



SHORT STORY NIGHT

FROSTED GLASS

BY GABRIELA GARCIA

RAINBOWS

BY JOSEPH O'NEILL

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Gabriela Garcia

The news reporter announced another shooting before cutting to commercials. Another unarmed black teenager shot by another white cop. Then the Channel Eleven jingle cut to the little curly-haired girl that reminded Mrs. Mendez of her own Eloisa before she'd become a surly teenager. Alternate Eloisa hawked paper towels. She spilled cereal milk on a pristine counter, and her commercial mom instantly wiped the mess with a smile that said, *Aren't you adorable every time you trash this house.*

"Here we go again," Mrs. Mendez said to her husband. She didn't understand why he insisted on watching the news channels all the time—all those terrible burglaries and stabbings and accidents. And the politics. The politics even worse. Mrs. Mendez placed a steaming plate of rice and beans on a tray table and grabbed the two empty beer cans that littered the floor.

"Only a matter of time now before the neighbors start up again with their protesting and complaining," she said.

Mr. Mendez grunted and dug a fork into the small mountain on his plate.

"Hope Eloisa has come to her senses and isn't planning to go off banging pots and pans again. Do you want another beer?"

"Mmfffhrrmm."

"I think it's her friends, you know. I think she has friends she doesn't tell us about."

"Rfff."

Mrs. Mendez settled into the brown pleather couch beside her husband and squeaked and skidded her way into a comfortable position. She watched a couple on the TV blissfully riding a double-seated bicycle and walking hand-in-hand on a pebbly beach. The herpes commercials. The herpes commercials always got to her. She threw her head back and felt exhaustion weigh her down like an anchor. The living room—all its porcelain knickknacks and collage photo frames, its ten-piece furniture set from Luxury City Discount Home—all of it an ocean trying to gobble her up.

"I think we need to replace the coffee table, Arsenio."

He'd fallen asleep.

Mrs. Mendez turned off the television and ate her husband's leftovers at the kitchen table, waiting for Eloisa. Lately the girl arrived in the evenings on Mondays and Wednesdays claiming she was at an after-school activity. But that wasn't all. She also insisted her mother call her Lucy, said everyone at school knew her by Lucy, said Eloisa was *old-fashioned*, as if she hadn't loved the name as a child.

Mrs. Mendez watched her neighbor pull up to her driveway, get out of her car, and inspect the brand-new hedge that had appeared between their homes. Mrs. Mendez had spent all day directing the contract workers, telling them exactly where to plant and how to spruce and where to trim. Now the tall woman with her dreadlocks in a bun like a woven basket atop her head leaned over to inspect the bushes. She shrugged. Then Mrs. Mendez watched the woman—*with her own eyes, right before her*—open her trash can to throw in a piece of paper and then leave the lid on the driveway.

"Arsenio!" she shouted, not taking her eyes off the woman.

"Hrrrf," came a grunt from the living room.

"Arsenio, she's doing it again!"

"Mmph."

"She leaves the trash lid on the floor so that all the raccoons and stray cats can have a ball—a *ball*—all night in her driveway and guess where they are coming next? Just guess? Here! That's where they are coming."

Even the hedge wouldn't be enough.

Mrs. Mendez fumed. She watched the lights go on at the neighbor's house. The Mendezes had installed the trendiest windows they could find—frosted glass, cut into identical squares. They could see out, but anyone looking in would see just blobs and shapes. They'd see silhouettes moving in and out of shadows like creatures stretching and curling into their caves. This is why Mrs. Mendez had busted her back for twenty-five years. This is why she had arrived with her one suitcase and cleaned homes for so many years while taking classes at the community college where all her teachers assumed by her accent she understood nothing. Why she'd studied accounting with an English-to-Spanish dictionary at her side and spent years working her way up a ladder full of splinters and snapped legs at every turn. So she could have goddamn frosted glass spy windows she could see out of but nobody could see into.

And now this neighbor woman with her lidless trash and her husband, who seemed content keeping house while seemingly unemployed, were trying to ruin a neighborhood full of hard workers like her. These neighbors weren't like the Horowitzes, who swept their driveway every morning. They weren't like the Hernandez-Smiths, who displayed not one but two

pristine American flags. And yet none of the other neighbors seemed angry; she'd even spied Mrs. Horowitz bringing the newcomers fresh-baked challah. Mrs. Mendez couldn't understand why no one cared about the quality of people moving into the neighborhood anymore. No one except her.

She watched as the neighbor woman's husband placed food before her. "Arsenio!" she huffed. "You wouldn't *believe* how this woman's husband lets her walk all over him."

Well, Mrs. Mendez wasn't letting this woman walk all over *her*. She stood and yanked open the front door. Mrs. Mendez squeezed her bathrobe tight around her and ran barefoot down her lawn and around the newly planted hedge. She grabbed the neighbor woman's garbage lid and slammed it on the can. She looked toward the neighbors' house, but the couple wasn't looking out. Too bad, she thought. She would have *welcomed* their shame if they saw a respectable woman like her having to teach them how to act like proper human beings.

"What are you even doing?"

Eloisa stood in the middle of the street. Her face was scrunched into a scowl. She stood in the judgmental pose she always paraded before Mrs. Mendez, staring at her with a hand on the strap of her bookbag.

"And where are your shoes?"

Mrs. Mendez crossed her arms and walked to the door. "I'm teaching people some manners. That's what I'm doing," she said, passing her daughter without a glance. "Well, are you coming inside, or are you going to stand in the middle of the street all night like a streetwalker?"

Eloisa rolled her eyes as she paraded before her mother, adjusting a choker that, with her disheveled hair, made her look something like a stray poodle.

