

# *I Am Here For You*

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Had someone met my six-year-old self at that sacristy door any one of the hundreds of times that neighboring farmer shoved me out when he was done, I would likely have fainted.

With relief, I'd like to think.

But that is not true. That is a made-up story.

It has nothing to do with this moment. Where everything but the actual goes.

The actual a pilgrimage of fact that demands to be written back in.

Right from the heart of the unspoken, and the unspeakable.

In pursuit of that actual, the picture of a girl fainting reveals the glib wanting of a grown-up, not yet recovered, prone to nostalgia, or puerile review. A poorly traveled retrospective imposed on to a wholly distorted child. Maybe not just nostalgia then.

Worse, mawkishness. Contrivance.

Can I even find the right descriptor for the pretense we try to revise into memory?

Because that is what it is.

A shortcut.

A con.

A swindle.

The act of a needy adult who swipes from that child what that neighboring farmer has already taken with both his fists.

Her truth.

Her dignity.

Her right to define herself exactly where she is. In all her complex anguish.

To say then, in that imaginary moment, were an adult to greet me, meaning her, at that sacristy threshold (with a view to interrupting the violations, one would hope), that I would have been capable of feeling relief would be to say something utterly untrue.

Of that child.

And therefore, of me.

Also, I am not sure there would have been anyone in my family, my village, or my parish capable of such an interruption. An intentional one, that is. I know this fact because no such axe ever dropped on his hand from the many sharpened bog-cutting blades or spud-setting spades, even when it became a common spectacle to see a child follow a grown man along a single village lane over and over to that church, that sacristy, that cowshed at the back of Auntie's, that garage across the way from our house. Many spots where something terrible came in and something actual left.

So, no. No relief for that girl at the prospect of an interruption. Even less likely to have that imaginary person show up at that doorway in the first place.

Can you see how far the boat gets shoved from shore with just one memory of one moment of one story? A child walking out a door.

In fact, a child being shoved out a door.

The truth boiled down to single verbs.

Girl shoved from door.

Boat shoved from shore.

Even before that girl has bobbed down on one knee. Before that golden tabernacle.

Already, her truth reframed (by she who writes this) more times than the half dozen steps that girl has numbly taken.

Numbly. An adverb not randomly chosen.

Adverbs should never be lightly used. Meaning used lightly.

Each word a universe in its multiplicity.

This, the actual burden of truth being storied: accuracy. Not that we can speak such precision into every affair. An impossible task to set for any human. And yet, such duty at the core of all things sacred. All things worthy of recording.

Word as God.

God as word.

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Here is the truth.

Had someone—anyone—come to that sacristy door, I would have fainted from shame. And not just shame, but blame.

Every woman knows this blame. At least, every woman to whom I have ever spoken of this exact after-moment of violation. That blood chill of instant dread. That knee-jerk knowledge of her soon-to-be vilification. That split-second internal refrain of instigator, not victim, a parade of you asked for this through the veins of every girl, as though encoded to the pulse as cardiac systole. And not just from within, but from without, where life itself has run afoul of truth as collective duty, and misogyny struts its cocky way toward legend—all hail the conquering male hero.

So, yes, had I been met at that door by anyone, I would have pissed on myself from fright. At six years old, already a graduate of my own girlhood as causal. Fluent in my heavenly downfall.

What did my six-year-old self know then of abuse but the guilt that wound its way around her person like the laces of her dance slippers 'round her shins, the very ones designed to raise her high on her feet, twirl her to the reel music so that she could feel she was born spinning.

Which she was. Born spinning. Spinning into places that had no names.

What do you call the place on the knob of your knee that eases into the meadow-green carpet of the altar while a grown-up locks an arched doorway behind you?

What do you call the important key that belongs only to men like him, the one that opens and closes the sacristy door for men's business?

It has a special name. Of this, the girl is certain.

Did she once hear skeleton key? On Columbo?

Is that what it is?

A key that opens everything.

If so, she wants one.

What do you call a farmer, not an ordained priest, who still carries with him something of that exact sacrosanct maleness?

Hard to know if questions like this register in that girl's mind as she lowers her thin leg in genuflection. Or if the metal twist of that key in the cradle compels her mind to capably splinter. The angry catch of that lock delivering its heated message.

