

Infinite Possibilities

You were born with pale blue eyes. You were born with white skin, a palm tree shaped birthmark behind your left knee and a penis like some vestigial remnant a couple of inches below where the cord was cut. You were born with a promise that the world would open up with infinite possibilities.

You returned to hospital three weeks later. She put her hand on your forehead and knew something was wrong and she woke him after midnight and he grunted and groaned and said *for Christ's sake I've to be into work at 4*. He drove and you cried in a blanket on her knees.

He kicked a football to you in the garden on a hot day in May and you still have a fragment of memory like something from a dream of the ice-cream van pulling up across the green, him taking your hand and coins rattling in his pocket beside your ear. You ate a 99 and sour snakes and he had ice-cream too, but gave you the stick of chocolate. You saw the ice-cream drip between his thumb and pointer finger and he smiled at you and licked it clean. You asked him if you'd grow hair on your hands too.

You woke to the sound of the telephone and her scared voice and the floorboards in her bedroom creaked as she ran across them. You met her on the landing, embarrassed to see her by the hot-press, pulling off her night gown, the stretch marks on her thighs and stomach clear in the landing light. She was stepping into jeans and said *go back to bed love, please, just go back to bed, your aunty Sheila is coming over*. Sheila woke you in the morning and called you sleepy head, then told you that your Dad had an accident at work but was okay and that you could visit him in the hospital. Sheila drove you that day and her car smelled of cigarettes and an apple scent that she spritzed and waved her hand through. He didn't look at you. If he did, he would have seen your face full of fear at sight of his arm, halved at the elbow, the rest of it lost to some machine and the hand he had licked clean of ice cream gone with it.

You came home from school and she was on the kitchen floor and he had his foot on her chest and was pouring from a can of Carlsberg and the golden liquid fell on her face and ran down her neck and shoulders to the floor and she begged him to stop. He said *you drink it bitch, if you don't want me to*, then he crushed the can with his hand and threw it at her head. You ran across the kitchen and told him to stop and he swung his stump and caught you across the nose and in that split second you felt the coarseness of the skin and would never forget it and he said *Look who's home, our fucking simpleton son* then he spat on her and took another can from the counter to the living room where the television played but he looked right through it.

She was the most beautiful girl you'd ever seen and while the bus took you to the secondary school in town you counted the villages along the way. She got on in the third village and you kept your bag on the seat beside you until she was walking the aisle and sometimes it worked and she sat beside you and smiled but the things you had planned to say didn't come because your voice stopped working under her gaze, or when it worked it stuttered like a faulty engine and you looked out the window instead and she got off in the town outside the girl's school. Four years of school mornings never became the morning you imagined.

You were the one that found him, when you called in on the way home from Cashman's joinery, where you worked as an apprentice, teasing splinters from your fingers and coming to know the smell of every type of wood – fresh pine, cat piss elm. He was in the garage of his bungalow outside town, where he had gone to live alone. A hose through the car window just like you'd seen in films and you were calm and opened the garage door first to let out the fumes, then opened the car door and turned off the ignition. You knew he was gone and his stump hung beside him. The artificial arm was on the passenger seat. You cried when you saw that and remembered him fixing his sleeve around it and examining it in the mirror when he thought nobody was watching.

She stood beside you and linked her arm in yours and you both looked into the pit, down at the pine box, and you wondered if in a million guesses he would have guessed as a young man that he would be buried one-armed in a Roscommon graveyard. At the house afterwards her new man said *maybe it would be best if you took your father's house and gave your mother some space* and she just nodded and cut you loose.

The world did not open its arms to you. It raised its palms in hesitation and asked if you were sure and you said *of course not*, but you couldn't spend another day in that bungalow, where you could still smell his purple Silk Cuts. London found space for you the way you found space for your mother's holy medal, shoved down into your suitcase and never seen again once you'd unpacked in Clapham. You drank with older men and some reminded you of him and all of them seemed sad and had sad stories about their fathers who had worked in mines and brothers overseas in police forces or armies and sisters who deserved more and mothers they raised a glass to. Even when they laughed, which they often did, there was loss in the sound and you looked at the map of London above the usual table and wondered at the chances of making a journey on any of those endless roads and hitting a dead end. But somehow, they had all managed it.

