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Extracts from the play 'she had a ticket in mind'

O'Connor, F.

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she had a ticket in mind

Like so many I was both enraged and inspired by the Waking the Feminists campaign of 2015. It stirred me to write a play. Following Anne Enright's observation that a few bad plays by women would surely be welcome distraction from the many perfectly written, turgid plays by men she'd stumbled from out of the Abbey's doors, I felt I could write a play as bad as anyone else. More than that, I felt it was essential now to do so.

I had been working on a piece of poetry, a stream of consciousness dialogue between a mother and daughter. When this writing began to divide into other voices and characters I recognised the possibilities of a play developing.

As a child of the 60's – which in Ireland translates as the punitive 50's – I received a second hand experience of the repression of Irish women. I wore it on my skin, from punishments, from humiliations. Discipline and punishment were the dominant expressions of women with authority over me – nuns, teachers and my mother. In the late 1970's I found a way out that combined punishment with the pleasure of imaginary fantasy: the ballet, winning a scholarship to train with The Dance Theatre of Harlem in New York. I can see now how I was attempting a physical realisation of my ambitions in the most literal of ways - my body would be my ticket out of the country and its repressions - I would become a ballerina, or so I willed it, like any good fairy of 19th century fantasy.

Becoming a ballerina is both an enactment of punishment and a spectacular triumph over it. Physical sacrifice, martyrdom, madness – all tropes of 19th century ballet, are also reality for many a female ballet dancer – just look at the movie *Black Swan*. I realise now that the ethereal creatures of my mother's fantasies, *Odette/Odile*, *Giselle*, *The Dying Swan*, perused in picture books in the long evenings waiting for my father to come home, were all embodiments of her own experience.

An intelligent and beautiful woman, Stella, my mother, had four live births, a miscarriage and an ectopic pregnancy from which she clinically died in surgery but was resuscitated. At the time six children per marriage was the norm, although often exceeded. In Stella's case, after each pregnancy she plunged into chronic depression leading to mental breakdown. She was often heavily medicated before being hospitalised for extended periods and receiving electroconvulsive treatment, following which she lost most of her teeth. She died aged forty six.

That's one side of the story of her life, and it's as much as I know. Clearly there was more; my mother, like so many women of her generation, kept her secrets well hidden. As her eldest daughter I felt both the brunt of her illnesses but also the effects of her cautious engaging with 70's early feminism that began to feed her curiosity. A child of 30's impoverished rural Ireland, convent girl and no stranger to the rod, Stella lived through a period of darkness only slowly turning to light, in which her own daughter's development of sexuality was a catalyst for intense disturbance. The mass of contradictions that made up my mother, pious Catholic who threw the parish priest out of her house, activist feminist opposed to any forms of contraception, gave me the starting point for my play in which the texture of secret lives and lies is examined to explore, among other things, women's unknowing participation in their own subjugation.

Played by four actresses, *she had a ticket in mind* is a kind of whirling dance through many facets of women's stories now coming to be known. In researching for the play I was struck by similarities to my own experience in the testimonies of offspring, when they spoke of the cost to their mothers of the secrets they had kept, often for their whole lives. The conceit of the play is an alternative history lesson in which a class of schoolgirls imagines some of the internal narratives of Irish society over the last decades. It's a class in which one member is a missing presence - the roll call at the beginning of the play notes a silence after the teacher calls out the name of Ann Lovett.

Ghosts of iconic figures, some real, some a part of the literary canon, unearth the untold of women's lives: Peig Sayers to Annie Murphy (of Bishop Casey infamy), to Queen Mebh of Connacht, to Pegeen Mike, to Joanne Hayes, to the teenage visionaries of the 1986 Sligo apparitions, and many more, appear and disappear as the secrets and lies beneath Irish womanhood are probed for what was lost when truth was the forbidden.