That unruly hair, Mrs. Mendez thought. That hair she had paid so much good money to heat and press and wrestle into submission each week, driving to the closest Dominican hairdresser, a full forty-five minutes from their house. Now Eloisa was refusing to keep her appointments, claimed she wanted to wear her hair *natural*, in all its curly anarchy, taking a cue from some-or-other black pop star.

"But you're not black, Eloisa," Mrs. Mendez had said in confusion the first time this happened.

"Really? Tell that to my hair," Eloisa had responded, a hand to her bony hip.

"You're *Dominican*, Eloisa."

"It's Lucy. I already told you I'm going by Lucy."

“Dominican is not the same thing as black. Haitians are black. And no Dominican has ever named their child *Lucy*.”

They had similar fights each week now. Eloisa acted like she knew more than her mother, even though she'd been handed everything in life. Even though she'd never had to scrounge and save and claw her way through these Broken English streets to finally arrive in Miami's suburbs. Eloisa didn't have to force her mouth into unnatural shapes to curve around impossible words like *turtle*, like *cinnamon*. English spilled out of Eloisa's mouth like a newborn baby, slippery and loud and unafraid to announce its existence. The worst wasn't when Eloisa got mad and yelled back at her. The worst was when Eloisa said nothing and looked at Mrs. Mendez like she couldn't comprehend the genetics that bound them together. When the corners of her lips edged up into a smug half-smile, and she stared back at her, blank, like she did now.

“*Malagradecida*,” Mrs. Mendez said under her breath. *Ungrateful*.

“What?” Eloisa slung her backpack off her shoulder and dumped it at her feet.

“Why are you so late again? Did you eat? Don't leave your things on the floor.”

Eloisa leaned against the kitchen partition and considered the chipped black polish on her nails. Mrs. Mendez didn't understand why she *wanted* to look unkempt. It was some kind of statement, and Mrs. Mendez wasn't going to give Eloisa the satisfaction of noticing.

“Oh my god how many times do I have to tell you I am in a club and we have meetings where we talk about important things happening in the world that you don't care about and yes I ate.”

“So *much* happening in the world. Exactly why I don't want you out there with all those criminals.”

“Uh-huh.” Eloisa slumped to the couch, where she sat beside her father.

“They shot another unarmed black teenager,” Mrs. Mendez heard Arsenio say to her.

“Makes me so fucking mad,” Eloisa responded.

“The prison-industrial complex...”

“Language!” Mrs. Mendez interrupted Arsenio with a shout. “Arsenio, tell her to watch her language!”

She got no response.

Arsenio had told Mrs. Mendez, many years ago when they first courted, when she was a junior accountant on the rise and he the new owner of a handyman business, that it was precisely her ambition and conviction that attracted him. But lately he seemed to shrink and shrivel in the shadow of her success and strength. She couldn't understand how the same man who had once commanded all the attention in a room with his easy, garrulous manner, who had danced *bachata* as if the rhythm coursed through his blood, who had insisted on the name Mendez Family Dream Repair Service LLC, now stayed silent as their daughter turned her back on everything they'd built. Yet she was not going to push him into an alliance with Eloisa. She wasn't going to allow the two of them to gang up on her. If she had to maintain the family order on her own, well goddamnit she would.

Mrs. Mendez looked out the window toward the hedge as the television droned on. She watched as shadows crept beneath the branches and stretched over the lawn like languorous cats, how the leaves shimmied with each breeze. She wondered if the neighbor woman had noticed. If she'd thought, as she leaned over to examine the brand-new addition like a fault line between their homes, *If only I could afford such a gorgeous hedge.*

She purchased a fence. It was expensive and made of metal, and the contractors followed her home the same day she made the purchase to install it. The workers hauled the chain-linked metal strapped to the bed of a pickup. The Home Depot was far from Mrs. Mendez's home. She drove, and the truck trailed behind her, and Mrs. Mendez watched Miami's gaudy downtown cityscape come alive: purple and pink lights creeping on as the sun set, highways crisscrossing like embroidery threads, a single party cruise with a circling spotlight off in the distance of the inky bay.

Arsenio waited by the door as Mrs. Mendez drove up the driveway, and the truck bounced to a stop at the curb, two workers in dirt-smeared khakis and baseball caps hopping out.

"What the hell is this?" he yelled above the sound of metal crashing onto concrete and instructions shouted between the two workers.

"Arsenio, I told you we can't live like this," Mrs. Mendez said, calmly wiping her shoes on the welcome mat. "We have to protect our investment."

"I don't understand." Mr. Mendez shook his head and looked from one worker to the next. "How much was all this?"

Mrs. Mendez opened the door and pulled Arsenio in beside her. Eloisa sat at the kitchen table looking amused.

"Give me one second, *muchachos!*" she yelled at the two workers who were each holding one end of a metal panel and shuffling it behind the hedge as she closed the door.

“Look!” she said, nudging Arsenio beside Eloisa at the window that looked out on the neighbors’ house. “Look at their lawn filled with political propaganda. And they have a bunch of *chairs* on their driveway, Arsenio. As if they’re still back in whatever island they come from sitting on their porch to wait for the fruit-and-vegetable truck.”

“But you have a chair by the door.”

“I have a *porch chair* by the door, Arsenio. Christ. It’s shiny and glazed and matches the bedroom window shades. What they have is made of *straw*, Arsenio. That chair looks like something my grandmother would sell back in the Dominican Republic.”

“Hmm.”

“And the woman has like twenty family members over to her house each weekend—this is not an exaggeration. All this commotion. All these babies. Thirty babies, and you don’t see thirty fathers if you *know what I mean*.”

Mrs. Mendez raised an eyebrow toward Arsenio.

“I don’t trust them. I’m installing the fence, and it’s going to lock. I’m not staying home without knowing I’m protected.”

“They’re really nice people.” Eloisa stood and opened the refrigerator, jumbling through stacks of Tupperware until she found juice.

“How would you know? Eloisa, *please* stop drinking straight out of the carton.”

