



## Praise for SAOIRSE

‘Audacious and propulsive, a story that surges with emotional vitality – this is a dazzling novel’

– Colin Walsh, author of *Kala*

‘*Saoirse* is a delicious literary jigsaw, leaving the reader to piece together the memories, paintings and confessions of our eponymous heroine. Beautifully written and enticingly intriguing, Charleen Hurtubise is a shiny new star in the Irish literary firmament’

– Liz Nugent, author of *Strange Sally Diamond*

‘Utterly beautiful with lyrical prose and storytelling, I loved this!’

– Nina Pottell, *Prima*

‘*Saoirse* is utterly absorbing as both a character study and a mystery. Beautifully written, with poignancy and depth, this is one that will stay with me’

– Jo Spain, author of *The Trial*

‘A beautifully wrought, deeply human story of the power of creativity in the face of survival. By turns funny and moving, with an unforgettable cast of characters (with a special mention to Daithí, the Mr Darcy of Donegal) *Saoirse* brims with humanity and hope’

– Louise Nealon, author of *Snowflake*

‘A novel as rich with narrative layers as the visual art of its protagonist, yet limned with trauma, with the consequences of secrecy and silence, and with the hope that can come from true connection and community, *Saoirse* is an audacious act of storytelling’

– Belinda McKeon, author of *Tender* and *Solace*

‘Gripping and emotionally complex, *Saoirse* is a moving portrait of love, heartbreak and the sacrifices one woman makes for the family and life she deserves . . . luminous!’

– Michelle Gallen, author of *Factory Girls*

‘Hurtubise balances grit and tenderness on a high wire of sustained tension’

– Lauren McKenzie, author of *The Couples*





# SAOIRSE

CHARLEEN HURTUBISE





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For Sue



# Saoirse

*(Sear-sha)*

*Irish female name, meaning “freedom”*



# *Part One*





## The Prize

Early October 1999

The front door is open and the full length of Daithí fills the frame. He leans against the doorjamb, soaking in the unexpected heat from the autumn sunshine. The mid-morning brightness splits the surface of the bay into shards of light below the house, dazzling Saoirse for a moment as she pulls the car between the gate piers, past the slate sign Daithí has fastened to the wall. Here, in their remote corner of Donegal, houses have no numbers, only names. *Teach Cuan na Míolta Móra*.

Eloise is slumped in her car seat; she has fallen asleep somewhere along the winding coast road. Saoirse can't bear to think of her youngest daughter's face when the public health nurse cooed, tickled her thighs, and then surprised her with an injection in the arm. The child had jumped at the sting, her bottom lip quivering. Eyes, soft and dark as her father's, filling with tears, looking at Saoirse as though she was the source of the betrayal, her own mother the cause of her now broken heart. She wept inconsolably as the nurse turned to her paperwork while Saoirse gathered the child in her arms, comforted her between sobs.

Saoirse pulls into a patch of shade at the end of the house, barely coming to a stop before reaching for her bag, rummaging for a sketchpad, a receipt—anything she might use to capture this moment, the light on Daithí's face. Something about his position reminds her of the first time she sketched him in the garden at the Byrnes' house. She fishes out a repurposed Altoids tin, prying open its lid, selecting a broken piece of charcoal—she finds an old bill in her bag, turns it over and blocks in the lines of his shoulders, his arms. It is not the first time she has considered painting a series using him as her sole subject, simply titling the exhibition *Daithí*. Add it to the growing canvases of her daughters playing at the sea, climbing the rocks, placing their tiny hands in the crevices of the walls surrounding the house.

Whichever her next series, it will be a happier collection than the one



she is due to install in the Raymond Frank Gallery in Dublin next week. A van collected the canvases days ago. She was happy to see it move off down the road, her *dark period* as she knows it, as though it is all behind her now.

She will follow the paintings up to Dublin in a day or two. Daithí will drop her into Sligo town to catch the train. Fiona, the curator, no longer trying to hide her irritation, is insisting the paintings have a descriptive title at the very least. *Gan anim—without name*—will not suffice.

“They speak for themselves,” Saoirse has argued, borrowing the curator’s own lingo. “You either connect with the work, or you don’t.” But this exhibition is different from all the others that have come before. The smaller galleries allowed her what they saw as the eccentricities of the artist, leaving her to her own devices. She is aware of the scale and prestige of this upcoming exhibition—but what she hadn’t reckoned on was the scope of Fiona’s ambitions, her plans to not only curate the work but also to document Saoirse’s journey, to make a big deal of the trajectory that has brought her to this place most artists will only ever dream of reaching. Her resistance to this success, she fears, will bring its own suspicions.