The play concludes with the scene of a woman pushing a pram home in heavy rain, dragging her other small children along, carrying another in her womb. Inside her mind the truth of her intentions, her panic and dismay, are played out as the imagined reality of so many Irish women, a reality that could not be spoken of or heard. And I suppose the woman is Stella as much as she is me.

she had a ticket in mind.

Classroom during a history lesson. Four chairs make up the set. Extract 1

Blue: Suigh seos girls, agus oscail sa leabhra. Deirdre, tú fein ag leabh ar dtús, mar sé do thoilha.

Deirdre/Chorus: (*Bus bell*) She had a ticket in mind

paper tongue

from a bus-man's groin

hand chunking the wringer

metal tang coming through and

the clipped mechanical

of its music

she listened to

like a responsorial from

her own secret chant and

she was on her way.

Blue: 'The year 1973', a historian noted, 'yielded its aggregates: beets, spuds, cabbage, barley and maize.'

Deirdre: Farmers were mired in their acreage, farmer's wives heaving progeny into old mattresses.

Chorus: Daughters though were journeying.

Blue: Newly familiar with the alternative formula – turning them into verdure, turning them into yield – newly pregnant with the knowledge they moved, leaving the fields, emerging cautious, sliding along the roads, steady exodus, buses steaming, trains rail clack grieving all the way to the shore. There, boats at anchor, filling with their burdens to ferry away, away, away across the Oirish Sea.'

Grainne: (*Dreamy*) Yellow fields like fever,

toiled and tilled,

ploughed and seeded.

In the ditches nesting: girls, legs akimbo.

Blue: Sé do bheatha, a Mhuire...

Chorus: atá lan de ghrásta. (*continues through Mebh's lines to 'fingers'*) Tá an Tiarna leat, is beannaithe thú idir mná, agus is beannaithe toradh do bhroinne, Íosa....

Mebh: The unrecorded history of the journeying, hiding in knickers, torn gussets; the issuings, the silvery flow like change from a bus man's fingers; it marks her place on the line; her beads: rosary ropes to a knife-edged summer, lying beneath a weight...

Chorus: O Lord, open my lips...

Medb: ...and letting fall away all warnings...

Chorus:

of the lone space body

of the ticking clock

pit-a-patta, pit-a-patta,

of a potential lie

when the innocence

of a smile wore the inner lewd

of a come-all-ya,

of a

roll ova,

in the clova,
of a ry-ed.

2

(Bell)

Deirdre: Thimble drops of water to dollies' frozen mouths. Sparrow sips, dab the chin, wipe the nose, finger plastic mould between the legs where another hole offers a periscope view: pink-hued recesses, rosy caves, wondering how it worked and how you might become *Womb*. Bending your dolls, pulling off legs, reattaching then with proprietary twist, pulling off arms to see inside, any inclination of breast? Any inclination of flesh and warmth? Succour?

Blue: No matter, you'd find it later in a yellow field, with scalded legs, with big girl, clumsy self-loathing. You'd find it under a weight that uttered 'I love you,' in a sleepy resentment, in a whisper as you were fingered...

Chorus: Hush, hush, a leanbh tréigthe.

Mebh: 'I love you,' says he.

Blue: (*to doll*) 'It won't hurt, relax, it won't hurt, there, there now, hold still, hold still, it won't hurt you...'

Chorus: Come to the gates, a chuisle mo chroi, here, here.

Deirdre: Snip off the toes then. Snip the finger tips. Snip off the nose. And the lemony curls. And the sweeping lashes.

Grainne: When we went in we'd to change our names – I don't know why. It took a while to get used to.

Deirdre: The dolly that cried – pink sound box in the hollow of her back. Maah.

Chorus: Open her up, see how she runs.

Grainne: Brigid was to be my name but the girl I shared with was also Brigid – that was her real name but she was to be called Mary...

Chorus: Mary!

Grainne: So whenever I was called, she answered and when she was called nobody answered, or else twenty did, because the place was running with Marys.

