

MARY, BEFORE

It is the way of evolution that one generation provides for its offspring the thing it lacked itself. And you are here, my angel, and he is not.

We could not speak civilly to each other. As the waves smashed against the house, we smashed against each other. The sea became fearsome. I cursed him and he cursed me. His dark pall mirrored in the water. I soared through these troubles, breathless and full of love. The weather cleansed me. As cold as it became outside, my heat and my fire glowed red for all to see.

Calm times gave us rest, and in those hours he would talk. He would tell me of the unhappiness of childhood, and I think now, in hindsight, that this is where we bonded; this was our only mutual ground.

I have remembered his sadness. I honour him as I raise his child without him. My strength came from him, from his lost years of joy, and I pray to God each morning before you wake that I may face the day with love in my heart and a smile on my face.

ROCK FOLK

Bluebottles buzz. The dog hates the noise, the whining of them in the stillness: they are everywhere. She snaps her jaws, clicking her teeth, adding a beat to the sonic whine. Some newspapers lie behind the door. I roll one up and lash out, bash at the air. This is no anomaly; this infestation. This is normal. The municipal dump and the sewage works were built before the new houses. Soon the winter winds will scatter the stink and the insects, but on this last calm day of autumn they linger.

We go out to the shop to get fly papers and peppermint tea. To find a mother-and-baby group: to get out of this house.

As I step into the street a fat woman with bleached hair calls across the street to me. She speaks with an English accent. Says she hopes I don't mind, but she's borrowing the slide from the garden. She thinks it's wrong for the kids to be playing in our garden while we're out. She thought they might damage the plants. Your slide is now on the small patch of dried earth that is someone else's back garden. She says she will return it later. I know she never will.

People stop me on the path. They say: 'my how she's grown. What a pretty girl.' There's soft concern in their eyes. An elderly lady gives us a pound for sweeties. She says she raised

three on her own. She says she knows it is hard now, but it will get easier.

We reach the bank. There is twenty four pence in my account. Not enough to make a withdrawal. I count the change in my purse and add the newly acquired pound to the tally: enough for fly papers. Not enough for dinner.

The local shopkeeper knows his market, he has stood at this counter, stocked these shelves, all his adult life. There is a selection of repellents. I buy the cheapest. He chats in Gaelic to another customer. I understand their conversation. They speak in phlegmatic phrases and shake their heads. Her man is dead and her children are all away. They speak of the ones who have gone, remembering the life in the place when they were young.

I resolve to teach you Gaelic, that you may know poetry and always have the expressions of your heart slaving on your tongue. I will carry you up the hills and tell you the names and stories of each place. Your ear and your tongue will be wealthier for such an education. But first I must move to the country. There isn't a bare hill left here with its own Gaelic name still upon it.

I do not raise my eyes to the conversation. I listen like a mute. I steal a meal.

I push you in your buggy through the town to the old dance hall and the toddler group. There is an entrance fee of another pound and I ask if I can pay double next time. We are admitted to the smooth floor boards with toys stretched on their length. You fight to free yourself from the ties of the pushchair. Old MacDonald and his sheep bleat on repeat on the stereo. You race around the room. You smile and laugh. Here in this place of tea and toys and noise you are a shining social light. You beam and bounce. From child to child, from group to group, to

each one a hug or a kiss is taken from you. Your tokens to the world are the simple gestures of love. It is all you know. You are so bright and so alive and so tantalisingly happy, while other children pout and push at each other. I do not know how I produced such a magnificent specimen, and all on my own.

All on my own. The utter loneliness I feel in these groups of mothers and babies sipping tea and spooning yogurts. I have no gossip. I have no news. I have no catalogue shopping to brag about. There is no husband or in-law for me to moan about. I do not know the newest Mother, the tiniest baby. I am silent in this clutch of cacklers. I know they will turn on me, turn on each other in moments of anger or frustration, will lash out with their tongues smashing frail sentiments and unwise fashion decisions ... just as a few hours ago I bashed the flies.

I attach myself to a two-year-old boy in a T-shirt and pretend with him that we are racing plastic cars along a plastic road. We make loud bbbrruummm sounds and he smiles.

Two hours pass. You and I are covered in the dust from the floor. We are both tired and content from our collision with society.

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Past the pier. Balamory styled coloured doors. Past the queue of B&Bs. Along the shore old boats die, caged fish grow and noseys seals are shot. By the posh hotel. Through dog shite alley. To the sea, to the sea. To the secret garden of the rock people.

They fell from the mountain many years ago. The entire village of stone landed on the path above the cliffs. You find a stick. Your limited vocabulary tells me you think it is a magic wand. You knock on rock. And call out in greeting. Some

words I know as English, but mainly it is yabbering. Nonsense ramblings. I translate automatically, in tune with your imaginings.

A small squat boulder has a recess for a door and a nook of moss for a doorbell. You ring the bell but nothing happens so you take the stick and strike the door. One word, a name, is called.

