SUPPORT LIVE ENCOUNTERS.
DONATE NOW AND KEEP THE MAGAZINE LIVE IN 2018!

Live Encounters is a not-for-profit free online magazine that was founded in 2009 in Bali, Indonesia. It showcases some of the best writing from around the world. Civil and human rights activists, animal rights activists, poets, writers, journalists, social workers and more have contributed their time and knowledge for the benefit of the readers of the magazine.

We are appealing for donations to pay for the administrative and technical aspects of the publication. Please help spread the free distribution of knowledge with any amount that you feel you want to give for this just cause.

Om Shanti Shanti Shanti Om
markulyseas@liveencounters.net

Donate

All articles and photographs are the copyright of www.liveencounters.net and its contributors. No part of this publication may be reproduced without the explicit written permission of www.liveencounters.net. Offenders will be criminally prosecuted to the full extent of the law prevailing in their home country and/or elsewhere.

Cover photograph by Mark Ulyseas
CONTRIBUTORS

GUEST EDITORIAL BY DOREEN DUFFY

DOREEN DUFFY
Etta and the snow

EILEEN CASEY
Tales from the Old Country

BRID CONNOLLY
When skies are grey

JOAN POWER
Missing Links

SHIRLEY KEEGAN
Departure Lounge

SUSAN CONDON
Espresso for Mary

TRISH BEST
Home

GAVAN DUFFY
Closed Doors

KEVIN DOYLE
The Fat One

ANNE MARRON
Room to let

NIAMH BYRNE
Judith and the Crocodile

MAE NEWMAN
In sickness and in health

TRISH NUGENT
Hello Dolly

ANNETTE BRYAN
Fluffy’s new home
I was absolutely delighted when Mark Ulyseas invited me to act as guest editor on this edition of Live Encounters. The writers who have come together to form this edition have brought stories to these pages that bring characters to life and show how they respond within their world with no fear of recrimination or judgement.

Writing fiction allows us to put ourselves in another’s place and live their lives for a short while and experience all that entails. Live Encounters gives us the platform to stage these scenarios, to let the characters play out their lives for an audience. Without publication of our work, our characters would live a lonely life and die within the pages of our notebooks.

“We do not believe in ourselves until someone reveals that deep inside us something is valuable, worth listening to, worthy of our trust, sacred to our touch. Once we believe in ourselves we can risk curiosity, wonder, spontaneous delight or any experience that reveals the human spirit.” — E.E. Cummings

When I write, what works for me best is to be inspired by an image or sometimes a line comes to mind and from there the story emerges. If I was to try to describe the theme in my writing it would have to be the human condition. In each story I have written, the theme emerges as I write. It comes from the heart of the characters, once I really feel I know them and that they come to the page with complete honesty, then the story tells itself.

I chose ‘Home’ as the theme for this edition. Home can be a million different things to a million different people, it can be the country, or the town, or the house you live in or the heart of the person you want to be with. It’s more than bricks and mortar it is also a feeling of security, a place where we want to be.

This collection of short stories delves into the concept of the home as a concrete structure, a place of physical shelter alongside it being a representation, a sanctuary, an inner place of safety where trust and love must be paramount. Unfortunately for some, home is not a safe place and within its walls can be a place of fear and vulnerability to the extent that they are forced to leave even with the prospect of nowhere else to go. We are all born with that first breath of life; it’s only after that things change. As writers we try to stop being passers-by, put ourselves in that position for a moment, show how it feels.

Live Encounters, created by Mark Ulyseas, Publisher Editor, has become home to some of the best writing from around the world. With a sincerity and sense of freedom that is second to none, Live Encounters lets its readers lean all the way out so they can see in 360 degrees, holds them there until they have seen all they need and then pulls them back from the edge, inspired.

All stories are subject to copyright ©
I popped another tablet onto my tongue, the last one out of that blister pack; I take out another pack, hold it in my hand, ready. I put my hand against the window the cold creeps up through my palm; my skin looks even darker against the vision of white outside.

I can hear the song again, in my head, his voice so deep like it’s reaching inside me; the music barely matters, just his voice telling me the story. My father always sang the stories to me in the evenings when we lived back home in Kenya; the fire beside our hut would show pictures, the scent of bay rum high on the wind while the orange sky turned black.

I shivered. The snow outside the window made things look pretty. I could feel the silence; even the pile of wood in the corner of the yard was mostly covered now. Everything looks better, cleaner, covered in a layer of white.

“Etta, Etta, where are you?” Alice’s voice was getting fainter, she sounded sick, like breathing was hard to do. She couldn’t reach me here; she can’t make it upstairs, not anymore anyway.

Last night when she decided to tell me all the things I could do, I made my face look like I was listening; she might have still been strong enough to lash out a slap.
“You could grow that out you know, there’s all sorts of straighteners these days and lotions that could iron that out.” I put my hand to my head as if I was considering what she was saying.

I wondered why it still mattered to her how I looked. Was it so she would have something to keep him here?

I keep my hair short, so tight to my head there’s nothing left to straighten out. It feels wiry but strong. I get some kind of strange comfort when I run my fingers over my skull, up and over the scar at the back. I know who I am.

She was still talking when I went out to the kitchen to check on the stew. I could hear her voice but couldn’t make out the words. I shook the tablets out into the tea towel and ran the rolling pin over and back until they were just fine powder and then I folded it gently into the stew and stirred.

Round and round the thick brown liquid churned and swallowed up every last bit of white. The metal spoon was scraping in circles on the bottom of the pot a horrible sound but it was something else to drown out her voice.

I remembered the woman in the store ages ago, her face screwed up in an expression of pity and curiosity while she looked me over.

“She said to Alice. It must be so hard, especially when they’re so different to us, sure they must barely understand us as it is.”

“Oh it is,” Alice said taking a long slow breath, “but it’s rewarding and sure you know yourself even if you take in a dog off the street you grow to love it once it belongs to you.”

Then she lowered her voice but only a little, and said

“Some people say they can be damaged goods though, you know, like they make up stories and that, even about the people that have taken them in and done their best for them, it’s odd but I suppose we don’t really know what they’ve come from or what way they lived before we got them”.

Her eyes slid over me as she spoke.

The woman went on,

“You’d think they’d be grateful to get a home with a good family wouldn’t you, a chance at a brand new life, a better life.”

She had laid her gloved hand on Alice’s arm patting it gently. She went on and on about how great Alice was to take in another desperate child.

I whispered the word desperate to myself all the way home in the back of the car, it felt like it fitted, it was right for me.

When I finally get to sleep at night, in my dreams, I feel the heat on my back, shade my eyes from the sun and rest under the Olea tree waiting for my father to return. The branches look dark against the orange of the evening sky. I still miss my father there isn’t a day goes by that I don’t think of him but even in my dreams my mind won’t let me have this happy memory. Almost like I am between sleep and wakefulness the nightmare rears up again. I always try to wake before the noise begins. The sounds of voices heavy and deep speaking words I don’t understand. The thud of boots against the ground, enough to know there are more than three men, maybe more, these sounds are the first things that frighten me. My heart swells up in my chest fills my throat with a scream that will not get the chance to escape. I feel my ankles kick against each other as I try to scramble to my feet to run, my eyes searching for the safety of our hut but the ground eats me up as they slam my face right down in the dirt and then there is pain, so much pain and noises I will never be able to forget, words in a language I do not understand and do not want to.

I wonder was the ground still kicked up, when my father returned, balls of spit where they’d hawked it up making barking noises like dogs? Were there parts of me left there amongst the dirt? It would have been easier if they’d taken an axe to me before they split me in two.

I thought I was going to be okay here. Alice and he had made it all sound fine when they brought me here. The social worker looked at my room I saw her tick a few boxes on her bundle of forms and then she left.
ETTA AND THE SNOW

I didn't mind the work it was good to keep busy. At first the land all around the house seemed so big. The hills brown and green where one followed another for as far as your eye could see with jagged stones beaten into the earth. It was so different to what I knew.

When Alice got sick he set up the bed for her downstairs but he remained in the room beside mine. He said we'd have to manage between us to do what was needed.

It wasn't too long afterwards that he began to come to my room at night. After the first night, I started to collect the tablets, bit by bit over the weeks and months until I had enough. The doctor didn't seem to take any notice of how many she had, he just wrote out a new prescription each time he came. Alice told him she had trouble sleeping and the nightmares were horrific when she did. I heard her whisper to him that she couldn't trust me that I was making up stories. I kept tidying around the room when she said that. He looked over his glasses at her, he kept writing on his pad but when he scrawled his name at the end I heard him say he'd heard something alright, from the social worker he said.

"Ah you can have too much aul talk alright but you need to get your rest now Alice that's what you need to do."

I nodded at him while I slid the bed pan out from beneath her and straightened the sheets under her chin. I'd felt a little burst of hope when he'd said he'd heard something I hadn't thought that social worker believed me. The doctor gave me a half smile and looked like he was sorry maybe for the things she was saying or maybe because of what he'd heard from the social worker. I couldn't tell.

When he left I saw him stride out through the back yard he walked up to the first field to where Alice's husband was bringing in the cows. I could see his face redden while he spoke, he pushed his cap back scratching his forehead shaking his head then he patted the doctor on the back and waited while he got into his car and gave him a big wide wave as he drove out the gate. When he came striding towards the house fingering his belt I was ready for him. I closed the door to Alice's room and ran up the stairs. I was waiting on turn of the landing I could hear him climb the stairs two at a time until he turned the corner into me. I didn't look away even when I drove the kitchen knife deep into the centre of his chest.

There was a sound, like a sucking sound. I felt the heat of his blood while I held it in him and watched the scared look in his eyes while his knees buckled and his weight dragged me to the floor with him. I bent there over him the sickly sweet smell of his hair blending with his blood as it turned black.

"Etta, Etta.” Her voice crackled.

I felt scared for a moment like she could make it up the stairs to me, like the life could pour in behind his dead eyes again and he could rise up out of his body and strangle me, or worse.

I go back into my room. The cold in this room feels wet around the edges; sometimes the wallpaper feels like it will crawl right off the walls it gets so damp, I wait for the cold to get right into the middle of me and freeze out all the feeling. I pop another tablet onto my tongue, I try to tune into the song in my head again, it's difficult. Her voice has scratched in between the music and the words.

I pop two, three tablets this time and try to take them faster but they make me gag and I'm afraid I will be sick and lose all the ones before that are lying sweetly in my stomach. I try to breathe and slow things down to keep them safely inside me. So the little one that has begun to grow there can rest and sleep without dreams, forever.

I find my reflection in the glass; I see my father. He has come home. I see him cut down the Olea tree, the smell of bay rum leaking from its bark staining his hands with its scent forever?

I see the tree now the branches lying dead on the ground, dark against a warm orange sky.
Once inside her hotel room, the thrum of the vending machine and ice-maker becomes less intense; yet the sound is lodged in Rose O’Brien’s head. Her brother settles into one of two plush, over-sized armchairs and again, she notices how heavy-set Sean has become. Rose hands him a bottle of Long Island Pale Ale and an opener. He uncaps it with one swift jerk and drinks deeply.

‘You could fit half our old street into this bed,’ she observes, her small, white hands smoothing out the satin quilt. ‘Remember that family ... Mahoney? You must remember them. So many kids squashed into that two up, two down. It’s a miracle anyone got any rest.’

‘Ole man Mahoney didn’t, that’s for sure,’ Sean quips, his Southern drawl more pronounced than Rose can recall. He leans towards the window and lifts the heavy voile curtain a couple of inches.

‘Busload’s pulled in. For Mikey’s wedding, most like.’ He drops the curtain and shifts about in his chair, scowling at the floor and hunching his shoulders. ‘God Rose, I never thought I’d still be in the US of A after all these years. It wasn’t the plan, that’s for sure.’
Again, Rose is conscious of the thrumming from the corridor but she doesn’t refer to it. ‘It must be ten years ... at least?’

‘The longest time yet. Miley got the best education money could buy...and then his mother’s funeral didn’t come cheap neither. Sean holds the bottle up towards the light to see how much beer is left.

‘I guess trips home were not a priority. How fast the years have flown though.’

‘Beer’s the one thing this country’s still good for, God Bless America,’ he says, ignoring her reference to the passing of time.

‘I’m serious about that piece of real estate Rose. Though you’ve paid it no mind.’ He looks directly across at her. ‘Damn if it’s any use to me.’

‘Want the other one?’ she asks, nodding towards the complimentary welcome bag on the bureau. She wonders how a piece of ground four feet across and nine feet deep has become real estate?

‘I’m not asking a cent for it, if that’s the ways you’re thinking.’ He waves the empty bottle towards her for emphasis.

‘Here, you might as well have it,’ she says and takes the second bottle from the bag.

‘Might as well, it’s five dollars a pop in the bar.’ He twists off the cap. This time, a rush of frothy bubbles spills over the rim and he wipes it away with the back of his hand.

‘Cheapskate.’ She smiles to take the harm out of it.

‘Will I put on Fox News for you?’ Ordinarily, she wouldn’t dream of turning on the television set but anything to avoid this issue of ‘real estate’ which Sean first mentioned earlier in The Plumbago Bar and Grill, five floors below. He’d leaned his elbows on the table and held his knife and fork upright like soldiers to attention; the way he had as a young boy.

‘I bought a burial plot many years ago,’ he’d explained, his voice rising a little above the hum of conversation. ‘I always thought my bones would rest near the folks’ grave... but that’s not goin’ to happen. And now that Stacy’s planted here... well, long story short, it’s yours if you want it Rose.’ He saw the surprised look on her face.

‘It don’t mean you’re about to snuff it girl, hell no,’ he said hastily. It comes to us all...eventually... no doubt about that.’

She’d sneaked a look at the adjacent tables but the other diners seemed totally oblivious to their conversation. The fact that Sean had such a burial plot was news to her. And to have held onto it for so long was certainly puzzling. In one way, however, it made sense. The emigrant’s safety net, she’s heard it called.

* Rose is tempted to turn down the air conditioning but Sean might complains. Although he’s visibly perspiring, she feels chilled. It occurs to her now that not once the whole evening has he bothered to ask if she already has a plot. For all he knows, she might wish to be cremated and have her ashes strewn across the sea.

Would you prefer CNN? She takes her cardigan from the closet and buttons it up to her neck.

‘Nah... if it’s all the same to you Hon. He doesn’t appear to notice the flood of colour staining Roses’ cheeks as she remembers snatches from their earlier conversation.

‘It’s not as if you are going down with anyone in particular,’ he’d persisted, blunt as ever. When he’d lowered his knife and fork, they clattered against his plate so loud she thought it would break.

Rose hears a rap on the door and moves quickly to open it, relieved at Michael and Theresa’s arrival.

‘Hi Aunt Rose, can we come in?’
'Of course' she says to her nephew and nods to her sister. Theresa immediately sits on the bed while Rose views the room through Theresa's gimlet eye.

'I haven't opened the cookies yet ... or the potato chips,' Rose says, pointing to the complimentary guest bag. If anyone would like some coffee ...,' the words tumble out of her mouth in a rush.

'Quit fussin,' Sean says lightly, 'we're fine.'

'I can't believe we didn't bring our own teabags!' Theresa says, kicking off her sling-back evening shoes. They fall with a soft thud on the plain beige carpet.

'Once tomorrow is over, I’m in flat soles for life, I swear.' Rose looks at Theresa's bunions remembering when she herself once wore stilettos which were impossibly high and pointy-toed.

As Theresa rotates her ankles, Rose begins to wonder if she knew anything about Sean buying the burial plot. They'd always been thick as thieves, even as children. On one of his regular visits home in those earlier years, Theresa might very well have accompanied him through the spiked iron gates of the cemetery. The route to the family burial plot would have taken them along an avenue lined with tall fir trees and leafy sycamores. Then down the other side of the hilly slope that screened off the view of the town; their footsteps crunching on the gravel stones.

'Looks like I'll be drinking alone then,' Sean says.

'I personally prefer a ball of malt. What are the chances at the wedding Michael?' Theresa says and winks at the young man. Theresa had arrived into John F. Kennedy, armed with her full quota of duty free whiskey. Michael winks back and gives her the thumbs up. Rose looks closely at her nephew, his tall, lean frame reminding her of Stacy's elegance. Michael bore no resemblance to his father and certainly had none of Sean's rougher edges. Educated at Manhattan University, there's barely a trace of Southern in his voice.

'Guilty as charged Aunt Rose,' Michael replies.

'How's Diana? Rose asks then. 'She'll make a stunning bride.'

Michael smiles. 'There's no denying that Aunt Rose.'

'And her folks are pretty damn decent people,' Sean beams with pride at his only son.

'You did real good Mikey,' he says. All three fell silent.

'I wish those machines weren't so loud,' Rose says after a few minutes. Ordinarily, she wouldn't complain.

'It don't bother me none,' Sean says and Theresa and Michael both shrug their shoulders.

