

I WISH MacGOWAN HADN'T WRITTEN THAT SONG

Da is singing as I leave Carthy's bar just before midnight, sneaking out the hall door, pulling it quietly behind. I leave a full pint of Guinness on the windowsill. I hate the stuff but old Carthy had thrown up two free ones when we walked in, saying it would be a while before I get another as good. As the lads arrived the pints were lined up, the glasses of whiskey. Seems to me they think there's no good Guinness or whiskey in America and then they started buying bags of Tayto, shoving them up my jumper, into coat pockets and down sleeves, stuffing their faces until Carthy had said he was sold out.

'This must be the last supper for young Reilly is it?' old Timmy said, sucking on an empty pipe and everyone else's smoke since the cancer.

'It is, Timmy,' Da said, a full pint in his hand. 'Sure he's leaving us tomorrow. For Amerika no less. And here, listen, I learned this song for you, son.'

'Ah Da.'

‘On the Reilly boy,’ croaked Timmy. ‘Now give the man a chance lads, will ye?’

‘Hup lads. Whisht now,’ roared Carthy. ‘A singer in the house over here.’

There was silence first, but once Da got into it and started performing I stood back, giving him his space. It was then I made for the hall saying it’s like a bloody wake in here but doing my best to smile, to hold it together. On the way someone planted a fresh pint in my hand and said good luck, and only I was trying not to spill it, I mightn’t have made it. Outside it’s perishing. I should’ve brought my coat but then the lads wouldn’t have let me through. Whatever the hell came over me is forgotten with the cold and I consider going back inside before walking off in the direction of the Old Bridge, the whole pub bursting into a drunken chorus of love and dreams behind me.

The frost is already down, the moonlight sparkling on the road. Passing by the cinema, it’s dark inside. No late shows anymore. It was in Screen One I got my first shift off a country girl called Mary I met in the queue for popcorn. I’d gone on my own to see *Home Alone* and Mary was meant to meet a friend there but when they didn’t show she got in beside me instead. We’d seen each other before around the Tech. yard and next weekend we met again, made a date of it, queued for popcorn together and held hands on the way out, me staying with her after the picture till her mother came. On the third weekend we left *Kindergarden Cop* early and kissed down under the Old Bridge, she letting me touch her skin, smooth as silk, and I’d never been touched like that before.

I still see her sometimes. She has a kid now, got married to a farmer older than the both of us and she drives a beat-up Jetta to the market every Saturday morning, the boot full of carrots, onions, spuds, sprouts or whatever else is in season. Wearing Wellington boots, her clothes are always mucky, her mousey-brown hair tied back in a ponytail with an elastic band, but untidy looking, not like how it used to be.

When I reach the Old Bridge I stop halfway over, lean on the stone wall and listen to the Slaney bursting through the arches underneath. I try to remember how many times we went down there and then wonder if there's anything like this in New York, somewhere you can stand and close your eyes and listen and imagine you're out the country. I've been wondering about things like this for a while now. Like will I be able to go fishing in the Hudson? Will I manage the driving on the wrong side of the road? Do they have snooker halls? Where would you get a hurl mended? Will I get the hurl through Customs even? And what if I can't hack the job or if the bossman is a terror? What do I do then? Who can I go to over there?

I open my eyes and realise I'm shivering, my chin trembling. I start walking, fast, up Slaney Street, past the best chippers in town, through Market Square, up Main Street, past St Aidan's, the cathedral I was baptised in, made first confession in, took first communion in, was confirmed in. But I haven't been to mass on a Sunday now for ages, not since I turned eighteen I'd say when Da had said I was old enough to make up my own mind.

I stop outside the gates to Bellefield. The pitch looks as flat as anything and I'm raging I won't get to play on it next year. But my eyes are starting to water, my fingers and the tip of my nose almost numb. I clap my hands and rub my face. I start to run, careful not to slip, the Guinness slopping about inside, coming up my neck a little but I swallow it down. I get instant heartburn, I hock and spit, I imagine I'm doing laps with the lads. I jump, pretending to catch the *sliotar*. I sprint past the petrol station, out the Milehouse Road and I have to slow down here as the frost seems thicker than in town.

At home I try to make as little noise as I can turning the key, but inside there's light spilling from under the kitchen door. I creep in, maybe Ma's left the light on by mistake but when I open the door she's sitting at the table in her dressing gown, the anniversary mug between her hands. The room is warm, hits me in a wave and the smell of the roast beef from earlier is still here. She looks up with a blank face, the

kind she makes when praying.

‘You’re early,’ she says.

‘Ah, I had enough,’ I say, closing the door and moving to the kettle.

‘Is your father not with you?’

‘No. He’s singing now.’

‘Ah.’

‘The *Fairytale of New York*,’ I say, filling the kettle from the tap.

‘Oh, that’s a new one for him.’

‘I wish MacGowan hadn’t written that song.’

‘What?’ she says.

‘I said I wish MacGowan hadn’t written that song. It’s on every bloody time I turn on the radio.’ I replace the kettle, switch it on.

‘It’s a nice song,’ she says.

