

TRAVELLER WEDDING

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Chapter 1

We have sat quietly in our caravans for over a century while our fellow Irish have told lies about us through gossip, newspapers, books and films. Kept shtum over the years as a great many people have walked through the mud and knocked on our doors. Policemen, social workers, public health nurses, speech therapists, psychologists, councillors, community representatives and - most infuriatin of all - artistes. Such characters all have one thing in common. They make out like they are tryin to help you, when really they are in it for themselves.

Our history has been passed down from generation to generation through talk, but the settled Irish have never understood that because of how important writin is to them. I have always marvelled at how they use words to trap meanin and trap us while they're at it. Whether with an official report, some court order demandin we move or just a nasty name. It's all done with bloody words. That's what made buyin this hardback notebook so dauntin and yet so inevitable.

I always suspected there was a novel inside me. Ever since they sent me off to have a shower durin the spellin competition in Holy Child National School because they didn't want a traveller takin home the cup. Over the years I have accumulated old paperback classics in my trailer and attempted to write short stories. Could never seem to make them work, though. At school they thought I was dirty and at home posh. It felt like I had to choose and would never find my voice.

However, something happened this week which I consider far worse than usual. This latest insult has a certain edge. Like they have crossed a line. In short, a violent videogame has been released for the Christmas market entitled *Traveller Wedding*. This may very well be the strongest example ever of stereotypin I have endured throughout my entire life. Or perhaps it's because one of our own was a paid consultant on the game that uneasiness lingers. Deep down, though, I think it's the fact that we actually helped him. I personally helped Michael stick a knife into his own people. That is simply too much to bear.

Finally, after thirty six years, this girl is provoked. She has reached a point of frustration where something deep within her is ready to become a history book sittin on the library shelf which tells the truth to settled kids. They must understand our story. Know who we are. Who we are *not*. Otherwise they will believe what their parents tell them. That we are dirt. That we are outcasts or vagrants. That is not acceptable to me.

Assumin I'm goin to begin, I should probably start by explainin that Michael - the paid consultant I mentioned - had not been seen around here for sixteen years when he suddenly reappeared last winter. In fact, throughout our camp and other camps his whereabouts had become an almost entertainin mystery.

The first to notice his return were my two eleven year old nephews, Paddo and Christopher. They were burnin a small piece of carpet behind the spiked green bars that run alongside the dual carriageway and their smoke could no doubt be seen comin through the little trees by mornin motorists. There was a gap in the bars where they stood and anyone who glanced in would have caught a glimpse of Paddo rubbin his right hand against the makeshift cast on his left to keep warm.

Spring doesn't start until the middle of March - St. Patrick's Day to be precise - when the stones turn over in the water and the cold goes out of winter. It takes a long time for that day to arrive and while they are waitin the government likes to build paths, walls and houses to match the grey sky. At least that's what they did here, on the road to Dublin airport. An area sinned on by the clouds and snorted at by cars. Not a real place. Merely the rim of a route.

Both lads reportedly nodded as Michael suddenly climbed through the gap, briefly rubbed his hands together out of respect for their fire and promptly started walkin across the grass behind them. Three more members of our camp noticed him in the moments that followed. One was Trigger, our groomed and mud-stained white pony who was standin at the far edge of the green but looked like he could fly as easily as the planes overhead. He stared upwards while chewin weeds. Planet, a golden dog slumberin in the middle of the entrance to our tarmacadam who studied the approachin man through half-closed lids. Finally, myself. I was sittin on top of the dump and watchin the entire camp as I am prone to do. It was unlikely Michael saw me, but I couldn't miss him as he slowly entered our haltin site of twenty two mobile homes, seven caravans, six sulkin sheds, five cars and two vans.

On the left of the entrance he cautiously broached, a thick wooden pole stood with a satellite dish and American flag attached - while below a danced-upon pile of chopped wood was poured up the grassy mound.

I remember Michael kicked the wood as he passed.

One hand in his jacket pocket, his other opened the door of a green portable toilet with FUCK YOU MIC written on it. Like he was lookin for someone inside. Then he stopped movin, studied the motionless caravans and trailers and sheds. Examined the ground, even, where remnants of that age old battle between pebbles and glass lay. Made sure both his hands were back inside his jacket and continued bitin his lip.

I thought he still looked handsome, though would have been invisible to some girls nowadays because of his thinnin hair. His piercin blue eyes were no more open than when he was younger and his mouth no less poised in smooth conviction and determination. He had a calculated amount of stubble on his face and wore runners, jeans and a dark grey sweater with a green t-shirt peekin out from under the neck.

I considered runnin down to greet him, but my anger was givin orders. It told me to sit tight and watch this long brewin drama unfold - so I simply straightened my dress and observed as he started movin around the camp.

Some of our doors were open, though nearly all were still.

In the areas between our homes lay wooden tables, occasional garden chairs or benches. Sometimes thin rubber pipes crissed between our domains. There's always a lot of scenery here. The decorative and the dumped. Yucca plants and wind chimes. Wire. Strips of wood. Lager cans. Filin cabinets and square metres of chipboard lyin halfway onto the surroundin grassy mound as if hopin for sun. Yellow butane cylinders with pipes leadin inside. A few genies. Not the type that reside in a bottle. The type that provide electricity.

Not knowin what to do after sixteen winters, Michael was producin a pack of Johnny Blues and sparkin up. Passin Missy's caravan. His demeanour that of a tourist, to be honest. Missy kept two old wooden carts outside her place - one painted bright green and one red. The wheels were rubber and on top of each all sorts of plants blew in the wind. In the back of one cart, two tin milk pails that Missy's grandfather had made stood proud.

Nobody had emerged from their trailer - although less considerate dogs were now barkin and approachin him. Awkwardly, he stepped

behind the Virgin Mary molded by his fifteen year old cousin Francie whom he'd never met. Francie had based his Virgin Mary on Angelina Jolie. There were two babies at her feet and another in her arms and all three were different colours. Blue, orange and pink. Mary Angelina wore a white shawl and a gold band over her hair. I giggled as Michael used his non-smokin hand to steady himself on her neck. The arm she had free extendin outward and to her side, Missy havin sellotaped a weather-beaten photo of her late nephew Paul onto the four fingers. The little finger was gone. A tear drawn from eye to cheek in black felt tip looked like make-up gone askew but the green neon halo around her head added class. Michael ashed his cigarette and, while nervously eyein the dogs, briefly glanced down at the potted St. John's Wort by Mary's feet. Otherwise known as Allus Mhuire. Mary's Sweat. A plaque beneath readin *Virgin Mary - most beautiful and fair above all other virgins.*

The dogs began barkin and goin for his ankles, so he was forced to stand up on the low wall behind the statue and stare down at them until my ten year old cousin Winona emerged from her trailer. That girl was the stamp of her mother with her cow eyes and wellies.

'Any of the men around?' Michael looked down at her and exhaled smoke in a shot.

'Yeah,' she nodded and gestured down the street toward the largest and cleanest caravan of all. 'Jimmy's in.'

The creamy, glib roofs of our homes made three streets and so Michael bravely jumped off the wall and headed down the first in the direction Winona had pointed. I had to move a few feet to my left, to keep him in my sights. Reckoned he had a very self-conscious walk. Like he was directin himself in a western.

There was Jimmy, grimacin through his lace curtains at Michael who was now standin on his and Sinead's pallet of a porch.

'Howaya doing?' Michael smiled as the door was opened.

Jimmy simply stared back and nodded. In his late fifties and so slim he almost seemed like a two dimensional cut-out, his dark grey eyebrows always seemed to watch over the cautious mouth below. Not someone who could be surprised without notice.

'Jimmy?' Michael clarified like a jovial social worker. 'It's Michael!'

Jimmy barely nodded.

'I work at a company in Dublin now,' Michael said. 'We make videogames. My bosses have decided they want to make a game about us. Wanted to talk to youse all about it?'

'Go and knock on any of the caravans in the next street,' Jimmy said and shut the door again.

'Thanks,' Michael raised his voice and arm very loosely at the figure already makin tea inside and slowly stepped down off the pallet.

I watched him wander past the swingin back doors of Old Joseph's camper which was clearly not the concern of anyone this weather, its wooden cabinets hangin open inside. Salty the rabbit breathing beside a liver coloured brick which sat in the middle of its floor. We only remembered Joe's camper as a place to let shoes air - or when we occasionally brought Salty a handleless fryin pan of greens.

In the old days you could always tell a policeman from a doctor or nurses from nuns, just by studyin how they walked onto the site. You had to be able to do that. As he stepped almost playfully over a black suitcase with VHS tapes spilled out underneath, I was siftin right through Michael in the same way and didn't like what I saw. It wasn't that I should have known what was in store that first day. The truth is, I *did* know.

As he broached the second street different dogs did the same thing. So did Michael, though I wasn't sure he looked as reasonable standin on a beer keg to the four lads who approached.

Something we need to get straight, before I describe these fellas, is that there's no longer really a 'traveller look'. That's in your parent's heads. A combination of different forces. First of all, some of us did used to have a look. Like our eyes were wounds or wells. The gift of pain, we call it. Secondly, because we sometimes marry closely, our children can have a close look about them. Finally, the drink that hit some of us hard combined with outdoor life made us lush. That's it - and nowadays you won't see it much. Our men are a bit thicker in the arms and legs, bit rounder in the face and us women too. We're strong. Most of all, though, we just look like settled Irish people. I'm a traveller and I'm puttin my name to that.

While there were a few jibes from the lads, none of them asked Michael outright what he wanted - listenin instead as he repeated his little speech about a company designin some videogame. Even from my distance I could see the most incredible thing was happenin. Quite literally, the fellas didn't know whether Michael was a travellin or settled person.

You must understand, even gay travellers come home for Christmas. This individual had vanished into thin air.

My uncle John was first to recover, in his fifties but with all the wild stupidity of his late teens and with a face massaged into the greatest of leathers by booze. He broke the silence by quickly visualisin the game as Travellers Vs. Fingal County Council. With meathooks. Johnny had lived most of his life around Fingal and would repeat this little suggestion again and again durin the ensuin discussion as the others laughed and joked in a similar vein because they all knew Grand Theft Auto and the like.

‘That’s the kind of thing my bosses want to do,’ Michael put on a long face. ‘It’ll be crap!’

‘Why’ll it be crap?’ asked my good lookin young cousin Marto with his extremely dated Beckham hairstyle and tattoo of the family name Ward peekin out from under his white t-shirt.

‘Last year they made a game set in the jungle,’ Michael glanced at him and bit his lip again. ‘But they didn’t go into the jungle.’

‘Are you sayin you’re goin to make this place look like the jungle?’ Marto cocked his haircut cheekily, though the others waved him off.

‘They want to make a violent videogame set in Ireland,’ Michael explained. ‘So they thought... travellers! But I said hang on. I have some clout in the office. I said *hang on*. I know that community. Didn’t tell them I was from here. But I said let me go and *talk* to them first.’

‘That’s shite that is,’ Marto made out like he was appalled. ‘Makin us out to be all violent.’

‘Well,’ older Johnny bared his teeth in a wise, stubborn grin. ‘Violence is the way. Your bosses sendin you down here. They’re sendin you to death’s door!’

They all sniggered.

‘You’ll be taken up the Dublin mountains!’ Clean Christy shouted and they all exploded with laughter.

‘Ah, stop it,’ Michael seemed hurt. ‘I’m Ape’s grandson. It’ll be on the shelves next Christmas and all the kids will be playin it. Just want to get your *opinion* first.’

‘I *know* who ya are,’ Johnny patted him on the shoulder reassuringly because he was old enough to remember. ‘Come ‘ere. You should

seriously have meat hooks and knives and guns. Get the travellers in the game to go after Fingal County Council...'

As this express chat took place my four relatives scrutinized Michael with prominent necks, sometimes forgettin not to circle him completely. They wouldn't have shown such neck and circle if they agreed he was a traveller. You can be sure of that.

'Well,' he sighed uneasily as he offered his pack of Johnny Blues around. 'At the moment it's gonna be called Traveller Weddin. Go to a traveller weddin. Have a fight with your cousin - get this many points. Smash up the place - get this many points.'

The men erupted and one or two selected smokes.

'That's fuckin brilliant!' Clean Christy seethed as he postponed placin his Johnny Blue between his lips, suggestions on the tip of his tongue.

'I'll help by killin ya today,' Marto's fourteen year old brother Francie interrupted. 'I'll cut you up with me sword!'

With that Francie suddenly walked away from the group in his grass coloured tracksuit and gelled hair, promptin everyone includin Michael and myself to die laughin. At more or less the same moment, my muscular cousin Bernie cruised up slowly behind the wheel of his perfect white sports car in his Formula One jacket - this particular cousin is about twenty years old and wears two chains hangin from his neck with *Ward* and *Freedom* in silver plated letters.

'So you're tryin ta make money ow a dis,' he made a fist of his own face after bein filled in by the others, who stared down at him reverently in his driver's seat.

Michael once again assumed a pained expression and was about to protest when suddenly little Francie came chargin back toward him with a sword as promised. Michael knew to stand his ground, just pivoted somewhat. I don't think the sword touched him, but he would have felt Francie a little - that boy has an almost sexual aggression. Johnny took the sword away from him, thank God and walked off with it.

'No,' Clean Christy shook his head as the laughter receded. 'In all seriousness. You'd want to be careful comin back here after all this time, Michael. It's not just fists anymore. You'll have two guys pointin guns at each other the odd time! It can be quiet here for months and months and then all of a sudden - without *any* warnin - two guys will be pointin fuckin guns at each other.'

‘But if I let them make it all violent,’ Michael arched his neck and exhaled smoke. ‘About all that shit... then it’s just backin up what they write in the papers about us, isn’t it?’

‘But traveller’s *do* cause loadsa trouble,’ Bernie whined back from the sports car obtusely. ‘Ninety per cent of traveller’s life is makin trouble. We make trouble all the time!’

‘Seriously?’ Michael stared down at him, tryin to see through the years that had passed. ‘Do you believe that about us?’

‘Yeah,’ Bernie nodded in all seriousness and met his eyes.

‘So,’ Michael theorised. ‘Ninety per cent of today you’re gonna be violent?’

‘I am,’ Bernie smiled and they all burst out laughin again.

‘I was hopin to hang out and remember what it’s like,’ Michael lamented. ‘Then be able to go back to my bosses and say *forget* your idea about the traveller weddin. I’ve got a better idea!’

‘Travellers versus Fingal County-’

‘How about horses?’ Clean Christy interjected. ‘The kids are mad into racin.’

‘That’s *shite*,’ Bernie shook his head from the driver’s seat. ‘He’ll have to make it violent.’

Ambition lead Michael down our third and longest street where dogs began the same routine as he veered toward his deadpan, round-bodied old grandmother Rosie. She was in her sixties and standin outside their caravan takin clothes off the line. Apricot coloured hair crawlin down a faded orange pinafore dress and beautiful woolly yellow sweater - while bunched up navy blue socks grasped each of her legs like trophies.

She wasn’t wearin shoes and smiled cautiously.

‘Hi gran,’ Michael said. ‘Ape here?’

‘Inside,’ she replied, lookin her twenty sixth grandson up and down.

‘Thanks,’ he nodded and risked a quick peck on the cheek before knockin on the door.

I folded some of my dress underneath me and sat on my hands all the more anxiously - thinkin *this* should be interestin. Michael’s grandparents and mother were not happy about how his life had turned out. They would have liked to see him marryin one of us. Stayin here with his family. Takin a job that was local and ended with his arrivin back at the camp every night. They always saw the whole videogame world as

something for settled people. I remember Ape once complainin about his grandson's hobby by sayin that settled people thrived on games because even behind the most difficult ones there was a pattern - and settled people always had to have some kind of pattern. That it was only us travellers, the true Irish, who knew patterns were the enemy of happiness. We understood that if you really wanted to live, you had to let life come at you. In doin so you would realise the only real rhythm was God's. Not something men could imitate. The settled people didn't get that, Ape claimed, because they had turned their back on God. Because they were dead.

With perfect timin, that very man opened the door of his two room garden shed and smiled gently at Michael. In his early seventies, he wore a neat grey wool cardigan, had beige eyes that were wide and acquittin and cheeks that became infrared when he told tales.

'Michael,' he said and took a deep breath.

I suddenly felt it was time to greet Michael myself and ran down from the dump. Yet as I neared Ape's shed weariness overcame me. I felt giddy. Both from strength I had manufactured over the years and love that hadn't dissipated in the process. I hesitated right outside, hopin to master my own feelins while watchin him through the window as he examined the framed monochrome photographs hangin on his grandparent's wall. They depicted Gable, Presley, Kelly, Grant, Monroe, Wayne and O'Hara. The only hint of colour a natural wooden frame around his great grandparent's portrait.

In that image Joe McDonagh is wearin a long grey coat over a smart, pressed suit and restin his hand on the shoulder of his wife who is wearin a black sweater and has a scarf tied around her neck. Her name is Bernie. Both are eyeballin the photographer with principled intensity, unmitigated by any form of indulgence whatsoever. Pale and rugged faces that patrol traveller ghost stories.

'Go on Christine,' Rosie laughed at me as she folded. 'Pop in and say hello.'

The passage of time was holdin me back. Standin away and closer to Rosie, I was unable to tear my eyes not only from Michael but what he was lookin at - what he was seein after all this time.

The warmth of that cheap wooden picture frame honourin his great grandparents was matched by the wooden kitchen dresser nearby, the centre inlet of which was accommodatin Our Lady in porcelain on top of a pink Johnson's baby wipe pack. Behind the glass cabinet doors,

illustrated mugs steeped and stoopin in false myths about Ireland and yet reflectin our way of life into the bargain. A metal campfire mug was turfed in too. Michael ran his finger along the surface of the dresser past Ape's portable stereo and a jumbo GERODOG Premium tin.

'No, I'll wait for him to come out,' I whispered and started to help Rosie with the clothes. 'Let him see Ape first.'

My hands were shakin because it had been hard enough seein the last sixteen years through my own eyes and now it was apparently time to see them through his.

Viewed by the outside world our homes look like decadently scattered pills. While on the inside, with untapped leaves at each window, you are somewhere else. From outside our trailers look stopped. Inside, it's clear your world never truly will. As I folded Rosie's great grandson's little jeans and stole the odd look within I knew by Michael's demeanour that you settled people had actually taught him to forget this.

That made me sad.

I noticed he was gazin toward the corner where a black oil stove stood with a silver pipe headin for the roof and a brass horse and cart, metal kettle and bucket sat on black tiles Ape had lain there only.

Rosie abruptly left me with the clothes, climbed inside herself and opened the cabinet doors under the sink where orange juice and milk were kept because she didn't have a fridge. She had a cooker, though, upon which pots were steamin. Potatoes drownin in one, turnips in another. Chicken underneath in the oven, judgin by the smell. You never did know how many would come home for dinner.

I took another judicious step backwards to ensure I was out of sight and continued to fold. In my adjusted view catchin Michael's chubby, stubbled teenage uncle Seamus sittin on the couch and two slim, nine year old cousins who were both napped in grey and blue sports gear.

'You guys like computer games?' Michael was askin them by way of introducin himself.

'Yes,' Seamus breathed politely while slowly runnin a finger under his chin.

'Not in here,' Ape said as he took his hands from his cardigan pockets and sat down. 'I won't let them. A bit is okay. Odd bit of boxin or whatever!'

I know his grandfather's voice reminded Michael of an older traveller tone - that beautiful, tamed growl that trundled through sentences with the shock absorption of a wagon wheel.

'You *know* most of the time it's not like that,' Ape said about the Traveller Weddin idea. 'Violence is very rare! Your own family is quiet. Do you not remember?'

There was a moment's silence and I wondered if they recalled their old disagreements about videogames.

'How long have we been here now?' Michael asked, tryin to re-frame their relationship as he studied the livingroom.

'Thirty seven years,' Ape stretched his bottom lip with his teeth and then looked at Michael. 'Was beginnin to think you were gonna die in some ditch alone. Are ye back now or what?'

Michael glanced at the black and white movie playin silently on their widescreen television in the corner and then slowly sat down on the couch. He could see me, strictly speakin, but didn't suddenly smile or anything.

'Cup of coffee, Michael?' Rosie asked as the water boiled.

'Just some hot water would be great Rosie,' Michael said. 'Thanks.'

'Hot water?' she queried as she pulled at the bottom of her yellow sweater.

'Boiled water,' Michael clarified.

'Boiled water cooled down?' Ape turned his head gently toward his grandson with a confused look on his face.

'No,' Michael smiled. 'Just hot water thanks. What kind of work you doing?'

'Nothing at the moment,' Ape said and glanced at the movie. 'Treetoppin. Bit of PVC. I like to do different things. Keep movin the body in different ways. Get exercise.'

'That's right,' Michael looked back at his young cousins. 'Have you heard of the Nintendo Wii?'

'Yeah,' one of them nodded, chin on fist.

'It's much better,' Michael looked back at his grandfather. 'You have to stand up to play it... move around.'

'Not get fat,' Ape nodded slowly like he was mullin the matter carefully.

'A lot of games on the Wii are sit-down games,' teenage Seamus breathed.

Suddenly Brian and Martin McDonagh walked past me and up the steps, hardmen arms bent in fear, faces tied up in affability and mobiles pointin out the arse of their jeans. Michael rose as they entered and there was a reunion among first cousins.

'Are ye movin back in?' one of them asked Michael.

'No,' Michael said. 'Don't plan to.'

'You're just gonna hang around,' Ape sighed.

'Is that okay?' Michael asked.

'Of course!' Ape stood up. 'This is your home. Come to my shed after your hot water and I'll show you the wheel I'm restorin. Go and see your mother first though, for God's sake.'

With that Ape left, throwin his eyes to heaven as he walked past me outside.

I then took a deep breath as Michael himself promptly emerged and, to my absolute shock, walked right past me without sayin a word!

The anger I had worked so hard to get rid of quickly returned as I slowly began to follow him past the gnomes and colourful little wooden man drivin wooden horses on his cart. In the middle of the yard at the end were two big old wheels from my great grandfather's barreltop caravan many summers ago. I watched Michael looking at all the material on the ground. Waxy, which you would call lino and a lot of bicycle tires that month if I remember correctly. Then suddenly shakin hands with Christopher-Angel. News of his return spreadin.

I loitered outside the trailer where he met his two teenage brothers Christopher and Jason and sixteen year old sister Denise for the very first time. Short, sandy-haired kids his mother had with a man she married shortly after Michael left. Her first husband, Michael's father, had committed suicide. God be good to him.

'I think a weddins *great*,' I heard his sister sigh when her newfound brother rapidly told her the idea for the game. 'Can I be de briad?'

Everyone laughed.

'Don't get me wrong,' I heard Christopher sayin to Michael. 'There's a lot of fightin at weddins among other breeds these days. Just not so much with us. The Quinn Wards are pretty bad.'

'In the game,' Denise was sayin. 'At the weddin. Would you have different names. All the different traveller's names?'

'That'd be good,' enthused Chris. 'Have the Wards and Joyces and McDonaghs. Maughans. Like a scoreboard. Ye can choose whatever family you want when you're doin the settins at the beginnin of the game.'

'But are weddins *honestly* still violent?' Michael asked in that earnest voice.

'Depends on whose wedding...' Jason muttered.

'How many weddins have you been to in the last year?' Michael asked.

'Fifteen,' Jason answered.

'How many have there been violence at?' Michael folded his arms.

'Seven,' Jason estimated.

'Right...' Michael sighed. 'Fifty percent.'

'Yeah,' Christopher concurred. 'That sounds about right.'

'But sometimes it wouldn't be serious violence like,' Denise finished textin someone. 'Just bare knuckle. The weddin we were at last month, a fight started and I got sent home by my aunt 'cause she said I'd get rapped with a bottle.'

'Sometimes they have guns,' Christopher nodded.

'Only if they come to the weddins with long jackets down to here,' Denise suddenly came into my view for the briefest of moments as she leant forward to touch her shin.

'If there's a problem they open them up,' explained Chris, makin guns with each hand. 'Go Pop-Pop.'

'I know,' Michael said quietly. 'Sure in my day a baby got shot in the foot and died. Woman got shot in the face.'

