

EVERYTHING IN
THIS COUNTRY
MUST

A NOVELLA AND TWO STORIES

COLUM McCANN

PICADOR

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Also by Colum McCann

Acclaim for *Everything in This Country Must*

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FOR

Isabella and John Michael

*Horses buried for years
Under the foundations
Give their earthen floors
The ease of trampolines.*

PAUL MULDOON
Dancers at the Moy

EVERYTHING IN THIS COUNTRY MUST

A SUMMER FLOOD CAME and our draft horse got caught in the river. The river smashed against stones and the sound of it to me was like the turning of locks. It was silage time and the water smelled like grass. The draft horse, Father's favorite, had stepped in the river for a sniff maybe and she was caught and couldn't move, her foreleg trapped between rocks. Father found her and called *Katie!* above the wailing of the rain. I was in the barn waiting for drips on my tongue from the ceiling hole. I ran out past the farmhouse into the field. At the river the horse stared wild through the rain maybe she remembered me. Father moved slow and scared like someone traveling deep in snow except there was no snow, just flood, and Father was frightened of water, always frightened. Father told me *Out on the rock there, girl.* He gave me the length of rope with the harness clip and I knew what to do. I am taller than Father since my last birthday, fifteen. I stretched wide like love and put one foot on the rock in the river middle and one hand on the tree branch above it and swung out over the river flood.

Behind me Father said *Careful now, hai.* The water ran warm and fast and I held the tree branch still able to lean down from the rock and put the rope to the halter of the lovely draft horse.

The trees bent down to the river in a whispering and they hung their long shadows over the water and the horse jerked quick and sudden and I felt there would be a dying, but I pulled the rope up to keep her neck above water, only just.

Father was shouting *Hold the rope, girl!* and I could see his teeth clenched and his eyes wide and all the big veins in his neck, the same as when he walks the ditches of our farm, many cow paths, hedgerows, fences. Father is always full of fright for the losing of Mammy and Fiachra and now his horse, his favorite, a big Belgian mare that cut soil in the fields long ago.

The river split at the rock and jumped fast into sprays coming up above my feet into my dress. But I held tight to the rope, held it like Father sometimes holds his last Sweet Afton at mealtime before his prayers. Father was shouting *Keep it there, girl, good!* He was looking at the water as if Mammy was there, as if Fiachra was there, and he gulped air and he went down in the water to free the draft horse's hoof, and he was gone so long he made me wail to the sky for being alone. He kept a strong hold on one tree root but all the rest of his body went away under the quick brown water.

The night had started stars. They were up through the branches. The river was spraying in them.

Father came up spluttering for air with his eyes all horsewild and his cap lost down the river. The rope was jumping in my hands and burning like oven rings, and he was shouting *Hold it girl hold it hai, for the love of God hold it please!*

Father went down in the water again but came up early, no longer enough in his lungs to keep his head down. He stayed in the river holding the root and the water was hitting his shoulders and he was shouting watching the draft horse drown, so I pulled hard on the halter rope and the horse gave a big scream and her head rose up again.

One more try, Father said in a sad voice like his voice over Mammy's and Fiachra's coffins long ago.

ago.

* * *

FATHER DIPPED UNDER and he stayed down as long as yesterday's yesterday, and then some headlights came sweeping up the town road. The lights made a painting of the rain way up high and they painted shadows on the hedgerows and ditches. Father's head popped out of the water and he was breathing heavy, so he didn't see the lights. His chest was wide and jumping. He looked at the draft horse and then at me. I pointed up the road and he turned in the flood and stared. Father smiled, maybe thinking it was Mack Devlin with his milk truck or Molly coming home from the sweet shop or someone coming to help save his favorite horse. He dragged on the tree root and struggled out from the river and stood on the bank and his arms went up in the air like he was waving, shouting *Over here over here, hai!*

Father's shirt was wet under his overalls and it was very white when the headlights hit it. The lights got closer and in the brightening we heard shouts and then the voices came clear. They sounded like they had swallowed things I never swallowed.

I looked at Father and he looked at me all of a sudden with the strangest of faces, like he was lost like he was punched, like he was the river cap floating, like he was a big tree all alone and desperate for forest. They shouted out *Hey mate what's goin' on?* in their strange way and Father said *Nothing* and his head dropped way low to his chest and he looked across the river at me and I think what I was telling me was *Drop the rope girl*, but I didn't. I kept it tight, holding the draft horse's neck above the water, and all the time Father was saying but not saying *Drop it please Katie, drop it, let her drown.*

* * *

THEY CAME RIGHT QUICK through the hedge with no regard for their uniforms and I could hear the thorns ripping back against their jackets. One took off his helmet while he was running and his hair was the color of winter ice. One had a mustache that looked like long grasses and one had a scar on his cheek like the bottom end of Father's hayknife.

