

Pack Up the Moon

'Refreshingly honest,
laugh-out-loud
funny and heartfelt'
Cathy Kelly

Anna
McPartlin



Pack Up the Moon
by
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Chapter 1

The Thin Blue Line

It was early March and raining. The clouds were relieving themselves with a ferocity akin to a drunk urinating after fourteen pints. I looked through the frosted glass, imagining the impact the downpour would have on my whites blowing wildly in the accompanying gale. Then back to the floor, immediately noticing the slight yellowing in the grouting around the toilet.

Men, I thought. *How hard is it to aim for the loo?* I briefly contemplated how it was that my boyfriend could manage to clear a pool table with pinpoint accuracy, park a car in a space the size of a stamp and yet when it came to pointing his mickey in the direction of a large bowl, he had the judgement of a drunken schoolboy. The edge of the bath felt cold under my skirt.

Three minutes.

Three minutes can be a long time. I wondered would it feel so long if I were defusing a bomb. I started to count

the seconds but quickly lost interest. The mirror needed cleaning. I'd do it tomorrow. I absentmindedly played with the stick in my hand until I remembered that I'd just peed on it. I put it down. I brushed invisible fluff from my skirt, this being a habit I had picked up from my father although obviously he was not a skirt-wearer. It was our response to nerves. Some people wring their hands; my dad and I cleaned our clothes.

The first time I really noticed our shared trait was when my brother, aged seventeen, announced that, instead of becoming the doctor my parents had dreamt of, he was going to become a priest. My mother, mortified by the thought that she would lose her son to an absent God, spent an entire evening screaming shrilly before breaking down and taking to her bed for four days. My dad sat silently cleaning his suit. He didn't say anything but his disappointment was profound. I remember that I wasn't too pushed at the time. As a self-obsessed teenage girl, I didn't share the same concerns about Noel's sacrifice as my parents, although I admit that the thought of having a priest in the family was slightly embarrassing to me.

We weren't very close then. He was your typical nerd, bookish, intense and politically aware. He studied hard, brought out the bins without being asked and was an ardent *Doctor Who* fan. He never smoked, never indulged in underage drinking or for that matter in girls. For a while I thought he was gay, but that theory passed when I realised that to be gay you had to be interesting. Still, we were adults now and, although I could never understand his utter devotion to The Almighty, times had changed and all the traits that made for a nerdish teenager guaranteed a

fascinating adult. I now counted Father Noel as one of my best friends.

Two minutes.

I was twenty-six years old. I was in love and living with John my childhood sweetheart. I had the pleasure of watching my lover grow from a fair-haired, blue-eyed, idealistic boy to a fair-haired, blue-eyed, self-assured man. We'd been together nearly twelve years and for me he was definitely The One. We'd been living together happily since college. We were renting a nice place – two bedrooms, two bathrooms, a kitchen and a cute sitting-room – just off Stephen's Green and although it was small and sometimes smelled of sweet old lady, it wasn't that expensive which was amazing considering the location. I had a good job. Teaching was never my life's dream, but then I considered myself lucky to have been unburdened by ambition. Teaching seemed as good a job as any. Some days I liked the kids and some days I didn't, but it was steady. I was home most days by four thirty and I had three months off in the summer. John was still in college doing a PhD in psychology, but he also managed to hold down four shifts a week as a bartender. Some weeks he'd bring home more money than I would and he maintained that he learned more from drunks than he would in college.

We were happy. We were a well-adjusted happy couple. We had a good life, good prospects and good friends. There are a lot of people who would like to have the kind of security we had with one another.

One minute.

My mother had often pondered aloud as to when John and I would think about marriage. I'd tell her to mind

her own business. She'd note that I was her business. We'd fight about the issue of privacy versus a mother's love. At twenty-six I felt too young to marry and this feeling remained, despite my mother constantly reminding me that she had two young children by the age of twenty-four.