'Really?' Denise exclaimed.

'This is *terrible*,' he shook his head. 'I told my bosses we're not like that anymore! Dunno what I'm gonna do. You guys in school?'

'No,' Christopher said. 'Denise was in school.'

'No, I *wasn't*,' Denise snapped as if bein put down. 'I was in primary school.'

'What you lads work at?' Michael then rapped his knuckles on the fridge, as if meetin unknown siblins was just part of a business venture.

'Tree-toppin,' Chris said. 'We deliver leaflets all around the houses and put our initials on the back. Write CM on the back of mine. Then if we get a call I get that job 'cause it's my initials. Had a job there a few days ago. A woman was gonna gimme seventeen grand for one acre.'

'Seventeen grand?' Michael asked. 'For tree-topping?'

'No, no,' Christopher said. 'For everythin. Would have had to hire in fellas. Pay them hundred Euro a day. But she never called.'

'What do most of the men do nowadays?' Michael asked.

I could tell by his crewcut that Jason was smilin at Christopher.

'Whatever's goin,' he said. 'Sellin. Buyin. Our da used to collect scrap but he's too busy.'

'What do *you* do?' Michael asked Denise.

'Cookin and cleanin,' she sang in irony and ecstasy.

Their younger and equally sandy-haired sister Teresa walked past me in her school uniform.

Stepped inside, stared at Michael and turned to Denise.

'Bernadette'll *kill* you for bringin a strange man into the trailer!' she said.

'He's your brother,' Denise snapped. 'He's makin a game for the PSP about travellers.'

Teresa grew vexed and then glanced at me standin outside.

I put a finger to my mouth.

'Girl in my school likes you Christopher,' she quickly recovered. 'She said... you know the one with the spiky blonde hair? And his mother's gorgeous.'

'What's her name?' Christopher asked.

'Amy,' Teresa replied slowly as she sat down between her brothers.

'You allowed have girlfriends and boyfriends these days?' Michael asked. 'We weren't.'

'No, we're *not*,' Teresa sighed.

'Well *you're* definitely not,' Denise snapped at her.

'Who's that in my trailer?' Bernadette asked me, then passed me.

Her fragrant blonde hair up in rollers, she entered and yelled.

'Jesus of Nazareth!' were the words that chose her.

Michael stood up and I could see him properly again.

'Son!' his mother roared laughin, as if somehow deflatin all the years. 'I don't have a heart for ya to come back to!'

'Hi ma,' he said.

It was at that point I spotted a car enterin the site with Michael's oversized second cousins inside, really started to feel like an intruder and began to back off. He'd been home for less than an hour, yet travellers across the length and breadth of Ireland - a considerable number in England too - already knew.

Christopher-Angel had rung Patrick Ward. Who had immediately enlightened Barney Maughan. Who had phoned his girlfriend. Who texted Auntie Chrissy. Who informed Francie Joyce and The Kerry Clan. Who naturally told their second cousins in Tullamore. In other words the Connors in Drogheda were wise to it. Meanin everyone in Carlow. Each family embellishin the story along the way. Michael came back but he spent so long in Africa that he is black. Michael came back with his settled children. Michael came back but is a ruined man. Typically, the news would be that someone was gettin married or havin a fight in six weeks or similar scandal. Michael's return was choice nugget for the newswire.

Breathless from seein his mother again, the realisation that everyone knew he was home and witnessin the camp growin marginally more populated and animated by the minute, he next skipped between Francie and Ciaran's trailers to meet his grandfather in the homemade shed as discussed. A shed once constructed from wood found lyin around the camp in order to accommodate a cowboy buggy, before the buggy was then sold. The wine felt floor now a crash of bicycles and the wall a place to hang harnesses, whips and halters. In the far corner wicker baskets, prams and old cases were piled up. At their foot, rotten chunks of a wheel once re-painted beautiful blue.

'They gave me that,' Michael's grandfather said with a naturalness that suggested they were alone. 'To fix it. But it was rotten. So I'm startin from scratch.'

Michael tapped the solid wooden core of Ape's new wheel and the iron ring that surrounded it.

'It's good to see you again Michael,' his grandfather sighed as he worked. 'Always worried about you a lot. I don't like my grandsons playin those games. Fake football and all that. Two of them had the things. We got rid of them.'

'Consoles?' Michael squeezed curly wood shavins from a few days ago and leant against the counter. 'How'd you manage that?'

'Ah, I just kept goin on about it all the time,' Ape sighed and started drivin at his block of elm with a gouge. 'Sayin I didn't like them. Remindin them what happened to you. Jimmy never made much money from those arcades in the end. You twisted his arm.'

'Surprised you managed to get consoles away from kids,' Michael murmured.

'It was really the mothers,' Ape grinned. 'Talked to them. Was always pullin different wires out. Pull this wire out one time and that wire out. Soon they didn't work. Eventually they just threw the things out. Why not go out and play football yourself on the grass? It's ridiculous...'

Ape put down the gouge, reached for a veiner and glanced at Michael.

'That's the problem with settled life,' he said. 'It's always simulatin something. Instead of actually doin it. TV was the same.'

Michael waited for him to look away before throwin his eyes to heaven.

'The young lads are different, though,' he suggested.

'Aye, they are,' Ape started in with the veiner.

'Some of them seem prejudiced against us!' Michael sighed. 'Gainst their own people like?'

'Aye.'

'What's that about?'

'They've just never been on the road,' Ape put down the tool and started caressin the wood with his hand. 'We moved here in '72. The first month we left four times. There was a good dump nearby. Went when we had to, came when we had to. But these young lads don't know the road. I would rather be on the road.'

'Still?'

'Oh yeah,' his grandfather smiled. 'I'm settled now but I would rather be movin. I knew a lot of people on the road. Y'know? But the kids - you try bring them somewhere. We brought them to England and all they could say was it's not Longcommon! *It's not Longcommon*. Took them down to Tullamore and they were *cryin* to come home. They haven't grown up with it. They aren't travellers any more than you are.'

'We're travellers in our blood,' Michael said slowly.

'Ah,' his grandfather sighed. 'If you told these young ones about your computer game they'd probably think it was brilliant. I had eight daughters includin your mother and two sons. I don't know how many grandchildren but it's more than fifty. Would estimate that I have around twenty great grandchildren. Even two or three great *great* grandchildren. I worry about every single one of you. Fear for your place on this earth.'

'What are you talkin about?' Michael asked. 'Drugs?'

His grandfather took a look at him, but didn't answer straight away.

'Well, there was a guy but he was told to leave,' he finally lied. 'We don't want ya here, we said. You're not welcome here. You are not *wanted* here. Get out.'

'And he did?'

'He knew he had to...' his grandfather said and reflected for a moment. 'Do you know what would be good for a game? The other mornin the men came from the pound to take the horses. The young fellas were runnin around like crazy tryin to hide their ponies. Puttin them in the sheds and everythin. The council was gettin complaints about the horses bein on the green and damagin a church. I don't know what church they were talkin about. You could do that! Man from the pound tryin to catch the horses and the name of the game is to hide the horses.'

'Michael,' I said.

The two of them turned sharply and looked at me standin in the doorway in my cloth print dress with dandelion shapes and leather boots.

I tried to stand as straight as possible while Michael nodded and smiled nervously back. *Tried* to breathe. Had spent so many summers trainin myself not to feel the way I felt that winter's day. So that sun felt to me like rain did to most travellers. Yet Michael McDonagh had come home in winter. He had come home.

The ground of the dump was a smooth mash of redbrick nodges, pebbles and scrap amidst puddles. Near the slope an inch-thick black pipe exited the ground and sprayed a fairly tight stream of water out from the joint. Michael passed the pipe, kicked a Heinz tin and started takin measured steps up the hill. Passin cement dappled windowsills, breezeblocks and rocks amidst drier, crumblier earth. Near the top grew the thinnest little bush trees. I walked up after him and sat down on my tuft of grass.

We stared at Elli's cave and a washin machine and the push of everything forced back by the dozer.

'How's business?' I asked.

'It's tough,' he spoke more self-consciously now. 'These days I'm just a code monkey. Not many opportunities for games designers or programmers in Ireland really.'

'Right,' I nodded.

'For a long time I was a tester,' he shrugged. 'Got fired because of my spellin. You woulda been great at that, actually, because you have to write down what you think of a game. Help them balance it durin the last few months before it's released. It's easier writin fuckin code. But that's not what I want to do.'

'No?'

'Want to write my own games, eventually,' he sighed and looked at me.

'Will you be able to?' I asked.

'Dunno,' he said. 'In the old days only took a few people to make a game. Now it takes huge gangs.'

'Really?' I asked.

'It's like they're makin a big movie,' he laughed. 'People workin on the graphics, radiosity, tonality. The physics. *Man*. That physics crowd are a bunch a *messers*. They're my friends. They're great!'

I was lookin at the little hill on the other side where two tiny green trees slanted at identical angles as if worshippin the dump's spirit. Beyond them, the housin estate. A lot of travellers had settled there. It looked like any Irish council estate - except for the occasional horse on the grass between it and us.

I knew we were bein watched and that pressure to get married would return.

'It's a lot of work,' he sighed. 'Like bein a labourer. You can go all sorts of places and get work buildin the worlds people are gonna see inside computer games. If that's what you want...'

'Bet that's not enough for you Michael,' I smiled and started to steer my palm through yellow flowerweeds.

'You're still just as beautiful,' he glanced at me.

I looked at him for a moment and then casually picked up a tiny triangle of mirror lyin nearby.

Moved my blonde hair out of the way and studied my face like a little girl.

'More fever than sculpture,' I noted.

'Pays okay,' he didn't react to my self-appraisal. 'Last summer I spent the whole time stuck in the basement of a company I was workin for. Codin a game called *Mercurial*. Put so much detail into it, Christine. The carpets. Under the carpets. What books were on the bookshelves.'

I scratched the back of a hand with the mirror.

Michael nervously glanced at the other side of the dump, where my well-to-do cousins lived. Examined their white van, koala coloured trailer, two small caravans and one of those temporary wooden houses you see on buildin sites. It was a very tidy arrangement. Almost like a bunch of settled person's toys.

'Are you married?' I looked up at him.

'I was engaged,' he squinted at me. 'We've split up.'

I nodded slowly.

'Just moved out Monday actually,' he said. 'Nowhere to go...'

'Well,' I said without hesitation. 'This is your real home, Michael. Don't ever forget that.'

He smiled.

'Played too many video games for her?' I sighed. 'Was that it?'

'Ha,' he was unable to laugh. 'I actually don't play games so much nowadays.'

'No?'

'Sometimes I do,' he smiled. 'I don't like them as much. Early eighties was the golden age. A lot of the games nowadays are crap. They have no heart.'

I knew it was Michael who had no heart and that he was simply searchin in the last place he had seen it. What the hell had happened to him? To us both! For the first time in years, I missed holding a lighter between my fingers.

So I pulled my sleeves over my hands, placed my chin on my knees and began to think back to long before we were born - when our paths had started to cross.

Chapter 2

Settled people assumed we were called tinkers because we made and mended things from tin and certainly that was one reason the name got so old. The verb to *tink* did mean to mend a pot and *tinceard* did mean tin craft. Yet it was also a nod to the metallic sound our men made doin such work, the tinkle of the bell announcin our arrival in the villages and the much older monikers Tynkere, Tynker and Tinkler that referred to tradespeople a thousand years ago. Hell, my granny once told me we were called tinkers because we spent so much time tinkin about a problem that we always found a way around it. That we thought of a hundred different ways of survivin. I don't think a name has one God. The important thing is that the term tinker was more or less okay with me in the old days, before we became known as simply travellers. Tinker wasn't derogatory. Itinerant, on the other hand, was not okay. Knacker was not okay. Gypsy was inaccurate because we didn't marry Romanys that much here, though we didn't mind that mistake really. We had the road in common with those gillies, if not religion, and bein mistaken for them could be good for makin money from fortune tellin.

Patsy Ward was my great grandfather and he travelled through the villages mendin pots, pans, cans, buckets, lamps and umbrellas. His forehead thrived on a roll of judgments every given hour. There was neither slack nor stress in his face and although the sides of his mouth were slightly drawn back it was only in earnest - makin it unnecessary for him to flex when whatever happened, happened. The smoky, healthy hair of his brows was similar to that on his head, in each place appearin as a relaxed swish. He never wore anything other than a white shirt and baggy suit. I'm sayin every single *day* until he died in '79. Might ask you for old iron, broken pots, ovens. Yet seemed able to make everything from tin. Absolutely everything. From kettles to pails. Could make whatever you wanted. He did a lot of jobbin too - fixin older tinware. Would put in your tinker's dam. I know for a few years he even worked on orders for hardware shops. Nowadays it's impossible to buy tin in Ireland. You

literally can't get a sheet here in the 21st century. Yet back in those days himself and my great grandmother Mary had tin for blood. It was what they lived on as they travelled from village to village with a cart, tent and one more child every year or so.

Mary had black curly hair, an excited face and this misaligned smile of proud teeth. Happiness rested in her eyes, if her jaw seemed a little over-worked and her cheeks were the colour of roses. She was runnin on the right kind of love, there was no doubt about that. Absolutely never dressed like a vagrant or poor person - on the contrary wore a beige cotton dress with trees and bridges and clouds in the design, a dark elastic-lined belt, lovely peach wool cardigan and paisley headscarf. She respected a decent watch, small earrings and a silver plated necklace.

Pasty and Mary did not travel the whole country, just stuck within a small route that was known to them - only for fairs, weddins or funerals did they go further.

When I was a little girl nanny Mary told me all about the old camps. Most of them are gone now. Saps Condemns, Saps Bridge, Hill of Clara, Bogtown, The Sandy Road of Ferbane, River Road of Birr, Ballrange. Those stops aren't all mapped in libraries. Just loosely charted in my mind. Nanny's favourite was O'Donnell Bridge. She loved the mouth of that river. The way it was devoted to the ocean, yet coveted by land. They camped on a badly ploughed thin beside the water, next to strawin grass which decomposed into rock pools. A wooden, rectangular boat sat in the water and my grandfather - the serious seven year old - tried to sink it repeatedly.

Bein a small island on the door of the Atlantic meant you were in the thrall of elements, yet safe at the same time. That weathertrick accounts for a lot of our nature. Because while grass, hedges, bushes and trees were a fight of lime and spinach and olive tones, a curious haze draped and balanced it all. A policin green mist - charged with ensurin us Irish didn't overdose on luminosity or measure the wingspan of our good nature too literally.

When no room remained in the tent or even under the cart, Patsy and Mary began sleepin in the shelter of the hedgerows and watchin a competition of blues lap the night sky. Once a drunk countryman kicked Patsy in the face on the way home from the pub for absolutely no reason. That kind of thing was rare enough in those days, though. Nothing compared to what we endure now. Which is not to say it was easy. Put it this way - if just themselves and the children were campin and they were

quiet it was usually possible to stay a week. If there was a second family with them, as there often was, it would only be a few nights before guards would destroy the camp and tell them all to move.

That was always hard - they would have to wake the children up and go lookin for another spot.

I believe they stayed more than a week in some areas, though. Knew one great family down the road from the Hill of Clara. Nanny explained they would camp near houses and villages, not on top of them. That it was good to be able to ask for water and allow the horses graze on the long acre or wherever. Tell my little grandfather to search for firewood.

Neither nanny Mary nor Patsy promised me they were never cold, but they did used to say it was the warmest tent a soul could imagine when the tent was right. After he had finished collectin wood Nanny sent my little grandfather to nick some hay for the ground inside. That was their routine for years, because it took them a long time to get a barreltop caravan. When they finally did, it seemed like everybody had one.

Patsy painted their larch van red, blue and green and once laughingly told me this confused the country people even moreso because it *proved* we were gypsies after all! Inside were benches on both sides and a bunk across the back. A small stove. I stepped inside one for a few minutes when I was a ten year old girl and thought it was wonderful. Yet they kept usin the tent, even after they got the barreltop, because my rapidly multiplyin grandaunts and uncles couldn't all fit in the little hotel on wheels. My aunties weren't allowed sleep in the same place as my uncles, anyway. Ladies in the barreltop, three lads underneath with rugs hangin down either side and Patsy and Mary in the tent.

The tent was preferable come evenin, because the fire burned at the entrance with a kettle hangin over it. Mary sat there from dusk, choppin potatoes and communicatin with the children by shoutin and whisperin. My grandaunts and uncles were disciplined messers who would never step on the day's successes lain around the burnin wood - vegetables, milk and whatever else had been won.

'This is our fire,' nanny Mary would sigh. 'Please God, it always will be.'

She could read that fire.

The older children used to sit there for a few hours and listen to Patsy playin the mouth harp, my grand uncle Sean on the whistle and above all to nanny Mary tellin them ghost stories. A lot of the stories were

about dead travellers. Like the story of old Roadie McDonagh. He was a McDonagh who hadn't been buried properly by his family, spent eternity wanderin the road and became terrifyin if he strayed off it. Once some kin were camped beside a dusty, rollin field on which a government of black headed gulls were gathered. A man was seen wanderin through the gulls, yet not one bird flinched. That was when they realised it was Roadie. His ghost was fifty feet away when they ran - never returnin for their horses or cart or belongins.

When the settled children were goin to bed, their parents would say go to sleep or the tinkers will take you. Mary would meanwhile sh-huuush my grandaunts and uncles when the pub was passin because she remembered what had happened to Patsy's face that night in the hedgerows. She might make up some story about settled people needin children's ankles for breakfast broth.

As the girls listened to bedtime stories in the wagon, a curvature of cloth stared down at them. Lookin at the cloth was like lookin at the sky. You always have some kind of screen. At least that much is natural.

*I'll eat when I'm hungry
I'll drink when I'm dry
If the sunshine doesn't kill me
I'll live till I die*

Today was what mattered. Tomorrow irrelevant. You'd pick the potatoes when ya had to. They were there when you needed them. Yet it wasn't that you had no plan. You did have a plan. It was just the plan was in your head and you needed freedom to execute it. The plan was in line with your soul. My ancestors were fiercely protective of their innocence. Would move around dependin on the seasons - when it was time to be pickin in the fields they would move to an area where the farmers expected to see them. Adjust their work patterns accordingly. One week Patsy would be repairin tinware in someone's shed, the next he'd be workin on somebody else's bog. It just worked. Always they would leave behind a black circle by the side of the road, where nanny Mary's fire had brought everything together.

They rarely travelled with more than one other family - Ireland couldn't sustain much else - and it tended to be a different family every year. The only people they toured with more than once were Joe and

Bernie McDonagh and their clan. Joe and Bernie were the duo in the old portrait Michael had been lookin at the day he came home. His great grandparents. Their family had an interest in horses. They weren't fully fledged horsedealers like some travellers. Joe was more of a tinker than Patsy. Yet both men naturally dealt in horses to some degree and Joe owned many throughout the years. To us, horses were just part of the road. After all, a road without a horse was useless.

Joe was what you called a tangler. He'd encourage the settled people to buy and sell horses from one another at fairs. Settled people love pretendin they're not interested and it was Joe who would have to do the deal, which meant a tiny commission. Sometimes he would sell horses himself and knew a few tricks. Like mustard up the ass to make it happy for a few weeks and cheer up the buyer. Twice he even poisoned a horse to make it cheaper for him to buy. But there were also travellin horse dealers. A different breed to our great grandparents. They dealt in serious horses, to tell you the truth. Neither Patsy nor Joe would have done that. They preferred to tinker.

They did sell rabbits durin their first year travellin together. Joe could be out all night snarin. I believe both our great grandfathers became great scavengers. Rags, down, horsehair, mattresses and scrap metal. It could be sold to dealers when they had enough of it. I know they would sometimes snaffle vegetables or even something from the pantry if there was nobody around. If you think I'm sayin it was idyllic, you're holdin the book upside down.

What you must understand is that within our great grandparent's lifetime they were witnessin the pure dependence of our people on tin and horses start to become polluted. Patsy, Mary, Joe, Bernie and the children were dependin on the farmers in all sorts of new ways as the twentieth century opened its eyes. They increasingly took food, second hand clothing and money in exchange for different kinds of work. If the men didn't have money in the mornin they would approach a farm and ask for a day's work. Do all manner of things like clean the sheds, the stable, sty. Eat with the farmer and later bring some money back for Mary and Bernie. It still felt good because they had their own accommodation and could move around. Still seemed on our own terms. Y'know? We have always been very resourceful. Pasty and Joe could be here, they could be there - wherever they needed to be! Then move on, nothing lost.

The two couples always stayed up late at night together, laughin or acousin around the fire and it usually ended well. There were a few times

when the men started boxin for fun and the women were worried. Slight competition seemed to exist between the families. Joe, in particular, always seemed to be lookin for an edge.

They might have frolicked and fooled ya, but they were some of the smartest lads around in those ridiculous days. There was a thought and philosophy present. Many would say they slagged each other like you wouldn't believe. Yet that was actually how our great grandparents communicated. It's still how the fellas talk now. The trick, I suppose, is to come up with the best line or to skewer a point you couldn't otherwise by way of a joke.

Whenever Patsy would take the lead if they were liaisin with a farmer or just plain plottin, Joe's ears would prick up and - in fairness - when Joe showed his strength Patsy would reveal something by glancin at Mary or even Bernie. The women knew what was goin on. It was beneath the surface. It didn't invade too much. It was there.

If work dried up in one area, they simply moved on. As the years piled up it became clear that what our great grandparents actually worked at was of increasingly little importance. They looked for opportunities and made the best of them. Patsy and Joe would decide where to go based on tradin and beggin. Bernie too had convictions about what areas were promisin. Yet once there was something for them to do, they would hang around and do it. There was a lot of work in those days if you weren't stuck on tin. Hand work. Back then a lot of families in the country would farm or make cheese or whatever. There was a place for you.

One year the men simultaneously promised their four hands to the potatoes of two separate farmers in fields twenty eight miles apart. A steady argument developed about which farmer should be honoured, based on the pay and prospects associated with each. Ultimately, each man chose the other's farmer. First Joe said Patsy's find was a better bet. Then Patsy suddenly insisted they head towards Joe's commitment. It was pure ego. They were locked in a dynamic in which neither could let go of tryin to look like a modest leader.

For a while they were united in hustler's pride, schemin to be in two places at once. However, the balance was shot once more when Joe came up with the solution. In a moment of inspiration, he realised that one farmer was the type who needed to see them pickin, whereas the other was more interested in findin his barn a quarter full of spuds the follow-in mornin. They would pick on the former's land but deliver to the barn of the latter! Only after he paid them would they yank *his* crop and drag

it all the way back to the potatoless client from the previous evenin. A psychotic, two day scramble.

Patsy hated the idea. Felt they could lose both jobs. Yet as Joe talked it up with eloquence and fearlessness, his friend realised he had no choice but to get excited too. If he boycotted the scheme, the women would levitate with Joe to an unspoken level where Patsy would be rendered a coward. He therefore slowly began incorporatin intrigue into his queries around the fire.

In reality, it was a disaster because the pickin took much longer than expected. By the time they had picked half of the potatoes in the first farmer's field it was pitch black and they were exhausted. It would probably be the followin evenin before they fled, soon after which the farmer would notice his barn was every bit as empty as his field and the guards would be called. Yet, again due to ego, our great grandfathers found themselves bendin to their plan. They rose at dawn and were aggressively triumphant by midday, whereupon they hauled the sacs into their two barreltops and began the long, guilty trip to the faraway barn.

They arrived at 4.30pm to see the evil Connors clan all over the second landscape of potatoes like invaders from Mars. The farmer had obviously been more cautious than expected and had accepted the solicitations of a different breed. He was the gentry, after all. Had a white stone house in the middle of grass that looked like a faded billiards table, beside a beautiful oak and surrounded by four classy white horses with their heads solemnly ducked and chewin. One of which had been tangled the previous year by Joe at The O'Donnell Fair. Shite! They set up camp for the night - plannin an optimistic U-turn at first light.

