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Oh No, A Bank
Robbery! Fuck!

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Oh No, a Bank Robbery! Fuck!

Flaubert was Madame Bovary. My teacher explained this to me. I'm reading it right now: mum wants me to read the *great* books, because I read a lot, and she thinks that if I read the *great* books, I could grow up to go to Trinity, which is the best university in Ireland, or Oxbridge, which is two different places in England, which are apparently even better. I like to read books where people shoot each other. I like to write stories where people shoot each other, and I go 'pew, pew pew pew, tshhh' with my mouth, almost involuntarily, as I write the big shoot-out scenes. Mum says not to write the shoot-out scenes: she says to write *great literature*, which doesn't have the shoot-out scenes, but has people settling disputes through talking a lot, and accusing each other of being *disingenuous*.

"Sir!" says my character Ryan, "you're being disingenuous!" He pulls out an assault rifle. Pew! Pew pew pew! Tshhh!

Mum doesn't actually read *great literature*. She just asks my teacher, Mrs Cronin, to advise her on what to make me read. She ineptly hides empty wine bottles when I enter our half-painted kitchen, and phones up my dad, who lives in Dublin, to call him a cunt. She listens to talk radio and calls up to opine that Ireland is being overrun by Polish, and asks why isn't anybody doing anything about this? I'm half-Polish. I don't know why Mum doesn't think of me when she says these things. If the Polish had to leave, wouldn't I have to half-leave? What if Poland then kicked out the Irish? Where would I go?

Flaubert was Madame Bovary, and Kafka was Gregor Samsa, and I *am* a spy that's had his cover blown but isn't going to go down without a fight. I do

like those books, by the way, the *great* ones: I like what they say about being bored. Madame Bovary was very bored, and read a lot of cheap romance novels, and then tried to live life as if it were a romance novel which *of course* doesn't work in the real world, which *great literature* is closer to than normal books, even if people turn into bugs, and so because of her, whatsthe word, *hubris*, she was led to a *tragic end*. I am very bored. I would like to live like they live in books, even if I have a tragic end. A big heroic shoot out. Pew! Pew pew pew, etc.

Funnily enough there is at least an exciting bank robbery later in this story. You'll see how that goes when we get there. But first I should have other things: character establishment, interior monologue, specificity of detail. I am trying my hardest to learn what literature *is*.

I'm reading in the car. My mum asks me for the millionth time how I don't get sick when I read in the car. If I'm in a good mood I say it's because I'm used to it: today I ignore her. My mum soon starts crying. She tries to hide this by doing it quietly, with a lot of electric twitching of the face. She puts on a pair of sunglasses. I ignore her when she cries. This isn't because I'm a bad person, but rather because if I try to ask her about it, she usually just gets pissed off at me. I think it's because I'm a kid, and it would be above my station to think that I could console her or offer helpful ideas, like "we should live somewhere that isn't so fucking boring."

"It isn't *fucking boring* here Sean! This is a lovely place! We've got the sea right outside our house! It's beautiful, it's peaceful, there's hardly *any* crime - you should be *grateful* you live here." etc. etc. etc., rude, condescending, wrong.

Mum also reads fucking boring books, when she ever reads at all, like *Fifty Shades of Grey*. I asked Mrs Cronin what the appeal of it is as it's one of the most popular books ever (I must learn how to write literature that *sells*). She opined that part of it is how it fulfils the *kingmaker narrative*, whereby someone is established as dreadfully normal and insignificant but is then revealed to actually be deeply unique and important, which is always very popular, see: Harry Potter. Everyone likes to imagine that they, too, will someday be revealed to be deeply unique and important. You're a wizard, Harry! You've been bequeathed a great fortune, Pip! The attractive multi-millionaire wants to bang you, Anastasia!

Mrs Cronin helped me send off a story (involving this narrative conceit) for a writing competition for under-18 writers sponsored by Trinity. I'm still waiting for the reply. Me winning it would be my own *kingmaker narrative*. I told Mrs Cronin that everyone in Ireland is dreadfully normal, hence why writers only come from, say, America and England. She countered by saying we've produced, for example, Joyce, Beckett and Wilde. She then regretfully concedes that they all left to places like France. There's a beach near our house. I like to stand with my feet in the waves staring towards France, at the blur of the horizon; blue haze against white mist, the limit and the infinite, almost reachable. It's nice.

