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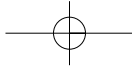
An Army of Secrets



If you were to stroll down the candy-cane façade of a suburban housing estate early on Christmas morning, you couldn't help but observe how the houses in all their tinselled glory are akin to the wrapped parcels that lie beneath the Christmas trees within. For each holds their secrets inside. The temptation of poking and prodding at the packaging is the equivalent of peeping through a crack in the curtains to get a glimpse of a family in Christmas-morning action; a captured moment that's kept away from all prying eyes. For the outside world, in a calming yet eerie silence that exists only on this morning every year, homes stand shoulder to shoulder like painted toy soldiers: chests pushed out, stomachs tucked in, proud and protective of all within.

Houses on Christmas morning are treasure chests of hidden truths. A wreath on a door like a finger upon a lip; blinds down like closed eyelids. Then, at some unspecified time, beyond the pulled blinds and drawn curtains, a warm glow will appear, the smallest hint of something happening inside.



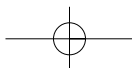


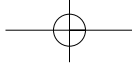
Like stars in the night sky which appear to the naked eye one by one, and like tiny pieces of gold revealed as they're sieved from a stream, lights go on behind the blinds and curtains in the half-light of dawn. As the sky becomes star-filled and as millionaires are made, room by room, house by house, the street begins to awaken.

On Christmas morning an air of calm settles outside. The emptiness on the streets doesn't instil fear; in fact it has the opposite effect. It's a picture of safety, and, despite the seasonal chill, there's warmth. For varying reasons, for every household this day of every year is just better spent inside. While outside is sombre, inside is a world of bright frenzied colour, a hysteria of ripping wrapping paper and flying coloured ribbons. Christmas music and festive fragrances of cinnamon and spice and all things nice fill the air. Exclamations of glee, of hugs and thanks, explode like party streamers. These Christmas days are indoor days; not a sinner lingering outside, for even they have a roof over their heads.

Only those in transit from one home to another dot the streets. Cars pull up and presents are unloaded. Sounds of greetings waft out to the cold air from open doorways, teasers as to what is happening inside. Then, while you're right there with them, soaking it up and sharing the invitation – ready to stroll over the threshold a common stranger but feeling a welcomed guest – the front door closes and traps the rest of the day away, as a reminder that it's not your moment to take.

In this particular neighbourhood of toy houses, one soul wanders the streets. This soul doesn't quite see the beauty in the secretive world of houses. This soul is intent on a war, wants to unravel the bow and rip open the paper to reveal what's inside door number twenty-four.



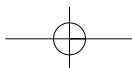


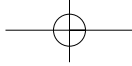
It is not of any importance to us what the occupants of door number twenty-four are doing, though, if you must know, a ten-month-old, confused as to the reason for the large green flashing prickly object in the corner of the room, is beginning to reach for the shiny red bauble that so comically reflects a familiar podgy hand and gummy mouth. This, while a two-year-old rolls around in wrapping paper, bathing herself in glitter like a hippo in muck. Beside them, *He* wraps a new necklace of diamonds around *Her* neck, as she gasps, hand flying to her chest, and shakes her head in disbelief, just as she's seen women in the black and white movies do.

None of this is important to *our* story, though it means a great deal to the individual that stands in the front garden of house number twenty-four looking at the living room's drawn curtains. Fourteen years old and with a dagger through his heart, he can't see what's going on, but his imagination was well nurtured by his mother's daytime weeping, and he can guess.

And so he raises his arms above his head, pulls back, and with all his strength pushes forward and releases the object in his hands. He stands back to watch, with bitter joy, as a fifteen-pound frozen turkey smashes through the window of the living room of number twenty-four. The drawn curtains act once again as a barrier between him and them, slowing the bird's flight through the air. With no life left to stop itself now, it – and its giblets – descend rapidly to the wooden floor, where it's sent, spinning and skidding, along to its final resting place beneath the Christmas tree. His gift to them.