“Can you hand me a beer?” Mr. Mendez turned to Eloisa. “I’m going to go watch the news.”

“Because the woman, Mrs. Portman, teaches at my school,” said Eloisa, handing over a bottle.

“What? Arsenio are you hearing this?”

“Did we run out of the Presidente?”

“Why is that so shocking?” Eloisa said. “She is a social studies teacher for the tenth graders. And she sponsors the Social Justice Club.”

“The what?”

“All I see is Bud Light,” Mr. Mendez said, taking the refrigerator door from Eloisa.

“God. How many times do I have to tell you? The Social Justice Club. That I joined at school.” Eloisa stepped out of her father’s way and thumbed the rubber bracelets at her wrist.

“What kind of club is this?”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“I guess Bud Light will do.”

“What kind of club is this, Eloisa? Answer me right now.”

“Jesus, mom. Why are you freaking out?”

“Is this the black thing again? Is it *that neighbor woman* who is making you believe you are black?”

Eloisa bored into her mother. Her face twisted. Mrs. Mendez could hear the drilling start outside.

“Do you really think that all the white people out there—the cops—that they care whether I’m Dominican or Haitian or from another freakin’ planet? All they see is this skin that’s the same color as yours, the same as Mrs. Portman’s. Can’t you see that you’ve spent all your life trying to prove you’re not something you *are*?”

Eloisa left her there. She left Mrs. Mendez by the window with a hand on the cool frosted pane. Mrs. Mendez felt ill. She looked out, past the hedges, past the workers pounding the fence into the ground, toward the neighbor’s house. Mrs. Mendez noticed a trash lid on the ground.

The fence was not enough. The neighbor woman was *flaunting* it in Mrs. Mendez’s face now. She was *flaunting* the fact that she was trying to ruin the neighborhood, to ruin her daughter, to ruin everything Mrs. Mendez had worked so hard to protect. *Three* times a week now Eloisa came home later than usual. She had started watching the news with her father *every night now* and ignoring Mrs. Mendez when she complained that the world was going to shit. Eloisa acted like it was a problem Mrs. Mendez had worked so hard, saved all her money, gave Eloisa this life Mrs. Mendez pined for when she was a girl living in a two-room shack who had to wake up at five in the morning each day to feed chickens and scrub laundry on a zinc board while sweat plastered mosquitos to her face. And this woman with her primitive-looking hairdo, with her foreign-looking jewelry, with her handmade-looking furniture. This woman wasn’t just displaying election signs on the lawn anymore. She had erected a giant flag from some other country Mrs. Mendez didn’t even recognize and stuck a sticker that read *Black Lives Matter* on her nice-looking car. Mrs. Mendez was mortified.

But the worst, the *worst* grievance had occurred as Mrs. Mendez prepared dinner the previous night. She’d looked out the kitchen window, wondering when Eloisa would show up, and had seen her daughter and Mrs. Portman engaged in lively conversation outside. The neighbor woman smiled and laughed and Eloisa *smiled and laughed back*. Mrs. Mendez couldn’t remember the last time her daughter had smiled or laughed with her. She’d

demanded that Eloisa explain what she and the neighbor woman had talked about. And Eloisa had given her a smirk and said simply, “She wants to make Lucy Mendez president of the club. Moi!” Mrs. Mendez couldn’t take it anymore.

“Can’t you get one of your men to graft a hedge onto the hedge?” Mrs. Mendez said as she shaded her eyes with her hand. The contractor walked the perimeter of the fence outside Mrs. Mendez’s home.

“Ma’am,” said the contractor in an accent that matched Mrs. Mendez’s. “With all due respect, ma’am.”

“Yes?” Mrs. Mendez was growing impatient with the man’s bumbling. Why was it that so many like him had no idea how to act before a successful person like herself?

When Mrs. Mendez had arrived, white American ladies at grocery counters had smiled with prim politeness as she tried to mime her desire for frying cheese. Older immigrants, the Miami elite—Cuban-Spanish descendants and Venezuelan businessmen, Colombian socialites and Argentine doctors—kept to themselves, offered only charitable greetings, seemed simultaneously surprised and disappointed that a woman with a smooth hazelnut complexion spoke their tongue.

Men like the contractor liked to assume they were the same, Mrs. Mendez and him. She’d worked hard to prove they weren’t. She’d worked hard for respect. Mrs. Mendez was never going back.

“Señora, grafting is not at all practical, or...possible,” the contractor said, no longer smiling. “And I’m afraid that a hedge that tall would not be stable. If what you’re worried about is safety—”

“Who said anything about safety? Did I call you here to pry into my life? I’m the one paying *you*.”

The contractor removed his ballcap. He wiped at his forehead with a handkerchief. Then the contractor’s lips curled into a smile. It was so sudden a change of facial expression that Mrs. Mendez frowned. Was he mocking her? She didn’t care. “I don’t care,” she said.

“Okay, señora.” The contractor made a serious face again. “How about this? We can build *another* fence on the *other* side of the hedge you already have.”

“A hedge nestled between two fences?”

Mrs. Mendez looked toward the neatly pruned ficus, its leaves packed tight like sugar cubes. She liked her hedge. She hated to cover it up with another fence. But she wondered what, in the end, mattered more, what, in the end, ensured her survival—beauty shining from the outside in or the ugly, the reminders of the world as it was at its ugliest, kept out?

"I suppose that could work. But it would have to be a thick one. I don't want to hear the neighbors either."

More contractors arrived. They dug and shoveled, powered tools. Mrs. Mendez grew tired of watching the process from her kitchen window and took a nap on the couch. Mr. Mendez and Eloisa were to arrive in a few hours and Mrs. Mendez was going to tell Eloisa she was forbidden from attending her after-school meetings with the black club. Mrs. Mendez was putting her foot down. She was not going to stand idly by while Eloisa tried to drag her family back to the societal cesspool from which Mrs. Mendez had escaped.

