

Prologue

I never was much of a gambler in life, while I loved the idea of hitting the jackpot, the idea of losing more, struck a sense of fear in me. So, the realisation I made shortly after my death, that every day of our lives is in fact a gamble, seemed odd. Each day we subconsciously hedge our bets, blindly awaiting the outcome of these choices, unaware how they are changing our lives. These tiny incidental decisions silently build to shape and mould our future bringing about the major changes we just can't help but notice.

My death may have happened in a moment but that moment came about because of one decision I made two years previously. Sitting alone on a frozen beach in the midst of winter, I'd desperately been trying to take control of my life. As is the way with life, I could never have imagined the impact that one decision would have.

But does anyone ever truly die? Every person leaves an imprint of their time here with even the shortest of lives leaving the biggest legacies on the hearts of those who loved them. A single memory acts like a solitary spark keeping the embers of love burning through the most painful separation. It's these memories that bring warmth to my heart, these are now my priceless possessions.

It is often said that everything must come to an end and whilst that's true, everything must also have a beginning. This story starts at the beginning of my end.

Chapter 1- Petal on the Beach

I stand alone on the cold stone shore, my eye caught by the frost coated pebbles sparkling brightly in the rays of the winter sun. I look over to the boisterous sea, noticing how the sunbeams seem to dance upon the waves like magical fairies, delicately creating the most stunning reflected light.

The serenity of the ocean is like a magnet for me in times of turmoil, when my mind is troubled and I need some time to think. Today, I sit here in fear of my own future, so scared I'll make the wrong decision, subconsciously I've stopped making any at all. Unsurprisingly, my life has ground to a halt and as I sit upon the ice cold shore on a perfect winter's day, I know this has to change.

In the distance, I see the silhouette of a lone figure standing by the shore, a middle aged lady who appears to be throwing petals into the ocean. Bright red petals boldly stand out against the sky as the breeze violently whips them across the ocean. My eye is caught by the swirling red petals, I'm struck by how beautiful they look suspended precariously above the ocean, held by the force of the wind whilst almost sparkling against the crystal blue sky.

Returning to my quiet contemplation when the last of the petals have been thrown, I casually note as the lady leaves the shore. My gaze once again rests on the picture perfect scene before me. How can I make my life as serene as this view? How am I going to take that first step? Where do I even begin to try to break this cycle I feel trapped in? Suddenly, there's a softly spoken voice from behind me, momentarily making me wonder if I've imagined it.

"There's nothing more beautiful than the beach on a bright winter's day is there love?" I turn my head to see the middle aged lady with her empty basket stood beside me, this time speaking a little louder. I hadn't even noticed her coming towards me, my troubled mind commandeering all my senses.

"No, I don't think so, I don't think there's anything better than this. Maybe it's weird but I much prefer the beach on a winter's day."

"I do too love, on a day like this it's hard to believe anything bad can happen in this world. It's just so perfect. It's magical."

"Do you mind if I ask why you were throwing petals into the ocean? From a distance, it really looked beautiful." I eagerly await her reply, my curious nature peaked by the intrigue.

She smiles at me briefly before raising her head towards the shore line before replying "I do it every year on my birthday, you see my husband passed away a few years ago, we'd been married for 32 years. I used to wonder how I managed it, but truthfully, I wish it had been so much longer. Well, every year since we first met he would buy me a dozen red roses on my birthday, in the beginning of our courtship he would have to save up for weeks to buy them. So after he died, I remember waking up on my first birthday without him and there were no roses in my vase. It made me feel like I'd lost him all over again. I never realised how much those flowers meant to me, it broke my heart to look upon an empty vase that year. So I decided, I would buy him the roses instead, as a thank you to him for all the years of happiness he gave me. It's become a new tradition for me, it helps me feel close to him. Now, each birthday I wake up to the familiar roses in my vase like they always were and for that day at least it feels as if nothing has changed".

"What a beautiful way to honour your husband, turning something so painful into something so positive is truly exceptional. I hope I meet someone as special to me as he was to you. "

"You will love, my mother used to always say to me, follow your heart as it's only your heart that knows the way to love. If you have an impulse to do something but you don't know why just do it because if you follow your heart you cannot fail. That's how I met my husband, as soon as I saw him I knew he was mine. That's not to say we didn't have our problems but when love is right the crinkles, even the deep ones, straighten themselves out. The only love that fails is the love that was never right in the first place. But when it's right even during the darkest times love will always remain, silently waiting for the moment to burn bright once again. Oh I'm going to shut up now, I sound like an old romantic fool and I don't want to bore you."

“No, you don’t bore me at all, your story is beautiful and inspiring so thank you for sharing it with me.”

“It’s been a pleasure love, have a lovely day. I hope to meet you again in the future to hear all about your own beautiful love story.”

I bid the lady farewell, feeling a tear come to my eye, what an extraordinary conversation to have with a stranger when I came here to find the confidence to follow my heart. To make the decision I’ve been fighting against for so long. I wonder to myself, if I go for it, does that count as following my heart or being foolish? How can I know the difference?

A strong cold gust of wind forces me to pull my coat tighter around myself. Looking down to my feet, I notice a single blood red rose petal gently resting by my foot. I watch it being carried by the wind to the other side of me. I’m struck by how vulnerable it looks there on the beach against the hard stones. The dark velvet redness of the petal gently rests for a moment against a chalk white pebble next to me. I quickly retrieve my phone to take a photo. This can be my symbol of hope, a reminder that nature is kind and gentle even if I find it hard to believe right now. A sense of being trapped in a crazy world of uncertainty and inner fear has become my personal prison lately. When I look at this photo I’ll always remember the beautiful story the lady told me. This symbolic petal of hope belongs to her husband after all. Just as I take the photo, the breeze whips the petal away and I watch as it bounce and tumble across the icy stones, out over the sea in honour of its rightful owner.

