

The Caravan

My uncle Billy lives in a caravan in a field at the back of my house. The first time I saw another caravan on the road I thought that someone – another child – had kidnapped him on me. It was only then that I learned caravans were meant to move. Billy's caravan never went anywhere. It was plonked on a bed of concrete blocks, right beside me from the day I was born.

I used to visit Billy at night when I was too afraid to go to sleep. Billy said that I was only allowed out of the house if I could see the moon from my window and if I brought him wishes from the garden. On the night of my eighth birthday, the sight of a round, fat moon sent me straight down the stairs and out the back door, the wet grass on my bare feet, the thorns of the hedge grabbing me, pulling me back by the sleeves of my pyjamas.

I knew where the wishes hung out. A coven of them grew close to the caravan on the other side of the hedge. I picked them one by one, satisfied by the soft snap of stem and sticky juice of severed end, the bump of one fluffy white head into another. I cupped my hand around them as though protecting candles from the wind, careful not to knock off a single wisp of wish and lose it to the night.

I twirled the syllables around my head as I collected

them – dandelion, dandelion, dandelion. Earlier that day, we had looked up the word in the big dictionary underneath Billy's bed. He explained that it came from the French term – *dents de lion* – lion's teeth. The dandelion began as a pretty thing and the petals of its skirt were pointy and yellow like a tutu.

'This is its daytime dress but the flower eventually needs to go to sleep. It withers and looks tired and haggard and just when you think its time is up' – Billy held up his fist – 'it turns into a clock.' He uncurled his fingers and produced a white candy-floss dandelion from behind his back. 'A puff-ball moon. A holy communion of wishes.' He let me blow the wishes away like birthday candles. 'A constellation of dreams.'

Billy marvelled at the bouquet of wishes I presented to him when he opened the caravan door. I picked as many as I could find to impress him.

'I knew it,' he said. 'I just knew that the moon would come out for your birthday.'

We filled an empty jam jar with water and blew the cottony heads of the dandelions into it, their feathers floating on the meniscus like tiny swimmers lying on their backs. I closed the lid on the jar and shook the wishes, celebrating them, watching them dance. We left the jar on top of a dank stack of newspapers to stare out of the caravan's plastic window.

Billy heated a saucepan of milk on the hob of his gas cooker. His kitchen looked like a toy I hoped to get for Christmas. It always surprised me when it worked in real

life. He let me stir the milk until it bubbled and formed little white sheets of skin that I pulled away with the back of a spoon. He poured in the chocolate powder and I whisked the spoon around and around until my arm hurt. We tipped the steaming brown stream into a flask and brought it up to the roof to watch the stars.

It took days for the dandelion seeds to fully submerge in the jar. They clung to the surface, hanging from their ceiling of water until it seemed like they either gave up or got bored. Just when the world thought they were goners, tiny little green shoots appeared like plant mermaids growing tails underwater. Billy called me to come over and marvel at the stubborn little yokes, the wishes that refused to die.

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Today is my eighteenth birthday. I'm a bit nervous knocking on Billy's door. I don't really visit him at night anymore. The outside of the caravan is cold against my knuckles. It has a lining of rubber along the sides like a fridge door. I dig my nails into the squishiness and tear a bit away. It comes off in a smooth strip like a sliver of fat off a ham. There is a shuffle of papers and the squeeze of steps across the floor. Billy opens the door and tries his best not to seem surprised to see me.

'Well,' he says, making his way back to his armchair.

'Sleeping Beauty,' I greet him. He didn't get up for milking this morning and I had to do it for him.

‘Yeah, sorry about that.’

‘On my birthday and all,’ I say.

‘Oh fucking hell.’ He grimaces. ‘It’s a wonder St James didn’t leave you in the *leaba*.’

‘He didn’t know. Mam forgot to tell him.’

‘We’re an awful shower. What one is it anyway? Sweet sixteen?’

‘Egotistic eighteen.’

It’s a small victory to see his face scrunch into an amused grin. I wait until he turns his back to fill the kettle.

‘The offers for college came out today,’ I say.

He turns off the tap and looks back to me. ‘Was that today?’

