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Ready for the Real
World

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An té a bhíonn siúlach, bíonn scéalach.

He who travels, has stories to tell

-Irish proverb

Brick Alley Café

I looked up from my double chocolate muffin with a single candle in it. It was leaning to one side, which made it look like an eerie crooked finger sticking out from a chocolate mound of dirt. Nevertheless, it was the thought that counted. Across from me Joseph eagerly awaited my response and nodded, first at the muffin and then at me.

"It's beautiful. I love chocolate!" I tried to sound as excited as I could, but the journey on the plane had been dreadful with people snoring behind me and babies crying in front of me. It was the second time in my entire life that I had been on a plane and so far, I wasn't a big fan.

I had come here straight from the airport with all my luggage. Joseph was my cousin, but we hadn't seen each other since we were little. Joseph and my aunt Margaret lived in Dublin, whereas my mother and I lived on the other side of the sea in England. For some reason my mother never visited them, even though my mother was Irish and wanted to show me where I came from. I guess most of the time she was unfit to travel because of the cancer.

Joseph met me briefly when he was about ten years old, but we never saw each other in person. Occasionally, we spoke over the phone when my aunt Margaret called, and my mum told me to say hello to Joseph. Other than that, we didn't stay in touch. My

mum talked about him now and again and sent him a birthday card every year. I helped her decorate it with little glitter stars and hearts made out of folding paper or sometimes origami. He always sent me something in return. I still have the origami frog that he gave me for my twelfth birthday.

I smiled, looked up in thought and sighed. I could see us writing the cards together, sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of tea. It was something that we both loved to do.

When my mother died, I didn't know what to do with myself. Ordinary, silly things were not the same anymore. In the morning, I found myself pouring two cups of coffee out of habit and then drinking both by myself while I sobbed away, feeling lonely and scared. It was so quiet in the house. My ears buzzed from the silence. I kept the radio or the television on all the time, just to get rid of the silence.

Two days after the funeral I was given a plane ticket by my gran. She told me everything my mum had planned for me and to listen to the first mp3 file. My mother had recorded instructions for a journal that she had prepared in secret with assignments and checklists.

When my gran told me that I would be staying with my aunt Margaret and cousin Joseph, I immediately called them to get reacquainted. We saw each other at the funeral and had spoken on the phone many times in the last couple of weeks when I was preparing for my trip abroad. We discussed flight times, accommodation,

what to do in Dublin. We briefly talked about my mother, but that was a subject I wasn't ready to explore yet. The hurt of losing her was still too fresh.

Joseph could no longer hold his anticipation and said, "Well? What are you waiting for? Make a wish!" I closed my eyes, blew out the candle in one swift go, took out the eerie candle and made a wish. I didn't have to think long. This was an easy one.

The coffeeshop in the middle of Temple Bar was busy at this time of morning. It had two massive wooden tables that could fit twelve people and all the seats were occupied. On the walls were paintings and framed sketches, just as my mother described in the audio file.

Joseph had skipped his International Law lecture at Trinity College to meet me at this coffee shop. He looked very sharp in his bohemian chic outfit with a crisp light-blue shirt and his blazer that was clearly vintage or bought at a second-hand shop. His hair was fiery red. I could scarcely believe that this was its natural colour, but it really was. He did say, however, that he had had highlights in the past to make it more "ginger spice," as he would call it.

I looked at Joseph and my eyes lit up.

"Do you wanna know what I wished for?" I sat up straight and wiggled my bum on the chair. Joseph shook his head.

"But then it won't come true."

"This wish will never come true, because it's an impossible one." I held my head down and took a bite of my muffin.

"In that case, what did you wish for, Jenna?" Joseph moved closer with his head leaning against his hand.

"I wished my mum could be here to see us. You and I, here together in Dublin. Me, getting out of that house and seeing the world, scared to death every step of the way."

I looked into Joseph's eyes and a tear fell on the table. I quickly dried my eyes with the sleeve of my sweater. For some reason I didn't want him to see me crying. Joseph folded his hands and sat up straight. He looked at me before he spoke.

