

body was now pressed into his hips. Our breathing and breaths heaved in unison. His energy carrying my breath. The pain, the faint hum of the tattoo gun, were not hidden by the music. His weight, his height, fell into me. My neck cushioned his head. His lips on my shoulder. A spasm was rising in me. Right through my body. The tension made it almost impossible to focus. Tears came. His grip on my stomach was getting tighter. Struggling to find words, my breath was quick. My whispers.

Please don't hurt me, please don't hurt me.

Sorry, sorry. But he didn't pull away. I wouldn't . . . I couldn't . . .

Pulling his hands apart, away from my stomach, away from my body. The rapid movement helped me find the strength to push my stool forward. He quickly turned me to face him. It was like a dance, a waltz. There was a distance of a foot between us. Lowering my head, pushing it into his chest, my words came easy.

You need to find someone.

He lifted my head and looked straight into my face.

There was someone, he said.

The Best Beoir

Often the loneliness in others needles us to acknowledge the loneliness in ourselves. Mary Elizabeth and I have a friendship that spans over thirty years. We know what it is to be hidden, silenced and forgotten. When we found each other in college, she was organised and determined. My casualness meant things were done very slowly, while Mary Elizabeth planned, prepped and achieved all in a matter of hours. She was not only an organiser in academia but also when cooking, cleaning and washing. Sometimes, when making fun of her, I would say, *Oh, you definitely have that Paave gene.*

Our friendship began in a broken lift in the university. Mary Elizabeth was panicking, nervous about missing a lecture. Getting trapped in lifts was a regular occurrence for me. The longer we waited for the lift to be fixed, the more claustrophobic feelings began to rise in me. Restless and anxious while pretending to be calm. As the time ticked by, we recognised the lift would not be fixed any time soon. We shared bottles of water and bits of food from our satchels. Our impairments – both with cerebral palsy, both with speech impediments – meant calling for help was impossible. We were now at the mercy of one of our friends or classmates noticing that we were absent, though missing lectures wouldn't

necessarily cause concern. This realisation made us laugh, then cry. During those eight hours, we swapped wheelchairs for comfort, just to stretch our bodies. Then we measured our height and the length of our arms and legs – where they bend, where they straighten. We compared and contrasted what assistive technology we used. She had gadgets for everything, including technology to open her curtains or switch on the television. Not being able to get out of the lift brought an edge to her frustration.

Speaking at length about my family came naturally to me. Mary Elizabeth's monosyllabic answers about her family life made the conversation awkward. After an hour or so of swapping general details, I silently told myself to shut up. Maybe her family was dead. Later, turning the conversation over in my head, it was clear that she hadn't shared large parts of her story.

People often mixed us up, called us by each other's names. It wasn't because we looked particularly alike. It was because of the cerebral palsy and people's laziness. This infuriated Mary Elizabeth, but the idea of having a cerebral palsy twin was comforting to me. Having a friendship with another woman – our shared movements and a shared aesthetic – made the able-bodied world less intimidating. Nodding my head, pretending to be her, just for the hell of it. Her impersonation of me was much more refined. This type of playacting was all in our accents and the way we moved our hands. We spent a lot of time laughing.

We read not just feminist theory but work by disabled

feminists. We'd chat for hours about abstract academic nonsense that made us both feel intellectual. During those conversations, we stayed purely focused on the similarities between our impairments and our ethnicities. The excitement when we recognised that the term 'intersectionality' didn't always include impairment or disability made us feel as if we had climbed Kilimanjaro. We thought we were being sophisticated when we used the phrase 'the disability aesthetic'. Mary Elizabeth's diction was sharp and clear; my speech was slurred and marred by my impairment. In company, we had an understanding that she'd do the talking because her voice was much more coherent to the non-disabled ear. After many discussions, we came up with secret signs so she'd know exactly what word to use and how to articulate it in a posh way. We played a lot with our voices. Mary Elizabeth loved correcting me.

Our involvement with disability politics was always on the fringes. Being involved in campaigns often felt like too much hard work. We just wanted to live our lives. Participating in activism and politics didn't always involve a choice. We had to support our friends. Activism, we both agreed, was not fun.

