

MID-LIFE CRISIS

I'm on my hols. Want to stay in my gaff?

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THE DEMONS OF DOLORES

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THE BIG STORY

Our Lady Of Sorrows

She's the Irish popstar who caused world headlines when she was arrested for alleged assault on a plane at Shannon airport last Monday. Barry Egan tells the turbulent — and very sad — story of Dolores O'Riordan. It involves four years of rape as a child, suicidal thoughts, depression and hopefully, the road to recovery

SOME of us who know — and love — Dolores O'Riordan have been bracing ourselves for disaster for years now. That 'disaster' came at 5am last Monday on Flight EI110 from New York to Shannon. I was only surprised it hadn't happened years ago. So, Dolores finally went off the deep end with the most ignominious splash of her career. With her sanity fast unravelling seemingly, she was arrested for an alleged assault on an Aer Lingus flight attendant and allegedly head-butting and spitting in the face of a guard. It sounds like a tawdry spectacle of which Dolores, no doubt, would be rightly ashamed.

There is, if you allow me to tell it, a context...

Dolores is not well. She has been an accident waiting to happen for quite some time. Not many people who know Dolores are surprised about what allegedly happened at 10,000 feet over Shannon and on the ground at the airport. Most of the people who know and love Dolores O'Riordan want her to be in a better place. That is easier said than done.

Her mother has spoken of the singer being in a "very vulnerable place". In addition, and without wishing to exonerate or excuse her from her alleged violence, Dolores is carrying quite a burden of pain and torment from her past. I don't use these words lightly or even dramatically. It is easy to throw about phrases like 'dealing with her demons'. Dolores O'Riordan's demons, however, would frighten the life out of most of us. Read this next paragraph back twice before you judge Dolores O'Riordan too hastily. Too harshly.

She told me this in October, 2013: "He [the abuser] used to masturbate me when I was eight years old. He made me do oral sex for him and ejaculated on my chest when I was eight years old. It was inappropriate touching. For four years, when I was a little girl I was sexually abused. I was only a *kid*."

Dolores kept the dirty secret of what happened to her during her childhood buried inside her all her life. It has cast shadows over her whole life. The dirty secret caused Dolores O'Riordan to have a nervous breakdown — and to be depressed and suicidal and anorexic. She had panic attacks. She didn't sleep or eat properly. How could she?

For years, she looked like she was rehearsing for Angelina Jolie's role in *Girl, Interrupted* — resembling at times, in her anorexic-seeming condition, a nervous breakdown waiting to happen. The story of what was done to Dolores O'Riordan from the age of eight to 12 by someone in the Limerick area who was in a position of trust is heart-breaking and disturbing.

"We moved into a busy housing estate when I was seven. There were tons of people around all the time. My mother worked a lot to pay the bills and my father was oblivious

to it." (Her father Terence, she explained, had a bad bike accident in 1968, "which left him invalided with permanent brain damage" and he "was never the same again.")

"My father would have killed him [the abuser] had my poor father not been 'retarded'!" When her father, who had been ill with cancer for seven years, died on November 25, 2011, at home in Ballybricken, county Limerick, Dolores knew in all likelihood that she would see her abuser at the funeral in Limerick. "I had nightmares for a year before my father's death about meeting him," she told me in November of last year. These fears were realised when the man who abused her "came over and cried and said: 'Sorry!'"

I asked her what did you say to him when he said that. "My father had just died. I didn't see him for years and years and then I saw him at my father's funeral. I had blocked him out of my life."

Dolores said she was going to talk to the priest at the funeral about her sexual molestation. "But I didn't. I asked him to pray for me as I was about to go on another world tour and I worried that I might not make it through."

So there you have it. Imagine being raped repeatedly as a child by someone known to your family. Just imagine the horror of living with all that. Maybe I am just naive but I expected more in terms of human sympathy. The feigned moral outrage of the tabloids is nothing short of nauseating, poking fun at someone who is obviously in a distressed state singing in their police cell. A bit of empathy wouldn't have gone amiss.

Have we lost our duty of care for our fellow human beings? I'm a Christian and I say, there but for the grace of God go you and I. What Dolores allegedly did exposes the underlying and fragile fault lines that govern all our lives. We are all human. And Dolores is more human than most.

