

Flight

Lia Mills

Call me Aisling.

You think you know the story, the one about the old woman turned to a radiant girl by the love of the rightful king, when, if you ask me, it's more like the girl becomes a hag through the antics of some old goat. Or the one about the girl who causes bad blood among the men, running off with one of them when she belongs to another...

Call me Grainne, Deirdre, Aideen, Eve. Call me anything you want, but give me a break, let me tell you how it was, for me.

My father, let's call him Mick, is a gambling man. He'd bet on anything. Horses, dogs, weather, an election – anything with a result. Once, when a neighbour's child went missing, he opened a book on where she'd be found and when. Alive or dead.

It's a sickness, my mother says. She stretches the wings of her white cockatiel.

Mick won the bird in a wager and gave it to her. When she's not around, it clings to the mirror in its cage, confides in its own reflection. Released, it swoops to her shoulder, murmurs secrets into her hair, nibbles the velvet lobe of her ear. It lets her tug on its feathers. She preens it with her ringed fingers, chases fleas with her blushing nails.

Our Mick plays fast, loose and dangerous. He'll beg, borrow, steal. When my mother's out he ransacks the house, looking for things to sell. If it's not nailed down, it'll go. He lost the house from under us once. My mother's brothers got it back, but he lost it again. That time, he went to the local shark for help. You could say that's where the trouble started, when your man, Feeney, entered the picture.

You'd be wrong.

We've had the electricity cut off, the furniture and cars, everything, repossessed. Wouldn't you know it, Feeney has a sideline in repossession. Gives with one hand, takes with the other.

My mother says, Mick can't help himself.

She builds a house out of my little brother's lego. She sits on the floor of my room and pieces together walls out of red plastic bricks on a green base, a blue roof. She adds a tiny window with hinged white shutters, a yellow door she puts lego daisies in front of. Posts her rings through the window and pulls it shut. Unless you pick it up and shake it, you'd never know it was a box. She hides it under my bed.

He comes in bulling. Tears my door from its hinges. Pulls out my drawers and tosses them to the floor. *Smash!* Finds the plastic box. *Smash!* The rings tumble out. The bird flies to the pelmet, squawking. Downy feathers fall, like snow, to mix with the ones that rise from my split pillow.

The deceit! He roars, the treachery! Not a fucker to be trusted! Not even my own flesh and fucking blood.

The sour blast of his look.

The crazier things get, the more he thinks bluff and bluster will carry him through.

The big thing is to keep it out of the papers, not let them get a whiff of what really goes on behind the high walls, the hot tub, the cctv. It's a good show, but you wouldn't want to look too closely at the paperwork. Talk about smoke and mirrors. If word gets around, he'll be a goner, and all of us with him, how would we like that?

No more fancy clothes or foreign holidays, no more parties.

He's a bit of a party man, our Mick. Everyone's friend, a good host. Openhanded. Generous.

He wouldn't be completely unknown to the guards, mind, for all his good suits and business deals, his friends in high places. It's all smiles and Howya Mick to his face, but the neighbours look down their noses all the same. They think they know where trouble lives, on our side of the wall. They want to keep it that way. They'd rather not know too much.

Walking around the world with your eyes open isn't enough to make you see what's right in front of you. *Looking* means you have to take the shutters down as well.

My mother's naked fingers preen the bird. Things could be worse, she says. Look at the starving millions.

He says I'm spoiled. Rotten. I should be grateful for every stitch, every crumb, each slate and brick. The shoes on my feet. The hair on my head. The parties.

Christ, those parties.

Card games into the small hours. They pass the malt and the cigars, trade stories. They never tell about the one-that-got-away; always, it was *this* big, so fast, *that* hard, *that* furious, fists and steel, fire and fucking brimstone. Never the ash they leave behind.

What's mine is yours, Mick says to his friends.

He has debts to discharge, after all.

I'm sent to bed early.

All the things in the world that creak. Pine trees, cedars, an old man's bones. A door, floorboards, a bed.

Did you ever wake in the night, a tree boiling up through you like you were soil? It traps me in its branches, pins me down. My legs and the top of my head torn off. Birds fly away, screeching.

My mother says, you're dreaming.

He goes too far. In a late night crapshoot, here in our own house, he stakes – not the pile, this time – but my mother. And loses.

