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Going Back

Written by Rachel English

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Going Back

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One

June 1988

Boston

Chapter 1

Elizabeth rested her head against the side of the phone booth and exhaled. Her left eyelid twitched. It always did when she got flustered. She tried not to look at her flatmates, although they were pretty hard to miss. There the two of them were, a short distance down the street, pacing back and forth like even a moment's rest would bring bad luck. Under the mid-afternoon sun, Peter O'Regan's Ireland soccer jersey took on a synthetic gleam, and Donal Mulvihill's spindly legs looked so pale they were practically blue. Behind them a row of brown and red apartment buildings shimmered in the heat.

She told herself that this was simple. All she had to do was keep the phone pressed to her ear and carry on talking. 'I miss you so much,' she said. 'But I'll be home in no time at all.' She threw a quick glance in the lads' direction. When they looked at her, they'd assume she was still chatting to her boyfriend. In actual fact, the line had been dead for five minutes or more. The problem was, the instant she ended her charade the two would come bounding over, desperate for information. Then they would see her damp eyes.

It was Peter and Donal who had decided she should ring Liam to get the result of the Ireland–England match. Donal said there was no point in him calling home because all the family would be in the pub watching the football on the big screen. Peter said he would do it, except his mother would want to know if he'd been to mass. But, they pointed out, if she made the call not only would they get the score, she could engage in some long-distance cooing.

‘Go on, Elizabeth, you know you want to,’ said Peter, his heavy-lidded brown eyes giving her an imploring look.

‘Oh, and we’ll need a match report,’ chimed in Donal. ‘We’ll want plenty of detail if the result is good. Not too much if it’s bad.’

‘Which it will be,’ added Peter.

She had teased them for a few minutes, reeling off lists of all the other things she had to do. They both knew she was only play-acting. Three years of friendship meant they were well aware of each other’s quirks and games.

The moment the quarters clunked down the chute, Elizabeth realised she had made a mistake. Somehow, Liam made ‘Ireland one, England nil’ sound like abject defeat, and ‘I miss you’ sound like an accusation. It was well for her, he said, and not in the jokey way he normally used the phrase. To be fair, his bad humour wasn’t directed solely at her. Three of his friends were actually in West Germany for Euro ’88. Thumbing lifts and sleeping rough and ringing at all hours from autobahn service stations to let him know what a wild time was being had. Poor Liam was at home in Tipperary, working through a rain-sodden summer. So she tiptoed around his ill-temper, assuring him it was work all the way in Boston with no time for going on the lash. But his words, and his tetchiness, stung. Before she knew it, there was a volley of pips, and he was gone.

Elizabeth was sure that if you asked anyone who knew her, they’d say it was a wonder she was in Boston at all. She wasn’t cut out to be an emigrant; she was too much of a home bird. She’d heard these lines a hundred times, especially from her mam and dad. She had assured them she’d be back in October. After all, this was 1988, not 1958. Going away for the summer was what students did. Her explanations fell on stony ground. In her parents’ world, when people went to America, they stayed in America.

Liam too had been perplexed. He could understand, he said, her university friends wanting to go. Now they were about to graduate, what had they to keep them in Ireland? There was little

prospect of any of them getting a job. And it wouldn't do them any harm to expand their horizons. 'But you're different,' he said. 'Surely you understand that?' As he often pointed out, he had a steady job so she didn't need to find work just yet. She could stay at college and become a teacher, like she'd always wanted. Did she not realise that everything was falling into place for her? That was something else everyone said about Elizabeth: she was lucky.

It had taken months of coaxing and cajoling – and just the teensiest bit of sulking – to get Liam onside, but now that she was in Boston he was getting awkward again.

She had hardly placed the phone back on the hook when Donal and Peter came darting towards her like greyhounds out of the traps. A well-upholstered couple with a little boy of two or three were forced to leap out of the way. The child began to wail. 'Goddamn idiots,' yelled the father. Elizabeth's eyelid gave a robust twitch.

'The face on you,' said Donal. 'I take it the news from Stuttgart isn't good?'

'How bad was it?' added Peter.

