

Number 27

Diarmuid ordered a shot of phlegm from his throat, received a double, then sent the concoction hurtling over the railing of Parnell Bridge. The Lee was deep and near freezing, with flood warnings in place across the county. It was 3am on Wednesday morning, and most post-club phantoms had shared taxis or trekked it back to student accommodation, protected from the cold by heavily battered offal, floating in stomachs of cheap lager and two for one cocktails. He waited until a lone person was crossing the bridge. He heard her heels and could tell she was a woman of common sense by her heavy black jacket and gloves. He judged that she was reasonably sober, given the way her takeaway was tucked neatly under her arm, to be savoured at home with a cup of tea, rather than attacking it like a starved German Shepherd by the fountain on Grand Parade.

When she was about twenty feet away, he climbed over the railing and looked down. He reached back and grabbed the cool bar. The ledge on the opposite side was more treacherous than expected, all algae and bird shit. He could swim as well as a dumbbell. The water always sounded louder on the opposite side, even though the difference was a matter of inches.

The footsteps stopped.

She'd spotted him.

He rocked on his heels. His heart thundered and his head swam above the water. It felt like levitating. The footsteps restarted and neared, and Diarmuid exhaled an enormous stored breath so it fogged around him and lent the scene a sense of theatre. This was his favourite part. That split second before they spoke and he wondered what they'd say.

Most simply shouted 'Stop!' or 'Wait!' but even then, the difference in tone could be exhilarating. A North African man with a neat white beard once dragged him by his hood, across the railing on Brian Boru Bridge, slapping his ears and calling him a *stupid boy*. A muscled French guy shed his boots and t-shirt, before pinning Diarmuid to the footpath on Wellington Bridge, revelling in the role of action hero. It was the only time he had to fight his way free, with a well-aimed punch to Gallic testicles. Some were desperate, some authoritative, and though he preferred sober passers-by, there was dark comedy in a person trying to offer life-affirming advice after enough shots to fill a toilet cistern. He only ever did it when sober, so he could experience it fully.

He could feel her closeness behind him, and smiled to the river. Here we go.

'Please,' she said. 'Don't.' Her accent was south Tipp, evocative of modernised farmhouses and Munster finals.

Somewhere across Cork City, sirens blared in the dark. Whenever he heard sirens this late, he searched the sky for smoke, but he didn't have time now. It was time to speak.

‘Stay away! It’s none of your business!’ He’d perfected a convincing hint of fragility, just enough quiver to make his rescuer believe that a clumsy move would send him toppling to the water like some sea-stack that had withstood centuries of Atlantic storms then collapsed at the touch of summer’s day ripple.

‘Oh God. Please don’t.’ She was close enough that he could feel her breath on his neck, smell the chips under her arm. The sirens faded and his body trembled in a sort of tantric anticipation at the prospect of her touch on his shoulder.

‘Stay back!’ he said, the swirling surface of the Lee trying to hypnotise him.

‘I’m Caroline. Caroline Egan. Please, look at me. Just tell me your name.’

He released a couple of pained sobs. It was around this time that most people started to panic. Their entire existence was defined by his next move. The rush in those seconds, held up against days in friendless lecture halls wondering why he’d chosen to study Psychology, and monotonous evenings stacking shelves in Aldi, was worth living for.

‘Please, it will be fine, whatever it is, it will be okay. You just need to talk to somebody.’

He shivered. 'Ah, who'll listen?! Nobody wants to hear it!' The biting wind piggy backing on the surface of the Lee made his eyes water and easy to pass off as tears.

'I'll listen. Just tell me, what's wrong?' He turned to her, finally seeing her clearly, disarmed by green eyes you'd go to war for, a face you'd want to see after coming out of a coma. She was trembling. He had to remind himself of where he was balanced, such was her force of distraction.

'I know it's hard,' she said. 'I know how bad you feel.'

He scoffed.

'My dad killed himself,' she went on, 'not a day passes that I don't wish somebody was there to stop him.'

Her disclosure caught him off guard. The rescues usually played out with some volleys of pleading and resisting. This was uncharted territory, a serve he struggled to return. The mention of a father was enough to unsteady his balance.

'He'd have tried again!' he argued, fastening his grip on the rail, shutting his eyes and shaking the boyhood memory of walking into his father's workshop from his mind.

‘No, he wouldn’t. He really wouldn’t, that’s why it’s so awful!’ She laugh-cried. ‘He just hit rock bottom. He’d have gotten back on his feet.’ Her hand touched his shoulder and it may as well have been lightning. ‘I know that if he could see what it did to who he left behind, he wouldn’t have done it.’

He shook his head and thought of his father, suspended in air, his head bent forward in apology. He turned to her. ‘Do you really think so?’

‘I know so,’ she said.

He took a few laboured breaths. He’d made up his mind that she deserved a neat conclusion. He’d felt her every ounce of her worry and concern and wished he could bottle it, market it and sell it as Pure Empathy. If she’d walked in on his father, the old man would probably have hopped down and turned the noose into a tire swing. He hovered a hand in her direction and she took it, the leather glove clasp his palm. He met her eyes and nothing else existed. Their connection was the universe.

