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NADINE DORRIES



Run to Him
A SHORT STORY

NADINE DORRIES

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Waterloo Street, Liverpool

The cold woke Fionnuala long before the alarm.

During the night, her da's old army coat had gradually fallen from the bed on to the floor, allowing the cold to slip deep inside her thin bones. The snow had begun to fall the night before Christmas Eve and had barely stopped since. It filled the bedroom with an eerie whiteness, stillness and quiet. Deathly quiet.

Lifting her arm out from under the blanket, she reached down and, with one tug, heaved up the heavy old army coat, which weighed almost as much as she did, and tucked it in as she curled up into a ball to make herself warm once again.

Moments later, Fionnuala's da, Fred, popped his head around her bedroom door. His braces hung loosely over his vest, the top buttons of his baggy trousers were yet to be fastened and he wore his cap low on his brow. As with most dockers, his cap was the last item of clothing to be removed at night and the first back on in the morning.

'Are you awake, queen?'

'Aye, I am, Da,' Fionnuala whispered back, careful not to rouse her sisters, sleeping in the double bed next to her own.

'I'll light the fire and make it nice and warm downstairs, before you come down. Just give me ten minutes now.'

Fred pointed his finger into the air, as if to nail his words to the ceiling, then he turned and trotted on tiptoe down the stairs, but not before Fionnuala had rewarded him with a sleepy smile.

'Thanks, Da, you're the best,' she whispered, as she scratched her neck. The woollen coat itched but she was determined not to let it move again, as she snuggled down and savoured the prospect of another ten minutes' sleep.

Shall I tell him now? Dare I tell him now? It was the first thought that had entered her consciousness the second she woke.

Fionnuala concentrated on her father's footsteps descending the wooden stairs and silently counted until, with meticulous care, he avoided the steps known to creak and groan under his considerable frame. She thought how lucky she was that she had a da like Fred. The docks were closed on Christmas Day, a rare day of rest. He usually worked a full six days, sometimes seven when money was tight. But so proud was he of his daughter, Fionnuala, the nurse, that he would do anything to support her. To forfeit his one morning in bed and to be the first up in a freezing cold house to light the fire, was a duty of joy. Nothing was too much for Fred when it came to his daughters, especially Fionnuala.

Now she looked over at the double bed with its tidy row of sleeping sibling redheads and smiled. She was the only one of eight daughters to have inherited her mother's dark auburn hair and almost black eyes. Her da had brought home a bed for her to have as her very own when she began her nursing training, and now this single bed was wedged in between the wall and the double, where her sisters slept. It left a gap so small that she had to scramble to the end of the bed, in order to place her feet on the floor.

Fionnuala would never let her da know, but now that the snow had arrived, she would have been much warmer sleeping in the big bed, with her sisters for hot water bottles. She would have had no need of the old coat on top of her blankets.

As she closed her eyes and drifted back to sleep, down in the yard she heard the familiar sound of a shovel, scuffing against the yard cobbles, and the tumble of coal on metal as the coke hit the sides of the bucket. In just a couple of hours, the bedroom would fill with screams and squeals of delight, but by then she would be striding in through the hospital entrance, to begin her long twelve-hour shift.

It felt as though she had been asleep for much more than ten minutes, when she heard her da sneeze back into the room. With one hand he clutched seven soft pink, blue and lilac-striped flannelette pillowcases over his shoulder, and in the other he balanced a cup of tea, which slopped generously into the saucer upon which it precariously sat.

‘Here’s your tea, love, sup the slops out of the saucer first.’ Her da looked sheepish as he handed the tea to Fionnuala and then placed the pillow-cases gently onto the floor at the end of the double bed, winking at her as he did so.

‘Merciful God,’ Fionnuala whispered. ‘Does this mean that there is no Father Christmas? Was he with you all along, Da?’

Fred put a finger to his lips as he grinned. ‘Shh, we don’t want to wake our Mary, she will have the street up, she will, if she wakes before the others.’

Fionnuala pushed herself up off the bed with one hand and balanced the cup and saucer in the other. ‘What’s that yellow thing sticking out of the corner of Mary’s pillowcase?’ she whispered back.

‘It’s an LP by Bobby Vee.’

Fred had lowered himself gently onto the end of his daughter’s bed while she drank her tea.

‘But, Da!’ Fionnuala was stunned at this surprise Christmas gift. ‘We don’t have a record player, she won’t be able to listen to it.’

‘I know, queen, but she’s mad about Bobby Vee, isn’t she? And this fella came down to the docks selling them for next to nothing. What could I do? I couldn’t say no, now, could I? Knowing that he’s all our Mary talks about. She can look at the picture and read the words on the songs and what she knows, if I drop a word in Callum O’Prey’s ear, we might have one of those radiogram thingies soon. When I get a bit of cash together. Anyway, that fire’ll be nice and warm now. I’ll go and get your breakfast ready. Bacon butty, queen?’

Fred suddenly felt foolish and wanted to retreat to the kitchen. Maggie had already given him hell about buying a record for their Mary, when there was nothing for her to play it on. He was now anxious that Mary might not be as pleased with the purchase as he was.

Fred was second generation Irish and had himself been born and raised on the streets. He had quickly picked up the accent of the dockers and spoke in that lilting, nasal mix which was Irish scouse. Now he stepped back and, reaching across the bed, planted a kiss on the top of Fionnuala’s head.

‘Your present will be waiting for you, when you get back tonight, along with your Christmas dinner,’ he whispered.

Fionnuala knew what he meant. Her ma would keep her Christmas dinner on a pan of simmering water, with a lid over the top.

‘Best way to keep a dinner warm. Never dries out, so it doesn’t,’ Maggie would say, each time she served a dinner from on top of the pan.

Fionnuala had never returned late at night from a shift, without there being a hot dinner on the simmering pan waiting for her, even if everyone was in bed. She swore the dinners tasted nicer for having sat those few extra hours, waiting to be eaten.

As she stepped into the kitchen now, she saw that her da had taken her black wool cape, with its blood-red lining, down from the hook and hung it across the back of one of the kitchen chairs in front of the fire, to warm, ready for when Fionnuala stepped out into the freezing cold morning. He had screwed the hook into the wall, the first day she arrived home wearing the heavy cape. One of his last jobs of the day, before he damped down the fire each night, was to take down Fionnuala’s cape and

brush away imaginary dust. Fionnuala, always in bed and long asleep by this time, had no idea.

~~‘Ah, you are such a good da to me,’ she said, rubbing her hand across the top of the cape. ‘Tis a~~
warm as toast already and that’s a grand fire, Da, thanks.’

Fred blushed as he placed a warm plate, with Fionnuala’s sandwich, on the table. Two slices of
yesterday’s bread, fried in the bacon fat to freshen it up, with what looked like half a pig compresses
between two doorsteps.

‘Isn’t it funny, how it feels so special on Christmas morning,’ Fionnuala said, giving Fred a peck
on the cheek. ‘Merry Christmas.’

Fred looked at his daughter, his eyes brimming with pride and affection. ‘Aye, Merry Christmas
queen. Although you are working, it should be a nice and quiet one for you today, as you sent half of
the patients home yesterday.’

As Fionnuala tucked into her breakfast and chatted to her da, she looked up at the crepe paper
decorations, crafted by the girls under her mother’s careful supervision and draped across the ceiling.
The light from the fire had banished the damp and the chilled grey light of just half an hour earlier.

‘It’s so warm in here Da, I don’t want to leave now,’ Fionnuala said, wrinkling her nose in an
exaggerated manner, as she smelt the turkey she had helped to stuff the previous evening, now slowly
roasting in the range oven, at the side of the fire.

‘Will you tell Mammy, before she starts giving out, that I’ll pop into mass in town, on the way to
the hospital? There’s only one bus an hour today and I can’t miss it and be late.’

‘All right, love, you have a good day and we will all be waiting here for you now, when you get
home. Your ma has a letter from Auntie Joanna in Australia. She has kept it to open tonight, as a
special treat, and we can all sit together while she reads the news from Brisbane. You know what your
ma’s like, there’ll be enough tears to mop the floor. I’ll have me hankie ready, though.’

Shall I tell him now? The thought wandered through Fionnuala’s mind, as she listened to her da
rabbiting on, and watched as he poured more scalding dark brown tea into her enamel mug. *Shall I
wait back a minute and tell him, while we are on our own?* The steam was clearly visible, as it rose
in front of him and for a moment, her da’s face, snake-charmer-like, danced and swayed in the blur. Her
nostrils filled with the smell of freshly brewed leaves; another Christmas treat for Fionnuala, to have
been served the first fresh mash of the day. It was normally reserved for her ma.

Fred fussed around her, picking up her black shoes and spitting on the leather. For the second time
that morning, he buffed them with the rag he kept especially for her work shoes. As she continued to
eat, she asked herself again, *shall I tell him now? Shall I?*

Fred lifted up the birdcage cover, which Fionnuala had adapted to fit over the wicker basket she
used for work. It had been split down the middle, and the elastic of the two patterned halves of so
plastic now covered both sides of the basket, to keep the contents inside dry.

