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Written by Maggie O'Farrell

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THIS MUST BE THE PLACE

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1

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The Strangest Feeling in My Legs

Daniel, Donegal, 2010

There is a man.

He's standing on the back step, rolling a cigarette. The day is typically unstable, the garden lush and shining, the branches weighty with still-falling rain.

There is a man and the man is me.

I am at the back door, tobacco tin in hand, and I am watching something in the trees, a figure, standing at the perimeter of the garden, where the aspens crowd in at the fence. Another man.

He's carrying a pair of binoculars and a camera.

A birdwatcher, I am telling myself as I pull the frail paper along my tongue, you get them in these parts. But at the same time I'm thinking, really? Birdwatching, this far up the valley? I'm also thinking, where is my daughter, the baby, my wife? How quickly could I reach them, if I needed to?

My heart cranks into high gear, thud-thudding against my ribs. I squint into the white sky. I am about to step out into the garden. I want the guy to know I've seen him, to see me seeing him. I

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want him to register my size, my former track-and-field-star physique (slackening and loosening a little, these days, admittedly). I want him to run the odds, me versus him, through his head. He's not to know I've never been in a fight in my life and intend it to stay that way. I want him to feel what I used to feel before my father disciplined me: I am on to you, he would say, with a pointing finger, directed first at his chest, then mine.

I am on to you, I want to yell, while I fumble to pocket my roll-up and lighter.

The guy is looking in the direction of the house. I see the tinder spark of sun on a lens and a movement of his arm that could be the brushing away of a hair across the forehead or the depression of a camera shutter.

Two things happen very fast. The dog – a whiskery, leggy, slightly arthritic wolfhound, usually given to sleeping by the stove – streaks out of the door, past my legs and into the garden, emitting a volley of low barks, and a woman comes round the side of the house.

She has the baby on her back, she is wearing the kind of sou'wester hood usually sported by North Sea fishermen and she is holding a shotgun.

She is also my wife.

The latter fact I still have trouble adjusting to, not only because the idea of this creature ever agreeing to marry me is highly improbable, but also because she pulls unexpected shit like this all the time.

'Jesus, honey,' I gasp, and I am momentarily distracted by how shrill my voice is. Unmanly doesn't cover it. I sound as if I'm admonishing her for an ill-judged choice in soft furnishings or for wearing pumps that clash with her purse.

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She ignores my high-pitched intervention – who can blame her? – and fires into the air. Once, twice.

If, like me, you've never heard a gun report at close range, let me tell you the noise is an ear-shattering explosion. Magnesium-hued lights go off inside your head, your ears ring with the three-bar high note of an aria, your sinuses fill with tar.

The sound ricochets off the side of the house, off the flank of the mountain, then back again: a huge, aural tennis ball bouncing about the valley. I realise that while I'm ducking, cringeing, covering my head, the baby is strangely unmoved. He's still sucking his thumb, head leaning against the spread of his mother's hair. Almost as if he's used to this. Almost as if he's heard it all before.

I straighten up. I take my hands off my ears. Far away, a figure is sprinting through the undergrowth. My wife turns around. She cracks the gun in the crook of her arm. She whistles for the dog. 'Ha,' she says to me before she vanishes back around the side of the house. 'That'll show him.'

My wife, I should tell you, is crazy. Not in a requiring-medication-and-wards-and-men-in-white-coats sense – although I sometimes wonder if there may have been times in her past – but in a subtle, more socially acceptable, less ostentatious way. She doesn't think like other people. She believes that to pull a gun on someone lurking, in all likelihood entirely innocently, at our perimeter fence is not only permissible but indeed the right thing to do.

Here are the bare facts about the woman I married:

– She's crazy, as I might have mentioned
– She's a recluse

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– She's apparently willing to pull a gun on anyone threatening to uncover her hiding place.

I dart, in so much as a man of my size can dart, through the house to catch her. I'm going to have this out with her. She can't keep a gun in a house where there are small children. She just can't.

I'm repeating this to myself as I pass through the house, planning to begin my protestations with it. But as I come through the front door, it's as if I'm entering another world. Instead of the grey drizzle at the back, a dazzling, primrose-tinted sun fills the front garden, which gleams and sparks as if hewn from jewels. My daughter is leaping over a rope that her mother is turning – my wife who, just a moment ago, was a dark, forbidding figure with a gun, a long grey coat and hat like Death's hood. She has shucked off the sou' wester and transmogrified back to her usual incarnation. The baby is crawling on the grass, knees wet with rain, the bloom of an iris clutched in his fist, chattering to himself in a satisfied, guttural growl.

It's as if I've stepped into another time frame entirely, as if I'm in one of those folk tales where you think you've been asleep for an hour or so but you wake to find you've been away a lifetime, that all your loved ones and everything you've ever known are dead and gone. Did I really just walk in from the other side of the house or did I fall asleep for a hundred years?

