



**SPREAD
THE WORD**



2017 Longlisted:

*9 Days – Modes of
Distraction*

by

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Ever since we left Coxsackie, there had been a tacit agreement between us not to talk about R, so I sat at the window, twisting for a better view of roofs and chimneys stretching across the sky and tried to sketch them. Blue merged to purple in the evening. Hunched at the end of the bed, I leant forward to sketch the gardens which were tiny and packed in. Green hedges surged. Our garden was overgrown with a tangle of dried grasses and Red Hot Pokers clawing each other. My neck ached but in the distance the Wicklow hills opened a hazy line of grey. In the street below, a man with a long pony tail pulled a shopping bag on wheels and two girls in short dresses clumped down the street.

In a new place I would have a studio like my old one, a garden of light flooding in, shelves for paints, canvases and brushes. I would work with the fury and passion I used to have.

*

The pad's sheer whiteness, a hard purity like snow. Heavy falls lay around the house that February. Hills were crisp topped and a cold wolf of wind nosed down the valley. White light teemed as R, snug as an airman, clutched my hand and we ventured out. He attempted to run, hobbling. Fell and sat like a fat alderman, declaring in a serious voice how he was tired. He scrambled up, spreading out his arms for support. We walked towards the lake. In the confusion of moving, it was possible some days, to believe R had tucked his two year old self among pots and pans in the kitchen cupboard. Dry air sank in my throat.

*

F pushed open the bedroom door.

“I`m back.” He sat on the bed leaning towards me. “You`re sickening for something. What are these?” He pulled out the packs sheeny with light, packaging proclaiming, ‘0 - 3 months.’ “Who are they for?” His face shadowed with puzzlement, brows frowned like caterpillars. That book with holes in it which R had loved. Holes through which singular creatures were revealed. The butterfly. The sun. Melons and apples.

Silence fell into the hollowmost parts of me. Walls closed in. On us, The dressing table and drawers.

“I thought, they`d be useful.”

“We don`t know anyone with a baby.” His voice fell.

“The sister of the girl in the next flat has three under five.”

“ Is her sister here?”

“She lives in a village outside Crakow.” I lay the packs of baby-gros in the bottom drawer of her dressing table, the way babies were laid in poor families, years back. One outfit to wear. One in the wash and one spare.

“Get shot of them or you`ll be more upset. Look, don`t you think we might...try again?” His arms folded, drew me to the sofa. “We have so much to give a child. And to each other.” He held my hands. “I wish things were as they were. But we mustn`t let what happened be an impediment.”

The mirror caught my face messed with tears, bits of hair awry. Loss stretched, a thin, taut veil sharp as blade.

“I’ll return them. Next time you’re out, buy yourself something. You’ll feel better.” He bundled the packages in his arms, smoothing out creases. He bent over and kissed me on the top of the head, picked up his back-pack and left, the front door slamming shut.

*

I was not myself or any of the selves I had been. I pulled on a jacket, eager for air and left. The next couple of days I wondered the network of tightly packed terraces with back-yards so narrow, it was a wonder a washing line could be strung across. In a square, neat houses were hushed behind gardens with iron railings but walking past, they did not seem so cramped, rather they were tended, cared for. A pale blue house at the end, with a flourish of tall flowers looked peaceful and English. An expensive restaurant had opened. A Volvo garage swamped the corner and a florist had a vase of lavish long stemmed grasses in the window. Unprepared for so many changes, I had wanted Dun Laoghaire to be the same, to remind me of who I was but it had changed in the years since I had gone. At the corner, two houses were being converted into a home for difficult children. F had called it a waste of the corporation’s money but I liked the landscaping of the garden with low hedges and large glass doors.

I had wanted to live in the country after returning but F said he had to be near the University. I clicked on estate agents sites. Red brick. Bay windows. Dormers. Other people`s lives

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Grey-stone Victorian terraces rose, leading to an unfamiliar street of stark new houses and a block of flats. Cries came from a kids playground opposite. Usually I hurried, as though any minute R would waddle towards me. A girl in leggings and a pink tee-shirt pushed a swing back and forth, her child in the little boxy seat. Buggies crammed near the gate. The only accessory. The girl lit a cigarette, letting the swing go nonchalantly to and fro. The baby looked up, fat cheeked and blooming. He threw a rattle out of the buggy and little bells glittered.

