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Opening extract from

Bad Things Happen

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Published by

Matador

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CHAPTER 1

There are days and moments that become the landmarks by which we navigate the brief histories of our lives. They are the time-stamps by reference to which every event, no matter how significant, is marked before or after. That day was to become my Pharos, the beacon whose beam would forever illuminate my memories and reminiscences. Sometimes, those days creep up on us, unexpected, unbidden. But on a bright late summer morning, staring out over a calm sea from high on the cliff-top, I had a sense that everything was about to change. And so it would. But in all of the daydreams that I'd choreographed of that day, I could never have imagined how the scenes would play out.

I had arrived in Dublin the afternoon before. Looking down from the plane, in the clarity of mature summer, I could see all the way up the coast to the Mourne Mountains. I hadn't been back for almost five years, but the sight of the fields and the housing estates and the roads of County Dublin stirred in me a nostalgic sense of home. It was the same every time I came back from London – the absurd niggling disappointment that, amid the bustle of traffic and the chaos of school playing fields, maybe the place hadn't missed me, nor even noticed I was gone.

The taxi had dropped me in Howth, a small fishing village on the coast just north of the city. The soundtrack to the twenty minute drive from the airport was the driver's dogmatic diatribe on the ills

facing the country and his bitter assurances that I was better off out of it. I was glad to escape. I wandered over to the harbour wall, bag slung over my shoulder, and looked out to sea. To my left, fishing boats were preparing for a night shift trawling for whiting and pollack and mackerel. Beyond the winking lighthouse at the harbour entrance, swarms of gulls, razorbills, gannets and guillemots swooped and screeched around the rocks on Ireland's Eye.

This was the village in which I was born and in which I spent my childhood. And yet, after nearly twenty years away, I was checking into a small hotel on the harbour front. I had thought about calling my father, telling him I was home, asking him if perhaps I could come and stay. But I hadn't really spoken to him for, I don't know, almost a year? And so I hadn't had the nerve to make the call. It had always been so, ever since I could remember. My mother had died giving birth to me, her first child. I had come early, with scant warning, and there had been no time to get her to the hospital. An awkward and harrowing birth begot an awkward and often harrowing child, and the effort had been too much for her.

She had been my father's soulmate and muse, and there was never any doubt in my young mind that, given the choice, he would have sacrificed me to save her. Not that he was ever unkind or cruel – he provided for me in a way that was the envy of my friends. But there was no bond between us, and I think that I presented him every day with a reminder of what he had lost.

My father was born to a wealthy Dublin family, and his inheritance had allowed him to pursue a life in the arts. A painter of no little ability, he was hailed as one of Ireland's greatest living artists and feted among Dublin's art cognoscenti. His obligations to, and place among, Dublin's social elite meant that I spent my evenings at home with nanny after nanny, each of whom in turn would be hired only to leave soon after, driven away by my father's austerity and the loneliness of life in the big house with only a small boy for company. As soon as I reached the age of twelve, I was enrolled in a boarding school miles away. For both of us, I think, this was a chance to start again.

I know he blamed me for her death. Maybe he would never

admit it, but he did. And all through my life I was a source of disappointment to him. Try as I might, I could never bring him pride or joy. And I tried. I painted and studied and played music and football, but nothing was worthy of more than a cursory, "Good boy, well done". Nothing I did merited the bear-hug, or the whoop of pride of the other fathers. We never went to the ice cream shop after school to celebrate a passed piano exam or a gold star. We never sat over dinner recounting tales of some epic footballing victory over St Jarlath's or St Joseph's. And yet I idolised him and craved his esteem, his acceptance even. But my efforts served only to prove to him that I was as self-centred and careless of others as I had been the day I was born.

I went to bed early in the small room on the hotel's top floor, but slept only fitfully. I finally surrendered to the demon insomnia and got up as the sun rose early over the nose of Howth. I pulled on my running shoes and kit and made my way through the deserted lobby to the front door.

Running gives me time to think, to disentangle the problems that vex me. When I run, there are no distractions, no interruptions. The metre of my footfall somehow provides a rhythm for my ponderings. The curved peak of my running cap creates a tunnel that bounds my vision and focuses my thoughts. Through the dark days after Caitríona, it became a sanctuary to escape both the reality of her loss and the well-meaning but cloying sympathy of my friends. In those days, I needed clear space in which to make some sense of what had happened, to somehow make a plan for the future.

