



# The Woman Who Stole My Life: A Novel

By Marian Keyes

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**A funny new novel from international bestselling author Marian Keyes about Irish beautician Stella Sweeney who falls ill, falls in love, then falls into a glamorous new life in New York City. When her dream life is threatened, will she rally to reclaim love and happiness?**

In her own words, Stella Sweeney is just “an ordinary woman living an ordinary life with her husband and two teenage kids,” working for her sister in their neighborhood beauty salon. Until one day she is struck by a serious illness, landing her in the hospital for months.

After recovering, Stella finds out that her neurologist, Dr. Mannix Taylor, has compiled and self-published a memoir about her illness. Her discovery comes when she spots a photo of the finished copy in an American tabloid—and it’s in the hands of the vice president’s wife! As her relationship with Dr. Taylor gets more complicated, Stella struggles to figure out who she was before her illness, who she is now, and who she wants to be while relocating to New York City to pursue a career as a newly minted self-help memoirist.

Funny, fast-paced, and honest, Keyes’s latest novel is full of her trademark charm and wisdom and is sure to delight her many fans.

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## **The Woman Who Stole My Life: A Novel By Marian Keyes Bibliography**

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

##### **Praise for *The Woman Who Stole My Life*:**

"Gloriously funny." —*The Sunday Times* (UK)

"A total triumph" —*The Daily Mail*

"Not only is it a great story with funny, loveable characters, it made me laugh out loud." —*Stylist* (UK)

"One of those rare books that will swallow up your day without realising it. Romantic and uplifting it won't fail to put a smile on your face. Marian Keyes is back to her best." —*The Daily Express* (UK)

"A warm and hilarious page turner." —*Good Housekeeping* (UK)

"Funny but poignant." —*Marie Claire*

"A smart new drama from the awesome Marian Keyes." —*Heat*

"Full of twists and turns, with warmth and humour on every page, it doesn't disappoint." —*Closer*

"A modern fairy tale, it's full of Keyes's self-deprecating wit" —*The Sunday Mirror* (UK)

##### **Praise for Marian Keyes:**

"Keyes's witty women . . . humorous writing style, and uplifting tone have become beloved by readers across the globe." —*Chicago Tribune*

"Deeply hilarious and unexpectedly deep. Keyes never falters." —*Newsweek*

"[A] pleasure to read . . . a sharp and honest exploration of a favorite Keyes theme: resilience." —*Cleveland Plain Dealer*

"Keyes's portrayal of depression is nuanced and authentic. Helen's vibrant voice is spot-on...." —*Publishers Weekly*

"A well-crafted novel with engaging characters and a gripping plot." —*Christian Science Monitor*

"A tasty literary latte." —*USA Today*

"Keyes manages to stuff a smorgasbord of genres into one tasty tale. . . . The real joy is in the journey itself; watching Keyes's quirky characters as they change partners, reveal battle scars and command your attention on every page." —*People*

"From the Brontës to Maeve Binchy to Helen Fielding, British and Irish writers have long specialized in diarylike stories of ordinary women thwarted by unusual circumstances. The Limerick-born Keyes offers an

entertaining . . . take on the genre. A fun romp . . ." —*Kirkus*

#### About the Author

**Marian Keyes** is the internationally bestselling author of more than ten novels and two autobiographical works. Several of her novels have been adapted for television and film. She was born in Limerick in 1963, and brought up in Cavan, Cork, Galway and Dublin; she spent her twenties in London, and lives now in Dún Laoghaire with her husband, Tony.

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Can I make one thing clear—no matter what you've heard, and I'm sure you've heard plenty—I'm not a full-blown karma denier. It might exist, it might not, like how on earth would I know? All I'm doing is giving my version of events.

However, if karma does exist, I'll say one thing for it, it's got a fantastic PR machine. We all know the "story": karma is running a great big ledger in the sky where every good deed done by every human being is recorded and at some later stage—the time to be of karma's choosing (karma is cagey that way, plays its cards close to its chest)—karma will refund that good deed. Maybe even with interest.

So we think if we sponsor youths to climb a hill to raise money for the local hospice, or if we change our niece's nappy when we'd rather stab ourself in the head, that at some point in the future something good will happen to us. And when something good does happen to us, we go, Ah, that'll be my old friend karma, paying me back for my erstwhile good deed. "Hey, thanks, karma!"

Karma has got a string of credits the length of the Amazon, when in fact I suspect karma has been doing the conceptual version of lounging around on the couch in its underpants watching Sky Sports.

Let's take a look at karma "in action."

One day, four and a half years ago, I was out driving in my car (a cheapish Hyundai SUV). I was moving along in a steady stream of traffic and up ahead I saw a car trying to get out of a side road. A couple of things told me that this man had been trying to get out of this side road for quite a while. Fact A: the man was bent over his steering wheel in an attitude of weary, imploring frustration. Fact B: he was driving a Range Rover and simply by dint of the fact that he was driving a Range Rover, everyone was going to think, Ah, look at him there, the big, smug, Range Rover driver, I'm not letting him out.

So I thought, Ah, look at him there, the big, smug, Range Rover driver, I'm not letting him out. Then I thought—and all of this was happening quickly, because, like I said, I was moving along in a steady stream of traffic—then I thought, Ah, no, I'll let him out, it'll be—and mark me closely here—it'll be good karma.

So I slowed down, flashed my lights to indicate to the big, smug, Range Rover driver that he was free to go, and he gave a tired smile and started moving forward and already I was feeling a warm sort of glow and wondering vaguely what form of lovely cosmic payback I'd be getting, when the car behind, unprepared for me slowing down to let the Range Rover out—on account of it being a Range Rover—went plowing into the back of me, shunting me forward with such force that I went careering into the side of the Range Rover (the technical term for such a maneuver is "T-boning") and suddenly there was a three-car love-in going on. Except there was no love there, of course. Far from it.

For me, the whole thing happened in slow motion. From the second the car behind me began to concertina

into mine, time almost stopped. I felt the wheels of my own car beneath me, moving without my say-so, and I was staring into the eyes of the man driving the Range Rover, our gazes locked in horror, united in the strange intimacy of knowing we were about to hurt each other and being entirely powerless to prevent it.

Then came the awful reality as my car really did hit his—the sound of metal crunching and glass shattering and the bone-juddering violence of the impact . . . followed by stillness. Just for a second, but a second that lasted a very long time. Stunned and shocked, the man and I stared at each other. He was only inches away from me—the impact had shifted us so that our cars were almost side by side. His side window had shattered and small chunks of glass glittered in his hair, reflecting a silvery light that was the same color as his eyes. He looked even more weary than when he was waiting to be let out of the side road.

Are you alive? I asked, with my thoughts.

Yes, he replied. Are you?

Yes.

My passenger door was wrenched open and the spell was broken. “Are you okay?” someone asked. “Can you get out?”

With shaking limbs, I crawled my way across to the open door and when I was outside and leaning against a wall I saw that Range Rover Man was also free. With relief, I registered that he was standing upright, so his injuries, if any, must be minor.

Out of nowhere a small man hurtled at me and shrieked, “What the hell are you at? That’s a brand-new Range Rover!” It was the driver from the third car, the one who’d caused the accident. “This is going to cost me a fortune. It’s a new car! He doesn’t even have plates on it yet!”

“But, I . . .”

Range Rover Man stepped in and said, “Stop. Calm down. Stop.”

“But it’s a brand-new car!”

“Shouting about it isn’t going to change things.”

The yelling quieted down and I said to Range Rover Man, “I was trying to do a good deed, letting you out.”

“It’s okay.”

Suddenly I realized that he was very angry and in an instant I’d got him—one of those good-looking spoiled men, with his expensive car and his well-cut coat and his expectation that life would treat him nicely.

“At least no one was hurt,” I said.

Range Rover Man wiped some blood off his forehead. “Yeah. At least no one was hurt . . .”

“I mean, like, not seriously . . .”

“I know.” He sighed. “Are you okay?”

“Fine,” I said, stiffly. I didn’t want his concern.

“I’m sorry if I was . . . you know. It’s been a bad day.”

“Whatever.”

It was mayhem all around us. The traffic was tail-backed in both directions, “helpful” passersby were offering conflicting eye-witness reports and the shouty man started shouting again.

A kind person led me away to sit on a doorstep while we waited for the police and another kind person gave me a bag of sweets. “For your blood sugar,” she said. “You’ve had a shock.”

