

Big Girl, Small Town

an excerpt

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TUESDAY

8.43 a.m.

Item 22: Crying, gurning and carrying on

It was the sound of a cup or a plate smashing that woke Majella. It was her ma's gurning that kept her awake. Majella lifted her head out from under her duvet. The air was hot and dead because she'd forgotten to switch off the fan heater. Her skin was slick with sweat. She pushed her head back under the covers and closed her eyes. After five minutes of listening to her ma howling, Majella hauled herself out of bed and unlocked her bedroom door.

- Majellaaaahhhhh?

The cold sliced through Majella's t-shirt and joggers, tightening her nipples. Majella always wondered about this reflex. It was an odd one.

- MA-JELL-AH? Ah've cut meself!

- Ah need a pish.

- Ah'm bleeding real bad!

- Ah'll be down in a minute.

- Ah'll bleed tae death!

Majella often had to repeat things for her ma.

- Ah said ah'll be down in a minute.

After Majella flushed the loo and washed her hands, she opened the bathroom cabinet and took down her da's first-aid box. She had, over the years, replaced everything in the box apart from the scissors. But she still thought of it as her da's first-aid box. She carried it downstairs and into the

kitchen. It was a right fucken mess. A plate was shattered across the floor and her ma was clutching the kitchen counter, bleeding onto the Lino. Majella took control.

- Will ye quit yer nyammen!

When her ma quietened down to a bearable level, Majella laid the first-aid box down on the kitchen table and oxtered her over to the chair. Her ma was still wearing yesterday's clothes.

- What did ye do til yerself?

Her ma snorted a noseful of snotters down her throat, then wiped her eyes. Majella controlled her revulsion by focussing on the floor.

- Ah dropped the plate and it smashed on me foot and ah think ah've cut a vein or something open. Will ye call us an amblelance?

Majella felt it was too early to commit to an ambulance.

- Show us yer foot there.

She bent over and took her ma's bony foot into her hand. Blood was pulsing out, but Majella didn't see the point in getting excited. Majella rarely saw the point in excitement.

- Ah'll clean ye up and then we'll see if ye could be doing with going down tae the surgery.

Majella handed her ma a tissue, then walked to the kitchen sink in her bare feet, over the shards and blood. She filled the washing-up basin with warm water, then fired a dose of salt in. Her ma noticed Majella's bare feet.

- Oh fer the love-of-God mind yer feet there or we'll both end up bleeding til death here on the kitchen floor!

Majella said nothing. She knew she wouldn't get cut. She rarely hurt herself, except for the odd burn in the chipper. Cunter made her and Marty record those accidents in the Green Accident Report Book, which hung on the wall, although Cunter'd never bothered reading it in all the years it had been hanging there. Some days, when Marty was bored, he'd take his pen to the book and write detailed reports on how he'd bruised his cock on the chest freezer, or on how Majella'd bitten her tongue when talking to Mr Mastering from up the Forestry. Majella didn't need to record her ma's

accidents in a book. They played on a cinema screen in Majella's head all hours: the time she'd cut her hand open with the Stanley blade trying to cut Sellotape on a parcel; the time she broke her ankle going out to the back yard in a pair of joke slippers; the time she fainted in the chapel and hit her head and didn't come round, so she had to be taken to hospital and held in for Observation. She was a car crash of a woman, someone people said had no luck.

Majella went back over to her ma and placed her foot in the basin of water.

- It's stinging me! It's really sting-Eee.

Majella's ma sounded like an annoying wean when she whined. Majella restrained the impulse to give her a clip around the ear.

- It's only salt whatter. It'll clean it out for ye.

The water turned reddish as Majella held her ma's foot down. When she lifted it out she was surprised by how small it felt in her own meaty hand. She wondered what it would feel like to walk on such tiny feet. She saw that her ma's foot was cleanly sliced open on one side, and as she looked, the blood started to pump out again. Majella knew her ma wasn't good with blood. She glanced up and saw that she had her face turned towards the free calendar she'd got off Feely's meats the previous Christmas.

Pleased to Meat You with Meat to Please You!!!

- Am ah cut bad?

- Ye'll live. But ah'll call a taxi and get us down tae the surgery. The nurse'll prob'ly want tae take a look at ye.

- Oh ah'm not able for a taxi . . . ah'm wild faint.

Majella got to her feet, dried her hands on her joggers, then went to dial Bogey Taxis. When Pamela McHugh heard what had happened, she put them to the front of the queue. Majella thanked her, put the phone down and shivered.

- Ah'm away tae put on a jumper, then we'll get out tae this taxi.

Without waiting for an answer, Majella climbed the stairs to her bedroom. She hoked out a

pair of socks. It was a thing she made sure of, to pair her socks, for Majella couldn't wear odd socks. They made her feel like her feet were quarrelling, and she could never forget that one foot was patterned, the other plain, or that one foot was grey, the other pink. She squashed her feet into her trainers and hauled on a fleece. Then she checked she had her purse before combing through her hair. She knew the accident would be all around town in no time: the O'Neill wan cut herself again. God knows what rumours would go flying off the back of that story. But for now she needed to get a tea towel tied around her ma's foot so they wouldn't make a mess of the taxi.

9.07 a.m.

