

DIRTY LITTLE FISHES

She must be a good friend because on Mammy's day off we catch two buses and walk up a billion stairs to visit her. It's an estate like ours, only with less swears written on it. We are waiting outside Mammy's good friend's door in a corridor the colour of evil. Mammy pulls down her sleeve and holds it over her face.

'God protect us from the reek of cat piss,' she says, and knocks on the door.

'Be quiet in here now, the woman's dying.'

'Will she die today? While I'm here?' I ask hopefully.

Mammy gives me a look and knocks again.

A man opens the door and looks through the gap. He has a round face like a simple baby and his top lip is wet. He has flattened long strands of hair over the top of his head, which is speckled with freckles. He lets us in and I see that his slippers have dog faces with long brown ears. I think he must be an awful eejit to wear them on his feet. I try to look at his slippers, rather than his face.

'I'm very pleased to meet you,' he says, taking my hand. 'You are a beautiful young lady.'

And you are a gobshite.

His eyes are as quick as a rat's. He twitches his wet lip and rubs his fingers up and down my hand as if he's a doctor feeling my bones for breakages. He speaks like a doctor too, smooth and posh, as if he is sure of everything in the

world. I wonder if that is why Mammy has put her good skirt on and is speaking oddly.

'How is she today, Maurice? Is there *any* improvement?'

'The same really, the same.' He does a brave sort of smile then takes Mammy's hand and starts rubbing it.

I can't see the woman who is dying when he opens the door to the front room.

I wonder if it's all a joke and there isn't really a dying woman at all for us to look at. The curtains are closed, turning the light that comes through them soupy orange. The smell is far, far, more terrible than in the hall outside. It is not just cat's piss; it is a terrible badness. You breathe it into your nose and taste it in your mouth. It is thick and real. Mammy blinks hard. She wants to put her sleeve over her face and run. She hasn't a stomach for smells at all.

'Show me where the kitchen is, Maurice,' she says. 'I'll pop the kettle on and we'll have a little chat.' She turns to me. 'You watch the fishes.'

The fishes are in a tank in the corner of the room. It's all lit up and there's a low buzz coming off it. There's multicoloured gravel and a shipwreck. There are fish with go-faster stripes — zippy lines of electric light. They spark and turn through the bubbles rising from a black pipe in the corner. They like the bubbles tickling their arses, it's in the way they wiggle.

There are slower fish too; I count four white ghosts with tissue fins. There are black fish, glum velvet triangles with dangling streamers. Halloween cut-outs. They could be the shadows of the other fish, except there are only three of them. They stick to the bottom and stop and start, stop and start, as if they are

searching for something they've lost amongst the stones.

There is a plastic mermaid no bigger than a peach sitting on a stone at the bottom of the tank. When she sees me she shakes out her yellow hair and swims to the top of the tank with a quick flick of her tail. She taps on the glass with her fist.

I open the flap at the top of the tank.

'Come to see the dead one?' she says, leaning out on her elbows, her tail treading water with a crawling stir.

'She's dead? I've missed it?'

The mermaid frowns. 'She might as well be. Look, she's there behind you.'

I turn. If I stretch out my arm I could touch her, the dying woman, she's so near.

She's as flat as the pelt of a run over cat. Propped up in a little nest of cushions with her face turned towards the fish tank. Her eyes sleep under closed lids, soft blind eggs. Her mouth is a slack pocket. Otherwise her face is a pale flower and the tank is her sunlight.

'There's nothing much to see,' says the mermaid. 'She's nearly dead.'

Even so, I have a good look.

Nearly Dead lies with her arms tucked neatly by her side like a good girl. She has a scarf tied loosely around her head, which is as bald as an onion.

The top of her pink nightgown is unbuttoned. Her chest goes up and down in a sticky way, a moving rack of bones with long shrivelled diddies. I don't think she would like me to see this.

'Jesus, careful, don't disturb her,' hisses the mermaid.

I nod. I have to be gentle in case I break Nearly Dead or wake her. I don't want to wake her. I like her all peaceful and asleep. I do up a tiny pearl button, then another, then another. I point my nose away and try not to breathe in, because she is the smell that fills the room with terrible badness. There is dribble on the side of her mouth so I take big handfuls of tissues from the table, dab, and throw the tissues behind the sofa. She looks much happier. She knows I am here and she's glad in her sleep.

'I wouldn't touch her,' murmurs the mermaid. 'You'll get what she's got.'

'I didn't touch her, I only touched her buttons.'

