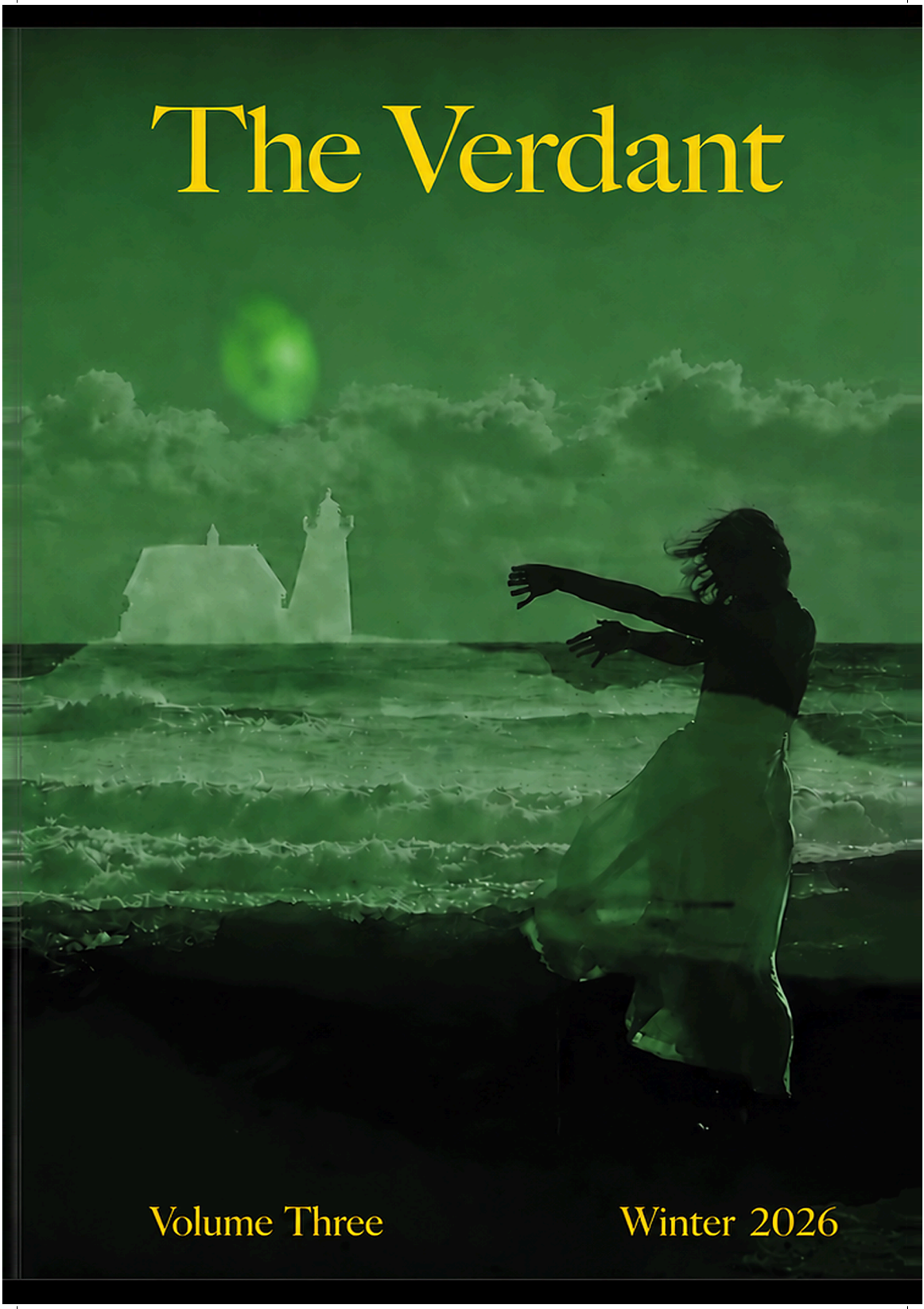
The Verdant



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~

American College Dublin

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Oscar Wilde House by artist-in-residence Gerard Byrne

ABOUT THIS ISSUE

Every great writing program needs a literary Journal, and American College Dublin, which offers both BFAs and MFAs in Creative Writing, is no exception. Grounded in Oscar Wilde's childhood home, the program draws aspiring writers from as far afield as São Paulo, Amsterdam, New York and of course, from Dublin itself. In our programs, students perfect their craft while taking part in the fertile and vibrant Irish literary community.

This issue is a ground-up reboot of the journal and features work from both up-and-coming and established writers, all of whom have deep connections to American College Dublin. The Verdant also features original artworks from Oscar Wilde House/ACD students and staff.

In the following pages, readers will...

...Plunk down on the sofa in an Irish/English household to take in a rugby match that means more than tackles and tries.

...Journey down the self-destructive anxiety-ridden mindscape of a man approaching his life's lowest point.

...Languish in the easy but maybe *not* so easy days of summer.

...Run from a romance turned dangerous and toxic.

...Join the search for a missing boy alongside his rancor-driven parents.

...Walk the streets in a state of self-reflection as kismet turns expectations into reality.

...And work to keep a sinister secret in Bruges, during one of the First World War's most devastating battles.

- Bill McClane
  Editor, The Verdant



Oscar Wilde photographed by W. & D. Downey, 1889

“It takes a great deal of courage to see the world in all its tainted glory, and still to love it.

— Oscar Wilde, An Ideal Husband

BIG INTERVIEW

Gary Grace

My bare hips press forward into the cold porcelain of the sink. Holding my face close to the mirror, I inspect for blackheads. I'm multitasking. Time is of the essence. I have a big interview.

I push, gently, with the tips of my index fingers, growing satisfied with each successful squeeze. Comedones rise from the trench between my nostrils and cheek. Little pods birth, then rest in the grooves of my fingertips. I rub them off on the rim of the chrome drain stopper. I rinse them down before filling the basin. I bow my head and submerge my face in the cold water, closing my pores. The water rises, covering my ears. Echoes transport me to the bright, white-tiled floors of the Spanish swimming pools I'd taken for granted on summer holidays in my youth. I remember shrieks of laughter ringing out. I remember being happy.

If only Wednesday were heavy enough. She could sit on the back of my head to keep me under, watching curiously at my legs flailing, her eyes squinting in the warm glare from the skylight. Later she could peer down through that same glass at my limp body, pausing from grooming herself, vaguely wondering who would feed her next.

I let the water drain and I dry my face. I cough into my hand. Some phlegm has come up and dangles brightly before I rub it off into the sink. There's more. I bang my chest recalling the last time I tried to quit smoking. Since leaving the bar it's been easier but it's like the longer you're off them, the more phlegm there is. A bigger glob comes up, but it's coated in saliva and slides right down the bowl into the drain. My cheeks and eyes are red. It looks like I've been crying, and maybe I have been.

Anna has been subletting me her spare room for fuck all, but the landlord is jacking up the rent. When I told her I'd been sacked from the bar, she smashed the plate she'd been drying by the sink. It's hard enough as it is. Could I not get my act together. Do I not realise what a favour she was doing me in the first place. That favour was supposed to be temporary. Mates rates. But it's been two years.

I need a real job now, or I'm going to have to find somewhere else to live.

Anna, the actuary, and I, are nothing alike –she's the type to iron her underwear and vacuum the curtains–but our arrangement suits us. We share a lonely lasciviousness that was discovered only by the convenience of proximity, and would never in a million years work in the real world. But we exist within a wordless system; a bottle of wine left out on the table on a Tuesday, a bedroom light left on late, the door cracked open just enough. Paper thin walls on a Sunday morning and the invitation of a vibrating hum.

The sex is rough in a way that makes me uncomfortable. It's the sort of sex that she might not usually have, but she says it's the only kind that works for her with me. She looks at me as if it must be the kind of thing I like. To choke, to slap. I get it. I know why she thinks those things. I work in a rocker bar. I mean, I *worked* in a rocker bar. I have tattoos that snake down my arms. I fight sometimes. I own many leather jackets. I don't like doing it, but I'm happy to, if that's what she wants. It's her flat, after all.

Besides, I've grown to prefer oat milk in my tea. I prefer to sit on nice patio furniture and listen to birdsong while I smoke my morning fag. I don't miss the fumes and broken bottles of the alley. Also, Wednesday needs a garden where she can chase and decapitate. Finding a place that would accept us has historically proven difficult. People think they don't like cats. There'd been a place before here that had been perfect, but the landlord had wanted an additional thousand euros as a 'pet deposit'. A thousand euros I couldn't pull together even if I'd tapped up all remaining friends, all remaining friends who'd answer my call that is.

Anna had said that we could stay for a month or so, while we looked for a place, that she wasn't wild about cats though, and that they weren't allowed on the lease anyway. It only took a day for her to warm up to my girl. Wednesday had plopped herself down on the couch beside Anna, purred as she dozed, and with an outstretched paw, made minimal contact with Anna's leg. That's all any of us needed. Someone to be there, warm, saying nothing.

Perhaps a nine-to-five wouldn't be all that bad. If it means we can stay. Regular, sociable working hours. Consistent, decent funds. I wouldn't mind getting away in the summer, it's been so long, for some sun. My eyes sting. I need to sleep. I need to iron my shirt. I need to get into the city, to be on time. I need to make a good impression.

Anna has gone to work. She left a note wishing me luck in my ‘Big Interview’ that included a request to “please” keep “the cat” out of the bathroom.

I drag the bathmat over from beside the tub to keep the door ajar for Wednesday. I shred Anna’s note and let its pieces fall like confetti into the toilet and call for Wednesday in the hushed voice she recognises. I know she won’t come until she’s ready. Until the bathroom is all steamy and warm. Until the heated towel rail is ready for her.

After showering, I brush the excess water from my body and follow errant chest hairs make their way towards the drain. I step out onto the tiles and wrap a towel around me. Wednesday gets up from the mat and curls around my dripping legs. It rouses a familiar feeling; my fingers running down the back of a silk dress and the touch of a stranger who doesn’t really care for me. Wednesday leaps up into the sink, flops over a paw, stares at me. In the mirror, I examine my shaved face. I know I don’t but still think I look eighteen, with no responsibilities. But I do. I cannot fail her. I have to get my head straight. I have to get this job.

As a child. I relied on imaginary friends for support. They’d tell me what to do and assure me that everything would be ok. They had voices but I gave them bodies, little plasticine men. Other boys had their G.I Joe dolls, all the same. But they hadn’t made their men. Each of my lads had a different colour and their own personality. I kept them all in a special lunch box, separated by playing cards so that they wouldn’t stick together.

Red had his own separate lunch box. He was huge. Bigger than any G.I Joe. It had taken all the red plasticine from several packets to make him. His special power was anger. He was never afraid, even if bits of him fell off, fighting. Blue was regular sized. He always gave good advice but was timid. Black could hide in the shadows or bring them out to cover up things when needed, like my lies. There were others, too.

But Green was my favourite, clever and funny. I kept him close when I'd speak to Lindsey. He'd tell me to do things to make her laugh. I'd told her that she was pretty, sweet and clever. Green said that I should offer her my treat-size pack of Smarties after lunch and maybe she'd be nice to me. Polite declines weren't something she'd learnt yet. She smiled, took the Smarties, and then ran off giggling.

One day, when my mother pulled up to collect me, Green guided me once more. I told Lindsey I had a secret to tell her. She pushed back her hair back behind her ear.

"I love you," I whispered and gave her a peck before running off to the waiting car.

Being jerked along by her mother, Lindsey managed to turn and wave. With my lips pressed against the glass, I blew as hard as I could, bloating my cheeks, fogging the pane, upon which I rubbed the outline of a cold clear heart that framed my face, for her.

Without the plasticine man egging me on, I knew that I'd have been left clutching the Smarties in the corner, pissing my Teenage Mutant Ninja pants.

I don't interview well. I know that. I need Green. How am I going to do it without him? Shit. My chest feels like someone I don't like is hugging me too tightly, breathing into my ear. It isn't like Anna has packs of green plasticine just lying around the gaff. How am I supposed to make a Green Man before I have to leave for the bus? I'm coughing again, and a big grey-green blob flies out and sticks to the mirror, obscuring my left eye. It's insane how obvious it is. I'm laughing. I can't stop and I'm wheezing. I know what I need to do. I need enough. I need fucking loads. I'm wheezing and I know I need to make it harder, to be gasping. I can feel the blood rushing to my face. I bang my chest, feel it loosening, it's happening. A handful of phlegm spills into the bowl. I quickly pop the plug in. It's a lot but I'll need more, still, to make him complete. There's a plunger

behind the toilet and I'm surprised at the ease with which it all comes back up. Yes, there's definitely enough. I separate it from the soap scum, toothpaste clumps, Anna's coiled long hairs and my short prickly ones.