Sitting alone once again on the beach surrounded by the calming influence of the sea and the gentle squawk of the birds above, I finally know what it is I need to do. I have to move away completely. I have to go to a place where no one knows me, no one expects anything from me and most of all no one cares about me. I know this might sound like I’m enforcing isolation on myself but I’m not. Sometimes people close to you can stifle you with their concerns and influence you to do things you didn’t want to because they think they know what is best for you. I want to know that I’m strong enough to stand on my own two feet, to really try to change my life and to live my own dream. If I fail then I can get some comfort from the fact that I’ve tried. I’d rather regret what I have done than what I haven’t done.

I think back to the last time I felt really happy and carefree, it was last year and as a treat my friend Casey and me took a trip to Dublin. For one long week we basked in the July sunshine and explored the strange but familiar city. Our nights were spent in the pubs meeting people and laughing like we had never laughed before. I often think back to that week and I know it was just a holiday. I know they never last but what if they can? Maybe I could make it work? I'll never know if I don't try and if it all went wrong, it's only a plane ride to come home again. I've absolutely nothing to lose and if there is ever a time to make a massive jump then surely it's when I have nothing to lose?

"What the hell are you moving to Dublin for" is my father's reaction; he isn't pleased with the news, especially when I tell him I'm going in less than a week.

"I've nothing to lose here; I've no job, no money, nothing. What can I lose except pride, dad?"

Equally displeased is my mother who thinks any city is far too dangerous for her daughter especially ones in other countries. "Autumn, can't you reconsider and move to Exeter instead or Bristol if you have to. There's no need to go so far or to another country for god's sake."

"I want to go to another country. I want to see how it feels to live on my own two feet. I'm 25 and still live at home with my parents I don't want to be here at 40. I need to do this."

"We're your family, we can help you move out and get a place of your own?"

"No, no, no! I don't want to always be struggling to make ends meet, working a job that I hate, living for just two days out of every seven wishing away my whole life until I'm dead with nothing to show for it."

"All you'll ever have to show for your life is children; you don't need to go to Ireland to have a baby."

"I don't want to have a baby, not yet, there are things I want to do and see. How can I have a child or a relationship when I hate myself and my pathetic life?" I feel the tears well up in my eyes as I sit at the kitchen table with my head in my hands.

“You’re not pathetic and neither is your life. We all have times when it’s hard, things seem to go wrong whatever you do but running away never solved anything. Now more than ever you need your family.”

“Mum, I know I have a family who care which is why I can go away. It isn’t forever and if it all fails I can always come home but at least I’ll have tried. I just need to try.”

“Look Autumn” my dad walks over from the doorway where he has been observing this, he gently ushers for my mum to step aside before kneeling in front of me.

“If this is what you want to do then of course we support it, you’re old enough to make your own decisions but you don’t know anyone in Dublin, we have no family there and you have to understand why we’re concerned.”

I look at my mum and see the flame of anger in her eye, almost as if dad has committed the biggest act of betrayal. I do understand their concern but I can’t let it stop me.

The place I once called home has become my prison; its gentle loving arms have turned to thorns that chain me here against my will through fear, guilt and familiarity. We’re all scared of change but there comes a time when we have to either embrace it or get left behind with opportunity and hope leaving us in the same cold bed we made all those years ago. Now, most of my friends have moved away. I feel as if my home has become a land of strangers. The streets once awash with familiar faces is now a shallow stream of unrecognisable faces enjoying the fruits of their retirement but making me feel like an outcast in my own town.

I, like my friends moved away to university. I did my degree in Drama, my parents never thought it was a real subject. I can’t count the times they’d begged for me to do something “proper” like Mrs Jones’s daughter down the road who was training to be a solicitor. However, I loved the world of film, of theatre and drama but my confidence always held me back. The parts I craved always eluded me. I had a few minor roles, one in a company promotional video but my big break was providing the voice for an animated cartoon. But apart from that, things didn’t really plan out the way I thought they would.

Something told me that I had to move away or I'd never get anywhere. I never felt good enough, as if I didn't deserve these parts. Gradually, I began to believe it, as a result my confidence plummeted. I'd search auditions but always find reasons why I couldn't go. I became scared of them and in the end I stopped trying altogether. That's how I ended up where I am now, loathing myself and my situation.

Living back with my parents, wallowing in my own self-pity, wasting time that could've been used doing something productive. I'd said I was only coming back for a few months but that was over a year ago. Anytime I thought of leaving, the same fear and excuses that stopped me from auditioning always managed to keep me right where I was. Trapping me in a cell without walls, a prison of my own making.

Now I've made the decision to move I feel free, as if a weight has been lifted off my shoulders but I'm still surrounded by a fog of nerves. When I think about what I'm going to do my hands start to shake but I know I have to do it. Don't they say you should always do the things you fear first?

As the magnitude of my decision becomes clear, the fear starts to grow. I begin to tell my friends, explaining to them my theory of how it will all work out. But as I begin to convince them, I find myself becoming less convinced and ever more fearful of my chosen path. But like the lady on the beach said today, if you follow your heart you cannot fail. Although I can't see how that success will look right now, I know if I just believe in myself then it will lead me to a happier place than I am in now and that's good enough for me.