“Kaku,” you say.

“Come Kaku, out!” The eyes in your head light as he opens his door and shows himself. You stoop suddenly and pick a little pebble off the ground. Offer it over. And it is gone, taken.

“Songu,” you say. “Come Songu, out!”

And the second one appears from the recess in the rock. You bend just then and snatch at a stalk of green, hold it up to the one called Songu.

I sit on another rock, probably another dwelling. I watch. I see their round ruddy faces. They are low and grey. Their ears and noses are large and their eyes are tiny. Hair like heather grows out of their heads. He has a beard that may be some tangled lichen. Faded ferns form clothing.

Their voices are mumbles and are deep and gravely. Like little stones and pebbles being swept through a burn. Like the crunch of a stout boot into a mountain stream. Your voice is the tinkling of that clear water stream. You make light music of the air and Kaku and Songu ground it in the tones of all time.

Drinks are offered. You cup your hands and hold them out, little podgy doughy digits waiting for wonders. You sip, raising your baby hands to your mouth, and you make motions to me to do the same. And I do, I cup my hands together and hold them out. And then drink.

The mouth that was caked and dry is now moist and clean.

My heart slows. My breath becomes deep. I actually feel my body relax; an almost forgotten sensation. The daily domestic duties become rubbish in my head and are discarded. Sanctuary is offered me as you dance in circles with Songu.

Kaku takes me by my hand and leads me low down; encases me with rock; enshrouds my soul with soil. I ask for help with my life and the drum of his heart holds me, offers to me the wisdom of the Ancients....

“Transcend Your Reality.”

I take his words as one would take a gift of gold.

Not a second in time has elapsed. You are still in a twirl with Songu. Infected by your giggles, I laugh, giggling like a little girl. Kaku holds out his hand, his great calloused paw. I hold the cold limb and feel that it is smooth, like polished haematite. I look deep into the very grey eyes, seeking the soul of this Being. The whole body beats slightly – it seems it is the rhythm of his huge heart. I am struck by this moment, aware that I have met, and been instructed by, a Being of Pure Love.

I want to ask so many questions and he sees the wondering in my eyes and shakes his head to silence me. He asks me to return some day, tells me I am new on my journey and will not comprehend his answers. He says he will explain later, when I have learnt more of this island world where the ancestors are still peaceful. He says there are many dangers. He tells me not to be afraid of tigers. He warns me of faeries, says they are mainly full of mischief.

You come skipping over. Kaku is but inches taller than you and must only bend his head to kiss you. Songu goes to the door of her boulder-home.

I see now the lie of the village, the paths between the dwellings. There are others, of that I am certain. I strap you back into

your buggy. You warm into sleep, and we bumble back to our box.

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Potatoes fall out of the lining of my coat and dislodge the carrots. The onion is still safe in my bra – nearly there, nearly home, stay put, please, dear veggies. I am mortified. I have to bend down and collect the pinched potatoes. I look about me quickly, and coax a carrot back up my sleeve. All day they have nestled in my clothing, the onion leaving a twang in the air and up my nose.

I saw the opportunity as I waited for the old shopkeeper to finish his conversation. I saw our dinner waiting. Now the spuds are spread out on the street and under the wheels of the buggy and I have to scabble about and be furtive again. I gather them into my coat pockets.

I hate to wake you. My breasts are heavy with milk, about to start dripping. Come, baby, wake up now and let me comfort your cries and kiss your face. Let me change that nappy and watch you toddle about the floor and squidge your soft bottom. I have time now, little sweetheart, dinner is bubbling away to itself, let me wake you and make raspberries on your tummy. We could bathe together and you can slide up and down my soapy body. If I put some Billie Holliday on the stereo would you rouse yourself and dance and jiggle with me?

I sway my hips and run my hands the length of my body, pretending I am still sexy. I shoogle my shoulders and my feet move to Stormy Weather. The kids on the street can see me, peer in and point at the madwoman trying to dance to weird music. I amuse them. I make them laugh.

Bare baby bum, beautiful. We crawl and squirm on the carpet. We listen to The Beatles and I try to teach you the words. We've four stolen potatoes, four stolen carrots, one stolen onion, some magical sausages, and all of it is swimming in a big steel pot with a plate for a lid – hot, homemade food. The allowance for single mothers who do not work will be in my bank account tomorrow. It is a pittance but tomorrow we will eat fresh fish.

I mash stew. You put both fists into the bowl and squeeze. I do not know who I should ask about this, the correct procedure for feeding babies. My way is fun, but not exactly successful. We need someone to help guide us, to guide me in this motherhood maze.

Time for a bath and then bed, baby, for soapy, sudsy, slippery, wriggly, splashy, fun time, followed by a massage. And the draining of the boobs as you slip from this wakefulness to sleep.

