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Oisin McGann

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Oisín McGann

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For my agent, Sophie,
who tells it like it is

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Ivor McMorris was on his way to buy some milk when his blind eye started hurting him again. As the first dart of pain lanced through his socket, he instinctively pulled a soft cloth from his pocket to wipe the discharge that sometimes seeped from the corner of his right eye. But that was only a reflex; his eye was fine. It just wanted to hurt him.

It normally happened in bright sunshine. This time it was after nine in the evening and the street was dark. This was an area of council estates and blocks of flats and the streetlamps were poorly maintained. With the fingers of his right hand pressing against his eyelids, Ivor lowered his head and continued towards the convenience store in the small arcade of shops at the end of the street. There was a wind blowing but most of the litter on the street had been pasted to the pavement by the recent rain. A beer can rolled noisily by his feet. Rectangles of orange and yellow glowed out of the wall of terraced houses on either side of him.

The pain always started the same way. The eyeball felt swollen in its socket, even though the doctor had told him it was, in fact, smaller than the left eye. It throbbed, the warm

twinges gradually growing in strength, getting sharper and hotter. A particularly vicious one made him grunt in pain.

He had to get the milk and get home before the agony took hold. Ivor had talked to people who suffered from migraines and they said the pain was similar, but he didn't believe it. When his eye wanted to, it could paralyse him. Sometimes he cried like a child.

Ivor didn't like leaving his flat. He knew he would be followed – he was getting used to it now. There were other people on the street, but he could not tell which of them might be there for him. The watchers, wherever they were, seemed content to observe in their unobtrusive way. But there was no way of knowing when that might change. He was afraid that some day they would stop watching and *do* something to him again.

A gang of eight teenagers, none older than sixteen, sat on a low garden wall wasting the evening away as only teenagers could. A stereo buzzed a caustic tune. Kids didn't normally bother Ivor – he was not one of those adults who had forgotten what it was like. That said, he was only in his twenties and already they seemed like they were from a new era. He ignored them as he walked past. He minded his own business, so they should mind theirs.

But it wasn't that type of street. These kids were looking for entertainment and they were the type who expected others to provide it.

'Hey! Problem with yah eye, man?' a black boy with a skewed baseball cap shouted out.

Ivor kept walking. Another boy, pale and acnescarred with movements that mimicked an LA gangster, stood up and jogged out onto the road to overtake Ivor. His perfectly white tracksuit and cap said his mother still did his laundry.

'Mah bro' asked you a question, man,' he barked, walking backwards to face Ivor while he talked. ''S rude to ignore 'im like tha', y'know.'

Ivor stopped as he found his path blocked, his hand still pressing against his eye. The darts of heat were getting worse. He just wanted to get some milk and get home. He couldn't make his hot chocolate without milk and he couldn't face an evening without hot chocolate.

'Yes,' he replied. 'I've a problem with my eye. Now, get out of my way.'

There was discharge seeping from the corner of his eye now. That happened when the socket got irritated. He wiped it away with his little finger.

'I seen you around,' the boy said to him. 'Ain't we seen him around?'

There was a chorus of affirmatives from the others, who were gathering behind Ivor to follow the proceedings. They had indeed seen him around. Ivor wondered if he was supposed to commend them on their powers of observation. He decided against it and went to walk around the boy in front of him. A hand stopped him.

'Stay 'n' talk wiv us, bro',' the boy urged in a voice that spoke to the others as well.

'Excuse me.'

'Nah, man. Ah know yah face now. Yah da hermit. Ain't he da hermit?'

The chorus confirmed it. He was the hermit. They'd seen him around. The pain was white-hot now, and he knew it showed on his face. It seemed to burn like acid along his optic nerve. Soon his whole head would be bursting with it. To hell with the hot chocolate – he had to get home.

'Hey, Lucas, ain't he rich?' the black kid asked his pasty pal.

'Word is that you won da lottery, man,' Lucas persisted. 'Is that true? Is you rich?'

'I have to go . . .' Ivor hissed through gritted teeth.

'No, you don't. You gonna answer mah question, man.'

