



2019 Longlist

Hometown Legacy

by

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Hometown Legacy

I was born in a house on a hill in the small city of Cork, a few miles inland of the Atlantic. It's the sort of place where nothing significant ever happens, with its winding roads, back alleys and broad accents. The River Lee bisects the city, dividing it into the rich south side and the less privileged north. I learned my beat in Cork and it will always be home.

In Irish, Cork is called *Corcaigh*, which means 'marsh'. It's been a settlement since the 6th century, when Saint Finbarr collected students and founded a church and monastery on a cliff above the Lee. In his honour, half of Cork is called Finbarr and the others carry it as a middle name. With the name comes a strange sense of humour, self-deprecating to the nth and loaded with colloquialism. The people of Cork proclaim to take history in their stride. The town is, they say, the *real* capital of Ireland.

Near the end of the street where I grew up on the south side, there is a pedestrian footbridge. The footbridge and the road it leads to are poorly lit and badly maintained, with small amounts of local traffic but little else. The bridge hosts gangs of adults drinking and gangs of teenagers drinking. The walls are daubed with unimaginative graffiti, enveloped by grungy gang messaging: IRA. HEAPHY'S RATS. NICE BAZZER. It's completely normal to find the occasional used needle poking out from small piles of illegally dumped rubbish. Every town has a place like this, a forgotten hole in the local history.

For as long as I can remember, my mother has favoured avoiding this bridge but it's a shortcut to the city centre so everyone ignores her warnings (including herself). She has always told me to avoid the bridge after dark.

“Don’t cross the bridge at night!” she says to anyone departing the house after twilight, even if she knows they’re not going that way. The bridge is the sort of place that lends itself easily to accidents and easier still to menace.

A small city could never hold in my wild spirit of adventure, born of too much reading and no shortage of daydreaming. The financial crisis hit Ireland hard; I lit on out as soon as I could but somehow often found myself returning to my mother’s house and the warm fire that illuminates her sitting room.

It was a completely ordinary Friday in October when I met George. The ground was wet from the misting rain that had deluged the country, but the sky was clear and the air was crisp and fresh; I could see stars twinkling overhead and my breath rose up before me in little puffs of early winter. It was cold and dark and despite my mother’s endless warnings, I gave in to the temptation of the shortcut and walked up over the bridge.

The Romans never conquered Ireland (a point of immense regional pride), so the country saw its first true changes during the Viking and Norman invasions. Arguably for Cork, things went downhill from there. In the Middle Ages there were a couple of thousand people in the town and half of them died of plague when the Black Death swept in. Truthfully, Cork has something of a habit for getting into trouble— in 1491, my unfortunate kinsmen accidentally got caught up in the War of the Roses, when a pretender to the throne sought support for a plot to overthrow Henry VII. A former Mayor of Cork agreed and took some men to England; they were all executed. Cork is called the Rebel County, and it’s not for nothing. My grandmother would say, “God loves a trier.”

Years have passed, but I remember the bridge like it was yesterday. I remember the orange glow of the lone streetlamp reflected softly on the wet

ground. I remember the swoosh of the cars driving along beneath me. I came from the darkness and he didn't see me- but I did see him. I remember taking in his too-long white shirt, sleeves rolled up the elbows, and his tattered Converse.

We were walking towards one another in the narrow space, but instead of continuing past me, he stopped and turned to the side. Thinking that he was clearly unhinged and that I could still turn around and walk away, I watched him pull himself up onto the railing of the footbridge. For a split second I didn't understand what was going on.

He took a big breath and pitched forward, leaning out over the dual carriageway. They say that in these moments, the adrenaline rushes and fight or flight kicks in. It's a cliché to say that my heart burst to life but I swear I could hear it pumping in my ears. Realisation dawned.

"Please don't," I said loudly. "Please don't do that."

He hadn't expected me and I interrupted him. He reached out and grabbed hold of the suspension wire- the only thing that stopped his fall to a terrible end. My legs were weak and my mouth was dry. I swallowed a few times. My hands were suddenly freezing and I was wide awake, blood buzzing in my veins. Fight or flight.

"Just walk on girl, nothin' to do with you," he said.

"Please. I can't leave you here, and I don't want to watch. Please. Please don't make me watch this." For a long time, he looked down at me from the heights, weighing his desire against my plea.

