

**Safe in a Box* was published in Ireland by The Stinging Fly & in USA by Stranger's Guide.

SAFE IN A BOX

Jill Crawford

Your girl comes to check on your oul boy afternoons, after her domestic shift at the clinic.

Did yez never think of havin a wee un ever, Sam?

Aye, we'd one that died, he says. Never left hospital. Brain-sick so it was.

Sorry to hear that, your girl says.

Augh, it was a long, long while ago, sixty-five odd years. But I did wonder why the Lord would do that till us.

Aye, your girl says, I'm sure ye did.

He's terrible frail got, fading ears, drowning eyes, hands murky—death's nibbling at the chapped, puffed, crooked tips of him. Still he likes a chat so he does, and as they're gabbling, your girl mentions she's wife of a man, who was son of a man, who was son of a woman who used to own The Flax Inn, there in the town.

Your ould boy once worked for that woman who owned The Flax Inn, back when he had subtle eyes and supple fingers, and was a carpenter by trade.

Aye, I 'member, he says. Heck of a business woman, hi. She missed nothin. So she'd have been yer grandmammy-in-law. What was it now she went by? Murphy. But here, ye're not Murphy?

Naw, my fella's Murphy. I'm Drennan, your girl says. Didn't change my name when I married.

That right?

Aye, didn't feel right in the end. Tried it, but didn't feel right. My wee uns are Murphy, but ye know, I couldn't make peace with it. Ye were given yer daddy's name an' ye'll stick with it, I said to meself. An' sure, his ma's still about, so there's a Mrs Murphy already. So I'm just Drennan.

Well there ye are, your ould boy says.

Didn't go down at all well, I don't mind tellin ye.

Sure it takes all sorts.

Davey's ma didn't speak to me for a fortnight.

Boy's a dear! Ye're just right, I reckon, cos it's yer name an' ye've to answer till it.

Your ould boy thinks for a bit—Maud Murphy, he says. I built her a kitchen once. Her wee son picked up a dinted chisel an' scraped his self, an' the mother gave the child a clout for touchin what he wasn't s'posed to touch, so the wee fella got a double punishment really.

Sure he's dead now so he is, your girl says.

Augh, is that right, is it? I 'member him like yesterday. The tar-black hair of him an' the wee scraped knees.

I never even met him for Davey an' me had just started courtin, an' he hadn't showed me to his folks yet. Aye, Mickey's been gone these years.

Never heard tell of that one, oul boy says, wondering now why he's still here when that child's already been a man and gone; bit of fun though, piecing the puzzle with your girl who comes. Would ye like to come to Polepatrick with me the morra? he says. Company, like?

Oul boy used to drive to the cemetery every day, sometimes twice, to talk to his dead one and tend the flowers and have a wee gossip with a nice throughother critter named Angela.

Angela's an angel for stray felines, he chuckles. Ach now, she's right an' dacent so she is, if a mite strange, an' she'd never see a beast starve so I wouldn't say a cursed word about her. But sure, I haven't clapped eyes on my pal Angela since they ripped my car off of me.

That's a dreadful pity, your girl says. I'd not see ye stuck. I'll be fit to drive ye down if I can get Davey's ma to mind the wee uns that wee bit longer t'morra, but ye know, she's terrible particular about the notice even though she hasn't a body at home anymore. In fact, I best be makin a move or the same one will be complainin. I'll see ye the morra then, Sam?

Aye, it'll be awful nice to get a dander an' a jabber, an' not be bottled up all day.

He hoists himself from his chair, dainty-like, mouldy-jointed. The rickety coop of the ribs swivels left and right in seek of something, and he hobbles over to his stick that's propped against the rim of the fireplace—a wavery limb of blackthorn with a knob at one end he once pulled out of a ghoulish hedgerow when the sap was down and his fingers were fit to polish the good elegant length of it. Stick and he follow her into the hall. His spare hand, mesh of knuckle and vein sealed in scaly mottled skin, fumbles along the wall for balance.

It's our seventieth anniversary in a week, he says, shuffling slippers across the carpet. Nine years since she left me here on my own.

Tears come, for himself maybe. He wipes them away with the heel of his palm. At the coat stand, he delves a paw into the pocket of an anorak and rummages.