He carefully put her work shoes into the pink gingham shoe-bag, which her mother had stitched by
hand, complete with her initials embroidered in white cotton, and laid them in the basket. For the first
time that morning, there was a silence between them, while Fred fiddled with the corners of the cover
on the basket.

Now.

Fionnuala leaned forward, preparing to speak...

‘You’re all set,’ Fred announced brightly. ‘Have ye got two pairs of stockings on? You will need
them, there’s no sign of a thaw.’

As quickly as *‘just the right moment’* had entered the kitchen, it took flight and left. Fionnuala
realizing the precious opportunity had passed, now hastily stuffed the last crumbs of fried bread into
her mouth.

‘Mary and Joseph, I forgot to put the satsumas in the pillowcases,’ said Fred, slapping his

forehead with the flat of his palm.

~~‘I’ll take yer mam her cuppa and slip them in, maybe she can have her tea in peace, before the rumpus begins.’~~

‘I’ll be gone when you come back down, Da,’ said Fionnuala, flicking the breadcrumbs from her lap into the hearth.

‘OK, love, I’ll wait for you at the bus stop at the end of the road tonight. Try and have a good day.’ Fionnuala felt her colour begin to rise, as the first butterflies of panic settled in her stomach.

‘But, Da, the buses aren’t reliable on Christmas Day. I’ve no idea whether I will make the twenty past eight, and I may even be the lucky one and get away for the seven o’clock. If we are quiet and everything’s done, Sister Joyce will let one of us leave, and if I’m lucky, it might be me.’

‘Well, in that case, I will be at the bus stop from a quarter to eight until you arrive home, whatever bus ye may be on. No daughter of mine is walking home in the dark, after a long day at work, when there has been a murder not yards from here, what kind of man do ye think I am?’

‘The best,’ Fionnuala said, making Fred blush yet again.

They exchanged smiles as her da slipped through the door and up the stairs, struggling to carry the satsumas and her ma’s tea.

Fionnuala looked up at the statue of Our Lady on the press, blessed herself and whispered, ‘I bottled it again, didn’t I?’

*

Fionnuala ran down Waterloo Street towards the bus stop and, as always, she glanced down Nelson Street towards the house of Annie O’Prey, then up at the windows, where she knew the secret that had burnt in her heart lay sleeping. Within those soot-blackened, terraced walls, lay Annie’s son, Callum, home from prison these last few months. Like the good boy he now was, he would escort his mother to mass this morning and stand dutifully by her side, whilst she lit a penny candle for her late husband and for her best friend and neighbour, who had recently met the bloodiest of ends during a moment of privacy, sitting on the lavvy in her own outhouse. This was the reason Fred would not allow his daughter to walk home from the bus stop alone. If a woman could be murdered whilst sat on her lavvy, it could happen to anyone, anywhere.

If Fionnuala had fallen for any other boy on the Four Streets, telling her parents would not have presented such a problem, but Callum was bad news. In and out of prison, the O’Prey boys had a reputation for being prolific local thieves and, at the same time, local heroes. But Fionnuala was well aware that with Callum, it was all bravado. He loved to help people; well, really, what he actually loved was being needed and appreciated. Fionnuala knew he basked in the praise and gratitude heaped upon him, in a way unique to those with Irish blood in their veins, and never was this more obvious than when he managed to do something for one of the families he had grown up with and known since birth.

All it took was a request, dropped into his ear down the Anchor, and off Callum went, without a second thought. That, really, was Callum’s problem: he never considered the consequence of his actions beyond his need to feel valued and important. It was all that mattered to him. There was no doubt of the worth of the O’Prey boys to the community, but every mother on the streets was glad they were Annie’s boys, and not their own. Fionnuala’s own mother, Maggie, had even made excuses for Callum, until the day he stole a car and knocked out the girls from Nelson Street.

‘As God is true, if I was Annie O’Prey, I would be in an early grave, so I would, with the worry of that Callum,’ she had said.

‘Sure, he means no harm,’ her da had interjected.

‘Aye, I know that, soft lad.’

Fionnuala’s mother had a tongue as sharp as any knife in the drawer and took no prisoners, but what she lacked in maternal affection she made up for in domestic efficiency, and Fred was more than happy to be the ‘soft lad’ in the house, when it came to his children, often winking at his daughter behind Maggie’s back. With relief, they would grin back. They took no offence at their mother’s brusqueness, but when she snapped at Fred, it was as though her words pierced their own hearts and the pain lingered, until Fred slipped them a sign that he was unwounded.

Now, Maggie said, ‘He’s helped us out often enough, but the lad really needs to settle down. The police have them panda cars all over the place, it’s more dangerous now altogether. He’s been in jail twice already and if he’s not careful, he will end up serving years like his brother and what use can either of those lads be to their mother from behind bars? Sure, Annie’s not getting any younger now.’

‘Well, we have no worries there, queen,’ Fred said, as his chest puffed out with pride. ‘Once Fionnuala’s off to train to be a nurse and God willing, the others will follow. You can’t get better than that.’

‘Aye, isn’t that the truth. God forbid we should ever have a child turn out like one of the O’Preys. What, in the name of God, did Annie do wrong? She took those boys to mass with her every week and never missed a beat, once their da died.’

‘That accident was a bit of bad luck.’ Fred became morose whenever the name of a man who had died in a dock accident was mentioned. ‘Two seconds later and that rope would never have hit him.’

Maggie had been standing at the sink and at the memory of the accident which had claimed the life of Benjamin O’Prey, took her hands out of the washing up water and blessed herself with dripping dishwater. ‘God rest his soul,’ she said, and quickly added, ‘Well, let’s hope none of our girls ever take up with one of the O’Preys. I want better than a jailbird for all of them. I’m not sure what would be worse, one of them in the family way, or marrying an O’Prey.’

‘Holy Mary mother of God, no! Are ye serious, woman? There is only our Fionnuala anywhere near their age and she has standards, does our Fionnuala. She would never look twice at an O’Prey boy, the cut of him, are ye mad? She’s better sense than that.’

And for months, it had been those words which Fionnuala replayed, every night in the moments before sleep.

She’s better sense than that.

*

Fionnuala and Callum had turned their childhood friendship around an entirely unexpected corner, on the night before she began her nurse training. There had been a bit of a do in the Anchor, to send Fionnuala off in style.

The residents of the Four Streets seized any excuse for a party. Each one, man, woman and child worked long, hard hours to keep body and soul together and they liked to play as hard as they worked. Saturday night was spent in the Irish Centre, the Grafton or the Anchor pub on the Dock Road.

Bill, the landlord of the Anchor, had laid on plates of sandwiches and pork pies, along with the free first drink of the night. Bill and Fred had both grown up in Liverpool during the war. They had survived the Blitz on the same street and both knew many who hadn’t. From the same town in County Clare, neither had returned home to Ireland, the country of their ancestors and yet, they were still connected across the water, to families and friends who knew both men well. There was no question of Fionnuala’s leaving party being held anywhere other than in the Anchor.

The residents of the Four Streets, young and old, made their way to the pub straight from evening mass. Hairnets and curlers bobbed up and down in the smoke-filled room. The bar stood four deep and

the church was entirely empty, before the priest had had time to remove his vestments. The prospect of a free pint and a butty had created a minor, if dignified, stampede, straight out of the back of the church.

It wasn't just Fionnuala's family who were proud of her. Everyone in the pub patted her on the back and scooped her into their arms with congratulatory hugs, delighted that one of their own had brought respectability to the community. And God knows, after a double murder on the streets, they needed it. If Fionnuala could become a nurse, born as she was into a family that shared the poverty and faced the same struggles as they all had, then any one of their children could do it, too. With God's blessing and strict attendance at mass, twice a day, of course.

'Well done, Fionnuala. God, 'tis such a relief to know there is medical help on our own street with my hip being so bad now.'

Nana Kathleen, from Nelson Street, had both of Fionnuala's hands clasped in her own and Fionnuala felt the familiar sensation of a bank note being slipped into her palm.

'Didn't I tell yer mammy, when I read her tea leaves, I could see someone in the family putting on a uniform? Did I not?'

'Sure, Nana Kathleen, she hasn't stopped talking about it since I got the news from the Director of Nursing at the hospital. Her first words, when I handed her the letter, were, "*Holy Mary Mother of God, Kathleen told me this was happening and I thought it was our Cathy's lad joining the army.*" I think the fact that she had it completely wrong sent her into more of a tizzy than the news that I had a place in the nursing school. That and the fact she had to run straight to the pub and ask Bill if she could use the phone, to ring Auntie Cathy in Clare and tell her that her lad Pat most probably wasn't running away to join the army, after all.'

