

The Story of Maria's Son

This is the story of Maria's son, but it is a story with two endings.

Maria lived in a small neglected suburb on the edge of the city and at the foot of the mountains. She had one son, and he was her world. His life was her life, and her thoughts were directed only to him. Eighteen years before, she met his father on the one holiday she had ever had, in Spain. Herself and the girls in the biscuit factory had clubbed together and booked two weeks in Benidorm. Her first glimpse of the turquoise sea as the plane droned down into the Spanish dawn made her eyes prickle with astonishment and joy at such postcard beauty. The world was full of marvels, she thought then, and life was beginning.

Most of the girls met men on that holiday. Some had a quick fling, or even several one-night stands. But on the second night Maria met Jorge. As far as she was concerned that was it. He was the man of her dreams, with golden brown eyes, dark skin that felt like satin when he touched her arm and a sweet bucket of a mouth that she wanted to suck all the kisses out of forever and ever. Jorge was a printer. He wooed her and stuck to her like a clam throughout the holiday. He brought gifts of specially printed notelets and cards, with her name on them, and clever drawings of two hearts entwined. He told her he loved her and she believed him, because she loved him. It did not seem possible that the love she felt could not equally be returned. It was also the first time she had fallen in love, and as it was her nature to be giving, she gave herself to him, heart, soul and body.

Things had moved swiftly. In retrospect, she believed she became pregnant on the third night of the holiday, which was the second night with Jorge. She saw no reason to withhold herself from this man, who was good, charming and whipped her senses to a delirium. At the end of the holiday, she had a vague sensation of unwellness. She noticed, as she lay roasting on the beach one afternoon, waiting

until Jorge would come from the printers to join her for the last hour or so by the water's edge, that she felt not quite herself. It was not exactly a sickness, but an odd sensation of having been slightly pushed out of her own body.

Around her, voices of other holiday-makers rose on the air. People played in the water like children. They dipped their overheated bodies into the Mediterranean, and swam around for a few minutes, whooping with pleasure, occasionally splashing someone else as they went.

On the final evening, Jorge arrived with a generous heft of pink, scented writing-paper, on which her address in Ireland was printed in delicate slanting writing, fresh from the printing press. *So that you do not forget to write to me*, he murmured close to her ear in his delicious accent, making her forget her earlier feelings of physical displacement. She felt weak with love for him, and that night they fell again insatiably into one another's arms.

Back in Ireland, she did not forget to write. But after three letters, and once she relayed the news of her situation to him, Jorge's correspondence suddenly ceased. At first, she did not want to believe that such a thing could have happened to her. Her mother, who in her way was sympathetic, told her not to be a fuckin eejit and did she think she was the first girl to get knocked up and then dropped like a hot potato?

'But Ma,' Maria wailed, 'he told me he loved me!'

Maria's mother threw her eyes to the ceiling and folded her arms. 'Daughter dear, you weren't the first he said that to. Now the best thing you can do is forget the louser. You'll manage. Trust me, you will!'

Over the years, Maria placed her trust in her mother's advice. She managed very well indeed, all things considered, with a small, adored son whom she christened George. Eventually, she moved away from her mother's house and into the suburbs. She mostly forgot about Jorge and concentrated instead on George,

determined to raise him to be a good man, a reliable man, although he had no father to show him how to be a man.

For George's sake she took two jobs, one of them with a domestic cleaning firm, the other as a waitress on Saturdays and Sundays, when she cycled to a restaurant perched on a thickly wooded hill half-way up the mountains. She scrimped and she saved so that George would have the right clothes for school, the right trainers, the right pencil-case and ruler, a proper boy's lunch-box and, after school, some decent computer games. Because she did not trust banks, she saved money in two ways: at the Credit Union and in a narrow tin box kept beneath the crimson layered skirt of an ornamental Spanish doll, bought at the airport by Jorge as the lovers said their tearful goodbyes. The doll stood in a perspex on the landing window. She congratulated herself on her cleverness in secreting money in such a way. As time went on and George grew older, she knew that she had almost equal amounts of money stashed in both locations. It was a comfort on the rare occasions when she awoke at night, to know that there were, literally, some thousands right there in her home, to be put towards George's education.

