




Freckles

Cecelia Ahern is an Irish novelist whose work was first published in 2004. Her debut novel *PS, I Love You* became one of the biggest selling novels of recent years and was made into a hit Hollywood film. She is published around the world in forty-seven countries, in over thirty languages and has sold over twenty-five million copies of her novels. She has published seventeen novels, including two Young Adult novels and a highly acclaimed collection of stories, *Roar*, which is an upcoming series for Apple TV.

She and her books have won numerous awards, including the Irish Book Award for Popular Fiction for *The Year I Met You* in 2014. *PS, I Love You* was awarded two Platinum Awards at the 2018 Specsavers Bestsellers Awards, for UK and Ireland.

Cecelia Ahern lives in Dublin with her family.

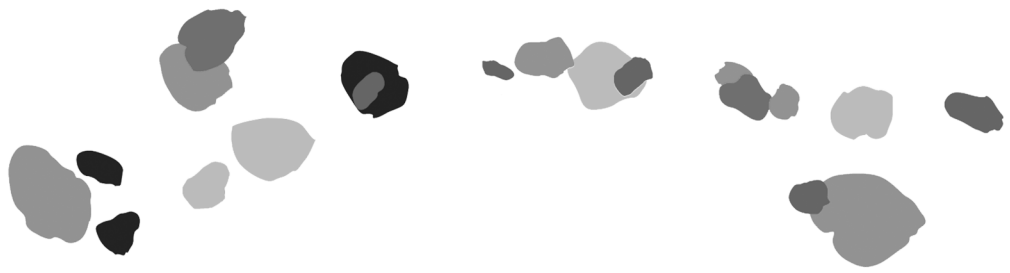
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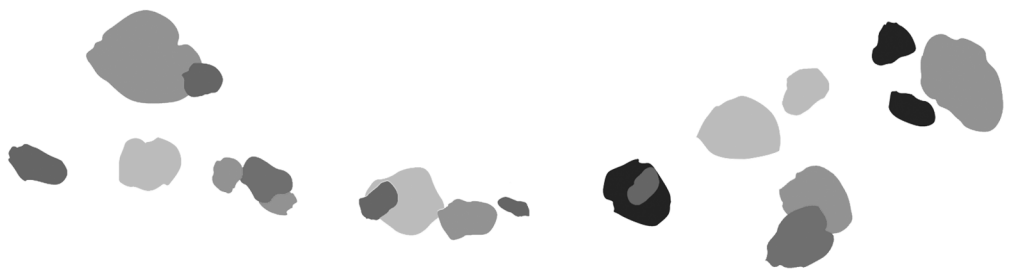
Young Adult novels

Flawed
Perfect



Freckles

cecelia ahern



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For Susana Serradas

PROLOGUE

The crunch of a snail under my shoe, in the darkness. The crack of the shell. The squish. The ooze.

It hurts me at the back of my teeth, a shooting pain through a nerve in my gums.

I can't pull my foot up fast enough, I can't rewind, the damage can't be undone. I've hit the squishy interior of the snail's sluggish insides. Flattened and twisted them into the ground. I feel the mush on the sole of my shoe for the next few steps. Carrying a crime scene on a slippery sole. Death on my shoe. Smearred guts. A twist and wipe rids me of it.

It happens walking at night, on rain-slicked ground, when I can't see where I'm stepping and the snail can't see who's stepping. I've always felt bad for the snail, but now I know what it's like. Retribution. Karma. I now know

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how it feels for my outer shell to be cracked, for my insides to feel exposed.

He stepped on me.

He walked with me for a few steps too, his sole slippy with my mush. I wonder if his soul is slippy with me too. If he felt the crack and ooze of me under his gaze as he spat his hate-filled words and then walked away. My shield taken with him for a few steps before he realised he was still carrying me. A twist of his shoe, like extinguishing a cigarette, and I'm discarded.

The remainders of me on the pathway. Cracked and exposed, an unprotected soft interior I've worked so hard to protect. A leakage of all the parts that were so well-contained. Feelings, thoughts, insecurities all oozing out. A silvery slivery track of emotional entrails.

I didn't see his foot coming. Wonder if I took him by surprise too.

