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Opening extract from

The Butterfly Shell

Written by

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First.

There are a few things about me you should know.

I always wear my butterfly shell – even when I'm swimming or sleeping.

I don't cut myself any more.

and

I believe in ghosts.

Which I know sounds weirder than numbers 1 and 2 but if you had the kind of year I had maybe you would believe too. Not ghosts as in a white sheet over your head at Halloween kind of way but more in a maybe spirits do exist kind of way.

The doctors told Mam I might have some 'post--traumatic stress', that after an accident it's quite normal to feel disoriented. I don't feel disoriented. The sun is beating down on me while I write this and it's been hot and sunny every day since I arrived. I read in the paper this is the warmest and driest summer on record in Connemara since 1995. I'm looking out at the sea and everything seems crystal clear.

I'm glad now I kept a diary. I might have to use it sometimes to be sure I'm being accurate, but mostly I remember everything that happened this year. Lots of weird things happened even before the accident. So I guess I'd better start at the beginning.

The beginning of First Year.

Here goes.

1

I was a bit nervous the day before my first day of secondary school. Just the normal amount of nervous I think. I had my uniform ready and a new pencil case and bag. I wished I knew more girls going to the school but really I was fine. In primary school there were twelve girls and thirteen boys in my class. Four of the girls were going to the Tech (which is mixed), five to the posh private school on the Green and Deborah Walshe and Bea Carpenter who were already best friends and always glued together and never talked to anyone else and me – we were the only ones going to St Bridget's School in Rathmines.

Dad said it was ridiculous to go anywhere but local and he didn't think for one second that private schools were any better than the regular ones. 'And as for the tuition? Are they mad?' So I had a feeling that even if we were rich (which we aren't by the way – just average as far as I can tell) I wouldn't be going to the Green which suited me fine as I'd rather walk to school.

Mam and Dad hardly ever go out at the same time and in fact my mam rarely – and I mean rarely – leaves the house at all these days so when they did go out and said they'd be back in a half hour, I thought I'd take advantage of their exit.

It really was a spur of the moment thing that made me go into Mam and Dad's bedroom to borrow some of Mam's perfume. My mam loves perfume. She has a different smell for each mood and I love her lavender one. She hadn't worn it for ages. My plan was to take it to school with me and put it on just before I got there and then wash it off before coming home.

I don't know what I was thinking. It isn't as if borrowing perfume is something that is easy to get away with. My mam always notices even if there is the slightest smell of something and she always knows exactly what it is. She can smell when I've made hot chocolate – hot chocolate! – which doesn't even have a smell as far as I can tell.

The small pale blue bottle of perfume called Linen Sky that Mam got for her birthday was on top of her dresser but not the lavender one. That's the one I wanted because it reminded me of Mam from when I was

little, when we would go away for summer holidays. Once we even went to Canada to visit Aunt Kate. Mam wasn't so big then and she smelled like lavender all the time. I guess I kind of wanted to hold onto a summer feeling and even though I had no intention of snooping, I opened the top left-hand small drawer to see if it was there. And that's when I saw the box.

It was a beautiful wooden box with the lid held on with an elastic band and before I knew what I was doing I had it in my lap and was opening it. It was full of letters on cream paper. I took them out and promised myself I would only look at the top one. It was folded in half so I opened it. It was in Mam's handwriting.

Dear Marie who would be one today,

I wish you were here – to start to walk – to call me Mama – to smile and already have favourite things.

I love you.

The next letter was also to Marie but before I got a chance to read it I heard a sound at the front door. I sort of froze – just literally stood there holding onto the box instead of putting it away and legging it out of there. They must have forgotten something and that's why they came back so soon. My heart was beating so hard I was sure they could hear it and then I could feel my neck and face getting hot and red which I hate and which happens sometimes when I don't know what to do. I didn't hear anything more – maybe it was just someone putting a flyer through the letter slot. I really would make a ter-rible professional thief because by then my hands felt all sweaty and I didn't want to get the letters wet so I shoved them back in the box and back into the drawer and ran out of the room.