He was showing signs of being exceptionally good at maths, and her heart ached with pride in him. Although she would never admit it to her neighbours, like many mothers she dreamt of him joining the professional classes. Someday, she thought, he might become a doctor. He would heal people. She hoped he would never go for law, however. In her opinion, solicitors had big mouths, necks as thick as a jockey's bollocks, and it was universally acknowledged that they overcharged. Medicine, please, she prayed, not law.

So it was for George's sake that she knuckled down, literally, on the floors of some of the grand homes in which she worked, poking her fingers into unsavoury corners of domestic filth, sticking brushes down many toilets, spraying and swirling clean scents into places where clean scents would not otherwise be found.

It was for his sake too that she worked overtime some evenings, to have that little bit extra, so that George could go on the school tour to Paris or Barcelona or wherever the teachers decreed was the place to go that year. Sometimes, she would meet the very same people whose houses she cleaned, in the restaurant at weekends. At first she used to feel awkward about it, but after a while she couldn't be bothered dealing with such feelings. Occasionally, they blinked in comfortable Sunday surprise, recognising her as she awaited their menu choice. *No starter for me*, some cashmere-wrapped woman might murmur modestly, or, *I think I'll treat myself and go for the goat's cheese*, as if that was a really daring thing to do. Once she heard a woman remark softly to her silent husband about how great Maria was to *hold down two jobs to make a go of things*.

At home and school, George was diligent. The school was ten miles from the estate, far from the local one, which Maria regarded as too rough. He had local friends of course, but, miraculously for the times they lived in, appeared to hold himself at a slight remove from trouble. This pleased her. She did not worry that when George was busy tweaking at his mobile phone there could be anything other than boyish conversation going on between him and his mates. She would eye him fondly, her heart swelling as she observed him, his vital, straight shoulders, slim hips, and the golden brown eyes which reminded her of his father. Like his father, George would be of interest to the girls, she surmised. Unlike his father, she hoped she had knocked a bit of character into him, mainly by not spoiling him and by teaching him the value of a Euro.

'The world owes none of us a living, son!' she once said.

'I know that Ma. You've told me that before!' George had replied, impatient by now at the familiarity of this mantra.

'So long as you know,' she said softly, dropping the subject.

One day in late May, when the air was heavy with the scent that rose up from

crushed grass, the one scarred horse chestnut tree, and the few wanly flowering shrubs at the edge of the estate, Maria waited at her gate for George. The domestic help suppliers were on strike because of a dispute regarding van rosters, and to her dismay she was off work all that week. There had been the usual May rain and despite the pleasant, early summer scents, she felt irritable and wandered impatiently up and down her own path.

It was a week before George's Leaving Cert and, encouraged by his maths teacher, he had applied for a place in both Oxford and Cambridge University, in England. *He really should go for Oxbridge*, the teacher had advised Maria at the spring parent-teacher meeting. *Nothing to lose and everything to gain. I think he can do it, I really do ...*

Oh, she had replied, astonished at George's brilliance, which even she had not fully realised.

We should hear something, maybe a provisional offer of a place by the end of May.

A neighbour passed.

'Waiting for George?' said the neighbour pleasantly. He stood for a minute to adjust the belt of his jeans and wipe the sweat of the damp day from his face. He was an old widower who passed much of the time voluntarily collecting litter from around the pavements of the estate. Everywhere he went he carried a long fork-like gripper and a light plastic bin.

'Clammy weather despite the rain, isn't it?' he said, idly opening and shutting the litter gripper. 'It'll be a hard bus-ride across the city for George this afternoon. The traffic's gone crazy. I wouldn't like to have to face a long bus ride on a day like this!'

'Ah, George doesn't mind. He studies on his way home!' said Maria, with the pride of one who never studied much.

Minutes passed. She kept looking up at the sky.

‘I suppose a few clouds never did us any harm!’ she said at last.

