from the floor.

"Jesus, Davie, what did he do to ye in there?" he said then glared at me. "I swear, if you touched him, I'll fuckin' murder ye and feed you bollox to the cat."

Charles' ears flicked, and he scampered into the bedroom. I wondered whose side he would be on here, mine or the boys?

"I didn't touch him," I said. "We were only gone for forty seconds; what do you think could have happened? I'm *not* a pervert."

"He *didn't*," Davie said. "He was just takin' a bath when we came in he said."

Petty wriggled, his mouth collecting cat hair from the floor. The guitar case was open on the carpet in front of the telly, some money peering out and some scattered on the floor like leaves from a tree.

“He’s going to kill us, Petty,” Davie said.

“I’m not, I’m not,” I said, seizing Davie and shaking him. “Will you shut the fuck—”

“Get *off* him,” Petty bellowed.

“No one’s getting murdered,” I said. “Now will you shut up and let me think for a second—
Jesus.”

I sat down on the couch, one hand still holding Davie. The pits in the carpet where Buffalo parked himself had turned black and greasy. I wasn’t going to kill them. But I’d take the money. Buffalo didn’t need it. *I* needed it. Petty and Davie needed it. We could do something with it maybe.

“He wants you both dead,” I said. I let go of Davie’s arm and rubbed my eyes—I’d started to tear up a bit in the bedroom. “And he was willing to give me all this money to do it. You’ve driven the fucker mad.”

“Why doesn’t he just move then?” Petty said. “With all that money.”

I told them that he shouldn’t have to move because of little shitebags like them. That this was his home. They continued staring into the floor.

“Some home,” Petty grunted. “State of the place.”

I looked over at the guitar case again. Since moving into Buffalo’s flat, the mould in the corner of the room above the telly had spread and the ceiling tiles in the kitchen—like the ones in schools—had started to crumble.

“I suppose it’s like the fuckin’ Shelbourne Hotel in your gaf is it?” I said. “Roast dinners and flat-screen televisions?”

“What do you think?” Petty said, snarling back at me. “Our own Ma doesn’t remember Davie’s name half the time. Last week she got into bed with me and tried ridin’ me to death ‘till I smacked her one in the gob and she fucked off; the next morning she didn’t say a thing to me. And

Davie can't go back to school until he gets himself a new school uniform his principal said, but we can't afford it."

"We don't have dinner some nights," Davie said, still gazing into the carpet like there were answers in there.

It was almost midday and Buffalo would be back soon. I couldn't leave them here, they'd kill Buffalo if they got their hands on him. He was a sick old bastard, but he didn't deserve that.

"Would you come with me?" I said.

"What do ye mean?" Petty said. "Come with you *where?*"

"I dunno—Scotland!

"Scotland?"

"Yeah, Scotland. I've got a buddy in Aberdeen. They'll let anyone in up there. We can get the plane over. Have you got passports? Have you ever been on a plane? We'll say I'm your uncle. There are jobs in the oil over there, it'll be handy picking up work with all the E.U. agreements and that—I'd learned that much listening to the news. I bet they'd take you on as well, Petty, in a couple years after you do the Leaving Cert; whatever they call them in Scotland. We'll take the money with us."

They looked at each other.

"I'm sorry for the vase. And the slapping, Davie. I really am," I said. "We can even pop down to Anfield for a game."

"Course we have passports," Petty said. "Ma used to bring us to Spain in the middle of the school year when it was cheap. She'd tell us that we could never complain about her never bringing us nowhere."

I pulled Davie around in front of my face and pulled off his monkey cap. Little sores oozed at the corners of his eyes and his narrow lips were cracked and scabbed. But his eyes beamed back at me, bright green. *Just a boy.*

“Are you alrigh’ son yeah?” I said. He nodded and rubbed his nose into his shoulder.

“Petty?” Davie said. “What about Ma?”

“Fuck Ma.”

“I’ve never been to Scotland before,” Davie said.

“You’ve never even heard of Scotland,” Petty said.

“We’ll make a life, a good life. And you’ll get dinner every night I promise. And Davie can go to school somewhere and we’ll get him a new uniform. Two of them for when one gets dirty. I’ll even let you drink a pint with me in the evenings if you want, Petty.

He could’ve been bullshittin’ me: He could have been just going along with all of this so I’d let him go. But the way he looked at Davie: I trusted him—I’d no choice now that I wasn’t going to be slaughterin’ them. I never would’ve killed them. Not really.

I cut Petty free and told them to meet me at the bus stop and to hurry because Buffalo would be home soon, and I wanted to give him the satisfaction of thinking I’d done the job; he deserved that much. I packed my suitcase and changed into my *nice* shoes, a pair of pressed brown trousers, and one of Buffalo’s polos. I pulled down my Ma’s painting from the bathroom and took it with me in one hand, the guitar case in the other, and my suitcase tucked under my elbow—I made sure to pack the teabags in there too, leave Buffalo to his Earl Grey. Charles tried to follow me out of Number 8, but I shooed him back in and felt better knowing Buffalo would still have a lick of company.

A few minutes later, the brothers came around the corner. All they had was a backpack each and Petty had a box of cigarettes stuffed into his hip pocket. Davie had on him a pair of round-rim

John Lennon sunglasses and was waving his passport in front of his face. I told him it wasn't fuckin' Spain we were going to. Sergeant bleedin' Pepper!

Petty leaned up against the bus stop advertisement case. The glass had been smashed so it looked like a mosaic featuring the *Mamma Mia* film poster—What a load of shite. Davie sat down on the ground between me and Petty and twisted his neck to look at the painting, which was resting between my palm and the tip of my shoe. The electronic sign above our heads said the 66 bus was three minutes away. Petty plugged in one earphone and glared down at his phone, flicking and poking at the screen.

“Is your head alright?” I said. “Ye didn't give me a choice.”

“It's grand.” Then he pulled the earphone out: “You were actually going to kill us?”

“It was an option.”

I looked down at the ground and didn't say anything, so he went back to his screen.

Cigarette butts, a McDonald's bag, and two used needles littered the bus stop and chewing gum, varying in degrees of newness, decorated the grey concrete in black and pink like pepper. Three women sat in a row against the back of the glass: one was asleep with her head across the lap of the other, who was roaring down the phone—something about her daughter. The last one sat with her head hung like an onion sack between her knees, fingering her rosary beads and muttering prayers into the ground.

Davie turned the painting, so he could see it better. “What the fuck's this?” he said.

“My Ma painted it before she died,” I said.

“Is he supposed to be your Da or somethin'?”

“I don't know. I never met my Da.”

“Righ'. Me neither.”

A man ran by wearing a Liverpool raincoat, chanting something, and pulling at the crest of his shirt like a heart—one of the local junkies. He looked down at Davie.

“Are you a Red, kid?”

“Fuckin’ am!” Davie said, like he knew the prick.

Petty slapped two cigarettes out of the box, sparked one, and offered me the other. I put it between my lips and he held the lighter under my nose. Petty pulled hard on his, ballooning his cheeks, and spewed a stream of smoke through his teeth up to the heavens.

“You can’t beat the Johnny Blues,” he said. Then he passed it to Davie, who took a drag, and coughed under his T-shirt, as if trying to muffle the sound. I wanted to call him a gobshite and smack it out of his hand, but Petty looked at me as if to say he was grand, leave him to it—I wasn’t their Da.

#

When the 66 arrived, I hadn’t any change for the fare, so Petty paid the driver.

“I’ll fix ye up later, all I have are twenties and fifties, and if I open this guitar case, we won’t get out of Dublin alive.”

“Grand. It’s only a few euro.”

Davie rushed upstairs holding the cigarette behind his back; the bus driver told me if he didn’t throw it out the window that he would throw all three of us off and call the guards. I maneuvered the painting, guitar case, and suitcase up the narrow stairs and sat in behind Davie, who had dashed up the stairs and taken one of the front seats with the window facing the Liffey. He threw his feet up on the other half of the seat meant for someone else. Petty took the other front seat across from Davie and told him to toss the smoke out the window. A man was lying down on the back seat of the bus, gripping a two-liter bottle of Coke like a baby singing The Auld Triangle. He was decent to be fair to the cunt.

The bus pulled off and I nearly fell out into the aisle trying to catch the painting. The boys laughed away at me, offering no help. I clipped Davie around the ear, and told him he was a pup, trying to sneak a smoke onto the bus.

“If ye fuck this up, you’ll be in a home with the fuckin’ priests, so will ye behave yourself?” I felt like their Da.

Petty propped open the window and the smell of Dublin wafted in: barley, piss, and bad luck. I couldn’t see the cars in the lane next to us because we were up so high, but I imagined Buffalo passing us in the passenger seat of Cynthia’s Escort around this time, turning down Usher Street and up to the square, happy to have been mauling Cynthia all morning. He would look at where the guitar case had been behind the telly when he turned on the midday news, then again for David Attenborough that evening. He would smile at the vacancy, occupied now by the ghost of his filthy feat. I wondered what he thought my plan would be? Where he thought I had gone? If he would ever see me again? At least he had Charles.

The sun hugged the Spire on the north-side of the Liffey behind us as we peeled away from Wolfe Tone quay toward the blackening sky. The bus hummed against the curb at Houston Station, loading a horde of people headed back to Palmerstown, Lucan, and the boggers back to Kildare. Rain began to clatter against the front window as we pulled off again, the sound drowning out Luke fuckin’ Kelly (god rest him) at the back of the bus.

Davie opened his window and the traffic bellowed through the upper deck of the bus, trucks hissing and cars hammering on the horn at each other. The rain lashed harder against the front window as we pulled onto the N4 until we couldn’t hear anything else. Davie dug a finger into his nose and flicked bogeys in Petty’s direction. I noticed mustard on the side of his hand and I remembered the mosaic on the floor in the kitchen. No one would clean it; Buffalo sure couldn’t, the prick. And I thought, how sad. How very *very* sad.

Chapter 2 - Tomo Byrne's Wedding

Iarla was in bed and Big Paulie's arse was in his face, his big red bollocks hanging like peaches at the end of Iarla's mattress. It was Tomo Byrne's wedding that day and Iarla still needed two things: a job and a pair of shoes to wear with his suit. Iarla had never met Tomo Byrne, but he had been informed within forty minutes of landing in San Francisco airport that he was to be invited to the wedding this Sunday. Seán, his childhood friend from back home in Dublin, who had encouraged him to come to San Francisco in the first place, had assured him that the more he drank at The Fiddler, the more likely he was to pick up a job there. But four heavy nights had passed getting slaughtered on Guinness and Iarla was beginning to suffer for his sins, and he was no closer to a job than he was when he walked off the plane. He needed to pick up some work soon or he would be back in Ireland on the tills in Tesco and his Ma would want him to go back to college. Big Paulie told him he'd better be getting up and dressed because they were leaving in thirty minutes. Iarla's suit was hanging there on the wall above the head of his mattress—that's where all the lads hung their gear--in the garment bag. He could slip into that and he'd be ready to roll.

He was still fucked for the shoes though.

Iarla had gone shopping with his Ma a couple of weeks before leaving for America. She'd brought him to Best Menswear, where they would fit him for a nice tin of fruit. Iarla was fierce embarrassed to learn that Sarah O'Shea fitting him, pinching his inseam and running her gel nails around the inside of his waistband. Iarla had to imagine what her brothers, Eoin and Shem O'Shea, would do to him if they saw his sister with her hand halfway down Iarla's jocks. Sarah was more interested in chatting to his Ma about what had happened to Mr. Walsh after the incident at the Debs with Laura McCabe.

Iarla stood there in front of the mirror with Sarah between his legs. Any of the lads would've been pure jealous of him. The suit hung on him like a binbag, but Sarah said once she got the measurements, she'd have it hemmed and cut so that he'd look like James bleedin' Bond.

At the till, his Ma announced that life wouldn't hang around for him back in Ireland, that he was off to America, leaving his poor Ma and sisters behind.

"But he'll find himself a nice American wife; a rich one too," she said.

The shop didn't have any size-twelve shoes, so his Ma promised to pick him up a pair on Grafton Street next week.

She arrived home the next Tuesday and unveiled a pair of shiny, leather clogs than dress shoes. Iarla looked at the price on the box and his Ma's delighted face and didn't feel much like telling her that he would look like Bertie Ahern if he wore them and to send them back to the nineties where they belonged.

He packed the shoes into his suitcase first, so they wouldn't be the first thing he saw when he got to America. His Ma stuffed socks into them to keep the shape; they were wedged between a pair of Asics runners and John Player Blue cigarette packets for Seán--she said Sean's Ma would have a fit if she knew he was smoking cigarettes over there in America. On the plane, he imagined them buried in there, shined black and bursting with socks, making the rest of his clothes smell like the finest Bosnian leather. He would look like a right gobshite in those yokes.

Big Paulie's ginger chest glistened against the sun which was simmering through the foggy windows. He told Iarla that his face looked like a bag of hammers. Seán shouted in from the kitchen. He was stirring cups of tea and clinking the spoon off the edge of the mugs in an annoying way and asked if Maureen had offered him a job yet or what because he had been locked every night, so there must not be much work. Not yet, Iarla said, sitting up on the end of his mattress and straightening

his socks--they'd gone black on the soles from the moldy kitchen floor--he'd never get them white again.

