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WHAT IT WAS & WHAT I KNOW: ATTEMPTS AT FAMILY HISTORY

by

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors
(English)

The Honors College

University of Maine

May 2021

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ABSTRACT

Family stories and family histories are contingent on how they are remembered. As these stories are passed down, the ways that they are remembered can change, with the truthful aspects of these stories disappearing over time. As a result, many family stories are not necessarily truthful, but this does not discount their value. The aim of this project is to explore these ideas while also answering the following question: to what extent are family stories bound by the 'truth'? In order to answer this question, I have explored my own family stories that I know may not be true and have told them how I remember them; ultimately telling stories that are a bit different than how other members of my family might remember them. I have done so by creating a work of creative nonfiction that is composed of small stories and vignettes that all tie into these overarching themes and attempt to answer this larger question. In doing this work, I have also explored how these stories affect me and how I fit into them; ultimately finding that it is not the truth in these stories that matters, but how we feel about them.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor, Gregory Howard, for his guidance throughout the thesis process and his willingness to work with me after only having known me for ten minutes. Thank you for letting me follow all of the threads that came up through this process, and for guiding me towards this work. I am so thankful for our time working together.

I would also like to thank the McGillicuddy Humanities Center for their generous funding of this project. I'll be the first to say that I was not in this for the money, but I also can't deny that it helped. Without their encouragement, I would not have looked to publicly present this work to the University of Maine community, and I am beyond grateful that they pushed me to do so.

Thank you to my family, friends, professors, my thesis committee, and anyone who listened to me discuss this thesis for an hour when they didn't have to. I know that I must have been unbearable as I've worked on this, and anyone who has had to deal with me while I did so definitely deserve some type of an award.

Finally, thank you to Melissa Ladenheim. Without your assistance, I never would have even gotten to the thesis process. Thank you for giving me a second chance, I hope I used it well.

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CREATIVE DISQUISITION

DISCUSSION

I had not initially intended to do a creative thesis. My concentration in English is not creative writing, and I've only taken one course in the subject during my four years. When I began thinking about the honors thesis, I always assumed some large form research project either about literature analysis or professional writing. I still had a desire to explore creative writing a bit more, and to use it to look at a subject that I had always had an interest in. After I found out that the honors thesis could be a creative work and realizing that doing so could still count as my English Capstone, I knew that I had to take that opportunity. Doing a creative thesis felt like the perfect way to wrap up my honors career, and to really hone my skills in multiple different types of writing. Before I began this work, I had never attempted to write creative nonfiction, but it was the genre that made the most sense for the work that I wanted to complete.

I did not initially settle on writing this thesis as a piece of creative nonfiction. When I first began thinking about this thesis, I was intending to do more of an ethnology or genealogical study that focused on earlier members of my family. Knowing that I would be studying abroad, at one point I had even considered doing more of a set of travel logs, exploring all of the areas of Ireland that my family was from and track my experience while being in those places. As I moved more towards really beginning my thesis, and I thought more about what I really wanted to do with the work, I found that none of these forms really fit with what I wanted my thesis to look like.

Creative nonfiction is a form of writing that I have always been interested in, but I had not yet had much experience working with the genre. I had read many personal essays and other forms of creative nonfiction while taking other English classes, but I had never really interacted with the genre with any real depth. Knowing that I wanted to tell a story that was inherently personal, it felt right to turn to creative nonfiction. After reading some recommendation from the genre, it was cemented for me that a work of creative nonfiction would be the best way to tell the story of my family and of myself.

I have always had a large interest in genealogy and family history, something that was obviously fueled by the fact that there was a large amount of my family that I had no way of knowing. I was always the one that was asking for more stories, more details that I could cling to and create a story out of. My interest in this subject jump started when I realized that there were questions about my family that my parents could not answer, but that they were questions that I still wanted the answers to. There was a large amount of my family that I could have looked at, but I narrowed it down to my paternal grandfather's family for a variety of reasons.

Out of all of the branches of my family, this was the part of my family that I knew the least about. Through the amateur genealogy searches that I had done over the years, I was able to learn a good amount about other branches of my family. The people that I choose to write about were the ones that I could not pin down, the ones where I could never confidently say that I had found a record that I knew to be true. It was a lingering question that I wanted the answer to, a lingering story that I wanted to tell. I looked like these people, carrying their eyes and their shoulders and looking hauntingly similar to some women that I had never met.

Once I choose to study abroad in Cork, Ireland, it cemented the idea that I would focus on this part of my family. I had always been told that my father's father was born in Cork, and that had most of his family had come from there as well. A quick google search told me that my last name was the most popular last name in that area, confirming that what I was told was likely true. My time in Ireland ended up being cut short, but the time that I spent over there still helped me confirm that I wanted to do with this project. After spending in Ireland and immersing myself in Irish culture, I wanted to explore this Irish part of my family and I wanted to write about where I was in relation to them. Keeping all of this in mind, I came to what ultimately is my thesis: a work of creative nonfiction where I explore specific family stories and evaluate where I exist in relation to them.

INTENT

The intent of this work was to study family stories, and while doing so, study my own family and their stories. Family stories are an interesting type of narratives, they are often passed down orally and never written down. They are contingent on how they are remembered, and every time that they are told, they are told just a little bit differently. Different members of the same family will remember these stories in an entirely different way, and over time all of these stories will change dramatically.

I remember every story that my father ever told me in an entirely different way than he has told to me. The ways that he remembers these stories are likely different from how his parents told them to him. The differences in how we remember these stories mean that we tell them differently, with varying levels of truth. Knowing this and knowing that many of the family stories that I have been told were not entirely truthful, I wanted to evaluate this idea. I know most of the stories that I was told were not true, and so does my father. Both of us only know what were told and we both know that we were told is likely not true. One of my initial goals for this thesis was to evaluate or not it mattered, to evaluate whether not it mattered if any of these stories that I was told were true or false. After completing this work and doing some research into the members of my family, I know that most of what I was told is not true. I also know that it does not entirely matter.

In addition to evaluating the validity of these stories, I wanted to evaluate what these stories meant to me, and where I fit in with all of these stories and the people that

they are about. These are people that I was never able to meet, but people that I was still tied to. These were people that I have always been told I looked like, people that I followed to a country, for a short time. In writing about many of these people, I intended to pull back and think about myself, trying to decide whether or not I was like them. I wanted to leave this with a stronger understanding of myself after thinking about where I came from. One of my small goals was to always come out of this with one true fact, one thing I could tell my family that I had learned one thing about this branch of my family that I could confirm. In doing this, I came to understand that this one true fact was going to be about myself, that the only thing that I could confirm to be true was going to be about me.

I did not fully know what I was intending to do until I started working through this thesis and finally got a grasp of the work that I was doing. After working with the thesis for a few weeks, I came to understand that I wanted to compose a work of creative nonfiction that discussed the value of the truth in family stories and above that, evaluated the importance of family stories themselves.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Eula Biss, *Notes from No Man's Land*

Biss' series of essays, *Notes from No Man's Land*, was the first piece of creative nonfiction that I read in order to inform my thesis. Biss writes a series of essays about her experience with race in America, discussing some infamous racial conflicts in the country while always pulling it back in some way to discuss her own feelings towards these events. Biss exhibits some form of mastery in how she always pulls back to her main point. Her opening essay, a discussion of the history of telephone poles, follows them from when they were first erected to when they began to be used to lynch black men. The discussion of telephone poles at first seems out of the blue, but by the end of her essay makes perfect sense. Biss writes in a very cyclical nature, with her essays often going into a different direction before she pulls it back together at the end. I have found myself subconsciously doing something very similar, emulating what Biss does so well in my own work.

Sarah Gerard, *Sunshine State*

In *Sunshine State*, Sarah Gerard tells the story of her own upbringing in Florida, discussing many different parts of her upbringing. Gerard does not shy away from some of the rougher parts of her upbringing, opening with an essay about her childhood friend who ultimately became a stripper and spent time in shelters for battered women. In some of her other essays, Gerard almost becomes a journalist, writing about a troubled bird sanctuary and work with the homeless population in

Florida, creating a different tone from the essays what are more personal. Gerard is a master of writing about the personal, about writing about topics that are difficult to talk about. While doing my own work and discussing some topics that are a bit harder to discuss, I've looked to Gerard to see how she has balanced doing the same type of work.

Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*

Hartman was one of the last books that I read which informed my thesis, and I actually read it for an entirely different course that focused on the intersection of romanticism and modern Black studies. Hartman discusses her experience tracing her African-American family back to Ghana, where her ancestors were sold into slavery. Hartman spends a lot of time in her book discussing what she wants to get out of her work, asking large questions that she does not ever seem to get the answer to, something that I have seen happen a few times in my own thesis. Hartman rides the line between looking at history and looking at her own family, something glaringly similar to what I do in my own work. Hartman even spends a lot of time discussing naming in her family and the importance of family names, one of the larger themes of my own thesis. Reading Hartman towards the end of the thesis process had me take a different look at my own thesis and made me think more about the importance of looking into family history

Leslie Jamison, *The Empathy Exams*

Leslie Jamison explores empathy in its many forms in her own series of essays, *The Empathy Exams*. Jamison begins by discussing her experience as a medical actor, where she was quite literally asked to judge medical students on their abilities to

empathize with their patients. Jamison does not only talk about her time as a medical actor, but she also discusses a wide variety of topics that all pull back to the ideas of empathy and what we mean when we say that we understand someone's pain. Jamison writes about many different types of pain, jumping from discussing many of her different injuries to discussing incarcerated men. She seems to do so with ease, and I have attempted to emulate that while many different people and many different themes.

Michael Patrick MacDonald, *All Souls: A Family Story from Southie*

I first read *All Souls* when I was still in high school, in a course where we discussed both the sex abuse scandal of Boston Catholic Churches and Whitey Bulger, comparing how both of those figures had a hold over people in Boston. MacDonald tells the story of his own family, who lived in housing projects in South Boston during the seventies, while also telling the stories of people in his neighborhood. This work is less of a personal essay and more of a memoir, but the subject matter was always similar to the work that I have been doing while looking into my family. Reading this text a few years ago was what really kicked off my desire to look into this particular branch of my family.

Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts*

Maggie Nelson does not write in chapters or in sections, in *The Argonauts*, she simply writes, breaking up each discussion into paragraphs and never titling a single part of her essay. In *the Argonauts*, Nelson discusses her journey into motherhood while also looking at her own relationship with her partner. Nelson writes in prose, pulling from other authors and theorists to supplement her own work. Some of the

writing in my own thesis is modeled after the prose that she writes in, and at one point remained entirely un-chaptered and untitled.

METHODOLOGY

Due to the personal nature of this thesis, I went about the composition of this work in a very natural way. I did not want it to ever feel like I was forcing the work and make it seem like I was creating something fictional. I am telling true stories about myself and about my family, I wanted the way that I wrote to be representative of that. In order to do that, I started by making a list of everything that I remembered about my family and everything that I thought I wanted to write about in this thesis. Most of what I started with were not exactly stories, most of what I remembered were just details or some off-hand comments that I later turned into stories while I discussed them.