"I only saw your mum once in person, but what I remember is that she was a very nice person. She wrote the most beautiful birthday cards. I kept them in a shoebox in my closet."

His cheeks dimpled and the corners of his eyes wrinkled. It was an endearing moment and my heart filled up with a magnificent glow. I was glad to be spending this time with him here and to get reacquainted.

"It's been six weeks yesterday, but every morning when I wake up, I think she will be sitting at the kitchen table reading the paper and drinking coffee. I am actually glad that I am somewhere else than in a house that continuously floods me with memories."

"What's that?" Joseph nodded in the direction of a black notebook lying on the table next to the muffin.

"Is that the famous book you've told me about?" There was a smirk on Joseph's face as he said those

words. I must've told him about this book at some point in the last six weeks. I didn't remember.

"Yes. It is, the journal my mother prepared for me before she died." I carefully flicked through some of the pages and stopped halfway on a page with elegant black handwritten letters.

"This is the Dublin checklist. There is another one in the back of the book, which is the Donegal checklist." I lightly tapped the front of the book.

"There is also a collection of audio files that I started listening to. My mother explained her choices on the list to me in the first one." I stared at the book and went back to the moment when my gran gave me this book after my mother died. My heart felt heavy again. Joseph must've noticed because he rubbed my arm and smiled at me. I returned the smile and said:

"I have the sound file here. Do you want to hear it?" I was already rummaging through my backpack to find the mp3 player that I got with the book. When I got up, I saw Joseph with a troubled look on his face. In a concerned voice he said,

"I'm not sure if I want to. Are you really okay with this? It feels kind of private."

I handed him one of the ear phones.

"I don't mind at all. I'll listen with you if you want." I said in a casual voice. He put one in his ear and moved closer to me so we could both listen.

"Are you sure?" I nodded reassuringly.

"It's okay. The first time I heard her voice it was difficult, but now I have gotten used to it." I pressed the

little button on the side and watched the little greenish screen for the mp3 player to start. A fragile women's voice sounded through the earphones.

My darling Jenna,

I am sorry for leaving you. I wish we had more time together, but the universe decided that it wasn't meant to be. I asked your gran to give you this mp3 player with files that I have carefully labelled. They are in chronological order and will guide you through the challenges and adventures I have set out for you. I know you must be surprised that even in death I give you guidance to where your life should be heading, but these files have a purpose - to let you be more independent - and it is about time I thank you for all the time you were there for me when I was ill.

The voice paused and she breathed in and out twice accompanied by a wheezing sound....

I have saved up a large sum of money and your gran has also contributed a large amount. This will allow you to take a year off and think about what you want to do. This is your time, Jenna! Time for you to start living your life.

The sound of my mum swallowing something was heard on the audio. The voice continued:

You should have received your ticket and the address of your aunt Margaret in Dublin. You should also have received a black book from your gran. Go to the middle page. Here you'll see a checklist for your time in Dublin. I want you to complete all the items on the list, not necessarily in chronological order and you don't have to complete them in the first two weeks that you are there, but I dare you to do them all.

The sound of pages turning. The audio continued....

There are twenty-two items on the list. I have chosen the number twenty-two, because that was my age when I first came back to Ireland.

1. Visit Howth. Which is a small peninsula just outside of Dublin. I loved going there. There are yellow flowers that smell like coconut in the summer breeze. While you are there, you might as well do number 2, which is eat fish and chips at the best fish and chips shop of Howth and Dublin even.

I spent a lot of time writing and drawing when I lived in Dublin. I know you'd wish you had more time to draw. That is why I have given you number 3. Drink coffee at the Brick Alley Cafe. A group of artists go there for inspiration. You might even be bold enough to ask for some drawing tips. And when you are in a cafe, chances are that you might meet a nice Irish boy which is at number 4, but who knows this could happen even before that.

A muffled sound of my mum coughing into a sleeve or a handkerchief is heard through the audio. The sound gave me a discomfoting feeling like someone was banging on a drum. The pain and heartache associated with the sound was still fresh. I remembered this type of cough. It started around three weeks before she died. She kept on persisting that it was just a cold, but I knew better.

