

Roisín O'Donnell

Nesting



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For Mary and Áine

At first

I was land.

I lay on my back to be fields
and when I turned
on my side

I was a hill
under freezing stars.

I did not see.

I was seen.

Night and day

words fell on me.

Seeds. Raindrops

Chips of frost.

From one of them

I learned my name.

I rose up. I remembered it.

Now I could tell my story.

It was different

from the story told about me.

'Mother Ireland', Eavan Boland

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I

BEFORE THUNDER

SPRING 2018

Ciara steps out of the car and a cold sea wind catches her breath, whipping her hair across her face. After some manoeuvring, ignoring tuts from the passenger seat, she's managed to squeeze her old silver Micra into a tight parking spot across the road from Skerries beach. The April afternoon sky stretches bright and clear. Above the rooftops of the sea-front terraces, gulls glide as if manipulated by invisible wires, their taut wings motionless.

The passenger door slams.

Ryan rounds the car, and she hears him open the boot. Ciara turns, pushing her hair from her eyes. Struggling against the weight of the wind, she hauls open the back door to a torrent of 'Me first, me first, me first!' Four-year-old Sophie has unbuckled her own seatbelt. She squeezes under her mum's arm and jumps onto the pavement, dark pigtails flying.

'Yes! The sea! Can we build a castle, Daddy?'

Ciara doesn't catch Ryan's reply. She's too busy grappling with the buckle on two-year-old Ella's grimy red car seat. This car needs to be cleaned. Deep-cleaned. Christ. That's why they always take her old banger to the beach instead of

Ryan's pristine jeep. Finally the buckle opens. 'Wha-la! There we go, missus. Freedom.'

'Up, Mammy.' Ella reaches out one of her chubby arms, still so young that she has dimples where her elbows should be. Her other arm is hooked as always around Hoppy the blue rabbit with the love heart sewn on his chest. Threadbare in parts, stuffing gone lumpy, he looks somehow both careworn and wise.

'Come on up then.' She kisses Ella's cheek and nuzzles her neck, inhaling the faint smell of bananas and porridge.

Sophie has skipped ahead into the sand dunes with Ryan. There's something comical about their mismatched figures. Her fluorescent orange cycling shorts, butterfly top and sparkly hairclips, alongside his black T-shirt, pressed jeans, dark grey hair combed neatly in place. Despite her father's grip on her hand, Sophie is still managing to dance.

Sharp blonde stems of sand reed scratch Ciara's ankles as she weaves through the dunes with Ella on her hip. 'You see the sea, Ella love?'

The strand curves in a crescent around the bay, striated with bands of crushed shells, driftwood, seaweed. RTÉ forecast twenty degrees for today. An April high, which clearly didn't factor in the bitter gusts sweeping off the Irish Sea. Sunday afternoon, the beach is dotted with clusters of people huddling under coats or sheltering behind windbreakers, determined to make the best of it.

At the end of the boardwalk, her runners sink into the sand. When she's caught up with Ryan she puts Ella down and stands beside him looking out to sea. 'Tide's out,' she comments, for something to say.

Ryan turns to her. 'I'm taking them swimming.'

His grey eyes study her face, testing her. He was in such good form this morning, when he announced they were going to the beach, but already something has changed. What has she done this time? Her heart begins to quicken.

'Swimming? As in like, paddling? Sure they'll love that.'

'I said swimming. Proper swimming. They're big enough.'

'But they don't know how to swim?' She tries to laugh. 'It's bitter, Ryan. They'll freeze.'

He folds his arms across his chest. His lips set in a thin, determined line. She hears her mum saying, *Pick your battles, love.*

'Okay. Swimming. Why not. I'll stick the wetsuits on them there. Girls! Come here to me, will you?'

The wetsuits are from last summer. Ella's is so tight she can't bend her arms. Ryan stands watching as she hauls Sophie's back zip up, lifting her daughter off her feet. 'Hey Mammy! Stop! You're hurting me!'

'There now hun, perfect.' Sophie waddles away like a bad-tempered penguin. Imagine if Sinéad were here, how she'd laugh at the sight of her nieces.

Ryan is pulling off his T-shirt, frowning. 'Did you not get them new wetsuits? I thought I gave you the money?'

