

# My Life In The City

Philip Ó Ceallaigh

A small backpack was open on the bed. I was filling it with items of clothing. Morning sun hit the bedspread and the varnished floorboards. A 1930s art-deco block, fourth floor. Out the window, a view over a promiscuous jumble of buildings, various ages and styles, afloat in early summer green.

When I lived there first, three years before, the room was empty. A mattress on the ground. I would read there in the evenings, pillows against the wall, in a pool of lamplight, as the birds in the trees went quiet and the sky turned dark.

Then I met Carmen. The mattress became a double bed. A dressing table with a mirror appeared and then a chest of drawers, and a massive wardrobe.

Now I was getting out.

I rented, cheap, from an old friend who lived abroad. His father, the previous occupant, had died. Before moving in, those three years earlier, I had helped the relatives bin and burn and scrub. We hauled out papers and books and furniture and fixed leaking taps and replaced cracked windows. And as we did this work, I thought of the books the man had read, left stacked and yellowing on their shelves, worthless even for second-hand bookshops, and of the sheaves of letters he had received and kept, the correspondents now dead, and the boxes of black-and-white photographs of people dressed like 1950s movie stars. The pictures on the wall, the worn and mismatched accumulation of furniture, all the useless knick-knacks and souvenirs—you couldn't tell what they once signified or if an antique shop would hang a tag on them. I'd read that in India a man of good family prepared for death by shedding his burden of household possessions and obligations, and withdrawing to a quiet place to reflect. It seemed a better way to go.

And so I moved in, carrying my single bag of belongings. On my first night alone there I crept about like a nervous guest, afraid to make a sound. The apartment still held the imprint of the dead man. The parquet was eroded at doorways by a lifetime of his footsteps. The walls were yellowed by nicotine and the ancient dust of the city. I lay down on my mattress on the ground and had trouble falling asleep.

But I slept deeply and when I woke the room was flooded with morning sunlight and I felt immortal. I was making my way, claiming my own space. In that city of brutalist apartment blocks and screaming boulevards I had got myself a touch of class in a quiet neighbourhood close to the centre. I thought I might stay there forever, or until I got something even better.

I sanded the boards by hand and varnished them and painted the walls. I turned up the music and had friends over. I brought women back. Had long evenings alone reading, and stood on the balcony and watched the rooftops and the yards and distant blocks under different skies, different lights, imagining myself the one stable element in the ever-shifting world, there to give it wholeness by observing and remembering it.

I met Carmen at a reception. I was telling somebody about a play I'd seen and then she was standing next to me in a black dress, a long string of pearls looped to fall between her breasts, and she was saying theatre was fine, but what about illiteracy levels among marginalised groups? I had no interest in marginalised groups. My life in the city was moving along nicely. I had written a prizewinning play and then a movie screenplay. I was covering my meagre expenses until my next big break by co-writing a TV soap with three other people. She told me about her NGO. I told her I wished to learn more about the poor. She offered her card.

She moved in three weeks later. By then the pearls had been returned to their owners, and I learned she was broke. She was a volunteer with the organisation I'd assumed she directed. I was proud to support her good work.

My first lesson about the poor was that Carmen did not wish to live like them. She insisted I buy a washing machine. That was when I first noticed the apartment closing in, as I stepped from the shower, squeezing between the newly installed machine and the toilet bowl. I had been content to do my laundry manually, steeping it in a bucket in the bath and stirring it with my foot when I showered.

Then wardrobes were required for Carmen's clothes. So many clothes she could not get around to wearing them all. Not enough days in the year. It seemed as though every time she left the house she came back with more frippery. And wanted to know what I thought. I always thought it was fine. Everything looked good on her. But these items needed to be stashed somewhere. Same with the shoes. Soon I was tripping over them. They even turned up on bookshelves.

I bought a drill and a hand saw and put up shelves from floor to ceiling in the alcove in the bedroom. I was proud of my handiwork and it solved the shoe problem for a while. Then there were new shoes.

And when we took a trip together we needed keepsakes, souvenirs, trinkets. Kitchen implements and appliances were a practical requirement. And then there were presents for birthdays, name-days, Christmases, or as spontaneous gestures, and since we already had everything, we had to get it twice. We had a teapot, so we got another one, so ornamental and delicate it was useless for brewing tea and just sat on a shelf. Decorative jars and bowls multiplied throughout the apartment, on windowsills and shelves and ledges, and they filled up with shells, hairclips, cosmetics, nailfiles, bangles, perfume bottles, earrings, ticket stubs, ribbons, pens, pencils, coins, matchboxes, feathers, face creams, essential oils, buttons, pins and coloured stones. The apartment was a vortex, a black hole, sucking in shoes and fabric and baubles from throughout the universe.

