

AN EXTRACT FROM

*the*  
**PUNCHING**  
**MAN**  
MARSHA  
SWAN



A NOVEL IN **2** PARTS

There was a shirt factory next to the school. On our way home we'd sometimes see men coming out of it carrying big boxes and bundles of fabric, and once we found a shirt left behind in the lane. We always wondered where they were sending them, imagining some far-off country, but the one we found didn't look good enough to send anywhere. It was ripped and dirty.

From the outside of the building all you could see was a rusty fan turning slowly, silently like a shark coming for you in the ocean, and one day it went still in its metal cage high above the bricked-up windows. It didn't move the next day, or the next, and when we realised the mysterious men who worked there weren't coming back we took the factory over and made it ours.

Behind the building there were a lot of hedges and trees growing up against an old, long door that was meant to slide back but hadn't been used for years. When we crawled into

the hedges, we found out we could get inside by squeezing through a gap between the side of the door and the wall. A bigger boy couldn't have done it, but we were all small and the door had come off its path a little. It was rusty like the fan. Everything else was made of bricks.

When we broke in we found out there weren't even sewing machines inside. We'd pictured lines of women bent over them in the dark, women we never saw who churned clothes out onto the floor for the men to pick up and press into huge blocks tied tight with rope. I'd imagined them singing sailor songs while they worked. Instead it was filled with broken junk, which we moved out to the edges of the big room.

So the factory became ours and we called it the Project, one of my favourite words I'd picked up so far in school. We named it in English because we thought it made it sound more important and our families wouldn't understand.

One day when we were going to the euro shop on Thomas Street we saw a strange thing happen. Elvis was kicking a plastic bottle around pretending he was Gheorghie Hagi. –He won't make it past this fella. No, wait, he's done it! I've

never seen anything like it. The goal's open... and it's in! Hagi, again!

The bottle skidded into the gutter far up along the path and, as we watched for where it would stop, we saw a man and a woman coming towards us. Another man had been walking ahead of us and when he got close enough to them—Pow!—he punched the man in the face.

Just like that. And walked off.

The fella facing us stumbled backwards, grabbing his nose, but I couldn't see any blood.

He only cried out once in surprise and then turned to stare at the back of the other man, but he didn't shout at him or chase him.

Nobody stopped or asked if he was ok, or grabbed the other man like they would have in a film, holding him down on the path until the Guards showed up. Some people didn't even notice. A girl on the bus going by had her face turned but I couldn't see if she was interested. Sometimes grown-ups aren't interested in anything.

The punching man had looked normal, too; he didn't look like the men who sat around drinking cans of cider all day next to the post office or down under the bridge on the canal.

We couldn't hear what the man and woman were saying

to each other. By the time we got closer they were starting to calm down a bit and looked more like startled animals, like the deer in Africa when a lion's just eaten one of the babies.

-I can't believe no one did anything. Nobody even stopped! she said.

-Did you notice him walking up? Did he look like he was drunk? the man asked, touching his nose lightly with the ends of his long white fingers.

-I didn't see him really but he looked fine—at least, if he's off his head on something it's not drink.

She handed him a tissue and he held it to his nose.

-Why...? He kept dabbing at it. -Do you think I should've gone after him?

-Jesus, no.

-He must've thought I was someone else.

And so after that we were fascinated by the punching man. We made up excuses to hang out on Thomas Street for the next few weeks but we didn't see him again. Maybe he was a dangerous criminal, we thought, and he was running away. But then why would he try to get people to notice him by punching strangers?

Things at school were changing. They were changing for me because I knew enough English to understand what was going on and it was a lot less scary now that I knew what was coming next.

I knew what time breaks were (11:05, 12:30), which boys to avoid (Eoin, Derek), what day we got to go swimming in the pool at Guinness's (Thursday), what days we got to go to the girls' school for English (Monday and Wednesday). I knew that the teachers here couldn't ever hit you, they weren't allowed. That was why some of the boys were so bold and swore and threw things. They knew the Miss couldn't do anything about it except send them to the office and Brother Paul might give them a letter to take home. Or, more often, he just made them sit outside the office and write in a copy until the next break.

But things were also changing in the whole school. More boys were coming from other countries. I was still the only one in fourth class, but in third and fifth class there were two brothers from Africa, Thomas and Bruno. I thought Africa was a country but in our English class we learned that it was much, much bigger even than Romania and had sixty countries in it.

Some of the men in the hostel said to stay away from them. They said the blacks were bad and they would try to

trick me to take my money, but Daniel said that was stupid:  
 –Unless you have a lot of money, I don't think you need to worry about it, do you? They might be different from us but we don't know what they're like. They probably think we're all bad because we're Gypsies.

After a couple of weeks they started coming to English class with us and I liked them. Thomas and Bruno were already really good at football so they got to play with the other boys on the breaks right away, while our little group still played pennies. But it was fun to watch them running around with the white-white Irish kids and nobody seemed to care. They were so good everyone always wanted them to be on their team.

On big break one day Bruno tripped over someone's foot and cut his knee. He was trying not to cry, I could tell, and Eoin was telling him to go into the office so Sir could give him a plaster, and then all of sudden Eoin stopped in the middle of what he was saying and everybody started crowding around.

–Look! He's bleeding.

–It's red...

–It looks the same.

–No it doesn't because you can't see it as much on his skin.

–It's cool. Does it hurt?

Most of them just stood and looked, though, without saying anything. I guess I hadn't thought about what colour their blood would be before either. I wondered if it was still blue inside them or if anyone even knew because I didn't think you could see the veins in their wrists or anything to find out. I tried to get a look at Bruno's knee as he limped into the office, leaning on Eoin's shoulder like they were famous footballers on the same team, but I couldn't see around the other boys.