Hayknife was first to the edge of the river and his rifle banged against his hip when he jumped on to the rock where I was halter holding. *Okay, luv, you're all right now*, he said to me, and his hand was rain-wet at my back. He took the halter and shouted things to the other soldiers, what to do, where to stand. He kept ahold of the halter and passed me back to Longgrasses, who caught my hand and brought me safely to the riverbank. There were six of them now, all guns and helmets. Father didn't move. His eyes were steady looking at the river, maybe seeing Mamma and Fiachra staring back at him.

One soldier was talking to him all loud and fast, but Father was like a Derry windowshop dummy and the soldier threw up his arms and turned away through the rain and spat a big spit into the wind.

Hayknife was all balance on the rock with the halter, and he didn't even hold the branch above his head. Icehair was taking off his boots and gun and shirt and he looked not like boys from town with

come to the barn for love, he looked not like Father when Father cuts hay without his shirt, no, I looked not like anybody; he was very skinny and strong with ribs like sometimes a horse has after a long day in the field. He didn't dive like I think now I would have liked him to, he just stepped in the water very slow and not show-offy and began making his way across, arms high in the air, getting lower. But the river got too deep and Hayknife was shouting from the rock, saying *Stay high, Stevie stay high side, mate.*

And Stevie gave a thumb-up to Hayknife and then he was down under the water and the last thing was the kick of the feet.

Longgrasses was standing beside me and he put Stevie's jacket on my shoulders to warm me, but then Father came over and he pushed Longgrasses away. Father pushed hard. He was smaller than Longgrasses but Longgrasses bashed into the trunk of the tree and hit against it. Longgrasses took a big breath and stared hard at him. Father said *Leave her alone, can't you see she's just a child?* I covered my face for shame like in school when they put me in class at a special desk bigger than the rest, not the wooden ones with lifting lids, except I don't go to school anymore since what happened with Mammy and Fiachra. I felt shame like the shame of that day in school and I covered my face and peeped instead through my fingers.

Father was giving a bad look to Longgrasses. Long-grasses stared at Father for a long time too and then shook his head and walked away to the riverbank where Stevie was still down in the water.

Father's hands were on my shoulders keeping me warm and he said *It'll be all right now, love,* but I was only thinking about Stevie and how long he was under water. Hayknife was shouting at the top of his voice and staring down into the water, and I looked up and saw the big army truck coming through the hedgerow fence and the hedge was broken open with a big hole and Father screamed *No!*

The extra lights of the truck were on and they were lighting up all the river. Father screamed again *No!* but stopped when one of the soldiers stared at him. *Your horse or your bloody hedge, mate.*

Father sat down on the riverbank and said *Sit down Katie,* and I could hear in Father's voice more sadness than when he was over Mammy's and Fiachra's coffins, more sadness than the day after they were hit by the army truck down near the Glen, more sadness than the day when the judge said *Nobody is guilty, it's just a tragedy,* more sadness than even that day and all the other days that follow.

Bastards, said Father in a whisper, *bastards,* and he put his arm around me and sat watching until Stevie came up from the water, swimming against the current to stay in one place. He shouted up to Hayknife *Her leg's trapped,* and then *I'm gonna try and get the hoof out.* Stevie took four big gulps of air and Hayknife was pulling on the halter rope and the draft horse was screaming like I never heard a horse before or after. Father was quiet and I wanted to be back in the barn alone waiting for drips on my tongue. I was wearing Stevie's jacket but I was shivering and wet and cold and scared because Stevie and the draft horse were going to die since everything in this country must.

* * *

FATHER LIKES HIS TEA without bags like Mammy used to make and so there is a special way for me

make it: Put cold cold water in the kettle and only cold, then boil it, then put a small boiling water the teapot and swish it around until the bottom of the teapot is warm. Then put in tea leaves, not bag and then the boiling water and stir it all very slowly and put on the tea cozy and let it stew on the stove for five minutes making sure the flame is not too high so the tea cozy doesn't catch flame and burn. Then pour milk into the cups and then the tea, followed at last by the sugar all spooned around into careful mix.

My tea fuss made the soldiers smile, even Stevie, who had a head full of blood pouring down from where the draft horse kicked him above his eye. Father's face went white when Stevie smiled but Stevie was very polite. He took a towel from me because he said he didn't want to get blood on the chair. He smiled at me two times when I put my head around the kitchen door and he held up one finger meaning *One sugar please* and a big O from fingers for *No milk please*. Some blood was drying in his hair and his eyes were bright like the sky should be, and I could feel my belly sink way down until it was there like love in the barn, and he smiled at me number three.

Everyone felt good for saving a life, even a horse life, maybe even Father, but Father was silent at the corner. He was angry at me for asking the soldiers to tea and his chin was long to his chest and there was a puddle at his feet. Everybody was towel drying except Father because there was not enough towels.

Longgrasses sat in the armchair and said *Good thing ya had heat lamps, guvnor*.

Father just nodded.

How was it under the water, Stevie? said Longgrasses.

Wet, said Stevie and everybody laughed but not Father. He stared at Stevie, then looked away.

