

***The Rules of Revelation* extract: ‘Cork was a male kind of place’.**

Lisa McInerney

She felt the fact remained that Cork was a male kind of place but she'd be damned if she didn't pull against it a small bit. She had started gathering lists of names and dates, photographs, printouts of old newspaper articles, books. It was terribly hard to find a woman who'd made a dent in the place without a borrowed crosier and this made her feel angry on behalf of Cork and her country, but a little bit relieved in herself, because she was right in thinking her revolutionary capacities would always have been limited to giving birth to a revolutionary; she wasn't, in fact, a slovenly bitch. Lately she was thinking very dark things and that Jimmy could be rebranded as a revolutionary was one of them. That one man's revolution was another man's terrorism. *Man*. Jesus, there she went again. *Jesus*. A man made into a god.

Her sex had seemed a cruel joke when she was a girl. Her body was one that was made to suffer and she didn't feel she had been born only to suffer, though if she had would that not have been very Christ-like? The blasphemy in that. Imagine this *thing*, this dirty, bleeding, debased casing that men lost their minds over daily, imagine saying that thing was godly. *Divine, Heavenly*: these words were allowed if men blessed you with them but it was a sin to take to heart what they said. Christ was born to suffer and so were women but men were closer to Christ. What did men ever suffer? A bruised ego and the odd swollen ball? Oh, the self-harm, she supposed. As if that were an unconscious way for them to redress the balance based on this lie they told themselves and the world: *like Christ in Gethsemane, we tear our hair out and look to the sky. Father, father, why have you forsaken me?* Because that's what fathers fucking do, Maureen thought, writing it in black marker on a bench in Fitzgerald Park. And if Cork turned its back on her then Cork was very obviously male.

There was a lot of her sort of craziness going around these days. Maybe it was the settled and cosy women of Ireland waking up, at last, or coming out from behind the backs of the men who'd hemmed them in, at last, or growing a conscience, at last; the ordinary women of Ireland had been very good at turning their backs on their sisters when there was some prize of safety in it. Now they were after turning the country on its head and fucking the Church out of it and Maureen was glad of it, but put out because she hadn't seen it coming. First the

gay marriage and then the abortion. Outside of Ireland they were talking about harassment and abuse of power and every day there seemed to be some superstar fella in the doldrums over his shitty carry-on coming to light. That gobshite in the White House had probably helped it along, even though he didn't look able to find his arse with both hands. Here Maureen would normally have suffixed with, 'God love him,' but God was no longer in Ireland.

So maybe there were local heroines on the way, young wans of Ellie's age who'd change the face of the city and maybe Cork could be steadied yet, maybe when Maureen got her walking tours going she'd be adding new names every few weeks. *This is where she went to school, or, Up there in that women's place is where such-and-such a campaign grew legs.*

Ellie making televised political statements on the quays.

Ellie storming City Hall.

Ellie on hunger strike.

Ellie writing in black marker on park benches, *Don't mind Ould Wans who think they were Magdalenes when they had it easy.*

Maureen thought sometimes that she'd like to have been a proper drinker. Drinking was discouraged in young ladies when she was a young lady, so she'd stuck to acceptable measures with the odd gin and tonic when the occasion called. She thought now that she'd have made a great bar stool philosopher. There but for the grace of . . .

She'd have made a great religious leader. There but for the grace of . . .

Maureen had always thought that when Ireland changed she'd be a lighter soul and it was true that the delicious upheavals of the last few years had delighted her, but at the end of it there was a sort of hollow in her identity; now that the idea of a woman had changed she felt that she was somewhere between two states. Neither soft nor stuffy enough to belong to the older species and neither correct enough nor revolutionary enough for the younger.

She put the kettle on when she got in and sat on the couch to look through the collected histories on her coffee table, though she did so with no pleasure, no energy.

It was lavender tea she had reluctantly purchased from a health food shop. She wasn't sleeping this weather. She couldn't make her mind up on what to blame. She was used to blaming the country but she could hardly do that any more, now that Ireland was a paragon of paradise. She supposed she was pleased for Ellie's generation and the great sacrifice in being pleased had knocked her sideways.

She was reading about Terence MacSwiney's widow – Muriel MacSwiney, a great nationalist and a bad mother, so Maureen quickly decided that she was a fan – when the

rapping sounded on the door. And sure there was another of Cork's many wayward sons, a sort of son to her himself, she'd once so fervently believed.

'Would you look?' she said when she opened the door, and held her arms out as if presenting him to a legion of peering biddies behind her in the hall, all of them bad at being old and worse at guiding the young.

Nothing gammy at all, sure a young stag with his chin in the air and his nostrils flared.

'Have you been saying shit about me, Maureen?'

'Have I been what?' she said.

'Saying shit about me,' he said.

'To who?' she said.

'To the whole of fucking Ireland,' he said.

'The whole of Ireland? About you? Jesus, what age do you think I am? I wouldn't have anything to say about you if I met your father on the road, Ryan.'

'You did enough damage three years ago,' he told her, first finger out.

'What damage,' she said, 'and you gallivanting around the Far East?'

'Is that the problem, is it? You heard I was doing all right, is that what has you raging?'

'You're some langer,' she said. 'Come in.'

'I will in me shit,' he said, and pushed his chin closer to the outstretched finger. 'If you're behind this, I swear to God, Maureen. I swear to fucking Jesus.'

'I'll ask Jimmy what's eating you.'

'Ask him, do. G'wan, amn't I waiting long enough on him to take another chunk out of me?'

She watched the chin come closer again to the finger. 'Would you not ask yourself what you're at, Ryan, coming to my home at this hour and raving about gossip on my doorstep?'

