

BARRY DEMSPETER
HALF A MAN

CHARLIE ALMOST BUGGERED UP their wedding day with his insistence on being involved with every little detail, from the flowers in Nessa's bouquet to the caterer's menu. He knew he was being obnoxious, but couldn't help himself. His mother had taught him to always be the one in control. After the nth revision of the vows, Nessa detonated one night when they were getting ready for bed. "What's wrong with you? They're just words. We can vow to always play Scrabble on Sunday afternoons or to sing one Bob Dylan song a day. Hell," she said, clearly exasperated, "are you sure you wouldn't rather marry your mother?"

Charlie struggled with a clever comeback. At times of anxiety or change, his own voice winnowed away to next to nothing and he heard his mother's words marching from his mouth. "Save me, for Christ's sake," he said, his face cracking into a feeble grin.

The two days before the ceremony were a little better. Charlie did his best to control himself rather than the situation. He screwed up a few times: when Nessa bought him a silver tie to go with his black velvet jacket for instance; ties reminded him of childhood Sunday School and of how he almost choked whenever he moved his neck. Since this was actually an example of Charlie going against his mother's wishes, Nessa finally caved.

On the morning of their wedding day, watching Charlie in his white underpants doing his ritual crunches and push-ups, Nessa admitted that she loved him beyond good sense. "In a way, I'm the one marrying your mother," she said, slapping her hands down on the edge of the bed. "I don't care," she sighed loudly. "I'd marry you even if your mother was Genghis Khan."

Charlie's grin broke new ground. "I love you too, beyond all words," he said, "which is why we don't need any of that *love, honour and obey* stuff."

"But we agreed that those things are timeless," Nessa said.

"But there's a negative vibe to them."

“I’ll make you a deal,” she said, eyes piercing. “We keep one for me. How about *In sickness and in health?*”

“What about just *health?*” he asked. Begging in his underpants didn’t give him much advantage.

He got a stitch in his side at the look of *Sickness* on the page. The hard hack of the *ck*, how it rhymed with *dick* and *prick*. It reminded him of his father’s death two years prior. He and Charlie’s mother had been divorced for years, but she still ended up at his deathbed beside his second wife, a Filipino woman at least a decade younger. “I don’t want to think about illness on my wedding day,” he said.

“You took away my orchid corsage and my hors d’oeuvres. You’re not taking my *Sickness*.”

A few hours later, Charlie, standing in front of the minister, could see his mother’s face in the first row of the chapel. When Queen’s *You’re My Best Friend* started playing, he took hold of Nessa’s hands and dashed back up the aisle.

Since Charlie’s best buddy Grey was taking pictures of the bride and groom in the small park across the street, they were the last ones to arrive at the small reception hall. The guests had already helped themselves to the modest buffet. Charlie’s mother had insisted.

Nessa was biting her bottom lip so hard that Charlie expected a trickle of blood to run down her chin. Charlie, on the other hand, was used to being bested and put in his place.

“I married into this?” Nessa asked, just loud enough for Charlie to hear.

Even after his first stroke, Charlie considered them lucky. They’d lived through both their mothers’ slow deaths and their own four miscarriages and the realization that a baby wasn’t in the stars for them; Charlie’s bout with prostate cancer and a bad fall that left Nessa with a left-leg limp; her dream job in the graphic arts’ department at *House and Garden* and his Governor Generals Award nomination for his first book of poetry. Not to mention a three-bedroom split level with a half an acre of woods. The only thing that had truly threatened their togetherness was Charlie’s affair, which they never talked about.

Early retirement was the best choice they ever made. Charlie left his job teaching English at Birchmount Park Collegiate, just a ten-minute drive

from their house a mere block away from the Scarborough Bluffs. He was only 55 and was having a ball learning how to break all his previous routines. Two years later, at 57, Nessa followed suit.

His first stroke, three years later, was hardly worth the bother of writing a poem about it. *Ischemic* and *Embolic* were apparently the words a patient wanted to hear. A small clot, most likely from one of his legs, slipped free and popped up into his brain. He felt weird for close to an hour, as if he'd been sucked dry by a vampire. The worst of it was that he couldn't remember the name of anything, not *hospital* or *doctor* or even *wife*. But after a shot of a drug called tPA, he could feel himself returning to his body and after a good night's sleep he was normal again.