The living room is always dark with Father grim, but it was brighter now. I liked the green of the uniforms and even the red of Stevie's blood. But Stevie's head from the horse kick must have been very sore. The other soldiers were talking about how maybe the army truck should take Stevie straight off to hospital and not get dry, just get stitches, and not get tea, just come back later to see about the draft horse if she survives under the heat lamps. But Stevie said *I'm okay, guys, it's just a scrape, I'll kill for a cuppa*.

The tea tasted good from long brewing and we had biscuits for special visitors, I fetched the biscuits from the pantry. I bit one to make sure they were fresh and I carried out the tray.

I was sneezing but I was very careful to sneeze away from the tray so as to have politeness like Stevie. Stevie said *God bless you* in his funny funny way and we were all quiet as we sipped on the tea but I sneezed again three four five times and Hayknife said *You should change out of them wet clothes luv*.

Father put down his teacup very heavy on the saucer and it was very quiet.

Everyone even the soldiers looked at the floor and the mantelpiece clock was ticking and Mammy's picture was staring down from the wall and Fiachra when he was playing football and the soldiers didn't see them but Father did. The long silence was longer and longer until Father called me over, *Come here, Katie*, and he stood me by the window and he took the long curtain in his hands. F

turned me around and wrapped the curtain around me and he took my hair and started rubbing, not tender but hard. Father is good, he was just wanting to dry my hair because I was shivering even in Stevie's jacket. From under the curtain I could see the soldiers and I could see most of all Stevie. He sipped from his tea and smiled at me and Father coughed real loud and the clock ticked some more until Hayknife said *Here, guv, why don't you use my towel for her?*

Father said *No thanks.*

Hayknife said *Go on, guv,* and he put the towel in a ball and made to about throw it.

Father said *No!*

Stevie said *Take it easy.*

Take it easy? said Hayknife.

Maybe you should all leave, said Father.

Hayknife changed his face and threw the towel on the ground at Father's feet and Hayknife's cheeks were out-puffing and he was breathing hard and he was saying *Fat lot of fucken thanks we get from your sort, mister.*

Hayknife was up on his feet now and pointing at Father and the light shone off his boots which were polished and his face was twitching so the scar looked like it was cutting his face. Longgrasses and Stevie stood up from the chairs and they were holding Hayknife back, but Hayknife was saying *Rid our fucken lives and save your fucken horse and that's all the thanks we get, eh?*

Father held me very tight with the curtain wrapped around me and he seemed scared and small and trembling. Hayknife was shouting lots and his face was red and scrunched. Stevie kept him back. Stevie's face was long and sad and I knew he knew because he kept looking at Mammy and Fiachra on the mantelpiece beside the ticking clock. Stevie dragged Hayknife out from the living room and at the kitchen door he let go. Hayknife turned over Stevie's shoulder one last time and looked at Father with his face all twisted but Stevie grabbed him again and said *Forget it mate.*

Stevie took Hayknife out through the kitchen and into the yard toward the army truck and still the rain was coming down outside and then the living room was quiet except for the clock.

I heard the engine of the army truck start.

Father stood away from me and put his head on the mantelpiece near the photos. I stayed at the window still in Stevie's jacket which Stevie forgot and he hasn't come back for yet.

I watched the truck as it went down the laneway and the red lights on the green gate as it stopped and then turned into the road past where the draft horse was lifted from the river. I didn't hear anything then, just Father starting low noises in his throat and I didn't turn from the window because I knew he would be angry for me to see him. Father was sniff sniffing, maybe he forgot I was there. He was going right down into him and it came in big gulps like I never heard before. I stayed still because Father was trembling big and fast. He took out a handkerchief and moved away from the mantelpiece. I didn't watch him because I knew he would be shamed for his crying.

The army truck was near out of sight, red lights on the hedgerows.

I heard the living room door shut, then the kitchen door, then the pantry door where Father kept

his hunting rifle, then the front door, and I heard the sound of the clicker on the rifle and him starting crying going farther and farther away until the crying was gone and he must have been in the courtyard standing in the rain.

The clock on the mantelpiece sounded very loud, so did the rain, so did my breathing, and I looked out the window.

It was all near empty on the outside road and the soldiers were going around the corner away where I heard the sounds; it wasn't like bullets, it was more like pops one two three.

The clock still ticked.

It ticked and ticked and ticked.

The curtain was wet around me but I pulled it tight. I was scared, I couldn't move. I waited and it seemed like forever.

When Father came in from outside I knew what it was. His face was like it was cut from a stone and he was not crying anymore and he didn't even look at me, just went to sit in the chair. He picked up his teacup and it rattled on the saucer so he put it down again and he put his face in his hands and he stayed like that. The ticking was gone from my mind and all was quiet everywhere in the world and I held the curtain like I held the sound of the bullets going into the draft horse, his favorite, in the barn, one two three, and I stood at the window in Stevie's jacket and looked and waited and still the rain kept coming down outside one two three and I was thinking oh what a small sky for so much rain.

WOOD

IT WAS JUST PAST NIGHTTIME when we brought the logs down to the mill. The storm was finished but there was snow still on the hedges and it looked like they had a white eyebrow.