Nana Kathleen laughed as she walked away to join her son and Mrs Keating pressed half a crown into her hand, as Fionnuala went in search of Mary, the only one of her sisters allowed anywhere near the pub. Her da would have Mary glued to his side, while his eyes, narrowed and as sharp and dangerous as a Stanley knife, would be on the lookout for any young lad who dared to speak to her.

As Fionnuala shuffled through the crowd, Mrs Green, a widow for as long as anyone could remember, slipped a shilling into her coat pocket. Fionnuala was overcome with gratitude. Her pockets felt heavy and weighed down with silver coins. Not for the first time, she thought how much she loved being Irish and, familiar as it all was to her, she understood that the generosity of her neighbours, poor though they might be, was unique and unlike that to be found anywhere else.

Now, suddenly, as she was squeezing her way past some of the younger men, she heard Bill, the landlord, begin to shout. 'Quiet please, QUIET! Fred has asked Tommy Doherty to make a little speech for our Fionnuala, here. QUIET! Fionnuala, where are you?'

Everyone in the room turned to look, as Bill thumped the base of a pewter pot on the bar, and slowly silence fell. Fionnuala felt the blood slowly creep upwards and flush her face. She was unused to being the centre of attention. As the eldest of eight, she was often the one looking after other children. Maggie's regimental domestic routine guaranteed that Fionnuala always had her share of housework and younger sisters to look after. Even Fionnuala knew it had been a miracle that she had passed the entry exam for nursing, so disturbed and fragmented had her studies been by the demands of family life. Now, Fionnuala stood, in shock, as Tommy Doherty began speaking.

'I remember the day you were born, Fionnuala.'

'So do I,' her ma's voice shouted out, from somewhere in the crowd. Everyone began to laugh.

'I don't.' Fred's voice.

'No Fred, you wouldn't. You were in here, until four o'clock in the morning with the rest of us wetting the baby's head and unable to manage your way the entire thirty yards along to your own back door. You somehow found yourself in the wrong house that night. 'Twas a right shock for Mrs Green.'

the next morning, when she found you asleep in her outhouse,' said Tommy.

'Aye, 'tis true,' said Mrs Green, who was five foot nothing and weighed around sixteen stone. She grinned at the thought of a fading memory, a night she hadn't talked about for a very long time. As everyone turned to look at her, she took a sip of her Guinness, squinted as she primly adjusted her horn-rimmed spectacles and continued, 'I only had me pink baby doll nightie on. Felt ashamed I did.'

Fred put his hand over his face, shame-faced in his turn.

Fionnuala looked around her as everyone rocked with laughter. She had to be up at six the next morning and report into the school of nursing at eight thirty. Her stomach did a somersault with nerves at the very thought. As the laughter died, Tommy presented Fionnuala with a gift she had never, in a million years, expected. The neighbours had clubbed together and bought her a suitcase and an engraved fob watch, along with a silver hairbrush set. The words *Nurse Fionnuala Kennedy* shone out at her from the back of the engraved Timex. She was holding in her hand the thing she could not afford to have bought and had dared not asked her parents for as she knew how tight money was, even though it had been on the list of essentials sent to her by the hospital. The worry of arriving at the nursing school unequipped had eaten away at her happiness for weeks and now, here she was, with the one thing she needed more than anything, the polished glass glimmering in her hand. She thought for the first time she may cry, but there was more. Fionnuala gasped when she saw the hairbrushes. They were so heavy and beautiful. She had never touched or seen anything like them in her life, and neither had anyone else. Not even Deirdre, who had organized the collection and had been in charge of buying the gifts for Fionnuala, and who now looked in astonishment at the silver hairbrushes.

Tommy continued. 'It was Auntie Maura here who bought you a nurse's outfit on St John's market when you were just three, and so we feel partly to blame.'

At that exact moment, just as all eyes were on Tommy, Callum O'Prey slipped a glass into Fionnuala's hand.

'It's a gin and orange squash,' he whispered. 'You look like you need it.'

Fionnuala mouthed a thank you, lifted the glass up to her nose to inhale the intoxicating perfume and turned back to face Uncle Tommy. When she looked back round, Callum was nowhere to be seen.

'And so, we send ye on yer way, Fionnuala, with our blessing. Every family on these streets behind ye, and sure aren't we the ones who are delighted that we can bring all our medical problems to ye, and if ye don't mind, can we start with my—'

'Shush now, will ye.' Everyone burst out laughing again, as Maura put her hand over Tommy's mouth.

Tommy roared, as he raised his pint of Guinness and called for everyone to join him. 'To our Fionnuala from the streets, and to her proud ma and da.'

As everyone raised a glass, Fionnuala gazed around the room and felt as happy as she ever had in her life. And she knew this also had something to do with the warm feeling which had washed over her when Callum O'Prey had slipped the glass of gin and orange into her hand.

'Boo,' Callum said as, once again, he appeared from seemingly nowhere behind her.

'God, you scared me, I never heard you.'

'Ah, one of the tricks of the trade,' said Callum, tapping the side of his nose.

'And what trade would that be, Callum O'Prey?' asked Fionnuala, tartly.

'The trade that made sure ye had a nice set of brushes to commemorate setting away on yer nursing training.'

Fionnuala's hand flew to her mouth. 'I can't take them, then,' she said indignantly.

'Oh, for the love of Jesus,' said Callum. 'I should have kept me big gob shut. Fionnuala, don't get getting all pious on me, now. Ye can't give them back, so ye can't, not without sending me back to Walton jail anyway, and you also can't let everyone know what I just told you about the brushes. The

bizzies would run me off the street. They will all be thinking Deirdre got them and Deirdre will be thinking someone slipped them in, which they did.' Callum grinned. 'Ye know how it works. Jesus isn't it me who keeps the street in tea leaves?'

Fionnuala knew this was true and she was also aware that to be prissy about the brushes, when she knew for a fact that the new Eubank in their outhouse had mysteriously appeared courtesy of Callum, was hypocritical.

'Where did they come from, Callum?' she asked him in a serious voice. 'I have to know.'

'Not from a house,' he said, looking sheepish. 'It was from a delivery to Lewis's. No one will know.'

'Promise me you will stop this and find a job,' Fionnuala said earnestly. 'It's the only way to stay out of Walton jail, Callum.'

She had placed her hand over his and, as he looked up at her, for the first time it struck him that he had found a way to make someone like him and it didn't involve thieving. In fact, just the opposite. Fionnuala's reaction to the brushes had not been at all what he expected. If he had done that for another person in this pub, they would have been beside themselves with delight. There wasn't a single family on the Four Streets could afford to buy a set of silver brushes and even if they could, with their horses wouldn't make these people, who had known hunger, throw money away on something so frivolous.

Fionnuala looked directly at him and her dark brown eyes owned him. All he had to do to please her was to agree not to steal, and he realized that having Fionnuala proud of him for doing that would be worth foregoing the approval of every other family on the Four Streets.

'Will you promise me, now?' Fionnuala had some of her mother's ways and like a dog with a rawhide would not give up once she sunk her teeth into something.

'I promise to stop the thieving, if ye give me a tail home?' Callum said cheekily, catching Fionnuala off her guard and taking huge pleasure in watching her blush furiously.

For a split second, Callum thought he had blown it and that she was about to walk away, but then she smiled.

'All right,' she said, 'if you want, but you keep yer hands to yerself, Callum O'Prey. I will not be fighting for my honour in the entry.'

'I promise,' he replied, with a grin on his face.

Fionnuala looked around and saw that her friends were calling her over. 'I have to go and join Angela Keating and the others. Don't tell anyone. Me mam and da wouldn't be happy.'

'I promise you that as well, Fionnuala.' Callum grinned and doffed his cap.

The grin quickly slipped from his face as she disappeared into the blue haze of cigarette smoke. He had no idea how to take Fionnuala's honour. Callum had spent his entire life thieving for his neighbours. He was sweet seventeen and had never been kissed. Despite her boldness, neither had Fionnuala.

Callum's pal, Michael, came and stood at his side. Michael worked at the repair garage and every day he mixed with men of the world, men who had enough money to own cars. Michael was also from Dublin, unlike Callum's family and most of the people on the Four Streets, who had originated from Mayo, Cork and every village in between.

Callum looked Michael up and down. 'Michael you must know things about girls, do ye? If I kiss a girl, am I taking her honour, now?'

Michael furrowed his brow, lifted his cap, rubbed his Swarfega-coated, greasy hair and put his cap back down again. Michael did that every time he was asked a question, regardless of the depth or seriousness.

'I would say it was now, to be sure. Once a girl has been kissed, that's it. She's not a virgin any more.'

more, is she, and there's plenty more goes on. I hear about it all the time from the lads at the garage. There's not much I don't know about that kind of stuff now, so I'm sure that's right.'

