MASTERS IN CREATIVE WRITING
Full Thesis

A CLOUD IN HER EYE
Novella and Reflective Essay
by
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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Magister Artium, in the Department of English, University of the Western Cape.
Keywords

Ireland, student, sisters, family conflict, bias, prejudice, drugs, friendship, protectiveness, reconciliation.
Abstract

A CLOUD IN HER EYE

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M.A. Thesis

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Rae and her sister, Alina, are young women who have travelled from Australia to visit their aunt, Trudy, in Ireland. Rae’s suspicions that something is amiss with the arrangement are confirmed when they discover that their parents have been arrested for settling in Australia without the appropriate visas. The two young women, who are half Irish, must remain in Ireland until their parents are able to join them. Rae enrols at a university to continue her studies, and Alina finds a job that requires her to move out. Rae is upset with Alina for leaving, and drops out of contact for a while, but then when she does reach out, her messages aren’t returned. Eventually she goes in search of her sister and finds that Alina has left Dublin without saying where she went. Months pass in fruitless searching. Rae settles down at Trinity College, makes friends, and also befriends Joe, a rough sleeper on the Dublin streets. When she discovers that her sister might be in Galway, Rae travels there, accompanied by two friends. Joe offers to aid them. While there, they encounter someone who claims to know Alina, but demands payment before revealing anything. Rae asks Joe – who is familiar with the backstreets – to deliver the cash. Joe is never seen again, and Rae, after some time, finally admits she has been betrayed. One of her two friends decides to explore the clubs and stumbles on Alina who is working there. When Rae approaches her sister, there is a confrontation with the possessive employer, Murphy, who strikes Alina, putting her in hospital. Alina returns to Dublin, and life resumes where it left off, but then Murphy attempts to take Alina back. Rae hurries home and finds Trudy blocking the door to the house with a shotgun which she fires at Murphy’s knee. The demonstration of protectiveness shows Rae how badly she misjudged her aunt. She then discovers that she misjudged Davin, whom she admired from the beginning but incorrectly assumed he was interested in her sister. The novella ends with a recognition of her flawed perceptions which stands in juxtaposition to her confident judgements of people in the opening chapter.

29 October, 2018
Declaration

I declare that *A Cloud in Her Eye* is my own work, that it has not been submitted for any degree or examination in any other university, and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by complete references.

Jonathan Paul Jacobs                        29 October 2018

Signed:  

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Dublin Harbour

I’ve been deaf to the ferry engine for the past hour, but now that its voice falters, my head is full of it. The engine attempts to revive and limp on, but then it coughs a few times and shudders its last. The decking rattles under my shoes and falls still.

I glance down. My feet are numb inside the once-white tommies. I move my toes, trying to expel the curious buzzing trapped there. One toe looks back at me through a small hole worn in the fabric, making me feel like a thirteen-year-old tomboy. Whatever. I’m a low maintenance girl. I take a deep breath and let it out over Dublin Harbour.

Propped against a steel banister on the roof deck, I drink in the view. Today is crisp and overcast. There are a few rents in the cloud seams, and I picture an aeroplane getting snagged on a thread up there, splitting everything open in a wash of glorious sunshine. Finally arriving in Ireland has put me in a strangely quixotic mood.

I’ve dreamed of this day for so long. I finally get to explore the fairytale land and walk through stories of its past. Being half Irish, I’ve dug much into the nation’s history, but history only truly comes alive when you stand where those people once stood, enter the stone homes where they eked out a living, and hear the songs passed down through generations, songs that I’m told are still played in streets and pubs.

I long to see the ancient ringforts built without any mortar, and the weathered castles like the Rock of Cashel where defiant locals resisted Cromwell’s advance at the cost of their lives. Closer to my heart is the Old Library of Trinity College. The pictures remind me of scenes from some of my favourite historical period dramas.

My musings are disrupted by Alina who weaves her way towards me with lazy strides, and I realise why she chose those denim shorts for a day like this. She takes a detour, looping around a trendy couple. The young man’s pleading brows make me wonder what he did. His girlfriend—all plats and beads and tie-dyed wraps—flinches as his attention darts to my sister.
Alina manages to suppress the smile, but not the gleam of bored triumph. She joins me at the rail.

“Men are all the same,” she says with a shake of her head and a swish of auburn tresses. She half stands, half leans, with one foot pivoting on the toe, the bobbing lure of an angler fish. We don’t need to turn around to know he’s still risking glances. For Alina, it’s another little victory, another epaulette she’ll protest against while pinning it to her ego.

“This is boring,” she says after a moment. “We’re staring at nothing.”

“You mean apart from the freight ships and tugs and fishing boats and quays and busy dockyards?”

“So boring,” she says. “And I don’t want to be last in the queue. Come on Rae, let’s go.”

The random milling of people has acquired a discernible unity, and we slip into the drifting herd.

Alina is three years older, and at least fifteen pounds prettier. I never had the discipline to diet, so when I decided to lose weight I tried the other approach—the one that involves summoning dinner to reappear and be flushed away. I only managed it once, and I swear I was traumatised for a week. Seriously—anyone who can do that twice is fearless.

I tried eating healthy. Muscled my way through a few years of tastelessness. It was the brussels sprouts that finally opened my mind to the fact that some things were simply not meant to be eaten. Two years later I’m still washing that nail-varnish flavour away with sweet things.

Sweet things … They spy me out from three city blocks and call me by name. Especially the pastries. As we walk past the ferry’s cafeteria, I can hear éclairs and strudels lifting their angelic voices. “Rae!” they cry. “Don’t pass us by, don’t …”

“Rae!” My sister gives me one of her goggle-eyed looks and pries me from the menu boards. We hurry down the stairway, shoes padding on the deep carpet. There are mirrors against the wall at the landing, so naturally I bump into Alina’s back.

Reaching the first deck, we take our place near the tail of an impossibly long queue. I don’t particularly mind. It’s an opportunity to do something I enjoy. I like watching people, guessing their stories, working out the motives that drive them.

Behind me is a tall Indian woman who looks without seeing, her thoughts held captive by whatever marches into her skull through the white earphone wires. A freckled boy behind her looks as if he’s holding a coin between his knees. His mother is telling him they are not going to lose their place in the queue and he will just have to pinch. Watching the crisis is too stressful. I turn away.
There’s a man not far ahead of me, mid-fifties I’d guess. He has dark stringy hair and an Italian ferocity to the lines of his nose and chin. He’s checking his watch for the third time in a single minute. I have a feeling that, if the watch wasn’t made of gold, he’d stamp on it. The brunette beside him with the subdued eyes looks decidedly stamped on. Shiny metal, it seems, gets more respect from this man than his wife. The way they stand together speaks of familiarity that has sunk into an easy disregard. A Guy-Fawkes marriage, I’ll bet. Short-lived explosive beginnings without any real plans for tomorrow.

I look around for their opposite and spot them at a distance. A silver-old pair, talking. She has to lean in towards his hearing aid at times, but does so without annoyance. That’s the barbeque marriage. Small, controlled flames, maintained, cooking up something to be shared.

No, I don’t have any experience with marriage or relationships, but from what I can see, experience isn’t always the best teacher. Sometimes the person with the commanding perspective on the battle is standing on the hill, not buried in the fray. I’ve become rather adept at my hilltop assessments—reading people from small clues.

Gold-watch in front of me turns to his wife and asks her something. She looks at him as if for the first time in her life and says, “No speak English.”

I shall ignore this.

This episode isn’t representative. I’m not often wrong in my evaluations of people.

I’m doing a masters in sociology, and I’m busy with a thesis. Or maybe I should say I’m planning to be busy with a thesis because I haven’t quite got a topic yet, but I know what the tone is going to be. A scalpel is the image to represent it. I like to get down to the heart of matters—especially where things went wrong. I like applying sociology to history. Understanding the errors of the past is the best way to prevent them spoiling the future.

My head is full of entitativity paradigms, semiotic consistencies across variegated social constructs, political debiasing of hierarchical language forms, and then there’s that one great fear—sharp as a squirt of lemon in the eye—that I shall reach the end of my days unkissed. (I mean by someone I like. The awful misunderstanding with that brick-headed Peter Jones doesn’t count.)

Dating, it seems, is not my superpower. The more I talk, the worse it goes. Perhaps I talk a lot, and perhaps my interests are a little strange and eclectic. I’ve been told I’m too opinionated and contentious, but I have strong reasons for disagreeing with that. Few people get my ironic humour. Maybe it’s that, or maybe it’s just my weight. Whatever the reason, it’s apparently not easy to like this conglomerate of oddities known as Rae Julia Appleton.
There’s not an awful lot to do in queues. Alina is too distracted for conversation, so I pull out my fortieth anniversary edition of *The Sociological Imagination*, by Mills. Even the gloomy cover design makes it look like a tough read. I notice a lady next to me sunk in a paperback. The low word density on the open pages and the loud splashes of red and gold on the cover tell me exactly what kind of book it is. I can only glimpse part of the title through her fingers—the word “diamond”.

I return my attention to the *real* book in my hands. I wonder if anyone notices me, if they have to suppress flutters of awe. After five minutes of reading, I haven’t absorbed a thing. I’m trying to imagine what other words are placed around “diamond”.

I close the book and turn to Alina to see if she’s found anything interesting to do. She hasn’t.

“What do you think she’s going to be like?” I ask.

“Huh?” Alina replies, frowning slightly. I realise I’m interrupting another of her performances.

“Aunt Trudy. What do you think she’s going to be like?”

“How would I know? Last time I saw her I was seven.”

Twelve. I don’t say it aloud.

She steps a little farther out, providing a less obstructed view for someone behind us. This is all a game to her, but I worry for my sister. We don’t know the ropes here and I want to tell her to be more cautious.

“I’m sorry,” she says as she glances back at me. “What did you say?”

“I wasn’t speaking. I’m just trying to picture her.”

Aunt Trudy was never a popular name in our house, and after that night when my father woke us all with his yelling over the phone, we were actually forbidden to mention her for a time. But that event seemed to have vanished from memory when our parents sat us down and asked how we would like to visit our aunt in Ireland. They felt it was time for us to get in touch with our O’Leary roots.

I began planning immediately—travel blogs, maps, guides, online encyclopaedias …

Alina went clothes shopping.

In spite of my enthusiasm at finally being able to step onto Irish ground, there’s a niggle at the back of my thoughts. The excitement of the whole thing swept me past a few incongruous details, but now that the turbulence has died down, those details are bobbing to the surface.
“Surely you also noticed,” I say, “Things back home were … well … tense. Mom and Dad fighting in their room almost every night, and then at the worst of it, they send us on the most expensive holiday we’ve had in years. It doesn’t add up.”

“Maybe they want space to work things out.”

“They didn’t have to send us to another country. It’s not like their shouting is *that* loud.”

“You think they’re talking about divorce?” she asks.

The word stabs like an icicle. “No,” I say.

The Indian woman with the earphones glances at me.

I lower my voice. “No, but I have a feeling there’s been trouble with work. I overheard words like accountant and money and tax a few times when I walked past.”

“Sounds to me like they have some wicked fun conversations.”

“Be serious, Alina.”

“Why? This is a holiday. And you need to stop thinking things to death. I warned you that all that reading was going to fill your mind with weird ideas.”

“Well at least I fill it.” The words are out before I can catch them. They were funny in my thoughts. They sound coarse in my ears.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

I looked away, annoyed with myself.

Eventually the queue squeezes its way out through the doors, over the gangplank—a portable bridge, really—and into the baggage claim hall where I find my compact blue travel bag. Then I have to help Alina with a bag that could pass for a shipping crate. It’s made of expensive-looking leather—probably belonging to an endangered species—and weighs half a mammoth. If it didn’t have wheels, one of these simpering boys would offer to carry it for her, even if it meant throwing away his own bags and sacrificing the cartilage in his knees.

We join another queue at the coach stop. Morton’s double-decker bus, green as a lettuce, whooshes around the bend, comes in too fast, and somehow manages to stop at the precise mark. If the driver was trying to impress us, he has succeeded. We have a deep impression of boyish recklessness.

People begin squeezing in, oversized bags getting jammed in the door and in the narrow passage between the stairs and the overfull baggage rack. Alina’s gets stuck at several points, but three or four pairs of strong hands come to the rescue. A pretty girl in distress is something that cannot be borne.

We zoom down the road. Within seconds, the ships and quays are replaced by warehouses and then office blocks as we race into the centre of Dublin and lurch to a stop near the Liffey.
It’s a river that looks to be made of Guinness stout. Or could it be that Guinness is made from Liffey water? The problem doesn’t hold my attention long. I tasted Guinness once—an experiment I’ll never repeat—and I’ve no plans to taste Liffey.

We are carried through the bus doors by the torrent of travellers spilling onto the wide pavement. As soon as the space around me clears, I make a long, slow turn.

“I’m here!” the Irish part of me calls out, as if waking from a lifelong dormancy. “I’m home.”

The English part of me coughs and points out that I’m standing on a pavement in the middle of a strange city, invited by an aunt that doesn’t want me for a holiday that almost had my mother in tears. “Home?” it asks.

This is the hundredth time the misgiving has returned, but out here, where I’m caught up in the rushing unfamiliarity of a city that now looms tall and strange, I flinch.

It’s like hearing a faint click above me as the rope attached to my harness takes weight during one of those perilous bridge swings. Probably nothing, but all the same, it makes me glance back at the dwindling platform.
First Acquaintance

Necessity forces me out of my thoughts. Gawping will do us no good. People are rushing past, heading for the line of city buses that are constantly arriving and departing along O’Connell Street. I did my homework. I know the street names here. We need to catch the bus that takes us to Glasnevin.

I help Alina drag her stuffed mammoth over the flagstones and away from the road. This place is bustling, but the pavement is so wide it’s not an unpleasant to stop and gather your wits—if you ignore the little shiny marks that must have been left by a few thousand pieces of ejected chewing gum.

Over the engines and shrilling brakes of buses and taxis, I hear music—pan pipes. It comes from the other side of the road where two Native Americans perform in front of their merchandise stand. I’d been expecting a band of Gaels armed with fiddles, whistles and bodhrans, but I suppose this is a city, and there’s a sense in which all cities belong to all people.

“So where do we go?” Alina asks.

“Uhh …” I’m looking around, not seeing the yellow brick road. Alina turns away, doesn’t want to know about it if it’s a problem. It was going to be this way from the moment I started researching the trip. Any preparation would be my responsibility, and anything that didn’t work out, my fault. I glance this way and that until my attention is caught by a bus signboard. The nearest one is number eleven. I walk over, but as I examine it, my dismay grows.

It lists names I don’t recognise and can’t pronounce. Páirc Wadelai, Sráid Uí Chonaill, Raghnallach, Cluain Sceach and so on. Gaelic, I guess. Although, according to a chatty woman I met on the ferry, when speaking English, one is meant to refer to the language as Irish. Gaelic is the Irish (Gaelic) word for the language. Very confusing.

When I study the Irish names, they look like Frenchified Hebrew with some Greek drizzled on top. I work my way down a hopeless matrix of times until I spot English at the bottom: Wadelai Park >> 25mins >> O’Connell St. >> 25mins >> Ranelagh >> 20mins …

In spite of the concrete slabs under my feet, I’m at sea. I’ve almost never used public transport and I’m finding it has a language of its own. I had thought, stupidly I suppose, that there would be a nice bold sign with Glasnevin printed on it. I look down the road. There are dozens and dozens of these stops and they seem to follow no order: 1, 11, 122, 13, 16, 40, etc. It would take a very long time to search them all.
I walk back and explain my findings to Alina who pretends to listen. After a few words, she steps in front of a tall man wearing a charcoal suit and carrying a briefcase.

“Excuse me,” she says in the voice she reserves for special requests. It’s a voice that tinkles with the clear purity of wind chimes. It suggests innocence, sincerity, meekness. It suggests someone who is not my sister.

The man stops in mid stride as if he’s run into an invisible barrier. His face blooms into a smile.

“I’m afraid we’re quite lost,” Alina says with a giggle. “Is there any way you could help us get to … Glass something or other …?”

“Glasnevin,” I say.

“—yes, Glasnevin?” she resumes. “I would really appreciate it.”

There was never any doubt he would help. But when he begins to speak, our confidence withers. The accent is so thick and the words so fast that I miss all the important details. Then he catches sight of his bus, breaks Alina’s enchantment, and runs off, wishing us well—that part I understand more from the tone than the actual words.

“Did you …?” Alina begins.

I shake my head and we burst out laughing.

“Was it even English?” she asks.

“Perhaps he was from one of the inland or western counties, like Cork or Monaghan. Someone told me the accents out there can be—” I switch to my best Irish accent, “as wild as the moors.” It’s probably a terrible imitation of an accent, but it’s good enough for Alina.

We have an Irish mother, but she grew up in England. She is much younger than Trudy, and the two were separated when their parents divorced. Trudy remained in Ireland with her father, but my mother was taken away to Essex where she grew up as an Englishwoman. Consequently, Irish accents are aren’t exactly familiar to us.

I look around and notice a shop nearby. It’s a café. We could buy something cheap and ask directions at the counter. I lead the way inside. Alina selects a still water and I opt for a ginger ale before we take our place in the queue and discuss our problem.

The slant-shouldered boy in front of us turns around for the third time, clearly working up the courage. Here we go again. He pushes the flop of blonde hair aside and addresses me. It often happens this way. I’m the less intimidating one, the access route to Alina.

“You’re new in Dublin?”
I like his voice, like his face—a thinking face—and then I get a hold of myself. I’ve been here too many times to be fooled, and in truth, I’m sick of the whole routine. I decide to get it over with.

I point. “No, she’s not my friend, she’s my sister. Her name is Alina. Yes, she’s single. And no, I don’t mind if I cease to exist in the conversation now that I’ve done my part.”

He ought to be shocked, but there are no growing orbs of white around his curious eyes, and then he grins. Is he mocking me? I’ve had enough of this. I give Alina my drink and walk outside to do a bit of people watching and some internal boiling.

When they emerge, it’s clear that Alina has only just mentioned our navigational crisis. The boy is talking with great animation.

“Royt, royt. Oyl be glud t’ help ye. In fact Oy doon’t have mooch on royt noe, so Oy ken take ye there moyself.”

It’s not nearly as difficult as the last accent, but it’s rawer than we’ve heard on movies. I’ve got my accent filter running now. Alina, I can see, hasn’t quite caught up, but she’s wearing that I-know-something-about-you look that conceals her uncertainty. The situation might not be entirely within her grasp but the look ensures it’s under her command.

The boy’s voice shakes a little as he finishes speaking. Catching sight of the mammoth, apparently for the first time, he offers to carry it for Alina who acquiesces with a bright laugh.

His name, I learn, is Davin. We make our way up the street on a sidewalk that dwarfs the road while our new friend works his charms on Alina and I tag along behind. He asks my name, but I know it doesn’t sink in. I’ll see if I can make it obvious when he tries to address me, see how well he can squirm his way out.

He hoists Alina’s bag off the ground, trying to conceal his shock at the weight, but there’s nothing he can do about the veins swelling in his neck or the way his face imitates a squeezed plum. He hands his coins to the driver and fights the bag into the luggage rack.

Alina gasps when the driver looks at her. “Oh,” she says, “I thought Davin …”

Davin, devastated, leaps back to the driver and settles Alina’s fare, apologizing and claiming thoughtlessness and, no doubt, celebrating his role of shining protector. He glances at me but I have coins in my hand and hold them up for him to see. We find seats on the upper level.

Apart from the general pastiness of skin tones, the people around me don’t look vastly different to those in Melbourne. My lingering ideas of tartan cloth and red plats drift away. Behind me, a teenage boy in tatty jeans and a crumpled Levi tee-shirt is working on his phone while earphones produce music at such a level that we get to listen for free. It’s not Irish jigs
and reels; it’s not even the Corrs; it’s Eminem shouting about something or other and sounding just as angry as he did back home.

I glance down the rows—there are one or two couples that chat, but most are travelling alone, many of them reading, few looking about. I expect it’s only tourists that peer through the windows. Those at the back would certainly be tourists. Who else would be pointing, jabbering and attempting to take pictures of the road. I consider taking a few snaps myself, but I don’t really want to be associated with that spectacle at the back. I resolve not to give myself away—not yet.

Davin and Alina are talking across the aisle—at least Davin is. He’s describing a small harbour nearby where he apparently stays most weekends. I was right about the thinking face—he navigates words like an explorer navigates terrain. I wouldn’t call him verbose, though he did hit her with “antediluvian” when describing some old yacht. I think he was meaning to be funny. It didn’t work. If this boy is going to have any chance with my sister, he’ll need to learn a whole new language.

Alina is stroking her chin, eyes unfocussed, listening with half an ear and even less brain. I imagine information pooling in the facing ear, being pumped across and quietly tipped out the other. Davin glances at me a few times, but I’m not rescuing him. I give my full attention to my first Irish bus ride.

The wrap-around windows are like a giant screen. It’s like I’ve stepped back into a sensation I remember only from childhood—that all-enveloping fascination with a thousand new and interesting details.

Beneath us, the driver releases the parking brake, and we begin to move. Being so high above the ground reminds me a little of a roller coaster ride, and I settle down into my seat to take everything in. The bus whisks us up O’Connell Street and into the city. It isn’t long before I begin to notice spires and bells. It seems you don’t have to travel far through the streets to see a chapel.

I haven’t travelled on the upper level of a double-decker before. It’s a nervy yet dreamy experience, as if I’ve escaped the tug of the earth.

We float past buildings that are somehow metropolitan and village-like at the same time—some modern, many not. All of them are draped in dark ribbons, testament to a recent downpour. The sun emerges and the whole city bursts into a riot of glistening colour. The sun disappears and the colours retreat. This happens five times before we reach the northern suburbs. It rains once and wind hurls the drops against our windows until it sounds like the
rattle of automatic gunfire. Ten minutes later, the sun is back … and then it ducks away again. I feel dizzy. How do people dress for this climate?

We roll down Botanic Road and over the bridge. Gardens on the left, park on the right, plane trees in full bloom everywhere. The sun peeks out again and soft green light spills over the red-painted sidewalk. It’s like something from a children’s picture book and I’m entranced.

By the time the bus slides into our bay, Davin has led us to the door. We step off and he offers to walk us to our aunt’s house. I want to decline. We know nothing about this plume-haired boy—it might not be wise to show him where we stay. But Alina has already accepted. She doesn’t want to tow the mammoth.

We walk under dripping boughs before turning into a narrow lane that’s all puddles and trickles. The algae and moss sagging off dark rock walls tell me these wet conditions have been seen before. I give it little attention though—there’s a moment fast approaching. It plays out in my mind. My aunt is going to look at Alina, gasp and say, “My, Alina! How beautiful you have grown—a right young knockout!” And then she’s going to look at me and say, “My, Rae, how um …” She can’t say beautiful, because it’s not true; and she can’t say big, because, well, it is.

But after walking a few streets till we find Steeple Avenue, and after counting the numbers up to 27, my concerns fade into the background. I wasn’t exactly expecting one of those stone mansions I’ve been seeing on the travel websites, but neither had I expected this. My aunt’s house is a small, low, drab building with gravel instead of a garden, and paint that must have died and faded ten years ago. It’s a house that has obviously been given no love for a very long time.

Alina is the most put out.

“What the …?” she catches herself in time. She looks at Davin in a way that seems to demand an apology, as if he, being Irish, is to answer.

The door opens and we fall silent. Aunt Trudy appears and marches towards us with a brisk, decisive stride. She’s a small, dark-haired, gaunt woman, and her movements are sharp and birdlike. Her grey knee-length skirt and dull-brown jacket must be what she wears to work at the bank. Hard heels clop on the path as she advances. I would have swapped those foot-biters for anything else the moment I got home.

She gives us a tight smile that doesn’t reach her eyes. Those eyes are clear as crystals and twice as hard. She points them at Davin who tries to introduce himself.

“Don’t think you can work those charms on me, you big bowsie. I know what you’re up to. Off wicha now.”
It reminds me of how school teachers talk to their pupils who are attempting to get away with some mischief.

“Well you can’t blame me,” he tells her with a grin. “Slán agat, Alina, Rae.”

I glance up at him as he walks off. It’s not the Irish that surprises me; it’s the fact that he remembered my name.

“Well, girls,” Trudy says. She has a crisp undertone that informs us if we try anything with her we’ll regret it. “Come inside,” she says. “Unless you enjoy lounging outside the garden of death.”

I frown. Is the woman mad?

Trudy points over my shoulder. Alina and I turn and look through the wrought iron bars of a little cemetery in which headstones lean this way and that in the soggy earth.

“View out here’s not exactly darling, is it now?” she says. With that she turns and marches back indoors. Alina regards the mammoth, her brows pinching, but that look is going to have no effect on me, nor apparently on Trudy. I cross the threshold just as the sun winks out and drops begin to patter.

When the door closes behind us, it’s dark inside. Too dark. I have to disagree with my Aunt. This is in fact worse than the view of death’s garden.
I’m not the sort that flies into hysterics when someone happens to display orange and red together, but even I have my limits. As I look around at the walls of what might be a living room—but for the fact that it couldn’t have been decorated with any consideration for the living—I can’t escape the conviction that my Aunt is disturbed.

“Ugh!” says Alina as she clatters through the door. She has always tended to speak without thinking—a concession that permits her speaking at all.

The couch is something you would expect in a run-down asylum or police holding area; curtains that might once have been canvas potato sacks stand guard over the tiny windows, turning away most of the light; the walls are painted in a soft mud grey, and then there’s my aunt, against whom all these features are lively splashes of orange and red.

I’d thought, when she visited us years ago, that her wardrobe was dowdy—long, straight skirts; plain cream blouses; and buckled shoes that calloused the eye. I wonder now if she had been wearing her most extravagant outfits.

“You two will share the room down the passage,” she says. “Toss your bags in there and meet me in the kitchen. I’ll wet the tea. Then we can talk.” With that she turns on her heel and strides from the room.

Alina glances at me. She licks her lips as if to speak, but nothing emerges. I lead the way along the unadorned passage. At the end is a steel door, the kind that belongs on toolsheds. It gives us access to a room—small—containing two beds—very small—with iron frames that look capable of removing kneecaps. A single shelf projects from the inside wall on military-grade brackets, and an iron locker stands guard in the corner.

Our mother told us Trudy would likely seem a little odd and even severe as a host, but—and there was a kind of pleading note that entered her voice—we would soon be getting along as easily as three ducks in a pond.

After dropping my bag, I walk over and open the cupboard door with a screech of old hinges. Guns!

I stand transfixed, hands beginning to shake. Alina creeps up beside me. I now remember that there was another one of these lockers near the front door. Is Trudy some kind of activist?

A voice from the doorway causes us to leap into the air.

“Hands off the old fowling pieces,” my aunt says. She doesn’t need a gun. Her eyes are now the open ends of barrels. “What’s taking you two so long?”
We scamper from the room and follow her back down the passage and into the kitchen. This part of the house is a little less gloomy owing to the bigger windows and white tiles, but the furnishings are old and far from comfortable. Trudy sits and waits for us to take our places at a small table. The woven wire chairs do not disappoint. I’ll be wearing a chess board for hours after this.