Our friendship grew strong. Surnames and particular events – weddings, christenings and funerals – were flashpoints for us to pinpoint our familial connections. Her grandmother and my grandmother lived, or at least camped, together during the nineteen-seventies and eighties. Mary Elizabeth's discomfort was clear when discussions on family delved deeper. As a very young child with cerebral palsy, she had been fostered and then adopted into her settled family. During the

first few years of our friendship, aided by a lot of alcohol, she assured me she felt no insecurity. Those conversations were always prickly. Keeping my mouth shut was never easy. Mary Elizabeth vacillated between wanting to know her birth family and not wishing to complicate her life. When she was searching or questioning, comments from me were not welcome. There were invitations to come to my family events. She never said no; she never said yes. The suggestions always hung in the air between us, followed by an offer of a loan of a handbag, pashmina or a pair of shoes.

Once, when we were drunk, Mary's rage about her birth family surfaced, prodded by me.

Are you not curious to know who your real family are? Imagine if we were blood cousins.

Mary Elizabeth shouted at me, *Is CP not enough for you? Our bodies and the way we live? Our lives are already morphing into each other.* Then she cried, and my guilt made me wish this conversation wasn't happening. She continued, *You're lucky your family accepted what came out of your mother's womb. They love and support who and what you are. When you look at photos, you know who you belong to. Not everybody has that.*

Mary Elizabeth was just back from Boston, and it was near to our thirtieth birthdays, when the conversation nearly opened up again. Mary Elizabeth quickly shut it down: *Let's not carry this into the years of friendship we have ahead of us. We are family. Just leave it at that.*

I had assumed, naively, an idyllic narrative where she was raised with privilege and power. My presumption that her

settled family gave her access had caused its own problems. She had confidence, something that was lacking in me. My identity was often denied and ridiculed. Education was a battle, a struggle, a lifelong journey for me. She had been in mainstream education. Nonetheless, we found each other.

Privately she called me her sister and remarked on how circumstances call us to rely on our second family, our disabled family. In disability politics, as in gay politics, there is the sense that our families often don't want us or understand our lives, so you have the family who reared you, and you have your second family. Our friendship covered this. For us, it was our disability and our Traveller identity that encircled us.

From that day in the lift, her gay identity was prominent. Her coming out, telling her family, seemed to have been easy, natural. She did once ask about homophobia among Travellers. There was a tone to her question, a judgement. She was testing me.

As in most female friendships, we were engrossed in each other's love lives, real and imagined. There were more flings and romances in Mary Elizabeth's life than in mine. People found her interesting and looked at her. Not only because of her impairment, as there was an extra layer to their stares. She was sexy. Her haircut, her clothes, women took a second look. She had elegance and poise. Asking her had she gone to finishing school led to a messy row. An argument about class and ethnicity sprang from one of her skirts not fitting me. Our feminism didn't stop bitchy competitive arguments between us. She was generous and was always building my confidence.

However, in the early years of our friendship, both of us took a while to find a deep, unconditional giving.

There were parties and hangovers and lots of other non-disabled female friends who often brought out jealousy in me. Their able-bodiedness drove me demented. It was never about their physicality; it was more to do with status and the belief that able-bodiedness is the ultimate form of what it is to be human.

Moving through the world, the compromise was always about access versus independence. Does it matter how we get in as long as we get in? For me, it does matter. Mary Elizabeth was so confident. She believed she had an absolute right to gain entry regardless. The truth is, it's difficult for me to hold non-disabled people's attention. Often the situation can be frightening and intimidating. We move differently in the world. Their pace is fast, physically and verbally. Often a height difference adds a particular dynamic.

The activist in me was never off. Principles and compromises. The unspoken dialogue was about the settled thing. It didn't bother her that most of her friends were settled, but there was a limit to how many able-bodied or settled people were allowed into my circle. She could go and do things with her other friends that weren't possible with me. Eventually, those able-bodied friends fell away. Our lives moved at a different pace from theirs. Her life was now in tune with mine. Our milestones were in sync. We mutated into each other's identity. Holidays, weekends, everything was done at each other's side.

