

Powder

Eithne glanced at the passenger seat, expecting Sandy to be asleep. The woman had to be exhausted. She had travelled to Dublin from Ohio through the night, a ninety mile car ride and two flights. But Sandy was wide awake, sitting very straight, clutching her bulging handbag close to her chest. It occurred to Eithne that Ethan's ashes were not in the big red suitcase. His mother was holding him in her arms.

'Are you hungry, Sandy?'

'I guess. I haven't eaten since last night. Or I think it was last night.'

They stopped at Barak Obama Plaza, a place Ethan had found hilarious. Sandy didn't get the joke. Inside, they sat at a plastic table. Sandy lined up her food in front of her, like a child in a school canteen. A skin was forming on the paper cup of baked beans she had ordered.

'So. We're on the road, Sandy.'

'Mhhmm. Yes we are.'

'You'll love the scenery. Especially if we get the weather.'

'I'm sure it'll be just fine, honey.'

The week was going to be torturous. There was only so much small talk anyone could be expected to make.

Sandy picked up a piece of popcorn chicken. A pale, surprised looking boy with flesh tunnels through his ears sat beside her and emptied four sachets of sugar into his coffee.

'I wouldn't ate in this place,' he said, eyes flicking around the room and from one woman to the other 'if you fucken paid me. They kill the chickens by throwing them against the wall.' Sandy took a wide-eyed suck from her Coke, her expression like the boy's, and ate nothing until breakfast the next day.

Since then they had posed at the Rock of Cashel, kissed the Blarney Stone, idled in Killarney traffic watching shit fall into a leather nappy from the plump rump of a chestnut pony. From time to time, Eithne searched Sandy's face for a sign of collusion, for a look that said she found it bizarre too, touring Ireland in a rented Nissan Note, doing this most macabre of bucket lists. *Americans don't do black humour*, Ethan had told her, *especially my mother*. Sandy sat down to dinner in restaurants, ambled towards lake shores, leaned over cliff edges, all the time clutching her misshapen handbag, and scarcely raised her head to look around her. Months of planning had gone into the trip, but Sandy might as well have been anywhere.

It wasn't all bad. Sandy had chosen their accommodation from a small website, Secret Ireland. They stayed in elegant historic properties, places Eithne could not have afforded. Sandy had booked separate rooms, so after dinner Eithne could retreat to her room and gather herself.

On the fourth day they visited the Cliffs of Moher. When they arrived at the castle there was a problem; their rooms had been double booked. Sandy and Eithne would have to share. The only room left was a twin in a garret, with a grubby PVC skylight and a watermark above the toilet in the en-suite. Eithne couldn't face spending all evening in the room with Sandy. After dinner she went to the bar alone. She ordered a 'hedgerow martini' and sat in a blue and gold brocade armchair. The drink smelled of marzipan but tasted like garden compost. Ethan would have enjoyed it, not the flavour, the emperor's new clothes aspect of it. He used to order craft beers and rename them. *Scaly Brendan's Stagnant Bathwater*. *Nursing Brigid's Milk Stout*.

There were a few couples sitting at tables around the room. The lone man at the counter was tall and expensively dressed. When her drink was almost gone the barman brought her another. The man got off the stool and hoisted the front of his trousers. He came and stood by her table.

‘May I?’ His shirt was crisp, his wedding ring thick and pinkish.

‘I can hardly say no, can I?’ She held the glass up and took a long drink. He sat down.

His name was Ross. He was from Chicago. He was direct, in the way Ethan had been. She remembered she had liked being around someone so possessed of themselves. He was celebrating, he said, and told her about the deal he had signed with a start-up in Shannon. He had a company, a wife, two sons.

‘In that order?’ she asked.

‘It isn’t polite to talk about politics...’ he said, then talked about politics. He paused to let her laugh at his jokes and didn’t seem to expect her to say much. On another night this would have annoyed her. Tonight she enjoyed not having to make conversation. With Sandy, she found herself talking incessantly, a running commentary on what they were doing, where they were going. Trivial talk; between them, the important words were still unsaid.

Two more drinks arrived. Ross pulled his chair close and flexed his thigh against hers. The movement was precise, perfunctory. She wondered how many times he had done this. She felt drunk and sad. Sandy was alone upstairs while she was flirting with Ross, Republican Party reptile, who was wearing a shirt so well pressed that it rustled, presumably ironed by his wife. She stood suddenly and tried to blink away the drunken whirl she felt. Ross got up and patted his pockets for room key, mobile phone. How was she going to get out of this one?