‘Yeah. I got into Trinity. I’m starting next week.’

He looks sad. Then he grips his hands on both sides of my shoulders and lets out a sigh. ‘I’m fucking delighted for you.’

‘Thanks.’

‘Fuck the tea,’ he says, waving the idea away. ‘Fuck the tea, I’ll get the whiskey.’

He rummages around in the press. Plates rattle and a tower of bowls topples over. Billy attempts to knee the avalanche of crockery back into place. I want to clean up the mess to have something to do, but then he stands up, emerging from the press triumphant with a bottle of Jameson.

‘Happy birthday Debs,’ Billy says.

‘Thanks.’ I take the bottle of whiskey from him like it’s a prize in a raffle.

We’re both standing awkwardly. I really don’t want it to

be my idea. I'm supposed to be an adult. I can't beg for things to happen anymore.

'There's a clear sky up there tonight,' he says, finally.

'It's also fucking freezing,' I say.

'There's a hot water bottle in the press if you want it.' Billy reaches up to the door in the ceiling and pulls down the fold-up ladder to the roof. He stomps up the steps in his boots, trailing his sleeping bag behind him like a child going to bed.

I boil the kettle. The odd contents of the caravan peer at me. A wooden model of an old-fashioned aeroplane dangles over his bed. A tiny man is sitting on it as though it's a swing, a pair of binoculars in his hands. We christened him Pierre because he has a moustache.

The hot rubber of the water bottle warms my hands. I climb the steps of the ladder two by two until the night wind splashes my face. It feels like being on a boat. We crawl into our cocoons of sleeping bags and lie down on the galvanised metal sheet that covers Billy's home. The roof is cold and slippery under my hands. It feels like lying on a block of ice. We look at the sky as though it depends on us to hold it up there.

The view from the roof of the caravan is the only thing that doesn't get smaller the older I get. We can hear the cows' hooves swishing through the grass. They come mooching over and sniff around the place to see what's happening. I inhale the dank, musty sweat of the caravan off the sleeping bag. Billy smells of cigarettes and diesel. The sleeves of his jumper dangle over his fingerless woollen

gloves. A hedge of stubble prickles around his mouth and reaches across his cheekbones to join up with the hair behind his ears.

‘You have a story for me,’ Billy says.

‘I don’t feel like a story.’

‘You do,’ he says. ‘I’ll pick a star.’

I pretend to be unenthusiastic and fidget with the zip of my sleeping bag. I tuck my hair behind my ear and wait for him to land on a star.

‘Can you see the North Star?’

‘No, it’s only the brightest star in the sky.’

‘It’s not, actually. The Dog Star is the brightest.’

‘You told me the North Star was.’

‘Well, I was wrong.’

‘That’s a shocker.’

‘So you see it? I’ve shown you it before?’

‘Only a couple hundred times, Billy, but you told me it was the brightest star in the sky.’

‘It’s the second brightest.’

‘And I’m supposed to figure out the second brightest star?’

‘It’s the one with the W near it.’

‘Yes, I know, it’s the one that *seems* like the brightest . . . but it’s not.’

‘I’m just checking we’re talking about the same one. Fucking hell. So, you see those five stars that make the wonky W near it?’

I squint up at the sky and try to connect the dots. I used to pretend I was able to see what Billy saw. I hate the

effort of trying and still not being able to make things out. As far as I can tell it's like reading braille, only using lights that shine from billions upon billions of miles away. There are too many – the crowd of them all staring back at me is overwhelming.

The older I get, the more of an effort I make. Billy breaks the stars down into pictures and stories, and makes it easier to distinguish between them. The W is one of the easier ones to spot.

'Yeah, I know it,' I say. 'The one that looks like a rocking chair.'

'Exactly,' he says. I look over at his index finger pointing up, tracing the stars together in smooth, straight lines. 'Cassiopeia's chair.'

'I remember her.'

'Right so – tell me about her.'

'You know the story, Billy,' I say.

'I haven't heard you tell it before.'

I sigh to buy some time. The characters are beginning to congregate in my mind.

'Go on then,' Billy prompts.

