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SUNDAY WORLD
ENTER PRIZES AND WINNERS

IN the hierarchy of selflessness, as donors of love, they stand alone, these blessed, beautiful creatures we call mothers.

They bear us for nine months, but, in truth, the umbilical cord is indelible, an eternal conduit transporting dotting lifeblood from one beating heart to the other.

Until her last breath a mother carries her child's burdens. She rejoices in our triumphs, frets when our lives veer off course, sacrifices herself to allow us to prosper.

Her life is a love song to the imperfect creature she introduced to the world.

Those pictures of an elderly mother waving through a window reimagined as an emotional Berlin Wall at the grandchildren she loves more than life but cannot touch or hold, is lockdown's defining picture, Covid's devastating curse.

A mother is a credit union from which we borrow wisdom, knowledge, assistance and time, safe in the knowledge that we are never required to repay the debt.

The greatest architect to have walked the world could not design such magnificence.

Her soul is a palace of warmth, the immersion of her tolerance never switched off. Each room of her being is insulated with benevolence, centrally heated by her smile. She sustains us from the pantry of her humanity.

From a bottomless well she ladles the aqua of her sensitivity.

There is nothing on this earth — nothing — as gorgeous as a mother's embrace.

Mothers were photoshopping long before Photoshop existed: Her mind's eye smoothed our many imperfections, cropped out our endless kinks; she alone saw us as picture perfect.

They bleed affection and tenderness these creatures of Venus, their inexhaustible loyalty a salve to the corrosive fluids — rejection, loss, fear, uncertainty, anxiety, isolation — a pitiless, acidic world too frequently fires our way.

EMBRACE

At the supreme court of motherhood there is no judgement: Just a verdict of boundless indulgence for repeat offenders.

Call her Ma, Mam, Mum, Mammy...she is our emotional anaesthetic against life's most painful trials.

The pulverising trauma of a mother's loss will today accompany many of us to the graveyard where she rests.

We will speak to her and strain our ears, hoping her response might somehow be carried on the wind.

Travel restrictions mean that, for many others, the priceless Mother's Day embrace must be virtual.

In these dislocating times their framed, smiling portraits on the mantelpiece have the power to both brighten a day and induce a tear from the deepest part of our being.

We think of her, singing along to her Matt Monroe or Fureys or Nathan Carter records, lost in the music, the lyrics maybe carrying her across the years to her own youth.

We see her in a favourite dress, the sparkle in her eyes reflected in the little trinkets she wore like a second skin.

Or diverting to the TV pages of her daily paper, concerned some witless programme schedulers might have inflicted the terrible calamity of scheduling Morse and Mrs Marple to run simultaneously on a Tuesday night.

We think of how her face reddened like a sunburnt tourist after even a thimble of beer or wine.

We see her tending to the garden she so loved, the lawnmower or hedge-clippers like a backing vocalist to her singing voice.

We think of her at the funeral of her own husband, how she found the strength — as these incredible women do — to walk into a dark tomorrow without the light of her life.

We remember how it was when, as adults

“Call her Ma, Mam, Mum, Mammy... she is our emotional anaesthetic against life's most painful trials...”

HUGS: Roy with his mother Betty and father Aidan, inset below



There is nothing on this earth - *nothing* - as gorgeous as a mother's embrace...

ON THIS MOTHER'S DAY, TELL HER YOU LOVE HER

ourselves, we would visit, the weight falling from her world as she put the kettle on. And how, somehow, within ten minutes, that cuppa would morph into a bowl of stew, a corned-beef sandwich, a chicken curry and a mountain of Custard Creams that stretched higher than Mount Everest itself.

We remember her appearing at the school gates on Friday lunchtime, a chocolate bar her passport to pour a few extra seconds of love into our world.

We remember her during Italia '90 or during Dublin's fallow days, fleeing to the back garden, unable to watch, offering novenas that God's light might guide Packie or Jayo.

We remember how she would talk of her

own mother, and our understanding, as she regaled us with happy stories from her own childhood days of little, of that handsome phrase about the apple not falling far from the tree.

SMILING

What images will accompany you as you sign a greeting card or buy flowers today?

When I think of my mother, I see her dancing, singing, smiling, her face drenched with joy.