I could have swooped him into my arms, nuzzled him. The girl stubbed out her cigarette with her foot and hurried off. I wended off, past small houses backing onto one another until reaching the sea-front, the sky opening up, a lighter grey blue and the wind squally and hard with its salty smell.

Boats clustered in the quay while plump gulls breasted the waves. Far out, a smudgy pink sky was reflected in the water. Not like the sea of my childhood which flung waves madly at the shore. Rude and rough in winters nights, smooth and sheeny as glass in summer.

The path led along the cliff edge to the beach and the harbour. Wind tangled my hair and a boat far out had a red sail. Always someone sailing.

The main street had independent shops, like those in Coxsackie, where if I bought something, instead of online, I felt virtuous. A picture framers. Pottery. Three cafes and two restaurants. A craft shop and several clothing boutiques. 'Belle Isle,' I read above one with light summery tops and dresses in the window.

Out of the sun, the shop was cool, discreet but the clothes were colourful. Several orange and red dresses in light fabric hung on one rail another had tumbling dresses with ruffles and tiers.

"Can I help?" A girl with short dark hair appeared.

"May I try this on." Chiffon drifted under my fingers.

In the changing room, the dress was a streak of light. Turning side to side in the mirror, it was dazzling and bright. Sleeveless with the armholes cut in, leaving my arms bare, so I was boyish. Ethereal. Sophisticated. Grown up.

"I'll take it," I pushed back the curtain.

"It looks great." The girl smiled.

"I may as well wear it home."

"Sure. I'll put your clothes in the bag instead."

I was lighter. Replenished. Filled with radiance. Birds called in the trees and traffic hummed. A line from a prayer of my mother, came, 'This is today and we must praise it spilling its contents at our feet.' I had not understood at 7 years.

*

A shower smeared the air, so I hurried. The red of the traffic lights was the same as those on the back of a car. Trees were dipped at the edges with light, from pale green to almost lemon. Nothing staying the same. The clear day sucked away, pressing a leaden sky down and a sudden shower splintered the air. I should have taken an umbrella. The roads were liquorice strips. Hurrying, I reached a church on the corner and the heavy door fell open.

Velvet shadows. Light filtered through stained glass, a sulky green of an angel in one window next to one in robes of whorish reds and purple. Leading around the sections held in the colours. They glowed, alchemies of changing tones. Glass might be good to work with. Colours set, so they did not run away.

I held a candle, an intense blue at the core while a flame blew around the outside pale as the alb my brother wore as an altar boy, supplicating himself at Easter. He had flown down, a bird in a little wind through the bleakness of Good Friday with the telling of what the soldiers did. The words of Pilate rang, 'What I have written, I have written.' Life was like that. What was done, was done. And the continual question resounded. Was R in heaven with saints and angels, with my grandmother who had walked miles to Mass? Perhaps mouldering in the ground, chewed by worms and slugs. I had to believe he was in a safe place even though F had given up on the proprieties of religion years ago, saying it had no logical foundation. Though rationally agreeing, I clung to a few tenets of faith, for belief beyond the confines of the tiny, white coffin.

“Excuse me.” A tall priest, his unlined face as a schoolboys, smiled. Priests were strange creatures, seeming one thing and being another. Mercurial. “Are you here for the Bazaar raffle? You wouldn’t be Mrs Fitzgerald?” He shifted foot to foot and I wanted to leave. “She’s to meet me to give over the money raised, but I’m new and haven’t met all the parishioners.”

“I’m not, sorry. I came in out of the rain.” Limp hair bedraggled my eyes.

“We may as well use the roof over our heads.” He smiled, while a door at the back of the church scraped open.