Now Fiona has requested her sketchbooks to put on display, she will use them to write detailed descriptions for a catalogue in the absence of Saoirse’s cooperation.

“There are no sketchbooks,” Saoirse has lied. But she does, in fact, have books full of drawings, graphic depictions, like untold confessions, events that happened just outside the frame. She keeps them locked in a secret place. When this is all over, and the exhibition is dismantled, Saoirse envisions herself burning the sketchbooks. The past can haunt someone else now, she thinks, and turns her hand back to this drawing of Daithí, back to the things in her new life which can be named.

*Leah on the Rocks.*

*Daithí on the Threshold.*

She breathes him in as she works.

Every happiness that is hers is right here, in this corner of the world. The slowness of the day, the blue sky rising tall above the house—a house Daithí has built for her and their two girls—Eloise, their baby, will sleep here, in the shade, windows open to the sea air. Her older sister, Leah, builds a fairy castle on the rock beside the sea wall, draping seaweed for

a bed; shells become the characters of her invented world. She stops now to wave to her mother pulling into the driveway.

Saoirse plans to go immediately to her studio; she will make larger sketches of this scene, of this man, and then she will turn to the canvas already drying on the easel—the girls barefoot amongst the rock pools. He will find her here—*Mind your sister*, he will say to Leah. He will come in and close the door, she won't need much coaxing away from the easel where she is painting them into this corner of the world. The two of them, imposters in a country that reminds them, at many turns, they do not belong. But here—they are four now. They are one.

Daithí unfolds his body in the doorway, crosses his arms. And as he does it dawns on her—he is still home. He is home when he should long be at work, he should have Leah dropped at school by now—that was the plan while she took Eloise for her appointment. But here is Leah, in her uniform playing at the rock, here he is in the doorway, waiting for her return. She is unwinding the window, opening the door. A recognition passes through her. She feels the warmth leaving her body. *He knows.*

“What?” she asks. “What is it?” She tries to keep the panic from her voice. It puzzles her, then, when he smiles, in spite of this strange look in his eyes.

“Tell me!” she demands. She wants to rush to him, shake him, make him quickly say the thing she has dreaded hearing all these many years.

His voice is low, almost a whisper.

“Your man rang this morning.”

She feels the blood draining from her face.

“I told him you weren't home. He left a message.” He comes across the gravel to her, takes her forearms in hands so large and comforting they could hardly belong to a human. It is then he sees the fear on her face.

“No, love. It's all right. There's nothing to worry about,” he reassures her, caressing her, trying to unseat the panic. “It's good news. Hey. Look at me.” He takes her face in his hands. “You've won a prize. That's it. That's all.”

Panic gives way to relief. She is rattled by her own sloppiness. If she is not careful, she will give herself away. She moves out of his grasp so he will not feel her shake, busying herself with lifting the groceries from the boot.

Daithí opens the door and unbuckles a still-sleeping Eloise, lifting her out of her car seat. She shifts and settles onto his shoulder, he smells the back of her neck, gives the folds of fat a soft kiss. He watches Saoirse, puzzled by her reaction.

“It’s good, babe,” he says. “It’s all good.”

“Okay,” she says flatly. “You should get Leah to school.”

“That’ll wait. She’s happy for you. Come inside,” he says gently. “I’ll make a cup of tea. I’ve the details written down—”

“Give me a minute.” Her Midwestern accent comes through in full force, the American accent is not something she can turn on or off. She finds, when she is happiest, she has the song of the language, fragments of someone who has lived in this part of the world forever. Now, she hears the syllables fall dead and flat, and fearful.

“I’ve to put these away.” She nods toward the shopping bags, the handles cutting into her palm. She can’t afford any further attention brought to this exhibition. She turns to the sea, breathing, convincing her body it is not time to flee.

When she turns around, he is watching her, raising a question with the twist of a brow, a shake of his head. She knows he will ask questions later, but for now, for the children, he will play this out, and she will play along, too, feigning delight when he gives her the details of this latest prize she has won.

“You coming?” he calls to Leah out on the wall. “Remember?”

“Oh yes,” Leah shouts, abandoning her castle, suddenly remembering something important she must do. “Dotty took a phone call, Mammy—”

She is jumping off the rocks, running toward Saoirse.

