

**TRUTH
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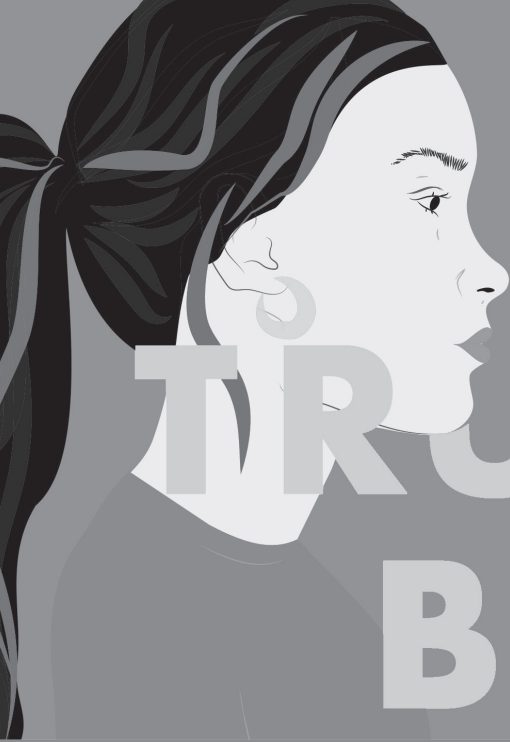
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SUE DIVIN

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For Grace



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Especially in a broken home like ours
Where broken doors and windows feed the cold,
Each generation has a sacred task:
To tell a better story than it was told.

Damian Gorman

(From 'If I Was Us, I Wouldn't Start From Here',
commissioned by the Poetry Jukebox)

Chapter 1

TARA **Derry, 15 August 2019**

Everything holy in our house is in the attic, under a layer of dust. Nan says it's the same for the whole country, thanks be to God. Still, she's the one who sent me into the roof space on a mission to recover the lost Child of Prague statue she wants to give to the neighbours. Their daughter is for getting married tomorrow and is dreading rain. Nan swears putting their faith in a battered ornament of the baby Jesus will bring blazing sunshine. Since my ex, Oran, got shot in the leg, I'm done believing. I flash the torch into the eaves. I can't remember the last time I was up here. Years. Nothing's changed except the dust is thicker and, as I straighten, I realize with a thud that my head now hits the roof. I rub my temple. The true miracle is that we even *own* a Child of Prague or that I can be arsed looking for it. My family only wheel out religion for special occasions. Weddings. Funerals. First Holy Communions. My first Holy Communion was my last Holy Communion which, judging by my mates, is fast becoming a new Irish tradition.

'It's in a box,' calls Nan from the landing below.

'I could be a while,' I say, looking at the boxes piled everywhere. They must breed up here. I sneeze and wrinkle my nose.

'I'll stick the kettle on,' says Nan. It's her universal solution. 'Shout if you need my help.'

As if she's going to swing herself through the ceiling with no

ladder when she's wheezing with the exertion of walking down the stairs. I sneeze again as my eyes adjust to the light. If I wasn't grounded, I wouldn't be in the house, never mind hunting religious icons. I glance about, wondering where to start. Where do baby Jesus statues in red robes and gold crowns hang out? Shoeboxes? Old suitcases? With pound-shop Christmas decorations?

I hunker down by a pile of leftover carpet bits and start rummaging under lids and pulling at knotted string round boxes. One corner is infested with ancient crockery, wrapped in yellowing *Derry Journal* papers from last century. Books and magazines are jammed in old sports bags. The titles are all student medical stuff. Was Mam a wannabe brainbox one time? No one needs learning for wiping bums in a care home on minimum wage. There are ring binders too, with paperwork and handwritten scrawls. Hardback notebooks. Faded file blocks with curled edges and blurred blue ink. But no Child of Prague.

Crawling across uneven planks, I stir dust. A red suitcase with copper fastenings catches my attention. A spider scuttles as I make my way over. The suitcase looks old enough to be Nan's. Certainly ain't mine. Furthest I've ever been from Derry was a wet weekend in Bundoran for slot machines and candyfloss. Budget airlines are beyond our budget. No chance of a flight to Glasgow to see Oran, even if Mam would let me, not that my fake ID would cut it anyway. Bits of rusted metal from the clasps flake away on my fingers as I twist them. *Click*. The lid is stubborn at first, like time has glued it in place, then it unsticks. Shining the torch in, I gasp. White lace. A wedding dress. Last thing I expected to find in our attic. Neither Nan nor Mam ever married. Nan has hardly left the house this millennium, except for her blue rinse community club, and, when it comes to men's bits,

Mam's too busy cleaning them in nursing homes to have time for their higher purpose. We're women's lib central. Three generations of Connollys. No posh double-barrelled surnames. No wedding rings. All Ms no Mrs. I drop the lid and lean back against an old deckchair. So why have we a wedding dress?