I shake off this notion. The gun business needs to be dealt with right now. 'Since when,' I demand, 'do we own a firearm?'

My wife raises her head and meets my eye with a challenged,

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flinty look, the skipping rope coming to a stop in her hand. '*We* don't,' she says. 'It's mine.'

A typical parry from her. She appears to answer the question without answering it at all. She picks on the element that isn't the subject of the question. The essence of sidestepping.

I rally. I've had more than enough practice. 'Since when do *you* own a firearm?'

She shrugs a shoulder, bare, I notice, and tanned to a soft gold, bisected by a thin white strap. I feel a momentary automatic mobilisation deep inside my underwear – strange how this doesn't change with age for men, that we're all of us but a membrane away from our inner teenage selves – but I pull my attention back to the discussion. She's not going to get away with this. 'Since now,' she says.

'What's a fire arm?' my daughter asks, splitting the word in two, her small, heart-shaped face tilted up to look at her mother.

'It's an Americanism,' my wife says. 'It means "gun".'

'Oh, the gun,' says my sweet Marithe, six years old, equal parts pixie, angel and sylph. She turns to me. 'Father Christmas brought Donal a new one so he said Maman could have his old one.'

This utterance renders me, for a moment, speechless. Donal is an ill-scented homunculus who farms the land further down the valley. He – and his wife, I'd imagine – has what you might call a problem with anger management. Somewhat trigger-happy, Donal. He shoots everything on sight: squirrels, rabbits, foxes, hill-walkers (just kidding).

'What is going on?' I say. 'You're keeping a firearm in the house and –'

'Gun, Daddy. Say gun.'

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'– a gun, without telling me? Without discussing it with me? Don't you see how dangerous that is? What if one of the children—'

My wife turns, her hem swishing through the wet grass. 'Isn't it nearly time to leave for your train?'

I sit behind the wheel of the car, one hand on the ignition, the cigarette from earlier gripped between my lips. I am searching my pocket for an elusive lighter or box of matches. I'm determined to smoke this cigarette at some point, before the strike of noon. I limit myself to three a day and, boy, do I need them.

I am also shouting at the top of my voice. There's something about living in the middle of nowhere that invites this indulgence.

'Come on!' I yell, secretly admiring the volume I can produce, the way it echoes around the mountain's lower reaches. 'I'm going to miss my train!'

Marithe appears unaware of the commotion, which is commendable in one way and irksome in another. She has a tennis ball or similar in a sock and is standing with her back against the wall of the house, counting (in Irish, I notice, with a ripple of surprise). With each number – *aon, dó, trí, ceathair* – she thwacks the socked ball off the wall, dangerously close to her body. I watch, while shouting some more: she's pretty good at it. I catch myself wondering where she learnt this game. Not to mention the Irish. She is home-schooled by her mother, as was her elder brother, until he rebelled and enlisted himself (with my clandestine help) at a boarding-school in England.

My schedule is such that I often spend the working week in

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Belfast, coming back to this corner of Donegal at weekends. I teach a course in linguistics at the university, coaching undergraduates to break up what they hear around them, to question the way sentences are constructed, the manner in which words are used, and to make a stab at guessing why. I've always concentrated my research on the way languages evolve. I'm not one of those traditionalists who lament and breast-beat about how grammar is deteriorating, how semantic standards are slipping. No, I like to embrace the idea of change.

Because of this, within the extremely narrow field of academic linguistics, I retain an aura of the maverick. Not much of an accolade but there you are. If you've ever listened to a radio programme about neologisms or grammatical shifts or the way teenagers usurp and appropriate terms for their own, often subversive use, it will probably have been me who was wheeled in to say that change is good, elasticity is to be embraced.

I once said this in passing to my mother-in-law and she held me for a moment in her imperious, mascaraed gaze and said, in her flawless Parisian English, 'Ah, but no, I would not have heard you because I always switch off the radio if I hear an American. I simply cannot listen to that accent.'

Accent aside, I am due, in several hours, to deliver a lecture on pidgins and creoles, based around a single sentence. If I miss this train, there isn't another that will get me there in time. There will be no lecture, no pidgins, no creoles, but instead a group of undergraduates who will never be enlightened as to the fascinating, complex, linguistic genealogy of the sentence: 'Him thief she mango.'

I am also, after the lecture, due to catch a flight to the States. After extensive transatlantic pressure from my sisters, and against

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my better judgement, I am going over for my father's ninetieth birthday party. What kind of a party may be had at the age of ninety remains to be seen, but I'm anticipating a lot of paper plates, potato salad, tepid beer, and everyone trying to ignore the fact that the celebrant himself is scowling and grumbling in a corner. My sisters have been saying that our father could shuffle off his mortal coil at any time, and they know that he and I haven't always seen eye to eye (to put it mildly), but if I don't come soon I will regret it for the rest of my life, blah, blah. Listen, I tell them, the man walks two miles every day, eats enough pulled pork to depopulate New York State of pigs, and he certainly doesn't sound infirm if you get him on the phone: never does he find himself at a loss when pointing out my shortcomings and misjudgements. Plus, with regard to his much-vaunted potential death, if you ask me, the man never had a pulse in the first place.