'Bloody hell,' said Callum. 'I never knew that. I'm still a virgin and I'm seventeen. I had better put an end to that soon, had I, Michael. Are ye a virgin still?'

'Feck, no,' said Michael with a note of disgust in his voice. 'I've kissed loads of girls, so I have. And with that, off they both walked to the bar to refill their Guinness pots.'

Fionnuala left the do, whilst most people were on to ordering their fourth round. Bill wasn't daunted, she thought. Putting everyone in a good mood with free food made sure that their merriment emptied pockets and purses over his bar. Fionnuala had been so full of yawns and excuses that she must await to bed, because she had to be up and report to the nursing school early, that no one complained when she slipped out of the snug door and down the pub steps.

The road was full of the Mersey mist that lay on the glistening damp streets and clung to the cobblestones in the centre of the road, diffusing as it met doorways and windows and slipped in, under and into the cracks.

She hadn't caught Callum's eye and deliberately didn't look for him as she left. If he wasn't watching her keenly enough to see when she left, then it wasn't worth him having her tail home.

She had no sooner turned into the entry than she heard his faint footsteps behind her.

'Boo,' he said again, for the second time that night, and this time Fionnuala laughed.

'Away with you,' she screamed. 'May the cat eat you and the devil eat the cat!'

Callum laughed, too. 'Why do you think my nickname's Dixie Dean?' he said, smiling. 'No one's ever known where I am. You shouldn't walk out here on yer own, after all that's happened around here lately,' he said in a voice that was suddenly serious, a voice that made Fionnuala's heart leap.

'It's nice that you are so concerned,' she replied. 'I will admit, I did feel a bit wobbly. I told my mother I was walking with someone, so I'm glad you caught me up.'

'I couldn't get out of the pub fast enough, when I saw ye go. Ye know what my ma's like. I had to let her know chapter and verse where I was off to, or she panics that I'm off robbing again. She's really clingy now that I am the only one at home. She will be mighty upset if ever I end up back in jail. It doesn't bear thinking about.'

'Well, there's another reason, then, why you have to give up the thieving, Callum, for yer mam's sake. You are all she has. Now that her best friend has gone, she needs ye to be at home with her and help her. You know she thinks the sun shines out of your backside, don't you?'

Fionnuala and Callum both laughed at the thought of his mother. No matter what anyone had to say or wherever it was, Annie O'Prey was renowned for turning any conversation around to her wonderful boys.

'You don't need to please anyone, you know, Callum,' said Fionnuala. 'Everyone thinks ye are just great, anyway.'

Now Callum's stomach flipped over. Fionnuala had just said that everyone thought he was great. Not a living soul in his life had ever told him that before. His mother may have said so to others, but she had never said so to Callum. Unless, of course, she was passing on thanks for his latest thieving effort.

'In fact,' she carried on, 'I'm not sure how many a family would have managed on this street without yer help. It may not have been legal, but God, I have heard so many people say, "Thank God for Callum O'Prey".'

Callum stood still in the entry and Fionnuala, who had walked on a little, stopped and looked back. The words she had just spoken were words he had never before heard. Callum was always the wrong 'un. He had spent his life being told by the nuns how he was stupid and no good for anything. He had upset his mam with his holidays in jail, along with his adored big brother.

‘What’s wrong?’ she asked.

‘Fionnuala, is that so? Is that what you have heard people say about me?’

‘Sure, of course I have, they say it all the time. Every time they place another order and you miraculously provide whatever it is they want, with absolutely no risk whatsoever to their own. Jesus, my mother canonizes you every time she runs the Eubank around the kitchen. But it doesn’t matter, Callum, it’s all praise built on sand, as it’s false and sinful and you have to stop now. People may praise you when they sweep their floors, but that doesn’t hand you self-respect and they don’t respect you for it. You put yourself at risk for the benefit of others and what do you get out of it? A criminal record, that’s what. Does it really bring you comfort in jail, knowing my mam is finding it easier to keep the kitchen clean?’

Callum had been full of pride at the thought that his neighbours didn’t regard him as a complete idiot, but now Fionnuala’s words were dripping into his consciousness one at a time, and for the first time in his life, they were seeping through. Fionnuala was right. She was about to become someone, a decent person. People were already looking up to her and she was only seventeen. He wanted that too. The neighbours would never throw a party in the street for him. Callum realized this, with a sinking heart. He looked at Fionnuala and knew his life was about to change.

‘I have said to you that I promise – and I will keep that promise, Fionnuala. Ye see them stars, in the sky, they are my witness and I say this, that I will stop the thieving, on one condition, if ye let me have a kiss, right now.’

Fionnuala had stopped talking. She looked down at the new suitcase in her hand and didn’t know what to say. She was only sure of one thing: she didn’t want to say no.

Callum took a step towards her. Putting both his hands on her shoulders, he pulled her towards him and kissed her on the lips. It was a short peck to begin with, but then, after he had pulled away with his cheeky smile and gleaming eyes, and announced, ‘Well that was nice,’ he kissed her again, slowly and for a much longer time.

Fionnuala had no idea how long they stood there for. It was only the sound of old Mr Keating stepping into the outhouse, just over the back yard wall from where they were standing, that brought her to her senses.

Fionnuala wobbled backwards for a moment, as if she were in shock and Callum reached out and took hold of her hand. He felt as if he had changed from boy to man, in just a few moments.

‘I’m sorry,’ he whispered in her ear.

‘Sorry for what?’ she asked, looking back at him.

‘For taking your honour,’ he said.

He had no idea why Fionnuala began to laugh.

‘You are a case, Callum O’Prey,’ she said, before she slipped away in through her back gate.

Callum stood and watched her go, unable to move, and as the gate closed behind her, Callum looked up to the sky and a thousand stars winked back at him.

*

They had seen each other as often as was possible over the next few months, always in secret. Callum had been taken on the night shift at the English Electric factory and sometimes Fionnuala worked nights too, which suited them well. She slept at the nurses’ home when she was in class or on her shift and only returned back home on days off.

Men weren’t allowed in the nurses’ home, and if they rang the bell they had to wait outside on the steps, until the nurse they were calling for stepped outside. Fionnuala had heard stories of nurses entertaining in the common room and more risqué tales of boyfriends being slipped into beds, but the

was not for her.

~~‘Sneak him upstairs,’ her friend Helen had said, after Callum had delivered her to the door of the nurses’ home for the third or fourth time.~~

‘I have no intention of inviting Callum into my room, or my bed, until there is an engagement ring on my finger, Helen. I know it’s the Sixties, but I’m not stupid altogether.’

Fionnuala did wish they had a little more freedom to be alone together, though. As it was, they took walks along the shore and trips out on the rowing boats on Sefton Park lake.

It was on one sunny day, whilst Callum rowed Fionnuala across the lake, that he declared his love for her and she, fully aware it was something of which her parents would never approve, told him she loved him back.

The truth was, she did want to love him back, and not just in words alone.

‘I never thought anyone would turn me around the way you have,’ Callum said.

Fionnuala let her hand trail in the water, as the ducks swam close to the boat, pecking towards her hand for bread she had brought.

‘Are you happy, though?’ Fionnuala asked. ‘Do you not feel better for working in the factory and living an honest life?’

‘I do, aye, but that’s because I have you now. If I was still on my own, I’m not sure I would be able to resist the temptation. After all, I’ve been robbing since I was a kid with me da. They used to take me and my brother down to the docks at night to wait by the perimeter fence and then run back up the steps to the street with the knock off goods, and hide them in outhouses, depending on who wanted the stuff. I’ve left stuff in your outhouse, for yer da from mine, on many a night, Fionnuala, I can’t see why yer da would disapprove of me.’

Fionnuala’s heart bled for him, he was so innocent. She couldn’t put into words why she knew her father would disapprove, other than to say it was one thing to fence stolen goods and place an order like many on the streets had done with the O’Prey boys, it was quite another when it came to your daughter taking up romantically with the street villain.

But now that she was in love with Callum, it was a dilemma she faced each day and she knew she would have to tell her ma and da very soon what she was up to. She couldn’t go on lying to her parents, like she was, any longer.

That night, as Callum walked her back to the home, she made a pact with him.

‘Now that you are at the English Electric, just get the word out that you don’t thieve anymore and then we will tell me da about us.’

Fionnuala had yet to admit to Callum that the silver brushes were still wrapped in tissue paper in her drawer, hidden under newspaper, and she knew that, never in her lifetime, would she use them.

‘Do you mean that?’ said Callum, putting his arms around Fionnuala’s shoulders.

‘See the stars up in that sky?’ she said, reminding Callum of their first night. ‘That’s not starry, them’s my judge and jury.’

*

That night seemed like an age ago to Fionnuala, as she ran for the bus on Christmas morning. In the time which had passed since, she had struggled to keep the hugest secret from everyone, in a family where every piece of information was shared, and it weighed heavily, but for now, she had other things to think about. She just wished she were to see her Callum today. The few moments they had planned at the bus stop might not now happen after all, if Fred was waiting for her. How nice it would have been, if she could have invited him into their kitchen tonight, as they all gathered around to listen to the letter from Auntie Joanna in Australia, or if she could have walked down the road to see Annie and

sat awhile with her and Callum.

