

All Ears by Paul Ryan

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The old big box radio is the only radio in the house that can get Ireland. I switch it on and wait for it to warm up, for the yellow light to glow. The match kicks off in drenching rain. The commentator says if Ireland get a result tonight in Belgium they could make the World Cup Finals for the first time ever. They've already beaten Holland, and Cyprus twice, and only lost in France because of an unfair disallowed goal.

I've got to find the right place to listen to the match because otherwise Ireland will lose. I sit on the settee. No good, Belgium attack. I sit on the chair, Belgium shoot. I stand, Belgium win a corner. Only when I switch the light off and lie down on the carpet next to the radio do Ireland start to play well.

The door opens. 'What are you doing there in the dark', Mum says. She's always watching us for signs we're acting peculiar. She's terrified one of us will end up like my cousin Teresa who came to our house at three in the morning asking Mum to paint her nails. Teresa's nerves have gone and I think Mum believes it might be contagious.

Mum switches the light on. Belgium get the ball.

'Mum!' The ball goes to their left winger.

'Your tea's ready'.

'Mum. Switch the light off!'

'This looks dangerous', says the commentator.

'Please Mum.'

'Your tea's getting cold. Didn't you hear me call?'

Edge of the area now, the striker shapes for a shot.

'Mum, please. It's the World Cup.'

She turns the light off and the shot goes over the bar. She sits down on the settee.

'Who's playing?'

I can't hear the commentator.

‘Answer me, or I’ll turn it off.’

‘It’s Ireland, Mum, they’re playing Belgium.’

‘What’s the...’

‘nil nil...’

‘..score.’

‘Your tea will get cold.’

It’s nearly over, I tell her. I’m lying. It’s not even half time.

‘You can come back to it. They won’t win anyhow, Sean. You’ll catch pneumonia lying on the floor like that.’ She feels my hands, ‘Blocks of ice!’

I tell her that since I’ve been lying there, Ireland have played well. I tell her Belgium will score if I move. I can’t even go to the toilet. There’s a pain in my kidney, but I don’t tell her.

‘A lot of nonsense’, but all the same she listens.

There’s a foul and the kick goes to Belgium.

‘They might play better if you lie on the floor as well. Mum.’ But she won’t.

‘Pray to St Anthony, Sean’, she says. St Anthony is the wrong Saint. He’s the one you’re supposed to go to if you’ve lost something, but he’s her favourite saint, the one who helps her find money down the side of the settee, and neither of us know the real Saint for winning football matches.

‘We can do it, Mum.’ This is a gift I will give her. ‘Go on Ireland!’ I shout.

‘You’ll have the neighbours in on us’, she laughs.

The light’s out in the hall. The TV blares in the back room. I hope they don’t notice their tea’s not ready. Maybe this can last longer.

And then. A minute before half time Ireland press forward and win a free kick on the edge of the box. Brady chips it over to the wall. Stapleton, loitering around the penalty spot, sprints to the near post, beats a defender, side foots the ball home.

‘Yes!’ I leap to my feet. ‘Goal, Mum!’

‘Didn’t I tell you, Sean.’ She claps her hands. ‘You can’t beat the Irish when they’re raised.’

I’ve never seen her so happy. I want it to last forever. But something’s wrong, the commentator says. It’s been disallowed, no one knows why.

Half time.

Liam appears at the door.

‘Are Ireland losing yet?’

‘They’re doing brilliant, aren’t they Mum?’

‘They’ll lose’, says Liam.

‘They won’t. Mum, tell him.’

‘They always lose.’

‘Oh Liam.’

Rosie appears at the door. ‘Mum, I’m going out.’

‘Come in and let me look at you.’

‘Why are you all sitting in the dark?’

‘We’re listening to Ireland lose’, says Liam.

Rosie drawn by the novelty comes in and sits down.

‘They only need a draw’, I say.

Second half.

Ireland start on the attack. Brady beats three defenders, drifts through the defence, shoots, forces the keeper to save. They sweep forward again. It’s all Ireland now. Free kick deep in the Belgium half. Langan’s kick, carried on the wind and rain, sails high over the defence to Robinson at the far post. He will score, he must score. The keeper saves.

The back door goes. Dad calls loudly, ‘Oh, I’m tired’, his way of telling Mum he’s ready for his tea. But she doesn’t move. He comes in and puts the light on.