This visit – my first in over five years – is not, I am telling myself, the reason for my stress, the explanation for my brain-bending craving for nicotine or for the jittery twitch of my eyelid as I sit waiting. It has nothing to do with it, nothing at all. I'm just a little edgy today. That's all. I will go to Brooklyn, I will visit with the old man, I will make nice, I will go to the party, I will give him the birthday gift my wife has purchased and wrapped, I will chat to my nieces and nephews, I will stick it out for the requisite number of days – and then I will get the hell out.

I crack open the car door and scream, 'Where are you? I'm going to miss my lecture,' into the damp air, then spy a crumpled book of matches in the footwell of the car. I disappear down for it, like a pearl-diver, resurfacing triumphant with it in my hand.

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At this moment, my wife yanks open the door and commences strapping the baby into his car seat.

I exhale as I strike a match. If we leave now, we should make it.

Marithe scrambles into her place; the dog squeezes in, then over the seat and into the trunk; the passenger door opens and my wife slides into the car. She is, I notice, wearing a pair of man's trousers, cinched round the waist with what looks suspiciously like one of my silk neckties. Over the top of this is a coat that I know for a fact once cost more than my monthly salary – a great ugly thing of leather and tweed, straps and loops – and on her head is a rabbit-fur hat with elaborate earflaps. Another gift from Donal? I want to enquire, but don't because Marithe is in the car.

'Phew,' my wife says. 'It's filthy out there.'

Into the back seat, she tosses a wicker basket, a burlap sack, something that looks like a brass candelabra and, finally, an ancient, tarnished egg-whisk.

I say nothing.

I slide the car into first gear and let off the brake, with a perverse feeling of accomplishment, as if getting my family to leave ten minutes late is a major achievement, and I draw the first smoke of the day down into my lungs, where it curls up like a cat.

My wife reaches out, plucks the cigarette from my lips and stubs it out.

'Hey!' I protest.

'Not with the children in the car,' she says, tipping her head towards the back seat.

I am about to pick up the argument and run with it – I have

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a whole defence that questions the relative dangers to minors of firearms and cigarettes – but my wife turns her face towards mine, fixes me with her jade stare and gives me a smile of such tenderness and intimacy that the words of my prepared speech drain away, like water down a plughole.

She puts her hand on my leg, just within the bounds of decency, and whispers, 'I'll miss you.'

As a linguist, it's a revelation to me the number of ways two adults can find to discuss sex without small children having the faintest idea what is being said. It is a testament to, a celebration of, semantic adaptability. My wife smiling like this and saying, I'll miss you, translates in essence to: I'm not going to be getting any while you're away but as soon as you're back I'm going to lead you into the bedroom and remove all your clothes and get down to it. Me clearing my throat and replying, 'I'll miss you too,' says, yep, I'll be looking forward to that moment all week.

'Are you feeling OK about the trip?'

'To Brooklyn?' I say, in an attempt to sound casual, but the words come out slightly strangled.

'To your dad,' she clarifies.

'Oh,' I say, circling my hand in the air. 'Yeah. It'll be fine. He's . . . er, it'll be fine. It's not for long, is it?'

'Well,' she begins, 'I think that he—'

Marithe might be picking up on something because suddenly she shouts, a little louder than necessary, 'Gate! Gate, Maman!'

I stop the car. My wife snaps off her seatbelt, shoves open her door, steps out and slams the door, exiting the small rhombus of the rain-glazed passenger window. A moment later, she reappears in the panorama of the windscreen: she is walking away

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from the car. This triggers some pre-verbal synapse in the baby: his neurology tells him that the sight of his mother's retreating back is bad news, that she may never return, that he will be left here to perish, that the company of his somewhat scatty and only occasionally present father is not sufficient to ensure his survival (he has a point). He lets out a howl of despair, a signal to the mothership: abort mission, request immediate return.

'Calvin,' I say, using the time to retrieve my cigarette from the back of the dashboard, 'have a little faith.'

My wife is unlatching a gate and swinging it open. I ease up on the clutch, down on the gas, and the car slides through the gate, my wife shutting it after us.

There are, I should explain, twelve gates between the house and the road. Twelve. That's one whole dozen times she'll have to get out of the car, open and shut the damn things, then get back in again. The road is a half a mile away, as the crow flies, but to get there takes a small age. And if you're doing it alone, the whole thing is a laborious toil, usually in the rain. There are times when I need something from the village – a pint of milk, toothpaste, the normal run of household requirements – and rise from my chair, only to realise that I'll have to open no fewer than twenty-four gates, in a round trip, and I sink back down, thinking, Hell, who needs to clean their teeth?