“Trip any use?” my aunt says.

I glance across at Alina. She’s equally clueless. I’m about to ask, but Trudy speaks first.

“Any good,” she says. “Was it a pleasant trip?”

“Oh,” I say. “Yes, thanks. It was—” I had intended to tell her about our ordeal with the trains from Gatwick to Holyhead, but though she’s paying attention, there’s something about her posture that tells me she’ll be counting the words. I stow what I’d intended to say and end with, “an adventure.” I take a sip of tea. “It’s the first time we’ve been overseas without our parents,” I add.

She nods. Was I imagining it, or did she contract her brow at the mention of my parents? The niggle in the back of my thoughts reappears and begins scratching again.

When I say nothing more, the sounds of sipping and swallowing take over until they press against the walls. When Trudy speaks, I release a small breath.

“Afore you do anything stupid, as I’ve no doubt you both will, I am going to give you some house rules.”

Alina’s posture changes. It reminds me of the way our Doberman raises its head at the sound of the mailman.

“First, you don’t stay out past eleven. Second, you don’t sleep in past six. Third, you keep out of Tolka Valley Park, even in the middle of the day. There’s been talk of gangs, drugs, and Protestants there.”

Not even a hint of a smile shows on her face, but I have a feeling we’ve just experienced a joke.

“In the morning I’m going to give you a list of places you can see and the buses you need to take to get there. Sleep late and I’ll put a bucket in your room and lock you there for the day.”

That has to be a joke, but not even on her best days did my mother have a wit this dry.

Her eyes flit from me to Alina. “Well, this has been grand, but I need to get back to work. Banks aren’t understanding with personal time. I need to be at a charity board meeting tonight, so you’ll probably only see me again in the morning.”
She takes her cup and saucer to the sink and heads for the door. “If you’re peckish, there is bread in the press, cheese in the fridge. You’ll find lentil soup on the bottom shelf for supper. If you aren’t up by six tomorrow morning, expect to be woken.” She’s out the door before I can even frame a question.

“Banks?” Alina asks. “Is she in charge of security?”

I grin. “The branch would close before the month is up. Everyone would turn back at the door. I think she’s a senior clerk or something. Been doing it most of her life.”

Alina moves over to the window and peers out. “She’s gone.”

“So?” I ask.

She doesn’t answer. Instead, she leaves the kitchen and walks down the second passage.

“Alina!” My voice is a harsh whisper as I run after her. “You can’t rooting through her things!”

This still elicits no answer, and she opens what, to my mind, is the forbidden door in this house—the door to Trudy’s bedroom.

I draw in my breath. The walls are bright lavender! In spite of the paint being old enough to have flaked in places, the room is as lively as a country flower garden.

“Surely this can’t be her room,” I say, looking at a coat hanging beside the door. It’s a man’s coat. Alina looks at it and smirks before stepping across to the cupboard. Without hesitation, she opens it and starts perusing the hanging garments like someone leafing through a book.

“It’s definitely her room,” she says. “There’s like a dozen of those drab skirts here. Oh! What’s this?” She pulls out a bright green floral dress with backline low enough to raise my eyebrows.

Alina keeps flipping through the outfits as I tiptoe across to the dresser. There are photos pressed down under the glass top.

On the far left, I recognise the young Trudy. There’s an aged photo of her standing with small group, all of them in school uniform. She’s little more than a girl, but the same iron shows in her rigid features and ramrod neck. There are a few more photos in which she appears with spinsterish young women, but then there’s such a change I barely recognise her. She stands in a summer dress on the beach, blushing alongside a young man. I wouldn’t call him good-looking, but he has kind eyes that makes me hope there are more pictures of him. There are.

His wispy moustache almost ruins the next photo, but the way Trudy clings to him tells me she either doesn’t mind or hasn’t noticed it. Then the moustache is joined by sideburns as he sports hunting garb complete with knee-high boots while posing in a boggy grassland. He
seems more than a little pleased with himself as he holds up a pheasant by the legs. I’d guess him to be around twenty-five. There are more pictures of him, including one in which he and Trudy stand arm in arm outside the front door of the house we’re standing in. Trudy’s smile is almost as wide as the door behind them.

Perhaps it’s owing to the spell of this place that I’m also locked in the past and I don’t immediately guess that this is my late uncle, Clary, or realise why he never gets older than twenty-five in these pictures. I finally spot the wedding photo at the top of the arrangement. Understanding hits as hard as the car that took him from this world.

“Alina,” I say, my voice faltering. “Alina, I think we should leave.”

“You need to see the wicked slips she has,” Alina says. “Some pretty risqué stuff for a starchy widow.”

I look around at the peeling walls and the dull wood of the four-poster that couldn’t have been varnished in twenty years. I recognise the man’s coat now from the hunting picture, and suddenly I feel as if our very presence in this room has been lemonade dribbling on a sarcophagus.

“Alina, we shouldn’t be in here. Please—let’s go.”

I tell her what I found which brings her over to the dresser. Eventually I manage to pull her away and we try to replace things in the wardrobe as they were, but I fear we’ve left sticky lemonade fingerprints only Trudy will see, and she’ll detect them the instant she opens the door. There’s a lot I would give to take the past ten minutes back.

Afternoon passes to evening. I had intended to go for a walk, but travel has a way of sapping energy, and I’m on my last reserves. I try to read for a while in the living room which has the only comfortable armchair, but those pictures on the dresser and the story they tell are filling my mind.

The sociology is still refusing to go in, so I place my phone on the page, tip the book up so Alina won’t see, and do a quick search for novels containing the word, “diamond”. I recognise the cover, and in a few moments I’m guzzling up the pages of When a Diamond Bleeds. I can justify giving my brain a little comfort food every now and then. The book turns out to be more of a horror than the thriller I expected. As the gloomy house grows dark, I start to recoil from crimson pools swelling under beds and the silent emptiness of dark homes. That reminds me to write to my parents, and it gives me an excuse to close the book. Both books.
I type out an email on my tablet. It’s mostly to let our parents know we’ve arrived without incident, and partly to seek a little reassurance about Trudy. I tell them she doesn’t seem exactly overjoyed to be hosting us.

The reply comes after fifteen minutes. I do a quick calculation. It must be four in the morning back home. I read my mother’s reply. She admits that Trudy has a cold shell, but assures me she will warm up to us and urges us to give her time.

I tell her not to worry, that it’s not like we were looking for alternative accommodation.

She replies with more assurances of Trudy’s good heart and more urgings to get along with her. My mother isn’t usually this pushy, but I let it go and promise to write when there’s more to say.

The lentil soup, as far as Alina and I can tell, is composed of exactly two ingredients—lentils and water—so we make the cheese slices thick. It’s an early supper and a quiet one. This house seems to eat sound. As night claims the passages, we retreat to our bedroom, close the door, and cover ourselves with thready blankets. Sleep doesn’t appear to be able to find me.

“Rae,” Alina calls in the darkness. Rae, are you awake?”

“Mmm,” I say.

I hear shuffling. It sounds like she’s turning to face me. “Do you get the feeling Trudy doesn’t really want us here?”

“If I wasn’t sure earlier, the soup cleared matters up. I think if she had to choose between us and a rash, we’d be the ones looking for new accommodation.”

“I don’t remember her being this stingy.”

“That’s because, last time, we were hosting. I’m sure it’s not personal. She probably doesn’t like having anyone staying in her house.”

“But aren’t Irish people meant to be, like, the most welcoming people in the world?”

“Maybe she doesn’t know. We should tell her at breakfast.”

Alina snorts. It’s not the kind of noise you would expect from someone so strikingly attractive, but she gets away with it. Boys actually find it lovable, but maybe that’s because their brains stop working when she makes eye contact with them.

I wonder if all love is like that. Does it only work properly when the mind shuts down? It makes me wonder—is my problem that I think too much? An appealing idea. My excessive brain activity is what keeps love at bay. Perhaps if I learn to dumb things down, kisses would rain on me like …

“Rae, what are you thinking?”
“Huh, oh, um … just working out an itinerary for tomorrow.”
“No geeky stuff like visiting museums,” she says. “Tell me what you’ve got so far.”
I’m galloping to recover. I need to parry. “I was thinking of … finding someone with a rash and seeing if they’ll share.”
“What are you talking about?”
I wait, just to give my little joke a chance, but this isn’t her sense of humour. “You know, so we can feel more welcome here? Don’t you remember about her choosing between us and … Oh never mind. Probably not that funny anyway.”
“That’s just disgusting, Rae. What have you really got planned?”
“Honestly? Geeky stuff.”
“Hopeless,” Alina mumbles and turns over. “You were the one who did all the reading about this place. Think of something interesting for tomorrow.” In five minutes, she’s snoring like a toad. She has quite the repertoire of indelicate noises.
I don’t want to dream about that awful room weeping dry tears of old paint, but I keep finding myself there whenever I close my eyes. I need a distraction. I think of Ireland, and that makes me think of meadows, which make me think of sheep.
Really, Rae?
It’s worth a try. I set up a fence in my mind and line my woolly quadrupeds behind it, but the sheep start belching with voices that sound uncannily like Alina’s and turn into frogs. They hop all over the place, landing with cold splats, croaking like their little lives depend on it. The plague of frogs keeps me awake through the black hours and into the grey hours. I drift off for a few moments and open my eyes to see a gorilla staring me in the face.
Howth

It’s not a gorilla, it’s the person who just happened to wake me at a bizarre moment of a mad dream. Why I’m having an African adventure in an Irish bed is beyond me. The gorilla’s features draw into tight lines and it grows several degrees more intimidating as I recognise my aunt.

“This is not a hotel, your highnesses. No sleeping till lunch.”

Alina mumbles something in a tone of annoyance, turns, settles into a better position, and recommences snoring—loud and impertinent. How does she not have a beard? Would that everyone could hear this performance. Now that would aid them with perspective on yonder angel descended from the stars.

I look at my aunt with some embarrassment, but she actually smirks. She marches to the other bed, leans over and calls short and sharp, “Wake up!”

Alina screams with honest fright. Her reaction is so violent and so sincere that even my aunt steps back.

“Breakfast in five minutes,” Trudy says. “There are no duplicate keys yet, so when I leave the house, you leave the house. If you are not ready in time, it’s your room and a bedpan.”

I realise she’s toying with us, but there’s also a warning there, and I blush crimson. She knows we were snooping yesterday. Surely she knows.

At breakfast—a gourmet spread of beans-on-toast and black coffee (instant)—I keep my eyes on the plate as my aunt speaks.

“Tonight we’ll have a proper talk about your stay here,” she says. It sounds like we are going to be charged with home invasion. “I suggest you take yourselves to the library, or if you fancy a bit of walking and some sea air, you could do worse than Howth. There’s a castle there that’s been in the same family for eight hundred years. If you’re as fond of history as your mother tells me, Rae, you’ll like the place.”

I’m still getting used to the accent. She says town as “tiyn” and Howth as “Hote”. When she points to it on a map, the little spark of comprehension flares into an overhasty “Oh you mean Howth.”

My aunt doesn’t respond.

“That’s where Davin said he stays over weekends,” I tell Alina. “Remember?”

She nods and I can see from her vacant eyes that she has no recollection of the fact.
I want to ask about Howth, but when I begin my first question, Trudy cuts me short with a shake of her head and points to my hardly touched plate.

“I’ll write out directions while you eat.” She scribbles down the information on a small note pad while we attempt to make inroads into the meal.

“Ten minutes and I lock the door,” she says, handing me the piece of paper and leaving the room.

“But …” Alina looks at me, tears gathering. “How can I do my make-up in ten minutes?”

Her question rankles me. It’s not the vanity, it’s her choice of pronoun. I, not we. Am I being oversensitive? Probably. I seldom bother with makeup anyway. I look down at the bean-strewn toast and find something to blame my mood on. We’ll have to get our own breakfast.

After emptying our plates into the bin, I leave the kitchen, and Alina trails after me.

Jeans, tee-shirt, anorak, trainers, wallet. I’m ready. Alina is trying this and that, blubering, pulling her hair, dropping her face in her hands. I take charge and make some sensible choices from her preposterous wardrobe, fasten her hair into a ponytail, and we’re out of time. I snatch a pack of breath mints seeing as neither of us will have a chance to brush our teeth.

Trudy is waiting. She hurries us out the door, locks it behind us, and points down the road. “Head that way and follow the instructions,” she says. “We’ll talk tonight. Make sure you’re back before six.”

I dig through my pockets as she walks off. Fantastic—I left the folded page of instructions on my bed. I brace myself and prepare to call after her, but as I imagine her response, I reconsider. What am I doing? I’m a millennial. I whip out my phone and ask it what I need to know. It doesn’t take long.

Confidence restored, I glance up and see that Alina still has a pillow scar on the side of her face. Mentioning it would be unwise.

“You’ve dressed me like a hillbilly,” she says.

It’s meant to make me feel bad. But coming from the mouth of a twenty-five-year old, it makes her sound ridiculous.

“You think that’s funny?”

I sigh. “You look fine. If boys stop you to ask for my number then you can complain. Agreed?”

Her anger dissolves as the comment begins to take shape in her mind. “Have boys asked you for my number?”

“All the time.”

“Who?”
We talk about less than nothing as we amble through our drippy lane and turn into Griffith Avenue.

“Did you know this is the longest shopless tree-lined road in the northern hemisphere?” I say.

Silence.

“Alina?”

“What?”

“Weren’t you listening? I said this is the longest—”

“Yes, yes, the longest trees in the northern hemisphere. I got that the first time. I’m not deaf. But you always want to talk about such boring things. And anyway, you should have said tallest trees.”

I let it pass. It’s not worth it.

Griffith Avenue claims my attention. It’s a seemingly endless line of knobbly planes with that patch-like bark. Dappled shade and beads of sun tremble on the sidewalk as a draught nudges the boughs. We pass neat little double-storey homes, their front yards filled with jungle gyms and sand pits.

In the stream of traffic, I count half a dozen of the bright yellow buses that seem to grin as they whizz along. Contented-looking pedestrians glance up with a smile and a greeting if I make eye contact.

We board a train—known as the Dart—at Clontarf Road. It’s mostly empty and it’s all green—walls, seats, railings, us. We have only a wispy idea of how rail works. I try to decrypt the train circuit printed on the wall. From what I can see, Howth is the last stop.

Alina is sprawled across a seat, her feet up, earphones pounding. “Worked it out?” she yells.

Fortunately we have this coach to ourselves. I mime removing earphones before attempting to answer. She plucks one out, rolling her eyes almost out their sockets.

“I think so. We just wait until we reach the end of the track and that should be us, unless this train takes the other junction, but I remember seeing a display that said this is the Howth one.”

“But how will we know when we’re there, Rae?” It’s the whining voice. “How will we tell one station from another?”

Jets of steam are beginning to emerge from my ears, I’m sure of it. Alina can get me started like nobody else. Surely she saw the big Clontarf Road sign when we boarded. Obviously there will be a similar one marking Howth. And even if not, why is she using that tone as if I’m
responsible, like I should apologise? I consider a calm explanation, but rising pressure gets the better of me.

“Good point,” I say, “How about you hang out the window. I’ll tie your ankles to the rail here so you don’t fall. You can just scream when your head starts bashing through sails and then we’ll know we’re at the harbour.”

She glares at me. I glare back. A cultured voice interrupts us with an announcement that the next stop is Killester and that the following will be Harmonstown.

“The train driver is going to tell us,” she says, pointing at the speaker in the ceiling.

“It’s a recorded voice, but whatever.”

We almost blow it by hopping out at Howth Junction—not the same as Howth—but we hesitate just long enough and the Dart whisks us off again. After two more stops, we reach Howth and disembark.

I want to hire bicycles. Alina doesn’t. I don’t care. I saw how big the place was on the map. I hire a bike and tell her she can run to keep up. She gives me the standard death stare which I ignore while pushing my bike outside to wait.

As soon as she emerges from the building, we set off. It’s nice to glance back and see her wobbling over the concrete wharf, almost crashing into everything and everyone within range. I’m not being mean by insisting we cycle—not intentionally—just making sure she doesn’t get her way with everything.

The harbour is small and neat. Two sides are fronted by shops and filled with people, mostly tourists strolling, shopping and taking pictures. A teenage boy has set up a microphone and guitar on the far side. The gentle, melancholic strands of Leonard Cohen’s *Cold and Broken Hallelujah* drift over the water to us, a patchy quilt of sound that blends naturally with the crying of gulls.

It’s mid-summer, but the wind appears to have forgotten this. My ears are growing cold in gusts that turn the water choppy and dark. Cables shake until they clap against masts in a frenzied warning that everyone ignores—the sun is out and the day young and inviting. We turn from the harbour front and I lead the way up a hill so steep we are obliged to get off and push our bikes. Alina, who you might have expected to be the more athletic, is puffing harder than me. A diet of secret drugs, smoke and drink has hollowed her out. So did the abortion. She doesn’t think I know.

We stop at a small cafeteria and buy a coke for me and a water for her. I get two chocolate bars, and she asks for a pack of Marlboro Red and a lighter. If that’s the price of her scrawny frame, I want no part of it.
Alina insists on heading back down, even though we’ve only gone a few hundred yards. I start pushing my bike up the hill. She sends a few choice words in my direction, but the yells blow themselves out and give way to ragged breathing.

After half a mile, the slope loses some of its attitude and we’re able to put our bikes to their proper use, though anyone who sees Alina will question this. We go here and there, get lost, stay lost and, by some accident, find a sign indicating a heather-fringed path which supposedly leads to a viewpoint.

The path runs beside a beautiful mansion painted ivory white, almost blinding in the sun. It’s a good thing we’ve had a chance to familiarise ourselves with the brakes. We skid to a standstill at the top of a hill that plummets down to what must be a sea cliff, judging by the sheer rocky faces visible on the left and right. I close my eyes and take a deep breath.

“Pretty spectacular, isn’t it?”

No answer. Alina’s head is down, hands cupped in front of her mouth. Hopeful puffs of smoke emerge as she scrapes away at the lighter, but the wind is taking too strong an interest in matters.

“Ah, come on, Rae! How am I supposed to light up here?” She flings the cigarette on the ground and glowers.

I look out over the ocean. How does she not see this? After a moment, I consider her crisis. “The wind is blowing right to left,” I say. “Over there we might find a bit of shelter.”

“We’d better,” she says, and peddles away, showing her first initiative for the morning. We find a little hollow, get off the bikes, and settle down. I hop up with a yelp. This heather is not the soft, downy cushion I expected. More like a myriad tiny thorns glued together and dyed green. I choose my next seat with care.

The ocean below us is enormous, bigger than I’ve ever seen. It must be because I’ve never looked at the sea from a height like this. Those little sails down there seem as delicate as cut petals. Around us, the slopes are painted with a simple colour palate—green heather with patches of orange, purple and white flowers. I actually prefer it to the complex dazzle of a garden.

As I listen to the wind, I consider my fondness for Irish music, especially the traditional tunes, and I can almost feel the same soul, the same wildness in the crisp air. Or maybe I’m just being a tourist, imposing fanciful meanings on everything from the age of monuments to the texture of the dirt.
Alina sucks at her cancer stick and blows the used smoke away—always away. Once, she was dating a boy who blew smoke in my face. He never did it again. It gave me a weird feeling, that encounter.

“Want your water?” I ask.

She offers a smile. The cigarette has eased her cravings. I wonder, as so often before, why she doesn’t just quit.

I hand the water across, take out my chocolates, and chain-eat them, then wash them down with the coke. That calms my cravings. “Cravings?” an unwelcome voice in my mind asks. I need to break from this line of thought.

“You think Aunt Trudy is okay?” I ask Alina. “In the head, I mean. Sometimes I can’t tell if she’s joking or not.”

“No, she’s not right in the head. What kind of normal person wakes people up by yelling in their faces?”

“And then serves them dry beans on burned toast?”

“Threw them out half-dressed?” Alina shakes her head at the insult.

“You’re more than half dressed,” I say.

“Well my face is half-dressed. I hope we don’t meet anyone interesting.”

“You look fine, Alina.”

“Only fine?”

“Better than me, you vain cow.” I say it as a joke, but she turns to me without any humour in her eyes.

“Why do you put yourself down like that all the time?” she says. “You’re not ugly.”

“I’m fat—like you haven’t noticed.”

“Only a little. And you could lose it in two months if you wanted.”

This is starting to feel like an intervention, another attack on my diet. I don’t reply and she drifts back to her own thoughts. After a while, I see low clouds heading our way. Sun still warms the hills, appeasing my worries, but after the little I’ve experienced of Irish weather, I’m suspicious. If a sneak attack is on the way, I want to be inside a coffee shop before the air gets thick with squalls. Alina agrees, and we head back to the road.

We make the downhill journey with little effort. I have a pretty good head for directions and we get lost only once. I’m not wrong about the weather. By the time we reach the harbour, the masts are clapping out what sounds like a hurricane warning. We drop our bikes against the bright green wall of Maud’s Café and leap inside as the heavens open behind us and begin
emptying their buckets at our heels. The glass door closes and we approach the counter, a little out of breath and more than a little pleased with ourselves at the narrow escape.

I order myself a hot chocolate and Alina chooses a skinny something or other that can’t be much fun. We take seats near the harbour-side window and watch rain pour down the glass. It always makes me feel cozy watching misery from comfort—at least in a weather sense. I certainly hope it’s not true in other ways.

Maud’s doors open several times, admitting cold, misty gusts and some well-washed people. One of these looks vaguely familiar.

“Davin!” I hear myself say, and then wonder why I bothered.

“Hello, Rae,” he replies with a smile. “Alina.” His smile gains enthusiasm while losing confidence.

Alina grins and points to the empty chair between us. Davin promises to be back in moment. He hangs his dripping coat, buys himself a coffee and joins us.

“Pretty wet out there,” he observes. “I almost took a dive while running for the door.”

“I thought you’d be used to it by now,” Alina says. She looks at him through her curving eyebrows as if she said something witty. I wonder why she’s playing that part. Davin is the opposite of her type. Perhaps it’s just fascination with the first local we’re able to claim as an acquaintance.

I consider how different they are—he has nothing of the bad boy about him, while Alina literally oozes bad girl. He can’t have missed it. Yet I see his hope charging through the walls of sense and reason, soaring into a realm of golden clouds where Alina’s lifestyle of wild drugging indulgence will be swept away by their shared love.

“So Davin,” Alina says. “You know the hangouts in Dublin, right?”

“I know most of the respectable ones.” His smile stretches. In his thoughts, he’s already picked the spot and he’s out on the balcony with Alina in his arms. It almost shows, like there’s a little projector flashing the scenes across his eyes.

“You gonna take us out? Give us a chance to meet some of the locals?”

The reel tears off the projector and the eyes lose their flickering light. The corners of his mouth twitch as he plummets like a stone. By locals, she doesn’t mean girls—and he knows it. He summons the courage and tells her he will be happy to. After a brief silence, he turns to me.

“Plan to look in at Trinity while you’re here? You know it has one of the best libraries in Europe? It’s several libraries actually.”

Alina lets out a pained sigh and begins sipping her drink.

“Could I?” I ask. “Don’t I need to go with a tour group?”
“The campus grounds are open to the public. I’ll be there tomorrow. Why don’t you come round at lunch. You’ll find me in the main cafeteria.”

“I’d like to but …” I look at Alina.

She shrugs.

“How would we get there? I still haven’t worked out the buses.”

“You could say that again,” Alina laughs. “That’s why we met you.”

“How about …”—he peels his eyes away from her—“I could give you my number and when you think you might—you know—want to head over ...” It’s Alina’s number he’s after, but he hasn’t the nerve to ask her, so he’s doing this in stages. Annoying as it is, I don’t want to be the one to shut him down.

“I’ll drop you a message,” I say. “Let’s exchange numbers.”

He’s obviously hoping this display of gentlemanly consideration will win Alina’s affections (and thereby transform her character). After we arrange to meet on campus the next day, he begins telling me about the clubs and societies which number well over a hundred. Apparently he’s tried several.

The choices he made fascinate me—the food and drink society, the classical society, the TED society, and a few centred around foreign nations including Japan, Germany and Russia. He certainly has wide-ranging interests. He even tried the archery and fencing clubs, but apparently not for long. My questions in that line don’t yield much and we end up talking about his foreign interests.

Outside, sheets of water cascade down our window panes. The harbour has become a painting that tries not to dissolve in the cloudburst. Alina is sharing looks with someone at another table. When a tall young man walks outside during a lull in the rain, she joins him for a smoke.

Davin must be devastated, but he hides it well and continues chatting with me. It’s my attention that’s divided. I peer through the glass while attempting to listen to Davin.

The man talking to my sister is tall, dark haired, and steady-eyed—uncomfortably so. When I caught his glance earlier, he looked back at me with a penetrating intensity that told me I would always be the one to drop my eyes first. He’s dressed in a casual but stylish combination of suede and denim, and there’s no missing the confidence in his body language. This is very much Alina’s type.

Cigarettes burned up, they take out their phones for the inevitable exchange of numbers. He shakes her hand—a professional touch—and heads off as Alina comes back inside and
drops into her seat, hardly aware of us. All I want to do is ask Alina about the new acquaintance, but I can’t do that in front of Davin.

The rain starts and stops again, and then the sun leaps out through the narrowest of gaps, making me think of a boy poking his face through the curtains at a school play to wave at his parents.

Davin offers to give us a tour of his uncle’s boat, but the day has slipped by and we need to catch the train back. So we take our leave and, after returning the bikes, climb aboard the green salad express and miss our stop because I’m focussed on prying information from a taciturn Alina. Clontarf Road—where we were meant to disembark—is not the end of the line, so we get a pretty good tour of Dublin. By the time we make it back to Griffith Avenue, we have no chance of reaching the house by six.

My aunt is not impressed by our late return. She waves aside my explanation, directs us to the asylum couch, and sits on a chair that has been placed directly in front of it.

We take our seats. Trudy certainly knows how to create an atmosphere. She folds her hands, looks at us, and I have a sudden conviction that whatever she is about to tell, I don’t want to hear it.
News

When Alina chokes, covers her face and runs from the room, part of me goes with her. It’s like I can feel her crying, feel her tears running down my own cheeks. Surely they aren’t my own tears. It’s not like we’ve lost someone. Or have we? Is losing a home the same thing?

Scenes appear before me like different expressions on a cherished face—the small back garden where I used to sit beneath the peach trees that never yielded a worm-free peach but looked like spring itself when in bloom, the quiet sidewalks and the parks full of people where my interest in sociology was born, the dam almost hidden by gum trees where I caught my first fish and where my mother caught Alina smoking what she swore was her first cigarette, and the vast blue-and-gold skies that gave just enough rain and more than enough warmth.

I wipe my cheeks with the back of my hand and try to make it look as if I’m working a stray lash out of my eye.

“When will they leave?” I ask.

“You mean—when will they be deported? It all depends. They hope to avoid detention centres, but we aren’t sure how this works.”

“I don’t get it. We were approved for permanent residency before we arrived. What changed?”

“Rae, you weren’t listening. Your family was never approved for residency. You moved there on your father’s temporary working visa, no more. Your father ignored my advice and stayed on. He said thousands did it in Europe. I told him he was a fool to try it in Australia.”

