

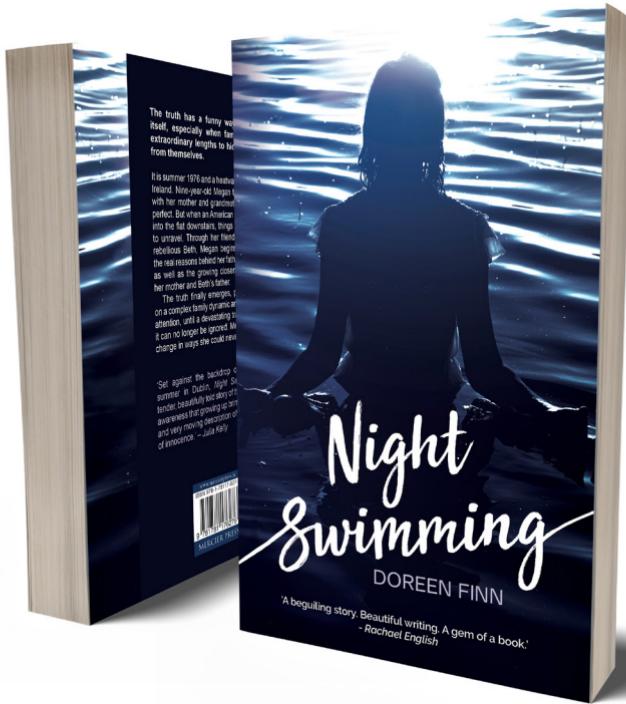


Night swimming

DOREEN FINN

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Night Swimming

DOREEN FINN



MERCIER PRESS

For Emily and David, and for Mark

MERCIER PRESS
Cork
www.mercierpress.ie

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ISBN: 978 1 78117 627 6

A CIP record for this title is available from the British Library

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Printed and bound in the EU.

Prologue

My father was disappeared. He didn't disappear himself; it was done to him. He had no control over it, and he was gone before he knew about me, before he had a chance to meet his only child.

His name was Felipe and he was Bolivian. My mother met him in art college in Dublin and they fell in love. Felipe was a photographer – a brilliant one, apparently. He'd left Bolivia because of the junta and because he was on a list of some sort, a list of wanted people, the ones who went against the military, who spoke out about atrocities, who stood up publicly for what was right. Men and women, no one was spared. Felipe was marked because he had photographed protests by the miners and had them published in foreign newspapers. His father had publicly criticised the president. Before I was born, he went back to Bolivia. He took photos of military brutality, of mothers whose sons had been taken away. *Los Desaparecidos*, they called the ones who vanished. The Disappeared. Gone, into thin air, never to be seen again.

Except they weren't anywhere near thin air. They were buried, in spots around Bolivia. No crosses marked their resting places, no flowers were laid. And families spent the rest of their lives seeking the truth.

A bit like me, I suppose.

My mother never told me any of this, mind you. In fact, she never told me anything at all about Felipe. Instead, it was left to me to find out about him, to sort through the pieces of the puzzle and complete the picture. Clues dotted our house. Photographs. Paintings. Books. Old cuttings from newspapers, brittle and yellowed.

It wasn't easy; I was only nine that summer. Up until then I

Night Swimming

hadn't worried too much about my father. We lived our lives without him, and it didn't matter to me. I was a child. The patterns of my life were set, the rhythms slow and undemanding. My mother, my grandmother and I lived together, and we were happy, mostly. Fathers didn't really figure, until Beth arrived. Beth Jackson, with her questions and curiosity, making me think about things that hadn't bothered me up to then. Beth with her New York sensibilities and her bohemian parents. The changes that were wrought.

The Americans brought us many things that summer. New food. Cocktails. Quesadillas and margaritas, frittatas and mimosas, our tongues tied on the unfamiliar sounds. They bestowed upon us new music that made my mother's small record player judder in the swelter of those white, heatwaved nights. Led Zeppelin. Pink Floyd. The Ramones. The Doors. Such a change from the music we habitually listened to up to then. They gave us new ways of looking at the world, broke us out of our Irish slumber. The Americans gave us truth, though we may not have liked it at the time.