She smiled at her friends' downcast faces and put an arm around each of them. 'Boys,' she said, 'I have a surprise.'

There were only five of them in the grimy, unfurnished apartment on Lantern Street. When Americans asked, Elizabeth liked to stress the 'only'. She knew that sleeping ten to a room didn't bother some people, but she couldn't have handled living in one of those apartments where everybody tumbled out the door in the morning like towels spilling from an overstuffed cupboard. She had heard of one set-up where twenty-four Irish lads shared a house. You would swear there was a competition for the dirtiest, sweatiest living experience.

Their street was a stone's throw from Boston University, and for the bulk of the year it was colonised by American students. During the summer months, the young Irish took over. For Elizabeth's generation, spending a summer in the United States was as

much a student rite of passage as getting drunk on cheap cider or having your electricity cut off. No doubt most of those who took the trip told their parents they were there to earn money. They probably told each other they were there for the adventure. But, if many were honest, what they were really doing was getting a sense of America, seeing if it was somewhere they could call home. In the trademark dark humour of the Irish, they were known as ‘trainee emigrants’.

In the late afternoon, the flat roof of the apartment block was cooled by a light breeze. Music from a transistor radio, its sound tinny and indistinct, drifted over from the next building. Elizabeth and Michelle had spread out their sleeping bags on the pitted concrete and were basking in the sun, the unfamiliar warmth tickling their skin. From where they were sitting, Elizabeth could follow the curve of Lantern Street as it meandered towards Commonwealth Avenue. Directly across from them was a three-storey, red-brick apartment building, the mirror image of their own. On the corner was a small grocery store, its windows festooned with scraps of paper advertising flat-shares, removal vans and second-hand textbooks.

Michelle and Elizabeth had become friends on their first day at university in Dublin. Elizabeth remembered sitting in the cavernous lecture theatre, part thrilled by the newness of it all, part terrified that she didn’t know a single person there. Imagine her joy, then, when the girl beside her – a vision of cool in a black mohair jumper and battered Doc Martens – had revealed that she felt exactly the same. The two had escaped to the canteen where they’d bonded over the shared experience of being the first in their family to go to college. Shortly afterwards, they had met Peter and Donal, and the four had decided to rent a house together.

‘And get this,’ Michelle was saying now, her dark curls appearing to bob in time with her voice, ‘the cereal was full of marshmallows – and some of them were in the shape of leprechauns.’

‘You’re making it up,’ replied Elizabeth as she fanned herself with the *National Enquirer*. Michelle worked in a supermarket

and appeared to have brought home the entire news-stand.

‘I swear. I asked the woman if it was breakfast or dessert. She smiled at me, but no doubt she was thinking, “Where do they find these people?” Of course, I can’t say anything to the folks at work. I can’t say, “Listen, we have food at home, only it’s less imaginative,” because then they drone on about Ireland being the Third World.’ She looked at a grinning Elizabeth. ‘Don’t laugh, some of them genuinely believe that.’

‘Don’t I know. I must bring a box of that cereal home with me. I can see my dad’s face. He’s suspicious of anything more new-fangled than porridge.’

Elizabeth’s father was a one-man campaign against fripperies and self-indulgence. Syl Kelly had left school at fifteen to work in the sugar factory in Thurles, and he’d been there ever since. In his view, most modern youngsters were educated beyond their intelligence. He had been especially baffled to hear of one local lad who was going away to ‘find himself’. ‘Finding a job would be more in his line,’ he’d said. At college, when trapped by the ramblings of one of her more pretentious classmates, Elizabeth had fantasised about bringing her dad up to Dublin and setting him loose. He would have been in his element, threatening them with snagging turnips and the like. Needless to say, she had never snagged a turnip, although she agreed with Syl’s old-style common sense more often than she would care to admit.

‘The two boys are going for a few drinks later,’ she said. ‘To celebrate the result. I don’t know as I’ve ever seen them so excited about a soccer match. Do you fancy going along?’

‘I was planning on writing a letter home.’ Michelle frowned. ‘They’ll get anxious if they don’t hear from me soon.’