Iarla had a mighty hangover and his eyes were melting into the back of his head. He learned that the tequila would do that to him, but when the Hispanic lads from the kitchen at The Fiddler finished up at ten o'clock, they drank it like milk and sent shots of it down the bar to Iarla, who only wanted to be seen to be drinking his pint and reading the Irish Independent until he was offered a job like Seán said he would--there was nothin' more Irish than reading the paper. He hadn't the constitution for the Mexican spirits.

Iarla had saved up all summer, working in Tesco, so he had a few hundred dollars left to tide him over for a couple of weeks. He deserved a decent pair of shoes for his feet. It would be suicide to slip those clogs on in front of the lads. But the past few days on the gargle had gotten the better of his plans to go out and buy a pair that didn't make him look like a priest or a principal. It was bad enough that his suit was black, he thought when he pulled it out of the garment bag and compared it to the blue, brown, pinstripe, and plaid suits that hung on the walls of the apartment on hangers, but he had a pair of black shoes too.

"You'll never score a bird wearing that," Robbie said. He wore beige linen shorts and a candy stripe shirt.

"Ah, it's a bit different alrigh', classic like," Big Paulie said.

"Yeah sure you look like Where's fuckin' Wally in that shirt, give over will ye?" Baz chirped from the kitchen. That shut Robbie up.

When Iarla tried on the suit, the cuffs fell down onto his knuckles and the trouser ends sagged like belly fat over his dirty white socks. All the lads had a right little laugh.

"Charlie Chaplin wha'?" Seán said from the windowsill.

“Jaysis, what did they do to ye?” Baz said.

Fuckin’ Sarah. She’d never bothered to take up the trousers of the arms enough. Too busy gossiping about poor Mr. Walsh who rode Laura McCabe at the Debs. Iarla was back there in the mirror, Sarah between his knees and his Ma rabbiting on about how very upset Laura’s parents were when they found Mr. Walsh sneaking out of the house the next morning.

Baz, who was ironing the lads’ gear for that day told Iarla to give it here.

“I’ll turn those up for ye with a bang of the iron,” Baz said. He was sound, face like a cat’s arse, and he was missing a couple of teeth in the front, but pure sound. You could see the tip of his tongue boogying around in his mouth when he talked to you. The suit was like a handful of lettuce, pure creased from sitting in the suitcase and the pressure in the airplane.

“That’d be lovely, if ye don’t mind?”

“No bother.”

The ironing board was propped up like an altar, shirts in a pile at one end waiting to be saved by the whip of Baz’s iron. Baz held up the shiny black tie that Sarah had said were all the rage in The States.

“Jaysis, look at your man here with the shiny tie.”

“What’s wrong with it?” Iarla said.

“It’s a weddin’ you’re going to, not a funeral.”

“Have ye shoes?” Seán said.

Iarla didn’t dare take the clogs out of his suitcase, he’d had enough embarrassment for one morning.

“I forgot to pack them. I’ll have to borrow a pair.”

Robbie offered a pair of his brown monk shoes to Iarla, but when he could barely get his big toe in, Robbie snatched it back.

“Your feet are fuckin’ bread loafs!”

“Don’t worry, Hollywood might have something for those spuds,” Seán said. Big Paulie handed Iarla a bottle of Heineken and clanked his own against it.

“Cheers,” he said.

“Cheers.”

Finding work in the first few days wasn’t as handy as Seán had promised. On the phone in the months leading up to Iarla’s move, he described San Francisco: the comfort of the apartment on Monterey Boulevard (the road name sounded so luxurious over the phone), and the women (Seán made it sound like there were women queuing up for him at the bar). Two things he hadn’t embellished, however, were the weather and how expensive everything was (though Iarla suspected that highlighting the extravagant cost of living only accentuated how much money Seán collected at The Fiddler slinging pints for thirsty tourists). Iarla imagined himself like Seán, floating up and down the bar, taking orders in threes and fours, spinning beer bottles on his palm, and ringing the bell above the bar to signal happy hour. The punters would love him. Seán had said that picking up a job in San Francisco would be handy enough because all the J-1 heads would be gone back to Ireland by the end of August.

Iarla had met the woman who owned the pub, Maureen, on his second night at The Fiddler. She was a black-haired, blue-eyed, ex-nun with a creamy Galway accent, and seemed always in good humor to talk about our lord and savior and point to the Mary Mother of God statue above the bar. There was no cursing allowed in the pub and she had a big sign above the bar to let patrons know: *No cursin’ praise be to God*. It was pinned up next to a replica of the Sam McGuire cup (it was probably the closest a Galway woman could get to the Sam). She had a poor habit of dipping her chin when she spoke, which made her look more John of Gods than John the Baptist. Iarla told her that he had

worked a few Christmas stints at The Moore, collecting glasses and sweeping crisps and peanuts out from under the tables. He told her that he even pulled a few pints on Christmas Eve after the pub had closed, when John Moore bought a Christmas round for the staff. Iarla said he would have a crack at anything as long as he got a few bob for it, that he was in for the long haul if she would have him. Seán had told him that he would need to be willing to do anything at the bar if he wanted a job: Man the taps, change a keg or two, that stuff was handy, but he'd also have to be cleaning the grease traps and mopping up vomit in the toilets. On Iarla's second night drinking in the bar—the place was rammed with a wedding party—Seán roared down the bar to stick Iarla on the line in the kitchen. Maureen's chin sunk into her chest, and her eyes gave Iarla the once over before telling Seán that he didn't look like kitchen material. She seemed perfectly calm in the chaos, tipping her glass of red wine every couple of minutes. She probed Iarla's chest with a long fingernail and told him that he was *too cute*. She told him she would keep him in mind as long as he promised he wouldn't go missing after a few weeks or shag any women in the toilets.

The apartment was heaving with lads whizzing around like ants, slipping in and out of shirts and slacks and trousers, saying asking each other what they thought of this pair and these shoes. It seemed to Iarla that no one offered any real suggestion.

“You're not wearing that are you?”

Some of the lads, Iarla was just seeing for the first time because most of them stayed with their mots in cozy queen beds instead of a single mattress on the floor two feet from someone else. They rushed into the apartment, grabbing ties, shoes, shirts from suitcases, not noticing Iarla there in his Liverpool jocks.

Baz handed Iarla back the suit—on a hanger and all. Baz went off toward the bathroom and Iarla heard the shower hiss. Iarla planted his feet in the legs of the trousers. The ends were turned up

seamlessly, and a perfect crease ran down the middle of the shin—fair play to Baz. He was half-dressed now. The socks were grand, sure no one see them, and the trousers fit him like paint, pure glued to his legs. He liked that. Now the only thing dressing his top half was the hair around his nipples.

The night Iarla arrived at the airport Seán and Robbie O'Rourke picked him up in Robbie's girlfriend's Porsche—it was a mighty squeeze into the back seat with his suitcase and sports bag, but he could hardly complain, sitting in a Porsche for the first time. It Robbie, Iarla assumed from the frequency that Seán posted photos with him, was Seán's closest friend in America—they struck championship-final poses in most of the photos they took together, arms lobbed around each other's shoulders, brushing beards. That had been Iarla and Seán back in the day.

From the cramped front seats of the Porsche, Seán and Robbie took turns pointing in the direction of San Francisco landmarks, fighting to explain that the Golden Gate Bridge was, in fact, not golden at all and more like the color of rust. Iarla saw nothing but distant glimmers of light as they cruised down Monterey Boulevard. They searched for parking for twenty minutes, finally settling on a side street, where the car would have to be moved by 6a.m.

The exterior of the apartment looked like the Spanish villas Iarla saw on holidays with his Ma and sisters when he was younger. The walls were painted chalk-white, and denim-blue shutters framed the grimy windows, which were decorated (or guarded, Iarla couldn't tell), by fancily twisted black bars made to look faintly like flowers. The lonely key with which Seán unlocked the gate with made Iarla feel as though he was entering a cheap American motel room rather than a home—his house keys in Ireland were a bunch: To the porch, front door, back door, shed, garage door, bike lock, and the spare to the O' Sullivan's. When Iarla took the key from Seán and slipped it into his pocket he feared that it would be lost within a matter of days.

At the bottom of the stairs that led up to the apartment was basket of shoes, piled high above the rim, which had reminded Iarla of his collection of old shoes, football boots, and hurleys that he left behind in his mother's porch—she promised him that the lot would be gone within a week after he left. Iarla dug through the basket for a pair while Baz was ironing his suit. Paint chippings from the walls, not as well-maintained as the exterior, littered the crevasses of each stair and the pile of shoes. The door into the apartment was cracked open, and where the lock and keyhole would be, was a missing chunk of door.

Hollywood came up the stairs. Iarla only knew Hollywood from Facebook and Instagram posts, which was how he had come to know most of the lads in the weeks leading up to his migration, scouring pages and matching faces to names he had heard Seán talking about. From what Iarla knew, Hollywood had a good-looking girlfriend, a big American smile with no missing or yellow teeth, and a big square face that would fit nicely onto any cinema screen. He had posted photos of his school reunion at Belvedere College with all his rugby boys, wearing American brands like Ralph Lauren and Tommy Hilfiger and American colors like yellow and pink polo shirts. His mattress, Robbie and Seán had pointed out, was the one in the corner with no sheets on it, only a suitcase, a pair of football boots, and *Real Estate for Dummies*; Seán had explained that he lived at his missus' place but that his uncle Donal owned the apartment and had Hollywood keep an eye on the comings and goings of the place.

Iarla had been most nervous about meeting Hollywood; he knew Sean and Robbie well enough and he could tell what the other lads would be like at home in Ireland: Baz wouldn't have gotten close enough to a college to even smell the diplomas, but he seemed like a man who knew his Gerry Adams from his Bertie Ahern; Big Paulie would be working in a Paddy Power collecting the betting slips and hoarding the schoolkids out during the lunch hour. Hollywood seemed to be the

most American out of the lads. Iarla liked that and wished that he could be like that too, with a big American smile on his face and a pastel-colored shirt on his back. If people in America didn't notice that Iarla was Irish, that was fine by him.

Seán came into the living room, towel twisted around his waist, slapped a cigarette from a Johnny Player Blue box, and walked over to the window. Hollywood joined him. He was a handsome silhouette there against the window. A well-cut suit hung neatly over his broad figure.

Seán tossed Hollywood the packet of Johnny Blue and he popped them into his chest pocket. He was much bigger in person and his collar sat around his neck like a tulip. Seán had told Iarla that Hollywood's uncle Donal was good friends with the mayor of San Francisco, and that notoriety made him look comfortably American. Baz came out from the bathroom.

“How dinner with Padraig Harrington?” he said.

“Yeah, ye lucky bastard!” Robbie said.

Big Paulie twisted his ear in from the kitchen.

“It was grand. Padraig is trying to play a round in with Donald Trump now since McIlroy got one in.” He propped a pair of tortoise-rimmed sunglasses up against his fringe now that he was away from the window, tossed a brown leather bag on the kitchen counter. He announced he had a treat for them after they all paid their rent to Donal.

“Ye mean to you, ye robbin' bastard,” Seán said.

Hollywood pulled a small bag of cocaine out held it up for the lads like a prize pheasant. They erupted and circled around Hollywood.

“Go on, ye langer!”

“Fair play.”

“Ye dancer!”

Then they handed him an assortment of paper-clipped wads of cash, loose checks, and stuffed envelopes with twenty-dollar bills poking out. A couple of the lads said that they would stop by an ATM on the way to the wedding and sort him out there. Iarla had paid rent for three months to Seán, who said that he would pass it onto Hollywood.

Spotting Iarla, who was sitting like a spare shoe at the end of his mattress, Hollywood ducked out of the circle of lads, who were still bouncing, and pulled him up to his feet and into a hug.

“What’s the craic, lad?” he said and took a look up and down at Iarla.

The lads dispersed back to getting dressed, tying ties and helping each other fit suspenders. Baz went back to the ironing and tossed a shirt at Iarla a couple minutes later, all lovely and warm. From the bathroom, Robbie was telling Iarla about how he met his fiancée at a wedding a few months ago and that there would be hordes of birds at this thing.

Seán was stretching suspenders down Big Paulie’s enormous back, And Big Paulie was telling him to line it up with the crack of his arse. Hollywood sat down on Iarla’s mattress and asked him about the trip from Ireland. Iarla sat down again beside him, his head still splitting from the drink. He told him that he had never been on such a long flight so he was glad to be flying Aer Lingus.

“You can’t beat Aer Lingus. You fall asleep for a couple of hours and when you wake up, someone’s thrown a blanket over you and served you dinner and a glass of vino. World class,” Hollywood said.

Iarla sat up to tidy-up the pile of clothes on top of his open suitcase, which was beginning to embarrass him in Hollywood’s presence. He stretched his hands through the sleeves of the shirt—it was still lovely and warm—and buttoned it up about halfway. He was dressed now save a tie around neck and shoes on his feet.

“Are ye in for the long haul then? In America, like? Hollywood said.

“The long haul if the Americans will have me wha’?” Iarla said.

