

**Catherine O'Mahony**

UCC

2017

**“As many different ways to weather a storm as there will be storms to weather”**

The rain. Lashing the window in fluid grey sheets, the kind of rain that soaks into your skin, reaches your very bones - it's all I can look at as I sit here in the confines of this tiny hospital room. It's all there really is to look at, other than the stark walls, the glowing monitors, the limp form of my daughter on the bed next to me. Eight hours I've been sitting here. Eight hours breathing in that antiseptic smell, the unforgiving contours of the hospital chair keeping me awake, keeping me watchful. I sent himself home for some sleep - he needed it more than I needed him here with me. Barely.

The other driver walked away from the wreckage completely unharmed, they said, a shake of the head in wonder, a hint - not enough, not nearly enough - of disapproval. Although staggering may have been a better word for it, stumbling, half blind with the drink, an auld lad down to the pub - “just the one now, I'm driving, sure you wouldn't put the dog out in this let alone make it walk home,” until it turned to two, three, four and so on, an Irish goodbye with no chance to take his keys from him.

It's quiet here, for hours upon hours at a time, punctuated by brief whirlwinds of doctors, nurses, medical students doing the rounds. She still hasn't woken up so I sit, discarded books by my side, her favourites, in case she can hear me. *The Hobbit. Harry Potter. Northern Lights.* I read to her until my voice rasped and the words blurred on the page and now here I am, just sitting, an aching pit where my stomach should be, a black fear that I haven't felt in years.

I woke up gasping in the middle of the night, those years ago, convinced something was wrong, so wrong, a fiery band across my chest with every breath, a guttural noise of panic to wake himself. Surely not again... not now, with so little time left to go. We had arrived at the hospital drenched, the howling storm causing fluorescent lights to flicker briefly over the water pooling from us onto the floor of A&E until a nurse mopped it up quickly, muttering something about wet floors and broken bones, disapproval etched into the lines on her face.

Broken bones.

I almost laughed when we were told, the sheer giddiness of relief for our girl, our child we tried and failed for so long to have, safe inside me for a little while more. Broken bones, the pain wholly my own, nothing wrong with her, her heartbeat strong. I had known this time would be different - I felt her strength every time her small form moved inside of me. Strong enough to break my ribs, rare as the nurses assured me it was. “A kicker,” my mother-in-law said knowingly. “A fine, strong baby” she said, with an added “...at last,” a touch too insensitive, although more barbed comments about her lack of grandchildren had stopped after the last miss. Small favours.

The cheap plastic of the chair creaks beneath me as I shift, fingers twining in the soft blanket draped over me, unnecessary in the oppressive heat of the hospital room but comforting

nonetheless. I drag my gaze briefly away from the curtain of rain, as though to check she's still there. I don't know why I do this to myself - just looking at her causes something to twist viscerally inside me, seeing her like this, immobile, immutable. It's like we're trapped in a moment of time - there's a permanence to this scene as though this is how it has always been and always will be, the rain beating an incessant tattoo against the window, the girl on the bed and myself watching over her. She's a slip of a thing, thirteen now, the beautiful, wilful thirteen of a girl making her first forays into adolescence, independence - I don't think I'll ever lose the need to see her safe, no less in its ferocity than it was the day I first laid eyes on her.

My ribs had burned, the day we finally met her, mere days really after they had fractured. They burned along with everything else for hours and hours until the pain was a deep sea I drowned in, breathed through, inhale, exhale. It was worth it, worth the agony when I held her for the first time, when she opened her eyes. Blue, a deep blue, like her grandfather's, God rest him, reminding me of summers spent with him on the beach, unearthing periwinkles from damp sand, worn smooth by the sea, washed clean by the rain. Showing him one the same shade as the flowers that share their name, the pure colour stark against the grime of a child's hands.

How quickly it must have happened. I can't stop imagining it. The torn wreckage, by the road, silence broken by the patter of rain and the mournful wail of far off sirens. Before that, the crunching shriek of tortured metal against metal, the seat belt snapping bones as the laws of motion carried my daughter forward for an instant more. Breaking ribs but sparing her the windshield, thank God, though there's a livid scar across her cheek, a shard that flew. The impact of the other car had been mostly on the left side, so at least himself was there to meet me at the hospital unharmed, safe, but shaken, terrified and that in itself was almost too much to bear - I'd always depended on him not to fall apart when I could feel myself ripping at the seams.

She lies now in the hospital bed, asleep for so long, and she looks so small, so small, white against the white sheets, in a white room, a stark contrast from the sullen, overbearing clouds outside. The hard strike of drops against glass punctuates the beeps of monitors, establishing a rhythm that I cling to - it's a harsh sound but a sound of life. I clasp her hand in mine, tempering the strength of my grief, my grip, to a barely there touch. Her fingers are so thin, her bones like the bones of a bird, hollow - I imagine the snap. I jerk my hand away, flutter it over my own ribs, remembering the burn, the pain, the molten love and rush of relief, thirteen years ago, when I knew she was safe. I'd let her break them all again, take her broken ribs, just to know she's safe but I can't and she isn't and I stay and hold her hand and stare at the drops trickling down the window pane.

Hours later. A gasp, a sudden sharp intake of air. I turn to the bed, my breath caught in my throat.

A flash of colour, periwinkle blue. The rain stops.