

Meditations on the Second Deck

Stephen O'Brien

"Tori, like Amos? That brings me back! I loved that one song about Cornflake Girls!"

I smile. It's something most millennials I've met bring up when they hear my name. Either Tori Amos or Spelling: the actress from *Beverly Hills 90210*, and someone I know for being the butt of a joke in *Scream*. That's my real namesake apparently; my mom was a big fan of 90210.

The psychiatrist Dr Foster, first-name Jodie (who, despite the resemblance, was not named after Jodie Foster—I asked), must be new, as I've never seen her before. Perhaps she's the psychiatrist they throw at teens they don't know what to do with. Seeing how they brought me here just to up my dosage of quetiapine and nothing else, I think that that's probably the case.

"So, Tori, your file says that you struggle with intrusive thoughts and emotional dysregulation. Has it been better or worse recently?"

"It's better," I lie. There's no point in speaking about my issues. Last time I did, I had to spend a month in St. Pat's. It was Mom's decision to have me locked up, it's always her decision on what I should

or shouldn't do, as if she's the one living in my head, going through this.

"That's good to hear. Your mother was in contact with me about you, and she was hoping..."

I block out whatever she's beginning to say; I nod and mumble a few 'uh-huhs,' but inside I've decided I don't like her. She's probably been influenced by my mom. She's such a *girl*, a 'Cornflake Girl,' if you will.

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"Well, Tori, I think we're finished here... Unless there's something else you wanted to say?"

I can't tell if this is a compulsory question, or if Dr Jodie Foster's *magical* intuition could tell that something is up with her 16-year-old mental patient sitting in front of her, fidgeting and trying to avoid her gaze.

"No, there's nothing, thanks Dr Foster."

"Ok, well, get home safe! Is your mom waiting for you?"

"Uhm, yeah. She's just parked outside."

### **Stop 145303, St Vincent's Hospital**

Getting the bus isn't my original plan, my mom dropped me off at St. Vincent's. It was the shouting match on the drive here that made her not bother to wait around. Whatever, I'd rather not have to drive home with her. She'd probably start crying, and I'd have to hug her and say I'm sorry for her making me angry. Or she'd finally tell me how she *really* feels, which I'm sure she had to hold herself back from saying aloud.

I'm getting angrier, not just from the fight; my shoes keep squeaking. I can't seem to figure out what's causing the squeaks. It's just a constant irritant, one that *she* told me to get, and not the Doc Martens I wanted...

I'm on the bus now. It's a sensory overload. There's a reek of weed from the girls at the back of the bus, who are shouting over the TikToks blaring from their phones, a cacophony of obnoxious popular songs on loop, and high-pitched screeching. There's an empty can of Orchard Thieves too, rattling from the vibrations of the bus, and every so often hitting my foot when the bus turns to the right. I can't stop wondering who has drunk from it, and if they were 13 or 30. I start scratching my arm, it's the only thing that quells the rattling in my head when I'm uncomfortable.

Honestly though, I'd rather be here, with the unknown stains and the rattling cans and the nauseating loudness, than in the car with Miss Control Freak. If my life was a movie, it would be *The Virgin Suicides*, and my mother Mrs Lisbon. She probably doesn't even know that movie. Or who Sofia Coppola is. Maybe Dad would. Actually, I don't know; we haven't had a conversation deeper than small talk in months. I think he regrets me. I'm a drain on the family, what with all these appointments and meetings and groups. I'd probably regret having me too.

### **Stop 145313, Longley Road**

I'm cramped and sweaty. I can't open the window next to me, and I'm trying to make myself as small as I possibly can, just so I don't brush up against the old man sitting next to me. He looks weird and smells of mildew, although I feel bad thinking that because what if he's the sweetest old man in the world?

Mildew Man is looking at me, I can see it from my periphery. I think he's staring at my thighs, and I feel his foot on my foot. This is Mom's fault, forcing me to take this stupid bus with predatory men like him. Time to give him a piece of my—He's blind; that's the ball of his cane on my foot, and he has cataracts.

I feel like such an ass. Why did she have to put me in this

position? I hate her, I really do hate her. I wish I didn't, I know it's wrong. But I do. She would never say it, but I know she hates me too. I see it in her eyes when she looks at me. I'm just a lesser version of her. It's her fault though. I didn't ask to be born; I didn't want to be *her* daughter. I told her that much before the appointment, that she would have been better off sterile. How that would have fixed both our problems.

She was playing her stupid CDs too. I felt embarrassed to be sitting in her shitty sedan while the Carpenters sang about 'Yesterday Once More.' I do like that song though. She used to play it all the time when I was younger, but she'd ruin it by singing half a second faster than Karen Carpenter. Eight-year-old me would complain incessantly, but she'd just laugh. She didn't even realize she was doing it. Sometimes, it was funny. Not nowadays though, nothing she does is funny. Just annoying.

