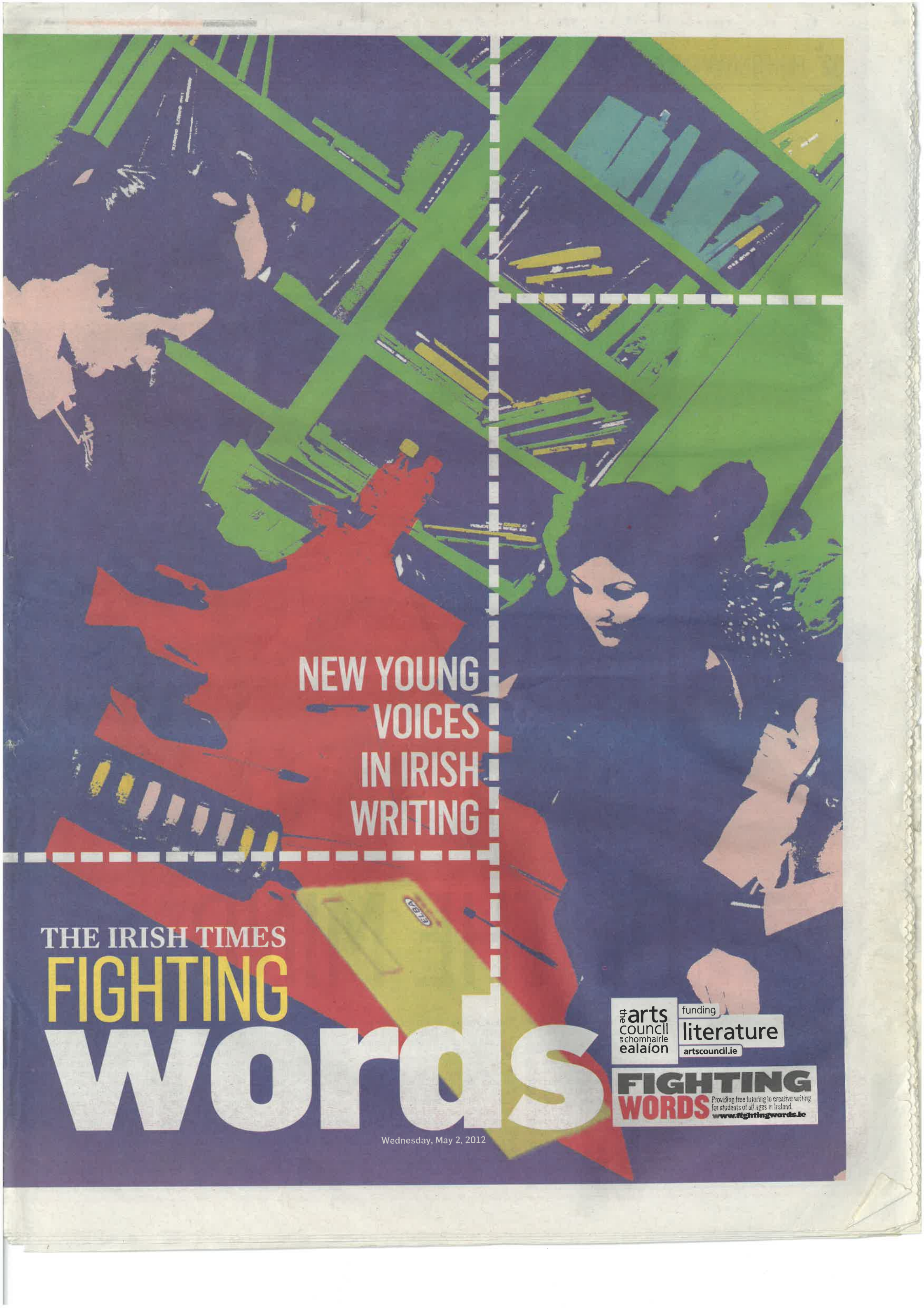




NEW YOUNG
VOICES
IN IRISH
WRITING

THE IRISH TIMES
FIGHTING

Words

Wednesday, May 2, 2012

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**FIGHTING
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war

OF THE MIND

ROSS MURPHY

is 17 and goes to the King's Hospital school. Originally from Sutton, in Dublin, he now lives in a small town in Co Meath

Illustration by Nick Miller

ABIGAIL HERBERT was 12 years old. So far this morning she had woken up once, gotten out of bed twice, put on her uniform and buttoned her shirt from the bottom up, as she wanted the best part of the day to be at the end. She hadn't done her tie yet, so as she wouldn't die of strangulation before she reached her 40th birthday, and she was in the middle of tying her shoes for the sixth time so as her father would come home tonight.

Abigail felt safe.

Abigail had to tiptoe across the dimly lit landing, missing all the lines in the wood, so as not to wake her mother.

Abigail walked downstairs, stepped gingerly into the kitchen, right foot first, and looked at the blue wall before the purple wall.

Abigail felt safe.

Abigail began to eat last night's uneaten dinner for breakfast. The beans had developed a skin, which made it slightly harder for Abigail to finish them all, but she managed it. The chicken posed troublesome. The last time she had eaten chicken was last year, the day before her father left. Abigail hadn't eaten chicken since. Abigail didn't know whether eating it would make him come back or push him further away. Abigail felt her

stomach tighten; she wanted to scream. Abigail wanted to get away, she wanted to drop everything, let everything go, escape. But she couldn't; she felt it; she knew it was there; this was her cross to bear.

Abigail was having a good day at school. She had not been asked to read anything or colour anything. When Abigail read, she read each line out loud, but in between each line she repeated the previous line to herself; sometimes she didn't read the line correctly when she repeated it to herself, so she had to do it again. This stressed Abigail; sometimes Abigail feared she would never get it right, and be

trapped in an endless cycle, trying to escape. This scared Abigail.

Abigail also didn't like colouring. Abigail would protest that colouring was futile. Abigail would argue with her teacher; Abigail would argue the point that colouring a picture merely alters the light reflected off it and that she couldn't see a valid reason for doing so, but really Abigail was petrified of having to delve into the world of colour; the world of colour was dangerous. If Abigail painted a picture and left one colour without its equal, it would start again. For everything purple in her picture there would have to be something orange; for everything red



THE word

THIS SUPPLEMENT is the second Fighting Words/*Irish Times* publication of new writing by children and teenagers. The stories have a wonderful imagination and energy, covering a wide range of subjects, such as life in the city, a stalker, funny advice on how to write a masterpiece, obsessive-compulsive disorder, murder and an unconventional princess with a beard. This collection comprises just a small selection from the thousands of stories written at Fighting Words over the past year.

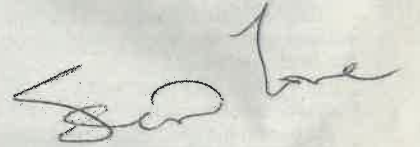
Fighting Words is a creative-writing centre located at the heart of Dublin city, beside Croke Park. It's a place where everyone is welcome and where all the tutoring is provided free by 400 volunteers. Our purpose is to give as many children and young adults as possible the opportunity to realise their creative potential and to nurture the writing skills that they all, to varying degrees, possess.

Creative arts are an essential part of a child's education. All children should have a right to develop their creative thinking and abilities – a key ingredient for succeeding at college, at work and in life. Fighting Words is now open three years, and in that time we have hosted more than 30,000

students.

It is clear to us that the interest in creative writing and related arts is colossal in Ireland, and it would be a very positive development were the formal education system to reflect this reality. Our experience at Fighting Words is that creative artists would be more than willing to play their part in making this happen.

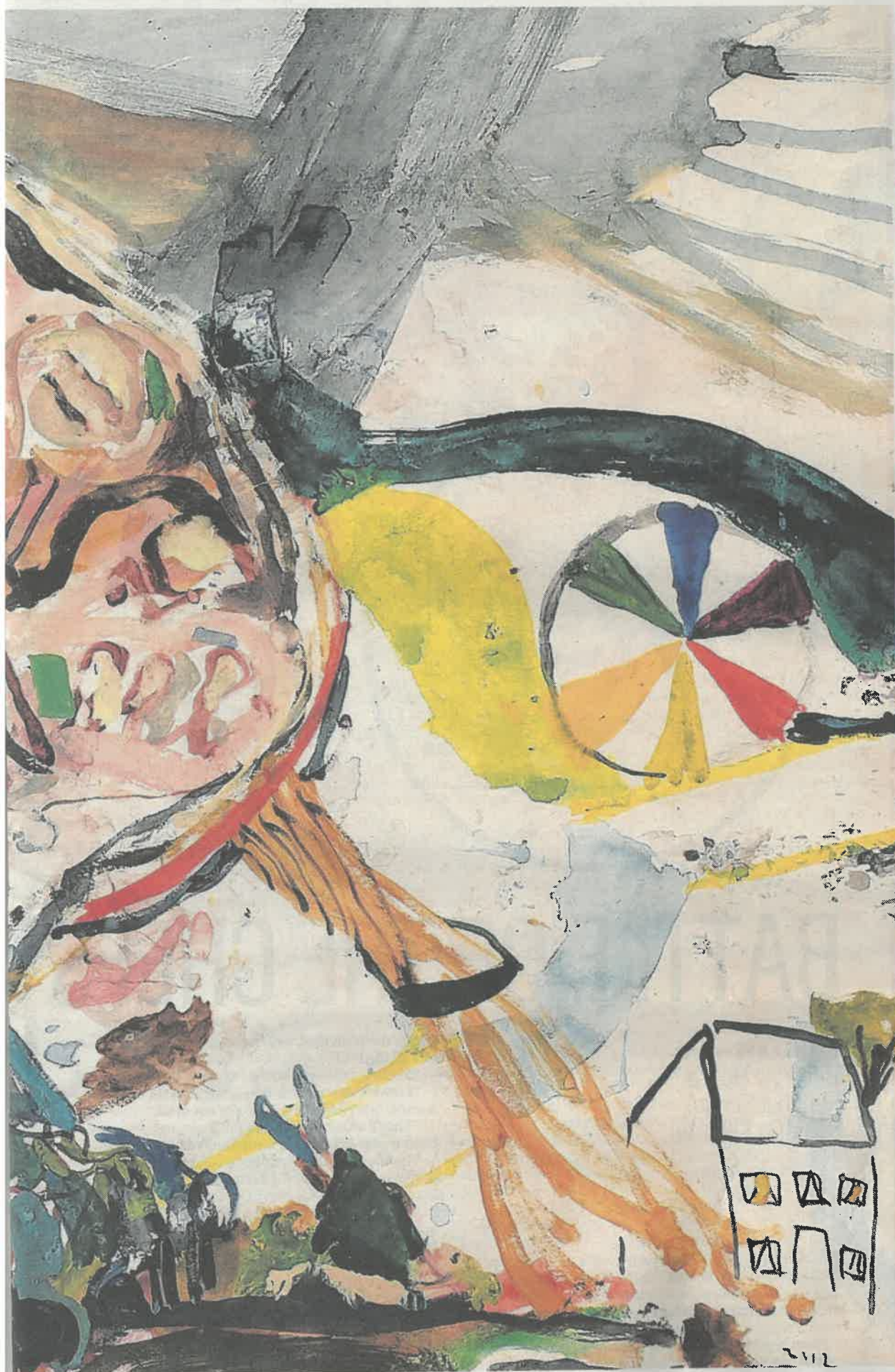
We are delighted to be publishing these new young voices with *The Irish Times*.



Seán Love
executive director
Fighting Words

■ The Fighting Words editorial committee that chose the stories for this selection are Laura Cassidy, Roddy Doyle, Hilary Fannin, Joanne Hayden, Brian Herron, Claire Kilroy, Paul Murray and Gerry Smyth.

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fightingwords.ie



there would have to be something black. Without this balance Abigail could die in a blazing fire or lose herself amid unfathomable darkness.

Abigail felt alone.

Abigail had friends. In fact, Abigail was a very popular girl, but Abigail still felt alone. All her friends were free; all her friends had no idea what tormented Abigail. Abigail couldn't talk to anybody about the biggest part of her life, staying ahead of the game.

Abigail came home, locked the door behind her and checked it seven times. Abigail then checked every window and door in her house, seven times, until she was sure she was safe.

Abigail watched TV until her mother arrived home. Her mother walked into the living room and, without pausing to take a breath, started to berate Abigail over leaving her toothpaste in the bathroom this morning. She told Abigail she was never to do it again. Just before her mother left the room she told Abigail she was useless.

Abigail was consumed by this comment. She kept telling herself over and over again, I'm not useless I'm not useless I'm not useless. Abigail was afraid

if she did not confirm within herself that she was not useless, then she would become useless.

Abigail muttered under her breath, "Mother, don't answer me if you can hear me." Abigail heard no answer. Abigail then told herself that her mother could hear her. Abigail then said, "Mother, don't answer me if I'm not useless." Abigail heard no answer. Abigail then told herself that her mother mustn't think she's useless after all.

This stopped Abigail from actually becoming useless.

Abigail was an intelligent girl. Deep down Abigail told herself she was living a lie. She knew that every time she walked into a room with her right foot forward rather than her left foot, so as to prevent discovering a spider in her closet, it was quite nonsensical.

Abigail knew that the colour purple not matched by the colour orange cannot cause suffocation, even if her asthmatic's friend's favourite colour was purple and least favourite colour was orange.

Abigail knew that reading everything twice, so as to cancel out the thoughts created by reading it and to

prevent it from becoming true, was really not necessary, and Abigail knew that she did not cause her mother and her father to break up, but Abigail was consumed by her mental games. Abigail could not escape. Abigail was a victim of her own mind.

Every day, Abigail would wake up and tell herself she will break free today. Every day upon waking, Abigail felt a rush of excitement when she thought of being free.

Abigail imagined all of the things she could do, all of the opportunities she wouldn't miss. Abigail would remember all of the times she had broken down, collapsing in a flood of uncontrollable tears, feeling that the entrapments of her mind were just too much for her. Abigail would channel all her energy into hoping, a hope for freedom.

One morning, Abigail broke the chain. Abigail wore unmatching socks, one blue, one grey. Abigail had conquered her worst enemy herself. Abigail was free.

Abigail was hit by a blue car while crossing a grey road on her way to school. She died instantly.



Seán Love
at Fighting
Words.
Photograph:
Brenda
Fitzsimons

FIGHTING WORDS
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SECOND CLASS

St Laurence O'Toole's CBS,
Seville Place, Dublin

ONE DAY, Harry the Fish Finger was hanging out on his favourite plate. He was eating some of the peas who were also on the plate. His best friend, Superegg, was relaxing in his egg cup. "Ah, man, this is great!" said Superegg.

"Yeah, it's brilliant," responded Harry. "But I really want to be a Gaelic football player."

"Grand," said Superegg. "I'll bring you out to see the Mighty Peas playing the Beans on Toast."

Harry the Fish Finger was reeeeeeeeeeally excited.

He put on his pea outfit – his green jersey, his pea-shaped flag, his pea hat and his green face paint and lipstick. On his way into Croquette Park (the

Crocker), he bought a horn to get the crowd going.

Little did Harry know, the ref of the match was a fork!

Harry had a massive fear of forks. He was scared of forks because they could pick him up, like they had picked up his ma and da, so he sat as far away from the ref as possible.

But he wanted to stay for the match because he loved Gaelic so much and his favourite team, the Mighty Peas, were in the final. He blew his horn and sang, "Olé, olé, olé, olé! The Mighty Peas will win today!"

The Peas were on three goals and 10 points.

Greenzer, the star player, was about to score another goal, but the ref blew his whistle. It was half-time.

During half-time, it started to rain salt and pepper, so everyone got flavoured. The pepper made most of the crowd sneeze, but Harry and Superegg were okay because they were used to pepper from hanging out on Harry's favourite plate.

Greenzer couldn't stop sneezing because he was allergic to pepper.

"Greenzer is gone! We don't stand a chance," said Superegg, sadly. "We'll have to forfeit."

"No!" said Harry. "The sun is coming out, with its smiley face. We'll be okay. We can win the cup!"

But Greenzer was still sneezing. He just couldn't stop. There was no way he could continue playing. He sneezed so hard that he blew the ball all the way up to where Harry and Superegg were sitting in the stands. Superegg caught the ball.

"Here, take the ball and go on to the pitch, Harry!" he said. "This is your chance! Don't worry about the ref, I'll distract him."

Harry was very excited and a bit nervous at the same time. He took a deep breath. "I'm going to fight this fear," he said to himself.

As he ran on to the pitch, the commentators said, "Ah, here's Greenzer's substitute. That's the tallest pea I've ever seen!"

Because of his green jersey and face paint, they thought he was a big pea, not a fish finger.

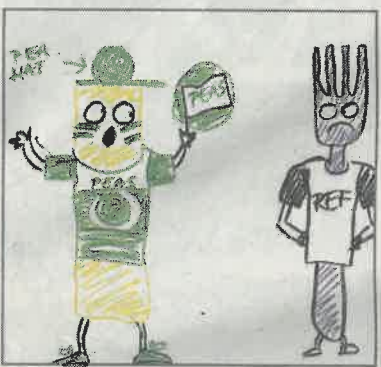
Suddenly Harry heard Superegg's voice over the loudspeaker. "Could the referee please come to the head office because he's won the lottery!"

"I won, I won, I won!" shouted the fork, as he ran off the pitch.

He didn't realise that Superegg had tricked him. With the fork gone, Harry was free to play the best game of his life. The Beans on Toast didn't play very well, and Harry scored the winning goal just as the full time whistle went. Superegg flew down to the pitch to congratulate him.

"That was a cracking goal!" he said. "I knew you could do it!"

The Mighty Peas fans all ran on to the pitch. "We won, we won, we won, we won!" they sang. "The Peas won, the Peas won!" They all cheered as Harry the Fish Finger lifted up the Broccoli Maguire cup.