She mumbles something about the suits being out of stock and busies herself unlacing her runners and rolling her black leggings up over her knees. Feeling his stare on her, she ties her hair back, zips up her pale-pink fleece.

Ella toddles up and grabs her hand. 'Mammy, come!'

They leave their beach bags and rolled-up towels on the

dry sand, above the hungry creep of the advancing tide. Her daughters pull her over the harder, wave-rippled sand, onto the place where the wet beach mirrors the sky.

At the first lick of the frothy waves at their toes, the girls squeal and run away. Ciara curses under her breath. It's even colder than she expected. Waves slapping up her bare calves. The wind, menthol. What if there are jellyfish? Blooms of Lion's Manes, drifting in Dublin Bay. Stepping deeper, into the tug of undercurrents, she imagines tentacles lacing unseen between her children's bodies. God forbid any of them get stung. If anything happens to ruin this day, it will be her fault.

Ryan strides over, takes Sophie's hand. 'Come on, we're going swimming. We're going deeper.'

Sophie shrieks each time a wave hits her. Ella is pulling at her mum's fleece wanting to be lifted. She scoops her daughter onto her hip again. The wetsuit isn't making much difference. Ella's teeth are chattering.

'Cold, Mammy.'

'It's okay love, you'll be okay. Isn't this great fun? Will we try to jump the waves?'

She eyes Ryan. How long do they have to endure this?

At the diving spot by the Martello tower, people are preparing to jump. Open-water swimmers, leaning against the rocks, wrapped in coats and towels. If any of them were to glance in her direction, what would they see? A happy family? Out near the horizon, Skerries Island looks like a sleeping giant with a friendly beer belly curving out of the water. She wants to point this out to Ella, to laugh about it together. But right now, there's no space for stories.

'I'm freezing! It's too, too cold!' Sophie splashes over and wraps her thin arms around Ciara's waist. 'Can we get out now, Mammy? I want to get out NOW!'

Ryan is cupping water in his hands, tipping it over his shoulders. He fixes her with a look of contempt. 'They just have to get used to it.'

'They're cold, Ryan.' She cringes at the pleading in her voice. 'It's too cold for them. I think I'd better bring them in.'

'Fine.'

'I'm sorry it's just I don't want them getting—'

'I said that's fine.'

He turns his back and dives in, muscular arms slicing into the water, swimming away from them.

Maybe he'll keep aiming for the horizon. Maybe he'll end up in Greenland.

Stop. You can't think that. Jesus.

The girls run back up the beach, Ella wailing 'Cold, cold, cold!' One at a time, she peels off their wetsuits and bundles the girls into the bathroom towels she shoved in the beach bag this morning. Sophie howls when she rubs her dry. Suddenly Ciara is four years old again, sitting on Castlerock beach during those summer trips home to Derry, her mum rubbing a scratchy towel on her goose-bumped, sandy skin.

'How about some food?' Ryan's voice takes her by surprise.

She hadn't noticed him getting out of the sea. He's always had this habit of appearing quietly, startling her. His question is directed at Sophie, who goes all shy, buries her head in her mum's chest.

There it is again, that voice in her head. *Haven't you got*

what you wanted? The thing you've been secretly longing for? A lovely home in Ireland. Two little girls. Pigtails curling in the salty spray, jumping around in Minnie Mouse swimsuits with frills around the bums. Ryan, a loyal, hard-working husband. The type of man who other women sneak glances at, when he's pushing the swings or ordering lunch, or standing – as he is right now – bare chested, towel-drying his hair. And yet – on this bright day with seagulls screeching – there's a gathering weight in her chest, like the feeling before thunder.

Slides, see-saws and sea-rusted swings. The cold wind has died down, and there's some warmth in the late afternoon sun. Along Skerries Harbour, there's a festive atmosphere, couples and families walking along the seafront. A boy is flying a dragon kite over the marina, and a man is using a drone to film his kids, who are trying to down it with rocks. 'I've told you,' he is saying. 'I have specifically asked you to please not.'

At Storm in a Teacup, she orders ninety-nines for the girls and Ryan.

'Not having anything?' He speaks without looking at her.

'I'll share some of theirs,' she says. 'I'm not that hungry.'

Soon, Ella has a dripping vanilla beard. Raspberry syrup oozes between Sophie's fingers. Ciara mops their chins with paper napkins, creating a shredded gloopy mess.