She woke to her phone ringing and heard what sounded like shouting and protesting outside. Eloisa's name flashed on her cell screen.

"Eloisa?"

"Mom *what the hell. What in the actual hell.*"

"Don't speak to me like that. Where are you? Why aren't you here?"

"I'm literally outside. Outside this...prison wall...that you've installed. Dad is trying to figure out if he can knock down a section or find a ladder. We've been calling you. Why haven't you answered?"

"What are you talking about ladder?"

"Why would you install another fence? And all the way around the house with *no opening or entrance*? This doesn't even make sense—"

Mrs. Mendez rushed to the kitchen. She turned on the light, but even so, a darkness permeated through the frosted panels of the window and cast a hazy gray shadow. She saw it then: the thick, corrugated metal—the corrugated metal of her miserable childhood home—protruding over the top of the hedge and casting a shadow down the lawn. She put her cell phone down and could hear Eloisa's muffled voice: "*Mom? Mom?*" She could hear Arsenio's voice in the background: "I've stayed quiet for so long just to placate her! Just to avoid trouble!" And what was unmistakably the neighbor's voice: "I'll get my sledgehammer."

Mrs. Mendez rushed out the door and up to the edge of the monstrous construction. She fumed, thinking, *This is why that fucking contractor is getting nowhere. How could he be so stupid?* She could hear voices on the other side.

"Eloisa? Arsenio?" she called out.

"Mom?" she heard Eloisa cry out. "Mom, is that you?"

“Eloisa!” Mrs. Mendez shouted. She unlatched the door of the original fence, which now felt flimsy, almost gentle. Mrs. Mendez pushed and nudged her way into the ficus bushes until she was surrounded by their dark cloak. Branches splintered and scratched Mrs. Mendez’s bare legs and face. Leaves nested into her hair. She finally reached a tiny clearing in which the new wall towered and topped a foot above her. Each panel seemed soldered onto the next, the gray tin chalky and uneven, rusted in places. She placed a hand on a cold metal ridge and shivered.

“Eloisa!” Mrs. Mendez shouted, hearing a strange echo. “Arsenio!”

She could make out only the neighbor woman’s voice now.

“I’m coming,” the voice said. “I’m going to save you, Mrs. Mendez. I’m going to knock down this wall and get you out of there.”

“No!” Mrs. Mendez screamed back. She tumbled and fell back on her butt in the fresh-packed dirt, a nest of twigs and leaves crunching on the ground beneath her. She’d created an indent in the hedge and could feel her weight pushing back on the original chain-link fence. A tangle of branches and crushed bushes now blocked the exit toward her house.

“Eloisa!”

There was no response. Mrs. Mendez crept and placed her face on the wall’s surface as if a cool hand pressed to her cheek checking for fever. Mrs. Mendez heard a faint hum, her ear to the galvanized metal, like a wave lapping before her, like all the earth sighing beneath her. She could hear nothing now. She could see nothing.

“Mrs. Portman!” she finally called out. “Mrs. Portman!”

But she couldn’t even hear the neighbor’s voice anymore.

Gabriela Garcia is the winner of a Rona Jaffe Foundation Writer’s Award. Her writing appears or is forthcoming in *Tin House*, *Zyzzyyva*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *Black Warrior Review*, and elsewhere. She has an MFA from Purdue University and was the 2018 writer-in-residence for Sarabande Books. She tweets about mostly cats @gabimgarcia.

Rainbows

 [newyorker.com/magazine/2020/10/05/rainbows](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/10/05/rainbows)

Joseph O'Neill

I came to this country—from Ireland, at the age of twenty-three—unaware of the existence of mentors. I'm certain that I had never heard the word “mentee.” The words in Ireland were not exactly the same as the words in America. When a classmate told me that she was going to meet her “mentor,” I had to ask her to explain. In America, she informed me, there was a social practice in which an older, experienced person donated time and knowledge to a younger, relatively foolish person in order to help the latter better understand the world's perils and pathways. I was filled with a suspicion that bordered on disbelief. I probably said, “Ah, go away.” Ireland has changed, everyone tells me, and maybe this sort of suspiciousness is no longer current. I doubt it, however.

I audited an undergraduate class in anthropology. I needed a break from the dreariness and difficulty of my master's degree, which was in applied analytics. The class was titled *Animals & People*. The pet, the pest, the hunting asset, livestock, the endangered animal: we investigated the social and ideological aspects of these phenomena. I found it interesting. I may not have been an anthropologist, but I did own a kitten. The professor whose class this was, Paola Visintin, became my mentor.

Let me say that Paola was my elder by almost twenty years but was cool in a way that made professors closer to me in age seem gauche and youthless. Her style was important to me. She was thin, of course. She wore her brown hair in a slightly scruffy shoulder-length cut, with bangs, and she casually wore clothes by Martin Margiela—including a deconstructed gray wool jacket that I thought about for years with a feeling of bitter loss. Margiela, a recluse of great mystique, was rumored to be Paola's personal friend, and that was about the coolest thing possible. Mystique was important to me at that time, and some nationalities had more mystique than others. Paola was Italian, from Trieste—a city, she once suggested to me, that still belonged to an invisible Austria-Hungary. She was left-wing to a degree that seemed almost unlawful. She emanated a worldliness in which significant intellectual and sexual powers converged. She spoke with a strong and beautiful Italian accent. She was unafraid.

Joseph O'Neill on mentors and perspective.