‘After you.’

‘I’m a widow.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘I’m a widow. I’m here with my mother in law.’

‘I didn’t realise. I’m sorry, I...’

‘I’m sorry,’ she said and fled upstairs.

She was out of breath when she got to the room. Sandy was sitting up in bed, the handbag in her lap. Without her make-up her face was delicate, papery.

‘Jesus, Sandy. You weren’t waiting up for me, were you?’

‘Sometimes it takes a while for me to fall asleep.’

Eithne went in to the bathroom. She locked the door and looked in the mirror. Her roots were greasy, mauve under-eye circles showing where her concealer had worn off. If Sandy hadn’t been in the next room she would have made herself vomit.

‘Fucking get it together,’ she told her reflection. She went back into the bedroom, in time to see Sandy tilting pills from her palm into her mouth. Eithne got into bed, turned her back and switched off her lamp.

‘Goodnight, Eithne.’

‘Goodnight, Sandy.’

‘*Goodnight, Mary Ellen.*’

‘Very funny, Ethan,’ she murmured and fell asleep. She woke just after three with a headache, ‘hedgerow aromatics’ gurgling in her bowels. For the rest of the night she lay awake. Her shame deepened with each Ativan-thickened breath from the other bed.

Breakfast was served by the barman from the previous night. He was discreet and professional, like the brochure promised. When Ross came in, he seated him at a table near the window. Still, what if he came over, offered condolences to them? A flush rose from her neck to her cheeks. As for the food...Sandy had ordered her eggs ‘over easy’ and when they arrived undercooked, pierced the oily yoke with the tip of her knife. Eithne pushed her plate away and went outside for a cigarette. The secrets people kept, the lies they told... and she was no better. How was she going to get through the week?

Yet she did. They had Guinness and oysters by a weir in Clarinbridge, and spent a night in Galway city. They took the road from Leenane to Louisburg through Doulagh and

caught a ferry to Clare Island. If Sandy was vague and distracted, she was also polite and charming. Wherever they went the staff loved her. Eithne didn't feel the need to talk so much and once or twice had to admit to herself she might actually be having fun.

On the way to Inishowen they visited Yeats' grave. It was windy, the shelf of Benbulbin blurred by low cloud. Some of the older graves were overhung with pink hydrangeas. Even Sandy was captivated.

'They reckon they reinterred the wrong bones. Louis Macneice said they buried a Frenchman with a club foot,' said Eithne, reading from her phone. Sandy looked appalled. The black humour thing again.

For their final night they arrived at a dowager house at the end of a long avenue dimmed by unkempt woodland. A balding man in his fifties greeted them.

'Hey ho. Is there a dead body in here?' he said, using a knee and both hands to get the red case out of the boot. He staggered inside with it. His name was Redmond O'Neill. He gave a short history of the house, of *the family*, and joked about Victorian plumbing as he led them upstairs.

When Eithne had come here with Ethan in the winter they stayed at the golf resort, a vanity project built by a developer who had long since fled. She hated the mock Georgian facade, the purple and taupe bar area that could have been in Birmingham or Riga or Perth. They walked to the village for a pint. Paint flaked from the closed door of the only pub, a price-list in punts bleached almost blank in the window.

She was glad Sandy had chosen this old house. There was a gravity about it, with its dark furniture and drab oil portraits of unsmiling men in Victorian dress, although it too was changing. A famous sportsman had married a starlet here the previous Easter. Features on it had begun to appear in Sunday supplements and fashion magazines. Now the quietly rich who had enjoyed it for years found themselves at the communal table in the evenings in the

company of Americans doing Europe and thirty-somethings from Dublin who changed for dinner. People like Sandy and Eithne.

She paused on the turn of the staircase to put her bag in her other hand. She felt a heave of dread that they would have to share a room again. They crossed the landing onto a wide corridor filled with soft yellow light. A rusty dappling from a rowan tree at an arched window flickered across the carpet. It felt as though the house was rising out of the damp wood.

‘Your mother has the best room in the house,’ said Redmond.

‘Oh, she’s not my mother.’ She sounded cheerful. She blushed.