I'll be seein ye then, Sam, your girl says loudly, making for the door before he finds what he's after. Ye've got a nice dinner to beat into ye later. Don't forget to take the clingy film off this time before ye nuke it.

Agh, ye're awful good, he says, grinning. Ye're awful good to an oul boy, ye girl ye. He squeezes her hand with cool, darkening fingers, placing a note in her palm.

Now Sam, she says, I'm only after tellin ye a million times that I don't want yer money. I'm glad to help. I toul' ye that.

He tuts and shakes his head. Get on away on with ye. Ye never accept, an' sure it's nothin. Times are tight. Ye can buy the youngsters a treat with it. An' maybe ye'll bring them fer a visit one day?

Her hand hovers in the space between her flesh and his, not wanting to return to her till it's empty.

Now listen. I can't be takin this. Ye get a scarce enough pension, no doubt.

Well, I don't drink an' I don't smoke an' I don't drive an' my dog's gone, so who am I goin te give it till anyways? Take it. He pushes her hand to her, eyes fierce—It would please me. An' sure I can't bring it wi' me!

That's ridiculous me takin money off an oul fella, she says, closing the note in her fist. Thank you, Sam. An' there's to be no more giftin of tenners, alright? I do fer ye cos I want to, an' that'll be the end of it.

He stands at the open door as she crosses the road, gets into her car and clicks key in ignition. He minds those tremors under him, cute rumble of the engine, grind of his boot on the clutch to clinch power, and propulsion. He totters back inside and looks out through the patterned glass of the shut front door. Winding her windy down, she waves over, brief streak back and forth like a rag in a puff of wind.

She flicks on the radio. O-O-Ophelia, The Lumineers. As she drives away, she toots thrice at the blur of him, thinking he might not be able to hear too clear from all the way in there, but he can still hear right enough sometimes.

Her car slants into the pitted lane a good quarter of an hour late. When it finds the farmhouse, Davey's ma is ready and waiting outside the back door with a face like an angry cat and the wee uns already in their coats, baby girl on one hip while the boy toes a stone with his welly boot and chases after. There's a gap between boy and baby girl, gap enough for three other wee uns your girl wasn't fit to bring to the world whole.

Davey's ma carried eleven sound children of which Davey's last and most treasured, and the one whose name, at age eighteen, was put on the mortgage of his folks' new

farmhouse, so that his own young family hadn't a hope of getting a mortgage to raise a dwelling place of their own, in spite of all this land about them.

I'll not ask ye in for a cup of tay, his ma says. I've a wil' pile of cleanin up to do what with my floor-layers in an' out. An' time's marchin.

Aye well, I'm late cos I had to pop in an' get a few things at the supermarket for their dinners, an' for his piece t'morra, your girl says.

He'd get given a quare an' tasty beef stew the night if he were in my house, his ma says.

Aye, well he'll be no worse off with me. Anyway, he's lambin tonight straight after the brackie work. He'll eat on the hoof or when he's done, your girl says.

There's a triple-pack of frozen Chicken Kiev, which was on offer at Iceland, sweating in the boot of her car.

Ye'll be wantin yer milk with ye, his ma says and plods back into her flashy cavern that sprang from the grave of the plain, small farmhouse, where Davey and his ten brothers and sisters were reared.

Here wee man, your girl says, sweeping her boy up in her arms. Where's my big kiss then?

Hi mammy. I saw an orange tractor today, he says, squirming out of her grasp, off and after his stone that's angular and lopsided, travelling slantways across the broken tarmac instead of rolling directly.

His ma comes back with baby girl in one arm, squat bottle of lemony milk in the other and a plastic bag dangling from her wrist, clinking quietly with dirty vacant bottles.

Did she not feed much then? your girl says. I thought she'd sup the lot.

Well look, I tried to get it into her, but I'm not a miracle-worker. She's a picky wee skitter with a powerful scant hunger.

Your girl says nothing, takes her daughter, sets her into the car seat, belts her up briskly. The quizzical eyes catch hers and she cups the crest of the round, fair head with her hand. Are ye happy to have yer mammy back? she says, muddling a cluster of buttery strands. Ye've the eyes of yer dear dead granda, my wee pet.

The child's face that was full of thought cracks open and cackles in raspy spurts that ripple across the fields and startle the beasts at their grazing.

