




In A Dark Mirror

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Published under 

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Prologue

The white markers in the middle of the road rushed by like the second-hand on a clock. If Aifric pressed her nose against the window, she could see them go past the car one by one. Tick, Tock; Black, white.

“Are we there yet?”, Eoghan cried beside her. Eoghan was her baby brother, 8 years old, and a pain in the arse. “If he asks one more time, I push him out, and he can walk”, she thought.

“Soon, honey”, Mam replied from the passenger seat.

It had been an exceptionally boring day, she had to give him that. They had been visiting mamó, and that was a challenge even for the grown-ups. Mamó had been in a care home for two years now. She suffered from dementia, and most of the time she didn’t even remember her own name. Let alone her family’s. Although Aifric knew it wasn’t mamó’s fault, it had hurt that her grandmother wouldn’t know her own granddaughter. So most of the conversation was introducing yourself, and when you finally got all the names sorted, you started over, because she’d forgotten the first ones again.

Aifric knew that it was hard for her parents too, especially for mam. Mamó was her mother after all. Aifric

shuddered at the thought of seeing her own mam in a care home drooling on a bib.

“How soon is soon?” Eoghan cried.

Aifric’s patience was wearing thin. “For every time you ask, it takes 10 minutes longer, twerp!” She told him.

“That’s not true!”

“It is, so be quiet now.”

“Liar!”, Eoghan was eight, and not stupid enough to fall for that of course. “Mam, Aifric’s always picking on me!”

“Aifric, leave your brother alone.”, mam called. She was definitely annoyed now.

“But he started it!” Aifric defended herself.

“Quiet now, both of you, or I’ll pull over and you can walk home!”, Daid boomed from the drivers seat.

Aifric sighed and looked out through the side window again. The rain was leaving trails on the window, and the white markings went by one by one.

She turned her head towards the traffic behind them. Suddenly she felt a chill, as if something was wrong about what she saw. It took her a while to realise what it was. The lorry behind them was way too fast, it was beginning to undertake them, and it was dangerously close to the fast lane.

“Daid”, Aifric began. “I said quiet back there, or...”. Daid never finished that sentence. The creaking sound of metal on metal filled the car, as the lorry scratched along the rear wing. The wing was torn into shreds and emitted sparks that flew right up to Aifric’s window. Daid lost control, and as the torn metal got under the wheels,

it sent the car toppling over. The world was upside down for a moment, and in the corner of her eye, Aifric saw another car approaching. They had been falling right into it's path. A deafening noise filled the car, as it was lifted up in the air, and sent flying off the road. Her brother screamed, and she turned her head towards him. Part of the crash barrier was broken, and a long beam of it smashed through the right window, as the car toppled over once more. Eoghan's mouth opened as if to scream again, but his cries where silenced by the stream of blood, that came out instead. In slow motion Aifric watched as the metal beam sliced through her brothers waist. It was an eerie silence around her except for a sickening dry crack as his spine was severed. The metal pierced through his side pushing out his entrails like a bow wash of blood in front of it. Blood sprayed from his severed body, tinting Aifric's white blouse with red stains. Finally, his upper body sank down into the space behind the passengers seat, twitching once or twice. The last Aifric heard from him, was some gagging noise.

The car lay still, Aifric hung in her seat belt, her face much to close to her brothers crushed body. She opened her mouth, and tasted blood, that ran over her face. His blood, or hers?

"Mam.", she whispered. Then louder "Mam!" She reached towards the passenger seat to her mothers shoulder. As she touched the shoulder, mam's head slumped to the side in an unnatural pose. In the rear view mirror, she could see her mother's eyes, staring blankly into the void. Her neck was snapped. Aifric drew back so hard, that her shoulders bumped into her brothers broken body.

His severed upper half slumped down further, leaving her to stare at the bloody mess that had been his waist once. Aifric closed her eyes and started screaming.

Aifric sat up straight in her bed. The hospital gown she was in, was soaked with sweat. She panted hard, trying to remember where she was. Ever since the accident, she had to relive this fatal moment every night in her dreams. She always saw her brother cut in two, and she always woke up screaming. For a moment she sat there, shaking and panting. They had given her a one-bed room, because she kept waking up her roommates every night.

“So much for the damn sleeping pills.”, she thought, and got out of bed. She went into the small bathroom, turned on the lights, and stared into a mirror.

A pale, almost ghostly face stared back at her. It belonged to a fifteen year old girl, and anyone would have called it a pretty face, if it weren't for the pale features, and the dark circles under her eyes. She had a pointed face, that was framed by curly auburn hair, and dominated by a pair of enormous dark brown eyes, that had given her an ever melancholic look, even in happier times. Now her hair was a tangled mess, and her eyes looked sadder than ever.

The door opened, as the night nurse came in.

“Aifric, are you OK?”

“Stupid question,” Aifric thought, “Of course not, or I wouldn't be here”

But aloud, she said: “Yeah. I'm fine”

The nurse, who was a corpulent woman in her fifties,

came into the bathroom. “Bad dreams again?”, she asked sympathetically.

Aifric nodded. “Same one as always.”

“You need something to help you sleep?”

“No.”, Aifric shook her head. She didn’t want to sleep, not ever again. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw the image of her brothers severed body, as if it had been painted on the back of her eyelids. Aifric wished she could cry. She had not been crying, not even once. Not here in the hospital, not even at the funeral, where she had been brought to in a wheelchair. The doctors first wouldn’t let her go, but she insisted. But when she saw the coffins, and the grave, all she could think was, that she was supposed to be with them, down in the cool damp earth. Resting.

She couldn’t cry, and she felt ashamed for that. She had loved her mam and daid, she had loved even Eoghan. And now she didn’t feel anything but the terror when she woke up screaming at night.

It will come, they had told her. But when would that be? And did she really want to cry? Once she started she was afraid she would never be able to stop again.

The weird thing was how little had happened to her. While her brother was literally cut in half, her mam had her neck snapped and daid died of his skull injuries before they reached the hospital, she had but a few broken ribs, a twisted ankle and a concussion alongside some minor bruises. Somehow it felt wrong that she stepped out of this almost unharmed, when all the others had to die.

The nurse handed her a glass of water and a little blue pill. “Take this, and you’ll be better. Promise.”

Aifric knew the nurse was right, she had taken these

pills before. They made her feel sleepy, and everything became numb. The feeling of terror didn't go away, but it she'd be indifferent to it. She sighed, put the pill in her mouth and washed it down with a gulp of water.

One

Aifric sat on her old bed and took a look around her room. It was a weird feeling, seeing her room stripped bare of most of her belongings. What had been her life only two months ago, was now carefully packed inside twelve cardboard boxes. Most of them had already been taken away along with everything that belonged to mam and daid. Since she was the only one left of her family, the youth welfare service, in the shape of a very corpulent woman named Mrs. Cox, had decided that the house had to be sold along with most of the things in it. Aifric didn't think it was fair that she didn't get a say in what to keep and what not. On the other hand, she wasn't sure she'd been able to keep up with it.

She closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath. Although most things were gone, her room still smelled like her room. She tried to imagine all this had been a nightmare, and mam would come up the stairs and ask if she had a bad dream, just like she did when Aifric was a little child. Through the open door, the smell of her own child-

hood mixed with someone else's from the opposite side of the floor. The face of her little brother flashed before her eyes. Eoghan, as he stood in her bedroom door, mocking, but not daring to enter his bigger sisters place. Eoghan, as he ran across the floor from the bathroom, after he had flooded it. Eoghan, as his small body was ripped apart.

Aifric gagged. She felt a sudden rush of sickness, and tried hard not to throw up her breakfast. She remembered what the therapist at the hospital had said and began recalling columns of prime numbers in her mind. The doctor had told her to imagine something complex to fill up her mind, and draw her attention away from her memories. Maths had always been one of her favourites, and so she had begun to memorize prime numbers. It took all of her concentration, and eventually filled up her mind whole. She overcame the nausea and felt strong enough to get up. She took one last look around, and then rose up and grabbed the two suitcases, that stood by the door.

The suitcases contained all that she was allowed to take to her new home in some rural orphanage north of Limerick. Some pants, underwear, the dress she got for the school dance, school uniforms, two pairs of Mary Janes and Carla, her beloved plush pig. The rest of the personal stuff would be stored in a warehouse, until she was old enough to get her own place.

Rustling from downstairs told her, that Mrs. Cox, who had been outside to instruct the movers had come back in. Aifric hurried to move the suitcases downstairs. Mrs. Cox was waiting at the lower landing.

"Girl, what took you so long?" She took one of the suitcases. "We don't have all day!"

Aifric sighed. She wasn't expecting Mrs. Cox to understand that this was an important moment for her. She was seeing the place she grew up in for the last time after all. But for a welfare worker, Mrs. Cox was astonishingly insensitive to her fosterling's feelings. Instead she kept on stressing, that she had fifty-nine other cases, that were indeed more urgent than this one. In one of her clearer moments, Aifric had wondered what cases might be more urgent than that of a traumatised fifteen year old orphan with nowhere to go to, but she knew better than to ask.

"I just needed a moment," she murmured, "to say goodbye."

She helped the woman to load the suitcases into the boot of the car. Mrs. Cox closed the boot and walked to the drivers side. Climbing into the car took her a while, since it was not easy to cram 20 stone of woman behind the wheel of a small Italian car.

Aifric sat on the passenger side, fastened the seat belt, and wiped the sweat off her hands in her jeans. Ever since the accident, she felt very uncomfortable in cars, and couldn't bear to look out the windows. Now she had a two hour drive ahead of her, and the prospect filled her with terror. When the motor started, she took one last look back at the small house she grew up in. It would be sold, to clear off any debt her parents had left her, and new people would move in. Maybe a family like hers. A heavy weight seemed to lower on her chest, and once more she wished she could cry. When the car turned into the main road, she could not bear the view through the windows and closed her eyes, resuming to recall prime numbers.



The car stopped. Aifric opened her eyes. They had hardly spoken a word since the trip started, except for Mrs. Cox, telling her not to be scared a couple of times. “Everything will be alright,” she had said. “I’m a good driver.”

“Yes,” Aifric had answered through gritted teeth, and without opening her eyes. “So was my daid.”

Now Mrs. Cox set up her best impression of an encouraging smile. “See? I told you it will be safe. And here we are!”

Aifric looked around. They had parked in front of a big iron gate, that blocked the entrance to a fairly large estate. It was surrounded by high walls, but through the gate she could see the lush green of a garden and, in the distance, an old house. It would have been pretty, if it weren’t for a strange air of decay that surrounded the place. It wasn’t so much that the house was in a desolate state, but the paint on the walls was cracked here and there and weeds grew in the flowerbeds. Were Aifric in a normal state of mind, she might have been scared by the place. But right now, she just noticed it without any emotion.

Mrs. Cox opened the drivers door and heaved her massive body out of the car. Aifric undid the seat belt, opened her door and got out of the car herself; relieved that the long drive was over. While Mrs. Cox rang the bell, Aifric moved behind the car, and began lifting her suitcases from the boot. She tried to listen into herself, but she didn’t feel anything. She carried the suitcases to the gate, that was just now opened by an old nun. “Hello,

hello!" The old nun said. "My name is Sister Immaculata, and you must be Aifric!" Although her voice was friendly, her face was emotionless. It took seconds until Aifric realised, that the sister had reached out a hand, and remembered her manners. She took it, and whispered: "Nice to meet you, sister." The nun's hand was cold, and she had hardly any grip at all. It felt a bit like a dead fish in Aifric's hand. They followed the old sister in. The front door was made of heavy oak, and dominated the whole front of the house. Immaculata had to use her whole weight to push it open.

Inside, Aifric found herself in a large hall. A broad staircase led up to the upper floor, and on the wall to her left, an enormous wooden crucifix dominated the place. Sister Immaculata crossed herself. The carved Jesus figure was a little too detailed, the wounds on his side, thorns on his head and his face a grimace of agony. Aifric's attention was drawn to the staircase, as a group of girls came down. They were talking, some laughing and pointing towards Aifric, as if she was some curious animal. The girls were between 8 and 12 years old, except one, who stood out from the crowd, not only because she was the oldest and tallest, but because of her ginger hair. Her long sleek hair was the colour of copper, and her eyes were as green as the ocean. Apart from the squinting look on her face, she was stunningly beautiful. While the other girls seemed curious, the ginger one just stood there, arms crossed, and stared.

Immaculata ignored the girls on the staircase, and pushed Aifric towards the door to the right. "Mother Agatha will see you now." She stated, and led both of

them into a huge office.

Opposite from the door stood a huge wooden desk, behind which a grim looking nun was seated. Behind her, on the wall, was another crucifix, made of brass, and with a heavy silver Jesus figure, which did not look quite as agonised as the one in the hall. Below the cross, carefully rolled up, hung a long leather cord, that reminded Aifric of a whip. "Welcome to St. Mary's. I am Mother Agatha", the nun behind the desk began in a voice like rusting iron. "Please sit!" Mrs. Cox sat down in one of the chairs that stood in front of the desk and Aifric sat in another. Mrs. Cox handed some papers to Mother Agatha. "I need some signatures. Here, and here..."

The two women began talking about the bureaucratic details, and Aifric stopped listening. Her mind was beginning to wander. She looked around the room, seeing old bookshelves, folders full of papers, a golden pen on the desk. She was brought back into reality, when Mrs. Cox rose from her seat.

"So Aifric," she said. "I'll leave you in the capable hands of the sisters. I will come to see how you do, every once in a while, if you need anything, ask the sisters, or call my office!" She put on that encouraging smile that she had faked so well many times before, and patted on Aifric's shoulder. Automatically, Aifric rose, and took the woman's hand. But she said nothing. "Goodbye, Aifric!" Mrs. Cox said.

"Goodbye Mother Agatha! It was a pleasure seeing you." She turned to Agatha and shook her hand too.

"Likewise." Mother Agatha hardly rose from her seat. "Sister Immaculata will show you out. Sister?" Mrs. Cox

turned, and hurried out of the room, as if she couldn't get away from this place fast enough. Immaculata followed her out, and closed the door behind her.