I scoop up the cumulative glob, bring it to the kitchen and slap it down onto a wooden chopping board on the kitchen table. I need to sit down to be able to focus. He will fall apart if he doesn't have something to keep him together. I open all the cupboards and I find pasta, rice, tins of chickpeas, protein powder, bicarbonate of soda, honey, couscous, marmite, sesame oil, chicken stock. I grab some useful things and spread them across the table. I need a glass of wine to relax, that's all, just a glass of wine and I will relax, and I will do better. The wine will help me. It will help me keep it together later, to appear confident, to smile. I tip out some rice and grind it up into a powder with the base of the wine bottle, there's still loads left so that's fine. I bring the powder to the viscous blob and roll it around and add some flour and some bicarbonate of soda because that's what makes things rise, isn't it, and I roll it around and keep adding flour until it's ready to be straightened up into the shape of a man.

The kid-Green really was more of a kid. Maybe even a little bad. A little bad boy at heart, a messer, a scamp. This Green needs to be more serious. He needs to be a man. Who the fuck is chopping onions? My eyes are watering again. I'm going to need to be able to see if I'm getting his facial hair right. It looks cold outside. I'll just smoke in here. I'll open a window later. Spray some Febreze. I'll be grand with another glass of wine. I'll perform better, sure, like that movie with your man, what's his name, from the ads. He's sad and he can't teach anymore but he has a few and he's grand.

Businessmen have beards. I fucked up shaving my face, but all's not lost! New-Green will be looking *sharp* after I apply some of my little spikey hairs to his face. I use the tweezers

from the Swiss Army knife I have on my keys to pick up individual hairs and now he's looking really good. I've tiny shards of mirror in the side of my hand. These tweezers from the Swiss Army knife are flippin priceless. There's very little blood, really. By the time I'm in there it'll be fine. But there is enough for now. I give a wee slice down his torso, make a fist and thick dark drops plump and drop into the cavity. And I seal him up. Oh my god, New-Green is so much better. I flop him about in the flour to get him firmed up. I use the edge of the tweezers to sculpt his face. A raised eyebrow like he's about to start cooly stating salary expectations. I use some of Anna's hair to give him a belt wrapping it around his waist. He's perfect.

I think we might even get this Green. We'll be able to pay for things. We'll be able to take Wednesday to the Vet. We'll be able to pay back my parents and my sister. We'll be able to afford a holiday and take Anna, and it wouldn't even be that weird.

We've got this, you're perfect. Look at you, like? I don't know what the problem is. What's wrong? Why are you saying nothing? Speak! C'mon, please!? We need to get going. We're running out of time. You'll just have to do it your… Oh shit, sorry man, I remember now, you need to go in the box, and it'll all happen when you come out later. I'm sorry. You'll play a blinder. That big safety matchbox will work, won't it? You'll be like Dracula man, a fucking legend. You'll be safe in there. You won't fall apart.

The front door is opening into the dark hallway. How can it be night?

Wednesday's floury paw prints lead Anna's eyes from the kitchen to the bathroom and back to the kitchen table where she's now got Green between her paws. Anna drops her keys into the dish on the hall table, says nothing. She removes her coat and throws it down on the floor before marching to her room and slamming the door behind her. Still in a towel, my legs

are shaking. My hands. My eyes. Wednesday has left a tiny man-shaped stain on the chopping board as only she should. We won't need that coffin after all.

Gary Grace is from Dublin. He holds degrees in English Literature from Lesley University in Cambridge, Massachusetts and an MFA in Creative Writing from American College Dublin. His work has been shortlisted for The London Magazine Short Story Prize and featured in journals including *Crossways*, *Ropes*, and *The Pig's Back*. His collection of stories *THIS IS A VOLUNTARY ADMISSION* and his novel *My Brother, The Gun* are scheduled for publication.



Montego Bay by Martin Burns

SUMMER'S END

Stephanie Mariner
writing as Lee Toohey

Evelyn wasted no time waiting for apologies that would never come. She was thirteen when her mother told her that's how you pile up rocks of resentment in an otherwise smooth marriage. Smooth, she recalled her mother saying, not happy. '*Don't get fixated on an apology. 'Sides, whatever he did he's bound to do again, so why put his teeth to grind on words he don't mean and settin' you to thinkin' somethin' that ain't broke is fixed?*' Mama would end her wisdoms with the snap of a dish towel at Evelyn. Spindly and plain, she still looked too much like a little girl to be thought of as someone's wife. But Evelyn's mama knew about time and how it hauled past whether anyone paid it any mind or not.

Mama wasn't the least bit surprised when Dale Haugen spent more time tapping on their storm door than he did catching pop flies for the Roughriders. He went from puny neighbor boy to strapping young man faster than the flicker of a firefly. Dale saw something special in the too-tall skinny girl with a mouthful of metal that everyone else overlooked. By senior prom, Dale, bursting with muscle and rut, towered over the willowy and delicate beauty queen that sprang out of Evelyn.

At their wedding, Evelyn's mama caught the way gossipy aunts and nosy neighbors dawdled in their glances at Evelyn's tight and very flat waist. Dale had hurried Evelyn into a ring so he could take her with him to college; nothing to do with her being in a family way. Her mama suspected Dale caught on that now not a soul overlooked the charms he'd always seen.

Evelyn had a single valise to pack into the cab of Dale's battered old Dodge truck. She hadn't had the time or inclination to collect the things a woman would carry to a new life. Perched on her girlhood bed, Evelyn sobbed as her mama chastised her for wanting to bring her soft animals.

"Your bed is for you and Dale now. He won't abide it being littered with little kid toys."

Her mama patted the bony point of Evelyn's shoulder and considered it might be the time to share the details of what Dale would be expecting from a shared bed, but she suspected Evelyn might already know, and if she didn't, she'd find out soon. There was no point in increasing the girl's nerves with speculation.

The drive from North Dakota to South Carolina turned into a one-way trip. Dale's college years turned into Dale's career years. His ball playing got him into a good school, but his sharp mind landed him a great job.

Their three children were born in South Carolina. All but the oldest, Rose, were born after moving into a sprawling, restored farmhouse on the outskirts of town. Rose, named after Dale's grandmother from his mama's side, turned sixteen the summer the lemon tree had a stress bloom. The peach tree beside it produced as if driven by a jealous disposition. Like Evelyn, Rose was a gangly child with a near-painful plainness to her. Sixteen fluttered over her like an Easter dress. Suddenly, a lovely-looking young woman was stomping throughout the house.

"Ma! Another branch snapped on the lemon tree, and Ransome says there is a crack in the trunk at the top." Rose wilted at the kitchen table.

"It's lived its life, Rose. Gave all it could right to the end. It's a tree, hun."

"I've made lemonade from that tree all my life."

"Most of your life."

Rose had been the first bump in Dale and Evelyn's well-laid plans. They had agreed to wait for two years after Dale graduated to start a family. Rose, strong-willed and toting a steamer trunk of her own plans, showed up a year sooner than Dale's anticipated graduation date. The shock at double measures failing them poked at their sense of feeling like grown-ups. The idea of being responsible enough for a baby sailed out of their vision on a gale of fear and worry. They huddled in their small bed, smaller by the month as Evelyn's belly grew, and fretted over every little thing.

"Maybe I should move back with my folks while you finish school?" Evelyn, hand in hand with homesickness on the best of days, now curled in its lap and listened to its whispers of how her mama would know what to do.

"I don't know, Ev, maybe we should both head back."

"You can't drop out of school. You're too close to gettin' your degree."

Evelyn realized neither she nor Dale had ever faced a real problem in their lives. Of course, a pipe burst the first winter, and Dale bounced a check because he deposited his pay into the wrong bank, but those weren't real problems. She caressed her round and bulging tummy. Her baby wasn't a problem either.

"Or maybe you keep going to school, I keep working at the store, and in a little while we have a new roommate," she said.

"Can we name her Rose after Oma?"

"How do you know it's a girl?"

"Because Rose won't be my favorite name for a boy."

They giggled, and had a little girl.

With Dale's good job, they had saved and bought a big house in the country a week after Rose turned three. They reverted to their original plan and decided it was the right time to have a

second child. After three years of trying, Evelyn had all but given up on having more children.

Dale brought home sparkling apple juice when Evelyn called to tell him the doctor confirmed that they were expecting. The joy lasted two more weeks until it and the baby spontaneously expelled from her body. Dale took a week off from work and held his wife when she cried. He held tighter when she didn't.

When she phoned him a year later, four months after Rose turned seven, he came straight home and cradled her while she wept, so afraid she'd lose this baby too. Madison, tenacious as she was beautiful, clung fast until she arrived on time. She retained her cherubic allure even as her teeth fell out and her legs grew twiggy. Calm and sensible, the child's ethereal beauty affected everyone but her.

On the heels of her pained and despondent sister, Madison floated into the kitchen with a pail brimming with lemons. "Daddy said to let 'em be, you got peaches to deal with. But branches are breakin', and lemons are fallin' all over the ground. Can I juice 'em, mama? We can freeze the juice."

Evelyn turned and looked at the two crates of peaches and thought of the stack in the garage, "Sure, hun, but only bring in what you can juice today. You and Rose can check if some of the neighbors have use for lemons."

"Ransome and I are goin' fishing." Rose launched into a fresh pout.

"You spend too much time with that boy. Please don't fall in love. Ransome and Rose Rogers? It isn't nice, hun. Find a boy with a name that'll go better with yours."

Though Evelyn adored the young man she had watched sprout up alongside her daughter, she could do without a family attachment to Ransome's mother, Priscilla Rogers. The woman was a born-and-raised Southerner who found every opportunity over the past thirteen years to point out that Evelyn was as much of a Yankee as Priscilla could ever abide. The remark always

perched between two insincere peals of laughter. More galling were Priscilla's often public observations on Dale's frequent absences from social events. Growing more blatant year after year, insinuations laced with faint sympathy were plopped like dollops of curdled cream that Dale was neglectful of his wife as much or more than his social duties. These slights were often dropped during long stories about Priscilla's adventures abroad. *Oh that's right, shugah, you've never been. Why that husband of yours barely ever gets you past the back fence.* Evelyn wanted to defend Dale, but instead she held her tongue in silent, acerbic agreement.

Rose deflected her mother's insinuation. "I don't love him like a boyfriend. And not because of his name. Pretty well convinced he likes boys more than I do."

"Rose, don't talk about your friend's private life until he does. It's his to say, not yours." Evelyn hefted a crate to the kitchen table. "Would you rather sort these or get your brother up from his nap?"

Whisking from the table with a huff trailing her like the bustle of a ball gown, Rose sashayed to the staircase to fetch her baby brother. Rose and Oliver shared a commonality neither would ever know. After Madison was born, Evelyn developed an infection. The damage indicated she'd have no chance for more children. Dale consoled her by reminding her that they had settled on two children. Two seemed like the perfect number. Evelyn agreed, but having the option taken away feels different than deciding.

Four years later, when Evelyn called Dale with the news, he came home again with sparkling apple juice. Evelyn proposed naming him Oliver after her father. She repeated Dale's joke about Oliver being better suited for a boy.

"Cute name for a little girl, too." Dale smiled.

"Oliver it is, come what may."

What came in May was a little boy, quiet and beautiful. He was a surprise, just like his sister Rose, and like her, welcomed and loved.

Evelyn sat at the table and sorted peaches, inspecting each one. At the ready, a stack of brown bags and bunches of bananas. The almost ripe peaches went in a brown bag with a banana to hurry them to ripen. The ripe ones she reserved for canning, and the over-ripe ones she'd use for pie and cobbler for the church bake sale. Any that hinted of mold or rot were regulated to the bin for compost. Crate after crate, she sorted. Before lunch, Dale commented on how much progress she'd made.

"I got them all for you. Low fruit too," he said.

"I thought as much, seeing all the crates."

