

TO THE YOUNG ONES

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FIRE COMMUNITY BOOKS

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*An address to the youth of Ireland, from the book *The Fire Under the Grass* —
firecommunitybooks.com*

This last word is for you — the young ones. The rest of the book was written in *we*, because the wound belongs to all of us. But this page is a handing-over, and a handing-over needs a *you*. So: you. Sixteen, nineteen, twenty-five. Put the phone face-down a minute. An old fire wants a word.

First, something you are owed, and rarely given: an apology.

We handed you the silence. Not on purpose — nobody ever handed it on on purpose; that was always the way of it — but we handed it on all the same. You were raised by people raised by people raised by people who were taught that speech was danger, and though the danger died before your grandparents were born, the training didn't. You learned the half-second pause before you learned to read. You learned which doors in the family were painted shut before you knew there were doors. And then we sent you out into the loudest, most connected age in human history carrying two hundred years of *say nothing* in your chest — and we wondered, publicly, in the papers, what could possibly be wrong with the young people.

Nothing is wrong with you. Hear that from an elder in print, because you may not hear it often enough out loud: nothing is wrong with you. Something was *handed* to you. They are different things, and the difference is the beginning of your freedom.

Second, something you already know, but may never have seen named as what it is:

The silence found you anyway. It just changed its clothes.

Your grandfather had the shed; you have the scroll. His pub closed at midnight; your feed never closes at all. Look at the old arts

of going-around, the ones this book walked through — and look at your own pocket. The slag became the meme: the feeling, deflected into the joke, shareable now, infinitely. The *grand* became the "all good" text, the thumbs-up on a day you cried. The story became the profile — the self, curated, performed, polished for the room, except the room is now the world and the performance never gets to end. The busy became the scroll, the endless legitimate elsewhere, the door you can walk through without leaving your bed. Every art in the old house has been rebuilt in glass and light, and the new house has one terrible improvement on the old one: it travels with you. Your great-grandfather could at least not bring the pub to bed.

And so you are paying the silence's newest tax, and it is a heavy one: the loneliness that hums under a thousand connections; the anxiety with no name on it, which is what unspoken things become in a body — that was always what they became, ask the generations before you, except no one ever told them either; the friendships wide as the ocean and shallow as the screen; the comparison that never sleeps; the feeling — tell the truth now, you know it — of being seen constantly and known by no one. Your generation talks more about mental health than any generation of Irish people who ever lived, and suffers it worse. That is not a contradiction. That is the clue.

Third — and this must be said at full length, because almost nobody says it to you straight — the conditions you are living under are real, and they are hard, and they are not your imagination and not your softness.

Look at what has actually been laid on your table. You are the first generation on this island in a hundred years raised to expect less

than your parents had — and told, in the same breath, to be grateful. The house: your grandfather, with one wage and no exams, walked into a home of his own; you, with the degree and the two jobs, are in the childhood bedroom at twenty-nine, or handing more than half a wage to a landlord for the privilege of a room, and the word *mortgage* has become a folk tale, a thing that happened to other people in another Ireland. Understand what this book has taught you and read your own life with it: the landlord is back. The oldest dread on the island — *the roof is not yours, it can all be taken, do not put down roots* — the dread we spent a century of land wars burying, has been quietly reinstalled in your generation, wearing a lanyard instead of a top hat, and nobody even had the decency to call it what it is.

And the boat is back. You know it is; your phone knows it; the group chat has gone half to Australian time. The seventh generation's haemorrhage is running again — your class scattering to Sydney and Vancouver and Dubai, the airport goodbyes, the *sure you'll be home at Christmas* — except now the going is dressed up as adventure and lifestyle, so you are not even permitted the honesty of calling it what your great-grandmothers called it, which was loss. It is loss. A country that cannot house its young is holding an American wake in slow motion and playing music over it.

And while the rent took your money, something quieter took your rooms. The places a young person could simply *be*, without paying — the youth club, the parish hall, the pub you could nurse one pint in all evening, the corner you could stand on without being moved along — have been closing, pricing up, shutting down, one by one, all your life. Your generation is told to connect, to reach out, to talk

to someone — into a country that has been steadily demolishing every free room the talking could happen in. Mind that with your own eyes: the gathering places went, and then the gathering went, and then they wondered why you were all on the phone.

And into the middle of your growing-up came the locked years — the thresholds that never got crossed. The debts that never happened, the matches with no crowd, the exams cancelled, the first jobs and first loves and last goodbyes conducted through glass. Every generation before you was walked across the bridges of its youth by some ceremony, however threadbare; a whole cohort of you crossed with no ceremony at all, alone in your rooms, at the exact age the crossing matters most — and were then told to get on with it. This book has taught you what unmarked thresholds do to people. You are carrying some. It has a name now.

And beyond all of it, in your pocket, glowing at one in the morning: the world itself. The burning forests, the wars in real time, the futures priced and repriced nightly — a dose of planetary dread no generation in human history was ever asked to metabolise daily, at seventeen, before school. Your great-grandmother's sorrows were at least the size of a parish. Yours arrive at the scale of the earth, and there is no keening for a glacier, no wake for a future — no form, yet, for the grief you are actually carrying. And in the same pocket, the newest predator: the most sophisticated industry in the history of money, engineering your attention, your comparison, and your loneliness, for profit, with machinery your parents cannot even see — and beside the old bottle, its new colleagues: the powders at every session, the vapes, and the gambling apps that have their hooks in

half the young men of Ireland while the country looks the other way, the way it always looks the other way.