"Sit!" Mother Agatha commanded. She was a woman in her late fifties or early sixties and time had made her features hard. Her hair was invisible under her veil, so it didn't give away a hint on her true age.

"Welcome to St. Mary's!" Mother Agatha said again. "We will take the responsibility of your education from now on. For us, the Sisters here at St. Mary's you will be like our own flesh and blood. We feed you, we teach you and we will pray for you. Comes time, we will have formed you a good and useful member of society!"

"Your name is Aifric?" Mother Agatha asked. "What's your Christian name?"

Aifric didn't understand this question, so she answered. "My name is Aifric. Aifric Lyons."

"You don't have a second name?"

"No." Aifric asked herself where is was going. Mother Agatha pondered for a while. "That is unacceptable." She concluded. "You need a Christian name. You will be known as Magdalena from now on!"

Aifric blinked. She didn't get the point here. "Why?"

Mother Agatha rose from her seat. "In this house, you will not question me! We have strict rules here, and I expect you to follow them. Pray hard and obey, and you will be saved!"

Agatha sat back on her chair and the tone of her voice got friendlier. "I will not tolerate any of this heathen lan-

guage in this house. It is not agreeable to God, not at all! A good catholic never speaks Irish, for it is unchristian. Do you understand?"

Aifric did not understand, but she nodded silently. Her family, like most Irish people, had been catholic, and the pastor in their parish at home, had held his sermon in Gaeilge every other Sunday. Her parents had always set a high value on teaching their children English and Irish alike. In school, she had often talked to her mates in Gaeilge; it was considered cool among her peers, also because many of the older teachers weren't good at it.

"Good. Now girl, give me your telephone!"

Aifric was confused. "My telephone?"

"Your mobile telephone. All of you young people have them nowadays, don't they? They are not allowed in here, they allow access to all sorts of filth. You will have no need to call someone, and if you do, you can always ask Sister Immaculata or myself, and we will let you use the telephone, if we see fit." She reached out her hand.

Aifric sighed, and pulled her mobile out from her pocket. It was an old model without internet access, and here was no signal here, so it was pretty much useless. There was no one to call anyway. Most of her old friends had turned away. In the beginning, they had visited her a few times, but these meetings had been awkward and weird, so they had stopped coming. Probably they couldn't stand being around the girl that had been touched by death. Aifric didn't blame them.

She handed over the phone wordlessly.

"Now go. Heather, will show you around."

Agatha rose from her desk, and led Aifric through the

door back into the hall. “Heather! Heather Whelan!” She yelled so suddenly, that Aifric flinched.

The ginger girl came down the staircase, decidedly slow. Agatha impatiently tapped her foot. “God hates the lazy!”

“Yes, mother.” Heather replied, but didn’t move any faster. She stopped in front of them, and looked Aifric over with blatant hostility.

“Please show Magdalena around, and help her settle in.” Agatha said, her voice cold as ice, while she stared back at Heather. The tension between the two could have been cut with a knife. They stared at each other silently for a moment, then Agatha turned and disappeared into her office.

Heather stared at Aifric, arms crossed. After a while, she said: “Hey!”

“Hi!” Whispered Aifric. She was feeling very scared.

Heather just gave her a bugged out look. “Come along then!”, she commanded then turned and began walking up the stairs. Aifric grabbed her suitcases and hurried after the girl. Packed with her luggage, she had trouble keeping up, but the ginger girl did not make any attempt to help her. From the stairs they walked along a corridor, which ended in a fairly large dormitory. Heather explained, that there were two dormitories, each at the opposite ends of the corridor. One for the younger girls, and one for the teenagers. There were five beds in the dorm, the one near the window was Aifric’s, Heather explained. Between the halls were the lavatories. The dining-hall along with the kitchen and the classrooms were downstairs.

While she began to unpack her things, Heather sat on

her bed and watched. "Got any fags?" She asked.

"I don't smoke." Aifric replied. Heather grunted, produced a packet of cigarettes from somewhere, and left.

"Charming." Aifric thought. She had the feeling that nearly everyone in here was hostile towards her. The abbess, the other girls. She sighed heavily and continued to unpack.

Two

After Aifric had unpacked her belongings, she went downstairs to look around the rest of the house, and to find out more about it's routines. On the way down, she bumped into a girl of maybe 10 years. She was frail and skinny, and she had her jet black hair tied in plaits. The dark hair made her skin look paler than she was, and she had dark circles around her eyes. "I'm sorry" the girl whispered almost inaudibly.

"It's OK." Aifric heard herself say. She almost walked past the girl, but then remembered her manners.

"Hi. I'm Aifric. I'm new here."

The girl didn't answer, instead she kept staring at her shoes.

"Do you have a name?" Aifric asked. The girl nodded, but didn't answer.

"But you don't wanna tell me." Aifric stated. The girl shook her head.

"Oi!" Heather darted up the stairs. "Leave her alone!" She shouted at Aifric. Aifric took a step back. "I just said

'Hi!'" She said defensively.

Heather didn't respond to that, but put an arm around the young girls shoulders.

"Come on, Mary-Jade" she said. "No worries."

She led the girl upstairs without looking at Aifric once more.

After she had walked around the house for a while, she saw all the other girls move towards the dining-hall, and suspected that it was dinner time. She didn't feel very hungry, although it had been hours since she had her last meal.

She followed the other girls into the dining-hall, and looked around. Everyone was staring at her, as she entered, but none of the girls said a word. She felt the cold gaze of Sister Immaculata on her, and shivered.

"Sit!" Immaculata commanded.

Aifric took a seat, as far away from Immaculata as possible. Heather was sitting opposite to her, and stared aggressively. The black-haired girl Mary-Jade sat next to her, still not looking at anyone.

That strange feeling of unreality, that had accompanied her since the accident was stronger than ever, like in a nightmare in which she knew she was dreaming, but couldn't wake up. It made her want to run away, but where could she run to?

As if to stress the nightmarish surreality of the scene, a girl entered the hall, who looked completely out of place. She was fair haired, with bright blue eyes and freckles, and wore a smile that belied the grimness of the place. The

girl pulled a trolley, with two bowls of stew, which she then handed to the two girls who had entered after her. The two were the youngest of the girls here, maybe about eight years old, both ash-blond and looked like sisters.

The bowls were placed on the table, and the girls sat down. The freckled girl took the free seat next to Aifric. “Hi!” She reached out her hand. “I’m Mercedes!”

Aifric took her hand, and felt the girl violently shake it. “So, you’re Magdalena? Nice to meet you!”

Aifric still felt she was being watched by Sister Immaculata, and did not dare to correct the girl. So she only said: “Likewise.”

“Now,” Sister Immaculata boomed. “Let us say grace!”

It had been so long since Aifric said grace at the dinner table, that she could hardly remember it. Mamó used to pray before she went bonkers, so they did when she was there, but at their usual family table, they never did. She simply folded her hands and pretended to pray, instead looking at the other girls through half closed eyelids.

Sister Immaculata intoned:

Bless O Lord, this food to our use,
 And us to thy loving service;
 And make us ever mindful
 of the needs of others,
 For Jesus’ sake. Amen.

Aifric watched Heather who only moved her lips in silence, and she was pretty sure, the ginger girl mouthed *Fuck You!* instead of *Amen* at the end.

When the grace was done, everyone was permitted to eat, and Mercedes took the opportunity to tell the story of her life to Aifric, whether she wanted to or not. Mercedes was twelve and had become an orphan when she was very little, and could hardly remember her parents. Her mam had died when she was still a baby, and her daid had been at sea, and never returned, so she was brought up by her grandparents. When her grandfather went sick, they couldn't care for her any longer, so she had come here. The only thing, she explained, that made her sad, was that her mamó did not return her letters anymore. "She's got grandfather to look after," she said. "She has no time to write,"

"But," Mercedes shared her wisdom, "there is no need to give up! You always need to cheer, otherwise you get wrinkly!"

It went on like this for the rest of the dinner. Why had the only person in this place, to talk to her be a rocket-mouthed, precocious twelve year old?

Aifric stirred her stew.

She sat up straight in her bed, panting hard. It was night, and she needed a while to remember where she was. Hands laid on her shoulder, and gently pressed her back into her pillows.

"Shh" a soft voice whispered. She looked around and saw Heather sitting on her bedside. "Oh, great! Just what I need now." Aifric thought. But Heather was completely different from what she had been this afternoon. All of the attitude was gone, instead the girl looked concerned.

Earlier, at dinner, Heather had been sitting opposite to her, ostentatiously far away, and glaring threateningly.

“You should try not to scream.” She explained. “If the sisters hear you, they gonna punish you.”

“I’m sorry.” Aifric began. “I had a bad dream.”

Heather gently ran her fingers through Aifric’s hair. “I know. We all have them.”

“I didn’t mean to wake you. I’m really sorry.”

“No big deal. I don’t sleep much anyway.”

Aifric looked around. In the near complete darkness of the room, she could only make out silhouettes, but the only other girl she shared a room with was Mercedes, and she seemed to be sound asleep. In the dim light, she could see Heather smile. “Wanna talk about it?”

“About what?” Aifric was confused.

“The dreams, stupid!” Heather replied. “Maybe it helps.”

“I don’t know if I can. I’m sorry.”

“It’s OK. Just an offer.” Heather didn’t seem to be offended. “If you need someone to talk, I’ll be here.”

“Thanks, that’s sweet of you.” Aifric said.

Heather changed the subject. “What’s your name? I mean, your parents surely weren’t so cruel to call you Magdalena, so this must be Agatha’s idea of christening or something.”

Aifric suddenly felt more comfortable, with this girl around. “Aifric.” She answered. “Aifric Lyons.”

“That’s what I call a good Irish name!” Heather winked. “I’m Heather Whelan.”

“Why does she do that? Give you another name?” Aifric asked.

“She thinks you go to hell or something, if you don’t have a proper Christian name. Some of the girls have gotten new names. I’d prefer to call you Aifric though, if you want that.”

“I do.” Aifric said. “Is Heather your real name? Or did she rename you too?”

“No, she didn’t. I was born Heather.” Heather shrugged. “I don’t think it’s a biblical name. But you never know what’s going on in the old penguins head.”

She smiled. “Before I got here, they called me *Faolchú*.”

“The wolf?” Aifric translated. “You liked that, didn’t you?”

“Never tell Mother Agatha. She’s quick with the cane, when you use Gaelge in here.”

“Does she really spank us?” Aifric could hardly believe that. The thought alone filled her with terror. She had never been spanked in her entire life, and the idea deeply frightened her. Heather seemed to be more pragmatic about it.

“Normally it’s only the cane.” She shrugged. “I can handle that.”

“Only?” Aifric asked. “That sounds bad enough for me!”

“I’ve had worse. Ask my mom. She knows how to beat the living shit out of you!” Heather looked disgusted. “Enough of that. I think you should try and get some sleep.” She got up and turned to leave, but Aifric put a hand on her wrists.

“Thank you.” She said. “To be honest, I thought you were the local bully around here at first. Guess I was wrong.”

Heather smiled. “Don’t tell anyone. I have a bad arse reputation to protect.”

“I won’t. My lips are sealed.” Aifric promised. “And thank you.”

“No problem. I know how harsh nightmares can be.” Heather grinned sheepishly. “Plus you’re kinda cute!”

Aifric didn’t know what to say, so left it with a whispered “Good night!” And curled up in her sheets, feeling a little bewildered.

Three

As days passed, Aifric learned the routines of her new home. They had to get up at five-thirty in the morning and do a morning prayer, then -in rotation- two girls prepared the breakfast. After breakfast they had to go to class, where most of the lessons were given by Sister Immaculata. For some classes, such as science-class, an otherwise pensioned teacher from the nearby village came by.

Mercedes had told her that she always wondered why they weren't simply sent to a public school in the nearby village. Aifric didn't give much thought to it, however.

She did not have many problems to catch up in school, since they all were taught together, which meant, despite Sister Immaculata's impressive overall knowledge, the two oldest girls were at least a year behind the regular curriculum.

Not that Aifric would have been able to pick up where she left eight months ago. Her school life was mostly limited to being physically present, but luckily she could

answer most of the questions asked. Yet, Immaculata demanded an intimate knowledge of the bible, which Aifric didn't have. Nor had she any strength to read and learn all the parts she was told to.

This brought her new troubles. "You either develop a thick skin, or you learn that stuff" Heather told her. "She will not let you get away with it for long."

And indeed Aifric learned the painful way that Immaculata was serious business. When she failed to recite her scripture, she had to stand in front of the classroom and stretch out her hands. Immaculata would hit her fingers five times with a bamboo cane. Strangely, even though the whole procedure was painful and humiliating, these were the only moments Aifric could feel herself. So she didn't even flinch.

What she didn't get, was any psychological help. In the hospital, she had had sessions with a psychiatrist twice a week, and could call for someone anytime she felt the need to talk. To ask the sisters for help was unthinkable, and even if she did, they would only tell her, she needed to pray harder, so that God might forgive her sins.

The third sister in the house was a young nun named Sister Claire. Claire was not as harsh and unforgiving as the other two, and she even seemed to have sympathies for the girls. However, even Aifric noticed that her fear of Mother Agatha was far greater than her love for the children in her care. Mercedes said, that she was a former resident of the orphanage, or -as Heather put it- an *inmate*, but she could not proof that claim, and Claire never talked about herself in front of the girls.

Claire did most of the night watch, she took turns with Immaculata to oversee when dinner was prepared, and that the girls went over to the small chapel behind the house to say their evening prayers. Dinner was usually a rather thin stew, for they weren't allowed to eat meat, except on Sundays and the sisters constantly preached austerity. "Austerity my ass!" Heather used to say. "Mother Scrooge here is a tight-arse!"

Aifric learned the names of the two ash-blond girls, who were indeed siblings, twins even, to be Aileen and Aislin -Mother Agatha however preferred to call them Grace and Martha. As Heather stated, who of them was Grace, and who was Martha changed on a daily basis, and was also depending on which sister addressed the girls.