‘Peter’s meeting some of the lads from work. You never know, you might be missing out on the love of your life.’ Peter was a labourer on a large construction site. Every evening, he came home moaning about the heat and the dust, but the pay was good and the social life was even better. He had already accumulated a considerable group of friends, most of them Irish.

‘Tuh,’ said Michelle. ‘If they’re friendly with Petie, you can guess what they’re like. It’ll be a bonus if they can lift their knuckles off the ground.’

Elizabeth lay back on her sleeping bag and laughed. ‘You’re a cruel woman. Will Orla be about? I’ve a feeling her standards aren’t quite so high.’

‘I heard that,’ said a flat Dublin voice.

Damn, thought Elizabeth, as she sat up again.

An instant later a blond head peeped over the parapet. ‘Actually, I have plans,’ Orla said. ‘One of the girls in the café has set me up with her brother.’

Elizabeth did her best to warm to the fifth flatmate, but some days this was hard. Orla Finnegan had endless self-belief and a scarily sharp tongue. Men flocked to her like birds after a plough.

Orla plonked herself beside them and stripped down to her pink underwear. Her green eyes fixed Elizabeth with a condescending stare. ‘Calm down, pet. We’re on our own up here. No men to distract or old women to offend.’

Elizabeth didn’t think that she’d done anything to prompt this jibe; it was just part of the game that Orla played. Everybody had to be pigeonholed, and Elizabeth’s place was as the prim, prudish flatmate. ‘You ought to be careful,’ she said, picking up her sun cream and offering the bottle. ‘You know how quickly we burn.’

Orla shook her head. ‘Answer me this, Elizabeth. Were you ever young?’

‘I don’t follow you,’ she replied, hating the nervous squeak that had replaced her normal voice.

‘You see, I have this feeling that you’ve always been a grown-up. I can picture you at primary school with your solemn little face. Telling the rowdy boys they’d be sorry if they didn’t complete their jigsaws to the best of their ability.’

‘I went to an all-girls school,’ she said, immediately cringing at the silliness of her response. It was always the same. Give her a couple of minutes, and she’d think of something witty. In that

instant, though, her brain was frozen. Strictly speaking Orla was Michelle's friend. 'There's no real harm in the girl,' she'd insist. Right then, as she braced herself for another onslaught, Elizabeth wasn't so sure.

Orla was fixing her hair into a high ponytail. 'You know what I was thinking? Before you go home and get shackled for good, you should have an adventure. With a big Boston man. Someone who'll give you a bit of a rattle. And a few stories for the grandkids.'

'Now, now,' said Michelle, who usually intervened if the tormenting went too far. 'Orla, why don't you tell us about this fella you're meeting tonight?'

Elizabeth stayed quiet. Best, she thought, to draw a veil over her boyfriend's sulk. Further evidence of Liam's unhappiness would only bolster her flatmates' belief that some day soon she would pack up her belongings and head on home. They had cause to be sceptical. At college, she had spent most weekends back in Thurles, often disappearing on Thursday and not returning until Monday. During their previous two student summers, when her classmates had flitted off to England or Germany, she had stayed in Ireland. Throughout those autumns she had listened with envy to their tales from InterRailing trips through France and Italy and Yugoslavia: tales that grew taller with every telling.

This time, Elizabeth was determined to prove her friends wrong. She wanted to experience America. Not that she harboured any fanciful notions about seeing the Grand Canyon or Las Vegas or New Orleans. What she enjoyed were the small differences: groceries in brown paper bags and big traffic lights, steam rising up through pavement gratings and women wearing runners with business suits.

Plus, despite what Orla might think, Elizabeth craved another few months of being a make-believe adult, sitting up half the night talking about matters of no consequence and listening to Donal and Peter turn insulting each other into an art form. That seemed in every way preferable to real adulthood.

It had never occurred to Danny Esposito that he would miss his big brother. How could you miss someone whose life was dedicated to nagging and interfering? But now that Vincent had left, the grey and white clapboard house had all the atmosphere of a funeral home, and Danny felt too big and clumsy and loud. At that moment, he was doing his best to stay quiet. He padded across the porch, trying to avoid the creakier boards, hoping his mother wouldn't wake.