Eloise is waking, lifting her cheek from Daithí’s shoulder. She sees her big sister and startles into full excitement, kicking at Daithí, rocking with glee. *Dotty*, Leah calls him. *My girls* he says and treats them as though they are both his own, even though Leah must be driven to Dublin every other weekend, to keep her bargain with Paul.

She watches the three of them walk toward the house, Leah has climbed onto his shoes and wraps her arms around his waist, he hoists his legs stiffly, giving her a lift, balancing the baby in his arms. They move as though they are one entity.

Saoirse places the bags down on the gravel and steps beyond the shel-



ter of the house, the wind off the sea catches on her inhale. She can't put this off any longer. She has to tell him and tell him soon.

"Let's have chocolate biscuits!" Leah calls up to Daithí.

"No way," Daithí tells her. "Biccies are for ordinary mummies. Clever mummies must have cake."

Saoirse smiles.

Leah pokes her head out around his legs, her eyes wild with excitement. She beckons to her mother.

"Come on, Mammy, something good is happening."

### **IRISH ARTIST WINS £50,000 ART AWARD**

*Irish Times*, 14 October 1999

Donegal-based artist Saoirse Byrne has become the first Irish woman to win the prestigious Margaret Dowling Art Prize which recognises emerging artists around the world. The aim of the prize is to discover and financially support promising artists, allowing time and space to focus on their work. Byrne's first solo exhibition opened in 1996 at the David Davis Gallery, and since then the artist has gone from strength to strength, holding several solo exhibitions across the country, including in Cork, Limerick and Donegal. Her work is featured from next month at the Raymond Frank Gallery in Dublin and runs through into the millennium in an exhibition entitled *Lost Was Found*.

The Margaret Dowling Art Prize was established in 1984 and there is no submission process. Artists are unaware their work is being considered for the life-changing prize.

The judges were impressed by Byrne's current exhibition featuring a collection of eight pieces, an array of oil paintings and other mediums capturing everyday objects. Appearing as mundane, simple objects at first: a vial of lavender, lines on a road. They exhibit sculptural qualities, an intensity of colour, while the use of light adds both a weight and a lightness, dependent on the directional aspect. The judges describe the work as having 'a complex directional gaze,' remarking on 'the tension this creates, an uncertainty, as though the object isn't the subject at all, that it is perhaps only a clue to something imminent and unsettling awaiting just outside the frame'.

Byrne's paintings first came to the attention of critics at the



Annual Exhibition of the Irish Academy of Arts where she won the Eugenia Lawrence Scholarship. From here she went on to continue her studies and earned a BA in Fine Art.

Ms. Byrne has established a reputation for maintaining a deliberate silence about her work and is generally unavailable for interview or comment.

# Flight

Early September 1990

If her heart wasn't already beating in her throat as she boards the plane, her blood pressure spikes when she notices a man sitting in the seat she has been assigned. She doesn't trust herself to speak, to interact with another human, to tell him to move. Instead, she stands in the aisle, double-checks her boarding pass, compares the number and letter with the decals on the overhead bins.

"This you?" the man asks, rising halfway from his seat.

She nods, grateful she doesn't have to engage.

"Sorry, sorry," he apologises. He is compact, dressed tidily, a white shirt with sleeves pulled up to his elbows. His sport coat hangs on the button knob in front of his seat. He stands out into the aisle, making space for her to pass.

"Take the window seat." He gestures, as though his act is somehow what she desires, a sacrifice he will make for her, a stranger. She moves past him, pulling her overnight bag into the seat with her.

"Will I put that up above?" The man gestures to take it.

He has the same Irish accent as her friend, Sasa.

"No, you're fine," she tells him.

She wishes she had used the bathroom before she sat down but it feels too late now since she has settled in her seat, crushing her overnight bag into the space at her feet. She is still clutching the stolen passport, amazed by the fact that she wasn't stopped. She opens it to the middle pages, placing her boarding card inside when she notices the folded piece of paper, her original birth certificate, bearing her real identity. She should have destroyed it in the bathroom before she went through security.

"I hate to tell you, but they're going to ask you to stow that," the man points out. "Give it a shove, under the seat."

She resents that he feels he should instruct her on a basic point of

flight etiquette—but the bag is too tight for where she is stowing it and the air hosts are cross-checking the doors. He extends his hand with a patient smile, waiting to take it. She gives it over and he arranges it in the overhead bin for her. He folds his sport coat and lays it beside her bag. She wedges her documents into the seat pocket in front of her and turns to watch the vehicles on the tarmac.

An air host moves down the row, banging overhead bins closed as he passes.

