

WORDS FROM A GLASS BUBBLE

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VANESSA GEBBIE



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A GLASS BUBBLE



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In memory of a good friend, Jan Newton.

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THE VIRGIN MARY spoke to Eva Duffy from a glass bubble in a niche halfway up the stairs. Eva, the post woman, heard the Virgin's words in her stomach more than in her ears, and she called her the VM. The VM didn't seem to mind. She was plastic, six inches high, hand painted, and appeared to be growing out of a mass of very green foliage and very pink flowers, more suited to a fish tank. She held a naked Infant Jesus who stretched his arms out to Eva and mouthed, every so often, 'Carry?'

The VM's words were unfailingly meaningful, but often ungrammatical.

'It will be the porcelain and silver effigies that speak properly,' Eva said. And anyway, this VM had to speak out of the corner of her mouth where her pink lipstick had smudged.

She also appeared to have a wall eye. That would be the sloppy painting in the VM factory according to Connor, Eva's bricklayer husband, who never stopped on the stairs to find out if she spoke to him, too. 'No one's perfect,' Eva said.

Connor had a port wine stain on his left cheek in the shape of Cyprus with a few undiscovered islands under his ear. He had the habit of turning sideways when he spoke. He turned sideways on the stairs too, didn't look at the niche. Eva mumbled enough *Hail Marys* for the two of them every time she went up

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or down; she always picked up a small oval photo frame from the shelf, said, 'How's Little Declan keeping?' and kissed it. More gilt than silver after twenty-four years of kissing.

That particular day, standing at the turn of the stairs, holding her only baby's photo, Eva heard a dog bark twice somewhere on the estate. That was a good sign. She replaced the photo with the VM's bubble to one side and, on the other, the phial of Holy Water from Lourdes brought by Mrs Flynn after Declan was taken with the asthma.

Also, instead of saying one thing for Eva to think about on her post round, the VM said two: '. . . but we live in cavernous times,' she said. That was the usual meaningful bit. At least, Eva supposed it was so. She patted Declan, made to go on down the stairs. But the VM spoke again in Eva's stomach. 'Don't you go delivering no letters to that Finn Piper,' she said.

'Why ever not?' Eva's mouth said. There was no reply from the VM. Eva's heart said, 'I can't be promising that. It's not up to me who gets their letters.' What was a post woman after all said and done but a carrier of people's questions and answers? It would not do to short-circuit the process.

Ah, but it may have been a safe thing to be promising what the VM wanted. In all those years of being post woman, there'd not been so much as a weekly cut-price promotion leaflet from the Stores to take up the four mile track to Finn Piper's farm. 'Mad as a box of frogs,' said those with opinions, and the kids from the estate cycled up there on fine evenings, threw stones at what was left of the windows to make Finn angry, and no one said not.

Finn Piper would rumble deep in his throat and screech like a night owl, throwing his voice round about the pine trees. He

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would *ack ack* like the blackest of the crows and *honk* like the oldest ravens in the crags. His black-bearded face would appear in first this window then that, as he flapped his hands and screeched, and the estate boys would set up a howling and a barking back. But none of them could make the sound of the birds like Finn Piper, and they never stayed up there when dusk fell to hear the thin cry of the buzzard rising from the old chimneys into the night sky.

But that was the day that Eva Duffy did have a letter to take to Finn Piper.

It was a Wednesday. The writing on the envelope was a child's, the stamp was askew, and it had been posted locally a week before. Must have got caught up. Eva kept that letter until last, and drove the van as far as she could up a muddy track, parking by a tubular metal gate, padlocked and tied to its post with blue string. There were gorse bushes on either side. Eva hoiked her skirt up and stood on the second bar of the gate, swung a leg over the top and dropped onto the mud. One foot slid into a brown puddle.

That was the VM reminding her not to give Finn Piper any letters. 'What do you know about being a post woman?' Eva muttered, rubbing her shoe with spit and a finger. She had two miles further to go, stepping round cowpats and sheep droppings, scattering knots of dirty-bummed ewes, before she reached Finn Piper's farm.

The front door was open. Chickens were scratching in the mud, both inside and outside the house. There was no letter box. Eva put her head round the door. It was very dark. No convenient hall table on which to place the post.