“The yanks will love ye with those bushy eyebrows and thick head of hair on ye, they’ll call ye Black Irish and ye should run with it because Americans love meeting Black Irish because they think they’re the more Irish than a pint of Guinness.”

Iarla went scarlet.

“Be weary of the drink. The lads love a few scoops and the bartenders in America pour Irish people whiskey like there’s no tomorrow,” Hollywood continued.

Hollywood was pure sound; Seán wouldn’t even pour Iarla a couple of free pints at The Fiddler on his first night and had the cheek to offer him advice about tipping in America when Iarla left him just the change: “It’s not like home, he had told him. People over here live on tips.”

“It’s been a struggle,” Iarla said.

“If you’re stuck, my missus’ Ma can sort you with some work cleaning houses, but you should keep trying to work the bars because that’s where there’s real money to be made. Yanks will do anything for good Irish accents, few freckles, and a lock of ginger hair behind the bar,” Hollywood whispered like it was a secret. “You’ll be grand.”

Iarla bent his ear to his mouth like it was anyway. Hollywood picked up a flat cap from the skirt of the pile of clothes that Iarla had shoved into his suitcase and pulled it onto his head. Then he slapped Iarla’s cheek and said not to underestimate the power of a good paddy cap either. He looked like one of those Irish Americans eating lunch on top of the rafters at the Empire State Building, without the dusty face; a warm tan on his cheeks and a smattering of freckles across his nose. Iarla looked around the room again and realized that most of the lads were now fairly dressed, looking in finer form, bug-eyed, and dolled up.

Hollywood sauntered over to his own suitcase in the corner of the room and tossed a clump of ties into Iarla's lap.

"A spicy tie will do the job for any black suit, but you'll need different shoes unless you want to be mistaken for Larry Murphy," he said.

"He'll look like a queer if he wears one of those ties. He needs somethin' classy." Big Paulie chimed in from the kitchen.

"What would you know about class, wearing a checkered shirt to a wedding? Ye wally," Hollywood said.

Hollywood rung it around Iarla's collar. His Ma had told him that the suit would do for all sorts: Debs, weddings, funerals, job interviews, but she had said nothing of weddings now that Iarla thought of it, hadn't considered how different fashion would be in California. Neither had he, to be fair. Hollywood knotted the tie, lovely and tight and rolled down Iarla's collar.

Burrowing through his suitcase for his belt, Iarla found the package that Seán's Ma gave him to give to Seán: A Tesco bag stuffed with chocolate digestives, Mars bars, Hobnobs, and Barry's tea bags. He'd forgotten all about it, buried in there. He pulled it out and checked to see if anything had melted on the journey. Big Paulie spotted the blue and red packet poking out and asked if those were Digestives? Baz, who had been earwiggling from the ironing board in the kitchen roared in and said if there was bickies going that he wanted a few with a cuppa. Hollywood snatched the box of Barry's teabags.

"Fucking teabags, the lot lads." He held the box above his head like a trophy. "Whack on the kettle, there, Baz will ye?"

That was the most Irish-sounding Iarla had heard the lads since arriving and thought how mad it was to be losing your marbles over a few teabags. Most of the lads, except Baz, had picked up

an American twang, spoke with a slower, crasser cadence, spitting their T's and opening their mouth the whole way to yawn their Rs.

On his first morning, alone in the apartment, Seán had asked Iarla if he would take the trash out to the side of the street before the garbagemen came at nine. Iarla hoped that he wouldn't start speaking American words. His sisters warned him that if he came back with an American accent that they wouldn't let him eat Christmas dinner with them. After he explained that he wouldn't be home at Christmas, that once he spent past ninety days he would be illegal, which meant he wouldn't get back in if he left. They stopped teasing him about his impending American accent after that. When Amber, his youngest sister asked (pregnant only with the stress of her Junior Cert exams, unlike Chloe, who had started to show in the belly) if he would still be sending home presents, Iarla promised that he would send them home all sorts of nice American shite like Mrs. Butterworth's pancake mix, a baseball glove, and ranch dressing. Chloe said that she would be out with the little one in January, so he had better be picking up a few coats and some socks or some of those little cardigans from The Gap or Old Navy or one of those places.

Iarla had been texting his Ma and sisters in a group message since he arrived in Chicago for his first layover, then onto Dallas, then San Fran. His first text was a lie: *It's lovely here in Chicago. You'd want to see the sun, it's great! And the pizza is unreal.* He sent a photo of a slice of deep-dish pepperoni pizza and a pint of Guinness too. After watching them bawling in the airport before he went through security, he hadn't the heart to tell them that the heat getting off the plane in Chicago in August felt like a steaming hot blanket and that he was praying that San Fran was a bit cooler. Or that his clothes were soaked through with sweat until he froze dry in an over-air-conditioned restaurant that served reheated slices of Chicago-style pizza, which costed more than a whole chipper dinner from Sam's for all four for of them on a Friday. He only admitted that the Guinness

wasn't up to scratch, which he knew was something all Irish complained about in America. He had learned that much from other friends who had moved, and that it was a fact that every Irish expat used to ensure folks back home that they hadn't forgotten where they had come from, god forbid.

Hollywood called Iarla into the bathroom. A pool had formed on the tiles from lads getting out of the shower. He flipped open a shoebox like a box of doughnuts and told Iarla to try them on. It was a pair of brown leather shoes adorned in fancy-looking designs across the toe. Hollywood hadn't worn them yet—the tags were still on the soles.

“They should loosen up fairly quick for ye,” Hollywood said.

“Ah, I couldn't do that,” Iarla said. He examined the thinness of the leather and silkiness of the laces. He sat down on the toilet sit and slipped one on, careful not to get them wet. It fit like a sock. Hollywood slammed the box shut.

“Be careful not to scuff them won't ye? I've to get married in them next week and the missus will have a fit they're in bits on the wedding day.”

He felt like Jimmy Grimble. The wooden heel clicked on the tiles in the kitchen. They looked pricier than the black clogs his Ma had bought him that was for sure. And the lads were whistling at him now from the pool table in the bedroom. Big Paulie asked him where he pulled those chazwozzlers from? and Robbie said that those were Hollywood's wedding shoes. Seán called Iarla a lucky fuck and said that Hollywood wouldn't even let him borrow a pair of football boots the other week. He went over to the window for a sulk and a smoke. Big Paulie said the cheap prick had a fit when he tried on one of his Tommy Hilfiger shirts. Hollywood told him that he had nearly busted out of the shirt just looking at it.

Robbie dug his hand into Hollywood's bag and passed a Ziploc bag of white to Seán and told him to sort it out amongst the rest of the lads. Hollywood took up his satchel, pulled his sunglasses back down onto his nose.

"I'm outta here." He pointed down to his shoes on Iarla's feet. "Take good care of them now, won't ye?"

"Cheers! I owe ye a pint!"

A medley of Irish goodbyes sprung from kitchen, living room, and pool room: Chat to ya, lad! See you, boss! Bye-bye-bye-bye-bye.

Seán split lines of white on a mirrored tray on top of the pool table. Iarla watched him work with dexterity that suggested he had done this plenty of times, smoothly sweeping lines in order like soldiers' rations, then licking the side of his credit card and tonguing his gums as he would a fancy wine. Seán clicked the card against the tray, pointed to the longest line, and told Iarla that that baby was for him.

Iarla never knew Seán to be into drugs at home. Bit of hash every now and again maybe. But it seemed America had changed him a lot in just a few years. He even walked differently now with the gait of a champion boxer and had grown a bushy brown beard. Robbie rolled up a hundred-dollar bill and said Benji-fuckin-Frank, handed it to Seán. Seán said it was High-rollin' baby! He would have never said baby when he was in Ireland. It wasn't a bad thing, Iarla supposed. Seán looked confident and was into the gym now, his arms the size of his legs and his chest took on the shape of a swollen suitcase under his shirt.

Iarla had never snorted a line of cocaine in his life. Staring down at the lines on the tray, it looked so devious. His Ma's face stared back at him in his reflection; she'd murder him if she saw him now. But her face washed away after a moment with the lads, Seán, Big Paulie, and Baz glaring over Iarla's shoulder at the pool table. Big Paulie rubbed his hands together and clapped them over

the table. He looked like he was ready for a steak dinner the way he licked his lips and hunted the lines with his eyes, pointing to one and claiming it as his. Iarla couldn't tell the difference between any of them.

"Hurry up," Baz said, seeming to shift into predator mode now.

"It's not like they were going to grow legs and run away," Iarla said.

"I've still to shine me shoes," Robbie said.

"Fuck your shoes," Big Paulie said.

"Gabiella's going to be there today, and I wanted to be well-oiled and looking me best," Robbie said.

"Gabiella wouldn't touch ye with a forty-foot pole," Baz said.

Seán leaned on Iarla's shoulder and toyed with the lines there on the tray, evening out this one, straightening up that one while he waited for Iarla to Hoover his oblation.

Seán had earned an A in art class for the Leaving Certificate. For his Leaving Cert project, Iarla remembered, Seán went to his aunty Joan's house down the country for a week and painted Eyre Square. Mr. Murphy said his talent was unprecedented and gave him five-hundred euro for it once he graduated and told him that he was going to hang it in his living room above the fireplace. Seán didn't look like he was much into painting anymore, just this: Cutting cocaine and saying baby. This was his art now. His Ma, Mrs. Dempsey, would slaughter him if she could see him. Seán handed Iarla the rolled-up bill and told him to make sure he blew the whole fuckin' thing. It was like his Ma telling him to eat his Brussels sprouts at Christmas dinner. Iarla poked the bill into his nose, and Baz told him not to be bogeying up the bill. Iarla dipped his head like a thrush in a bird bath and sniffed the line, running the end of the bill as straight as he could along the track that Seán had painted for him. He popped his head up again as if his nose was bleeding, sniveling a every couple of

seconds and wiping the tip of his shnoz. Big Paulie, Baz, and Seán licked their fingers and swooped down onto the leftovers like nuns on a priest.

Outside, cars boomed down Monterey and Iarla thought of his bedroom back home in Ireland: If Iarla stayed beyond Easter, his Ma told him, she planned to gut his bedroom, have it redone, and rent it out to the Spanish students in the summer. After a few weeks of complaining about his decision to move, his Ma came around to the idea and eventually seemed to like it, telling Iarla that he could have a good life in America and sure once he get sorted with a Visa, he could be back and forth. He might even bring his Ma over for a little holiday every now and again after doing so much for him over the years: Birthing, babying, and breastfeeding him. Somewhere nice for her and the girls to visit for the Christmases.

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After Seán asked Iarla if he would like to come over to San Francisco—they'd been playing Fifa online against each other—Iarla asked him if he meant like a holiday, a few weeks? Seán told him he should come over for good because there was nothing worthwhile at home anymore. Iarla wondered how much Seán knew about what was at home anymore. It'd been nearly three years since he'd left and still all Seán wanted to talk about was all those fucking eastern Europeans taking jobs and sending money back to their families in their home countries. Seán reckoned that his hard work went much further in America, far away from the Polish.

At the time of his decision to move, Iarla's Ma happened to be having a new conservatory put in by a group of Polish fellas. They had the place done in two weeks like they said they would and even worked around some costs for his Ma because she would fix them soup and sandwiches for their lunch to save them going off for two hours during the day and spending money at the deli. They were all lovely and even swept the floors in the kitchen where they had dragged dirt and clay through each day.

The eastern Europeans (and the Africans moving over), Iarla thought, were more Irish than the Irish themselves. Most of the foreigners in his class in school had spoken better Irish than he had. Black Tommy from the Congo captained the Kildare under-twenty-one gaelic football team and was now on the Lucozade ads on telly. On the first bus in the mornings on his way into DIT, a medley of languages would sing in conversation, over the phone, and even from the bus drivers who hadn't the money or the nerve to go on the strike. Looking at Seán, Robbie, Big Paulie and Baz, dappered-up in dicky bows and linen shirts, genuflecting into a bag of cocaine, they looked like a lot of things, but none of it looked Irish.

Seán's life looked much different in reality than it did on his Facebook—pictures of him at Vineyards, on the beach, and daytrips to Los Angeles. Iarla had imagined him living in an apartment with some other Irish lads, which he was, sure. But he had imagined that they would have all abandoned their homely habits for tidier ones now that they had their own place and paid their way in the world. Seán hadn't grown up at all in America. His life was tethered to a life of drinking and drugging. Iarla almost texted his Ma on his second evening at The Fiddler when he was left alone for twenty minutes and found Seán with a group of people in the bathroom dishing out keys of cocaine in a cubicle that he was ready to come home. Instead he texted: *Cozy little Irish pub here. Owner is a woman from Galway who knows Mrs. Tully from Scoil Íde. Job looks promising here maybe. How're the girls?* He attached a picture of a pint of Guinness and captioned it: *Nothing like The Moore.* She texted back almost immediately: a picture of his sister's bump. *Isn't she huge? Glad to hear all is well, son xx*

Hollywood sprang back through the door and grabbed his keys from the counter. The crisp jingle made Iarla turn his head. His head was sharp now and the hangover was off in the distance.

“Don't bother trying to keep up with the lads,” Hollywood said.

