

Organization Ensues

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When my mom's sister got pregnant, the O'Brien family was

overjoyed. There had been rumors that Maureen was a lesbian, and the staunchly Catholic family could not forgive that. Plus, they violently begrudged anything that ensured less fire-haired clones on the planet.

My mother came from a family of ten. Her parents, Ewan and Margaret, were satisfied with this number because anything under 10 was considered a tragedy in Port Glasgow during the 60's. It didn't matter how poor you were: the goal was to hit double digits. Ewan and Margaret had done that. They'd married young, bought a tenement house, and in between making just enough money to get by, spawned two hands' worth of children—not a single one of which turned out sane or steeped in civility.

The O'Briens were notorious in the Port. They were just as poor as everyone else, but their depravity exceeded what was deemed tolerable for people who had nothing except each other. Andrew had been to jail twice; Neil was always just narrowly escaping death or criminal charges; Lorna and Lexie, the twins, were thieves; Janice had verbal tics and pulled her hair out until her scalp was patchy; Gavin had already had three kids by 15, and was feared by fathers; Maureen was bound to the bottle, and likely to throw it at you after she drained it.

Rose—my mother— was the eldest girl and third oldest overall, born right after Bruce and Craig. The three of them formed the leadership trifecta of the O'Brien clan. Flagrant affronts to the family were funneled through their joint deliberation; smaller, less insulting ones were resolved through the flippant whims of whichever O'Brien you had been unlucky enough to provoke. There were rarely occasions that required them to take pause and plan. If there was a system to their mayhem, checks and balances that kept them from murdering in the light of day, it went largely unexercised. But then Maureen's boyfriend beat the shit out her during her third trimester.

My mother has described the scene to me a hundred times. She was making a large pot of lentil soup when she heard the front door open. Bruce and Craig, who were once peacefully occupying the living room, are suddenly yelling. Andrew, awakened by the commotion, passes through the kitchen into the living room, whereupon his own yelling joins the choir. My mother emerges from the kitchen, wielding ladle and concern. There is Maureen, standing battered in the doorway.

A broken blood vessel has turned the whites of her left eye bright red, and a dark indigo bruise has taken over her cheek, which is—and this is not an exaggeration—the size of a mango. She’s holding a parcel under her arm looking at no one specifically.

“This is for mum.” She sets it gently on the coffee table, offering no explanation.

“Oy! What th’ fawk, Maureen?” Craig asks.

“What?” She says back.

“at was your fawkeen Eddie did ‘at?” Bruce asks. Here, my mom always interjects that the siblings knew better than to lie to Bruce.

“Aye,” Maureen says.

Swift as snow, organization ensues.

The way my mom tells it, Bruce and Craig had become quite patient by their late twenties. Had they been in their teens, they would have been well on their way to Eddie’s before Maureen could have set that package down. In their heyday, they were suspected of being in a gang. Mom says they would leave for hours to buy groceries and come home empty-handed, their jeans soaked to the calves. Sometimes their jackets would be wrapped around their waists, shirtsleeves bunched around their ashy forearms in the dead of winter. Whoever did laundry—which was no small chore in the O’Brien household—found loose teeth in their pockets and scrubbed blood out of their cuffs.

Since then, the pair had settled. But a stunt such as this, some dosser bashing their sister’s face in? Well, that was certainly enough

to bring them out of retirement.

Andrew: *Aam gonnae kill 'at fawkeen lunatic.*

Bruce: *We're naw gonnae leave Reenie raisin' 'at wean alone.*

Andrew: *Better 'at than a loser fur'a pa.*

Roma: *Oy! The two ay yoos hush! We're naw fawkeen killin' anyone.*

Craig: *Awright, Rosie. Teel us th' plan.*

When Eddie came home later the night, he opened his door and came face to face with Bruce, Craig, Andrew, and Rose O'Brien. Maureen had let them into the apartment without asking any questions. All they told her was that she could come back home in 20 minutes.

When Eddie saw them, Mom says the color drained from his face instantly. He bolted for the door and got as far as the hallway before Andrew tackled him. With Craig's help, they dragged him back inside, where Bruce was waiting with duct tape.