'Cassiopeia was a queen in a past life – the wife of Cepheus,' I explain. 'He's up there too. Cassiopeia was gas. She was lovely like, but people thought she was strange. She wore her hair loose and went around in her bare feet all the time which people found shocking because she was supposed to be royalty. She gave birth to a daughter called Andromeda and she brought her up to love and respect herself – a radical idea, back in the day. Her free spirit was

mistaken for arrogance. Word got out that there was this hippie queen going around barefoot, loving herself and teaching her daughter to do the same. Poseidon wasn't having any of it. He decided to remind humans that they could not run the show. So he sent a sea monster to destroy her husband's kingdom. Cassiopeia was told that the only way to save the kingdom was to sacrifice her daughter, so she did. She chained Andromeda to a rock at the edge of a cliff and left her for dead.'

'The bitch,' Billy says.

'Well, she had no choice. It was either that or let the monster kill everyone.'

'The Greeks were fucking nuts. Can I guess what happened to Andromeda?'

'You can.'

'Rescued by prince charming?'

'Of course,' I say.

Billy passes me the bottle of whiskey. It burns my throat.

'Perseus killed the sea monster on his way back from slaying Medusa and Andromeda was obliged to marry him out of courtesy,' I say.

'Classic. And what happened to Cassiopeia?'

I point up to her. 'She's up there in her rocking chair. Poseidon tied her to it so that as she circles the North Pole, she is upside-down. She's stuck in that chair, spinning until the end of time.'

'Jesus,' Billy says. 'Spending half your time upside-down. It might make you see the world differently.'

'I'd just be dizzy.'

‘Maybe you would at first, but you might get used to it.’

‘I’m happy with gravity, thanks.’

‘Happy enough for me to push you off this roof?’

He shoves my sleeping bag so hard that I roll over and scream. ‘You prick, Billy! That’s not funny.’

‘Not a fan of the birthday bumps?’

‘Stop it,’ I say, but I’m happy and warm inside. I think about my story and take another swig from the bottle. The first sip of whiskey has already sent me spinning up towards the sky.

Commuter

It's my first day of university and I've missed the train. Billy insisted that I'd make it. He was late finishing up the milking before dropping me off at the station. So now I'm going to be late. I don't know what I'm late for, exactly. Maybe I should try and make friends. I'm nervous that all the good ones will be gone by noon. It's orientation week and I have seen films set on college campuses. If I'm going to bump into my future best friend or lover, it will happen on my first day.

I've only ever been to Dublin in December. Billy brings me up to see the Christmas lights every year. My first memory of Dublin is waiting to get the bus home from O'Connell Bridge with Billy when I was five or six. When the bus finally came, it was a relief just to get onto it to shelter from the lashing rain and the wind that was turning umbrellas inside out. Billy tapped the driver's window and showed him a ten-euro note. He folded it up and tried to squish it down the coin slot like he was doing a magic trick.

The driver looked at him. 'What am I supposed to do with that?'

Billy took out the note and made way for the passengers behind us to pay their fare. 'Sure you've plenty of change

there, boss,' he said, nodding at the clinking sound the coins made.

'Do I look like a slot machine?' The driver stared at us until Billy backed away.

We got off the bus and back into the rain. We always got the train after that.

It was strange to see Billy around people he didn't know. He wasn't as sure of himself. When he made me hold his hand, I didn't know if it was for my benefit or his.

Still, we found a way to navigate the city that suited us. The years melt into each other so that they become one: we would stop by the GPO to pay our respects to Cúchulainn and the lads, then walk across the bridge and up through Dame Street as far as Thomas Street to the bakery where a scary woman with a pastry face sold us fifty-cent sausage rolls. Billy once offered a cigarette to a homeless man along the canal. We sat down on a bench with him and had the kind of easy conversation some people make at the church gate after mass.

On Grafton Street, we watched a puppet in the window of Brown Thomas teasing a shoe with a hammer and nail. Toy trains went chugging around their predestined paths. Billy asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I pointed at a busker painted as a bronze statue and said I wouldn't mind being one of them because their job was to make people happy. Either that or a priest. He smiled and said, 'Good luck with that.'