The mermaid sweeps her hair over her shoulder and narrows her eyes. 'Tell him she wants to hear music. Tell him she wants Shirley Bassey.'

She turns on her tail and swims down to her stone sending the little electric fish darting everywhere. She sits with her back to me and I watch her bubbles rise and pop on the surface of the water.

I follow the sound of Mammy's voice. She is leaning on the kitchen table with a glass at her elbow. He is leaning towards her.

'She wants to hear music,' I say. 'She wants Shirley Bassey.'

The rat smile falls right off his face and he goes rushing out of the room calling. Rita, Rita, Rita.

'Can we go now, Mammy?'

Mammy fishes a cigarette from the packet. Her mouth is smudged and her shoes are off. They lie toppled sole to sole under her chair.

'I don't like it here. I don't like him. He's an eejit,' I say.

'Pass me that teapot down from the shelf there,' says Mammy.

I reach up to the teapot and nearly drop it because it is heavier than I thought it would be. Mammy takes the lid off and pinches her fingers through the small opening. She pulls out notes and hands the teapot back to me.

'Bus fare,' she mumbles through her fag as she tucks the notes in her handbag, narrowing one dark eye against the smoke.

'Did she really say that to you? Did Rita really talk?' He is crying all down his nose and holding me tightly by the tops of my arm.

Mammy stubs her cigarette out and buttons up her coat.

He is telling us how much he loves Nearly Dead and how much she loved Shirley Bassey. He tells us he would give anything for just an hour with her, how she used to be before.

Mammy rolls her eyes and leans back against the cooker.

When he kisses me goodbye he leaves his spit on my cheek. Then he gives me 50p. Then he makes Mammy promise to come back again tomorrow.

He gives her some pound notes for the bus fare and for some bits for Nearly Dead. I wonder if he will notice the teapot getting lighter. As we walk down the cat's piss corridor I look back and he waves from the front door of the flat. The dog slippers look up at me with downturned mouths, as well they might.

This time the journey takes longer because I know where we're going.

Mammy is in a good mood, she has her fur on and her red mouth is neat today. The bus driver calls Mammy my sister and she laughs in a way that shows her teeth, white against the red. Red and white and black are Mammy's colours. When I was little I believed she was Snow White, with her

black, black hair.

On the bus Mammy talks to me about Nearly Dead. She met her when she was cleaning a big house in Lawn Crescent. Mammy cleans big houses and takes the money she finds when she hangs clothes up, or hoovers behind the sofa, or goes through the drawers. The ladies she works for are called Bitches and their husbands are called Bastards. Mammy often has to leave when the Bitches find out that the Bastards are sweet on her. Or if the Bitches find out that Mammy mostly just walks into the room, sprays polish in the air and sits down with a Campari to watch the telly. Nearly Dead was the cleaner a few doors down. Nearly Dead would give Mammy fags and tell her about her husband.

'I thought he sounded like an idle fecker,' said Mammy. 'A concert pianist with a nervous breakdown. He tried giving lessons to kiddies but the mummies didn't like him.'

Mammy is looking at a man on the bus. He can't take his eyes from her face, he's never seen anything like her. She's an apple and he badly wants to eat her. He looks like he might cry, as well he might. For she is Snow White. She has bewitched him. Her colours are red and white and black.

'Closest thing to a mother, she was.' Mammy says, ignoring the man, tracing her name on the misty bus window. She doesn't look a bit sad.

'Are you going to be here every time I come to visit?'

'Maybe,' says the mermaid.

I know she is. She had her face poked up through the top of the tank as soon as I came into the front room. I'd have preferred only me and Nearly Dead.

The mermaid nods her yellow head at the sleeping, dying woman.

'He hasn't been in to her since you left. He's after your Mammy now. Then he'll be your Da.'

'Don't be soft, Mammy wouldn't have him. Look at the state of him.' I frown.

'How did she get on that different nightie then? It's blue not pink,' I say.

'He only changes her when you're coming. He's not interested in looking after her anymore. Now he's lining up his next wifey.'

Feck off, mermaid.

I flip the lid down on her. She drops to the bottom, swishing the gravel with her tail like an angry cat. I stick my tongue out at her and she pushes her nose against the glass, blowing out the sides of her face in an ugly way.

'Don't you listen to her,' I whisper to Nearly Dead. 'He's not after my Mammy at all. You look very pretty today in your nightie.'

I think I see her smile.

'She can't hear you,' the mermaid babbles from the bottom of the tank. 'She doesn't even know you're there.'

He has sent Mammy to the shop for a prescription. She was glad to get the air. He gave her money from the teapot to buy squash for me and wine and fags for her.