"It was a different time," I used to say and that was true. Most of my mother's friends were married with kids by the time they reached their mid-twenties. I was from a completely different generation. The Show Band versus the MTV generation. While she grew up on Dickie Rock, I gyrated to Madonna. Before meeting my dad, her idea of a fun night out was lining up against the wall at the local dance hoping one of the lads would pick her for a waltz. I, on the other hand, was from the disco generation. Besides, none of my friends were married.

Thirty seconds.

OK, that's a lie. Anne and Richard met in college. She was the middle child of a middle-class family from Swords. He was the son of one of the richest landowners in Kildare. They met in a queue to sign up for an amateur drama group during orientation week. They got talking, abandoned the queue to get coffee. After that, they were inseparable. They married a year after college. Big deal, they were the only ones.

Clodagh, my best friend since age four, hadn't managed to hold down a relationship over four months. She had emerged from college a tenacious, intelligent, hardworking career woman, managing to work her way up to Senior Account Manager of a large advertising firm within three years. She succeeded in all she did, with the small exception of her romantic life, and that perceived failure hurt her.

Then there was John's best friend Seán, dark, brooding, dry and beautiful. Clo called him "the living David". He had not only made his way through eighty per cent of the girls in the Trinity Arts block, he'd also managed to nail a few lecturers along the way. His longest relationship to date had been with an American girl called Candyapple (her real name, I kid you not) during a summer we all spent working in New Jersey. She was your typical coffee-skinned, brown-eyed, big-breasted, small-waisted nightmare. She had long curly brown hair that somehow reminded Anne of the Queen guitarist Brian May. Seán called her "Delicious"; the rest of us called her "Brian". They lasted six weeks. He left college and after a few false starts he fell on his feet, landing a job as editor of a men's magazine. His quick wit, sincere worship of football and encyclopaedic female carnal knowledge ensured his continuing success. Relationships didn't matter and marriage and family certainly was not a priority.

Ten seconds.

John loved our life. You know those smug couples you meet and instantly hate. He could be smug like that. He never seemed to care that Seán had his pick of women through college. He didn't even mind that he had only ever had sex with one person. He was content, loved up, happy. He was rare. We were rare.

The first time we had sex we were both sixteen. We were in a tent on the side of a hill in Wicklow. It was a warm summer night, not a cloud in sight. The moon was full, round and bright, the sky was navy and thick like velvet, the trees were towering, leafy and smelt of sun. No wind, no breeze, the world seemed still. We had our

little campfire, a picnic basket, a packet of condoms and a bottle of wine, which we both merely sipped, our underdeveloped taste buds mistaking its fruity freshness for the taste of rancid crap. Kissing turned to cuddling, which turned to snuggling, which led to nuzzling, graduating to feverish genital rubbing and one hymen later we were lying in one another's arms looking up at the fag-stains on the blue nylon tent, wondering what all the fuss was about.

Clo had warned me that practice made perfect. We managed it four times before we returned to our respective parents, proud and full of secrets.

Five seconds.

I wasn't ready. I felt sick, praying it was stress-related and not morning sickness.

Oh fuck. What will I do? I don't want to be a mother. I don't want to be a wife. I don't want to feel like I'm my mother before I've lived. I want to do things, I'm not sure what. I want to experience different places, I don't know where. I'm not ready.

I hadn't mentioned to John that my period was over two weeks late nor had I mentioned that I had bought a pregnancy test. I wasn't used to keeping secrets from him but I was sure that I was right not to involve him in this.

Why worry him?

The problem was I wasn't sure if he would be worried. He smiled when my mother teased us about marriage and babies. He'd take time in a supermarket to stop and smile at a dribbling child, while I would push through the throng, impatient with everything bar getting what we'd come for and leaving.

Two seconds.

He would be excited, I could feel it in my bones. Worse than that, he would want the baby. There would be no furrowed brows or tearful decisions to be made. There would be excitement and planning and books and baby clothes. My stomach started to hurt.

I'm not ready.

My hands were shaking as I turned the stick.

Please don't be blue, please God, don't be blue!