The word 'remote' doesn't even come close to describing our house. It's in one of the least populated valleys of Ireland, at an altitude even the sheep eschew, let alone the people. And my wife chooses to live in the highest, most distant corner of this place, reached only by a track that passes through numerous livestock fences. Hence the gates. To get here, you have to really want to get here.

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The car door is wrenched open and my wife slides back into the passenger seat. Eleven more to go. The baby bursts into tears of relief. Marithe yells, 'One! One gate! One, Daddy, that's one!' She is alone in her love of the Gates. The dashboard immediately starts up a hysterical bleeping, signalling that my wife needs to fasten her seatbelt. I should warn you that she won't. The bleeping and flashing will continue until we get to the road. It's a bone of contention in our marriage: I think the hassle of fastening and unfastening the seatbelt is outweighed by the cessation of that infernal noise; she disagrees.

'So, your dad,' my wife continues. She has, among her many other talents, an amazing ability to remember and pick up half-finished conversations. 'I really think—'

'Can you not just put the seatbelt on?' I snap. I can't help it. I have a low threshold for repetitive electronic noises.

She turns her head with infinite, luxurious slowness to look at me. 'I beg your pardon?' she says.

'The seatbelt. Can't you just this once—'

I am silenced by another gate, which looms out of the mist. She gets out, she walks towards the gate, the baby cries, Marithe yells out a number, et cetera, et cetera. By the penultimate gate, there is a dull pressure in my temples that threatens to blossom into persistent dents of pain.

As my wife returns to the car, the radio fizzes, subsides, crackles into life. We keep it permanently switched on because reception is mostly a notion in these parts and any snatch of music or dialogue is greeted with cheers.

'Oh, Brendan! Brendan!' an actress in a studio somewhere earnestly emotes. 'Be careful!' The connection dissolves in a crackle of static.

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'Oh, Brendan, Brendan!' Marithe shrieks, in delight, drumming her feet into the back of my seat. The baby, quick to catch the general mood, gives a crowing inhale, gripping the edges of his chair, and the sun chooses that moment to make an unexpected appearance. Ireland looks green and pleasant and blessed as we skim along the track, splashing through puddles, towards the final gate.

My wife and Marithe are debating what Brendan may have needed to be careful of, the baby is repeating an *n* sound and I am thinking it's early for him to be using his palate in such a way as I idly turn the dial to see what else we can find.

I pull up at the last and final gate. A Glaswegian accent filters through the white noise, filling the car, speaking in the self-consciously serious tones of the newsreader. There is some geographical blip that means we can, on occasion, pick up the Scottish news. Something about an upcoming local election, a politician caught speeding, a school without textbooks. I twirl the dial through waves of nothingness, searching for speech, panning for a human voice.

My wife gets out of the car; she walks towards the gate. I watch the breeze snatch and toy with hanks of her hair, the upright, ballet-dancer's gait of her, her hand in its half-mitten as she grips the gate lock.

The radio aerial strains and picks up a female voice: calm but hesitant. It's something about gender and the workplace, one of those issue-led magazine programmes you get in the middle of the morning on the BBC. A West Country octogenarian is speaking about being one of the first women employed as an engineer, and I'm about to turn the dial further, as it's the kind of thing my wife will be avid to hear

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and I am really in the mood for some decent music. Then a different voice comes out of the little perforated speakers near my knee: the dipping, vowel-lengthened accent of the educated English.

'And I thought to myself, My God,' the woman on the radio says, into my car, into the ears of my children, 'this must be the glass ceiling I've heard so much about. Should it really be so hard to crack it with my cranium?'

These words produce within me a deep chime of recognition. Without warning, my mind is engaged with a series of flash-cards: a cobbled pavement indistinct with fog, a bicycle chained to a railing, trees dense with the scent of pine, a giving pelt of fallen needles underfoot, a telephone receiver pressed to the soft cartilage of an ear.

I know that woman, I want to exclaim, I knew her. I almost turn and say this to the kids in the back: I knew that person, once.

I am remembering the black cape thing she used to wear and her penchant for unwalkable shoes, weird, articulated jewellery, outdoor sex, when the voice fades out and the presenter comes on air to tell us that was Nicola Janks, speaking in the mid-1980s.

I slap my palm on the wheel. Nicola Janks, of all people. Never have I otherwise come across that surname. She remains the only Janks I ever knew. She had, I seem to recall, some crazy middle name, something Grecian or Roman that bespoke parents with mythological proclivities. What was it now? I am recalling, ruefully, that it's no real surprise that things from that time might seem a little hazy, given the amount of—

And then I am thinking nothing.

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