Over a tiny dinner Patsy grew irritated with Joe for comin up with the whole idea in the first place and demanded they offer the potatoes to the second farmer at a good rate rather than haulin them all the way back to the first. This provoked an argument because while the first farmer would likely come after his potatoes, both families had been promised they wouldn't be starvin once they reached their destination. Eventually Joe - the original architect - had to back down and agree to offer the spuds to Farmer No. 2. The man was baffled by the offer and had little interest, only agreein when the lowest price was dismissed and barterin attempted. He finally accepted the two families into his kitchen for a few hours and everyone ate a wonderful feast.

As the families left, the farmer took pity and gave our great grandfathers enough money for a night's drinkin in the local, which he promised

welcomed tinkers. The women snatched it quickly, though gave a little back to the lads and ordered them off to the pub to drown their potential feud.

In McGonagles the fellas did indeed become temporary friends again and started playin darts with the locals. Instead of usin the toilets, Joe headed outside and with the stout makin him feel free took a stutterin piss against a blue gum trunk while gazin at the establishment, which was covered in three roofin jobs. The pub itself was thatched, followed by the lounge which was slated and needin repair Joe noted, followed by the family's own home which was thatched. Studyin this dippin and risin roof scheme in the dark, he was at a grand vantage point to watch the police arrive and enter by the first door. Rapidly, he strode through the second with his head down and walked straight over to Patsy, who was deeply engaged in discussion with a pig farmer.

'The shades is toreen,' he touched his elbow. 'Crush!'

That's Minceirtoiree. Our own language. It's blanker than this one. A bit like old Irish. These days we just call it cant. It came in very handy.

It wasn't that our family and the McDonagh's and whomever else we hooked up with never stopped movin back in those days. That my ancestors braved all conditions. You simply couldn't do that in Ireland. Durin the winter everyone stayed in a lane near the town. They literally didn't budge an inch. Winter was hard. It brought back a lot of stuff from the past. Made you examine your conscience.

Yet shelterin just wasn't like bein on the road. Patsy's heart was always on the road, even in the dead of January. The neighbours and people around the town often thought you were dirty and so for Patsy and Joe and their wives it was a wonderful feelin when St. Patrick's Day arrived - because it was travellin season again and time to get goin. Patsy told me he liked drink in the winter, whereas in the summer was happy with buttermilk.

What you have to understand is that, in the old days, families used to support each other much more than they do now. Extended family. That's a settled person's term. It doesn't make sense. It's all just family. They would have done better to come up with a term like fold-up family, to denote how settled people have shrunk the notion of kin. But nowadays even in our clan it's shrinkin. If you're not closely related then it is considered slightly less important. It's still big but not so much as in the old days. In the old days my great granduncles, great grandaunts and great grandparents were all heavily involved. Everyone would

connect at fairs and funerals throughout the year. There was a huge cast of players, all of whom had a big influence. You felt part of something far greater than yourself.

Despite our great grandfather's dedicated ballet, it was our great grandmothers who were the glue. Always sellin brooches, hair-grips, combs, tie-pins, beads, laces, pictures, strainers, scissors, needles, thread, shoe laces, polish, horsehair brushes, collar studs, feather fishin lures, wooden flowers, reed baskets and wire files. Nanny Mary would even read the cups and tell them all she could. She'd nearly know what to tell them. When it was a young person she'd tell them they were goin to be married or they were goin to have some good luck. You're tryin to better yourself! That was her favourite nail head. She sometimes used a crystal ball which was a piece of glass and nothing more.

Sellin and fortune tellin was really just to get their foot in the door. Once they'd sold some little thing, they'd start the stammy and Mary and Bernie could be persistent. In fact, it was almost like they were demandin rather than beggin. People tended to give Bernie, who was particularly stern, something to get rid of her. Some gave useless shite, of course, things you wouldn't feed or dress an animal with - and Mary would dump that crap down the road. In those days they used to call it alms anyway. Alms givin. People were generous, but they were also a little wary. They knew Mary and Bernie would curse any farmin they did if they went away empty handed. It would be strange for our great grandmothers to pass a house that didn't care about them a little.

'God save everybody in,' Mary would sigh. 'I'll say a prayer for ya.'

Bernie always seemed to be miserable lookin, have the baby on her tit when the door opened and insisted you had to mention God.

'God bless this house or this farm!' she exclaimed. 'May health, purity, goodness, meekness and every virtue reign here. May all those who dwell here be filled with faithfulness to thy law and with thanksgivin not only to yourself but your Son and the Holy Character. May such a humble blessin remain forever on this house - or this farm - and all who dwell here.'

She was usually in the kitchen by the time she said Amen. A bit of meat, spuds, cabbage, lock of onions, tea, sugar or maybe a bit of butter? See, back in those days most people grew their own vegetables. Kept chickens, cows, made cheese. It was *food* you would beg for. This was before money really. Money kind of happened in the forties. At least for us. Before that it was only something we got for tinkerin. It didn't circulate

for any old reason. They always gave Bernie something. The great story about her family was that, back when she was a little girl, they had been refused a place to stay by a household durin one of the worst downpours of the noughties. Before the rain showed any signs of ceasin and long before the sun came up a thousand rats took a corner through the forest and infested the gardens and rafters.

Chapter 3

My sister Josey lived in a council house across the green and had such a beautifully tiled and cupboarded rectangle of a kitchen with such an unblemished wooden tabletop that I always thought it looked like a showroom. For fifteen minutes I had been talkin about Michael like it didn't bother me while she stared at me with raised eyebrows. Occasionally sneerin very slightly or shakin her head. Askin three times if we would marry. Josey had blonde, frizzy, shoulder-length hair and similar, feverish looks to my own. Havin said that, she was eight years older and did look sort of compromised by life. Silk bathrobe on, neglected Marlboro Light in upright hand, she subsequently began tellin me a story about Christopher-Angel's work in the ten minutes before I left.

'Mairead!' she suddenly roared. 'Don't bring other people's names into the conversation!'

My blonde, curvy, fifteen year old niece Mairead was standin halfway down the hall in a yellow Nike tracksuit and legwarmers - complainin on the phone to a young friend of hers and startin to refer to third parties. That is something that can be very dangerous in our community. You wouldn't know what trouble you might cause. Still, when Mairead didn't respond and her mother stubbed her cigarette, marched into the hall and began shoutin at her I *was* slightly taken aback. It seemed over the top, because at that point I didn't know the background.

'Leave me *alone* will ya?!' Mairead shrieked, slammed down the phone and stormed upstairs.

To my complete shock, Josey charged after her daughter in a caped-crusadin flash and literally reeved her downstairs by the hair.

Immediately, I intervened.

'Hang on!' I yelled. 'What the hell are you fightin about?'

They were both breathing melodramatically.

'She knows,' Josey seethed.

'I *don't* fuckin know,' Mairead scowled. 'She's gone round de bend.'

'Don't use that language in here,' Josey pointed at her sharply.

'She's mad!' Mairead shrieked again. 'I don't want to be fuckin *near* her!'

'Out the door so,' I said pragmatically and flicked the catch. 'You two are bad as each other...'

'Fine,' Josey moaned. 'Don't let her out of your bloody sight, though, Christine.'

It wasn't the first time they had been split up. Yet I was surprised all over again when my sister suddenly lunged forward and grabbed Mairead's phone from her hand.

'Gimme my phone!' Mairead immediately roared, like she couldn't believe her mother's nerve.

'No...,' Josey disappeared back into the kitchen. 'Watch her, Christine.'

'Get out that door,' I whispered to my niece.

The grey surfaces of the estate where many of my relatives live were clean and still that dusk.

Before goin to my trailer we headed for the main road and the Texaco garage because Mairead wanted a pack of Johnny Blues. In the evenin air I sensed benevolent conspiracy, like before the curtain was raised for one of those plays we used to do in school. I sensed it from the people outside their council houses, Jimmy and Christopher who were settin something on fire near their cart and even the insulated cars tumblin by as we waited to cross.

'What's goin on?' I asked Mairead, though she didn't answer immediately.

The petrol station never pulled up its main shutter or opened the doors, no matter what time or date - yet their little hatch never closed.

'Nothing,' Mairead finally sighed while waitin for the Tunisian man to get her cigarettes. 'She needs to get checked out.'

'Don't say that,' I whispered forcefully. 'She's your mother!'

'She's crazy.'

Mine was an actual caravan, as opposed to a trailer or shed. Still called it a trailer though. Very simple. Just a bedroom and livingroom. I had a proper sink and fridge and all that. Some couches built into the walls. Orange tones everywhere. It was a little dull-lookin after years of neglect

to be honest. In the bedroom, a sea blue blanket hung by my window which I sometimes clipped up as a curtain and there was a red candle on my bedside table.

I noticed my bed wasn't made and started straightenin it for Mairead.

'N-no,' she exhaled in the bedroom doorway and pointed behind herself with a cigarette. 'I'll sleep on the couch out here!'

I puffed a pillow, eyeballed her with a grin.

'I'm *afraid* to sleep in here, Auntie Chrissie,' she said with a straight face. 'It's too dark.'

'You're good!' I winked and unfurled my turquoise duvet. 'Wish you'd just tell me what's goin on love. Anyway, I'll sleep out there because I'll be up late.'

I had only said goodnight, stepped back into the livingroom and closed the bedroom door when Michael stepped into the caravan.

My first instinct was to laugh because the last time we had been alone in a caravan together it had changed the course of my life. We never would have been alone up the dump years ago either. Things hadn't changed much since then, yet these days the whole camp was probably hopin for the opposite - that we would shut the door behind us and redeem ourselves. Of course, there was my niece to consider.

Traveller girls always take care not to be alone with men other than their husbands, brothers, fathers or sons. Because if our reputation is tarnished, that's it. We're considered dirty. No man will ever want us.

'Mairead's here,' I therefore snapped. 'Go away or you'll ruin her life too.'

'I'm twice her age,' he scowled.

I sighed.

'Don't have anywhere to stay,' he brandished a nagan-shaped paper bag. 'Thought we could get locked.'

As he stepped inside, pretended to glance around the caravan and eventually collapsed on the couch I organised two glasses. Excitement and despair chasin each other within me. The way he was lookin around and that comment about Mairead bein too young for him didn't sit right. Was he definitely a settled person or what?

I placed glasses on the table, pulled closed the front door and rubbed my hands together for old warmth. Slowly and somewhat nervously sat down beside him. Brought my knees up to my chin, sniffed the vodka he

had poured and told him about Mairead and her mother fightin. Was able to get a much closer look at him than I had that first day.

'How's the game comin along?' I asked, unable to get comfortable on my own couch.

'They think a weddin is the best idea,' he sighed.

'What else did you suggest?' I asked doubtfully.

'Well,' he looked at me. 'I'd love to make it about the lads racin their horses. But that's not very excitin to my bosses. Plenty of games about that already. They're tryin to be original.'

'The wedding's not original,' I blinked.

'It *is* original,' he nodded. 'It's just-'

'The *weddin* part is original but the violence-'

'Well,' he shrugged at the floor. 'Eighty percent of games in the shops are violent, Christine.'

His eyes seemed fixed in a reluctant direction.

'Thing is,' he said. 'They're goin to make the game. The likes of me and you won't stop them. One way or another it'll be on the shelves by Christmas.'

'You said that you could influence-'

'I'm *there*,' he looked at me. 'I'm in the room. So I'm tryin to improve it. You might be able to help me.'

'I can help ya by tellin ya not to make it about a weddin,' I said. 'It's *unrealistic*.'

'Really?' he took another sip.

'Well, it's not good for travellers,' I shrugged. 'Put it that way.'

'The lads told me half the weddins are bloody,' he smiled.

'That's not true,' I said. 'It's not the point anyway. You're gonna... take that *one* thing and use it to represent us?'

I took a deep breath. Havin spent half my life workin in voluntary organisations and havin such debates with travellers and settled travellers and settled people - whomever - I would probably have been happy livin out the rest of my days without ever discussin such things again. I didn't like what it did to my tone of voice. Yet dealin with Michael I had no such restraint. This was the man who had ruined my life.

'I'm a fuckin *traveller* Christine,' he reminded me.

I looked at him for a moment and realised a couple of things. Firstly, he was in pain. Sure, it was hidden and probably complicated, but he was not a peaceful person by any stretch of the imagination. Not with eyes like that. Secondly, all his years away had allowed him forget how prejudiced the settled community was towards us. How *could* he make a game about a traveller weddin - full of violence - if he didn't think we were troublemakers. It was such a settled person's perspective.

'If you want a fuckin minstrel talk to Rosie or even Lucius,' I dumped my glass on the table and waved my hand dismissively.

He smiled.

'It's like you've forgotten how hard things are for the *kids*,' I pulled my sleeves over my hands. 'You not remember those stories your granny used to tell us?'

'Yeah,' he said, almost wistfully - glancin momentarily at the way I had covered up.

A lot of people thought the Irish were obsessed with God, but they weren't. They were obsessed with land. That was one of the reasons us travellers were looked down on. Because we didn't own land. At least that's what Michael's granny said.

'Not sure you do remember,' I shook my head slowly.

'I *do* Christine,' he lifted the paper bag and poured more vodka into his glass. 'You don't forget what your granny tells ya.'

'No,' I said. 'But after sixteen years I'd say you feel a bit different.'

'You're still angry with me,' he said gently as he screwed the cap back on the bottle. 'Aren't you?'

'Well,' I shrugged. 'Very little has fuckin changed here, Michael.'

'Why do you stay?' he sighed. 'Anyway, that's not true. It's gettin better.'

'Shite!' I said. 'They have no *fuckin* problem acceptin we have a right to exist, so long as we don't come near them. Almost all of them are the same. Fuckin prejudiced. People who would never say a thing against someone of a different colour - but they have no problem discriminatin against us.'

He was silent.

'I'm talkin about how I *feel*,' my chest rose and fell. 'Very little has changed in *me*. Don't want to be part of that world.'

'Right,' he sighed.

'We're still refused service in pubs,' I started countin on my fingers. 'Still told to leave shops and hairdressers. Denied bookins in hotels. My cousins Amy and Siobhain and Claire - an absolutely beautiful bunch of girls - were refused into a shop in Liffey Valley! They were publicly humiliated by the security staff, Michael. Actually escorted out of the shop-pin centre!'

Rain started hittin the roof. God, I *loved* that sound. Like a gold rush on iceskates.

Michael smiled too.

'That's why I'll never move across the grass,' I sighed. 'Just love hearin that.'

'Are you not bein a bit tough on me?' he asked. 'I did grow up here.'

'It doesn't matter,' I fingered his ribs and smiled. 'You've renounced your membership of the travellin community.'

'Bullshit,' he scowled.

'Do you use the name McDonagh?' I asked.

He hesitated.

'You don't,' I smiled.

He closed his eyes.

'I don't get you,' I laughed. 'Just stop them from makin the game badly if you care. Why come back?'

Michael opened his eyes slowly.

'What do you actually *want*?' I asked.

He looked at me slowly.

'I dunno,' he sighed.

I sighed myself and tried to relax.

The window over the sink was an oblong of dim light and through rain you could just about make out ivy on the wall and a load of dumped roof insulation lain against it. The glow of the downpour was bowed at by cups hangin on a holder that stood over one gas ring when I wasn't cookin. My slim Febreeze can, plastic bottle of bleach and empty 2 litre bottle of diet coke stood like soldiers over the grey plastic basin. All believers in the blue warmth of the perfect shower outside. You were *with-in* the rain when you lived in a trailer. Divorced from it after movin into a house.

'No,' Michael whispered. 'You don't forget when people think you're animals and beasts. Remember my gran's caravan bein towed? Or Desir-ee Cullen's trailer bein lifted into the air. Her fuckin home, belongins *way* up in the fuckin sky! All them guards standin around. Fuckin cunts.'

He sparked up a Johnny Blue as I thought of the thousands of court proceedins intended to move us on, without so much as a thought of where we would go.

All the stones thrown at us over the years. Bein described as a national problem. A nuisance to farmers. Claims that our horses spread foot and mouth! They actually viewed us as a threat to tourism for a while. Do you know that? The powers that be reckoned if we were seen around town durin holiday seasons that foreign visitors would return home to England and America and talk about it.

Knowin damn well they didn't like us, it was only a matter of comin up with a reason. All those summons. Fines by the sanitary man. We were causin havoc, they said. Pandemonium. A menace to social order. Infestin. Breedin! Claimin they were kind and charitable toward us, but that we didn't appreciate the generosity.

The bedroom door opened gently and we both blinked as Mairead stuck her head out.

'Can I get a glass of water?' she asked.

'Quickly,' I said. 'This is Michael.'

'Hiya,' she nodded and shimmied to the sink.

'Hiya,' he said.

She filled a glass and drank it while starin out at the rain.

All three of us were silent and I thought Mairead looked like a ghost.

'Can I borrow your phone?' she suddenly asked and glanced in my direction.

'No credit love,' I sighed - really wantin her to go back to my room.

She moved her eyes from me to Michael.

'Sure,' Michael said, produced his mobile and tossed it.

'Thanks,' she nearly caught the Nokia. 'I'll bring it back in a minute.'

With that she disappeared into my bedroom and shut the door.

For a moment we didn't say anything - just let the rain comment on everything from our discussion, to the hour, to Mairead.

Naturally, the weather was commentin on our history before long. We were alone in the middle of the night once more. Like the past had become turned around.

'Are you ready to be kissed?' Michael asked.

I shrugged meekly as he put his glass on the table and leant toward me.

'Everyone thinks we're tyin the knot,' I sighed.

He closed his mouth around the edge of mine and began kissin me properly.

It felt good.

Didn't last more than a few minutes, though - because I felt so guilty about Mairead bein next door.

He went outside to take a piss while I checked on her.

'Michael!' I screamed out my bedroom window. 'She's done a runner!'

God as my witness, I don't know how she eased through such a small hole.

My blue curtain blanket was actually folded on the bed.

Michael's phone on my little table.

Immediately, we legged over to the garage in the rain. She almost certainly would have passed by there. There weren't a lot of other directions she could have gone.

The Tunisian fella behind the glass remembered myself and Mairead from when she bought smokes.

'Oh, the blonde one I seen you with tonight about ten?' he said. 'Yes, I seen her - she walked down *dat* way toward VIP Feetness.'

'Where's she going?' Michael looked at me.

'Aaeaaaaahh,' Josey started moanin like crazy the moment we appeared at her door, roarin for her husband to come downstairs. 'Christopher-Angel! Mairead's gone! She's gone! She's after runnin *away*.'

'What do you mean?' I asked, confused.

'She's run away with Gull!' Josey wailed like a banshee cat.

'Gull?' I asked.

'They're a couple, Christine!' she moaned as Christopher-Angel appeared. 'She knows I know.'

In his black moustache and black pyjamas which seemed to showcase his crucifix and hairy chest, Christopher-Angel collapsed onto the bottom stair - because Gull was Mairead's first cousin and our sister Steph's sixteen year old son.

We all have a problem with first cousins gettin married in this community. It's not okay. Second cousins, grand. Not first cousins. Yet occasionally we get stuck with it because the kids run away together and there is absolutely nothing anyone can do. It's like I said before - no other fella will touch you after you've been alone with a boy for fifteen minutes, let alone run off with him for a few days.

There was a lot of sobbin, stiff drinkin, mobile phonecallin and cursin at the long, wooden kitchen table before the sun rose - at which point the four of us marched over to Gull's mother and father who were expectin us. Gull's father Jason, our brother-in-law, had already checked Gull's shed and lo and behold money was missin and we all just knew they were gone. That was it. The *two* of them were gone, y'know, so it was obvious they were gone together.

'You and Michael were involved?' Jason asked me. 'Were ya?'

'That's not true Jason,' Michael raised a finger with sixteen years of lethargy.

'I swear to God,' I shook my head as tears returned. 'On my nieces and *nephews*. We would *never* have knowingly let this happen! I was talkin to Michael, Jason. She was *so* quiet climbin out that window. Like a fuckin ninja.'

Obviously she had texted Gull from my bed. That was how we messed up. Givin her a phone. Gull probably picked her up on the corner by VIP Fitness. Shite! I wouldn't have minded if they had done it on their own time. This way *I* had to take the blame.

There was excitement in the camp that mornin, because the moment a young couple disappears is the moment we all accept they're gettin married.

'Shotgun weddin!' cackled Rosie.

'That's it,' Nelly's Francie nodded.

'Be happy for them,' Ruari said through his voice prosthesis. 'They're old people now.'

That's how it goes in our world. Literally. It's like John Wayne in *The Quiet Man*. You sit up one side of the cart. I'll sit on the other. No hands touchin. No patty fingers.

When they returned Gull and Mairead would continue sleepin together. That was okay. You were allowed to share a trailer after you ran away.

Nobody heard from them for a few days, but we obviously knew they were okay because they were together. We wondered if they were actually goin to a priest and tryin to get it over with, or just chillin. Finally, Gull's mother texted him and he texted her back. The followin day he drove slowly back into the camp with his irreversible bride in the passenger seat, her hair like Medusa and lookin very smug altogether. A banquet of petrol station junk food, followed by round the clock B&B copulation no doubt.

I was jealous - in case you don't know.

A slow ceremony of noddin among the men and tears among the women followed and by that evenin a weddin date of April 4th had been set - Mairead's sixteenth birthday.

There were twelve of us kids and none of us went for our first cousins. So when Gull and Mairead ran away it was a shock. There was consternation. In fact, we still couldn't be sure the priest would even marry them. He might say they were too closely related or something. It was awful when priests reacted that way. It was so hard to find the right person to marry and when you did, hellish bein told no. But if the priest wouldn't agree to it, what could you do except find another priest and hope he took a different view? Goin up the north was good that way.

Second cousins, no problem. We often married them. In the old days it was all matchmakin, see. These days most of the children choose their own partner. I still like to know who it is. Like to know who they're pickin even if I'm too smart to get involved. Just want it to work, I suppose. We want our girls married young so they don't get into trouble. So that nothing goes wrong for them. Y'know? I prefer when it's at least a distant relative because that way you know what you're gettin. You also know that when times are tough, it can't all fall apart because everyone is part of the same family anyway. Besides, people who are related have more nature for each other. They're less likely to smack each other around. I don't say unlikely. Just less likely. Family counts for so much in our community. It really does. These are my people. Those belongin to me. My own.

There are certain travellers who we just don't marry, of course, because we don't mix with them. Unfortunately, if you go back far enough you often find there is *some* connection. We're all connected! Marriages

to settled people can work, too. Though a lot of the time they don't. Look at what happened to Michael. He got engaged to a settled girl and now he was back again, sayin it was over. Many of us would be against that kind of thing. I remember a nephew of mine was goin to marry a settled girl once and my brother actually went and told the girl's parents he was already married! That was the end of that.

I have to be honest. Otherwise what's the point of writin this book? Although none of us married first cousins, our mother and father actually *were* first cousins. It's true. Gull and Mairead was actually just history repeatin itself because precisely the same thing happened when our mother jumped over the budget with our father forty three years earlier. The budget was the bag of tools for tinsmithing. Jumpin over it was all you had to do.

Chapter 4

Even when my mother was a little girl it was clear the end of tinkering was upon us. Although she camped at O'Donnell Bridge with her parents and even tried to sink that same rectangular boat my grandfather had targeted years earlier, Ireland had genuinely started to industrialise since the Second World War had ended. You could feel it. It was really difficult when plastic hit kitchens. When a family trade is handed down from generation to generation, nobody expects the world will someday dismiss it. Yet thanks to all those Tupperware parties in suburban livingrooms across America, tin ceased to be such a currency. No longer held such potency. Meanwhile, thanks to the arrival of farm machinery there was also much less need for hand work and *much* less need for horses.

It was frightening how quickly these changes occurred and it meant other difficulties which were normally sewn into the hem of our existence soon proved trickier for my parents and grandparents. Like what I suppose you would call 'town planning'. The whole notion of public and private space had become more clearly defined in the twentieth century and now that we weren't fulfilling a definite role, people started to feel we were camping in their garden rather than merely the same area.