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‘Mr Piper?’ Eva called, but the dampness ate her words.

She fetched a flat stone from the wall and put it on the ground just inside the door, placing the letter addressed to *Mister Finn Birdman* on the stone where he would not miss it. Then she shouted his real name once more before retracing her steps. But only a short way. It was the twittering of a flock of sparrows approaching that stopped her, and she ducked behind the stone wall, to hide rather than to spy.

But she did spy. The bearded figure of Finn Piper came loping and twittering across the meadow swinging an old green enamel saucepan, naked as the day he was delivered. Two colliers followed, low to the ground. He crossed the yard to his house, and the twittering stopped as he put the saucepan down, slopping water onto the mud. He looked round, and Eva ducked again. She counted twenty. When she peered over the wall, he was sitting on a tree stump with his back to her, holding the letter, and as she watched he raised it to his face, sniffed at it, and carefully bit one corner as though he was testing for gold.

Later, Eva talked to the VM. ‘It was the back of his neck,’ she said.

‘What was?’

‘Ah. Like a little boy’s. Vulnerable.’

‘Needing a wash, more like.’ The VM’s mouth seemed a little pinched tonight. She hefted the Infant Jesus, who was out of proportion with his Mother—big enough for a three year old—higher on her arm. ‘I were watching.’

‘I thought so,’ said Eva. ‘I could feel something like your breath on my own neck.’

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Eva, in bed, couldn't talk to Connor about little boy's necks. So she said, 'Took a letter to that Finn Piper today. Been in this job twenty years, give or take. First one.'

Connor chuckled into his pillow, facing the other way. 'Mad as a box of frogs.'

'They all say that.' Eva watched the streetlight striping the Artex through the curtain rings. She sighed. 'I wonder . . .'

'Wonder what, then?'

'If Finn Piper can read.'

Connor sat up and turned on the light. His hair was sticking up. Cyprus was looking redder, it always did that when he was tired. 'Now don't you go interfering . . .'

'I can't take you seriously with your hair like that,' she said. 'Put the light out and go to sleep.' 'And,' Eva could have said, 'you are beginning to sound like the VM.' But she didn't.

The next day Eva had no spare time, but on the Friday she took an extra bag in the post van. Connor's old painting trousers. A few jumpers, patched but fine. A new orange shirt that Connor hadn't liked, still in its cellophane. She'd carried the bag downstairs, holding it to her left side so the VM would miss it.

She didn't. 'Taking them someplace nice then?' she said.

'None of your business,' Eva's heart said, as her mouth said, 'The needy.' And she'd paused in the kitchen and added half a chocolate sponge wrapped in foil.

Finn Piper, barefoot but dressed this time in old jeans and a grey plastic raincoat, was tying a long length of blue twine round and round the trunk of a half-dead pine tree. He must have seen Eva sidestepping the chickens but he didn't look up or say a word.

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‘Mr Piper?’ Eva said, staying twenty feet or so back.

‘Ah.’ Finn Piper curled the twine over and under itself into a complicated knot and let it hang like a tassel from the tree. He stood back.

‘It’s a tree alright,’ he said.

‘It is that.’ Eva said. ‘And very handsome it looks too.’

He smiled, made a noise deep in his throat, a soft rumble, the cooing of a pigeon.

‘I wondered,’ Eva said. And the VM’s voice came from nowhere as always, ‘I’d say you got thirty seconds to change your mind, love.’

Eva took a deep breath. ‘I wondered,’ she said firmly, ‘if you’d read the letter from the other day, or whether . . .’

‘Ah,’ Finn Piper said, pulling the crumpled envelope from his mac pocket, handing it to her. It was torn. Through the tear she could see enough of the contents to know what it was.

There was a pause.

‘Lucky thing,’ Eva said.

‘Lord love us,’ said the VM. ‘Will you leave it, Eva Duffy?’

Later, back home on the stairs, the VM didn’t say anything. ‘Go on,’ Eva said, after a few breathless *Hail Marys*. ‘Tell me you told me so.’