My eyes were closed although I don't remember voluntarily closing them. I sighed deeply and this reminded me that I was a smoker so I lay the stick down and ran to my bedroom to grab a packet of cigarettes. I returned and lit up. I inhaled deeply, determined to enjoy what could be my last cigarette for a long time. My intention was to finish the entire cigarette before unveiling my future. However, this plan was obliterated by the sound of John's key in the front door. I hastily put the cigarette out by dousing it in cold water with one hand while waving madly with the other in an attempt to dissipate the smoke, which seemed to billow around the confined space. I could hear his footsteps make their way upstairs and towards my hideout. I was out of time.

"Emma!"

"I'm in here!" I called, a little too shrilly.

He attempted to open the door. I watched helplessly, hiding the stick up the arm of my jumper. It was locked. I sighed with relief.

"Why's the door locked?" he asked suspiciously.

"I always lock the door," I lied, hoping he'd momentarily lose his memory.

He didn't.

"No, you don't," he said, still pushing down the door handle.

"John," I said sternly, "can you just give me a bloody second?" I could hear him walk toward the bedroom. He was mumbling something about me being a bitch when I had my period.

I wish.

I sat back down and turned over the stick. I looked at it for the longest time. I closed my hand over it and then I looked again. I bit my lip, hurting myself in the process. I opened my fingers again, revealing a gloriously white window. Not a hint of blue. I moved to the window to ensure maximum light. Nothing. It was clear. No blue line. I had my life back. I wasn't pregnant. I wasn't even a little bit pregnant. I was just late and I had a party to go to.

Thank you, God!

★ ★ ★

When Richard's grandfather died at the age of ninety-one, he left a very large portion of his estate to Richard, making him extremely wealthy. To this end it was decided that there would be a party to celebrate, an "inheritance party". Anne was initially concerned that it would be in bad taste.

"He was a very old man, who died after living a great life full of love and achievement. Why would having a party to celebrate your good fortune be disrespectful?" I had asked her.

"It's been so long since we've had a party," was John's contribution to the cause.

“Besides, my granddad had a great sense of humour. He’d love the idea,” Richard intoned, desperate to enjoy their new fortune.

“It’s a fantastic idea! We can celebrate his life and the fact that our good friends are loaded,” Seán insisted.

Eventually Anne succumbed and so it came to pass that the day I discovered I would not bring a new life into the world was the day that my world changed forever.

★ ★ ★

I thought about writing to you for such a long time. I never actually dreamed I’d get around to it, but when I did, it seemed so easy. Memories are absurd things. Some are vague, some crystalline, some too painful to recollect and some so painful it’s impossible to forget. Happy times are remembered with warmth and laughter, recalled as an anecdote in the pub, exaggerated for the crowd. The really good ones keep you company on an otherwise lonely evening. The clearest memories are of those occasions when you experience great highs or lows. It’s the emotion the situation inspires that you remember. That feeling of incredible exultation or terrible despair enables your brain to note the details that normally pass you by like the colour of someone’s shirt, a hand gesture or how warm or cold it was.

You can recall the creases caused by the smile on a loved one’s lips or the way tears crept from their eyes. But pain is hard to put into words and in life there is always pain. It’s as natural as birth or death. Pain makes us who we are, it teaches us and tames us, it can destroy and it can save. We all have regrets – even Frank Sinatra had a few.

Some tragedies are of our own doing and then sometimes things happen that are out of this world's control and when it happens, it can take our breath away.

Happiness is a gift. It washes its warmth over us and reminds us of beauty. It should never be taken for granted. I should never have taken it for granted. That thin blue line represented happiness. I didn't know that it would later represent something that I would never get back. But then I wasn't ready.

Chapter 2

Space-Hoppers, Cigarettes and Lipstick

My little drama concluded, I was now in the bath trying to wash St Fintan's secondary school away. Despite my good fortune I was in a bad mood and not looking forward to the party that I had partly instigated. The door unlocked, John entered and his grin suggested that my earlier outburst had been forgiven.

"Can I wash your back?"

I told him to piss off.

"Will you wash my back?"

I gave him the fingers.