By the time he comes to his senses, she's gone. He's livid, as if she's to blame. When her brothers come around to find out why she's not returning messages, your man, Feeney, has to broker an agreement to get her back.

She has a stunned, a beaten look to her. She jumps every time a door opens and again when it closes. She'll only talk to the bird. She wears it on her shoulder, like jewellery.

One grey day, no warning, she opens the window and shoos the bird out into the drizzle. It sits in the dogwood tree and blinks its scaly eye, its comb up. She closes the window. The bird takes off in bedraggled curves, swoop, fall, swoop, fall. Not used to all that space. White feathers left behind on the carpet. My mother draws the curtains, her eyes blood-red.

My mind cracks, like an egg.

Mick forgot to mention that your man, Feeney, has his price. He wants a trophy to wear on his arm, to show them all what a man he is. What a hero, such a stud.

He wants me.

I'd like to say my mother fights for me, that she stands up in his face, *I won't let you harm a hair of that child's head*, but she looks away.

What's the difference, one old tyrant or another?

I look for clues in the mirror. My face blooms like a water-lily from the black.

We feel the ground shake before they get here, a caravan of sleek black cars.

They get out, one by one. Men in black.

Which one is he? I ask. No one knows for sure. Already, my own people are no use to me.

Mick is talking to one of them. Are you Feeney? I ask. He laughs. That's a good one. No. He's the old man.

Your father?

He scowls. What are you, thick? My grandfather.

He's flying in. Mick looks uneasy. He'll land in the bottom acre.

In a plane? My heart leaps to my throat. I clamp down on it with my teeth. Do I have to go away with him?

I can see it, now. Feeney will carry me off. When I'm broken and biddable, when he thinks he can trust me, he might let me come back.

I'll go on down and meet him, I say. May as well get it over.

Mick looks as if he'll come with.

Alone, I say.

Thinking, Let you choke on your own bone.

I set off down the path. The garden is lovely, wreathed in its early summer glories. Colours blaze. Laburnum, wisteria, a red-leafed acer. The lemony dogwood tree, the scent of jasmine and lavender. Small pink and white stars of clematis. Hawthorn.

Life is a series of thresholds we have to cross alone, but there are people on the other side. I just have to get there to be what they are, know what they know. Mothers, widows. The dead.

The plane is sleek, pearl-white. The old man has his back to me. I hide behind a willow and watch. He turns back from the rhododendrons, fastening his fly. Nice. I crouch where I am while he talks to the pilot, slaps him on the back, a big guffaw and he takes off in the direction of the house where there are lights on. Music. An old-fashioned band. Country waltzes.

The pilot is under the belly of the plane, peering into its snowy throat, fiddling with a wrench. A pair of jeans sit low on his narrow hips. A white shirt hugs the curve of his ribs. A moon shaped gap on his flank shows skin as taut as a sheet in a newmade bed I'd like to lie in. I take him in through my eyes. He stops, wipes his hands on his arse. Brushes a hank of brown hair away from his face. There is a scar, a mark, on his brow that my thumb wants to soothe. Light in his deep grey eyes.

I step out of the shrubbery, brush thorns from my clothes.

He starts, looks around. Are you alone?

Not any more.

His eyes flick over my shoulder to check.

I want to touch his mouth where it lifts, fit my lips to that scar of his. I move closer. Too close. He stands his ground. The heat between us rises.

Did you see the Boss, going down the path?

His breath fills me, as sweet as the first ever taste of air in the history of the world.

I did not. I saw a goaty old yoke, playing with his beard.

I give him a bold look. Give us a ride?

I'd be kilt.

Go on.

A quick one, just.

The world is full of chances, but you have to know them when they come for you. Up with me, and into the co-pilot's seat before your man, Mark, can change his mind.

He sits in the seat beside me and flips a few knobs. We're rushing then, low and fast, picking up speed, bumping along the bottom acre to the edge of the world.

The horizon dips, tilts, falls. We're flying. They'll all see us. This hasn't dawned on your man yet. He's maybe not the brightest, but a lovely hollow at the base of his throat pulses when he turns to ask, Do you want to?

No-one has ever asked me this before. Not once. The sweetest question ever. Do. You. Want.

