

IITOS NATIONAL ORTHOPAEDIC LITERARY AWARD 2020

Winning Story – ‘Faded Denim’

Ms Aisling O’Byrne, Trinity College Dublin

An astonishing, shattering, brilliant story, told with great skill and discipline, and with a rhythm and pace that seem perfect. A timeless fear, dropped into the present moment: I’ve been reading a lot of short stories since the start of the first lockdown and this is one of the best I’ve read. “ *Roddy Doyle*
– 25th November 2020

You used to love the world at night. You said the world is a kinder place when everyone is sleeping. Nobody’s yelling, nobody’s arguing. The streets are bathed in silver and the lamplights pool like pots of gold. I wish I could see the city through your eyes. Because to me, the shadows seem fiercer and the edges seem sharper when they are shrouded in darkness. The city lights on the horizon don’t look welcoming, they look accusatory. Little people leading little lives that are so far removed from my own. My life doesn’t even feel like mine anymore. It doesn't seem like my life without you in it.

My mother says I’m in shock and that it’s completely normal. She said I should see someone, talk to someone, that I should let my feelings out. I can already hear her hushed conversations with my sisters, her friends about toxic masculinity, about how men are impossible. But to be brutally honest, I don't feel anything at all. I feel completely numb, completely detached. I feel like I’m floating above the ground watching phantom figures live a nightmare that cannot possibly be my reality. Even when I look at the blue plaster cast on my right hand I don’t believe it’s mine. There’s no pain there, there’s nothing at all. Shouldn’t putting your fist through the wall of waiting room B warrant some sort of punishment? Shouldn’t a broken knuckle give you some sort of lifeline, something to focus on? Shouldn’t it make you feel something, anything, give you some sort of proof that you are alive. You used to love how quiet it is at night. And that was so unlike you. I used to joke that half the reason we ended up together was you hating the sound of silence. You felt obliged to fill those long car journeys down to Kenmare with narrations about college, about food, about friends, about Dublin. You used to ask me about how I got my licence, how I felt about insurance, did I like the motorway, would I ever consider getting a hybrid car. So many stupid questions that I used to laugh at after I dropped you off. You were just my mother’s friend's daughter, a girl who split petrol money with me, another opinion on what music to play in the car.

It was only once you started disagreeing with me, that I began to feel myself fall. When you started caring less about what I thought and more about what I should think. And that was my favourite thing about us. How unbelievably different we were. How we could never agree on anything, how each decision was a debate. I miss that. And I need that. I need you to argue with me right now. To change my mind, to help me see sense. Because right now, I hate the quiet of the night. And it's all because I’m so terrified that it might be broken by the tiny baby boy in the next room.

When you found out you were pregnant you were so happy. So unbelievably happy. I think we must have been the only people who ever decorated a whole nursery based on a gut feeling but you were right. So now the room beside me is painted in Faded Denim blue and there’s monkeys littering the walls. The hall is filled with balloons and teddy bears and matching mother-son pyjamas but there's no mother here to wear them. There's hundreds of bath salts, flowers and diffusers with our names on the cards but I can't bring myself to open

any of them.

I can't even bring myself to sleep in our room. Your smell is still lingering on the soft cotton sheets. Your book is on the nightstand, still half-read. There's a pile of your clothes in the wash basket and I can't wash clothes for someone who is never going to wear them again. There's all these little fragments of our lives hidden around this house and I can't bring myself to disturb any of them because a little part of me still hopes you will come back. And I'm so angry that you can't. And that your last few months of life were spent in this twisted excuse for living that COVID-19 has given us. Instead of spending our summer frolicking through Temple bar and browsing through George's arcade, we were forced to walk that same path around by Killester time and time again. And we missed that new parent ritual of oversampling in Mothercare and instead browsed sensibly online. I missed your ultrasounds, your check ups, your appointments because fathers weren't deemed essential in the eyes of the government.

So maybe I can blame them for part of this. Because maybe if I had been at one of those hundreds of appointments, I could've heard something that they missed. Or told them something that you didn't. Maybe if I had been allowed to be with you, I wouldn't feel so desperately useless all the time because there was 'nothing I could do'. But how can I know that there was nothing? I'm supposed to be the one who keeps you safe, the one who protects you. Isn't that the only job the father actually has? How can I take the word of doctors who never knew you, who never knew us. And I know, I know it sounds so irrational to believe that there was something that could've changed everything but I can't help but believe that. And the millions of scenarios that could have been, play over and over in my mind like the tinkling music of a twisted merry-go-round.