The four of them looked like rabbits, their noses wiggling in some secret language that was foreign to Iarla. His heart boomed under his shirt and he hoped he wouldn't drop dead here in the apartment and disappoint his Ma. Hollywood was off again, saluting Iarla and deriding the boys by the table, now dipping their fingers into the bag. It was all birds, booze, Charlie, and green cards.

On the way to the church, Baz was on about Gabriella again saying her Ma married her Da for a Green Card, so the least she could do is pay it forward. Robbie chose the music from the passenger seat. In the back seat, Seán and Big Paulie told Iarla about single women they knew that would be at the wedding. They said to stay away from Roisín Hayes unless he only wanted his hole because she was Irish herself and wouldn't be any good for a Green Card. Robbie told him that he would meet the rest of the Monterey boys there too. Big Paulie whizzed through traffic and once Iarla decided he hadn't the liathróidí to tell him to slow down and be careful, he sat back in his seat, closed his eyes behind the sunglasses that Seán had loaned him for the day and thought of his mother and sisters, who had texted him that morning to say that they were having the O'Connor's over for a BBQ and that Chloe's baby was the size of a cantaloupe now.

In the car park, Baz pulled out the Ziploc bag again and they all dug their keys in at the same time and looked to Iarla to do the same. But Iarla didn't want to be getting above himself and didn't think his heart had the constitution for any more abuse. Seán closed the bag and tossed it on Iarla's lap and said Ah go on go on go on like Mrs. Fuckin' Doyle. Iarla took up his lonely key to the apartment like a knife. Baz popped the car key out of the ignition—a new-looking Mercedes—and swung it on his finger before pocketing it. Iarla couldn't imagine him driving it at home unless he was a drug dealer. As Iarla dipped his key into the bag, the rest of the lads hopped out to take some photographs, Seán and Robbie sported their usual victorious poses, and left Iarla to himself in the backseat. He heard his Ma again in his ear as he scooped up a small lump of cocaine from the bag.

Fuck it.

Seán was leading the lads around to the front of the church.

In the pub on Sundays after hurling matches, Seán had always been the one to step up on the table and deliver the post-game analysis:

“Pat,” he would say, “You were fantastic out there, like a whip! Bucky, you’re coming along just fine, you just need to learn to keep that head of yours and last more than forty-minutes before getting sent off, but I love the passion. Iarla, you’re the only hope we have of winning a championship this season, so you’ll be on the water after this pint!”

He would raise his pint above his head and cheers to their manager Eddie, who was a bit of a BIFFO but they loved him all the same. Then he made sure to clank his pint glass against everyone’s on the team and even Mockser up at the bar, who never missed a game. He thanked Mockser for keeping the lines straight—as straight as he could anyway—and the nets buckled to the posts. The clangor and clink and clatter of glasses was a warming sound to Iarla. He had been envious of the gusto with which Seán lived his life then and hoped that bravado some would rub off on him in America. But in the backseat of a Mercedes, carefully lifting the key to his nose so as none spilled, Iarla felt as alone as he had felt since moving to America, a sinking sense of shame stirring in his empty pockets.

The wedding was grand. It was at Shakespeare Garden in Golden Gate Park and it looked romantic enough for Romeo, Juliet and Othello combined. The whole affair was something out of an American film, the flower girls prancing down aisle tossing red and white petals—Liverpool colors, Iarla said to Seán. The groom and groomsmen wore red trousers, red waistcoats over white shirts adorned with gold flowers pinned to their chests. Hollywood stood with the groom and other groomsmen, sunnies on the whole time, brazen against the sun. He seemed to be the only one not

sweating through his suit, including the groom, who was perspiring like a bag of ice outside the wrought iron gate, dragging on a cigarette like it was his last. Waiters dressed in silky black shirts and trousers tripped about like swans in the rose gardens with trays of champagne. They must have been sweltering.

A woman with a bundle of bangles clashing on her left wrist approached Iarla and asked him how he knew the happy couple. She kept fixing her hair and the bangles fell down onto her elbow. Seán could see the sweat rising under the cake of make-up on her cheeks and forehead. She sounded American for the most part but the longer she talked, Iarla started to notice the brogue. Roisín. She was good-looking, and she'd have made some GAA player with the shoulders and legs on her. She was grand.

Up at the make-shift altar, sun-kissed men and women sat in rows, a colorful array of shirts and ties and fancily-trimmed shoes. Everyone except the family had to carry their chair down the long walkway to the altar at the sundial, which Iarla thought was a bit lazy of the bride and groom. Everything about the affair felt like a bit of a rush-job.

After the service, Irish people poured out of the lush backdrop. Irish accents boomed around the gardens. Even the priest was half Irish—Father Chuck—Seán had said. Iarla told him that all priests are Irish. People who saw Iarla amongst the Monterey crowd, which seemed to be the biggest contingency there besides the grannies and grandads and aunts and uncles of the bride and groom, introduced themselves to him. Every handshake pounded a warmth into Iarla: Mick O'Toole, nice to meet you; Liz Geraghty; Gram McNamara, I hear you're some hurler, we're always looking for a good half-forward ourselves; Donald Caffery, how are ye settlin' in? A couple of people asked Iarla about work too.

Mick O'Toole, who nearly broke Iarla's hand when he shook it for two whole minutes, didn't let go until Iarla agreed to meet him for a coffee and talk about working some labor on his

new sites in Tenderloin. Iarla hated coffee. Shay Fergusson, upon seeing Mick's attack on Iarla's poor, boney hand, rushed over and told him to steer well-clear of Mick O'Toole because he would cut his paychecks if he made any mistakes like dropping a bag of cement or breaking a shovel handle. Liz Geraghty said her cleaning company only worked with high-rolling celebrities who tipped generously sometimes. She said that Michelle Pfeiffer just handed one of her girls a thousand-dollars one afternoon just for cleaning the inside of the microwave and scrubbing the grit around the bath tub.

The reception was laidback, and there was no seating chart, just rows of picnic benches. Iarla's Ma would be stressed out of her head wondering who she should sit beside. And the food was a self-serve buffet, which Iarla agreed was a much more efficient way of feeding so many people.

The Monterey crowd, which seemed to be growing with lads who had lived there at one point or another, paired-off to the fancy portable bathroom and came back with sunglasses hiding their ballooned pupils from the bride's parents. Baz and Seán fetched a couple of women some drinks from the bar and sparked, what seem to Iarla to be, two separate conversations.

Hollywood announced himself by slapping Iarla's sweat-soaked back and pointing to the group of lads pooling around the buffet. Iarla's veins felt empty and his eyes bulged a little.

"Howya?" he said.

"Howya." Iarla said.

The woman with the bangles was back again asking Iarla if he'd like to have a dance. He told her he wanted to get some grub into him first, but he'd come find her when he fancied a dance.

"Ah howya, Hollywood. You alright?"

"Grand Roisín, yeah, yourself?"

"I'm well, thanks."

Her American accent was back. Then she was off again, headed for the buffet.

“You don’t like her no?” Hollywood said.

“She’s a bit much, isn’t she? The make-up and all the shite on her wrist,” Iarla said.

“Yeah. But she’s grand.”

Iarla examined the material of Hollywood’s groomsman suit.

“Some tin of fruit,” he said.

“Tomo wanted Liverpool colors on us. It’s a bit much.”

Hollywood picked two glasses of champagne from one of the trays on the table, handed one to Iarla, and pinged his glass off of his.

“It’s a bit different from back home isn’t it? The wedding, like?” Hollywood said.

“Hippy shite,” Iarla said. Hollywood laughed at that and explained that the wedding would all be wrapped up in a couple of hours, that American weddings never lasted three days like Irish ones, and that the party would have to continue at The Fiddler. Iarla sipped away at his champagne. He wasn’t hungry, but he wished he was, so he could have something to do and not look like a lump of damp sod standing beside Hollywood—at least if he had a plate in his hand, he could fend off Roisín and her bangles.

Robbie passed by and invited Iarla to the bathroom.

“We’ll be there in a minute, bud.” Hollywood said. Robbie was off. “You don’t strike me as a man for the bag,” he continued when Robbie was out of earshot.

Iarla went scarlet.

“Today was a bit of a first. It’s mad fuckin’ stuff. I thought my heart was goin’ to fall out of my face,” Iarla said.

“There’s no use in getting above himself over here with it. A few of the lads can’t go for a pint without the stuff,” he said.

Donal approached the two them.

“Yous look like wallies standing here under the sun—Where’s Caroline today?” he said.

“She’s showing a house up there in Nob Hill to some couple from Atlanta.”

“Righ’.” Donal introduced himself to Iarla.

“Are ye behaving yourself?” Donal said.

“Doin’ my best.”

“He has a better head on his shoulders than most of the other lads,” Hollywood said. Donal seemed to understand what his nephew meant and cheered to that.

Donal was a tall, slender man with a touch of Eamon deValera about him, nose drooping down onto his mouth and dark blue bags hanging from his eyes. His hair was slicked back like one of the heads from the film *Casino*, but it suited his long skinny head quite well.

There was a mad mix of people bopping around the reception, the Moore, the bog, and the Americans. It was like Croke Park on Bloody Sunday with all the accents flinging about. Iarla thanked Donal for having him in the apartment and asked him where all the Irish lads came from and how they ended up in the Monterey apartment. He explained that

“I bought the Monterey place about thirty years ago when I was his age, in the eighties,” he poked an elbow into Hollywood’s side. “I came over to work construction with Mick O’Toole over there,” he pointed to Mick who was dancing around the perimeter of the dance platform like a donkey (the father-daughter dance was in motion and Mick boogied on the train of the bride’s dress, causing her to jerk back and nearly fall). “More and more boys started coming over and soon it became a tradition, started looking after one another, helping boys get jobs, find places to play gaelic and hurling and soccer. I wanted to hand it over to Hollywood here soon once he gets his realtor’s licence.”

“That’s class,” Iarla said.

“I think it’s all a bit sad these days though, when the lads just get married and sink into this little Irish bubble. I remember when Irish boys came over to America because there was nothing for them at home and they worked their bollox off on the sites and the railroads, and went up to mass on Sundays. The Irish in America aren’t what they were. Back then, they were the heart of communities, now they’re like leeches, the yanks just haven’t caught on yet,” he said taking on more of a fatherly tone.

Hollywood left to go and deliver his speech and Donal went on asking Iarla questions about his family back and home and if he ever thought about playing softball, that all the hurlers made good softball players. The hitting at least. Iarla told him he didn’t know a thing about softball.

After the speeches and dances, people flocked to the dance platform. Hollywood delivered an inspiring speech about loving and the harmonious relationship between Irish and Americans, quoting JFK and Bono, which earned him an eruption of roars from the Monterey crew. Behind him, the sun hung like a bowl of lemons on a kitchen table smiling down on the whole affair. The breeze ruffled the skirts of women’s dresses and upended the gelled heads of hair on the men. Robbie slunk from the dance platform with a rogue bottle of champagne and a woman whom Iarla assumed was his girlfriend Polly. He had mentioned back at the apartment. They crept behind a cluster of rose bushes to do god knows what.

Seán called Iarla up to dance. He said that he had some chicks up there he wanted Iarla to meet, that one of them said he looked like a young Robbie Ramone in his black suit. Chicks made Iarla think of women in leather jackets, black flag tattoos, and tall leather boots on the backs of motorcycles, not wealthy foals from Pacific Heights. He didn’t think much of his likeness to Robbie Ramone either. Iarla said he couldn’t afford to sweat any more than he already was.

Seán didn’t take no for an answer, he was over at Iarla’s feet, dragging him by the wrist. Iarla had to be careful not to scuff Hollywood’s shoes.

Iarla rubbernecked to Hollywood, who was stood there where they'd been. "Come on, will ye?" Iarla said.

"Wha'?"

"I'm not getting' up there on my own."

Hollywood said something back, but he was out of earshot now and the music was booming.

Iarla followed Seán to the dance platform, shimmying through the crowd of people dancing and taking photos together, trying to protect the shoes. When they got to a cluster of dancers that Seán landed at, Iarla felt mighty awkward. He didn't know how to dance in America, and resorted to his Ma's famous Twist, which caught him a mixture of expressions from the dancers around him. After an embarrassing couple of minutes of twisting and stepping side to side, clacking one heel off the other, Hollywood grabbed Iarla's wrist and led him off the dancefloor and up the walkway to the gate, where the grannies and grandads were making to leave.

The groom, whom Iarla had yet to meet, was kissing his in-laws goodbye into the back of a convertible car, the kind you would never see in Ireland. He ambled up to where Iarla and Hollywood were standing, fanning himself with his hand.

"Jaysis that was some work today, boy, I'm glad he was I didn't have my own family over," he said. He shook Hollywood's hand first then extended one to Iarla.

"Howya," he said. "Tomo Byrne." He had a coarse Dublin accent and a hand like a brick. "Are you the new boy over?" he said still fanning himself and pulling Iarla's arm out of its socket. Iarla couldn't get a word in edgeways. "Have ye any work sorted yet? Whatever ye do, stay away from Liz Geraghty, she'll have ye scrubbing the undersides of toilet seats! And Mick O'Toole." Tomo was pouring sweat, and he reeked of gargle. Pure drunk. "I worked for him for a year and Mick charged me money at the end of a job for breaking a dodgy drill if ye could believe that."

