

Feel the Change

Exploring Climate Change
Through Storytelling



Oisín McGann

Poetry Ireland and Green-Schools

Video Files

There's a short introduction video to this resource on the Green-Schools website, which offers advice on how to you use it. You can find it here:

[Introduction Video](#)

The text for this resource is also available as video files. It's divided into three parts, and you can stream them from the site, or download them and play them from your computer.

Just play and pause each section as you need it. For each cartoon, pause it and take a minute to look at the picture before you play the 'About' piece.

[Feel the Change Video-Part 1](#)

[Feel the Change Video-Part 2](#)

[Feel the Change Video-Part 3](#)

There are is also an audio description for each cartoon, which can be found here:

[Cartoon Audio Descriptions](#)

Thank you, and we hope you enjoy using *Feel the Change*.



Exploring Climate Change
Through Storytelling

Oisín McGann
with Poetry Ireland
and Green-Schools



Produced by Poetry Ireland

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was originally produced for the Weather Stations project
in association with Tallaght Community Arts,
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Who We Are and What We Do

Poetry Ireland

This resource was partly inspired by Oisín McGann's work as Writer in Residence as part of Poetry Ireland's Development Education through Literature Programme, which has been running since 2006. While Oisín's residencies focussed on climate change, the programme has enabled schools throughout Ireland to explore a diverse range of global issues in projects co-ordinated by Writers in Schools, working in partnership with WorldWise Global Schools.

Writers work with schools, undertaking residencies where they deliver creative writing workshops on addressing specific themes, teaching practical writing skills and, more significantly, as with all arts forms, encouraging curiosity and empathy. The students are given a chance to engage imaginatively with the issues, and to build stories around them by and through working creatively in a range of genres, including poetry, prose, art, film, song and improvisation. By using art to provoke empathy, it is our hope that the participants will benefit from a more developed knowledge and understanding of global justice issues, and thereby becoming more engaged and active global citizens.

In tandem with the residencies, this resource is intended to be used to provoke thought and conversation, and to prompt an emotional response, rather than to simply deliver information. We hope that you find it useful, engaging, and that it will provide a starting point for many interesting and imaginative discussions.

Green-Schools

Green-Schools is an international environmental education programme, environmental management system and award scheme for primary and secondary schools. It is operated in Ireland by An Taisce's Environmental Education Unit (EEU) in partnership with Local Authorities nationwide. The Green-Schools programme is student centred and promotes and acknowledges long-term, whole-school action for the environment.

The National Climate Change Action and Awareness Programme was established by the EEU in 2017 and was originally developed to support the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act of 2015 and the National Mitigation Plan 2017. More recently we have focused on the development and implementation of a number of key actions set out in the new Climate Action Plan.

For Ireland to achieve a just transition, we know we need rapid societal change and collaboration between local and national government, NGO's, business, communities, and individuals. The National Dialogue on Climate Action is the primary tool to actively engage people with climate, enabling and empowering at a local and national level. It does so through 3 key pillars; climate literacy, enabling active engagement and through research and evidence.

It is our hope that this resource further improves climate literacy in Ireland.

Our world is changing . . .

And there are stories to tell.

I want to talk about stories and how they affect us. Whether you know it or not, you were born with the desire to tell stories, and to hear them. You are alone in your head. Nobody else can see all the stuff you have going on in there – and you can't see into anyone else's head either. And we need people to know that there are so many things that we think about.

There are two things you have to do, when you share what's in your head. You have to communicate clearly, so that people understand you. And you have to get their attention and hold it, so that they'll take in what you're sharing with them. They have to care enough to listen or watch, or both.

This is why we tell stories, it's why we create art. And whether you're just telling a friend about something you saw the other day, or telling a joke, or drawing a picture, or explaining something, or making a video, or writing a text or a comment, or a poem or a story, you are using the skills you've been learning all your life to get people to listen to you. You are using the promise of stimulation to grab onto and hold someone's attention.

And a story is the best form of that. I want to show you how to write stories. I'm also going to use cartoons to show how a picture and a few words can convey an idea quickly and simply.

This too, is a part of storytelling.

You've probably heard a lot about how our weather, our climate, is changing. Well, there's good news about this, and there's bad news. The bad news is that it's real, and it's already happening. We have changed our atmosphere, so that it is holding in more heat, which is also giving our weather more energy, which will cause more extreme weather. Because everything from our food to our buildings is affected by the weather, it will have major consequences for our lives and our future.



The good news is, there are already millions of people working to do something about it. In fact, a large part of the planet's population is involved in one way or another. It's that big.

Considering it's so important, and it affects so many people, you'd think we'd be all over this. It's a challenge for the entire planet, so we should have sorted it out by now. I mean . . . it's a serious emergency, right?



This is the problem with having brains built for stories. We think we're reasonable, logical, that we act on facts, when we are actually driven as much by emotion as reason. We react best when things are urgent, immediate . . . when there's drama and visible danger. We're not as good at taking action against big, slow changes that affect the entire world around us.

But there is drama and danger out there, and there are people taking action against it every day, and have been for a long time. Some of that is very visible, like people protesting on the streets, or pulling different stunts to try and get the attention of the public.

Most of it however, is much less noticeable, and that means that people pay much less

attention to it. It often feels slow and ordinary, like projects taking place in your community, jobs that your local council is doing, or even things you do in your own home that are still having a real effect.

There is also an enormous amount of scientific research being carried out, most of which we never see, but which can lead to groundbreaking discoveries and incredible advances – so much so, that it can feel at times as if we're living in a science fiction world, where science and technology have progressed to the point where they feel like magic.

More important than any of that though, is the urgent need to change the way we think about our world, and there's only so much that reason and science and information can do when it comes to *what* we think and *how* we think.

Because at heart, we are not logical, rational beings, we are driven by passion, empathy and instinct. Our world is changing, and not only is it important that we face up to this challenge, but it also offers endless material for creating stories. And as our world's climate changes, we will all have stories to tell.

**We'll be building our stories
Using The Three P's:
People: Our Characters
Place: Our Setting
Problem: The Start of Our Plot**

Part 1: People

Who is your story happening to?

These are your characters. A story is about what happens to a particular character. As we all know, characters don't have to be human; they can be anything with life and personality. A childhood reading all sorts of picture books and comics, watching Pixar and Disney, will have shown you animals, fish, furniture, buildings, vehicles and trees that are all characters. Your characters have to be distinctive, entertaining, and seem as believable as

possible in order to engage your reader. They must also act as functions of the plot – they have to help make the story work. Their actions must help drive the story forward. The personality of your character influences their decisions, their actions, affecting how they deal with challenges. We experience things through them, *their* emotions affect *our* emotions. This is empathy, a vital part of storytelling. A good story should provoke different emotions.

About the Cartoon

The idea I wanted to get across here was that problems can affect different characters in different ways. People might not even be aware of a problem at all, if they don't feel affected by it.

Can you think of any situation where something was a problem for some people, and not for others? It could be to do with who they are, where they live, how much money they have, what skills or education or experience they have.

Think of a problem and give an example of how different characters are affected by it.



Eaten From Beneath

Conal was out of breath, his lungs heaving, his legs weak from running through the streets. Behind him, he could hear the shouts getting closer. They were gaining on him. But he was almost there. He was almost there . . .



As he clambered to the top of the wall, he couldn't believe the sight that confronted him. The stable where he'd made his secret den was an old grey brick building covered in a rough plaster and roofed with slate. It stood in a yard surrounded by a high wall, where he now sat. The stable itself backed onto the river. There had been cracks running up the back wall when he'd first discovered the place. He knew the ground under it was being eaten away by the river. But to see *this* now . . .

'No, no, no, no, no!' he panted. 'What's going on?'

Conal found himself tilting his head as

he looked at the building, leaning with the angle of the end wall of the stable. It was bulging far enough out to start pulling free of the roof. The wall looked ready to fall right out. The crumbling structure was going to collapse if that wall gave way.

With a fearful glance behind him, he swung himself down and into the yard. He paused to listen, and heard the running footsteps coming closer.

'There!' someone said. It sounded like Gavin. 'He went over that wall!'

Conal swore softly to himself. This was his secret place, an abandoned horse-yard on the edge of town, a short cycle from the road they all lived on. As far as he knew, nobody else came here. Half hidden by the high wall, the place was a bit dangerous, because the building was old and rundown, and it was beside a river, but that made it feel all the more special. The wide front door was rotten and hanging off its hinges, and there were a few windows on the first floor, which were missing their glass and frames. Trying not to think of that sagging wall, he hurried inside.

After he'd found the place, he'd brought in an old wooden ladder so he could climb up through the big hatch onto the first floor. He'd laid out some layers of sponge rubber below the hatch, that he could jump down into for laughs. He scaled the ladder now, up to the first floor. He'd borrowed his dad's hammer to nail the top in place so it wouldn't slip. The hammer was back in Dad's toolbox now, so Conal looked around for a brick or a stone or

something to knock the top of the ladder loose. He needed to pull it up and out of the way, and fast. He couldn't let them climb up after him, or they'd have him cornered.

Though the place was totally rundown, it was dry inside, particularly upstairs, and he'd spent most of the last two months hanging out here. Ever since he'd started secondary school, a gang from his class had made his life a misery. Gavin Brady had seen him drawing, snatched his sketchbook and shown everyone else. They all found it hilarious. What kind of weirdo drew pictures like these? Conal grimaced. So what if he drew weird stuff? He *liked* weird stuff.

And everything they teased him for, he knew they did themselves. Gavin read gory horror comics. Toby drew rude pictures *all the time*. Emma pretended to hate reading, even though she was always the first to put her hand up in science class. Every single one of them did something that the gang bullied *him* for doing.

But now he was labelled. Now, they had a target. Now, no matter what he did, Gavin and the others slagged him off about it. The sods just wouldn't leave him alone, and the town was so small, they all lived around the same street. He couldn't help running into them after school too. Then he'd found this place; a private place to hide out, away from the bullies, and from home and his brothers and sisters who never gave him peace.

He glanced over at his sketchbooks, and his monster figures, and the stack of comics, which were a little too close to the leaning wall. Some of his most precious things. He couldn't leave them here, the

sods had found his secret place, but there were too many things to take in one trip.

Now it looked like the stable was going to collapse some time soon, and Gavin and two of the others had just climbed over the wall into the yard. This Saturday morning was turning into a disaster. He could hear them at the door now. He had to get this ladder up, but there was nothing heavy enough to knock the nails out of the wooden frame of the hatch.



'What is this place?' Emma's voice asked. 'What a dump!'

'I think it's kinda cool,' Gavin replied. 'We could use this place as a headquarters.' 'A headquarters for what?' 'A base, like. For doing our *stuff*. Anything we don't want people to see.'

Conal scowled at that. 'Anything they didn't want people to see'. Like picking on him. He couldn't get the ladder to budge. He shuffled away from the hatch, trying to stay out of sight. Moving to the nearest window, he peeked out and saw there was just the three of them below. Maybe he could find a way to get past them. But then

what would he do about his stuff?

‘Did you see the state of that wall though?’ Toby said, his fingers scratching at the dark brown skin of his scalp, which was visible through the stubble of his tight-cut hair. The whole thing’s going to collapse.’

‘It might still be okay,’ Gavin added hopefully. ‘Come on, I want to know what that freak is doing in there.’

‘It is *totally* going to collapse,’ Emma decided, shaking her head, her red hair bouncing as she studied the weathered bricks of the wall. ‘It’s going to fall right out and send half the building into the river.’

‘We shouldn’t go in,’ Toby said. ‘It’s too dangerous.’

‘What do you think happened to the wall?’ Gavin asked.

‘The ground’s all gone from under it,’ Emma told them. ‘You could see it from outside the yard.’



Conal pressed his lips together. The water level had been higher than normal for weeks, and parts of the bank were

giving way further up the river. It was a September weekend and there had been a storm the previous night, that had passed over their town. The storm clouds were still looming over the hills and there were quiet rumbles of thunder and occasional flashes of lightning. He should have checked the section of bank outside the walls. When the river was in flood, it tore at the banks on either side, wearing them away. It had gone down a bit, but there was more floodwater coming.

He crept over to the window on the other side, one that looked out on the river. Emma had spotted what he hadn’t. He could see now, that the earth had given way under one whole corner of the building. No wonder the wall was leaning outwards – the water had eaten the ground from under it. He scurried back over to the front window, where the other three were still wary of coming inside.

Toby pointed upstream at the hills in the distance.

‘That rain’s all going to come down through here,’ he said. ‘My aunt’s farm is up that way. She says the forestry people cut down all the forests up there years ago, so there’s nothing to suck up all the rainwater or hold the soil in place. She says we get more heavy rain these days, and a lot of the soil is getting washed off the hills too. Now there’s nothing to soak up all that water, it comes downhill, into the town. The river’s going to rise up again. When it does, it’s going to rip this heap of bricks right off the bank.’

‘What about the freak?’ Gavin said, an intense frown on his round, freckled face. ‘Are we going in for him or not? Look at those sponge mats on the floor. He’s got a

whole little hideaway set up here. This could be comedy gold.

‘I say we go in,’ he decided. ‘Dare you to go first.’

Conal suppressed a snort of disgust. While Gavin liked to act the big man, he tended to be the first to volunteer someone else.

‘I’ll go,’ Emma said quickly. She was always keen to prove that she was as brave, or braver, than the boys.

‘You won’t get him out on your own,’ Toby said. ‘We need to scare him good and proper. It’s all of us or nothing.’

As usual, he was ready to give something a go, but he liked to have the gang with him for back-up.

‘Too chicken to go on your own?’ Gavin asked, making the flapping motion with his pointy elbows.

‘Look who’s talking!’ Toby snapped, giving him a hard look and pointing at the tilting wall. ‘I just don’t want to be *up there* when the *roof* caves in.’

But Emma was already creeping inside. Gavin hurried after her and Toby sighed and threw his hands up in a helpless gesture before following them. Conal pulled back from the window and stared at the top of the ladder, just visible over the rim of the hatch. He looked around, already knowing there was nowhere to hide.

The damage looked frightening from inside; the whole building must have been weaker than he’d realised. The end wall was leaning outwards, while the longer wall, the one alongside the river, was bulging in. The corner where the two walls joined was coming apart like a zipper. Rain had got in; the upstairs floor was damp and

slippery. Some of the wooden beams holding up the floor had pulled free of the end wall and the wooden surface was sagging. Emma was carefully climbing the ladder. Conal pulled back out of sight as her head poked up through the hatch.

‘Hey, take it easy!’ she growled as Gavin pushed up beside her.



He didn’t want her leading the way, and there was no talking sense into him. He climbed over the edge and stood up.

‘There’s the freak!’ he said with a grin. ‘Hey, Conal! Got yourself a little hideout here, yeah? A bit banjaxed, isn’t it?’

With nowhere else to go, Conal was treading carefully back over the buckled floor to the far side of the room. He had a cooler box there, and some other boxes too, for storage and seats. The place was a mess; there was powder and fragments of plaster, it had all fallen off the brick walls. Pieces of the slate roof tiles were lying all over the floorboards.

The floor itself had a deep dip in the middle, and it no longer felt solid when he backed across it. He could feel sections give

under his weight. The cooler box had tipped over, scattering its contents on the floor, the snacks and drinks he'd stored up here. His most important comics were in a backpack though, so he slung that onto his back. He started stuffing his figures into his pockets, but he was never going to carry it all. And where could he go?

Desperately, he glanced out the window at the river below. It was a long drop, and the river was still in flood. Deep, with powerful currents – the type that dragged branches and debris along with them. Besides, he'd never be able to swim and carry his stuff.

'Man, where are you going?' Emma asked. She was giving him a mocking smile, and yet Conal thought she looked paler than normal. 'What are you gonna do? Jump out the window?'

Gavin laughed, but there was a tension in it. He was scared and it showed.

'Maybe we should just leave him to it,' he said. 'If he wants to hang around until the place falls down around him, then let him.'

Then Toby appeared at the hatch, muttering curses as he crawled up and took in the scene.

'This is nuts,' he said. 'Grab the freak and drag him out of there.'

'Come and . . . come and get me,' Conal said through his teeth. 'If you've got the guts!'

'Hey . . . What's . . . what's that noise?' Gavin asked.