Very quickly the police showed up and started redirecting traffic and taking statements. Shouty Man shouted a lot and kept jabbing his finger at me, and Range Rover Man was talking soothingly, and I watched them both like I was watching a movie. There was my car, I thought, hazily. Banjaxed. A total write-off. It was utterly miraculous that I’d stepped out of it in one piece.

The accident was Shouty Man’s fault and his insurance would have to cough up, but I wouldn’t get enough to replace my car because insurance companies always underpaid. Ryan would go mad—despite his success we were constantly teetering on the brink of brokeness—but I’d worry about that later. For the moment I was happy enough sitting on this step eating sweets.

Hold on! Range Rover Man was on the move. He strode over to me, his open overcoat flying. “How do you feel now?” he asked.

“Great.” Because I did. Shock, adrenaline, one of those things.

“Can I have your phone number?”

I laughed in his face. “No!” What kind of creep was he, that he tried to pick up women at the scene of a traffic accident? “Anyway, I’m married!”

“For the insurance . . .”

“Oh.” God. The shame, the shame. “Okay.”

•••

So let’s look at the karmic fallout from my good deed—three cars, all of them damaged, one wounded forehead, much irateness, shouting, raised blood pressure, financial worry and deep, deep blush-making humiliation. Bad, bad, all very bad.

Friday, 30 May

14:49

You know, if you glanced up at my window right now, you’d think to yourself, “Look at that woman. Look at the diligent way she’s sitting upright at her desk. Look at the assiduous way her hands are poised over her keyboard. She’s obviously working very hard . . . hold on . . . is that Stella Sweeney?! Back in Ireland? Writing a new book?! I’d heard she was all washed up!”

Yes, I am Stella Sweeney. Yes, I am (much to my disappointment, but we won't get into it now) back in Ireland. Yes, I am writing a new book. Yes, I am all washed up.

But I won't be all washed up for long. No indeed. Because I'm working. You only have to look at me here at my desk! Yes, I'm working.

...Except I'm not. Looking like you're working isn't quite the same thing as actually working. I haven't typed a single word. I can think of nothing to say.

A small smile plays about my lips, though. Just in case you're looking in. Being in the public eye does that to a person. You have to look smiley and act nice all the time, or else people will say, "The fame went to her head. And it's not like she was any good in the first place."

I'll have to get curtains, I decide. I won't be able to sustain this smiling business. Already my face is hurting and I've only been sitting here for fifteen minutes. Twelve, actually. How slow the time is going!

I type one word. "Ass." It doesn't further my case, but it feels nice to write something.

"Begin at the beginning," Phyllis had told me, that terrible day in her office in New York, a few months ago. "Do an introduction. Remind people of who you are."

"Have they forgotten already?"

"Sure."

I'd never liked Phyllis—she was a terrifying little bulldog of a creature. But I wasn't supposed to like her—she was my agent, not my friend.

The first time I'd met her she'd waved my book in the air and said, "We could go a long way with this. Drop ten pounds and you've got yourself an agent."

I'd cut out the carbs and dropped five of the stipulated ten pounds, then there was a sit-down where she was persuaded to settle for seven pounds and me wearing Spanx whenever I was on TV.

And Phyllis was right: we did go a long way with that book. A long way up, then a long way sideways, then a long way off the map. So far off the map that I'm sitting here at a desk in my small house in the Dublin suburb of Ferrytown, which I thought I'd escaped forever, trying to write another book.

Okay, I'll write my introduction.

Name: Stella Sweeney.

Age: forty-one and a quarter.

Height: average.

Hair: long, curly and blond-ish.

Recent life events: dramatic.

No, that won't do; it's too bare. It needs to be more chatty, more lyrical. I'll try again.

Hello, there! Stella Sweeney here. Slim, thirty-eight-year-old Stella Sweeney. I know you need no reminding of who I am but, just in case, I wrote the international best-selling inspirational book *One Blink at a Time*. I was on talk shows and everything. They worked me to the bone on several book tours that took in thirty-four U.S. cities (if you count Minneapolis–St. Paul as two places). I flew in a private plane (once). Everything was lovely, absolutely lovely, except for the bits that were horrible. Living the dream, I was! Except for when I wasn't . . . But the wheel of fate has turned again and I find myself in very different, more humbling circumstances. Adjusting to the latest twist my life has taken has been painful but ultimately rewarding. Inspired by my new wisdom, not to mention the fact that I'm skint.

No, bad idea to mention the skintness, I'd better take that out. I hit the delete key until all mention of money has disappeared, then start typing again.

Inspired by my new wisdom, I'm trying to write a new book. I've no idea what it's about but I'm hoping if I throw enough words onto a screen, I'll be able to cobble something together. Something even more inspirational than *One Blink at a Time*!

That's grand. That'll do. Okay, maybe that second-last sentence needs to be tidied up, but, fundamentally, I'm out of the traps. Fair play to me. As a reward, I'll just take a quick look on Twitter . . .

•••

...Amazing how you can lose three hours just like that. I emerge from my Twitter hole, dazed to find myself still at my desk, still in my tiny "office" (i.e., spare bedroom) in my old house in Ferrytown. In Twitterland we were having a great old chat about summer having finally arrived. Every time it seemed like the discussion might be about to taper off, someone new came in and reignited the whole thing. We discussed fake tan, cos lettuce, shameful feet . . . It was fecking fantastic. FANTASTIC!

I'm feeling great! I remember reading somewhere that the chemicals produced in the brain by a lengthy Twitter session are similar to those produced by cocaine.

Abruptly my bubble pops and I'm faced with the fairy-dust-free facts: I wrote ten sentences today. That's not enough.

I will work now. I will, I will, I will. If I don't I'll have to punish myself by disabling the Internet on this computer . . .

Is that Jeffrey I hear?

It is! In he comes, slamming the front door and throwing his wretched yoga mat onto the hall floor. I can sense every move that yoga mat makes. I'm always aware of it, the way you are when you hate something. It hates me too. It's like we're in a battle over ownership of Jeffrey.

I jump up to say hello even though Jeffrey hates me almost as much as his yoga mat does. He's hated me for ages now. About five years, give or take, basically since the moment he hit thirteen.

I'd thought it was girls who were meant to be nightmare teenagers and that boys simply went mute for the duration. But Betsy wasn't bad at all and Jeffrey has been full of . . . well . . . angst. In fairness, by dint of having me as his mother, he's had a roller coaster of a time of it, so much so that when he was fifteen he asked to be put up for adoption.

However, I'm delighted that I can stop pretending to work for a little while, and I run down the stairs.

“Sweetheart!” I try to act like the hostility between us doesn’t exist.

There he is, six feet tall, as thin as a pipe cleaner and with an Adam’s apple as big as a muffin. He looks exactly like his father did at that age.

I sense extra animosity from him today.

“What?” I ask.

Without looking at me he says, “Get your hair cut.”

“Why?”

“Just do. You’re too old to have it that long.”

“What’s going on?”

“From the back you look . . . different.”

I coax the story out of him. It transpires that this morning, he was “down the town” with one of his yoga friends. Outside the Pound Shop the friend had spotted me from the rear and made admiring noises and Jeffrey had said, from bloodless lips, “That’s my mom. She’s forty-one and a quarter.”

I deduce that both of them were badly shaken by the experience.

Maybe I should be flattered, but the thing is I know I’m not too bad from the back. The front, however, is not so good. I’m that strange shape where any weight I put on goes straight to my stomach. Even as a teenager, when the other girls were worried sick about the size of their asses and the width of their thighs, I’d kept an anxious eye on my midsection. I knew it had the potential to go rogue and my life has been one long battle to contain it.

Jeffrey swings a shopping bag of peppers at me, with what can only be called aggression. (“He menaced me with capsicums, Your Honor.”) I sigh inwardly. I know what’s coming. He wants to cook. Again. This is a fairly new departure and, against all evidence to the contrary, he thinks he’s brilliant at it. As he searches for his niche in life, he combines risibly mismatched ingredients and makes me eat the results. Rabbit and mango stew, that’s what we had last night.

“I’m cooking dinner.” He dead-eyes me as he waits for me to cry.

“Grand,” I say, brightly.

That means we’ll get fed around midnight. Just as well I have a stash of Jaffa Cakes in my bedroom, so big it almost covers an entire wall.

