

Versions

of

a

Girl

What about
the life you
could have
lived?

Catherine Gray



Versions of a Girl

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*For Mark,
one of the best humans I ever met*

We always may be
what we might have been.

– Adelaide Anne Procter, 'A Legend of Provence'

The Police Station

HOW IT ENDS

March 2014

Ballymena, Northern Ireland

In a way, she's looking forward to prison. Unlimited time to sleep and read, hardly any TV, no mobile phone, wonky Wi-Fi. Haven't all those things been the centrepiece of every holiday she's had lately?

She wonders if she'll get super fit and start bench-pressing the equivalent of small humans. Learn Egyptian for a future trip to the pyramids, maybe. Solve the riddle of the Dora-bella Cipher. It's uncertain why she'll become a weightlifting, language-learning cryptologist just by virtue of walking through prison gates, but she doesn't make the rules.

The terrible food she can do – given her idea of cooking for one is stabbing cellophane with a fork. The only worry will be if she has to join a gang for protection. She's never played well with others. It would only work if she were the boss. The head of the cobra, as such.

She knows she's avoiding the gravity of this situation by being blasé. It's her special skill and, depending on who you talk to, also her most irritating trait. Because this isn't *Carry on Convict*; it really is a predicament. She is at an existential fork in the road.

There aren't many times in life you occupy this space, where you sit suspended between two very different possible

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realities. Where an action – or the lack of it – has the power to provoke a life-changing reaction.

On the church steps before walking down the aisle. Seeing that your partner forgot to sign out of their email account. Finding a bag of money on the street. Pausing in front of a Belgian Malinois at the animal shelter.

Do you move or stay still, click in or keep out, pick it up or leave it, say yes or say no. It seems like such a small choice but the consequences are giant.

Motor idling, she sits in the car park trying to decide. The police station hunkers just thirty feet away. Lowered blinds give it a heavy-lidded look, as if it needs a nap. The road back to Glenfoot is equidistant.

There's a deep temptation to speed out of this car park and keep going. Like Thelma, or Louise . . . whoever it was that Susan Sarandon played in the film. Mind you, that road only leads to Glenfoot Beach, not the Grand Canyon, and Glenfoot Beach is about as deadly as a kids' ball pit. You could drive into the surf at full speed, only for the spear-mint waves to push you safely back to shore, so she'd need something more dramatic, much more—

Rap, rap. Sweet Jesus: that made her jump.

A man asking if she's coming or going – his wife is doing laps of the car park in her mud-brown Lada. She makes the universal sign for 'staying' by pointing into her own lap.

She turns the engine off and the silence closes in. The windows mist up and despair takes hold as she thinks of all the sunsets she won't see, the horses she won't stroke, the babies she won't bounce . . .

Oh, do get over yourself. The melodrama of you. This is no Greek tragedy. Merely a Northern Irish mini-drama.

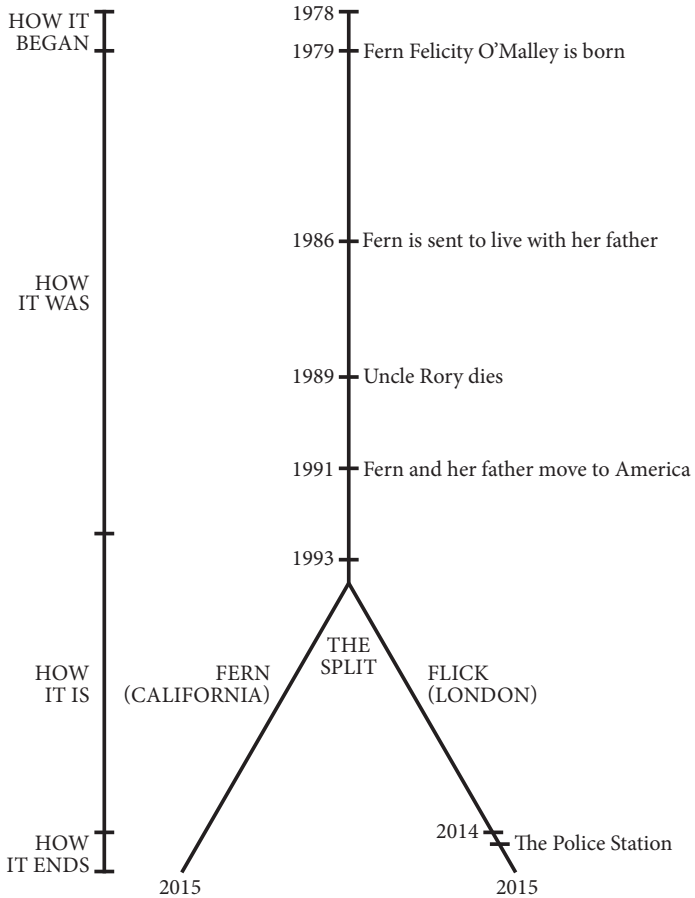
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You'll be out in five years if you can behave yourself and don't become a prison gang boss. Frankly, she's wasted more time in relationships she was too polite to end.