'They’re on all the corridors,' Michael says but maybe your room is closer than ours,' he adds kindly.

'You can always ask to be moved.'

Rose shakes her head, sorry now that's she's mentioned it at all.

'We shouldn’t stay up too late tonight. We’ll need our beauty sleep and tomorrow will be long enough ... though nothing like the weddings at home, isn’t that right Michael?' Theresa says.

'That’s right. Here, we usually finish up around midnight. Michael forces back a yawn.

'They’re only getting fired up in Ireland then,' Sean says, 'weddings and funerals are always good for a shindig.'

Again, it comes to Rose. An image of Theresa and Sean strolling through the cemetery. A bleak place no matter what the season; a place where so many people she'd known throughout her life were laid to rest. And plenty of secrets buried with them too she’d bet. A surge of anger shoots through her. Of course Theresa knew about the plot.
She was probably the one who recently suggested to Sean that Rose should have it ... now it was of no use to him.

'It was some street where we grew up, wasn't it?' Sean says. 'We could be here all night tellin' you stories Mikey.'

Michael glances at his father and rolls his eyes.

'A lot of things went by without much notice,' Sean adds and Theresa nods agreement.

'Not everything went unheeded,' Rose says, resentment tightening her mouth. 'I hope your father hasn't sentimentalised our childhood Michael.'

'Your aunt was always a softie,' Sean says, directly to Michael, ignoring the coldness in Rose's blue eyes. 'Even when it came to stray kittens. She was forever bringin' 'em home.'

'Better than what some neighbours did to them. Who can forget that? Lifting the grid over the drain for one thing...and letting them stagger blindly to their death.'

'Gross,' Michael says, scrunching up his face in disgust.

'I hope your father hasn't sentimentalised our childhood Michael.'

'Your aunt was always a softie,' Sean says, directly to Michael, ignoring the coldness in Rose's blue eyes. 'Even when it came to stray kittens. She was forever bringin' 'em home.'

'Better than what some neighbours did to them. Who can forget that? Lifting the grid over the drain for one thing...and letting them stagger blindly to their death.'

Time to put ourselves to bed,' Theresa says, forcing her swollen feet back into her shoes.

A lot worse goes on in the world than drowning unwanted kittens,' Sean says as Michael helps him out of the chair.

Rose can feel her heart racing. What might happen if she were to mention to Mikey the man who'd wanted to marry her all those years ago? Jack Hourihan. Only Theresa and Sean had hounded him away because they said he wasn't good enough for their baby sister. How would they talk their way out of that?

'Man, I'm feelin' it now,' Sean says and stretches.

Yes, definitely time to say goodnight,' Theresa agrees.

'Think I'll turn in myself, I'm bunched.' Michael can scarcely hide his relief that he can escape the growing tension in the room.

On his way out, Sean squeezes her arm. She thinks she sees his eyes glisten. But surely not? He's never been sentimental.

Rose locks her door then lowers the air conditioning. She brushes her teeth and cream off her make-up, barely glancing in the bathroom mirror. Once undressed, she quickly pulls on her pyjamas and takes from her handbag the blue plastic plugs she'd bought in the Shopping Mall earlier. She removes their wrapping and inserts them into her ears. Once under the cover, the bed seems even larger than the night before and Rose cannot rid herself of the images crowding her mind. Jack Hourihan's handsome face swims before her followed by Sean and Theresa, smugly mapping out her future. And now, all these years later, deciding her final resting place. Again, resentment makes her body ache.

Despite the ear plugs, the noise from the corridor filters to her. Rose pushes the plugs deeper, holding them in with her hands until the sound becomes a dull throb. Eventually, she falls asleep but her dreams take her along the gravel path, among the rows of ended lives.
When skies are grey

‘You are mmm sunshine, mmmmmmmm sunshine…. you make me mmmmmmmm when skies are grey…’

Della, sitting at her window, spotted Mick Cully on his way home from work, singing and whistling as he walked from streetlight to streetlight. He lived in the room above hers with his wife and baby son. He was the happiest man in the entire house, maybe even in the whole of the street. The poor fool.

Della moaned as she stood up and moved away from the window. She put the kettle on the gas ring. She needed a cup of tea after her terrible day, the worst for a long time.

It started with the ten o’clock Mass. Fr Fahey was in a cranky mood. She could tell from his big backside in the green chasuble and the creases on his fat neck as he bowed and nodded and genuflected. Then, at the gospel, she saw that one of the altar boys was crying when he carried the big missal down the altar steps. The child wiped his nose on the sleeve of his soutane when he knelt again and the snots glistened in candle light. At Communion, she closed her eyes at the altar rails and stuck out her tongue to receive the host. She heard the priest’s sniffy disgust and a snigger from the altar boy. She opened her eyes a fraction and saw the smirk on the child’s weepy face. She should have turned her back on the pair of them, but she needed the Communion more than that.

She was filled with awful thoughts. Thoughts about the happy family at the top of the house, about shop girls, about the two bowties across the road. About everything. Her stomach ached, filling her mouth with acid that erupted in vile belches. She knew it all came from her bitter thoughts. She read somewhere that bitterness was like swallowing poison and expecting the other person to get sick. Well, that was her; she was thinking all these bad thoughts and it didn’t make a blind bit of difference to anyone else, it was just making her sicker and sorrier than she ever was in her whole life.
It wasn’t always like this. She was innocent once upon a time. She was an only child, adored by her parents, her aunts and uncles, born and reared in this very room. She was a good scholar, at the top of the class. She played on the street - hop scotch and skipping and Queen-E.I.O - with her friends. When she was fourteen, she left school with a good education and went into the textile factory in Francis Street. She brought good money home and that meant that the family could burn coal in the fire, get warm blankets for the bed. Have meat and gravy on a Sunday.

And she went on social outings with the girls and boys from work, gathering outside the factory gate on summer mornings, baskets of sandwiches and lemonade and cakes for picnics. Glencree. Glendalough. The Botanic Gardens. She thought that she would meet someone, a nice boy who would respect her. There was someone, all right, but he wasn’t nice, by any means. No. No. No.

Her pay packet was needed when they got the gas. Before they got the gas, they had to cook on the open fire. That was hardship. But that was life and they were used to it. And when they got the gas cooker in their room, it was wonderful. And her mother used to boil the kettle for the neighbours. ‘Why wouldn’t we? Sure, it’s only a couple of coppers.’ That’s what her mother always said. But Della privately thought that it was her shillings that boiled the kettle. When her mother died, Della put a stop to all that. No more boiling kettles for the neighbours. That was the holy all of it. And besides, they took it for granted. They had no respect for her and the likes of her.

Like that young trollop in the bakery this morning.

When the Mass was over, she went into the bakery as usual.

‘A sup of water, Miss.’

‘Have you no manners?’ the shop girl asked.

‘What are you talking about?’ Della couldn’t believe her ears. ‘What the blazes are you talking about?’ Bile welled up in her mouth. ‘Will you get me a drink of water for God’s sake, I’m after receiving Communion.’

’No please, no thanks. No manners,’ the shop girl said. She stared at Della but then, she went into the back of the shop and came out with a cup of water. A chipped cup. Della took her three sips, *Father, Son and Holy Ghost*, and left the cup on the counter without a word. But she was only outside the door of the bakery when the two bowsies from across the street started.

‘Auld one, the bauld one. Auld one, the bauld one.’ Della swung her shopping bag at the two boys, almost clipping the younger one. She always carried a rock in the bottom of the bag. Best to be ready.

‘You little blackguards.’ she shouted at them and they laughed into her face. They ran out of her reach and turned around again.

‘You can’t catch me, you can’t even see, you’re a blind auld bat, batty, batty bat.’

‘Oh, your teachers must be very proud,’ she shouted. She swung the shopping bag again, but they were too far away.

‘Ha, ha, you can’t catch us. You can’t catch us. Ha, ha, ha, ha, you couldn’t even catch a bus.’ She would like to wring their necks. It was the only thing that they could understand. She crossed the street and shouted up to one of the windows.

‘Come here. Come here and listen to me. Are you proud of your blackguard sons?’ The window looked back at her without blinking. ‘Are you so proud of your little brats?’ A window at the top of the house rattled. A bucket of water spilled out. Most of the water missed her and splashed onto the footpath but still, she got a good dash on her head and shoulders.

‘Shut up ye auld bitch. Shut up, shut up, shut up.’ The man held the bucket in front of him. He was wearing a vest and his face was twisted into a snarl. ‘I’m trying to sleep, ye auld bitch. I don’t need to listen to you and your screeching.’

‘You bloody bastard, what did you do that for?’
'Well, you can tell that woman that her two bowsies are tormenting the street. Tell her to teach them some manners. If she has any herself. You tell her from me.'

'Tell her yourself, ye auld bag.' He cleared his throat and spat. 'Go home to hell, let you. Shut up, shut up or I'll come down there myself and I'll show you manners.'

'Ah, the big man, the big man.'

Della turned away before the night-watchman could say anything else and she heard the window slamming shut. She crossed the street and reeled down the lane to her own hallway and stairs. She had to hold onto the handrail, using it to haul herself up from step to step.

The ewer and basin stood in the corner with a towel hanging on a hook beside it. She dried her face and head, looking into the mirror. She was old. Her hair was like grey wire, so different from the thick black mane that she had when she brought her pay packet home. And went on those outings to the Dublin mountains. She brought her chair over to the window and sat there, watching the street, until the sky turned grey and then, navy blue. The street lights flickered into life. Mick Cully, singing his song, appeared in one of the pools of light. She wiped her face again, the tears glistening on her sleeve. She shook herself and got up.

She filled the kettle from the bucket of water standing in the corner. She lit the gas ring but she saw that it was very faint. Another shilling. She rooted in the bottom of her bag. She pushed the rock aside and found her purse. She inserted a silver shilling into the meter behind the door. The blue flame flared under the kettle and set it singing a low hum. She liked plenty of tea when things went bad for her, like today.

She could hear Mick Cully skipping past her room, up the stairs, still singing.

’The other nnnnn, as I laaay sleeping, I dreamt iiiiiii...’ He opened his own door to his home and walked in light footsteps which she could hear through her ceiling. She heard the murmur of joy in the voices of his wife and child, laughter bursting out and dying down. He started whistling, the same song, as he crossed over and back. The whistling pierced through her ears.

She closed her eyes for a moment, tears springing up again, but then, she caught her sweeping brush and banged on her ceiling.

'Shit up, shut up, for heaven's sake,' she shouted. He stamped hard on the floor and the plaster on her ceiling shed a scatter of flakes. The next thing, she heard him on the stairs and he pushed her door open.

‘What the hell is wrong with you, Missus?’ She had the sweeping brush in her hands and she pointed it at him, holding it like a spear.

‘Don’t you swear at me, you bloody blackguard.’ He backed off.

‘My God, but you’re a bitter auld wan. A good bang would sort you out and that’s the honest truth.’

Della staggered backwards, supporting herself with the brush. She shook her head, tears streaming down her face.

‘Now, shag off and leave us alone,’ he said, slamming her door. She sat down, weak and spent. She could hear him running up the stairs and laughing as he went back into the room. His wife was laughing too. Even the baby seemed to be joining in.

The kettle boiled over and quenched the gas flame. She didn’t – she couldn’t – move out of the chair. Mick Cully's voice filtered through the ceiling.

’You mmmm mmmm happy, when skies are grey...you never know...’

And then - she could hardly believe her ears – Mick and the wife started to dance.
MISSING LINKS

Joan Power lives in Dublin and has two grown-up sons. She is a member of St. Muirin’s Writers’ Group for fifteen years and also a founding member of Platform One. She writes both poetry and prose and has won prizes for both. She has also been published in several anthologies. The short story form is her favourite and she likes to study how successful writers approach the challenge and complexities of the short story.

MISSING LINKS

Our marriage was ten years old that last summer in Valencia when things finally began to unravel. I knew I wasn’t blameless - the fault-lines ran deep - but Johnnie didn’t make things easy. There was a new hardness to him, a flashy meanness. That miserable wet Monday afternoon when he told Angie her earrings were crap was a typical example.

Outside rain was beating down, slapping onto the sloping narrow streets of the old town with malignant force. We’d retreated from the terrace of Rizzo’s Dive into the dim airless café. Rizzo was too cheap to run the air-con unless the mercury read over thirty five and the place was a sauna. The smell of mold mixed with sweat, booze and stale perfume. Angie was three-quarters drunk, make-up melting, dyed blond pony tail coming undone. Johnnie, three drinking hours ahead of everyone, was in dangerous simmering mood. He sprawled on a plastic chair, trawling the company for entertainment. He reached across the littered table and fingered one of Angie’s dangling silver earrings.

‘Hey, Handsome Johnnie,’ she cooed.

I knew she fancied him.

‘These earrings are crap,’ he said. ‘Some cheapskate left out a link.’

Abruptly he slumped back in his chair surveying the effect of his words.

‘Whaddya mean? They were expensive and made in Barcelona.’

‘Well, they’re badly made. You look...’ he shrugged. ‘Silly.’
I could’ve slapped him. But Angie’s stricken face and slack jaw were all the entertainment Johnnie needed. Geordie Joe and Pedro, side by side as usual, looked from Angie to Johnnie in turn. No one looked at me. A hollow clanking racket broke the silence. Rizzo’s fat bug-eyed Mamma, wrapped in a stained overall, flip-flopped out from behind the bar with bucket and mop. Dirty rainwater was seeping in from the terrace down into the café.

‘Ayeo,’ she sang. ‘Mi dios, este es terrible!’

As she squeezed past, her rigid meaty backside slid along my arm like a corpse.

Everyone watched her efforts to stem the flow. No one moved. Rizzo came through the plastic kitchen curtain with a tray of tapas, plonking it down before us. I wouldn’t touch it. I’d seen it all last night on the bar counter: cracked oily dishes of olives, greying pickled eggs and rolled up herrings under a slick of greenish garlic oil. Specks of herbs, or grit, floated in the liquid. I knew Joe and Pedro would plunge their fingers into each dish, ignoring the plastic spears. When they drank from their pints of lager, a film of oil from their lips would float on the top, dissipating the foamy head. Angie, sobbing, groped at her earrings. I put my arm around her.

‘Ignore him, Angie, your earrings are gorgeous. Johnnie, you’re a shit.’

Impassive, Johnnie loaded three olives onto a spear and, tipping his head back, lowered it into his mouth.

Angie was near my own age but my relationship with her was parental. On these drink-sodden afternoons, she’d given me her story.

‘Shelly,’ she whispered, ‘I saw her last night, my mother. I know it’s her!’

‘Oh Angie no,’ I sighed, ‘shush now. Listen, don’t drink anymore. This boozing every bloody afternoon is wrecking us all.’

‘Gawd, I’m bleedin’ meltin’ ‘ere, mate! I ‘ate this poxy ‘eat,’ she’d say. ‘I’m bleedin’ outta ‘ere me, back to England. Green and pleasant land wiv proper bleedin’ chips ‘n teabags.’

The door burst open and a ragged group spilled in from the street, umbrellas scattering spray. The harsh Australian twang of Lullaby Lil rose above the scraping of chairs across greasy tiles as they joined us. Suddenly, Johnnie was animated.

‘Welcome wine drinkers! Rizzo, bring out that local gut-rot you call wine, your cougar girlfriend is here’

‘Fuck you, Johnnie,’ Lil said.

‘Fuck yourself, Lil,’ he grinned, ‘for who else indeed, would do the deed, besides old Rizzo there?’

Johnnie would perk up now that the opportunity for mockery had increased. Lil wanted to forget she’d ever been intimate with Rizzo. It had happened a few times when she’d first arrived in San Quatrae. Like all first-timers she’d been seduced into a hedonistic month-long binge. Judgement suspended by sunshine and drink, she’d slept with Rizzo in his putrid back room. By the time she sobered up, she wanted to re-write history. In San Quatrae this was allowed by everyone but Johnnie - he kept track of all lapses.

Why did I stay with him in this sham El Dorado, with its cast of drifters and misfits, its hostile, draining climate? But I knew the answer to that. We both did.

I looked around the table as we shuffled to make room. There was Johnnie and me, never looking at each other; Geordie Joe and Pedro sliding their pints along in unison; Angie, embracing Lil, saying *Sit beside me, honey,* there was Sarge, AWOL from some supposed military life; Mick the Spick, rat-like and feral and there was Lil’s sidekick, Bleedin’ Renee, a manic depressive from Birmingham who spoke with a visceral, sapping screech.

‘Gawd, I’m bleedin’ meltin’ ere, mate! I ’ate this poxy ’eat,’ she’d say. ‘I’m bleedin’ outta ’ere me, back to England. Green and pleasant land wiv proper bleedin’ chips ’n teabags.’