Blue: Blinking her blue startled eyes: Maah! Blinca-blinca, Maah! Blinca-blinca, Maah!

Mebh: (*apart*) Walk up Euston Road. Traffic roar drowning out footsteps. Black taxis billowing diesel smut. Lone girls disappearing into noise.

Grainne: So then we said we might as well all be Mary. If we couldn't be our real selves.

Mebh: The city swallows faces.

Juno: I'd left him a message but they said he didn't work there anymore.

Mebh: Swallows voices.

Grainne: So when we were called we didn't answer. Unless they called out 'Mary', and we'd all answer then.

Blue: The doll that was a bride. Her dress sewn onto her, the lopsided veil, white untouchable.

Grainne: Except for the ones who really were Mary, of course.

Chorus: The carriage rocking side to side.

Grainne: They couldn't answer. That was the rule.

Chorus: (*moving together as on a train*) De dah, de dah.

De dada, de da.

Juno: I borrowed the money from a friend. Sympathetic now, but I knew how his mind worked. I'd pay him back quick as I could. My hands were trembling. Train moving me towards it. Chatter in the carriages. Brick houses passing. Small gardens, child's bike thrown down, passed.

Chorus: De dada, de da.

Blue: White satin, dolly's wedding dress, made by your mother. At night while you slept.

Mebh: By day the woman ignored you, by night her needle was your instruction. She gathered the taffeta veil beneath a crown of fake teardrop pearls – remnants of a necklace you broke one time. Pulled from around her neck, you remember?

Blue: Creamy pearls: the spill and scatter across a wooden floor.

Chorus: De dah, de dah,

De dada de dah.

Juno: He was a bouncer at a nightclub off Grafton St. Not your big beefy tattooed type – not at all. An out of work engineer in the recession with a wife in the suburbs, two young children. We'd had a few chats. A kiss once. Nothing else. Then I heard my name called out behind me one evening. Except it wasn't my name. 'Sylvia' he called.

Chorus: Sylvia!

Juno: I turned, recognising something in the voice. And there he was.

Chorus: De da, de da, de dada de da.

Grainne: You had to laugh. We kept it up, drove the nuns mad. Sure half of them were Mary too.

Bluestocking: Your mother taught you to read, taught you to count up and take away. So you counted out seven of her pregnancies, and the six girls that survived. After each term there came what was called 'depression'. 'Your mammy's depressed', they'd say. And after each depression came electro- convulsive therapy... (*convulse*) ...to set her right again.

Grainne: But then when we thought about it, about all the other homes and all of the Marys in them – the whole country teeming with Marys, secret Marys. And every Mary of a Mary of a Mary, Mary begotten and all her hidden sisters, and all the teeny tiny Marys to crawl forth and multiply, proliferate the hallowed Virgin Mary over and over in Holy perpetuity. Fuck me, how we laughed – we really did. But that was just the hysteria.

3

(Bell)

(Chorus take turns with pushing a pram/chair)

Peegen Mike: Saved a shilling when she could.

Chorus: Penny for the hen.

Peegen Mike: At the post office she turned her shillings into a note and when she got home she hid the note with the others wrapped in her wedding dress, rolled up on the bottom of her wardrobe. She thought of this; it gave her a purpose. The children holding onto the pram, the baby querulous in the pram. The shopping in her basket weighing them down. Her feet sore, legs tired, nausea, she couldn't keep down a bite. Pushing home, nods to the watching neighbours, warning the children to keep up, one hand steering the black pram, one hand carrying the food, pram hood up then when the rain starts to spit, coat hoods up for the children, pick up the basket, hurry now, we'll be soaked...

Chorus: Maah!

Peegen Mike: Come on, I said, before it starts pouring. The baby is crying, steering the pram with the basket hand she fishes for the dummy in her pocket, the eldest tries to find sweets in the basket, a bag falls out of the basket, stop that, she picks up the bag, hold onto the pram, I said, both of you, she jerks them forwards, the younger child trips, flat out onto the pavement, she keeps going with the pram, the older child tries to pull the younger one up, 'Get up, she's going!' the child screams, 'you're hurting me...'