Eddie flailed and screamed like a madman, he got so loud at one point that Andrew suggested knocking him out. Of course, the others were in agreement that he should be conscious for this. They taped his mouth; Bruce held his legs; Andrew and Craig each kept an arm pinned to the ground with their knees. From my mother's perspective, Eddie was stapled to the floor like Jesus Christ on the cross. So, what happened next was only fitting— she took a hammer to Eddie's right hand. The crunch was unforgettable, mom says.

Their work was done, and with 15 minutes to spare. But then Andrew asked a very good question: *Is this fawkeen dobber even right-handed?* My mom had no choice but to smash Eddie's left hand, too.

Maureen came home and found the poor bastard with his hands stuck in the freezer. She took him to the hospital where his fingers were declared so mangled that he needed surgery. Eddie was subsequently fitted with two mitten-like casts that he had to wear for a month. And sure, this meant a little extra housework for Maureen, but at least her face would heal in peace.

A few days passed. When Maureen finally came by the house

again, she told everyone that when the police arrived at the hospital, they took one look at her face and Eddie's broken hands, and didn't even ask if he wanted to file a report. The story that Eddie, who worked in the shipyard, gave police was this: he was welding a stiffener to a plate when the slab slipped and crushed his hands. Nobody was particularly inclined to refute this account.

Before my mother left Scotland in the eighties, back when all the kids still hung around Ewan and Mag's house, nothing was above family. It had always been—and would always be—that way, which is why even after the siblings dispersed, Bruce moving to Greenock, Craig and Neil to Southbar, nobody tried anything. The O'Brien legend persisted: if you hurt one of them, you could be certain that eventually they would come for you. Your arms would be held behind your back, your knees would be kicked in, and your jaw would hang a little looser.

Mom's big change came 1983, when she met my father in a nightclub down by the River Clyde. Van Schaffer was an American sailor, or, more aptly, a young, wanderlust Mississippian. The naval ship he hailed from was docked less than a mile from where he first lay eyes on Rose O'Brien, who had already noticed him and was fast approaching. According to my mom, my dad was a black man in a country full of white women who loved black men—she had to move fast.

During their drunken introductions, my father said that he was 23 with no girlfriend to speak of. This was mostly a lie. He was, in fact, only 19. And although he did not have a girlfriend, per say, he did have a wife. The day his ship arrived in Dunoon, he had been wed nine days to his high school sweetheart, Selma. But my dad had traveled to a foreign country and met this lively, brash, loose cannon of a woman. The very embodiment of all things good southern girls were raised not to be. Sweet-faced Selma was on the other side of the ocean. If the fruit hung any lower, it would have been on the ground.

The annulment took three days; my parents dated for three

years. Come the end of 1986, my dad was scheduled for deployment. It was either follow him or forget him, and as much as my mom loved the Port, a part of her wanted out of it. Where she was from, you went to school; you graduated at 16; you went to work in the factories; you married young not old, Catholic not Protestant; you had a clan of children and then you died. If my mom wanted more out of her life, she had to go get it.

The entire, teary-eyed O'Brien clan took her to the airport where she and my father left Port Glasgow, Scotland for Key West, Florida.

In 1990, I was born. Three years after that, my brother, Darien.

Growing up, we lived on military bases all over the States. Our neighbors were from around the globe, spoke many different languages, brought cultural zest to the blocks we lived on. Mom said that's exactly how Scotland was, people of all ethnicities scattered around. She remembered authentic curry shops and Chinese restaurants on every street, how they served Scots and Pakistanis and West Indians. When dad retired and we settled in a flourishing suburban community in Virginia, we all needed a moment to adjust.

People had become indiscernibly alike. The women were blonde, the men were blonde, their kids were blonde, their Labradors were blonde. They had the same jobs. Women were nurses; men were contractors. Women were interior designers; men were supply chain managers. They seemed to move as one, with no defining features, nothing to set them apart. No edge. They were all smooth corners.

My mom required more adapting than anyone. Aside from the obvious—that she'd moved 4,000 miles away from her family and now had children of her own—she'd been appointed to a new rung on the socioeconomic ladder. Back in Scotland, her family couldn't even afford a refrigerator (I know what you're thinking, and I already asked—they left their milk out on the window sill to keep it chilled). Now, my mom owned an immaculate, five-bedroom 2,700

sq. ft. home; she drove a Mercedes; on occasion, perfectly good milk had spoiled in her thousand-dollar refrigerator.