"Stay there," he said. "Don't move." His accent was thick and flat, but his voice was small and young; he was only a child. I stayed put, watching his descent.

He started to look around, sliding his hand down the wire so he could begin to lower himself to his knees. The railing was wet and I longed to turn my face away so I couldn't see if he slipped, but I couldn't look away. As soon as his Converse touched the ground, I dropped my bag and stumbled the last few steps. The relief was consuming and I started crying before I reached him. I grabbed him, this child I didn't know, and held him close, letting him sob into my shoulder. We were both shaking.

"It's okay," I said, "It's okay. You're down now, it's gonna be okay." He separated from me and in the orange glow I saw his face for the first time. "How old are you? What's your name?" I asked.

Ireland was fully colonised by the English between 1540 and 1603 during the Plantations, and again with the arrival of one Oliver Cromwell in 1649. In Ireland we know Cromwell as a genocidal maniac, but the English seem to think he's absolutely fabulous, so I suppose it all depends on your viewpoint. In Ireland, Cromwell set about his task with relish. His deep antipathy for Catholicism was borne out when he banned the faith, offered bounties for priests and executed the ones he found. Penal Laws meant that land belonging to Catholics was confiscated and no Catholic was permitted to live in a town.

His men sacked Wexford, killing thousands and setting it alight; Cork fell quickly in the aftermath. In Drogheda, Cromwell gave no quarter, referring to his savagery as "a righteous judgement of God on these barbarous wretches". You get the impression he was both a zealot and not much fun; thousands of Irish were transported as indentured labourers. Cromwell's actions brought famine and plague, widespread dispossession and disenfranchisement. My people lost everything; everything was taken from them by force.

"I'm 17. George Ryan." He was still crying and his voice was thick, but I told him my name and gave him another hug.

"Why were you on the bridge? Where do you live? Can I bring you home?" I had no idea what I was doing, but I couldn't leave him there and I was grasping for anything that might help.

"Nah, home is up in Knocknaheeney girl, it's ages away. I just couldn't take it anymore."

"Couldn't take what?" I asked, "What's going on that's made you this sad?"

"I'm sick of being mocked. All those stupid fucking bullies, they're always at me."

"For what?"

"I'm gay like," he said, looking down at his shoes.

"I'm sorry," I said, "That's shit." I didn't know what else to say.

"They're supposed to be my friends like. They're all over there," he said, gesturing to the other side of the bridge. "I don't want to go back to them." I glanced across and could hear vague shouts and chatter, carried a little on the wind to where we stood.

"Okay," I said, "So what are you gonna do, go home?"

"Yeah, fuck this girl, I'm going home to sleep. I've had loads to drink." I already knew that; his eyes were hazy and his words were slurred.

"Who are you going home with?" I asked. "I don't think you should go alone when you're this upset."

"Ah no, it's fine. Julie's down the road there, I'll ring her and we'll go home together."

“Can you ring her now, while I’m here?” I asked him. I didn’t quite believe him, but he nodded and took his phone out of his pocket and rang Julie. To his credit, she answered and when he started crying again she said she’d come back for him. He hung up the phone.

“Listen,” I said, “You’re very drunk and you might not remember this tomorrow, but I really need you to message me as soon as you’re home, so take down my number. And promise you’ll message.”

“I will, I will,” he said, “What’s the number?”

I watched him enter it into the phone.

“George, I know this won’t make much sense right now, but the bridge isn’t the answer, yeah? I think some day you’ll have friends who won’t be shitty.” I felt useless, running out these platitudes as though I could solve this boy’s problems with just a few words in the dark.

“Thanks girl,” he said. He gave me one last hug and then he left, walking down the bridge toward Julie, who was waving at him from the road beyond.

In the mid 1800s, *an Gorta Mór* came. It means ‘The Great Hunger’, a famine so severe that it changed Ireland irrevocably. Proximally, the famine was caused by a potato blight that passed through Europe in the 1840s- but ultimately, Ireland was at the time part of the United Kingdom. Decisions made in London meant that Ireland exported its production of food crops and livestock, creating a starvation gap in which one million people died. A further million emigrated, birthing Ireland’s status as a country of migrants. The population of Ireland has never recovered. “It was a genocide,” people will say, “and they killed us by the million.”