Even though it may feel like it, this is not where it all ends. I'm not dead. I'm crushed and oozing. A smithereened Allegra Bird. You can't fix the broken outer shell. But you can rebuild.

One

When I was thirteen years old I connected the freckles on my arms together, like a join-the-dots puzzle. Right-handed, my left arm would become a web of blue pen lines. After a while it developed into drawing constellations, mapping them out from freckle to freckle until the skin on my arm mirrored the night sky. The Plough – the Big Dipper to some – was my favourite constellation to draw. It was the one I could immediately identify at night, and so when it was lights out in boarding school and silence descended upon the halls, I turned my reading light on low, clenched a blue gel pen, and traced the seven stars from freckle to freckle until my skin resembled a night-map.

Dubhe, Merak, Phecda, Megrez, Alioth, Mizar and Alkaid. I didn't always choose the same freckles, sometimes I liked the challenge of replicating this constellation elsewhere, sometimes on my legs, but crouching over for such

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a long period of time stung my back. Also it didn't feel natural, like I was forcing these other collections of freckles to become something they weren't. There were the ideal seven freckles, perfectly aligned already on my left arm to specifically be the Plough, and so I eventually gave up on the other freckles and each night, after my morning shower had washed the ink away, I would begin again.

Cassiopeia followed. That was an easy one. Then Crux and Orion. Pegasus was a tricky one with a total of fourteen stars/freckles, but my arms saw more sunlight than the rest of my body, face not included, so it had a higher concentration of melanised cells, perfectly positioned for a fourteen-star constellation.

In the darkness of our boarding school dormitory, in the cubicle beside me, Caroline heavy-breathed as she touched herself thinking nobody knew, and Louise on the other side of me turned pages on the anime comics that she read with a torch. Across from me Margaret worked her way through an entire bag of mini Crunchies before sticking her fingers down her throat and puking them out, Olivia practised kissing against a mirror while Liz and Fiona kissed each other. Catherine sobbed quietly because she was homesick, and Katie wrote hate mail to her mam who had cheated on her dad, and everyone else in the all girls' boarding school immersed themselves in their secrets in the only small space that they could call their own while I mapped my freckles like they were stars.

My private act didn't stay secret for long. I would do it nightly, and blue pen on top of blue pen, night after night, eventually doesn't wash off. The ink lodged itself in the pores in my skin and even a scouring brush, hot water and

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a highly stressed nun, Sister Lettuce – nicknamed by all of us due to her tendency for beginning every sentence with Let us . . . Let us give thanks and pray. Let us open our books to page seven. Let us do lay-ups because she was also our basketball coach – couldn't do anything to get it off or make me stop. I received odd looks in the shower room, at swimming, when wearing short sleeves. The weird girl with the pen marks on her arm. They're patterns on the celestial sphere, animals, mythological people and creatures, gods and objects, I'd tell them, holding my arm out proud, never ashamed of my designs. The response to that was a lesson in ink poisoning. More trips to the counsellor. Extra laps of the running track. They knew physical health equalled mental well-being and they were trying to busy me with as many activities as they could to distract me from vandalising my skin, but it all felt like punishment to me. Run her in circles. Get that girl away from her skin. But you can't get a person away from their skin. They're in it. They are it. No matter what they said, I couldn't stop. Every time the lights went out, and the silence moved in like a mist from the sea, I felt the familiar longing to connect with my skin.

I wasn't embarrassed about the pen marks. I didn't care if people stared. The only big deal was the commotion they made of it and I certainly wasn't the only girl who had marks on their skin. Jennifer Lannigan cut herself with a blade, tiny little cuts all over her legs. I had a good view of them in English class, the white gap between the top of her grey socks and the end of her grey skirt. We weren't allowed to wear make-up in school but after hours Jennifer wore white make-up, black lipstick, pierced her own lip

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and listened to angry music by angry men and for some reason her entire package made it acceptable to us that she would do this insane thing to herself.

