

# The Snow Laundry

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# The Snow Laundry

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*For Cleo and Bonnie*



*In the end, it's like going to bed as usual  
except we lie down side by side in the street  
and the night sky is our ceiling, and blood  
drifts away from us between cobblestones  
like rose petals torn up and scattered.*

Róisín Kelly



# 1

He's chatting with the other guards as if he's one of them. He's even wearing the same dark uniform. His sleeves are rolled up, his hair slicked back.

I keep my eyes on him as we file into the laundry hall: a grey sea of girls in itchy work-coats, moving sleepily to our workstations. Washing machines, hand basins, steam-presses, dryers, folding benches.

Everything is grey here, but outside the large windows the world is white with snow.

He laughs at something one of them says. And I remember why Bon and I used to call him Teeth. He's got a perfect smile, perfect teeth. He throws his head back and laughs again and for a moment he's illuminated by the light from the windows; for a moment he looks like some kind of hero.

But he's not a hero. And he should have been dead.

That scar along his temple. Bon did that.

Teeth was in the police then — part of the old government and their plan to clean up the city. 'Clean the Streets', was their slogan, which really meant 'get

rid of the homeless kids whatever way you can'.

It's hard to believe now, even for us. What happened on the streets back then is the stuff of dark cruel fairy tales.

Those of us who lived in the tunnels were mostly safe as long as we stayed out of sight. It was the kids on the streets that were in most danger: those who slept in the alleys covered by pieces of cardboard and stolen blankets.

I keep my head down as I walk across the floor to the steam-press. Heart pounding, I tell myself Teeth won't recognise me. I look different now. My hair has grown out. And there were others back then. I'm not the only shaven-head girl he pulled into an alley.

But he will recognise Bon, I'm sure of it.

I'm desperate to run downstairs to warn him, but all I can do is to stay right next to the steam-press and wait for the Message. Once we enter the floor, we aren't allowed to leave. I wouldn't even get as far as the door if I tried. The guards are carrying guns and they're more than happy to use them.

I stop looking at Teeth. They'll notice if I stare. They are like bloodhounds — any little change, anything out of the ordinary and they are on to it. Nothing escapes them, not even the guards high on S.

I look out the windows instead.

Tower A is only a few feet away but it's almost erased by the falling snow. Big silent flakes. The world is white, white, white.

Towers A and B are identical: two grey concrete buildings that were once the Airport Hilton. From our room upstairs, Bon and I can see the abandoned airport. In summer the sun catches the windows of the control tower, and we can see the overgrown runways spread like fingers through the wildflowers.

It's hard to imagine that the laundry was once a hotel restaurant. The only decorations left are two huge chandeliers.

We helped move everything out when we arrived a year and a half ago. Glass tables, gold painted chairs. The long bar made of marble. Plates and glasses. Thousands of green cocktail umbrellas. The soft carpet was ripped up, leaving only concrete floors.

The loudspeaker in the corner crackles, and then a male voice says: 'To your stations. To your stations. Work commences in one minute. To your stations.'

Fi is not here. She's always running late.

I turn to look towards the doors and see her stroll in as if she hasn't got a care in the world: thick black hair tied in a ponytail, eyes painted dramatically with the green eyeliner she somehow gets away with using.

I like Fi. I like that she always chews gum even

though it's not permitted. I like her crooked teeth and that she has sex in the toilets during the breaks, with whomever she wants.

A buzz from the loudspeaker. We all turn and face it.

Fi joins me at the linen press, takes one look at me and knows something's wrong.

I try a smile, wishing I wasn't so transparent.

The new National Anthem starts. Fi looks at me quizzically as we sing along.

*'Together we create a new nation, a new people. Loyalty, work and strength. Together we hold the future.'*

The words leave a bad taste. The only thing that's true is the work part.

When the Anthem is finished, the familiar announcement begins. We all turn to face the main loudspeaker as if it's Elenore Maslin herself.