Mammy drove the red tractor. It went down the lane with hardly any speed at all. The headlights were off and she kept the throttle steady so as nobody would hear. She was wrapped in two coats and had my brown duffle closed to the neck but still the wind was cold. The logs scraped along the ground behind the tractor and made a sound like they were nervous too. The logs were wrapped with chains to keep them from slipping, but still the chains rattled and I held my breath.

The light from Daddy's room was on. It sprayed out yellow onto the snow at the back of the house.

Mammy said hush to me.

She pushed the throttle forward and the tractor quickened a little on the hill. She didn't want the engine to cut out and die. Daddy might hear something and then he would ask. The engine was like the sound of a cough rising.

Mammy turned in the tractor seat and pulled up her head scarf to look back and see if all the logs were following. I was walking behind the logs and I gave her a wave and she smiled and turned again.

My boots made footprints in the tracks left by the pulled wood. They were size eights that belonged once to Daddy and still they were much too big for me and I could feel the newspaper shifting in the toes.

The snow had frozen and it crunched under my feet.

The tractor got to the top of the hill and then, when the logs came up, Mammy pulled back on the throttle.

All the clouds had disappeared and there was a slice of moon out that looked like a coin had been tossed in the sky. I wanted to sit on the end of the logs and have the tractor skid me along. We had a small wooden cart before Daddy got sick and he skidded us through the fields on the back of a rope. We laughed and shouted hard, me and my brothers. Sometimes he dragged us along through the mud all the way down to the church where we had services. Once he pulled the cart too hard and we slammed into a tree. I got a big cut on my head and it bled down my chin, but I didn't go to the hospital. Daddy said I was a big enough lad, not to cry, and he carried me all the way home. He had wide shoulders then, not hunched into himself like an old raven.

* * *

THE MAN WITH THE BIG CAR had called at the door three days before. He had gray hair and a gray suit and a Union Jack in his lapel. His face was very tight like someone had squished it together with pliers. I knew him from church, but couldn't remember his name. He said that there'd been a fire at the Lodge and it was an emergency, he didn't want to use the Kavanagh mill on the other side of town.

Forty poles, he said to Mammy. Twenty-five shillings each. They'll be carrying the banners. We'

leave the wood at the end of the laneway. They'll have to be smooth and varnished and rounded at the top.

I was sure that Mammy was going to say no thanks. Ever since Daddy got sick she said no thanks to every other job, she said we got enough money from the checks in the post. But this time she rubbed her hands together and finally she whispered, Okay.

Your husband'll be all right with that, then? he asked.

He will, aye.

He was never mad keen before, was he?

Mammy looked behind as if she was expecting Daddy to be listening, then she jiggled the door handle up and down.

The man smiled and said, Next week, so?

Aye, next week, said Mammy.

* * *

I LOOKED UP TO THE LIGHT in Daddy's window and then back to the tractor. Mammy had her hands held hard now to the steering wheel as she turned the corner going close to the house.

There was ivy on the walls and it looked like our secret was climbing up the vines to Daddy's room.

I ran to catch up with the logs in the courtyard. My chest rose and fell hard. Mammy was leaning back over the seat and waving her arms at me to hurry up. She was trying to say a word but there was no word coming and then she whipped her body back around.

She stood up quickly from the tractor seat and turned the steering wheel hard left and braked. I was thinking maybe she had hit one of the dogs, but I ran around the side and saw the wheelbarrow, full of bricks. The back wheel of the tractor had just missed it. It would have made a fierce noise. I grabbed ahold of the wheelbarrow and rolled it away a few feet.

Mammy whispered: Get you there in front of the tractor and make sure there's nothing else in our way, good boy.

The courtyard was empty mostly but I moved the bricks to the side of the old outhouse and then dragged some scrap planks over to the water tank. Mammy looked stiff in the face, but then she gave a smile as I cleared the path for the tractor.

The snow from the top of the planks sat on the sleeves of my coat and then melted and ran down my elbows, where it made me shiver.

I waved Mammy on.

She put her boot down hard on the brake, releasing the lock—it clicked a loud click—and the tractor rolled forward slowly once more. The tires caught on the hard snow and the logs made a groan against the ground.

The doors to the mill were open. Mammy drove the tractor all the way in and now the sound was different, softer, the tires rolling over sawdust. I pulled the string that led to the light and it flooded

the mill and there was dust all around us. A few empty bottles of lemonade were on the workbenches where Daddy had left them long ago. I thought about running into the house to get some milk from the fridge but Mammy said: Come on now, Andrew.

She climbed down from the tractor and yanked her dress from where it caught on the mudguard. She closed the door of the mill, clapped her hands together twice, and said: Let's get cracking.

* * *

DADDY SAYS he's as good a Presbyterian as the next, always has been and always will, but it's just his meanness that celebrates other people dying. He doesn't allow us to go to the marches, but I saw a picture in the newspapers once. Two men in bowler hats were carrying a banner of the King on a big white horse. The horse was stepping across a river with one hoof in the air and one hoof on the bank. The King wore fancy clothes and he had a kind face. I really liked the picture and I didn't see why Daddy got upset. Mammy never said anything about the marches. If we asked a question she said, Ask your daddy. And when we asked why, she said, Because your daddy said so.