19:41

I tiptoe into the kitchen, to find Jeffrey staring motionless at a tin of pineapple, as if it were a chessboard and he were a Grand Master, planning his next move.

“Jeffrey . . .”

Tonelessly, he says, “I’m concentrating. Or rather, I was.”

“Do I have time to visit Mum and Dad before dinner?” See what I did there? I didn’t just say, “What time will I be getting fed?” I made it not about me, but about his grandparents, which hopefully will soften his angry heart.

“I don’t know.”

“I’m just going out for an hour.”

“Dinner will be ready by then.”

It won’t be. He’s keeping me trapped. I’ll have to confront this passive-aggressive warfare at some stage, but I’m feeling so defeated by my pointless day and my pointless life that, right now, I’m not able.

“Okay . . .”

“Please don’t come in here while I’m working.”

I go back upstairs and wish I could tweet “#Working #MyHole” but some of his friends follow me on Twitter. Besides, any time I send a tweet, it reminds people that I’m nobody now and that it’s time to unfollow me. That is a true measurable fact which I sometimes test, just in case I’m not feeling like enough of a loser.

In fairness, I was never Lady Gaga with her millions and millions of followers, but, in my own small way, I was once a Twitter presence.

Denied an outlet for my gloom, I remove a brick from my Jaffa Cake wall and lie on my bed and eat many of the little round discs of chocolate-and-orange happiness. So many that I can’t tell you because I made a deliberate decision to not count. Plenty, though. Rest assured of that.

Tomorrow will be different, I tell myself. Tomorrow will have to be different. There will be lots of writing and lots of productivity and no Jaffa Cakes. I will not be a woman who lies on her bed, her chest covered with spongy crumbs.

An hour and a half later, still a dinner-free woman, I hear a car door slam and feel someone hurrying up our little path. In this cardboard house, you cannot just hear, but you can feel everything that happens within a fifty-meter radius.

“Dad’s here.” There is alarm in Jeffrey’s voice. “He looks a bit mental.”

The doorbell begins to ring frantically. I hurry down the stairs and open the door and there is Ryan. Jeffrey is right: he does look a bit mental.

Ryan pushes past me into the hall and, with zeal that borders on the manic, says, “Stella, Jeffrey, I’ve got some fantastic news!”

• • •

Let me tell you about my ex-husband, Ryan. He might put things differently, which he’s welcome to do, but as this is my story, you’re getting my version.

We got together when I was nineteen and he was twenty-one and he had notions about being an artist. Because he was very good at drawing dogs and because I knew nothing about art, I thought he was highly talented. He was accepted into art college where, to our mutual dismay, he showed no signs of being the breakout star of his generation. We used to have long talks, late into the night, when he'd tell me all the different ways his tutors were cretins and I'd stroke his hands and agree with him.

After four years he graduated with a mediocre degree and began painting for a living. But no one bought his canvases, so he decided that painting was over. He played around with different media—film, graffiti, dead budgies in formaldehyde—but a year passed and nothing took off. Ultimately a pragmatic man, Ryan faced facts: he didn't like being perpetually penniless. He wasn't cut out for this starving-in-a-garret business that seems to be the stock-in-trade of most artists. Besides, he had acquired a wife (me) and a young daughter, Betsy. He needed to get a job. But not just any old job. After all, he was, despite everything, an artist.

Around this time, my dad's glamorous sister, Auntie Jeanette, came into a few quid and decided to spend it on something she'd coveted since she was a little girl—a beautiful bathroom. She wanted something—said with an airy wave of her hand—“fabulous.” Jeanette’s poor husband, Uncle Peter, who had spent the previous twenty years desperately trying to provide the glamour that Jeanette so clearly craved, asked, “What sort of fabulous?” But Jeanette couldn’t actually say, “Just, you know, fabulous.”

Peter (he later admitted this to my dad) had a dreadful moment when he thought he might start sobbing and never stop, then he was saved from such humiliation by a brainwave. “Why don’t we ask Stella to ask Ryan?” he said. “He’s artistic.”

Ryan was mortified to be consulted on such a mundane project and he told me to tell Auntie Jeanette that she could feck off, that he was an artist and that artists didn’t “bother their barney” on the placement of washbasins. But I hate confrontation and I was afraid of causing a family rift, so I couched Ryan’s refusal in vaguer terms. So vague that an armload of bathroom brochures were dropped off for Ryan’s perusal.

They sat on our small kitchen table for over a week. Now and again I’d pick one up and say, “God, that’s gorgeous,” and, “Would you look at that? So imaginative.”

You see, I was keeping our little family afloat by working as a beautician, and I’d have been very grateful if Ryan had started bringing in some money. But Ryan refused to take the bait. Until one night he began to leaf through the pages and suddenly he was engaged. He picked up a pencil and some graph paper and within no time he was applying himself with vigor. “She wants fabulous,” he muttered. “I’ll give her fabulous.”

Over the following days and weeks he labored on layout, he spent hours scouring Buy and Sell (these were pre-eBay days) and he jumped out of bed in the middle of the night, his artistic head fizzing with artistic ideas.

News of Ryan’s diligence began to spread through my family and people were impressed. My dad, who had never been keen on Ryan, reluctantly began to revise his opinion. He stopped saying, “Ryan Sweeney an artist? Piss artist, more like!”

The result—and everyone was agreed on this, even Dad, a skeptical, working-class man—was indeed fabulous: Ryan had created a mini Studio 54. As he’d been born in Dublin in 1971, he’d never had the honor of visiting the iconic nightclub, so he had to base his design on photos and anecdotal evidence. He even wrote to Bianca Jagger. (She didn’t reply but, still, it shows the lengths he was prepared to go to.)

As soon as you put a foot into the bathroom, the floor lit up and Donna Summer’s “Love to Love You, Baby” began to play softly. Natural light was banished and replaced with an ambient gold glow. The

cabinets—and there were plenty of them because Auntie Jeanette had a lot of stuff—were coated with glitter. Andy Warhol’s Marilyn was recreated in eight thousand tiny mosaic tiles and covered an entire wall. The bath was egg-shaped and black. The toilet was housed in an adorable little black lacquer cubicle. The makeup station had enough theatrical-style lightbulbs to power the whole of Ferrytown (Jeanette had stipulated “brutal” lighting; she was proud of her skill in blending foundations and concealer but she couldn’t do it in poor visibility).

When, with a final flourish, Ryan hung a small glitter ball from the ceiling, he knew that the masterpiece was complete.

It could have been tacky, it skirted within a millimeter of being kitsch, but it was—as stipulated in the brief—“fabulous.” Auntie Jeanette issued invitations to family and friends for the Grand Opening and the dress code was Disco. As a little joke, Ryan purchased a one-ounce bag of fenugreek from the Ferrytown health-food shop and chopped it into lines on the elegant hand basin. Everyone thought that was a “gas.” (Except Dad. “There’s nothing funny about drugs. Even pretend ones.”)

The mood was festive. Everyone, young and old, in their disco-est of clothes, crowded in and danced on the small flashing floor. I, overjoyed that (a) a family rift had been averted and (b) that Ryan had done some paying work, was probably the happiest person there. I wore a pair of vintage Pucci palazzo pants and a matching tunic that I’d found in the Help the Aged shop and had washed seven times, and my hair was blow-dried into a Farrah flick by a hairdresser pal in exchange for a manicure. “You look beautiful,” Ryan told me. “So do you,” I replied, perky as you please. I meant it too because, let’s face it, suddenly becoming a wage earner would add luster to the most ordinary-looking of men. (Not that Ryan was ordinary-looking. If he’d washed his hair more often, he could have been dangerous.) All in all, it was a very happy day.

Suddenly Ryan had a career. Not the one he’d wanted, no, but one he was very good at. He followed his Studio 54 triumph by going in a different direction—he created a bathroom that was a green-filtered, peaceful, forest-style retreat. Mosaics of trees covered three walls and real ferns climbed the fourth. The window was replaced with green glass and the soundtrack was of birdcalls. For the final reveal to the client Ryan scattered pine cones around the place. (His original plan had been to source a squirrel but, despite Caleb, his electrician, and Drugi, his tiler, spending most of a morning shaking nuts and shouting, “Here, squirrely!” in Crone Woods, they weren’t able to catch one.)

