

Joseph O'Connor

*Mothers Were All the Same*

I MET CATRIONA again on the train in from Luton. I had noticed her on the plane, just before we came in to land, leafing through the lousy in-flight magazine – ‘a great big top o’the morning from Delaney’s Irish Cabaret’ – while the old lady beside her worried about air disasters. The hostess told her to calm down and held her bony little hand. The old lady’s hand, that is. Not Catriona’s. Catriona’s hands weren’t bony at all. They were cute.

She said it was statistically impossible. She said you had more chance of being kicked to death by a mule than dying in an air crash. The old lady said to tell that to Yuri Gagarin, but the hostess just giggled and said, ‘Who’s he when he’s at home? Something to do with glasnost, is it?’ Catriona looked over at me. She grinned, and she rolled her beautiful eyes.

The plane screeched in, bucked as the wheels skimmed the ground, and shuddered to a halt outside the arrivals terminal. Catriona was ahead of me as we shuffled in off the tarmac, collars raised in the cold. Two police cars emptied. The plainclothes men stared and scribbled like crazy on their clipboards as we filed past them.

I told the customs guy I’d just arrived from Dublin, and I didn’t know how long I’d be staying. That was true all right. He glared under his peaked cap, making me feel guilty. He had a face like the ‘Spitting Image’ puppet of Norman Tebbit, but without the charm. I mean, I hadn’t done anything, but the way he looked at me made me feel like some kind of terrorist, just the same. Then he asked me to write down my full name, and he slouched off into a back room. That’s it, I

thought, I'm finished now. I gazed around the baggage lounge, full of wailing babies and neon signs. LUTON: GATEWAY TO THE SOUTH EAST. RYANAIR TO THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND. LOADZA LUVVERLY LOLLY IN THE SIZZLING SOARAWAY SUN. Then I saw her staring at me. Just for a second, but she was definitely looking at me. I smiled back, but she turned away to look for her bags. I made up my mind to ask her later, if I got the chance.

'Right,' said the customs man, and he told me to report my address to the local police as soon as I had one. I was going to ask why. But you don't bother, do you? You're so relieved that your name hasn't somehow crept into their bloody computer that you just smile politely and say thanks very much. He said he hoped I had a nice trip, and he was sorry for holding me up. But it was for everyone's good, if I knew what he meant. I knew what he meant.

I only had my rucksack, so I caught up with her on the other side of customs. I saw her immediately, looking in the window of the Sock Shop.

A troop of boy scouts was lined up at the burger counter, screaming curses and waving banknotes. Three football fans were drunk and singing in the corner, beer all over their England shirts. Soldiers walked up and down with machine guns in their hands. Actually, there were uniforms everywhere, now that I think of it. That's one thing I noticed straightaway, everybody seemed to be wearing a uniform. Customs, police, pilots, cleaners, waitresses, delivery boys, hostesses, all rushing around the hall. Above it all was the sound of the loudspeaker, announcing late flights and missing passengers.

I said, 'Excuse me,' and she turned around, looking a little surprised.

'Yeah?' she said.

I asked if I had seen her somewhere before. I was hoping she wouldn't think this was some big corny pick-up line, but I really did think I had seen her somewhere before and I couldn't remember where. I said I couldn't help noticing her

on the plane and she looked familiar. She said she really didn't think so, and she looked away. I said I was sure. She turned again and scrutinized me. Then she asked if I was a friend of Johnny Reilly, by any chance. I said, yeah, I was. Used to be anyway. Recognition dawned on her face. That party he had - last Christmas? I was there with a blonde-haired girl. Susan. Yes. She remembered me now. I was pretty flattered, actually, until she pointed out the reason she remembered me. I was the one who had puked over the aspidistra in the hall.

I grinned. She pursed her lips and looked at her watch. I said it was a small world. She said, yeah, it was a small world, but she wouldn't like to have to paint it. There didn't seem to be much else to say. She'd just come over for the weekend. What about me? I was here looking for a job. Who wasn't? I told her I didn't know how long I'd stick it. She just kept staring at that watch so eventually I just said bye, and she wished me luck and dragged her case outside to the bus stop for Luton station.