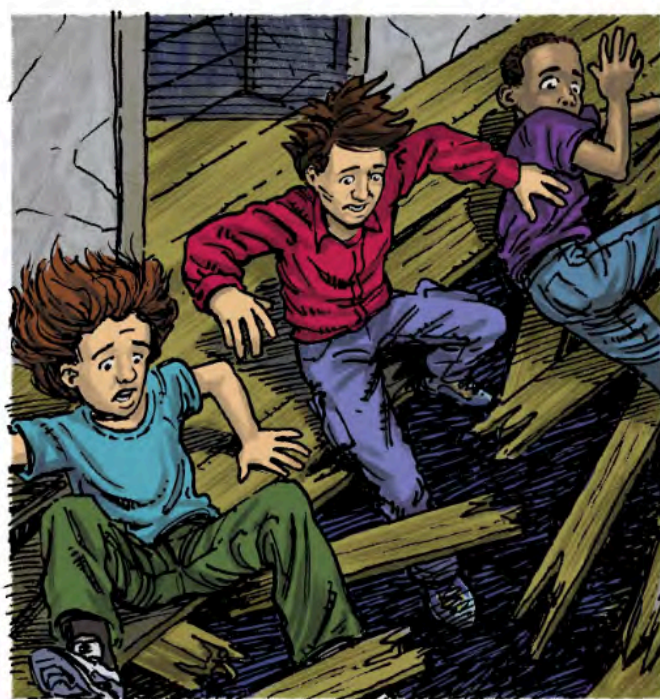
The other two fell silent so they could listen. It only took them a moment to hear it too: a muttering, grating, tumbling sound, rising steadily, louder now than the distant thunder, but almost like thunder

itself. Conal backed into the corner as Toby shuffled cautiously over the sinking floor to the window overlooking the river. The other two bunched in either side of him, all three peering out and up along the course of the river, squinting at something moving in the water, upstream from where they were. Conal turned to stare through the gap between the bricks in the splitting corner.

No, it wasn't something moving in the river. It was the river itself.

'Get out! *Out!*' Toby yelled, rushing back towards the hatch. 'We have to get out!'

A torrent of water was rushing downstream, filling the river's width, bursting over the banks. Churning white water swept under them, gushing in around the exposed corner of the building, tearing at the foundations of the stable itself. Even as the three bullies started to make their way back across the buckled floorboards towards the hatch, the floor lurched under their feet, sending them sprawling forward. Toby screamed and Emma yelped. Gavin let out a wail as the



floorboards gave way under his feet and in a frantic scramble, the three of them barely made it onto a more solid section near the top of the hatch.

Conal felt his whole body freeze up as a section of the riverside wall collapsed behind him. The earth beneath it was clawed away by the violent current and it crumbled under its own weight. Above him, he heard the thick planks holding up the roof creaking and cracking. He could hear slates sliding off and falling on the ground outside and into the water.

He was stuck on a corner of floorboards and broken beams. In front of him, the floor was gone, leaving a carpet of broken rubble and shattered wood on the ground floor, in the space below. If he jumped down, he'd break his legs, and he'd still be trapped in the centre of the building when the roof came down. And the gap was too wide to jump across. He'd never make it.

'The whole place is going to go right out from under us!' Gavin shouted over the noise of the water. 'Conal! You have to jump!'

The others backed away across the buckling floor as more of it sagged. The gap was getting wider.

'I can't,' he said, shivering. 'It's too wide. I can't make it!'

He saw the end wall was ready to go too. Once it did, it was going to bring the whole building down on top of them.

'Get out!' he called to them. 'Get out! It's all going to come down!'

'Not without you!' Emma shouted. 'Come on, you can make the jump!'

The end wall tilted out another few feet and then stopped. Conal looked out

towards the river, but there was rubble in the water now too.

'We'll catch you! We'll pull you in!' Gavin yelled. 'But you have to do it now, man!'

Conal glared at them. He didn't trust them. He didn't trust that they'd risk themselves for him. He was sure they'd let him fall.

They saw how he looked at them, and right in that moment, they understood what they'd done to him. How their bullying had eaten away any trust he might have had. They didn't think of themselves as cruel or nasty, but his fear of them had driven him in to this dangerous place and now, because of them, he'd waited too long to get out.

'We're sorry, all right?' Gavin said, in a calmer voice. 'I get it. You think we're complete pigs. And I'm sorry, I'm *really* sorry for all that. But you've got to *jump*, man. There's no time left. You have to let us help.'

Off to Conal's left, the end wall of the stable crumpled, cracked apart and finally gave way. The last section of floor in the corner jolted under his feet. The back wall, already eaten from beneath by years of river erosion, began to topple outwards.

With moments left, Conal threw off his backpack, ran the few steps that he could and leaped across the gap. Pure adrenaline took him further than he'd ever jumped before, and as his front foot landed on the boards on the other side, they fell away under him and he would have plunged down onto the wreckage below if not for Gavin and Emma and Toby, who grabbed his flailing arms and jacket and hauled him the rest of the way. Conal heard the crash



of falling brickwork, beams and slate roof behind him.

Without another word, they rushed for the ladder, the others letting Conal go first and then they bounded down it, slipping on rungs and leaving splinters in their hands. Within seconds, they were out the door and clear of the building.

‘We made it, we made it . . . we . . .’ Gavin gave up talking and panted for breath.

Sections of the back wall of the yard had fallen too. They crept as close as they dared to the edge of the bank, gazing out at the roaring water. Nobody said anything for a while. Then Conal spoke up:

‘Thanks,’ he muttered, his whole body shivering from the thrill and the shock of what had happened. ‘Thanks for that.’ ‘It’s . . . it’s blocking the river . . .’ Emma said.

It was true. The rubble from the collapsed building was creating a blockage across half the river, and the remaining gap was quickly becoming clogged with debris. This new dam was already causing the river level to rise.

‘I think we should go,’ Toby suggested shakily.

‘I think you’re going to have to find another den, Conal,’ Gavin declared.

‘Maybe one that’s not next to a river,’ Emma added.

Water started to spill over the bank, washing toward their feet. Running to the front wall of the yard, they clambered up it, all four of them pausing at the top to throw stunned looks back towards the ruined building.

In the yard, a tide of cold water claimed the muddy ground.

About the Story

When I first wrote this, the characters were a bit younger, and it was about three friends who had taken over this abandoned stable as a camp for the summer. It was based on the kind of thing I did with my friends as a kid, when we’d be out all day during the summer holidays, looking for places to hang around, climb and explore. However, I wanted some of the drama to come from conflict between the characters, rather than just the physical danger they were in from the environment, so I decided to weave in this plot element about bullying. This added to the danger, because now it was no longer just about the building collapsing, the four characters also had different motives – different reasons for being there – and this got in the way of them recognizing the danger and escaping from it. This kind of character conflict is something writers use in storytelling all the time. It’s another way to get the reader emotionally involved in what’s happening.

Have a Chat

Think of a problem that people often argue about how to solve. Why do they argue over it? Is there more than one solution? Will the solution affect some people more than others? Is it something that can be solved in one go, or will people have to keep acting on it?

When we're creating characters for stories, we often try to have a combination of characters who will clash with each other, who will disagree or struggle against each other. Sometimes that clash is the problem, or sometimes there'll be a problem they can't agree how to solve. It helps make the characters feel more real, and adds drama to the story. Describe the characters in this story. How are they different from each other?

If you look at any story about a disaster, you'll usually find characters disagreeing about how to solve the problem, or whether there's even a problem at all. In most disaster movies, there'll be a scene where the people in power ignore the warnings from scientists or other experts.

Another thing we look for in a story is how the experience changes the character. As you go through life, any dramatic thing that happens to you will have an effect on you. How do you think the experience of Conal and the others will have changed them?

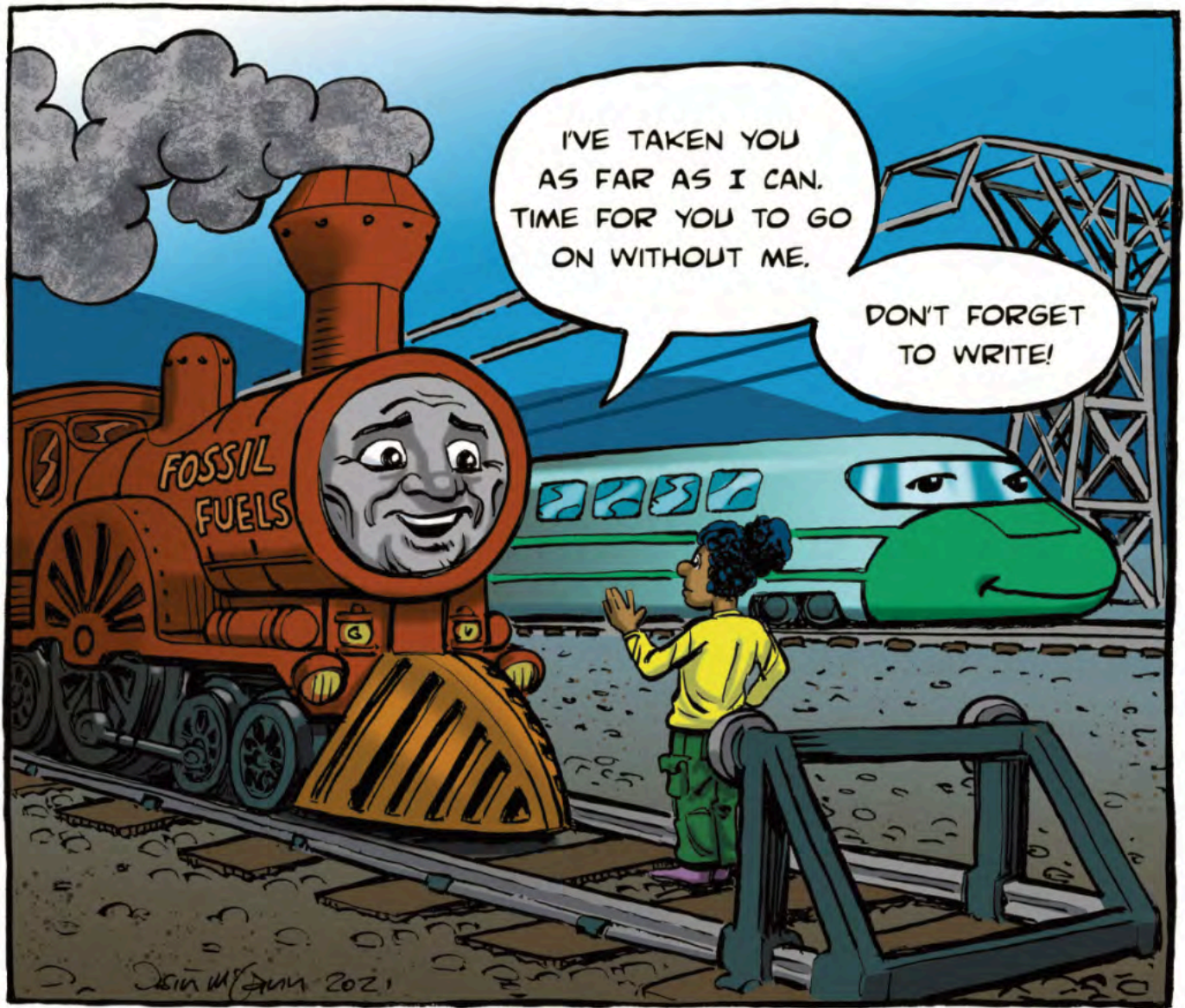
What experiences have you had in your life that changed how you looked at the world?

Your life is intimately connected with the lives of your family and friends, and yet you might often disagree or argue about what to do in a situation or say, how to fix a problem. What kinds of things do you argue about most? Are they important? Would something be more important to you than it is to someone else, or vice versa?

Character clashes can start stories too. Your protagonist, your main character, might have an antagonist, someone who acts against them. A story with good guys and bad guys is a simple version of this, but there are many different types. Stories are often about conflict.

About the Cartoon

Not every cartoon is aiming to make a joke; some are intended as a simple way to drive a point home. Cartoonists will often find a way to portray a theoretical issue by making elements of it into characters. This is called 'anthropomorphism', giving human traits to an object or an animal. It's effective because we tend to have a more emotional reaction to living things with personalities, than we have to objects or ideas. We even see faces in random patterns, because it's how our brains are have evolved to think. We *want* to see humans. With this cartoon, I wanted to portray fossil fuels as an old friend, one



we've been on a long journey with. We've built our civilization on wood, peat, coal, gas and oil, but now it's time to move on from them and find new, less harmful ways to generate the power we need to carry us into the future.

Have a Chat

Think of an example from something you've read or watched where someone has made an object or machine into an animal – or made an animal seem more like a human. Why do you think they did it? Do you think it worked?

Pick an object and give it life. Imagine what kind of personality it might have, based on its appearance and what it's used for.

We often use animals as examples of certain character traits, for example: 'as sly as a fox'. Can you think of any others? Do you think they're fair or accurate?

Can you think of any examples from real life where someone treated an object as if it was alive? It could be someone giving out to their computer or their car, or even just acting as if the object has feelings or a will of its own.

Heat Rays

Inferness was going to wipe out all life on Earth, and only Tank-Top, WildWitch and the Brute could stop her. The fusion cannon she had installed on her space station was already powering up, and they had just minutes to get past her droid defences to reach her command deck. It was going to be close.

‘Hang on! Hang on! I need to go to the loo!’ Tank-Top called out.

‘Ah, Rory! We were just getting to the big bit!’ Niamh sighed.

It completely broke the spell, and his sister and their two cousins gave Rory exasperated looks as he hurried back up the garden to the house. He was wearing a



big tank turret made out of a cardboard box and a couple of cardboard tubes, all painted green, and he shrugged his way out of it, leaving it at the back door as he went inside.

Danny pulled off his Brute mask, looking at its lumpy, purple features and

the ragged mop of black hair. His face was covered in sweat.

‘This thing is *hot*,’ he said, wiping his sleeve across his forehead.

His costume was the best one; a full body suit, complete with mask and foam padding to make him look like he was covered in muscles. He was really getting into the role too, of the monstrous purple character from the films and comics.

Niamh, who was playing Inferness, also had a store-bought costume, and she was working it for all it was worth, with the black, sleeveless futuristic suit over a skin like lava. Amy had even painted her face to look like the character, to save her from using the cheap plastic mask that came with the costume. It was too hot, and Niamh’s breath kept steaming up the inside of the mask.

Amy was WildWitch, and she hadn’t really wanted to play. She was three years older than her brother Danny, and due to start third year in secondary, but their parents had all popped out to the shop to get stuff for the barbecue, so she’d said she’d keep her cousins entertained for an hour. She’d reluctantly painted her face, put on an old purple blanket as a robe, used some gel to spike up her short black hair, and was now running around the garden with the younger kids.

And though she didn’t like to admit it, it was a bit of laugh. She hadn’t helped save the world in ages. They were using water pistols and foam-dart guns and it was great craic. Amy was making sure they drank

plenty of water though, because of the heat, and Rory seemed to need the loo every half hour.

‘Okay, I’m coming!’ he called as he appeared at the door and pulled on his turret. ‘Let’s do this! Let’s kick Inferness ass!’

‘Yeah, like *that’s* gonna happen,’ Niamh snorted, extending her skinny arms, one hand splayed, the other holding a water pistol. ‘I’m going to turn all that armour into a puddle of metal. You can’t fight *lava*, baby!’



And so the battle continued. Niamh’s command deck was the top of the plastic tank for the heating oil, behind the garage, and she used the low wall around the base to scramble back up into it before the others could catch her. The Earth was a beach ball printed like a globe, sitting on the ground not far away. The three superheroes had to try and climb up after her without getting sprayed, before she could hit the beach ball, and she had a big container of water to refill her gun, as well as a small arsenal of water balloons. This

was going to be tough. They weren’t allowed stay between Niamh and the ball, and time and again they tried to scale the side and ends of the red plastic tank, only to be blasted from above, but thanks to their body blocks, Niamh wasn’t hitting the ball either. The struggle went on.

