Arts & Humanities

# We Call on Spring: A Short Story

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“It’s probably going to take a long time, you know,” Michael says. “That’s what the doctor told you, isn’t it?”

It can be a long old road: those were the doctor’s words. A long *auld* road, actually. The doctor grew up in my mother’s part of the country, and he seemed, yesterday morning, to need to gift her with occasional reminders of this fact by tripping, at intervals, from his golf-club grandiloquence — *at the present moment, Mrs. Cahill,*

*the matter we must most urgently consider is this* — into the kind of colloquialism that might have had him at the mart, leaning onto a mucky railing, muttering about animals. *Take it handy* — that was another of his counsels, and my mother nodded, the way you'd nod if you were at work, in the boss's office, and he'd just called you in to say your hours are being cut, but it's nothing to do with your performance, and we value you, and we need you, we're just doing this to you, and it can't be helped.

"I don't like that doctor," I say to Michael again, and he leans in closer to me, and puts his lips to my shoulder. We are back in Dublin now, in our house, the house we bought — sing it — at exactly the worst moment, five years ago, but that doesn't matter because — second chorus — we bought it as a home, not as an investment. We bought it to live in, not to sell on. That is the line, and no further questions are allowed. Neither are terms like *in it for the long haul*, which we used a lot at the beginning; yes, maybe this is why I took such issue with the doctor's words, but really, a long auld road? The news that her mind has already started to take a nail scissors to its own seams, that this has been going on behind our backs for maybe, already, three years, and then, *a long auld road*?

"Fucker," I say to Michael, and he nods, and also — and I don't let on that I have noticed this — burps slightly, and quickly turns it into a cough. We had Indian for dinner this evening, picked up from Namaste down the road, because a day like this does nothing if not take you off the hook for cooking. The debris is glaring back at us from the coffee table now — a day like this also allows you to eat your dinner on the couch — and I know he wants to have the poppadums I didn't finish, I know he is partly looking at them, partly thinking about them, while trying very hard only to look at and think about me, but I just don't have the energy to shove them over to his side of the table. I could use my foot, even; just a slow slide of the plate. But no. The whole strain and rottenness of the day has come down to bear on those poppadums, on the matter of those poppadums, and they will not be moved. I will crush them with my heel, get the greasy yellow bits of them caught up in my sock, before I will move them, or share them, or do anything with them which resembles easiness and normalcy. None of this is normal. The poppadums will remain uneaten on that plate.

Required, now, are the details which made today so trying, and so particular; they are as follows. My mother has, for a while, suspected that something is not right. I visit my parents once a month, sometimes more often, driving down there from Dublin on a Friday evening or a Saturday morning, and so you would think that I

might also have suspected that something has not been right, but I have a talent for denial in the face of the unpalatable — this does not relate to the poppadums, ordinarily I love poppadums — and, given that I have inherited this talent from my mother, this morning's visit to the doctor's surgery was an interesting one for us both. She, of course, was further along the road, the auld, etc., of realization than was I; she had asked me to be with her when she got the results, so obviously she had already made the initial visit and the follow-up visit without telling anyone, as is her thing. Topics, for example, discussed by my mother and me during our phone call of October 5, the night after the initial visit: *Downton Abbey*; the length of time you can drive a car with an out-of-date NCT disk; the question of whether we are by now too late into the camel-coat trend for it to make sense to buy a decent one; and a murder that was in all the papers that week. Awful. Now that I think of it, my mother mentioned something about that murder which was news to me, and which I was impressed at her knowing, given that I thought I had devoured everything about the case that was to be found online; did she just make that up, I wonder now? Is that part of it? Embroidering already unbelievable things with still more grotesquery, still more incongruity? But no; she must have heard it somewhere, from some of the girls — the girls! — at work. They gossip; they bring rumors and discoveries to one another's desks like buttered scones. When will that be taken from her? When will she no longer be able, listening to a story, to widen her eyes and shake her head and store it up for the next time I phone?