Illustrations by Anna Carey

HARRY'S big FEAR



Illustrations by Scott Kelly

BATTLE OF THE CHEFS

SIXTH CLASS

Two-Mile House
National School,
Naas, Co Kildare

IN A RESTAURANT in Spain lived a mean chef called Jason. One day, he was licking his moustache and trying to get the ingredients right for a burger. Mickey the Minion, who had just come in from the banana shop, said, "Excuse me, Master."

Jason replied, "What now, Mickey? I'm busy!"

"I have something to tell you that you might be delighted about. It involves big money," Mickey told him.

Jason's eyes popped out at the mention of money. "There's a cookery competition in France called the Battle of the Chefs. If you win, you get 25 grand."

"What do you mean if? Of course I'll win!" replied Jason.

"But there is a big chef in France who might win," said Mickey.

Jason went to work on his infamous recipe, guinea-pig carbonara.

He tried to catch a guinea pig, but he could not, so he went to Vinnie's Guinea Pet World with Mickey the Minion.

While Jason was distracting Vinnie, Mickey stole a guinea pig and put it in his man bag. They ran back to the restaurant and packed their bags for Paris. Jason put the guinea pig in a pet cage, and they headed to the ferry port. Mickey the Minion had to carry all the bags.

During the trip, Mickey got seasick and threw up all over Jason. Jason got really angry and threw Mickey overboard. "See you in France, loser!" he yelled after him.

Jason then realised he had to hire a new minion, so he hired Vicki the Minion, who was half-price at the onboard Minion Shop.

The competition was taking place at the top of the Eiffel Tower in Paris. Who did they meet when they got there? Mickey! He had made it to France and was now working with Fred the French chef. Also competing were Marco the Italian chef, Yang the Chinese chef and

Paddy the Irish chef, who were all after the grand prize of €25,000.

"Mickey, I thought you were dead!" said Jason.

"I have a new master now," Mickey said in a French accent, "and I'm pretty sure I'm not dead."

"That's a shame. It doesn't matter anyway, you've been replaced by my new minion, Vicki," Jason said.

The Battle of the Chefs began. Jason started preparing his guinea-pig carbonara. Fred got to work on his snail and frog-leg burritos.

When Mickey was looking for the tortillas for the burritos, he came across the book called *Making Minions Seasick for Dummies* and suddenly realised it had all been a fix-up! Fred had made him sick so he could have him as his own minion and try to win the competition.

Fred ordered Mickey, "Get me the snails!"

Mickey replied, "On the way."

Mickey met Vicki on the way to the ingredients room, and he told her everything he had learned about Fred. Vicki told Mickey that she had discovered that Jason was a bad guy and wanted to get away from him. They both decided to get their own back. Mickey then replaced the snails in the recipe with slugs, and Vicki (who had been working with Fred previously) replaced the real guinea pig with a rubber dog toy in the shape of a guinea pig.

When Jason and Fred presented their dishes, the judges got sick after tasting the carbonara, vomiting all over Jason (again).

Next up was Fred. One of the judges commented, "Hmm, kinda squishy." Then then judges got sick all over Fred. Both Jason and Fred, however, were still convinced they were going to win the big prize.

The judges announced the winners. In third place was Yang the Chinese chef, second place went to Marco the Italian chef, and in first place – the crowd held its breath as they all waited – was Paddy the Irish chef with his brilliant Irish stew.

Paddy was delighted and started dancing a jig. Mickey and Vicki shouted, "Go on Ireland!" and started dancing as well.

Jason and Fred immediately started fighting. They were later arrested and spent 20 years in prison for fighting on live television.

Vicki looked at Mickey and said, "Let's get out of here. I'll take you to the best banana shop in Paris." They hopped in her banana mobile and rode off into the sunset.

Later on, they went to Ireland and started working for Paddy, who turned out to be a very decent guy. The Irish are known to treat their minions well!

The Cod-Father's revenge

FIFTH CLASS

Gaelscoil Bhaile Munna, Ballymun, Dublin

ONE DAY, OSCAR, the Free-Running Panda, and Luke, the Reggae Jamaican Jellyfish mon, went to school.

They didn't know that the Cod-Father was coming to school that day!

Now, the Cod-Father was a priest, an angry fish priest. What's more, the Cod-Father *hated* free-runners and Jamaican reggae music.

The only reason he hated free-running was because he was jealous of Oscar's mad skills.

Oscar turned to Luke and said, "I'm really looking forward to the club for Brigid, my girlfriend. It's our two-week anniversary."

"Ye mon," said Luke. "Mah band is totally playing tonight."

Suddenly, to Oscar's awful surprise, he saw Brigid walking down the road talking to the Cod-Father.

Brigid had a pile of paper in her hand.

"OMP" - Oh my panda - "that's my girlfriend and my sworn enemy!"

"Yah mon, whatcha gonna do?"

Oscar went over to the Cod-Father. "What are you doing with my girlfriend?" he asked.

"She likes me better," he said.

Luke stepped in to defend his friend. "She is Oscar's, bro'. What you gonna do?"



While they were talking, Brigid turned around and left with her pile of papers. "I have to get back to class," she said.

One of the sheets of paper blew over to them, and they saw that it was a flyer for Luke's gig that night. That gave the Cod-Father an idea.

"I'll tell you what I am going to do. Me. You. Dance-off. Tonight," said the Cod-Father.

"I'll be there. Seven o'clock sharp," said Oscar. "But we'll have to be quick. My bedtime is eight o'clock."

Oscar and Luke walked back to class. While they were walking back, Luke said to Oscar, "I'll have to train you."

They went to the gym to train. At the beginning, Oscar struggled. He was good at free-running but not at dancing. He kept practising. All afternoon. And eventually he became deadly at dancing.

Later that day, they got ready for the club. Luke put on a tuxedo, so he

would look good when his band was playing. Oscar put on his best free-running gear: a panda tracksuit, a red top and blue trousers. He also put on a pandana.

They arrived at the club. "Nice penguin suit," said the Cod-Father to Luke.

The Cod-Father had his best robe on. "Nice dressing gown," said Luke. "Did you borrow that from your granny?"

"Ha ha ha," said the Cod-Father. "Let's get started!"

They took their places. Just before the music started playing, Luke told them he had found a judge. They looked over and saw Simon Cow tied up.

"Mooooo. Let's get started," he said.

Oscar went first, and started with the baby freeze.

"Oscar has the mooooooves," said Simon Cow.

The Cod-Father came back with the

Worm. "Moove off the stage," said Simon Cow, who did not like the Worm.

Then Oscar the Panda did a belly dance, followed by the Mars Walk. Simon was impressed.

Next, the Cod-Father started the Milk the Cow move. Simon did not look happy. He sat with an angry look on his face and shook his head. "This is udder nonsense," he muttered.

As he was trying to master the Milk the Cow move, the Cod-Father's skin started to change colour, and his scales started to crack. He had forgotten that he needed to hydrate every hour.

Oscar started to laugh and finished the dance off with the Shuffle and Happy Feet. "Epic fail," he shouted at the Cod-Father.

Oscar saw Brigid cheering for him. The Cod-Father was on the ground wheezing.

Brigid walked over to Oscar. "Can you please save him?" she asked.

"Why should I help my enemy?"

Just as Oscar was walking over to the Cod-Father with a glass of water, the Cod-Father changed into a wrinkled old man.

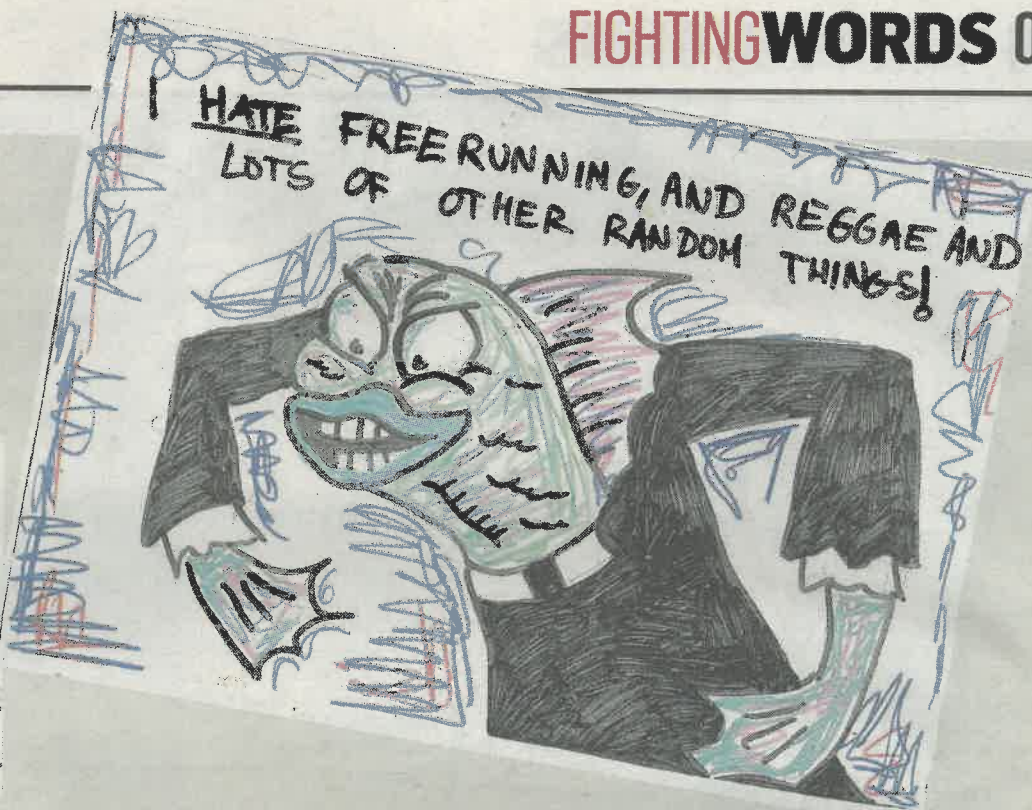
Suddenly, Animal Control burst into the club. The Cod-Father was the only one who escaped, now that he was a man. He didn't realise that Brigid had been hiding in the toilets.

"Since Oscar tried to save my life, I will try and rescue him," said the Cod-Father.

The Cod-Father jumped in front of the Animal Control van. While they were distracted, Brigid opened the doors at the back and rescued everyone.

"Quick, moooooove," said Simon Cow. "We don't want to get caught again. And, by the way, Oscar has the mooooooves, so he won the dance-off."

Oscar was happy. He had won the dance-off and was now friends with the Cod-Father. He wasn't afraid of him any more. And he would make it home in time for bed!



Illustrations by Carol Walsh

ONCE UPON A TIME, there was a small, normal baby called Jojo. One day Jojo's mother, Mrs Angry McGuigan, the well-known witch, sat Jojo down and said, "You see this cupcake here? Don't ever eat it, ever."

Before the words were out of her mouth, Jojo leaped on the cupcake and stuffed it into his mouth. Mrs McGuigan shouted, "NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOH!"

Suddenly, Jojo started to grow. He grew to the size of the school and burst through the walls of his house. Because he was holding his rattle, the rattle grew as well. Five thousand gardai turned up and tried to capture him. They shouted at him, "Freeze!"

"Ga ga ga ga," said Jojo and knocked them all over with the rattle. Then he ran away, knocking over buildings that were in his path.

Meanwhile, down at the sea, Millie the Mermaid and her pet dolphin, Coco, were looking for coconuts. They swam to the shore, and when they got out of the water Millie suddenly grew a human body and Coco turned into a sparkly and shiny red BMW.

"This is a nightmare," Millie said. "There are no coconuts on this beach."

"We could check that mountain over there," said Coco.

Together they began to climb the mountain. But little did they know it wasn't a real mountain. It was Jojo - asleep!

When Jojo saw Millie and Coco, he was frightened and started crying. His mouth opened and Millie and Coco fell into it! They managed to grab hold of his one tooth, but the tooth was too slippery because he had been drinking milk (in his dreams). They fell down again but managed to grab hold of his tonsil. It was also too slippery, so they fell into his stomach!

"What are we going to do now?" Millie asked Coco. Before he could reply, a squeaky voice rang out. "Fee fi fo fum! Who dares enter my house?"

Millie and Coco screamed. Coco said, "Sorry mister whatever-your-name is! We didn't know it was your house!"

"And you broke my favourite vase!" the squeaky voice complained. "And my name isn't mister whatever. It is Mr Bean! You've probably heard of me..."

Millie said, "Well, I definitely haven't."

And then a jelly snake slithered into view. He

was multicoloured with black eyes.

He said, "But I'm always on the television! Mrs Angry McGuigan uses me on her magic cooking programme."

"What have you done on it?" asked Millie.

"I helped Mrs Angry McGuigan make magic cakes that could turn people into giants. Unfortunately, one day I accidentally got trapped in one of the cakes. Before I could get out, this small, bald thing, with one tooth, who could only say 'Ga ga', ate the *whole* thing. Me included!"

"That small bald thing is a baby," said Coco.

"More importantly," said Millie, "how are we gonna get out of here?"

Meanwhile, Mrs Angry McGuigan had tracked down Jojo to the beach. She knew she had to get Jojo back to his normal size before the gardai found him.

Luckily, she had a plan. She quickly made a new cupcake with coconuts and a couple of strands of Rapunzel's hair, and loads of gluten. She put the cake on the ground beside him, and said, "Now, whatever you do, don't eat this cake!"

"Ga ga," said Jojo, and ate the cake again!

Instantly, he started to shrink.

"Oh my God, he's shrinking!" shouted Mr Bean. "We need to get out of here!"

They all jumped into Coco the BMW and they drove back up towards Jojo's mouth.

Unfortunately, Jojo had just drank a tonne of seawater to help the cake go down. Luckily, Coco was able to turn back into a dolphin, and Millie into a mermaid. They swam to freedom, with Mr Bean slithering behind them. They leaped from his mouth just as Jojo shrank back to his normal size.

"That was the craziest thing that ever happened to us," said Coco. "What will we do now?"

"We still haven't found any coconuts," said Millie.

"Don't worry," said Mrs Angry McGuigan. "I have some coconuts in my bag." She handed them out, and they stuffed them in their mouths happily. Unfortunately, these were magic coconuts (she was a witch, after all) and they turned into leprechauns.

"This is a nightmare!" said Millie.

"If we are leprechauns," said Coco, "where's our pot of gold?"

And they set off together to find it.

THE BABY WHO GREW

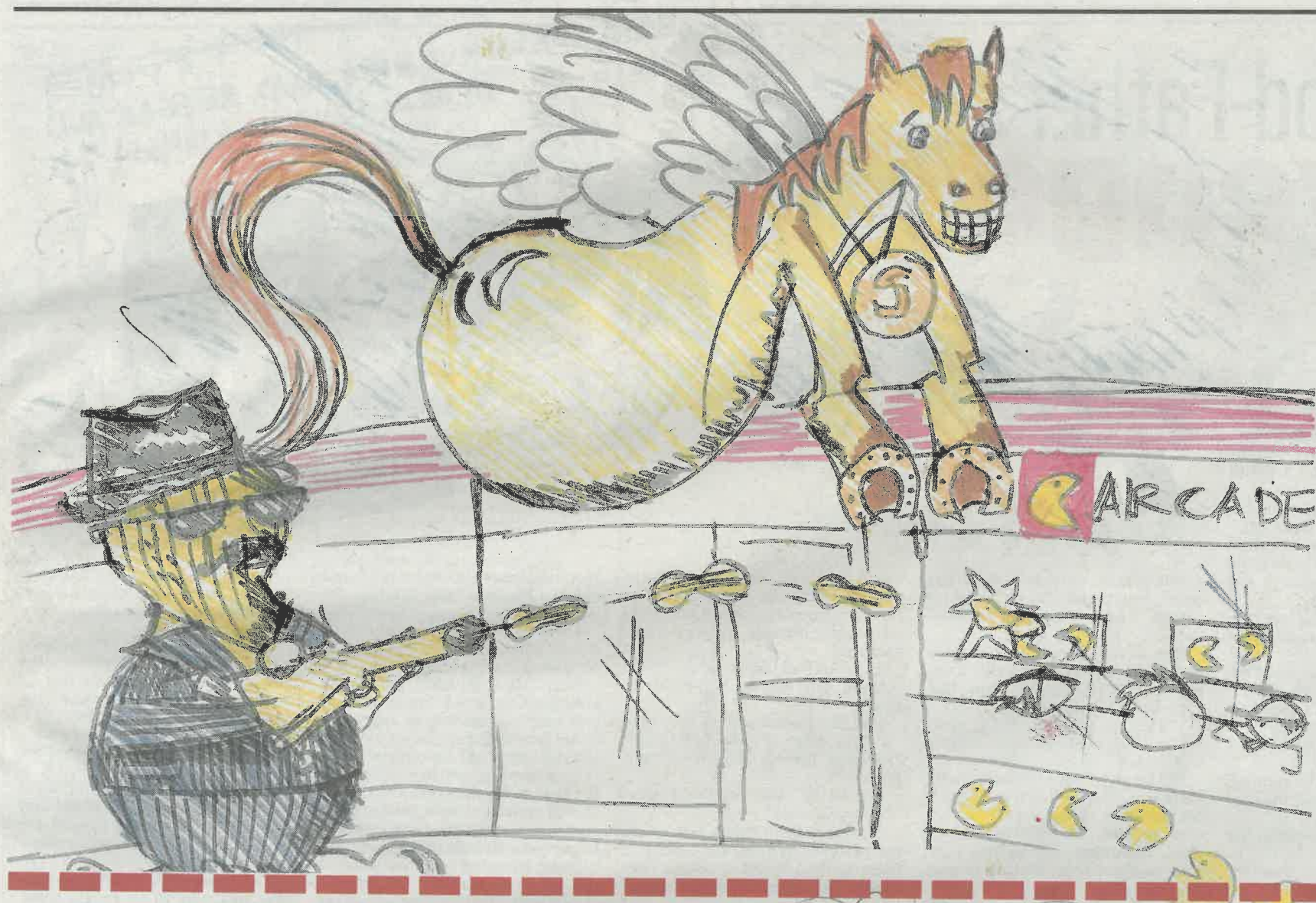


THIRD CLASS

St Enda's National School, Whitefriar Street, Dublin



Illustrations by Katie Bartrand



THE ADVENTURES OF GANGSTA PEANUT AND 2-LEGZ!