'I have to— Uurrrgh!' Ivor's voice gurgled into a growl as the pain blinded his other eye. It was unbearable now. It was as if someone had planted a white-hot industrial ball-bearing in his eye socket. He screamed. It made no difference but he screamed again anyway.

Lucas stepped back as Ivor's face clenched up, the older man's breathing coming in harsh gasps. Ivor's skin was glossy with sweat, his brown hair hanging lank over his forehead. His fingers moved with a will of their own, forcing the eyelids of his right eye open. As the fingers dug clumsily into the socket, he jerked his head down once . . . twice. He gave another shriek and his movements became more frenzied.

'Dude's goin' ape, man!' Lucas cackled. 'Someone check his pockets!'

'You check his pockets,' another voice retorted. 'I ain't touchin' the freak!'

Lucas reached round to slip his hand into Ivor's jacket pocket. And that was when Ivor finally succeeded in plucking his eyeball out of its socket. With an agonized roar, he struck out at the young mugger, slamming the eye against the kid's temple.

It hit with a dull crunch and Lucas fell backwards onto the wet ground, stunned. Blood trickled from his temple into his hairline. A shard of glass was embedded in his skin. Ivor

looked down at the palm of his hand in dismay; that was the fourth eye he had wrecked. Dr Higgins was going to give him another lecture about that. He tossed the remains of the glass ball away and stared down at Lucas. Parting the scarred, sagging eyelids of his right eye, he gave the kid a good long look at the empty socket.

'Get out of my sight, you little cretin.'

Lucas didn't need any more telling – he didn't even stop to pick up his baseball cap. The rest of the gang were already running. Lucas took off after them.

Ivor sighed and pressed a tissue against the shallow cut in his palm. The army had stopped giving him the more expensive plastic eyes after he'd ruined the second one. Glass eyes were a little cheaper. The pain was already abating – it always did after he got the eye out – but now he felt embarrassed about how he looked. He really needed his hot chocolate. Ever since getting off the painkillers he had avoided alcohol and medication, but he still had to have his little comforts.

Scanning the street, he saw that there was nobody else around now. If there was somebody still watching him, they were doing it from a window or a rooftop somewhere. Let them watch, he was past caring.

Walking the last hundred metres to the shop, he kept one hand over his empty socket while he got the milk from the fridge. As he passed the shelf of newspapers, he spotted the front page of the *National News*, which had a large, blurred photo of what could be either a flying saucer silhouetted against the night sky, or a dustbin lid thrown into the air. The headline read: WE ARE NOT ALONE. The story was about a 'mysterious shape' seen over a suburb of the city the night before.

'Christ Almighty,' he muttered. 'Can't they find any real news?'

Ivor paid for the milk and then he walked out. He always felt self-conscious about the gaping hollow where his eye should be. Higgins was right; if he was going to keep breaking his eyes, he would have to start carrying spares.

The newsroom clattered with activity as journalists and editors worked to make the deadline for the Friday morning edition. Amina Mir could feel the excitement like static in the air, making the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. Voices called for copy, people argued over headlines and layouts, a woman yelled down the phone at a photographer to email in the shots that were due an *hour* ago and somebody somewhere was cursing at their computer again.

Tomorrow was going to be a big news day and everyone wanted to be finished with this edition so they could harry their contacts in the government, the police and the city council to get a sense of which way things were going to go. Every newshound in the city wanted to know if there were going to be riots.

Amina loved it all. The *Chronicle* was one of the country's top newspapers and she was getting to see how it all worked. This was where her mother had started years ago. Get a foot in the door doing work experience and if you got lucky, you could make an impression. And Amina was good at making an impression.

She was due to start her second year of university in September – journalism, of course – but her mother had told her that this was how careers were made: getting into a good newsroom and making photocopies or making coffee for the editors. As a favour to her mother, the managing editor, a grizzled old soak named Joel Goldbloom, had even given her some minor human-interest articles to write.

They were the usual tripe that papers used to fill in the side columns: ELVIS MUSIC CHEERS UP DEPRESSED GORILLAS, or HEDGEHOG MAKES IT DEPRESSED GORILLWAY, or MUGGER FOILED BY CHIHUAHUA. Amina wanted to make the front page before she was twenty-one, but for now she'd settle for writing about human beings . . . and not getting stuck in the horoscopes.