I thought maybe our poles would hold a banner just like that, with the King sitting high up on his horse. I asked Mammy but she said, Hush now son we've got a big job to do.

* * *

I KNEW WHAT TO DO from watching Daddy. We unwrapped the chains from the logs. The metal links felt dead in my fingers.

Mammy had thin little wool gloves on and she offered them to me, but I said no thanks. She took off her head scarf. Her hair fell to her shoulders, black with little bits of gray. Her cheeks were red from the cold and she looked pretty like she does in old photographs. She reached into her dress pocket, took out some matches, went across to the kerosene heaters.

When she struck the match it looked like there was fire jumping from her hands. In a few minutes the mill was heating. We pulled the last of the chains out from under the logs and one of them rolled across the floor of the mill. It bumped into the sawhorse.

Mammy looked out the window, but the yard was empty except for the tracks we had left in the snow. She tapped on the windowpane and the ice on the glass shook. Then she took the chain saw down off the wall and said to me: Stand back.

Mammy fired it up and the metal teeth ripped around and around the blade. She made a vee cut first and I put pressure on the log so it would cut quicker. She sliced the log into three long sections and there was a bead of sweat on her forehead, just sitting there, not quite sure if it was going to fall down her face or not, but she turned off the chain saw and put her head into her shoulder, and wiped the sweat away.

How long will it take? I asked.

A few days, she said. They need them in time for marching practice.

I saw some bats flying outside, past the window. They dipped around and went very fast.

We bent down to lift the piece of log into the cutting machine. The wood was wet where Mammy had sawed it and I could feel it ooze down my fingers.

We were breathing hard when we got the log in place. Mammy hit the switch and the sharp blade went along the middle of the log. When you cut trees you can tell how old they are by the number of rings, and I wondered if I cut myself open would I be able to tell things about myself, but I didn't say anything because Mammy was staring into the machine.

Do you think the pieces are too thick? she said.

I wasn't sure, so I said no, they were perfect.

She gave a small smile and some hair fell down her face and she tied it back behind her head. She stood with her hands on her hips.

Right so, she said.

We took the first piece to the rounding machine and Mammy spent a long time making sure that everything was adjusted right: the blades, the buttons, the oil. She looked at me across the machine for a long time and said, It's our secret, right?

Aye.

You won't tell your brothers neither?

No.

God help me, she said in a whisper.

Mammy turned the machine on. It clattered and she looked like she wanted to tell it to be quiet. The wood spun around and around and bits came flying off until it began to look like a pole. I started sweeping the floor. I put the bristles of the brush right down into the gaps of the floorboards just so I could get every little piece.

There was a great smell of timber in the air. Mammy switched off the machine and ran her finger along the wood and then she turned to me.

Will you get the thingymajig ready there, love? she asked. She was pointing at the sanding machine. I ran across and got it. It wasn't heavy.

Plug it in there, good lad, she said.

A little spark jumped out from the wall, blue like lightning.

* * *

WE MADE ONE GOOD POLE but Mammy said it was too late, that we'd try again the next night. We reversed the tractor out and left it in the courtyard where it was before and then we put the lock on the door of the mill. Mammy took a rake to the snow on the ground to get rid of all the footprints and tire marks.

When we got back to the house I showed Mammy the secret to keeping quiet on the stairs, staying to the left-hand side, watching for the creak on the seventh step, then stepping real light on the eleventh and missing the fourteenth altogether.

Mammy washed her hands in the sink so Daddy wouldn't smell the wood and then she went in

wake him up and turn him so he wouldn't get sores on his body.

She does that six times a day. First she tucks her hands in under his legs and she props them up with a pillow. Then she puts her hand under his back and she rolls him over. The first few times she did it he used to moan but now he just grits his teeth and looks straight ahead at the wall. Once, when she was rolling him, my brothers and I saw his willy fall out from the gap in his pajamas. Paul laughed first and then me and then Roger. Daddy looked at us and said, Get out boys. Mammy tucked his willy back in and pulled the drawstring tight.

* * *

THE DAY DADDY FELL he went down between two sawhorses. My brothers and me were playing hide-and-go-seek in the courtyard. Roger found him and shouted to come quick to the mill and I ran as fast as I could. Daddy was there with his eyes wide open. He had a piece of sandpaper in his hands and his hair was covered in dust. He was trying to move but he couldn't.

He was making chairs when it happened. Daddy made the most beautiful chairs in the whole Britain. Any man or woman, said Mammy, would be proud to sit in one of his chairs. They were fit for the Royal Family and they were even fit for the Queen herself. He used to make cabinets too, and sometimes he even fired the little brass handles in the forge at the rear of the mill. They were mahogany cabinets, which was the most expensive wood and only made on special order from a man in Belfast. Every time he sold a cabinet Daddy would bring us to town for red lemonade and ice cream. Sometimes for fun he swayed in and out of the lines.

