

Dare to Dream

By Carmel Harrington

Pre-class banter echoes through our cavernous village hall.

'You may superglue my mouth shut. I'm a disaster.'
'If I don't lose, there's no justice.'
'I'm fecking starving!'

'Do we have to go through this every single week?' Dee shouts.

Nobody answers our class leader and resignation sets on her face. She fights the same losing battle every week. United in our goal to beat the abhorrent scales, our pre-weigh-in striptease continues.

I can feel heat emanating from the photograph that lies in my pocket. The red exit sign baits me and I ponder a dramatic dash to the door. They'll all assume I've eaten too many kebabs and couldn't face the wrath of Dee.

Dare to dream. I take a steadying breath. Can I start again? Or am I a sixty-five year old fool, destined to confirmed bachelorhood? Yes, I'm healthier than I've been in over a decade, thanks to Dee and the Circle of Losers slimming club. But have I left it too late?

For years I've substituted food for love. The layers of fat I worked so hard to maintain, were just another self-imposed barrier. Funny how every pound I shed, the more exposed I feel.

I don't want to hide anymore though.

I spot Hugh, the unlikely youngster I've befriended.

'Grow some balls.' I tease him, nodding towards Emma, the unwitting object of his affections.

'Feck off Bill.'

'Nice mouth on you.' But we're both smiling.

Dee's voice cuts in, 'Karen, there is no need to take off your socks as well as your shoes. And Emma, how much do you think those earrings weigh?'

'Every ounce makes a difference.' Emma repeats one of Dee's catchphrases. She winks at us all, and I join the laughter that ripples down our line, like a mexican wave.

Dee continues her lecture, 'If you've done the work this week, you will see the results, socks or no socks.'

With poor Karen standing on the scales looking like she's waiting for execution, Dee marches over to one of the posters hanging with blue tack to the grey walls.

'All together now. What's our motto in the Circle?'

Silence.

'That's right, we say - Eat wise and drop a size!'

We must be an awful disappointment to her. Sometimes guilt makes me join in, but tonight, I've no energy to worry about Dee.

I notice Eimear, another regular shivering in a light sundress. 'You're making me cold looking at you!'

She rubs her arms and says, 'Lightest thing in my wardrobe Bill.' She yawns loudly, 'I got no more than three hours last night. I almost didn't come, I'm so banjaxed. But I've got to lose this baby weight before the christening. State of me!'

'Lack of sleep is a killer alright.' Emma says. 'I've only had four hours in the last two nights.'

We all guffaw at this. Emma is a party animal.

Hugh says, 'I saw you in The Stores last night. You looked great.'

'Aw thanks Hugh. I didn't see you there. You should have said hello.'

Before he can respond, Karen throws in one of her random comments, that we all love so much, 'I sometimes don't wear a bra for my weigh in.'

Emma squeals with laughter, 'You're a dark horse. Let it all hang out!' She gives her chest a little wiggle and Hugh dies a death.

One by one everyone has their turn on the scales. Some jubilant with results, others disappointed. Hugh gives an oblivious Emma an enthusiastic thumbs up when it's her turn. Poor fecker.

'Well Circle, how does everyone feel today about their weight loss?' Dee asks.

There are a few murmurs of good and a 'crap' from Emma.

'Hugh, you did great this week.'

'Well,' he rubs his stomach as he speaks, 'as you can see, my body is a temple.'

I heckle, 'Temple of Doom!'

'I'll ignore the terrible dispersions of that old goat!' Hugh replies. 'Under Dee's guidance, I've managed to lose another 4lbs tonight.'

'Impressive.' Eimear says.

I don't disagree and tip an imaginary hat to him.

'Three more pounds and you get another medal of honour.' Dee holds up a small plastic circular medal attached to a long piece of ribbon, as if it is olympic gold.

'I've seen better tat in Mr Price,' someone sneers. Dee blushes at the insult.

'It's just a token, I'm told it helps, having a visual reminder of how many stones we lose.'

'It does help.' I say to her.

'I can't wait to get one.' Karen sighs. 'I've lost 9 lbs since I started'

'Which was nearly two years ago. And you've put back one since last week.' Dee moans.

'I knew I should have come braless tonight.' Karen states sadly and we all laugh.

'Just stick to the menu planner. No more tweaking of the Circle recipes, adding butter or cream willynilly.'