I think I am a boat; an old dying rowing boat. I am moored to a rock. I may only sway this way and that. Only traverse the length of a rope. I cannot venture to free lands, only dream a notion of other times, other places. Loneliness has set rot to my timbers. I wish for sails and an oar to help me along. I am wood, made by a tree. I have danced with the wind. I have played with the rain. I have housed birds and squirrels, sheltered their young. But time passes and change is inevitable.

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I wake to the sound of the dog barking, there is shouting and some banging coming from somewhere. The street lights shine through the sitting room window. Two teenagers are

bouncing a ball off the side of my house. It bangs on the window and they laugh, one girl, one boy in hysterics. They see me and my bed-hair and they seem pleased. They concentrate their attentions on the window now and aim the ball for the space where I stand. They succeed. The dog shouts again and then hides under the table. I hide under the table, too, to comfort the dog, to think about what I should do. A passing wind of bravery ruffles my hair and I stand and go to the door. Go out, confront them. Only, I am not confrontational and I mess it up. I speak softly.

“My baby is sleeping. Would you mind playing elsewhere, please?”

They snigger. The boy speaks. He is small for his age and his shoulders are hunched like one who is afraid to stand tall.

“You are a fucking weirdo” he tells me. “You don’t belong here. We want you out. We are going to have a party when you go. Fucking Lesbo.”

The girl starts a chant.

“Devil child, devil child, mother of the devil child. Devil child, devil child, mother of the devil child”.

I close the curtains on the outside world and take the drape off the television, turn it on. I spoon dark brown stew into a bowl and sit and watch Coronation Street.

OUT OF THE RAIN

He came with the rain, out of the damp grey. The deluge fell down and he rose up out of it. The bright boxes paled behind the fresh aura. A membrane encased him. The wet seemed not to mind him at all, nor he the downpour. He bounced along with sun shining from his blue blue eyes. Nothing could touch him, could detract from the joy in his heart, the smiles of summer days in his head. He was invincible. I thought he wore a halo. I saw some sort of angel stomp through this barren no-man's land.

He was swathed in a blanket. An ancient tartan rug circled his girth and swung about his shoulders. Healthy socks joined hardy boots. One shin, another, a flash of knee and I was transfixed. I gawped out at the live man with two legs, upright and sober and strong and happy, just striding along. Long forgotten rosaries slipped around my subconscious and my lips moved in silent prayer. I willed him in. I pleaded with the powers above and below to allow me to speak with him. Mirth and magic oozed from his pores. I wanted some of that.

He hesitated in the road. He listened (or so it seemed) to the delicate notes of 'Hail Mary forgive us our sins' trail into the ether, and he turned to the window. He saw me. Our eyes met

and I was lost. Lost and gone forever Oh my darling. I abandoned my daughter with a bowl of pureed beetroot in breast milk and ran to the front door.

“Thigh a-staigh bhan uisge!” I demanded. He heeded me not and seemed uncomprehending. I repeated in English “come in out of the rain”. He grinned and opened the gate.

Had I been wise, had desperation not torn my heart already, had I retained any sense of man I may have paused for breath and thought of this great Highland lad with all the trimmings of the culture and yet none of the language sauntering around Singlemotherville unaccompanied, and I might have smelled the game. It is too early in the story for if-onlys. Or maybe it is already too late.

“Are ye lost?” I said.

“I am not. It is you that must be lost, sister, in this cultural wasteland,” he replied.

“You are soaked to your skin.”

“That is but a wee shower and handy for washing the dirt of the road off of my plaid.”

So that’s what it was. The massive woven woollen thing he had swaddled about his body and kept up with an old belt, decorated with a sporran. His voice was deep and echoey. Resonant with rhythm as taught by dramatists and elocution classes. It was a lowland accent and hid some foreign twang. The sound of him brought moisture to my very dry places.

“Take off yer boots and leave them there. Come away in,” I ordered, hiding the tremble with terrible strength. I wanted to undress him. Put the babby to bed and take him and stake my claim on him, this vision of masculinity.

“There’s a hole in my boot’ll make a soggy patch on your carpet.”

Wordless, I went to find my best socks, not the pink fluffy ones from an aunt at Christmas but the handknit pair uncovered in a charity shop. To impress him, to nurture him, to show I cared, to give him a reason to return. I imagined the scene where he would come back through the little houses and call from the road:

“Woman, I have your socks and they need a wash”.

Meanwhile, he found the living room, the baby in the high-chair, the dog waiting for scraps. He surveyed the scene with a glint and a wink and when I returned, he grinned.

“That’s a bonny babe,” he declared.

My tongue froze.

“Her father will be cross with you, inviting a strange man into the house when you should be feeding the wane.”

“She doesn’t know her father and he doesn’t know her.”

Unwitting fool, I supplied the answer he desired without thought or hesitation.

“He must be dead or very stupid to abandon this beauty,” he said.

“He is alive and well and lives an hour away but cannot find his way here. He left when I fell pregnant. It was a difficult time. I am a difficult woman.”