'Rita's morphine is wearing off. When it does I need to be here to administer another dose,' he says. 'Your Mummy won't be long.'

They have a back bedroom that is used for nothing else other than a piano. It has a stool you sit on with a fringe that is coming undone.

'Do you want to learn how to play?'

'No thank you,' I say.

He opens up the piano and puts his fat white fingers over keys like yellow teeth. His fingers run up and down and make sounds like raindrops. I draw nearer to hear.

'Sit here, next to me, that's right.'

On top of the piano is an ornament. A lady with an umbrella wearing an olden days dress. She is planted in the middle of a knitted doily. Whenever he looks away she frowns and waves, shakes her head and gestures. She is trying to tell me something. Her big painted eyes look sad. She can't speak; they didn't paint her a proper mouth.

His leg in brown trousers is close to my leg in red patterned tights. He smiles down at me like a rat. He smells of sweat and damp. He smells worse than Nearly Dead.

Every visit is the same. He sends Mammy to the shop and makes me sit at the piano with him. I hold my breath until Mammy gets back and pray she'll be quick. When she comes back they sit in the kitchen and drink wine and I sit with Nearly Dead and watch the fishes.

Nothing changes, day after day. Except the colour of Nearly Dead's nightie and the water in the tank.

The water in the tank goes from clear to green then greener. Slime collects in the corners, it settles on the shipwreck and on the gravel.

'She's going soon. Any minute now. Look at her,' says the mermaid, pointing over my shoulder. 'He drugs her up to be like that. So she's out of it. Wait till she wakes up. Then it's a different picture round here.'

'Why are you so nasty about her?' I trace a line on the glass to see if the electric fish will follow.

'I'm a mermaid. We're not very nice. We sing songs that sink boats and drown sailors, don't you know?'

I shrug, barely.

Behind me, on the sofa, Nearly Dead makes a little farty wheeze. Like the air leaving a balloon. I'm over her in a moment, watching her closely, in case she's speaking. But there is no other noise than the racketty draw and drop of her chest which moves with a soft sticky whistle.

Then the mermaid murmurs. 'Tell him she wants the curtains open, and the window too. Her spirit wants to follow Pippa's.'

'Who's Pippa?'

'Her budgie. It flew away last year. She loved it like a star.'

'Can you love a star?'

The mermaid doesn't answer, she is brushing her hair and staring down into the water.

I watch Nearly Dead. She is good and neat and tucked in today with a clean scarf on her poor smooth head. Her flower face is pale in the thick soupy light. Her mouth is only a little open and her eyelids are sealed up shut. She is still, apart from the clanky up and down of her chest, like a wind-up toy running down.

'She wants you to have something. She told me last night.'

'She does know I'm here then?'

The mermaid scowls down at the fish circling below her. 'Dirty little fishes, will

he ever clean this tank? They're losing their shine and I'm getting covered in this green shit.'

She splashes up handfuls of water and tries to wash her arms.

'She had this place looking lovely. She'd polish this tank till it shone. He does nothing. Fat fecker.'

I find a tiny toothbrush amongst the boxes of medicine and the needle tubes on the table behind the sofa. Its bristles are quite soft.

'I'll clean you,' I say.

The mermaid lets me scoop her out of the tank, and very very gently, so I don't hurt her scales, I clean her with the toothbrush. When I get to her face I notice that she is smiling. I've never seen her smile and she looks so pretty that I smile back.

'She wants you to look in her jewellery box,' smiles the mermaid. 'Third drawer down in the dressing table. The one with the painted ballerina on top. Take the little red velvet bag. But don't open the bag until she's passed on. Put me back now. Careful.'

They are in the kitchen. I hear the laugh Mammy does when she's pretending something is funny. Musical scales ending in a high note. I hear his voice, low and soft, like a posh rat's. I try the two doors I haven't been in. One is a very small room with boxes, the second is a bedroom.

The curtains are half-drawn and the bedsheets lie on the bed in a sour mound. There is a magazine under the bed. I pick it up and see pictures of naked ladies in it. They are leaning on cars and against snooker tables

showing their hairy privates with their mouths open like they can't breathe properly. I kick it back under the bed.

The dressing table is covered with a thick layer of dust.

I open the third drawer down and take out the jewellery box with the picture of a ballerina on the top. I sit cross-legged with the box before me and open it.

Inside there is another ballerina. She spins around to a tune made from chimes.

'Would you mind not dancing, if it's going to be at all noisy?' I whisper.