Our relationship began when I asked if it would be O.K. for me, a mere auditor, to see her during “office hours” (another new concept). She agreed, on the condition that we meet at a coffee shop on West 141st Street. This was near her apartment, the precise location of which, it was somehow understood, would never be mine to know. Of course, I found out. We met about six times over the course of two years, always at my instigation, always at the same coffee shop. We sat at a particular table in the smoking section. I was honored that she

made time to see me, and I speculated that the honor had to do with a shared European identity. Paola seemed to be well disposed toward Ireland, a country, she once told me, that was incomparably supplied with rainbows. Exactly what we discussed I no longer recall, but I have a surviving sense of the excitement I felt when travelling to those meetings from Brooklyn. Many quandaries and crossroads characterized my life in those days, and I took pleasure in telling Paola about them. There was a lot to talk about, it seemed to me. I had not yet found a career, or love, or a home, or money.

Simply to think about the foregoing—all of it, even the departure from Ireland—for some reason fills me with shame.

The meeting that I think about was our last one.

Paola was already at the coffee shop when I arrived. She immediately asked, “What has happened?”

With tears in my eyes, I outlined the events of the night before. Certain details were too embarrassing and awful to relate, especially the details of how I’d come to find myself in the situation that produced what had happened, details that made me furious not only at my personal weakness but also at my naïve and counterproductive upbringing in rural County Limerick.

Paola wasn’t one to offer solutions. Her conversational practice was austere and consistent: she listened, she asked specific questions, and she took seriously what one had to say. When she lit a cigarette, it usually meant that she was about to offer her thoughts. These were always brief. She seemed to have disdain for her own opinions. More than once she cast doubt on the very idea of wisdom, which made her seem wiser than ever.

Therefore I put my question to her with no real expectation of receiving an answer. “Should I report him?” I asked.

“Report?”

“Yes,” I said. “To the authorities.”

“The authorities?” I had the impression that a private joke was passing through her thoughts. “I have a better idea, Clodagh,” she said, stubbing out her cigarette. “Now, listen to me very carefully.” She looked squarely into my eyes. “Are you listening?” I nodded. She had never been so definite. She said, “Get over it.”

My kitten grew into a cat, turned into an old lady, died. The obstetrician lifted a red-blue creature from behind a blue paper curtain—and, flash, the creature, Aoife, turned eighteen. This last milestone was reached in the final semester of her senior year, in January.

One Monday evening in February, my husband, Ian, became aware that our daughter was involved in a prolonged phone drama in her bedroom. He knocked on her door and went in. Aoife, who had been crying, told him that a boy at her school was harassing her. Harassing as in doing what? Ian asked. Aoife told him harassing as in direct-messaging her on Instagram after she'd told him more than once to stop, harassing as in following her around at school all day long and making her dread going anywhere. Following you around? Ian asked. Why? Dad, he's obsessed, Aoife said. Ian asked Aoife if she wanted him to call the parents of this boy, James. Aoife told him that she did not want him to do that. I'll take care of it, Aoife said. O.K., Ian said.

I was in Columbus, working, when Ian reported this conversation. I told him, "I don't know any James. Keep an eye on her. I'll handle it tomorrow." By the time I landed in New York, early on Tuesday evening, there had been further developments. In the taxi home, I called Ian and learned that our daughter had not gone to school that day. She had contacted the school to explain her absence and stated that she felt fearful about going in so long as James Wang was there.

"James is James Wang?" I said.

The school had asked Aoife if she wished to file a complaint.

I said, "A complaint? What kind of complaint?"

"There's a complaints procedure, apparently," Ian said. "There are regulations."

"Go on," I said.

After consulting with a friend—

"Which friend?" I asked.

"Some friend, I don't know," Ian said.

"Go on," I said. Ian didn't keep track of the friends. I did. My money was on Mei.

—Aoife had told the school that, yes, she wished to file an official complaint for harassment and intimidation against James Wang. She wouldn't go to school unless he was stopped.

I was nearly home. "I'll talk to her," I said.

"I'm not sure she wants to discuss it right now," Ian said.

I have spent twenty years in business talking to people, almost all of them men, who have not wanted to talk to me or, if they have, then not about the things I've wanted to talk about. This skill of making people talk to me against their will comes in handy in relation to my daughter. Aoife is a sensible girl, a very good student, but she is headstrong and furtive

about certain things, and sometimes the issue must be forced. The issue is almost always the same: what the facts of her life are, and what she is minded to do about those facts, and whether what she's minded to do will or won't serve her interests.

When I got home I said, "Where is she?"

Ian said, "She has some friends with her right now. In her bedroom."

"Who?" I was hanging up my coat.

"Some girlfriends," Ian said helplessly.

I knocked on Aoife's door and went in. She and Mei and Sophie were sitting on the bed, backs to the wall, looking at Aoife's phone. "Hey, guys," I said.

The visitors understood me. After some demonstrative hugging, Mei and Sophie left.

I had wanted Aoife to tell me the facts, because I was sure that Ian had not been told the whole story, but when I sat down next to my daughter I took her into my arms and said, "I know, love, I know," as if I already knew the facts.

Aoife's guidance counsellor was Ms. Vincenzullo. I rang her that night. There was some difficulty getting hold of her private number, but I got there. I explained that Aoife was distressed and feared returning to school. Ms. Vincenzullo said that she was aware of the situation. I insisted that precautions be taken to protect our daughter. Ian was sitting nearby, listening. I told Ms. Vincenzullo that we, Aoife's parents, would be watching the school very closely. I said this ominously. My experience has been that American institutions respond only to the danger of litigation. That is awful, if you think about it. I said to Ms. Vincenzullo, "An unsafe environment for our child is not an option." That was my language.

"Aoife will be safe," Ms. Vincenzullo said. "James will be absent for a while."

The next day, Aoife went back to school. I offered to drive her there, but she said she would be O.K. She was right about that. The boy, James Wang, didn't bother her again. The authorities had done their job.

For about ten years we had been using a nearby laundromat. Their full-service wash was efficient and, for a small extra charge, they would deliver clean, folded clothes to your home. If you were a regular customer, like our family, they'd stick a tag on your bag that said "V.I.P."

