

## EPISODE 1

A SHORT STORY WHERE THE NARRATOR LOOKS  
BACK IN TIME AND FINDS HERSELF WANTING.

As I walk into the second floor classroom I do a quick scan. Anyone I know? New people? I nod, smile.

- Renée! Hiya. Good to see you.

I take a seat between Renée and a woman I haven't met before.

- Hi. I'm Angela.

- Hello. Denise.

We chat for while before the class begins: Renée, Denise and I.

After a few first day formalities the tutor sets us to work on a writing task for this unit on auto-ethnography.

"Very simple" he says, "I'd like you to tell a story from your past. Not your life's story, ok? Just a simple story *from your life*. Tell it to the person beside you. Take notes as you listen and reflect it back. And vice-versa. Have a think about it for a few minutes and decide who'll start."

A simple story, he said. I can hear the familiar sparring voices in my head telling me that I'm crap at telling stories: too earnest. Or maybe I just don't have enough practice. Yeah! That's it! Always holding back. Well yes, but with good reason! I remind myself. We're wasting time now... a story? A feckin' story? Come on, think of something! ... something that isn't bloody depressing, let's have one with a bit of entertainment value, can we? A good story.

These thoughts are not getting me very far, I should be thinking through a real event from my past, not arguing with myself about my lousy storytelling skills or my penchant for the morose. But as I turn to Denise to begin this exercise a story from my past does actually come to mind. Great! I won't worry about the wording: I know what happened. I'm sure some of the detail will come back to me as we go along, even if it was a long time ago. I forget to worry about the entertainment value. Now, I just want to tell this story that has suddenly become utterly compelling to me for some reason. I haven't thought about this incident in - what? - twenty years? And now it has just popped into my head, just like that! Strange.

Deep breath, don't introduce it, I say to myself. Just start and let it speak for itself, if that's possible. I'm conscious that I feel comfortable enough with Denise to relate my story. And I amuse myself with the thought that I'll just "come out" with it.



I used to be a secondary school teacher in a middle-class convent school in Ireland. One day, during a break, maybe I'm correcting copies or preparing for my next class - I am alone in any case - I am approached by three or four Transition Year girls.

- Miss Rickard? Sorry to interrupt you, Miss. We'd like to ask you something.

- Ok, Clodagh, I say, putting down my pen. What's on your mind?

Clodagh is holding an envelope in her hand and she and the other girls look nervous for some reason.

- You see, Miss, we have this great idea for a film we're doing for our media production module. It's for our TY Art class. We'd love it if you would play a part in it.

- Play a part? As in ... *act*?

- Yeah Miss, we think you'd be great! One of the other girls chips in.

- Ah girls, I'm flattered but I'm not really one for the limelight!

Clodagh insists:

- No, but Miss you'd be brilliant. We've written you a formal invitation. Mrs. D. wants us to be very professional, like. I'm the producer. Actually, we all have different jobs. We've explained the scenario in this letter for you.

She hands me the envelope that she's been holding just as the bell rings for the next class.

- Alright girls. I'll think about it.

- Ah thanks, Miss. You're great. You'll be brilliant in it!

- We'll make you famous, Miss!

- Go on now: I only said I'd think about it!

The girls leave and I open the envelope.

Dear Miss Rickard,

I am writing to you on behalf of our TY media production team. We plan to make a short film about bullying and we would like you to play the part of the English Teacher. It's the story of a girl who is being bullied by other girls in her class. She has no friends and is very isolated and sad. Only her English teacher notices her at all and she is the only person the girl talks to. But the girl is too afraid to tell her about the bullying.

In the end the girl can't stand it anymore and she takes her own life. The last scene shows you at the girl's funeral. When all the other mourners have left the graveyard the closing scene is of you, tearfully, throwing a red rose onto the girl's coffin.

We think this is a very moving story and we hope that you will accept our invitation to participate in our project.

Yours sincerely,

Clodagh B.

I put the letter down and find that I have a sick feeling in my stomach. A red rose? All I can see is "inappropriate teacher-pupil relationship" written all over this. A headline flashes: "Lesbo teacher mourns bullied girl" No way Mrs. D. I-Don't-Think-So! Professional letter or no professional letter: I wasn't born yesterday!