I waited for the next bus. Well, if she wanted to be like that, fine, I didn't really feel like being friendly anyway. Too many things on my mind. I didn't feel like some big conversation. OK, OK, so I had Aunt Martha's place, but that was only good for a few weeks at most, the old bat. I'd have to get a job soon. Then my own place. I never knew the folks would be so upset about me going, either. When I told them first they were delighted. But the morning I left it was a different story. Tears and scribbled addresses and folded-up tenners in the suit pocket. The whole emigrant bit. You'd have sworn I was going to the moon, the way they went on. The whole thing was like some bloody Christy Moore-song come to life in our front room. On the way out to the airport I actually thought my father was going to tell me the facts of life. It was that bad.

At least the suit wasn't too hick. Still fitted me, anyway. Just about. Though I'd really have to go on a diet. All the drinking I'd done in the weeks I was saying my goodbyes

was catching up fast. I must have put on eight pounds. But everyone insists on buying you pints, so what can you do? Everyone except Johnny Reilly, of course, the tight shit. My father got me the suit the week I started college. It was hanging over the back of my door when I reeled in that night. He said I'd need a good suit. I wore it twice in three years. Once for Granny's funeral and once for my graduation. He said to bring it with me to London anyway. He said I'd need it for all the interviews.

On the bus I thought about Una Murray. I'd never known she was into me until it was too late. But after our farewell drink she lunged at me on Capel Street Bridge, with the wind from the Liffey blowing through her hair like in a movie or something. Shit. If only I'd known before. Well, it wouldn't have made any difference. Still, would have been nice to know. Susan would have been jealous as hell.

When I got to Luton station, the London train was just pulling in, and the scramble of passengers was milling around the doorways. I fought my way on, dragging the rucksack behind, and I made a rush for the one spare seat. There were posters everywhere, saying that unattended luggage would be removed by the cops and blown up.

There she was, sitting opposite me as I squeezed in. Catriona. She was reading a book. *The Ultimate Good Luck* by Richard Ford. She looked up and smiled again. She said we must stop meeting like this. I tried to think of something smart but nothing came. I just grinned back like an idiot and I think I blushed as I offered her a duty-free cigarette. She shook her head and took off her glasses and pointed to another sign. NO SMOKING. An old man with a moustache glared at me.

'Haven't you heard of King's Cross?' he said.

We got talking again. She asked me where I was staying in London. Strange, but I said I didn't know. I don't know why I said that. Because I did know. But as Johnny Reilly says, I can't give anyone a straight answer, and I must admit that much is true. I suppose I was afraid she'd have nowhere

to stay and want to come to Aunt Martha's with me. Look, I know it's stupid, but I'm funny like that. I like my space. Crazy, I know, but what can you do? I think it's because everyone at home asks so many bloody questions. Where were you? Until when? Who were you with? And the great bloody existential conundrum of course: just who do you think you are? All that stuff is enough to make anyone defensive. I'm not saying it's right. I'm just saying that's the way it is.

I needn't have worried. She was fixed up already, staying in some hotel near the station. It was a small place, she said, but it was hunky-dory. I couldn't remember the last time I'd heard that expression. Hunky-dory. As the train pulled in I asked if she needed any help with her bags. I knew she didn't, but I thought I'd ask anyway. She said she could manage on her own. So I shook hands with her on the platform and said goodbye again. Her hand was cold. She smiled, because I was being so formal, I suppose, with the handshake and everything. She said she might see me around. I shrugged and said I hoped so. She told me she hoped I'd find somewhere to stay, and I said good luck, see you, and walked off.