Hot on the heels of the forest bathroom came the project that got Ryan his first magazine coverage—the Jewel Box. It was a wonderland of mirrors, Swarovski tiles and claret-colored velvet-effect (but water-resistant) wallpaper. The cabinet knobs were Bohemian crystal, the bath was made of silver-flecked glass and a Murano chandelier hung from the ceiling. The soundtrack (Ryan’s music was fast becoming his unique selling point) was the “Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy” and every time you turned the taps on, a tiny mechanical ballerina rotated gracefully.

Working with a small, trusted team, Ryan Sweeney became the go-to man for amazing bathrooms. He was imaginative, painstaking and ferociously expensive.

Life was good. There was the odd hiccup—when Betsy was three months old, I got pregnant with Jeffrey. But, thanks to Ryan’s success, we were able to buy a newly built, three-bedroom house, big enough for the four of us.

Time passed. Ryan made money, he made beautiful bathrooms, he made people—mostly women—happy. At the end of every project, Ryan’s client exclaimed, “You’re an artist!” They meant it and Ryan knew it, but he was the wrong sort of artist: he wanted to be Damien Hirst. He wanted to be famous and notorious, he wanted people on late-night arty-discussion shows to shout at each other about him, he wanted some people

to say he was a fake. Well, he didn't. He wanted everyone to say he was a genius, but the best sort of genius generates controversy so he was prepared to put up with the occasional slagging.

Nevertheless, all was well until one day in 2010, when a tragedy befell him. Strictly speaking, the tragedy was mine. But artists, even unfulfilled ones, have a habit of making everything about themselves. The tragedy, a long-running one, didn't bring everyone together, because life isn't a soap opera. The tragedy ended with Ryan and me splitting up.

Almost immediately, strange, exciting things began to happen to me—which we'll get to. All you need to know for now is that Betsy, Jeffrey and I moved to live in New York.

Ryan stayed in Dublin in the house that we'd bought as an investment in the midnoughties when everyone in Ireland was tying up their futures in second properties. (I got our original starter home in the divorce. Even when I was living in a ten-room duplex on the Upper West Side, I hung on to it—I never trusted that my new circumstances would last. I was always afraid of boomeranging back to poverty.)

Ryan had girlfriends—once he'd started washing his hair more regularly, there was no shortage. He had his work, he had a nice car and a motorbike—he wanted for nothing. But he wanted for everything: he never felt fulfilled. The gnawing pain of incompleteness sometimes went underground but it always returned.

• • •

And now here he is, standing wild-eyed in my hall, myself and Jeffrey looking at him in alarm. “It's happened, it's finally happened!” Ryan says. “My big artistic idea!”

“Come in and sit down,” I say. “Jeffrey, put the kettle on.”

Babbling unstoppably, Ryan follows me into the front room, telling me what has happened. “It started about a year ago . . .”

We sit facing each other while Ryan describes his breakthrough. A stirring had started deep down in him and, over the course of a year, swam its way upward to consciousness. It visited him in vague forms in his dreams, in flashseconds between thoughts, and, this very afternoon, his brilliant idea finally broke the surface. It had taken nearly twenty years of toiling with high-grade Italian sanitaryware for his genius to burst into bloom but finally it had.

“And?” I prompt.

“I'm calling it Project Karma: I'm going to give away everything I own. Every single thing. My CDs, my clothes, all my money. Every television, every grain of rice, every holiday photograph. My car, my motorbike, my house—”

Jeffrey stares in disgust. “You stupid asshole.”

All credit to him, Jeffrey seems to hate Ryan as much as he hates me. He's an equal opportunities hater. He could have done that thing that children of separated couples sometimes do, of playing the parents against each other, of pretending to have favorites, but in all honesty you'd have been hard-pressed to know which one of us he hated the most.

“You'll have nowhere to live!” Jeffrey says.

“Wrong!” Ryan's eyes are sparkling (but the wrong sort of sparkling, a scary form). “Karma will see me

right.”

“But what if it doesn’t?” I feel horribly uneasy. I don’t trust karma, not any more. Once upon a time, something very bad happened to me. As a direct result of that very bad thing, something very, very good happened. I was a big believer in karma at that point. However, as a direct result of that very, very good thing, a very bad thing happened. Then another bad thing. I am currently due an upswing in my karma cycle, but it doesn’t seem to be happening. Frankly, I’ve had it with karma.

And on a more practical level, I am afraid that if Ryan has no money I’ll have to give him some and I have almost none myself.

“I will prove that karma exists,” Ryan says. “I’m creating Spiritual Art.”

“Can I have your house?” Jeffrey asks.

Ryan seems startled. He hasn’t considered such a request. “Ah no. No.” As he speaks, he becomes more convinced. “Definitely not. If I gave it to you, it might look like I wasn’t doing it for real.”

“Can I have your car?”

“No.”

“Can I have anything?”

“No.”

“Fuck you very much.”

“Jeffrey, don’t,” I say.

Ryan is so excited he barely notices Jeffrey’s contempt. “I’ll blog about it, day by day, second by second. It’ll be an artistic triumph.”

“I think this sort of thing has already been done.” A memory of something, somewhere, is flickering.

“Don’t,” Ryan says. “Stella, don’t undermine me. You’ve had your fifteen minutes, let me have mine.”

“But—”

“No, Stella.” He’s all but shouting. “It should have been me. I’m the one who’s meant to be famous. Not you—me! You’re the woman who stole my life!”

This is a familiar conversational theme; Ryan refers to it almost daily.

Jeffrey is clicking away on his phone. “It has been done. I’m getting loads here. Listen to this: ‘The man who gave away everything he possessed.’ Here’s another one, ‘An Austrian millionaire is planning to give away all his money and possessions.’”

“Ryan,” I say, tentatively, keen to avoid triggering another rant from him. “Could you be . . . depressed?”

“Do I seem depressed?”

“You seem insane.”

Even before he speaks, I know he's going to say, "I've never been saner." Sure enough, Ryan obliges.

"I need you to help me, Stella," he says. "I need publicity."

"You're never out of the magazines."

"Home decor magazines." Ryan dismisses them with contempt. "They're no good. You're matey with the mainstream media."

"Not anymore."

"Ah, you are. A lot of residual affection for you. Even if it's all gone to shit."

"How are you going to make money from this?" Jeffrey asks.

"Art isn't about making money."

Jeffrey mutters something. I catch the word "knobhead."

•••

After Ryan leaves, Jeffrey and I look at each other.

"Say something," Jeffrey says.

"He won't go through with it."

"You think?"

"I think."

22:00

Jeffrey and I are sitting in front of the telly eating our pepper, pineapple and sausage stew. I'm trying hard to force down a few mouthfuls—these dinners of Jeffrey's count as Cruel and Unusual Punishment—and Jeffrey has his face in his phone. Suddenly he says, "Fuck." It's the first word we've exchanged in a while.

"What?"

"Dad. He's issued a Mission Statement . . . and . . ." Speedy clicking. ". . . his first video blog. And he's started a countdown to Day Zero. It's Monday week, ten days' time."

Project Karma is a go.

Keep breathing.

Extract from One Blink at a Time

Let me tell you about the tragedy that befell me nearly four years ago. There I was, being thirty-seven and

the mother of a fifteen-year-old girl and a fourteen-year-old boy and the wife of a successful but creatively unfulfilled bathroom designer. I was working with my younger sister, Karen (but really for my younger sister, Karen), and generally I was being very normal—life was having its ups and downs but nothing to get excited about—when, one evening, the tips of the fingers on my left hand started to tingle. By bedtime, my right hand was also tingling. Maybe it's a sign of how dull everything was that I found it pleasant, like having space dust popping under my skin.

Sometime during the night, I half woke and noticed that now my feet were tingling as well. Lovely, I thought, dreamily, space-dust feet too. Maybe in the morning I'd be tingling everywhere and wouldn't that be nice.

When the alarm went off at 7 a.m., I felt knackered, but that was par for the course. I felt knackered every morning—after all, I was very normal. But this particular morning, it was a different sort of tiredness: a bad, heavy, made-of-lead tiredness.

“Get up,” I said to Ryan, then I stumbled down the stairs—and in retrospect, I probably really was stumbling—and started boiling kettles and throwing boxes of cereal onto the table, then I went upstairs to rouse (i.e., shout at) my children.

I went back downstairs and took a swig of tea, but to my surprise it tasted strange and metallic. I stared accusingly at the stainless-steel kettle—clearly bits of it had infiltrated my tea. It had been such a good friend all these years, why had it suddenly turned on me?

