

Story 40 – **Waking Up**

(a.k.a. Women without Men)

“Make it new!” –Ezra Pound

As I became conscious of my own thoughts I remembered vaguely the bus crash. The driver took the icy turn off.

I awake, dazed and confused, take an I.V. out of my arm suspiciously. I stumble out of the bed and hold the back of the hospital gown closed. I look out the window at the city. I’ve never seen this view before. I’m not sure where I am but I think it’s still Dublin. My view is further confused by the light dusting of snow over all of Ireland I can see. “Where am I?” I ask aloud and I’m confused by the sound of my own voice. I stumble out of the room and my legs feel oddly detached, or not detached, but... too far away? I look around for a doctor, someone to explain my situation.

After the hallway I find a reception area and see some people waiting around in plainly uncomfortable chairs. A little girl with big smiling eyes, grinning as she pushes the long brown hair from her sleepy face, runs towards me.

“Daddy!” I’m too shocked to speak. She looks at me smiling, expectant. Her big brown eyes begin to hurt. I kneel down and hug her awkwardly. “Honey... daddy hit his head and is very confused now, okay?”

“Okay,” she says, hugging me and smiling blissfully with her eyes closed.

A man in a white coat grabs me by the arm and takes me back to the room. He explains what’s happened; my body was dying, another body’s brain was dead, and he’s been doing some damned fine pioneering work—if he made enough headway there’d be some huge grants from the European Union, or Cheng Industries. “I have all the documentation I need but have kept both your names out of most things. It will be in the news but without your names. You can tell your family, or not.” I thank him for sparing me the media frenzy, the likeliness of becoming a circus exhibit. “I’ll try to go along as this new person,” I say. “Just tell them all I’ve suffered a head injury I suppose.”

I meet my new parents and brother in reception. The girl is gone, I’m told something about her mom taking her home. They seem bland and forgettable. My new mother hands me some clothes to go put on as my brother quickly takes to reminding me of our teenage exploits; running shopping carts into a nearby ravine, making up inappropriate nicknames for peoples’ mums like “porn star Polly” and “saucy Sally”. At

home he kicks back on the couch and insists we watch a film to relax my mind. I want to go scour my new personal affects and find out anything I can about this person, but then his mum says, "No, Aidan, listen to Noah. Relax. Just relax now. I'll go boil the kettle and make the tea. And some sandwiches." His da is standing behind her; a man of few words. "Okay," I say, nodding in agreement, or acquiescence. Six cups of tea and eight sandwiches later we've watched *Die Hard* and the *Simpsons* movie and finally I get to stow away to Aidan's room and find out everything I can about him.

I scour his notebooks, books, music and video files, find passwords, check his Facebook, e-mail, and periodically stop to pace the messy 427 cm by 366 cm room and practice walking with these parts hanging between my legs. I look under my T-shirt. It feels strange to find no breasts. It feels a relief to be out a bra. Goodbye bleeding, cramps, and yeast infections; hello shaving every day. Life is trade-off's. There's a good chance nothing really gets better, it's all just making trades until you find a balance you can stand to live with long-term.

Aidan O'Brien is 22, his brother 30. I was 33. I just got 11 years back. That's good no matter what body you go forwards with. I find cigarettes in his favorite leather jacket. I throw them out. That's another 10 years at least. After I've been in his—my—room for so many hours it's pitch black out and everyone has long gone to bed I feel exhausted. I decide to take a shower and get ready for bed.

In the shower I examine my new body fully. He exercised. Ate okay, actually. Lifted weights with his brother in the garage some. 175 cm tall, average build, dusting of blonde hair all over and dark, sandy blonde hair on top. Sky light blue eyes. Everyone else in the family has green, grey, or hazel eyes. His brother always secretly joked to him about it; who was their mother having an affair with? Looking down at an uninterested penis I decide a very hot shower is the way and see what I have to work with—besides that it's all plainly functional given the kid. A little *too* plainly functional. It is odd to have all this hanging out; bicycling might prove a challenge. I start some stroking and am soon estimating the erection; about 15-16 cm and neither really thick nor slim. Just right, I think. This is good. Despite popular myths I know from personal experience that vaginas are not huge chambers that will stretch to accommodate any size. They are not in fact like the wardrobe in *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*; a mystical compartment that will go on forever and ever off into mystical lands. They are actually quite small really; boxed in by internal organs, intestines, uterus, and general layers of skin and blood. Though they are not, as the other sexist myth goes, there to accommodate any size no matter how small. Women don't exist to accommodate whatever's offered. Obviously I must have an orgasm. A good firm, tight, rapid yanking hand job, heavy on the head work, and almost totally forgetting the balls (like I used to do with my breasts when I had them) should do it—and it does. I'll have to practice holding back—you have to learn the opposite as a woman in this society. It's potent but

