

Withered From The Frost

Chris Connolly

Had it existed, the interview would be finished, and any minute now he will receive a message from his wife asking how it went.

“Good,” he will reply. “But they have a lot of candidates.”

From his position in the kitchen he sees the old birch tree, still looking haggard from the tail end of winter, and notices the first signs of growth elsewhere; daffodils straining from the turf, bluebells just now visible beneath the tree. This is his wife’s work, the fruit of a few days’ labor in autumn.

There have been numerous interviews so far, both real and fictional, but recently they have been more fictional than real.

He has taken to scribbling random pieces of information down on a pad each day for her to see when she arrives home – job specs, dates and times, phone numbers. It hasn’t been all that long since this planted evidence of his earnest search for employment was genuine. He had spent entire days and weeks searching out potential jobs at first – sending CVs, making calls, arranging appointments. He had been a man possessed of

unwavering determination until he realized that he wasn't alone in this, nor was he the most determined – as he had thought – or anywhere close to being the most desirable, as he had assumed and then hoped, then doubted, and then fully realized. His daily routine now includes the planting of evidence in his own home to hide the fact that he has been lying in bed all day while his wife is hard at work trying to keep them afloat.

He makes sure to look busy when she arrives home slightly later than usual, having taken a detour to buy a nice bottle of red – “because you deserve it,” she says, kissing him hello. He feels sick. He wishes his wife was more severe, not this caring, proud-of-him-no-matter-what angel of a woman.

As she prompts him to tell her all about the imaginary interview, he is sure her eyes are actually gleaming, a mixture of hope and pride and anticipation. He keeps his recounting of it short and vague at first, his stomach churning when she inquires about any particularities, forcing him to conjure up details.

It isn't the general lie that makes him queasy, but the ease at which the details of it come to him. He hadn't realized until recently how fervent an imagination he possesses, how well he can invent, or how it makes him feel to be telling these lies,

never quite sure whether he's doing so to protect his wife or himself.

"You're making headway," she says often. "It's only a matter of time."

But his headway has been limited. For every one of him, there are ten who have more experience, who are younger, who actively pursued additional training when the going was still good, who are better looking, play golf, went to a better school, who don't have the first signs of greyness in their hair – who actually *want* to be accountants. He is somewhere toward the bottom of the pile when it comes to desirable candidates for any position he can bring himself to apply for, and he knows it.

His wife looks tired as they sit down in front of the television. As a dental hygienist, the bulk of her day is spent looking into people's mouths. When they first married, she talked about a change of profession – she hadn't wanted to stare at people's teeth for the rest of her life and couldn't explain to him why she had chosen to do so in the first place. Likewise, he couldn't explain his choice of profession either.

They are now approaching the final years of their 30s, with a nice house and a crushing mortgage, a good car and

increasing debt, a happy marriage and no children. For the latter they tried, but in a somewhat vague manner. "If it happens, it happens," they told each other in the beginning, but it hadn't, and after a year or two – when they had begun to make more concerted efforts to no avail – they had seen doctors and done tests. There is no reason, the doctors say, that either of them shouldn't be able to make a baby, and they haven't stopped trying – not officially – but the hope has waned over time, and neither like to talk about it much anymore for fear of upsetting the other.

He wonders if it is a blessing, given what he now sees as the likelihood that he won't ever find employment again. Either way it makes him feel nauseous – the overbearing feeling of deficiency, both financially and paternally. At least, he tells himself, he is sparing his wife the dread that goes with not being even close to finding work, willing this belief to counter the elaborate lies and deceit he now flings regularly in her direction.

The lying hadn't come easy at first.

Having attended several interviews in the first months, the time between each new one began to lengthen and he could see the worry slowly creeping in, though she tried her best to hide

it, and one evening he told her that, yes, he had another interview coming up and, yes, he was hopeful.

He didn't, and wasn't, but got up early a few days later, put on his best suit and left the house. He spent an hour or two sitting in the coffee shop at the train station before going home again, spent the rest of the day trying to decide whether to tell his wife the truth or not. He was still undecided when she returned that evening, but when she asked him about the interview – seeing that look of hope in her eyes that now makes him feel ill – his decision was made for him. It hadn't come easy at first, but the easier it becomes – and the better he becomes at it, his own deviousness surprising him – the worse he feels.

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He spends yet another day in bed, watching the same inane talk shows, the kind where a handsome, middle-aged white man belittles and exploits disadvantaged, under-educated and intellectually deficient black people by having them humiliate each other on stage. There is a 16-year-old boy calling a 15-year-old girl a whore, denying that he is the father of her child.