'Eddie,' she shouted, as I walked through the ticket barrier. I turned and saw her trotting towards me, dragging her case, panting. She said she was sorry, that I must have thought she was really rude. I wondered what she meant. She said if I really had nowhere to stay why didn't I come with her? She said that was the obvious thing. She was sure they'd have another room. It was a really cheap place too, and if I needed somewhere to sleep for a few nights, until I found something else, it was probably OK. I hesitated. I knew I couldn't afford to stay in any hotel, no matter how cheap, not even for one night. Three nights would nearly clean me out. But then I thought, to hell with it. Why not? Nothing ventured, all of that. I just felt like doing something different. I don't know why. Something spontaneous after all the weeks of planning every last moment. That's what I

wanted. And I suppose I have to admit I thought she was pretty cute, too. I asked whether she was sure she wouldn't mind. She said, of course not. She'd love the company. I could come with her now, and maybe she could show me some of the sights over the weekend. All right. I said I would.

She was amazed that I'd never been to London before. She'd come over every summer for three years. She had a job over there whenever she wanted it, in some trendy lefty bookshop on Charing Cross Road. She might come over for good next year, she said. But she knew what it was like to be in London on your own. It was such an overwhelming place. So huge and anonymous and impersonal. So different from Dublin. Yeah, I told her, that's why I came over.

Then she wanted to know what Johnny Reilly was doing these days. I said I didn't know. I was going to tell her about our big falling out, but I didn't bother. I just said I hadn't seen him for a while, and I hadn't a clue what he was up to, but it was probably either illegal or a waste of time.

'That sounds like Johnny all right,' she said.

So we went over together to the El Dorado Hotel and we signed in. The Greek guy behind the counter told us he rented rooms by the hour. You didn't have to have them for the whole night. There were no questions asked here, not blooming likely. I blushed like a sap and she made some joke. The Greek laughed out loud and apologized. Then he said he did have separate rooms to spare and he'd show us the way. Creaking up the stairs I whispered that I wasn't so crazy about this kip. But she told me not to be so silly, that old Zorba was only joking about the hourly rate. I said I thought he was pretty serious, and she sighed and said she knew, but for seven-fifty a night you couldn't expect The Ritz. I coughed knowledgeablely and said I supposed she was right.

While she changed and unpacked, I slipped downstairs and outside and phoned Aunt Martha. The phone box was plastered with stickers advertising masseuses and prostitutes and kinky nuns and 'corporal punishment specialists'. I

thought it must be great to be a specialist at something. Aunt Martha's businesslike voice buzzed down the line. I was to come over immediately. She had the dinner on and my cousins were just dying to meet me again. I imagined Uncle Frank and her and Alvin and Sharon sitting around the table. I could just see them all – waiting for me. I reconsidered, just for a second.

But I just couldn't face it. I told Aunt Martha I was sorry but I was still in Dublin airport and I couldn't make it until Monday. It was the fog, I said. Everything was screwed up because of the fog. I felt bad about lying, but what can you do? She sounded so disappointed though. Soon as I'd said it, I regretted it, but it was too late then. She said they'd just have to wait. I said I was really sorry. She said she should think so too. All the trouble she'd gone too, not to mention the expense. I noticed her weird accent. She nearly didn't sound Irish at all.

The funny thing was, though, as soon as I put the phone down I knew in my heart that this whole thing was a big mistake. I really did. I just had this feeling, you know? Like God was going to get me for lying to Aunt Martha. Not that I believe in God. But still. You never know.

Back at the El Dorado things were looking up. My room was fine. It was small, but you could see Tower Bridge in the distance, and there was a television in the corner. I flicked the switch but nothing happened. You had to put a pound coin in the slot to make it work. Well, it looked good. And although I didn't want to watch anything, it made me feel good knowing that I could, if I wanted to, if I had a pound to spare.

I sat down and bounced on the bed. Gently. Yeah, this was great. God, I thought, if my mother could only see me now. Holed up with a strange woman in a King's Cross knocking shop. I felt like a Harold Robbins hero.