There was the dole, too. We started to get the dole in the sixties. Well, the end of the sixties really - although for years beforehand many of us had been cleverly claiming it anyway. As soon as they allowed us have it officially, we all grabbed it. We would have been mad not to! Needless to say, nothing is free in this world and by taking their money we became somewhat beholden. It was originally in voucher form for those of us who didn't have a house. They wouldn't pay cash. That was a trick. To cage us like birds. Maybe even a way to get some of the dole back, because the only houses we could move into were government houses. I honestly can't be sure once we get onto the subject of the government because I hate politics, but the dole was definitely something that slowed my parents and uncles down because they had to *be* there once a month to sign on. In fact, in the early years it was once a week. Weekly signing -

just for the travellin community! That was totally discriminatory and they got rid of that. Worst of all, though, was that everyone had to start conductin their business in secret or benefits would be stopped. That took our pride and independence away.

Even in 1965, when my mother and father jumped over the budget, it was obvious things would never return to the way they had been - indeed things looked set to change a whole lot more.

At the start of that decade skirts had been knee-length, but when they married minis were the rage. There was no way Francie would have worn a mini but she was certainly married in a hurry, green knee-length number with a belt and buttons and collars. Our granny found it shockin anyway. Ma managed to pull off a sort of Ronette beehive, in an attempt to look like Veronica Bennett although I very much doubt she did. Unfortunately, there are no photos. I know her hair was so brown it seemed black and that her face was rounded by dimples. Can tell you that even nowadays her eyes always seem one step ahead of things. She would have looked great on her weddin day I think. As for my father John, he remains a huge man even now. You could park a lorry on his chest. Back then his black hair dribbled down over his forehead, sellin oily black irises. Quick on the uptake, he wore white vests as consistently as my great grandfather had worn that suit I told you about. Even when it was freezin. My da just *had* to be in his white vest.

Ma and da - two young, married first cousins - continued travellin the road passionately for a few years after tyin the knot. At O'Donnell Bridge tellin my sisters Stephanie and Josey all about the rectangular wooden boat from our grandfather's day and Francie's own day but which unfortunately was there no longer. They didn't travel in a barreltop wagon, but rather the kind of caravan settled people used for holidays and while John was certainly a craftsman on the inside - clingin to carpentry, flower-makin, shoemakin, umbrella repair and the odd bit of weldin - on the outside he seemed destined to become a collector of waste. Maybe it wasn't so bad, he reasoned with my mother. All part of bein on the road. Adaptin.

They were afraid of Dublin. Too many strange people and in the old days it was hard drivin a pony and cart with all the motorcars. But my da now argued there was metal in the city. A hoard you would never find in the country. He also talked about suburbia. How the houses were stacked up against one another. In the country they were so far apart ma couldn't cover many in a day, but in suburbia it would be easy to do a

hundred. She smiled at that after beggin all her life. There was anonym-ity in the city, he added. He could collect and sell metal yet still sign on and nobody would know.

Besides, they had started to get awful trouble off the guards about bein by the side of the road in recent times. The authorities were always bangin on their door and sayin it was dangerous for them to be parked where they were. Slappin them with court orders. What else could he tell her? They would get into cinemas and pubs much easier! There was street lightin! It would be a far cry from the dark country road where you needed a fire or you wouldn't be able to see your own hands.

Francie, mother of those fires, was unconvinced. Although she couldn't articulate it, she was worried about John's drinkin. He had gone savage over the handouts. Become absolutely stupid with alcohol. What you have to understand is that once upon a time our people never had the money. Now him and his brother lived in the pubs. It was ridiculous, ma said. He didn't need money. He needed work. Yet what could she do? She had my two sisters and two brothers to take care of. Da was the man. At the end of the day, she would respect his decisions about how to spend the dole, where to live, what work to pursue. Everything was decided by him. That was it. On the few occasions she challenged him out of sheer desperation with their deterioratin situation, he roared at her so ferociously that she thought long and hard before doin so again. It was his world. You could be sure of that.

They will correct me if I am wrong but it seems to my memory that uncle Joseph and his wife Charlotte shifted down to Dublin first. Each time they came back and visited our camp they were takin another couple off with them. That was the way of it. Before long all the brothers, sisters and their families were stoppin here on this green in Longcommon where I was born. Like everyone else, my parents insisted their first trip to the city was temporary. Yet after livin here a few months they would never really leave again. Heartbreakin. Inside, they were so torn. In the city you had less freedom, after all. You had to camp where the government said.

The more da drank, the less he spoke. He might tell Francie that Dublin was the place to be, but deep down he knew it was the end of the road. I think that was one of the reasons he became so hard to live with.

My mother put up with awful shite from him over the years. Throughout seven pregnancies he drank, came back to the trailer and took out all his frustrations, failures and anger on her. He would throw

stuff around. Curse her. Hit her. She would take my sisters and brothers to our Auntie Roslyn's trailer when it was really bad. Of course, Roslyn and Gerry were often havin problems of their own. In those days men in this community *knew* the women would take it and so came home pukin, with bloody noses, behavin like wild beasts and it didn't matter. They did whatever they wanted to top off an evenin. Treatin my ma and auntie's like parts of themselves, with which they could do as they pleased.

Over the years it made my mother so very low. The way he spent almost all their spare cash on stout and left her sittin at home every night. Then came back and forced her to have sex. I think it broke her.

My sister Josey, graspin the Tommee Tippee mug she refused to abandon at age five, once watched her make a run for the door. Back then little Josey's blonde hair was straighter and her eyes weren't so wide. She was a dreamer. Always somewhere else. Perhaps because of what she saw. She explains in great detail how that night our father grabbed our mother by the hair, while our mother wrapped her arms around the doorway.

Steph tells the story even more colourfully - says ma's hands began to bleed from holdin on.

They both agree that once he got her inside he threw her against the wall with such force she needed seven stitches.

I told ma a hundred times had it been me, I would never have put up with that. Steph says the same. I think our ma knows us girls are serious. These days my sisters and cousins don't take that kind of thing off their husbands. Not in this camp. They might have gotten away with it once, but they sure as hell don't get away with it now. We give as good as we get. That was the silver-linin of settlin in Longcommon. Even though the older generation talked about movin around, we knew they never would again. Once we copped that, around the age of nine or ten, it occurred to us they might be mistaken about other things too. We started to question them. So, I suppose, there were *some* advantages to slowin down. Only some. Like I say, one reason my father was such a brute in the first place was that he wasn't on the road. It obviously works both ways.

'For the rest of my days I will live here in the camp,' he said to me outside the church when I made my confirmation. 'But my heart will always be on the road.'

It's well nigh impossible for someone who is not nomadic to understand. Such a trick for you to value who we truly are. I have sympathy

for the fact that you are wadin through so many half-truths and untruths. Have heard some people say we used to be settled but were starved or burnt out of our homes. Some of us were. I do have relatives whose ancestors left houses rather than give their daughters to landlords. But we were never a shower of failed settled people who just needed to be re-settled. Your parents were wrong about that. Seriously. Most of us have been travellin since ancient times.

We lived in Celtic times. We lived in pre-Celtic times. We weren't wanderers for any negative reason. Yet the government were indeed takin that position around the time my parents moved permanently to Longcommon. Treatin them like victims of colonialism or something! I can't tell you how upsettin that was for my father.

'That's not our history,' he used to sigh.

We have existed for a long, long time. Traditionally, we have been on the right side of things too. No, it wasn't a red-haired tinker who made the nails to crucify Christ. We weren't forced to wander the world without a home as a result. That's a settled person's myth. Nor did tinkers steal one of the four nails, meanin there's a day every year when we can steal without sinnin. That's a traveller myth.

However, my father explained that we *were* around at the time of St. Patrick and did help him when he was a boy slave. Described in great detail how we freed him from his cruel master and I do believe that to be the case. He told me we hated any form of bein tied down. That durin the Black and Tan days we were great friends to the nationalists. Known everywhere as the best hunters and soldiers. People were frightened of us. We are constantly mentioned in Irish mythology. Have a look. We are part of your history. Part of your country. You should not be ashamed of us. We are God's own people. The true Irish. With a right to live where and how we please.

We believe life is meant to be lived on the road. That settlin down is akin to dyin. Life is about new things, new horizons. If you reject that by boxin yourself in, you're already dead.

It's the most natural thing in the world to meet up with family and anyone who admits how big their family is will be forced to move. Yet one also moves to *avoid* people. That's another reason it's so important. To get away from people you are fightin with before it becomes too serious. We are not confrontational like the settled Irish. They would spend thousands of Euros goin to court and stubbornly live beside neighbours

they hate forever and ever. That's not the nomadic way. There is always conflict in life. You can't avoid it. But you can move on.

Of course, after my mother and father settled on this camp in Longcommon, they remained travellers. In the end, bein a traveller doesn't only mean movin. Nor does bein settled mean stayin in one place. These are, ultimately, states of mind.

We look at life differently. We look at work and accommodation and a lot of things differently. We don't define ourselves by occupation like so many settled Irish. We define ourselves by family. I would say that's the problem with this world. It has become *all* about the individual. Not about the family you have, the path you're all on together and the mosaic you feature in. Instead, it's just whatever stupid idea you come up with all by yourself and manage to convince some woman of.

It was all fields here when they arrived in 1970. The council wouldn't start buildin houses like the one Josey ended up livin in until the eighties. I think my mother disliked the Dublin people. Thought they had their noses stuck right up in the air. Yet every newly arrived travelin family set up wherever there was space, irrespective of what the Longcommon people thought.

On the second day, a normally dressed woman and man approached Francie in the field.

'Hello!' the woman shouted. 'I'm a nun.'

Francie looked from the woman to her male companion.

'You're not a nun,' she smiled back at her.

At that very moment, she saw Michael's mother Bernadette passin by and marched off to get better acquainted. They spoke about the nun who hadn't really been a nun and after that day visited each other frequently durin the early weeks and bitched about how the government gave them so little support. About how if you were starvin or ill the council wouldn't help. Butterin batch, Francie related to Bernadette that one child in the camp was deaf and dumb and yet the local authority had done nothing until the St Vincent de Paul first got involved. Bernadette responded enthusiastically by agreein it was only when you were givin birth the powers that be helped - in the form of a midwife or doctor. Yes, my mother concurred. It was the St Vincent de Paul. Nobody else cared.

They were the first to believe we had the right to some help. The government took *much* longer. Even today it's not really that interested. Thinks we're stubborn. Causin problems for ourselves. It doesn't

genuinely respect our ethnicity and culture. Says we die young because of the way we live - not because we were denied health care for so many years.

Yet it was around that time, when ma first moved to Longcommon, that things started to change. A raft of silly initiatives had been undertaken in recent years or were imminent. The Travellin People Review Body. Task Force on the Travellin Community. Commission on Itinerancy. The First National Convention of the Irish Travellers Community. The Itinerant Action Campaign.

None of them respected our traditions. That commission I mentioned, for instance, declared 'all efforts directed at improvin the lot of itinerants and at dealin with the problems created by them and all schemes drawn up for these purposes must always have as their aim the eventual absorption of the itinerants into the general community.'

You see what I'm talkin about?

There were actually fines for travellin. Francie and Bernadette shook their heads. Fines, no less! Mounds of clay and rubble. Deep trenches dug. Boulders to prevent us from campin.

If we weren't settled, they insisted, we could never be educated. There were many organisations in our future. Like Pavee Point - that was created by a traveller actually. Exchange House. National Traveller Women's Forum. The Irish Traveller Movement. I would eventually become very popular in such places because of my ability to write like a solicitor.

Now our two families had resumed contact, old stories of our great grandparents bein on the road years before were dusted off and tried on for size. The story of the magic potato swindle was recycled for the current generation, in the retellin comin across as far more lucrative and dramatic. The old competition between the men sketched as camaraderie.

There was a brief period after our parents moved into the camp when, come evenin time, the two families would visit one another. Michael's father Joe played cards with John who had acquired a television for our trailer which he connected to a truck battery. The McDonaghs thought this fantastic and watched football for about two months. My sisters and brothers often runnin back and forth between the two trailers.

Mum insists that durin those early years daily life on the camp was quite good. John would often be doin business with Joe and she would

be in and out of Bernadette's trailer. They had met others, too, from stoppin here - all of whom ma had some olden connection to.

Our parents started to rely more on the suburbanites who gave them junk and food just like the farmers had once done. Except these days they gave money too. These days there was usually nothing for John or Francie to do in return. These days they were more like pure beggars.

Electricity, runnin water, bin collection and toilets were not available back then. It will therefore come as no surprise that our camp was dirty. Francie got water from shops or houses or petrol stations. When it was wet, things used to get difficult because so many people were movin around that it turned into a bog. I think da used to make little shacks out of rubbish for my sisters to play in.

The renewed connection with Michael's family did not endure. There were scores of trailers arrivin and within six months their bond had become enveloped by the more complicated politics amidst the multitudes. Within a year, the two families had stopped acknowledgin one another and by the time Michael and myself were born nobody even remembered there was history. We were all just faces livin in the same area. That's how it is for us travellers. Our world is always boilin over with forgotten connections - and the more settled we become, the more connections we forget.

It's the same for everyone. We were all nomadic once. Yet you've trapped yourselves in cement boxes. Seated yourselves in front of screens. I *know*. Even if you don't.

Chapter 5

The day Michael selected for his next visit was windy and freezin and sunny and our dog Planet looked like he had been poured onto the mound beside the entrance as he lay watchin the grass and his very own fur get blown all over the place. I was makin sausage and ketchup sandwiches for an endless number of takers and keepin an eye on my little nephew Jason who was drivin his electric scooter around.

Mobile phones had been jumpin like beans non-stop that month, what with disappeared travellers reappearin and first cousin engagements and what have you. Every family in Ireland who had anything to do with us, many families in Manchester and three across the rest of England knew the latest gossip, had recycled it many times and all but discarded it. Things were startin to quiet down. It seemed like Michael had never been gone and that Gull and Mairead were already in their autumn years. In fact, we had even been treated to a brief argument after they came home from the chipper one night.

Life went on.

I was removin frizzy, carroty rope from one of Jason's black plastic wheels when Michael appeared in front of me.

'Hi,' I wiped my hands on my dress and looked up at him.

'Howaya?' he nodded and did some eye contact.

There was a calmness to the interaction that made me feel we were past the beginnin of gettin to know each other again. Still, I found myself foldin my arms in mild discomfort while standin up.

'Remember you were sayin your game can't be about horses?' I asked.

'Yeah,' he smiled.

'Well,' I washed my teeth with my tongue and glanced aside. 'I have another idea for ya.'

'Really?' he asked.

I looked back at him and saw that false type of interest social workers and their brethren display.

'Yeah,' I nodded. 'Come with me.'

We walked towards the entrance of the camp.

'Where you takin me?' he asked.

'I want to show something,' I said quietly. 'It wasn't here in your day.'

Immediately outside, a bunch of the lads were doin something to Shane's truck. The cab was lifted so the front of the truck was dippin toward the ground and they could get underneath. Think they were takin turns attemptin something with a wrench.

'Aaahh,' Francie said in reply to Shane. 'Believe me. I know a good thing. Any good things around here I'll find them.'

Myself and Michael nodded respectfully as we passed.

'I know,' Paddy murmured. 'You'll be overpaid for it.'

As Michael and I walked around the front of the cab and crossed the back road we found Trigger tied to a staked metal pipe with blue rope, balancin on the slope of grass. His head dippin as he looked through rubbish and branches for weeds at the very edge of the road, muzzle brushin off tarmacadam while hind leg tripped over rope. The wind blowin his white fluffy spiked mane around a little and swayin that long, combed white haircut of a tail. He had some dark blotches on his tummy and I rubbed him there while climbin past.

As we walked those first yards together, in the moments before it was natural to chat, I noted my feelins durin this third visit of Michael's were quite banal. Of course he had eventually returned, I grinned. Like a line of string giftwrappin a life I lived for nobody. Soon he might even bore me, too. Just to tie the knot.

We heard the truck engine roar to life and glanced back as sunny smoke started goin to heaven. Francie and Shane were now swingin the blue, rain dotted cab down into place again. Then everyone except Joe climbed inside and drove past us for the main road, shoutin as they went.

'Make an honest woman out of her!' Paddy howled.

As we walked across the grass, buses groaned by on the dualer and the odd plane approached to land.

'How's work?' I asked.

'Gettin busy,' he nodded. 'It's all about bein ready for Christmas.'

'Wow,' I jutted my eyebrows humbly in the hope of flatterin him a little today. 'Must be so interesting...'

He looked at me like he wasn't sure how to take that.

'Yeah,' he shrugged. 'These days videogames are all the rage, Christine. They used to make games out of movies but now it's the other way around.'

I nodded slowly.

'Do you find it scary?' I asked. 'Like Ape says. What if everything becomes a game?'

'That's happened,' he shrugged as we started to veer. 'There's sites where you become a character and actually walk in and out of shops and even buy things - you can *live* like that.'

He was watchin a couple of Holy Child girls walk by in their black socks, grey skirts and navy jumpers. Their hair tied up and one of them clickin away on her mobile. The speed at which the two girls moved was incredible.

'Kids are the ones I feel sorry for,' he nodded vaguely in their direction.

Two blue-sweatered schoolboys followed the girls a while later, though with much less speed and determination. Hands in grey pockets, stopping and swirlin. Kickin and examinin the pavement.

'Where are you takin me Christine?' Michael asked as we descended the green and walked past Auntie Mona's abandoned trailer which was a tomb of woodcuttins nowadays.

'The gym,' I said.

'VIP Fitness?' he looked back because that was the other way.

'No,' I said.

I skipped over the faded, stringy hay and then up and over the fence of chocolate brown corrugated iron. Then we jumped down onto thick wires and zillions of really thin ones - stridin across them until we got to ferns that preceded the gym.

The door was long gone which meant we just approached a gap in the concrete structure. It looked darker than I remembered inside, but that changed once we entered.

The place was little more than shiny cream walls, a tiled floor with a square of seventies carpet in the middle and two families of weight apparatus ignored for more than one winter. Half the equipment sat on a

section of tiles that were raised at the far end, while slouchin blue punch-bags hung on either side of the entrance.

Michael circled the bags, unsure whether to dig or hug.

'The room we used to put the vegetables in,' he said slowly.

'Yeah,' I nodded from where the equipment was.

'Mmm,' he said.

I inspected the raised tile section and after a moment's hesitation sat down beside a weddin cake of dusty purple barbells.

'You hear about Big Blessed John and Scoby Maughan?' I asked in a contrived way.

'No,' he stupidly hugged one of the bags and stared at me.

'They had a fight,' I smiled.

'What?' he yelped. 'How old are them lads?'

'Fifty odd,' I said. 'Anyway... I was thinkin maybe you could make the game about bareknuckle.'

He looked upwards, where his bag's rope was tied around a rafter only available because that part of the ceilin had been peeled away by the lads.

'Yeah?' he said, again like a social worker.

I knew he wasn't takin me seriously so kicked junk away from my reclinin leg - some lad's scaled silverblack trainer, a Steve Collins newspaper article and framed Republic of Ireland soccer photo.

Remember I told you about Michael's great grandfather Joe, who was in that old photo with his wife and with whom Patsy manipulated the potatoes? Well, Joe's cousin was one of the great legends of the twentieth century. King McDonagh. Awarded six white horses and a new caravan when he won that title and - the story goes - never even willin to take off his jacket. He believed no man was good enough that he needed to take off his jacket to beat him! A knockout artist. Died in 1963 at the age of 63 and 10,000 people attended his funeral - a lot of them settled people because in Kerry we had a deep connection with the locals for many years goin back. He could have been challenged. If someone had been willin. Nobody was. Had his last fight before he died and won. Died of a heart attack, although not because of the fight. *There* was a man. King of the Travellers! A fightin man. There's no real king today. Don't let anyone tell you there is. It's purely speculation. Whomever different families think is the best man. I could name three or four, to be honest.

'Barney Joyce,' I said.

'Barney?' Michael smiled. 'What about Joseph?'

'Joseph's dead and gone,' I bit my lip. 'John Paul Quinn you would have to put on the list. Paddy McDonagh, your third cousin. You could base the game on all of them Michael. It'd be brilliant!'

'Seriously?' he asked, even though it was his own family. 'That little shit is boxing?'

'He's in jail at the moment,' I said. 'But he's gettin out... I think it's *this* month.'

'He anything like the King was?' Michael asked. 'How old is he?'

'Thirty one or thirty three,' I said. 'Six foot seven and twenty stone weight. Comin out this month and gonna be fightin... he wants to fight John Paul Quinn. John Paul is kind of the King at the moment.'

'Oh *yeah*,' Michael said doubtfully.

'If ya know what I *mean* like,' I let a deep breath do what it wanted. 'Because he's unbeaten. He hasn't fought now in eight years but he's still the King.'

Michael nodded.

I was seriously thinkin it might be possible to make the game about boxin and hoped he was doin the same. Made me feel uneasy the gym was in such poor condition, though. Not just rubbish but smashed tiles, food and scattered bar bells everywhere - monuments to how the lads had squandered their conviction.

The fights normally take place up the road on stones. On a grounds. In a site. Places like that. Sometimes just a cul de sac. You get two referees. They're called fairplay men. Even if you're fightin tomorrow mornin you *have* to get someone to show fairplay. Can't be just anybody. Has to be someone with a name, who can fight or at least is respected among the travellin community. Someone who has a dangerous family basically. There's normally two fairplay men. Sometimes it's one representin each side. Sometimes the two of them just agree, neutrally, they're reffin for both. Y'know?

In the last fight I saw, both fairplay men were very nice fellas from the Quinn Ward¹ family. That's one of the most famous families. One of the

1. The Quinn Wards were called that over smugglin one time. They were actually just Wards, but told the police they were Quinns. Now we all call them the 'Quinn Wards'.

most dangerous fightin families. Both the lads fightin agreed those two fairplay men were acceptable.

Fairplay means makin sure that it's bareknuckle. *Fists only*. No head-buttin, no elbow, no kickin, no nothing. Of course, you will get that stuff the odd time. There may be a disqualification. It's not incredibly strict. There's some leeway.

'You'll get an odd headbut and a hit in the break these days,' I shrugged. 'But generally speakin the game is just as beautiful as it's always been.'

Michael squinted at me - surprisin indeed that one traveller had to sell bareknuckle to another.

'What do you think?' I asked him.

I meant to remind him that if someone goes psycho, it's not bareknuckle at all. There's no skill there. That was the problem with violent videogames. It was just people wanderin around aimlessly, punchin and shootin.

'You could actually have fairplay men on the screen,' I grinned. 'The player would know not to mess around with them because they're dangerous enough guys and so on. Sometimes the game would last a few minutes. Sometimes much longer. But it's not a stupid disagreement at a weddin. It's a refined sport!'

'Who fought last?' Michael sighed.

'Peto McGinley and Jimmy McGinley last Christmas,' I replied without missin a beat - like Michael's new secretary of boxin or something. 'Two cousins. Shameful enough to say, they were each fightin their own cousin.'

He was studyin me, realisin I had rehearsed this.

'One of them, can't remember which, was disrespectin family,' I said. 'Callin the other's mother and aunts names. His own aunts. Givin out to his grandfather. Sayin he wanted to fight his grandfather a few years ago.'

The younger cousin came to an age where he could give it back and so the two lads went for an hour and a half. Everyone rushed in and begged them to draw for peace sake. Because at the end of the day if one of them had won it wouldn't have been peace. Do you know what I mean? That would have only made it worse. They just got a lot of frustration out. It was a draw. Fair enough result.

'They'll walk by each other now and wave,' I toyed more with the junk at my foot. 'They were happy enough to get out of it.'

'Many there?' Michael asked.

'About two or three hundred,' I shrugged.

That was an awful lot for a fight. It was prearranged. Sometimes you got spur of the moment fights and only two or three people would be there. Two lads suddenly want to fight and it'll just happen. The lads in question might not be trained or fit. Will just go out and throw their best. Walk off down the road behind a tree and come back an hour or two later and that will be it.

'In truth,' I said to Michael. 'It all lead back to one cousin fightin one trainin buddy. Peto shouldn't have been trainin with him, because he knows that's their enemy. He started talkin. Sayin he'd do this and that to other people. Jimmy picked him up on it. Said he'd fight him right away. That he didn't have to be fit. He didn't care. But Peto said no, he wanted twelve weeks. Jimmy said fair enough, you can have your twelve weeks. That was how they got to Christmas.'