Dolores texted me later last summer that she wanted to go for brain-shock therapy to help her with the pain of what happened to her in her childhood. In the end she thought it might be too harsh. "Sometimes that therapy erases the memory too much... erasing the ability to write."

Dolores told me that she blamed herself for that man sexually abusing her for four years beginning when she was eight. "That's what happens. You think it is your own fault. I buried it. It is what you do initially. You bury it because you are ashamed of it. You think: 'Oh my God. How horrible and disgusting I

"I knew why I hated myself. I knew why I wanted to make myself disappear"

am.' You have this terrible self-loathing. And then I got famous when I was 18 and my career took over. It was even harder then. So then I developed the anorexia.

"When I Googled anorexia and studied it, I found out it was a common pathology that develops later on in life. So I was putting on this charade, this perfect face. I had anorexia, then depression, a breakdown."

I told her that anorexia is a form of suicide: you want to make yourself disappear.

"I knew why," she replied. "I knew why I hated myself. I knew why I loathed myself. I knew why I wanted to make myself disappear. It was something that I noticed manifested itself in my behaviour and the pathologies I began to develop in my early adult life, such as my eating disorder, depression and eventually the breakdowns."

"I think I am getting stronger for sure. But I'll always be a bit of a train wreck. Nobody's perfect. Those people who pretend they are perfect aren't perfect." Dolores O'Riordan is anything but perfect: a tortured soul as prone to black moods as she is to cloudbursts of absolute and undiluted joy. And when the cloudbursts happen there is no better person you'd rather be around.

In Rome last Christmas, we sat in an outside bar in Trastevere and laughed and talked for hours. She was the happiest I had seen her in ages. Then, two hours later back at the hotel, she was a different person — she became dark and odd and out of kilter, possibly even a little out of her mind, certainly unaware of what she was saying or doing.

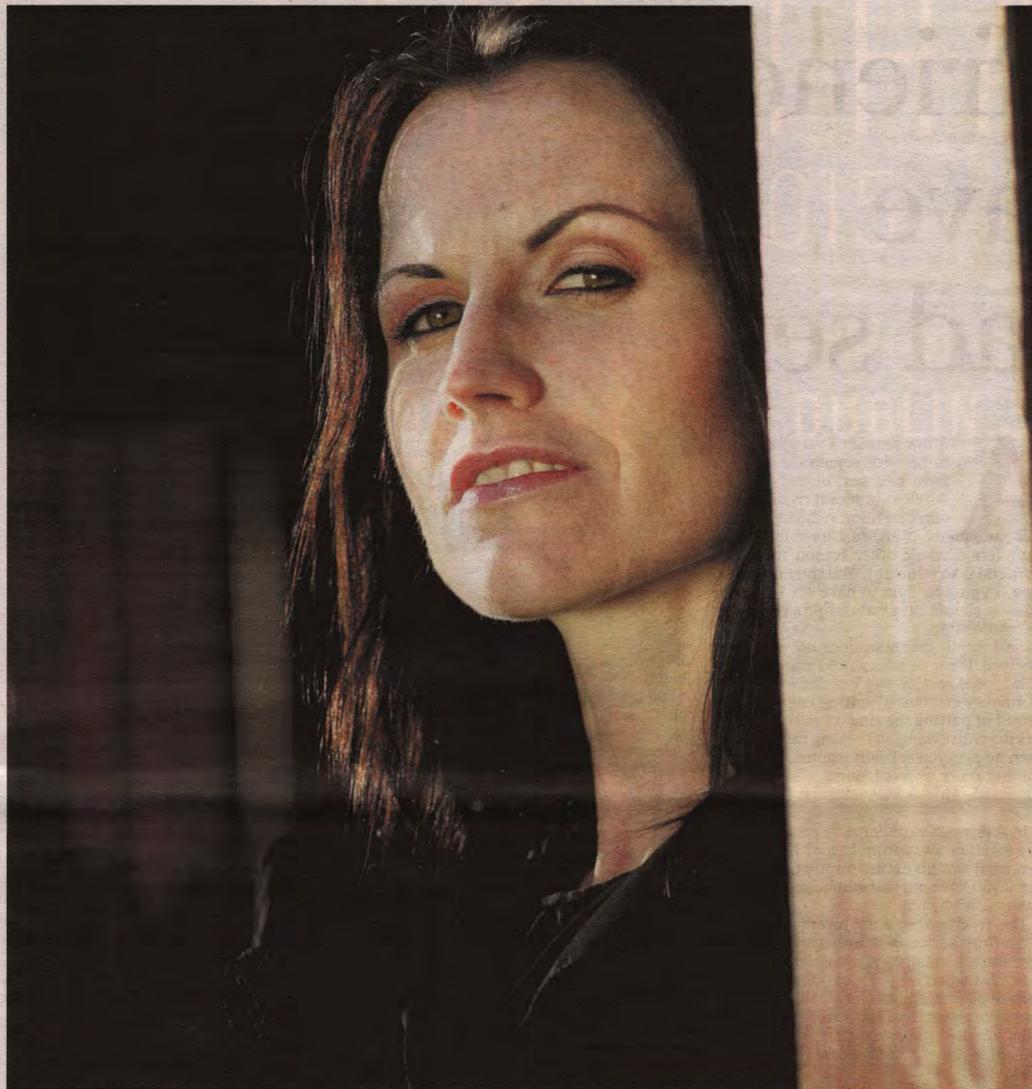
She was singing and being a bit bonkers. I got the impression that Dolores only gave the interview about her sexual abuse in the *Sunday Independent's LIFE* magazine because a) it would get it out there so publicly that it could no longer be a dirty little secret and she could truly start to heal herself, but more bluntly, that it would put a halt to her destructive binge drinking. Sadly barely a month after the interview came out, Dolores was back drinking worse than ever, and with moods just as black.