I'm sorry. I shouldn't laugh at those things. It ruins my karma. Now, where were we, Ah! Number 5. I love the parks in Dublin. They are tiny spots of comfort in a crowded city that never sleeps. It was always my place for reflection and sometimes redemption. I want you to visit St. Stephen's Green and walk through the park, maybe even accompanied by that nice Irish boy that you are bound

to meet. Or Joseph, your cousin. He is almost the same age as you are.

The next one is something you will probably dread the most, but I know you can do it. You have been talking about it for ages and you know you want one. Number 6. Get a tattoo. I want you to get one that reminds you of me.

Number 7 is a funny one. You have to go on one of the many themed tours in Dublin.

I've always seen them drive through the city, but never actually went on one. You have to do it for me and tell me all about it in your dreams.

Number 8. Have a Guinness at the Bleeding Horse. This pub was one of my favourite pubs in Dublin.

Number 9 is best enjoyed with someone else, but you can do it alone too, which is go on a Wicklow Day Tour. The Wicklow mountains are absolutely amazing. Don't forget to bring your sketch pad.

I paused the recording and skipped a piece of it.

“She explains the whole list to me and why she chose all these things for me to do. I have heard this recording numerous times already.” I knew where the last bit was, and I skipped to that.

These files tell the story of the most amazing times of my life and will tell you more about where you come from. The black book is there to create and document your adventure.

Listen to the files when you feel like it. Some of them have a special label or a special order, like the Donegal files. Please wait until you are in Donegal to listen to them.

I love you, Jenna. I love you so very much.

Joseph took the earphone out. I could see he was moved.

"Wow, Jenna, I don't know what to say." He finished his coffee and poured both of us a glass of water.

"I have so much respect for you. It must be great to hear your mum's voice, but it is intense to know that she died only a few weeks ago."

I also took my earphone out and paused the file. My sleeve was already wet with tears, so I used a paper napkin to dry my eyes.

"It's fine now. The first two weeks were awful. My stomach hurt whenever I listened to it, but now I have listened to it so many times that her voice is something like your favourite song that you turn on whenever you want to feel better." Joseph smiled and blew his nose in a tissue.

"I must admit, it is good to hear your mother's voice again." He hugged me, only it was a bit awkward because the waitress came to refill our cups. Like it was the wrong timing.

Joseph cleared his throat and whispered "alright" under his breath.

"Now for a more upbeat conversation. What is the most outrageous thing that your mother wrote down for you?" He cupped his face in his hands awaiting the answer. He even wagged a bit from the excitement.

"Some are just restaurants or pubs, but others are a bit odd. This one is most definitely the weirdest one." My finger pointed at number six.

"She tells me to get a tattoo that reminds me of her."
I tried to smile.

"Why does she want you to get a tattoo?" The corners of my lips rose, and I held up a finger because my mouth was filled with chocolate muffin, which is hard to swallow because it stuck to all parts of my mouth. When I had swallowed a couple of times, I wiped my mouth with a napkin before I said:

"We used to watch these tattoo artist programmes on television. I was amazed by the beautiful pieces of art they can create." I rummaged through my bag to find my phone and frantically scrolled through my photo roll to find something.

"I even made a few designs myself." I gave Joseph my phone and he scrolled through the designs. His eyes went big and after scrolling through some designs.

"These are amazing. Your mother was right when she said you should draw more. I especially like this one." He put the phone on the table and pointed at the picture on the screen. It showed a sketch of a woman whose body is round like a ball. She carries a small child in her hands. Her hair is wrapped around her whole body and part of the child as some kind of protection.

"That was my mum's favourite. She said I would understand why when I will have children of my own."

"So, what holds you back from getting a tattoo?"

"I don't know. Maybe the fact that it is permanent. What if I don't like it after a few years and I want to get it removed again?" I put the phone back into my bag and took another bite of my muffin.

“That surely is a possibility.” He rolled up his sleeve as far as he could and showed me a tattoo on his shoulder blade. It was a little heart with a banner in the middle that said “Trixie.”