“I haven’t any experience on the laboring sites anyway and wouldn’t be in the humor for that sort of work in this heat, to be honest with ye.”

“Soft, wha?” Hollywood said.

“Get yourself down The Fiddler, bud. Bit of bar work is the only work fit for an Irishman these days. Construction shite isn’t worth a damn anymore because all the Mexicans worked those jobs now and the agencies are cracking down on the paperwork. You’d be the only one speaking English on the bleedin’ site,” he said.

Iarla asked him how he met his wife and where they were off to on their honeymoon. “Sure, I’ve only known her the few months. But love is love, brother what?” he said.

Iarla didn’t know.

Tomo waved goodbye to a few more in-laws. He said that it had been donkey’s years since he had been home, and that it will be a serious session down pub once he gets there. He told Iarla to get himself sorted with a bird sooner rather than later if he had any interest in staying. Then he turned to the last of elderly in-laws who were leaving the wedding, waved goodbye into the rear windshield. Then he told Iarla and Hollywood that he had to go shag the missus before he got too flustered, that he promised her one in the back of the wedding car before they leave for Cabo. He was off.

Hollywood pointed to some hills off in the distance.

“Twin Peaks. Best view in the city up there,” he said.

“Let’s go,” Iarla said. Big Paulie had a woman (his missus maybe?) on his shoulders and Seán was still dancing desperately with the woman he had been hounding at the bar—the lads had gone astray from the dancefloor and buffet table, all now swooning over women at the cocktail tables. Baz chatted with a woman next to the leftover bones of the wedding cake and Robbie was up pestering the DJ.

“Righ’,” Hollywood said. “Come on. You’re drivin’.”

They waved goodbye to Donal. If anyone could find him a bit of work, it would be Donal. He seemed to know everyone at the wedding and people seemed as interested in talking to him as they did in wishing the bride and groom the best of luck.

#

Iarla felt like a bit of an eejit looking over San Francisco, staring down Hollywood’s finger along Market Street, into Oakland in the distance, and at the Golden Gate Bridge glimmering between the sinking ginger sky; in the few days he had been in the city, he had spent most of them drinking in The Fiddler and lying on his mattress, nursing a hangover, then beginning the long trek back to Fisherman’s Wharf to do it all again. From up there, the whole city made sense, the gridded streets and the landmarks, plain as cake under the failing sun. On the winding drive up, Hollywood played The Sheepdogs’ new album.

“It’s like they forgot to make their music in the eighties,” Hollywood said. Iarla felt like he understood that.

It was mad driving on the other side of the road, but the automatic was handy enough.

Up there, the two of them sat against the guardrail, the whole of America at their backs. Hollywood pointed out the Pier 39, Fisherman’s Wharf, and Alcatraz.

“What do ye think of Tomo?” Hollywood said.

“Bit of a chancer, but sound enough,” Iarla said.

Tomo’s a cute hoor but that I’ve known him my whole life, he’s the soundest man in America when he’s not langered. He deserves a good little life over here; a couple skrogs and a gaf and he’ll be set up somethin’ tidy with Lydia.”

Iarla wanted to ask Hollywood about his fiancée, how they met, if he was nervous about the wedding, and all those sorts of questions, but he had been in San Francisco for five days now and all

the lads seemed to want to talk about was women, weddings, green cards, and cocaine. He imagined he met her somewhere fancy and that they suited each other well and would have handsome American children, who wore yellows and pinks and had square shoulders and combed-over haircuts and would play water-polo or lacrosse (which were the American equivalents to rugby and hockey in Ireland).

Hollywood slouched against Iarla and seemed to retreat to silence, gazing out at the bay in the distance. Iarla felt the warmth of Hollywood's breath against his ear and matched his breaths with his like a waltz. Hollywood's shoulders pressed a little against Iarla's when he inhaled and dropped away when he exhaled. Their breaths danced like that for quite a while, before Iarla dropped his head against Hollywood's shoulder, looking down at the shoes Hollywood had loaned him. Iarla looked out again, the bridge tinkling milky red above the water. It made him think of Ireland, and of how green it looked from the airplane as he'd left Dublin airport, how cozy the farms and meadows looked under the velvety dew. The cocaine and champagne from earlier resurged in his head and life felt lighter up on the hills than it had at the wedding.

It would have been Sunday dinner a few hours ago in Ireland and he imagined his Ma doing the washing up while the girls were watching Eastenders in the front room. What would his Ma have thought to today? Hasty, drug-fueled matrimony? She would pass the baton to Father Paul no doubt and say that it wasn't her job to decide anything in the name of the lord. Iarla pulled out his phone to take a photo of the sun, pouring, weeping into the waves, out onto the horizon for all the lonely Irish immigrants in the city. He would post it later across his social media pages and his Ma and his sisters would know he was doing ok; his friends would be jealous of how surreal the San Francisco sunset looked from up here, and strangers who saw it would imagine he lived his life a particular way that was above how Irish people did in Ireland. Iarla knew that wasn't true, but he liked the idea that people back home might think that. Hollywood slunk his fingers around Iarla's hand and gripped it

tight for a moment before just resting it there, sweating. Iarla felt his own breath pick up through his shoulders a little. He had nowhere to be, he thought to himself, and was content with the idea of sitting with Hollywood as long as this moment lasted. He let his fingers open to Hollywood's and after a couple of minutes, he felt a bead of sweat fall into the gap between their hands. Perhaps this was all that freedom meant in America: Sitting on top of a hill, silent as a grave, a whole city under your nose, empty pockets threaded with secrets and cocaine, and having nowhere to be on a Sunday evening.

Chapter 3 - The Deli

Frank painted houses. He knew about a recession before any of those snobby pricks in the Dáil because the first thing that people stopped doing when the money slackened was paint their houses. His usual customers, whom he'd check on every five or six years, would tell him that things were a little tight and that if they could survive another few years they would.

“Sure, all the other houses are in bits in the cul-de-sac, so who's going to notice?” They'd begun to say.

When they sat down to dinner, Irene was onto him again about the mortgage and the payments on that “fucking van” as she called it. She said she needed him to find a bit of work soon or they wouldn't be going away on a holiday in the summer, and after the year she'd had in the school, she needed a break.

Frank couldn't sleep. The stress of it all, the mortgage, the van, Irene on his back about collecting up the money from customers that had, as she called it: *outstanding bills*. Some nights he'd stare up at the popcorn ceiling for hours until he was exhausted enough to nod off. He'd sleep during the day sometimes when Mockser came over with a DVD.

When Frank pointed to the flecking gable wall where the lovely *Spring Marmalade* yellow he had painted nearly four years ago had turned black, Mrs. Donovan said she just couldn't swing it and that she was very sorry. She invited him in for a cuppa tea anyway and a few of those Mr. Kipling cherry tarts. *Lovely*. Her sons battered the gable wall with a hurley and slíothár while she poured the tea. Mrs. Donovan was Frank's favorite customer because she paid him well and on time and made him supper at the end of his day. And Irene didn't worry about her trying to ride Frank because she had been a nun, teaching down in Mount Sackville—Irene worried about the owl ones offering themselves out instead of paying. Was she mad? Frank loved it when his customers fixed him a little

ham and cheese sandwich or in the least made him a cuppa strong tea with plenty of sugar. He only had to put up with Mrs. Donovan and the likes running their boney fingers into his big beard—*that's some beard ye have on ye there, Frankie. What are ye hidin'?*

“What’ll we do, love?” Irene said. She muted the telly because the ads were on—she couldn’t stand the ads.

“Ah, a bit of work will turn up,” Frank said. He lurried a heap of Sheppard’s Pie into his mouth—Irene was a pain in the arse, but she was some cook. The teachers went mad for her chicken korma when it was her turn on the potluck. She’d just started in her new role as principal at the beginning of the school year, which meant that they had a few extra bob coming in to tide them over. She wanted her holiday though and she’d loaned her sister in England a few hundred euro for her university fees—she was going to become a nurse at fifty, fair play to her, but the money was dust as far as Irene was concerned.

“Have ye looked at anything else? Other avenues like?”

Avenues.

“I haven’t. Now will ye go ‘way while I’m trying to eat me dinner.”

He had thought he had some hope of work with the banks and the pubs—they were big jobs and he could get Mockser a bit of work with him too, mixing the paint, cleaning the brushes, and holding the ladder. But the banks had been putting in marble walls and wood paneling in the offices—it was no wonder the country was in a recession. And the pubs were so busy with all the unemployment that they didn’t have time to be closing just to get a lick of paint on the walls. No one gave a fiddler’s fuck about the look of the place.

“Everyone is looking at the holes in their shoes, not the paint on the walls, Frank,” John Moore had said.

Some of his customers had started doing their own painting which was always shite because you can't just be up there strokin' away—this wasn't the bleedin' Karate Kid. Others decided to keep their windows clean instead, which ended up costing them more in the long run. Mockser reckoned it distracted neighbors and in-laws from the sun-washed walls of their houses and the paint chippings on their window sills. Charlie Duncan, the window washer, the dopey prick, and his son, Charlie Jr., who had just as baldy a head as his Da, drove around in a black Mercedes Sprinter with a big cartoon of a dopey-looking discjockey on the side and big red writing: *CD's Window Cleaning*, and their home phone number on the back window below a *Best in the Business* vinyl. *Says who?* Charlie Jr. knocked on doors with his cap in his hands like Oliver fuckin' Twist and before you knew it, Charlie Sr. was parking the Mercedes in the driveway, digging his ladder into your grass, and ashing his cigarettes into your flowerbeds. He'd be shouting in the first window he cleaned:

“You wouldn't fetch us a cuppa there, love, would ye?”

Irene changed into her pajamas and closing the curtains. Frank prepared for another sleepless night—he'd borrowed a book from the library: the new Dan Brown one that Irene said all the teachers were raving about in the staff room.

“Will ye look at that fuckin' water feature there in Mags O'Brien's garden. And she still owes us money from last year. Could ye believe that, love?”

“Her husband just died a couple of months ago, maybe she's lookin' for somethin' to fill the hole, I dunno.”

“You should march on over there in the mornin', love, and tell her to cough it up and if she tries anythin' on with ye, tell her to pack up that fuckin' water feature and bring it back to Woodies for a refund.”

“Ah, I can't be hasslin' a widow for a few euro.”

“She’s probably swimmin’ in insurance money.”

Irene walked around to Frank’s side of the bed and pulled out his journal—he kept notes about customers in there: what brand and color of paint he’d used, how much he’d charged (so he could add to it next time and say isn’t it terrible how dear paint has gotten—that was Irene’s idea), whether or not they’d served him a cuppa tea, or a cuppa tea and a sandwich; or in Mrs. Donovan’s case, served him a whole fuckin’ dinner and a scoop of Ben & Jerry’s and all—that was Frank’s idea. He also wrote down if the son or daughter was smoking the hash out the window and had offered him a few puffs to keep his mouth shut, fine by him; if he suspected the wife was having an affair behind the curtains in the bedroom—he swore he heard Mockser in Betty O’Malley’s one day panting away and saying *You’ll ride me to death, Betty! Will ye take it easy?* Betty worked in the Paddy Power and Mockser was always trying it on with her. When he asked him about it down The Moore, Mockser said it hadn’t been him but he wished it had. Whoever it was, Frank said, better hope that her husband, Sgt. O’Malley, didn’t find out. With the jobs on the Council houses, which were great because you were paid the money up front, he noted if there were boyfriends/fathers living there who weren’t supposed to be; not that he’d rat them out—that was Irene’s idea.

One evening a few months back, Frank came back and told Irene about Mary Fay there behind the curtains with some youngfella, moaning for her sins, the dirty thing. Irene said that that was just perfect, and if she didn’t pay up by the end of the month, all the teachers would be hearing about her escapades in the staffroom.

“Ah no, I couldn’t be doin’ tha’, sure she’s a single woman, she’s every righ’ to be riding her summers away behind the curtains,” Frank said.

Irene looked disappointed when he handed her a check from Mary Fay at the end of the month and asked her to bring it to the bank on the way down to the school in the morning.

#

It was Valentine's Day and Frank was fixing a few Denny's sausages and a rasher sandwich for Irene. He even threw a few slices of white pudding on there for the day that was in it. Irene poured herself a coffee from the Keurig and sat down.

"Have you knocked around to the Jennings' recently? There's paint practically peeling away on their house," Irene said.

"What were you doing over at the Jennings'?" Frank said.

"I took me walk over there to scope out a few of the houses."

"Ah, love, that Nigerian fella paints all the houses on that road, I couldn't be at that lark. He's nice enough."

"Is there no ketchup?" Irene said.

Frank took the bottle of Heinz from the cupboard, gave it a good shake, and handed it to her.

"There y'are."

He poured himself a cuppa tea and looked down at the table. Irene was tucking into a rasher sandwich; her mouth dripping with red sauce. He was proud of his efforts with the breakfast.

"What about the GAA club, would there be any work up there? Painting the goal posts or something?"

"Ah I don't know. Will ye just leave it—please—for one fuckin' mornin'," Frank said.