Mum parks the car, swearing under her breath about parking spaces, and I follow her into the bank. I think we bank at the bank we bank at purely because it has *Irish* in the name. The bank front has a *marble portico decorated with the carved figures of the gods Dionysus, who is feeding himself from a fistful of grapes, and Apollo, who wields a great bow, and the*

portico is held up by *neo-classical columns that have been weathered by the salinity of the seaside air* and there are great stone steps that you have to walk up to reach the door, and is the only such building in our town. The town hall's just a flat fucking concrete thing: banks, however, are important. Inside, the walls are coloured unnervingly purple, the carpets are overly furry and damp, and there's a taste of dry plaster dust in the air. Everyone inside has their head hung down like they're ashamed to be there. My mum went to queue, and I sat in the corner to read, and unfortunately finished. *'He has just received the legion of honour'*. I thought about Madame Bovary for a while, and felt the pleasant kind of sad you feel when you read *great literature*.

Time passed in the same way that time sends waves to erode cliffs into sand. I stared about.

One old guy stood in the other back corner from where I was. He was dressed in a suit coloured like an old lime that hung off him the way a kid's suit hangs when he's borrowed it off his big brother. You couldn't see it, but I bet he had a fake leg, because he lost his real one in the Siege of Jadotville in 1961. Pew! and so forth. There was a girl queuing behind my mum who looked about three years older than me – I'm thirteen - but who was pregnant. Mum says it's a cursed thing about our town, and she blames the Polish. The father of the child is a local crime lord, perhaps: that would help establish that said crime lord is evil. A guy in front of my mum was talking to the teller: he was dressed in yellow tracksuit bottoms and a giant yellow gilet that puffed around him like those fish that inflate themselves to scare off predators. He was compulsively scratching his chin whilst talking.

You're not supposed to write 'suddenly', but anyway, the doors suddenly burst open! Two men! Bank robbers! Black *rib-knitted* balaclavas *speckled with faint grey dust!* Armed! Fuck! One has a pistol, the other a sawn-off shotgun!

"On the ground! On the ground! On the fucking ground!" yells the one with the pistol. Gilet man drops, Pregnant Girl drops slowly and delicately for the unborn child, Old Man in the corner looks irritated and slowly begins bending to his knees, and my mum dashes out the queue towards me.

"Stop running!" shouts shotgun man at my mum.

"I'm just going to my boy! I'm just going to my boy!" she clutches me tight. It's painful. I wonder if she's doing it more for me or her.

Everyone's silent. The robbers are breathing hard. I think my mum's thrown them off whatever plan they had.

"Everything in the register! Now!" Pistol shouts, eventually, pointing a gun at the teller, who's crying. Shotgun man fires a round into the air, provoking a short shout from all around, and plaster falls from the ceiling in crackling fragments followed by a bulging cloud of dust.

"I saw in a film that you should ask for the loose notes: it makes it harder for the police to track the money" I tell them.

"Shut up!" says Shotgun, pointing at me with his shotgun. My mum screams.

"Well, that's a sawn-off: it's hardly going to reach me here, is it?"

"Do you wanna fucking see?" he yells, disproportionately, like an upset toddler.

"You think you're a big man, pointing a gun at a child?" asks Old Man in the corner, who's on his knees with his hands behind his head, as opposed to the

others in the room who are face flat on the floor, or me and mum, who were sitting down with her wrapped around me.

“Do you want to see how big a man I am?” asks Shotgun, pointing at Old Man with his shotgun.

“You IRA?”

“What?”

“You IRA? With the balaclavas? My granda’ fought in the IRA, the war of independence, back in the 1920’s - good man, made the Irish republic, gave us Roman Catholics rights - but ever since then we’ve had you fuckers stealing the name and blowing up civilians and selling heroin to fourteen year olds and making a fucking mockery of the country, I mean, it’s only since the media started scapegoating the poor Muslims that I’ve been able to get through an airport with an Irish passport without-”

“Shut up! Shut the fuck up or I’ll put a fucking bullet in you!”