I did not mean to say so much. Too many words already spilling from my mouth and not the ones I wished, not blabbing the bare truth for that must be hidden deep within. Now he would think me some monstrous creature unable to mind my man or shut my mouth.

I looked about the house then, our little council house, and I saw the mess. The kitchen door lay open and the scene inside, was clear. A sink stacked with unwashed crockery. A floor covered in clattered clothes. Coffee cups and their fetid contents,

foul brown rings on every surface.

Last night I went to bed. The daily debris remained wherever it had fallen and I crawled exhausted into my pit. The sound of your snores did not bring the Hoover out of hiding. I was not compelled to clean and sort and put away as you cruised unconscious through faery lands. As you dreamt, so did I. Curled up beside you I shared your innocent sleep. You had one tiny fist stretched toward me, the fat bracelets around your wrist the last thing I saw before I closed my eyes last night. And now I regret my momentary lapse. I tidy at night, every night. So afraid am I of the health visitor; the neighbours; the judges that stroll into my life every day that rather than rest I polish and make perfect the place.

The drips from yesterday's porridge are congealed onto the dining table. The organic cotton nappies soak in their shit-filled bucket in the kitchen doorway. I had neither the strength nor the inclination to rinse the muck out of them, until this moment. The bra, the bolster holder, outsized catapult, stained by dripping breasts decorates the only armchair. The breast pump, unholy torture device glares with one eye from atop the television. He stared at it and shook his head, just a little and went to join you.

Decisions are hard, my little one. For dreamers such as you and me, the choices of life are immense obstacles to be pondered and dissected until all that remains is what must be done.

He was trying to entertain you when I returned from self-mortification to the moment in time. He had introduced and ingratiated himself by emptying the contents of his sporran onto the table. He had avoided the old food spills. A brief history in male fashion was the topic of conversation.

“Long, long ago all the men in Scotland wore these dresses.

And this thing here is the matching hand bag. Once upon a time it would have held oatmeal but I carry my toothbrush and a pack of cards. Here we are, look at these pretty pictures.”

You offered him your attention. You studied him with laughter in your eyes and I knew you’d found a toy. I hoped I’d found a playmate.

I washed two cups, put the lid on the nappy bucket and filled the kettle with water, set it to boil. There was not time to do more. There never is the time to do more. The kettle clicked off and your conditioned response was to howl as though set on fire. He was shocked at your sudden change of whim.

“Boobs,” I explained. “She cannot see me sit with a cuppa before she has her boobs. It’s what babies do, yell for milk and cuddles as Mammy pours boiling water on her first cup of tea of the day.”

He nodded.

I scooped you up then from the chair and cradled you. I debated whether to secrete myself away and leave him alone in this midden, or just behave as normal. I chose the latter. Perhaps he’ll think I’m Mother Earth. So I suckled and soothed my little girl whilst a stranger watched. You drained one, moved to the other, noisily greedily gulping. Then, sated, you belched, reclined in my arms and fell asleep. Unable now to fake any thing I carried you to my bed and tucked you in. I simply by-passed your room and the cot I pretend you sleep in.

He watched. He sat in the only armchair with his arms stretched out along the back, chest puffed out; observing.

The bedroom mirror displayed a huge woman with sagging breasts. The hair was wild. It was an image of an overgrown beast, the Highland cow. The hairbrush disappeared several weeks ago, sucked up into the house never to be seen again.

Beads of sweat rolled down between my udders, dripped down the backs of my knees. Anxiety – palpitations made pulp of my body.

A man! Fit and well, in my living room and I look like, like, like ... a milk cow with too much hair ...

“Sister, this place does not become you,” he says. In his hand is a pipe. He is fixing a smoke. “This is my pipe of peace, take a smoke with me and chill out sister.”

He is foreign – of that I am sure.

“Is it drugs?” my little girl voice squeaks at him.

“It is grown on the good green earth and can only aid you through your troubled waters. Go on, get that into you. You need it more than anyone I know.”

Maybe he is German. Waters sounds like Vaters.

“It’s been a while,” I sigh, and offer thanks to all the angels and saints. “I try and avoid the drug scene here.”

“This is grass, sister. It has no chemicals so it’s not a drug so it’s no bother”.

He stresses ‘no bother’, almost shouting it out.

I nod. He passes the pipe and his lighter. I try not to grab. I don’t want to seem too keen. I am desperate of course, but he doesn’t need to know how desperate.

“I grow it myself in polytunnels in Devon. I come up to bring my Ma her supply. She has a croft at the arse end of nowhere. I’m thinking the universe sent me here this day to help you. You seem to be the most stressed person on this island. Do you wanna talk about it?”

He has turned more w’s into v’s. I won’t mind a little idiosyncrasy; the man is interested, in me! The pipe, the lighter, the fragrance, my senses jingle and fade. Years and times fall away from me. I inhale again and again. I suck until it’s gone.