“Why didn’t he say anything to us?”

“He didn’t know this would happen—only suspected it. He only recently became worried after a bad fallout with his business partner. His partner was the one who arranged all the cash jobs and obviously knew the secret. It seems you were sent here just in time. Your parents are now in the custody of immigration officials.”

“But I still don’t understand why he didn’t tell us. Why act like we were just going on some holiday?”

Trudy sighs. “Would you want your family to know a dirty secret if there was a chance it could stay hidden? He didn’t tell you because he was hoping he wouldn’t have to. If things had gone the way he wanted, this would have been just some holiday. Your mother begged me not to say anything unless necessary. As you can see, it has become necessary. I only found out this afternoon.”
“Is there any chance things could go back to normal, like they just pay a fine and we get citizenship?”

Trudy lets out a short, humourless laugh. “After a few years of tax evasion? They can consider themselves lucky to be deported.”

“How soon?” I ask, my voice trembling.

“If all goes well, perhaps a month or two, but I’m told these things can take the better part of a year.”

“A year!”

“That’s what I said. I’ve made peace with the fact that I will need to support you and your sister until all this is over, but there are some understandings we’ll need to reach.”

I’m not really paying attention. Her woes are the last thing on my mind.

Trudy pushes her chair back and stands. “We’ll take it up another time,” she says and leaves the room.

Through the maelstrom, little facts are thudding into the ground like projectiles from the tornado we once saw in the outback, when my father drove away at more than double the speed limit ahead of a leaning arm that flexed its sinews of wind and debris and destruction over us.

I remember how we were never allowed to have friends over, how we always gave a postal address and not a residential one, how my parents never had a house party. I just thought they were averse to company.

When I get back to our room, Alina is curled up, looking at the wall.

“Is it true?” she asks.

“I don’t know,” I say. But I know.

I try to call my parents, but there is no answer on either phone. I try texting, but there’s no reply. I write an email, asking for news, and watch the inbox for two hours before switching off the light. Alina’s breathing has long since relaxed, but there’s no sleep for me.

I trace memories like a child running her finger over the pictures in an album. I see the brick of the English council houses in our first neighbourhood, brick so dark it always looked wet; I remember the natural forests and tight country roads of Mauritius, and then the vast spaces of the Australian midlands. I remember my father’s smile, hear his laugh, easy at first like summer showers, growing thinner, misty. I’d never recognised the anxiety that must have been eating him. I see my mother’s carefree warmth grow less carefree, more clutching, soon followed by Alina’s rebellion.

I turn to watch my sister, a frail sliver breathing under her sheets. I wouldn’t have expected her to be this derailed by the news. She always acts as if our parents are no more to her than an
annoyance she can’t wait to be rid of. Where had those tears been hiding? Is she mourning our home, her connections, opportunities? No, I can’t see any of those things drawing tears. Perhaps she’s just more attached to family than she lets us believe.

I wonder if I can trust her out of my sight. I resolve to keep her busy for a while. She needs to find some purpose here. Left to her own thoughts, she’ll escape from herself, from this situation. That means the worst parties, the boys, the drugs, the steep fall into ruin again. Things got really bad a year ago, but when I compare the little argument that started it to the news we received tonight, I worry. It’s not just her I worry about. If she slides away, I’ll be on my own.

Often one tumbling boulder dislodges others. While waiting for sleep, I spend half the night considering how to pour concrete around my sister’s unstable foundations.
Prospects

The next day, I get a reply. My mother’s email implores us not to worry. She insists they are in no danger, just a little discomfort which will soon be over. She promises to call when she can. Alina and I both reply, but we need to hear voices and not read disembodied words.

We mill around until afternoon, watching our phones, then go for a long, silent walk around the area, not really caring where we go, just trying to pace off some of the numbness. We talk a little, remember a lot, worry constantly. What else is there to do?

When my phone rings, I switch to speaker and we crowd over it in the middle of the sidewalk to drink in every word.

My mother’s voice is strained, like it’s been cried sore. Without giving details, she tells us again not to worry—which worries me—and says they will be in England before we know it. I’m getting frustrated with all the appeasement.

“Please tell us what’s really happening,” I say. “You’re making it worse by hiding all the facts.”

My father takes over. “We’ve lost the house,” he says and there’s a muffled exchange between the two of them. He resumes. “While they sort through our records, we’re staying at … an emigration centre.” I’m fairly sure he used emigration in place of detention. “It’s not a prison,” he adds. “If you ignore the security, you’d think it’s a budget motel. We’re safe and comfortable here. As soon as we get back to England, I’ll get everything sorted out and back to normal. You’ll see. When all this is over, we’ll look on this whole thing as a mere bump in the road.”

Apparently, my mother has more tears to give, because I hear a sob. My father’s voice is cable-tight when he speaks again.

“No more than a bump in the road. You’ll see. I was planning to leave soon anyway. We’ll just need to work a bit harder to make up some of the losses.”

Another sob.

I can only imagine the arguments they’ve had, the accusations and recriminations. I don’t care whose fault it was. I just want my parents back.

The call ends after a round of goodbyes and promises to stay in touch. In spite of the absence of good news, we do feel better after the call. Simply hearing their voices was a reuniting of sorts. They are still there, still contactable.
A message arrives from Davin, asking where we are. I’d completely forgotten about the arrangement we’d made. I apologise and tell him we aren’t feeling well and won’t be heading down to the university. I can’t reveal anymore, so I bring the chat to a fairly abrupt end.

A few days pass. Alina starts heading out on her own, and sometimes a car fetches and drops her off. His name is Murphy—the young man from the café. Apparently he’s a successful businessman. Alina doesn’t say much about him, but she’s constantly on her phone, and her social media streams overflow with pictures from the clubs and parties they attend. It seems inappropriate to me, but I guess this is her escape.

Trudy vents her feelings about the late hours, so instead of coming home when we are asleep, Alina begins staying out until the next day.

Because of our situation, I’m a little more needy than usual. So when she stirs around lunch time one day, I make us both mugs of coffee and sit cross-legged on the bed opposite her.

“So …” I begin, “time for more details. Tell me about him.”

She lets out her breath, glances up from her phone, and gives me a look that suggests I’m some great burden in her life. “Rae, can’t you see I’m busy?”

It’s more than I can take. I leave my coffee, leave the room, and go for a long, long walk. Next time she wants to chat, I’m not listening. Let her know how it feels.

I get my chance that night. She comes home early, for a change, and finds me still awake. Alina doesn’t often want a real heart-to-heart and she never comes straight out with it—always sails in close but not too close, waits for me to invite her into the harbour where I can ask the right questions.

“What are you thinking, Rae?” she asks. It’s her standard hail when dallying about the harbour mouth. She sounds agitated and probably wants to offload.

“Don’t feel like talking,” I say. I turn away from her, and draw the pillow over my head. Of course I can’t sleep. I’m just holding the position long enough to convince her I’m sleeping. I know I’ll regret this. I already do. A voice screams in my head, “Rae! Get up! Listen to her! This is not a time for foolishness!”

I stay down, pretending to sleep, uncomfortable, angry with her, angry with myself, wishing I had the courage to reverse my decision.

Alina doesn’t give the wanting-to-talk signals again. I’d thought she would. I rue the success of my little vengeance with each passing day.

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It’s well into the third week when Trudy begins another of her staged conversations with us. We sit at the kitchen table in front of pea soup—all soup, not much pea. After finishing her bowl in silence, Trudy folds her hands on her lap. Her posture is deliberate and stiff. When she speaks, her voice is equally rigid.

“Some time ago, your mother rang me up and said she was growing terrified of being caught. She wanted to make provision for you, wanted to know I’d look after you if everything went to rot.” She purses her lips. “As you can see, I am a widow of limited means, but I am not unwise with my savings. I will lend you the money for the remainder of your studies, Rae, though we should be able to get some kind of state funding—your mother being Irish. Alina, you will be able to study if you choose. If not, there are jobs to be had.”

I spot Alina’s eyes narrowing. She understands all too well. Trudy isn’t making an offer but laying down a rule.

“Hopefully,” Trudy continues, “it will not be too long before your parents are released, so you may stay here until you are able to support yourselves. However, I will not tolerate slothfulness. Tomorrow morning, I want to see both of you visiting colleges or looking for work. No more foostering about, sleeping till afternoon and pushing my chairs into the carpet. Like I told you, this is not a hotel.”

The comment about chairs feels personal and I want to tell her she should have said “an hotel”, even if that’s archaic, but I manage to keep my teeth clamped.

Alina snorts.

“Anything to add?” Trudy asks.

“Not a hotel,” Alina mumbles. “Thanks for clearing that up.”

Something shifts in my aunt’s eyes. Her silence begins to frighten me. Before anything more can develop, I rise from the table and excuse myself, promising to do the dishes later. I need to get Alina away from Trudy. Fortunately, my sister trails after me.

“I’m not going to college!” she snaps as soon as our door is closed.

“Aunt Trudy isn’t asking you to. She’s just giving you the option.”

“You say it like she’s being thoughtful. I’d rather jump in a sewer.”

“How’s she supposed to know what you like and don’t like? Anyway, she said you could work if you’d prefer.”

“Like I need her permission. And I have work already.”

“Had.”

“I can still do the social media part from here.”
“Unlikely. The whole point was for you to be there at the events and usher in those cashed up bogans you’d been chatting with. And that was hardly work.”

“Suited me. I’m not made for slogging away in some office.”

“Well, you’re made to eat, so you’re going to have to find a way of paying for food.”

“Oh, you’re just so ready with your tongue, aren’t you? Just like Dad, always picking on me.”

“I’m not picking on you, Alina. I’m trying to help you get perspective. Do you really think you can hang around the house all day reading fashion mags and browsing social networks? We’re in the real world now.”

“Excuse me! You want to tell me about the real world. You—the girl who’s never had a date apart from academic functions.”

I’d been intending to restore the peace, but this snaps my temper. “Well at least I can name the boys I’ve been out with …”

The conversation ends and the argument begins. It’s her fault.

It must be.

She plays me till we’re both bristling like porcupines. By the time it’s over, the original discussion is buried under a layer of quills—all crimson tipped.

The next morning, we take an uncomfortable walk to the University College of Dublin. A phone call to Trinity College earlier had sounded positive, but UCD is nearby and it seems a good idea to have a point of comparison. Alina tags along, mumbling that the only reason she’s doing so is because Trudy’s hovel is suffocating her.

The campus is small but neat and modern. There aren’t many students here in the holidays, so the place is empty enough to be unsettling. We pop our heads into a few lecture rooms, causing swing-door hinges to moan and send echoes down long, empty passages. The place could be the set of a very disturbing film and we’re both getting creeped out. By the time we reach the exit, we’re almost at a run.

We still haven’t mastered the buses. The first one we catch looks to be headed in the right direction, but it takes an unexpected left and charges away from the city with gusto. We have to scramble off at the first opportunity and walk back, fares wasted. We find another stop and, this time, make a better choice. The 9 bus takes us down over the Liffey and into Dublin’s thrumming heart.
We’re getting ready to jump off as Trinity approaches, but the bus flies past the empty stop. I’m certain the mistake is mine and I’m too embarrassed to show my distress or to ask the driver, so I keep a straight face as we pass one empty stop after another, with Trinity dwindling behind us. Eventually another passenger steps past us, pushes the big red button that pings in the driver’s compartment, and we slow to a halt at the next stop.

Realisation floods me. I’ve heard that ping constantly, but this is the first time I make the connection between the button and the stops. I’d thought the button was for emergencies.

This time we’ve travelled a good deal more than we paid for. The driver doesn’t say anything, but I suspect he grins while driving away. It’s a long return walk. Fortunately, Alina is too distracted to realise we are heading back the way we came.

After about a quarter of a mile, I notice a man on the sidewalk. A cup is placed in front of him, his sleeping bag and a pile of belongings behind him. In the context of this bright, lively city, the sight is strangely jarring. Nobody belongs on the street, but this man seems more out of place than most. I’d say he’s in his mid-fifties, with grey hair and a respectable white beard.

I’ve already studied him longer than is polite, but then I notice the cover of the book he’s reading. Novels, newspapers, magazines—all of these I could have passed by, but this is too far a stretch. It’s *The Trial and Death of Socrates*. I grin with recognition.

And then I notice he’s looking at me. “Can I help you?” he asks in a soft voice.

“Oh, sorry,” I stammer. “I didn’t mean to stare. It’s just that I recognise the book, and I suppose I’ve never seen anyone reading Socrates on the street.” I offer a parting smile and turn away.

“Plato, actually,” he says.

He’s obviously not very bright. I point to the cover and read it out loud.

He smiles and resumes in quiet tones that barely rise above the hubbub around us. “Socrates never wrote anything. Most of what we know of him comes from Plato, with a few contributions from his neighbour and a pupil. The words we attribute to Socrates may be in large part Plato’s by creation and, in this anthology of dialogues, entirely his by recording. So I believe my earlier occupation would be most accurately described as reading Plato.”

“Uhh … Oh.” Now I’m feeling like the not-so-bright one. “What are you doing out here?” I ask.

He frowns. “Didn’t we just cover that? Reading Plato. At least I was, before you arrived.”

“No, I got that. I mean, why are you here? You speak like you should be teaching or lecturing.” I only realise, once the question is out, how insensitive it is.

He drops his eyes and his voice is barely audible. “I’m working my way back,” he says.
I feel like I just kicked a bird with a shattered wing. “I … I don’t have any coins,” I tell him.

He holds up a hand. “I’ve collected enough for the day. But if you if you have any volumes of Kant, Descartes or Hume you can spare for a week, I’d be obliged. You know, so I can tear the pages out and use them for thermal stuffing. Philosophy is a great comfort in hardship.”

His humour surprises me and I grin. “I’ll keep my eyes open,” I say.

“That would be grand.”

“Where would I find you?”

“Round and about here. Drift a little with the weather. Most street folks have an idea of where the others are, so just ask for Joe.”

“You don’t use the … charity hostels?” I was going to say homeless hostels. I wonder if charity is any better a word.

“Not anymore. Difficult to get a bed. Easy to get robbed.” There’s a lull and he opens the book again. I can see he wants to get back to his reading.

“Bye, Joe,” I say. “It was a pleasure to meet you.”

“So long …?”

I hesitate, but there’s a sincerity here I don’t want to insult. “It’s Rae,” I tell him.

“So long Rae. Fare ye well.” He smiles and returns to Plato’s philosophical embrace.

I rejoin Alina who has been propping up a sign post. “What was that all about?”

“Did you see what he was reading?”

“A book.”

“Ancient Greek philosophical debates.”

She’s not impressed. Not even interested. “Are you going to keep talking to strangers like on the ferry?” she asks.

“That was because I wanted to find out more about Dublin before we arrived. This was accidental. He just caught me staring at his book.”

“You shouldn’t be so quick to talk to strangers,” she says.

“Well every time you meet someone at a club, you’re talking to a stranger.” That drains the rest of whatever she was going to say.

I’m not going to maroon myself as Alina thinks I should. So I consider Joe’s request. I don’t have any of the authors he mentioned, but perhaps I could find a second-hand bookstore. What I glimpsed of a broken person hoping to mend himself plucked a heartstring. I would like to see him find his way back, and who knows? Maybe I could help.
Something has caught Alina’s eye. She’s looking down the street and I turn to see if there’s some kind of commotion, but then she hands me her phone and poses. I might have known. The value of any scene is gauged by how well it works as a backdrop.

Trinity College—I’m in love before we’re halfway across the main courtyard. Grey stone buildings, pillars, statues, porticoes, a cobbled courtyard that feels like it belongs in a feudal castle, enormous libraries, green fields … In truth, I made up my mind earlier based on the reputation, but the feast before my eyes is selling me what I’ve already bought. I want to be here. I need to be here. By the time I arrive outside the admissions office, I’m all but hopping with anticipation.

Mrs Monroe, a nice middle-aged lady in a plain brown suit, asks me a few questions and takes me into an office where we have a long chat. Alina chooses to wait in the reception area. The questions are polite and rather general. Mrs Monroe appears satisfied.

I’m taken to see one of the professors in the sociology department, Professor Burke. I had expected another suit, but Prof. Burke, also a woman, is attired in diaphanous florals that drift with her movements. She floats into her seat after shaking my hand, asks numerous questions while skimming through my tentative and still vague proposal, and agrees to supervise me once my transfer is complete. Back to admissions and more paperwork. They will need to wait for transfer details from the University of Melbourne.

By the time we leave, I can barely contain my excitement. Then I remember my parents, and guilt swamps me.

We take another route, cross over the Liffey on foot, and head up the broad walkway along O’Connell Street. When we take the corner, a young ebony-skinned woman rushes out from under a banner. Her tee-shirt displays a plea to save the children of Africa. She approaches us and asks us to donate. Our tourist wallets are not deep and I make our excuses.

Alina’s instincts lead us to the Iliac shopping centre. Mine take over once we’re inside, and we end up at Starbucks. I’m feeling a slight hypocrite for having insufficient money to help a starving child while I’m looking at a menu where the cheapest item probably costs as much as ten meals in Africa. With that reasoning, I tell myself, I’d starve.

We can’t afford a meal, so we share a scone, sort of. Alina only has a small bite, then sips coffee poisoned with sweetener while staring out the window. There aren’t many people I can do this with—sit comfortably in a vacant silence. I used to think it indicated the quality of the relationship, but it’s not that. Our interests are just so different that silence meets our expectations.
“Been thinking about work,” Alina says.

Normally we don’t discuss personal topics after an argument, and last night’s one is still echoing in our skulls. She’s clearly taking a big step, so I place my cup on the saucer. I want her to see I’m listening. Her gaze, however, is fixed on the window and the cross-currents of shoppers passing by.

“Murphy and I have been talking,” she says.

“We don’t discuss personal topics after an argument, and last night’s one is still echoing in our skulls.”

“Please don’t tell me you’re going to move in with him.”

She turns back to me and there’s a hint of amusement there. “It’s not like that,” she says.

“More of a business thing. He has a lot of contacts and we’ve both worked in entertainment. He wants to find me a job.”

“Sounds good.” I offer the words slowly, like someone lifting the lid of a cardboard box, unsure if the noises inside are from a hamster or a snake.

“In time, he actually might have an opening very similar to what I was doing back home. Celebrity reception. Maybe even a shot at acting. It’s my kind of work.”

“Okay …”

“The thing is, none of the jobs are in Dublin. He wants me to move.”

“It’s not a hamster, and the strike covers the distance. I recoil, stung. “But … Alina. Surely you aren’t planning to move out?”

“I don’t have a choice.”

“Yes, you do. You could find another job.”

“My kind of work isn’t easy to find. This is something I’d be mad not to take.”

“You’re going to leave now, in the middle of all this drama with our parents?”

“Rae, you know I can’t stay with Trudy. That woman hates me.”

“She doesn’t hate you. In fact she probably thinks you hate her. The only time you ever speak to her is when you disagree.”

“Surely you aren’t planning to move out?”

“I don’t have a choice.”

“Of course you do. You could find another job.”

“You’re going to leave now, in the middle of all this drama with our parents?”

“The first job starts next week.”

I barely hear as Alina talks about an extra room and how I can visit if Murphy is okay with it. There’s something about that last condition that worries me. When I ask, she admits that though he’s remarkably generous, he also wants to know everything that’s happening. He sounds like one of those controlling types and I tell her so in bold capitals. Anything to put her off this.
I start raining on her party and I don’t care. All I can think about is that my sister wants to leave me just after I lost my parents. How does she have the right to do this? My arguments make no impression—apparently she’s already made her decision without me—so I fall into a miserable silence which puts her into an even worse mood than me.

When we arrive home, Alina is too agitated to talk. But Trudy insists on knowing what we’ve been doing about colleges or work. Instead of saying she has found work, Alina leaves me to answer for us both.

“Exactly where do you think you’re going, young Miss?” Trudy snaps. “I asked you a question!”

“You’re not my mother,” Alina says and keeps walking.

Livid hues swirl across my aunt’s face. She stands for a moment as if trying to hold herself back, but then passion sweeps her forward. The opening reprimand is spoken in a tone that could detonate any bomb. Both women explode with everything that’s been building in them over the past weeks. By the time it’s over, the walls are running with the things they’ve said. If there had been any hope of persuading Alina to stay, it’s gone.

The next morning, Alina makes arrangements to move out a few days early. I sit on my bed and watch as she packs her bags and the room grows emptier with the disappearance of each item.

But it’s more than emptiness I feel. Alina is doing this for herself. Only herself. Once again, I’ll be cut out from her life—I’m back to being the nerd sister she’s ashamed to be associated with. My mother once said Alina just wanted to protect me from the dirty or even dangerous aspects of her life—the backstreet realities behind all the glamour. I don’t buy it. The only thing she wants to protect is her image.

I don’t think she needs to move out. I think she wants to.

After packing her bags, she ignores our aunt but hugs me at the door, tells me she’ll send the address. At the end of the path she turns around, looks back at me, and her face softens. It’s a little smile, but it’s all warmth. Mine is a weak imitation and there’s no heart in it. I won’t give my blessing.

I watch as Alina moves away, pulling that mammoth I so hated and that now seems to me like family. They move past the graveyard and into the dank alley until the road bends and my sister is gone.
I blame it on selfies. Those Instagram snaps of her living it up pushed me to a new level of resentment. She harvested thousands of likes from the rest of her online followers, but I refused to participate in the buzz. I visited her profile regularly, but silently, like someone watching meals through a window.

As promised, she sent me her new address. I waited a day to reply, then I told her I was a bit busy at the moment. When she didn’t say anything more, it hurt. So I ignored her for a week. The fact that she, too, remained silent locked my jaw at an even more severe angle. I stopped watching the social network feeds. I didn’t want to know about her new, wonderful life.

I made it to three weeks before I felt compelled to message and ask if we could meet for coffee. Those double ticks refused to turn blue. She might have changed her privacy settings, but I doubted it. She was ignoring me, so I ignored her, but this time I barely made it to three days.

I tried calling, but it went to voicemail. I left message after message, but she didn’t call back. At last I began scouring every social network she’d signed up with. All the feeds had gone silent about a week earlier. What was even more strange was that all the photos in which Murphy had appeared were now gone.

I still had the address, so early the next morning I caught the dart to Dún Laoghaire. The street was right, the number was right, and even the ivy-bearded face of the apartment matched the photo she sent. But the occupants were wrong.

The middle-aged couple was still moving furniture in. They hadn’t seen my sister, only a man who matched the description of Murphy, so I asked a neighbour. After looking at the photo, the elderly woman nodded and told me Alina had lived there until a few days before, but had no idea where she’d gone.

I must have walked every street in Dún Laoghaire and spoken to more strangers that day than I normally would in half a year. Finally I went to the guards—the Irish police—who took my details and said they would be in touch. But they had almost nothing to work with, and it’s not like it was a forced abduction.

When I explained the kind of work she had been given, they asked if she had ever used drugs. I could see where their thoughts were going. I told them she had never ventured far in that direction, that she had never really fallen—except once, and not for long.
It had made her wiser, hadn’t it? She knew how to dance on the edge of the frying pan and keep her balance. I told this to the guards. Then I told it to myself, and kept telling myself all the way home.

By the time I collapsed onto my bed, all the bitterness had been swept away by a far darker tide. When I excused myself from supper, Trudy made a comment about Alina returning once she’d had enough of being a prodigal.

I wanted to yell into my aunt’s self-righteous face. If it hadn’t been for her coldness, Alina might not have left at all. But instead of yelling, I wavered. Could Alina actually want to cut me off like this? How was that even possible?

For the first time I can remember, I clutched the sheets in balled fists and cried myself to sleep.
Trinity

Three months have passed. Three months of soft rains and patchy sun, of dank misery and sudden hope swallowed again by cloud. Three months of long, gloaming evenings made longer by the emptiness of my room at the new digs and the solitariness of my walks. The sting has faded, but not the ache, and the memories have grown stronger—mostly the good ones. They knock constantly at the door of my mind, but when I let them in, they make me feel emptier than before.

As soon as I was able, I left my aunt’s. Better for both of us. Not even she could have missed the aura of blame that rose from me like steam whenever she approached. Perhaps Alina would have left even if Trudy had been kinder, but perhaps not. I know it wasn’t all my aunt’s doing, but she pulled the trigger.

My parents have learned the whole story, which means our conversations are always at the point of rupturing. The guards have given me no news. My sister is missing.

I visit the parks—as many as I can—always looking for a slight figure and amber tresses. Whenever a woman’s head is covered, I study how she walks. Alina has this peculiar gait, a slight rotation with each stride. It’s not an offshoot of vanity—she walked that way even as a little girl who was obsessed with oversized teddies, toffees, and amusement-parks.

My search takes me to clubs too. I still don’t feel at home there. I’m never quite sure what to do. Club dancing to me is hardly dancing. My kind of dancing is ballroom—you study it, perfect it, and execute it according to the rules. In clubs, as far as I can make it out, you don’t dance, you wiggle. What gets me is that everyone else looks so comfortable. I can wiggle about like the rest of them, drink in hand, but I still feel like a sardine in a fruit salad.

It doesn’t really matter though. I’m not there to party. I’m studying every face, searching, hoping. When I feel really brave, I ask a few questions, but I haven’t had much luck with that.

“Hi! Excuse me. Down here. Yes, I’m … No, I don’t want a drink. Do you know someone called Alina? No, that’s not my name, it’s my sister’s name. I’m trying to … No I don’t want to dance. I’m trying to … No, thank you, you already offered me a drink and, if you remember, I said no. I need to … Oh for heaven’s sake! Can’t you clear up for half a moment and concentrate?”

They aren’t all that bad, but one tends to remember the worst ones.
With Alina went most of my appetite. Along with that went many of the excess pounds, or maybe it’s all the walking. I’d like to pretend I don’t care, because how can I be glad about a consequence of tragedy? At any rate, it hasn’t made a noticeable difference to my life.

I’ve reconnected with Davin—though I prefer to keep a sensible distance from anyone who was one of my sister’s admirers—and I’ve begun to make friends at Trinity.

Taryn, I’ve got to know quite well because she’s my new digs-mate, and Brett came with as a package deal. He and Taryn have known each other since they were children. He’s one of those brotherly types who appears to be as comfortable in new friendships as old ones.

Nobody has actually said it, but I’m sure that we three are seen as the nerd herd. We’ve got the wrong threads, the wrong lines, and the wrong moves. I saw Brett dancing once. I hope I will be able to live out my days without experiencing that again. He wore this smug look as he rolled what was visible of his hips under that hang-belly. I’m not sure which was the most disturbing—the extent to which he had the moves of our era wrong, or the depth of his conviction that he had them right.

It was an absurd, winking, chin-thrusting, oily confidence in a performance that caused everyone else to avert their eyes. I probably shouldn’t have described it all to Davin, but need compelled me—if you can’t erase something you’d rather not know, share it with someone else. It distributes the load.

There’s a fourth in our university group who sometimes joins us—Vincent. He’s xy-chromosomal Irish perfection, Cú Chulainn returned to us. Only that this one is a killer of ladies rather than men or giant dogs.