Daddy even made the seats in our church. He said everyone should do his bit for God. Our neighbour Mr. McCracken said the seats would put the Catholic church to shame, but Daddy said there was no shame in any church, cheap wood or good wood, everyone sat in the same direction.

Reverend Banks said in a sermon that they were great works of the Lord, and that day all the men slapped Daddy on the back and he walked out tall and proud.

He was so tall he could grab onto the rim of the door in the mill and pull himself up ten times. He worked there all day long, last star to first, and Mammy used to bring out sandwiches to him, sometimes in the evening a can of beer.

When he finished a chair Mammy always tested it out for him. Once in summer I saw her standing outside the mill on a wooden stool and she was reaching up in the air and laughing. Daddy was beside her, smiling. He used to smile a lot like that and his teeth were nice and white.

The doctor said it was a stroke and when Daddy tried to say things he couldn't. For a long time his words were all jumbled like he had too many in his mouth. He sometimes stared at his hands like they belonged to someone else.

Mammy moved into my bedroom because Daddy couldn't sleep right, and I moved in with my brothers.

The worst thing was that he wasn't able to turn the pages of his Bible anymore, but Mammy had an idea. She took out her makeup bag and put hairpins on his favorite pages so they stuck out the top

Then Daddy was able to flip the hairpins using the back of his hand, and he was happy then even though it was hard for him to smile.

Daddy has a face that, if you don't know it, you might think he's angry when he smiles, but it's like a special password, the way his mouth turns.

* * *

EACH NIGHT it was like we were digging a secret tunnel. I never stayed up so late before. We cut the logs until they were thin, smoothed them out, and made little round rims at the top, so they looked like the front of our banisters. That was the hardest part. Then we used paintbrushes to put on the preservative and even some polish so the logs would be nice and fancy and dark brown.

We used up all the kerosene and we had to work fast just to keep our fingers warm. Mammy gave me a pair of gloves, Daddy's old ones. They were yellow and I thought about the white gloves of the marching men. I could picture their nice gloves around the poles and the big shiny buttons they wore on their coats.

We made four poles the second night and seven the third. We got so fast that we made twelve on the fourth night. They kept getting better and better. The little round pieces at the top were perfect.

On the last night we finished the job early. We stacked the forty poles in the corner of the mill near the door. They were leaning together like a whole big forest all smoothed out.

Mammy ran her fingers over a couple of the poles and when she got a splinter in her hand she said, Oh, sugar.

She sanded the pole down again and then we walked back across the courtyard. She sucked the little bit of blood from her finger. It was late. There were millions of stars in the sky and the moon was smaller than before. All the snow had melted away and the ground was muddy now.

We kicked off our boots at the front door and in the kitchen we ate some bread and butter and apricot jam.

Mammy went to have a bath and I went to my room. My brothers were sleeping away. They were breathing at different paces and they were a bit like a caterpillar the way they moved. I thought about squashing them.

I didn't sleep very well. I kept tossing and turning and then I had to help Roger back to sleep because he started crying. I went downstairs to get him some hot milk but there was none left in the silver canister. Mammy was sitting there with her head in her hands. She didn't notice me until I dropped the lid of the canister and it made a big clang. She took me over to her and gave me a big kiss on the head, which made me feel silly.

I went back upstairs and missed all the creaky points.

Roger cried when he heard there was no milk but at last he went to sleep and they all started breathing again in their caterpillar way.

I pulled up the covers and made a tunnel underneath. I was thinking of what it would be like to go there just once, to see the men in bowler hats carrying the poles along the street. Lots of people

cheering and blowing on whistles and drums playing. Ice-cream vans giving out free choc ices. All the crowd would stand up on the tips of their toes and say My oh my, look at that, aren't they wonderful poles, aren't they lovely?

* * *

WHEN I WOKE UP it was still dark like it always is in winter. The wind was blowing hard.

Mammy was on the landing already dressed.

We went into Daddy's room and closed the door behind us. He had the Bible open on his chest. The hairpins were sticking out. She brushed his teeth and got him to spit into the pan and then she told him I was mad keen on shaving him in the morning, was that all right?

Daddy said that would be all right as long as I didn't hack his face to pieces. He was just about able to get his words out proper.

I said, Great.

I ran downstairs and heated some water in the kitchen and then I got the white basin that was made from old china. His blade and the soap were under the sink. The towels and washcloth were already folded on the table.

I took a quick look out the window and Mammy had the poles stacked up in the center of the courtyard. She was looking down the laneway and waiting for the van to come and pick them up.

I balanced the blade across the bowl and carried the things out of the kitchen. I didn't care about the stairs anymore. I even pressed heavier so he would know I was coming. He was already waiting for me. He smelled a bit like he needed a bath. I flipped on the radio by the bed and turned it up a bit just like Mammy told me to. The news was on, there was something about queues in the petrol stations.

Daddy was propped up in the pillows and I put a towel behind his head and he gave that funny smile he has.

He said, Heated the water, did you?