Illustrations by Angela Finn

ONE DAY, Gangsta Peanut was walking down the road when he saw a group of kids playing Pac-Man games. He did not like this one bit.

Gangsta Peanut ran into the arcade and destroyed all the Pac-Man games and bumped into Stanley the horse. Stanley was also known as 2-Legz.

"Yo, 2-Legz! I heard you got beef with Pac-Man," said Gangsta Peanut as he popped a peanut in the last machine.

"Heck yeah! I was playing Pac-Man so much that I lost my legs!" said Stanley, destroying the arcade with his mutated ear wax from his wand.

"Aiiight then, let me break it down for you like this," said Gangsta Peanut. He started to rap.

"Let's make a pact to defeat Pac-Man," said Gangsta Peanut.

He started to rap: "It's me and Stan We've got the master plan, in Pacmanistan. We're gonna defeat him like he don't know where he's been!"

"Heck yeah, let's roll!" said 2-Legz.

"What's that? A catchphrase or somethin'?" said Gangsta Peanut.

"Heck yeah!" said 2-Legz.

Then they hopped in the Lamborghini and raced off to defeat Pac-Man.

As the car hit 200 miles an hour on the motorway, 2-Legz said, "Oh, sporty!" Just then, a snail wearing a Pac-man T-shirt over his shell overtook them on a Harley motorbike.

"Let's get him!" said Gangsta Peanut.

"Heck yeah!" said 2-Legz.

Gangsta Peanut shot out the motorbike's tyre with a peanut, and he skidded off the road into a ditch.

The poor snail was left behind with no shell.

"Let's get back on the road!" said Gangsta Peanut.

"I want revenge!" said the snail, and he vowed to track them down. He stuck his thumb out to hitch a ride.

Meanwhile, Gangsta Peanut and 2-Legz were back on the road.

"Do you wanna hear my new rap?" asked Gangsta Peanut.

"Heck yeah!" said 2-Legz.

Gangsta Peanut rapped: "Yeah, okay, yo man, this is gonna be so cool, man. We gonna be bumpin', man. Helping the boys out. This is how we do it. You feelin' me, dawg?"

"Heck yeah, let's roll!" said 2-Legz. Then he said, "Are we there yet?"

"No," Gangsta Peanut told him.

For the rest of the trip, every 20 minutes 2-Legz would ask, "Are we there yet?" and Gangsta Peanut would answer "No."

As they were driving, they passed by a McDonald's. They stopped off to get a shamrock shake. Michael D Higgins was working the drive-thru.

"Good man! How come you're taking Irish milkshakes?" asked Michael.

"To represent the Irish," said

Gangsta Peanut.

"Good man yourself!" said Michael D Higgins as they drove off.

Finally, 2-Legz and Gangsta Peanut arrived in Pacmanistan. They were bursting to find Pac-Man.

"We'll find Pac-Man as soon as we've used the toilet," said Gangsta Peanut.

"Good idea. Heck yeah!" said 2-Legz.

Later, as they were cruising the streets of Pac City, they saw a hobo.

They stopped to ask him, "Do you know where Pac-Man is?"

The hobo said, "I'll share the information if you share a dollar with me." Gangsta Peanut gave him a dollar, and the hobo told him that he would find Pac-Man in the Pac Palace.

They went to the Pac Palace and saw Pac-Man there, surrounded by mini Pac-Men bodyguards and his friend, the rapper 25 Cent.

The bodyguards made Gangsta Peanut and 2-Legs nervous.

"Maybe we better go in the back way," said 2-Legz. "Keep a low profile."

They eventually got into the palace, and Pac-Man and his minions saw them.

"Hey, how did you get in here?" said Pac-Man.

"The back way!" said 2-Legz.

"Uh, uh, uh..." stammered Gangsta Peanut, when he spotted 25 Cent. He said, "You're my idol!"

"Who, me?" said Pac-Man.

"Get outta the way, fool," said Gangsta Peanut, walking over to 25 Cent.

"Yo, man, you wanna rap battle?" All the bodyguard minions crowded around them to watch them rap.

"Stanley, give the man a beat!" said Gangsta Peanut to 2-Legz.

"Hee-haw, hee-haw," said 2-Legz. 25 Cent started: "Yo, you so smelly, you need a brand new telly, you look like a washer cause you can't get a wash, you go to your mamma, wish wash wash!"

"No, man, you stink! That was lame!" said Gangsta Peanut. "It's my turn now. This is my hit," and he rapped about his journey.

"I saw a snail, I blew him off the rails, I broke his nail. I went to Mackey D's and I got some green peas, I put them in my shake and I fell into a lake."

Gangsta Peanut won the rap battle. He was crowned the King of Rap and was made ruler of Pacmanistan.

2-Legz was made the prince.

Pac-Man was expelled from Pacmanistan. The country was renamed GangstaMun and its capital was Gangsta Nut City.

Gangsta Peanut and 2-Legz thought that all was well and happily ever after. What they didn't know was that Pac-Man had teamed up with the snail and they were now plotting their own revenge. The battle would now continue...

FOURTH AND SIXTH CLASS

Virgin Mary Boys' National School, Ballymun, Dublin

Photograph: James Schepel/Getty Images

The Little Girl

Their words drip with hate
And she's lost in her despair
Of long dark roads and closed gates
They taunt "Catch me if you dare"
"Hey little girl," some of them say
"Don't you know you're doing fine"
But the little girl is running laps
And now she's lost in time.

The moment is black velvet
Dark and deep but true,
Bruises; coal and ebony,
All wrapped up in sky blue
But it is there, beneath it all
And she sees that they know
And they wrench her up, by her heart
Only to push her below

Their words of murky crystal
Are melting to the grounds
And she is stronger now
Without their blackened sounds
She calls them out, one by one,
By the scruff of their lies
Can you see her now, the little girl?
Unbound from her ties?

Hey little girl, you little girl
Don't you know you're doing fine?
The beat of life is strong in you
Without that boundary line.
She walks now, the little girl,
With their names in her fists,
And knowledge in her stride.
his taste upon her lips.

The Descent

Words spin her around and around
Until a smile graces her lips.
Gone are the days of pearl-drop tears,
Frayed ribbons and inked fingertips.

The sky a blurred haze as she spins
Its masses of silk and cotton,
Blush pink and amber and whisper
Of secrets long forgotten

But soon blotched lives would all amend
Loveliness would plummet and sprawl
Kin bound to earth by the heavens
The sky would drop and bury them all

KELLY O'BRIEN

is 16 and attends Portmarnock
Community College, Co Dublin

Stalker

ON THE STREETS

‘WHAT’S HE LOOKING at sitting in Tesco?” says Kelly. Some man walks by and stares at me, Kelly and Katie. We get so paranoid when people look at us.

Well, anyways, Katie asks me and Kelly to go to town with her to get her ma some stuff, so we go. Waiting at the bus stop and the man we saw at Tesco walks up and stands beside us and I start to get a bit scared because I get real scared when I think of kidnappers and it popped into my head.

The bus comes and I give Katie my money to pay to get me on the bus. I rush upstairs in a sweat and run down the back of the bus panicking. Katie and Kelly walk up laughing at me. “What you laughing at?” I shout.

“You,” they laugh back. “That man isn’t getting on this bus. You just have to control your fears.”

A relief came on me. I look down at him and he follows the bus with his eyes, and I start laughing.

Walking down Parnell Street, I turn around and see that man again. I go into a panic and rush away. Katie and Kelly follow me and sit me on a step. “What’s wrong with you?” asks Kelly.

“I’m after seeing that man again,” I reply in a panic.

“Well, calm the hell down, you’re after giving us such a fright, like take a chill pill.”

I calm down and we go into loads of shops; but we don’t find what Katie’s ma wanted. So I say, “Let’s go to O’Connell Street,” so we head there.

We’re walking into Penneys on O’Connell Street and Katie has to go and get her ma’s stuff. I’m looking at a Justin Bieber top and I turn around and Kelly and Katie are gone.

I go looking for them and I see that man who we saw in Tesco and Parnell Street, and I get all panicky and rush the other way and bump into Kelly and she asks me, “Where’s Katie?”

“I don’t know – I thought she was with you,” I reply.

“Well does it look like she’s with me? So go looking for her,” I tell Kelly.

“I saw that man again,” she flips.

“I don’t care if you saw that man, shut the hell up about him, just please shut up,” I say.

We go looking for Katie and we can’t find her, so we ring her ma and we tell her, and she comes in the next five minutes, and we go looking for her and we check everywhere. Katie’s ma says, “Well, we’re not going to find her with all of us together, so let’s split up.”

We split up and I go and check all the clothes shops and I still cannot find her. I have to go to the toilet, so I go to McDonald’s and I hear crying from one of the cubicles. I call and ask, “Are you okay?” and I get no reply, but I don’t know who it is and the doors open a bit and I look in and it’s Katie.

I run over and help her up and ring her ma and I look at her and ask her, “What’s happened?” Her clothes are all ripped up and she’s roaring crying. We’re just standing there and we hear a man coming into the girls’ bathroom and we’re standing there really still and not moving a muscle, and he pushes our door open and it’s that man we saw.

I push him out of the way and me and Katie run. He runs after us and we run into Penneys and hide. He doesn’t find us and Katie starts roaring crying, saying, “He tried to attack me.”

I ring her ma and tell her to come to Penneys. I hang up and ask Katie does she want an ambulance and she doesn’t reply, so we walk towards the door and we see Katie’s ma and she takes us home and rings an ambulance for Katie and rings the police.

They tell the police everything and they go looking for the stalker and the ambulance comes and Katie goes off in it. I go home to bed, trying to get my head sorted, and I keep getting flashbacks of the stalker and I walk downstairs and I feel weak and I faint and end up in the hospital with Katie.

BERNICE BOYD

is 13 and a second-year student at St Michael’s Holy Faith Secondary School in Finglas, Dublin

THE GOLDEN SEED

JACK MANNING

is 14 and in second year at Ard Scoil Rís, Griffith Avenue, Dublin

IT WAS JUST a normal day for Kevin McBride, an 18-year-old man living in Dublin. It was planned that he and his son, Jordan, would go exploring in the forest. Jordan was going to be four years old in two weeks’ time, and he had already developed an interest in animals and their behaviour. He especially liked dogs, and he hoped to catch sight of a fox in the forest for the first time today.

Kevin was only recently getting over the loss of his wife, Sharon, who died a year before. It was a horrifying time for him and Jordan. Kevin needed counselling and Jordan needed to be told countless times that everything would be okay. Less than a month later and Kevin was back in work and Jordan in playschool.

The friendly lady who ran the playschool agreed to mind Jordan while Kevin was at work, and she had expressed her condolences numerous times. But Kevin’s boss was flexible and he allowed Kevin to work from home on his computer. Jordan was sad to see his minder go, but was promptly happy again to be with his dad. Nine months later and they are still struggling with day-to-day life.

Kevin awoke prematurely with Jordan jumping up and down on his bed yelling, “Let’s go! Let’s go see a fox! Let’s go!” “One minute, Jordan,” Kevin replied, almost sounding intoxicated. “Dad didn’t get much sleep last night.”

“But you said half twelve! You promised!” Jordan provoked.

“I know, son, just give me a couple . . . a couple . . .” Kevin trailed off as he rolled over. “Oh fine then! I will be waiting downstairs in the hallway. Hmph!” Jordan said bravely.

Kevin had been working all night on a very important project that could possibly acquire him the promotion of his life. Kevin was currently working for an abominably low salary with which he could barely put food on the table. He eventually got up to find Jordan sitting at the door with a bag on his back.

“What’s in the bag?” Kevin asked out of curiosity.

“All sorts of stuff! Let’s go,” replied Jordan. And off they went to the forest.

The journey took about an hour, and Jordan eagerly rushed out of the car once they arrived.

“Now remember to always stay with me, even if you do spot a fox,” Kevin warned.

But before long, Jordan was rushing about, listening to the sounds of the birds and laughing at the sight of the squirrels. Kevin walked along, listening to the crunch of the leaves as he stepped.

He looked down for just a moment, and that’s when he saw it. A shiny golden seed, which looked so flawless that it seemed it had been untouched for centuries. He stared at it for a couple of minutes, before deciding he would take it. From then on, Kevin just speculated as to what it could be, and what he should do with it. Amid all of these thoughts he heard Jordan scream in delight.

“A fox! A fox at last!” he yelled.

“Hush! You’ll scare it off,” Kevin advised.

But sure enough, the fox had been and gone in a matter of seconds. Jordan was disappointed it didn’t last long but happy he at least caught a glance of one. Kevin’s mind, however, was focused on something completely different.

Kevin was lying in his bed, staring at the



golden seed, when he decided to plant it. He was considering handing it into a museum but thought that it was probably very valuable. He jogged out to his back garden where he planted the seed in the ground.

After four days, he already noticed a little sapling growing where he had planted the seed. It seemed to be a tree, which would take very long to grow fully. But it seemed to be growing at some speed. He was fascinated at this. He still decided to keep it to himself, as he predicted it could bring him great fortune. Two weeks passed and it was already a small tree. He was completely astonished as to what it looked like. The branches were golden and there were no leaves.

Instead, there were €50 notes. Kevin thought he was dreaming as it seemed so ridiculously lucky. He examined the small tree carefully, before picking off one of the mint-condition notes. He held it up to the sun, and sure enough, it was real. He laughed hysterically and danced around, waving the cash in the air. He picked all of the notes, which were in abundance, off the tree. The money amounted to €450!

The next day his boss called him to say that he couldn’t give him the promotion. “Well, I quit anyway!” he replied before laughing again in delight. The cash had already grown back within a week, but this time there was more as the tree had grown even bigger. He picked it all before deciding to hide the tree in something so no one would find out, not even Jordan.

He knew he would have to tell him eventually, though. In the meantime, he would think about what he will do with all of the money, which was now over €1,500.

He decided he would give one quarter of every sum of money which grew on the tree

to charity, put a half into his savings account, and use the remaining quarter to keep in his house and for luxury goods. He felt a jolt of excitement when he thought of a BMW and a big house.

It was a long time since he had felt this happy. The thought of being able to buy whatever he wanted felt exhilarating. The next day, while Jordan was in playschool, Kevin went on a spending spree. He purchased the most expensive computer and designer clothes he could find.

Two weeks later, the tree was fully grown and he had purchased well over €100,000 worth of stuff. Now that it was so big and the notes were growing back every day, he had a renewable income of €20,000 a day.

The tree was now too big to cover completely with the tent he was using, so he just closed the blinds whenever visitors came over. As a result he had to tell Jordan. Kevin promised he would buy him the life-sized stuffed fox that he always wanted in return for Jordan not telling anybody about the tree.

“But why not, Dad?” Jordan asked.

“Because people would try to take it away if they discovered it existed,” Kevin replied. This was good enough for him.

Six months passed and Kevin was now living everybody’s dream. He had his BMW, flat-screen televisions in every room, and he completely modernised his house. People were starting to get suspicious of this sudden fortune. His next-door neighbour, David, knocked on the mahogany door.

“Just a second!” Kevin yelled while closing his blinds. He opened the door.

“Hi, Kev,” smiled David.

“Hello, come in!” replied Kevin reluctantly.

“You’ve done so much to the place. Get the promotion of your dreams?” questioned David.

“Actually, yes,” lied Kevin.

David looked around, from the 50-inch plasma to the beautiful original artwork of Renaissance painters.

“Can I tempt you with a coffee?” asked Kevin.

“No, no. I’m in quite the hurry. I better be going. Goodbye!” David said, swiftly closing the front door.

That was odd, Kevin thought to himself.

Later that night, Kevin was lying in his bed. He thought about all of his things. He then realised that he hadn’t even thought about his wife in the last half a year. He suddenly felt incredibly guilty and selfish. “What have I done?” Kevin said aloud. “I’ve allowed materialistic goods to overcome me!” he said angrily.

In his rage, he ran down the stairs and grabbed a box of matches on his way out to the tree. It was nearing midnight. There were strong winds, but he was determined to fulfil what he was planning. He lit a match and threw it at the base of the tree. Within minutes, all the money in the world was engulfed in flames. The smoke blocked out the hazy full moon.

He laughed at the tree as it burned to the ground. Amid all the smoke, Kevin felt a strange sense of relief. As he turned his back on the flames, he remembered the old saying his mother used to tell him. “The best things in life are free,” he said to himself, smiling.

As Kevin was settling back into bed, happier than ever before, something unbeknown to him was happening. Lifted out of the ever-rising flames was a golden seed. The wind carried it into the distant shimmering moonlight, and it landed softly on the forest floor, glistening, ready for the next lucky adventurer to stumble upon it.

How to write a masterpiece



SINÉAD CALLANAN
is 14 and lives in
Castletroy, Co Limerick

Illustration by Ruth O'Donnell

'H EY, CIARA, I'm writing a story for this magazine, *Fighting Words*, but I don't know what to do. Any ideas?"

"Umm, I don't know. Write something you know about, or has happened to you, I guess, so it's realistic."

"I suppose, but I want it to be exciting, not just everyday sort of stuff."

"If you can't think of anything yet, just write down whatever comes into your head."

"But my head is filled with loads of random stuff. If I think of one thing that makes me think of 10 others, and each of those 10 makes me think of 10 more, and it just goes on and on and on, like a pyramid of thought."

"Are you writing now?"

"Yes."

"Well, what are you writing?"

"Our conversation."

"What? Our conversation? Give it over, then."

"Here you go . . . Well, what do you think?"

"What's all that in the middle about a pyramid of thought or something? I'm sure you never said that."

"Oh that's a 'purple passage'. My English teacher said it's like a paragraph in a story that has nothing to do with the actual story."

Shakespeare did them all the time."