I spent a lot of time experimenting with this work, trying out different forms of writing and different formats in the beginning of this process. I came upon the form that I ended up using, the vignettes that mostly use short paragraphs, after trying to use different styles to do this work. After trying to use the traditional paragraph style, I found that it did not give me the opportunity to really work through the subject matter in the way that I wanted to. It did not give me the room to show how I was coming to terms with the work in the same way that the vignettes I ultimately ended up settling on. As I realized that the focus of my work was not the family stories themselves, but how I interacted with them, I realized that I needed a format that allowed me to do that.

After reading *The Argonauts*, I saw how a work of creative nonfiction could be effective without truly following the paragraph style format. I started experimenting with that format a bit more after reading it and found that it was easier to write my thesis, and

that it sounded how I wanted it to. Once I started writing and began discussing with my family what I was writing about, they were more forthcoming with other stories and other details that they had never discussed with me before. These short discussions with my father ended up creating much of the work that I composed later in the process and created an entire thread where I discussed his half-sister, my aunt.

I also spent a good amount of this thesis reflecting on my time in Ireland and how that time affected me. I turned to discussing the abrupt nature of my departure from Ireland, as well as my experience living alone, farther away from my family than I have ever been. Doing so forced me to really consider where I fit into these stories and forced me to write about myself far more than I had intended to, writing about my own eating issues and discussing myself more than I had ever intended to. This was something that came up naturally in my writing, and although I strongly considered pulling it from the thesis entirely, I felt that it was important to include it. In writing this, I want to be truthful with how I discuss myself as what I say about myself is the only thing that I know to be true. In a work where I am not always bound by the truth, I wanted to keep one thing true in the instances that I could.

What I wrote about was also contingent on what was going on in my life at the time. About midway through this process, I found some old family photos and some old documents about my paternal grandfather and his daughter. After finding these, both of them came to be larger focuses for the writing that I did after that and created a smaller storyline where I discussed my grandfather's forgotten daughter and the circumstances around his death.

I found myself writing in short vignettes instead of a proper essay-like style, this was the form that felt the most natural when I first started writing the thesis, and the form that I found myself continuing after I really started working with the thesis. I utilized this form because I found that it gave me more room to work through the finer details of many of the stories as I was writing. I wrote in shorter paragraphs, while leaving other thoughts to their own paragraph to highlight their importance among each small narrative. The way that I was writing was very similar to how I was thinking about the work and working through the material.

Instead of editing throughout the entire process, I waited to start editing until I had completed the initial writing, waiting until the work came to its natural end. I did not want to worry about editing until the creative well was dry, until I knew what the work itself looked like. Once I began editing, I was able to go through and fine a more cohesive story and set of storylines within the thesis itself.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

The personal essay is the field for dealing with uncomfortable truths, a way for the author to work through many inherently personal subjects, which is one of the reasons why I was drawn to this field. The work that I created is a different form of a personal essay, it is not a form of reporting, it is a lyrical work, riding the line between the lyric poem and the lyric essay. I did not start with that form, but it was the one that I settled on after trying out a few different styles. In the beginning, I toyed with numbering each vignette and sometimes gave them titles before I realized that it doing so did not really fit with what I was doing with the thesis. The form that I settled one was very much influenced by the other writers that I looked at while I was working on this thesis, specifically Maggie Nelson. Nelson's *Argonauts* is written in short paragraphs with no breaks for chapters or different themes, giving a sense of an almost stream of consciousness style of writing.

Nelson uses that style of writing to explore difficult topics and to move between them with ease. I first looked at Nelson's work about midway through the 498 semesters, and after I started toying with this format I found that the narrative came together in a much better way. Instead of focusing on writing in a typical essay type format and following all of the conventions that requires, I was more concerned with the actual content and what I was writing about. Switching from following typical format to writing in a more lyric way felt more natural, and when I read my work it began to sound like the way I would tell one of these stories, mirroring my own pattern of speaking. Although I

was influenced by Nelson's writing style, I still played with the form a bit more. I wrote in much shorter paragraphs, often only leaving one sentence for a paragraph, verging on a more lyrical and poetic style than an essay style. I do this in most of the vignettes, leaving some paragraphs that are a bit longer, and including some that are barely a sentence, highlighting this point as a more important thought.

I do this in the very first vignette of this thesis, where most of the paragraphs are only a sentence or two except for a few. The longer paragraphs are where I work through thoughts, or where I choose to describe something in more detail. Some of this is by necessity, there were very few things in the thesis that I was able to describe in some level of detail, and when I had the opportunity to it felt important to take it. It made for interesting moments wherever I had vignettes with these longer paragraphs and some of the much shorter ones. Using both longer paragraphs and shorter ones is something that I saw a little bit in many of the other authors that I looked at, especially when I consider lyric poets as well as essayists.

The work that I do in this thesis is a bit different from what some of the authors I discuss in the literary review do. Sarah Gerard and Leslie Jamison both are kind of serving as journalists as well as tracking their own perceptions and emotions. I do some of the same things in my own thesis, but where Gerard and Jamison serve more as reporters than anything else, I do the opposite. In this work, I am more interested in charting my opinion on how these things happen, instead of focusing on how they actually happen. There are many moments within the thesis where I choose not to learn how some things actually happen, and more moments where I choose to focus on my

feelings towards these moments than on writing about these moments as they actually occurred.

SUMMARY

I had set out to decide whether or not it mattered if a family story was true, when I started this work. It became clear from the start, when I first discussing stories that I knew were not true, that it never mattered if a story was true or not. At the core, it always mattered what the story meant to the person that was telling it. I first realized this when I was discussing my great-grandmother, who I was once told was the first female Vice cop in the country. A quick look at a census record was able to prove that story wrong, but it was still a good story. It still mattered to me when I heard it, and it was still important to me when I was young that I had that female role model. Even though I learned that that story was not true, it did not make it matter to me any less. As I continued to move through this work, and I came to discuss more stories and prove them wrong, I came to that conclusion many more times. If there is one thing that I have learned about family stories, it is that they are not important because they are true, they are important because we care about them and we continue to tell them.

I wanted to know where I fit into these stories, where I stood in relation to the people that I was discussing. I have come to understand that there are parts of myself that likely came from the people that I wrote about, but that I might not ever know what they are. There are little things that I can point to, eyes I inherited from my father's father, a complexion that is so clearly Irish, a lack of patience that my father has always claimed to be the Irish in me. These are things that I can trace, things that I can confirm by looking at photos and by listening to stories. There are other things, things that I inherited

that I do not see when I look at my mother and her family, things that I do not see when I look at my father. They are little things that I got from someone else, little things that they might have understood more than anyone else. I just do not know to look for them.

I have found that there is a value in considering where you come from and the people that came before you. There is a value in thinking about the traits about yourself that you do not understand and trying to see if they came from somewhere else. In order to really think about myself and think about where I am going, I had to look to the past to see where it is coming from. I had to look to see that before my father, no one in my family had graduated from high school. In order to truly appreciate what I had been able to do in my life, and what my father has done, I had to look to where it started to see just how impressive it was.

On a more personal note, this process reignited my love for the study of English. When I first began working on this, I only had intentions of attending law school and not pursuing English at a higher level. This project was intended to be one of the last long form English projects that I would compose and possibly the only creative one. Doing this work reminded me what I choose to study English in the first place and convinced me to apply to some programs to get a masters in English as well as to get a law degree. Ultimately, I ended up choosing to pursue a masters in English, and I elected to do so at the same college that my father went to. If I had not done this thesis, but perhaps done one focused on something else, I do not think that I would have pursued English for my graduate degree.

CREATIVE WORK

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Katherine Boyce Reardon: Author and narrator

Michael John Reardon Jr: Katherine's Father

Michael John Reardon Sr: Katherine's Grandfather, Michael Jr's Father

Katherine Marie Reardon: Katherine's Grandmother, Michael Jr's Mother

Charles (Charlie) Reardon: Michael John Reardon Sr's Brother

George Reardon Jr: Michael John Reardon Sr's Brother

Mary Reardon: Michael John Reardon Sr's Sister

George Reardon Sr: Michael John Reardon Sr's Father

Mary Crotty: Michael John Reardon Sr's Mother

Lisa Reardon: Katherine's Mother

Alison Reardon: Katherine's Sister

Michael John Reardon 3rd: Katherine's Brother

Ann-Marie: Michael John Reardon Sr's Daughter

Part One: Searching

The largest debate is about where they are born.

In 1922, the IRA burns all civil records held in Dublin.

Among those, are any proof of where George and Mary are born, and confirmation of which county or which town they lived in.

There are three different boats that Mary comes over on. In one of them, she has a friend. In the others, she is alone.

In all of them, she leaves from Cork.

George appears on one singular manifest, coming from Liverpool. How he gets from Cork to Liverpool is never explained. It never needs to be.

The tricky part is when they get to Boston.

A 1930 census record lists them all living in Charlestown, lists George and Mary as being born in Ireland.

It lists the names and ages of all of their children, confirming the birth order and the existence of all four of them.

We never see a single birth certificate. Nothing that proves dates of birth, nothing that tells me if they are born in Boston or somewhere else.

Once, I was told that George and Mary took their family back to Ireland as often as they could. My grandfather is even born there.

In one story, they are all born there, and they don't arrive in Boston until my grandfather is eight years old.

A marriage license lists George and Mary as being born in America. I just don't buy it.

I think that they didn't have their own birth certificates, so they found others.

My grandfather's draft card lists his height and eye color, lists his mother as his emergency contact. It includes a series of numbers that have to mean something, but I don't know what they mean. They might signify where he enlists, where he is going for boot camp. It might list a number that only matters within military records, but I wouldn't know.

George, his brother, has a card that says the same thing. They both list their mother as next of kin, not their father.

It makes sense, I list my mother as my first emergency contact and my father as my second on every form where it asks for them. I think it is just a thing that we do.

There are obituaries featured in an archive of the Boston Globe, but I have never gone ahead and spent the necessary five dollars to view them.

Sometimes, Charlie's obituary stares at me and waits for me to click on it, waiting for me to prove a good story wrong.

My grandfathers exists in that same database, a single click away from me confirming his daughter's name.

His funeral card sits in a box in my basement somewhere, fifteen copies of them stacked together, in the same condition they were in thirty years ago.

His death certificate, the only of these that we own and did not discover is neatly folded in three. It hides itself in an unmarked envelope, at the bottom of a box in my basement. On it, it lists that both of his parents had been born in Ireland.

It is the only document that I know to be true.

I think that we have always existed right on the outskirts, that we are always missing the mark by a moment.

My great-grandparents leave Ireland barely two years before it becomes independent, they miss an entire revolution.

My grandfather and his brother fight in World War II, but they are not medal winners. There is no *Saving Private Reardon*. They simply go to war and come home.

They don't graduate high school, and they don't even think about college. Perhaps they know someone, someone who goes to Harvard and does something great. It just isn't them.

I like to think that they are fine with being on the outskirts, with being simply okay.

If they know anyone, it is a local celebrity. They know New England Labor leaders and nothing else. Maybe, once, one of them meets a Kennedy.

One of the daughters. I think they meet one of the daughters. It's in passing, it's only a few moments.

They never get closer, but their children might. Their children go to college, and they do just a little bit better. That is the cycle of this all.

Doing just a little bit better, every time, until we are no longer on the outskirts.

My father once told me that my great-grandmother was the first female vice cop in the country.

I've never had the heart to prove that wrong; it's just too good a story.