"Ah, the little bastards gave you a hard time," he laughed.

"Don't call my students little bastards!" I admonished.

"Why not? You do. Besides, when they piss you off, I have to live with the consequences, so I feel I have a right."

He was right.

"Alright, I'll allow you to cheer me up," I grinned.

“That’s good of you,” he said, kneeling on the floor and playing with my bath water, his eyes glinting.

I melted. “OK then. Get in but don’t push me into the taps,” I warned.

His clothes were off almost before I got to the word “taps”. He sat in behind me and we lay in the warm water, his arms around my gloriously empty stomach and the water sloshing over the side. I let some out, leaned back and asked him how his day went. He responded by telling me about a fantastic psychological test that he had pulled off the net and I was instantly sorry that I’d asked.

“It’s great – I’ve got to do it on you,” he threatened.

I looked around at him. “That’s sexy,” I said.

“It’s great – it’s a laugh. But you’ll need some paper.”

“I’m in the bath,” I pointed out while trying to get comfortable.

He started to wash my back. “It’s very telling,” he said ominously.

I told him that, after six years, I was under the impression he knew everything there was to know about me. He smiled smugly.

“There’s always more, Em. Sometimes we don’t even know ourselves. Like for instance, until yesterday I didn’t know that I could eat two Big Macs, a large fries, six chicken McNuggets and a chocolate milkshake in one sitting without feeling sick.”

“Christ,” I said, “that’s disgusting.”

He nodded his head in agreement. “That’s me, baby,” he laughed with his arms in the air.

★ ★ ★

Later, he arrived into the bedroom with a piece of paper and a pen.

“John, I’m trying to get dressed here.”

He put the pen and paper on the dressing-table. “Come on, it’s just a few tests. Ten minutes tops. I want to try it out before the party.”

I couldn’t believe it. “You’re not planning on doing this at the party?” I asked incredulously.

“Em, it’s a laugh,” he said unconvincingly.

So I picked up the pen anyway, knowing I had no choice. “Make this quick. I have to blow-dry my hair,” I warned.

He pulled out the instructions from his briefcase and started reading. “OK, pick a colour and write it down.”

I thought for a second and wrote.

“OK, name three things that you associate with that colour.”

I thought for another few seconds and then wrote down three words.

“Have you got it?”

I nodded yes.

“What colour did you pick?”

“Red.”

“Good, now what are the three words?” He was grinning smugly.

I read my words aloud: “Space-hoppers, cigarettes and lipstick.”

“What?” he asked, obviously perturbed. His grin faded and he was looking at me funnily.

“Space-hoppers, cigarettes and lipstick,” I reiterated.

“I heard you the first time. It doesn’t make any sense – you’re doing it wrong.”

I couldn't believe it and frankly had had enough of his poxy game. "What the fuck do you mean I'm doing it wrong?" I screamed over my hairdryer. "It's a psychological test. You asked me to pick three words that I associate with red and I picked them. How can that be wrong?"

Bewildered, his hand reached for his forehead and it became obvious that he was fighting the urge to scratch his head. "How do you get space-hoppers, cigarettes and lipstick from the colour red?" he yelled.

I was struggling with a new-found cow's lick and not having the laugh that had been promised, but, as I had anticipated that laughter would not be the outcome of John's little game, I just answered him in the hope that he'd leave me be.

"When I was a kid my space-hopper was red. I smoke Marlboro, the packet is red, and my favourite colour lipstick is red. It's that simple." I turned up the hairdryer.

"Well, that just doesn't make any sense," he mumbled, rereading the page.

Then he shouted something about the three words and how they were supposed to describe how I saw myself. He was clearly disturbed with my answer, so in an effort to relieve his pain I turned off the dryer and thought for a minute.

"Maybe it's revealing that deep down I'm a chain-smoking space-hopper who likes red lipstick. That's amazing. You're right. I've really learned something about myself." I was laughing now, but he remained perplexed.

"When we did it in the lecture hall it worked really well. You must be mentally challenged, Em. I swear it

works with everyone else.” He crumpled the page and threw it in the bin.