In a trance, I take the controls. He shows me what to do, but I'm in charge.

It's the biggest thrill of my life. I'm looking, looking, gathering the whole of the sky's blue cloak in through my eyes, the white heaped pillows of clouds, all the flying things, their feathers, their hollow bones and little beating hearts. Soaring.

We should go back, he says. They'll be wondering.

I push the joystick and we dive. He fights it, overrides, pulls us level.

Are you insane? This thing is Feeney's pride and joy. He'd kill me if ...

He might kill you anyway.

It's easy to swing the plane around and buzz the lawn, where the guests are gathered, gawking. Feeney mimes a slash to the throat.

Oh, man, Mark groans. This is bad.

I wave them all goodbye. You're stuck with me now. In the beginning he keeps his distance. He won't lay a finger on any part of me, though he lets me hold on to him, on the pillion of a motorbike, say. The wind in my face. He tells anyone who'll listen that it's all a misunderstanding, he's a man of honour. He'll come in, so long as they swear to let me go.

Which is something, but not enough. The more he holds himself clear of me, the more I want him.

You wouldn't be the first, I say.

I slide my tongue into the whorl of his ear, blow in it, fit my hand to his breastbone, wingbone, collar.

No joy.

Feeney's men chase us up and down the length of the country. Being Mark's friends, their hearts aren't in it. Sometimes they send warnings. One retires, another moves to Spain. A third goes into politics. Things get tricky. Feeney is surrounded by younger men, and the new generation don't know Mark. They have their own codes, their own way of doing things.

We spend months with the tree people in Wicklow, playing chess, of all things. A tournament. Turns out Mark is a grand master. He can't let on who he is but he keeps winning. People take notice. At night I twine myself around him like creeper, afraid he'll fall. When he cries out, it's not words of love, but chess moves:

Knight to queen three!

Kingside castle!

A journalist comes to write about him. We move on. We sleep in high places, swaddled in cloud. Dolmens, thrones of rock, the forked branches of great elms. Take cover in the towns. In Limerick a white van pulls up beside us and I nearly lose my reason when I see your man who was talking to Mick the night of the party, but he rolls down his window and tells Mark where Feeney is looking, where to avoid.

Tell him I haven't touched her, is Mark's reply.

Are you gay, is that it? I ask. We're washing in a burbling brook, birds trilling all around. If it was a film set, we'd be making out like bandits. He won't even look at me. He's aggrieved. No, that's not it.

I can't help taunting him. It'd make sense, though. When you think about it. Just because I don't fall on you? You've a big opinion of yourself. So it's not that. But he does miss his mates, the adventure, all the man-talk.

In an African club off Parnell Street there's crazy music playing. A drum beats its way up through my feet, starts a pump going in my heart. Mark goes to the bar. I'm bopping around on my own when a beautiful black man comes and sets me spinning on the floor. We dance like I've never danced before. I follow his steps, he follows mine, then he swings me right off my feet, over his head and down, my skirt around my ears, all my blood in my face.

Breathless, on fire, my heart still dancing, I go to our table for my drink. Mark is livid. You're making a show of yourself.

So?

Like a tart.

And?

My blood is well and truly up. I scoop the ice from my drink and run it along my neck. It catches in that little notch where the collar bones meet. Something in his eyes. I run it down my breast bone, it breaks into little threads of water that slip under my shirt. I meet his eyes. That ice has more balls than you do, I say. He stares. Beads of sweat break out on that high forehead of his. I can tell he wants to lap the water from my salty skin.

At last.

Outside, clouds flee the scene. Everything rushes east, like they've heard the sun is coming up, and want to be there when it happens. We hunker down, turn inward. My mind empties into him.

This is what we've come to: he is my in, my out; my sky, my golden dawn, my morning; the place where I begin.

We swap day for night, keep running. The moon gathers the days in her bright net, rolls them in a ball, for safe keeping. Night comes and swallows her whole. She returns,

wishbone thin and gleaming, taut as the inside of a thigh, a wrist, a hollowed flank. I want it all to stop, here. Now.

A black dog follows us from the river, skulks at our heels. Starved, angular, all hide and bone and begging eyes, scabs on the leathered pads of his feet. He whines when we speak to him. You think this means something else. In stories, when a black dog appears on the horizon, you're screwed. It's a messenger, or a spy.