Both girls were rather lively, and seemed to have a good connection to Mercedes, who always flocked them together like a mother goose. They seemed to be content with that, and held their distance to the two oldest girls of the group.

The most curious member of their little family was Mary-Jade. She was nine years old, and she hardly ever spoke to anyone but Heather, who seemed to be her surrogate mother. Usually she was quiet and did nothing more than trying to keep as close as possible to Heather, but sometimes, out of the blue, she could have such violent tantrums, that it took Heather all of her strength to hold her back. At other times the girl would start crying for no reason, and nothing in the world would calm her down,

while ten minutes later, she would sit at the table with you, and laugh.

Heather went to great length to make sure that the sisters didn't witness these episodes. If they did, they would usually give the girl the cane and make her recite the rosary 20 times. The latter was not really a punishment for Mary-Jade, for she was the only girl in the group to be deeply religious.

If she was in a good mood, she could be of great help for any of the required bible lessons, because she seemed to know at least long parts of the book by heart. She was especially good with the parts that commented on sin, which also seemed to be the favourite parts of the sisters.

Aifric fell into the daily routine surprisingly quickly, mostly because she didn't resist anything. There were times, when she was so far away, that not even the pain of Immaculata's bamboo cane could make her snap back into reality.

On such days Heather made it a habit to sit by her bedside at night and watch over her.

Four

Aifric tried to remove the safety belt. It was stuck, and she could not see, because her hair was hanging in her face, and it was soaked in blood. A warm, yet invisible, hand was gently caressing her blood smeared face. Death's bloody hand finally called to her, lured her to come with him. Fear overwhelmed her, and she tried to push the bloody hand away.

Slowly the nightmare faded, and Aifric realised that the hand stroking her face was not at all Death's. Instead it belonged to Heather, who sat over her bed, whispering to her.

“Sorry, did I wake you again?”, she whispered.

Aifric had lately managed to keep her nightmares silent enough not to wake sister Immaculata, who otherwise would come over and punish her.

“No, I woke you!” Heather smiled mysteriously. “And by the looks of it, I didn't interrupt anything, right?”

Aifric shook her head. "Not really. I had another bad dream."

"More of a nightmare, from the sounds you were making. Come on, get dressed!" Heather tore away Aifric's sheet.

Aifric was mystified. "What? It's the middle of the night!"

"A few minutes before midnight. Come on, you don't wanna be late!"

Aifric wondered what could be this urgent in the middle of the night. But, still sleepy, she obeyed.

They sneaked through the dark corridor. In the dim light Aifric saw that the ladder that led to the attic was down.

"What if Sister Claire hears us?" She whispered.

"Shush!" Heather hissed. "She won't, relax."

Silently Heather sneaked up the ladder. Reluctantly, Aifric followed her. In the Attic, all girls were assembled. Everyone looked a bit sleepy, but even Mary-Jade was there.

Mercedes beamed at her: "Surprise!"

Before she realized what was going on, Mercedes hugged her. "Happy Birthday!" The girl laughed. Aifric had tried to push the thought of her upcoming birthday as far away as she could, for the past few weeks. Last year, she had a sleepover with her friends. They wore pyjamas, drank a lot of fizzy drinks and stayed up late. All this seemed like a story another person's life now.

After Mercedes finally released her, she looked around. Near the window, a candle was lit. Beside it, was a cake. The cake was a tiny and very simple tray bake from a

supermarket, but it was chocolate-coated and sprinkled with almonds. Something of the sort that was strictly forbidden in this house.

As were birthday-parties. Mother Agatha considered celebrating the day of one's birth to be vanity.

Heather made her way over to Aifric, gently pushing Mercedes out of the way, so she could hug her friend. "Happy sixteenth, love!"

She led Aifric to the cake and the candle. "I know, it's not much, but at least we've got a candle. And, well, cake."

"Were did you get it from?" Aifric wondered.

"It's from the same miraculous place were my ciggy's come from." Heather grinned.

"You nicked it?"

"Of course I nicked it. You're not going to get all moral on me, are you? Because I've got the penguins for that!"

Aifric shook her head.

"Right then, blow the candle, make a wish!"

Aifric looked around, then sighed, and blew out the candle.

"Did you make a wish?" Aislin asked curiously.

"She's not supposed to say, silly!" Mercedes said. "Otherwise, it won't come true!"

Aifric sincerely hoped that it would. All she had wished for, was to make it through her birthday.

A task that would turn out to be harder than she thought. They sat together for about an hour, eating the cake, and the other girls were chatting away happily.

Aifric did not participate in any of their conversation. Her mind wandered off into the past, where she had been celebrating her birthday with her family. She remembered her mam's smile, and how Eoghan had smeared the chocolate coating of the cake all over his face.

The memories made her head swim. Why wouldn't she cry? She sighed. Best not to think about it. Heather had taken the seat to her left, and now put an arm around her.

"Maybe this was not such a good idea." She said.

"Sorry, I'm such a party-pooper!" Aifric whispered to her friend.

"No problem. This sounded like a great plan, when Mercedes came up with it. I didn't have in mind, that it might stir up some memories." Heather responded.

"I'm OK, just, let me sit here for a while, and don't expect me to talk much."

The celebration was small, and of course it didn't last very long. All of them had to get up at five-thirty in the morning; and the excitement of secretly staying up so late wore off; especially Aileen and Aislin were nodding off before it was one o'clock.

Heather stashed the remainders of the tin-foil-tray in some secret hideaway, where she usually hid her cigarettes. Then they climbed down the ladder, and saw that the little girls got back into bed.

When the three older girls stepped back into the hall, they saw a figure standing on the stairway. It was Sister Immaculata.

“Shit!” Heather murmured. She took a quick look around then stepped in front of the other girls.

“What is going on here?” Immaculata boomed.

Heather stood in front of her. “I thought it would be a nice idea, to sing a little birthday tune to Aifric.” She said, in a strong and steady voice.

“At one o’clock in the morning?” Immaculata asked.

“Yes, sister. I thought it might cheer her up. She always so sad.”

“And then you thought waking her up in the middle of the night, would be a good way to make her happy?”

“It was worth a try, wasn’t it?” Heather returned chiefly.

“Don’t you dare to talk back to me, young lady!” Immaculata was not amused. “Who else is behind this?”

She looked first at Aifric, then at Mercedes, who tried to hide behind Heather’s back.

“No one.” Heather said. “This was my idea of a surprise. I woke the girls up, and thought they would participate in my little serenade.”

Immaculata looked at Mercedes and Aifric again. “Is that true? And don’t lie, the Lord sees through you!”

Bravely, Mercedes nodded. It was lucky that it was so dark, otherwise Immaculata would have seen how she blushed. She’d never been a good liar.

“Magdalena?” Immaculata now stood in front of Aifric now. It took a long while until Aifric reacted. She still wasn’t used to being called by her new name, and her mind was somewhere else entirely.

“Answer!” Immaculata cried.

“It was as she said.” Aifric managed to say.

Seemingly content with the answer, Immaculata turned her attention back to Heather. “You will explain yourself to Mother Agatha!”

As she led Heather away, she turned to Mercedes and Aifric. “You two! Back to bed!” She commanded.

When Aifric didn’t move, it was Mercedes, who took her hand, and led her back to the dormitory.

“Everything will work out fine.” She explained. “Heather knows what she’s doing!”

Mercedes tried to sound more confident than she was.

Aifric didn’t see Heather again until breakfast. She was limping, and when she sat on her place, she grimaced, as if she was in pain.

“Are you OK?” Aifric asked carefully. “What did she do to you?”

“A good spanking” Heather said light-heartedly, as if she’d been invited to a picnic.

“I’m sorry.” Aifric whispered, as they laid the table. “And all because of me!”

“Nonsense,” Heather brushed her off. “None of this is your fault! And it was definitely worth it!”

Aifric was confused. “Worth a spanking?”

“If we don’t have a little bit of fun in here, and break the rules, we’re all getting bonkers!” She held her finger to her temple and made a *cuckoo* gesture.

Aifric just sighed. “Too late.” She thought to herself. “Far too late.”

Five

Sister Claire checked the cupboards. “All well girls!” She said. “Off you go!” Luckily Sister Claire was on duty tonight. Usually doing the kitchen chores was a pain in the arse, as Sister Immaculata always found fault with something, which usually included a sermon on how they’d all go to hell, accompanied by strokes on the fingers with her bamboo cane.

Sister Claire usually was more *laissez-faire*, although she also would not tolerate any misdemeanour.

Heather and Aifric headed out as fast as possible, rushing into the dormitory. The other girls were still in the chapel, saying their evening prayer. Kitchen duty was the only occasion when the girls would be excused from the evening service. They were required to say their prayers now, in the dorm, but Heather had no plans to comply.

Aifric entered the dorm, and sat on her bed. As usual, she hadn’t been talking much during the day, and she was surprised that Heather was seeking her company so often. When they were alone, it was usually Heather who did

the talking, while Aifric just sat there and listened, or sometimes she didn't even listen. Heather didn't seem to care. She had constantly tried to lift Aifric's mood. To her everlasting frustration, never with much success.

Now she was sitting next to Aifric, instead of preparing for her evening prayer.

"Gosh, I'm happy I don't have to be in the chapel," she started.

"Aren't you going to pray?" Aifric asked.

"Have you ever seen me pray?" Heather laughed. "I thought I'd only fool the penguins!"

"You'll be in trouble again!" Aifric stated.

"I'm always in trouble, honey. Trouble is my middle name."

"They say you were in jail?" Aifric bit her lip. Aislin had told her that in obvious admiration, before she was hushed by Mercedes.

"You bet I was!" Heather was far from offended.

"What happened?" Aifric could hardly imagine someone as caring and oft-times selfless as Heather being in jail.

"Long story." Heather shrugged. "I broke some guys nose."

"Really?"

"I was hanging out with some girls in the malls around Limerick quite often. I was living on the streets for some time. Fell in with the wrong crowd. Well, actually I *was* the wrong crowd."

She continued. "I didn't want to be at my mam's place. You know, mam has been pissed as long as I can

think, and those loser boyfriends she had used to beat me up. If she was too drunk to do it herself that was.”

“So I ran off. Hung out with some girls, you know. We were often nicking stuff. Got caught the first time we grabbed a car and drove around with it. Police got us. God, mam’s loser boyfriend beat me with his belt until I passed out.”

She shuddered, and took a deep breath before she continued. “Few months later I was caught stealing at the mall. The store detective gave me a choice, the bastard. He’d call the police or I *be of service* to him.”

Aifric looked puzzled. “Be of service?” She asked.

Heather rolled her eyes. “You’re so innocent, it’s adorable! He wanted me to suck his dick!”

Aifric was shocked. “What did you do?”

“I gave him my answer.” She clenched a fist. “Right on the kisser!”

“Of course no one believed my side of the story.” She sighed. “So they put me in the slammer.”

“I’m sorry!” Aifric put a hand on her friend’s arm.

“Not to be sorry. I deserved what I got, I guess. And jail was at least better than the Limbo here.”

Aifric was mystified. “The what?”

“The first circle of hell, also known as the Limbo!” Heather grinned. “And you thought you were the bourgeois highbrow here, didn’t you?”

“It’s from Dante’s *Divine Comedy*” she explained.

“You read classical literature?” Aifric was surprised.

“You’ve got a lot of free time on your hands in jail, even with all the therapy stuff and classes and all. All they had there was a not so well sorted library, with al-

most only really old stuff in it. So I began to read.” Heather laughed. “Doesn’t fit into the profile of the bad arse delinquent, does it?”

“No.” Aifric admitted. “It doesn’t.”

“Do you have any brothers or sisters?” Aifric wanted to know.

“Nah,” Heather replied. “I don’t know why. I don’t think it was family planning, but more like being too pissed to fuck or something.”

“You? Any siblings?” Heather returned the question.

Eoghan’s face flashed before Aifric’s eyes. “A brother.” She answered.

“Where is he now?” Heather asked.

“Dead.” Aifric said gravely. Dead. The word hung in the room like thick black smoke. Dead. The smoke clouded Aifric’s view, and she felt her belly clench painfully, as if she’d just received a blow.

“Are you feeling OK?” Heather looked concerned.

When Aifric opened her mouth to speak, her voice failed her. The painful clench moved upwards, through her chest and into her throat. A pain stricken sob escaped her mouth. It came out so forcefully, it made her throat ache.

Alarmed, Heather leaned forward to put a hand on her friend’s shoulder. Aifric fell forward sobbing again, as Heather caught her, gently stroking her hair. The warm touch of Heather’s hands pushed Aifric over the edge, and the flood rushed over her.

A feeling of loss and grief overwhelmed her, and it seemed all the tears she didn’t cry for the past months, were now breaking out at once, her eyes too much small to

let them all pass through. Her violent sobbing shook her body back and forth, and the last thing she saw, before the drowned were Heather's green eyes resting upon her calmly. Then the waves crashed over her head and she sunk to the bottom.

Heather gently placed her friends head in her lap, and continued stroking her hair.

When the flood finally receded, it was day. Aifric had no idea how long she had been gone. She had a splitting headache and her mouth was bone-dry. She carefully looked around. She was in the infirmary. Old cupboards filled with bandages and flasks, a small bedside cabinet and dark curtains.

Heather sat on a chair by her bedside. "Welcome back!" She smiled happily, but dark circles around her eyes belied her mood.

"Hey!" Aifric croaked through her sore throat. Heather took a glass of water from the cabinet, and held it to Aifric's lips. The water felt cool and refreshing. After a few gulps she reached out her hands, to take the glass from Heather. She noticed her friends hands where stiff and her fingers where blue-black. Heather didn't seem to notice, or at least she didn't let it show.

"How did I get here?" She asked.

Heather smiled. "You don't remember?"

"No."

"We had to carry you here. The sisters where not too happy, but even they thought you were in a bad enough shape to put you to bed."