Last year, she'd made three requests for Dale to get the ladder and pick the high fruit. She didn't ask a fourth time. The peaches fell and rotted. A whole yield gone to birds and rodents. This year, she situated the ladder in the orchard, propped against the largest peach tree. Dale had spent the early Saturday morning picking peaches. Gathering the low fruit, usually a task for Evelyn, was his quiet apology. He didn't have to grit his teeth, and Evelyn didn't have to accept it with a crowd of doubt.

Mama was right about those rocks. Every 'I'm sorry, hun' could pile up between them. Not because of mistakes being made, but because of the lack of sincerity to mend. There was invariably a sound reason they couldn't take a trip to Europe, despite all the time in the world for camping trips. Fun outdoor adventures where Evelyn had to cook over uneven heat, chase kids to hold them down to slather them with sunscreen and fog them with insect repellent. Dale also managed three annual hunting trips. Two Christmases ago, she walked Dale to a jewelry case and indicated the necklace she admired. It had all their birthstones. She explained it was both beautiful and sentimental. At their Christmas gift exchange, she learned Santa didn't believe she'd had a nice

year because she got a new hat and gloves she didn't need, and a cast-iron waffle maker for camping she didn't want.

Evelyn tossed a mold-spotted peach into the bin for compost. Like her negative thoughts, mold spread fast and would spoil the whole crate. Dale was a solid man and wouldn't blink if she turned up at church with that necklace lying across her blouse. Nothing stopped Evelyn from stepping up to that jewelry counter except Evelyn.

As she sorted the crate, extra mindful of mold, Evelyn lifted a near softball-sized peach. It was perfect, not a bruise or blemish on it. Its shape and color showed it was on the edge of ripeness. She brought it, cupped in both palms, to her nose and inhaled the delicate warmth of it. The smell of earth and fresh air encasing a heart of sweetness. Instead of putting the peach in a paper bag, Evelyn perched it on the windowsill to let it ripen in the sun. After church, when Dale went golfing and the kids had Bible school, Evelyn planned to slice the peach and savor every dripping, sugary bite.

Oliver toddled in and pulled Evelyn from her thoughts. She bent and hoisted her son into her arms, watched from the window as Madison lugged another armload of lemons to the house. Dale followed his daughter, scooping up the runaways.

Evelyn served lunch on the patio, and they ate under a gentle sky. Dale and Rose cleared plates and stacked them in the machine. Rose tidied, freeing the kitchen curtain from the tie-back, not noticing the peach on the sill.

Dale carted two crates of no-good fruit past Evelyn as she tended to Oliver on her lap. The boy stuffed peach chunks over his drooling smile.

"Taking these to the compost. Cartes'll go in storage unless you need them."

"Don't. Thanks, hun." She threw him her warmest smile.

Oliver swung his arm and knocked his juice box onto the ground. She swept him up, saying she'd get him another.

Late in the evening, well beyond the time she'd turn in, Evelyn slipped between the cool cotton sheets of her marital bed. Dale stirred and wondered where she'd been.

"Peaches." She switched off the light on her nightstand.

"All done?"

"Every last one of them."

"Crates on the patio or in the garage?"

"Garage."

"I'll get 'em tomorrow."

"Thanks, hun."

As Evelyn drove home from church on Sunday, her cell phone jingled. Dale's brand-new truck died at the side of the road. He needed Evelyn to pick him up because the dealership wouldn't open until morning.

"Ev, I might need to use your car tomorrow."

"Sure, hun."

When Evelyn and Dale returned home, they discovered Ransome on their front porch with a dish towel wrapped around his fingers. Rose burst out with the first aid kit and a dramatic telling of a fishing knife mishap. Dale ushered Ransome into the car, certain the boy would need stitches. Before Evelyn could question why her newest dish towel was used, Oliver catapulted a lung-wrenching shriek from inside the house. She dashed up the stairs to find her son a bawling welter against the pantry door.

"He wanted animal crackers. I told him we don't have any," Madison said.

Evelyn pulled her son to her chest, carried him to the kitchen table and secured him in his booster chair. She opened the pantry to retrieve a foil packet of fish crackers. They rained down on the table mat, and Oliver shoved one into his mouth. Fat tears pooled across his chubby cheeks.

"Those are fish, not animal crackers." Madison twirled a lock of her hair around her finger.

"He's hungry. Any cracker'll do." Evelyn closed the pantry door after getting a juice box.

"Don't know why he's got to act like such a baby." Madison folded her arms across her chest.

"Perhaps," Evelyn said as she jabbed the straw into the box, "you ought to stand in your mirror and ask that before askin' about anyone else."

"Mama!"

"Don't 'mama' me, Madison. Are you finished squeezing those lemons? You juiced half a dozen at most."

"There are way too many."

"I recall." Evelyn sighed. "Get your sister and let's take them to the neighbors. Should have taken them to church."

Evelyn's mama would have frowned at the use of 'should have' and responded with 'but you didn't, so now whatcha gonna do?' Evelyn almost never had an answer that made either of them happy.

Ransome needed four stitches and bragged he didn't cry once. Rose, her head in Evelyn's lap, cried enough for them both long past bedtime. Monday, Dale left with her car. So when the school rang to say Madison had forgotten her science project, Evelyn had to walk three blocks to pester her neighbor, Janie, for a ride. Evelyn had started her Tuesday morning chores when Dale called to tell her the dealership had arranged a rental car for him. He needed to pick Evelyn up so she could drive her own car home from the dealer. They agreed it seemed like a perfect night to order a pizza. Early on Wednesday, the daycare called to say Oliver was running warm and had gotten sick after eating his snack. She picked him up and nursed him for the next two days.

No one noticed the peach behind the lemon-yellow curtain; its shadow growing and shrinking with the arc of each passing day. Nor did anyone, in the repetition of habit and routine, detect the sweet perfume of summer wafting from ripe skin as it shifted to an emanation of must and neglect.

It was the stench of rot permeating the kitchen that prompted Evelyn to search for a cause. A thin, amber trickle, the last syrup of its life, crusted over the lip of the windowsill. She pushed back the curtain and found the peach, shriveled and mold devoured. Evelyn scooped up the formless ooze; the ruined fruit as lost to her as the waning summer. A flick of her head and a deep breath refocused her thoughts as she resumed cleaning. She scrubbed the sticky brown stain seeping into the glossy sill. A faint ring of discoloration resisted the insistent scratch of her fingernail. Evelyn jotted a note on her to-do list to paint over the stain.

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THE FAVOR

Bill McClane

I call three times before he picks up.

"Cole's headed to your place," the prick says, "He wanted to take his bike."

"It's five miles, asshole. Drive him."

He sighs the way he does, the way that makes me want to choke him, and then comes up with an excuse: "I gotta go to work, and besides, he knows the way… it's just along Route 4 mostly anyway. He's ten, he can make it fine."

"So, you're not going to go pick him up and drive him, then?"

"Well, you've got the truck now, I couldn't fit the bike in the Nissan anyway, and you're the one with the urge to baby him, so if you don't want to wait – if you think he's in *mortal danger* or whatever – then you go get him."

He hangs up before I get in another word; not even a proper "fuck you!" I can't help but scream and slam down the phone.

Ten years old, on his own at dusk on fucking Route 4, where no one pays attention and drives too fast. What kind of father? *No kind of father*.

I take the for sale sign out of the window of the shitty old dodge pickup, which I told him not to get in the first place and

got stuck with in the divorce – and head up Route 4 for looking for Cole.

Calvin and I divorced last year but separated three years before that. The only reason things are so stressful now, is because I nice-guyed the divorce and split custody without contesting it. I didn't think he'd even want custody, I think I got soft when my lawyer said Calvin had asked for 50/50. I thought it was a good thing, that maybe he wasn't as shit a father as he was a husband – but nope. Things are going to change, though, because I've got a hearing soon and am going to go for full custody on account of Calvin being a fucking prick. Well, for the judge it'll be on account of Calvin's drinking and shit like letting Cole – who just turned ten a week ago, and who is our one and only – ride home five miles just so he doesn't have to get in a car and see me. I'm sure that's what it was. Sometimes you've got to say no to a kid – even though I'm sure Cole pushed to go. Letting your kid do something dangerous cause it's easier for you – that's just not what a father should do.

I go slow and scan both sides of the road. It's a two-lane country road, but a long flat one, where people go speeding. Three or four cars flash me and scoot around. I get to the turn off that Cole would have taken without seeing him, so I make the right and drive the four side streets it takes to get to Calvin's rented house. No Cole. I see prick's lights are on, though and idle up across the street. I see him moving around the kitchen. I wrestled the impulse to charge in and give him more of something foul and angry but decide I should just drive back. There's an alternate way, all side streets and one dirt path. I bet Cole thought that would be more fun and maybe even safer, considering how fast cars go on 4. At least he's got some sense… I make a U-turn and head back, taking the second left before I get to 4. I drive a little faster. Cole should be at least halfway home by now. The part of the road that's dirt is bumpier than I remember, though I don't think I've driven down it for

probably 20 years… not since I was a teenager. It's also shorter than I remember and before I know it, I'm back on pavement. I ride the rest of the way home, still looking – but half figuring I've missed him, and he'll be at the house already – and then I'm going to look like an ass for over-reacting, for worrying, for just being a god-damned mom. Calvin will end up looking like the good guy, when I know he's the bad guy all the time. More injustice to rile me. I tell myself not to take anything out on Cole when I see him and also not to act like I'm worried. Just say I went out for him because I thought it was a long ride, and he might want to quit early – not that I was worried he was out of his depth or in some kind of danger. Then I think it – that maybe I am over-reacting. Is it a good thing for him to go on his own? I start to doubt my anger. After all the years Calvin's wife, then his ex-wife – it's hard to tell when I've got a right to be pissed and when he just got under my skin cause of him being him. I hate not knowing if I'm going to far…I hate that he made me so angry for so long, that my own internal anger-meter is broken.

I pull back into the driveway expecting to see his bike against the garage, but it's not there. Something shifts in me anger becomes something else that I can't put my finger on. When I walk into the house, the lights are out, the TV is off, there's not a sound.

"Cole," I call out, hoping I'll get a response, but already knowing that I won't. "Co-ole!" I call again in a stretched-out way. Nothing still. Fuck. I breath low and slow and try to not let myself get scared, not *really* scared. I funnel what I'm feeling into a kind of yellow alert emergency mode.

Jim Walker is a deputy sheriff and an old friend. Honestly, he might have been something more than that if he'd ever gotten up the steam to break up with Heather Peaks before he knocked her up. Jim never even got to finish college. It's something that I think about a more than I should, comparing an imagined life with Jim against how things went with Calvin. It

was a chance at something. I guess, somehow, I hope it still is – even though it isn't. He's still with Heather. Still, there's a pull between us, and it helps me get a ride through the neighborhood in his squad car. We go over the route twice, no Cole. Walker puts out a call and tells the three other deputies on patrol to keep an eye out, then we head to the warehouse where Calvin is pulling a night shift.

"Oh, for fuck's sake, What now?" Calvin says when he sees us walking across the floor toward him. "Sorry she got you into this." He says to Jim, looking right past me and giving Jim a bro-y up-nod.

"He didn't ever make it to my place," I tell him.

"So, he probably turned around and went back to my place – I thought you were going to pick him up you said, anyway?"

Jim takes a step forward.

"Calvin, your son is missing."

Calvin looks back and forth between us. I can see his wheels turning.

"Bullshit. Like I said, he probably just turned around and went back to my place. Did you even look there before you got the panic party started?"

"We've been to your house," Jim says sounding as official as an old friend can, "and we've been back and forth several times on the route between your house and Chloe's, and we haven't found him."

"Well. I mean. You look at the diner? Maybe he thought you were working and just went there. It's not…"

"Don't be stupid, Angela knows to call me the minute they see him. Everyone's looking."

"You're the last person to have seen your son." Jim says, "and it can be considered abandonment to allow him to bike from your house to your ex-wives."

"Oh, Fuck off Jim, He wanted to go – abandoned my ass."

"You're his fucking father… Calvin!" I said, giving him a jab with my finger. "What if he wanted to do crack? Would you let him do that?"

"Spare me!" Calvin says. "I used to walk seven miles to my dad's shop every Saturday. That's a long way from doing crack!"