I said this to Catriona on the Tube up to Leicester Square that night. She said she wasn't familiar with the Harold Robbins *oeuvre* – she was a little sarcastic really – but she

knew what I meant about the El Dorado. It hadn't been quite as sleazy last time she was there. Still, never mind. It was all part of our little adventure, she said. We walked around the square for a while, looking at the lights and the posters in the cinema windows.

I bought her an ice cream in a little place in Soho. She said this was a really trendy area now, and the shops were way too expensive. I said she didn't have to tell me, the ice creams had cost six-fifty. She smiled and said she'd give me the money. I told her not to be so silly, but she insisted, so I took it. I gave the waiter a two-quid tip. Well, I didn't want her to think I was mean. She said, 'You only did that because you don't want me to think you're mean.' I tried to be as offended as possible but she just slipped her arm through mine and laughed again, and there was something about her made me want to be happy. So I admitted it and she sighed with mock desperation that men were so transparent.

Catriona was beautiful when she sighed. Wearing jeans and Doc Martens and a Public Enemy T-shirt, she was far more elegant than any of the women we watched swanning out of the opera house in pearls and fur. Her eyes were kind of soft and sparkling, the kind you read about in books. Her face was lightly freckled. She had a way of talking fast and avoiding my eyes that was just irresistible. And she was funny, too. In the wine bar she made sarcastic comments about the posers and yuppies in the corners.

I told her about home and Susan and everything. It's funny how much you can trust and say to a total stranger. And I told her I wasn't really sure what kind of job I was looking for, just something a bit more interesting than sitting in Dublin on the old rock and roll. She said she still had a year to go in art school, then she'd probably come over here and do some course or another. She had lots of friends over here already. In fact, she knew more people over here than she did in Dublin. Lots of people. Bucketloads of them. She'd never be stuck in London, she said.

The thing that got me was this. When we were talking

about gigs and holidays and stuff I noticed she said 'we' all the time. We did this. We saw that. Some lucky bastard was obviously going out with her back home, and I suppose she kept dropping this 'we' shit to let me know that. Half-way through the second bottle of wine I plucked up the courage to ask her. She said he was a brilliant guy, Damien, they were really happy together and all that. A really wonderful pass-the-sickbag relationship.

'So, what's happening?' I asked her, pretending not to be jealous as hell. 'I mean, are we talking wedding bells or what?'

'Maybe,' she admitted, 'when he qualifies.'

'And kids and everything?'

'Yeah,' she said. 'I'm sure we'll have children. I mean, why wouldn't we?'

'I don't know,' I said, 'why would you? I mean, why?'

'What is this,' she said, 'twenty fucking questions?'

I suppose I shouldn't have been so pushy and everything. It's not good to pry. I know that, but you know, it was just the booze really. Booze makes some people happy or sad or horny. It makes me curious. Always has. Outside in the rain I felt uneasy and confused. She seemed very quiet now, like there was something on her mind. The mood of things had changed. The feel of the night was suddenly weird and different now. Maybe this hadn't been such a great idea. I told her I was sorry for asking so many personal questions. She just stood there outside the Hippodrome chewing her fingernails and saying nothing.

'Do you want me to go away?' I asked.

She smiled then. She slipped her hand into mine. She said she was sorry too. She didn't know what had come over her. She had things on her mind. She couldn't say. Maybe she'd tell me some other time. She was really sorry, though. Here she was spoiling my first night in London. I told her that was rubbish, and if it wasn't for her I'd be having an awful time. I said come on, here I was in London with a gorgeous woman and not a care in the world. She smiled and

looked up at me then. She asked me if I meant the gorgeous bit.

'Yeah,' I said. I did. She said she'd been called beautiful before, but never gorgeous. 'They're not the same thing,' I said, 'not the same thing at all.'

'Charmer,' she said, in a sad voice, 'you're just like Damien.' I said I was sure I wasn't. She said I was, but for one night it didn't matter.