On Saturdays I had to go around with Mariana to help carry the shopping, so the next time I saw the punching man I wasn't even with Elvis and Gheorghe, after all the time we'd spent searching together. He was standing at a bus stop, smoking fast and angry, but other than that he still seemed pretty normal. His clothes weren't old looking and he didn't have a beard or long hair. I was about to point him out to Mariana but then I thought I should keep it a secret. He didn't do anything strange except that when a bus didn't come, he walked away and then down a lane by the side of a church, away from town, away from the direction the bus would've taken him in. I was proud of myself for knowing

about the buses and thinking of it like that, like a detective.

That Monday I called a meeting at the Project after school to tell Gheorghe and Elvis what I'd seen. We came up with the perfect detective plan: we went to the lane I'd seen him go down and waited in a little park at the back of it, behind the church. We went there again on Tuesday, and on Wednesday. By Thursday we were so bored, and we didn't even know what we were hoping to find out, but just when we were thinking of giving up we saw him. He walked right past us and out into Thomas Street. Being Roma we were already used to being invisible: he didn't even know we were there.

We kept up our watch for a few weeks, following him as he wandered up and down Thomas Street—never going into town, almost never going into any shops or buying anything from the fruit ladies—before we saw him strike again.

This time it was an Indian fella listening to a walkman, walking fast with his head down. Because we were looking, we saw the fist strike out like a bolt of lightning. He didn't even know what hit him. There was a lot of blood, though, and the taxis with their lights on wouldn't stop for him. After watching a few cars slice by in the rain we crossed the street and Elvis told him the hospital was just down the road. He thanked us and ran off, blood trickling out between his fingers, over his face.

–Wow, did you see that?

–He really got him good.

–*Mama mia*, said Gheorghe, who said he could talk Italian because he'd stayed in Italy for a few months while his family was trying to find people to bring them to Ireland.

–Why do you think he does it? I asked.

Elvis punched the air a few times. –He's angry! He hates people.

–Lots of people hate people and they don't punch them. Do you think the Guards would give us a reward if we told them where to find him?

–Of course, Gheorghe said. –But we need evidence.

–Like pictures?

–If we could get them. And dates and writing.

So then the Project became our code word for our plan to get enough information on the punching man to get a reward. If the reward was big enough, we were going to give it to Elvis's dad so he could send for his mam and sisters. They were still in Romania and it was going to cost €3,000 to bring them to Ireland.

Elvis's dad was trying to find work but he didn't have his papers yet so he had to find places that wouldn't tell Social—so far he'd only worked as a security guard on a building site and that had finished when the building was done. When

they'd left Romania his mam had said she'd see him in a few months and they'd all live in a big house. I wondered if she had imagined a fire inside it. Now he'd been here for nearly two years and whenever we saw Elvis's dad he was watching the telly or talking to the other Roma men in the hostel about how to get their papers so they could work.

Some of the men said they'd heard that no one was going to get papers, that Ireland thought Romania didn't have enough problems for them to deserve to stay here. But every day they were talking about some new rule or finding out what they'd heard before wasn't true. Nobody really knew anything about what would happen. Gheorghe and I didn't care so much because we had our families with us, but we wanted to help Elvis and, since we couldn't get the papers for his dad, the only way was to get the money first.

We had thought of a lot of different ways to make money but this was our best plan yet. Gheorghe bought a new copybook from the office in the school and Elvis began on page one:

*On this day we saw a man...*

Page two was for the time I saw him at the bus stop, and page three was for the Indian man. We signed each page with all three of our names to make it official, except page

two from when I was on my own, only I signed that. Elvis knew the most words so he got to do all the writing, but it looked good to us.

We realised now that we should have got the Indian man's name and phone number so we would have more evidence. But we hadn't, so when we waited on Thomas Street, watching for the punching man, we looked out for the Indian man too, but we never saw him again.

–He probably doesn't live around here, Elvis was saying one day when we were waiting in the little park. –He didn't even know where the hospital was.

–Yeah, we'll never see him again. Especially after that! Gheorghe said.

I stood on my tiptoes to lean over the iron railings of the fence and see as far as I could down the street. –But we know where the punching man is and he's the most important. We need to find out exactly where he lives.

We'd never gone further than the park. Sometimes old men were sitting there drinking yellow cans but they didn't bother us as long as we stayed on the other side. It was a pretty good place to play, but the problem was that

we couldn't see exactly where the punching man came from—he always surprised us.

So today we moved across the street, where we had a better view of all the houses up and down it. But no one would've believed we really wanted to play there instead. We pretended to play pennies but everyone could see this was a stupid spot to pick and the people who passed by gave us funny looks. Mothers had to get their prams around us and half the pennies ended up rolling into the gutter.

We went home just in time for dinner and we still hadn't seen him.

The next day we tried again and a woman shouted at us, –You can't have my money, you little beggars! It's mine!

–We don't want your money, Gheorghe said, surprising me. He was usually more shy than Elvis, but now Elvis wasn't saying anything and he was the one standing up to her.

–Yes you do! Don't ask me for it!

–Ok, he said and smiled cheekily, which of course made her madder.

–Ok, Elvis said.

–Ok, missus, I said like the boys in school did.

She walked off then, still talking to herself. –You'll never get my money, you filthy little...

It was then we noticed that the punching man had

come up right behind us without any of us seeing him.

–Boys, he said, nodding. His voice was very low and calm, not what I'd imagined at all. –Lovely day.

We stared up at him. He wasn't that tall, probably not even as tall as Daniel, but he seemed huge standing there. All I could think about was whether or not he knew we were following him. And then he kicked the pennies into the road and started shouting louder than a lion. It didn't sound like words, just a huge roar coming from the middle of the earth where the fire rolls around, all the way up to the surface.

We ran and ran and didn't stop until we got to the Project.