Another fifteen minutes passed, and the day was getting hotter. Amy had told them it was over twenty-seven degrees when they came out, with very high humidity, and now what little cloud there had been was burning off. WildWitch, Tank-Top and the Brute were panting for breath from their constant efforts to climb up onto the top of the tank. Niamh, or Inferness, was getting closer to hitting the beach ball. The more the three superheroes crowded around the oil tank, the easier it was for her to shoot over their heads at the ball.

She shifted her position, taking aim again. She didn’t want to give in, but now that the sun had passed over the roof of the garage and was shining directly on the tank, the plastic was getting *very* hot. Her face paint was streaked with lines of sweat. And also, her knees were getting sore. She didn’t think she could stay up here much longer. It didn’t matter though, because she was lining up for her final, devastating blow.

‘This is it, losers!’ she shouted. ‘Just one shot from my cannon will raise the temperature of the Earth by *three degrees*! Your pathetic world is doomed!’

‘Hang on, what?’ the Brute called back, as he was about to shield the ball again. Danny’s voice had a sneer in it behind his monstrous purple mask. ‘*How* many degrees?’

‘*Three* degrees!’ Inferness screeched

back, sounding a little less sure of herself.

‘That’s . . . that’s not a lot for a fusion cannon doomsday weapon,’ Tank-Top replied in a reasonable voice. ‘I thought it would be like . . . a gazillion degrees or something. *Three* doesn’t sound very scary.’

‘I’m trying to be realistic,’ Inferness said from her command deck. ‘In school, they were saying that if the Earth’s temperature went up by three degrees, it would be a global disaster. That’s what I’m doing . . . I’m creating a global disaster.’

‘Honestly, that’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard,’ Danny said. ‘At least make it a *hundred* degrees hotter. Three just sounds silly.’

‘She’s right, though,’ Amy piped up. ‘Two or three degrees is really bad. That’s what the scientists say. And five means like . . . crocodiles in the Arctic.’

‘Amy, we’re superheroes,’ Rory said, as if she didn’t understand this simple point. ‘We don’t get all suited up to stop some villain who’s . . . who’s . . . just going to warm things up a bit. This has to be a serious threat to the human race.’

‘It *is* a serious threat,’ Niamh insisted. ‘It’ll melt all the ice at the poles! The seas will flood, like, half the cities on Earth!’

‘Could you at least make it *fifty* degrees?’ Danny asked. ‘Come on, try and make it sound just a weensy bit scary!’

Inferness considered this for a moment.

‘Okay then, what the hell. Fifty degrees,’ she said. And then she took her shot. The stream of water hit the beach ball dead on, and sent it spinning across the grass.

‘Your world is toast,’ she said.

‘Then we shall AVENGE IT!’ the Brute roared, and ran at the oil tank.

Niamh swung a water balloon at him and though he tried to block it, it hit him right in forehead. He staggered, his knees buckled under him, and he collapsed face down onto the grass. The others laughed at his goofy fall; it was a really convincing act. Then Amy and Rory aimed their own weapons at Niamh, intent on avenging their devastated planet. Niamh ducked down to avoid the squirts of water and the foam darts, but then stared down at the Brute and she held up her hands to pause the game.

‘Hang on guys! Hey, Danny? Danny are you okay?’

He wasn’t moving. This wasn’t like him. Playing dead meant leaving yourself out of the fun. Even if he’d been ‘killed’ in the game, he’d still be trying to get back in, maybe by acting like a zombie or vengeful ghost. Instead, there was something about the way he was lying . . .

‘Danny?’ Amy said to him. She knelt down. ‘Danny, are you messing?’

She and Rory rolled him onto his back as Niamh climbed down from the tank. Amy pulled off Danny’s mask and put her



hand on his forehead. His face and hair were drenched in sweat, but he was pale, and his skin felt clammy.

‘Oh my God, he’s blacked out!’ Rory gasped. ‘Niamh, what did you do?’

‘What do you mean? I didn’t do anything!’ Niamh retorted. ‘I hit him with a water balloon, we’ve been doing it all day!’

‘There must have been something different about that one. I mean, *look* at him!’

‘It was a *water balloon*!’

Amy was tipping Danny’s head back and looking into his mouth. She’d done a first aid course and she was trying to remember all the steps for checking someone who was unconscious. Danger, Response, Airway, Breathing, Circulation. He was safe, but not responding. He was breathing, but it seemed fast and weak. She felt for the pulse in his neck

‘Rory, hush up, it wasn’t the water balloon,’ she said. ‘Or maybe just that tap on the head was the last straw. I think it’s heatstroke. Go and get the thermometer. It’s in the medicine cupboard in the kitchen. And soak a big towel with water too. Niamh, help me get him out of this costume.’

The two girls undid the velcro and pulled off the thick, padded costume. The fabric and the sponge pads were soaked with sweat, as were the t-shirt and shorts he was wearing underneath. They lifted him into the shade behind the garage and Amy handed Niamh the cloth mask and told her to wet it, which she did from the tap on the wall. Amy held the wet cloth to Danny’s forehead and told Niamh to spray him gently with one of the water pistols. A

minute later, Rory came back with the thermometer and the wet towel.

Amy laid the towel over his pale body. She gently inserted the thermometer into Danny’s ear and pressed the button for the sensor. It beeped and she held it up to look at the readout.



‘Nearly forty degrees,’ she said. ‘That’s three degrees higher than it should be. He’s roasting. We might need to call an ambulance.’

‘An ambulance?’ Niamh said, a sob in her voice. ‘Just because he’s hot?’

‘It’s only three degrees,’ Rory said. ‘We should . . . we should wait for our folks to get home.’

‘I don’t know if we can wait. This could be really serious,’ Amy said shakily. Keeping the damp towel on his chest, she took out her phone. ‘The temperature on the outside of your body can go up and down all the time. But the inside of your body has to stay at about thirty-seven degrees. Two or three degrees higher or lower and all the . . . the processes start to break down. You can *die* from it. His

breathing's wrong and his heart's already beating way too fast . . .'

She was about to dial 999 when Danny groaned and his eyes fluttered open. He looked bleary for a moment, as if he didn't know where he was, and then he drew in some deeper breaths. It was another few moments before he took in the fact that they were all standing over him with concerned looks on their faces. And not just his fellow superheroes. Inferness was with them.

'What are you doing?!' he cried. He pointed at Niamh. 'She's down from her command deck! Forget about me! Stop Inferness! SAVE THE EARTH!'

And then he scowled in confusion when they all burst out laughing.

About the Story

The aim of this story was to use a very down-to-Earth, human incident to demonstrate how we are completely immersed in our environment, in our atmosphere. The kids in this story are not doing anything dangerous, they're just playing a game in the garden. In countries like Ireland or the UK, we don't tend to think of the sun as dangerous, because we have a moderate climate – our air temperature rarely gets too high or too low, compared to other places in the world. But it's still a hard fact that if our bodies overheat, it can be dangerous. Just two or three degrees can be enough to do you harm. This also applies if you get too cold. When we talk about climate change heating the Earth by two or three degrees, it doesn't sound like much, but as it is with our bodies, when you're talking about the

overall temperature of the planet, small changes can have serious effects.

Have a Chat

Some of the best stories have their roots in ordinary human needs. Air is our most basic need. Our atmosphere has to have the right mix of gases, particularly oxygen; it has to be at the right pressure, and temperature. Imagine a real life situation where someone might not have enough air, or the air itself might be dangerous. How would the problem be solved?

Have a think about our other basic needs, and how civilization has come up with ways of providing for them. How has society provided for these needs? These are all ordinary, everyday problems that don't feel very dramatic, because they're so important, society has put a lot of work into solving them. But you can start a story using any one of these problems.

Some people have different needs to others. I'm short-sighted, so I need glasses to see properly. Someone might have an illness or disability that requires regular doses of a medicine, or some other routine or treatment or support.

Ask your teacher about the responsibilities the school has for its students.

There are countless situations where something could force you to act by preventing you from fulfilling a basic need. The more other people can relate to that need, the more they might relate to a story about it.



About the Cartoon

There's a difference between explaining something clearly and making someone care about what you're saying. A teacher might be telling you something important, but if you're not *interested*, it could be hard for you to pay attention to it. We all have different brains, so there's no single approach that works for everyone. If you ever find yourself talking in different ways to different people, that's why.

Have a Chat

Students come to school to learn, but what are you being educated for? Teachers come

to school to teach, but why did you choose to teach, and what are you most interested in teaching? Ask each other.

To tell a story, you have to figure out what it's like to be different people, to get into their heads and create experiences from their point of view. This takes imagination and empathy.

Think up different examples of empathy. The more real your characters feel, the more your readers will care what happens to them.

Part 2: Place

How does your character's environment affect their lives?

This is the location or setting for your story. Your character must find themselves somewhere for that story to take place. And that place is an important element in the personality and the physical body of your character. Think about your own setting – the environment you're in right now. It is not like a backdrop in a play. You interact with it. The quality and pressure of the air

in your lungs, the temperature of your environment, the food you eat, the level of sunlight shining on your skin, the lifestyle you have, the culture you live in, all affect who you are, mentally, emotionally and physically. If you go to a completely different place, that has a different effect, and the fact that it's different affects how you feel and think, how you behave, and



how people feel and think about you and behave towards you. And you, in turn, influence the environment around you when you interact with it. Most of what you see around you was probably put there by humans. We are constantly changing our environment. The same goes for your characters and their settings. They are always having an influence on each other.

About the Cartoon

When we write stories, we have to try and imagine ourselves in the position of the character. This often means that we have to take a point of view of someone who isn't like us, and imagine ourselves in a situation we've never been in. Our characters have to get things wrong, make mistakes, do things that are stupid and even mean or cruel, because this is what happens in real life, and it's what drives stories. We all mess up, from time to time. We also do damage to our environment, the things around us, either by accident or deliberately. While this can be incredibly annoying and frustrating in real life, it can also be very entertaining in fiction.

Have a Chat

Pick something from the environment in your life that you really rely on, and imagine it was taken away. Try and pick something that's not too obvious, like air or food or water, but still something that's important to you.

Can you think of things that humans damage on a regular basis? Are there some examples where that damage is necessary?

Do you think we're good at judging how much damage we do, and when to stop? Think of a situation where that damage isn't necessary, but we do it anyway. Can it be stopped, and if so, how? Can you think of a time when someone damaged something of yours, and how it made you feel? Was it a big problem for you, or was it just small, but annoying? Is it something you could use in a story?

A good technique for describing a character's feelings is to recall something in your life that affected your emotions in the same way, and try to apply that to the situation in the story.

Sometimes someone will shape their environment in a way that isn't bad for them, but it causes a problem for someone else. A new office building might block the view from your house. A dam could cut off water from someone further down the river. A neighbour might play their music too loud at night. The traffic on a road becomes too dangerous for children to be able to walk to their school. Think of your own examples.

What would you change in your everyday environment right now, if you had the power to do it?

Pick things that humans have made, and work together to figure out how they are connected to the natural world.

The New View

Through an Old Window

When Liz spotted the figure up in the ruins of the abbey, she knew immediately that there was something odd about this new visitor. People walked up this way sometimes, but it wasn't a real tourist spot and she often thought of it as *her* place, because it was on her family's land, in the field out beyond the end of their garden.

The site was little more than some stone foundations and low walls, though there was still one corner, part of the original chapel, that still stood several metres tall. Liz and her brother and sister had played out there for most of their lives. She was looking out through the kitchen window when she saw the figure, and for a minute, she thought it might be her boyfriend, Dylan, sneaking around the back to try and give her a fright. Then she got a better look and saw it was girl, someone she didn't know. Liz decided to go out and see who she was. She didn't really think there was anything suspicious about it until the other girl spotted her approaching and darted out of sight. Liz frowned.

Her mum and dad didn't mind people coming out to look at the ruins, as long as they didn't bother the cattle that grazed in the field – they were proud to have this piece of history on their land – but it was a few kilometres from town, and you never saw kids out here on their own, and this girl looked like a teenager. Liz often went out there for some peace and quiet, and



she had a little sheltered sport with a flat stone where she liked to sit and read her horror stories.

Climbing the back fence, she strode across the field towards the ruins, carefully stepping over the crusty cowpats. A head peeked out from behind a wall, and then quickly pulled back in again. There was something unsettling about this stranger. The girl had the same pale but flushed skin as Liz, and the same long, dark blonde hair, which had been blowing across her face.

'I can see you there!' Liz called out. 'You don't have to hide. We don't mind people looking at the abbey!'

'Please leave me alone!' the other girl shouted back. 'I'll go soon. Please, please stay back!'

Okay, thought Liz. *Now* I want to know what's going on. She kept walking, and the

other girl scampered from the wall where she was hiding, further back into the remains of the building. Liz broke into a sprint across the open ground, going around the site, intent on catching the stranger on the other side. She came round the back just in time to see the other girl do an abrupt about-turn and head off the other way. Liz was faster, and jumped a low wall to follow her. The visitor was racing through the ruins like she knew her way, never missing her footing as she climbed up a wall and through a window, but Liz caught up with her and grabbed her jacket, stopping her short.

‘Hey! You don’t have to run. What’s going on!’

‘Get back! Don’t look at me!’ The girl covered her face. ‘God . . . please, will you just let go. And keep back! Two metres, at least! Get back!’

Her panicked tone unnerved Liz, and she instinctively released the girl and took two steps back. The girl lowered her head so her hair hung over her face, pulled a piece of cloth from the pocket of her jeans and looped some strings over her ears. It was a light blue medical mask, the type you saw people wearing in hospitals. She held up her hands and took a breath.

‘I’m sorry, but you can’t come near me.’

‘Why not?’ Liz asked. ‘Who are you? Why were you running from me? We don’t mind people looking around here.’

‘I know. I . . . I was just looking to be on my own for a while. I need to hang around for a bit, is that all right? Just this area around here. I need you back out of it and wait outside the walls.’

‘What are you talking about? You can’t order me around in here. Who are you?’

‘You can call me Beth, okay? I’m not trying to order you around, I just . . . I just need you to keep clear of this space in here. You can’t be in here, in the floorspace of the chapel. Maybe a bit further out too, I don’t know.’

‘I’m not sure what’s going on here,’ Liz said. The girl sounded a little hysterical and Liz held her hands out to try and keep her calm. ‘Hey, is it Beth, as in Elizabeth? That’s my name too. I mean, my family call me Liz – most people do – but my friends in school actually call me Beth.’

The other girl, Beth, gave a little hello wave.

‘Why are you wearing that mask?’ Liz asked her.



‘Why am I . . . ?’ Beth hesitated. ‘Eh . . . Look, this is going to sound like a mad question, but what’s the date?’

Liz regarded the other girl for a moment, arching an eyebrow.

‘Bit out of touch, are we?’

‘Just . . . what’s the date?’

‘It’s the 7th of May.’

‘What year?’

‘Oh, *come on!* What are you, a *time traveller?*’

‘What year?’ Beth repeated insistently.

‘2016. It’s the 7th of May, 2016.’

‘Aw, nuts,’ Beth groaned.

‘Look, I’m not moving from this spot until you tell me what’s going on.’

‘That could be a really bad idea, Liz. For *you* as well as me. Like, seriously.’

Liz planted her feet a bit wider and folded her arms. Beth watched her do it and gave a smirk that was visible even with the mask on. Then the strange girl pointed out through the only remaining window frame in the wall of the chapel.

‘Tell me what you see.’

Liz looked . . . and then looked again. Framed by the stone rectangle were three huge wind turbines up at the top of the next hill. She knew this landscape in intimate detail. There were no wind turbines anywhere in the area.

‘What . . . what’s going on?’

In a fit of confused frustration, she went to grab Beth again, and Beth screeched and fought her off.

‘Stay back from me, God will you just *listen!*’

They squared off against each other, fists raised in a karate stance. Exactly the same karate stance. Liz looked curiously at her opponent. She’d obviously had the same kind of training. Beth looked off at the towering structures in the distance for a few moments, shook her head, then let out a quiet sigh and lowered her guard.

‘Ah, to hell with it. Okay, Liz. Try not to freak out.’

And then she took off her mask. Liz’s jaw dropped open and she felt suddenly dizzy. It wasn’t that she felt like she was

looking into a mirror, because Beth’s face was not a mirror image. It was Liz’s own face, the right way round. Only it wasn’t. It was a bit pudgier, the skin was blotchier and there were bags under Beth’s eyes from lack of sleep. Her hair wasn’t as well cut as Liz’s either. But Liz had no doubt about it, she was looking at . . . *herself*. A different version somehow, but it was her. Beth gave a slightly bitter smile.