"He did not! Maybe once. Why'd you put it in, anyway?"

"If this is going to be a good story, it's certainly got to have a purple passage. Pfft, Ciara, if it's good enough for Shakespeare, it should be good enough for you."

"Sinéad, why are you even writing this down?"

"Well, what if I get a really good idea from it, but then I forget it by the time I'm ready to use it? Hmmm, what would happen then? I'd be back to square one, wouldn't I? And we'd have to have this whole conversation again, wouldn't we? Or is that what you want? Eh, Ciara, do you want your only sister to be a failure, hmmm? Is that what you want?"

"You're not my only sister. What about Clodagh?"

"What about Clodagh? Oh, fine. I'm your only *twin* sister. Happy?"

"And, no, you're right, I definitely don't want to have this conversation again. This one is bad enough, thank you very much."

"Huh! That's the thanks I get for trying to make this family a success. I don't know what the world is coming to when people don't even want to help their own family!"

"Bloody hell, Sinéad! You're impossible! I'm going upstairs, before you try to guilt me any more."

"Come on! Stay! I'm just worked up is all. Poetic licence and that."

"I'm not sure."

"I'll make you tea."

"Yeah, okay then."

"Right, you type while I make the tea."

"Do I have to write down everything?"

"Yes."

"Fine. Who's your main character?"

"Not sure yet. I was thinking about

having a Widda Rafferty, though."

"A Widow Rafferty? Why?"

"No, a Widd-a Rafferty. Patricia Lynch always had one, and her books are really popular."

"I'm not sure she did . . ."

"She did, actually. And, anyway, it's my story, so I can put in whoever I want."

"Oh all right. Don't blame me if they don't like it. There, the kettle's nearly boiled. You'd better get the cups out."

"What do you take in your tea again?"

"You know what I take in my tea, eejit."

"Yeah, but it'll make the story more realistic if I ask you. So, what do you take in your tea?"

"Oh fine, I'll play along. Two sugars, a good bit of milk. Why does it matter, though: it's not like you're entering this conversation into a competition, right?"

"Well . . ."

"Sinéad, you're not entering our conversation, right? You're not, are you?"

"I was just thinking . . . You know . . . Maybe . . ."

"Sinéad, I'm not sure that's a good idea."

"Why not? It's a pretty original idea. There's your tea. Ginger nuts or Jammie Dodgers? Are you still writing this down?"

"I'll have a Jammie Dodger, please. And, yes, I'm still taking this down. But this isn't exactly what I'd call an original idea."

"And why not?"

"Well, what about that thing at the start, the purple path or something? You stole that from Shakespeare."

"The purple passage, actually. But that doesn't count, cos he's been dead for about 400 years. Plus, I gave him the credits."

"Well, what about the Widda Rafferty? You took her from Patricia Lynch. She died only about 40 years ago. I'm not sure how long copyright lasts, but I think it's 60 years after the person dies."

"No need to be such a downer, Ciars."

"Plus, this isn't even a story: it's a play. Not even a play, really. Just a conversation. Not even exciting."

"That really hurts, Ciara. Not the sort of thing a sister says."

"Kill me now . . ."

"That's a great idea! Anne Shirley always said that there should be a death in a good story. It'd be perfect if you died."

"Are you insane? I'm not dying just so you can get a story in a magazine."

"You won't actually die. We'll just put in that you did. Who are we to argue with Anne of Green Gables?"

"She's a fictional character! And she said later that that was just silly."

"But Ciara . . . Please."

"No. And that's final. I'm not dying in your story. I don't care what you say. Just no."

"Wow. You're so unreasonable sometimes. Pffft, kids these days."

"Leave it alone, Sinéad. I'm older than you . . ."

"Only by about three minutes."

"So you can't exactly say, 'Kids these days'. I'm not sure about saying 'pffft' either, because it doesn't make sense to read."

"James Joyce did it."

"What? James Joyce never said pffft."

"Well, maybe not pffft exactly, but he wrote sounds with words all the time."

"Sinéad, you have not read *Ulysses*. No way you have."

"Well, maybe not fully, but I've seen a programme."

"Doesn't count. Anyway, you're *not* James Joyce."

"What gave me away?"

"Oh, don't be so sarcastic with me. Sarcasm is the lowest form of wit."

"You would know . . ."

"There you go again! I think we should end this story-conversation-play, whatever this is, soon, before it gets worse."

"Hey! It's not that bad. Maybe if you were a better conversationalist . . ."

"You're not blaming this one on me."

"Anyway. It's not that bad. In fact, I think it's quite good."

"It's not exactly a masterpiece."

"Well, why not? It's got all the makings of one: Shakespeare, Patricia Lynch, James Joyce, Anne of Green Gables, me . . ."

"Oh, Sinéad, get over yourself."

"Well, those are fighting words!"

"What? No they're not."

"Yeah, but that doesn't really matter. Don't you get it? Cos the story's for *Fighting Words* magazine! Get it?"

"Oh, right. Well, moving on . . . What are you going to call it?"

"I was thinking of bringing the whole 'masterpiece' thing in to it."

"Please, no . . ."

"Yeah, well, what about just *A Masterpiece*?"

"Bit pretentious."

"So is saying 'pretentious'."

"I guess, but still, it makes you sound cocky. Call it *A Masterpiece* if you want, but I don't think you should."

"Well, what do you think I should call it then, if you're so great?"

"You should make a joke of it. Cleverly funny, you know?"

"So I should call it what?"

"I think you should call it *How to Write a Masterpiece*."

Butterfly

I WAS SEVEN the first time I saw a butterfly. Jane had left the window open a crack; I think it was by accident. The beam of light that came from the window hit a spot on the wooden floor not too far from where I lay, and then I saw it, fluttering, like paper in the wind. Brown, I think it was. It landed in my outstretched hand, maybe by chance, I don't know. It tickled, so I sat up to examine it more closely. The form that lay before me, on closer look, was disappointing. I pulled its wings off, bit by bit, and lay back, the pieces still in my hands.

The next time I saw one was nine years later. A little white one flew over Jordan's shoulder as he walked away from me. I fired a shot at it absently, than fired three at Jordan's back, where they formed a neat triangle. I was impressed with myself.

July 17th, 2003, the first day of my trial. It would continue for 22 days. It's strange, the way most people don't think shooting people in the back and ripping the skin off their hands, then carving your initials into the napes of their necks is funny. The price one must pay for having a misunderstood sense of humour.

Now I stare at the ceiling. The cell is too hot, but not hot enough for me to try to do anything about it. My last meal sits on the small table by the door, untouched. I had asked for a pocket watch, a knife and a bowl of pasta. I got the pasta.

The guard who is leaning against the corner of my cell tells me I have about half an hour left. The heat rapidly becomes unbearable.

- Can I take my suit off?

- No.

- Open the window then

He opens it for me. I knew he would. He is quite nice. Quite. A gentle breeze blows in, and I sit up, letting the fresh air waft around me. I close my eyes. Maybe this would be the last time I would ever feel something, something other than the pinch of the lethal injection which would spill poison into my system and lead me into a deep, permanent sleep. I sigh. I am not afraid; he told me not to be. The good die young, he told me.

Maybe that's what he was thinking when he beat my mom and Jane to death, before slicing them limb from limb and burying them under my room. The good die young. Jane was just 10 years old.

Him. My father. I used to think I was special; that's why he kept me around. But it was because he knew I was just like him. Though he, of course, would never get his punishment.

A single tear rolls down my cheek. I am realising a bit too late that I don't really want to die. But time ticks on, and in a matter of minutes now I would walk the long mile to the execution room. But for now I wait.

I feel a tickle on my right arm and open one eye. A beautiful blue butterfly, mission blue. I hold my arm up to examine it closely. I can feel its fear, its vulnerability. I feel what it feels... In a way.

The door of my cell swings open, and three guards walk in. I sit motionless for a moment, until a guard beckons me to stand. I stand, and walk slowly to the window. I lift my cuffed hands, and blow on the butterfly gently. It flutters out the window. I feel its relief, and I hope good things for it.

I hope good things for something.

Now I am ready.

AISHLING K MCWALTER

is 15, lives in Garrymore, Co Mayo, and is a transition-year student at Mount St Michael, Claremorris. Her interests are art, politics, writing, reading, knitting and fashion



Forgotten

MAIRÉAD REDMOND is 16 and is from Athy, Co Kildare. She goes to Coláiste Lorcáin in Castledermot



Photograph: Martial Colomb/Getty

BEHIND THEM, the sky shifts uneasily from dawn to day, the city woken from a fitful sleep. Hot tea tears at their throats and burns in their bellies; they watch as steam from the mugs punctures the icy air and disappears.

"A'right boys. Back to work."

Mick's booming drawl crumbles the silence and the men stand and stretch and return to the roads.

These are old men, tired and grey enough that the city around them remains oblivious of their passing lives, takes no notice when one of them is suddenly, inexplicably, gone. After work, they return to the pub where they've spent their weekends and bank holidays and lonely nights for too many years, while evening leaks tentatively across the sky. They stare at their drinks and at the bar and at the walls around them, and try to forget him, and try to ignore the silence that clings to the dust-coated tables and empty stools.

Once upon a time, they would leave their cramped apartments and saunter towards the docks or the half-finished buildings or the unlined roads. They slurped tea and laughed raucously, worked steadily, unhurriedly, and strolled to the pub with cheerful talk echoing behind them. Their mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters were left behind in Galway, Limerick, Donegal, but they could patch up the hole of absence with strong whiskey and long nights spent in the Arms. He would always be there, the last man to leave at closing time, yet somehow the first at work the next morning. He sustained their laughter, filled their silences, made them forget the parents and siblings who echoed in their memories. Now, without him, they found the whiskey wasn't enough and, frightened, they forgot how to speak.

The obituary read: "Tom Clyne (London and formerly of Roscrea, Co Tipperary) - Born October 19th, 1926. Died February 23rd, 1979, following a tragic accident at his place of work. At rest." They

knew it was too short, the way the coffin was too light and the meagre gathering of mourners too small. Wasn't he missed, they asked each other, as they trudged from the graveyard to the safety of the pub. "Deeply regretted" by friends, at least, even if the family back home had forgotten. They were quiet then, and knocked back their pints in silence, before leaving, one by one, to stumble home, alone.

At least when they were together they didn't have to think. They concentrated on not talking and not looking; no need to concentrate on not thinking. Alone, they would sleep to come and make them forget, but, even then, their dreams carried him back. They spent endless nights in the past, gasping for air beneath a sea of unwanted memories and regrets, plunged deep into a terrifying recall of the day he died. "That's it for today, boys." Mick's loud rumble was, for once, appreciated. There was work to be finished, though. They didn't like to leave it; it would only mean more for the next day.

"Go ahead," he said, "I'll finish up here."

They hear the same words again and again in their minds; each of them wonders what would have happened if one of them had stayed. Maybe he could have been warned. Maybe he wouldn't have been in that particular place right beneath the scaffolding. Maybe the steel bar wouldn't have fallen at all.

These days, morning comes too slowly, dragged across a city reluctant to wake up. They walk to work with bowed heads and bent backs and briefly feel the reassuring warmth of mugs of tea, hot at their palms and fingertips, frozen in the cold, white air. They feel hollow inside, a gaping wound of loneliness opening within. They feel a frightening longing for something they can't define - someone, maybe.

They finish work early and return to the pub, where they drink until the small hours, before wandering home drunk, briefly released from their minds.

A Pint of Milk THE HARD WAY

PATRICK CAVALIERE

is 13 and a student at Gorey Community School. He wrote this after his summer working on Paddy Gahan's farm and thanks him for a brilliant summer

'YAWWNN.' I HAD just woken up to my alarm at 6am and was struggling to get out of my bed. I was getting ready for another day at the farm where I was working for the summer. I spent my time there milking the 80 to 90 cows the farmer had and also feeding their calves.

It seemed like a normal day, but I was in for a surprise! When I got to the farm I went to help the farmer bring the cows down from the field. When we were halfway back down the lane from the field we noticed the cows were turning off and not going towards the milking parlour. We had forgotten to close one of the gates to the fields with long grass!

Unfortunately we had the bull down with the cows, too, as he was meant to be brought to the slaughterhouse, but we could not find a way of getting him in the horsebox. He was as big as a jeep and vicious; you could not go near him without him coming after you.

So because of this we were in the jeep, bringing down the cows, and could not get out, as it was much too dangerous being around Charlie the bull. Warily, we followed the last of the cows into the field, where we had to think of a plan on how to get them out.

It was a bad year for grass, and this was the only field with grass, so it was going to be a huge challenge getting them out, especially being in a jeep. I said to Paddy the farmer, "Chase Charlie out of the field in the jeep. That way I can get out and chase the cows out of here and down to the shed!"

Paddy agreed, and off he went, trying to chase Charlie out of the field - where, of course, he wanted to stay too, as

there was a lot of grass.

We eventually had Charlie down in the courtyard outside the milking shed. Paddy, who was probably in his 60s, and I went back to the field to attempt to lure out the cows. Paddy, who had just had a new knee put in, could not run properly, so the running was left to me. He went down one side and I went down the other of the field to try to get the cows in the centre of the field. Once we had done this we came at them from behind, to try and get them towards the gate. This worked brilliantly, as most of the cows went straight through the gate and down the lane to the courtyard. But of course there were exceptions: five of the cows had gotten away and ran to the back of the field. It was going to be much harder to get these cows out, so I said to Paddy, "Go and start milking the cows; I'll get these ones out with the stick!"

Paddy agreed, of course, and went off to start the machine, clean up and get ready to start milking. Meanwhile, though, I was having trouble with these cows; they just would not listen and go out, so I had to get out a stick. After a few lashes with the stick the cows were going exactly where I wanted them to go, and I had them out of the gates in no time.

While I was walking them back down the lane to the courtyard they were troublesome again, eating off the side ditches and refusing to listen to me. So I got my stick out again and hit them till they went on. Unfortunately, while I was reaching over to hit one cow another decided to kick me full force in the knee. After I had hit that cow as hard as I could they were off running down the lane and did not try anything else.

When I had gotten them safely in the courtyard and locked the gate I went to help Paddy finish off the clean-up before we started.

But a terrible thing had happened. The electricity was gone. How on earth were we going to milk 80 or 90 cows by hand? We couldn't. It would be hard to milk them by hand if they were in a good mood, but today, since we had taken them away from the field, they were in a terrible mood, and if we tried milking them by hand we would have just ended up getting kicked much too often.

Paddy's son is a mechanic, so we called him and asked him to

figure out what had happened. When he got down to us he looked at the power box and found out that the transformer inside it was broken. Desperate to milk these cows, we asked him could he fix it. He said he couldn't. It was eight o'clock now, and we were meant to start at seven, which meant the cows were getting restless.

Suddenly Paddy's son had an idea. He said to us that he could try to hook the power box to his jeep and then get his jeep running to supply power to the milking shed. It was a brilliant idea! We had the machine running and we were ready to milk again.

While the beginning of the milking went well, with only a few attempted kicks, the end was going to be a huge challenge, especially because we were not prepared and we thought it was all going to be all right.

Normally the lame cows come in last, as they are slowest and not as strong as the others who muscle their way in. But these cows were not stupid. One had worked out how to pull one of the ropes that fed them while they were being milked. This was nearly the doom of that cow.

The cows before that one had just left, and one had decided to go to the toilet on its way out. When the last of the cows (the lame ones) got in, the floor was dreadfully slippery. It all went well for a while, but then this cow decided to feed itself and curled its head round the rope, and pulled. Happy to see food falling down, it tried to reach down to the trough for it, but it had got its head stuck in the rope so in despair started kicking and shaking its head, trying to get free.

This made the other cows agitated, and one, while getting scared, slipped on the poo. It was the cow in front of the stuck one, and it fell, tripping up the cow behind it, who was already caught in the rope. As it fell it nearly got strangled to death by the rope but was freed in its descent. It was not over: this cow had landed on top of the cow who had slipped and was choking it.

We quickly ushered all the cows before them out and tried our best to free them. We managed in the end, but it was a close one.

We were eventually finished at 11 o'clock, two hours later than usual, but we were happy to have gotten through it.



Let's fight



Fighting Words, the creative-writing centre cofounded by Roddy Doyle and Seán Love, gives 10,000 students a year the chance to express themselves



AT FIGHTING WORDS we believe that creative writing and related arts are an essential part of every child's education. We want all children to have the best shot at realising their creative potential. To this end, our workshops and courses are free, and our approach is to give students the freedom of the page, to encourage and to take away the fear of writing.

We work with primary-school children in the mornings and second-level students in the afternoons. We also host sessions with adults, and with children and adults with special needs, such as physical or intellectual disability, mental-health issues and social marginalisation.

Primary-school children come for a two-hour workshop. They begin a story together, always getting rapidly to the core of the thing – the story and the words that make the story. Once they are into the flow, each child takes the story in their own individual direction, adding their own illustrations. The ideas grow, and change; the words become a story. At the end of the workshop, each child receives their own book – a printed version of their story, with illustrations and with the child's photograph and space for biographical details on the back cover. Each is now a published author.

The sessions with secondary students run, more usually, over weeks or a term or throughout the full academic year, and we have already published several anthologies of short stories by teenagers. We operate through all genres of creative writing, including fiction, prose, songwriting, graphic novel, film scriptwriting, playwriting, animation, poetry, feature journalism and radio documentary.

For students of all ages, we've witnessed it again and again: if the writing starts as a collective exercise, a bit of fun, almost a piece of theatre, by the time the writers go to the tables and start to write by themselves, they produce better, more confident work. They've seen the simple things that can make a good line brilliant, and they're keen to give it a go themselves.

We also run summer camps for children aged seven to 18. And every Wednesday and Saturday afternoon, we host Write Club, where teenagers come in their own time to write their novels and film scripts.

We know that not every student will become the next Anne Enright or John Boyne or Glen Hansard or Kirsten Sheridan – though there are already signs that some probably will. But that isn't the point. Fighting Words is a place where the freedom to be creative opens endless possibilities for children and young adults, leading directly to greater self-esteem, self-confidence and independence of mind.