You filthy thing.

The Yale latch snapping shut on the back door, the door meant only for the priest, who slips in unseen from his shiny car to the sacristy, only to emerge onto the altar, bedecked in dazzling finery. That door, clacking closed behind that farmer, its thwack akin to the confessional window smacking shut on the woeful sinner.

Now, the patter of his Wellington boots, rubber soles plunking assuredly along the tarmac. Seagulls overhead squawking their predictions, loudly, then softly, tossed and dropped by Atlantic pockets of gale and imminent rainfall. Shafts of splintered light through the gable-length stained glass, daubing splotches of rainbow-purpose on the wall and altar. Archangel Michael traversing choppy water toward the great Skellig Rock, his iridescent portrait dwarfing the seven-hundred-foot protrusion of mid-ocean granite just off the coast of their village. Rising winds from above shuffling slates like friendly card games of patience. Cold air so piercing that her bare arms pimple and bristle, pig's foot reminders that she is here and beastly.

Is there a name for such temporal distillation?

This place where soul leaves, and something else remains.

Time its own quarrel of rigid and infinite. That which exists only in this unbearable moment and that which has existed all along. Two strangers, side by side, on the Dublin train.

What, then, of the comfort that comes from the Sacred Heart lamp on the sidewall of the altar? Pale red glow merged in her mind as the steady companionship of the Savior. This exact lamp its own constant in every house the girl has ever visited, every sparse yet well-appointed sitting room awaiting its next station Mass, that blinking red eye on freshly papered walls, reminding the gaggle of stout-sipping men and tea-drinking women of God's invisible presence. The framed Jesus, heart ablaze, palms outstretched, message simple: I am here for you.

Beveled shade, on brassy saucer, the side-altar buoy to which this girl now clings.

Surely there must be a word, maybe in her father's gold-rimmed dictionary, for that throbbing want, so alive a creature, so much the head-to-toe of her, that if she trains her desperation with all her might at the wavering flame of the Sacred Heart, surely it will manifest the bearded Jesus Himself fresh from heaven.

Then, in that then of her breastbone-imploration, its ache so great in skin and breath it is the only feeling she knows, which surely must be prayer most powerful, then Jesus will stand before her. Tell her one true thing.

His one true thing will make her better.

She has no thought of what better is.

But Jesus will know.

He knows everything.

He lives everywhere.

In every house.

She waits.

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Here is another truth: This girl cannot move.

Her genuflection has petrified into beggary.

Begging to be taken.

Rescue, or maybe escape, as verb, noun, adjective.

Personified in her supplication.

How to lift her knee from that meadow-green carpet, its dented nap a sanctuary in which she had once found comfort. Seconds ago. Comfort too soft a word. No. Hiatus. Hiatus of person. What else to call that stretch of breath that shuffles the nerves back into place even as the slates settle along the eaves? How to take her leave from the whispering wind who has ceased its racket to be with her? Its sudden quietude an act of gentleness that prickles her eyes with unreachable tears.

How does that girl—in that skin—rise from that carpet?

Make no mistake. This is a territory. Of negligible square footage, yes. A life ring round

her waist would depict its circumference. But it is hers. This nameless place where no one even knows she has emigrated, and no one will stand quayside for her return. Only the gulls and their endless prophecies.

How to depart this hidden land. The land of the invisible.

Make of life a forward motion.

Not an invented life, one conjured by some well-meaning adult whose condition of forgetting makes that girl's lived substance a dull note, barely audible. Not that life. Instead, the life of fact. The fact of a family and parish awash in its own discipline of amnesia. A population tossed, for centuries, out of their own lived skins.

Such a speculation of ancestral ousting, even by she who writes, a dangerous proposition for a people primed to denial of their own collective impairment: Us? Nothing wrong with us. Only all that's right with us. What missing skins are you on about? Rubbish, you simple thing.

How, then, does that girl stand back up?

This labor of the bent knee made upright less about limb and more about instinct. How to resurrect the rustle of life's impulse to carry on even in the absence of animus.

Here, I might offer her a noun.

Spirit?