But cheap drink, cigarettes and the amorphous drift of days were all she craved. An advertisement for bar-maids had brought her to Spain and her love for Lil kept her in San Quatrae.
In a town where no-one toted a past everybody had a label. It was our map of social navigation. I was Secret Shelly and Johnnie was Handsome Johnnie. The Sarge affected a uniform of sorts, a khaki belted jacket pockets full of penknives. He’d start the day walking his poodle dog Lucky along the beach. He ended each night carried home from Rizzo’s by various volunteers, Lucky trailing behind.

Mick the Spick was addicted to gangster movies. His conversation consisted of quotes learned by heart in a Chicago accent. No one really spoke to him. He drank steadily through the day, upright and trembling in his child-size white polyester track-suit.

Lullaby Lil was so-called because she sang an old childish lullaby at closing time every night. Her surprisingly sweet voice, husky with cigarettes, always brought a hush to the bar, conjuring sad uneasy ghosts amidst the little family of exiles.

I suppose we were a typical ex-pat community. No one was young, most had a bit of money, a redundancy or some shady unexplained windfall. You’d find our mirror image along coasts where the sun shone even, it seemed, in India. There were stories of pints of beer in Goa costing ten old pence, hundreds of fags for a couple of quid, and six-course meals for silly money.

It only awaited the lotus-eaters like us to follow the dream. Geordie Joe and Pedro shook their heads.

‘Fuckin’ natives’ mate, big problem, right Pedro? Then you’ve got your foreign lingo and your weird customs.’

‘Got your fuckin’ snakes, too, Geordie Boy. Naw, we’re safe here.’

Angie was the only one I knew anything about. Abandoned as a baby to an Irish orphanage, a mischievous nun once told her that her mother was Spanish.

‘Exported her ‘nuisance’ to Ireland,’ said Sister Jarleth. ‘As if the Sisters of Mercy haven’t enough little Irish bastards to mind for the Good Lord.’

Abused and bullied, Angie dreamed of finding her mother. Compensation from a minor accident brought her to Spain to track down a woman whose name she’d never known, whose only trace lay in a throw-away remark.

Walking around San Quatrae Angie and I often saw two silver haired Spanish matrons, obviously sisters. Well dressed and aloof, they walked arm-in-arm through the cool of evening, nodding only to Spanish locals. At a café they sat silently drinking glasses of iced tea. The taller woman seemed the leader. The other woman ran a string of beads constantly through her fingers. I envied them their tranquility, their ease of time and place. Angie decided the woman with the beads was her mother. It was an obsession. Strangely, there was a vague resemblance - though I didn’t voice this.

Now, as I watched Rizzo’s mamma fling an old towel across the entrance to absorb the gathering flood, I listened to Angie’s usual mantra. She drew Lil into our conversation.

‘I saw my mother again last night.’

Lil and I exchanged looks.

‘Lil, you’ve great Spanish, please help me. I’m going to speak to her tonight!’

‘Jeeze girl, are you off your tiny mind?’ Lil looked at me. ‘Tell her, Shelly, this is bunkum! What would I say? “Excuse me Senora, did you by any chance have a baby girl thirty odd years ago and dump her in an Irish orphanage? Well, this is your lucky day lady, ‘cos here she is, taadaaa!”

‘No, no!’ Angie cried, ‘not like that! We’d have that iced tea stuff; get to know each other. I might have brothers and sisters, a whole family here in Spain! Tell her, Shell, please, I know she’s my mother, I know it!’

‘Let’s get you home,’ Lil said.

Supporting the sobbing Angie, we stepped out into the deluge. The gang sat on.
I was changing out of my damp clothes about an hour later when Johnnie came into the apartment.

‘Did Rizzo’s burn down?’ I asked.

‘I’ve no cash and you were gone ages. Is Angie ok?’

‘As if you care, you bastard, what was that shit about her earrings? You’re bloody cruel, you know she’s fragile’

‘With good reason,’ he answered, going to the safe behind our mirror. ‘Dumped by her mother, what kind of woman does that?’

‘WHAT?’ I shouted. ‘Are you talking about me? It’s not the same thing, there’s no comparison!’

‘That’s true, my darling wife, our child won’t pop up in thirty years’ time and surprise us.’ Johnnie slammed the safe shut. ‘If she lives that long she’ll still be a bed bound vegetable, hidden away in that beautiful place.’

I collapsed onto the bed, banging my fists into the pillow.

‘Stop! I couldn’t do it, Johnnie, we couldn’t do it, remember? We made the decision. REMEMBER?’

‘Not anymore.’

I remembered the sad weary Specialist.

‘Your daughter will never walk, talk or know you,’ he said. ‘For however long she lives she’ll need round-the-clock care.’

We’d sat in stunned silence.

‘There are many care options. Take things slowly, remember, you’re in shock.’

I remembered the blur of compensation hearings, the invasive publicity around one of the largest payouts in Irish medical history. I remembered the determinedly upbeat army of paid carers, the months of horror pretending to cope as, one by one, family and friends fell away, defeated by the prison of days. I remembered the helpless inadequacy and racking guilt of knowing that I was going to run. I couldn’t remember when love turned to hate.

‘I’m taking twenty out of the stash,’ Johnnie said, ‘there’s a poker game. I’ll wait if you’re coming back to Rizzo’s?’

‘No, I’m going down to the English bookshop.’

I took two aspirin and left the apartment. The rain had stopped and the streets were damp and cool, the white houses washed clean and fresh in the watery sun.

Mike Hogan had the only English bookshop on the coast and he knew everything about the town. Bringing my selection to him I asked casually about the two women who took tea at the corner café.

‘Ah you’ll mean the Mendoza sisters. An old local family, very wealthy but don’t flaunt it. It doesn’t change their tragedy though.’

‘What tragedy?’

‘Angelina, the one with the beads, has some rare syndrome. She can’t speak, can’t mind herself. She’s a child in a woman’s body, though you wouldn’t know to look at her. She was beautiful. But she’s well minded and happy enough. Louisa takes her walking every evening. She’s been known to bolt, poor wretch, be missing for hours. Not so much these days though.’

Mike looked at my selection of books and smiled.

‘Maeve Binchy and Colm Toibin, guess you’re feeling homesick, Michelle? Ah, it’s a powerful force right enough, eventually we all want to go home.’
Shirley Keegan is a self-employed Holistic Therapist living in the picturesque village of Kilworth in North Cork. She is an avid reader and is a member of her local book club. She has written poetry since her teens but until now has kept all of her writings private. She completed a 6 week creative writing course in the summer of 2017 and it ignited a hidden passion.

Shirley Keegan

Departure Lounge

Brigid lay on the beach viewing the sparkling water through her newly polished toenails. The sun shone brightly and the white powdery sand moulded softly to her shape under her colourful towel. As she looked up at the cloudless sky she considered hiring out a sunbed and parasol to protect her fair skin. She could easily afford it now. She had to continually remind herself there was no longer any need to be frugal, however, as her dear departed mother often said “old habits die hard.”

After much deliberation she had booked a posh hotel for this trip, she nearly had to pinch herself to believe it, Brigid Lynch the old spinster living it up in Spain. “Who’d have thought” she said out loud just to hear her own voice so she would know it was real and no longer a dream. This wasn’t her first time away from home, she had been abroad once before with her mother for a funeral in England. She had been so excited getting on the Ferry with her mother all those years ago. Her father hadn’t wanted her to go, he feared she was too young to be exposed to death but Brigid was oblivious to the reason. She was untouched by the sadness of the visit back then, upon reflection she thought that was more likely because of her personality and nothing to do with her young age at the time.
During the visit she was so careful not to dirty her good dress and warm winter coat. The excitement of wearing her good clothes midweek and eating such delicious food were embedded in her memory, it was a joyous occasion for her, when she spoke of it she always referred to it as her first holiday.

Thinking back highlighted how different this new life would be to her, she didn’t have the confidence yet to match her new found money. She had always observed ‘monied people’ from a distance, they had an air of confidence and expectation about them and she knew she had to work on this. She could spot a ‘monied’ person anywhere, despite their attire. They exuded confidence and a sense of entitlement and this was what she would aim for. She was mindful not to appear vulnerable in this new country, she had read lots of stories about holiday romance in her weekly magazines and she knew there would be plenty of people to take advantage of a woman on her own and even more so if they knew she was wealthy. Of course her pasty white skin was enough to make her stand out. She could hear other Irish accents on the beach but no one was as white as she was. She felt a little exposed despite her sensible swim costume. There would be no revealing bikini for Brigid; she had solid standards instilled in her.

Brigid had little experience in romance, it was not deliberate on her part but she had never found herself being pursued. She was shy, she was plain and she didn’t like to dance. When she was younger she did dream of the white wedding, her own home and children. She would doodle and sketch how her dress would look, until her mother found it and told her not to be silly, she was not the marrying kind. It was a regret for her, she would have liked to have had children. She hated being referred to as a spinster, of course no one said it to her face but she knew people whispered behind her back. She got knowing nods which made her feel she wasn’t even worthy of the words of greeting. No benefit in saluting the spinster.

Feeling the intense heat of the sun on her skin Brigid rolled over on to her belly which allowed the content of her stomach, now she didn’t even dry retch from the smell. She had become numb to the sad failing lives, like society in general already had. When she started her work she really believed she could make a difference for these vulnerable people and she felt in the end she had. At first she worked over and beyond her paid hours, meagre pay for the work involved. She made many calls and often lost sleep worrying but nothing made the situation better for these people. They were the forgotten and marginalised, existing more than living but so glad to be home, in their own homes. It was a comment she heard many times from those she worked with, “I just want to stay in my own home.”

Like the care assistants before her she became immune to the rancid smells of people lying in their own waste. When she first started in this job she would often have to run to the bathroom or out the back to empty the contents of her stomach, now she didn’t even dry retch from the smell. She had become numb to the sad failing lives, like society in general already had. When she started her work she really believed she could make a difference for these vulnerable people and she felt in the end she had. At first she worked over and beyond her paid hours, meagre pay for the work involved. She made many calls and often lost sleep worrying but nothing made the situation better for these people. They were the forgotten and marginalised, existing more than living but so glad to be home, in their own homes. It was a comment she heard many times from those she worked with, “I just want to stay in my own home.”

Over time she became immune to the rancid smells of people lying in their own waste. When she first started in this job she would often have to run to the bathroom or out the back to empty the contents of her stomach, now she didn’t even dry retch from the smell. She had become numb to the sad failing lives, like society in general already had. When she started her work she really believed she could make a difference for these vulnerable people and she felt in the end she had. At first she worked over and beyond her paid hours, meagre pay for the work involved. She made many calls and often lost sleep worrying but nothing made the situation better for these people. They were the forgotten and marginalised, existing more than living but so glad to be home, in their own homes. It was a comment she heard many times from those she worked with, “I just want to stay in my own home.”

Like the care assistants before her she became immune to the rancid smells of people lying in their own waste. When she first started in this job she would often have to run to the bathroom or out the back to empty the contents of her stomach, now she didn’t even dry retch from the smell. She had become numb to the sad failing lives, like society in general already had. When she started her work she really believed she could make a difference for these vulnerable people and she felt in the end she had. At first she worked over and beyond her paid hours, meagre pay for the work involved. She made many calls and often lost sleep worrying but nothing made the situation better for these people. They were the forgotten and marginalised, existing more than living but so glad to be home, in their own homes. It was a comment she heard many times from those she worked with, “I just want to stay in my own home.”

Over time she became immune to the rancid smells of people lying in their own waste. When she first started in this job she would often have to run to the bathroom or out the back to empty the contents of her stomach, now she didn’t even dry retch from the smell. She had become numb to the sad failing lives, like society in general already had. When she started her work she really believed she could make a difference for these vulnerable people and she felt in the end she had. At first she worked over and beyond her paid hours, meagre pay for the work involved. She made many calls and often lost sleep worrying but nothing made the situation better for these people. They were the forgotten and marginalised, existing more than living but so glad to be home, in their own homes. It was a comment she heard many times from those she worked with, “I just want to stay in my own home.”

Like the care assistants before her she became immune to the rancid smells of people lying in their own waste. When she first started in this job she would often have to run to the bathroom or out the back to empty the contents of her stomach, now she didn’t even dry retch from the smell. She had become numb to the sad failing lives, like society in general already had. When she started her work she really believed she could make a difference for these vulnerable people and she felt in the end she had. At first she worked over and beyond her paid hours, meagre pay for the work involved. She made many calls and often lost sleep worrying but nothing made the situation better for these people. They were the forgotten and marginalised, existing more than living but so glad to be home, in their own homes. It was a comment she heard many times from those she worked with, “I just want to stay in my own home.”

Before she left for her holiday she had gone to great lengths to ensure her remaining ladies were being well looked while she was away, she didn’t want anything to happen to them in her absence, they were important to her. They would have the best of care with outsiders who didn’t know her; the area or the people they were looking after. She liked to keep it casual so no new relationships could be established. She hired them privately and paid them well. This gave her a sense of importance, which she really liked. After all her years on the side-lines she was not letting anyone take her place now.
DEPARTURE LOUNGE

She briefly recalled all the others she had cared for in the last five years, since she had moved into this career, who’d have thought this work would be so lucrative, she certainly didn’t. She had worked in the local funeral home for the previous twenty-five years and moved jobs because she was tired of dealing with the dead. She respected the dead and took good care of them during her time there. She had enjoyed her job once but since her parents died she longed for human contact and interaction. This care assistant job was perfect for her and she often wondered why she hadn’t thought of making the move sooner.

She was proud of her ability to help these people, the very people she felt everyone else had cast aside. She gave them great care while they could afford the extra service and then the demise of each was dependent on their shrinking stash under the mattress. She reasoned this wasn’t calculated and cold, this was done for their own benefit. They wanted to die at home and when they could no longer afford her comfort she was only too glad to fulfil their wish. This was how Brigid saw it.

She had been very careful with her extra money over the years, it was low paid work and spending lavishly would be noticed among her neighbours. It was still a case of everyone minding everyone else’s business where she lived. They would often ask her if she was lonely rattling around in the big old farmhouse on her own. So she had taken her time, waited patiently. It was three years since her first casualty as she called it and this was her first big spend. The first time it happened she had accidentally given too much medication but when she saw the peaceful death she realised this was how she could really serve these people and make a difference to all of their lives. Some had months in her care and some had years; she made sure of their comfort and gave them much joy. All of their exits were peaceful. Brigid had a good relationship with the local Doctor, who repeatedly reminded her, he had brought her into this world. He said “most girls left this job after a year or two as the work was too demanding, but not Brigid, she was a saint to see after all these people with such great care when no one else bothered with them”.

The last old lady she helped to move from the departure lounge to her final destination as she liked to think of it, had been very difficult and contrary, Brigid thought it was no wonder she was estranged from her children. Normally she would take the time to build a relationship and friendship with those in her care, so she could feel she had improved their lives so they left this world with dignity.

She loved the attention at the funeral when people would tell her how lucky the person was to have had her in their lives; most of these old dears had no immediate family. This time however, she didn’t have the patience to wait; she was pushing on herself and beginning to think of her own retirement, one where she would enjoy her ill begotten gains, even though she avoided thinking of it like that. She knew nothing she could do would make this bitter woman happy so it was an ease to the both of them when she was gone. She was certainly the most wealthy Brigid had cared for and it allowed her a way out finally.

Once her remaining charges were sorted, Brigid would re-invent her life full of colour in a different country, maybe Spain where she was now, but not before trying others first. Feeling the intense heat of the midday sun on her back she turned over using the chance to admire the beautiful scenery briefly before lying down again. Breathing deeply Brigid smiled thinking of the luxury she would live in. She could adjust quickly to this new life; she deserved it and had paid her dues. Pulling her floppy sunhat over her face, she relaxed back into the warm sand, thinking how nice it would be spending her days in such comfort. With a satisfied smirk plastered across her face she never noticed the armed policeman and policewoman purposely approaching her from the left.

© Shirley Keegan

DEPARTURE LOUNGE

Shirley Keegan

DEPARTURE LOUNGE

Shirley Keegan
Susan Condon, a native of Dublin, Ireland was awarded a Certificate in Creative Writing from the National University of Ireland Maynooth. Her short stories have won numerous awards including first prize in the Jonathan Swift Creative Writing Award. Publications include Ireland’s Own Anthology, My Weekly, Boyne Berries 22, Live Encounters, Flash Flood Journal, Spelk, Flash Fiction Magazine and The Flash Fiction Press. Follow her writing on @SusanCondon or susancondon.wordpress.com

Big Jim, I hear them call him, but it’s difficult to see why.

The man huddled in the doorway is thin and frail, his eyes: a watery blue, sunken and weary. Yet he still manages to raise a smile, tipping the peak of his cap when I drop a few coins into the paper cup nestled between his feet.

“Ma’am,” he mutters which for some unknown reason brings a tear to my eye. It makes me want to burrow further into my handbag and rethink the pittance I’ve just given. But I resist the urge. Instead I hurry on. It would have been too embarrassing to top-up my initial contribution. It might even have been misconstrued as an insult. Besides, I only ever deal in cards; it was unusual enough that I’d had any cash to share.