Billy always wanted me to apply for Trinity. 'The only college worth going to. Fairly up their own holes though.'

He pointed at the high stone walls and spiked railings at the side entrance on Nassau Street but we never went in. I don't think he realised that it was open to the public. I always thought of Trinity as a reverse *Shawshank Redemption* situation, where you had to bribe Morgan Freeman with cigarettes and tunnel your way in.

Last year, when my school brought us to a careers fair, Morgan Freeman wasn't manning the Trinity stand. Instead, a grey-faced woman in a navy pantsuit gave me a brochure, eyed my scruffy uniform and told me that it took a lot of brain power to get into Trinity. She was wrong. It didn't take much brain power at all. You don't have to be smart to get into Trinity. You just have to be stubborn.

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I lose my ticket on the train up. I only realise this at the ticket barriers at Connolly station. I go over to the box marked INFORMATION and tell the man behind the glass window what happened.

'Where did you get on at?' he asks.

'Maynooth.'

'How much was the ticket?'

'I can't remember.'

'Can I see some identification please?'

'I don't have any.'

'What's your name sweetheart?'

'Debbie. Eh, Deborah White.'

'Are you over eighteen?'

‘Yeah.’

‘Well Deborah, you’ve got yourself a hundred euro fine.’ He points to a small sign at the bottom corner of the window that reads FIXED PENALTY NOTICE and slips me a sheet of paper through the tray. I scan it: *Up to twenty-one days to comply – if the penalty goes unpaid – may be subjected to a court appearance – may face a fine of up to a thousand euros upon conviction.*

‘I lost my ticket,’ I say.

‘Love, if you bought the ticket you’d remember how much it cost.’

‘But I genuinely can’t.’

‘I don’t know that. Show your fine to yer man at the barrier there and he’ll let you through.’

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I enter Dublin on my own for the first time as a convicted criminal.

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I find myself following a woman on her way to work. She is wearing a pair of runners with a pencil skirt and tights, takeaway coffee in one hand, briefcase in the other. She’s walking as if she’s trying to catch up with the rest of the day. I keep my distance a few paces behind her. We cross a wide bridge that vibrates under the weight of all our footsteps, bouncing under our feet as though it’s trying to cheer us up.

I get as far as O’Connell Street before I pluck up the

courage to ask a guard to point me in the direction of Trinity. He laughs at me and I blush, hating myself. I set off in the direction he sends me with a new resolve to look like I know where I'm going.

I wait by the railings at the front gate for a while before entering. I watch people going in and out of the mouse-hole that leads into the college and wonder why they made the entrance so tiny. It reminds me of a disturbing episode of *Oprah* I eavesdropped on when I was six years old. When my grandad was alive, daytime TV was his kryptonite. After eating his dinner in the middle of the day, he'd sit down and watch either *Oprah*, *Judge Judy* or Anne Robinson on *The Weakest Link*. On this particular episode of *Oprah*, a psychologist with floppy hair said that walking through doorways causes a brief lapse in memory. The audience of women gasped and nodded, remembering the times they left a room to do something only to stand there cluelessly scratching their heads.

I refused to leave the sitting room, convinced that now that I knew what the doorways were up to, they would wipe my memory clean. I clung to the armchair, burying my head in the crease of the cushions, kicking and biting Mam's hands when she tried to pull me up. In the evening, I gave up the fight and she dragged me into the kitchen to eat my tea. I crossed the threshold wondering how long it would take for me to forget who I was.

This doorway feels like it has the power to do something similar. It doesn't matter who I am. Once I walk through that door I will be changed. I'm not prepared for this. It feels like I should have a funeral for myself.

I make it look like I'm waiting for someone in case anyone is watching me. I look at my phone and my watch and scan the curious parade that passes by. Androgynous grunge, preppy blazers, cropped capri trousers, Abercrombie and Fitch jumpers, Ralph Lauren T-shirts, tote bags adorned with badges for obscure political campaigns.

A girl wearing a yellow raincoat gets off her bike. It's one of those vintage bicycles with a wicker basket at the front. I have no idea how she is pulling off the raincoat. Black hair. Fringe. Freckles. Nose-piercing. She looks happy – excited, but not in an embarrassing way.