Enough to flood vein and artery with meaning. Make of that genuflection a bucket to a well, filled afresh with fortitude. Some attitude of the elders at Sunday Mass, beaten as they descend to one crippled knee, resolute as they spine-straighten to standing.

But that girl might politely decline.

On a good day such as today, when I can stay long enough in her skin to hear her speak, she might simply say she doesn't understand spirit. That all she did was wait for Jesus to show Himself. And when He didn't, she stood up.

Reluctantly.

She won't know that adverb. But she will feel this reluctance in the stiffness of her knee. How unwilling her calf, how unfriendly her thigh to any demand.

Reluctantly, she will rise.

Relinquish her citizenship within that period of reprieve where the sacristy door had been locked, and that farmer had been long gone down the side yard.

No more for now, her boiled-down thesis.

Even that will not be a solid thought.

More the animal shake of a stray dog running from the waves, needles of seawater flung in all directions.

Slowly, she will reverse her way past the altar, down the steps, to the white tile floor, eyes glued to the Sacred Heart lamp in case Jesus might land with her back turned.

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Now, the exodus.

An exercise akin to the intricate step-work required to put together a slip jig or a hornpipe. Every flex of the soft shoe, or hard, an opportunity to express progress. Every twist of heel and toe a journey unbolted. Not a word uttered, yet a full story told.

Within this girl's steps from the church, a dance without language.

What I mean to say is, she has no language. Not yet.

Not a syllable to hand to a single soul had they bothered to ask her: What's wrong? And where have you been, child?

Maybe, again, I could retrofit to her lips a mumbled appeal from that once-bent knee: Oh Sacred Heart of Jesus, I place all my trust in Thee.

Or plump her vocal cords with a Thanks be to God as she passes Saint Anthony.

Or better still, have her say, even in her silent and hidden mind: That man over the old road did something terrible to me.

But none would be true.

Instead, in the choreography of that exact moment, the girl might offer the clap of her sandals on the stone floor, each slap of leather a feat of her own creation. Her, the maker of echo. She might nod to the octagonal lid of the slate-gray baptismal font in the alcove next to the altar, make of its squatted plumpness a hat-wearing elder proud of her devout exit. She might trace, with her mind's eye, the old lettering over the confessional—sagart paróisde—and wish for a time when such native script was commonplace. Her gut might

churn from some terrible knowing, her gaze now fixed on each flourish and curlicue, each character distinctive in its nameless symmetry. Close now to the porch doors, her focus might return to the lines where each tile meets, imagine ripples of still waters that greet each footfall. Nail-bitten fingertips might skim the first kneeler on the women's side, its rail slippery-clean and solid.

Each thing observed becoming, by magic, the observer, heads that nod from packed pews, aunties who wink or sneeze, candles that flicker in admiration, statues that track her just a little with their gazes.

Some natural faculty, even in the absence of language, rising to find what is missing. Some animal wisdom sufficient to vivify wood and brick, make of a lost scarf, a prayer book, a hair clip, the givers of lavish witness. Every part a player in this redrafting of her makeup, this impossible heave toward fact, a form of actual whose loss must be conjured from a place within that knows little of the thing it is conjuring.

How does she even know to go toward a spot on some inner map when no one has fully shown her the destination—by which I mean mercy, or protection, let alone the map, by which I mean, decency.

Yet, there she is, pressed down, shaken out with rabid purpose.

Tenderness, I might offer.

She might cock her brow, not in rejection but in subtle recognition.

Even in its lived ignorance, this single word rings a bell similar to the eucharistic chimes. How she envies those altar boys on a Sunday who grab that shiny gadget with its easy grip, the four brass cups singing their delicious devotion to God made flesh.

Does tenderness fit? I might ask again. Is that what you're looking for?

Again, she will shake her head.

No, she will say. Things are alive. That's all.

She might not even say those words. Instead, she will transmit from her insides the kinship of the inert. The salvaged spark from the seeming lifeless, enough to light up the trammled chambers inside her, awaken faint sensations she will later match to words from psychology books or novels: nurture, support, trust, affection. Beneath those, so many more: crime, testimony, shame, blameless, absolution.