"I'm only tryin' to help us, love. But no worries—" She took the rest of her sandwich between her teeth. She looked rabid with the ketchup oozing from her lips. "You go ahead and sit on your hole all day watchin' films with Mockser until someone comes knockin' on the door with a bit of work. Ride each other for all I give a shite." She snatched her purse and schoolbag from under the kitchen table and swung the back door open. "And you can tell Mockser to bring his own

fuckin' cans if he wants to be drinkin' instead of drinkin' all ours from the fuckin' fridge." She slammed the door shut and she was off.

Happy fuckin' Valentine's Day.

#

Mockser came over at ten o'clock with a breakfast roll, a can of Coke, and a *Racing Post* stuffed into his arse pocket.

"Get a plate, will ye?" Frank said. "You're dropping crumbs fuckin' everywhere. Irene'll have a fuckin' fit."

They closed the curtains to take the glare off the telly and watched *The Fugitive*.

"Your man Tommy Lee Jones brilliant, isn't he?" Mockser said. "What else is he in?"

"Loads."

"I know tha' but which ones?"

"Just loads, I dunno. Google it."

The postman came by halfway into the film and had left a heap of letters and bills—Mockser had fallen asleep. One was the mortgage. *Fuck.*

After Mockser left to go back to the Paddy Power, Frank cleaned the kitchen—it was his job to do the cleaning of the kitchen and the bathroom before Irene got home. She wouldn't go near the toilet if she knew Mockser had dropped the dogs off there that morning. He noted a couple of spots on the ceiling in the kitchen that needed a lick of paint—he'd get to them over the weekend. Irene would like that. Franks plonked himself back down on the couch and turned on Sky One. *The Simpsons* was on and Frank had a right little chuckle to himself: it was the one where the Shelbyville fuckers rob the lemon tree.

He dozed off after a bit.

#

He woke to the sound of the door slamming and he remembered the mood Irene left in that morning. He sat up and fixed the cushions, so Irene wouldn't know he'd been sleeping—she hated when she came home to find him there on the couch.

“Ah yeh,” She'd say. “you earned that little cat nap today, and if ye think I'm layin' on me back for ye tonigh' you can fuck off and wait till your fiftieth in April.” Then she'd point to the dirty dishes and crumbs on the floor and say “And do something about that there will ye?”

Mockser.

She burst into the sitting room and Frank braced himself for round two. She had a big Toblerone bar in her hand and a grin in her mouth.

“Jaysis, what's after happenin'?” Frank said. “Did we win the lotto?”

“No, ye clown.”

She paused. For some dramatic effect of something.

“I got you a job,” she chirped.

Frank muted the telly—the ads were on—and shook the last bit of sleep out of his head.

“Ye did wha'?” Frank said.

“I got you a job! It's not paintin' but. And you'll have to—”

“Where is it? Doin' wha'?” Frank had stood up and switched the telly off completely.

“Down there at the Tesco. I filled out your application at the office today and gave it to Clare Rogers—she works there herself.”

“The Tesco? Doin' wha'?”

“In the deli.” Irene was beaming, she fuckin' loved this.

“The *fuckin'* deli?”

“Yea! *The fuckin' deli.*”

Frank sat back down where he'd been sleeping on the couch. Irene popped her head back in the door and Frank had expected a bollocking.

"If we won the lotto, do ye think the first thing I'd buy would be a fuckin' Toblerone bar?" Irene had a smile on her face, which always made Frank happy—it was better than the alternative.

"I suppose not."

"You'll be great, love. Just think of the holiday in the summer." Irene was beaming again. "Spain or somewhere, it'll be lovely."

"Righ'."

#

Frank started work in the morning. He and Irene were watching the evening news: Kosovo had declared independence from Serbia. *Fair play to them*. Frank almost never stayed in on a Sunday evening—he would meet Mockser and Martin and the other lads down The Moore. Mr. McNamara would be there with his banjo giving it socks and singing "The Ferryman." It was a fuckin' tradition, but Irene told him that he better stay in and get ready for work in the morning.

"Sure, what's there to get ready for?" he said. She'd nabbed him going out the door.

"Lay out your trousers and shoes, pack up a lunch, and Clare said you'll need to shave." Irene went back to her ironing. "And you can do your own ironing tonigh'." Irene did the ironing, and Frank did the washing, that was their agreement. She was angry.

"*Shave?* I will in me shite shave." Frank combed through his beard with his fingers.

"Clare said it's for the food safety people."

"*Shave?* Like clean?"

"Like a baby." She was beaming again. She loved this. "I bought you a few of those razors from the chemist on the way home today. Can ye believe that they charge more for the women's razors? The only difference is that they're pink! Robbin' bastards."

Frank hadn't shaved since the Christian Brothers. Irene—to be fair to her—had bought him the works: few razors, the foam, and a Nivea aftershave balm. After he was finished, he took a good look in the mirror at his face, patting down the specks of blood leaking from his chin and cheeks. He'd put on too much of the balm and he looked like Mike fuckin' Meyers, bare-faced and greasy. He washed his face using some of Irene's facewash—apricot. It smelled lovely.

Irene laughed her hole off when Frank walked into the sitting room.

“Ah will ye stop,” he said, feeling for where his beard had been.

“Ye look great, love, I'm sorry. It's just—It takes years off ye.”

“Do ye reckon?” Frank was clapping his hand off his bare cheeks now.

“I'll give ye a bit of make-up too for the tan line.”

“What tan line?” Frank was in the hall now wagging his chin in front of the mirror. The lads down the pub, they'd eat him alive.

“Come on, get your ironin', done, love. We've a reservation at eight o'clock and I don't want us to be late,” Irene said. They were going out for dinner to celebrate the start of Frank's new job and Irene loved getting above herself, any excuse to say a word like *reservation*—she'd pick all that lingo up working in the Credit Union years ago. They were going out for fuckin' pizza, not swordfish.

#

Frank felt like a bollix. No one had noticed him at the restaurant last night, thank god, and he hoped that no one would down at the Tesco behind the deli. He and Irene had fought that morning after he told her that he couldn't be there making breakfast rolls for the kids on their lunch hour. Sure, what would her students think of the principal's husband asking if they wanted cheese and lettuce on tha'? They'd be there with big grins under their little noses saying, *Ab Mr. O' Neill, you wouldn't cut that in half for us would ye? Shem O' Shea got held back over lunch by your missus and he's no lunch*

with him. Irene told him that they probably wouldn't even recognize him in the uniform and hairnet. *The hairnet?* Frank hadn't considered the hairnet and he wasn't going to be shaving his head too, he'd look like your man from Breakin' Bad.

"What'll ye be doin'?" Mockser asked. He'd come to walk Frank to work. Sound of him. Irene told him to leave the van at home because Clare had said employees had to park in the farthest away spots. *Bit of exercise there for ye. Won't do any harm,* she'd said.

"Sure, I dunno. We'll see. I tell ye though, I won't be goin' near all those fish with the eyes."

Mockser followed him in the automatic doors, by all the trolleys and some woman giving out free samples of some new turkey sausages from Cork. It was half-nine and his shift didn't start for another half an hour. He'd been told to report to Aidan Heavy—the manager—first so he could show him around and give him one of those blue Tesco polo tops.

Mockser was digging around in the five-euro DVD basket. Frank's phone buzzed in his pocket. A text from Irene: *Good luck, luv. Proud of ye. xxx.*

Aidan Heavy—Frank knew his face from the big poster of the smiley prick as you walk through the doors—had a fat arse on him. When he paraded up and down the aisles telling the youngones and youngfellas not to stock the Mighty Munch beside the Skips and to move the foreign-sounding brands to the bottom of the shelves, he waddled, kicking his shiny black shoes out at forty-five-degree angles. He—Aidan—was standing by the customer service desk talking to some youngone. She was no older than seventeen. *Greasy prick.* The paint on the walls by the desk was filthy from kids kicking their feet against it while they waited for their money from the change machine. Frank had a bucket of change at home that he needed to bring in himself—the ten-percent charge was worth not having to handle all those dirty coins. Irene would have a fit though. Frank used to tell the lads in the pub, when they were first married that Irene would peel an orange in her pocket and you wouldn't even see her eating it.

Frank had a gander up a few more aisles—it was twenty to ten and he didn't want to seem too keen.

“You're who?” Aidan spat out. *Customer service, my arse!*

Frank explained who he was, and Aidan said to come find him at ten when his shift started because he was busy at the moment. Busy with his hand in his pocket, the creep.

Mockser had bought a stack of DVDs and was walking toward Frank, who was waiting by the automatic doors, which caused them to have a fit, opening a bit and closing a bit and opening again. Aidan Heavy waved his hand from the customer service desk to tell Frank to move out of the way of the doors, then went back to harassing the youngone. She must have gotten no work done with him around. Mockser pulled out DVDs one by one.

“Look at that, *Casino* for a fiver. And *Life of Pi*! Have you seen that one? It's mad.”

“Come on, let's go,” Frank said, stepping into the range of the motion sensor again to open the door.

“Where we goin'? Ye didn't quit already did ye? I've a bet on with John Moore—he reckons you won't last a week. I'll give you half if ye—”

“I've to come back at ten.”

“Righ'. Good.”

They headed out and across the car park to the Paddy Power—Mockser said he'd gotten a tip for the nine-fifty-five at The Curragh. Frank threw twenty-euro down on Mockser's tip—Mockser always had a winner in him. He recognized a few students from Irene's school in the Paddy Power drinking the free coffee and putting a euro down on the virtual roulette. They put their heads down when they saw him. *Fuck*. They'd seen him—he swore to Irene he was off the gambling after the St. Stephen's Day losses two years ago; he'd nearly had to sell the van. And everyone in town had heard about it. But he'd seen them too, and they'd both be fucked if either party mentioned it to

Irene. He nodded at them as they left, change rattling in their trouser pockets and their ties hanging out of their schoolbags.

The deli was a zoo. Slabs of frozen fish poised to look alive on beds of crushed-ice, chicken fillets wrapped in rashers, and they even had ostrich steaks. They'd be selling dogs next. Frank dug a finger into one of the fish's eyes. A voice squeaked from behind a shaggy head of red hair bunched under a thick black hairnet—it was one of the Dennehy sisters: "Don't touch the fish, sir." *Sir*—he wouldn't be calling anyone sir. He wanted to walk out of the fuckin' place. Little toerags telling him off. He was old enough to be their Da. Mockser was still in toe, eating a bag of King crisps that he said he would pay for on the way out. *Some chance*. Aidan Heavy was still "busy" up at the customer service desk, but it was nine-fifty-nine on Frank's Casio, so he headed back over to try Heavy again.

"Howya," Frank said. He tried on a smile—Irene had told him that he couldn't be sulking around with a gob on him behind the deli. Aidan must have only been about twenty-four, but he had a barrel for a belly and his hair was slicked back like a duck's arse. He'd sweaty, purple bags under his eyes and he talked out the corner of his arse-shaped mouth.

"*Hony*," Heavy mimicked back—Frank would call him *Heavy* he decided then and there. "This isn't fuckin' Meath Street Markets."

"It's hardly Donnybrook Fair either," Frank said. The youngone behind the desk let out a laugh. Heavy was sweating.

"Frank O'Neill, isn't it?"

"'Tis."

Aidan looked down at Frank's lower half.

"You'll have to come back tomorrow," Heavy said.

"Wha'? Why? Ah here, I was only havin' a laugh with ye."

“I can’t have ye wearin’ jeans to work; it’s not part of the uniform.”

Frank was going scarlet.

“Well no one fuckin’—I mean, no one told me.”

“Well next time you’re lookin’ for a job, you’ll come in yourself instead of sendin’ your wife. Come back tomorrow wearing a pair of black or navy trousers—I don’t like to be too picky—and I’ll have someone train you up in the deli.”

“Righ’,” Frank said.

“Or don’t,” Heavy added.

The youngone behind the desk was still listening. Frank felt his face going pure scarlet now and rage was bubbling on his tongue—he wanted to tell that Heavy prick to go fuck himself into next week. *Trained up*. Sure, there was nothin’ to it: slappin’ a lick of butter in the roll and stuffing it with sausages and rashers and puddin’ and maybe an egg on Sunday if you were feeling fancy. He wanted to tell Heavy that he was a fat prick and to leave the poor youngone alone and let her work. But avoiding the argument was something being married to Irene had taught him well. So, he said *Thanks boss, I’ll see ye in the mornin’*.

Mockser’s horse would still be running at The Curragh and he could catch it if he left now. He headed toward the automatic doors and Heavy called after him to take Mockser with him—his head was back in the DVD basket.

Sister Miriam was leaping up and down when they walked into the Paddy Power—Mockser always tipped of the Sisters on the horses. He called it his penance. *Go on ye Daisy*, she roared, waving her betting slip above her habit. Mockser ran up to the youngone behind the glass to collect his winnings. He’d only ever bet a euro or two on a horse. For him, it wasn’t about the money. Frank slipped by the crowd of punters—youngfellas in their school uniforms and older lads in those

construction kacks with the built-in tool belts and the flappy pockets. They ripped up their slips and tossed them in the air like leaves. Betty O' Malley told them she'd pull the coffee machine if they started that lark.

Frank pushed the betting slip under the glass and Betty handed him back a hundred-and-forty-euro. *Minted.*

"How's the hubby, Betty?" Frank asked.

