When people arrived at the island of Carraig-gan-Anam — a speck in the Atlantic Ocean off the west coast of Ireland — the first thing they noted was its sparsity. Or, rather, that observation struck second, once they emerged from the sandpaper squeeze of the sea wind and its ceaseless, whistling embrace.

It was an unremarkable place of around forty thousand inhabitants, otherwise populated by sheep, limestone, storm beaches, and sea breezes. If it sounds quaint — picturesque, even — remember that people seldom appreciate that which they have grown accustomed to. This was doubly true for remote islands, where proximity to the sea ceases to impress after a time. And what else was there? You could say it was a spectacular sight from above, an overwhelming variety of greens and greys that tore the eye from the turquoise trim of the ocean that encircled it — and you would be right — but no islander could have known this. Up close, those same colours were decidedly ordinary, another rock in another field.

Nothing happened there.

The greatest scandal in the island's history was the occasional theft of milk bottles from the houses that lined the promenade, the work of a local vagabond whose needs most considered greater than their own. Such was the extent of scandal on the island. It was an uneventful, unprepossessing, wholly uninteresting place. A place of modest interests and entirely without intrigue. It wasn't quite ennui — the islanders had no use for such a word — but certainly it was life lived at a slower pace than the mainland. A comfortable placidity. Until Sam Murphy took an eight-inch blade and shoved it in the neck of Becca Farrell.

Carraig-gan-Anam was never the same.

The island went into a frenzy. People were terrified. They demanded answers. The local paper, woefully unprepared as they were with its staff of three retirees and someone's unemployable grandson, did their best to provide the copy their public demanded. Until then, they had cut their journalistic teeth documenting the mundanity of the islanders' lives with scarcely believable levels of enthusiasm. Admirable work, but hardly a suitable finishing school for the altogether more mournful matters at hand. Still, they did what they could. They documented. In excruciating detail and without the barest hint of the integrity that one might hope — if never quite manage — to find in a more established press. The police, serious folk, seconded over from the mainland, spilled out detailed accounts of everything they uncovered, filling page after page of what had by necessity become a daily paper. Everything they said was recorded, expanded upon. Speculation was rife concerning the relationship between Becca and her killer. Had they known each other prior, or was Murphy simply a cold-blooded

murderer? Or perhaps just mad? People debated every possibility, in print at dawn and in the pub at dusk. The paper covered Murphy's background at length, with particular attention on his upbringing and whether there were any clues — or any blame to be attributed — for why he became who he became. They also profiled the victim's family, in at least as much detail. The extended families on both sides are more similar than you might think. They have all since departed the island.

The people of Carraig-gan-Anam were perhaps uniquely positioned to question why exactly so much extraneous detail was being provided, uncorrupted by media as they had been until that point, but the totality of their astonishment rendered them speechless. Nobody questioned the onslaught of information. People simply consumed. But even the most unfathomable things become boring to all but those directly involved.

The story died, but appetites ballooned. People wanted something else. Something to *sink their teeth into*. The paper's small team became sleuths in their own town, desperate for the flakiest morsel of gossip that might buy them another day of research until the next big story finally broke. The quality of the writing was inversely proportional to the word count required, and demand always won out. They always filled their pages, but they did occasionally worry about how substantive any of it was. Despite their concerns, the paper continued to grow, quickly establishing itself as the single source of truth on the island. Turned out people didn't really care about how meaningful any of it was, so long as there was enough of it. Besides, at this point some villagers had become 'sources,' parading their prejudice under the guise of opinion pieces, spilling their suspicions with as much consideration as a fisherman grants a freshly reeled batch of seaweed. An entirely new means of filling column inches.

The paper's impact escalated; suggestions became likelihood, opinions became fact, and sensationalism became accepted wisdom. A steady seep from print to parlance, all for the price of a small cup of coffee. Some understood that the paper had strayed from its initial function, that its power had grown beyond its benefit, but their focus was on what was being communicated, not the existence or cadence of the communication itself. So, they established a rival press, The Daily Dose, branding themselves objective and honest. The voice of the masses. In response, The Carraig Daily launches a full-blown media offensive, demanding their readership boycott the new upstart, but appetites had grown. There was room for both.

