

Roddy Doyle

Smile



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I stayed up at the bar a few times but I didn't want the barman thinking that I needed someone to talk to. I sat in a corner near a window but the barman kept coming over, casually walking past, looking for empty glasses, and asking me if I was alright for a drink or what I thought of Brazil getting hammered by the Germans or of Garth Brooks not coming to Croke Park. I tried to picture myself from where he'd been looking at me. I can't have looked that bad – that lonely, or sad. Or neglected. It never occurred to me that he might be gay. I was fifty-four. I was too old to be gay back.

There was another place, the Blue Lagoon, a bit further away at the other end of the street. I hadn't gone in but I didn't like the look of it from the outside. It was always too busy. Full of families and couples and groups of men who looked like they talked serious rugby.

I can hear her.

My wife.

—Grow up, Victor.

So I stayed put and decided that Donnelly's was my local. I'd never really had one before. There were three

or four pubs within walking distance of the old house – the house I’d just left – but I’d never homed in on one. I’d been in each of them only a few times over the years and I don’t think I’d ever been on my own. Rachel had always been with me.

I went to this new place every night – or, every evening. I had to force myself to do it at first, like going to the gym or to mass. I’d go home – home! – cook something, eat it, then walk down the straight line to the pub. For one slow pint. I’d bring a book or my iPad with me.

Donnelly’s.

It was a good old-fashioned name for a pub. I was living near the sea again and I’d gone past the pubs I’d known when I was a kid. The Schooner, the Pebble Beach, the Trawler. They were all a drive away from the apartment, or a long walk that I didn’t want. Or too close to where I’d grown up. That would have been sad, a man of my age going back to some wrinkled version of his childhood. Looking for the girls he’d fancied forty years before. Finding them.

Donnelly’s would be my local. I trained myself to feel that it was mine. I listened out to hear the names of the staff. My barman, the lad who was on most evenings when I wandered in, was called Carl. Or Carlo, by those men and women who seemed to know him quite well. I kept it at Carl.

—How’s himself?

—Not too bad, Carl.

—Same book.

—It’s a big one. I’m nearly done.

—Any good?

—It’s okay.

—What’s it about?

—Stalin.
—There was a fucker.
—God, yeah.
—Worse than Hitler. They say.
—A monster.
—Who'll win tonight?
—Costa Rica.
—D'yeh think?
—I've my fiver on them.
—What're the odds?
—6 to 1.
—Not bad for a two-horse race.
—That's what I thought.
—We'll be cheering for them, so.

Going into the bookie's was new too. Or just pretending to go in. I hadn't put anything on Costa Rica. I knew nothing about horses or greyhounds but I'd stick the occasional fiver on the football. The winner, sometimes the score. There was a Paddy Power right beside the pub. It became – even just walking past and having a look at the World Cup odds in the window – part of the rhythm of my day. Another corner of my new home.

I'd moved in in the summer, so it was all done in daylight. Waking up, getting out, coming home, climbing the stairs, opening a window, cooking the dinner, strolling down to Donnelly's. A pub in daylight is a different place – it's less of a pub. It's a good time to start, a good time to move in. I could sit back for a while and watch the room become a pub. I'd nod at men I'd seen before.

—The heat.
—Unbelievable.

The apartment – the block, from the outside – reminded me of my old primary school. The car park

at the front even looked like a deserted schoolyard. The wood of the main door was a bit rotten where the paint had gone. The door glass had chicken wire running through it. The stairs up to the first floor were wide enough for gangs of charging boys. And there was something about the light that came through the high window at the stairwell in the morning – it seemed exactly like the school stairs more than forty years ago. It wasn't an unpleasant sensation.

My old primary school was only a couple of miles away. The secondary school was even nearer.

The apartment was okay. I'd decided that almost immediately, even when it was empty and bare, and the letting agent – a nice young one, in her early twenties – had let me in to see it. It was going to do.

—Fresh paint, I said.