“Last week someone dug up my lavender plants while I slept, the week before they took all the pot plants. Her toys have been stolen right out of the garden. They fight and shout and beat each other out there in the middle of the street. Teenagers follow us around. They call me lesbian. They call her devil child”.

“Glasgow’s even worse,” he replies. He makes a hard-man face, straightens his back a little more and lets his knees fall open. It is more natural than an act.

“The woman next door is drunk on cider all day and all night. She’s on her own with three kids. She threw their toys out on the road and burnt them, then asked one of the charity women to get more toys.”

“Shite is a state of the mind and happens to the weak,” he says. I had expected a little hint of compassion, maybe an intake of breath or a tut tut tut.

He fixed another smoke, maybe for himself this time, having lost the first one completely. I watched the green stuff, beautiful buds becoming crumbs on the lid of a small tin. He fingered the fine fragments, picked out the seeds and stowed them safely aside. He began snipping the stalks with a scissors. He concentrated on his task. I watched his splayed knees, naked and knobbly. I wondered what lay under the kilt. Was everything about him so perfect and meticulous?

“Amazing what you can find in a sporran these days,” I said, my throat dry and my head light.

He grinned again, a big toothy easy smile.

“Have a gander at these your wee one sure enjoyed ‘em.” He passed a pack of cards, Tarot cards.

“I can tell your fortune.” He raised one eyebrow as he said this and I knew that it was a chat up line.

“You can tell me your name first,” I said.

“Wallace”.

I laughed out loud, snorted snot down both nostrils – the irony of it.

“Is it the great hero, William Wallace, come for coffee on this miserable, dreich day?”

“Nae lass. I’m Wallace McGurk. Wally to me pals and you’ve not made nor offered me any coffee at all.”

“Well then, Wallace. I’m pleased to meet you. My name is Mary. I named my daughter Angel but she’s known as Angie.”

“She’s a great wee thing, awfully big to be still drinking out of you.”

“She is eighteen months old and you’re not wrong, she’ll be needing to kick that habit pretty soon”.

“You speak the Gaelic to her?”

“I do.”

“Will you teach me some?”

Maybe I got cheeky with the cannabis. Maybe I was flirting. “A bit of Gaelic would do wonders for your image,” I said.

“You’re dead right, sister, I’d fair pull the finest women if I was reading tarot cards in my own native tongue.”

We laughed together and I forgot the outside world. Forgot about you, forgot the woman I was trying to be. Forgot his native tongue was most certainly not Gaelic.

I remembered the boiled kettle, the promise of a mug of coffee. I tried to stand on newly wobbly legs with swimming head and dizzy eyes.

“You’re in a dwam,” he said, “a Scottish muddle.”

“Yes, I think so, but I need a drink. My mouth has gone dry.”

He laughed as I toddled to the kitchen and attempted to find the coffee and sugar and milk. My tongue seemed swollen. I struggled to concentrate, to remember why I was in the kitch-

en and somehow I found a bottle of cheap nasty whisky in the cupboard, saved for teething emergencies, for rubbing into raw baby gums – an old wives’ tale to cut down on the howling and to minimise damage to my poor nipples.

“You’ll want to know about the outfit, eh?” he asked.

I tried to act casual, tried to maintain some sort of control over myself, tried to appear normal.

“Well, it is a little unusual. You seem to have stepped out of a different century. But then, the accent you have is also a little bizarre. I can hear Glaswegian, Cockney and some sort of American in your voice. You must be well travelled. What do you take in your coffee?”

“Whisky” he said, and left the subject of his nationality.

I laughed out loud. “Of course you do.”

I made whisky coffees. I giggled again. Here I am, in this guddle of a house, stoned, with a strange man and about to have alcohol and all before lunch. I smiled inside, handed over the mug, sipped from my own, warmed and tingled and losing control. I felt fine really.

“Tell me, so. Tell all about the good dress. It’ll be a better yarn than my maudlin meanderings.”

“Sister, I have a plan, a great plan. This wee shite hole you’re in is a gold mine for the likes of me. For I am one of the greatest entrepreneurs you’re going to meet. I bin about, travelling like. It was Holland I was born, me Ma is Dutch. Hates the Scots, she says, but it is really me Pa she has trouble with. He’s pure Glaswegian. I started wearing the kilt to piss her off, years ago when I was seventeen or so, but the outfit’s become part of me, a kind of identity. A trade mark. Folks only got to meet me the once and they mind me again. You’ll not forget this face, now will you?”

I'll not forget the face but I can't place the accent. He has femininity folded into his pleats yet the boots and the stomp he has are loaded with testosterone. He is a mixture and a puzzle. I would like to find out more. There's intrigue here.