"At this point I need you to come down to the department and…"

"No way. If he's really missing – and I still bet he just went over a friend's house or something - then I'm not wasting time sitting and blabbering, we should be looking."

I'd say that I wouldn't wish the next few days on my worst enemy, but my worst enemy is right here alongside me, and truth be told, I'm glad he's suffering too. It's his fault, after all. But I can't be angry all the time… sometimes I slip into plain old despair. I cycle through hate, terror, grief without any way of slowing the spinning down. I'm dizzy from it.

Lots of townies come out and we have organized search parties. We walk in a line through woods and vacant lots and the grounds of the old grain silo complex. I put posters around town with his photo – a picture from his birthday just a week ago when he got the bike he was riding. I stand and stare at his face for a good minute every time I hang a poster.

Then, on the fourth day of looking, the fourth day of not knowing what happened to Cole or where he is – everything in my life upends for the second time in a week.

We're just through searching for Cole on property that borders a dirt road, and the volunteers are pulling water bottles out of a minivan. The field we're in is part of some L.L.C. farm business, though they didn't do much with it except dump old tractors and machinery. Calvin walks away from the group and onto the edge of the field by an old, rusted harvester. He leans a hand on it and starts peeing. When he turns around he has this emotionless, gray-eyed look in his eyes. I think for a

moment that he might be feeling the weight of what's happening – but then he smiles. It's a wry smile. The kind of smile you make to yourself when you've succeeded at something. A volunteer holds up a water bottle and calls out "Calvin, you want one." Calvin shakes his head no. But he doesn't shake away that self-satisfied smile. Then it hits me like someone slapping me hard on the back. He's done something. I don't know *how* I know, just something in that smile – but in that moment, I realize that I've been looking at things wrong.

The only reason everyone thinks Cole's gone missing on the way to my house is because Calvin *said* he went. There's no other evidence of it. On the second day someone found a couple of fruit-stripe gum wrappers on a side street. Cole was always chewing that gum and when they found it, I had short lived hope. But later that night I talked myself down. Lots of people chew that gum. It isn't evidence - not really. No, the only thing that police are going on is Calvin's story that our boy wanted to bike to my house. That's it.

I watch Calvin zip his fly and wipe a hand over his face. I'm sitting on an old tractor tire.

He turns and sees me watching him. I look wrecked and, in that moment, when he registers me sitting defeated and grief-stricken on the tire he turns his quiet self-satisfied smile into a mocking kind of frown. The expression is a beacon of cruel joy shining out from his swampy insides.

"What did you do!" I call out to him without even realizing it I'm saying it aloud.

His face shifts into a cartoonishly confused expression.

"What did you do!" I shout again, standing. This time it's loud enough that some of the volunteers turn. I start towards him, closing the distance between us fast.

"What did you do?" By the time the words come out a third time, I'm all emotion – shaking, and tears. I bare my teeth like an angry animal. A few of the volunteers take steps towards me

then think better of getting close. Calvin slides his hands into his pockets, standing erect and calm, shaking his head to signal he has no idea what I'm talking about. I know what he's doing. He's trying make himself look in control and make me look hysterical by comparison. It'll probably work.

But he doesn't see the piece of concrete crusted rebar hanging behind me in my right hand. It had been right inside the tire I was sitting on. He doesn't clock it until mid-swing. That rusted steel bar splits his left ear and gashes his cheekbone.

"FUUCKK," he shouts, grabbing his jaw. He pulls his right arm back to swing at me, but trips over the lot's uneven ground and a lidless igloo cooler filled up with dirty rainwater. He falls back, putting his hands out behind him - both land in shards of broken bottles.

He holds his bleeding hands up when I swing again. The second blow is short and low – only scraping his thigh, but the third swing - a two-hand strike made with my feet firmly planted comes down on his left knee with a crunch. Then volunteers swarm me.

"Murderer! Murderer!" I scream as they pull me back and hold onto the rebar. In the commotion, my accusation is lost. People on the scene figure I'm just angry at Calvin for letting Cole go on such a long ride alone. But that's not what I mean.

Calvin goes to the hospital, and I go to the police station. Jim Walker sits with me. I don't say anything and make it clear that I won't. I'm no dummy. After three hours, another officer comes in. He tells me that I'd dislocated Calvin's kneecap and that it was a miracle I didn't break his jaw. I give my best concerned face, trying not to crack a smile. He also says that Calvin declined to press charges. He's about to say that I'm lucky before Jim shakes his head nearly imperceptibly at the other cop. Jim knows I'm not lucky. Dan goes on to say that Calvin *has* filed a restraining order. Clever, I think. Calvin looks like the good guy – scared of me, averse to violence. How many

times had he slapped me? A dozen? I never filed a restraining order.

But I stay calm. I thank the officer. Jim offers to drive me back to the search site so I can get my car. As I walk through the precinct on my way out, I think of telling everyone what I know happened – that Calvin killed Cole, but they all look like a bunch of fucking idiots. Jim is a good man, but just a uniformed deputy, he won't be able to move on this on his own. He'd have to turn it over to some gum chewing, lazy do-nothing. No… I know that if I'm going to get justice for my boy, I'll have to do it myself. But what's justice? Calvin dead? A confession and a conviction?

I'm lost in these thoughts, going over and over them before I even register that Jim is saying something. I pick it up mid-sentence.

"…a few of them said that you were screaming murderer. Did you mean that? I mean, do you think Calvin really killed Cole?"

I don't know what I look like but seeing Jim, see me – I must be in shock. He pulls the car over and takes my hand.

"Hey, I'm sorry – I shouldn't have even asked, it's a crazy thing to ask or even to imagine, I should have realized that you were being like, figurative or whatever and that…"

"Yes." I say as soon as I regain my wits. "Yes – I think he killed him. I think he murdered Cole. I don't mean it like by letting him go on the trip, he might as well have killed him – I mean I don't think Cole ever went on a trip and I think Calvin beat him to death or shot him or… something…or something."

"OK, OK," Jim says, unbuckling his belt, moving over and holding me. I don't realize I'm crying until he wipes my cheek. I want to keep talking, keep accusing and explaining that I don't know – but that I *do* know - but I can't get my muscles to do anything, I just turn into a bowl of saltwater pudding.

Jim says I'm in no condition to drive and just takes me

home. We'll worry about the car tomorrow, he says. He tells me he's going to think about the best way to move on my suspicion, but that it's crazy to do anything tonight with me in my state, and him being turned around by my accusation. He looks me in the eye at the door, holds my shoulders and says, "I believe you, and I don't trust Calvin and I never have. Let's give things the night and call me whenever you want in the morning. But get a full night's sleep." He brings me to him, and I lean my head back. He kisses me on the forehead, which is easy for him as he's a full foot taller than me. I would have let him kiss me anywhere.

With the morning comes a clear-eyed drive: prove that Calvin killed Cole. It had only been five days since Cole went missing. Some, like my mother and father and a few friends – and even the police – think it's still possible that Cole shows up somehow. But I know better. I know he's gone, and I know who did it. This new purpose slides into the hole that the dim light of hope had barely illuminated over the past five days.

I shower and put on clean clothes. I haven't done either in days. Then I call Jim. He takes the day off and we go to his apartment. That's how I learned he and his wife are living apart. It's an experiment, he says, but added that he isn't single – even with the way things are. He says it, but I don't think he believes it. I don't. We talk till noon. At times it feels like something. Something good, something unlike anything I'd ever had with Calvin. I can't even think of what it was I had with Calvin at the beginning anymore. Then despite my best efforts, I slide into darkness again. Somehow thinking of the future is worse than thinking of the past. The future seems impossible without Cole.

That night, while everything is still fresh, I go to Calvin's place with a shotgun. I tell myself that going to get a confession no matter what it costs me.

A block before I get to his place, I cut the headlights and slide the pickup into an empty spot. With the shotgun up under

my long sweater, I walk to his house. The streetlights are the old yellow kind, and their light falls mostly on the street anyway, letting me get all the way to his house without being illuminated. I walk around back. The sliding door to his kitchen is open halfway. I slide the screen over and sidle in. The only light is the flickering blue from his TV, so I cast no shadow. The prick is playing some Call of Duty thing with his headphones on. I walk right up behind him and draw back to cock him in the back of the head with the gun stock. Whether it's a reflection in the TV, or some animal survival instinct, the prick turns and moves just as I bring the butt down, so it just grazes the side of his face.

"Fucking bitch!" He calls out as we wrestle over the gun. In the fight, I pull the trigger and blow a hole in the ceiling. The force pushes me back and I lose my grip on the gun. He gets to it faster, and levels it to my face.

"WHAT DID YOU DO!?" I scream.

He pumps the next round into the chamber, and a calm comes over him.

"Don't move." He says. His eyes scan of the room and out of the back window. "You are not supposed to be here – you broke into my house after a restraining order with a gun. You fired that gun, and now you're fucked. I can shoot you and there's nothing anyone can do about it."

I see a violent glee in his eyes and his finger massaging the trigger.

"Please," I say.

"Please what? Your life isn't worth living without Cole anyway, right?" He taunts.

"What did you do?" I repeat. "I know you did something."

His head moves up, and he looks at me from the bottom of his eyes.

"I know what you're doing." I say, "You're trying to figure out what would be worse for me – never knowing the truth or

knowing that you did something and will get away with it, but there's no choice really – because I *know* you did it. Don't care how. It doesn't matter how because even if you kill me – I'll know."

"It's because of you, you know," he says. "If you weren't such a cunt! Then it wouldn't have happened."

I wanted to call him a fucking liar, to tell him that he's still lying to himself, that he's just a cold-blooded selfish prick, but I could see the conflict in him. He wanted to tell me. He wants to open up. Wait for it. I tell myself. Wait for it. There's a moment of uncomfortable silence as he grips and re-grips the gun, he's weighing it all. If he tells me than he'll *have* to kill me – he's just not sure if he's committed to killing me yet. But I can see he's starting to reason it out. He's thinking ahead as best he can. I'll never stop, he's realizing. As long as I'm alive, I'll never stop accusing him, I'll never stop finding ways to come after him. He's seeing it. He doesn't really have a choice. He can't let me live.

Calvin's hands moved over the gun, and I steel myself for the trigger pull. Here it comes.

"I never liked him. It made it easier." Calvin says in a voice that feels like a gear shift into a slower register. "I loved him like a dad loves a son, I guess - but it was clear he was going to turn into a faggot."

There it is; that disgusting bigot shit that Calvin's own father pumped into his veins.

"He was TEN!" I can't help shouting.

"Don't fucking play like you didn't know!" He shouts back. "He was gonna be a fucking embarrassment. You don't know. You don't know. It's different for fathers in a way you cunt mothers don't understand – and it just gets worse once he gets older, not better."

His eyes trail off and he gets quiet, then sort of re-boots and shoves the gun barrel forward.

"Is that what you want to hear! Hunh? Is that it?"

My mind swirls, is he What does he mean? I can't get my bearings.

"So, it's *not* about me then – it's just about some bullshit pride homophobic shit! You're such a funking liar."

"I did the boy a favor. I know you were lining up to get full custody. I'm not a fucking idiot! You would have paraded him around just to embarrass me. He wouldn't have had a chance."

"What chance does he have now!" I shout back at his bullshit.

"At least he can't be your show-pony and can't be a faggot boy that I'd soon have to pay top dollar for with whatever child support you were gonna get awarded. He'd carry my name but live with you, so you could talk shit to him about me and turn him against me!"

"You didn't even want custody! You just asked for it to fuck with me!" I tell him.

"You always think it's about you! Everything is about you!"

He's spiraling, I demand again: "What did you do!"

"Part of me wanted to leave the body there for you to find, I really did – but I'm not cruel – and I knew I'd spend the rest his life in jail or trying to keep out of it. I just did what any loving father would do."

Calvin's voice gets faster and louder. He's working himself up to kill me. I can feel it. Then like a car shifting, he revs lower again, finding his pace and taking a deep breath.

"I did it with that five-pound mallet that he used as a doorstop. The one he used to crush rocks with looking for those fucking crystals you turned him onto. He was sleeping. He didn't even let out a noise. Just like not waking up. It only took two hits. The third was just to be sure, or because once I got going…"

I don't say anything. My brain is on hold somehow. I thought knowing would be better, but he just put this picture in

my head that's un-*something*, un-bearable, un-thinkable.