I juggle the torch from hand to hand, thinking. In primary school, Father's Day was torture. Teachers would think they were all politically correct saying, 'Sure make a card for your granda or your uncle.' But I didn't have them neither. The last time I bothered to ask Mam about Da was after the Love for Life talk in first year secondary. 'You're the love of my life,' she'd said. 'End of. As for the birds and the bees? Bees come with a sting. Work on being an independent woman first, right? Us Connollys and men – it never works out. It's a family curse.'

As I stare at the white lace, I mind the mortification of turning sixteen in April. Mam produced a banana and a pack of condoms in the kitchen. Nan laughing in the rocker. They made sure even if my face was ketchup, I knew which way was up. The thought stirs warmth low in my stomach. Oran hasn't messaged as much recently. I bury my face in his hoodie. Ma's raging I still wear it and that I hide it from the wash. It smells of his deodorant. I haven't had call to apply the banana lesson yet but maybe, maybe if he's allowed back from Scotland . . . Not that I'm supposed to be in contact with him at all. He was kicked out of the city by the New IRA. Mam says he's trouble. Says I deserve better. What Mam doesn't know doesn't harm her.

I chew my lip and twirl the torch. The beam hits the rafters in the far corner and shines on a heap of scrapbooks and junk. On top is a grey cowboy hat. Mam used to love country music. Laced with a few gins, she goes all soprano. Ducking under the lowest beams and worming round cardboard mountains, I grab the hat.

My fingers leave marks on the felt. Banging it with my palm induces a sneezing fit. The hat turns from grey to black. Perfect. It'll match my entire wardrobe. The fit of it's a bit on the large side, but it works at an angle. Finders keepers. I focus back on my mission. The light beam swings behind the red suitcase and there, peering out from newspaper, tucked inside a shoebox, is the Child of Prague statue. I grin, recognizing my ticket to freedom. The grounding this time was for smoking. Mam didn't buy the rationale that technically, due to Nan's emphysema, nicking her fags was an act of charity.

Removing baby Jesus from his blanket of newspaper, I kiss his porcelain cheeks. With this statue, Nan will go soft and, since Mam is on night shift, my prayers will be answered. Tonight is the August bonfire. I don't even know why we do bonfires – something political or religious. Either way, it's an *Us and Them* thing. I. Am. Going. I'll even live feed it from my phone for Oran cos he'll be mad at missing it. Unless he's wasted. Again. Glasgow is parties 24/7 he says. The guns did him a favour. I wonder.

'Nan?' At my holler from the attic, she sticks her head round the kitchen door. 'You sure this statue needs to be broke to bring sunshine?'

'Aye,' she shouts. Then dissolves into coughing from the effort.

I take a last look at the immaculate Child of Prague with his wee gold crown and red cape, then drop him down onto our landing below. As he hits the wooden floor, his head snaps, a clean crack. The momentum bounces the severed head down our stairs.

'Perfect,' says Nan, when she catches her breath. 'I'll get the glue.'

Me and my mate Lena drape ourselves over the city walls. Below us, the weans from the good families are messing with community workers, slipping down the banking on plastic and Fairy-liquid slides and kicking about at cage football. Other kids in white runners and shorts are sorting through piles of planks and junk under the green, white and yellow bunting across the street at the back of the Meenan shops, helping older lads with the finishing touches. The bonfire is three storeys high – jammed with British Army Para flags, Union Jacks and a massive ‘F**k Soldier F’ sign. I’m not up on alphabet soldiers. Something to do with the Troubles. In a few hours, they’ll light it with petrol bombs and hopefully someone will have a few cans to share. Once the cans are empty and we’re full, we’ll join the alcohol-free community gig in the Gasyard. We’re wise to them. They can make you empty your pockets but not your stomach. Unless you puke.

A banner wraps the low railings where a couple of men stand smoking: ‘Free Derry says no to state terrorism’. Watching them watching us, I find my nails digging into my palms. They’re the kinda ones that pull more than punches. Self-appointed vigilantes. Think they rule the place. I might not understand much but, trial by jury? Innocent until proven guilty? No torture? When we first did about rights in primary school, our teacher sounded out ‘U-ni-ver-sal’. Meaning, like, for everywhere. Guess we’re off the map. Out of this world. Somehow, here it’s OK to shoot teenagers in the knees. That stuff, everyone understands. So much for peace.