Chapter 2 - Plane to Dublin

I've never thought of myself as a brave person but as I board the plane that'll take me miles away from everyone I've ever known or loved, I realise that I don't know many people who could do this. There isn't much that's braver than putting your faith and security at the foot of your dreams and continuing to chase them despite having no idea if things will work out. However, it's strangely comforting to know that when this plane touches down I'll have no one to rely on but myself. Despite being so vulnerable, I feel empowered, like I finally have a semblance of control over my life. It feels as if there's an invisible strength growing within me changing my fear to power. Today is the first day of my new chapter, I'm walking into a nation of strangers and I'm nothing to anyone other than what I want to be. In that respect my slate is completely clear. The voices of my past have been silenced, the negativity that tore down my confidence can no longer reach me. As I stand alone at the airport, I realise the only two things I'm taking with me to Ireland are my dreams and my suitcase.

Taking my seat on the plane, I gently rest my head against the window pane as I try to forget about what it is I'm actually doing. I concede that if perhaps there's a right way to start a new life this probably wouldn't be it. However, I've never been the sort of person to take the easy route, so I suppose it would be out of character to start now. Truthfully, I know in my heart that if I'd stayed it wouldn't be long until my courage failed me once again. I know I would have created another prison without walls, on hand with a million excuses as to why I had to stay exactly where I was. The time for change is now, it truly is now or never.

Starting our descent, I see Dublin's beautiful aerial aspect, growing in size as we continue through the clouds to the ground below. I cast my eye over every inch of the city I can see, wondering which corner of this city will I call home? Who out there, going about their daily business will find their way into my life? What will they look like? What are they doing now? I know this city holds many surprises for me, but as we touchdown, an unbridled excitement envelops me as I realise all possibilities awaiting me. My friends are out there, my opportunities are waiting for me and if fortune favours the brave then I know I can't fail.

I saunter through the airport and approach the bus stop. I spot the massive queue for the buses so I duly join the back with a heavy sigh. The woman in front of me turns around at the sound of my sigh and smiles at me. I smile back before I retrieve my map and begin to try and find where it is I need to go when I finally get into the city centre.

"Excuse me" I look back up to see the woman in front of me in the bus queue still smiling at me.

"Are you heading into the city centre? If so, did you fancy sharing a taxi? It might be quicker than waiting in this queue?"

"That would be great, I don't want to stand in this queue all day either. I just want to get into town and start exploring too. I'm Autumn by the way."

"That's exactly how I feel, I've never been patient at the best of times but I'm itching to get rid of my bag and explore. I'm Amelia, it's really nice to meet you."

We both make our way into a waiting taxi. Amelia gives the address of where she's staying, while I retrieve the details of the hostel I've booked.

"Oh my god, we're staying at the same place, look I'm at the same hostel. What are the odds of that?"

I pass my confirmation to Amelia as she compares the details on my confirmation to hers.

"Oh my god that's so freaky, when does that ever happen, it must be fate? We are both on our own so at least now we both know one person in this city. We're hostel buddies."

"I think you're right, I definitely believe in fate and if I was ever in need of a buddy it's now."

"So what's your story Autumn, how come you're in Dublin?"

"I'm moving over here, hence why I need to stay in the cheapest place in Dublin because I don't know how long it will take me to get myself settled. I'm not a great planner or saver...generally Amelia, whatever makes my life easier is what I'm not very good at."

"Ah I see, so I take it you haven't got a lot of money behind you then? Do you mind if I ask how much money you've brought with you?"

"Well, I have €1,000 but I have to find a place to live with that and who knows how long it will take for me to get working."

"Autumn, are you joking? You're not serious about that surely? How long have you been planning the move?"

I feel a searing heat hit my cheeks as I feel the scrutiny of Amelia's stare searching my face to gauge if I'm in fact serious. I watch as her features furrow in a look of concern.

"Well, it was a spontaneous decision. I actually decided to move last week and before moving out here I didn't actually have a job. So, I just cobbled together as much money as I could but I know fate will help with the rest, I'm an eternal optimist that way."

I see Amelia's eyes widen in horror as the realisation of my words hit her, she pauses in her reply as if she is wondering whether she should say exactly what she's thinking.

"Wow, well I don't know whether I find it the most amazing thing I've ever heard or the most stupid? I hope you don't mind me saying Autumn but I've honestly never come across anyone quite like you before. That's a compliment by the way."

"Thank you, I'll take that as a compliment. I'm not offended at all Amelia because I've wondered the same thing myself and I came to the conclusion that only time will tell whether I've made an amazing gamble or a stupid mistake. I figure if it turns out to be the worst case scenario, at least I can go home knowing I tried rather than always wondering."

"Now I agree with that completely and if I can help you Autumn in any way, I absolutely will."

"Thank you Amelia, you're already helping me. Just having someone to talk to is more than I could have imagined right now and it really means so much. So what brings you to Dublin, Amelia?"

"Oh I'm just passing through on my travels; I'm here for two weeks and then I'm off to Norway. It's funny to hear you say you came here before because I did to. It felt very homely to me too so I wanted to spend some real time here and explore properly."

"You know I never did the whole travelling thing but you never know in the future, maybe when I retire I'll do a trip like that. Who are you travelling with?"

"You should, it's never too late to enjoy the beauty of what the world has to offer. I'm not travelling with anyone, I'm on my own."

"Are you serious Amelia? Now it's my turn to be shocked, doesn't it scare you to go so far on your own?"

"No not at all, I've always been able to take care of myself. I'm not a risk taker by nature so I just make sure I keep my wits about me wherever I go."

As I sit chatting to Amelia in the taxi it quickly feels as if I've always known her my whole life. We seem connected in that odd way where, we are two totally different people, but yet we seem to still have so much in common.

Finally, the taxi pulls up outside our hostel, we make our way to the reception desk and since the rooms are allocated on arrival, we get to share. As I don't like the hostel experience, I've paid for a private room which means that we get a room all to ourselves.

"So Autumn, do you fancy going for a cheap and cheerful lunch and having a look around the city centre?"