But I wasn't a goth and drawing on your skin had no psychological explanations that they could find. The dorm supervisor went through my cubicle and removed all my pens, which were returned to me in the morning before class and removed again after study hour. People would watch me around pens like they would a child with scissors. So, pen-less, I kind of found myself in the same camp as Jennifer. I never understood the compulsion to inflict pain on oneself, but it was a means to an end. I took to using the sharpened corner of my ruler to scratch a line from one freckle to the other. I knew better than to scratch the actual freckle, I had been warned on the perils of cutting moles and freckles. I graduated from rulers as I found sharper items: my compass, razor blades . . . and pretty soon after, horrified by what she saw on my skin, the supervisor returned my pens to me. But she was too late, I never went back to using ink. I never liked the pain, but blood was more permanent. The hardened scabs between freckles were more distinctive, and not only could I see the constellations but now I could feel them. They stung when the air hit and they throbbed beneath my clothes. There was something comforting about their presence. I wore them like armour.

I don't scratch the surface of my skin any more but at twenty-four years old, the constellations are still visible. When I'm worried or stressed, I catch myself running my finger over the scarred raised skin of my left arm, over and over again, in the correct order, from one star to the

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next. Joining the dots, solving the mystery, chaining the events.

I'd been called Freckles since the first week of school when I arrived at twelve years old until I left at eighteen. Even now, if I randomly meet someone from school they still call me Freckles, unable to remember my real name, or probably never knew it in the first place. While they never meant any harm, I think I always knew what they really saw of me was skin. Not black or white like most of theirs, so white it reflected the sun. Not a Thurles colour, but a colour they desired and went through bottles and sprays in order to get but came closer to looking tangerine. There were plenty of girls with freckles who didn't inherit the nickname but freckles on darker skin to them was different. It never bothered me, in fact I embraced it because it went beyond a nickname and held a deeper meaning for me.

Pops' skin is as white as snow, so pale in some parts it's almost transparent like tracing paper, with blue lines running beneath. Blue rivers of lead. His hair is greying and thinner now but it was curly red and wild. He has freckles, reddish ones, so many on his face if they joined up he'd be a sunrise. You're lucky they call you Freckles, Allegra, he'd say, all I was ever called was matchstick or, even better, fucking ugly! Then he'd guffaw loudly. Ding-a-ling-a-ling my hair's on fire, ding-a-ling-a-ling, call nine nine nine, he'd sing and I'd join in with him, singing the song he was taunted with. Me and him, ganging up against the memory of them.

I never knew my mam, but I know she was foreign. An exotic beauty studying on Irish shores. Olive-skinned,

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black-haired and brown-eyed, from Barcelona. The Catalonian Carmencita Casanova. Even her name sounds like a fairy tale. Beauty it seemed, met the Beast.

Pops says I had to get something of him. If I didn't have freckles, he doesn't know how he could have claimed me. He's joking of course, but my freckles were the calling card. When he's the only person I have and have ever had in my whole life, my freckles connect me to him in a way that feels vital. They are my proof. An official stamp from heaven's bureau that bind me to him. The raging mob could not come to our house on horseback, with torches of fire, demanding he hand over the baby the mother didn't want. Look, she's his, she has his freckles, see.

I inherited my mam's skin tone but I inherited Pops' freckles. The parent who wanted me. Unlike Mam, who gave me up to have everything, he gave up everything to have me. These freckles are the invisible blue ink-line, the permanent scar that connects me to him, dot to dot, star to star, freckle to freckle. Link them and you link us on and on and on and on.

Two

Joining the Gardaí Síochána, the Irish police force, had been my lifelong goal. There was never a Plan B and everyone knew it. Detective Freckles is what they'd called me in our final year.

Ms Meadows the career guidance teacher had tried to push me into doing a business degree. She thought everyone should study business, even the art students who went in with their creative bendy thoughts and came out like they'd had electroconvulsive therapy after being preached to on the advantages of a basic business degree. Something to fall back on, it was always said. Business made me think of a mattress. I was hopeful about my future, I wasn't contemplating failing never mind planning on falling back. She couldn't convince me to change my mind because I saw no other place for me in the world. Turns out I was wrong. My application to the Gardaí was denied. I was stunned.

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A little winded. Embarrassed. With no mattress to fall back on I did some recalibration and found the next best thing.

I'm a parking warden with Fingal County Council. I wear a uniform, grey pants, white shirt, a high-vis vest and patrol the streets, not unlike a garda. I got close to what I wanted. I work on the side of the law. I like my job, I like my routine, my route, my beat. I like organisation, and order, rules and clarity. The rules are clear and I uphold them rigorously. I like that I'm fulfilling an important role.