I think about it a lot though, because it's just too good a story.

I wonder if that was the story that my dad was told, or if he looked at his two daughters and looked at the world around them telling them to be small and gave them a hero.

He gave them a hero that left her country during a war by herself and was 6'3 to her husband's 5'5 and she wasn't a waitress; she was the first female vice cop in the country. She didn't shrink to her husband, quite literally.

I know that it probably isn't true, but there are a few things that I know.

My great-grandmother was named Mary Crotty, and she was 6'3. She was probably the eldest daughter in her family, and her father might have been an RIC. He would have been hated, when the revolution started around them. He might have even died in it. She would have been from County Mayo, and the West of Ireland will have been the most beautiful part of the world.

She came to the country on her own, and she was probably a waitress.

I don't care.

I don't care because my father told me that she was the first female vice cop in the United States, even though we know that it wasn't true. It was never really important, if what my father was true. It was important that he told it to me. It was important that my father granted me this female role model right where I needed her. It was important that my father added to a legacy of amazing women and it was important that that mattered.

My great grandmother was named Mary Crotty, and she was from County Mayo, and she was the first female vice cop in the United States. She was also 6'3. Lately, I think about her too much.

I think that Mary comes over alone, maybe with a friend of hers. She doesn't have any family, but she might know somebody-a friend of a friend- and they might have a place for her to live. I never bother with those details.

I think George is alone. I like to think that he meets people on the boat, probably some labourers like him, so he's not entirely alone when he gets there. Maybe some of them are from Cork too, maybe they're not all Irish. I'm sure one was Scottish, maybe one was Welsh. Maybe even an Italian.

I think that they pick Boston for a reason, and I think it's a good one. I think that they both know, despite being entirely alone, that it might not feel that way if they are in Boston. They'd probably heard of dozens from their villages going to Boston. They were probably convinced of it all.

The American dream, that is.

Everyone bought into it, around then.

From what I've seen, it was just about 1916 when this all happened.

They probably looked at their homeland and saw a revolution was brewing and whether or not they supported it-.

No, I think they supported it. I just think that they wanted better.

They decide to leave.

I like to think that they both fall into their own ways of life. Mary was either the first female vice cop in the country or she was a waitress.

George worked construction; I've decided.

I don't know how they first meet, but I like to think it was pretty good.

I like to think that they end up at a local pub that's flooded with Irish and somehow, between all of it, they find each other. Maybe their eyes meet from across the room, or maybe there's a mutual friend.

I like the idea of the mutual friend. The kind of person that my grandfather and his siblings would have thought to be an aunt or an uncle, despite not being related to them. They might have been a godparent.

I used to refer to my brother's godfather as my uncle, just to explain him to other people.

I like to think that they had one too.

I think that there is a romance to it. There is a romance to being almost entirely alone in a new country while your country is changing, and you cannot be there to see it.

There is a romance to finding someone, despite all of it.

Here is what I think, George.

I don't think that you were terribly tall. In fact, I think that I'm taller than you, and I'm among the shortest in my family. I think that you went to church every Sunday, and you made your children go too.

I used to do that.

I think you were better at going to confession than I ever was. I think you probably went once a week.

I haven't gone in a little too long. It's probably about time that I go again.

I'm sorry to say it, but I think that I am far more educated than you. Part of this, is because of you, so I'll thank you for it. You probably stopped going to school right about the time that you learned to read and write.

It might make you laugh, but both of your great-granddaughters are going to be in school until we're both at least 23, respectively.

You probably had a kid by the time that you were 23. And it was probably the Michael John that my brother is named after.

I think that you probably worked in construction, I don't know why, but it always made sense to me.

I don't think that you spoke Gaelic, aside from a few words that even I know, at this point. I think Mary did.

I've done my research, and I know the West of Ireland saw Gaelic speakers for a good while after the South did. So, I think you knew the basics, and Mary knew it all.

I know a few things to be true. I know you were an unskilled laborer, and you came over alone, with little education.

You lived in Charlestown. My dad says that my brother has a little bit of Charlestown in him. I've never really thought about what that meant.

I don't know much about you George, to be entirely honest, and I'm sorry to say it.

I think that you would have recognized where I lived. I think you would have recognized where I went to school, and I think you would have recognized that I read Yeats.

I like to think that the broad shoulders that I hated when I was fourteen came from you.

I have an eating disorder. I cry for six months every time a dog of mine dies. I cried almost every day my freshman year of college. I cry a lot.

I think you would have hated that about me.

I got kicked out of a foreign country once, and I didn't bat an eye. I called my father, and he booked me a flight, and I packed up my entire life in record time. I didn't cry. I went to the men's only bar down the street and I ordered a shot of Jameson, paid in cash, and left. At 5:30 the next morning I was through security, and I ordered a Bloody Mary in the lounge even though what I really wanted was another shot of Jameson.

I think you like that about me.

I never turn down Jameson. I should probably blame you for that. I had a glass of red wine on the plane, even though it was barely eight am. The woman two rows ahead glared at me for it, and I glared right back.

I had three glasses on wine in the lounge at Heathrow and would have had another if I wasn't worried about TSA agents questioning me when I flew into JFK.

You heard that right. JFK. I couldn't even get a flight into Boston. Dads' best friend had to drive me home. I won't name him, because I know that you know who he is, and he hasn't consented to be named. He's Mike's godfather. You weren't around for that.

He drove me home and he didn't bat an eye about it. He moved his entire day so that he could drive me home. We don't deserve people like him. But we have him. And you know exactly why I'm grateful for him.

I think you might be disappointed in me.

I think you hate that I drink chardonnay, and that I still can't watch Marley and Me because every female Labrador retriever that I have had has died before they turned seven.

I think you hate that I study English at a college in Maine.

I think you hate that I don't know a thing about cars.

I think you hate that I'm scared of guns, and once dumped a boyfriend when he told me he was going to get one.

I think that you might also like me.

I think you like that I drink straight whiskey and I don't flinch when I do it.

I think you like that I've never had protestant whiskey.

I think you like that I've never trusted a person until I've seen them drunk.

I think you like that I yell back.

I think you like that I have your eyes.

I think you like that I got kicked out of a country and I didn't bat an eye.

I think you like that I'm named after my grandmother, and that I've screamed at people for spelling my name wrong.

I think you like me, just a little bit.

But I also think that you're disappointed in me.

I didn't mean to write it down, that I had the eating disorder.

Honest.

I was angry when I wrote it. Sometimes I am so goddamn angry, and I can feel the anger burning through me and eating me from the inside out. I don't even remember what it was that I was angry at.

Maybe it was you.

I think that I would have called you grand-da. In the stories, my dad never really quotes himself when he talks about you, but when he does, he calls you da. So, I think that it would be grand-da. I've yet to decide on the spelling, but I think the name is right.

Anyways I think I was angry at you. I think I was angry at you for dying.

I think I was angry and maybe I was emotional because life is emotional and maybe I was tired. I'm always tired.

But I am sure that I didn't mean to write it down. I know that.

I didn't mean to write it down, because I had never said out loud to either of my parents that I had an eating disorder yet.

That doesn't really make sense. I know that.

Eating disorders are not properly explained to young girls.

I think that it's because if they explained it properly, all of us would wake up and realize that we all engage in disordered eating. One day we would realize that anorexia and bulimia are not the only eating disorders that we can have. That there in fact is a spectrum of issues relating to eating between those two extremes and we just get good at ignoring them.

I think I had an eating disorder for two years before I realized it, but don't hold me to that.

I'm kind of bulimic, but not really. Part of me is bulimic, and the other part of me just instead engages in terrible eating habits, eating habits that prove to myself that I cannot call myself okay yet.

I hate restaurants that have calorie counts. I can't use fitness apps on my phone anymore. Every night I spend twenty minutes justifying whether or not I get dinner. I've never put sugar in my coffee because I've never granted myself those calories.

I don't do proper meals sometimes. Sometimes I eat half a grapefruit and a granola bar and a few bottles of water and act like that's normal eating for a day.

It's not good, and I promise that I know that. I just also like pretending that this is fine.

I also think that I like to be angry, I like to cling to the anger because I hate that I am like this.

I also sometimes think that I want to blame it on someone that isn't me.

So sometimes I will blame it on you, grandfather, because you aren't here to stop me.

I'll try to stop doing that.

I know that names carry weight. I think of names a lot.

Sometimes, I envy my sister.

She wasn't named after anyone, not really. I guess she was named after Karen, my mother's mother.

I was named after my grandmother, and it was never something up for discussion, not really. My parents named me Katherine Boyce and acted like my name didn't carry a ridiculous amount of weight. I write about this a lot, because my name carries ghosts.

My mother named me after her entire family, and my father named me after his mother. My name always felt heavy.

I don't know if my mother will ever admit to it, but she named me after herself, so did my dad.

It's almost as if they weren't positive about another child and went ahead and named their first after both of their families, and themselves.

They were selfish.

They should have been.

The first Katherine Reardon died coming home from brother's funeral. She died over a year after a drunk driver swerved onto the wrong side of the road and cut her down. She had just gotten a driver's license. My dad was 17 when she died. She picked his college, even if she didn't notice. My dad named me after her.

For years, everyone called me Katie instead of Katherine, and I didn't realize that it even mattered until I was fourteen. Everyone who met me in college calls me Katherine.

Everyone at work calls me Katherine. My parents call me Katherine now.

So does my sister.

My brother is named after my dad and my dad is named after his dad. I was his confirmation sponsor. I think he only did it because our CCD proctor liked me more than my sister, more than Ali, but never tell her that I said that.

Sometimes I think he did it, because he trusted me for it. I'm never sure.

I care a bit too much about names, I know that.

I'll blame my parents for it. They made sure that our names carried weight. They wanted them to.

I care a bit too much about names, but I don't think that it's a bad thing.

See, all I really have are names. Maybe a few dates, and figures too.

I know that in 1933, my grandfather and his siblings lived in Charlestown.

I know of three brothers and one sister, all born in the order that I was told they were born in.

I have draft cards. Two of them. I have death certificates that do nothing but confirm that there are few people left.

Names of people, names of places, names of events.

I have to put a lot of stock in names, it's all I have to go off of.

So, if all I really have to go off of are names, can I ask one question?

Or I guess, one more.

Do I have them all right?

I've been trying to think about what a 'normal' immigrant story would look like.

When I look at immigrant stories, when I look at notable Boston Irish, nothing seems 'normal'. I am shown countless stories of people like Whitey Bulger or Ted Kennedy, people that I know were real, but are extremes.

Here is what is real:

Patrick McCarthy is eighteen when he comes over, eighteen and leaving Kerry in hopes of the 'American Dream' that he's heard so much about.

A friend of a friend had come over a few years ago, and he had an extra room for him to rent, so he ends up with a small room in a small house in Charlestown, but at least he has a place to sleep.

He's not eligible for much, and no one really wants to hire Irish anyways, but he tries anyways. He's strong and broad, and sooner or later someone will need an unskilled laborer like him.

He gets a decent enough job in construction after about a month and starts to fall into a fine pattern of living.

The streets aren't paved in gold, and it doesn't seem like he'll ever make enough money to afford a place of his own, but he is fine.

He meets a girl at church one day, and maybe she's also from Kerry and maybe she isn't. They marry by the end of that year, and somehow they've been able to afford a small house in Charlestown, near the friend of a friend that gave Patrick a chance.