'Esteemed workers.' She has a soft voice. Quivering, and full of emotion. It always sounds as if she's thanking someone for saving her life, not washing her clothes. She continues, 'This is your Benefactor speaking. You have been given a new life. Make sure to give back. I and the Administration are grateful for your service.'

Everyone starts to move. But then, an extra click. A Message has been added. We stop abruptly as Elenore Maslin continues, 'In a few days we are celebrating

the birthday of ONE, your own personal Leader and Guardian. We expect you to work hard to show your gratitude.'

The recording stops. A second passes and then the laundry hall becomes a hive of activity. Everyone starts working and talking all at once. Steam rises from the presses, the row of grey washing machines along the wall are loaded, and crates of delicate underwear in pinks and creams cascade into the handwashing basins.

'What's the matter?' Fi hands me a sheet from the crates piled high next us. 'You seen a ghost or what?' She moves to the other side of the press, getting ready to catch the sheet as it comes out, all straight and crisp.

I insert the sheet, careful not to look in Teeth's direction. 'I'm fine,' I say.

'You don't look fine, girl. Bon forget to keep you company this morning?' She winks at me while catching the sheet before it hits the table. She's great at folding it as it comes out. She hardly ever burns herself.

Fi always talks like this. I don't really mind. Bon says I am a bit of a prude. He says things like, 'How could you live in the tunnels for so long and still be shy?'

And it's true, I've seen almost everything. But I'm still me and that's important. Lines need to be drawn somewhere. Like when we lived in the tunnels, I didn't steal. I begged and scavenged. I knew all the places to

find leftover food. I was a master scavenger, but I didn't steal. That doesn't mean I judge those who did, though. Everyone does what they have to do to survive.

Reaching for another sheet, I give Fi a smile. I make sure to show her a bit of teeth, otherwise she will go on about how timid I am.

Obviously, I don't pull it off.

'Pathetic,' she says, and shakes her head. And then I realise she's hidden a piece of gum for me, between the sheets. Again.

I glance in the direction of the guards. Cigarette smoke hovers above them, catching the grey light, and they're busy talking.

'Quick, take it,' she says, grinning. 'Don't let them see.'

Fi loves to see me squirm. I stuff the gum in my pocket and quickly insert the next tablecloth.

A girl from handwashing looks our way. I glance back to make sure she didn't see the gum, but she's already busy emptying a new load of silk underwear into the hot basin.

She looks sick. And too thin. I don't know much about her. Only that her name is Ash and that she's from the North Tunnels.

I noticed her yesterday too. I don't know why the guards can't tell that she's sick. She could be twelve,

maybe younger. Half of the kids in here are as young as her — we call them Teenies. Although, most of us don't know our age. It's a miracle I know exactly when I was born.

I was bloodied and newborn when I was found outside a newsagency, squeezed between two bundles of *The Daily News* that had been delivered earlier that morning. By the time the newsagent discovered me, a dog was already yanking at my leg, trying to drag me away.

I've always been told I was lucky. Lucky that the newsagent took me in and called the police when, as my last foster mum pointed out, 'He could perfectly well have let you rot in the alley.' They said I was lucky to have a roof over my head, lucky to have a bed, lucky that there was food on the table. They never said I was lucky to get punched in the face so hard that it took five weeks for the bruises to disappear, or lucky to be felt up by my foster dad in the middle of the night.

When I ran away to live in the tunnels, I tracked down the newsagent and asked if he could remember when he found me.

'You haven't known your birthday all this time?' he said.

He looked shocked, as if this was the worst thing anyone could experience and that, if only I'd known, I

could have spent my birthdays surrounded by presents and cakes, pink teddy bears and sprinkles on soft-serve ice cream.