They had both made a promise that tomorrow morning they would spend the day wandering around the sales in Church Street and take tea in Blacklers. She would make this Christmas more special than Callum had guessed it would be. Over tea, she would suggest that they visit her mam and da and tell them together, on the night of Boxing Day.

*

Helen waited in the changing room at the end of ward two for Fionnuala to arrive. She could hear her footsteps running down the long corridor, but before she had the chance to open the door and warn her that Matron was already on the ward, she heard the words ring out.

‘Nurse Kennedy, do not run.’

Helen knew if it hadn’t been Christmas morning, the reprimand would have been far worse than that.

Fionnuala’s cheeks were bright red with the cold, as she bustled in through the door and took her ward shoes out, before sliding the basket under the wooden bench.

Helen took the clean uniform, that the laundry porter had delivered the night before, down from her peg and began to undo the white linen-covered buttons down the back, to help Fionnuala save time.

‘What took you so long?’ she asked, as Fionnuala gratefully stepped into the pale pink and white striped dress.

‘I had to be at mass and God, the priest was so slow, he took for flaming ever.’

‘You Catholics, the world won’t cave in if you miss a day, you know,’ said Helen, a touch reprovingly.

Fionnuala raised her eyebrows, ‘I know, Helen, but sure, I wouldn’t enjoy Christmas Day, now, if it hadn’t been to communion, and would you want to have to work with a miserable sinner?’

Helen grinned back. ‘Who says I don’t, anyway. What would be different, I would like to know?’

Fionnuala looked dismayed. ‘God, truly, am I miserable? Have you a spare clip for my hat?’

Fionnuala struggled to tuck her auburn hair under the starched lined cap. She never seemed to have enough hair clips. ‘I wouldn’t be surprised if I was. I cannot go on any longer with this guinea about me and Callum. I’m going to tell Mammy and Daddy tomorrow night, let them have a nice Christmas before I drop the bomb.’

‘God, are you sure that’s the right thing? I thought you said they were dead set against him and that is even before they know he’s been dating their daughter for months.’

Fionnuala groaned. ‘You should have seen Daddy this morning. He’s so proud of me, Helen. He crucifies me that I might be letting him down, but I have decided, if my seeing Callum is a bad thing then seeing him in secret is worse. It has to be done, he has to know.’

‘Well, on your own head be it. What will you do if he says that he forbids you to see Callum anymore?’

‘Da won’t say that, Ma might, but not Da.’

‘Fionnuala, it’s Christmas Day. Merry Christmas is the normal thing to say!’ Helen prised a clip out of her own cap and passed it to her friend.

‘Oh, God, I’m sorry, Helen, Merry Christmas.’ Fionnuala grinned at her reflection in the mirror as Helen picked up the hairspray and coated the back of her hair.

‘Do you know, Fionnuala, I’m sure it’s because you are the eldest, that you can’t dress yourself without help.’

One corner of Fionnuala’s linen apron hung down almost to her waist, as she struggled to extra

the fob watch from her purse and with the clasp, pin her apron to the dress.

~~‘Do you know, Helen, I think you could be right,’ she said, before they both marched out of the changing room and through the swing doors onto the long Florence Nightingale ward, into the little office at the end, to take report.~~

Fionnuala might not have been able to fold her starched linen hat, but she was a professional through and through. She was a nurse because she loved her job with a passion. It was a love born from the pride instilled in her by everyone who knew her, pride in a girl who had broken the spell which hovered over the Irish immigrant community – where a job at Woolworth’s was considered an impressive achievement and one that paid *good money*.

The night staff looked sombre as they filed into the office, ready to hand over the night report to the day staff. Fionnuala noted the familiar sick, white and exhausted expression on the face of the nurse about to hand over the night report. She almost dragged herself in through the office door. A stark change from the previous evening, when she had bounced in, looking forward to a quiet Christmas Eve and the hospital choir which visited each ward to sing for the patients. She had been on her feet and mostly alone, for a full twelve hours, with no break.

Fionnuala’s earlier concern about breaking the news to her da about Callum faded, as the night nurse in charge read out her report for each patient on the ward, from the Kardex patient file. Apart from the night nurse, Sister Joyce was the only person who sat down during this ritual. Now she took her place on the leather chair behind her desk. Her dark navy blue dress was immaculate and proud against her frilled, starched linen hat. The silver buckle on her Petersham belt gleamed and reflected the lights from the small Christmas tree in the corner of her office.

‘This Christmas tree is surely an indulgence, is it not?’ She said this at least once a day, in her soft Southern Irish accent. ‘Given that we have an enormous tree in the bay window, at the end of the ward, do you not think we have been a little greedy?’

But the nurses on the ward knew perfectly well that it was Sister Joyce herself who had insisted on having a small tree in her office. She was fiercely competitive with the other ward sisters. Her ward had to be the tidiest, the cleanest and the smartest and when it came to Christmas, she had to outshine the others, literally.

Helen winked at Fionnuala and inclined her head slightly, as she looked out through the office window and watched the morning tea trolley rumble down the ward. It was being trundled along by Joe, one of the walking wounded patients, who had been kept in by Sister Joyce for a few extra days over Christmas, rather than be discharged home to an empty bedsit.

Fionnuala and Helen both noticed that Joe’s pyjama pants had slipped halfway down his backside while he was serving the hot drinks. Joe was also helping out on the ladies’ ward opposite and Fionnuala knew that was where he would be heading next.

‘Excuse me, Sister,’ said Fionnuala quietly, as she slipped out of the office.

‘Joe, pull your pants up,’ she whispered in his ear, then she put one hand on each side of his pyjamas and pulled them up, before tying the thick woven white cord securely.

‘There you go, Merry Christmas, Joe,’ she said.

Sister Joyce had noticed and raised her hand slightly for the night nurse to wait, until Fionnuala was back in the office.

‘Well done, Nurse Kennedy,’ she said.

The night nurse gave Fionnuala a glance which screamed, ‘Couldn’t that have waited?’ Fionnuala instantly felt embarrassed as she remembered that this nurse had three young children at home and probably couldn’t get there fast enough, with it being Christmas morning.

‘Dignity, respect, compassion and reassurance, there are no words more important or worth remembering when dealing with patients.’ Sister Joyce continued.

Everyone in the office replied in unison, 'Yes, Sister.'

~~With a work-weary voice, the night nurse continued.~~ 'In bay three, we have a very poorly young man. He was brought in last night, from the new housing estate, out at Speke. He's a young Irish boy and works on one of the scaffolding gangs. The scaffolding was frozen, but he was still sent up, for some reason, and slipped on a frozen plank. He has serious concussion, and the tibia and fibula in both legs are broken. In fact, there are eleven major fractures which I have listed here. Apparently, he hit the bars quite hard on the way down. To be honest, he's not that good. The doctors only left an hour ago and will be back shortly. Nurse Sands is with him now and has been all night, which has left only two of us on the ward. His parents have been informed. Fortunately, they live near the port in Dublin and they are trying their best to board a crossing this morning. If they do, they said they should be here by ten. I think we will be lucky if he holds out until then. His blood pressure is down in his books and despite the atropine and adrenaline the doctors have given him, there isn't much improvement. He has a drip up, obviously. Unless he stabilizes, there is no way the doctors can operate yet. Thankfully, he was saved from hitting his head too badly and there is no obvious concussion. His pupil reactions are normal but he had almost no pulse or blood pressure when he arrived with us.'

'How old is he?' Helen asked for the one piece of information the night nurse had forgotten to tell them.

'He is sixteen, Nurse Windsor, and his name is Jack. When he arrived he was still conscious, but not for long. He cried like a baby for his mammy, screaming for her, he was, he was in so much pain. Despite the fact that there is no obvious concussion, he has been unconscious since, which could just be the amount of pain killers he's been given to try and stop the shock setting in. I have just checked his blood pressure with the nurse as I walked past, it is still only 95 over 60 and his pulse is now rapid and thready.'

The nurse provided every detail of the medication and care Jack had been given, when suddenly they all heard the sound of the night nurse who had given one to one care to Jack running up the corridor. Instantly, Fionnuala felt a shiver run down her spine. There was only one reason why it was acceptable for a nurse to run at full pelt down a hospital ward and they all knew what it was. Fionnuala threw open the office door, as Nurse Sands' voice screamed, 'Get the crash team, he's arrested!'

'Holy Mother,' said Sister Joyce under her breath. 'A sixteen-year-old lad on Christmas morning' and within seconds she was on the telephone and dialling 111, the shortest dial and the emergency number of the hospital switchboard.