‘Eithne and my son were engaged,’ said Sandy. Redmond took in her use of the past tense. He let her words settle then pushed open a wide door. Sandy’s room was enormous, with a four poster bed hung with heavy tuberoses patterned linen, and views of a fast river lined by salleys and yellow irises. They arranged to meet in the lobby at three. Redmond led Eithne to a room at the end of the corridor. It had a high, narrow bed covered with a quilt in shades of kingfisher and royal blue, a tiny chaise longue under a tall window. After he left, she lay on the bed and flicked through the welcome pack, a folder of fliers for walks and attractions in the area, bound in faux leather. She had done some of them with Ethan. Now she would have to do them with Sandy. She closed her eyes. One more night. She had endured Ethan’s death, and his funeral. Surely she could do this?

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Eithne had met Ethan on a team building weekend in Connemara; Plex.com liked its staff to socialise. Ethan had just arrived from Head Office in Portland, Oregon. He was casually excellent at the activities, most of which she found hateful. She didn’t notice him before the trip, but he seemed to be everywhere after it.

‘Ethan and Eithne,’ he said when he asked her out the following week. ‘Serendipitous. It’s worth a go.’ The sheer corny cheek of him made her say yes. After a while he extended his contract, kept the shiny apartment the company were paying for at Grand Canal Quay. On weeknights she slept over; it was convenient for work. She held on to the tiny terraced house in Phibsboro she had bought when the boom was still getting boomier, a dim cave of bazaar colours and old lady things, chunky china from the forties and fifties and G Plan side boards painted in high gloss finishes. The spinster house, Ethan called it. They settled into a sort of domesticity, without the routine that might have made it dreary. And then he died.

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Eithne went downstairs at ten to three. Sandy was waiting, freshly changed into a white short sleeved blouse trimmed with navy anchors, and navy trousers. She had fixed her hair and was holding her raincoat. She had lost weight since the funeral, but her flesh still seemed to inhabit her clothes, even when it wasn’t there anymore. There was a tug around the buttons at her breasts that gave her a wanton look. It was as if Nancy Reagan had been cast in an am-dram production of a Tennessee Williams play.

‘Where would you like to go first, Sandy?’

‘Well I don’t know, honey. What do you think?’ This had been her answer to everything since they had set out. Today Eithne found it irritating.

‘We have to wait til dusk to...’ Eithne stopped. Redmond O’Neill was fitting a bottle of Black Bush to an optic in the morning room. She couldn’t bear to let him hear the rest of the sentence.

We’ll have to wait til dusk to sprinkle the last of Ethan off Malin Head.

They told Redmond they would be at the table by eight thirty. Outside, it had clouded over. Montbretia and fuchsia combed the hire car as Eithne turned left. They passed through villages rubbed out and written over by the spidery outlines of new towns, unfinished houses

that would never be homes, shopping centres without roofs or windows let alone shops. Once, they waited at a pedestrian crossing and watched the green man flash at an empty street.

‘Where is everybody?’ asked Sandy.

In a town near the border, they parked behind a closed down hardware shop. They dipped under overfed hanging baskets and went into a hotel. The foyer smelled of pine disinfectant. Sandy ordered food in the bar, ‘veg’ soup tinged acid yellow with synthetic bouillon, a chicken sandwich on thick soft bread that oozed butter and grey stuffing. She said it was delicious; maybe it was. Ethan had said the food in the States was foul, unless you bought at a farmers’ market from a hipster with an MBA. But as in every other place, Sandy ate almost nothing. It was as though she hadn’t yet realised that what she felt wasn’t hunger. It was a vast, ravenous grief.

Eithne excused herself. She went outside for a cigarette. The street suddenly filled with the sound of honking horns and a wedding car pulled up, a buttery vintage Rolls Royce with a v of primrose ribbon pulled taut across the bonnet. The father of the bride got out first, a big man with pink hands and a bashful smile. Cars emptied shivering tangerine-tinted girls and sticky-haired boys on to the street. Eithne went inside and paid the bill. Sandy’s face crumpled as the bride beat her way past in stiff skirts. Eithne pretended not to notice.

She took the coast road where she could and found herself naming each bay, each townland.

‘You know this place so well, now,’ Sandy said.

Now? My father was from here. This is my place, Eithne didn’t say.

‘We won’t be able to see the Northern Lights at this time of year, Sandy. Don’t you know that?’ Eithne wanted her to make a decision. Sandy just patted her arm.

