



OF FAITH

Congratulations to the latest winner of our short story competition, **Amy-Joyce Hastings**, for crafting this beautiful piece on finding the courage to face your fears

SHORT STORY COMPETITION

It's time for the lie. Jess stands up from the table and excuses herself to go to the bathroom, her heart fluttering at the uncustomary deception. Her husband nods absently in response. His head is bent, listening attentively to her aunt Deirdre while she reminisces about her late sister's teenage exploits. The twins are sleeping peacefully in their dual-width buggy in the alcove of the hotel's bay window.

She had only ordered a quick bowl of soup, not wanting to feel full for the task ahead - not to mention the butterflies worrying her stomach. The rest of the family are still eating their carvery lunch. They are gathered here following the Month's Mind mass for her mother and they are sure to linger for a drink and conversation. She estimates she'll have at least an hour to get it done.

She strides out of the hotel and hurries to their parked car. She pops the boot and removes the bag she had stashed discreetly that morning, feeling a bit like an international spy. It's a short walk to Salthill Promenade. The beach is more crowded than she expected for a Monday afternoon, because the warm May sun has attracted workers on their lunch hour to the strand. She unzips the bag and takes out the large fluffy towel. It's not a beach towel per se but their largest bath towel from the house. She cocoons herself within its softness. She tries not to feel self-conscious as she wriggles awkwardly, undressing beneath it. She unzips her smart navy dress to reveal the swimsuit she is already wearing.

A gang of students nearby sharing brown bags of chipper chips erupt into sudden laughter. She glances nervously over, wondering if it's her they are laughing at, but they pay her no mind, engrossed in their own banter and flirtations. She kicks off her court shoes and swaps them for the flip flops sequestered in the bag. It's not a big deal, she tells herself, but her body begs to differ. Her nerve endings are suffused with a kind of electricity, sparking. A light breeze from the sea lifts her hair and her skin prickles into goosebumps. Just do it, she thinks. Leaving the bag on the rocky promenade she walks slowly towards the

tower, her bath towel wrapped around her like a sarong. Despite the sun it is colder here, exposed to the wild Atlantic. She can taste the salt on her lips as she climbs the stone steps.

Her mind flashes back to a month earlier, the taste of her own tears - holding her mother's frail hand - the skin painfully soft, stretched thin like paper over the elegant finger bones. Her mother had been an amateur pianist, and as a hobby had taught local children - herself included - the basic grades. They had both lost Deirdre's Dad several years earlier. At her mother's bedside she'd tried to lighten the mood, "At least you'll get to see Dad again". Her mother had smiled at her sadly and then said something that has stayed with her every day since, resounding like an echo, "I'm only sorry now I was afraid to take more risks, what was I ever waiting for?"

Her steps slow and her flip flops splash heavily through the salty rock puddles as she approaches the diving boards with trepidation. There are three levels, staggered at different heights above the ocean. She opts, as planned, for the middle of the three. It's only three metres above sea level but the distance stretches to a dizzying degree, the waves below seem to crash louder in her ears than mere moments before.

It's not that she can't swim; she can pass for a basic level swimmer, doing gentle lengths in hotel pools, and staying in the shallows of the Mediterranean the few times she has holidayed there. But ever since an incident aged five, when her feckless swim instructor had caught her by the ankles and thrown her into the pool by surprise, she has never had the courage to dive into a body of water. She had been wearing armbands so was technically safe enough, but the splash had doused her in chlorinated water and the shock made her gulp down mouthfuls in her panic. Though he had pulled her out immediately and tried to brush it off as nothing, the fright had stayed with her all of these years.

But in the rawness of her grief, and with her mother's words echoing daily in her mind, she has found herself feeling again like that frozen girl: forever scared of taking the plunge. Then this very morning one of the twins had taken

his first bold stagger forward and in the rush of sentimental pride she felt, she had found herself yearning to be the kind of brave mother they would strive to emulate. She tries to muster her courage - reminding herself of all she has come through, the losses and disappointments, the rounds of IVE. She is finally a new mother, at 40 years of age. Her own parents are gone ahead; it is time to leave behind the child, and jump wholesale in to this new chapter of herself.

She tilts her chin up, facing the horizon. The sea is choppy with little white triangles foaming on its surface, but the horizon is a clear blue framed by distant mountains, with an infinity of diamonds sparkling on the water.

She slides her bare feet from her flip flops and squares them on the cool wet rock. She uncurls her fingers from the cold iron railing and inhales deeply. Scrunching her eyes tight, she runs full pelt, only blinking them open after she flings herself from the diving board. In the single second of free fall between the diving board and connecting with the ocean she feels a rush of exhilaration as great as any skydive. Her heart soars upwards momentarily then plummets into her stomach as she splashes into the sea. The water catches her in its fathomless embrace. She plunges briefly, then surfaces in the buoyant water, her smile breaking like the waves on the rocks.

She tastes salt water once more, but this time it is the taste of victory. The rush of exhilaration settles into a thrum of contentment in her chest as she pivots to floating gently on her back. Her long hair drifts on the surface of the water like a mermaid's. The air is light with virgin sunshine. She can almost see the particles of sunlight spinning and dancing in the air. And suddenly she feels a connection so absolute - a presence - and she knows. Her mother and father are with her. Here, now.

Jess feels truly alive for the first time in months. She looks up to the highest tier of Blackrock Tower. The landing board ten metres above her head looms long like an obelisk against the azure sky. She considers it and thinks, 'This is only the beginning...'



Amy-Joyce has won a tablescape of her choice for six guests from beautiful Irish business The Designed Table (left). The new Spring Collection will help you create the perfect tablescape to elevate your dining experience; thedesignedtable.com. Visit irishcountrymagazine.ie to read our runner-up entrant, and to find out how to apply for our next edition.