My base is Malahide, a suburban village outside Dublin city, beside the sea. A pretty spot, an affluent area. My home is a studio flat above a gym in the back garden of a mansion on a leafy road bordering Malahide Castle and Gardens.

She, Becky, does something with computers. He, Donnacha, works from home in his art studio, one of those nice garden rooms, doing fine art ceramics. He calls them vessels. They look like bowls to me. Not for cereal, you'd barely get two Weetabix in the base and it doesn't have the depth for enough milk, especially with the Weetabix absorption levels. I read an interview with him in the *Irish Times* culture magazine where he describes them as definitely not bowls, which is a description that brings him great insult, the bane of his professional life. These vessels are receptacles for his message. I didn't read far enough to get the message.

He talks a curious kind of prattle with a faraway look in his eye as if any of his agonising wonderings mean something. He's not a listener, which I thought would be typical of an artist. I thought they were supposed to be sponges absorbing everything around them. I was half-right. He's already so full of shit he can't make room for

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any more absorption, he's just leaking it all out now on everyone else. Artistic incontinence. And it costs five hundred euro minimum for one of his tiny bowls.

Also five hundred euro is my monthly rent and the catch is that I be available for babysitting duties for their three kids whenever they ask. Usually that's three times a week. Always on a Saturday night.

I wake and turn to look at my iPhone: 6.58 as always. Time to process where I am and what's going on. I find being one step ahead of my phone first thing in the morning is a good start to the day. Two minutes later the alarm rings. Pops won't own a smartphone, thinks we're all being watched. He refused to have me vaccinated, not because of the health dangers, but because he had a theory they were inserting chips into humans' skin. He once brought me to London for a weekend for my birthday and we spent most of the time standing outside the Ecuadorian Embassy calling Julian Assange's name. The police moved us along twice. Julian looked out and waved and Pops felt something monumental passed between them. An understanding between two men who believe in the same cause. Power to the people. Then we saw *Mary Poppins* in the West End.

At 7 a.m., I shower. I eat. I dress. Grey trousers, white shirt, black boots, raincoat in case I need it for those little April showers. In this uniform I'd like to think I could be mistaken for a garda. Sometimes I pretend I am. I don't imitate a garda, that's illegal, but in my head I do, and I speak like I am. That air that they have. The aura. The authority. Your protector and friend when you need them, your foe when they think you're acting the maggot. They

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choose which one they are at any given moment. It's magic. Even the new fellas with chin-fluff can do that stern disappointed old-before-their-time look. As if they know you and know you can do better and Jesus why did you have to let them down. Sorry, Garda, sorry, I won't do it again. And the girl ones, you wouldn't mess with them, but you'd definitely go on a session with them.

My hair is long, coarse, black, so black it has a blue sheen, like petrol, and takes an hour to blow dry so I only wash it once a week. It goes back in a low bun, cap on and low over my eyes. I wrap the ticket machine over my shoulder. Ready.

I leave the garage, fifty yards from the house, separated by an enormous garden designed by an award-winning landscaper. The pathway from my place weaves through a secret garden, the route I was told to take, towards the side of the house, where I get out through the side pedestrian gate, special code 1916, the year of the Irish Republicans' uprising against the British, chosen by Donnacha McGovern of Ballyjamesduff. If Padraig Pearse could see him now, doing his bit for the Republic. Making bowls in his back garden.

The ground floor that faces me is almost entirely glass. Floor-to-ceiling sliding doors that open up like they're a brasserie in the summertime. Bring the outside in, bring the inside out. You don't know which is the house and which is the garden and then you shake it all about. That kind of designer waffle. I can see into every room. It's like an advertisement for Dyson. White circular futuristic-looking things in each room, either sucking in or pushing air out. What the window wall really does to the house now is

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reveal the mayhem in the kitchen as Becky rushes around trying to get the three children ready for school before she drives to work, somewhere in the city I think. I call her Goop, to myself. You know, one of those women that has kale and avocados on their weekly shop. Sneezes chia seeds and poops pomegranates.