Taryn, our nerd queen and perfector of the groundless sweeping statement, is in love with him. Pitifully. Disgustingly. Vincent, for some unfathomable reason, has no problem hanging out with us when his supermodel friends are not to be found. Taryn ogles, drools and makes gawping noises that might pass for dialog garnish—the mmm’s, ooh’s and oh’s listeners are permitted. She, thus far, has not shown herself capable of generating actual speech in his shimmering presence.

When he is not around, she has a lot to say, mostly in the way of absolute assertions backed by copious doses of emotion, a furrowed brow, and waving arms. The conspicuous absence of sturdy reasoning and sometimes even fact make her a regular target for anyone who thinks a little on what she’s claiming. And that is usually Brett.

Plump and pleasant, when not dancing (if the word can be applied to his execrable displays), he is our postmodernist. Without hostility, he will question and oppose any idea, apparently just for the exercise. I don’t think I’ve ever heard him make an absolute claim about
anything. Frankly, I think he’s afraid to nail his colours to any mast, so he pins them to his coat and goes about swinging his axe at everyone else’s masts—in the most amiable way.

He calls himself a deconstructionist. I call him a demolitions engineer. For him, the entity known as “the answer” is dubious and it is the question that stands supreme. One thing that’s difficult to fault, though, is his reasoning. He slices through knotted ideas no matter how intimidating or well-established they are.

It probably won’t tax the imagination to see that Brett and Taryn have much to say to each other, and even more to say about each other—though that’s mostly Taryn.

This morning is typical. We’ve been slaving in the library and have decided to take a mid-morning break. The main sports field at Trinity is filled with students lounging, playing frisbee, and jogging. The sky is filled with patchy cloud, and the air is filled with Taryn and Brett’s argument. It’s religion today. Again.

“I have no time for these so called religious academics,” Taryn says. “The term is in itself a contradiction. Religion is about believing something in spite of evidence. Religion refutes reality.”

Brett lies back on the grass, folding his hands behind his head while chewing the last of his doughnut. “Aren’t you going a little over the top there, Taz?”

“A bit of hyperbole always serves the purpose.”

“What purpose?” Brett asks. “If you exaggerate aspects of a worldview, aren’t you misrepresenting it?”

“Since when did you get religious?”

“Are you implying that only the religious would insist on a fair argument?”

I smile. Taryn frowns.

“I’m still agnostic,” Brett adds.

“Agnastics are just scared to make a decision,” Taryn says. “Fence sitters. And I don’t know what this fair argument of yours is. The argument is over. Are you the only person who hasn’t heard that evolution has been proven? And evolution means God has no place.”

Brett yawns. “Anyone who says evolution ends the argument understands neither of the two. Evolution happened—sure, I’ll grant that. But evolution only considers the final simmering up of existing life after everything else was there to allow it. You’re basically saying if the soup could boil without being stirred, there’s no chef. Things don’t fall out of existence if they aren’t needed.”

“I wish they did,” I mumble. “Reports on research methodologies would be among the first things to fizzle away.” I lie back and join Brett in his contemplation of the sky.
“Brett,” I say, “why aren’t you religious?”

He thinks a while. “I saw religion in my family. More than I wanted to. It was like they were serving a system instead of anything divine. It just looked like a way of controlling people.”

“So why aren’t you an atheist?”

“Well, logically, you can prove something exists, but how do you prove it doesn’t? To say something doesn’t exist just because you haven’t found it—that’s pretty meaningless unless your search covered all the universe, or universes.”

“Oh!” Taryn whispers with a quiver in her throat. “God exists.”

Brett and I look up at her, shocked that his words could have produced such a dramatic effect. Taryn’s cheeks are deepening into a blush of splotchy crimson, her eyes locked on a new arrival.

“Hey,” Vincent says, dropping down. His hair sits right, his clothes hang right, the light falls right. With this boy, though, I have absolutely no interest. Vincent is the archetypical player, and thanks to my sister, I know players. He’s taken countless women to bed—tells us openly—and will most likely continue to do so, married or not. A ring doesn’t curb lust, and this is one boy who would sooner cut off his arm than resist his cravings. Frankly, I think he’s disgusting. I suspect he thinks the same of me, for different reasons. The consequence is that we’ve started to get along rather well, something that ignites Taryn with fires of jealousy. She gets strangled by her own tongue whenever she tries to join the conversation. Even now she has to swallow halfway through the word “Hey!”

“Did you hand in your thesis draft?” I ask Vincent.

“Yeah,” he says. “Think I’m gonna get it back covered in slashes of red. I’m still not exactly sure where I want to focus my investigation. I tried concealing this with flabby, inclusive terminology, but Griegson will see through it. I’ll be called in before the day is up and given a new deadline for tomorrow, but there’s this party at St. Stephen’s Green …”

“Is a party worth an angry supervisor?”

“This is a big deal. You should see the DJ’s lined up. I have friends travelling in all the way from Galway. Place is going to be packed. Anyone who’s anyone will be there. Gonna be good craic. You hand in your first draft?”

“Sort of. I think I’m in the same predicament as you.”

“I thought you managed to narrow your focus from that idea about history and perceptions.”

“I did—kind of. I got it down to how inherited perceptions influence current ones.”

“So, how history shaped the present?”
“Not exactly. It’s more about the interpretation side of things.”

“Explain.”

I take a breath and gather a sample of the main ideas from the clutter on my internal desk. “History was observed through human lenses, and no two lenses are entirely alike,” I say. “There’s bias in the encoding and decoding—the recording and the reading. I’m basically looking at the extent to which inherited misrepresentations subconsciously affect present judgement. But that’s still far too broad.”

“You’ll probably need to dig into a bit of psych for this one if you want it to hold water. But it’s an interesting idea. You still speaking to—What was his name? Joe?”

I nod.

“How does he tie in?”

“People on the fringes of a society can notice things the rest of us miss. Joe’s been a lot of help with the historical aspect too. You won’t believe how much he knows. It’s so weird that someone like that can end up on the street.”

That makes me think of the last place I saw him—a road near St. Stephen’s Green, and that reminds me of the party. A thought blossoms. “Are there any tickets left?” I ask.

“No such luck. Sold out long ago. Would you have gone?”

“No for the party, but to hunt for my sister.”

He is quiet for a while and gives me a look that seems to hold genuine pity. “Tell you what. I’ve got an extra that I was going to give to that fine thing I just spotted in the law department, but I’ll trade you. I want to meet Joe. I’ll give you the ticket if you take me to see him.”

“Will you help look for Alina at the party?”

“I’ll keep an eye out. Still got that picture you sent. But I’ll be busy tonight.”

There’s no need to elaborate. He slips out his vibrating phone and reads the text message. The smile that creeps over his face is hungry. “Gotta go. So can you head out at around three?”

I nod, and he lopes away with perfect athletic strides.

“Oh!” Taryn gasps unconsciously. At least she’s breathing again.

Brett seems to have fallen asleep. We give him a few shoves, and when he’s recovered the soft frown that denotes consciousness, we head back to the library where I expect I’ll scan numerous pages of a few dozen books in another futile quest for inspiration, and then contemplate the ceiling while doodling on my note pad. If I could just settle on a specific direction, I could push off and gather speed. But every direction I consider is either overcrowded or treacherous for some reason.
If Taryn works as industriously as this morning, I’m finding my own corner. Or I’ll look for someone clawing their eyes out with frustration. Right now, nothing would be more comforting to me than the knowledge that I’m not the only one with no idea of how to pull a thesis together.

When we reach the library, my fears take form. Taryn is one of these people who mimics her thoughts. When she thinks, she taps a finger against the side of her laptop, purses her lips, and searches the ceiling through narrowed eyes. Then inspiration will strike—she’ll take a sharp breath, give a nod, and resume typing with a look of smug triumph. She’s practically yelling for attention.

I can’t work in front of this performance, but now that it comes down to it, I can’t bring myself to desert her and find a quiet corner. I’m sure she’d take it personally, and seeing as I haven’t know her for long, I’d rather not test the bounds of our friendship.

Then I catch sight of Davin leaving the library. It’s the excuse I need.

“I’m popping out, Taz,” I say. “I just saw Davin and I want to chat to him. You’ll still be here for a while?”

“Oh. Sure,” she says, sounding far less happy with her lot than I would have expected.

I catch up to Davin just outside the library.

“Stop! Thief!” I call out. I cringe as the words bounce off the courtyard walls, causing several people to look around. It came out far louder than I had intended.

Davin turns and surveys me. “What did I steal?” he asks when I catch up. “Your sense of etiquette?”

“My brain.”

“Oh, that,” he says without even a ghost of hesitation. “I think I put it in one of these side pockets on my satchel. There are some very small pouches here …”

I try not to laugh, but I can’t help it.

“So you’re having a dull day?” he asks.

“Dullest day of my life. And I’ve been having the same day for the past three weeks?”

“That’s a lot of Thursdays for one month.”

“Exactly!”

We split apart to walk around a group of students using the same path.

“I wanted to ask if you’d heard anything that might give a clue about Alina,” I say when we come together again.

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Davin’s face doesn’t exactly fall, but there’s an almost imperceptible dimming of his eyes. Clearly, his feelings for my sister haven’t waned. I wonder if it’s concern for her, or lingering pain from her lack of interest in him.

“Sorry,” he says. “I really wish I had, but I promise I’ll let you know the instant I hear anything.”

“Please do. Even if it you aren’t certain or if it doesn’t make sense.”

“Sure.” We stop just before the road. I’d thought he was going to the canteen, but we passed that turn earlier and now we hover beneath the grand arched entrance to the college.

“I’ve been meaning to ask—” he says. “Someone mentioned they saw you speaking to rough sleepers in town. Is it part of your search for Alina?”

“That’s just Joe. He’s someone I bumped into while walking through town. He’s a nice old man who lost out in the economic crash and who’s trying to work his way back to a normal life. And don’t look at me like that. I’m not giving him money and I don’t speak to him alone or at night.”

“Are you trying to help him?”

“I’ve lent him a few books—we have some similar interests—and we chat for a few minutes when I go by. Joe is incredibly well read. I don’t think I’ve named an author he hasn’t heard of.”

Davin’s severe eyes tell me that this information is not having the effect I intended. I know what’s coming. “You know there’s a good chance he’s on drugs,” he tells me. “They say around half of them are hooked. Addictions can make people dangerous.”

“Uh! You boys are all the same. Yes, I know about all that. I’m not stupid—even if I don’t currently know where my brain is.”

Davin pats the small pouch of his bag and his features relax into a smirk.

“Oh, yes. Thanks. I keep forgetting.” I let out a breath. “Joe might drink and maybe he’s popped a few pills to dull the aches out there, but I really doubt he’s on the hard stuff. I’m sure he’ll manage to work his way back, and I’d like to be a part of that.”

Davin nods.

This older-brother act grates my independent spirit, but it isn’t enough to make me angry. Of all Alina’s admirers, he’s the only one I actually enjoy talking to—really enjoy talking to. If it weren’t for Alina, perhaps …

I catch myself before that thought matures. It won’t do me any good, and it’s wrong for more reasons than I care to list.

“Where are you off to?” I ask, wondering if the question is too forward.
He eyes me for a moment. “If I said I was going to try and crack the fourth level of a first
person shooter game, it would lower your opinion of me, wouldn’t it?”
I make a face.

“Exactly,” he says, “which is why I’m going home to start memorising an encyclopaedia.
I begin today.”

“That sounds even worse.”

“So then you vote for the game. Excellent. These talks bring such clarity. If my conscience
gives me trouble, I’ll refer it to you.” He winks as he heads out the gate and disappears into the
stream of pedestrians.

I’m not entirely sure if he’s joking about the game. Can I really picture the quietly
thoughtful Davin crouched in front of a screen, firing imaginary bullets and rockets and
spattering gore everywhere? I want to believe he’s only teasing, yet I’m quite certain he’s not.
This must be the perennial boyhood of men peeping through.

I wish there was a way to make men grow up. But I fear that’s no different to wishing they
would all turn into women. The idea makes me grin.

After wandering through several courtyards, I finally drag my feet back towards the library
and prepare to murder another hour as I wait for Vincent.
St. James’s Hospital

“… and don’t ask about his family, his education, his accent, or his home?”

Vincent frowns. “Is there anything I can ask?”

“Oh, and I forgot to mention his ambitions. That would be a very bad idea.”

We leave campus and make our way to Grafton Street, the biggest and most beautiful of the pedestrian roads. The way I’m talking, you would think Vincent is the foreigner and I’m the local showing him around.

It’s because of a kind of protectiveness I feel for Joe that I’m being a little bossy, and because of my complete lack of respect for Vincent that I treat him brusquely. I suspect he is out of his depth with a girl who responds to his roguish half-smile with unconcealed nausea.

“You’ve lost weight, Rae,” he says.

“And you’ve lost concentration.” I don’t bother to take him up on his rather blunt insinuation that I had weight to lose. “What was the last thing I said?”

He can’t remember. I remind him not to crowd Joe, to respect his space.

“No chance of that,” he laughs. “I have no desire to catch anything.”

I stop in my tracks, wait for him to turn. Then I stare him down. “Joe is probably a lot cleaner than you. You think rubbers keep you clean? Tested yourself for the STI’s that aren’t stopped by your latex shields? HPV? Herpes? Syphilis?”

I know a good deal about all this owing to my worries over a carefree sister.

“I’m HIV clean,” he says.

“Hooray, that’s one in a small army. And anyway, all you can really be sure of is that you were clean three months before you were tested. Window period, Vince. As far as we know, with your widespread amorous habits, you could have them all. So don’t you dare lift your nose at Joe.”

There’s a slight flicker of anger, but it passes in an instant and he deflates like an untied balloon. “I’m sorry, Rae.”

I drop the look. “Okay, just promise me you’ll respect him.”

“Like a beauty queen.”

“No. Not that. You have no respect for women, especially the pretty ones.”

“I respect you.”

“Taken in sequence with my last words, you just insulted me. Shut up, Vincent. Let’s just walk in silence.”
He laughs. “I like you. You give it to me straight. Wish there were more girls like you.”
“No you don’t, and we both know it.”
This brings more laughter and we walk the rest of the way without speaking, but it’s the kind of silence I used to share with Alina—one of fulfilled expectations. The tramping of feet and the overlapping sound clouds of buskers do more than enough to fill our ears.

Joe isn’t in his place. I ask Robert—Joe’s closest, and possibly only friend—who is in his usual spot, a recessed doorway across the road. It looks like the back end of some grand municipal building. I doubt that door has been opened for years.

“Ee’s in hospital,” Robert says. “They took him off two nights ago.”
“What! Was he sick?” I chide myself for missing clues that had probably been right in front of me.

“No. Got painted red. Three kids come round, roaring drunk, looking for respect. Thought they was gonna pass by until one takes a closer look at Joe, starts yelling. Joe, he talks calm at first, then he ignores them. That’s when the first one loses it and they all start kicking him. The first one, he keeps yelling something about Evleen—no—Eileen and money.”
“Have you been to see him?” I ask.
“Naa. Think they gonna let me in them clean hospital rooms?”
I don’t know how to reply.
“Could you tell us which hospital?” Vincent asks.
“Word is he went to St. James.”
We thank him and catch a bus that takes us most of the way. Vincent is still tagging along. I’m not sure why—he’s hardly likely to get his interview.

The glass entrance leads into an impressive hall. Skylights make the place feel airy. Between the indoor trees and ferns growing here and there, I’m reminded of an upper-class shopping centre. I approach a receptionist. Joe is the only name I have, but when I describe him and explain the circumstances, she looks at me with more interest.

“Are you a relative?”
“No. I met him on the street. Been helping him out a little.”
“You’re aware that he has a drug history? There’s nothing showing from the last set of tests, but his file says he’s tested positive before.”
“So then he’s cleaning himself up,” I say.
“Maybe, but many in his situation relapse. I just want to make sure you know.”

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“I’ve had drug trouble in my family,” I tell her. “I know the facts better than I’d like, but I also know people can recover.”

She nods and glances down at a file on the desk. “This Joe is quite a character. Some of the nurses have been talking about him. He’s been constantly quoting lofty passages which he says are from Milton and Virgil, and he sometimes falls into a language no one can recognise. The nurse who had the first shift thought he was rambling, and so she trimmed his morphine. It was when he moved on to Dante and filled the air with fire and demons that they took the hint and pushed the morphine up again. Now, I’m told, we’re back to Milton.”

She explains where to go and we follow the signs to a ward where Joe is half trussed to the ceiling and wrapped in bandages that look disturbingly like basting cloth.

As I enter his field of vision, he lifts his voice in singsong tones. “Rae, you sublime angel! You being of heavenly light.”

I wonder how high they pushed the dose. What happened to the quiet, reserved Joe? It strikes me that this might be my first glimpse of the man he once was.

“Did you bring me something to read?” he asks. “All they have here are medical textbooks they won’t let me touch, and glossy magazines I won’t let myself touch.”

“Sorry, Joe. I didn’t bring anything. I came straight from your corner after speaking to Robert. But if you’re still here tomorrow I’ll bring whatever I can find. Why don’t you just watch telly like everyone else?”

“Sad cure,” Joe declares in rising tones, as if addressing a hall of acolytes, “for who would lose, though full of pain, this intellectual being, those thoughts that wander through eternity, to perish rather, swallowed up and lost in the wide womb of uncreated night, devoid of … something and something else. I can’t remember now. My thoughts are fuzzy today.”

“Milton?” I’m only hazarding a guess based on what the receptionist told me.

“Who else but Milton?”

“It sounds like a reference to hell.”

“Close enough. I believe it was a prophecy concerning the invention of the cathode-ray tube which, in turn, led to the cranial evacuator, something people mistakenly refer to as a television. The term television—if you were wondering—has a Greek origin which means to see far, but it’s the supreme cultivator of mental short-sightedness.”

“Uh … thanks. I’ll throw my cranial evacuator onto the sidewalk the moment I get home.”

“Irony becomes you, young Rae. Did you bring me books? Oh … no, I already asked you that. What are they doing to my mind in this place? Will nobody give me a book—a real book?”
He looks up at the ceiling and mumbles a little to himself before breaking out again. “Forbid us something and that is the thing we desire!”

“Another quote?” I ask.

He turns and looks over at me. “How do you not know Chaucer?”

“Easily, and I prefer it that way.”

“Ah, but how would you know that the absence of a thing is better than the possessing of it if you have never possessed it?”

“I had a taste of this thing once.”

“Acquired taste, lass. All the best enjoyments are.”

“I liked chocolate at first taste.”

“By best enjoyments, I’m referring to the amount of long-term good it does you. Chocolate, cranial evacuators, and morphine are kin.” He frowns and tries to lean over, arching his neck towards the floor. “There isn’t by any chance a book propping a leg of this bed up? It feels as if it’s listing to starboard.”

I try to hide my smile. “Joe, are you alright?”

“Haven’t I just been explaining at length that I am not? I’m in the critical stages of mental starvation.”

“I wasn’t asking about your boredom, but about your injuries.”

“Oh, well the opiate in my brain informs me that I’ve never been better. As to reality, I have no idea. I suspect it’s just bruising and a few cuts.”

“Do you know why it happened?” Vincent asks, taking a step forward.

Joe looks at him, apparently noticing him for the first time, and it’s like the drawbridge lifts and the gates swing shut.

Even when I turn the subject in other directions, Joe no longer shows any desire to talk. It becomes so awkward that we take our leave soon after.

I don’t need to chastise Vincent. He knows. Without complaint, he hands me the concert ticket.

“I’ll keep my eye open for Alina tonight,” Vincent says, “but don’t depend too heavily on me.”

The notion of depending on him hadn’t even crossed my mind. “You know a second-hand book store anywhere? The one I’ve been visiting doesn’t have a great selection.”

“I know one or two, but they aren’t cheap.” He glances at my disappointed expression.

“Tell you what. You find the books and I’ll find the cash. Don’t give me that look. My folks are loaded.”
“Thanks, Vince,” I say, wondering how so much kindness and selfishness can coexist in one person.

We walk back through streets faced with buildings grand and modest. We pass a young woman playing a guitar and singing an Irish folksong—notes sweet enough to melt the heart and words that could break it. I think I’m beginning to feel just a little of the tragedy and the hope of all that is Ireland.

Where in these currents have you immersed yourself, Alina? Are you laughing, or has your adventure ended in bitterness? I don’t even want to think of what it would do to me if I find you in ruin.

Brett and Taryn also manage to secure tickets and are determined to go with me. I make it very clear I’m going there to search, not party. Brett, Taryn tells me, is going to get ossified, bombed with the inebriating force of more ale than he can carry in both arms. From what I’ve seen of her, she’ll stay dry as a desert skeleton. Nothing makes her more uncomfortable than a party. A purpose like the one I’ve given her is everything she could hope for. She’ll be able to move through the ranks of revellers, imbibing the thrill of the night (secretly) while wearing the look of a woman on a mission, pursuing a higher cause.

We arrive early. The party is only expected to get going by midnight. I’m there by seven. They’re still busy testing the sound and lights. Taryn joins me after ten minutes, but Brett texts to say he’ll be late. We can guess why. Booze will be expensive in the grounds. He’s probably tanking himself up on cheap vodka from Tesco’s. That way, he only needs to maintain the level tonight.

Taryn knows Alina’s face. She’s seen many pictures, but this afternoon she asked me to send her all the recent photos I have. It was quite a lot, but I don’t doubt that every one was scrutinised with a detective-like intensity.

We enter the walkways and burrow through crowds milling outside the gate. At first, we walk quickly, studying faces, leaning this way and that to get better angles. After two hours and a dozen laps we find a bench recently vacated and collapse onto it. We can still watch faces as they pass by.

“Think she could have dyed her hair?” Taryn asks.

“Possible. But she never really liked dying it. Preferred the natural colour.”

“Unless she’s trying to hide.”
The idea that Alina would hide from me is like the thrust of a stiletto. I know Taryn didn’t mean it to hurt, but it hurt all the same.

We decide to do a few more laps before the party starts. At ten, the gates swing open and the assembled crowd begins to pour in, drawn to the thumping, shuddering pulses of sound energy that shake our ribcages even here at the outer perimeter. We decide to wait at the entrance, but after half an hour, Taryn realises that they’ve opened another entrance on the far side. We’ve seen over a thousand faces but probably missed as many. We do another hour of gate watching—one on each side—before moving into the mob of revellers. We each pick a direction and Taryn marches off, shoulders high, head angled forward, glasses protruding on her nose.

Brett arrives a little later. I don’t call out to him as he staggers through the gate. He’s one beer away from being spectacularly drunk. Apparently, he measured it to perfection. I can’t have him clinging to me and filling my ears with the jumbled nothings chasing each other through the sloshy marshes that were formerly his brain. That’s one distraction I cannot afford. Anyway, no matter what I do, he won’t remember it.

My phone rings. It’s Taryn. I have to press it hard to my ear and she has to yell. Finally I make sense of her disordered yipping.


http://etd.uwc.ac.za/
St. Stephen’s Green

As I fight, squirm and dig through the crowd, my feelings escape the reach of words like excitement or hope, or even anxiety. It’s far messier, and in spite of the music, my mind is empty but for one repeated echo. *Alina!*

When I reach Taryn, I grab her skinny shoulders and give them a vigorous shake. She hasn’t seen me coming, so she screams a little before recognising me. Then she starts rattling at a furious rate.

“I think it could have been her but the hair was like it used to be and she looked taller than you said but only a little and maybe also a bit older but it made me look twice and when I glanced down at my phone to check and then back to her I couldn’t see her anymore. Oh, I’m such a stupid, blind …”

“Which direction was she going?” I interrupt.

“There … I think.” Taryn points.

I grab her arm and we march off while I ply her with questions about what this woman had on and who she was with.

It sounds like she was wearing black—or yellow—and she was walking with two men—who apparently could also have been women … We push this way and that. The music swells around us as we near one of the three dance areas. It pulses, rumbles, rises until it’s almost volcanic. The lights flash, leaving spots in my vision as I study faces. Taryn follows along the trail that closes on her heels. Twice she tugs and points; twice I shake my head and continue the burrowing search.

Little people do not do well in these conditions. By the seventh or eighth time a semi-lucid young bull tramps on the instep of my frail shoes, I’m beginning to struggle. I’m also beginning to wonder about Taryn’s sighting, and I consider the thickness of her glasses.

We withdraw to the gate and find a bench where we rest for a moment and hold a council of war. There aren’t many options. We decide to split up and show people the photo of Alina, hoping someone might have noticed her in the crowd.

The first person I show it to is a pimple-affected teenager. I remember those days and I feel bad for him. He looks at the photo, licks his lips and gives a double thumbs-up. My feelings do an about-turn and I very nearly slap him. I’m tempted to bypass all the boys, but they are more likely to have noticed my glamorous sister.
The next boy seems to be more interested in the phone than the photo. I have a suspicion he’s following me and I make a hasty escape to another part of the grounds. I decide to speak only to girls from now on, but after about sixty fruitless enquiries, I catch sight of a man I recognise, and it freezes me in place.

Murphy.

He spots me at ten paces and while there’s no recognition in his face, he doesn’t take his eyes off me again. There’s no missing the confidence—even control—he emanates, but there’s something else that causes my step to falter. It’s an emptiness in the eyes, or maybe a hardness of the mouth—whatever it is, I get an uncomfortable feeling. He just seems like someone who would do anything he thought he could get away with.

I gather my courage as he approaches. “Hi,” I shout.

“You look lost,” he says in cultured tones. “Need any help?”

My uneasiness recedes under a strange charm as he regards me with a face that now seems friendly, even charitable. It’s like a warm globe has been switched on. I have this curious feeling that he could keep me safe. I almost want to impress him. Is this how he made Alina feel? The thought reminds me of my purpose.

“Have you seen her?” I hold up my phone. A glance is all it takes.

“Never,” he says, looking into my eyes with an intensity that burns.

He smiles, but it’s not a friendly smile. He knows who I am. Before I realise it, he’s turned and walked away.

My phone rings, buzzing in my hand like the tail of a rattlesnake, and I almost fling it away. It’s Taryn again. I manage to answer, squeeze the phone against one ear, and jam a finger in the other.

“Rae—the bridge. Hurry! It’s Brett. He needs help. Hurry!” I can’t hear any more. I look around. No, I decide, Brett can wait. I let Alina go once and I won’t do it again.

I abandon manners and do a good deal of shoving as I set off in the direction Murphy took. When I reach the edge of the crowd, he’s not ahead of me. I must have passed him, so I plunge back into the mass and tunnel this way and that.

After several minutes, I re-emerge and spy Taryn. She has her arm around Brett who staggers alongside, sloshing water with each step. I don’t really want to get caught up here, but I think they might have seen me. Turning away could have serious consequences for our friendship. I hurry over and help support our bedraggled friend to a nearby bench.

“Someone shoved him into the pond,” Taryn explains as we set him down.
Brett doesn’t stay there for long. He’s already shivering and the chill appears to be sobering him up. He decides he’s had enough for the evening and leaves for home as Taryn and I head back into the frenzy of bodies.