A year later the second one hit him harder, leaving him paralyzed on his right side. For the first few days, he could talk in a slurry kind of way, but on the third day, mid-sentence, his ability to form words just went away. It was like having his tongue snipped off.

"How's this for luck?" Nessa said. She was wearing her tan suede jacket with dark blue denim jeans and he would have given anything to tell her that she looked pretty.

He couldn't walk for the first few months, but he worked hard at physio and was finally able to stumble. He couldn't pee standing up anymore. His right arm just hung at his side. Having to learn how to use his left hand was much harder than he would have thought. Utensils flew across the kitchen table. He'd fumble with the TV remote. He couldn't button his own shirts let alone undress Nessa.

It was when he had software installed on his laptop that allowed him to speak again that he began to really lose hope. His computer voice was tinny and robotic, completely devoid of emotion of any kind. Whether he was asking for the salt or cursing God, it was the same monotonous drone. He hated the voice and so spoke less.

Nessa didn't like to leave him alone, so his lifelong friend Grey would often come to stroke-sit, as he called it. They'd usually watch TV, which for Grey meant a long, rambling commentary, giving his version of the way the story should go. It drove Charlie batty.

"Do you have to talk non-stop?" the awful Charlie voice asked, not a hint of the disdain that he meant to be there.

Grey just snickered and continued. In profile he resembled Humpty Dumpty.

“Shut the fuck up,” Charlie said, but the program refused to swear, inserting *flock* in place of *fuck*.

The days only got worse at bedtime when he was stripped of his computer and couldn't communicate at all, couldn't turn over on his side, no way to reach for Nessa who was curled into a half-shell shape on the other side of the bed. His only chance to connect with her was when she leaned over to kiss him goodnight. But the danger was that a swipe of his left hand across her breasts could turn out to be more of a slap than a caress.

One morning, he refused to take his blood thinners. “I don't want to go on,” he announced.

Nessa's entire face flushed bright red and she grabbed him by the chin and shoved the pills into his mouth, clamping his jaws shut while the pills dissolved into a sour mush.

This reminded him of his mother who would often force-feed him peas that he'd leave in a tiny pile on his plate. He tried to spit once when she released him, but all he could produce was a string of green drool.

The more Charlie thought about it the more he realized that what he called luck was really a combination of his insistence and Nessa's take charge attitude. No wonder they were often described by others as a team, a force to be reckoned with. One of their best experiences was the month they drove around Spain. It was July and extremely hot. The olive groves shimmered in the afternoons. There were orange and lemon orchards a short walk away from the village of Chite where they'd rented a house. All they had to do was reach up and pick the fruit from overhanging branches. The oranges were warm, as if they'd just been born.

To an outside observer, it might seem as if they were one of those couples who bickered all the time, who couldn't agree on anything. But that wasn't the case. They shared most of the same passions: art, literature, ecology, socialism and foreign films. There was nothing that drove them apart. Nessa was a bit more argumentative, but Charlie had his opinions too. Nessa wasn't into music, but she'd listen to practically anything. He was a secondhand record store sort of guy. If she lived alone, music would just be background, but with Charlie, the soundtrack of each day was an eclectic mix, from Etta James to Lyle Lovett.

The day they were listening to Lucinda Williams' *Live*, they were driving to Cordoba, a few hours away from their home base in Chite. The outside temperature gauge said 50 degrees Celsius. The highway felt like it had been stripped to bone. They missed the first exit because Nessa couldn't find it on the map and therefore decided it didn't exist. They did their usual panicky blather until the second exit appeared, which Charlie took with a squealing of tires.

A few kilometers further, Nessa insisted on a left turn which almost immediately began to narrow. They had rented a Chevy van and were soon driving so close to the buildings on either side that they could each have reached out their windows and touched stone. Nessa ordered Charlie to try and back up. But they had already wound their way so deeply into the old part of the city that the only choice was to slowly inch forward even though they might get stuck.

Charlie insisted on staying the course. Nessa did what Nessa did best: reconnoitered. If someone had been in the back seat, they would have mistaken the cacophony between them for a real showdown, but they were having fun. By the time they squeezed into a roundabout and found their way into a wider road, they were cheering one another on.

But now there was only half a person for Nessa to manage. A clumsy, uncooperative half. And all that Charlie had left to insist upon was that he didn't want to continue living this way. Perhaps the discord kept Charlie alive. Who would Nessa take control of if Charlie was gone? It didn't feel like a game anymore. This wasn't Spain. It was barely Scarborough. But how could he explain that in his robot voice?