“Seatbelts,” he says and continues moving down the plane.

For all the stupid things she has ever done, this is the biggest disaster she has engineered. She wonders if there is still a chance to slip off without drawing further attention to herself, attention to her mistake, to the crime she is committing by boarding a plane under a false identity. Is *this* a felony? she wonders. She will add it to her many others. This can’t be any worse than everything else that has come before. Once she disembarks into this unknown country, presents herself as Sarah Walsh, the woman on the stolen passport, there is no turning back. So far, she has gotten away with it, the similarities are there. Everyone had noticed how much they looked alike. Still, she lets her long dark hair fall around the lines of her face, covering her ears, so there is less to compare.

The man beside her clears his throat.

“First flight?”

“Mmm,” she says coldly.

“Paul,” he says, stretching his hand out to shake. Tiny lines show around his eyes when he smiles. She looks at his hand but doesn’t take it. He pulls it back and keeps talking as though he hasn’t noticed her slight. “Or Pól. Some people call me the Irish version of my name.”

He launches into an explanation about some language he is allowed to use, whether it is on his passport or not. Something about the English and colonialism, and his birthrights as an Irishman. She has stopped listening. She is staring at the dark hairs covering his arms to his wrist, examining his clean fingernails, neatly manicured, noticing his nervous manner, the way he is talking with his hands.

“But call me Paul,” he says decisively. “Keep things simple.”

She wishes she had bought a book in the airport, to fend off conversation.



“You have a name?” he asks, eyeing the seat pocket where she has stashed her Irish passport.

“Sarah,” she tells him, firmer than she intended.

“Sorry,” he says. Settling back into his seat. “You sound more American than Irish.”

“Long story.”

He looks at his watch. “We’ve roughly five hours, forty-nine minutes. Go.”

She smiles despite herself, quickly concealing it.

“Let me guess, rather.”

“Please don’t.”

“You’re not from Boston.”

“Hmm.” She is noncommittal.

“But your mother is Irish. Your father is American born.”

“You’re a psychic,” she says dryly.

The plane lurches and pulls away from the stand. Her hands sweat. She is relieved to see Paul lifting a book from his seat pocket.

The thrust of takeoff pushes her back into the seat, she watches the ground leave them, she cannot pull back from this now. The world grows small below, ships in the harbour shrinking to tiny game pieces. They head out over Massachusetts Bay, over the Atlantic, up into a bank of clouds.

*Sarah Walsh. Born in Ireland. Twenty years old on the seventeenth day of . . .* She chants this information, though she has drilled herself so many times it is seared in her memory. By the time the captain’s voice fills the cabin they are in Canadian airspace, though all she can see is a blanket of clouds, a world turned over on itself. She imagines her sister, Léa, somewhere below, somewhere safe—and she knows she must block out those last moments—the way she laid her on the back seat of the car, knowing the next face her sister would see would belong to a stranger. She must train her thoughts away, think of her own survival. She rolls up her sweatshirt, places it in the window, resting her head on the ledge.

SARAH IS STARTLED AWAKE BY a vigorous shaking. She sits up and clutches the armrest.

“Nothing to worry about,” Paul reassures her. “Just a little turbulence.”

The plane gives another shimmy, and a slight drop like they’ve sailed



over a speed bump, but then returns to a smooth stream, as though they are not even moving. She stretches and looks around. The cabin has darkened. Someone has thrown a blanket over her knees.

Paul points to the meal placed on the lowered tray of the empty seat between them, the wrapper still on.

“Chicken,” he says. “Sorry. It’s gone cold. I didn’t want to wake you.”

She feels the depth of her sleep in the knots in her neck.

“Thank you.”

“Will I get them to warm it?”

“It’s fine,” she tells him, pulling back the foil. She can’t remember her last meal. She tries not to eat too quickly, not to give her hunger away.

“So, what about you?” she asks.

He looks up, pleasantly surprised she is initiating conversation.

“What about me?”

“What brought you to Boston?”

“I study medicine.” He presses his lips together, as though humbled by his own revelation.

She acknowledges his remark with a lift of her eyebrow.

“Not impressed?” he asks.

“Should I be?”

He folds his arms, amused.

“Definitely not. No.”

“Don’t they teach medicine in Ireland?”

“Yes, of course. I was on a clinical placement. I hoped to gain a fellowship, stay in Boston a little while longer.”

“Nice,” she says, uninterested.

He scrunches up his nose.

“Well, not nice. I didn’t get the fellowship.”

She registers his disappointment.

“Sorry.”