Listen. Sometimes a dog is just a dog. They need love and food and water. They need light. They need the saving dark.

My mind as clear as the sky, I'm consumed by a longing for the berries from my mother's quicken tree. No sense to it, that's what I want.

His hand on my mouth, Don't say it.

My lips shape endings on his skin

We creep home on a moonless night, bring the dog for luck. I beg for a bath. My mother perfumes the water with oils, sets candles on the ledge. I slip into the steam of comfort. The knots of our long flight loosen. It's over. There's a child coming, she can see it. This changes everything, she says. I'll have a word with my brothers, see what they can do.

I stand up out of the water, scummy now and grey. Its residue coats the enamel when the water drains. Disgust in her eyes.

The world is a grubby place, Mother. It rubs off.

Sometimes you have to steal your luck. Other times you get to make it.

It's May again. The gorse is out, wild and prickly as cactus, so much hidden sweetness in its yellow flowers, the smell of freedom and dreams in a riot of thorns and tangled wood.

We're back where we started, but not for long. The peace is uneasy, but it holds. Our child is born. Another few days and we can leave. Our dog is loyal, on guard. I was wrong about him. He's not just a dog, he's a sign. He wandered into the story by chance, but he had to come from somewhere.

Feeney will make his move, but he hasn't done it yet.

Not if, when.

I can see it, clear as day. Blade, bullet, screwdriver. Traffic light, car park, a heist gone wrong. Our bed, our son asleep between us.

The courts?

Don't make me laugh.

They'll all blame me. Let them.

Who tells the story wins, but there's any number of endings and I've a few of my own up my sleeve. This time I can plan it, think it through. Let the official version

have its day, it buys us time. The more versions there are, the more chance we have of slipping through the net. Listen out for the hunting horn, the alarm, church bells, an engine running in the night. Watch for the ribbon of news as it breaks on your screens.

Bodies found in ditch.

Don't believe everything you hear.

An empty boat. A stolen, burned-out car.

All I ever wanted was a choice. When your story is all you know, you think it's all there is. When you're in so deep that you're lost, you can't see what's coming. Enter it anywhere, the same things happen. But you can read it backwards. You can slip between the lines and leave.

The best-kept secret is that there are other stories. That you can tell your own.

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Afterword

This story revisits, revises and plays with the Tóráíocht Dhiarmuid agus Gráinne or the Pursuit of Diarmaid and Grainne. The Tóráíocht is part of the Fenian cycle of Irish legends, which tell the exploits of the great hero Fionn Mac Cumhaill and his warriors (the Fianna). In the original story, Grainne, the daughter of Cormac Mac Art, has been promised as a wife to Fionn. Grainne is a young woman, but by this stage in his life, Fionn is getting on in years and has already buried a wife or two. At the wedding, Grainne persuades Diarmuid, one of Fionn's younger warriors, to run away with her. Fionn's furious pursuit, and the adventures that follow, are part of our mythology.

A key feature of that mythology is that the woman is entirely to blame for everything that goes wrong. The hero has no choice because she puts him under a magical compulsion – in other words, 'he couldn't help himself'. Another, less well-known, feature is that the ancient kings and chieftains had a practice of lending their daughters to overnight guests as a mark of their esteem. The heroes are reluctant lovers, which can't have been much fun, and they're far more interested in hanging out with their mates than staying at home with the women, which sounds familiar.

But what leaks through the cracks in the stories, for me, is that the woman asserts her right to choose who she will, or will not, have sex with. I had fun writing this version, transposing the original emphasis of the chase, or 'pursuit' to 'flight', and shifting the point of view to the young woman, letting her tell her own story while incidentally setting the Fianna in a more contemporary context. I called the young woman Aisling (borrowing Herman Melville's iconic opening line) as a way of underlining the intentions of the story, both playful and serious. The Irish word aisling means a dream or

a vision, and is associated with a particular form of political poem where a spéirbhean, or dream woman, appears to the poet and inspires him to write the vision she reveals. She is a political variant of the poetic muse, and usually serves an agenda. In this story, she speaks for herself.

I wrote the story for a reading in aid of OneinFour, a charity that works with people who have experienced sexual abuse in Ireland – statistically, one in four people, hence the name of the organization.