That is the table you were set. So when they call your generation soft — and they do; *snowflake* is only *who do you think you are* with the serial numbers filed off, the installed voice doing its old work on a new target — let this page be the elder that answers back on your behalf: you are not soft. You are carrying the old wounds in new dress, plus several no generation ever carried before, with fewer rooms to carry them in, and you are still here, still funny, still kind, still showing up. That is not softness. By the standards of this book, that is endurance of the first order.

But now the turn, and take it as the respect it is, because only the seen can be told this: the conditions are real — and the silence is still not the answer to them. It never was, not even in the old hard times; the old people built the keen and the wake *in* the hard times, because of them; the fires were never fair-weather technology — they were forged for exactly this weather. And here is what the silence does with hardship that is genuinely collective, and mark it well, because it is the trick of the age: it privatises it. The rent, the boat, the locked years, the dread — these are done *to* your whole generation, together; and the silence takes each of you into a separate room and whispers that it is your failure, your falling behind, your personal flaw dressed as a housing market. Shame is only ever possible in isolation. The moment two of you say the true thing to each other — *I can't afford to live here; I'm barely holding on; I'm frightened of the future* — the shame is exposed as misaddressed mail, and what stands in its place is the older, more dangerous thing: solidarity. The powers that set

your table know this, whether they say it or not. A silent generation endures its conditions. A speaking one changes them.

Because — and here is the next thing, and it is the hard one, said with love — you have the words now, and the words are not enough.

You are the most emotionally literate generation this island has ever raised. You can name an attachment style at the breakfast table. You know the vocabulary your great-grandmothers would have wept to possess. Honour that; it is real progress; it was won for you by people who broke themselves getting it. But watch — you are sharp; you will see it once it's pointed out — watch how the vocabulary can become the newest and cleverest going-around of all. The wound, *described*, is not the wound *gone through*. Naming your anxiety in a post is not the same as shaking with it in front of a friend who stays. A therapy-speak conversation can circle a feeling as gorgeously as your great-uncle's stories ever did, and land on it just as rarely. Awareness is the map. It is a better map than any Irish generation ever had. But nobody was ever carried anywhere by a map.

What carries is the old grammar, and it has not changed in ten thousand years, and it will not change for the algorithm: the true thing, said aloud, with your body in the room, to people who stay, inside an edge, without shame. Voiced. Embodied. Together. Bounded. Unashamed. Your ancestors did it wailing at gravesides and sweating in stone houses and standing at fires on the hills. The forms are yours to invent — they were always reinvented, every generation, that was the life of them — but the five stones are not negotiable, and here is the one your age most needs carved somewhere it can see it: *embodied, together* means in the flesh. In a

room. In a field. At a fire. The screen can call the gathering; it cannot be the gathering. Nothing goes through on the feed. The feed is where things go around.

Next — to the young men in particular, because the tax falls heaviest on you, and the graves say so.

You inherited the hardest strain of the silence, the one bred in the men — say nothing, need nothing, be grand, be gone — and it is killing your friends. You know that it is; most of you have already stood at one of the funerals, and stood there saying *I only saw him Tuesday*, and felt the old machine grinding on with you inside it. So let one thing be said to you plainly, man to man, across the generations, from all the fathers who could never say it: the hard thing was never the silence. Any of us could manage the silence; we managed it for two centuries; it is the easiest thing in the world, and it costs everything. The hard thing — the thing that takes actual nerve, the thing your great-grandfathers fought empires rather than attempt — is the sentence. *I'm not all right*. Said sober, in daylight, to another man, with your own face on. That is the most dangerous act an Irish man can perform, which is exactly why it is yours. Your generation of men will be remembered for one thing or the other: the ones who kept the silence, or the ones who broke it. There is no third generation of men on offer.

And last — the reason this page exists at all: you are not being asked to carry a burden. You are being handed a torch, and you were always going to be the ones, and here is why.

Every turning in the history of every people was made by its young — not because the young are braver, but because they are less

finished. The old have their houses of going-around fully built, mortgage paid, extensions on; asking them to dismantle is asking them to lose everything they know how to do. But you — your walls are only half up. You can still build differently, and what you build, you will hand on, and the ones you hand it to will never know there was another way. That is how cultures actually change: not by argument, but by one generation quietly constructing different rooms.

And you are the freest generation this island has ever raised — free in the one way that matters for this work. Not free of hardship; this page has just spent its longest breath saying otherwise, and it meant every word. But free to *speak*. No empire hangs the loose word now. No cloth takes the child of the girl who tells the truth. No law, no landlord, no pulpit stands between your mouth and the true sentence — for the first time in the whole long story, the silence is defended by nothing. Every generation before you kept it at gunpoint; you are only asked to keep it by habit. And a habit, unlike a rent, can be broken this evening, for free, and the breaking of it is the beginning of everything else — because the conditions on your table will only ever be faced by a generation that has found its voice, and its people, and its fires. Speech is the one door they forgot to lock. Walk through it.

So go first. That is the whole commission. Not a movement, not a hashtag, not permission from anyone — the culture is upstream of you, and you are the current, and the current does not consult the river about the direction. Build the fires: real ones, small ones, a few friends in a field or a yard on the old nights, phones in a box, one

shaped hour where the true thing can be said and met. Learn to hold the edge for each other, and take the holding seriously — an opened person is a sacred trust, and your generation, of all generations, knows what mishandled openness costs. Ask your grandparents the real questions before the library closes; you are the last ones who will ever be able to. Say the sentence to the friend you're worried about, and stay for the answer. Do the first brave thing, and let your crowd see you survive it — because your friends are not waiting to be persuaded out of their silence, they are waiting for proof, and you can be the proof by Friday.

The children on the June bonfires have been keeping the appointment for two hundred years without being told why.

You are why.

The old fires are banked and waiting, and the night is dry, and the hills of this island have stood dark long enough.

Light them.