

**Irish Times Bestseller
Shortlisted for a
BGE Irish Book Award 2016**

*Every family has a story ... join the Guinness family
on an evocative, inspiring & heart wrenching road trip
of self-discovery.*



PROLOGUE

OLLY

Our lives are just a series of moments. From the small, mundane occasions that we let pass us by without notice, to the big showstoppers that make us pause and take note. Then, when you least expect it, a moment so powerful and defining happens that changes everything in a split second.

The thing about change is, it's not always good.

Today was a day of insignificant moments, until Jamie's scream bounced off the walls in our house and time slowed down. Relief at seeing him in one piece was fleeting as I followed his eyes and saw what he saw. Evie, my thirteen-year-old daughter, lying unmoving, vomit splattered on her face and chest, dripping into a noxious puddle on the dark floorboards.

Time then sped up as we made our frantic dash to the hospital. And now we are in no-man's-land as we wait for more news on Evie.

A kind nurse has just left our cramped hospital waiting room and the musky, woody scent of her fragrance lingers in the air. Vanilla, apples, sandalwood. It's Burberry perfume, I'd recognise it anywhere.

I look to my right and am unsurprised that the smell has sent Pops right back to 1981 too. A time when it was the norm in the Guinness house to spray that scent into the air every morning, in an effort to bring someone back. Until one day the bottle was empty and Pops said, 'that's enough now lad.' I watch him as his grey eyes water up and he turns to hold my gaze, nodding. A silent acknowledgement of mutual pain triggered by the scent of a nurse's perfume. For maybe the one-millionth time in my life, and I daresay in my father's, I yearn for my mother.

MAE

How long have we been sitting in this room now? It feels intolerable and I long to see my daughter. I seek out the clock on the wall and realise that it's almost nine p.m. Three hours' sitting in this small room waiting for news on Evie. Meagre updates from harassed but kind nurses and we cling to the fact that at least she's alive. Panic overtakes me once again at the thought of any scenario that doesn't include ... I can't complete the sentence. I continue bargaining with God.

My mantra, my prayer, is simple – don't let my baby die. I'll do anything if you grant me this one thing. I'll be a better mother, I'll be a better wife, I'll be a better person. Please keep my baby alive.

Is this my punishment? Perhaps divine intervention from a higher level, stopping me from making a huge mistake. The thing is, it didn't feel like a mistake earlier. It felt good. I look at my husband and wonder what would he think if he knew that when he called me this evening, I was in a bar with another man. And that five minutes before that, I had made my mind up that I wasn't coming home tonight.

OLLY

Evie. I catch a sob in my throat before it escapes. Even so, Jamie hears it and looks at me, his little nose scrunched up in worry. I smile to cover it up. He's scared enough without worrying about me as well. I glance at Mae, but she's looking out of the small window, lost in her own worry and pain. Should I go over to her? I chicken out and decide maybe later.

MAE

My mind races. I cannot understand how Evie could end up in such a state. I peek up at Olly again, as that same irrationality that won't stop plaguing me jumps up and hits me in the face. Shouldn't my perfect house-husband have known that something was wrong? I want to scream at him again, 'Why didn't you see this coming, Olly?'

I know his answer to that baseless accusation would be, 'what about you, Mae, where were you? Why didn't you see this?' And the weight of my shame makes me hang my head low. The blame sits on both of our shoulders. Somehow or other we've let our daughter down.

OLLY

That bloody perfume cloyes at me now and memories batter me, determined to be heard. Mam was only thirty-three when she died, younger than I am now. I look at Mae and contemplate a world where my wife dies. As my chest tightens in panic, I look back at Pops and wonder how he ever managed to smile after he lost my Mam, his love.

Evie and Jamie. I have my answer. My children. Of course pops smiled for me, his son. He had no choice but to keep trucking on. We don't have a choice, as parents. We keep going no matter what curve ball kicks us in the bollocks.

I resist the urge to grab my father to hug him and cry for our loss. Instead I reach over and pat his knee. I am alarmed at how bony and frail it feels. The cancer is eating him up and I know that he must be in pain sitting here in this room for hours on end. But he won't go home, he won't rest in bed, so I know that there is no point in asking him to leave. He's stubborn, but I suppose I am too. I glance at Jamie. Like grandfather, like father, like son.

MAE

'You need to get that sorted,' Pops says. He misses nothing and has noticed me wincing from back pain again. I nod and refrain from biting back, when on earth would I have time? My life is a blur of early mornings and late nights at school. If I'm not at work doing my principal duties, I'm at home marking papers or setting assignments. Whilst simultaneously trying hard to fit in some quality time with a family who don't seem to need me any more. Self-pity, now there's an ugly trait that has joined forces with irrational jealousy. What have I become this past year? I used to be a happy, self-assured woman.

My mind keeps going back to that brief flash I caught of Evie when I arrived at the hospital. Her complexion the colour of unspoilt snow. Perfect, unblemished. Still. Too still.

I can feel Olly's eyes boring into me, but I avoid making eye contact with him.

'Do you need anything?' I fuss over Pops instead, noticing he is very pale. 'A hot drink?'

'I'm good. Don't be worrying about me. It won't be long now, I'm sure. They'll be in soon to confirm she'll be fine. She's a strong one, our Evie.'

I hope he's right. I know that I must find a way to make this better. Please, give me the chance to make this better. Don't let her die. A sob escapes again, so I lower my head, allowing my hair to hide my face. I think I hear Olly whisper my name, but I'm not sure. The realisation that I yearn to feel his strong arms around me confounds me. Most of the time I want to stab him with a fork, slap him, shout at him – anything to get a reaction, get noticed. But right now, I want him to murmur reassurances that everything will be alright.