“How long am I here?” Aifric couldn’t tell, whether it was minutes or hours.

“Two days.” Heather replied.

“Oh.” Aifric tried to remember anything she might have done, but all there was was the searing pain, that still resided in her chest. She felt her eyes burn again, but there where no more tears. They had simply ran out.

Heather clumsily ran her fingers through Aifric’s hair. “What happened to your hands?” Aifric asked.

“I’ve been naughty again!” Heather shrugged.

“Did she hit you?”

“Yeah, as usual.” Heather replied.

“Because of me?” Aifric was alarmed.

“Don’t worry about it. You need to get better now.” Heather tried to avoid an answer. “It is my feud with the old penguin, nothing you need to rack your brain about.”

“I’m sorry!” Aifric whispered, taking her friends hand in hers.

“Not your fault” Heather replied. “You know how I can’t restrain myself when I’m upset.”

She locked her gaze on Aifric’s eyes, and Aifric felt the her glance trickle down into her chest, like a warm liquid. They sat there, eyes locked for a while, and Aifric gently stroked Heathers hands.

Sister Claire entered with some dinner and a glass of milk for Aifric. “Ah, you’re awake!” She said. “Here, you need to eat!”

She handed the milk to Aifric.

“Heather, you should go to dinner now!”

Heather sighed, and looked towards Aifric, who nodded. Heather got up, and made her way to the door.

Six

Heather sighed when she entered the dining hall. Her worries for Aifric had been growing. The poor girl had been coming in and out of a state of stupor during the last couple of days, and the sisters with their prayers and strict rules weren't exactly helping.

She looked at her hands, while she sat down on the table. Those bruises were the sister's answer to her request to bring Aifric to a hospital. Heather had no idea what it was that Aifric needed now, but she sure wouldn't get it from Agatha and her lot.

Heather had insisted that Aifric should be brought to a hospital, first with Sister Claire, then with Agatha. That's when she got the cane. "It's not your place to speak!" Agatha had explained. "And not on you to worry about that girl!"

But worry, she did. Aifric's vulnerability had triggered Heather's instincts. But, although Heather hadn't been willing to admit that to herself, there was something more about Aifric. The way her hair glinted in the sunlight.

The gaze of those enormous brown eyes. And the way Heather's heart missed a beat, on the rare occasions when the hint of a smile appeared on Aifric's lips.

She tried to shrug off her worries, and concentrated on her meal. But her mind always wandered back to the pale skinny girl in the infirmary.

"How is Aifric?" Mary-Jade brought her mind back to the table. "Have you seen her?"

"She's getting better. She stopped crying, and today she spoke to me." Although Heather wasn't quite sure if Aifric wasn't just so exhausted, that she was beyond tears.

Mary-Jade nodded. She never asked why Aifric had collapsed. She knew better than anyone how quick you could topple over the edge of sanity. Instead she asked: "Will she come back to us tomorrow?"

Heather wasn't sure Mary-Jade talked about Aifric showing up in the dining hall, or her mental state.

"I don't know, sweetie." It was the right answer to both questions. But Heather was sure, that the sister's would not tolerate Aifric's miserable state for much longer, and she would be forced to get up and resume her daily chores, whether she was ready or not. Maybe it was for the best, keeping her mind away from her sorrows.

"You like her very much." It was a statement, not a question. Mary-Jade always observed people very carefully, and probably she knew more about what was going on between Heather and Aifric than Heather herself.

"Guess so." Heather confirmed. When Mary-Jade smiled at her knowingly, she added: "I don't know how this is any of your business though!"

For the rest of the meal, she changed the subject to the poor taste of the stew.

The days came and went, and Aifric was moved to her bed in the dorm again. She was also assigned her usual duties, like cleaning up and kitchen work, and she showed up for class. She was however, much to Heathers disappointment, excused from the meals. After dinner Heather went to the chapel, where she found Aifric quite often. Aifric stayed longer than was mandatory, but Heather knew she wasn't praying.

She usually knelt behind Aifric, and talked to her. Some days she got an answer, and some days she didn't. Tonight Aifric had a good day.

"Missed you today!" Heather said.

Aifric turned her head. "How was dinner?"

"Tasteless. As usual." Heather grinned. "Mercedes is missing you. She's alone on her side of the table, and she has no one to talk their ear off."

Heather offered a roll, she had stolen from the dinner table, to Aifric. "Here, you need to eat something!"

"I'm not hungry." Aifric waved away Heather's hand.

"I know, but eat it anyway." Aifric had been skinny ever since Heather had met her. But these days she was only skin and bones, and had become so frail, that Heather always worried, she might not be able to get up. Something in Heather's voice made Aifric take the roll and she slowly began to eat it.

"Good girl!" Heather praised her.

“Your fault, if I throw it all up again!” Aifric warned her.

“Do you plan to?” Heather tried to sound indifferent.

“No, but that what happens, when the sisters try to feed me stew.”

“Obviously. But that’s the stew, not you!” Heather joked.

Not that that was so far from the truth. Meals in this place were meagre, and most days they consisted of stew and some bread. More often than not, it didn’t even have meat. So it wasn’t advisable to miss a meal here, and Aifric had missed plenty.

“If it stays down, I’ll see you at the breakfast table first thing in the morning.” Heather commanded.

Then she helped Aifric up, and led her to the dorm.

Aifric did appear for breakfast the next morning, mostly because Heather did not leave her side until she had eaten. Most of the time she slipped part of her own meal onto Aifric’s plate. This routine went on for days, and slowly Aifric was regaining strength.

One night Heather was sneaking up the stairs from the dorm to the roof. When the sisters had gone to bed, she sometimes got up there to have a smoke. She usually managed to nick a packet of fags when they were sent to do some shopping, and Heather always felt a little triumph when she got away with it. Smoking them was her secret celebration of victory.

She went through the hall, just to see that the ladder was already down. Someone was on the roof! She care-

fully looked up, but couldn't see anyone through the opening. Breathlessly she sneaked upwards, trying to make as little noise as possible. When she lifted her head through the opening, she carefully looked around the attic. It was empty, but the window was open. The slender frame of the girl sitting on the window sill, was unmistakably Aifric's.

The younger girl had already noticed her, and turned her head.

"Hi," Heather said. "Didn't realize you got out of bed."

"I can be sneaky too, you know?"

Heather walked to the open window and sat on the sill beside her friend.

"Guess I'm a bad influence then." Heather took a cigarette from her packet and lit it. Then she offered it to Aifric.

"No thanks!" Aifric looked disgusted. Heather shrugged, and inhaled the smoke deeply. She held her breath for a couple of seconds, and then breathed out again.

"You come here often?" Aifric asked.

"Only place you can have a smoke around here without being bugged."

"Am I bugging you?" Aifric looked at her friend cautiously.

"Nah," Heather put an arm around Aifric's shoulders. "You are most welcome anytime, sweetie!"

They sat silent for a while, and looked over the surrounding landscape. The night was moonlit and warm, and the girls could see the trees and hills in the distance.

Heather silently smoked. She spoke again, when she had finished her cigarette.

“If it wasn’t such a fucking prison, this place would almost be beautiful.” She sighed.

Then she cocked her head. “Wanna be a bad girl?”

Aifric held up her hands in defence. “I’m not going to smoke your fags!”

“Rubbish!” Heather said. “There is a pond over there, behind the trees. We could climb the garden wall, head over and go skinny dipping.”

“You’re mad!” Aifric cried.

“I’ve done it many times!” Heather seemed quite serious. “We can’t use the front door of cause, but we can climb down the rain pipe; its mounting is just like a ladder!”

Heather stuffed the stub of her fag into her pocket, after clearing it of ash, and climbed out the window. Aifric nearly saw her falling, but it was only one step to the edge, and Heather had made it. Before Aifric could react, she was half way down the pipe, only her head was still visible over the edge of the roof.

“Are you coming, or what?” Heather said impatiently.

Aifric got up, and carefully climbed out the window. Getting to the edge of the roof was the tricky part, once she had a foothold on the rain pipe’s mount, it was indeed as easy as Heather had claimed. They both got to the ground safely, and ran towards the wall.

The back wall of the garden was not as high as the fence marking the front, but still too high to reach, at least for Aifric. But the wall was overgrown with vines, and Heather took one of the thicker ones, and climbed

the wall effortlessly. For Aifric it was a tougher to get up there, because she wasn't in a very good shape. She got up high enough to reach the edge, but couldn't pull herself up. Heather placed one foot under a vine to get a better hold, and pulled Aifric up the rest of the way. "I'm sorry." Aifric said breathlessly. "I used to be better at this."

Heather shook her head. "Girl, you weigh less than a paper bag. No wonder you can't climb for a few feet!"

"Are you going to tell me to eat more?" Aifric felt a little offended.

"Do I have to?" Heather gave her a stern look, then turned on the small edge, sat down, and slid down the wall towards the ground. Aifric followed her; this part was a lot easier. She fell into soft grass.

"You're alright?" Heather helped Aifric up.

"Yeah, I'm fine." The truth was, that Aifric's heart was pounding like a hammer, and she could hear the blood rushing in her ears. She was scared, but also excited.

"Follow me!" Heather led her through the grass towards a group of trees. When the moon came out again from behind some clouds, Aifric could see the glint of moonlight on water from behind the trees. When they reached the pond, Heather led her towards a breach in the trees, where the grass grew right up to the embankment.

"Isn't this a cool spot?" Heather beamed.

Aifric looked around. The warm July breeze rustled in the leaves, and the moonlight coated the scenery with silver light. So little had she seen of the place she was living now.

“Beautiful.” She breathed.

“The last one in the water is a snail!” Heather began undressing.

“You’re really gonna get in there?” Aifric looked in astonishment as her friend removed her clothes.

“Sure, sweetie! It’s what we came for, eh?” Heather turned around and waved at Aifric encouragingly.

“I don’t have a bathing suit, and not even a towel!” Aifric defended herself.

Heather got rid of her underwear, and ran into the water. For a second she was gone, but then she surfaced again, splashing.

“Come one, Virgin Mary! It’s not that anyone is here to see you!”

Aifric reluctantly began to undress, still unsure, whether this was a good idea.

“Oh, right” Heather mocked from the water. “I forgot, our Mother Supreme converted you into Maria-Magdalena! Get in, the water is fantastic, Magdalena!”

That did the trick. “My name is Aifric!” Aifric shot back.

“Prove it!” Heather laughed.

Aifric dropped the rest of her clothes, and jumped after her, trying to spray Heather’s face with water.

Later, after they’ve gotten out of the water, they lay in the grass, waiting for the summer breeze to dry their skin and their hair and Aifric looked at the stars. She had never noticed before how many there were.

As she shivered when the wind chilled her bare skin, and Heather gently put an arm around her, to keep her warm. The skin-on-skin was awkward, but it felt good. Comforting. Alive. The excitement was still pumping through her veins, and she realized, that this was the first time in months she felt alive again.

She turned her head towards Heather. "Thank you." She said.

"Thanks for what?" Heather seemed confused.

"For taking me here. It was wonderful."

"You're welcome." Heather smiled at her.

They watched the stars for a while, until it was time to gather their clothes, and return to their beds.

Seven

After doing her homework, Aifric went downstairs towards the dining hall. When she was on the stairs, Heather caught up with her. She was smiling conspiratorial. Heather had been glowing all day, still excited from last night's adventure. They didn't have much time to talk today, but Aifric knew that Heather had enjoyed her small victory over the nuns extensively.

And who would blame her? It had been a beautiful night, magical and liberating. But there was something more in Heather's attitude towards her. It hadn't only been for the fun of escaping their prison for a night, it was also the joy of each other's company.

Aifric had not figured out what it was they shared, but since last night she had the strong feeling that it was more than their common fate. Heather's attitude towards her was not only friendly, often she was openly flirtatious. And Aifric was not entirely sure what that meant.

Heather seemed more certain of herself. When they walked down the stairs together she causally took Aifric's

hand on hers and gently caressed her fingers only for a second before she would let go.

In the dining hall, Heather's playfulness evaporated at once. Sister Immaculata was sitting on her usual place her cold and unforgiving gaze literally sucked the life out of the place. Aifric asked herself, if she would ever stop feeling a chill whenever Immaculata was in the same room with her. Three girls were already there, only Heather, Mary-Jade and herself were missing. They were punctual on the spot, but Immaculata shot a disapproving look in their direction anyway. Heather's hand lightly brushed Aifric's before she went over to her place at the opposite site on the table. They said their prayers, or in Heather's case pretended to and finally began their meal.

Mary-Jade, who was sitting beside Heather, looked rather satisfied. Aifric couldn't hear all of what she was saying, because she kept her voice down, so Immaculata couldn't hear her. Which wasn't too hard, because the old sister's hearing had had its heyday quite some time ago. Heather seemed amused.

"You shouldn't put your pretty little nose into other people's affairs, or someone might pluck it off. She playfully grabbed Mary-Jade's nose, and Mary-Jade giggled. Aifric wondered what was going on. Seeing Mary-Jade this happy was a rare sight. As Mary-Jade glanced across the table, Aifric got the feeling, they were talking about her. That was confirmed when Mary-Jade pointed in her direction. Aifric clearly heard her say the word *snog*. Heather laughed.

"Do you even know what that means?"

“Of course!” Mary-Jade leaned towards Heather and whispered something in her ear.

“Don’t let sister Immaculata know, you know that.” Heather warned her with her voice down. “She’ll wash your mouth with soap!”

Just know Aifric noticed, that Mercedes, who usually would have told her what she had done all day by know, was unusually quiet. When she turned to face her, she saw that Mercedes was trying as hard to follow the conversation on the opposite side of the table as she was. Aifric blushed.

“What are you looking at?” She snapped at the blonde girl.

Mercedes was startled. “I’m sorry. Did I miss something? What’s going on with you two?”

“Nothing!” Aifric said a little too quickly.

“Ah,” Mercedes whispered. “And nothing is also why you weren’t in bed last night.” She grinned. “Don’t worry. Your secret’s safe with me.”