“Who was Trixie?” Was my first question.

“Unless you don’t want to tell me, then that’s fine.” He smiled politely.

“I got this one year ago after my dog Trixie died. I always wanted a tattoo, but like you I wasn’t sure. I decided to put it somewhere I could hide it from other people if I wanted to. It was a tattoo just for me. Besides, I don’t go prancing around shirtless in the summertime, so it could be hidden if I wanted it to be. I am still happy with it. I even got another tattoo after that.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Thanks for the tip and the compliment.” There was a brief silence while I looked at my coffee and Joseph watched his phone for new messages. When he put the phone down, he asked me.

"How are you holding up so far? I imagine it must not have been easy to go through all of this." I stirred endlessly in my coffee and listened to the regular rhythm of the spoon going around. I knew he was going to ask these questions and I didn't mind answering them, but I hoped it could have waited a little while longer. I hadn't had time to cope with it yet. It was inevitable that my mum was going to die, but no matter how well you prepare, these things always come as a shock.

"It's tough, being on my own and all, with no father to fall back on. She says that she will also tell me about my father, but I am not sure if I want to know about

him. I managed fine without him." I sighed as I took the spoon out of the cup because the sound was starting to irritate me.

"You know, I don't feel like talking about it. I'm here now as I promised her I would. I am scared to death, but I will try for her. I owe her that." Joseph nodded and smiled at me, tilting his head a little.

"I am very proud of you. You know that. It is so amazing what you are doing for your mum. She would be very proud of you too." I smiled at him, feeling a bit shy.

"Luckily you are here with me, so I don't have to do all of this alone." I patted Joseph's hand.

"You were so sweet these last few weeks. If it weren't for you and my gran, I would probably be alone in my apartment feeling very miserable." There was a tear in the corner of my eye. I rubbed it away with my hand. That is the second time I cried, and this was only my first day here.

"I still miss her every day. She was my best friend first before being my mom. When I read her challenges and checklists in my book and when I hear her voice on the sound files, it feels like she is with me for just a few moments. I feel her presence around me." Joseph nodded understandingly and gently brushed against me in a friendly way. He rubbed his hands together and I saw a twinkle in his eyes.

"So! Anything you can already tick on the list?"

"Let's see...." I opened the written page again, holding the book up in one hand. In my backpack I

looked for my black drawing marker that I designated as *the* marker that I would write with in the book. Other markers just weren't good enough. I twirled the marker through my fingers and read out possible answers, while I checked the ones that I was sure I could cross off.

"Why were there 22 items on the list, again?" He said with his eyebrows raised.

"My mum told me she was 22 when she first came to Dublin."

"Ah. Yes. I remember her saying that on the audio file." I closed the book and put it in my bag along with the marker. We both got up and put on our coats. Joseph carried one of my suitcases as we left the cafe.

"Well. We can take number three off the list and we could argue that number four can be crossed off too, since I am Irish and quite handsome if I may say." We both laughed and walked out of the cafe. It was colder outside than we both had anticipated. Joseph put on his gloves.

"Let's go home first. Your aunt Margaret is looking forward to see you again."

Dame Street

I had grown quite fond of this city in the two days I was here. My mother had told me many things about Dublin already when she was still alive, and I could see why she loved it so much. I discovered that when I stood on O'Connell Street and took a deep breath, closed my eyes and listened to the seagulls in the sky, I could imagine my mother standing here just as I was. She was about the same age when she first came here, a year or two older perhaps, when she probably did the exact same thing. She told me this in one of her podcasts. It felt good to do things like that. I even brought some of her old clothes with me to Ireland that I wore occasionally. We had the same size clothes and I always borrowed her jeans and blouses.

I had already completed seven things on the list, but there was one thing that I dreaded doing most: getting a tattoo. I had been talking about it for ages. Showing my mum multiple examples of tattoos that I liked. Getting one, however, was not so easy. I knew why she had put it on the list. she explained why she had done so on one of the other tapes she made for me.