Chorus: Maah!

Peegen Mike: She turns back, reversing with the big pram, 'come on, it's going to lash in a minute,' the wind has picked up, leaves are rattling in the gutters, 'she hurt me', the younger child cries, 'no I didn't, I pulled you up', 'she did, she pinched me', 'get over here both of you', the rain is spitting on the pram hood, on her hair, lacquered and back combed before she could leave, on the messages in the basket, on her two girls just over bad colds, lips and noses still red and chaffed, on her feet in the stiletto shoes, her legs in the stockings pinned into the girdle that is becoming too tight. She thinks of the pound note she will hide in her wedding dress, later, after she has got the children fed and put to bed, but before he comes home, it makes her heart beat faster, the thought of her dress, fitted, hand stitched, beautiful on her, worn once then carefully folded, layered with white tissue paper, laid out like a body

in a striped box for the rest of her life, but now rolled into a ball of dirty pound notes that will get her out of this...

Juno: I went back to the nightclub. One afternoon, I walked past the closed door, back and forth. Eventually I knocked. Two women setting up the bar for the night. I asked for him. The women washing glasses, stooping to bring up bottles, busy and knowing. 'He doesn't work here now,' one said. 'No number, no trace,' said the other. I was relieved. No trace. I went to be sick in a public toilet.

Chorus: Da da, da da, de dada da da.

Da da, da da, de dada da da, de dada da da, de dada da da, de dada dada dada da da

Juno: A weekend case my mother had bought me before she died. Always these cases – at Christmas or birthdays, as though luggage was all I needed. Now it carries the things on the list they gave me. Sanitary towels, nightgown, changes of knickers.

Chorus: No number, no trace.

Medb: Long brown hair. She stands at the bus stop, her case in hand.

Juno: Neatly packed with clean knickers and sanitary towels, a cotton nighty, slippers...

Chorus: As she's been told.

Juno: Nobody knows, apart from the guy who's lent me the money, and I'll pay him back quick as I can...

Chorus: Penny for the hen...

Medb: The city absorbs this journey: it's just another of the millions of stories making their way through.

Chorus: Over from the auld country is yeh? Pullin' a load?

Juno: Nobody knows, and if nobody knows then it's like it never happened.

Chorus: 'The unmarried mother's greatest need is secrecy.' Said a Dail Eireann report, 1950 – is that not good enough for you?

Pegeen Mike: 'Come on, we're nearly home.' The rain is falling in heavy sheets like a vendetta against them. Their heads are bowed to it, and the wind squalls around the huddle they make, attached to the stately black pram. 'Alright baby, won't be long now,' the baby is howling for milk and warmth. She feels like howling herself. She slips her hand into her coat pocket to check the damp pound note. It is still there. In America somewhere the first child of her womb lives, perhaps. Happy or unhappy, she will never know. The wind is driving against them so strongly it takes her breath away. In a filing cabinet somewhere a paper registers the first attachment.

Chorus: Clean record, white certificate pristine as the hands that wrote it.

Pegeen Mike: Certainly not in any way liable...

Chorus: Certainly not.

Pegeen Mike:... merely performing its duty.

Chorus: Dutiful as the first born that gets a vocation

Pegeen Mike: ... paper afterbirth of a chain of command that delivered her from the shame of her womanhood.

Chorus: Deliver her from all evil.

Pegeen Mike: Nobody knows.

Chorus: An Irish solution...

Pegeen Mike: The children stumble along the new concrete of a suburb, newly laid to meet the marriage-sanctioned citizens, those without shame. The baby howls, 'keep going,' she harries the other two, 'nearly there, nearly there now, nearly home'. Nobody knows her, and nobody ever will.

END