Lookin around I couldn't shake a feelin of loss because when the lads first made that place a gym it was so tidy and they had all the stations in for watchin the World Cup. Now I feared it had merely been a waitin room for gettin into the drugs business. Sure, one or two lads who were serious used VIP Fitness these days or might be found in the boxin club - but it didn't bode well that none of the really young ones were in here. That everything was still.

'Jimmy boxes,' I yawned. 'And if the DVD of his fight with Peto is ever sent into the IABA he'll be in shit.'

'Who are they again?' Michael asked.

'Irish Amateur Boxin Association,' I started drummin the raised section between my legs. 'He'd be banned from boxin like.'

Amateur boxers are not allowed use their fists on the street. It's a traditional thing for us, however and we shouldn't be prevented from doin it. But if you do bareknuckle in your own time and in your own community while you're *also* doin boxin at a national level, you can be banned. *If* the IABA finds out. We all know lads it's happened to.

'Tell me about Big Blessed John,' Michael smiled.

'Big Blessed John,' I tried hard to sound like one of the boys. 'Back at fifty four years of age. Fightin Scoby Maughan!'

‘Another legend,’ Michael sneered. ‘He’s about the same age, isn’t he?’

‘Scoby’s fifty two,’ I said. ‘We couldn’t *believe* this, Michael. All we knew was all talk about Big Blessed John.’

‘Well,’ Michael said. ‘He never would have been caught on video, obviously.’

It was all talk, all hearsay, but everyone knew Big Blessed John was great. He was one of the best ever. But for a young girl like myself or people who’d never seen him it was so excitin. My grandfather saw him many times. We couldn’t believe it. Big Blessed John was fightin. Jesus Christ. We’re gonna get to see for ourselves!

‘What was he like?’ Michael asked.

‘Believe me,’ I kicked away that dusty trainer. ‘At fifty four years of age he impressed the young fellas an awful lot... we can only *wonder* what he would have been like thirty years ago.’

‘Yeah...’ Michael looked at the ground. ‘You wouldn’t have liked to get in front of him I’d say.’

‘He was punchin the *head* off Scoby Maughan,’ I grinned. ‘Now, it wasn’t a fair fight. The fella showin fairplay was one of the Quinn Wards who hate Big Blessed John’s family and the Nevins hate the Maughans too. They’re showin fairplay? Nah. Big Blessed John bit Scoby at the end of it. He bit him! After givin your man a dog’s beatin. So they disqualified him.’

‘But everyone knows who won the fight,’ Michael sighed.

‘Big Blessed John,’ I nodded. ‘He was everythin we thought he was gonna be and at fifty four!’

‘What was it over?’ Michael asked.

‘He’d been drinkin at Joseph’s funeral in Manchester,’ I said. ‘Came back to discover the Maughan’s had sent him a challenge on DVD.’

‘The fuckin challenges are on DVD now?’ Michael asked.

‘Sometimes,’ I nodded slowly. ‘It can be sent from one part of Ireland to another that way. Y’know? On this DVD they were callin him names. They were *all* on there. Scoby Maughan. His son Hussy Maughan. His son Trevor Maughan. I haven’t a clue what his other son’s name is. All windin him up. Big John, you think you’re the greatest. You’re not the King. There was a King. Years ago. King McDonagh. *He* was the King. All due respect to him and his family. But I’ll bate you any day.’

Michael threw his eyes to heaven and for a moment I didn't know how to take him.

'It's just a thing goin on years,' I yawned. 'Do you know what it is? It's the Sunday World. They were goin out to travellers and gettin their statements off them. Big Blessed John was sayin I am the greatest and all. Suppose Scoby felt his position as a fightin man was bein eroded. That it was his role as a fightin man to pick him up on it.'

'No arguments lead up to it?' Michael asked.

'No,' I smiled. 'It was just who's the best!'

'Well,' Michael sighed. 'Scoby Maughan... in my opinion and a *lot* of people's opinions... was never a great fighter at all.'

'I know,' I nodded. 'But he could take a beatin.'

'That's it,' Michael said.

'Really tough,' I nodded. 'But was never a great fighter.'

'Never,' Michael pinched the thigh of his jeans and pulled them out from his legs a little. 'My brother told me he was an entertainer. How before the fight he'd be out messin with his son. Shadow boxin. Everyone would be lovin it. Laughin at him. Smilin and laughin and jokin. Yeah. How many were there?'

'Suppose there were two or three hundred again,' I said. 'It's after becomin a money thing over the last four or five years, see Michael. They're gettin recorded. Banged onto DVDs. Sold. Big Blessed Joe versus the Maughans. Five, ten quid out in the market. People are into it. What do you think?'

'Yeah...' he sighed. 'Again, the problem is there's loads of videogames about boxin.'

Neither of us said anything for a moment or two.

I wondered again what the bastard was up to - why he had come back - as he slowly walked over and sat down beside me.

Abruptly leant forward and began kissin me on the mouth.

I kissed him back, at first.

Almost immediately his hand was creepin under my t-shirt, though, which didn't feel right and so I stood up.

'Michael,' I said. 'What are you doin here? Why have you come back? Is it for me? Because I'll tell ya right now - I'm not goin through that shit again.'

'I better go find somewhere to live,' he muttered and stood up himself.
'Can't couch surf forever.'

Then simply walked out the door.

Chapter 6

When I was christened my great grandmother lent my mother a white frilly dress that my great grandfather Patsy remarked was too big and that would need to be returned anyway for whomever's great grandchild came along next. My grandaunt Deborah also provided a shawl for strength and, of course, I had been blessed in the womb many months back. All that stuff is very important to us. Our faith is crucial in the camp. Something very real. Something that is with us *all* the time. Not an idea we consider once a week at mass, or even less often. That's the way it is with a lot of settled Irish. Not us, though. God walks by our side always. He never leaves. Suppose it's one of the most important things we are given as children. The gift of faith.

My mother breastfed me on the caravan step, to avoid wakin da or the others. Lookin down at me she felt powerful, serene. Despite rememberin how a local settled man had, one evenin shortly after they first moved here, poured a bucket of petrol over a woman on the path and set her alight. He had used a red plastic bucket and that was how the Gardaí got him. There had been a sticker on the base from a big hardware place in town.

Within hours a lovely, quiet blue day had proclaimed itself and she was carryin me around the site naked and roarin. Past my grand aunt Deborah who was peelin potatoes in her doorway. Past a small goat tied to the passenger handle of da's white Renault 4. Ma stared at the goat each time she passed, using it like one uses an unnecessary railin. My first two teeth deserved to come through, she whispered to herself somewhat desperately. Yet with an inner strength that was calm and sure. Sure that she was doin the right thing for me. Even though it probably seemed to Deborah that I was just clingin and screamin. Mum *knew* I needed her to hang in. Then *I* could hang on.

Throughout the night she'd tried many things that often distracted and pleased me but even my favourite, a luke warm bath in the galvanised metal basin, hadn't worked. I had clung to her as if she were

lowerin me into a furnace. Enough. I needed her. She held me and in another hour it was all over.

I imagine her breathin and smilin for a few seconds.

In the absence of my roar she could once again hear the main road. Discussion from John's driver and passenger seat, where himself and another man sat doin business. Was I asleep?

Da thought they had cut her up in the hospital. She was given nine stitches which was more than normal and Pethidine. Had been immobile. Now she found herself wonderin how long it would be before the next baby. I perceived her have that whole thought, mature from my cry-in and in celebration of the fact that I had calmed down we played with a big bowl of water beside the caravan.

It went everywhere, spilt over everything and I thought that was interestin. Thought it was fun. Still naked, I peed. Tried to catch the pee. We washed and got me into some clothes. Ma was a wise one. She knew to be calm with a child. Knew it even depended on the free-flowin clothes you wore yourself and other little things like the wipeability of the caravan floor. She learnt all that from my granny. Learnt you *had* to be able to keep things relaxed and simple, not less stresses get in the way.

Newly clothed, I played on chequered waxy with a little icing-coloured doll my da had produced while ma smoked a Johnny Blue and grinned with exhaustion from the step.

I fell a few times. Different sorts of falls. One was quite loud. A hard bang. I was strong willed, ma said. Each time we just had a brief cuddle and it was right back onto the waxy! She hoped I could hold onto that courage. Not lose it because life was too soft or too tough. She vowed to try and help me keep that important sense of balance, despite our havin left the road behind.

Sometimes ma felt frustrated with God and Jesus. I know she never felt it toward Our Lady. After all, Our Lady was a mother too. She did feel it toward the lads, though. Wanted to know why we must go through so much pain. Why the travellin people are so marginalised. Discriminated against for so long. What was His purpose? It never took away from her dedication, though. Like a lot of us, she loved goin on pilgrimages - to Croagh Patrick or Lourdes or wherever - and placed a great emphasis on Saints. Most of us have a special Saint we pray to and whom we'll carry in relic. For my mother it was St. Christopher. He hung from her neck in silver.

My father was inquirin, havin stepped back into the caravan, where his boots were and she followed him inside briefly. Mutterin that she would be back in a moment. My power of concentration was much stronger nowadays and trust sufficient that all I would do was look up in a minute or two if she didn't return. It was important to leave me there, to play in a different way. To mooch on the waxy. Be waved at giddily by auntie Margaret who stared serenely out the window of her blue caravan, with silky cream curtains of green and gold terrain over which angels slipped or didn't. I was cold. Except that I wasn't. As my mother returned to the step, she wound up a chat with my father who remained inside. Looked at me as we both heard him curse. Where's da? I glanced above her shoulder and took in the caravan window. Then quickly shifted my eyes to the other window. Quite a step forward, she thought! Until recently I had just looked confused when she said things like that, but now I loved it. Where's da, ma or Christine?

I didn't want her to leave me alone at night. I whimpered. Yet moments later as I stuffed Cat's ear into my mouth, my second tooth almost through - and deservedly so, she repeated to herself - I was smilin again. What love she felt for me at these times and again later as she took a swift, steady look at me as I slept. How small she always felt in the presence of such a blessin from God. She sat down on the step again as my father came out and walked straight across the camp, where his business partner had started fillin radiators with sand to increase their weight as scrap.

I seemed more and more to appreciate her company. She had time for me that was never available to my older siblings. A sort of companionship seemed to grow between us. How much pleasure I seemed to get when she joined me for play and when I had already been happy anyway! It was dangerous to let Christine become distressed before joinin in, she was learnin. She should step in quickly because I was quite a serious little lady, moreso than anyone else in the family and easily upset or bored. If she could just show me that life had pleasures, high points all by itself, perhaps I would learn to make better use of the time in between.

She was naturally anxious I would lose the rhythm of our people. That I wouldn't have the basic beat. Knew I probably wouldn't be raised on the road. Yet how I amazed her, nonetheless. So many things showed my awareness, yet were hard for her to articulate to John since they were so fleetin and he was so preoccupied. Like the waxy that mornin. Or the famous cubes from Auntie Noreen!

We had started by buildin towers with the cubes - I liked to watch them grow but became distressed when they came tumblin down. Maybe what really upset me was the way she went 'oooh!' when they tumbled. We had recently started puttin one cube *into* the other, before finally puttin all the cubes in their clear Perspex cube box and puttin the lid on top. That fact - that in less than two weeks I had grasped the concept of the lid bein on top and now tried to fasten it once all the cubes were in - entertained her. I could also take out the cubes, but with some difficulty as I couldn't reach fully inside, couldn't get my little fingers down. I would sometimes try to put back one I had taken out. Could easily be occupied by this for fifteen to twenty minutes. Though I lost all interest once the cubes were out, scattered. Looked at her like she was soft in the head if she attempted to put the top on the empty Perspex case when it was empty.

I lost my fear of the tubes tumblin. She shirked her habit of exclamation. Apparently I made a great effort to carefully remove the top cube from the tower without bringin down the rest. She congratulated us. Shed a tear. Because no such plastic games would ever have been necessary on the road.

When I tried to crawl my left foot got in the way, it wouldn't move back or something and when occasionally on all fours would quickly flop onto my tummy. Though she tried to hide it, I could still sense ma's desire. Since movin so close to the settled community, since seein settled kids walkin to school every day, she wanted me to crawl.

I began to watch the world from the flopped position, could go from flopped to sittin and that gave me confidence. Previously I had needed help even sittin back up. Also, I found, it was possible for me to move backwards. Go near me, let me even lean against you and I'd finally hike myself up.

Crawlin, I became a bigger part of the camp. My brother Christopher was helpin our father paint wooden flowerboxes for a woman off Amiens Street. I was nearby, on my waxy and fancied the big yellow paint tin. I was in no doubt about reachin it and didn't crawl again for anything else that day. Made my old starts and then backed onto my bottom again. I would try again soon, no doubt. Ma wouldn't mind, but she would and *did* give me many unorthodox things. A full 2 kilo tin of emulsion just wasn't on!

She took me around to the shop as consolation. I looked at myself in a propped up little mirror on the buggy. Saw a fun playmate. Found birds

in flight. Pointed at them. Then looked at my hand rather than any bird. I had found my hands for the first time back at six to eight weeks and thought what *are* these things? Nowadays I looked at them with impatience.

I tried to get out of the buggy for dogs but she took hold of my yellow PVC and helped me back into position. Really didn't like puttin that coat on. More and more was showin a natural preference for no clothes. Spendin much of my time with little or nothing on. When it was time to get dressed or wear a nappy I would try to hinder the process. In fact, I apparently took issue not only when gettin dressed, but when gettin undressed. Pushed tights away and clutched, pulled at t-shirts. Didn't like things near my neck, chest or particularly between my legs. Hated the restriction. I wouldn't be naked for long, though. Soon it would be a sin.

Ma told herself to remember how good her little girl was whenever she took me to the shop. I could be quite the opposite. She sighed, rememberin how my massive head stretched her. Even now as she pushed the buggy toward McGrogan's it seemed out of proportion with the rest of my body. Constantly detonated by a sudden, overjoyed smile. A smile which should have consulted with the rest of my face before goin off, because it made me look like I'd been drinkin and farmin for fifty years. My mouth was often compared to uncle Martins because it contained enthusiasm for nothing. No secret teeth. Nineteen of the full twenty on show - like clenched, bloodless fists angry about a top middle one missin.

First Holy Communion showed I was becomin more aware of His presence in my life. Until then my family had guided me, but now I was definitely startin to do some of the work myself. I recall that day vaguely because it took place a mere week after my brother Seamus was born. He was number eight. Some people say we believe in havin a lot of children. How can we not? We don't believe in sex outside marriage. Within marriage it has God's blessin. Some of the younger girls want less children nowadays and want to space out their pregnancies. That's wise. It's personal. Sure, look at me. I never had any children!

It's important to remember there were many babies born over the years who didn't survive the journey. That is very sad. When people say we have a lot of children, I say you don't know the half of it. There were a lot of miscarriages over the years. All the girls used to have them. It feels like another community, hidin behind the travellin community, made up of all those little souls who didn't make it. They are real too.

Y'know? We pray for them. Those of us who made it were often premature, the midwives said and sometimes weighed a little less. Occasionally we were deaf or blind. Thank God, it has improved a lot over the years.

I was the first in my family to really attend school. My brothers and sisters only attended primary school for a few weeks before Communion or Confirmation. How *could* kids be in school when you were movin around all the time? Besides, we knew the schools worked to get traveller ways out of children. They wanted you to forget your culture and history. The funniest was called School on Wheels - a bus that came around to wherever you were stopped and tried to cajole the kids inside! That was the bloody Legion of Mary.

'There's nothing wrong with readin and writin and all of that,' da told ma. 'The problem is they'll make her feel *ashamed* to be a traveller - make her see us through settled eyes.'

Yet things were different now we weren't on the road. Ironically, now that ma finally wanted to enrol me it was difficult. She approached five Catholic schools but there was no room, so eventually she went to the Protestant one and bathed in their gentility. I went there for two weeks but can't seem to remember it. Apparently all the headmasters in Longcommon knew each other, though, because soon one Catholic school was telephonin the Protestants and sayin Christine Ward is one of us. They were a bunch of weirdos, ma laughed. Not right in the head.

If you can't travel, she said, be a settled person. If you're havin trouble with that, teach.

My da walked me to school every mornin anyway - he did that much - and told me a series of stories about two horses called Aristotle and Plato who were travellin from the centre of Ireland. I remember we had to walk through an old chilly arch which is gone now. Past Our Lady's Church. I respected, keenly, each of my da's stories about the horses. While remainin perceptive about how much effort he'd put into a given one. It had a lot to do with whether he'd been drinkin the night before.

Walkin through Longcommon was great for dwellin on things divorced from school. Suggestin to the sensor inside that it wasn't a school day at all. I remember how, before makin the final turn, it was necessary to walk down the little back street behind McCabe's pub and pass a laundrette with a wooden whale for a sign. In the window were leaflets in neat piles and newspaper clippings mounted on black card. I would stare at them really carefully, as if that would postpone the inevitable.

I only mention this because it was walkin down that little back street I first laid eyes on Michael.

He was comin down the lane while we were goin up. Me in my little uniform. I remember his dark hair bein really long for such a young lad. His eyes serious little slits. He looked me up and down, though I didn't acknowledge him. My father nodded at him and that was the sum of it - we all passed each other by.

On the basis of three occasions when our mornin paths crossed in as many months, I fell in love. My feelins toward him were given great platform in my mind and heart. The boy with the long hair was the answer to it all. I dreamt up epic other-worlds in which the two of us were together. On another planet. In another cosmos. Wrapped up and lyin close in a hut inside the wintry republic of some star. Spendin the day under a tree that I could see from miles above. Or maybe just in a caravan movin slowly down the road.

The national school's red bricks, hearty trees and a kind of coy garden-in made it seem like a settled person's home. It wasn't my world, that was for sure. Dark when you entered the side door underneath the steps - meanin you quickly skipped upstairs and hung your coat.

Durin my first few months, I could feel ma's hands all over me. Pushin me toward this settled experience and yet holdin me back. Cautionin me that the world wasn't so sensitive. Like a superhero monitorin their protégé. My father and her were tryin to get me into this buzz of school/home. Look, you're already back at the camp. It's not even late afternoon! Yet when a child returned from the toilet and re-entered the classroom others noticed. When you sat down at a table, you collaborated. We walked in a line to the yard. It was so organised. Child gusts in the rooms and halls prevented me from posturin in a bubble of my own. Made my tummy ache with health. I grew wary. My mouth learnt to contain its enthusiasm.

Every third day, on average, they made me have a shower. A teacher called Miss O'Faolain stripped me and it felt horrible. She washed me in cold water with a small window open. It wasn't ice cold but felt so weird. Like she was tryin to wash me away or something. That never stopped. They were constantly sendin me off to have a shower. While I can't be sure it was necessary those first few times with Miss O'Faolain, it sure as hell wasn't required on all the subsequent occasions. They got it into their heads I was dirty and, whenever they sensed the slightest lack of submission, announced it was high time for a wash.

Three other travellers attended the school and sometimes, suddenly, they segregated us from the settled kids. In retrospect, that was weird because we were completely different ages. I was five but remember a twelve year old in the small library with me. That library was the size of an office and we never did anything worthwhile in there. They gave us work but it was stupid stuff. Like we were stupid. I don't know why they hid us in there. Perhaps someone special was visitin.

Nowadays some travellers go to schools just for travellers. That's wrong too. It's wrong to segregate. Isn't the whole point of school to be around other people, from whom you can learn different things?

I remember those school days vividly. How the light bled vaguely, as grazes sometimes do. Heraldin activity. It was like I could see the settled people's values and the school's intentions in that light. What's everyone else doing? Am I doin what everyone else is doing? Or am I just copyin? Is copyin as good? Or is copyin simply what everyone else is doing? One word - later two - remained unerased on the top left hand corner of the blackboard for the whole day so we could drink them in. Each word meant something different. Except for brilliant, fantastic, wonderful, excellent, fabulous, incredible, superb and amazin. They all meant the same thing.

Yet the showers continued. The only thing about them I liked was the opportunity they presented to move around the buildin while everyone else was in class. I remember peekin inside empty rooms with wet hair on my way back and remember the gym in particular, which sometimes had smells from the nearby kitchen. Don't feel like italicisin the word gym or clothespeggin it in quotes - but something needs to be done to your perception of it because it was even less of a gym that what our lads did to the vegetable room years later. It was just the basement.

It was dim, with barred windows down the back and up front. Apparatus used for jumpin and stretchin introverted in corners and crannies just like every mornin when we stood in lines for roll calls, hymns and announcements. The peace you can store in an empty room in a primary school is unnervin in its authority. As if our unconscious - less wounded than adults' - skulked around resentful of what they were tryin to teach us upstairs.

I imagined someday settin the school on fire on the way back from an unnecessary shower.

We used to say two prayers at those mornin assemblies. *Our Father* and then another one that rotated. Some settled kids in my class shocked

me by never sayin *your kingdom come, your will be done but my kingdom come, my will be done...*

I played with a girl called Alison. One day the headmistress told us that Alison had been hit by a tractor and died. Her parents had been away - we had all just returned from Easter - and Alison had been stayin with her granny when it happened. Imagine the granny havin to tell the parents when they came home, ma sighed. I didn't know what to feel and it didn't occur to me that Alison's granny might have lived in a rural area. I visualised a tractor breakin the lights around Longcommon! Me of all people, the road in my blood, unable to imagine anything but the city.

I remember feelin slightly excited after bein told she was dead. Not in a good or bad way. Just excitement. When I arrived home immediately goin to the hidin place where I had stashed the small coloured writin pad she had given me and examinin it. As time passed I thought about her less. Certainly wasn't brought to her funeral or anything.

I was developin a tendency to daydream while sittin in class. Imaginin myself bein virtuous, helpin others in difficult situations, the brave one. Such thoughts stopped me from feelin left out and helped me sleep at night, in foetal position. Holdin myself and fearin a dream I had about a tall wall. Also dreamt I was in jail once. Perhaps because Uncle Martin had recently gone there. I don't know. Anyway, jail was like a swimmin pool changin room in my dream. There were no females apart from me. I was sittin amidst many grown men, writin my name on a small egg for dinner because one of them said so.

The followin day I told Miss Burke about the dream.

'I dreamt I was in jail last night,' I said.

'Maybe you were,' she sighed.

When I played with a big girl called Susan and her little brother, they pushed me occasionally. I don't think they were bein mean. It was always in the midst of something - like racin or strugglin for a ball. One of the times I fell, the teacher on watch saw it and immediately sent me to have a shower. What a strange way to react! Yet from that point on Susan wouldn't talk to me. I honestly don't know why. Such were the little mysteries that grew me up. That grew a lot of traveller kids up.

I will never forget the day something went wrong with the elastic in my dress. I can't remember whether it started in school or had been wrong when I left the camp and only poorly remedied by ma. In any case, my dress started fallin off in the yard. Classes roared laughin. It

happened twice and I ran behind the rockery and bushes in tears. The moment my clamberin legs were unmasked the dress fell down again. Like in some timed pantomime. Remember bein really upset. Not comin out from behind the bushes! Miss O'Faolain came to rescue me. A megaphone in her hand the only thing missin. After some crouchin and conversin we walked back into the school with me holdin up my dress and teachers keepin all the kids quiet.

Miss O'Faolain and I sat in the coat room, which I disliked. The wood was so old it giggled and yet it grew on you anyway. She fixed a few pins so that my dress would definitely not fall down again that day. It pissed me off that I wasn't wearin knickers. Later in that room, gettin ready to leave for the day, the boys continued tauntin me.

'Itinerant!' they pretended to gasp.

I began cryin, knowin ma was close and soon enough she found me. Asked what was wrong. I told her they were callin me names.

'Come on,' she sighed. 'We're leavin.'

I found a little yellow lighter around the camp and, although it seemed broken, always kept it hidden in my uniform.

One day in class we took turns sayin what we wanted to be.

'I wanna be a copper!' Shane said.

So intense was the laughter that greeted this, I panicked.

'I wanna be a settled person,' I blurted out when it was my turn.

I didn't really want to, but suppose my father had been right when he said they would make me ashamed of who I was.

I was very good at readin and writin, though. Best in the school. Used to win every spellin competition. One mornin, headin off, I told ma it was me who would win the cup.

