

Andrea Carter
The Lamb

It has been put away for so long, there are times when I wonder if it really happened. Other memories have accumulated and a skin has formed, but that skin is easily pricked and the shame seeps through.

The sun is so low in the sky that I almost miss the turn. I drive with speed. It is a road I cycled daily; I knew every bend, every tree, every poorly filled pot-hole. But today I feel the need to read the sign, to prove to myself I am really here, that I have come back, finally, to face things. My resolve is not strong.

I indicate and turn off the main road. The mile or so stretch into town has changed little; the odd new bungalow or slatted shed, otherwise the same scrubby hedgerows bind the same fields of cattle and sheep: houses familiar from childhood birthday parties I'd struggle to put a name to now. I pass a cottage, red brick, with an old barn behind, and suddenly I am eleven years old and drowning in summers past, climbing bales of straw with Ruth. My hands shake but I keep them steady on the wheel.

I park in the square. The town is quiet, bereft of traffic ever since it was bypassed by the motorway to Galway¹ a few years back. I'd read something about it when searching the internet for something else, the name of the town giving me a jolt I wasn't expecting on an otherwise ordinary day. I wonder if there is any need to lock the car; there never used to be. It was a safe town back then. But the car is a rental, so I probably should.

Before I pull the key from the ignition my phone rings. Robert.

He sounds sleepy. "So how is it?"

I smile. He has become the parent; I am the child. He is anxious, wants me to have fun.

"It doesn't start till seven. It's only five here, now."

"But how does it feel to be back? It must be great, right? I know it must be sad with Granny and Grandad gone but..."

I end the call quickly though I crave more. It will cost him too much, this overseas call. But I am touched he has roused himself in the middle of the night to ring.

I sit for a while, my hands on the wheel, not wanting to leave this place of safety. His voice has conjured up a well-thumbed album of happy images. Conceived while I was shamelessly drunk, his father a fool, my son is perfect. He is me but better, a better person than I am. He is brave and true to himself. I allow myself to picture him on his graduation day; on the morning of his first job; on the day he told me he was in love. At every occasion, every milestone, my guilt was there, like the bad fairy at a christening.

I take my scarf from the passenger seat, wrap it twice around my neck and tuck it into the collar of my coat. The sun is shining but it's cold, and there's a sharp wind. It is three weeks since St Patrick's Day². In a few hours I will be in a hotel in the next town, clinking glasses, reminiscing. But first, there is somewhere I must go.

The square looks better than I remember it. Steel bowls of daffodils, tulips and lilies are well tended, houses freshly painted in tasteful new shades of mushroom and cream, and duck-egg blue. The town of my memory is grey with boarded-up houses and peeling paint – a grimy sort of place. [...]

A man with a young boxer pup gives me a nod. He looks familiar – could be one of the boys from the Tech³ grown up, but he is too young. Nearly three decades have passed since I set foot in this town, two since my parents followed me to Australia. Both now buried in the hot dry soil.

I reach the school and peer through locked gates. Rundown but unchanged, grey and imposing, it could be any convent in any town in any county; the school it accommodated long gone, absorbed into a community school along with the Brothers'⁴ and the Tech, or so I've heard. The nuns for the most part had

¹ a city in Ireland

² *St Patrick's Day*: a cultural and religious celebration in Ireland, held on March 17th

³ technical school

⁴ *the Brothers'*: a Catholic boys' school

been kind, I remembered, the religious difference not really an issue for Ruth and me coming from our tiny Church of Ireland⁵ primary school. Seems such nonsense now. I stand with my hands rooted in the pockets of my coat as the memories flood back. [...] Stuffy classrooms. “Walk on the left-hand side. No running on the stairs!” Stewed tea from a Burco boiler⁶; chicken cup-a-soup; sweaty cloak-rooms, and changing for PE. *What are you looking at? Fucking queer. Lezzer⁷. Dyke. Les-be friends...*

I close my eyes. I might not be able to do this.

The grotto is just past the school, in the grounds of the chapel. Although this gate is open I don’t go in; the statue of Mary is clear enough from the street, regal in her open cave. I remember the term of the moving statues; the girls in tears in class, comforting each other. *I saw it, I know I did. I know what I saw.* Ruth and I, wondering if we were missing out. So much more drama in Catholicism.

And now I see the house. For years I crossed the street to avoid it, until the only way to avoid it fully was to leave. Today I walk towards it.

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It was a Sunday afternoon. I was watching music videos on MT-USA⁸ when the phone rang. I should have been studying, my inter-cert⁹ less than ten weeks away. I answered, knowing it would be for my father and that calling him would mark the end of my skiving. The only calls I ever got were from Ruth, who always forgot to tell me something *essential* on our cycle home and was on the phone again before I was ten minutes in the door.

“Hi.” I didn’t recognise the voice. It was female, husky.

“Hello.”

“Do you want to come to a Paddy’s Day¹⁰ party we’re having on Saturday?”

I hesitated.

There was a laugh somewhere in the background. “It’s Dee, by the way.”

Dee was the popular girl in our class, the one who had the power to change things, to change *lives*. Dee was not someone you said no to. I had always wanted to be part of things, to be included, but glasses and frizzy hair hadn’t exactly provided a passport. I said yes, of course, although I was surprised that my parents let me go.