The truth has a funny way of outing itself, especially when we go to extraordinary lengths to hide it – even from ourselves. Like the heat during the relentless sunshine of those months, the truth emerged, vapour-like and shimmering. Like the heat, it was insistent, pressing itself on us, demanding our attention. It could no longer be ignored.

And we were never the same afterwards.

JULY

The ad in the evening paper was short and to the point: *Self-contained garden flat, two bedrooms, close to city centre. Available immediately.* I wondered why it didn't mention the fresh white paint on the walls, the tiled hall floor, the new front door. Jim, our handyman, had replaced our old, splintered door with its peeling paint, and in its place was a door he'd salvaged from somewhere else. Jim had sanded it, replaced the broken pane with new bubbled glass, and painted it bright red. Claret, it said on the tin. My grandmother, Sarah, said she had paid for the ad by the letter, so anyone interested in the finer details of the house could see for themselves when they came to view it.

At nine, I had no interest in thinking about letter counts in the small ads. It was far too hot, anyway. The heat palpitated, wrapped tightly around the still, summer days. Sarah made me wear a sun hat, a ridiculous thing made of leather that my mother had been given as a present from South America years before. It was a farmer's hat, or a rancher's, designed to keep the sun off while galloping across grassy plains. Definitely, it wasn't meant for an Irish child. The crown was too big for me, the brim wide and flat.

My mother liked South America. She had faded newspaper photos on her studio wall of miners' strikes in Bolivia, pictures of the Andes, a painting of a *cholita* in national dress. A line of small paintings of tango dancers she had done years before, blurred to show their movement across the page, hung on the wall. They had been there since I was a baby, and even though they were kept out of the light, they were starting to show their age. Edges curled, the red of the girls' dresses less vivid than it had been. Alizarin crimson,

July

the paint was called. My mother, Gemma, still had a tube of it, well squeezed now, the remaining paint drying inside the small metal casing. Felipe's mother was Argentinian, a dancer. Felipe taught my mother how to tango. I imagined her, dark hair in a bun, a rose between her teeth, tapping out rhythms on a wooden floor with hard-soled shoes. She didn't much like to talk about any of it – Bolivia, South America, the tin mines – so I didn't ask her. Instead, I looked it up in the encyclopaedia. Bolivia was in the southern hemisphere, so they had their winter when we were in the middle of summer. It was famous for its salt flats, for having the highest capital city in South America, and for being the place where Che Guevara died. Gemma had a poster of him on the back of the attic door, all cigar, black beard, blacker beret. Felipe had met him once, Gemma said. The details were fuzzy and though I pestered her, she never had much to say about it. It was hot in Bolivia, but it couldn't have been as hot as it was in Dublin that summer.

Sarah got up extra early each morning to do the gardening, and was back in the house by breakfast time, dabbing her forehead with a tea towel. She said the heat made her feel like an old woman, but she didn't look that old. Her hair was going grey, but she still wore it in a bun at the back of her head. Her skin was brown from all the garden work, and her eyes looked bluer than ever. I got used to sweat trickling down my skin, gathering in the creases at my elbows and knees. I tasted salt on my fingers, on my lips. My eyes hurt from squinting. Sleep did not come easily, despite open windows and a single sheet draped across my big bed.

Heatwave was a new addition to my vocabulary. We were in the middle of a heatwave. If I concentrated hard enough, I could almost see the heat in the still air, zigzagging in jagged lines around me, mixing with the smell of petrol and dirty fumes in the wake of passing buses. Women fanned themselves with folded magazines. Children soaked each other with garden hoses. Tar melted blackly

Night Swimming

on the roads. Dire warnings were given on the news, in the papers, on radio bulletins, all saying the same thing: *water is in danger of running out*. Sarah forbade my mother and me from having baths unless it was absolutely necessary. She decanted all used water into a special bucket kept outside the back door. This she poured over the plants each evening. My mother remarked that Sarah was indeed being a good citizen. My grandmother replied that caustic comments should be kept out of the conversation when young ears were pricked. I was just surprised that Gemma even noticed the bucket. Maybe it was the crazy weather, the torpor driving her out of her attic, downstairs to where it was marginally cooler.