All tutoring at Fighting Words is provided by volunteers. They are the lifeblood of what Fighting Words is about, and they currently number more than 400. All our volunteers are subject to interview, reference checking, Garda vetting and training.

We also have creative partnerships with a wide range of organisations, such as the Abbey Theatre, Brown Bag Films, *The Irish Times*, axis Ballymun, Curious Broadcast radio, Hugh Lane Gallery, Athena Media, Storyful and many more.

We host about 10,000 students a year at the centre in Behan Square. They come from every county on the island of Ireland. We are constantly booked out a year in advance. Satisfying the demand is a major challenge.

"What I loved is that we got freedom. Freedom of the word. I didn't realise the strength of a teenager's word until I read our book in full... our dreams, hopes, even fears. It really takes over your heart." – a 15-year-old student.

Fighting Words is an independent creative-writing centre cofounded by Roddy Doyle and Seán Love. It is privately funded. We always need your help. If you would like to make a donation to support our work, or if you would like to volunteer, please email fightingwords.ie





Group endeavour: Teachers and volunteers with students from Our Lady of Mercy Convent School in Booterstown, Dublin. Photographs: Brenda Fitzsimons

**We want all children to
have the best shot at realising
their creative potential**



The RIVER

ANNE MARIE KEANE

is 13 years old and in first year at Donabate Community College, in Co Dublin

UPWARD I MOVE towards the yellow light above. Out into a small pool I flow. Above, the twinkling of silver stars reflects in my shiny pool and a crescent moon dances across my surface. The night air is sweet and earthy, and the hoot from a nearby owl mixes with the gentle sound of the lapping water. A gentle breeze moves the surface into ripples as I swirl forward to meet the dawn.

At the break of dawn, sunlight begins to make its way upwards as its rays flicker through the trees covered in dew. The dawn chorus rings out loudly in a lovely calming tone. As I trickle downhill, I notice a kingfisher. Its colours are so spectacular and vibrant as it swiftly flies over me and back to her squeaking chicks in the nest near my river bank. The clouds are amazing as they slowly drift by, in all different shapes and sizes, with tints of pink and yellow flooding the sky.

As I meander down further, some of the water breaks away into a small pond. The pond is crowded with lily pads as the buds begin to open into splendid pink and white flowers. At the side of the pond there is a fisherman. He appears elderly and half-asleep as he dips his delicate fishing rod into the water in the hope of catching a fish. It was a good time for him to come, because, at this stage, all of the salmon are feeding and quite a lot of them are beginning to rise. I meander further down towards an old brick bridge surrounded by huge towering chestnut trees and a few weeping willows, their branches dipping into the water. By this stage it has begun to rain, but this does not bother a sturdy cow and her calf as they come to drink by the water's edge after their morning of peaceful grazing.

The banks are getting wider and higher; it is becoming difficult to see the meadows now. I swirl around several large rocks of unusual shapes, sizes and colours. Suddenly, I am falling at a rapid pace, down, down, down... "Crash." Foam and spray, bubbles and light. I am swirling, gurgling and bubbling at the foot of the waterfall. As I flow forward, a beautiful stag comes to my edge to drink cool, fresh water. His eyes dart about, looking for danger. Suddenly I am underground. Deep, dark underground. Concrete is all around me, and the thundering sound of turbines. As I rush ahead, the electricity sparkles and crackles before heading off to light up the town. Free at last, the air is fresh and clear as I rest in a large reservoir of cool, crystal water.

I have now expanded and am carrying a large volume of water. I am moving very slowly and steadily. I am feeling very heavy. The babbling sounds have been replaced by bells, horns, engines and voices. Large steel bridges are reflected in my surface. "Splash." A stone hits my surface and sends it into rings and ripples. "Splash." This time a heavy piece of plastic material hits my surface and begins to sink instantly. I am very unhappy that there is someone above my surface that feels that it is all right to dump their material into me and walk away and forget about it. As I flow further on, I am smothered by a curtain of horrible exhaust fumes. Factories spill, pour, leak and drain their poisonous waste, and I feel that it is a deadly load.

I taste the salty water and hear the seagulls' cries. The large tankers and passenger ships flow out on my waves to sea. Freedom at last. My banks disappear. I am embraced by the sea. My arrival is exhilarating as I listen to the whales calling from the depths of the sea.

Out into the wide open sea to begin a new adventure.

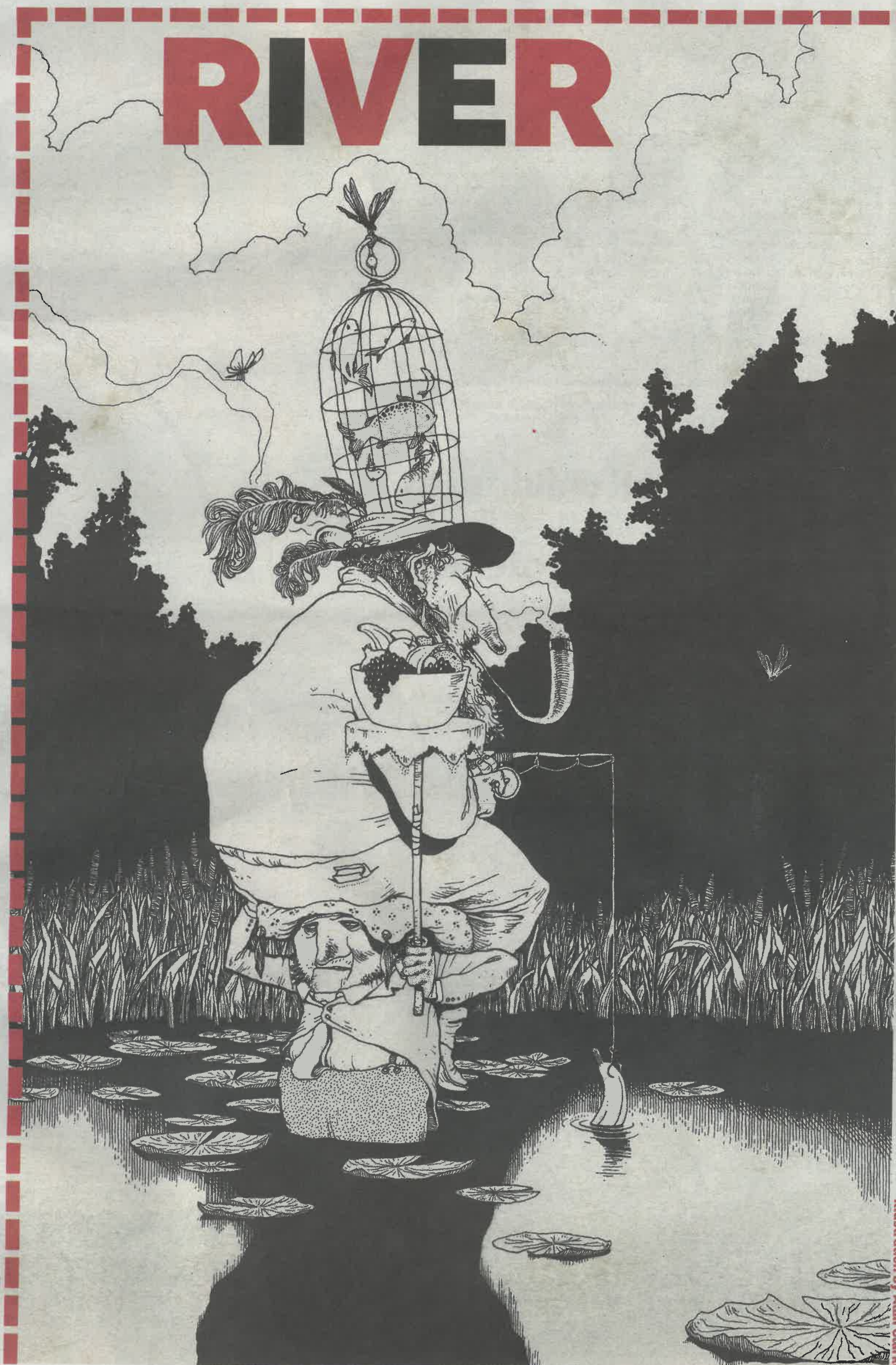


Illustration by Alan Clarke

SELF deceit

DEIRDRE CORISH

is 15 years old and a transition-year student at Portmarnock Community School, in Co Dublin

I ARRIVED INTO class at 9.49am. Four minutes late. Just four. Still I found myself bombarded with the same questions and accusations as I always was. Where were you? Do you have a note? Do you think this is acceptable behaviour for a higher-level student? I'll call your mother if you do it again. I swear I will.

"Are you even listening to me?" Ms Forde glared at me over wire-rimmed spectacles. I'd always hated those glasses, and how they nestled there over her beak nose, magnifying her eyes to such an extent that she looked quite similar to a dirty big crow.

"Yes, Miss," I lied. Of course, I lied. I'm not Alan I'm-so-absolutely-confident Farrell. I can't answer back to teachers and get away with it like he always seems to.

"It's all in the body language," Alan had told me once. "You have to be assertive. They'll eat you alive if you look like a weak one."

Alan was convinced that teachers were like hunters, and they selected the weakest of the herd at the start of each term like prey – that was the kind of crap Alan spewed up almost constantly. Personally, I thought it was the other way around. The students hunted the teachers. At least it was if

Ms Greene was anything to judge by. She'd never really stood a chance against us. Nobody listens to her when... well ever, really. Half the class probably don't even know what subject she teaches for the amount of notice she's given.

When Ms Forde decided she'd had quite enough making a fuss over nothing for one day, she narrowed her eyes (like she always did). "And look," she hissed, pointing at the clock behind her (as per usual), "you've just wasted 10 minutes of valuable class time." Yes, "valuable" class time. As though it's any more important than another time of the day. When (in all honesty, now) am I going to use German again?

If I was Alan I-don't-give-a-damn Farrell, I'd have told her then that clearly I hadn't wasted any of her "valuable" class time. If she had allowed me to walk into class and take my seat, and not said a word – instead of shouting at me for no bloody reason – then she'd have nothing to complain about. She brings it on herself, I swear she does. But I'm not Alan the genius Farrell, so I settled for a grunt, and then collapsed into my seat, two rows from the front.

"Chris!" Not two minutes later my name was hissed from behind me. I checked that Ms Forde was fully preoccupied with writing down the rules for past-tense German verbs before I turned around to look at Alan I-grin-like-a-Cheshire-bloody-cat-when-my-friends-get-in-trouble Farrell.

"What?" I snapped. "We're skipping next period, right?" I rolled my eyes, and turned around to take down Ms Forde's notes. I never understood verbs, and all their finicky little endings that change for every

tense and every person. I have much more important things to worry about than what verb ending goes with "we" or "they".

My effort to do schoolwork was rewarded with a stab in the back from Alan I'm-such-a-good-friend Farrell's pen.

"Come on!" he whispered. "You and me, hanging out together – we'll have a class time. There's a science test next period – and don't even try to tell me you've studied."

"I have," I lied.

"That's the spirit, mate."

Alan I-corrupt-my-friends Farrell winked at me. I quelled the distinct urge to punch his face in, and turned back to the notes – but, of course, Ms Forde had wiped them off the board before I got a chance to take them down. Thanks a million Alan I-ruin-any-chances-of-my-friends-passing-German Farrell.

I promised myself that I wouldn't cut class with him. I promised myself. And you know how they say that a promise broken is a promise never made? Well, that's not true, because I swear I did promise, even if I found myself sitting in the bushes not 20 minutes later with Alan I-manage-to-mess-up-everything-around-me Farrell. I really did promise.

I suppose there was a certain sense of relief at not having to go through that science test, but I was still annoyed at Alan for putting me up to this.

"I've done you a favour," Alan know-it-all Farrell reasoned with me, lighting up a cigarette. "Now you get a day in the sun and no science test. Consider yourself lucky."

"I'm not getting away with this," I said. "If my mam finds out..."

"Just shut up Chris, yeah?" said Alan listen-to-me-because-I'm-always-right Farrell, rolling his eyes. "It's all in the body language."

Yes, that's actually what he said – I'm not making this stuff up. He seems to think everything is "in the body language".

"It's the key," he continued, "to getting what you want."

He pulled a drag from his cigarette, and then held it there between his

forefinger and his thumb, because I suppose he fancied it made him look cool and roughed up. Personally, I thought he looked quite the eejit, but you just don't say those things to Alan your-opinion-doesn't-matter Farrell.

"Let's put it this way," he said. "If you go back in there," he gestured towards the school. "And walk down the corridor like that's exactly where you should be, then no one will look twice at you. If you turn into a nervous girl, then of course you're going to get caught. So cool it."

That's the sort of thing I hear daily from Alan my-head-is-too-bloody-big-for-my-body Farrell. And, of course, his theory really made no difference when he was stupid enough to sit us within view of the school gates, because it was inevitable that we would get caught – a fact that didn't occur to me until after I found myself sitting in the principal's office.

I'd call it pretty fair to say that lectures on tardiness are similar to those on cutting class. We were drilled with the usual questions. Where had we been? Did we have notes? Did we think this was acceptable behaviour for Junior Certificate students? Our mothers would be getting calls – that was a promise.

"Are you even listening to me?" Mr McCormack glared at us through narrowed eyes. I'd always hated those eyes, small and beady. They reminded me of tiny black beetles, shining in the sun.

No, I wasn't listening. "Yes, sir," I lied.

"Not really," Alan I'm-so-bloody-confident Farrell said bluntly.

Of course, this set off another lecture. Alan just didn't know when to stop, did he? Look at what he'd done. Both of us, sitting here in the principal's office. It was his bloody fault, and I shouldn't have taken it. But I did, because I'm a good friend. Not like him.

We walked home together that evening in the warm late-spring sun, sharing two days' suspension and a lot of blame. To be honest, the last thing I really wanted to do was walk home with Alan I-get-my-friends-suspended-from-school Farrell, but I didn't have a

choice, did I? He lived in the same direction as me. I dragged my feet behind me as I walked, half hoping he'd get sick of such a slow pace, and walk ahead. He didn't.

"Two days off school," Alan I-see-the-good-in-everything Farrell whistled, something I found quite impressive, seeing as he had his signature cigarette clamped between his lips at the time. "Sweet."

"It's not funny!" I snapped. "My mam's going to kill me."

"You'll be grand, Chris."

"No I won't!" I fumed. "I told you this was a bad idea, but you wouldn't listen – it's your bloody fault, and I'm taking the rap!"

"You didn't have to come," Alan the genius Farrell shrugged. "You could have gone to that pesky science test; it was your choice."

"You didn't give me a choice!" I protested.

Alan frowned. "You act as though I forced your hand or something."

I raised my eyebrows.

"As if I could!" he scoffed. "Here's the problem, Chris. You blame everyone else for your mistakes. You cover up your own drawbacks by looking at mine. Not. My. Fault."

He punctuated each of the last three words with a stab of his cigarette in my direction. "You wouldn't have cut class with me if you didn't want to," he said with all certainty.

"Stop being such an idiot, Alan," I tried.

"There you go again, mate. Blaming your problems on my idiocy." He shook his head.

I was speechless. I truly didn't know what to say. I began to wonder how Alan really-bloody-annoying Farrell had suddenly become Alan I-know-you-better-than-you-know-yourself Farrell.

"Friends, yeah?" Alan asked.

"Oh yeah, best friends." I smiled, deciding in that exact instant that I hated Alan Farrell.

"Awesome!" He gave me the thumbs up, and grinned, his cigarette clenched between his teeth, making him look as stupid as ever.

"Get'cha again, mate." He patted my shoulder and headed down his road. I hated him. By God I did.



Rapunzel

RAPUNZEL WAS a princess, but an unconventional one. She'd spent years looking for "true love" but could never find it. All of her fellow princesses found it easy to find a man; one even found hers by licking a toad. (Later, Rapunzel tried this but only found pretty colours for half an hour!)

Her father, the king, saw her problem and managed to convince her that nobody thought themselves good enough for her. She then believed that nobody *was* good enough for her. After all, she was tall and had long blond hair, blue eyes, the whole package.

She also had a beard. She was proud of it, and knew everybody was jealous of it. I mean, anytime anybody saw it they stared at it for minutes on end.

Anyway, Rapunzel was in her room one night, admiring her beard and wondering if there was anybody else as fantastic as her, and when they would come along. She glanced out of her bedroom window, which overlooked one of the many towers of the castle. She had a thought, and then an idea and then . . . a plan. A rather absurd plan, but what did you expect? It's a fairy tale.

She would make her father lock her up in a tower a few towns over. He would then go and hype and advertise the beautiful girl locked in a tower, and declare that whoever rescued her could take her hand in marriage and, with that, become a prince.

The king, who had no other children (save his eldest son, "Simple Jack", who had nearly lost half the kingdom to a botanist Gypsy after the "magic bean" incident), was happy to oblige, as he wanted the royal bloodline to continue.

Soon, the arrangements were made. Rapunzel occupied an abandoned watchtower a few towns away, behind moats and dragons and defences of all sorts.

The king went to the town squares of the nearest towns and heralded the challenge to the local men. There was great excitement when they heard the news of princedom and being instantly married to this "beautiful" girl he spoke of.

It had been several weeks since Rapunzel had first entered the tower. She had grown impatient and cranky. As if that wasn't enough, she didn't bring anything to trim her beard. She dangled it out the window and it was only eight feet from the ground.

Eventually, one man (affectionately named "Onions" because of his pungent scent and the red rings around his eyes that made it look as if he'd been crying) rose to the challenge.

He strolled past the tower's defences as the dragon had a full belly and the moat had been dammed with all of the "rescuers" that failed to cross.

When he came to the foot of the tower, he stuck his hands in his pocket and whistled out in awe.

He eventually shouted, "Rapunzel, are you there?"

Rapunzel turned on her heel and shouted, "Yes!"

As she leaned out the window, her beard dangled just out of the man's reach.