He slipped off to a fat middle-aged woman with a soft hat and a big shopping bag displaying a large design of flowers on her arm.

*

I like bad weather. Droplets trickled down my neck through rats tails of hair. I needed a cut, but could not remember the name of the girl who had done it last. At the bookshop on the corner, I grabbed the slippery handle of the door and tumbled into the dry premises.

Hiding amongst the shelves, I turned to the main display of photography books propped open. Except one. The cover. The insides of my bones chilled. Him. G. He had slipped out of my consciousness. Behind the lettering, the gnarled backs of mountains, rivers and streams ran over rocks ridden with gorse splayed across the cover. I picked it up, slipped through the pages of the outside world unfolding. Seas splayed under the glossy texture as though under glass. A

graze of green fields taken from a height. One photograph showed a boat, worn, ruined wood taking up most of the frame. Here was the Moy, where Vivien Leigh's father fished for salmon, there, the lake where Cuchulainn's sword had fallen. A wide lens shot showed a spread of mountains. Taken at evening, it was redolent with brown tones, including a shack for sheep or keeping logs. Bare trees on a scraw bare hill, flicked with snow, electrified with distress. The land was scrubby, pure sparseness. Rivers and hills were sharply framed. Mountains spread like those I had walked in. Precipitous rocks which ranged a scabbled trail down sheer cliffs, where the only alternative was the gaping, charging sea as seabirds darted and gulls dived for food. Otherwise, beyond creatures of the deep, no other living thing survived.

As a kind of companion, for the long hours of night, I bought the book. A reflection in the door met me on leaving. Ragged tailed hair. It did not matter Nothing did, for the bag with the book hung. Trapped. His words caught and on the pavement, a sign said, 'Breakfast All Day.' I did not know how that could be. But of course it was possible even as threads of time were out of kilter, slipping sideways.

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Abba was blasting from a retro tv show, when I came in. F rose and placed his lap-top on the kitchen table. "You didn't take your phone." His eyes, dark, flayed. The whole of the afternoon had slipped behind. The clock hands said twenty

past six. “I came home early and got a good bottle of wine.” He brandished the bottle with a particularly delicate label of pinks and blue.

Home? Where was that?

“But you clearly forgot to buy the fish.” He opened the fridge door.

“I`m sure there`s food.” I reached for a cupboard and glanced along the kitchen counter, as though to miraculously encounter a haddock or plaice, pure, white flesh glistening on a plate.

“I`m sure there is. Only trouble is, it`s not cooked. I`d better go around the corner and get a take - away. Chicken Chow Mein?” he called, not waiting for an answer and left.

I wanted to run out after, calling, “It doesn`t matter. I don`t care about food.” Gravity grabbing my ankles, I sank to the sofa. He came back, laying the packages of rice and chicken on the kitchen counter and we divided the dishes. We sat to eat while rain spattered the windows which misted with the heat of breathing.

*

G`s voice bled in, descriptions of streams and mountains. The confluence of paths over rough stones weathered with moss and lichen. He brought back how he had lived. Amongst woods. Along streams, at the edge of the sea. He had disturbed my heart` path more than a decade before. We had driven to Dingle, slept on a beach for a week in August, his head resting on my belly, days and

night merging. We drove one rainy morning to the sheer magnificence of the cliffs of Moher. I had been alarmed, standing in a biting wind. While rain lashed, he was in awe of the elements. He had been easy to be with. Or mostly. His years over mine were a type of hold. He used to ring late at night, saying he was calling round and I acceded to him and the long mornings.

Restless to be out of doors, he had sought the open air and we had walked miles in full winds, jackets fat as old men, their mouths seeking the refuge of the other. He opened up the outer world, explaining how one feature derived from another. A glacial valley, its steep sides fell, a sheer drop to a magnificent floor wide as a ballroom.

*

“You there?” F called through the bedroom door and thumped down his bag. I flipped shut the book and shoved it under the bed.

“You remembered flowers for the party. But they`ll have cost a bomb.”

Delphiniums, carnations, and lilies stretched their heads. “And you`ve used the bucket.”