It didn't matter that I only had time to read one. I got the picture: they were love letters to the perfect child. Letters about how much she was missed, this child who had the same name as me.

I never did find the perfume.

I went to my room and read until dinner.

*

It didn't take long to walk to St Bridget's. At the end of our street is Leinster Road. Straight down that for seven minutes and then right onto Clareville Avenue and at the end of it are the trees. That was something I liked about this school even before I knew I was going there – it's surrounded by trees and doesn't feel like it's in the middle of the city which it nearly is. By the gate there is a willow tree that kind of sweeps

over the sign with the name of the school on it. I hope they never cut it back although I wouldn't be surprised if they did because now all you can see is 'get's Secondary School'.

Just as I was getting to the school I saw a girl come out of her house, cross the street and go straight to the willow tree. Imagine living right across the street from the school. How lucky is that? If you went to bed with your uniform on you could sleep in until you heard the first bell and still be on time. When I got closer I could see she was busy writing something on the ground with her foot. I could tell she was weird from a mile off. But I could also kind of tell that she didn't care. She looked at me looking at her and said, 'Hi I'm Stella Stella.' She sort of whispered the second Stella which I thought was an unusual way to introduce yourself. Later that day in school whenever the teacher said anything she did the same weird repeating thing. Like when the teacher said, 'Open your books to page 15, Class', right away Stella whispered really quietly to herself 'to page 15, Class.'

I said, 'I'm Marie.'

She said, 'Hi Marie Marie,' and looked back at her feet so I just went into the school.

There was actually another Marie in my class. Her hair was dead straight and she was Polish, and on that first day, Rachel Quinn (who you could tell a mile off was not weird and was probably the opposite of Stella) decided that Marie was gorgeous and should be her friend and so she was Marie and then Rachel started calling me Other Marie. I couldn't believe it when she said that – not that I minded having a nickname, it's just that one.

Rachel must have seen my reaction because she wouldn't stop using it.

And in no time she had our home teacher, Miss Featherston, under her spell. When she was switching our seats after lunch Miss Featherston actually called me Other Marie.

Rachel Quinn is beautiful by the way and knows it. She already had loads of friends because they all went to St Mary's Primary School together. And I bet she'd have had loads of friends even if she didn't already know them. She's that kind of person. The uniform looked so good on her and her perfect blonde hair made me sick. I would have loved to sit behind her in class and just cut a huge chunk out. Can you imagine her face when she noticed?

Mam says I am lucky to have naturally curly hair and that people pay to have their hair look like mine. That I cannot imagine even though on my last report card from primary school it said, 'outstanding imagination and command of the English language'.

I never know how to wear my hair it's so frizzy. I'm not sure if it looks better tied back in a ponytail or just out with a hairband. Mam says I should just stop fighting it and before I know it curly hair will be all the rage. I don't think so but then my mother was never going to be a good one to know what is 'all the rage'. But I do like that expression – even if she is the only one I've ever heard use it. Rage is right.

*

Day two was when it started.

I tried to smile when Rachel called me Other Marie but I could tell she didn't really like me. I felt like she was testing me. It was like her eyes looked through me and she had already decided that I wasn't interesting but that I might be interesting to torment.

It didn't take long to find out what the day held in store for me and it was kind of my fault. I thought that in the morning everyone was leaving their bags down at the windowsill at the end of the first floor hall. Turns out it was just Rachel and a girl who might have been Claire and Jill who had put their bags there and when I went to get mine they were laughing at it. 'It's so ugly it looks like it was bought in the Heron Gate Warehouse,' Rachel said.

Now I suppose I should have said something at that point but I was sort of paralysed and I just stood there waiting for them to put it down. The thing is they were right. It *was* from the Warehouse and I hadn't really cared till that moment. I did have my eye on a turquoise bag in town but when Mam said, 'Don't be ridiculous we aren't paying that much for a bag' in her voice that meant 'this is not up for discussion' I hadn't said another word. Had I only known what would happen I might have made a case for the turquoise bag, voice or no voice.