'Here, let Mammy have some of that.' She takes a bite of Ella's ice cream, aiming to get rid of it before it melts completely. The sweetness makes her stomach turn. She can feel

Ryan watching closely. 'Oh God. The state of them. Ice cream is never that brilliant an idea, is it?'

Ryan says nothing. *Here it is. The start of another of his silences.*

A headache is building at the base of her skull. Her body, flooded by the uncanny sense that she's trapped. Stuck in this bright day forever. She's invisible, walking unseen through the crowds. Other women are happily herding children, holding partners' hands or strolling with friends, talking. Her little meandering family blends in perfectly, so why are these dark thoughts swirling again?

Two years since she returned to Ryan. A couple of months since she stashed the wetsuit money in the nappy bag on some blind impulse. A flush of guilt, as if she's a smear on the perfect day, sullyng the moment. She remembers that wartime painting she once saw in the Tate on a school trip to Liverpool. People on a merry-go-round. From a distance they looked happy. It was only when you looked closer that you could tell they were screaming.

The drive home to Glasnevin takes half an hour. Whenever she stops at a red light, she sneaks glances at Ryan. Her husband is on his phone, scrolling, brow furrowed, maintaining his aloof saint pose. *Like St Peter*, she thinks, *standing on a knot of snakes*. She wouldn't have known about this before she met Ryan. Now she has an impressive knowledge of the gospels and the Old Testament – the burn-in-hell parts, and the parts related to women who disrespect their husbands.

Her attempts at conversation have become increasingly

desperate. She sounds like a radio talk-show host running out of ideas, prattling into the small hours with no one listening.

She's shrinking, during this late afternoon drive back into the city. She's fading, as she drives down the Clontarf Road, into that view over Dublin; the city clasped like a crab's claw around the bay. Beyond, the crooked wizard's hat shape of the Sugarloaf. The blink of the candy-striped Poolbeg chimneys.

'Grand day out wasn't it?' she tries.

Ryan says nothing. He won't even make eye contact, has barely spoken to her since the beach. It's as if he can't really see her, can't see past his anger for long enough. If only she could flip the switch back to how he was this morning, when his good mood stretched between them in a warm panel of sun.

She parks in the driveway of their pebble-dashed semi on Botanic Close. A boxy 1970s build, with a long narrow front garden, overgrown hedges. The landlord or a previous tenant planted pyracantha along the wall, and it has webbed out, ugly thorns reaching in all directions. A bloody graveyard plant, her mum called it, the last time she came to visit. Now at least Ciara's daffodils are brightening the place up, nodding their heads in the breeze.

Ryan gets out before she's even stopped the engine. He unbuckles the girls, brings them inside. She hears them screeching with laughter in the hallway.

Opening the boot, she's caught by a head rush. *Another one.* She waits for it to pass, then takes out the beach bag, the

dripping wetsuits, the heavy, saturated towels, the plastic bag full of buckets and spades. She lowers the rear door using her elbow, shuts it with her backside. In the gloomy hallway, she stops and throws everything in a sandy heap on the lino by the coat stand.

Ella shouts, 'AGAIN, DADDY!'

In the living room, Ryan is swinging the girls around, turning them into pendulums held by the ankles. A one-man version of Tayto Park.

She peeks round the door frame. 'Looks like great craic.'

Ryan looks at her as if she is something small and shit-caked, then goes back to swinging Ella and Sophie.

They love him. He's a good dad. Isn't he?

She shuts the kitchen door against their delighted squeals, boils a kettle, whips out a bag of penne, pops open a jar of tomato sauce and soon has some class of pasta concoction bubbling. Then without even thinking, she's in the bathroom wearing rubber gloves, armed with a spray bottle of Flash, and a pack of J-cloths.

It's a habit that started when she was pregnant with Sophie. She used to call it 'nesting'. That thing women do when they sense their baby is arriving soon. Grouting, hoovering, taking a mad notion to paint the backyard wall Azores Blue. Only, she didn't sense an arrival but an impending threat. Cleaning, painting, fixing every centimetre of that house felt like the only thing that was safe.

'Girls! Dinner's ready!'

Sophie clatters into the kitchen, moaning about being thirsty. Ella refuses to let anyone help her into her highchair.

Ryan looks at the pasta on his plate, moves it around with his fork and then stands abruptly.