“Absolutely, I'd love that. Do you happen to remember where Temple Bar is by any chance? I really liked it there.”

Amelia smiles and nods her head and we both get ourselves ready to start our first exploration.

We make our way through Temple Bar and spy a little café where we take up the best seats by the window. As the conversation continues to flow, I begin to think that Amelia is right when she said our meeting was fate. The fear I felt of being alone in a strange city has, for now, been absolved by our chance meeting which is absolutely priceless.

Chapter 3 - A Place to Stay

It feels as if the day has only just dawned when my covers are abruptly pulled off me by an excitable Amelia, who declares in her best school mistress voice that I need to get out of bed.

"Not many people survive awakening me like that Amelia, you're a lucky girl. It must be that I don't know you very well so I'm still on my best behaviour."

"Oh stop it, the morning is the best part of the day and you can't spend it in bed when there's so much to do."

"What! The morning is nothing more than preparation for the afternoon and a morning spent in bed is what mornings were designed for. I pull the covers up around me before they are once again tugged off with force.

"I'm getting you up for a reason, while you've been sleeping I've been looking through the newspaper I've lined up three house viewings for today. There wasn't much in your price range in town but if you go out to the suburbs there's a lot more. The first viewing is in town; not far from O'Connell Street but it's in an hour so you need to get up and get ready. I told you I'd help you and before I leave I at least want you to have somewhere to stay.

"Did you really do that for me? I think that's the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me." I give Amelia a big hug; it feels great to know I have her support and that I don't have to do this alone.

"Really? What kind of people do you know back there in Devon".

"It's the sentiment that means the most, I've only known you a day and yet you've been so supportive and kind and you really didn't need to. It means a lot to me."

I smile as I see Amelia's cheeks redden at my compliment.

I quickly get myself ready, slap some make up onto my face and as I look at my reflection in the mirror I feel an amazing sense of pride in myself, today is the day I start to build the life I want. Before me is a blank canvas and despite this being the hardest situation I've found myself in, it feels like the easiest. Maybe it's a false sense of security but maybe things are finally changing for the better, only time will tell.

We walk along the sun streaked street, every word out of Amelia's mouth has me in stitches, I don't remember a time I've laughed as much as I have since I met Amelia. I wish my family could see me now because I know that they would be relieved to know that they have no reason to worry about me out here.

"Right, this is the street we need, its number 17. You look this side and I'll look that side."

"You're really quite bossy aren't you Amelia?" I say with a laugh.

"No I'm not bossy, I'm directional, one of life's supervisors if you like, but never ever bossy."

I laugh and raise my eyebrows knowingly as we begin to wander down the street, looking at our separate sides trying to find number 17. I quickly notice the houses are very traditional Georgian style houses, each standing proudly in their regal terraces, displaying their period features and transforming the street into a bygone age. I could see myself living in a street like this, I love beautiful architecture and these buildings are lovely. We keep walking silently down the road, concentrating intently on counting down the houses as we go, our trepidation rising as we get nearer. However, I begin to notice as we continue down the road the houses start to appear greyer, the vibrant doors become a little more faded and the bright black steel balustrades that welcome you up

the concrete steps take on a more mottled and flaky appearance. As we reach the end of the street, the houses can only be described as appearing to be quite dilapidated.

“Autumn it's here, I found it.”

As I stand with my back to the house, I take a deep breath and hope that the pattern on my side of the road hasn't followed the same trajectory on the opposite side. I turn to see an oppressive grey Georgian house, sitting in the darkest corner of the road; my heart sinks as I realise it is by far the worse of all the houses I've seen so far. It appears that the sun only shines at the top end of the road, as if it's too embarrassed to light the dilapidated features of these poor relations. The sad and lifeless house stands limply at the end of the terrace with every window caked in dirt. The ground floor window displaying a prominent crack that almost resembles a bullet hole, a residue of grime seems to cover the entire building. The door looks frail with the remnants of red paint that used to cover it clinging in patches near the exposed timber; almost as if the whole door had been stripped of its paint. If I were to kick the door I'm sure it would crumble.

“Oh my god Amelia, this is like something from a horror movie, I'm actually scared just looking at it.”

One look at Amelia tells me she is thinking the same as me; we look at each other and laugh although I feel as if I'm about to cry at any moment.

“Shall we go home Autumn, you don't have to see it I mean...”

“Well we're here now; so let's just get it over with shall we?” A strange curiosity overcomes me, I almost want to see just how bad it can be, if the interior is truly as bad as the exterior suggests?

We both cautiously approach the door and bang on the part that looks the least likely to give us splinters. We're so scared of breaking the door, we're not even sure if the

inhabitants can hear us. After it's clear they haven't Amelia kicks the door hard in a bid to try and rouse the occupants.

The door is opened by a portly man who looks old but yet has a young face, I can't decide whether he is in his fifties or thirties because at different times I think different things. He's dressed in white trousers which are covered in stains and he also wears a knitted jumper, even though it's quite a warm day. His lank and greasy hair is swept across his forehead to one side exposing a mole on his hairline.

"Hi, we have a viewing here...um now."

"Come in" he ushers us in with no smile, no polite acknowledgment of any kind. He isn't Irish, he has an accent that I can't place and he isn't the approachable type so I dare not ask.

We walk into the hall with a ceiling so high that it appears to never end but a thick film of mildew covers everything in sight, just like the exterior, the walls display the same grey pallor. The floor is wet and if I dared to touch the walls they would be too. There is also a putrid smell that makes it clear the occupants don't like to clean.

