

## **An extract from *Twist* by Colum McCann**

We are all shards in the smash-up.

Our lives, even the unruptured ones, bounce around on the sea floor. For a while we might brush tenderly against one another, but eventually, and inevitably, we collide and splinter.

I am not here to make an elegy for John A. Conway, or to create a praise song for how he spent his days – we have all had our difficulties with the shape of the truth, and I am not going to claim myself as any exception. But others have tried to tell Conway's story and, so far as I know, they got it largely wrong. For the most part, he moved quietly and without much fuss, but his was a lantern heart full of petrol, and when a match was put to it, it flared.

I am quite sure that I will hear the name of Conway again and again in the years to come: what happened to him, what strange forces worked upon him, how he was wrecked in the pursuit of love, how he fooled himself into believing that he was something he was not, how we fooled ourselves in return, and how he kept spiralling inwards and downwards. Then again, maybe Conway was just being honest to the times, interpreting the present in light of the past, and perhaps he got it correct in some way.

I am not sure that anybody, anywhere, is truly aware of what lay at the core of Conway and the era he, and we, lived through – it was a time of enormous greed and foolish longing and, in the end, unfathomable isolation.

When all is said and done, the websites and platforms and rumour mills will create paywalls out of the piles of shredded facts, and we will piece together whatever sort of Conway we can to suit ourselves. Still, I'd at least like to try to tell a small part of his story, alongside my own, and alongside Zanele's too, and if I take liberties with the gaps, then so be it. Like so many people nowadays, I'd prefer to sweep the memory of those days under the carpet. That I have made my mistakes is hardly unique. Maybe I tell this story to get rid of it, or to open up the silence, or to salve my own conscience, or perhaps I tell it because I am scared of what I too have become, steeped in regret and saudade. I often lie awake wondering what might have been if I had done things just a little differently. The past is retrievable, yes, but it most certainly cannot be changed.

In January 2019 I boarded the Georges Lecoq, a cable-repair vessel. For a struggling novelist and occasional playwright, it was a relief to step away from the burden of invention onto a ship that would take me out to the west coast of Africa, a place I'd never been before. The centre of the world was slipping, my career felt stagnant, and frankly at my age, I was unsure what fiction or drama could do any more.

I thought I would spend a few weeks on the ship, then return to Dublin and write a long-form journalistic piece, shake out the cobwebs. My first two novels had been minor successes, and I had written a couple of plays, but in recent years I had fallen into a clean, plain silence. The days had piled into weeks and the weeks had piled into months. Not much sang to me: no characters, no plot-lines. The world did not beckon, nor did it greatly reward. As a cure I had thought I would try to write a simple love story for the stage, but it had turned out to be a soliloquy of solitude, not a love story at all. I shut my laptop one morning. All my characters slipped into a chasm. I cast around for new ideas, but mostly it was fall and echo, echo and fall.

Colum McCann, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2025

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