The only time that Charlie had seen Nessa lose her cool was after the third miscarriage. The first had happened on a workday, but because she'd stayed until midnight the night before trying to meet a deadline for the spring issue, she was taking the morning off. It struck quickly, a sudden attack of cramps, then she could feel herself bleeding. By the time Charlie got home from school, she seemed more worried about his disappointment than her own feelings. She said that she'd had an inkling that something was going to go wrong. Lots of first pregnancies result in miscarriages, she'd said. Next month, she was ready to start again.

The second time they were getting ready for bed, discussing Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*; they were on the verge of understanding the ending when Charlie noticed a dark wet spot on Nessa's nightgown. She hadn't felt a thing.

She cried that time, but she wasn't one to wallow. It took about a week for her to say, "Third time lucky."

But the third time was unbearable. She woke up one Saturday morning and had sharp pains in her abdomen. She had just passed the three month point. An hour later, she was wailing. Charlie bundled her up and drove her to the hospital, but she lost the baby in Emergency.

For months, she let Charlie make meals and do the laundry. He got her out of bed every morning, persuading her to bathe and dress. She wasn't able to go back to work for over a month and when she was ready, Charlie drove her there and picked her up for the first few months.

It was actually the fourth miscarriage that lifted her out of the shadows. When she told Charlie that she was pregnant, he was afraid that she would never recover if this one ended in tragedy. But she was ready for the worst to happen and when it did, at work this time, she was almost relieved.

"That's enough," she said and returned to making everything else just the way she liked it.

No sooner had Charlie and Nessa given up on having children than Charlie found out that he had prostate cancer. The radiation treatment made him sterile. When he was told this, he remembered wanting to reach across the file-strewn desk and slap the oncologist, a swarthy middle-aged man with a dyed black moustache. But Nessa was asking so many good questions that he focused on her until the urge passed.

But something went awry in their relationship after this. Nessa's inner strength began to grate on Charlie. Some days, he mistook her getting on with life for bossing him around, though that was a poor excuse for what Charlie went and did next. He let himself stumble into a brief affair with a new English teacher named Anastasia Goldberg. With her long neck and soft lines, she reminded him of a vase. Her passion was poetry. Charlie had recently published his book, *The Dreaming Willow*, and was putty in the hands of a compliment. He hadn't planned on anything happening. But one day they were in the photocopy room together. A Seamus Heaney poem was

flashing into the tray. She asked whether she could teach one of his poems. He said that he'd be honoured. Next thing he knew his face was in her neck and his dick was in her hand.

It wasn't a long relationship, less than two months. And there were no proclamations of love. Charlie would have thought that a fling fostered in poetry would have been mushier, more intense, but it was such an untethered experience that it couldn't survive the first blip.

One night after he'd followed Stasia in his car from the school parking lot to her condo complex, driving underground to the Visitor Parking section, he thought of a line from Dante's *Inferno*: *In the middle of the journey of our life I found myself within a dark woods where the straight way was lost*. He was making a terrible mistake. He shivered at how easily his car fit into the slot. Stasia was waiting for him at the elevators. Although they rose to the ninth floor, they were deep in the core of the building, not a hint of sky.

"You'd never leave your wife for me," she stated after they'd made love and she was perched politely on the edge of the bed.

"No, of course not," he said more quickly than he expected. Why would he leave Nessa? She was more beautiful than Stasia with her spectacular breasts and dazzling green eyes. Stasia had a starved look about her and the swing of her white-blonde hair exposed her large ears every time she nodded.

"Then why are you here?" Stasia asked, staring him down with her wolf-blue eyes.

He couldn't help but sound like he was assigning blame. "Because this means nothing," he was able to say without her so much as blinking, "and nothing feels good."

She leaned down to where Charlie's head was boosted on a folded-over pillow and licked a wide swathe across his lips. Then she just waited. Her breasts were so still that they might have belonged to a dead woman. He reached up and cupped them, longing for Nessa's breasts.

The next night, getting ready for bed, he made a mistake and called Nessa Stasia. "Hey, Stasia, did you remember to tape *Jeopardy*?" he asked. He was all the way to *Jeopardy* before he could put on the brakes. He sucked in his fear and looked up to see Nessa watching him in the dresser mirror.

She'd heard him praise Anastasia: *great new teacher, good egg, pretty woman*. Mentioning her name seemed to reduce his guilt. If he could toss her into ordinary conversation, then he knew that he hadn't gone too far.