The business was operated by a family from somewhere in the interior of China—I can't remember the place they once told me. The husband was a cheerful simpleton who barked at customers in very basic English and played practical jokes with the laundry bags. The wife was obviously a lot smarter and spoke much better English. It seemed incredible that she was married to the husband, but needs must, I suppose. Even though I never asked them

their names, I came to know the family well enough. They lived in an old tenement building just a block from ours. They employed various friends and relations, most intriguingly a teenage girl—she had been farmed out to the couple, I suspected, as used to be common in Ireland—who gradually transitioned into a good-looking, mannish young person. If this had caused any major problems, I didn't see it. These people had other things to worry about.

The couple had one child—a son. I met him when he was five or six years old. He'd sit under a table among laundry bags, absorbed by a gaming console. You'd see him there at all hours. His father told me that the boy was No. 1 in his class at math. That seemed unlikely, given that he always appeared to be in the laundromat, playing video games. But time proved the father right: a few years later, he proudly informed me that his son was the only student in his year to test into a specialized high school. I was thrilled. I had watched the lad grow up. I had seen him working the begloomed washing machines on sunny afternoons and, after he turned twelve, making weekend deliveries. How many times had I buzzed him up to our floor? A hundred? Two hundred? I had seen his parents working night and day for their boy. The laundromat stayed open from seven in the morning until ten at night, every day of the year save New Year's Day. What a triumph for the family.

One Sunday, I stopped by the laundromat. The bag of whites we'd dropped off two weeks earlier hadn't been delivered. I wanted to check up on it.

The laundromat presented a familiar and reassuring drama, with a double stroller occupied by a pair of oversized children, some harassed moms, a dishevelled man, and two hipsters. In the dimness at the back, behind a table piled high with bags, the mother and the trans or nonbinary young person were going through a basket heaped with clean brights. I surveyed the bags stacked up against the wall. When I didn't see mine, I asked the mother, "The purple one?"

She whispered something to the young person, whose shortish black-and-purple hair had been fixed into cute little tufts. This person went into the storage room and brought out my sack. The tag on it said "V.I.P. \$30." When I got out my wallet, the mother made a gesture of refusal. "No—no money," she said.

I was insistent, however. This was the first time that they'd failed to deliver as promised. That was hardly a reason not to pay.

The mother said, "No money. You don't come back here again. Finished." She stood with her hands clenched at her sides.

I didn't understand. I looked to the young person for guidance, but the person was examining me as if I were the curious specimen.

"Your family bad to my son," the mother said. "Please get out now."

“Your son?” I said. What was she talking about?

“You know my son—James,” the mother said.

“James?” I said—and, to my horror, I understood.

Unconsciously I had slung my bag over my shoulder. Now it was too heavy. I put it down. I said, “I didn’t know. I had no idea. I’m so sorry.” I wished I knew her name. Then I realized that I did know her name. “Mrs. Wang,” I said, “I didn’t know.”

“I tell the school, This big year for college. Grades important. James study hard. I tell the school, James sixteen. Junior. Doesn’t know girls. Not one kiss. The school not listen. Suspend him.” More aggressively Mrs. Wang went on, “Your daughter senior. Eighteen years old. Grades done. College application done. Everything easy.” I tried to reply, but she kept going. James’s grades had crashed. He was shunned by his friends. He didn’t want to go back to school. They took him to a doctor, and the doctor said he was suicidal. “What we do now?” she said to me. “You tell me what we do now.”

Her husband peeked out from behind the screen at the very back, then hid again.

“I’m very sorry, Mrs. Wang,” I said.

The mother smiled bitterly. “Easy to say.”

These things have a limit. The mother had every right to be upset, but I was not going to be forced into a conversation of this kind. “James will be fine,” I said. “You’ll see.” I hoisted my bag over my shoulder like Santa.

“Your family finished here,” Mrs. Wang said. “I protect James.”

The bag was heavier than ever. After a short block, the muscles in my hands and fingers burned. I put the bag down and called Aoife.

I could tell from her voice that she’d been sleeping. “It’s noon,” I said. “Up, please.”

She muttered something.

“Listen to me,” I said. “Why didn’t you say it was the boy from the laundromat who was bothering you?”

“I did tell you,” she lied.

“You told us it was James Wang. Why didn’t you say who he was?”

“I thought you knew,” she said. “Anyway, why does it matter?”

I said, “We could have sorted this out with his parents. We didn’t need to bring the school into it. We could have handled it family to family.”

Aoife said nothing.

“What happened to him, exactly? Was he suspended? Aoife? Hello?”

“What?” she said angrily.

“How long was he suspended for?”

“I don’t know.”

Cartoon by Paul Noth

Link copied

“Well, estimate.” I was raging. There were so many things I had to stop myself from saying to her.

“I don’t know, Mom,” she shouted. “Maybe two weeks. Mom, he’s a creep. He kept following me around. Not just at the school—around here, too. Ask Mei.”

“Tell me exactly what he did,” I said.

My daughter told me that James had been stalking her. He would hang around the subway station until she appeared and then get on the train with her, sometimes in the same car. He’d walk behind her on the way home, always keeping her in his sights, never overtaking her. He started to show up wherever she went at school—the hallways, the food truck where she bought lunch. He was always there, hanging around, staring at her. Aoife told him repeatedly to leave her alone, but he didn’t comply. He messaged her on Instagram, and after she blocked him he messaged her again from a friend’s account.

“How many messages?” I said.

“I don’t know, Mom. Two.”

“What did they say?”

