

SHORT STORY

Clare's Freedom

by M. M. Coelho



"Birthday party" by Tamir David

All the Clares in the world have something that belongs to me: the choices that should have been mine, the opportunities I wasn't given. All I wanted was to be normal, to have had a typical family, to have never been forgotten in school, to have never had social workers coming by to check up on us. I had to leave. I had to leave to become who I was meant to be. And I never thought I'd be going back.

"This isn't fair. You're free!" I told Clare once as she brushed my hair. She was helping me get ready to attend a funeral with Mother.

"I have responsibilities, Lila. I've dinner to prepare, I've the house to clean. That's not freedom." But she had freedom — much more than I did.

The car in front of me is annoyingly slow, but the uninterrupted yellow line on the ground informs me I can't overtake it. The stench of cleaning products this rented car exudes is suffocating. I open the window. The icy wind blows so fiercely on my face it feels as if the cold is cutting my skin. I need the fresh air though. The winter night envelops the world in shadows; the green around the motorway surrenders itself to the black, to darkness. All I see are street lights over the never-ending road and the small red and white bulbs warning me other cars are coming and going.

A car passes by in the opposite lane and I have an epiphany: Nothing is stopping me from swerving into the next car that drives by; nothing is stopping me from causing death and chaos. There is nothing stopping me from causing real pain, to feel truly alive, to kill and get killed. To surrender myself to darkness too.

"We're all gonna die. You understand that, right?" my mother asked me when I was little.

I didn't.

"In ancient times, people worshiped the dead and buried their family inside their own home," she continued as we were getting ready for Grandmother's funeral.

I was terrified Mother would bring Nana's old dead body back home and bury it there. She didn't. But she started visiting the cemetery every day and forced me along. It started innocently as a means for her to forget her pain, to feel close to the woman she grew up speaking to every day. Then, after a couple of months, she began attending strangers' funerals once or twice a week, "to remember that death is imminent", she'd say. It didn't feel like long until she was attending every single funeral in town. Nothing was more important to her than funerals, not us going to school, not our meals, not our birthdays. Nothing in life was more important to Mrs. Tara Kennedy than sending people off to the World of Death. Clare, as the eldest, got away from most cemetery visits given she had more pressing chores in the house. I, as the youngest, was forced to attend them all with Mother.

I am not sure if I am sad to be going to hers; it just feels strange... surreal.

I see small lights approaching me in the opposite lane. Will I do it? It would be so easy. So delightful! The noise, the crash, the pain, the screams, the smoke... the life that finally bursts out of a real wound, the strength that pours out of one's heart when one is truly terrified. I want to feel that strong; I need to. The prospect of achieving this from the comfort of my rented car is too tempting. I pull over. I don't trust myself.

I step out of the car into the darkness. I walk away from the motorway into the gloomy forest. I look up to the sky that is supposed to illuminate us, inspire us, protect us; but the clouds prevent my thoughts from reaching it, and I realise I have to go back to my overcast life, to my overcast past. Speeding into another car won't change things much. It'll just be another funeral I have to attend.

I ran away when I was eighteen. I wouldn't have dreamt about such a thing growing up. I wasn't happy but I was never taught that one could change one's life. I was never taught that happiness was important or worth fighting for. Until the 'accident'.

When I got pregnant, I knew I couldn't become a mother. I never wanted to; it meant I'd be stuck in this town and forever attending funerals. Mother was becoming more and more dependent, and there was no way I was going to end up looking after a baby and an old woman. I was to be a free person, not someone's carer. The only rational thing to do was to abandon it all and never think about it again. Initially, I succeeded. Until I randomly came across the obituaries one day. At first, I read it to tease the old me. Gradually, it became a strange but comforting daily practice.

Until I read Mother's name.

It's a short enough drive from Cork Airport to my old family house in Cobh, and as I come into the town, I am surprised I haven't forgotten the way back to the house. I have avoided thinking about Cobh for so long that actually seeing it feels unreal. I haven't set foot in County Cork since I left. I spell my name Leela instead of Lila; I still use my ex-husband's surname; I always say I am from Waterford; I always say I am an orphan and have no siblings. I was barely a woman when I left. Now my hair is much greyer than it is brown, and wrinkles have permanently set on my face.

I park outside the house. There's a light on. I open the car door slowly. I feel the ground with my right foot before I trust it enough to commit my left foot on it too. I stand up and take a deep breath before approaching the house. My heart races as I ring the doorbell.

The door opens slowly, and the old face that greets me couldn't look more ancient. My father is seventy-nine now and God, he looks older. His eyes, which were always small, are

now nearly shut — hidden behind heavily wrinkled eyelids. He stares at me. He nearly recognizes me, but not quite.