We would exhaust each other with endless arguments about why I would only have romantic relationships with certain types of men. Traveller men and men with disabilities have a particular type of masculinity. Mary Elizabeth thought this was narrowing my opportunities and was also inverted discrimination on my part. The variable was always dependent on mutual attraction. She thought political men were a pain in the arse, and whatever about them liking me, she always said oppression experienced by men didn't always enlighten them on their sexism. Fundamentally, intimacy and sexual attraction can't always be shared or understood by your best friend. This understanding was where we found growth in our friendship. I forgot how difficult it was for her as a gay disabled woman. In that sphere, 'normalcy' seemed to be on my side. Finally, a pathway opened up where we both recognised our differences in personality, sexuality and life history.

We moved through our twenties and thirties building our careers and nourishing each other. She nursed me through all my broken romances and promised that the day would come when 'a good man' would come into my life. She spent two summers at Boston University. During that time, she had a serious romance. We spoke and Skyped for two hours each week. Watching my best friend surrendering to love was captivating. After some time, her American love issued an ultimatum: Boston or nothing. A decision had to be made. The idea of Mary Elizabeth moving to another country was painful to me, too painful. There was a job here in Ireland that she was holding out for. As she was weighing the pros and

cons of moving, my heart was filled with familiar fear. Then she phoned one evening; the job here in Dublin was what she wanted. My prayers were answered.

A Friday evening in 2015. She and Helen had been out canvassing for marriage equality. My job was to have the dinner on. Helen was her real love. They were determined to get married, one way or another. There was a mixture of giddiness and nervousness in us. Ireland was changing. There must have been many couples like Helen and Mary Elizabeth all over the country wound up about the referendum results. Equally, many allies and friends like me felt a range of emotions from guilt to helplessness at knowing that maybe we could be doing more to support our gay friends. The dinner seemed measly by way of action. She had suggested doing a bit of canvassing to me. The day, the time, the area didn't suit. My excuses were always at the ready. Without question marriage equality was important to me. However, she wanted me to canvass my family and community. Nice, settled, leafy suburbia was left to one of her other friends. Canvassing Travellers felt pointed for me. She hadn't asked me to canvass people with a disability. She brought that rage in me to the surface once again. There was no conversation. We both looked at each other, knowing the only canvassing I'd be doing would be supporting her and Helen. That was the thing about our friendship. The careless needling of each other to remind us of just how 'woke' we both were.

A few years later, when campaigning for the recognition of Traveller ethnicity, Mary Elizabeth's support was nuanced.

There were opportunities to tackle her but it felt too complicated. Her silence was not a rejection of the notion but rather a reflection of the complicated business of internal oppression and identity politics. The marriage referendum was about a public vote. Traveller ethnicity, if put to the people, may very well have been rejected. Mary Elizabeth knew this. There was no point in us arguing about it.

The intensity of that Friday evening before the count seemed to spread right across the city, through each county, then the whole country. We were to meet on Dame Street the next morning and head towards Dublin Castle where the count would be announced. It was the first time in my life that this kind of act of generosity had been called upon. My vote was about affirming somebody else's identity and right to marriage and family life. Digging deep, the wounds of several generations were being healed, each cohort remembering what they lived through – the pain, the isolation, knowing that they would never be fully part of their own family, that they would never be an equal citizen. This day would change all that.

On that Saturday, it was clear that Ireland had embraced same-sex marriage. On Dame Street, my phone was buzzing. The rainbow flag was displayed on every shop front. People were carrying it, wearing it and not prepared to explain it. The crowds were large but magnanimous. Music was playing. Mary Elizabeth was giving me instructions to find her and Helen. The crowd parted. There we were, two minorities stretching and reaching and celebrating our diverse realities. Symbols and metaphors fall short of capturing the tenacity of humanity.

Finally, Mary Elizabeth came towards me, her power chair on high speed. She grabbed and hugged me like we were back in college. Embracing Helen, wiping her tears, it was a moment when private and public history collided. Acutely architected as part of the epochs of human shame, darkness, waste, the terror that defined and marked people's lives for so long now passed in the embers. We parted all that night, danced barefoot to music from the sixties, seventies and eighties. On the Sunday morning, we had breakfast. Mary Elizabeth, looking coy, showed me the diamond on her finger. Helen said, *We're ringing the registry tomorrow. A June wedding next year. Will you be our best woman?* Best beoir is a role given to Traveller matriarchs at wedding ceremonies. They can be cousins, widows, friends, a woman who is considered vital to the union and celebration. Also, a woman who is unattached and unmarried. This important role in the bride's life and in the marriage ceremony elevates her status. In Traveller culture, best woman is sometimes considered more important than best man.