Yet, I don't look up or move towards my husband. I stay on my own, back aching, sitting on a cold, bloody plastic chair. It's most likely one of the most uncomfortable chairs in the room. I realise that there's a whole month of therapy in that choice right there.

OLLY

I look around the small family room we're camped in, typical of the kind of waiting room that you find scattered around hospitals all over Ireland. Shades of magnolia with faded pictures of landscape scenes framed on the nondescript walls. Despite their best efforts, they fail to brighten up the tired room. There's a small cream-leather sofa that has seen better days pressed against the back wall. A potpourri of tears and coffee stains embedded into the fabric.

Jamie is sitting upon it, cross-legged, with his iPad mini. But, for once, the usual tip-tap of his hand, as he battles his way towards the next level of *Candy Crush*, is still. He looks scared.

Mae is still at last. Since her arrival, she's paced the room like a caged lion. She's cried, she's shouted at me once or twice, then she's paced the room some more. Pops sighs loudly with dissatisfaction and then throws in a loud 'arra' for good measure. He's letting us know that he can see what we're doing to each other and he doesn't approve one bit. I decide to ignore that for now and move over to the couch so that I

can pull Jamie in tight to me. At seven he's almost at that age where he doesn't need cuddles any more. Not in public, anyhow – but today is an extreme circumstance and he relaxes into my arms.

I can hear his heart hammering away through his shirt. He catches his breath in jagged succession as he tries to stem the tears that are threatening to escape.

'It's going to be okay, dude,' I whisper. He looks up at me, doubt making his eyes dark and I reiterate the statement with authority. Somehow or other I need to make my words come true.

MAE

Olly is rocking Jamie back and forth in his arms. His little eyes are heavy with fatigue, flickering as they always do when he puts up one last defiant fight to stay awake. I smile at my baby, my youngest child, and wish that I could just walk over and snatch him from Olly into my arms. I want to feel his soft breath on the nape of my neck as he snuggles in close to me. I want to be the one to give him comfort. He loves that spot under my chin to rest his head. Or at least he used to.

As hurtful as it is, I know that while I need Jamie right now, he needs Olly more. He's gotten used to having him at home at his beck and call these past few months. He's forgotten that it used to be me that he ran to when he scuffed his knees or banged his head. I haven't, though. I ache to hold him, but I know that it would be selfish of me to do anything about it.

This position I find myself in, I feel powerless to change. I do not have the luxury of slowing down in work. We need my salary as my husband seems to have given up on ever finding a job again. His sole focus these days is being the perfect house-husband. The only problem with that is, he also seems to have given up on me. On *us*. I simply don't know what to do.

I sigh and turn away from them. I know it's not fair to blame Olly for the relationship he has with Jamie, after all he's earned that closeness, their bond. But watching our son relax in his arms right now, in a way that he hasn't done with me for a long time, makes me want to run over to my husband and slap him hard across his saintly face.

The violence I've been feeling towards my husband these days startles me. I love him. Or at least I think I do. I just don't like him very much. I know I sound like a prize bitch. I'm well aware that every thought is irrational. In fact, I can feel something oozing out of my skin, like a septic pus. What I'm feeling is jealousy in all its ugly and green glory, the cause of all my irritations. But acknowledging something and being able to stop it are two different things.

I take a long, deep breath and look at my son. I remind myself that Jamie has not stopped loving me. But the balance of power has shifted in our house since Olly became a stay-at-home dad. I wish I was a nicer person who could find it in her psyche to be happier for the new-found father-and-son bond that they have going on. But I'm not. I suppose, in my defence, I would cheer with abandon for them both, except for one thing. The stronger they seem to become, the weaker my relationship with the children becomes. I sigh in frustration at the stupidity of this.

OLLY

I can feel my father's eyes upon me once again, worry emanating from his every fibre. He looks like he wants to say something to me, but keeps changing his mind and he finally settles on holding his counsel. I smile at him, tell him that I'm fine.

Pops, my allegiant. I'm not sure I can remember a time when he isn't here by my side, when I needed him. Before and after that apocalyptic day in 1981. Many men would have faltered and lost their way, I reckon, doing the whole single-father gig, but not my father.

He's strong and I wish I were more like him. It always makes me laugh when my friends worry that the older they get, the more they are turning into their fathers. I worry that I'm not.

I close my eyes and think of Mam once more. What would she make of this if she were here? Would she feel disappointment in her son, with the mess he's making of his life? I hazard a guess that she would, because I'm pretty pissed with myself too. Somehow or other, I've taken my eye off the ball. Now things have gotten all screwed up and my thirteen-year-old daughter is lying in a room hooked up to tubes.

I've felt shame a few times in my life. When I lost my job a year ago that was a kick-you-in-the-balls day for sure. A close second is the first time that I had to ask Mae for money because my personal bank account was depleted of funds. My debit card had become as much use as a chocolate teapot. And don't get me started on the endless pit of desolation as rejection letters began to pile up high on our study table. But none of these are even close to the shame I feel now, as I sit in this waiting room.

My beautiful Evie, fighting for her life down the corridor.

I'm bewildered. I don't know how this has happened. And then, with surprise, I acknowledge another emotion bubbling up inside – I feel angry. I know that rage is only counterproductive and I need to fight it, to stay calm.

The door opens and a doctor walks in, his face unreadable, and we all jump to attention.

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