

ALUMNUS

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I HADN'T EXPECTED it all to feel so emotional. I don't mean the embroidered cloaks, the pomp and circumstance, the speeches in Latin, the classical organ music, the grandiose setting. None of that moved me especially. No, it was seeing my firstborn girl among the sea of tasselled hats undulating between me and the podium. This was her graduation, one day at the end of three years of days; some of them so agonisingly long and tortuous, devoid of hope. Others so god-dam brief, if she blinked she missed them; all of them leading her to this place today, her alma mater.

Leaning on my walking cane at the back of the hall, anxious not to miss a moment, my finger on her name, my eyes flitting from pamphlet to podium, I eventually settled down and allowed my mind to wander. I saw snapshots, screen grabs and slow motion footage of all that had brought my girl this far. Unlike party-weary First Years still wearing Mammy's fabric softener, content to slouch, disinterested, at lectures, my girl had taken the scenic route and her hunger for learning was the sharper for it. She had organised and re-organised her adult life, moved from the country into the city, and was raising her boy. All the while, her chosen subject was sauce for her hunger. And here she is now, the darling of the

sociology department, but she was my darling first.

I won't lie: I cried at the ceremony, because I know the journey she took to get here. Despite the symbolism of academic achievement, a piece of parchment doesn't do full justice to that amount of travelling.

Later that night in her house, long after the ceremony, I woke up all of a sudden. It was 3.25am. I was scrambling out of a deep sleep trying to identify the noise that had woken me. I heard my girl's front door slam and I realised that it must be her car horn I could hear blasting out like billy-oh in the residential cul-de-sac. I got up, found my slippers, limped into the kitchen and that's when I noticed she'd left her phone on the sideboard. I hobbled off to make tea, ready to console my grandson should he waken. Just at that moment, the pitch of the car horn went up an octave. From her front door I watched as she drove out the lane and away. I was able to track her progress for the next twenty minutes or so by the offending car horn as she drove around the locality.

I was alarmed when, with zero change to the decibel output, she drove back and parked outside the house. I watched her leap out of the driver's seat, startled to see her clad only in a tee-shirt and a pair

of underpants. She charged past me into the house, only to emerge again in seconds, this time with her pyjama trousers on. She said nothing and went back out to try and quell the din, unrelenting.

Two sympathetic able-bodied neighbours came to her rescue, anything to stop the racket. They escorted my girl as she drove to an industrial estate carpark, abandoning her car, battery disconnected. Peace at last. One of the neighbours chatted on the way back about seeing a car full of lads, all wearing their hoodies up, inside the car. That she wouldn't normally see this sort of thing as she was never out at this time of night, what with the children and all (none of whom stirred in any of the houses during the entire nocturnal cacophony, by the way). My girl laughed and suggested that she'd done her neighbour a service then, by broadening her experience, getting her out to see the neighbours she didn't even know she had.

My girl says: "And it's funny, mum, there she was getting excited about a car load of hoodies, and there's me thinking oh, look, they're wearing their hoodies up inside the car, they've got this whole little sub-culture going on, what's that about then?"

And I smile to myself, knowing full well that a First Class Honours Degree in Sociology has not been lost on my girl.