They have three or four kids, and they all stay at the same station as their parents. That is fine. Yes, the dream is for Patrick's kids to have a better chance, but maybe it is his grandkids that have the better chance. Or his great-grandkids.

The streets are not paved with gold, but they are paved with an opportunity.

There is a chance of a better job, of a college degree. There is a chance that if it isn't them that gets the chance to be better, it is the person that comes after. There is simply something in Boston that there wasn't in Ireland.

There are more Patrick McCarthy's than there are Kennedy's or Whitey Bulger's, but that doesn't matter.

In 1943, Michael John Reardon(or John Michael Reardon, depending on who you ask), enlists in the Air Force. There is a war going on, after all.

George, his brother, has already done this, and it doesn't seem like the worst idea. There doesn't seem to be a lot of options, for kids like him, and this is something.

What is a kid like him?

Kids that leave high school, kids that aren't qualified for a lot, kids that leave high school to work to help their fathers support their family. Kids that will do that by any means necessary, whatever that means.

George goes Navy, maybe because he likes boats, and maybe because the Navy recruiter was the first one he saw.

Michael, however, finds the Air Force Recruiter. He also might have just liked planes.

He ends up in bombardier training-

No, he doesn't. He's 6 feet tall and we read somewhere that bombardiers are small. 5'3 or something like that.

He flies the planes.

No, he doesn't. It feels wrong.

He trains dogs. I don't know why the Air Force needs dogs, but he trains them.

Maybe he doesn't actually train them, but he at least goes to a few days of training. He gets the gist of it.

He trains his own dogs in the exact same way that the Air Force did, and his son does it too. He takes something, from his time in the Air Force.

He isn't like George, though. He doesn't last.

Barely lasts the war, if at all, leaves with what is likely a dishonorable discharge.

He drives trucks and stays almost associated with the local teamster's union but not officially.

It doesn't call to him, like it calls to George, I think.

They're different, like brothers often are.

George, the second, my great-uncle, had red hair.

My dad told me that everyone called him red, because we are obviously very imaginative when it comes to nicknames.

My dad said that he was the nicest guy in the world. He is one of the only people in his father's family that he ever has really referred to.

He was career Navy. He joined in World War II, and just never seemed to leave it.

I like to think that I understand that, based on the stories.

My father has claimed that his father never graduated high school- he went to work instead. I wouldn't be surprised to learn the same thing about George, to learn that the war came, and he saw an opportunity to change the trajectory of his life.

I think that he was the kind of man that craved that form of structure, the discipline. That it was all a perfect storm to knock him into the kind of life he needed.

My dad has never said a bad thing about his Uncle George.

He had three sons. George, Bobby, and Charlie.

I've been coming back to names a lot. It's hard not to, considering the people in my family.

Three Georges in a row, pairing off with three Michael Johns.

I think he names his son Charlie because his brother is barely 25, when he dies.

I don't know where Bobby comes from, and just maybe, it doesn't come from anywhere.

I keep forgetting it, but it is in fact entirely possible that some of the people in my family were named for no other reason, than that it was a nice name.

George moved to Florida, at some point. I'm not sure about the year, but I think his children were grown, by then.

He died about five years after my grandfather, fifteen years after his sister, and almost fifty years after Charlie.

My dad's uncle George, the second one, had red hair. He was the nicest guy in the world.

I know that to be true.

My grandfather had two brothers and a sister, George, Charles, and Mary, respectively.

I never met them.

George was career Navy, or Air Force. I think it was the Navy. I think he had sons too.

I've never heard much about Mary, but I wonder about the name.

She was probably named after her mother.

The one that I keep thinking about, is Charles.

I've only ever heard someone refer to him as Charlie, never as Charles. He was the youngest.

When I was little, and when my dad was younger too, we all heard the same story.

Charlie, like the rest of his brothers, fought in World War 2. Charlie was Navy and stationed at Pearl Harbor. He died in the attack, and that's what made his older brothers enlist in the war.

I have a few theories about Charlie, a few stories that might tell me what happened.

In one story, Charlie is woken up to the first wave of the attack, to the first bombings. Like many others, he is left utterly unprepared, but somehow, he pulls it together. He has been on the *Nevada* for a few weeks, months at the very most, but some small part of him is prepared.

It is one of the gasoline fires that kills him. The *Nevada* takes six bombs that morning, with one exploding near the gasoline tank. The intense fires that followed would be what finally killed him.

In a different version. He is stationed on the *Arizona*. He doesn't have a chance. Later, I would find out that about half of the lives lost that day were on the *USS Arizona*, and I would place Charlie among them. It would be the explosion, that killed him. Or maybe it was something else. No one would ever fully know what happened on the *Arizona* that day, but I would place Charlie on it.

The thing is, I hope to god that none of these theories are true, because I have seen my great-uncle Charlie's birth certificate.

He was fourteen years old, when Pearl Harbor was attacked.

I know that it doesn't rule anything out, but can that be false? Can it just be that a story got misconstrued? Can it be that he actually died in Korea and my grandfather looked at his little brother and gave him a war that the US won? Can it be that over sixty years we

got something wrong, and that a fourteen-year-old boy didn't die a million miles away from home?

In my own defense, the story doesn't add up.

I haven't met a single fourteen-year-old that did not look like they were exactly fourteen years old. I don't think the Navy would have been fooled. I don't think they would have let a fourteen-year-old enlist before we were even fighting in a war. I think a story just got a little better over the years, and a little more heartbreaking.

I have other theories, other stories that explains it away just a little bit better.

In a different story, one that is much truer, Charlie never goes to Hawaii. He thinks about it, though. He wants the sunlight. He doesn't like snow, but he likes being near the ocean. He always tells his brothers and his sister that when he is old enough, he will go to Hawaii.

In a different story, one that I know to be true, Charlie is barely fourteen when the Arizona sinks. He does not sink with it. Years later, his brother might remember that Charlie said something about Hawaii once, and he will create a different story.

In death, his little brother gets to go to Hawaii.

In death, he gives his younger brother a better story.

But here's the thing:

I want this story to be false.

I can hold a grudge like nobody's business.

I'm still mad at the girl, who when we were fourteen, didn't want to tip our waitress. I distinctly remember slamming down a twenty-dollar tip for a forty-dollar check and never speaking to her again.

Every once in a while, I remember that I'm mad at people, but I can never exactly remember what it is that I'm mad about.

My dad claims that it's the Irish thing to do. The Irish are the best, at holding grudges.

He's been mad at people for years, and he doesn't know why.

I think that makes sense. The island itself is riddled with history and conflict, the kind of conflicts that people don't just recover from, the kind of conflicts that you pass on to your children.

It's not hard to understand why generations later and oceans away you will find people who are still angry about things that didn't happen to them, or anyone that they know.

And yeah, I can hold a grudge like nobody's business.

I used to hate my eyes. I thought they were odd, not really blue, not really grey, at least when I was younger. As I've gotten older, they seemed to have settled on blue, but I might be too quick to say that. A guy I used to work with was obsessed with my eyes, because sometimes they were grey and sometimes they were blue, and he kept wanting to see the change.

It was strange, because I've come to think that they are just blue.

I never liked them, because I was the only one with them. Dad and Ali and Mike all have the same brown eyes, and moms are hazel.

Mine are blue. When I was younger, my parents said that they came from my grandfather, but my father was never that specific about it.

I have a cousin who also has blue eyes, on my mom's side, but they're a little different from mine. A bit bluer, in my opinion.

I got my eyes from my dad's dad, and I think my hair was a similar color, before I started dyeing when I was eighteen.

I know that I got the skin from there, my dad has told me the story.

Apparently, my grandfather was called 'tavern tan' by all of his friends, or at least everyone that hung around his bar. They said it because they claimed he could get a sunburn from the lights at the bar, because he got them so easily. I get sunburns inside. I get them all the time. I get them in December.

That's what I got.

Blue eyes, and skin that wants me to be a hermit.

I think I could have done better.

I keep thinking about my birthday.

It's not that important, but I keep thinking about it.

I was born on the 12th of July 1999.

Every year, on the 12th of July, the Orange Order marches in Northern Ireland celebrating what they consider to be Protestant superiority in Ireland.

I'm Catholic. I'm fairly sure that my family has been Catholic since around the same time of the first Pope, although that might be up to debate.

We've at least been Catholic enough in Ireland that the above information could make some family members blow a gasket.

See, the Battle of the Boyne was fought on the 12th of July, and the loss of James I paved the way for Protestant ascendancy in the country.

My family has been, and always will be, Irish Catholic.

I don't know why I keep thinking about my birthday. Other things are more important.

I did dance for four days a week for eleven years. I used to stretch every day and paint myself with makeup and hairspray and listen to classical music and enjoy it.

I used to destroy my knees and my back and my hips and listen to terrifying loud cracks as I moved, and I could still do half of my senior pointe routine.

When I was seventeen, I well and truly injured my back. I got back spasms every day for a week and some days I couldn't stand up without it aching. I used to sit in a different chair in my drama class because I needed to sit straight, and I alternated between three different pairs of sneakers in an attempt to fix it.

The back spasms eventually went away. My back continued to ache for a little while longer, but later it numbed out.

Sometimes, my body likes to remind me of it. My back will spasm and I won't be able to move from where I am sitting for a few minutes and I'll adjust my entire room to have three safe places to sit.

I will wear heat patches for eight hours straight and sometimes I see it all coming and sometimes I don't.

It's not the original pain, but it still hurts.

Some part of me thinks that must be what it was like for George and for Mary and for my grandfather. That sometimes, the pain of losing Charlie when he was so young snuck up on them and didn't hurt in the same way but still hurt all the same.

I don't think that any of us are really similar, but I think we all could have recognized that pain. I just think that theirs was different. They got it from something just a little bit better, not the grief, but the physical pain.

I don't think that any of them would have done something like ballet. I don't think that Mary would set out to take dance classes a few days a week, destroying her body but not being able to show anything for it. She wouldn't have a house to show for her injured back, no fountain to explain away why her knees ache when it rains.

When they injured themselves, I think it was always for a good reason. Broken bones that they got from work, injuries that they at least got paid for. They wouldn't be like me. They wouldn't pay to be able to do something beautiful just to see how it equally destroyed them.

Their injuries would have been proof of physical labor, something respectable. Mine are proof of nothing more than a hobby. But still, every once in a while, I can still feel that pain.

They probably saw it coming, sometimes, but sometimes it probably came out of nowhere, like the way my back sometimes hurts out of nowhere, like our bodies are reminding us what hurt us, once.

I do not wear a cross around my neck every single day.

It's not that I don't have one.

My mother's mother gave me one for my confirmation at 15. It's sterling silver, absolutely stunning. She bought it from Tiffany's.

I don't wear it often. It comes out at Christmas, and sometimes Easter. It's always worn at confirmations. I may have worn it at my high school graduation.

No one in my family wears a cross every day. We all wear them when we are supposed to, like for religious events, and when people ask us to.

I know a lot of people that wear one every single day. I sometimes think that I could do that, but that ensures sleeping in it. It's an expensive piece of jewelry. I'm only intending to bring it out when necessary.

I don't know if that is being frugal or being realistic or if it is just an excuse.