The righteous and upright host of the show is telling the audience that in just a moment, “right here on stage, we’ll be finding out if Tyrone *is* the father, and we’ll have more ‘Teens in Trouble,’ coming up after the break – don’t go away!”

He wonders who is worse – the people who make the show or the people like him, watching it. He turns the sound down and listens to the rain. As 5 o’clock approaches, he still hasn’t showered or done the usual tidying up, but he feels glued to the mattress, trapped in a complete state of inertia.

He wonders how it has come to this.

Finally, he drags himself from bed, half-dressing, spraying himself with deodorant and half-heartedly making the bed, superficially tidying the kitchen. As he does so, he glimpses the garden.

Spring has stalled, it seems, and it looks grey and hostile outside.

He is sprawled on the couch in the living room when she arrives home, concern painted onto her face at his ragged demeanor. Before he realizes it, as if on auto-pilot, he tells her about another interview. She brightens up immediately and he

tries to imagine that what he has told her is the truth; how easy and painless it is, he thinks, to raise someone's spirits.

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The morning of the interview he wakes to the smell of bacon and finds his wife zipping around in the kitchen. "I thought you'd need a feed for your big day," she says to him with a smile, kissing him on the cheek as he sits.

He is beginning to notice that feeling of mounting, unbearable guilt at alarmingly regular intervals now, finds himself wishing more and more that his wife wasn't so kind. If only she didn't love him so much, he thinks, things would be so much easier. Notions of confession invade his mind.

She delays leaving for work until he is ready to leave himself, wanting to see him off the way a mother would a child to school. He dawdles to the train station, a blanket of frost on rooftops and footpaths, the last edge of winter still stretching over everything.

He sits in the coffee shop watching the nine-to-fivers float by. In the past, he always found the commute to work depressing, feeling anonymous and robot-like, disliking the

sensation of being another tiny particle in the people-stream of suits and briefcases. Sitting there now, there is nothing he wants more than to once again be a part of that monotonous flood of people on their way to work; he would relish that dull security.

His nerves are frayed for the rest of the day.

He finds himself unable to sit still, unable even to escape into the alternate reality of the American talk shows. He goes out into the garden once or twice hoping the cool spring air will calm him down, but the spurts of green and newly-blooming flowers make him feel uneasy.

It is the bluebells, he realizes – his wife's favorite flowers. He remembers how beautiful they were the previous spring, covering the ground beneath the big birch at the back of their garden in a striking violescent carpet, but somehow they look angry now, hideous and unreal, newly-bloomed but already decaying.

Later, he sits at the kitchen table with his wife, stories of his latest fabricated interview flowing from his mouth until she has heard enough, until her face is filled with that sickening pride and happiness at his resilience, his potential.

That night they make love, and he feels cold and vacuous. She falls asleep with her head resting on his chest, content and secure. He lies there thinking in the darkness, drifting around inside a crushing emptiness.

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Standing in the still of the kitchen, the coolness of the tiles spreads from his bare feet through his body. He has no interviews to attend, real or imaginary. The weeks have rolled by, but winter has not yet relinquished its hold on things. For several days now the temperature has dipped sharply, the mornings dusted with the sparkling pallor of yet another night's frost, yet another cold snap arresting the progress of spring.

He is still in the kitchen when she returns from work, and he is shocked by the sight of her.

She has been crying, yet she is smiling. Her face is flushed and he senses something in her demeanor, some change; embodied in her is some new vitality he can't quite grasp.

"What is it?" he says nervously.

There is no preamble to her response, no hesitation. She is beaming as the words come out, welling up, and he understands before she says it. She speaks, and then there is silence.

He has no words.

He embraces his wife and she clings to him. He closes his eyes for a moment, hopelessly wishing to find himself existing in some other space when he opens them again. As he does so, something in the garden catches his eye.

The bluebells.

They no longer look to be bursting out into the world, bright and vibrant; victims of the late frost, they now look faded and wilted, defeated and retreating back into themselves and appearing to him in this moment as his own cruel reflection.

The urge to protect her from this sorry sight is overwhelming.

She moves to let go of him, to gauge his reaction to their momentous news, but he reins her back in. He is paralyzed by

the range of emotion assaulting his mind, dread and joy the same thing.

He has no words.

He holds her tight in the silence, feeling now more powerless than ever, but attempting still to shield her from the garden and from everything else, not wanting her to see the sad conflict in his eyes, not wanting her to see the flowers withered from the frost.