Jenna, I know you dread getting a tattoo, but now is the best time to get one. Be brave! Be bold for once! It doesn't have to be a big one. I don't think a sleeve or your whole back covered in tattoos suits you, but just a small one. Something that reminds you of me.

I had listened to that tape over and over again and decided today would be a good day to finally face my fears head on.

Come on Jenna! You can do it.

I heard my mother's voice in my head as I walked down Dame Street towards Christ Church where, according to Joseph, the best tattoo artists in Dublin worked. Joseph had his "Trixie tattoo and another small one on his hip: a rose bud in black. It was very small, but for him the symbolism was very significant.

Before I came to Dame Street, I had done some more shopping: Presents for my aunt Margaret, who was so kind to take me in. And for Joseph, who was my life saver. We have become best cousins forever. Without him I'd probably have stayed in my room at my aunt Margareth's house reading or watching television and never ventured outside the house.

The shopping bags I was carrying around were getting heavy. I was tired from doing all the walking and realised I hadn't had lunch. My phone told me it was just a little after three and I wanted to find somewhere to eat. To my right was a side street and I found a place where I could sit outside in the sun and have something to eat.

When I sat down, I noticed the tattoo shop was only a few metres to my left. The tables were all occupied, and I was lucky to occupy the last one. I ordered tea and a sandwich. When I sat there waiting, I suddenly felt how tired my feet were and how hungry I actually was. To keep myself busy until the food arrived, I looked at the things that I had bought. I found the funniest thing in a

pound shop: a fake tattoo sleeve. Just to see what it looked like I put it on and imagined the tattoos being real.

"Nice tattoos. I think a sleeve would suit you just fine." Standing in front of me was a boy with long blond dreadlocks, holding a cup of coffee and something in a bag that vaguely smelled like cinnamon. I took the sleeve off nervously and put it in one of the bags. I looked at him and managed to give him a faint smile, but I couldn't say anything. He was tanned, like he had been on holiday to a sunny country. His shirt was black with rolled-up sleeves. I could see many tattoos on his arms.

"Do you mind if I sit here?" He asked very friendly. The only thing I could do was nod politely.

"I'm sorry, all the tables are taken, and I am so busy that I don't want to finish my lunch at work, because then I won't eat properly." I watched his every move as he sat down.

"I'm Chris, by the way."

"Jenna." I waved at him with my fist, holding my sleeve tight with the tips of my fingers. It looked a bit weird. For a minute I didn't know what to do with my hand, but eventually I held my cup of tea in both hands and carefully blew into the cup.

I felt a bit uncomfortable sitting here with this boy. He was handsome, worldly, and so different from the boys I had seen at work or school. I imagined he was brave and adventurous, unlike me. For me, this was the first time in my life I had been in a big city like this.

"I'm sorry. Did I offend you in any way?" He put his sandwich down and wiped his hands clean on his jeans.

"No. I'm sorry. I'm just not used to all of this." He took a careful sip from his coffee whilst still looking at me.

"Like what? Sitting here with a stranger and having something to eat?" His smile was endearing, and it comforted me a little.

"No. Not that." In my mind my cheeks were burning up bright red and I felt nervous.

"This is the first time I have been to a big city like this." I put a string of hair behind my ear and put my cup of tea down on its saucer which had a puddle of tea on it.

"So, you're here for a holiday?" He spoke with his mouth full. I could see he was in a hurry but didn't want to be impolite.

"I'm here to start a new life. My mum died a few weeks ago and she was all I had. She wanted me to go to Ireland and enjoy life." He swallowed his food and flushed it down with a large gulp of coffee.

"That is really sweet of her." I told him the story of the tattoo and that I had been dreading to even go into the shop, but that I really wanted to go ahead with it. I also told him about the checklist, and we joked about number four, which I could definitely check now, because Chris was Irish and nice.

He told me that it was destiny that we met and that my mum must be watching over me somewhere and

setting things up because he actually worked in the tattoo shop.

He gave me his number and we agreed to meet up in a pub in Temple Bar after he finished working. He promised he would bring his sketchbook to draw some examples.