When Rachel said, 'Let's see whose it is,' I knew I had to say it was mine. But something seemed wrong with my throat and when I walked up to take it, nothing came out. 'Other Marie, is this yours?' Rachel asked in a really fake voice. 'We had no idea. Let's see what you have in it. I mean we're all going to show what we have so you may as well too.'

For a second I thought that meant she wanted me to hang out with them but then I saw her looking at Claire and Jill and you could tell they wanted to laugh and I wanted to run away from them as fast as I could.

Rachel went first. She had a cosmetic case with make-up – actual make-up as in real foundation not just tinted moisturiser, lip gloss, mascara, three pens from the Pen Place shop and a gorgeous little key ring with a silver cat on it for her locker key. Her lunch was in a flowery plastic box that looked more like a jewellery box than a lunch box. And she had pink tissues and a silver binder with loads of poly pockets.

'Here you go Other Marie,' said Rachel and she held out my bag for me. But somehow she managed to turn it upside down when she was handing it to me and every-thing fell out – and I mean everything – my navy blue binder, my babyish pencil case with a rainbow on it – no make-up bag – and an ordinary key ring with some yellow tape on it so I could keep my home key separate from my locker key. Rachel

‘helped’ me pick everything up saying each item in her really fake nice voice that I knew she used to make the others laugh. ‘Here Other Marie, don’t forget your rainbow pencil case.’

I felt my neck and face get hot and when I looked at her I knew it had started. Rachel had decided that I would be the one she would get and I knew I wasn’t imagining it but I didn’t really understand it. I don’t think it was just that my things weren’t cool. I think she saw something in my eyes when she first called me Other Marie and I know that isn’t something that would stand up in a court of law but I do know it started then.

I kept reminding myself that I would soon be home and then I could read more of my book. The rest of the day passed pretty quickly.

Our last class was English and we got to work right away. The teacher, Mr McGuire, seemed amazing even though he was almost completely bald. He read the first chapter of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* out loud and told us our homework was to describe the characters from Chapter 1. Lots of people started complaining that we shouldn’t have homework because it was only day two but I had a feeling that it was because they weren’t really listening when he was reading and so they didn’t have a clue what to do.

I decided to do my homework as soon as I got home. It was very easy and hardly took any time at all so when I finished I kept on writing and in my extra A4 pad I described all the girls in the class. I’m going to call this my File Pad. I’m not sure what I’ll do with it but Dad always says ‘trust your gut’ and my gut told me to keep track of who was who. Plus it was good practice for when I become a writer.

I was reading an absolutely fabulous book, a really old one my cousin sent me from Canada. It was called *Janis of City View* and was about a girl who got leukaemia but she never ever complained and was really nice to the little kids in the hospital and then she died but first she donated her eyes so some blind person could have them.

> I always wonder if that means you will see the world the way your donor did. And maybe you would have some of their memories. I wonder if that’s possible. I read a short story in a magazine when I was waiting for my dad at the dentist’s and it was about a girl who had a heart transplant and then she fell in love at first sight when she was on a plane and it turned out the guy had been the donor’s boyfriend. I didn’t really find it very realistic but I do think sometimes very unrealistic things can happen.

2

That night Mam was watching *Grey's Anatomy* and Dad was reading the paper beside her. How he could follow what he was reading was beyond me – Mam kept hitting his arm every two minutes and saying things like, 'I knew they'd get together' or 'Didn't I say it was probably her lungs?' or 'Good Lord I never saw that coming.'

I took advantage of their domestic bliss to look again for the perfume. To be honest it was the letters I wanted to find. But when I opened the drawer they were gone. I thought of asking Mam about them but I knew that was probably not a great idea. It wasn't as if I didn't know all about this Marie. I had known for six years. I just didn't think she was so much a part of Mam's life now.