People, like houses, hold their secrets. Sometimes the secrets inhabit them, sometimes they inhabit their secrets. They wrap their arms tight to hug them close, twist their tongues around

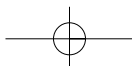
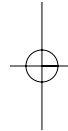
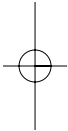




the truth. But after time truth prevails, rises above all else. It squirms and wriggles inside, grows until the swollen tongue can't wrap itself around the lie any longer, until the time comes when it needs to spit the words out and send truth flying through the air and crashing into the world. Truth and time always work alongside one another.

This story is about people, secrets and time. About people who, not unlike parcels, hide secrets, who cover themselves with layers until they present themselves to the right ones who can unwrap them and see inside. Sometimes you have to give yourself to somebody in order to see who you are. Sometimes you have to unravel things to get to the core.

This is a story about a person who finds out who they are. About a person who is unravelled and whose core is revealed to all that count. And all that count are revealed to them. Just in time.





2.

A Morning of Half-Smiles

Sergeant Raphael O'Reilly moved slowly and methodically about the cramped staff kitchen of Howth Garda Station, his mind going over and over the revelations of the morning. Known to others as Raphie, pronounced *Ray-fee*, at fifty-nine years old he had one more year to go until his retirement. He'd never thought he'd be looking forward to that day until the events of this morning had grabbed him by the shoulders, turned him upside down like a snow-shaker, and he'd been forced to watch all his preconceptions sprinkle to the ground. With every step he took he heard the crackle of his once-solid tight beliefs under his boots. Of all the mornings and moments he had experienced in his forty-year career, what a morning this one had been.

He spooned two heaps of instant coffee into his mug. The mug, shaped like an NYPD squad car, had been brought back from New York by one of the boys at the station, as his Christmas gift. He pretended the sight of it offended him, but secretly he



found it comforting. Gripping it in his hands during that morning's Kris Kringle reveal, he'd time-travelled back over fifty years to when he'd received a toy police car one Christmas from his parents. It was a gift he'd cherished until he'd abandoned it outside overnight and the rain had done enough rust damage to force his men into early retirement. He held the mug in his hands now, feeling that he should run it along the countertop making siren noises with his mouth before crashing it into the bag of sugar, which – if nobody was around to see – would consequently tip over and spill onto the car.

Instead of doing that, he checked around the kitchen to ensure he was alone, then added half a teaspoon of sugar to his mug. A little more confident, he coughed to disguise the crinkling sound of the sugar bag as the spoon once again pushed down and then quickly fired a heaped teaspoon into the mug. Having gotten away with two spoons, he became cocky and reached into the bag one more time.

'Drop your weapon, sir,' a female voice from the doorway called with authority.

Startled by the sudden presence, Raphie jumped, the sugar from his spoon spilling over the counter. It was a mug-on-sugar-bag pile-up. Time to call for back-up.

'Caught in the act, Raphie.' His colleague Jessica joined him at the counter and whipped the spoon from his hand.

She took a mug from the cupboard – a Jessica Rabbit novelty mug, compliments of Kris Kringle – and slid it across the counter to him. Porcelain Jessica's voluptuous breasts brushed against his car, and the boy in Raphie thought about how happy his men inside would be.

'I'll have one too.' She broke into his thoughts of his men playing pat-a-cake with Jessica Rabbit.

‘Please,’ Raphie corrected her.

‘Please,’ she imitated him, rolling her eyes.

Jessica was a new recruit. She’d just joined the station six months ago, and already Raphie had grown more than fond of her. He had a soft spot for the twenty-six-year-old, five-foot-four athletic blonde who always seemed willing and able, no matter what her task was. He also felt she brought a much-needed feminine energy to the all-male team at the station. Many of the other men agreed, but not quite for the same reasons as Raphie. He saw her as the daughter that he’d never had. Or that he’d had, but lost. He shook that thought out of his head and watched Jessica cleaning the spilled sugar from the counter.

Despite her energy, her eyes – almond-shaped and such a dark brown they were almost black – buried something beneath. As though a top-layer of soil had been freshly added, and pretty soon the weeds or whatever was decaying beneath would begin to show. Her eyes held a mystery that he didn’t much want to explore, but he knew that whatever it was, it drove her forward during those stand-out times when most sensible people would go the opposite way.