That's a devilish laugh for a wee girl, his ma says.

Your girl says nothing but looks over, hard. She's always at the wee girl, always favouring the boy. Classic farmer's wife. Unless it's because of the lost ones.

The boy hops up into his car seat, ready to be clipped in. Come on, mammy, he says. Come on, come on! Just do it, will ye? Let's go.

Give me a minute, will ye? Your girl's pulling the straps tight on the baby seat while Davey's ma just stands at the threshold of her precious house with her arms the one length and no thought of giving a hand. Too busy barring the way in.

The boy is flailing arms and legs now, kicking the rear of the seat in front.

Houl' yer horses you, she says, reaching across and handing him her phone. Here! Content yerself with that a wee minute while I to speak to yer granny. She hokes out a dummy from the Tupperware box in the changing bag, lodges it in the baby's mouth and

turns to his ma: Would ye be able take them for an extra hour t'morra? she says. Cos I've to take the wee oul man to the cemetery on a jaunt to where his wife's buried.

Oh ye do, do ye? An' are ye gettin paid for that?

No, I'm not.

Will he be givin ye back our petrol money then? his ma says—Ye get little enough out of him as it is.

It's volunt'ry, Yvonne. There's no harm in helpin a body for no reason, for once. An' I wouldn't begrudge the wee man a trip up the cemetery. Sure, it's no more than a mile out of town, your girl says.

His ma sniffs. Can't he not take his self?

No, he can't. It's too far for him to walk with his knees, an' his eyes are bad. They took his car off him when he crashed into the side of a house.

Jeepers. Did he now? Well, he's not yers to be worryin about. Haven't ye enough on yer hands with two wee uns an' a workin fella to look after.

He's got nobody, your girl says. He didn't have a squad of youngsters like you had.

Aye, well there's only one bothers with me now—my David. Ye'll no doubt do as ye please, his ma says. Away on with y'uns. She turns into the house, beating the air with her hand in a gesture that's as much a shooing away as a farewell.

Thanks a bunch, your girls says in her head, because she can't speak it aloud without consequences.

Bye granny, the boy hollers, not lifting his face that's mesmerised as he prods at the screen that's thumping tinny music and flickering colours.

Here, what's that yer watchin? your girl says.

Peppa, says the wee boy.

Why are ye watching it in Russian, ye wee weirdo?

The day's fading from the fields as they bounce down the lane and head to the bungalow, ten mile up the dulled road in a cul de sac in the village.

At home, she sees them fed, milked, bedded, and plonks down on the couch for an hour or two of telly before she kips. Davey won't be in till late if he even makes it home and doesn't go to his ma's. She gives a great yawn. Her boobs are sore, hefty. She hokes out the pump, puts the flange of the thing to her tit and starts compressing the dicky lever to suck. An in-an'-an-out, an in-an'-an-out, her eyes on the telly or she gets annoyed by the paltry drip of the stuff. *Louis Theroux: Twilight of the Porn Stars*. She never mulled what happens to them after—

Tommy says, It's not normal to leave somebody you love to go and have sex with somebody you don't love. My heart's home safe in a box where nobody can touch it, and I go out and do what I have to do, and then I come home. But I always get my heart broken.

Louis says, I thought your heart was safe in a box?

Tommy says, Yes, but sometimes I take it out even when I don't mean to.

Your girl says to her telly, Aye well, get used till it. Hearts don't do what they're ast. They plop ye in it before ye know it an' then it's too late.

She unlatches herself and extracts the other one, the slow boob. Yer turn, she says, kneading and jiggling it slightly to agitate the milky glands. Aie, fuck sake! The nipple's stingy. Eyes back to the TV screen—

Alana says, Everyone has problems. Everyone. I went into porn because I wanted to go into porn. It had nothing to do with my dad being incarcerated.

Wee Catherine's folks are porn stars who fell in love, got married and raised her up just fine. She's good at her school and wants to be a police officer. She says, I'd like to stop people from doing the wrong thing, because I want everybody to do the right thing. Her daddy killed his self because he thought he was failing at being a proper man.

After it's over, she switches to the news. Syria. Zika. Europe. Westminster. Stormont. A murder in Lurgan. A young girl dragged through Belfast Crown Court for deciding not to be a mammy yet. A hit and run. A house fire. An' the weather, which is to be a bit shite for a spell.

