

Guest Fiction:

Fiona Farrell

Excerpt from *Limestone**

Clare went for a walk the minute she arrived. It was only 7.30 after all and Paul had always advised instant adaptation. You had to get outside immediately if you were to combat the jet lag inevitable when flying from one side of the world to the other in a single long day. Something to do with the pineal gland. You must not give in to the natural urge to sleep on arrival but go outside. You must walk about with your head bare to the sky. You must let the local conditions work their influence. Clare was vague about the exact process: she supposed some patch on the top of her head that was sensitive to light, something like a tuatara's third eye. A tender spot like the place on a baby's skull that must not be touched: that spot that eighteenth century philosophers believed to be the site of the immortal soul.

Paul did not know much about souls – a medieval concept in his opinion – but he did know after years of careering about the world to climb mountains or attend his own collection of medical conferences that this was the cure for jetlag. Reset the pineal gland, flick the switch on the light receptor, go to bed at the local hour, a quick jog round the nearest park on rising in the morning, a light breakfast, and you were back on deck.

Clare's ears were buzzy, still hearing the phantom engines that had borne her here at 30,000 feet. Her skin was dry after its long incarceration in the thin shark-y skin of the machine. She felt light, detached, as if her body were taking time to catch up. One part had arrived here in Ireland, while another part of her had been left behind like so much luggage and was still wearing summer clothes and strolling across Hagley Park in sandals. It would catch her up later. Meanwhile, she should put on her winter boots and coat and go out for a walk round the streets of Cork. She should attend to the business of resetting her pineal gland, as if she were no more than an electronic device, as predictable and plain as a kitchen timer.

Outside the air was damp and dark. The hotel's neon name glinted scarlet on a street puddled with street lights as if solid earth had melted to dark water between a cliff edge of tall grey buildings and a concrete embankment bordering the channel she had glimpsed from her room. She knew she was on an island, that this city was moored like a ship at the head of a vast convoluted harbour with deep inlets and coves, that it lay at the mouth of a river which forked about it on either side, remnant of a marshy rush-choked estuary. She had studied it closely before leaving home, spreading a map over the table as she ate her breakfast. She liked knowing where she was going before she left, always bought maps to trace the network of roads and bridges and parks. She liked knowing how places aligned, north-south, east-west. She liked knowing the exact route to take from Union Square to the

Castro or from Bloomsbury to the National Theatre. She brushed toast crumbs from the gazetteer and imagined flagging down a cab to go to a show on Broadway, or walking to the Musee d'Orsay, along Rue Du Bac, then left at Quai Anatole France...

She liked, too, that maps never told her everything. That the city of Cork, for instance, encountered not on the map but in the flesh, smelled just like Dunedin of wet tarmac and diesel and sea salt and brewing hops and yeast. Car wheels slapped past and people walked quickly with their heads lowered against the weather. She joined them, turning up her collar but leaving her head bare for the gland to do its re-dial. Past buildings closed for the night with their grills up and lights out, past a pub with the warm wash of laughter and loud talk, walking in a grey world that was all primal smell, the way foreign places always are when we first arrive, so that we walk about a strange city like a cat in a new house, sniffing. Beer and hot chips, an Indian restaurant smelling of fenugreek and cooking oil, the sour smells that hung about alleyways like day-old breath.

She walked with her hands shoved down in her pockets on footpaths made up of stone squares instead of tarmac, along streets unsheltered from the weather by verandahs. Past a shop with a window full of frilly white first communion dresses and glittery tiaras and little white shoes arrayed around a photograph of a praying child. Past shops with windows filled with heaters. Past shop windows displaying silky clothes of summer blues and pinks and sandals with tiny spindly heels, though the people on the streets were clad in coal black and ash grey. Past a shop that seemed to sell nothing but brass: brass camels and brass plates and brass trinket boxes. And another with a single cellphone displayed in a spotlight like the baby Jesus in his manger. And another with a random collection of leaf rakes, feather boas, toasters and a selection of coffee mugs, a shop whose purpose seemed to be solely to sell, in a general kind of way, anything that might be saleable.

She was careful to begin with, noting the signs at each corner. Left into South Mall from Morrison's Quay. Right into Grand Parade by some bronze civic commemoration of men and angels. The principal streets were broad between their cliffs of grey commercial stone and the cars nosed bumper to bumper, idled at the lights, pulled away with that sense of purpose that always made her feel a little lonely. All those people, knowing their way home...

The streets all ended in water. No matter which she chose, they came at last to an embankment, a bridge, the oily gleam of a deep channel. And the lights of the traffic were blurring in rain like shoals of those strangely tentacled electrically pulsing creatures that winked in the depths of ocean chasms.

She zigzagged from one embankment to the other, then turned off into a labyrinth of smaller pedestrian lanes.