“Just dumb stuff. ‘You’re pretty.’ ” She had raised her voice again. “This is someone who comes into my home, Mom.” One time, she told me, she had instructed James through the intercom to leave the washing in the lobby. When she went down to collect it, he was still there, waiting for her. According to Aoife, he had a very weird, threatening look in his eye. “He’s seen my bras, Mom,” she yelled through the phone. “He’s kept some of my panties, I know he has, there’s two at least that are missing. He’s a weirdo. He shouldn’t be working with people’s private things.”

“O.K.,” I said. “Thanks.” I know when my daughter is lying and when she isn’t. The missing-panties detail was absurd, but the rest of it added up. It didn’t add up to much, to my mind, because James was a child. He had feelings that he couldn’t understand or manage. The important thing was that I was informed. Information enables action.

Right there, on the sidewalk, I called Ms. Vincenzullo. It was a Sunday, but it couldn’t wait. That is my core skill, I believe: making phone calls promptly and persistently. It is a surprisingly rare skill. I left a message. I wasn’t optimistic about hearing back.

But Ms. Vincenzullo did ring back, right away. It took me by surprise. I hesitated to accept the call.

The action I’d had in mind was to advocate on behalf of James and to ask if the complaint could be struck from his record. But I knew how American organizations worked. It was a dark wood of decision trees. Either Aoife had had a well-founded grievance or she hadn’t. Either she would have to retract her complaint or the school would have to retract its decision. The school would not retract, and neither, I knew, would my daughter, nor would I advise her to. To admit to second thoughts would be to invite trouble.

Everything was a mess, everything was wrong. I didn’t answer Ms. Vincenzullo.

The laundry bag hadn’t grown any lighter. I had two blocks to go. Men and women were striding past me. Cars and trucks were hurtling down the avenue. I struggled onward. In Ireland, if I needed a lift, I had had only to raise a hand at the side of the lane and someone, usually a stranger, almost always a man, would stop and bring me closer to my destination.

When I got home, Aoife was ensconced in her bedroom. Later she emerged in order to leave the house and see friends. Ian came back in the early evening, bearing takeout. He set out the paper plates and split two pairs of chopsticks. He helped himself to a huge portion of everything. I joined him at the table but ignored the food. I said, “There’s something I need to tell you. I don’t know where to begin.” With that I began.

Afterward Ian said, “Jesus Christ—that’s the kid? He looks like he’s thirteen.”

Ian rarely sees me distraught. I don’t like it when he does.

“Hey,” he said. “It’s going to be O.K.”

He was asking me to fantasize. He was asking me to invent a world made up of different facts.

“We did what we had to do,” Ian bullishly continued. “We protected our daughter. What the school did or didn’t do—well, that’s the school’s business.”

This was American of him—the obsession with liability. I wanted to tell him, Either you do the right thing or you do the wrong thing.

But I said nothing. Some things can't be usefully discussed. At nine o'clock, I went to bed. Later that week, Ian found us a new laundromat. Later that year, Aoife got into Wesleyan. In the fall, we drove her up to Middletown in a rented van big enough to accommodate her bicycle and her mini-fridge and her cello.

We had a client in Albany. It was my job to travel up there once or twice a month. I went by train, along the Hudson River. The three-hour journey goes by quickly, because the river is always differently beautiful. I like it best on those still, gray mornings when you raise your eyes from your laptop and the water is as tranquil as the floor of a palace. The return trip, especially in the winter dark, feels long and dreary. I usually try to get more work done.

I was at the Albany station one night in early March, waiting for the train, when I saw a figure in an ankle-length wool coat and a wool pompom hat standing alone at the end of the platform. She was smoking a cigarette. Then the Maple Leaf, come all the way from Toronto, arrived with lights blazing and two conductors gallantly teetering in open doorways. The figure slowly approached, hands held behind her back, contemplating the ground. She was content to be the last passenger to board. I knew that silhouette from somewhere. Looking more closely, I saw the face of Paola Visintin.

A train car's small staircase fell out with a thud. I sprang up the metal steps and turned left and kept going down the aisle until I reached the front of the train. I didn't want her to see me. I believe that I was embarrassed about what I'd turned into—a middle-aged, slightly overweight American woman in business attire, with no mystique and no Margiela. This wasn't an ordinary emotion for me. My self-accusations are usually about day-to-day failings. I have no large regrets about what I have made of my life. It is a worthwhile life. It is a worthwhile body, too.

Soon my panic was replaced by a contrary feeling: a euphoric, almost romantic desire to talk with Paola. Contemporaneously I understood that what I wanted wasn't only to reconnect with my old mentor but to inhabit the self I had been when I was Irish and young. This was also unusual. Looking backward isn't a trait of mine. It requires a kind of courage that I don't have and don't want.

Hastily I Googled Paola and learned that she had left Columbia, currently taught at *SUNY* Albany, and had published a book titled "The Urbane" (2007). Then I got to my feet and walked along the aisle, scanning the passengers to my left and right. They had come from mythic upstate places—Syracuse, Rome, Utica—and yet here they sat like ordinary twenty-first-century mortals, watching movies or trying to sleep. I reached the café car. Paola sat alone at a table, reading a book in French. Her free hand held a bottle of beer.

I continued to the bar, got a drink, and came back. "May I sit here?" I said.

Paola glanced upward and said, “Of course.”

Her hair was darker than ever, but finer and cut a little shorter. Silver roots gleamed at the parting. She wore a black cashmere sweater and a bracelet made of large gold links. Her face had the wrinkles of a long-term smoker. She was thin, thin. She hadn’t recognized me.

I stirred my double Bloody Mary with self-confidence. I said joyfully, “Paola, it’s me. Clodagh.”

Paola looked up from her book. She removed her reading glasses. She was having difficulty placing me. “Ah, yes—Clodagh.”

“How are you, Paola?”

With a wry motion of the eyes and mouth, she signalled that everything was as well as could be expected. She said, “So how has your life turned out?”

