

Passengers

by Deirdre Shanahan

The houses lean towards each other in the backroads, tall and narrow, passing on secrets. My grandmother's rooms are dark and cool in summer, colder than the earth in winter. It's easy to forget mum left four years after she arrived at twenty one. She came to fathom the city from a village outside Crakow, travelling alone on three trains, a path leading to my father.

Passengers towards each other, we still live here, torn from her life, in the tall redbrick house near the Green. Dad doesn't know where she went when I was five. He shakes his head, saying, "She never settled."

He fills his days with other women, crosses London in his van to tell them he plays the guitar and violin, until after weeks of believing and enduring his lack of money, they fall away. I want to fight him about them, but he says in the early years with my mum, they tore across the city to see bands or friends, until his phone rings. Always distracted, he holds the phone tenderly as a hand and I have to wait until he is finished. He turns to me.

"This city, Savannah, makes people feel small." He opens his arms in an attempted plea of distress. He sits in the worn armchair as kids from the school opposite run out of the gate, their shouts and cries light as air. "I asked friends. I went to the usual places, the office she worked at. I saw that bull of a man from Wales who lived in the canal but he hadn't seen her."

After mum left, I hoped she was living nearby and I might run into her at the market, the park, the shops so I hung around, bought chips, stayed in the arcade to play the fruit machines. Grandmother watched from the window with a thin worried face as I returned. And I let her worry. Liked to scare her. Or maybe she was looking out for her too, her daughter-in-law lost among the sea of people pushing their way to the tube.

Dad played in a band, though he rarely does these days, except for one Sunday afternoon, he and his mates piled into his van for a pub in Kent. Mostly he buys stuff, salvages from stalls but never knows what is valuable or what will last and has to check with one of his mates. He brought books he thought were first editions, Staffordshire ware which weren't and glass purporting to be Lalique. Always chasing pieces; he had a notion about a clock he was sure was made by an old established clock-maker in London, only to find it wasn't. He thought he knew someone who knew someone who would put him in touch with a silver trader who understood hall-markings. It took him months before he found a book explaining them. Pieces slipped through his fingers; jewellery of crystal, paste brooches in initials, a formal 'E,' or languid 'S.'

Every corner, alcove, nook and the space under the stairs fills. Boxes of books sit in the hall for sorting. Vinyl records. Dresses and coats from up-market charity shops. Girls love Vintage, he says while Grandmother drowns under the smell of moths and the whiff of old, over aromatic perfume on fox stoles.

The house heaves with prizes from Dad's poor sales techniques: mantel clocks from the thirties, mirrors whose backs came through, china dogs, ceremonial swords and horse brasses, centenary mugs of George and Alexandra along with boxes of silver, marquetry and paper. Others in mother of pearl and tortoiseshell tones, another of brass from the First World War, which was issued to all the soldiers.

The tortoiseshell box was a gift for mum, an early small triumph from a stall in Camden Market, but she fled with her new man. Useless, other than holding safety pins and paper clips, an old stamp from the Vatican and a red button, it stands on a table in the lounge, gathering dust. Its curved lid glows deeply in sunlight from the bay window, as dust motes spin, a hands span. The way you measure horses. One time we went to the country, it was half term and a friend of Gran's drove us for miles, as we sat tight in the back of her sleek car until we reached fields and the black and chestnut horses elegant in their glances at us, the strangers.

On Monday, the doorbell rings in Craig, who decorates for Gran and a black guy, behind.

"This is Lucas. He'll lay the tiles," Craig says, as they carry in tools and settle to work.

Lucas is tall and silent but walks with ease. He has sturdy hands, with nails short and clean. They work until six, coming downstairs with their bags of tools. Craig goes out but Lucas gazes at a hall cabinet with marquetry of women from Japan and the shadows of birds. He is the tallest person we've had in the house, but has a gracefulness as he slips upstairs, in and out of the rooms they have to work in.

"Will they come back tomorrow?" I ask as the door slams after them at five.

"Of course. Till the job's done. Dr. Leopold wouldn't recommend lazy workman. Say that about him. He knows good men," Grandmother says.

He has to, with three houses in Goldhawk Road and another around the corner. He has stood in Grandmother's hall on his way from one job to another, running his fingers through lank, dark hair, excited about his latest project; a conservatory in one house. Loft extension in another. Laying a patio in the house with the largest garden.

"...they did bathrooms and kitchens in the Harcourt Road house." Grandmother says, "And what's his name, the ...other boy?"

"Lucas."

"Probably on a scheme for lads not getting anywhere," Gran says, her eyes pierce, a deadly blue. She slithers her words, trying to lock away the strains of what she means. "At least, Savannah, he works. Perhaps you'd think on that for the summer..." I've heard this before but I manage. Dad slips me twenty quid.