The day before, she had been singing for the Pope at the Vatican. With Dolores O'Riordan, sometimes there's but one step between the sublime and the ridiculous. And the sad. (The drunken singing in Rome had echoes of what Dolores was reported to have done in the cell in Shannon Garda station on Monday morning.)

In Rome, people came over with their camera phones. I told them to go away. Dolores's singing only got louder. The manager of the hotel asked me to get her to stop. She could not be stopped. It was like trying to stop a hurricane with a paper bag.

I left her and went to bed and took my phone off the hook in my room; back in Dublin, over the years, Dolores had a disconcerting habit of ringing me from her home in Canada at all hours of the night, drunk out of her mind, rambling like a lunatic, wailing about life like a banshee unhinged.

THE BIG STORY



'IT'S SIMPLY LOVE THAT'S IMPORTANT': That's what Dolores O'Riordan told Barry Egan in April of this year — and love is what Dolores needs now more than anything. Opposite page: Dolores with her mum Eileen. Main photo and cover photo: David Conachy

I would often hang up after a while and she would merely ring back and continue where she left off on my answering machine. I love her (I invited her to my wedding during the summer; she sent me a lovely present instead) but Dolores shouldn't drink.

She's an absolute mess when she's drunk — dangerous to herself. The dark stuff in her head boils up to the surface with drink, and comes out in a nasty black tempest of inner turmoil and rage. She doesn't deserve eternal punishment in the seventh circle of Dante's *Inferno* for what she allegedly did last Monday morning at Shannon — I'd say what Dolores is putting herself through in her own head right now is suffering enough — but she does need to apologise to everyone concerned.

You can only imagine the troubled thoughts and feelings that assailed Dolores's mind through her youth and into her adult life — putting an enormous strain on her, psychologically and emotionally. It is no surprise that Dolores has admitted to suffering from anorexia, nervous breakdowns, and suicidal thoughts over the years. This goes some way — but not nearly far enough — to explaining her volatile vulnerability, her precarious psychological state at times.

"I tried to overdose last year," she told me

last summer. "I suppose I am meant to stay here for the kids."

"It is just about acknowledgement for me now — not revenge," she said, slowly. "I'm not that type but it will free me to go into group therapy as I go on with my life and I can be a better and stronger mother."

"I am pretty good but sometimes I hit the bottle," she added. "Every thing is way worse the next morning. I chain smoke when I drink. I have a bad day when I have bad memories and I can't control them and I hit the bottle. I kind of binge drink. That is kind of my biggest flaw at the moment," she told me.

It will have to be decided whether Dolores will go to court over what allegedly happened on the plane and in Shannon. Perhaps Dolores has already been found guilty in the court of public opinion. I hope not.