For a moment, I wonder if the girls have any idea of the hidden agenda here, probably not. But there is no doubt in my mind but there's more to this story than the "Sympathetic-teacher" "Only-one-who-understands" scenario that Mrs. D. has conjured up. There's another plot thickening here: of that I am sure.

However, to keep my paranoia in check I decide to talk to the one teacher on the staff I am out to. K. has known me since I was a pupil in this school myself and she knows Mrs. D. very well too, having worked with her for decades at this stage.

At lunchtime the next day I ask K. to come with me for a walk around the school grounds and I tell her about the letter and the girls' project. Should I accept? I'm conscious that despite my misgivings about Mrs. D., the girls do seem genuinely committed to the project and have already gone to so much trouble. I honestly think they'll be gutted if I refuse.

- What do you think K.? Am I reading too much into it?

- Angela, let's put it this way, if this film is made you won't have any say as to how it is read or by whom.

- Very true!

- It looks innocent enough on one level. And you're right: I don't think the girls are aware of any ulterior motive. But I do think that Mrs. D. is up to her usual mischief. In fairness though, it's not out of badness: she's an artist and she just likes to be the *agent provocateur*.

- Yeah. Well, that's what I was afraid of. On the other hand, I was also thinking maybe it might be a good thing to do. You know, get the whole thing out in the open once and for all, what the hell? Feck this double life! Why not let this story get told and face the music afterwards?

- But Angela, this isn't *your* story and you can't be sure how it will be seen, or what the fallout will be afterwards. The sinister innuendo? The thinly veiled contempt? Do you really think you'd cope with that? I think you are being set up, quite frankly.

- Yeah, I think so too. It might be interesting though ... if only.

- It might, perhaps. But this isn't the right time. You need to think about your job for next year, missus. And, I know you, Angela. You are too sensitive for your own good. Besides, I can't see the principal or the staff really knowing what to do if it all blows up on Parents' Night or something. Can you?

- No, not really. Individuals would be supportive, I think, but not "as a staff".... And the Board of Management is a bit top-heavy with Holy Joes.

...

- Don't do it, my friend, it isn't worth it.

- Yeah, you're probably right. Not worth the grief, I suppose.

My suspicions confirmed following my conversation with K. I need to tell the girls that I won't be taking part in their movie. I write them a formal reply in keeping with the professionalism that they want for their enterprise. I give them some excuse about being camera-shy and not up for acting in a film. The next time I see them they all look crestfallen: teachers don't usually refuse to support students' projects... and they'd asked so nicely. I suggest that there are other teachers who might be happy to take up the role.

- Ah no, Miss. We really wanted you to do it.

As I turn away, at first I feel regret at disappointing them and then I'm overwhelmed by a wave of disgust at my own hypocrisy and cowardice. I want to call them back and tell them the *real* reason, but I'm not even sure how I would articulate it. It's too big for me to understand myself. It's not the right time.

Denise and I discuss the story, I fill her in on Catholic schools in Ireland, what Transition Year is and so on. As we talk, some more details of the story come back to me. I remember that the girls ended up making a different film. It starred two teachers and the plot, I think, had something to do with an illicit extra-marital affair. I recall the image of Mr. S. and Mrs. T. clinking wine glasses over a candlelit dinner. Titillating in its brush with the immoral, I seem to remember that it was played for its comic value.

Later that evening back in my hotel in Bristol, I write out and think more about the story I told to Denise that morning. I think how interesting that the TY girls abandoned their original story of (homophobic?) bullying. I haven't thought about this in years but as it comes back to me now I recall feeling vindicated at the time about my decision not to play along. Had it been just for the storyline, and not for the impact of Miss Rickard as *THAT* teacher, why wasn't another teacher offered *my* role? I realise that that is how I've always seen it, but I also now realise that I chose not to discuss it with Mrs. D.: at least I have no memory of having discussed it honestly and openly with her. Thinking back, perhaps I should have. But a lot has changed - in Ireland and in me - in the past two decades and I know I'm seeing this in a new light. It is also possible that I did try to talk to her, I really don't remember. The strongest memory of all for me in this story is the image of me placing a red rose on the coffin of a dead schoolgirl. And that never actually happened.