‘Least they’re only burning wood this year. They took the tyres out of the bonfire,’ says Lena. ‘Two hundred and thirty of them. Was in the *Journal* and all.’

‘Where’d they even get two hundred tyres?’

She shrugs. ‘Businesses fly-tipping on the sly to avoid recycling.’

Oran had different ways of burning tyres. Scorching black circles with cars on the roads round the city at 3 a.m. Sometimes it was a bit mad being with him. I’ll never admit it, but Mam is probably right. He’s bad news but he swears he’s gonna change. I’m like the only person left in the world who still believes him and maybe that’s why we’re still meant for each other, because hardly anyone believes in me any more either, except him. All the rest are like ‘You got *potential*, Tara, but you gotta start using it’. My phone pings an alert and my heart flips. It’s him.

Luv ya. Don’t be missing me too much.

I read his text five times. Not like him to be going all cheese. Another alert springs up. Oran’s on live feed from Glasgow, driving, one hand on the steering wheel, the phone in the other. I hug my phone. So maybe it’s not a call just for me, but at least he texted and now I’m seeing him. I clasp the mobile to my chest and lean against a tree on Grand Parade to watch in private.

‘You going to record it to watch again under your duvet tonight?’ Lena laughs.

I grin and give her the finger, but when I look back at the screen my smile fades as the scenario sinks in. Something’s wrong. Oran’s a definite headcase – but this is crazy. He doesn’t own a car so it must be stolen, and he sure as hell shouldn’t be driving and streaming. On both counts, he’s framing himself with clear evidence. The footage is bumpy as he drives round some industrial estate, taking corners with drift and handbrake turns, the speedometer gradually picking up and engine noise rising above the music blaring from the radio. I can’t make out everything he’s saying, but as he flicks the camera view back to himself, clearly identifiable, he’s mid-spiel going on about the

New IRA. Lambasting the ones who kneecapped him for joy-riding and anti-social behaviour. Just cos not everyone trusts the police shouldn't mean self-appointed men in balaclavas should dole out street justice. He spits his words. 'What gives them the right to say I can never see my mam again in Derry? I'd have better rights if I was in prison doing time.' One by one he names them. Gives their home addresses. 'Carry this on your conscience every time you see my ma walking your streets.'

I pale. Like WTF? Everyone knows who pulled the trigger but naming them? On social media? Either he's deliberately burning his bridges, or drugs and forced exile have melted every last viable brain cell. He'll never set foot in Derry again.

I straighten up, livid, and start shouting at the phone, as if he'll hear me across the airwaves. As he careers round side roads and alleys, Oran's eyes are rolling in his head. He's spaced. This footage is seriously incriminating. And dangerous. He's not even wearing a seatbelt. Either he doesn't realize, doesn't care or he's doing this on purpose. I flick out of the live stream and pull up his number on speed dial. Twice it rings out as I pace about. Minutes later, screaming in frustration, I flick back to the video.

The camera is now flipped to street view, the engine screeching and the car racing past grey industrial walls in a blur. For an instant, he switches the view back to himself. The tears are tripping him; his I'm-alright mask replaced with a vacant hopelessness. Then it's back to street view. Dead ahead, at the end of a long straight, is a low concrete wall. Beyond it, a yard of rubble and junk. I'm thinking that Oran's playing chicken. At the last second, he'll pull the handbrake and spin. Then I hear him say one last word: 'Bye.' And as the car speeds on, the penny drops.

I can't not watch. What I see sears my brain. Glass smashing,

metal grating, buckling, the mobile tossed from his hand and ricocheting, bashed from ceiling to floor, still live-streaming the chaos, from blue sky to black tarmac, windshield and wipers, white clouds to grey brick, as the car hits the wall, flips, somersaults, slides and crumples. A strangled cry sticks in my throat. I can't let it out because if I do, this will be real.

Lena runs to me as I collapse onto the cobbles. Silence. Stillness. The final screen view is of blue sky beyond a broken windscreen. I paw at the phone as if I can reach Oran. Save him. But all I can hear is silence. No radio or commentary. Stillness. Nothing. Not even breathing. And all I can think of is the snapped head of the Child of Prague.

Nothing will fix this. Not glue. Not even miracles.