“Ah, sure.” He tries to brush it off, without success. “It’s a pity. Both my father and brother got it in their time. I thought it was a legacy, a sure thing. But—that’s the way.”

Two small bottles of red wine sit on his tray, he tilts them toward her.

“Anyhow, I grabbed us a drink. To celebrate my failure.”

“Very thoughtful of you,” she jokes.

He unscrews a bottle and pours the contents into the plastic cups.



She hesitates, deciding if it will help her focus or hinder her nerves. He notices and pulls the bottle back. Squinting, he measures her up. “What age are you?”

“Old enough.”

Was it only a few weeks ago she had sat up late into the night with her Irish friend Sarah—Sarah Walsh, or “Sasa” as everyone called her—a childhood mispronunciation that had stuck and morphed into something sounding close to *Sasha*. It hadn’t been as much of a celebration as a goodbye. She had been devastated her new friend had decided to leave Boston and follow a boyfriend down to Florida. Florida wasn’t a place Sarah was willing to go, ever again. It was on this night she had glimpsed Sasa’s passport—and the possibility of escaping from this nightmare that had become her reality.

Paul is waiting for an answer.

“I’m twenty,” Sarah lies.

“Ah bless,” he says, pouring the rest of the second bottle into her cup. “Somewhere in the world, you are legal to drink. *Sláinte*,” he says. They tip glasses and she sips the wine. It is warming and settles her straight away, and it also reminds her she must use the bathroom. She excuses herself. It feels good to stand and stretch her legs and move around a bit. The wine has already gone to her head. When she is finished, she washes her hands and splashes her face with water. Looking in the mirror, she tells herself to be cautious about the easy chatter between herself and Paul. When she returns to her seat, he has refilled her glass.

They have each finished three small bottles by the time the lights are turned down in the cabin and he has snagged two more from the galley, for later, he says. The alcohol takes hold of her quickly, loosens her up. Makes her forget. She thinks she should drink more often.

“What’s your plan?” he asks.

“No plans, really.”

“Visiting relations?”

“I was born in Ireland, but we left when I was a baby.” The lies come much easier with a few drinks.

“I guess that makes you as Irish as the rest of us.”

“I guess.”

“Will you visit your mother’s people?”

Sarah shakes her head.



“She hasn’t kept in touch with anyone.”

“So, you’re coming back to discover your roots.” The way he puts an emphasis on roots annoys her.

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Seeking your heritage.”

“Maybe.” The audacity of him makes her laugh through her annoyance.

“Or running away.”

She stops laughing.

“We are all running from something,” he says.

She clears her tray to the middle seat between them, puts her seat back.

“What are you running from?” she asks.

He smirks.

“Nothing really. Success, I guess. Maybe failure, rather. I became engaged in America. To an Irish-American girl. My mother is furious.”

“She doesn’t like her?”

“She hasn’t met her.”

“Why is she furious?”

“My mother likes things to go a particular way. Her way. I’m to focus on my studies, gain prestigious fellowships, and not marry American girls. It doesn’t matter now. We broke it off.”

“Sorry to hear.”

“Yeah, well. My mother will be delighted.”

“You haven’t told her yet?”

“No. I’ll tell her in person, I suppose.”

“Aren’t you upset?” Sarah asks, turning to face him fully, interested in what people with normal lives feel when things go wrong. She thinks of Eddie. Then tries to erase him just as quickly.

“Ah, she wasn’t for me, I suppose. You know what they say—”

“Not really.”

“What’s for you, won’t pass you by.”

“I hadn’t heard that before.” She thinks of the things that eluded her and her sister. Like parents who looked after them, kept them from danger. The basics. She isn’t sure she believes in his saying.

“Well, no matter, I’m expected to become a doctor. That is the obligation and that is the expectation I shall fulfil. It would have been handy



to get the fellowship, but it won't deter me." He sits up tall and puts on a brave face. "Cheers, anyway." And he downs the last of his drink.

"Well, I'm sorry it didn't work out for you," she says. For a moment, she genuinely feels for him. There is something about his demeanour, a glint of charm perhaps, that moves her—or is it the wine?

"I loved America. The people, the lifestyle. Especially if you make money. And that is one thing about medicine. I'll make money."

"Hmm," she says. "A doctor. I am impressed now that you mention it."

"Works every time," he jokes.

He puts his head back on the seat and smiles.

She is sorry when she hears his soft breathing, once he has fallen asleep. She is on her own then, with her thoughts, over the dark Atlantic, flying into the unknown.