The early morning air was heavy with the smell of fish and diesel as I turned away from the pier and its winking lighthouse, and headed for the dirt track that quickly climbed to the crest of the high cliffs. To my left and below, the sea lapped at the rocks and fizzed gently with each receding wave. At the cliff edge, there was a new billboard set in an ornate wooden frame. I stopped as I came to it and paused my stopwatch. Set into the frame was a map of the coastline below showing the whereabouts of the wrecks of ships that had come to grief on its rocks. It showed some ten or fifteen wrecks, where each was bound, and a shivering estimate of the number of

lives lost with each one. The Leinster, the Queen Victoria, the Prince – looking out to sea that morning, it was hard to imagine it so wrathful and violent as to claim even one ship, but below the glistening surface lay the victims of its latent power, or of the German U-boats that patrolled the coastline during two world wars.

There might be, I suppose, in some parallel dimension, a chart that records the lives that have come to grief on the jagged rocks or beneath the howling gales of fortune. Their names, perhaps, appear beside the picture of the wreckage, surrounded by the flotsam of lost ambitions, the jetsam of vanished dreams. Was some traveller at that very moment perusing a billboard and shaking his head, saying to his companion "Ah, the Aengus, what a tragedy that was, what a waste..."?

I shook myself free of the place to where my mind was wandering, restarted my watch and set off again. Caitríona couldn't bear the whining of the self-proclaimed hard-done-by, and I fight to stop myself sliding into the same trap. It seems to me that those who feel most sorry for themselves are often the very ones with most for which to be thankful. It is, perhaps, their being accustomed to good fortune, spoiled by it, that makes them more vulnerable to misfortune. I never wanted to yield to that weakness lest I should fail Caitríona or, if ever we should meet, appear weak to Aoife.

The path wound its way down from the cliff-tops toward the Baily lighthouse. The morning sun was taking the faint chill out of the air. My pace had quickened in my idle musing until I had to stop, out of breath and sweating hard. I stood bent over, hands on knees. A lady taking her dog for its morning stroll was coming towards me. The little terrier ran up enthusiastically and sniffed at my ankles curiously, and the lady slowed as she tried to decide if I was in need of some help. I rubbed the little dog's head.

"I'm grand, thanks," I said to her, panting like the terrier, "thank you."

She smiled sympathetically and walked on. I sat down on the soft grass and looked again out to sea. Aoife's birthday was a little over a month away. It was twenty years since I stood in the maternity hospital at The Coombe as a startled eighteen year-old, wondering

how I had ended up there and what the future could possibly have in store for a fool who had thrown it all away.

I had met Caitríona shortly after leaving school to start university in Dublin. She shared a house with one of my classmates and three other lads – one of whom was her brother – all hailing as they did from the same town in County Wexford. I had met up with them in a pub in the heart of Dublin's student flatland. Surrounded by the sound of excited country accents, we talked about life in Dublin and the price of a pint, and we debated the controversial issue of the day – the provision of information on where and how to obtain an abortion, a question that deeply divided the student community at the time. A third year Law student, she was almost three years older and a lifetime more sophisticated than me. Her opposition to abortion and to the distribution of information that might encourage it and undermine the life of the unborn child was total, violent. One of our group was a Students Union representative from the Agriculture faculty, and his ill-advised assertion that the Union had not only a right but an obligation to provide such information to its members precipitated a tirade of such vitriolic incredulity that he silently finished his stout, picked up his satchel and mumbled away from the table. I was enraptured.

In the days that followed, I could think of little else. I suppose the awe in which I beheld my new-found liberty in the city and the university gave me an innocent verve and an eagerness that might have been, I suppose, in some way attractive. To my bewilderment, it appeared that Caitríona thought so, and where others in her position might, for the sake of her own credibility, have sought to hide a romance with a younger student, Caitríona almost flaunted it as a symbol of her scant regard for convention. I was caught in a whirlwind that provided an education of which Cardinal Newman might not have wholly approved, but one that accelerated my journey from boyhood to manhood. And as I grew in maturity and experience, so our relationship burgeoned and became one in which I was an equal partner. We spent our time engaged in student politics, in raucous socialising and in furious, passionate lovemaking. It was an idyll that hit a sudden and insuperable impasse sometime after Christmas.