"What beautiful golden locks you have," he cried, blissfully unaware of its true nature, as he couldn't see that far up.

"If it was a bit longer I'd be able to climb up and see you," he said. "I'll come back in a week, and it should be long enough then."

And that he did.

And this time he'd brought quite the handy rope ladder, so that Rapunzel had to climb down.

"Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair," he said, knowing that if anybody had heard that line it would be parodied for generations. She then leaned out the window and her beard swooped down.

He put one hand on the beard and pulled himself up a few feet. He soon let go after hearing a yelp and being swung around like a crazy pendulum.

"What the *hell* do you think you're doing?" screamed Rapunzel.

"I was just going to climb up," replied Onions in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Are you mad?" she bellowed. "That'd hurt like hell. How about I pull out your goldie locks and all?"

The man blushed with embarrassment and realised how silly his idea was.

"Sorry," he said. "Grab this ladder and tie it to something."

He threw it up and she followed his orders, and threw the other end out.

"I'm coming up," announced Onions as he couldn't wait to see this so-called beautiful girl he'd come for.

He reached the window puffing and stumbled into her chamber.

"Hello at last," she said, and he caught a glimpse of her.

His eyes widened and his jaw dropped. His head grew light and, before she knew it, Onions swooned out of the window. She tutted, and climbed out of the window, realising her plan wouldn't be going anywhere.

As she passed the mangled corpse of Onions, she looked at him and rolled her eyes. "He had a rather big nose anyway."

And with that she walked home again, with her beard following close behind her.

RYAN McBRIDE

is 17 and attends
Mulroy College in
Milford, Co Donegal



LIKE SON

AOIFE O'CEALLACHAIN

is 18 and a sixth-year student at Newpark Comprehensive in Blackrock, Co Dublin

'DO YOU REMEMBER how to do this?"

"Yep."

"You sure?"

"Yep."

"First step?"

"Make sure the hose is in the tank before you start."

"Next?"

"You blow into the hose."

"And what do you listen for?"

"Bubbles," I said, trying to hide my smile; the word always made me laugh.

"Then?"

"I loop the hose down to the ground and put the end in the bottle."

"After that?"

"That's all you taught me."

He tousled my hair and smiled. Dad did the rest; he always did. No matter how many times we did it, he was the one that ended up with oil on his teeth.

"Oh, and when you're finished taking . . ."

"Borrowing."

"Borrowing," I repeated, mimicking his grave tone, "I lift the hose up, way above my head" - Dad always told me that - "so the oil doesn't spill."

We knelt between cars on a raw winter's evening and "borrowed" from people we didn't know. Dad assured me we'd repay them; we never did.

Children played in the schoolyard across the road, oblivious to the tube running into what may well be their own car. I looked at Dad, poking his head out from under the car hood, searching for something that wasn't there.

My eyes went back to the children. They chased each other around the outskirts of an ice patch. Some of the braver ones tested the ice, but went back to their game after a hesitant step. I didn't envy them. I was doing my dad proud, helping the family. Why we needed oil was beyond me - heating? routine? boredom? It didn't matter; I was making my dad proud. He called me his "little working man", but I always corrected him, pointing to the notches on the door frame. Two inches taller than last year. No, I didn't envy them, but still I watched.

The soles of Dad's shoes were worn out, but only at the top. Ma said this was because he was always on his toes, ready for action at any moment. He changed his position and kept lookout. This was the first important day of my childhood, the day I held the hose. I wanted to tug on his coat, to show him how well I was doing, but that seemed childish, so I didn't.

I looked back at the children, still running aimlessly. I felt dignified in helping Dad, even if I didn't understand why. I had recently grasped the concept of why oil entered the car clear and exited blackened, but why we needed to "borrow" this from others I did not know. I began breathing deep, heavy breaths, pretending to be a train. I didn't make the noise, not today - I simply watched the children disappear and reappear through the puffs of air.

"What the f*** are you doing?" Dad yelled, distracting me from my breath. The oil was going back up the hose and into the car. The tube had slid through my gloves and into the bottle, now returning to its original source. He slapped me across the back of the head and yanked the hose out of the car, knocking the support rod of the hood in the process. Tears filled my eyes as he shoved my head towards the ground, telling me to find the lid of the bottle. The children peered through the bars of the schoolyard, curious in nature. He grabbed my collar and dragged me to my feet with ease, asking me what we should do next. I didn't answer, so he asked again.

"Run?"

"Run."

This was my second test; the first was holding the hose. He looped the hose around his hand and elbow three times and hung it around my neck as we ran. I screwed on the lid tight before he snatched it from my hands; he didn't trust me any more. Rheumy-eyed and disgraced, I chased him down the road. We turned a corner and slowed our pace, trying to catch our breath. When we were safely away from the witnesses, I stopped.

Several feet ahead, he watched as I gasped in the street, air reluctant to fill my lungs. Inexperienced, I bent forward, placed my hands on my knees and let out short winter breaths. I heard Dad's footsteps approaching and waited for his trademark slap, but it never came. He simply patted me on the back, tightened his fingers around my shoulder and waited. After a moment, I looked up and smiled. He smiled back, teeth and lips stained black.

SO THERE WE WERE, sitting in a room which wasn't too bright and was quite small. There was a smell of coffee and bleach. It was rotten. I was sitting beside Sinéad at a small desk with two other chairs on the opposite side, and there was also a small black recorder on the desk to record all the interviews. I didn't know what to be thinking. Sinéad and me didn't know if we should say anything to the garda today. What if we got caught? We were sitting there for a good few minutes. It was too quiet. I wasn't used to this silence. We had seen a lot of gardaí walking by the room, but none had come in yet. It felt like we were sitting in there for years. I turned to Sinéad and said, "What are you going to say?" And just as I asked her this, two men wearing suits walked in the door, into the small room we were sitting in.

When they first walked in, we weren't too sure who they were. They were both very tall with dark hair, and they looked very serious walking into the room, and just sat straight down.

They weren't in Garda uniform. They sat down in the two chairs opposite us. They didn't say anything when they first walked in, so it was a real awkward silence. Once they sat down, one of them said, "We're detectives." That explained why they weren't in Garda uniform. Then they started to ask questions. It felt as if you were standing in school with the most strict teacher just waiting to be shouted at and given out to. I was dying to laugh with my nerves. I thought it was funny.

The detectives started by asking us for our details. Just basic, like your name and date of birth, address and all that.

"Name," one of the detectives snapped.

"Marie," replied Sinéad as she was sitting comfortably and relaxed in the chair, but her nerves were gone - I could tell by looking at her. I looked at her, I was thinking to myself, What is she up to now? I kicked her leg as if to tell her to tell them the truth.

"Yours," said the detective, but was interrupted by Sinéad, who said, "Sinéad!"

"What?" said the detective.

"Sinéad, that's me name."

"You just said Marie."

"Well, I'm just after telling ya that it's Sinéad," she said, being cheeky.

After Sinéad nearly giving them a fake name and all, she ended up giving them the right details. She gave them her name and I gave them my name, Shannon. After taking our details, they started questioning us. They asked us, "Where were you both on Thursday at half-one?"

Sinéad panicked and lied. She told them we were in school. One of the detectives turned and said, "Don't lie!" When they said that, my heart went. They said they had CCTV footage of us up in Mary's Court. I never knew there was CCTV in Mary's Court, and I knew Sinéad never knew that either by the way she looked at me when they said that. They asked us what we were doing up there when we should have been in school. I told them we were given a half-day. They said that they didn't care, that they just wanted to know what we saw.

We weren't that nervous any more, because we had a feeling that they already knew why we weren't in school. We didn't want to go to school today with all the classes we had. We weren't in the humour for it. So we started telling them. We were in Mary's Court at about half-one. Sinéad's ma and da were in work, so we went up to the flat for a few minutes. Then we left Mary's Court and went around the corner to Chapel Street. That's where it happened.

"Tell us what that was that you say happened on Chapel Street," said the detectives.

"Nothing," said Sinéad quickly. Then the detectives told us to just relax and tell the truth - or face questioning in court instead of just doing the interview.

So, given our choice, there in the room or in a court, we chose there. Me and Sinéad hardly ever agree on anything straight away, but it was obvious to both of us that being in an interview was better than being in a court. We told them how when we went around to Chapel Street we seen a fella running and jumping over one of the garden walls and sitting on the ground.

"What did he look like? What was he wearing? Describe him," said the detective.

"He was small and skinny. He was wearing a blue tracksuit and a pair of runners. He was out of breath from running so fast. Next of all a car that was dark green with tinted windows sped around the corner."

"Tell me the make and model."

"I don't know what make it was. Two men jumped out of the car wearing balaclavas."

"Any weapons?"

"Steel bars."

"Clothing?"

"One had jeans on and the other had tracksuit bottoms. They were both tall; one was skinny and the other was real stocky."

"What did you do?"

"We froze. Our nerves were gone. I told Sinéad to get her phone out, and before I could say anything else the two men had walked along about three garden walls towards the one the young man was sitting in. The men were now in the garden. We seen the steel bars swinging up and then heard a few shouts of pain. It felt as if there was nothing we could do. I felt so helpless, useless. It's not as if I could have walked up to two men with steel bars and got them to stop. It was too serious. The men dragged the young man out of the garden, who was covered in blood, and threw him into the back of the car and sped off."

We couldn't believe what we were after seeing. It felt as if it happened within two seconds. We were in complete shock. Sinéad was after ringing the Garda and a couple of minutes after the car sped off the Garda turned up. That's when we were told they were going to have to bring us here to the station. We were scarla getting in the Garda car, and everyone was after being standing there, looking at us. I could only imagine what they were all thinking and what all the aul ones were saying! Then the detectives went over a few questions that we were asked at the scene. The detectives showed us a picture of a car and a young man and asked us could we identify them as being the ones we seen. It was them.

They said thanks for our co-operation and that we could go and they would be in contact if anything else came up. We were so relieved to be out of there! It felt like we were in there for years. The time was after dragging in. We couldn't believe it was done and over with. Well, most of it. The gardaí said they would be visiting our houses to inform our parents of what had been happening. So we still had to face them at home; we had a lot of explaining to do.

About a week later on the news was the discovery of the fella's body. He was involved with a group of fellas that were all about the drugs, and it was said he was killed over a small drugs debt. Sinéad and me were talking; we couldn't believe it. We both agreed that never again did we want to witness something horrible like that; never again did we want to have to be interviewed like that; never again did we want to mitch school.

Never again!

NEVER again

KAYLEIGH CONWAY

is a transition-year student at Mount Carmel Secondary School, in Dublin

Illustration by Leemage/UGC/Getty



THE Portal

ALEX DELAMER

is 16 and in transition year at Belvedere College in Dublin

HE STARED AT IT, a shiver running down his spine. This portal had appeared from nowhere a few minutes ago. Finn was usually in early, and it was usually to finish the homework he'd been distracted from the night before. And so this morning, as he'd been working his way through another exercise on French verbs – really, what use is the *passé composé*? – there had been a sound like the ripping of wet paper behind him, and when he turned, there it was, sitting in all its monochromatic glory. It hadn't taken him very long to decide it must be a portal to another dimension, perhaps the result of paranormal activities, or a scientific experiment gone wrong.

Finn read far too much. It was probably for this reason that he didn't just walk away at that point. The hero of one of the novels he so often read would never have walked away. And since Finn thought very highly of himself, neither would he. So he sat in place and studied the abnormality in front of him.

It didn't look very frightening, just black and white spots. What was odd about these spots was their tendency to slowly merge as you looked at them, until they formed a grey, a grey which hurt Finn's eyes, and forced him to look away, blinking back tears. The thing that was disconcerting about the portal was its tendency to emit noises that sounded worryingly like something very large and angry roaring. These noises were quiet, but it was not the quiet of an iPod with the volume turned down; it was the quiet of an extremely loud noise which is, happily, far away. And so Finn sat there, watching and listening and timing himself, to see how long he could look at the portal without blinking.

So when Kevin walked in, Finn was practically crying, having just bested his previous record of 47 seconds with an incredible time of 51 seconds. Kevin took in the whole scene for a couple of seconds before asking, "What did you do?"

Finn sat up, manfully trying to ignore the pain in his bloodshot eyes. And nearly succeeded.

"I didn't do anything. It just . . . appeared."

"What is it, then?"

Finn sat up even straighter. He'd been preparing this one all morning.

"It's like an abscess on the space-time continuum."

"A what?"

"An abscess on the space-time continuum."

"You don't even know what you're talking about."

"I do!"

"Explain it then."

Finn paused. This could be one of the trickiest subjects he'd ever tried to bluff about. He was ordering his explanations and preparing to speak when Kevin said, "I don't even care. What's it do?"

Finn explained its weird optical effects and the strange noises it made. Kevin was interested. This was much better than double business on a Tuesday morning.

"And what happens when you touch it?"

"I haven't tried yet."

"Pussy," snorted Kevin.

"You do it then."

"How much will you pay me?"

"Why would I pay you?"

"Because this absence thingy could be dangerous."

"It's an abscess. I'll give you €2."

Kevin shrugged – it was enough for a drink. That made it worth the risk in his book. He crossed the room and stood looking into the portal. He looked into it, peering deeper and deeper, until he was almost convinced there was something moving . . .

"Are you going to do this or not?"

Kevin jumped, his reverie broken.

"I'm doing it, I'm doing it; stay calm."

Once more he looked into the portal, but this time he brought his finger closer and closer until finally it was sliding through something very like jelly. It didn't seem to be harming his finger, so he pushed until his whole hand was in.

Finn watched, worried that at any moment Kevin would make him pay the €2. His fears were realised when Kevin began drawing his hand out.

"That'll be two . . ."

Finn jumped backwards as something seemed to grab Kevin by the arm and brutally drag him through the faintly glowing portal. The light the portal was emitting flared for a moment, then settled back to its glow, which now seemed very ominous.

Finn knew what to do, of course. He didn't read books for nothing. He read them to train for situations like this. He had no choice but to be the brave one. He leaped into the portal, mentally congratulating himself on being such a hero. The portal itself felt like tiny hands plucking at his face and clothes. Finn was elated. An adventure, all of his own!

Of course, that's when it all went to hell.

When Finn arrived, there was no epic quest or helpful native creatures, no scenic land or cheerful sounds. What there was was a cave with no shadows, where every surface was emitting a red as dark as the blood clots found in a dissected heart, and the giant thing with skin that seemed black and scaled in the red light, hunched under the low cavern roof, and sporting far too many limbs, claws and teeth. Then Finn saw what it was hunched over – Kevin.

But not a healthy Kevin, waiting to be rescued from a monster with one fatal weakness. No, this Kevin was in a very bad way. His face was streaked with blood and tears, the blood coming from several cuts on his face and scalp, and the tears from the unimaginable pain in his eyes. He was convulsing, his face an inhuman death mask of pain and terror, and his mouth stretched open, wider than Finn had ever seen a mouth opened before, in a silent scream of anguish.

When Finn finally managed to wrench his eyes from Kevin's face, further horror was awaiting him. Kevin's legs below the knee were gone. There was no clean cut either. Instead they looked as if they had been brutally ripped off, with the flesh hanging off in strips and shattered bone poking out. Blood was pooling beneath the stumps, which were waving back and forth at the knee. But, perhaps worst of all, Kevin's stomach was ripped open, and his entrails were spilled across the floor. The monster crouched over Kevin had inserted arm-like things deep inside, and, even as Finn watched, a bulge grew in Kevin's side and then burst open to reveal the claws which had just been forced out. Finn couldn't help himself, and threw up everything in his stomach.

He straightened back up, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, just in time to see the monster use a further set of appendages to rip off Kevin's forearms. Blood spurted from the arteries in the arm, some of it splattering across Finn's shoes. He retched again, but there was nothing left to bring up. His gaze was drawn back to Kevin's face, and he realised something which made everything far worse.

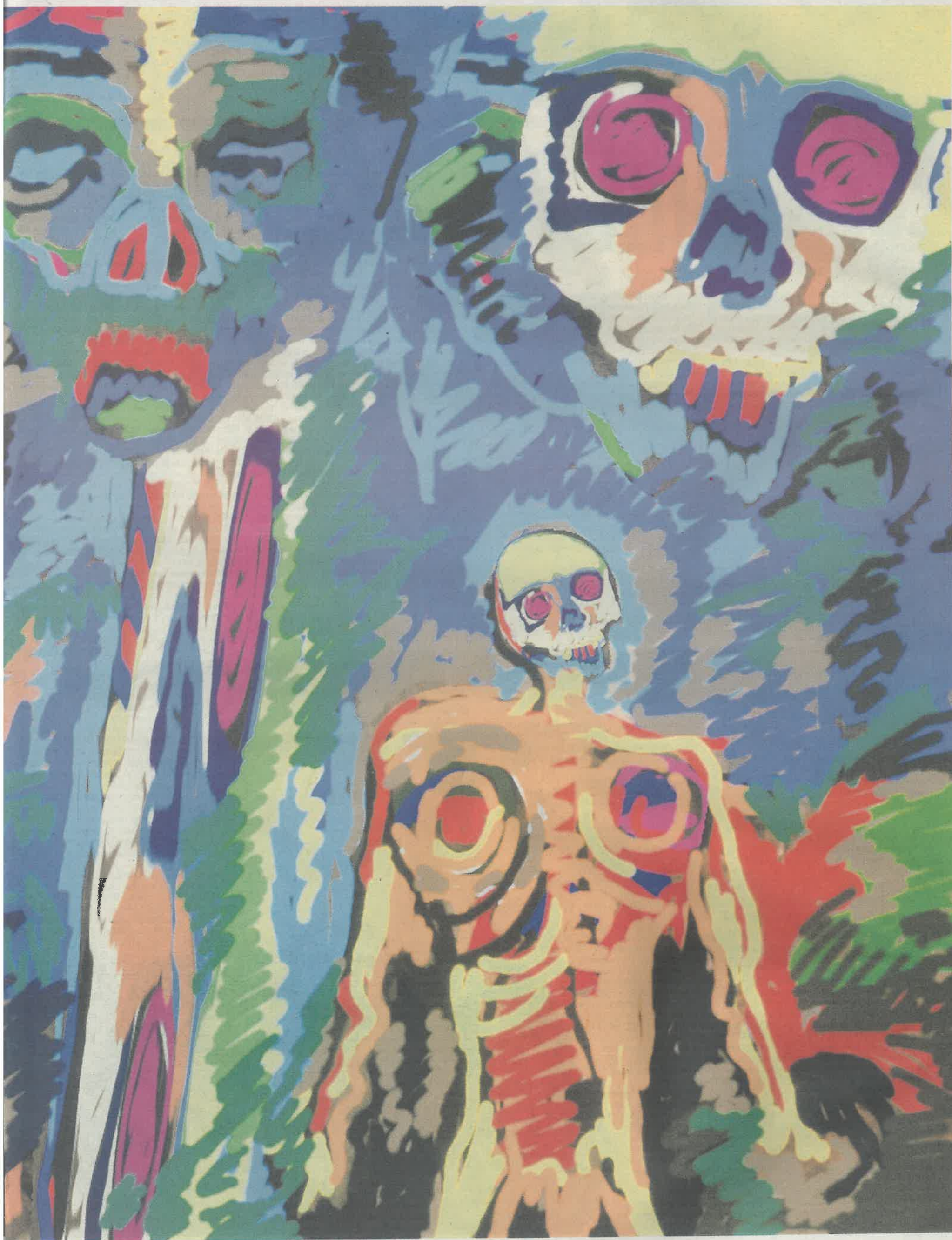
Kevin was still alive. Against all the laws of nature, he was living through this mutilation of everything that his body once was. As his eyes rolled in their sockets, they came across Finn, standing helplessly, watching his suffering. His eyes stopped their insane wanderings, and fixated on Finn, a gaze so intense it pierced his very soul and pinned him to the wall behind him. Finn stood helpless beneath this scrutiny, wanting to do something, anything, to answer the pleading look in his friend's eyes.