The house is quiet without murmurs of chat on the depth of tiles or sizes of wood, or the thud, thud of a hammer. Only sepia portraits of men and women in silver and gilt frames are company. In one photo on the side-board photograph, I look at the world from the encircling arms of my parents, who seem happy or are trying to be.

"You seen my box?" Grandmother asks. She is ruffled, coming out of one room into another, scouring chests of drawers, little tables for vases and her collection of porcelain in the lounge.

"Those boys. Flitting in and are gone. We don't know where they are from." She slashes out the words in minor despair. I scan the room. Not fallen. Or pushed behind a bowl

or standing photo. It is nowhere, so I try to forget, though I cannot. I liked it too. A rare simplicity about its shape and design. No tricksiness or hidden parts. A box in wood. She scurries from room to room like a fat bee, annoyed, unable to find her glasses. I can't see how anyone would want a small dark, box with a polished lid.

She stumbles up and down stairs searching, her hair white and thinning like an old coin. On the landing, she lifts up a china arrangement of flowers, violets, roses, lilies and others I cannot recognise.

"So many figurines. Dr. Leopold gave me this because I had no garden and no flowers."

She was a secretary in the same firm for twenty years and when I asked if she had met anyone since Grandad, she said she was let down, and turns away in a flare of resentment, a lilt and trickle of Spanish accent and I wonder if mum is still with the man she left with while we buzz around each other like bees trapped in a jar.

"I'll look for it when I come back."

"Where are you going, Savannah?" she cries, tight with an inner rage as I run down to the front door.

"Out."

"Out. Where?"

But I run and the door snaps fast shut on its own. The city alarms her, as the years strain her face; thinned cheeks and longing eyes of brown, tones deep as the land she comes from, with terraces on the mountain. Only a few women her own age from the church visit, clatter into the house in high heels every couple of weeks for coffee or tea or her *soirée*. Dad drinks and hides it. One morning before school, I found bottles in the fireplace. Loss changed dad. Changed us. It seems leaving is easy. Staying is hardest. The real test. I want to pour loss into a box. Close it and hold it down. Clasp it. Never let it open or free, but hold in my fears and disappointments; mum flying in on short visits, sometimes suggesting I go with her but never giving practical details. She was adrift in a life lived elsewhere which she wanted no one to tamper with.

People fill the pavement. Busy. Jobs, college. Doing stuff. Earning. I wish I was one of them and then I don't. Couldn't stand it. Lorries thud by the green, hurling around the corner to the Western Avenue. Girls with buggies. Men with little briefcases on wheels. Elbows in your back. Lucas sits on a wall outside an elegant white house.

"Hi. Want some?" He lifts a can of Tango and smiles. "Hot out, man."

"I forget, being inside."

"Your gran has a lot of stuff."

"Over the years..." Who can explain her obsessions, or dad's; days lived in the past in a shuttered house with draped rooms, thick with longing and dust piling on china figurines?

We stroll down the street and I pass under the gaze of his eyes, weak under his look as he leaves me behind and crosses the road. He will come to the house next day and work without words. Will leave, going to where he came from.

In the morning, Craig fiddles with the pipes, checking bolts and little bits that slip around the coils. They both work through the long day, barely stopping to eat, even when I bring them tea and a plate of biscuits.

At five the door slams and the house is heavy with emptiness but when I turn around, it is to find Lucas.

“Craig’s gone to get a spanner. We’ve nearly finished.”

“Have you?” Disappointment swells my voice.

His eyes are deeply russet, the depth of a forest. The crest of his cheek has a glow.

“You wanna go for a stroll?” he asks.

“Love to.”

Next day, he jumps down from the wall where he’s perched to meet me and we walk towards the green where a huge tent spreads and kids run in the play section screaming. We walk round the strands of tightly knit streets until we arrive back at my Grandmother’s.

“You want to see my neck of the woods?” He points.

“White City? I’ve never been there.”

“Let me show you, sometime. Tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow. Yes. That’d be good.”

“Here you are. Home,” he says.

For supper Gran cracks eggs, pale as the inside of her arms, into a bowl with a quick break and is only concerned with making an omelette. The shells halved are smeary with light. The omelette glows deeply yellow, oozing with tomatoes and ham. Free Range eggs she says the man at the corner shop gets all the way from Herefordshire. She will feed me to fill her sad soul. She will try to fill mine.

He’s leaning in a doorway as I approach the same place the next evening. We walk to the traffic lights, leaving the pubs at the corner and the drunks around the betting offices. He says we should catch a bus and to hurry.

“You come this way to work?”

“Craig picks me up on his way from Enfield,” he says as we pile into seats past women and shopping bags, kids let out of school with voices hard and wild, as they chew gum, size each other up, curse and laugh, like I used to.

“Where d` you really come from?”

“Leeds,” he says and we scramble for seats. “Came down with my brother. But he’s got his own place. He comes around when he has the time. He’s studying at uni, so he can do that.”

A brother at uni. He must be clever. The bus lugs, stop after slow stop. We lurch to a halt and women with bulging shopping bags, stumble on.