But for now, she will make of her exodus a concoction of childish longing. By the time she reaches the outside door, she will have sat fireside, a dozen times or more, within the family of the inanimate. Each spectator—bench, pillar, kneeler, statue—an ally now taken and tucked into the lodgings of her broken mind. Into spare rooms she never knew existed. Each room a shelter of the forgotten and the remembered.

Her palm on bubbled glass a daydream.

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At last, the open air. Cold and bracing.

Her old friend, the wind, full-throated in its welcome.

Bathing her in the outside of things to wash away the inside.

Before her, the concrete font, stout and constant, will beckon her to dip her fingers into blessed waters, drench her forehead with clemency.

Without even thinking, she will douse her whole fist, then trace a sopping line from scalp to eyebrows. One more dip to draw the horizontal.

Hello yourself, the mossy font will whisper. She will nod. A small nod. She will doubt the font has really spoken. The inanimate, in the outside of life, calcifying once more to mortar and stone. Still, the sound of anything—even imagined—such a balm, she will wish to God every blessed thing 'round her would reveal their secrets. Prove their aliveness before she leaves here.

Pauline, the tufts of grass along the tarmac's edge, might beckon. Pauline, talk to us.

Visit us, the pebble-dashed walls might chime in. Do you think we need to shave?

They might laugh. Meaning, they might try to make her laugh.

Me, me, the metal crucifix might cry from its rooftop fixture. Are my screws loose? Will I fall soon?

Me, the chimney might shout from the cottage across the way. Check my flue.

She might smooth the coarse walls with a palm-stroke, tell them they are as soft as a baby's face. She might whisper to the rusting cross that it's well bolted. Going nowhere. Signal to the cottage chimney that it was fixed last week. Pat the head of the wiry grass. Let it know she won't trample it.

A man will approach from the west. She knows west because the sun slips down behind that mountain each fine day. His feet will hit the tarmac of the churchyard. He will clear his throat. Preparing for prayer. Or maybe simply to let her know he is there. He is that sort. Mannerly.

She knows this man well.

Short. Old. Lively.

Once a footballer.

Now, he roars at the television during All-Ireland finals. The whole village hears him.

She sometimes plays with his niece. He and his wife are childless. Yet, they mind that girl in a way that tells her they should have had a half dozen. Their niece visits once a month from ten miles away. Gets a room all to herself for the bother. Dolls that stay there. Clothes in the wardrobe. Her own shoes under the bed. More than one pair.

A very rich business. This only-child affair.

The man will jaunt by.

Surprised to see her, as though she had appeared from thin air, he will laugh. A nice laugh. Half-embarrassed. He had just been talking to himself.

Poll, he will say.

Her nickname.

Some people call her that like it's a joke.

Others like she's a newborn.

He will say it the nice way.

She will know this.

Poll, he will say.

And he will smile at her.

Hello, she will say, her voice low, like her sister's radio at nighttime.

Did you say a prayer for me? the man will ask. For all of us?

By now, he will be trotting past, his tiny frame covering ground as though pulled along by his drag-racing greyhound.

Yes, she will say.

She will mean it. Though she said no prayer. None that she can remember.

I wouldn't doubt you, he will say, his back now to her. He's in a rush. Maybe to the shop. Or over to the harbor.

Good girl yourself, he'll toss behind him. Some invisible doorsill over which she can now step.

Threshold, you might offer.

No, she will say. Nice man.

Nice, the feeling she will carry. Enough to tether her. Though I dare not ask to what. She is returning. This is what matters now.

You will marvel that such a child has the God-given capacity to spot the difference between that old man and the farmer. Can still see the harmless in one after the sacrilege of the other. But she has that in her. Enough insight to take this old man's praise as welcome.

Granted, she will never trust a man again. Not for as long as she lives. But she will always know the difference. And sometimes, despite that, maybe because of it, when she is older, she will invite the bad ones in.

But for now, her mind has dropped new anchor.

Good girl yourself.

Those words have a nice feeling to them. She takes it.

She will tilt her head toward her own chimney top in the fifty-yard distance.

Out of the blue, another good thing comes to mind.

The Brady Bunch.

Her heart pounds.

She takes off running.

Thirty whole minutes somewhere else.

She runs.

Fast.

Faster. □