Finally, after what seemed an eternity to Finn, during which Kevin's eyes never deviated from his own, never stopped their begging even as his body convulsed in its death throes, the end came, quickly and violently. One moment Kevin's ravaged face was there, the next, a gaping hole in the front of his skull, created by another arm which had found its way up Kevin's neck. Finn couldn't help himself. He cried out, mourning the loss of his friend. So rapidly it seemed to Finn that they hadn't moved, the arms were withdrawn from Kevin's mutilated corpse, which slumped to the ground, and the creature was barrelling towards Finn at a speed which frightened him. He turned and dived back into the portal.

He landed in front of his stunned classmates, who had since arrived and were gathered around the portal. He stood panting, praying that the creature couldn't pass through the portal. Then the assembled crowd gasped, and Finn turned, only to find he couldn't turn, held in place by something. He looked down, and was mildly surprised to find a claw poking out of his chest. Then the pain registered and he was screaming, but then he wasn't, he was coughing instead, and each time he coughed he brought up more blood. As he stared at his red hands in disbelief, the rest of the creature followed through the portal. Several people ran for the door, only to find themselves brought back by more arms.

Soon the blood was seeping out from under the classroom door.





Silly

EVA EZERGAILE

BILLY

BILLY, DARLING, you really should go to bed now." "But Mommy, I want some chocolate." "No, it's time to go to bed. Hurry up now." As the sun shines in through the curtains there is a loud knock at the door. Mom walks in and wakes up the boys.

"Billy, wake up. It's a big day for you today. Get ready and come down for breakfast."

Billy jumps out of his bed. He is so excited. It's his first day at school. Billy is a small boy with tiny little fingers and brown curly hair. He shares his bedroom with his 16-year-old brother, Patrick, a lazy teenager. Billy is only four years old yet very nosy. They are a small family living in Dublin. Their dad died just before Billy was born.

Billy's mom walks over to Patrick.

"Wake up, Pat."

He turns the other way around in his bed. Mom pulls his blanket off and throws it into the corner.

"I said wake up!" In a few minutes Billy comes downstairs with a teddy bear in one of his hands.

"Mommy, Teddy said he wants to come with me to school." "Oh Billy, don't be silly. Sit down and eat your cornflakes."

Billy looks at her with his puppy-dog eyes.

"Don't even look at me like that."

He sits at the table, lifts up his right eyebrow and picks up the spoon.

When he is finished, he runs back upstairs to brush his teeth. He gets his little stool from the corner of the bathroom and drags it over to the sink. While pulling the stool, he spots a small spider at the bottom of the wall. He quickly gets his brother's toothbrush and follows the spider. When he gets a chance, he smashes Patrick's toothbrush against the tiny creature. He carefully observes the spider, sniffs the toothbrush and puts it back without rinsing it.

Suddenly, Patrick rushes into the bathroom with his schoolbag. Billy runs back to his mom and Patrick starts brushing his teeth not having a clue what Billy has done.

Patrick flies down the stairs and shouts, "Ma, I'm leavin'."

"Are you not going to have anything to eat?"

"Nahh, gonna get something in Centra."

"All right. Have a nice day, Pat."

"Oryt, u too."

When Patrick leaves, Billy runs upstairs to get his bag. He rushes into the room and gets confused, as he can't see his bag anywhere. Billy carefully looks around the bedroom with a wrinkle in his forehead. When he spots the bag in the corner, he puts it on his shoulders and starts picking his nose.

"Billy, hurry up please!" Mom shouts.

Billy quickly licks the green, slimy booger and runs down.

"C'mon, let's go, pet."

It is a five-minute walk to get to the school. When they arrive the teacher is there to meet them.

"Nice to meet you," Ms Roche greets them.

"Nice to meet you too," Mom answers.

Billy stares at the teacher as if she is an alien. They say their goodbyes as the school bell finally rings. Billy is seated with a boy called Jimmy. All of the kids think that Billy is really cool because he has SpongeBob on his schoolbag. When lunchtime starts, the sixth-class minders enter the room.

"Hi girls," says Ms Roche. "When they are finished with their lunch, you can bring them out in the yard."

"Yes, miss."

When the girls turn their back on the class, Jimmy throws an apple at one of them. All of a sudden she turns around and the apple hits her in the face. "Aaaaaaaa!!!!!! My eye!" She runs out crying. The other girl is just standing there. She doesn't know whether to give out or run after her friend. A few minutes later the teacher comes into the room still holding a fork in her hand.

"Who threw the apple at Emma?"

There is silence. Jimmy, scared that the teacher

will give out to him, says, "Billy did."

"Billy, come with me now!"

"It wasn't mee-e," Billy sobs.

Ms Roche goes over to him. She grabs his arm and drags him with her.

"This behaviour is not acceptable!"

The principal is nowhere to be found. Luckily for Billy, Patrick and his mates come to collect him for his dental appointment. They sign out of the book and leave. On their way to the dentist, Jack (Patrick's friend) spots a girl that he has liked for ages.

"Oh my God, she's a babe."

"Look at her legs," says Patrick.

"Patrick, what's a babe?" asks Billy.

"You are, ha, ha, ha."

They all laugh except Billy.

When they arrive at the dentist, the dental assistant walks into the waiting room and calls out the next patient. "Charlotte Farley here?" Some girl stands up. "Excuse me," Patrick interrupts.

The dental assistant turns around and looks at him.

"We have an appointment at 11.05, but we are a few minutes late."

"What's your name?"

"It's for Billy Thompson."

"Can you hold on a minute, please?" Patrick nods. She comes back and says, "Your appointment is on Tuesday."

"Yea, so are we next?"

"No, sir, today is Monday."

As Patrick goes quiet, his friends start to laugh at him.

"Oh, alri, thanks."

"No problem," answers the dental assistant.

Patrick takes Billy's hand and leaves with his friends. Once out of the building, Patrick's mates head off to the gym.

"Text me when you get home," says Jack.

"Will do," answers Patrick.

When they get home, the house smells phenomenal. Mom has just cooked roast potatoes and chicken.

"Mommy!" exclaims Billy.

"Oh hey, darling. How did your day go?"

Billy looks around and answers, "I'm hungry."

"Go and get changed first."

Billy goes up to his room. When he enters, he sees Patrick without a shirt. He seems to be really happy for no reason.

"Hey Bill, come over for a sec."

"No, Mommy told me to get changed and then go down to eat my dinner."

"All right. Wanted to show you something cool I found the other day."

Billy is curious and goes over to him. Patrick quickly grabs him and makes him smell his hairy armpits. "Mmmmmmmmm!!!" He coughs and tries to call her again. "Mmmmm!!!"

"Now that's how a real man smells."

Patrick laughs. He lets Billy go.

As quick as he can, Billy runs

to the door, wipes his face and

yells, "I'm going to tell Mom

what you did to me!" He

sticks his tongue out.

Patrick just laughs at him.

Billy runs down: "Mom,

Patrick made me smell his

armpits!"

"How many times

have I told you to stay

away from him,

huh?" "He tickled

me. He said he was

gonna show me

something."

"I'll talk to him

later, hun."

"Okay."

Patrick comes

down to have his din-

ner. When they are all sitting at the table and enjoying their meal, Billy says, "Mommy, guess who I am?" He stands up, lifts his leg on the chair and tickles his little fingers up his leg.

"I don't know, who?"

"A babe."

"Don't be silly Billy."

"I'm not! Patrick said that I'm a babe."

"Patrick, will you ever grow up?"

"Chill. It was only for a laugh."

She gives him the look and there is silence. Billy leaves the table and goes up to his room. He decides to have a little sneak peek at Patrick's stuff. He sees his laptop on the table and starts to mess with it. He tries to open it, but isn't able to. Once he finally gets it opened, he plays with the screen, bending it forward and back. Billy pushes the screen too far and *bang!!!* it falls off. His eyes pop out and his mouth drops.

"Ooooooooooooooh no!" He is terrified because he knows if Patrick finds out he's going to kill him. He gets Sellotape and tries to put the laptop back together. He hears someone running up the stairs and hides it under his bed. Patrick comes in and jumps into his bed. Billy is really stiff. His heart is pounding. Even though it's only 6pm, Billy gets into his pyjamas and pretends that he is really tired and goes to bed.

A few minutes later Patrick asks Billy, "Have you seen my laptop?"

Billy is sweating under the covers but manages to stay still. He is faking that he is already asleep. Patrick is lying in his bed, playing with a tennis ball. The ball falls and rolls under Billy's bed. Patrick gets up to get it and Billy jumps out of his bed and shouts, "I'll get it for you!"

"Don't worry, I'll get it myself," says Patrick.

Patrick sees a corner of his laptop.

"What the hell is my laptop doing under your

bed?"

Billy looks at him as if he is about to cry. Patrick pulls out his laptop and the screen falls down on his foot. The Sellotape is left hanging off one of the corners. He hurries downstairs screaming, "Maaaaa!"

Billy hides behind the curtains and starts to cry. All he can hear is Patrick roaring. After about 10 minutes he hears footsteps. The door opens. He tries to hold his breath because he has been crying and he doesn't want anyone to find him. His nose is dripping, so he carefully picks up the curtain and wipes it. The person who had come in earlier is gone. He is feeling mortified and very tired. Patrick has calmed down and is watching football. As the time passes, Billy falls asleep behind the curtains.

The house is surprisingly calm. Patrick is still watching telly. Mom is tidying everything up as usual and Billy is still asleep behind the curtains. The silence is interrupted by the loud noise of a vacuum cleaner. Once Mom goes into the boy's room, all she can hear is coins and Lego pieces going up the hoover.

While she is vacuuming, she hits something behind the curtain. She pulls them open and finds Billy sleeping. She shakes him and whispers, "Billy? What are you doing, love?"

She turns off the vacuum cleaner with her foot. Billy wakes up. He has big red circles under his eyes.

"Patrick's laptop broke."

Mom gets on her knees and gives him a big hug.

"Don't worry about that..."

"But he hates me now."

"Ah, would ya stop. He doesn't hate ya. He was just angry. Besides, you have given him a good reason to find a part-time job. How long have you been here, hun?"

"I don't know," he mumbles

"Are you hungry?"

"No."

They chat for a couple of minutes more and then Mom puts Billy to bed. In a few hours, Patrick also goes to bed.

As the birds start singing, Patrick's alarm goes off. He knocks it off. Neither of the boys is getting up. As usual there is a loud knock at the door before Mom comes in. She opens the curtains.

"Get up both of ye!"

"Five more minutes," Patrick moans.

"No! Yis are already 10 minutes late!" She walks out of the room.

They do their usual morning routine and walk to school. It's only Billy's second day and he already hates it. He is sitting by himself at break when two third-class boys come over to him and take his lunch.

"Give it back!" Billy cries.

All of a sudden Patrick appears.

"What are you two snobs doing? Give

him back his lunch or I'll beat yis up!"

They get a fright, throw Billy's lunch

on the ground and run away.

"You okay? Did they do anything to

you?"

"No." "Oryt, let's go then. We still have to sign out in the principal's office."

"Okay." Even though Patrick was really annoyed with him for breaking his laptop, he takes Billy with a big smile on his face to the dentist. This time on the right day.



Photograph: Brad Wilson/Photofest/Getty

THE ROOM IS bright and cold and two hearts beat inside me.

The first is my own, tired, pounding in an uneven rhythm. It sounds like drums in a rock song, like the music I listened to as a teenager, skipping beats just to get the crowd going. I can't hear the second heartbeat; it's too small, but I know it moves to its own rhythm, inescapably different from my own.

Fluorescent light pours down like the lights of heaven. But heaven makes me think of death, so I sever that thought. The terminal is wide and full of movement; everything's coated in silver. The escalators and conveyor belts are like steel monsters from children's science fiction, waiting to eat me up. As this child grows inside me, I've begun to think like one.

No. She's not a child yet, just a lump of cells, dividing and multiplying and trying so hard to become a baby, but they're not one yet, so it's still okay to kill her. Somehow, I know she'd be a girl. And I know her eyes would be green, like mine and both my parents'. But so much is unknown, and that's why I must tear those cells apart before they grow any further.

Five minutes left before boarding. The screen says four, but that's unimportant. I can take the extra minute to sit here and think hard and be sure I'm making the right decision. They said this was my choice. It's something to be proud of, a chance to assert my rights as a woman, but rights don't matter to me now.

The doctor said it was unlikely. One half-formed limb millimetres too short – a suggestion that she might be small, like I am, or that some disease might plague her. Not an illness caught or formed by living, like the flu or cancer, but something that might be a part of her. Every time I blink, her face appears before me, white and shiny like raw fish. The eyes are filmed over with a fluid-like glass, staring at nothing or at something I haven't the power to see, and I can't even tell which.

The seat beside me fills with folds of red and purple. The colours are too loud for me; I narrow my eyes against them. When I dare to look, I expect to see a young woman. She's not young, but she's not old either. Her body is folded in on itself. The skin of her face has the same texture as the creased shawl she pulls tight about her shoulders.

I move to the edge of my seat. There's something unnerving about her agelessness, about the wrinkles that cover her skin but never reach her eyes. I push away until the metal armrest digs into my side.

"Looks like time for your flight now, dear."

I look up. Gate C87 is emptying of people, of cases and handbags. I don't want to go.

"You're flying to London, aren't you?"

I nod. The look she gives me says I'll have to be leaving soon.

"I'll give it one more minute."

One more minute and the people will be gone, sitting in tight-packed seats and reading books with bright covers, enjoying someone else's joys and tragedies.

"Visiting friends? Family?"

Moments pass before I realise that I've been spoken to. My minute is almost gone and I can hear my watch ticking.

"No."

"A holiday?"

"That's right. A holiday." I don't look up.

She doesn't respond but I keep waiting, because it's the only thing to do. There's no way of knowing if

my answer satisfied her.

The woman at the counter stares right at me. Her arms are folded. A voice rings out on the intercom. It tells me this is the final boarding call for flight 316 to London. The concept of flying seems impossible; to move at 500 miles an hour without feeling the movement in my body seems absurd. The aeroplane will be built of metal, and I learned all about it once, sitting at a plastic desk in a room that looked wider to me than it could honestly have been, but I can't remember how the plane doesn't fall from the sky.

Then it comes to me. I turn towards the woman beside me, and she turns to face me with not a hint of surprise on her face, as if she's known I would ask this question all along. As if this is what she's been waiting for.

"You must be taking this flight too. Why aren't you getting on?"

She could be waiting for me. Maybe she's taken a liking to me, decided the plane will leave with both of us or with neither. Maybe she cannot go alone.

"It's not my flight, dear. I'm a little early for mine, that's all."

There are no people left, no colours, and this cold white space is one of hundreds, and I know it will be hours before another flight departs from here. This place is dead, forgotten, and it's no place for the living. I see us as if from a distance, as if from that unknown world the others have all gone away to. We look like ghosts.

"How early?"

"An hour. Maybe more like two."

Her eyes sparkle. I know I'm supposed to laugh, but I don't find it funny. It's impossible to arrive two hours early by accident, and I can't tell what she's doing here, and it worries me.

"Why?" My voice comes out defiant and shaking, like a child arguing with her parents, who knows that because

C87

they've lived so much longer than she has, they will win.

"Why did I come here early? To watch, of course. There tend to be interesting people here." She chuckles, as if at some private joke I can't understand. "But I'd better not keep you here for my sake. Go. You're late."

She doesn't know what I am late for. Or maybe she does. For the first time I notice that her hair is not grey but an other-worldly silver. Dressed in purple, she looks like a witch from a child's storybook. I feel sure that she can see my future, though it's hidden even from me.

I take a step back, then another. Her face shrinks as I move away, but I can still see that her lips are drawn tight, and her eyes are shining. The woman at the counter calls out to me. She asks if I am staying or going. I don't answer, because I know it doesn't matter to her.

The air in the plane is stale. A hundred people have already breathed

it in and out. I walk down the aisle with my bag clutched to my chest. All the seats are taken, except one, and I can't see it at first.