"The folk here chuck out the best of loot. See all they washing machines and fridges and freezers just laying about outside? I can fix them and sell them. I'm telling you, a gold mine, and then there's the bleeding tourists what roam about all over this place, moneyed folk from all over the shop. All they want is to spend their dosh, flash the cash wherever they can, 'cos they got too much of it. Well, I just purchased for myself a cracking bus, an ancient thing outta the seventies and she's a beauty. I'll pile them in from the airport and ferry them all up here. I know this island, know all the weirdy weavers and the arty farty women wanting rid of all the candles and driftwood mirrors they've been making through the winter. Stick an island label on the tat and watch it sell. I'll bring all these city folk on mad adventures through the bog and the moors. I'll tire them out through the day and get them pissed on me pal's moonshine of a night."

He pauses to inhale. He is passionate about his subject. He can see his plan. He is watching it take shape and form. I have no money, maybe he can get me work. The ethics are nonexistent, but there's a child to feed. I can make driftwood mirrors. He could sell them. I could do some small thing, for love and money. I have bought into his plan before I can think of the harm it may do.

"I got a few fiddlers and a fella plays a decent tune on the chanter. I'll be like the Pied Piper. I got a vision for myself. There's a fella stays around here someplace, plays the bagpipes real well and is always in need of a toke. I'm here to make a deal

with him. Want him to find himself a good place on one o' these pretty hills and let rip on the pipes and I'll traipse all the fat Yanks up the hill to take their photos. Charge them for every photo. Charge them for each tour out. Find cheap beds for them, make a profit for myself. I'll bedazzle the bejaysus outta them with the good dress as the Big Yin'd say, an take them on an adventure through the Highlands o' Scotland."

I am in awe. I am hooked. There he is, languishing in my only armchair and spouting his fabulous dreams out of his strong mouth. He is handsome and confident and has a plan. I have a plan. This fine fellow is my ticket out of this slum. He could be the provider I have yearned for. His back is strong and straight. His eyes are clear. He has good teeth. He is kind to children. He has money, the wherewithal to make more, and a mammy on a croft to take care of me. The only question left is whether he can satisfy the sexual energy lying inside of me, the dormant, plugged volcano of passion. Look at him with his chest all puffed out and his chin high in the air. He could easily be the King of my small country. I'd be his Queen and his slave.

He fixes another pipe. The tin of grass is balanced again on the naked knee. I may go and run my tongue along that leg and let my eyes peep under his blanket. I imagine roaming through the old deserted villages, the houses cleared for sheep and left to the winds. I imagine tearing the plaid off him, laying it on the ground, throwing him down and jumping on him. If I had any money at all I'd bet he's magnificent under the kilt. The gentle purposeful way he sifts through the grass and the seeds, makes me sweat. But I will have to bide my time. There are better looking, thinner younger lassies may suit him better. There are cleaner, tidier houses.

I stand up. I need to move the jelly legs. I put Janis Joplin on

the stereo and do my sexy little dance. He hands over the pipe. I suck and suck and try to look appealing, alluring.

“Mary, why did ya invite me in?” he asks.

“For sex,” I say, and take his hand. The grass has taken hold of me. I think I am in a field somewhere. I am acting out the dream I just had. I lead him to my daughter’s bedroom and close the curtains. I unbuckle his belt and the great tartan rug falls straight off him and onto the floor. There are yards of fabric and I lay down on it.

We fuck in the afternoon while my baby sleeps. And afterwards I thank him, kiss him and ask him to leave so I can do the housework.

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Early afternoon sunshine catches leaf tips and glisters. A hanging prism casts coloured blocks around the kitchen. Outside the motherwort held the rain like precious tear drops, like only a mother can.

I am shaking, convulsing, the tender feelings fading. My body is crumbling. I want it again. It wasn’t enough. I need more. A warm pulsating that stems from sex, my sex. I touched the lace through my skirt. One finger must find the spot, quick, before the baby wakes. There’s a terrible heat inside me, a longing. The milk-cow udders felt almost like breasts again. I brush a nipple and the tickle ripples straight to my clitoris. His butt makes seven out of ten, his chest, eight – his teeth six but his tongue nine. Kissing him rates a nine, but man alive his cock rates ten. A few more goes with him and I could teach him how to use it.

An unreal daze drowned me. The mountain mists and heavy

clouds flowed through me. It was too fumbly and sweet for real passionate fucking. Too trusting and honest to be simply sex. My body is raw and aching. I crouch down in the kitchen, between the bin and the wall, where I cannot be seen from the street. I must find the source of all this, must remember my own body. That sacred point of power has all the energy and balance imprisoned. I must find it. The root of me rocks and swells and I call out to the empty room. I shriek to be released. The relief as I came. I remember, he took his fingers to his nose and sighed. I also smell my sex and rest my head on the bin, happy.

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Pick and pluck, snip and clip. Tweeze and trim. Oh! You must stop crying, please. Tweezers like tofu cannot grasp the hair, coarse thicket, stubborn bush. Wailing screeching teething babe, no pill or potion will soothe the gums. Beautify me magic wand, electric razor, depilate, epilate. Scratch and scrape the blade along this leg and then the other. Give me peace my darling please, my arse is up agin a mirror trimming the tangle of bum fluff.