‘You were asking for it.’

Liz was an intelligent girl, though she was not particularly imaginative, and tended to take life as it was. So if a girl who appeared to be her was standing right in front of her, then that was just how it was. Still, she needed to be sure.

‘What’s your favourite book?’ she asked. ‘I’ve never told anyone . . .’



‘When I was you, it was Stephen King’s *Firestarter*,’ Beth replied. ‘But I’ve got other favourites now. I’m from your future.’ She pointed out the window. ‘And so are the windmills. They’ll be built up there a year from now.’

So that was that. Liz was talking to her

future self. Okay then, fine. Beth put the mask back on.

‘How is this happening?’ Liz asked.

‘Last night – I mean, last night in *my* time,’ Beth corrected herself, ‘an asteroid bounced off Earth’s atmosphere. They said on the news that whatever material it was made from had caused disturbances in the space-time continuum and that “time spots” were happening all over the globe. Little areas where different time periods were overlapping. I suppose this must be one of those. I just came out here to sit and read, and now we’re *both* here, so we must be in 2016 and 2020 at the same time. That’s why you need to get out of this space. I don’t know how long these things last. It might snap me back to my time any minute. Or, y’know . . . not at all.’

‘You’re from 2020? And you can *time travel* now?’

‘Not on purpose. It’s an accident. A disaster really. Nobody knows what’s going on.’

‘How are you not totally freaking out about this?’

Liz held out her hands to grab Beth’s shoulders, but Beth shoved her back.

‘Stop! I told you, you have to keep back! Look, you can’t *touch* me, all right? You have to keep your distance. For a start, I’m not freaking out because I’m all out of freaks. The last few years have been one freak out after another, and now we’re in 2020 and I have no freaks left to give.’

‘Why, what’s going on?’ Liz asked anxiously.

‘I’m not sure I should tell you anything. I don’t know what effect it’ll have.’

‘You can’t say that *now*, not after what you’ve just told me. And I’m not budging

from this spot until you tell me what’s happening.’

‘All right, but just remember, some of this will sound bad, but things are . . . they’re working out okay for you,’ Beth said. ‘You’re not to panic.’

‘Yeah, sure. Don’t panic. That’s exactly the thing people say when everything’s okay.’

Beth sighed again and sat down on Liz’s – on *their* – favourite stone and Liz sat down a few metres away.

‘Right. Anyway, to start with; there’s a pandemic,’ Beth began. ‘That’s why I’m wearing the mask. If I have the disease, I don’t want to give it to you, and this helps stop me breathing it all over you. There’s a virus called COVID-19 that appears near the end of 2019 and it spreads everywhere, all over the world.’



‘Oh my God,’ Liz gasped.

‘Yeah, totally. Anyway, half of Ireland had to close down for ages to help stop the virus from spreading. We were off school . . . like, totally off school, for six months.’

‘No school for six months! That’s

incredible! That's so cool.'

'Yeah, no, it got to be a real drag, actually,' Beth said. 'You're going to be in Fifth Year in 2020, remember? Your Leaving Cert is coming up next year. Try doing all that schoolwork *at home . . . on your own*. No school-friends around you. No craic. We were all chatting on video, but it's not the same. We have to keep our distance from people. You can't hug your friends.'

'Aw no! I love hugs!'

'I know.'

'You mean, not even Dylan?'

'Not even Dylan. And I've hardly seen Granny or Grandad, except on a screen, because they're the other side of the country. We didn't go on holidays this year, because we can't travel. Airports are empty because hardly any planes are flying.'

'Is this real?' Liz exclaimed. She couldn't believe it. It all sounded so . . . so . . . dystopian.



'I'm only getting started,' Beth told her. 'Loads of shops and restaurants and all the pubs have had to close for months. You can only shop for essential stuff. There are lots

of zombie apocalypse jokes because of the warning signs and the doom and gloom and the empty streets. Only a certain number of people can go into a shop, and you have to wear one of these masks. When we're in *school*, we have to wear masks. We have to use sanitizer on our hands all the time. I'm washing or sanitizing my hands, like, six or seven times a day.'

'It sounds mad. This . . . this isn't *normal*.'

'No, it *is* normal *now*. This is how it is every day now. They're not taking any chances. Lots of other things have been cancelled too. There's no karate training; we can still do running because it's outside, but there's no big races any more, so it's hard to stay motivated. No charity runs either.'

'That explains it then,' Liz said.

'Explains what?'

'Well, you've kind of . . . sort of . . . let yourself go a bit. You look a bit rough.'

'Hey, you git! That's not fair, you don't know how it is!' Beth protested. 'I'm not doing enough training . . .'

'No, I wasn't saying-.'

'I'm stressed out to bits! I'm comfort-eating to cope because my nerves are shot . . . you don't know what it's like! I'm actually doing really well, considering.'

'Okay, okay, I'm sorry.'

'Oh, *and* then they *cancelled* the Leaving Cert this year,' Beth added. 'Everyone was working their butts off at home for these exams and they just . . . basically *estimated* what grades everyone was *likely to get*, and that's how the government decided what college places they got. Only hardly anyone can go into college now. It's all video

lectures at home. Even some television and radio shows are being done from the presenter's homes. I don't even know if I'll be doing the exams next year or not.'

'But this can't be true,' Liz insisted. 'There's just no way.'

'This is what's *normal* now,' Beth said again. 'This is what I'm telling you. There's so much that's going to change. I mean, there's Brexit as well. In June of 2016 – eh, this year – Britain votes to leave the European Union . . .'

'What does that mean?'

'It's . . . eh . . . Ah, don't worry, it's pretty boring and the news will be talking about it for *years*. They'll explain everything. But it's a big deal for Ireland too. Then there's Donald Trump being president . . .'

'Trump? The *reality show guy*, is going to be the American President?'

'Yeah, he gets voted in in 2016. That all gets a bit mad. And then he got voted out again this year, after he did everyone's head in. And the weather's going bananas. Climate change is totally a thing now. There's the Beast from the East in 2018, when there's freezing weather and heavy snow in Ireland for weeks, and everyone goes mad, stocking up on bread, and all the shops run out.'

'They run out of *bread*?'

'And there's floods in loads of places and wildfires all over the world,' Beth went on. 'There's really bad bushfires in Australia in 2019. They kill loads and loads of koalas.'

'Aw no!' Liz put her hands to her mouth. 'I *love* koalas!'

'I *know*,' Beth said. 'And anyway, then COVID-19 appears at the end of 2019

and the whole world changes in 2020. I mean . . . The. Whole. World. The life you have now? Everything you think is normal? That's going to change. You won't think it can, but it does.'

'None of this sounds real.'



'That's what everybody keeps saying,' Beth said in an exhausted voice. 'It's like a really long, slow disaster film. And we're actually *living* in it. Now look, can you just move back out of the chapel? You don't want to get stuck in my time if I get snapped back, do you?'

'But I *am* going to get stuck in your time, amn't I?' Liz sobbed, throwing her arms up helplessly. 'That's where I'm headed. You're *me* in 2020!'

'Yeah, but I mean you don't want to get pulled in there *now*.' Beth gave her a sympathetic look. 'It'll all change, eventually. I didn't really understand it before, but *everything* changes. And it keeps on changing. I didn't want to lay all this on you, but you wouldn't let it go. Now . . . please, move back out of here. I think . . . I think if you keep the window in view, and

go back until you can't see the wind turbines on the hill any more, that's the best way to be sure.'

She could see that Liz was upset, and who could blame her, after hearing all that?

'Listen, I know it sounds really bad, but there's good stuff happening too,' she said softly. 'You'll see. Everyone's being a bit nicer lately, a bit kinder to each other. You're talking to the people around you more. You appreciate *so many* things and so many people that you took for granted. You know what's important. You see things differently.'

'The scientists came up with vaccines for the virus in less than a year, which is pretty incredible, apparently. And Ireland's coping better than a lot of other countries. You know how frustrated you're getting right now, how you keep swearing at the news? Well, you finally feel like you can make a difference.'

'You'll get involved in an environmental group in a couple of years and you'll go on marches and meet a bunch of new friends, some really cool people. You'll be connecting with people all over the world. Seriously, we're making things happen – we had an assembly in the Dáil and everything. We're making politicians sit up and pay attention. They don't know what to do with us. The world's a bit of a mess, but it feels like it's pushing towards something better.'

'Oh, and you learn to bake . . .'

'You can *bake*?!' Liz exclaimed.

'Oh yeah, trust me, baking's a whole thing in 2020. You're gonna be a total baking queen. That's it, see . . . things keep changing, but *you* change with them. You fit into the world you're in . . . It's like these

ruins.' Beth gestured around her at the chapel. 'A long time ago, this was a proper building. People worshipped their god here and there was a completely different view out of that window and *that* was what was *nor-*.' She frowned, holding her hands out to the sides suddenly. 'Hey, did you feel something strange there?'



'What?' Liz replied. 'Yeah, like a . . . like a wobble.' She was backing away, not wanting to go, yet still wary that she might get pulled into this future chaos too early. 'Hey, what about Dylan. Are we still going out? We're still together, right?'

'Dylan? Oh! Oh my God!' Beth gasped. 'I completely forgot! This'll blow your mind. Wait till I tell you about Dyl-.'

And just like that, she was gone, as if she'd never been there.

'Aw nuts,' Liz whimpered, taking a shuddery breath. 'That's just . . . *typical*!'

It was a deeply unsettling thing to see someone disappear right in front of you. She peered through the stone window frame. The wind turbines were gone too. She found she was shaking and wanted to

sit down, though she didn't want to go and sit on the stones of the abbey.

Instead, she turned back for the house and started walking. As she walked, she struggled to remember what Beth had told her and, jumping over the back fence into her garden, she found she only had a vague memory of what had just happened. It was like a fading dream, like trying to grasp smoke, and she frowned, turning to look back at the ruins of the abbey. What had she been thinking about? Something about the future, and what things might be like in a few years, as she was finishing school and planning for college. It seemed important at the time and now she couldn't for the life of her remember what it was.

Things were going to *change*; that was the thought that had stuck with her. Normal was temporary. She was struck by the certainty that some day, her life would be totally different . . . and that would be okay.

Now, however, she had a sudden urge to try and bake some bread.

About the Story

This story came from the idea of how we tend to view 'normality' as something that can't change, when in fact, it changes all the time. The pandemic that started in 2019 is a perfect example of this. Things we took for granted, like standing in a crowd, walking into a shop without using a mask or sanitiser, or going to school, changed in a very short period of time. Over the space of a few months, it became 'normal' for children to do their schooling on screens at home, to see people walking around wearing masks, and see Garda checkpoints where they stopped people to

ask where they were travelling to. Imagine explaining these major changes to the 'you' of 2016. That idea was the starting point of the story.

Almost every story is about a change in someone's life, usually one that creates a challenge for the character. It can be that they go to a different place, or meet different people, or it could simply be that something about their environment changes. This is a major factor in the way we have to think about the climate crisis, because our weather is changing, which will in turn, change our environment, which will change our lives.

Have a Chat

Think of ways that your environment has helped shape who you are. It could be to do with how you dress, or wear your hair. It could be scars, or where parts of your skin are darker or more freckled than others because they see more sun. It could be the language you speak or the accent you speak it in. The world you live in has an effect on you. Think of some examples. These are things that also make you different to other people. It is part of what makes you the person you are.

Different places around the world have different climates, so they suffer different extremes of weather. What kinds of extreme weather have you heard about on the news, and where were they? How are they different to what we get here?

What kinds of problems do people face in other places, that we don't have here, and why? The setting affects the story.



About the Cartoon

There is a limit to the amount of land we have, the amount of soil we have to grow crops, and wild areas to support wildlife. The more we take away from these purposes, the less life our land can support. We will also lose land to rising seas, and to environmental damage. With this cartoon, I wanted to create an image that conveyed how self-destructive our activities can be.

Have a Chat

Everything we eat, everything we make and everything we burn for energy comes from the ground. Our existence depends on them, so we have to think about the future of them. Our soil, along with the peat, coal, gas and oil we burn for energy, formed

from millions of years of dead organisms, mostly plant life, layer upon layer. Life like fungi, bacteria and worms keep our soil fertile. Without them, we would not be able to grow food.

What kinds of things can affect soil, to prevent crops from growing in it? How do different kinds of weather have an impact?

How many ways can you think of that we dig into the earth? Do we return the ground to its original state afterwards? Think of how much of Earth's history is hidden deep beneath the ground, in the seabed, in glaciers and the wood of old trees. Imagine discovering something unusual buried deep under the ground . . . something that might start a story.

Cremation

I'm not sure when I first noticed that the tree was dead. I wasn't even sure what kind of tree it was – a poplar or maybe a birch. Before this, my main concern about it had been that it was close to the garage, which stands separate from the house, in the corner of the garden. There were traces of cracks in the concrete around the base of the wall, where it looked like the roots might eventually undermine the foundations. Like so many things in life, I didn't pay much attention to that tree until it became a problem. It was in a blind spot in my consciousness; there, but unnoticed. There was this thing towering over the back of the garden, at least as high as the house, and I hadn't even looked at the leaves to see what type of tree it was.



I was certainly paying attention to it now. It hadn't reached maturity – the trunk was less than a foot in diameter at the base and it was about thirty feet tall. A thin,

lanky adolescent, yet to find its bulky strength but already high enough to make an unwieldy corpse. I had noticed that the bark had started cracking and lifting away from the wood, no doubt due to a disease of some kind. With two young kids, a budding teenager and all the work I still had to do on the house, we had a lot of other things going on. Having a disease in a tree treated was way down on my list of priorities. But soon the bark was peeling away in heavy leathery strips, exposing the pale bare wood of the trunk. Woodlice took up residence in busy clumps in the gaps and cracks of the sloughing skin. When the leaves didn't come back in the spring, I knew we had a problem. A dead tree, big enough and close enough to damage the roof and even the wall of our garage if it fell.

This wasn't the first tree to threaten our home. On the day we'd picked up the keys for our new house, we arrived to find a heavy bough had fallen from an ancient horse chestnut at the back of the garden, in the other corner – one of a line of gnarled and ancient trees that ran behind the row of houses and had been there long before anything had been built on the land. The branch had narrowly missed our neighbour's garage and could have done thousands of euros worth of damage.

There we were with a house in need of renovation, an empty shell, still waiting for a heating system, a kitchen, bathrooms and even doors – so much of our money was bound into this place for the next few years

and now the first thing we had to do was pay six hundred euros to chop down a dead chestnut tree.

Apart from the fact that I hated having to cut down such a beautiful old beast, it was money we simply couldn't spare, but there was no avoiding it. If the tree fell, it could demolish our neighbour's garage or crash through the back of our house.

That job took a full day, with three men, a cherry-picker and a tractor and trailer. The house was showered in sawdust that floated into the air in gritty clouds as the tree surgeons started high and worked their way down in a roar of chainsaws, lopping off a piece at a time and either dropping them or lowering them on ropes. That old chestnut ended up spread out across our garden in its component parts, as if waiting to be assembled again.



I watched as much as I could, trying to learn how they did it. I figured, I never knew when I might need to cut down a tree myself. They wouldn't take the logs in part payment and I couldn't keep them in the garden –they'd take up too much space

and wreck our back lawn. Something else we wouldn't have money to fix for a few years. I didn't have the chainsaw, or the skills, to chop the huge logs into pieces I could burn. So I kept a few chunks, let a friend of mine take as much as his car could hold, and let the tree surgeons drive off with a large tractor trailer full of logs from our tree.

That was in 2010, just before we had the worst winter Ireland had seen in decades, when I ended up burning logs almost every day for about four months. Logs I had to *buy*. I was well bruised from kicking myself over that winter.