'Comin home with a cup ma!' I almost shrieked.

But they didn't let me enter the spellin competition that day. What did they do? That's right. They decided I needed a shower. I had won every single quiz before then. Swear to God. They simply didn't want a traveler takin home the cup.

The last straw, in my mind.

I threw a table at Mr O'Malley and screamed as loud as possible that I would burn everyone out of the fuckin kip.

When Miss O'Faolain sat down with my parents the followin week it was decided I should leave school after makin my confirmation.

That was fine with ma and da.

'You've started actin like them,' da said. 'I don't want that. Kids do get awful cheeky if they stay in school too long.'

Our classroom was the last to be evacuated and by the time we got outside the fire was quite advanced, smoke pourin out the windows and cracklin sounds comin from inside.

I noticed one of the more senior firemen sittin in his car, his eyes fixed on the distant road rather than our school. Even after climbin out and securin his hat he continued watchin the road, the emergin crowds - perhaps waitin for the guards to show up because something would definitely need to be done about the crowds.

Two firemen were fully kitted out and goin through a ritual of checkin their radios, guide lines and breathing apparatus. A third was scrawlin something on a blackboard that hung from one of the pumpers while a fourth ran a wire to a giant Turbex fan that stood in front of the entrance - suddenly switchin it on and movin away nimbly as it hummed to life with the clout of a bus engine.

Until that day the only male I had ever fancied had been Michael McDonagh.

Yet as one of the firemen walked around the fan and pulled open the front door, then stood aside as masses of rich black smoke tumbled out, I made a decision.

If Michael and I didn't get married, a member of Longcommon Fire and Rescue would do.

Remember movin my eyes across everybody. The firemen, fan operator, Miss O'F and my fellow pupils. Everyone had calmed down a little and was starin at the fan. If the smoke cleared it would mean there was somewhere else for it to escape. There clearly wasn't because it didn't dissipate at all.

I gasped as the two firemen dragged their charged hoses inside the buildin without further hesitation.

'Alan and Paul,' a sub-officer roared. 'You two vent the window on the... on the left side... you can go across the roof.'

The lads took a thirty five foot ladder off the side of their pumper and carried it towards the neighbourin community hall.

They obviously knew what they were doin, because within five minutes they had little Sean Barret out of the buildin.

When I saw him comin out, his face black and fist held politely to his mouth, I silently promised never to set another fire.

I kept watchin the school burn, though.

To this day, it feels important not to spell words as perfectly as I would have durin that spellin competition.

Back then Ireland didn't have proper fire scene investigators. Merely SOCOs. Scene Of Crime Officers. Years later, in a residential centre for firesetters, I learnt these guys showed up whenever there was suspicion of arson and had to decide what happened. The same people were called to everything from murders to robberies. They pretended to know about combustion, but didn't really. I probably know more about it, at this stage.

They would only ever conclude that something had *probably* happened. It was probably arson. Probably started in here. Probably set by that little itinerant bitch. Probably... probably... probably. They were neither qualified nor permitted to say more. They also obtained insurance information. Did background checks. Normally reviewed police records, vandalism in the area and attempted to establish motive.

Of course, in this case they would be less than methodical. What could anyone do about twelve year old Christine Ward who had come from that dirty camp across the dualer? Except warn her never to come near the real world again.

Chapter 7

The church in which Gull and Mairead were married seemed lit by a thousand lights and yet no electricity was being used. Much of the glass was blue and much had no pigmentation whatsoever, allowing a holy harshness assault the salmon marble pillars and little grey cathedral that was the altar. As Mairead made her way to the front of the church on Christopher-Angel's arm, preceded by bridesmaids Christy and Niamh, I moved my eyes across the half-full pews and reckoned my brother and sister would probably be happy with the numbers. Which is to say, there wasn't noticeable overflow. Nowadays the location of a wedding goes unannounced until hours beforehand. For years it used to be the day beforehand. Now it has to be kept quiet until you are literally walking out the door. It's the only way to keep the multitudes from descending and trouble from occurring. You can't have trouble. After all - marriage is one of the seven sacraments.

As my beautiful niece in her cherry ripple dress and handsome nephew in his cardboard ash suit came to a standstill in front of the altar, I allowed my eyes move upward to the ceiling which was a yawn of yellow wood reinforced by brown beams. Hanging down, slim posters created by schoolchildren crying Knowledge, Wisdom and Understanding. I scowled because that struck me as really hollow, lowered my eyes again and licked my lips which were a little dry. The steps to the altar were covered with the creamiest, softest yellow carpet and I noticed that our rotund and red-faced Father Andrew was shaking ever so slightly. Unable to hide the virtuosity he felt upon marrying travellers as he stood at his simple but heavily draped table with an open bible from which four or five coloured ribbons shot outward marking classic prayers.

'The Lord God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air,' he said solemnly into the microphone. 'He brought them to man to see what he would name them and whatever man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and beasts of the field. Yet for the

man no suitable helper was found. So Lord God put him in a deep sleep and while he was sleeping took one of his ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man and brought her to the man.'

We stood as Gull and Mairead took their initial vows and outlined their commitment, after which Father Andrew joined their hands together.

'Do you take Jason Maughan as your lawful husband?' he asked Mairead. 'To have and to hold, from this day forward, for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and health, to love and cherish until death do you part?'

'I do,' Mairead replied in her husky voice.

Father Andrew asked them more questions concerning freedom of choice, faithfulness to one another and their feelings about children. Gull and Mairead answered the questions in hushed tones and separately declared they knew of no lawful impediment to being married.

It was at that point Michael entered the church, walked up to the bride and groom and started obtrusively shooting video with a digital handycam.

Anger festered within me as he captured the blessing and exchange of rings, communion rite and preparation of a unity candle - because it seemed his entire life was constructed to infuriate me.

'Jason and Mairead are going to light their unity candle,' Father Andrew was explaining almost directly to Michael's camera. 'A symbol of their relationship and love - the candles from which they light it having been lit by their parents in order to represent their lives leading up to this special moment.'

There was a place for me, Auntie Christine, in one of three stretch limousines that drove to the hotel. Because we had booked a middle of the road place, our reception might have appeared superficially similar to many Irish weddings. It took place in a relatively small, oblong room on the second floor with poor quality buffets, tacky decor and dim lighting. Rows of tables with nothing but green paper cloth on them gave way to the dancefloor which led right up to the head table, behind which was the bar and near to which a DJ stood with a collection of coloured lights stacked around him.

Our men sat together at long tables - young fellows at some and older ones clustered together down the back. Meanwhile, we ladies had

congregated up front. Husbands and wives, brothers and sisters did not sit together. The men were at one end of the room, women at the other. That was it.

I was wearin a short green dress with a white belt, black leggings and these beautiful black heels with pretend diamonds in a downward line. My sisters and nieces were more darin. Every dress was pastel and burlesque. Each hairdo a phenomenon. Our make-up executed with the classy dash of geishas. Plenty of cleavage, too. If you doubted for one moment this was an important day, all you had to do was glance at us ladies.

My brother and sister seemed to have accepted their kids were a married couple and were in great spirits. Gull had, after all, bought a beautiful cross for Mairead. Really thick. That's a done thing. Might come in handy down the road when things are tough. Something to fall back on. Y'know? She was wearin it around her neck and, actually, it looked a little ridiculous. Except that it didn't - because it showed how much she meant to him. It made me smile and nearly shed a tear. Gettin married was just *so* important.

As I mentioned earlier, one of the reasons fairs used to be so important was because they were an opportunity to catch up with family. These days you would find yourself goin to a weddin more often than a fair and you got excited. Thinkin about who you might meet. One weddin often lead to another. Seriously. It was a great place for things to happen because there was already a certain feelin in the air - you knew those attendin were pretty much considered acceptable, otherwise no marriage would be takin place at all. It was the perfect place to find someone.

I looked down and flicked one of the many red, coin-shaped rock sweets on the table with the words *Just Married* runnin through it and a grey heart in the middle. Then looked up, glanced around and noted that Mary Pat had abandoned her timid older sister Simone who kept runnin to the Ladies. That Mairead was dancin with Christopher-Angel. My cousin Marto dancin in his bare feet, although takin care to keep at least a foot and a half between himself and the girls. Auntie Nelly runnin around like a maniac grabbin children.

Beside the dancefloor, Mairead's ma tryin to get people to queue for dinner one table at a time because it was intended as a buffet.

'The weddin was awful!' Clean Christy was suddenly shoutin over at their table. 'But the reception is brilliant!'

Joe Maughan locked on snakebites beside him.

'It's a weddin,' he kept shoutin. 'You're supposed to drink!'

Mairead's sister Cait tapped Gull on the shoulder.

'Hi,' she said above the music. 'Just wanted to let you know, if you break her heart, we'll break your legs.'

Yogi McDonagh stumbled over to me and asked what class I was in, despite my bein thirty six. It was the same question he always asked. I'll forever be a little schoolgirl in his eyes, because back then I was probably the only one.

'Leave me alone Yogi,' I grinned.

At the very end of the room Missy was sittin alone in some kind of strange, silk poncho with her arms folded underneath and a deliberately false smile sewin up her dimpled face. I could never understand that woman. Surely it would be better to make an honest choice to stay away than to sit here in that state. I skipped plenty of weddins and was beginnin to regret not havin skipped this one - but can't have looked like she did.

'Are you crying?' Michael nonetheless asked as he placed his pint on my table, sat down beside me and steadied his handycam which now hung from his neck.

'No,' I scowled at him.

'It's great isn't it?' he cast his eyes around.

'Thought you'd be disappointed,' I discarded my vodka and lime from Steph and started on the one from Evelyn. 'Nobody's fightin.'

'That's hardly gonna happen here,' he blinked. 'Everything should be fine.'

'What use is it so?' I asked.

He looked away and sighed.

'Sorry,' I smiled. 'How's it goin anyway?'

'Fine,' he nodded and looked at me. 'I got a place to live.'

'No,' I said. 'How's it goin with the game?'

'Oh,' he said.

'I don't care about *you* Michael!' I teased.

He laughed and cleared his throat.

'It's goin well,' he said and began brushin the green paper cloth on the table. 'They gave us a games engine to work with. It's the engine from another game they did last year. Makes it easier.'

His voice had that pragmatic, earnest tone settled people adopt when makin polite conversation in loud surroundins.

'I don't know what you're talkin about,' I shrugged. 'But yeah... sounds great.'

'The graphics are lookin good,' he added. 'The art and animation? We're very fussy. Keep re-doin shit.'

'Right,' I nodded. 'Until it's perfect?'

'Well,' he said. 'Within reason. But yeah. I like it. It's a small team. One project. One office.'

'What's your boss actually like?' I asked.

'Fine,' he sighed. 'We're stayin in close contact with the publisher too. I hate the fuckers, but if we weren't touchin base they would never publish a game like this - and I think they're gonna. I really think they're gonna. Isn't that great?'

I smiled weakly.

'It's only by knowin what they can live with and what they can't - that we'll get this title through,' he added.

I nodded.

'Gettin to the stage now where we can actually play the game ourselves,' he sighed.

'Already?' I asked.

'Mmmm,' he nodded.

'Wow,' I sipped my drink. 'Can't believe it's really fuckin happenin.'

'I know,' he nodded.

Karaoke was gettin underway and Michael's cousin John launchin into Garth Brooks, his absolute favourite, with passion and focus.

*If tomorrow never comes
Will she know how much I loved her
Did I try in every way to show her every day
That she's my only one
If my time on earth were through
She must face this world without me
Is the love I gave her in the past*

*Gonna be enough to last
If tomorrow never comes*

‘Well done son,’ Michael sighed with his pint aloft. ‘One thing we didn’t realise, actually, was how hard it would be to do the different levels.’

‘Yeah?’ I sighed, lookin back at him.

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘We’re snowed under. Can’t afford to sub-contract things we really *need* to sub-contract? Think our initial design was too ambitious. Too free. Know what I mean? You could do anything at the weddin. Go anywhere.’

He was tryin to tell me something.

‘I argued for it to be left that way,’ he shrugged. ‘But Simon said you *need* to have some kind of path. Or people will hate the game. You know what I mean?’

‘No,’ I said.

‘It’s like a hero’s journey,’ he sighed. ‘The typical hero’s journey goes like Ordinary World... Call to Adventure... Mentor... Threshold... Threshold Demon... Initiation-’

‘Oh shut the *fuck* up, Michael,’ I said. ‘Just get us both another drink - and make mine a double because you’re about to fuckin get it and you’ll need alcohol for the pain.’

He stared at me and then started movin his tongue around inside his mouth while I looked over at my incredibly good lookin cousin Sean from Belfast who had started singin Elvis with real irreverence, jabbin his fingers at his delighted grandaunts.

*I’ve got a dirty, dirty feelin
Dirty feelins goin on
You know I almost hit the ceilin
When I woke up and you were gone*

There were two hotel staff standin outside the doors of the reception room for the entire evenin. The lads were startin to get a little rowdy at the younger table, actually. Nothing serious. Just standin up and makin speeches to one another. Bobble Junior and Jimmy had taken the pledge

for weeks beforehand, partly to save up for drinks and new clothes. You had to be careful what you said at these kind of events, of course, because we'd always be castin around for things to use against you. We would try to bait you, make you say things you'd be sorry for. Even that is part of the ritual.

Ma sat down beside me in the long-sleeved, knee length dress she always wears to weddins, with large mahogany and beige squares driftin over tiny black and white ones. Ma has a boy's haircut nowadays, except it's grey and one of those offended faces - except her mouth insists it's purely out of concern.

'What's goin on?' she gestured toward Michael at the bar with her glass of gin. 'Is he marryin you?'

'Havin one of those mid-life crises they have,' I replied.

She looked at me for a moment.

'Who have?' she asked.

'Y'know...' I said. 'Settled people.'

'Oh,' she nodded slowly. 'But-'

'He's a bastard,' I said. 'Is that clear enough for ya?'

She nodded.

'Leave me alone ma,' I snapped. 'He's comin back.'

'Christine,' she said sternly. 'I won't be able to visit you in another one of those homes.'

'I know ma,' I said. 'Now go!'

She stood up and walked off before Michael returned with a fresh pint for himself and a double vodka and lime for me which I immediately started drinkin.

'You're still pissed off with me,' he sat down slowly.

'You're *using* us Michael,' I said.

'This is the world I'm from!' he cried as his handycam swayed. 'This is what I know.'

The song ended and suddenly you could hear the rasp in my voice.

'Why not do it properly?' I asked. 'Make it about what it's really like to be a traveller. How hard it is fightin against all the shit we have to. That would be a good game!'

'Nobody would buy it,' he pushed his former Guinness out of the way. 'Anyway, I can't write anything too complicated. The programmin team will kill me.'

I squinted at him for a while.

'Videogames have always been violent,' he said. 'It's just the graphics are a lot better these days.'

'A lot of us don't like them,' I felt my eyes wellin up. 'I don't like them. Mortal Kombat and all that shit? Shame on the people who make that stuff!'

'You don't have kids...,' he smiled.

Before realisin his mistake.

There was the sound of feedback.

'Please put your... hands together for the bride and groom,' said the DJ. 'Who are dancin the first slow number of the night.'

We all applauded as Gull and Mairead started sleepwalkin to *You're Still The One* by Shania Twain.

'I thought that would be us,' I nodded in their direction. 'Thought we would have all this.'

Michael glanced at me as I started to cry.

'I thought we would walk through this world together,' I said.

He looked down in shame but I just looked around the room. Or my vodka and lime did. There was bald Joe Maughan in his puddle-coloured shirt with buttons open. He seemed to be watchin us.

'What if they don't have a fight with their cousin?' I muttered and wiped my eyes.

He glanced up.

'What?' he squinted.

'I *said*,' I sighed. 'What if the player doesn't have a fight with his cousin? Can he slow dance instead?'

I was actually swayin slightly and Michael wasn't sure how to take me.

'I hadn't thought about it,' he said.

'The player should be able to do whatever they want,' I swallowed, almost defiantly. 'Otherwise it's not a real videogame.'

With that I stood up and marched off.

'You don't understand breadcrumbin!' he shouted after me.
I stopped and turned around.
'I can't fuckin believe you're doin this to us Michael!' I yelled.
'Christine,' he followed me with arms raised. 'Come on...'
'It's not fair on the ones who aren't *like* that,' I moaned. 'Most of our family aren't like that. It's quiet! We're very quiet!'
There were people around us.
'What's goin on Christine?' Steph was demandin to know.
'I've got him sussed,' I said.
'Huh?' Michael squinted.
'Took me a while to realise what you were doin,' I nodded. 'Comin back? I knew it wasn't for your stupid fuckin videogame!'
'Why then?' Steph asked.
'He's easin his conscience,' I enunciated each word.
'Right,' Michael looked away dismissively.
'Makin himself feel it's okay what he's doin,' I studied his face. 'Makin himself feel it's okay what he's *done*.'
'What have I done?' he looked at me again. 'Exactly?'
'You've ruined my fuckin life!' I leant forward. 'And now you're ruinin all our lives.'
'That's not true,' he looked at me. 'I came back to see you.'
'You're a fuckin bastard Michael McDonagh,' Joe Maughan was suddenly growlin by his side, then spittin in his face.
'What the fuck did ya do that for Joe?' Michael wiped his face, his beady eyes betrayin an anger I thought had died forever.
What happened next went unrecorded.

Chapter 8

I remember a sign the council made when they first started housin us and which my fourteen year old runners stumbled across lyin abandoned in the muddy field under a grey, pushy sky. Travellers will enter this housin estate, it said, on the understandin they are agreeable to undergo a process of familiarisation in settled circumstances as a transitional stage to qualify for a Local Authority dwellin in the normal way. Yeeuch. I sneered down at the words, because more and more of my family were moving over there. Susan, Dearbhla, Jimmy, Eoghan and Mick had all done so in the last year. Each claimed it made them awful lonely for the camp. That's what happens. House us and we pine. Even *steppin* inside a council house could be frightenin. After all, most people who live in houses settle there forever - while to us the thought of not movin again is like dyin.

Even now, years later, most of my relatives will invariably wander over here to the camp at some point durin the day. On the camp there's always plenty of other people. In a house you're by yourselves. No comparison. It's funny, though, because many young ones who were born and reared in the houses still end up in caravans after marriage as there never seems to be a house available when they go out on their own. The kids see returnin to a caravan as a kind of setback, but it allows us keep our tradition alive. I mean, they're hardly goin to sponge off their own parents. Many, like Tony and Suzanne, set up in the driveway. Some come back here to the camp. I suppose more and more will be housed. Not me, though.

I performed a muddy, midday two-step on the sign. Then legged home in my denim shorts and stringy blue top because we were due to cram into Jim's van and hit The National Romany Caravan Parade. Someone from our camp or Berr's Villa usually won, even though we weren't Romany, so we always made sure to turn up in plenty of time. Down the years ourselves and scores of cousins and second cousins and third cousins would park our caravans along the edge of the road and

you just knew a wonderful time would be had by all. A lot of business, to be sure, but also a lot of fun. A *lot* of fun. Fairs and markets were still held properly when I was in my early teens. Yet things I was told about when my granny was tryin to get me and my sisters to sleep years earlier were hard to imagine happenin anymore. The big fightin between different groups of travellers, for instance. That was something I never saw with my own eyes. It was only fightin between two lads I encountered. Sometimes a few more would get drawn in, but there were no armies left. The settled people thought we were one big nomad army, of course.

Havin long since given up on Michael and gettin close to marryin age, I found anticipatin The National Romany Caravan Parade that year particularly excitin. It made me feel alive because who knew what fella might take a likin to me, or me to him. Admittedly, a lot of babies were conceived after parades or fairs and soon weddins planned in accordance - although nothing like that would have occurred in my case because I was a very good girl. I never would have done something like that to my parents.

For all the flirtin and preenin Steph and myself did at the parade that day when I was fourteen, no connection with a boy seemed likely to endure when it was past midnight and time to drive home. I was only mildly amused to discover that Michael was catchin a ride back with us. Nor did he really acknowledge me in his jeans and runners and bare torso. I remember my supposedly un fascinated eyes movin slowly over the tattoos that covered his back. Christ on the cross, an angel floatin to the left and grim reaper on the right. Beneath it all, sun risin over an ocean and the words *Destination Unknown*. I looked away as we all drove silently home. It just didn't feel like he looked away.

All I really knew about him was that he liked video games. That he tried to fit in with everyone else, but didn't. Had long since lost any interest in football, which the other lads were only becomin more addicted to. Had shown little of his family's love for boxin and was known to become mildly irritable when his cousins tried to rope him into shenanigans. He was quick, though. Very quickly mastered things. Then immediately lost interest. There was talk it all stemmed from the suicide of his father. I knew all this without even knowin much about him.

That night in the van Michael began tellin the other lads he was goin to be playin videogames in his trailer by Christmas. None of them believed him because in our world videogames remained huge, bulky, expensive things you wouldn't find anywhere but arcades. Hulks the lads

would have needed a van to move. Yet one day shortly afterwards he showed Steph a page in a magazine depictin a family sittin around their television. They weren't watchin television, though. They were grippin joysticks from which wires lead to a box on the carpet. On the screen, a version of Space Invaders.

Yet even though he showed us the magazine and swore up and down that by Christmas he would have one of the prized boxes himself - and that we could all take respectful turns - it never happened that year. He claimed there was some problem with supply and demand. A shortage of microprocessors or something. Nobody believed him except me. Actually, it was true. Videogames were missin underneath many trees that Christmas.

Michael eventually purchased the Volcabox RCS and I never saw him so happy. By that point we were fifteen and had developed a renewed interest in one another from afar. I remember the day he came back with it, his lettin me try the joystick outdoors. Tellin me it was much more sensitive than the joysticks of years past. Before long, cartridges linin the wall of his family's caravan were visible through the window as were posters, cards, dolls, magazines with cheat codes on the back pages and all that crap. He gained some respect from the other lads, who were deep into buyin and sellin by then, from hawkin copies of Volcabox games to the kids in Coláiste Iosaef. As you may or may not know, Volcabox games were stored on cassette tape. He had to borrow his cousin Seamus' stereo, run a jack lead to his own and ensure the recordin levels were just right to produce copies that wouldn't crash. Remember he told me all this in the hope I would be impressed. I was, to be honest, if not by what he was sayin.

The boy I fancied was into every kind of videogame you could imagine. He loved the action titles in all their emptiness - they didn't seem action packed to me - and the fightin games which struck me as ridiculous compared to bareknuckle. He was curious about adventure and puzzle games, for which you used your mind, not just your gut. Strategy games. Simulations. Wasn't mad about sports games, now that I think back on it. Once his cousin William had a football videogame and I remember Michael had little or no interest.

It was gettin to the point where he didn't sleep much and the men in his family often complained he was useless durin the day. They insisted sleep deprivation lead him to lose a centimetre of his right index finger while cuttin roof lungs for Sean O'Donoghue with a buzzsaw in the

industrial estate. His fatigue was due partly to a knack for twitch games. His favourite bein twitch games that were also fightin games. You remember I said he was descended from the King? His grandfather and father, although they never pursued the title, were every bit as good. Michael could have been too. Apparently he would rather fiddle with a joystick. His favourite twitch game was called *Tend Pray Kung Fu*. I remember in those days the fightin games were 2D and seem corny compared to what exists now. Nor was there much of a story.

Michael once claimed - in a flash of juvenile philosophy - that settled people had one life, travellers had two and heroes in videogames three.

I remember the lads would be outside playin football while he was inside playin Mario or Donkey Kong. Sometimes they played with him, but not as much as you might imagine. They didn't huddle together the way I think settled kids did. Michael was seen as a bit obsessed. He *dreamt* about videogames. Once even stayin awake for three days - two nights in a row - continuously playin Bargain Ben. Initially everyone was disgusted, though by the second night he was the seventh son of a seventh son. A theory that collapsed if you went back one generation. His round, wayward auntie Collette given the questionable job of removin milk bottles of urine until she informed everyone he had collapsed hand around stick.

