Bourne toWrite... creative writing workshops

Part 2: The Pillow Method

by Patrick Hyland

The Friday evening sun is fading, and two friends take the shortcut home. Narrow back lanes lined with wheelie bins. A rusted-up Falcon without a saddle. A barking dog in the distance, starving. Dark-brown shards of a Smithwick's bottle shimmer beneath the autumn half-light. Ruby-red, romantic. Maeve is blowing cherry-flavoured bubbles. Brónagh trails downwind and catches the scent of lemongrass and sage: a different world.

"Come on!" Maeve shouts. "When did you say your father gets home?"

Brónagh hitches the bag higher upon her shoulders. Steps over a car battery. "Half six!"

Maeve spits out her chewing gum and catches it on the volley. Watches it sail into Mrs O'Neill's rosebush. Breaks into a jog.

Brónagh hears the first chime of the Angelus as they bundle through the front door. Her mother is standing in the hall, a tea towel tucked into her apron. Maeve takes the stairs two at a time.

"Hi, Mrs O'Shaughnessy!"

Brónagh shuffles into a one-armed hug, squeezing her eyes shut against the stench of Silk Cut and boiled cabbage. Her mother flicks her head towards the ceiling.

"No rearing in that one."

They linger until the bell's final toll. Then Brónagh shrugs off her schoolbag and turns towards the stairs.

"She won't stay long."

On the landing, she's confronted by a framed portrait of the Son of God. She hurriedly traces the sign of the cross with two fingers and opens the bedroom door to find Maeve sitting cross-legged on her bed.

"About time," she says, unzipping her schoolbag. "Lock that feckin' door."

“I can’t. My father doesn’t—”

“Jesus Christ, close it then!”

The door clicks shut, and the rest of Maeve’s arm emerges from the bag. An explosion of turquoise.

“I found it under Fidelma’s bed,” she boasts.

Brónagh reaches out for the magazine, shielding her eyes with her free hand.

“Why do you call her that?”

The woman on the front cover has on a pair of stonewashed jeans and a plaid shirt tied in a knot at the midriff. All but two of the buttons are undone, revealing the full shape of her right breast.

An off-white typeface reveals itself:

Too Small? Too Large? Reshaping Your Bosoms—All You Need to Know

101 Ways a Man Can Please You—If You Would Only Tell Him

Is It True What They Say About Vitamin E?

Diane Keaton: The Glitz, the Glamour, & The Godfather

Maeve’s slender index finger taps the top-left corner.

The Pillow Method

“Page 23,” Maeve whispers before zipping the bag closed and turning towards the door.

Brónagh stows the magazine in the bottom drawer of her bedside locker—underneath her journal and a second-hand copy of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Far from a perfect hiding place, and this is not a house where secrets can be kept easily. Nevertheless, there it remains.

Until the very next morning.

Half-delirious, she sits up against the headboard and turns to page 23. A first reading for gist. Then a second for detail. A mental note of all the new words. Like Lucy hiding in the wardrobe, stumbling around in the dark. About to discover Narnia.

She slides the magazine under the mattress and takes her favourite pillow between her legs. Turns over onto her stomach. Waiting. Wondering if it is all just an elaborate joke.

Then her cheeks flush crimson with the image of the cover girl and her perfectly round breast; the smell of cherry bubblegum; the toll of the bell. It ripples through her like hot lava. Her legs dissolve into the pillow.

And then the sound of a revolver being cocked: click-clack.

The bedroom door.

A weight lodges in her chest. Footsteps behind her grow louder. At the sound of a belt unbuckling, she pulls the nightgown down over her slick, bare thighs. Waves retreating from the shore, exposing unblemished crystalline sand.

“Da,” she gasps. “Plea—”

The blow lands clean across her shoulder blades: searing heat. The man’s voice comes frigid.

“Bitch!”

From behind trembling hands, she watches her father raise the leather high. Before her lips can form another sound, the brass buckle cracks against her skull, and her world goes dark once more.