She puts off the telly and sits in peace until she's done milking.

Can't tolerate listenin to that oul news, she says to the room. Does my head in. Nothin but violent violence an' goings-on that are never good.

A strange car pulls down into the cul de sac, hurling its headlights through the front window. She drops deep in the couch, out of sight, so as not to expose herself. The car turns and leaves, lost likely, but her heart seized for a second there, when those men came to mind who beat the crap out of her fifteen-year old nephew in his own home, a mile down the road. Drugs, people said, not the RA or anything, cos he was dealing and everybody knowed that. But a body had to wonder if it was cos of something else—like him being bi and brazen about it, thinking it was fine cos of all them 'uns on the telly. They knocked him into a grim shape

with his two legs in plaster, jaw wired. Same week her wee boy was born. The pair of them stuck in the same hospital for different reasons. Still gives her the shivers.

She tosses her contraption in the kitchen sink and puts the half-filled baby bottle in the belly of the fridge, lifting out a part-drunk bottle of white and pouring herself a good sup into a purple plastic glass; everything she has is plastic. Placing the bottle back behind the expressed milk and dilutey juice, she takes her sup into the scullery where she tucks her hair into a Yankees cap and pulls on a grubby dressing gown over her uniform to soak up the stink. Groping in the pocket for her rolling tin, she steps out in her sock soles into the back garden to light up and look at the stars.

Them stars is beautiful, she says to the tip of her cigarette.

Eleven lovely roasts at the back of her throat. She scrapes the butt against the rough wall of the house, drops it into a flower pot, glugs the cold tang down her and goes back in, turning the key behind. Dressing gown and hat go back on the hook of the scullery door. Then she washes her hands and face. All part of the ritual.

Them stars, she says out through the kitchen window, feeling in her their fever for bliss. Her three figurines—*Mammy's ordaments*—sit up on the window sill, out of reach of the wee boy. They are carved out of wood with simple white frocks, bare faces, wire wings. One for each she's lost. Three daughters, is the notion she has. Sleep tight, she says, touching each with a fingertip before she heads bedwards.

After she's peed, she swallows her pill, brushes her teeth and scours the gaps with the fiddly do-fer the dentist gave her because her gums keep bleeding. The body's not just mended yet since she had the wee girl. Troublesome birth, but they're both here.

In bed, she can't settle. She's all hot and bothered. If he were here, but he's never here when she's roused. Her hand reaches down to the squishy nub and taps softly as if she's knocking at the door of an elf. She conjures up that porn star girl on the telly, the one with the springy hair and dark eyes. So different to her. All gilt and pert and smooth and pretty, while your girl's still saggy and clotted. She can't wait to get back into her running shoes. At school, she was best cross-country runner, and that included the boys.

He comes in the middle of the night, too knackered to shower, splashing his face, hands, oxters and bollocks at the bathroom sink, swamping all round him as usual. Then he climbs into bed with a clatter, still smelling of new lamb, and starts poking at her. Poke, poke, poke till she's full woke and he says, Do ye want some?

Might as well get somethin out of this arrangement, she says, but she's too tired to even raise her bones.

He scales down her and sups until she comes. Then he says, Were ye at the drink and the fags? Sniff sniffing at her. The nose he has.

So? she says. Ye said nowt about it when we were courtin so ye can shut up about it now. She's boiling, because he's shamed her though she's done nothing wrong. Ye can please yer self, she says. Comin in an' stirrin me up at this hour. It's a little power she has these days, what with the wee uns and everything else.

He turns away his craving, bare steep wide back to her, like a rock face she'll never get a grip on.

Why didn't ye just stop at yer ma's, her all alone in that massive house with her fancy floors while we rot here in this titchy hole with me payin all the bills, an' just barely?

Wisht, woman, he breathes. My ma's had nothin all her life.

Well, she's doin fine now for a farmer's widow.

It's her time, he says. Ye'll get what's comin when she's gone. That'll make ye happy, I s'pose.

Aye, wait till my ma's dead, your girl says. Ye didn't tell me that when ye proposed, did ye?