As he left the room I heard him mutter, “Fucking space-hoppers!”

★ ★ ★

By the time John and I reached the party it was in full swing. The hall door was open and there was a couple sitting on the stairs kissing. As we passed them, John made a huge wet kissing sound. Fortunately they didn’t seem to hear it. We headed straight for the kitchen, where Seán was already sitting at the table skinning up a joint. John plonked down beside him, while I went looking for Anne and Richard and found them in the sitting-room. Anne was busy making sure the assembled crowd was having a good time while Richard was throwing alcohol down his throat like it was a gaping hole that required filling.

There was a big homemade sign hanging over the fireplace with the words “WE’RE IN THE MONEY” printed on it. I smiled when I saw it and told Anne I liked her style. She, disgusted at her husband’s sense of humour, asked me not to remind her while attempting to keep her back to it.

The music was loud, people were standing about chatting, some were dancing and all were drinking. I didn’t really know most of them, they were the workmates of the two hosts, so I returned to the kitchen to find the two lads bleary-eyed and John choking.

Seán looked at me and smiled stupidly. “Have a drag,” he said.

So I did and I felt the back of my head blow off.
“Sweet Jesus! I need a hat.”

They both laughed and Seán told us how a friend of his had posted a sample selection of differing strains of cannabis from Amsterdam. The little plastic bags were name-tagged and accompanied by a menu. We were busy being sincerely impressed when Anne burst into the room with an empty tray. She took one look at us.

“Oh lovely, what a pack of wasters! You’re only here five minutes and look at the state of you!”

I smiled at her. Anne was Den Mother. John used to say that she was born an adult. She was the one we all relied on to be sensible and she never failed to deliver.

“Got any glasses?” I asked, unable to move.

She handed me two large pint glasses before leaving the room, with her tray now stacked with sandwiches. I filled my glass with wine and John’s with beer. I looked at the wine for a few minutes before taking a sip and made a mental note never to put wine into a pint glass again. Having said that, it tasted fine. Seán had started to skin up again and I was really beginning to relax after my stressful day.

“Where’s Clo?”

“She’s here,” said Seán, while dispersing tobacco with expert hands.

“Where?”

“Upstairs with some guy,” he answered, grinning.

I felt suddenly alert.

“I tried to get into the bedroom to leave my coat,” he continued. “The door was locked and Clo’s voice told me to fuck off.”

John started to laugh. I wanted to check it out, but my legs wouldn't work. Anne kept entering and restacking her tray, only staying long enough to warn us about overdoing it. Richard, who was pissed, was holding court in the sitting-room. We remained in the kitchen drinking, smoking and laughing at rubbish.

After a while Anne arrived back into the room.

"How's it going?" I asked.

"Richard is on his fourth we're-filthy-rich speech. I really don't know what's got into him," she said and suddenly I was reminded of my mother.

Seán was laughing. "Half a bottle of vodka, four Slippery Nipples and at least two joints," he noted as though reading a shopping list.

Anne remained unimpressed. "Yes, very funny, Seán. You're a fucking comedian."

Seán was so inebriated he was fully sure that her jibe was a compliment. "Cheers!" he said, lifting his glass and John and I followed suit.

"You're a bunch of wasters," Anne said and we fell about the place laughing, delighted with our title. She smiled and threw her eyes up to heaven like an amused parent admonishing bold children.

She was piling more food onto trays when Clo walked into the room with a guy trailing behind her.

"Hey, folks," she said, relieving Seán of his fresh produce. The guy just stood there, not sure where to put himself. She parked herself on a chair and patted the one beside her. "Sit here," she said, smiling at her new friend again.

But he didn't see her, as he was too busy looking at us,

who in turn were staring at him as only stoned people can. He sat, appearing perturbed. We were waiting for an introduction. Clo smiled at us, as if forgetting about the sexual object beside her. Eventually John asked her to introduce us.

“Oh,” she said, “this is Philip.”