‘I know that, honey.’

‘We can still wait til dusk if you want. Only it won’t make any difference.’

‘I guess we could go now, then.’

Eithne doubled back, and got onto the road north. Beside her, Sandy became almost animated. She held the handbag to herself and talked about Ethan; how good he had been at sport, and music, and maths (math she called it). How funny he was, and smart, like his father. She talked about him as if he was someone Eithne might like to meet. They went through Malin Village and Sandy murmured approval at its close cut green and cotton-white shop fronts. They passed a huge church and small rust-dribbled bungalows before they reached the blocky fort and modest weather station at Malin Head.

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Ethan had booked the trip to Donegal for her birthday. On the way there they walked Derry’s walls and ate fat buttery prawns in a restaurant overlooking an abandoned border post. The next morning, Ethan got up at eight to play golf. To Eithne, it seemed such a grown up thing to do on a Saturday morning. She lay in the bath for a long time and read a book. In the afternoon they went for a walk on Culdaff beach and had a pint beside a turf fire in a pub that was showing fake horse races.

Just after four they left for Malin Head. Ethan wanted to see the Northern Lights. When they pulled into the car park, there was one other car, a red Toyota with a northern number plate. A couple got out, a trim pair in their sixties in matching blue anoraks. They followed Ethan and Eithne to the information board and stood beside them. According to the forecast, it wouldn’t rain until the next afternoon, but Eithne felt bright briny spits on her cheeks. She pulled Ethan towards the headland.

‘Is this far enough north for you?’ Ethan didn’t answer. The other couple walked after them and stood nearby, smiling. The sky was low and leaden.

‘We’ll see nothing tonight,’ the man said. They went back to their red car.

‘Jesus. How depressing are they? ‘His n hers’ pacamacs,’ Eithne said.

‘This country drives me crazy. Satellite pictures and they still can’t give an accurate weather report.’

‘It comes in off the Atlantic. It’s unpredictable.’ She felt defensive, somehow.

Ethan was quiet when they sat down to dinner. He seemed disappointed in that way he had that always seemed churlish to her. It happened when he went to a shop on a Monday and found it closed, or when he couldn’t talk someone round to his point of view. It happened when Eithne didn’t want the same things as him. She looked up, ready to distract him, make him laugh. He was scowling at the wine list.

‘Bottle of merlot,’ he told the waitress. Murr-low. Not even murr-low please.

‘I’d prefer white.’ Eithne was surprised at herself, even more surprised than Ethan.

‘We always drink red.’

‘Well, I want to drink white tonight.’ She took the list and pointed at a bottle. ‘Order the red as well. I’m thirsty.’

They left the next morning after an early breakfast. On the way home, they stopped at Grianan an Aileach. She got out of the car, leaving Ethan with his camera and guide book. She went inside the ring fort. She hadn’t been since she was a teenager. She had worried that it would seem small, less majestic than it had when she was young. It still stunned her. She tramped the soft grass and climbed up the stone terraces, too tall now to hug herself to the walls as she walked around them.

Her father had taken them there to see the solstice once. A rod of golden light had dissected the circular fort, cast a line through it that seemed to cut across Inch Island, across the Foyle and Swilly waters. Even on a day like this, she thought the drab of cloud and field and grey water beautiful. When Ethan came into the circle she was standing in the centre, feet apart, as if straddling the line of the sun.

‘What the hell?’ said Ethan. He didn’t wait for an answer. He told her the history of the fort, facts he had read from the information board and the guide book, camera slung heavily around his neck. But what kind of knowledge was that?

On the drive back to Dublin they chatted much as they always did, but there had been a shift. Eithne knew this was all they could be to each other, travelling companions. She knew Ethan could feel it too. He dropped her at the spinster house before he returned the hire car. He said he would message her later. He didn’t. She thought little of it until the next day, when his secretary came to her desk to ask where he was.

The cause of death was a heart attack. Eithne and the caretaker of the building found him lying on his bed clad in black and orange lycra, still with his runners on. The caretaker opened the windows, to let his spirit out, he said. While they waited for the ambulance and police to come she lay on the bed beside him. His hair was frizzy, like Sandy’s when she got off the plane. Eithne had never seen it look like that before, and wondered how much time he spent making it not frizzy when he was alive. All the things she hadn’t known about him.