The next time he tested the waters and shared a little anecdote about Anastasia, he used the diminutive of her name consciously. “Stasia had a kid in her poetry unit try to pass off Dylan’s *Like a Rolling Stone* as his own writing.”

“Don’t call her Stasia,” Nessa interrupted. “It’s too familiar.” He could tell that she was angry by how she shook her head.

Charlie stumbled out with a “Whatever you say.” He could feel a blush flooding his face until he must have looked as red as a stop sign.

“Cut it out, Charlie,” she said. “You’re making an ass of yourself.”

It made him feel queasy and stupid not to know whether Nessa knew the whole story or whether she just thought Charlie was on the verge. Did she even think Charlie was capable of that level of deception and betrayal? There was a part of him that wanted to shock Nessa, reminding him of what a control freak he’d been on their wedding day.

The next morning he dashed into Anastasia’s class between periods. He knew he was being cowardly, not giving her time to even think about what he was saying. “Best we stop the hanky panky,” he said. “Be friends and fellow teachers.”

Before he could add a compliment or suggest how much this broke his heart too, she responded “My sentiments exactly,” expelling a big sigh. “I was dreading tears.”

He didn’t know whether she was kidding, but the grade elevens were already arriving with their wrinkled copies of *Life of Pi* and their utter disinterest in what went on between two teachers. Later that day, Charlie would drive past the door to Anastasia’s underground parking twice. He would punch in the numbers of her cellphone, but hang up before it even rang. There were two nights of awful dreams, and a short, violent sob in the shower on the third morning. He avoided Nessa’s eyes for close to a week. But she was tender with him as if she knew that he was in more pain than either Anastasia or herself. It had been crazy, destructive and not worth the bother.

Although they never named it, Charlie began referring to that year as his midlife crisis, which included taking on a grade nine special needs class, going rock climbing with Grey and a couple of other buddies and taking banjo lessons. There were no more stories about Anastasia, of course. Nessa started calling him Charles for a while, but it was clear that they both missed the intimacy that Charlie created. Everything slowly went back to normal and the realization how good normal was.

Nessa had little tolerance for self-pity. She often bragged that she just couldn't sustain a grudge, that it took more energy clinging to pessimism than it did coming up with a solution.

"We're flying the coop on Saturday," she said one morning as she helped Charlie maneuver spoonfuls of oatmeal with his left hand. "We're going to Florida," she announced, "and Grey and Christie are coming too."

This was serious stuff. Nessa wasn't fond of Christie. She thought that liking her was a betrayal of Grey's first wife, Carla, who had died of breast cancer half a decade ago. Taking a trip together together meant that Nessa was serious about being happy again.

He tried to refuse, but a man in a wheelchair didn't have much say in where he might end up. Before he knew it, he was being wheeled through the Pearson terminal, then lifted into a seat on the airplane, riding the turbulence, leaving winter and its suicidal thoughts behind.

Indian Rock Beach was just outside of Largo, a twenty-minute drive from St. Petersburg. They shared a unit on the first floor with a patio overlooking the Gulf of Mexico. They flipped coins over who would get the front bedroom and Nessa and Charlie won. The sound of waves dogged Charlie night and day. It hurt the inside of his head.

The first night, as the sun was slipping down into the horizon, painting the entire beach orange, Grey picked Charlie up in his arms and walked him down into the pool until they were both fully submerged. If Grey were to let go of him, Charlie would drown. Trust of this size was too big for words.

Later, he lay in bed with the back of his head still damp. Nessa lay beside him breathing lightly. He would have liked to talk a little, but his laptop was on the dresser several serious falls away. He let himself entertain a small fantasy of being healed. Grey's arms had dipped him into the pool so delicately, his left side had shivered.

The week became routine, as everything ultimately did, and Grey's arms might as well have been his aluminum walker. Friendship was utilitarian. Love, a caregiver. The only thing he liked about Florida was the palatial bathroom in their condo, all done up in pink tiles and grey shower stall the size of a closet, tub, sink and toilet. With the help of his walker, he was able to spin a little in front of the floodlit mirror. Death was a whirling dervish.

