USING LITERARY TECHNIQUES IN JOURNALISM

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Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of M.A. is entirely my own work, and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that work is original, and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within

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AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION

I conceived the idea for this research project. I interviewed the 13 subjects in the book, Tick. Tick. Bang! I wrote the 13 stories and accompanying thesis. My supervisor, Paul McNamara, reviewed the book and thesis during my study and once it was completed.

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by

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In an era of social media, click-bait articles and false news, newspaper circulations are in sharp decline. Many news consumers feel overwhelmed and disconnected by the sheer volume and complexity of the information available in the media.

Literary Journalism is a narrative form concerned with telling the stories of ordinary people in a unique way. It attempts to capture the universal elements of humanity, allowing readers to share common daily experiences and make better sense of their daily lives. With cultural understanding regarded as the form's prerogative, Literary Journalism utilises the emotive and aesthetic abilities that are usually confined to the novel, to paint detailed pictures of social settings and tackle the issues, principles and values facing communities.

In documenting 13 stories which comprise a single literary artefact, the examples of Literary Journalism produced for this study employ a different set of techniques and tools to those of traditional news reporting. Focused on the crucial moments that exist within the drama and the monotony of everyday life, this study documents the communicative potential of immersive reporting by delving into the cultural dynamics of Dublin City and demonstrating the importance and the consequences of the facts revealed in each story

The accompanying essay examines the origins and development of Literary Journalism, provides a related literature review and a methodology describing how the 13 short stories were produced. Considering the influence Irish Literary journalists had over the decades, this study argues that the embattled genre should be represented in the Irish media, to better inform the general public and rebuild the trust tainted by the instant information age.

One conclusion drawn is that Literary Journalism should go beyond simply providing the news. The broad range of literary devices available to practitioners, endows them with a duty to elevate each subject with a thorough investigation, therefore enhancing the reader's experience.

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INTRODUCTION

Sometimes the facts are not enough. Sometimes a formula is not enough. Sometimes what is needed is as much of the human soul - the emotions, the grit, the look of warmth or deceit - as a reporter can gather (Alexievich, 2015). In this technological era, where power propels through the hands of those who understand the mass media machine, the public is bombarded with instant information, fake news and commercial campaigns: sometimes a true story needs to be told the old-fashioned way, using the entire literary arsenal at the journalist's disposal. Within the last century, the journalist's ability to communicate the human condition has been stunted by the pursuit of the objective ideal and the propagation of sensationalised news (Fegan, 2019), while the rising levels of news avoidance continue to reveal the lack of trust the public has in the press (Benton, 2019). But it is not the first time journalists have fought to gain the public's confidence.

Literary journalism is a narrative form based on immersive reporting. It focuses on day-to-day events by finding meaning and symbols. It applies any literary device - aesthetic descriptions, metaphors, poetic syntax and perspective - to the observations made. It paints portraits of the public. And relies on the journalist to record what they heard, smelt, felt, tasted and saw, before asking question after question to gain a thorough understanding of their subject and their life, allowing them to write clearly and with feeling.

In this literary journalism experiment, the research continually pointed to the way in which we use our words, or rather, how we take them for granted. For instance, let us consider the word 'journalism': once we hear it, our minds jump to the last headline we saw or the last news story we heard because the word's meaning is set concretely within us.

Maybe we invest in a newspaper, a newsletter or journal. Maybe we prefer the radio or TV. Maybe we stay online, scrolling through the algorithms and adverts that our ever-watching apps tailor to our search engine activity, clicking and never questioning how easily we stumbled on such ready and relatable information. Or maybe we choose to ignore the media altogether.

The author of this practice-based project will deconstruct a few words - journalist, journalism, novel and literature - before establishing the origins of literary journalism by unravelling the roots of fact and fiction and providing examples of the form and its practitioners; proving the journalist's right to any literary device and illustrating the role commercial interests played in shaping today's newspapers. Then, the author will discuss the 13 accompanying stories alongside the methods used in their compilation.

To begin the deconstruction, let us hark back to the middle of the 17th century, when newspapers and periodicals were first published and the soon to be labelled and professionalised journalists were individuals who simply kept a journal, detailing the world around them and making note of the questions they had or had answered for themselves. There were no writerly restrictions put upon them, nor was there an obligation for them to write solely fact or fiction. There was merely space to be filled on blank pages and adverts offering payment for journal excerpts (Underwood, 2008, pp.18-19).

From inception, the journalist and novelist have been entwined, simply because "the formal and fantastic romance (of the 17th century), the long-winded involved story, was losing its vogue," (Lyall, 2008). The journalists and novelists were writers who became interested in capturing the veracity of life. And who began to develop literary devices that would enable them to describe reality and ensure the unrealistic romanticism of the 17th century faded from view. The literary progression they made was not distinguished by their subject, whether true or imaginary, as both were focused on capturing an accurate picture of their society. And both types of writer kept journals.

It was the excitement stirred by the French Nouvelles (novellas) arriving in England around the same time that inspired the term novel. "Interestingly, in its more archaic definition (dating back to the late fifteenth century), the 'novel' was a synonym for 'news' or 'tidings' and the 'novelist' for a 'newsmonger' or 'news carrier'," (Underwood, 2008, p.20). So, without any difference or guidelines, journalists and novelists began to advance their literariness, while the entangled relationship between fact and fiction continued to grow.

What has remained unchanged is the role of the journalist, which is that of a messenger. Whether it is a satirical fable, news from up the road or from afar, the journalist has always been charged with providing

useful information that enables the public to make informed decisions on current issues (Bovee, 1999, p.28). If we take heed of this standard and use it as a marker for defining what journalism is, we can decipher what falls within its perimeter as we delve into the eras when both the journalist and novelist excelled. But what makes a piece of writing literature? What makes it literary?

Technically, literary scholars determine those pieces of writing classed as art. And this is subjective to their tastes. It is also the reason why so few works of literary journalism are considered literature; but this is changing. With more and more research appearing and detailing the history of journalism and the novel, it is getting harder and harder for literary scholars to deny the claim journalists have, not only to the novelist's techniques, but to their legacy (Bak, 2020, pp.165-166).

In *What Is Literature? A Definition Based on Prototypes,* Jim Meyer claims that literary works are: *written texts; marked by careful use of language, including features such as creative metaphors, well-turned phrases, elegant syntax, rhyme, alliteration, meter; in a literary genre (poetry, prose fiction or drama); read aesthetically; intended by the author to be read aesthetically; containing many weak implicatures (are deliberately somewhat open to interpretation); dealing with the human condition and experience in some way.*

Meyer argues that "works in other genres are often considered literature, but again, the terminology used to describe such works - terms like 'literary non-fiction' - indicate that such texts are not prototypical literary works," (Meyer, 1997, p.9); thus, flagging a problem literary journalism faced: its title. Considering the journalistic form fulfils the requirements Meyer lists, it would appear that literary journalism does not qualify as literature, simply because the literary world has forgotten where it came from. However, the literary journalists have not.

Since the late 20th century, there have been disputes over what term best suits the journalistic form. It has been called literary non-fiction, creative non-fiction, narrative non-fiction, literature of fact, personal journalism and parajournalism; but if we calculate the time wasted on this endeavour, surely it is feasible to accept the preferable term, literary journalism, as Norman Sims put it (1984, p.4). Then, it is possible to begin assessing what the form can achieve.

LITERATURE REVIEW

I

FROM THE PRINTING PRESS TO THE DEATH OF ROMANTICISM

The development of mass communication has always been driven by the possibility of generating revenue. As far back as 1450, when Johannes Gutenberg had perfected the first printing press, he foresaw "enormous profit-making potential for a printing press that used movable metal type," (Franklin, 1994). He soon began printing bibles and shipping them all over Europe, before discovering that the bible was not as profitable as the indulgences the Catholic Church was selling to those wanting a pardon from their sins: Gutenberg was printing pardons as early as 1454 as a lucrative side business (Kelley, 2012).

By the 16th century, his printing methods had reached most corners of the world, allowing others to spread their message and instigate change, such as Martin Luther and his *95 Theses* condemning the Catholic Church. At the time, there was no mention of journalists or novelists. There were scientific revelations shattering the Church's teachings and strengthening the public's desire to make up its own mind. There was also a growing understanding of how powerful the printing press could be, which in turn gave rise to the different forms of censorship rippling through the publishing world (Franklin, 1994).

"During the reign of Mary I (1516–1558), the Stationers' Company, the guild of printers which was established by royal charter in 1557, was charged with providing under its own auspices for the supervision of printing and the granting of privileges in the printing trade. The Star Chamber Decree, which was issued in 1586 during the reign of Elizabeth I (1533–1603), brought comprehensive regulation of the printing trade, placing multiple complementary control and licensing measures in the hands of the Stationers' Company. The first Stuart kings of England (1603–1714) inherited and retained this system of control."

(Wilke, 2002, p.16)

As the quality of paper and ink used by printers was cheap and made printing affordable, it enabled the sector to flourish alongside the writers who dared to speak out against the injustices of their time, who witnessed savage social cruelty on their streets and knew the flouncing tales of Chaucer no longer represented their reality. Having seen the political and religious pamphlets used to garner a following by those in power, the authors of what is known as "rogue Literature" began to print pamphlets that "consisted of moralizing accounts about a criminal underworld, in which the boundary between fact and fiction is knowingly distorted," (Verhoest, 2016, p.37).

The main objective of these pamphlets was to incite social change, though it was not safe to speak out against authorities: for that reason, the facts of their stories were painted with fiction. And considering the pamphleteers were risking persecution - alongside their printers who often moved premises or changed the name above their doors - they used any literary device they could to get their point across. These proto-journalists and early social commentators also used aliases to avoid being caught and tried for treason (Verhoest, 2016, p.38).

At the beginning of the 17th century, the pamphleteers' success was growing in England, along with the threat they posed to social stability. The authorities arrested several and sentenced them to death; but the pamphleteers ignored such warnings and continued to scrutinise those in power by blending fact and fiction, allowing the public to make informed decisions (Verhoest, 2016, pp.37-39). By the mid-17th century, the first newspapers and periodicals were being printed in English and distributed throughout Europe and America, without a predetermined formula dictating the shape or form of stories and news reports.

Even the "purveyors of fiction, accommodating themselves to a more exacting taste, applied themselves seriously to the reproduction of famous scenes and portraits by the aid and guidance of historic documents and antiquarian research," (Lyall, 2008, p.15). This era is known as the birth of "realism" and is studied as literature within the academic realm. Its ties to the development of journalism is rarely acknowledged, even though the pioneers of the form were journalists for most of their careers. The literary forms we know today - fiction, journalism, the novel, popular literature, biography, narrative or

interpretive history, the topical essay, the short story, humour-writing, the advice column, literary criticism, journal-keeping and travel writing - were not separate genres in the minds of readers or writers when they were first practiced: their techniques and nuances were utilised by any writer, regardless of the content (Underwood, 2008, p.36).

What is apparent in the bravery and boldness of the pamphleteers is their determination to tell the stories they wanted to tell - to depict the contemporary degradation of life and inequality - to the best of their ability. Whether it was fact dressed up in fiction or fiction dressed down to read like fact, they focused on finding the safest and most effective way to make their point, suggesting that the move toward realism cannot simply be viewed as a fictional phenomenon, especially when the work of Daniel Defoe, one of the form's founders, is examined.

Born in 1660, Defoe lived a life as adventurous as any of the people he interviewed or created. He was a writer of both fact and fiction, a newspaper editor, a rebel, an employee of the secret service and a pamphleteer. The literary world recognises him as one of the most influential people in the history of the English novel; but they do not fully represent the extent of his character or his abilities, because they do not pay dues to the journalistic techniques he used to create his historic novel, *Robinson Crusoe*, which Defoe wrote when he was almost 60 years old. He had spent most of his life working as a journalist, often placing no barrier between fact and fiction (Underwood, 2008, pp.37-38).

"The germ which in his (Defoe's) fertile mind grew into Robinson Crusoe, fell from the real adventures of Alexander Selkirk, whose solitary residence of four years on the island of Juan Fernandez was a nine days' wonder in the reign of Queen Anne. Defoe was too busy with his politics at that moment to turn it to account; it was recalled to him later on, in the year 1719, when the exploits of famous pirates had given a vivid interest to the chances of adventurers in far-away islands on the American and African coasts."

(Minto, 2011, p.135)

Throughout Defoe's life, his journalistic work took precedence over every other aspect, as he had committed himself to creating social change. His name was signed on a pamphlet in 1688, though he had described himself as a young author in 1683, which would incline researchers to believe that he had been publishing progressive pamphlets under an alias; but it was not just current affairs that interested Defoe. He had the foresight to recognise the public's interest in scandal and created the *Journal of Society,* dedicated to documenting minor political arguments and entertaining readers. He also invented the leading article: a general interest piece that took up the front page and encouraged readers from all walks of life to buy the newspaper (Minto, 2011, pp.124-126).

But what is it about Defoe's Crusoe that makes it stand out? In the work of fiction, where fact provided the foundations and the basis for the plot, Defoe used descriptive language to depict each scenario and focused on the smaller elements, allowing the reader's mind to thoroughly roam through the world he had not simply imagined, but researched in great detail. The use of flowing dialogue establishes the sense of reality he tries to convey, while the narrative gives an insight into Crusoe's thoughts. Or rather Alexander Selkirk's thoughts.

Such markers of form were techniques Defoe perfected as a journalist, reporting from both the centre and the edge of society. But the most interesting literary innovations occurred when Defoe's truth seemed to slip into Crusoe's prose, which is a trait of literary journalism that is often discussed. Literary journalists select subjects who they relate to; who they see a piece of themselves in.

"I have been, in all my circumstances, a memento to those who are touched with the general plague of mankind, whence, for aught I know, one half of their miseries flow: I mean that of not being satisfied with the station wherein God and Nature hath placed them…"

Robinson Crusoe by Daniel Defoe, Chapter 14

(Gutenberg, 1996)

Similarly, the fictional writing of Jonathan Swift - who was born seven years after Defoe - is marked by the years he spent editing newspapers and working as a journalist and pamphleteer. Known for his satire and striking literary attacks, the Dublin-born writer employed "an arsenal of techniques - masked meanings, hidden messages, duplicitous rhetorical devices and disguised personal digs - in order to demonstrate that the public face of the high and mighty often disguised a dubious back story," (Weingarten, 2005, p.122). Once again, the blurred line between fact and fiction made it possible for the journalist to hold those in power accountable, as Swift was "willing to risk serious punishment", (Weingarten, 2005, p.11) to effectively depict the reality he witnessed. Although a protestant, Swift often challenged the quality of life that Irish Catholics were subjected to.

"I do therefore humbly offer it to public consideration that of the hundred and twenty thousand (Irish) children, already computed, twenty thousand may be reserved for breed, whereof only one fourth part to be males, which is more than we allow to sheep, black cattle, or swine; and my reason is that these children are seldom the fruits of marriage, a circumstance not much regarded by our savages, therefore one male will be sufficient to serve four females. That the remaining hundred thousand may at a year old be offered in sale to the persons of quality and fortune through the kingdom, always advising the mother to let them suck plentifully."

A Modest Proposal by Jonathan Swift

(Gutenberg, 2008, p.7)

In the excerpt above, Swift exposes the belittling treatment of the Irish "savages". He also reveals the mindset of the English by implying their lack of morality and their innate sense of grandeur. Published in 1729, three years after *Gulliver's Travels*, the controversial essay confirmed that Swift's dealings in

journalism, alongside allegories and prose, were far from done. And so, the 18th century became a literary battleground, where writers evaded the clutch of those in power, while sharpening their techniques; but what is safe in the hands of history is the startling impact Defoe and Swift's journalism had on the future of literature. Despite being natural enemies due to their differing political beliefs, the pair have been linked throughout literary history because they defined the meaning of writing for a higher purpose (Underwood, 2008, p.53).

Once, Defoe was asked why he so often conveyed the facts of his stories allusively. His response was that he "wrote for the instruction of mankind, for the purpose of recommending invincible patience under the worst of misery; for indefatigable application and undaunted resolution under the greatest and most discouraging circumstances," (Minto, 2011, p.149).

II

THE 19th CENTURY, THE RACE AND THE REALITY

"On the morning of September 3, 1833, a paper printed on four letter-size pages and filled with human-interest stories and short police reports appeared on the streets of New York. Its publisher was a young printer named Benjamin Day, and he sold his paper, The Sun, for one penny."

(Peters, 2020)

At the beginning of the 19th century, there was an increasing number of newspapers and periodicals being published throughout Europe and America. Literacy levels were higher than ever and industrialisation was in full swing. Surprisingly, the design of the printing press had not developed much. But everything was about to change as the first significant advancements to the printing press were made. In 1811, the first rotary press was designed by Friedrich Koenig. Three years later, Koenig and his associate invented the first steam powered press, which was put in service at *The Times* of London, where the number of sheets printed per hour was doubled (Britannica, 2020).

The years to follow were full of design innovations - such as continuous rolls of paper, an iron frame to bolster the press and a cylinder-based system - creating a more efficient work process, increasing the daily output, lowering the cost of printing and heightening the possibilities, alongside the competition. Before these innovations, it was mostly shippers, businessmen, political leaders and professional people who could afford the price of a newspaper (Peters, 2020). By 1833, it was reasonable to imagine a daily paper anyone could afford; but to appeal to the working classes, there needed to be a shift from the editorial content at the time, or rather a return to stories that dealt with ordinary people and the events happening around them. Benjamin Day was a New York publisher who envisaged such a market and the potential of employing newsboys to hawk his penny paper, *The Sun* - the first successful penny daily (Weebly, 2020).

Within two years of its publication, *The Sun* was selling more copies than any other newspaper in America. And with such a profitable news product in circulation, it was not long before other titles, such as James Gordon Bennett's *The Herald*, sprang into publication. The Penny Press even spread to France, then England, where the Stamp Duty was crippling publishers and had forced more than 560 of them to avoid the fee (Peters, 2020). But with all this Penny Press glory came the race to sell headlines and advertisement space, which intensified the urge to sensationalise stories.

"No longer did editors add interesting material to fill space. Instead, the aim was to expand readership. Increasingly, editors would brag about the size of their newspapers' circulation, not only as a mark of prestige but also as a bait for advertisers. Activities in the municipal court, sporting events and the balls of the socially elite attracted the interest of the expanding readership."

(Bovee, 1999, p.202)

A budding marketplace had been created for budding writers to develop their techniques. Most notably, there was Charles Dickens, who not only wrote some of the world's best fiction but carved his characters from the wealth of writerly wisdom he gained as a journalist, striving to master his craft and challenge those in power. Having spent some of his childhood in poverty, Dickens' work grew from his innate dissatisfaction with social inequality in England. His first successful book, *Sketches by Boz,* was a collection of stories originally published in newspapers and periodicals. It demonstrates Dickens' love of "slightly cracked, extreme personalities," (Underwood, 2008, p.66) and showcases London.

"One of our principal amusements is to watch the gradual progress - the rise or fall - of particular shops. We have formed an intimate acquaintance with several, in different parts of town, and are perfectly acquainted with their whole history. We could name off-hand, twenty at least, which we are quite sure

have paid no taxes for the last six years. They are never inhabited for more than two months consecutively, and, we verily believe, have witnessed every retail trade in the directory."

Charles Dickens, 1836

(Gutenberg, 2009)

The excerpt above is from *Sketches by Boz* and highlights how well Dickens knew London; although almost 200 years old, it reads as if it could have been written today, which demonstrates Dickens' eye for spotting the most telling truths. He also brought the shop spaces to life by detailing different windows of time and showcasing the variety of occupiers, proving that reality can achieve the timelessness often found in fiction.

In 1835, Edgar Allen Poe published a fictional story about a man flying a balloon to the moon. Three days later, a story appeared in the *New York Sun*, with the headline *"Celestial Discovery",* claiming a Scottish man had a telescope that was strong enough to witness life on the moon. For days, the *New York Sun* ran with the fictional tale and reached sales no other newspaper had ever achieved. When it was revealed the story came from the editor, Richard Adams Locke's imagination, it was clear the blending of fact and fiction was no longer just the preserve of journalists speaking out against authorities for the betterment of society: it was also a marketing tactic to sell newspapers (Bovee, 1999, pp.93-94).

The techniques journalists used were increasingly questioned as more false news, such as the *New York Herald's* zoo hoax, took up space previously dedicated to factual stories. Even Dickens could not bite his tongue, having watched the news mania develop. In his novel, *Martin Chuzzlewit,* he portrayed over-the-top reporting in the American press.

"'Here's this morning's New York Sewer!' cried one. 'Here's this morning's New York Stabber! Here's the New York Family Spy! Here's the New York Private Listener! Here's the New York Peeper! Here's

the New York Plunderer! Here's the New York Keyhole Reporter! Here's the New York Rowdy Journal! Here's all the New York papers!"

Charles Dickens, 1844

(Limpidsoft, 2020, p.507)

The shift towards objective journalism began to take place over the next few decades. The invention of the telegraph led to the inverted pyramid style of reporting, which presented information in accordance with its importance. The American Civil War illustrated the danger commercial investors pose to reporting news fairly, as ownership determined what side newspapers took in the national conflict (Mackowski, 2017). But there were still journalists the public could trust to depict the world by using whatever literary technique was necessary.

During the late 19th century, Mark Twain worked as a reporter rather than a purveyor of social scandal (Shedden, 2015). Recognising the inadequacy of the reporting at the time, alongside the increasing limits being imposed on reporters, Twain used his journalism to finesse his literary style, while using satire to dissect important issues. In his short story, *Spirit of the Tennessee Press,* Twain compares American journalism to a gunfight in which his editor clarifies the true meaning of journalism, but only when attacked by a rival editor.

"The heaven-born mission of journalism is to disseminate truth; to eradicate error; to educate, refine, and elevate the tone of public morals and manners, and make all men more gentle, more virtuous, more charitable, and in all ways better, and holier, and happier; and yet this blackhearted scoundrel degrades his great office persistently to the dissemination of falsehood, calumny, vituperation, and vulgarity."

Mark Twain, 1871

(Gutenberg, 2020)

Despite this moral awakening, the gunfight continues until each participant carries himself to a hospital. But before Twain's character follows behind the rest, he states:

"I think maybe I might write to suit you after a while; as soon as I have had some practice and learned the language, I am confident I could. But, to speak the plain truth, that sort of energy of expression has its inconveniences, and a man is liable to interruption"

Mark Twain, 1871

(Gutenberg, 2020)

The piece demonstrates Twain's skill as a literary figure and as a concerned journalist faced with the deterioration of his profession. So, why does Twain fit so comfortably into the history of literature, noted for his ability to inspire realism in fiction, while his roots in journalism dissipate, even though they were embedded long before he wrote *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*?

It would appear the exponential growth of popular newspapers, alongside the advancement of printing press technology, made the need to appeal to large audiences - by reporting to a broader swathe of people - more lucrative than investing time and money in specific locales and stories (Pressman, 2018). The result was that journalism of a literary kind - such as Stephen Crane's *New York Sketches,* published in multiple newspapers during the early 1890s - became harder and harder to find because those who owned the printing presses knew sensational news sold newspapers and that competition was rife (Sims, 1990. P.34).

III

THE 20th CENTURY AND THE WIDENING GYRE

"Give up Paris. You will never create anything by reading Racine, and Arthur Symons will always be a better critic of French literature. Go to the Aran Islands. Live there as if you were one of the people themselves; express a life that has never found expression."

W.B. Yeats, 1896

(Ismael, 2012, p.7)

By 1900, what was defined as literature - what was read, studied and critiqued - was decided by scholars and critics, just as it is today (Underwood, 2008, p.26). The controversy caused by sensationalist newspapers, documenting trivial drama and embellishing headlines, ensured most of the journalism at the time did not fall in line with literary standards. But there were journalists who knew better than to turn to fiction; who knew how and when to use the literary techniques available to them because they wanted to achieve more than orderly facts and outrageous scandal could. There was no name or title for such journalists. There was hardly even a place for them. Still, they believed in the importance of communicating diversity. And that a story is far more interesting when you know it is true.

At the turn of the 20th century, the Irishman, J.M. Synge, had already spent several summers on the Aran Islands. He had listened to W.B. Yeats and focused his mind on capturing the tales and details of those a little closer to home. Having travelled and struggled to find his literary feet, he spent his time with the islanders, learning their language and their traditions. He was immersed in their culture, when "the knowledge he had been subconsciously acquiring during his travels, suddenly came into focus: he looked at these primitive people, and through them, into the heart of humanity," (Ismael, 2012, p.9).

From 1898 to 1908, Synge's journalism, mostly travel pieces, was his main source of income. It was also how he learnt to master his writing skills, as having to report on the far corners of the earth, often illustrating them to the Irish public for the first time, he had to truly capture the reality he witnessed and achieved this by using what literary devices were necessary. In particular, his use of dialogue succeeded in shattering the detached voice of mainstream journalism, while bringing his subjects to life and proving that Synge was "interested in presenting factuality through human-interest stories," (Keeble, 2012, p. 350), which was in direct conflict with the new burgeoning norms of journalism.

"After a while my companions went away and two other boys came and walked at my heels, till I turned and made them talk to me. They spoke at first of their poverty, and then one of them said—'I dare say you do have to pay ten shillings a week in the hotel?' 'More,' I answered.

'Twelve?'

'More.'

'Fifteen?'

'More still.'

Then he drew back and did not question me any further, either thinking that I had lied to check his curiosity, or too awed by my riches to continue."

J.M. Synge, 1907

(Gutenberg, 2009)

The aesthetic ability Synge displayed in his journalism was transportive. He was able to reference and compare the other places he had been to, allowing him to create a greater sense of the world and paint his subjects' position in it.

"I went out through Killeany - the poorest village in Aranmor - to a long neck of sandhill that runs out into the sea towards the south-west. As I lay there on the grass the clouds lifted from the Connemara mountains and, for a moment, the green undulating foreground, backed in the distance by a mass of hills, reminded me of the country near Rome. Then the dun top-sail of a hooker swept above the edge of the sandhill and revealed the presence of the sea."

J.M. Synge, 1907

(Gutenberg, 2009)

There is no denying that Synge's journalism nurtured his fiction. His most notable play, *The Playboy of the Western World,* portrayed his characters and their depth with such accuracy that the public could hardly handle the truth he faced them with. There were riots outside the Abbey Theatre and across the nation, cementing his journalistic roots within his literary legacy.

In America, the Illinois native, Hutchins Hapgood - who was a Harvard graduate, drama critic and editorial writer - was fighting for his journalistic right to write real narratives inspired by the people he met. Known for spending weeks and weeks with his subjects, studying and questioning them because he believed real stories had a power that fiction could not muster; he claimed that fictional writers could do well if they were to make use of the tool journalists used daily: the interview. And with a portfolio consisting mainly of subjects that other journalists did not recognise as worthwhile, he continued to prove the form could and should do more than simply list current events (Sims, 1990, pp.18-20).

What stands out in his work is the level of detail he acquired and displayed through use of his perspective. In *The Autobiography of a Thief,* he succeeds in demonstrating the mindset of the ex-pickpocket he spent several weeks interviewing and observing, therefore offering the reader a window of insight, not usually provided by mainstream journalism.

"For a long-time I took Sheenie Annie's advice and did not do any night work. It is too dangerous, the come-back is too sure, you have to depend too much on the nerve of your pals, the 'bits' are too long; and it is very difficult to square it. But as time went on, I grew bolder. I wanted to do something new and get more dough."

Hutchins Hapgood, 1903

(Gutenberg, 2014, P.108)

Interestingly, Hapgood spent his career writing this way, implying his unwillingness to give up the literary aspect of his work. However, his pleas for journalists to embrace their literary skills were blunted by the growing interest in muckrakers, who spent their time upending corporate regimes by exposing their illegal activities. There was a new area of communications developing too: public relations.

Its purpose was to repair or refine the public image of corporate firms, who had been subjected to the wrath of the muckraking journalists. It was also the muckrakers who recognised the market and the potential profit. By the time World War I began, there were P.R. firms in operation; but no one expected what was coming. Nor did they know journalism had such a dark side.

During WWI, the role of journalists came to the forefront, as they were responsible for bringing the story of the trenches to the towns and cities of the warring parties. There was also a need to recruit soldiers and raise capital, which was something each of the governing powers knew the press could help them with. Considering the term propaganda comes from the 17th century, when the Catholic Church established the *Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* (Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith), with the sole purpose of promoting Catholic faith (Hargreaves, 2003, p.187), it is no surprise that propaganda played a part in the war. But what had never been seen before was the annihilation of the line between fact and fiction, simply to serve a political purpose.

In 1917, the American president decided it was time the USA joined the allies in the war. The German threat to the American shipping industry was increasing, along with the growing concern that Germany might actually win the war. The president, Woodrow Wilson, managed to get the go-ahead from congress; but it was the public he was worried about, since he had recently been re-elected on the slogan, "*he kept us out of the war*," (Basen, 2014, p.16).

Within days of receiving approval to go to war, he set up the Committee on Public Information and hired the best muckrakers and the pioneers of P.R., such as George Creel, Ivy Lee and Edward Bernays. Then, he set them the task of persuading the American public to believe in the war.

"The CPI's Division of Advertising churned out posters and ads that depicted German atrocities that never happened, played up threats to American homes and families that were wildly exaggerated, and generally appealed to the fears and anxieties that lurked beneath the surface of public consciousness."

(Basen, 2014, p.17)

When the war was over, the success of the C.P.I. inspired the growth of the P.R. industry, as it had made the possibilities of mass persuasion crystal clear, especially to Edward Bernays, who was Sigmund Freud's nephew. Having realised that he and his colleagues sold the war to the American public, by using images and symbols, Bernays began to believe anything could be sold once the right story was told. He set up his own P.R. company and made a career out of selling brands; but the more he spoke about the process, the more questions were raised about the ethics involved. There was also a growing concern among the public, who had begun to believe they were being manipulated (Hargreaves, 2003, p.186-188).

"Long after the killing stopped, men debated the meaning and importance of the verbal conflict. To some participants it had all been like a prep-school prank, an exciting happening, signifying little; others drew from it portentous meaning and a stern lesson. But almost every interested observer realised that

something vital about mass communications had changed during the war and the debate centred around the nature of this change."

(Marquis, 1978, p.467)

IV

THE REIGN OF OBJECTIVITY

Before the 1920s, there was no mention of objectivity within journalism. Instead, the terms ‘unbiased’ and ‘uncoloured’ were used to set the standard of reporting required from young journalists (Stamenkovic, 2020, p.11), who had been attending journalism lectures and trade union meetings since the early 1880s (Wein, 2006, p.8). So, what changed in favour of objectivity? And who decided it would fix the problems journalism was facing after WWI, such as a declining and untrusting readership (Marquis, 1978, p.468)?

The scholar, writer and reporter, Walter Lippman, was one of the leading commentators on the role of journalism at the time. Having played his part in the war, spinning the propaganda wheel for the Allies, he “returned home disillusioned” (Whitehead, 2015, p.11) and eager to rectify what was wrong with the press, which he believed to be the blatant disregard for the distinction between fact and fiction, solely for political gain (Simonson, 2016, p.344). In 1922, Lippman published *Public Opinion*, hoping to restore integrity and decency to both democracy and journalism. He called for “journalists to bring home to people the uncertain character of the truth on which their opinions are founded, and by criticism and agitation to prod social science into making more usable formulations of social facts, and to prod statesmen into establishing more visible institutions,” (Lippman, 1922, p.256).

With a surge in P.R. companies and campaigns, it was getting harder and harder for the public to recognise what was real and what was for sale because the industry had no regulations or rules. There was only a short list of principles that had been written by Ivy Lee, one of the leading members of the American WWI propaganda machine, the C.P.I. (Basen, 2014, p.16). Clearly, the press needed a way to gain the public’s trust. It was Lippman’s belief that objectivity was the answer.

"Every newspaper when it reaches the reader is the result of a whole series of selections as to what items shall be printed, in what position they shall be printed, how much space each shall occupy, what emphasis each shall have. There are no objective standards here. There are conventions."

Walter Lippman

(1922, p.243).

There is no way to justify falsifying news events. Nor is there a way to claim objectivity is the complete answer to journalism's critics. There has been an overwhelming amount of research written on the subject, which proves the journalistic commitment to attaining the best professional model. But the way we perceive reality is just as Lippman said: "we shall assume that what each man does is based not on direct and certain knowledge, but on pictures made by himself or given to him," (Lippman, 1922, p.21); which implies that our perception is marred since conception, depleting our ability to attain the objective goal. And if "the most damaging bias is rarely discussed - the bias born of class," (Cunningham, 2003), does it not imply that there are better ways to tackle the issue - such as a broader diversity in newsrooms - rather than limiting the journalist's ability.