The VM didn’t reply. Her wall eye seemed to be looking over Eva’s shoulder, the plastic chin was more tilted than usual, the mouth even more pinched. But the Infant waved his arms and blew a spit-bubble.

In bed that night, Eva rubbed Connor’s back.

‘So how did it go?’ he said.

‘How did what go?’

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‘Get on with you, woman,’ said Connor. ‘You had chicken shit all over your work shoes.’

Eva sighed. ‘He couldn’t read,’ she said.

‘And?’

‘He’s never been to a kid’s party, either.’

Connor didn’t move. But Eva felt something unsteady creeping under the muscles of his back.

Later, hours later, Eva lay there, eyes closed. Connor was awake, she could feel it through the mattress. A tautness. Sleep would not come to her, held away by memories as insistent as a flock of starlings on new grass seed.

Nursery rhymes. Earnest adult voices over the plinking of a xylophone.

‘Girls and boys come out to **PLAY**

The moon doth shine as bright as **DAY** . . . ‘

The smell of food. Sandwiches, crisps, little sausages, bright jellies in paper cups. Giggles. Kids laughing. Adults talking. The rattle and bell of some plastic toy. Declan coughing. Declan coughing. Declan . . .

‘Wee Willie Winkie runs through the **TOWN**,

Upstairs and downstairs in his night **GOWN** . . .’

Every sound and smell a shard of pain. Eva couldn’t focus on what Declan’s face looked like. Every time she tries, she just sees balloons. Hears the xylophone, then a click. How still everything went, suddenly, and the wail of an ambulance cutting through the quiet.

Mothers sliding away with their toddlers.

Connor climbing down from a dirty white pick-up still wearing his hard hat, following the ambulance men in through the glass door.

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‘What?’

A half-eaten yellow jelly baby trodden into the hall carpet.

Eva, in bed, waited. Sleep came to Connor in the end, just before dawn, but not to Eva. She slipped out of bed and went half way down the stairs, didn’t say anything with her mouth, but sat, head in hands, while her heart said things about memories rising up, about a squished jelly baby.

The VM sniffed. ‘Well, can I say it now?’ she said.

‘Go on.’

‘I told you not to take Finn Piper no letters. I said . . .’

‘I know what you said.’

This was early Saturday, and Eva was working the morning shift. She got ready slower than usual, sat on the bed for a while and watched Connor snoring. The day seemed weighted down. And it was that day that the VM again said two things for Eva to think about.

‘Life,’ she said, ‘ain’t no bowl of cherries.’ Eva ignored this one; it said nothing she didn’t know anyway. She picked up Declan’s photo, kissed it, and the VM said, ‘You be enjoying yourselves, now.’

The VM wasn’t looking at her any more. Her bad eye seemed to have slipped sideways and she was looking past Eva with the other eye, like there was something important on the wall behind her. Eva didn’t answer with her heart or her mouth. She went to replace Declan in the niche, when something in what the VM had said came back at her like an echo and bounced around in her heart. ‘You be enjoying yourselves . . .’

Eva picked up the VM’s bubble and turned it over. The glass was sealed at the base with a black plastic plug. The VM’s voice

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was somewhat muffled, 'What in the name of Paddy O'Neill are you up to?' she said. 'I can't breathe upside-down.'

Eva pushed Declan's photo deep into her hip pocket.

It didn't take much effort with a kitchen knife to loosen the VM's plug. 'Will you be telling me what's going on?' said the VM, who, being attached to the plug with a dab of hard yellow glue, lay in Eva's hand, her fronds of green plastic foliage and bright pink flowers scattered over the lino. Her bubble lay on its side on the table, completely empty.

'This might hurt a bit, sorry,' said Eva's heart, as she slid the knife between the VM's robes (she didn't seem to have feet) and the base. The base fell away and rolled under the table.

'Ow,' said the VM.

'Wheee!' said The Infant, his face glowing.

'There.' Eva inserted them both into her breast pocket, from where the VM's face peered like a small boy's pet mouse in a blue hood.

'And me,' said The Infant, face against the inside of Eva's pocket.

'Sorry,' Eva said, folding a handkerchief and pushing it underneath the VM so that he could see out too. 'Now. I've got to get to work.'