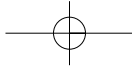
‘Half a spoon is hardly going to kill me,’ he added grumpily after tasting his coffee, knowing that just one more spoon would have made it perfect.

‘If pulling that Porsche over almost killed you last week, then half a spoon of sugar most certainly will. Are you actually *trying* to give yourself another heart attack?’

Raphie reddened. ‘It was a heart *murmur*, Jessica, nothing more, and keep your voice down,’ he hissed.

‘You should be resting,’ she said more quietly.

‘The doctor said I was perfectly normal.’



‘Then the doctor needs his head checked, you’ve never been perfectly normal.’

‘You’ve only known me six months,’ he grumbled, handing her the mug.

‘Longest six months of my life,’ she scoffed. ‘Okay then, have the brown,’ she said, feeling guilty, shovelling the spoon into the brown sugar bag and emptying a heaped spoon into his coffee.

‘Brown bread, brown rice, brown this, brown that. I remember a time when my life was in Technicolor.’

‘I bet you can remember a time when you could see your feet when you looked down too,’ she said without a second’s thought.

In an effort to dissolve the sugar in his mug completely, she stirred the spoon so hard that a portal of spinning liquid appeared in the centre. Raphie watched it and wondered: If he dived into that mug, where would it bring him.

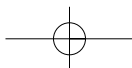
‘If you die drinking this, don’t blame me,’ she said, passing it to him.

‘If I do, I’ll haunt you until the day you die.’

She smiled but it never reached her eyes, fading somewhere between her lips and the bridge of her nose.

He watched the portal in his mug begin to die down, his chance of leaping into another world disappearing fast along with the steam that escaped the liquid. Yes, it had been one hell of a morning. Not much of a morning for smiles. Or maybe it was. A morning for half-smiles, perhaps. He couldn’t decide.

Raphie handed Jessica a mug of steaming coffee – black with no sugar, just as she liked – and they both leaned against the countertop, facing one another, their lips blowing on their



coffee, their feet touching the ground, their minds in the clouds.

He studied Jessica, hands wrapped around the mug and staring intently into her coffee as though it were a crystal ball. How he wished it was; how he wished they had the gift of foresight to stop so many of the things they witnessed. Her cheeks were pale, a light red rim around her eyes the only give-away to the morning they'd had.

'Some morning, eh, kiddo?'

Those almond-shaped eyes glistened but she stopped herself and hardened. She nodded and swallowed the coffee in response. He could tell by her attempt to hide the grimace that it burned, but she took another sip as if in defiance. Standing up even against the coffee.

'My first Christmas Day on duty, I played chess with the sergeant for the entire shift.'

She finally spoke. 'Lucky you.'

'Yeah,' he nodded, remembering back. 'Didn't see it that way at the time, though. Was hoping for plenty of action.'

Forty years later he'd gotten what he'd hoped for and now he wanted to give it back. Return the gift. Get his time refunded.

'You win?'

He snapped out of his trance. 'Win what?'

'The chess game.'

'No,' he chuckled. 'Let the sergeant win.'

She ruffled her nose. 'You wouldn't see me letting you win.'

'I wouldn't doubt it for a second.'

Guessing the hot drink had reached the right temperature, Raphie finally took a sip of coffee. He immediately clutched at his throat, coughing and spluttering, feigning death and



knowing immediately that despite his best efforts to lift the mood, it was in poor taste.

Jessica merely raised an eyebrow and continued sipping.

He laughed and then the silence continued.

'You'll be okay,' he assured her.

She nodded again and responded curtly as though she already knew. 'Yep. You call Mary?'

He nodded. 'Straight away. She's with her sister.' A seasonal lie; a white lie for a white Christmas. 'You call anyone?'

She nodded but averted her gaze, not offering more, never offering more. 'Did you, em . . . did you tell her?'

'No. No.'

'Will you?'

He gazed into the distance again. 'I don't know. Will you tell anyone?'

She shrugged, her look as unreadable as always. She nodded down the hall at the holding room. 'The Turkey Boy is still waiting in there.'