On the Friday night that my mother asked me to come to the doctor's with her the next morning, and explained the purpose of her visit, I burst into tears, and my mother looked sharply at me and said, I don't know what *you're* getting so upset about; I'm the one it's happening to, and I'm the one who has to tell your father — which is something, incidentally, which has yet to be done. That is my mother down to a tee, to phrase it in a way that perhaps might help the doctor to more easily understand her — or to understand her at all, which quite clearly he does not, going on the way he spoke to her yesterday, as though she was an old woman and not my mother, who is fifty-seven, and has skin of the kind I'd quite like to have now, actually; no, I'm serious. And also — have I mentioned this? — my mother is on Facebook. Properly on it, too, with a proper, witty Facebook persona, not in the way that most people's parents are on there, either lurking wordlessly as at the door of a room containing their teenage children, or running off at the mouth in all lowercase or all rowdy caps, with the punctuation skills of a fly.

What I mean is: this must be a mistake. “That doctor,” I say now to Michael. “That doctor. I don’t know about him.”

“But he did talk to other doctors,” Michael says.

“Well, who knows anything about them?” I say, and this time I do push, with a toe, at a poppadum. Michael looks at it: he can’t help himself. He went to a boarding school, and he has never been able to approach mealtime as anything other than a race for seconds.

“Do you want those?” I say, nodding toward the poppadums. “I just got these socks. They’re new. I only put them on this evening for the first time. They haven’t even been inside my shoes.”

“No, no,” says Michael, and he smiles at me, and he reaches a hand to my cheek, and he strokes me there: softly, so tenderly. *God*, it strikes me. He thinks I’m being nice. He’s thinking how lovely I am, at a time like this, for thinking of him.

Michael: I got him at a party. I took him for myself; he’d come there with my friend. My then friend, I should say, but what odds; she and Michael were only together a couple of weeks, and she and I weren’t close friends anyway, and now we’re Facebook friends, so it’s as though nothing ever happened. Something did happen, though, and it happened at that party; it was in a narrow room, with a back door that spilled out into a narrow yard, and I was in the yard, where the smokers and the hanging outdoor lights and the barbecue smells were, and I glanced for some reason into the house, and he was taller than anyone else in the room, and he was handsome, properly handsome, not just cute the way most boys of my acquaintance were at that stage, which was to say, they were good-looking for as long as the good looks of their early twenties would last: Michael’s looks were carved into him, and when, months later, I met his father and his brothers, I understood why, and how. Which is to say, yes, I was shallow, and I went after him for the way he looked, and everything else — and there was, it turned out quite to my astonishment, so much else — was a bonus.

Michael and I still look odd together, though we have by now both grown into the way we look, blurring the edges a fair bit, but back then, ten or twelve years ago, there were a number of people who were ready to believe that our being together was some kind of performance art. Because I am what the Americans call *homely*, which I discovered when an American told me I was homely and then went to great

trouble to correct my misunderstanding that this was to do with a fondness for cushions and interiors magazines. I'm just ordinary-looking, the fact is; I did not get my mother's skin, as I've mentioned, and I did not get her cheekbones, and I did not get her frame. I got most things from my father, including his charm, which is what I put to work on Michael that night, and how I found myself, three years later, walking up an aisle with one of those men and back down the same aisle with the other one. Charisma: people have it wrong, I think, when they talk about it, that business of being able to convince someone, in the moment that you're speaking to him, that he's the only person in the world. It's not that. It's not about focus, or intensity, or effort. It's about a kind of shape shifting; it's the ability to turn yourself, for those two minutes or ten minutes or two hours or twelve years — though it runs on empty a bit at the twelve-year point, admittedly — into precisely the kind of person your interlocutor is seeking, even — especially — if he doesn't know it himself. It's about reading cues at such a deep and constant level, and so unthinkingly, that you're doing something which must, surely, be meant for a marsh or a mountain forest, not for a pub or a party or a funeral meal, or wherever my father and I are to be found in our natural habitats.