'Send the on-call doctors,' she said, in a voice which betrayed not a shred of her dismay or concern. 'It's a cardiac arrest on ward two.'

Fionnuala and Helen ran down the ward and hustled Joe and the tea trolley to one side, then Sister Joyce opened and fastened back the ward doors wide, to make room for the on-call medical team and to clear a straight run through and down the ward to the one little room which was used for the sickest of patients.

Fionnuala was the first in to join the exhausted night nurse. It was only her second cardiac arrest since beginning her nurse training. The first had been on a post-operative man in his late seventies. The fact that this was such a young boy made her more nervous than she otherwise would have been.

'Get the foot of the bed off,' barked the night nurse, as she removed the pillows from under the young boy's head and threw them outside the curtains.

Helen had both hands on the footboard and now she lifted it clear with one tug, and carefully manoeuvred her way out through the curtains with it.

'Here, help me,' the nurse said to Fionnuala, as she climbed onto the bed with one knee and placed her hands under the heavy bed head. Fionnuala copied her and did the same on the other side, but the bed head refused to move.

‘Just what we need now,’ said Nurse Sands. ‘Let’s do it together. Are you ready? On three – one. two... three.’

And with that combined effort, the bed head lifted clear from the frame and banged against the wall, the weight of it almost pulling both of them off the end of the bed. In a second, both Fionnuala and Nurse Sands were on the floor at the side of the bed.

‘Ready, Nurse Windsor, brake off.’

‘Yes, Nurse Sands,’ Helen replied. ‘Right, let’s go.’

The three of them moved the bed into the middle of the room, so as to give the doctors some space at the head of the bed when they arrived, and as Helen slammed the brake on at the foot of the bed Nurse Sands said to Fionnuala, ‘You start, I’ll do mouth to mouth.’

Fionnuala immediately lifted her raised fist, gave one hard thump on the young boy’s sternum and began to compress his chest up and down. The three nurses counted out loud together.

‘Where the hell are the doctors?’ Nurse Sands said out loud, after her second bout of mouth to mouth.

Then they heard the crashing of metal trolleys against walls and the familiar sound of heavy feet running towards them.

*

When it was all over, Fionnuala found it hard not to cry. The sixteen-year-old boy, who had been sent up a frozen scaffold on Christmas Eve, had died.

Joe was in the kitchen and had made a large metal jug of milky coffee and placed it on the desk in Sister Joyce’s office, with six regulation issue, pale green cups and saucers.

Sister Joyce looked at him in amazement.

‘Ah, away wi’ ye, Sister, ’tis Christmas Day now, the wee girls are upset, so they are. Let them have a coffee. The few patients we have on the ward are upset, too. They are all in the day room having a ciggie, and the women on the other side are coming over to visit; they know now, as well.’

‘And who told them, Joe?’ Sister Joyce stood upright and stretched every inch of her five feet and two inches. She fixed her withering gaze on Joe, who looked sheepish.

‘Ah sure, news flies round these wards, does it not?’

Sister Joyce relented. ‘Thank you for the coffee, Joe. You’re right, it is Christmas and the nurses will be upset.’

As Joe looked at her in shock, she gave him a smile. A rare event in itself and one certainly never witnessed before by Joe, who had been a patient on the ward for almost two months.

‘Thank you, Sister,’ he said, grinning back, before he left to join the others in the day room.

*

Fionnuala and Helen were still at Jack’s bedside.

‘Open the window to let his spirit out,’ Fionnuala whispered to Helen.

Helen did not regard herself as religious, but it was a routine followed by every single nurse in the hospital after the death of a patient. There were enough ghost stories flying around the hospital as it was, and there were certain wards which every student nurse dreaded being sent on to for a night shift.

‘Isn’t he just gorgeous?’ Helen turned back from the window and stroked the young boy’s hair away from his face and his cheek with her finger. ‘He’s like a young James Dean.’

Fionnuala was busy washing the dirt of the building site from Jack’s body, dirt which the night nurses had had no time to deal with.

‘The poor, poor love,’ Helen said. ‘He’s the same age as my little brother. God only knows what would be like at our house, if this happened to our Steven. I don’t think my mother would ever get out of bed again. I can’t imagine any of us would.’

Fionnuala dried Jack’s limbs with the towel and pulled the sheet up and over his many broken bones.

‘Will you close his eyes?’ she asked Helen.

‘Aye,’ Helen replied, as she gently coaxed Jack’s eyelids, with the long dark eyelashes, down and for the last time, closed his film star brown eyes.

Fionnuala and Helen stood still for a moment, at his side. Fionnuala wanted to pray, but she felt this might make Helen uncomfortable.

Helen looked up at Fionnuala, ‘God rest his soul,’ she said, as a tear slipped down her cheek.

Fionnuala took her handkerchief out of her own pocket. ‘God rest his soul,’ she responded and with a sob between them, they slipped out from behind the curtains to head to the office for further instructions. As Helen passed the window, and despite the cold, she pushed it even further, opening onto the widest setting.

When they reached the office, the doctors were still there. One was filling out the death certificate and the ward register, while the other was talking to Sister Joyce.

‘Would you like me to talk to the relatives?’

‘Well, I would, if I knew where they were,’ she replied. ‘I tried to phone, as soon as he arrested. The number we have from the work mates who brought him in, is for a shop near to where they live. They have just called back, to say his parents left the house last night and are on their way to Liverpool.’

‘What shall we do with the lad then? If his parents aren’t here to see him, we should send him straight to the morgue.’

‘Let’s give them an hour,’ Sister Joyce replied. ‘They won’t be allowed into the morgue and it seems a bit harsh, if they travel all this way and then don’t even get to say goodbye to their son.’

‘That’s a good idea,’ said the doctor. ‘It’s a shame it’s Christmas morning.’

Fionnuala had noticed that doctors in the hospital varied in their attitude towards the nurses. Some were friendly and spoke to them as equals. These were mostly the very junior doctors, however; the vast majority treated the nurses as handmaidens, barking out their orders with an air of superiority and importance. One such doctor had made Fionnuala cry on her very first day, something she was determined would never happen again. The consultants were regarded as mini gods and only Sister Joyce was allowed to speak to them, unless they asked a nurse a direct question.

Sister Joyce took in the girls’ tear-streaked faces at a glance.

‘It’s Christmas morning, nurses,’ she said, ‘and it hasn’t been the best start to the day. Have coffee, courtesy of Joe, and let’s work out how we are going to manage the rest of the day. There is one thing we know: it can only get better.’

Fionnuala wasn’t happy drinking coffee in the office, with the doctors present. It made her feel uncomfortable. However, the staff canteen was closed, because it was Christmas and she had discovered it was quite usual for the nurses to eat with the patients on the ward on Christmas Day, just as though they were a family.

‘I have managed to purchase plenty of treats for the ward, with the donations we have had over the year,’ Sister Joyce said. ‘Let’s start with this one, shall we?’

Out of the cardboard box on her desk, which appeared to be full of chocolates, she extracted a bottle of Scotch whisky and, without further ado, poured a small measure into each coffee cup.

Fionnuala dared not speak. She had never even tasted whisky, but she did want to look as though she had. Then, to her surprise, she noticed something quite unexpected. Helen and the junior Doctor

Brookes were smiling at each other over their coffee cups, and Helen was blushing. Fionnuala was surprised. ~~Helen was the prettiest and most glamorous nurse in the hospital, with a personality match.~~

‘We have the consultants arriving, with their wives and families, at twelve,’ said Sister Joyce. ‘They will take a sherry with us all, including the patients, in the day room. We will then take the sherry in to those who cannot leave their beds. The consultants and their wives will visit the patients at their bedsides, to wish them Merry Christmas. When they have left, we will serve lunch on the table at the centre of the ward for us all. It should be an easy day from here on in, nurses.’

Sister Joyce had probably never got anything quite so wrong in her thirty years as a ward sister.

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The hospital choir had returned to the wards, to sing to the patients, while they ate their lunch. They sang two carols on each ward, which meant they could cover most of the adult wards in an hour and a half. The nurses in the hospital choir were those on duty. Making Christmas Day a better one, for patients who needed to remain in hospital, was their calling and they had all been slipped on to the ward rota as extras, to ensure the tradition survived.

Fionnuala and Helen had finished serving lunch to the patients, with Joe’s help, and had just sat down to tuck into their own, when the choir singers began to arrive through the ward door. It was only two thirty in the afternoon, but it was already becoming dark outside. The sky was heavy with yet more snow-filled clouds and the wind lifting up from the river was fierce.

The end of the ward looked out onto the front of the hospital through large glass windows, and they all noticed as an ambulance, with blue lights flashing, hurtled up the drive.

‘Let’s hope it’s not one for us,’ said Sister Joyce. ‘Let’s say grace, shall we, before the carol singers begin. Doctor Brookes, if you would be so kind.’