"I did him a favor," he says, but his eyes tell me he doesn't believe it.

I see right down the black of the barrel as Calvin pulls the trigger. But there's no boom, no explosion of gunpowder and blood – nothing of what he hoped for. He pumps it again and fires. Nothing. He looks up at me in a kind of desperate confusion.

Then his eyes find it: the black wire running down from my collar. The fight had torn off a few buttons, and the wire taped to my chest is exposed. I see his crooked wheels spinning.

"That…That's what you want to hear, right?" He says. "That's what you *think* happened. But… But he got lost. He got, something just happened, had nothing to do with me."

Jim Walker is already through the door. He runs into Calvin like a linebacker hits a quarterback. Calvin crashes back into the kitchen, landing on the ground, Jim has his weapon drawn and trained on him in a flash.

"Check it." Jim says to me.

I tear open my shirt and look at the small recorder belted to waist. I peel off a piece of electrical tape to reveal the device's little red LED. It's flashing.

"Still on. It's recording," I say seeing the volume bars go up and down on the little display.

"Ok. Turn it off now," Jim says.

I press the button and hear the beep. This whole time Jim has his gun trained on Calvin, who's on his back, shotgun across his chest, hands in the air.

"It's off now?" Jim asks.

"Yes." I answer.

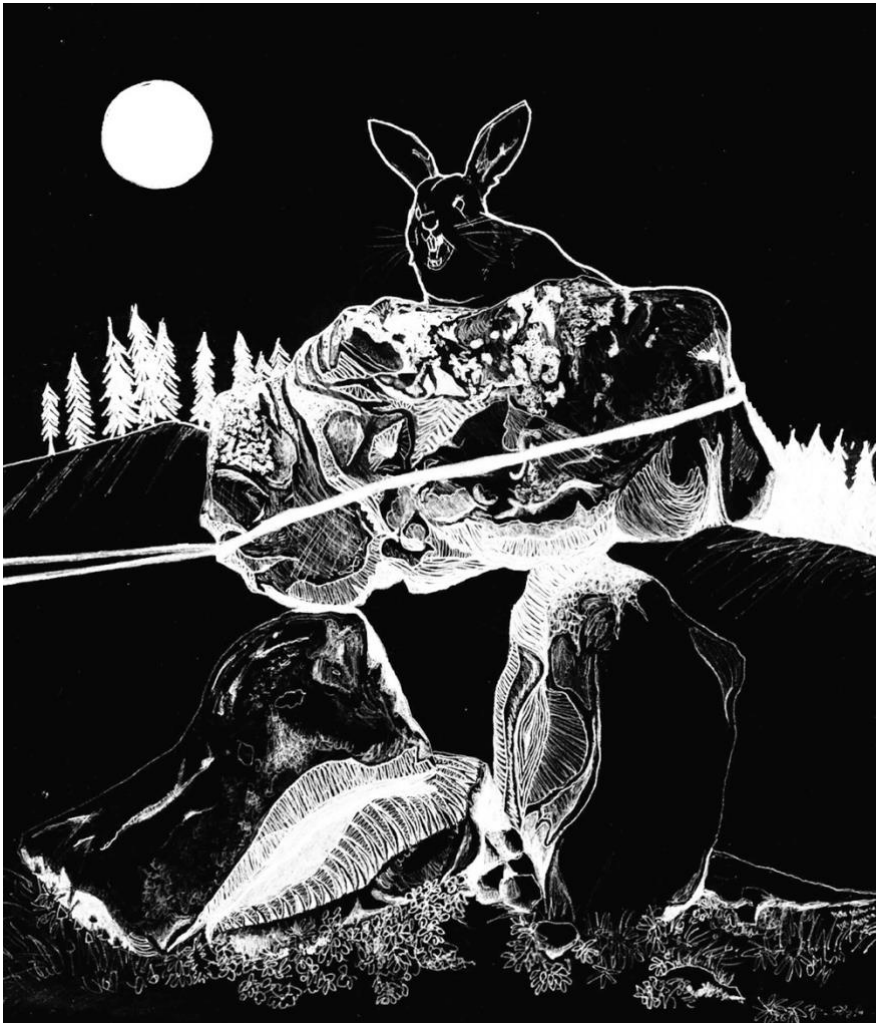
"Ok. Then it's your call." Jim says, "How do you want this to end. He's got the gun; his prints are on it. I can do it in one shot. It'll check out, no problem. And I'm not gonna judge you one way or the other. It's your call."

This is a moment I didn't expect when Jim and I came up with the plan earlier today. He didn't think anyone in the department would go along, which was fine with me – I felt like we'd move faster and better on our own, anyway. Fewer rules. I knew that Calvin would never admit anything to anyone, he would never get wasted and tell a friend, but somewhere in his fucked-up head, I knew he wanted me to know. I could tell yesterday in the field when he smiled.

If he killed Cole, he could certainly kill me, but only if he thought he could get away with it. I also knew that if he had the chance to kill me, if he had a clean opportunity – he'd tell me what happened to Cole as a brag to torment me. He'd want to lay it out – he'd want to twist that knife. So, Jim and I decided to give him that opportunity. We filled the shotgun with one live round that I would fire to make sure it felt real – then load empties in for the rest. Jim had his friend wire me up. We hit record right before I got out of my car.

But now, in this moment – with Calvin's life in my hands – I'm at a loss. It could all end right here. Everyone will know what he'd done because it was on tape. I wouldn't have to wait and worry about a trial and evidence and whether they could find Cole's body. Jim is giving me a gift, but I'm not sure if it's one I can take. I try asking the question: what would Cole want me to do? Then it occurs to me: It doesn't matter – Cole's dead.

Bill McClane is a veteran documentary and reality television writer and director whose programs have been seen on Discovery, A&E Networks, Netflix and National Geographic. He recently completed his MFA in Creative Writing from American College Dublin and seeking representation for his first novel. He lives in Cornwall, Connecticut.



Mary Keane

THE WOMAN IN THE RED DRESS – AND YOU

Carolina Conte

That Friday night I made it to Notting Hill almost an hour before your performance of Sylvia Plath's poems. The show had been announced only a couple weeks earlier, and it so happened that I would be in London on that late November when the show was on. I thought I was lucky to be at the right place at the right time, and that I would have a chance to meet you face to face and say "hello"—and perhaps finish the line appropriating one of Plath's verses, "hello, *I am nobody*." A daring expectation, but perhaps a still plausible plot. Despite the years since our last and only encounter, I had enjoyed living in the possibility that we would meet again, and that maybe you would remember me. *Anything is possible if you wish hard and long enough*, said Peter Pan – I think that was the line. And I should have taken the source of my quote as a hint, was I creating some kind of fantasy or make-believe in my mind?

In the lobby of the small theatre, I waited for the only other patron who was there to step away after retrieving his ticket, and I approached the house manager, with the gift I brought you, a copy of one of my favorite books. And with the book, a card. In the card, I shared with you that that was one of my favorite books, and then reminded you about that one time, years ago, when we had met. I asked the house manager if the book could be passed on to you. She thought it was a lovely

gesture, and she said she would be happy to do so.

The architecture of the theatre was quite peculiar. Trying to find the way to my seat, I went down a small corridor that seemed to be taking me to a haunted basement. Down and down it went, and then to the right a couple steps up, and there it was. I took my seat in the middle of the second row. Soon after, the house lights went down, and the spotlights came up. And there was you. You, me and another fifty people. Sharing molecules in the same room. In that one moment in time. And then you spoke. And it was no longer as it had been the time before. Something felt lost in time, in the years that had passed. Time had faded what I imagined once existed between you and I. Something had gone missing in my experience of you, more likely, something had gone missing in me – and it was no more. In that intimate space, life itself seemed to unfold, irrevocably – putting an end to fantastical possibilities. Everything was exactly as it was supposed to be. And yet, in that one time already long gone, you had looked into my eyes, called me by my name, and we had talked for hours. But the end of the show was the end of that. When the house lights came back on, I was just another body in the room. Applauding you. You exited backstage, and I left through the front of the house.

The wait for the bus at the stop was filled with regret... in the foolishness of my thoughts, an uncomfortable sensation crushing the experience of a good night at the theatre – for that was all it had been. That realization brought me a yearning, to dance away all that was on my mind – literally. There was a *Dance Until Midnight* rave happening only a few minutes away, so I boarded the bus and traveled to my second destination, seeking yet another communal experience, seeking to erase the thought of you.

I could hear the music bouncing off the walls as I jumped the steps towards the dance floor, trying to make up for the time I had already missed. In the darkness of the vast and round area

of the club, alone in the crowd, guided by the strobing lights, I walked around the place to find a spot. When I did, I closed my eyes hoping to surrender to the moment, from tune to tune, and the mixes bridging them. And when I opened my eyes again, I saw a woman wearing a red summer dress – in the winter. It was a distinctive sight because of the color of the dress and its fashion for that time of the year. I watched the woman. Like me until then, she kept her eyes closed and her arms up. "Raving is a state of mind," I repeated to myself. I believe it is. I closed my eyes again and raved to the old classic disco tunes signing the end of the music playlist—as the clock approached midnight. "Enjoy Your Life" was the last dance, the farewell. Friday it was no more. I was back on the pavement, breathing the chilly and crisp November air, walking towards the tube station for the train back home.

When I was finally able to escape my thoughts, and not just look, but actually see… there she was. The woman in the red summer dress. Sitting right across from me. Coincidences, or supposed life connections, do not seem to become anything concrete in my life. But there she was again, the woman in the red summer dress, now under the harsh white light inside the train. No music. No grooving. A Cinderella story after midnight. With effort, I tried to keep my face down, looking at the floor beneath my feet, while my thoughts continued to fly.

Three stops down, she alighted the train. And then my body sprang forward leaving my thoughts behind. I found myself following the woman in the red summer dress—into that winter night. What had I done? I followed her on the way out of the tube station. And kept on going. She turned left on the first corner and entered a pub. And so did I. I stood still near the door. Someone from a booth waived at the woman in the red summer dress. She walked to her—and that her was you.

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SORRY ABOUT THE POTATOES

Natalie Hodgess

‘Kill the English!!’ roared Auntie Betty as little particles of spittle projected from her perfectly painted mouth.

She always applied her makeup meticulously before and after car journeys, in case a Garda should stop her on the road.

For this journey, a visit to her nephew Jack’s house in Crumlin, which also coincided with the all-important St Patrick’s Day Ireland vs England rugby match, she had been delayed leaving the house by a phone call from Father Robert who was asking if she could help with the flowers at poor old Benedicta’s funeral mass that Sunday, God rest her soul. She willingly accepted, Father Robert was like a husband/God/father figure to Auntie Betty, she would actually run through a burning building naked if he asked her to.

Because of the delay, she had screeched up outside Jack’s front door at five past 3 in her scratched up blue Opel Corsa, parking even more erratically than usual, rushing into the house still wearing her driving shoes, carrying her black patent low-heeled pumps in one hand and her usual basket of scones in the other, pushing past Jack’s English wife Alice at the door to get in front of the TV.

‘Get those dirty bastards!’ was the next iteration from

her mouth as Betty pulled her smart Sunday coat off one shoulder hovering excitedly, half up half down towards the sofa, her eyes gleaming as Ireland threatened to score a try.

To see Betty serving at the alter every morning at mass you would see a sweet, stooped lady, always well dressed, smooth grey hair pinned in place, quiet and sensible. This version that appeared at rugby games against the enemy brought a different species out entirely, a livid, nationalist, sporting hooligan who grew in size and volume ten-fold and who would literally slaughter the young men in white jerseys if they were in the room with her.

'Would you like a cup of tea Betty?' Alice asked through pursed lips, determined that this year would be different, that she wouldn't get offended by the apparent hatred of her nation by every member of her Irish family.

After three years of living in Ireland she was beginning to understand a little more about where the nation's anger came from towards her homeland. She was continually bemused as to why she hadn't learnt about the atrocities at school, ever. She had been busy learning about the Tudors and Guy Fawkes and all the great battles, plagues and fires, but not one mention of the hurt her nation had caused her new family's people through the generations.

Betty on the other hand, born in 1938, never tired of telling Alice about the '800 years of persecution'. Stories of the hard-working decent Irish families who had literally starved to death because of the potato blight on their crop. And the food that could have saved them being sent past the starving mouths of their innocent children to be sent to the fat-cat rich landlords in England.