He hated the mornings on the beach, sand wedged between his fingers and toes. Grey would deposit him on a plastic chaise longue where the hairs

on his body stuck to the plastic mattress and made him itch. The three of them kept him under a canopy of shade while they frolicked in the surf. Nessa was throwing herself into the physicality of it all and seemed to have fallen in love a bit with Christie who looked strangely wan and ragged in her blue bikini. Despite being twenty years older, Nessa, in a black one-piece with ruffles around the crotch, looked far more substantial, flesh instead of paper.

Grey had a gut the size of a toy football, but no one minded. The back of his baggy swimsuit showed a bit of ass crack, but again, it was okay. No one was judged in Florida. Maybe it was the glare, maybe the drunkenness of imbibing so much salt water and adrenaline. After playing themselves out, they'd come to fetch Charlie and carry him back to where the water lapped around Grey's waist and let him paddle with his good hand. Charlie knew that he looked like an idiot, but no one even looked.

They almost made him feel normal, not one of them per se, but as if he'd always been half a man and had learned not to feel shame or sadness about it. Some people carted huge secrets with them everywhere they went. Some were lepers. Some, cripples. Charlie was who Charlie was. He wanted to whisper this in Nessa's ear to thank her for taking control of his despair and breaking it down into its lesser components. But there wasn't time. Fun was all-inclusive.

Their last evening, they went to a sprawling restaurant just across the one-lane highway from the Gulf. Christie had a heaping stack of mussels drowning in butter, while Grey had the swordfish. Nessa settled for crab cakes the size of catcher mitts. Finally, Charlie chose the lobster ravioli in cream sauce. Because it was a bit of an ordeal to eat, the bad right side of his mouth spilling whatever he put into the good left side, like a wonky assembly line, he still had half left by the time he was totally exhausted. Nessa arranged for it to be put in a Styrofoam container that she sat up on the dashboard while strapping Charlie into the passenger seat. Then Grey gunned the engine, pitching forward clumsily, sending the lobster ravioli flying straight onto Charlie. It hit him mid-chest, the lid popping open, the food spilling into his lap.

They gave Charlie a bath back in the condo, Grey supporting him while Nessa scrubbed his nooks and crannies. He wished he could die right there. Shame could kill, he knew it. Later, in bed, Nessa tried to talk to him, to make him laugh a little, calling him her *Lobster Man*. But Charlie wouldn't budge. He decided then and there to find the right opportunity to die.

They had to stop at a car wash on their way to the airport that offered both exterior and interior washes. The car stunk. It was a smell that flew back to Toronto with them and managed to survive the dry, cold air, following them all the way home. It was a stench that Charlie would never forget. It outranked the smell of bleach and urine in his mother's nursing home, or that blood reek he experienced on a Grade 8 trip to the Toronto Slaughterhouse.

They were well on their way to Quebec City for their honeymoon when Charlie couldn't bear himself a moment longer. "I was a twerp," he said as they searched for a spot to have lunch in Trois Rivieres. "Why didn't you just kick me in the balls and be done with it?"

"That was yesterday. Stop living in the past," Nessa ordered. "We've got much more important things to think about."

They rarely agreed on anything when it came to little things like restaurants, paint colours or TV shows. But this was part of the thrill. It felt great to fight for what you wanted.

"Your choice," Nessa said. "My wedding gift to you."

"Damn," Charlie said. They ended up driving around the town half a dozen times before he chose a dolled-up diner where he had French onion soup and Nessa ordered chicken salad.

That night, tucked in their Quebec City hotel room, Nessa got very sick, most likely the chicken. Charlie did his best to give her space, yet to be there for her, to hold her hair back while she heaved. She sometimes pushed him away, though there were moments when she asked him to just hold her and hum a kind of lullaby. He chose John Denver songs, *Sunshine*, *Take Me Home Country Roads* and *Annie's Song*, until she shoved him halfway across the room, telling him to shut up and leave her alone.

"I'm sorry that I made you promise to stay with me when I'm sick," she said near dawn, the spasms dialed down to tiny, periodic shudders.

"Huh?" Charlie asked as elegantly as he could muster.

"I made you vow."

"No you didn't," he said.

"Yes I did. It was part of the wedding ceremony."

"I had my fingers crossed," Charlie said, letting himself be thumped.

Who fell asleep first would remain a point of contention for the rest of the honeymoon, but Charlie was definitely the first one to wake up and see

the Quebec City sunlight splattered around the room. It was old sunshine with a French sparkle to it. He just knew that Nessa would love it too. But he let her sleep until mid-afternoon. He was secretly glad she was ill. It made him feel like a husband.