The right thing to do is obvious. She already knows the answer to that. She was responsible for his death.

The real question is: can she physically do it? Actually move her body from the freedom of this car into the confinement of the consequences.

Because right now, the enormity of it has her paralysed.



How It Is

The Campground

HOW IT IS

Twenty-one years earlier – July 1993

Paradise, California

Fern watches them.

‘Drew, do you want another sausage?’ his apron-wearing mother calls across the campground. Drew runs towards her and wraps his seven-year-old body around her legs. Drew is annoying. But his mum doesn’t think so. She laughs, pretends to attack his hair with the BBQ tongs and pops a sausage into his mouth. Then pats him on the backside and says ‘shoo’.

Other mothers, like Drew’s, love their kids. It’s just hers that doesn’t. So she’s not lovable. That’s the only explanation. Where other kids have a soft centre, like the belly of a Care Bear, Fern must have a cave filled with crows.

Drew runs towards the lake and cannonballs into it, shouting, ‘Cowabunga!’ She bets he will remember this day. If not the whole of it, then at least in part. The day they camped beside Lake Oroville and found a sugar-drunk racoon in their tent surrounded by Reese’s Pieces packets; the day his mother loved him and gave him the last sausage.

Sitting on the low-lying limb of a cottonwood tree, Fern picks at the hole in her white plimsoll and feels the needle of potential tears. Focus now. She runs a finger along the inside curve of the shoe’s sole, where she wrote F*E*R*N with a marker pen two years ago, when she was twelve.

Mum used to write her initials inside all of her clothes

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labels with an orange pen. It was a fuzzy-tipped pen that didn't run. Nowadays, Fern writes her name inside the labels of her clothes, but the pen always runs in the wash, even when she uses permanent marker.

Once, she asked her dad whether he knew about the magic pens, showing him an ink blot on the back of her Fleetwood Mac T-shirt.

'Why are you writing on your clothes, you headcase? Goddamn it, Fern, that T-shirt is a seventies original.'

She'd rather have had a Shakespears Sister shirt, but Da wouldn't hear of it.

'Don't be so uncool, pet.'

Drew's mum is hard to watch. Fern strokes a heart-shaped leaf and slows her breath, trying to stop her heart sprinting as if it's being chased. Look at that tractor instead, *look*, it's so eaten up by plants that it's half farm machine, half forest, like a centaur from the Narnia books she's read. She imagines that it growls to life at night and goes on farming adventures.

She doesn't know why she seems to be the only petty thief in the world who targets campsites. Birds sing while you work, there's always trees where you can hide and the campers leave their cars open, as if the surrounding greenery is a protection spell against crime. Given they're 'getting away from it all', the campers don't notice their credit cards have got away from *them* until they stop for gas on the way home.

It's the perfect place. Da would be proud if he knew. He may have stopped her from ever doing it again – working alone is forbidden – but he'd still pause and throw her a 'You're some kid, Fern Felicity O'Malley'.

It was Da who told her that their way of stealing is called 'petty theft'.

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‘What does “petty” mean?’ she asked.

‘In most contexts, it means small-minded,’ he said.

She didn’t get it. Surely taking what you need and no more is big-minded. ‘We’re making sure karma doesn’t come back to bite us in the bum,’ Da added, but she didn’t know who Karma was either, or why he liked to bite bums.

If you look at the bigger picture, will these rich folks miss the thirty dollars she needs for food? Nup. They will not. They would drop that on a round of fancy frozen yoghurt served by Daffy Duck at Disney. Will they miss the ten dollars she needs for pharmacy supplies? Nope. They’d throw that at some valet-parking attendant as a tip.