Anne, now finished piling the tray, welcomed him to her home and headed off into the sitting-room. We all just smiled at him until he excused himself to go to the loo. The second the door closed behind him, I asked the question on everyone’s mind.

“Did you just have sex with him upstairs?”

“No!” she stated categorically while nodding her head yes.

“So where did you meet this poor bastard?” Seán asked tactfully.

“The taxi rank.”

We laughed again.

“There really is an awful lot to be said for public transport,” she noted and Seán nodded in agreement.

Anne arrived back in. Seán asked her to sit with us, but she was on a mission to find more ice. John called her Doris Day and, as she left, he was given two fingers for the second time that day.

Philip returned and sat down. We all stared at him again. After a few seconds he spoke. “So this is an inheritance party?”

We nodded again.

“What exactly is that?” he asked, appearing unimpressed.

It seemed pretty obvious to the rest of us, but Seán decided to answer him. “It’s when a very, very rich

grandparent dies at a very old age and leaves you pots of cash.”

We all smiled at him, stupidly delighted with the simplicity and honesty of his answer. Philip wasn't convinced. “So, somebody died?” was his question.

John looked at him as though he was retarded.

Seán said, “He was very old.” He took a drag of the joint directly after he said it, blew it out slowly and smiled at Philip. He reminded me of Steve McQueen in *The Magnificent Seven* and we stoners laughed again. Philip was a grown-up and therefore not impressed. He excused himself from our presence by saying he was going into the sitting-room, but we all knew that he had every intention of leaving the building. We waited till we heard the front door slam.

Seán looked at Clo and stated the obvious. “You do realise he's gone, don't you?”

She smiled at him. ““Gone But Not Forgotten!”” She laughed at her own joke.

I turned to John and with surprising ability grabbed his chin and turned it towards me, looked into his eyes and said in an American hillbilly accent, “I hope you give me somethin' I won't forgit tonight.”

Without missing a beat he answered in the same stupid accent: “You and your sister, honey!”

Seán, who was taking a swig from his can, nearly choked at his friend's comic genius and everybody laughed again. Eventually Anne and Richard joined us. Clo passed the joint to Anne who took her first long and sustained drag and Doris Day left the building. It was a few minutes before she realised that Philip was missing.

When she inquired as to his whereabouts, Clo responded monosyllabically with: “Gone.”

John added, “But not forgotten.”

We all fell about laughing and Anne said, “Christ!”

The night pretty much continued in that inane vein. At one point John and I were dancing – well, in fact, merely holding one another up and swaying. Anne put on Prince’s “Purple Rain”, which was our song. We swayed some more and remembered the night we had listened to the song while christening our brand-new ten-year-old Ford Escort. We smiled at the memory and recalled how amazed we were when the windows actually did steam up. John spun me around at the end of the song and dropped me. Despite this little mishap I felt like Ginger Rogers – again the power of mind-altering drugs. After helping me back on my feet, he kissed me and I felt sixteen. John could always make me feel sixteen, which was one of the reasons that I loved him.

People started to leave and Clo disappeared to sleep under the stairs, a habit she picked up in college. Unconcerned, we forgot to look for her when leaving. It was three in the morning and Richard and John were in deep conversation about some stupid football game. We were standing at the door and I was tired and cold.

Eventually Anne called time and we headed out onto the street. We hadn’t reached the edge of the footpath when I remembered that I had left my lighter behind. I wanted to go back in and get it but John insisted we’d get it in the morning. I wouldn’t listen. The lighter was a silver-plated Zippo that Noel had given me for my twenty-first birthday. He had it engraved and I loved it, not just

because it was a cool lighter but also because, to me, it represented his acceptance of my hedonistic lifestyle. So despite John's protest I went back inside. He said he'd wait on the street.

Anne and Richard were in the sitting-room picking up cans; Seán was still in the kitchen, smoking yet another joint. I smiled at him and made some stupid remark while looking for the lighter. He offered me a drag for the road. I accepted. He smiled at me.

"You're beautiful," he said.

I smiled, waiting for the punch line that didn't come. The words hung in the air.