Tomorrow might be her chance at a real break.

She eyed the door to Goldbloom's office. He had her sifting through one of the paper's email inboxes for spam, but he had hinted that he might have another story for her to write. There was going to be a massive protest march tomorrow, calling for an end to the controversial war in Sinnostan. Hundreds of thousands of people were expected on the streets and most of the paper's reporters were going to be occupied in covering various aspects of it.

Amina was sure they'd be able to find her something to do.

'Amina!'

She popped her head round the computer monitor at the sound of Goldbloom's voice.

'Yes, Joel?'

'In my office. Now.'

The editor's office was a large, cluttered space with a beaten-up old desk and a worn leather chair. There were a couple of more modern pieces of furniture in the room but they were littered with paper and treated with thinly disguised contempt by their owner. You had to have spent time in the world before you earned Goldbloom's respect. A wall of glass allowed him to look out on the newsroom and level his evil eye at anyone who appeared as if they might be giving the paper anything less than their best. Amina

entered and stood in front of his desk like a schoolgirl before the headmaster.

'I have a story for you,' he grunted at her as he flopped back into his chair.

Amina's face lit up with an eager grin. She was an attractive girl; her dark hair and Arabic skin came from her father, but the rest she got from her mother, and she had a gift for smiling in a way that made most people smile back. But not Goldbloom. His red, slightly bloated face showed no sign of reflecting her delight.

'It's a human-interest piece,' he told her.

'Oh,' she said, trying to convey her disappointment without sounding ungrateful. 'I . . . I thought you might need more people out on the streets.'

'The streets are covered,' he retorted. 'And besides, you haven't made nearly enough cups of coffee to earn that kind of credit yet.'

'Right. How much coffee will I have to make, then?'

'Oceans of it,' he said, sifting through some piles of paper. 'And your mother was able to take the photocopier apart and put it back together before she was allowed out on the streets. You can't even change a cartridge yet. Still, you'll be glad to hear there are no animals involved in this one . . . so far as I know. Here, this is it.'

He handed her a piece of notepaper with a name and address on it.

'Young fella – used to write articles for us a few years back,' Goldbloom added, running his hands through his thinning, yellowy-white hair. 'Got on to me recently. He's living on a disability allowance now – was serving in Sinnostan and got wounded in action. But get this: a few

months ago he won a couple o' million on the lottery and he's *hardly spent a penny*. Word got out about his win and now he barely sets foot outside his flat. He says there's more to it than just the pests and the begging letters but he wants to talk to someone in person. That's you, sweetheart. He's expecting you tomorrow morning.'

Amina gave her boss another smile. The story wouldn't be quite as dramatic as a riot, but it was a definite step up from hedgehogs. She looked down at the name: Ivor McMorris.

'Thanks, Joel! I really appreciate this.'

'Thank me by turning in a good story. On *time*. Now get your big silly grin out of my office.'

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Amina stared down the street before her and looked back at the address on the notepaper: 143 Winston Street. This was definitely it. Ivor McMorris lived in flat number five. She blew out her cheeks and continued walking. The Underground station had been grotty enough, but this area was a dump. That didn't put her off. She regarded places like this as hives of social issues such as poverty, drug abuse and domestic violence, buzzing with great stories. She expected to see much worse than this as her career progressed.

The block of flats was a relatively small, damp-looking concrete-cast building on the corner of the street. It wasn't a complete slum – the window panes had obviously been cleaned recently and the bars on the windows were freshly painted in a pale mauve.

Checking her reflection in the stainless steel speaker panel, she straightened her navy suit jacket and flicked back the hair feathered over her forehead. Then she pressed the buzzer for number five.

'Yes?'

'Mr McMorris? I'm Amina Mir, from the *Chronicle*.'

She still got a thrill from saying that.

'Hi. Come on up – second floor.'

The door's lock clicked and she entered, making her way through a utilitarian lobby and up the stairs. McMorris was waiting at the door of his flat. He had only opened it a crack.

'You on your own? Can I see some ID?' he asked.

Amina blinked for a moment, but then fumbled around in her handbag for her wallet. She showed him her citizen's identity card.