The main goal of objectivity in journalism is to provide "stories based on provable facts, supported by evidence, accurately relayed and representing all aspects of any controversy without bias," (TheNewsManual, 2020): thereby allowing the reader to make informed decisions. But what if a journalist does not question the facts provided? What if the facts do not provide enough understanding? What if objectivity cannot be achieved because "there is no 'true reality' to which objective knowledge can be faithful," (Curran and Gurevitch, 1997, p.226)?

Maybe the "concepts of objectivity and truth function for us as regulative principles," (Curran and Gurevitch, 1997, p.237). Or maybe objectivity "has persisted for some valid reasons, the most important being that nothing better has replaced it," (Cunningham, 2003). Either way, the ideal has developed over

the years and into different branches, such as principled objectivity and pseudo-objectivity (Wein, 2006, p.11). It has divided and united journalists; but the one thing they do agree on is their ability and responsibility to check and verify information in their copy.

V

THE FIGHTING VOICE OF CHANGE

Despite the ongoing battle over objectivity, there were journalists who knew that facts would simply not demonstrate how "the real world remains uglier, kinder, subtler, richer, crueller, stranger, more monotonous and chaotic, and above all, more complex, than standard journalistic practices capture," (Kramer and Call, 2007, p.64). They have always been around; but they did not always have a name or a place where they belonged. They had to spend half of the 20th century contesting the objective norm paradigm, voicing the truth of those who did not fit within the lines and proving there is more than one way a journalist can tell a story.

Ernest Hemingway was a journalist when he joined the Red Cross, flew to Italy and drove an ambulance during WWI. Returning home to the USA with a new perspective, he picked up his journalistic career, alongside what he thought was his role and responsibility to the public. But it was not long before he heard of the term objectivity and refused to believe that conventional journalism had any "value beyond serving as an apprenticeship to a serious writing career," (Underwood, 2008, p.142). In 1922, he quit his job, "complaining about the limitations of reporting and deciding to give up journalism before it ruined him," (Frus, 1994, p.55). Then taking what he had experienced, he turned his back on the ream of facts expected of him and spent the next three decades revolutionising the literary world.

The excerpt below is the beginning of an article Hemingway wrote for the *Kansas City Star*. It reads like a short story and confirms Hemingway's literary flare for journalism. It shows why he was stifled by the objective world of journalism.

"At the End of the Ambulance Run" (January 20, 1918)

"The night ambulance attendants shuffled down the long, dark corridors at the General Hospital with an inert burden on the stretcher. They turned in at the receiving ward and lifted the unconscious man to the

operating table. His hands were calloused and he was unkempt and ragged, a victim of a street brawl near the city market...”

Ernest Hemingway

(Reilly, 2013)

Although Hemingway turned to the novel, he built his career on his journalism skills. His dedication to his research and reporting enabled him to create characters with many dimensions. His use of short, abrasive sentences depicts the stark reality of the situations he observed - such as the Spanish bullfights he loved - while also demonstrating the grasp he had of conventional journalism. His use of dialogue displayed his command of his craft and eye for detail, as he let his subjects reveal themselves by showing the actual rhythm of their thoughts. It was also one of the reasons the limitations of newspaper journalism irritated him so much: he wanted to give his subjects a voice - their voice to be specific - so he could truly paint them (Underwood, 2008, p.141).

The excerpt below is from *The Sun Also Rises*; one of Hemingway’s barely fictionalised novels. The dialogue details the characters and their conditions without having to describe them.

“‘We left our bags here at the Dingo when we got in, and they asked us, this hotel, if we wanted a room for the afternoon only. Seemed frightfully pleased we were going to stay all night.’

‘I believe it’s a brothel,’ Mike said. ‘And I should know.’

‘Oh, shut it and go and get your hair cut.’

Mike went out. Brett and I sat at the bar.

‘Have another?’

‘Might.’

‘I needed that,’ said Brett.

We walked up the Rue Delambre."

Ernest Hemingway

(2004, p.77)

During the 1920s, it was not only Hemingway who wanted a change. The American civil rights movement was in full swing and the writers and artists "shared a common goal: to find new ways of depicting and interpreting Negro experiences that would, once and for all, erase the image of an inferior race long crystallized in the American caste system," (Schmidt, 1991, p.78). Among them was Zora Neale Hurston, a southern black woman, an editor, a journalist and a writer, who moved to New York in 1925 when she was offered her first position at a magazine, *Opportunity*. She was involved in the civil rights movement; but she did not get involved in the internal disputes over the style or perspective a writer should choose (Schmidt, 1991, p.81). Instead, she focused on how to best represent herself and the southern community she grew up in because she believed it was her duty. And although she was writing with the purpose of progressing the civil rights movement, she succeeded in advancing both the literary and journalistic worlds by practicing immersion and infusing her findings with her background in literature. In her 1928 story, *How It Feels to Be Coloured Me,* she describes her own childhood experiences and packs the images of her reality with powerful and timely metaphors, while poetically sharing the facts of her life, reminding the reader that a literary artist is at work.

"I do not always feel coloured. Even now I often achieve the unconscious Zora of Eatonville before the Hegira. I feel most coloured when I am thrown against a sharp white background…For instance at Barnard. 'Beside the waters of the Hudson' I feel my race. Among the thousand white persons, I am a dark rock surged upon, and overswept, but through it all, I remain myself. When covered by the waters, I am; and the ebb but reveals me again."

Zora Neale Hurston, 1928

It is particularly important to note the circumstances under which Hurston wrote, for if she were confined to the objective kind of journalism, her story would not have been told correctly, nor would it have been as effective in creating change or striving for equality, which appears throughout history as a fundamental journalistic attribute. Still, there was not a term for the kind of journalism Hurston was generating. There was only a growing understanding amongst journalists who wanted to communicate meaning beyond the facts that the tightening restrictions imposed on journalism made for a very inhospitable environment. And as the novel flourished, having buried its ties with journalism, more and more journalists turned to its fictional retreat, simply for the freedom of expressing and communicating the strange wonder of the world they had seen.

The English novelist, George Orwell, worked as a journalist and studied Jonathan Swift before he abandoned newspapers for novels. Born in British India, he grew up in England but later returned to Bhurma to enrol in the Imperial Police Force, seeking life experience because his parents could not afford to send him to college (Marks, 2011, pp.5- 7). Hoping the five years he served would inform his writing, he resigned in 1927, realising he was "disgusted with being a functionary in the Empire's vast machine," (Weingarten, 2005, p.17). He returned to London with a burning writerly ambition and committed himself to writing about the oppressed before immersing himself in the city's underworlds.

"I was conscious of an immense weight of guilt that I had got to expiate… I wanted to submerge myself, to get right down among the oppressed; to be one of them and on their side against their tyrants."

George Orwell

(Packer, 2009)

By the 1930s, Orwell had written for several periodicals and honed his skills as a narrative writer; but the continued push toward objectivity was stripping him and others of their journalistic expression, saddling them with the *status quo* and forcing them to be merely "stenographers, who simply reported what powerful people said and did, without providing context or analysis," (Pressman, 2018). In 1933, Orwell published his first book, *Down and Out in Paris*, which was based on his own experiences and championed his journalistic style by portraying the smaller margins of society in a deeply aesthetic and insightful way. The work also displayed the extent of Orwell's research and his dedication to understanding, if not becoming, one with his subjects.

"A ring of dirty, hairy faces grinned down from the gallery, openly jeering.
What could a few women and old men do against a hundred hostile tramps? They were afraid of us, and we were frankly bullying them. It was our revenge upon them
for having humiliated us by feeding us."

George Orwell, 1933

(2013, p.185)

The problem Orwell and other literary journalists faced was finding somewhere to publish their work. Literary journalism still did not have its name or reputation. And it was not recognised as a prosperous route (Sims, 1990, p.5). There was only one office that trusted in the communicative power of the form: *The New Yorker*. Established in 1925, it gave journalists - such as Joseph Mitchell, Lillian Ross and A.J. Liebling - the time and space they needed to achieve their literary goals. It also gave them a significant role in the history of literary journalism, as they became "responsible for keeping literary journalism alive

during the middle years of the 20th century, before the new journalism burst on the American scene," (Sims, 1990, p.83).

VI

THE NOT SO NEW JOURNALISM

By the 1960s, the steady decline of newspaper circulations was stirring a panic amongst American editors, who knew they needed something different - something new - to reconnect with their readers and save their newspapers. They had already cut the number of their columns or shrunk the size of their pages, and in many cases, they skirted financial ruin (Davies, 1997); but they were up against radio and TV, which were bringing events to life in ways the public had never heard or seen before, creating more and more competition for newspaper journalists, who were struggling to keep up with the times because, for the most part, what they had to work with were the facts - in order of importance. It was becoming clear that the objective ideal had alienated "the subjectivities of the journalists, the subject and the readers," (Norman, 2009, p.7), which was the reason they did not recognise the journalism that was about to bring the news to their doorstep, kicking and screaming.

Leading the way was the *New York Herald Tribune,* whose editor, James Bellows, "recognised the danger in competing with the ever-growing New York Times and set out to hire young writers unafraid of experimenting and producing innovative articles," (Bortz, 2005, p.92). In 1962, he redesigned the Sunday edition and hired Clay Felker from *Esquire* magazine to edit the supplement, *New York* magazine, aiming to prove that a Sunday newspaper "could serve as an impressive example of journalistic design and artistic expression," (Bortz, 2005, p.93). Then, he hired the Irish American, Jimmy Breslin: a native New Yorker who dedicated his journalistic career to portraying the people he came across every day - the poor, luckless and forgotten - and to ensuring those with authority and wealth did not go unobserved.

At the time, Breslin had just published his second non-fiction book, *Can't Anybody Here Play This Game?* He was also working as a freelance journalist and had his own unique reporting methods, which did not involve sitting around the office and waiting for the phone to ring. Instead, he walked the streets of New York endlessly and immersed himself in the culture and the chaos, before eventually rushing back to the office and hammering out his copy, just in time to meet his deadline (O'Neill, 1984, pp.xiv-xvi).

His style was "poetic and profane, soft-hearted and unforgiving," (*The Irish Times*, 2011); but most importantly, it was a departure from the detached journalistic norm. Breslin put himself on the page, amongst the people, relaying what he saw, heard and discovered.

His use of overflowing dialogue, descriptive scenes and telling gestures were so effective that they sparked a barrage of speculation, criticism and jealousy "because his fellow journalists never fully understood what he was doing…only that in some vile, low rent way, the man's output was literary," (Wolfe, 1975, p.26). Yet, it was Breslin's own ruthlessness that set him apart, as when it came to writing about the change his city needed to see, he wrote what he saw precisely how he saw it, which is something most journalists, whether literary or straight, might aspire to achieve.

"Williamsburg now is Puerto Rican, black and white. Most of the whites are Jewish. It is a marvellous example of how the poor are left in the cities to fight among themselves while those with enough money to move to the suburbs watch the fight on the evening news."

Jimmy Breslin, 1981

(O'Neill, 1984, p.71)

Breslin succeeded in awakening the literary hunger many journalists were reserving for the novel they assumed they would have to abandon journalism for. At a nearby desk, Tom Wolfe was watching him come and go, while thinking about the work Breslin was doing and how he was doing it; alongside a story he had read in *Esquire* magazine, written by Gay Talese: a *New York Times* feature writer, who was also using different literary techniques to make his facts read like short stories. Inspired and enlightened, Wolfe began to think: "I could take both of them," (Wolfe, 1975, p.18). And in 1963, he wrote *There Goes (Varoom! Varoom!) That Kandy-Kolored (Thphhhhhh!) Tangerine Flake Streamline Baby (Rahghhh!) Around the Bend (Brummmmmmmmmmmmm);* which was the first piece of his new

journalism. And once it was published, the journalistic world began to rip its literary roots right out of the dirt, where the objective norm had buried them.

"What interested me was not simply the discovery that it was possible to write accurate non-fiction with techniques usually associated with novels and short stories. It was that - plus. It was the discovery that it was possible in non-fiction, in journalism, to use any literary device…to excite the reader both intellectually and emotionally."

Tom Wolfe

(1975, p.28)

The years to follow were filled with raucous debate over what became known as New Journalism. There were non-fiction novels being reviewed as literature, while some novelists were even discarding their fiction - such as Truman Capote and Norman Mailer - in search of the higher truth they knew literary journalism could attain. But the problem with the 'new' journalists was that they were not doing anything new; at least not when you browse the history of journalism - from Defoe to Dickens and Orwell - and recognise the literary journalism *The New Yorker* was still producing. In fact, the staff at the *New York Herald Tribune* regarded *The New Yorker* as their main competition (Bortz, 2005, p.101).

In 1965, Wolfe wrote *Tiny Mummies! The true story of the ruler of 43rd Street's Land of The Walking Dead,* which was a satirical attack on *The New Yorker*; requested for *New York* magazine and approved by the editor of the *New York Herald Tribune.* And as soon as it was published, it became known as *The New Yorker Affair* because it generated a furore of criticism from journalists and scholars alike, accusing Wolfe of writing nothing other than "low rent rabble" (Wolfe, 1972). But the most unfortunate thing about the article was the divide it caused between literary journalists of the time, as the writers at *The*

New Yorker would no longer associate themselves with Wolfe and his counterparts, despite being due their own recognition for their contribution to development of modern journalism (Sims, 1990, p.106).

And so, the blossoming years of journalism that ensued, were then split into two journalistic avenues, rather than becoming a single literary form. Yet, the new journalists did succeed at proving the old rules of journalism no longer applied because they no longer sufficed to convey any sense of the times: the social upheaval or the shift in manners and morals (Abrahamson, 2006).

"In Vietnam, many of the beat reporters who arrived believing in objectivity, eventually realized, if they stayed long enough, that such an approach wasn't sufficient."

Brent Cunningham, 2003

By the late 1970s, "many of the passions that had provided the genre its subject matter had receded; but in the longer view, an admirable legacy can be claimed," (Abrahamson, 2006); simply because the publicity the form and its practitioners received paved the way for journalists to be accepted "as artists similar to novelists," (Bortz, 2005, p.120). At last, longform journalism was normalised, creating a space for future journalists to follow, while also drawing the public's eye back to the origins of literature and reminding it that the difference between the journalist and the novelist was a decision to write either fact or fiction.

The communicative power of journalism in its literary form demonstrated the arduous work its practitioners undertook: like Hunter S. Thompson, who spent a year with the Hells Angels, only to depart from their company when they beat him half to death. Or like Joan Didion, who came close to quitting writing for good because the journalism demanded of her did not allow her to express the anarchy she witnessed on her beat. Or like Truman Capote, who spent years interviewing two murderers in prison, while committing every conversation to memory. Or like Wolfe, who discovered an entire culture and brought it to light by stepping out of his comfort zone.

So, whether it was new or not, American journalism of the 1960s and 70s ensured the public knew it had a voice. And the novelists knew they had competition.

VII

THE END OF THE 20TH CENTURY AND BEYOND

Literary journalism has existed all over the world - in China, New Zealand, Finland, Slovenia, Brazil, Spain, and Canada - for more than a century. It has been known as *Jornalismo Literário, el periodismo literario* and *Bao Gao Wen Xue*, depending on which part of the globe you travelled to (IALJS, 2020). But what has not differed, no matter the destination, is its commitment to delving into everyday life and portraying the drama, the emotion and significance by fusing fact with literary technique. It has also appeared throughout history - in numerous studies and translations - to have taken the clutch of circumstance and cruelty to summon the literary ability of journalists, who had to find a way to tell the truths they were witnessing, whether it was cloaking the facts in narratives, metaphors or satire (Bak, 2011, p.11).

In Ireland, the journalist Nell McCafferty spent the 1970s reporting from Irish courtrooms for *The Irish Times.* A feminist and civil rights campaigner, she played an active role in fighting for change in society. This was evident in her work as a journalist and in her cutting literary ability. In 1981, she published a collection of her court reports, *In the Eyes of the Law,* and reminded Irish journalists and literary scholars alike, that the truth could be served in many different forms. Choosing to keep the names of those who had to appear in court anonymous, McCafferty revealed the name of the judges, enabling her readers to become familiar with the kind of justice being served and who was serving it. Her use of dialogue captures the character of the people she describes and intimates their place in society, while her own presence on the page ensures that any injustice is examined in full light and the right questions are asked. The amount of time McCafferty spent in the courts also enabled her to refer to similar past cases and portray the process effectively, so the reader does not get lost in jargon.

"The massive acquiescent silence is not dependent solely on the fact that these children are itinerants. Other children, from poor areas, have been locked up carelessly in the Bridewell. Mind you, I've never heard of a child from Foxrock being locked up there."

Nell McCafferty

(1981, p.79)

As an advocate for change, McCafferty did not think twice about using any literary device within her armoury to convey her point. She knew she was navigating uncharted waters and often felt isolated by her own brilliance because she was practicing a kind of writing rarely seen in Irish journalism (Sheridan, 2004). The journalism she was practicing was about to be christened by the American journalist, Norman Sims, who compiled his book, *The Literary Journalists,* in 1984 and traced the history of the form, named its practitioners, its goals and its characteristics, whilst also spurring the publication of other highly influential texts and staking literary journalism's claim in history (Keeble, 2018, p.863). And although McCafferty did not make Sim's list, she did practice immersion, write aesthetically and use narratives to supply her reader with the emotional reality of the news, proving that literary journalism was alive and well in Ireland, decades after Synge helped plant its roots.

Similarly, the Belarusian journalist, Svetlana Alexievich, had been collecting the stories and the experiences of the Soviet people since the 1970s. Her journalistic style was known in Russia as *Literary Reportage,* yet it shared the characteristics of literary journalism and thrived because "communist censorship provided writers with years of practice in the literary game of disguising universal meanings in the detail of the text," (Keeble, 2012, p.123). It is also believed that the "communists distrusted the idea of a bourgeois 'objective' journalism, whose rise during the 1920s became the professional standard for the capitalist media," (Bak, 2011, p.31). And due to recent research and translations, it was possible to prove

that literary journalism had been shattering social perceptions across Eastern Europe for decades, under the name *Literary Reportage* (Taylor, 2019).

In 2015, Alexievich became the first female literary journalist to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. During her speech, she explained the reason for her methods of reportage and detailed her grievances with the objective media, whose coverage of Chernobyl consisted frequently of military and technical terms, such as atom, explosion and heroes, which overtly obstructed the public's ability to understand that a new era had come to pass (Taylor, 2019). From the grand stage of the Swedish Concert Hall, she used her platform to draw an eye to the questions hovering over literary journalism: is it factual? Is it literature?

"What is literature today? Who can answer that question? We live faster than ever before. Content ruptures form. Breaks and changes it. Everything overflows its banks: music, painting - even words in documents escape the boundaries of the document. There are no borders between fact and fabrication, one flows into the other. Witnesses are not impartial. In telling a story, humans create, they wrestle time like a sculptor does marble. They are actors and creators."

Svetlana Alexievich, 2015

Established in 2006, The International Association of Literary Journalists set out to answer such questions by encouraging inquiry in the field, enhancing standards of content, informing courses, promoting responsibility amongst practitioners and fostering academic relationships across the globe (IALJS, 2020). It boasts a long list of contributors, such as Norman Sims and John S. Bak, who are committed to publishing annual research on the development of the form because its ability to convey the reality of the world we live in - in all its glory and shame - should not be confined to the past, as the world gets stranger each day. We need literary journalists to describe it.

Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah spent months in South Carolina, America, researching Dylann Roof, who was 21-years-old when he walked into the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church with his Glock

handgun and opened fire on the 12 people standing in prayer, shooting most of them dead. In 2016, Ghansah attended Roof's trial and quickly realised that reporting the facts would not make sense of what happened.

"After weeks in the courtroom, and shortly before Dylann Roof was asked to stand and listen to his sentence, I decided that if he would not tell us his story, then I would. Which is why I left Charleston, the site of his crime, and headed inland to Richland County, to Columbia, South Carolina - to find the people who knew him, to see where Roof was born and raised. To try to understand the place where he wasted 21 years of a life until he committed an act so heinous that he became the first person sentenced to die for a federal hate crime in the entire history of the United States of America."

Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah, 2017

Practicing immersion and journeying through Roof's life, Ghansah wraps her scenes with meaningful and poignant descriptions, painting what she saw and setting the mood of each place. There is a sense of timelessness created by her intermittent weaving of American slave history with the development of Roof's belief in white supremacism, as the reader is offered an insight into the racist minds of the generations that came before Roof. If Ghansah were simply to report the facts, her readers would not be left with the eerie feeling of what was wrong with American culture. Nor would they be moved by the hopeful note that Ghansah resounds throughout the piece by giving a voice to the victims' families and paying respect to the strength of the African American community and their ancestry.

"In Charleston, I learned about what happens when whiteness goes antic and is removed from a sense of history. It creates tragedies where black grandchildren who have done everything right have to testify in court to the goodness of the character of their slain 87-year-old grandmother because some unfettered man has taken her life. But I also saw in those families

that the ability to stay imaginative, to express grace, a refusal to become like them in the face of horror, is to forever be unbroken."

Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah, 2017

For centuries, literary journalism has provided the public with the unity and bravery they needed to improve their societies. It has given safe cover for those who chose to speak out against authorities. It enhanced the novel and enticed certain writers to leave the world of fiction behind.

It is taught in America, England and Australia. The wells of research into it deepen each year (Bak, 2020). So, why is it not celebrated more? Why is it not universally accepted as a discipline?

VIII

LIMITATIONS AND CRITIQUES

"Whether we acknowledge it or not, we've been here before. Like the New Journalism, the style of writing now popularly called long form has an extended yet overlooked history, as do the debates over what to call it. And now, as it enjoys a renaissance in print, is amplified by curators online, and breaks new ground in the digital world, it is more important than ever that we call it by its most proper name: literary journalism."

Richard Lance Keeble

(2018, p.866)

The oldest and most limiting issue literary journalism has faced is the uncertainty over what it should be called. It has had numerous titles over the years which has led to a divide amongst practitioners and stunted its growth. Most recently, it has been dubbed long-form or long-read; but the origins and aspirations of the form are not justified with such words, as they merely divorce the form from its rich history (Roiland, 2015, p.65). It can also be argued that the debate has ensured "literary journalism has been slow to embrace a vast range of potentially exciting perspectives," (Keeble, 2018, p.871), thus confirming the importance of recognising the most applicable title. The term 'literary journalism' has been flying in journalistic circles since the early 1900s (Roiland, 2015, p.66), when journalists were forced to abandon their literariness for objectivity.

The problem came into focus again when Svetlana Alexievich won the Nobel Prize for literature: there were debates over the style of journalism she used, despite the amount of research available on literary journalism and its Russian version, literary reportage. "There are multiple definitions of Alexievich's books: they were called a 'collective novel,' 'novel-oratorio,' 'novel-evidence,' 'people talking about

themselves' or 'epic chorus', collective testimony, and documentary monologue-confessions" (Gapova, 2020, p.106). It was Alexievich's intention to write journalism that reached a literary standard. And she achieved this with her rolling prose and use of aesthetic descriptions, symbols and themes (Serafin, 2020).

The second and most recent limitation of literary journalism is the fact that most people studying it, or practicing it, do not have substantial experience with literature or language because they come from the academic discipline of communication studies, which "suggests that the majority of future PhDs risk not having the proper literary training needed to fully exploit a literary journalistic text," (Bak, 2020, p.125). For future students of literary journalism to excel, it is integral that the form is recognised by its legitimate title and named correctly, so the budding literary journalists are equipped to fully harness the form's possibilities.

The third critique of the form is the looming question: *how did the journalist get the information? how do s/he know that is what happened? or how the subject was feeling?* Tom Wolfe was accused of climbing inside his subjects' heads; but all he did was ask how his subjects felt and what they were thinking (Wolfe, 1975, p.25). Yes, there were times when literary journalists abused their readers' trust, such as the *Jimmy's World* saga in 1980, when the author, Janet Cooke, fabricated a composite character and won the Pulitzer prize for local reporting, before admitting she had lied about the young boy in her story and resigned from her position at the *Washington Post* (Bovee, 1999, pp.101-102). The incident served as a stark reminder to all journalists of the importance of truth and integrity within their practice. It also highlighted the difficulty of achieving the necessary standard of literary journalism. Which leads to the fourth and final problem: the amount of time it takes to do the work thoroughly.

"Literary journalists gamble with their time. Their writerly impulses lead them toward immersion, toward trying to learn all there is about a subject. The risks are high. Not every young writer can stake two or three years on a writing project that might turn up snake-eyes."

Norman Sims

(2014, p.9)

With the continued decline of newspaper circulations in many countries (Fegan, 2019) and the associated economic consequences, it is not possible for every editor to invest in sending reporters away for weeks or months to research a story. But it is possible, and arguably imperative, for editors and journalists alike, to know and understand their beats and the characters populating them, as there are ways to integrate literary journalism - such as the character profiles of Jimmy Breslin - and provide journalists with the opportunity to write both literary and straight.

It takes a shift in journalistic perspective. And a reminder of those who risked or lost their lives writing the words the world needed to hear, because they knew it was their duty.

IX

TACKLING THE DETACHED MODE

Literary journalists strive to bring the public closer to understanding the world by immersing themselves in public and private life, sometimes over an extended period. But they are not the only journalists committed to battling the detached norm. There is a new genre of journalism in this era of instant information called ‘slow journalism’. It exists alongside other slow movements - slow food and slow fashion - which are dedicated to slowing life’s pace as “speed is the disease of the digital age,” (Norman, 2017).

So, what is slow journalism?

Its prerogative is to provide the stories behind the facts and to offer the other side of the argument once researched and verified. Considering we are inundated with information from sources we cannot trace, slow journalism aims to ensure reporters take the time they need to gather their information and compile a story with informative value, rather than instant gratification.

Its practitioners can use any literary technique and practice immersion, similar to literary journalists; but the slow journalist must ensure readers can participate in their work and follow their facts all the way back to their sources (La Masurier, 2014, p.143). The commitment to complete transparency is to hold the slow journalist fully accountable for what they write, allowing the reader to trust in their work. It would appear to be a step in the right direction in “a world where 400 hours of video are uploaded to YouTube, and 527,000 photos are shared to Snapchat every minute,” (Perryman, 2019).

Similarly, citizen journalism challenges the detached model of journalism because it is written by the public for the public. It has been a phenomenon of the digital age, ever since the public found its voice online and realised that it could research areas journalists were ignoring. Some studies even suggest “that citizen journalism is related to higher levels of civic participation and positive attitudes toward non-profit volunteering and donations” (Miller, 2019, p.23). Yet it is argued that most citizens are not trained as journalists, therefore leaving a question mark over the accuracy and value of their information (Licitar,

2018, p.17). Still, it is vital that the public participates in the news by questioning it and the world around it. And whether it is literary journalism, slow journalism or citizen journalism, the public must believe it has a place and a say. It is also the responsibility of every person to choose their news carefully, especially when the darker side of the media is but a click away.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The professional and literary techniques that characterise literary journalism were utilised in this practice-based project for the purpose of communicating the reality experienced by the author's selected subjects and their emotional growth. The goal of the project was to test the author's ability to create a broader understanding of society by giving a voice to those featured and by portraying their truth in a narrative style based on immersive reporting. The focus was on people who live or work in Dublin City. The intention was to create an in-depth picture of the diversity, drama and meaningful moments occurring in their daily lives by employing an alternative to the detached journalistic norm.

The artefact consists of 13 subjects, whose lives and experiences, fears and aspirations make up the 13 stories in the project; and whose professional occupations provide the setting for their stories and reveal their values and beliefs, alongside their interactions with the public and their kin. The events portrayed occurred during the first week of November 2018, meaning the action in each of the stories took place in one week. The stories are ordered by the day and time they transpired. The information was gathered by the author's eye-witness account of events or the subjects' recollection of them in interviews. The context of each narrative was created through the inclusion of the author's extensive research and by incorporating the material gained during the period of immersion. The subjects' internal dialogue was communicated by applying literary devices not commonly used in newspaper journalism, such as perspective, flashbacks and emotive language.

The reason for practicing the methods of literary journalism was to enable the author to find and convey the motive behind the action and the meaning beyond the facts that portray the lives of those featured. Against a background of declining trust in the media and falling newspaper circulations in Ireland (Benton, 2019), the author concentrated on obtaining and providing an understanding of the varied perspectives existing within the city because it is "this diversity of authorial production that allows readers to choose from visions that are similar, complementary, different or even diametrically opposed to

his or her own," (Martinez, 2017, p.27); thereby offering an insight into different communities. The approach was intended to help the author establish trust with the reader and tackle the disconnect dividing the public and the media, as it has been argued that "the values transmitted by reportage about cities are the revindication of culture generated by the inhabitants in their multiple amalgam," (Vargas, 2018, p.729).

Immersive reporting ensured the author could develop trusting relationships with her subjects and interpret the larger significance of their lives, as well as delving into the human condition - the joy, hope, loss and loneliness that propelled their thoughts to action - and capturing the authenticity of their emotional, irrational and nuanced behaviour. The literary devices incorporated facilitated the author in painting the subjects' point of view and detailing a picture of their social settings. But the complexity of life and the unpredictable nature of the city implied the implausibility of rendering a complete portrait of the subjects' reality. The resulting stories should be viewed "as a way of examining the world," (Kramer, 2007, p.146), rather than an exact mould of reality.

The qualitative approach centred around interviews - structured, semi-structured and unstructured - documented through the use of recording devices, note taking and photography. The subjects and their families, friends and colleagues were the main source of information, while the time spent at the subjects' work premises and in their homes and communities supplied an understanding of their social landscape.

The subject selection was confined to Dublin City because the author endeavoured to highlight the success and the struggle that walks the streets and goes unnoticed every day, just as the focus on researching marginalised social groups and navigating routes less travelled by conventional journalism was driven by the possibility of taking what was different or ignored in Irish society and making it commonplace. This effort to get "to the heart of what exactly led to decisions, or choices, that were made, and how these choices came to take the form that they ultimately did," (Martinez, 2017, p.34) eventually revealed the bigger issues facing the public and allowed the author to magnify them through the lens of the subjects' eyes and emotions. It also enabled the author to apply literary aspects - such as theme and symbolism - once the information gathered had been analysed.

The first three months of this research project were dedicated to identifying and approaching potential subjects. When the 13 subjects were selected and informed of the time and access needed to achieve a comprehensive level of understanding, the author commenced the interviews and began to practice immersion by visiting the subjects' place of work at least two or three times a month and attending their shows, events, lectures or meetings; helping them with their errands and their daily routines while becoming a part of their community. The process of interviewing the subjects and immersing the author in their lives spanned 11 months. Then, the following 12 months were spent writing and editing.

The 13 stories demonstrate an alternative way of providing the audience with the knowledge they need to better understand the city, as the scene-by-scene depiction of the subjects' daily reality and emotional development provides a true glimpse of society and the impact it can have on the choices people make. The effective use of immersion and observation showcases the essence of life: the moments, mishaps and meandering that characterises the subjects' narratives. But the importance of recognising the subjects' complexity and the craft's limitations, alongside the time it takes to practice the methods of literary journalism, should be considered before a project of this kind is embarked upon, simply because the intimacy needed to portray the subjects' perspective lies in their hands and their willingness to share the innermost parts of themselves with an audience. It might take a single day, two weeks or several months. The literary journalist must be ready to invest the time required to capture that second of revelation.

METHODOLOGY

I

SUBJECT SELECTION, STRUCTURE & STYLE

In 1946, the American writer, journalist and Nobel Prize winner, John Hersey, wrote *Hiroshima*, providing the world with a harrowing account of the devastation caused by the nuclear bomb the USA dropped on the Japanese city. By choosing to document the lives of six survivors - two doctors, two women and two religious men - from the moment the bomb dropped until a few months later, Hersey offered his readers six perspectives. And by staggering their accounts, he succeeded in portraying the similarities and the differences in each of their experiences. The impact of his structure was evident from the beginning of each story. We learn that Mrs. Nakamura, looking at her neighbour when the bomb exploded, described how "everything flashed whiter than any white she had ever seen," (Hersey, 1946). Dr. Fujii recalled the event differently. For him, "faced away from the centre and looking at his paper - it seemed a brilliant yellow," (Hersey, 1946).

Inspired by Hersey's structural composition, the author of this practice-based project endeavoured to document the lives of people living and working in Dublin, during the same time period, with the intention of relaying a diverse range of realities. The author had to decide what subjects would best convey this picture of the city by providing a varied mix of people and workplaces.