Certainly, there was solace to be had in these new comforts, but it would have been impossible for her not to feel out of place. Her new neighbors hadn't come from similar backgrounds and it showed in their mannerisms, how easily they cut their eyes when she did her own yardwork or conversed with the trashmen. People were enamored by her accent, but their interest in hearing about Scotland visibly waned when they discovered the abject poverty she had lived in.

To some extent, her new surroundings rendered her edge obsolete. Privileges such as safety and abundance threatened to file down her hard parts. She had to shelve her Glaswegian street smarts— forget how to throw a punch, pick a lock. At the apex of these changes was the opportunity to be a softer woman. And what a gift that would have been, had I not cut off six inches of Beth Turner's hair after blinding her with a handful of glitter.

Allow me to set the scene. It is 11:30 A.M. in Room 203. Ms. Lugo's fifth-grade Mathematics class is deeply engrossed in designing geometric Mandalas. Cast in stark contrast to my pink-obsessed peers, I am clad in khaki Bermuda shorts and a loose t-shirt that reads "Smile, Mon!" above a dreadlocked, Rastafarian smiley. I'm sitting with my chin in my hands, staring off into space, when Beth Turner knocks my arms out from under me. My chin smacks loudly against the desk.

Some of my classmates recoil, some say *Oooh*. Most stare wide-eyed. They are waiting for me to react, hoping for a show. They want to know if the new girl is shark or minnow. I touch my hand to my bloody lip and hear Beth ask her friend for a marker. She's pretending nothing happened.

Without thinking, I take a handful of glitter and blow it into her face. She covers her eyes with her hands, screaming *Stop! What are you doing?* That's when I grab a long lock of her hair, wrap it around my fist, and start cutting. Nobody helps her. The kids in our class are frozen in their seats, paralyzed with astonishment. Ultimately,

it is Ms. Lugo that saves Beth from the asymmetrical pixie I have in mind.

“Let her go! Let her go!” She’s yelling, trying to pull me away from her. But I cling to Beth’s hair like her hair does her scalp. What I cannot cut, I tear clean out.

I don’t say anything to the principal until my mom arrives. This is a trick I learn from crime shows I’m not supposed to be watching: say nothing until your lawyer arrives. I knew a pissed off mom was better than any lawyer, and when my mom found out that Beth started it, that Beth had been terrorizing me for a month, “pissed off” will be an understatement.

When my mother finally arrives, she doesn’t disappoint. She rips the principal, the vice principal, and Ms. Lugo a new one. Although, when she catches me smiling at the sight of her raking them over the coals, she pops me in my mouth. I stop smiling and listen to what the adults have to say.

They want to expel me, but they can’t. The school security officer says given the delicate nature of the altercation—the fact that Beth and I are literally little girls and my weapon of choice was literally glitter—this particular situation doesn’t qualify as an assault. They suspend me for three days and change my homeroom. Before we leave the office, the principal looks at me affectedly and asks if I understand why I’m getting into trouble, but Beth isn’t. I shrug.

“You know, Beth is probably going to have to cut her hair really short now.” Ms. Lugo lingers for my apology.

“Good.” My mom and I say in unison.

Ms. Lugo’s jaw drops. The principal folds her arms and explains that although though my suspension officially begins tomorrow, I need to leave the school grounds immediately. She makes a remark about Beth’s parents pressing charges, which sends my mom flying into another profanity-laden frenzy.

We walk in silence out to the parking lot. When we get into the car, out of eyesight, my mom clutches me tightly to her chest and breathes an unforgettable sigh of relief.

“Blinding th’ wee cunt and cuttin’ ‘er hair off? Yer an O’Brien, love.” This singular event changes the course of our relationship forever.

Unlike Eric, who was incredibly affable but terrified of rocking the boat, I was tough like mom. I spoke out and disagreed, not caring if it branded me as a difficult (and it usually did). Like my mother, I had a uniquely tactile approach to problem-solving. Force, it seemed to me, was a perfectly natural means of resolution if you weren’t too chicken shit to use it.