I nodded and dipped a washcloth into the bowl and wet the side of his face. I was listening hard under the radio for the sound of the van coming along the laneway. There was nothing but the wind blowing outside. When his face was wet I put the soap in a lather and tried to smooth it out on his face and my fingers were a little shaky.

The radio had gone from news to ads.

I got the soap on his face and took the blade—Daddy calls it a straight blade—and started like Mammy does, at the bottom of his neck where he has all these tiny little bumps. He closed his eyes like always. The blade went slow. I didn't want to cut him, but he told me to go faster, not to worry, it was a better shave if you went quicker.

You'll do it one day soon yourself, son, he said.

I heard my brothers getting up in the room. They were shouting and laughing and hitting each other with pillows.

Daddy moved a little and some soap got on his pillow. I wiped it off, then went up along the side

of his cheek to his sideburns. His eyes stayed closed. I went quickly over the left side of his face.

Good lad, he said.

I was praying the van would come soon. Music started on the radio and Daddy told me to turn off, but I pretended I didn't hear him and kept shaving away. The black and gray hairs made funny little patterns on the blade, along with the soap. I wiped it carefully on the end of the towel.

He said, Turn the radio off, son.

I said, Ah please, Daddy.

Are you listening to your father? he said. Turn that mess off right now.

I reached across and flipped the radio off. Just then I heard the van in the laneway and he heard too. It turned in at the gate and made a squishy sound as it went through the puddles.

I could see by the way Daddy's forehead creased that he was wondering. I told him it must be the postman coming early and I pretended to look out the window and I said, Aye it's a red van, it must be the post. Really it was a blue van. I turned the radio on again so he wouldn't hear any sounds or van doors or the poles being loaded or any other noise that might happen. But he told me straight to turn the radio off again, no ifs ands or buts.

I started shaving his chin and then I moved up to his mustache and thought I should have washed my hands better because maybe there was still the smell of wood and preservative on my fingers.

My hands got very trembly.

The blade touched against his top lip but it didn't bring any blood. With his eyes closed, he looked like he was thinking about something very carefully.

They're very early, he said.

Aye.

This is the earliest I ever heard them.

The doors of the van slammed with a loud bang and I coughed a loud cough. Daddy stirred his back against the pillows and said how it must be a package of some sort, but for the life of him he couldn't imagine who would be sending a package.

I don't know, Daddy, I said.

He asked me to help run his fingers over his face, so I lifted his hand up. We started first on the neck, then the cheeks, the sideburns, down to his chin, and then I helped him touch the little hollow between his chin and his mouth.

You missed a part, he said to me.

Will I shave it?

No, run downstairs, he said, see about that package.

I bolted down. Mammy was still in the courtyard when I got outside. She had tucked the money away in her apron. The van was gone. My brothers opened the window upstairs and they were roaring down, but I didn't hear what they were saying.

Mammy, I said.

Aye?

He thinks there's a package.

Mammy went across the yard, taking small steps through the puddles.

I looked at the oak trees behind the mill. They were going mad in the wind. The trunks were b and solid and fat, but the branches were slapping each other around like people.

HUNGER STRIKE

THE BOY WATCHED from the headland above the town. He saw the old couple as they took the yellow kayak out from the house. They shunted it with difficulty to their shoulders and carried it toward the pier.

The old woman walked at the rear. The man was slightly bent, but he was still a good foot taller than she. She held the boat as high above her head as she could, but still it sloped down toward her. Their faces were lost beneath shadow as they shuffled down the tarmac road. Between them, resting on either shoulder, were the paddles. As they walked, the man and woman seemed like some strange and lovely insect. When they got to the edge of the pier they shucked the yellow kayak from their shoulders and busied themselves with getting it to water.

It was low tide, so they used long ropes to drop the boat from the pier. It landed with hardly a ripple. They stood talking a moment and the sunlight shone through their clothes, giving darkness the shape of their bodies.

She was rake-thin and the old man carried a paunch.

The old man made a gesture toward the sea and then turned and held on to the rungs as he climbed down the pier's rusted ladder. Even in his slowness he was fluid. He planted himself firmly in the kayak and placed the paddle across the center to stop the boat from rocking. The woman followed down the ladder tentatively. A breeze caught her dress and the old man touched her on the back of her legs. She turned and seemed to let out a small laugh as he guided her from the ladder into the double well of the boat. When she placed her foot down, the kayak hiccuped in the water.

They wore no life jackets but the man fumbled with a spray skirt, adjusting it tightly to the lip of the well. He nudged his paddle against the wall of the pier and the boat began to move out into the harbor. His paddle hit the water, sending out ripples that had long faded before she too reached out and struck, now in unison with him.

The kayak glided out and the boy's eyes followed them all the way until they turned and moved south along the headland, a bright yellow speck on the gray cloth of the sea.

* * *

SO THIS, THEN, was the Galway town where his mother had once spent her summers: sunlight, steeples, green postboxes, the stark applause of seagulls, the mountains stretching in the distance like a gift of simplicity.

