The Beating

Thirteen years old, Tom had been, the first time his father beat him with real violence. He'd had the occasional chastising slap before that, open-handed, usually, but a couple of times too with the belt, delivered less to punish than in the hope of driving from him some of the wildness that the old man felt certain would someday get him killed. But this was different. A remark passed below in Cotter's, more in teasing than anything else, about how he'd been seen with McGroarty's eldest climbing the sty up into one of the high fields. Blackberry picking, probably, or after mushrooms. But said with a smirk that wouldn't leave the informer Burke's mouth alone—those thick lips slobbery with what porter had been taken and shining with glee at the trouble he was stirring. Sat at the end of the bar, Tom's father had taken the words with a nod, scarcely acknowledging them, and finished off his own glass, forcing himself to an easy pace, while the others, the few who were in that Sunday evening, looked on without being seen to. McGroarty's eldest, Mairéad, was noted to be slow, stupid, to have it crudely said, fifteen and already that or near enough in stone-weight, with her upper front teeth gone from falls and a barbarity of hair the red of muddy carrots that kept her big pale eyes most of the time hidden. It was already widely known, certainly among the kids at school, that for the price of a few pennies or pieces of chocolate, or for any bit of shoreline forage that might seem to her a treasure—coloured stones or shells, a mermaid's purse, a bottle that she could be made to believe had washed up on one of the island's beaches from Japan or Brazil or some corner of Africa—she'd lift up her skirt or let her breasts be squeezed and caressed; and there'd already been talk of her having gone missing a day and a night from home before being found in the back of one of the harbour's fishing sheds, still drunk out of what little mind she had at the best of times on a flagon of rum or poitín, with a black rheum of faeces and blood crusting the fat of her inner thighs and with her dress, sack that it was, fairly torn in shreds away from her.

The beating Tom took was for what had been said in Cotter's, but also because of what it seemed to make of him for targeting such a pitiful wretch, what it implied of

his nature, even young as he was. When his father had come into the cottage, he'd been stretched out on the floor ahead of the fire, struggling through his homework before the yellow flashing of the flames, with the few arithmetic riddles that needed puzzling apart or poring over the poem he'd taken down in such painstaking fashion from the blackboard, "The Stolen Child," "The Planter's Daughter," "Inniskeen Road: July Evening"—or if it was something in Irish, something like "Oileán Agus Oileán Eile" or "An tEarrach Thiar," in an attempt at getting it learned by heart for the following morning. Without a word of explanation he was grabbed by the arm, hauled upright and dragged back outside onto the road, the first punch, thrown without warning, bursting his nose, the shock of it blacking out the world, the follow-up shot, probably not even a second later, catching him above the eye, misplaced only because of how he'd staggered, and sending him hard down into the dirt of the road's verge. Had there been room for pleading he'd have begged, but the only sounds until Bríd finally came into the doorway and began screaming for them to stop were the lumbering weight of his father's breaths, the bloody gasping of his own, and the gunning of his heart in full stampede. He took a kick in the stomach and felt certain he was dying, and then he was lifted to his feet again and further beaten, the older man's big hard fists following him with ease as he staggered blindly away, mashing his lip onto his lower teeth, swelling the flesh around his eyes, slamming repeatedly into one side or the other of his head. "Get up, lad," the voice kept saying, the tone unrecognizable with anger and revulsion, until he was swallowed by the darkness that would keep him the better part of two days out cold. When he finally did wake those couple of nights later, every part of him felt broken. Even drawing air hurt, the slightest movement an agony to his ribs, throat, jaw, and pulped mouth. The bones of his face throbbed, his eyes—for the little they could open—flushed shadowy. Bríd sat perched on the edge of the bed beside him, her own face blanched from crying and a lack of sleep, working at him with a damp cloth, attempting as best she could to soothe the wounds he'd suffered. *Why?* he'd asked later, at some point the following day, wincing in pain, some of his teeth broken to shards, his lips and gums in shreds, the confusion of it all keeping him constantly capsized. *What did I do?* And her mouth a slat, she could only shake her head and shrug, as if there must have been some cause or reason, whatever it was, because neither of them had ever known their father anything like that, and never would again, he a man who'd rarely even lifted his voice in anger. Maybe he'd had moments of violence on the boats, or going back to the couple of years spent as a young man on the building sites across in London, but he'd never before carried any of it home with him.

Three weeks it took, before Tom was able to return to school, nowhere yet near fit, his concentration still lost to easy drifting, pain evident yet in his voice as a tight, airy

tuck, but needing to get out of the house and back to something like normality. That day, father and son had walked together in silence down the hill from the cottage, and there'd been no running; childish things had been resolutely put aside. The Máistir, Sullivan, watched them from the classroom window as they approached, then came out into the yard to the side of the school and shook Paudie's hand, his manner sombre, formal, leaving Tom, purposely ignored, to stand in silence alongside, eyes fixed to the ground, the bruised flesh of his face a thundery wash of greys and angry yellows, until in spare murmurs and nodded silences all had been settled between the two men. He'd be coming back, his father made clear, only till May, because once he had his Confirmation made Mick Sweeney's sons were taking him on, Mick being a first cousin of the boy's poor mother, a bed in heaven to her, and as soon as the priest had him sorted with the sacrament he'd be starting full shifts with them on the boat. "The time till then won't be long passing. What is it? A few weeks? And he won't be an ounce of trouble to you in the class. You've my word on that." The Máistir started to smile, thinking this a joke, then realising otherwise cleared his throat and assured Paudie that he wasn't the least bit concerned on that score, since in all the years he'd had the lad in school there'd never been anything in the way of trouble, that Tom might have chattered a bit now and then, the same as they all did, but in actual fact had always been one of the better behaved.