If I wear the cross every day then I have to get ashes on my forehead one day of the year. I have to go to church every Sunday. I'd have to go to church at midnight on Christmas and on Easter and I'd have to fast on Good Friday. I'd have to go to confession.

I haven't gone to confession in a while. I think that the last time I went was my brother's confirmation.

That was two years ago.

I would spend longer confessing for not having gone to confession than for any sins. That would be if I finally found a Catholic Church that I liked in Maine instead of waiting to go home to go to church, as if that ever made me actually attend.

I'd likely have to get over the fact that almost ten years ago they changed a part of mass, changing a phrase that the whole congregation has to say to the priest.

It's not like it's impossible. I know all of my prayers still. I know how to do mass, and I know what to do in confession. I was a straight A religious education student. My old religious ed coordinator still asks over me.

The thing is, I only wear my cross a handful of times every year.

Part Two: Ireland

I know better than to make plans. That's how you make God laugh, right? You tell him you made plans.

Here is how it broke down:

The virus gets worse, and what once was something I never had to worry about was suddenly the subject of every conversation I had.

My classes go online, from both universities I was technically attending. It's not unexpected, in fact, it's exactly what I expect.

I spent fifteen minutes talking myself into going grocery shopping, because I had this aching feeling that it would be a waste of my money.

I know it rained every day there, but it was raining especially hard. Still, I went grocery shopping anyways, I just didn't buy chicken for once.

At 8 am the next morning, I was greeted by three aggressive emails, a few Facebook messages, and a WhatsApp message from a roommate.

Six of us lived in the flat, and so I in fact had a one in six chance of being the one who was sent home first.

Apparently I'm a lucky girl.

Two of the emails were the exact same, both saying that I had what came out to 36 hours to pack up my life and be inside US borders.

The last one was the number for a travel agent.

My father is probably still annoyed that I woke him up at 4 in the morning, but I've never been good with travel agents, and all the credit cards were in his name anyways.

I made a strong pot of coffee, messaged my roommates that I was being sent home, and started to pack.

I think that I was just a little bit too calm, like what was happening wasn't a big deal when in fact I was heartbroken.

Not two days before I was planning a trip.

I know better than to make plans

Irish names leave nothing to be desired, except maybe simplicity.

They are all flooded with letters that they probably do not need, letters that confuse the reader how to say them.

Especially the girls' names.

They do not roll off the tongue, instead they command the full force of speech. I have always admired them.

I like what they mean. I like that they demand focus. I like that the women that I have met with Irish names have refused to allow people to say them wrong more than once.

Saoirse will only tell you once that her name means freedom. It is the only time she has to.

Aine will not tell you how to pronounce it. She will expect you to figure it out herself.

Siobhan has told a hundred people how to pronounce her name and she will tell a hundred more. Somehow, it does not bother her.

Aoife will sit and watch you stare at her name for a minute or two, but she will wait until you say it wrong to let you say it right.

Niamh knows that the gap when the teachers calls roll is her. She doesn't wait for the wrong name.

I like that they refuse to Anglicize it. I like how they cling to them and their Irish spellings and the letters that they refuse to drop.

I'm a little jealous of it.

We didn't do that. We didn't do Gaelic. I think it's because everyone just stopped.

Sometimes, I wish that they didn't.

I did not in fact have to go to Ireland.

Yes, it was the country my father was the most comfortable with.

The time difference made sense, and my mom was okay with it, and there wasn't a language barrier.

As my father described it, 'it was the safest country for me to go to'.

However, for the same reasons, I could have gone to Canada.

Or Scotland, Wales, even England. I could have argued for Spain, after seven years of Spanish classes.

It wasn't really a consideration, though. There wasn't ever really another option.

I've been trying to understand why I have always been drawn to try and understand this part of my family.

I have been trying to understand why I am concerned with whether people that died decades before I was born would be proud of me, if they would like me.

I am trying to understand why I am concerned with legacies, why I am concerned with history.

I think it's the Irish thing to do. I wasn't the only one there that was doing that.

I let my dad pick out hotels for me.

Part of it, is because he's worked in the hotel business, and he knows what he's talking about. The other part is that he wants me to be safe, and that's something I can live with.

He took special care to make sure that his children live in a safe town, and he spent weeks looking into the colleges that I was planning on attending. It doesn't bother me, too much, that this concerns him.

So, I let him pick out hotels for me.

I lived in Ireland for a few months, and while I was there, I took a vacation.

By myself.

It just worked out that I have five days off of classes to catch up on reading, and I happened to be ahead on my reading.

So, I started looking at train tickets, and cities I wanted to go to, and how much money I had in my savings account. I picked Galway city.

I asked my dad if it was okay for me to do that, as if I wasn't a twenty-year old woman that had the right to do whatever I pleased, because that is what I do.

I ask my dad if it's alright for me to take a trip alone, and he picks out my hotel for me. It always tends to be just a bit more money than I want to spend, but I do it anyways.

I spent three nights in Galway and changed trains twice each way. On the way up, a woman my mother's age helped me with the station, and kept an eye on me as I read *Amongst Women* with headphones in.

I ate at the bar every night, because eating dinner at a table alone has always felt like a particular kind of torture, for me. On the second night, I spent hours talking to the bartender, a girl maybe three years older than me, and she wrote the names of five bars where she knew the bartenders on the back of an old receipt.

"My boys will take care of you", were her exact words, and I gave her a six-euro tip even though you don't tip, in Europe.

Two of her friends bought me drinks, and I had a very intense conversation with one of them about the lack of decent Tequila in Ireland.

I stayed until midnight, every night, and walked maybe two minutes to get back to my hotel, because my dad picked the hotel that was the closest to all of the bars that I might want to go to.

He is good at it, picking out hotels for me.

I really liked the vegetable stand.

It was a five-minute walk down the street from my apartment, and I appreciated not having to walk a mile and a half just to get groceries, every once in a while.

They don't use as many preservatives in Ireland that they do in the America, so I had to get groceries about three times a week.

I was putting a lot of effort into making sure that I was properly eating, and I don't really know why.

I oftentimes get anxiety about buying food, about telling people what I want to eat because I decide they are judging me for whatever it is that I am eating.

I know that it's unlikely, but I've always felt it anyways.

But for some reason, I never really was nervous at the vegetable stand.

I think it was partly because I don't think that anyone could judge me for buying fruit and vegetables. Also, I think it was just a nice guy.

He was running a family-owned vegetable stand across from the student accommodations, and it was somehow the one for most of the international students. The

same time every few months he probably had a couple of kids wander in and try and remember what they needed to make dinner, try and think about how they were supposed to cook carrots.

I bought a lot of avocados. And zucchini. And every once in a while, I bought carrots and potatoes. Once a week, I bought eggs.

I bought strawberries and raspberries a couple of times, and when I did it, he always threw in another package for free.

I really liked it, the vegetable stand.

Every once in a while, when I was younger, my dad sang this song-‘Black Velvet Band’.

He didn’t sing it right, I found out later, when I started singing it with an Irish friend in Cork city and he informed me I was singing it entirely wrong.

I couldn’t even remember how I knew the words, even though I didn’t even know the correct ones.

My dad hadn’t sung it in years, and he never did it with much frequency, but he did it enough that I remembered it.

It’s a traditional Irish folk song (a trad tune, as I called it in Cork), and all trad tunes tend to have a really tragic story behind them.

Black Velvet Band is about a young man who becomes enchanted with a girl in town, who ends up framing him for robbery. He ends up sent to Australia, a common punishment for young men in trad tunes, but my dad only ever sang the chorus.

The exact lyrics, which my father never sang, looked like this:

“Her eyes they shown like diamonds

I thought her the queen of the land

And her hair, it hung over her shoulder
Tied up with a black velvet band”.

I think that his dad used to sing it, and maybe his parents did too. It never seemed to carry much importance, except that he sang it every once in a while, not even realizing that he was doing it.

Before I went to Ireland, it was the only trad tune that I even knew a few words to, and I’m sorry about that.

My friend Brianne knew all of them, and she sang them time that we went out.

I think that we forgot things, that she didn’t. I think that we were preoccupied with making better for ourselves and the reality that life isn’t always pretty and whatever else. We were preoccupied, and we forgot to pass some things down. Little things, like music.

And then bigger things, like Gaelic.

I could have taken classes in it, but I didn’t. Most of it was because I wanted classes that would help me in my studies, but part of it was because I didn’t see the point.

When George and Mary came over, they could have kept certain things and they didn’t. They kept small things.

So did their children.

I've told my father more about Irish history than his father did, but he knows more about The Troubles than I do.

He remembers the little things, and so do I.

My dad has never drunk Bushmills in his entire life, and neither have I. We're Catholics, and people in our family have considered Bushmills a 'Protestant Whiskey'. We make note to remember that, because it was important enough for them to tell us about it.

But it seems like everyone else knew the songs except for us.

I keep thinking about dead Irish writers.

I think that I should read more of them.

I've never read *Ulysses*, but there's a copy of it on my bookshelf, somewhere.

I've also never read Samuel Beckett, which I think makes me both a bad Irishman and a bad student of English.

Never read Oscar Wilde, either, but I know that I should.

I have, however, read John McGahern, and Colm Toibin.

I read Brian Friel, and Edmund Spenser, and a good amount of the big poets.

I think I liked the poets, the most.

I am honest when I say that I have never read *Ulysses*, but I know the quote: "History, Stephen said, is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake."

I liked the poets because they all seemed to get that. They wrote about Celts, and the Vikings, about Christianity coming in and never going away.

Sometimes I think that part of being Irish is being defined by history, just a little bit.

I really liked the bard O'Rahilly.

On the first day of one of my classes, my professor put this one poem on the projector.

"I'll stop it all now, it won't be long before I'm dead
Since the dragons of the Lee have been destroyed;
I'll follow to the grave those whom all the brave admired,
The princes my ancestors were servants to before our saviour died."

-O'Rahilly

I keep thinking about dead Irish writers, and I think that they were thinking about dead Irish writers too.

Creative writing prompt from University College Cork- Choose a painting and write a poem in response.

Louis Le Brocquy *Image of W.B. Yeats, 1994.*

Tell me, Yeats, why I look at this painting of you see a reflection of every face that I never saw?

Tell me, Brocquy, why you painted this man in such obscurity?

Tell me, Yeats, about the bard O'Rahilly and how to write in both Irish and English all at once.

Tell me stories of Sligo, and the ghosts and faeries that you walked with-

Tell me of John O'Leary and Maud Gonne, of Lady Gregory, of small cabins and big houses.

Tell me about beautiful lofty things and the revolutionaries or maybe just tell me a story.

Tell me about Oisín and tell me why I feel like I know you, somehow.

Tell me why I had to travel across an ocean if only to know about you.

Or maybe just tell me nothing.

Just let me look at this painting and let me see you as a shadow.

Let me look at this obscurity and see someone else.

Let me just try and figure out what it is that I want to see.

I'll only do it for a minute longer, I promise.

But before I go-

Tell me, Yeats, why I had to be drawn to you?