That said, we love a scandal in Ireland where the mighty fall from grace and the pious are caught in sin. Dolores O'Riordan is neither particularly mighty (her best days in the Cranberries are behind her) nor pious (she got married to her husband Don Burton in virtually her knickers in Holy Cross Abbey outside Tipperary in 1994).

As Colin Harrison wrote in *New York* magazine in 2012, "we love scandals assuming their

flames of destruction don't touch us or those we care about. They make us feel momentarily safer (his fate was not mine) and a bit more alive (*could his fate be mine?*)"

Born on September 9, 1971, Dolores will hopefully survive this scandal and emerge from the wreckage a better, mentally healthier, person. They say the biggest lies are the ones you tell to yourself. Last Christmas in Rome, Dolores told me that "I'm in a place of great happiness. I've never been happier or as calm or contented in my life." I didn't believe her, and I suspect, not just with the benefit of hindsight, that she didn't believe it herself either.

Sitting in Piazza Navone late one December night, she said that it was "amazing to have the burden lifted off my shoulders; it is almost like going into therapy and confessing it, except you do it the other way around, because when you are famous you just open up and that is it. It does feel good to have that off the shoulders. I feel a definite sense of a relief."

"I don't have to explain it to people. It happened. And you know, I think it makes people understand who you are and how you are a little bit better."

In hindsight, in Rome Dolores said a last fascinating thing about her boundaries.

"I cannot have sleeping tablets around,

"We love a scandal in Ireland where the mighty fall from grace and the pious are caught in sin"

because if I have a few drinks I'll take them. On tour, it was just so easy to say: 'I can't sleep, I've had a couple of drinks, maybe I'll take one.' Then you take another. Then you don't wake up. That can happen. I am careful now."

Dr Harris Stratyner, a psychologist, addictionologist, and vice president of the Caron Treatment Center in New York, talking to *Vanity Fair* last year about John Galliano's unforgivable anti-Semite outburst in Paris in 2011 while on drink and drugs, said that in a blackout state "things can come up that are the complete antithesis of who you are... that initially, when you drink, alcohol is a mood disinhibitor."

"There is a tendency for people to say things because they feel disinhibited. But it doesn't actually have to be the truth. It could be something that is going through somebody's stream of consciousness, because they saw something on television, for instance. Let's say Mr Galliano — who I have never met and never treated — was coming into a bar and saw Hasidic people. That could have triggered something. That does not mean he is an anti-Semite. He certainly could be anti-Semitic, but he may also love Jewish people. The thing to know is that in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, alcohol dependence is under the rubric of being a mental illness. Pills can cause the same thing—the brain is going, to use a layman's term, haywire." Maybe that's what happened to Dolores O'Riordan on the flight? She went haywire?

Dolores has no choice but the long road to recovery. She doesn't have to travel down the road of recovery on her own.

In April of this year, I met Dolores and her mother Eileen for lunch near the family home in Bruff, county Limerick. Eileen said at one point: "I remember my own mother — who was 92 when she died in 1997 — saying to Dolores one morning: 'You'd have been better off if you'd kept your little job in Cassidy's in Limerick.'"

Eileen then recalled visiting her famous daughter in Dingle in 1993. "Dolores came to the door. She was in tears. She said, 'Will you help me, mammy?'"

"I said, 'What's wrong with you?' She said nothing, then said: 'Nobody can help me now.' I didn't know what she meant and I was very worried about her. She was unable to tell me or explain or communicate very well. It was a long drive home and I thought about it all the way home. That was a turning point for Dolores."

"You get to the point where you want to die," Dolores said, "because you think that you'll get peace when you're dead and you can't get any worse than you are. We built a house in Dingle that we never lived in. It was around the time of [the third Cranberries' album] *To The Faithful Departed*. All the songs were depressing and I was very depressed and I was extremely anorexic on that record and as it came out, I got progressively worse."

"Looking back now I never thought that I'd be here with two boys and two girls — a beautiful 22-year-old, a beautiful 16-year-old, a beautiful 13-year-old, and a beautiful nine-year-old," Dolores said referring to her children Mollie, Dakota, Taylor and Donnie. "I realise now that life isn't about money, fame. Actually, all that crap. It's simply love that's important."

That's what Dolores O'Riordan needs now more than anything.