As the summer slowly progressed Heather made a habit of sneaking out. Sometimes she could motivate Aifric to come, sometimes not. Aifric found that these nightly excursions were among the few times, where she was not brooding about her fate, and Heather always made sure, that there was something new to see.

They did not always go to the pond, sometimes they ventured into the forest, sometimes into the fields, where they watched owls, bats and other nocturnal animals going about their business. They carefully avoided the vil-

lage though, because they didn't know what would happen, if the villagers saw them. The orphanage had been here for a hundred years, and Heather couldn't imagine, that nobody knew what was going on behind the run down old walls. Better not to trust them.

One night they even took Mercedes on an excursion to see the owls hunt near the barns. The blonde girl had been begging Heather for days, until the older girl had finally given in.

Mercedes on the other hand, kept her promise. Not even the twins knew about their nightly activities.

Maybe they had become careless, maybe they had grown to bold, maybe the old hag wasn't as stupid as they had thought. One night, when they came back from a longer run through the forest, Aifric had the feeling, something wasn't right, the moment she had climbed back in through the window.

The ladder to the attic was still down, but when they climbed it, Aifric froze. The door to the dormitory was open, and in the door frame stood the broad figure of Mother Agatha.

"What's wrong?" Heather whispered, when she saw her friend hesitating. Then, when she stood beside Aifric she became chalk white.

"And what where you two up to?" Mother Agatha's voice boomed across the corridor.

Aifric grabbed Heather's arm.

"This is bad." Heather muttered. "This is very bad. I'm sorry Aifric. So sorry."

"Come here!" Agatha commanded.

With wobbly knees Aifric and Heather stepped forward.

“So?” Agatha held her arms crossed before her chest.

Heather spoke. “It was my idea, mother. I talked her into getting outside. We were watching the owls. It’s all my fault!”

“Is that true?” Agatha shot at Aifric. Aifric looked over to Heather who nodded. “Yes, Mother” Aifric confirmed.

“Do you think that keeps you free from sin?”

“No, Mother.”

“Into my office! Now!”

Back inside the dorm, Aifric could see Mercedes, who was clutching her cushions and cried silently.

She could see Heather’s teeth grind, as they walked behind the nun. Then Heather turned to her and whispered: “What ever she’s going to do to you, Aifric. Don’t let her break you. Just concentrate on me, OK?”

Aifric nodded.

“Promise?”

“Promise.” Aifric whispered back.

The old nun led the two of them into her office without a word, and closed the heavy wooden doors from the inside.

Eight

“Get up, you first!” Sister Agatha thundered and pointed to Heather. Aifric didn’t know what was coming, but she knew it was something horrific. Heather did not flinch. She knew too well what it meant. Their desperate attempt for a little freedom had been an act of disobedience Agatha could not let pass. Agatha hung a rope through a hook at the ceiling and commanded: “Undress!” Heather didn’t argue, she unbuttoned her blouse and removed it. When she turned to open her bra, Aifric saw her hands shake a little, but beyond that, Heather was cool as ice. She did not protest or plea. All she did was stare. It was this silent stare that drove Agatha mad all the time; Heather’s private little war against the old nun. Obviously, she didn’t break yet. Aifric noted the scars along the redheads back. When Heather had removed her blouse and bra, Agatha tied her hands tightly to the rope that dangled from the ceiling. Heather turned towards Aifric as far as she could in this position.

Agatha reached into her drawer and produced a long

black whip. Aifric gasped. “She’s not gonna hit Heather with that thing!”, she thought. On the other hand: It would explain for the scars on the girl’s back.

Agatha swung the whip testing, and the swirling noise made Aifric sick. Heather searched for her eyes, and their gazes locked.

“The heart is more deceitful than anything else”, Agatha quoted the book of Jeremiah before placing her first blow on Heathers bare back. Heather drew in air sharply on the blow, but no sound escaped her lips. She held her gaze firmly at level with Aifric. Aifric however, let out a sharp cry.

“It is incurably bad!” Agatha continued, blowing the second strike. Aifric covered her mouth with her hands. She felt sick already.

“I, the LORD, probe into peoples minds!” SMACK!

“I examine peoples hearts!” WHACK!

“I deal with each person according to how he has behaved!” Agatha’s voice was shrieking with fury now. Heather was fighting back tears, as the blow hit her.

“I give them what they deserve based on what they have done!” The last blow was so vicious, that it drove the air out Heathers lungs. Still, her gaze was fixed on Aifric, and her lips were sealed shut.

Agatha put away the whip, and loosened the knots around Heather’s wrists, and Heather slumped to the floor. Her back was covered with red streaks, and blood slowly ran over it, where the whip had torn her flesh.

Agatha grabbed Aifric’s arm and pulled her from her seat: “Your turn.” She said coldly. Aifric’s insides turned to water. Her hands were shaking uncontrollably, as she

tried to unbutton her blouse. She managed somehow, not without tearing off two buttons, and she felt hot tears streaming from her eyes, as Agatha lifted her arms up. Heather, who still sat on the floor smiled at her encouragingly. On their way to Agatha's study, Aifric had sworn to herself, that she wanted to be like Heather. She would return anything the old nun threw at her, with the ice cold stare, that Heather always used. This was their war against Agatha. A war that Agatha could not win, if she, Aifric, stayed strong.

Now all of this was easier said than done. Right now she was trembling with fear, and she had lost the fight against her tears. She did not understand what Agatha said, her words were a mere background noise. Instead she tried to find Heather's eyes through her blurred vision.

Then the first blow slashed down on her bare back. The pain was even more intense than she had imagined. It stung through her whole body, and made her see stars. Hot tears welled up, and she could not see Heather anymore. The second blow was more than she could bear: She heard herself scream out loud.

"Stop, please!", she screamed, but Agatha was unforgiving. Her begs for mercy were cut by the blows of the whip, and it seemed an eternity until she was finally released. She dropped to the floor sobbing, hardly hearing what Agatha commanded next. Heather, although herself barely able to walk, helped her to put on her blouse and led her out of the study.

On their way to the bathroom, Aifric managed to stop crying, but she couldn't bear to look at Heather, who was limping, but still with her head high. Back in the girl's

lavatory, Heather got some fresh towels and began, to clean Aifric's wounds. Her back cleaned and with some bandages on, the pain was bearable; it was easier to stand than the humiliation. She didn't speak a word, while she cleaned Heathers back, and when she was finished, she turned and went to bed without a word.

It wasn't until the next evening, Heather got a chance to talk to Aifric. The girl had been avoiding her, and was obviously upset. Heather was afraid Aifric blamed her for being beaten, and didn't dare to ask.

After supper, she entered the lavatories, to take a look at her wounds, when she heard sobbing from one of the toilets. It was not uncommon that one of the girls came here to cry, and cry they did often in this place, and Heather knew it was best most of the time, to leave them their privacy; but the familiar voice made her look more closely this time.

She found Aifric weeping in one of the toilet booths. She went over to her, taking the girl's skinny hands in hers. "I'm sorry, my sweet!", she whispered. Aifric sobbed, and looked away.

Heather felt tears dwelling in her own eyes too, but decided that they had to wait. "Look at me, please!", she pleaded.

"I can't." Aifric managed to say between sobs. "You must hate me!"

"And why would I do that?" Heather replied in a soft voice.

It took Aifric a while to speak again. "I betrayed you",

she breathed.

“Why would you say that?”

Aifric finally turned towards Heather, but without meeting her gaze. “I shouldn’t have screamed, like you”, she whispered, “and after two blows, I begged for mercy. I would have done anything for her to stop, anything!”

“I know how that feels honey, I know. It’s no reason to be ashamed.”, Heather hushed.

“I’m not worthy of your friendship”, Aifric blurted out, before sobbing uncontrollably again.

These words stung Heather deeper than the old penguins whip. She felt tears run over her own cheeks now. She held Aifric’s face with both hands, and made her face her directly. “She wants you to think that. But it’s a lie. All she tells are lies. You will never be unworthy to anything and anyone. Least of all me.”

“I’m proud of you, Aifric. You faced her, and you survived. No one will ever know how many tears or screams it took, but you are here, still alive. I’m proud of you!”

She pulled Aifric’s head into her lap, and stroked her hair tenderly, until the tears dried up. When Aifric finally looked up to her, the auburn girl had stopped crying. “Want me to have a look at your back?”, she asked cautiously.

“That would be a relief”, Heather agreed. They went over to the showers, and Heather began to undress. Aifric helped her to remove the bandages. When she was naked, she stepped into the showers, wincing at first, when the hot water ran over the cuts and bruises on her back. After a few seconds the pain went away, and the hot streaming water was a relief to her aching muscles.

As Aifric undressws, her brown hair fell over her shoulders in the long curls that Heather sometimes envied her for, Heather almost smiled. But her loving gaze was interrupted by the sight of Aifric's wounds. Her back looked a mess, with blue-black streaks all over it. It gave Heather a sting in the heart to see her friend so bruised and torn. Although she knew she herself looked no better, the sight was harder to stand than the pain.

Aifric looked at her questioningly. "It will hurt, won't it?", she asked.

"What will hurt, sweetheart?" Heather returned.

"The water."

"Only for a second. Come here."

Aifric carefully stepped into the shower. She held her arms under the water, which was comfortingly warm. "Turn." Heather said. She picked up her facecloth, and watched while her friend turned around. Instead of pulling her into the shower jet, Heather soaked the facecloth with water and wrenched it over her friends back.

"Ow!", Aifric cried as the water ran over a deep cut between her shoulders.

"I'm sorry." Heather muttered and began to softly stroke around the cuts with the facecloth. Getting more comfortable with the water Aifric leaned back until she stood in the shower jet, having the water running through her hair and over her face. She was so close to Heather now, that she could feel the steam rising from her skin. Heather stroked the wet strands of hair from Aifric's face and shoulders. She felt a strange tingling in her stomach, like butterflies swirling, while she moved the facecloth from Aifric's back to her shoulders.

“Better?”, she whispered in the girl’s ear.

“Yes.” Aifric had her eyes closed, and enjoyed the warm water as well as the gentle touch of the fabric. Heather’s heart raced, when she drew closer, closing the gap between them. Aifric’s body felt soft and warm against her and the tingling in her stomach spread below her waistline. In slow circular motions, she moved the facecloth over Aifric’s shoulders, and gently along her back, washing away dried blood.

For a second, she could feel the girl tense up, but when she gently put her arm around Aifric’s waist, she let go, and leaned into Heather’s embrace.

Heather got bolder, and began stroking the cloth across Aifric’s chest.

Aifric opened her eyes. “What are you doing?” She whispered hastily.

“Want me to stop?” Heather asked. Aifric opened her mouth to speak, but didn’t bring out a word. Instead she shook her head. Heather leaned over the girl’s shoulder and kissed her cheeks. The sensation in her belly was now urging. This was new. Heather had had wet dreams before, and she had known what she was because these dreams had never involved any boys. But being here in the shower with Aifric was uncharted territory. Aifric had her eyes closed again, and she could feel the girl’s body shiver with an excitement that reflected her own. As desire took over, she leaned herself into the embrace the feeling of skin on skin sent chilling notions of pleasure through her spine. She let go of the facecloth and grabbed the Aifric’s shoulders, turning her around. Aifric’s huge eyes were fixed on her’s in surprise and excitement as

Heather pulled her close and kissed her.

Both of them sank to the floor, hands touching, lips kissing, tongues exploring. It went on for a long time and pleasure was growing as was the excitement. She didn't even notice that she was lying flat on her aching back in the end.

Heather couldn't say how long it they had spend under the shower. When they unlocked their embrace, both of them were breathing heavily, and all their pain was forgotten for the moment.

"I love you." Heather whispered. Aifric could not answer. There was a lump in her throat, and she was still shaking from the excitement. She just brushed a copper-coloured strand of wet hair from her friends face and smiled.

This was the first time after the fatal accident she truly felt herself again.

Nine

Heather pretended to concentrate putting the plates back in the kitchen-cupboard, while Aifric was washing the dishes. She tried not to think of her friend, and had even avoided looking at her all evening. She tried to ignore the feeling of guilt, that laid heavy on her heart.

Aifric, of course, had noticed that. She turned from the kitchen sink. "Heather, what's wrong?" She asked.

Heather felt caught. "Nothing." She said uncomfortably.

"Yes, something is wrong!" Aifric insisted. "You don't even do as much as look at me!"

"Did I do something? Is it because of yesterday?" There was so much desperation in Aifric's voice, that Heather's heart clenched painfully.

"No, no!" She said. "It's not because of yesterday!" That, Heather knew, was a lie. It was not the fact that she had slept with Aifric, that bothered her. That was, in fact, the most beautiful thing that had ever happened to her. But that was exactly the problem. It was not only

sex. She had fallen in love with this girl. And this meant she presented an Achilles heel.

“I don’t think we should do this!” She said quietly.

“It’s a little late for that,” Aifric replied. “We already did this!”

“That’s not what I mean!” Heather retorted. “She knows!”

Aifric was shocked. “Do you think that? If Agatha knew what happened between us, she’d ripped us to shreds already!”

“Not the shower!” Heather returned. “She knows that there is something going between us.” Tears welled up in Heather’s eyes. “Don’t you see? Why do you think she beats the crap out of you?”

“She knows that I like you. And she knows that I don’t care about whatever she throws at me!” Heather was crying now.

“She finally has found a way to hurt me.” Heather’s voice almost vanished between her sobs. “It’s my fault! All of it is because of me! I’m sorry, I’m so, so sorry!”

As Heather sank to the floor Aifric rushed to her friend, sitting next to her and putting her arms around Heather’s neck. “Shh. It’s OK. I’m here.” She tried to comfort the girl.

“You shouldn’t be. You mustn’t be!” Heather pulled herself out of Aifric’s embrace. “She will come after you, because she wants to hurt me!”

Aifric knew Heather was right. And she discovered a new feeling inside her. A feeling that she hadn’t known for a long while. It took her a moment to realise that it was anger. She was angry. Angry with Mother Agatha,

angry with the world, and she was angry with Heather, who thought she could steal away from her.