As ignorant as the newsagent was about my life, he did remember the date I was born. He remembered because it was the day after a Boeing 737 crashed in the forest just minutes before landing. The front pages of the newspaper that morning had shown a picture of the scorched plane surrounded by burning pines. ‘You looked like you’d fallen straight out of that plane,’ he said to me, ‘covered in blood and crying your lungs out.’

Thanks to the newsagent, I know that I was born on the sixteenth of August and that I’m now seventeen. Unfortunately, my mother didn’t think of leaving a note specifying the name she intended me to have, so by the time I ran away from my third foster family I’d in turn been called Elizabeth, Sarah and Mirabelle. As if a name like those would make me more like them. As if it would make my skin a little lighter, a little more pearl, alabaster, or porcelain.

But most of them didn’t use my name anyway. It was ‘girl’, ‘piece of shit’, or mostly just ‘you’.

It was Mika, my best friend in the tunnels, who gave me my name.

Mika’s much older sister was almost always on drugs

but for a few months she tried to give it up. She found a job at a hairdresser and a tiny apartment in the eastern part of town, and she let Mika stay there during the day. It wasn't much of a place but it was warm, and as long as the 'good-for-nothing, scumbag landlord' didn't knock on the door asking for rent money, it was an okay place to hang out.

Mika found an old DVD in the flat. It was the first season of an ancient TV series called *Ally McBeal* and she watched it every day on her sister's player. When she returned to the tunnels at night, she would recount each episode for me. She could remember entire scenes, and she acted out the dialogue so well I felt as if I had seen the show myself.

'You know, you're just like her,' she once said, referring to the main character in the series. 'You should call yourself Ally.'

'You think I'm like a lawyer?' I said and laughed, thinking that sometimes Mika was more than just a little crazy.

'Not like a lawyer,' she said. 'But sassy, serious. And real smart, you know? Shit, no one can draw like you, girl.'

I wish Mika was here now. I wish she hadn't died. And I wish I could tell her about Teeth, and how desperate I am to get hold of Bon.

I pull a pink tablecloth from the crate, feeling sweat trickle down my back. It's always hot in here, it doesn't matter what the weather is like outside. Open windows aren't allowed. I guess they're scared we're going to leap, one after the other, a migration of kids ending our lives six storeys below, on the snow-covered lawn.

That would be an inconvenience. The Administration's laundry would not be done.

I look at the guards in the corner, I can't help it. Teeth is still there.

'Girl, pay attention,' says Fi.

I've inserted the tablecloth without pulling it tight, and it's come out all creased.

Fi hands it back to me. A smooth, quick gesture. The guards don't like us making mistakes. I spray it with water, then feed it into the press again, pulling tight as I do.

'What are you staring at?' she asks.

'Nothing.'

But Fi is not stupid. She knows something is up and it's only a matter of time before she will look and draw attention to us.

'They've doubled the guards,' I offer.

She lowers her voice. 'Someone blew up a train at Central Station. People died.'

'A train?' I whisper, reaching for the next sheet.

‘I’ve heard the new guards are staying until ONE’s birthday. Just to make sure we don’t start a revolution and kill his guests or something.’

‘Who blew up the train?’

Fi leans over and catches the tablecloth from the press, and I get a full view of her cleavage, which, like the rest of her, is pretty perfect. ‘I’m not sure,’ she says. ‘But I know why. Maslin is bringing back the Citizens Act.’

‘What?’ I almost stop working but catch myself and place the next sheet in the press. ‘But that’s crazy. Where did you hear that?’

Fi shrugs.

‘But she was against that,’ I say. ‘And *none* of us can prove our family goes three generations back.’

‘Honey,’ she says, ‘lower your voice.’

I nod, but my hands shake as I try to keep the sheet straight. I burn my thumb. ‘Shit,’ I say.

Fi leans closer. ‘They haven’t exactly kept their word, have they? They locked us up, right? So why not this?’

‘But that means ...’

‘We’re screwed,’ she says. ‘And that we won’t be citizens after all.’

‘Who told you?’