I am wearing my best pair of jeans and one of Billy's check shirts with the cuffs rolled up. I look like I'm going out to dig potatoes. I watch the girl disappear through the hole to the entrance into the front square. I take a deep breath and follow her.



Standing under the banner that heralds Freshers' Week, I am painfully aware of how fresh I am. I don't know what I was expecting – maybe a designated corner for the purpose of making friends. I'm used to knowing a person's name, their dog and what their da is like drunk before I risk speaking to them. There are stalls and tents full of people who seem to know each other already. English accents clip the cobblestones. I wander around like a self-conscious ghost waiting for someone to notice me.

‘Hello!’

‘Jesus.’

‘Sorry, I didn’t mean to frighten you.’ A bearded avocado is talking at me. ‘I’m with the Vegan Soc and we are playing a word association game to try and debunk the myths surrounding veganism. So, like, if I say vegan, what’s the first thing you think of?’

‘Hitler.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘Hitler was a vegan. At least, people say he was. It was propaganda, probably. Or bullshit.’

‘OK, interesting. You still associate the term with that factoid even though it was proven to be false.’

‘Something about Hitler sticks in the mind.’

‘Would you ever consider going vegan?’

‘I don’t know. I live on a dairy farm.’

‘Dairy farming takes babies away from their mothers,’ he says. I can’t tell if he’s joking or serious. ‘Cows have been modified over centuries for human consumption. They are Frankenstein’s monsters, every single one of them.’

‘But Frankenstein only had one monster,’ I say.

He pauses to think about this for a moment until he comes to a conclusion in his head. ‘Exactly,’ he says, pointing his finger at me as though he has crossed a finishing line and won the conversation.

‘What’s your name?’ I try.

‘Ricky.’

‘Ricky,’ I repeat. ‘I’ll try to remember that.’

‘You won’t.’ Ricky looks like he is going to say something

and then stops himself. 'Go vegan,' he says instead, and fist-pumps the air.

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I join the end of a queue to look like I'm doing something.

'Is this the queue for registration?' The girl in the yellow raincoat is talking to me.

'I think so,' I say.

'Great, I need to do that today. What course are you doing?' she asks.

'English,' I say.

'Oh great, me too. Are you in Halls?'

'Ha?'

'Halls. College accommodation?' she asks.

'No, I live at home. About an hour away.'

'Oh, you're a commuter! How are you finding it?' She says it like she is genuinely interested in my wellbeing.

'Well, I've only done it once so far.'

'Oh right, yeah, that was a stupid question.' She pauses. 'I'm Santy, by the way.'

'Nice to meet you, Santy. You've a cool name.'

'Thanks very much. My parents are big on Greek mythology.'

'Oh.' I've never heard of a Greek called Santy.

'What's your name?' Santy has the type of green eyes I've only seen in music videos.

'Debbie.'

She laughs. 'Sorry, it's just – you just pointed to yourself.'

‘Did I? Sorry, I’m not used to introducing myself.’

Santy is from Dublin, but she doesn’t speak like the Dublin kids in the Gaeltacht who sounded so posh they may as well have been foreign. She sounds normal. Grounded. Unspoiled. There has to be something wrong with her.

‘Santy!’ A girl wearing a beret walks towards us. She is short and stocky, wearing expensive glasses and carrying a brown leather satchel.

‘Hiya! Debbie, this is my roomie, Orla. She’s from Clare.’

‘Nice to meet you,’ I say, giving the girl a firm handshake. Anyone else from the country is my competition. There’s only room for one gobshite from the back-arse of nowhere. I needn’t have worried though. Orla sounds like a member of the royal family.

‘What are we doing today?’ she asks Santy.

‘I need to register,’ Santy says.

‘Great, me too.’ Orla pulls a folder out of her satchel. ‘I think I have everything.’

‘Are we meant to bring stuff with us?’ I ask.

‘You don’t have the forms?’ Orla asks.

‘What forms?’

‘You’re supposed to register online. You got an email.’

‘I haven’t seen it yet,’ I say. ‘Our internet at home is shite.’