“You know what?”, she said firmly. “I am here, whether you like it or not. I am here, and I’m not going to leave anytime soon!”

Her voice was quivering a little, but she went on, although she felt tears welling up in her eyes too. “You are about the only thing in this frikkin’ twisted world that makes any sense to me! I’m not going to give you up, just because you feel guilty about what you cannot control! You’re goddamn stuck with me here, so deal!”

Heather looked surprised. She had not expected such an outburst . “I don’t want you to get hurt-” she began.

“I am not finished!” Aifric interrupted. “I am not going to watch you winding in self-pity. You did not whip me, Agatha did! And she keeps on pushing us!”

“I am not going to step back anymore. You think you’re so tough, you can bear her whip? OK, so can I! I’m tougher than you think, and god knows I’ve been through hell and back! So don’t you ever dare to tell me what to do, or who to love!”

Aifric leaned against the wall and slumped to the floor, exhausted from her own outbreak.

Heather stared at her in disbelief. Her face was still wet from tears, but she seemed to have forgotten about that.

“Wow!” Was all she could say.

Aifric continued, almost whispering now. “You know, last night, when we where in the shower, I realised one thing!”

Heather's normal self suddenly flickered through sadness and self-pity. "You're a dyke?"

Aifric couldn't help, but chuckled. "OK, two things!" Then all humour faded from her voice. "Heather, I want to live. Until last night, my mind was revolving around the question why I survived the crash. I thought I should have been buried alongside Mam and Daid. And Eoghan."

She took a deep breath. "When we were together, I realised it's not over yet for me. I don't want to die!"

Heather reached out for Aifric and touched her wet face, wiping the tears off with the back of her hand.

There was a long pause between them, before Aifric spoke again. "Someone has to stop her."

It was clear, about whom she was talking. "Yes. And who might that be? Us?" Heather looked into Aifric's eyes.

"Do you see anyone else?" Aifric stated. "No one will come for us, no knights in shining armour. Not the youth welfare and not the police. If we want to get out of here, we have to do it ourselves."

"You wanna run?" Heather answered.

"I'm tired of running. I wanna take the fight to her. You have resisted her all this time, you must have thought about it yourself!"

"In my dreams, I snap her neck with my bare hands." Heather admitted. "But I don't think we can just beat her up, it'll be even more trouble."

"We need a strategy." Aifric leaned her head on her girlfriend's shoulder. "Are you in?"

"So we're an army now." Heather sighed. "A traumatised girl and a sociopath. We're some frikkin' army."

And then, after a pause: “Yes. I’m in.”

Every night, after they said their evening prayer, the girl’s dorm was turned in to a war room. They had decided to let Mercedes in on their plans. The girl could keep her mouth shut, and she was resourceful and clever. And, as it turned out, underneath her cheerful nature, her hatred for Mother Agatha was no less than Heather’s or Aifric’s.

They knew they could not simply walk into the village, and talk to the local policeman. It was clear to all of them, that the villagers at least had a good idea what was going on behind those old, crumbling walls. Generations of troubled and orphaned girls had been suffering here silently, it was hard to believe, no one knew what was going on.

At least, that was Heather’s point of view. “Maybe I’m being paranoid.” She said. “But I don’t want to bet on the help of people, who didn’t give a shit for the past fifty years.”

They talked for long about what they should do. In the end, they decided, that only the public could help them. So they would document the abuse, writing down meticulously every beating, arrest or forced rosary.

Which presented them with problem number two: To credibly document the abuse, they needed to take pictures. And that meant they needed a camera.

“Where do we get a camera?” Mercedes asked.

“Heather could nick one at the grocery store.” Aifric suggested.

“They don’t have that sort of stuff. Plus they would

notice.” Heather shook her head. “If I nick a package of fags every other month, no one notices. But an expensive camera? They’d be on our tails in a second!”

“But we don’t have a camera here!” Mercedes cried.

Aifric pondered for a second. “That’s not true. Agatha took my mobile. It should still be in the bottom drawer of her desk.”

“Yeah, great!” Heather cut in. “But there is no signal for miles around!”

“True. But it has a camera. And you can remove the memory card.”

Heather smiled at her girlfriend. “I didn’t think of that. You’re a genius. Problem is: How to get into the office unnoticed. That thing could be in Fort Knox for that matter.”

Mercedes looked confused. “What is Fort Knox?”

Heather couldn’t help, but grin. “It’s where the Americans used to keep their gold.”

“So,” Aifric brought them back on topic. “How do we get in?”

It turned out, they wouldn’t need a secret plan. A couple of days later, Mercedes was called into Agatha’s office, to be sent grocery shopping. And while she was inside, Mother Agatha was diverted by some noise in the kitchen where Sister Claire had dropped a couple of plates.

When Heather opened their nightly war room meeting by announcing her plan to get their hands on the phone, Mercedes produced the phone with a huge grin in her face.

“Oh.” Heather looked puzzled.

“When I was alone in her office for a moment, when Sister Claire trashed the kitchen, I took the opportunity!”

Heather tried to look stern. “Don’t look so smug. Do you have any idea, what she’d done to you, if she had caught you?”

Mercedes poked out her tongue at Heather. “You’re only jealous, because I can nick stuff too!”

Heather sighed. “I don’t want you to get into trouble with her, that’s all. Good job, love!” She ruffled the younger girl’s hair.

Ten

As the days went by, the girls developed a routine in documenting their daily abuse. Every night, after they said their evening prayer, they would meet in the lavatory, and take pictures of their bruises. Usually, they were not supervised by one of the sisters, so smuggling the camera-phone into the room would be possible, and they could document the injuries on the younger girls as well.

Aileen and Aislin were complying readily, although they didn't know what the overall plan was. Mary-Jade however, made as much a scene when Heather tried to photograph her, that she nearly blew the entire operation, because Sister Claire would come in, asking what on earth this noise was all about.

Heather insisted on sparing the girl, although Aifric wasn't happy about that. Mary-Jade was the one of them who received the least abuse from Agatha, which was in part for Heather's fierce protection, and in part for Mary-Jade's religious devotion, which pleased the old nun. However, Aifric was sure that the young girl bore more

misery and trauma than all of them combined. Aifric was convinced that painstakingly documenting these traumas, was paramount to their mission, so she insisted of filming the girl's tantrum, but Heather stopped her.

They nearly got into a fight over this, but Aifric gave in, because she new, that it was impossible to change Heather's point of view when it came to Mary-Jade. Her will to protect the girl from any harm was stronger than Aifric's reasoning.

Aifric was packing some of her school stuff in into her locker, when Heather entered.

"Are you OK?" She heard the older girl ask.

"I guess." She answered. "Why?"

"I was pretty hard on you the other day. You know, when we took the pictures."

Aifric turned around. "I'm good. We're good, if that's what you ask. I still think it would send a strong message, but maybe you're right. We should not disregard Mary-Jade's privacy. Even if it is for the greater good."

"So no hard feelings?" Heather slowly tiptoed closer to her girlfriend.

Aifric smiled. "No hard feelings. As if I could be angry with you for long."

Heather grinned. "That's a relief." She closed the distance between them and looked deep into Aifric's eyes. Aifric felt that warmth she had always felt, when Heather was close. A feeling of being alive. It ran through her body and kicked a swarm of butterflies into action in her stomach.

Heather's hand was running over her face, and she leaned forward into the kiss.

Aifric had no idea how long the kiss lasted, but when they separated, she saw Mercedes standing in the doorway, with the widest grin she could possibly manage. Startled, Aifric drew back. She felt the blood rush to her cheeks.

"Um, we were just..."

"Snogging." Mercedes grinned. "Don't let me interrupt you. Just don't be late for dinner!"

Heather started laughing. "Yes, let's go feast! Come dine with me, my love!" She curtsied in a melodramatic way, before taking Aifric's hand and leading her to the stairway.

When they reached the dining hall, Heather's playfulness evaporated at once. Not only was sister Immaculata sitting there, like she always did, sucking the life out of the place and anyone who dared to enter, but also something was wrong. The whole room was not right, although Aifric couldn't put a finger on it. Not until Heather pointed out the obvious: "Where's Mary-Jade?"

Mary-Jade had been absent from dinner sometimes before, usually when she was doing her bible studies with Father Geoff. She always claimed that these studies were helping her to get a grip to life, although she seemed even more brooding and monosyllabic than usual, if that was even possible. Although she didn't exactly know why, when Mary-Jade attended her bible studies Heather always felt extremely nervous. This feeling passed on to

Aifric and to everyone else.

After saying their grace everyone ate their dinner in silence, even Mercedes seemed to be quieter than usual.

After dinner, in the chapel, Heather prayed for real. “Holy St. Mary, Mother of God”, she whispered. “Bring Mary-Jade safely back to us.”

Aifric repeated the line, mostly because she thought it would never be wrong to pray for someones safe return, but she didn’t grasp why Heather was so tense.

Later on they were lying on Heather’s bed together, when Aifric asked: “Heather, what’s wrong?”

“Hm?”

“You’re so... nervous.”

“I’m sorry.” Heather replied. “I didn’t mean to scare you!”

“It’s because of Mary-Jade not being here?” Aifric wanted to know. “You’re always like this when she is doing her bible studies.”

Heather turned towards her friend. “I don’t know. I think there is something going on here. I know, she says how much she likes the time with Father Geoff, but when I look into her eyes, I see how scared she is. Something terrible is going on here although I cannot say what it is. It’s just a bad feeling, I can’t explain.”

Aifric put a hand on her friends shoulder. “It’s OK. I just think you like to have her around, you know. I know how much she means to you.”

“I promised to protect her.” Heather whispered.

“And you do!” Aifric reassured her friend.

It turned out these words would haunt both of them the next morning. Heather woke to the voice of the old penguin from below. She looked around. Sister Agatha seemed to be in the yard, yelling at someone. She didn’t understand the words, but she knew something was underway. Alarmed, she hopped out of bed, and made her way to the door.

“Heather?” Aifric’s sleepy voice followed her, but she didn’t turn around. In the hall, she bumped into Mercedes, who was just on her way upstairs.

“Heather! Heather!” She cried. “You need to come! Please!”

“What’s wrong?” Heather asked.

“It’s Mary-Jade!” Mercedes could hardly talk. “She’s on the roof! I think she’s going to jump!”

At these words, Heather turned back, and headed for the roof access. The small ladder that led upstairs was down, and she climbed it hastily. She could hear the blood rush in her ears, and her heart beat frantically. She hit her head on a crossbeam on the way to the tiny window, but didn’t even slow down. One more step, and she sat on the window sill, legs on the roof.

Mary-Jade was balancing a few feet away on the rim. Some of the tiles were loose, and she could fall any moment. She seemed calm.

“Jade, Darling!” Heather called her. “Come back in, please!”

Mary-Jade turned her head. "Go away," she said quietly. There was an unusual hostility in her voice.

"Please!" Heather begged. Part of her wanted to jump forward and grab the girl, but fear that the younger girl would step forward held her in place.

"Go away!" Mary-Jade's voice now rose to a scream.

"Come back inside!" Heather begged, "Whatever it is, I help you get through it. Please!"

The girl took a step towards the edge.

"I told you, I will protect you!" Heather's voice broke. "I'm always there for you!"

"Liar!" Mary-Jade screamed. "You didn't protect me! You just left me! Everyone always leaves me!"

"Tell me what's going on. Has anyone hurt you? Just tell me!" Heather's eyes were blind with tears now.

"I trusted you!" Mary-Jade cried. "I thought you were my friend!"

"I am your friend!" Heather's voice broke with desperation. "I love you!"

Hearing this, Mary-Jade anger seemed to chill a little, and Heather hoped she might change her mind.

"I know." The younger girl said quietly. "Best friends. . ."

Heather reached out her hand and answered ". . . forever."

Then, Mary-Jade took a step forward and disappeared over the edge. A second later Heather heard the sickening crunch of the girl's body crashing on the concrete below.

For a moment the horror was so intense, she couldn't breathe. She saw stars, and a sick feeling build up in her stomach. This wasn't real. This wasn't happening. Except, it was.

Heather pulled herself back through the window. Tears blurred her vision, and rage exploded in her chest. Faster and faster she first walked than ran downstairs.

Later she would not be able to remember how she got to the main hall, but she remembered clearly, how she approached Sister Agatha. Aifric came in from outside, behind the penguin, and looked terribly pale. But she ignored her friend. The old penguin was bellowing commands, and hurried towards her office.

Heather blocked her way. "Heather Whelan," the old penguin began. "don't you dare...". Her words were cut by Heather's fist, that crushed into her face. Heather was a good fighter, but right now, she was out of her mind, and only pounding the nun with her fists, screaming "Murderer!" and "You killed her!" at the top of her lungs. It was Aifric who pulled her away.

It took a few seconds for Agatha to pull herself together after the attack, but she was surprisingly quick. Aifric tried to hold the still ravaging Heather, who had now collapsed on the floor.

"I see you two in my office tonight." Agatha snarled. "Until then: Into your room!"

Back in the dorm, Heather found that Sister Immaculata had not only escorted them back to their dormitory, but also locked the door behind them, and Heather knew she was in serious trouble. Attacking Agatha openly would not be tolerated. But somehow Heather didn't care. All she could think of, was Mary-Jade's tiny body, smashed on the concrete.

She screamed again, and kicked the door, but it was no use. Aifric put her arms around her from behind, and her burning rage cooled a little. She turned to face her friend, and looked into Aifric's face, which was white as chalk, her eyes open in shock. It was like looking into a mirror, and seeing her own feelings in the reflection. Heather vaguely remembered, that Aifric had ran downstairs, when she turned to make her way onto the roof. The girl probably saw Mary-Jade fall. A deep black hole inside her opened up and swallowed everything around her. Her hot rage evaporated into the cold, and the darkness engulfed her. In the middle of that darkness sat Aifric, half naked and in shock. The blackness shut out everything but the searing pain and Aifric's desperate face. She grabbed her friends arm and calmly led her to the bed. Heather's fingers felt numb, and the intense sense of unreality overwhelmed her. They laid down together and Heather pulled the blanket over their heads. Aifric curled up in her arms and Heather tried to keep the pain away by concentrating on her slow breathing.