The neighbours were mostly elderly. The basement, where they pickled cabbage in vats in the winter, was not vast enough for their junk. It spilled into the common landings and the stairwell. One day, a widow on the second floor clutched my elbow and drew me into her apartment to climb on a chair to retrieve a box from atop a wardrobe. Her balcony was clogged with cupboards, boxes and old fridges, blocking out the light.

That night I woke abruptly. Carmen woke too and asked what was wrong. 'I can't breathe,' I said.

'Open the window.'  
'It is open.'

Her organisation helped victims of domestic violence. I got involved too. I'd arrive home after an afternoon concocting love-complications for TV and the papers would be laid out on the kitchen table for me or a document open on the laptop. I became skilled at making pitches to the PR departments of banks and luxury hotels for a few drops of their 'corporate citizenship' budget.

The money from the screenplay was gone and I wasn't writing any more prizewinning plays. When not occupied with TV drama and philanthropy, I was cooking and cleaning and shopping and doing the laundry and paying bills. Carmen reacted acidly when I suggested she might take a turn washing the floor. She was not a servant and if I was neurotic about dust—'anal' was the word used—then I could hire a cleaning lady.

Sometimes, when cleaning the toilet perhaps, or scrubbing a stovetop, I would become quietly angry. But I had to acknowledge that she was not lazy. She was fighting the evil in the world. She was busy putting everyone else's house in order.

My pal Ritzi had a bar. The owner was living on a beach in Thailand and Ritzi was in charge until he decided to come back. It was an odd watering hole. You'd take a stool and to one side of you were maybe a couple of girls concerned about the welfare of street dogs and on the other a biker with a greying ponytail who'd urge you to read *Mein Kampf* with an open mind. One afternoon we had the place to ourselves and Ritzi was behind the bar, polishing some glasses that looked already bright. We were both drinking red wine from tumblers and I was talking:

'See Ritz, a little boy on a beach, he'll pick up a rock and throw it in the water. The rock is an extension of his power. But the little girl will collect the pretty shells and stones, put them in her pocket and bring them home. Women want to possess beauty, make it their personal attribute. And men want to possess women. Beauty is just the language that expresses her fertility.'

Ritzi nodded. He played bass in a band that hadn't gone anywhere but he still gigged. He had been single for some time, as far as I knew.

'The biological imperative, you mean. So he can spread his seed.'

'The woman—reasonably enough—wants certain assurances before she'll consent to be knocked up. So the male, in competition with all other males, gets caught up in the world of activity to demonstrate he's a practical and capable fellow. Next thing, he's building cities, accumulating goods and there's holy matrimony, and he's goes around being civilised. How much of this did the poor bastard understand? He wanted to feel alive, and now he's in jail. He can recall begging on his knees to be let in the gates. And this constraint on the male, the deal he makes with the female to be permitted to stand at the altar of her beauty, erupts in orgies of violence. The armies of Genghis Khan, waves of horsemen, burning it all down, one city after another, breaking and entering, taking what they want without saying please or thank you or wiping their boots.'

I took a big drink at the end of this speech. You'd think I'd just ridden the long hot dusty road from Mongolia myself.

I placed my empty glass on the counter. Ritzi lifted an eyebrow. I nodded. He refilled. The bubbles swirled in the dark liquid and settled. We had not exhausted the subject. It was still afternoon.

The night before we split, Carmen accused me of being attracted to the wife of a friend of mine. We'd been out visiting this couple. They lived on an upper floor of a standard brutalist block with a view of other such blocks, and as evening fell the lighted windows looked like rows of TV screens tuned to the same show. Our hosts had queued with other young couples in the open-plan area of a bank to outline their credit requirements, and had as a result succeeded in jamming a lot of stuff under their low ceiling. It was mostly from Ikea, which had landed on the edge of town some years before like a giant spacecraft from another civilisation.

Carmen made the accusation, or bitter observation, in the street, as we were going home. I waved down a cab and we got in. We said nothing for the duration of the ride. The charge detonated at home as we were removing our shoes in the hall. The fight wore on through hours of darkness side by side in bed.

Once these sessions started, I could find no way to end them. Every word I spoke would turn out to be incriminatory, provocative and combustible. Afterwards, I could never remember exactly what was said. These fights drew on another register of utterance, slick and darting, and when she'd demand I explain what I'd meant two comments back or two days before, I never had a clue—a hydra nightmare where you faced the monster bravely and decapitated it while mutant versions multiplied in the shadows.