The older I got, the more inclined my mom became to divulge her roughneck past. She told me about impaling a girl in the head with her high heel in *Club 67*, consequently getting banned for life. She told me about Blair Kelly, a huge lass from Colgrain who whooped her ass one night when they got into it on the ferry. She told me about the streets of Port Glasgow and I listened in awe, unsure how I could have missed a side of her that hid in plain sight.

“Does dad know?” I asked.

“Aye, of course,” she said, “who’d ye ‘hink was holdin’ mah purse?”

A fundamental difference between my mother and I was that as the years progressed, I fought less physically. By the time I left for college, I was settling scores tactfully in the dead of night or, sometimes, not even in person at all. It was business as usual—rigging, misleading, ruining—but I cared about keeping my hands clean now. I had more discipline than the average O’Brien, and it showed.

When I found out my boyfriend had cheated on me, my first instinct was to gouge his beautiful green eyes out. Instead, I hacked into his university account mid-semester—using a VPN to mask my IP address, of course—and dropped a few of his classes so that he couldn’t graduate on time. Med school would just have to wait.

When my upstairs neighbors weren’t mindful of my study hours, I starting picking the lock on the communal electric box and shutting their power off. Having a party? Watching the play-

offs? Leveling up? Not anymore they weren't. When their loudness persisted even without electricity, I started intercepting their mail and shredding it. But first, I read it. I jotted down their bank account numbers and camouflaged it in my statistics notebook.

My mom thought I was brilliant, but in truth, I aspired to her level of mastermind. After she got into a minor fender bender, we found out the "victim" was seeking extravagant medical attention. There hadn't been a scratch on this guy or his obnoxious, six-wheel drive. We looked the asshole up and discovered that he was a former NFL player, released from his contract due to recurrent back injuries. He was looking for a pay off, but mom was prepared to give him a little more than that.

Donning my Cleopatra wig from Halloween '99, she filled a spray bottle with brake fluid and spritzed his truck in the middle of the night. A week later, the vehicle's top coat had peeled off in huge splotches. As luck would have it, his polka dot pickup compelled one seriously miffed resident—guess who—to complain about the eyesore to the HOA. We don't know how much it cost him to have that goliath thing repainted, but we were confident it was more than the \$8,000 he'd weaseled out of Geico.

We could not be tamed. The two of us pushed one another to retaliate harder, with less and less mercy. It seemed to us there was a legacy at stake, and as our affinity for chaos came to a climax, we fully intended to uphold it.

What happened was this: Darien got robbed. He was supposed to meet with a guy named "Jake" in a Kmart parking lot to buy a phone from him. I vaguely remember asking Darien if Kmart was still in business, but he didn't know. Overhearing this, my dad idly told him to be careful; he said he would. An hour later, Darien came home visibly rattled, without his money or a new phone.

As the trade unfurled, Jake had snatched the money from Darien's hand and took off towards a running car that was hidden along the side of the building. When Darien gave chase, he fell. His scuffed palms and blistered kneecaps were proof of this detail, of

which he was intensely embarrassed.

My father wanted to file a police report, but my brother pleaded with him not to. It was his senior year and he was being scouted for baseball. He was worried about anything that might hurt his chances, and being the victim of a robbery, he felt, not only cast him as gullible, but weak too. My mother understood this in a way that my father did not, but her attempt to talk him out of the police report was just as unsuccessful.

When the officers arrived, they asked Darien exactly what had happened. After he told them—his face flushing when he said he tripped— it was their expert opinion that nothing could be done. Because he was handing Jake the money when it was snatched, Darien had, technically, *given* his robber the money.

“By that logic, there’s no such thing as a bank robbery. Just a bunch of tellers handing out money to men in masks.” I said pointedly.

“Hold on. This guy was wearing a mask?” One of the officers pulls out his notepad. Darien shakes his head, missing the joke.

“Well then there ya’ have it.” The officer smirked.

My dad was so heated by this response that he asked the officer for his badge number, then kicked him out of our house.

“Fucking pigs.” He said, slamming the door.

Darien, who was clearly trying not to cry, made a beeline for his room. My dad followed after him. It was just mom and I standing in the hallway. We exchanged careful glances; organization ensued.

While the men went to bed, we remained awake. I wanted a midnight snack and she needed a glass of water. Happy coincidence that we should both wind up in the kitchen when we did. I opened my yogurt. Crushed ice clanged at the bottom her cup. We took our seats at the breakfast bar, eating and sipping quietly.