They all bowed their heads and closed their eyes, as the sonorous voice of Doctor Brookes boomed out the grace. Fionnuala opened her eyes to look around her. Everyone was sitting around the table with hands clasped before them and eyes tightly shut. The Christmas turkey was steaming on the table along with hospital kitchen aluminium tubs, filled with roast potatoes, vegetables and as many trimmings as could fit onto the regulation white and bottle-green trimmed plates.

Fionnuala noticed she wasn’t the only person with her eyes open. Helen was staring dreamily at Dr Brookes and what was more, as he spoke the grace, he was looking equally dreamily at Helen. Helen caught Fionnuala’s eye and they both grinned. Well, well, well, thought Fionnuala, and I spotted first.

As the choir singers began, the pager in Dr Brookes’ pocket beeped. He jumped up from the table and ran to the office to pick up the telephone.

‘I’m needed in casualty,’ he said, and ran out of the ward doors without a backward glance.

‘Poor man,’ said Sister Joyce, ‘he hasn’t slept in over forty-eight hours. Bon appetite everyone.’ She picked up her knife and fork, the signal for everyone else to do the same.

As the choir sang, Fionnuala looked out of the window. The snow was beginning to fall once again. Helen lived in the nurses’ home and wouldn’t be travelling home until she was officially on duty in two days’ time. Fionnuala prayed that the buses would keep running, so that she could return home tonight.

She had no way of letting Callum know he had the same idea as her da, to meet her at the bus stop and wished now she had asked him to come to the hospital gates, so that he could catch the bus home with her. She knew that as soon as Callum saw Fred Kennedy, he would realize what was happening and would slip back home. Fionnuala felt both sad and angry. She had truly wanted to see Callum

their first Christmas Day. Watching Helen and Doctor Brookes had made her feel melancholy and lonely.

Helen came and sat next to her. 'What's up? It's Christmas and you look really miserable.'

'What's up with me?' said Fionnuala, smiling. 'Well, I was just thinking now that, if I didn't have my Callum, how useful it would be to take a few lessons in flirting from you. As you seem to be such an expert.'

'He is a bit special, isn't he?' Helen whispered.

'He is, I'm sure. He's certainly nicer than most of the others, but I'll tell you what, it has made me absolutely certain that come hell or high water, I am telling my mam and dad about Callum. When we were laying out Jack this morning, I thought, God only knows what's around the corner. Life is too short, isn't it?'

There was a murmur in the room. Matron had arrived to pay her Christmas visit.

'Nurse Windsor,' she said to Helen, 'could you run along and help in casualty, please, they are rather busy and could do with extra hands.'

Even though Sister Joyce had been in charge of her own ward for over ten years, she jumped to attention when Matron walked into the ward and everyone else followed suit.

'Please, sit down,' said Matron. 'I have just come to wish you all a Merry Christmas. Nurse Kennedy, are you taking the bus home tonight?'

'I am, Matron,' Fionnuala replied.

'Well, once the rumpus in casualty has died down and Nurse Windsor returns, maybe Sister Joyce will allow you to make your way home. I have heard from the porter that the snow is due to get much worse as the day goes on.'

Fionnuala felt like running over and kissing her. Maybe she could ask little Paddy, who lived on Nelson Street and was friendly with the O'Prey boys, if he could run a message to Callum and they could meet, after all.

'Thank you very much, Matron,' she replied, casting a glance at Sister Joyce.

'We have an extra two girls on ward one, Sister Joyce,' Matron said. 'You could let her go now, if you were so inclined.'

'Well, I don't see why not,' said Sister Joyce. 'They have had a tough morning. Go on, Nurse Kennedy, run and catch your bus before it gets any worse.'

Fionnuala could not believe her luck. She almost fell over the chair, as she pushed it back from the table.

'Thank you, Matron, thank you, Sister Joyce, bye, everyone!'

She waved to the patients around the table and was out of the ward doors, before Matron could change her mind and call her back. She met the kitchen staff on their way into the ward to collect the dishes, as she walked out through the swing doors, but as she opened the changing room door, she thought of Helen.

'Drat, I need to see Helen and say goodbye.' She spoke out loud, just as she let the changing room door shut again and turned to go down the long arterial main hospital corridor to the casualty ward.

As she approached, she saw a middle-aged couple, standing in the middle of the corridor, looking up at the overhead sign, obviously trying to find their bearings.

Fionnuala thought they looked troubled. 'Can I help?' she enquired. 'Are you lost?'

It was the man who spoke.

'We are looking for our boy, Nurse. His name is Jack. He was brought in last night, after an accident on the building site he was working on. We are trying to find out which ward he is on.'

Fionnuala was speechless. Her mind raced, while she tried to work out what to do. If she returned to the ward, she would most likely be stuck there for at least a couple more hours and not get to see

her Callum after all. She didn't deliberate for long, she knew what she had to do.

'He was on ward two. I will take you down there, to Sister Joyce,' she said.

'Was? Why would we be going there, then? Can we go to the ward he is on now?'

It was Jack's mother speaking. Fionnuala realized that they had no idea their son had died on Christmas morning and that, in his last moments, he had cried out pitifully for his mammy.

While Fionnuala was struggling to think what to say, she saw Helen erupt through the casual doors. When she saw Fionnuala, her face instantly flooded with relief.

'Oh, my God, Fionnuala, you have to come now, right now. It's your Callum, he is in casualty.'

'In casualty, why? Has he come to collect me?' Fionnuala knew, even as she spoke the words, that it was not the reason why Helen had come to find her.

She could hear the carol singers at the top of the stairs at the entrance to the children's wards, now singing 'Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer'. The door to the end of the corridor blew open and she watched as the snow sent flurries down the corridor towards her, carried on an icy breeze which forced her to pull her cape tighter across her body. She felt as though she was a million miles away, yet she knew that she was also right there, waiting, and that whatever Helen was about to impart was bad news and she needed to prepare herself.

'He's not that good. He has been in a car crash, the police are with him and they are questioning him now. They have just told me that, when he is well enough, they will be taking him straight to the police cell and back to jail. He stole the car, Fionnuala.'

Fionnuala blinked. It was all she could do. Speech was beyond her. She tried, she opened her mouth and formed a word, but she had no idea what it was and, unuttered, it stuck in her throat.

'I have to go, it's chaos in there; a tram has left the tracks. That's what made Callum skid. Helen helped to see to the people on the tram. He could have run, I suppose, but that's how the bizzies got him, anyway. I'll be shot if I stay here one second longer. Hurry, Fionnuala, he's in big trouble, you need to run to him.' And with that, Helen disappeared back through the swing doors into casualty.

Helen's words had hit Fionnuala with a force that left her face stinging.

He could have run... slap. He's going back to jail ... slap. Stunned, she stood and watched Helen go back. The noise from casualty flooded the corridor for a few seconds, as the door opened and the door sliced clean away, as they shut again and silence once more filled the corridor.

'Excuse me, Nurse.' It was Jack's mother, once again. With a shock, Fionnuala realized they were still there.

'We don't mean to be a bother, sure we don't, but could ye take us to our son.'

Fionnuala took a deep breath. It was not her place to tell Jack's parents that their son was lying in the morgue, having died five hours earlier. That was for Sister Joyce.

Her job was to make the tea, hold out the handkerchiefs and to watch and learn from Sister Joyce because one day she wanted to be a ward sister, too.

She thought someone else was speaking, when she heard herself say, 'Please, come with me, I will take you to Sister Joyce.'

Like a robot, she walked down the corridor, slowing her pace, so that Jack's parents could keep up with her, suppressing her overwhelming desire to run to Callum, as fast as the wind that broke through the main hospital doors and into casualty. There was only one place she wanted to be and that was by Callum's side, whatever he had done. Callum would need her. He was scared of the police and not very good at explaining himself.

As they reached the ward doors, Fionnuala turned to Jack's parents. During the walk along the corridor, she had made small talk, to a background accompaniment of a loud and persistent buzzing in her brain. *How was your journey? Is the weather bad in Dublin? Have you children at home?*

'If you can just sit here a moment, I will fetch Sister Joyce for you,' she said, as they reached the

wooden benches used by visitors waiting at the end of the ward.

~~‘Oh, thank you so much, Nurse. I’m desperate to see my boy, we just can’t wait another minute can we, Pat? I’ve been beside myself since yesterday.’~~

Fionnuala looked at Jack’s father for a long moment. Both he and his wife looked exhausted. Fionnuala forgot her own troubles, as she thought about the catastrophe they were both about to face. She and Sister Joyce would be there to catch them when they heard the news. They would hold them through those first moments, when the facts refused to be heard and hovered stubbornly and cruelly, taunting them from the sidelines of consciousness and then hitting them with a force which could take them both down at once.

Jack’s father gave Fionnuala a weak and shaky half smile. He knows, she almost said out loud. He may not realize it yet, but he knows.

‘Please, just wait a moment here, while I put my basket down.’