As a result, I never really saw Michael. He was either workin with his uncles, wastin money in the arcade or shut away inside his caravan chasin a higher score. It made me all the more curious. This guy wasn't like the others. He didn't slouch around the camp, thinkin and schemin. When I once visited the arcade in town with his brother to tell him his uncle Frankie had died and to come home quick - because I was the only one who realised where the arcade was - I was intrigued by the place.

I remember it bein full of settled boys his age. You could smell them. Boys becomin men. Although I saw a few pinball machines, which I kind of understood, the place was mostly just videogames. Wall to wall. Some of the games made out of dots, others with lines. No girls anywhere to be seen and I remember wonderin where the girl's machines were? An awful lot of chewin gum on the floor. Can't say I liked it. We eventually found him transfixed by something called Time Crisis.

Watchin him standin there, foot on pedal, indistinguishable from all the settled kids, a tear slowly formed in my eye. His hands were convincin the joystick with a love he had never shown for horses and I just didn't see the point of it all. They were like all those old paperback

classics I had read since leavin school. Other worlds. Other lives. You died and started all over again.

Perhaps my disinterest had something to do with the fact that Michael's games were just not for girls. I mean, there weren't any girls *in* them. Other than the occasional damsel in distress. The games were all about fightin or searchin around - that was what men did.

It wasn't that I *couldn't* like video games. It was the type of video-games that existed. I had assumed there were many different types. That Michael just didn't pick very good ones. That day I realised the whole world was playin the one fuckin game and it scared me.

Defender. Donkey Kong. Robotron. Tempest. I think he liked seein his name on the scoreboard at the end. That it made him feel special. His name was all he could write, though and he couldn't read.

That was where I came in.

He knew I'd been to school and was supposedly a genius when it came to readin and writin. I was always walkin around with some old book which looked really contrived in our camp.

Late one night, dogs barkin and the trucks in heat, I passed his trailer and he called my name.

I could hear really simple music, composed with eight bars.

Remember doin a little circle because it wasn't possible to see him.

'What?' I eventually shouted.

'Come here a minute,' he muttered.

'No,' I replied. 'My ma'll kill me.'

There was some noise and then he appeared at his door.

'What is it?' I scowled.

He grinned at me for a moment and then, with motor movement of an obsessive, produced Johnny Blues from his back pocket and offered one to me.

I shook my head.

'I'm tryin to play an adventure game,' he said while lightin up. 'It's all words, though - can't get past the openin tune.'

'So what?' I asked.

'Will you have a look?' he blew smoke out into the night.

TO START, TYPE GO

GO

WELCOME TO THE MAP OF FURGAMIA! ONE OF THE FINEST ADVENTURE GAMES AVAILABLE FOR THE VOLCABOX RCS. YOU MUST TRAIPISE THROUGH THE KINGDOM OF FURGAMIA IN THE HOPE OF FINDING THE SECRET PARCHMENTS AND THUS LIBERATING PRINCESS VIOLET FROM THE EVIL KING CRAMMY.

TO GO NORTH, SOUTH, EAST, WEST HIT KEYS N, S, E, W

TRY COMMANDS GET, DROP, GO, LOOK, READ, CLIMB, MOVE, HIT, KILL

YOU ARE NEAR AN OLD RUIN. YOU CAN SEE STEPS AND A TREE NEARBY. ENTER COMMAND.

CLIMB TREE.

I DON'T UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU MEAN. ENTER COMMAND.

GO TREE.

I DON'T UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU MEAN. ENTER COMMAND.

GO STEPS.

YOU ARE AT THE FRONT DOOR OF THE RUIN. ENTER COMMAND.

Although I hated the music, the game seemed more fun than all the others because there was a story. I liked stories. They were important in the camp. Right up there with food and warmth and love. A type of glue

that held us all together. This particular one seemed like a myth. After half an hour I loosened up and we were there all night, while everybody else in the camp was asleep. Had my mother known I wasn't in bed she would have been runnin all over Longcommon lookin for me.

'Fuckin paralysed because I can't read,' Michael murmured just before the sun rose. 'You're so smart.'

'Am not,' I shook my head, without takin it off the screen. 'I haven't learned anything from readin.'

'No,' he shook his head. 'You have a clever way of sayin things - it must be the books.'

There was silence.

'Did you really burn down the school?' he asked.

I looked at him.

He was handsome in the marble light of the screen.

It's hard to admit this, but chattin away in that caravan as light started pourin through the windows, it really felt like I had found my man.

When people gossiped about us after that night it didn't bother me because I thought Michael felt the same way.

Two days later himself and his uncle Francie drove back into the camp in high spirits. Standin tied on the truck was a coin slot arcade game called *Marvel Superheroes*. It was almost completely gutted - there was no way it would ever work - but that didn't stop Michael from tryin to revive it. For weeks he could be found under its hood. I kept worryin whether it would electrocute him. Not if it isn't turned on, was his reassurance. Once I handed him a screwdriver. Every now and then he would stand up and switch on the extension leadin to his families' genie, though no lights ever danced on the screen. You could tell by the way he cared for it, the way he stared at it for five minutes while suckin on a Johnny Blue every mornin before crawlin inside, Michael thought that *Marvel Superheroes* machine was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

He spent a while tryin to convince Francie they should get involved in the videogame business. Probably because Francie's da had once sold a truck of second hand bar stools to a pub in Longford. But Francie didn't see how it would work. They had only managed to pick up *Marvel Superheroes* because it had been retired. Had pulled it from a skip. No functionin or fixable arcade games were goin to fall into their hands. They were simply too expensive. Or so we all thought.

Michael went and talked to his cousin James' father, who was rich and had once sold two crane games to a pinball emporium in Derry. He tried to sell him on the whole idea of these new videogames. I think initially he was suggestin to James' father - Jimmy - that it would be great to open an arcade ourselves. Tellin Jimmy how the walls of arcades were painted black to hypnotise lads into focusin on the screens and forgettin about the world outside. We'd just put down waxy on the floor, he shrugged. Explained videogames were the biggest thing since television. That kids were goin mad for them. That a fortune was bein made and we should get in on the fuckin act. That we would basically be dealin with cabinets and a coin slot that people kept feedin with money. Money you could hear every time a coin dropped because it landed on top of other coins. Almost like the old gladar box, Michael added.

Michael's cousins used to be called coiners because of the gladar box. It was a small cube, with the impression of a coin on either side, that was introduced to certain families at rural kitchen tables years ago. A small hole lead inside. A hole the unfortunate victim studied as Michael's cousins melted solder in a ladle. Just before they poured, however, they would ask the spectator for water to cool the prize. While the countryman's back was turned, Michael's cousins would drop a real coin into the mold and pour metal into the hole. When the box was opened a hot piece of currency rolled out.

There were two reasons Jimmy was meant to have been disinterested. Firstly, he wasn't charmed by videogames. Second, he thought it was a risky business venture. He thought almost everything was risky, mind you. Like all good businessmen, he knew the importance of sayin no and would do so about eleven or twelve times a day. Leave the games for farmers, my auntie Winona claimed he used to reply whenever Michael made his latest pitch. What it really indicated, I think, was that Jimmy didn't want to engage too much with settled people. Your basic sale was fine. It had a beginnin, middle and end. Actually runnin an arcade would have meant havin customers who could oblige you and few travellers lust after that.

Jimmy was mainly interested in dumps. Scrap metal merchants. PVC. Tree toppin. Buyin and sellin. That was business. Connin the buffer. Even loans among the family. At the same time, Jimmy knew there was very little buyin and sellin left to do. Used to be you could offer people a real bargain. But nowadays it seemed the big stores would give them bargains quicker. Might even give them more of a bargain. In the old days a livingroom suite might be a grand. These days you opened up the

paper and saw it for IRE499. More and more of the lads were workin in factories. Thankfully they had not yet gotten into drugs.

Our camp is full of drugs now. Quite a few lads have died too. A sixteen year old died from Ecstasy last year. Got a bad tab. They also die from heroin. These days it's mostly cocaine, though. We don't associate with them. Don't want them around our place. Drugs are seen as disgraceful here. A shame among the family. Yet it's after hittin the travellin community really badly in the last ten years. It's something that's become normal among young fellas. Skunk too. Seems everyone smokes skunk. To say nothing of who sells what. That's the real epidemic.

Back then, though, drugs weren't a big thing in our world and Jimmy was castin around for other options. Still, I don't think he would have gone for the videogame idea if Michael's father hadn't killed himself fours years earlier. Partly out of sympathy, Jimmy acted like he was intrigued by the way the cabinets produced money out of thin air and agreed to have a closer look. Albeit only at the possibility of sellin second hand cabinets to a small arcade in Dundalk.

The deal threatened to go sour when Jimmy and Michael discovered half the games they had paid a measly price for didn't work. Remember they spent hours devastated by the money they had lost. However, in his sorrow Michael finally managed to get them functionin. It seemed the two player option worked fine and if Michael played with four hands he could make it happen. Still no good - because the Dundalk buyer had already warned he would test every single unit.

That night the lads hatched a plan to train five boys around the age of six to play the game without seein the screen, hide one inside each dud cabinet and actually have them play against the buyer durin testin!

I wasn't there on the day, so don't know how the little lads escaped to freedom, but believe with every fibre of my bein the deal was successful and they got the cash because Michael gave me a small silver-plated bracelet the followin day.

After that Jimmy really did start buyin and sellin second hand cabinets. Ones that worked. There were so many different units, so many imitations of other games. New stuff comin through the camp every six months. Michael explained to my eager ears that for many years it had seemed slower. A cabinet would be the bees knees for two or three summers at least. After all, they were video games! Yet now the hulks were replaced every six months. A machine some arcade in Dublin was finished with would promptly become the holy grail to a snooker hall in

Lisdoonvarna. I remember one time the lads rollin out of the site with twenty cabinets under the plastic on the back of the truck. Happy days.

What Jimmy disliked was that once he had sold units to a proprietor it was over. If you looked closely, you could see an awful tragedy play itself out in the hills of his face after each sale concluded beside his trailer. *He* wanted to be empty in the coins when the catchbox was full. He would have *loved* if there was some way to arrange that. Of course, there wasn't. It was always just straightforward, once-off cash sales. Thank God.

Once they sold a cabinet that was workin perfectly but had a damaged shell by makin a beautiful tin body from scratch. Measurin it up themselves and leavin holes for the buttons and joysticks to sprout. Sometimes, before sellin, they would test them. Which meant they were rigged up outside the trailers, beside the genies. I made up my mind that I disliked them. They were for boys. The only one I ever saw for girls was the stupidest thing in the world. Think it was called Ms. Pacman.

Jimmy himself never bothered playin the games. Like a dealer never injects. The man probably never stepped inside an arcade. Certainly never owned one. But he did become *the* blackmarket supplier of arcade cabinets in Ireland for just under three years. He lost an awful lot of money.

Deep down, there was just something about those 2D games I found scary. Almost hauntin. Yet I tolerated them. What could I say? I was just a girl. Michael's girl, I assumed. Who comforted herself by guessin the reason he liked platform games with levels and clouds and tunnels, was that he was a traveller. Still, I hated the way each level looked like the last, with a few little differences. Like a settled person's way of lookin at life. You think you have it down pat and so nothing ever surprises.

However, one Saturday morning after Michael had been away for a fortnight with his other uncle Maurice I walked into his trailer and found him playin a new game that I hadn't seen before. It was 3D. The moment I saw the screen, which allowed Michael to actually move around in some desolate area near the sea, my heart sank. The graphics were poor - especially compared to what they are nowadays - but the fact that he could really move, without really movin, terrified me. I actually had nightmares after that. Despised that kind of defrosted freedom, which he didn't need to move off his ass to experience. Smelt death when he played and not because the game was violent or idle - because it was so meaningless.

My parents were delighted with the bracelet he had given me and wanted to know when we were gettin married. I explained he hadn't asked and eyebrows were raised. At the same time, Michael was known as different and why would he buy me a beautiful bracelet if he wasn't honourable?

I secretly began to worry that maybe it was because he felt obliged to do so. Began to sense he didn't really want me. After all, if he wanted me, why didn't he kiss me more often?

I was the only one who realised he was leavin, which is not to say he told me.

Everyone else seemed unfettered by his takin a trip, assumed he would return and limited their goodbyes accordingly. Travellers are always comin and goin and all the men had temporarily disappeared at some point over the years - only to promptly reappear when they became hungry or lonely. It wasn't until a few months later that people startin wonderin where he was and I was pressed for information I didn't have. That was when it started to become an issue. Michael was not around and he wasn't at another camp and he wasn't stayin with settled travellers and - as a matter of fact - nobody knew for sure just where the hell he was. Yet, despite this chatter, it *still* didn't really settle in for almost a year. About ten and a half months to be precise. When his uncle-in-law Roy Maughan died and Michael didn't come to the funeral.

Roy Maughan was a huge Roy Rogers fan. He was known as Roy Rogers Maughan. He was the same height as Rogers, just under five foot eleven. Used to stand like him. Wear the same jacket. He adored all the movies. Had a beautiful casket pulled by horse drawn carriage and his family hired three limousines for themselves. The man had fifteen children and obviously they all had their own kids too. The service was in Chick Church and the burial in Longcommon Cemetery. A very emotional time around here. It was a big church but nowhere near big enough for the crowd of people who showed up, the bulk of whom were left standin outside. He was an old enough man and knew everyone. People came from Manchester, Birmingham, Belfast. All over Ireland. Connemara. There were people at the funeral involved in a bitter dispute with one another - but they relaxed for Roy Rogers Maughan's send off. That's usually the case. It's very rare you hear of traveller funeral assassinations. Though it does happen.

His grave was beautiful. It took up two plots. A black marble floor and fine metal railins. On the headstone a picture of himself beside a picture

of Roy Rogers! Packed with hearts and flowers and the like. His wife would visit his grave every single day for the rest of her life. Maintainin and payin for it forever. We used to burn the caravan in the old days and I still believe that was better. It helped you grieve. Much too painful to still be walkin in and out. We also used to burn the belongins of the person who died and that's something that has continued. I suppose it's just a way of showin respect. We don't burn absolutely everything. It's obviously nice to hold onto a keepsake of some kind.

At Roy's funeral his relatives expressed their grief very openly. Screamin and roarin and even jumpin into the grave in the case of Bobble Maughan. There was an awful lot of closin and re-openin the coffin - much touchin and kissin of Roy - until the priest had to warn about shift-in weather.

When Roy's funeral came and went without Michael manifestin, people began to realise that he was really gone. Whenever we thought back to that funeral we fancied it was just as much a farewell to him. Like on the ninth day, when the soul leaves the body? Or durin months masses, the masses said every month for a year at the graveside. Not to mention one year later, at the blessin of the cross, for which people travelled far and wide all over again. That was every bit as emotional as the funeral, though for myself and Bernadette not because we were thinkin about Roy Rogers Maughan.

It was a very sad time for me because I realised my man wasn't comin back. That he wasn't my man after all. I don't know if people readin this will understand, but reputation is extremely important in the travellin community. The fact that Michael and I had done little more than kiss wasn't important. That our love story was virtually a figment of my imagination. It was a figment of everyone else's imagination too and nobody was ever goin to touch me. Not even the ones who sensed I was a virgin. I was dirty. That was it. God payin me back for burnin down the school.

Chapter 9

The plastic case honoured that tradition of movie poster and album cover and game box for which the image has been masterfully painted by hand and is undoubtedly of much higher quality than whatever chocolate sits inside. I breathed a little laugh while gently massaging the merchandise and studying the depiction of a rural hotel carpark and eighties function room behind large glass windows. Inside, a rowdy crowd of stereotypical-looking travellers were imbued with the movement of an epic renaissance painting, the men with the bristle of Halloween masks and women with murderous leers. At the bar, fists were flying. While in the corner three men seemed preoccupied by a brown leather bag apparently emanating a mysterious golden glow. In the carpark another wild-looking caricature lay asleep on the tarmac in a red lumberjack shirt under a dim blue sky.

Michael was paying his first visit since the wedding six months earlier, standing just inside our entrance with twenty copies of the game in a box under his arm and casting his eyes around to see whether anyone else was approaching. So far the only takers had been myself, Eoghan and Paul - those two lads now shouting from across the camp that Shimmy Ward was trying it out on his PS3.

From what we could see through his doorway, Shimmy was simply walking around the virtual function room and boxing everyone. Each time he went anywhere near a fellow traveller, the traveller glanced at him and uttered the canned line: 'Ah, howaya doin!'

If Shimmy punched, as he invariably did, there was an appropriate sound effect followed by the traveller who had been struck exclaiming: 'Jaysus, that's a bit much!'

The voices were like wind-up dolls. The graphics weren't realistic. Something they got perfect, though, was the sky upon exiting the pub. The haze in the carpark. That was done well. Listless, aimless wandering was something it captured - although perhaps not intentionally. At the

bottom left hand corner of the screen a box entitled Weaponry boasted that Shimmy was carryin a chairleg, bottle and knife.

'It's fuckin brilliant,' he glanced back at us all - because by now Bernie, Mary, Steph, Susan, Paddo, Christopher, Mic, Auntie Nelly, Missy, Francie, Winona, Jimmy, John, Marto, Clean Christy, Johnny, Bernie, Rosie, Ape, Brian, Martin, Denise, Jason, Christopher-Angel, Dearbhla, Jimmy, Eoghan and even Joe Maughan were crowded behind myself and Michael. There were more on the way, too. Young ones tunnellin through our legs and scootin onto the floor. I assumed they would be disappointed by the game, the kids, as it was a pale imitation of their favourite titles. It could have been much harder to play, too. All seemed to be about the novelty of bein in the world of travellers and cheap violence. Yet the little ones appeared enamoured. I wondered, somewhat anxiously, what the adults would say. After spendin the last six months assassinatin Michael's character.

Steph believed he had ruined my life and that before this was all over I would have the privilege of ruinin his, insistin Michael wanted me and would propose soon - at which point I could blow him out like a candle.

Auntie Nelly was more sympathetic towards him, suggestin he had gotten lost and was tryin to find his way back home - she reckoned it had been my place to wait for him and that I should now be his woman.

Missy believed I was wrapped up in the wrong man.

Little Winona thought he was a weirdo.

My uncle John said nobody could tell me he was bad news, because I simply wouldn't listen.

Clean Christy had developed a whole line about his bein involved in drugs.

Francie said he wasn't the 'type' I was 'supposed' to be with.

Brian and Martin claimed that Michael havin a woman elsewhere and comin back and wantin me too was like tryin to have his cake and eat it. That he had already disgraced me and if I allowed him do so again it was my own fault.

Susan said he might be excitin, but wasn't the right one.

Ape said nothing but you could tell he found it all very sad.

Christopher-Angel thought the whole thing was hilarious.

Joe Maughan still wouldn't leave me alone.

'I'm surprised you hand delivered them,' I said as we walked away from Shimmy's trailer.

'Well,' he threw the empty box away. 'Maybe you don't know me as well as you think.'

'You're not a player in that company at all,' I stopped walkin and looked at him. 'You make the tea. Don't you?'

He looked at me slowly, then grimaced.

'I can't believe you ever thought it would be any different,' I shook my head and slowly started walkin again.

'You did,' he slowly followed me. 'Or why the hell did ya spend all that time debatin with me?'

'Consultant in the Travellin Community,' I read from the back of my own copy. 'Michael McDonagh.'

Then threw it toward a rainbow puddle and walked back to my trailer. A few minutes later he appeared at my door again.

I sighed and started choppin ginger.

'They used me,' he said, steppin in.

'They used you,' I concurred. 'And you used *us* Michael.'

'Why didn't you get married Christine?' he suddenly asked.

His tone sought vindication, but I knew it was only fear.

'Stop it,' I sighed. 'You know nobody would fuckin touch me.'

'Joe Maughan proposed,' he smiled.

'Nobody I *liked*, Michael,' I stared out the window. 'Nobody I *liked*.'

'Don't tell me you're a virgin?' he asked.

There was silence.

'It's not like it's God's wish for us,' I said slowly. 'If you have sex before marriage it means that when you get married you're not givin your whole self.'

I could still hear Shimmy playin the videogame.

'That means I can't give my whole self to *you*,' he said slowly.

'You can't,' I said.

I heard him snort.

'So what are you waitin for?' he asked. 'A thirty six year old virgin?'

'Well,' I spooned honey into mugs. 'I'm not waitin for you, Michael.'

'I'm into monogamy,' he shrugged.

'If we've already been with other people,' I shook my head. 'It's not monogamy.'

'Monogamy means one person at a time...' he muttered.

My neck almost reared back as I looked at his reflection in disgust.

'The type of monogamy you're talkin about is dead and gone Christine,' he raised his voice. 'In the real world people have different relationships. One after the other. That's how it goes.'

'I know how it goes,' I said. 'You don't need to educate me. Some people already tried that and ended up spendin loads on reconstruction.'

'D'you ever wonder why it's so rare?' he took another step toward my back. 'Bein with only one person? It's only us who do it. We're not even one per cent of the fuckin population, Christine. Way *under* one per cent. D'you ever think... maybe we're just wrong?'

The kettle was boilin.

'Let marriage be held in honor among all and let the marriage bed be undefiled,' I slid the mugs over. 'For fornicators and adulterers God will judge.'

I could almost feel his breath on my neck.

'It's so hard to find the right one Michael,' I poured hot water on the honey. 'I sometimes wondered what you were thinkin. Kissin me like that? You must have known what it would do.'

There was silence.

'It's so important to have a partner in life,' I sighed. 'Someone to walk by your side.'

'Don't know why I left,' his voice weakened slightly. 'I really thought there was something out there.'

'There's *nothing* out there Michael,' I turned and faced him. 'I used to think that too, but I swear to God there really isn't. They're miserable. It's a miserable world they've got in return for all their ideas and concepts. They have stupid little love affairs, mirror images of whatever they're pretendin to be that particular year - I'm talkin from experience - and their *whole* economy is based on buildin those houses. A lot of those jobs they wouldn't stop talkin about were buildin houses. Houses that cost so much, the money they got paid to build them went out the window buyin them. It's not a life!'

He nodded.

'All I ever wanted was to be *wanted*,' I nearly started cryin. 'I wanted someone to love me. Used to think about you when I was seven, Michael. When I was seven!'

I turned back to the mugs.

We hadn't turned on the lights and it was startin to get dark inside. He stepped away from me and soon I heard him sit down. It was quiet for a while and there was something musty in the air. Like together we sensed the dull splendour of our misspent youth.

There really is nothing more perverse than a life not lived.

Finally, he reached for the lamp on my little wooden table and I began stirrin the honey.

'I know what you're sayin,' he said slowly as the trailer brightened. 'About the settled. They're not happy. They work but they don't enjoy the work. They never save a penny. Just drink it.'

'They don't know what they want,' I said upon dumpin the last piece of ginger into his mug.

Then came over to the couch with two steamin mugs and sat down, handin him one.

He took a sip and looked thoughtful for a moment.

'God,' he said. 'That's good.'

I smiled.

'If you're really goin to leave that stupid world behind and if you're willin to marry me then I will give you another chance,' I admitted.

He closed his eyes to trap a tear.

Then put down his drink and placed a hand on my bare leg.

It was happenin.

The story of Michael and Christine finally endin.

I hope you liked it.

'There's just *one* thing,' he said.

I looked from my leg to his face.

'What did you mean when you said you were talkin from experience?' he asked.

'What?' I blinked.

'Stupid little love affairs,' he said. 'You said you were... talkin from experience.'

I stared at him.

His hand became still as he stared back.

Michael had pretended to be surprised at the notion of my being a virgin, when in truth he expected nothing less.

Chapter 10

If my story drew to a close at that point nobody would be the wiser and my fiancé would certainly be a lot happier. Unfortunately, I am not in a position to uphold the tradition of us traveller girls bein sweet and virginal and innocent. It would be lyin not only to you, the reader, but to all my sisters in the community. By forever portrayin ourselves as 'one men women', we contribute to the myth that we are dirty under any other circumstances.

Six years after Michael disappeared I met a guy called Niall.

I remember the day, the place clearly - it was in a room I did not particularly like.

A room that was used for a million different things and one that, like every other communal area in the buildin, had a security camera up in the corner.