singular, not like the waves of pleasure in my old body. And I can't start up again as soon. That's kind of good though; to be so easily satisfied and know exactly when you'll be satisfied. It's so logical, efficient, orderly.

I go to bed nervously but fall asleep quicker than I have in years, in my old body, and sleep better than I have in years.

The next day I'm back to scouring Aidan's—my—things. I make a day of it before Noah comes in to tell me it's much later than I thought, nearly six. "Come on," he says and pulls some of my things out of the closet, "put these on and let's go."

Soon we're walking down the street to the nearest bus stop, "got to get back on that horse" he says and we go upstairs and ride into Dublin city with me gripping the front hand rail tensely the whole time. Nothing happens, as per usual. We walk around Mountjoy Square, past Saint Vincent de Paul, through an alley that wreaks of wee like every alley in Dublin, and to a pub. It's not open. A bouncer lets Noah in. "My brother," he says and they let me in too.

We sit at the counter and I get a free Jameson on the rocks. He recounts more of our teenage exploits as he takes off his jacket and puts on his bouncer arm band ID and waves hello to everyone at work. He lets me in on his life philosophy:

The world according to Noah is that Ireland should leave the EU and be self-sustaining since it has the farmland to feed itself. Never mind that De Valera essentially ran Ireland like that in the 1950's and it turned the place into a kind of District 12; Aidan's old notebooks mention that our great grandfather had to set traps for rabbits in the morning to help feed his family.

Noah thinks regular jobs are for chumps. "Our parents worked hard all their lives and what did they get for it?" he says.

"Um... their house that has no mortgage, their monthly retirement payment, free state health care."

"Yeah, but they didn't really get anything for it," he says and pauses as a bar girl walks by. "Hey," he says casually. "Hey," she says and smiles. "The bar girls like the bouncers because we solve problems," he says, adding in a whisper, "Look at her mighty fine ass, and tits too! And hers," he adds as another bar girl walks in.

"Do you ever go out with them?"

"No. not really."

"Nice bodies—like some of the women at the gym. I like to look."

"Do you ever talk to them?"

"No, not really," he says, then continues to talk about his approach to life.

He collects Jobseeker's Allowance while working as a bouncer, paid under the table, on rare occasions having to punch some guy with an attitude problem. He laughs about the time he had to call around for someone to cover him so he could run back

home to see his welfare officer at home when he wasn't supposed to be working. Here he's outside the rat race and knows some bouncers he works with have IRA connections. He speaks boastfully of this while I sip the Jameson and nod along. "So, have you ever done anything for the IRA?"

"Oh lord no. But I could. I've got the connections."

"Oh, okay," I say then sense he doesn't care my tone. "Cool," I add. "Well... thanks for the drink. I'm going home though. Rest up." I turn and walk away, leaving half the drink behind.

The next day I call most of the people in Aidan's—my—phone and tell them I've suffered a head injury. I talk with everyone and find out all I can. There is a heartening outpouring of support; everyone wants to tell me everything, make sure I know everything I should, everything to stay safe especially; east Dublin isn't great, north Dublin isn't great either. Someone recently tried to shoot one of the Savage's at JC's supermarket in Swords, try to stay off the Quays at night because there have been two stabbings there in the past two years, and for the love of God, don't forget your daughter's birthday—a little girl never forgets! I awkwardly thank everyone as I jot down notes rapidly.