Eleven

They had come to retrieve the body. Police was there, and they had asked questions. Nobody had talked to Heather or Aifric though. There was so much Aifric wanted to tell them, but why would they listen to her? Mary-Jade had been known to be mentally unstable, but a doctor had confirmed, that she was no danger to herself. That had turned out to be wrong. So this wasn't the sisters fault, right? All the sisters where deeply shocked by the young girl's suicide, even Agatha; if this was an act or the truth, only Agatha knew.

That was the official story. A bureaucrat had been mistaken. A tragic incident. But no one was to blame. That didn't stop Heather from blaming herself, of course. She had been big sister to all the smaller girls, but Mary-Jade had always been closest to her.

This morning Aifric had been running outside, to see what was going on. She had seen the girl fall from the roof, the tiny body smashed on the concrete. It was Eoghan all over again. The only reason why she hadn't

collapsed completely was Heather, who laid on the bed curled up like a fetus, her head resting on Aifric's lap.

"I can't give in, I can't break now. She needs me." This thought has been on her mind all day. Kept her going, although there was nowhere to go. The silence was unbearable. Aifric could hear the blood rushing in her ears. Eventually, the policemen went away, and Sister Claire sent in Mercedes. The blonde girl was pale, her eyes still widened in shock. She came over to Aifric's bed, sat on the bedside, and leaned herself against Aifric. Aifric put one arm around her, while she kept caressing Heather's hair with the other hand. Mercedes started to cry. Weirdly, Aifric almost welcomed the girl's tears because they broke the unbearable silence. And it gave her something to do.

It was nearly dark, when Mother Agatha finally came for Heather. Aifric had known Agatha wouldn't let her get away with striking her. Heather had really done it this time. Agatha had a black eye, and her lower lip was swollen.

"I hope that hurts!" Aifric thought.

"Heather! My office! Agatha bellowed.

Aifric helped her friend up, and Heather followed Agatha without resistance.

"You wait here!" Agatha commanded when she led the girl down the stairs.

Aifric sat on the stairs, Mercedes by her side. They could hear the wooden office door fall into its lock, then there was silence.

A second later, Agatha's screams were heard, muffled through the door. And again and again, the whip. Aifric bit her lip, every time she heard the *Whack!* of the whip. It went on and on, until finally, a terrible scream echoed through the hall. Mercedes began sobbing, and covered her ears.

Aifric jumped up and ran down the stairs. Then paced up and down in front of Agatha's office, unsure, if she would make things worse, if she stormed in there now.

Before she could make a decision, the door opened, and Heather stumbled out. She stood upright long enough to wait for the door to close, before she collapsed onto the floor. Her white blouse was torn, and soaked with blood. Obviously the old hag had torn it to pieces before she started the whipping.

Mercedes was standing at the foot of the stairs, her mouth opened, and her eyes wide in terror.

"Help me! We need to get her into the lavatory!" Aifric commanded.

Mercedes rushed to her aid, and together they managed to get Heather up the stairs, and into the bathroom.

Carefully, Aifric removed the remains of Heather's blouse, after sitting her down on the floor.

"Mercedes, go to Sister Claire, get me some bandages!"

But Heather shook her head. "No." She said. "Get the camera first!"

For a moment Aifric stared at her girlfriend, in disbelief. Heather's injuries were severe, but on the other hand: It had been the plan, to document the abuse in pictures. Then she turned to Mercedes. "You heard her. It's under the loose panel left of my bed. Hurry!"

Aifric looked at Heather's back. There was hardly a piece of skin intact, there were streaks and bruises everywhere, many of the streaks were torn open, and where the whip had hit the barely healed flesh from her previous ordeal, it had literally been torn to shreds. These gaping wounds were drizzling a constant stream of blood.

Aifric got up to get some water to clean the wounds, but Heather grabbed her arm.

"First, the pictures!" She said though gritted teeth. "It needs to look bad!"

Aifric looked at her friend pleadingly. "This is beyond bad!"

Heather nodded. "If it looks like it feels, then yes." She pressed Aifric's hand. "We have to get through this."

Mercedes came back with the camera-phone and handed it to Aifric. It beeped when she turned it on, indicating that the battery was dangerously low.

"I go get Sister Claire!" Mercedes announced. "Hurry up!"

Aifric took a dozen or so pictures of her girlfriends injuries, before she turned off the phone and slipped it into her pocket, because she heard Sister Claire in the hall. She grabbed a fresh towel soaked it in warm water, and carefully began to clean Heather's wounds. By the time the Sister arrived, the ginger girl had fainted.

Sister Claire had made the sign of the cross, when she saw Heather's bleeding back. Together, they brought Heather to the infirmary.

"Oh, why did she have to do this? She knew Mother

would have to punish her.” Claire murmured over and over, while cleaning and bandaging the wounds.

“Why didn’t *you* stop her, if this is so horrible to you?” Aifric thought.

“Are you going to call an ambulance?” She asked instead.

“She will be fine in the morning!” Claire shook her head. “Doctor O’Connell will see her.”

“Doctor O’Connell is a quack!” Aifric hissed.

Claire seemed genuinely shocked. “Magdalena!” She exclaimed. “Be glad Mother Agatha didn’t hear that! Under these circumstances, I will pretend you never said it. No go to bed! You can see her in the morning!”

Aifric sighed, but she knew there was nothing she could do. She slowly walked upstairs, and let herself fall onto her bed. She felt hollow and fatigued. She wanted to cry, but she had no tears. The helplessness she felt added to her pain, and she felt bitter hatred boil deep inside her.

Mercedes came over, and slipped into her bed. She put her arms around Aifric. “Everything will be alright, wouldn’t it?” She asked.

“Yes, love. It will. Our time will come, and we will make that old hag pay!”

After a sleepless night, Aifric finally got out of bed, carefully avoiding to wake Mercedes, who had fallen asleep eventually, and put on her dressing gown. The sisters were already awake, and normal morning routine would be expected to resume in half an hour.

Before she went to the infirmary, she checked on the

other girls in the opposite dormitory. Yesterday, she had been so involved with her own pain, and later that of Heather, that she had forgotten, that she wasn't the only one, who had witnessed Mary-Jades horrid death. Despite the situation, the girls were fast asleep.

Luckily, they had been sent to bed, before the drama around Heather unfolded, so they were blissfully unaware of what Agatha had done to her.

She silently closed the door again, and ran across the hall to the infirmary, where Heather was lying in her bed. Sister Claire was there, trying to feed Heather some porridge.

“Good morning!” She said, when Aifric entered.

“How is she?” Aifric asked.

“Not good. She won't eat.” Sister Claire was obviously concerned.

“Let me try!” Aifric stepped forward.

“Alright, maybe you get through to her.”

“Am I excused from breakfast then?” Aifric asked.

Sister Claire nodded. Then she got up. “I leave you two alone. If you need something, call me.”

When passing by Aifric, she stopped, and put a hand on Aifric's shoulder. “I'm very sorry for this.”

“She needs to be in a hospital!” Aifric insisted.

“I know. But that's Mother Agatha's call.” Claire's voice was trembling. It was just now, that Aifric realized, that Claire was as afraid of Mother Agatha as she was. And that she could not hope to get any help from her, even now.

When the sister had closed the door behind her, Aifric went to her girlfriends bed, and knelt beside it.

“Hey sweetheart, it’s me!” She greeted her.

Heather’s eyelids fluttered, and her eyes opened. A feverish shimmer radiated from them.

“Hey, sweetie.”

“You really got yourself into trouble this time.”

“That’s what I’m good at!” Heather tried to show an encouraging smile. It turned out a grimace of pain.

“Don’t you wanna eat? Sister Claire made you some breakfast.”

“Not hungry. Besides, it tastes like moldy old socks.”

“That’s because it is moldy old socks.” Aifric joked. She took a tip of a spoonful of the porridge and tried it. “Mercedes’ pink ones, I’d say. At least a week old.”

Heather grimaced again. “Don’t make me laugh, it still hurts too much.”

“Sorry. I just wanted to make you feel better.” Aifric sighed. “I hate to see you like this.”

“I’m sorry, Aifric.” Heather grabbed her girlfriends hand.

“For what? You have done nothing wrong!”

“I did, sweetie, I screwed up big time!” Heather tried to lift her head, but managed to wince in pain. “I promised her, I’ll protect her. And I didn’t even see, when she needed me most. I betrayed her.”

Aifric was confused. “What happened to Mary-Jade wasn’t your fault. Agatha is to blame, and...and Father Geoff, but you...”

“I didn’t see what was right under my nose. I left her alone.”

Aifric didn’t understand. “You did all you could!”

“Forgive me, Aifric.” Heather whispered.

Aifric had no clue, what there was to forgive, but she knew her girlfriend wanted absolution. And she would have forgiven anything, that Heather might have done.

“I do. I forgive you.” She whispered back. “I love you, never forget that!”

“Thank you.” Heather closed her eyes again. “I love you too!”

Heather drifted back into her feverish sleep, leaving Aifric mystified. She knelt by the bedside, until Sister Claire came back.

Twelve

Dear Ladies or Gentlemen,

I hope, whoever you are, takes this seriously, because I am desperate. My name is Aifric Lyons, I'm sixteen years old, and I'm a prisoner. Fourteen months ago, I lost my entire family in a car crash. After months in a hospital, I was brought here, to St. Mary's Home for Children, north of Limerick. This house is an orphanage, run by the catholic church. The nuns here, were supposed to help me, but instead I found abuse and violence.

We are six girls living here, and all of us are spanked and beaten almost daily. There are very strict rules, and even the slightest mistake results in beatings. The Abbess, Mother Agatha, says, that this is because our souls can be saved this way, because we are stained with sin. I don't know what that means, but losing my family was not my fault!

If she thinks, we have misbehaved greatly, we are beaten with a whip. My friend Heather is very ill from the last whipping, but she is not allowed to see a doctor.

Yesterday, one of the girls, Mary-Jade, has jumped to her death from the roof. She was ten years old.

The police was here, but they wouldn't even hear us out. I know this sounds like a conspiracy theory, but I think they collaborate with the sisters, to keep what's going on here a secret.

A few weeks ago, Heather and I began to document the abuses with the camera of my phone. I put the memory card into this envelope, so you can see for yourself.

I include a list of names and dates, so you can see who of us is on the pictures.

I really hope you take this seriously. Please help us, you are our last hope!

*Yours,
Aific Lyons*

Aific looked at the lines she wrote, and hoped it would seem credible enough to them to at least look at the photos. They had to take this seriously, they just had to!

She carefully pulled the memory card from the telephone, hoping that all images were saved there. She had checked if they were on the card twice, but now the batteries had run flat, so she couldn't check again. She wrapped the card into a piece of paper, carefully labelled it *Memory Card* and put it inside the envelope, together with the letter, and their carefully taken list of abuses. There was one line on it, with name, date and time, for each of the photos on the card. She closed the envelope, and double-checked the address. It wasn't a real address, because they couldn't find out the street. Instead it only said *The Guardian, Dublin*. Aific knew for sure that the *Guardian*

had an office in Dublin, and she thought a British paper would investigate the affair more open mindedly, because they wouldn't have as much reason to fear the authorities than an Irish paper.

She got up, hid the envelope under her blouse, and went to the dormitory, where she slipped the envelope under Mercedes mattress. Mercedes was waiting for a signal, to smuggle the letter out of the house, when she was sent to the shops the next time. Originally, that had been Aifric's part, but she had been grounded since Mary-Jade's death. Agatha suspected her of conspiring with Heather. Which was, strictly speaking, exactly what she did.

Aifric then turned to doing her housework chores, and visited Heather in the infirmary afterwards. Heather looked worse than ever. It had been three days since Agatha had beaten her half to death, and her condition still hadn't improved. To make things even worse, she had developed a fever. Aifric was certain her friend needed antibiotics, but the sisters wouldn't call an ambulance. With the mobile dead, and no reception anyway, there was no chance for Aifric to do it herself. The only phone in the house was in Agatha's office, and that was out of reach.

"Hey, sweetie!" Heather's voice was weak.

"Hi, love!" Aifric greeted her. "There are butterflies flying outside."

That was the codeword to tell Heather, that the letter had been handed to Mercedes. The same words, that Aifric said to Mercedes five minutes earlier. So secret was their plan, all three of them had sworn not to speak of it

uncoded. Not even when they were alone.

“How are you feeling?”

“Shitty?”

“You look better.” Aifric said. “You’ll be fine soon!”

“You’re a lousy liar.” Heather managed a smile. “But thanks for trying.”

Aifric took her girlfriends hand. “We’ll get through this. Scout’s honour. And when we’re free, we get ourselves our own room. With a big cosy bed.”

“Girl scouts don’t shag each other!” Heather grinned.

“How do you know? You’ve never been one, have you?” Aifric raised her eyebrows.

Heather began laughing, but her laugh was cut but a terrible sounding cough.

“This doesn’t sound good!” Aifric was truly scared for her friend now. “Let me get Sister Claire!”

But Heather waved her off. “No! Listen,” she began. “If I don’t make it. You have to promise to carry out our plan, and get the girls out of here. Save yourself!”

Aifric felt tears welling up. “Nonsense. You’re gonna be fine! You and I . . .”

“This is important!” Heather interrupted her. “You told me, you want to live. Now here’s your chance. If I don’t make it, you need to live for the both of us. Get a life, live your dreams, find a nice and -also important-hot girl to be with. All that stuff.”

“Heather, don’t talk like you’re gonna die! You are scaring me!”

“It’s OK, love. It’s just in case.” Heather managed a smile. “I just feel like shit right now, so I’m rambling.”

