

Bloody hell

Emmet was pulling at her frock. She hated dresses. He was welcome to it. She beat him away. Brothers could be so annoying. His fingers were all covered with goo. He'd been painting. A mugsy mess of colour stamped on a piece of paper that had now stuck to his bum as he wandered around grinning, threatening everybody in sight with paint smeared paws ready to strike and slay, a bear in the wood, honey to the hive.

He clung to her. Older sisters could be so gloriously demanding.

It had been a long summer. Why the fuck her parents wanted to get married she couldn't understand. She thought they were married. La madre que les pario. She hated weddings. Mac soith. She poked Emmet with a boney elbow to prove her point. He started to cry, too young to realize she was taking care of him for the next fifteen minutes as her parents sorted out something about the shitty little wedding. Little fucker had no choice. Here she was. Emmet squealed. She smiled gaily. Little shit. Let him scream his balls out. Fat good it would do the little wanker. She kicked him again just in case. He was learning. He just squealed and tried to smile, wince more cautiously in her direction. His hand flapped out towards hers. Kaka zaharra! She fed him a Lego brick. Eeejit. He'd play with anything. If his sister gave it to him. She did. Silly fucker. Que niño más tonto.

Somewhere in the middle of Barkshire her parents were giving language classes for the summer and who knows why but they thought it a good idea to get married. All very civil. At the reception she spent most of her time under the table with Emmet. He knew how to enjoy himself. He had an infectious laugh which spun her into torments of ridiculousness. And she would curse and he'd giggle even more uncontrollably. They even managed to miss the official photos. Their mother was not amused. What the fuck. She could go screw herself. Although she did a good good night kiss. Deep down her parents were

cool but they could be so fucking annoying most of the bloody time. The whiff of her father's whiskey still lingered as he snuggled close to read her a story, husky voice purring over the words, dragging her into an ease less slumber. They took it in turns herself and Emmet. One night with Papa and the next with Mama. She didn't usually swear at bedtime. Saved it up for lights out. Her parents were relieved she remained under the table, after the scene in the registry office.

"Fucking Hell."

Heaven help us. Parents and grandparents smiled as their heads shook, no one willing to express the first reprobation.

How can she say something like that? Her father was vivid. He'd only asked her to pass the milk.

The child's mother fumed. She sipped her tea with an apparent calmness. Her smile attempted to foil the torment. Her parents smiled. Her in-laws inhaled. Just another family gathering. Cigarette smoke, sticky pastries, icing, the background blur of a low key TV set preaching filled the embarrassed silence with fumes of stifling panic, breath held slightly too long.

"Fucking Hell!" the child repeated.

"Leave the table dear." They weren't sure who had said it first. Responsible parents acting together.

Thank fucking god. She could go to her room finally and strangle a doll. Jesus Christ. For fuck sake get the hell out of here! Daughter and granddaughter was screaming silently, head ballooning under the pressure of unexpelled expletives.

"Whose fucking dog is this?" she raged trying to storm through the door. The animal blocked her path, tongue lavishing generous spittle somewhere about the height of her bare knees.

Two sets of grandparents smiled again. At least their granddaughter's temper gave them something to share, to break the ice as they met for the first time.

"I'll get it," Niall's mother offered with a shrug and a half effort to rein in the panting dog who wanted little more than a cuddle, a fondle from a tiny creature something like himself.

"No I'll go," her husband said. They'd been married for so long they had forgotten how to argue. A vague smile. She'd known he'd go all along. She smiled across at her son. What a difficult grandchild that girl was proving to be. But, then again, children never seemed easy, until they were someone else's.

Three generations, three nations, in-laws, grandchildren and a stray dog all fought to retain some respect and a place at the table in a foreign country. In an ideal world they would all have been somewhere else. But for some reason, a rented house somewhere in England seemed a good neutral site to meet. Ainhoa's parents were doing their best. Niall's followed suit. Language was a fine barrier. Didn't have to say much. They hadn't a word of English. They hadn't a word of Spanish. Smiling worked. With a bit of luck they wouldn't have understood their grandchild. The look on her face was harder to pass off.

Only six o'clock. Time for tea the Irish in-laws were hinting. Ainhoa could see them move towards the kitchen. The huff of cold meats hung on the limpid air. Her own parents would be over ripe, still full from cakes half an hour ago. Far too early to eat in Spain. Sometimes she thought you should never mix countries. Her husband looked as if he was agreeing. Niall's Irish red veins fire-fighting under the tension. Shut her the fuck up she could sense him mouthing over another refreshing cuppa tea.