‘God forbid they might have to park their own car,’ Da says every time they pass a valet stand. She makes an annoyed snort too, even though she doesn’t understand why it’s a bad thing to have money to pay people to do things for you.

Fern waits. The red minivan’s door is wide open. She just needs the people around it to switch their focus. It’ll come. A kid choking on a French fry, the need to sing ‘Happy Birthday’ over a cake, the teens whooping as they find a tyre swing; anything will do. Just fifteen seconds of group distraction and she can sneak into the car, take the wallet she can see sitting there, and be folded back into the forest.

She leans back on the tree’s cool trunk. It’s relaxing being invisible. Only the sparrows above are aware of her right now. Lately she experiences the world differently. Perhaps it’s something to do with having turned fourteen. People keep commenting on the way she looks and, wow, are other people’s opinions heavy. She can’t walk down a street without feeling them on her.

While she waits, she wonders why the Drews of the world

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remember and she doesn't. Her memories before the age of seven are mostly a blank. Kids she meets at the skate park, pool or library, talk in coloured-in detail about their childhoods. Whole hours seem to have remained, like a bluebottle she once saw frozen and perfect in a snowdrift. Sometimes they even have whole *days*. The day they went to the theme park, rode the log flume and had hotdogs; or when they fell off their bike and made a planets project.

Aside from one episode burnt upon her brain (not now, thanks, brain), Fern doesn't have the memories these kids have. She only has flashes, in place of seven years of life lived. As if she were dropped into her skin and yanked back out again a few seconds later.

A seagull swooping on her chips like a jet, stroking a fringed lampshade, a slap right across her face, jumping on a trampoline, coming out of the Irish Sea with blue skin. Feeling lonely under a honeysuckle bush, Da being the tickle monster, fearing she would see a banshee at her window and her whole family would die, sliding the cookie tin off a high shelf, the rush of 'knock door run'. In-out, flash-dark, catch-gone.

And then a tear in her existence, as if a page were ripped from a book. Her mum sending her to live with her dad, when she was seven. She doesn't remember why it happened, or how it happened, or anything at all really.

She's always having to make other people feel better about her being motherless. 'It's OK,' she says, 'really,' and beams at them in her best well-adjusted way. It's like when you tell people your cat just died and they say, 'Oh God, I'm sorry,' and then you have to say, 'Don't worry, it's OK,' even though it's really, really not.

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Fern hasn't heard from her mother ever since. And while her father has stuck around, these days he's incapable of anything but scratchcards and shots.

Sounds of an argument snap her out of this thought. Drew – the little upstart – has taken another boy's Garbage Pail Kids card without permission and is now waving it above the head of the other kid, who roars with frustration. 'Give me Adam Bomb back, Drew. He's my favourite.'

The adults sigh and gather around the boys. 'Drew,' his mother says, stroking the small of his back. 'What did we talk about this week? Sharing is caring.' Fern shakes her head in disbelief. Drew needs a smack round the legs, not a stroke.

This is her opening, though. She drops down and gets across to the minivan, head low, flattening herself against its red belly, then hopping into the driver's seat. As she pulls herself up, she catches the horn with her elbow. *BEEP*. It's brief, but obvious.

Drew's mother turns, scowls, runs towards the van, quicker than she looks. Fern shuts the driver's door and bounces around the vehicle locking the rest. Spit speckles the window as the mother pounds on it and says, 'Open up this instant, young lady.' Fern is trapped.

The other campers close in on the car. They'll call the cops, for sure. Nobody here appears to be chill about her camping out in their precious minivan. A smug one-armed cheerleader doll grins at her from the floor. The van jiggles from the hammering on the window, making the keys in the ignition jingle.

Keys. Adults now surround the minivan, but the dirt path that heads out of the campsite is clear. And her only exit. Fern

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turns over the ignition and thinks about how Da does it. As the van wakes, the adults shout.

Da sometimes lets her do the handbrake and gears if they're in an automatic. Handbrake releases first, then D for drive, then foot on the accelerator. The van lurches forward. She hits the brake instead. Whoa.

Then Fern does the only thing that makes sense: drives away. Chased by pretty much the entire campsite, aside from two teenage boys, who are swinging on a tyre swing and cheering her on.

'THIEF!' someone shouts after her. It makes her flinch.

She's an idiot. Tears start to form and spill. They have another car at the campsite, so they'll be after her as soon as they find the keys.