Creative writing prompt from University College Cork- 'describe something you can do with some level of skill

How To Be Forced To leave a Country Within 36 Hours

1. Have the time of your life in Ireland, think that nothing could be better, and start planning trips to places like Dingle.
2. Wake up at 8 am and see that your college emailed you six hours before. Be filled with an alarming sense of dread.
3. The email will tell you that Donald Trump (you never refer to him as president) had placed a level 3 travel warning on the entirety of Europe. Your college gives you 36 hours to get home, and this is non-negotiable.
4. Wake up your father. It might be 4 am at home but he does the flights. Tell him you need the next flight out, the next flight he can get, and that you don't care where you have to fly out from.
5. Come to the kitchen to make coffee. You have to start packing now, because you told your dad you needed six hours at the most and you can't risk missing your flight.
6. Run into one of your flat mates. Explain to her that you've been called home, despite the fact that Ireland has yet to be affected by the travel ban. Write in the flat mate group chat that you have to leave.
7. Start to pack, try and finish *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* before you go. Wait for your father to call you back and tell you when you leave.

8. Find out that you can't even fly to Logan Airport, and instead you have to fly to JFK and have your dad fake a trip at one of his New York stores, so he has an excuse to drive from Boston to New York and back.
9. Your dad calls. His best friend is driving from New York to Boston to visit his son and if you don't mind he'll drive you home. You don't mind.
10. Finish packing. Call your mom. It doesn't sink in yet.
11. Have a final goodbye dinner with the flat mates that are still there. Go to sleep at 8 pm
12. Wake up at 4 am. Get in a taxi at 5. It doesn't sink in yet.
13. Your bags are overweight, you know that, but the woman checking you in sees the look on your face and doesn't charge you for it. You go through security.
14. Find the lounge. Order a bloody Mary. Get something to eat. Realize that you just wanted straight vodka, not a bloody Mary, but drink the entire thing before getting on the plane anyways. It doesn't sink in.
15. Get on the plane. Land in London. Wear a mask the entire time because you have a smoker's cough from all the nights you spent in the smoking section at An Brog.
16. Have three glasses of wine at the lounge in London.
17. Get on the plane.
18. Land in New York. Go through security again.
19. Get in the car with you dad's friend that you haven't seen for almost three years.
20. Get to Boston.
21. (One Week Later). It sinks in.

Part Three: Confirmations

Here's how I see the whole thing.

The world isn't kind to you, not really.

I understand that happens, especially to new immigrants, oftentimes to Irish immigrants.

The stories aren't that good. There's never a hero. You are all just ordinary people who might disappear among another immigrant story.

The world isn't kind to you, but you're not special in that regard.

Maybe there's a few standout events, a few stories are almost glorious but aren't really.

It doesn't matter, because you can tell a good story.

So, the stories get better, somewhere they are in fact grounded in truth.

But it doesn't matter. They aren't true anymore, and to be honest, it doesn't bother me too much.

Are we all storytellers?

I spend a lot of this thinking about what it is I'm trying to get out of it. I think that what I am trying to get out of it is something that I can never get. I want an answer, and I don't know what the question is, at least not yet.

My dad used to tell me that all of the serious conversations that you ever had were with a bottle of something in front of you, at least until they weren't.

I think that we would do well with one of those.

One bottle of Jameson between the two of us, and that's it.

I don't have a full question, something that I know I want the answer for, so instead I would do this.

I would say 'explain'. I'd let you decide what I meant by that.

I'd let you decide what I was asking about specifically and let you decide where to go with it.

I want to know if you're going to start by explaining what exactly it was that you did in World War II, or what happened right after.

Tell me what happened to your first wife. Tell me about your daughter. Talk to me about the bar. Tell me what happened to Charlie. How about why you stopped speaking to Mary?

Explain the arrest that my father remembers but I cannot find any record of.

Explain the third wife. Explain that one to me.

Explain why I can't find records. Explain why I also find conflicting records.

We could talk about whatever it was that you wanted to explain.

We could treat it like confession.

Maybe, you could explain something about me.

I just want to see where you'd start.

Explain.

I am trying to decide why you changed your name. The problem is, I likely already have an answer.

John Michael Reardon became Michael John Reardon around the year 1950, if I had to guess. I have a few options as to why.

The nicest one is this: everyone calls you Michael more than they call you John. Sometimes it's just one of those things that happens. There's no rhyme or reason to it. They just decide it fits you better. Finally, you break down and use it for everything else—even how you name your son.

Another one is this: Someone makes a mistake on an official document, and you never get around to fixing it.

Here is the realistic one: There is a warrant out for your arrest. In your attempt to avoid it, you switch your names.

I have the most fun in deciding what it was that you did. Sometimes, I think that you stole a car. On other days, you are caught with a gun and no license for it.

On most days though, it is some form of aggravated assault. I'm never sure exactly what happened, but I do believe that you get angry over something.

It's a bar fight. Someone says the wrong thing, and you snap.

Perhaps you are settling an old grievance. Finally dealing with a grudge that you didn't realize you were still holding, that you couldn't remember why you were still holding.

It might not even have been yours. You might have been settling an old score for George.

It might have even been for Charlie.

Here is the likeliest possibility of all of it: It all happened.

When you are younger, they call you Michael just as much as John. Somewhere along the line, a clerical error changes the name.

The warrant for aggravated assault just serves to cement what has already happened.

John Michael becomes Michael John, no one really cares to dwell on the difference.

I was talking to my mother's mother a little while ago.

She had asked me to drop by before I headed back to college, but that isn't really important.

She was drilling me about this thesis. This is one of those things that she is just so proud of me for. It's one of those things that she tells all of her friends about and she reads all of the emails about it and things like that. Every single member of the food pantry that she works at knows that I am working on a thesis and that I got a fellowship. She always wants to know more about this and sometimes I don't know what to tell her.

She was telling me that she noticed something in all of the Irish Literature that she had read. She noticed that at the end of it all, everything somehow came back to shame.

I have been thinking about that for a little while.

I'm trying to think about who was ashamed of what and why they were ashamed of that.

I know that because we were all Irish Catholics all of us have probably felt just a little shame at some point because that's kind of part of the deal.

Someone had good shame, though. Someone had the kind of shame that sent them to fifty confessions, and they never fully felt went away.

At least two people carried the kind of shame around with them that just eats someone from the inside and colors the relationships they have with their spouses and their kids and their friends.

Everything else I have been able to assign to someone without questions. There's just something about shame that I cannot come to force on somebody.

There are good cases for a lot of people. There is a good case for me to assign it to Mary Crotty because we never heard about what happens to whatever family Mary Crotty had. There is no proof that Mary Crotty writes her family, there is no proof that she doesn't feel shame over leaving her family and her home while revolution breaks out.

George, the first one, could have it for the same reason. He also probably felt shame because he couldn't give his family a better quality of life, in the ways that fathers do.

The second George fought in a war; I am sure that there was something in that that he carried around with him for the rest of his days.

I could not tell you enough about Mary Reardon to assign her shame. Maybe that's a shame in itself.

Michael John, the first one, I'm sure there was something. If I have to guess, it's over his daughter. That's at least some of it. I know that there must have been more.

Charlie isn't old enough for it. He never gets old enough to have the kind of shame that I think everyone else must get. He's practically my age the entire time. Maybe I'm too nice to him.

I also think it might just be that I recognize the care that went into cultivating a nice story about Charlie. Whatever it was that happened to Charlie, everyone went out of their way to make sure that he is a hero, he is the golden boy of his family.

If I can say one thing with almost certainty, it is this:

Everyone was ashamed of what happened to Charlie. I don't know what it was, but there is a reason that a better story than what it was gets told.

I have come to understand that 'what it was' and 'what I know' are entirely different statements.

I keep thinking about dead Irish Writers, when I should really be thinking about the women that inspired them.

Let's talk about Yeats.

No, not Yeats, let's talk about Lady Augusta Gregory, and let's talk about Maud Gonne.

Lady Gregory funds Yeats, and she funds the Abbey theatre, and between it all she does some writing and some translations. She finds time to be a revolutionary and do a bit more.

Someone threatened to kill her once, and she wasn't scared.

For lack of a better term, she tells them to bring it on.

Maud Gonne is the great love for Yeats, but it doesn't go both ways.

Yeats asks her to marry him multiple times, and she always says no.

She goes ahead and marries someone else and has children with someone else.

It doesn't stop Yeats.

Years after Maud Gonne's husband has died, Yeats asks her again.

They are on a beach with Maud Gonne's daughter, and I do not know what comes over Yeats this day.

Maud Gonne says no, like she has so many times before, but Yeats does not stop there.

He walks down the beach, looks her daughter in the eye, and proposes to her, just like he had her mother minutes before.

She says no.

Yeats seemed to be very unlucky, when it came to love.

I think that Yeats was unlucky in love, and I'm sure that one of you were too.

I don't know who I'm talking about.

How about you, Charlie?

You exist at twenty-five years old, and right now I am twenty-one and I am unlucky in love so I think that we must be the same.

Maybe I'm wrong, and there was a girl waiting for you to come home.

Even if there was, I bet that you can humor me for a second. That's what family does.

All of these poets, all of the dead Irish writers that I cannot stop thinking about for the life of me, write about love.

I'm good at it, talking about it about these soul crushing loves that they write about, as if I have had that great love.

I don't do things like that, real love.

I am busy.

That's a lie. If I wanted to, I would find the time. I would let my grandmother set me up with the nice guy from church. I would let my cousin on my dad's side set me up with the nice guy she knows through a friend of a friend. I would let my friends give my number out to the almost decent guys that they know. The ones that walk them home after parties and don't try anything, because now that is the bar for us.

I just don't do things like that. I am good at three dates. I get to a third date, almost sometimes, and then I realize that a third date means that there might be a relationship, and right now I do not do things like that.

I am busy, after all. I have essays to write and tests to study for and there is a term paper to do a grammar check on. I have grad school applications.

I don't do love, and I know that there are a few guys out there who curse my name and maybe one of them really liked me.

I just don't like to think about things like that.

I will deny it to anyone else but you, Charlie, but I am not unlucky in love. I am not like any of the poets.

I would rather be one of the poets.

I came home last week.

I didn't have to, not yet, but my parents asked me to. Something about it being easier if I was home, about needing me to help out, it was something like that.

I don't know. I just came home last week.

I don't know why I'm telling you all this, Michael John, because it isn't like you are about to answer me.

I guess there are a lot of things that I don't know.

That's not the point.

There are two portraits of you in my basement. Pictures that I haven't seen in years.

In one of them, you are in your Air Force uniform, and you are smiling. You are barely older than I am now, if at all, and you look happy. It's in black and white, if only because color photographs hadn't been invented yet.

I think about stuff like that, sometimes. About how when you were young there weren't color photographs, about how, at the end of it all, you were an entire generation older than my other grandfather.

Even if you hadn't had that heart attack in 1990, even if you had survived that heart attack, I likely wouldn't have had you long. If you were alive today, you would be 98 years old.

You were older when you had my dad, and he was older when he had me. My family is a generation older than it should be, a little bit.

I think about stuff like that, sometimes.

That isn't what I was writing about.

I don't remember ever having seen these pictures of you before, but I know that I must've seen them before.

They're set up in this folder type frame, so they mirror each other, which I guess is a little poetic.

In the second one, you are older. Probably the age that my dad is right now, which I guess makes sense.

I always think of my dad as simply looking like himself, never like anyone else. That's not right though, because he looks like you.

In strange ways. He doesn't have your coloring. He has the same coloring as his mother, the one that is so obviously Italian when mine is so obviously Irish.