‘Oh dear.’ Orla looks embarrassed for me. ‘There’s really no point in queueing if you don’t have the forms.’

Santy tilts her head to the side and looks at me like I’m a stray dog she’s found in her back garden. ‘It’s OK, you

can do it any day this week,' she says. 'All they're going to do is give us condoms and a rape whistle.'

'Do the boys get rape whistles too?' Orla wonders.

'I suppose so,' Santy says. 'It would be sexist not to give them to everyone.'

'Do you know where I could find a computer?' I ask.

'Have you checked the library?' Orla clearly thinks I'm an idiot.

'Oh right yeah, sorry,' I say, and apologise my way out of the line.

'It's that way,' Orla says, pointing in the opposite direction.

'Thanks.'

I pretend to walk towards the library. I open up my purse and count up coins to buy a ticket for the train home.

Not Maud Gonne

I dump my bag in the kitchen and go straight out to the yard. I find Billy in one of the pens about to bottle-feed a newborn calf. He clutches a big plastic carton with a tube hanging out of the hole where the lid should be. He sees me watching and takes exaggerated steps as he sneaks up on his victim. She scarpers as soon as he lays a hand on her.

‘Come here ya little bollix,’ he says, grabbing the calf by the tail and pulling her back to him.

‘Bitch,’ I correct him. ‘She’s a girl. It’s the same with the cows, you’re always calling them bastards but they’re women.’

‘The day I have to worry about the gender identity of cows is the day I lie down on the flat of my back for a bit of euthanasia.’ He shoves the plastic tube into her mouth and down her neck, then turns the bottle upside down and holds it above his head. The beestings trundles out of the bottle into the calf’s stomach. I wonder if she is able to taste it.

‘You look shook,’ Billy says.

‘I am.’

‘How’d it go today?’

I shake my head and feel myself go red.

‘That bad?’

‘Why did you never tell me there was a Greek called Santy?’ I ask.

‘Ha?’

‘A girl I met. Her name was Santy.’

‘Good for her,’ he says.

‘I thought you knew all of them.’

‘The Greeks? A whole ancient civilisation? I’m flattered.’

‘You talk about them like you do.’

Billy shoves his cheek out with his tongue like he’s trying to work out a sum in his head. ‘Let me get this right. You’re thick with me for not telling you something I thought you already knew.’

‘No, I’m thick with you because you talk like you own everything.’

‘Wow-wee. That’s some accusation.’

I hop the gate and sit cross-legged in the straw. ‘And now I sound like a gobshite.’

‘You do. This girl . . . Her name didn’t happen to be Xanthe, no? X-a-n-t-h-e. That’s a Greek name.’

‘Oh fucking hell.’ I collapse into the straw. Blood rushes to my head. ‘I kept calling her Santa Claus’s nickname.’

‘Well, now you know.’

‘How can I have lived this long without knowing anything?’

“I know that I know nothing.” Socrates. By the way, other people know about him too. I’m not sitting on him.’

I pick up a strand of straw and twirl it in my fingers. It goes from being two blurry strands into one strand when I open and close my left eye. ‘I hate being stupid.’

‘You’re not stupid. Just, maybe, naïve?’

‘Well, that’s condescending.’

‘There’s nothing condescending about it. Naïve is a great word. You should look it up.’

‘Give it a rest.’

‘Naïf, from *nativus* meaning natural or innate. It has the same roots as the French verb *naître* – to be born.’ He pulls the tube out of the calf’s mouth. It trails across the straw like an umbilical cord. ‘We’re all naïve. There’s no other option.’

‘It must be exhausting being so profound.’

‘I’ve taught you everything I know,’ he says, clanking the gate open.

‘I think that’s the problem.’

‘Are you making me my tea?’

‘Do I have a choice?’

I hold out my hand and he pulls me up from the straw.

Outside the shed, we pass three dead calves piled on top of each other.

‘Notice anything strange about that one?’ Billy says, poking the one in the middle.

‘It’s dead?’

He turns the calf over with his boot. ‘Its legs are in the middle of his belly.’

‘It’s like Chernobyl out here,’ I say. ‘What was wrong with the other two?’