We search for an hour. I begin showing Alina’s picture again but there’s no recognition. By the end of it, my feet ache, my throat is raw from yelling, and my eyes feel as if they are collecting little grains of sand. Street lamps aren’t as bright as before. When the last DJ ends his set, my ears surge out into the emptiness and whine like sirens.

Early morning clean-up teams begin their work while die-hards settle down on the lawns.

I stand at one of the gates and watch faces as people stream out, taking my hopes along with them.
Westward

Trudy looks at me, her expression as flat as the walls of this horrible living room. It wasn’t easy for me to come here, but I’m desperate.

“I don’t want you going after her,” she says. “I know Alina’s type, and she’ll drag you down.”

“You don’t know me and you don’t know us,” I say. “I’ve been pulling her out of trouble for years. If you have any idea of where she might be, you need to tell me.” Since Alina left, I’ve stopped tiptoeing around Trudy. Not living under her roof has also permitted a boldness I wouldn’t have shown before.

“She made her choice,” Trudy says.

“That’s what you think, but what if she didn’t? Aunt Trudy, if there is anything you can remember that could help find her, please …”

There’s a slight twitch in her cheek and then she looks away, far away, as if trying to recall something. “Now that I think about it, I do remember one thing. This Murphy she was seeing—his car had a Galway number plate. I didn’t write it down, but I do remember the G in the middle.” She glances over at me. “Don’t get your hopes up. Even if she’s there, I doubt she wants to be found. It would be pointless and unwise for you to go bumbling around a strange city. Report the information to the guards if you want, but leave it at that.”

“I’ve already tried the guards. And I won’t need to bumble around. I know someone who’s familiar with Galway—even the bad parts. He could give me an idea of where to look.”

Trudy frowns. “The bad parts?”

“He lived on the streets there.”

Her needle tipped eyes make me squirm like a butterfly against a board.

“He’s decent and incredibly knowledgeable,” I say. “I’ve been talking to him about my thesis and he’s given me lots of useful information. I’ve lent him a few books in return. You might even have seen him on your charity outings.”

“You mean Joe?”

“Yes.” I push my chin forward. Trudy still intimidates me, but I’m not going to let her see that.

“Rae, I’ve known him for years and I can’t be sure he’s trustworthy. How do you know he isn’t selling your books for drugs or drink?”
Regardless of her intent, she’s attacking my judgement. She probably doesn’t realise how underqualified she is for evaluating Joe. She has hardly any education and he is a walking library. She might have known of him for years, but she probably doesn’t know him at all.

“He’s returned all the books so far,” I say. “He’s an intellectual who hides from almost everyone—not an easy person to read.”

“I’m not a fool, Rae. I’ve worked with these people for a very long time. You need to keep away from him.”

She is being a fool, a small-minded, prejudiced fool. If I’m to expand my intellectual horizons, it’s not Joe, but my aunt I need to avoid.

“Can we just forget about him,” I say. “Is there anything more you know that might help?”

She shakes her head and sighs. “My guess is that your sister has fallen in with the wrong crowd. I think you’re wasting your time. She’s a fish that escaped the net and she won’t thank you for going after her.”

“We’re her family, not her jailers.”

Trudy lets out a dry and bitter laugh. “Do you think she sees me as family?” She turns away and stares out the window.

For a moment, I’m too startled to reply. Was that pain I saw in her iron visage? I never even considered she might have been hurt by my sister’s words. Trudy has always been so unassailable, so unreachable. Trudy seems like one of the hardest people I know, but perhaps diamonds really can bleed.

My eyes unconsciously wander down the passage to her bedroom door. With a shock, I realise what I’m doing and glance up to see if I’ve been discovered, but she’s hardly aware of me.

“I should go,” I say, getting to my feet.

She doesn’t answer, but when I step out the door, she clears her throat.

“Rae, you know you can visit if you want.” She turns her eyes up to mine for only an instant before retreating to her study of that window.

“Thanks,” I say. After a brief hesitation, I close the door. The walk to the bus stop isn’t enough to clear my head. I end up walking the five miles home.

Trudy is wrong about Alina. It’s possible my sister is in Galway, but she won’t be working at a club. She would have called to let me know she’s alright. Something else has happened—must have happened—but Trudy can’t imagine it because she’s already formed an opinion based on nothing more than her antipathy. Blind prejudice. Just like her opinions on Joe.
I’ve been thinking about what to do, and I have some ideas. I’m not sure how to make them work, but I know a good place to start.

Joe looks at me, thoughtful. “If your aunt is right about the number plate, then Galway is where your search must go. I don’t know if you’ll find her there, but you might find him.”

He scratches the bristles of his white beard while thinking. “Unfortunately, it makes sense that Alina couldn’t have moved simply for a job. It doesn’t explain the silence. There’s something else at work, and I worry you might need to brace yourself. Finding her might be more painful than losing her.”

“That’s not a reason to give up. You mentioned once that you know the city. Where would you suggest I start looking? Who could I speak to? I’ll even pay them.”

“Don’t be so hasty to flash money around. There are plenty folks out there who will be happy to take your cash, then head straight to the pub and search for your sister at the bottom of half a dozen pints.”

“What else can I do?” The police—sorry—guards didn’t find anything. Unless I hire someone, what other option is there?”

Joe taps his fingers against his lips. “Can you meet me there in three days?”

“You’re going to help look for her?” The sense of relief makes me catch my breath.

“Things are quiet at the office at the moment,” he says with a sweep of his hand around his portion of sidewalk. “I’ll just need a copy of your sister’s picture.”

“But … you can’t do this for free.”

He shrugs. “Bus fare and enough for a week’s food will cover me. You’re a student and I know money is scarce.”

“I have enough for a few months’ expenses.”

He considers but then shakes his head. “Seventy euro will cover me.”

It’s a paltry sum for what his help represents. If Joe says he knows Galway, I don’t think any detective would have a better chance of finding the trail.

“Can’t I give you a little more than that? A hundred?”

“Seventy is my final offer.”

“Why?”

“I spend my days asking for charity. Can I not give it too? Allow me that dignity.”
Later that day I give him a printout of Alina’s photo and two bank notes, hiring perhaps the sharpest albeit the most unlikely private investigator in all of Ireland.

If my aunt finds out about this, she’ll disapprove, but I’m not going to trouble myself with her opinions on someone she is not equipped to understand.

I might not have known Joe as long as she has, but because of the academic culture he and I share, I’m able to recognise in him what many people can’t. I certainly know him better than Trudy does.

On the bus home, I recall his lined face. Those eyes hold all the sadness of a rainy morning, especially when he smiles. It’s not the first time I’ve suspected that he lives with deep regret. And I wonder if this kindness to me is a form of atonement for something in his past.

I tell Brett and Taryn about Galway and what I’ve arranged. Brett says little but doesn’t support me when Taryn spins into a fit of paranoia and chews me out about being hasty and reckless. I get a little hot in my answers. It’s not exactly an argument, but it leaves me unhappy, even when they agree to go along. It’s like they are humouring my silly whim, all the while knowing—in their towering wisdom—that I’m about to faceplant. It’s not the support I was hoping for.

I decide to call Davin while leaving Trinity. He’s delighted to hear I may have a trail at last. He wants to join the group, but his uncle is away and his aunt is very ill. He promises to catch up with us if she recovers in time but doubts it will happen.

“Want me to tell Alina anything from you if I find her?” I say.” Why am I asking this? But I know why even before the question has formed. I like Davin. Hope is growing in me and I want to cut the fantasy beanstalk down before it’s tall enough to crush me.

“Oh, royt,” he says. “Thanks for asking. There’s something I’ve been meaning to tell her for some time.”

My heart hits shoe soles and I prepare to take mental notes.

“Would you please tell her I’m growing mighty fond of her sister.”

I don’t comprehend initially and I ruin the moment with my confusion. He has to say it again and it’s like repeating a punch line. Words stick in my throat. Now he thinks I’m upset with his disclosure and I’m too off balance to mend the situation. I end the call with an entirely cold goodbye, and then, as I realise what I’ve done, I almost hurl the phone against a nearby stone wall.
Once my wits have returned, I message him and say I refuse to pass the message on and he should give it to the appropriate sister himself over a cup of coffee.

He replies that this will be a problem because the appropriate sister, he has not forgotten, hates coffee and only drinks hot chocolate and milkshake.

I laugh and can’t stop myself smiling as I arrive at the bus stop—resulting in a moment of confusion when an old lady smiles back at me. Inspiration strikes and I’m texting again. The conversation runs as follows.

Me: Define “appropriate sister”.
Davin: 5ft6
Me: Alina is 5ft8 and I’m 5ft4. Shoddy attempt.
Davin: I was referring to the length of your tongue—measurement confirmed by the lashing I just got.
Me: Inappropriate definition of appropriate. Unimpressed.
Davin: Exacting.
Me: What is?
Davin: You.
Me: That’s your definition?
Davin: You think I could do better?
Davin: Right—a test. Very well, appropriate could be defined as attractive.
Me: Sarcasm not appreciated.
Davin: Sarcasm not present. I also need to add hungry to my definition.
Me: You asking to die?
Davin: I’m asking you to get a bite with me.
Me: You tread very close to danger, young man.
Davin: You don’t scare me, young lady.
Me: Wait till I empty the chilli bowl into your unguarded burger.
Davin: Burgers have just been removed from the menu. Chillies too.
Me: I can bring my own.
Davin: Maybe you do scare me a little. Let’s get milkshakes.
Me: That last line could have come from a sonnet. You have such a beautiful way with words.
Davin: Hahaha. There’s a nice place here in Howth. Shouldn’t take you more than an hour or two to get here. I’ll take a snooze while you travel, so call to wake me when you arrive.
Me: Now where did I put those ground chillies? Pretty sure I found a new container after they ate through the glass of the last one.
Davin: Okay, fine. I’m already in your area. Knock at your door in ten min?
Me: Just arrived home. Hold on.
Davin: Holding.
Me: Ten minutes, you say. You think a girl can get ready in ten minutes?
Davin: We’re not going to a ball. Isn’t ten min enough?
Me: For most girls, a ball would take ten days. Ten minutes isn’t enough time to even make a decision about going out.
Davin: You’ll get ready faster if you stop texting.
Me: You’ll live longer if you stop giving advice. And stop distracting me with messages. I’m trying to find my other shoe.
Davin: _
Me: That still made me look at the screen. Still a distraction. Eleven minutes.

Twenty-three minutes later, I step out into the bracing air and give Davin an awkward hug. Real interactions are more complicated than text-based ones. I’m not nearly as confident now that we’re talking in person, but my confidence grows a little when I hear the slightest wavering in his voice. By the time we get to the pub I’m starting to feel more like myself.

“You said milkshakes,” I remind him.
“A well poured Guinness tastes like milkshake.”
I give him my best flat stare. “If the milkshake is made from milk that’s black with rot and then flavoured with gall, maybe.”
“You really don’t like savoury things, do you?”
“Davin, there is nothing to savour in any of these beers and stouts and whatnot you men drink. It’s all some trial you put yourselves through because you think it impresses women.”
“Beer is delicious. But the argument is irrelevant. They make milkshakes here.”
“You’re getting one too,” I inform him. “I’m not going to be the only one with something tasty. I refuse to carry the full weight of every drooling stare.”
He grins and orders a strawberry for me and a chocolate for himself.
After I tell him the rest of the details about the proposed trip to Galway, he’s quiet.
“Rae, I don’t think it’s a good idea. I mean, how well do you actually know this Joe?” he asks.
An unpleasant prickling sensation works over my skin. “I wasn’t asking your permission,” I say, my voice a little higher than intended.

“I’ve lived in Ireland longer than you,” he continues, “and I get a bad feeling about this. I’m just offering my advice.”

“You’re questioning my judgement.”

“Well, in this case, maybe. It’s not exactly a great plan.”

He sounds sincere, but does he really not see how offensive he’s being? I push the drink away and look out the window. I’d thought he would be the one person to offer me the respect of supporting me. But he’s no different to Trudy or Taryn or even Brett who sat there giving silent agreement to Taryn’s criticism.

Davin may not have said much, but his words are the curling water atop a huge wave. Or maybe the curdling water. Seldom have my feelings undergone such a violent reversal.

“Rae? Are you angry with me?” he asks.

I turn and stare at him. “Your powers of perception amaze me. I’m going to leave now. See if, over the next fifteen minutes, you can detect that I’ve gone.”

I’m too angry to sleep. When the anger cools, the sense of injury starts spinning down and wavering like a top. Could I have been a little unreasonable?

I glance at my phone. No messages. Oh well, I suppose I killed that before it even started. Once he considers the wounds I gave him, he won’t be coming back for more. Maybe he was right about the tongue.

I used to think my singleness had a lot to do with shape. A new perspective on that slowly emerges, but without a solution. How do you diet for an overweight personality?
The bus leaves at 9.15 AM, but the sun will only rise about an hour before that. A little after seven, I head out into the pre-dawn greys still tinged yellow by street lamps. I catch my breath. Snow! If I’d known it had been snowing I might have sat by a window. There’s something magical about snow when you’ve mostly lived without it.

With the sunrise just starting to colour the white surfaces, this is quite possibly the most enchanting morning I’ve seen in years. A neighbour is standing outside his door, scowling and muttering to his wife about the “bleeding slippery mess”. I ignore him and smile to myself as my shoes start to crunch down the hill.

I had planned to take a city bus to town but that’s not happening anymore. I’m not having scenes like this obscured by foggy windows. I’ll need to walk at a brisk pace, but that should keep me toasty.

The roads are still asleep—houses, ears and trees hiding under their snowy duvets. When I reach the park, I see I’m not the only one up, and footprints tell of a few dozen strollers that were here before us. I feel sorry for the dogs. I want to suggest the owners try walking barefoot. But most of the dogs actually seem to like it, apart from one short-haired boxer-type. He’s walking like a cat over a wet road, lifting his paws to his shoulders and not daring to sniff anything.

It’s about four miles to the bus stop. I wasn’t able to print my ticket, but I show the driver the image on my phone and explain my situation. He’s satisfied. I release a deep, foggy breath and choose a seat near the middle, against the left side-window. The bus is fairly empty so we all have a bit of space to ourselves.

Ten minutes later, we are out of Dublin and I’m watching smallholdings and then farms flicker past, all covered in the lightest dusting of white that sinks into the ground by the minute.

When we arrive in Galway, it’s midday and sunny. I glance around and it doesn’t take me long before I have a pretty good idea of where I am and where I need to go. I’ve always been good with maps and directions. Perhaps it comes from years of having to take responsibility when Alina and I went anywhere. I set out on a road heading due west, but just to be sure, I ask the lady at the coffee shop. She indicates the opposite direction. West appears to be different in Galway. I blame it on the lack of sleep.
With a croissant and hot chocolate, I head out, nibbling and sipping and enjoying the bright sun. I consider beginning the search before the others arrive, but I have no idea where to start.

The hostel is a simple place. I like it, particularly the aged black and white photos of donkey drawn carts travelling through what I presume is old Galway. The rooms are clean and quiet. After paying, I head to my dorm where I’m the sole occupant. I onto a bunk, not really intending to sleep.

Two hours later I’m ejected from my dreams when they are invaded by floor-shaking music. I’m hopelessly confused until I stumble over to the window and discover a bar underneath me. There won’t be any more sleeping through this. Time for a walk.

The weather has, of course, changed. Galway is small, cold and miserable. Or maybe that’s me. I walk through the square passing a few others, their noses turning blue in the soft downpour of sleet. I try to see each face, always looking for my sister. I may as well be looking for her in the houses of parliament. She would never be outdoors in weather like this.

There’s a brick road that winds down the gradual slope between stores that have all been stolen from a child’s colouring book. Sun bursting through a grey blanket reflects off the wet road like a mirror. I wonder how many high-heels have slipped here over the years.

Around me, coats are thick, collars high, and hats low, but people are out in numbers. One thing I’ve learned about the Irish is that they are not intimidated by anything the clouds can hurl at them.

Three musicians are busking. There’s a guitarist who sings along with a banjo player who tries to sing and a double bassist who just basses. The two crooners show they are not only musicians but also acrobats. They’ve somehow managed to get up onto the rounded tops of chrome bollards—those hip-high posts that allow pedestrians to pass, but not cars. The buskers play, sing, and wobble for all they are worth. A few people drop coins, but I keep to the far side of the road, not wanting to be part of the spectacle. I’d also hate to find myself beneath a musical avalanche if something goes wrong.

At the bottom of the road I cross over a river and crunch through the ice to a pebble beach where some old ships are dying from rust and hypothermia. The gently falling sleet finds a wind to ride and comes hurtling across just as the sun appears through a tear in the grey blankets out west. Funny how a bit of sun changes everything.

While I’m trudging out over an enormous green above the coastline, my eyes are on the golden clouds, so I don’t immediately realise what’s happening when the trudging becomes squelching which deepens to a sullen slosh as my left tommy vanishes. I’m on a soccer field
or perhaps a Gaelic football field, but apparently it’s a dual purpose facility that becomes a swimming pool when it rains.

I finally clear the green, which I think I’ll dub the wet—this being the more appropriate adjective for now—and clamber over some rocks to the beach. The shore is muddy sand, but it’s beautiful.

Somewhere back over the wet, in the shivering city of Galway, is my sister. Or so we hope. I wonder if Alina is looking at this same sunset.

I browse through memories of her against the backdrop tik-tik-tik of sleet on my plastic poncho.

I see her as a little girl crouching under a tree in the garden, watching the sleet fall, her face scrunched up in disgust. The house is only twenty yards away, but she refuses to make the short dash because someone at school told her that sleet is hail snot.

Other such moments emerge, flying-ants climbing into the air and drifting around.

The rain has stopped—upstaged by the wind no doubt. Fence posts start to whistle. My poncho is being blown against me with such force we must be bonding on a molecular level. The sun beams. What’s with this weather? I’m too cold now to reminisce anymore and the sunset has become one of those polite smiles—all brightness and no warmth.

I squelch and splosh my way back to the bridge, and by this stage the exercise isn’t enough to restore what I’ve lost. If I get any colder my legs will crack off at the knees and I’ll shatter on impact. Call me dramatic but this place knows how to put the ice in your bones.

When I get back to the hostel, I make a grand, soggy, shivering entrance. Brett and Taryn are here and are suitably impressed. I offer a hasty greeting and hurry to the showers.

Once restored to a toasty thirty-seven degrees Celsius, I join my friends in the common room where they are waiting for me with blankets and hot drinks. We brought packed meals along to share. Brett warms the macaroni-cheese in the microwave while Taryn asks where I went.

It sounds like I walked across half the county. Felt that way. The meal is quiet, and when it’s over, Brett opens a beer and slides down in his couch until he can give his undivided attention to the ceiling. I’m too full of conflicting hope and dread to want idle chatter, so I do the same.

Taryn, however, fidgets. She looks from Brett to me and back with the desperation of a drowning person. Some people are comfortable with silence; Taryn is not among them. I think she believes a death of conversation brings a death of relationship. I can see her pulling out her breather mask and preparing for CPR.
I furrow my brow and try to look heavy with thought. I wonder if it shows that the only thing I’m thinking about is looking thoughtful. She leans forward and takes a breath. I’m not going to escape this rescue attempt of hers.

“So…” she begins, and then her eyes dart wildly around.

I cringe. Who says Soo…” without first thinking of a topic? She shuffles as if settling in for a good chat. “So, I’ve been thinking…”—she’s now searching the ceiling along with Brett. “Terrible weather we’re having.”

Brett looks over at her. “Weather?” he says. “Really?”

“Well you’re not exactly helping with your booze snooze.”

“Helping what?” She starts to say something but then just glares at him. For Brett, this is making no sense. He frowns, takes a deep swig and settles back again.

“There’s great nightlife here, especially for students,” Taryn continues.

This time I frown.

“Right,” she says, blushing. “We’re not here for that, I know.”

As far as conversational resuscitation goes, she’s giving us quite a performance. Her expression lights up again.

“But it could be the best way to start getting to know the locals—you know, ask questions, do some … you know…”

“Investigating?” Brett suggests.

“Well the word makes it sound stupid, but isn’t it actually a good idea?”

Brett looks at me, but then he pulls his lips tight and shakes his head. “I think it would be a better idea to wait for Joe. If he knows this place as well as Rae says, he’ll probably have a plan. If we go splashing around, we could muddy the water.”

“How?” she asks.

“What if this Murphy recognises Rae again? What if he doesn’t want her to find Alina? If we start showing pictures around, we might get the wrong kind of reaction. There’s a lot of mud we could create.”

“Agreed,” I say.

“But look here,” Brett resumes. “It’s still early and we don’t need to sit around all night. This place is more depressing than winter drizzle. Let’s take a walk.”

“You know it’s winter drizzle outside?” I say. “And it’s dark.”

“An anorak will protect you against precipitation and Taryn will defend us against the dangers of the night.”
“Huh?”
“A joke, Taz.”
“Jokes are meant to be funny.”
“You set the bar too high.” He glances at her. “Or maybe you need a few beers in you to appreciate my mastery of wit.”
I throw a pillow at him and head off to fetch my poncho.

We amble through the streets and refrain from entering any of the clubs, though Brett makes a strong case for supporting a pub or two. We don’t give it a moment’s consideration. A drunken Brett is something neither of us want to see again. So we walk.

The Spanish Arch was charming when I passed it in the afternoon. At night it looks like an ideal spot for trading government secrets and committing murders. We don’t linger.

After almost an hour, we end up at the Galway docks where The Celtic Explorer is moored. I look over its cranes and winches and its five or six decks that get smaller and smaller until the top ones hardly seem big enough for a person to stretch out and tan. I’m curious as to the function of this ship. If Alina were here, she would probably run up the gangway, laugh at my protests, stroll around like she owned the place, and light a cigarette. If caught, she would turn on the angel smile and the silver laugh and get away with a reprimand so mild it would sound like a dinner invitation. She always managed to dodge serious trouble.

“It makes me think of the ships that fish those dangerous waters up north,” Taryn says. “It’s all sun and smiles when they board and then they get out there and the weather changes and bam! I remember seeing this one sailor who always wore a yellow bandanna. He was the one who used to laugh when the waves got high, but then one day … Rae? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I say and try to control the shuddering.
“You had such a look while I was talking.”
“I … I just don’t like ships.” I turn away. “Let’s go. I need to sleep.”

I want to know what happened to the man with the yellow bandanna, but I dare not ask, because throughout my life, it was Alina who laughed at the waves.
In Search

When my phone alarm goes off, it’s morning outside while still being as cold as midnight. I get a bit of exercise when I fight soggy shoes onto cringing feet that want nothing to do with them. I really should have brought a second pair. Brett and Taryn are already dressed and waiting. We have a quick cereal breakfast and head out into the chilly dawn.

I spot Joe in Eyre Square and hurry over to meet him. While in Dublin, I offered to put him up in the backpackers, but he said he knew someone here who would give him a bed for a few nights. Today, he’s dressed in a tweed jacket I haven’t seen before, and his trousers appear to have been washed and ironed.

Before he notices me, I catch a strange look on his face. In spite of the neatening up, he’s never looked so hopeless. But the expression vanishes as I enter his field of vision. He gives me a nod and the slightest of smiles.

“You had breakfast?” I ask.

“After a fashion, lass. I found a dead cat in the back alley. Cooked it over a fire of plastic bottles.” And with that, his bleak mood is swept beneath a rug of humour. I wonder if it’s defensive.

“You’d better stop with that nonsense,” I say. “Brett and Taryn will think you’re as mad as a box of frogs.”

“That’s an Irish expression,” he says, as my two friends arrive. “Can you mimic the accent yet?”

I push the base of my tongue a little forward and pour a liberal dose of “r” over everything as I brighten all the vowels and tell him it’s a grand mornin’ and I would be happy to catch a bit o’ sunshine afore noon.

He frowns. “What, exactly, was that?” he inquires as my friends laugh.

“An Irish accent?”

He scratches his head. “I think it’d be best if you stay with your English one. That fact that you haven’t acquired an Australian one from your years there tells me you aren’t a sponge for accents.”

I try to hide my disappointment as I introduce Taryn. Brett and Joe shake hands—they’ve met a few times—but Brett seems unprepared for the rattling of his tender frame.

“I keep forgetting about your grip,” he says, nursing his fingers. “I feel like I just inserted my hand into a meat grinder.”
“At least my hands are cleaner than the grinder,” Joe says. “I wash them every year.”

“Oh Joe,” I say, “stop it now.”

He gives me a hurt look that isn’t lost on the others. Taryn glares at me like I’ve just shoved a cripple down the stairs.

Joe’s sense of humour really does test the limits. He knows his status as a rough sleeper is a point of discomfort for those with homes, and he doesn’t mind making people squirm a little. I don’t think he’s being manipulative or anything; he just finds it amusing.

“So what’s the plan?” I ask.

“There are two people I’d like to speak to,” he says, “but I didn’t realise we would be this many. It could be a problem. The more ears, the less folks have to say.”

“We’ll hang back when you get to that part,” Brett says. “We’re just here to support a friend.”

Joe gives him a nod and stands. He tucks the paper under his arm and pulls his cap down.

“You don’t mind walking?” he asks me.

“How far?” I try to shut out a ten-voice chorus of wailing from the ends of my shoes.

“Oh, not far,” he says. “It will never be more than a block at a time.”

The morning is one of those indecisive ones—patchy cloud and a good deal of confused wind that dashes here and there and then stops to look around as if searching for a part of itself that got lost along the way.

“Joe,” I say, jogging a few steps to catch up and walk alongside him. “I know you like to keep thoughts to yourself, but are you going tell me the plan? Don’t I need to know more than which direction to walk?”

Joe doesn’t turn to me, but he speaks as he walks. “For now, you’ll be doing very little,” he says. “I spent yesterday talking to some old friends. So far, there are only two leads.”

“Is it enough to take to the guards?”

“There’s still no evidence of anything criminal. They won’t make it a priority. If we find your sister and need help getting her out, we’ll call them.”

As he talks, I notice an odd heaviness to his voice. I’m not surprised. I wonder if it has to do with this place. My guess is that there is some personal history here he’d rather forget.

We walk in silence. Even after my feet are so sore that the darkly lit pubs with their bitter taps are beginning to look good, we keep on walking. The first of our two leads is not where he should be, so we turn around and walk most of the way back before changing direction.

In the meantime, the indecisive weather has made up its mind. It wants exercise. Small clouds tuck away their drops and sprint all over a crisp blue sky.
Down in the warren of streets, we hear a lot of harmless shrieking above us, but then we take a turn that lines up with the direction of the wind and we get blasted like model aeroplanes in a test tunnel. On reaching a long, exposed bridge over River Corrib, we’re almost swept over the railing. This is becoming a bit much. I bite my 5ft6 tongue lest the wind get hold of it and give Joe a lashing. He seems to have divined my thoughts.

“Only a few more roads,” he says.

Taryn is muttering to Brett about knots in her hair and Brett isn’t listening.

We turn, eventually, and I see a pub. Before we reach it, Joe notices something and moves across to the archway of a grey stone building. There’s a man there in a sleeping bag. Joe suggests that Brett and Taryn wait while we head over.

“Robbie,” Joes says as we approach. “That you in there?”

The sleeping bag stirs a little and mutters something I can’t quite make out but the tone suggests it wasn’t polite.