The author's list of prospects included:

- A north-inner-city location - to highlight the discrimination an address can spur (THE VOICE)
- A homeless couple - to portray life, love and social disadvantage (THE HOMELESS)
- A bookmaker - to illustrate the role chance plays in business (THE BOOKMAKER)
- A traveller - to show the difficulties faced by minorities (THE FIGHTER)
- A sex worker - to explore one of the oldest professions in the world (THE ACCOUNTANT)
- A family run business - to examine values and tradition (THE SHOPKEEPER)
- A stay-at-home parent - to question the idea of fulfilment (THE MOTHER)

- A stallholder on Moore Street - to look back at Irish history/opportunity (THE STALL)
- A fireman - to discover how a first responder lives in a troubled city (THE FIREMAN)
- A performer - to assess the cost of fame (THE ENTERTAINER)
- An African hairstylist - to represent new culture and the mixing of traditions (THE WEAVE)
- A convict - to experience the underworld (THE SOLDIER)
- A scientist - to contemplate the future (THE SCIENTIST)
- A politician - to examine power and control (THE POLITICIAN)
- An embalmer - to understand death as a market (THE EMBALMER)

Using this general list of potential subjects, the author researched practitioners in the city, picked up the phone, visited their business premises, bought tickets to events, hung around and talked to people who could assist, while also visiting different places and contacting community groups, in search of subjects whose lives and experiences would demonstrate the versatility of the city. Three months later, the author had selected 13 people whose stories would feature in the collection.

A politician and an embalmer also featured on the initial list of potential subjects. However, the former could not commit to the immersive process due to a family bereavement and the latter could not commit because of the busy and unpredictable nature of his job. As neither could invest the amount of time required to establish trust and rapport with the author, they unfortunately were removed from the list.

From the beginning, the author set out to write descriptive and expository narratives, implying she would have to spend time with each subject, interview them, their family and friends, while witnessing their interactions and observing them at work and in their social environment. The author ensured each of the subjects fully understood the extent of the access needed; then informed them that their names would be changed in the written texts as the author's priority was making them feel comfortable and safe sharing their experiences. After dealing with an inquisitive presence for months, the author did not want the subjects to have to deal with any more questions about their lives, just like Synge, who disguised his

subjects because he did not want them “feeling that a too direct use had been made of their kindness,” (Synge, 1907).

Once the subjects understood the author’s purpose and the process, the interviews began.

II

IMMERSION & INTERVIEWS

After securing the participation of the 13 subjects in this practice-based project, the author refrained from researching anything more about them or their professions, until the interviewing process began. The intention was to approach each interview with genuine curiosity, ensuring the author asked questions thoroughly and the subjects used their voices to detail where they came from, what happened to them in their lives and what was important to them. The author did not want to speak for them or make assumptions from information that had been gathered prior to the meetings - to allow the subjects to tell their stories in their own words and anecdotes; tone and gestures; time and rhythm.

The setting for each of the initial interviews was selected by the subjects because it was important they felt at ease. The best place to achieve this was on their own turf. The interviews were semi-structured and focused on gaining an understanding of the subjects' lives by establishing a timeline of significant events and building trust with them. Each meeting lasted approximately two hours and was recorded on a Dictaphone, while the subjects' interactions with other people and details from their chosen environment - the café, the park, the pub, the home or the place of work - were captured in the author's notebook before the next interview was scheduled.

The author's relationship with each subject developed differently, depending on the openness of the subject, and determined the author's line of questioning, alongside the length of time it took to record details of the crucial moments that changed the subjects' lives. Considering the author did not know the ins-and-outs of their experiences, there was no way of directing the subjects through their recollection of events, other than to ensure they each accounted for every decade and milestone of their life.

In hindsight, the only certainty was the author's willingness to wait until the subject was ready to divulge the intimate details of how their lives transpired, which most often occurred when common ground was found, respect and trust had flourished and the author had enough information to recognise that something in the subjects' timeline did not make sense. Or that a feeling or event was mentioned and

then ignored. The author also learnt to recognise hitches in communication, as they often provided the missing piece of the puzzle, when the subject later explained the issue fully.

Once, the author had gained an understanding of the subjects' lives, it was possible to focus on significant issues and events by asking tough questions, such as: what defines you? What drives you? What do you value? What is your approach to life? What scares you? What do you want from life? What do you need from life? What will you do to get it? Who matters? And who does not?

Three months later, the interviewing process focused on the practice of immersion. The subjects were familiar with the author, who knew of their successes and their struggles and had spent time with them at work, as their professions partially revealed their narratives. The author had to be aware of the subjects' social responsibilities and factor in the nature of their working lives. Subjects were not always in a position to answer every question. However, the author was able to witness them in action and take note of their mannerisms and their interactions with clients and customers. Sometimes, the author was also able to get involved and help them - such as selling fruit and vegetables on Moore Street, copying scientific equations onto a chalkboard at Trinity College and collecting the competition's odds at the dog track - which provided a real-life understanding of their work and the city in which they lived.

The author visited each of the 13 subjects at least twice a month, depending on how busy they were at work and how much they could communicate during this unstructured portion of the interview/immersion process. The author captured the subjects' stories by highlighting areas of importance via organising structured interviews to gather the information needed.

By the second year of this project, the author had learnt to read a situation and decide on the best way to document it. There were times when the author was on the outskirts, looking in and listening while taking notes. Sometimes, the author sat with a Dictaphone and a notebook, looking at the subject or someone close to them, asking question after question, reading their reactions and jotting them down. Other times, the author was right at the centre of the action, unable to do anything other than be grateful for the moment and pay attention to what her senses recorded - in similar fashion to Truman Capote, who spent years interviewing his subjects for his book, *In Cold Blood*, without doing anything other than listening

and being present because he believed it was “absolutely fatal to ever take a note or use a tape recorder when you interview somebody,” (Capote, 1968). The author chose the method of reportage by deciding what would promote the most natural environment for the subject. It was always possible to make notes or ask questions later.

The author even encouraged subjects to continue when they believed they were talking about something irrelevant, because gathering as much information as possible was the best possible way to ensure the authenticity of the subject’s voice and the authority of the author’s. For the author, it was sometimes difficult to know what was and was not important as a subject spoke. But the importance of recognising the risk the subjects were taking by revealing the private details of their lives was very important, as the more the author came to understand each of the subjects -their hopes, their fears and their regrets - the more they had at stake, which is why the author’s “own sense of integrity, honesty and empathy matters more than anything,” (Kramer, 2007, p.35), especially when it comes to practicing the methods of literary journalism.

The significance of the subjects’ vulnerability compelled the author to share her own experiences, enabling the subject to not only connect and relate, but to understand why telling their story mattered to the author. And the more time the author spent with subjects, the more she began to recognise pieces of herself in them, which is a trait that literary journalists often speak about because the form allows practitioners to “confront and acknowledge aspects of themselves, usually alienated in conventional journalism” (Norman, 2009, p.62). However, it was not just the subjects who shed light on their lives.

The author came to meet most of the subjects’ family and friends simply by being around them so much. It also became apparent, as they began to delve deeper into certain issues, that their work environment was not an appropriate place to have such discussions. Sometimes, the subjects would invite the author to their home. Other times, they would take the author to visit their favourite café or park. Or the author would run errands with them. The author was always ready to tag along if one of the subjects called with some free time or someone they wanted her to meet, which provided the opportunity to see them in their natural environments, surrounded by the people they loved and who often knew them better

than they knew themselves. This gave the author the opportunity to gain another perspective on their lives by asking more questions, such as: how did the subject react to a certain situation? How did the situation arise? How did it go wrong? Why did it matter? What did it change?

With regards to finding themes and symbols in the subjects' lives, it was merely a matter of time, as each would return to the same metaphors, images or memories when they elaborated on their stories; sharing what stood out to them, what meant something, what seemed coincidental, what moved them to emotion and what became evident through reiteration of narratives. And just as Gay Talese believed his subjects truly revealed themselves when they were comfortable enough to let their masks drop (May, 2014), the 13 subjects shed their defences, when they knew they were safe and respected.

It was the author's duty to recognise the importance of the observations and the progress made. If the goal was to provide meaning beyond the words, the author had to be alert and present for every encounter, which could last an hour, a day or a night. If the author did not, the narratives might simply become a ream of disconnected events.

The method of documenting the information gathered was a continuous and immediate process. If an interview or meeting was recorded, the author transcribed it that day or the next. If an encounter could not be recorded, the author took notes of the dialogue, the atmosphere and the surroundings, alongside the people at the premises; then drafted the scenes as soon as possible.

The effectiveness of this process allowed the author to readily reference the information. And make the shift from interviews and immersion to compiling the facts and constructing the narratives.

III

TRANSITION TO NARRATIVE

The second year of this practice-based project began with a revision of the information gathered because the author wanted to ensure there were no questions left unanswered. The author was aware of the issues facing each of the 13 subjects, the impact their experiences had and their view on the city and life itself, which made it possible to consider selecting the events for each of their narratives and begin to focus on specific themes and images. The author's goal was to showcase the variety of realities that exist in a specific geographic area by confining the subjects' narratives to a specific time frame and offering an insight into city life and the problems that arise on a daily basis: this meant each of the following meetings - encounters and observations - could potentially be the foundation for the subjects' stories.

For the duration of the project, the author lived in Dublin's north-inner-city, which ensured the ability to practice immersion and experience the chaos of the city first-hand. The young boy on his tricycle – who appears in six of the stories - came to the author's attention during this period of revision and analysis. The erratic nature of the boy's behaviour and the frayed edges of his red hoodie, alongside the time of day and night that he peddled around the area alone, spurred the author's curiosity, especially as a number of the subjects lived, worked or frequented the area too.

It was mid-October 2018 when the author set out to secure the strongest narrative for each story by spending every day in a three-week period with the subjects, dropping into their place of work, observing them and helping them when possible; accompanying them on their errands, sitting in their office or the backseat of their car; wandering through the city with them or standing by the seasonal bonfires, wondering how the community could be helped if the lotto was won. The young boy on his tricycle appeared when the author was with three of the subjects - *The Voice, The Shopkeeper* and *The Mother;* then three other subjects - *The Stall, The Soldier* and *The Fireman* - encountered him in the same week, which determined the sequence of their stories in the end product, as the author wanted to incorporate the

boy and portray the subjects' truth, while facing the reader with the same questions the author kept asking: who is the boy? And why is there no one looking after him?

Once those six narratives were sequenced by date, day and time, according to when the subjects encountered the boy on his tricycle, the author looked back over the notes and transcriptions from the meetings with the seven other subjects during that week and met with each of them again. The purpose was to attain an understanding of those seven days in the city and the events that took place in the subjects' lives - the time and place they occurred - and enable the author to construct their narratives by selecting the most illuminating events and ordering the stories in accordance with the day and time those events transpired.

Here is the final sequence of stories:

I- THE VOICE

II - THE BOOKMAKER

III -THE ACCOUNTANT

IV - THE SHOPKEEPER

V - THE ENTERTAINER

VI - THE FIGHTER

VII- THE MOTHER

VIII - THE SCIENTIST

IX - THE HOMELESS

X - THE STALL

XI - THE WEAVE

XII -THE SOLDIER

XIII - THE FIREMAN

The author was with each of the subjects on the day described in their stories; but it was not possible to stay all day and night with them, which meant she had to question them on the rest of the day's events - their thoughts, worries and emotions - and recreate those events not directly witnessed by gaining a thorough recollection of them through semi-structured interviews. The author also interviewed the family, friends and colleagues who witnessed the days' events, for a broader perspective.

Several weeks later, the author collected additional information needed to begin the writing process. And the subjects answered more questions.

IV

THE CASE OF *THE BOOKMAKER*

The bookmaker, Louis, was not much of a talker, unless the conversation was about odds and dogs. The author sourced him at Shelbourne Park, where he was standing beside the racetrack, at the top of the bookmakers' line. He agreed to be interviewed once he knew the author was interested in depicting a life dependent on correctly calculating chance. The initial meetings took place in that exact spot, with Louis's father sitting in a foldout chair beside Louis's bookmaking station. The conversations were brief and continually interrupted by punters, which made it difficult to discuss anything other than what was taking place.

Two weeks and multiple visits later, Louis put the author's name down on a list at the door of Shelbourne Park, so he did not have to leave his station every time the author visited. And so the latter could attend any time, take notes and observe Louis and his father, alongside the crowd, the dogs and the interactions that took place, simply for the sake of experiencing the environment.

The author's persistence and struggle to comprehend how the dogs were evaluated, eventually led to Louis's father explaining the tricks of the trade; then, what Louis was like as a child, how and why he came to follow in his father and grandfather's footsteps; how he came to make the mistakes he did and how he learnt from them. He even revealed how Louis met his wife.

Listening to his father and laughing, Louis decided to meet the author away from the track and tell his side of the story. The interviews that followed took place at a café near Louis's home and were structured and recorded because Louis never had much time to talk.

It was not possible to record the conversations that took place beside the track; but the author continually took notes and stayed close to Louis, who did not truly open up until the author accidentally met his daughter and she applauded Louis for "finally sharing his secrets".

After which Louis no longer held back.

There were times when the author wondered if it would be possible to tell Louis's story because it did not feel appropriate to push or rush him. Luckily, the author's use of immersion eventually established trust and forged the understanding needed from both parties.

On a number of occasions, Louis gave the author a lift to and from the racetrack because she lived five minutes away from Louis's father's home. These moments spent in the car were the most illuminating spent with Louis, as he was either plotting his wins or putting off a post-mortem.

The day of Louis's narrative, the author was waiting outside his father's house, when Louis pulled up in his Mercedes and waited for his father to get in while reciting his odds. When Louis's father opened the passenger door, the author opened the backdoor and climbed in, where she witnessed the dialogue between Louis and his father, noticing the odd mood Louis was in.

When they arrived at the racetrack, the author followed them inside the stadium and took note of the growing crowd and the communication between Louis and his father. The races began as per usual, except Louis seemed to be distracted by an old dog that he had not seen race in over two years.

An hour later, the author had to leave and said goodbye to Louis, who barely noticed. The next day, Louis called and asked if it was possible to meet at his favourite café, where he sat sipping on a latte and explaining his uncharacteristic behaviour the previous night: he and his wife had separated.

Sitting opposite the author, with a Dictaphone in front of him, Louis listed the reasons he thought his marriage failed. And why he would never give up bookmaking. Then, he described how his home and life no longer seemed to fit him, and how he had spent the rest of that night, after the author left and he dropped his father home. It was the most honest and open Louis had been.

The author spent several more nights at the track with Louis and his father, as they both believed the dog track would feature centrally in his story.

V

LITERARY TECHNIQUES

In 1972, Tom Wolfe concluded that the extraordinary power of the 'new journalism' was derived from four literary devices - scene-by-scene construction, dialogue, third person point-of-view and the recording of everyday gestures and symbolic details (Wolfe, 1972). The author of this practice-based project incorporated these devices into the 13 narratives by carefully documenting the information gathered - in recordings and handwritten notes - and practising immersion, which enabled her to become familiar with subjects' mannerisms and learn how to listen to the stories they told while evaluating the emotion and value their words carried by recognising and decoding their behaviour.

The implausibility of capturing a whole person on the page (Norman, 2009, p.61), ensured the author acknowledged the "imagination's role in representing reality from a unique angle," (Morton, 2018, p.95) and implemented this element by carefully selecting scenes and encounters that would illustrate a variety of the subjects' characteristics and the issues facing them. And by representing and supporting the narratives' idea and themes with the most illuminating dialogue and details.

Inspired by Ernest Hemingway's ability to capture his subject's voices, allowing them to tell their side of the story, the author used a Dictaphone to record as much dialogue as possible; then transcribed the recordings and used them as references, while continually relistening to them, noting the natural tone and tempo of the subjects' voices and applying it to the sentence structure. The emotion and urgency driving the scenes was achieved by shifting from long to short phrases: another trait of Hemingway's work.

As for aesthetics, the author was motivated by Joan Didion's descriptions in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem,* because she painted her scenes vividly, along with the social issues belonging to their settings.

"One is standing on a highway in the middle of a vast hostile desert looking at an eighty-foot sign which blinks 'Stardust' or 'Caesar's Palace'. Yes, but what does that explain? This geographical implausibility reinforces the sense that what

happens there has no connection with 'real' life."

Joan Didion

(2008, p.98)

Aiming to produce this aesthetic awareness, the author frequented each of the environments portrayed and spoke to the locals/regulars, hoping to gain an insight into the history of the space and communicate the meaning it held for the community, such as in *The Voice*:

"Standing on the highest balconies of the flats, they (the locals) would look down on the city: the banks, offices, restaurants and boutiques that paved the way to the horizon. They would convince themselves, under the clouds and the stars, that they were going to make it. Then, they would abandon their aspirations, leaving them to balance on the ledge, when they looked down at the bars and barbed wire confining them, reminding them of what they were expected to be: criminals, addicts and scumbags. They were not meant to succeed."

Faced with complicated and technical topics, the author did not shy away, no matter how long it took to gain a complete understanding of an issue. In the case of *The Bookmaker,* the author struggled to find a coherent way to write about the process of evaluating the dogs and compiling the odds, until reading Adam Smith's *The Money Game* and identifying the simple way he presented information.

When writing each story, the author aspired to create a lively set of events happening in real time and deploy other literary devices, such as onomatopoeia, most notably and extravagantly used by Tom Wolfe. For example, when the young boy on his bike enters or leaves a scene, "tick-tick-ticking" as he peddled away.

The work of Jimmy Breslin strengthened the author's belief in telling stories about ordinary people and their day-to-day lives, alongside the possibility of creating a sense of intimacy, not only with the characters and their thoughts, but with New York City.

"Later that night, Klein the lawyer, an island of silence in a loud room, stood at the picture window of his living room and stared down at the lights of Queens Boulevard. After a while, bars appeared in the window."

Jimmy Breslin

(O'Neill, 1984, p.163)

The author sought out moments like this in the 13 subjects' lives and tried to embody the effects of their surroundings on their internal dialogue, such as in *The Homeless:*

"Kev took a second to savour the syrup of Nina's smile, before making his way, cautiously, to the back wall, where he urinated under a tree. Looking up at the stars, he saw prison bars instead of branches, then wondered what he had expected; why had he even bothered?"

Similarly, the author was captivated by Charles Dickens's proficiency in depicting how time had treated certain parts of London City in his series, *Sketches by Boz,* and tried to accomplish this in *The Mother:*

"Walking up to the top of the road, Shauna reached the place where the flats used to be. She looked up about as high as where she had lived, where she had lingered between the concrete and stars. Then, her eyes traced a line to where the steps would have been. To where she found a baby when she was Sara's age."

But the most effective technique the author copied from the greats - George Orwell, Hunter S. Thompson, Gay Talese, Martha Gellhorn, Walt Harrington, Zora Neale Hurston and Hutchins Hapgood - was establishing open communication with each of her 13 subjects. The bondings built on the author's understanding, openness and capacity to relate, stimulated new lines of questioning and deepened the connection between the author and the subject, to a point where the "doubling may express itself in a rupturing of the writer's persona," (Alexander, 2009, p.58).

VI

REFLECTIONS

For a literary journalist to succeed, they must have the time to build relationships with their subjects, as the value of the information they receive will depend on trust and respect. There is no way of telling what a person has experienced. Nor is there a way of knowing whether or not they will share it with you. But you may notice when certain events and emotions do not add up, which may tell you more than your subjects are prepared to. So, it is up to the literary journalist to decide if she can afford the time.

The author began this project with a list of professions and reasons why and how they would reveal the reality of life in Dublin City; yet the author did not consider whether it would be possible to witness all of the subjects and practitioners fulfil every aspect of their job. In the case of *The Accountant*, Viola, a lap dancer at night, the author could not follow her upstairs to the dance parlour, where she would dance for her customers. The author could sit with her or near her at the club and witness the men watching her, approaching her and chatting to her, commissioning her and following her up the stairs, then returning when they were ready; but the author had to rely on Viola's detailed descriptions of the dances and the clients' reactions, once she sat back down. Or when the author visited Viola at home, met her mother and her daughter, spent time with her in the daylight and saw the piles of books that surrounded her when she studied. Viola also provided the author with a dance preview and tutorial, as she was determined to share how and why she did what she did. The author would not have been able to tell Viola's story with such accuracy if it was not for their mutual determination.

Another element the author did not or could not plan for was the subjects' circumstances, such as the homeless couple, whose families could not be interviewed due to the nature of the couple's situation. The author did talk to the people who worked with them at a homeless centre and met a few of their acquaintances; but they were the most difficult subjects to work with because of the uncertainty they faced every day, such as the battery dying on their phone, a fight breaking out or an arrest taking place.

To complete this story, the author spent hours waiting for no one to arrive, which took its toll considering the relationship the author had built with the couple.

The author would worry about what had happened to them, then visit their regular haunts but rarely find them due to the nomadic life they led. Sometimes, they would arrive for a meeting, devastated by another hurdle they had encountered and the discussion the author had planned would have to take place another day. Which took up a lot of time. But the author continued to remember what Tom Wolfe said: “People who become overly sensitive on this score should never take up the new style of journalism,” (Wolfe, 1975, p.67).

The most crucial piece of advice is: do not give up.

If interested and invested in your subjects’ lives, you will have the ability and the endurance to weather the storms that come, because you will recognise the role literary journalism has played in spurring change over the years and believe that your subjects’ voices deserve to be heard. It is not easy work; but it is worth every moment, especially when you understand that “to do this work well, you must find your own way and make your own mistakes,” (Kramer, 2007, p.59).

CONCLUSION

"Like good woodworkers, automobile designers and architects, journalists are constantly producing useful products that are unique. In that sense, they are artists - not fine artists, like poets and landscape painters - but artists nevertheless."

Warren G. Bovee

(1999, p.170)

If the human condition consists of "everyday personal theories and belief systems, including religious faith, spirituality, freedom of will, the principles of ethics, social responsibility, and other values which are shaped by education, individual life experience and culture," (Horodecka, 2014, p.55), why should journalists be confined to an objective formula? And why should they be refused their place in the literary world, when literature is defined as "written expressions of human emotions and thoughts," (Rhee, 2011, p.295)? There is no more time for fiction writers and journalists to fight over who can use what literary device, especially when we know "war is a conundrum and no writer has ever sorted it all out," (Norman, 2009, p.52). It is time journalists embraced their legacy and executed their goal - to provide the public with useful information - to the fullest of their abilities, as it is understood "that human beings construct their identities by finding something to be normal against," (Pauly, 2011, p.73).

Although literary journalism is alive and well, there are still murmurs of uncertainty and hesitancy towards the journalistic form because of the absence of academic discipline, the neglect of the form's rich history and the disregard for its original nomenclature (Keeble, 2018, p.865). It is imperative that the form is accepted at every level and journalists are supplied with the literary arsenal they need to enable

the public to make better informed decisions, if the disconnect developing between the press and the public in certain countries, is to be rectified.

It is no surprise that literary journalism takes time and money to accomplish. But there has never been a time when funding was not an issue for the press (Hargreaves, 2003, p.34). Nor was there a time "when more people have consumed and discussed more journalism and literature," (Boynton, 2019, p.179), implying there is a market and a reason for literary journalism to be accepted in the academic world and in newsrooms. Despite the growing number of translations of works of literary journalism and the increase of related modules delivered at universities - greatly influenced by the International Association of Literary Journalists (Bak, 2011, p.4) - the need to remove the automatic expectancy of "killer news" (Merritt, 1997, p.12) is essential to the continued development of journalism - both straight and literary.

There is no denying that objectivity plays a central and important role in journalism. It is a goal journalists strive to attain, which is evident in the lengths they go to - even risking their careers or lives - simply to provide the truths they discovered without the tarnish of bias or incredibility.

There is also no denying journalism's impact.

Since conceived, it has shaped and moulded society. It has smashed barriers and birthed political policies. It has changed lives. Sometimes, it has even saved them.

Other times, the lives of journalists have been lost.

"Forty-two journalists and media workers have been killed while doing their jobs this year, according to the International Federation of Journalists' annual tally. A further 235 are in prison in cases related to their work, the report showed."

(Guardian, 2020)

As discussed in the *Literature Review*, there have been times when the practice of journalism has been seen as treason, yet the journalists never gave up. Instead, they armoured themselves with aliases and

sharpened their craft. Surely, the modern realm of journalism should be allowed to do the same. Surely, the fundamental purpose of journalism - to hold those in power accountable and provide the people with a voice - deserves to access its historic lineage, and all of its resources, if it is to continue on its ground-breaking path and communicate its message in the best possible way. The resurgence of literary journalism has served "to problematise both the practice and the consumption of journalism, allowing us to glimpse other possibilities while its empathic qualities disturb some of the professionalised discourse of distanciation and force us anew to ponder what the motivations for such neutrality might be and whose purposes it may serve," (Keeble, 2012, p.396); thus indicating that the last century, vexed by corporate interests, public relations and sensationalism, is rattling and ready to crumble.

This practice-based project explored the process of immersion and found that literary journalism is built upon the subjects' trust in the journalist and the quality of the information gathered depends on the respect their relationship has garnered. It also concluded that the amount of time spent with the subjects and the people close to them determined the level of understanding gained, while also providing an opportunity to witness the moments they value most and observe them in the environments that determine their reality.

The search for meaning beyond words and facts was identified in the monotony of the day-to-day and recognisable only when the practitioner could decipher the subjects' tell-tale behaviours and the difference between what was being said and what was not, against the backdrop of chaos and silence. But the importance of remembering that "in the interview method, the participant observer enters the reality of his research subject through empathy," (Vargas, 2018, p.734), is integral to achieving this goal and greatly helped by the literary journalist's ability to communicate openly and relate to their subjects, who are taking a risk simply by talking.

Finally, the time will come for the literary journalist to transcribe their interviews, organise their notes and begin to plot the narratives of their stories by selecting the events - either witnessed or recollected - that best support the theme and idea. Then, it is time to consider the literary devices available and use them to do what the perfect writer would do in Walt Whitman's words, which is "make words sing,

dance, kiss, do the male and female act, bear children, weep, bleed, rage, stab, steal, fire cannon, steer ships, sack cities, charge with cavalry of infantry, or do anything that man or woman or the natural powers can do," (Underwood, 2018, p.142); just be sure to capture the raw and rugged aspects of the reality being portrayed because the instigator of change is in the details. And as long as truth and integrity are the foundation, there should be no opposing the form or technique used.

"You get hooked trying, hooked looking for the meaning behind all

that loss, all that waste. You look and look,

and before you know it, ten years have passed."

Michael Norman

(2009, p.51)

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TICK.

TICK.

BANG!

By

Maeve Devoy

CHAPTERS

I

THE VOICE

16:45 Tuesday

It was the first Tuesday in November. There were red and yellow leaves falling from the trees on North Circular Road. The wind was spinning them in rings around the cold. Darkey could not take the cracked emerald of her eyes off them; restless and reckless, they were riding through the air without a second to spare. They did not care what had happened there. What the newspapers said. Or whose blood was shed. They were not scared. They were dancing.

Darkey was sitting on the cushioned bay of her parents' front window, surrounded by handwritten sheets of music for her five o'clock singing student. She was trying to finish the lesson plan when the leaves had stirred her into silence.

Above them, all the windows and doors of the flats and houses were locked. The curtains were closed. The lights were off. The sirens were always wailing, while the streets, just like the leaves, were dead; along with too many of Darkeys' family and friends.

Those remaining wondered who would be next.

Would things ever be the same?

"Never," Darkey said.

Shifting away from the window, her dark chestnut hair fell behind her shoulders. Her diamond shaped face was graced with a distracting beauty that rarely wrinkled with emotion.

She was looking down at the sheets of music when a car came speeding up the road. She turned to the window just as it passed by, sending the leaves into disarray.

Snapping her fingers, Darkey smirked, knowing that she would never let herself be so vulnerable. She was not raised to blow away.

She grew up in the flats across the road, where the people took care of themselves. They did not ask strangers for help. Or call the Gardai.

They hustled for everything.

Standing on the highest balconies of the flats, they would look down on the city: the banks, offices, restaurants and boutiques that paved the way to the horizon. They would convince themselves, under the clouds and the stars, that they were going to make it.

Then, they would abandon their aspirations, leaving them to balance on the ledge, when they looked down at the bars and barbed wire confining them, reminding them of what they were expected to be: criminals, addicts and scumbags. They were not meant to succeed.

Darkey was an only child, though she never felt like one. She was always with her cousins, sharing beds and burdens, dinners and turns pushing the pram or telling bedtime stories. She was small and easy to lose in a crowd, until she opened her mouth.

Singing from the steps of the flats, into the city and back, Darkey turned heads as she passed by; people stopped what they were doing to listen to her. To see the girl sweetening the streets with melodies her bones seemed barely big enough to hold.

In her dreams, she was a dancer; studying in London, attending auditions and bowing before a black-tie audience. As soon as she could walk, she took classes in gymnastics, hip-hop, freeform, ballet and tap. Nobody could say no to her.

Or tell her when to sing.

She trained Monday to Friday, practiced in her spare time and competed at the weekends, when she lay in bed at night, with curling rags in her hair. Staring at the plastic constellations stuck to her ceiling, she would wait for the sound of her friends, laughing and cheering, returning from the park or the bonfire.

Once it was quiet again, Darkey would fall asleep, dreaming of her routine.

Looking down at the street, where shadows were swelling, she picked up her phone and checked the time. It was five to five in the afternoon.

She wondered where her student was, just as her phone began to ring in her hand; she dropped and caught it, smiling to herself, before she saw who was calling. She sat up, crossed her legs and answered.

A few seconds later, she was dragging her long black painted nails along the cushioned edge of the seat. With a look of disgust hardening her face, contradicting the compassion her voice was trying to convey, she hung up.

Since the last drug feud shooting, she had lost two long-term singing students, not including the one that she had just lost on the phone, knowing that she could not afford to lose any more. She could not listen to more excuses, stained with the same tone.

She knew they were scared. That they had already made up their minds.

When they asked her to travel to them, she flinched and declined. She would not compromise her community. Nor would she take her business somewhere else.

She would not sit there, crying over her losses either. Gathering the sheets of music around her, she stacked them into piles, while reminding herself that she was 12-years-old when she first realised she would never be a professional dancer.

That she would never be good enough.

She would spend days perfecting her stance, then move onto her pirouette, or her arabesque. There was always something she had to correct. She was never happy.

No matter how often she won, she had to push herself to do better.

There were too many people who could not believe she had made it that far. That someone from her area had an interest in those dance classes, competitions and roles.

She laughed at them. They knew nothing.

Darkey understood by then, why she could not quit; they were different. She had not sabotaged any of their routines. Or believed that they could be so ignorant.

She just kept showing up and winning; telling herself, over and over, that failure was not an option. That she had to prove them wrong.

She caught her reflection in the window, gasped and began to fiddle with her hair, when a blue door flung open on the second floor of the flats. Two young boys charged out and down the steps, banging shoulders and cursing. The door slammed behind them.

The pigeons, loitering on the ledge, scarpered into the air.

The boys reached the bottom step, where they leapt onto the pavement; one right after the other, smooth and deliberate as a conductor's hand signalling the orchestra to ready itself. Pressing her forehead to the windowpane, Darkey knew where the boys were going; why they were tearing through the dead dancing leaves.

Racing against the gale galloping towards the coast, they were pistons firing at the dusk and smoke. They never let the road, or each other, out of sight.

They knew the flames would not wait if they did not make it to the Royal Canal with haste.

It was the quickest way to the bonfire.

“Fuck this,” Darkey said.

****

Leaving the sheets of music behind, spilling onto the ground, Darkey walked into the hallway, put on an oversized hoody and runners, grabbed her keys and left the house. It did not matter how she looked; where she was going, there was nothing she could hide. Outside, the wind consumed her, pushing her onwards. She pulled up her hood and followed the lead. With a steady but deadly rhythm to the beat her feet were keeping on the pavement, she put her head down and kept her mouth shut. When she was ready, the words would come.

Turning a corner, she slowed down.

The shadows surrounding the orange street lights were filled with memories she had sewn into those streets. Like sheets of armour, they protected her.

She knew the face to every bouquet, necklace and note, pinned or tied to the railings and poles. She had a story for each, and for each of the bereft, ridiculed and robbed.

She even had a story for the daisies that she spotted, daring to grow in the cracks of the pavements. She used to collect them for whoever was in trouble, until she got older and realised everyone was struggling. That there would never be enough daisies.

“I was never young,” Darkey said.

Stopping at the side of the road, the traffic extinguished her words. She waited for the pedestrian light, then crossed. Noticing that the sun had been slung to the roar of twilight, she hurried over to the bridge and glanced around, instinctively, before walking down to the water’s edge. Shivering as she let out her breath, she stared down into the canal’s depth.

She used to go there every day before training. Or when the Gardai raided the flats. Or when they appeared from behind yellow tape, declaring another neighbour dead on the street.

Turning on her heel, she began to walk with the flow of the stream. She never wanted to leave her community. She was safe there, where no one judged her.

When she crossed the River Liffey, her ears popped. Straight away, she puckered up, thinking that if people believed what they read in the newspapers, then they believed that she was up to something. Once, she destroyed a shop's entire newspaper stand, because she knew the 'thug' in one of the headlines; screaming her dead friend's name, she was escorted off the premises.

He was not a criminal. But who cared? He was from the area; they were all the same.

Darkey knew a lot of people with addictions, convictions and mental illnesses. She never saw the difference between them and others trying to do better for themselves or their families. They deserved to be happy.

