

## Protection

Aisling crouched onto the floor of the loo on the train and stuffed the little box she'd wrapped in tin foil into the corner. It didn't exactly blend in but putting it in the bin seemed so final, and there was still a chance she'd change her mind before the train reached Connolly Station in Dublin, even though they were only a few minutes away. She hadn't taken the things out of their little box, didn't want to touch them, even if part of her was a bit intrigued. They probably felt slimy. That's what she'd thought when Mona had stood up and held one aloft to the roars and laughs of the other women who'd travelled to Belfast with them. Most of them had never even seen one before. Mona was still playing with it when Aisling had left to go to the loo.

The train lurched, and Aisling had to place both hands on the sides of the cubicle to steady herself. When she straightened up, she peeled away a piece of toilet paper stuck to her shoe, then washed her hands. No soap. Typical. She fluffed up the paper bag from the pharmacy to pretend the things were still in it, left the loo and went back to her seat beside Mona. Imagine calling them things; she'd just finished an English degree. And it wasn't like it was the '50s. It was 1971. Still, some of the women called them yokes, which was worse. It reminded her of that joke about the dirty egg, that used to go up to people with its yolk hanging out.

Mona nodded at the paper bag.

'Have fun in there with them, did ya?'

'Great craic altogether,' said Aisling. 'I see you're not bored with yours yet.'

She nodded at the condom, unspooled and strung out, lying across Mona's lap.

'Maybe you should put it away,' said Aisling. 'Y'know, in case the inspector comes along or something.'

‘And what would be the point of that?’ said Mona. ‘I didn’t go all the way to Belfast to hide what I bought. That wouldn’t be much of a protest against the ban.’

Aisling arranged her scarf over the empty bag on her lap. ‘Suppose.’

‘I’m surprised you came on the trip.’ Mona picked up the condom and ran her finger around the rim. ‘With you going to do teacher training and all.’

Aisling said nothing and looked at the houses flit past the window. She hadn’t wanted Mona’s company, but she hadn’t exactly been able to say anything when Mona had plonked herself down beside her on the train. As if Aisling had been able to think about anything other than the consequences of doing this since they’d left the pharmacy in Belfast. Not that she hadn’t thought about them before the trip—of course she had; she nearly hadn’t climbed on the train in Dublin, had almost turned around and left, but something in her had made her clamber up those steps. That something had a lot to do with Mam; she knew that much. But that something had shrivelled up as the train trundled towards Dublin, towards Customs. Even if she wasn’t arrested, there was no way she’d be allowed to teach. She didn’t need Mona to tell her that. And what was she to do then?

Dad had scrimped for years to put her through university. Her part-time job hadn’t covered much, barely her fees. He’d borrowed money from the bank to pay for her lodgings, even though she knew that money was needed at home. The roof needed fixing. And the underside of the car was rusting. It probably had been like that for years, but she hadn’t noticed until the last time she’d gone home for the weekend, when Dad had given James from down the road a lift into town, and she’d sat in the back seat for the first time since Mam had drowned. Ever since that day, she’d always sat in the seat beside him. No wonder she hadn’t noticed that behind the front seat the place for the feet had disintegrated, rusted away, and she was able to see the road rushing under her feet. When she’d said it to Dad, he’d said he meant

to put a piece of plywood across it, that he was glad she'd reminded him, that it would have been awful if a rat had got into the car. She hadn't even thought of that.

Beside her on the train, Mona was playing with the condom, stretching it in and out like a concertina. Still, at least Ellen hadn't sat beside her. She was sitting two rows back with her friend Joan, and that suited Aisling just fine. She felt bad enough about hiding the condoms as it was. Ellen had always been kind to her, ever since Aisling had first lodged with her when she'd started university. She'd always sensed when Aisling was lonely, or down, and had made time to talk to her, even though she'd enough to be doing with her office job and cooking for three lodgers. Joan called over a few evenings a week too, often chatting with Ellen for hours in her bedroom, leaving the living room free for the lodgers to watch telly.

At first, when Ellen had served up steaming plates of meat and veg to the lodgers, Aisling had worried about what Dad was eating. Not that she'd cooked amazing meals for him when she was at home or anything. But at least when she was there, he'd always had a proper meal. Now that she was gone, he probably just had a boiled egg or something. She'd said as much to Ellen one night, and Ellen had said an egg wouldn't do him any harm, that it was good for a man to fend for himself.

When she'd heard why Mam died, Ellen had said other things too, and Aisling wasn't able to stop thinking about what she'd said. Dad would have been annoyed if he'd known she'd gone with Ellen to meetings for the Irish Women's Liberation Movement; Aisling knew that much, even if he must have agreed with what they stood for. After what had happened to Mam, how could he not?

Then again, he'd never faced up to how she'd died. He just wasn't able to. Her clothes still hung in his wardrobe. It wasn't as if he needed to make room for any of his own. He'd loved her since the first day he saw her, passing by him when he was fifteen. Mam had said

that a few times, back when she was in good form. But she'd never mentioned the person she'd loved more than anyone, even though at the end he must have been all she thought about.

Aisling had only found out about him years after she'd died. And for so long before that, when anyone asked her what had happened to Mam, she'd told them what Dad had said, that Mam had tried to save a man in the river, a man who had a baby and toddler at home. Not that many people asked or anything. Most people around knew that Mam had drowned, and the man too, and never brought it up, only to ask how Aisling's dad was doing. They never asked how Aisling was doing, only her dad.