Fi doesn’t answer. I glance over and see her tap her index finger against the bench, a slight movement,

almost undetectable, but a clear warning.

I smell him before looking up. It's the guard we call Pinkie. He's always on S — the pink amphetamine balls they push up between teeth and gum. When the ball dissolves it colours the lips pink. The smell is putrid and sugary, like stale sweat.

'Ladies.' He stands so close that his breath almost makes me gag.

Fi looks up and flashes him a smile as if she had no idea he was coming our way. I have to hand it to her; her acting skills are brilliant.

'Guard,' she says. 'You look mighty handsome today.'

Fi's smile is so wide that I'm sure he can see the gum in her mouth.

He blushes, just a little, and I look down. There is no way of knowing what he will do if he feels humiliated.

'Talking about anything interesting?' He speaks softly, as if trying to imitate Elenore Maslin.

The other guards look in our direction, waiting, hands resting on the butts of their guns.

'I was just mentioning the heat,' I say, glancing up again.

He narrows his eyes. 'The heat?'

Fi rolls her eyes at me and I want to kick myself. How could I be so stupid? Talking about heat will sound like a complaint.

‘Sorry,’ I say, and look down. ‘We are grateful to be warm when it’s so cold outside.’

‘You *should* be grateful,’ he says..

He takes his eyes off me and steps closer to Fi. ‘And you, gorgeous,’ he says, reaching over and suggestively pushing one of her curls out of her face. ‘You and I might have a chat later.’

‘Always happy to talk about the Administration’s great work,’ Fi says, then adds, ‘Long live our Benefactor,’ before beaming another big smile at him.

Pinkie withdraws his hand as though he’s burnt himself, then nods curtly. ‘All right, carry on,’ he says.

Fi and I stop talking. We can’t afford to attract more attention. Instead, we work. Sheets, tablecloths, pillowslips. One after the other, the pieces go through the press. Slowly, measuredly. But my thoughts are all over the place. Everything is wrong. Teeth. The Citizens Act. And who is fighting in the city?

When the bell announces the lunch break, I have twenty minutes to get to the kitchen floor to find Bon.

‘Your hair,’ says Fi, as we move with the crowd towards the doors.

I reach up and realise I’ve lost my elastic. I scan the floor around me, but everyone is pushing and squeezing to get out and I can’t see a thing. Fi pulls one from her pocket and hands it to me.

‘Thanks,’ I say, as we head out the doors.

I don’t bother getting my jumper from the hallway locker. Instead, I give Fi a wave. ‘I’ll see you after.’

‘You’re not coming for lunch?’

‘No, I’m seeing Bon.’

## 2

The concrete stairwell used to be the building's fire escape. Now we all use it. The lifts are reserved for the guards, just like the lounge areas and the original Hilton bathrooms on each floor.

My steps echo as I start down the stairs. Outside, snow keeps falling. Down in the yard, a bright yellow van is parked. It says *Karl's Balloon and Party Decorations* on the side. Even though there are three days to go, deliveries for ONE's birthday keep coming.

I remember my hair and put it in a ponytail as I quickly continue down, passing the metal works floor.

I can't count the times I've thought of cutting my hair. It's long, dark and shiny and might have served me well in a normal life, but in here looking feminine is dangerous and I'm not tough like Fi.

But Bon loves it. He once said it reminded him of water.

I laughed. 'That doesn't make any sense.'

'It's just the feeling I get when I look at it,' he said.

I don't see things the way he does. He's able to see

something good even in the worst things. He still believes we will make it out of here one day, as long as we keep our heads down and work.

But there's nothing good about this situation. If Teeth is placed as guard on the kitchen floor, it's only a matter of time before he'll spot Bon. You don't forget someone who tried to kill you.

Another flight of stairs. I reach the kitchen floor.