I see her before a dessert of sherry trifle, each sugary, cholesterol and calorie-laden spoonful sending a lovely rush of delighted dopamine signals to her brain.

I see her years of sacrifice so that her son might shine.

Most of all I see love in human form.

The world feels like a lump of nothing right now, the broken vaccination promises maddening, the absence of any Official Ireland vision on how to break out of this Covid prison ever more intolerable.

But there is one simple act which, for a little while, is guaranteed to lift us all out of slumps and slouches.

On this special day, make a point of telling your Mam you love her.

In decades to come that declaration will shine on as the crown jewel of all your memories.

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SUNDAY WORLD
LITERARY PROGRAMS PAGES

PERCHED on a park bench last Friday afternoon, wrapped in an ermine blanket of cheering April sun, a small miracle visited and rendered the world a lighter, brighter place.

Happiness came and sang me a song.

A tiny robin, his red breast palpitating as he whistled his joyous symphony, sat next to me.

Unafraid, sociable, curious, basking in the glow of a gorgeous late-spring day, he offered his friendship.

I accepted it as the most extraordinary gift.

His music could not have been any more soothing or jubilant or tuneful had it been conceived in the concert hall of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's brilliant mind.

It was a soaring celebration of being alive.

A born showman, this diminutive Pavarotti trilled and quavered, the entire dimensions of the universe reduced to his ecstatic chorus of avian evensong.

He stared me in the eye, arching his neck gymnastically, his tiny, pinprick headlights demanding my attention.

It was as if he was talking to me, lifting me from a slump, offering a spellbinding lesson in nature's magnificence.

His complimentary concert endured for fully ten minutes. This delicate, beautiful creature sat no more than four feet away and pumped euphoria into the world.

Free of charge, he donated his voice and his companionship.

Palmerston Park is perched on a lovely spit of land where Rathmines, Dartry and Ranelagh intersect.

Beyond the avenue of mature, Himalayan oaks, the red-brick mansions are homes to stately, old-money wealth.

But this minuscule handful of winged contentment was worth more than the entire opulent terrace.

Craving his audience's approval, his entire being pulsed and shivered with the effort he poured into his ode to being animate. It may read like the daftest or most pretentious line: But it was a strangely spiritual, life-affirming experience.

Gruel

This past year has padlocked so many doors, extracted the amusement and spontaneity that is the vitamin and lifeblood of breathing.

A suffocating nanny-state gospel is force-fed to a weary nation like a bottomless, long past its sell-by date bowl of flavourless gruel.

It can feel as if certain individuals, bewitched by their new-found Covid-created celebrity, will do whatever it takes to retain control over every aspect of our lives.

I have never felt so hopeless, so trapped, so down.

Among the many nuggets of wisdom to be mined from Joseph O'Connor's magical novel, *Shadowplay*, is

the following: "Tears are the part of grief visible above the water, they are not where the wreckage is done."

Quietly, pitilessly, below the waterline, Covid wreaks its chaos on so many lives.

We all long for familiar consolations. So many waking hours I crave the simple pleasure of a high-stool, a pint settling before me, the soothing, hushed, impromptu jazz of early afternoon public-house conversation cleansing the soul.

Freedom

Life is on hold and our psyches are bruised.

And then, on Friday, this little, fearless rescue ship berthed next to me and winched me to a better place.

His birdsong felt like freedom: A jailbreak from the crushing sameness of another incarcerated hour in lockdown, a liberating, carefree, chorus.

Robins, I discovered later courtesy of an internet search, are shortlived: The record for longevity is held by a ringed bird that survived until its ninth year.

It is as if, knowing their time on stage is so fleeting, they give all of themselves to their uplifting performance art.

Apparently, they are famed for their tameness and my Friday friend was, undeniably, a gregarious ambassador from the feathered kingdom.

As extrovert as Freddie Mercury at Live Aid, an uncontrollable bundle of gyrating charisma.

He had a story to chirp, this minute town-crier, and it was my blessing to be the recipient of his good humour.

I had a terrible column half-written to fill this space.

It was downbeat, angry, depressing. I knew it was awful stuff and searching for inspiration I went for a walk.

And I came to sit on that park bench.