“Well, it wouldn’t be a bullet, it would be pellets, or shot-” I explained

“Shut! Up!” yelled Shotgun, aiming at me with his shotgun. My mother screamed again, and moved in between us.

“Please,” she whispered to me, “please, Sean, just shut up, just shut up, it’ll be over soon, just-”

“But he couldn’t mum-”

“Put that down!” shouts Pistol, who had been distracted by Shotgun, and who had just noticed that Bank Teller had picked up a phone. She dropped the phone. “Hang it up!” She hung it up. “Get the money! Get the fucking money! In the bag!” He threw a potato sack onto the counter. She slowly

started putting bundles in, weeping as she did. Gilet gets up off the ground, sighing, and lights a cigarette.

“Please sir” she said, still crying, still moving money. “Please put out your cigarette. You can’t smoke in here.” Pistol turns to Gilet, shocked that he’s got up.

“Well these two are waving fuckin’ guns around, it’s mere anarchy enough in here, I wouldn’t think it’d be a problem to just calm my nerves?” he says, and takes a drag.

Bank Teller continues to cry, whilst slowly passing bundles into the bag.

“Hurry the fuck up!” yells Pistol, turning back to her, before smacking her on the head with her pistol. She screams, and falls to the ground behind the desk, clutching her profusely bleeding head. “Get up!” he yells. She doesn’t. He hesitates, looks almost scared in his sharp blue eyes of what he’s done, then starts clutching at notes to force them in the bag himself. Shotgun is still pointing his gun at me and mum when Bank Teller collapses loudly onto her side, making Pistol jump. Gilet slowly walks over to Pistol.

“Hey,” he says, and forces his cigarette butt into Pistol’s open blue eye. Pistol screams, and Shotgun turns around.

“Fuck!” says Shotgun, who fires his shotgun at them. Pellets fly into both Gilet and Pistol, and the gilet itself deflates like a balloon. Shotgun loads the shotgun again as Old Man gets up and makes an inexplicably fast dash for Shotgun, who has his back to him. Pistol shoots Gilet as Old Man seizes the shotgun out of Shotgun’s hands.

“Give that back!” yells No-Shotgun, in a high-pitched voice, before being shot in the head by Old Man. My mum screams, and does not stop screaming

for quite some time. No-Shotgun is on the floor, head cracked like a clumsy egg, stray viscera spreading on an expanded pool. Pistol shoots Old Man, then turns around to bundle a bit more cash into the bag before picking it up to run out the front door. I force myself out of mum's arms, and I run for the shotgun.

When I make it out the door, pistol is at the bottom of the steps.

"Hey!" I yell at Pistol, who, surprisingly, turns around. He's got his pistol by his side. I have a shotgun at his head. "Why are you doing this?"

"What?" he asks. He's almost hyperventilating.

"Why are you doing this? Motive matters. It affects everything about the story, and how we perceive the characters. Do you have a sick mother? Was that your brother in there, and you can't pay for her medical fees?"

"I just...I just want the money" he says, stunned by everything and a child aiming a gun at him.

I weigh it up, and decide that since he killed Old Man, he does not deserve to survive this story. I'm judge, jury, executioner. I am God. Of course I am: I'm writing this. It starts to snow, because I want it to. I could turn him into a dolphin. So I do. He's dry and sallow, flopping ineptly on the pavement, a balaclava on his dolphin face. In *great literature*, or real life, justice is not a guarantee of the universe, nor are satisfying conclusions. In pop fiction, and here, I fire the gun, ending the unrighteous dolphin's life. Ka pow! Chk-chk! Would I be this brave if bank robbers really came to the little seaside town of Youghal, County Cork? I say at school that I'd have been one of the ones who resisted the Nazis, but they say everyone would think they would, but most people didn't.

My mum finishes talking to the bank teller, and comes to get me out of the corner where I'm waiting. She's crying again.

