

The Risk Manager

The September I returned to Dublin from South America – directionless, deflated, almost broke - I signed up with a recruitment agency that specialised in public sector administrative jobs. I had spent most of the money my mother left me on a year-long trip, drifting between hostels, from experience to experience, in an attempt to free myself of the albatross of grief that had settled on me after her death. The last of my inheritance paid the deposit for an attic studio in a redbrick mid-terrace, on a cul-de-sac near the canal, upstairs from two students who were much younger than me. They left their bikes flung across the hallway and most nights, when I came home from the pub, I banged my ankle bone against a protruding pedal.

Before I left South America I had decided that I would sing. The urge came to me after a night in a white-washed basement bar in Buenos Aires. Sometime in the early hours, when the place had emptied, a woman pushed her chair back from a rickety table and stood up. She sang a song of intense sorrow, of a man in mourning for his lover, who made the night skies shudder with the sound of his wailing. The dead lover, her soul immortalised in a dove, perched at his window. The woman sang unaccompanied, and her voice was the rawest thing I had ever heard, noble and uncompromising.

I knew I had a reasonable voice. I came from a family of singers, of late nights and maudlin ballads, damp eyes in hushed rooms, but anytime I had tried to sing in public, my voice sounded weak and shallow, strangled at the source, trapped somewhere behind my solar plexus.

In a shop window near my new place, I saw a poster for an open mic on a Tuesday night in a pub on the northside. *Take the Plunge! Folk, Jazz, Blues!* The lounge was upstairs, an oval shaped room with an elaborately moulded cornice, and painted wall panels; there was a makeshift

plywood stage at the back, surrounded by low clunky brown stools and tables. Tea lights flickered in jam jars. I went straight to the back of the room, towards a semi-circular velvet banquette that ran underneath a tall stained-glass window, the highest panels of which opened into the street. At the interval, the guitarist climbed down from the stage and put a pint glass on each table, a collection for the house band. It could be a humiliating thing to do, I thought, to beg for your wages; but the way he flitted between the tables, swift, confident, joking - he made it look charming. When he got back on stage, he gave a call out for any singers that hadn't had their chance. No one came forward. There was just a whine of speaker feedback, the scuffle of feet, the scraping of stools being adjusted back into place.

In early October, the agency called me about a three-month job in a health centre. The bus dropped me near a large round treeless area, around which an estate spread out in boxy rows of terraced houses, some with elaborate double-glazed porches, and bump out rooms for the luckier end-of-terraces with larger gardens. I picked my way across the grass, my interview heels sinking into the damp ground. The centre was a one storey 1930s building brick building at the end of a row of small shops. There was a hairdressers, a bookies and a small supermarket that was permanently shuttered but always open; every afternoon, on their way home from school, the local kids tied dogs to empty gas canisters and threw poppers inside when the doors opened.

My boss was Joan, the most senior nurse, a tall, angular woman with broken veins on her cheeks who blushed anytime she had to make a decision or was asked an awkward question, the colour sweeping from her neck upwards. The first day she met me at the reception, and we sat together on one of the rows of fixed plastic seating, a sheaf of papers balanced on her lap, her knees crammed against the chair in front. I was to be a Grade Four. She repeated *Grade Four*,

with added emphasis on the number, as if this was something that should surprise me. The reason, she said, was that in addition to my *substantive* duties - manning the reception, signing for deliveries, answering phones - I was to be the centre Risk Manager.

A thick dogeared file, labelled RISKS, sat on top of a filing cabinet in the cluttered, dingy room behind reception. I was to sort the routine stuff, log repairs, follow up with Maintenance.

Anything serious was to be escalated to Senior Management. Joan repositioned a stack of wobbly baby formula tins and picked up an extension lead from the floor. Lethal, she said, with a sly smile, and she held it up high and let it clatter onto a desk.

The most pressing issue, right now, she said as she led me outside, is this. The pigeons. She pointed to a ledge that ran along the front of the building just under the deep-set eaves. A row of nests clung to the ledge, clusters of densely packed twigs and dirt, alive with frail quivering and fluttering. The walls and pavement underneath were streaked with bird droppings. The staff are driving me nuts, she said.

A large grey domed head poked out of one of the nests, and two orange eyes stared down at us. She, Joan said, is particularly vicious. The ringleader.

Most evenings I opened the Velux window in my attic room and practiced my singing. I had tracked down the lyrics of the song I had heard in Buenos Aires - the grieving man, the dove, *la pasion mortal* – and I sang along to recordings I found on YouTube, until the students below banged on the ceiling. But when I turned down recordings, and sang alone, the melodrama of the lyrics felt ridiculous, overblown, and I went out of tune, lost the flow of melody, and sank defeated onto the bed.

The health centre was busiest in the morning, which was when the nurses ran their baby clinics. Rows of plastic seats crammed with new mothers and babies, some strapped into huge buggies on tractor-like tyres, their heads barely visible underneath a mound of blankets. Toddlers bolted for the automatic doors and were yanked back pitilessly by the hoods of their padded boiler suits. In the afternoons, one or two patients on crutches would come looking to get their dressings changed; or sometimes an elderly woman, accompanied by a middle-aged son or daughter would come in to collect pads or drop in forms. The adult children were cranky, usually double parked, late for the school run and frustrated that the forms were never filled out correctly. There, Mam, sign *there*. Would I have been that mean, I thought, if my mother had lived long enough to annoy me with her frailty. I would never know. I would never be a middle-aged woman accompanying her mother to collect incontinence pads.