The city stole two decades and younger men with more energy came from other countries just as you had, and older men made mistakes in banks and building stopped and you realised how little you possessed. You sat in Heathrow and looked at the board. Johannesburg, Rio, Cairo, Singapore. Knock. Men and women in suits carried briefcases and young couples passed in tight clothes with big headphones on their necks. The pilot gave her name and you thought what a life she must have, seeing cities from the sky in the morning or at night and then she set you down on the runway with your suitcase and the road to the bungalow still the same as the day you found him.

A pamphlet was sticking out of the letter box like a sharp white tongue one morning and it invited you to a protest in the village. Your old primary school was being shut, along with the one from the next village, and the people in the hall that night shouted at a man in a suit and blue tie and asked him if he'd make his own children take that journey every day just to get an education. You said nothing and knew that all of their shouting was in vain, and you saw a chance and earned your bus license and applied for the job when it finally came around. It was a van instead of a bus in the end, as only eight children needed to be brought to the primary school in town, four little boys and four little girls, one set of twins among them, redhead girls with big smiles and fringes.

You drove the route you knew so well and later ferried their younger brothers and sisters and all other comers. Every afternoon you pulled up outside the low grey wall in a line of other vans and buses, listening close enough to hear the bell and the slowly rising wave of chatter and shrieking that burst through the school doors, down the concrete steps and crashed into the yard and you, every day, marvelled at hundreds of them flying off in all directions like sparks from a table saw. You played a game where you'd see if you could spot your passengers before they got to the van. And they'd climb on full of the energy of being finished for the day, all smiles and you never said much but always smiled back. Some of those little boys and girls would go on to great things and great places and others would not. It saddened you, that you could often tell which ones would not.

You buried her cancer wracked body and shook hands with the new man who had grown so old and you were happy that she had found him in spite of all that had passed, which was best left alone. You sat by the fire every night and kept up with the news and imagined your old passengers grown up in the faces on the screen, the newsreaders, the peacekeepers in Lebanon, the lads lifting the All Ireland. The homeless in Dublin, the students protesting on campuses. One night you saw one of the redhead twins fully grown - you could never tell them apart - making bits of some property developer on Primetime and you laughed and cheered her on.

You had surgery on your hip and the doctor told you it would keep you ticking over and to postpone a replacement as long as possible. You took to wearing glasses for reading the newspaper and for watching the football from the side-lines every Sunday. You were caught off guard when Jazz came to you late - late fifties and discovering a new *passion*, though the word embarrassed you. An accident really, when the radio in your car became stuck on one station. You made a journey to the city from time to time and bought records. You read about Jazz history and most of it didn't stick but was interesting all the same and kept you company on lonely nights.

That morning, the morning of all mornings, you couldn't have known what came next, when all the previous moments added up to one that meant more than any other. You felt fine when you woke and your hip felt strong, though you had no appetite for breakfast. You drank tea and took some in a flask and whistled to the dog as you put on a wax jacket and walking shoes and opened the door and he jumped onto the passenger seat. Summer all over May, in the branches and the sky already blue, tractors at work in green and brown fields, county colours hanging from upstairs windows. You took the car all the way to Loughlin's Hand, where a flat palm of beach leads to one of four paths through woodland, like fingers, and a thumb of stony headland juts into the lough. The

car park visible below the road and you could make out two small boys jumping from the pier to a dinghy, struggling in the water, and coming down the hill in the distance what looked like a tour group and their van parked facing the sea. You slowed to pass a woman around your own age walking on the verge and something made you look at her in your rear-view mirror. You parked and let the dog out, summer, but still carrying that Atlantic cold, glad of the jacket and hat and you put your hands in your pockets and said 'Now boy, which way will we go?'

Word Count **1999**