Reaching the next bridge, she stepped under the stone arch into the pitch black, without blinking. Her footsteps echoed around her, while she moved along the path that she knew like a vein leading straight to a beating heart; there was no way she could falter. The worst thing she could ever do was forget where she was from.

At 18, she left to study performing arts at college in Belfast; where there were concrete floors and too many girls with eating disorders. It was a cut-throat environment in a cut-throat industry, just the kind of thing Darkey was used to.

She excelled in her first year.

Travelling home every weekend, to mend what the city had broken, Darkey was faced with the fact that she had lost more than anyone else she had ever met; she oozed an unquenchable emptiness. Andshe gave up on love as it was more potential pain.

Sick of explaining herself, she cut herself off, showed no emotions, threw no punches and focused on her dream. She learnt from her mistakes, pushed everyone out of her way and trampled them, if she had to; it had been done to her.

"Fuck love," she said.

In her second year of college, she was done watching her tongue. She no longer sang or cared what it took to succeed; all she could see was the failure expected of her.

It was propelling her lifts, blinding her from herself, while the poor college facilities were giving her injuries. Walking up the stairs, on her way to the Christmas ballet rehearsal, limping with shin splints, a bone in her leg fractured.

There was silence, except for the crack that shattered her dreams, left the students around her gasping, tiptoeing away; knowing that she would never dance professionally again. Darkey knew it too. But she held onto her tears, until she was alone.

She emerged from the other side of the bridge, where the wind tore off her hood and swung the sweet scent of soot at her. She stood still to breathe it in.

The sound of pebbles grinding against the dirt behind her startled her. She turned and shot a look into the darkness beneath the bridge. She did not hear the tick-tick-ticking of the red tricycle that was following her. Nor did she see the young boy who was peddling it in pursuit of her shadow. With mousy brown hair and thin freckled cheeks, speckled with dirt, his eyes were a shocking sky blue.

He did not move.

Darkey did.

****

Picking a pebble off the pavement, Darkey kicked it into the darkness under the bridge. It scuttled and plopped into the canal, illuminating the quiet. She took a step closer, tilting her head. The boy was holding his breath and his tricycle, safely out of reach, wrapped in the shadows, where he intended to stay. Darkey knew his name, though never remembered it as often as she saw him peddling around the streets; if she had seen him earlier that evening, she would have told him how to get to the bonfire. Fortunately, he already knew.

When a gust of wind came and ruffled Darkey with its smoky fingers, she shrugged and smiled, thinking that she must be mad. She turned and stared at the wispy clouded night.

“I was never young,” she said.

She looked ahead and saw the somersaulting leaves on the path. Walking with uncertainty, she plucked a soft soprano’s melody from the wind and began to sing. She closed her eyes, swooned and searched the air for the notes she needed.

The pace she was keeping on the pavement was as smooth as she sounded. The lyrics on her tongue were words she thought she could not write because she never sang about her life.

In that moment, she knew it was time.

When she injured her leg, she was helpless. She continued to go to classes for two weeks on crutches. That was how long she could withstand the torture. Then, she packed up her stuff and went home.

In the midst of blaming everything and everyone else, she realised she had sabotaged herself. She never listened to anyone else.

Not even to the doctor who told her to rest her leg the first time she got shin splints. Her entire focus rested on her competition.

With nowhere to go, and nothing to do, she had to sit by that window, dissecting every decision that she had ever made. She went through her old notebooks out of boredom; she opened boxes full of pictures, trophies, medals and mementos from those she had lost. Amongst the memories buried with the hurt, she found herself.

Then, everything made sense.

For years her mother had been begging her to quit dancing. To sing instead. She would record Darkey singing in the shower and play it back to her, over and over. Darkey would tell her to leave it alone. That it did not matter how happy it made her; she had to train.

By the time her leg healed, Darkey had changed.

She was teaching dance classes in the community centre near her grandmother's house, where Darkey's parents moved when her grandmother passed away. Darkey remembered what her grandmother used to say to her. To never hold back. To sing her heart out.

Darkey always swore that she would.

After buying a cheap guitar, she took some singing lessons. She no longer needed to run from her pain; having sat with it, she understood it. Then, she found a way to use it.

Beginning the following September, she moved to Liverpool to study music. She did not return for four years, until she had a degree, countless performances, collaborations, scores written and future projects. The singing lessons were her bread and butter.

Reaching the bridge at the end of the path, she let the melody fade from her mouth, before looking around and jogging up the hill. She did not see the boy farther back, peddling his red, ticking tricycle; trying to string her notes together.

When the pedestrian light turned green, Darkey crossed the road.

Disappearing through a fence, she scaled down the dirt and stones to the canal; walked across the grass to the railway track that had been out-of-service for as long as she could remember. It had been a cemetery for cigarette butts, crushed cans, hearts and morale, footprints and soleless sneakers. It was a constant reminder of why she had to make it.

Throwing her hood up and her head down, she stepped out from the arch and strode towards the blazing crown of the city; where her family, neighbours and friends were gathered, chatting and arguing over who had the best chance of winning the lotto.

The children were chasing each other, lighting sparklers from the flames of the bonfire.

“I was never young,” Darkey said.

“But I am not yet old.”

As she began to sing the melody, a train chugging on the air in the distance, rattled the railway tracks like violin strings. The wheels beat a rhythm on the iron beneath them.

For an instant, Darkey thought it was the beginning of the city’s symphony. That it must have been what the leaves were dancing to.

Then, she heard a familiar tune, chiming over the crackling bonfire. She stopped singing, looked up and saw the crowd, arm-in-arm, swaying and harmonising.

She took a few steps closer.

Recognising the song, she started laughing and running toward them. She had co-written the track with a band in England. It was all over the radio. All over the world.

When she reached the singing mob, she embraced them as they closed in around her, hugging her. She sang with them, noticing her mother, who had seen Darkey’s work all over the ground at home and had known exactly what had happened.

And exactly where to go.

Where there were no lights, Darkey’s neighbours deposited the wood, scrap and tyres for the bonfire, which the children had been collecting and competing for all year. They spent days stacking its base. Then one evening, they watched it burn.

Together, they stood, purging anything that was holding them back. They celebrated how far they had come, remembering the reason they were all there.

They were survivors.

Darkey looked around at them, smiling with pride. She turned to her mother and watched her teach the children her song; though she could not sing.

She owned an alterations business and designed the outfits Darkey needed for her performances. She was Darkey's biggest fan. And her best friend.

Her father was still at work.

Darkey remembered her record label was waiting for her music. She walked over to warm her hands on the bonfire and stared into the fury of the flames, inhaling the smoke.

She did not see the boy on his red tricycle, tick-tick-ticking along the edge of the light, humming her tune. Usually, he would peddle around the outskirts, without saying a word.

Maybe he found his voice, when Darkey found hers.

"I was never young," Darkey said.

"But I am not yet old."

II

THE BOOKMAKER

18:30 Tuesday

Everyone wants to be a winner. To have the opportunity to predict the future. To place a bet, or take a bet, and know they were right. That the stars had aligned just for them. If they did not, Louis would be out of business. He calculated the odds and the dogs raced. It was an old game. But it was a good one. And he had been playing it long enough to know that for punters to put their money down, he had to give them a taste of what they wanted.

In the hallway mirror, he checked himself from every angle. His tailored suit hung handsomely. His silver hair combed back perfectly. His watch glimmered. Nothing, it seemed, was out of place, until he smiled; then, the nerve below his right eye trembled.

He dropped the act and grabbed his car keys. The pleasantries were not an absolute necessity. But getting to work on time was. Stepping outside, he locked the door behind him.

The two-storey detached house dominated the darkness around him. He crossed the concrete to his Mercedes, hopped in, buckled up and took off into the mountains, down the winding road that led to the motorway.

He did not look back.

He had an hour to collect his father and get to the track before betting began. He reached over to the passenger seat, grabbed that night's race-card and balanced it on the dash. Reciting the odds he had scribbled down that morning at the race meeting, he stalled on the dog that had taken his breath away; She-Ra was her name.

She was a stayer.

Pure white with pink paws, she never faltered in form or lost. She was an impeccable animal. Louis would not deny it. He had put his money on her, more times than not.

Then, she disappeared from the race-card. That was two years ago.

When he saw her name earlier, he was surprised. She was racing alongside two young dogs that had been winning recently.

She was too old, he thought.

20/1.

The numbers were traced, over and over, in black ink beside her name. Those odds would reel the punters in, for a look if nothing else; it would set their blood racing, which was exactly what Louis wanted. He sat back and accelerated.

The dogs were his entire focus for the next few hours: he needed a level head. He pulled a Marlboro Red cigarette from his shirt pocket, sparked it and rolled down the window. The wind sliced through the car, cutting away any comfort.

He had never dreamt of being a bookmaker. A pilot, maybe. A racing car driver, maybe.

Never a fourth generation bookmaker, hoping that he looked the part. That he had taken the gamble out of gambling. At 54, he believed it was too late to change.

He had no qualifications. No other work experience.

There were deep lines carved around his eyes, which was what he got for spending a lifetime beside the track. As a young boy, he worked for his father and his grandfather, running up and down the bookmaking line, keeping track of their competition's odds.

He was the quickest too; but everyone knew that Louis enjoyed a bit of friendly competition. In school, he played poker instead of going to class, reckoning that it did not matter, once he won.

He tried the suit and tie, nine-to-five job when he was 17: he went to work in an office and quit two days later. He could not hack the pace.

His father was not surprised. He told Louis it was time for him to join the family business. He had to start earning some money.

Louis agreed with him.

At 19, he was the youngest person to ever apply for a bookmaking licence. The Gardai forced him to find a guarantor; without hesitation, his father obliged.

Louis had seen a lot of guys go bust: the money was not coming in, so they could not pay back their borrowings. Other guys walked away because they were losing. They could not see how it would ever work out. Either way, they were left with nothing.

Louis went into it with his eyes open.

There was one track, 12 races, four nights a week to be exact; the races were every 12-14 minutes, which left the betting time at four to five minutes. When the money comes in, the dogs go out and the odds fluctuate: it was easy enough, once he got the hang of it.

Most importantly, Louis understood he had signed up for a life with no guarantees. And he had no one else to blame.

Take the traffic lights just up ahead, turning from amber to red at the edge of the city.

“Will I make it?” Louis asked.

“Will I take the chance?”

Every young fella has a heavy foot - try telling them to come back tomorrow. That there was no such thing as the last race. They will not listen to it. Louis did not.

He thought he knew it all in the beginning. That his father and his grandfather were outdated. Then, he went belly up, just a few weeks after going out on his own.

He had nothing.

Speeding toward the changing light, he gritted his teeth as the adrenalin shackled the breath that was charging through his chest. He eased off the accelerator and exhaled.

That was what bookmaking was all about: weighing up the odds. They were all a bookmaker had in his favour. Stopped at the red light, he lit another cigarette.

He was an old dog. He did not need to win every race.

****

Parked outside his father’s house, Louis kept the car running and beeped the horn. There had been more traffic in the city than he had expected. He was running late. Checking his face in the rear-view mirror, he cracked another smile that made him shiver and look away. He picked up the race-card and began to tap the steering wheel, with his eyes darting from the odds to the car clock. He stopped and undid the top button of his crisp white shirt. He was at the top of his game. He had nothing to worry about.

“Are you ever going to give those cigarettes up?” his father, Louis. Snr., asked.

“The smell off them!”

Louis jumped.

His father lowered himself into the passenger seat, shut the door and buckled his seatbelt. He turned to stare at Louis, who was looking at him, when a set of passing headlights poured over the car’s windscreen; filling the space between them and defining their likeness, their pressed suits and ties, matched with cool and hardened eyes.

Once they put their tweed caps on straight, they turned away.

“You’re wrong about that one, son,” his father said.

He was pointing a wrinkled finger at the 20/1, written beside She-Ra’s name. Louis shook his head and pulled off.

“It’s nice to see you too,” Louis said.

They laughed.

That was not the end of it though; as Louis drove towards the racetrack, his father reminded him that he had learnt from the best. That even as a young boy, he would have known better.

Or at least, he should have.

“What are you thinking?” his father asked.

“Of course, an old dog can win!”

Louis agreed.

But his father did not know She-Ra the way he did. Louis was being reasonable: the other dogs were stronger.

“Give it a rest, please,” Louis said.

Then, there was silence, except for the city, shining like honeycomb around them, humming like muffled bees. It reminded Louis of the arguments his parents used to have; how they would shut their bedroom door and lower their angry voices, then come back out, laughing and blushing at each other. They were always kind to each other.

They raised four children and bought a bigger house, a better car, when they could afford to. The trick to it, his father had taught him, was to leave the business at the track. He never took it home, or his frustration out on others.

He never spoke of winning either. He either broke even or lost. And eventually, Louis's mother stopped asking.

Louis met his wife, Anna, when he was 21. He was on holiday with friends in Portugal, when he spotted her dancing alone at a bar. He would not leave without getting her name, or without learning that she was 20, from Spain and working there for the summer.

Six weeks later, Louis was still there; where he proposed to Anna and she said yes. He had never been more sure of a bet. With her dark hair and charm, Anna made him believe for the first time that maybe there was such a thing as luck.

Louis's father had to call and ask if he planned to come back to work? Their time was up.

They moved back to Dublin, raised three children, bought a bigger house and car. They had everything that people wanted, except time together.

Louis was working almost every night of the week, every holiday and long weekends. He was never around or able to attend any of the family gatherings; if he wanted to make a living out of bookmaking, he had to be standing by the track, watching the dogs. It was that simple.

He could not afford excuses.

Or illnesses.

Most people assume the bookmaker always wins. But he does not. He has bad days, weeks and months. There was no telling when it could all go wrong.

Bookmaking was a slippery pole. It had no memory. No favourites.

He had to be nice to people on the way up because he would be meeting them on the way down. It was not a matter of maybe, but when.

At first, Anna understood; but after 23 years of marriage, why could Louis not take more time off? Why did she have to do everything on her own?

Louis tried to follow his father's advice, but by the time the children were grown, the arguments were over. As a couple, they were at a dead end.

They lost sight of each other, trying to protect themselves. And for the first time, Louis could not tell what Anna was thinking. Or who she would put her money on.

"You alright there, son?" his father asked.

Louis jolted upright.

The stadium was just up ahead, bleaching the night with its fluorescent lights. He tightened his grip on the wheel, then turned into the track carpark, rolled up his window and parked beside the entrance, where security had designated a spot, to save his father a longer walk.

"Yeah," Louis said.

"I'm grand."

And as he picked up the race-card, the thoughts of his wife slipped away.

****

Inside the stadium, everything changed. Time moved faster. Everything got louder. Even the crowds of family and friends were in a fiendish frenzy, dictated by where the money was going. Or rather, on which dog. It was as if nothing else lay beyond the stench of opportunity and stale beer. It was infectious. Louis could not deny it. He loved the buzz.

It was the reason he never hung around after the meeting. The only thing that remained the same was Louis. With him, what you saw was what you got.

It was called fixed odds.

The better bet.

Louis walked ahead to open the track door for his father, who held Louis's arm, closing the door behind them. In front, the track lay quiet and untouched. Louis took a moment to savour how it looked before the mayhem of winners and losers erupted.

Pulling a cigarette from his coat pocket, Louis lit it and exhaled. The smoke clouded around him, then dissipated, just as the stars abandoned their robes and the moon spied all below it.

He reminded himself, as he always did before taking any bets, that luck had nothing to do with his odds. After putting out his cigarette, he tightened his coat collar, put on his leather gloves and walked toward his spot at the top of the bookmakers' line.

Thinking back on the time he had spent at the bottom, working his way up, a smile crossed his lips. There were only a few bookmakers left, so it was not much of a line. But that did not matter to Louis. He was exactly where he was supposed to be.

His father was already seated in his fold-out chair beside Louis's board. He was waving his watch at Louis, who liked to do his own parade before the races began.

"Nothing gets by you father, does it?" Louis said.

They laughed.

Louis patted his father's shoulder, then took off into the stands. With his race-card in hand, he moved without hesitation, and was greeted with warm smiles and easy laughter.

Anywhere else, it would have looked like friendship. Beside the track, it could only be about two things: the dogs or the cash.

After his lap, he returned to his board, where his runner, Matt, was waiting. He was an old friend, who had been a bookmaker for a season or two back in the day; but it did not work out for him. Louis liked him. He was great at his job.

When he filled Louis in on his rival's odds, he did not mention anything about She-Ra. And Louis did not have time to ask. The stands were filling up. The lure was pacing.

Louis checked his watch and took out a cigarette, then put it away and took a deep breath. Reminding himself the first race was always the worst, he examined the first group of dogs to be walked on the track's podium.

Then, stepping over to his board, he stuck out his neck and furrowed his brow. As the dogs were paraded, he inspected each one carefully. He did not display any odds, until he was certain he had priced them correctly.

"Here we go," his father said.

"Watch out."

A small crowd of punters descended from the stands. Louis stood with his hands in his coat pockets, facing them, ready to take their bets.

He smiled and moved amongst them effortlessly, charming them, taking their betting slips, cracking jokes and laughing while folding their cash. When the signal triggered, he stopped taking bets. He turned to face the track. Just as the lure passed, he froze.

The traps went up and the dogs charged out. Louis stood still, preparing himself for the worst. Even after laying the whole race, he did not smile or celebrate. He cleared his throat, then his board, paced the track wall and went over his numbers.

By the third race, his punting line was longer and more animated. He had to work quicker to keep track of the money, to place the dogs and take a breath.

The other bookmakers were not doing as well. But that did not surprise him. They kept going inside to keep warm. That was their first mistake.

Louis had not budged. He smoked a cigarette whenever he could. But that was it.

Before he knew it, it was the ninth race. He was staring at the 20/1 shot, pondering what could go wrong, when She-Ra appeared on the platform. Louis took a step back.

His favoured dog had barely aged a day.

Wearing the red number six, she stood beside her trainer and her competitors, in front of the shivering, swaying crowd, without turning her head or making a sound. Whether she was focused or tired, he could not tell. He examined the other dogs, then put up his odds.

She-Ra: 16/1.

Another queue started to form, full of rosy faces and questions about the 16/1. When betting time was over and the dogs were in their traps, there were only two bets, each of a fiver, placed on She-Ra. It was no shock to Louis, who got exactly what he wanted.

Bang!

The dogs were out.

Dog two, dog three and dog four were fighting for first. Dog one and dog five were tight behind them. She-Ra was on the outer edge, last but strong.

The first corner was a tight fit. The other dogs were too close. They were butting heads as they grappled with each other. The crowd was fixated on every bit of dirt that was kicked back on the track.

At the second corner, dog three slipped and went down and over his head. The other dogs went down with him. It was She-Ra who shot by, straight through the finish line.

The crowd erupted.

Louis howled.

It was a guttural sound, like a wolf that had gone too long without crossing the moon. It made him laugh momentarily. His mask slipped.

He took off his cap to fan his face, while the other dogs picked themselves up. Louis's father patted him on the back, then sat down.

"She did it," his father said.

But Louis barely heard him. He was looking from the track to the stands and back, slapping his hat off his leg. He knew he had gambled. He knew he had been lucky.

"She had a little help," Louis said.

Then, he fixed his hair and straightened his cap. The bookmaker was back. Once his odds for the next race were up, the queue grew steadily.

****

All debts settled, Louis could go home. His father was waiting for him, asleep in the car. Louis smiled with relief to see him. Since his mother died seven years ago, his father had not missed a night at the track. Louis opened the car door and threw his stuff on the back seat, then eased himself in, reversed and pulled off. The stadium lights shut down behind them. The city darkened. As the stars blew up the sky, Louis wished the track would not follow him home. He rolled down the window and lit another smoke.

It was not yet time for a post-mortem.

His father slept until they turned onto his street, where Louis could see the tip of a bonfire, burning beyond the rooftops. He pulled to a stop, waking his father, whose head bounced up with heavy eyes.

"Are you sure you're alright, son?" his father asked.

Louis laughed.

The seatbelt held his father up as he leaned forward, grasping his cap firmly between his hands. Noticing the hallway light that his father had left on, Louis reached across and lay a hand on his chest, then unbuckled him.

He was alright, Louis thought.

They both were.

They hugged, then said goodbye. Once his father was inside, Louis drove off, out of the city and back to the motorway, where the crystal lit night was laid out like loot on dark velvet. And where the dogs were no longer there to distract him, but to haunt him.

He turned on the radio.

Frank Sinatra's "That's Life" came crackling out. Louis turned up the volume and sang along. He let his mind visit 1983, when he was clerking for one of Ireland's greatest bookmakers, Billy Staunton, who wore a pin striped suit and fedora hat.

He dealt the cards at The World Poker Tournament in Las Vegas. Louis travelled with him as a clerk. He got to see the best players of that time playing one of his favourite games. Then, he saw Frank Sinatra perform.

How could he ever forget it?

He was born for it.

Driving up the winding road to his house, he parked and turned the engine off. The city was a twinkle behind him as the darkness painted over him.

He grabbed his things and stepped out of the car. He had not left any lights on. He could hardly see the thirsty plants bashing their heads against the windows and the walls. Since Anna left three weeks ago, everything had changed, except Louis.

Walking inside, he turned on every light, threw his things by the door and walked into the living room. After pouring himself a glass of whiskey, he sat down and took a long swig, before trying to think about what he had done wrong.

Then, he focused on the silence, confining the tiny tick of the expensive watch that entwined his wrist. Echoing through his life, somehow it no longer seemed to fit; along with the house that was now too big and the garden that was far too large without his Spanish love.

His wedding ring began to itch his skin, so he took it off and placed it on an empty coffee table. The only thing that felt right was his suit.

Why would he change?

He made himself comfortable, then sipped his drink. The race-card peeked out of his top pocket. The 20/1 was the perfect shot at the old dog's heart.

He sat there with all the lights on. The only thing he knew he could depend on was if there was money to be made at the track, he would be there calculating the odds. As any old bookmaker would say, he did not have to win them all.

He fell asleep in the chair, holding his glass, with the last drop left to drink.

III

THE ACCOUNTANT

00:00 Wednesday

At the stroke of midnight, a group of men in suits walked out of The Quays lap dancing club. They wore woozy smiles and loose ties. They had just bought eight dances off Viola. That put her at ten so far that night. A few more and she might smile. Sitting on a velvet sofa, wearing red laced lingerie and thigh high socks, she scanned the club floor with her cruel, blue eyes, calculating the potential profit. Minutes were money when she worked there.

Deciding to wait, she heaved her buxom like bait. Her belly button ring glittered in the dimmed light. Her dyed blonde hair had dark roots and ironed tips that curled against her pale shoulders. There were stretch marks lining her stomach and nothing she could do about them.

If men did not like her, they could go somewhere else.

“They’ll come crawling,” she said.

“They always do.”

Two other girls were working the stained red carpet. The younger was chatting with two men at a table. The other was slinking around the silver strip pole. Viola cringed as she caught a glimpse of her. She was reminded of why she never went near the pole.

There was no money in it. And unless the dancer could do the splits upside down, it put the punters off. Viola preferred to stick to what she was good at: counting.

Each dance was three minutes long. It cost €30, which meant €10 a minute. The dances were paid for at the reception to the dance parlour upstairs, where the profit from her first dance always went to the house. Everything after that, went into her pocket.

Lap dancing was legal and safe. The cash was untraceable: no records were kept. The money was worth it- if the women were able for it.

Despite what people believed, none of the women were forced to work there, or any other club she had worked. They were all there for the same thing.

Viola had met only one dancer whose boyfriend made her dance. All she did was cry on the club floor. She made nothing. Viola and the other dancers paid her airfare home to her mother in Romania. They stuck together that way. But not in any other.

There were rules, just like any job. They could not take their G-strings off. Or let the men touch them. Some dancers let men grope them, which gave the men the wrong idea.

Viola complained about it once; but her boss laughed at her. The women were making more money than he was. He could not see a problem.

When she started dancing four years ago, she was 23-years-old. She sat at the back of the club drinking, shaking and avoiding the men. Eventually, one of the older dancers approached her, telling Viola to come with her.

"You have to make money," the woman warned.

"The boss is watching."

Walking over to a table of two Indian men, the woman sat down and started talking. Viola followed her lead. She could barely breathe because of her nerves. Or maybe she had drank too much alcohol. Either way, she did not say a word.

A few minutes later, the son bought his father a dance from each of the women. The older woman stood up and winked at Viola. Then, she went to the dance parlour, where she performed first so Viola could see what she had to do.

It was the only bit of help Viola ever got.

Taking her clothes off was the easy part. Getting money out of the men was hard. They had to be told that it was ok for them to be there. That their wives and girlfriends had nothing to worry about. They were not swapping numbers or having sex. So they were not cheating.

Viola despised the men, though she usually disguised it. Some of them liked it, which did not surprise her. Nothing surprised her anymore. Only her ability to assess and adapt.

She bent over to pick up a champagne glass on the table, spilling just enough cleavage to turn some eyes. Her glass was filled with lemonade and sparkling water: it was called a Dazzler. The dancers got a commission for each one a customer bought them.

Viola drank nothing else.

Swallowing her last sup, a man stood up at the bar. She pulled up her socks, then looked in the opposite direction. She had spotted his wedding ring during an inspection of the club floor earlier, an instinct that the welt of experience had left on her.

It stung her every day, when she was walking in the light of the ordinary. When it was not necessary to price up the men she met. When it was necessary to trust someone.

Lap dancing was not a job for everyone. Some women stay just an hour, a day, a week and leave. The other dancers do not make it easy either. Nobody wants fresh competition.

“What’s wrecking your head?” a voice behind her asked.

It was the man from the bar, holding two drinks. She smiled and took a cigarette from the packet on the table, then began to twirl it between her fingers.

“You won’t believe me,” she said.

“Maths.”

He laughed.

“Why,” he asked.

She tilted her head, examining him.

“I’m the accountant,” she said.

He was sold.

****

His name was Eoin. He was at the club with a recently separated friend, who he left sitting at the bar, once the barman told him Viola was drinking a Dazzler. She introduced herself, then pointed at the sofa. He sat down, listening with a fixed smile, as she revealed she was studying accountancy. That she had sat an exam last week. And waiting for the results was pure torture. A lot of dancers use fake stories. Viola, however, could not lie.

When she did, she would forget what she said and make a fool of herself; though she did not tell the men everything either, just enough to get them to start sharing. At which point, she sat back, smiled and listened.

Perching on the edge of the sofa, she angled herself toward the room while leaning in to listen to Eoin. Some of the men wanted nothing more than counselling. They did not buy dances. They might tip her. But it was not enough. Not for what Viola needed.

She continually worked the floor with a flick of her hair; by shifting her thighs and playing with the cigarette in her hand. Those that spied on her from across the room, sat with reddening cheeks as her painted nails tap-tapped the table, teasing them.

She was in command.

“Let’s go for a dance,” Eoin said.

Entreating Viola, he stood up, demanding her full attention. She surveyed him curiously, then put the cigarette back in its box.

“Yes sir,” she replied.

As seductively as she could, she led the way to the dance parlour, swaying her bouncing hips. When she ascended the staircase, the light from above shone down between her thighs. Eoin tailed her quietly, eyeing her, with his hand gripping the rail.

At the top of the stairs, he paid for his dance before entering the parlour, where there were different sized cubby holes with two security men guarding them. Viola appreciated their presence. But it was awkward. She never liked a big audience.

She crossed the floor without looking at the security guards. She reached her dance room, pinched the black chiffon curtain, turned and held it open for Eoin. He stepped through and she followed, pointing at the cushioned alcove, signalling him to sit down.

He did what he was told. She closed the curtain.

When she first started dancing, she could not keep time. She would go over by a minute and the other dancers would complain about her, as if she was trying to give the men a free stir.

The dancers would say anything to get rid of each other. But Viola would never give the men anything that they did not pay for; the very thought of it made her skin crawl.

Now that she had her routine, she did the same thing over and over, unless a customer kept buying minutes off her. Then, she would do more of what he liked.

Maybe pull her G-string down a bit.

That was it.

Grooving to the music, she was hypnotic. The sweat beneath her eyes brandished their blue, every time she lifted her head to look at her customer. It was as if a great passion had consumed her. She was a professional.

She was thinking about the bins at home, when he reached out to put a hand on her. She slid out of reach, before standing up.

"Times up," she said and walked out.

If he wanted more time with her, he would have put the money down. As he now had something to think about, he might want more later.

Back downstairs, Eoin's newly separated friend was sitting at her table. She began to walk toward him, when the club door swung open and a group of drunken men stumbled through it, singing bawdy ballads. They wore football jerseys and dribbled with excitement.

Viola knew they would need a few moments to orientate themselves at the bar; once they had acclimatised, they would spend their money. She introduced herself to Eoin's friend, who ordered her another Dazzler and spoke too quietly for her to hear a word.

By the time Eoin returned, two of the men in GAA jerseys were sitting at a table opposite her, cracking jokes about their companions. They were celebrating a hurling match that they had won earlier that day.

Eoin and his friend excused themselves when they finished their drinks. Viola was disappointed, until she reckoned she would make more money. She was tired and the drunken men were amusing themselves; it was not long before all three women were working them.

"This is a disgrace," the eldest man shouted.

He was looking directly at Viola, when he slammed his bottle of beer on the table. She looked away, shaking her head and laughing.

The judgemental types always looked at her like she should know better. But it was they who should know better. She was making more money in a night than they would in a week.

"Shut up will ya," a man retorted.

"Ya old fart."

There was laughter.

Viola enjoyed the fellas sticking up for her. But she did not need them to. She had been taking care of herself for a long time and had been with her fair share of men.

She knew how to handle an idiot.

It was the middle-class types with their perfect lives, wives, careers and Range Rovers that annoyed her. They acted as if they were above her. And believed it too.

They came in looking for filth. They made her sick.

Once they were spending their money though, she smiled and took it, or as much as she could stomach. If they tried to touch her, she was happy to explain the rules.

One of the hurlers, Caleb, was Viola's type: funny, tall and dark.

She was chatting to him, with her limbs lightening and lifting as he spoke. She could have forgotten where they were had he not asked the question men always ask when there's a spark between them and a dancer.

"Why are you here?" he inquired.

She sat back and looked away from him, pushing herself back into the sofa. The question stripped her more than any clothing she could have removed. But she did not squirm.

She straightened up, took out a cigarette and reset her glare.

“Why do you think?” she asked, looking at him

“The money,” she answered.

Breaking the smoke in half, she extinguished the spark. Then, it was back to business.

“Let’s go,” he said.

****

Upstairs in the dance parlour, Caleb paid for three dances. Viola turned away from him coyly, once she saw him take out his cash. Crossing the room without turning back, she looked like a snack as the light drizzled over her. She was smiling. She had just stacked up the night’s profit in her head, when she reached the chiffon curtain, took a breath and erased every trace of her delight. It was not included in the price.

Some of the dancers wanted to be models or actresses. They hoped a rich man would walk in and save them. Viola did not need saving. She needed their money.

She wanted a house.

Her accounting job had paid for her final accountancy tuition; but it would not pay for somewhere to live. Not when she was the sole earner.

She looked back at Caleb, with one hand on her hip. She tugged on the curtain, then held it open for him. He stepped through with his eyes gorging on her.

She shifted from foot to foot.

“Sit,” she demanded.

Closing the curtain behind her, she began to perform the extended version of her routine, while going over her grocery list in her head. She forgot why she had thought Caleb was handsome. Once he was a customer, he became nothing.

It was the same with each and every one of the men, even the handful off the internet she had slept with. She did what she had to do while spending their money.

She never slept with anyone from the club. What she did in her free time was her business. The club's customers were off limits. If she broke the rules, she could not work for a week; she had not yet met a man who was worth that.

She never slept with a man for a euro less than four hundred either. And she always had a friend who knew where she was, waiting for her to call.

It was not difficult to have sex for money. Some people cannot wash down the idea; but that meant nothing to her. They could not judge her. She had never set foot inside a lap dancing club before she applied to work in one. Before she really needed the money.

When she realised how much there was to be made, it was difficult to stay away. Once they are in the game, all the dancers change.

The fetish work was the easiest. The men usually smelt her body, then were done and she was out the door. But not before checking she had every penny due.

She had to kiss a few of them too, which was repulsive, considering she had never kissed anyone she did not fancy. Now she repeatedly had to remind herself what the money was for.

The parlour lights flashed twice above her, signalling the club was closing, just as she was shaking the booth with her grand finale. She stepped down off the cushioned seat, fixed her hair and adjusted her underwear. Then, she took a playful bow.

"Until next time," she said.

Without hanging around to see the look left in his eyes, she hurried downstairs and smiled when she saw that the other dancers had given up on the men, who were finishing their drinks. Waving goodbye, she stepped out the staff door.

When she reached the dancers' dressing room, she was the last one in. The others were changing, taking turns to use the sink. They rarely felt the need to speak; except for the odd curse, when they remembered something the men had done or said.

She washed her face and put on a tracksuit. Her car keys and bag were ready to go. She never stayed for a drink or a chat. She wanted her cash and her bed.