I turned away and walked the rest of the bridge, past the revelling teenagers George had left when he'd decided to throw himself into the next world. They were laughing and joking, hooting to the moon and cackling. Booze ran freely and they seemed to be having the time of their lives- young, free and untroubled in the cold night air. Drunk and miles from home, they had no idea that one amongst them had attempted to take his life just feet away. Ignoring the urge to scream at them, I hurried onward to the safety of my mother's kitchen.

George was not my first brush with suicide. I was six when I came downstairs one morning to find my mother in tears, the result of her brother's suicide outside his home in the suburbs. Shortly before he died, he bought me a new Barbie. I still have the doll, somewhere.

I was thirteen when my brother's best friend hung himself. Seeing my teenaged brother in a too-big suit, shouldering the coffin of a boy he'd traded cards with, was hard to bear. My brother doesn't speak of it.

When I was seventeen, a cousin of mine went missing. Our extended family climbed into cars to find him, driving out into the freezing wet December night as a local radio announcer gave a physical description of him every few minutes. Michael is 28, tall and thin with bushy eyebrows. Last seen driving a navy blue car.

They found the car on the side of a road; the fumes were overpowering. At the funeral, his mother collapsed, while his father met each visitor with a handshake, accepted all apologies, and shed not one tear. "Nobody took him by the hand and told him what to do," he said to me. "I won't take his choice away from him." What are you supposed to say to that?

By the early 1900s, Ireland was agitating for Home Rule, demanding limited freedom from the British. Though this nearly came to pass, the outbreak of World War I in 1914 meant that Home Rule was shelved. Irish soldiers enlisted to fight with the British and Cork's Volunteers joined the Royal Munster Fusiliers. My father taught me that they suffered casualties in Gallipoli, at the Somme and at Passchendaele- no small burden, for a tiny corner of a still-growing Empire.

Back home in Ireland, at Easter 1916, revolution came. Launched by Irish republicans seeking an end to British rule, the Easter Rising lasted six days. Members of *Óglaigh na hÉireann*, the Irish Citizen Army and women from *Cumann na mBan* seized key locations in Dublin and proclaimed an Irish Republic. In Cork, 1000 Volunteers mobilised but didn't fight (unusual, given my ancestors' general proclivity for attempting this sort of thing). The Rising ended in surrender, and its the seven leaders were executed by the British. They also arrested 3500 people (many of whom hadn't participated) and sent 1800 to internment camps in Britain. "Obviously," my history teacher told us, "the sense of resentment against the British increased considerably."

A close friend at university called me one New Year's Eve and said it was done for him. He'd had enough of all the stars in all the skies. "I have to go girl" he said, "My head is fucked." We stayed on the phone for eight hours, watching the sun rise. Every time he told me he had to go, I told him I still had something to say and could he hang on a minute? And together, between the pair of us, we decided against him going, after all. Each New Year's Eve he messages, to say thanks. "Another year done girl," he writes, "More to come."

I went to guitar lessons every Friday evening after school with my teenaged best friend. We would walk from the school gates up the Douglas Road and into Brian's house. We'd say hello, practice our chords, learn new songs and head home. Brian was a kind and loving man, with a young daughter he clearly doted on. "She just amazes me every day," he would say. More than a decade later, in December, I was home in Ireland for Christmas, driving across the city. There was a documentary on the radio about a local musician who had died by suicide. It took me a few seconds to recognise how I knew this name; my guitar teacher was gone, another soul lost to the ether.

Suicide is a legacy that haunts my family. I've never been able to conceptualise the sense of pain in my parents' hearts; I'm not sure I could bear it. I can't take the sadness away for them and for a time, I had nightmares that my father too would disappear beneath the makeshift noose, the exhaust fumes or the brown plastic bottle of pills. Once, while drunk, he became upset at the losses incurred. "Oh Jesus," he said, "I worry so much about all of you."

So please, believe me when I tell you that I took George at his word when he said he just couldn't take it anymore. Please believe me when I tell you that I walked in my mother's door that evening and called the Gardaí. The local garda station is perhaps two minutes from the footbridge; George and Julie could be walking past it as I called.

Though the people of Cork didn't fight in the Easter Rising, they rose to the occasion during the War of Independence that followed. In 1919, the MPs elected from Ireland refused to take their seats in Westminster and set up a rebel parliament in Dublin. The British government sent in the Black and Tans and the Auxiliaries, who set about making themselves notorious. Statues in Cork tell the

stories of the dead. In March 1920, the Lord Mayor of Cork Thomas Mac Curtain was shot at his home in front of his wife. His successor Terence McSwiney was arrested in August that year and died on hunger strike in October. In December, the Black and Tans set the city alight; the Burning of Cork claimed 300 buildings and the local men continued their revolt regardless. At the end of the Civil War, Ireland was partitioned into the Free State and the six counties that now make up Northern Ireland; a direct result of the original plantations, some 300 years before.