Her only edge is that she's local. Well, ish – she's been in Paradise for a year now. And when kids don't go to school, like she hasn't *at all* in their three years of America, they spend a lot of time in the forest. Often with a big stick and a mashed pack of stolen cigarettes even though they don't like cigarettes.

And so, she knows this national forest's crisscross of dirt tracks like the inside of her own brain. The map of its trails do actually look like a brain. She's stalked every RV park for easy pickpocketings, eaten snacks left behind by holiday-makers at every beauty spot, and used the campsite showers, which are hot and strong, even if you do need to press-press-press the button.

To the west of the campsites there are skinny trees and used needles that she has to dodge, then a path along the highway that leads back to the motel where her and Da live.

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To the east of here, the forest gets thicker, closer, lovely. Even she still gets lost in it sometimes, so there's a cool circle of a compass in her pocket to help.

Glancing in the rear-view to check they're not on her trail yet, she takes the track on the second right, heading east. Tall pine trees hold her close and sweet air gushes into the van. She realises she's been holding her breath. Exhale, inhale, exhale, you're OK, you're OK.

She swings a left and slows to a crawl, the van bumping along the path as she messes with the fuzz of radio until it becomes a voice. A local radio presenter makes cringey small talk with himself.

What now? Just dump the van and run, of course, but she knows from *Columbo* reruns on TV that this vehicle is loaded with 'physical evidence' from her. Not just fingerprints, but hair, skin, clothes fibres.

To cover her tracks, she'll need to wipe the minivan down and blitz it with bleach. Which would require gloves, probably. Criminals seem to like leather ones. And, of course, she'll need a vacuum cleaner. She enters a daydream where, from now on, she pulls one of those smiley-faced vacuums behind her, like a pet.

Cleaning up the van isn't an option. So, she needs to hide this evidence on wheels. Otherwise she'll end up in a juvenile detention facility for grand theft auto. Given this take was more of a mistake, bland theft auto would be more accurate. She smiles at her own wordplay; she'll tell Buck about that one later.

At a fork in the road she chooses the least travelled path. And then does so again. The minivan bumps on, low-hanging trees stroking and then whacking her roof. Fern can go no

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further, so she pulls off the road, hiding the van as best she can. Here, the trees are lush and there isn't a primary-coloured flash of litter in sight. People don't come here.

She stops, grabs Drew's mother's purse, plucks a credit card from it, then hops out. Ten seconds later, she dashes back and plucks the keys from the ignition, stashing them in her dungarees. Just in case.

An hour later, she's home. For a moment she stands outside the motel. He hasn't seen her yet and she feels a push of love in her chest. Wally.

He's 'powerless over ice cream' as he puts it, often giving her half-eaten tubs, saying, 'Save me from myself, Fern.' Every day he wears something yellow because it makes him feel happy. One time he made her guess his age and when she said 'eighty!' he went into a big huff and muttered about only being sixty. Whenever guests of The Rest Inn leave things behind in the rooms, he mails them back across country free of charge. He tells several dad jokes involving cheese and the only time he's mean is when he's playing chess. Fern has known him for one year but it feels like ten.

Wally is studying the local newspaper, half-moon spectacles wonky on his nose. He scribbles away in the newspaper's margin, rubbing the back of his bald head and probably thinking up something else kind to do.

She kicks open the door to the motel lobby, *bing bong*. Her arms are full of paper bags, groceries spilling out of them.

'Hunting?' he says.

'Gathering,' Fern replies, putting the bags down.

She chucks a bag of salad leaves in the air while Wally pretends to aim and fire a rifle. Some Twinkies have fallen

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on the floor and he throws his hands up with delight, picking them like they're woodland mushrooms. She holds a bunch of bananas high as if it's a prize fish on a hook. They belly-laugh at their inside joke.

Fern stops to say hi to the fish. 'Hi, Axl. Hi, Hendrix.' A pair of bored-looking goldfish swim around some neon wavy things and a castle in the shape of a skull. A bug-eyed baby shimmies out of the skull's empty eye socket.

'They made a baby!' she says.

'They did. More to come, I bet. They're probably in there hiding, growing. I was thinking of Dolly as a name for that one there.'

Fern crouches down, tapping the tank to try and attract Dolly. Wally starts to say something – stalls – tries again.

'Um, I mentioned to your dad about this, kiddo, but it didn't seem to land. Somebody's been asking around about you two.'

'What do you mean?'