Back at the bar, the boss was closing the tills. The money in the dance parlour cash box had already been counted. It was separated into shares on the counter.

"Bit of a head on you tonight V," he said.

She blushed.

"Did the trick," she replied.

"Didn't it?"

He handed her €470, which she folded and put in her bag. She never asked too many questions. Or answered many either. She said goodbye and walked out.

Her car was parked in the nearby 24-hour garage. Once she was sitting in it, she examined her face in the rear view mirror. Without her makeup, the skin beneath her eyes was a dark purple, as if plump petals had been plucked from her fatigue.

It was 3.30 am.

She drove out of the city with the window down and a lit cigarette in her mouth. The wind cleansed her as she moved in silence. The sound of the city stripped itself from her ears.

She was exhausted and her back ached from the size of her breasts. Since the age of 12, they were the first thing any man noticed about her. She never had a great opinion of them as a result. But it was the lap dance club that slayed her dreams of romance.

She parked outside her little apartment: the downstairs half of her landlord's home. There were no lights on in the estate. She took a breath and held her bag tight.

Once she was inside, she quietly locked the door to her one-bedroom apartment. Her mother was asleep on a fold-out bed, snoring in the middle of the living room. Viola smiled while tucking her in and headed straight for the bathroom.

After showering and getting ready for bed, she tip-toed over to her bedroom door, gently opened it and stepped inside. When she found the precious bundle buried beneath the blanket, she cast all her worries aside.

"Eve," she whispered.

Her daughter turned to her, reaching out her hands. Viola leaned down, kissed her warm cheek and hugged her tightly. Then, she sat up, placed that night's wage in a hole she had poked in their mattress and fell asleep with Eve in her arms.

At 19, Viola became pregnant. She had just started her accountancy training when Eve's father decided to leave the country. With nothing to say that could make him stay, Viola decided she would never let herself or Eve need him again.

That she would take care of everything.

In the morning, the alarm woke them. They brushed their teeth and their hair, got dressed and had their breakfast together.

Viola's mother was sitting on the sofa, drinking coffee and reading. She stayed over when Viola had to work and avoided Eve's questions about her mother's job.

Viola's parents wished she had not told Eve about the club. But Viola would not lie to her daughter. Nor would she ever leave Eve alone with a man.

Kissing Eve goodbye, Viola waved as she watched her mother drive her to school. Viola usually had some study to do. That morning, she had nowhere to be. So, she put her feet up.

On the kitchen table in front of her was a bouquet of violas, her favourite flower. There was a letter propped proudly amongst them. She picked up and sniffed it long and hard. It smelt far better than the cash upstairs.

It arrived yesterday, congratulating her on passing her final accountancy exam. She would be fully qualified by the end of the year, which meant a promotion and a salary increase.

More importantly, it meant just a few more months working at the club. Then, she would have enough; enough for the tick of her clock to revolve around her heart.

She fanned herself with the letter, addressed to Ms. Vivienne…

IV

THE SHOPKEEPER

09:00, Wednesday

The door to Little Treats was wide open. Joy was standing in the middle of the shop floor, wondering why. It was happening to her a lot these days. She would forget what she was doing. Or why she entered a room. At 72, it was testing her patience. She was scowling as she stared at the redbricked houses on the opposite side of the street, demanding an explanation to come to mind. When a sliver of light cracked through a slate of dark cloud, illuminating the windows and the windscreens, it distracted her; snatched her from the moment and plunged her into the past.

Her silver brow softened with the comfort of remembering. Her eyes smiled. She did not have to think twice about her life inside Little Treats.

Precisely 43 years ago, her husband, Roddy, chose the name when they bought the house and converted the living room into a shop. They did not know what they were getting themselves into, just that if they were together, they did not need anything else.

Rain or shine, they were behind the till, holding hands and hoping that everything worked out. They never neglected their duties. Or revealed the secrets confided in them.

They were an inseparable pair, who were the only shopkeepers on the street, under the shadow of Croke Park. They never got to attend a match because they could not afford to miss the business that it brought to their door; instead, they sat and shared a chocolate bar, while listening to the game on the radio, waiting for the stalls to empty.

Whenever the streets filled with GAA supporters, Joy and Roddy were ready to greet them. Despite rarely having enough room or stock for all of them, the same happy faces returned, year after year, for a catch-up and a sing-song.

Joy and Roddy never missed a day.

They got to spend a lot of time with their four children, steadying their wobbles and catching their falls. Joy knew that not too many people got that chance.

Blessing herself, she snapped out of her trance.

“What are you doing?” she asked herself.

“This is ridiculous.”

She unfolded her arms and began to shuffle towards the door, just as her neighbour, Caroline, stepped through it.

“Are you not freezing?” Caroline asked.

Do you want me to close the door?”

Unsure of what she was supposed to be doing, Joy looked down at her feet, needing a moment to think; noticing that she was still wearing her pink furry slippers, she blushed, darkening the creases on her cheeks. She looked back up at Caroline, who was smiling.

“A bit of fresh air never harmed anyone,” Joy said.

She spun around and sauntered back to the counter, knowing there was a reason the door was open. Biting her lip, she promised herself she would figure it out afterwards, on her own.

Turning on the kettle beneath the till, she offered Caroline a brew and pointed at a stool. Then, she adjusted her highchair, clambered up and leaned in to listen to Caroline speak about her family and her work. Struggling to keep up, Joy pinched at her white flannel shirt, thankful for the cold breeze that was blustering through the door, keeping her alert.

Each day, it was getting more and more difficult for Joy to remember the beginnings and the ends to the stories she heard or told. But what frustrated her the most was the pretence; as whenever she tried to summon a thought, or act as if she grasped an entire idea, her mind tumbled away with the yarn it was spinning.

Lost in thought, she was frowning again.

“Joy,” Caroline said.

“Are you there?”

****

Joy was fixated on a shelf behind Caroline, where there were chocolate biscuits and beans beside tubs of brown sauce and a box of washing powder. Caroline waved a hand in front of her, scattering Joy's thoughts and sharpening the silence. Joy leaned back and looked up at her, with her hands and her pretences resting on the counter. She began to laugh.

Caroline laughed with her.

"Oh dear," Joy said.

"I feel very tired today."

Caroline picked up her handbag, squeezed Joy's arm and said goodbye. She was just about to step outside when Joy called her name.

"Please love," Joy said.

"Would you close the door?"

Without another word, Caroline bent down and removed the doorstop. Then, a bell rang, shrill until it was quiet.

Wild with panic, Joy jumped off her stool.

"Give me strength!" she said.

"What was that?"

Shifting back, rocking on her feet, she inspected the door. The sunlight shredding through the wire-glass window, lay like bars across her cheeks.

She set her rusty blue eyes on the top of the doorframe, where a gold bell glinted at her; the vague memory that she had of her son, hammering it to the wall, ruptured beneath its glare. Surely, she knew why it was there.

"There was never any need…" she said.

"…Before."

She was staring at the door, when it swung open and the bell rang; the morning got busier and the ringing got louder. Joy could not move from her seat for over an hour. By then, there was no change left in the till either. But she could deal with that after she dealt with the bell.

Walking over and opening the door with gritted dentures, she bent down and wedged the doorstop into place. Then, she rejoiced in the requiem of silence.

"There's nothing worse..." she said.

"…Than forgetting."

The wind blew over her, cooling her and her doubts. She checked the clock above the chocolate stand; shocked to see that it was past midday and the shop was in disarray. She began to tidy the nearest shelf.

Making her way around Little Treats, she moved with a blissful certainty and ease. She did not need to look at where her feet were going. Or what she had to do next.

The memories were set in her bones.

Lately, she had been worrying about what she would do without those four walls, enclosing her fondest memories. When she was there, she simply had to look at the tears in the linoleum floor; the crooked shelves and the cracks, to remind her of her favourite stories.

"How am I supposed to retire?" she asked.

"Everything I know is here."

She was born in Limerick, the eldest of 12 children. Her parents sent her to live with her aunt because there was no more room for her at home; she was ten-years-old.

The first train she ever saw took her all the way from the fields she used to play in to the smouldering factory that was Dublin City; where there were women wearing furs, cars beeping and street vendors yelling. Joy had never seen anything like it.

It was a thrill. But it was not home. Not until she met Roddy.

By then, she was 19.

She had settled into the scene and gotten a job in a clothing store, where she never wore anything fashionable because she did not think it suited her. She was a small, stout woman, who preferred a well fitted shirt and a long, well ironed skirt.

The night she met Roddy, she was at a dance feeling awkward as usual, when a red haired man started following her around the dancefloor. She shimmied away. Roddy noticed her big eyes, her short dark curls and bountiful step, then her discomfort.

He came over with his raucous hair and dashing smile. Joy hopped with delight at the opportunity to say hello, unable, or maybe even unwilling, to look away.

She had never felt that way.

"It's my turn," Roddy said.

Joy blushed.

She took his hand. Roddy tucked his thick arm around her waist, pulled her closer and led the way. Every day after that, Joy followed Roddy, believing that she was truly lucky, because he was kinder than anyone she had ever met.

She was kinder because of him.

"I never knew…" she said.

"…A person could do such a thing."

Standing behind the counter, Joy turned on the kettle. There was a picture of Roddy hanging on the wall beside her; stretching over, she stroked the polished glass that had separated them, since Roddy fell ill and died seven years ago. Since then, nothing had been the same. It was only Little Treats that had not changed.

"Maam," a voice said.

"Maam!"

Joy gasped.

****

The American man standing at the counter was looking for the entrance to Croke Park. He could not apologise enough for surprising Joy, who could not understand why he had travelled all the way from the USA to see a giant GAA pitch. He must have thought she was half mad, pointing and stuttering, over and over, despite only having three directions to give. Feeling a chill, she looked at the open door.

The young man followed her gaze.

"Where are you from?" he asked.

She looked up at him.

"Limerick," she said.

"It's a wonder how I never lost the accent."

Taking a bottle of water from the small fridge, the American stepped over to Joy, took out his wallet and handed her a €50 note. Joy keyed in the sale. The cash-drawer burst open.

Then, the sound of emptiness clattered around the room.

Joy sighed with exhaustion.

It was her granddaughter's 21st birthday yesterday. She was up late, celebrating with her family at the greyhoundtrack; where her bet on an old dog was successful and paid out.

"I'll be back in a minute," she said.

Perking up, she walked around the counter, stepped into the hall and retrieved her winnings from her coat pocket. When she returned to the shop floor, she saw the little hand that had been trying to grab a chocolate bar from her stand, more days than not, whip in and around the doorframe; the silhouette of the young boy, who it belonged to, was stencilled in light against the window. Sitting on his red tricycle, he tore off like a shred of silk into the day.

"That happens every day," Joy said.

Looking up at the bell, she no longer needed to wonder what it was for. She wanted to catch the boy; to tell him that he did not need to steal. He just had to say hello.

It was what Roddy would have done.

He had a way of noticing people before they noticed him. He could sense strangers' stories; what they needed or where they were going, simply by laying the oak of his eyes on them.

Joy was different.

"Maam," the American said.

Joy blinked.

Hurrying over to the till, she handed the man his change and watched him leave. Once she put the money in the till, she walked towards the door.

On the days that any one of her seven grandchildren came to visit, she would shut the shop and let them have whatever they wanted. Her children visited more often than she felt necessary, considering that she did not want to be a burden.

She wanted them to have the life that she had.

The pitter-patter of tiny paws behind her sent her into a flapping delight. The sunlight flooding the doorway warmed her for the first time that day. She turned around and saw her silver bearded Jack Russell waddling towards her.

Bending down, she removed the doorstop, knowing that the memories she needed would still be there in the morning. She locked the door and walked into the hall with Jack.

She did not look back as the bell rang out.

V

THE ENTERTAINER

17:00 Wednesday

The performers' dressing room at The Hidden Tiger Bar was small, damp and cramped. There were three mismatched tables on which sat lamps draped in feather boas. They had every kind of gel, powder and spray laid out on them. There were wigs, dresses and heels strewn from every corner too; if someone did not know what they were doing in there, they could really hurt themselves. At least, that was what Simon hoped.

At 8pm, he was hosting the bingo. He was one of three resident drag queens there, where everyone knew him as Pearl. That night, he was working alone.

That was not the problem.

He was.

It was his sixth and final night working. He was exhausted. His bloodshot eyes were a testament to the edge that he was about to tip over.

Silently, he was undressing behind a ripped partition, wishing that the night had already ended. That he could go home.

Earlier that day, he had turned down a job as a makeup artist in London. With the residency and an increasing number of bookings across the city, he was making quite a celebrity out of Pearl; for her to thrive, he had to put himself aside.

On that evening, however, he did not want to.

He stepped out, wearing a pink silk robe that parted as he walked to his makeup station, revealing his long skinny legs that did not seem to end. He sat down on a cushioned stool, adjusted the lamp and the mirror, then the strength of his vodka martini.

He did not see a reason to remain sober. Nobody cared, once Pearl was there.

Simon necked half the drink, refilled it and got to work. The first step to erasing what he could of himself, was to shave off everything from the waist up; which he took care of before arriving at work. Then, he began to comb and gel back his thick auburn hair.

His freckles and high cheek bones were defined by the paleness of his skin. It kept him looking like the young Kerry boy he used to be.

He stopped and took another swig of his drink.

It was his fourth year working as a drag queen. He had never considered it as a career, or the money, which was better than he could have imagined.

He grew up in a small town, where he never knew what he wanted to be because he never had a chance to be himself. By the age of five, all he knew was that he fancied boys, and that in a small town like his, it meant that the air turned to whispers wherever he went.

He was afraid of what people might say, even though he knew they were saying it anyway.

By nine, he had outgrown his Barbie dolls, alongside his trust in most people. He used to play with a boy two years older than him, who grew up down the road from him. One day, the boy kissed Simon, when he was not expecting it.

He and that boy kissed for over nine years. Simon never told a soul because the boy had told him not to. That boy is married now, with three children.

That was small town life.

Simon shivered.

It was time for him to get rid of his eyebrows. He glued and flattened them down; then covered himself in three shades and layers of foundation. By the end of the first hour, he had created a blank canvas.

Pearl was next.

****

Downstairs the bar had just opened. Simon turned on the radio to drown the noise. There were many fine lines between him and Pearl. So many small differences and shadows to be invented, that Simon had to hover over every detail. In the mirror, his face was plain as a mannequin's. His brown eyes were the last trace of him. Running them over his painted skin, checking for blotches and finding none, he smiled- the pride lingered. He knew too well that he was only there because he was one of the best.

Selecting an assortment of brushes and gels, he laid them out and topped up his drink before beginning to draw on two new eyebrows. His hands moved surgically as he began to transform himself. No matter his mood, he had to perform.

There were plenty of wannabees willing to stab him in the back for his spot. He had to keep up his act or they would be all over social media, dragging him down.

They would do anything for a crown.

When he turned 18, he came out to his parents, who said they always knew and loved him, then drove him to Dublin to study communications; along the way, Simon realised he was leaving nothing behind. That was the first time he tasted freedom.

He moved into a house with four girls who adored him; who did his makeup and taught him how to walk in heels. He was no longer the talk of the town, just a boy who liked boys and did not mind putting on his friends' dresses, if it put a smile on their faces.

He no longer worried what other people said about him; all those years of saying nothing had loaded his tongue with a response to every remark that he never pulled the trigger on. It came in handy when he made his first drag appearance.

His friends signed him up for a college talent show; got him drunk, dressed him up and pushed him on stage, where everything fell off him. He vowed never to do it again.

But by then, he was skipping most of his classes to help his roommate, who was training to become a makeup artist. Simon was fascinated by everything that she worked on; he would stand at her shoulder until she let him help.

Believing that he could do better, he dropped out of college and signed up for a yearlong course in makeup artistry, promising himself he would be the best. He never missed a class. Or a high grade. The following year, he taught the course.

Another hour later, Pearl was looking like herself, while Simon's drink was untouched. He took a big gulp, stood up and turned up the radio, stifling the noise from downstairs.

When he was ready, he walked back behind the partition, where he spent most of the next hour dressing. He was bent over with his fingers pinning a purple wig to his head, when there was a knock on the door.

"Yo!" the DJ yelled.

"Pearl!"

Simon rolled his eyes.

"10 minutes to showtime," the DJ shouted.

Peering through his legs at the closed door, Simon shook his head to ensure that the wig was secure. Once he was satisfied, he stood up and threw the long ringlets back off his face, which was utterly changed. Up close, there were slight hints of the tricks that he might have played. But who cared? Simon was no longer there.

He was now Pearl.

Wearing red fishnet tights and a red and yellow tartan skirt and blazer, Pearl, in a pair of red platform boots, was eight inches taller than Simon. The black leather gloves and choker were Simon's signature; another line drawn between him and Pearl.

Some people believed he wanted to be a woman. That he must be missing something in life because he dressed up as one for work. He no longer had the time to change their minds.

The only problem Simon had with his career was finding the opportunity to display his skills; as he did not want to be a woman, he could not use them on himself. He began to create different personas, photograph them and post them on social media.

An events manager saw them online, contacted him and offered him a place in a drag competition. With money to be won, Simon could not refuse.

He came third and brought home some vouchers, alongside a thirst for first. when he started winning, his drag career took off. He had not allowed himself to stop earning. To think about anything other than his spot at the top. Or what he had to do to stay there.

After a heavy misting of hairspray, he turned off the radio. The boom of the crowd beneath his feet hauled him out of his head. He polished off his drink and took one final look at Pearl in the mirror; it was the last time that all of his work would be in the right place.

"Ready?" he asked himself.

He laughed.

Capturing the corners of the smile he had just conjured, he shimmied out of the room, down the corridor and the stairs to the backstage area. There was a stage assistant standing by the red velvet curtain, peeping out at the empty stage. When he saw Simon, he began to wave.

Simon hurried over, until the heat pulsing off the crowd hit him. Then, he stopped, closed his eyes and inhaled the energy.

"Are you ok?" the stage assistant asked.

Simon looked up from under a thick set of false lashes, grinning. He lifted his head, tossed the purple ringlets off his shoulder, strode over to the curtain and pinched it. Disappearing into silence, he altered his angles and softened his silhouette.

"Showtime," he whispered.

Letting go of the curtain, he shifted from side to side, balancing on the wings of the butterflies in his stomach. He took a deep breath and a firm grip on his nerves, stuck his hand past the velvet and twirled a leather covered finger in the spotlight.

When he withdrew it, slowly, the stage assistant tapped his microphone.

"Good evening, everyone," he announced.

The crowd hushed and howled.

"Please welcome your host, Pearl."

The DJ played a drum roll, while Simon counted to three before stepping out, past the curtain, where he let Pearl take control.

****

Sashaying across to the microphone, Pearl's curls bounced inches below the ceiling. She ignored the crowd that was straining to look up at her. There was a table with a drink waiting for her on it. All she wanted was a sip as the spotlight followed her, bringing the shimmer of Simon's disguise to life. She reached the table, picked up the glass and finished the drink. When she leaned into the microphone, the crowd leaned with her.

"I'll take another one," she said.

The crowd erupted.

She knew exactly what they wanted from her; how to cross the lines that they would not. How to comfort their madness by revealing her own. That way, they did not have to be afraid to be themselves. In fact, Pearl dared them to embrace themselves, by reminding them they were all outsiders. That she too, did not belong; except on that stage.

"Hello bitches," she mouthed.

Shaking her chest and plumping her purple hair, she stared down at the audience. With their bingo slips, their pens and their hungry hearts, they were ready to eat her up. She began to compliment them, and condescend to them, while winking at some of the men.

Then, she explained the rules.

They were playing musical bingo, which meant that the DJ would play snippets of different songs, until one lucky player marked off a full row on their slip. The more winning slips, the more free drinks, which meant that it was a long two hours.

Dancing, lip-syncing and death-dropping to the music, the sweat dripping off Pearl was just as dramatic as her performance. When it was time to give away the last of the free alcohol, her voice was raw from roaring and her wig was clinging on.

Her mascara had begun to run too.

But who cared?

No matter how many of her lines were blurred, the crowd still looked up to her, swinging from the rafters.

"Goodnight bitches," she said.

She bowed.

The audience cheered for more. But Simon was done.

****

Behind the curtain, the crackle of the crowd's electricity spiked the air that Simon was breathing. He was buzzing. With just an hour to be spent mingling with the audience, his shift was nearly over. He whipped off his small tartan coat, made his way up the stairs and down the corridor, wearing the confidence Pearl had gifted him, like it was a diamond necklace. Without her, he knew he would be different. That his life would be easier.

Reaching the dressing room door, he heard Precilla and Fab Fanny chatting inside, swung his coat over his shoulder, threw open the door, strode towards them and twirled before sitting down at his makeup station. Precilla and Fab Fanny clapped.

They were in their robes, finishing off their makeup, with their wigs brushed and hung up beside them. Simon fixed himself a drink, while catching up with their conversation, laughing and filling them in on his show; they did not need to know about the job in London.

They were his friends. That was his business.

After retouching his makeup, he showered his wig with more hairspray, stood up, wished the queens luck, picked up his drink and left. Walking down the main staircase, he lifted his chin and his shoulders as he slipped back into Pearl's persona.

The crowd touched and grabbed him, passing him around; they took pictures and asked him questions about his private life. Or rather, Pearl's.

Simon answered what he could, until the heat and the pressure of what people believed became too much. Excusing himself to get a drink, he pushed through the heaving bodies that stood between him and the exit. He did not hear his name being called, over and over.

"Simon! Simon!"

He pushed on.

Outside, the fresh air hit him like a clean sheet; if fewer people had been about, he would have dropped to his knees to inhale it. Instead, he bummed a smoke off a stranger.

A moment later, a hand touched his shoulder.

"Simon!" a woman said.

He tilted his head.

"Simon!"

Jolting with surprise, Simon turned around to see his old roommate, Suzanna, who was laughing with exasperation.

"Well?" she asked.

"What happened?"

Simon stared at her, confused. He could not understand her concern. Then, he remembered that he had told her about the job offer in London. Explaining to her the reason why he did not accept it, she let out a breath and held his hand.

"You're doing too well…," she said.

"…To stop now."

Simon hugged her.

Honestly, he never expected someone to be looking for him there. He did not spend any time there, as people usually asked for Pearl.

With hands poking and pulling at him, he excused himself and got back to the show. The next time he had a moment to himself, he checked the time and ran up the stairs, without saying another word. With the next show about to start, he was officially off the clock.

Inside the dressing room, he removed his wig and as much of his makeup as he could, before changing his clothes, packing his bag, walking out and down the stairs to the back door. Outside on the street, in a pair of jeans and green parka-coat, he flagged a taxi, hopped in and took out his two phones, checked them and put them away.

He realised he needed a separate phone for business, when his own life could not keep up with Pearl's social media. Some people did not know where to draw the line.

On an average day, Simon received two or three messages from questionably straight men, asking what Pearl was wearing and offering to buy her things, as if Simon was sitting at home, wearing a wig and heels. Honestly, he did not understand it.

He liked to hike and go for coffee. To sit at home in his bathrobe and slippers, watching TV. He wanted to find love too. But anytime he got close, Pearl got in the way.

He had to give his drag career an expiration date. He would not spend his life defining or defending the line between him and Pearl. At 28, he would hang up his wig.

Until then, he would not rest.

He rolled down the window, just as the taxi crossed the River Liffey, heading north of the city that was already singing beneath the street lights. The wind shaving his skin with the cold, reminded him of being buried neck deep in the sand along the coast of the small town where he grew up; when he was just eight years old and his mother was calling his name, over and over, against the wind off the ocean.

He had ignored her.

"Little Pearl?" she called.

He looked at her, like it was the first time he had ever been seen.

VI

THE FIGHTER

00:00 Thursday

On the edge of his bed, Tommy sat rocking himself back and forth. Shifting his weight from one foot to the other, the caravan creaked beneath him. His hands were in fists, held tight against his chest, rubbing knuckle to knuckle. It was the third night in a row the open-eyed nightmares had him staring into the dirty grey wallpaper, thinking about his father; about dying young and all the things that Tommy had done wrong.

It could not go on. Or else, he would not.

Heaving himself off the bed, he fumbled out of his bedroom, cursing and grunting at the dark. He had been too lazy to fix the light. Or to ever adjust to the size of his caravan. And the five stones he had put on over the last year was not helping him.

He pushed himself through the narrow doorway, stumbled into the kitchen and switched on the light. The wind was whistling outside, carrying the birds' lullabies from the trees; reaching up, he shut the window tight.

Taking a pizza from the compact freezer in the corner, he removed it from its packaging, put it in the oven and set the heat. His stomach grumbled, sickening him.

The bin was overflowing.

Holding the empty pizza box, looking for somewhere to put it, he realised every surface was covered in junk and takeaway cartons, clothes that no longer fitted him and books he had not read. He could not control his rage. Nor did he have to.

Kicking open the caravan door, he started to throw the rubbish outside. His anger rose with each layer of filth he unearthed. His family peeped out from their neighbouring caravan window, holding their breaths.

They knew better than to chance lifting the lace curtains. He was the boss - the man - of that halting site; if he was not in the mood to see or talk to anyone, they should remain invisible. This was the way things always were.

He banged down the steps, into the darkness, where he stormed around, gathering pieces of wood and throwing them on the mound of rubbish that lay between his caravan and his brother's. Then, he poured some petrol over them, lit a match and flicked it.

When the fire burst into existence, he took a step back.

Staring at the flames, he took his t-shirt off, wiped his forehead with it and threw it on top. Pulling out a cigarette from his tracksuit bottoms, he sparked it and inhaled its smoke.

With the blazing thrash chasing the shadows off his skin, the tattoo of his name across his back glistened as his sweat rolled down it; he told himself that now was not the time to worry about the windows of the hotels and businesses in the vicinity, bearing down on him like bloodless eyes. The people inside those buildings could think whatever they wanted.

He was a traveller. He had no say. He coughed and spat on the fire.

Behind him, the coldness of the clear night had shushed and shut the doors of Dublin's largest social housing estate. Some called it The Jungle.

Tommy was eight years old, walking through the estate on the way home from school, when a lad ran up and punched him in the face. This was not unusual. Except that day when he got home, nursing a black eye, his mother told him his father had taken his own life with a shotgun. That was when Tommy went numb.

He would have done anything for his father, who suffered from schizophrenia. At the time, his psychiatric illness was worsening, which meant he needed more help than he was willing to ask for; never mind take. Still, Tommy never understood why his father did it.

Not until now.

With lingering regret and just €400 of his drug money left, a shiver of shame turned his head away from the flames. He stared at his caravan.

Noticing the windows were clouded, he sprinted up the steps and spotted smoke billowing from the oven; rushing over and opening it, he took a step back. When the scorched air passed, he saw the burnt pizza, slammed the oven door, turned around and put both of his fists through the wall.

By then, there were no more birds to frighten in the trees.

***

Shaking and sitting, standing and walking from the sofa to the kitchen, Tommy gazed down at his knuckles. The fire writhing wildly outside, no longer held his interest. He was somewhere else, rattling behind the bars of his silence. Lighting another cigarette, he smoked it furiously. The ignited memory of his father was spreading within him, scorching the edges of his sanity. He had to keep moving. Or he might go alight with it.

At first, he did not believe it. Not his father. Not the fighter.

He could not have left him.

Not his boy Tommy.

It was not until the day of the funeral and the closed coffin that Tommy finally understood why his father was not coming home. That he was dead.

Tommy spent the whole ceremony trying to wrap his head around it. He stared at the coffin, hoping it was a sick joke. Afterwards, his uncle put an arm around his shoulder, took him aside and shielded him from the rest of his family.

"You are the man now, Tommy," his uncle said.

Tommy cried.

It was the last time he showed any kind of weakness. If he wanted to be the man his family needed, he had to keep his grief to himself. He could not speak of his father either; as just hearing his mother call the name Tommy, shared with him, was agonising.

His family did not have to ask how he was. He regularly came home with a broken nose and busted lip. He had to fight the kids from The Jungle and from school, who were always making fun of him for being a traveller. Then, he had to fight the kids from the other halting sites, who used to make fun of him for not having a father. When they called him a sissy, he could not walk away. His father had taught him how to fight.

His father would watch Bruce Lee, Van Damme and Seagal films, then teach Tommy and his two younger brothers the martial arts moves. He would laugh at them when they took it too seriously. They would laugh back at him, then tackle him. There was nothing better than seeing him smile. He was their hero. Their very own Mike Tyson.

He did whatever he could for them and their mother. She used to sit and watch as they re-enacted the historic fight scenes, with the long grass of the green beside the halting site

scratching at their knees. The two raggedy horses that roamed there were oblivious to the beeping traffic and the hard beady eyes that lined the windows of the passing cars.

Tommy did not notice them then either.

He was happy.

Taking a step back from his memories, he had to remind himself to breathe. His heart was breaking as it beat against his chest. What if he dropped dead? What would his mother do?

He sat down and started pounding his legs with his fists. Shaking his head, trying to rid himself of the dread coursing through him, he decided that if there was no way out, there had to be a way through. He roared like a lost and lonely beast.

"Tommy! Tommy Boy!" his brother yelled.

"What's goin' on?"

Tommy gripped his knees and gritted his teeth. His face was burning.

"G'way!" Tommy said.

"G'WAY!"

His brother stood defiantly in the doorway, with the fire hissing behind him. He stared point blank at Tommy, who only tore his eyes away from his knuckles for a moment.

"Just tell me what you're feeling," his brother said.

"I won't make a fool of ya, I promise."

Tommy flinched, as if he took an unexpected blow to his stomach. He covered his face. The snort that shook his body a second later, broke the stitching of the words that had sewed his mouth shut. He dropped his hands and looked at his brother with tears in his eyes.

"I feel shite!" he said.

"And I'm fat!"

They laughed.

Then, they sunk into silence. They had never talked about their feelings; yet there was no more time for either of them to play the hardman.

Tommy was deadly serious. He had no options. No prospects.

His girlfriend left him six months before. He was lonely and broke. He had to stop selling drugs because everyone was dying. He could not box either; he had no hunger for it.

So maybe the whispers were true. Maybe he was a good-for-nothing pikey. Without another word said, he dropped his head and ran his fingers over the back of his neck.

His brother backed out the door, ran past the fire and into his caravan. His pregnant girlfriend was sleeping; he did not want to wake her. Tommy had frightened her earlier, when she saw him throw his boxing gloves, and everything else, out the door.

Tommy's brother had snuck out to salvage the gloves, while Tommy was looking for more firewood. After finding them, he returned to Tommy.

"Here," his brother said.

"You need to do something positive."

With the gloves dangling in front of him, Tommy looked up. The gloves were worn soft and their threads pulled and stained. They looked older than he remembered; but then, he had not looked at them since he lost his last fight three years ago.

His face twitched and tightened.

"That's enough," Tommy said.

"Go back to bed."

And as he stood up, he snatched the gloves from his brother. He wanted to feel the blue leather, imprinted with the man he had fought so hard to be.

When he felt nothing, he threw the gloves on the sofa.

Outside, he looked down at the dying fire, snarled and walked off into the darkness, gathering wood and wondering if the gloves would even fit him now.

Or if he would trust himself in the ring again.

***

Boxing was all about movement. It was setting traps and jabbing, planning how to give punishment without receiving any. Fighting was different. It was aggression. It was getting inside your opponent's head and overloading them with punches. Instinctually, Tommy was a fighter. He wanted to go toe-to-toe. To dance the bloody mamba. He would snap a rib or shatter a jaw, just to prove he was a man. To him, there was no better way.

At 12, he was tired of being beaten up and seeing his mother worrying. He joined the boxing club beside the halting site, bought his first pair of boxing gloves and made a list of those who had bullied him. Using his fury as fuel, he trained five times a week.

Every morning and evening, he would repeat the same moves until his muscles remembered every double right hander and duck. Better than he did.

Inside the ring, it was set, ready, touch gloves and box; nothing existed outside the ropes, except the trainers' voices, yelling instructions. He was never fully engaged and thinking.

He was reacting and adjusting to his opponent's style, while continually reminding himself that he had to move, keep his chin down, arm up and jab straight. That way, he was protected.

The aim was to prevent his opponent from landing points, although Tommy never had much patience for scorekeeping. Whoever did not get up, lost in his eyes.

He never looked scared either, which unnerved the other fellas, who believed him when he told them he was fine. It was a lie, right up until he threw his first punch. Then he was an unstoppable force. In the first six months, he made it to the All Ireland Boxing Final and won. He ticked off every name on his list too.

A year later, he took a stretch in height and went up a weight division. The fellas he fought were still going down, just not as quick as Tommy was used to; which made it more interesting, more satisfying for him when his anger triggered and he put them away.

He was the champ.

Back inside his caravan, he put his left leg in front of his right, then began to spar at the air. Ducking and dodging, he controlled his breathing for the first time that night: he did not sound like he was dying. But then, it was never his form or style that let him down.

It was his head.