“We`re short of vases. But aren`t they lovely?” The vase on the mantelpiece held a creamy sea of orchids. Shadows of stark greenery stripped over. I breathed in. Summers. My parents` garden had been vibrant with lupins, foxgloves. Dizzying scents. “You`ve lots of friends here.”

“Exactly. You need to meet people. If you saw a doctor, he could give you something. It might help you get out of yourself.”

His ginger hair had been cut so short, the usual vibrancy of his curls was gone. A firey Tiger Lily behind him. He was right. The flat was overly full of stuff. The confusion of their accumulated possessions stacked and toppled in every room. Fragile towers of art materials, table lamps, chairs from front porch, rugs made by craftspeople we had known. Sediment and debris of a shared life on another continent.

The dark eyes of the Argentinian psychotherapist had pierced. He was a tiny man reminding me of a lizard with his long arms and lithe movements. I did not want to talk to a stranger. Talking made the loss expand inside, so I was larger with the weight of expectation of things improving. And dashed when they did not.

*

F leant close, stroking my hair.

“Soon you`ll get back to painting. In a routine and it won`t be like last time.”

Last time was the last time with R. For all time. And it was all my fault. His flighty blonde hair in the swampy lake under the crack of glassy ice. A man had gone out in a boat. Too late. Always too late. R lay on the ground, cheeks murky and softened with earth. Soils spilt from his mouth and his eyes were closed.

Blue as petals. Cornflowers. His face was pale, with fine veins of delicate lavender. At the side of his head, blood trickled from the impact of a rock. Gritty

texture had imprinted on his skin. I had clutched him, unable to fathom why having borne him, I could not give him life.

*

In the kitchen, the dark tone of the counter and the metallic fridge were like my uncle's butchers shop; cabinets big enough to walk into and flashes of chunky red flesh hanging from hooks thick with blood and soft melting white tissue.

The radio forecast hot weather. 'Spanish weather', my father had called it, though he had never been to Spain. Never been beyond fifty miles from the farm. He must have been thinking of the phrase from the song. "First she washed them, then she dried them over a fire of amber coal, In all my life I ne`er did see a maid so sweet about the soul..."

A sole. A person's foot or their soul? The lady's or someone else's? It would have been unusual for my father to sing words riven with confusion, for he was level headed, practical, with skills of carpentry. A man who knew his own business, making tables, dressers and mending anything; a lop sided chair, the runner for a drawer. He made things new. If only I could put on a new skin, start life over again. Wasn't that meant to happen every seven years? All I had to do was wait to become a new person.

The days had rolled into one so there was no need to change clothes. I went nowhere. Had not even wanted to leave upstate New York with R secreted in the earth. But F had kept persuading. We had to think of our future. Start

again. Go back to where we came from. It would help me get over things, he said leaning over in bed, while I turned away with fear. He had lain against the white field of the bed while I wanted a cavernous quiet to creep into and fall deep, deep down.

In the weeks afterwards, I had driven over the bridge in Coxsackie, wanting to go into the waves, lose herself in a welter of storm, swirled away with the river. F had explained the benefit of returning to Ireland in terms of being able to visit my mother, though he had not been overly solicitous before, having called her eccentric; “Poor old girl. Waves pounding all night`d drive anybody loopy.” His words had buzzed and collided. He did not know about the sea, for he was an inland man, brought up in the city. His idea of outside, was a patch of garden, whose view of the sea was a manicured version from times when he went to stay with relations in Bray.

*

F sniffed and picked up days old clothes draped on a chair.

“You need a bath. There`s a whiff.”

I ran warm water.

“What`s that noise?” He looked around as though someone was hidden amongst the towels or in bathroom cabinet. An opera singer or a busker?

“Me. Singing.”

“You`d better get a move on. They`ll be here soon.”

Tip-toeing wet footsteps to the bedroom, I dried myself, dragging a slippery dress over my head.

“You’re not wearing that?” he asked, while cleaning the glasses in the kitchen.