All morning, the VM grumbled. 'Me, who's never travelled,' she said as Eva did her round on the estate. 'What's this?' she said, as Eva put her head round the door of the corner shop on Limerick Street and put their letters on the counter. 'Never been here, ugly place,' she said, as Eva sent a load of brochures and brown envelopes tumbling through the glass doors of the factory office.

'Be an angel and drop us off home?' the VM said at the end of the morning.

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'I'm no angel,' Eva said.

'Please? I don't want to go near no kids' parties.'

'No,' Eva said.

It was windy at Finn Piper's farm just before two that afternoon. He was sitting on his tree stump, party invitation in one hand, the other on the neck of one of his collies. He had tied up the orange shirt—still in its cellophane packet—with blue twine, and had hung it from the pine tree, where it moved in the breeze, shining and twisting like an ill-conceived kite. He had put on Connor's painting trousers and his legs stuck out of the ends like sticks of celery. Connor's v-necked red jumper had something indefinable down the front.

The VM sniffed. 'If there's one thing I can't be doing with . . .'
' . . . it's snobbery,' Eva finished the sentence as she picked her way across the yard. Finn beamed up at her, opened his mouth wide and crowed, a long doodle-doo that sent a flight of rooks skyward. The chickens grubbing about his bare feet looked up for a second, then resumed their work.

All the way down the track, all the way along the road into town, Finn Piper sat hunched in the passenger seat of the post van, his arms round his knees, craning his neck to see what was passing, then nodding to himself. The van smelled of earth and river water. Occasionally, the shrieks of eagles split the air, nearly sending Eva off the road.

'Will you be taking more care, Eva Duffy?' said her pocket.

Finn called out the names of things as they passed. 'It's the sheep alright. It's a field alright. It's horses alright. It'll be men alright. It's a house. A house.'

It was a house, but it was a poor one. The front gate swung on one hinge, and there were a few toys strewn to one side of a

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stained and cracked concrete path. A rusty tricycle, a ball, a plastic bucket and spade. A half-empty sand pit. A larger child's bicycle with a flat tyre lay on the grass in front of a football goal made from bean sticks and string. Hanging from the letter box was a single green balloon.

The presence of the post woman here on a Saturday afternoon was odd enough, but the sight of Finn Piper on the estate had roused a small gaggle of boys who watched Eva knock on the door. She heard the yap of a dog from inside the house, then another and another behind them on the road. She turned and two lads laughed, then fell quiet.

A small boy in a red jersey opened the door, a toddler clutching his leg.

'Mam!' The bigger boy shouted back into the house. 'He's here. It's Mister Finn Birdman.' Then, to Finn Piper, he said, 'I wrote it, by myself, nearly. I didn't think you'd come. It's not my birthday, it's his.' He nodded at his leg, looking faintly embarrassed. 'Can you show us how to make your bird noises? Please?'

Finn Piper just stood, head on one side.

The toddler's nose needed wiping. Eva Duffy patted Finn Piper on the back. 'Go on,' she said. 'I'll be back at five thirty. Enjoy yourself.'

An older boy appeared from the shadows, another toddler on his hip. Finn Piper growled, an old pigeon. He didn't move. The middle lad looked back into the house, and Eva could hear it now—the plink of a xylophone, earnest adults singing nursery rhymes, children giggling, the rattle and bell of a plastic toy.

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‘Go on with you,’ the older boy said to Finn, ‘They’ll not eat you.’ He turned to Eva, his eyes flicking to her pocket. ‘Would you come in too?’ he asked.

Eva felt Finn Piper slide his hand into hers. She felt her other hand deep in her hip pocket, her fingers finding and curling tight round a small oval frame. She felt an intake of breath from the VM. Then Eva, whose head did not want to go in at all, stepped over the threshold.



It was late, late in the evening when Connor helped Eva put the VM back in her bubble. The VM seemed to be smiling, although her eyes were puffy, and that was maybe tiredness. The Infant’s cheeks shone, but then the light in the kitchen was bright.

Connor glued the VM back to her base, reassembled the foliage, and put her bubble back together with the help of some masking tape.

‘Good as new,’ he said.