They feel sorry for me, them in their sprawling mansion, me living in one room above a gym. In their back garden. Wearing a high-vis vest and a lightweight operational safety shoe. I let them feel that. My room is stylish, it's clean and warm and I'd have to pay the same amount of rent just to share a space with three others anywhere else. They would have to lose everything to ever find themselves in my position. That's the way they see it. For me, I kind of left everything behind to gain this. That's the way I see it.

I'm not lonely. Not all the time. And I'm not free. Not all the time. I look after Pops. Doing that from two hundred and fifty miles away isn't always easy but I chose to live here, this distance from him, so that I can be closer to him.

Three

I try not to look into the kitchen as I pass but Becky lets out an almighty roar for everyone to hurry the fuck up and impulsively I glance inside and see the kitchen island covered in milk and juice cartons, cereal boxes, lunch boxes, the makings of lunches, children in various states of dress, cartoons blaring on the TV. Becky's not dressed yet, unusual for her; she's in pyjama shorts and a vest with lace trimmings, no bra, her boobs low and swaying. She's lean though, she works out from 6 a.m. to 7 a.m. most mornings in the gym below my bedroom. She's one of those women that women's magazines talk about. The lean-in woman. When I hear that phrase I picture Michael Jackson doing that tilted dance move. Gravity-defying. Then you hear his feet were clicked into the stage and it wasn't real at all.

Donnacha sits on a high stool at the breakfast counter reading his phone as if nothing is happening around him.

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Time is no obstacle. He'll drop the kids to school and then will dilly-dally in the studio with his bowls. Just as I've safely reached the front of the house, about to walk down the long driveway lined with their expensive cars, where palatial gates protect the house, and wild rabbits scarper as they see me coming, Becky calls my name. I close my eyes and sigh. At first I wonder if I can get away with pretending I haven't heard her but I can't do it. I turn around. She's standing at the front door. Her nipples in her flimsy vest are hard as they hit the morning air. She tries to hide one behind the door frame.

Allegra, she calls, because that's my name. Can you babysit tonight.

It's not a regular babysitting night and I'm not in the mood. It's been a long week and I'm more tired than usual. Spending a night with kids who keep to themselves in their bedrooms or sit motionless with their heads in computer games isn't taxing but it's not the same thing as relaxing on my own. If I tell her that I can't and they see me in my room, then I wouldn't be able to relax either.

I know it's late notice, she adds, giving me an out, but before I get the chance to take it, she points out firmly that it's nearing the first of May. We need to discuss the rent, she says, all business now. I did say we'd evaluate it after the first six months. All assertive and power-stancey, even though she's hiding her hard nipples. It sounds like a threat. The only time I haven't been able to help her out is when I've travelled home to Pops, which I've given her advance notice of. I'm always available, but I don't bother saying that.

About the rent-evaluation thing, I say, sure. But I still

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can't babysit, I have plans tonight. As soon as I've said it, I know I have to make plans, which is annoying.

Oh Allegra, I wasn't implying, she says with a shocked expression at my accusation that a discussion of my rent was a thinly veiled threat. Not so thin at all, flimsier than her PJs. Really, people are all so transparent I don't know why we bother to fuck.

Have a good night, whatever you're doing, she says before closing the door, wobbly boobs and all.

I can't afford a small increase in rent but I can't afford not to live here either. I haven't done what I came here to do yet.

Maybe I should have said yes to the babysitting.

To get to the village I walk through Malahide Castle grounds: mature trees and landscaped walkways. Benches with brass plaques in honour of those who walked here, sat there and looked at this and that. Immaculately kept flower beds, no litter in sight. The occasional grey squirrel. Curious robins. Mischievous rabbits. A blackbird doing its morning vocal warm-up. It's not a stressful start. I mostly pass the same people at the same places, at the same time. If I don't it's because they're running late, not me. A man in a business suit, wearing a backpack and enormous headphones. A woman with an alarmingly red face who jogs as though she's falling sideways. The leaning jogger. I don't know how she does it. Stays upright, keeps going. The first few days she used to catch my eye, as if in a hostage situation seeking rescue from her ambition, but now she's zombified, in the zone, staring into the distance and chasing something that keeps her going, an invisible carrot on a

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stick. Then there's the dog walker and the Great Dane, followed by an old man with a wheelie walking frame accompanied by a younger man who looks like he's probably his son. They both say good morning, every morning without fail. Good morning, he says, good morning, says he, good morning, I say to them both.