But Alice was tired. She'd been working at home on her laptop till late last night, but was really just waiting for jack to get back from the 'one pint' he was planning to have after his meeting in town so they could eat dinner together.

He had finally got back after one in the morning, and they had barely spoken today while she angrily hoovered around him then stormed to the shops to get supplies.

Now he was every bit as passionate and angry as Betty while they watched the match, literally drooling over the idea of Ireland beating England.

Alice's thoughts were oscillating between 'don't worry it's not personal, they have every right to be upset' to 'it's actually just a rugby game over a hundred years later' to 'I'm sorry about the bloody potatoes but can we move on?'

None of which she would voice but which was eating her up from the inside out as she perched on the edge of the sofa silently willing the boys in white to score. The thing is, Alice knows it's not personal, so why does she take offence? It's like an inbuilt need to defend her nation, well the majority of her nation, who weren't responsible.

She prides herself on her values of defending the vulnerable, standing up to the bullies. She thought she'd built up a resilient shell from working in the corporate world she'd inhabited for the last 12 years since leaving college. A company she is loyal to but all too familiar with the culture of bullying she has witnessed over her time there. The same small cohort of senior managers who would target certain new staff and graduates that came in, seeing their empathy or lack of confidence as a weakness in this competitive world and subtly and psychologically tear more strips of self-belief from them. In her HR role, Alice would offer support and solace to these people, working hard to build them back up, to keep them in the jobs they would learn to excel in if they could just ignore the power-hungry bitter bosses.

So, when Auntie Betty and countless others verbally asserted their passion and hurt about the actions of 'England', Alice felt this unconscious duty to defend the good guys, the English people who were also suffering from poverty and

starvation towards the end of the 19th century, who, she feels certain, would never have willingly stood by while the baddies let a million Irish people die.

She wondered endlessly how she could make it better, what it would take, maybe apologizing from now to the end of time. But it's such tricky territory, say the wrong thing, state something with the wrong sentiment like 'sorry about the potatoes' and you could be deemed clueless and careless, trivializing or underplaying the severity of the situation and thus making the whole thing worse.

"GO ON JOHNNY, GO ON JOHNNY, GO ON JOHNNY," Jack and Betty were screaming in unison at the TV screen, at a volume Alice felt sure could actually shatter the patio doors, as Sexton tried to weave past the English line of defense. But to no avail, England managed to defend and after a frantic few final minutes of the match, with chances at both ends, the game ended in a draw and Alice breathed a sigh of relief as Jack turned off the TV in disgust. Peace returned to the semi-detached house, Betty's invisible angry cloak slipped away, she returned to her sweet elderly self and the party sat down at the table to enjoy their shared love of tea and scones while discussing less contentious topics of shared interest, such as the unusually mild Spring they were experiencing this year in Dublin.

Natalie Hodgess is a passionate educator and sustainability manager based in Dublin. Before transitioning to teaching, she built a career in corporate social responsibility. Since moving from England to Ireland in 2008, Natalie has explored the historical ties between the two nations through research and storytelling. She graduated with an MFA in Creative Writing from American College Dublin. Outside of writing, she is a passionate follower of Arsenal football club, and she enjoys spending time in nature with her family.

SCHLEIFER

Gabriel dos Santos de Sa

Oktoberfest in Munich is well into its second week, and the night is just beginning. I'm sitting alone in a beer garden. A live band plays favorites met with a chorus of clinking steins. Waitresses in old-school Bavarian costumes balance 12 liters at once and glide through the swaying, singing crowds. The joy is infectious and makes it dangerously easy to pound through too much beer, which I'm doing on my own before a scruffy beard of a man calls out to me, first in German, then in English:

"Hey! You alone? Come join us!"

Yes, I am alone, even though it feels strange saying it – I broke up with Leo just over a month ago, and I feel like I'm on the run – I went from New York, where we'd lived together for a year, then to Dublin, and now – Germany.

I join the group and before long, they're sliding a second liter my way. It's different than the one I picked on my own – richer with scents of caramel and toasted bread. Someone asks where I'm from, another jokes about teaching me the art of "proper" beer tasting. I sip while the group gulps. Three beers in, and I feel the urge to unleash my inner dance diva. The beer garden is lively, sure, but now I'm looking for a different energy. Edgier. Sexier. I say goodbye to the group.

Outside, I steady myself in the cool air, before setting off

toward one of Munich's queer nightclubs where I can surround myself with shirtless strangers under a disco ball. My phone vibrates. I glance down – Grindr. Plenty of tourists fill the grid, but I want a local. My phone vibrates again.

Hey, you seem fun. Want to meet up?

From the profile, he looks tall, handsome, and German – which is everything I'm looking for tonight. I even like his opening message; short and direct. No overthinking, not trying too hard. I bet he knows what he wants and isn't afraid to ask. I reply. Soon, we're texting about where to meet.

You should come to Munich Glockenbachviertel, he suggests. *It's a gay district here in Munich. Lots of great pubs, and we can figure out the rest of the night from there.*

It's your town. I'm game. I respond.

He shares the address. It's only a 20-minute walk from where I am. We text as I walk. He sends a few more photos and even a couple of voice notes. His accent is sexy. I tell him I'm from Brazil and he sprinkles in Portuguese words for me.

"*Você é lindo,"* he says in one voice message, his pronunciation is clumsy but full of effort. I'm flattered and amused. Adorable. His final text as approach the pub: *I'm here, babe*. That single word, *babe*. It sends a spark through me.

The pub is alive with chatter and laughter and early 2000s pop. I scan the room and make him out leaning against a table near the back. His broad shoulders are framed perfectly by a snug button-down shirt. Better than the photos, I think.

He spots me, stands up, and closes the gap between us in a few quick strides. Without hesitation, he wraps an arm around me and kisses me. His hands resting confidently on my waist as if we'd known each other forever. I melt into it, and it goes on for a long moment – tongues moving in sync, teasing – and by the time we pull apart, I'm addicted.

*"*Wow," I say, a little breathless. His eyes light up.

"Nice to meet you," he says as if we hadn't already spent

the past 20 minutes texting like teenagers. With my hand still in his, he leads me outside the pub.

"So, this is Glockenbachviertel," he says, gesturing around us with a proud grin.

"It's the heart of Munich's gay scene. You can find everything here. Dark rooms, clubs, bars. It's where everyone comes to feel free."

We walk and talk about ourselves – the usual questions about where I'm from in Brazil, why I'm living in Dublin, Ireland, and what brought me to Munich. But when we veer into passions and careers, everything shifts.

"I'm an opera singer," I say.

"No way," he says, with excited disbelief.

"I'm also an opera singer here in Germany."

For a moment, I think he's joking. But the way his eyes sparkle lets me know he's serious.

He pulls his phone out of his pocket and shows me a photo of him performing in what seems like a sold-out concert.

"Opera is my life. And now I meet you, a fellow singer. What are the chances?" He says.

We talk about our favorite singers and the most challenging arias we'd tackled. I tell him about performing with Andrea Bocelli.

"You performed for 100,000 people?" he asks, "That's insane! I can't even imagine that kind of crowd."

I shrug, trying to play it cool. At some point, he leans closer, his lips brushing my ear,

"There's a dark room near us," he says, his voice full of promise.

"What it called? I have tickets for Macho Sauna for tomorrow. Maybe I can use the tickets tonight," I ask, wondering whether this is the same gay sauna I had reserved for my last day.

He waves his hand. "No, Macho Sauna is far from here and it's

for tourists." he replies. "This one is right around the corner."

Hand in hand, we slip into the dark basement of the bar. The air charged with an intoxicating mix of anticipation and desire. The room is pitch black. But we don't need light, our hands and tongues are doing all the seeing. His fingers are everywhere, dragging across my Brazilian skin like he's mapping it out, gripping me hard enough to leave marks. I'm pressed against the wall, his body pinning mine. His lips are all over me, biting, sucking, driving me completely insane, while his breath comes out in ragged gasps against my neck. He makes me forget every Grindr hookup I've ever had.

Afterward, as we catch our breath, he leans against me, his voice soft and playful.

"So," he says, "am I your first German?"

I laugh, still catching my breath.

"You are. Am I your first…?" Before I can even finish asking, he answers with an enthusiasm that practically overflows.

"Yes, Lindo, you were my first Brazilian… I guess we can each check that off our lists." We share a quiet laugh, the kind that comes from something absurd – but meaningful, too. We sit naked for a while longer, the connection between us growing stronger.

"Come over to my apartment? I'll cook something for us," he asks.

"You're going to cook for me now?"

"Of course," he says with a wink.

"Well, I'm down." I say.

He smiles as he slips back into his clothes. He motions that he needs to use the bathroom.

"I'll wait for you at the bar," I say, pulling on my underwear.

I make my way to the bar and settle in to wait for him.

He's takes longer than I expect, and I order a half-pint of

Radler. By the time he's
back, it'll be gone, I figure. But twenty minutes tick by, and his return feels increasingly. Far longer than a quick trip to the bathroom should take. My mind starts to wander, imagining him meeting someone else there. Maybe they slipped off to the darkroom together. After all, this is a gay bar, no strings, no attachments, just fun. That's how it works in places like this. I finish the last sip of my Radler and go check the bathroom. He's nowhere in sight. A wave of shame rolls over me. He's ditched me. I weave through the crowd, scanning the bar, half-expecting to spot him leaning against the counter, maybe ordering some overpriced cocktail from the other bartender. But he's not. I go back downstairs to check the darkroom. So, here I go, heading in that direction, feeling a mix of determination and defeat. As I near the entrance — bam — someone grabs my shoulder, hard. My skin goes cold, heart slamming against my ribs as I turn, every nerve on edge, bracing for whatever the hell is about to happen.

It's him.

"Let's go," he says, breathless, his eyes darting around.

I can't think fast so I don't argue. I just go where he drags me. We're walking very fast, his grip tight on my hands. He's pulling me so hard it feels like we're running away from something. We're outside in a moment. I hesitate for a moment before leaning in for a kiss, but he turns his face away, leaving my gesture hanging in the air. We head outside. The crowds have gone and many of the lights are out.

"Crazy how the streets emptied out," I say, forcing a smile to hide the unease bubbling inside me.

"You're so selfish," he snaps. "Why did you just disappear in the bar when I went to the bathroom? Where the fuck did you go?"

I stare at him, confused if this is the same guy I just had sex with.

"This is not how you talk to me," I say. "Plus, you were the one that disappeared for almost half an hour."

He stares at me, but I don't wait for him to respond. Without another word, I pull my hand from his, turn and start walking the other way, my heart racing. He runs around in front of me and stands. I sidestep around him, but he grabs my wrist, his grip almost bruising. Tears stream down his face.

"You can't do this to me!" his voice cracks as he cries out.

I whip my hand away. "Don't touch me again!"

He starts ranting as if we'd been in some kind of long-term relationship. He makes accusations and demands about my life, my plans, my choices using details gleaned from the short conversations we'd had up till now.

"You know what?" I say, my anger boiling over, *"BOY, BYE!"*

The instant the words leave my mouth – he shoves me with a force that pushes the air from lungs. I fall back onto the asphalt. I and get my hands back fast enough and the back of my head cracks against the ground. The world blurs. The air smells sharp, like oil and fear. Things spin as he looms above me.

His face twists into something diabolical, unrecognizable. I move to stand up and back away from him, but the head knock and the night of drinking make it hard. My legs barely hold me. I see him slowly reaching into his pocket. My chest tightens. I strain to focus my vision.

On my feet, I pull out my phone, fumbling to search for the German police number. But before I can, he pulls out a short, black-bladed knife and grabs me by my belt pulling me in close. I gasp when I feel the cold metal of the knife pressed against my side.

"Come with me," his voice raw and trembling.

"We're going to my place like we said. We'll have the night we planned."

"I'm not going," I say as calmly as I can, trying to feign control.

He presses the knife against me a little harder, his breath coming in quick bursts. It hurts.

"If you scream, I'll stab you to death." He hisses.

I fight to push the thoughts away, but my imagination refuses to cooperate, relentlessly crafting vivid, horrifying scenes of my own death. His eyes look wild. My mind races for an out. If I play into it, maybe? If I ask him for a hug, he might loosen his hold, and I could make a run for it.