'But they are so bland without my little extras.' Karen moans. She's not here to lose weight really, we all know she comes for the company.

'A great week for Eimear too, five off.' Dee says.

Eimear is jubilant, 'I've been walking the hind legs off poor Buster!'

'There was another sighting of dog poop in the village this morning. Right at the school gates. Last week it was outside the village hall. It's intolerable.' Dee moans.

As we all groan, she replies, 'What? Dog poop is killing our chances of winning the tidy towns.'

'I never leave home without my poop-a-scoop.' Karen announces.

'Is it the same dog I wonder?' Hugh asks and it's obvious to all except Dee that he's pulling her leg.

'Hard to tell.' Dee gives considerable thought to his question. 'Looked roughly the same to me.'

'You should introduce DNA testing for all the local dogs. Find the culprit.' How Hugh keeps a straight face I don't know.

The prospect of CSI style poop investigations cheers Dee, until she realises we're all giggling like kids.

Ignoring us, she focuses on poor Emma, who confesses, 'I didn't lose.'

Hugh's hand hovers over her shoulder, ready to offer comfort. But then he chickens it and pulls it back. I tut loudly and point to his balls. If looks could kill...

'I wouldn't mind but I didn't have a single cheat.' Emma pleads her case to us all.
'Except for one or two vodkas and red bulls. Five max. And just the one baby guinness.'

'Sounds like my kind of night.' Eimear declares.

'Red Bull!' Dee doesn't share her enthusiasm. 'Of all the mixers, full of sugar. Sure its a wonder you didn't put weight on!'

'I didn't meant to.' Emma is folorn.

'Why don't the two of you go to The Stores together? Hugh can keep you on the straight and narrow.' I suggest. I'm helpful like that.

'Don't be putting him on the spot, he's better things to do.' Emma says, looking unsure.

Hugh won't get a more opportune moment than right now. Come on lad. But he chokes and remains silent.

'Damn it.' I bore holes into his head, but he's impervious to me now.

I want to shake him, to tell him he's wasting his life. The mood in the room shifts. Disappointment thickens the air.

'Who brought photographs for our slimspiration board?' Dee asks. I feel a line of sweat threaten to stain my blue shirt.

I caress my photograph. One happy entry in the diary of my life.

Excitement dances in the air, as everyone is eager to share their best versions of themselves. As pictures of wedding days and happy loving moments are passed between us, I gulp back regret. Hello again old foe, back to torment me.

'Come on, don't be shy Bill.' Hugh says, giving me a dig.

I pull out my photo strip memory of one perfect rainy, day in Dublin, almost twenty years ago.

'The happiest day of my life.' Then with dramatic intent, 'With the love of my life.'

This gets their attention.

'Show us!' Emma cries and when greedy hands reach out to grab my photograph, I falter.

'It's all I have left of us.' Panic knifes it's way through my body. What was I thinking? I can't share my secret with them.

They smile, eyes questioning. I look at Hugh and feel like a fraud. I take another steadying breath and say, 'Be careful. Please. It's my only photograph of Eoin.'

It feels good to say his name out loud.

'We'll be care ...' Emma begins then stops as she realises what I've said.

The room is silent as one by one they pass my photograph between them.

'He's very handsome.' Eimear is the first to find her voice.

'I never knew ...' Karen says. 'I've known you for over forty years, I never knew you were a...'

'A homosexual?'

She looks startled, but nods.

'How could you? Nobody knows, except Eoin of course. And the odd faceless partner I've met in dark corners of nightclubs, when loneliness got too much.'

'You look so happy.' Dee whispers.

'Behind the PhotoBooth red curtain we were rulers of our own world, free to kiss, to love, to hold each other and just *be*.'

'What happened? Hugh asks.

'I was a coward, a fool. I let him go.'

'Why?'

'Ireland's tolerance of homosexuality was different in the 80's. It was only decriminalised in 1993.'

'So you could have been arrested for being gay?' Hugh asks.

'I didn't know that.' Emma admits.

'I always knew I was gay, but stuffed it deep inside of me, a shameful secret. I'd fantasise about a world where I could come out without fear. But every time I'd consider it, I'd lose my nerve.'

When I met Eoin, all reason left me. I close my eyes and in an instant I am back in his arms. The soft caress of his lips on mine and the warmth of his hands in the small of my back.