And then sometimes we forget for a moment and we charm one another, my father and I. We let a bug get into the system. And these are the dangerous moments; these are the moments when the air in a room feels made out of tiny points of fire. Once upon a time, when I was new to him and when my having a mind of my own was only a source of darling comedy, this alignment of the mirrors must not have been a problem, but it is now, and Michael knows how to get me out of it; Michael knows how to catch my eye and remind me that over there is the door. And so Michael knows, too — of course he does — what is frightening me most about all of this.

"That's a long way off yet," he said to me this evening in the car.

"Look, your father will manage," he also said, but he didn't look at me as he said it.

And then, almost to himself: "You never know," a note of hope tilting his tone upward, and in the instant after the words came out of his mouth he seemed so locked into the shock of having said them that my first response was to tell him to watch the road, and asking him what he had meant — though we both know what he had meant — came second. He did not answer me. How could he answer me? These are the kinds of things we must be careful never to put into words.

Of course I am the one who should tell my father; or, at least, I should be there when it happens. My mother is waiting until next weekend to do it, because all this week my father will be under such pressure at school. My father is not at school, he is the headmaster of a school, and as they have been doing for the last twenty-five years at that school, they are adding on more rooms, they are expanding on the school's footprint, and it is my father's responsibility, this week, to see to it that the grant application for the newest addition is properly written, and properly submitted. He will be retired before they finish it, this new part of the school, but he is determined to get it started. He probably thinks that they'll name it after him.

Actually, they probably will.

When we first moved into this house, Michael and I, the previous owners had left their blinds on all the downstairs windows. They were Venetian blinds, the plastic white kind, and even before we brought our furniture in, I said it to Michael, I said, those blinds have to go. Michael nodded. Oh, yeah, he said, we'll get rid of them. But I meant they had to go straightaway, and so as soon as the first of the kitchen chairs was carried in through the door, I was up on it and I was lifting the first of the blinds out of their fixtures at the top of the window frames. I could not imagine spending even a day in the house with them, they reminded me so strongly of that school. Of weekday afternoons in the eighties, when it was my job to turn the rod and ease the room into darkness so that the projector could be turned on, and we could have the *comhra*, that clicking through the illustrated slides with which the teachers, one of them my father, had the job of teaching us to be able to string together a sentence — any sentence, sentences about shops and ice creams and fictional school days and fictional families — in the language they were duty-bound to force on us, the language we would drag with us until we were eighteen, when we could leave it, neglected and exhausted as an old mule, at the exam-hall door.

My God, what am I talking about: Irish? What does it matter whether I speak Irish or not? I wanted to get rid of those awful, off-white blinds; they were miserable-looking, they were mean. We replaced them with these wooden ones, or ones which, as the Argos catalogue put it, had the look of wood. And they do. They're brown. They're grained. They're closed, now, against the night.

I think — it's almost ten — that Michael would like to watch television, and so would I, but there is a thickness to our silence at the moment — there is a heartbeat to it — and I do not want, yet, to be without it. I pick, with a fingernail, at a piece of rice or something lodged between my teeth, and Michael sighs; perhaps he thinks I am

biting my nails, out of stress, out of nervousness, out of fear. He leans forward a little so that he can see my face more fully. Naturally enough, he is waiting for me to cry. That would certainly make things — not easier exactly, but clearer. The moment would become the kind of moment with which we would both know precisely what to do. I would cry, and he would do things with his arms, his strong arms, his arms he has been taking to the gym every Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday night. In other words, he has been in training for this moment for years: am I not going to give it to him? Cry it out, cry it flat, this thing, this broiling. But I can no more cry right now than I can sit down at a piano and play a concerto, or a symphony, or whatever it is that people play; whatever they decide to play, I suppose. What is actually worrying me is that I almost feel I could laugh. At what, exactly? But there it is, yes, there I can feel it again, coming up in me like carsickness. And not gateway laughter, either; I do not mean the kind of laughter that will dissolve pitifully into a vale of tears. I mean the giggles; I mean something extremely undignified and extremely wrong. I mean something appalling, so now I am acting the way I do when I am carsick: I am taking deep breaths, and keeping my eyes closed, and turning toward the living-room window beside me as though it is the window of a taxi, and I am leaning into it, counting down the streets to home. There is a wheel, and it will turn.

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