That night Catriona and I made love in the El Dorado Hotel. I had no condoms but she said it was safe. We held each other tight as the bedsprings gave us away. I didn't care. I didn't think about anything except her. I couldn't. Afterwards we lay in each other's arms. I asked her is she sure it was safe. She said yes. Her voice sounded weird. Like she was about to shout. Then I touched her face and she softened. She held my hand very hard.

When I woke up I didn't know where I was. My head hurt and my mouth was numb. She was sitting at the dressing table, putting her earrings in. She said she was going out for the day and wouldn't be back until teatime. She had to see this friend of hers. I asked if it was a guy. She laughed and said no. But she wouldn't let me come. It was just girl talk, she said.

'I'll probably tell her all about you,' she smiled, 'all about how I seduced you.' She kissed me before she slipped out of the room. She said she'd see me back here at eight.

'Yeah,' I said, 'mind yourself.' She said she would.

Down in the breakfast room the Greek grinned lasciviously as he ladled a large sausage on to my plate.

'Eat it all up,' he said. 'You will need all your strength, yes?'

I spent the day dossing around. On Oxford Street the shop windows were full of cheap suits and grim-looking dummies. A guy in sunglasses was selling gold chains from a cardboard box outside the HMV Megastore. 'Any shop in the West End, ladies and gents they'd costya two hundred

nicker straight up but here it's not two hundred, it's not one hundred and fifty, it's not seventy-five or fifty or even thirty. A pony, ladies and gents. First twenty-five pound down gets it.' Nobody moved. 'Come on now, loves,' he said, 'before Mister Plod comes back, who'll give me twenty-five for one of these lovely items?' I walked away and bought a postcard of Princess Diana for my mother. I wrote it over coffee in a little place on Russell Street. I told her I'd arrived safely, and that I was fine, and already making friends. I smiled when I wrote that. I couldn't find a post office open anywhere so I put the card in my pocket and forgot all about it. I never sent it. I still have it in my pocket somewhere, all crumpled up and torn. I've always kept it.

When Catriona came back that night she had an upset stomach. She was bleary-eyed and pale. She told me she'd eaten some awful burger or something, and it hadn't agreed with her at all. I told her to watch it. I told her catching salmonella is the national fucking sport over here. But when she tried to laugh it really creased her up. She had to lie down. She had to get some sleep. Soon as she said that she leaned over and vomited on the floor. I was worried. She walked into the room and flopped on to the bed, shivering and clutching her stomach. She really was in a bad way. When I put my arms around her she started all of a sudden – I mean for absolutely no reason – to cry. I asked her to tell me what was wrong. Had she had some row with her friend? She said, no, she hadn't even seen her. Why not? She snapped at me then. I mean, she nearly bit my fucking head off. She really got weird on me, started saying she had no friends and she was on her own. I said I was her friend and she laughed and said, yeah, things were that bad. Then she said she was sorry. I held her hand as she eased painfully under the sheets, with all her clothes still on. I asked if it was something to do with her period.

'Oh my God,' she sighed, 'spare me the new man bit.' She laughed out loud then, really laughed the bloody roof

down. No, she said, if there was one thing it had nothing to do with, it was that. Then she told me she just had to get some sleep. I was to come back and see her later on.

In my room I walked up and down, chain-smoking and flicking ash all over the carpet. I didn't care. Then I lay on my bed and stared out at the lights on the street. What the hell was wrong? Would she be all right? Jesus, say if she bloody died or something. I got up and poured myself a glass of duty free. The tumbler was dirty and it tasted like toothpaste. But I drank it anyway. Then I had another one. Then I had a double. She'd probably be OK. Just some bug or something, that was all. In fact I wasn't feeling so terrific myself. I fed a pound into the television. I watched a documentary about a tribe in the Amazon that eat monkeys.

The bed was wet when I woke up. The stench of the whisky was everywhere. The clock on the wall said ten-past eleven. Shit. I must have dozed off holding the bottle. It was nearly all spilt. My jeans stuck to my legs. I splashed water over my face. I stared in the mirror. I looked awful. My face was pale and my tongue felt all furry. Maybe it was that ice cream we'd had the night before. I don't know. Six-quid-fifty for strawberry-flavoured botulism. Or too much cheap red wine. Yeah. That was probably what was wrong with her. Just a hangover.

