

## **The blue starts at the feet**

**Mary de Sousa**

I watched from a mattress on the floor as every hour they turned, too easily, what was left of her. On the third day they wheeled me in a bed so we were eye to eye now, side by side, waiting.

'The blue starts at the feet,' the nurse told me, motioning me to the end of her bed and lifting the coverlet. 'How will I know?' I had asked. I was tired of watching but I didn't want to be buying another stale salad in the hospital canteen when she went. She had been there when I arrived and forever since.

The nurse, kind, tired, efficient had the skill all good nurses possess. She had watched me carefully and knew what I could bear. My mother had this same skill when this was her world, when she swished and bustled through these heavy doors with her blue uniform and steely eye.

There is no real darkness or silence in hospital just as, if you stay long enough, there is no real world outside anymore. There is always something emitting an unearthly white light, always something buzzing or humming, always someone groaning rhythmically, so I was awake each time they came and watched as they changed the pink hospital nightie, laid her arms neatly on top of the clean smoothed sheet once again, readying her for an appointment she kept missing. She was putting it on the long foot. Never mind the white paper dove tin-tacked to the door of her room to let everyone know. She wasn't having any of it.

So between times I sat and held the hand that could still open and reeled off the names of her family, mammy, daddy, the run through of the saints' names of her siblings. I dripped water into her mouth. And I sang. When she lost her mind near the end we could still belt out Fields of Athenry. I told her things I didn't believe and couldn't know. That her eldest son would be there waiting for her. That her Mammy would be there beside him. That everything would be alright. That I would take care of everything.

Sometimes, when more was to be done to her, I was shooed gently from the room and went to make a cup of tea at the nurses' station. The geriatric ward was bursting. Next door I glimpsed a Sikh man with a huge snow white beard sat upright as magnificent as a lion, a beatific smile on his face, surrounded by his children, the mirror covered with yellow silk. She would loved to have told me that story after work.

Each time I returned to her I checked. This time the small feet with the terrible bunions looked white in one light and pale violet in another.

I couldn't tell you when this started. When the worm first pushed itself into her brain. I don't even know if that is a good metaphor. The first thing to know about dementia is that you don't really know anything.

When it came I had to reconjure her fast but I was used to that. I have imagined her all my life even when she was standing right in front of me. She had moved a lot and left much of herself in Ireland so she didn't always know who exactly to be.

I looked again and the mottled bruising had passed the toes. It had begun. I panicked and searched for the little glass phial. Whenever I came home she sprinkled a few drops of lavender on my pillow. When I was small and stricken with asthma she sat with me reading books, breaking Karvol capsules under my nose (and fixing a scapular to my neck).

Now I leant close and held the little bottle under her nose. And then I searched my phone, turned up the volume and held it to her good ear. Luke Kelly rasping I sang a song for Ireland shocked us both back to life. From where I will never know she whispered 'thank you.'

There was no priest so I crossed her forehead with water and took a run at the Hail Mary. And she was gone.

Afterwards I visit her in the funeral parlour. She is so very little. Only the thinnest slice of her is left, her famine face carved deep. The face could be in black and white, sat outside a cottage with smoke curling out of the chimney behind. She is wrapped in a thick green shawl with paisley pattern. Don't be

fooled. She is disguised to the last. The shawl is from Pakistan. She spent two weeks there with me enjoying the fact she had made the journey more than the holiday. She dived into the life of the house, the cook, the driver, the guards, the garden and the birds. She watched a hoopoe and a blue roller and I laughed at her joy.

She holds a wooden rosary beads from Mexico in the good hand. They have hidden the feet and the trousers, too long, are extended so she looks tall for once. 'The trouble with me is, I'm butty,' she told me once lapsing in to Dublin slang in the changing room in Marks and Sparks as we hunt down the highly elusive *right* pair of trousers. I can see now we obviously didn't find them. And they were only outdone by the pair of shoes that fit. That, we both know, does not exist and heaven knows we searched the length and breadth of England and Ireland for them.

She had buried Ireland deep apart from trips home, but dementia pushed it back up to the surface. A badly behaved dog was a 'bowsie.' When she was on the rampage the accent slipped back to Chapelizod. In moments when she surfaced from the confusion she had found an old solution to our troubles. 'What if we all gathered round?' she asked me.

She taught me a million things and gave me the strength to reject what I didn't want - how to do hospital corners, how to be kind, how important words are, how difficult it is to raise four children alone. When I make her Christmas cake I see her hands in the bowl. What I didn't know she had also taught me was how to say goodbye to her.