Eva sat at the kitchen table, hands round a cup of tea. ‘You should have been there,’ she said. ‘Like the bird house at the zoo, it was, in the end. Listen—’ and she cuckooed, but softly, so as not to disturb the neighbours.

Connor said nothing, but picked up the VM’s bubble and Declan’s photo and took them up to the niche. He was a long time coming down.

Later, when Eva started snoring, Connor got out of bed, fetched Declan out of the niche, and sat on the stairs in his pyjamas. He held the photo gently, turning it this way then that, letting the lights from the estate pick out his son’s curls, his nose, his

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birthmark. Declan's own little island; more like Malta than Cyprus.

Cyprus felt hot tonight, but it didn't seem to matter. Connor didn't turn his head away, but looked straight at the VM.

'Hello?' he said, then listened. And he might just have heard a reply, somewhere inside him, somewhere near his stomach perhaps, or his heart,

'You'll be Declan's Dad then? About time.'

Later, in bed, Eva patted his back.

'You're awake?' he said.

'I am,' said Eva. 'Where've you been?'

'Nowhere,' Connor said. 'Go to sleep, will you?' Then he said, 'I've got one question. Why did you take the statue with you?'

'Just for company,' Eva said with her mouth. 'I took her along for company.' But her heart said, 'We were holding each other's hands.'

Then, there was a sound. The cry of a buzzard as it might have been made by a small boy, a thin little cry that rose triumphant into the post woman's house, echoed round the stairs and floated out of the open windows to disappear among the whispers of wind in the night sky.

‘I CAN SQUASH THE KING, TOMMO’

WHEN THE WIND is in the east, coming just steady over the coal tips, the tunnel on the old Merthyr coal line sings like an empty pop bottle. The sound bells about the soot and bricks as if it's caught in the throat of a Dowlais tenor, coaldust and all, then it spills out and flows down the valley to the town. It settles between the council houses, seeps through the gaps in the windows; a *hoooooing* that has children crying there's ghosts in the chimney. Then Ianto 'Passchendaele' Jenkins, in khaki, stops his begging on the steps of the cinema and lifts a finger into the air, like he's conducting.

If the wind is stronger, it sets the big old iron rocking horse going on its tarmac square behind the High Street, and it squeaks, squeaks, squeaks like there's a football team of little lads astride, some standing. The swings on their brown chains swing with no hands to push. Back, forth. Squeak, squeak And sheets of newspaper blow across the tarmac, swirling with bus tickets and sweet wrappers in a demented ballet, piling against the doors of Ebenezer Chapel to make work for the Minister.

Passchendaele Jenkins lifts his finger into the air and looks up at the windows of the Savings Bank, watching for Tommo Price to move. And Batty Annie, her hair like string, leaves the door of the old linesman's hut swinging on its one hinge, and stumbles, bent, along the tracks in her slippers waving a

‘I CAN SQUASH THE KING, TOMMO’

shrimping net that’s full of nothing but holes. She’s fetching her son home.

Wait for me, Lovely Boy . . .

Then Tommo Price, wearing a suit, looks out of his window at the Savings Bank, watches Batty Annie bent into the wind disappearing behind the council houses on her way to the tunnel. He will shake his head before going back to his ledgers. And the figures on the paper will be blown about as he watches. And Tommo will push his chair back, call across to Mr Billy Harris, Deputy Manager, that he has to go out. Billy Harris will nod and carry on pulling a thread from his sleeve as he talks to the publican’s wife on the telephone.

By the time Tommo gets to the tunnel, Annie will be inside, her slippers soft on the moss and stones. He’ll breathe shallow at the stink of piss. He will see nothing at all as the light is gone, taken by the wind. He will feel it, cold on his face, as he hunches his shoulders, coughs.

Annie? Come away now . . .

Tommo will hear her breathing, sharp, each intake like a sob. He’ll hear the scritch of her net against the bricks, a scuttle of tiny claws, the damp velvet dark pressing on his ears. And the sound. The *hooooing* of the wind, magnified now. And if Tommo puts his hand on the wall, presses his fingers into the grease and soot, he can feel the wall trembling, still. As if the coal train is coming.

Annie? I will make you a cup of black tea with sugar?