"We're being robbed." She says "we're being fucking robbed." My dad tells me about her loans. He says it's not *entirely* her fault. He explains that the Irish government never really took advantage of the Celtic Tiger, which is a metaphor (unfortunately) for when the Irish economy was great, and now the Tiger is dead, and the Irish economy is fucked. Mum takes me out to the car, dragging me by the wrist, then turns around and looks as if she's only just noticed how fiercely she's been clutching me, with nail marks imbedded in the flesh over my veins. It upsets her. She upsets herself. She tips up her glasses, showing her red eyes, and lifts up a smile.

"Sean, Sean, beautiful Sean. Do you want an ice cream?"

"Yeah!"

"Shall we go to the Gelato, get that cookie-crumble-chocolate ice cream you love?" she prides herself on remembering things about me, which TV shows I like, and my friend's names (I don't have many, hence all the free time I have to *read*).

"Awesome!" She hugs me. She's breathing hard, like a sprinter.

"I love you, Sean. I really, really love you. And I want what's best for you. That's all I want. That's all I want."

We sit across from each other in the Gelato. I'm enjoying my ice cream when she reaches over to start stroking my hair. I tell her to stop, because it's embarrassing, so she does. I then look at her face, and regret having said that. It'd be strange to say 'you can continue to stroke my hair now', though,

so I can't do anything about it. Sometimes I get angry about how she makes me feel guilty, and I tell her this, but then she looks guilty, which makes me feel more guilty, which would be funny, except for that it isn't.

"Are you happy, Sean?"

"Huh?"

"Are you happy, right now, with the ice cream? ...Would you like to see a film tonight?" I don't like the way she says film, 'fill-im'. So Youghal. I try to say 'film' like they'd say in, say, a film, where they're American, or occasionally British.

"...Taika Waititi has a new one."

"I'll take you to see that, tonight." She nods, tight smile, "I'll drive you to Middleton." The Youghal cinema closed after four decades recently – mum's best friend Julie's lingerie store closed about the same time, most the shops here seem to be closing - so it's become a big thing for us to even go to see films. When she promises to drive me somewhere, it's mainly her promising not to drink that evening, which is kind of her.

"Thanks, mum."

"How do you feel, Sean?"

"Well I feel pretty good, what with the ice cream, and the film."

"Sean. I've got to tell you something, Sean." She's tapping her sharp red nails on the table. It sounds like speed typing.

"...what?"

"We're going to have to sell the house."

"...oh." I think about this for a while. "Will we move?"

"Yes, we'll have to move."

“But, I mean, out of Youghal, out of Cork, out of Ireland?”

“No, no, we won’t move out of Youghal – well, definitely not of Cork. We’ll just have to sell our house. Even if it was my parent’s house. My grandparent’s house.”

“But I want to move out of Youghal!”

“No you don’t, Sean.”

“Yes I do!”

“No you don’t, Sean, we’re happy here.” She’s being *disingenuous*.

“Yes I do, I’m not fucking happy here!”

“Why aren’t you happy here?” she screams this, abruptly. She’s almost crying again, almost gasping. How does she have it in her to cry so much? “Sean? Why aren’t you happy here? I’m doing everything I can.” People are looking at us. “It’s a nice town! There are good people here! I got you into a very good school. Aren’t you happy? You live across the road from a beach! How many people get to see the sun set on the sea every day? And I buy you... I buy you all the books and video games you want. How many mums take their kids to Cork City every other week just to go to Waterstones? I’m doing literally *everything I can*.”

I didn’t know the answers to her questions. I don’t know. Maybe I’m just being dumb. Maybe I’m just being fucking dumb. I read books about people in London and New York. But being there doesn’t make them happy. Why would it be different for me? My mum loves this place. Fuck. We might lose it. Fuck, fuck, fuck. Feck, even.

I don't think I'll get to grow up to live in a world of exciting shoot-outs. I'll just grow up to live in the adult world, where 90 % of your concerns seem to be about having an adequate amount of money, or if your children will be able to make an adequate amount of money.

I've started reading *Dubliners* by James Joyce. It's about small tragic Irish lives lived in *paralysis*. My mentioning of this in this particular story is not very *subtle*, even though *subtlety* and *nuance* are the *heart* of *great literature*. Anyhow, I'm really enjoying it, and it feels nice to know someone from Cork became a famous writer.

After about two hours I got tired of reading, and went for a walk on the beach to see if it'd make me feel better. I always thought I'd feel excited about any prospect of moving, but now I just felt scared, and sad in a way that feels like physical nausea.