I find my seat by the window. The view is of grey concrete, but that will change soon. Everything will change. We're moving, and I can see grass, so green and fresh you'd see it nowhere but in Ireland. I don't know why I'm flying away from here.

I remind myself that it's not for good, but then I think that maybe it is. This is the land of green fields and white flowers and refusal to kill. What I'm about to do is forbidden here. I don't know if I can come home after this, and if the ground wasn't already moving under me I wouldn't be able to leave at all.

I close my eyes and try to feel her moving inside me, but I feel nothing. It's too early. It will always be too early for us.

The hotel is booked and the appointment made. But I'll have some time when I get off the plane, time to

collect my things and step into the clean air, to have a chat with the cab driver about something trivial, like politics or flowers. To think a little harder until I grow tired of thinking.

At eight years old, I decided to name my first child Emily. It was the name of a favourite schoolteacher, discovered on a letter to my parents. I dreamed of the day when I'd call it out and watch my daughter running to me, when I'd write it on birthday cards, but now I know I never will. I can't give this child life, so the least I can do is name her.

They showed me her picture on the ultrasound last week. They let me hear her heart beating. And no one can say she's not real to me, not now, because the world's moving so slowly I can't bear it, so slow, and how long before we get away from here? I can't tell if we've left the ground yet, and then we have and there's no mistaking it. Emily. The world falls away and the clouds swallow us whole, and we're both beyond everything now.

CASSIA GADEN GILMARTIN

is 17 and a fifth-year student at Jesus and Mary College in Goatstown, Dublin

Illustration: Leon Zernitsky/Getty

‘WHY WERE WE ALL wearing black at the funeral?’ The young voice drifts past my ear, and I brush the side of my head against my shoulder, partly because the steam from the saucepan makes my face feel wet, and partly because I don’t want to hear.

‘It’s tradition.’

Honestly, not everyone had been wearing black. A lot of people, especially the younger ones, had been wearing other colours, half-concealed by their coats as they huddled on the pews. Many probably owned nothing in a more sombre colour, at least not of the kind you could wear to a funeral. I had been forced to buy a new outfit. I hadn’t wanted to wear any other colour.

‘Tradition like the funeral was?’

I glance back at him, his legs dangling from the kitchen chair while he watches me make dinner, his eyes following my hand as I stir the soup.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Grandpa didn’t believe in God.’

I take a deep breath, exhaling gently, though I want to let it out in a slow hiss.

‘I know. We talked about that.’

Reaching into the cupboard, I am absurdly careful not to drop the bowls. The soup pours in before I’m ready, leaving trails of green down the sides of the bowl, though it shouldn’t have been too much weight for one of my hands to support.

‘About how his funeral is more for us than for him?’

I try to remember a conversation when I said something like that, but my head is too full of the conversations I had earlier today, with dozens of people who were so sorry for my loss. My son has used the word ‘funeral’ three times now.

‘It was a celebration of your grandfather’s life, and we were celebrating in the way we knew how. He’d have been happy.’

‘But if what the priest said was true, and he lives in heaven now, then he is happy, right? Not would be.’

‘Damn it.’

A drop of hot soup lands on my arm. My son’s eyes, whenever I look back at him, are serious, concentrated, focusing entirely on my reaction, as though trying to find a truth he could not in my words. A hint of surprise at my muttered words shows; he has never heard me swear at something as simple as a slight burn. Funny, my father never managed to remain entirely in control of his language when I was growing up. It had never bothered me.

‘It was a way for us to all remember him together,’ I finally say, sticking a spoon into the side of the bowl and handing it to him. I take my own, sitting across from him. He waits until I’m listening properly.

‘But who is it we’re remembering?’ He looks troubled. ‘Grandpa was an atheist,’ he says firmly, and I find myself wondering where he learned the word.

‘I know.’

Forcefully, I take a spoon of soup, letting it burn my tongue. My son is eight years old. I should be explaining everything to him now, telling him why the priest talked the way he did, about heaven and hell and our loved ones resting in peace for all eternity. Why we’d had a Catholic funeral in the first place, and why nobody mentioned that, really, my father would have fallen asleep halfway through if he’d been there. Instead, I swallow a bland lump of broccoli and wait for my child to continue our conversation.

‘He would have hated it.’

The sulky tone sounds more normal, coming from someone so young. He uses bigger words than the other kids his age, putting them in full sentences in a way that seems almost impossibly articulate. In this and many other ways, his intelligence has always surprised me, and he only ever speaks like this when he is very upset, or very angry. Tonight, I can’t tell which.

‘He would have wanted us to be happy.’

‘He’d have known we aren’t.’

‘What?’

‘He’s dead. It’s the worst thing ever. If he wanted his funeral to be happy, he was stupid.’

‘Eat.’

He’s silent for a minute. Maybe because I’ve never said anything that sounded so much like an order before, at least not since he was very small. I never needed to. My sister told me, if I wasn’t careful, that I’d end up with a rebellious teenager, one who never had anything to say to me. For the first time, I imagine the positive side of having a kid who never asks questions and, above all, never has his own answers ready.

‘It is,’ I say at last.

‘Huh?’ He drops his spoon, looking almost eager.

‘The worst thing ever.’

He nods silently, and for a minute I wonder if all he needed was permission to be sad.

‘But it could be less bad. If we did it right.’

‘Did what right?’

‘Being sad.’

‘You think I’m being sad the wrong way?’

I meant to ask what he meant, not accuse him. To my relief, I don’t seem to have upset him, but I decide to try to distance myself from the conversation, just a little, so I can talk about his grandfather without having to think about my dad, who raised me, loved me and brought me to the zoo to see the tigers when I was only two months old.

‘There isn’t a right way.’ Suddenly, he looks up again, his eyes full of wisdom. ‘But this is all so fake.’

I’m about to reply, but when I take more than a moment to think, he repeats, ‘He would have hated it.’

‘Maybe,’ I concede.

Again, he tilts his head hopefully. He has always had such happy eyes; I hate to see him upset.

There have been a lot of times when I, as a mother, have not known what to do, and a lot of times when I’ve done the wrong thing. I take a moment to close my eyes and pray to whatever kind of being might or might not be up there that this is not one of them.

‘He really loved you,’ I whisper across the table.

The steam in front of me stirs, blowing outwards, and through it I watch him. He meets my eyes for a moment, then drops his head to think about the words, not devaluing them for their simplicity. Then he fixes his gaze on mine again.

‘I know he loved you a lot, too.’

His voice is firm again, holding the same assurance as when he told me that his grandfather had held no religious beliefs whatsoever. The words touch me more than they probably should, and I don’t want to ask any questions, not of my eight-year-old son, not now, but he reads them in my eyes.

‘He always talked about you when we were playing, about how he had known how to win the games because you gave him loads of practice. Told me how much like you I am. And he said he loved us both a lot too, just said it for no reason.’ He smiled. ‘He knew you loved him as well.’

I nodded without speaking. A strange feeling rose in me, a mixture of grief and reassurance. I had experienced the same feeling when I had gone to his house after he died, the same house I grew up in. It

had felt so familiar; so much had remained the same, and I had fought that familiarity every step of the way. Now, I smile back at my son, and I don’t ask him why he is still smiling too, or wonder too much about why, for several minutes, we are light-hearted enough to finish our soup.

It seems too early to go to bed, but I am already exhausted. My son looks tired as well. I pick up the bowls, placing the spoons inside them, so they swing around to one side when I turn around. I wash them quickly in the sink, vaguely wondering why I never bought a dishwasher.

Finally, I turn back to face my child, looking for the light in his eyes I had worried would disappear after his first experience of death. It is there; faded, fractured, but alive.

‘Would you like us to watch some TV first or go straight to sleep?’

‘I’m tired. Can we watch it tomorrow?’

‘All right.’

I promise myself that we will sit on the couch and watch television together. We will come close to tears at things that should not really be that sad. I will make extra popcorn.

When I climb into bed, the light from my bedside lamp is gentle, colouring the duvet with a soft yellow. I turn it off, and the darkness seems equally calm. The pillow is soft and comforting in my arms.

Who are we remembering? For the first time since my father’s death, I am allowed to cry myself to sleep.

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Illustration by Mike Moran/Getty

Remembrance

MY NAME'S ANTONY and I live in an apartment block down at Coolock. My best friends are Craig, Stephen and Michael. We do be always around in my car, going on cruises and all. I work for a Chinese company, doing deliveries. Craig, Stephen and Michael always buzz round with me in the car. We do always have a laugh, and when I'm off we do buzz out drinking, the lot of us.

Me mate Craig has a girlfriend, Jenny, and he's gonna be getting married in two weeks. Michael's gonna be moving to Cavan soon. We have a plan that the day before he goes, we're gonna throw a party for him and we're gonna go to a club. In two months, the lot of us are planning on going to Ibiza for Stephen's birthday. He's gonna be 21. He's gonna try apply for his licence for the car. He keeps telling us that he's going to get a Toyota Glanza. But his insurance would be too dear. I tell him that he should start off with a smaller car. Once he gets that all sorted he won't be getting in my car - ha!

He also talks to me 'bout getting a job. He wants to be a mechanic, fixing cars and all. His dad used to be a mechanic. Stephen always told us, when he was younger, that he wanted to be just like his dad.

My plans are to go back to school and go to college. I was kicked out in sixth year for being an eejit. I'm glad I'm going back 'cause I'm planning on getting a job in a factory. So I'm gonna get me Leaving and all, and go straight to college to do a course in safety purposes for factories.

It's Friday and now we're all talking about Craig's big day. I'd say it'll be a buzz! The lot of us are going. I'm going to be best man. Can't wait.

"Awh Antony," Craig says to me.

"I'm buzzing up to the bank to withdraw a few bob. Ya buzzing up man?"

"I can't man. Busy today. Have to sort a few things out, y'know."

"Alrigh," says Craig. "No prob man. Be back in a few."

I walk off and leave him to it.

So I'm just sitting back on me couch when the six o'clock news comes on. I'm watching it and it says there's a man in hospital with plenty of stab wounds. The name of this young man is Craig Connell. As soon as I hear this, I'm snapping. I go up to the hospital to see him. Jenny is there, sobbing. I ask her if I can have a word with Craig. Jenny walks out and I start talking to Craig. I ask him if he's all right and all. So we're talking 'bout what happened, and I ask him, "Who did it?" He just

tells me all he remembers is he was getting into his car and a gang approaching him, giving out loads. Then, before he knew it, the money that he had withdrawn from the bank for the wedding was gone and he was on the ground in pain, 'cause he had been stabbed.

So I says to him, "I'm gonna find these eejits that did this to you. I swear I will."

"You're only going to get yourself in trouble, Antony," says Craig.

I walk outta the room, pissed off 'bout what happened to Craig. I hop into my car and drive around looking for the gang that did this to Craig. I don't see anyone. But one of my mates, Ger, tells me that he thinks he knows who robbed Craig. I drive around a bit more but don't find them. But I plan to go out again the next day and the day after until I do.

I'm driving around again. I see a bunch of young fellas in a car in a laneway. I get out of mine and walk over to them. They're in the car counting money. One of them hops outta the car, and I say to him, "Here, where'dya get that money, man?"

The chap says, "Never mind where I got it. It has nothing to do with you, all right."

I say, "All right," and walk on, but

the gang starts following me. They threaten me. I know who they are. They tell me not to say anything. I'm getting angry. One of them pushes me. I'm really angry now.

I take out a gun. I've had a gun for a long time but I've never used it. I step back. I start shooting the people that did this to my friend Craig. Now I'm scared. What have I done? I run straight to the car, get in, turn the ignition and take off. I'm driving around. I'm shaking. I want to go to the hospital to see Craig.

I'm nearly there, but there's a Garda checkpoint. The garda says, "Sorry. You wouldn't just pull over to the side of the road there, would ya?"

I'm frightened but I pull over. The guards start searching me and I tell them, "Here, officer. I've nothing on me. Will ya let me go?"

The garda says, "You in a rush or something?"

I say, "Yeah, I am, officer. I'm goin' to see a friend in the hospital."

The garda says, "Do you mind if I search the car?"

I do mind. I don't want them to search the car, but I say, "Sure. G'wan ahead. I have nothing to hide."

So the garda begins to search the car. The gun is under the driver's seat. The garda is still searching and looks

under the driver seat.

He says, "What's this here sonny?"

I say, "Here, I don't know where that has come from."

The garda says, "Sure, sure. I would like some details."

"Me name's Antony. I'm from Coolock. I live in an apartment. Down past Clonsbaugh it is. Coolock apartments," I say to the garda.

"All right Antony. I'm arresting you on possession of a gun. You don't have to say or do anything, but if you do it may be given in as evidence later in court," says the garda.

So I'm arrested. The garda tells me I can phone someone, but I don't. I'm goin' to be in court the next day. They take my phone.

I'm sure everyone's trying to ring me to talk about Craig. They haven't got a clue where I am or what's happened. I don't know if anyone I know will be in court.

They're driving me there and we go past the snooker hall. I see everyone standing outside. Craig is there. His arm is in a sling. He doesn't look well. I don't think he should be out of the hospital. The lads are having a smoke. I ask the garda to stop so as I can say hello to my mates. They let me out of the car.

I shout at Craig, "Sorry pal. I've been arrested. I don't think I can be your best man." I walk towards Craig. And then I run. I do a legger on the gardaí. They start chasing me.

I make it to my pal Michael's house. I ask him to let me stay there for a while. At first he doesn't want to. Then he says okay. But not for long.

Now it's Wednesday. I've arranged a flight to England. I'm doing a runner on the gardaí. I don't want to go to prison. I'm up early for my flight. I'm all dressed up, and I say good luck and bye to Michael. I hop in the taxi.

The taxi driver is talking and I'm talking back and he goes, "So where you going Antony?" I jump around, a bit shocked he knows my name, but I play it cool.

"To the airport please. And how do you know my name anyways?"

The taxi man goes, "You're that fella who shot my son, aren't you?"

I'm really shocked now. I don't know him, but he knows me.

"No... Why?" I say.

I start panicking, and think who's this?

"You bleedin' are," shouts the taxi driver. "You shot him in cold blood, you bastard."

"I swear it wasn't me. Just drop me to the airport will ya."

I'm a little aggressive now. I just want to get away. So we're nearly at the airport. The taxi driver pulls into a lane and I try to get out of the car. The taxi man pulls out a gun. I'm shocked. Where did that come from? What's happened? I feel a bit dizzy. I'm in pain. I feel my chest throbbing, and there is something wet rolling down my head. Then the taxi man just dumps me out of the car, jumps back in and drives off.

I see a man walking down the lane. He's looking at me lying on the ground, covered in blood. I hear him. I say to him, "I'm afraid of dying." The man walks over to a phone box and rings the ambulance and the gardaí. So the gardaí are there investigating what happened and all. They ask the man did you see what happened. The man says, "No. I was just walking my dog and I seen this man here."

So I'm rushed to hospital and my friends haven't got a clue where I am except Michael! And then here they all are, round the bed with me and I can hear them. They're all thinking in their heads, I hope he stays alive. I think it's mad that I can hear them thinking in their heads. None of their mouths are moving. They're all here and then the nurse comes in. She looks like she has something to tell them. He was shot seven times. Six times in the upper body area and once in the head. We could not save him.

All the lads start crying and saying, "Why, why Antony? He was like a brother to me. Why?" So then the priest comes in for the last rites.

I know I'm dead.



The
novel I
started

before I
realised
it had
already
been
written

MOBY DICK

by Roddy Doyle

Call me Darren.

Herman Melville's version:
"Call me Ishmael."

MOLLOY

by John Banville

I am in my granny's room.

Samuel Beckett's version:
"I am in my mother's room."

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

by Anne Enright

It is a truth universally
acknowledged, that a
single man in possession
of a good fortune must be
online.

Jane Austen's version: "It
is a truth universally
acknowledged, that a single
man in possession of a good
fortune must be in want of a
wife."

REBECCA

by Sheila O'Flanagan

Last night I dreamt I went
to Brittas Bay again.

Daphne du Maurier's version:
"Last night I dreamt I went to
Manderley again."

THE STRANGER

by Lorrie Moore

Today, Mort is my mom.

Albert Camus's version:

"Mother died today."

MRS DALLOWAY

by Emma Donoghue

Mrs Dalloway said she
would delouse the kids
herself.

Virginia Woolf's version: "Mrs
Dalloway said she would buy
the flowers herself."

WUTHERING HEIGHTS

by Willy Vlautin

I just got back from seeing
my son of bitch landlord –
the shut in hoarder who
has it in for me.

Emily Brontë's version: "I
have just returned from a
visit to my landlord – the
solitary neighbour that I shall
be troubled with."

TO THE LIGHTHOUSE

by Eavan Boland

Yes we can, if the weather
holds up.

Virginia Woolf's version:
"Yes, of course, if it's fine
tomorrow," said Mrs Ramsay.

BIRD ALONE

by Richard Ford

Two parts of the day I love,
cocktail hour and just past
cocktail hour – old men's

time for juicing – because
they cannot sleep, because
they would sleep.

Seán Ó Faoláin's version:
"Two parts of the day I love,
morning and evening – old
men's time for walking –
because they cannot sleep,
because they would sleep."

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

by Neil Gaiman

My father's family name
being Pirrip, and my
Christian name Philip,
everyone calls me "the
Dude", "Dudester" or,
occasionally, "Dudio".

Charles Dickens's version:
"My father's family name
being Pirrip, and my Christian
name Philip, my infant
tongue could make of both
names nothing longer or
more explicit than Pip. So, I
called myself Pip, and came
to be called Pip."

A TALE OF TWO CITIES

by Arthur Mathews

It was the vest of times,
it was the wurst of times,
to open a vest and wurst
shop...

Charles Dickens's version: "It
was the best of times, it was
the worst of times..."



IT WAS THE VEST OF TIMES,
IT WAS THE WURST OF TIMES
TO OPEN A VEST AND WURST SHOP...