Raphie sighed. 'What a waste.' Of a life or of his own time, he didn't make clear. 'He's one that could do with knowing.'

Jessica paused just before taking a sip, and fixed those near-black almond-shaped eyes on him from above the rim of the mug. Her voice was as solid as faith in a nunnery, so firm and devoid of all doubt that he didn't have to question her certainty.

'Tell him,' she said firmly. 'If we never tell anybody else in our lives, at least let's tell him.'





3.

The Turkey Boy

Raphie entered the interrogation room as though he was entering his living room and was about to settle himself on his couch with his feet up for the day. There was nothing threatening about his demeanour whatsoever. Despite his height of six foot two, he fell short of filling the space his physical body took up. His head was, as usual, bent over in contemplation, his eyebrows mirroring the angle by dropping to cover his pea-sized eyes. The top of his back was slightly hunched, as though he carried a small shell as shelter. On his belly was an even bigger shell. In one hand was a Styrofoam cup, in the other his half-drunk NYPD mug of coffee.

The Turkey Boy glanced at the mug in Raphie's hand. 'Cool. Not.'

'So is throwing a turkey through a window.'

The boy smirked at the sentence and started chewing on the end of the string on his hooded top.

'What made you do that?'

‘My dad’s a prick.’

‘I gathered it wasn’t a Christmas gift for being father of the year. What made you think of the turkey?’

He shrugged. ‘My mam told me to take it out of the freezer,’ he offered, as if by way of explanation.

‘So how did it get from the freezer to the floor of your dad’s house?’

‘I carried it most of the way, then it flew the rest.’ He smirked again.

‘When were you planning on having dinner?’

‘At three.’

‘I meant what day. It takes a minimum of twenty-four hours of defrosting time for every five pounds of turkey. Your turkey was fifteen pounds. You should have taken the turkey out of the freezer three days ago if you intended on eating it today.’

‘Whatever, Ratatouille.’ He looked at Raphie like he was crazy. ‘If I’d stuffed it with bananas too would I be in less trouble?’

‘The reason I mention it, is because if you had taken it out when you should have, it wouldn’t have been hard enough to go through a window. That may sound like planning to a jury, and no, bananas and turkey isn’t a clever recipe.’

‘I didn’t plan it!’ he squealed, and his age showed.

Raphie drank his coffee and watched the young teenager.

The boy looked at the cup before him and ruffled his nose. ‘I don’t drink coffee.’

‘Okay.’ Raphie lifted the Styrofoam cup from the table and emptied the contents into his mug. ‘Still warm. Thanks. So, tell me about this morning. What were you thinking, son?’

‘Unless you’re the other fat bastard whose window I threw a bird through, then I’m not your son. And what’s this, a therapy

session or interrogation? Are you charging me with something or what?’

‘We’re waiting to hear whether your dad is going to press charges.’

‘He won’t.’ He rolled his eyes. ‘He can’t. I’m under sixteen. So if you just let me go now, you won’t waste any of your time.’

‘You’ve already wasted a considerable amount of it.’

‘It’s Christmas Day, I doubt there’s much else for you to do around here.’ He eyed Raphie’s stomach. ‘Other than eat doughnuts.’

‘You’d be surprised.’

‘Try me.’

‘Some idiot kid threw a turkey through a window this morning.’

He rolled his eyes and looked at the clock on the wall, ticking away. ‘Where are my parents?’

‘Wiping grease off their floor.’

‘They’re not my parents,’ he spat. ‘At least, *she’s* not my mother. If she comes with him to collect me, I’m not going.’

‘Oh, I doubt very much that they’ll come to take you home with them.’ Raphie reached into his pocket and took out a chocolate sweet. He unwrapped it slowly, the wrapper rustling in the quiet room. ‘Did you ever notice the strawberry ones are always the last ones left over in the tin?’ He smiled before popping it in his mouth.

‘I bet nothing’s ever left in the tin when you’re around.’

‘Your father and his partner –’

‘Who, for the record,’ Turkey Boy interrupted Raphie and leaned close to the recording device, ‘is a whore.’

‘They may pay us a visit to press charges.’