My shift begins at 8 a.m. and ends at 6 p.m. It's relatively quiet in the village itself, until the school traffic mayhem kicks in. Before I begin, I go to the bakery on Main Street every morning. The Village Bakery. It's owned and run by Spanner. He always has time for a chat when I'm there, because I'm there earlier than most of the crowd. It gets momentarily busy when the 7.58 Dart arrives and everyone gets off and scrambles into his place for a coffee. He's been there since 5 a.m. baking bread and pastries. You can barely see him over the top of the counter that's filled with a dozen type of breads, twisted and braided, puffed up, polished and decorated in sesame, poppy, and sunflower seeds. They're the kings of the bakery, in prime position above the glass cabinet of cakes. He insists I call him Spanner, even though it's Dublin slang for idiot. He did something stupid one time during his school days and it stuck. Maybe more than one time – I know he served time in prison. Said that's where he learned how to bake. So I told him I once had a nickname too, at school they called me Freckles. And he took it upon himself to start calling me that. I didn't mind. After moving to Dublin it was kind of nice to have something here that was familiar, like somebody here knows me.

Morning, Freckles, the usual, he asks, barely looking up from guiding dough through a machine and folding it over.

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Danish pastries, he tells me before I even ask. Apple and cinnamon ones, fuckin machine broke this morning. I'll have them ready for lunchtime instead. Good enough for them.

He always talks about customers like they're the enemy, like they'll be the ending of him. I'm a customer but it doesn't insult me, it makes me feel good that he talks to me like I'm not.

He folds the dough over again, into another layer. White and blobby. It reminds me of Tina Rooney's stomach when she came back to school after having a baby, and her flesh had grown around her caesarean scar, doubling over like raw dough. I watched her in the changing room as she lowered her camogie jersey over her head. She'd seemed so exotic at the time. A girl our age who'd had a baby. She only got to see him on the weekend, and her bedroom cubicle was plastered in photographs of the little thing. I don't think any of us had appreciated how hard that was for her. How she was living two completely different lives from one day to the next. She'd told me she slept with a fella at Electric Picnic, the music festival. In her tent. During the Orbital set on the main stage. She didn't know his full name or have his phone number and she was going back the next year to see if she could find him. I wonder if she ever did.

Bleedin Whistles gave me an earful about the pastries, Spanner says, bringing me back in the room. He carries on, not looking at me: I tell ye, the nerve of him, givin out to me about what he gets for breakfast. He should be happy he gets anything at all. He says the last bit louder, over his shoulder, glancing towards the door.

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I look outside to homeless Whistles sitting on a flattened piece of cardboard, wrapped in a blanket with a hot coffee in one hand, and biting down on a fruit scone.

He's lucky to have you, I tell Spanner, and he calms a little, wipes his brow, throws a towel over his shoulder and gets me a coffee and waffle.

I don't know where you put those things he says, sprinkling the waffle with icing sugar, before wrapping it in newspaper to hand it to me.

He's right, I eat what I want and my body stays the same. Maybe it's because I walk so much all day every day, on the beat, maybe it's because of my mam's genes. She was a dancer, apparently. Or wanted to be one. That's how she met Pops, she was doing performing arts, he was a music professor. Maybe she got what she wanted for a while at least between wanting to be and not being. I hope for her she was. You wouldn't want to give up something for everything and end up with nothing. Quite unfair on the something.

Two euro twenty for a coffee and pastry, a morning special. Less than half of what you'd pay in Insomnia or Starbucks down the road. A real bakery competing against those commercial chain fuckers, don't get him started. I'm in here at 5 a.m. every morning . . . Spanner's mostly cheery though, he's a good start to my day, the best and fullest conversation I have with anyone most days. He steps round the counter and reaches for his cigarettes in the front pocket of his apron and stands outside.

I sit on a high stool up facing the window, looking out to the village Main Street that's slowly coming alive. The florist is moving her display out onto the pavement.

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The toy shop is being unlocked, new flowers, rabbits and eggs hand-painted on the window in preparation for Easter. The optician is still closed, the off-licence, the stationery shop, the solicitors. The coffee shops are opening. Spanner beats them to it every morning.