Hair salon, chemist's shop with perky displays of winter vitamins, a restaurant where people sat at candlelit tables eating lasagne and drinking wine behind windows fogged with comfortable warmth. A tiny square, empty and gleaming though the automated doors to a Tesco slid back and forth, back and forth to some invisible prompting. Cigarette stubs dissolved to shreds on the paving stones and a cheery little pop song broadcast to a dismal black and white dog tethered to a railing. Smaller alleys branched off at odd angles like dark tributary creeks, lined with bins awaiting collection. She turned left and right and right again and straight ahead, liking the sting of cold rain on her face after hours of overheated confinement, liking the rasp of chill air in her throat after hours of other people's breathing, liking the clickclack of her heels on stone, the feeling of disengagement that has her walking on wet paving as if it were water through the twists and turns of a strange city. The stone gathered sound and tossed it about between the narrow walls. One sound hung above them all. A strange repeated cry like a bird calling. It hung over the stone streets, unbearably sad, two syllables, the last with a dying fall.

Ay-ko! called the strange bird. Like a morepork back home sitting in the fork of a ngaio calling for its mate in the dark. Ay-ko!

Out onto a wide bright street with a confident eighteenth century swagger to it, curving away between clothing stores, the day's relentless party over, the skinny mannequins left striking stiff-legged poses behind grilles half-lowered like drooping eyelids. A few people queued in the rain for a bus. She walked among them with the strange sensation that they could not see her at all. She felt a little dizzy, a little lost. How did this street line up with the others she had walked along? Her internal compass was swinging about wildly. North-south? East-west?

Ay-ko!

Ay-ko!

A bus pulled up, sighed deeply. Left, she thinks, heading back into the labyrinth. Left then right and I'll be back at the hotel. She had a sudden yearning for its bland nowhereness. Surely her pineal gland was set by now. She felt ready for the queen sized bed and oblivion. She headed down a narrow alley that smelled sourly of congealed animal fat and broccoli.

Ay-ko!

Down here the call was louder. It seemed to come from around a corner just ahead, beyond a shoe shop and a cluster of people gathered like steers on a winter hillside outside a pub, backs turned to the rain for a quick determined fag.

Ay-ko!

Another alleyway led off at an angle. The call was close, floating sweetly and mournfully the length of its dark passage with its rich ripe stink of old cheese and stale fish and urine, that smell that is seaweed and seabird and the wide open ocean and also the salty tang that clings to the most intimate crevices of the human body: under the tip of a toenail,

within the damp crack of the vagina, in the tiny pipi twist of the navel. She walked through the sea smell between buildings that seemed taller now, in the narrow declivity, her boots tapping staccato on stone. There were back entrances here to cafés and market aisles. Wheelie bins and a single pallid light above a furtive doorway where something was lying curled on a strip of wet cardboard. A blue nylon sleeping bag, drawn close round a shock of matted hair.

As she passed, the body in its blue bag rolled over. Dead light shone on the white face of a young man sleeping. He stretched out, yawned luxuriously, the way a baby yawns, as if it wasn't raining, as if he lay at his ease by a flowing stream among lilies, his face wide open to the warmth of the spring sun. He slept as if he could trust the world. And the sight of him and his white face in the rain was dreadful.

Suddenly she was not simply walking to adjust some gland. She was not preparing herself for attendance at an international conference to which she had looked forward for weeks. Suddenly she felt lost. Not lost in the adult fashion where you know you must simply ask at a pub for directions. But in the fashion of childhood when panic bubbles up like sour water from a blocked drain: that pricking of the skin, the urge to run, mouth open, crying shamelessly for anyone to see, till you have reached safety. The paving began to tip beneath her feet. A chasm opened beneath her toes. She was alone in this wide world. Utterly, utterly alone. And no one was going to reach down and gather her up in his strong hands and carry her home.

Ay-ko!

She forced herself to breathe evenly, to believe that the panic would pass if she simply breathed and walked steadily toward the corner where there were people passing by and everything was ordinary. There were lights. There were shops.

Ay-ko!

Left onto a pedestrian mall, which surely she had walked down earlier? That shoeshop? That café smelling sweetly of chocolate? And there on the corner by a big building which had to be something official, a post office perhaps, there was a man seated by the wall beneath a streetlight. He was swathed in clear plastic like a supermarket cabbage. He had on a woollen cap with ear flaps and he threw back his big heavy head, and called.

Ay-ko!

He delivered it like some Italian tenor, with a little catch between the syllables. He let the final syllable fall, calling as if his heart might break. A man in a long black coat approached, takes a paper from the pile by the man's feet, dropped a coin into his hand and walked away briskly.

The Echo. Of course. Not a lament, but a man calling the name of the evening paper.

Clare crossed the street.