Then, through some heavenly serendipity, a stranger smaller than my fist introduced himself.

Lockdown will more than likely annoy and frustrate me again today and tomorrow and the day after.

But for those few minutes with my new friend, I broke free of the shackles and feasted on the meal of life.

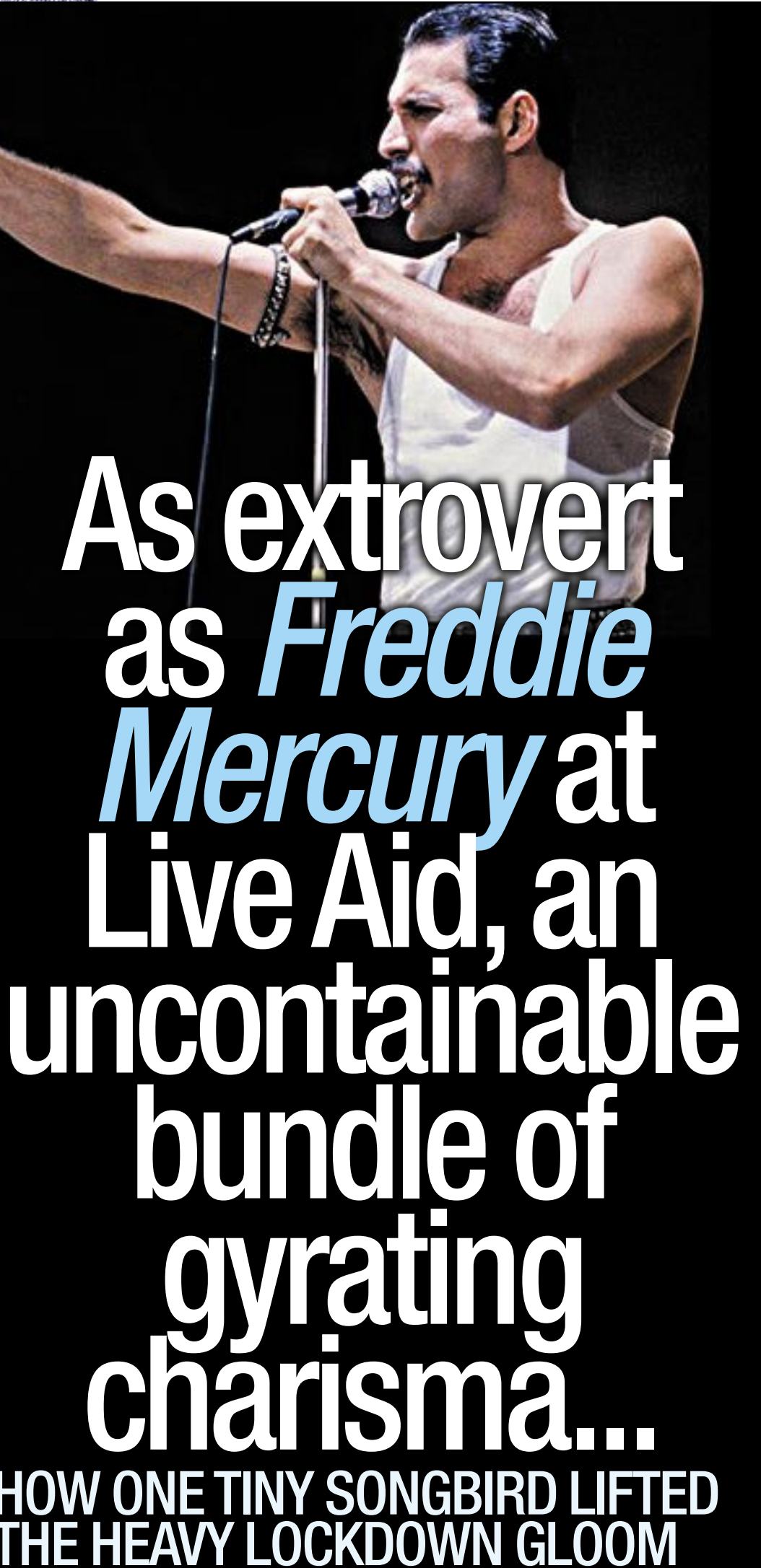
Like the robin, Charles Lindbergh knew the freedom of flight.