And then the other tree died. I could appreciate the irony. One of the things I'd looked forward to about finally owning my own property was planting a few trees with the kids. Instead, there would be two less trees in the world because of me. We were hit with several weeks of windy weather and I anchored the brittle mast of dead wood as best I could with a couple of ropes, worried that it would fall before I had a chance to *control* that fall. In the meantime, I started to do a bit of research online, learning how to cut down a tree. There were a number of helpful demo videos on YouTube – and many, many more that showed the accidents that could happen when idiots with no expertise or experience tried some DIY lumberjacking. Smashed roofs, walls, cars, cut and crush injuries . . . there seemed to be no end to the damage you could do with relatively little effort.

I also found out that it was impossible to hire a chainsaw in Ireland. Presumably because of the aforementioned idiots and the amputated limbs that resulted. But I

was still confident. This wasn't a huge tree and as long as I could get it to fall diagonally across the garden, it wouldn't do any damage. I wouldn't even need a chainsaw. I had a couple of bow saws I figured would do the job.

I love wood in all its forms. I love walking in forests, I love working with wood with my hands, I love the colours and textures, the feel of cutting and shaping it. I like to burn it too – I prefer a wood fire to a peat fire. There may be less heat and it does burn out faster – depending on how well the wood is seasoned – but it also burns out almost completely, leaving hardly any ash, compared with the mounds left over when you burn peat. I hate the powdery grey clouds that ash makes when you have to clear out the fireplace.

It's better for the environment too. The managed forests replace trees as they're felled. Young trees absorb carbon as they grow and hold onto it, so using wood as fuel is, theoretically, carbon neutral. As long as we're replacing them, they're not adding any new carbon to the atmosphere.

Theoretically. Frankly, it would be better if we didn't burn anything at all.

Ireland's peat bogs, on the other hand, will take hundreds, if not thousands of years to form again, if it's even possible. And in the meantime, we're releasing all the carbon trapped for thousands of years in that peat. The oil, coal and gas we've based most of our civilization upon have taken even longer to form and there's no question that they'll eventually run out.

A wood fire sounds better than peat too. It's the sound of a comfortable home. Every couple of months we get sacks of

logs delivered. They're always too big for the fireplace, too chunky to get a fire going, and for someone who works at a desk a lot of the time, there's no better stress relief than getting the axe out and spending an energetic hour splitting logs and chopping some kindling.



The weather was getting cold again, there were new storms coming and the tree had been standing dead for too long. So one Saturday, I went out, and tied two new ropes to branches halfway up to help steer it as it fell. The other end of one rope was anchored to a heavy stake in the ground, the second tied to the trunk of another tree. Our teenage son was too cool to be interested, but our two daughters, three and four-and-a-half years old, were fascinated. They were under strict instructions to wait inside out of the way, but they pressed their faces against the back window, waiting for Daddy to amuse them – which, of course, was my most important role in life.

The key thing was making sure the tree

fell across the lawn, not towards the house, not onto the hedge and fence that bordered the back of the garden and *definitely* not onto the garage. And obviously I had to be careful not to be flattened by it too. A lot of the YouTube videos went through my mind as I started sawing. Climbing a stepladder, I cut off a couple of the bigger branches on the garage side, hoping the loss of weight on that side would help persuade it to fall the other way.

Then I started on the trunk. I cut two wedges out, one on the front and then one slightly higher up on the back, leaving it standing on a 'hinge' of wood just a couple of inches thick, which should, in theory, dictate the direction of the fall. The wood was taut, but lifeless and dry. I had assumed the tree was unstable, unbalanced and brittle, just waiting to topple at the first bite of the saw. Instead, it just stayed standing there after I cut out the second wedge, attached to its stump by no more than two inches of wood across the trunk. I gazed up into its branches, wary of its weight, but surprised and struck by a newfound respect for how well formed this thing was. Thirty feet high, with asymmetrical branches and yet so precisely balanced that it stayed upright on a base little thicker than the edge of my hand. It had taken more than ten years to get to this size, through all manner of weather and even now that the life was gone from it, it was still stronger than I'd given it credit for.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see my two little girls at the window, waiting. Putting a hand against the trunk, I pushed. And the tree came toppling down, hitting the marshy lawn with a soft crunching thump. I couldn't hear my daughters from

outside, but my wife later told me she'd never heard the girls laugh so loud.

Their Daddy pushed a tree down with one hand.



I untied the ropes, then set about cutting the tree up into logs and sticks. I left them along the wall of the garage to season for a while, stacking the thinner branches into a rack I'd made by the fence and tossing the bundles of twigs into a pile to be used as kindling.

We only light a fire in the evenings, so it might burn for three or four hours before we let it go out. That tree took over ten years to grow and we used up all the wood from it in less than three weeks. I thought a lot about that – the whole idea of burning stuff for heat and energy. And that's what we do; despite having other, limitless sources of energy at our disposal, we continue to burn in hours something that takes years, centuries or millennia to form.

As a species, we are setting fire to our house to keep warm. We are, ever so slowly, cremating the earth we live on.

I love a good fire, but I miss the tree.

About the Story

This was the story of how I had to cut down a tree in my garden. Having to cut it down made me think a lot about its form, how it had grown, and how I was going to deal with it when this column of dead wood became a threat to our garage. Trees are largely formed from air – nearly half of the structure of the wood is created out of carbon, which is drawn from the air as carbon dioxide during photosynthesis. The same carbon dioxide we breathe out. When that wood is burned, all that carbon is released back into the atmosphere – turned back into carbon dioxide.

Peat, coal, gas and oil are older forms of the same thing; living things that died, and whose remains were crushed down into the earth over thousands or millions of years. This is why we call them ‘fossil fuels’. Millions of years’ worth of carbon that should not have been released. Now there’s too much of that carbon dioxide in the air, because of all the fossil fuels we’ve been burning and, along with other greenhouse gases we create, that carbon dioxide is acting like a blanket, holding in too much of the sun’s heat.

The tree had taken years to grow and we burned all of it in the space of a few weeks, and that was only with the occasional fire. That made a big impression on me.

Have a Chat

Think of your basic needs, the things you have to have to stay alive and healthy every

day. What do you rely on? Pick one thing that you need, and describe what would happen if you started running short of it. A shortage of resources can be a small, personal problem or a massive global issue. Wars have started over things like water supplies, farmland, or resources like coal, gas or oil.

Our environment supplies our needs, and sometimes there is conflict over who has control over a limited resource. Pick two things that people fight over today; one that’s small and personal; one that countries would go to war over. These kinds of things can be useful sources of drama for stories.

Now pick two examples of a *shared* resource, where people have agreed on a system to avoid fighting over it; one small and personal; one on a national scale. These are ways of avoiding conflict we don’t want in real life.

Look at the place around you, assuming it’s somewhere you know well, and imagine something has changed, something you didn’t expect. It could be something fairly ordinary, like the walls have been painted. Or it could be something weird, like the gravity has failed and everything is floating around in the air.

Forget characters, just concentrate on the setting. Make a change that would make you stop and wonder, ‘What on Earth is going on?’ Remember, stories are often about change. The more you look, the more you’ll notice that your environment is always changing.



About the Cartoon

The world is not going to end. Climate change means just that: change. However, some of those changes will be on a very big scale. It will affect farmland, cities, coastlines, wilderness, the oceans, glaciers and sea ice, as well as all the people and animal life that live in all those habitats. We can stop some of this from happening by tackling the causes of climate change. Some of those changes are locked in though, and they are going to happen no matter what we do. Fortunately, humans are extremely good at adapting to our environment – or adapting our environment to us.

Have a Chat

Look around you. Give some examples of ways that we humans have adapted to our environment. No matter where you are – unless you're naked in the wilderness somewhere – there will be examples all around you. And I don't just mean protecting yourself from the weather. What does each thing enable you to do?

Is there anything you think is particularly clever? Is there anything near you that doesn't work properly? Why? Is there anything near you whose purpose you don't understand? Is there anything you've never noticed before?

Part 3: Problem

The character's struggle.

This is the start of your story, and the root of your plot. Your character has to be faced with a challenge, so that they will struggle to overcome that challenge, and your reader can watch the process, experience suspense, and be engaged and entertained by that struggle. We put our characters through difficult times for other people's entertainment (and our own). You can have one utterly simple problem, as you might have in a picture book or a short cartoon. Or you could have lots of small

complicated problems, held together by one much larger, overarching problem, as you might have in a novel or a film. In this case, each small one might have to be solved in order to get to the solution of the big one – or sometimes solving something small leads to a bigger challenge. Once we've solved the main problem, we finish up. There's no point hanging around once we've finally relieved the suspense. It'll get boring. The problem is the start of your story, and the solution is the end.



About the Cartoon

There are things that we need and things that we just want. Human need is a major driver in most stories. Because civilization has fulfilled most of our fundamental needs, or at least, has provided the means to fulfill them, many of us have spare time and disposable income. Our lives are not totally taken up with surviving.

However, it's human nature to seek stimulation, and to acquire things we associate with pleasure and wealth. We want *stuff*. And billions of euros are spent every year on advertising and marketing to convince us that we cannot be happy unless we are constantly seeking more stuff. We won't keep most of it, but we will always want more.

There is a big difference between stories and reality. Stories need conclusive, dramatic solutions. In life however, most of our problems are solved by slow, steady action rather than one big dramatic act. One of the solutions to climate change is, strangely, to *do less*. Buy less, use less, burn less, travel less.

The pandemic forced us to do less. It was a vital part of the way we all helped prevent the spread of a deadly disease.

Everything we use in life comes from the Earth. The less we use, the less impact we have. But we still have to *live*, which means using the Earth's resources, while doing as little damage as we can, and making sure we don't run out of the things we need.

Have a Chat

Think of examples of other problems you've solved by doing less . . . or nothing.

Some of the things we throw out will break down and become part of the ecology. Some won't break down, and will just sit there, but won't do much damage. And some will start causing damage as soon as they're discarded. Even when we put things in recycling, we may not be able to recycle those materials forever. Plastic bottles can never be made into new plastic bottles.

Some people think that if something can't be reused or recycled completely, it should never be manufactured. Would you agree with that? Why?

Think of an object you're particularly interested in; it could be a football, a musical instrument, a games console, anything at all. Find out if it can be recycled or not, and if so, can it be recycled where you live? Have you ever visited a recycling centre? How many things can you think of that are recycled there? Could you set a story there?

We often hear terrible things about plastic and how bad it is for the environment. But it's not that plastic is bad, it's how we use it. It's a material that has changed civilization.

Maybe we just need to treat it in a way that recognizes how *valuable* it is, and stop throwing it away? Can plastic ever be used to save lives? Can you think of an example?

The Things On My Skin

AAAGH!

These things on my skin!
These things on my skin!
I'm all that they've got,
I'm the world they live in.

Flowing waves, blowing winds,
Move like hands round a clock,
I'm a thin living skin,
Round a hard ball of rock.

Just look what they're doing!
Can't they smell the bad air?
I was fine with the poo and
The farts that's all fair.

They're all living creatures,
They have to let rip,
It's part of their nature,
But I'm ready to flip!

AAAGH!

They're drilling my skin!
They're drilling my skin!
They've oil rigs and diggers,
They're jabbing them in.
It's the smoke that's the thing,
That drives me insane.
That and the digging,
The drilling . . . the pain!

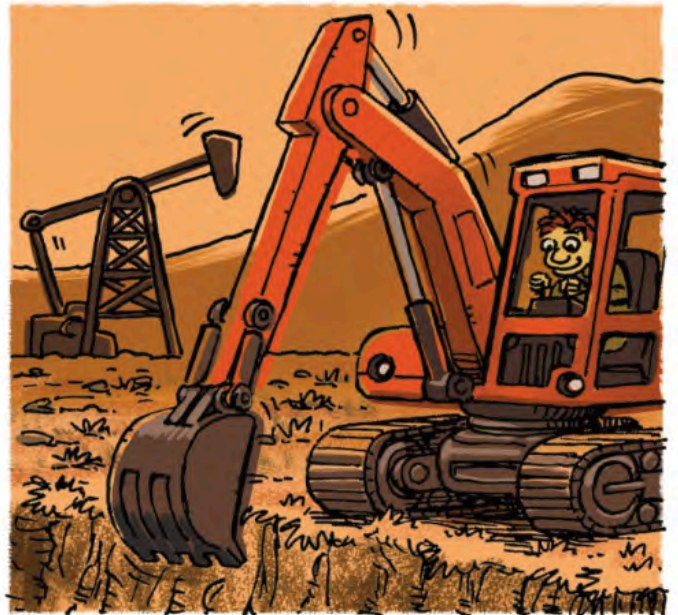
I've got land, I've got seas,
There's enough to go round,
But stop cutting down trees!
Don't dig up ALL my ground!

They crawl on my surface,
They're making me itch,
The smell makes me nervous,
Makes my atmosphere twitch.

AAAGH!

They're eating my skin!
They're eating my skin!
Machines in their billions,
Gulping it in!

Watch them poison my soil,
Watch them making a mess,
Burning coal, burning oil,
Liquid dinosaur flesh.



It took so long to make,
It took billions of years,
But they're so quick to take it,
They have me in tears.
My whole body's ruined,

I mean, sure, it'll mend,
If these slobs, these buffoons,
See some sense in the end.
They put stuff in the air,
That should stay in the land,
What's that doing up there?
I've had all I can stand!



AAAGH!

They're burning my skin!
They're burning my skin!
Their fires like cigarettes,
I'm breathing in!

The air and the oceans,
Are losing their cool,
It's got me emotional,
Feeling the fool.

The smoke's like a blanket,
All itchy and hot,
It's warming this planet,
When I'd just rather not.

My weather's mutating,
And not for the better,
The bits they all hate,
Will get hotter or wetter.

AAAGH!

These things on my skin!
These things on my skin!
They're changing my weather,
With new waves and winds.

The heat whips up storms,
Churns up the sea's flow,
From the whales to the worms,
Nature's hit with cruel blows.

But there's still hope for me,
There's still all those kids,
Who are starting to see,
What the grown-ups did.

To that thin layer of air,
The air they all breathe,
Now they're starting to care,
About where this all leads.



Flowing waves, blowing winds,
Move like hands round a clock,
I'm a thin living skin,
Round a hard ball of rock.

I'm all that you've got,
I'm all that you need.
Before I get too hot,
You should stop and just . . . breathe.

About the Poem

While this is a text aimed at younger readers, the idea is an unpleasant one – that humans are parasites living on the skin of the Earth. Many environmentalists don't like this kind of imagery, as they think it's too negative. I wrote it to relate environmental damage to harming the human body, because damage on a planet-sized scale can seem to be distant and theoretical, and often doesn't provoke a very emotional reaction. It's just too big.

Stories are more about provoking emotions than they are about delivering facts, and they can be more effective in convincing us of something because of that. Drama gets our brains working. It makes us *feel* things.

If there's one problem that the issue of climate change has suffered from, it's that the people trying to raise awareness of it have relied on facts to get the message across. On the other hand, those who've tried to block or confuse the message, have often appealed to people's emotions, instilling doubt and suspicion. And they play on the idea that this too big and far away, so we can avoid taking responsibility.

Have a Chat

Think of a dramatic problem from a film, TV show, book or comic that could have been solved in a much easier way if someone had taken action earlier to stop what was happening. How and why did the writers manipulate the story towards the more dramatic ending?

Think of something in your life that you do on a regular basis to avoid having to deal with a much more dramatic situation. How would you change that to get more entertainment out of it?

An emotional reaction can be much more powerful than an intellectual one. And we react with more emotion and greater urgency to close-in, immediate issues, than we do to big, long-term problems we struggle to relate to or understand. In a similar way, the dramatic, final conclusions we see in fiction offer much more satisfaction than the slow, consistent actions that get us through day-to-day life.

There are lots of times in our lives when we wish we'd chosen a different course of action. Think of an example where something unfortunate and dramatic happened to you, and you could have avoided it if you'd taken some simple precaution – perhaps it was even something you knew at the time you should do, but decided not to. Why didn't you?



About the Cartoon

In many countries, the money spent on the military dwarfs the budgets of other public services. The basic argument for this huge spending is that a country cannot afford to lose a war. The nation's security must be maintained at all costs. But military force is also a means of exercising power, a way to impose your will on other countries. As nations move increasingly towards achieving security by having more friends, cooperating and not getting into wars with their neighbours, the world is getting less tolerant of those who impose their will by threatening, bombing or invading another country. If we reacted to climate change the way we react to the threat of war, we would be much better prepared for the challenges we're already starting to face.