Hours later, while grabbing an Espresso to fuel yet another another after-hours meeting, he enters my mind. The usual thoughts, that I’m sure we’ve all experienced, float around my head. He is somebody’s son, maybe a brother, husband, parent or even grandparent and I wonder how he has ended up here, sheltering from the bitter wind in an open doorway in Nassau Street. Although close in proximity to the affluence of Grafton Street, he could just as easily be a million miles away.
My mind conjures up the many scenarios that might have resulted in him being here today. While I feel sorry for him, I do consider the fact that maybe, in a past life, he has been an abuser to a wife and child and finally been barred from their lives. I don’t know him, having only ever heard that one word he’d uttered with his country lilt, yet somehow I can’t see him in that light. When he had looked up at me, something in his eyes had reminded me of my own father’s; kind and intelligent.

“Mary,” a voice shouts. “Espresso for Mary!”

It takes a moment to realise that’s me. My name is Darlene. A name I love, but I’ve long ago given up using it when ordering a coffee. It has resulted in the entire shop turning my way: the server shooting bright red as he tries, in vain, to pronounce it, while the queue gets ever longer. Mary is easier.

I push my way towards the counter and take my coffee.

Grafton Street is full of pedestrians taking photos in front of Brown Thomas. Many of them pose with the door man. It feels as if he’s been there for centuries. This cheerful man with the black top hat and ruddy cheeks the colour of his immaculate uniform was a constant throughout my childhood. My heels click a tune on the pavement and instead of mentally preparing for the next meeting, as I usually do, I think again of Jim. Big Jim. Apart from their age and the proximity of their locations, the two men are a world apart.

Maybe it was a drink or gambling problem that pushed him onto the streets. His age has me doubting that drugs were the cause but, I suppose, you never know for sure. Taking a caffeine hit, I admonish myself for immediately jumping to the conclusion that his homelessness was all of his own making. Maybe he’s been a victim of circumstance; the recession that has sent us all spiralling from our ivory towers into the abyss below, some falling further than others. I arrive at the office block with only minutes to spare, all thoughts of him evaporating rapidly as I’m shepherded to the sixth-floor boardroom.

Days later, after a stressful Monday morning, I need a walk to clear my head. It’s April and the sky is a cloudless blue, but it is still bitterly cold.

I turn up the collar of my jacket and curl my bare hands into my pockets wishing that I’d brought my leather gloves. Pushed along by the lunch-time crowd, I find myself entering St Stephen’s Green. Although close to the office, it has been years since I’ve walked the shaded pathway that brings me to the bandstand. My mind floods with childhood memories. If I close my eyes I can almost see my two younger sisters at the pond’s edge, trailing their fingers through the murky water.

One day, in particular, I remember so vividly that it could just as easily have been yesterday. We were all dressed in our Sunday best - my dark hair short, their golden hair plaited and gleaming in the afternoon sun. They constantly argued. On this occasion, it was over the stale bread for the ducks. Helena, always the wilder of the two, had snatched the bag of bread, torn the slices into pieces and fired them all into the middle of the pond before Victoria had even realised what happened. Then the squabbling had really started.

I was the older sister: The sensible sibling who got to babysit far too often. It may have caused me to resent them a little. Don’t get me wrong - we all got along and still do, on the few occasions we meet. But even now, I constantly feel like the outsider. It’s as if we were always two different families. I was ten when they were born. Although it was never said, I’m guessing - by doing the maths - that I wasn’t exactly planned. They, on the other hand, were planned and planned and planned. Add to that, the fact that they were twins and there was always going to be a degree of separation.

Before they arrived, the house was quiet while mother slept. A lot. I remember the highs and lows of my parents numerous trips to the clinic. The nods, the whispers, the smiles from which I always felt excluded. But then, a few short months later, there would inevitably be tears and cries from my parents’ bedroom where my mother would spend most of her time. The whispers, after those episodes, were not the excited kind, but the finger to the lips kind where I was forever ushered away from her.

"Don’t disturb your mother. She needs to rest."
"You can see her later, when she’s feeling better."
But that never happened. By the time she was eventually feeling better the twins had arrived and then there was no longer any room left for me. I disconnected then. Pulled into myself and became the independent, self-sufficient person that my husband has recently come to despise. He forgets that these were the qualities he once found so attractive in me; the air of confidence I exude when entering a room, my intelligence and my inquisitive mind. When the recession hit, my star continued to soar, while his plummeted along with, it appears, everything about me that he used to love. I convince myself that’s the reason he’s chosen Poppy over me. She’s everything I’m not - which allows him to again become the star attraction.

I wasn’t supposed to know what was going on back then. But with little else to do, I’d begun to eaves-drop. The clinic was always spoken about in hushed tones and their visits, and the days that followed, brought extremes of either happiness or sadness.

Especially to my mother. I began to hate the word: my life becoming uncertain as to what was to follow in the days, weeks and months ahead. They would also determine whether my father was home much or whether he worked late, arriving long after I’d gone to bed. That was until the day he left for work and never returned. One of the so-called, missing. I never knew whether that word referred to the person who disappeared or the huge void left in the lives of those they left behind.

My sisters began life as triplets, but arrived as twins, and for the most part we all got along. But because they were twins, they didn’t need anyone else. They had each other. I learned to love my own company more and more. A habit I’ve come to depend on again recently. I’d spend hours with my head between the cover of a book, returning to the library or, when money allowed, the local book store to replace it with another as soon as I’d finished. I was an avid reader but, I suppose, my social skills didn’t develop quite as they should. In my late teens, I blossomed, if the number of male heads turning was to be believed - but I didn’t know how to deal with the attention. That’s what books and magazines were for. They gave me an opportunity to reinvent myself.

I mastered the art of make-up so that, for my first day of college, I emerged a fully-fledged swan. It’s amazing how superficial the human species can be. I’d never encountered this amount of attention in all of my eighteen years. Guys went out of their way to hold doors open as I approached while girls kept me seats at lectures and in the canteen.

“It’s a beautiful scene, alright.”

Lost in my memories, the voice, coming from the other side of the bandstand, startles me.

“Mary,” he says, smiling as he tips his hat. My quizzical look has him pointing to the name in black marker on the side of my paper cup. I don’t have the heart to correct him.

“It is,” I say, returning his smile. “I came here often as a child.”

“He too,” he says, his blue eyes twinkling, “but maybe a little further back than you.”

I watch as ducks skim across the water, seagulls swooping overhead as children throw chunks of bread through the air. Some of them manage to catch the bread mid-air before it ever hits the water.

“Sometimes, I wish I was back there,” I say, “it feels like another lifetime.”

“There’s no going back,” he says, his voice a gravelly whisper.

I turn towards him. “But surely—”

He cuts me off. “I could never return. This is where I belong now.”

“I could never return. This is where I belong now,” his eyes look past me and into the distance.

“Life takes a series of twists and turns. Some good, some not so good. We all make choices, never knowing where the alternate route might have led. Mine led me here.”

He nods towards a pop-up tent behind him. “That’s my home.”

“What about your family? Do they know where you are?”

He shakes his head. “You learn to push their memories from your mind. It’s easier that way. Although your smile,” he sighs, “it reminds me a little of…” His voice trails off and I’m unable to make out the name.

“Who?” I ask, bending closer.

“My daughter,” he says, rubbing his finger below his right eye. “Now I’d better go. Places to be, people to see.” He shuffles closer to me, extending his hand. “Pleased to make your acquaintance, Mary!”

© Susan Condon

2017 december POETRY & WRITING © liveencounters.net
ESRESSO FOF MARY

Noticing the dirt under his finger nails, I hesitate. In that brief moment, whatever connection I had previously felt is broken, he has already shoved his hand into his pocket and turned away. He bends to pick up his paperback. A battered Churchill biography I read some years ago.

“Sorry,” I whisper, but he doesn’t reply as he enters the pop-up tent he calls home.

*  

It’s November; dark, wet and busy. A cold spell has pushed in and we’re braced for winter. I flick through a news app while I’m waiting for my coffee order. A headline catches my eye.

Homeless man found dead.

My heart skips a beat. It could, in all likelihood, be him. I’m unable to determine whether I’m thinking of Big Jim or the missing man that used to be my father.

“Mary. Espresso for Mary!”

I pick up my coffee and walk slowly towards Nassau Street, afraid of what I might find.
Home

Debris from the latest causality of this insane war litters a quiet urbane street. People rush towards me, frightened and fearful, knowing that a follow up bomb may explode. Plums of grey ash and smoke hang in the air and I must walk cautiously, picking my way through the rubble.

When did all this insanity become so normal, so expected?

I hear a cry, coming from behind the shattered door of the chemist shop. Glass crunches under my feet as I try to navigate my way in. I’m glad I’m wearing sturdy boots.

‘Help me. Please.’ I hear the pathetic cry of a woman above the confusion and mayhem happening outside on the high street. Carefully I try to pull away fallen shelves from the young woman who is lying over her small child. She looks lost, alien almost, with grey skin and hair, matted and mottled from the contents of broken bottles of shampoo mixed with talcum powder and dust.

‘Little English’ she says.

‘It’s okay’ I reply.

I pull the baby from beneath the shield of her body.

‘Look’ I say, ‘look, she’s okay’ holding the child for her to see. The woman cries hysterically and I just stand watching tears flowing through the grey dirt embedded on her face.

‘Over here’ a voice from behind me shouts, ‘we have another one.’ The local police officer takes charge, having just arrived on the scene the medical crew get to work straight away helping the mother and child, while a crowd of rowdy young people climb through into the rear of the chemist looking for other members of staff, other survivors of the blast. Screams are heard.
For some it’s their first encounter with death and destruction while for others it’s their opportunity to loot anything of value or any substance they can get their hands on, despite the fact the police are near.

I ask ‘What happened?’ the policeman says a bomb in a truck, not far from here exploded.

‘It’s the next street behind this; that’s why this building is so badly damaged. You did well’ he is saying, ‘saving that child and her mother like that.’ He looks over his shoulder and nods to the paramedics who are shaking their heads, while one of their colleagues tries to resuscitate a man lying among the fallen rubble of the building. Leaving me standing in a street filled with frightened and panicked people, I wonder if life will ever be the same.

I feel it before I hear it. The footpath beneath my feet shivers; shudders and then BOOM, it reverberates through the city. People spill out from the apartments nearby, running blindly. Scared parents gather screaming children; shepparding little ones who have no comprehension of the events taking place. Get back, get back; shouts are heard over the stampede but no one heeds the warning. I run too. Go with the flow; not knowing if I’m running into disaster or safety. Thud, thud, thud. The dead flat sound from a flurry of rapid fire echoes through the descending night. Some people drop to the ground while others try to find a place to hide, out of harm’s way. It’s chaos.

An eerie quiet is shattered by screams of banshee like sirens breaking into the night. Traffic stops, abandoned cars are strewn across the roads, life is suspended while control is taken back by force from the unknown force.

I keep running. I slip down a side street; the short cut I have always taken to my favourite department store. I know that there is a deep recess where double doors lead into a supermarket. But in the doorway is a bundle of dirty clothes and what looks like a sleeping bag over layers of folded cardboard and newspaper. Left there for the night, the street livers, the homeless and the helpless, I think, until it all starts to move. I’m frightened and my heart pounds hard in my chest. I can’t scream because the rapid fire is still continuing and I don’t want to give away my location but fear is rooting me to the spot. An old man emerges from the cocoon of his filthy sleeping bag. He looks mystified.

‘Can I help you’ I ask, gathering my wits about me when I realise there is nothing to fear.

‘What? Who are you?’ his gravel voice grumbles.

‘There’s been a bomb and the police are clearing the streets. You have to go’ I try not to sound as panicked as I feel but the urgency of the situation is lost on him.

‘Where?’ he says. ‘Where would I go?’ he is waving his filthy hands, instructing me to leave. He shakes his head forcibly, I’m staying. I stay here every night. He seems proud to tell me. ‘People know me; leave stuff for me; I’m no bother to any one.’ He is almost staccato in tone before he stops when we hear pounding footsteps approaching, telling us that we should get out of there, run.

Police shout again, this time they are dressed in riot gear and are armed. ‘If you don’t leave we will arrest you’ they are loud and aggressive; they have to be.

‘Go’ the homeless man whispers, ‘Don’t let on that you’ve seen me’ he curls away from me into the sleeping bag and hides.

‘But’ I stutter ‘I can’t. What if...’ I stop when I see my reflection in the shop doors. I think I look ridiculous talking to a bundle of rags but this man is adamant, he won’t leave his home, his refuge. I leave him and run, harder and faster than I have ever ran. I tell myself that I will have to deal with the guilt of leaving a vulnerable old man alone in this time of crises for another day.

In the pitch black I trip over a dead dog lying in the road, smashing my head off the kerb. Out of the corner of my eye I see a bright flash. It’s much closer and far louder than I ever expected it to be. Another one. Then another one, it’s not right. Is it a result of the fall or am I running into more danger. Frantically I try to rationalise what’s happening around me. My breath punches me in the chest. My sides hold onto the stitch before I vomit into a gutter.

I’m lost and terrified. My head pounds hard. I jump, screaming at the top of my voice, when I feel a hand on my back. Turning, ready to swing my hand bag towards him but I stop.
'Robert, oh my god, Robert. How did you find me?'

'I've been chasing you for the last five minutes. God you can run fast' he is out of breath, smiling at me. He puts his arms around me and I buckle beneath the safety of his body. For the first time to night I can't think straight.

'Are you okay my love?' he asks. 'You have no idea just how scared I was when we got split up. Where did you go?' He is bleeding from a deep gash on his forehead and his clothes are covered in blood and dirt.

'I just ran.' I mumble.

'I thought you might head to our favourite place, remembered that little restaurant on the corner?' pointing to the red bricked Georgian building. I'm confused and look blankly at him. 'Our first date, remember?' His concerns are evident. I feel that I know him, my body is reacting to his touch but my mind is puzzled and fuzzy and yet, I know his name.

'Remember how we laughed all night when they asked us to leave the place because the staff needed to go home, we talked so much.' He is looking hard into my face, holding me. 'You don't look well. I'm going to the ambulance over there to get help. Will you be alright if I leave you, just for a few minutes?'

'I'm alright' I say. He sits me down on the kerb, slowly and gently. Kissing me on the top of my head, it feels like a familiar thing he would do.

Once again calm is restored. People gather beyond barriers the police have erected. Mobile phones light up the night. The air about the street is excited. Stories are exchanged and exaggerated. Camera crews and reporters broadcast back live to the waiting studio. Every minute of the night's event will be scrutinized and analyzed. I hear hysterical laughter coming from a group of young women, out for a night on the tiles.

'Mam,' I say when I hear her. 'I'm okay, I'm okay, really.' We are laughing and crying telling each other our news, but in my mind I'm screaming, I miss you so much and I want to go home where I know I will be safe. She repeats every word I say to the rest to the family and I wonder why she won't put me on loud speaker: 'We're watching it on the telly. Are you sure that you are alright love? You don't sound yourself.' In the background I hear my father ask; what do you expect. She shushes him before continuing, 'is Robert with you?'

'Yes mother, he is just gone for help,' I promise to call her later when I get home and hang up remembering when I first left home just how frightened I was. From an early age I recall my mother showing me how to cook easy meals, tips on cleaning and how to manage my money. 'you will thank me one day,' she would say when my face crunched into a grimace. I smile in the memory.

Slumped and exhausted after the phone call, in my traumatized state I fight with my mind, trying to fit the shattered pieces into place. It happens, in a split second, I'm hit by a force as hard as any weapon or blast, realising that everything I miss from home or thought of as home, is standing across the street from me. Robert, his strong arms that shroud me each night and hands that gently caress. I watch him having his wounds dressed by a paramedic, under protest and pointing towards me. Each new memory attracts me to him, each moment of love and safety I have and hold close to my heart is here, with Robert. I'm almost in shock, I shiver again adrenalin from my lucky escape is leaving my body. Robert is looking about him, my handsome man, who wants to make memories with me and keep me safe.

Extra paramedics arrive on the scene, treating more of the walking wounded. This quiet side street is becoming a make shift clinic. I watch people helping each other. Residents arrive with tea and coffee and food, everyone willing to do their bit for a community rocked to its core. Home for many will be somewhere else tonight. But home is more than the bricks and mortar, more than fancy furnishings. It's more than a brilliant red sunset or a walk on a beach or hot mugs of soup on freezing days. It's that smile when you need it; that hug when you feel low; that shining light when you are lost in the dark; that promise of always being there, ready when you are, waiting for your return. It's no questions and no judgements; it's the love of the one you love who loves you in return.