When I was six, my mother and father sat me down in the living room and told me they wanted to have a chat about our family. That it was time to know a bit of the history.

I knew it was serious because they sat beside each -other and across from me and were both smiling their heads off.

They started by telling me that they went to Dingle on their honeymoon. This I already knew and in fact Dad was always showing me pictures of Fungie the Dolphin who lives there and came right up beside them on the boat. The pictures just look like they are of waves to me but Dad always said, 'Look you can see him just under the water,' so I always pretended to see. After Dingle they went to Connemara and walked along the beach at -Lettermore. And that is where Mam saw an abalone shell for the second time in her life.

Abalone. A beautiful bluey-green shell that seems to change colours in the sun. The first time she saw abalone was on the dreamcatcher Aunt Kate had in Canada. And now there it was right on the beach in Connemara.

The Ojibwa Nation believed the dreamcatcher kept the spirit in harmony as it walked through Dreamland. Mam thought that sounded like a good idea and that if she ever got a dreamcatcher she would want to decorate it with a shell. She said it was just sitting there on a rock and the greeny-blue colour was what

caught her eye. It wasn't the whole shell – just a tiny piece a little bigger than her thumbnail – but it looked exactly like a butterfly sitting on the rock. As she pocketed the perfect piece of shell, she felt like something special was happening. The next day she found out she was pregnant and she said they were over the moon and she decided to save the butterfly shell and give it to this child to mind him or her always.

A her as it turned out.

My sister.

Dad took over the story then and said, 'She was born on the 16th of April, she was perfect, and her name was Marie.'

I wanted him to keep going so I didn't ask any questions like, 'Isn't Marie my name??'

Marie only lived seven weeks. One morning Mam went to collect her from the cot and she wasn't there. Her little spirit had gone. Mam held her for hours waiting for it to come back. She said she kept willing her to come back. Hoping against hope. Checking every two minutes to see if maybe she had started breathing again. And when Dad found them sitting together in the rocking chair a few hours later, it took ages to convince Mam that Marie wasn't ever coming back. So they put her back in the cot and called the doctor to 'make arrangements'.

Then Mam started talking again and I was a bit frightened because I had never seen her cry before. And it wasn't normal crying – I mean there were tears coming down her cheeks but her voice was gentle like she was just explaining how to make muffins or something.

Mam said they dressed Marie in the tiniest blue and white dress that had pleats at the bottom and a tiny -pocket near the top. 'Imagine. As if a baby needs a pocket,' she said. 'It was a very sad time for us but we had to accept that things don't always go to plan. I wanted to give Marie the beautiful butterfly shell when she got older but that wasn't meant to be, so I put it in the little pocket of the blue and white dress where it could be buried with her and near her heart forever.'

Dad said, 'And so the little pocket came in handy after all. Now I think we should all have some ice cream – to celebrate our family history.'

I wasn't really quite sure what we were celebrating but I guess it is a big deal to find out you have a sister even if she is dead. But to be honest I still felt like an only child.

While Dad was getting the ice cream Mam said she wanted to show me something. She went over to the bookcase and reached behind a book and took down a beautiful little photo album with a pink satin cover. In it were pictures of Marie and my mam and dad. It was hard to see Marie's face or what she looked like because she was so small and she was always wrapped in a blanket or a towel or something. Dad kind of looked the same but Mam looked so different. For one thing she was really thin in the picture. I wanted to ask her, 'What happened? What made you change so much? Is this really you?' But I didn't say anything

because she still seemed upset from talking about Marie. Then she put her arm around me and said it was exactly one year and two months after the funeral that something wonderful happened and they were over the moon again because she found out she was pregnant.

Pregnant with me.

And when I was born I got a dead baby's name.

Now I was Marie and she was the Other Marie.

The Other Marie. I liked the sound of it until Rachel used it. Then I felt embarrassed and I worried that somehow, thanks to Rachel, everyone was going to know our family secret.