My dad has the same face as you, and it seems like the same shoulders. If I have to guess, which I am, because the picture reveals little more than your shoulders, my dad is built in the exact way that you were.

That one is in color. Your daughter is in it with you.

I just don't want to talk about her, and I don't care if you hate me for it. In all of this, there are a few things that I get to decide, and this is one of them.

You look a lot more like my dad than I had imagined.

I don't know if your daughter is even alive.

To be honest, I can't think of her name right now either.

Sometimes I can't come to decide whether I want to know that, whether I want to know if she is alive or what her name is or if she had children.

I really don't know.

I know that I look like her. I look more like her than my father does.

I don't know how to feel about that.

I keep thinking about what I want from you, grandda.

Maybe, I want you to explain your daughter to me. I want you to explain her to me like you explained her to my father.

I want to know what you expected to happen, with all of that.

But I don't think that you knew that.

I don't think about your daughter at all, Mary.

I'll assume that you named her after yourself, which probably deserves its own essay. You went ahead and named your only daughter after yourself, and I don't even think about her.

I'll blame your son for that, my grandfather. I'll have to assume that there was a reason that she only lived in Dorchester and George lived in Florida and I know more about George than about Mary.

I don't know why I'm talking about you, or any of this.

I think about that a lot.

On my mother's side, it's all women. My mother has two sisters, and her mother has two sisters and all the people on that side that I ever think about are women.

You don't get that luxury, from me.

You had three sons, and I am the daughter of the son of one of your sons. For me, your side is all the men.

That isn't fair to you, or to Mary. Sorry, I guess.

I don't think that's my fault, though.

I think that you and I are a little bit similar, though.

It's just that there are things about me that I cannot explain away to my mother, or to my father, and I'd like to think that they aren't just me.

I'm not saying that I want to blame things on you, I don't think that's fair. It's just that there are things about myself that I don't like all that much, and I'd like to think that it isn't just me, who feels this way.

I wanted to do more research into you than into anyone else, but I'll deny that when I'm asked.

I wanted to look into everyone, I promise, but there is something about you. I don't really know what it is.

I'll think about it. Or at least I'll think about Mary a little bit more.

I owe you that.

Ann-Marie Reardon seems to draw the short straw.

Her mother dies. Her mother dies when she is just a child, and perhaps she never remembered her. But maybe she did.

She could possibly be alright. She still has her father.

Except that she doesn't.

Her mother's mother decides to raise her.

It is unclear why this exactly happens. It is also unclear how her mother dies.

It would be nice to assume that she saw her father regularly. It would be nice to assume that they had a good relationship. It might just not be right.

Ann-Marie is eighteen when her half-brother is born, but she does not see him.

His mother asks for that. She complies. She ends up in Lowell.

Ann-Marie disappears for almost eighteen more years. Maybe she goes to college. She probably doesn't, but it's nice to think that she might.

Ann-Marie Reardon either becomes Ann-Marie Byrd or Ann-Marie Bird. It seems like she has both a husband and a wife.

It is unclear. She probably liked it that way.

For a little while, she draws the short straw, but perhaps that is not all that she does.

She speaks fluent Italian. After eighteen years away, it is a skill that comes in handy.

Her step-mother had died. She had died and left a son behind, and at her funeral her sisters talk about taking him away from his father and having him go to the University of Maine and play football.

They say this all in Italian. Ann-Marie spoils this for them.

She sees her brother for a little while. Then she doesn't. He comes to understand that being with her won't push him towards a good future.

If he remembers anything about her, it is that she had a dog. A Siberian Husky that she kept chained up in the backyard every day and night. It is one of those things that always bothers him.

In 2021, he cannot tell you if she is living or dead. If he has to guess, she is dead.

Brian Friel does not grant Máire very many options, in *Translations*.

He doesn't grant her a command of English, he doesn't grant her much education, and he doesn't really grant her a happy ending. He doesn't grant her much of anything outside of the little village of Donegal that she was born in.

Here is what he does give her:

1. The opportunity to emigrate to America
2. A chance to learn something at the hedge school
3. Someone who loves her
 - a. He just doesn't speak Gaelic
 - b. He also dies at the end, even if she doesn't want to believe it

But Máire isn't a woman, at least not to Friel, she is migration.

She is supposed to represent every soul that leaves Ireland for America, every soul who simply cannot stand it anymore. Everyone who wanted a better opportunity, everyone who looked at their home and didn't see one anymore.

But Máire cannot be all of that. Máire is simply one woman.

One woman who has so little, but who may be capable of so much more.

We just don't know if she gets that.

Brian Friel never tells us what happens to her.

Her story lives and dies with the men in the story.

At one point, I will tell you why Ann-Marie wasn't at her father's funeral.

Or maybe, I won't.

I will talk about why none of us know how to spell any part of her name with any level of accuracy.

I'll even talk about why my dad can almost tell me about her, but he never talks about her with any love lost.

I'll talk about why, if I am to be a good niece, I will only talk about her one saving moment.

We can only talk about her knowing enough Italian to hear my father's aunts talking about him. Her knowing enough Italian to hear their master plan of taking my father away from his father.

That's a fine way to remember her, if she's dead.

But here's the thing: Ann-Marie wasn't at her father's funeral.

I think it's because she wasn't invited.

I keep thinking about why I focus on the male poets, when I could think about Paula Meehan.

I think about Northern Irish poets, when I could think about Dublin-born Meehan.

I could dwell on that more, but right now I am thinking about Paula Meehan.

No, I'm not.

I'm thinking about Ann Lovett, and a statue of the Virgin Mary.

Ann Lovett was fifteen, in county Longford, and she was pregnant.

On the 31st of January 1984, she left school. She left school and somehow she found her way to a grotto dedicated to the Virgin Mary. It was there, fifteen and almost alone, that she had her child.

Both her and the child die, right in front of the Virgin Mary.

One of my professors in Ireland told us that everyone knew about Ann Lovett, that everyone was horrified when it came to Ann Lovett.

But Paula Meehan was the one who wrote a poem about her. Not really.

She wrote 'The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks' and she only talks about Ann Lovett at the very end.

Mary remembers her, she remembers what happened, but then this is what she says:

"I did not move,
I didn't lift a finger to help her,
I didn't intercede with heaven,
nor whisper the charmed word in God's ear."

Like everyone else, who must have known that something was wrong when they looked at Ann Lovett, Mary stays silent. She stays silent, but she remembers it.

That is what they all did, and that is how it happens again.

Maybe that's why I don't think about Paula Meehan.

Maybe, it is Mary Crotty that tells all the great stories.

Maybe it is not one of her sons who take it upon themselves to tell great stories, but Mary herself. Maybe it is her that decides she was the first female vice cop in the country, not one of her children.

Despite the fact that everything I know about her is what her son decided to tell us, it might be her that decided what he gets to say.

She might have been the great storyteller. She might have been the one that decided she was not just a waitress, that she was not just another woman from Mayo. She was the one in charge.

She dictates every single story that her family tells. When her children are younger, they gather around her and listen as she tells the best stories.

Maybe, when her sons get older, they want to tell the stories too. They just don't ever seem to tell them as well as their mother had.

Maybe, in the same ways that stories get taller, they also get shorter. They can never quite tell the stories right, so they add details.

Maybe, there are stories that they just do not have the heart to tell, there are stories that someone left back in 1960 that might be a bit better than what I might have said instead.

Mary is the one to place Charlie in Pearl Harbor, instead of wherever it is that he was when he died.

Maybe Mary Crotty tells the stories of countless other Crotty's, and maybe she doesn't have a single brother. Maybe she is an only child and is the one that is responsible to tell stories about her father and her father's father.

She tells stories about farmers and maybe she tells them that one of her cousins was in the rising. Beneath it all, she has words in Gaelic that maybe only her daughter ever remembers.

Her daughter might tell these stories to her children, but I wouldn't know.

Her sons focus on Reardon's, and not Crotty's.

Sometimes I wonder what drew me to this.

My brother and sister grew up on the same stories, hearing the same details, and they don't seem to ask about it like I do.

I kind of envy them for that.

I am spending so much time trying to understand the past, so much time mourning people that I never got to meet, that sometimes I am worried that I am missing something. That there is something going on in the present that I should be equally concerned with, but I am far too busy being concerned with the past.

I have spent so long thinking about the past, trying to understand it. I have made so many attempts to use it to justify the parts of myself that I don't like that much. I keep trying to think about why I do that, and I keep coming up short.

Maybe I am just a natural storyteller, and that I saw stories that needed to be told. Maybe it is something else, but I don't know what that might be.

Perhaps it is because my father once told me that I look like his father, and I just couldn't let it go. I just internalized it.

I do that sometimes: I take small things and I just can't seem to let them go. I dwell on them, the practical part of me refusing to let them go.

I sometimes worry that this whole thing is me refusing to let go.

What I like to think that I am doing is telling stories that might not have been told otherwise. At the end of the day, I think that every story should be told.

My mother thinks that I am just inquisitive by nature. She says that I heard a story that I couldn't hear more about, and I just couldn't let it go. I wanted to know more and there wasn't more to know, and I didn't like that as an answer.

She might be right.

William McCarthy is one of those big labor guys. He is one of those labor guys who is only important to a select group of people, who will brag about meeting him and will tell you a story that is just a little bit like this:

William McCarthy stole a car when he was fifteen.

Not only that, but he also led Boston Police on a high-speed chase before ditching the car right outside the office of Teamsters Local 25 and hid in the cab of a tractor-trailer. When the driver of the tractor-trailer came back, McCarthy convinced him to take him to New York City, and they became friends. He taught him how to drive a big-rig.

Two years later, McCarthy faked his birth records and got a chauffeur's license. He ended up joining Local 25 and worked for Benjamin Motor Express.

During World War II, he served in the Army.

He was elected president of the 7,000-member local Teamsters union in 1946. In 1969, he would be an international vice president of the Teamsters.

In 1972, president of Joint Council 10, overseeing all Teamsters locals in New England.

He wouldn't lose until 1984, when he ran for First Vice President, the number two position within the union.

Jackie Presser, president of the Union, would publicly accuse him of trying to use organized crime to help him in his bid.

McCarthy would deny it, and the case would be closed.

He probably used the help, but then again, so did Presser. So did Hoffa.

Presser would be dead by June of 1988, and McCarthy would win a 9-8 vote to be president of the Union by mid-July.

In 1989, he would negotiate an agreement with the Department of Justice, seeking trusteeship of the Teamsters union. McCarthy would agree to purge the union of corruption and seek democratic internal reforms.

McCarthy would seek election again in 1990, but his political position in the union would weaken. Twice, he would face charges that he awarded contracts to his son-in-law, but he would never be removed from office.

In 1991, McCarthy would lose re-election as president of Local 25. In 1992, he would retire after 20 years as the president of Joint Council 10.

My dad met him a few times. He referred to him as Billy. He referred to him as a friend of his fathers, or as his fathers' brother.

My father's father was one of those union guys. He might even tell you a story that is just a little bit like this, or one that is entirely different.

In one story, Billy McCarthy is my grandfather's cousin.

In another, he is my father's uncle.

Both are likely true.

My father is one of those people that calls all of his friends his 'brothers'. I used to explain away family friends as uncles because it was easier than trying to explain how these people knew me or what they were to me. I assume that he gets that from his father.