Robert sits down beside me and drapes his arms around me. It feels like home. I'm right where I should be, I think. I'm home.
Gavan Duffy is a member of Platform One Writers Group. He has previously published in Crannog, Stony Thursday Book, Poetry Ireland review, The Stinging Fly, Boyne Berries, Poetry Porch, South Bank Poetry Journal, New Irish Writing. He has placed or been commended in various competitions including Dromineer, Redline Book festivals. He was shortlisted for a Hennessy Award in 2014. This is his first published fiction.

Gavan Duffy
Closed Doors

The old radio looked like a tiny church to me, the arched top and recessed front, the rich scratched wood veneer, like the pews and confessionals of our local chapel. For Cormac, who saw faces in everything, the knobs were eyes and the slot for the dial, a mouth on a mask. While he untangled the cable and plugged it into the socket, I cleaned its surface with a damp cloth. The knob clicked like someone clucking their tongue and the steady buzzing of static was pushed out from its speaker. Cormac slowly turned the other knob, pulling a white needle across the double row of numbers on the dial. We both flinched a little when it stopped on a new song his sister had been singing earlier; Cormac shook his head, disappointed. I think we had both expected to hear the past. His next attempt travelled an inch and only found the days weather, after that he turned the knob like he was trying to twist a pinch into a welt.

His sister complained when she saw it up on the kitchen table, she said it was probably full of spiders or mice, everything from that old shed was. Cormac didn’t answer, just turned his back towards her. She never spoke directly to me, she sometimes asked him questions about me, as if I wasn’t there. She stood watching while we continued to ignore her, her teacup held out like she were waiting for someone to refill it.
As soon as she left the room Cormac turned off the sound, lifted the radio to his ear and shook it like a savings box. He nodded me closer, shook it again for me to listen, we looked at each other, there was a hard rattle from inside. I said it was a coin, Cormac suspected jewellery, when I suggested a key he nodded quickly to himself and then again at me. We had spoken before about his grandfather hiding money before he died. Cormac searched the kitchen drawers until he found an old screwdriver; we turned the radio upside down to find a way inside.

We had managed to loosen one of the screws when Cormac’s two older brothers came home. The eldest, Eddie, took the screwdriver from Cormac and patted the top of his head, hard, as if he were bouncing a ball off the floor. The other one shouldered me off the chair and pulled the radio away from Cormac. His name was David; we called him the fat sheep of the family behind his back. They smelled of beer and cigarettes. They were both blond and balding, wearing sharp collared shirts, bright as comics. Eddie said he remembered this old thing from his grandfather’s house. He plugged it back in and asked what the screwdriver was for. He tuned the radio to a classical station while Cormac answered, telling him we were trying to fix it. Eddie turned the volume up to its loudest, left it for a few seconds, turned it back down. It sounds fine to me, he said to Cormac. David formed two fingers and a thumb into a pistol, pointed them into my face and loudly farted. They stopped laughing long enough for Eddie to ask how my sister was before starting up again. I wondered for a moment if I should be annoyed, I decided no.

David was first to grow bored of us. He took cold turkey from the fridge, sat back down and cut small pieces with the edge of a spoon. He had a sweetly spiteful way of watching you, as if you were swallowing a drink he had secretly spit into. He told a joke I didn’t understand, I rolled my eyes, pretended I had heard it before. He whisked up one of his sour smiles, tapped the table with a single finger, then placed a coin on his palm for us to try and snatch. Cormac went first, three attempts, pretending I had heard it before. He whisked up one of his sour smiles, tapped the table with a single finger, then placed a coin on his palm for us to try and snatch. Cormac went first, three attempts, before the third he lobbed the coin into my chest, pulled another from his pocket and slid it across the table to Cormac. Their sister saw this as she came back into the kitchen. She asked did he have any more tricks; we turned the radio upside down to find a way inside.

As soon as she left the room Cormac turned off the sound, lifted the radio to his ear and shook it like a savings box. He nodded me closer, shook it again for me to listen, we looked at each other, there was a hard rattle from inside. I said it was a coin, Cormac suspected jewellery, when I suggested a key he nodded quickly to himself and then again at me. We had spoken before about his grandfather hiding money before he died. Cormac searched the kitchen drawers until he found an old screwdriver; we turned the radio upside down to find a way inside.

We had managed to loosen one of the screws when Cormac’s two older brothers came home. The eldest, Eddie, took the screwdriver from Cormac and patted the top of his head, hard, as if he were bouncing a ball off the floor. The other one shouldered me off the chair and pulled the radio away from Cormac. His name was David; we called him the fat sheep of the family behind his back. They smelled of beer and cigarettes. They were both blond and balding, wearing sharp collared shirts, bright as comics. Eddie said he remembered this old thing from his grandfather’s house. He plugged it back in and asked what the screwdriver was for. He tuned the radio to a classical station while Cormac answered, telling him we were trying to fix it. Eddie turned the volume up to its loudest, left it for a few seconds, turned it back down. It sounds fine to me, he said to Cormac. David formed two fingers and a thumb into a pistol, pointed them into my face and loudly farted. They stopped laughing long enough for Eddie to ask how my sister was before starting up again. I wondered for a moment if I should be annoyed, I decided no.

David was first to grow bored of us. He took cold turkey from the fridge, sat back down and cut small pieces with the edge of a spoon. He had a sweetly spiteful way of watching you, as if you were swallowing a drink he had secretly spit into. He told a joke I didn’t understand, I rolled my eyes, pretended I had heard it before. He whisked up one of his sour smiles, tapped the table with a single finger, then placed a coin on his palm for us to try and snatch. Cormac went first, three attempts, pretending I had heard it before. He whisked up one of his sour smiles, tapped the table with a single finger, then placed a coin on his palm for us to try and snatch. Cormac went first, three attempts, before the third he lobbed the coin into my chest, pulled another from his pocket and slid it across the table to Cormac. Their sister saw this as she came back into the kitchen. She asked did he have any more tricks; we turned the radio upside down to find a way inside.

As soon as she left the room Cormac turned off the sound, lifted the radio to his ear and shook it like a savings box. He nodded me closer, shook it again for me to listen, we looked at each other, there was a hard rattle from inside. I said it was a coin, Cormac suspected jewellery, when I suggested a key he nodded quickly to himself and then again at me. We had spoken before about his grandfather hiding money before he died. Cormac searched the kitchen drawers until he found an old screwdriver; we turned the radio upside down to find a way inside.

We had managed to loosen one of the screws when Cormac’s two older brothers came home. The eldest, Eddie, took the screwdriver from Cormac and patted the top of his head, hard, as if he were bouncing a ball off the floor. The other one shouldered me off the chair and pulled the radio away from Cormac. His name was David; we called him the fat sheep of the family behind his back. They smelled of beer and cigarettes. They were both blond and balding, wearing sharp collared shirts, bright as comics. Eddie said he remembered this old thing from his grandfather’s house. He plugged it back in and asked what the screwdriver was for. He tuned the radio to a classical station while Cormac answered, telling him we were trying to fix it. Eddie turned the volume up to its loudest, left it for a few seconds, turned it back down. It sounds fine to me, he said to Cormac. David formed two fingers and a thumb into a pistol, pointed them into my face and loudly farted. They stopped laughing long enough for Eddie to ask how my sister was before starting up again. I wondered for a moment if I should be annoyed, I decided no.

David was first to grow bored of us. He took cold turkey from the fridge, sat back down and cut small pieces with the edge of a spoon. He had a sweetly spiteful way of watching you, as if you were swallowing a drink he had secretly spit into. He told a joke I didn’t understand, I rolled my eyes, pretended I had heard it before. He whisked up one of his sour smiles, tapped the table with a single finger, then placed a coin on his palm for us to try and snatch. Cormac went first, three attempts, pretending I had heard it before. He whisked up one of his sour smiles, tapped the table with a single finger, then placed a coin on his palm for us to try and snatch. Cormac went first, three attempts, before the third he lobbed the coin into my chest, pulled another from his pocket and slid it across the table to Cormac. Their sister saw this as she came back into the kitchen. She asked did he have any more tricks; we turned the radio upside down to find a way inside.

David was first to grow bored of us. He took cold turkey from the fridge, sat back down and cut small pieces with the edge of a spoon. He had a sweetly spiteful way of watching you, as if you were swallowing a drink he had secretly spit into. He told a joke I didn’t understand, I rolled my eyes, pretended I had heard it before. He whisked up one of his sour smiles, tapped the table with a single finger, then placed a coin on his palm for us to try and snatch. Cormac went first, three attempts, pretending I had heard it before. He whisked up one of his sour smiles, tapped the table with a single finger, then placed a coin on his palm for us to try and snatch. Cormac went first, three attempts, before the third he lobbed the coin into my chest, pulled another from his pocket and slid it across the table to Cormac. Their sister saw this as she came back into the kitchen. She asked did he have any more tricks; we turned the radio upside down to find a way inside.

David was first to grow bored of us. He took cold turkey from the fridge, sat back down and cut small pieces with the edge of a spoon. He had a sweetly spiteful way of watching you, as if you were swallowing a drink he had secretly spit into. He told a joke I didn’t understand, I rolled my eyes, pretended I had heard it before. He whisked up one of his sour smiles, tapped the table with a single finger, then placed a coin on his palm for us to try and snatch. Cormac went first, three attempts, pretending I had heard it before. He whisked up one of his sour smiles, tapped the table with a single finger, then placed a coin on his palm for us to try and snatch. Cormac went first, three attempts, before the third he lobbed the coin into my chest, pulled another from his pocket and slid it across the table to Cormac. Their sister saw this as she came back into the kitchen. She asked did he have any more tricks; we turned the radio upside down to find a way inside.

David was first to grow bored of us. He took cold turkey from the fridge, sat back down and cut small pieces with the edge of a spoon. He had a sweetly spiteful way of watching you, as if you were swallowing a drink he had secretly spit into. He told a joke I didn’t understand, I rolled my eyes, pretended I had heard it before. He whisked up one of his sour smiles, tapped the table with a single finger, then placed a coin on his palm for us to try and snatch. Cormac went first, three attempts, pretending I had heard it before. He whisked up one of his sour smiles, tapped the table with a single finger, then placed a coin on his palm for us to try and snatch. Cormac went first, three attempts, before the third he lobbed the coin into my chest, pulled another from his pocket and slid it across the table to Cormac. Their sister saw this as she came back into the kitchen. She asked did he have any more tricks; we turned the radio upside down to find a way inside.

David was first to grow bored of us. He took cold turkey from the fridge, sat back down and cut small pieces with the edge of a spoon. He had a sweetly spiteful way of watching you, as if you were swallowing a drink he had secretly spit into. He told a joke I didn’t understand, I rolled my eyes, pretended I had heard it before. He whisked up one of his sour smiles, tapped the table with a single finger, then placed a coin on his palm for us to try and snatch. Cormac went first, three attempts, pretending I had heard it before. He whisked up one of his sour smiles, tapped the table with a single finger, then placed a coin on his palm for us to try and snatch. Cormac went first, three attempts, before the third he lobbed the coin into my chest, pulled another from his pocket and slid it across the table to Cormac. Their sister saw this as she came back into the kitchen. She asked did he have any more tricks; we turned the radio upside down to find a way inside.
He called their mother to have a look, she touched one of the dials lightly, as if she were testing a blade, then took a tiny step away from him. He rubbed his hands together roughly, like he were warming them up for some tricky task, plugged the radio back in and clicked the power on.

He was tuning it and telling how they used it to listen to football matches, when Eddie stood and punched him into the side of the face. He dropped to one knee and held the edge of the counter, like a boxer I had seen once on TV, holding the top rope. Eddie stepped back, fist raised, breathing through clenched teeth. David stayed in his chair. Their mother stood still, hand to her cheek as if it had been her who was struck. David rose and stamped down between his shoulder blades with the sole of his boot. They put an arm on each other then, half leaning half pushing, as they kicked the body of their father. The only violence I had ever seen in this house was Cormac’s sister thumping his back as he sat at the kitchen table, eating a cake she had left in the fridge for herself. I had laughed as he continued to stuff it into his mouth. She hit her brothers in the same way now, pounding their shoulders and heads with the undersides of her fists. She screamed at her mother, asking why she had not stopped this. She screamed at her brothers, asking why they had not done it years ago. She ignored Cormac who had quietly watched the whole thing happening, then shouted at me to get out.

The two brothers left through the front door. Their sister helped their father to stand up; he was bleeding from the mouth and a cut in his eyebrow. She sat him at the head of the table, held a tea towel onto his face. The blood stopped for a second when she took it away, then seeped through again, avoiding his eye as it made its way down onto his neck. I would have liked to stay and see what happened next, but Cormac grabbed the radio and waved me to follow him out the back door.

We went back to the shed where we had found the radio, over two streets, down the side of his grandfather’s house, through the half fallen door leaning against its own jamb. Cormac set the radio down on an old work bench, rummaged through the tools for something to open it. I watched while he worked, remembered a time his father had casually pushed his mother out of his way, like he were opening a door. Cormac unscrewed the base of the radio, lifted it like a lid. I loved Cormac’s smile, I hated when it hardened. He reached inside and picked out a small black stone. We looked at it for a moment, I took it and threw it hard at the filthy glass of the only window, it bounced off. Next I took the screwdriver he had used and flung it like a knife; it hit the glass and fell onto the floor.

Cormac’s smile was returning. I grabbed the radio and rammed it through the window, the plug caught like an anchor on a shard of glass. Cormac was laughing, pointing out other things for me to break, a vase and picture, a box of fruit jars that cut my finger, and he counted as they smashed against the wall.
Mam’s buried six-feet underground in Glasnevin cemetery because of breast cancer. I wasn’t staring into space thinking of that version of her at the Saturday morning breakfast table. The woman who loved a drink with her girls, cooking Sunday roasts and reading a bestselling thriller by the fireplace was instead at the forefront of my thoughts.

‘Fiona, enough bread. You'll have a stitch at your match.’

Dad destroyed my memories of Mam with his sharp tongue. The curves at the end of his mouth twisted up like The Joker from Batman. His eyes not as sinister as the clown but there was an air of nastiness in his aura. Even more so than usual. He must’ve had another tiff with his precious girlfriend, Linda.

I shrugged back at him without eye contact. Linda, ‘the family friend’ who helped Dad through his ‘very tough time,’ remained silent. She knew not to say anything, or I’d tell her where to go.

Dad was just so dumb with his words. He always commented on my food intake like a normal person would pass an observation on the weather. I sprung out of my chair with my plate in tow. Dad didn’t notice my protest; he was too busy reading his phone.

Linda followed me. The oxygen in the tight kitchen became scarce. A cosy kitchen when Mam was alive. I was from planet earth; Linda was from a planet not yet discovered. She tried to talk to me about my upcoming match and her latest points in golf, but I was so drained of energy after what Dad said, I just nodded, pretended to listen, and looked at the picture of my real family that hung over the bin.
A few minutes later, I could hear a hair dryer upstairs. Dad was out in the garden admiring his plants that he treats better than me, his only child, his sixteen-year-old daughter. I had the needed space. I ran into the living room, and picked the sweet wrappers from last night's secret that were stuffed deep behind the cushions.

‘Five minutes,’ Dad said, pointing to his watch.

‘I’m ready now,’ I replied.

My shame in my pocket so close to him

We arrived at the club house without saying a single word to each other.

I slammed his car door.

He rolled down the passenger window.

‘Watch it, Fiona. Audi A4s don’t come cheap.’

My rage from the comment he said at the breakfast table was wrapped up in the whoosh of that bang.

‘Oh, sorry.’

I wasn’t.

Faster, fat cow. That voice I tried to suppress was back for the first time today.

The laughter and giggles echoed behind the wooden door gave me the same shooting feeling in my stomach as the smell of chlorine from a swimming pool. I knew when I heard or smelled those things; my skin will be exposed to the world.

Opening the door, my usual hidden corner was occupied with teammates and bags. No room for me

To the left of me was Lara, her fake-tanned, skinny long legs like hotdogs, and blonde hair could be mistaken for a human Barbie doll. I glanced at her phone, she was texting someone, leaving them love hearts and xxx. A world as foreign to me as central Azerbaijan. Claire sat on my left, a red head with freckles all over her body but plot twist; she basically had a six pack. I was an overgrown chubby milk bottle mashed in between them.

I was a substitute, again.

Facing towards the grey brick wall, I took off my jumper and t-shirt, praying the material didn’t get caught on my head like Mr Bean and that turkey. My jelly pear back visible to the dressing room.

When I pulled off everything and flung my jersey on, the redness flushed out of my cheeks. Relief. Job done. My shorts and socks were already on, a trick I’d been doing for years.

A stocky but cute guy in a group of boys winked and smiled at me as him and his group of friends got told to leave the grounds for wolf whistling. I beamed back at him. My heart melted to caramel.

‘Fiona, warm up,’ my manager said, with five minutes left in the game. A game we were winning by ten points.

‘Get the ball first. Use your weight to bulldoze them out of the way. Score yourself or pass.’