'I was loved.' I whisper.

I don't know how long I stay lost in that memory. But when I open my eyes, the room is silent, everyone watching me, hoping for a happy ending that they know cannot come.

'We were going to leave Ireland. Go somewhere where we could be with each other. The week before we were due to go, Dad died. Mam fell to pieces. She needed me.'

'You were a good son.' Karen says.

'I paid a high price for that.' I say and swallow the bitter bile that burns the back of my throat. 'I worried too much about what others thought. Eoin told me that he'd move here, but I didn't have the balls to let him.'

The years disappear and I am back to that night when Eoin and I fought. He called me a coward. He cried. He begged. And me? Well I just let him walk out of my life.

'Where is he now?' Emma asks.

'I don't know.'

'That's so sad.' Emma says, tears have left white tracks on her face.

I don't disagree.

Eimear asks. 'Why tell us all now?'

'I'm sixty-five. Maybe I realise that it doesn't matter what others think. If they like me the way I am, great. If not, it's their loss.'

'Screw anyone who dares pass judgement.' she shouts.

I smile at her, our tell-it-like-it-is gal.

'This gay marriage referendum has made me feel like a fraud.' I admit. 'How can I expect people to fight for the right for me to marry whomever I chose, if I can't be honest?'

'It's bullshit that same-sex marriage is banned.' Hugh states. 'Whats the big deal? Live and let live.'

'There a lot of people who think that same-sex marriage is a threat to more 'traditional' unions.' I smile at his innocence and wish that more thought like him. 'I never thought I'd see a time where someone like me could get married. This referendum has awoken a deep buried need, a desire, a want. When I vote, I want to do so honestly, transparently. I want the people who matter to me to know why a Yes vote is so important.'

'We could go with you to vote, if you want.' Hugh says.

'The Losers en force, then go for a drink afterwards.' Emma says.

I look around the circle and see only acceptance and to my horror, I start to cry.

I have finally shared a long-held secret and a jumble of emotions has been unleashed. I feel relief to have it out in the open, but also, a deep grief.

Dee hands me a box of tissues, then reaches under her desk, pulling out a bottle of Amaretto. 'A present for my dad, but I think our need is greater.'

'You're giving us alcohol?' Emma says.

'This is a moment that warrants note.' She pours the dark brown liquid into plastic cups from the water fountain.

'Do you still love him?' Dee asks.

'Yes.'

'Then you must find him. Don't stop till you do.'

'He'll have found someone else by now.' I say.

'Eoin was your one true love, right?' She asks.

I nod.

'Isn't it possible that you are his one true love too? What if he's stuck in some horrible no-mans land just like you have been? Have you ever thought about that?' Dee looks distraught at the injustice of it all.

'You said you were daring to dream Bill.' Eimear chimes in.

'I'm daring to dream.' Huge shouts, grabbing my shoulders. 'I've got balls.'

'He's pissed as a fart.' Karen hiccups.

'Will you go to The Stores and not drink red bull with me?' Hugh looks at Emma with such yearning, the whole room holds it's breath.

'Me?'

'I think you're beautiful. I think you're perfect. I think I might love you. And I think if you give me a chance, you could love me too.'

My heart swells with pride. Thatta boy.

'Ok.' Emma squeaks and we all clap as Hugh punches the air in triumph.

'That's a big pair of balls you have.' I tell him. He sits back down, goofy grin in place and they both lean in close. I know sparks are gonna fly with those two.

'I need another drink ...' Dee sobs and stands up to refill each of our cups.

'Any chance you've a bag of Tayto in that shopping bag, Dee?' Eimear asks.

'Not a hope.' Dee says.

'Sour cream and onion anyone?' Karen pulls out a green tub from her handbag.

'Karen!' Dee exclaims horrified. 'You brought Pringles to the Circle of Losers?'

'You brought booze.' Karen replies.

HA!

As we all munch, Emma says. 'This can't be the end of the story Bill. You have to look for him.'

'I'll help you.' Hugh declares. 'I'm good at finding stuff on the internet. Bet I can track him down.'

His eyes lock onto mine and he glances to my balls, winks and says, 'grow some.'

Funny guy.

'He might not want me anymore.' There I said it. My biggest fear.

'True. But then you will know.' Hugh says. 'Don't live one more moment with regret Bill.'

Dare to dream?

YES, I think I will.