### **Stop 145413, Belvedere Way**

Blind Mildew Man has gotten off, taking with him the cane and his mildew smell, though the weed stench from the back of the bus continues to be wafted around. The rattling is still there too, and the TikToks seem to have gotten louder—Or maybe I'm just going crazy. These bratty kids don't have any respect, don't even realize that we don't want to hear them. Do they not think about anybody else but themselves?

Ok, it was wrong of me to say what I said to my mom, I know, but what I said wasn't *wrong*. The truth hurts, but at least I was honest! Maybe I shouldn't have shouted, though. That was a bit overkill. And as much as I needed to say it, and as much as I hate her, it was painful to see her face. She froze and she seemed like she was struggling to speak. Then she just opened my door and told me to get out. I had barely slammed the door shut before she sped off down O'Rahilly Road. With the way she was driving, I wouldn't be surprised if she crashed. And

I'd feel horrible because I'd be to blame. She's the adult though. If she can't handle me, she shouldn't have had me, which was what I was trying to tell her...

She hasn't texted me. No notifications, just my background of *Carrie* covered in blood staring back at me. I feel like her, a bit. Overbearing mother? Check. Misunderstood and mocked? Check. Psychic abilities? The jury is still out on that. I think I should just listen to some Hole to distract me. I know Courtney Love is a bit of a horrible person, but I can't not listen to *Live Through This*! It's one of the best albums ever! Now I can't stop thinking about how the media tried to make it out that Kurt Cobain wrote the songs. Which I think was a load of misogynistic bull... Shit, I think that's my aunt at the bus stop. I hope to God she doesn't get on —

She's gotten on. I hope to God she doesn't come upstairs —

"Hi Tori! Fancy seeing you here! Where's your mother?"

I take out my earbuds. She's always this perky and obnoxious it seems, even on a Tuesday evening commute. "Hi Ellen. She's not here, it's just me."

"Oh! Whereabouts are you coming from? This bus route is a ways out from Grange, sure it is!"

Does she have to be a nosey old bag? Gotta create some excuse for her... "I was just visiting a friend. Gave her a CD to borrow."

"Aw that's sweet! Your mother always talks about your CDs, how your room is just a library of music. So 'retro' for your age!"

"Oh, she does?"

"Sure, she never stops, Tori! Every time I see her, she tells me about the newest musician you love, what's the newest one again? That band with your one! Kurt Cobain's wife!"

"Hole... yeah I like them."

"I remember your mam was not a fan of them back in the day."

Yeah, she's too preppy for them, Ellen.

"She was more into Oasis and the likes. You know who she loved though? Sinead O'Connor."

"I don't believe that at all, Aunt Ellen. Mom likes pop, the fluffy stuff."

"It's true! She loved all those singer-songwriter girls! She was a bit of an activist type. She wanted to go to this woman festival in the States, that one Fiona Apple was there—Tracy Chapman too."

"I never knew Mom liked that music."

"Tori, you barely know the half of your mother! The stories I wish I could tell you, but she'd kill me if I did! She always said that she wanted to name her daughter Tori, after that one Tori Amos—she loved her!"

"She told me she named me after Tori Spelling..."

"Wait, you're right... She did love 90210... But she definitely liked Tori Amos, I remember one of the Tori songs being your parent's first dance."

This is news to me, the idea of my mom being... cool? Not possible.

"She was only telling the girls how she brought you out to a record fair in Mallow a few months back, she seemed to have loved it."

God, I forgot about that day. I'd been so low for months, and after another appointment that did nothing to help, she surprised me by driving us out there. And she let me stay an hour to search the whole fair, it was kind of nice of her.

"I didn't know that..."

"Your mother thinks the world of you, Tori. We sometimes tell her to shut up because if she could have her way, she'd never stop talking about you!"

### **Stop 145473, Carthy Street**

Aunt Ellen has moved on from talking about Mom and is talking instead about traffic; how there "must be some situation going on" that's caused a diversion from O'Rahilly Road. She blames all the young, distracted drivers on their phones, all while scrolling through

Twitter, oblivious that her bag has fallen over. I can't stop thinking about how my mother once was—how she is nothing like that today. I can't help but bring the conversation about driving etiquette and car crashes back to Mom.

"Does Mom complain about me?"

"Tori, we all complain about our kids. Don't tell Michael, but the amount of times I've talked shite about his BO to your mam... it's like the boy doesn't know what a shower is!"

I laugh at that. Sometimes I forget that Aunt Ellen is a real person, and not just my aunt. I guess I do the same with Mom.

"But, Tori, she's told me that she's worried about you. She thinks that you hate her, or that she's not a good enough mother. I tell her that's not the case, all parents feel like that when their kids become teenagers, but she seems fixed in that mindset."

