

BALLEA WRITERS

Bealtaine, the annual national festival, promotes the participation of adults in the arts. This year, the festival organisers launched the fourth publication in the series titled 'Consolation and other short stories'. One of the writers featured in this year's publication was Mary Lynskey of Ballea Writers Club.

James tore open the letter and idly watched it fall to the floor. He couldn't have caught it at gunpoint. The expensive cream parchment contrasted sharply with the filthy red kitchen lino, worn black with age in places. It hadn't seen a brush or mop since the bitch had walked out six weeks ago.

Bleary-eyed from whiskey, he staggered sideways, colliding with the dresser, causing crockery to rock precariously before settling back down in a bed of dust. He walked the letter into the dirt, satisfied his black footprint now made an impression on its sophisticated exterior. Black dots swam across his line of vision, interspersed with a constellation of stars, which exploded each time he moved his head.

He stumbled from cupboard to worktop, fumbling with giant hands for the box of painkillers. 'Jesus, I'm dying,' he thought, finally locating the familiar red box and shaking two Solpadine into some water, willing the milky bubbles rising in the glass to dissolve quickly. Brain busting, he downed the disgusting mixture in one go and held his breath. He couldn't cope with throwing up, and prayed hard for a break. Ten minutes, that's all he needed; ten minutes and he'd be grand. That fuckin' Solpadine was mighty tack. Only for it he'd never cope.

In the distance, church bells summoned the great and good to assemble, and he'd no doubt that hypocrite of a wife of his was answering the call. Fighting nausea and biding time, James considered the letter. Not that he needed to read it, mind you. The empty wardrobe had made it perfectly clear she wasn't coming back, so whatever was in it wasn't good news for him.

A drink, James decided, that's what was required, and he foraged blindly amongst the bottles and cans littering left and right. Empties tumbled off the Formica worktop like skittles, scattering in all directions. Eventually he struck gold, finding a can of cider he'd missed the night before, buried under a blanket of take-away cartons. He did a little drunken victory dance and popped the ring, guzzling large mouthfuls. Rivulets of gold wound their way through the crevices on his stubbled chin, trickling downwards into the thick dark hair that carpeted his clammy chest.

He pelted the empty into the overflowing sink and resumed his search, this time exposing a crumpled cigarette box containing a plastic lighter and two fags. The fag stuck to his sweaty fingers and he almost burned the face off himself as he fired it up, greedily sucking smoke into his blackened lungs. The fit of coughing convulsed his whole body and he bent double, grasping the edge of the counter, sending a carton of curry flying. Yellow blob joined the mess on the floor and helpless tears topped them off, like raindrops landing in dog turd.

Sivers of light tried to penetrate the back window, grimy with soot, net curtains yellow from weeks of cigarette smoke. The pain inflicted by the singeing cigarette yanked James back to reality and with surprising speed, he launched himself at the sink, cursing like a madman. The cold water gave instant relief but destroyed his smoke, tendrils of tobacco now mingling with the greasy sink

The Cure

By Mary Lynskey



contents. More cider, that's what he needed. Hand wrapped in a rag, he renewed his quest and came across a measure of whiskey in a grubby glass. A bluebottle floated on the surface and he flicked it expertly onto the table.

Retrieving the letter, fag and whiskey, he shuffled down the narrow dark hallway to the front room, depositing his weary bulk onto the leather chair beside the fireplace. Sweat poured liberally down his forehead, scalding his bloodshot eyes and he sat very still, waiting for the palpitations to ease. A fresh bout of coughing forced him to his knees and he spat into the grate, sending a cloud of grey ash floating upwards. It was sometime before he'd recovered enough to drag himself back into the armchair.

James held the letter up and slowly scanned the page. Blood boiling, he balled it up and flung it blindly in the direction of the fireplace, all the time imagining her head bouncing off the marble, cracking like an eggshell. Who the fuck did she think she was? Was she for real or what, tormenting him like this?

The balled up letter hopped harmlessly off the coal box before rolling out of sight. His headache returned with a vengeance and he longed for the cure. Early-houses flashed through his mottled brain and he finally settled on Conway's. It should be quiet by this time, the dockers gone home to breakfast and bed. He chuckled madly to himself, idly rubbing his balding head with a massive, nail-bitten hand. James knew he couldn't even pretend he'd never got the letter, caught on the hop as he had been by the postman. Half drunk, he had awoken from a stupor on the couch and had opened the front door without thinking. Registered it was: he had to sign for it, caught round as a hoop. The big sneering head on the fucker standing there. The nosy bastard could think what he liked, James thought. Shag him, shag them all. Shag her most of all. He didn't need her; didn't need anyone.

Twenty-five years they'd been married. James had to add, well to himself anyway, that he'd been stunned when it had happened. Never saw it coming, still couldn't believe it. She'd had the balls. Little Mary Burke, the quietest mouse in the town. Well by Jaysus, she wasn't getting away with it! Nobody made a show of James McNeil!