Later, she sat with the caretaker and looked at footage of him leaving the building. She watched him come out of the lift and bend to pull the tongue straight under the laces of his left shoe. She watched him raise a couple of fingers in salute at the caretaker and take off across the concourse. She watched him pause at the door and bend to breathe, one hour and eight minutes later. But where had he run to?

Eithne’s cousin was a Garda. He accessed the city’s CCTV footage and traced Ethan’s route. Cameras had captured him as he crossed the city, along the Liffey, past the Four Courts. The last images were after Blackhall Place. She watched him stand under a lamp post at the bottom of her street and look up towards her house. She watched him turn back.

The company informed his parents. Eithne told them to pass on her phone number and received a call from his father within the hour. Bob came to Dublin the next day to identify

his son. He asked Eithne if she wanted to see him but she said no. It was enough to have found him. There was a small service in Dublin before the body was flown to America. Eithne asked her mother to attend. Ethan's father seemed to expect it.

'I never realised they were that serious,' her mother told Bob. 'I only met the poor chap the once.'

The funeral service and cremation were in the States. Bob bought Eithne's ticket. Within a few minutes of landing, she realised why. She had been cast as the tragic young fiancée. Ethan had told his father that he was taking her to Donegal. He planned to propose. But he didn't, and Eithne couldn't say so. They mistook her mortification for a broken heart.

She found herself paired with Sandy in the funeral car, at the service, at lunch. Bob's second wife had arranged everything, the flowers, music, readings. Bob wrote the eulogy; he talked for twenty minutes and didn't mention Sandy. Eithne felt sorry for her, yet found her...pathetic, if she was honest. She had let Diane replace her as wife, almost as mother too. After the cremation his parents split his ashes. Ethan would have been amazed; they managed it without the services of a lawyer. Sandy contacted Eithne a few weeks later and asked her to accompany her on a trip around Ireland to scatter his remains. She had only met Ethan thirteen months earlier, and he had been dead for four of them. But what could she say?

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On a clear day you can see Tory Island from Malin Head, a stubborn bump in the water. Today there was just a dull white sky, the sudden loom and scream of gulls above them. Eithne helped Sandy across the basalt terrace towards the water's edge. The sea came over the rocks with gentle slaps and Eithne watched Sandy open the handbag for the last time. She had done this every day on the trip, but Eithne dreaded this one the most.

‘There is so little of him left,’ Sandy said. Eithne watched her put her hand inside the urn and pull out one of the little plastic sachets she had divided him into *for convenience*. Eithne pictured her standing at her kitchen counter, spooning her powdered son into sachets as though he was a street drug she was getting ready for sale. Eithne wondered which part it was. A hand. A lung. A ventricle from the heart that had given out in February.

‘What did Bob do with his share?’

‘Oh, he and Diane brought him to all the big places he had visited back home. The Empire State, places like that. Augusta, though her never got to play there.’

‘And you just wanted to bring him to Ireland?’

‘Oh no, honey. I brought him to Spring Valley Drive, where we used to live.’

His father had gone on a tour of America with his second wife. Sandy had taken Ethan back to the house they lived in when he was a child, before the divorce. Two families had lived there since they left. The woman of the house brought Sandy in for ice tea when she saw her crying outside. She let her look around the garden and brought her upstairs. Ethan’s old bedroom was a little girl’s bedroom. Nothing remained of him. She knew this would be the case, but found it devastating. She didn’t know what to do with him. She stood on the street outside the house, patting her pocket, trying to think of the right place. He was everywhere, and nowhere. In the end, she walked around the block and sprinkled him along the grass verges where he had thrown his bike.

Sandy tapped the last sachet against the back of her hand, like the boy in Barack Obama Plaza had with the sugar.

‘We came up here to see the Northern Lights. It was cloudy. I think he was disappointed,’ said Eithne.

‘Poor Ethan.’ She looked at Eithne. ‘He never really learned that you can’t always get what you want.’

Eithne watched her pivot until her back was to the wind. Sandy seasoned the Atlantic breeze with the last of her son. She turned to Eithne, her face bright with relief, with gratitude that she hadn't been left to do it alone. There was a smudge in a corner of the sachet. Sandy held out the little bag and Eithne took it from her. She tucked the last of Ethan into the pocket of her jeans. She might come back in the winter, on a clear night.