There's stirring in the next room. Those few soft gurgles cut through the night like a knife. You always said the stillness of night was a different kind of quiet. A nice quiet. Like the sound of a page being turned in a book. Or the patter of soft rain when you're tucked up in bed. To me, this silence is anything but kind. It's deafening, filled with all my questions unanswered and with all my fears unsaid. It's only at night that I realise how terrified I am of my own child. And I hate myself for it and I wish it wasn't true but it is. I am and it kills me everyday but every time I look at him, all I see is you.

There's an old picnic bench at the edge of Kenmare that we loved. It's faded wood, aged by years of harsh sea winds and you used to laugh that it was more faded by its exposure to each generation. From sticky toddlers who battered it with monster trucks to adolescents who engrained it with Amber Leaf. There's initials engraved underneath from people who fell in love twenty years ago and secrets hidden in the planks that not even the best local gossips know. Last January, we split a bottle of Dádá there and pontificated on whether or not to add our initials to the litany of names on its belly. I had my keys out, ready to commit when you stopped me. You said you wanted to be old and grey when you signed it, you didn't want to jinx fate. You said by signing it after a long and happy life, you were passing on good Karma to the bench and to the generations to come. I loved you for that. I still do. I can hear him now next door. He's squawking, demanding my attention but I just can't go into that room. I can't look at my own child's eyes because they are just too like yours. And I can't stomach the rage I feel when I look at him and the disgust I feel at this rage. I clench my fist through my cast and relish in the creeping pain in my knuckles because I deserve to be punished for this. I close my eyes and I can see the doctor's face, sorrowful as he tells me the worst has happened and shocked as my fist breaks the yellow clad walls of that suffocating waiting room. I can see my fist after the collision, plaster stuck to my knuckles,

blood trailing down my arm. I can hear the muttered voices, the hushed gasps but what scares me the most is I can't remember the pain as the bones broke. All I remember is the breath leaving my chest, replaced instead by a throbbing ache that has yet to go away. I remember the absolute shock, hitting me like a bus, that still hasn't subsided. It reminds me of 'Gotcha', the game of siblings, where scaring each other from behind the door leads to indisputable bragging rights. Well this was it, the gotcha of all gotchas but it wasn't a game. He's screaming now. He won't let himself be ignored and that seems to be another thing he's inherited from you. It's so inhumane, so animalistic to want to leave him that way. To let him cry himself out because isn't that what we all have to do eventually? I don't want to be the adult in this situation, I want to cry too. I want to be comforted, I want the security of someone who will always be there.

The door creaks ever so slightly as I open it and for one second, the crying stops. The Faded Denim walls mock me, and the monkeys stare scathingly, as I make my way slowly across the room. My legs move as though they're made of lead, each step feels like a hundred yards. The wood of the crib feels cold to touch. As my eyes adjust to the soft glow of the sailing boat nightlight, I see him. A tuft of sweaty brown hair, two chubby flailing arms. A tiny red face, so wrinkled with rage that the eyes can't even be seen. I don't need to see them. I know their exact shade, their exact shape. I know how they crease with laughter and glint with mirth. I know how they cloud with thought and pierce with anger. I don't want to know them in any other way but yours.

Arms that aren't mine reach out to the heaving bundle, and manage to clumsily lift him up. His skin feels so warm. I sink into the worn armchair in the corner. It almost feels as soft as his skin. I begin to study his face, his legs, his tiny little hands. His nose is smaller than the nail on my pinky finger and his ears are like two little 2cent sweets. His features begin to blur slowly as tears run down my face to join his. Darker drops of blue appear on his pastel babygrow. I close my eyes and I can feel my pulse behind them, forcing itself to be heard. I can hear the sobs crashing one after another, like waves on the rocks as they finally tear themselves free. I can feel the space opening up in my lungs as I breathe again, as that knife of a knot uncurls in my chest.

I don't know how long it is before I notice. Before I realise the baby boy in my arms is no longer crying. Instead, one tiny hand is resting on my bright blue cast. Two brown eyes are gazing up at my own. They're so familiar that it nearly kills me but for once, I can't pull my gaze away. Because I know how your eyes look when you're happy. And when you're sad. But most importantly, I know how they look when they're full of hope. When they're full of life. And looking into these eyes, I can finally hear it. The nice quiet of the night.