Giving it another wounded look, I started on Jeffrey's special toast, which was simply ordinary toast without the butter—he had a “thing” about butter, he said it was slimy—but my hands felt fumbly and numb, and the enjoyable tingling had stopped.

I took a mouthful of orange juice, then spat it out and yelped.

“What?” Ryan had appeared. He was never good in the mornings. He was never good in the evenings either, come to think of it. He might have been in top form in the middle of the day, but I never got to see him then, so I couldn't comment.

“The orange juice,” I said. “It burned me.”

“Burned you? It's orange juice; it's cold.”

“It burned my tongue. My mouth.”

“Why are you talking like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like . . . your tongue is swollen.” He grabbed my glass and took a swig, and said, “There's nothing wrong with that orange juice.”

I tried another sip. It burned me again.

Jeffrey materialized at my side and said accusingly, “Did you put butter on this toast?”

“No.”

We played this game every morning.

“You’ve put butter on it,” he said. “I can’t eat it.”

“Okay.”

He looked at me in surprise.

“Give him some money,” I ordered Ryan.

“Why?”

“So he can buy himself something for breakfast.”

Startled, Ryan handed over a fiver and, startled, Jeffrey took it.

“I’m off,” Ryan said.

“Grand. Bye. Okay, kids, get your stuff.” Normally I ran through a checklist as long as my arm for all their extracurricular activities—swimming, hockey, rugby, the school orchestra—but today I didn’t bother. Sure enough, about ten minutes into the car journey, Jeffrey said, “I forgot my banjo.”

There was no way I was turning around and going back to get it. “You’ll be fine,” I said. “You can manage without it for one day.”

A blanket of stunned silence fell in the car.

At the school gate dozens of privileged, cosmopolitan teenagers were milling in. It was one of the greatest sources of pride in my life that Betsy and Jeffrey were pupils at Quartley Daily, a non-denominational, fee-paying school, which aimed to educate “the whole child.” My guilty pleasure was to watch them as they traipsed in, in their uniforms, both of them tall and a little gawky, Betsy’s blond curls swinging in a ponytail and Jeffrey’s dark hair sticking up in tufts. I always took a moment to watch them merge with the other kids (some of them the offspring of diplomats—the lightbulb of my pride glowed extra bright at that bit, but obviously I kept it to myself; the only person I ever admitted it to was Ryan). But today I didn’t hang around. My focus was on home, where I was hoping for a quick lie-down before going to work.

As soon as I let myself into the house, I was overtaken by a wave of weakness so powerful I had to lie down in the hall. With the side of my face pressed against the cold floorboards, I knew I couldn’t go to work. This was maybe the first sick day of my life. Even with a hangover I’d always shown up; the work ethic went deep in me.

I rang Karen and my fingers could barely work the phone. “I’ve the flu,” I said.

“You haven’t the flu,” she said. “Everyone says they’ve the flu when they just have a cold. Believe me, if you had the flu, you’d know all about it.”

“I do know all about it,” I said. “I’ve the flu.”

“Are you putting on that funny voice so I’ll believe you?”

“Really. I’ve the flu.”

“Tongue flu, is it?”

“I’m sick, Karen, I swear to God. I’ll be in tomorrow.”

I crawled up the stairs, stumbled gratefully into bed, set my phone for 3 p.m. and fell into a deep sleep.

I woke dry-mouthed and disoriented and when I reached for a swig of water, I couldn’t swallow it. I focused hard on waking myself up and swallowing the water, but nothing happened: I really couldn’t swallow it. I had to spit it back into the glass.

Then I realized that, even without the water in my mouth, I couldn’t swallow. The muscles at the back of my throat just wouldn’t work. I concentrated hard on them, trying to ignore the rising panic, but nothing happened. I couldn’t swallow. I actually, really, couldn’t swallow.

Scared, I rang Ryan. “There’s something wrong with me. I can’t swallow.”

“Have a Strepsil and take some Panadol.”

“I don’t mean my throat is sore. I mean I can’t swallow.”

He sounded bemused. “But everyone can swallow.”

“I can’t. My throat won’t work.”

“Your voice sounds funny.”

“Can you come home?”

“I’m on a site visit. In Carlow. It’ll take a couple of hours. Why don’t you go to the doctor?”

“Okay. See you later.” Then I tried to stand up and my legs wouldn’t work.

• • •

When Ryan came home and saw the state of me, he was gratifyingly contrite. “I didn’t realize . . . Can you walk?”

“No.”

“And you still can’t swallow? Christ. I think we should ring an ambulance. Should we ring an ambulance?”

“Okay.”

“Really? It’s that bad?”

“How do I know? It might be.”

A while later an ambulance arrived, with men who strapped me to a stretcher. Leaving my bedroom, I had a stab of sudden shocking grief, as if I had a premonition that it would be a long, long time before I saw it

again.

Watched by Betsy, Jeffrey and my mum, who were standing at the front door, silent and looking scared, I was loaded into the van.

“We could be gone awhile,” Ryan told them. “You know what A&E is like. We’ll probably be hanging around for hours.”

But I was a priority case. Within an hour of my arrival a doctor appeared and said, “So? Muscular weakness?”

“Yes.” My speech had degenerated so much that the word emerged like a slurred grunt.

“Talk properly,” Ryan said.

“I’m trying.”

“This the best you can do?” The doctor seemed interested.

I tried to nod and found that I couldn’t.

“Can you squeeze that?” The doctor gave me a pen.

We all watched as the pen fell from my clumsy fingers.

“How about the other hand? No? Can you raise your arm? Flex your foot? Wriggle your toes? No?”

“Of course you can,” Ryan said to me. “She can,” he repeated, but the doctor had turned to talk to someone else in a white coat. I caught the occasional phrase: “a fast-moving paralysis,” “respiratory function.”

“What’s wrong with her?” There was panic in Ryan’s voice.

“Too soon to say but all of her muscles are shutting down.”

“Can’t you do something?” Ryan beseeched.

The doctor was gone, being dragged across the room to another crisis.

“Come back!” Ryan ordered. “You can’t just say that and then not—”

“Excuse me.” A nurse pushing a pole ushered Ryan out of her way. To me, she said, “Just get you on a drip. If you can’t swallow, you’ll get dehydrated.”

Her search for a vein hurt, but not as much as what happened next: a catheter was put into me.

“Why?” I asked.

“Because you can’t get to the toilet on your own. And just in case your kidneys stop working.”

“Am I . . . going to die?”

“What? What are you saying? No, of course you’re not.”

“How do you know? Why am I speaking so funny?”

“What?”

Another nurse showed up, wheeling a machine. She put a mask over my face. “Breathe into that, good woman. I just want to measure your . . .” She watched yellow digital figures on the screen. “Breathe, I said.”

I was. Well, I was trying to.

To my surprise, the nurse started speaking loudly, almost shouting—numbers and codes—and suddenly I was on the move, being whizzed on a wheely bed through wards and corridors, on my way to intensive care. Everything was happening really fast. I tried to ask what was going on, but no sounds came out. Ryan was running beside me and he was trying to decipher the medical language. “I think it’s your lungs,” he said. “I think they’re shutting down. Breathe, Stella, for God’s sake, breathe! Do it for the kids if you won’t do it for me!”

Just as my lungs gave up, a hole was cut in my throat—a tracheotomy—and a tube was shoved down into me and attached to a ventilator.

• • •

I was put in a bed in the intensive care ward; countless tubes ran in and out of my body. I could see and hear and I knew exactly what was happening to me. But, except for being able to blink my eyes, I couldn’t move. I couldn’t swallow, or talk, or wee, or breathe. When the last vestiges of movement left my hands, I had no way of communicating.

I was buried alive in my own body.

As tragedies go, it’s quite a good one, no?

Saturday, 31 May

06:00

It’s Saturday but my alarm goes off at 6 a.m. I have agreed to a writing routine with myself: every day I will “rise” early, “ablute” in cold water and be as disciplined as a monk. Diligence will be my watchword. But I’m knackered. Last night, the news that Ryan really was going ahead with his fool project meant it was gone midnight before I began my Sleep Coaxing Routine.

For most of my adult life, my sleep has been a shy, unpredictable creature, who has to be shown how much it is welcome before it will appear. There are many ways I demonstrate my love—I drink mint tea, eat yogurt, swallow a fistful of Kalms, have a bath in sandalwood oil, spray my pillow with lavender mist, read something very boring and listen to a CD of whales singing.