I wobbled onto the pitch.

‘Stand in front of her, your ball all day long,’ the opposition manager coached to the girl marking me.

At the final whistle, euphoria broke out between the team. We were in the championship final. I didn’t get a pass of the ball during the game.

‘Vodka and 7up later in the old school pitch,’ Claire softly said into my ear.

I gave her some thumbs up as I took off my boots.
At home, I couldn't stop thinking about that boy.

Later that evening, as it got dark outside, and the street lights turned on, I got ready for the night ahead. I squeezed myself into a pair of jeans that didn't chafe my fat bits together, third time lucky on that front. I put on fake eye lashes and applied a medium amount of makeup. I loved winter so much; I was able to cover everything up by wearing a massive coat. I sprayed too much perfume on.

‘We're heading the pub for a drink,’ Dad shouted up to me with the cold from outside whizzing into the house.

‘We’ve left you money for pizza,’ Linda said.

I yelled back thanks.

Group Whatsapp from Lara.

Drink sorted! Yous all owe me a tenner! And yes I’m taking commission for getting served!!

Reply from Claire.

OMG you beauty!

I put my reply amongst the rest. A happy emoji.

Reaching the field, I got a big hug off Lara. Which meant she was drunk already. Her breath smelt like a just opened tin of paint mixed with liquorice. I poured out a quarter of the 7up from a 500ml bottle, and filled it up to the brim with vodka.

I supped on it, the liquid contents burning my throat. A buzz flittered up to my head. There was about ten of us all together. As I pretended to listen to Claire and her boyfriend troubles, it dawned on me, I didn’t eat anything after my match.

More vodka.

Talking.

Laughing.

Head spinning merry-go-round.

How long are we here? No reply. Did I ask that question myself?

A reply, from afar, relax Fiona, what, you need to go back to your Daddy?

Don’t mention him. I screamed in my head.

Relax, Fiona. Jeez. It was a joke.

I said it out loud. Not in my head. Oops.

More vodka. It was going down like water now.

Boys all around me. Not one of them interested in me. But, that guy from earlier. The one who melted my heart, he was there.

‘Hey, so it’s yourself. Stalking me now are we?’ I said.

He grunted back at me, and went straight over to Lara. She was fake laughing, touching them all on the shoulder. Teasing them.

Observing everybody, my guard was down. Each breath in and out, Mam in bed with her chemo bag, and Dad playing golf with Linda popped into my head. Another uncontrolled memory, the funeral. In the pub afterwards, Linda shaking everybody’s hand as they left, the last person to comfort my Dad was her.
The way she trickled her index finger all the way from his wrist to his nails was uncomfortable to watch but the darkness clouded me so much I didn’t zone in on it on the worst day of my life.

You looked at your dad’s messages when you were twelve? Remember Fiona?

I can’t stop the thoughts.

Dad, do you love Linda? Think Fiona? You asked your Dad after pitch and putt on your tenth birthday on the way home.

Linda was in your dad’s phone as Work John. Recall? Come on now Fiona? You looked out late at night, the week before you started secondary school and you saw your Dad kissing Linda in her Mercedes.

Lara wasn’t there, everything was a blur. It was just all the boys.

They went silent.

‘No fat chicks.’

Bursts of laughter rippled through the group.

I turned around, tears forced themselves, but they didn’t come out.

‘Go eat a kebab.’

I smashed the boy who laughed the most with my fist and bottle. Blood burst from his mouth. Up-roar and commotion spurted around me. Somebody tripped me to the ground. It was Lara.

‘Jesus Christ Fiona, go home,’ Lara shouted into my ear as I lay flat on the dewy grass, her pinning my arms to the ground. Her Dad was a self-defence coach.

‘He called me a…’

‘Go home now!’ Lara stood over me, pointing towards the way out of the field.

I got up from the ground. The guy I hit was on his hunkers. He kept on dapping around his mouth, making sure he’d all his teeth.

I turned my back, walked at first. Then, I gradually ran. I eventually ended up at the front of my estate with my chest panting and finally, tears erupted.

I got a text message from Lara at my front door. Heard the full story, hope ur ok? x. The censored porch light skipped my heart. I was sobering up a little bit.

Dad wasn’t home by the time I’d started on the mini muffins over the kitchen sink. Each one of them chewed and then washed down with coca cola. The miniature chocolate bars were my next victims; I kept eating them until I got sick in the toilet. I sat in the living room without the television on. I rested my head back. Closed my eyes.

The key sounded in the lock. Dad and Linda fell through the door laughing and shushing like people my age. I sat bolt upright. I must’ve fallen asleep. I started to think about what I’d done between the time I’d got home and now.

‘Desmond, the toilet,’ Linda said, in her over-dramatic voice that sunk into my insides.

‘Fiona Butler, explain yourself?’ Dad said, him drunker than anyone present.

Dad sat down beside me. His eyes swaying.

‘We need to change your therapist,’ he said, slurring most of the sentence.

‘I need to change my Dad,’ I replied, still staring at the blank television.
'She's not working for you.'

'It was Mam's birthday today and you didn't even mention it.'

I thudded up the stairs, and slammed my bedroom door. Dad followed me, knocked on my locked door a few times. I said we'll talk in the morning. Okay, okay, we've lots to discuss he said. Then, his footsteps down the stairs.

I picked up the picture of Mam on my study desk. The one with her smiling at her 50th birthday. She was gaunt then. The cancer had gone unreparable. She put on some show that night. I'm an expert at putting on shows. I picked up the picture, and kissed my mother on her forehead. I kept looking at it.

I slipped into bed.

As I was about to turn off the lamp, that voice came back again. Saying I'd fail. That I'm fat. Insignificant. A nothing. A nobody. I turned off the light. The room in complete darkness. That voice. Silent. For now. I drifted off to sleep. Just thinking about Mam.
Anne Mary Marron, Dubliner, Emigrant and Lifelong Learner always had a gra for reading and communicating. All of which formed a foundation to develop her favourite hobby of writing short stories. Anne holds a BA in English and MA in Sociology. She lives with her husband Niall, in Lucan, County Dublin. They have three grown up children; Maria, Niall and Liza. Anne published her Memoir Letting Go in 2015.

Jenny Williams felt very lucky to be living in 60s Britain. Her generation were constantly told by the media that it was the Young One’s time. The Beatles sang, “All you need is love” whilst the Rolling Stones ranted, “They could get no satisfaction.” And Cliff Richard raved about his walking talking living doll.” The top favourite programme on TV was Friday nights Top of the Pops. Teenagers fantasised about appearing on the television. Rock and Roll and Mary Quant’s mini skirt were the latest craze. Dylan’s song, *The Times They are a Changing* had topped the Best Sellers for weeks.

It was a wonderful time to be young, free and single. However, this was something Jenny was not. Whilst she was young, with all the tastes, needs and wants of her generation, she was also a wife and mother. From being a carefree teenager, her life had changed dramatically when she met and married George.

The couple were living hand to mouth. All of their best-laid plans had been scattered to the wilderness when Jenny found herself pregnant soon into their marriage. Their Landlady had reminded them of the rules of their tenancy “No Children”.

Borrowing from family and friends they had scraped the deposit for a small three bedroom terrace house in a little cul de sac just off a busy road. It was run down and neglected but was all they could afford and they consoled themselves they had the rest of their lives to transform it into their dream home.

Jenny opened the latest threatening letter from the Building Society. It was just one of many bills demanding payment. Talking to her idol Paul, she argued.
‘Love is all you want. You must be joking. If it were just love, we would be millionaires. But we are desperate. Where will we get the money for the mortgage? If only I could get a job. But who will give me a job with a six month old baby’

Her rant was interrupted by the sound of baby Paula crying from her pram.

“Poor love, your mother is talking to herself. She’s mad. You are right to be frightened.”

Jenny looked into the big blue eyes staring back at her.

“Yes, you are gorgeous, just like your mad mummy. Maybe I will get a call from the BBC to appear on their Friday’s show.” Paula began to gurgle back at Jenny.

“Don’t laugh, I am a good dancer and I’ve got my figure back again. They might give me a permanent slot on TV. Yeah I know pigs might fly.”

She carried the baby around the little terrace house. Admiring the latest paintwork in the tiny box room, she continued wandering and wondering.

As she entered the front bedroom, she mused

“That second hand double bed looks lost in this big space.”
Consoling herself

“We live for the moment”.  
“But is it enough. What can we do?

Walking into the back bedroom she loudly thanked both their parents. Their cast offs had helped furnish the little house. A single bed, wardrobe and chair filled the space. George called it the guest room. Friends arriving unexpectedly, one hand as long as the other, they took their hospitality for granted.

“No money but lots of penniless friends.” Jenny growled to herself and baby Paula.

Getting up from the chair she walked over to the mirror and staring at her reflection she implored.

“What can I do?”
The image replied
“You know what you must do’
“Let this room.”

Much later, she stood outside the Post Office. Finding it difficult to breathe, she steadied herself against the shop window. Licking her lips, she struggled to compose herself. She didn’t want strangers in her home. However, what choice did she have? Drawing a deep breath, she pushed open the door and entered the small shop.

“I’d like to put an advertisement on your Notice board.”
“Of course, my dear.”

Taking the blank post card Jenny wrote Room to Let.

As she pushed her daughter home in the pram, she couldn’t help worrying. How would George react to her news? But they had no choice. His wages alone couldn’t pay their bills.

George arrived home at seven. He was relieved his baby daughter was sleeping. Jenny urged him to come and eat the special dinner. He wondered to himself; since when was Shepherds’ Pie special. If he remembered rightly his Mother used the left over’s to make the dish.

“I’ve got a surprise”
His heart began to hammer:
“Oh no.”

“We got some post today. But don’t worry. You’ll never guess. I’ve sorted it.”

Before she could continue with her surprise, a loud ringing on the doorbell interrupted them.

“Are you expecting visitors?”
“No, no-one”

“Get rid of whoever it is. I fancy a quiet night” he winked.

Two strange women stood on the doorstep. Both women looked bedraggled, the older one more so. The younger of the two stepped forward.

“Do you have a room to let?”

George was startled by the question. Before he could reply, Jenny answered.

“I’m afraid it’s just a single bed-room.”

“That’s all right. My mother’s just travelled from Co Mayo in Ireland. The journey by train and ferry took two days. She just wants a room for a few nights.”

George walked away, muttering to himself. Smiling, Jenny invited the women into her home.

Taking on the role of hotel porter Jenny offered to take the elderly woman’s suitcase. Her offer was quickly refused as the daughter fussed around her mother.

“Are you sure you will be all right?”

“All I need is a good night’s sleep.”

Feeling sorry for the two tired women Jenny reassured the daughter her mother would be well cared for reminding her she was a mother of a young baby girl.

Next morning George gave Jenny an ultimatum.

“She goes or I go.”

Knowing it was just bluster, Jenny agreed.

“Yes, of course.”

As she sat, savouring the first cigarette of the day her peace was broken by a timid knock on the kitchen door. Jumping up she nearly collided with the stranger.

“Did you sleep well?”

“Oh yes, I can’t remember when I slept so deeply. It must be the tranquillity of your home. You’re a very lucky girl.”

“Yes we are very happy. Mrs...”

“Please call me Betty. I have a confession to make. I’m afraid I don’t have any money.”

Seeing Jenny’s shocked reaction.

“Don’t worry. I’ll not stick you.”

Jenny sat staring at the old woman. She didn’t look like a criminal. Actually, she looked like a victim. Swallowing hard, she offered the woman a coffee. Betty told Jenny about her seven children.

“Most of them are scattered around the globe. They grow up too quickly. Relish this time of your life child. Mine are gone. I don’t know when I will ever see them again.”

Jenny introduced the little woman to her baby daughter Paula.

“Oh you are so lucky to have such a lovely child.”

“Yes, I agree. She is so good. Sleeps right through the night.”
The old woman began to dab her red eyes with a white embroidered handkerchief.  
“I had a child just like your little one.”

On the point of reminding her she once had seven little ones Jenny bit her tongue. This woman was a stranger. Yet she felt compelled to encourage her to have a good cooked breakfast.

“I’m sure you need it after all the travelling. Just eat what you like.”
And Betty devoured the lot.

At noon, the daughter called to collect her mother. She paid Jenny a month’s rent in advance. Jenny tried to argue, telling her it was all right if they just wanted to stay and pay for one week. However, Eileen insisted.

That evening Jenny showed George the money.

“It’ll help to pay the arrears on the mortgage.”

And in answer to his scowl.

“Do you have a better idea?”

But he was too engrossed watching George Best winning another match for Manchester United.

“Grow up”

“You never consulted me.”

“Somebody had to do something.”

However, she was talking to a blank wall.

Betty was the perfect lodger. Always mindful of Jenny’s space she never entered the kitchen before knocking. And never complained if Paula’s crying disturbed her sleep. Constantly reassuring Jenny how lucky she was with such a beautiful baby. Jenny reminded her of her own brood.

“Surely you enjoyed your own.”

“Yes. But I had one special baby. Just like Paula.”

“What happened? I’m so sorry. None of my business.”

“I sold her to the Americans. We had no money. And they had no child”

Jenny could not believe her ears. Before she could reply, Betty had left the kitchen. Plonking herself on the nearest chair Jenny grabbed the cigarette packet.

“What have I done?”

Betty was gone from the house before mid-day. In addition, didn’t return until bedtime. Jenny couldn’t help wondering where she went each day. This routine continued for several weeks. Until one morning, Eileen arrived unexpectedly to collect her mother. She had a taxi waiting outside the house. Answering the impatient ringing of the bell, Jenny enquired,

“What’s your hurry?”

Eileen burst out

“He just disappeared off the face of the earth. Well that’s how it seemed to us back home. She’s been trying to trace him. Last week the Salvation Army contacted her. He’s living in Kilburn.”

“Who is living in Kilburn?”

Suddenly Betty appeared at the top of the stairs.
“Eileen, will you give me a minute?”

Eileen ran up the stairs to her mother.

“I’ll give you a hand getting ready.”

Hovering in the hallway Jenny witnessed the transformation of the old woman. As she descended the stairs, dressed in a formal pin striped suit she walked tall and proud. Embracing Jenny, she begged

“Wish me luck.”

“With all my heart.”

The next morning Betty could be heard humming *A Mother’s loves a blessing*. Jenny was relieved to hear it. Good news perhaps! She worked around the kitchen; keeping her ears alert for her tenant’s knock. She wasn’t disappointed. Betty told her they had successfully traced the errant husband to a bedsit in Kilburn. He was actually working on the London underground.

“And I’ve got more news - Eileen has rented a lovely new flat and she wants me to share it with her. My husband has agreed to pay our rent for the next six months.”

And with a laugh, “you never know what’ll happen. At least I have a future now. Oh, and by the way, I hope you don’t mind, but I got Paula a Bunny Easter egg”.

“There is no need. You paid rent for the room. It was a business arrangement.”

“No Jenny, to me it was personal. And I will always be grateful. Lodging in your home was a turning point in my life. My luck changed. I feel like a different person now.”

Betty was Jenny’s first tenant. Others would follow. The little spare bedroom became George and Jenny’s prize asset during those early difficult years.

https://pixabay.com
JUDITH AND THE CROCODILE

On the door was a drawing of a frog’s head its eyes large and wet looked out from the side of its wide beaked mouth. A slender silver crown banded its head. In the room lay a very long bed, Judith thought that’s an especially long bed. It was low to the floor and had a tasselled blanket for covering. Stood against the partition wall a rocking chair with a high back and wide seat, opposite was a long freestanding mirror. The window was high and large there were two shelves and on one of them were rolled up papers. Judith took them down and saw they were drawings in chalk vivid in places of swamps, long grasses and rivers banks. The hairs on the back of Judith’s neck rose and as you sometimes do, she felt a presence and swung around. She thought she saw a crocodile standing in the long mirror but the room was empty.

‘How strange’ Judith said aloud. Before closing the door Judith ran her finger through the frogs face but it diminished it none.

I’ll have to paint that and get rid of the furniture; I don’t recall it when I viewed the house.’

On their first night in their new home, Judith lit the fire and spread a rug on the floor. Elijah, Alice and Judith sat on it and had a picnic dinner. The house was off a village in a line of eight and at the back low down ran a very fast flowing river. There were railings and willow trees at the bottom of the garden and one could look into its dark flowing water. After dinner Judith and the children went to peer over the railings as the evening light drew down. They threw sticks in and watched them rush away. Alice pointed

‘Look Mammy’ and across on the other sandy shore they saw a blanket of frogs hopping.

‘Wow mammy’ said Elijah ‘Lots and Lots.’