—Yes, she said.

—Was there blood on the walls?

She looked at me, to make sure I was joking. I wasn't sure I was. But she smiled.

—It just needed, like. Sprucing up.

—Fine.

I wondered if the last tenant had died in here. In the kitchen section of the one big room, or in the bedroom I'd glanced into. Or the bathroom. But I didn't ask her. I knew it would sound creepy. And I didn't really care.

—I'll take it, I said.

—Oh. Cool.

—Am I your first client?

—Fourth.

—Does your dad run the business?

—No.

—Sorry, I said.—I'm being stupid.

—It's okay.

There were two windows. I looked out one of them and saw the car park, the low railing, trees, and the red-brick houses across the street.

I pointed down.

—Cats, I said.

There were two of them – three of them – sitting under a Renault that looked like it hadn't been moved in a long time.

—They're all over the place, she said.

She stood behind me.

—But they don't do anything, like.

—Grand.

I moved in two days later. I brought a bed from the old house, and the Roberts radio that had been in our bedroom. The clothes I wanted filled one case. My sister brought me a kitchen table and two chairs. I drove out to Swords and got a TV, an armchair and a fridge in Harvey Norman's. I drove down to SuperValu and bought three of their big bags full of stuff – coffee, teabags, soup, apples, bananas, washing-up liquid, a scourer, washing powder, brown bread, a baguette, tomatoes, salt. I half filled my new fridge and put things up on the corner shelves. I put the salt on the table and started my first shopping list.

Pepper etc.

I sat in the armchair and watched Germany versus Ghana, and felt happy enough. I decided my neighbours were prostitutes. Before I saw any of them. There was something about the apartment block; when it wasn't a school – when I wasn't on the stairs – it was East European, Soviet era. I was taking my trousers off the first night when I heard laughter above me, a woman laughing. She was being paid to laugh. It made some

kind of sense. I was folding my trousers but I was living dangerously. Behind enemy lines. Somewhere in the building was the whore with the heart of gold, waiting for me. She'd see what my wife couldn't see, and fuck me. For nothing. And cook for me. Or let me cook for her. *Pepper etc.* We'd watch football in bed. I'd hide her from her pimp. I'd get my son to beat him up.

I was there three days, on my way down the stairs to my new local, before I saw a neighbour. He was coming up the stairs, dragging a man-bag, like a big, balding schoolboy. He looked at me and nodded. He was twenty years younger than me, and sweating.

—Great weather, I said.

He didn't answer. I heard his door open – he didn't knock; he wasn't visiting a prostitute – before I pulled open the front door.

The next morning I saw my first woman. I was looking out the window at the seagulls. Someone had left the lid off one of the black wheelies, and a gull had hauled a chicken carcass out of the bin and dropped it. There were three gulls fighting for it, and another gang attacking the bin. The cats were under the Renault, waiting. A taxi pulled up, out on the street. There was the usual delay, a back door opened, a bare foot, then the rest of the woman got out. She leaned against the low railing and put on her shoes as the taxi crawled away, up the street. She straightened up and walked into the car park. She was young – very young. Her knees, in particular, looked very young. She walked like she had no weight. I stood back – I didn't want her to see me looking down. But I could see that she looked happy. I heard the front door – nothing else. She was a prostitute's daughter, I decided. Being given the chances her mother had never had.

It was like the chicken had exploded in the car park. The fight between the gulls had become a major battle for wings and bones. The noise of them – I’ve always loved it. I looked at the cats. They hadn’t moved but they were tenser, braced. A window above me opened.

—Fuck off – !

A man. He’d learnt to say fuck off quite recently. I wondered why he hadn’t shouted something in his own language. And I was glad he hadn’t. What I’d just seen and heard had been great – the gulls, the cats, the girl, her knees, the shout. It had been wonderful. I had no one to tell it to but I didn’t mind that.

I looked at my phone; it was twenty to six.

Milk – small carton.

Bin bags.

—Victor?