Charlie swore to himself after the trip to Florida that he wasn't ever going to smile again. He was dedicating the rest of his life to being miserable. There wasn't a plan yet, but he fully intended to die as soon as possible. But then he wondered why he was hurting Nessa? What had she ever done, but loved him, even when it meant looking the other way?

He noticed that she was keeping closer tabs on him. Even Grey seemed worried when he came to stroke-sit. One day, Christie tagged along. When Grey was in the bathroom, she leaned in really close and asked him whether he was going to kill himself anytime soon. He didn't have time to get to his computer and respond to her in his robot voice, but later when Nessa returned and Grey and Christie were heading off to play tennis, he shook his head in her direction and kept shaking it until Nessa blurted out, "Is something wrong?"

It felt good to have people worried about him. A half a man didn't automatically mean that just the bad half remained; maybe he was all good, maybe the best of him was carrying on.

When Nessa was in the bathtub one morning, he decided to surprise her by making her tea and toast. He climbed out of his wheelchair and attached himself to his walker. If he leaned his dead side against the walker, he found that he was able to reach with his good hand. He squashed the bread quite a bit getting it into the toaster, but he did it. Unfortunately, he wasn't so lucky with the kettle. His wrist brushed against the element and the sleeve of his shirt started to smoke. He managed to pull his arm away, but had nothing to snuff out the sparks. Finally, he tipped over the kettle, extinguishing the fire, but almost scalding his good leg. He then tried to back away from the stove and slipped in the puddle of hot water, going down with a series of thuds.

Nessa appeared in a bright yellow bath towel and looked stricken when she saw Charlie sprawled in the middle of the kitchen floor. She saw the overturned kettle and the red hot element and must have thought that he was trying to set himself on fire.

“My God, Charlie? What were you trying to do?” Her cheeks were so pale, they looked like mushrooms.

Since his computer was in the living room, he couldn't explain it to her. He lifted his left hand and pointed desperately at the toaster.

“Were you that hungry?” she asked. “Couldn't you have waited until I was out of the bath?”

“No,” Charlie tried to scream. He pointed, thrusting his finger at her.

“Did I do something?” she asked. “Is it my fault?”

Lifting himself up on his left side and dragging his legs behind him, he started slithering away from the stove.

“Oh, dear God,” Nessa said, kneeling down and grabbing him by the feet, bringing him to a stop.

They tousled a little. The dead weight of his paralyzed size was too much for Nessa. He made some distance. She just stood there, gaping at him.

He made it halfway to the couch, his sweater and trousers covered in wisps of dust. A scrap of orange peel was stuck to his chin. The couch was within sight. He had never loved its south-of-France blue and white stripes more. He could almost see the edge of his computer on the coffee table.

“Please,” Nessa said from close behind him. “Calm down. Darling,” she added.

Another set of laborious squirms and he was there, but without the energy to hoist himself up on the couch. Somehow he twisted himself around (the Human Pretzel!) and, almost upending the entire coffee table, tossed his good arm on the edge and rose up to his knees. “Holy shit,” he would have said if he could.

Tilting like that famous Italian tower, his fingers crawled awkwardly into place. “Oh key,” the robot that was him said. “Bake fast.”

Nessa turned a shade of military grey and threatened to call an ambulance. “You've had another stroke,” she said to herself, smoothing the front of the yellow bath towel as if beginning to make herself presentable to strangers.

Charlie blew it again. “Break fist,” uncomfortably close to violence. A robot gone rogue. He could see Nessa was one spelling mistake away from taking over.

“Breakfast,” his tin voice said, his fake self, the half a man who remained. “I was making you breakfast.”

She stared hard at him as if he'd said something miraculous.

"I'm a ninny," he apologized. "Hard to surprise and ask for help at same time."

Colour swelled back into her face, floodgates open. "You weren't trying to kill yourself?" she asked.

"With toast?" he said, which made Nessa giggle. He let his jaw drop, hoping she might see the gesture as a stroke-blasted version of a laugh.

Then she was crying, down on her knees, bundling Charlie into a hug. So this was illness, he thought. This was what a vow looked like after thirty years of knowing it was there, but thinking it might never have to be used. It was like a backup generator in case the power went out.

Nessa was in the process of recovery. "We'd better clean you up. You look like a lint brush."

Not for long, Charlie thought. Soon he'd be spiffy again. Nessa always did what she said.