Heat made people funny. That's what I heard Sarah say to Mrs Brennan in the shop one day as she handed over money for our groceries. We're better off in the rain, was the woman's reply. At least we know where we stand. I began to observe people around me, my attention tuned to the slightest change. Miss Buckley, the retired teacher across the road, stopped going to daily Mass. Our family doctor took to wearing sandals to work. Mrs Doherty next door did no housework. Instead, she lay on a blanket all day and read books, offering her husband sandwiches when he came home from work. The husband, in turn, dug a huge trench the length of the garden and filled it with unsuitable plants – eucalyptus, dahlias, sunflowers – that Sarah said would die with the first hint of cold weather.

But the biggest change was in our family. I don't know if I can blame the heatwave, or if the Americans were the reason it all happened. Maybe we were just biding our time, and they were the catalyst we had been waiting for.



The Americans made an appointment to view the flat. Within five minutes of their wandering around the whitewashed interior, admiring the two small bedrooms with their white linens and

July

quilted bedspreads, the red sofa and mismatched armchairs, the tiny kitchen and the hot sunlight that poured onto the wooden floor, we had new lodgers. The French doors had been thrown open in the kitchen, but the white voile curtains hung listlessly on either side of the doors, cotton folds unmoving. It was equally hot inside and out.

It was just the mother and daughter that afternoon. Judith and Beth. A double act that didn't seem to work – even then, on that first encounter. Judith touched her daughter constantly, chattered too brightly when including her in the conversation. Beth, beautiful and tanned, kept her gaze on the garden, the walls, anything but her mother's face. She was older than me, her hair like bleached silk lying obediently down her back. Words streamed from Judith as she looked around, her Americanisms and inflections incongruous in the unmoving Dublin afternoon. Sarah stood to the side, allowing this pleasant stranger to peek behind doors, test light switches, peer into cupboards. Judith was older than Gemma, her skin less smooth, her long hair shot through with silver. This was nothing unusual; most mothers were older than Gemma. Judith's voice was gentle and I could have listened to her speak all day.

Judith twisted the knobs on the cooker. It was ancient, enamelled white with an oven door that stuck when the temperature inside got too high, but it was kept clean by Sarah, scrubbed so hard that the enamel was lucky to survive. So said Gemma.

'Are there saucepans?' Judith asked. She opened cupboard doors, taking stock of what was stacked in neat piles inside.

Sarah showed her where the pots and pans were kept, in a cupboard beside the cooker. Like cups, they were stacked inside each other, the lids placed neatly beside them.

'I cook,' Judith said, almost apologetically. 'It's what I love to do, and I'm always in the kitchen.' Her hands stilled on the countertop. 'I don't know what I'd do without it.'

She was the first person I had ever met who confessed to loving

Night Swimming

cooking. Cooking, like so much domestic work in those days, was a chore for most people's mothers, drudgery to be got through and tolerated. Food tended to be unchanging. Roast chicken on Sundays, leftovers on Mondays. The rest of the week was a steady stream of stew or shepherd's pie, lamb chops and potatoes, and fish on Fridays. I rarely thought of food. I neither liked it nor disliked it. It simply was.

The Americans were in Ireland for a year. Judith's husband was a professor of literature, taking up a post in Trinity College. She was leaving their furniture in their apartment in New York. They were subletting it to a friend of theirs, so there was no need to worry about anything. Was the heat always this intense in Ireland? Didn't it usually rain all the time? She hoped the grocery store wasn't too far away. Beth was going to start school in September. *Sixth grade.* I tried it out, but it sounded wrong. What was a grade? And so it began, the introduction of new words, the burgeoning of vocabulary. Over the summer I would test out these new sounds, see how they fitted alongside all those I already knew. As Judith spoke, Sarah smiled at times, made sounds of agreement, shook Judith's proffered hand when it was decided that they would return the following morning with her husband. Chris.

'So, Beth, how do you like Ireland?' Sarah asked the blonde girl.

Beth, leaning against the door frame, shrugged, her eyes fixed on the garden and Sarah's abundance of flowers. 'It's okay, I guess.'

Judith smoothed Beth's shoulders, her palms flat on the girl's skin.

Beth pulled angrily away from her mother. 'Would you stop doing that, Mom? Jeez.'

In the silence that followed, Beth jammed her hands into the pockets of her shorts. She sniffed and tossed her head. A wasp buzzed in a fold of the sheer summer curtain. Sarah knocked it to the floor and stood on it with the toe of her shoe.

'Oh my,' Judith said. 'I do hate those things. I'm allergic.'

