

An Armenian in Dublin

by Mary O'Donnell

Galo and me have made our way home from the town's newest watering hole, the Bogota Bar, which describes itself in the local paper as

“A MEETING POINT FOR ALL THINGS LATINO —
MUSIC, DANCE & THE BEST OF VINO!”

Someone had hung castanets on the walls, along with pictures of flamenco dancers, and posters of bulls. I liked one framed black and white photograph which showed the horses of Argentina being ridden by gauchos with wicked looking little spurs flicked like scorpions' tails at the backs of their boots. But I'm disappointed. I'd expected tangos, at the very least, even if Galo and I wouldn't have dared to try and tango. It would have been nice to watch. Instead, it was pretty much the usual pub scene if you forgot the posters. People sat and drank, with some flamenco music playing very low in the background.

So we stumble out into the night and head along the canal towpath, taking the shortcut home. There's an unseasonal fog, and it's so chill our breath creates new swirls within the fog, and every inhalation is like a ragged drag on the lungs. I've lost my key and we need

to get back to the house to find the spare which is kept in the back garden on a narrow ledge beneath the coal bunker lid. This means we have to scale the back wall. Galo shivers and whacks his upper arms as he tries to warm himself in the freezing night. Even the swans are curled up, their heads and necks tucked back in a sinewy letter U that ends just beneath the edge of the wing. He's always complaining about the damp of Ireland. For a man who's survived winters from hell this surprises me. I pause for a moment and tighten the neck scarf on his short, Armenian neck.

The back wall is studded with broken glass embedded in concrete but as we make our way along the canal, all things seem possible. We've faced down worse than a jagged wall. But Galo is as bad for me as I am for him, and sometimes we make unpredictable decisions. We also attract attention in a town where Galo's red jeans, and his orange and blue bandanna stand out like bleeding wounds to masculinity. None of the men around here wear colours like that, so they have it in for him when I'm not around. I'm his lucky talisman, his girl, I stand between him and all harm as he survives in these backwaters.

We find a bin and Galo hoists me onto it, we're breaking our sides laughing at nothing but trying to stay quiet, shut de fuck *up* Maree he tells me in his heavy accent. It's amazing how the most un-fluent people can swear fluently in virtually any language, I think, trying not to laugh, but once on the bin I have to get onto that wall. I'm taller than Galo so it's obvious it has to be me, the giraffe with the llama I tell him, both of us with long necks and backs but my legs are longer than his. I glance down at his stolid body, its chaos of hand-scissored steel-grey hair that never lies down even when there's no wind, and I wish he was the one doing the manly thing, trying to scale the wall to see what's possible and what isn't.

Its how he's spent his life, wandering between the possible and the impossible. Back in his own country he got himself raped when he was fifteen, which makes it sound as if it was his fault and it's not what I mean. One night a man he didn't know asked him to carry a load and said he'd pay him. Galo, a village boy, took him at face value, but soon discovered the hard way that the load wasn't cases and bags, it was this big dangling scrotum and in no time at all he'd twisted Galo's arms behind his back, threw him over the bonnet of a car

inside a rusty open shed, and broke him. The muezzin was calling out just then, he told me one night as I held him in my arms, kissing him to calmness on his forehead and temples, and a rooster was asserting itself among a bunch of chickens in a coop, so nobody heard his screams. He needed surgery afterwards. The doctor was not sympathetic and didn't use enough anaesthetic. Galo says the man looked at him as if he'd brought it on himself, or had wanted this. It was weeks before he could go to the toilet properly. His parents would look strangely at him, wondering why he was pale, and when he said he was constipated, they offered him stewed figs and senna leaf.

Mostly, Galo and I hang out because we treasure one another's company. And treasure is the word. There are friends and friends, and on the matter of friendship I've ridden the rainbow of colours. Galo's at the high end, almost beyond colour, he's that pure. Let's just say, all things considered it's not every girl he takes to. And I'm so lucky it's me.

So here I am with the triangles of glass glaring at me beneath a street light, like crooked teeth dying to gouge my flesh, and I have to lift my bony knee and angle it to

find a resting place on the wall so that I don't damage myself. Then I haul Galo up, feeling his wiry wrists, God the strength of him despite his stature. Before long we're both precariously balanced, our knees are splayed, arms stretched awkwardly, heads facing one another, and we're like two cats, what with his striped canvas coat and my furry hoodie.

Getting down the other side isn't a problem. There's a bench which the landlady Mrs. O'Loughlin set in concrete at the bottom of the garden many years ago, perhaps when she believed tenants would take an interest and sit out of an evening to admire the view. There isn't a view as such, just the house itself with its white, peeling paint, and the neighbours' wandering shrubs from both sides which sidle down into our garden. Neither Galo nor I is interested in planting geraniums and nasturtiums, but we mow the lawn to keep the peace. Mrs. O'Loughlin is uncomfortable with us but can't throw us out as we haven't broken any contract. It took her a while to get the measure of me, her eyes running over me every month when she called for her rent, staring – initially mystified, then later, as if affronted – at my clothes, my hair, my high heeled shoes. I go nowhere without heels, which is why

they're caked with muck by the time we get home. She's dying to pass some remark every time she sees me, but doesn't dare, because she's not one hundred per cent sure of her ground. Even so, she'll shove the rent up first chance she gets.