“Why not?” My cleavage was not that low.

“It’s too revealing. What’ll D think?” His face was taut with annoyance.

“He’s not still a priest.”

“But you know what he’s like.”

“You said he was always going out with girls and having a great time.” I sat on a stool at the counter and considered opening one of the bags of crisps.

“He used to. And I never thought he’d see the inside of a Seminary unless they let in M with him.” He set out each glass, its globe catching the light.

“What does she do, anyway?” I arranged glasses in straight lines. “I thought he only went out with girls who were accountants.”

“I don’t know but you need to do something. Keep occupied.” He set free the celery from a plastic bag and cut it into sticks. “I’ve got bottles in the fridge and the red opened to breathe.”

*

In the bedroom, I searched for the black stilettos with dainty straps and diamante stars. Barely passing for shoes, mum had said, “They’d be no use in the country.” By gripping the edge of the stack of tea chests, I was able to walk, despite wobbling. I could reasonably pass for normal. Almost like an adult.

I scoured the jewellery box. A milky pearl rosary wept in a heap at the bottom, sunk down, poured over by strings of other necklaces. The beads had passed through mum`s fingers for years until she gave them to me after the first miscarriage, saying I should pray every day for another baby. I had been sceptical but perhaps mum`s prayers had been effective. Until twelve weeks. The weal of loss had written itself in blood on the sheet. And a second. Garish scarlet had wounded my sight. Nothing came right until R. Nothing had made sense until him. But nothing had made sense afterwards. In the long afterwards, after him, when days and hours had spun out of control.

I found a necklace, pulling it out but the beads freed themselves, ran away on the carpet. The polished hard eyes of Carnelian and Onyx flooded the floor. My father had given me the necklace and I loved with a taut hard pain ever since he died. I rummaged on the floor until most of the stones were gathered, except for those behind boxes and the wardrobe in the corner.

Chatter rose from the other room. People arriving. I slipped on a pair of earrings and pressed a lipstick across my lips in a red slash. F would be talking about his new department and the lectureship which he was hoping would lead to a professorship. I had to grit my teeth from laughing, as he had frequently bemoaned the standard of the students.

“How are you?” D kissed my cheek.

“Fine. Thanks.”

“You haven`t a drink at your own party. Let`s get you one. The food`s great. Did you do the little pastries yourself?”

“Yes.”

“No,” F chimed.

“It was the deli on the corner,” I admitted.

“We`ve got awful sophisticated the time you`ve been away. In Dublin anyway. On a par with London or Paris, despite all the debts. None of the old bit of ham on brown bread,” D laughed.

“I like home cooked ham,” I lay into another open sandwich.

“So, you getting used to being back? It`s not the same as being here for a holiday. You`ll see all our faults. Ten years or so away is a long time.”

“It is.”

“A lot of changes.”

The whole world changed. Shifted. Earthquaked.

“Best thing, being home,” D continued.

The city was not home. I would rather have gone to a small town or out in the country. The chatter gnawed. D talked to M. She had long, blonde hair straight as pencil hanging down my back. How could they say so much? How could there be so many words in the world?

“What`s wrong?” F asked. “Offer M something,” he whispered, pushing a platter of dips towards me. “She hasn`t touched a bit.”

“She`ll probably think it`s too fattening. I`ll eat it.”

“You won`t. Offer them round.”

In Coxsackie, I made chilli, baked potatoes, open sandwiches of smoked salmon with the mildest of tastes, from a farm where a river wound its way

through trees and mountains. I was a good cook then. Good at most things; meeting people, talking, making them welcome, especially strangers.

Entertaining was simple.

“M would you like some?” I offered a bowl of mussels.

A strained a smile through limp hair.

“No, thank you. I don’t like shell fish.”

“Anything else? Pastries? Some have goats cheese.”

“I`m full really.” M drew her shoulders up in a little shrug as if to say, do you really think I eat and her blue eyes were wide with amazement as her lips moved but the words escaped me. Nothing made sense. Words ran away. All I knew was, it was Friday and soon Friday would end. My glass slipped to the wooden floor where crystals of smithereens spread with the uncontrollable red wine.