'Does your dad owe some money maybe? I'm told the guy's Mexican and always wears a Yankees hat. Seems to have been in town for a couple of days now. Nobody's giving him anything, obviously, but just make yourself scarce if you see him, Fern.'

'Don't worry, I can look after myself, Wall.'

Wally frowns. Opens his mouth, then shuts it.

She unlocks room 105, unsettled by what she's just heard. The key is almost just for show. One hard shove and this door would give. Whoever's looking for them wouldn't struggle to get in.

*

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Her dad, Ciaran, is snoring, the air clotted with sleep. His rhythm stalls, catching on a hook, as she flicks on the light.

‘Jesus, Mary and—’

‘It’s not the Holy Trinity, Da, just me.’

‘Fern! I, what time is . . . I didn’t hear my alarm.’

She opens all the windows.

‘Jeez, Da, it smells like booze and bad decisions in here.’

They once played a game where they generated imaginary band names for each other. ‘Lanky Angles,’ Fern riffed about her dad’s skinny dark looks. ‘Flint and Snow,’ he tossed back at her, given she resembles a black-and-white photo of an olden-days girl come to life. The only colour on her is the zigzag of pink that is her mouth and two halos of hazel, her eyes.

‘Why do I sound like a shite folk band while you sound really cool?’ Fern said. “‘Flint and Snow” is so lame.’

‘How did I raise such a smart aleck?’ Ciaran replied, ruffling her hair. ‘I thought it was a touch poetic, like Dylan Thomas.’

Right now, ‘Lanky Angles’ pounces on his Marlboros and lights one up, reclining back and crossing his long legs. As Fern goes into the kitchenette, he swigs from a bottle of rum, thinking he’s being sneaky. Fern sees him, says nothing, unpacks the food.

‘Thanks for shopping, pet. Did you take the money from the jar?’

‘Yes, Da,’ Fern answers, as she side-eyes the jar on the counter, which has contained thirteen dollars for the past week. She snips the credit card in two and hides the plastic shards under a cupcakes packet in the bin.

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Thanks, Sandy; what she now knows Drew's mother is called. Of course she's called Sandy.

She imagines Sandy at home, trying to get through the elevator-style hold muzak to cancel her cards, then being told that only forty dollars have gone, spent in a 7-Eleven on Route 191. Fern hopes it'll be some consolation for her lost minivan. Looking for the van will be like the stolen vehicle version of seeking a needle in a haystack, given Plumas National Forest is roughly ninety bajillion miles wide.

Fern mixes the pancake batter like she's done it a hundred times – because she has – and softens the warm pan with a lick of butter.

They lie back on the couch, bellies full. Ciaran lights up a spliff he's just rolled. Fern opens her neon orange wallet, sliding out the one photo she has of her mother.

'Da, why don't I look much like Mum?'

'Dunno, pet. Why wouldn't you want to look like me?'

He flashes her a grin, a jumble of overlapping teeth he describes as his 'bag o' chips smile'. Fern touches her small neat teeth, her sharp cheekbones, slightly too big nose. The angles and nose are definitely his, to be fair.

Fern wishes she did look more like her mother, Imogen – 'Imo' to her friends. In the photo, she has an elf queen vibe, with her swinging amber hair, cherry-ice skin and blonde-lashed eyes. She looks like she should be sitting on a throne made from shells, overlooking a series of waterfalls.

Come to think of it, Fern does have the same skin tone as her mother, but whereas Mum's skin always looked exactly as it should, Fern's just looks like a blank space in need of a tan.

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Ciaran's skin is so brown that people often ask if he's 'half Spanish or something?' To which he replies: 'I'm an Irish Viking.'

'Stop saying you're descended from Vikings – you have no proof of that,' Wally once said. 'Other than your ability to womanise and pillage.'

'Ouch, Wall,' Ciaran replied, laughing and stumbling back as if he'd been wounded. 'So unlike you, buddy.'

'Well, I keep offering to do your family tree and you keep refusing,' Wally said.

'I can't bear to find out that we're the great-great-progeny of peasants,' Ciaran said, winking at Fern, who didn't understand half of what he'd just said, but still grinned as if she did.

Right now, Fern has more questions to ask Da about the past, but the conversation is clearly over. He pours three fingers of ginger wine into a tin coffee cup that says 'Rise and shine' in bubble lettering ('Rise and wine', more like) and heads into the salmon-pink bathroom to creak the shower on. The pipes squeal.