"Get him out of the fucking way! He's frightening me shitless," Their daughter was retching.

The big dog lapped lips and searched for a face to maul with friendly tear soaking slobber.

That shitty little bitch is going to make my day their daughter screamed silently I will kill the fucking cow and tear off his cojones hasta que la muerte le separe.

She paused for a moment and added "Arraioa!" in Basque. Then "little txortalari!" She paused again wondering if she had an equivalent in Irish. "Dun do Bheal!" was as far as she got. Her father really should speak more Irish. His daughter felt a real need for extensive vocabulary, the cognitive challenge of living longer and exploiting the nastiness of her mother's tongue to its fullest.

Her Irish granddad finally tugged the dog one side. She stomped up the stairs. About fucking time.

Bloody grandparents. Fucking fussing and pooing, full of shit. And her own parents all sweetie peasy, full of shit themselves. They were quick enough to shout when they argued at home and kept Emmet from sleep and herself from relying on his snores to send her off and into lands where flags and routines and cursing were all fiery meltdowns where nothing was distinguishable, everything a nest of equal opportunities, hidden insults which would never be said, or questioned, or expressed, but swept beneath magical carpets which floated high and took all cursing into the sky. Oh yes, her parents could be as good as gold. She refused. They could go screw themselves in any language they wanted. The reek of cold ham, cabbage and baked potatoes clambered up from the kitchen, tickling the back of her nose into an infectious scream. She listened to Emmet. Silly eejit. But his wheezing kept her calm.

She'd give Emmet a kick or two. Make him roll over and scream. Serve them all right. They he'd smile and they'd both giggle beneath the blankets, a covert bollocking to all those family members who liked nothing better than to goo and coo over shitty little kids who just wanted to fart in public.

Basque grandparents cupped china in well beaten hands, smiled, wrinkled in incomprehension while seething inside in a hive of fluttering emotions, each out lasting the previous in intensity and bitter reproach.

"She had to find an Irishman?"

"Could have been English."

"And what was wrong with someone from Pamplona?"

"Pamplona? She could have stayed in Vizcaya!"

Silently Ainhoa's parents berated their failure in breathing into her eight Basque surnames and a language no one could understand beyond the narrow mountain chain that tied them in and made them so special.

"We love the Spanish," their in-laws had chirped. More than we do they thought, disappointed that the Irish hadn't immediately found solace in a similar struggle against imperialistic gains over individual needs. Surely to god they would see the Basque country as a nation just as Ireland was.

"Where the hell is the Basque country?" Niall's father had asked, Guinness withering into another, a stout decision if there ever was one.

"North of Spain."

"What? Sunshine and beaches all day? That's what you want?"

"They run a bar." His son took a swallow. "It rains a lot."

"You could run a bar here. Rains a lot here too."

"You're on the dole." That was a pint. They had another. Anyone could run a bar if you had the money.

"Bah. Thought you'd studied for something. University didn't you?"

"Languages dad. French and Spanish."

"That'll get you nowhere. Could have tried Irish and become a civil servant. That would be a job. How will you ever become a civil servant in Spain? Not without Irish I bet."

"Basque".

"What the Jesus fuck is that? Another Mickey mouse language fit for queens?" None of them had ever been much good at Irish and it had never seemed important to a family used to immigrating; culture had been eroded by coffin ships and Ryanair flights.

They dribbled through another pint in silence.

Niall's mother nodded pleasantly. Whatever, she seemed to say. "Whatever makes you happy", but her son knew her deep down and that he would never make her happy. Irish mothers had a series of ambitions for their children which could never be adequately fulfilled. Maybe all mothers did. Fathers just tended to resign, or take early retirement. He wasn't sure which was the healthiest option.

"That daughter of ours cannot continue to speak like that."

Niall and Ainhoa put the grandparents to bed in a nearby hotel. Both sets of them. Time to break out the whiskey. They had only their own children to contend with now. It hadn't been a bad evening overall, indigestion all around, equally divided, to be expected.

That child was hissing discontent down their corridor. Swearing them blind. They hoped she had droned off to sleep. She was so infuriatingly cute. Wild curls swinging in devilment, a sticky sweet smile curling around a missing front tooth as her tongue lapped up the insults searching for a cheap injury.

"What can we do? How often can we tell her?"

"Got to be tougher. No chocolate."

"She doesn't like chocolate."

"See! Manipulating us she is! Of course she doesn't. It would give us an angle on her. Only five for Christ's sake and mouthing off like that, not just with us but in public. Think she does it at school? Bet not. They know how to control her. Spoilt she is."