“Robbie, it’s Joe. I need to talk to you.”

There’s more stirring and struggling and finally a head emerges from the neoprene cocoon. “Joe?” it says.

The man brushes strands from his eyes and squints up with a face that looks tired, so tired. It’s not a mere lack of energy. A sculptor has etched lines into this man’s face that no sleep will ever erase. You’d think something has fed on him from the inside.

“Oh, Duncan,” Joe says. “Difficult to tell who it is when there’s no more than a tuft of you to see.”

“Joe,” the man rasps, “how are you? I heard you was dead?”

“Not yet, Duncan. I have some miles left. And so do you.”

Duncan nods and tries to speak but erupts into a wet cough that drags on for almost half a minute.

“That’s not sounding good, boyo.”

Duncan waves him off and coughs again while he shakes a cigarette from an empty box. He lights up and drags, calming himself. “What brings you back?” he finally manages to say. “And who is she?” he nods in my direction.

Joe settles down next to him and pulls out a folded page which he opens up.

“She is the sister of this girl,” he says, handing over the picture of Alina. “We were hoping Shane might know where she is, but he’s not where he’s supposed to be.”

“Shane’s dead,” Duncan says. “Took a bad turn about three weeks ago. Robbie’s gone too. Last winter.” He studies the picture and whistles his appreciation.
“She disappeared several months ago,” Joe says, “and we think the man behind it is here. He’s about Six-one, short dark hair, well-dressed, probably a dealer. Ring any bells?”

Duncan swears quietly and shakes his head. “So she was using?”

Joe nods. “On and off.”

“I wish I could help,” Duncan says and begins to cough, “but I’m not as connected as before.” The last part of the sentence emerges like the dying notes of an over-squeezed accordion. He coughs for almost a minute.

Joe lays a hand on the withered man’s shoulder and puts something down on the far side of the sleeping bag that only the two of them can see.

“Thank you, Joe,” Duncan says when he can speak again. “You always been the best of us.”

“You get yourself to a hospital and stay there this time. I don’t like the sound of your lungs.”

“You know how it is,” he says. “I can’t take it in the hospitals.”

“Well the guards won’t let you stay here for long. Where will you move to?”

Duncan shrugs. “Somewhere else. I was hoping for the overhang by the library, but Bernard has that, and a group of Romas has my old spot down by the river. Dubs any better?”

“Same problems, just more.”

After a silence that seems to hold an ocean of empathy, Joe rises. “So long, Duncan.”

“Look after yourself, Joe—and be careful.”

We turn and head back the way we came.

A thin voice follows us. “Oi, girl.”

I glance back.

“I’m sorry for your sister.”

“Thanks,” I say. I give him a quick smile, but his words only increase my worry.

Joe doesn’t speak until we’re outside the pub. “The next lead—who is now apparently the only lead—should be here by now,” he says. “It’s his regular lunch spot. I should warn you though, we’re not exactly friends.”

Joe’s heavy voice suggests he’s wrestling with some terrible recollection. When he takes hold of the door handle, he hesitates. Clearly, whoever we are about to meet is someone he does not look forward to seeing. Finally, he frowns, almost wrenches the door open, and ushers me inside.

It’s one of the real Irish pubs—no bright and shiny trimmings for tourists, no big green leprechauns glowing with fluorescents. Inside, it’s dark, from the bronze pendant lights to the
ancient wooden counters and antique furniture. The smoke is thick. I can’t believe a few dozen cigarettes and pipes can produce this. Searching through a haze of blue cloud, I glimpse a small peat fire shivering and wheezing under a skinny chimney—too skinny it would seem.

There’s a man in the corner playing what looks like a large mandolin—I think it’s called a mandocello—and half a dozen of his friends are gathered around, singing, or more like bellowing. The result is surprisingly melodious.

Joe looks this way and that. He speaks to the barman who points across the room. We leave Brett and Taryn at the bar and carve a path between tables.

Two elderly gents we pass are quaffing dark pints. One of them is complaining at considerable volume about a hurling match. The “eejit ref”, it appears, belongs in jail.

The man we approach sits alone. He turns from the television and looks at Joe without interest, then at me with a great deal of interest.

“Angus,” Joe says, taking a seat.

I sit down too, but I keep the chair away from the table and don’t settle in.

Angus turns to Joe and does a fine job of spelling *Sod off* with steepled brows and a raised half lip.

Joe opens his jacket and takes out the printed photo. “Seen her?” he asks.

Angus looks up and shrugs. “Maybe. Maybe not.”

“This is her sister,” Joe says, indicating me. “Are you really going to try and make money off something like this?”

“Do I run a charity? Information like this has a risk. Two grand. And you know you won’t get it cheaper from anyone else.”

“You know I don’t have that,” Joe says.

“She does.” Angus inclines his head at me.

I stare back at him. “I’m a student! Where am I going to get that?”

“Your problem, sweetheart.” He drains his mug, stands, and glances down at Joe. “You know where to find me, old man,” he says as he leaves.

“Angus, wait!” Joe says.

He doesn’t even pause in his stride as he leaves the pub.

When we’re alone again, Joe is the first to speak. “Sorry, Rae,” he says. “I’m not sure who else to go to.”

“You think Angus really knows?” I ask, scowling at the table.

“Doesn’t matter. You can’t pay a sum like that just for an address.”

“It’s my sister, not an address.”
“We’ll find her another way.”
“What other way? You just told me he was your last option.”
Joe doesn’t answer as he frowns at the picture on the table.
I’ve had enough. I’m not getting this close and giving up because I’m too stingy. What I told Angus wasn’t entirely true. I have almost two thousand euro in my account—earmarked for rent and groceries—and Taryn could lend me a hundred. I’ll have to find some way to make it back, but that’s tomorrow’s problem.
Joe protests weakly when I ask him to take me to the nearest Bank of Ireland, but I’m set.

When we get to the bank, Taryn comes in with me. We join a queue and after a few moments, she turns to me.

“Are you sure about this?” she whispers.

“It’s a lead, Taryn. A real lead. If it was your sister, would you turn away when you’re this close? It’s not like the guards were any help. What else can I do?”

I approach the teller and make the withdrawal. Taryn hands me a few notes and walk out and rejoin the others. The envelope of cash feels heavy.

“Let’s go,” I say to Joe.

“You want to go with?” he asks. “Angus doesn’t work in some office in a good part of town. There are people there who might not treat you right. He might not treat you right.”

Joe doesn’t need to carry on. I’ve read enough thrillers to be able to picture the detail he’s not mentioning. I reach into the pocket of my coat—and hesitate. But I was the one who walked onto this bungee platform. Am I really going to freeze at this point, embarrassing myself and insulting Joe?

I hand the envelope across.

“See you at the backpackers later?” I ask.

Joe frowns as he takes the money. It’s clear he doesn’t want to do it this way. Yes, it’s a lot of money, but if it leads me to my sister, it’s well worth it.

“Could be on the late side,” he says, “but I’ll be there.”

“Be careful,” I say.

“I’ll be alright.” He touches his cap, turns, and sets off down the road.

As I watch him go, I note the uneasiness of his posture. It’s his past, I’m sure of it now, invisible to me yet leering at him from every stone archway and empty recess.
We walk back to the square. On the way, Brett makes his strongest case yet for stopping at one of the bright restaurants along Quay Street. There’s nothing else that needs doing for the afternoon, so we let ourselves be bullied. Anyway, we’re starved from all the walking.

Taryn and I order shepherd’s pie, and Brett orders a burger and a pint. I remember, as the meals arrive, that I’m more or less broke. Brett spies the motion as my hand goes to my wallet and offers to cover me until we get back to Dublin. It’s an offer I have no choice but to accept.

After the meal, he orders a second pint, but my feet are already starting to tap and bounce under the table. Seeing as we don’t all need to head back, they stay while I take my leave and hurry up the road to Eyre Square.

Of course it’s too early for Joe to be there. But by ten o’clock that night, he’s still not there. We wait around the whole of the next day, but Joe never arrives.
Night Life

It’s a slow, creeping experience—the doubt. It seems to work its way up from my ever-wet shoes like rising damp. I fight it. Joe will be here. I know he will. Something has prevented him.

He wouldn’t have … He couldn’t have …

As the assertions lose conviction I compensate with force. It’s not just Alina and all my savings at stake here, it’s my dignity. What would people think of me if it turned out … I don’t even want to go there.

After ambling around the square till evening, I walk into the backpackers’ common area where Brett and Taryn fall silent with an abruptness that more or less reveals the topic of their conversation.

They exchange glances, each apparently goading the other. It’s Taryn who eventually speaks.

“Rae, don’t you think we need to consider the possibility that … uh …. Joe might not be coming back?”

“You mean,” I say, raising my eyebrows, “that he robbed me?”

Taryn cringes, but Brett speaks up.

“You said he was staying with a friend. Could be possible this friend was a bad influence. If Joe has had just one hit of something, an old craving could be back. A wad of cash might have been more than he could resist—even if he meant well.”

I stare at my shoes while Brett speaks. When he’s done, I step over to the counter and make myself a cup of tea.

“Look,” Brett continues. “I’m not saying Joe’s a thief or a liar or anything like that, but I had a friend who got into the hard stuff and I’ve seen what it’s like. If he had money—anyone’s money—and the craving hit, he would spend it. He said it was a thousand times more intense than dying of thirst. Drugs can make people do things they absolutely don’t want to.”

“Joe is not a drug addict! And I’m not a blind fool!” I hurl my cup on the floor. It’s made of polystyrene, so it bounces away in comic mockery of my distress, but the tea, at least, splatters in a satisfying arc.

“Alright, Rae,” Brett says, standing. “I’m going out to let off steam. I recommend you do the same.”

He leaves and I’m too embarrassed to start another conversation with Taryn, so we read.
We wait up for Joe until eleven, but I’ve finally lost hope.

It doesn’t feel like more than an hour or two when the banging on my door scatters my dreams. It’s Brett and he’s shouting. I can smell his breath before I open.

“Neela! I saw her.”

“Who?”

“Neena!” He takes a breath for another attempt, but I’m awake now.

“Alina?” I cry.

He nods as vigorously as his torpid movements will allow. I almost rush out in my socks but decide I probably won’t get far. By the time I’m ready to leave, Taryn is there, and we head out with Brett in the lead—sort of. He keeps wheeling and veering, so we have to support him from time to time and hold him to a constant bearing.

He can’t remember the name of the club—apparently it was his third or fourth for the evening—but he knows where to find it again. Possibly. If those directions get lost in his cranial slush, I think I might actually punch him.

The bracing night air shocks me fully awake. I have my doubts about all this, but it’s also raised enough hope that if we can’t find the place, it will be like losing her all over again.

We try to get him to explain so we can run ahead, but he insists he needs to accompany us for “pertekshin”. I don’t think a sober Brett could protect me against anything more dangerous than a logical fallacy, and in his current state, not even that, but he’s being stubbornly male. I think he’s also proud of himself and wants to be a part of this.

We don’t have far to go. The club has no grand entrance—just a few signs and a welcoming party of beauties and bouncers.

After passing the two muscleheads, we pay the cover charge of five euro—Taryn gets this—and are ushered down a corridor and into a large space that’s fairly dark in spite of the numerous lights. Music pounds through the club. There’s a wall-to-wall bar at the far end and a DJ booth nearby.

Brett leads us into the middle of the floor, peers this way and that, and ogles a tall blonde girl who does not ogle back.

“Well?” I shout over the music.

He raises a finger as if to point and begins turning, searching, not seeing what he’s searching for.
I’m in tatters. Apart from looking like I crawled out of a sleeping bag, I’m being stretched between new hope and the despair and shame that have exhausted me over the past twenty-four hours.

I begin skimming over faces as I’ve done so often in the past months. It only takes a minute before my attention is caught by a skinny figure walking away. She’s too thin for Alina, but there’s that slight rotation with each stride, the auburn tresses, the coquettish tilt of the head.

It can’t be. This woman is moving freely, independent. If my sister were free, she would have visited, or at least called. It cannot be her. It’s not possible.

But the details continue matching up with a lifetime of familiarity.

There’s no growing joy. I feel emptier with every pulse of the music, each click of recognition, until I can no longer deny the unbelievable reality, until all that remains in my thoughts is a hollow ache.

I choke, trying to swallow the fact that Alina was not taken from me, but that she abandoned me of her own free will. That free will is insultingly obvious in her minxy steps, like she owns the place.

I’d expected to find her in some kind of imprisonment, unable to make contact. I dreaded that possibility. But with the search ending like this, the pain is mine and not hers.

Would I have preferred it the other way?

The question is no more than a needle stab in the back of my thoughts, but it angers me because it makes me feel guilty, and I’m not the guilty one here.

When she turns to the side, I see her face and the picture is complete. She’s doing the coy smile, leading a heavy-set young man and his girlfriend up the stairs.

Taryn has seen. She raises her voice and asks if I’m alright.

I nod, perhaps the biggest lie of my life, and head after Alina. I keep a distance and let my hair drop forward to cover my face.

Upstairs, there are couches and low tables. There’s another bar here and Alina leads the couple to a barman and speaks to him. He disappears through a back door and returns a little while later. I don’t see the handover, and I don’t really need to. I know they aren’t buying peppermints—though there’s probably some drug going by that name. The drugs are immaterial. The point is, when I had no one, my sister shook me off so she could live the high life.

She turns around and heads back to the stairs, winking at a good-looking man as she passes him. Only when she gets within five yards does she look up and see me.
One hand goes to her mouth, the other shoots out as if wanting to push the image away. She half crouches, gasping, but recovers quickly and rushes up to me.

“Rae, what are you doing here?”
We don’t hug, we just look.

“You’re not even going be friendly enough to say hello?” I ask in my least friendly voice. She looks over her shoulder and turns back.

“Rae, you can’t be here. If—”

“Of course I can be here. If a few hundred other students can be here, why not me?”
She glances again over her shoulder and the distress is plain.

“Worried someone might think we’re related?”
She’s not really listening to me and it’s raising my temperature further.

I see someone I recognise. He has that same overpowering way about him, the same hard mouth and steady eyes. I steel myself, refusing to look away. Those eyes lock on mine with that same unnatural charm, promising warmth while glinting like ice in the dead of winter.

I can’t deny, even to myself, that he frightens me, but I’m too angry to back down. I tilt my head up as he starts moving towards us.

Alina has seen him and she turns to me in a panic. “Go away, Rae. Please!”
He’s almost here.

Alina turns to face him. At his approach, she steps back, treading on my foot.

“Leave her alone, Murphy,” she pleads. “You promised you’d leave her alone.”
I blink. This is not what I expected.

Murphy smiles at Alina. “Don’t you think it’s time she gets to choose for herself?” He takes a deep pull on his joint and blows the smoke across Alina’s nostrils.

She trembles, leaf-like. For the first time I notice just how thick her make up is, and how gaunt her frame. She’s always been slender, but this is something else. The word, anorexia, darts through my mind. I push it away and fix my eyes, instead, on her hair. But that has changed too. The auburn tresses are no longer lush or silky. It actually looks as if she’s wearing a cheap wig.

Murphy looks past her and studies me. This time, with my anger cooled, I feel the strength of that invasive stare.

“Please,” Alina says. “Just leave her alone and let her go. She won’t come back here. I promise.”
He ignores her and advances, taking a deep drag so that the tip of the joint flares.
I step back.
He smiles, grips my arm just under the shoulder, pulls me towards him, and empties his lungs in my face.

The room vanishes along with all the people. I’m fourteen, waiting with Alina outside school for our mother. Hans, Alina’s supposedly European boyfriend is waiting with us. He could have smoked on the way here, but I get the feeling that without an audience, half the pleasure would be stolen.

Hans is a seventeen-year-old loser. He’s intelligent but makes stupid life choices to compensate for this, beginning with dropping out of school because it “wasn’t his beat”. He’s a young man who can be recognised by baggy surfer vests, a fringe that’s always in his eyes, a cigarette, and a look of deep and noble anguish he’s been practising in front of the mirror all morning. What Alina sees in these kinds of boys is beyond me. Or is it beneath me?

Hans has just finished regaling us with descriptions of his emo-esque sufferings, which I take the liberty of interpreting as simple boredom. Alina is smitten. She looks up at him with adoring eyes. I want to puke.

“Rae,” Hans says. “I think it’s time you broke out of your little nerd box. There’s more to life than grades, you know.”

“Oh?” I say, “and you’ve found it, have you? Please. Enlighten me.” I always talked above my age.

That was when he leaned past Alina and blew a cloud of smoke at me. And when he discovered Alina has claws. We never saw him again.

But Hans was a kitten wearing tiger stripes. My instincts tell me this Murphy is something else. As the room and the people reappear, I know what’s about to happen and I turn to Alina, but I’m too late.

Her face has changed. All the meekness is gone, her eyes are narrowed, and her lips pulled back. I try to stop her, but she leaps in front of me and slaps Murphy so hard that the joint flies across the room. He totters and knocks into someone’s drink, spilling it over the arm of his suede jacket.

When he turns, a screen has been ripped away and all I see is rage. He takes one step and hits my sister in the eye. Alina is so frail. What chance does she have? She’s thrown back, glances off my shoulder, and spins. Her delicate face comes down on the sharp edge of a low table and the rest of her slumps onto the carpet.

Everyone stares.
The carpet around her head begins to discolour, growing darker by the second. People are shouting, gasping. I stumble forward. I need to get to her, but I’m pushed aside. It becomes chaotic.

More shouting, more people. Someone taking charge. Furniture being moved. A voice yelling for space. I tunnel through and kneel by Alina’s bleeding head. I think they realise I’m family and leave me be. There are bandages. They turn red so fast.

Dizzy. I’m not sure if it’s me or everything else. The whole world is falling into a nightmarish tumble. For an instant I’m aware of sirens, voices, lights. But the sounds are warped, drowning. Then it’s like a blanket settles over me, turning everything into a dark nothingness, carrying me to a quiet place.

Somewhere, far away, hands are shaking my arm, but I prefer it here. Here I feel safe. Here I don’t have to listen to the gasps or watch those bandages turn crimson.
Winter

During an Irish winter, you still get several seasons a day, but the little bits of summer are more about clear blue skies than golden warmth because the sun barely clears the trees. Midday shadows stretch a long way from the branches casting them.

I feel sorry for the leafless planes with crooked hands held aloft, fingers cutting the chilly gusts. It’s almost as if they spend winter locked in supplication. Blowing some warmth into my gloves, I break into a trot as drizzle dots the road.

I hurry over to the bus, and as is my wont, climb the steps to the upper deck where the front seat—my seat—is empty. Here was where I sat when we travelled on that first day to our aunt’s house.

It’s the same big window that glides forward, letting me peer down over the streets, and the same bright yellow safety bar in front of me. But now the glass is fogged up inside and running with droplets, there are no tourists snapping pictures behind me, there is no Davin, and there is no Alina.

Much has changed, but one thing that’s gone back to the way it was, is accommodation. I’ve had to move in with Trudy again. No money, no choice. Taryn was upset but not nearly as upset as I was. When I’ve saved up enough, I’ll be free again, but it will take a few months of part-time cashiering.

At the hospital, I’m a few minutes early for visiting hours, but a nurse recognises me and lets me through. I’ve been here every day for the past two weeks, so I know the way.

There are four beds in the ward. It’s women only. The first bed is empty and a nurse is cleaning out the little cupboard and drawer. The items are being dropped into a plastic bag, like they are being thrown away. I don’t want to watch. I remember the quiet woman who occupied it. She must have taken a sudden turn.

I hurry past to the next bed. Alina is awake, staring at the TV where a game show is in full, riotous swing. It’s in such contradiction with the mood of the room that it almost blends in as some absurd counterpart. Alina stares at it, but her vacant eyes tell me she’s not following the game.

I open my mouth to greet her, but the words catch in my throat as I see the bruising around her eye. The bandages must have come off this morning. The eye itself is red and the skin around it mottled blue and green. There’s a jagged cut that’s been stitched and it’s going to leave a scar. I saw her without the thick make-up the first time I visited and realised how much
she’s aged, but what I’m seeing now takes it to a different level. The woman before me is not beautiful. To most women I know, beauty is power, and this is like a reversal of our hierarchy. It freezes my tongue.

Her head lolls to the side and she studies me.

“Hello, Rae, she says with a flicker of a smile. “You’re looking well.”

“Alina,” I blurt, searching for words that aren’t ready. “Your eye is … okay?” How could I tell her she’s looking well because the lie would be too obvious, and the truth would be far too cruel. It’s strangely uncomfortable being on the other side of this predicament. Cynical irony has no place here and I’m hardly fluent in any other language.

“The eye’s blurry,” she says, “but they tell me it will get better.”

“How … is the … service—I mean the care since you complained?” I ask.

“Food still tastes like soil,” she says, “and the wine tastes like fruit juice.”

I grin. At least she still has a sense of humour. “They say you can probably leave in another week.”

Alina swears with some vigour and turns to look at the ceiling. “Rae, another week will destroy me. I thought Trudy’s hovel was the lowest rung on the ladder, but the ladder goes underground.”

In the context of that empty bed next door, underground is not a word I want to think about.

A young, well-groomed doctor walks past to look at a patient at the far end. On the way back, he turns and smiles.

At me.

I glance towards Alina, surprised, confused, guilty. Her habitual smirk of conquest is nowhere to be seen, and in its place is a desolation that makes her seem small and insignificant.

“Taryn and the others say Hi,” I offer. It’s a hopeless consolation, but I can’t think of anything else.

“They all know? You had all your friends looking for me?”

“Couldn’t stop them. It’s what friends do.”

“I didn’t need to be found, Rae. I would have worked it out in the end.”

I manage to resist the bait. We could have a blood-letting feud right here. I summon all my courage.

“Maybe finding you was as much for me as for you,” I say. Getting those words out was like pulling a frightened dog from its kennel.

Alina studies the ceiling. She swallows a few times, and even though she’s probably fighting it, her eyes grow filmy.
“I know,” she says at last.

It’s not an apology, not even thanks, yet somehow it’s just right. For the first time in our lives, I think we’ve reached a genuine understanding.

After a few deep breaths I speak up. “Why didn’t you call, Alina? I didn’t even know if you were still alive.”

“I meant to, but my phone wasn’t private. He made me tell him the password. He went through it at random times. I didn’t want him getting hold of you, so I deleted your number.”

“You could have memorised the number and used a payphone.”

“I was too frightened to slip around him like that. He knew everything that happened there, and he’s dangerous, Rae. When I thought of leaving, he found out and it was bad. I mean really bad. They say he killed someone once, and I can believe it.”

“Why did you go with him in the first place?”

She swallows and her eyes press shut as if her throat is sore. “It wasn’t always like that. He was kind at the beginning. When he asked me to come to Galway, I didn’t want to go. That was the first time I saw how angry he can get. I already owed him money and he said if I didn’t work it off, he would get it from you.”

All the angry thoughts I’ve harboured against my sister look up at me, and for a moment I’m unable to speak. “Well he’s out of our lives now,” I finally say, sidestepping the whole topic.

She nods and closes her eyes. There’s nowhere I need to be, so I stay and watch as she falls asleep to a background drone of the telly, the beeping and wheezing of machines, and the bustle of the nurse making that bed. On the screen, a silver-suited presenter throws up his arms, and the crowd howls in a show of tragic sympathy when the last contestant doesn’t know how many muscles are in an elephant’s trunk and loses a free trip to Disney World.

I catch a bus into town and jump out near Merrion square. A quiet stroll is what I need before heading into Trinity for an hour or two before the library closes. Swirling dead leaves skitter across the darkening walkways and do cartwheels over the grass, but there are no children out chasing them today. All chins are tucked, caps low against the bitter wind.

On the way back, I spot Robert. He waves me over, and after a moment’s hesitation, I cross over to where he sits. He holds out an envelope.

“Joe said to give you this,” he tells me.

I can see it’s too thin to contain a repayment, so it must be a letter. I consider asking him to burn the cursed thing, but I suppress my emotions and I take it, stuffing it in my pocket.
“Is he around?” I ask, looking left and right.

“Naa. Didn’t say where he was going, but he’s cleared out. Some Donegal kid is in his spot.”

“Donegal? Isn’t that on the other side of the country?”

“People drift to Dubs from all over. Want me to tell Joe anything if I see him again?”

“No thanks,” I say. Any follow-on questions will require embarrassing explanations, so I drop a coin in his cup and hurry back into the crowd of pedestrians. The letter is utterly distracting—it feels like a brick in my pocket. Yet, in spite of the raging curiosity, I have no desire to open it.

The following week, Alina comes home. Trudy makes some effort to talk to Alina and she doesn’t make any mention of blame. But the gestures are measured and there’s no apology. I see through the act. Alina is just another charity project. The woman doesn’t have an ounce of genuine feeling or concern for her niece. Trudy remains as hard and heartless as the iron frost on her gate. She belongs right there on the periodic table with her metallic companions. Chromium, magnesium, Trudy, Cobalt.

But Alina and I make the best of it. There’s a roof over our heads, and if my misadventures taught me nothing else, they’ve taught me to be grateful for what I have. I only wish the roof was owned by my parents and not a relative who doesn’t seem to want any part in the family.

After a few days, I cook a celebratory dinner and even buy a tub of ice cream—a real stretch with my depleted funds. Ice cream was always our signal for family conversations—for remembering the good times and the embarrassing times, for sighing and laughing. The wheels in our family didn’t always roll smoothly, but they kept turning. There were strong bonds between us, and ice cream was so often the magic potion to cast a spell over the table and put us in the mood for just being the Appletons.

Trudy eats her meal and when I tell her about pudding, she says she’ll leave us to it. Perhaps she doesn’t know what it means to us, or maybe she can’t humble herself enough to eat something I bought, but whatever the reason, it leaves me feeling snubbed.

Well, we don’t need her either, and we have a good few laughs with just the two of us. Something of the old—or rather the young Alina seems to have returned. On a whim, we decide to call our parents and put the phone on speaker. We miscalculated the time difference and wake them before sunrise, but they boil a kettle and we share a table that spans a few oceans.
They still don’t have a release date, but there’s less steel to my father’s optimism and my mother’s throat has unclenched. For the first time, I allow myself to believe the assurances that it won’t be long. The call lasts almost an hour.

After climbing into bed, I show Alina a photo I took on the way home. She stares at it for a long time. It’s a night scene from a bus window, and it shows O’Connell street in its full end-of-year glory. Christmas is approaching, and Dublin is festooned with streamers and bright trees and globes that make evening walks and bus trips a slideshow of cheerful colour.

After turning out the lights, Alina and I talk for some time, making plans to bring the cheer into our little home with a feast of turkey and gravy and a cheap bottle of port. We’ll get one of those plastic trees with flickering lights, and a host of little gifts to completely scandalise the dour atmosphere of this place. If all we have is this cave, we’ll make it the brightest, cosiest cave in Glasnevin.
The university canteen is a curious place. The only time it makes sense to go there is when it’s miserable outside, but the whole enclosure is open and breezy. Today it’s miserable outside and we’re all shivering in the canteen draft that becomes a moderate hurricane whenever someone opens the glass door.