Niamh Byrne is a writer from Dublin. She is published in three collections including Poetry for Easter 1916 commemorative. A member of four writing groups she chairs workshops and is currently finishing her first novel. Niamh teaches Creative Writing and has a MEd in Adult and Community education. She has performed her work at Red Line Festival and in St John’s Theatre, Co. Kerry. Most recently, two collections Niamh has published in were shortlisted for the CAP awards 2017. Circle and Square won best anthology.
'Yes darling lots and lots.' Judith felt the tingle again and turned swiftly to catch the curtain fall in the high window.

Damn it Judith jumped. No now stop Judith' she said to herself, Far far away, shake it off, it's tiredness you always get jumpy when you're tired, a few weeks of peace and quiet and all will be good.

Putting the children to bed, Alice gave mammy a book. 'The wind in the willows' Judith said 'This is a new one Alice.'

'I got it from the frogs room Mammy' said Alice.

Tucking them into their floor beds Judith switched off the main light and switched on a lamp with Elijah and Alice's little white faces looking up at her.

Yes, she had done the right thing taking this job away from everyone and everything a fresh start for the three of them.

'Chapter One, The River Bank…'

Turning out the lamp the room was pitch dark Judith realised there were no streetlights shining in so she popped the lamp into the hall and left the children's door open just a little. Tidying up the picnic dinner Judith sat and listened to the house.

'The walls are that thick you'll barely hear the neighbours its only when you open the windows the sound drifts in' the auctioneer had said.

There was silence Judith put one more scoop of wood on the fire, she thought that she heard tapping, listening, the wood cracked, Judith's relief was enormous.

'Don't get spooked' she said to herself. Letting the fire die down Judith made a cup of hot milk, took her bag, and went to bed. Judith stood looking out her window for a while, it was quiet and dark, pools of light shone only a little from the houses.

Well at least people are still up I’ll go to sleep while they are awake. Taking from her bag a hammer and tucking it under her pillow Judith read her book and quickly nodded off to sleep.

Laying on his very long bed the crocodile waited, tapping his claws against the footrest. A line of light from the lamp in the hall cut across the blackness. Standing up the crocodile listened

'Silence' he said walking to the long mirror standing full length opened and closed his jaw, pushed out his little hands and twisted and licked the air with his tongue. He waited

'Silence.'

Walking to the door, he thought he heard frogs chirping, listening,

'Yes frogs chirping many frogs chirping' crocodile said.

He decided to wait and rocked gently back and forth in the long backed rocking chair. Opening and closing his jaw, licking and twisting the air with his tongue a long nail scratching his belly. Getting up after a spell the crocodile listened once more

'Silence.'

Opening the door the crocodile came face to face with a frog wearing a crown. Crocodile snapped its jaw at the picture and the lidded eyes rolled over. The boards in the hallway creaked under crocodile’s weight and its shadow passed over the lamp. Crocodile stopped

'Yes it is frogs, frogs chirping and croaking.'

Pushing Alice and Elijah’s door open the crocodile stood over them looking from one to another. He sat between them on the floor and ran their hair through his long nails. Crocodile lay down and reached his little clawed hands out but the chirping and croaking of frogs bubbled up into the room. Crocodile snapped his jaw as he got up. He closed the children’s door and stood on the lamp in the hall. Darkness engulfed the house.
The crocodile stuck out his tongue twisting and licking the air its little hands reached out and turned the knob of Judith’s room.

On the opposite shore of the fast flowing river a blanket of frogs chirped and hopped gathering in the king’s name on the night of no moon. They made their way across the dark swift river and hopping through the railings and willows began to leap against the cat flap and land on the kitchen tiles croaking and chirping. Before long, the floor was a shimmering crowd of frogs. Judith woke dreaming of the frogs on the opposite shore only to realise she could hear them now. The room was dense with a foul odour her flesh wet and clammy. Judith sprang up, the floorboards moaned and creaked and coming behind her was the crocodile licking and twisting the air with its tongue. Judith screamed and pushed her hand under her pillow the crocodile opened its jaw and snapped it shut its little clawed hands reached out.

The house began to shudder and turn with the hopping, croaking and chirping of the frogs. Judith hit and screamed into the dark as a mound of wet hopping croaking frogs burst into the room. The frogs leaping landed upon the crocodile’s underbelly, on the crocodiles eyes, on his bumpy head and on his scaly back and more and more came. All hopped, croaked, chirped, and blinked their lidded eyes until their weight felled the crocodile to the floor at Judith’s feet. Frogs kept coming their weight and noise dumbing the crocodile down he trashed his tail and swung his head. Some were thrown to the walls, some hit the ceiling, and some flew at the window, still the frogs kept coming piles and piles of frogs. The crocodile’s tail slashed at her and the crocodiles jaw snapped at her. Up over the bed and back down onto the floor Judith made her way through the frogs and out of the room.

Judith went to her children she found them huddled together and crying. Judith locked their door behind her the stream of frogs still came up the stairs and filled her bedroom. The noise was dreadful streaks of growls and thrashings and furore of croaks and chirps filled Judith’s head until its sound was all her senses could carry. The thrashing got less and overtime the fits and bursts were shorter. Grey streaks crossed the sky and Judith collapsed when she heard a loud croak the loudest croak of them all. She filled her belly again and again and gathered it in her neck and turned the knob of Judith’s bedroom and laid out on top was the crocodile. A procession of frogs made their way down the stairs while the King of the frogs chirped and croaked high up into the air. Judith followed and watched their slow march to the willows at the bottom of the garden. The king stood on the steps and watched over them. The frogs spun around and around, leaped and stood on top of one another but they could not throw the crocodile over the railings. The king looked to Judith with big wet eyes and croaked high up into the air. Judith went to the railings, pulled, and pulled the body lifting it to slump over the railings looking back at the house Judith gave one last heave and pushed crocodile into the dark fast flowing waters.

Walking back up the garden the dawn growing in the sky there was complete silence. Looking behind her to the opposite shore Judith found it empty. Going into the house Judith walked through the streaks of blood on the tiled floor and walked past the strips of blood on the wallpaper of the hall and stairs. Lifting the smashed lamp Judith went into the room with the pastel chalk drawing of the king of frogs on the inside of the door. Looking at the long narrow bed, about to sit in the high backed rocking chair Judith caught a flash in the long mirror. It was a woman looking back at her. The woman was caked in blood and mud her hair ripped out and knotted her face moulted in brown and red, her hands shivering and her feet wet and muddy. Her nightdress torn to the waist, her chest exposed and scratched and a deep pocket of black around her eye and her neck red raw.

Judith edged slowly to the reflection touching every now and then the blood, the bruises, and the scratches. Looking into the woman’s eyes she pulled off the nightdress and as it slipped from her fingers she stood back from the mirror and lifted her head up to look. She saw the blood between her legs and the handprints on her waist and thighs, her hair ripped out, the red rings around her neck. Judith raised her arms into the air she made an arc. Holding her arms there widening her legs and the handprints on her waist and thighs, her hair ripped out, the red rings around her neck the king looked to Judith with big wet eyes and croaked high up into the air. Judith followed and watched their slow march to the willows at the bottom of the garden. The king stood on the steps and watched over them. The frogs spun around and around, leaped and stood on top of one another but they could not throw the crocodile over the railings. The king looked to Judith with big wet eyes and croaked high up into the air. Judith went to the railings, pulled, and pulled the body lifting it to slump over the railings looking back at the house Judith gave one last heave and pushed crocodile into the dark fast flowing waters.

Mounds and mounds of frogs marched out of Judith’s bedroom and laid out on top was the crocodile. A procession of frogs made their way down the stairs while the King of the frogs chirped and croaked high up into the air. Judith followed and watched their slow march to the willows at the bottom of the garden. The king stood on the steps and watched over them. The frogs spun around and around, leaped and stood on top of one another but they could not throw the crocodile over the railings. The king looked to Judith with big wet eyes and croaked high up into the air. Judith went to the railings, pulled, and pulled the body lifting it to slump over the railings looking back at the house Judith gave one last heave and pushed crocodile into the dark fast flowing waters.

Judith went to her children she found them huddled together and crying. Judith locked their door behind her the stream of frogs still came up the stairs and filled her bedroom. The noise was dreadful streaks of growls and thrashings and furore of croaks and chirps filled Judith’s head until its sound was all her senses could carry. The thrashing got less and overtime the fits and bursts were shorter. Grey streaks crossed the sky and Judith collapsed when she heard a loud croak the loudest croak of them all. She filled her belly again and again and gathered it in her neck and croaked and croaked and croaked until it turned into a roar. Then reaching out her arms Judith drew the mirror to her and hugged herself until dawn burned in every corner of the room.
Mae Newman lives in Rathfarnham and has written short stories and poetry. She is a member of St Muirins Writing group, Platform One, Marleygrange Poetry Society. She was the overall winner in the Italian Amistade Poetry Competition, Shinrone Poetry awards and second in the Scottish International Poetry award as well as getting awards in the Dromineer Literary Festival, Goldsmith Summer School. Francis Ledwidge Poetry, Jonathan Swift Creative Writing Awards and The Golden Pen. She has been featured in many anthologies.

IN SICKNESS AND IN HEALTH

In Sickness and in Health

She's enjoying the last of the Indian summer while dozing in the garden. The trees are just starting to turn different colours of amber. The rose bushes are still in full bloom and the scent of them wafts over to where she is lounging. On the grass, Pink Ladies lie in abundance. There was a bumper crop this year, so she feels very generous towards the birds. The twins have had their fill and can't eat anymore. The garden kept them all fed through the year and she was happier outside than in the house. All that digging and planting kept her sane. When her potatoes and vegetables started to grow she was filled with the wonder of it all.

Even now when she looks at her crop she's overcome with awe. These last few years she has concentrated on growing organic, now she has a nice little income from the local markets. Saturdays are special for her and the boys and she love meeting so many different people every week. Next week she's going to include some of her home baking. Though she doesn't really need it, the privet hedge affords her a private space.

It blocks out the farm and the ugly sheds scattered all around. She loves this hour of peace before the children come home from school. As she lies on the hammock, her mind wanders back to when they started school first. She really thought things would be easier. Now with the twins in their last year and the eldest two working and living in Dublin, she wonders where the time went. A cold breeze sweeps across her face. Suddenly something lands on her cheek and she screams.

'I'm sorry,' says a voice that sounds like gravel.

The sun blinds her and as she tries to sit up the hammock wobbles. Clutching both sides she tries to balance herself and succeeds in falling on the grass. All she can see is a pair of filthy runners and two big toenails sticking up through them. Bony hands clutch her elbows; hands she remembers.
‘What the hell do you want? I thought you were dead.’

‘No, I had to see you.’

As she steadies herself she has a good look at her intruder. He seems taller, thinner, almost, translucent. The clothes he’s wearing are at least two sizes too small. Two large wrists dangle below the frayed cuffs. Brown shiny trousers, at half mast, don’t do much for him. A dirty looking grey tee shirt completes the outfit. Broken veins cover his cheeks and the white of his eyes are a peculiar shade of yellow. Three wisps of hair are cemented across his scalp. He smells musty and damp.

‘You have some nerve. How dare you come in here, go back to where you came from.’

‘I want to say I’m sorry.’

‘Sorry are you? You don’t know the meaning of the word. If you think you can waltz back in here you have another think coming.’

‘Please, Una, let me explain.’

‘Larry, please go now.’

She stretches herself to her full five feet and with her head held high, crosses the path to the house. It takes all her strength to walk straight, the line of sheets flapping into her face helps. The door, which she always meant to replace, has swelled in the warm weather so she has to pull and push at it to get it open. She’s conscious of his eyes boring into her back, each step of the way, but stops herself from looking back. Dragging the top and bottom bolt across the door she collapses, crying on the cold stone tiles. How long she lies there she has no idea but when she eventually rouses herself she is stiff and cold. Slowly she becomes aware of the twins shouting. She’s all fingers and thumbs as she tries to slide the locks back.

‘Mammy, what’s going on? Why is the door locked?’ asks Alan.

‘Is my tea ready?’ Tim cries. ‘I’m starving.’

‘Go upstairs and change. It’ll be ready when you come down.’

‘We saw a tramp on the lane. Is that why the door was locked?’ Alan asks.

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about. Change out of that uniform now and stop wasting time.’

Going into the kitchen to prepare tea she goes through the ritual of setting the table and putting on the kettle. Getting the milk from the fridge and filling the blue and white striped jug. Unwrapping the bread from the damp tea towel, she puts it on the breadboard. A batch of scones is already on a plate. She’s shaking so much the bread knife falls to the floor. Her mind is racing with the old saying ‘that means a man is coming to the house’. He wouldn’t have the nerve to come back, would he? Alan is no fool. He can ferret out information like no one else. Tim is different. His main interest in life is where and when the next meal is coming from. She never noticed before how much he resembles his father. Alan is more like her, short and chubby. Tim is a good six inches taller and darker. Working automatically she continues to butter the freshly made brown bread and heats the teapot. Leaving a pot of homemade gooseberry jam and some bananas on the table she goes to the bottom of the stairs and shouts.

‘It’s ready. I’m going out to the line to take the clothes in. Put your dishes in the dishwasher.’

Alan follows her a few minutes later.

‘What’s wrong, Ma? He asks.

‘What do you mean? I just fell asleep.’

‘Are you sure you’re not sick?’

‘You know I’m never sick. Come on lets get these chores finished.’
She can't remember when they fell into the pattern of Alan helping outside in the evenings and Tim
in the mornings. Alan takes the cows home, does the milking as well as making sure the hens and
other fowl are secure during the night. Tim tidies the kitchen and puts the dinner on that Una has
already prepared. Tim, who is up every morning before cockcrow, has the cows milked and all the
animals fed and watered before Alan is even out of the bed. During dinner they quiz her again about
the locked door and the tramp in the lane. She's relieved when it's time for their homework and she
can pretend to watch television. Her mind is in a quandary. A voice in her head keeps asking why?
Why now?

She's sits up sharply when she hears shouting from the kitchen. The boys very seldom argue. She is
making her way along the hall when she hears Tim say,

'You don't have to keep saying he's a tramp. I thought he was very nice.'

'Keep your voice down or Mammy will hear you. Of course he's a tramp.'

'Alan, how often have you heard Mammy say not to judge by appearances.'

'Mammy wouldn't be pleased if she knew we were talking to a stranger, tramp or not.'

'Well I thought he was a lovely man. You did too. Admit it. Somehow he didn't seem like a stranger.
Is it his accent?'

'You're right, Tim, there is something familiar about him. Maybe he's one of these who come around
every couple of years. Do you think he was hungry? Should we save our lunch tomorrow and offer
it to him? We could always sneak out a few apples. I'm looking forward to meeting him again.'

'Ok, Alan, I'll keep Ma busy and you smuggle out as much as you can.'

Not knowing what to do, she creeps up the stairs to bed and pulls the quilt over her head. Amazingly
she falls asleep immediately.

Looking in the mirror the next morning she's surprised to see she still looks the same. Her brown
hair is still salt and pepper. Her daughters try colouring it every time they come but she doesn't
really like it. Thank goodness they've stopped putting make up on her. Wouldn't she be look lovely
mucking pigsties? and byres and all that muck on her face. They're good girls whose hearts were
broken when their father disappeared. Though she tries not to, her mind wanders back to that
summer fifteen years ago. It was one of the hottest summers on record. The twins had been born in
the middle of winter so she was glad to be able to leave them outside or take them with her when
they were cutting the hay. It had been a long hard time. Tim could never get enough no matter how
much she fed him. Alan would lie on her breast for hours barely sucking at all. The girls were a great
help but she was exhausted. Body and soul were tired. She had hoped Larry would be so delighted
with sons he'd be over the moon. Instead he did nothing but moan and complain all day long. Every
night there was a row because she was so tired or one of the twins would start crying at the wrong
time. He started staying later and later at the pub. She was glad of a few hours peace but he was so
sarcastic when he came in he was like a different man.

Then came the night he never came home at all. At first she wasn't worried but when the morning
became afternoon and then evening she knew something was seriously wrong. Phoning the public
house in the village she was told he'd left early the night before. The publican said he was in brilliant
form and only had the one. Sure not to worry, but within half an hour neighbours started calling.
Everyone had a different theory. The Guards were called. His mother arrived. She could have done
without her. There was no love lost between them and now all this was her fault. Her mother took
over the running of the house and minded the children while she lay crying in the bed. Their bank
balance was in the red though she couldn't account for the large sums Larry drew out every couple
of weeks. His photo was in every paper and the television did a programme on missing people.
He was spotted everywhere but all the leads came to nothing. They got rivers drained and bogs
searched. Divers went down deep and dangerous lakes. All in vain. To get rid of his mother and the
auld lads, trying to get one foot under the table, she had to pull herself together. The children were
delighted and even when she shouted they just smiled. Life went on.

The following Easter she got a postcard. No postmark, no address, just 'I'm well'. There was only
one Easter he missed in the last fifteen years. She was convinced he was dead but a card arrived the
following year. Now he's back.
Hello Dolly

That Christmas, my sister and I each asked Santa for a dolly. When we ran downstairs on Christmas morning we squealed with excitement to see two dolls in boxes with our names on them under the tree. They had lovely shiny brown hair and wore pretty red and white checked dresses.