All of 94 years ago, an American newspaper columnist described the prevailing lightness of being when it was confirmed that the American aviator had successfully piloted the Spirit of St Louis across the vast Atlantic.

"For a little while the aspect of the world and all its people had magnificently altered. We came out of slumps and slouches. There was more brotherhood in being."

I found that happy space on Friday, propelled to a state of grace by my fearless, feathered Lindbergh.

“So many waking hours I crave the simple pleasure of a high-stool, a pint settling before me, the soothing, hushed, impromptu jazz of early afternoon public-house conversation cleansing the soul”



As extrovert as Freddie Mercury at Live Aid, an uncontrollable bundle of gyrating charisma...
HOW ONE TINY SONGBIRD LIFTED THE HEAVY LOCKDOWN GLOOM

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SUNDAY WORLD
ENTER PRIZES HERE

BREAKING through the silence, voices from a former life fill the empty rooms.

Readying for sale the old family home – the place where we were formed, where we grew, where we became who we are – triggers a rush of recollections. The ache at your core makes it difficult to breathe.

The many of you who have arrived at this slightly overwhelming crossroads in life will understand.

When you are saying goodbye, bricks and mortar can sometimes assume the characteristics of flesh and blood.

Within these walls, the novel of our clan's existence was written in the ink of everyday living.

Dad first strolled across the threshold as a young boy. That was 1937, two years before World War Two began; 21 taoisigh ago.

These few hundred square feet are a storehouse containing the most precious pages of our back catalogue.

In the front room, sitting on the chair that was her throne, I hear my mother, eyes half closed, surrendering to some memory of youth, struggling to hold Finbarr Furey's note as she sings When You Were Sweet Sixteen.

Her smile, undimmed by death, lights up every corner of the place.

I look out the window from where she watched the world go by; her beloved garden overgrown and untidy, the flower beds she tended like children, lifeless and grey.

Guilt colonises every atom of my being: Sorry, Ma, sorry.

Retracing ancient footprints, a rainbow of emotions forms on the skyline of the heart: Sadness, affection, loneliness, joy, gratitude, helplessness, grief, gladness, a dreamy remembering. And, more strongly than any of the others, love.

There is a craving to turn back time, to when this place was as busy and loud as Grand Central Station at rush hour.

Hubbub

The sense is of the vanishing of your own history, of bidding a final farewell to how it used to be.

There is a nagging sense of walking away from something vital to our story.

It is heightened by a jolting realisation: Whoever moves in will erase every last chapter of our parents' lives. The keys to their kingdom will jangle in a stranger's pocket.

If the little terraced palace is ghostly and mute now, evidence of the old hubbub, the endless happy days when it represented the epicentre of the universe, are everywhere.

Coats still hang on their familiar pegs. The kettle that worked so many 14 hour days without

complaining snoozes on a kitchen counter; the fridge magnets, an Atlas of family adventures, map out all those far flung summer weeks.

On a sideboard, the "good China" that only came down on Christmas Day.

The pint glass into which Dad would pour a can of Guinness once The Late Late Show soundtrack erupted looks forlorn and thirsty.

I feel myself welling, grasping for something that is beyond reach.

Each of the dozens of family photos on the walls open a door to a room in a lost world.

Smiling faces at First Communions; a wedding embrace; a dusk toast at some Mediterranean taverna.

Life bursting from every pixel, and yet so many of these happy creatures now sleep in a cemetery field.

Sauntering from room to room is like walking through a museum of your own yesteryear.

Little things touch you most profoundly, gentle whispers from a lost past...

A mother's slippers sitting by her bed, a slightly faded pink, faithfully awaiting feet that will never lodge there again.

Dad's address book, each name triggering a thousand images, a biography of back then.

On a stray page a note to himself, a reminder to drop a suit to a dry cleaner. I wonder if he did.

And, fully 12 years after he fell, the Old Spice aftershave that was his second skin untouched on a bathroom shelf.

I see it there and in a rush of understanding, I grasp why Mam could never part with it.

Earlier I walked down the avenue, bringing the families that filled each house back to life.

Why is it that time chooses to hurtle along the tracks of our days like an out-of-control freight train?