'You're just a kid,' he said, the lack of enthusiasm evident in his voice.

'This is . . . I'm at university,' she said haltingly. 'I'm with the paper on—'

'Work experience.' He sniffed. 'Nice to know Goldbloom's taking me seriously.'

He opened the door and reluctantly let her in. McMorris was a few centimetres taller than her, with a square face and curly brown hair. He'd look good enough in a photograph; a little on the thin side, but with wide shoulders that saved him from being skinny. There was a certain rough style in the way he wore his faded jeans and green T-shirt. She always liked to take a few shots of her subjects with her compact camera, just in case she could get one printed.

The skin around McMorris's right eye was marred by a spray of triangular and diamond-shaped scars. Amina made a mental note of them. Hours spent poring over her father's books of battle injuries had taught her to recognize shrapnel wounds when she saw them. That meant that his disability was most likely a missing eye.

He wasn't much older than her – probably in his early twenties – but there was far more experience written on his face. She had seen that look on the face of her father and his mates, one that said they had seen just a little too much.

Behind the door was a basket full of opened envelopes.

'Begging letters, mostly,' he told her. 'People with sick relatives. I get a lot of offers too: "oncein-a-lifetime" chances to invest in start-up businesses. You win the lottery and all of a sudden people start offering you "opportunities" to get rich . . . well, richer.'

The one-bedroomed flat was comfortable, if a little cramped. There were piles of books on shelves and stacked around the edges of the floor. One bookcase was filled with graphic novels, another with films and CDs. The walls were painted in the kind of creamy yellow popular in rented places, but the framed expressionist paintings that hung on them looked like originals – possibly his own.

McMorris's home spoke of a man with a lot of time on his hands.

'Have a seat,' he said. 'You want coffee or tea?'

'Just water if you have it . . . I mean, *mineral water*. If you only have tap water—'

'Don't worry,' he reassured her with a smile, as he opened the fridge in the little kitchenette. 'I don't drink the free stuff any more either. Ever looked up inside a tap? I mean, I'm sure it's safe enough, but . . .'

He had a wide smile with a hint of sadness about it. Amina imagined him to be one of those guys who was more popular with the girls than he realized. She had to remind herself that she was the one in control of this interview.

'Do you mind if I record this?' she asked, taking her recorder from her bag.

He shook his head as he poured two glasses of water from a bottle in the fridge. She sat on the chair that looked towards the television, shunting it round until it faced the couch across the low coffee table. Switching on the recorder, she placed it on the table between them. He handed her a glass and sat down on the couch.

'Now, Mr McMorris—' she began.

'Ivor.'

'Sorry, Ivor. How would you like to do this? Do you want to just tell it your way, or would you like me to get things started with a few questions?'

He took a sip of his water and leaned forward, staring intently at her. Amina was reminded that he was a virtual recluse, and she was probably the only young woman he had seen up close in some time. Her mother had prepared her for times like these. 'Men like talking to pretty young women,' Helena had once said. 'Don't be afraid to use that. Work your advantages. If they want to lose themselves in your eyes or ogle your legs, let them. You know they won't get anywhere with it, and it'll help loosen their tongues.'

It was the main reason Amina wore skirts to interviews.

'Why don't I do the talking?' Ivor said to her.

She nodded and sat up straight, crossing her legs.

'You want to know why I'm afraid to spend the lottery money,' he began. 'But I can't explain that without giving you some background. I wanted to do journalism at university, but the idea of a student loan freaked me out – and besides, I was looking for something more. I thought the army sounded like a good option. Plenty of adventure,

sports, travelling, and they had a scheme where they'd put you through university, so I'd get an education without spending the next ten years paying off debts.

'Sinnostan was just heating up. It wasn't a war back then – they were still calling it a "security operation". I didn't think I'd get sent there, but it turned out I had a gift for storytelling and they needed writers. The moment I finished basic training they rushed me through a crash course in journalism and shipped me off to the Media Operations Unit in Kurjong.

'I joined the hearts 'n' minds campaign . . . y'know, putting together news stories to convince the Sinnostanis that we were occupying their country for their own good . . . showing them what great guys we were. Putting a good spin on the whole thing.