We do cradle to grave, Joan said, on a cigarette break, standing in the rain at the back door. Eating and pooing, that's what it all boils down to in the end. Mostly.

Joan was a reluctant manager. I took the job temporarily, she complained, and now I'm stuck. She gave the mothers extra baby formula and didn't record it in the book, and once I watched her crouched down in the waiting room with a screaming toddler, right at his level, for a full twenty minutes. During our fag breaks, I told her that my mother had died at sixty-five, completely out of the blue, with an undiagnosed heart condition, and that I was still reeling. I told her about the attic room and the annoying bikes, and that I had no plans for Christmas, none, not even Christmas Day, and she put her arm around my shoulders and said that I would be alright.

What cannot be cured, must be endured, she said. It's a line from a song. **Love is Teasing.**

At lunchtimes I sat apart from the other nurses, scrolling through my phone, half-listening to their chatter; their complaints about bad backs and difficult teenage kids, how everyone – the young mothers, the elderly, Joan, Senior Management - expected so much of them. Occasionally, they were subdued, describing the worst cases, the babies left crying for hours, the blank-faced toddlers who had witnessed too much, the skittish young women with bruises on their necks and deep pinch marks on their upper arms. They were sick of writing reports for Joan, of escalating to Senior Management, of filling forms, of nothing happening.

At the open mic I had progressed from sitting at the back to moving further up the room, two rows from the stage, encouraged by a non-verbal flirtation with the guitarist which carried me through the latter half of November and into December.

Do you sing yourself, he asked me. We were at the bar, waiting for drinks. He pushed a piece of paper towards me. Put your name down. Go for it. Leather wristbands and knotted embroidery thread bracelets. Bitten-down nails. He watched me scribble my name and the title of the sad dove song. You'll have to bring your own chart, he said, I don't know that one. Nothing ventured, I said, and underlined my name with a flourish, immediately feeling ridiculous.

By mid-December, I had sorted broken lights, replaced faulty toilet seats, fixed a kettle that didn't switch itself off, and thrown out free standing chairs that could be used as weapons. I reported the young boys who threw stones over the car park wall, ordered locks for filing cabinets, and alerted maintenance to the possibility of a child catching their fingers in the sliding doors.

No one could resolve the issue of the pigeons. Every week the nurses put another risk assessment in the file. Infectious bird droppings could have resulted in a public health risk, the noise prevented staff concentrating on their work, and one bird had swooped in and plucked a Twix from an open window ledge. *It could have been in the hand of a small child!*

What is their problem? I complained to Joan. She dropped me off at the bus stop most days now the evenings were completely dark, and we usually had a last cigarette. Her car was messy, with schoolbooks scattered on the back seat and dried up banana skins in the ashtray and between the seats.

It's what you do when you can't fix the big things, she said. She nodded towards the burnt-out patch of grass beside us where a car had been set alight. You obsess about the small things. She started the engine. Go on, out you go, she said, releasing the door lock. A wave of red rose up from the base of her neck. I knew I had reached her limit, the hard edge of her tolerance. She was tired, bored of me and my problems, my neediness. How inessential I was.

I took the guitarist home. It was the week before Christmas. By the time I had pushed past the bikes and fumbled for the light any charge between us already been dampened with too much drink and a freezing walk along the canal. A pedal caught my foot and I fell forward, face first, with nothing to break my fall. That night in the hospital, embarrassed, still wearing my bloodied coat, my nose throbbing, I felt completely untethered. Around me bare-legged teenagers shivered and puked into plastic bags, and a young man slept curled up on plastic bench. A woman beside me with a tinsel in her hair lip synched along to the piped music: *Last Christmas I gave you my heart, and the very next day you gave it away.* The guitarist had his coat on before I

had been fully triaged. You'll be ok? he said hopefully, tucking his scarf inside his jacket. No point in the two of us sitting here. A nurse dabbed my wounds and tugged strands of hair from dried blood. He's a keeper, she said, drily, as the guitarist disappeared through a revolving door into the early morning.

Early on a frozen January Monday, I returned to work. From across the green, I saw that the sliding doors had been wedged open by fire extinguishers, and just inside, Joan stood holding a small cardboard box. As I came closer, I saw she was shaking, her face wet. Inside the box were the bodies of three tiny birds, partially wrapped in white gauze.

I did my best, Joan said. I opened the windows and doors, tried to coax them out. We looked up at the rust-streaked walls and ceilings and smudged glass dotted with bloodied feathers. It would take a full day to clean. She was pale, her mouth a thin line. There was nothing for it but to let them wear themselves out, she said. Stupid, desperate creatures.

One Tuesday night in late February, when the crowd was sparse, I took my music charts from my bag and climbed the steps at the side of the stage. It was all pretty dire, the tempo was much faster than I had intended, I came in late, speaker feedback deafened the front row and my voice sounded tuneless and shrill. During the guitar solo, I hung my head and considered exactly how daft I would look if I just left the stage, made a run for it, but when I looked up all three musicians were looking at me expectantly, waiting for me to start, their faces impassive. They did not care whether I was bad or good, they were just doing their job. It was then that I felt something unclench its grip and the deadweight around my chest shifted, slightly. I sang.

Afterwards, there was some lukewarm applause, and I became aware of people moving, eager to get a last drink. Orders were shouted, card machines beeped. As I climbed down off the stage I looked back at the guitarist, but he was focused on some girl in the front row, his hands already shaping the chords of the next song, the sound floating above us all, lifting into the far reaches of the room and out of the open window.