Two years later, on the day that Traveller ethnicity was being officially recognised, Mary Elizabeth rang me pretending it was a casual call, enquiring about my plans. She asked would I meet up with herself and Helen. Later, during the early hours of the morning, after a lot of talking, dancing and singing with my Traveller friends and family, my phone kept buzzing. Mary Elizabeth had sent several texts and messages. The last one read, *Are you not coming over to celebrate with me?* That was four hours previously. I found myself ringing her

doorbell at 4 a.m. The light was on. She was up and waiting. Her celebration of Traveller ethnicity felt sore, lonely and tender. Mary Elizabeth produced flutes of champagne. We clinked glasses. There was a sadness in her that was almost physical as if there was a hidden fracture in her body. We talked some but mostly cried.

Helen, in a weird way, was locked out of this experience. She was aware of the depth of the occasion. There was a rawness that night, as there had been the night of the marriage referendum. Our intimacy held friendship, anger, shame and confusion. This was the moment she had decided to embrace, or at least acknowledge, her Traveller ethnicity. The fragility of our conversation rapidly sobered me up. Each time myself or Helen would try to move the conversation on, Mary Elizabeth would explode. Finally, we were both overwrought with tiredness. She wanted what I had with my family and I wanted what she had with Helen. Sometime during the morning, sleep took me. Mary Elizabeth had wrapped a Foxford rug around me, remarking that this must have been what our grandmothers looked like after a good row or ballyrag. Later over breakfast, Helen warned the two of us that we needed to stop the identity politics. *Traveller ethnicity should be a celebration for all of us in this house, not just you.* These words stopped me in my tracks. She turned to Mary Elizabeth, took her hand, and said, *Even if you don't own your Traveller ethnicity, it's still there, and you just have to accept that.* The wedding day had finally arrived. Mary Elizabeth had insisted that we book into a hotel room and that Helen

wouldn't see her until the ceremony. The night before her wedding celebration, Helen warned us to go easy on the Prosecco. Like all bridal parties, we had organised hair and nail treatments. We swapped expensive bracelets to mark our friendship. The blue wedding dress was tight and tulip-shaped, with a slit right up the front to echo the petals of her favourite flower. She was a stylish bride. Laughing, she assured me there would be at least three straight, single men at the ceremony. While tying the bow of her champagne-coloured shrug, it was my role as best woman to remind her that she was off duty; the role of matchmaker was given to the universe on that day.

Mary Elizabeth, knowing me the way she did, had encouraged my Traveller look. Nobody does weddings like us. My diamond-encrusted corset was spectacular. It was her present for my best beoir duties, presented in a gift-wrapped box. At first sight, my eyes dropped; the idea that she thought this was a Traveller thing infuriated me. She told me to shut up. Breathe, try it on. She pulled the strings, and we laughed so much. She had it made for me. Then there were the hair fascinators. Every detail that would accentuate my female Traveller CP body registered with her.

As time drew near for Mary Elizabeth to make her way down to the garden, we embraced. There was a white canopy, chairs covered in white satin with blue ribbons to match Mary Elizabeth's wedding dress. We moved towards the canopy, hand in hand, silently acknowledging the sequence of change, courage and contingency that is our friendship.

Winding back the Clock

Female lecturers who are wheelchair users tend to over-compensate. At least this one does. My clothes are hanging up like a uniform. The balance between the content of the lecture and its presentation can swing either way. Students don't listen to the content unless they're interested in what you're wearing.

Turning over in the bed, pushing the button down on the alarm. The snooze button is not an option. Rolling over, realising the pink Egyptian cotton sheets are stained. Dares, body clock... these last few months, losing track has become a habit. The new app on the phone takes a bit of time to set up. My feet to the floor, enjoying the luxury of underfloor heating in the master bedroom's en suite. The furniture is minimalist, just like a magazine. Pulling the sheets off the bed, throwing them in the washing machine, knowing there's no stain removal strong enough.

The hot water from the shower and various smells, from anti-ageing products to environmentally friendly packaging, are a reminder of my former life. Poverty gives you a hunger for luxury. The work paid off. The sacrifices. The compromises. The radio is blaring. The advertisements are a reminder to get registered to vote. Wondering how to get my name on the voting register in my new area; time is against me. The voting