‘Clouds, if you get enough of them, can be disastrous,’ said the neighbour absent-mindedly as he pulled a discarded milk-shake carton from the gulley below the pavement. ‘Think of the rain in ’87! Savage! The whole of Ringsend and Ballsbridge destroyed when the river burst its banks! Oh, you could lose your life with too much cloud.’

‘Still,’ Maria peaceably, not wanting to offend the neighbour, ‘at least we’re in a big city and not out in the sticks. The floods can be really bad out there. Global warming has changed things,’ she said knowledgeably.

‘You know that’s true I suppose,’ said the neighbour. He looked at his fingernails. ‘Well, it’s the biggest city in Ireland now,’ he said, earnestly. ‘It’s a cosmopolitan city now. It’s big, oh very big and full of foreigners. Not so big it can be seen from the moon I’d say. Not like the Great Wall of China. But it’s a big, big place.’

Maria was beginning to wish her neighbour would move on. She wanted to concentrate on George’s arrival down the long road. The man must have sensed her inattention, because he said goodbye and headed off in search of litter.

When half an hour had passed it became apparent to Maria that George must be delayed. She texted him.

Are u stuck in traffic?

A minute later the reply came. *Yea, c u l8r, round 6. Gud news Ma!*

She re-read the message, afraid to believe what she thought the good news might be. Oh God, she panicked joyfully. That must mean ...

She raced back into the house, opened the tin box beneath the doll’s voluminous skirt, and pulled on a light jacket. The supermarket was a ten minute walk, but if she was quick she could get there and back in half an hour. There was,

obviously, something to celebrate. As she raced along the road she had no time to do more than greet her neighbours in the most cursory fashion, a nod here, a quick hello there.

Once in the supermarket, she delayed, fascinated by the sheer choice of foods, most of which she would not ordinarily buy unless they struck her as good value. Although she had not intended to, she took a large trolley instead of the small basket she would normally have chosen. She took her time along the supermarket aisles, examining sauces and pastas, rich, sweating cheeses, and the warm, yeasty aroma of breads that lay piled provocatively within wicker baskets. She bought Italian breads and French breads, then added some Polish bread for good measure, on the grounds that it was good to experiment. Then she added two thickly cut steak fillets, a head of garlic, lettuce, vine tomatoes, and small new potatoes from Cyprus. For dessert they could have that rich creamy ice-cream George so liked. Strawberry cheesecake flavour, she remembered, reaching into the ice-cream cabinet and withdrawing two tubs.

She walked home as briskly as she could, but, weighed down with groceries, the journey took twice as long as it normally would, and she arrived at her gate breathless and with tired arms.

The moment she looked up the path at the house, she knew something was amiss.

The front door was half open. She noticed too that the upstairs blinds were closed. Had she forgotten to open them that morning? No, it was not possible. Forgetfulness was not her style. Once inside the gate she dropped the groceries and ran. She pushed the door back fully and raced down the narrow hallway, glancing wild-eyed into the small sitting-room at the front as she went. The cushions of the sofa were all over the place, the sofa itself had been ripped and the television stolen. Worse, to her mind, was the sight of George's school rucksack on the floor

beside the open kitchen door.

It was only afterwards, when the harm was done, that Maria began to think that it might, perhaps, have been the presence of that doll in the landing window that gave some peering Peter, some crack cocaine addict, the idea that she had nice, worthwhile *things* in the house, that it might be a worthwhile place to turn over.

‘George! George!’ she screamed, flailing around for some sight of him. But the kitchen, which had also been overturned, with broken crockery everywhere, and the fridge door wide open, was empty.

Some instinct made her pause before she went upstairs. She thought of the Spanish doll, perched in her display case. Some dread seized her. She began to take the stairs in twos, screaming as she went, calling out her son’s name over and over in the silent house.

He lay there on the landing floor, collapsed and crumpled in on himself the way a dog that had just been killed might be.