At 15, he left school because his cousins were making a fool of him for going. He got an apprenticeship in carpentry, while training every day. He had not lost a fight, or missed a

day's work, and still, he could not sleep. He could not lie in bed, staring at the ceiling, worrying about being the big man either. Not when people were afraid of him.

He would often find himself lurking around the edges of The Jungle, smoking and sniffing out trouble. His cousin, Paul, a settled traveller, lived there.

Two years older than Tommy, Paul had made a fortune selling coke and heroin. He was operating at such a high level that he needed a minder he could trust to protect him.

Everyone knew Tommy.

If they did not, they had heard a story or two about the young traveller boy who went around knocking everyone out. Paul tried to recruit him for that very reason.

Tommy declined.

But eventually, he needed the distraction. He called his cousin, accepted his offer and went to work. The gear was ordered a month in advance from Africa. It would come in ounce bullets that had been wrapped in condoms and swallowed.

Once it arrived, it was cut up and stored in different locations in Dublin. The heroin was weighed and bagged immediately. The coke was mixed with various substances for a bigger profit; but that meant it had to be stashed for longer, adding to the cost and the risk. When it was bagged, it simply needed to be delivered.

It was already sold before they placed the order with their boys in Africa. And as soon as they collected their money, they made another phone call.

It did not always go according to plan, which was where Tommy came in. Earning a couple of grand a week, banging down doors and busting heads, he was dousing his rage in blood and drugs, then sleeping soundly when he fell into bed.

He was not thinking too much then either.

Boxing with bruised hands and ribs, he was still winning every time he stepped in the ring. He was just not sure why, as every time the referee held his arm up, all he could think of, was what he had lost.

A year later, he had a match with an opponent he had previously beaten. He stayed out the night before partying, knowing he would not be fit to fight the next day.

His trainer noticed that something was not right but Tommy chose to fight anyway. He was an animal. Afraid of nothing, except himself.

He was 10 points ahead but exhausted. In the next round, he started whispering to his opponent, trying to get inside his head and awaken whatever anger it held.

Tommy wanted to be hit. He wanted to be knocked out.

“Come on!” Tommy yelled.

His opponent answered by throwing punches he had never used before. Tommy was relieved. Each time he let his opponent hit him, the pain stunted his own muted attack.

When his opponent won, Tommy pretended to be stunned. Then, he stormed out of the stadium, leaving his fight kit behind.

Later that night, his trainer returned the boxing gear and tried to persuade him not to quit. Tommy slammed the door on him.

The gear was still on the ground by his caravan the next morning. Tommy threw it in a corner and forgot about it. He was not that man anymore.

He told his cousin he wanted to step back from the beatings, which was not a problem, once Tommy hired his own enforcers to do the dirty work. This way he could keep his hands clean and out of the messy business they were in.

With each passing year, new brands of competition arose. There were deathly disputes, surprise shooters and grievances that had to be squared. For every lost comrade or seized shipment, there was more money to be made and voids to be filled with the coke that they sniffed off the corner of their own coins. The clock was ticking on whoever was next.

It took two cousins overdosing on heroin, three murdered, three more in jail and hysterics from his mother, who thought that he was only selling hash; to make him question what he was doing. He even had an aunt dying from AIDS in hospital, while her son worked protection for him.

“Fuck!” he said.

“FUCK!”

Covering his ears with his hands, Tommy paced up and down his caravan. The last time he had tried to explain that the drugs were not cutting it, that he was not sleeping, his cousin was not listening. They were sitting in traffic on the way to one of his factories, when he hushed Tommy and told him to look in the car’s rear view mirror.

There were two guys, wearing only black, on a motorbike. They were racing up the middle lane of the motorway, smashing the mirrors of the other cars. Tommy panicked and tried to get out. But his cousin stopped him.

"They'll shoot," he said.

Ramming the car in front of them, he shot out of the lane and pulled into a halting site nearby, where he abandoned the car. Tommy hopped out and followed him.

After running a few miles through the fields, they took cover in a patch of tall grass and stayed hidden until it was dark. That was it for Tommy.

He was out.

Three months later, his cousin was arrested. Then, he was stabbed 31 times in prison.

Tommy sat down on the couch, laid his head back and shut eyes. The fire died outside, while the birds returned to the trees.

If he was not that man anymore, who was he?

He fell asleep.

***

Waking up to the sound of his own snoring, Tommy sat upright and looked out at the morning, frosting the halting site. With a stiff neck and a bad taste in his mouth, he stood up and grabbed the clothes he had left, walked out and down the steps, onto the dirt and into the dawn. He snuck into his mother's caravan to shower, dressed and left the halting site. He did not look up. He did not want anyone, or anything, getting in his head.

He had made a decision.

With his brother's words ringing in his ears, like the bell before the next round, he decided he was going to finish school. He had been smart once. Maybe he could be again.

Then, he might make some money legally.

Cutting through The Jungle, he walked along streets that were still with slumber. It was his memories of years spent fighting, throwing stones and watching people shoot up, pass out and get put out, that were awakening.

He stepped lightly, for his own sake.

It would take many a day to fix him. He needed time to admit he had cried. But he swore to himself that he would talk. As soon as he got home, he would sit down with his family and explain to them, in as few words as possible, how he had been feeling.

Reaching the social welfare office, he stood outside for 45 minutes, smoking cigarettes. When the door opened, he jumped from his trance and walked up to the desk, where he was told to get a number.

His phone rang. He silenced it.

After taking a ticket, he waited to be called, while silencing two more phone calls. When his number binged up on the board above the service desk, he shuffled over and told the social welfare official what he wanted to do. Pulling at his sleeve and avoiding her stare, he looked younger than his age, quite like a boy he never got to be.

She assigned him an appointment with an employment assistant the following week, then gave him a leaflet detailing the different ways he could complete his Leaving Certificate. Smiling, she said goodbye.

Tommy blushed.

Outside, the sun was high. The wind was whisking the bitter cold. People passing seemed to be in a hurry. He was enjoying the fresh air, feeling like he had put on a new pair of boxing gloves. Like he had finally done something good.

His phone rang.

It was his mother, crying so much that he could barely understand her. He had to force himself to breathe, while his free hand curled up into a fist.

“Slow down woman!” he said.

“What happened?”

The Gardai had arrived not long after Tommy left that morning. They threw his family out of their caravans, then battered them because they felt they were not being co-

operative. Wearing all black and helmeted, guns and batons at the ready, their badges were hidden from sight to hide their identities.

"The bastards!" he said.

He hung up.

Running, sweating and panting, he barely made it to the entrance of The Jungle, where he had to stop because his legs were wobbling beneath the weight of him. He put his hands on his knees and his head down, breathing long and hard, just as two young lads cycled by, laughing at him. He stood up and gave them the finger, then started to run and spit again.

He needed two more spit stops before reaching the halting site. The gardai were nowhere to be seen. Nor was their warrant to raid an entirely different halting site down the road. Although they made the mistake, they left a trail of bruises and broken pieces behind.

They did not return.

Or apologise.

It was nothing new to Tommy or his family. They had all been victims of discrimination at some point in their lives. Unfortunately, it was an almost daily occurence.

Tommy cursed himself for not getting there faster. For not helping them.

What kind of person did that make him?

He took the cigarettes from his pocket, threw them in the empty bin beside his mother's caravan, walked into his own and took off his jacket, which he threw on the sofa with the Leaving Certificate leaflet in the front pocket. Picking up the old boxing gloves, he jogged back outside, called his brothers and told them to get their gear; they were going training.

Walking down to the bottom of the halting site, where there was an old stone shed with two punch bags hanging inside, Tommy stepped in and warmed up. When he threw his first punch, dirt fell from the rafters, landing in his eyes. But he did not quit.

He kept punching and blinking, knowing this time, he was fighting for his life.

Back in his caravan, his mother was looking for dirty clothes she could put in the wash. When she picked up his jacket, the leaflet fell out. Picking it up and inspecting it, she returned it before hanging up the jacket, swearing she would not mention it.

Not until he did.

That evening, when they sat around her table for dinner, her smile gave her away. Who could blame her?

She was the proud mother of a fighting man.

VII

THE MOTHER

10:00 Thursday

Shauna knew this was coming. She would be lying if she said otherwise. It was the thing about being a mother, she always imagined the worst. But then, never in her life did she think she would be standing on a bus, holding a pram while hiding what she assumed was an ecstasy pill in her coat pocket. Maybe that was why it hurt so much. She should have known. Or at least noticed. Like any good mother would have.

She was changing her daughter's bed linen earlier, when a small bag of blue pills flew across the room. Shauna picked them up, assuming they were sweets, until she brought them downstairs, made a cup of tea, poured them on the kitchen table and counted all twenty, shaped like little ghosts. The smell of them burnt her nose.

She picked up the phone and called her mother, without sputtering a word or a tear. She blamed herself, then told herself she did not deserve to feel betrayed.

Her mother told her to call her uncle, Willy. He was a drug addict a decade ago; if he did not know what he was looking at, he would surely know someone who would. He spent most of his time at a homeless centre. He asked Shauna to meet him there in an hour.

Her daughter, Sara, was 15 years old.

"Jaysus," Shauna gasped.

Looking around at the other passengers on the bus, she shrank; though none of them were looking at her, she still imagined their pity filled stares. She avoided eye contact, fearing they would figure out her crime. Or tell her what she was already thinking.

She should have been at home folding the washing, putting the shopping away or cleaning. Anything other than standing on that crowded bus, headed toward the city.

Trying to disguise the dread gnawing at her nerves, she squeezed herself down to a crouch and checked her four-year-old daughter, Melissa, who was asleep in her pram. Her blonde curls, strewn across her rosy cheeks, looked as if they belonged to an angel.

Shauna petted the plastic rain cover that separated them. Then, she settled her eyes on her own reflection, stood back up and wiped her face with her sleeve. With her long brown hair, tied into a low ponytail, she looked older than 33.

Her face and neck were covered in red patches, which happened whenever she was nervous. She looked guilty.

She had never robbed a thing. Or touched a drug before.

On the steps of the flats where she grew up, drugs were bought, shot and sold. The death, and everything else that came with them, was a horrible thing to swallow as a child.

Enough for Shauna to never try them.

She was the youngest of five children. The quietest too. She kept to herself mostly; playing with her baby doll, helping her mother and studying. She secretly listened to the chatter that clattered outside. But never stepped out from behind the door.

When she was 17, her parents got a house. It was a ten-minute walk from the flats: the fresh start they had been waiting for.

Shauna and her two older brothers moved in with her parents, which was convenient because her brothers were rarely at home. And because Shauna was pregnant.

There was no debate about giving up the baby. Nor could she have afforded to go to England. It was just that Shauna always knew she would be a mother.

Her boyfriend of five years, Paul, was the father. He was the same age as her, and from a flat nearby, where he secretly signalled meetings to sneak kisses from her.

He was the love of her life, until she had Sara.

“Ma!” Melissa yelled.

The bus was parked on O’Connell Street. Everyone else was getting off.

“Alri’ baby,” Shauna said.

****

Out on the street, Shauna checked that the pill, wrapped in tissue, was still securely stuffed in the corner of her coat pocket. She sighed with relief once she was satisfied. She bent down and took another look at Melissa, who was sipping on her bottle. Standing back up, she zipped up her coat and took off. With the fresh air blowing against her skin, came the sting of the open wound. She kept her head down. She did not feel the need to look at the lifestyle she could not afford, heckling her from every door.

"Give us a break," she begged.

"Please."

The dark clouds bruising the sky were thickening, threatening rain. She quickened her pace. But there was no escaping it. When it came pouring down a minute later, she took shelter under a tree, while Melissa laughed in her pram. Shauna smiled at her.

Drops of rain ran down her nose, splattering against the plastic rain cover. Melissa kept trying to wipe them away. She was too young to know that she was salvaging the day.

When the rain stopped, Shauna carried on.

She never had big hopes, or dreams, just an idea of how her life would go. How she would be working when she got pregnant; studying or saving to buy a house or a holiday.

When she became a mother, she became nothing other.

Everything was about Sara.

Shauna and Paul were sharing a room in her parents' house, where Sara was sleeping in the bed between them, waking every few hours, crying. It took a long time for Shauna to figure out why. So sometimes, she cried too. But she never let Sara out of her sight.

She minded Sara when Paul went to work. She played with her, fed her, tickled her and read to her. She never missed a move Sara made.

"Righ'," she said, lifting her head

The homeless centre was up ahead. She crossed the road and parked the pram behind a car, where all that Melissa could see was the pavement lined with slanting houses.

After handing her half a sandwich, Shauna took out her phone and called her uncle, who told her he would be out in a minute. Shifting from foot to foot, she put the phone away, then slid her hand into her coat pocket, checking the pill was safe.

Finally, she stood still.

“Look at you,” her uncle yelled.

She jumped.

Her hand shot out of her pocket, morphing into a wave before she dropped it. She tried lifting her lips into a grin. But that faded fast. She was in no mood for talking.

Her uncle looked happier and healthier than she had ever seen him; though the tightness of his skin over his bones never allowed the tell-tale signs of his old habit to leave him. Once he reached them, he embraced Shauna, then leaned down to greet Melissa.

Shauna took the piece of tissue from her pocket, flashed the pill at her uncle, then put it away. He stood up and asked if he could see it again.

“That’s a yoke,” he said.

“Sorry! Ecstasy!”

Smiling like he had just won on the horses, her uncle gazed at her. She took a minute to herself, while he looked away.

With the pill back inside her coat pocket, she Shauna thanked him and said goodbye. He did not look surprised, rather relieved that it was a brief encounter.

They hugged again, surprising each other. It was tighter. And warmer. Shauna took it with her, until the cold sank in, and with it, the nightmare.

“Bleedin’ ecstasy!” she hissed.

“Seriously?”

Like any good mother, Shauna had warned Sara about drugs; about addiction and the destruction it causes. Sara sat silently, nodding along, while Shauna convinced herself that she had scared Sara off them. That she had done her job.

“How stupid!” she said.

She saw the gardai on regular patrols of the estates. The cars and strangers rolling down their windows, as they passed through. The young boys and girls too; running up and down to them, leaning in to shade the business that was picking up the slack in opportunity.

Where did Sara get the pills? How much were they worth? How much does she owe? Were they for herself? Were they to sell?

Shauna was just about to turn a corner, when she heard the tick-tick-ticking of something metallic, approaching her from behind. She stopped and turned around.

A young boy on a red tricycle pulled up beside her, wearing jeans and a frayed red hoodie with the hood pulled up. He did not look up at Shauna. Or acknowledge her.

Instead, he stood humming a high melody, reaching for each note.

“Why are you not in school?” she asked.

He stopped.

Wishing that she could take her words back, she watched him push down on a peddle, turn and bolt off. She did not see his face, as he tick-tick-ticked away from the city.

She was shaking her head when she reached the bus stop. There was a bus about to shut its doors. She stepped onto it and lifted up the pram. The front wheel jammed.

Shauna had to pull and shove it, to free it.

“Maaa!” Melissa cried.

No one helped.

****

With her back pressed against the bus window again, Shauna shifted the rain cover over the pram, just enough to hold Melissa’s hand. The pill was still in her coat pocket. It was the thought of the young boy that was gutting her. She had no idea why he was not in school. Or where his parents were. She could have helped him though; if she had been behaving like a proper mother, which was what Shauna aspired to be.

Ever since she had Sara, the looks people gave her implied the opposite. She always seemed to be doing something wrong.

Paul worked in a warehouse, where his wages went up every year, though it never made a difference. They lived with Shauna’s parents, who said they did not mind, until Shauna and Paul had their second son on the way.

By then, they had a bit saved.

In 2010, they moved into a house with a council renting plan. It was another 10 minute walk from the flats, with grass in the garden. Shauna had never been happier, which was fortunate, because they could not afford to move.

Now, a mother of four, Shauna could hardly tell where the time had gone. She could tell stories, list dates and times, tastes and fears, and everything else about each of her children. She could name each of them by the sound of their footsteps in the dark, when they came looking for her, after they had a nightmare.

All she wanted was to be with them.

Squeezing Melissa's hand, before tucking it under her blanket, Shauna fixed the rain cover, then straightened up. A moment later, her phone buzzed in her coat pocket, startling her.

It was her mother, calling to explain that she would be at Shauna's house, waiting with the kettle on. Shauna clutched onto the pram, fearing she might not make it.

When she hung up, she was shaking.

The bus turned a corner, charging the breath in her lungs. She began to pant as if there were stallions cantering, digging their hooves into her chest. She looked around, sweating again, with her defencelessness unnerving her. She stretched over and rang the bell.

When the bus stopped, she got off and took a swig of Melissa's bottle.

Walking up to the top of the road, she reached the place where the flats used to be. She looked up about as high as where she had lived, where she had lingered between the concrete and the stars. Then, her eyes traced a line to where the steps would have been.

To where she found a baby, when she was Sara's age.

She had snuck out of their flat, without a coat or shoes on; she tip-toed over to the ledge and looked up at the night. Her breath was dangling in front of her, melting like chandeliers of ice, when she heard the tiniest cries coming from the steps.

Rushing over, she found the baby boy. He was in a plastic carrier seat, wrapped in a blue blanket, with a bottle propped on top.

She dropped to her knees, to lean in and look at him.

"Where is your mammy?" she asked.

He stopped crying.

She touched the bottle, which was warmth beneath her fingers. Then, she rubbed his chubby cheek, which had toughened against the cold.

Picking him up, she cuddled him.

She fell in love with him that moment; she christened him, Alexander Leon, swearing that she would never let anything bad happen to him. That she would take care of him.

When her mother found them, she called the Gardai, despite Shauna's pleas.

She looked down at Melissa, who had fallen asleep in her pram, with the sun cracking the grey sky above them, warming the air. Shauna checked the time on her phone.

It was nearly 2pm.

Without another look around, she hurried home, where she stood searching for her keys at the front door. When her mother opened it, Shauna could hear the kettle bubbling.

Sitting at the kitchen table, with Melissa playing by her feet, Shauna explained everything to her mother, who did not flinch. Instead, she reminded Shauna of the time that her mother caught her with a packet of cigarettes. Shauna rolled her eyes.

"Ma," Shauna said.

"Am I a good mother?"

Her mother sat solid as a rock.

"You are," she answered.

Shauna looked away.

"Do you remember that baby on the steps?" Shauna asked.

"I do," her mother said.

"How could I ever forget?"

The front door opened.

Shauna's sons, Niall and Sean, came running up the hall, fighting to give her a hug. Once they pounced on her, squishing her with their love, they took off, over to her mother.

Then, Shauna stood up.

She was going to wait for Sara in her bedroom. The scene of the crime was where she believed her daughter's punishment time should be served.

Sara would be home any minute: she would look just like her mother that morning, when she found the pills and rode the bus. She would criticise Shauna for going through her stuff; then hug her and apologise.

She would say that the pills belonged to her boyfriend. That she was only supposed to have them for the night. That it was a mistake.

Shauna would hold her daughter's hand, on the bed that she had just made. She would ground her daughter; take her phone, the pills and the TV from her room.

She would deal with the boyfriend later.

Before she did anything else, she wanted to talk to Sara about her own life. About the dreams and the plans that she had. And the baby boy that she thought of almost every day.

She was hoping that if Sara knew her better, she would do better.

Wiping her tears, promising she would, Sara would go back downstairs to help her grandmother prepare dinner. Shauna would sit on the edge of the bed.

Without a clock in the room, she would feel the tick of time on her bones. She would wonder what was next.

"It was being a mother," Shauna said.

VIII

THE SCIENTIST

18:45 Thursday

Some people said that it was accepting death. That it was mad to go without a way back. To Luke, it made perfect sense. He was a scientist. Of course, he wanted to go to space. He was a normal nine-year-old earthborn boy when the first clear images from the Hubble telescope were published in *National Geographic* magazine. When he stood on top of a grassy hill, staring up at a clear blue sky, wishing that it was a plaster he could rip off. Like the beginning of most love stories, Luke never looked at the world the same way again.

Growing up in a small Wicklow town, surrounded by fields and forests, there was not much for him to do, other than explore and build worlds of his own. He would return home every evening, believing that the stars were pin pricks in the night, where the light had burst through. What Hubble captured was far more beautiful. Far more destructive too.

There was sheer blackness, glittered with groups of stars that were burning and forming in the colourful gowns of the gases belonging to the nebula. There were cataclysmic explosions, concealed by the unfathomable distance that separated us and them.

Hoping to catch a glimpse of the cosmic catastrophe, Luke stood there all day, trying to reconcile what he saw with what had been discovered. When the sun set on him and his questions, he ran home through the fields to lay awake in his bed, scolding himself for not looking hard enough. From then on, he never accepted anything for what it seemed.

He was a shy boy who sometimes stuttered when he talked to strangers; he panicked while trying to think of something to say. Deciding that it was best to stay away, he gave up on the idea of friends because he did not think it was worth the possible humiliation.

It was his first mistake.

By the time he started secondary school, he was lonely. He had to imagine every kind of adventure on his own, as his mother, father, older brothers and sister, had outgrown the curiosity that he possessed. His bedroom walls were covered with every image from Hubble that he could find, continually reminding him that life could ignite at any moment.

He had not even tried to fail.

On his first day, he walked up to a group of boys who spotted him coming and called him ‘Lanky’. Without a fluster, he retorted, then discovered that he was surprisingly funny. Once the nickname and the friends stuck, he was surprised at how easy it was.

“Do you see?” he asked.

There was laughter.

Luke stopped pacing the podium, lifted his hand over his brow to shield his view from the fluorescent lighting that was hung in Lecture Room C. He was the resident astrophysicist at Trinity College, where there were 20 first year science students sitting in front of him.

He was giving a talk on failure, which seemed fitting, considering that he was standing in the one place he never believed he would be. He felt the same urgency he felt over 20 years before, when he discovered he did not know what lay beyond the horizon, just that if he had the chance, he would go. With, or without, a way back.

“Take a ten minute break,” he said.

The students exited.

****

Resting on the wooden desk beside the podium, Luke dropped his head into the palms of his hands. Frustrated, he reminded himself that dust and gas, floating around in the dark matter of space, gain weight and with it, gravity. That under the pressure, the atoms fuse on a nuclear level, irritating themselves iridescent. That was how a star was born. Then, it spent billions of years tearing every volatile piece of itself apart, while humans spent a few marvelling up at it and the others, navigating by them and wishing upon them.

It was a violent, yet vital, part of life. Realising that changed his.

He took a deep breath.

Lifting his head, he pushed himself away from the desk, walked over to the board, picked up a piece of chalk and wrote the word ‘possibility’ on the greenboard. The door opened and the students returned as he put the chalk back.

“Right,” he said.

“Where was I?”

Back up on the podium, he rolled up his sleeves and started pacing. He was staring down at his brown leather shoes, scratching his chin, until he clicked his fingers.

In secondary school, Luke made his next big mistake; by thinking he could make up for the time he lost. He was not thinking about what he wanted to be, when he launched himself into every available subject and sport.

By the time he was 15, he was forging signatures in students’ notebooks to earn some pocket-money, while making more friends and gaining more confidence. There was not a cinder of his childhood-self left, except that he was excelling in all three of his science classes.

Believing that he needed to be challenged, his parents and teachers agreed that he should skip fourth year. He, however, felt differently.

He still loved the stars. But for their beauty. Not their behaviour.

Convincing himself that he could capture it, he told his family he wanted to be an artist. Despite the mediocrity of his grades in the subject, he fought through his growing frustrations, worked endlessly and compiled a portfolio.

In his final year, he attended an art college open day, where he was blown away by the display of art. Or rather, how little talent for it he had.

It was his first taste of failure; although essential, it was bitter.

Not long after he gave up his dream of becoming an artist, he began to pull himself apart, doubt by doubt, questioning who he really was. How had he wasted so much time?

It was constantly on his mind, even at football practice, when he thrust too deep into a tackle, came down on his arm and broke it. He could do nothing with the pain, other than sit with sinking realisation that it did not hurt as much as what he had been doing to himself.

Then, all he could think of was the stars, battering themselves bright. He knew he had picked the wrong fight when he saw his science grades were still his highest.

He applied to study science at Trinity, where he began class the following autumn. He stood out on the college green, looking up at another clear blue sky, hoping he would make it to space. Plenty of people had done it before.

Why not him?

He could not stand under the night and name the constellations. But he could explain how they became. That was the thing about science, what most people did not know was the most interesting part.

It was also the greatest failure of all.

“Boo!” the students yelled.

Luke stopped and pitched his hand over his brow.

“You’re not leaving us!” one of them said.

They laughed.

“Stop it,” he said.

“We don’t have time.”

Tomorrow, they had to move on.

****

The question Luke was asked most, worried him most. Death was inevitable. Even for the stars. When they run out of fuel, their core collapses. In less than a second, they no longer resembled what they were. Or the life they had fought for. In a flash, the shockwaves sent shuddering through space, birthed other stars and shattered other solar systems. It was called a supernova. Luke wrote his college thesis on it. Of course, he wanted to see it.

Knowing all there was to know, or rather, all that was known about it, he wanted to get as close as possible, as maybe something had been missed. Maybe he would be the first to see it.

“How could I stay?” he asked.

There was silence.

Luke took it in his stride, turned and walked toward the other end of the podium. His pace was keeping his thoughts straight; reluctant to break it, he carried on.

After graduating, he flew to America to work with NASA. The space agency continually recruited young scientists to aid their research. Anyone in Luke’s class could have applied.

There was nothing special about him.

He did not stand out in college. Or in the States. He did not drink tea, coffee, fizzy drinks or juice. He did not have any allergies. Or trouble sleeping.

He was made for space.

When he returned home to the Celtic Tiger, the four months he spent at NASA aligned him perfectly with an abundance of offers. He was not with the space organisation long enough to learn much; but he did feel the ropes that bound his dreams.

It astonished him how easy it was.

Making his next decision was also easy, as Trinity sweetened a Ph.D. in astrophysics with the possibility of using the Hubble telescope. Choking with excitement, he accepted the offer; years later, he did not think he would still be there, talking about failure. But then, as a scientist, he had to make the right amount of mistakes.

If he was curious enough, he would not give up.

The mistake people made was believing they could not understand. That they were not smart enough. Or even worse, that they were not interested.

“As scientists..,” he said.

“…we failed.”

He stopped and checked the time on his watch. He had 13 minutes left.

Looking at his students, following his every word and movement, he dropped his hands and stood squinting, sweating and running out of breath. The students were on the edge of their seats, despite knowing how the story ended.

In 2012, he was sitting in his small office at Trinity, where he was working as a researcher, while contemplating the different ways he could get to space. During his Ph.D., there had been a call for astronauts. But he did not apply, thinking he was not ready.

Scrolling the internet, he came across an article on The Mars First project, which was an initiative to send people to Mars by televising the trip that had only been completed by rovers and probes. It was a one-way mission, because there was no way back.

Luke knew the technology needed to transport enough fuel for the interplanetary travellers to return had not yet been discovered. That did not bother him.

He did not want to be on TV.

Knowing he was going to apply, he kept putting the application off, wondering how he could stand out. The day it was due, he was working at a summer festival for Trinity. He applied some glitter, found a quiet spot behind a tent and videoed himself detailing the reasons why he would be useful on Mars. Then, all that was left to do was to write 1,000 words on his greatest fear.

Smiling, he wrote, “fear not applicable”.

Months later, he was sitting in his office, when he got an email declaring he was one of the one percent. That he should hold his breath.

He had almost made it.

****

Soon after, the questions started. First, the journalists came with their dictaphones. Then, he was on the radio, realising that he had not told his family, who were happy for him, when he eventually called them. His mother kept every article and recorded every TV interview. It was somewhere in the middle of the mayhem that he was asked to give a talk about his journey at the Science Gallery, where he had begun to help curate events. Afterwards, people came up to him, asking him the same questions. How could he go? And why?

Without replying, he changed the subject.

He only had a few weeks to complete the next step of the Mars First programme, which was to pass a medical and psychological evaluation. Luke played football every week and ate well. He did not smoke or drink alcohol. He had nothing to worry about, unless he was crazy.

He was speechless, when he failed the medical exam.

The doctors did not know what was wrong with him, just as he did not know how much it meant to him. Devastated, he went to different specialists, where he tried every test and got no answers. He was unable to help himself, which was agony.

Luckily, he broke out in chicken pox, just in time to pass the medical exam and move onto the next stage, which seemed to be wait and wait. As the months passed, he continued to work at the gallery, where the only problem he had was an old one.

“Now...” he said.

“There is no time.”

He used to try and explain what he learnt in college to his family and friends, who never understood a word of the science he spoke. Eventually, he gave up, thinking they did not need to know, once he did. It was a mistake that most scientists made.

Luke had to use his imagination to find new ways to communicate the science that he had studied. Breaking down everything he knew to fit an exhibition or a talk, he experimented with the language and descriptions he used.

If his audience left confused, he knew he had not done his job. As a scientist, it was the hardest discovery he ever made.

Over the years, he read and learnt different pieces of information about the Mars First Project. What was most important, was that they ran out of funding.

That did not surprise Luke.

His reaction did.

Listening to astronauts describe the effects gravity had on them, never interested him too much. He had imagined the journey too many times, to believe them without experiencing it. But what he could see, after the supernova of his dream, was all that was left: his life spread out like the crashing cosmos, as if he were already floating in space.

“What ends…” he said.

"…creates."

Stepping down off the podium, to sit on its edge, he straightened his legs and leaned in towards the students. With his brown eyes looking out at them, he filled with hope.

"Now…" he said.

"Do you see?"

The students drew their breaths, then nodded their heads, packed their bags and left. When the lecture room was empty, Luke zipped up his coat, picked up his suitcase and turned out the lights. He had to go up two flights of stairs before he reached the ground level, crossed the main entrance and stood outside, where the cold, clear night, was perfect for stargazing.

Luke's eyes were on the puddles left by the rain earlier. Then, a quarreling homeless couple caught his attention. Reminding himself it was rude to stare, he looked ahead at a junction, the smoking traffic and the steamy crowds.

All the way to the pub, to play scrabble with his friends, he took note of what was around him. Once he knew there was a tick, echoing deep within the treasure box of life itself, he did not need to look up; something made from the same stuff as the stars, surely abided by the same rules.

Trust him, he was the scientist.

IX

THE HOMELESS

22:30 Thursday

There was a purple heart spray-painted onto a north-inner-city wall. It enclosed the names, Kev and Nina, who were standing beside it, arguing under a streetlamp. There were three plastic bags at their feet, filled with everything they owned, except the paint that Kev had stolen earlier, hoping to cheer Nina up. She was due in court for stealing toiletries from a pharmacy; the last thing she needed was a graffitied promise that she could not take back.

Hurling the can of paint down the street, Nina muted the growl grappling through her teeth. Then, she surveyed the clouds gathering to suffocate the stars; scoffed and looked back at Kev, who was leaning toward her, gasping for a word.

"What if the guards come and see us standing beside it?" she said.

"Are you thick?"

Kev ducked as if he dodged a punch, turned and took a couple of steps back. Reluctantly reminding himself that they still had to hop a fence before they could go to bed, he checked both ends of the street were clear, walked over to Nina and put his arm around her.

When he tried to kiss her, she turned her cheek.

He walked away.

"Suit yourself," he said.

"I won't be long."

At the junction ahead, he turned left, jogged up the path and down the set of stone steps that led to The Royal Canal, where he had stashed a small piece of carpet under the nearby bridge. Waddling alongside the current, he huffed and puffed to himself.

He could understand Nina's point. Not her tone.

He was 23 years old; clever in school but bold. It was ADHD, the doctor told him, when it was too late. Kev had already been told too many times that he could do nothing right; he

no longer wanted to try. At 16, he left his parents' house, thinking he had figured everything out.

Two years later, he ran out of favours and couches to crash on. The streets were his only option, while drinking and taking whatever drugs he could, blunted the edge of the knife his life had become.

Now, drinking less and using less, there was barely a trace left of the boy he once was. There was a belief hardening like cement within him, that he would die out there.

Reaching the bridge, he stopped and took a €20 mobile phone from his pocket. It was the most valuable thing he owned, despite never having the price of credit or anyone to call. He turned on the torch, shone it on a pile of rubbish, smiled and stuck his hand in.

When he retrieved the carpet, he returned to Nina, who was standing as far away from the painted heart as she was willing to walk. Kicking at imaginary stones, she was in her own world, where she could have looked carefree if it were not for the baggage.

Eight years older than Kev, she was slighter and quieter; not a bit of her was built for the life they were living. She was from a nice, well-educated family, who had everything a child could want, except belief in the stories she told of abuse.

Instead, they blamed her mental health.

They wanted her to take more medication, so she took every other kind than that prescribed, thinking that if they did not believe her, they did not know what was right for her. She walked out of her parents' house two years ago; not knowing where to go, or how to get there.

With the change in her pocket, she bought a train ticket to the city and wandered around until dawn. She was partly blue when the gardai found her asleep on a bench; they took her to the nearest homeless centre, where she woke up.

She never saw herself where she now was, dressed in strangers' clothes, hungry and smelling just like she felt, which was horrible. But she would not go back.