July

'Nothing to worry about,' Sarah replied, picking the striped corpse up by a crushed wing and flinging it out the door. Nothing scared her. She left jars around, coated inside with jam and filled with water, enticing greedy wasps to their death. It worked every time.

'Why don't you show Beth the garden, Megan?' Sarah's hands were on my back, propelling me outdoors. It wasn't a request; it was an order.



We stood, the American girl and I, on the hot, cracked slabs of the patio, among Sarah's plants that she kept in large, terracotta tubs. It was my job to water them each morning, before the sun got too hot and burned them. I knew all their names: lobelia, pansy, begonia, petunia, marigold, phlox, sweet pea. And the funny names: Tumbling Ted, Black-eyed Susan, Sweet William, love-in-a-mist. I liked painting them, their petals bleeding colour onto the page of my sketchbook, the paper wavy from watercolours, my fingers paint-stained, like my mother's. Usually the hose for watering the flowers snaked in loops around the pots, but now it was coiled neatly at the side of the garden, unused since the water restrictions had been announced. Hairline cracks spidered the sides and edges of the tubs. I loved watering the flowers because I could splash my bare legs and feet without being told off for wasting water.

Neither of us spoke for a moment. My hands hung by my sides. Beth chewed on a thumbnail. A few feet away, a bird pecked at a dry piece of earth that Sarah had turned over earlier. It crumbled and fell apart. The flowers drooped on their stems. The heat had sucked everything dry.

'I didn't want to come here,' said Beth, breaking the silence that had gathered around us. 'I'm supposed to be at camp now. With my friends. Not here in stupid Ireland.'

I felt compelled to defend the place of my birth. 'It's not stupid.'

Night Swimming

Her snort was derisive as she walked away, plucking a bloom from the clematis, dismantling it in one furious movement. The petals drifted to the ground, and she snatched another, demolishing it even quicker.

I glanced back at the house, but sunlight winked on the French doors and Sarah's face was hidden. Destroying flowers was forbidden, in the same way that stealing and smoking were forbidden.

At the end of the garden, the apple tree overshadowed the rambling rosebush, which scrambled over the back wall, smothering the grey bricks and the old wooden door. Sarah didn't like me scaling the walls. They were old, like the house, and in danger of crumbling. My friend Daniel lived next door, and he was forever climbing the wall that separated our gardens. Nothing ever crumbled beneath him, and he weighed more than I did.

I trailed after Beth, not wishing to seem as though I was following her, which I was. She pulled raspberries from the canes that grew at the bottom of the garden and pushed them into her mouth one by one. Juice wet the corners of her mouth, but I didn't worry that Sarah would see her. Berries were for eating. Flowers were for admiring, but any of the berries that grew in the long, narrow garden were available for consumption.

'These are so good!' Beth managed to say around a mouthful of raspberries. 'This yard is pretty cool.' She pointed at the house next to ours, where Mrs Doherty lay unseen on a checked wool blanket, sunglasses on, a book in her hand. I could see her from my bedroom window, but after a few days she wasn't that interesting any more. She wore her swimsuit and covered her skin in baby oil, and if she was lying close enough to the wall, sometimes I could smell the oil, its soapy sweetness at odds with the heavy scent of Sarah's summer flowers.

'Who lives there?'

'The Dohertys.'

July

'Are they old?'

I wondered. The Dohertys were older than Gemma, older, possibly, than Judith. It was hard to tell. 'Probably. I think so.'

'And who's in there?' Beth pointed at Daniel's house, shading her face with her hand.

'My friend.'

'What's her name?'

'He's a boy. Daniel.'

'Cool! How old is he?'

'Nine, like me. Why?'

Beth's shrug was fluid. 'Too young. Pity. Isn't there anyone my age around here?'

Curiosity bit me. 'How old are you?'

Beth shook her hair back. It flipped over her shoulder and settled into straight lines again. 'Twelve.' She made it sound like twenty-five. 'I'll be thirteen in November.'

The apple tree, which Sarah claimed was over fifty years old, shadowed the ground. Apples, tiny and rock hard, were beginning to form along the branches. The previous owners had planted it when their first child was born. I often wondered if they ever thought of the tree, if they even remembered it.

Sarah and Judith stepped outside.

Sarah called to me. 'Megan, is everything okay?'