Caitríona had been feeling unwell for a couple of weeks, a condition she dismissed as the result of some particularly heavy drinking over the Christmas break. It was only when she missed a second period that she became really worried and agreed to go to the doctor. The change that the dawning realisation cast on her was immediate and dramatic. The explosive extrovert that had so captivated me three or four months before withdrew from life and into herself. On the morning of her appointment with the local GP, she seemed to me so much smaller and younger, a meek and timid shadow of herself. In hindsight, we knew the answer long before we came out of the doctor's surgery. We walked in shell-shocked silence along the canal, and sat down on a bench. The early spring chill made sure that we were alone, and we huddled together for warmth and solace in silence. We stared into each other's eyes, searching for an answer that neither of us could find.

In the couple of months that followed, we lived in a daze. We told nobody, spent long evenings alone together trying to figure out the right thing to do. Intense though the early days of our relationship had been, we had never strayed into discussions about the future. The thought of Caitríona as a mother, or of us as parents, had seemed as far away as senility and death. Yet now that I was faced with an irrefutable reality, I was forced to confront those thoughts. And when I did, I had to admit that in this intensely ethical, wildly courageous student was the germ of a passionate, devoted mother. I started to reconcile myself with a view of the future that would have seemed as alien as a television soap opera only weeks before. I painted in my head romanticised pictures of us as happy parents, successful young professionals and tireless socialites, and somehow I reconciled these three into one achievable persona.

Caitríona plucked me violently from this naïve reverie. She had, in the weeks that followed the positive pregnancy test, regained a great degree of her hitherto feisty demeanour. She dealt with the uncertainty and the fear with a heightened abrasiveness and an even greater disdain for the views of those with whom she disagreed. Even her closest friends were beginning to avoid her. As her final end of

year exams approached, she used this increasing isolation as an excuse to study even harder than usual. She was neurotically obsessed with not throwing away what she had worked so hard to achieve. Then I made an offhand remark about how we would manage no matter what happened, and the dam burst.

"What did you say?", she demanded, putting her cup of tea down on the table.

"You know," I said, putting my arm around her shoulder to draw her closer. "We can get through anything. Even if we have to put our plans on hold for a few years, we'll still be fine. Who knows, we might even make a good family!"

She stared at me as though I had suggested termination, and the coldness of her glare froze the smile on my face.

"Are you really so stupid?" she whispered slowly, almost spitting out the words. She pulled away from me, and buried her face in her hands. "How the fuck did I get here? What possessed me?"

She stood up, and stared down at me. From a whisper she moved to a menacing growl to a furious scream.

"We have nothing. No money. No qualifications. No jobs. D'ya think my parents are going to be standing beside us, shoulder to shoulder? I can just see my mother rubbing my bump, can't you? She'll be *so* excited."

She was incandescent with rage and I worried that she might make herself unwell. I stood up and reached out to sit her down. She slapped my hand away.

"Get your hands off me you feckin' egit," she screamed. "Do you not understand what's happening here? Can't you see? Are you that thick?"

"Caitríona, stop, please." I pleaded, partly for her own good, partly to stem the abusive attacks that were stabbing like knives. She had never spoken to me like that before, and I suddenly realised that in a few short months she had become the very point of my life. I couldn't lose her, couldn't imagine a life without her. And yet my hero was filled with contempt for me.

She relented a fraction.

"I should have realised that you just don't have a clue," she said,

her hand to her forehead. "I should have seen it. Jesus Christ, do you have any idea just how fucked we are? I've ground out the last three years to try and set myself up, and now what? Even if I get through these exams, it'll take some CV to get me out of this. Do you see yet? Everything I've dreamed of is over, before it even started."

She sat – more fell – down into the armchair.

"We can't keep this child. I just can't play Mammy."

And so the decision was made. I don't know if I agreed or disagreed, I seemed to be outside the decision, like I was watching a television documentary. We got through the rest of term, and Caitríona sat her exams with her condition less and less concealed beneath the billowing clothes she had taken to wearing. After her last exam, she was secreted away in her Wexford home, like a Provo taken to a safehouse. I was, unsurprisingly, persona non grata in her parents' house, and Caitríona was reluctant to come to my father's house. So we saw each other only infrequently during the summer. The separation was unendurable.