“Fierce weather,” Taryn mumbles over her coffee and blows steam across the rim as she waits for it to cool to a drinkable temperature.

We all look at the windows where rain-bullets flatten themselves against the glass, and wind smears the layers wherever it pleases.

“So you haven’t seen Joe since?” Brett asks me.

“No. I passed by his spot yesterday and today. Don’t think anyone else has seen him either.”

“You talking about Joe?” Vincent asks as he walks up and takes the remaining seat. “I heard his name.”

Taryn takes a gulp of coffee and her eyes open wide. I can almost see the scalding liquid burn a path of blisters down her throat. She blinks away tears and quietly turns vermillion, but otherwise manages to hold back any further evidence of pain.

“It looks like he’s moved on,” I tell Vincent.

“Pity. I liked the old chap,” he says.

“Really,” I ask. “He didn’t really seem to like you.”

Vincent laughs. “Well maybe I like the version of him you always talked about. But I actually wanted to ask about Alina.”

I give him an update and then, to release some internal pressure, I add a few details about Trude the Rude. Maybe I also just want to reassure Taryn that I regret moving out.

“I’m sorry,” he says when I finish. “You didn’t deserve this, nor did your sister. That aunt of yours, though … It sounds like she belongs in the army. I’m sure if they loaded her into a bomber and dropped her on the enemy, she’d be very effective.”

I smile. “No enemy deserves a bomb like that.”

“Seriously, though. It’s possibly a good thing I never knew Alina. If I had, your aunt would get some strong words from me.”

I can think of other reasons why it’s a good thing Vincent never knew my sister. She was a player too, but I still wouldn’t want her getting played. And, oddly enough, I like having Vincent as a friend. Needing to kill him for how he treated Alina would spoil things. I do,
however, feel the conviction behind his anger. Of course he would resent any injury done to a pretty girl, unless he did it, but in this case, his indignation is probably justified.

“Did you lot see the paper this morning?” Vincent says, changing the subject.

“Are you looking for someone to read the words for you?” I ask.

He lifts his nose at me. “I’ll have you know, Rae, that I can not only read letters, but also count all the way to twenty. Twenty-five after coffee.”

We laugh—Taryn far too loudly.

“So the paper?” Brett prompts. “Did you bring it?”

“Sorry. I reached my daily quota after reading the headline, so I threw the rest away.”

Taryn makes a barking sound and falls instantly silent when everyone looks at her. She buries herself in her coffee and takes another large swig. A small whimper escapes and her hand trembles as she lowers the paper cup, but she resists the urge to spit and run for the cold tap. Wild beasts could not drive her from this table. Each second is a teaspoon of heaven.

My phone buzzes and I snatch it up as Vincent finally relinquishes the details of a new political scandal.

“Alina?” I say, after reading the name on the screen and stepping away.

“Rae! Hurry! It’s Murphy. I saw him looking in at the windows. I think he’s trying to get at me. I think he found out I stole some …” She screams and I hear her running. Then there’s a thud and a slam of a door. The call doesn’t cut off, but there’s no voice on the other side. I wonder if she dropped the phone before locking herself into a room.

I’m already out the door, running across the courtyard through the rain.

“Alina!” I shout into the phone. “Alina!”

I clatter to a stop under the huge entrance and call my aunt.

“Rae,” she grouses, “you know I can’t—”

“It’s Alina!” I shout over her, gasping for breath as I begin running again. “She thinks Murphy was at the window. She’s worried he’s going to break in. It seems like he has a reason …”

I realise Trudy has hung up. This time it’s too much. She’s not just heartless, she’s plain evil. I want to reach through the phone and fasten my hands around her neck. I’m so angry I’m cursing her through tears as I rush past the stores and over the bridge. Transport—that’s why I’m here. I need to get a bus. I spy the number eleven bus, sprint over to it and scramble through the door.

“Please hurry!” I tell the driver as I dish out coins. “My sister’s in trouble.”

“Where’s your sister?” he asks, his face tightening.

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“Glasnevin.”

“Why don’t you take a taxi? That will get you there in a few minutes.” He points across the road.

Abandoning my coins, I spin around, shove past a portly man climbing onto the bus, and sprint over the tar.

“Can you get me to Glasnevin?” I call out as I open the passenger door of the first taxi I reach. “It’s an emergency.”

The driver indicates for me to jump in and we pull away. I’d worried we would end up haggling over the fare, and I’m not sure if I have enough. I’m just glad we’re moving.

It dawns on me I’m not going to be able to do much when I arrive. Why didn’t I bring my varsity friends? I try calling Brett, but there’s no answer. I don’t expect Vincent would be much help. A winning smile won’t aid anyone here. What about Davin? I hesitate only for an instant before dialling.

He picks up after too many rings. “Hello, Rae,” he says, in a tone that holds neither enthusiasm nor animosity.

“Davin,” I almost shout. “That dealer is at my aunt’s house. Alina thinks he’s trying to get in. I’m sorry to call you like this but I don’t know who else to ask for help.”

All he says is one word. “Address?”

“You’ve been there. It’s the same place.”

“I need the address for the guards.”

“Oh. Twenty-seven Steeple Avenue, Glasnevin.”

“I’ll get there as fast as I can,” he says and hangs up—obviously to make an emergency call. Why the blazers didn’t I think of that?

“Is that where we’re going?” The driver asks.

“Sorry?”

“The address you just gave—is that where you want to go?”

“Oh, yes. As fast as you can.”

The windscreen wipers fight the rain as we hurtle over a bridge and climb the hill on the far side. Before I think to call Brett again, we’re grinding to a halt outside Trudy’s home.

There’s another car. It has a G in the middle of the number plate. I run down the path towards the open door.

As I rush inside, there’s a boom like the report of a canon. My aunt stands in front of me, shotgun pointed at the ceiling, bits of paint and ceiling boards snowing down between her and Murphy whose hands are clamped to Alina’s arm.
I stare.

Trudy’s voice is cold. “Get your dirty fingers off my niece,” she growls. There’s a sliding of metal and a click as she reloads.

“She owes me,” Murphy says, calm as ever. “Dipped her hand into the honey pot without having the cash. When she’s worked it off, you can have her back. This is simple business. Understand?”

Trudy’s voice shakes a little this time. “I said—get your dirty fingers—off—my—niece.”

Murphy smiles. “You’re not going to risk shooting her.” In a flash he steps behind Alina, draws one of those horrible claw-like knives, and holds it to her throat. “You can’t hit me without hitting her,” he says. “Probably couldn’t hit me if the barrel was against my chest. Now get out of my way.”

Trudy lowers the gun. It’s over—I’m about to lose my sister all over again. I can’t. I just can’t. Something inside me breaks.

But then my ears almost implode with a second thunderclap from the shotgun.

Murphy drops with a howl, clutching what’s left of his knee. Alina hurries over to where I stand and clings to me, but I’m not sure which of us is doing the supporting. My knees are acting like they expect a volley of lead too.

There’s a sound that’s been growing, and I realise it’s not in my mind when it cuts off. A siren. Three uniformed guards rush in. One takes the shotgun from my aunt.

Murphy is quick for a man with only one good leg. He makes it to my aunt’s bedroom and locks the door. Two guards run after him and kick the door open. They leap inside as we hear glass break. The sounds of a scuffle ensue, and a moment later Murphy is more or less carried out, hands cuffed behind him.

The glare he directs at my aunt is something he must have learned from cobras. Only the twin jets of venom are missing. It doesn’t make any impression on Trudy. The look he gets in return is one she would give to an earthworm that crawled over the threshold.

Once he is out of sight, a female officer asks my aunt what happened.

Trudy looks at her with marble austerity. Then she staggers and almost collapses. The woman leads her to the couch and asks Alina and me to sit as well.

I’m the first to find my voice and I tell her what I know. Trudy doesn’t have much to add, and Alina confirms all we’ve said. She doesn’t mention anything about this honey pot of Murphy’s.

There’s a knock at the open door and I turn to see Davin. The officer allows me to leave while she finishes up with details, like why Trudy’s house is stocked like an arms depot.
Davin and I stand outside against the low front wall. I tell him what happened and thank him for calling the guards.

“No problem,” he says. “I’m just glad nobody’s hurt.”

“Murphy got hurt.”

“That makes me even gladder.”

I chuckle and feel a little of the tension dissolve.

“Seems like your aunt is quite a shot,” he says. “I don’t think I’ll ever visit here again.”

“You’ve never visited here.” I hadn’t meant it to come out as a complaint, but the complainy voice is all too apparent. I’m about to apologise but he’s quicker.

“Well it’s not like you ever visit Howth.”

“Oh, but that’s where you’re wrong. I head over to sit on the cliffs almost every Saturday morning.” There’s still a second message beneath the words, but this time it’s not a complaint. I wonder if he’ll understand.

“What a coincidence,” he says. “I occasionally do the same thing—ever since next Saturday.” He grins and heads off before I’m able to respond. Did we just make a date?

I rejoin Trudy and Alina as the officer completes her report and leaves us to the dreary living room, now with additional ventilation and bright red accent points on the carpet.

That night, Trudy cleans up while I make supper. Alina helps me, but she’s really just hanging around. I don’t mind. She’s over the worst of her distress, but clearly preoccupied. I ask her to empty the canned beans into the pot and five minutes later she’s still fiddling with the opener.

“What’s bothering you?” I ask. “You look like you want to say something but you can’t.”

She glances up, her lips working. “It’s …” she indicates the door.

“You didn’t think she would actually shoot someone?”

“Not that. It’s what she said to him—about me—or the way she said it. It’s just weird.”

“You mean like she cares?”

Alina nods. “I feel like I should say something, but it’s just going to be awkward. I hate stuff like this.”

“Well, the worst thing you could say is nothing, so maybe you should go with weird.”

“That’s not helpful, Rae.”

“Just say thank you. Or if you can’t find words, sing her a song.”
Alina mimes throwing the can of beans at me, but then takes a breath and heads through the door.

I don’t creep over to listen, but I stop slicing carrots and strain my ears.

“Aunt Trudy?” I hear.

There’s no reply, but the scrubbing ends and I can imagine those eyes glinting up from the soapy carpet.

“I just wanted to …”

“Come on, Alina!” I whisper. “Force it out!”

“I just …” she tries again, and stutters dry. She coughs a few times and makes a final attempt. “Can I help you clean?”

Trudy must be as surprised as me. I realise I’ve been quiet for too long, so I resume cutting. But a little while later, I creep over to the door and glimpse them on their knees, in matching gloves, scrubbing together.

We don’t talk much at supper, but there’s something different. Every last trace of contempt is gone from Alina’s eyes.

I always thought her protective streak came from my father’s side. Seems it was in the other bloodline. Overprotectiveness—I wonder if that’s what made Trudy so unbearable. Was she trying to defend Alina from herself at the beginning? Military grade tough love? It gives a new perspective on things.

The next day, Alina and I decide it would be best not to tell our parents about the break-in. Trudy listens to our reasons at breakfast without comment—and then makes a phone call that night and tells them everything. Trudy, it seems, is still Trudy. It’s a long conversation full of tears and worry on their side and reassurances on ours.

There is a ray of hope to brighten things, though. Their lawyer believes they will be released before the end of the month. I don’t think I’ve ever looked forward to anything as much.
Almost three weeks have passed. My parents are being released and they expect to arrive at Dublin airport in a fortnight. I’m still unsure how it will go down with all these extreme personalities. The sky will light up, that much I know—I just hope it will be with fireworks and not eruptions.

Alina and Trudy—impossible as it seems—are actually getting along quite well. Trudy found Alina a half-day job at the bank, and Alina, to my shocked surprise, accepted it. I’ve always thought of my sister as a bit of a dim-wit, but I forget she did better at maths than me—and without any real effort. She’s never applied her brain much, but she does have one.

Yesterday, they headed off to work together. It was quite something to see my wild sister dressed in modest black slacks and jacket, walking alongside her starchy aunt. Her eye has recovered and she’s looking healthier, but still old for her years. There’s a quietness about her that just seems like tiredness. We let her rest in the afternoons.

I noticed several bottles of pills in the bathroom last night which she has obviously been making an effort to hide from me. I didn’t have the courage to look at the labels. The bottle I dread probably won’t have “ARV” printed on it, but all the same, I was only too happy to escape with my ignorance intact.

Occasionally, Alina wakes us both with nightmares, but those are getting fewer. It tells me she’s improving. For now, that’s enough.

Murphy has been sentenced and is behind bars. I visit him once a week with a box of doughnuts. No, that’s not true. But I haven’t tried to poison him which is about as good.

Since speaking to Davin, I visited the Howth cliffs on the one Saturday it wasn’t raining, but he didn’t arrive. That’s not to say it was a wasted trip. I’ve developed a genuine liking for Howth which has brought me here again this morning. It’s not just the views; it’s the history. Sometimes, I look down from the hilltop and think of the legendary Fionn MacCumhail and his men departing this harbour almost two millennia ago for their final, ill-fated battle, or I envision the Viking and then the Norman ships gliding into the quiet waters like crocodiles.

Thinking of those times and walking this ground gives me a visceral thrill, as if shards of those lives long past still exist in my own humanity, tingling as they remember.

I always leave my bike at the spot where Alina and I first sat and watched sail-petals drift about on the sea below. This morning, however, I’m not just here to watch and think. I settle down on a favoured rock—carefully chosen for a specific reason.
For a long time, I’ve toyed with the idea of opening Joe’s letter, sometimes even fiddling with the seal and plucking the flap, wanting to know what hides within and not wanting to know at all. But I’ve made up my mind. I won’t have this uncertainty spoiling Christmas in two days. It’s time to get it over with. I break the seal and pull out the plain, slightly crumpled page, and start to read.

Rae,

I am sorry. I’ve died a hundred deaths thinking of what I did. I will pay you back, I promise on my soul. I’ll find work, and as soon as I can start putting money away, you will be reimbursed. I did mean to help you, but there is a dragon in me that was roused when I arrived in Galway. My will is brittle before it. Pity me, if you can.

“The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.”

I thought I knew hell before I betrayed a student’s trust. I found burning pits deeper than I’d ever imagined. Try not to think too badly of me.

Yours,
Joe

I give it a second, slower read. I’m no longer simmering with anger, but it’s difficult to think kindly of him when his professed intention to repay is free of any actual repayment.

The section about betraying a student sticks in my thoughts—most people would have said a friend. Maybe he was a lecturer after all. And his dragon suggests that Brett was right about the habit. I wonder if it was what put him on the street, or his panacea after it happened. Either way, I do feel sorry for him. I’ve seen how deep the claws of addiction can embed themselves. But when I think of him spending my hard-earned rent money on drugs … I’m still angry.

I suppose I saw too much in him because of my obsession with academia and his wealth in that currency. I thought the common ground made us birds of a feather. Maybe it did, but even if birds settle in trusting flocks, they can still peck each other in the eye. Fortunately mine were closed at the time.

I couldn’t see it then, but I’m pretty sure now that the deep and almost noble aura of tragedy he carried about him in Galway was no more than a wrestling with conscience as he yielded to temptation.

I fold the letter back into the envelope and put it into a pocket alongside some scraps of library notes I still need to follow up on. It’s not a good reminder.
I’ve made progress with the thesis and I’m on the second draft, but the tone just feels off. I was scything my way through the mistakes of history and dissecting faulty perceptions behind bad decisions, but my own perceptions of late have embarrassed me. The ink has drained from my pen.

Cloudy biases are always so well defined from a distance when they’re affecting someone else. It seems that when they affect us, they don’t just wrap around, but swirl within the eye, blinding us to their own influence.

I would never have thought it possible that there could be so much of that at work in me, but without my knowing it, admiration and disdain mostly hid the real Joe and the real Trudy. And the list doesn’t stop with them.

Perhaps the wisest among us shouldn’t be described as those able to trust their own perceptions, but as those who know they can’t.

Something moves in the corner of my vision and I glance around for the twentieth time this morning. Unbelievably, it is Davin. His sloped shoulders and flop of blonde hair are unmistakeable.

The first time I looked down that path, wondering if I’d ever see him up here, I just thought it would be nice if I did. But over the weeks, the repeatedly deferred hope grew a little stronger, a little more needy with every disappointment. I think I may have worked myself up into a kind of frenzy. Now that I see him, the rush of emotion is nothing short of intoxicating.

My heart trips over itself in a continual stumble and I’m not sure what to do. Should I meet him half way? Do we hug, or shake hands, or just say “Hi”? The uncertainty renders me immobile as he closes the distance.


Davin arrives and I sedately fold away the page as if putting aside my duties for an unexpected interruption.

My rock is small, so he sits in the heather.

He leaps up from the heather. “Yaaa-ow! This stuff is made of knives!”

I burst out laughing, which is good because it hides any tremor in my voice. “Honestly?” I say, reeling in the giggles. “You’re Irish and you didn’t know?”

“Evidently not. I would have remembered.” He picks a few remnants of the encounter from his trousers and I’m not entirely sure where to look.

“Sit here,” I say. “There’s a bit of space.”
It’s kind of close. Our shoulders bump a few times as he’s settling down. More tripping in my heart. I’m not going to pretend I hadn’t considered such an eventuality. The rock is expertly chosen. My section is far from comfortable, but there’s no way I’m mentioning that. Before I allow myself to get carried away by tingles, there’s something I need to get out, and it’s best to have it over with as soon as possible.

“Davin,” I say, “before we talk about anything else, I want to apologise for snapping at you when we went for milkshakes. I was a boiler about to explode. I’m not normally that bad.”

“It’s alright,” he says, “Anyone can lose their rag when it’s rough. After a moment of hesitation, he glances up. “Can I ask what the trigger was? I’d like to avoid it in the future.”

I don’t want to answer, and I can see he won’t pry an answer from me. I could just say it’s personal, but he deserves better, and it’s about time I was open with someone. I’m going to tell him.

Something whispers in my ear that I’m about to get dumped without ever actually making it into a relationship.

There’s no way I’m going to tell him.

“Not many people enjoy criticism,” I say. “I’m not really an exception.” The sudden change of tack wasn’t well considered. I’ve now gone and made it sound like it was all his fault.

He turns away and I want to hurl myself in the heather.

“Uhh, Davin, this is coming out wrong. Delete that last line.” Maybe I’ll have to tell him after all.

I take a breath. “My judgement of Joe was… hasty, and the whole plan to charge off to Galway like that wasn’t the best idea. You were probably right to question things, but my ears were full of Taryn and Brett’s nagging. My aunt’s too. It was like everyone was telling me I was a fool. I don’t … like having my decisions questioned.”

“Well, I might have questioned things, but I didn’t think you were being a fool.”

The voice in my head says this makes him a fool. I clear my throat. “Thanks, but those weren’t my best decisions.”

“You found your sister though.”

“It wasn’t really me. It was between my aunt and Brett, though Brett gets no thanks for going on a pub crawl and accidentally running into Alina. He just wanted to get plastered from one end of Galway to the other.”

Davin laughs. “Yeah, I can see how he earns no points for that.” He picks up a handful of pebbles and starts throwing them, dart-like at a pinnacle of rock. The level of accuracy suggests he hasn’t done much sport. “How is Alina?” he asks.
“Better. Much better than I expected. This whole thing seems to have given her a needed fright. After hospital, she cleaned herself up, and Trudy got her a job last week. But it’s still early days. She’s in that post traumatic, dream-like stage. I’m not sure what will happen when things shift—like when my parents arrive in a few weeks.”

“You think she’ll run out again?”

“No, but I worry about disruptions breaking her new habits which are actually quite healthy. I worry she lacks any real motivation, and that it wouldn’t be difficult for her to lose interest in life. She just seems jaded with anything the world has to offer. What’s left to inspire her?”

Davin looks out to sea for a while. “Maybe there’s another angle on this,” he says. “How about if she could start looking out for others? Finding some purpose in that?”

“That’s … not a bad idea. But how would I get Alina involved?” I ask.

“There are a few groups in Dublin that hand out food and basics to street folk. I’ll get you some contacts if you want. It’s worth trying out.”

“Will you come with?”

“Not a chance. Far too dangerous.”

I chuckle, and he nudges my shoulder.

“Yeah, I’ll join you. But this reminds me of Joe. What happened to him?”

I consider telling him that I basically emptied my account and handed over a student’s fortune to a junkie—supposedly for a top-secret exchange of information. But I don’t want him to spend the rest of his days laughing at me.

“I haven’t seen Joe since Galway,” I say. “Word is that he’s moved on.”

“You once suspected he wants a chance to atone for past mistakes. You think he feels he’s done his good deed for you?”

“Possibly,” I say, marvelling at how that theory is the precise opposite of reality. I’m not telling him any more. Enough embarrassing honesty for one day.

“I hope he does well,” Davin says.

“Same,” I say, and entertain an image of pushing Joe into a river. I wouldn’t want it to be deep, but preferably very cold and muddy.

Davin picks up a larger stone and throws it over the edge of the cliff some fifty yards ahead.

“What if someone’s down there?” I say. “I thought you were into philanthropy.”

He looks at me. “Philanthropy, my dear gal, is full of contradictions. The base of the cliff is an unsafe place to fish. By raining stones on a prospective fisherman’s head, I’m helping him by exposing the danger.”

“That makes no sense.”
“No, but it’s my theory and I’m sticking to it.

I grimace and shift a little. Maybe this rock wasn’t so well chosen after all. I’m fairly certain
one of my legs is about to fall off. There’s a curious tension in my thoughts. The intoxication
still has me giddy, but I’m not sure if I altogether like it. I’m beginning to think it might be
nice to have a little alone time, just so I can breathe and think awhile.

I glance at him, wondering if I should say something.

“That’s a very pretty face,” he says. It sweeps me back into the current and I realised we’ve
just entered a whole new domain. My slight reserve gives me an edge of boldness and I decide
to broach something that’s been bothering me.

“If you think this face is so pretty,” I say, “why did you only have eyes for my sister?”

in your own reality, Miss Appleton. When we first met, I spoke to you. You were the one that
batted me away.”

“I batted you away because you were after her.”

“I wasn’t.”

“That’s complete rot. I was overweight and greasy-haired and dressed like a kennel cleaner,
and Alina looked like she stepped out of a magazine.”

“You weren’t that overweight, and the rumpled look is in these days. Anyway, you’re
carding on the wrong thing, or the wrong sense. What first got my attention wasn’t what I
saw, but what I heard when I was standing ahead of you in the queue.”

“You were eavesdropping?”

“You have excellent powers of deduction.” He smirks and I cringe a little at the reference
to my sarcastic assault from a few weeks back. He’s got more pluck than I first thought.

“You,” he continues, “were discussing something forgettable, like public transport, but it
was clear who was doing the thinking. I like thinkers. I particularly like the way you think.”

“So she’s pretty and I’m smart?”

“She doesn’t need to be in your sentence for both adjectives to find a suitable pronoun.”

“That is the weirdest, most bookish compliment I’ve ever been paid.”

“You like it?”

“It’s not bad. Not bad at all.”


“I’m done pondering,” I say, letting myself be carried forward again by the moment. But
even as I say the words, there’s a growing voice in my ears that tells me a bit of quiet pondering
might not be a bad idea. The voice sounds rather like a emergency siren, and if I’m not mistaken, it’s warning about a system overload. I’m not accustomed to these doses of emotion. The pitch is exhilarating, but I’m starting to feel just a little exhausted. What I would really like is to be alone and just let things settle. But the thought comes too late.

“Good,” Davin says. “I’ll race you back to the harbour.”

“Handicap for the local,” I tell him, forcing myself to play along. “I’ll take the bike. You need to jump off the cliff and swim round the point.”

He grins, leans in, and kisses me. I’m caught so completely off guard that I freeze.

Even though this is a moment I’ve dreamed of, it’s nothing like the dream. There is no crescendo of violins, no melting embrace. Our noses bump. I very nearly ask what he’s trying to do. Following a sharp, wet smack, he sits back and there’s a rather long silence.

He clears his throat while a breeze discovers the salivary patch on the side of my mouth and I wonder if it would be rude to wipe it with my sleeve. I must be frowning, but Davin, once again shows himself immune to such clues.

“Beat me if you can,” he says as he leaps to his feet. “Last one there pays.” He hurries away. The ungainly stride confirms that he is no athlete, but this hasn’t blunted his enthusiasm. Head down, arms pumping, he shrinks into the distance as the current that rushed me to this point finally sheds its momentum and glides into doubtful eddies.

My leg slowly recovers function. I step over to my bike and lift it from the heather. The strange reluctance doubles and locks me in place. I need perspective.

On a sudden impulse, I give Taryn a call. I don’t ask if she’s busy, because she always says yes. So I use her own technique and upload a solid block of info in a single uninterrupted burst.

“Taz. Uh, so Davin kissed me and it wasn’t exactly nice, but I do like him and he wants to go to lunch, but I don’t know if I’m ready to move any further along this couple road—except that I really don’t want to lose him and—well—I’m not sure where to go from here.”

A pause. “What?”

“Which part are you saying what to?”

“Rae, are you drunk?”

“No.”

“Is Davin?”

“I don’t think so. And what’s that supposed to mean? Are you implying it would take drink for him to want to kiss me?”
There’s no reply—for far too long. “Uh, no,” she eventually says. “I just didn’t think that … he … and you …” There’s a flatness to her voice. An unwelcome idea creeps out of the shadows.

“That, you weren’t into him, were you?”

“What! No, he’s not really my type, even if we do have the same interests and basically the same personality profiles and even the same favourite colour …”

I cringe as the truth washes over me. Apparently her Vincent-crush had not shut all other doors as I’d assumed. The call ends even more awkwardly than it started. What a mess.

I drop the bike, sit down, and call another number.

“Morning,” a sleepy voice drones.

“Alina.” I take a breath, and then it all pours out. It’s one of the first times I’ve confided anything like this in her. She broached the subject of Davin and me a few days ago, so I know she’s ready for this and I don’t hold back. I tell her about Taryn too, and then the dam is suddenly empty and I run dry.

There’s a kind of choking on the other end, then a snort, and then she’s laughing, laughing like I haven’t heard for years. There was a time when it would have made me angry, but this is the person who just attacked a ruthless psychopath for me and who now carries the scar from the encounter. She has laughing rights. And, well, I suppose it is funny in a way.

“Raebles,” she says, using my childhood name when she can speak again, “I have no idea how you’re going to fix this, but I want to hear all about it when you get home.”

“You know you aren’t being any help at all, right?”

“I know. Sorry. Okay, here’s an idea. Why don’t you invite Taryn to lunch at the place where you’re supposed meet Davin? Then they can get together and your problem is solved.”

“It’s not solved. I like him. I think. Or maybe I haven’t quite decided. This boyfriend stuff is so draining.”

“Uh huh? How long have you two been together now?”

“Irrelevant.”

“Well, maybe it’s just the weirdness of a new situation that’s freaking you out. Give it a chance for a few days before you slam the door.”

I have to admit, it doesn’t sound like the absolute worst advice ever. I thank Alina and promise to catch up with her later. She chuckles and tells me I have no idea how much she’s looking forward to it. I tell her she’s a cow which brings another laugh. I’m smiling as I hang up.
Davin has vanished over the hill. It seems he was taking this race thing quiet seriously. That’s going to make him sweaty. And then he’ll want to lean in close with a puffy breath while beads trickle down his red face and smelly steam drifts around us …

I’m am definitely going to get lost on the way down, give him a chance to cool off. Hopefully he’ll be a little upset. That should make things more manageable.