"Cheers," I said, a moment too late.

"I'm sorry, I didn't meant to embarrass you," he slurred.

"It's fine," I said, going red. I saw my lighter on the table and grabbed it. Instinctively I bent down to peck his cheek to signify my exit. He turned as I reached his face and I felt a shock run through me when his lips made contact with mine. We both pulled back and he began to apologise profusely. I didn't want him to fuss, as it had been an accident. We were friends and it was no big deal.

Chapter 3

The End Is Near

I was moving towards the door when we heard a screech of brakes closely followed by a sickening thud. I hadn't even properly registered this background noise when Seán was up and running out the door. I heard Anne and Richard shouting. They were calling John's name. Suddenly I was stuck to the floor, still staring at the spot where Seán had been sitting.

Anne was now screaming, "*Oh Christ, oh Sweet Jesus!*"

My heart started to beat wildly. My chest started to hurt. I heard Richard screaming at Seán. "*Don't touch him, don't move him!*"

Suddenly my legs started to work. I was moving, running out of the house onto the street. Once outside, I saw my friends. Richard ran past me into the house.

Anne was standing in the middle of the road, staring down at Seán who was bent over someone who was bleeding very heavily from the head. I looked around for

John. I must have been shouting his name because Seán looked up at me with panic in his eyes. I walked towards him and realised that the bleeding head was John. I started to shake and it seemed to take forever to get to where he was lying. I slumped down on the ground.

“John, John, John.” I kept saying his name over and over again but he wouldn’t move. The driver was sitting on the curb, holding his knees to his chest, mumbling something about not seeing him and that he’d just appeared in front of the car. I looked at this stranger biting his lip and crying.

Richard came out of the house saying the ambulance would be here in five minutes. Anne ran back into the house. Seán was talking to John. He was telling him that everything would be OK and that the ambulance was on the way. I told him I loved him and that he was to hold on. It was very cold; John looked very cold. I started to try to lift him up to take him into my arms, but Seán stopped me.

“We can’t move him, Em. He’ll be OK. The ambulance is on its way.”

“Please wake up!” I begged. I just wanted to see his eyes. “Please wake up!”

Anne ran out of the house with towels in her hands as the ambulance came up the street. The medics got out and moved us out of the way. Seán pulled me away and held his arms around me tight, as though he was afraid that I would run away. Richard was staring at the driver who was sitting on the curb, his lip beginning to bleed. Anne was standing in the middle of the street still holding the towels.

I was allowed to go in the ambulance with John; the

others followed in a taxi. I held his hand while they worked around me. They stuck tubes into him and used paddles on his heart. He was still asleep but I talked to him anyway. I told him that we could go on holiday as soon as he was better and not to worry, because everything was going to be fine. I mentioned how much I needed him on a number of occasions and even spoke about some stupid football match he was looking forward to.

We got to the hospital and I was left standing in a corridor while they wheeled him into a room that only staff were allowed into. A nurse took me into a waiting area and asked me if I wanted a cup of tea with sugar.

“Sugar is good for shock,” I said.

She agreed and smiled at me sadly. “I’ll get you that tea,” she said and left.

The others arrived minutes later and waited. Nobody spoke. I was terrified. I knew it was bad.

Please stay alive. Please be OK, I kept saying over and over again in my head.

Holy Mary Mother of God, please save him. Our Father Who Art in Heaven, please save him. Please God, please sweet Jesus, please save him. Glory be to the Father, please, I prayed, then I prayed again.

Seán suddenly remembered Clo. She was still in the house, passed out somewhere, blissfully unaware of this nightmare. Anne went to phone her.

The doctor was walking towards us. I looked up at him and it seemed like hours before my eyes reached his. He asked if any family were present. John’s parents hadn’t arrived yet. I stood up. I said I was family and walked towards him.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “John’s head injuries were just too serious. We did everything we could. He wouldn’t have felt any pain.”