Caitríona's pregnancy had only deepened the chasm that separated me from my father. I had taken to addressing him by his christian name during university, partly because I thought it might annoy him, partly because "Dad" seemed so at odds with the relationship we had had. I remember the evening I told him. He was sitting in his study, reading, when I came home. I knocked on the door and made my way in.

"Hi Lochlann," I said, quietly. "How's it goin'?"

He turned his head to look at me.

"Well, thank you. And you?"

"Yeah, good."

Silence.

"Listen, I need to talk to you, it's kind of serious."

He removed his reading glasses and swivelled his chair to face me.

"It's about me and Caitríona, my girlfriend. The thing is…"

I faltered, lost my nerve. I was tempted to turn tail and flee out the door. But I couldn't escape his stare.

"The thing is… Caitríona's pregnant. She's going to have a baby. We're going to have a baby."

He said nothing for what seemed like forever, just looked at me. I tried to find some emotion in his stare – anger, pity, disappointment – but there was none.

"What are you going to do?", he asked.

"I don't know. We haven't really figured it out."

Another long pause and then, as though I was choosing a new car, he said:

"Well think about it and let me know if there is anything you need, anything I can do."

I needed a father. I needed someone who cared enough to be aghast, distressed, to shout at me, to tell me what an idiot I was and then to tell me what to do and that it would all be fine. Instead, I got a barely interested observer and a tepid offer of assistance. I nodded and walked out of the room.

I hadn't really known what reaction to expect from Caitríona's parents. Although Caitríona would have taken that as yet further proof of my naïveté, it was simply that I had had no experience of a normal family. As it was, her parents seemed to oscillate between one day berating her for the selfishness that threatened to destroy the good name they had worked so hard to nurture and the next behaving like the model family they had apparently been in the days before her aberration, ignoring completely the event that, in a couple of months, would change her life forever.

Those days we did spend together were spent mainly in the waiting rooms of the maternity hospital in Dublin. We felt like pariahs among the beaming, glowing mothers with their wedding rings and designer maternity wear. I have never seen Caitríona, so capable and strong, look so helpless. I felt impotent and useless in a world where I had no status and no idea. We couldn't face the ignominy of the ante-natal classes, among suited fathers-to-be taking an hour out of the office on St Stephen's Green, slapping each other's backs and predicting in loud voices that junior was sure to be another 'Rock man or play football for Dublin.

In the eighth month of pregnancy, Caitríona finally became too great a threat to the good reputation of her parents, pillars as they were of the local community. So she was banished back to Dublin

and I went to find us a flat. I refused to go cap in hand to Lochlann, and so between her student grant money, a student loan from the University branch of the Bank of Ireland and what I had squirrelled away from a summer spent working behind the bar in a pub in Dublin, we could just about afford a one bedroom flat south of the city. It was no place for an expectant mother and yet, in that tiny flat, those last few weeks were somehow almost idyllic. Back together, we found the strength that had escaped us throughout the summer. Moving a single light bulb from room to room because we couldn't afford another, and taking napkins from the local chip shop while the owner wasn't watching because we had no toilet paper, we were happy for the first time in nine months. Perhaps it was the fact that the limbo period was almost over. The birth and its immediate aftermath terrified us, but at least it was almost here and we could only face that with which we were faced. We had both squeaked through our exams, so Caitríona had her degree and I had made it through to my second year.

Together, we made it through the interviews at the convent that would organise the adoption on behalf of the Adoption Agency. The nun in charge was a benign old woman who had seen too much of this before to be shocked or to make obvious her disapproval. The social worker who took our case, Siobhán, was a kindly young girl, who took to embracing us both while appearing on the verge of tears. It was at the convent that we met with the prospective adoptive parents. Although forewarned, I hadn't expected the emotions it would bring. Mostly, I was intimidated. An obviously successful couple in their late thirties, they reminded me of so many of the well-to-do friends of my father who had populated my childhood. Looking back, I suppose they were as scared as we were. For them, we were the people that could shatter their dream, a dream that had maybe taken years to come true and was now so close they could almost touch it. I remember now how tightly they held each other's hands as we negotiated the stilted conversation.

My abiding memory of that time should be one of despair, of pain, of fear. But it's not. When I remember those days, I remember mostly the strength I drew from Caitríona and the sense that we

would get through it. And unlike nine months before, Caitríona did not treat my optimism with contempt – I think maybe she in turn drew some strength from it.