'Someone is trying to wreck things for me by spreading stories which is sly and fucking petty carry-on and like something someone's mammy would do.'

'Am I the only mammy you know? What about your son's mammy, didn't you go making a mammy yourself?'

He leaned in again. 'What'd you say?'

'He's a dote.' She smiled. 'Diarmaid. Lovely name. He's the bulb off you.'

'G'wan,' he said. 'G'wan you fucking—'

He was close enough now for her to reach out and take the lobe of his left ear so that's what she did.

'You're a pup,' she said. 'What are you?'

She had him bent almost double and the blood came fast to his cheeks. He yipped in what she'd take as assent; she pulled him forward. 'Get in here,' she said, and he did, because she was merciless and he was mortified; had she an audience she was sure he'd cry with rage. She took him by the ear into the sitting room and wished then she could have dragged him up Patrick's Hill, so enjoyable she found the action. She'd have made a great bully, she'd have made a great and evil nun, there but for the grace of . . .

When she released him she saw that she'd made him speechless; he stood, gaping, rubbing the black stud in his lobe.

'God, you must have been a terrible gangster,' she said.

He hadn't been reared well, she knew, having met the father and seen how easily led and often macerated he was. She'd never met the mother but it wasn't a responsible woman who'd leave her parents in Italy to have six children on a Corkonian council estate. And what kind of well-reared boy became a gangster? She had experience in this sort of thing, her own son having been dragged up by Holy Joes till he was a plague all by himself.

And still Ryan Cusack couldn't figure out what to do about being caught by the ear. Still he was allowing himself to be chastised. If she were him, she'd knock her assailant down before kicking a hole in the door, but she wasn't him, not of the same generation at all. How they could be so soft and yet so self-righteous was a mystery; it was all in the head now, she thought, they were all about connections and rights and responsibilities and confounded by physical jolting.

'Tea?' she said.

'Don't grab me like that,' he said.

'All right so.'

'You could've pulled my fucking ear off.'

'Pity about you. Leaning in over a grandmother like that. And she living alone.'

'You shouldn't have mentioned my young fella to me.'

'Why, aren't you proud of him?'

'Don't be smart.'

'Jesus, Ryan, one of us has to be.'

She remembered how he took his tea; she'd made him enough of the stuff. She started into the task without asking again. When she turned back around he was sitting on the stool in front of his mother's piano, still a bit purple. He didn't refuse the tea but he didn't take the mug from her either. She left it on top of the piano.

'In case I don't ask Jimmy,' she said. 'What's eating you?'

‘See, I think you know.’

‘I don’t know.’

‘So it’s not you leaving comments on every video we make about how I’m a disgrace to my city? And telling journalists that I used to deal so I don’t deserve a go at this music thing? Coz it’s like something you’d do for the craic.’

‘Who’s we?’ she said.

He rubbed his nose. ‘Me and . . . This thing I’ve got going.’

‘What thing?’

‘The music thing.’

‘We, the music thing?’

‘We, like, the . . .’ – it took him some seconds to shape the word – ‘. . . band.’

‘Your theory is that I’m leaving mean messages on the internet about your band?’

‘It’s not a theory.’

‘I’m sixty-eight, Ryan.’

‘That doesn’t mean that you wouldn’t.’

‘Why would I want to drop you in it if doing so could hurt my own boy? If I went around saying you were a little bollocks wouldn’t they all want to know who was the big bollocks employing you? And he the apple of my eye, Ryan.’

‘Yeah, see, the sarcasm is what makes me think you’re trying to get to him and all but he’ll blame me for this, when he catches on at all he’ll take the legs off me.’

‘Catches on? To the music, is it? Can you do that anonymously? Like the fella above in Limerick with the plastic bag on his face?’

‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘I don’t know what the fuck I was thinking.’

She took a mouthful of her own tea, which had gone cold. She grunted and went to refresh it. On her return he carried on, ‘I’m fucking trying, like,’ and stuck a finger and thumb in his mouth.

‘You’re looking well,’ she said. ‘It’s obvious you’re trying.’

‘How’d you know my son’s name?’

‘Sure I met him with your father.’

‘How’d you know I was in Seoul?’

‘Because unlike Seoul,’ she said, ‘this is a small city.’

‘Exactly my fucking problem,’ he said, into his fist.

‘Bastards,’ she said.

‘What?’

‘They’re only bastards, Ryan. Whoever’s claiming you. I wouldn’t mind them.’

‘I have to mind them.’

She shrugged. ‘You’ve one thing going for you, though.’

He didn’t ask her to elaborate, only looked at her with his forehead corrugated.

She explained, ‘The thing between your legs.’

‘Ah, Jesus, Maureen.’

‘I’m telling you. All of this cities notables have been men. You’ll get away with it. Cork loves a pup and a chancer and Cork exalts its men. This is a very male city.’

‘A male city? Fuck’s sake.’

‘Tell me a famous daughter, so.’

‘I dunno, Mother Jones?’

‘What?’ Maureen said, and for the second time today she felt a weight lifting and its absence buckle her. ‘Who?’

‘That trade-union wan. The most dangerous woman in America.’ By way of answering her raised eyebrows he scowled and said, ‘My cousin has the horn for shit like that.’

‘I know the name Mother Jones,’ Maureen said, scowling back.

‘Worker’s rights,’ he said. ‘All I want now is to work but this work’s too good for the likes of me even if I’m good at it . . . My head is wrecked.’

‘And mine with you.’ Maureen said. ‘Mother bloody Jones. For the love of God, do you not see what a curse it is that a man had to tell me that?’