When I stumbled in she was sitting up in the bed and wearing my pyjama top. I sat down beside her and asked how she was. She had been crying again. She wrapped her arms around me. The smell of drink filled my head. I told her not to worry. I said everything would be all right. She said my name a few times while I tried to kiss her. She was so beautiful. I couldn't help it.

'Please,' she said, taking my hands off her. She couldn't. It wasn't that she didn't want to. She just couldn't. 'Don't you understand anything?' she said, with tears in her eyes. 'I mean, do I have to paint you a picture?'

I said if she wanted to be like that she could stay on her own. It wasn't my bloody fault she was sick. I told her I bet

old Damien wouldn't have stood for this bloody primadonna crap. Who the hell did she think she was, anyway? She told me to get out. I said I was sorry. She started screaming, 'Get out, you shit. Get out of my room.' She picked up a glass and pitched it at me; it smashed on the wall.

When I came back later and knocked on her door there was no answer. I stood in the corridor, apologizing through the keyhole. No sound came from the room. The Greek came by and saw me on my knees.

'The ladies, my friend,' he shrugged, 'what can you do with them?' I said nothing.

Next morning Catriona was gone. She'd checked out at seven-thirty, taken all her stuff, ordered a cab for Luton airport. The Greek said he was terribly sorry. I said I hadn't known her that well anyway.

'Still,' he said, 'a very sad situation.' I asked him what he meant. He said no offence, but it was just very sad, a young girl like her.

Breathless, I stood in Catriona's room, staring at the made-up bed and the open windows. My pyjama top lay on the chair by the window. There was a brown bloodstain on it. The Greek's wife came in with an armful of clean white towels.

The young lady had been very ill in the night, she said. They were going to call me but Catriona had insisted that they shouldn't. She begged them not to. She couldn't let anyone find out. If her parents discovered, they would kill her. She explained everything and said it was nothing to worry about. The nurses had told her all this would happen. What she needed now was rest. No worry, and plenty of sleep. It was all over now. But a little discomfort was only to be expected.

The Greek's wife told me she was terribly sorry. She'd thought I would have been aware of things. If only she'd known, she would have broken it more gently. I felt like my whole body was turning to water. She asked me if I wanted a drink. I said no, I still had some duty free left.

Joseph O'Connor

I arrived at Aunt Martha's place at lunchtime on Sunday. The door opened and I fell in. She was furious with me. What did I mean, turning up in this drunken state? Did I think this was some kind of boarding house? And where had I been, anyway? She'd phoned Dublin on Friday night to see whether the fog had lifted. My mother had been worried sick about me. I'd better have a good explanation. They were just about to call the police. My father was searching the house for a photo to give them for *The News*. The only one he could find was the one they took the day of my graduation. They didn't know what kind of trouble I was in. Out in the hall I rang home. I said I'd bumped into Johnny Reilly, a guy I once knew in college, who was living over here now. I'd decided to stay a few nights with him. My mother said she wanted me back home on the next plane. She said it was patently obvious that I couldn't be trusted to look after myself.

Alvin and Sharon said it was good to see me. Sharon had purple hair now, and Alvin had a ring through his nose. I managed to croak that I was sorry for all the trouble I'd caused. They shrugged and said not to worry. They said London was all about enjoying yourself. They said I shouldn't let my mother guilt-trip me. In the kitchen someone made me a cup of strong coffee. Alvin said not to pay any attention to Aunt Martha either. He said mothers were all the same. Then Sharon put her arms around me and told me to stop crying. She was sure it would all blow over soon. We'd be laughing about it, she said, in a few weeks.

I went to bed and stared at the ceiling. I wrapped the blanket tight around me. Really tight. Over my head. So tight that it felt like a second skin. And the whole world was shut out now, on the other side of the darkness.