‘Dad wouldn’t do that.’ He swallowed, his eyes puffy with frustration.

‘He’s thinking about it.’

‘No he’s not,’ the boy whined. ‘If he is it’s probably because she’s making him. Bitch.’

‘It’s more probable that he’ll do it because it’s now snowing in his living room.’

‘Is it snowing?’ He looked like a child again, eyes wide with hope.

Raphie sucked on his sweet. ‘Some people just bite right into chocolate; I much prefer to suck it.’

‘Suck on this.’ The Turkey Boy grabbed his crotch.

‘You’ll have to get your boyfriend to do that.’

‘I’m not gay,’ he huffed, then leaned forward and the child returned. ‘Ah, come on, is it snowing? Let me out to see it, will you? I’ll just look out the window.’

Raphie swallowed his sweet and leaned his elbows on the table. He spoke firmly. ‘Glass from the window landed on the ten-month-old baby.’

‘So?’ the boy snarled, bouncing back in his chair, but he looked concerned. He began pulling at a piece of skin around his nail.

‘He was beside the Christmas tree, where the turkey landed. Luckily he wasn’t cut. The baby, that is, not the turkey. The turkey sustained quite a few injuries. We don’t think he’ll make it.’

The boy looked relieved and confused all at the same time.

‘When’s my mam coming to get me?’

‘She’s on her way.’

‘The girl with the’, he cupped his hands over his chest, ‘big jugs told me that two hours ago. What happened to her face by the way? You two have a lovers’ tiff?’

Raphie bristled over how the boy spoke about Jessica, but



kept his calm. He wasn't worth it. Was he even worth sharing the story with at all?

'Maybe your mother is driving very slowly. The roads are very slippery.'

The Turkey Boy thought about that and looked a little worried. He continued pulling at the skin around his nail.

'The turkey was too big,' he added, after a long pause. He clenched and unclenched his fists on the table. 'She bought the same-sized turkey she used to buy when he was home. She thought he'd be coming back.'

'Your mother thought this about your dad,' Raphie confirmed, rather than asked.

He nodded. 'When I took it out of the freezer it just made me crazy. It was too big.'

Silence again.

'I didn't think the turkey would break the glass,' he said, quieter now and looking away. 'Who knew a *turkey* could break a window?'

He looked up at Raphie with such desperation that, despite the seriousness of the situation, Raphie had to fight a smile at the boy's misfortune.

'I just meant to give them a fright. I knew they'd all be in there playing happy families.'

'Well, they're definitely not any more.'

The boy didn't say anything but seemed less happy about it than when Raphie had entered.

'A fifteen-pound turkey seems very big for just three people.'

'Yeah, well, my dad's a fat bastard, what can I say.'

Raphie decided he was wasting his time. Fed up, he stood up to leave.

'Dad's family used to come for dinner every year,' the boy

caved in, calling out to Raphie in an effort to keep him in the room. 'But they decided not to come this year either. The turkey was just too bloody big for the two of us,' he repeated, shaking his head. Dropping the bravado act, his tone changed. 'When will my mam be here?'

Raphie shrugged. 'I don't know. Probably when you've learned your lesson.'

'But it's Christmas Day.'

'As good a day as any to learn a lesson.'

'Lessons are for kids.'

Raphie smiled at that.

'What?' the boy spat defensively.

'I learned one today.'

'Oh, I forgot to add *retards* to that too.'

Raphie made his way to the door.

'So what lesson did you learn then?' the boy asked quickly, and Raphie could sense in his voice that he didn't want to be left alone.

Raphie stopped and turned, feeling sad, looking sad.

'It must have been a pretty shit lesson.'

'You'll find that most lessons are.'

The Turkey Boy sat slumped over the table, his unzipped hooded top hanging off one shoulder, small pink ears peeping out from his greasy hair that sat on his shoulders, his cheeks covered in pink pimples, his eyes a crystal blue. He was only a child.

Raphie sighed. Surely he'd be forced into early retirement for telling this story. He pulled out the chair and sat down.

'Just for the record,' Raphie said, '*you* asked *me* to tell you this.'