I was still tossing and turning at 1 a.m. and finally—God knows at what time—I fell asleep and dreamed about Ned Mount, from the telly. We were somewhere sunny and outdoors—it could have been in Wicklow. We were sitting at a wooden picnic table and he was trying to give me a big box containing a water filter. “Please take it,” he said. “I’ve no use for it. I only drink Evian.”

I knew it wasn't true about him only drinking Evian; he was just saying it because he wanted me to have the water filter. I was touched by his generosity, even though he'd got the filter for free, from a PR company.

Now it's 6:00 a.m. and I'm supposed to be getting up but I'm too tired, so I go back to sleep and wake again at 8:45.

Down in the kitchen, Jeffrey watches in silent disapproval as I make coffee and throw granola into a bowl. Yes, in my heart I, too, know that granola is, in fact, many small pieces of biscuit, with the odd "healthy" cranberry and hazelnut thrown in. But it's an officially designated "Breakfast Food"; therefore, I am entitled to eat it guilt free.

I hurry away upstairs to escape my son's judgment and I grab my iPad, get back into bed and check on Ryan. No more posts from him since last night. Thank Christ. But it's still horrifying.

His video Mission Statement puts me in mind of a suicide-bomber thing—the rehearsed delivery, the zeal; he even sort of looks like one, with his brown eyes, dark hair and neat beard. "My name is Ryan Sweeney and I'm a spiritual artist. You and I are about to embark on a unique undertaking. I'm giving away everything I possess. Every single possession! Together we'll watch as the universe provides for me. Project Karma!" He actually raises a clenched fist. I swallow hard. All we're missing is an "Allah Akbar."

I watch it four more times and think, You knob.

But the video has been viewed only twelve times and that was by Jeffrey and me. Nobody else has picked up on this. Maybe Ryan will change his mind. Soon. Before any damage is done. Maybe this video will be taken down in a moment. Maybe the whole thing will just go away . . .

I contemplate ringing him, but, on balance, I'd prefer to live in hope. Until recently I never knew I had such a talent for denial. I take a moment to praise myself: I really am very gifted at it. Very!

While I'm here online, I decide to see how things are with Gilda—a couple of clicks is all it will take. Then I manage to force myself to stop and in my head I say the mantra for her: May you be well, may you be happy, may you be free from suffering.

Moving on, it's time for my pill—the likelihood of me getting pregnant at the moment is nonexistent, but I'm only forty-one and a quarter and I am still very much in the game.

God, I'd better do some work!

I jump out of bed and prepare to ablute—"ablute" sounds so much more admirable than "shower." I don't want to ablute—or, indeed, shower—but standards must be maintained. I can't put clothes on over my unablated body, I simply can't. It would be the beginning of the end. But until I get curtains I can't sit at my desk in my night attire for any interested passersby to see.

I ablute in cold water. Because Jeffrey has already had a shower and all the hot water is gone.

For God's sake! My clothes! In one of his many attempts to hurt me, Jeffrey has taken to doing his own laundry—which I have to say isn't at all hurtful—but he's accidentally washed some of my stuff and he's overdried them to the point where they're as stiff as cardboard. And he's shrunk them. I tug on a pair of jeans but I can't close the top button.

I try another pair and it's the same story. I'll just live with it for the moment. My one other pair of jeans is in the wash basket and I'd better make sure Jeffrey doesn't get his hands on them.

I sit at my desk, I fix a small smile to my face and I read the inspirational words I will read every morning until this book is written. They're from Phyllis, my agent, and I'd transcribed them exactly as she'd barked them at me that day in her office two months ago. "You were rich, successful and in love," she'd said. "Now? Your career has tanked and I don't know what's up with that man of yours but it's not looking so good! You've a lot of material there!"

I pause in my reading, to let the words sink in, as you would with a prayer. I'd felt sick then and I feel sick now. Phyllis had shrugged. "You want more? Your teenage son hates you. Your daughter is wasting her life. You're the wrong side of forty. Menopause is racing toward you down the track. How much better does this get?"

I'd moved my lips but no words had come out.

"You were wise once," Phyllis had said. "Whatever you wrote in One Blink at a Time, it touched people. Try it again, with these new challenges. Send me the book when it's done." She was on her feet and trying to move me toward the door. "I need you out of here. I've got clients to see."

In desperation, I'd clung to my chair. "Phyllis?" I was pleading. "Do you believe in me?"

"You want self-esteem? Go to a shrink."

I was wise once, I remind myself, my hands hovering over my keyboard, I can be wise again. With vigor, I type the word "Ass."

12:17

I'm distracted from my scribing by my phone ringing. I shouldn't even have it in the room, not if I'm serious about doing uninterrupted work, but it's an imperfect universe we live in, what can we do? I check the caller; it's my sister, Karen.

"Come over to Wolfe Tone Terrace," she says.

"Why?" Wolfe Tone Terrace is where my parents live. "I'm working."

She makes scoffing noises. "You work for yourself. You can stop anytime you like. Who's going to sack you?"

I swear to God, no one has any respect for me. Not for my writing, not for my time, not for my circumstances.

"Okay," I say. "I'll be there in ten minutes."

I throw my phone in my bag and vow, afresh, that I will be disciplined soon. Very soon. Tomorrow.

In the hall I meet Jeffrey.

"Where are you going?" he asks.

"To Granny and Grandad's. Where are you going?" Like it isn't obvious, the defiant way he and his yoga mat are staring me down, like a couple on the verge of eloping. We love each other, they seem to be saying. Whataya going to do about it?

“Yoga? Again?”

He looks at me, all sneery-faced. “Yeah.”

“Great. Good . . . er . . .”

I am uneasy. Shouldn’t he be going out and getting drunk and into fights like a normal eighteen-year-old boy?

I have failed him as a mother.

• • •

Mum and Dad live in a quiet side street in a small terraced house that they bought from the council a long time ago.

Mum opens the front door and greets me by saying, “Why in the name of God are you wearing boots?”

“Aaaahh . . .”

She eyes my jeans. “Aren’t you roasting?”

It was early March when I arrived in Ireland and since then I’ve had the same three pairs of jeans on rotation. There’s been so much on my mind that clothes were at the bottom of my list.

But the season has gone ahead and bloody well changed and suddenly I need sandals and floaty pastel garments.

Mum, a short, round creature, has always felt the cold but even she’s going about without her cardigan.

“So what’s happening here?” I ask.

I can hear a whirring noise, then Karen’s eldest child, Clark, bursts past Mum and yells at me, “They got a stairlift! For Grandad’s bad back!”

I can see now. A contraption has been fitted to the wall by the stairs and Karen is strapping herself into a seat with three-year-old Mathilde on her lap. Then she lifts a lever and the pair of them start their whirry ascent. A very slow whirry ascent. They wave at Mum, Clark and me and we wave back and the mood is celebratory.

Mum lowers her voice. “He says he won’t use it. Go in and sweet-talk him.”

I stand at the sitting-room door and stick my head into the tiny room. As always, Dad is sitting in his armchair, with a library book open on his lap. He radiates grumpiness, then he sees that it’s me and he becomes a little more cheery. “Ah, Stella, it’s you.”

“Are you coming for a go on the stairlift?”

“I’m not.”

“Ah, Dad.”

“Ah, Dad, my eye. I can climb the stairs on my own. I told her not to get it. I’m grand, and we haven’t the

money.”

He summons me closer. “Fear of death, that’s her problem. She thinks if she buys yokes like that, they’ll keep us alive. But when your number’s up, it’s up.”

“You’ve another thirty years in you,” I say, staunchly. Because he might have. He’s only seventy-two and people are living to be ancient. But not necessarily people like my parents.

From the age of sixteen Dad did a physical job, loading and unloading crates, in Ferrytown docks. That wrecks a person, much more than sitting at a desk does. He was twenty-two the first time a disc slipped in his back. He spent a long time—I don’t know, maybe eight weeks—immobile in his bed, on strong painkillers. Then he returned to work and eventually banjaxed himself again. He got injured countless times—it seemed to be a feature of my childhood that Dad was “sick again,” something that rolled around as regularly as Hallowe’en and Easter—but he was a fighter and he kept on working until he couldn’t any longer. At the age of fifty-four, they’d broken him beyond repair and that was the end of his working life. And his money-earning life.