The silence was punctured by the rasp of a familiar voice. 'Is that you, Danny, love? I need a word.' He winced before turning around; there would be no escape this evening.

'Hey there, Mrs O'Connor, how are you doing?' Bridie O'Connor and her husband, Mossy, lived next door. Despite the temperature, her grey hair was starched into position and her face meticulously painted.

'I'm surviving, honey. I was thinking about your mom. Is she all right?'

'Oh yeah, Mrs O, she's fine.'

'It's just I haven't seen her in a few days. And you know me, I have to be tormenting myself. I said it to Mossy, I hope Regina isn't unwell again.'

'Don't you worry. It's the weather. She doesn't care for these temperatures, you know? Prefers to stay indoors.' It was a fantastic evening, the sky a seamless blue. A cloud or two would have made it more interesting, but you couldn't have everything.

Bridie sighed. 'I'm the same myself. I said as much to Mossy. This heat will kill us all. Just you look at the damage it's doing.' She gestured towards the rhododendron bush at the edge of her neat, wooden porch, its blooms now brown and shrivelled.

Danny nodded. A conversation with Bridie was rarely a two-way process. When Mossy passed on, he was definitely heaven-bound.

'You off out, love?'

'Uh-huh. Grabbing a beer with the boys from work.'

‘Perhaps I’ll call in on your mom in a little bit.’

‘Ah.’ He paused. ‘There’s no need to go troubling yourself. She’ll tell you if she wants anything.’

Bridie pursed her already narrow lips. ‘Well, you know best. I suppose.’

The exodus from 19 Emerald Street had begun with Danny’s father. Seven years before, Dino had met a woman called Bellissa and, after years of part-time philandering, he’d decided that this was the real deal. In Danny’s view, his mom’s replacement was poorly named; the second Mrs Esposito appeared quiet and drab. There must, though, be more to her than met the eye because the old man was a changed character. When Danny was a kid, his dad’s temper could rip the skin off your back. These days he was the very definition of calm.

The rest of the family had taken the departure and remarriage badly. Danny liked to think he took a more balanced approach. If it wasn’t working, he reasoned, why continue to make each other unhappy? He had to admit the divorce had not brought any particular joy to his mother. His two sisters had left within a year of each other. Now his brother too was gone. Vincent and his girlfriend were renting the bottom apartment of a sagging triple-decker. The couple had moved just ten minutes away, but without Vincent the house no longer felt like home.

For a moment, Danny considered bringing the car, a twelve-year-old Ford Maverick with an unreliable temperament and a hacking cough. Lately, as often as not, he had ended up walking. Vincent, who acted like the car was a slur on the family’s honour, claimed it was a miracle that such a pile of garbage ever got on the road. Danny avoided the obvious retort; he drove what he could afford to drive.

Bridie O’Connor was becoming a nuisance. He was sure she meant well. Actually, on second thoughts, he wasn’t, but that was a worry for another day. His immediate concern was keeping her away from Ma. If there was one thing he knew about Regina, it was that she hated fuss. And Bridie was a mountain of fuss.

Besides, what was it she wanted him to say? ‘To tell the truth, Mrs O, my mother is depressed as hell. She hasn’t been out of bed in three days. I could hold an orgy in the front room and she wouldn’t notice. Do come on in, though. And, while you’re at it, why don’t you invite the rest of the street?’ He could picture her face.

This was one of those days, and there were many, when Danny imagined he was treading water, waiting for his real life to come into view. A couple of nights back he’d said as much to his brother. They had been having a beer in a local bar, a squat brown-brick place with rusty grilles on the windows, when he’d tried to broach the subject. With Vincent you had to be careful how you phrased stuff because it didn’t take a lot to get his brother worked up. ‘Do you ever think,’ Danny had asked, ‘that there’s more to be had?’

Vincent had thought for about half a second. ‘More money? Every day of my life.’

‘You know that’s not what I mean.’

His brother had grunted and given him a look that suggested he wasn’t up for this conversation. ‘Sometimes, Dan,’ he’d said, ‘I don’t know where you get your ideas from. Or what’s going to become of you. Really I don’t.’