We're ushered into the front room with an abrupt nod of the head; other than when we were greeted I've not heard our host talk once. As we enter the front room, I can't help but notice the carpet is so streaked with stains it's impossible to be able to tell what the original colour was. Threadbare rugs look like rags strewn across the carpet and the moth eaten furniture in a putrid mustard colour slumps lifelessly next to the damp walls. Beads of moisture run down the walls to form puddles which leave behind a legacy of mould and a thick brown ring when it finally dries. A battered table and a broken bookcase with one shelf having fallen out is gathering dust at the back of the room.

"This is the kitchen."

As we enter the kitchen we find the source of the smell, dishes line every work surface with mould growing on them, the bin has overflowed onto the ground and the tiles on the floor are caked in grime. There's an older woman who I take to be his mum sitting at the kitchen table, reading and smoking a cigarette. In front of her is an ashtray full to the brim with cigarette ends.

"This is my girlfriend Sylvia" he says as he places a hand on her shoulder. She looks up briefly, gives us both the once over and continues reading without as much as an acknowledgement.

I look at Amelia whose face has turned a sickly shade of pale green.

Finally we ascend the broken staircase up to see the bedroom they have for rent. I notice that the carpet is so old and frayed that it has become a slip hazard with the material bunching at the end of the stair making the dimensions deceptive.

"Be careful, don't use the banister it wobbles."

Neither I nor Amelia had any intention of touching it, from the minute we walked in we could see that the banister was at a strange angle and that it did not look at all safe.

We finally make it up to the bedroom; I look around the dismal room and see the filth and mildew is again caked onto every surface. On the floor lies a dirty, moth eaten old mattress with no cover, sheet or duvet and in the corner is a single hanging rail which in the damp has turned to rust.

"As you can see it comes fully furnished" the man states as a matter of fact and I try my hardest not to burst out laughing.

“Well thank you so much for showing us around today, you've been so helpful. I have a few other places to see but I'll get back to you about it. He gives a slight grimace which I take to be a smile and we go downstairs to leave.

As we hit the warm, fresh and clean air we both breathe as if we had never taken a breath the whole time we were in the house. We quicken our pace away from the house, as if we've just been released from captivity.

“Autumn, I've never been so petrified or horrified in my life. I thought they were going to have us for dinner. I honestly have never seen anything like that in my life.”

“I couldn't get over the stench, then when he told me it was fully furnished I thought he was joking.”

“Well, we have two more places to see today and let's just hope they are a lot nicer than that. I am so sorry about that, I genuinely don't think I've ever seen anywhere that horrendous in my whole life.”

As we make our way to the bus station, we ring the landlord for directions and both say a little prayer that this viewing is more promising than the last one.

“Right Amelia, he's given me the details of the bus we need and he's said he'll meet us at the bus stop and take us to the house, so we just need to ask the driver to drop us off at the pub, there is only one so no chance of missing it.”

“Autumn, are you sure we should let him take us there, shouldn't we just meet him at the house? I'm not sure it's a good idea to get into cars with strangers especially when the area is so unfamiliar.”

“It's ok he sounded really nice, honestly trust me it'll be fine. He sounded totally trustworthy.”

"Well, firstly you can't tell someone is trustworthy by their voice but at least we are together and I'm not sure we'd have any idea how to get there but if he makes one inappropriate move I won't ask any questions."

"Has anyone ever told you that you are actually quite an intimidating person when you want to be."

"Yes, that may have been mentioned once or twice before but I don't believe it's actually true."

"Trust me, it really is true Amelia. But don't get me wrong, I like it, just remind me never to get on the wrong side of you."

The bus driver yells at us that this is our stop as Amelia and I quietly slumber on each other's shoulder. We give our thanks to the bus driver and then walk towards the pub to wait for my prospective landlord to arrive.

The shrill of my mobile phone alerts me to the fact that he must be here but looking around for him would be useless as I don't have a clue what he looks like anyway.

"Hey Autumn, do you happen to be standing by the door with a friend?"

"Yes that's us" I start to feel slightly nervous after all I'm meeting a total stranger, he could be anyone. My mother's words to never get in a car with a stranger ring in my ears, bearing in mind she said that to me as child I can imagine her disappointment.

"I'll be round in a second."

I've barely managed to put my phone in the bag when he pulls up and I'm slightly surprised as he's a lot younger than I thought he would be, I was thinking late thirties but he's actually only in his late twenties or early thirties. From the corner of my eye I see

Amelia look at me with a smile on her face, he's rather attractive and evidently Amelia has noticed this.

"Hi girls, I'm Ciaran, it's great to meet you both."

"Hi Ciaran, I'm Autumn and this is my friend Amelia."

Amelia climbs into the back of the car and I sit in the front before Ciaran drives off towards the house.

"So Autumn, what brings you to Dublin?"

Here we go again, the one question I dread the most.

"Well, I decided that I wanted to focus on my career and I felt that I needed to move to a city to do this."

"So what do you do?"

"I'm an actress by trade but I'll have to get settled here first, so before I do that I'll take a job just to get the money coming in."

"That's the way to look at it, so how come you didn't move to London?"

"Well, I'd lived there before and I fancied a change really."

"Has your friend moved over with you too?"

"Oh no, Amelia is travelling, I only just met her at the hostel yesterday?"

"I'm doing the charitable thing and taking her under my wing."

"Oh grand, so you're travelling, where are you going?"

“Well after this it is Norway, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, Fiji and Tokyo”

“Wow sounds great, who are you travelling with?”

“Just myself at least that way you don't have to please anyone else, I've a friend over in Norway but after that I'm on my own.”

“I did a bit of travelling a few years ago but I never went on my own, I'm not sure I would either, I would be too scared on my own and I'm not afraid to admit that.”

“I know I said the same thing, I have no idea how you are not terrified Amelia”

“It's amazing how quickly you get used to it; I've always been very independent so it doesn't really bother me.”