"Sure, how would I know? I never see him."

"Come here, ye won't say anything to Irene will ye? About the gambling?. She'll have a fit."

"Yer grand," she said. Then she blew a little kiss to Mockser, who was counting the coins in his little purse. *Dirty jezebel.*

The boys in the uniforms picked up the shredded slips while the construction lads, and a few ladies to be fair, dressed in the same gear with Hi-Viz vests on, flocked to the coffee machine.

"Do ye fancy a pint?" Mockser said.

"Go on," Frank said.

"I'd love a breakfast roll."

"We can't go back to Tesco."

"*You* can't—well ye *can*—"

"But I *won't*."

"Give us a tenner there and I'll run in."

"Righ'."

"Righ'."

Mockser came back with two rolls, packed tight in a layer of *Tesco* paper and another of cling film.

It was Frank's last pint of freedom. Once the lads at The Moore found out he was working the deli tomorrow, they'd be worse than the kids, saying, *Jaysis, Franko the hair net suits ye*, and asking for extra sausages, the greedy pricks. They joined Mr. McNamara for a game of the darts.

Peo Brangan was in the corner with Buffalo—the English fella—wolfing down a carvery lunch.

“The odd couple wha’,” Mockser said.

Frank skulled his pint.

“Irene wants her holiday to Spain again. And I've no money for it,” he said.

“Why Spain?” Mockser said.

“The bit of sun, the bit of beach. Ye know yourself.”

“Isn't Irene a working woman herself and doing fair well? She only wants to spend the bit of time with you, so don't be doling out the life savings on a fuckin' holiday. Sure, Spain is full of too many Irish heads, it may as well be Kilkenny. God, I'd have to sell one of me bollocks to go to Spain.”

#

He spent his first week in the deli shadowing Buddy O'Brien, Mags' son. It had been Heavy's idea, the prick. Buddy was sound though and high as a kite, it was a wonder he hadn't lost a finger to the big knives yet. On his lunch breaks, he'd sprinkle a bit of hash onto the tobacco in his roly and shared a few puffs with Frank, fair play to him. Mockser would pop around the back with them and drink a can of Fosters, then go off to cut the grass up the GAA club. Some days, he hung around the deli, chatting to Frank until Heavy told him to get the fuck and that he needed to pay for that bag of crisps.

Buddy showed Frank how to work the weighing scales and how to print the labels off. He taught him how to roll the meat and fish properly because Heavy was a particular prick about that.

The sausages had to be cut in half before going into the rolls, so customers wouldn't burn their tongues and sue the shop, and the garlic mayo had to be spread on first, not dolloped on at the end, because that would be messy. If he cut the breaded chicken fillets at an angle, he could take up more space in the rolls, which meant he saved on chicken, which was a good thing in Heavy's books. And always wear fuckin' gloves when you're handling anything food related, even just picking up a knife or replacing a tub of butter.

Irene was proud of him, and she even offered to start doing his ironing again after Frank handed her his first check to lodge in the bank on her way down to the school in the morning. She bought him a new journal and told him that maybe he wanted to take notes like he did with the painting.

"You could write a fuckin' book," she said.

She could be thoughtful like that sometimes and it were those moments that made Frank think of when he'd first met her, working at the Credit Union. He was looking for a loan to buy the van. At the time, she'd told him it was a terrible investment because they were coming out with new Transit models every six months, so it would depreciate quickly, but it was the eighties and they were handing out loans like free samples of turkey sausage. Frank bought her a bouquet of flowers on their first date and she nearly cried, bless her. She'd only gone a bit sour after she discovered Frank couldn't have kids because he didn't produce any decent swimmers, the doctor had explained. It was the pressure from her Ma and aunties that got to her, Frank thought. He couldn't blame her. She was grand though. Things were grand. Their marriage was grand besides the bit of arguing here and there about the dirty dishes and the unemployment. But that was all sorted now that Frank had the job at the deli; Irene was off his back and had planned a weekend for them for Frank's fiftieth in April in Kilkenny. It was grand. Everything was Grand.

#

Every shift in Tesco became exactly like every other shift in Tesco. Frank served breakfast sandwiches and chicken fillet rolls and steak and kidney pies and mushy potato wedges soured in enough garlic mayonnaise to feed an altar boy. Heavy hated his job, he was a miserable prick. And he made employees who hated theirs hate them even more. So, Frank tried to torment him and get small wins for the deli workers—Buddy, Clare, Ade, the Dennehy sisters, and other friends he had in work—he'd lay the fish out (he'd gotten better about the fish) like they were kissin' or ploughin' each other, then he'd blame it on the schoolkids when Heavy came and asked what the fuck the salmon was doin' ridin' the trout? He'd gotten friendly with the two lads who worked in the back who were allowed to wear tracksuit bottoms and Liverpool jerseys to work—Marcus and Ope. They were sound enough and would put him onto new music and films, that he'd put Mockser onto.

Frank was Macaulay Culkin in *Home Alone*, setting traps and watching them go off—moving the flowers into the range of the automatic door sensor so that it opened when the ceiling fans rustled them; spraying the mist on Heavy in the vegetable aisle when he was doing his rounds, complaining about the kids who stocked the bread. The second hour was always the longest for some reason. Frank spent most of his shift looking forward to lunch break where he had gone on to become the darts champ of Tesco—he'd started a bracket and was delighted when Ope beat Heavy one Friday evening—they all went a bit mad on the drink down The Moore that night.

The shifts on Sundays were the handiest. Tuesdays the longest, Saturdays and Fridays the happiest, and Thursdays the messiest with all the transition year students on their half day. Charlie Sr. would be there on some mornings, cleaning the windows, and saying, *Ab bonya, Frank? Is there no work about no?* Dopey prick. Wednesdays and Mondays were his days off, which he was glad of because Heavy was always in a foul mood on a Monday after the drinkin' on a Sunday. Mockser hung around at the end of Frank's shifts and had a tip for the horses and a DVD for them to watch back at Frank's before Irene got home from the school. He always packed a heap of sausages and

rashers into a roll for Mockser and lathered it in tomato sauce, so that it would drip on the floor and Heavy would have a fit. Mockser thanked him for that and marched up and down the line of schoolkids, asking them if there were any new bands around the school because he had a man in America and had they ever heard of *Moore's Morning Drunks*?

Frank always brought home a big fish on a Friday—salmon or something nice—and Irene loved that. He didn't enjoy his time in the deli at first, he preferred to be in the stock room and away from the action and bustle of the shop floor, where Heavy watched him constantly. Each department had a designated *lifer* who wore the badge with honor and pride on their little nametag—they'd sworn their lives to the place for a regular salary and a bit of health insurance. Ade—the Nigerian lad, fair play to him—was the *lifer* in the deli, but he loved the bit of craic and never grassed on Frank or Buddy for acting the bolix. Ade's shifts were full of motivation and contentedness. Frank's shifts were the equivalent of Jesus walking in the desert for forty days and forty nights and his feet would be killing him by the time he got home. He'd be bollixed at the end of the day, but he was sleeping a bit better now—like he'd been when he was busy painting houses—so he was happy enough about that.

The school rush was nuts. Frank had to keep track of which of the kids were skipping the line, which wrapped down Aisle 1—bread and biscuits. Heavy marched up and down making sure no one was robbing anything or leaning on the shelves. He threatened to call the police one day when he caught Shem O'Shea opening a packet of Chocolate Digestives while he waited in line.

Frank learned most of their names and they seemed to like him, saying, *Ab bonya Mr. O'Neill, are ye comin' to our hurlin' match this weekend? and did your missus tell you about the cow in the upstairs of the old building? That was us, but you won't say anythin' won't ye not? You're sound Mr. O'Neill.* He asked them about their studying and told them that the mock exams didn't count for anything as long as they delivered on the real thing, but not to tell Irene he'd said that, she'd have a fit.

#

Kilkenny had been a blast. Irene was in flyin' form, sippin' on cocktails by the river and ordering mad Italian dishes from the restaurants in that accent she'd picked up in the Credit Union. She told Frank to go on and have another pint when the barman rang the bell for last call, and she held his hand walking around Kilkenny Castle. The sun had been beaming all weekend. They may as well have been in Costa del Sol. Irene's sunglasses were glued to her face all weekend, she loved it. They did some ridin' in that big king bed too, and Irene was happy to have a break from the school and the ironing for the long weekend. On the last night, she said she was delighted with him for sticking out the job at the deli. She knew it had been hard on him, but she said they'd finally paid off the fuckin' mortgage by the end of next year. They were laughing.

#

Some of the kids—the boys mostly; the girls had more sense—robbed their lunch; Frank saw them slipping them into their bags when Heavy wasn't looking. Most were little toerags for robbin' them because they would spend their lunch money on Mars bars and Mighty Munch so Heavy wouldn't suspect them. One day, though, Heavy caught little Gary Doyle shoving a chicken fillet roll into his bag by the biscuits. He'd suspected some of the robbin' because the sales were down, and he knew the angles on the chicken-fillet-cutting couldn't amount to that much of a shortage, but the line was long out the door during the lunch hour—he read the account books like the Bible and had started using one of those clickers to count the kids coming in over lunch. Heavy was phoning the police and scaring the shite out of the poor bastard. Gary Doyle was only a youngfella and his Da was a bit of a prick, but he was only quiet, god bless him. Frank knew that Gary robbed the odd roll, but he paid when he could and never went up there buying other shite like the other lads. He hadn't any money for a lunch, Frank suspected. Frank knew. His oul lad was an alcoholic and his Ma was brown bread.

Seeing the commotion out the window beyond Charlie Sr. lathering up the windows in soap, Heavy was holding Gary by the arm. Frank grabbed him out of Heavy's fist and stood him next to his hip. A siren boomed from down the road. *Jesus Christ*, Frank said to himself.

"What do ye think you're doin'?" Frank said. He eyed Heavy now like a dog takin' a shite.

"What am *I* doin'? He's after stealin'."

Gary went to say something, and Frank put his hand over his little mouth. Gary wouldn't do himself any favors with a mouth like his.

"I told him he could have it, that was going to pay for it at the end of me shift," Frank said.

"You wha'?" Heavy was pure confused.

"The poor fucker told me he hadn't any money for his lunch."

"Sure, he's probably been stealin' for weeks now." Heavy was red in the nose again, glaring down at Gary. "The books—"

"Fuck your books. If ye spent as much time watching the lines of kids walkin' out with rolls in their hands as ye do harassin' the poor youngones behind the tills ye might catch someone proper."

Frank pulled a heap of change out of his pocket and said "There y'are, it's all there, now will ye let him get back to school or he'll be in more trouble." The squad car pulled into the car park and Heavy told Frank to get rid of them. Heavy was pure scarlet now, he was sweating under his eyes again.

Frank told Gary that robbin' was wrong, because if ye get caught, you're fucked, and that if he ever needed a roll for lunch and didn't have money to just let him know and he'd give him a few euro then he could look Heavy—the prick—in the eye on his way out and flash the receipt at him. Gary said thanks very much and that he was sound enough for an oul lad. Cheeky bastard.

When he got home that evening, Frank told Irene what had happened with Gary Doyle and about Heavy calling the police on him, and she said that it was no surprise: his poor grades were miserable, and she'd been calling home to his Da but there's been no response. It was fierce sad that boys like Gary Doyle whose Da didn't give a shite about his education and worse didn't even give him a few bob for his lunch.

"You were very good to do what ye did, love," Irene said.

"Imagine that was one of our kids," Frank said.

"Imagine."

Million Dollar Baby was on the telly. Irene loved that one. When they first went to see it at the Vue in Liffey Valley, she was out of her seat throwing digs at the air whenever there was a scrap on screamin' *Go on, love, batter her!* They were nearly fucked out of the cinema for that.

Irene was doing the ironing—there was a heap of it to be done after the Kilkenny trip. The opening scene was playing, and Hillary Swank was walking out into the arena to see the end of the scrap, your man coming back from the battering he'd taken. She was practically beaming, she almost burnt Frank's Liverpool jersey, leaving the iron on it for too long. She knew Frank didn't like the boxing films—he'd been a boxer as a boy, was headed toward the Olympics at one stage, his Ma told Irene when she'd first come over for a cuppa tea. Frank had given up talking about boxing. He'd spent years telling stories about his time in the ring, how good he could have been. Every story he told hammered the reality that he'd failed as a boxer.

"Sure, no one makes it to the Olympics," Mockser had said once down The Moore.

He knew she knew he didn't like reliving the hurt from that, watching films about boxing where things always worked out rosy.

"You can turn it to somethin' else, love, if ye want," she said.

"Ah no, sure you like this one, don't ye?"

“It’s rivetin’! The endin’ is a bit mad, but sure I’d ask you to do the same if I was Maggie.”

“Would ye?”

“I would.”

Irene got back to the ironing. The heap of clothes didn’t seem to be getting any smaller on the end of the board.

“Come on down to the couch, will ye? Ye can’t be doin’ the ironing durin’ your favorite film. Sure, I’ll do it in the morning before work.”

“You’re workin’ again tomorrow? But it’s Wednesday.”

“I’m pickin’ up a shift for Ope in the back. He’s gone over to America for Tomo Byrne’s wedding. He’s marrying some rich Californian youngone, fair play to him.”