I laughed. It was a thrilling question from a thrilling questioner. To answer Paola, to hear myself narrate how things had gone for me, made my life seem coherent and adventurous. The scene felt charmed. Our conversation on a speeding and brilliant Amtrak train was linked, as distant events are linked in a folktale, to those long-ago conversations on 141st Street. Somewhere south of Rhinecliff, I offered to buy the drinks. Paola pointed at the remnants of my Bloody Mary and said, “I’ll have one of those.” I was proud. I had influenced her.

When I returned from the bar, two men at the neighboring table laughed coarsely. Paola and I glanced at them—big, overloud, beer-drinking, sprawling white guys in their fifties—then looked away. There was no need to spell out the politics of the situation, and indeed our conversation had been happily free of any mention of the stupid, evil President. I was conscious that I had no real sense of what Paola’s ideas on that topic might be. She had never been someone to think what everybody else was thinking.

Over our Bloody Marys, I found myself telling her the story of Aoife and James. She listened, as of old, with calm interest. She expressed curiosity about the technicalities of the complaint procedure—“Does the school write the rules, or is it the Department of Education?”—but otherwise said very little.

When I was done, Paola raised her eyebrows. After a few moments she said, “Aoife must be an Irish name. It’s beautiful.”

This oblique response was in character, but I needed more from her. Surely she saw how ashamed and anguished I was.

The men across the aisle broke out once again into noisy laughter. It drew Paola’s attention. “Have you noticed,” she said suddenly, “how degenerate the so-called Irish and Italians are in this country? It really is quite interesting.” Her voice was almost certainly audible to the two

men, although I didn't dare look to see if they were listening. How tenaciously, Paola said, Irish- and Italian-Americans clung to their so-called heritage, and yet how little resemblance their mores and outlooks bore to those in the old countries. There was, she said, a certain pathos in the situation of communities morally misshapen, presumably, by their ancestors' brutalizing experience of poverty, emigration, and assimilation. Notable, also, was the recent and deepening fusion of these two ethnic groups by intermarriage, which had had the effect of creating a hybrid identity founded on comical and grotesque notions of racial self-worth. She was thinking of writing something about it. It would involve, Paola said, a lot of research on Long Island, a part of the country that had long fascinated her.

She said with a small smile, "You look puzzled, Clodagh."

Was she testing me? Did she suspect me of Irish-American degeneracy? I felt under scrutiny—that I'd disappointed her, with my story of my business career and my maternal ups and downs. Had she always been such a snob?

"Sorry," I said. "I was distracted. This thing with the boy from the laundromat . . ." I shook my head.

Paola asked, "He's not making trouble anymore?"

"Well—Aoife's at college. We've had no contact."

"So it's a happy ending," she said.

Was she being ironic? Was she bored? "It isn't Aoife I'm worried about," I said. "It's James. He's got a suspension on his record. For sexual harassment, of all things."

Paola rattled the ice cubes in her plastic glass. "He will be fine. He will survive. People survive, Clodagh." She drained what was left of her drink. Her hand had drifted to her book.

She was condescending to me, and the encounter now felt fully anachronistic. I wasn't that girl from Newcastle West, and Paola was no longer the cool professor who jingled keys to an enigmatic adult world. My former self would have wanted to know what she was thinking—about me, about everything—would have wanted to assure her that I wasn't in the habit of ambushing near-strangers with autobiographical monologues. But I felt sorry for her, this childless, too-thin woman in her sixties who couldn't quit smoking and was still interested in her air of mystery.

I finished my drink and smiled. Quite amiably I said, "It was very nice to see you, Paola."

"Goodbye, Clodagh," Paola said, just as amiably. Giving nothing away, she smiled once again. She picked up her book.

I went back to my seat. The train stormed on and on. Time stormed onward, too. In the spring, I went into our local Duane Reade. There I ran into someone I didn't want to see.

The checkout staff—one woman—had temporarily absented herself, and this had resulted in a long line of customers that wound around belt barriers and from there into an aisle enclosed by tall racks. I joined the line and waited. Soon enough everyone shuffled forward, and I progressed beyond the racks and into the open area with the barriers. Facing me in the winding line, in effect approaching me on my right, was Mrs. Wang.

There was no question of fleeing. You make your bed and you lie in it.

Away from that hot, dark laundry, she looked a lot younger. She was in her mid-thirties, I realized. Then a movement of the line placed us alongside each other. We exchanged polite nods.

"Hello, Mrs. Wang," I said. "How is your family?"

"Good," she said. "Your family?"

"Good, thank you," I said.

She gave me a more searching look. She said, "Your daughter good?"

"Yes," I said. I forced myself to utter the sentence "How is James?"

"Good," she said. "Accepted by No. 1 college." She smiled. It was an amazing smile. She said, "University of Pennsylvania. Ivy League."

"Congratulations," I said. "He's a good lad."

Mrs. Wang said, "Yes. Work hard." Then the line quickened and she was called forward to make payment.

When Ian came home that evening, I told him that I wanted to visit Ireland again, to see my brother.

"Sure," he said. "It was fun last time."

The last time had been when Aoife was four years old. She was anxious about going, until I promised her that we'd see rainbows. After that she would not stop talking about the rainbows of Ireland. It worried Ian a little. "There had better be rainbows," he said.

"There will be," I said. But I was worried, too.

On the airplane, Aoife asked me, "Are rainbows real?" She was suspicious.

"They are," I said.

We landed at Shannon in the morning. In the rental car, Aoife was wide awake and inspecting the sky. It was a windy spring day, with white and gray and blue clouds speeding in from the west.

We had not been driving for more than a few minutes when Ian said, “Aoife, look.”

A rainbow faintly showed above the estuary. “Rainbow,” Aoife shouted.

We drove from County Clare into Limerick, then back out toward Newcastle West. There were so many rainbows that we stopped looking for them before we reached Adare. ♦