"Excuse me," she said. She would buy a paper in exchange for directions. "Could you tell me the way to Morrison's Quay?" She pronounced it 'key' of course, as she had learned it should be said, back when she also learned through and thought and rough and cough. It was one of those things that taught (taut/tort) you (ewe/queue) that language was wilful

and not to be trusted. The man took her change and she saw suddenly in the way he was looking toward her but not at her, that he was blind or very nearly so. His eyes swivelled at odd angles, milky and bulbous. A white cane was propped against the wall at his elbow.

He frowned up at her.

"Morrison's Quay," she repeated more loudly. As if that might help.

"You're after lookin' for someone?" said the man, and though it must be a question, he made it sound like a statement of fact. His eyes were blank and empty as the bottom of a glass.

"Morrison's Quay," she said again. She was used to this: not being understood. She could hear other people when they didn't seem to be able to hear her at all. In North America, where the people spoke Friends or Bob Dylan or When Harry met Sally. In England, where they spoke Coronation Street or the Beatles. She had been studying their speech all her life until she had become fluent in regional nuance. Whereas when she spoke, they had not learned to tune for meaning. The flat vowels and upward inflections of her speech left them puzzled. They couldn't hear her at all.

The blind man leaned back, arms folded. "You're lookin' for someone you've lost," he said. And he said it with such authority that Clare found her self thinking why, yes, I am. I am not just looking for directions to a hotel which I seem to have mislaid in the rain. Nor am I here in this city for several days of talk around the theme of *Location/Dis-Location, the shifts historical and contemporary in the location of the studio and the academy in relation to the concepts, values and practice of art history*. That's not why I have spent this whole long day travelling. It is not why I am here at all. I am here to find someone I have lost.

The blind man was regarding her keenly as if she were plain beneath the street light. "And you think I might have seen him?" he said. Clare said nothing, standing in the rain clutching her damp newspaper. "So, what's he like then, this fella that's run off on you? Left you all on your ownio?"

"He's..." she began, but the man was off on his own riff. Leaning back comfortably against the wall with the rain splattering his plastic sheeting he declaimed to the dark street as if he were addressing an auditorium full of appreciative patrons. "Would he be that skinny fella with the red hair, quick on his feet?"

And Clare, fuddled with dislocation, finds herself replying that yes, yes, that's him exactly. And the blind man was saying she'd got herself an artist there, an expert! "You can't hold that sort down, my love, no matter how beautiful a woman might be, no matter how warm her fire. He's off down the road quick as look at you..."

Clare looked down into his bleary eyes. She could hardly breathe.

"Ach, come on now, Gerry," said a voice at her shoulder. "And give me my paper now." A thin woman, fumbling in her shopping bag among lumpy packages for her purse. Her hair was dyed blonde and scraped back so tightly into a bun it seemed as if the strands must break.

"Marson's Quay," she said to the paper seller. "She's after askin' for Marson's Quay." And she pronounced it 'kay' the way Clare has wanted to say it all her life.

"Is that so, Missus Neill," said the paper seller, dealing small change deftly. "I don't think that's what she's wantin' at all. I think she's lookin' for the red haired fella."

The woman took her paper. "Down there," she said, nodding toward the narrower street. "Left at the corner. You can't miss it."

"And don't you worry. He'll be there," said the paper seller. "Waitin' for you as if you'd never been parted."

"Thanks," said Clare.

"I've a son in Australia," said the woman, zipping her bag shut on its straining cargo. "God bless now."

So Clare folded her paper under her coat and set off down another narrow street, forcing her breathing to steady, walking carefully on slippery paving to the corner where she looked left then right but stepped out just the same into the path of a black Pajero which seemed to emerge from nowhere. So there was some cacophony of hooting and 'Sorry! Sorry!' as she leapt back to the kerb. Some answering "Mind what you're fuckin'..." from shadowy figures behind glass. Some drumming of the heart, some pressing necessity for the safe, anonymous room with its bath and fluffy towel.

E-cho called the blind man at her back.

She broke into a run, sweaty fingers clutching her newspaper and suddenly, miraculously, it was there: Fagan's Hotel on Marson's Kay. Its sign twinkled through the rain.

And ah! The comfort of a bath, a pink dollop of the hotel's complimentary body wash, the sensation of submerging into bubbles of rose and ylang ylang and what is that? Ylang ylang? And how can there be so much of it all of a sudden? Vast plantations of ylang ylang must flourish somewhere beneath a tropic sun. Or maybe it grows in the jungle. A tangled vine with a brilliant pink flower of which only the stamen is commercially useful, the ylang ylang pickers of the world plucking the sweetly scented flowers and tossing them into their baskets... She was drowsy, floating like Ophelia in the Millais painting, only she clutched a face cloth where the poor girl had clutched her sprig of rosemary. For remembrance. For remembrance of her dead father, stabbed through the arras. Poor mad girl. Mad with grief and loss...

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