“Yes?”

“Hi, Dad.”

“Lila?” he puts his hand on his heart and breathes heavily. “Dear God, it’s Lila!”

He stares at me open-mouthed, hand on his heart, before retreating inside silently. I couldn’t see any reaction beyond surprise itself. Maybe he is glad to see me, maybe he isn’t. Maybe he has forgotten me somewhat. Sure, I’ve nearly forgotten him — I barely know the man. When he wasn’t absent, he was silent and hidden in his study. He was irrelevant to my life, perhaps to everyone’s — like most fathers. Seeing his ghost is still unsettling though.

I walk in, I close the door behind me and go straight to the sitting room. I suppose coming here instead of a hotel was a mistake. I can’t stay. I can’t go to my old bedroom. I should have just gone to the funeral and stayed at the back.

What possessed me?

Dad sits staring at the window. I sit next to his armchair. I glance at the window too but there is nothing to see. I get up and look around the room. Most of the furniture is the same: the table, the shelves, the rack. There are new picture frames filled with photos of Clare with a man who I assume is her husband and two little girls who I assume are my nieces in front of a house nearby. I wonder why Clare never moved to America like she always said she would... Mother, dressed in black, is in a few pictures with the girls and I recognize the small black dresses she has sewn for them. Clare and I had the same. As I walk along the room the pictures change, the girls grow up; they graduate; one of them gets married. As much as I acknowledge that time passes, that I got old, that my life has changed in so many ways; whenever — inadvertently — I thought of life back here, I always imagined this place exactly how I had left it. I always pictured Clare as a twenty-eight year old, Mum in her mid-forties — younger than I am now — and I never updated my memories.

“How are things?” I ask Dad. “How are you?”

He shrugs.

I hear the toilet upstairs being flushed and the door opening and closing. The pipes in this house are loud enough to wake you. I hear steps coming downstairs and my whole body freezes. The steps sound like Mother’s. A child always recognises her mother’s steps as they always bring something, be it sorrow or joy. And perhaps there’s another set of footsteps

alongside it. I look at Dad but he's impassive to the noise. I wonder if he can hear it, if it is real or not.

"Who are you?" An old voice asks. I turn around. It's Mother. Am I imagining this? Dad is looking at her too but he doesn't seem surprised. Maybe I am not even in Cobh. Maybe none of this is actually happening.

"Lila? Lila?" She walks over to me and touches my face. Up close, her face seems so strange, so old, so weak, so filled with feelings. She runs her fingers over my face while repeating my name. It is strangely soothing.

"How delightful that you came to my funeral! That's all I wanted! A big funeral, all of my family mourning me, as it should be."

"I...I... I thought you were dead..."

"I've decided to have a funeral before I die. You know, so I can attend it properly. I put the notice on the paper. I arranged the catering. Oh, it'll be beautiful, Lila. And you've come, you've come!"

"This is a sight I never thought I'd see. How generous of you to show up, Lila." A younger voice says.

I turn around. It's Clare. More than the fright of seeing Mother alive, the ghost of Dad or the town; more than the melancholy of witnessing the changes time has brought in its passing since I left; more than bearing the weight of what should have changed but didn't, and what should have been but wasn't... seeing Clare is tough. I never thought she'd still be in Cobh. She looks more tired than old. She looks powerful. The piercing strength in her stare cuts through me. I cry.

I fall to my knees and cry until my lungs hurt from sobbing. I cry for everything I left behind: that life, that tiny baby, this old woman...

I wake up with Mother comforting me. She strokes my hair and offers me a cup of tea — which she then asks Clare to make. She tells me I look well and asks how I've been and what I do for a living. She makes small talk as if not having seen me or heard from me in nearly thirty years was entirely normal. She doesn't wait for any answers either before moving on to telling me about her funeral arrangements. She stops herself mid-sentence, remembering she has a little something for Clare and I.

Clare looks at me. And, at that moment, all our differences are suspended. We know exactly what is about to happen.

We hold our boxes and take off our shoes. We each pull on the silver lace around the wrapping paper solemnly, every second of it filled with memories. We get undressed and put on our mourning dresses. They always looked the same, yet each important funeral brought a new dress — which we tried together the previous night. I sit by the dresser and Clare brushes my hair.

“Do you hate me?” I ask Clare. My eyes filled with so much embarrassment; they could barely meet hers in the mirror.

And as our mum walks back into our room, dressed like a Victorian doll for her own funeral — happier than I have ever seen her — I instantly know the answer. It was I who took something that belonged to Clare: her right to leave, her freedom.