Have a Chat

War stories are exciting. They have action and danger and heroism. In the real world, we'd rather avoid war. Environmental disasters in stories are exciting. They have action and danger and heroism. In the real world, we'd rather avoid them too.

Military forces don't just fight wars. Think of some examples of environmental disasters where the military might be, or have been, brought in to help. How would they help, and what makes them well prepared to do it?

A lot of militaries are starting to regard climate change as a threat to their nations. Think of ways the military could help the environment, and ways that they harm it.

A Screech in the Night

Sophie woke with a fright, though she didn't know why at first, blinking and still drowsy. A sound outside, she thought. Then she heard it again; a high-pitched screech, a harsh 'ar-ar-ar-ar-ar-ar!' sound. She pulled her duvet up to her face, eyes wide with fear, her heart galloping. Leaning over, she pushed the curtain aside with a shaking hand. Out in the darkness of the back garden, she saw a scattering of glowing eyes down at the end, near the back wall, and she jerked back in panic.



'Daddy! *Daddy!* Something's outside!'

Her cry was so loud, so terrified, it brought her parents running into the room in seconds. Her older brother Eamon followed them in a moment later. Her mother turned on the lights as her dad knelt by the bed.

'What is it, pet?' he asked urgently, with concern on his face.

'I heard a screech outside! I saw *glowing eyes!*' she whimpered.

The sound pierced the night again, and Sophie flinched. Her dad smiled.

'Don't worry, love, it's only a fox. And you just saw reflections in their eyes. Have you never heard that sound before?'

'*That's* what a *fox* sounds like?' Eamon said. 'Seriously? I thought they'd, like . . . just bark or something. That sounds like a banshee stubbed her toe.'

Sophie knew he was trying to be the big lad, but she was glad he was joking about it. Eamon was twelve, four years older than Sophie, and though he liked to think he was much more grown up than her, this kind of thing was new to him too. They had grown up in the city and since moving to the new house, they'd found the countryside a *very* different place. And now she had foxes waking her in the night, and scaring the be-jeepers out of her.

'Let's see if we can spot them,' Mum said, turning the light off again.

Dad pulled the curtain aside a bit, Eamon climbed onto Sophie's bed, and their parents knelt in behind them, peering out the window. Sure enough, there were foxes out there, an adult and three or maybe four cubs; it was hard to see in the gloom. And even though they saw the humans at the window, they did not immediately run off. Sophie was wonderstruck. Foxes, *right here* in their garden!

They continued to see the foxes in the days that followed, glimpses of them in the

garden and in the gorse bushes on the hillside above them. There were two adults and five cubs, one with a crooked back leg, that it might have been born with, or maybe it had been hit by a car and the leg had healed badly. It was smaller than the others too. The cubs had thinner, more yellowy fur and looked smaller, stringier and were less cautious than their parents. Dad reckoned they'd been born in late March, and were about ten weeks old.

Dad had grown up in this area, then moved into town for his job. Now he and Mum had bought a bungalow out here, because they said houses were too expensive in town. Sophie and Eamon missed their friends. The house was up a country road in the hills, so they had to be driven everywhere; they couldn't just go out and play on the road, like they could when they were living on the estate.

Trying to spot the foxes became a favourite pastime, and the pair were allowed to go up the hill on their own, as long as they stayed on the slope facing the house, and kept out of their neighbours' gardens. It was about a week after that first night when Eamon found the den while he was out exploring. From then on, he and Sophie tried to get out every day to see the playful animals.

It was a warm day in June, after school, and they were out on the hillside. Eamon was looking through his binoculars at the den, further along the slope, the entrance partially hidden under a gorse bush.

'Can I have a go now?' Sophie asked.

'In a minute!' he said sharply, making her scowl.

They were lying on the grass, which was yellow and dry. There hadn't been any rain

in weeks. Even the peat the grass was rooted in looked parched, all hard and rough beneath their hands, with cracks running through it. With the drought, there weren't many places for the foxes to get water now, and their path to the nearest stream ran right past the house.

Eamon had been given the binoculars for his birthday a few days ago; they were proper expensive ones and he didn't like letting his little sister use them. He was getting interested in birdwatching, but the field glasses were handy for observing the foxes too. All the cubs were out on the hillside, play-fighting and larking around. The kids had names for all of them, but their favourite was Limpet, the lame one that walked with a limp. He was smaller than the others, and got picked on by his brothers and sisters. It might have been for this reason that he was more curious about the children, and would come closer than the other cubs. He was looking over at them now.



'Pleeeeeease?' Sophie asked again.

Eamon groaned, tutted and handed her

the binoculars.

‘Okay, but don’t touch the lenses, you’ll leave smudges.’

‘I know. I’m not an *eejit*!’

‘You are a *bit* of an *eejit*,’ he murmured, and she slapped his arm.

‘Limpet’s coming closer,’ she whispered as she lifted the binoculars to her eyes.

‘Let’s try the treats.’

They’d been carrying dog treats with them for the last while, hoping to get close enough to give the foxes some. Anything they left out got eaten, but the foxes always kept a careful distance from the children. Limpet was only twenty metres away now, winding back and forth as he walked closer. He came closer still, only about ten metres away, and Sophie reached into her pocket and threw a treat to him. He bounded back, came forward again, and sniffed the meat-flavoured biscuit. He snapped it up and eyed her cautiously, waiting to see if there were more where that came from.

Sophie was about to toss another one when Eamon jumped to his feet, and Limpet took fright, scampering off back to his siblings.

‘Aw, what did you do?’ Sophie protested. ‘He was going to come over!’

‘Look,’ Eamon said in a low voice. ‘Over past the trees there. Look at the sky.’

He was pointing, and she followed his gaze out to the hills on the other side of the valley. There was a wide column of grey smoke rising into the sky.

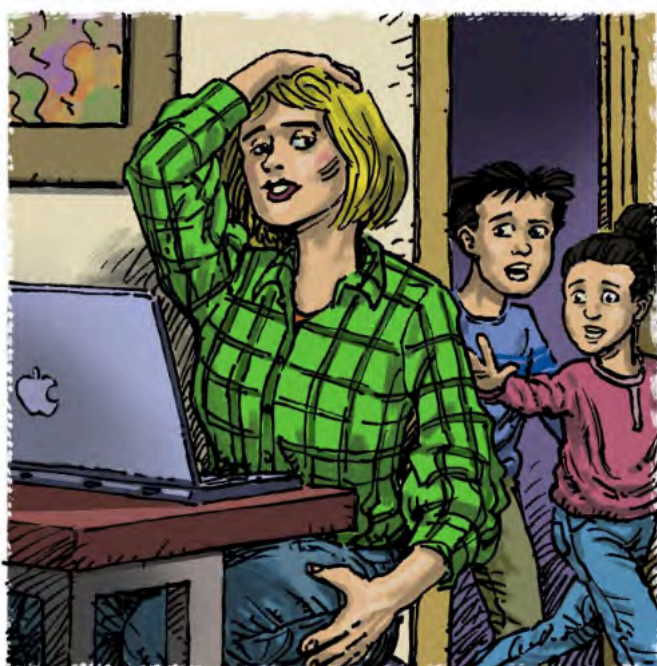
‘It’s a fire, a big one,’ Eamon said. ‘I wonder what’s burning?’

‘Do you think it’s a house?’ she wondered aloud.

‘It looks too wide. A field maybe? Farmers burn fields sometimes, I think,

before planting their crops. I dunno. We should go and tell Mum.’

The two of them started running down the hill, weaving around the gorse bushes, their feet crunching down on the long dry grass. Ever since the COVID pandemic, their mum had worked in her office at home, which meant she was there to mind them after school. She was working on some chart with numbers on her laptop when they burst into the room. Her first reaction was to be annoyed, but then she saw their faces and the way they were heaving in excited breaths.



‘What is it?’ she said, immediately holding her hands up for calm when they started blurting out. ‘Hold on, hold on. Take a breath – then talk.’

Eamon told her about the smoke, and she walked out into the front garden with them. Her phone rang as she gazed at distant column rising into the sky. She answered, spoke with the person for a minute, and then hung up.

‘Okay, that was your dad, he’s on his way home,’ she told them. ‘A big stretch of

the gorse on the far side of that hill is on fire. It's still a long way off, the fire brigade is on its way and there are already people trying to put it out, but you're to stay in the house or the garden until I tell you it's safe, all right?'

Dad came home, only to head out again soon after to join the people digging trenches to help stop the fire. Mum was organising, calling around to keep the neighbours informed, and check in on the older folk on the road. Tractors went by with plastic tanks of water on their trailers.



The fire continued to burn into the evening, the smell of the smoke carrying across the valley. As darkness began to fall, one of the neighbours came over to talk to Mum. He was an elderly man named Aidan, a lawnmower mechanic who worked out of a big shed in his garden. Eamon and Sophie pretended to play basketball at the hoop at the side of the house, hanging close enough to Mum to hear the conversation.

'It's crossed the road at the bottom, and it's coming up the hill at the end there,'

Aidan said, pointing to the wild area behind their properties. 'It could get this far tonight if they can't slow it down. I've got a pressure washer I can put on the hose and take it up onto the slope with the pick-up, but you might want to take the kids and head down to the town.'

'The Air Corps are sending a helicopter that can dump water,' she assured him. 'It should be here in the next hour. And John texted a few minutes ago, and says they've got most of it out over on Healy's Hill. We should be okay.'

'I'm not so sure,' Aidan muttered. 'If the fire gets into the peat, it'll be much harder to put out. It could burn for weeks. Nothing'll grow there after.'

Mum gave him a hard look and tilted her head towards Eamon and Sophie. They knew that gesture; it was the 'don't scare the children' look.

'Mummy,' Sophie called over. 'What about the foxes?'

'We can't worry about them right now, there's a lot going on, pet,' Mum replied, heading back towards the house. 'Gorse fires are just something that happen in nature from time to time. I'm sure they'll be all right.'

Eamon looked at his sister as he heard this, knowing Sophie wouldn't be happy with this answer.

'It'll be okay,' he assured her. 'Look at all the people out there. They'll put the fire out long before it gets here.'

But three hours later, the overcast sky was getting dark and there was an orange glow against the deep grey clouds from the fires that were spreading over the hillside. The wind had changed and just as the fire-fighters had halted the advance of the

blaze in one direction, it had started off in another, and most of it was creeping along the hill behind Sophie and Eamon's house. They could see the flames up on the ridge now, close enough that sparks and embers were visible, drifting into the air.

Dozens of locals, including Dad, had joined the fire-fighters, digging trenches and beating back the flames as the fire crews trained their hoses on the advancing edges of the blaze. Mum was on the phone again, making sure the message was getting passed on: The Air Corps helicopter was battling another fire somewhere else, and wouldn't be here for some time. The word was going out to evacuate the houses along the road, just to be safe. Mum waved to Eamon and Sophie.

'I've put some some water and snacks in your schoolbags,' she said, as she ended a call and then took another one. 'We'll bring the sleeping bags and the toothbrushes too, just in case we have to go stay over in Granny's. Go in and grab a book to read and then get in the car, we're going to leave in a minute. Don't be worried now; I'm sure we'll only be gone for a few hours.'

They were hurrying towards the back door when Sophie grabbed Eamon's arm.

'Look! It's Limpet!'

The fox was there at the end of their garden, moving back and forth, as if he was trying to see what was going on. Eamon chewed his lip and pushed Sophie gently towards the door.

'Come on, we better do what Mum says,' he told her. 'She's not in a mood for messin'.'

'I'm not messing!' Sophie protested. 'What if he's looking for help?'

'Foxes don't look for help from humans,' Eamon said. 'They're wild animals, Sophie. Go on in the house and get your book.'

Eamon had a novel and a couple of comics he was reading, and it took just a few seconds to grab them and come back out. Sophie wasn't out yet, so he went round the side to look at the fire again. The wind was picking up, and Mum had said that would make the flames spread faster. He saw that Sophie's window was open.

'Sophie!' he called, rapping on the frame. 'Hurry up! What's keeping you?'

That was when he noticed her light wasn't on in her room. He walked around to where Mum's car was parked on the driveway at the side of the bungalow. Sophie wasn't there either.

'Sophie?' he called again.

'Eamon, where is she?' Mum said, coming up the driveway. She had her jacket on and was ready to go.



Ignoring the question, he ran into the house and seized his binoculars, rushing out again and using them to look up the hill. There was only darkness, and then a

little flash of pink. Sophie had been wearing a pink jumper. He held the binoculars steadier, moving them slowly . . . and there she was, clambering up the steep part of the slope towards the den. She was going to try and rescue the foxes.

‘Oh, you *eejit*,’ he whispered, putting a hand to his face.

‘Eamon?’

Mum came up beside him, glanced down at the binoculars, frowned, then looked up at the hill.

‘Oh my God, she didn’t . . .’

‘She did,’ he said.

‘This girl . . .’ Mum took a long, deep breath. ‘This girl will turn me grey before my time. Eamon, go and get in the car and stay there.’

‘Mum! I can—.’

‘Get in the car!’

He edged towards the car, but he didn’t want to get in. She took out her phone and called their father. She was already striding up the garden.

‘I swear, when I catch that girl, the next time she’ll leave the house will be to go bloody *college*.’

Eamon knew that tone. Mum was angry because she was scared. She was about to climb over the wall, when she looked back at her son, alone by the car. Then she cursed to herself.

‘All right, I can’t leave you there on your own,’ she shouted. ‘There’s a torch in the glovebox. Grab it and come on!’

Sophie stumbled through the smoky gloom, feeling scared and stupid. She’d never come up here on her own in the dark before and now she wasn’t sure of the way to the den. The black shapes of the bushes all looked the same and she kept tripping

on humps and roots. Why hadn’t she brought a torch when she sneaked out her bedroom window? Above her, she could see the fire, eating its way down the slope. The flames looked very high and they were getting very close. The wind blew the smell of smoke and burnt vegetation towards her. She could feel its warmth on her face and the fumes stung her eyes.

Behind her, she could hear Mum and Eamon calling out to her. They were coming after her and she knew they’d try to stop her, but Limpet was up ahead, and he was heading *towards* the fire. She had to save him, and yet she was worried that he was trying to stay ahead of her. Was she driving him towards the wall of flames?



Then she saw the den, saw him stop and poke his head inside, then look around. He did it again, and seemed to grow more frantic. He let out one of those shrill, screeching barks.

‘Have they gone?’ she asked, more to herself than the fox. ‘You poor thing. Did you get left behind?’

She crept closer, wanting to pick him up

and carry him home, though she knew he was a wild animal, and would not want a human anywhere near him. Limpet darted this way and that, unsure of which way to turn. The little fox looked confused, stopping and standing there, his body trembling. Sophie's attention was so fixed on the animal, it was only when she heard a crackling sound that she raised her gaze and saw that the fire was much closer now, eating its way across the gorse bushes that overlooked the den.

'Come on, Limpet! We have to get you away from this fire!'

If he stayed here, the fire would eventually surround him, cutting him off. There was nothing for it but to try and reach him. Sophie came slowly forward, making comforting noises as Limpet stared at the fire as if hypnotized by it. She held out her hand and the fox turned and growled, but it was a small, scared sound.

'Sophie! Sophie, get back!' Mum cried from behind her.

Sophie twisted around to see Eamon and their mother pushing through the bramble and gorse that partially covered the track up to the den. She could see that Mum was fit to burst with fear and fury, but she was holding it in.

'Sweetheart, we have to get out here,' she said in a very tense, controlled voice, as she held out her hand.

Limpet crouched down, shivering at the sight of these new people, even as the crackling roar of the flames grew louder. It was getting hard to breathe with the clouds of smoke closing around them.

'Mum, give me your jacket!' Eamon said. 'You take Sophie! Sophie, I'll get Limpet. You go on now!'

Mum seemed about to argue, but then she pulled off her jacket and threw it to Eamon as she took Sophie's hand. He caught it and walked ever so slowly towards Limpet, holding the jacket up.

'It's okay,' he said softly. 'We're going to help. It's okay.'

He kept saying it as he drew closer, and then he dropped the jacket over the fox cub, covering Limpet and quickly bundling him up.



'That's it, good boy, now come on!' Mum shouted.