“What’s the plan?” I asked.

We sat there for hours, hammering out a foolproof strategy. We decided to wait exactly one week before creating a fake Craigslist profile to lure Jake in. We would respond to his add and meet up for

the trade, and as just as he was sufficiently disarmed, we would beat the living shit out of him. We needed the week interim to let the dust settle and get everything in order, make sure we'd crossed our t's and dotted our i's.

As we imagined he would be, Jake was quite receptive to our inquiry, and fortunately for us, he and his getaway driver had done most of the logistical work. We knew the Kmart had closed down, so it was free of cameras. There were multiple exits out of the lot onto the main road, which made agreeing on this location when Jake suggested it easy. We could infer that his buddy would be parked at any one of three various passageways on the side of the building, so it would be necessary to circle the lot just before the trade to see which. We knew that we would simply look lost, two women driving around a vacant lot, craning their necks in every direction.

Before we got in the car to go, mom and I had a serious talk. She told me, essentially, that if I had since changed my mind, we didn't have to go through with this. We could let it go, the way Darien and my father were trying to. She reminded me that what we were doing was dangerous, illegal; if we got caught, I would lose my scholarships, maybe even go to jail.

I thought about how my brother would never forget what happened to him. How, as his big sister, it was my implicit duty to protect him. Avenge him, if I failed at that. "We're doing this."

We'd been to the parking lot many times before the night of trade, scoping the area out, preparing against unforeseen obstacles like weather and traffic. The night was cool and the sky was clear, traffic had yet to accrue on the other side of the Kmart. We spotted Jake's driver parked in the leftmost passageway, behind a small dumpster. He was out of our line of vision, but we'd parked in that exact same inlet for practice, and we knew that he couldn't see us either.

The man of the hour was standing in the far-left corner of the lot. As we approached, we turned the car off. Mom and I had hotly debated who would be the one to initiate the trade, to face Jake. I

had persisted with such obstinacy that eventually she relented and agreed to let me do it.

The closer I got, the more he came into focus. Jake could have only been 5'9", but he was long-legged and dressed comfortably. He was wearing a Virginia Tech baseball cap, but it didn't exactly thwart facial recognition. He was olive-skinned, clean-shaven, button nosed. Attractive, save for his weak chin and preferred pastimes.

"Hey," I smiled. I looked around. "Did you walk here?"

"Yeah." He nodded. "I live just down the road."

"In Fairmont?" I asked. Fairmont, a neighborhood I'd just made up.

"Yeah, over that way." A surge of adrenaline coursed through me.

"Oh, I know some people that live over there, do you know—" I maced him.

I held the keychain container tightly in my hand and sprayed his eyes, his mouth, his ears when he turned his face away to cough. His hat fell off and I sprayed it into his hair, all over his shirt. I kicked him hard in his groin, until he was wheezing too hard to scream. I heard the car door open behind me, then the pitter patter of my mother's sneakers as she approached with Darien's baseball bat.

Jake rolled onto his side, trying to catch his breath. The bat soared high above my mother's head before crashing down on him. His ribs snapped under the lightweight aluminum. *Please* he wheezed. My mom struck him again in the torso, handed me the bat. I didn't bat an eyelash as I took it, swung it down on Jake's arms when he tried to cover his face. The crunch was unforgettable.

Mom and I made eye contact. She smiled; I smiled. Jake gasped for air in between us, clutching his sides.

I saw the discarded phone lying next to him. I wondered briefly if it even worked, or had just been a prop. I thought about how little it took to lure a person in, how everything turned into bait sooner or later. Before I could smash it, my mom cleared her throat—our signal to get back to the car.

The trunk was still popped, waiting to reclaim Darien's bat. I

tossed it in, and we drove coolly to our planned exit with no chase from Jake's driver. My heart hammered in my chest and my hands shook violently; I was thankful we agreed to let her drive back. My mom glanced over at me, chuckling as we assimilated into burgeoning traffic, camouflaged in a motley of cars.

We drove in silence for a little bit, soaking up the high of come-uppance served.

"Ye' alright?" She asked.

"Yeah." I nodded.

Then I sighed. "I should've broke that phone. Make sure he doesn't try that shit again."

She smiled. "Och, trust me, love. He won't."