After that day, for what must have been a couple of years or more, the beating went unmentioned. By the time Tom started work with the Sweeney brothers and those other men who crewed the small trawler, the most serious of the damage had healed, though the marks, slower in fading, remained evident: his nose, having set crooked, giving a rasp to his breathing when under strain; the few broken teeth that couldn't be easily pulled out let be until rot enough had set in for the gums to give up their shards; and his lips, for a long time tender to any kind of food or drink either side of tepid and plain, thickened now hard as hide, making something stubborn and bullish of his mouth. But none of the boatmen cared or passed remark, burdened as they were, each of them, with scars of their own to bear, the worst of them every bit as ugly. Occasionally, whenever the crew's number waned, some cousin or one of the hired help deciding to throw his hat at the fishing and make instead for Birmingham or Boston in search of a different and better-paid kind of work than could be had on Clear, Paudie, if he happened to find himself idle, would fall in for a while, to help out but glad also of the chance to earn in cash, and over the following days and sometimes nights, too, father and son would again fish together, side by side.

During the weeks after what had happened, they'd hardly spoken or even looked in one another's direction, but time eventually got them beyond it, to a point of civility at least if never again to anything approaching the closeness they'd once had. Much of what yielding

did occur was due to Bríd, who at home of a night would start up conversation on the back of some overheard snag of gossip or a subject raised below in the classroom, asking mainly for the sake of breaking the silence, her voice pitched ever so slightly unnaturally high, how so-and-so was related to such-and-such again, or what year the bad storm had hit, the one that wrecked the American yacht off Sherkin, or whether there was anyone left on the island now able to remember the lighthouse keeper—some relative of theirs, wasn't he?—who'd fallen to his death that time, out on Fastnet. Addressing the questions to her father, mostly, since he in his reticence always needed the most drawing out, but finding ways of bringing Tom in on them, too, passing some remark, half the time probably intentionally wrong, that she just knew he wouldn't be able to leave unanswered. In this way, words were exchanged—never much, but after a while accompanied by the odd nod between father and son, or a roll of the eyes or put-upon smile, acknowledging without either of them having to speak of it that wasn't she the devil altogether with her questions, but wasn't she such an absolute pet, too, the best one of them, when all was said and done, for the heart the size of a king's castle that she had beating away inside her. And eventually some of the barriers did come down, so that when out digging the fields for drills of spuds or turnips, just the pair of them through most of the day, she being still below at school yet, they were at least able to converse, in the kind of small give and take manner that with effort and practice became easier, and if the beating remained between them and always had to, with neither able to forgive what part in their minds the other had played, whether in the instigation or the executing, then an acceptance of it, of sorts, did eventually allow it to be overcome.

And then, one Sunday, they were climbing the hill up home after a lunchtime hour spent on two slow pints of stout apiece below in Cotter's, and while his father stood waiting in the ditch, taking his increasingly usual eternity to piss, Tom had stopped and idled in the road, gazing back down over the harbour, the sea spread like slate beneath a heavily rutted sky, the only boat out in this wind the ferry bringing back supplies from the mainland.

"Can I ask you something, Da?" he'd said, just as his father's breath caught with an audible hitch, and after two or three further seconds spent braced, the stream that the older man had been awaiting and silently pleading for began to flow—a trickle, the best he could manage any more, but steady enough because of the couple of pints of Murphy's, a steaming wetness whispering against the fronds of ditch briar, to prompt a great sigh of relief, the heft of which Tom, from where he was on the road, could nearly feel. Even when the last of it had fallen away Paudie continued to stand there, his big shoulders set square and his gaze fixed resolutely ahead, in over the ditch to the fields beyond. Then, finally, he shook himself briskly dry, buttoned the front of his trousers and leapt at an awkward stumble, barely keeping his balance, back down onto the road.

"The few clatters I got that time," Tom continued, once they started walking again.

"What about them?"

"It's just, I've never been able to fathom what I'd done." He could hear the pull of his father's breathing with the effort of the incline. And the tightness of it.

"Just forget it, can't you."

Tom stopped, and after a few further steps Paudie stopped, too, and stood straight, though rather than looking back, put his hands on his hips and drew deeply of the air.

"That's just it, you see. I've tried forgetting. But it won't go away."

Silence held a long moment then, shaken only by the occasional ruffle of the breeze bothering the growth of the ditches.

"You know, Tom. The McGroarty girl. If you're determined to make me say."

"Who? Mairéad, is it? What about her?" Tom felt sickness coming into him, a sour revival of the taken drink starting in a small sudden burst back up out of his stomach. "Come on, Da. Did she say I did something?"