Wrapping his arms around the wriggling bundle, Eamon let her push him ahead of her and the three of them scrambled down the trail away from the creeping edge of the fire.

But they had taken too long. The wind was growing stronger, and the blaze had crawled down the hill on either side of them. It was going to cut them off before they reached the grassy slope down to the house. The air was thick with smoke, and the flames glowed an angry orange in the darkness, with embers floating through the

air around them as the wind whipped them into an increasing savagery.

‘We can’t get out,’ Mum muttered to herself. ‘Oh my God, what are we going to do? We can’t get out!’

Then they saw figures coming up the hillside, visible now in the firelight. Aidan’s pick-up truck was climbing the slope beside them. There was a big tank of water sitting in the back. Dad was one of the figures, carrying the hose of the pressure washer, and he started spraying the fire, dowsing the burning foliage ahead of Mum and the two children. Other people spread out around him, beating back the flames with spades and snow shovels. Behind them, a fire engine was coming up the road.



Coughing and gagging, barely able to see through the smoke, Eamon and Sophie ran to their father, and he dropped the hose and hugged them tight. Mum squeezed his shoulder and urged their son and daughter to hurry on down to the car.

‘She ran up the hill to save a fox,’ she said to her husband.

‘Of course she did,’ he said, laughing

and shaking his head as he picked up the hose again. ‘Never a dull moment with our Sophie. Are you all okay?’

‘We will be. And the fox too.’

A light in the sky came swooping in and a helicopter appeared, its powerful engine deafening as it flew over them, a giant orange bucket hanging from cables underneath it. The bucket released a mass of water, drowning a section of fire near the top of the hill.

‘It’s about time!’ Mum grunted.

Eamon and Sophie stopped at their garden wall, by the driveway, turning to watch the helicopter dump its water and then fly off in the direction of the nearby lake to pick up more. The first fire engine pulled up behind their car, its blue roof-lights flashing, and fire-fighters started to unload their hoses. Eamon still had Limpet wrapped up in the coat and Sophie touched his arm, pointing out to a spot in the undergrowth. There, among the gorse and brambles, on the trail down to the stream, they could see the family of foxes. Eamon nodded.

‘Time to let him go,’ he said.

Sophie came up beside him as he crouched down, and together, they unravelled the jacket so that Limpet was lowered gently onto the ground beyond. The fox cub shook himself free and scampered off a few metres, caught sight of his family, turned to look at Sophie and Eamon for a moment, and then loped off, hampered only slightly by his lame leg.

‘Oh,’ Sophie said quietly.

‘What did you think, that we were going to keep him?’ Eamon asked.

She didn’t answer, and then she shook her head, but it was obvious she’d thought

it might happen.

‘He’s a wild animal, Sophie. He belongs out there.’

‘Yeah, I know. But I just thought . . . with all the bushes burnt like that . . .’

Eamon nodded. Though he didn’t want to admit it, he’d thought about it too. It would have been cool to have their own fox. Turning to lean his back against the wall, he noticed Sophie was shivering, and he draped Mum’s jacket over her shoulders. They watched the fire-fighters striding up the hill dragging their hoses. Somewhere in the distance they could hear the helicopter. They’d stop the fire before it got much further, he was sure of that. Even so, he wondered what other animals had been driven away, or how many might not have made it at all.



Their parents were coming back down the hill now, along with some of the others who’d come up to help, and Aidan in his pick-up, who was heading down past the house towards the gate onto the road at the bottom of the hill. They were dirty from the smoke and ash, sweaty and exhausted,

but they looked relieved. They had faced the blaze and saved their homes. The fire-fighters were getting the fire under control now, and the helicopter would be coming back.

It looked bad. There was enough light from the sky to see that most of the gorse was gone, burned down to stumps. It looked like a wasteland from some apocalyptic film. The ground was black and grey with ash and the air had a pungent stink to it.

Mum had told them earlier in the day that if the peat and roots and seeds were left after the fire, everything would grow back. Then the wildlife would come back too. As she’d said to Sophie, wildfires were a natural thing, although some were worse than others and people sometimes set them deliberately, just to cause trouble. And then there were other types of people, who would come out and work day and night to help save their neighbours’ homes.

He gazed back over his shoulder, trying to spot the foxes, and saw no sign of them. Their home had been consumed by fire, the small creatures that were their prey could well have been wiped out – there was no way of telling. He wondered if Limpet and his family would come back, or if they’d be forced to make a new home somewhere else. He supposed they’d just have to wait and see.

‘Hey, I’m starvin’,’ he said to his sister. ‘Let’s ask if we can get chips.’

She smiled at that, which made him feel better too. The fire was beaten and everyone was safe. And tomorrow, they’d go looking for foxes.

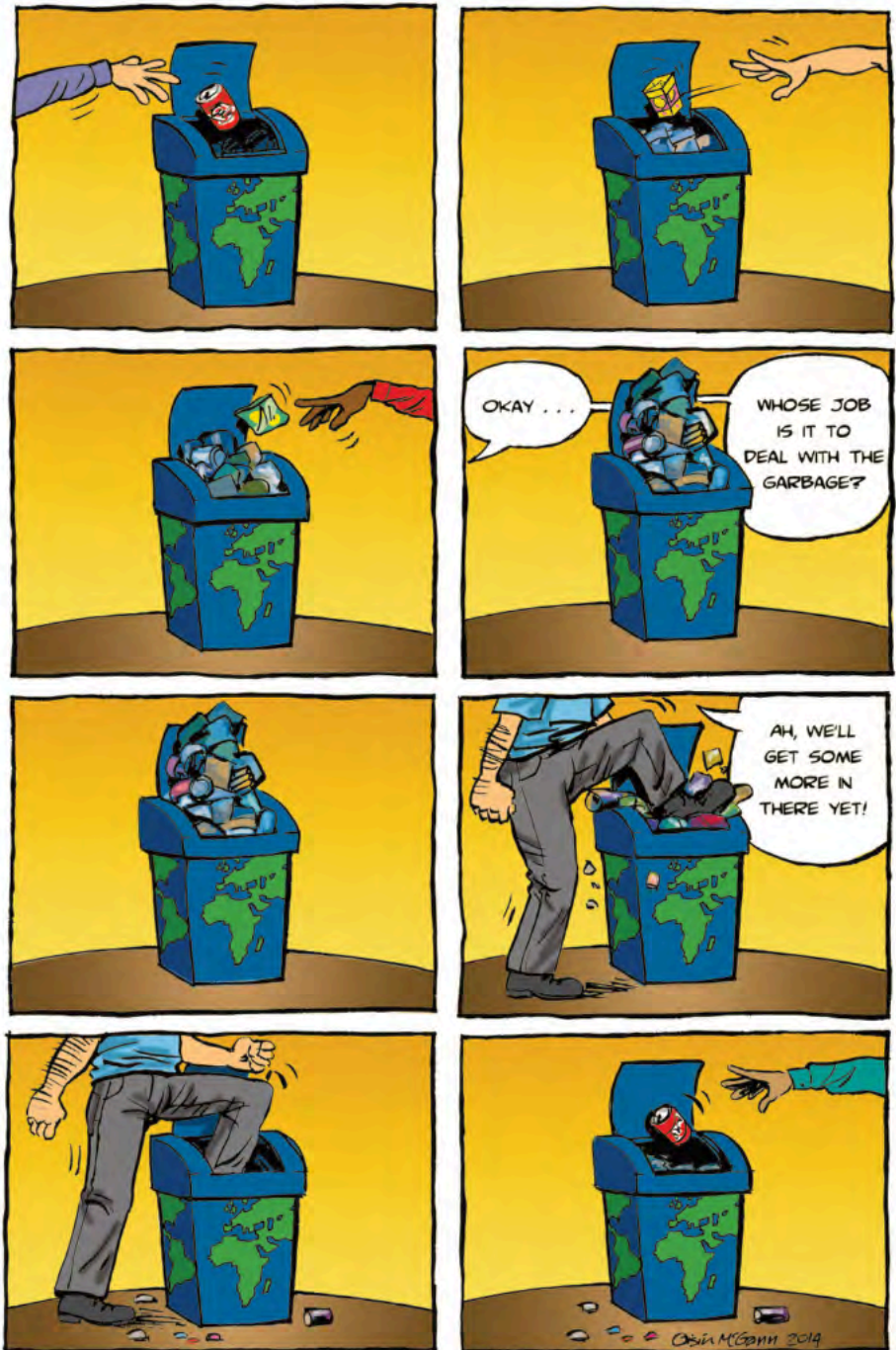
About the Story

As with some of the other stories, I wanted to root the danger in the environment itself, forcing the characters to respond to it. While Ireland doesn't suffer from the kinds of wildfires you might see in Australia, Congo, Brazil or the United States, we do have gorse fires every year, and some of them get out of control. The aim with this story was to show the damage they do to wildlife, as well as the vegetation, and the threat they pose to people's homes. These fires are a very visual, very dramatic kind of environmental damage, and an easy one to understand.

Have a Chat

It doesn't always take a disaster to harm the wildlife in an area. Animals cannot adapt to changes in their environment the way humans can.

Evolution has adapted them to a particular way of living, and if there is any major change to their habitat, it can have devastating effects, which could include things like farming, cutting down forests, draining wetlands, mining or construction. The more space we take, the less there is



for the natural system we all depend on.

Think of some examples of animals, how they are adapted to a particular environment, and how a change in that habitat would affect their chances of survival. Think of some examples of environments that humans change, and what damage that might do. Now think of examples where humans have protected particular environments.

About the Cartoon

There's only so much waste that our world can take. We are recycling a wider range of materials all the time, and finding new ways to reduce and reuse things too, but we still dump massive amounts of waste into landfill, as well as all the pollution and material that ends up in our rivers and seas. Different kinds of pollution can cause different kinds of problems, and demand different solutions, but the best solution is not to put the stuff there in the first place, or even better, to not create the stuff at all. This, however, doesn't make for a good story.

Have a Chat

Is there any kind of pollution that you see on a regular basis, where you live? To make a story out of it, you could imagine it on a much bigger scale, or make it more toxic or dangerous. Who is putting it there and why? Could it change the environment, or the creatures that live there? Science fiction stories often feature mysterious materials, substances or elements of technology left behind by an ancient civilization.

Imagine being an archaeologist far in the future, and discovering one of our dumps, buried deep in the ground. If they didn't know anything about our society, what kinds of ordinary things do you think might confuse them?

Come up with some weird, alternative explanations for everyday objects you might find in a dump. It could be some odd piece of our technology, or some daft little thing that they think is really important.

As we make use of the world around us, some damage is unavoidable. Think of your own home. No matter how careful you are, things get used up, worn out or broken. What kinds of damage do your parents or guardians get most annoyed about? What bothers *you* the most? Think of one example of a thing that could be fixed when it got broken, and one that had to be replaced with a new version. Can you think of something that caused a major problem because something went wrong with it, or because it broke?

Some wildfires are natural events, and have been happening for as long as there has been vegetation to burn. Others are started by accident. But sometimes people start these fires on purpose. Why do you think someone would do this? What other kinds of deliberate damage can you think of?

What kinds of pollution or damage can put our health or our lives at risk? If you can create a problem with it, and come up with a solution, that can be a great basis for a story. Who would be most affected by the problem? Who would be the best kinds of people to solve it?

Has something ever happened in the town or area where you live, when something people really needed was cut off for a long period? It could be the water or electricity supply, or an important road or a bus or train service. How were people affected?

The Faerie Curse

The BMW X7 pulled over to the side of the narrow road, onto a gravel lay-by. The snow-covered stones made a dull crunching sound under the wide tyres. Martin Gallagher grabbed his expensive Nikon SLR camera from the passenger seat and got out, looking around him and taking a long breath of the cold air. His children, James and Sarah, climbed out either side of the back seat.



‘Have you got your wellies on?’ Martin asked. ‘Make sure you take them off before you get back in the car.’

Even after a walk up a mucky trail on a snow-covered hillside, no dirt would be permitted in Martin’s beloved SUV. It was a beautiful giant of a car, and only marginally less precious to him than his children. James rolled his eyes at his sister, who gave a ‘whaddaya gonna do?’ shrug in return. Still, it would be a lovely trek up to the top of the hill.

Martin took a photo of the slope from where he was standing. Tucking the camera under his arm, he zipped his red and yellow hiking jacket right up to his chin. The wind was bitter up here. Sarah wrapped her arms around her, feeling the cold despite her silver puffer jacket, scarf and two pairs of socks. She blew a strand of brown hair out of her eyes.

‘Are you right? Can we get going?’ She jerked her head towards the trail that led away up the hill.

Her younger brother wasn’t waiting. James was already starting up the track, which was visible only as a dipped line in the snow. There was a ditch by the side of the road and it was nearly half full with water. Sarah jumped over onto the bank on the other side. The shockingly cold weather that had settled over Ireland for the past few weeks was lifting, and the heavy layer of snow that had blanketed the land was starting to melt. All along the ditch, thin streams of orangey-brown water were trickling down the bank.

Sarah gazed up at the hillside. That was a lot of snow that was going to turn to a lot of water.

‘Grandad said this pass can flood sometimes,’ she said as her dad jumped over behind her and they set off after James. ‘Might not be the best place for a car park.’

‘Don’t you start,’ Martin grunted. ‘I get enough of that from Dad. I told you before, he’s not himself. He’s getting on now. His mind’s not what it used to be.’

‘Still though, he lived up here all his life. He knows the place. He says we need to leave this land alone.’

‘Catch up with James there, will you? I don’t want him leaving mucky footprints all over the site before I take the photos.’

Martin’s family owned the land around this hill, but it was wild and rocky, fit only for grazing sheep, and Martin had no interest in being a farmer like his dad. He had gone into finance. Lately, however, the area with its hills and forests, had become popular with hillwalkers and Martin had seen a chance to finally make some money out of this stoney piece of Gallagher land. He’d get a digger in, level some of the ground and make a car park, and then charge for entry. Just a couple of quid, but it would soon add up. He’d seen it work in other picturesque locations.

All you needed was an automatic barrier to take coins and control the cars coming in and out, and then just send someone up to empty the box every few days. Easy money.

Martin stopped to take more photos. He was going to set up a website for the car park, and wanted some scenic photos in different seasons to show off the landscape. The snow was perfect. The tall, upright spruce trees near the top of the hill were dark and dramatic against the white, and the sky was a deep blue. The place had a raw, stark beauty.

He snapped off another photo, and then he heard James calling for him. Sarah had gone on ahead and she was waving for attention too. They were looking at something on the ground. He strode up the track, feeling the strain in the tops of his thighs and the backs of his calves. It always

felt good to get out and clear out the lungs.

When he reached them, he found them crouched down by some cracks in the ground. It was particularly striking to see the black-brown wounds; sodden peat exposed in the bright snow. The longest curved in a shallow, ragged crescent, about twenty-five or thirty metres, one end of it crossing the trail up the hill. The Gallaghers all gazed at the fissures with interest.



‘The ground’s cracked,’ James said. ‘I think it’s a sign, Dad.’

‘It’s a sign that the thaw has started, that’s all,’ Martin replied.

James was an intense lad, inclined to get obsessed with things. Once he locked onto an idea, it could be hard to get him off it. At the moment, it was Irish mythology. He got totally absorbed in reading books about it, and pieces on the web. It didn’t help that his grandad was filling his head with stories about the area.

‘It’s the faerie ring, Dad,’ James insisted. ‘You can’t mess with the ring.’

The top of the hill was out of sight behind the trees. According to the locals, it

was a faerie ring, and you weren't supposed to interfere with such things. Many farmers treated them with a superstitious respect. Martin sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose.

'There's no such thing as faerie rings, James. Those are just stories. There's no harm reading those yarns for a bit of entertainment, but they're nothing to do with the real world.'

'Maybe you should put the car park up the road,' Sarah suggested, pointing to the other side of the pass. 'There's no peat, it's all stoney over there. And it's higher up.'

'You just want to keep this hill for the sheep,' James said. 'Because you want to study shepherding.'

'I want to study *agricultural science*,' Sarah corrected him, not for the first time. 'You know that. Stop pretending to be stupid. I'd just like to keep Grandad's sheep if we can. I like the sheep, and this hill has the best grazing. And he said you can get floods on this part of the road. So why not put the car park where you won't get puddles all the time?'