Tottering around the back garden, I suddenly start to feel sick but manage to control it. I'd love to be able to say it's my time of the month, but I can't say that. I mixed grape and grain, that's the problem. Galo steadies me, his arm around my shoulder for a moment. Then we check out the coal bunker, lift the lid carefully, feel around in the dark. It's not there, Galo hisses. I open my phone and switch it on to throw some light. He's right. There is no spare key. Where the fuck is it, I whisper. Relax, Maree, we are not thieves he says calmly. Then we both stare at the downstairs toilet window. For once, it's closed. Galo normally leaves it wide open, despite my admonishments, but this time it's fixed tight. I glare at him. Now I'm worried about having to spend the night in the open, we'll catch our deaths from the damp air rising from the canal. Already, we're dripping with a mixture of mist and sweat. There's nobody we could ask for shelter, and the neighbours, though civil, ignore us.

We're going to have to break a window, I tell him. We can't do that, he says. I can see the whites of his eyes as he scans the patch of garden with its high walls and impossible catty odours. Seems like every cat in the neighbourhood chooses to mark its territory here. I look up at the sky as I realise the fog has cleared. A wind has blown in from the west. Now there are drifts of coppery clouds, and a few tossed stars. Nearby, someone's burning coal, the mephitic odour is catching my throat, and someone else has passed by on the other side of the wall eating chips. I can smell the vinegar and my belly is aroused, imagining a paradisaical feast of chips and battered chicken, just the thing for Galo and me if only we could get into the house.

Nothing for it, I tell him. Use your elbow on one of the small panes. I cannot do that, he protests, agape, flexing one of his heavily quilted arms as if examining it. He fancies himself in the striped canvas coat and is afraid of ripping the fabric if he elbows the glass. We can't use a stone, I say. Too much noise. He stares at me. And I'm not doing it, I tell him just to clear up any ambiguity. He sighs and looks at the ground as if considering, then starts to breathe in and out, heavily, like one of those

Japanese guys about to smash through twenty layers of concrete with the side of his hand. Okay so, here goes, he says, lunging forward rapidly and bringing his elbow against the glass with a strength that sucks my breath away. It isn't a clean break so much as a significant crack, enough for us to push and wiggle the glass until finally a large piece comes loose from the putty and falls into my hand. I throw it inside the house, where it drops more or less soundlessly onto the brown carpet of our living-room.

Hey, we're in, Galo cheers as he lands neatly on the floor. His automatic fear of authority means he doesn't like to attract attention. Ironic really, given the get up of him. I've tried to take him in hand and occasionally suggest a trip to the better class of charity shop to tone his appearance down a little. How about a simple navy fleece, I suggest, or how about these jeans? But no, he will bargain and haggle in George's Market on trips to Dublin, and comes home with an exotic array of colour and texture that won't work this side of the Bosphorous.

Immediately he sets to looking for a strong piece of cardboard to replace the broken glass, emerging from

his bedroom a few moments later with something from the bottom of his wardrobe, where he hoards everything. His room is tidy compared to mine. The bed is made and there are no clothes lying on the floor. His fur coat is hanging from the door of the wardrobe. Those who can afford it like to wear fur in the Armenian winter, he once informed me, which was why he bought this squirrel coat in a charity shop. He likes the notion of being able to afford his own fur now that he's in Ireland, oblivious to the fact that he's now a marked man locally.

His small plastic holdall is packed and zipped. No reason why it should be, but occasionally he considers moving on, fleeing. I tell him he's in flight from himself but he smiles and says he wouldn't want to leave me behind. Even so, the plastic hold-all stays. He's like one of those pregnant women who pack a small case months before they're due to give birth, so as not to be caught out at the last minute. He rarely enters my room, disliking the untidy boutique appearance of it, endless dresses and skirts draped on hangers, and often strewn across the unmade bed. I never sleep without having planned my outfit for the next morning, having checked the weather forecast beforehand. He

doesn't have to plan his, working in a burger bar. Every evening, he carries in the smell of deep frying and garlic and sauces, it's in his hair, on his skin, deep in the fibres of his clothes.

We're hungry. Galo phones up the local pizzeria and orders in. I've put a match to one of those instant fire bricks and there's a pleasant glow in the hearth. Later, we'll add the dried out wood we've been collecting since summer, stacked it in the kitchen until needed. I change into a matching green and silver maxi dress and shawl, anything to shed the now filthy jeans, the frilly blouse (which ripped as I was clambering the wall), the fringed suede jacket. Taste counts. Even so, I'm not immune to the sniggers that come after me, or the brazen grins of teenage boys down in at the canal lock, the sniggering guff of them, the howya Marees that come from their mouths.