Across the road in The Hot Drop, she puts a chalkboard out front advertising a special omelette and carrot cake. She's slowly but surely putting more cakes on the menu. It used to be just toasted sambos. I wonder why she'd bother, his are the best. Spanner eyes it, narrow slits. She waves nervously, he nods his head slightly, while inhaling, eyes squinted, smoke drifting in.

Friday night, Spanner says, blowing smoke out the side of his mouth, speaking as if he's had a stroke. Are you going out.

Yeah, I say, continuing the lie I began with Becky.

I've committed to it, now I just need to find somewhere to go. I ask him about his weekend.

He looks up and down the road, like a 1950s burglar casing a joint.

I'm going to see Chloe.

Chloe the mother of his daughter, Chloe the woman who won't let him see his daughter, Chloe the weight watcher's cheat, the solpadeine addict, Chloe the monster. He sucks the cigarette, his cheeks concave.

I have to go see her, and end this. I just need her to listen, face to face, one on one, no one getting in the middle and confusing everything with their opinions. Her sisters.

He rolls his eyes.

Ye know what I mean, Freckles. She'll be at a christening party at the Pilot so if I just happen to be there, no reason

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why I wouldn't be, I've drank there before, me mate Duffer lives around the corner so I'll go out with him, few pints, all very above board, and she'll have no choice but to speak to me.

I've never seen anyone drink tobacco in like him, long and hard, inhaling practically a quarter of it before flicking it. The cigarette goes flying across the path of a woman, a local pharmacist I recognise who drives a blue Fiat that she parks at the Castle car park. Startled, she yelps a little as the cigarette just misses her, and looks at him angrily, then, frightened by his size and demeanour, a baker not to be messed with, continues on. Whistles whistles negatively about half the fag being wasted, then shuffles over to the still-lit cigarette in the gutter and brings it back to his cardboard seat.

Ye rat, Spanner says to him, but gives him a fresh cigarette before coming back inside.

You should be careful, Spanner, I warn him, concerned. The last time you saw Chloe you had an argument with her sisters.

The three ugly sisters, he says. Faces on them like busted cabbages.

And she threatened you with a restraining order.

She couldn't even spell it, he laughs. It'll be grand. It's my right to see Ariana. I'll do anything. If bein nice is the last resort, then I'll be nice. I can play that game.

The commuters from the 7.58 Dart start to mill on to the Main Street from the train station. Soon the small space in the bakery will be crowded and Spanner will be single-handedly serving coffees, cakes and sandwiches as fast as he can. I finish up my coffee, and take my last

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mouthful of waffle, wipe the icing sugar from my mouth, discard the napkin and I'm gone.

Move on now, Whistles, Spanner shouts at him. You'll put everyone off their food and not one of them ever gives you a cent.

Whistles slowly stands, grabs his stuff, his cardboard seat and shuffles off around the corner and down Old Street. The breeze blows his tuneless song in my direction.

The first jobs of the day are the local schools. Not enough space, too many cars. Tired, stressed-out parents, pulling in where they shouldn't be, parking where they shouldn't be parking, cardigans and coats hiding pyjamas, trainers with business attire, hassled heads sweating to drop off before they leg it to work, bed-headed kids with school bags bigger than themselves being shouted at to hurry up and hop out. Would someone for the love of God take their kids from them so they can go and do all the things. I get abuse from the same double-parked stress-heads every morning. Not the kids' faults. Not my fault. Nobody's fault. But I've still got to patrol it.

First I eye up the free space outside the hair salon that will be filled within the next half-hour with a silver three series 2016 BMW. I glance inside the small salon, lights off, empty and closed until 9 a.m. While I'm looking in the window, a car pulls into the available space outside the salon. I turn around and eye the driver, a man, who's switching off the engine and undoing his seat belt. He looks at me the entire time. He opens the door, puts one foot out on the pavement and stares at me.

Can I not park here, he asks.

I shake my head and even though I'm not imitating a

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garda, I am being one in my head. Gardaí don't always have to give reasons.

He rolls his eyes, pulls his leg back into the car, and as he's securing his seat belt and starting the engine he looks around at the signage, confused and irritated.

I stand there until he drives away.

It's only 8 a.m. Pay-and-display begins at 8.30 a.m. No legal reason why he can't park here.

But she always parks here.

Every day.

It's her spot.

And I protect it.