I'm gonna catch you a Daddy to love. Make space around the eyes, shape one brow to become two. Take the dark line from the lip. I am here. I am here. Somewhere beneath these years of neglect I live and I will shine. He will be back. I know he will. The feel of him said it. I will have him again and make him want me forever. I want to leave my tongue on his fair skin, sleek and soft and smooth and honed. Aye, there's the rub, for I am fat and furry.

Ow! I am stabbed. The kitchen scissors are no tool for this

task. I cannot concentrate with all that crying, your outpourings of grief, your howling, shrieking. It sounds as though you are building a pyre with the fires of fury and rage. It is only a tooth, we all grow teeth. And now you are silent for a moment, just long enough to draw breath, to begin anew, a new octave, a higher pitch, more guttural, now despondent. Come and chew and chomp on my once delicate flesh. Find comfort gnawing nipples. No tingles for me now, pure pain only. Let me take it from you. Let me pacify the points of pre-molars, the gums scarlet and sore and throbbing. I offer Neurofen, Ashton and Parsons Powders, Bonjela but, in the end, it's grinding my flesh that brings ease. And sleep, blessed sleep.

I remove myself from the vice of your jaws and return to the window. The mirror is balanced there along with the various implements I am using in an attempt to appear even slightly more presentable – beauty tools, inadequate for their purpose.

Outside, the moon has risen, the little slice of light above the tree tops. I am transfixed by their bare limbs. I see the edges of their spindles where ice drops shine. Not a leaf left. They are stripped and bare and glorious in their nakedness. The winds have taken even the algae and mosses.

My fixation with the arboreal is my Mother's fault. She used to sing to an old tree. When times were hard, when Daddy drank, when Papa died, she went to the oldest yew in Europe to sing, to cry, to lie silent. This ancient icon lives in the graveyard of our local church in Fortingall. People come from all over the world to see it; to theorise and speculate about it. My Mother met it at twenty one, having been shipped from the wild flat lands of Connemara to Stirling by my Father. He loved her. She loved the poetry of his soul, the Shakespearean plays and sonnets he quoted constantly. He drank port, he drank whisky

and one day love went from his heart and romance left his side and he opened his mouth each day with a terrible tirade.

‘Thy husband is thy lord, thy keeper’, he would rant. When it developed into “My goods, my chattels, you are my house, my horse, my ox, my ass, my anything,” she would grab me and leave, with him shouting: ‘Frailty, thy name is woman!’

She loved the stone circles. It is said that there are more standing stones and prehistoric burial sites around the shores of Loch Tay than anywhere else in Britain. She used to cycle up hills with me jiggling on a little seat on the back. We would lie prone in burial chambers and pretend we were the dead. We danced around cairns. She sat cross-legged and took great inhalations through her nose, forcing breath out of her mouth while humming. I thought she was marvellous. And of course, she sang to that old tree in the middle of the graveyard, in the middle of the village. The Kirk Elders elected to raise a railing to protect the bloody thing. My Father said it was to keep her out. He sulked when she would not raise her voice to join in the hymns and psalms praising the Lord. Instead, she knobbled her knees in the roots of that old Yew tree.

When I was ten there was a great storm and lightening tore the branches. My Papa stole a bough and brought it back to our farm. He made a treasure box for me and a jewel box for Mother. We never told Daddy. We were afraid he would take a dislike and destroy them. Daddy sought Truth in the Bible, said magic was his foe. My Mother studied the Druids and wept, slow and low like the rise and fall of a piper’s coronach. He taunted her emotions, her outpourings, quoting Lear again: ‘Women’s weapons, water drops’.

He sits now in a Parker-Knoll chair in a nursing home in Stirling. After two strokes he is aphasic, silent and drooling.

She has rented out the house, our home, and taken to the seas.
She sings on cruise ships, sips cocktails, screws sailors.

And you and I passed this Christmas together, but alone. No Grandparents to spoil you, to pull crackers with, to sing Jingle Bells. No Daddy to dress as Santa and leave sooty footprints on the mat. No wealth of clothes and books and Lego to be spread about the house. There was no family feasting on a great fowl. There was you and I and our dog, the doll I bought in a charity shop, the pram from a jumble sale and more pink fluffy socks from my Mother's sister in County Galway, a bone and a ball for the dog.

If my Mother knew the trouble we were in, she would be here. If I told her our troubles, she would jump on a plane and be here, sorting and fixing, listening and guiding. But her disappointment would be too much to bear. Her sadness for me might crush me. I am as proud as she, unable to ask for help, enduring instead, the harshness of isolation.

The trees are my fibrous friends, my family. Their grain and their pulp are now part of me and I pass this devotion down a generation. Cyclical shafts of strength for the girls. Out there, the branching lines push into the sky and the moon, catch a beam and the silver slithers down, down. The stumps attract me now. There is a difference. I have been blinded. There is something I have not noticed before; that is not a branch but a trunk. It has been there all the time but I could not see it. There are not just three trees, there are six, three pairs. From each base another rises. There are two trees growing from each set of roots, mirror matched, a single beginning for a couple; the same on that one and the other. And they seem to dance together, reflected in opposition, timber torsos bound at their beginning.