Fionnuala opened the changing room door and almost threw her basket in, before opening the ward door and facing the scene she had left only minutes before. She walked towards the centre of the ward where Sister Joyce was instructing Joe how to place the vases of flowers, being moved back onto the long table, now that the detritus of lunch had been cleared away.

‘Nurse Kennedy, what on earth is wrong? Why are you not on that bus already?’

‘Sister, it’s Jack’s parents. They have arrived.’

The two women exchanged a look. Of all the student nurses on duty in the entire hospital today, Sister Joyce could have picked one out of all of them, to help her through the next half an hour, she would have picked Nurse Kennedy, and she silently thanked God for bringing her back onto the ward.

‘Let’s move into the office, shall we?’ Sister Joyce gently, but firmly, took the elbow of Jack’s mother. ‘Come along, Mr Donnelly.’ Sister Joyce’s voice was calm and firm, not yet betraying any hint of sympathy. A professional to the core of her being.

As they walked past Joe, who had quietly slipped to the end of the table and stood with a large evergreen display of Christmas foliage in his hand, still awaiting instruction from Sister Joyce, Fionnuala whispered, ‘Can you ask the kitchen orderly to bring in a tray and a pot, Joe?’

Joe nodded and blessed himself with the sign of the cross. Thank the Lord Jack’s parents didn’t see that, Fionnuala thought to herself. As she turned in through the office doorway, her next thought was, *I’m coming soon Callum. I’m coming.*

Pulling up chairs to her desk, Sister Joyce asked Jack’s parents to take a seat.

Fionnuala noticed that their expressions had altered imperceptibly. They now knew something was seriously wrong. Jack’s father appeared to have aged ten years from the moment when she first met them at the end of the hospital corridor.

‘Is he being operated on, Sister? Only his workmate, who phoned the shop yesterday, said he had broken a bone.’

Sister Joyce lifted the heavy black telephone handset and laid it on the office desk. No calls would disturb them, once she began to deliver the very worst news a parent could hear. There was a tap on the office door and through the round porthole glass, Fionnuala saw the orderly, with a tray balanced in her hands. Awkward moments followed, as Fionnuala opened the door and struggled with it, while balancing the tray.

She attempted to inject brightness into her voice, whilst thoughts of Callum beat against the sides of her brain. ‘Can I pour you some tea?’ she asked. ‘Milk, sugar?’

Neither parent spoke. Both were now frozen with fear. Tongues no longer chattering, eyes no longer darting. Fionnuala loaded the tea with sugar; she knew it would help, if one of them should feel faint once they heard the news. As she handed each of them a cup and saucer, she noticed they were as white as the bed sheets she had changed that morning.

It was all as bad as she had expected it to be. For Fionnuala, the biggest challenge was not to c herself. ~~Not to break down with Jack's parents. Despite every nerve in her body telling her to run~~ Callum, she resigned herself to remaining in the office with Sister Joyce and, for a few moments, she forgot about Callum altogether, as she remembered how the night nurse told them Jack had cried like a baby for his mammy and how his mammy would never know that. They couldn't tell her. What use would that information be, other than to shatter her heart into even more pieces?

Fionnuala wanted to tell his mother that she had said a prayer for Jack and that it had been she herself, who had laid him out and that she had opened the windows to let his spirit escape to heaven. She desperately wanted to say to them, 'He was just a gorgeous looking young boy, with film star eyes and you must have been very proud,' but that would let them know she had been with him at the very end and maybe that wasn't any help at all.

Sister Joyce stepped in and banished any concern she had. 'It may help you to know that Nurse Kennedy here did all she could to save him. The nurses and doctors worked very hard and did all that was in their power.'

Both parents turned to look at her.

'Did he ask for me, Nurse?' Jack's mother's eyes were swamped with tears, but they were still fixed on Fionnuala.

She took a breath, *do I tell her the truth?* 'He did, he asked for you all the time.'

'Oh, God in heaven,' Jack's mother sobbed out loud and Jack's father put his arms around her shoulders. His face was set. Only the muscle in his neck, which twitched repeatedly, betrayed the extent of his self-control.

'Was he in pain?' The inevitable, excruciating next question. They asked the same question every single parent. *What shall I say? Do I lie to her?*

Fionnuala took another deep breath and told a lie. It was one she would take to confession with a little conscience and a guarantee of absolution.

'Well now, I think he may have had a little pain when he first arrived but sure, he had so many pain killers in him, he didn't feel a thing. He really didn't, of that I'm absolutely sure.'

Jack's mother sobbed again. 'Thank you, Nurse,' she said, through her tears. 'Thank you for trying to save him. I know you did your best.'

That was the hardest moment for Fionnuala, as her own tears pricked the back of her eyes. Thoughts of Callum, lying in casualty, flooded her brain, screaming at her, urging her to run to him.

She looked up at Sister Joyce who saw them and, without understanding what was wrong with Fionnuala, stood up from her chair.

It's time for you to go, Nurse Kennedy,' she said. 'Could you send Nurse Jones in, on your way out?'

Relief washed over Fionnuala, as she sprang to her feet. *I'm coming, Callum.*

'Where is my son?' Jack's mother reached her hands behind her neck and undid the clasp on the gold crucifix, hanging around her neck.

'He's in the mortuary, until you can let us know the arrangements you wish to make. Will you want to bury him here, or in Dublin?' Sister Joyce spoke very softly.

'Bury him in Dublin.' They were firm words from his father, addressed to Jack's mother alone.

But she was looking at Fionnuala. 'Could you take this for me, Nurse, and put it around his neck please?'

Fionnuala looked down at the gold cross and chain and didn't move. She looked at the parents and then at Sister Joyce, who took her hesitation as waiting for permission.

The mortuary building was on the outside of the hospital, as far away from casualty as it was possible to be. *Oh, God, no, Callum.*

‘That will be fine, Nurse Kennedy. Would you like to take someone with you?’

‘No, not at all,’ Fionnuala replied.

She didn’t want to have to explain to anyone else what was wrong; this was a job she would have to finish alone. She reached out and gently took the cross and chain.

‘I will do it right now. I shall tell him it’s from you and that you came for him. He will be wearing it when he reaches you in Dublin. I’ll send Nurse Jones in, Sister.’ And with that, she bent down and squeezed the hands of Jack’s parents.

*

Fionnuala didn’t care who saw her or shouted at her for running through the hospital grounds. She was on the outside. No possibility here of bumping into a patient on a trolley, but even as she thought that she knew the sight of a nurse in uniform in full flight was unseemly. But for the first time, she didn’t care.

As she reached the doors of the mortuary, she slowed down.

Lordy, it looks creepy in there, she thought, as she stood at the door. If Callum hadn’t been a casualty with a policeman standing over him, she might have waited and found someone else to wait in with her and keep her company. As it was, she was fighting the clock and without knowing it, had only minutes left.

She spoke out loud to boost her courage, as she walked in through the door. To fill the eerie silence with noise. ‘Hello everyone, ’tis only me come to find Jack.’ As she opened the door, she realized she had no idea which fridge he was in.

‘Where are you Jack?’ Fionnuala almost shouted. Using her brain, she went to the last fridge, with a label on the door nearest the entrance and, with dismay, noticed it wasn’t Jack’s name. ‘God in heaven, another one today,’ she said, as she blessed herself and made the sign of the cross. It was only on the fifth fridge that she found his name: JACK DONNELLY.

Fionnuala took a deep breath. ‘I am scared stiff here, everyone, but I know none of you are going to hurt me now are you, here goes...’

Within seconds, she had placed the cross and chain around Jack’s neck, kissed her fingers and laid them briefly against his cold cheek. Then she was out of the mortuary and running towards casualty, her basket banging against her legs. As she reached the doors, the first sight that greeted her was that of two large policemen, standing at the entrance. One had his helmet laid on the bench next to him and the other was fastening the strap of his own, as if he were about to leave.

‘Fionnuala.’ She heard Helen loudly and urgently whisper her name. ‘Over here.’

Looking up, Fionnuala shot Helen a grateful look and walked as quickly as she could towards the drawn curtains. There were people everywhere. Walking wounded, hospital staff and newly arrived visitors wanting to take their loved ones home. A cameraman had arrived outside, as had a news reporter, who was walking around with a pad and pencil, trying to persuade people to talk to him. A tram leaving the rails was big news, on a day when normally nothing else occurred.

As Fionnuala pulled back the curtains, the anger in her heart instantly melted. Callum had his eyes closed and his arms folded across his chest, as though he was praying.

‘Callum,’ Fionnuala whispered, as she placed her hand on top of his.

His eyes sprang open. ‘Fionnuala,’ he almost shouted. ‘Oh, thank God, I thought I wouldn’t see you before they took me.’

‘Who is taking you, where? What happened Callum? You promised me, promised me, you didn’t, why did you take a car? What have you done?’

It was now impossible for Fionnuala to hold the tears back, and they poured down her cheeks.

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