He was telling us that John was dead. My head hurt and my eyes were burning. I wanted to stop my heart from beating because each beat was becoming more painful. The others were staring at me. Anne was crying. I tried to listen to the doctor over the loud buzzing in my ears. He took me into the room where I had been previously denied entry. He stood for a minute, watching me stare at John’s body. Then he left. John was in the room but I was alone.

No. This isn’t happening. We’re at home in bed. I’m having a nightmare.

“Wake up! Wake up!” I called out, pinching myself hard. “Wake up!”

I knew deep down I wasn’t dreaming but I pinched myself harder. Then I held him in my arms. He was heavy and still warm.

I whispered into his ear. “Just open your eyes. That’s all you have to do. The doctors will take care of the rest.”

He wouldn’t though. Death was thick in the air, making it difficult for me to breathe with ease. There was a white sheet tucked under his chin. The blood had now stopped flowing from his head and he was clean. I could see his face again. He looked younger, like the teenage boy who had always picked me to play on his basketball team despite my inability to play. I took his hand again and I could feel my heart breaking.

I briefly wondered if I was about to have a heart attack and I welcomed it. He was dead. He was dancing with

me a few hours ago, but now he was dead. It was becoming even more difficult to breathe.

“I love you,” I said, my voice breaking. “I really wish that you would fucking wake up.” I pleaded with him but he couldn’t hear me, but I couldn’t accept that. I kissed him on his blue lips and rubbed my wet face against his cheek. I whispered into his ear and begged, “Please come back!”

Then I said “fuck” a lot, tears burning red tracks into my face, hands shaking and numb holding onto his growing colder and colder.

“Please come fucking back! I’ll do anything!”

I waited – but nothing. I looked up towards the ceiling. I knew it was stupid but I didn’t care.

“God, if you give him back to me, I will do whatever you want. I’ll be good. Please God, please God, please God just give him back to me. He’s twenty-six – he’s only twenty-fucking-six. Please God, please God, give him back!”

It didn’t work. I wanted to lie down with him, but I couldn’t bring myself to because for the first time lying with John seemed wrong, so I just held his hand and brushed his blond bloodied hair from his face, the face that I had grown up with, the face that I relied on, the face that was as familiar as my own but was different now. The light was out, the spark had faded away and all that we were and had and all that he was and would be was gone. My boy, my man, my friend, my challenger, my lover, my identity lay growing cold like stone. Tears flowed from the ocean that had once been my heart. I removed invisible dirt from the sheet that covered him. I found his hand and held it tight.

“I love you.”

Time stood still and I succumbed to the agony. I've no idea how long I was kneeling on the cold tiles clinging desperately to his hand. At some point Clo entered the room. She was crying. When she saw our boy she screamed. She didn't mean to – it was primal, it just came out, and she couldn't help it. She stood looking down at the body that used to be John and put her arms around me. I heard myself saying: "Bye, baby." Clo was sobbing as I held John's hand. The pain weighed us down, making sudden movement almost impossible. We just stayed still, still like John.

Someone had called my mother. She arrived with my father to pick me up, he silent and four steps behind her, not quite knowing what to do or say. She took control of me and, for the first time since I was a young child, I was grateful for her strength. As they led me out of the hospital I saw Richard comforting his distraught wife and Seán alone in a corner, staring and broken. We went home. I remember sitting in the back seat of the car, watching the night lights blur as we passed them, the reds and yellows of the streetlamps, the shining white of the passing cars. My father's Dean Martin tape was playing. He was singing about love. I looked up at the sky. It was black. Not a star to be seen. The skin on my face still burned. My mother kept turning to gaze at me, almost as though she was afraid that at any moment I would defy her and join John in death as I had done in life.

The house was cold. My mother put on the kettle to make tea, but I just wanted to sleep. She tucked me in and rubbed the hair away from my forehead. I couldn't feel her touch. My father stood in the doorway watching his

wife and child. She turned off the light and she lay beside me in the dark and I felt her warmth and an overwhelming sense of exhaustion. I remembered Clodagh's mother and how as a child I thought it odd that her reaction to her husband's death was sleep. I now realised why. Sleep was the only escape.