“Right girls, here we are at the house, there's another couple that live here but they really are two of the nicest people you could ever wish to meet I've have known them for years.”

I look at the house and from the outside it looks lovely, an average modern terrace house with a tidy drive and after this morning that is a step in the right direction but I'm reluctant to get too excited until I've seen inside. We ring the doorbell and a tall lady around my age opens the door, she smiles broadly before exclaiming “Hi, you must be Autumn, oh it's so nice to meet you I'm Keira, do come inside.”

There is something in her manner that isn't quite right and her tone seems exaggerated, I'm not sure I really like her but by the same token I'm not able to be fussy either.

As we tour around the house, the first thing that strikes me is that it's clean; it smells fresh, the kitchen has modern appliances. I'm really impressed with just how lovely this house is and I could really see myself living here.

“Wow the house always looks so tidy, you guys are great tenants”

Keira smiles broadly, I assume the praise for that effort lies squarely with her, if not she certainly wants to give that impression.

“Well I cleaned the fridge today, have a look?” Ciaran reluctantly goes to the fridge opens the door and shuts it again almost immediately.

“It looks fab but I doubt it was really very messy before was it?” He looks over at me, raises his eyebrows and smiles.

“So Autumn, I hear you’re from the UK, how long have you been in Dublin”

“Only two days.”

“Do you have a job at all?”

“No not yet, but I will.”

“What do you do?”

“Well I am an actress by trade.”

“An actress.” Her voice raises an octave as she says this giving the impression she doesn’t believe that such a job exists.

“So have you actually done acting work before?”

“Yes, of course I have had a few minor roles but it’s something you have to keep trying at, it’s not normally something you fall into.”

“So let me get this right, you’ve no job, nowhere to live and you’ve been in the country for 2 days?”

She looks over at Ciaran with a sarcastic smile as if to say, are you joking? I watch her and I feel a surge of anger towards her. I smile back as falsely as she smiles at me.

“Well I’m not so stupid as to think that I’ll just land the job that I want straight away, I know first I’ll have to get a job just to get the money in and that’s what I’m willing to do, the acting job I can look for later when I am settled.”

“That’s great” she again gives a sarcastic smile and slowly folds her arms whilst looking at me from top to bottom.

“Right, well thank you guys, I don’t want to take up anymore of your time. Are you girls ready, I’ll give you a lift back if you like?”

“If you don’t mind, that would be great. Thanks Ciaran.”

We make our polite goodbyes but I am still fuming and no amount of fake sentiment will take that away, I knew I was right to be wary.

“So what did you think of the house?”

“I thought it was gorgeous, I have seen some really awful houses lately and it’s by far the best.”

“I’m thrilled you liked it. It would be great to have you on board Autumn, I tell you what, you have a think on it and call me tomorrow and let me know.”

“OK I’ll confirm with you tomorrow but it’s looking good.” As much as I’d love to have time to find the right place, in reality the right place is the nicest place I can get at short notice, I don’t know when I might get a job so I need to keep my costs down.

Ciaran drops us both off at the train station at my request as we’ve one last viewing to go to before we head off.

“Autumn why didn’t you ask Ciaran to drop us off at the house it would’ve saved us a lot of time.”

“I didn’t want to let him know that I was looking at other houses did I? If this house is as nice as his one but without the weird tenants I’ll take it. I mean talk about the Spanish Inquisition, did she want to do a cavity search on me in the kitchen as well? I half expected her to get the marigolds out.”

“Autumn that is just gross. Now admittedly she was a bit...how shall I put it?”

“Psychotic”

“Defensive, she was a bit defensive like a lion marking its territory.”

“Is that what the smell was? The dirty bitch.”

“Autumn that was mean but actually hilarious; I think I’m rubbing off on you”.

We laugh as we walk down the road, turning silent for a few minutes while taking in the scenery. The area is a leafy suburb which reminds me a little bit of being at home, the wide open space of the park, the trees that twist and contort on the side of the road as if reaching to touch the sky, together they create a pretty line of trees each twisting in a different way.

“Autumn, these houses are amazing, look at the size of them, I’d love to live in a house like that one day.”

“You’re from Surrey don’t you already have a house like that now? I thought your family were rich?”

“Well yes they are, true the house we live in is big and it’s really nice but it doesn’t look like these, it’s not a mansion it’s more a normal big Victorian house that creaks in the night.”

“Oh I love Victorian houses they’re so full of character.”

“And woodlice, god they get everywhere and it was a nightmare trying to upgrade to double glazing as the windows are all funny sizes, I would never buy one, my dad wouldn’t have either but my mum fell in love with it and he’s a sucker when it comes to my mum.

"Ah that's so sweet, I hope I meet a guy like that."

"It is sweet until it's your parents and then it's just gross."

After walking up the wrong street and coming full circle back on ourselves in the now fading sunlight we concede that we may never find this house on our own, we call the lady we’re supposed to be meeting and confess that we are horribly lost and she kindly agrees to pick us up from the shops we passed about an hour ago, although she assures us we are in fact only ten minutes away.

“God I’m useless at directions, well Amelia at least that puts your ‘we would find it in the end’ theory to pot.”

“Ok, so we are both useless when it comes to directions, let’s just hope that this woman isn’t as highly strung as the last one, otherwise we’ll never be seen again.”

We make our way to the shops and spy a pizza place, we enviably look at the pizza menu when my mobile rings and alerts us to the fact that the lady is here.

“Hi Autumn, I’m in the red car on the side of the entrance by the railing, can you see me?”

“Oh yes I see you, we’ll be over in a second.”