I untangle my bike and pedal away in no great hurry. But I’m so distracted that I almost collide with a signpost as I take my first wrong turn, and I very nearly attend an old stone church for an unscheduled service when the bike catches a wobble down an uncharitably steep hill.

I put the brakes to use and regain control. It’s a pity they don’t work on Davin. But maybe if he wasn’t so oblivious to my cold signals, we wouldn’t have made it even to friendship.

The road flattens out a little and I glance up. In the distance, patches of shadow glide across the hills, chasing the wind inland.

I’ll be following the same direction later. With that in mind, I start to feel better about lunch—in a kind of ironic way—because it’s bound to prove a masterpiece of comedy when I tell Alina about it later. I wonder if I should let Trudy in on it.

And that’s when I have an epiphany.

Could it be that Trudy never tries much to be a part of our lives because she expects to be pushed out? Maybe the thing that hides her from us isn’t a curtain she draws but a blanket she clutches.

That single thought starts an avalanche. All my notions about her begin to tumble. It’s like I’m throwing shelves of hasty opinions onto the ground—and where they stood, a large window looks out on a scene I gave little attention before. What would I have learned about her had I not blocked the view?

My one consolation is that there’s time yet to make amends, and I have an idea of where to start.

Yes, I’ve decided. I’m going to let Trudy in on the story. I have a feeling this cascade of disasters is just the thing to crack a real smile across that wooden face.

I picture the three of us at the little table and realise there is an ingredient without which my plan won’t work. I’ll need to make a stop at the supermarket on the way home. Because after we get through the lentil soup, we’re having family ice cream—and even if I have to lock the kitchen door and hide the key, this time Trudy is staying.
PART 2: REFLECTIVE ESSAY

Introduction

“Every book begins with an idea that offers many, many possible directions” (Krishnaswami). This multiplicity of options was certainly the case with *A Cloud in Her Eye*. The kernel for the story was its setting. When I first realised I wanted to write about Ireland, there were, literally and figuratively, streets that led in every direction. I felt rather like the speaker in Robert Frost’s “The Road Not Taken”, often misinterpreted as inspirational, but which actually reflects the limitations and regrets of choice. (Little 133). Whichever road I chose would deprive me of the other options, all of which I wanted to explore. The abundance of possibilities led to some initial indecision. The only thing I was sure about was that the setting needed to be felt as more of a character than a backdrop.

The first question I had to resolve, was how it would be represented. When it comes to Irish books that give generous portions of the stage to setting, *Angela’s Ashes* by McCourt and *Dubliners* by Joyce have strong emphases on social corruption and the gritty, dirty angles of the country. O’Grady’s *I Could Read the Sky*, while not avoiding the detailed nuances of Irish life, leans more towards nostalgia. Other place-centric novels that were in my mind during the time of writing were *The Shipping News* by Proulx, which is set in Newfoundland, and two novels set in India – *A Fine Balance* by Mistry and *Shantaram* by Roberts. Though *The Shipping News* gives a vivid depiction of the small community and the rugged harbour village, this depiction comes across as a largely neutral one, owing to the outlook of a rather dull protagonist. The two novels set in India respectively lament and delight in the same environments represented in different ways. Books like these opened my eyes – or ears – to the possible tones of representation, the biases that lend character and partiality to the narrative voice. In *The Book Thief*, Marcus Zusak personifies random aspects of the environment in ways that often seemed forced, but he is so consistent that the personifying verbs find a place within the dominant tone. To me, this book was a marker for the outer limits of general personification. Joyce’s *Ulysses*, with its abundance of adverbs and adjectives, *The Shadow of the Wind* by Zafón, and *The Remains of the Day* by Ishiguro, similarly, served as markers for the amount of descriptive indulgence that might pass as acceptable.
My initial approach to a descriptive tone was kaleidoscopic. Wonder, sentimentality and a peppery strain of critical judgement jostled with each other. This was largely because I wanted to explore options before making a final decision, but I was also hoping to achieve a kind of breadth to the voice. Instead of making the representation rich, however, it diluted the effect of all components, so the tone had to be filtered to an acceptable level of consistency, and the criterion for this filtering was harmony with the emerging main character. The story, then, is one in which the initial idea gave birth to – and was subsequently changed by its offspring. Some might say this is to be expected of all parenthood.

Writing a book that has a strong sense of place is a daunting prospect. The modern taste has moved away from the indulgent descriptions that were formerly commonplace. Fowler refers to this former style as a tendency to live in descriptive details and attain a “minuteness of visual characterization” (303). That assessment, when applied to a modern writer, could hardly be interpreted as a compliment. These days, anything that interrupts the narrative for too long runs the risk of being condemned as boring or even purple if it hints at the poetic. Of course, there is an aspect of taste here, as can be seen by the wildly disagreeing opinions expressed by readers of literary works. Skimming through Goodreads reviews of many of the books I was referencing revealed that a writer can be both praised and condemned for the same passages. Writers are usually criticised more for excess than reserve, but I didn’t want this tempting me to the point of literary timidity. Ireland was always going to be more than a setting in this work, and there was always going to be a strain of Irish lyricism to how it was presented, so I was prepared from the outset to risk a level of criticism from the same group of readers who disapproved of the descriptive passages in some of the better literary novels on my reading list.

After settling on Ireland, I introduced a main character who would interact well with the partly animated setting, giving a kind of dialogue between them. I opted for a female protagonist, because of the opportunity it afforded in learning how to represent that perspective. The quirky, ironic, and occasionally self-deprecating Rae seemed to fit naturally on the rain-drenched stage I was building. After that, came her sister, who at first seems like a foil to the intellectual Rae, but reveals herself to be far more than Rae initially allows the reader to see.

Over numerous rewrites – twenty or more in some sections – this shift in Alina inspired the first-person voice of an unreliable narrator. Nick’s Carroway’s voice in *The Great Gatsby* by Fitzgerald was a good reference here. This, in turn, led to character trajectories for the rest of the cast that are largely an effect of Rae’s evolving perspective. It provided a way to show character growth without using up too much of the word count. With these elements in place,
there was enough by which I could filter the numerous plot ideas and variations. The result is a novella that might best be described as context- and perspective-driven.

Place

Perhaps the most easily detectable errors of fact in a book have to do with details of setting. It doesn’t take a discerning reader to notice them, and with software like Google Earth, it doesn’t even take a local. With a few clicks of a mouse, anyone can place themselves in the locations being described. Unfortunately, using this approach from the writing side of things is not particularly inspiring, but it can be used to check details.

Annie Proulx comments, “I like to go to places I write about, always thinking about Steinbeck’s big error in *The Grapes of Wrath*, where he placed his Okies in the eastern drought-free part of Oklahoma because he worked from a road map rather than actually going there” (Leyshon).

During the six months I spent in Ireland, I made notes, took pictures and recorded video clips. Knowing I would set a story there, I made sure to walk the ground wherever a scene was likely. Though some details are altered or fictional, they are all based on real ones. There are also combinations of events and places that are fictional, such as the party at St. Stephens, but I made sure to familiarize myself with the individual elements as well as looking up examples of such combinations.

Something I wanted to capture was the early impression. It’s far more difficult to notice that which has become familiar than that which is still different and fresh. This is clearly seen in Fredrick Busch’s war diary, in which so many of the entries read, “Same”. When events are recorded, they are noted in a matter-of-fact, emotionless voice which suggests that the daily experience of war had become unremarkable, and only the details changed (8 – 12).

But it wasn’t just the sparkle of the unfamiliar I hoped to capture. I was also looking to represent it in a way that steered well clear of a travel book, a way that helped to illuminate angles of the main character. The method that appealed was a type of personification that allowed me to impart or describe the personality I recognized in the place.

There are many novels that have achieved this well. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* was perhaps the first where I noticed the prominence of setting, though it is imbued more with
varying levels of stature or eminence than actual personality. Thomas Hardy’s settings are more than backdrops, and they interact with the cast in ways that reinforce social and personal status. The pastoral ruggedness lends buoyancy to the small community in *Under the Greenwood Tree*, while the endless and dreary furze cutting overwhelms the reader with a sense of hopeless for Clym and Eustacia in *The Return of the Native*. Annie Proulx, in the aforementioned interview, speaks of how the chief character in her new book, *Barkskins*, is the forest, and the rest of the characters were intended to carry the story of how it was destroyed.

I was aiming for something between these levels of characterization and stage-dominance. Pathetic fallacy did not appeal, because my experience of Irish weather is that it is profoundly changeable, even cheekily so. To use the weather as a reinforcement of emotional trajectories – unless they changed by the moment – would have seemed like contrivance. Instead, I opted to let the Irish weather accompany Rae on her journey as something of an inquisitive companion with moods that are often out of sync with her own. The cheekiness and rapid contrasts are, in my estimation, actually faithful representations of Irish society. This meant that this personified weather was not only a catalyst for Rae’s reactions, but also a depiction of her engagement with local culture.

**Character**

At first, I was deliberate about writing a literary work, and so I put a great deal of emphasis on character depth. It was a surprise when the characters ended up being less organic than they normally are, and I actually had to dial back the amount of delineation as well as the directness. Instead of letting them explain their motivations via dialogue or thoughts, they were left far more mysterious to the reader, inviting discovery and sometimes guesswork. Partially revealed characters, I found, can seem more real than overly elucidated ones.

At first, the characters’ identifying attributes were so forceful that they dominated, giving a one-dimensional effect. There was also too much consistency in those characteristics. Forgetful people do not always forget, and even the cruelest are sometimes kind. Real people as well as real relationships are full of inconsistencies and contradictions. The contradictions, however, need to seem plausible. Aristotle had such a high view of plausibility that he wrote
“Probably impossibilities are to be preferred to improbable possibilities” (50). He actually included the line twice in *Poetics*.

With the introduction of some unexpected and occasionally conflicting attitudes and choices, the characters filled out. They retained their core identities, and scenes that illustrated central attributes remained, so that the other elements coming into the mix would not confuse the reader.

Another aspect that had to be addressed was the issue of unlikeable and even annoying characters that would potentially repel a reader. Rae’s condescension might have been entirely true to her nature, but she was becoming unpleasant company. The same was true of Alina’s vanity and Trudy’s austerity. Not much pepper is required in a dish. I found the same to be true of negative attributes in central characters – a taste is often sufficient. Nobody wants to crunch their way through mouthfuls of bitterness.

I had initially intended to use the main character to illustrate hypocrisy, a conviction that her own breaking of the rules was justified. It led to several problems. The first was that it seemed forced. Even though her actions and attitudes were consistent with who she was, the resultant flow of events came across as theme-driven, giving the feeling of contrivance, as if the entire narrative had been set up to make a point – which it had. This, undoubtedly, falls afoul of Grace Payley’s lie of injustice to characters (193).

A large part of the solution involved liberating the characters from the theme, allowing them to behave as they would most naturally do, and seeing what emerged. It required discarding about forty percent of the chapters and beginning them over, but it was a worthwhile sacrifice that resulted in greater plausibility and palatability.
With the plot, I initially intended to add zest with a hint of adventure. *Middlesex* by Eugenides and *Captain Corelli’s Mandolin* by Bernières were in my mind while considering this. Neither book is an adventure story, but the runaway section in *Middlesex* and the mine-planting expedition in *Captain Corelli’s Mandolin* gave an effective lift to the plot trajectories. I wrote numerous versions of something adventurous, but none seemed to belong in the context of a book that establishes itself in the opening chapters as being distinctly down to earth. Another issue was that the novels I was referencing are both very long, so there is more than enough room to incorporate something quite different without it overwhelming the general tone. After much pondering and several discussions, I saw that the reason I was looking to lift the narrative was because the characters and relationships were not driving the story forward. I’d been painting racing stripes on a car that had an underpowered engine. Another problem was that while some of the new events were deeply, even unrealistically tragic, others were unrealistically serendipitous.

It was becoming clear that the only sensible repair to the plot was large-scale replacement. The idea of rebuilding an almost complete book was overwhelming. There were so many threads that would be severed and would need to be reconnected. At this stage I hit writer’s block, which Lamott redefines – in a way I relate to – as emptiness (178). I simply lacked the necessary inspiration, and almost abandoned the entire project. I had several long discussions with a friend who made suggestions and gave me the fresh perspective needed to return to the manuscript with purpose.

Using some of the new scenes, I decided to follow the advice of my supervisor, close the document, and start with a blank page. First was the hospital scene with Rae and Alina. This time, instead of focussing on Alina’s injuries – previously required to motivate future events – the passage allowed the two characters to just be themselves and grow their relationship. After writing a few more of these scenes, I was faced with dozens of severed plot threads, but they could now be abandoned for a more natural plot line that ran, unforced, through the new content.

Something I hadn’t foreseen was that the newer sections of the narrative, written with an awareness of all the necessary alterations, caused the older sections to seem slightly out of context. The old sections hadn’t looked faded until the new ones were placed alongside. As a result, the older sections had to be adjusted and sometimes replaced. Looking back, I see that
there is a noticeable shift in the maturity of the manuscript from two and a half years back until now. There is also a greater harmony between characters, actions, and themes.

Length

When packing a rucksack for hikes, I’ve generally found that the smaller the rucksack, the more time I spend selecting equipment and supplies. The same was true for me in writing a forty-thousand-word book. The basic essentials are still required – rounded characters, relationships that engage the reader, a satisfying plot arc, etc. – but the elements need to be chosen with far more care to prevent a constricting squeeze. Instead of having four scenes that illustrate the nature of a relationship, one or two might be required to convey the same ideas with the same effectiveness. At first it didn’t work. While the words were restricted, the high concentration of ideas kept the prose from flowing.

Generally, I’m heavy handed with my editing, but I’ve never cut this much. I had to throw out and start whole chapters over a few times. In the end, I probably wrote over a hundred thousand words in order to find the forty thousand that would remain. The idea of killing your darlings is something that’s often applied to those overwritten, decorative passages that can be sacrificed without any damage to the whole. But in this book, many of the doomed darlings were central. Dillard writes of this: “Unfortunately, it is often a bearing wall that has to go. It cannot be helped. There is only one solution, which appals you, but there it is. Knock it out. Duck” (4).

In a novella, there is a premium on page real estate that, as a writer, I’d never experienced before. I was informed that I could write a longer book and submit only the first portion, but that seemed like ducking out of a challenge and fleeing the opportunity to learn something.

Having decided to keep to the word limit, I had to make a decision – trim away anything not crucial to the advancement of the plot, and produce a narrative that never rested, that was always hurrying to the conclusion; or find a new, simpler plot. Because the sense of thoughtful wandering was central to how I hoped to reveal both character and place, the first option palled on me and the desk was cleared for a large-scale re-write.
Central theme

There’s a difference between a story that’s rich in themes and one that’s heavy in themes. My early versions tended towards the latter, being not just heavy, but also narrow in thematic interest. When I broadened the focus, I found that the story became more believable, which shouldn’t have been a surprise, seeing as themes never present themselves in isolation in real life. Those that were given more attention include loyalty and betrayal, sacrifice, social strata, friendship, and drug abuse. The central theme has a story of its own.

During my time in Ireland, many social mannerisms stood out, because I wasn’t inured to “the way things are”. One such attribute was a political-religious hypocrisy. A few personal encounters gave me the idea to write a story showing how individuals who condemn national hypocrisy may yet contribute to it by making exceptions of themselves in personal matters.

I saw great potential, but as the pages filled, I became uneasy with the idea of highlighting moral error in a nation that is not my own. It just seemed arrogant.

I began to feel that a commentary on hypocrisy using a foreign country as a source of inspiration might be seen as guilty of its own hypocrisy, because no author can claim to live in a perfect country. This is not to say that critical writings on the problems of other nations have no place, but it does seem like a daunting shelf for a book, and not one where this book belonged.

In past eras of literature, authors could voice commentaries on society, race and gender with a far greater degree of impunity, sometimes without even couching the sentiments in their characters’ voices. In the modern social climate of universal tolerance which was described as coming into vogue as far back as the late nineteenth century (Littell 884), critical voices are often met with hostility. The irony of universal tolerance is that it is fundamentally intolerant of anything that does not embrace its own outlook.

In light of these factors, I decided that, instead of a depiction of national, personal, and universal hypocrisy, it would be better to focus on the imperfect perceptions that result in poor decisions. The idea came about during the revisions, as Rae took on some of my own doubts, finding her judgments distasteful. Though it deviated from my original character sketch, the transformation felt right. The Rae I started with grew up during the process, not really becoming better, but becoming a more complete human, able to question herself and change her mind on matters she had considered closed.
In all this, the notion of hypocrisy drifted into the background, and what emerged in its place was the idea of imperfect perception – faulty assessments of people and situations due to clouded motives and unseen biases. It’s a more general and far more subtle theme, but I found it suited the character better. It was a theme that flowed from plausible actions rather than one which compelled actions that had begun to seem jarring.

“The real theme of the piece may not emerge or announce itself until you have worked with the story for awhile, but sooner or later you must become aware of it” (Vogler 96). The shift from embarking on to discovering a central theme is in large part due to the proposal. There was much that I gained from the proposal, but having to write it so early in a creative process required describing what had not yet been found. I use the word *found* instead of *created* deliberately, because my attempts to create a theme were unsuccessful. Starting with a theme wasn’t unlike like starting with fruit and attempting to grow stems and roots to support it.

Errors in perception is not another way of describing the appearance vs reality theme, though there is common ground. The focus here is not the deceit or delusion so vividly illustrated in works like Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* or Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*, but the more subtle biases that affect even those who are being deliberate about achieving clarity.
Research

While one never wants as a reader to wade through layers of researched facts, it’s probably true that most readers can very quickly determine if the author is avoiding specific detail or, even worse, guessing. Several months spent in a country do not give the intimacy of knowledge a local would have. I wanted Irish people to be able to read this without throwing their hands – or the book – in the air and complaining that the author has obviously never been to Ireland.

The research began with the process of walking the set where the story would take place, getting to know the people and just imbibing the atmosphere and details of the place. Umberto Eco mentioned in an interview that doing the research “means an infinity of things,” even just going there and watching the clouds (5:10).

But there were numerous details that had to be researched after I could no longer walk the streets. I read up social problems like homelessness and the history behind it, watched videos of evictions and interviews with locals, and looked into Irish law and forms of punishment for various crimes that I was contemplating as plot points. Later, I researched various medical conditions and hospital layouts, and even studied the anatomy of Irish heather. I wanted to be sure I had the fine details correct. Some of the research, like the sections I covered on law and court-room proceedings, were for versions of the plot that had to be discarded, but all of it contributed to the sense of Irish society which I kept in the back of my thoughts while writing.

Jodi Picoult, well-known for her extensive research, comments on how she owes it to anyone who is represented in her story to get the details right. (“A Conversation with Jodi Picoult”). Doing justice to the people and places mentioned was important, but there was another reason for thorough research. Fixed and accurate details give a sense of perspective in the same way that a rock projecting above the waterline reveals how fast you are drifting. This sense of anchoring gave a necessary fixed counterpoint to the narrator’s biased and shifting views, illuminating them by an indirect feeling of contrast.
Refining the voice

At the outset, Rae’s character was formed of more than one excess, because I wanted her to leap off the page. But this had to be toned down to keep her from being a caricature. When the excesses were brought into a more realistic level, the voice had to be refined too, and this required some level of entering into a woman’s mind. It would be a bold man who claims to understand how women think, but it was necessary to gain a respectable degree of insight in this department. I read several books with female leads and female authors, began taking note of the more subtle details of female interactions in social contexts, and paid close attention to the comments of female readers. I tried not to over-feminize Rae, something I always felt Dickens did with the lead women in *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit*. Perhaps it’s a natural tendency to either overlook or over-emphasize gender when writing from across a gender divide. But I suspect it may not be restricted to the case where there is a gender divide. An interesting comparison was between Harper Lee’s *Go Set a Watchman* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Jean Louise Finch is depicted in *Go Set a Watchman* with so much emotional instability and pettiness, that she approximates a caricature of herself. The more mature Lee presented Scout in *To Kill a Mockingbird* without any of that, yet Scout is entirely believable and intrudes far less into the story with, what are arguably, irrelevant mannerisms. It was a lesson for me in not over-emphasising gender clichés of character. Mantel, though a woman, depicts Cromwell in *Wolf Hall* without any masculine excess, and even in moments of unexpected tenderness, he does not come across as a conduit for a feminine voice. Finding such a balance that avoided both insensitivity and sympathetic excess was no more elegant a process than slowly chipping away corners.

Another temptation I’ve noticed with male writers is the compulsion to “side” with the lead female by demeaning males. I tried to keep any contextually relevant frustration with males true to Rae’s nature and her history – much of which did not make it into the final version, but still helped to provide a substructure for what is presented.
Conclusion

Over the course of the degree, three points have challenged me more than the others. The first is economy. Making the best use of page real estate is not restricted in its application to shorter books. When more words are permissible, there’s less of a need to make every scene, every conversation count – but they should. The exercise of filtering and selecting sections, sentences, and even words has sharpened my ability to recognise what will carry the narrative forward with the greatest effectiveness. While brevity may not be the heart of prose, the avoidance of bloat – whether on a volume or sentence level – can hardly be extolled too highly. Lambath writes, “… the fewer the words that can be made to convey an idea, the clearer and the more forceful that idea” (20). Strunk addresses the same notion with a characteristically succinct instruction: “Omit needless words” (21). King, quoting an editor, puts it as “2nd draft = 1st draft – 10% ” (222). Trimming away the excess is a principle that has been in my thoughts all this time, but memorizing a principle is not the same as recognizing the breadth of its application. Working with a supervisor who could point out the areas where I was not applying these principles was immensely helpful. It’s like stooping – you don’t always realise you’re doing it until someone mentions it. Seeing where I’d failed to apply the principle has been just as helpful as learning the principle itself.

Many of the books I’ve worked on employ imaginative, adventurous, and larger-than-life elements. I began to worry that I was depending too heavily on what I thought of as coloured pencils to rescue the basic charcoal sketch of the story itself. It’s not that I want to get rid of the colours in those books, but I wanted to be sure the foundations were as strong as I could make them. That’s why I chose to write a story that was centred on family relationships rather than a romance or adventure. It’s more difficult to make this subject material interesting, because there is less engagement with limbic responses. Romances, adventures, horrors, thrillers, and even tragedies all have a very immediate connection with base level emotions. Prose that has a level of reserve about it depends more heavily on an intellectual engagement – which may in turn offer a profound emotional resonance too, but only once the reader has been drawn into a more sophisticated appreciation than basic thrills. Far more rests on the quality of the writing – better craftsmanship with words, deeper insight into what motivates people, and an ability to make the commonplace fascinating. These are some of the foundational requirements I see in literary prose. There are many literary works that don’t
restrict themselves to the mundane – *The Name of the Rose* by Eco, for example, has all the ingredients of a detective novel – but I do recognise an ability to make the mundane compelling, and the extraordinary even more so, though many literary writers prefer to understate the extraordinary. Examples of this would be the shattered-glass-style descriptions of the violent protests in *Midnight’s Children* by Rushdie or when Assef beats Amir in *The Kite Runner* by Hosseini.

Because I had largely excluded ingredients of heart-racing action, mystery, romance and so on, I was compelled to improve the text so that the unexciting might yet be found compelling to a reader – J.M.Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello*, though far less plot-driven, was a useful reference here. This, then, has been my second major point of growth, something I hope to apply to all books I write in the future, regardless of genre or style.

There is probably no one who relishes criticism, but for an artist, the criticism has an added emotional sting, because of how personal the art can be. Artists often shelter behind the notion that their work is entirely personal – “If I say it’s right then it’s right, and any interference will only tarnish it.” That may be truer in some forms of art than others. The visual arts certainly appear capable of abandoning most if not all rules, but other forms with a greater technical dependency, such as films, don’t permit the same liberties. If an entire film is shot out of focus or with garbled audio, few would claim it to be brilliant.

Writing, in my experience, has a greater need for technical proficiency than many other art forms. This is illustrated by how often public customer reviews contain criticisms of bad grammar – often expressed with bad grammar. Even if the rules aren’t universally understood or agreed on, there is a greater awareness of the rules than in an art form like music, where most of the everyday studio concerns such as track comping, spectral distribution and sound envelopes, are understood only by the professionals. When one considers that most education systems cover correct language usage, it’s only logical that readers would have some understanding of what good writing is like. And here is the difference between writing and visual arts. We are taught that writing can be bad or even wrong, almost on the level of a maths equation, but the same cannot be said of visual arts.

Because of this, writers of prose – poetry is something of an exception here – who hope to express themselves with visceral immediacy, unimpeded by rules or principles, are not likely to encounter a warm reception. Valid criticism of a manuscript, therefore, holds an important place in the process.
My background as an English teacher made me conscious of the technical aspects of grammar and punctuation, but when I began to study writing about fifteen years back in the hopes of becoming an author, I was awed at how vast the field was. I discovered that many rules currently taught at school and even university are either outdated or considered matters of preference by some of the most respected grammarians such as Fowler, Gowers, Strunk and Zinnser. In punctuation, I found general trends, including a tendency towards minimalism with commas except in the case of disambiguation or the serial comma, and a growing reluctance to use semicolons and colons. I found differences even within countries, such as the various ways of rendering a dash. The emergence of digital reading devices has led to shifts because of how text is displayed. An example would be how a long ellipsis (…), which is prescribed by many, can be split across lines, rendering it nonsensical, whereas a tight ellipsis (…) is recognised as a single unit and not broken up. *On Writing Well* by Zinnser and *The Elements of Typographic Style* by Bringhurst discuss some of these changes. Prescriptive references such as *The Chicago Manual of Style* tend to recognize such variations less than descriptive ones such as the *Cambridge Grammar of English*. The modern developments and differences in approach revealed that many of the supposed rules condemning certain conventions as wrong are wrong in themselves. Many of the iron rules I’d been taught fell into this category and began to buckle as I tested them. This motivated me to achieve a better understanding of style, grammar and punctuation, so I would have a surer footing in the rapidly changing environment. It led to a great deal of study and subsequent application in four novels, one of which was finally completed and self-published.

Unfortunately, having a degree of knowledge and having applied it before can be considered justification for being able to do something well. A construction labourer, making a mess of my roof, told me in proud defence of his efforts, “It’s not the first time I’ve done this.” I had a dozen responses to that, none of which would have aided the situation, but it did make me think about the way in which knowledge and experience can harden us, block our ears, and prevent us from growing.

So when embarking on a degree programme in which the role of the supervisor is, in no small measure, to point out shortcomings, I faced a strong temptation to assume a defensive posture, thereby opposing any potential growth. Fortunately, I recognised the folly of this early on. I decided, in all cases, to make the requested alterations. The overall result was a considerable improvement. Sometimes we prefer a thing because it’s ours, not because it’s better. Learning to put this favouritism to death has been the third growth point for me as a
writer. Perhaps above everything I take from this degree is the conviction that if one wants to learn or grow, humility – however distasteful at the time – will be essential.
References


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