'It was exciting stuff, getting to see heavy armour storming up mountain roads, watching fighter-bombers shoot past overhead, riding in choppers and talking to soldiers who were revved up and eager for action.'

Amina found herself nodding. She hated reporters who nodded while they listened. But she had discovered recently that it helped. It showed she was listening – that he had her full attention, without her having to respond to what he was saying. It kept him talking. But she still thought that sitting there nodding all the time looked stupid.

'I wasn't too cynical about it all then,' he went on. 'I had a job to do and I enjoyed doing it. I was getting to cover some thrilling stories. I thought I might even get a book out of it in the end. I didn't spend a lot of time worrying about telling the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth – I had officers to keep happy. But on the whole, I suppose I figured we were doing our bit for the cause.

'It seemed like a pretty good gig until my crew went to cover the operations in this tiny village called Tarpan; me, my cameraman and our guide, who acted as translator. Like most of the places in Sinnostan, it's a pretty run-down dump stuck up in a lonely spot in the mountains. Mostly clay-brick buildings, forty-year-old cars made from spare parts, a few rickshaws and a drained bunch of people with those wide-cheeked, wind-burnt, oriental faces who looked like they'd never seen a foreigner before. The winter cold was setting in, and there's a dry wind up there that would cut you to the bone.

'We were sent to the scene of a car bomb in a marketplace in the middle of the village. It was gruesome; the injured had already been rushed to hospital, but there were still a few charred corpses in the burnt-out cars around the site of the explosion. Men with hoses were washing the blood off the road and into the drains. We started filming, even though we knew the insurgents – or the resistance, whatever you want to call the bastards – had a nasty habit of launching follow-up attacks on the people and the soldiers who gathered around these bombsites.'

His hand went up unconsciously to touch his right eye. Amina leaned forward slightly, wanting to urge him on but knowing it was better to let him do it in his own time. Ivor took a sip of his water and leaned back on the couch.

'That's when things got weird,' he said at last. 'This . . . this is what I remember: we were in the middle of filming when the second bomb went off. A suicide bomber on a bloody bicycle, believe it or not. We were caught in the blast and I was thrown against the side of an APC . . . sorry, that's an armoured personnel carrier—'

Amina nodded. 'I speak the language, my father's a major in the Royal Marines.'

'Oh, right,' Ivor said, looking slightly uncomfortable.' Well . . . anyway, I was knocked out. I didn't come to until I was on a chopper taking us to the hospital. I had a concussion, as well as shrapnel wounds in my face, arm and leg. And I had a punctured eyeball. They had to keep my head very still for the whole flight. There was a chance they could save the eye, so the medics strapped my head to the stretcher so that I couldn't move my head. They covered both eyes too, to stop me looking around and making the injury worse, so all I could do was lie as still as I could and listen to what was going on. The morphine took care of the pain and it helped with the fear too.

'Everything that followed was what you'd expect: the deafening roar of the chopper's engines, status reports shouted into radios, my hand being squeezed as friendly voices offered reassurances, a dramatic rush to the operating theatre as soon as we landed. And all through it, I couldn't see anything – just blackness with those bursts of light you get when you squeeze your eyes closed. In the clear, painful moments when the drugs started to wear off, I can't tell you how terrified I was that I was going to lose my eye. I could taste and smell blood; I could feel it on my face, along with the fluid from the eye itself. But they told me there was hope. And I believed them . . . God, I wanted to believe them so much.

'But it turned out the surgeons couldn't save the eye after all. That made things simpler for them. Once you take out what's left of it and remove the shrapnel that's lodged in there, recovery is much faster. My other wounds were minor enough, so they just pumped me full of painkillers and antibiotics and a few days later, they shipped me home.'

Ivor paused again, and for a minute he sat there saying nothing at all.

'It must have been absolutely horrible,' Amina said with a sympathetic expression. 'I . . . I've heard stories like this before – from soldiers, I mean. You never really get the same sense of the horror of being wounded from the news. I can't imagine what it must be like.' She hesitated, praying that what she said next wouldn't be too insensitive. 'I hope you don't mind me asking, but—'

'What has this got to do with me not spending my lottery money?' Ivor chuckled. 'After all, that's why you're here, isn't it? Not because I was wounded in Sinnostan.'