“Oh, no,” M gazed down while the scratchy carpet caught me.

“Are you all right?” F whispered.

My silk dress glowed with the rapid spread of wine.

“I`m sorry.”

“Get up,” he hissed, supporting me to an armchair.

“My head.”

“Never mind your head, look at the rest of you. And the rug,” he said. The soft Jacob`s wool carpet was messed with pink. All I could think was, sheep were not pink. “What happened?” He stood over me.

“I went to pick up my glass.”

“Are you all right?” D’s asked.

“It’s only...”

“Drinking,” F whispered, accompanying me to the bedroom.

From the bed, life in the street murmured on with cars passing and people running to the shops. A floral lace curtain blew in. The bay curved towards Dublin with white stalks of yachts and gulls in a fierce clamour. The sea in turmoil was sending them inland. Perhaps it was not gulls but the squeak of a child’s bike?

*

I changed into light pyjamas and lay on the bed. During the summers in Coxsackie, we lived outside, dragging mattresses out to sleep. The physical reality of our former home was near, if I closed my eyes. Those days lived intensely, as R toddled fearlessly, peering into flower pots and bushes. I had chased after him while his overlong, blonde hair fell about his ears. He was a bundle charging around the house, flecks of blonde strands flying.

I spun deeper, and deeper down, snorkling in dreams until from out of the basement of sleep I recognised a spiral of uncontrollable laughter as D’s. A pause. More talk. Talk about me, a good source of entertainment, no doubt. F’s family made me nervous, the sisters with their piercing looks, assessments, analysing what I was doing, unable to understand how their academic brother had married a painter when the rest of the family had sensible occupations as

teachers, bankers and accountants. The children of city people, although their parents had been raised in a village outside Cork, fifty years before.

D's voice. He was jolly company except for his girlfriend. It must be a novelty for her to see someone falling apart inside. Another voice rose. Doused in half wakefulness, I stood in the doorway.

"Can you please all go home, please?" Reflected in a mirror opposite, in my primrose pyjamas with pan collar, I was like angel Gabriel with his important announcement. But F shot up from his chair and ushered me back.

Why did he want me to, especially in my best nightwear from Macy's, even if at a double discount?

"Don't embarrass us further." He was pale with thin lips. Green eyes like those of a fox in the night, were hard and dark. He closed the door behind them like a burglar. "Stay there."

"Don't shout."

"I'm not," he lowered his voice.

"Why are you whispering?"

"What'll they all think?"

"I don't care what they think. I don't give a f ..."

"Shhh." He looked over his shoulder. "I'll tell them you're not well."

"I'm not well. I feel awful."

Last year, on sleeping tablets, I had wanted to take more or even drink along with them but always woke feeling more tired than when I lay down.

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F was up when I woke.

“What was that about last night?” He pulled on his jacket.

“There was awful noise in my head.”

“I don` t know what the others thought.”

“I don` t care.”

“You should. How` ll you get better, if you go on like this?” His voice was low.

After he left for work, I pulled out G`s book. The photographs were mesmerising. Light flooded from the sky amongst shadows of the trees. We had camped by the side of stream and he had showed me how to make a fire. We tramped the countryside, his tall figure bending to stones as he explained their passage from another landscape. He gave me the names of plants, explained how valleys were formed while on rainy days, we lived, hidden from the rest of the world as that morning, when R and I left the house for a walk. I let go of his hand, bent to gather stones to take home and doing so, lost part of myself as the lake`s mouth swallowed him to its sticky mud, easily as I drew breath.

About the Author

Deirdre says: Recently I won the Lightship publishing Novel Award and was 2nd in the Inaugural Spread the Word Writing Award with subsequent publication in 'Edgeways' from Flight Press. Some of my fiction has been shortlisted for the Asham Award, the Willesden Herald Competition, Aidan Higgins Award and Elle Magazine. I have had work read at Liars League, and The Word Factory, London.