He says nothing and having blurted it, she feels bad, even if it is the truth. There's no more talk and he's gone when she wakes at half past five, with the wee girl gurning to be fed.

When it's done, she goes into the kitchen for a drink of water. He's left his piece behind to punish her. Two rounds of good cheddar and pickle let to waste on the counter, so he can go to his ma's and get spoilt rotten with a fry-up.

Aye, the smug ould face on ye, your girl says as if his ma were right there, hovering at the door, judging. Ye bitter ould bitch, she says, as though she were able to say all the things she can't say. Well if he won't eat it, I will! She tears open the tin foil and bites a hunk off each corner of each sandwich till her mouth's packed to the hilt. Flecks of bread and cheese drop from her lips onto the lino. The butter slithers across her teeth.

As she's fixing to get the wee uns out the door on time, the phone goes.

Hello, it's me, his ma says.

Aye, I know. I'm comin now, your girl says. I'm on my way. I'm halfway out the door.

Aye, well... his ma says.

Something's brewing. What's up, Yvonne? Her stomach curls.

Well, I'm not feelin at all up till it t'day, his ma says. I think ye'll need to find someone else to look after the wee uns for a change.

What? Well what's wrong with ye? your girl says.

Augh, my pains. His ma groans.

Yer pains?

Aye, my pains in my chest. An' my head. His ma sighs.

Well... Your girl's fingers go to her eyes to muddle them, trying to come up with something. She keeps her voice steady—Well, can ye not take them though for a wee bit, because I have my work to get to within the hour an' I don't expect I'll find anybody else straight away? I can always call a few friends from the clinic an' see if they'll pick up the youngsters from ye a bit later?

Naw, I don't think I can take them at all t'day, his ma says. I would take them. Ye know, I never would like to say no to my own grandchildren, but I'm not feelin at all good for it t'day.

Your girl knows rightly what she's at—Is he there with ye?

Who?

Who d'ye think? Davey. Is he there?

Now why would he be here wi' me?

Was he in earlier for brekkie? your girl says.

Aye, he did land in earlier for a bite.

Aye he did. An' what did he tell ye?

Nothin.

Nothin?

What goes on between husband an' wife is none of mine.

Damn fuckin right it isn't, your girl thinks—An' so he said nothin, an' ye're not goin to help me out t'day?

Now you listen here, madam. I look after yer children regular enough, I reckon.

They're yer son's youngsters too. An' isn't he out farmin for near-enough free to keep ye in new kitchens while I put a roof over our heads an' food in our bellies?

Well, that's just shockin ungracious an' ungrateful, his ma says.

Look Yvonne, if ye don't take the wee uns, I'll have to take off my work, I'll lose the day's wages, an' they'll get pissed off an' cut my shifts for the rest of the month. Just, please. I'm feelin a bit weary, an' I can't be dealin with the mind games fer once.

I toul' ye, daughter. I'm not feelin at all well, an' I can't do it t'day.

Aye, ye mean ye won't, your girl says.

Look here, his ma says, I don't appreciate yer doubtin all I do for ye, what with me here on my own, an' at my age.

Fine, fuck ye then, she bursts, not able to hold it longer. Yer pity party won't wash with me, so ye may try it out on yer son instead. An' while ye're at it, ye may tell him as well that we'll be eatin baked beans again fer the foreseeable future, an' if we can't make the rent, we'll be movin in with you, whether ye like it or not. She hangs up and presses her eyes.

The wee boy's at her other hand, nipping the web of stretchy skin between thumb and forefinger.

Ow that hurts, she says.

Mammy, we forgot to scrub our teef.

Ye're right, she says. We did forget. Thank you for remindin.

She scoops up the baby and follows the wee boy into the bathroom. He holds out his dinosaur brush alongside hers while she squeezes on the toothpaste with her spare hand. As they stand at the mirror brushing, she's thinking—Katrina? Jolene? Debbie? Maybe Denise? Would Mrs Mac be fit to do her a favour? Or what about that friendly girl who doesn't work who lives at the bottom of the estate? What's-her-name. Maybe she'd take them. But naw, isn't she off to Dublin for a ween of days for a pop concert and the shoppin?

A queasy gust flitters through her and she stoops down to set the baby on its back on the brown bathmat where the wee limbs curl up into the air like those air roots on an orchid. Your girl sets herself down on the toilet seat and leans forward to ease the sickly feeling.