Hearing someone else say that—that I hate my mother—it's strange. Like, yeah, I hate my mother, but I don't *hate* her. 'Hate' is such a strong word, it feels almost violent.

"I don't hate her, she's my mom... I just think that..." I let myself trail off. I don't want to say out loud that I feel like my mom doesn't like me, no less to her sister. Anyway, even if I did, she'd just tell me how much my mom loves me. But I don't mean 'love', like family love. Mom just doesn't like me, and I feel it every day.

"Well, I think that you should probably let her know that, Tori."

### **Stop 145527, Rosebank**

"I'll be getting off now, Tori! Got to get ready for yoga! Tell your mam I said hi!"

"Will do, Auntie Ellen. See ya..."

She must have been trying to flatter me. I am her niece after all. My mom doesn't care the way that Aunt Ellen said she does, unless she's mixed me up with another niece named Tori who lives in Grange. But

that story about the record fair in Mallow, that did happen...

Mom must have been complaining. How she had to take her pathetic child to another of her expensive therapy sessions, and how she had to take me to that fair to keep me preoccupied, or buy my love, or give her an hour of rest away from me...

But she did spend the whole time standing with me, asking about the albums I picked up. Questions like why the girl on the CD I was holding was called St Vincent (and if was connected to the hospital or charity). Or if she knew any of the songs off *Disintegration* (she assured me she knew who The Cure was). She would beam with excitement when she'd see a Duran Duran CD and tell me about how she was their biggest fan when she was my age. She seemed happy to be with me, to be honest.

### **Stop 145623, Coppervalley View**

I can overhear some old women talking:

"I heard it was a pileup, out past St Vincent's."

"Oh bless them, I've never seen so many ambulances"

I can't stop thinking about Mom. I regret it, I feel awful. I'm such a brat, why can't I just be normal like her or Dad.

"...O'Rahilly Road is a disaster; they said someone was speeding."

What did she say? Mom was driving towards O'Rahilly Road, speeding too. Obviously not, I won't even try and think about it... but what if that was Mom? What if she caused it? I know she sped off— No, I won't allow myself to think like that. That wouldn't happen, it can't. I close my eyes and all I can see is her car driving fast, too fast for safety. Fast enough to be fatal if...

Our last conversation can't stop replaying in my head. What if the last thing I ever said to her was *that*. I know I said I hated her, and maybe I did feel that way, but I don't *hate* her. At all. I love her so much. What if

I caused her to crash? I'm sweating again. Everything is getting louder. Will those girls turn off those damn TikToks? I feel myself starting to—

“Oh dear, little girl, why are you crying?”

One of the old women has gotten up, and I'm looking at her through my wobbly, tear-stricken vision. She sits down next to me, hugging me and rubbing my back. It's all too maternal.

“I— My mom— I shouted at her— I think—” I stop to control my breathing, so I don't choke on my erratic breath. “I heard what you were saying about the crash on O'Rahilly Road. I'm scared it was my mom.”

“No, girlie, don't think like that.”

“She drove off fast. What if she's dead?”

“Oh honey... I'm sure your mam is at home, worried sick about you too.”

### **Stop 145836, Grange Rd**

I'm off the bus, and I don't think I've ever walked this fast. It's a sprint now. I'm rushing down the road, squeaking with every step. With each squeak the crash flashes in my mind. Squeak: I see her hair messy on the steering wheel. Squeak: I see the sedan, crumbled into the side of a lorry. I have tears running down my face, and I don't care. I don't care about how sweaty I am, or how the girls with the weed at the back are probably laughing at me. All I care about is if I see her car in her spot, or if it's replaced by the police car coming to say that they're 'so sorry.' I'm almost there though, just need to turn the corner...

And her car isn't there...

She's dead. I knew it. It's my fault, I caused this. My knees are shaking and my eyes watering. I can't stop the outburst. I'm on the ground, crying. All I can think about is how much I messed up.

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A passing car rolls down its window, and I can distinctly hear ‘Corn-flake Girl’ playing from the radio.

“Tori?”

The voice startles me, like I’ve heard a ghost.

It’s my mother, in her shitty little sedan. I’ve never been so happy to see that heap of junk.

“Mom? I thought— I’m so sorry, I—”

“Oh, Tori, I’m sorry I drove off. I just was so upset— I was worried sick when you weren’t in the hospital carpark, I thought something awf—”

“I’m so horrible, you don’t deserve a mess like me. You deserve a daughter like you.”

“No, Tori, don’t say that. You’re my daughter, I love you more than you could imagine, and I wish I could be a bett—.”

“I love you too, Mom.”

She’s taken aback by that, struggling to find a response. For the second time today, my mother is shocked by what I’ve said to her. This time though, she’s smiling.