They nodded obliquely. Spoilt or something like that.

Fortunately they still had sex to kill the blind spots. They rolled over finally and snored off.

Thank Jesus fucking Christ! She'd had enough interruptions. She pretended to snore and put them off their rhythm. Emmet stirred. She hated him. And loved him. That was what little brother's were for. Filled up your days with hours of devilish entertainment, fed you sleeping pills at night as you fell into the seething comfort of their promising loyalty.

Countries fled by. They spent time in Ireland, visited the Basque country, returned to England and settled on New York. Apparently their father was valued there. As a painter. A big brush painter as they say in Spain: houses and that kind of thing. Nothing small enough to catch your eye. Her mother found a job teaching English to newer immigrants, poorer than they were, still learning how to cope but energetically noisy and flamboyant as most had skipped out the European stage in their journey: they had come straight through Mexico. Her mother found the Eastern Europeans more difficult, the Asians too serious, which was saying a lot for a Basque woman. She wallowed in the raucous liveliness of the southern continent.

She'd loved the little fuckers' cheeriness, their ability to laugh and cough at the same time, spill the beans and wrinkle noses in peels of what the fucking hell. Go take a flying fuck at a rolling donut she'd tell them and they'd squeal down the street shaking their fingers in retribution, glorious deceit. A long way from the tight fog of northern Spain under winter, the showers mushing through

spring, the Irish landscape throttled under darkening clouds. But they were all caught equally when the snow blew in and NY choked in blizzards that left your throat gaping raw, curses stuck to the back of that bastard tongue, too fucking frozen to tear themselves into life. For a while it seemed everyone was a stranger learning to survive. Emmet struggled. He clung to her skirt like a wimpet to a boat hulk, a mine to a submarine.

For some reason, her parents faded away outside of Europe, melted away into the NY winter like snowmen in search of a fresh carrot. They never managed to enjoy old age. The drink, or the smoke, the rough paint or the stress of teaching, but they never made retirement. Maybe if you keep moving country you never do catch up. They didn't even manage to outlast each other. After a life spent nagging, they wound it up pretty much in agreement, in unison, within three months of each other, another peace process finally evolved.

Their daughter remained lost between countries, forgetting even their languages except for curses which flared violently, multi-tasking as they sped through all known idioms. There were some good Russian ones she learned later from friends who later turned out to be Crimean, or Ukrainian or Cossacks. The differences faded on neutral ground. No one in NY really understood where the Basque country was or why Ireland and the British Isles were distinct. No one really cared.

Emmet did the opposite and looked for a homeland. He needed some clarity. He sought out his mother's family and internal politics as a cover for lost identity. Aids, drugs and a badly timed bomb: his sister wasn't sure which got to him first but on a fiery Monday in a village outside San Sebastian he faded away in the arms of some young lad who disappeared shortly afterwards, rumoured to have ended up in jail.

A fluent curser she had never been able to cry. Not even with Emmet gone. It was hard to lose his grin, that smile, her brother's laugh breaking into a giggle unwinding her heart. But there was a period after he died when she just couldn't swear effectively. Her curses froze at the exit point, tears dried beyond release, specks of emotion unable to form fully and breath into release.

Sometimes she saw Emmet's cheeky grin in her own children. They occasionally had that glimpse of an old gene, faded, stone washed, still vibrant within the laundry basket. Their sense of fun, however, was shielded in a coldness which outshone their emotions, outlived their instincts. Their mother could understand that. They had to develop a screen for surviving in a foreign land. They reminded her of Emmet. He'd been the complete opposite.

The night they'd told her Emmet was dead she cursed and swore and shat and fucked and hated and remembered taboos in languages she no longer heard. Her second husband was from Chicago, union stock, but even he was shocked. His big thick hand and generously sausage fingers tried to keep her frizzled thick hair in place. No need for cussing he rolled, chest heaving with the effort. She stopped.

That big barrel of a man popped off as if someone had taken out the plug. Generations of Chicago raspiness soaked out in a couple of months. Cancer has a healthy appetite. Doesn't take long when the plate is full and stomach empty.

He'd left her a daughter just as Jake had two years earlier. Another robust man, full of southern charm and a love of whiskey that smelt of her father.

She went back to college, got a degree so could feed them and sort out health insurance and a cheap car when they were old enough. They of course would go to university, leave with debts she could never have imagined: that was the future, borrow it before you lived. In her day it was pay for it and hope you lived long enough to enjoy.