'Well, that's not how I was going to put it, but . . . yes.'

He leaned forward again, looking more intense than he had before.

'You see, I said it was weird because that's what I remember, and I could recall it for you in much greater detail than that if I wanted to. It's what I *remember*, but I'm convinced it's not what actually *happened*.'

Amina waited, glancing at the recorder to make sure it was getting all this. She had a feeling that this story was about to become more than a humaninterest article.

'Memory is a fluid thing,' Ivor said slowly. 'It changes over time; we forget names, get things mixed up; confuse times, dates and places. Very few people have perfect recall. But my memory of that time is damn near flawless. I can remember who was in the chopper, how long it took to get to the hospital, how many people were in the operating theatre . . . just about everything. I can remember the times these things happened.'

'It was a fairly traumatic event,' Amina pointed out. 'It's hardly surprising it sticks in your mind.'

'No, it's more than that,' he insisted. 'I was drugged, remember? Morphine sends you into outer space; it should all be a blur. But I can remember what times each stage of the event happened. I went and checked the incident report afterwards and I was accurate to the minute. I can remember it like it was *timetabled*. The recollection of it sits solid in my mind while the rest of my memories flow around it like . . . like . . . it was a rock in a stream. It's just not possible.'

'So . . . what? You think these memories aren't real?'

'Yes . . . no. I think . . .' He hesitated. 'I think I've been made to forget what really happened and had these false memories . . . implanted into my brain.'

'You're saying you've been brainwashed?'

Ivor winced at the term, with all the science fiction it implied, but nodded reluctantly.

Amina gazed out of the living-room window at the blocks of flats beyond, trying to avoid meeting his intense stare. She was becoming less and less certain about his state of mind. Goldbloom would not thank her for writing about the ravings of a shell-shocked war correspondent. Although maybe there was an angle on the man who was too mad to spend his lottery winnings.

'I've mentioned this to other people,' he continued, becoming increasingly animated. 'But nobody paid much attention to me. Posttraumatic stress disorder, they called it. I just needed therapy, they said. I've had bloody therapy! I know what I remember . . . and I know it's just plain wrong!

'The army just ignored me! They ignored me right up to the day that I won the lottery.'

He looked pointedly at her. Amina waited to be enlightened, sitting a little further back, grateful there was a coffee table between them. Ivor seemed ready to burst.

'And then what happened?' she asked, when she realized he was waiting for the question.

'Then they started having me followed,' he breathed.

Amina wondered if this was the time to turn off the recorder and get out, but she didn't want to do anything that would set him off. He could be dangerous as well as delusional. Better to hear him out, let him calm down a bit, make her excuses and leave as inoffensively as possible.

'I was rich, see?' Ivor said, opening his hands towards her. 'There are thousands of hacked-off soldiers with paranoid gripes against the army, but the world doesn't listen to them because they're nobodies. But suddenly I'm a millionaire, and if I want, I can start using all that money to shove a great big thorn up the army's backside. They're not ignoring me now because all of a sudden I'm rich enough to cause them real problems.'

'So why haven't you done it?' Amina asked. 'You haven't done anything with the money. You told Goldbloom you've hardly spent a penny!'

'I've been afraid of what they'll do,' Ivor said in a hushed voice. 'I mean . . . I don't even know what they've done to me *already*. I know they're watching every move I make and I don't know how they're interpreting what I do. I think they might hurt me . . . or . . . or they might mess with my mind again. I didn't want to do anything that might make them . . . angry with me.

'I could go out and buy . . . y'know, the wrong thing, and they read into it and decide I'm a threat to whatever they're doing and the next thing I know I'm being pulled into the

back of a van. I can't spend the money because I'm afraid of what they'll do.'

'But if you're scared that they'll come for you if you make trouble . . .' Amina asked slowly, a quizzical expression on her face, 'why did you ring Goldbloom and tell him you wanted to tell your story?'

'Because I'm sick of waiting for it,' he sighed. 'Whatever's going to happen, I just want it to be over.'