But when she went to secondary school, she was asked the odd time about Mam. And there was a girl with a brown plait called Karen who shouldered Aisling any time she saw her in the corridor. The third time she did it, Aisling caught her plait and yanked it hard. Karen slammed Aisling against the wall, calling her a dirty liar, saying her mam had never tried to save anyone, that everyone knew she'd tried to kill herself, and that Karen's uncle had jumped in and died trying to save her, leaving two little boys behind. Aisling had shoved Karen off her and given her a such a thump she'd reeled, but as Aisling had walked away, she hadn't been able to shake an unsettling feeling that she wasn't able to name.

When she went home from school that day, Aisling just sat on her parents' bed—the same bed Mam had taken to for a few days before she'd drowned. Not that that meant anything. Aisling used to bring her a cup of tea in her room after she came home from school, even though Mam didn't usually drink it. Mostly, she just lay there.

Dad had come up the stairs and asked, 'Everything alright? What are you doing in here?'

She pulled a thread out of the bedspread.

'Dad, how did Mam die?'

‘Aisling, why are you asking me this? I’ve had a long day . . .’

‘A girl in school said her uncle had drowned trying to save Mam, that she’d tried to kill herself.’ She looked at his gaunt face. ‘That’s not true, is it?’

He slumped onto the bed and didn’t say anything.

‘Dad?’

‘It just became too much for her, Aisling.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘She’d always been . . . y’know . . . low, even when she was a girl. But then when she was sixteen, something happened.’

‘What?’

‘I can’t really talk about this kind of stuff with you, Aisling.’

‘What can’t you talk about? She was my mam!’

‘We loved each other very much.’ He stared at the chest of drawers and dug his thumbnail into his palm. ‘We just got carried away.’

Aisling looked confused.

He exhaled. ‘She became pregnant, Aisling. But not with you. And we weren’t married, not back then.’

Aisling grabbed his arm. ‘I have a brother or sister?’

‘You have a brother called Oisín. Well, that’s what she called him. He might not be called that now.’

‘Why?’

‘Your mam was sent to a mother and baby home to have him. She was forced to give him up for adoption.’

‘Why didn’t you stop them?’ He was trying to avoid looking at her, but she wouldn’t let him. ‘Dad?’

‘I begged her family to let us keep him. I even left school and got a job to prove I could provide, but they wouldn’t listen.’

She looked at his wedding ring, snuggled under his swollen, arthritic knuckle. ‘But ye got married.’

‘That was years after. We always loved each other, even after everything.’

‘Why didn’t ye get him back then?’

‘We tried so hard, but we were never able to find him.’

He reached across the bed to the locker on Mam’s side, opened the drawer and took a tiny photo from a navy velvet box. He ran his finger over the image.

‘That’s him.’

The little baby had Aisling’s nose.

‘Your mam never got over losing him,’ Dad said. ‘And I never will either.’

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Thinking about that wasn’t doing Aisling any good, only making her upset. She needed to get the condoms back and join the protest. But Cora was in the loo. Again. What was she doing in there anyway? It was the third time she’d gone. Maybe it was nerves. Cora hadn’t seemed that anxious when she’d bought spermicidal jelly in the pharmacy, not that she’d known what it was for. She’d said as much, but it hadn’t stopped her buying so many tubes that the bag had ripped in the street in Belfast, the boxes falling to the pavement. They’d all had such a laugh, scooping them up. None of them were laughing anymore though. Not even Mona. Even she’d gone quiet as Connolly Station came closer.

Aisling glanced back at Ellen whose face was drawn, her skin stretched taut as a bodhrán. Ellen wasn’t one to balk though. Aisling knew her well enough to be sure of that. She’d seen the huge mutton stew Ellen had left in the fridge for the lodgers, enough for three days, in case she got into bother.

Cora came back from the loo. The train was pulling into Connolly, and the tang of tea mixed with cheese from the sandwich Aisling had had earlier rose up her throat into her mouth. Even though she didn't want to, she felt herself stand up, leave her seat and walk down the passageway, avoiding the eyes of the others, particularly Ellen's. She went past the door to the loo, then continued through the next carriage before standing at the exit door.

A while later, she stood behind the crowd that had gathered in Connolly to watch the protest. Ellen, Joan and some of the other women swallowed aspirin in front of the TV cameras, saying it was the pill. When they'd gone to the pharmacy in Belfast, Aisling had thought at first that the pharmacist was only having them on when he'd said they'd need a prescription for the pill, that he'd heard their accents and thought they were thick. One of the women had suggested buying aspirin to pretend it was birth control; she'd said it wasn't as if the lads in Customs knew what the pill looked like anyway.

And maybe they didn't, but there was no way anyone in Customs could have missed Mona waving her condom in the air like a sock. They didn't stop her though; they only asked to look into a few of the women's bags. And when the women refused to hand over the condoms and tubes of jelly, the men in Customs didn't do anything, just ushered them through, and the women who'd gone to Belfast almost skipped along the platform to the whoops of the crowd. As they left the station, Aisling leaned against a pillar, her eyes following them until they snaked out of sight.