“Look what I got in Marks...”

“My sister’s hip...”

“When I get a night dress I want it to be a warm colour, red or pink.”

“This is it,” Lucas announces and we jump off.

The evening is watery light with gold clouds and the terraces, a ghostly white in day-time are softened to dusky grey. He leads into the estate and blocks stream against the sky as we cross scrubby grass.

“Tallest on the estate.” He points to a chill, mean slab of concrete and we clatter up hollow stairs of Wordsworth Court because the lift doesn’t work. We rise up the stairway, past a chute of old junk spurting packets for fried chicken and a roughed up red plastic toy car while a stench of urine wafts.

On the sixth floor he leads to the cross walk where the wind blows through. Each window has dingy grey curtains and every front door is the same except for those boarded up. Down below, on scrubby patches of grass, boys knock a ball. A skip is full of broken chairs and tables. The playground has a worn swing and a couple of teenage girls turn a roundabout. He stops outside a blue door. 69.

Sharp black and white photographs hang on his walls. Marvin Gaye. A woman who might be Bille Holiday. Two huge white leather sofas line the walls and a long pile rug lays on the grey carpet. Outside, a mash of reggae and house thuds.

“Your own place.”

“It’s all right. Just the people. Wish I had money to move.”

“Wouldn’t Craig keep you on?”

“He does when he can. But I don’t want to spend my life skipping from one small job to the next, scared about not having money.” His words are hot with anger and he hunkers down as if trying to work something out. “Everyday I think something’ll come up. I ring and call around to offices. Nothing.” He clenches his hands so the bones of his fingers melt to cream. He stands, his eyes are tones of deep wood. Flecks of light and dark brown. Leaves on the ground. The mash of all the Autumns from when I was a kid, trailing around streets, hoping to run into mum.

A net curtain drifts across the French window and from a balcony opposite, a woman calls a boy, her voice roaring along the row of doors until a girl answers. A train emerges from a tunnel in the distance and cars run away with themselves. Lights are coming on like insects, sparkling office blocks and streets.

“Lucas.”

He’s left me in the middle of all he owns, all he has brought from another life: his magazines, an ipod his row of trainers along a wall and on a shelf in the corner, is the small wooden box. How easily it was pocketed, nipped away out of one room into another. How could he? From the kitchen, a click and switch and he runs in holding a wine bottle stuffed with anenomes glowing, ruby and deep lavender blue flames on the coffee table.

“Had to nip next door for a vase.”

“I thought you’d gone?”

“Like where? Back home?” he laughs. “Least this is better than that.”

“I know. You can be yourself. But I...noticed, that box.”

“Your dad said keep it. We used it for nails and plugs.”

“It was my mother’s. Before she left.”

“You want it back, then?” He sweeps over to the shelf.

“No. No, leave it.”

If it was useful. If dad said. The box didn’t belong to me. It’s travelling. Dad to mum. Me to him.

“Only you two and your gran?”

“Yeah. Before she left, he was...is, a musician and was mainly away. When he wasn’t, that didn’t work out either.”

While Lucas searches the fridge for cans of drink, I slip to the balcony. Tower blocks rise and like a hand spread over a clump of houses, the A40 flies like a streak of ribbon with cars trucked one after the other.

“I thought White City meant somewhere beautiful. Back home, we got hills. The one tree near here was damaged and pulled down.” His voice is pained and raw. In the distance, a crane strokes the horizon. A scrawl of roads cut and join. A siren calls and hooters call as lorries lumber past. The tips of trees are like twigs in their fragility. Even they can't survive. Was that it with my mother? Longing for countryside she knew in her bones. A small house edged with fields. Somewhere the sky doesn't collapse in on you.

“Look far enough you almost forget where you are, see things differently.”

“You gotta look out for yourself. Time lasts longer than rope.”

His high cheekbones catch the light. His skin in tones of tortoiseshell is husky, deep, soft with shadows laid down. A forest. A depth of trees. His eyes, mahogany shadows burn as his lips touch mine. Strands of music, strains of a guitar and piano rise and late evening hums on in loss and forgetting, familiarity and strangeness.

Deirdre Shanahan has published several short stories in the USA, including *The Massachusetts Review*, *The Southern Review* and *Iowa Woman*. In Ireland and the UK her stories have been anthologised by *Serpent's Tail*, *Vintage*, *Fish Publishing* and *The Irish Book of Short Stories* from Phoenix Orion. She has had work read at *Liars League London* and *The Word Factory*, London and had a play broadcast on *Radio Telefis Eireann*. Several stories have been shortlisted in competitions including, *Spread the Word*, *Paris Literary Prize*, *The Willesden Herald*, *Asham Awards*. Most recently she won the *Lightship Novel Award* and a residency at *Heinrich Boll Cottage*, Ireland. She has won a bursary to work on a novel from *Arts Council England*.