'Everything's fine.' I waved down at her.

'Don't pick any apples.'

'I won't.'

Beth laughed for the first time. 'What are you, some kind of good girl nerd?' She eyed me more closely. 'Do you do everything your mom tells you?'

'Sarah's not my mother. She's my grandmother.'

Beth nodded as she yanked at a branch of the tree. The apples, tiny and hard and green, held on tight. A wind chime, hung by

Night Swimming

Gemma before I was born, dangled above our heads. Beth shook the branch again, then gave up, letting it spring back into place. ‘So do you live here or are you just visiting?’

‘I live here.’

‘That’s cool. I wouldn’t mind living with my grandma. You must get to do plenty of stuff your mom doesn’t like.’

I shrugged one shoulder. ‘Not really.’

‘I thought grandmothers were pretty relaxed about letting you do stuff. I know mine is.’

How could I have explained to Beth that Sarah was as strict as any mother? She expected me to behave and be good, and I tried as much as I could not to let her down. I was her only grandchild.

‘So where’s your mom today?’ Beth reached up to make the wind chimes tinkle. They had barely moved since the heatwave started.

Gemma had gone out earlier and had yet to return. She bought all her paint from a wholesaler on the north side of the city, the father of a friend of hers from art college. He always gave her a good rate and she never went to anyone else. ‘Getting paint.’

‘Getting paint? What for?’

‘She’s an artist. She paints cards and people.’ My mother’s paintings were, quite simply, beautiful. Her studio in the attic was off-limits to me most of the time, but when I could, I went up and leafed through her pictures. I could never fully reconcile the pre-occupied woman with the joyful, brightly coloured paintings that she produced day after day.

Beth laughed again. ‘You mean she paints portraits.’

I was slightly unbalanced by her tone. ‘What?’

‘You said your mom paints people. It’s called portrait painting.’

She was beginning to get on my nerves. ‘I know what portraits are.’

‘I just don’t think that people would let her put paint on them,

July

which is what it sounds like when you say she paints people.' Beth pulled my plait. She leaned towards me. Her smile was mocking. 'Megan.'

I reclaimed my braid, moved away from her.

Sarah and Judith joined us by the apple tree. Judith fanned her face with a handkerchief. 'This heat! And all anyone told us about was the rain. All it does in Ireland is rain. That's what they say. All it does is rain, all day, every day, and that's why it's so green.'

Sarah laughed. 'Not this summer. I think the rain has forgotten about us.'

Judith touched the back of Beth's hand. 'Are you two girls having fun?'

'The greatest,' Beth muttered.

I glanced at Sarah. Her eyebrows were raised.

Judith's smile brightened. 'Oh good! It will be so lovely to have Megan living upstairs.' She put her hand on Beth's arm. I wondered how Judith couldn't see that her daughter retracted each part of her that her mother touched, as though she couldn't bear to feel the contact. The girl's anger hovered around her, hotter, almost, than the afternoon sun. 'Honey, are you ready to go get Daddy? We're going to move in tomorrow.'

'Dynamite.'

Judith's voice tightened. Her smile remained fixed, but it was a fake smile now, too obvious to be real. 'Now don't be like that, sweetie. We're going to have a fun time here and look, you already have a new friend.'

I wasn't sure I wanted Beth living so close. I liked things the way they were: Sarah, Gemma and me in our own, shrink-wrapped world. Daniel next door. New people could tilt the scales, disrupt our equilibrium.



The truth has a funny way of outing itself, especially when families go to extraordinary lengths to hide it – even from themselves.

It is summer 1976 and a heatwave is gripping Ireland. Nine-year-old Megan thinks her life with her mother and grandmother is almost perfect. But when an American family moves into the flat downstairs, things quickly begin to unravel. Through her friendship with the rebellious Beth, Megan begins to question the real reasons behind her father's absence, as well as the growing closeness between her mother and Beth's father.

The truth finally emerges, pressing itself on a complex family dynamic and demanding attention, until a devastating tragedy means it can no longer be ignored. Megan's life will change in ways she could never predict.

'Set against the backdrop of a rare hot summer in Dublin, *Night Swimming* is a tender, beautifully told story of the burgeoning awareness that growing up brings. A magical and very moving description of love and loss of innocence.' – *Julia Kelly*