These days, the docks have machines to do the unloading, which would have saved Dad’s back but would probably have meant he didn’t have a job at all.

“Please, Dad, do it for me. I’m your favorite child.”

“I’ve only got the two. C’mere . . .” He indicates the book on his lap. “Nabokov. The Original of Laura, it’s called. I’ll give it to you when I’m finished.”

“Stop trying to change the subject.” And please don’t make me read it.

It’s a curse being Dad’s “clever” child. He reads books the way other people take cold showers—they’re good for you, but you’re not expected to enjoy them. And he’s passed that way of thinking on to me: if I have fun with a book, I feel I’ve wasted my time.

Dad’s as thick as thieves with Joan, a woman who works in the local library and who seems to have adopted Dad as her project—no author is too obscure, no text too unreadable.

“It’s his final novel,” Dad says. “He told his wife to burn it but she didn’t. Think of what a loss to literature that would have been. Mind you, he’s a right dirty article . . .”

“Let’s go on the stairlift.” I’m keen to stop talking about Nabokov.

Slowly Dad gets to his feet. He’s a small man, short and sinewy. I offer him my arm and he slaps it away.

Out in the hall, Karen has returned to ground level and I study her clothes and hair with interest—in our unadorned states we look very similar so if I copy what she does, I can’t go wrong. She seems to be managing this warm-weather-transition thing with ease. Black skinny jeans with zips at the ankle, sky-high wedges and a pale gray T-shirt in some funny shrunken fabric. The whole effect looks like it cost a fortune but it probably didn’t because Karen is very clever that way, very good with money. Her nails are perfect nude ovals, her eyes are blue and framed with lush lashes and her blond hair—which in its product-free condition is as wild and curly as mine—has been captured and tamed into a sleek bun. She looks glossy but casual, relaxed but elegant. This is the way I must go.

I grab pretty little Mathilde. “C’mere till I squeeze you!” I say.

But she struggles and says, in high alarm, “Mummy!”

She’s a drip, that child. Five-year-old Clark is better. I’d say he probably has ADHD but at least he’s a bit of fun.

“Stella!” Karen plants a kiss on each of my cheeks. It’s an automatic thing with her. Then she remembers that it’s only me. “Sorry!”

Dad actually smiles. He’s amused by Karen’s aspirational ways and—though he wouldn’t admit it—a little bit proud of them. I used to be the success story of this family, but in recent months I’ve been stripped of my rank and the position has passed to my younger sister.

Karen is a “businesswoman”—she owns a beauty salon—and she looks every inch of it. She’s married to Enda, a quiet handsome man from a monied Tipperary family, who’s a superintendent in the Gardaí.

Poor Enda. When he started dating Karen, she was so brisk and sassy and pulled together that he mistook her for middle-class. Then, when he’d fallen in love with her and it was too late to back out, he was introduced to her family and discovered that she was an entirely different beast: working-class-made-good.

I’ll never forget that day. Poor polite Enda, sitting in my parents’ teeny-tiny front room, trying to balance a cup of tea in his giant lap and wondering if he’d ever arrested Dad.

Twelve years later we still laugh about it. Well, Karen and I do. Enda still doesn’t find it funny.

“Out of me road, Parvenue,” Dad says to Karen.

“Why do you call her ‘Parvenue?’” Clark asks. He asks every time but doesn’t seem able to retain information.

“A Parvenue,” says Dad, “and I’m quoting from a book, is ‘A person from a humble background who has rapidly gained wealth or an influential social position; a nouveau riche; an upstart, a social climber.’”

“Shut it!” Mum says, shrill as anything. “She might be a Parvenue but she’s the only one in this family with a job at the moment! Now get in that stairlift!”

I take a quick look at Karen, just to check that the Parvenue thing hasn’t upset her, but not at all. She’s remarkable.

She helps Dad into the seat. “Get in, you old snob.”

“How can I be a snob?” he splutters. “I’m part of the underclass.”

“You’re a reverse snob. A well-balanced working-class man: you’ve a chip on both shoulders.” Then, with a flourish, she lifts the lever and Dad rises up the stairs.

We all clap and shout, “Woohoo!” and I pretend I don’t feel sad.

Overcome with the excitement, Clark decides to take all his clothes off and dance, naked, in the street.

• • •

Dad returns to his customary position in his armchair, studiously proceeding with his book, and Mum, Karen

and I sit in the kitchen and drink tea. Mathilde snuggles on Karen's lap.

"Have a fairy cake." Mum throws a sixteen-pack, cellophane-wrapped slab of buns onto the table. I don't need to look at the ingredients to discover that there's nothing that sounds like food and that the eat-by date is next January.

"I can't believe you eat this shit," Karen says.

"Well, I do."

"Five minutes' walk away, in the middle of Ferrytown, the Saturday Farmers' Market is selling fresh, handmade cupcakes."

"It's far from fresh, handmade things you were reared."

"Grand." Karen is too canny to waste her energy getting into an argument. But she's going to leave soon.

"Have a fairy cake." Mum slides the package at Karen.

"Why don't you have a fairy cake?" Karen replies and shoves the package back.

The fairy cakes have suddenly become a battleground. To diffuse the tension, I say, "I'll have a fairy cake."

I eat five of them. But I don't enjoy them. And that's the main thing.

To be able to scratch the sole of my foot using the big toe of the other foot is nothing short of a miracle.

Extract from One Blink at a Time

My left hip felt like it was on fire. I could see the clock at the nurses' station—that was one of the perks of being on my left side; when I was on my right side I was just staring at a wall—and it was another twenty-four minutes before someone came to turn me. They rotated me every three hours, so that I wouldn't get bedsores. But the last hour before "the turn" had started to become uncomfortable, then painful, then very painful.

The only way to endure it was to reduce time to bouts of seven seconds. I don't know why I picked seven—perhaps because it was an odd number and it didn't divide into ten or sixty, so it kept things interesting. Sometimes four or five minutes could pass without me noticing and then I got a lovely surprise.

I'd been in ICU for twenty-three days. Twenty-three days since my body had packed up on me and the only muscles that worked were the ones in my eyes and eyelids. The shock had been—was—indescribable.

That first night in hospital, Ryan was sent home by a nurse. "Keep your phone by your bed," she told him.

"I'm not leaving here," he said.

"If she deteriorates further, we'll ring you to come in. You'd better bring the kids too, and her parents. What religion is Stella?"

“. . . None.”

“You must say something.”

“Catholic, I suppose. She went to a Catholic school.”

“Okay. We’ll organize a priest if one is needed. Go on now. You can’t stay. This is the ICU. Go home, get some sleep, keep your phone on.”

Eventually, looking like a whipped puppy, he went and I was left alone and I plunged into a surreal horror world where I lived a thousand lifetimes. I was in the grip of the worst fear I’ve ever known; there was a very real chance I was going to die. I could sense it in the atmosphere around my bed. No one knew what was wrong with me, but it was obvious that all the systems in my body were shutting down. My lungs had given up. What if my liver failed? What if . . . horrifying thought . . . what if my heart stopped?

I concentrated all my efforts on it and urged it to keep beating. Come on, come on, how hard can it be?

It had to keep beating because, if it didn’t, who would take care of Betsy and Jeffrey? And if it didn’t, what would happen to me? Where was I going? Suddenly I was staring into the abyss, facing the likelihood that this was where my life ended.

I’d never been religious, I’d never thought about an afterlife, one way or the other. But now that there was a good chance I was on my way there, I discovered, a bit late in the day, that I really was interested.

I should have done self-development courses, I berated myself. I should have been kinder to people. I mean, I’d tried my best but I should have done more. I should have gone to Mass and all that holy stuff.

What if the nuns at school were right and there really was a hell? As I added up my sins—sex before marriage, coveting my next-door neighbor’s holidays—I realized I was a goner. I was going to meet my maker and then I was going to be cast into the outer darkness.

If I could have whimpered with terror, I would have. I wanted to sob with fear. I desperately wanted a second chance, to go back and fix things.

Please, God, I begged, please don’t let me die. Save me and I’ll be a better mother, a better wife and a better person.

From listening to the nurses coming and going at my bedside, I gathered that my heart rate was dangerously fast. My fear was making that happen. It was good that my heart was still beating but not so good if I went into cardiac arrest. A decision was made to give me a sedative, but instead of relaxing me it just slowed my thinking down so that I could see my predicament more clearly.