Aoife was born at three o'clock in the morning. I felt throughout her labour and delivery, as I had through all of Caitríona's pregnancy, that we were the hospital's under-class, worthy only of grudging and contemptuous attention when those more deserving were comfortable. Siobhán had arranged that we would have a room, and Aoife lay in a cot beside Caitríona's bed. We had chosen her name on the spur of the moment some weeks before. Known as the greatest woman warrior in the world, Aoife was the mother of Cúchulainn's only son, Connlach. It seemed right that we should leave her a name that might give her the strength and courage to fight for her place in the world.

Siobhán had warned us, especially Caitríona, to avoid getting too close, to avoid at all costs bonding with our baby. But Caitríona could not ignore the crying child beside her bed and would get up to whisper soothing words.

"It's ok, Mammy's here…", she crooned, and lifted her eyes to look at me as Aoife stopped crying.

For months we had both prayed for this to be over, and yet in those few days after Aoife's birth we existed somewhere outside reality, somewhere somehow tranquil. The day finally came when we would have to say goodbye. We had sat on the bed in silence for what seemed like hours, staring at her as she slept in her cot, oblivious to the life-altering events that were about to unfold. There was a knock on the door and Siobhán appeared, ashen-faced. I wondered how long you would have to be in that business before you became used to those days. She came to the bed and hugged Caitríona.

"Why don't you say your goodbyes and go on outside. There's no need for you to be here when we take her," she said.

Caitríona nodded. She put her hand lightly on Aoife's chest.

"Goodbye, my angel," she whispered, silent tears streaming down her face. "I hope one day you'll forgive me."

She hesitated for the briefest of seconds, turned and walked

quietly out of the room without looking back. No histrionics, no drama. In the moment of perhaps our greatest shame, I have never been so proud of her. I looked over at my sleeping baby. I could find no words, no final gestures. I pulled open the door and walked down the stairs after Caitríona.

The path had descended from the cliff-top and ran along the side of a rocky beach. A family of holiday-makers, in spite of the early hour, was setting up a breakfast picnic beside a rock-pool. Two little children were running to and from the shoreline, squealing with delight as the approaching water chased them in and then ebbed. Their parents watched with that concentrated mixture of emotions, part joy at their fascination, part worry for their safety. I watched them as I had watched a thousand families before and wondered.

Aoife's arrival into the world was going to send us down one of two roads. Either she would bring us together and make us stronger in the face of whatever life threw at us, or she would prove our undoing, forcing us apart as we sought to push her out of our lives. In the years that followed, it turned out to be the former. Once I had graduated, we decided to leave Dublin. It was a decision based partly on a desire for something new, and partly on a need to get away from the past, at least for a while. And so we moved to London. Caitríona found a job that provided a perfect outlet for her penchant for political ranting, working for a law firm that specialised in representing social and environmental activists. After three years studying art, I took a job as a graphic designer with a marketing agency. My father's disdain at this commercialisation of my gift was barely concealed. Within four or five years of Aoife's birth, we had become the kind of people we had tried so desperately to avoid at ante-natal classes. Young, professional and passably successful. My work took us on secondments to New York, Hong Kong, Dubai, Johannesburg, always housed in luxurious accommodation, always coming back to London.

Beneath the façade too, we were quietly getting on with our lives. And yet, even after we were married we hadn't yet found a way to talk about her. Nor did we discuss having further children. I was, once again, outside the decision, and had I loved Caitríona just a

little less maybe I would have questioned the path we had taken. But I loved her absolutely, and would have endured a million miseries to avoid losing her.

As time went on, I felt guilty that everything we had might have been at the expense of fulfilling our obligations to Aoife. I had pompously declined Lochlann's offers of financial support, accepting only what I considered mine by some transparent definition of right. So we had spent three years struggling through University on student grants and a barman's tips. We had never been able to afford a nice holiday or a birthday dinner in a nice restaurant. The luxury of a car was beyond even fantasy. And suddenly we had the trappings of a comfortable life. Not that we were rich. We fretted like everyone else over buying our first house and spent endless evenings over a calculator working out what level of mortgage we could afford to borrow. But we were twenty-somethings with a house, a car and prospects. And I couldn't help but feel that we would perhaps have had none of this if we had kept Aoife. And I couldn't escape feeling guilty that, although I would never admit it even to myself, I was glad Caitríona had made the decision for me.