"OK, Don't get so worked up. Can I get a hug?"

He hesitates, but then, to my surprise, he nods. As he wraps his arms around me, He's closer but I don't feel the knife. We stay embraced for moment, then as the energy calms and we start to release, I shove him as hard as I can. My heart pounds and scream call out as loudly as I can.

"HELP! HELP!"

From this moment on, my only focus is the sound of my feet hitting the pavement. I can hear him shouting behind me, his footsteps heavy as he pursues me. Every corner I turn feels like a dead end. I'm drowning in the silence of the city. I search for any sign of life, anyone who might help. But the streets seem to have turned their backs against me.

We've gone blocks and I think I have lost all my strength, when I turn a corner onto a street packed with taxi's lined up and waiting. This is my chance. I rush toward the nearest one and try to open the door – it's locked. I look inside. The driver waives me off. Off duty?

"Motherfucker. Open the damn door!" I yell at him.

I risk a glance behind me, he's approaching. I don't wait. I sprint to the next taxi, this door is open, and jump inside, and lock it.

"Someone's following me with a knife, please, just drive!"

The driver looks out of the window and sees him

approaching. He starts the engine and pulls into the street. I look through the back window as he gets smaller. He folds his knife and slides it into his pocket, then walks to his right, between the parked taxis. I keep looking, nervous that he'll hire a car to come after me, but no one pulls out.

"Are you alright?" the driver asks.

I nod, trying to process what had just happened. The image of the knife and the weird, desperate anger in his eyes still loud in my mind. My head is pounding, my clothes smell like bad decisions, and all I need right now is a long shower and my bed. As the car weaves through the streets, I stare at the last conversation with him on Grindr. Without hesitating, I block him. Then, before I can talk myself out of it, I do something even more important, I delete the app.

The taxi rolls to a stop in front of my hostel, and I step out. My legs still feel like they might give out.

"Thanks," I say as I swipe my card.

The driver gives me a small nod as I get out, like he wants to say something but doesn't. I don't wait – just turn and walk inside.

The next morning, I wake up around 11. It's my last full day in Munich. Last night heavy on my mind, I make my way down to the hostel's breakfast room where I'm happy to see there's something left. As I pile some food onto my plate, my phone buzzes. I glance at the screen. *Your Macho Sauna Night is Tonight*.

Right – I completely forgot I had booked a gay sauna for my last night here. I hesitate. After everything that happened last night, do I really want to go? For a second, I consider skipping it. But then I shake my head. Fuck it. The ticket is already booked. After last night's disaster, A re-boot would be good.

My pass starts at 8, so at 7:45 I arrive check in. The receptionist gestures toward a sign with all the rules. One in bold stands out: *No phones allowed*. I put my phone along with my wallet and keys in a locker, and type in the code. Then, I step

into a room packed with hot men. The first room is large, and a little much for me - so I head into a darker, quieter room, with fewer people. Low moans fill the air. I feel To my left and right there are rows of glory holes, an architectural commitment to anonymity, adventure, and just a bit of risk. I'm not ready to embrace risk. Not tonight, not after…

Then I remember. I told him about the reservation. I mentioned it when we were together before things – before *he* went crazy.

The darkened room starts to drip with menace. I squint and focus and bob to try to make out each face. I shouldn't have come. I walk back towards the exit.

I weave past the new patrons coming in. They smile and wink as they pass. The bright light from the lobby blinds me as I swim against the tide of men coming in.

I'm almost to the door when I hear it:

"Hey babe."

Gabriel dos Santos de Sa is a world traveler who turns his unique travel adventures into captivating tales. Raised in one of Brazil's largest slums, he is motivated by a personal mission to show how travel can reclaim space in a world that often tells people like him to stay in their place. He's now writing his auto-fictional debut that challenges narrow ideas of success, identity, and who gets to travel the world, while pursuing his BFA in Writing at American College Dublin.



Caoimhe Lavelle

CHARLIE BOY

Tanya Farrelly

Bruges, 1918

'Come on Lina. If we don't hurry, I'll be late.' Elise stops in the narrow laneway that leads from their apartment to Markt Square to do up her sister's buttons. Red gloves dangle from the too-long sleeves of her blue wool coat, and Lina stumbles after her, heavy feet slip-sliding on the cobbles, breaking now and then into a trot. By the time they turn onto the Mariastraat snow has started.

'Elise,' Lina calls, and she turns to see that her sister has stopped, face upturned, moon eyes fixed on the vast whiteness overhead. Lina's mouth opens, she extends one hand to catch a feathery flake, and Elise smiles and looks skywards too, thinking about their father. A moment later, a thundering clang from the Belfry sends her skittering to pull at her sister's arm and hurry on.

'Your mother not well again?' Madame Renard eyes the girls over the counter. She's already hard at it, pummeling dun-coloured dough to slide into the giant oven. She pauses; a mechanical doll out of wind. This is the third time in so many weeks that Elise has covered her mother's shift. Although

usually she hasn't had to drag Lina along. 'And this one, shouldn't she be at school?' Madame Renard says, inclining her head to look at the child over her glasses.

'I didn't have time,' Elise tells her. 'She'll be no trouble. She can help out the back, sweeping…'

Madame Renard grunts, though she's not unkind, and Elise understands her reluctance to allow her sister, oversized and clumsy, into the boulangerie. 'Okay, but you'll have to be careful young woman. Don't touch anything unless I tell you to.'

Elise is tired at the end of the day. Her feet hurt in her mother's too-tight shoes, worn only because Madame is so particular about the appearance of her assistant. It makes no matter that not a customer crosses the threshold these days, that the sacks of flour stacked in the back all bear the CRB logo – and that every morning at half past ten a dog-cart is sent to pick up the batches and deliver them to the distribution centre.

Elise looks round as she helps Madame to clean down the surfaces after the day's baking. She is saddened when she looks at the empty display cabinet, remembering how as a little girl, she'd thought it a place of magic and sugary delights. Her father used to take them there on pay day, he'd tell each of his daughters to choose something and they'd stand before the glass and watch, eyes wide, as Madame Renard reached in to pluck two tiny iced cakes from the display. It's been so long that she can barely remember what such a thing tastes like.

Elise helps Lina back into her coat. Outside, snow is falling steadily and a hush has descended over the town. They cross the square leaving a mess of boot prints in the thickening snow. Elise can see, even before they reach it, that their apartment is in darkness. Beneath their rooms, a yellow light burns in their neighbour, Monsieur Alexandre's.

She unlocks the heavy door, finger's red-raw, and as she closes it behind them, the door to the downstairs apartment swings open and Monsieur Alexandre appears in the darkened

hallway. ‘Mes demoiselles,’ he says with a bow. ‘Come, I’ve something very special to show you.’ He turns, disappears back inside. Elise smiles, ushers Lina in ahead of her. She knows by the way his face is working that this is something new.

Monsieur Alexandre’s place is always in disarray. The apartment where he lives is also his workshop and scattered across the surface of the large wooden table lie screws, cogs, and winders, all the tiny elements that make up his creations. On a corner shelf, a ventriloquist’s puppet slumps abandoned. When Elise asked him about it, Monsieur shook his head sadly and told her that no matter how hard he tried, he could not bring the thing to life.

She is enthralled and horrified by it.

Inside it is cold, the small gas heater is not enough to keep out the cool air that penetrates the old draughty windows. It is the same in their own apartment, but Monsieur Alexandre, face flushed, and shirt sleeves rolled doesn’t seem to notice.

His back is to them, blocking whatever it is that has made the colour rise to his cheeks. Lina cranes to see past him, and they hear the crank of a winder. He turns, moves out of the way, and the girls clap in delight to see a white mechanical horse canter across the table. Lina squeals and reaches for the horse, but Monsieur puts a hand out to stop her. ‘Wait,’ he says. The horse stops, pauses and rears back on its hind legs. Elise has never seen anything like it. ‘This is Solomons,’ Monsieur Alexandre tells her. ‘Feel him, the hair, it is real.’ When the horse stops moving, he allows the girls to lean in to examine him. He is just like the horses they used to see in the town before the war came, but he is carved from wood. Horsehair covers his mechanical joints, Elise can imagine Monsieur Alexandre meticulously placing the small hinges. ‘Monsieur,’ she tells him. ‘I think it is your best yet.’ Monsieur glows at her words, pats her arm awkwardly.

Upstairs, Elise lights the lamp. Her boots thump on the

wooden floor as she crosses to their mother's room and eases the door open. The room is empty, white linen smoothened over the bed, a dent in the fabric of the small stool before her dresser; the only sign that she has been here recently, that she is probably not long departed. There is not a sign of last night's wreckage, of the overturned wine jug, crimson stain seeping into the floorboards. Everything has been scrubbed clean. In the kitchen, a scrawled note tells Elise that there is a pie that she can heat in the stove. No word about when she will return.

That night Elise lies sleepless. She thinks about Monsieur Alexandre a floor below, of the white horse and the other toys that line the shelves of his room. She is sure he feels affection for her and that he's ashamed by that affection. She's too young. He's a man, his slender face rough with coarse hair, his large hands assured, but gentle. She thinks too of her father, sent to a German factory where he couldn't even disclose in his letters the work they had him do. And then the letters stopped. Her mother's questions to the postman met each morning by a sad shake of the head. Elise often saw her sitting on the edge of her bed re-reading the last letter they'd received from her Papa, the familiar slant of his hand that only her maman could decipher. And now this. Two years of silence – her mother's lethargy replaced by these nocturnal outings.

In the early hours she wakes, hears the front door open, and then heavy erratic footsteps on the stairs. A thump makes her leap from her bed. It wouldn't do for Monsieur Alexandre to come out, and she rushes out to the landing to find her mother, face-forward, attempting to pull herself up with the banisters. 'Maman!' She crouches, hooks her arms beneath her mother's armpits and attempts to haul her up, but she flops back down like a fish. 'Come on, maman. I need you to help me, can you stand?' Her mother mutters something, catches hold of the banister again. Elise thinks that she hears a noise in Monsieur Alexandre's apartment and seizes her mother's arm. She is

amazed by the weight of such a tiny woman. Inside the apartment, her mother stumbles again. She crumples to the floor before Elise manages to get her into an armchair, mumbles something about being sick. Elise smells the spirits on her breath, the sharp tang of it before it all comes back, erupting from her insides. Her mother leans on her palms, shivers and jerks while Elise runs for a bucket.

She returns to find the episode past, her maman lies face down, limbs splayed as if she'd been knocked to the ground by one of the horses that drew the hansoms in the square. Spittle parachutes from her lips and catches in loose strands of hair. Elise takes shallow breaths, tries not to inhale the sour stench of it. She has a mind to leave her where she's fallen. She loves her maman, but she doesn't know what she hopes to achieve by these outings, except perhaps oblivion. The sound of her sister's voice, hoarse in sleep, changes any thought she may have had of leaving her.

'What are you doing Elise?' Lina stands in the doorway in her linen nightdress. 'Nothing. Go back to bed.' Elise moves round to the other side of the armchair shielding their mother's prone body from her sister's gaze. 'I'm thirsty.' 'Okay, well, go back to bed and I'll bring you some water.' Lina stands there, looking at her confused, and she wonders for a moment if the girl is sleep-walking. She turns then and goes back into the bedroom.

At seven o' clock Elise rises, she gently rocks her maman by the shoulder and she groans and pulls the covers closer. 'What about work…' she says. Her mother looks at her with bleary eyes. 'One more day, Elise. You can do it, can't you… that's a good girl.' 'And what about Lina?' she asks. Her mother rolls away from her, voice muffled beneath the cover. 'She's got school, doesn't she?' Elise sighs. She will talk to her maman, but not now, not if she is to get her sister to school on time before getting to Madame Renard's.

'What ails your mother?'

Elise glances at Madame Renard. ‘Stomach flu,’ she tells her. ‘She was lying over a bucket all night.’ She feels better that only the first part is a lie, but she is worried for her mother’s reputation. How long before it reaches the woman’s ears that she has been seen in the taverna in the company of soldiers. That would be the end of her job in the bakery, the end of any rapport with their neighbours.