I walked for ages, all around the bend of the coast. Each step I took pleurably sunk softly into sand, all light gold and stone-littered. I liked to turn around, to see the long arch of my footprints behind me, so far that the beginning was out of sight. I liked to stop to face the sea. Tilt left, the horizon towards France, where Joyce first published *Ulysses*, which was banned in little Ireland for *obscenity*. Tilt right, the horizon towards America, three thousand miles of cold sea. The last time the Irish were very poor they fled to America in droves, and some soon rose up to be, say, Kennedys, who were the most powerful family in America. But then most of them died tragically young – they seemed cursed, which is very Irish indeed.

I was carrying a letter in my jacket pocket that I was scared to open. It was from Trinity, about the competition for short prose fiction by under-18 Irish

writers. I decided to get it over with, like ripping off a plaster, so I tore open the envelope, which took an awkwardly long time.

“Dear Mr Murphy, we’re sorry to inform you at this time that your story *The Youghal Bank Robbery* has not...” Fuck. For fuck’s sake. Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck. I crunched up the letter and the envelope, ran to the waves, and threw them as far as I could. A wisp of a wave deposited the wet bundle gently back at my feet, like an unwanted gift.

Eventually, I came across Mrs Cronin, who was reading on a rock.

“Hey Mgrs. Cronin.”

“Hey Sean!” oak eyes magnified through massive brass-framed glasses. Her hair was tied in a knot, and she was dressed like she always dressed, in a way my mother describes as “profoundly dowdy”, i.e., like an old dusty sofa. She was unmarried at thirty-nine, but it didn’t seem to bother her. I think.

“I lost the Trinity writing competition.”

“Oh no! I’m sorry, Sean. It really was a very good story. But it was a thriller kind of thing – they were probably looking for people trying to be more literary.”

“Yeah. Yeah, that’s probably it.”

I asked her why it is, with regards to things that are *literary*, that we enjoy miserable stories: She always seems to know what it is that makes stories work, which is very helpful. She asked if I’d reached Joyce’s *A Painful Case* in *Dubliners* yet. I hadn’t. She said oh well, but anyway, it references this German philosopher *Friedrich Nietzsche* – she said I could remember to pronounce his name by doing two kung-foo moves: knee, cha! – and that knee, cha! once wrote a whole book to try understand why sad stories give us

pleasure called *The Birth of Tragedy*. Basically, sad stories describe the *Dionysian* state of the world, i.e., all the chaos and greed of people, but they overlay it with *Apollonian* elements, i.e., beautiful prose, humour, all the artful elements of writing, and that this gives a sort of redemption to the tragic state of existence. She had to explain this to me, like, four times before I got what she was going on about. This, she said, is what *great literature* truly does, more than anything else.

I sat down and stared at the drifting sea.

“Do you find that interesting?” she asked.

“Yeah” I said, “Yeah, it’s very interesting.”

The sky was grey and flat as concrete, and claustrophobically low. The waves underneath it were still somehow bright blue, and serene, and beautiful to look at. This is a *metaphor*.

“Me and mum are moving,” I said.

“Oh. Where to?”

“Dunno. We’ve got to sell the house; we don’t have enough money to keep it. Mum doesn’t want to leave Youghal, but I think we might have to.”

“Oh. I’ll miss you if you do, Sean.”

“I’ll miss you too, Miss.” We were both silent for a while. “I think I’m going to go for a swim.”

“I’m not sure about that, Sean: it’s mighty cold.”

“A cold sea’s still the sea. Might as well appreciate it while I’m still here.” I took off my t-shirt, shoes and jeans, and laid them out on the sand.

“Well. There’s a lifeguard, so I guess that’s fine... I’ll keep a watch over you too, but don’t go too far out, it gets dangerous out there. And come back in if it gets too choppy. Be safe, Sean.”

I rolled my socks off and threw them onto the rest of my clothes, and I started running towards the sea, Usain Bolt pose. You can’t walk: you get scared when you first reach the cold waves, then you don’t go in at all.