Over and over again, I thought, This can’t be happening.

The fear alternated with helpless anger: I was outraged by my incapacity. I was so used to doing anything I wanted that I never even thought about it—I could pick up a magazine, I could shift my hair out of my eyes, I could cough. Suddenly I understood that to be able to scratch the sole of my foot using the big toe of the other foot was nothing short of a miracle.

My head kept sending orders to my body—Move, for the love of God, move!—but it lay like a plank. It was defiant and disrespectful and . . . yes . . . cheeky. I raged and foamed and flailed, but without moving a muscle.

I was afraid to go to sleep in case I died. The lights around me were never switched off and I watched the clock tick away the seconds all through the night. Finally it was morning and I was taken downstairs for a lumbar puncture, then I wished I could die—even now the memory of the pain makes me feel faint.

But, very quickly, it produced a diagnosis: I had something called Guillain-Barré syndrome, an astonishingly rare autoimmune disorder, which attacks the peripheral nervous system, stripping the myelin sheaths from the nerves. None of the doctors had ever encountered a case of it before. “You’ve a higher chance of winning the lottery than contracting this yoke,” my consultant, a plump, dapper, silver-haired man called Dr. Montgomery chortled. “How did you manage it!”

No one could say what the trigger had been, but it sometimes “manifested” (medical speak) after a bout of food poisoning. “She was in a car crash about five months ago,” I heard Ryan telling him. “Would that have caused it?”

No, he didn’t think so.

My prognosis was cautiously optimistic: GBS was rarely fatal. If I didn’t get an infection—which I probably would, apparently everyone in the hospitals gets infections; by the sounds of things you had a better chance of living a healthy life drinking seven liters of unfiltered Ganges water every day—I’d eventually recover and be able to move again, to speak and to breathe without a ventilator.

So at least I probably wasn’t going to die.

But no one could tell me when I’d get well. Until these myelin sheaths—whatever they were—grew back I faced a lengthy spell, paralyzed and mute, in the intensive care unit.

“For the time being, the name of the game is keeping her alive,” Dr. Montgomery told Ryan. “Isn’t that right, girls?” he yelled to the nurses, with—in my opinion—rather inappropriate merriment. “Keep her going there, Patsy!

“And come here to me, you!” He grabbed Ryan by the arm. “Don’t you be rushing home and Googling things. They write all kinds of codswallop on that Internet and scare the drawers off people and then you’d be coming in here boohooing and saying your wife is going to die and be paralyzed forever. I’ve been a senior consultant in this hospital for fifteen years. I know more than any Internet and I’m telling you she’ll be grand. Eventually.”

“Are there no drugs to speed up her recovery?” Ryan asked.

“No,” Dr. Montgomery said, almost cheerily. “None.”

“Could you run tests to get some idea of how bad she is . . . how long before she’ll be well?”

“Hasn’t the poor woman just had a lumbar puncture?” He glanced over at me. “That was no day at the races, was it?” He turned his attention back to Ryan. “You have to wait this thing out. There’s nothing else you can do. Cultivate patience, Mr. Sweeney. Let patience be your watchword. Maybe you could take up fly-fishing?”

• • •

Later that day, when they’d finished school, Ryan brought Betsy and Jeffrey to see me. I watched their faces as they noticed all the tubes snaking in and out of me. Betsy’s big blue eyes looked terrified but Jeffrey, being a fourteen-year-old boy, with an interest in all things ghoulish, seemed fascinated.

“I brought you some magazines,” Betsy said.

But I couldn’t hold them. I was desperate for a distraction, but unless someone read to me, I couldn’t have it.

Ryan angled my head on my pillow so that I could look at him. “So how are you feeling?”

I stared at him. Paralyzed, that’s how I’m feeling. And unable to speak, that’s how I’m feeling.

“Sorry,” he said. “I don’t know how . . .”

“Do that thing,” Jeffrey said. “I saw it on TV. Blink your right eye for yes, or your left eye for no.”

“We’re not in the fecking Boy Scouts!” Ryan said.

“Do you think it’s a good idea, Mom?” Jeffrey shoved his face close to mine.

Well, it was the only one we had. I blinked my right eye.

“Score!” Jeffrey exclaimed. “It works. Ask her something!”

Faintly Ryan said, “I can’t believe we’re doing this. Okay. Stella, are you in pain?”

I blinked my left eye.

“No? That’s good so. Are you hungry?”

I blinked my left eye again.

“No. Good . . .”

Ask me if I’m scared. But he didn’t because he knew I was and so was he.

Already bored, Jeffrey turned his attention to his phone. Immediately there came the sound of running footsteps. It was a nurse with a face like thunder. “Turn that thing off!” she ordered. “Mobile phones are not allowed in the ICU.”

“What?” Jeffrey asked. “Ever?”

“Never.”

Jeffrey looked at me with what was, for the first time, compassion. “No phone. Wow . . . Where’s your TV? Hey,” he called in the direction of the nurses’ station. “Where’s my mom’s TV?”

“Would you shush?” Ryan said.

The angry nurse was back. “There’s no TV. This is an intensive care unit, not a hotel. And keep the noise down; there are very sick people here.”

“Calm down, dear.”

“Jeffrey!” Ryan hissed. To the nurse, he said, “I’m sorry. He’s sorry. We’re all just . . . upset.”

“Quiet,” Jeffrey said. “I’m thinking.” He seemed to be wrestling with some terrible choice. “Okay.” He

reached a decision. "I'll give you the lend of my iPod. Just for this evening—"

"No iPods!" the nurse shouted from a distance.

"But what are you going to do?" Jeffrey was deeply concerned.

Betsy, who hadn't uttered a word since she arrived, cleared her throat. "Mom, I think . . . I'd like to pray with you."

What the hell?!

My own plight was instantly forgotten and I flashed my eyes at Ryan. For a while now we'd suspected that Betsy had been dabbling in Christianity, the way many parents fear their teenagers getting into drugs. There was some sort of holy youth club that trawled her school for membership. They preyed on the vulnerability of children who'd been brought up by agnostics and it looked like Betsy might well have fallen into their clutches.

It was okay for me to pray in my own head, but praying—out loud!—with Betsy, like we were Bible-belt Americans, was all wrong. I blinked my left eye—no, no, no—but Betsy took my useless hands and bowed her head. "Dear Lord, look down on this poor miserable sinner, my mom, and forgive her for all the bad things she's done. She's not an evil person, just weak, and pretends she does Zumba when she never goes to class and can be quite bitchy especially when she's with Auntie Karen and Auntie Zoe, who I know isn't my real auntie, just my mom's best friend and they're on the red wine—"

"Betsy, stop!" Ryan said.

Suddenly an alarm started to sound, urgent pulses of noise. It seemed to be coming from about four cubicles away and it triggered the nurses into a frenzy of activity. One of them rushed into my cubicle and said to Ryan, "You all have to leave." But she hurried off to the emergency and my visitors, keen not to miss the show, stayed.

I heard the swish of a cubicle curtain and lots of loud voices giving orders and relaying information. A woman in a doctor's coat clipped briskly to the scene, followed by two younger-looking blokes, their white coats swinging.

Then—and you could feel the change in energy—all the noise and activity stopped. After a few seconds of absolute nothingness I heard, very clearly, someone saying, "Time of death is 17:47."

Within moments a lifeless body was wheeled past us.

"Is he . . . dead?" Betsy stared with saucer eyes.

"A dead person," Jeffrey said. "Cool."

He watched the fast-disappearing gurney, then he turned back to look at me lying motionless in the bed and the light in his eyes died.

14:17

As I walk home from my parents' house in my ill-fitting and weather-inappropriate clothes, I notice I have a

missed call. My head goes funny when I see who it's from. And he's left a message.

I shouldn't listen to it. Clean break, didn't I decide?

My fingers are trembling as I hit the keys.

And there's his voice. Just three words. "I miss you . . ."

If I wasn't in the street, I'd double over and howl.

I only realize I'm crying when I notice the interested looks I'm getting from passing car drivers. I hurry toward home and pray that I don't meet anyone I know.

Once I've shut the door safely behind me I do what I've been doing for—I count back—two months, three weeks and two days: I get on with things.

I check on Ryan's video. It hasn't been viewed since I last watched it this morning and nothing new has been added. We could be in the clear here.

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