The rumour is that the occupation is coming to an end. Already, there are less uniformed men about the town. Nothing is said about those in exile – what has become of them, whether they will return. Elise remembers the night their father packed his belongings. She recalls her mother ironing his shirts, she barely spoke a word. Their father kissed them, in the hall he shook hands with Monsieur Alexandre and asked him to keep an eye on his girls. The toy-maker had taken his word seriously, had discreetly taken the girls into his quarters while their parents embraced. By the time they climbed the stairs, their maman had stopped crying.

Their father studied snow. He knew the names of clouds, and how fast the wind would blow in the hours that followed. In Germany, he was a labourer, that was what they suspected. That was what rumour informed them, that the men were sent to factories where they assembled machines. Elise liked to think of her father doing work like Monsieur Alexandre, but she knew that whatever it was her father worked on, it would be nothing like mechanical toys. ‘Elise!’ Startled, she looked up from the dough, which she’d been pummeling half to death. ‘There will be no air left… that bread, it won’t rise.’ Madam tutted. ‘Your maman had better get better and fast.’

Elise knew that Madam Renard’s husband had fallen at the Battle of Liege, that he’d been killed by a bullet that pierced an artery and had bled to death in a comrade’s arms. Madam had continued to run the boulangerie; the need for it to keep going stronger now that she had no husband to support their three

children. It is five o' clock by the time Elise takes off her apron and begins the walk home. She hopes that Lina made her way home from school on her own, that she was not distracted by some small thing as she often was. She had instructed her if their mother was not home to begin her lessons by herself, and if she needed anything, she was to go downstairs and knock at the door of Monsieur Alexandre.

When Elise turns her key in the lock, she realizes that the bolt has been drawn on the inside. She taps tentatively – had her sister been scared on her own? 'Lina… it's me,' she says, her mouth to the wood. She knocks again, harder this time, and hears a shuffling inside and quick steps on the wooden floor. The bolt is pulled back, the door opens, and Elise is surprised that it is her mother who ushers her into the room. 'What is it?' Elise asks. 'What's wrong?'

Her mother sobs, almost pulls Elise towards the bedroom. Lina rocks on the balls of her feet. On the floor, a uniformed man, trousers ruched round his ankles stares, unseeing, at the ceiling above. 'My God, what happened…' Lina retreats, turns away from the body at which she's been staring transfixed. 'He was hurting Maman,' she whispers. Elise takes in the scene, the soldier by the bed, those still blue eyes, the iron tossed on the lace cover, and the trail of blood from the man's head seeping into the floorboards like the overturned wine jug. 'She came home and found us…' her mother says. 'She thought… he wasn't a bad man…. Oh God.' Her mother begins to cry. 'What are we to do, Elise?'

Elise rises, looks at her mother and her sister. There is only one thing they can do, one friend they can trust, Monsieur Alexandre.

Elise creeps down the stairway and taps at Monsieur Alexandre's door. 'Please… something terrible has happened. The toymaker follows her to the flat without question. When they enter, her mother is standing by Lina stroking her head.

‘It’s alright my love… it’s alright.’ Lina’s big face is bewildered. Her eyes return, as if by magnetism, again and again to the soldier. ‘Elise, take your sister to your room.’ Elise notices that her mother has attempted to right the soldier’s clothes, that she has pulled his trousers to his waist, and that his shirt is buttoned again. As she leads her sister from the room, she hears Monsieur Alexandre speak. In a low voice he asks her mother what happened, and she claws a hand through her hair. ‘All I wanted was to find out what happened to Florian… I thought one of them could help… that maybe he would know.’

Monsieur Alexandre bandages the soldier’s head to prevent the blood from smearing anything else. Elise remembers her father telling them that Monsieur had gone to college to train as a surgeon, but that he’d never finished the course. Elise wonders now if he might draw on his experience to save the soldier, breathe life back into his dead body as he does with his toys. But instead, he undresses the body and clothes it again in a trousers and shirt that belong to their father. The uniform he cuts up and burns in the fire.

‘We must wait until after dark,’ he says. They close the bedroom door leaving the dead man inside. Her mother sits that night in their father’s armchair staring straight ahead of her. When Lina has fallen asleep, Elise joins her mother by the fireside. ‘It’s all my fault,’ her mother tells her. ‘To bring him here like that in the day…’ Elise is glad to find her sober. And gladder still when at 3am a light knock comes to the door. ‘Alexandre,’ her mother whispers, and gestures for Elise to open it.

Monsieur lifts the man’s body and hauls it over his shoulder. ‘Where are you taking him?’ Elise whispers, and he shushes her and tells her it is better, the less she knows. He asks Elise to open the door – instructs her to close it again as soon as he is in the landing. She does so and listens to his foot on the stairs, careful. She imagines him balancing the soldier on his shoulder

as he negotiates the steep steps of the stairs. She listens for the sound of the heavy front door, but she hears nothing. Perhaps he is waiting by the window of his apartment to make sure that everything is clear.

When Elise wakes the next morning, her mother is in the kitchen making breakfast. The door to her room is open, and Elise wonders if she has been to bed at all. 'Maman…' she begins, but her mother puts a hand on her arm and silences her with a smile. 'Get your sister up,' she tells her. 'She must go to school,' she says. 'And you, you stay here until she returns…'

'And if she asks…'

'We must never speak of it again.'

Elise clears the dishes from the table. She smiles at Lina as though nothing is wrong, and though her sister's face is a map of confusion, she doesn't mention the man. The three of them leave the house together, they will walk as far as the square before her mother departs in the opposite direction for Madame Renard's. Elise listens as they pass Monsieur Alexandre's door, but not a sound comes from within. Could he have waited and moved the soldier after Elise had fallen asleep? But it was dawn before her eyes closed, and she hadn't heard as much as a mouse scurry through the darkness.

They've not got two metres from their front door when the postman turns the corner on his big black bike. He slows, stands on one pedal and throws his other leg over the crossbar. Nodding to the three of them, he takes a brown package from his bag and hands it to Elise's mother with a rueful look. He eyes her as she turns the package in her hands, nods almost to himself as Elise registers the postage stamp. Fear lodges in Elise's throat as her maman turns the package in her hands, waiting until the postman has left them. 'Maybe it's from Papa,' Elise whispers, urging her mother to tear the paper. With shaky hands, she rips the seal. When she plunges her hand in, her fingers light on something that neither of them expects. She

pulls out a watch: it's black face is smudged, but otherwise it is perfectly intact. Even as they look at it, the silver hands rotate; the brown strap is slightly worn from so much time on her papa's wrist. 'Florian,' her mother breathes, and Elise has to put an arm round her waist to stop her from sinking to the pavement. 'Is there nothing else?' she says. 'No note?' Her mother shakes her head, allows Elise, whose own legs are weakening, to guide her back inside. Lina says nothing. She hasn't spoken since the previous night.

The watch has not been sent by their papa. Elise knows this. He'd have written them a letter, told them that he was alright. Her mother sits and turns the watch in her hand, she presses it to her nose and sniffs at the leather. She places its cold steel to her lips. 'Who do you think sent it?' Elise asks. Her mother shrugs. 'All I know is, it means he's not coming back.'

Elise does not see Monsieur Alexandre for days. She taps on his door to tell him about her father and the watch. There is no answer, but she is sure that she hears a shuffling inside. In the daytime, the heavy curtains on his window remain closed, and it's impossible to know if the lamp is lit or not. Her mother returns to the bakery, and Elise walks Lina – silent now – to and from school. She knows that her sister's mind is on the slain soldier. She attempts to talk to her about it, despite her mother's warning. She tells her sister that the man was alright, that it was nothing but a bump on the head and that monsieur Alexandre took him to the doctor. Her words fail to convince the girl, and Elise worries that she might never be her loud, carefree self again.

Her mother no longer frequents the taverna. Elise is relieved that the wine jug too remains empty. Without fuss, they return to their routine. But Lina's silence continues.

One evening, on her way back from the library, Elise takes a detour and stops on the bridge to stare into the Minnewater. She loves how the mist descends over the water, shrouds

everything in its thin veil. Since the soldiers appeared in the city, her mother has warned her not to loiter in the streets alone, and she is alarmed when she hears steps behind her. 'You shouldn't be out alone,' the voice says, echoing her maman's advice. She turns to see Monsieur Alexandre. 'Where have you been?' she asks. 'Working.' He places his palms on the bridge, stares into the fog. 'I looked for you,' Elise tells him, 'somebody sent us papa's watch. Maman says he's not coming back.' Without looking at her, he takes her hand and squeezes it. 'I'm sorry.' 'Monsieur, what did you do with the soldier?' He turns his head then, raises a finger to his thin lips. He takes her arm and they begin walking.

He doesn't answer her question about the soldier. She was foolish, she supposes, to ask him out in the open like that. Her maman would chide her for it if she knew. Instead, she talks about her young sister, how she is worried about her silence, how she's withdrawn into herself, without referencing the reasons why. Her maman and Monsieur are right to be cautious; there's no knowing when a uniformed man might step from a doorway. Monsieur doesn't speak much, but when they reach the safety of the hallway and pause outside his door, he kisses her hand, and tells her to bring Lina down to visit him the following evening, that he has something that might distract her, and bring the light back into those moon eyes.

Elise is glad that Monsieur has returned. Not only that, but she senses something different in his demeanour. He has taken her arm before, but has never kissed her hand, and it is this more than anything that causes her to lie sleepless listening to her sister's soft snores. She wonders if it is because she told him about the watch. He has always taken his promise to their father seriously. Perhaps, knowing that her papa will not return has changed things. It may not be appropriate for a single man to call on them, not unless there was an engagement, a promise of intention. Elise feels again Monsieur's lips on the

back of her hand, wonders what she might do if he were to ask her to marry him. It would be one way that he could keep his promise to her father; Elise would be sixteen soon, no longer a child.

The next morning Elise takes Lina to school. Then she returns to clean their apartment and see what little she can scrape together for dinner. She listens in the hallway for any sound from Monsieur Alexandre's apartment, but hears none. In the afternoon, when she has collected Lina from school, she will take her downstairs and see if the toymaker's latest creation will help her sister to find her voice again.

When she has finished helping Lina with her homework, she tells her, casually, that Monsieur Alexandre has asked them to call downstairs, that he has a new toy to show them. "Remember the white horse?" she says, and Lina smiles a little, silent still. With a new nervousness, Elise taps her knuckles against his door. There is a shuffling and suddenly he is before them, smiling. 'Ah, Madam Lina,' he says, with a flourish, 'do come in.' He ushers them both in, and Elise feels the heat of his hand as it rests on her shoulder.

The apartment is in its usual state of disarray. Elise spots the white horse, points to it and asks Monsieur if they might see it canter across the table again. 'Of course, whatever the ladies wish,' he says, but today he has something even more special. They should close their eyes for this, and he will tell them when to open them. Elise looks at Lina, and smiles. 'We have to do as Monsieur tells us,' she says. 'And no peeking.' Lina closes her eyes, and Elise squeezes her hand. Whatever it is that Monsieur has, she is sure it will break her sister's silence. 'And you Madame!' Monsieur tells her. 'Or do I have to blindfold you.' Elise smiles and shuts her eyes tight. She hears Monsieur open a door and then close it again. The she hears the creak of his old armchair as he sits into it. 'Mes demoiselles,' he says, and their eyes spring open – a smile ready on Elise's lips. Propped on the

arm of monsieur's chair is the puppet – Charlie-boy – Elise stares at the doll, at its full rubbery lips and reddened cheeks. It is only when her sister clutches her arm and lets out a scream that she fixes in horror on the puppet's dead blue eyes.

Tanya Farrelly is a tutor at American College Dublin. She is the author of four books: two short fiction collections and two novels. Her debut When Black Dogs Sing (Arlen House) was longlisted for the Edge Hill Short Story Prize and named winner of the Kate O' Brien Award 2017. Her novels The Girl Behind the Lens and When Your Eyes Close are published by Harper Collins, London, and were both Amazon bestsellers. Her latest book, a short fiction collection, Nobody Needs To Know was published in 2021 by Arlen House. She holds a Ph.D. in Creative and Critical Writing from Bangor University, Wales, and teaches at numerous institutions, including the Irish Writers Centre, Dublin, and the People's College. She is the founder and director of Bray Literary Festival and was appointed Arts Council Writer-in-Residence at NUI Galway in 2021. She is the recipient of an Arts Council Agility Award and is currently working on a novel, and a new short story collection is forthcoming late this year.



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