And I am only one woman. I have no mate or pal or lover to shelter me in secret rhythms. I stifle a cry.

I watch you turn and mutter. I see your eyelashes grow. I examine the smooth of your cheek with my lips. I want to share the loving of you.

Even the trees have partners. Another year has faded, a new one grows and stretches out before me and I stand on my own. As the trees bow to each other and the reel or round begins, I must prepare to snare that man, that beautiful man. He has so much tangled love to give and he thought you were wonderful. I saw it in his eyes. I saw his dreams, his desires for a family to protect. Those sweet blue puddles that he uses to see, they showed his hunger. He craves, he covets kin and kith. He said as much, whispered that he would return in the New Year and claim us as his own.

2011 is six days old and the problem is that I miss him. I miss the great cock. I fell for him when I first saw him stomp his way towards me. Oh, for Christ sakes, why would such a free spirit as I yearn for the potential pot of coffee already made in the mornings?

Salty stingy water softens my eyes, my lungs heave in shallow breaths. The thought of him has forced an asthma attack.

My inhaler is hidden under the bed in the treasure box like a dirty secret, kept with my Mother's postcards from Santorini, your first curl, our hospital tags. The history of me is here: the keys to the big farm house in Fearnan and the tampons I dare not display in the bathroom. The beads I loved when I courted all that was Gothic; they dangled and clanked on my tiny titties as I straddled a lover. I doubt they will ever jiggle around these succulent fruits. The blue breather I have to open my airways and soothe the cilia, and a photo of the folks with their only daughter – me.

Push all air out, squirt the powder and inhale sharply. Suck it thoroughly through, coat throat and thorax in dust; special dust; healing, medicinal dust. I don't understand this asthma. My parents didn't have it, nor did they smoke, our house was warm and dry, we ate the best of food, we lived in the pure clean countryside air.

We had so much land, acres and acres of fertile field, sweeping down to Loch Tay and rising again into forest – we were rich, we were wealthy we were privileged. Here, in this social experiment, the island's poor scratch and scrape like our chickens on the bit of Government recommended dirt. Oh little darling, someday Grandma may return from sea and throw out the tenants and walk on land again, and we can all three of us live well and safe and dance around the standing stones. But Grandma avoids me. Grandma avoids the care of my dumb drooling Daddy. Grandma is now enjoying the hedonistic youth she never had. And I cannot disturb her to burden her with my troubles.

Outside, someone sings. The super-still silence is slashed by the less-than-sober shouts of "It's a Tinker's life for me." I run to the living room, quietly so as not to wake you again. The room lights are out but the curtains are open. I see the scene, lit well with all those lamp posts. A twenty year old lad cycles a child's bike with a bottle of vodka in his hand. The back wheel buckles and he throws someone's best Santa surprise into someone else's garden, picks up a handful of gravel and lobs it at a car. He is still singing. There is a large extended family of itinerant Irish amassing houses here. His Father comes and puts his bulk and his voice into the air, joining his son in the glory of life on the open road.

The woman whose car has just been scraped curses at the

young fella and his father. His Mother comes out of another house, swaying and yelling and agreeing that it's great to be a tinker. The big man breaks his bottle on her head and she falls down. Her son, his son watches. The neighbour goes inside. I dial 999.

The young fella's wife steps out, a son on each hip, another in her belly and two in care, he punches her and walks into the house. I close the curtains.

Pluck us from this place. Pick us up and carry us far away.

Why have I been abandoned here? It is my secret and my shame. This bed I have made is too messy and uncomfortable to lie in. Why is there no one to uproot this little branch of the family tree and re-plant it in a sheltered space? We cannot thrive here. Dear God and the Angels please transplant us where we may bloom and grow forever.

I am but an addendum in Wallace's plans. I know it. When he told me he could not have children, when he revealed his fishes could not swim, I saw his heart speak, heard the yearning cry for a symbol of masculinity, the selfish gene must reproduce and he cannot. In that moment, his sweet post-orgasm twinkling, I was thinking deeply and I wanted then to lure him and keep him and I mentioned – I just happened to say – I needed a father for the documents: the birth certificate that has 'Father Unknown' is the thing I would most like to rectify.

That is why he will return, to claim you.

My own Father's voice and Shakespeare's words still sound between my ears and my heart.

"A woman impudent and mannish grown is more loathed than an effeminate man."

If I was svelte and smooth he may fall in love with me. He would be proud to protect me too. No more chocolate cake.

Oh, not a crumb. I'll eat brown rice. No mashed potato. I'll put
Eminem on the stereo and thrust these hips 'til pounds drop
off. The next time he wanders this way I will be beautiful and
he will fall for me and take me away to safety.

Oh! Here's the Polis.