‘Mine is better looking than yours’ I said to Barbara, as I pulled my dolly from its box.

‘No it’s not, mine is better looking’ she said.

‘They’re identical’ said Da, laughing at us.

‘No, mine is nicer’ I insisted, hugging my dolly tightly to my chest.

‘How about having a modelling competition when everyone is home and we’ll see who wins?’ Barbara said. ‘They can all be the judges.’

I agreed straight away ‘My doll will win of course’ I replied confidently.

‘Go and get dressed now for mass or you’ll be dead late’ said mam, ‘put down your dolls until you get back’.

‘Can I bring my dolly to mass with me mammy?’ I asked her.

‘No you cannot. You’ll only be distracted from saying your prayers. You have all day to play with her when you come home. Hurry up now, your da is waiting for you.’
HELLO DOLLY

My sisters weren't even that interested when I jumped on their beds to show them my new dolly before I got dressed. Lily just grunted and said 'lovely' then turned over and went back asleep. She was delighted to have the bed to herself after the three of us had got up to go down to see what Santa brought. She wasn't too impressed that we were back so soon. Catherine, who was in the other bed with Joan, shouted at us,

'Turn off that bloody light this hour of the morning.' Joan was still unconscious and never budged.

When I was dressed, I brought my dolly back downstairs and sat her in the chair by the fire.

'Will you mind her for me mammy?' I asked her.

'Of course I will' she replied.

'Mind my doll as well' said Barbara, as she placed her dolly beside mine.

Ma didn't come to mass with us because she'd got midnight mass with Deirdre and she had to stay at home to get the dinner ready. My older sisters and brothers had arrived home very late on Christmas Eve and told ma they'd got midnight mass in town. Ma said we were too young for midnight mass.

'You have to be asleep in bed when Santy comes' she'd said. We didn't argue with her. It was the one night of the year that we thought we'd never get to bed.

Five of us walked across the field in the dark to Mass in the big church at the roundabout. There was me, Barbara, Enda, William and da. The baby Annette was too small to come with us.

The ground was hard and crunchy with frost beneath our feet and when I blew out my breath, it rose into the air in a white cloud. I was wearing my yellow jumper that mammy knit for me, under the red tartan dress that she'd made on her sewing machine. My sister had the identical outfit.

'You're like twins; the same as your dolly's' ma had said proudly, as she waved us off.

'But our coats and gloves are different colours mammy' I said. 'Hers are blue and mine are red; and her hair is shorter than mine'.

'Get off with you' laughed ma 'Father Michael will make a show of you if you arrive late'. Father Michael was a grumpy old man, who shouted at people who arrived late for mass.

We weren't late, and even though the church was packed we got a seat up near the front. Mammy had told us that the priest had put the baby Jesus into the crib at midnight mass and as I squeezed in between Barbara and da, I was delighted to see that yes the baby Jesus was already there, with Mary and Joseph and the sheep in the crib beside the altar.

Loads of children had brought their toys to Mass; I wished I'd been allowed bring my dolly. I would have loved to show her off to everyone. One little girl in a brown coat and a bobble hat had a dolly that said 'Mama'. She played with it throughout the entire mass; walking it up and down the back of the pew, and then pulling up its dress to show us its frilly knickers. I thought that was shocking carry on, and on Jesus' birthday too. Da said not to look at her, so I tried really hard not to look but she was sitting right in front of us. Father Michael kept looking down to see who was calling their mama as he was saying the gospel. He didn't look pleased but her mammy didn't seem to care at all.

When we came back from communion she stuck out her tongue at me and I could see the body of Christ stuck to it. That was a mortal sin. No one was supposed to see the body of Christ. You weren't even allowed to chew it. You had to keep it on your tongue and keep praying until it melted away. The quicker it melted, then the fewer prayers you had to say. Mine didn't take that long so I must have been really holy at the time; or maybe it was because I was starving. We weren't allowed to eat before receiving communion. The body of Christ had to enter a pure clean person. You couldn't be having communion on top of a feed of rashers and sausages. Some people took ages. They must have had loads of sins to pray for. Or else they'd had their breakfast already.

'Janey Mac' I said to Barbara, 'Imagine having your breakfast before Mass'.

TRISH NUGENT

© Trish Nugent

© liveencounters.net POETRY & WRITING The Christmas Special december 2017

2017 december POETRY & WRITING © liveencounters.net
I heard the young one in the brown bobble hat crying and saying she was starving, after her Ma gave her a slap on the leg for chewing her communion wafer. She took her dolly from her as well and said she was giving it back to Santy because she was so bold; that made the little girl cry even more.

‘Shut up or I’ll give you something to cry about’ her mammy said. I felt sorry for her and gave her a little smile but she just stuck her tongue out at me again.

I’m glad her mammy is giving her dolly back to Santy’ I said to Barbara, and I stuck my tongue out at her when da wasn’t looking.

When we came out of the church it wasn’t dark anymore. People were all standing outside chatting and laughing and smoking fags. Da was talking to Christy Byrne, one of his pals from work. I was starving for my breakfast and dying to see my dolly again, but da and Christy were chatting and laughing for ages, so we had to wait until he was ready. Eventually they said their goodbyes.

‘See you tomorrow for a pint Christy’ said Da.

‘See you then’ said Christy and a Happy Christmas to you all’ he said to us’.

‘Happy Christmas Mr. Byrne’ we chorused, delighted they’d finished their conversation.

We ran up the road ahead of da and squeezed through the railings around the big field that led to our house. Da was strolling along, one hand in his pocket, a sweet Afton in the other, and a big smile on his face. He loved Christmas, and he loved being at home. He was a train driver with C.I.E. There were no trains running on Christmas Day so he didn’t have to work like he did every other weekend. After legging it through the fields, we could smell the sausages and pudding as soon as we reached the front gate. My mouth was watering with the hunger. The fire was blazing in the living room where Mammy had set the table with her best white table cloth and willow pattern tea set. I threw my coat off as soon as I got in and grabbed my dolly. I ate my breakfast with her in my arms. As I held her hard shiny face to mine, I could feel the flick of her eyelashes against my cheek. She was the loveliest dolly in the world; There was no way I’d let Santy take her back.

After breakfast, we all helped to tidy up and do the washing up. Then we had to set the table again for dinner. The turkey was in the oven and all the vegetables were prepared. I saw the huge trifle on the top shelf of the fridge when I was putting the milk away. Layers of jelly and sponge covered in custard and cream and topped with hundreds and thousands.

‘Don’t even think of sticking your finger into that trifle’ shouted my ma from the living room. My da once told us that mammy had eyes in the back of her head, I never believed him until then. I shut the fridge and licked the cream from my finger before I left the kitchen. My mammy made a deadly trifle.

We spent the afternoon playing with our dolls and colouring in our colouring books that my sister had bought us. The older ones read their books and Christmas annuals after they’d helped mammy in the kitchen. Da sat in the parlour reading the newspaper and listening to Perry Como on the radiogram. My little brother sat on the floor making vroom vroom noises with his match box cars.

‘Can we have our modelling competition now’ I asked ma excitedly after dinner.

‘Ok’ she laughed, ‘but hurry up before the film starts, it’s The Wizard of Oz’.

‘Get on with it’ said Enda from behind her Bunty annual. ‘It’s starting soon; we don’t want to miss the beginning’.

‘You’ve seen it a million times’ I said to her. ‘You know exactly how it begins’.

‘Don’t be so cheeky’ she replied ‘or I won’t vote for you’.

‘Yes you will’ I laughed.

My sisters were all squashed together on the sofa waiting for the film. The boys sat on the floor. Ma and da sat in the armchairs by the fire.
'Right everyone' I said 'You need to raise your hands in the air for the prettiest dolly ok?' I instructed them importantly. I turned on the big light and pushed back the edge of the tablecloth and picked up my dolly and walked her proudly across the table.

I got a full show of hands and a round of applause. I was delighted. When it was Barbara's turn, they did the same for her. I was raging. Ma and Da said it was a tie.

'They're both equally gorgeous' Mam said.

'Sit down quick, the film is starting' said da.

I sat on da's knee and Barbara sat in beside ma who had the baby on her knee. I knew I had to accept the results of the competition but in my heart I knew the truth. I remembered then, the bold little girl in the church and I hoped her mammy had changed her mind about sending her dolly back to Santy. It was Christmas after all and I'm sure Santy knew she wasn't really bold; otherwise she'd have been on the naughty list. My brother Gerard turned off the big light again and sat on the floor beside Peter; and as we watched Dorothy set off to the magical Land of Oz, I thought that there was no place more magical than your own home on Christmas day.
FLUFFY'S NEW HOME

Annette Bryan is a writer and a member of the Red Roan Writers and Platform One. Her work has been published in magazines and newspapers. Her latest story “Site 666” is included in the award winning anthology “Circle and Square”. Her love for the Arts started at a very young age when she could be found taking the leading part while acting and singing at stage school. She studied painting in oils back in the eighties, and was overjoyed when she received her first commission. She lives with her husband Paul in Templeogue.

FLUFFY'S NEW HOME

Annette Bryan

As my car meandered up the steep dark roads of the mountain I wondered how on earth I was going to find Millie's house. As I looked back over Dublin bay the street lights lit up the city showing it off in all its glory. The snow covered rooftops made it look like a scene from a Hans Christian Andersons story book.

The directions were quite clear, turn right at the Blue Lagoon pub and follow the road until you come to a signpost that says “Millie’s Kennels”. That would have been alright on a warm sunny evening, but tonight it was impossible to follow the sign posts that were dotted around the little villages on my way. The wipers went to and fro as the snow slid down the side of the windscreen giving me just a second to see what was ahead. When I reached the next village I stopped to check directions, and asked myself why I left it so late to get a pup. My heart was pumping with anticipation, I couldn’t let my daughter down again this Christmas.

My thoughts were interrupted by the sound of music. “I’m dreaming of a white Christmas” crackled in the air every time someone opened the door of a pub nearby. People were sitting at snow covered tables outside of it, wrapped up in their winter hats and scarfs. I watched one or two of them laughing as they sucked on a cigarette, then blew the smoke through their nose or made circle’s from the smoke as it bellowed out of their mouth. The whiff of nicotine greeted me as I rolled down the window to ask directions to Millie's Kennels.

“The one at the very top of the hill is Millie’s cottage” said an old man who appeared to be a bit tipsy as he gave me directions. Everyone was in good spirits.

“Come back and have a drink with us, if you get lost” said another guy and they all went into fits of silly laughter.
FLUFFY’S NEW HOME

As I headed up the dark country lane, a signpost was covered in snow. Not knowing what house to knock on I opened the boot of the car and rummaged through the wet hurling gear still there from yesterday’s match. I pushed it aside to see if there was something there that I could use to clear the snow, gagging at the damp smell of grass. To my delight I felt something wooden. It was my hurl. It was ideal for brushing the snow off the signpost that was to guide me to my destination.

My heart was light as I knocked on the front door of the house that had a sign saying, “Millie’s Kennels”. A cluster of dogs ran to the door, barking as they greeted me. One little pup stood firm in front of her owner, it was no bigger than my hand, barking her guts out then running a little trot here and there, keeping her eye on me at every turn she made.

“Be quiet Cindy” said the lady who opened the door, her hair tied back in a loose bun, strings of it hanging around her face, her nose sticking out from under it. She pushed her glasses onto the top of her head, then, stretched her hand out and introduced herself to me.

“Millie,” she said then directed her attention to the little dog at her feet.

“Don’t be a naughty girl,” she scolded the pup who stopped barking on her command, then toddled off with her head held high. Pleased she had shielded her owner from the stranger at the door.

“As you can see I don’t believe in locking little doggy’s up in the kennels all day,” she said with a big smile on her face, as she picked up one of the smaller puppies who was struggling to keep up with the others.

Although the cottage was dated and the furniture well worn, there was a lovely atmosphere, as the puppies played with one another, rolling around and tugging at one another. Squeals of happy puppies could be heard in every corner of this small house.

The smell of dogs wet coat filled the air but it wasn’t offensive, as it was very clear to me that these little guys were well looked after.

One little Yorkshire terrier pup totted over to have a drink in a dish that was three quarters full. It was a dish for a bigger dog. As she climbed up the side of the dish it was obvious to me what was going to happen. She slid down the side of the dish into the water. The squeals from her as the cold water seeped into her silky brown coat, made me jump up out of my seat heading towards her, thinking she was going to drown.

“Where’s that bold puppy” said the owner as she picked up a towel and beckoned me to go with her as she went to rescue the pup. She was swimming around the dish, her little head popping up and down as she splashed around the water. There was little squeaks and plenty of barks as she wrapped the little pup in the towel.

“I didn’t believe I could be so firm with such a tiny creature.” she said.

I wondered which of the pups was for sale. Or if I had a choice, all the advertisement said was ‘Yorkshire Terriers puppies for sale. Good homes wanted.’

After drying the little puppy with the towel the owner placed her in a basket at the fire. She told her to stay. I wondered how she could be so firm with such a tiny creature.

“Stay” she said again louder. Eventually the pup got the message and her master gave her a treat.

“Good girl” she said in a sweeter voice and smiled at me.

“Now my dear, as you can see, puppies demand a lot of your attention,” she said. “They get up to all sorts of devilment. Just like children,” she said her piercing blue eyes checking me over as she waited for my response. “Will there be someone at home twenty four seven?” she said.

I was taken aback. I didn’t expect this kind of interrogation. I thought I just had to hand over the cash and be on my way. The more I sat talking to this woman, the more she fascinated me.
She was right. Dogs have feelings too and although I am a city man and wouldn't hurt a fly. I didn't think the breeder would be that fastidious about whom she sold her pups too. She loved dog's that was very clear, and she would rather keep them all, than give them to someone who didn't understand them.

"Dogs need a lot of looking after. They have to be fed and walked every day you know?" I just nodded, as I didn't get a chance to say anything. "They are very loyal animals, you see" she said looking at me over the rim of her glasses, "and the thoughts of one of my pups going to a bad home doesn't bare thinking about. Are you sure you can give my pup the life he is use too? She asked this time smiling at me as she led me out to the kennel in the back garden, collecting her coat and the key to the kennel. When she opened the door, to what appeared to be a garden shed. I was very impressed with the vision that greeted us.

There were five little kennels set out around the big shed, all divided by a wire mesh. Each one had a concrete path that led up to a wooden dog house. Each one a different colour, she stopped at the yellow one. There was straw thrown around the outside of it. There were little puppies crawling around under a red infra red light. A bigger dog popped her head out of the door of the wooden kennel and looked up at us.

"Hello Holly" said the owner "this man is going to give one of your puppies a nice new home," she said then picked the dog up into her arms, gently placing her under her left arm then patted her, as she kissed her on the snout. "He has a little girl who has asked Santa over the years for a small Yorkshire terrier pup." She lowered her voice and continued talking to the dog making sure I heard everything she said. "But it's only now that she is nine years old that Santa has allowed her wish to come through. She knows all the work involve with owning a puppy. So you see you won’t have to worry about this one," she said kissing the dog again. Then she looked at me and pointed at the pups, beckoning me to pick which one I wanted.

They looked so cute and I was delighted that the mother was a placid dog who didn't growl at me as I checked her pups out. There was a little pup sitting at the back of the kennel all on her own. Her coat appeared to be longer than the rest of the litter. It looked really fluffy. She seemed to be very quiet. I gently picked her up and stroked her head with my finger she snuggled up close to me. I knew straight away this was the one for my little girl. She was a pretty little pup with a nice shaped head and she licked my finger as I stroked her.

"She seems to have the same temperament of the brood bitch" I said to the owner and smiled, still holding the little pup in my arms.

"She’s a little beauty" she said stroking the puppy.

"Yes you are beautiful. My little girl will love you" I said a bit shocked that I found myself taking to the pup as though it was a baby. I placed my little friend in a basket I had brought with me and duly brought her home to my mother who would look after her until Christmas Eve.

The excitement on Christmas morning was electrifying. My daughter arrived down to see what Santa had left for her under the tree. Fluffy (The name given by my daughter) was sitting in her basket with a nice red bow pulling all her hair up out of her eyes, the three different colours of her hair (known in the dog world as a trio) made her look like she had a crown on her head. She gave a little bark as if to introduce herself to my daughter.

"Oh my God, I can’t believe it. Oh I love her" she said rubbing the pup against her face and kissing her just like Millie had. Something told me deep inside that this was definitely the right time to bring a puppy into our home.

"Welcome to your new home Fluffy. I will love you forever" she whispered then smiled up at me and winked.
Live encounters
POETRY & WRITING
FREE ONLINE MAGAZINE FROM VILLAGE EARTH
DECEMBER 2017

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARK ULYSEAS