If she had to take her story back, it would kill her.

Kev appeared from the darkness, looking as if he were carrying a sack over his shoulder. Nina crackled to life with laughter, stepped away from the wall, closer to him.

"C'mon," he said.

"Not now!"

When he reached her side, she kissed him, surprising him again. He shook it off and looked around. The street was empty. He was ready.

For almost a week, they had been sleeping in a tent that they had hidden in the backyard of a derelict house across the street. Grabbing the bags and rushing over, Kev dropped them beside the front wall, hopped up and threw the carpet over the spiked fence that was guarding the property's perimeter. When Nina was standing in front of him, he gripped onto the "For Sale" sign, held out his hand and bent down.

"Time to shine, darling," he said.

Nina grabbed onto him without hesitation; she let herself be pulled and boosted up over the fence. Then, Kev passed her the bags, climbed up and removed the carpet.

For the minute it took, they were flawless.

Walking up the overgrown driveway, into the darkness, the inkling of ease, of returning home, rustled over them. They let it prickle their skin with the sweetness of a sin, knowing that it would not last long. That they had to take what they could, when they could.

From the street, their torchlight could not be seen.

Neither could their bit of joy.

****

At the back of the crumbling house, there were mounds of scrap, surrounded by looming shadows that shifted in their sleep. It was hard to believe that Kev and Nina were safer there. Standing hand in hand, they scanned the dark for the discarded door that was concealing their tent. Their torchlight was barely making a dent in the night that had pierced them together. Whether it was the cold or their fear, their legs were trembling, threatening to buckle beneath them.

Finally, Kev found what they were looking for, squeezed Nina's hand and passed her the phone. After showing her where to point the torch, he stepped over the rubbish and got to work; a few minutes and readjustments later, the battered cloth was their paradise again.

“Ri’,” he said.

“M’Lady, your castle awaits.”

Giggling, Nina jumped in.

Kev took a second to savour the syrup of her smile, before making his way, cautiously, to the back wall, where he urinated under a tree. Looking up at the stars, he saw prison bars instead of branches, then wondered what he had expected; why had he even bothered?

No shooting star could solve his problems.

On the streets, wherever they lay their head, they had to defend. They had to sleep with a steel pole or a brick, some sort of weapon that might keep them safe.

The hostels were not much better. There were drugs and thieves everywhere, which made it impossible to stay clean or sleep, once they were separated into gender specific rooms; they had to fend for themselves. Kev had a lot of experience protecting himself. But Nina was different. He could not leave her and wait for her bruises to tell the story.

Zipping himself up, he shrugged off the thought.

Back at the tent, Nina had folded down a corner of their sleeping bag, laid out the book they were reading, alongside a cheese sandwich wrapped in tinfoil. Kev jumped in and kissed her.

When they were tucked in and warm, he picked up their book and began to read. With the wind lashing its whips all around them, they left themselves behind.

Existing only in the pages, in between the lines, they played their favourite characters, revelled in the fictitious dreams and toyed with their hopes. It was the moment that Kev and Nina looked forward to most; when they were in it, they were unbreakable.

But they knew nothing lasts.

Nina sat up.

There was enough tobacco in their tin for at least four cigarettes. She rolled one up, then put the rest away. Ducking under the sleeping bag, she resurfaced at the bottom.

Kev stopped reading, to shine the light on her.

“Are you listening?” he asked.

She nodded and smiled.

She did not realise that her short auburn hair was in tufts. Or that a sprinkling of dirt on her cheeks, resembled fresh freckles beneath her bold brown eyes.

“Ya ride,” he said.

He winked.

Without blinking, Nina turned and opened the tent a couple of inches. Kev shone the torch on the book and continued reading. A moment later, a blazing light filled the tent, slackened and cradled Nina, who was shielding a burning candle wick.

Kev was still and staring, until a moment later, when he blew the flame out.

Collapsing as he let go of his breath, he grabbed Nina, who began to cry. He knew why she poured out her heart to sleep, though it did not make it any easier to bear.

He believed everything that she told him; what she lost and how she loses herself when she cannot forget. He understood her mind goes somewhere else. And why she leaves him sometimes for days. But what he believed did not matter, he thought, because he did not.

“It’s alri’,” he said.

“Go to sleep.”

Taking the only sleeping tablet they had left from his coat pocket, he gave it to Nina with a dribble of wine. Then, he swallowed the last mouthful, switched off the light and spooned her still; if he had let her go, he would have been the one to shudder.

He had met her outside a hostel a year ago, when they got a bottle of wine together, rather than a bed on their own. They had stayed up the whole night talking; taking cover wherever they could, for as long as they could. They had been together ever since.

Sharing everything they had, they dared each other to get more, to do better and to laugh as they picked each other up. They fought and made up in the streets because they had no better place to go. No home. No ticket. Nothing more important than what was in front of them.

Kev had been trying to imagine them somewhere else; on a beach or in a house. But he could not. No matter how many books they read to each other, or how many stories Nina concocted, all he saw was the consistency of the concrete in his tomorrows.

Holding her tightly, he drifted in and out of sleep. The city shifted through its gears, while the birds began to sing.

“Wake up!” Nina said.

“Kev!”

He opened his eyes as she untangled herself from his arms. She sat up and turned off the phone’s alarm. It was six am; four hours before Nina had to be in court.

“Remember…” he said, rubbing his eyes.

“This is the hardest part.”

****

Outside, where it was still dark, the early morning dew was dripping from the backyard like froth. Kev and Nina were wearing almost everything they owned, which meant they could hold hands, leaving the only comfort they had behind. In a slow and solemn stride, they reached the fence and stood silent, trying to time their escape. Without knowing it was safe, they waited until they could no longer stand there, climbed up, took a look and hopped over. That Friday morning, they were lucky. They did not have to run.

Grasping at Nina’s hand, Kev nudged Nina as they passed the spray-painted heart. Nina gripped her plastic bag, pulled up her hood and walked on.

Kev stalled for a second, then kept on going.

By the canal, Nina checked her reflection on the water’s edge and said nothing, while stitching herself back into Kev’s seams. It was easier for both of them to forget what they had to do next, when they had each other.

At the bridge, they stopped again.

Kev tucked Nina in beside the wall, took the piece of carpet from his shoulder, stepped into the darkness and hid it. Grinning, he returned to Nina’s side, picked up the bags, put his arm around her and squeezed her. He never told her about the prayer he said every morning, because she did not need another reason to worry.

Making their way across the city, they shook against each other, fighting the cold and the demons that haunted them. That slithered through the city’s corridors, calling them.

They did not lift their heads or loosen their grips, until they were walking alongside the River Liffey. When they set their eyes upon the dawn that was dishing itself out in the sky, serving peaches and cream instead of clouds, neither of them could look away.

The warmth was the closest thing to hope they had felt in a long time. Letting it drip over them, they smiled at each other.

Then, Kev seized the last of his strength, hurried up the quays and dragged Nina with him.

"I'm starving," she whined.

"Gis a burger."

They laughed.

A few minutes later and out of breath, they arrived at a centre for the homeless, where the smell of toast nearly knocked them out. They sat down and drank two cups of coffee, ate three slices of toast, a bowl of cereal and a banana each.

Afterwards, they went through their pockets and their plastic bags, while making a mental note of what supplies they had. They put their phone on charge at the reception, went to the bathroom and freshened up; 15 minutes later, Kev was back sitting at the table, clean shaven and wearing an XL navy shirt. His dirty-blonde hair was smoothed over with water.

Waiting for Nina, he pulled at the collar around his neck. He was watching the clock on the wall tick toward 9am; an hour before court.

He hated courts and everything to do with them. Having been in and out of them, he could not help sweating every time he took a step inside.

Slapping his legs, he straightened up.

"Well," Kev said.

"Look at this."

Slapping his legs again, he lit up.

Nina was standing in front of him, wearing a green woollen dress with a black polo neck and trousers. Her hair was brushed into a short ponytail. Her green beaded earrings were trapping rays of light. Her face was glowing, though her eyes were weary.

Without believing him, she slouched over to him, dropped her bag and sat down beside him. Resting her head on his shoulder, she looked around at the other people, eating and chatting, acting like everything was fine. Like they belonged there, just as she did.

"I'm scared," she said.

"What if…"

Kev shushed her, then hugged her. Squeezing her with everything he had, he wished she had given him the chance to steal what she needed. He would have committed the crime the second she told him what she wanted.

Now, all he knew was they needed more than a smoke.

"C'mon," he said.

They stood up.

Back on the street, Kev rolled two cigarettes, passed one to Nina, then headed for the court. The sunlight was running its fingers through the clouds, caressing their cheeks and the river.

Trying to stay close to Nina, Kev avoided the cracks in the pavement for superstition's sake. Nina stayed a step ahead of him, avoiding him.

She had taken a step back inside herself, where Kev could not reach her. He could not stop looking at her either, when they sat down. They shared their last smoke. But nothing else.

Standing back up, they walked toward the court entrance,their shoulders slumped. Kev jumped a step and grabbed Nina's hand, which was warm as fresh dough. Then, their reflections in the glass doors shattered them.

When Kev opened the doors, he began to sweat, just as Nina let go.

When she shuffled in, he followed her.

They were red faced, laced with agitation. By the time they got through security, they were silhouettes of themselves. Shifting from foot to foot, trying to figure out where they had to go, they returned to security, where a silent finger pointed to the top of the staircase. When they reached the top, they were panting and panicking.

Spotting the elevator, Kev cried out. Then, he clocked a Garda.

“Garda!” Kev yelled.

“Garda!”

Rushing over, unsteady on the shiny floor, Kev halted and asked where Nina had to go. The Garda took a piece of paper from his pocket, looked it over and told Kev that some of the morning’s proceedings had been cancelled and rescheduled, including Nina’s.

Kev was bitterly confused when the garda repeated himself.

“I heard ya the first time!” Kev yelled.

Back by Nina’s side, his words flew from his mouth, so fast and fused with profanity, that it took Nina some time to understand him. Then, she burst with joy.

“C’mon,” she said.

“Let’s go.”

Picking up her bag, and Kev’s, she grabbed his sleeve, dragged him out of the court and sat him down on a wall around the corner. After rummaging through their bags, she scuttled off and left Kev rocking back and forth, holding his knees, banging his head.

“They don’t care what it took,” Kev said.

Repeating the words, he was seething, believing everything he had done was for nothing. That he had not made a difference.

Nina arrived back, grinning. Irritating him with her disregard for what had just happened, she hid her hands behind her back.

“Pick one,” she said.

He pointed left.

When she revealed her hand, it was empty. Kev groaned and rolled his eyes, itching with impatience. Nina whipped out her other hand, enclosing their cigarette tin.

Kev looked at it, then down the road.

Nina opened it and held it under his nose; it was full of brand new, smoked cigarette butts that she had picked up off the street. The smell leased Kev a lust for life again.

He jumped off the wall, into the sunlight, where he danced around, hugging and kissing Nina, delighting in her success. With enough money for a cheap bottle of wine, or some

cider, they would get soup and sandwiches in the evening, when they would trade some brand new, robbed razors for two sleeping tablets. Then, they would celebrate.

Had Kev known their tent and the rest of the rubbish would be thrown in a skip the following morning, he would have stolen something sweet to eat.

“No!” he said.

Wailing, he slapped his forehead.

“The phone!”

He was cursing at himself, when Nina smiled at him, reached into his pocket, pulled out the phone and handed it to him. She had collected it earlier, after dressing for court.

Kev kissed her.

Six days later, Nina moved into a rehabilitation centre, leaving Kev alone on the streets. Had he known she had applied, he would not have spray-painted the purple heart on the wall.

He would have spared them that argument.

X

THE STALL

10:30 Friday

Under the blue and white striped tarp, there were five sold-out trays gaping at Sheila from her stall on Moore Street. That meant it was a good day. So far, there had not been any trouble, though the feeling that it was coming never shifted. With only a handful of stalls remaining, the vendors did not have much say on what happened to them next; the future was hanging over their heads, just like the seagulls diving off the battered bricks to chase the pigeons away from the scraps on the ground. Every day they turned up for work, wondering who would still be there? Who had given up?

"Hey honey," she said.

"Can I help you?"

Stepping onto the pavement, Sheila's blue eyes beamed beneath the loose strands of her blonde hair, blowing wildly in the wind. She did not look like she was ready to walk away because she was not. She had been standing in the same spot, selling fruit and vegetables, for over 40 years; why should she have to leave?

What was she supposed to do?

She adjusted her pink puffer coat, tore a small recyclable bag from the roll stored in her utility belt, smiled and jittered with the same joy she felt every time a customer came along. She was reminded that life was nothing if it was bitter.

The young man approached her, pointing at a tray of mushrooms. Sheila began to discuss the dark pattern that the clouds were knitting above them, while she filled half of the plastic bag in her hand, pinched the top and spun it. When she looked up at him, he thanked her.

"No problem, sweetie," she said.

"That'll be a euro."

The man handed Sheila the money, thanked her and walked off, smiling and swinging the mushrooms by his side. Sheila put the coin in her belt and zipped it closed.

The street had taught her to keep her eyes open. To know what was happening around her at all times. Otherwise, she would not make a penny.

The first time she stood there, she was eight-years-old. Her mother had to tap her on the shoulder, reminding her to breathe. That was how scared she was, adrift in the hustle and bustle of what seemed like a different world; when there was only an inch between the stalls and the vendors yelling over each other, charming and haggling for every penny.

What deals they did, they did in silence because there was never enough of the good stuff to go around. But there was plenty of opportunity, which was all they needed.

Sheila was the youngest of six children. If she wanted money, she had to work.

She got into the swing of it quick enough, watching her mother and grandmother working together, moving effortlessly and efficiently, side by side; catching customers like flies in the webs they weaved with their secret recipes and stories. Pressing upon each other gently, sharing unspoken jokes over a few feet of cobbles, they made the world their own.

Sheila sold her first batch of potatoes, by simply holding them, trying to look busy. When an elderly lady asked how much they were, Sheila's mother had put a hand on her shoulder, leaned down and answered for her. Sighing with relief, Sheila handed the potatoes over.

Her hands, soft as whipped cream, were powdered with dirt.

They had not been clean since.

"Whatever kindness you give…" her mother whispered.

"...Will come back to you tenfold."

Sheila nodded at her mother. But she did not truly understand her words until she ran the stall herself, which was something she never thought she would do.

It was not easy work. Not pretty. Not fancy.

It was honest.

For ten hours, six days a week, she got up at 5 am, went to the market, bought her produce, set up the stall and served her customers as they came. Whether there was rain, or hail, or sometimes snow, she was there without shelter.

A brute shout shushed the street.

"What was tha…" Sheila said.

She stalled.

Two men were walking down the path, staggering drunkenly and bickering. They had passed earlier, sober.

Leaning against the stall, Sheila watched them. She knew what was going to happen next. Then, she was sorry she had any sense as one of the men punched the other.

She gripped the stall.

The injured man shuffled away, slowing to a stop opposite Sheila, who looked at him sternly, while placing her hands on her hips. The tall, wobbling man held up his hands, protesting his innocence, just before his friend charged at him, knocking him against the stall.

Stunned, Sheila grabbed a hold of them, reefing them apart.

"All I am trying to do…" she screamed.

"Is a day's work!"

The men landed on the closed shop front opposite her, where they continued to fight. She turned around to mend her display, then realised it was a waste of time.

In the corner of her eye, she spotted a young female garda pull up on a bicycle, speaking into her walkie-talkie. Easing back onto the stall, Sheila was grateful she no longer had to be involved; but if she was asked, she would not step aside, leaving the stall unprotected.

She would never do that.

Once the men saw the garda approaching them, they stopped wrestling. The man who had tried to plead his innocence earlier, punched his friend in the nose and scarpered off.

The other man dropped.

"This has to be a joke," Sheila said.

“Where are the cameras?”

The garda looked away.

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A few minutes later, Sheila was arranging some lemons. She had her back to the handcuffed man, face-down on the pavement, yelling at the Garda, who had been joined by two male colleagues. With the four litres of vodka and two bottles of wine in his backpack, they carried him away, kicking and complaining. Waiting for the street to resume its pace, cleaning the slate, she did not turn back around, until all that was left of the altercation was a few crooked crates and the last nervous shake of her hands.

The other vendors had not taken their eyes off her. They watched her as she inhaled the city’s air, until her smile untied itself from her lips. Then, they got back to business.

She was going to miss them.

They grew up on the street together, trusting and relying on each other. They raised their families and mourned their losses. They would stick together for as long as they could. But they could not blame each other for getting another job, deciding to study or sit on the couch and figure it out. If they could afford to, and were able, Sheila wished them well.

She was too old. Maybe too stubborn.

Scanning the cobbles crammed with empty crisp packets, discarded receipts and other filth, she jiggled as she caught a giggle in her throat. She looked at the stallholder closest to her, whistled and nodded at the coffee shop across the street.

When her friend nodded back, Sheila walked away.

She never believed there would be a day that she would fight tooth and nail for the stall. Or that there would no longer be traders and punters packed wall to wall. But then, she believed the promises the council made. She would never do that again.

At 18, she finished school, quit the stall and got a job building dialysis machines for a bio-medical company. Learning more and earning more than she ever had, she did not miss the stall. She did help on the weekends, if her mother needed her.

Sheila could not say no.

She met her husband, Ray, at a dance, where they fell in love. There was not much more to the story, other than they had not spent a day apart since.

After giving birth to their first daughter, she left her job and returned to her spot by the stall, where it felt like she had never left. She could not regret her decision because she had never imagined her life any other way. At least, not until she had to.

Back at the stall, there was a woman with a pram and two children, standing beside three young men, chatting and smoking. Sheila knew their faces from the hours they spent on the street, shifting from one group to the next.

She gave them discounts when they were short. She would help anyone as much as she could. But she had to make a living.

"Hi everyone!" she said.

They did not respond.

Stepping down into her spot in front of the stall, she took out the sandwich she had packed for her lunch and sipped her coffee. The people walking down the path were cutting around the stall, rather than trying to squeeze past.

That was not good business.

Sheila tried to catch the eye of passers-by, while reciting the deals she had on. Nothing she did made a difference, until she let out a shout.

"Come on lads," she said.

"Yis have to move!"

Brushing the loose strands of hair off her face, she dug desperately for a smile. The group looked her up and down. The cold wind blew like a brute between them

She did not budge.

The group shrugged at each other, then moved on.

"Thank you," she said.

She smiled.

She was holding onto a crate either side of her, when the path cleared. There was a man in a shirt and jeans at the end of the stall, staring at her.

“Why should they move?” he asked.

He folded his arms.

Sheila turned away from him, seeking some peace. She was taking a moment to breathe, when her neighbour winked at her. Sheila let her shoulders sink. The kink in her brow eased.

When she turned around, she spent no kindness.

“What?” she asked.

“How dare you!”

Stepping back onto the path, she walked toward him without taking her eyes off him. She strained her neck, trying to understand how he could judge her.

“Stand in my shoes,” she said.

“Then ask why.”

With her cheeks a raw red, she clasped both of her hands around her belt. She stood in front of him, stretching all five-foot of her.

“Now,” she said.

“Piss off!”

The man turned tail, blushing, while the group across the street laughed. Sheila shook her head with frustration, grabbed some loose potatoes and began to bag them.

Reminding herself that the street had changed, not her, she heard a slow tick-tick-ticking creeping along the other side of the stall. She stood still and listened.

With an inkling of what might happen next, she looked up.

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On the tips of her toes, gripping a tray of tomatoes, she tried to catch a glimpse of the opportunist. The tick-tick-ticking ceased, just as a tiny hand, as dirty as hers, felt its way over the top tray of plums. When it tried to steal one, she grabbed it. Gently, but firmly, she guided it toward the end of the stall. Repeating her mother's words, she reached the last crate, where a young boy appeared in front of her, with the hood of his thin navy coat pulled up. His blue eyes were like little venturous oceans, pouring over his freckles, breaking against her heart.

"Some things never change," she said.

She smiled.

Squinting her eyes as she assessed him, she let go of his hand, picked up an orange, tossed it and caught it. The boy shuffled into a sturdy stance, without looking away.

Sheila guessed he was about ten-years-old, too young to be wandering the streets alone. Wondering who was looking for him, she threw the orange to him.

He grabbed it with both hands, flinching. Then, he smiled.

"What vegetable makes you cry?" she asked.

He looked down, considering the question. Finally, he stomped his foot.

"An onion," he said.

He looked up.

"Exactly," she said.

"Next time, you'll get one in the head!"

The boy laughed.

Stuffing the fruit into his pocket, he did not speak before disappearing behind the stall. Sheila peeped and saw the red rusted tricycle he was sitting on.

It tick-tick-ticked, as he sped away.

"Oi," she yelled.

Picking up a plum, she waited for the boy to look at her, then threw it. He stopped and caught it with one hand, took a bite and chewed with a dribbling delight. As he vanished around the corner, away from the city, Sheila picked another plum and ate it.

With the juice rolling down her chin, she thought of her three children sitting by the stall, munching on berries and pretending to work. She could not imagine them as children, walking that street without her at their shoulder.

"How much?" a voice asked behind her.

Sheila jumped.

Turning around, apologising, she served the waiting woman. Trading into the darkness because the streetlight only stretched so far, Sheila spent the next few hours scuttling up and down the stall, bagging her produce and her profit, packing up the rubbish and making lists for the morning. The cold slithered up her sleeve. But she did not shiver.

Last year, the council tried to revoke the stallholders' right to pass on their trading licences to their children. They fought back and won, yet nothing had been done to restore the street or their businesses. Sheila knew her children may not want to take over the stall. That they only helped when she needed them. That did not mean they did not deserve a legacy.

She had been standing on the same ground for generations, adapting to the city's changes. She met people from different countries, who requested fruit and vegetables she had never heard of; then used every bit of, in ways Sheila never imagined. She tasted the world, bagged it and passed on the recipe.

She had regulars from when her mother was alive. That went out of their way to buy from the stall. To remind themselves of the way things were.

Some just like to hear the stories she told.

When a light rain began to fall, she packed up the last of her boxes. She knew the clock was ticking toward the end of a story. The others knew it too.

Her husband was waving at her from their van. She waved back, just as a young woman, with long braids in her hair, walked up to her.

"I hear you had some day," the girl said.

Sheila looked at her.

"Don't you worry about that," Sheila replied.

"What do you need?"

When the girl handed Sheila a €50 note, she broke it into smaller notes and coins.

“Thank you,” the girl said.

“And come’re to me!”

Pulling a leaf from the top of Sheila’s head, the girl said goodbye, then walked back up the street to the hair salon where she worked. Sheila laughed to herself, knowing it did not matter what the Council built. Or how high they built it. Underneath it, there would always lie the lives that made Moore Street. Like a diamond buried there, she shone with hope.

Kissing her husband and packing up the van, she headed home to eat the dinner he had prepared and get ready for morning. She had a stall to run.

“If you sit down for too long…” her mother had said.

“You’ll never get back up.”

XI

THE WEAVE

19:00 Friday

Dream was not being superstitious. She was being careful. The two bare bulbs hanging from the low ceiling were simply not dousing the partitioned shop with enough light. That night, she was not taking any chances. Gathering her long braids of hair, twisting and knotting them on the top of her head, she threaded lightly, over the cracked tiles, avoiding the shadows that were circling her; along their edges danced the collectors of a curse that was uttered a long time ago, far, far, away, from Moore Street. She had too much to lose, to turn her back on it.

Searching the overloaded worktops lining both sides of The Shine beauty salon, Dream found a lamp. She dangled over piles of curlers, scissors and pins to pick it up. Smiling, victoriously, she carried it back to her mother's beauty station, plugged it in and turned it on.

When it made no difference, she rolled her cocoa eyes.

"At least..." she whispered.

"I tried."

With a client due at 7pm, she cleared her mother's workspace. Consisting of a steel table, a mirror and two wooden chairs, it was not the glamour that Dream had imagined for herself.

It was a place to start.

She was 20 and studying business management in college. She had been borrowing her mother's space in the evenings, with the hope she would have her own by the end of the year. It made no sense to her, to make money for someone else.

Picking up the pink suitcase filled with her equipment, she placed it on one of the chairs and opened it. Folded on top, there was a piece of black and orange cloth.

Dream pinched a corner and lifted it up, letting the pattern of floral plumes unfurl before her. The fabric was woven in West Africa, where she was born.

Spreading it out over the table, she flattened it down by running her fingers over the intricacies. The rolling threads reminded her of home, where she would sit out on the balcony, in her mother's lap, plaiting her hair and ignoring the sun setting over the African sky; she would divide, crisscross and repeat, until she fell asleep.

If Dream closed her eyes, her fingers would finish her weave. There was no reason for the incremental beating of her heart. Or her sweaty palms.

"Why," she asked herself.

"Are you so nervous?"

Pulling a chair closer, she sat down, reached into the suitcase, removed a cardboard box and gently placed it on her lap. When she opened it, she smiled down at the yellow tea-set that was inside, painted with blue birds. It was the most precious thing she owned.

It belonged to her grandmother, who was one of the first women in her family to travel the world. To settle in Italy and export perfumes and other luxuries to Africa.

By the age of 24, she was an entrepreneur.

She moved back to Africa, when she met Dream's grandfather. She built a mansion with stone lions and guards at the gate, started a family and hired some help.

Dream's grandmother was too busy to cook.

Dream laid out the cups and saucers, teapot and spoons, just as her grandmother had when they used to sit in her gold-tipped garden, drinking fruit tea. Holding the pot and pouring, her grandmother would tell her stories about the places she had been.

How she did it all for herself.

All by herself.

Looking down at her watch, Dream shook herself up. With ten minutes left, she took the blonde hair extensions for her client, draped them over her black jeans, picked one up and began to brush it. Outside, the wind swept the rain against the glass door.

It was the colour of the sand, caught in the wind's mouth as it whistled down the dirt paths that she used to walk to school; that was occupying her mind, unnerving her.

It was not safe there.

In the dark, amongst the snakes, lurked men that would kidnap her and chop her up, eat her body parts and bury her bones. Her father and uncles had told her about the dangers that awaited her, figuring that she had to know what to expect, to protect herself.

A lot of children died on their way to school. And in other ways, on other journeys too.

"Voodoo," she whispered.

Her eyes darted around the room, then peeped through the shop's partition, into the mobile phone repair shop on the other side, where the guy on duty was looking at his phone, suspecting nothing. Reminding herself she was in Dublin, she took a breath.

All she ever wanted was a room with a view. To look down and see how far she had come. To wake up every morning, charging toward the sun.

Earlier that day, she went to view an apartment with her boyfriend, Kash. Both thought it was better than she imagined. So, they left an application with the letting agent.

He said he would call Kash with an answer that night. Dream would have to finish the weave, before hearing from Kash.

As a child, she did not know the difference. Or that there was a choice between light and dark. She was too young to pick a side. To understand poverty, death or religion.

She loved her parents unconditionally.

Her father was from a poor family. He grew up in a shelter built from scrap, practicing Juju and worshipping the Devil. As the eldest of six children, he was expected to provide for his family and not the rich Christian girl he had fallen in love with, despite knowing it would never work. It was against tradition.

In the beginning, Dream's parents did not believe they were cursed. They married and moved into a house her grandmother bought them; opened a grocery shop in the front room and had Dream. When they had her brother, the Devil was called upon.

Her father's family fed her baby brother a parasite, committing him to a life that would end at 19. But Dream did not know the meaning of evil, until she asked her mother, a year later, why she was not poisoned; why did she get to live?

"You are a girl," her mother said.

"Girls do not carry the family name."

The door burst open.

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For a moment, the rain fell like crystal spears on the welcome mat. Dream was mesmerised by its wrath, until she told herself to keep her head out of the dark. Jumping up, she greeted her client, Hannah, took her coat and her umbrella, showed her to the bathroom and turned on the kettle. Back at the beauty station, she checked her phone. There was no message from Kash. She filled with instantaneous doubt, wondering what could go wrong?

What stood in their way?

She placed a hand on her grandmother's blanket, unwilling to give in easily.

"It's not the time," she whispered.

"Or the place."

Looking herself over in the mirror, she wiped her brow and rolled up her sleeves. She tied back two loose braids of hair, then reapplied the red stain to her lips.

She was not glamourous because she did not want to be. She liked the dark cherry that her cheeks churned when she laughed too much. Or when she was embarrassed.

She wanted to make other people feel beautiful. No matter where they came from. Or how much they had.

They deserved to matter.

Hearing the bathroom door close, she picked up the tea pot, filled it with the kettle, put it back and pulled out a chair for Hannah, who strutted out of the shadows in a skinny pink dress, with her blonde hair swooshing over her shoulders. Dream whistled at her as she approached.

Hannah twirled and sat down, noticing the steam rising from the teapot. She looked at Dream and smiled with approval.

"This is lovely," Hannah said.

"This too…"

Holding the corner of Dream's blanket between two of her fingers, Hannah caressed the pattern. Dream gathered the tools she needed, while a shiver of excitement tickled her pride; she thanked Hannah. Then, she wrapped a towel around her shoulders and got to work.

With her hands moving methodically through Hannah's hair, pinning it and brushing it, Dream listened to her talk about her life, her fears and her faults, unable to hold back her own. Filled with compliments for each other, there was not a second of silence.

"Isn't it funny," Dream said.

"We're never happy?"

Outside, the rain was unrelenting. Dream checked her watch; it was eight o'clock, which meant she did not have a lot of time. The shop closed at nine.

"Right," Dream said.

"I have to stop talking!"

Hannah laughed.

Pulling her chair closer, Dream did not utter another word. She began the last plait, while Hannah scrolled through her phone.

Dream eased into a rhythm, whenever she weaved hair. She did not notice the time go by. She travelled through it in her mind, to all the memories entwined, crisscrossing and repeating. To where the curse always lurked.

By the time she was eight-years-old, her mother was pregnant with her fourth child. The food in their shop was perishing because she had no time to sell it.

Dream's father was no help.

He was drinking more and more, disappearing for days and throwing fists when he came home. The curse was taking its toll.

In a fit of fear, her mother decided to follow her older sister to Ireland, where she could earn more and create a new life for them. Dream did not believe her, until two weeks later, when she left; Dream thought it was a nightmare she would wake up from.

Even when she was preparing the meals and tidying the house, she hoped her mother would walk through the door. But all she did was phone, as often as she could.

For her siblings' sake, Dream turned off her emotions.

Three months later, her brother died.

Her father told her the parasite had taken him younger than most. That it was best not to tell her mother, who was due to give birth any day.

By then, none of it made sense to Dream.

She thought it best to believe her father. To spend her time looking after her younger sister, braiding her hair and playing with her. Savouring the sunsets, the pair held on dearly to the last reaching finger of light each day.

For two years, Dream's father lied to her mother. He told her their son was in hospital, while drinking the money she sent over. He rarely bought food, paid the electricity bill, came home or checked on them. Dream knew something was wrong.

Sitting on the couch, too afraid to sleep because they had no money to turn on the lights, Dream and her sister held hands and prayed. With no way of knowing where she was supposed to go, or how she was supposed to protect her sister, Dream cried until daylight reappeared at their window. Then, she got them both ready for school.

On their way, she found enough change to call her mother.

Two weeks later, they arrived in Dublin.

"Ow!" Hannah exclaimed.

Dream stopped.

The pin she was using to sew in the first hair extension slipped through the braid, poking Hannah in the head. Dream put everything down on the table.

"I am so, so sorry," Dream said.

"Wait!"

Standing up, she walked away, refilled the kettle and waited for it to boil. Growing impatient as it took longer than she expected, she returned to Hannah.

She was shaking her hands, trying to calm down.

"What is going on?" Hannah said.

"Tell me!"

Patting Dream's seat, Hannah turned to face her. Dream put down the teapot, took her seat and looked at her watch. Reckoning that she had enough time for a sup, she filled the pot and poured two cups of tea. Then, she spoke about her dream.

"You're not cursed," Hannah said.

"You're blessed - just look at yourself."

Not knowing what to say, Dream regretted getting so comfortable. She placed both of her hands on Hannah's shoulders and squeezed them.

"Right," she said.

"Let's go!"

Without pricking Hannah again, Dream finished the weave. When she brushed Hannah's hair, it looked like it had grown three inches.

Hannah was delighted. Dream was relieved.

Blushing and gushing over her new hair, Hannah thanked and paid Dream, swearing she would be back. Dream tried to give her change, but Hannah refused it and said goodnight.

When Dream was alone, she fanned herself with her cash and began to dance around, celebrating her success. It was not much. But it was a step.

She packed up her stuff.

****

It was 9pm. Time to go. The lamp was back where it belonged. Dream was sitting in one of the steel chairs, with her pink suitcase packed and upright, waiting to be wheeled away. The guy next door was locking up the store. Every minute or so, he peered in. Dream was tapping her foot, acting as if she could not see him. As if everything was fine. Inside, her nerves were thrashing just like the rain against glass panes.