Months before, burned out, argued out, I told her if she didn't shut up I'd strangle her and, in a moment of high dramatic vindication that made me detest her, she sat bolt upright and turned on the bedside light. I had said the unsayable, I had threatened her with physical violence, which was proof of my underlying aggression. The light was above my head and the lecture continued, but you would have needed a degree in clinical psychology to follow it. She'd veer off into these jargonised loony tangents, delivering horseshit fabrications as though they were the incontrovertible truths of the social sciences. It made no sense to ask if she believed her own rhetoric—the possibility, let's say, that my smouldering patriarchal rage could drive me to asphyxiate her. It was thrilling enough for her to articulate such things, to aggressively turn up the heat even as she posited her feminine vulnerability. She had proven on a number of occasions that my behaviour was 'abusive' and by the end of each inquisition I was so worn out the verdict seemed to stand.

Still, I regretted telling Carmen I would throttle her, and swore to her I'd never say it again. And I never did.

But I sometimes thought it, on those occasions late at night when I was so tired I could no longer formulate a coherent sentence, and she was in full righteous flow, and I would beg her to stop talking.

Please, Carmen, I would say. Please stop.

One night, several months before we split, I was leaning against the bar in Ritzi's. Carmen was there too, a touch of class against the background grunge, and Ritzi was posing me a riddle:

'What's the hole in a man's ass called? An anus, right?' 'Right'.

'So what's the hole in a woman's ass called?'

'What?'

'A bonus.'

We laughed, then laughed at each other laughing, and when it seemed to be over Ritzi looked at me and said *bonus* and it started again.

But Carmen wasn't laughing. With a stiff smile she asked Ritzi if the joke meant the male was the anatomical standard and the female a deviation?

Or that a woman was just a series of holes for the male to plug?

'Come on, Carmen,' I said. 'It's a joke...'

'Like Freud said, where there's a joke, there's a problem. It's a joke about women.'

Ritzi shrugged.

'I do have a problem with women,' said Ritzi. 'I don't have much luck with them and I suppose it's my own fault.'

Carmen was for a moment disarmed by Ritzi's lack of swagger. Then he asked her:

'How many feminists does it take to change a lightbulb?' 'I don't know.'

'One. And it isn't funny.'

Carmen smiled, but she did not laugh.

After that, I only saw Ritzi without Carmen. So almost never. I was busy with my job at the TV station and helping Carmen with her philanthropy. And I had my housework too.

We argued through the night, the final one we spent together, until we lay on our backs, exhausted, looking at the ceiling. At about four o'clock in the morning Carmen said to me, her voice now steady:

'What would happen if I got pregnant? You don't want to have children with me, do you?'

I saw how neat it had just become.

'No. I can't say I do.'

It's a long journey from the first night of passion to the first sleepless

night arguing about how to raise the kids, as some wise man once put it. At least we would get to skip the bit with the kids.

The sun was coming up, illuminating the walls.

The apartment was no longer mine. It would have been unreasonable to ask her move all that stuff. Her shoes alone—overflowing from their alcove, poking out from under the bed, invading the bookshelf, lined up on top of the wardrobe—would have needed a removal crew. A brief exchange followed, concerning practicalities.

And still, it tore me up, standing in the bedroom that final morning, the small backpack open on the bed, looking at all her junk. Our life together, our love, had got terribly wrapped up in it.

I waited until after eleven so as not to wake Ritzi too early then climbed the dirty stairwell, past walls of flaking plaster and windows that were either cracked or broken. He opened the door in the shorts and baggy t-shirt he'd slept in. It was a one-room attic apartment with a kitchen nook with a counter and a stool. There was a little sofa and an oval formica-top coffee table, a tall lamp with a lopsided dusty fabric shade and a director's chair by the porthole window. The floor was unvarnished boards, covered with a patina of grime. A narrow mattress with a knot of bedding lay against one wall and beside the mattress was an acoustic guitar and an electric bass connected to a speaker. The surfaces—the tables, the kitchen counter, the top of the speaker and much of the floor—were invisible beneath papers, books, magazines, plastic bags, jars, empty food containers, plates and bowls and cups and other items. He had been breakfasting on crackers with peanut butter and strawberry jam. A joint was rolled and waiting in the ashtray. I rinsed out a cup and helped myself to coffee and hacked at sugar caked at the bottom of the bowl. I transferred some books and magazines from the sofa to the oval table.

I sat down on the lumpy sofa, told Ritzi I was homeless. He lit up and puffed smoke. 'What happened?'

'It went sour.'

'Overnight?'

'Gradually. Then suddenly.'

'But that was your apartment.'

'I couldn't kick her out. She has no money. I threw in my job too.'

'Huh?'

'So I don't end up paying her rent. Or going back because I miss my

apartment.' 'Smart.'

'And she said I had a thing for Dia.'

Dia was my friend's wife. The couple Carmen and I had visited the night before.

'That's crazy,' said Ritzi.

'No it isn't. It's true.'

Ritzi said nothing for a moment. He was embarrassed.

'Want some?'

'No.'