‘Oh God, oh God, let him just be unconscious, let him be alive!’ she screamed. By then, the neighbour she had spoken to earlier was on his way down the road again, noticed that something was different about the house, and arrived at the top of the stairs, along with two women, just as Maria knelt down by her son. He lay near the window, where the doll was not smashed, but overturned, her porcelain legs sticking up ridiculously within her rumpled skirts.

‘He’s only passed out!’ Maria screamed and she urged the three that had gathered around her to do something for him. ‘For God’s sake get the doctor!’ she cried, pushing one of the women towards the head of the stairs. ‘Get a move on! Doctor! Ambulance! Phone 999!’

But the other woman, and the man, were crossing themselves already, and fell to their knees beside her, for it was clear that George was dead. His blood had spread in a bright, uneven pool, and there was a deep cut on his head.

‘Can you feel a pulse?’ Maria implored the man, whose hand was on her shoulder, who was hushing her in an attempt at consolation.

‘Let’s carry him to the bedroom,’ the man suggested gently, looking into her eyes.

‘What was he at, trying to stand up to those knackers? Why didn’t he let them take the money? What’s money? Is it worth poor George’s life?’

But after a time she stopped raving, and looked from one face to the other.

‘Why didn’t he just slip out of the house again before they saw him?’ she sobbed. ‘Why did he try to hang onto a tinful of money? Didn’t he know he was worth more to his mother than an old tin that would be opened to pay his fees one of these days? Why did he do it? Why? Why?’ she wept. ‘Now I can hardly pay for the funeral,’ she murmured to herself.

The neighbours had begun to weep.

‘There now!’ they said. ‘There now!’ and that was all they could think of saying, and they repeated it often, even after the guards arrived, and the doctor.

‘There now! There now!’

In the years that followed, whenever Maria spoke of her son George to the good neighbours who dropped in to keep her company for an hour or two in the evenings, she always had the same question to ask; tireless, gnawing, unanswerable.

And they always gave the same answer.

‘There now!’ they said. ‘Time will help! Let time do its work! We’re here for you, always!’ they impressed on her. And they sat as silently as Maria herself, gazing towards the flat-screen television on which the events of the world were reported in an unceasing tide of colour, blood and anger. Whenever Maria saw blood on the faces of children in the Middle East wars, she would weep, because it always reminded her of George, and the waste of young lives everywhere.

But surely some of those neighbours must have been stirred to wonder about what would have happened had George not decided to go bald-headed in defence of his mother's store of banknotes? And surely some of them must have stared into their own flat-screen television sets as the activities of the world unfolded before their eyes, as great towers crumbled in New York, as famines and despair ravaged the people of Darfur? Surely they pictured the scene of the tragedy again, altering a detail here and there as they did so, and giving the story a different twist. For her neighbours knew Maria and her intensities and follies, just as they knew George, and when you know people well it is sometimes easier to anticipate what they might say and do under certain conditions than it is to remember what the facts actually were. In fact, sometimes invention is far more satisfying than accurate retelling, because without invention the real history of our presence on this planet, which is storytelling and gossip, would wither and die.

So, let me tell you what I myself think might have happened had George not been so courageous. It is no more of a fiction than what I have just recounted.

To be honest, in some respects the new story is the same as the old.

It begins the same way, too. There is Maria working hard to make ends meet, holding down two jobs, fussing and caring for George so that he might have a better life and be able to hold his own with the sons of the professionals she half-admires. There too, is the neighbour, stopping to chat to her. When he opens his mouth it is to utter the same remark as before.

'Waiting for George?' said the neighbour pleasantly. He stood for a minute to adjust the belt of his jeans and wipe the sweat of the damp day from his face. It will be remembered that he was an old man.

'Clammy weather despite the rain, isn't it?' he said, idly opening and shutting the litter gripper. 'It'll be a hard bus-ride across the city for George this afternoon. The traffic's gone crazy. I wouldn't like to have to face a long bus ride on a day

like this!’

‘Ah, George doesn’t mind. He reads books all the way home!’ Maria crowed with the pride of one who never studied much.

Minutes passed. She kept looking up at the sky.

‘I suppose a few clouds never did us any harm!’ she said at last.