We approach the car, since I’m the one going for the viewing I get to sit in the front, just as I get into the car my phone starts to ring again, I hurriedly sit into the passenger side whilst trying to retrieve my phone to answer it.

“Hi Autumn, I’m in the car on the other side of the entrance, you’re in the wrong car”

I look at the driver to see it’s in fact a man with a most confused expression on his face, he doesn’t say a word to me or Amelia he just sits there and looks at us, if I was male I’m sure he might be scared but I don’t think it’s fear that I see on his face, more disbelief. I smile in a bid to try and hide my embarrassment and murmur “Sorry we’re meant to be in that red car there, very nice though your car, the seats are really nice and leathery and...”

Before I can finish my sentence my door is opened and I’m looking at what I presume to be the gentleman’s wife.

“Sorry, we got the wrong car but you’ve a lovely car, have a great night.”

His wife does not share the same composure as her husband and instantly starts to laugh. Her husband, maybe now realising that he isn’t facing divorce proceedings starts to laugh too and they both drive off in fits of giggles.

As we reach the right car the lady is wiping her eyes and as hard as she tries to compose herself she too is gripped by hysterics.

“Hi Autumn, I’m Nancy and I’m glad we found each other in the end?”

“We did, what are the odds of two red cars being parked together eh? This is my friend Amelia; it's lovely to meet you Nancy and thank you for coming to pick us up.”

“Not a problem at all. I'm sorry I just couldn't stop laughing, I saw you go over to the wrong car and I tried to reach you before you got in, I honestly have never witnessed anything like it in my life. The poor guy must have thought his numbers had come up, two young girls sat in his car. Then his wife comes along, I would have loved to see his face at that point, I bet he panicked.”

“Well I think his wife appreciated the excuse, she thought it was hilarious.”

“That was lucky for him and here we are at the house, it really is very close to where you were.”

I smile back at Nancy and I begin to feel a little embarrassed by exactly just how close we were it is probably even less than a ten minute walk from where we were.

“There are two other girls I share with Autumn, we've all known each other for years and they really are lovely people.”

I feel the weight of Amelia's stare on the back of my neck, as the last time we heard those words, the occupants were far from the loveliest people we'd ever met.

The house looks fairly neat and tidy from as much as I can see from the outside, the drive is not quite as tidy, it appears that the garden has been made into a makeshift drive. As I get out of the car my feet sink into what should have been a lawn of grass. I look around and see the remains of what used to be a border of flowers but since time has favoured the rearing of weeds, the plants have slowly died and now all that's left are the brown and crisp stalks of the has been plant.

“Watch yourselves as you get out won’t you, it’s a bit slippy especially as it’s been raining recently.”

Evidently hearing this bit of advice a little too late, I catch Amelia before she slips onto her backside as she exits the car.

“Autumn, I don’t know how it’s possible but this seems like it’s going to be even worse than the last house, I’m actually scared.” Amelia mutters under her breath as she finally finds her feet and lets go of my arm.

“It might be ok, have faith but I think I’ll take Ciaran’s house.”

We walk into the house behind Nancy and as we walk into the living room I feel as if I have walked into the Irish version of Deliverance.

Sat in a room covered in flock wallpaper that the world has not seen since the late 1970’s, in the dimmest of light and a sofa that I think I recognised from my aunt’s house when I was growing up in 1985 are two very contrasting females of the most extreme. In addition to Nancy, we have a stocky woman dressed in an old track suit who reminds me a lot of an old PE teacher. Finally a very quiet lady with ash blonde hair scraped into a very childish style is also sat in the room. I falteringly walk into the room as each and every eye focuses on me with intense scrutiny.

“This is Autumn, Autumn this is Daphne she works as an IT analyst in Blanchardstown” as she points to the masculine lady sitting in her chair “and this is Audrey and she works in the hospital with me and we’re all early risers.”

I shake their hands and smile, each set of eyes penetrate through me as if I’m on trial, Audrey’s shake is weak and flighty but she has the most penetrating of stares and speaks in more of a forceful manner than I would’ve expected from her.

"We are indeed early risers, so that means we are early to bed, we go about 10pm every night, so we would expect you to do the same. We don't mind you bringing your boyfriend round but not all the time and he can't stay over. Also, we do turn the hot water off at 9.30pm so you can't have a shower or do any washing after that time but we don't really have any rules in the house, we're all very liberal really."

I sit in stunned silence, wondering how they can be so oblivious that their actions manage to contradict every word that comes out of their mouth. The assumption that I have a boyfriend is quite surprising, I'm not sure if this should be taken as a compliment or an insult. I have no idea how to respond so I weakly smile hoping it is enough for them to stop staring intently at me. I try not to make eye contact with Amelia as if I do I don't think I can keep my composure.

However, this is not the case as Audrey continues probing about my relationship status. "So do you have a boyfriend Autumn?"

"No, I don't, not at the moment."

"We're the same, none of us have a boyfriend or are married, we've known each other such a long time now and we're such good friends."

Each of them looks at each other with a warm smile and I begin to wonder if I've walked in on a house full of man-haters, even if I had a boyfriend I'm not sure I'd dare let him through the front door."

"So, Autumn, would you like to have a look around the house, we'll show you your room."

I smile back at Nancy and follow her but in reality, I'm feeling very uneasy about everything already and in honesty I just want to leave. But not wanting to appear rude, especially after Nancy came to collect us I continue the tour with Amelia in tow.

I walk through the house and every room is papered in the most disgusting flock wallpaper, in the room they say is mine, the walls are covered in revolting green stripe wallpaper that is almost an antique in itself. The seams of the paper have turned brown and a ring of copper brown forms around the outside while inside it's a paler brown and is especially prominent around the window but covers the rest of the room. There's a smell of must, mould and mothballs while the bed looks like five generations have lived and died in it. The wardrobe and chest of drawers each look as if they'll fall apart at the slightest touch.