Oh, well. She'll ask him the rest of her questions tonight, after the gig, assuming he doesn't drink too much, stay out too late or bring home company.

OK so. She'll ask him the rest tomorrow.

Perched on a bar stool in Paradise Falls, Fern is waiting for her dad to change into his gig outfit. No, she doesn't know why he can't wear it to the gig either. Instead, he insists on squeezing into the bathroom stall to change.

'I'm not performing as myself, though, am I?' he said. 'I'm performing as Oscar Wolff, so I can't very well just do

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my set in the civvies I walk in wearing, can I? People want a bit of theatre.'

This is the first time Da has headlined a gig at Paradise Falls, or in other words, the first time he's been allowed onto the stage last. He comes out of the restroom wearing combat boots, tight drainpipe cut-offs, and a scarlet embroidered jacket that says 'mariachi band'. No shirt. An open chest.

He looks ridiculous. He's thirty-three, for godsake, so when will he stop thinking he's still young and start dressing his age? Plaid shirts and dad jeans would be so much less embarrassing.

She wants Buck here to witness this outfit. For the fifth time in the past half-hour, she scans the room. Still no Buck. 'Oscar Wolff' says a hand-painted banner over the stage. They chose red and didn't dry it before hanging it up, so the paint has dripped.

'Do I look OK?' Da asks, his brow furrowed, pulling at his jacket and adjusting the strap on his guitar. Fern's learned that the art of answering questions such as this one is: tell the truth, yet also don't answer directly.

'You look like the lost member of Soundgarden.'

Ciaran smiles, giving a thumbs up.

'Have you seen the sign, though, Da? It looks like a bad horror movie.'

'I know, right. Maybe I'll go on a killing spree after my set. How's my breath?'

He juts forward and breathes all over her. She's not going to sugar-coat this one.

'Like that glass wash,' she says, gesturing to the machine behind the bar, which has just coughed boozy steam all over them.

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‘Ah, no, really?’ Da puffs a breath into his cupped hands. ‘Dina’s over there – I need to fix that.’

Fishing out a tin of tiny mints, he pours the whole lot in his mouth.

Ciaran climbs onto the ‘stage’, a cheerful collection of painted upside-down wooden crates.

‘Good evening, San Diego!’ he calls, to jeers from the crowd. ‘Son of a goat, have I forgotten where I am again? These world tours make me head spin. Where are we?’ He holds the microphone out to the audience.

‘Paradise, California!’ they chant.

Among the chant is a shout of ‘Go home, IRA scum!’ from a muscly guy in a trucker hat. Fern flinches. A hush falls over the crowd. Ciaran laughs.

‘Give over,’ he says, with a swat of his hand. ‘I left my bombs at home, didn’t I.’

Da pulls his pockets out, a dollar and a baggy of weed fall on the floor. He places his boot over the weed.

‘Why would I bomb you, anyway? You’re not English, are you?’

A ripple of dark laughter runs through the crowd.

‘Now, enough politics . . . let’s have some fun.’

He strums some bright chords and the crowd relaxes; they’re in safe hands. Muscly in a trucker hat walks out, kicking a bar stool as he does. Ciaran launches into the opening of ‘Hotel California’. ‘On a dark desert highway, cool wind in my hair . . .’

Fern admires how Da deals with such insults. They’re nearly daily. ‘Being Irish in America means being judged with about as much subtlety as a box of Lucky Charms,’ he says,

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and he's right. People either seem to think he's a terrorist, thick or a drunk. Only one of these is true.

Fern, meanwhile, is assumed to be nice, when she isn't particularly nice. They treat her like a wind-up toy that they can place down and nudge into an Irish jig. Waiting for her to entertain them with her Irishness; as if she'll pull a leprechaun from noplac and, *skiddlydee, fiddlydoo*, he'll produce a four-leaf clover from his ass.

Da doesn't get tense about it like Fern. If anything, he plays up to it. Catches it, changes it, slings it back as a joke. He's so good with people, unlike her. And so great at singing, unlike her. The crowd love him.

The critics do too. 'Like honey and bourbon served in a bikers' bar,' one music reviewer described his sound. 'As if Icarus fell through the clouds and wound up in Oakland with a battered fender,' said another.