He took a few drags then stood up and went over to his bass and flicked

a switch that made the speaker boom then hum. He put on his headphones and plucked his strings silently and swayed to inaudible rhythm. I lay on the couch, legs hanging over the armrest, and dozed off.

When I woke, he was gone.

My first task was to clean the toilet so I could enter without choking. Then I dealt with the empty blue-furred jam and peanut butter jars and other remains of food.

In the evening, after dark, I went round to the bar.

That night, after closing the bar, we went back to the attic together and I sat on the sofa and smoked my first joint in quite some time and the dozy medium-sized objects of the material world stepped forward and presented themselves with the clarity of the bed and chair in Van Gogh's bedroom in Arles.

Ritzi, sitting at the porthole window in the director's chair, gripping a little pair of binoculars, whispered urgently:

'Hey! Turn off the light'.

I flicked the switch on the lamp. We were in total darkness.

'Why the whispers, Ritzi?' I asked, in a normal voice.

The little pair of binoculars was clamped to his eyes. He spoke in a low,

throaty voice: 'She gets in around this time, walks around a bit, strips off. Perfect body, long hair, doesn't have a boyfriend. Walks around like that.'

I asked to take a look. I went over and took the binoculars from Ritzi. Across the street, one floor below and slightly to the right, was a lighted window.

'Here,' said Ritzi, surrendering his chair. 'You have to sit down and keep it steady or it shakes about too much.'

I sat and looked through and found the lighted window. An empty room. 'Nothing,' I said, almost whispering in the furtive darkness.

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'Wait.'

I waited. Then she walked past the window, too suddenly. The angle was wrong and the window too small. She was gone before I could focus.

She appeared a second time. She was a young, slender woman and her hair was tied in a pony-tail. Beyond that, I could not tell much, and she was gone again. The lenses were tricky. Ritzi explained: first you shut your right eye and focused the left, then you closed your left and fine-focused the right. The waiting was a big part of it.

But when the girl did at last appear again she was for one luminous moment vast before my eyes as though projected upon a giant screen and I instinctively held my breath to fix my trembling vision as she untied her hair and shook it out. My eyes were so tired by then I did not know what I saw, only that it was a revelation from another world. There across the street, a girl who worked in a bar or a club, who came home late at night, alone, tired, and removed her makeup.

I passed the binoculars to Ritzi and went back to the couch and sat there in the dark, drinking. Occasionally Ritzi would say something.

'It's happening. She's undressing now.'

And finally: 'That's it. It's over. She's turned the light off.'

I pulled the cord on the lamp. Now lit, the air seemed hazy, as though

blurred with glowing reddish dust. Ritzi stood up and stretched. His eyes were bloodshot and the binoculars had imprinted little semicircles beneath each swollen lid. He looked stunned. Like a creature habituated to gloomy depths—underwater or underground—that had been hauled to the surface.

‘Ritz, I’ve got to introduce you to some nice women.’

‘You know some?’

I did indeed know some women, really fine people in fact, and some of

them were single. But when I thought about them some more, and thought of Ritzi, it no longer looked like a great idea.

In fact, none of my ideas looked like good ideas. I knew Carmen no better than Ritzi knew the girl across the road. She did say all that crazy stuff when she argued late at night, but really she was trying to get at something else. She was trying to get to the fact that I did not love her the way she wanted me to, the way I should have. And I pretended I did not hear what

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she was saying, and that made me a liar. What I really loved was my own space, where I did not have to lie.

Now I had all the space I needed. I put a blanket on the ground and lay awake in the dark, eyes open, listening to the roaches clicking and scratching among the papers and upon the dusty wooden floorboards. They were angry because the peanut-butter jars were gone. I thought of them walking on me as I slept. I would have to get some spray in the morning.

I lay there on my back for what felt like a very long time, listening. Then I fell asleep very late in the only city I had ever lived in, and in my dreams found myself living in another city. I believed in its reality while I dreamed, and did not remember the city where I slept. I had a whole past life in my dream city, and complex memories of my time there, of dream- friends and dream-obligations. I had a task to complete, and a destination, and recalled the streets and the interiors of the buildings as I went, endless interconnecting rooms and hallways, and stairways to be climbed, new but familiar, as it is when you remind yourself of your own life, which forever runs away from you even as you live it.

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Philip Ó Ceallaigh has published two collections of stories: *Notes from a Turkish Whorehouse* (2006), which won the Glen Dimplex New Writers Award for fiction, and *The Pleasant Light of Day* (2009). Both books were shortlisted for the Frank O’Connor International Short Story Award. Philip won the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature in 2006. He edited the anthology, *Sharp Sticks, Driven Nails*, for the Stinging Fly Press in 2010. He lives in Bucharest. *Trouble*, his third short- story collection will be published by The Stinging Fly Press later this year.