* * *

THE BOY PULLED on an extra shirt—it had once been his father's—and inside there was still room for the whole boy more. He rolled the sleeves high on his forearms and crumpled the collar so that it wouldn't look ironed. Across the caravan his mother was still sleeping. Her chest rose and fell. Her hair had

fallen over her face and some of the strands had taken on the rhythm of her breathing, lifting and falling. The boy stepped across the linoleum floor with his shoes in his hands and he opened the door quickly to stop it from creaking.

Outside, the last spits of rain had just died on the wind.

On the cinder block doorstep he put on his shoes and looked out at the sea. The gray horizon blended into the gray sky so that he could not tell where the sky began and the sea finished. Only a single fishing boat broke the expanse.

Moving away from the caravan, he kicked at a few stray stones. He wore black drainpipes hitched high on his hips, exposing white socks and black shoes. The boy had not polished his shoes since he bought them and they were scuffed now like dark ice.

He followed the track that meandered muddily down the slope, steadying himself on tree branches until he reached the main road into town. It was still narrower than most other roads he had ever known. In Derry he had never been allowed to wander, but his mother said this town was safe, she knew all its nooks and crannies, it was a harmless place.

The rain had ripened the roadside grass and the boy reached the graveyard, where someone had placed a small china Virgin near a headstone. He wandered through the cemetery, patting his shirt pocket where he had a near-empty box of cigarettes stolen from his mother's handbag. Hunching under his jacket, he lit a cigarette and then spat near a crucifix. He felt a sudden shame rise to his cheeks, but he spat again at another gravestone and walked on. He was thirteen years old and it was the fourth cigarette of his life. It tasted cruel and lovely and it made his head spin. He smoked it down to the filter, put it between his thumb and forefinger, then flicked it high out over the stone wall of the graveyard. It fizzled red through the air and the suggestion of it remained on his tongue like morning breath as he walked around the graveyard, past all the curious wreaths and statues and carvings. He looked at the names and dates on the stones, many of which were covered now with long grasses and lichen.

At one of the stones he saw an empty pint glass with lipstick on the rim and, when he looked closely, he saw that it belonged to the grave of a young man not much older than himself.

Tough shite, he said to the stone.

He turned and hopped the stile in the wall, rejoining the road toward town. The road had no markings but he balanced along an imaginary white line that twisted and curved around the corner switchbacking once so he thought he might come around and meet himself.

A car passed him and beeped and the boy wasn't sure if it was a greeting or a warning. He waved back weakly and stuck to the grass verge as the road cantered down the hillside into the town. He stopped and looked at the sign that gave the name of the town in two languages—he could not make the connection between them, the English being one word, the Irish being two. He tried to juggle the words into each other but they would not fit.

A few men stood brooding and malignant outside a pub at the bottom of the hill. The boy nodded at them but they didn't gesture back.

How're you? he said to nobody, under his breath.

Oh, flying.

And yourself?

Sound enough.

He thought to himself that he wore a shirt of aloneness and he liked this idea; he pulled it around himself as he walked for hours past quiet shops, beyond a boarded-up blacksmith's, along a row of lime-colored bungalows, through a barren football field, over the high wall of a handball alley, then back to town, where he came to a small amusement arcade full of rude and tinny noise.

This is a stickup, he said to a machine.

He pulled a cigarette from his shirt pocket without removing the pack—the way his uncle might once have done—and he played a single video game with the unlit cigarette hanging from his mouth. It bobbed up and down as he cursed the spaceships on the machine. On one of his fingers he had, months ago, begun to tattoo a single word but had stopped when he wasn't quite sure what the word should be. All that appeared now was a single straight line where he had stuck a hot needle into his forefinger and smudged blue ink on it.

The tattooed finger repeatedly struck the button on the video machine and the boy was well into his third game when he simply turned, left the arcade, and strolled down to the pier.

Just outside the harbor, the yellow kayak was making its way back through the water and the other couple was paddling with surety and grace. The paddles sliced the air in rhythm and the sunlight flashed on the turning blades. Seagulls flew over and around the kayak, looking for fish, he supposed, and it seemed to the boy that the birds made hunger look easy.

* * *

HIS MOTHER HAD TOLD HIM: Do not say *wee*. Do not say *wee*. She said there was a landscape to language and their accents could be a dangerous curiosity right now. He thought to himself that he was a boy of two countries with his hands in the dark of two empty pockets. He walked along the distance of the pier and he said the word *wee* repeatedly until it meant nothing at all. It could have been a rope or a knot or a winch or perhaps even a thing of joy.

Wee, he screamed, running down from the pier and all the way along the empty beach. *Wee*.

* * *

THAT FIRST NIGHT the caravan listed and moaned in the fugue of wind that ferried itself up from the water. The caravan sat on cinder blocks, one hundred yards from the cliff face, tethered with a chain at either end. When they switched the lights on, the boy thought the whole thing must have looked like some sad and useless lighthouse.

It's stupid here, he said.

His mother turned around from the stove and said: Oh, it's not so bad. You'll see. You'll end up loving it.

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