Fern doesn't understand why her dad seems to pursue The Big Time, but then when he's brushing his fingers against it, he'll pull back. He doesn't show for a gig, he doesn't call the guy with the label, they move to another town, and he huddles back into his comfort zone of playing covers themed around California. So original.

Greyhound bus by Greyhound bus, over the past three years they'd moved across the entire midriff of North America, going from East to West. They rode the buses, knees tucked into their chests, socks stuffed into the magazine holders of the seat in front, in desperate search of sleep. Horizontal beds felt heaven-sent. Fern had stopped counting at seventeen towns.

Then they found Paradise. Their off-system existence went unchecked. Nobody seemed very interested in why they were

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here, everyone was willing to pay Ciaran for odd jobs, cash in hand. The overwhelmed welfare system had bigger fish to fry than a guy with a guitar and his gobby daughter kicking it during the day, rather than working or learning. They asked for nothing from the State, and the State asked nothing of them.

Befriending Wally and knowing he would protect them from controversy – from behind his desk of authority at The Rest Inn – has seen them snuggle down into the soil. Meeting Buck and Dina created a tendril of green, a shoot of a root.

But still, The Big Time remains shimmering in the distance, like Oz, while they circle the Yellow Brick Road.

Da loses his cool for a second as he spots Dina in a white denim playsuit, holding a lighter in the air, her hair crimped. He waves, drops his plectrum, struggles to relocate his rhythm, then finishes his set with Neil Young's 'California Sunset'. The guy next to Fern slings most of his drink down, yells 'Bravo!' at her father and then leaves.

Finally. She thought he might be a good target, moved two stools down to be next to him. He looked together enough to not stay all night, had car keys next to his wallet, didn't look at her for too long, didn't seem likely to talk to her. And as she predicted, he's left a couple of mouthfuls of Jack and Coke.

Fern snatches it and throws it back. There it is. The catch of disgust in her throat, but then – the reward. A warmth spreading through her, as if she's just swallowed a tiny sun.

Looking after herself and Ciaran is hard. She deserves a drink every now and then. Over time the disgust has been

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overtaken by the hot ball of possibility, which starts in her stomach and licks up into her brain like a fire scaling curtains.

She looks in the mirror of the toilets of Paradise Falls, scanning for a sign of her having swallowed the sun. But she can't see any, other than a light in her eyes and flushes on her cheeks.

Standing in front of the full-length mirror, Fern takes up some space. Now that she's had a drink it's easier not to shrink. She turns side to side, trying to see herself as the world might. Nobody's watching her in here, unlike out there where some of the adults look at her as if she's a snack. She can pass as sixteen, thanks to her height, but her face still looks fourteen.

Almost round eyes, black hair, generous eyebrows, a chapped mouth that's small like a doll's, a right leg that constantly jiggles when she sits, a stomach that shows her ribs no matter how many chips she eats, a blue-tinged mole on her upper lip that people often mistake for ink.

'You've got a little something on your . . .' *No, I don't, world. It's a part of me.*

Fern doesn't want to watch her father get wasted on all the drinks he's going to be bought, so she weaves back through the bar and pushes open a swing door into the kitchen's smell wall of spicy chicken wings. 'Buffalo seasoning and broken dreams', her and Buck had christened the smell.

Where the hell is Buck? Bobbing through the swearing and sweating staff, she pops out the back and drops onto the street. Getting her BMX from behind the bins, Fern wheels it towards the road. Ciaran won't be home for hours and she wants to enjoy her whiskey buzz by riding around the

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sunset-pink forest trails. If Buck's not here, she'll have to go alone.

'I saw you,' a voice from behind her says. She swings around to see Steve, the second chef. Late teens and pulling on a cigarette, his expression a cocked trigger.

'He looks like a cardboard box on legs,' Buck once said of Steve's squat, cubed and tan physique.

'Saw me what?' Fern says, pulse thumping but face set to unbothered.

He gets up and moves towards her. 'What'll it take for me not to tell?' he says, backing her into a wall.

Clapping twice to turn the motel lamp off, she curls into herself and pulls her sleeping mask on. The eye mask says 'Not now' in diamanté letters.

Dina gave it to her after Fern complained about the curtains at the motel.

'They're meant to keep the sun out, right?' Fern said, pulling the thin fabric out.

'And yet, they almost seem to magnify light,' Dina said, laughing.