Not that the camera could see everything. I knew from studyin the screen in the office hatch whenever takin my pills that it could pivot to encompass either the door or the far wall, but not both. On Sundays, before the local Alcoholics Anonymous crowd visited, it was simply draped.

Also like every other communal area in the buildin, this one had an indented rectangular yellow sign on the door - RECREATIONAL ROOM it read - and sea blue walls risin from grey lino floors.

It was a residential centre for firesetters and Niall was visitin a few of us individually, as firemen often did.

He was probably in his late thirties judgin by that look of poetic resignation and pruned, unretirin grey hair.

We were sittin alone, facin one another on two grey plastic chairs in the centre of the room.

I had been tellin him all about my favourite hobby.

Explainin that I normally set fires after nightfall, because my chances of bein caught were lower and I could watch them from further away. How I always wandered around for an hour or so beforehand, looked over my shoulder and imagined things on fire. That helped me decide.

Over half the time I was sensible and set fires in places that were secluded, like cul-de-sacs and carparks. I never lit a fire in the exact place another one had clearly occurred because that wouldn't have counted and when I zeroed in on a spot would circle it for some time. Become familiar with the area. Wait for the right moment and be sure to have an escape route.

Often this part of the routine took only minutes but it could take me hours. Sometimes I didn't set a fire and just went back to the camp. Yet whenever I left without gettin my fix I would return very early the followin mornin and havin not really slept.

I might set several small fires in my chosen spot or one big fire, dependin on my mood.

I was well aware of the risks of hangin around and always walked home normally to avoid lookin suspicious. Three times, on the way back to the camp, I passed fire engines which added to the thrill.

Watchin the fires from a good vantage point was important to me. I could usually see them from the dump. They looked *so* beautiful in the night.

Afterwards I always became mildly distraught and wanted to set another one. I learnt to manage that feelin. To call it a night. Touch myself in bed instead. Replayin everything that had happened in my mind's eye. From the explosion of the lighter wheel, to how the settled people reacted. My breathing also quickened when I heard about the fire on the radio and particularly one time it was on television - though a problem I had tryin to record it onto videocassette in Auntie Nelly's made me lose my temper.

A day later I always revisited the scene of the fire and marked a map. Kept a little diary and returned on the anniversaries. Always.

Over the years I set exactly one hundred and eight fires in a twenty two mile radius of Longcommon, with four arrests and no injuries.

'They said it was an outlet,' I sighed wearily. 'Never found any connection to my menstrual cycle. They don't know what the fuck they're talkin about, to be honest. I still feel like settin fires after spendin fifteen months inside here. Don't even have to stay anymore if I don't want to

but... just feel completely lost whenever I go back to the camp... always have the same old feelins.'

Niall smiled and nodded gently.

'You're very well spoken,' he said. 'You're from the travellin community, aren't you?'

'Yeah,' I said, checkin him out.

There was a smallness about him and yet the rigours of firefightin had admitted dark, handsome and even lanky strokes. He looked great for his age, would be one way of sayin it.

Slowly, I moved my hand off my stomach and onto my thigh.

There was also a hardness in him - yet not something he ever wished to acquire or convey. More that pallid, austere quality seen not so much in doctors or nurses but perhaps hospital porters. Ambulance men. Those who move through tragic situations. Those who shoulder.

'Would you like to have sex with me?' I suddenly asked.

The poor guy disappeared from the room so fast that he knocked over the plastic cup of coffee sittin on the floor beside him.

There were thirteen firesetters in the residential centre and only three of us were female. I was the only traveller. The place had a real laddish quality and our first floor corridor felt sort of haunted because the management would leave rooms empty rather than stick fellas next to us. Other centres wouldn't touch cases like ours with bargepoles because of our history and that was why eventually Newpark Residential Centre for Firesetters had to be unveiled.

The buildin itself was less than a decade old, its exterior made that clear. The facade length curved in a stylish way that threw you off a little. Banks of unfocused glass cubes were set into both ends allowin blurry glimpses of emergency stairs. Yet inside it was clearly the nineteen eighties. The Irish nineteen eighties, despite the place havin been built much later.

I trust all the politicians and local counsellors and representatives from the regional drugs task forces and so on who attended the openin and accepted tea and biscuits - I'm sure they all crumpled their chins in respect. Cast their eyes over the walls and floors that were nothing if not clean and the series of mosaics on the canteen wall that were visible from the foyer. A feelin of rudimentary cheer pervaded, no doubt. Sure wasn't it great such a place existed at all?

Wanderin around the centre made me weary, though. As I mentioned earlier, I would become involved with many voluntary organisations for travellers in the years to come and sometimes think my time in the residential centre was preparation for all that. After all, it was the first time I was really interactin with people outside the camp. Not a wonderful place to start.

Everything was controlled there. If you had access to a lighter they reckoned you would probably start a fire. We were prohibited from smoking or havin access to ignition materials and the kitchen was obviously locked at all times. We were not allowed to wear, draw or showcase any material or clothing related to fire.

That afternoon, after meetin Niall for the first time, I was scheduled to do a workshop with the other female residents and wasn't much lookin forward to it. Clearly remember walkin over to the hatch and impatiently askin for my pills.

The medical student, whom I would bet money had recently started doin hours there to satisfy a work experience stipulation, casually kicked his feet so that his chair would move backwards toward the key box on the wall. Opened the box, selected a key on a Red Cross chain and then pulled himself back to the desk where the meds cabinet sat in the corner beyond an unruly pile of phonebooks. Unlockin the cabinet revealed such an assortment of click-closed plastic food containers filled with pills and white paper bags from pharmacies that my finger was trained to point at the shelf of the door where my Abilify sat.

'Do you have water?' the student asked.

'I'll neck them first,' I said.

'I have to see you swallow them,' he insisted.

'You will,' I sighed. 'Just give 'em here.'

He slowly handed me the pills, his mouth hangin open with integrity and I put them on my tongue before turnin and headin for the canteen opposite.

Meetin a fireman like I had been doin that mornin was just one in a series of things they had us do, part of a course they perceived us to be on. They would try and solve the mystery of why you set fires and develop ideas about how they could work with your family to cure you. Clinicians would grill you. Trauma work was tried, mood stabilization and social skills development. It was theoretically about learnin to take responsibility, understand what you had been doin, stop fuckin doin it

and eventually interact safely with fire. One important part of it was supposed to be makin amends with your victims or people who could potentially have been your victims. Didn't have to be people we slaughtered or maimed. It could be some fool whose shed we helped him get rid of. Could even stretch to firemen. We were supposed to write letters of apology and, whenever possible, have face-to-face meetins with the wounded party. In some workshops we were also meant to hold each other accountable, offer feedback and provide suggestions which could actually be quite good sometimes. That part was quite good.

You could earn privileges too, if you were doin well. For instance, over the fifteen months I had slowly earned kitchen privileges. Not to say the staff would ever have left me alone in there but I could set foot and bake what everyone called Christine's Cookies.

You were supposed to keep next of kin updated on all your progress and I must say it was a real blast seein the fourteen members of my immediate family crowd into Dr Ryan's office every month.

We occasionally watched Longcommon Fire and Rescue train and there *had* been talk that we would be allowed enter a buildin filled with non-toxic smoke to help us understand how shit it was bein a fireman but so far that had not panned out.

A lot of the lads had said in the past that meeting firemen was one of the best buzzes. I concurred with that as I strolled into the canteen that day after my first meetin with Niall. I had only met one fireman before him, a month after arrivin - some sixty year old who thought I was a dirty beggar.

I wouldn't have been willin to lose my virginity to him - or any of the residents for that matter.

I mean, these were the kind of lads who looked at those ink blot pictures and said 'it looks like a house on fire' or 'a fire engine skiddin around a corner' or 'a sun exploding' or 'fireworks goin off, one after another...'

The kind who responded to sentence completion tests in the same way. *He walked towards... the flames. People forget that... fire is so powerful.*

You might think I would relate to them, lovin fire myself, but actually we were like chalk and cheese.

They were boys.

When Elton John (not the singer) was five he was left alone and unsupervised in a B&B by his mother. He hated it, played with matches and

soon burnt them out of the room - leavin them homeless and facin charges in Leitrim District Court. I watched him workin his way through a packet of cornflakes in the canteen that day, his eyes dartin around and smilin at me for a second. I can relate to the fact that he has never gotten over that one single incident. It's his trajectory.

Padraic had been in care since age eight, when his parents claimed they could no longer control him. He had been lyin, robbin, boltin and had a history of firesettin. One day he set his father's bed on fire while his father was lyin in it! His father almost died. I had been briefly attracted to him a long time ago at which point we'd had an awkward kiss. My second kiss.

'I was mad at the lady because she gave out to me,' I remembered his starin into my eyes in the yard. 'I hid a burnin matchbox inside the bonnet of her Toyota.'

'What happened then?' I asked.

'Got in trouble...'

Aran used to sneak out his bedroom window in the middle of the night and go set fires in bins and doorways. They got bigger every year and recently he had started settin them outside occupied homes. He always experienced a pang of guilt right before he did so but explained how the feelins of guilt gave way to another feelin.

Simon's thing was vandalism. He had boasted to me about that when we'd first met. Explained how he used to hang out with a group of older lads who were into all that shit. Smoked hash, drank. Was in the residential centre because they had torched a rural buildin site.

Lookin around at the lads, waitin for the female firesetter workshop to begin, reminded me I would never let any of them touch me and made me think more about the fireman.

He hadn't seemed all that offended by my request.

'Women don't set fires,' Sheila's voice had a warmth that suggested she was inspectin the first page of a children's story, although her hands were clasped under each side of a grey plastic chair in the recreational room. 'That's what most people in my line of work think.'

Her gaping smile was chubby, toothy and her short blonde hair had grown into waves. Some fashion label's idea of a hoody left her upper chest free to emphasize a plain silver necklace with a silver dove that swayed slightly as her eyes swapped unassumingly over the three of us.

'But every year I come here there's more of you and you probably need different things than we give the lads,' she said.

We weren't sittin in a circle or anything and although there was potential for a certain solidarity because of our shared gender I already felt sure it would be squandered.

Sheila glanced at me as if readin my mind.

'I know you have already talked a lot about fire and there have been various counsellors and clinical psychologists who have tackled things with you,' she lamented. 'Some trauma work and mood work. I know you have done lots of general stuff? That you've been learnin to cope and behave responsibly and some of you have privileges. But, if it's okay, I would like to go *right* back to the start again! If that isn't a pain in the arse. We'll go round in a circle, start with each person tellin us a little bit about themselves and maybe how they ended up here. Maureen. Would you like to go first?'

'They say I have schizophrenia,' Maureen said slowly. 'I set two fires in my flat and then two more when I was in different places - a hospital and a nursin home.'

I was only vaguely aware of this cream dessert who was older than my mother and wore one of those perforated milky brown sweaters people her age find sexy, beige slacks that concurred and ridiculous summery white shoes with little holes over the toes if I remember correctly. Her fadin blonde hair was that kind of short, sharpish compromise people her age make.

'When were you diagnosed with schizophrenia, Maureen?' Sheila asked.

'When I was thirty three, think. Thirty two. Same for my mother. I don't know if they said schizophrenia then but-'

'They said you might have some problems,' Sheila finished. 'Do you have any family?'

Maureen nodded.

'Four children,' she said slowly. 'After all the children were born was... when I set the fires in the flat - they took the matches and the children away on the same day.'

She laughed to herself.

'Okay,' Sheila nodded a little slower than her integrity would go. 'And what do you expect to get out of these workshops with the other women?'

Maureen stared at her for a while, then glanced very briefly at the rest of us and shrugged.

'I only ever set fires because I was schizophrenic and that's been treated.'

'We're just here to talk Maureen,' I said.

Sheila glanced at me and then leant forward in her chair, hangin her arm over her knee, which was hangin over her other knee.

'We're here to explore the issues, Maureen. It's your prerogative. *Your* choice. But the more you are willin to tackle things, the more progress you are likely to make.'

'I still don't *really* believe that my fires were that serious,' Maureen almost laughed. 'I had a mental problem.'

'There may be other issues though,' said Sheila. 'It doesn't have to all be about fires. There's the rest of your life, too.'

I nodded.

'Why are you interested in the rest of my life?' Maureen, however, asked.

'Well, it's all connected,' Sheila smiled. 'Bernie!'

Bernie's hair would suggest she had recently climbed out of the shower all day long. Her face was both drawn and bloated and liberal lipstick was the counterpoint - the stamp of a commitment she had made to always hold it together. Her clean jeans and a clean, light blue top backed up the casual story.

'Well,' she had been sittin forward in her chair since arrivin, not wantin to get life wrong. 'I married very young. We had three kids. Split up. I moved in with Sean. Sean had three kids. I drank a lot and, y'know, got a lot of... drugs through the doctor. They took my kids away and in court they also, they sent me to that psychiatric place. I only tried to set fire to my own bed. I just wanted to kill myself. They fuckin convicted me of that! Sent me here. Even though I never set a fire before. Youse set fires for fun. Sorry, I'm not bein thick with ya. But I never done that.'

'Are you aware though, Bernie, that other people might have been harmed by the fire you set?' Sheila asked.

'No,' Bernie shook her head like she had explored that question on many levels. 'Who was in the bed?'

There was silence in the room until that older lady, Maureen, exhaled properly for the first time and relaxed a little in her seat - as if given a temporary pass by Bernie's self-delusion.

'Who was in the bed?' Bernie asked.

'Okay,' Sheila drew in her face. 'A bit of fire awareness might be something we need to explore there.'

'Who was in the bed?' Bernie kept repeatin. 'I'm not goin to do it again!'

Then she sighed demonstratively and rearranged herself further back in her seat, foldin her arms and lookin aside.

'I'm happy to fuckin sit here,' she said. 'Talk about it, but-'

'That's *all* we're here for guys,' Sheila leapt at the chance to accentuate how obvious a point that was, after I had already suggested it. 'Christine...'

I sighed and looked in the direction of the window although it wasn't really possible to see out from my angle, completely lackin the energy to shake my head or even indicate much.

'I'm a member of the travellin community,' I mocked. 'I believe it's wrong to live in a house and so I wanna burn them all down.'

I didn't cry until I got back to my room and then it was like takin a hit whilst lyin back on my disgustin bed. Became aware of a black plastic bag tucked down the side and pulled it out. It was ripped and empty and had a sticker with *Christine* scrawled on it by an exuberant volunteer - from when I had temporarily left the place after my year was up and they'd bagged and tagged the room. It had the effect of remindin me how circular, how unconsciously circular my existence had become.

I took off my top, under which was a ruined Diesel t-shirt, because there was no need to hide my arms in the room.

I had been a cutter for two years. Before that I used to hit myself with my phone or just bang my head against walls. Sometimes I scratched myself really hard too. Then one day on the dump I started using a razor. I had been on various pills since arrivin at the centre, but they rarely did much and usually had some side effect which was exasperatin and made it hard to know whether it was actually helpin or not. When

you're tired or suddenly puttin on weight, you feel quite different anyway.

Sure, I had felt better on the Abilify in recent months but I still didn't know if it was impactin my cuttin directly or not. It seemed to help with the depression, though.

Much more important than the pills, actually, was for me to physically get away from triggers or things that I had harmed myself with or locations I had harmed myself in. I was meant to find a comfortable place where I felt safe. That was the big problem with stayin in the residential centre. I might rid the room of triggers, but it *was* a place where my cuttin had occurred many times before and so I would never be entirely safe there.

I filled out what my counsellor Dr Ryan called an impulse log. Basically a journal. I tried to write, draw or doodle. Do something calmin like takin a shower, washin my hands or doin my hair. Occasionally talk to him, to Dr Ryan, or maybe even one of the lads if I felt foolish.

I sometimes prayed or listened to music, though my collection was a shadow of what it had been since binnin all triggerin CDs. Hugged my cotton dog Donagh. Cried. Made a list of affirmations in the impulse log.

Imagined that I was back at the camp, married to Michael and we had three little boys.

I read books constantly, when I could get compelled rather than glassy eyed and worked up. Played with Play-doh although it had been ages since I had done that and the plastic tub on top of my shelf looked less invitin with every passin week. Repeated mantras. *I feel fuckin shit. It's okay to feel fuckin shit.* Sometimes I walked around the garden, but not today because it was rainin. Occasionally did yoga badly. Meditated. Cleaned the room. Not today. All those things were tricks. Tricks weren't enough. So much was floodin in!

It had started the moment Sheila sensed I was bein evasive.

I needed to cut and nobody could help me. Nobody understood. There were so many fuckin myths about it. It was attention seekin, a lot of people used to say. That was the biggest misconception of all, so probably best to get it out of the way first.

Cuttin was my secret, okay? I was determined to conceal it from the whole camp and remember goin for months without anyone in the centre findin out. A few people did it for attention, that was true, but they were the minority and really engagin in something different to us.

Another fallacy was that cuttin was a failed suicide attempt. Ma had freaked out that way on a visit three months earlier. What I was experiencin was, again, completely different from what a person goes through when they're feelin like endin it all. I was actually copin by cuttin, strange as that may sound.

Yet another myth was that it didn't hurt. It didn't hurt the way it otherwise would because I was so numb, but actually I needed pain to release endorphins. That was what provided the feelin of escape. Don't even know if I would call it escape. It was something better. Shock postponed the pain, as it always does, but pain caught up with me soon enough. Another myth was that we were all lunatics.

The truth was that havin wounds validated the hurt I felt bein a traveller.

For a brief period after cuttin, nothing else mattered. It had said what I couldn't. It was like fires or writin. Something I was good at.

I was lyin there, thinkin about all this, when suddenly there was a knock on the door.

I opened it and Maureen was standin there.

'You have a visitor downstairs dear,' she mumbled and moved off.

'Who?' I called after her.

'A young man,' she replied.

The fireman.

I spent somewhere between three and four minutes choosin a t-shirt that held up my tits and washin my face with Silcock's Base and my teeth with nothing but water because I had run out of toothpaste. Then put on my small, silver dragonfly earrings and bounded down the stairs, nearly fallin but definitely not fallin. The fireman didn't see any of this, though. He saw me walk around the corner casually.

He was readin one of the few sheets on the noticeboard, relatin to five aside I think.

I tried stickin my hands in my back pockets and givin him a cool gaze.

'Howaya,' he nodded.

I smiled.

He glanced out the window next to the noticeboard, at the vegetable patch.

'Nice enough,' he sighed. 'The whole place.'

I stared at him for a moment and then slowly looked across at buildin C.

'I wonder would it melt?' I murmured.

He shrugged slowly.

'You been thinkin about what I said?' I asked.

He nodded slowly, then looked at me.

'Obviously it'll never happen,' he sighed like he was only resistant for practical reasons. 'At least not while you're in here.'

'There's a balcony around the back Niall,' I said. 'All you have to do is wait 'til 1am.'

He squinted.

'Are you joking?' he asked.

'Some guy sneaked in here last week,' I nodded.

'Your boyfriend?' he smiled.

'Someone broke in,' I said. 'They had to call the Guards.'

'Yeah,' he said. 'No thanks.'

'Just come around 1am,' I nodded confidently. 'Nobody's gonna know.'

'Some guy broke in?' he asked, almost weighin it up.

'An ex-resident,' I nodded. 'He came back a few days later but they had it locked so he smashed the manager's car. I'll leave it open for you. It's impossible to climb out but it's easy to get in.'

He studied me for a while, with a more realistic face.

'Y'know the long steps beside the buildin that go up to Knocksedan road?' I whispered. 'Climb over the wall half way up and you can see the balcony from there. Come at 1am. I'll keep an eye out.'

Dr Ryan emerged from the canteen at that moment and walked past the two of us. I didn't see him so much as feel him, keepin my eyes on Niall. It made me realise how risky the conversation was, though.

'Whether you're coming later or not,' I said. 'You better go now...'

I turned and walked off. Out of sight, I laughed. Even if he didn't come, I felt much better. Had been headin towards cuttin a while ago but didn't feel like I would anymore.

I closed the door of my room and started cleanin it up until my grasp of the chemistry between myself and the fireman stopped me from tidyin it too much.

It was only after some more smirkin and adrenalin had been gotten out of the way, when I was downstairs peelin potatoes on the dull steel worktop by a sink in the kitchen, that I actually started wonderin whether he would take the bait. Thought he would. Reasoned that if he didn't, he would seem feeble.

Then the winds in my mind shifted and I became insecure about my looks and reckoned he could probably get plenty of girls, bein a firefighter. Next I reminded myself that he was a guy and had been offered sex. Dangerous sex. I knew there had been an attraction. It wasn't all about me. It was the situation. How it had started. There was something there, I recited while unhookin my apron. It was out of my hands.

The evenin didn't drag, because of commotion I knew was occurrin in each of us.

Every ritual, from dessert to Chinese dominoes to the nine o'clock news, passed in a blur.

I washed underwear in my gammy sink and dried it with a blow dryer borrowed from Bernie. It was silly, because I would obviously have to don my jeans to get him off the balcony. But I would do that wearin only a bra from the waist up and when we got back to the room would take off my trousers immediately, like I was gettin back into bed.

I thought about it all too much.

Worried whether the graveyard shift employee stationed in the office would spot us on those two small squares of the screen dedicated to the balcony and first floor corridor. Listened to Longcommon FM which excited me because it was the local radio station, swirlin around his head wherever he was. Made myself read *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

1am came tamely enough. My eyes did a lot of handstands within the hands of the clock, divvyin up the time remainin before there was only a certain amount *more* time remainin. The tunnel of the last twenty minutes was all about sighin and throwin my eyes to heaven.

At 1.04am it was important to look out the window.

There he was, the fucker, remindin me how much I liked him and wanted this.

I thumped the window aggressively because he wasn't lookin at my room at all.

'Shhhh!' I could actually hear him say, his eyes becomin so small they nearly disappeared.

I suppose the other women had their lights out.

He was on the other side of the drop, standin on the soggy wood and kickin a rusted white metal bowl out of his way. He looked at me properly and shrugged. I was worried he was too close to the edge but guessed he was used to that kind of thing, bein a firefighter. He looked quite sexy actually. Not givin a shit about the drop. Apparently willin to risk gettin caught. His boots even slipped and slid a little on these incredible skinny vines that hung three quarters down the cement wall, past the moss stains and black rain stains. Unfortunately for some of the girls, it wasn't high enough to fracture more than a foot.

I jabbed my finger to the left a few times - if I had been in one of the rooms at either end he probably could have literally jumped in the window and I could tell he was thinkin that. Instead, he sensibly walked along the wall and then coaxed his body onto the balcony with the will of a child.

I took one last look at my virgins room before sneakin out to meet him. I had one of the slightly larger rooms and was supposed to feel sorry for people who didn't, although havin a larger room only meant more purple breezeblocks.

I opened the door to the balcony and there he was, over by two chairs. Like the chairs, his demeanour was planted in half an inch of water from the day's rain. He nodded at me and suddenly we were strangers again. Maybe this was the threshold for him. Suddenly, he walked across the balcony to the door.

We didn't say anything as we walked to my room, just kept our eyes from strayin too far from one another. He tried not to get the corridor floor wet, but of course did. I gestured at my room. Once inside, he stepped over my pro-fitness exercise mat and glanced up at my Play-doh before I gently pushed the base of his spine with my hand.

'Sit down,' I said, unzippin my jeans.

One of the first things I had done after movin in was shift the bed. Most beds in the centre were lengthways in the room. I had moved mine so it was across the window wall. It was cheerier that way. Perhaps only because it wasn't standard. I fucked my jeans in the corner.

As Niall slumped onto the bed, I leant over him and pressed eject on my Jwin stereo before insertin Nina Simone.

Wild as the Wind came on real low as it does.

He pointed at a photo of Michael taped on my wall.

'That your boyfriend?' he asked.

'Well,' I grinned. 'My childhood sweetheart.'

'A traveller?' he asked.

I sat down beside him and took his hand in mine. Couldn't find any cold in it. Just invisible wet from climbin and bein efficient. I leant into him a little and he closed his lips around the edge of my mouth, not unlike Michael would ten years later. We found a rhythm and it was really nice. Here was the closeness. We stopped, then, sort of satisfied with that introduction and he took a bottle of Buckfast from his coat which we both took turns silently drinkin.