'I'm going out.'

She's in the kitchen scrubbing sauce off the Peppa Pig placemats when she hears the front door click. Wrung out, this is how she feels. Drained. After dinner, the girls' bubble bath, teeth brushing and bedtime stories. After emptying beach bags, shaking out towels, standing in the dark rinsing small wetsuits under the garden tap. The bright kitchen lights were giving her a headache, so she turned them off and plugged in the side lamp instead. Her eyes are hot, her body aches. And now it's that dreaded time of night, when the girls are asleep and she's no longer shielded by their scuffle and song.

Ryan walks into the kitchen. He boils the kettle, makes a mug of camomile tea for himself and sits down at the table. Ciara moves away, fills the sink and starts going at the saucepans with a Brillo pad and a generous squirt of Fairy liquid.

When she cannot take the silence any longer, she pulls the plug, drying her hands on her top and turns to him, tries to sound casual. 'So, where did you disappear off to?'

'Out. I needed some space.' He laces his hands on the table and looks at her. 'I was totally humiliated today. All I wanted was to bring my children swimming, like any normal father.'

'But we did go swimming! We were in the water for a while.'

'Please,' he scoffs. 'We were in the water for about two minutes before you insisted we get out. You're always trying

to control me. Just like your bloody mother, the way she orchestrates everything.'

'Look this isn't fair, Ryan. I just . . . Don't bring my mum into this, please. I know you hate her, but—'

'What, are you kidding me? I've never said anything bad about your mother. Anyway,' – he's glaring at her now – 'where is that money I gave you for the wetsuits? And the change from last week's shop?'

She can't seem to find the words.

It's that head-spinning feeling again. Becoming untethered. Grasping for memories that disappear as soon as she settles on them. Last time her mum came over from Sheffield, she had to stay in a B&B because Ryan wouldn't let her in the house. If only she could just press pause. If they could communicate through calm-voiced interpreters, like at a UN conference. Failing this, she needs to stop the conversation before it deteriorates further. *The wetsuit money is hidden, with the rest of my pilfered notes. My getaway fund.* Her heart quickens at that flicker of tension in his jawbone. She has very little time left to avert this.

'I have a headache, Ryan. I have to finish cleaning—'

'You have a headache? Ha! How the hell do you think I feel? I've had a headache for the last five years, dealing with this crap from you. Lying bitch. I want that money back tomorrow.'

Please don't do this. Please.

Anything she says will be wrong. Words are useless. She has to step outside of language, away from it, into pure action. She reaches for a dishcloth.

'What the hell are you doing now?'

'Cleaning the sink.' Her hands are shaking. 'Look, I'm sorry for upsetting you, I didn't mean—'

'What, are you fucking kidding me? You're not sorry at all. What's wrong with you? You're crazy. No wonder you've no friends. I'm done with you.'

'Ryan, please can we just—'

'I said I'm fucking done.'

He stands up, chair legs shrieking against the tiles, and pushes the chair back so hard it clatters over. Her heart jumps.

He sidesteps past her, as if she's something diseased and festering, and fires his mug into the steel sink so hard the handle breaks, leaving flecks of china in the suds and on her hands. Leaving the kitchen, he slams the door with such force that the side lamp topples off the table and onto the tiles. The bulb shatters, plunging the room into darkness.

Hands shaking, still holding the checked J-cloth. Lemony Fairy liquid. Blood pounding in her ears, deafening. She has become the house. The toppled chair. The smashed bulb. The broken handle. Her bones and blood.

She waits and watches and listens.

One. Two. Three. Four.

A slit of light flickers around the kitchen door. His heavy steps reveal how far he is, how close.

Nights like this, she knows this is real, she's not imagining it. The fear is bright, animal, sure. Pure blue at the heart of a flame.

Afterwards, it's always more difficult. There will be no apologies, and if she dares bring it up, he'll scoff. *What are*

you even talking about? She will begin to wonder if it was all in her mind. Eventually his footsteps creak up the stairs. Their bedroom door slams. She's suddenly freezing. Shaking. She drops the greasy dishcloth, reaches for the blue hoodie on the back of her chair.

She swats on the light over the oven. The shocked kitchen stares back. A glitter of glass on the taupe floor tiles. She picks up plates, rights the chair, sweeps the shards – moving slowly, as if the house were made of ice.