Belgium sweep the ball left.

‘Will you turn the light off, you big gom’, she shouts.

They reach the edge of the penalty area. He won’t shut up. ‘Who’s playing, what’s the score?’

‘Tommy, will you let him hear?’

‘Is there anything else on’, he says and pretends to get up to go to the radio to turn it over.

‘Stop torturing the boy.’ He switches the light off and sits down.

The commentator says how well Ireland are playing.

‘We’ve been great, haven’t we, Mum? We can do it.’

I hum the Irish National Anthem for her and drag her to her feet and spin her round and round in a circle. Da de dee da dee da dee da da dee dee da dee.

‘Watch the mantelpiece’, she says. ‘You’ll cut your head open.’

We collapse on to the settee, laughing.

‘You’re pure mad, the pair of you,’ says Dad.

This is heaven, now. I want to tell her. But we don’t say things like that in our family.

‘Who’s the commentator?’ Dad asks.

Mum looks at me and we raise our eyes to the ceiling.

Belgium come back. Ceulemans gets on the end of a cross. Great save by McDonagh with his legs! It’s all Belgium now. Langan, Martin and Moran all make desperate clearances. We nearly die at every header, every corner kick. Only five minutes for Ireland to hold out, the commentator says. They’re dead on their feet, they can’t go on. To comfort her, I tell her, they beat Holland Mum.

‘Can’t you turn it up so we can hear’, Dad says, but we ignore him. Change nothing and they’ll do it. I’m the only one who knows the rules. I can name the whole Ireland squad. Their pictures are Blu-tacked to the wallpaper above my bed.

‘That Platini’s a good player’, Dad says. Mum looks at him like a traitor.

‘Platini’s French’, I say.

‘Sssssh’, says Dad. ‘Ireland have a free.’

‘Free kick’, Mum corrects him.

I wish it was just me and her again.

Belgium attack now in wave after wave. McDonagh makes a series of brilliant saves. Ireland are clinging on now, says the commentator.

An Irish attack breaks down, Belgium tear up field, swinging the ball wide left, in field. One tackle missed, two, out to the other side, in the centre.

‘Get him’, I shout.

‘Kick him,’ says Liam.

‘Pray to St Anthony, all of you’, Mum says. She blesses herself.

The attacker knocks the ball ahead past Heighway and falls to the ground. He made the most of that, the commentator says.

‘The cheater’, Mum says.

‘That was never a free’, says Dad.

The free kick from the right-hand edge of the penalty box smacks the crossbar. As it comes down four or five players scramble for it but Ceulemans gets there first and heads it home.

We’re silent. The commentator says McDonagh has sunk to his knees. The Irish manager has his head in his hands.

‘That clown should be ashamed of himself diving like that,’ says Mum. She has prayed to St Anthony, he has never let her down. Belgium wouldn’t have scored if the others hadn’t of come in the room. I promise God that if Ireland get a goal, I’ll be nice. I’ll do the washing up. When I say my prayers at night I won’t wish Liam dies of a wasting disease.

Now Ireland plough forward. Even Rosie is listening. Even Liam complains about the ref. ‘That’s ridiculous’, he shouts at the radio. Dad is on the edge of his seat. Mum sits on the settee and blesses herself again and again looking up at the artex ceiling. Listening there in the dark, we see the green shirts hundreds of miles away and the voice of the commentator distant as the moon landings describe the brave, tired bodies raising the last of their strength. I shiver. I’ve got cramp now from being in the one position as Liam Brady must have cramp, as Robinson, who wasn’t even Irish until a few months ago, must have cramp.

Only seconds left. Moran has the ball, breaks into a jog. His lungs must burn. He must be out on his feet. We imagine the agony on his face. A long ball, belted back, another attack begins. Only time to pelt the ball into the night sky. Only time... but no time, the referee blows the whistle.

Rosie and Liam leave without saying anything. Dad gets up and says half to himself, ‘I don’t know why you’re so upset. What is it only an aul soccer match?’

It’s just me and her now. I tell her Ireland played brilliant.

‘Didn’t I say your tea would get cold?’

‘Mum’, I say.

'I told you, Sean.'

'Mum, they could still get through.'

'You should have come out for your tea when you were called.'