The party started in the pub – I didn’t tell my parents that. I hadn’t told Ruth either so I’d been surprised to find her there, surprised and a little disappointed if I was honest. It devalued my invitation if Ruth had been invited too. It wasn’t as if it mattered to Ruth anyway, being part of things. Ruth didn’t buy *Smash Hits*¹¹, or sew the insides of her jeans together to make drainpipes¹², or save her pocket money for eyeliner. She was happy being her usual ruddy-faced, sloppy self in her jeans and sweatshirt. Ruth didn’t feel the mortification of being different.

I had my first drink that night, Stag¹³, gulped back too quickly. I’d been shocked by the drunken feeling and disappointed by how quickly it wore off – a sign of things to come. Ruth was drinking 7-Up. I tried not to talk to her too much, but she always made me laugh and I had to try so hard with the others. But it was not what I’d intended for that night. I could be with Ruth anytime.

We all went back to Dee’s house after the pub – the house I now stand outside. Today it looks empty, un-lived in. A “For Sale” sign hangs from the gable end and the windows are dull with dirt; ragged curtains hang limply inside as if they’ve lost all interest. I peer through the pane to the left of the door: a crack runs

⁵ *Church of Ireland*: a Protestant church

⁶ *Burco boiler*: an industrial size water boiler

⁷ (derogatory) lesbian

⁸ an Irish tv programme from the 1980s

⁹ an exam

¹⁰ *Paddy’s Day*: St. Patrick’s Day

¹¹ *Smash Hits*: a British music magazine

¹² slim-fit jeans

¹³ an Irish brand of beer

the full length of the glass like a scar. I see the stairs, newspapers grey and yellow cover the floor. It is a shock – I'd not expected to see in. For a minute I think it will be okay, I feel nothing, but the impact has just been delayed. I sway suddenly and the wave of nausea almost knocks me off my feet. But I allow the memory in; I take it on. It is the reason I have come.

85 It began at the foot of the stairs. I'd been in another room, trying to distance myself from Ruth. That doorway is in my eye-line now, smeared with something I'd rather not try and identify now that the nausea has passed. "Sweet Dreams" by The Eurythmics¹⁴ was playing and I was wearing my new Pixie Boots. I remember those boots still, their pointed toes, their soft grey suede. I wore them with jeans and an oversized white shirt, an oversized belt.

90 I heard the shouts – *Fucking dyke... who invited the fucking dyke?*

I followed the crowd into the hall. At first I just stood there, watching as Ruth laughed nervously, her cheeks that shameful high colour she seemed unable to control. Trying to pretend she was in on the joke, that she could take a joke as well as the next person; surrounded. Dee, with her back-combed hair and heavy earrings, and nonchalantly held cigarette, was shouting into Ruth's face. After a few seconds Ruth's
95 expression changed, embarrassment was replaced by fear and she fought back, argued, until Dee pushed her and she fell. And then somehow Ruth was on the floor, her hands covering her face, bitten nails protecting her face. Being kicked. Her navy sweatshirt rode up, revealing pink and white marbled skin that looked like corned beef.

Someone elbowed me and pushed me forward: a boy with a long black fringe and Crepe shoes. *You're best friends with that lezzer, aren't you?* A laugh. *Are you one too?* I felt my cheeks inflame, before throwing a few half-hearted kicks of my own. I'd never kicked someone before; my boots were soft so there was no real impact, but Ruth moved her hand at the wrong moment and my foot connected with her cheek. And she opened her eyes, eyes wet with grief.

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105 A car door slams on the street and it hauls me back to the present. I have been gazing at this house for too long; I must look odd. I turn and walk back towards the car.

I knew that night that Ruth had not been badly hurt, that the kicks had not been hard, that they had been meant to convey a message, not an injury. I knew that she would get up from the floor, that she would leave and go home, that she would go to school on Monday. That she and everyone else would behave as if nothing had happened. I knew too that I would start to avoid her, to regard the party as an
110 inevitable cutting of ties, a growing apart, the leaving behind of childhood friends. Ruth and I were interested in different things, that was all; it couldn't have lasted.

I knew that I would convince myself that what had happened to Ruth at the party would have happened anyway because of her clothes, her walk, her refusal to be anything other than what she was. That it would have happened even if I hadn't told Dee that Ruth had tried to kiss me. She had offered it to me on a plate,
115 in the house after the pub, and I discovered a story like that was currency: it bought attention and access, whether it was true or not. And I could not take it back once I'd said it; if I had, I'd have lost everything I'd gained that night. No sale or return on gossip.

What I did not know that night was that early on Easter Sunday morning, three weeks after the party, Ruth would take the shot-gun from her father's gun cabinet, she would go to the barn behind her house and she would put a bullet in her skull. [...]
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The light fades as I drive out of town. The reunion will be starting now. I know how these things go: I am a head mistress. There will be a banner. It will stretch right across the hotel entrance. *St Mary's 30-year school reunion!* it will read in large, red lettering, *Welcome Back to all our old girls!*

125 There will be a table in the foyer with a white linen table cloth, a vase of plastic flowers and rows of laminated name cards with safety pins. Three or four framed portraits will be placed discreetly to one side. There will be dates beneath the faces: classmates who died before their time. There will be one I have seen

¹⁴ a British pop band

before; a young girl outside a red brick house with a new-born lamb in her arms, her cheeks the scratched pink of a ripe peach. Forever fifteen.

I park my car outside the red brick cottage with the barn behind. This time there is no hesitation.

130 Because I loved Ruth. Because I still love Ruth. Because it was I who had kissed her and not the other way around, and Ruth had told no-one. I gave Ruth my shame because I had been unable to handle it. Because I was too young and stupid to know that I would never in my life love someone as much as I had loved Ruth.

Because it is time, 32 years later, that I told someone that.

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