"The room is all ready for you and the bedding is all included so it's move in ready."

I feel Amelia gently kick my ankle as she stands there proudly displaying a room that is anything but move in ready.

"How much was the room again."

"It's €400 a month excluding bills."

"I see and how much are the bills generally?"

"Not much really, we split it four ways, wouldn't be more than a €100 every quarter. We do have oil central heating which is another expense that we split 4 ways to, it's a bit more expensive than gas so we don't like to put the heating on too much.

"How much is the oil?"

"A tank will usually last about 4-6 months depending on how much we use it and a refill of the tank is around €2,000 so it would be €500 each."

"€500 each every 4-6 months and that isn't included in the rent".

“No we have to pay it ourselves unfortunately but you don’t really notice it, it isn’t so bad. I’ll show you the bathroom.”

We walk into the bathroom to see it decorated in the same wallpaper as my bedroom, except the wallpaper is peeling off and the rings in the bedroom are not just confined to the walls, they appear all along the ceiling too. There’s no shower and the bath is almost brown in colour. There's a floral carpet on the floor and a pungent smell that hits you as soon as you walk through the door.

“How long have you all lived here?”

“Oh we’ve been here 10 years or more now, we love this house so much and wouldn’t leave it now. It really does have a lot of character. I’ll show you the kitchen now, I think you will like it a lot, it's all very modern.”

I try to keep the smile from my face, raising my hand to cover my mouth as we make our way down to the kitchen. We walk through the door and it is clear that the term “modern” means anything but modern.

The white worktop is heavily stained by the remnants of coffee and tea stains, the sides are very cluttered with letters piled high in stacks.

“Well thank you so much for showing us around, we'd...”

“Oh it’s no bother, now let us go back into the front room and we can get to know each other. I know the other girls have a few things that they would like to ask you.”

“We do have to be going soon, we have a bus to catch.”

“I know Autumn but we have to be able to know a bit more about you to make our decision. We want to live with someone like us and who we can get on with so this is the

most important part." I detect a slight tone to Nancy's voice as she leads us back to the front room.

"Of course, it's very important to live with like-minded people isn't it." I'm not even trying to keep the sarcasm out of my voice at this point.

"So Autumn, tell us do you like to have parties?" Again I feel the weight of each stare on me. I start to blush slightly as I begin to feel very uncomfortable and as if I'm being interrogated.

"No, not at all, I don't have any parties."

"Do you tend to go out at weekends and come in late."

"No I don't go out at the weekend" I think in order to get this over and done with as soon as I can it's better to tell them what it is they want to hear.

"We're the same Autumn, we don't like people to be coming in late or drunk and waking us up, we have to all be up early you see." Nancy adds to Audrey's initial question, Daphne chooses not to speak, she just sits and smiles intermittently before nodding and smiling once again.

"Do you have many friends round to stay?"

"No I don't really know many people in Ireland yet, Amelia here is my only friend and she is leaving soon to go to Norway."

"Oh that's lovely for you Amelia, well Autumn we're all friends here and we're very approachable and friendly. We sit here of an evening together and watch television, I think you'll be very happy here."

I smile at the thought and I wonder how Nancy could have appeared so normal in the car, because at the risk of sounding cruel I don't think any of them in this house could be described as normal.

"Well, thank you again so much for showing me around the house, we really have to be getting on now as we have to catch a bus."

"Of course, well it's been a pleasure meeting you Autumn and you Amelia, we'll all sit down now and discuss what we think and if we like you we'll call you and offer you the room. We have your number."

I thank Nancy and her friends for their time, we're given directions to take us to the main road and we leave the house behind, both breathing a sigh of relief as we leave.

"Autumn now that really was like something out of a horror movie, I will never go on a viewing with you again. It honestly went from bad to worse."

"I know they sent chills up my spine, the way they just questioned me and the way they just stared at me the whole time, it was petrifying."

"Basically they were saying that you can't have a bath, not that you would want to, after 9.30pm or do washing, or have any friends round, have a boyfriend or go out and that you had to be in bed by 10 every night."

"That was the gist of it alright, even my parents aren't that bad."

Suddenly my phone rings and thinking it's perhaps my family I answer straight away.

"Hi Nancy."

I look at Amelia and her eyes almost bulge out of their sockets and she starts to laugh, jamming her hand to her face as she tries to conceal the sound.

“You’d like to offer me the room.”

This proves too much for Amelia who while trying not to laugh out of her mouth ends up laughing through her nose and sprays the contents of it all over her hand, which makes me start to laugh. Unable to compose myself enough to speak I have to turn away so I can't see her.

“Well I'll have a think on it; you see I have a couple of other places I have seen so I have to decide which one of them is more suited to me.”

“Well I've a place to stay tonight thank you, I would rather have some time to decide which of the properties I'd like to take not to rush into anything.”

”Really, there is no need to hold the room if there's another party interested you...”

As I leave the call I turn to see Amelia with her hands over her face; she evidently doesn't have a tissue. I rummage in my bag to find a tissue and hand it to her as I end the call with Nancy.

“Amelia they're absolute weirdo's, she just called to say that they've decided that I could move in and that I could move in tonight if I wanted to. You won't believe it but when I said I wanted to think about it she said that she'd hold the room and get this, said that we could discuss my move in date when I'd decided. I'm exhausted.

“You're joking. I wouldn't let my worst enemy into that house, they're absolutely terrifying.”

“I know, well at least it is over now and we can forget about it. I'll call Ciaran in the morning and let him know I'll take his place.”

As we board the bus, despite our exhaustion we both agree the perfect end to the day would be in the pub...just for one of course!