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A Slow Walk Anywhere

by Stuart Carruthers

She soaks in the bath submerged in the blood of her lover. Behind her, biting rain vibrates off a single pain, while the street below echoes to the sound of the rush hour.

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In the small hours of a mid-week day in the flat above the shoe repair shop, a man half naked goes about his business. Alcohol is taken. Used bank notes lie in neatly folded bundles on the plastic kitchen table. Hands covered in scratches. His father's pocket watch ticks to the beat of his heart. Ignoring the initial phone call, when she called again he answered in that irritated tone she had become used to.

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Between a life of boredom and rejection the tall girl from Rosemary Square plucked up the courage to speak to Francis Breen. He was as surprised as she was. Despite her parents' disapproval, Niamh slowly assembled a new life for herself. As the years disappeared, the shy girl with no friends developed and revealed an inner ruthlessness that took her lover by surprise. She wasn't interested in the money, the fake friends who suddenly hung on her every word or the new stone cottage by the docks. She had control.

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The man in the long black garment sensed he wasn't alone. In the house that was never her home, he welcomed her. The cold peaceful atmosphere of St Luke's made her feel uneasy. Bolting the door behind her, Niamh walked barefoot up to the altar dropped to her knees and wept uncontrollably. Words emerged in a scarcely audible tone. Removing his rosary beads from his inner pocket, he placed the crucifix into her right hand. The man with the emotionless face was shocked when she said, "I can't explain why I did these things."

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His sweetened lies and stories of known untruths only lasted so long. What they didn't see, she hid well. Words like a sharpened blade delivered at cruel times. Niamh entered a cycle with one way out. Hand on throat. Darkened times. Flowers stolen offered to hand. Repeat and repeat again. Let go.

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The street's a mess. Yesterday's paper desperately clutches naked skinny saplings. Behind the gloss painted black door a new order takes place. A man known for control gazed back from the mirror. A clump of her hair between twisted digits. With a tide he couldn't stop, she smiled. Stained hot water fills a copper tub. Dredging his heart for forgiveness as the pillow blocks out the light.

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She soaks in the bath. The man in the black garment sits waiting on her.