The ballerina stops and nods and flutters out her tutu, looking at herself in the tiny mirrors that surround her platform. I try on a necklace in the shape of long green parrots and white clip-on earrings. Then I see the little red velvet bag. I put it in the pocket of my pinafore and take off the necklace and the earrings and put them back. The ballerina smiles at me. She stands on her toes and stretches her arms up to show that she is ready. I close the box again very gently.

I go back into the front room. I will thank Nearly Dead. I open the door and go to her. So neatly tucked in. Such a very good girl. I am filled with love for her and smile at her sleeping face turned towards the glowing fish tank. I hold my nose and kiss her cheek.

Her eyes open. Blind blue.

Her mouth opens. Stinking pit.

Her body twists like a crisp packet in the fire.

From deep inside her a cracked bellow, a broken howl.

Mammy finds me behind the dustbins but I won't go back in the house. She's to bring my coat and shoes out to me there. I shiver on the bus so much that she gives me her fur. I see that face when I shut my eyes. I hear the cries always.

Nearly Dead is Really Dead. Mammy is careful not to cry at the service because she doesn't want to ruin her make-up. She has done her eyes all catty, like an Egyptian Princess. Her lips are red, just like they always are. Everyone pretends to sing a song about fields to a horrible noise. It is an organ. The coffin has shiny handles on it to pick it up and put it down. I look at it until dark blue curtains draw in around it with a whirr.

This is the last we will see of Really Dead.

Mammy tells me that she will be taken out from behind the curtain and burnt. They'll tip her out of the coffin first, so they can sell it to someone else on the side, and shut her in a big range. Then they will put her ashes in a nice pot and put her on the mantelpiece because this is what people do in England. I ask Mammy if that is what will happen to us when we die. She says no, we're Irish, so we will go into the kind earth and have a beautiful marble stone at our heads and spring flowers on our feet. I try and tell her that Really Dead is not in that coffin any more and will not be burnt up and will not be ashes in a nice pot. She is somewhere else. Most probably flying around with Pippa. The star that she loved. But Mammy can't hear me over the organ.

A wake is a party to celebrate a funeral. In the front room the curtains are pulled back, the sofa is empty and the table that held the medicines has an

ugly plant on it. Mammy has pulled a rug over the stains on the carpet and left the windows open. Old ladies sit around with their mouths in thin lines and Mammy passes fish paste sandwiches to them. Everyone is cold so he closes the windows and puts the electric fire on. I sit next to two old ladies who smell of talc as they start to warm up. They watch Mammy move about the room and nudge each other. Her colours are black and white and red. He looks at her as if she's an apple he'd like to hide from everyone. He frowns, as well he might. She has bewitched him.

I stare and stare at the tank until I realise I can't see the fishes.

I move closer, until I have my nose nearly up against the glass. The walls of the tank are pasted with green slime, apart from a little patch that has been scratched away. The fishes are all gone but the mermaid is still there. She is curled up on her stone at the bottom. I knock on the tank but she doesn't hear me. She is covered with muck. Her chest rises and falls stickily. She is dying, she is nearly dead.

I pick up an ashtray from the sideboard and throw it at the tank. The glass cracks and green spills out. It floods the carpet with the smell of the sea. It laps at my shoes. The mermaid washes up, still, stiff plastic.

Mammy says she'll tan my arse and I'll not sit down for a week. She says he is really upset because I spoilt the wake. Good, I scream, now he won't make me sit all near to him at that bloody piano or slobber over me for 50p.

Mammy's eyes go blacker and she hits me until I'm silent with surprise.

Dirty Little Fishes

I pretend to be asleep when she kisses my forehead. I know she is crying because some tears fall onto my face, where they dry all itchy. I can't scratch them until she leaves and she doesn't leave for ages.

The little red bag is red like a heart. Red like a secret. I tip what's inside into my hand. It is silver, dull, not bright. I polish it on the edge of my bedspread. It is a bracelet with beautiful, beautiful, things on it. There is a lady with an umbrella and an olden days dress on. There is a ballerina with a stand out tutu. But best of all, there is a mermaid, with a waving tail and hair swirling around her tiny cross face.

I close my eyes and in my imagination I see Rita. She's waving goodbye.

I give her hair and a nice outfit. A skirt suit and then a ballgown. Her eyes are the same blue as the little fat bird perched on her finger. She looks at me and laughs, the bird just looks at me.

They fly up into the sky together. I watch the soles of Rita's slippers and the swinging lampshade of her petticoat grow tinier, then disappear.

I hide my charms in a sock in the bottom of my wardrobe and go out to play.