The local units in Cork refused to accept the new reality and established a Munster Republic. Given the history of Cork so far, it should come as no surprise to learn that the Republic didn't last long, and that Cork was overtaken by the Free State forces.

My city also holds the dubious honour of being the place where the head of Government, Michael Collins was assassinated at *Béal na mBlath* in 1922. Collins was himself from Cork. Legend has it that he was advised against going there but insisted that "They won't shoot me in my own county." Perhaps Collins had been away from home too long. Denis O Neill fired the fatal shot; ironically a former British Army soldier who had fought in World War I, he knew Collins personally and had met him several times. Post mortem, Collins' men had to transport him 20 miles back the road to Cork City. The roads were blocked and the convoy travelled across fields and farms in the dead of night, sometimes carrying his body on their shoulders. They found Collins' diary in his pocket. His last words: "The people are splendid."

The sergeant in the public office heard my tale and told me that I would be better to call back later because this was 'a Monday morning type of issue' and the police were busy right now because the pubs and clubs were heaving.

"Can't you look for him?" I asked.

"Unfortunately not. Look, you did what you could, and he's gone home. He'll be fine."

When I got off the phone, I had no idea where to turn to or who to speak with. All I had was this kid's name and no weaponry to go to bat for him. I got a message about an hour later. "Hi dis is Julie. Georg is hme now tks grl." I never heard from either of them again.

After weeks of my chasing, the Gardaí finally called me to a meeting. They had found him, they said, at my insistence, and though he didn't remember my name, he recalled the bridge and the girl who helped him off it. He was getting help, they said, for his drinking. He seemed fine; his mother and grandmother loved and supported him. He would be well.

But I still couldn't forget George Ryan.

In the 1930s, the municipal government in Cork cleared the tenements of the inner city, and housing estates sprung up on the periphery of the town, mostly on the north side- the side where George came from, and my own father before him. And in the peacetime that followed the centuries of war and devastation, Cork thrived for a time- aside from the scourge of TB which ravaged the country in the 1930s and 40s, killing tens of thousands each year- and later the polio epidemic of 1956, which led to hundreds of children being evacuated out of the city to the countryside, among them my uncle.

In the years since I met George, I moved to Dublin and then to London. I changed career and fell in love with a man I met at an airport. I travelled the world. I sat with one of my best friends as she passed away in a hospital bed and I rang in every year with a promise that I would live a life of love, not limits. Every now and then, I would check in on George's Facebook page, just to see how he was doing, to make sure he was okay and still cracking on with this living thing. I often thought about sending him a message, but I stopped myself each time. I felt I would be interfering.

A generation before my time and George's, Cork survived as a manufacturing town, with Ford, Dunlops and Verolme playing a big role in local employment. When they closed one after another in the early 1980s, Cork was devastated by unemployment. Woolworths left Ireland and closed their Cork store in 1984. Local offices were boarded up. Shops closed. Thousands of people were laid off and the bottom fell out of the world for many local families. People panicked. My parents tell stories of poverty and hunger- when they were George's age, Cork was on its knees. Perhaps the city was saved by the self deprecating humour of Corkonians- but it was helped by the arrival of an almost unknown tech company which set up in Hollyhill on the north side; Apple employs six thousand people in Cork today.

George died in September, two years after I met him. I found out in December when I did my little check in, expecting to see his smiling happy face. There were thousands of messages from his friends and loved ones, covering over the ones that had pushed him to the grave. QUEER. FAG. FUCKING HOMO.

The footbridge is still there. And every time I am home, I cross it. I glance down there at night. I peer across it in the morning fog. I actively seek it out. It's

the sort of place that can change lives, in a town where nothing significant ever happens.

About the author

Aisling Twomey is a writer and yoga teacher, born and raised in Ireland but now living in London. Her work has been published in the *Irish Law Times*, the *Irish Times* and the *Irish Independent* among others. She also writes for Book Riot. Aisling is currently working on her first novel for young adults and is studying for an MA in Creative Writing at Birkbeck, University of London.