'It's bare bedrock over there,' Martin said, getting irritated. He didn't need his teenage children poking holes in his plan. 'You'd need explosives to flatten it out. There's much less work levelling that spot below us.'

'But you wouldn't be offending the faerie folk,' James added.

'When the faerie folk start driving cars and paying to park them,' Martin retorted. 'I'll listen to their opinions. In the meantime, the planning permission is in, and that's where it's-.'

'Look, there's more!' Sarah said.

She trotted out left, perpendicular to

the trail, taking high steps, her feet kicking out snow. Martin and James followed. She was right, there were more cracks. More torn, curving lines that ran in roughly the same direction as the first ones, traversing the slope, but further up. From where the family stood now, they could see others, the dazzling snow splitting, as if it had been raked with giant claws, leaving deep, black-brown scratches.

'Dad, it's a warning-', James began, but Martin held up his hand in a sharp gesture.

'James. *Not another word* about faeries, d'you hear me?'

'Okay.'

While his heart lay in financial services, Martin had grown up on a farm. He knew this land, but he didn't want to accept what he was seeing around him – and how disturbed he was by the sight.



Sarah was seeing it too, though unlike her father, she wasn't hampered by his sense of denial. She felt the sudden realization that they might not be safe here. Gazing at the cracks, she imagined the soft peat underfoot, heavy and turned to mush

by the water from the melting snow. With only grass roots to hold it, that wet muck was lying on sloping rock, losing its grip as it lost its solidity. Gravity would do the rest.

‘Dad,’ she said in a low voice. ‘I think . . . I think the ground’s slipping.’

‘I think you’re right,’ he rasped.

‘Okay, let’s go. Head back over to the trail and get down to the road.’

The ground shifted under their feet, nearly making them fall over. They froze for a moment. From somewhere nearby, there came a strange, tearing, sucking sound. Then the ground moved again and, without another word, the Gallaghers all started running in a diagonal line towards the trail down to the car. All around them, dark brown lines were opening in the snow, staining it with muddy water like blood oozing slowly from a shallow cut.

The lines grew wider, until the sections between them were like broken fragments of snowy surface, the smallest ones sinking as they spread apart in the mud. The whole surface of that section of hillside was grinding downwards, disintegrating in a slow-motion landslide. As deeper channels opened up, water was able to flow more freely, and thin streams began to gush along, turning more peat to mud.

‘Look! *Look!*’ James cried out. ‘The *trees* are moving!’

Sarah and Martin turned to where he was pointing. Their steps faltered, unsure of what they were seeing at first. The trees near the top of the hill were tilting, as if something was pushing against them. But that wasn’t what was happening. As the slabs of peat near the foot of the hill started shifting down the slope, the ground above it was undermined. One section

after another was starting to slide and the slabs of peat near the top could no longer support the weight of the trees.

The Gallaghers stared in awe as a giant raft of peat over twenty metres wide, held together by the trees’ roots, began to slip down towards them.

‘Forget the car!’ Martin roared at his children. ‘Head across and up! Get as far as you can from those trees!’



He turned, casting his eyes across the snow, trying to gauge which way the landslide was going to go. They were only halfway up the hill. The network of lines splitting the turf was all around them, but the snow was still unbroken further along the slope ahead. After another fifty metres, they seemed to be in the clear, and they all stopped to turn around and look.

Higher up, below the tree-line, the ground was shifting in a solid slab, but the further it went downhill, the more it broke up and turned to mud. Following the flow, their gaze swung down to the road . . . where Martin’s BMW X7 sat parked, right in the path of the mudslide.

‘Oh, my dear Lord, no!’ Martin gasped helplessly.

With a wet, sloppy rumble, the first wave of muck tumbled down the slope to the road and crashed over the big SUV, rolling it over with the sound of crunching metal and breaking glass, pushing it off the road and then burying it completely.

‘No, no, no!’ Martin moaned.

The mudslide continued, slow but inexorable, and as it flowed, the trees slipped on down the hill, still upright, held together on their raft of peat and roots, one breaking off here and there, but looking very much like they were marching off to war. A few even made it to the bottom, finally toppling over the point where the road had once been, the rest of the muck spreading out across the level ground, until finally, finally, everything came to a slow, sludgy halt.

There were still sections further up the hillside that looked like they might yet come loose, but for now, the land had finished rearranging itself. The three Gallaghers looked at the solidifying pool of mud, stones and vegetation that now blocked the road for a good sixty or seventy metres. Somewhere in the middle of all that was their car. James opened his mouth to speak and with a stern expression, Martin held up a hand to stop him.

‘It’s *not* faeries,’ he said.

Nature does the weirdest things, and can be a constant source of ideas. The world is strange and wonderful and wild, and sometimes downright spooky too.

About the Story

This story is based loosely on real events.

There have been peat slides where trees travelled down a slope, and stayed upright. Sometimes peat slides are a completely natural occurrence, where a section of peat gets so waterlogged, its fibres no longer hold it together and gravity causes it to flow down a slope. Human activity can weaken or dislodge areas of peat, or change the flow of water on a hillside.

I thought it was an extraordinary image. There was something otherworldly about seeing upright trees sliding down a slope, which made me think of the kind of mythology connected to various places around Ireland, and in particular, superstitions that still exist around faerie rings, so I thought that would be a good element to introduce, to make it feel as if it was almost some kind of vengeance. This was a very simple plot; a straightforward threat to the characters, the story building to a one-off hazard that emerges quickly and ends within minutes.

Have a Chat

Come up with a range of real life environments and how they might be dangerous in different ways. How do we make these places safer? Now create some fantasy settings – places that could not be real – and imagine what kinds of dangers they might pose to people who pass through them. Be as weird as you like. How do you keep yourself safe in places like these?

Have you ever heard of a real place that’s so weird it’s hard to believe it exists?



About the Cartoon

Humans need each other. Our lives are interconnected, and that has to be reflected in the stories we tell. In stories, as it is in reality, when a character pulls on the threads of their life, those threads pull on the lives of others. Empathy and cooperation have made our greatest achievements possible. And our greatest disasters. Climate change is an example of how we've wielded enormous power, without taking responsibility for it. But there's a positive side to that too. We have that enormous power, and we can choose to wield it better. Whether it's huge building projects, or fighting a pandemic, or changing our environment, the more we cooperate, the more we can achieve.

Have a Chat

When I was starting out as an illustrator, I was pretty antisocial, and I thought I had to build a career all on my own. I just didn't appreciate that this wasn't going to happen. I had been taught by people, I'd had support from friends and family, I had to work for other people to get paid. I had to rely on others, and convince them that they could rely on me.

Think of something you've been involved in, where a group of people got together to achieve something they couldn't have done on their own. You'll realize that you are part of many of these activities – our civilization is built on them. And there are stories to tell about all of them.

Part 4: Your Story

Make us feel it.

One of the main differences between fiction and reality is that, in fiction, the solutions tend to be dramatic and final. We need to crank up the drama and finish the story off with some conclusive event. That's the thing about stories in fiction – they end.

Reality goes on. Most of the best solutions to our problems are slow, gradual . . . even boring. We brush our teeth to stop them rotting and falling out. We develop a habit of looking for cars before crossing the road. We go to school to help prepare us for that big, wide world. We recycle our rubbish to reduce the waste we create.

These sensible solutions do not make for dramatic stories. But they work.



In the real world, our climate is changing, but we are changing with it. We've known this was coming for a long time – scientists have been warning us about it for decades, and a lot of people

have been listening. And it's not just the scientists who are taking action. All over the world, all kinds of people are working to help slow down climate change and to stop the damage we're doing to the home of . . . well . . . every known life-form.

Whether you realize it or not, you are already taking part in this too. Over the last few decades, we've made a lot of changes here in Ireland, to reduce the damage we've been doing to our environment. We've started taking our energy from the wind, the sun and flowing water. We're recycling more and trying to dump less. We've reduced the amount of pollution we release into our air and pump into the rivers and the sea. We've introduced controls on car exhaust fumes. When it was discovered that a chemical used in aerosols was destroying the ozone layer, a part of the atmosphere which helps protect us from the sun, the whole world decided to use far less of that chemical.

We're trying to farm in ways that produce more food and do less harm to the land. We have laws controlling when and how animals and birds can be hunted, how much fish can be taken from the seas, and there is ongoing work to protect the habitats of wild animals.

But we're still doing too many daft and damaging things to this world we call our home, so there's still a lot we need to do better. Even if our climate wasn't forcing us to change, this is stuff we should be doing anyway. We only have one planet, and we

need to take care of it. We need to act to stop life on Earth from getting much more dramatic and dangerous.

Except in stories. Drama and danger in stories is still good.

The Brief – Building Your Story

Stories have to make us care, and that starts with how the writer feels.



- 1 - Write a story about something that's important to you, something that's affected by climate or weather.
- 2 - Write the type of story that *you'd* enjoy reading, whether that's a social drama or a horror, a romance or a disaster story, a historical drama or a mystery. It's up to you.

People – The Characters

Create a few characters for your story.

- 1 - What makes them suitable, or unsuitable, characters to face this challenge?
- 2 - How are they different from each other?
- 3 - How will this experience change them over the course of the story?

Place – The Setting

- 1 - Where is the story set, and why?
- 2 - Are the characters familiar with this place, or is it new to them? Has something changed?
- 3 - Does the setting contribute to the problem or solution in any way?

Problem – The Plot

Decide what challenge your characters have to face. How do they try to overcome it? How do they fail, and try again? This is the struggle you'll use to engage and entertain your reader.

You can take any small problem and make it into a story by:

- 1 - Putting the characters in a position where they are forced to solve it.
- 2 - Making it difficult to solve.
- 3 - Giving them a limited time to solve it.

Tips for Writing

- 1 - Don't just tell us what happens, describe how it feels to the characters, as it's happening. Write moment to moment.
- 2 - The things happening in your story should affect your characters' emotions. This is what affects your readers' emotions.
- 3 - Show, don't tell. Try not to explain things too much. Have the characters do things to show us what's happening. They are the actors in your story, so make them perform; keep them moving, show them expressing their feelings, weave some action into it all.

Now . . . stop reading, and get on with writing your story!

Planning Sheet 1

Character

Name:

Physical Description:

Personality:

Occupation:

Interests:

Fears/Dislikes:

Role in Story:

Planning Sheet 2

Setting

Name:

Location:

Describe using the five senses:

How does this place make people feel?

Is it familiar to the main characters?

How does this setting affect the story?

Planning Sheet 3

Plot

Problem:

Why do they have to solve it?

Why is it difficult to solve?

What is the time limit that makes it urgent?

Do the characters have different goals?

Will the different characters clash or cooperate?



Oisín McGann

Oisín is a best-selling and award-winning writer and illustrator. He has produced dozens of books and short stories for all ages of reader, including twelve novels, in genres ranging from comedy horror to conspiracy thriller, from science fiction and fantasy to historical fiction. These include the *Mad Grandad* series, *Headbomz: Wreckin' Yer Head*, and novels such as *Race the Atlantic Wind*, *The Gods and Their Machines* and *The Wildenstern Saga*. In 2014 and 2015, he was the Irish writer-in-residence for Weather Stations, an EU-funded project where writers from five different countries were tasked with finding ways to use storytelling to raise awareness of climate change. He has carried on this work through school residencies in primary and secondary schools, funded by Poetry Ireland Writers in Schools and Irish Aid's WorldWise Global Schools. He is married with three children, two dogs and a cat, and lives somewhere in the Irish countryside. He has finally accepted that he will probably never have a proper job.

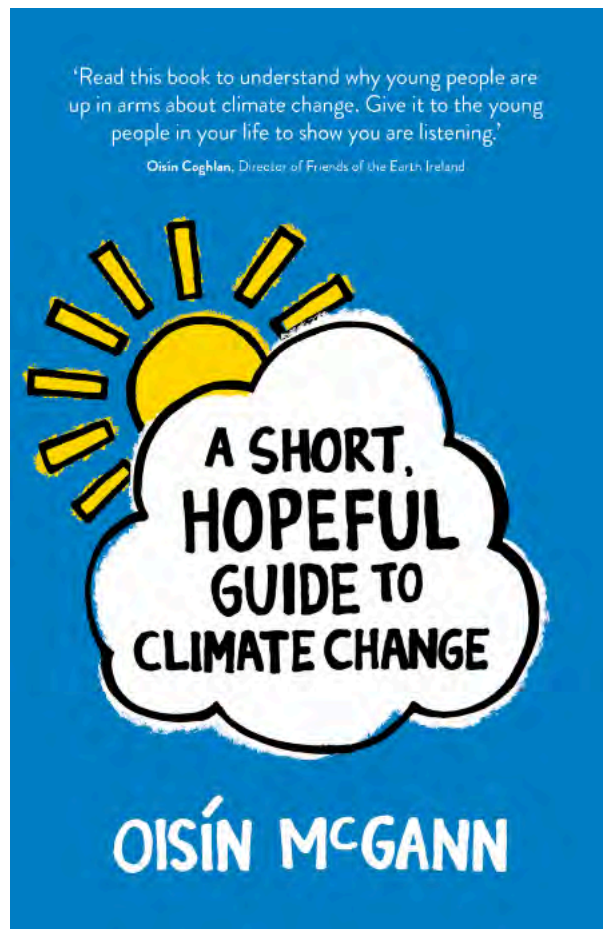
**This is the story of humans and fire
and how we've changed the world.**

It's a story about our civilization and our environment,
about wildfires and glaciers, war and wilderness.

It's about tiny ocean creatures, giant machines,
and teenagers protesting on city streets.

It's about climate change, and the millions of people
who are already taking action to do something about it.

This is an invitation to join in.



Written and illustrated by Oisín McGann.
Published by Little Island, in association with Friends of the Earth Ireland.

The Green Schools Programme

The Green-Schools Programme operates on a thematic basis as schools add a new theme to their programme following award and renewal of the Green Flag every two academic years. **Litter & Waste** is the first theme that schools focus on, and the most recent theme to be added to the programme is **Global Citizenship Food and Biodiversity** which was rolled out in September 2020.

1. Schools initially examine the impact of **Litter and Waste** on the environment and explore practical means for reducing and minimising the amount of litter and waste produced by the school while also increasing recycling and exploring composting opportunities.

2. The **Energy** theme focuses on conservation and efficiency and encourages schools to increase awareness of energy issues and make low-cost and no-cost changes to improve energy efficiency within the school.

3. Implementation of the **Water** theme increases awareness of water conservation, supply, protection and pollution issues among schools and offers practical ideas, actions and solutions on reducing consumption levels and increasing sustainability.

4. Green-Schools **Travel** promotes walking, cycling, carpooling and other sustainable travel initiatives on the journey to school, and encourages health, safety and fitness within the school community.

5. The **Biodiversity** theme examines the flora and fauna present in the school environment and suggests ways schools can raise awareness of biodiversity issues and increase the levels of biodiversity within and around the school.

6. Global Citizenship - Litter & Waste offers schools an opportunity to revisit the original Litter & Waste theme to review and improve its application within the school while also encouraging schools to explore litter and waste issues in a global context.

7. Global Citizenship - Energy offers schools an opportunity to review the original Energy theme within the school and also encourages schools to explore Energy in a global context.

8. Global Citizenship - Marine Environment focuses on raising awareness of the global issue of Marine Litter and the impact it has on the environment.

9. Global Citizenship - Travel offers schools an opportunity to review and maintain their actions in relation to sustainable travel to school, whilst exploring related global issues.

10. Global Citizenship - Biodiversity & Food focuses on food literacy, food security along with associated global issues, and the role nature has in producing our food.



Schools who have completed all ten themes will be given the opportunity to take part in the Primary Climate Ambassador programme, which is still in its pilot phase. Green-Schools carried out surveys with teachers, principals, Green-Schools staff, Local Authority staff and sponsors to gauge an understanding of where they would like to see the programme go in the next ten years. Most responses have shown that schools would like to be given the opportunity to take part in more projects related to the themes and to be given the opportunity to revisit themes. This will be the focus over the next number of years, to provide opportunities for the Green-Schools programme to be more flexible and offer more project-based work to participating schools on completion of the first ten themes.



Exploring Climate Change Through Storytelling