The hallway is empty. Everyone is on a break like us. I hear a sea of voices and the clanging of cutlery from the dining hall. I smell the salty soy cutlets we get every day, and the grey mash that tastes nothing like potatoes. It's kind of a bad joke. The kitchen workers prepare gourmet meals for the Administration and get tasteless food as a reward.

Their floor is identical to ours. Dining hall, bathrooms for guards, bathrooms for us, a guards' lounge — and then, of course, the huge industrial kitchen.

I pass the guard stationed at the door to the dining hall and scan the crowd of skinny boys in oversized chef's jackets. I can't see Bon anywhere, but I spot Berger and Ollie in the corner. Berger always stands out with his red hair and pale freckled skin. He's whiter than white, whiter than any of us.

It looks as if he and Ollie are arguing. Again. This

happens every other day. I don't know how they stay friends. They're total opposites. Ollie is quiet and sensitive, while Berger is loud and always in your face with his cheesy pick-up lines mixed with strange quotes from Nietzsche, his favourite philosopher. I honestly don't know if he's ever got lucky.

I leave the noisy hall and head towards the kitchen. Bon sometimes stays behind to practise cooking techniques. I think he's about the only one in the Towers who likes his job.

A pitiful attempt has been made to put up Christmas decorations in the guards' lounge. Two strings of gold and red garlands have been stretched across the room, catching the smoke from the group sitting around the table.

One of them sees me looking. 'Like what you see, sweetheart?' he says, and licks his lips suggestively.

I'm careful not to look back. Their roaring laughter follows me down the hallway.

The kitchen is empty and almost unrecognisable. There are things everywhere. Boxes of produce are stacked precariously along walls and every steel bench is littered with ingredients — some I've never seen before. This is even more extravagant than what they usually cook for the Administration. There are trays of cherries, and

some of tiny yellow berries so glossy they look as if they're about to burst. Blue fish in steel basins. Crabs. Yellow pears. Large bags of flour, slabs of butter. Big blocks of milk chocolate. My mouth waters. And I hope Bon gets a chance to bring some back for me, even though it's not allowed.

'Who knew you would be so good at this?' I said once, biting into a small tart he'd brought me, wrapped in a napkin and hidden in his pocket. He'd explained that it was filled with feta cheese and eggplant. Neither Bon nor I had tasted anything like it before we came to the Towers, but Bon seemed to have a great sense of what might go well together, and the Administration liked his cooking.

'How did you come up with that?' I asked.

He leant over to brush a crumb off my chin. 'I just think of what I want to feed you.' He grinned. 'You're too thin.'

Looking around the fully stocked kitchen, I know Bon will be in heaven. Unless he's been put on butcher's duty, which could explain why he's stayed behind.

Working in the butchery is hard. Their quotas are crazy; they do twice as much as the rest of the kitchen crew. But that's not why Bon doesn't like it. He doesn't like cutting up carcasses. He says the smell reminds him of the tunnels. Of death. But we still sometimes

meet there if we have something important to talk about. We've been doing it ever since we realised the Administration bugs our rooms.

I cross the kitchen to the butchery and enter the freezing room. The sounds from the dining hall go mute as the door closes behind me.

'Bon?' I call out.

The sheep carcasses block the view to the back of the room. They hang in rows from steel rods. Rows and rows. I don't like to look at them. I can't help imagining their once soft fur and floppy ears.

Large chunks of meat lie abandoned on the steel benches. Bloodied aprons are tossed next to them. Everyone's on a break.

'Bon?' I call out as I continue towards the back. But all I find is a rack filled with white work-coats near the window. The butchery is empty.

Ollie sees me when I return to the dining hall. He and Berger are no longer arguing. Instead, he's in the middle of folding a piece of scrap paper. He does it all the time. Makes swans, flowers, deer out of waxy food wrappings and butcher's paper.

Ollie gets up and comes towards me. I'm still not used to seeing him in a chef's jacket. I keep remembering him in the tunnels: dirty hoodie and jeans, always staying