"You were seen." Now Paudie did turn, though not all the way. He stood side-on to the road, the attention of his gaze kept to whatever could be made out between the leaning towards one another of a pair of twisted haws, as if too disgusted to meet his son's glare. But his voice was low and steady. "Going up into the fields with her. Don't deny it, lad. Don't make it worse now than it was."

Tom didn't, not then, because there were no words. And what hurt him to the quick was that he even understood, seeing it from that perspective. Poor Mairéad, who used to run to school as part of their pack, the one always or almost always falling, the clumsiest in any crowd, and who he'd been noticing down around the pier sheds these past weeks just as the evenings were turning dark, trawling for those foreigners among the different crews—men who lined up, he knew, from hearing it half-spoken of, for a turn with her at some pittance price, barely the loose coins in their pockets, her unhurried mind probably even making an affection of it, but her ruin already set. And he remembered and had never forgotten the morning, years back, while out with the dog in the casual hope of a rabbit, back when he couldn't have been much more than about seven or eight, finding her sitting crouched down behind one of the hillside ditches and weeping into her cupped hands, crying the most heartbroken tears—*Hiding*, she'd gasped, after he had asked her what was wrong and what she thought she was doing. *Hiding from the world*. He'd sat beside her, took her hand when she'd implored it of him, and let her pet and play with Bran, her stumpy nail-bitten fingers combing circles in the terrier's wiry scruff until the worst of whatever she'd been holding onto had ebbed away; and because of that, seeing her in such condition and sensing the terrible weight of the thing amiss with her, though she couldn't bring herself to speak of it and he'd been too young yet to even begin to understand, he only ever shook his head in refusal when boys he knew, friends of his,

tried to have him join them in persuading her into some shed or behind a hedge where she could be coaxed into opening her shirt for them and turning her head to one side while they grabbed fistfuls of her breasts and pinched and plucked at her nipples.

The day that had brought about his beating, he'd gone with her up into the fields because of two beautiful bright red birds that according to her were nesting in the high whin and which he'd quickly persuaded himself, based on her description, must have been cardinals, the same as the one he'd seen pictures of in a book in school, somehow come across the ocean from America, carried on a storm wind, maybe, or trapped by accident in the hold of some ship. There'd been no such birds, of course, she'd probably glimpsed robins or warblers, but no harm had been done, and he'd even enjoyed, for the time it lasted, the excitement of the hunt, the pair of them shaking the spiky furze with sticks, and raising wrens, chats, and yellowhammers for Bran to chase and bark at. More could have happened, had he wanted that and had he been what his father had obviously thought of him. Because he was one of the few that Mairéad had always liked playing with and didn't seem afraid of, a smile and a question put the right way, a little gentle pleading, was likely all it would have taken. But then he'd have deserved what had come to him and worse besides.

"You made a mistake," was all he said, and he set to climbing the hill again, passed his father at barely the distance of an arm's reach but without the least acknowledgement, and continued on, briskly, towards home, not once looking back. When he reached the cottage he hesitated before entering, knowing he had time, that the old man was a fair distance behind him on the road yet, and it might have been then, even young as he was, that his thoughts first turned in any kind of serious way to running, clearing out, making for the mainland and elsewhere, as so many of the island had and always would. Apologies this far along were as useless as explanations; words had lost their value, since what had happened couldn't be undone.

From the road a full dozen strides from the cottage's open front door he caught the dense, ripe smell of stew, sweet carrots and onions, wild thyme, and then the sight of Bríd, over by the range, fists laden with leftover scraps of skate, monk, or whatever had been going spare from the previous evening's catch, that she'd cut up and was feeding to the pot. His movement, or the sense of his presence, caused her to turn a loving smile towards the doorway's light, her hair bedraggled and face reddened from the heat of cooking, but uplifted at having him home.

"About time," she said, mock-scolding, but in trying to act as mistress succeeding only in sounding very young, all ends up the child she still mostly was, if she'd just been allowed to act and behave as such. "I was afraid you and Da were intent on supping Cotter's dry." Then, even as she spoke, her stare fell past Tom towards the doorway and the road

beyond. “Where is he, at all? Don’t tell me you left him below there. If you did, and he gets going with some of that crowd, we’ll not see him for the night.”

“Take it easy,” Tom said, forcing a smile of his own. “He’s along behind me. The hill up just has him beat, that’s all. Don’t be worrying, girl. Sure, you know a tide of porter couldn’t keep us from a plate of your stew.” But even as he spoke, he could sense that something was off, or had changed. The cottage felt at its usual Sunday ease, rich with flavours and shadows, holding its past and its stories close; yet within that state of calm, he’d become aware of a shifting, slight-seeming but essential, of the time—of life—slipping irresistibly by. As he almost never did, and knowing she’d think him drunk, he brought himself to her and, unbidden, kissed her cheek, for the warm salted taste and the feeling, however fleeting, of closeness. “We’re here,” he added, wanting this moment to last and for what he was saying to be true, but chancing little more than murmur, not trusting that his voice wouldn’t give him away.