I looked up when I heard my name but I couldn’t see a thing. I was sitting near the open door and the light coming through was a solid sheet between me and whoever had spoken. My eyes were watering a bit – they did that. I often felt that they were melting slowly in my head.

—Am I right?

It was a man. My own age, judging by the shape, the black block he was making in front of me now, and the slight rattle of middle age in his voice.

I put the cover over the screen of my iPad. I’d been looking at my wife’s Facebook page.

I could see him now. There were two men on the path outside, smoking, and they’d stood together in the way of the sun.

I didn't know him.

—Yes, I said.

—I thought so, he said.—Jesus. For fuck sake.

I didn't know what to do.

—It must be – fuckin' – forty years, he said.—Thirty-seven or -eight, anyway. You haven't changed enough, Victor. It's not fair, so it isn't. Mind if I join you? I don't want to interrupt anything.

He sat on a stool in front of me.

—Just say and I'll fuck off.

Our knees almost touched. He was wearing shorts, the ones with the pockets on the sides for shotgun shells and dead rabbits.

—Victor Foreman, he said.

—Forde.

—That's right, he said.—Forde.

I had no idea who he was. Thirty-eight years, he'd said; we'd have known each other in secondary school. But I couldn't see a younger version of this man. I didn't like him. I knew that, immediately.

—What was the name of the Brother that used to fancy you? he said.

He patted the table.

—What was his fuckin' name?

His shirt was pink and I could tell that it had cost a few quid. But there was something about it, or the way it sat on him; it hadn't always been his.

—Murphy, he said.—Am I right?

—There were two Murphys, I said.

—Were there?

—History and French.

—Were they not the same cunt?

I shook my head.

—No.

—Jesus, he said.—I hate that. The memory. It's like dropping bits of yourself as you go along, isn't it?

I didn't answer. I have a good memory – or I thought I did. I still didn't know who he was.

He moved, and put one foot on top of a knee. I could see right up one leg of his shorts.

—Anyway, he said.—It was the one who taught French that wanted your arse. Am I right?

I wanted to hit him. I wanted to kill him. I could feel the glass ashtray that wasn't there any more, that hadn't been on the table since the introduction of the smoking ban a decade before – I could feel its weight in my hand and arm as I lifted it, and myself, and brought it flat down on his head.

I looked to see if anyone had been listening to him. I could hear the remains of the word 'arse' roll across the room. I hated this man, whoever he was.

But I nodded.

—Fuckin' gas, he said.—And look at us now. Would he fancy us now, Victor?

—Probably not.

—Not me, anyway, he said.

He slapped his stomach.

—You're not looking too bad, he said.

His accent was right; he came from nearby. He took a slurp from his pint – it was Heineken or Carlsberg – and put the glass back on the table.

—You've done alright, Victor, he said.—Haven't you?

I couldn't answer.

—For yourself, like, he said.—I see your name all over the place.

—Not recently.

—Fuck recently.

I wanted to go.

—You did great, he said.—We’re fuckin’ proud of you.
I wanted to move house, get back across the river.
Home.

—Victor Forde, he said.—One of us.

A minute before he’d thought my name was
Foreman.

—You married that bird, he said.

I shouldn’t have, but I nodded again.

—Fuckin’ hell, he said.—Good man. There’s no end
to your fuckin’ achievements.

—Who are you? I asked.

He stared and smiled at the same time.

—Are you serious?

—I know your face, I said.

—My face?

He laughed. Straight at me.

—My fuckin’ face? he said.—Jesus. I was – what? –
seventeen. The last time you saw me. Am I right?

I didn’t know – I didn’t know him. But I nodded.

—Will I give you a hint?

I didn’t nod this time.

—Síle Fitzpatrick, he said.

The name meant nothing.

—Who?

—Go on – fuck off.

—I don’t know her.

—Síle. Fitz. Patrick.

—No.