When they were young her daughters insisted on Sunday roasts, ideally with their fathers present. Not together mind. That would have been just a little too much. Two ex-husbands at one table, no matter how much they remained in contact and shared children, a joint lunch was beyond the pale, out of bounds, too Woody Allen for her non native New York roots. In the end both exes died within months of each other as if they had reached an agreement, a conspiracy to leave her fend it out alone with her offspring. She'd hated her parents wedding and never understood why she had done it twice herself. Some kind of vengeance, a curse on her own dead relationships.

It was funny. They'd never had Sunday roast when she'd been married to either of them.

She really shouldn't give in to those girls so much. But what can you do when you get older and start realizing roots are frail and rarely firmly placed. You latch on to what is left.

New York offered so much she'd been told but she rarely moved from her barrio. Having had to travel so far, too young, her neighbourhood offered a resting place she rarely had the urge to leave.

She'd been reared in a village, her parents had bred her with small town values and like most in the big apple that is exactly what she brought with her, the diversity of a thousand well-seeded, closely knit communities that struggled to mesh into anything bigger: at least they didn't still kill each other with the intensity of their native lands.

One Wednesday morning, slapping the door behind her, for no known reason, nothing that stood out or called attention, she ventured further, down into the subway and found streets that only appeared in films. She didn't go to movies. They were just new streets. Blocks where no one knew your name. She gazed upwards at glass screeching to the sky, pigeons dive bombing her hair, flashing lights screaming for her attention, taxis ignoring her wave, people rushing by

in a haze of anxiety, lives flittering away on the edge of oblivion. In the middle of all that fuss she spotted the painting .

It was a side street, discreet, dignified, worthy of her desires. It caught her eye and she made the diversion.

It drew her in, soaked her up, fuzzed her brain into a wasp of hissing fury, a wave of release. The weave of erratic colour drew Emmet to her mind, shaded his doubts, carved his energy onto a canvas willing to weep.

Pollock style they told her. Slightly amused. She didn't look the type but they quoted her the possible auction price for the original.

She'd never been to an auction. She wasn't wealthy. But she wanted that painting.

Blots and lines, clouds and a mess but somewhere in there Emmet was hiding. She could hear him scream, goad her to a good kicking, a tempting Lego brick in the mouth, a swirl of fresh language that would set him into fits of rage or equally exhausting giggles. She began to curse again. Silently, with a vengeance, her swearing was re-born. That painting stroked the embers until they fluttered into life, into a bonfire where vanity was the least important fuel.

Her savings went on that auction bid and the resulting painting occupied most of her sitting room wall for the next ten years.

The brilliant scream of colour greeted her in the morning as fresh as a newly learned swear word or the familiar gutteriness of one well worn that slipped off the tongue with a velvet sigh of vehemence.

And it sat there throughout the day as she potted around, gave the occasional private class, between little bits of translation and her well earned slips of whiskey: always Irish, just in case. Her daughters feigned approval but she knew they were cursing deep down, wondering how she could have afforded it without having paid them off first. Kids were like that. So

wonderfully selfish. She'd learned her lesson: she had been her own best teacher.

It was gone now of course. The home was lovely. Fucking amazing. An expensive shit hole full of whores and bitches who should have been put up against the wall and given café years ago. But they all hung in there: that was their curse.

Her daughters visited regularly, occasionally bringing off-spring she could no longer quite name or place. They all seemed well dressed, polite and smiling so presumably all was well. What the fuck could she do about it at this stage? She nodded back as she had been doing all her life, trying to be pleasant, but finally saving the bad language just for her own precious self. "Lovely," she repeated far too often. "Just lovely." Grandchildren knew how to smile back correctly, affectionately even. It really wasn't necessary.

Her daughters had learned the same trick. They too knew how to be appropriate. She had taught them well. She didn't ask them about the painting. They had either married better than she'd expected or sold it off and made a fortune: the home couldn't be cheap if it managed to keep so many old biddies alive in the lap of luxury, although the concept of luxury becomes increasingly idle with age.

The daughters assured her the picture was fine, where it always had been. She didn't believe them but couldn't be bothered to swear. Let them lie. Sleeping dogs. She could no longer do much more than lie herself. Maybe she was paying for her own confinement but she could still see the landscape, curse the vivid colours as they never seemed to merge or form something easily identifiable, a life raft bobbing her immersed in their flow, a sea of blotched experiences that somehow blended into a life. Emmet kept appearing from within the mess. Eejit. ¡Que niño más ridículo! He'd still fall for a Lego brick. For fuck sake. He hadn't changed after all this time.