I think that he gets a lot of things from his father that I don't notice because I don't know to look for them.

Billy McCarthy is my grandfather's cousin. We don't know from which side, but I think that it must be his mother's. If anything, surnames give me enough cause to say that Mary Crotty had a sister, and her child was Billy McCarthy.

Billy McCarthy teaches my father something about whiskey, once, and it's one of those things that sticks with him.

It is one of those lessons that he later gives me.

Billy McCarthy is having a meeting with my grandfather, and my father has happened to be there. In this meeting, they will be trying to get my father at job. My grandfather is a card-carrying union member, and his cousin happens to swing the biggest bat in New England teamsters' unions.

My father is the good Irish son who always gets his father and his guest a whiskey when they have a meeting.

Billy says he wants two fingers worth. My father starts to pour what he knows to be two fingers worth of whiskey.

He is pouring what is the height of his index finger and his middle finger when Billy cuts in.

“Not those two” he says, holding up both fingers, “but these two”, he adds, holding up both his index finger and his pinky.

A few years later, my father will carry a Local 25 union card in his pocket when he walks around. He will be sixteen, even though you aren't supposed to be able to get one until you are 21. On weekends, he will work overnight loading and unloading trucks at Roadway Express and Mason-Dixon, clearing 400 a week. Billy will have made sure that this is near where he is going to school, and on Sunday nights he will work well into Monday morning and be late to school.

Billy McCarthy will go to my grandfather's funeral.

While there, he will hold up the obituary in *The Boston Globe* and mention that my grandfather will be the only person to leave this world with fireworks. My father won't know what that means for a little while longer.

Later, after my father and his best friend have gone home, my father will remember exactly what day it is.

My grandfather had died on December 26th. He is buried on December 31st. According to *The Boston Globe*, he is the only one being buried that day.

It will take a little while for my father to truly realize that he no longer had any living family.

He will notice the fireworks.

Some of them are not stories. Some of them are just details.

Mary Crotty is 6'3 and George Reardon is much shorter.

Mary Reardon has a husband with a weird name and sons that we are better off not meeting.

George Reardon, the second one, never fights in another war. His war ends in 1945 and he stays in the Navy, but he never ends up in another one.

George Reardon is from Cork, and Mary Crotty is from Mayo.

Michael Reardon, my grandfather, is a boxer. Maybe he does it for money, and maybe it is just a hobby.

Anne Marie might be dead, for all that we know. It isn't something that we dwell on.

My grandfather yelled at nuns once.

My father is left-handed, just like I am.

All I've gotten out of it is bad penmanship and having to learn everything twice.

My father had his left hand beaten and then wrapped across his chest so that he had to learn to use his right.

This goes on for a while, but sooner or later my grandfather loses his patience for it.

It takes something dramatic to get a Catholic man to yell at a nun. It takes a lot.

He yells at the nuns who are doing it, because who cares that a child is left-handed.

It is unclear, if there is where the beating stops, or if this is just the last moment where my father remembers it so glaringly.

Michael Reardon, my grandfather, owns a bar. When my father is in college, he lets him and his friends 'steal' from it.

The day that my father walks to college, he never sleeps in the same place as his father again.

Some things are just details. Most things are just details.

I saw the letter. You know exactly which letter I am talking about, Michael John.

I saw the letter and I think that I understand you, just a little bit.

I've always said that being Irish Catholic means that I have walked around guilty for the past twenty-one years and I will do it until the day I die.

I could talk about that more, and maybe I will later.

Catholic guilt is an artform and my parents were always great on it-but let's be honest.

They've got nothing on you.

You knew what you were asking. You knew why you shouldn't have asked it. You did it anyways.

Mentioning the wife, the one that you knew he didn't like, that was a good touch.

That's the kind of thing that I would do, I think.

I think that it's just that I'm a little bit spiteful.

I guess if there's one thing that I got out of it, it's that you confirmed your name.

John Reardon. That's what it seems like you went by.

Forgive me, If I don't entirely believe it.

Dads only mentioned your funeral twice, Michael John.

Once was years ago, and I barely remember what he said because it was only a second of his time.

He mentioned it again the other day, because for some reason we were talking about where him and my mom want to be buried.

To spoil the conversation: they don't know.

He gave you the proper Irish funeral, the ones that don't really feel as sad as they probably should.

A keg of Guinness, a few half gallons of Jameson, and a piper.

I have to imagine that if you left notice of what it was that you wanted, that's what it would have been. It feels right, somehow.

I've only been to the one funeral. I should have been to at least one more, but I didn't.

The one that I did go to was my Aunt Alice. She was 93, or 91, or 94, so it wasn't terribly sad.

She wasn't married and she had no children. She'd been a secretary under a couple of presidents, and it didn't really feel like how a funeral was supposed to feel like, I thought.

I spent the whole-time getting people wine and going out to the garage that used to be a barn to grab a diet Pepsi for the priest.

It's weird to say, but I don't think I got the full Irish funeral experience.

I was thinking about why, the other day.

I missed them all. I missed them all by about twenty years.

It is always little things.

It is going out to dinner in South Boston and my father remembers what the restaurant used to be.

He realizes that he never would have let me walk down that street thirty years ago but today we are going out for a fancy dinner.

It is that I am looking at neighborhoods that I might live in when I get older, and he has a veto list.

Dorchester, but only with a roommate.

Somerville, alone.

The North End, but it's expensive.

I never ask for the full reason. I know that it is little things that he remembers from forever ago that he just can't get out of his head.

It is sometimes when he speaks, an accent that he never had slips in. It is certain words, and it is so abundantly clear that this is how his father said them.

It is that once in a while he orders a Jameson and lets it sit on the table for a few moments before toasting the sky.

It is always little things.

There are two Catholic churches in the town where I go grow up. I have never stepped in one of them. Of the two, it was at least fifteen minutes closer to the house that we lived in, and I was only of only three Catholic kids in my elementary school that didn't go to that church.

For the longest time, I didn't know why.

Now, I know it's because they didn't want to baptize me.

The story goes like this: my mother goes into the church and asks if they will baptize me. The details of this conversation are never revealed, but they say no.

When my father finds out, he goes himself to understand the reasonings why.

There are a group of women who work at the church and volunteer at the church. They write the newsletter, and they run the religious education program, and they plan the dates for baptisms and confirmations and communions. They are the true gatekeepers of the religion, the real people who will decide who joins the church. Yes, the priest is in charge, but they have other things on their mind. These women are the ones that really run the show.

It is one of these women that my dad talks to. In an earlier conversation with my mother, she had discovered that my parents were not married in a church, but a restaurant. In the

course of the conversation with my father, she would do the math of when my parents were married and the month that I was born in and she would dislike the answer.

She claims my parents' marriage to be illegitimate. She wouldn't care to hear why my parents were married in a restaurant by a justice of the peace instead of in a big Catholic church. She wouldn't hear that the reason they weren't married in a church was because my father had maybe five people to invite to a wedding, and my mother would have decided that it would be terrible to make him suffer through a big wedding with no one sitting on his side of the church.

At one point, the priest walks by. My father stops him.

He does not disagree with a single thing that this woman says.

My father declares that the second he walks out of that door that we will never come back because he cannot understand why the church would turn him away.

He wanted to baptize his child in the church at the same time that people were leaving the church in boatloads. Still, they say no.

We don't end up being baptized at the other church. We do everything else there, but my father doesn't think to ask if they will baptize me.

He calls a priest that he knew at his alma mater instead, and they have no qualms about baptizing the restaurant baby.

It has been twenty-one years, and my father has still never walked into that church.

Neither have I.

Michael John Reardon only gives his son one requirement, when it comes to where he goes to college.

Despite sending him to Catholic school for his entire life, he probably doesn't really think that someone in his family can do stuff like that.

He's never imagined anyone going to a college that isn't Boston State.

Today, that is UMass Boston.

The only thing he tells his son is that he has no money to pay for it. It probably isn't one of those things that ever had to be said.

Maybe that is almost his way of telling his son that he was proud of him, that he was proud that he might even go to college.

It might even be faith in his son. Faith in his football skills that have gotten him this far, faith that they will get him into college.

It could be one of those things that Irish fathers sometimes do, where they never actually go ahead and tell you that they are proud of you, just say little things like that.

I don't know. All of them make sense to me.

Whatever it was, his son listens. His mother, before she had died, had said that she wanted him to go to a Catholic college.

He listens. He only talks to the recruiters from Catholic colleges. Always tells the recruiters that he needs a scholarship.

The only legitimate offers come from Notre Dame, Fordham University, and Boston College.

Fordham cuts their football program.

Notre Dame doesn't offer anyone money.

Boston College offers a full scholarship, and he walks to the school every time that he visits.

His father could visit him every single day if he wanted to, but he doesn't.

His son visits him instead.

I don't know if he ever went to Boston College's campus. If he saw his son graduate from college or from his graduate degree.

I just know that fifteen years after he graduated, his son started baptizing his children there.

Coda

This is not entirely what this was supposed to look like.

In one variation, I spend the entire time in Ireland, I use it to dig into records and I find exactly where we come from. I spend the entire time writing about what happens before, writing about what happens far before we know where this story starts. This work ends with Mary Crotty and George Reardon getting on a boat just as I am getting on a plane.

Life happened, and this wasn't what I could do.

In another variation, this isn't even the story that I am telling. Instead, I write something that is entirely fictional but is loosely based off of my family. Somewhere, in the depths of my computer, is the beginning of this story. In another time, I might see it through.

Never, am I supposed to be as large of a part in this as I have somehow become. I am always supposed to exist outside of the narrative, maybe only showing up at the very beginning or at the very end.

I don't know exactly what it is that turns the story into this. There is no eureka moment, no switch that flips and makes me start writing in this way.

It is just something that happens, as if it is entirely natural and that this is always what this what going to look like.

It is unclear where I become tangled up in this story. I did not mean to do it, I did not mean to write about myself as much as I wrote about anyone else, but still. I did it anyways.

It was just as natural as the tone I have written in, as the way that I have discussed everyone here. Somehow, every part of this has felt entirely natural and like it is all going in the way that it was supposed to.

There is a possibility that I was always designed to do this work. That every bump in the road and every text that I remember over the hundreds that I have read lead me to this place. This is not the work that I truly intended to do, but maybe it was.

That might be true, but there is also this:

In another variation, I do not do this work at all. I focus on something else, maybe I write about Shakespeare and the women in his works that I cannot seem to stop thinking about. I do not write about something so personal. There is no moment where I become entangled with my work. I exist as nothing more than the author, existing so far away from the narrative that I cannot find myself. It is not this. It is not even close.

In another variation, I am not even a factor.

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Katherine Reardon was born in Concord, Massachusetts on July 12, 1999. She was raised in Westwood, Massachusetts and graduated from Westwood High School in 2017. Majoring in English, Katherine has also pursued a concentration in professional writing and a minor in political science while at the University of Maine. During early 2020, she studied Irish Literature at University College Cork in Cork, Ireland. She is the recipient of a McGillicuddy Humanities Fellowship for Undergraduate Student research.

After graduation, Katherine will be returning to Massachusetts to pursue a Masters in English from Boston College. She intends to focus on Irish Literature and Culture during her time there.