‘Clouds, if you get enough of them, can be disastrous,’ said the neighbour absent-mindedly as he pulled a discarded milk-shake carton from the gulley below the pavement. ‘Think of the rain in ’87! The whole of Ringsend and Ballsbridge half destroyed when the river burst its banks!’

‘Still, at least we’re in a large city and not right out in the country. The floods can be really bad in low-lying parts,’ Maria said reasonably.

‘You know that’s true I suppose,’ said the neighbour. He examined his fingernails. ‘Well, it’s the biggest city in Ireland now,’ he said, earnestly. ‘It’s cosmopolitan. Full of migrants.’

Maria was beginning to wish her neighbour would move on. She wanted to concentrate on George’s arrival down the long road. The man must have sensed this.

‘Well, I’d best go on. No doubt you want to spoil your lambkin son!’ he teased gently.

Maria turned on him. ‘Are you talking about George?!’ she asked. ‘George was no lambkin, not from the day he was born!’

‘Oh now, oh now,’ the man said in a knowing voice, before moving on.

When half an hour had passed it became apparent to Maria that George must be delayed. She texted him and he replied that he was on his way, that he had good news for her.

So here she is now in the supermarket, shopping carefully for the anticipated happy meal. She has bought the breads, fillet steak, a bottle of red wine I forgot to

mention in the first story, and of course the ice-cream: strawberry cheesecake flavour, George's favourite.

When Maria arrived back at the house, pushing her way tiredly up the concrete path towards the front door, she noticed that it was slightly ajar. George was home, she thought happily, dragging her groceries into the hall and laying them down carefully on the floor.

But all was not what it seemed. George came thundering down the stairs, his face red and furious, eyes blazing. At a glance she also noticed that downstairs was wrecked, the television gone.

'What is it?' she shrieked.

'Oh Ma, Ma, the money's gone!' he shouted in agitation.

Maria screamed and threw her arms up in the air and ran outside in a panic. Just then, the elderly neighbour was making his way past her gate again, and spotting a drama in the making, decided to come in. At the same time, two women from across the way came running.

'I couldn't help it Ma. I couldn't help it. They must have been followin me. I didn't notice till one of them was holdin a blade to me throat!'

Maria ran upstairs and lifted the overturned doll. She stood for a moment, examining it all over, holding it by the head, and letting the long, wide skirt dangle in the air. She ran down again into the hall, where George, the elderly man and the two women clustered anxiously. Then, catching the doll by the feet she raised it above her head and brought it down on George's back, in blow after blow, delivered with venom, and the doll smashed on his head, which got another cut, so that blood flowed, over George's face and hands, over his white school shirt and even dripping down onto the hall floor. It was as if her whole life was unravelling like a huge sweater in which there had been one tiny tear. She saw it clearly, the yarn of her life, her sweating daily effort which was all poured into her dreams of

George's future, unravelling and falling to a heap of nothingness.

'You stupid, stupid blockhead!' she screamed between blows. 'How could you not have seen them? How often have I told you to keep the front door locked as soon as you come home? How many times, eh? You must've known they were on your heels. It wouldn't be the first time some of the lads from round here turned on you!'

She turned to the old man. 'Shouldn't he have been more careful than to let those yobbos run him down and into the place?'

'Well, I suppose you can't be careful enough these days,' said the old man uncertainly, his eye on the broken doll in Maria's hand.

'There you are!' Maria said. She flung the doll on the floor. 'You saw the doll on the landing window, knowing what lay beneath,' she raged at George, 'but you made no attempt to divert their attention! Never crossed your mind to phone the cops! Right? *Right?*' she screeched, twisting the lobe of his bloodied ear.

'Ma! No, no Ma! Sure what could I do? They knocked me around the place and began waving knives and hammers in me face!' George's lip trembled.

'You could've texted someone!'

'Ma, are you mad or what? They'd have killed me if I'd taken out the mobile.' Christ's sakes Ma, they'd have killed me!'

'I mean, did you do it on purpose, like? Did you want to avoid going to college? Is that what it's all about? Sudden laziness just when success is yours? You've got an offer in one of those big-smoke English universities, right? The kind of offer nobody around here gets in a million years?'