The people I call include a former boss at a warehouse by the motorway, packaging things in boxes and shipping them out. The manager generously offers me my old job back; they're understaffed, and I was never late and rarely hung over, even around the holidays. I did get the idea from Facebook messages and texts with friends that after secondary school I worked very hard at that job. I saved my money for driving lessons and considered becoming a professional driver for the company, which would have involved more money, enough to really help raise my daughter. Mum and dad wouldn't let me borrow the car so it cost a veritable fortune at €35 per hour driving lesson. But I did finally get my driving license. Between lessons and taxes I didn't have much cash in hand, or much left to give my daughter, especially after going to the pub with Noah and my friends from school. Exhausted, and influenced by my big brother, I quit the job and just took Jobseeker's Allowance and Children's Allowance. I've found I've only been seeing my daughter one weekend a month but going to the pub with Noah and our different mates from school once a week. I'm torn between thinking this Aidan was depressed and thinking he was just a fucking loser who wouldn't get up off his ass. I plan to work hard, save money, then talk to Aidan's—my—ex about providing for our daughter, and seeing her at least every weekend.

As the sun sets I look out the window and see all the snow has melted.

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The job is the job. Warehouse work. The night. 4 p.m. to 1 a.m. Good job for men. Just clock in, bang out a shift, get an hour for lunch, clock out, get paid. No dress code besides long pants, sturdy shoes, and a shirt. No public to check if you're smiling. No issues.

After work I sit outside watching the cars pass by, going to and from places. I used to wonder where, somewhere interesting? Now I know none of it is. I smoke a cigarette; I'm weaning this new body off them. I got odd new cravings.

Niamh pulls up in her mother's car. She has books in the passenger's seat.

"Still smoking?"

"Only three or four a day. I'll be off them soon."

"How's the head?"

"Doesn't hurt. Just don't remember. Tell me everything about little Tasha."

She talks for hours about our daughter. It's sunrise before we know it.

"How's UCD?"

"It's fine. I'll be a nurse soon."

"That's a good common job for an Irish woman."

"Yeah... nothing like the dreams we had as teenagers. Oh well."

"We might still travel."

"It's too late for that now."

For you maybe, I think. We pause in silence. It's freezing. I can barely feel my feet.

"Thank you," I say. She looks at me, thinks I've become more sincere. Isn't sure.

"I could have died. I almost did. At 22. Makes a person think."

She looks at me poignantly, nods.

"Let me know if you get any headaches," she says, gestures towards the books in the passenger's seat with little confidence. "Well, I'd better get home. Mum can't watch Tasha forever," she says with the nervousness of a mother who's been away too long.

"Is she still working at that café?"

"Same as ever."

Her brown hair starts to look auburn in the sun's rays. It's rained for the past six weeks and now this. I wave. She waves as she leaves. I hop on my bicycle and head for home. I can't afford a car with insurance being the racket it is in Ireland; they self-regulate. Like all business practices in Ireland they run wild until the EU steps in and some conscientious Germans tell them they can't run an industry as a cartel. There ought to be a law, and there is. It will never cease to amaze me how casually the Irish fuck over their own.

Did I ever love this girl? Maybe she was just available. Like school friends; they're not choice just whomever you're best suited to hang out with of the options

available in that limited pool. I'll never know now. Aidan was there for the birth though, I'll give him that. The first to hold the new baby. But what he thought or felt I'm not really sure. Of course he told everyone he was thrilled; a baby isn't something you can say you're unhappy about in Ireland. And the Constitution says no abortions so the choice was made for us. And how were we in this mess? From what I've gleaned from his digital footprint, thought we knew how to use a condom. Guess we didn't. I don't remember.

I have a history but no past, no back story. It's all absent from my mind. I was born in America and had a whole other life before but never mind that shit. I speed up my pedaling as the blood and the feeling return to my feet, and my whole body begins to feel revived.

At home I reheat the dinner mum made for me. I sit at my desk and stare at the pictures framed on the walls, glossy pictures cut from charity shop books: starkly beautiful arid desert New Mexico, stunning rocky Arizona, the long history pyramids in Mexico, the bold religious statue Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, the wall that can be seen from space: China. All the things never seen, never done. I drink hot decaf tea. Will see. Will do.