We enjoy library evenings. The people who attend readings and presentations know to keep their looks to themselves, to concentrate on whatever author has been rolled out for the evening. They are the town's finer spirits, largely female, with a sprinkling of cultured men thrown in to run things. I think writers

stabilise Galo and me. In their presence, we can think of higher things. We can make our own minds high like great floating sheets attached with silken cords to our feeble bodies, and consider how lucky we are. Well, I sometimes think I'm lucky, without actually believing in luck. I have a home and I have a companion and I can lead my life as I wish. When we leave the town library, it opens onto a tree-sheltered square. It's safe and quiet, and it doesn't attract the lower elements.

I collect welfare every week, ignoring the talk in the queue, the worst of it unrepeatable even with so-called professional people also queuing, but when I get to the top the woman on the other side is polite and businesslike and often smiles at me. I mean, she really smiles. And that's another reason I think I'm so lucky. There are people like her, gentle islands floating around all the time. It's just a matter of picking up the current that leads you to the right shore.

The doorbell rings and I say I'll get it. I open and the delivery-boy looks me up and down before handing over the pizza. But he isn't thinking anything. He's just looking, the way boys do. I pay him and add a tip. He thanks me. Thanks Mrs. he says. *Thanks Mrs!* Why do

you smile, Galo enquires as I enter the living-room with two plates in one hand and the pizzas in the other. Ah it's nothing, I tell him. I'm in a good mood, I add. And it's true. Sometimes the booze sends my mood up rather than down. I've sobered up, but I'm content in myself.

What's on Netflix, Galo asks suddenly, his mouth stuffed with pizza. The smell of cheesy garlic has filled the room and our bellies are tightening too and it's a glorious feast. We drink tumblers of cold water to wash it down, then Galo raids the fridge and finds a slab of salted caramel chocolate, which he breaks up into rectangles and puts on a plate beside us. We'll have to get another key, I say anxiously, dreading another encounter with Mrs. O'Loughlin. I'll deal with her, he says, anyone can lose a key. I guess so, I mutter, but I'm doubtful about how she'll view it. She imagines everyone wants to break into her precious property to squat. Once they're in, they can stay for three months and it's legal, she once told me when she was talking about security and locking windows. You can't get them out, it's terrible what happens to decent people like us, she said, staring at me vehemently as if I was a squatter. But I knew what was on her mind. Why she

felt herself victimised in some way. She thought I'd taken advantage. Pulled the wool over her eyes the first dark night she met me when I wanted to view the place.

We settle down and watch *Christmas with the Kranks*. Galo loves that sort of thing. It's only the end of September and the trees are mostly still green but already he's looking forward to an Irish Christmas again. He thinks Jamie Lee Curtis is hot. Yeah well, I tell him, I guess they don't make them like that in Armenia. I think she's just okay, but then I'm not a man.

When the movie ends Galo is still chortling to himself. It's time for bed, like it's four in the morning and tomorrow is welfare day for me. I can't be late. It's been a while since Galo invited me to his room, but he does it now. I'm not sure I want to go. He can be very equivocal about things. Does he or doesn't he want to make love? And how does he want to make love? He can't decide, but he always treats me gently, he doesn't lash out like some might do, he can forget about everything that defiled him, because he knows I won't harm him.

I agree to go with him. I undress him slowly, peeling the hoodie that was beneath the canvas jacket, peeling the green sweatshirt beneath that, and the blue vest beneath that again. He's always cold. I've told him he should get his bloods checked, but he won't do that. He's afraid of what it might show, although that's neurotic of him. He doesn't want doctors and nurses hovering, taking decisions, referring him God-knows-where. And then I unbuckle his jeans and remove everything else, even yanking his socks off, catching them by the toes.

By now, his nose is moving gently along my collarbone although I'm still fully clothed. He enjoys that part of my anatomy, tells me it's a piece of bone sculpture. He's like an animal on the scent, checking me out. It's familiar, this routine, and I remember the last time, about six weeks before, how long it took him to even remove my top, to allow his eyes to look. There are no scars. My breasts would be the envy of most women.

We always stop right there. He doesn't go below my waist. We move furiously against one another now, and perhaps this friction is as good as it gets, the gripping of one another's thighs, his hoisting me against him, the

release of odours as we grow warm, the sweet, refined humanity of it. This satisfies him. I learned quickly to control myself, that it was a small price to pay. Once, when I began to lift my skirt, to draw his hand down, he reeled back. He could not bear the sight of me, my unconcealed delight in him. He did not – at that moment – trust me enough to believe that I want rid of it, that I am his, that a time will come when all things are possible, and he need no longer be afraid when we live together as man and woman.

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