“I bet she’s a babe.”

Irene unplugged the iron and plonked herself down beside Frank. She was nice and warm there beside him and she smelled lovely too.

“You’re some cracker, you know tha?” Frank said. He laid a big kiss on her cheek.

“Jaysis, what’s after gettin’ into you,” she said, a big grin growing on her face.

Frank went in again, for her lips this time and she opened hers to kiss him back.

There they were, rollin’ around on the sofa like a couple of pigs, mauling each other with their mouths and grab arsin’ wherever they could reach. She was lovely and soft on top of him and he had the bit of excitement himself. And didn’t she smell lovely. They’d get their holiday in in June or July, before it got too hot. He’d book something next week and surprise Irene with it for her birthday in May.

The two of them—Frank and Irene—woke up on the sofa in the early hours of the morning. Irene had a blanket wrapped around her shoulders and was standing over Frank like Death herself.

“Come on, love, come up to bed, will ye?” she said, towering over him.

Frank looked down at the carpet. The dishes from the dinner—Irene’s Shepard’s pie—were stacked up. She’d have a fit if he left them.

“Gimmie a minute, I’ve to bring these here into the kitchen.”

“Ah don’t worry about them, love, just come on up to bed with me.”

Frank followed Irene up the stairs, careful not to step on the end of the blanket. Irene closed the curtains so that there was only a sliver of orange beaming through from the lamp posts on the road, onto the painting on the wall—Frank had painted it for Irene for their ten-year anniversary; a man whose house he’d been painting offered the canvas to him, along with a box of paintbrushes and some acrylic paint.

It was of the Wonderful Barn in Leixlip, where Irene’s Ma had lived before she died. Irene had always been on about it, how marvelous it looked and by god, the drinking that went on up there when she was young. He’d driven out in the van one Sunday afternoon when Irene thought he was in The Moore, skulling pints, and tried to capture the sun tumbling down between the treetops, leaving only a dim silhouette of the barn and the stairs spiraling around it. Frank didn’t fancy himself as much of an artist, but Irene had loved it all the same.

She slipped under the duvet and curled up beside Frank. He was exhausted lying there in the bed in the fresh sheets Irene had put on that morning. He couldn’t wait to fall back asleep, so he could go to work in the morning—he’d be a hero with the lunch crowd for what he did for Gary Doyle, and Charlie Sr. could go fuck himself there in the window, the dopey prick. He was meeting Mockser at the Paddy Power at nine—he wanted to tell Frank about a new band he was putting together up in the school. Irene still smelled lovely despite the slight bang of onions from the Shepard’s pie on her hair. Frank turned on the alarm for the morning—Irene had forgotten. He rolled back over, wrapped his arm around her belly. She was like a cat there in the bed.

“Night, love,” he said.

“Night, love,”

Chapter 4 - Critical Afterword

There has been a growing audience of readers of Irish literature for decades now. Contemporary readers only have to read the word “shite” or “jaysis,” coupled with the musical and unvarnished prose, to know that they’re reading something by an Irish writer with Irish characters. Fintan O’Toole proposes that Irish modernist writers (notably Joyce) could afford to be “opaque, allusive, densely textured” (410). Contrastingly, he posits that contemporary Irish writers, who engage in the simple ritual of words, believe that “the accumulation of potent and precise detail, if it is sufficiently thoroughly imagined, will call the universe into being” (412). This microcosmic approach to language and storytelling has the power to speak to the same philosophical ideas, falling away from “the high ambition of Irish modernism” (412). The modernists’ freedom to venture into macrocosmic and complicated literary narratives may have been largely due to the limited commercial opportunities for Irish writers. However, contemporary Irish works enjoy the opportunity to “address and respond to a contemporary audience” (O’Toole, 410). Significantly, O’Toole further posits that the dissolving lines between the Irish and the Other in a globalized economy (literary or otherwise) has resulted in an international audience “tolerant of works that address a specifically Irish context” (410).

Entering into the mid-century, soon after Joyce and Beckett, Irish writers began to break away from the high-prose, and fictive constructs of the modernist era, which Foster asserts was infused with “unstable genres, unreliable narration, ingenious ventriloquism, creative fantasy, and satirical imagination” (qtd. in O’Toole, 411). They began writing stories that were “increasingly detached from the old Irish verities of family, land, religion, and nationality” (O’Toole, 411). They were read by a global audience; they sold books and won prizes in literature. They reconstructed narratives that were fractured in time, geography, and reality, and instead embraced the opportunity to tell stories about Ireland and Irish people in an economic and serious way. John McGahern,

O'Toole says, might be the father figure of this kind of fiction, which has “an old-fashioned trust in itself and in the world it evokes, and his artistic children retain that strange trust in the ability of language to summon a kind of reality” (411), a microcosmic approach to storytelling. In her introduction to *The Granta Book of the Irish Short Story*, Anne Enright writes “when there is so much rubbish talked about a country, when the air is full of large ideas about what we are, or what we are not, then the writer offers truths that are delightful and small” (412).

These “small truths” offer writers the opportunity to explore large-scale ideas and collective advancements through the microcosmic rather than the macrocosmic—a language and prose style, stripped-down to explore small moments and parts that stand for the whole. Through a writer’s careful observation of daily life, simple fragments, we can examine financial globalization and social progress in Ireland. It is in these experiential “small truths” that we observe the nuanced shifts in my own stories: Irish wives want still holidays to Europe, Irish men still wish to gamble and be independent of authority figures in their work, young adults still emigrate to America. These traditions speak to the survival of an older-fashioned Ireland. Yet there are new truths too: black children speak Irish in Gael scoils, sons and daughters of Polish and Chinese immigrants play county hurling and Gaelic football in Croke Park, and African men set up window-washing services in small towns.

Writing these stories, I felt it was natural to evoke the voices of the displaced to convey the ways in which Ireland was shifting, socially and economically: Frank has lost his job as a painter, and the strain it causes on his marriage forces him into a job for a large corporation that his wife has gotten for him; Peo, having demolished his way through Dublin to pave space for apartments he could never afford, and businesses he would never patron, finds work providing simple comfort to Buffalo, who is at the mercy of state-supported healthcare and monthly welfare checks; Iarla is convinced by his friend Seán that moving to America will remedy the deflated job market in Ireland.

O'Toole writes that the use of child and adolescent protagonists can be seen as a conscious strategy by Irish writers to frame these humble narratives, which contain these small truths: "It is one way of telling stories without having to rely on large public narratives" (414). Yet while the child-narrative offers an opportunity to examine the space between the innocent and the experienced, it's through the economically displaced characters that we explore the ways in which they navigate and negotiate these new spaces that have been influenced and altered by financial globalization, while still infusing this tension between experience/inexperience, success/failure, and beauty/grit: Frank, for example, struggles to acclimate to a commercial setting, where he has a boss to answer to, and he observes the new foreign lunches that students eat—like curry pies, kebabs—and the ways in which Irish brands are privileged at eye-level by Heavy, which he can appreciate because Irish businesses need any help they can get. By this simple inspection, we note not only the fact that new foods and products have immigrated to Irish supermarkets, but that ounces of nationalism shine through in the privileging of Irish-produced commodities.

Mockser, is perhaps the most displaced of any of these characters, uneducated and largely unskilled save his ability to mark the straightest pitch in Ireland (this ability earns him notoriety from the Gaelic footballers and hurlers). Yet it's through Mockser that we see the shortcomings of western ideas about exceptionalism—when Frank meditates briefly on his failings as a boxer, the opportunity he missed in never making it to the Olympics, Mockser tells him, "Sure, no one makes it to the Olympics." Mockser recognizes the fallacy that we can all succeed, and that that's ok. Further, when Frank hopes that he can take Irene away on a holiday—an effort to reinforce a traditional dynamic in their marriage), Mockser suggests that they go away to Kilkenny instead and just to tell the neighbors that they're gone away to Spain. He urges Frank to subvert the social expectations and markers of class associated with going away on a holiday. After Frank asks him what kind of husband he is, if he can't bring the wife on a little holiday to Spain? Mockser retorts:

“Isn’t Irene working herself and doing fair well? She only wants to spend the bit of time with you, so don’t be doling out the life savings on a fuckin’ holiday. Sure, Spain is full of too many Irish heads, it may as well be Kilkenny. God, I’d have to sell one of me bollocks to go to Spain.”

Mockser observes that Frank’s concerns about manhood and his displaced position as the principal financier of the household are outdated and that it ought to be relieving for Frank to have a wife who can support him in his unemployment. His manhood is hardly worth dipping into the savings for. Irene’s heftier financial contribution to the house can only be a healthy thing for their marriage for Mockser, a poor bachelor who lives frugally on breakfast rolls, pints of Guinness, and scraps from the dinner rush at The Moore. Mockser would have abandon (quite literally) a piece of his manhood to get a holiday to Spain.

While the progression of social norms is queried in these stories (as well as other contemporary stories about Ireland), they still reinforce and embody many of the sweeping generalizations associated with Irish fiction. It’s instructive to ask what makes these stories “Irish” beyond the geographical settings and the birthplace of the characters. To read, say, “Tomo Byrne’s Wedding,” as a story only about Irish emigration and alcohol and drug abuse would be to miss the fact that Ireland’s (and Irish people’s) relationship with its transatlantic neighbor has become a strained one as stricter legislation and agencies impeded Irish expats potential to work off-the-books in Irish bars and businesses. Speaking of Tóibín’s echoing of Carleton and their similar distillations of “religion, politics, and repression,” Foster notes the careful decoding needed in deciphering Tóibín’s *Brooklyn* when considering it alongside Carleton as a contemporary metaphor for the Irish emigration story. He writes, “to read the fiction as a simple representation of these phenomena is to miss much of this achievement” (35).

Foster writes of Edward Said's belief that "Irish writing reflects a struggle against British colonialism that begins in the 1920s and climaxes in the 1950s may facilitate parallels with Asian and African cultures of resistance," that "it bears little resemblance to the trajectory or Irish history" (35). I concur with Foster in complicating this generalization about colonized states, and while some Irish literature about the Troubles and nonfiction work that's emerging from the uncertainty about the future of the North in the wake of Brexit, pertains to Ireland's colonial past, Ireland is an independent republic (as independent as an EU country of five or so million can be I suppose) for all intents and purposes. And despite its gamesmanship in international trade—it's a hub for tech industries: *Facebook, Intel, Hewlett Packard*—Ireland and its economy exist at the volatile mercy of the global market. Attention to this dynamic allows us to read, say, "Buffalo," not only as another lonely man in Ireland hungry for sex and a few pints, but as an Englishman who has naturalized in the heart of Dublin and whose Protestant religion is seldom a point of contention. Instead, his love for Liverpool Football Club and his stories of young Steven Gerard help engrain him into Dublin society.

Considering the idea that Irish fiction ought not to be over-determined as "necessarily violent, antagonistic, and unfinished," in response to hundreds of years of British colonialism, Foster posits that "although 'post-colonial' is the buzzword most often invoked, the consciousness of these novelists might be more accurately described as 'post-revolutionary' and international" (40). "International" in the sense that by subverting those generally rebellious and treasonous stories with more worldly encapsulations of the Irish diaspora, at home and away, the writers invite a wider audience of readers to consider Ireland in a more singular manner, aside from its imperial history.

Yet Irish writers (notably Roddy Doyle) have seemed to maintain a relationship with their Irish readers by demonstrating a kind of double-consciousness through what Foster describes as "whispered asides and jokey repetitions." While, for writers like Carleton and Thomas Moore, and

Joseph Plunkett, these devices may have been rebellious in how writers spoke to the echoes of colonization in and misgovernment of Irish society, Foster—writing in response to Moore—asserts that they were a gift in which Irish writers could explore “the ‘low, circumventing cunning’ of the populace and the thoughtless and ‘tasteless extravagance’ of the gentry, making up the ‘great concert of discord’ that characterized Irish life” (32). It must be true that as notions of the gentry has shifted, Irish writers must continue to adapt to a vibrant international society that’s increasingly altered by changing cultural moments where norms and conventions associated with gender, race, and class are concerned.

In his message to the people in 2017, President and poet Michael D. Higgins addressed the wide diaspora of Irish people, reminded them of their roles as peerless ambassadors for hardship and exodus: He rhapsodized, “migration has remained a constant feature of the Irish experience, defining us as a people, and shaping our outlook on the world.” I hope through microcosmic observation that my stories here represent a contemporary picture of Ireland in the midst of defining cultural moments and legislations: as a leader in social movements, legalizing gay marriage and supporting pro-choice bills for women’s rights, and as a front-runner in committing to greener futures, divesting in fossil fuels on a national scale. Yet, old stories of Ireland, I suspect, will go on: of men and women in pubs singing and telling stories of the Moore, the bog, and America; of boys and girls on GAA pitches clattering each other with hurleys and sliotars on cold Tuesday evenings; of children twisting their tongues to *téigh, feic, clois, tar, tabhair, abair, ith, faigh, beir, dean, bi* in schools; and of Dublin mothers and fathers stirring coddle on Sunday evenings—a smattering inheritance of a country so treasured for its love of life and Guinness around the world.

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