"Where is he?" she whispered.

She laughed.

Kash had to be late. She was being ridiculous thinking that he would leave her. Especially on a night like that. Maybe, he was lost.

Maybe, it was the curse.

In 2000, Dream's mother met her and her sister at Dublin airport. Dream did not have much to say on the way to their one bedroom apartment.

She was numb.

Then, she met her younger brother. Knowing that his resemblance to his older brother was a blessing, she could not stop crying. Maybe there was a better life ahead.

When her mother arrived in Ireland, she could only stay with her sister for so long. With too much pride to ask for help, she ended up sleeping on the streets, where she went into labour, surrounded by strangers who did not help.

An angel in a fancy black car stopped, picked her up, drove her to the hospital and paid for her care. He did not leave a name or a number.

"If he was not an angel...What was he?", her mother asked.

Dream looked down at her watch; it was five after nine. The guy next door banged on the steel frame of the partition, frightening her. She spun around and looked at him.

"Five minutes," she said.

"Please?"

He looked away as she began to scratch at her knees. Stopping herself, she stuck her fingers into her bun, to unwrap her braids from the knot she had spun.

Then, she took a breath.

In primary school, she was bullied about her accent, her clothes and the dark colour of her skin. She hated it, until she learnt how to give it back.

She had grown up beside the jungle.

What was she so scared of?

She began to stick up for herself, and anyone else that needed her help. Once, the other kids realised she was no different, they made fun of something else.

On more than a few occasions, Dream was left sitting, just as she was that night, wondering if someone was coming to get her. Her mother was working as much as she could, while minding Dream's younger siblings; she could not always make it in time to collect Dream from school. The teachers would wait with Dream, then drop her home.

Eventually, Dream was taken away.

Devastated, she moved in and out of 17 different foster homes, unable to settle because she was too far from her family. Or because the people were not nice.

She was not making it easy either. She would sit in the corner of her room, holding her legs against her chest, yelling until she was alone. Then, she would rock back and forth, pretending the streetlights were tribal fires, burning to light the way home.

The only consistency in her life was school, as no matter how many times she moved house and family, she remained there with her friends. By secondary school, she was popular.

Everybody knew her by her bountiful voice complimenting them. Or calling them out in the halls. Even the Polish, the Spanish, the Romanians and the others began to socialise more.

Kash was two years above her. From West Africa too.

She knew she wanted to be with him because she wanted to tell him everything. She trusted him more than anyone.

He was her home.

"Come on," she whispered.

She stood up.

The guy next door peered through the partition, held up his watch and tapped it at Dream. She looked over at him with her arms held up. She stood up.

The door finally flung open.

"I'm sorry," Kash said.

"I'm sorry."

He was dripping wet, holding a sagging bunch of flowers. Smiling down at her, he reached a long arm out and pulled her close. Welling up at him, Dream nudged him.

“What’s wrong?” he said.

“You were dancing around, flashing your cash when I walked by!”

Dream pushed him away.

“We got it!” he said.

She kissed him.

He had gone to meet the landlord, to pay their first month’s rent and deposit, before collecting her. He wanted to surprise her. Not scare her.

Since she turned 18, she had been living with him in his student accommodation. They had been working and saving for that moment, for too long.

But the view, Dream knew, was worth it.

Grabbing the handle of the pink suitcase, then his umbrella, Kash stuck out his elbow for Dream to latch on. Then, they stepped out into the rain.

The drops that caught her cheek reminded her of the first time it rained on her in Africa. It was the day before she left for Ireland. And the most beautiful thing she had ever felt.

As she walked into the night with Kash, the streetlight stretched across the puddles, keeping them a step ahead of the dark.

XII

THE SOLDIER

22:30 Friday

Throughout the entire evening, Dom was a gentleman. He opened the door and pulled out the chairs at the restaurant. He even used the silver cutlery. He could have pretended to be a different person if he wanted. Nobody knew what he had done. Or where he had been. There was nothing stopping him from enjoying his first date in over a decade, except him. He was soaked from the rain and the strain of wondering how nobody could tell he did not belong. As soon as the ordeal was done, Dom settled the bill and rattled with relief.

Huddled under the railway bridge with his date, he waited for her to find her keys, kissed her cheek goodnight and tore off, into the rain. When he reached the Royal Canal, he charged over the bridge and took shelter in the park. Standing at the end of a path drenched in darkness, he took out a cigarette and sparked it.

"What was I thinking?" he asked.

"Why bother?"

It did not matter who he became. Or where he went. The price of his past would always have to be paid; doused in that shade, he could not see a way of escaping it.

Lifting his head, he peered into the park that was poking out of the night. The dogs barking and branches cracking were snapping at his nerves. He pulled on his cigarette, quick and hard, then dropped it and squashed it with his black leather boot.

What did he have to do for a bit of peace? It was not cheap. He knew that.

He stepped out of the dark with his eyes shooting daggers in every direction. He walked over to the Royal Canal, leaned over the wall to spit and check his reflection in the swelling water. The raindrops shooting by his head were raiding the surface, distorting his view. Straightening up, he shifted back into the shadows.

Pulling his wet Armani coat away from his dry Armani jumper, he ran his hands over his gelled black hair. The pale steeliness of his skin strengthened the slice of his stare and the hard line of his jaw. His greying edges were sharp as razors.

He did not look bad for 45, he thought; he almost looked sophisticated, like he had something to say that was worth hearing- until he smiled, revealing a missing bottom tooth. Pressing his back against the wall, he waited for the rain to stop.

The bones he broke many years ago ached in the cold. He did not grimace. Or groan. The only comfort he needed to know was that he could still throw a punch.

Growing up in a block of flats, not too different or far from the ones nearby, he learnt how to stand up for himself when he was six-years-old. He was playing on the street and a boy punched him in the face. Dom ran home nursing his cheek, to meet his father standing at the door, handing him a hurling stick and telling him to sort the boy out.

If Dom did not, he would take the beating.

What was Dom doing?

Running away?

Clutching the hurling stick, Dom made his way down to the street, thinking he could not do what his father wanted him to. Then, he saw the boy.

“It was easy,” Dom said.

“Surprisingly.”

The boy never spoke to Dom again. But Dom did not care. By the age of ten, he had not run from another fight. He liked the fear his fists inspired.

He was no good at school. He could not focus and regularly landed himself in trouble. The only subject he enjoyed was art.

Sitting in the alley behind the flats, staring down at the fancy art set his mother had saved up for, he did not concern himself with who was watching. He was basking in the thrill of his unbeaten glory, when an older fella came from behind and stood on the paintbrushes, smashing them into pieces. Walking off laughing, he did not look back.

Sometimes, Dom wished he had.

He did not understand the anger that lightened his head as his blood fled to flank the fury in his heart; leaving his mind and body cold enough to get it back. Grabbing a brick from the rubble behind him, he picked himself up like a sword drawn for war.

Once he was behind the boy, he started pounding. Unrelenting, he got his blood.

His hands were trembling, dripping with the stuff. Abandoning the brick, he sprinted home and told his father, who told him to shower and wait in his room, quietly.

An hour later, the boy's family came knocking.

The boy was a bully, so they knew that the beating was coming. That life around there had to take its cut. They just wanted Dom and his father to know that they knew.

Dom had been looking over his shoulder ever since.

Glancing around the park, he could not tell who was looking or lurking. He could only hope he was out of sight. He did not belong there either.

The rain was fading into the wind, whisking the sounds of the city. Dom pushed himself away from the fence and took out his box of cigarettes. The drabs of light reaching across the canal, filled the bellies of the red rubies in his rings; he smiled down at them, trusting that they looked just as good as they were for protection.

In that same second, he heard a tick-tick-ticking.

Spinning around, he leaned into the dark. His knuckles and rings were ready. When a young boy appeared on a tricycle, pulling to a halt, the tick-tick-ticking stopped.

Dom scoffed.

The boy set his serious eyes on Dom, while whipping off his hood and nodding. His freckled face was stern as he strangled the sensitivities of his yout

Dom nodded back, shook by the look of him.

"Do you want weed?" the boy asked.

Reeling back, Dom reminded himself to have patience, then thought that it must be a set up.

"G'wan!" Dom said.

"Get outta here!"

The boy puffed out his chest.

"What about on tick?" he said.

Impressing himself, he smiled and gripped the handlebars of his tricycle. Dom took a step back, struggling to believe the boy, who could only have been about ten-years-old, had just offered him tick: a few days or a week to pay for the weed.

Dom took out a cigarette and pointed it at the boy, who looked down and noticed the black swallow tattooed on Dom's hand, with the joy dropping from his face like a dead bird from a tree. Shifting on his feet, the boy steadied himself on the seat of his tricycle.

“That’s a mistake,” Dom said.

“Always get your money first, never a day or a week late.”

The boy shot him a look of disgust.

“You…” he said.

“Can fuck off!”

Pushing past Dom, the boy peddled through the puddles, along the canal, singing the notes of a song. Dom closed his eyes.

“Oi!” he yelled.

The boy stopped.

“You be careful!” Dom shouted.

The boy pulled up his hood, without looking back. He disappeared in the dark.

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Lighting the cigarette in his hand, Dom took a long drag. The boy’s face was weighing on him, reminding him of how it all went wrong. He pulled at his collar, itched at his neck, squirmed and dropped his cigarette. Cursing and kicking the dirt, he walked back up the path, to the park gate, where the scars he had from existing on the brink, calloused his face with caution. He inspected the street, hoping he would not see the boy.

Where was he going? What was he doing?

Dom was wise enough to assume he did not have any drugs on him. That he was just testing his own tenacity. Dom would have warned him, told him that the money was not worth it, if he did not already know the trouble that would cause.

He was an outsider too.

Stepping into the light, he made his way to the entrance of a housing estate. He took one more concerned look around, then cracked each of his knuckles, put his head down and kept going.

When he was 14-years-old, his mother was pregnant with his youngest sister, Sophie. His family moved to a house outside the city, beside another block of flats, where nobody knew Dom or liked strangers. A week later, he had taken a beating.

His father was a carpenter. He was drinking too much and too often. He came home one night stinking of whiskey and swinging a frying pan at Dom's mother, who scrubbed whatever she could for a few quid. Everyone respected her for it.

Dom had given up the fighting, knowing he had gone too far. That he could not take back a drop of blood or trust himself.

Looking at his father, he could not trust him either.

He leapt from the cloak of his childhood, pushed his mother out of the way and pinned his father to the cooker. His father grabbed him and wobbled, toppling them both; Dom broke both of his legs and screamed until the ambulance came.

Then, he was drugged out of it for days.

A few weeks later, his father was done apologising. He came home, screaming at Dom's mother to go and get her "little bastard child". Dom pretended to be asleep.

He did not let his mother, or the man he had just discovered to be his stepfather, know that he knew the truth. Instead, he decided to find his real father once his legs healed.

Hobbling up to the boys who had beaten him, Dom asked for some real pills and a job. He reckoned selling drugs had to be easier than sitting at home where he did not belong.

He was sleeping on whatever couch he fell on, while selling hash, then ecstasy, once he realised that the latter was more profitable and easier to sell. He was dabbling in his own product too.

All the boys were.

Together, they snorted their first lines of cocaine and scaled the walls to drop acid and hallucinatory bombs on top of the city. Sweating and panting, they roared out in hunger; in belief that there was more to the world than what was on offer.

Crashing and burning, they died together the next day; they reminisced and resurrected, then got back to work. Dom was no longer peddling around the outskirts.

He was a soldier.

A year later, he got a phone call from his uncle in prison, who claimed to have what Dom wanted. The following day, Dom was in Mountjoy Jail, with a pen and paper he did not need because he already knew his real father; he was a friend of the family.

He had gotten Dom's mother and another woman pregnant at the same time. Dom's mother told him she would be fine; she would raise Dom on her own.

His father was a tall, dapper man, who went from selling a lot of heroin, and making a lot of money from it, to injecting it and being broke. Dom did not believe it until he saw him, festering in his own flesh. There was a lot of himself in the cut of his father's features; but he could not understand his choices. Dom swore he would not make the same mistakes.

Reaching the end of the estate, Dom stalled and scanned the bus stop. When he was certain he knew none of the other passengers, he dashed over and paid his fare.

Upstairs, he sat down the back and sank into the chair. Rolling his collar down, he rested his fingers on his sister's name, Sophie, tattooed to the bone; sighed and took out his phone.

With a bent thumb, he bashed the buttons and messaged his son.

"See you in the morning," Dom wrote.

Pressing his head against the window, Dom looked out at the night whizzing by. His son, Ben, finished school last year; he got a job in a deli and started training as a boxer.

He was just like his father. Except smarter.

At 18, Dom thought he had it made. He was living in a bedsit, with more cash and more product than ever before. He had a girlfriend too, who he left for Ben's mother, Sinead. Travelling back and forth to London, he was selling the same product for a different set of friends, borrowing from his stash, taking a yoke or two and clubbing with Sinead.

He was not keeping track of himself. Or the money.

In London, he got the call, informing him his father had a heart attack and died. Dom was not surprised; he knew his father was sick from his habit.

It was the reason Dom did not visit. He could not face the taut tragedy his father threatened him with. But he did make it home for the funeral.

Afterwards, he was walking to his mother's house, when two men dressed in military gear, put a sack over his head, threw him in a van and drove him to a field, where they stood him up and held a gun to the side of his head. He could not see their faces under their balaclavas.

"What are you bleedin' playin' at?" they asked.

They fired.

Dom thought he was dead, then deaf, until he heard a voice over the ringing in his ears.

"Too bad you can't thank your father," it said.

"His last words saved your life."

Waking up that night, on the green outside his mother's house, he lugged himself over to the front door and knocked. A minute later, his mother met him with tears in her black eyes.

Dom looked past her, down the hall, at his stepfather's silhouette, staggering against the stained yellow glass in the kitchen door. Slipping by his mother, into the dark, Dom's head lightened. The next day, he could remember nothing other than the blood.

Jumping up, Dom pressed the button. His stop was just ahead. He ran down the stairs, eyed the street and hopped off.

Close to his mother's house, his phone began to ring. Grunting, he took it out.

It was 11 o'clock.

Sinead was calling to say that the Gardai had been to the door, accusing Ben of fighting in the street. Dom had to talk to his son.

He hung up.

Breathless and buckling beneath the weight of his forfeited fate, he did not know what he was supposed to say? What could he say?

His hands were far from clean.

****

Upstairs in his bedroom, Dom shut the door quietly. The walls around him were bare, except for a samurai sword on a shelf beside a picture of his three children. Shooting over to his single bed, he sat on the edge and reached underneath; retrieving a small wooden box, he placed it on his lap, opened and closed it, then put it aside. There was enough for one joint inside. Dom kept it there, like a crutch, knowing one puff would make everything better.

He had not touched a drug in over a decade. He hopped walls to get away from the tit-for-tat, knowing he did not want to try this or that.

He wanted his life back.

Staring out his window onto the green, at the suspended cameras and clouds, he gripped his knees.

“What are you doing to yourself?” he asked.

He shook his head.

Too many of his family and friends were dead for the wrong reasons; reasons that were not worth death but could only be rectified by death. Dom did not want his son wearing the same chain of names around his neck.

He deserved better.

The day after Dom buried his father, he moved into a flat in London with Sinead. He could not look at himself. Or get the blood off his hands. He started taking more and more of his own product, while swapping it for others and buying whatever he had heard was good.

He was dragging himself around, like a match that would not light when he bought some heroin. He injected Sinead and saw a kind of peace that he had never felt, wash over her.

Then, he injected himself and laughed as everything that he troubled him dissolved.

“It was good,” Dom said.

“Too good.”

They were only taking it a couple of times a week when Sinead found she was pregnant. They quit the heroin and returned to Dublin.

A few days later, they were in his mother’s house, when his ex-girlfriend called to tell him he had a two-year-old daughter. He was a father.

In bed that night, everything he was and thought he would be, blistered out of him. He was sweating and scratching, crawling out of the bed, to the green, where he dropped to his knees with the toll of clocks ticking towards his end.

The next day, he went looking for every job and pill that could fill his pockets, his voids and his time. The years that followed were wracked with highs and lows; arguments, prison, missed birthdays and blow. Dom should have known what was coming.

Taking out a smoke, he stood up.

Outside, he pressed his back against the pebble-dashed wall. The hairs on his neck prickled. The sirens and stolen cars screeched off in the distance.

Dom lit it.

The second time he went to jail for possession, he did six months. Sinead gave birth to Ben. His mother kicked his step-father out. His youngest sister, Sophie, got sick.

By the time Dom was released, he was no longer afraid to live because of the expectations he could not fulfil. He had been faced with four walls and the fact that he had become what he was running from. He was not going back.

Dropping his cigarette butt in the drain, he drew one last breath of fresh air and tip-toed back upstairs, where he picked up the wooden box on his bed, bent down, stood back up, opened it and took out the small brown block of hash. He crept into the bathroom, wrapped it in tissue and flushed it, in preparation for the rainy days to come.

Once tucked up in bed, he turned off his lamp and stared at the dark, counting the seconds until he could leave to meet Ben. The first time Dom held his son, he imagined everything he could be, with his father by his side; it kept him clean.

His uncle was out of prison and running a security business. He gave Dom a job.

Dom spent all his time with his family, working or searching for Sophie, who was using more than Dom ever had. She was all skin, sores, bones and smiles, whenever he saw her; she never asked for anything, other than to talk.

Three years later, she overdosed.

Dom went back to the only way he knew how to deal with the pain. Three years later, he was in prison again. Sinead left him. And he could not blame her.

Sitting with his life falling through his hands like sand in the hourglass, he realised it did not matter if he had a fancy house, car or business; if he was not alive, all that would matter were things he had missed and why. He was not going to die like that.

He got out of prison, went back to work and avoided any reminders of his old habits. He gardened with his mother. He fixed up an old BMW. He answered every time his children called; he told them he loved them.

Tossing and turning all night long, Dom barely slept.

In the morning, he dressed and left the house without saying a word to his mother. He crossed the green, thinking of the young boy on his tricycle, singing his heart out.

“What a night,” he said.

“What a life.”

He laughed.

Under a sunny, partly cloudy sky, the wind blew the dead leaves down the path. Soon, he would meet Ben and listen to everything he said.

He would tell his son about his mistakes, then hug him, say he loved him and wait for him to leave before calling an old friend. Although Dom was still an outsider, he had been to war. The one thing he could guarantee was his son’s safety.

He was not the only soldier. Nor the last.

XIII

THE FIREMAN

16:30 Saturday

The sun was shining in from the garden, where the blue flowers and the swing were swaying in the wind. There were floral prints on the kitchen towels and the tablecloth. Tea was brewing in an old pot. The sharp rose-petal scent of perfume was drifting through the room. Stuey was gazing out the window, sinking into the sizzle of what lay ahead. Maybe three people shot dead. A suicide. Another father after harming his child. A hit-and-run. A cat stuck in a tree. Stuey never knew what it would be. Life was not like a movie.

It was like a box of chocolates.

"Do you want to talk about it?" his mother asked.

Sitting up, straddling his senses, Stuey reached over and squeezed her hand.

"No," he said.

"Thanks Mam."

Her beaming eyes and matching smile calmed his mind.

"Then, get outta here," she said.

"Sure, you're already there."

Tilting his head, Stuey drew back his hand, stood up and walked over to the sink, to pour himself a glass of water. Gulping it down, he gasped.

His mother hurried over to him, reached up and hugged him. Standing at 6'2, Stuey bent down and clung to her. Straightening up, he stretched and said goodbye.

He stepped into the hall that had housed his first imaginary inferno. He reached the sitting room, where he had revived his toys; stalled and stared at the pictures hanging on the wall.

First, he saw his grandfather in his firefighter uniform. Then, he found his father in a gold frame, standing in the garden, smiling under the sun.

Raising a hand, Stuey saluted them.

He was three-years-old when his father, who was a carpenter, died from a heart attack. Stuey was too young to remember much about him, so he learnt every single story about him, word for word. He even knew a few about his grandfather.

Stuey was no soft touch. He was not religious or easily scared. But there were way too many times he should have ended up dead.

Maybe someone, his father or grandfather, was somewhere looking after him.

Leaving the house and the sentiments behind, Stuey took out his keys and unlocked the shiny new fire car parked on the road. Covered in reflective stripes, stickered numbers and sirens, it was packed with every bit of safety kit Stuey could fit.

As an officer of the Fire Brigade, he had to be prepared for any situation, at any time. He had to drop everything, even the moments that meant the most.

If he was too late, there was nothing he could do.

Inside the car, he turned on the ignition, reversed and drove out of the tidy estate, past the mowed lawns and window bouquets. Running a hand over his shaved head, scraping his chewed nails against the spikes of his strawberry coloured hair, he pressed on the accelerator, sealing himself to the seat, driving toward some sort of doom.

Growing up, it was his dream to be a fireman. He might have been a garda or a soldier if it did not work out; all he promised himself was the flashing lights and the chance to save lives. He was not someone who messed around. Or wasted time.

He stayed out of trouble; studied and hung out with friends who dreamt of making a difference. He had to work too.

His mother had three jobs, Stuey and his two older brothers and sisters. She could not afford to give them everything they wanted; instead, she taught them how to get it for themselves. She raised them, all by herself, to be their own heroes.

Descending the road to the training centre, Stuey glanced through the bare trees. Across the green, he could see the redbrick building, the gothic tower and arch, the army of windows and the black tiled tips, paving paths to the clouds.

Raising his chin, he tightened his grip on the steering wheel.

At 18, he was studying for a degree in engineering, understanding that he could not sit around, hoping and praying for his opportunity. |To satisfy his ambitions, he tried martial arts, dancing and paying attention in class. But he always felt he was in the wrong place; it ate away at him, until five years later, three applications and a year welding, when he finally got the job of his dreams. What he knew now, would not have changed a thing.

Indicating, he turned into the centre, drove through the iron gate, up the small winding road that led to his other home. Parked in his spot, he unbuckled, pushed himself back and took a deep breath.

“Showtime,” he said.

He was not scared of death. It was the only certainty in life. There was no reason to worry about it twice. The living unnerved him. They could hurt him.

Sometimes, they could even make him doubt his choice.

Smothering his sensibilities, Stuey stepped from the car and strode across the ground, nodding at his colleagues, who were dressed in their navy uniforms, chatting by the fire-trucks and ambulances. The legacy roasting the air around them sparked the buzz that lit the blood in their veins. Stuey inhaled, simmering into his role.

Through the heavy doors and long corridors, he checked his phone. He had no messages or missed calls. Stepping into the dressing room, he changed into his uniform and boots, tightened his belt, walked up the stairs to his office and shoved his regret back in his pocket, along with his phone.

Greeting his fellow officer, he sat down at the desk and scanned the pages in front of him. Then, he laughed and joked. When he was alone, hunched over the desk, he did not

break a sweat. He delved into what he had missed since yesterday, completed some paperwork and checked his roster. Picking up his clipboard, he charged back downstairs.

There was only a minute until the bell tolled six o'clock.

Outside, in the yard, the station crew were gathered. Stuey knew each of the men and women; what they had been through, what they had lost and what lived in the darker parts of them, haunting them. But most importantly, he understood what he was asking them to do.

Going through the memos, courses available and updates, he assigned their numbers to roles, while they stood close to each other. He did not stutter, asking them to risk their lives.

"Fallout!" he ordered.

They dispersed.

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First, a call comes through to the control room. The information and the address were entered into the computer system. The predetermined response was selected. The nearest resources were located. Then, the officer hit a button and the bells rang at the station. The printers started printing. The computer screens lit up. Within four minutes, the team had to be gone. There was no room for error. Nor time for fear.

The third incoming call snapped Stuey out of his contemplation. He was standing beside the fire-truck, D33. His crew were already inside, seated and belted, peering out the windows, pointing at him and their watches. Stuey rolled his eyes and jumped in.

Patting the driver on the shoulder, he turned around; winked at the others and hit a switch behind him. The sirens blared. The whole team whooped.

Stuey faced the road, with his heart beating harder than a hammer, nailing him to the seat, just like it always did. For those few minutes, he did not know what was coming; what bitter treat had been plucked from the tray of life's salty, sprinkled horrors.

All he knew was that a car was burning on a city street. Sometimes it was accidental. Other times it was for the insurance, a warning or just some juvenile vandals.

Whatever the reason, Stuey told the driver to speed up.

It took him over two years to become a fully qualified firefighter and paramedic. There were sessions on dealing with the trauma he would face; but there was nothing that could have prepared him for the screams, the decapitations, the heat of the blaze or the blame.

He was young too.

He was swept out of the classroom into the furnace, without blinking an eye. He met his girlfriend, Leanne, who was a teacher, and just as committed to helping others as him. Somehow, she made him nervous.

Two years later, they married.

They bought a house close to where Stuey grew up, had two daughters and date nights. They were happy for the first few years; they were on each other's side.

Up ahead, there was smoke swimming over the rooftops, into the darkening night.

"Right," Stuey said.

"Are yis ready lads?"

The blue flashing lights, bouncing off the bungalow windows, marked their faces.

"Yes Sir!" they replied.

Swinging around a corner, the driver slowed and beeped at the small crowd of spectators blocking their way. Stuey could see the car, burning under a streetlight.

An hour later, he had completed the report. His team was back inside D33. The car was black and hollow. The crowd had gotten bored and closed their doors.

Stuey picked up the radio, declared D33 available, hung up and sat back. Another call came in, before he had put his seatbelt on. He rolled down his window and bit his nails.

Four minutes later, D33 was where it needed to be. There was a young man, slumped over on a step, unconscious.

Stuey and his team got him grumbling, while they waited for an ambulance to arrive and transport him to A&E. After filing the report, he declared D33 available.

The next call came in as soon as he hung up. It was half-past ten.

Once again, Stuey and his team were on the scene within a couple of minutes. They were parked by the Royal Canal, where a man had been stabbed in the leg.

Waiting for another ambulance, the team managed the man's wound and kept him alert. He was bleeding heavily, talking and slurring; telling the team he had just come from a flat, where he smoked crack, when he regretfully decided to rob the wrong house.

"What were the chances?" he asked.

His head dropped.

Stuey took out his phone, scrolled the screen, then put it away. He was hoping for a message from his daughters or his wife, when he heard a whizzing behind him.

He shot around and looked down at the Royal Canal.

BANG! Bang! Bang.

He shifted his gaze to the mouth of the bridge, where there was a smoking bin. Then, a young boy, staggering by the edge of the canal, covered his ears with his hands.

A second later, he disappeared.

Sprinting across the concrete and cobbles, Stuey reached the canal. The shadow of darkness cast from beneath the bridge suckled on the steel-toe of his boot. He took a step back and eyed the empty path beyond the bridge, wondering how fast the boy could possibly run.

When he reached the burning bin, he spotted a red tricycle beside it.

"Little shit," he said.

Shaking his head, he walked over to the edge of the canal and glared into the water that revealed nothing. Other than the horror he knew to have floated through it.

The chopped up body parts. The broken-latched briefcases. The unfortunate swimmers. The washed weapons and slippers. No wonder he thought about ending it all.

How could he turn off?

Sirens filled the air.

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Back at D33, the ambulance team arrived. Stuey welcomed the medical crew, checked the report, signed off and waited for the blue flashing lights to depart. All that was left of the incident were the bubbles of blood on the pavement. Walking around D33, Stuey took one final look down at the canal, where everything seemed as it should; questioning whether he had ever believed such a thing, he climbed into the truck and put on his seatbelt.

"Anyone for a cup of tea?" he asked.

His team cheered.

Speeding toward the training centre, he imagined the boy by the canal, parking up his tricycle and throwing the banger in the bin. He must have been too young to understand that he was standing too close. Or to know what was left after the smoke.

None of them did.

Every day, Stuey picks up the pain people inflict on themselves and each other. He listens to their threats and dodges their spit, their stones and their complaints about paying his wages. He sees young boys diving in with their eyes closed, trying to rule worlds they do not belong in. He always meets them again, one way or another.

Three years ago, his wife left him.

He had just been promoted. Everything was looking up. Except him. He could not leave all the damage and death behind him, bagged and tagged at the scene.

He was either arguing with his wife or hiding behind extra shifts at work, where he found some peace knowing he was always ready to save the day. He did not talk about the

tragedies he faced; instead he moved into his own place and saw his daughters a few times a week. He could not speak to his wife because he could not look her or the nightmare he had become in the eye. He began to think maybe he, and not the others, should have died

He did not phone or show up to work for three days. He sat sleeplessly in the dark, waiting for something to change. To the dirt on his premature grave.

It was late afternoon when his boss came knocking. He did not pull the curtains or open the door until he knew who it was. Then, he sat listening to his officer, who did not need to ask what was wrong. They both knew that Stuey was not alone.

Heeding the gothic spikes breaching the horizon, Stuey sat up and smiled. He was alive and healthy. He never drank or smoked. He had two beautiful daughters, a job he loved and colleagues that had become his family.

What more did he need?

Up the winding road, parked outside the station, Stuey ensured D33 was available and ready, jumped out and guzzled the air before entering the station. Around a dingy table, Stuey and his team cracked jokes about the job, though the silence that followed, often said more.

“When are you seeing the girls?” a colleague asked.

Stuey took a bite of a sandwich.

“Monday,” he said.

Wishing it to be true, he changed the subject. He had not heard from his girls or his wife. But he now knew he could talk to his crew if he needed to.

He trusted them with his life.

The bell rang!

Stuey and his team grabbed their coats and ran to D33. The call was a domestic fire, with another fire-truck and an ambulance already at the scene.

On arrival, all Stuey could see was a smouldering glow through a window on the second floor. The building was old. The flames were spreading.

Working together, the men and women of the Fire Brigade saved every tenant crammed into the place, bunk by bunk. They cornered the fire, put it out and filed the appropriate paperwork, all before the birds woke up. Slapping each other on the back, they said their goodbyes, got in their trucks and headed to their stations, to throw water on their faces.

By nine o'clock, Sunday morning, Stuey had three more calls and filed more reports. His head was heavy, though his green eyes, puffy and red, were yet to dull.

Looking forward to going home, he saw the bridge over the Royal Canal.

"Pull over there," he said.

"Please."

Nodding, the driver slowed and parked at the curb.

"A little further," Stuey said.

The driver inched onto the bridge.

"There," Stuey said.

Leaning out the window, he saw the morning sun, sugar-coating the canal beside the charred bin. The tricycle was gone.

"Little shit," Stuey said.

He laughed.

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Back at the station, the team due to take over were already prepping the other vehicles in the yard. Stuey's team thanked them before heading to the dressing room. Stuey banged on the door, without the energy to say goodbye, then trudged up the stairs to his office, signed over his shift and double-checked his lists. Bowing out the door, he could not wait to get home. He was crossing the yard to his fire-car, when he took out his phone, stopped and looked around as if there was someone he wanted to thank.

“See you tomorrow, Dad,” his daughters’ message said.

Not knowing what to do with himself or the joy he felt, he kept on walking, acknowledging his fellow firefighters. Back inside the car, he read the message again.

Gliding down the motorway, his face hurt from smiling. There was a car ahead of him, driving toward the smouldering, golden horizon. Suddenly, it swerved and slammed into the steel barrier. Stuey flicked on the sirens, picked up his phone and called control.

A moment later, there was an explosion.

He thought of his daughters and wife, expecting his call. His mother sitting at the kitchen table, proud of what he had become. His father standing in the garden, with the wind reminding the flowers to dance. His colleagues who had passed.

He had no doubt he was supposed to be there. He pulled up and saw the driver collapsed in his seat. The engine was hissing. The gaskets were bursting.

Stuey opened the boot of his car, threw on his fire coat and gloves, rushed to the vehicle and pulled the door handle. The driver slid down.

Unbuckling his seatbelt, Stuey grabbed and dragged him as fast and as far as he could. Then, the car exploded again, spitting debris in every direction.

Five minutes later, the fire-truck arrived.

Stuey sat with the driver in his arms until the team were by his side, lifting them both up and carrying the injured man away. Then, he felt an arm on his shoulder.

His girlfriend, Mel, was standing behind him, in her firefighter uniform, with her warm apple pie eyes gazing at him. She squeezed his shoulder, winked and ran at the fire.

Looking back, she blew him a kiss.

“My husband!” a woman yelled.

“Matt! Matt!”

Spinning around, Stuey caught sight of a woman charging at the scene. He grabbed hold of her sleeve, stopped her and waved at his officer, just as she collapsed in his arms.

Stuey spotted her car parked beside his.

“Don’t worry,” he said.

“Your husband will be fine.”

She cried.

“I was just talking to him!” she said.

“We live two miles away!”

Stuey helped her up, while the officer approached.

“Thank you,” she added.

Stuey nodded.

With sirens seizing the air and the fire put out, Stuey hit the road and drove toward the home he shared with Mel. Thinking about the promise of tomorrow, he put his foot down.

He did not need to look back.

“I’m out there, in the grit and the shit, trying to save a life, or bring a life into this world because I want to be,” he said.

“It was my dream.”