He nodded and muttered ‘I’m okay,’ over and over.

On the other side of the railing, she hugged him. The smell of perfume and the damp wool of her collar tickling his nose.

‘Let me call somebody,’ she said, breaking their union.

The getaway was the hardest part, made even harder now that Diarmuid didn’t want to leave. Sometimes a call had already been made, to the Guards or ambulance and the smartest thing to do was bolt. High tail it through some lane or alley and vanish. He came too close to Garda attention once, when an unseen onlooker flagged down a patrol car. The spurt of blue light gave them away and he escaped the scene like a hare who’d spotted a greyhound, then hid for hours in a nearby wheelie bin, burrowing into a warren of black bags filled with an apartment building’s waste.

‘No really. Really,’ he looked into her eyes, breaking one of his rules and showing his face plainly. ‘I’m fine. I’m sorry about your dad,’ he said. ‘What was his name?’ Another broken rule: never say more than necessary. But he couldn’t help himself. After 25 previous rescues, this felt like the pinnacle.

‘Denis.’ She tossed his sympathy back at him, with unbroken eye-contact. ‘Tell me your name,’ she said. ‘Please.’

‘Listen-’ He’d never told anybody about what he did. If he tried to explain it, they’d think it either cruel or a cry for help. But it was too precious to share, much less cry out. But there she was, ready to listen.

He was interrupted by a foursome joining the bridge, their silhouettes backlit by lights from the bus depot. Two guys and two girls, their drunken choir's grunts and shrieks a series of pins in the balloon of Diarmuid and Caroline.

'I'm Mick,' he said, sticking by his rules, capturing once last look, then running, drawing the icy air into his lungs. She called after him. She'd call the Guards next, or implore the oncoming group to pursue, but they'd never find him.

The adrenaline propelled his run home to the semi-detached house on Barrack Street, which he shared with three other first-year students. His hands were still shaking when he fit the key in the lock and the stairs groaned at his late homecoming.

He locked his bedroom and pulled his laptop from under his single bed. The first time Diarmuid clung to a bridge, he'd hoped to learn what his father was feeling in those final moments, when he tied that blue rope around the rafters in the garage. Tested the noose. Carried the small metal stool that Diarmuid had sat on as a boy, watching his father slide in and out from under cars. Stepped up on it, tightened the noose around his neck then jumped away from it all. He hadn't expected to become addicted to the rush of somebody trying to rescue him, that pure human connection. Those moments at the absolute centre of a person's world, them at the centre of his. It was an intimacy that couldn't be matched, and after Caroline, would never be topped.

He lay in the screen light, the laptop fan humming, a housemate dry retching in the toilet next door. He logged the details.

'Number 26. Caroline Egan – Parnell Bridge – March 6, 3am'

He allocated a score, under the categories drama, connection, and getaway, and rated his rescuer for poise, concern, and empathy. It was a beautiful interaction. Lacking the drama of a desperate lunge to grab him, or the heart stopping sound of a scream. Thankfully, there was no trace of French Rambo's aggression, and while tears were often a welcome accompaniment, their absence took nothing from a rescue that was bursting with intimacy.

He'd seen a couple of his rescuers since the night of their connection. Number 14, poor old Patricia, down the aisle at Lidl where she was leaning on her walking stick, struggling to reach a top shelf. Number 21, Petr, on the next pitch over at 5 a-side. He'd thought about going further afield, to Limerick or Dublin, where there was less chance of meeting again.

He found her Facebook page easily. Caroline Egan. Studying Biomed at UCC, her eyes in her profile picture making his heart rattle like a pneumatic drill. The rest of her page was private and Google turned up little. He searched her father's name. Denis, she'd said, the simple syllables almost bringing her to tears.

He found a link to an obituary from *The Nenagh Guardian*, and opened it. There was a picture of a smiling man of about 50, the belly rounded by country cooking and pints of stout, the nose a bulbous mass, the skin the spider-veined and dehydrated brittleness recognisable in every pub. Next to him was a teenaged Caroline and a shy looking woman in her best dress, who was now a widow. Denis Egan's obituary mourned '*the much-loved local businessman.*' Diarmuid swallowed. '*Well known in the community,*' '*leaves behind a loving wife and daughter*'. He imagined the woman, a husband missing from her bed, his shirt and ties still hanging in the wardrobe, his shoes still inside the back door like lonely pets waiting for their master.

As with Diarmuid's father, there was no mention of whatever terrible insight had led him to do what he did. Two men in their early fifties, who might have been the best of pals had they met in the pub or at the races. But Diarmuid understood it. He was joined to both men by a chasm of loneliness that no number of people could fill, a realisation that when the fleeting rush was over, there was nothing left. The rush was all there was.

He wiped his face and opened Facebook again, logging in with a fake account. He sent Caroline a message, thanking her for what she did, swearing to her that he'd never do it again and that he understood that life was precious. He shut his laptop and left it on the nightstand next to his wallet, then left his room, cleared the stairs without raising interest, shut the door behind him and headed north. Sirens rang out somewhere across Cork city and Diarmuid looked to the sky for smoke but didn't see any. He shivered, no night to be out without a jacket, then turned west, towards one last bridge.