With this resolve and fuelled with temper, James found his jacket, lit his last fag and hit off. Stumbling down the back lane he squinted painfully against a cruel winter sun. Head down, he concentrated hard on getting to Conways without event. The last thing he needed was to meet any of the neighbours who were doing his head in. He wasn't fooled by their 'concern'.

'How's it goin' boy? Have you heard from Mary? Will she be back soon, do you think?' they enquired.

James knew full well they were laughing at him; saw the nudges and smirks as they

gossiped their heads off. Wankers, the lot of them? He usually found the feigned sympathy, curiosity and hostility amusing and enjoyed torturing them, especially Noreen Forde, the young wagon next door. Now there was a woman who deserved her torture if ever there was one, he thought, smiling, remembering their last encounter. Huffing and puffing her way into his path, her ample bosoms heaving, she'd launched a tirade of abuse at him, her fat face purple with exertion.

'Come 'ere you, you fecker you,' she'd screamed, a stubby finger prodding the air under his nose. He'd laughed right into her poxy face, making her cringe, rocking back dangerously on her high heels. The look of disgust told him she'd got a whiff of the lorry-load of drink he'd consumed the previous night. Good enough for her. She's ranted like a banshee about loud music and fuck acting, which had puzzled James, until he'd remembered the gang he'd brought home at closing time.

A great party and in fact it hadn't been long over when the Wicked Witch had confronted him. On that occasion he'd invited her to climb on her broomstick, rev up and fuck off, which had really sent her into orbit. Sanding here, fleshy lips wobbling, James had thought she'd keel over as he'd sauntered off, still laughing. But today was different. Today his only goal was a pint and a drop, without the drama. He definitely couldn't cope with her today.

He almost cried when he spotted her on the horizon, click-clacking towards him at break-neck speed. He veered across the road and almost died, as a huge people carrier swerved around him, horn blaring, missing him by about two coats of paint. He stumbled on to the footpath and there she was, hands on hips, ready for battle. She and the double buggy filled the space between him and freedom.

'What are you going to do about the rats?' she roared, setting the two in the buggy off. The howls seared his throbbing head and he barely resisted giving them a slap each.

'Fuck off, and mind your own business.' He roared back, not caring that the whole street would soon be on the scene. Around here, this was excitement of the highest order.

'My children can't go out in their own back garden because of you,' she screamed. 'You're a fucking disgrace. No wonder Mary left you.' She rattled the pushchair to quieten the monsters.

'You're one to talk all right,' James sneered. 'A lot you care about them. Where did you get them anyway, hah? From opening your legs for every Tom, Dick and Harry down 'The Sheaf', that's where.'

Slight movements behind hedges told him they now had an audience. The punch caught James by surprise and with sixteen stone of weight behind it; he was sprawled on his back before he could save himself, head bouncing

on the concrete.

'That's the stuff, give him a bit of his own medicine, go on girl,' came from an unknown source as James rolled onto his side, and dragged himself into a sitting position. The brats had stopped crying, frightened into silence, as he glared into their space, rubbing his jaw.

'Doesn't change anything, you're still a tramp,' James muttered, before doubling over as her pointed shoe rammed repeatedly into his flabby side.

Fresh bile threatened to choke him. He rolled sideways, covering his head. Jesus Christ, was she trying to kill him? The catcalls grew louder as she gathered momentum. Clearly enjoying herself, she flung obscenities with every successful connection.

He floated in and out of unconsciousness moaning, 'Help me. Please, stop. I'm sorry.'

As he did so, Mary's face appeared, saying the same words. He watched, puzzled, as she begged him to stop, lying on their bedroom floor, her face cut and bruised. Her hands clasped her swollen belly. But she'd gone, he thought, so why was she here now with this lunatic kicking the daylight out of him? Were they in it together? 'Help me, stop,' she said again, and as if in a trance, he saw himself descend the stairs and leave the house. The next few days were a blur. Had he gone to 'The Sheaf' or not? Maybe. He couldn't be sure.

The sweet taste of blood caused him to gag and it spurted out, forming a puddle under his cheek. Strangely, the pain was gone, replaced by numbness. He rose slowly and watched with interest as Noreen was dragged back from his prone body by a big Garda, his arms wrapped tightly around her. She was dumped, roaring into a waiting squad car and he was glad she'd finally met her match.

An ambulance arrived and his body was loaded up after a brief examination. The ambulance then tore off, siren blaring. The large crowd had begun to disperse, shuffling uneasily, but he was glad to see more Gardai had arrived and rounded them back up, herding them away from the bloodstained patch.

The scene faded rapidly and he somehow caught up with the ambulance. Mary had gone and he wondered would he see her at the hospital. Something told him that she'd gone there when she'd left.

The pain returned as needles were shoved into him and a mask was rammed into place. He cried hard as hands roamed his body, questions he was unable to answer whistled past him. Had she felt like this when he'd battered her time and again? Bloody images mocked him as he was held down; some prick asked him to be calm. He didn't know; had never asked her; fixed things instead with flowers and promises. He smiled then, his mind made up to put everything right. Mary would understand when he explained, as always. He looked forward to their re-union as he escaped the continuous beeping noise and slipped blissfully away, white parchment and cure banished to the past forever more.