Aifric gently ran her fingers through Heather's red hair. Her forehead felt hot and sweaty. Heather closed her eyes, and it looked like she would fall asleep. But then she spoke again:

"You are the only person, who has ever loved me unconditionally. Thank you for that!"

"I will always love you." Aifric whispered, tears streaming down her face.

"The butterfly is free!" Mercedes informed her, later that day, when she was in the kitchen with her. It was the sign, that Mercedes had managed to put the letter into a public mail box.

Now all they could do was wait.

Heather died later that night. When Aifric heard the news, she felt strangely unmoved. It was like the moment of shock, when you hurt yourself badly, but the pain has not started yet. The moment were you cannot breathe, or scream or cry, and everything around you seems to fade into nothing.

Just that the pain didn't come. Instead she was frozen in that moment. To Aifric, the world felt like had become black and white, and dropped away from her. So far away, that even Mercedes' tears couldn't reach her.

It took a very long time, until Aifric finally screamed.

Thirteen

Through the curtains, blue and orange lights flashed, casting multicoloured changing shadows on the opposite wall. The eerie illumination woke Aifric. She looked around the room, but it seemed, she was the only one awake. As her gaze fell on Heather's empty bed, she felt a string around her heart tighten painfully.

"How many more people have to die?" She asked herself.

Sitting up in bed, she reached for the blinds, and pulled them apart just enough to glance through. The source of the flashlights were an impressive force of garda-vehicles, and about a dozen gardaí were running around the estate.

Now she heard rustling inside the house. The doorbell rang. She couldn't see the entrance from above, but she heard the heavy door open, and muffled voices from below. She rose from her bed, and tiptoed over to Mercedes' bed to wake her.

Aifric gently shook her.

“Mercedes, wake up!” She whispered. The younger girl stirred in her sleep. “Mmmh, just a little longer.” She murmured, trying to turn around. But Aifric was unforgiving. “Mercedes!” She repeated, now louder and grabbing the girls shoulder..

The girl finally opened her eyes. “What?” She asked sleepily.

“Wake the others. The gardaí are here!”

Now Mercedes was awake. “What? Are they coming for ... for us?”

“I think so.” Aifric replied. While Mercedes climbed out of her bed, Aifric made her way to the door, but before she could sneak outside the door opened. Mother Agatha came in, followed by two gardaí and a man in civil clothes and a woman in a business suit. Agatha pointed at Aifric. “This is Magdalena.” She stressed the name *Magdalena* as if to underline it’s rightfulness.

The man walked over to her, and Aifric took a step back. “Um, Magdalena Lyons?” The man asked.

“Aifric.” Aifric corrected.

“I’m Constable Gardner. I would like to talk to you.” He looked over to Mother Agatha. “Privately.”

They led her out of the room and downstairs into the kitchen. “Please, sit.” Gardener said, not unkindly.

Aifric sat down and now the woman in the business suit introduced herself. “I’m Gale McKinnon. I’m with the youth welfare service. The police is here to ask you some questions about the letter you wrote to the newspaper.”

“Great.” Aifric thought. “They don’t believe me.”

But Constable Gardener made instantly clear, that he did. "I have been talking to Mr. Hancock from the *Guardian*. He has provided us with some evidence and witnesses accounts. There is an investigation going on."

"So you believe me?" Aifric asked cautiously.

"Yes. We do." Gardener confirmed. "Still, I have some questions to ask you, about Heather Whelan."

Aifric swallowed hard. "OK."

Gardener sat opposite of her, while McKinnon took the seat beside her. "Don't worry. Nobody means you any harm," she said. Aifric didn't know whether to trust this woman or not. The youth welfare service hadn't been exactly helpful after all.

Gardener began questioning. "You have been here on the occasion of Heather Whelan's death?"

"Yes."

"When did you last see her?"

"The day before she died. She was very weak and in pain."

"The death certificate said, she died of a broken appendix. Your report says something else."

"She died from the beatings." Aifric sighed. It was hard for her to talk about Heather, but she knew it had to be done.

"You are hardly a doctor, so how do you know that?"

Aifric fought down tears, and tried to clear the lump that had suddenly formed in her throat. "She was beaten, and the wounds on her back wouldn't heal. Not this time."

"How do you think she got these injuries?" Gardener asked.

“Agatha used a . . .” Aifric’s voice broke, and she couldn’t go on. “Sorry,” she managed to say under her sobs. “I’m sorry.”

Gardener got up, went to the kitchen cupboard, and got out a glasses he filled with water. Without a word, he placed it in front of Aifric, and sat down again.

McKinnon laid an arm on her shoulders. “It’s alright, we can do this another time.” She said sympathetically.

Aifric shook her head, and shrugged off the social workers hand. “No!” She said, her voice still quivering. “I have to do this.”

It took her a few moments to pull herself back together. She took a sip from the water, which soothed her sore throat, and seemed to loosen the lump a little. “She used a whip on us, when we were especially, well, unmannered.”

Gardener nodded, and took some notes. “And did she use that whip on Heather, before she died?”

Aifric stared at him, unable to speak. So she just nodded.

“Did she use this method regularly?”

Again Aifric nodded. “We were beaten almost every day. But the whip was only for serious offences.” She took a deep breath. “And she usually took that out on Heather.”

“How would that pass off then?”

Aifric began to shake. The memory of her ordeal made her head spin. Yet she went on. “She would call you to her office. There you had to undress, you know, your blouse and bra, so your back was bare. She has a hook in the ceiling, where she hung a rope from. She tied your hands

above your head and then . . . then . . .” Aifric broke down sobbing again. McKinnon had become white as chalk during Aifric’s report, yet she tried to keep it together and comfort Aifric. Meanwhile Gardener was patiently waiting for Aifric, to calm down enough to go on. If he was shocked, his face did not show any of it.

It took a few minutes until Aifric could go on, but after a while Gardener continued asking questions.

“Has anyone else been subjected to this . . . this treatment?” He asked.

Aifric was confused. Had he not seen the photos? Maybe they didn’t believe her after all? She angrily wiped away tears with her sleeve. “Yes,” she finally said.

Gardener was looking at her expectantly, but she didn’t respond. “Have you been beaten?” Gardener’s voice was calm. Without answering his question, she rose from her seat and turned to face away from them. Then she pulled up her pyjama top. Her heart was racing, and the blood shot up into her face, but she needed to make a point here. Gardener was now staring at her bare back. Bright red scars criss-crossed over her skin, hardly healed. McKinnon held a hand over her mouth, and even Gardener’s cool attitude fell, if only for a moment.

“Ah, alright.” He said. While Aifric pulled her top back down and returned to her seat. He was clearly a bit shaken, although not as shaken as Aifric.

“The official report said that Heather died in the night of the 24th, before she could have been taken to a hospital.” He got back on the topic. “Did you notice anything unusual that night?”

Aifric felt the anger rise in her. “That’s bullshit!” She

cried. "They brought Heather to the infirmary room that night, she's been feverish the whole day! I told them to get an ambulance!"

"What happened next?" Gardener wanted to know. "Did they call an ambulance that night?"

"I don't know. I never saw her again. The next morning they told us, Heather had died. They said, she was on the way to hospital, when it happened."

Gardener looked satisfied. "That's all for now. Thank you Aifric!"

"What will happen now?" Aifric asked. "What about the other girls?"

"We'll take care of them. And of you." McKinnon said.

Half an hour later Aifric was still sitting in the kitchen, but all the other girls were with her. They sat in dead silence. McKinnon had called in a couple more social workers, who had equipped the girls with blankets. She came in and sat next to Aifric. "Can I do something for you?" She asked sympathetically.

"Little late for that, ain't it?" Aifric shot back at her. Ever since the interview she felt the strong urge to pummel someone.

"I assure you, that we do everything in our power to help you!" McKinnon seemed to feel the need to defend herself, but Aifric was not in the mood for forgiveness.

"Where have you been then, the past 8 months? Where have you been for the past 20 years? You wanna do something for me? Go back in time, and get me my life back!"

Go back and give the life back to all those girls who ever had to be here! Or, if you can't, just sod off!"

McKinnon tried to be professional. "I'm afraid, that's something that's beyond my powers." She confessed.

Aifric sighed. There was no use of taking it out on this woman. She obviously didn't know what had been going on behind these walls, and Aifric couldn't decide whether she had been lied to, or was plain stupid, or maybe both. Looking around the room, Aifric decided it would do no good starting a fight now, so she gave in for now.

"Maybe you can get us some cocoa then? They need something to warm up." She gestured towards the other girls.

McKinnon relaxed. "I think that can be arranged" she agreed. She got up and walked over to one of her aides instructing him get cocoa for the children. He stared at her blankly. "There nothing here. Where should I get chocolate at half past five in the morning?" He asked.

"What do I care, just get it." McKinnon snarled at him, and the man literally fled the room.

About ten minutes later he was back and all the girls in the room were handed a Styrofoam cup. "Be careful," the man said "It's really hot!"

By the looks of the cups, he got them from a nearby petrol station. Aifric carefully took a sip. The liquid was indeed way too hot and overly sweetened. Yet, to Aifric it seemed to be the best taste ever. She wondered how long it had been, when she got cocoa. Must have been some day in hospital. The sweetness of the chocolate made her feel better immediately.

Outside, she could hear Gardeners voice, then, coming

from her office, Agatha's voice. Curiously, she got up and walked over into the hall. Gardener stood near the door, and looked rather content. She walked over to him.

"What's going on?"

"Just got arrest warrants for the sisterhood here" he explained. Led by two gardaí each, Sister Immaculata, Sister Claire and Mother Agatha were brought through the hall.

Sister Claire looked so desperate, Aifric almost felt pity for her.

"Please," she cried at Aifric. "Tell them, it wasn't my fault! I didn't do anything to you, did I? Haven't I been good to you all this time?"

"But you knew." Aifric whispered. "You knew and you didn't help us."

Sister Claire began crying as the gardaí took her away. Immaculata didn't even look at Aifric. Mother Agatha however, was furious. A few days ago, Aifric would have been afraid of that rage, but now her accusations were only pathetic.

"It's your fault Magdalena, you destroyed everything! You're as foul as she was!" Agatha hissed.

Aifric stepped forward and blocked their way. The gardaí stopped.

"My name is Aifric!" Aifric screamed at her.

Agatha was not done yet. "You're a disgrace in the face of God! You will burn in hell, you hear me, in hell!"

"Yeah?" Aifric retorted, hardly able to control her voice. "Since you most likely will go there first, you can tell the devil that Aifric is coming! And tell him she's bloody pissed off!"

Gardener stepped up behind her, and laid a hand on her shoulder. The gardaí worked their way past her, and led Agatha towards the door.

“I hope they lock you up and throw away the key! I hope you rot in jail!” Aifric screamed after them, Sobbing she collapsed into Gardener’s arm, who allowed her to cry for a while before handing her over to McKinnon, who brought her to the infirmary room. “Try to get some sleep love,” She said, as she laid Aifric on the bed, and carefully pulled the blanket over her.

Aifric laid still for a while waiting for her tears to dry. Her head was dizzy and she felt fatigued. From somewhere inside a dream, she thought she heard Heather laugh, and although she knew it was just a dream, she gave in and let her mind drift away.

Aifric was half asleep, when she heard Gardner come into the room. He stopped in the door frame, and Aifric pretended to be asleep.

“Brave little thing” he said to McKinnon.

“Yes, she is.” McKinnon answered thoughtfully. “Do you know her story?”

Gardener shook his head. “Only what happened here.”

“She had a loving family. Both parents and a little brother. They all died in a car accident. Except for her.” McKinnon sighed. “The reports say she had to watch them die.”

“What are you gonna do with her?” Gardener wanted to know.

“No idea, The council will decide that.”

“I would suggest supervised accommodation. I know she’s only 16, but she might need a little sense of control. And she is very capable of doing things on her own obviously.”

McKinnon just nodded. Finally, she turned around and silently closed the door behind her and Gardner, leaving Aifric on her own. Aifric stirred drifted away into sleep.

Epilogue

The October sun was still warm in Aifric's face, but the chilly wind was a herald of the coming winter. The flurry whirled up a couple of golden leaves, and scattered them among the tombstones. The autumn sun made the whole scenery shine in gold and red. "A few weeks, and the trees will be bare." Aifric thought as she stepped down the narrow path between the rows of graves.

Heathers grave was located under a maple tree, which had red and golden leaves raining down on it. It was the kind of scenery Heather would have basked in. Fittingly her grave had been planted with violet heather that covered the whole of the ground. A simple stone said nothing but her name. Although she knew her friend wouldn't have a big scene, it troubled Aifric that the church didn't even bother to pay for more than the simplest of stones, after they had killed her.

She knelt in front of the grave and put her hand on the soft damp earth between the heather.

"Hello my love." She whispered. Tears welled up in her eyes, and a lump in her throat made it hard for her to

speak. After sitting still for a moment, she continued. “I wanted you to know, they gave the old penguin 25 years. I don’t think she’ll ever see the sunlight again.”

“I’m now living in a residential home in Bray for now. Only four other kids, and I’m the oldest. It’s quite OK, no one bothers me. I’ve got my own room, and the other girls mostly leave me alone. The carers are all really sweet, and everyone is especially nice to me.” She sighed.

“God, you would hate it!”

She kept her silence until she heard the steps from Amanda coming up behind her. Amanda was the social worker who had driven her here.

“I miss you.” Aifric whispered and rose from the ground. The grey woman stepped up at her side and laid a hand on her shoulder.

“Everything OK?” She asked sympathetically.

“I’ll manage.” Aifric nodded and straightened her back.

“She was your friend.” It was half a statement and half a question. Amanda knew the files, but she did not know the whole story.

Aifric shook her head. “She saved me.” She explained. And she knew Amanda would never understand what these words meant. Not only had Heather saved her life, she had also taught her how to live, when she thought there was nothing more to live for. Sure, there was a long winter coming, filled with tears and therapy sessions. But Aifric now knew that at the end of it, spring would come again. Maybe even for her.

The two women turned away from the grave and slowly walked down the path. The wind swept yellow leaves

around in tiny circles.

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