Of the adults that populated the houses on our block through my school days, all but one have slipped away.

Streets that were teeming rivers of mischief – football games, kerbs, beds, ropes swinging from lamp-posts and, every summer, for the two weeks of Wimbledon, reimagined as makeshift tennis courts – are now dry gulches.

PlayStation and TikTok have emptied the outdoors.

In a drawer, folded lovingly, I find a cutting from the Evening Press.

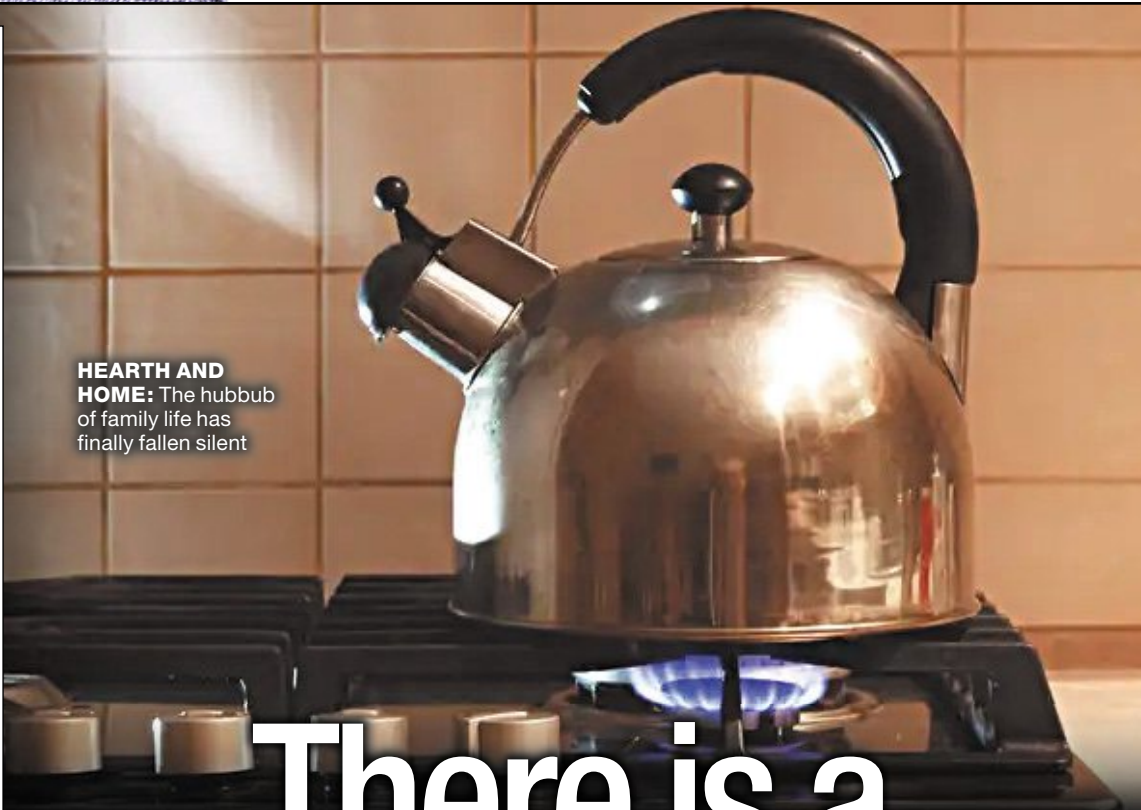
Two young adults, handsome, carefree and mutually smitten, stare into the camera.

It is November 1976 and Mam and Dad can see a life of limitless possibility stretching out before them. But above the fireplace, the old clock hammers out its tick-tock rhythm.

They have left us and soon the deeds to their castle will carry another unknown signature.

I lock the front door and walk away, leaving behind the rooms in which my heart used to beat.

“There is a jolting realisation: Whoever moves in will erase every last chapter of our parents' lives. The keys to their kingdom will jangle in a stranger's pocket”



HEARTH AND HOME: The hubbub of family life has finally fallen silent

There is a craving to turn back time, to when this place was as busy and loud as Grand Central Station at rush hour...

REVISITING THE OLD FAMILY HOME REVIVES A POIGNANT, FADED GLORY