—You fuckin’ do, he said.—Wake up, Victor. Síle.
You fancied her. Big time. All of you did. She was a
bike. Síle Fitzpatrick. She was *the* bike. Yis all said it.

I hadn’t heard that phrase, ‘a bike’, in years. It was
like a piece of history being taken out and shown to
me. A slightly uncomfortable piece of history.

—No, I said.

—Blonde bird, tall, Holy Faith, Bowie fan, woman's tits.

She was starting to come together; I thought I was remembering someone.

—You all fancied her, he said again.

—And you didn't?

—Well, I did. But I couldn't.

—How come?

—She was my sister, he said.

The laugh exploded out of him, as if he'd been holding on to it for years. There was nothing funny in it. The girl was in my head now, Síle Fitzpatrick, but I wished she wasn't. I wanted to tell him that I didn't know her. But I could see her sitting on the low ledge outside the chipper, her back to the glass. I was inside, looking at her hair, her shoulders, her white uniform shirt tucked into her skirt. I wanted her to turn and look in. I wanted her to look at me.

—You remember me now, I bet.

I didn't. But I remembered his sister.

—Yeah, I said.—I do now. Sorry.

What was his name? He'd been in my class for five years; he must have been. Fitzpatrick, Fitzpatrick.

I had it.

—Edward.

—Good man, he said.

I knew him, and I'd known him years ago. I knew his face and I'd known his face.

—Eddie, I said.

—I kind of prefer Ed these days, he said.—More adult.

He shrugged.

—Finally had to grow up, he said.

What he'd told me just before he'd laughed – one of the words came back and nudged me.

—You said 'was'. You said she *was* your sister.

—Yeah, he said.

—Was, I said.

—Yeah.

—Sorry – I said.—I don't – She's not – ?

—Dead?

—Is she?

—No, he said.—No. We're not close, just.

—Oh.

—Yeah.

—Grand.

—Say no more, says you.

The gap was beginning to close. 'Say no more, squire' – the Monty Python line was straight from the schooldays.

—You meeting someone? he asked me now.

—No, I said.—No. Just having a pint.

—Same as myself. D'you live near here, so?

I hesitated. I didn't want to explain.

—Or just visiting? he said.—Slumming it for a bit.

—No.

—No?

—I live down the road there – five minutes.

—Oh grand, he said.—So this is your local.

—Not really.

—Fuck this, he said.

He stood up and picked up his stool; he'd scooped it from under himself before he was upright. I didn't have time to cower. But he turned to the table beside us and lowered the stool one-handed while he grabbed a chair with the other and dragged it across to him. He sat down, and back.

—That's better.

There was even more of his leg on show now. He didn't seem to be wearing underwear.

—So, he said.—Yeah.

I waited.

—I was away myself for a bit, he said.

—Were you?

—Yeah, he said.—Here and there. Nothing special. But Síle. She'd love to hear from you.

He'd guessed it: Síle was the only thing I liked about him.

—I hardly knew her, I said.

—Go on to fuck.

—It's true.

—Yeah, yeah, he said.—She fancied you. Big time. Had me plagued. *Is he going to college? What's his favourite Bowie song? Is he going with anyone?* A right pain in the arse.

—'Heroes', I said.

—What?

—My favourite Bowie song.

He laughed. He sat back, almost lay back, and barked at the ceiling. There was grey pubic hair poking out of his shorts. He sat up, adjusted his crotch. Had he caught me looking at him?

—D'you know what? he said.—I'd say she'd still be interested in knowing that.

—What?

—Síle, he said.—She'd love to know that 'Heroes' was your favourite Bowie song. I don't believe that, by the way. Now maybe, but we're talking about — when? 1975 or '6. 'Heroes' was released in 1977. So you're spoofing. As usual. You can fuck off, so you can. Vict'ry.

I should have stood up.

—Remember we used to call you that? he said.

I should have just left. He might have followed me but I should have walked out and kept walking. I'd have been giving nothing away. Because I found out later, he already knew where I lived.