Item 1: Small talk, bullshit and gossip

Majella didn't have to oster her ma out to the car – Spade Byrne jumped out of the taxi and helped. Majella liked Spade, for he was a nice gentle lump of a fella. Some of the Bogey taxi men would've sat tight and pretended not to notice her ma could do with help. After the three minute run to the surgery, Spade killed the car engine so he could help her ma in the whole way. Everyone had a gawk at them as her ma was taken straight in ahead of the ones waiting because of the blood. Majella hated the surgery. It was the town's only practice, so the Prods from the bottom of the town and the Taigs from the top had to wait together. The Taigs kept to the left, the Prods to the right. There was no sign saying 'Catholic patients are requested to please sit to the left, Protestants to the right. Your cooperation is greatly appreciated by the Management of BogeyDoc'. It was one of those unwritten rules that everyone just seemed to know, like which pub to drink in, which streets to avoid walking down, which pharmacy to get your pills from, what religion to marry. Majella perched on one of the bench seats and tried to ignore the whispers from the deaf oul biddies around her.

. . . they said on the telly that no one's come forward yet with the DNA so that baste's still free . . . the police is out lifting wans off a list of suspects . . . sure she's as well dead anyway

. . . them O'Neill women are left a lonely bunch now . . . sure ye'd never know who's gonna be next ah have the door locked all day . . . ah hear they reckon she knew who it was that attacked her . . .

Majella realised by the sideways stares that she was rocking on the bench. She got up and told the receptionist that she was heading out for a bit and that she'd be back for her ma. Once outside she glued her eyes to the ground and set off walking at her favourite rhythm. The stroll calmed her though everything felt strange at this hour. The light fell at a different angle. People she hadn't seen in years were going about their routines. Empty school buses nosed along the street. Delivery vans were double-parked outside shops and busy wee women were pulling tartan trolley bags behind them. It all smelt and felt like being younger, of being got up for school and eating cornflakes in front of the BBC News before the long walk out the road to St Christopher's High School.

Majella'd been good at school. She usually came near the top of the class without trying. But that wasn't good enough for Majella's teachers. Many of them had taught both her ma and her da, and had formed the opinion that Majella had brains to burn from her da's O'Neill side, but was afflicted by the lazy, crazy Keenan streak from her ma's side. So Majella never had it easy at St Christopher's. Half the teachers needled her about her ma.

. . . It's not hard seeing where you got the love of your bed from, is it Majella? Your own mother so lazy she wouldn't even scratch herself when she itched . . .

The other half tried to goad her into doing more with her brains than her da.

Your father was a great scholar. Could've been the first of St Christopher's to go to university on the free place, but instead he ran off to the States. Then when he landed back home he went straight into the factory. What a waste. Your father had the brains to be a

teacher. But he threw himself away on that factory.

Majella's da'd told her he'd gone to America after leaving school because he wanted to build skyscrapers up to the angels. Majella's ma said he went to America to escape internment after his involvement with something he called Civil Resistance which, from what Majella understood, wasn't the Rah but something that led down the road to the Rah. Majella was hazy on the exact details as this stuff wasn't covered in history class and everyone spoke about it in mutters while looking sideways as if they were under surveillance. Her da only got one year at the skyscrapers business before Majella's grandad died after getting a hiding in internment. The Brits had released him from Long Kesh before he died. Majella had initially understood this to be an act of kindness, but had it explained to her that dying at home relieved the authorities of a whole lot of paperwork. Majella's da returned to Aghybogey to help her granny rear Bobby and Marie.

Majella ducked into McQuaid's garage shop to pick up chocolate and fags before walking towards the bridge. It marked the halfway point of the town, connecting the Taig and Prod sides. In history class they'd learnt that the first bridges had been wooden and were repeatedly burnt down during battles. When the planters arrived, they built a fireproof stone bridge and an untossable castle. Majella stopped on the hump of the bridge to get the best view of the castle ruins. Phelim O'Neill had tossed the castle on one of his glorious but ultimately doomed missions to drive out the planters. The invaders retreated to the good land on the east side of the bridge, while the Catholics were left with the ruined castle and scraggy bogland to the west. They salvaged stone from the castle to build the houses and walls that gave the town its first real shape. When the town was handed a grant to restore the castle, the archaeologists achieved what millions of peace funding and US diplomats couldn't, temporarily uniting both Taigs and Prods against their mission to rescue 'original stonework' from the tumble-down walls in the fields around the ruin. Oul wans from both sides of the divide had stood about at street corners or in the shops complaining, wondering whether the archaeologists would be coming into their houses next, to rob the stones from around their

heads?

Majella hadn't minded the archaeologists. She'd been sitting her GCSEs that summer, so she'd loads of study time. Her and Aideen would go to the castle to smoke or share a bottle of coke and talk to the archaeologists. They weren't in uniform because of the exams, so they pretended to be A-level students. Bored out of their minds with everything else in Aghybogey, they were happy listening to the archaeologists shite on about the local area, letting them hog the odd joint that Aideen robbed off her brothers. Majella had sunburned over and over again during those few months, sitting down by the river. It had been the hottest summer she'd ever known, the one time she'd got a tan on her arms and legs that had made the rest of her pale skin seem luminous in contrast. She remembered taking refuge under the bridge when it got really hot, near the wet smell of the river and the slippery stones. The archaeologists told them about the battles that had happened on the stone bridge in the olden times. Majella'd liked the sound of those days, when entire clans went hooring off into battle and the river ran red with blood. While she was at school there were only the riots around the Orange marches to look forward to in the run up to summer, or the odd bomb or gun attack for a bit of excitement. Every now and then an American newspaper or TV crew would come and stand on the bridge where Majella was now, the tossed Castle in the background, one foot on the Prod side, one foot on the Taig side, an I-Ron-Ick Symbol of a Town Divided, giving a monologue on The Troubles while people restrained the likes of Francie Kingh from diving into the shot to give the fingers. Before last week, Majella couldn't remember the last time she'd seen reporters in Aghybogey. It was the Muslim fellas who got all the publicity these days. Aghybogey had to make do with hosting the PhD students who'd come and spend days trying to get to know the 'post-conflict' community, trying to dig up memories that most people knew were best left buried.