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I'm up early to see a woman from work who's leaving. I take her for a walk through the blooming grass fields in the closest thing we're likely to get to summer in Ireland. We sit for a picnic, hot tea from a Thermos flask, conversation. I hang on her every word as long as I can discipline myself to do so. And when she asks questions I have an answer for everything; I still live with my parents—because they're elderly and of poor health. I can drive them to the hospital too, I have a license, Noah doesn't. She doesn't have a license, like most Irish women.

"I got a motorcycle endorsement on the license too, and scrounged for good deals on all the mandatory riding gear; helmet, gloves, boots, jacket, pants, L and N plate vests. But the cost to pursue it was just too much. It's cold and rainy here anyway. Besides, I father must be careful." That last bit really wins her over. Why not?

"Where's your daughter's mother?"

"Oh... mentally ill. And she drinks. I couldn't stay with her, no matter how I tried. I see my daughter as often as I can though, always have. She's my everything. And what of you?"

"Just from here," she shrugs. "Never been anywhere. Thought about it, Europe you know, but money..." she trails off. "And now with Nana sick, we're going to Roscommon to take care of her and tend the old family farm. And I'll never..." she starts to cry.

I take her hand. “I can show you something. Something to remember, forever.” She smiles and holds my hand nervously. She says there’s no privacy from her family at home so we stay here, obscured by the overgrown wild grass.

We lay down together on the blanket and I just hold her close and kiss her for a long time. From the lips to the neck to the navel to the thighs. I want her to be comfortable, hot, ready. I want to act like we have all the time in the world.

“We should... you know...”

“We have all the time in the world.”

“We have two hours,” she says plainly. “I’ll be expected.”

“Okay,” I say and gently pull down her Atmosphere trousers then her knickers. I lay her back down, check that my hand is warm, and lick my fingers. I want to break her hymen as painlessly as possible. A pinch. An intense pinch. My trousers down next and I’m on top of her. Pause for the condoms, out of the picnic basket—I could really stand to not have any more random kids. It feels so strange how my head is flush with impulse; hormones, thoughtless, impulse, more so than before. I can think just enough to get me this far then it’s all feeling. *I need to get in there* like a female sometimes needs a hard thing sticking in. Really needs it. Animal instinct takes over, and we’re along for the wondrous ride.

I try everything; different rhythms, different positions. All so much fun. Everything feels great. I really love my new body now. And she’s having fun; wet and open now though I know those vaginal muscles will take several times to tone up. It’s an experience though; a shock of feeling; a lightning flash to placid existence.

Afterwards we cuddle. I never was big on cuddling but always felt it was cheap and just plain rude not to bask together in the afterglow for at least a few obligatory minutes. The condom comes off as easily as it went on, despite erroneous claims about this from other men. As a female and male I can safely say it makes no difference for feeling. Any difference it makes to someone is all psychological. We pack up and I walk her home... partway. She doesn’t want the neighbors or her family to see, doesn’t want the goss, the intrusion of what little privacy she has. So I kiss her on the mouth and hug her goodbye. She pauses, then marches off towards her duty.

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I went back to the college from my former incarnation and coasted through on good grades, knowing the classes, the professors, how to appeal to one ego or another. They all couldn’t believe how well I did, and thought I just belonged there. My parents were indifferent; college is a thing to do. Noah seemed to feel confused, thought I’d see this new “school” and hate its b.ss., then drop out in the first semester, turning my back with an attitude, claiming to be too clever for it. Like anyone is too clever for a decent

job that pays a living wage. He seemed almost to feel betrayed. I lost all my friends; I made new friends. I thought about trading up my family for a new one too; maybe marry a nice young woman who's well off. Maybe later, after some more adventures. Niamh was shocked. Tasha liked doing home work while I studied too, like she used to do with her mom.

I worked the whole time, part time hours. Saved money, spent it on gifts for Tasha; dolls, dollhouses, a bicycle. Went riding with her every weekend it wasn't raining.

I didn't just do the three-year Irish degree but the four year dually-accredited U.S. and Irish degree from American College Dublin. So I'm free to travel. Maybe I'll marry an American, get dual citizenship. Maybe I'll go to Vietnam; its economy is supposed to be good these days, and the cost of living very cheap. Some of them take issue with Americans because of the past but what's that got to do with me now?

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