Competition requires differentiation, and so was born the search for fresh content. The Daily Dose began publishing counterarguments to The Carraig Daily's pieces, attacking their rhetoric and labelling them biased. People needed access to opposing perspectives. Lines were drawn and loyalties cemented, and both

organisations thrived. Stories became adverts, became calls to action. Violence on the island rose, crime went up across the board, but nobody noticed.

A third operator emerges, a website this time, nothing more than a collation of the stories published by the two opposing papers. It is a revelation. Demand is insatiable. Stories cannot come fast enough.

A four-year-old boy goes missing. For forty-eight hours, the disappearance consumes the island. When a body is found on the promenade, statements from the family arrive sooner than the cause of death. The three media outlets lay bare a timeline of the family's various struggles over the years, culminating in this greatest of tragedies, while the boy's porcelain features gaze up from coffee tables across the island. People are outraged, incensed, and completely immersed.

The funeral is widely attended. The family does not recognise half the faces, nor understand the grief that smears their features. Those in attendance judge those who stay at home, as though theirs is the self-serving act. They line the pews as the family exit, in crisp shirts and uncomfortable shoes, exploring the depth of their own indulgences for something they can use. They stand an inch taller, at the least.

Time passes. Someone else dies, someone older. Strangled in their home. It barely registers. Three fatal stabbings occur in as many days over the holidays; just one receives the gift of widespread coverage. Life goes on. A postman discovers another body on the beach, a middle-aged man of little importance. A jogger finds two more bodies in the mountains not long afterwards, schoolgirls, a few years from college. The islanders unite in their outrage. A story to rival Becca Farrell's at last.

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Sam Murphy sits on a springless mattress in a soulless room comprising two bunks, one toilet, and no windows. Phil has the radio on, one of those shows where people call in and shout about the government or their neighbours or what's in the news, swapping accusations and insults without ever taking the time to listen to one another. Sam himself is half-listening. He jolts as the cell door slides open. Still sends his nerves to mush the way they open it, even now. Nothing familiar about the harsh pitch of it. Not a thing you were supposed to get used to. The guard wordlessly drops a copy of The Carraig Daily at his feet, then departs. Doesn't have to do it. Not for the likes of Sam.

He closes his eyes and listens to the DJ's well-oiled tones. The guards turn a blind eye to it, so long as Phil keeps the volume down. Didn't have to do that, either.

Still, Sam can't concentrate on his reading with it on, even turned down low, so he folds the paper under his arm and waits. The host and his guests are debating a suitable punishment for the Marsh Mountain Killer of Carraig-gan-Anam. Two girls kidnapped, abused, and brutally murdered. They're saying the first was an accident, a crime of passion. Mitigating circumstances, according to the protesters. Callers on both ends of the scale express outrage. The host speaks often of the need for balance in the debate. Sam wishes they'd speak of the value of it.

They reach a verdict. On comes the station's special correspondent to announce the killer's sentence. Seems like it'll be shorter than Sam's. The DJ dismisses the correspondent, bemoaning the court of public opinion before hurriedly thanking all his guests as his show draws to a close. Nobody mentions how old the girls were.

Now the show's over, Sam fingers through his copy of The Carraig Daily. It's the four-year anniversary of Becca Farrell's murder. Her face sits above a single paragraph on page eight. Her name sits neatly underneath her picture, and nowhere else. They mention Samuel three times in the paragraph, with a deep dive into his background on pages sixteen and seventeen and the promise of an exclusive with his former teacher, Mr Madigan, in Sunday's paper. He flicks back to the front page. He reads the story of the Marsh Mountain Killer's victims, two young girls found dead and defiled and alone. The paper presents their suffering in stark detail. Sam struggles to finish the piece. It's not delusion — he knows what he is — he just has no desire to engage with the suffering of others in this manner. Seemed it wasn't much use to anyone, really, but then he had never been like other folk.

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The Carraig Daily remains in circulation; two-dozen pages a day and a bumper Sunday edition. People consume the paper religiously, speaking of being informed and being up to date and little of simply being.

Their staff occupy the largest building on the island. They frequently meet with political leaders, both at home and on the mainland. All of which is well documented in the Carraig, or in one of its sister publications.

They remain the number one news source on the island. The trusted voice of the people.

People just like us, on a rock like any other.