‘They were too big. The bull gives calves too big for the girls to push out. I did my best but those are the casualties.’

‘Oh.’ I nod, and try to be in control of how I feel about

that piece of information, as though knowing something about the problem could lessen it somehow.

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I take out ham, tomatoes and butter from the fridge and toss them onto the table.

‘When I say vegan, what’s the first word you think of?’ I ask.

‘Hitler,’ Billy says.

‘Same.’

‘Although, he probably wasn’t.’

‘Yeah, I know.’

I start chopping the cherry tomatoes in half. ‘I didn’t apply for my grant on time.’

‘Why’s that?’

‘I’m allergic to reality.’

‘You’re going to have to get over that. Is there a way I can pay your fees for this year?’

‘You can’t afford to be doing that.’

He fills up the kettle by the snout. ‘You can’t afford not to go to college. You want out of here.’

‘I’m not ready.’

‘What do you mean you’re not ready? You should be itching to get out.’

‘Well, I’m not,’ I say. ‘We don’t even have proper internet.’

‘I can’t really get a signal from the roof of my yoke,’ Billy says.

‘I’ve no money to get a laptop.’

‘Is that what this is about? You can’t go to college because our broadband is shite?’

‘It’s not just that, it’s loads of things. Like, who’s going to look after Mam?’

‘That’s not your job.’

‘See you say that, but someone has to keep an eye on her. That someone is not you.’

‘To be fair now, you’re not great at it either.’ He sits down at the table. ‘Since when were you Mother Teresa? You’re looking for excuses to stay when you should be raring to get out of here.’

‘Just for the year. I’ll take a year out. I can defer my course and go back next year. Do it properly.’

‘There’s never a right time to start anything.’

‘There is. I want to live in town.’

‘Hang on.’ He puts his hand up and swallows his gobful of sandwich. ‘Let me get this straight. You come home traumatised after spending a few hours in the place, and now you want to move there?’

‘I’ll apply to stay in college accommodation.’

‘In a city that just scared the shite clean out of you.’

‘I’ll save up this year. You don’t have to pay me as much as James.’

‘No fear of that. I don’t pay him enough for all the work he does in the yard, never mind the time he spends baby-sitting your mother. That’s all done pro-bono.’

‘Just give me enough to move out next year.’

‘To throw away on paying rent to live in a box in town?’

‘It’s what people do,’ I say.

He licks his index fingers and picks up the crumbs of brown bread like a child. 'I'll see about getting you a caravan.'

'Is that a yes then?' I ask.

'It's a fart in the wind is what it is.'

'Well, I'm not going back anyway. I can't.'

'You can and you will.'

'You can't make me.'

'Ah Jesus, Debs, listen to yourself. Do you realise how spoilt you sound? A day in Dublin has done this to you.'

I hold back my head, trying to force the tears back down. I've always cried easily. I hate myself for it, which makes me cry even more. I let out a few sniffles.

Billy sighs, embarrassed by my tears. 'Come on now, less of that. Chin up, snowflake.'

'Don't call me that.'

'*Don't call me that,*' he mocks me.

'You're such a child,' I say, but it's done the trick. I've stopped crying. I wipe the tears away with the sleeves of my shirt.

'Debs.' He waits until I look at him. 'The city frightens you. Don't let that stop you. Get to know it.'

'Do you know that my only experience of town is hanging around Collins Barracks and the GPO with you?' I ask.

'My stint at trying to radicalise you. You're no Maud Gonne.'

'Neither was she. An English-born Irish revolutionary muse. How'd she swing that one?' I dunk a fig roll into my tea.

‘Her father was a Mayo man. It was hardly her fault she was born in England. Anyway, she broke free of her naïvety.’

I catch the wet biscuit in my mouth just as it’s about to fall into the tea. ‘She allowed herself to be mythologised.’

‘And that’s a bad thing?’

‘I think so.’

Billy stands up and slip-slides in his socks towards the back door. ‘You’re going to college this year,’ he says. ‘If I have to foot the bill, so be it.’ He bends down to put on his boots. ‘Learn how to drive and I’ll sort out the Internet,’ he says, and slams the door behind him.