I say nothing, lay my hands on the sink and stare out the window into the black night. I’ve stood here so many times I can picture what the field behind our house will look like in the morning. Never farmed as long as I remember, it was my other world growing up. My Anfield, my Croke Park, my war zone. Out there I was *Commando*, *Rambo*. I was a combination of Chuck Norris and Bruce Lee. I was a cross between Ian Rush and Kenny Dalglish. I was ‘The Bomber’ Liston and Nicky English rolled into one and I bet I still know every dip and hole in it. I know where the rabbits burrow and where you’d go to your knees in muck after a heavy rain.

‘Was there a good crowd?’ she asks.

‘Yeah. Drunk as coots they are and there’s crisps everywhere.’

‘You’re sober enough then.’

‘I left most of mine behind. I can’t stand Guinness.’

‘Oh sure someone’ll drink ‘em.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Timmy there?’

‘Course he is.’

I look at Ma and she’s smiling, her elbows leaning on the table, the rim of the mug close to her lips. I notice her hair is greyer than

I thought in places and suddenly she looks older than her age, older than Da even. The kettle starts to boil, the sound surrounding me. I look to the window again, this time focus on my reflection and it's true — I look more like him.

'Do you want a hot drop?' I ask, reaching for the string and winding down the roller blind. She doesn't answer. 'Ma?'

She looks up, her face blank again. She shakes her head, 'No thanks.'

I get the big *A-Team* mug from the press — the one with Mr T saying 'I ain't goin' on no plane sucker' she'd bought for one of my birthdays — and drop a teabag in. I go to the fridge and get butter, milk, the block of red cheddar from behind the last of the roast. I cut from today's cake of flour bread, take a plate from the press and make a doorstep sandwich and I wish then I had a bag of Tayto to go with it. After the kettle boils I fill the mug, squeeze out the bag, top-off with milk. I sit at the table opposite Ma and take a bite.

'Pa Cummins left in a parcel for you,' she says, 'to give to his sister in Brooklyn. Did you ever meet her?'

I shake my head.

'I went to school with her,' Ma says. 'She left when she was about your age too. But she was never home much after, I suppose. Only for funerals really.'

I take a drink from the mug, swallow. It scalds all the way down but still I take another.

'Sean,' she says.

I look at her.

'Why are you leaving before Christmas?'

I want to take another bite but manage to say, 'Because it's easier than leaving after, Ma. And I start work the twenty-eighth.'

She nods, tries to smile as if everything's still okay and says, 'What will you do over there?'

'What do you mean?'

'At night. You're not to spend all the time in the pub now. You're

to save the money you earn.'

'Ah, I'll probably go to the pictures or something. Or maybe Broadway. To see a play or something.'

'A play?'

'Yeah. They're supposed to be good.'

'But sure you never went to a play in your life.'

'Well, sure, it's a new start, ain't it?'

'Tis,' she says, looking like she's praying again.

I take another bite, notice the shadows under her eyes, the lines around her mouth, the light soft hair down the sides of her face, all these things I've never noticed before.

She says, 'Pa says you can always call on his sister whenever you want. He says she knows the run of things over there and if you get stuck you should give her a call. He gave me her number.'

Ma reaches into her pocket and takes out a slip of paper torn from a copybook. She reads it before leaving it on the table. 'Her address is on the parcel outside. Won't you write it down before you hand it over?'

'Yeah,' I say.

'It was nice of her to offer.'

'What's in it?' She doesn't answer. How could she not have heard? 'Ma?'

'What?' she says, her eyes still on the torn paper.

'The parcel. What's in it?'

'Ah, mostly food I think. He mentioned a Christmas pudding and teabags and that.'

'No drugs then.'

'Sean,' she says, smiling like how she does for photographs at weddings and parties and on special occasions. Like in the new picture of her and Da hanging in the hall, taken last summer for their twenty-fifth anniversary.

We sit there and say nothing for a while. I'm thinking I hope I'm in bed before he gets home, and it's like Ma is waiting for me to finish the sandwich. When it's gone, I feel warm and full and the heartburn

is gone too.

She stands, offers a hand. 'Dance with me,' she says.

'What?'

'Come on.'

'Ah Ma.'

'Come on Sean, before you go.'

I stand. In her slippers she's smaller than normal. We step to the centre of the kitchen and hold each other. We move from side to side, over and back, from the fridge to the table, working our way over to the sink. She's humming something, almost silently. It was here she taught me how to jive when I had to bring Mary to her graduation ball and how to waltz when I asked her to the afters of a first cousin's wedding. Da took a video of us practicing the night before but he's never shown us.

I can just about make out what Ma's humming and the words come to me. In my mind I hear the old man singing them, lashing it out as if he was the drunk in the drunk tank. I can picture him now, squinting through the smoke at every face in Carthy's, acting out every line, every word, ballad after ballad, the pints lined up, the whiskies, downing them as if it was his true and only purpose in life.

Ma snuggles in. I feel her shaking so I hug her. She's all tensed up, like every sinew is wound to the last. I try not to cry but the tears won't stay in and when I close my eyes, the tears fall on her hair. Ma's humming gets louder, her voice breaking and I want to help her out, to get her to the end.

I start to sing MacGowan's song. Ma stops humming, holds me tighter. I carry on, holding onto her. And as I sing the lines about not making it alone, and building dreams, I see Mary standing in the queue for popcorn that first night, looking out of place, like she's scared. I remember that first kiss, her toned body against mine. I can smell how it was and remember again how happy we were when dancing, kissing and touching, and thinking how it seemed it was all going to work out just fine.