The shallow beginnings of the sea splashed around my feet like gunfire, and as I got deeper the cold stole the air out of my lungs - it’s most painful when it reaches the testicles, Jesus Christ, Jesus fucking Christ, agh - and I’m slower and slower with the weight of the waves until I’m up to my shoulders, then I’m swimming. I’m swimming. Strong paces out with my skinny arms. Body acclimatizes. It becomes refreshing, pleasant, bracing, real. I bob up and down with the waves like a buoy. I kept swimming out, eyes towards the horizon. There was a large ship far out leaving from Cobh, which is where the Titanic departed from, with so many Irish working class. I kept swimming. Fast and strong as I could. Someone was shouting from the shore. Shouting and shouting. I couldn’t make out what they were saying. I kept swimming until I needed all my energy just to stay afloat. I was suddenly so tired. Suddenly so cold. My skin was grey and blue in front of me, swinging arms hard against heavy waves. I turned around to the shore – it was so far away, couldn’t even see my house, couldn’t see the people on the beach, small as insects. I started to swim back. Swam and swam. The shore came no closer: a current was bearing me back out. Fuck, fuck fuck fuck. My breath was so sharp in my throat, so shallow. I kept trying. Kept pushing. Felt powerless, sad, angry. I noticed that I was crying. Fuck. Jesus. Something was coming out from the

shore. I tried to wave at it. It was moving fast, garish red. A kayak. A blond woman in her 20's wearing a lifejacket with her hair in a ponytail through the back of a cap reached down to grab me, and she pulled me on board. The lifeguard.

"Are you okay?" she asked. I started crying more. Couldn't stop it. There's so much crying in this story, which I hope doesn't come across as *cheap*, or *sentimental*. She sailed me back to land, where Mrs Cronin and my mum were waiting for me.

"Sean!" said my mum, who rushed to hug me. Her jumper darkened from my wet skin. I was so cold. She was warm. Comfortably warm. I pressed against her. "Sean, what were you doing?"

"I don't know," I said "I don't know."

"Don't do anything like that, don't ever do anything like that again" she was holding me so tight. "You could have been hurt" she said, "you could have been hurt."

I have an *aesthetic theory* of my own. You don't usually just cry at films because *sad* things happen. When I watched *Inside Out*, I didn't cry because the protagonist was sad with where she lived, or because she ran away. I cried when she came back, and her parents both hugged her, and they were all sad, because they cared about each other so much. You don't just start weeping in *Good Will Hunting* because shit stuff happened to Matt Damon when he was a kid. You cry when Robin Williams (or is it Robbie Williams? I think it's Robin Williams) hugs him, you cry because Robin Williams gives a About theshit that all this fucking bad stuff happened to Matt Damon. You cry

because of tenderness, compassion, because people give a shit about each other. Or at least I do.

That's the effect I was trying to evoke there. I didn't actually swim out like that. That'd be insane: I could die! I made it up, like the bank robbery, which is perhaps somewhat *disingenuous*. Especially since I've now pulled the same trick twice in one piece. It just seemed like a very literary thing to write for an ending, you know? I did have that chat with Mrs Cronin, about knee-cha! and stuff, but then I just went home. But I'm crying writing this, anyway. I suppose it's like imagining what your funeral would be like. I'm crying because it would be true: Mrs Cronin and my mum really give a shit about me, they really do.

Madame Bovary is all the more tragic because no one really gave a shit about her. But I'm not Madame Bovary. That's Flaubert. I'm Sean, a kid who can't really do anything about the fact the bank's going to rob his house, but who'll survive losing it. I'm Sean, a kid who failed a writing competition he'd put a lot of hope into, but who'll keep writing every day anyway. I'm Sean, who's a kid my mum gives a shit about, even if she gets angry at me sometimes, I guess.

About the Author

Foye McCarthy is a London-Irish writer. He recently finished an MA in Creative Writing at the University of Warwick. His main influences are Kurt Vonnegut, The Simpsons, and the way in which tea makes life bearable. He is previously unpublished as a fiction writer. He's on Twitter @roryisconfused. His London Short Story Prize-winning story was published by Open Pen Magazine in early 2017, and in the London Short Story Prize 2016 anthology published by Kingston University Press in Spring 2017.