Mary O'Donoghue
from *Motocross*

Our mother has started to smoke Rothman's, which are usually men's, and I nick one of them every so often. They are manstrong, and bitter as smoke that's been held in someone else's mouth for a long time. Smoking them makes me feel like one of those women that play the slot machines. The arcade is a salmon-pink hulk of a building, like a hospital without windows, and I wish that the sea would take it.

I am twelve. I drag Eamonn around after me, giving our mother and father time to have their drinks and fish and chips in the bar that nestles beneath the Point like a box held under an arm. I see two small girls trying to pull their father away from the arcade games, one clasped to each wrist. But he stays there like a tree, stock-still, hardly aware that his daughters are hanging onto him. For one awful second, I think that he's going to shake them off, like he doesn't know them, and they'll start crying. I haul Eamonn closer to me. He's already started bumping into people and grunting hotly as if it's their fault.

He's a madman for the motocross game. He sits himself at the red rubber wheel and hurtles through pretend countryside. He screams round deadly bends on a cliff road. He hardly ever crashes. Me, I take the wheel and get no further than a mile before I'm a burning wreck on the hard shoulder and Eamonn is laughing like a loud gurgling baby behind me. He's laughing because motocross is the thing he's a genius at.

Eamonn never gets into smoking, even when the older lads try to make him. Just to see how foolish he'd look. They're always up to stuff like that. Eamonn's loose mouth, the drool that sometimes threads his lip to his coat collar: they have a name and a game for everything. Dribbler. Stupid Eyes. You're A Spa and Your Sister's One Too.

Mary O'Donoghue

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I am nine when a teacher tells me that I'll get into heaven faster because of Eamonn. "He," she says, holding me still with her milkyblue eyes, "he is your cross. And if you carry it, without setting it down and running away from it, God will notice you and let you see his face quicker than the rest of us." I ask her if I'm allowed to let it fall, accidentally, like Jesus did. "Oh, of course, of course; even Jesus had to take a rest." I ask her if it means I'm going to die before my mother and father. Because if I'm going to see God's face sooner than most people, it must mean I'm going to die before most of them. "No, not at all. You just won't have to stay in Purgatory getting sins driven out of you." She seems almost envious.

And this makes me feel, for quite a while, more virtuous than my mother and father put together. "Your mother is a living saint," a shopkeeper says to me. When this is the most untrue thing ever. She is a saint only sometimes, and you can't be a part-time saint. One night we are watching a programme about the wives of famous quadriplegics. My father turns to me to explain in a whisper what the word means, but I get a good idea from the metal and wheels and the fact that the men can only move their heads. And sometimes only their eyes. They force their eyes from corner to corner, and the slow roll of blue is like a marble inching across a floor. Each of the wives has fair hair; each of them seems much younger than the husband. They're living saints. I can tell by the way the voice on the programme describes their daily routines. It sounds like he's murmuring a prayer. "Eleanor's day begins at 4:30 . . ."

Mary O’Donoghue

My mother is sitting in the armchair at right angles to the television. Every so often she looks away and shunts herself deeper into the soft green velvet. The screen is filled with the hands of a woman; she’s fastening a metal band round her husband’s head; attached to it is something that looks like a knitting needle with a rubber eraser at the end. Then she places her hands either side of his face and holds it over a computer keyboard. I feel sad because the metal band seems to eat into the skin of his forehead. It’s that tight. He starts to tap out letters. L . . . O . . . The time between them is a long empty space that makes my father shift around on the couch beside me. “Jesus, would you look at that,” he whispers. . . . V . . . E . . . The man in the metal headband rolls his big wet eyes up at his wife. His eyes are loose around the rims, like the edges of a dog’s mouth. They look like they could easily fall out. . . . Y . . . O . . . U.