Are ye okay, mammy? her boy says.

Aye, she says, mammy's just got a bit of a runny tummy. Probably got it from you, ye rascal!

Ye'll just have to do a big poo, he says. To get the bad out.

Aye, I will, she says. I will later.

And then she thinks of it. Naw, it's not possible. Sure, the baby's only four month old an' she's on the pill. Naw, that couldn't happen. Sure, they'd settled on two, an' she's happy with her lot. Two mouths are enough with them both workin, an' nobody dependable to

childmind, an' her with no folks to help her out, an' all the trouble before with the wee'uns that didn't come right. Naw...

Conor, she says, Will ye go into the fridge an' fetch me one of them wee boxes of juice?

The wee boy runs out to the kitchen, all happy to have a job, but the baby's getting grumbly. She tickles the sole of a tiny foot, pushes the step-up stool to one side and reaches to the back of the bathroom cabinet under the sink. Wasn't there a test left over from last time? Jesus H. Christ, she's fucked if she's to go through this again already. It's not here. She can't find it. She threw it out cos she didn't need it any more. No matter, cos the more she thinks of it, the surer she is. She just knows. When ye're a mammy, ye just know.

What the bloody fuck am I going to do? she says.

Ye've to get to yer work, the wee boy says, walking in with a carton of apple juice. Cos if ye don't get till yer work, they'll get pissed off an' cut yer shifts, ye said. He gives it to her with the sealed straw that he's pulled off the outside of the box. Can I've a sup too?

Aye, you go ahead first, pet. Ye want me to prick it for ye?

What's shifts, mammy?

It's the time ye have to spend at yer work.

How many minutes?

Aye, or hours.

Time is like, four years?

Aye, like the age ye're at, Conor. Now I'm puttin yer sister down for a nap in her cot, so will ye go in an' put on the telly for a bit, or do some drawin or somethin? Mammy just has to use the toilet so she does. An' I need five minutes on my own, but I'll leave the door open.

No worries, the wee boy says. D'ye want some before I go?

Naw, ye can have it all, wee man. Drink up, she says.

He trots out with the apple juice carton, stripy straw between his teeth, humming.

She puts the wee girl in the Moses basket to doze and comes back into the bathroom, pushes the door part-closed, steps into the hollow bath and lies down, pulling the bath towel down round her. O she. Violence of this body betrayin her. O just. Takin over all provinces of her. An' again so soon. She just. No time to come back, none for only her, when. O she wanted to feed her own self now, get strong and good, an' rear the two she has she loves to death. If she were meant to bring more, she'd have brung the others out with a pulse. An' no choice, no choosin. Why's God done this on her? An' she wasn't careless, wasn't. They've hardly done it since the wee girl came. Doesn't that not matter? Is she to deny herself and him and both forever, in case? And if she doesn't want it, worry of them catchin her, a bad unnatural girl all over the telly, prison sentence, criminal record so she can't get jobs or go to Disneyland America. O but she wanted to be elastic again an' alone in her own skin, an' out an' about, carryin her own self just cos the last five year she's been carryin others. She's content. Another's too much. She can't do another, sick with worry all the time.

How dare ye? she whispers to the presence, if he's even there an' gives a toss, an' isn't some oul devil. Why've ye snared me in my flesh when there's no call for that to be so these days? Not made to be a shell for every chick that springs haphazard. Need a break from

strainin to bring new children. Want to get back to my own body, own. Want to work with my wee uns I have, an' help with the lambs, an' get at my runnin, an' keep an eye on yer ool boy in his last wee stretch. Other things doin. That not count? Done plenty, done enough. No, no, no, no, she can't endure it. As she rises, the towel crumples in a heap at the base of the dry bath.

She finds her phone in the kitchen, disconnects it from the house wireless connection, goes to Play Store, looks up Best Anonymous Browser, chooses Tor Browser for Android, installs it after she's cleared some pictures of the wee uns from her Gallery to free up space. She downloads Orbot whatever that is, cos that's a must apparently, hoping there's still room in there to home that too. Opening up the new secure browser, she types 'shop safe pills for miscarriage' into a search box.

There are two million, two hundred and forty thousand results.

END