George nodded, his face reddening. 'Yeah, I got a place. Two places, in fact,' he said in a dull voice.

'Oh.' Maria dropped the doll, the truth of his words taking the wind from her sails. So he'd done it! He'd done it. He could – if he wanted – now take a

scholarship place at Cambridge or Oxford. Instantly, she wanted to calm the whole situation, to be rid of the gaping neighbours who should not be present for such good news. But they were staring at her. The words of the old man still prickled in her mind. The thing about George being a *lambkin*. Lambkin, how are you! She imagined them now, sniggering behind her back after the display of unfettered rage, and after the crazy logic of her thinking which, in the heat and panic of the moment, had let her down. She, who had always and for so long held their lives together, had slipped. Well, she wouldn't satisfy them!

She turned to George. 'So, you've got two scholarship places, eh?'

'Yes Ma,' he replied, looking at her, his eyes suddenly mistrustful.

'Scholarships!,' she said sarcastically, at the same time trying to lighten things a bit. 'I suppose you'll be too good for the rest of us from now on. I suppose you think you can do what you like, when it's not so long ago I was wiping your arse, and mopping up after you!'

The neighbours laughed at that, and the tension was broken. But the moment the words were out, her heart burned at the sight of his embarrassed face.

'Get into the kitchen!' she commanded with a forced laugh, giving him a shove in the back. 'Let me see to those cuts while we're waiting for the cops, scholarship or not!'

Again, the neighbours tittered. She wanted to get him away from them. She hated them suddenly. If they had not been present things might have been different. At least she had the groceries, the special meal she had bought so carefully, spending far more than she would usually for an evening meal. She wanted to get the potatoes sliced and par-boiled, and the cheese grated, and the garlic sliced, so that she could make cheesy potato pie for George. It would comfort him.

But George only poked at the food when she served it up. And even after he had washed himself clear of blood there was a new sullenness to him. The cops

came and made notes. They spoke kindly to Maria. Immediately after the squad car left, George said he was going out. She passed the evening uneasily, her eyes half-witnessing the events of the world as they were relayed on the news station, no longer caring about them, because her world had shrunk and she was poor in a manner she would not have thought possible.

She went to bed around midnight. She thought she heard George let himself in sometime during the night, turned over, and then slept deeply, because the drama had tired her out.

The following morning she went in to wake him for school, because it was revision week, the last precious week before the Leaving, but his room was empty; his bed had not been slept in, and when she examined the wardrobe she saw that his best clothes were gone. She rang around the neighbours homes but he wasn't in any of them. And she thought she could sense the little judgements as she hung up each one and phoned another. He wasn't at school either.

The police did their best but there was no news. Nor would there be for three weeks. A long text arrived saying that he was well and that she was not to worry. He was working in the midlands with a team of block-layers. There was plenty of work and no need to go abroad. He would not be returning home, he said. In time, he added, he'd replace the money that had been stolen, but she would have to wait. The text was simply signed, 'George'.

When she read that, she screamed to herself and jumped up and down, clenching her fists, holding bare knuckles against her teeth in an attempt to silence the screams, but still they emerged from her throat, high and pitiful.

... And so people may have let their thoughts wander as they sat before the television with Maria, listening to her voice repeating the same thing, over and over.

'Why did he try to hang onto a tinful of money – no matter how much was in

it? Didn't he know his life was worth more to his Ma than an old tin that would be opened to pay some stupid university fees? My boy, oh my lovely boy!' she wailed. Occasionally she thought of Jorge, George's father, and of the seed he had planted on her third night in Spain.

Perhaps every action has a double life, the potential for alternatives. In the end, it is only by paying absolute attention to the heart within our hearts – the invisible one which beats beyond the physical, vital with instinct – that we follow the path destined for us. Because no matter how tragic *that* path may be, it is better than the needless tragedy we bring upon ourselves. We witness daily, on our television screens, tragedy and needless tragedy alike. Even so, we learn nothing.