Fern lies there for a few minutes, trying to relax, then stops a sob. *Get a grip, idiot.* She feels under her pillow for the hidden plush rabbit she's had for as long as she can remember. She's too old for it now, but too young not to have it.

It's funny. She always thought that out of fight, flight or freeze, which she's read about in the library, she would fight. Everyone knows she's scrappy. Fight – or flight when they're too big – are her happy places. But tonight, she froze. She's

HOW IT IS

never frozen before. Or has she? A memory tugs at her sleeve, then slips away.

Tonight, if Buck hadn't arrived for work and pulled Steve off her . . . nope. Can't complete that thought. She flicks on the TV in her room, her rectangular sleep aid. The opening bars of 'People are Strange' play and the camera swoops down on Santa Monica. *The Lost Boys*: she loves this film. Then the thought rises, bringing with it another sob.

Tonight she was kissed on the thigh, having never been kissed on the mouth.

Fern is woken at 4 a.m. by a muffled crash, a female giggle and a 'Sssh' from her father. She pulls the duvet over her face. The clink of bottles is followed by a smell that creeps under the door and tiptoes into her nose. Weed.

The opening bars of a Rolling Stones track, followed by mutters and mattress creaks that tell Fern she won't have access to the toilet (on the other side of their 'suite') for quite some time.

Da clearly got lucky. She hopes it's Dina. If she gets stuck in here all night, she might have to pee into a cup again. 'I'd rather that than be scarred for life,' she explained to her dad one morning, when he asked why she was pouring a cup of wee into the toilet.

As the parent, he can play music until dawn, getting louder and more obnoxious the drunker he gets, but in the morning she'll have her head bitten off if she so much as stirs a spoon against a cup too hard.

Ciaran reminds her how lucky she is to have the enclosed bedroom, while he sleeps in the lounge on the flip-down bed

VERSIONS OF A GIRL

that can merge with the wall like a chameleon (not that they ever actually flip *up* his bed), but she knows full well that he only gave her the bedroom so he could host late-night gatherings.

Fern hooks a hand behind her head and stares at the ceiling, where she's stuck up seven glow-in-the-dark stars with Blu Tack. They're the only nod to this being 'her' room, as her clothes still spill out of the suitcase, one arm or leg trying to clamber out. There's nowhere to unpack into. The wardrobe is full of Da's stuff.

Staring at the weak glow of the crude plastic stars, she wonders, not for the first time, why her and Da are so skint all the time. It hasn't always been the case. He's always had rips in his jeans and the need for others to buy him drinks, but they used to live in a really nice house, so where's all that money gone? Da even has to do odd jobs for Wally around the motel to pay for their room.

After Mum sent her back to Ireland, she and Da lived in a huge house hugged by ivy, up a l-o-n-g stony drive that crunched. 'You were named after this house,' Da told her, pointing to a stone sign saying 'Ferndale'.

'Your great-granny and grandda built it, many years ago. And it was named after the ferns carpeting those woods there, which breed as fast as the rabbits in them. Your uncle Rory kills the rabbits, says they're vermin, but I think they're cute.'

Ferndale was basically a mansion. It had at least eight bedrooms – maybe more, some doors were locked – and was her home for the next three years. Swinging her leg over fences, water in her wellies, sun pulling the freckles from her face, baby lambs wearing black socks, being folded into a soft body that smelled like bread; Ruth.

HOW IT IS

Ruth lived in a small house near the front gate, which was kinda similar, but also different, as if a china-boned lady had created a fat-cheeked baby. Fern remembers the stone out-sides of both houses – Ferndale’s neat jigsaw and the smaller house’s higgledy-piggledy ones. ‘The Millhouse’ said a shy sign on the side of the smaller house.

The Millhouse had a huge wheel, almost as big as the house, that turned in the river alongside it. Fern would lie down under the weeping willow, make daisy chains and watch the water rush. She would ponder whether the house was powering the river, or if the river was powering the house.

Once again, Fern wonders why her memories are mostly a blank before she went to live at Ferndale. The only complete memory she has is from an evening after a wedding, which elbows its way to the front of her mind. She can smell the sharp chlorine of the pool even now.

It’s the only fully formed recollection she has of her mother, Imo. But she doesn’t quite trust the memory, as it seems too movie-like – vivid and dramatic.

Three motels back, she hunkered down in the dusty stacks of a Salt Lake City library and read about how memories misbehave, in order to try to convince herself that it didn’t happen.

All the while knowing that it did.

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