

MY WEEK SUSAN STAIRS

A bitter-sweet chapter closes as life's story takes a fresh turn

Learning to let go allows the novelist to look forward to a promising future

END OF SCHOOL, NOT OF DREAMS

It's a time of beginnings and endings in our house. An emotional mix of hellos and goodbyes. The sun shines but the air is cold on the evening we attend our youngest child's 6th year graduation ceremony. It's a gathering of young men in smart suits with new haircuts; proud parents; dedicated teachers. The place is humming with hope, good cheer and promise.

A reflective mix of prayer, poetry and song ends with a moving rendition of Lynyrd Skynyrd's *Free Bird* by the school's music group. Though I know the lyrics well, they take on a new meaning. Afterwards, in conversation with other parents, we recall the glorious summer of 1995, the year our sons were born, and hope the coming months bring a repeat of the same.

I spend the next day trying to come to terms with school being out forever for our family. It's not easy; I feel time is moving too fast. We can do no better than live by the philosophy of George Eliot quoted in the graduation programme: "It's never too late to be who you might have been."

SHED NO MORE TEARS

In between photo shoots and doing interviews leading up to the publication of my novel, there's time for the outdoor jobs we've been putting off. Despite trying to convince ourselves otherwise, our shed is full of things we no longer use. It needs clearing out before we see it off to a new home in someone else's garden.

Throwing away our collection of almost-empty paint tins and junk that

"might come in handy one day" is simple; letting go of the turquoise kayak in which our children paddled near Hook Head in summers past is not. I take a picture, and advertise it for sale online. The memories are in our heads, I tell myself, as a new owner carries it away. We don't need the objects to remind us.

The evening sky is a clear, sweet blue when I take the bus into the city to attend the launch of *Town and Country* — *New Irish Short Stories*, edited by Kevin Barry. Smock Alley Theatre is buzzing. Familiar faces and voices in the foyer; even more upstairs in the enormous church-like banquet hall, among them Lucy Luck, my agent from London. Soft light streams through stained glass windows on the back wall as

writers take to the podium. Kevin Barry gives a wonderfully animated reading. Afterwards, we retire to The Clarence for food and chat.

Later, we climb the stairs to a room overlooking the still, black stripe of the Liffey for The Stinging Fly literary magazine's 15th birthday celebration. As darkness falls and the river begins to reflect the lights of the quays, the night is all about words. Poetry and prose spills, clear and strong, and the enchanting songs of tartan-trousered troubadour Larry Beau linger in my head long after I leave.

A PERFECT CIRCLE

I cycle along the Grand Canal on another perfect day. The neat, red-bricked terraces of Portobello stand bright in the sunshine. Red ribbons around maple trees cause me to brake and investigate. A notice pinned

to a trunk implores: "Save the trees of Lennox Street". The idea that the council plans to chop them down is incongruous on a day so filled with life and beauty.

Another photo shoot, this time in St Stephen's Green. I chat with the photographer as we walk briskly up Grafton Street and find we share a love of coffee and walnut cake and that she hails from Fethard-on-Sea. "We've been holidaying round there for 20 years," I say, and we talk about the locality. "Do you know Baginbun beach?" she asks and I tell her I do, very well. I picture us there, unstrapping the turquoise kayak from the roof of the car, carrying it down the steep, rocky path and over the sand to the water's edge. I see our children — brown-limbed and wet-haired — taking turns to paddle it across the bay. Now, the youngest of them starts his Leaving Cert on the day my first novel is launched.

I arrange to meet my two daughters after the interview. "We're around the corner from H&M," they tell me, when I call the eldest. She's been helping her sister to shop for a month-long volunteering trip to Tanzania. They've brought my three-year-old granddaughter along and we sit watching her blow bubbles. To our left is the lane with the watersports shop where we bought the turquoise kayak. I watch the youngest addition to our family dancing in the sunshine and think: we've come full circle.

The Story of Before by Susan Stairs is published by Corvus



