

THE BOATMAN

Margaret's brother arrives a little after four, coming up the yard in that heavy way of his, still with sleep on him and hauling two shovels and a pickaxe, the weight of his boots on the gravel as familiar to me as the sound of my own voice in my head or my boat on the water, its old wood moaning among the waves.

I remain at the kitchen table, hunched over a small glass and with a dark refilled bottle beside the flat of my left hand. These past two nights have done for the whiskey, and I am reduced now to more home-grown poisons. But that's all right; we all have hard tastes here, and we're well used to the fire. Beyond the window, the staggered silhouettes of ash trees stand black and dense against the horizon. I drain the glass and pour again, running the alcohol to its brim, the liquid clear and illicit and full, for now, of the early hour, then slide it across the table in anticipation of my brother in-law. A minute passes, the clock dropping its seconds in clicks, and if Michael seems to linger outside longer than usual I know that it is because he's looking at the sky, the stars, and listening for the first flute notes of birdsong. Feeling the stillness of a rare morning without breeze. And it is as if the world is waiting.

When he enters, his steps trying to go gentle across the hall's linoleum, the balance of the stillness shifts. After a moment he fills the doorway and leans against the jamb. Neither of us wants to speak yet, lacking I suppose the necessary words, but also because there's little left to say beyond expressions of anger, and we're both too beaten down for that. I gesture towards the glass, and he takes a couple of paces forward, picks it up in his thick fingers and drinks slowly. I watch him, then help myself to a last long, deep swallow from the bottle.

“Is herself asleep?” he says, and I nod. They'd given her something to put her down, because after so many days awake she was out on her feet. Now the house around us feels like a hole. She has fallen in and is still falling, and I am clinging to an edge. Everything that has gone before seems redundant now, all the efforts at survival, the love, the wasted laughter. Beth, who'd only ever seemed so small between us but who within five minutes had managed to diminish to almost nothing the time before she'd entered our world, has cleaved us entirely open in her going. Without her, Margaret and I are nothing but collections of bones, emptied of worth. All I've wanted, ever since the hospital had first admitted her, was to be able to sit by myself and cry. But I am twenty-eight years old and haven't spilt a tear since I was a boy, and it seems that I have lost the ability to let go in that way. Margaret weeps, haemorrhaging tears almost, but I can only stand there, helpless, not looking at her but neither looking away. If I was a better man, I'd take her in my arms and hold her, to feel her hair unkempt in my face and eyes, and her cheeks wet against mine and hot with fever, and to know the broken-hearted heave of her breath punching through her thin body. But that's still a step beyond what I can manage. I want to be strong for her, and we both know that it is what she needs and probably what I need too, but words of comfort are stuck in my throat. We're deep in this together, and yet the world feels untouchable around me. It's as if I've been set down on a jut of reef in the middle of the sea, some small hard rock with bottomless water a step away in every direction, and there is nothing I can do but stand and watch while others around me struggle to stay afloat and while my betters sink and drown.

Outside, at this hour, I know the morning well. Usually, if I haven't already cast off ahead of threatening rain, I will be loading my boat for the day. Four is not early for me. But this morning, because we are walking into instead of away from the dawn, up the hill to the old graveyard instead off towards the shore, I see the hour wearing another face, blushed with new colours and bearing a different weight of darkness. When I lift my head, stars come up over the brow of the hill and, as we climb, are lost and the sky in that direction melts and turns a shade of blue that seems to soften with every step, every breath.

“You'd have thought the doctors could have done more,” Michael says, and then the air catches hard in his throat, and his stare finds his feet in embarrassment at having spoken a private thought accidentally aloud. I listen to him breathing as we walk, his exhalations making the sound of pages being turned. He has the pickaxe slung over his right shoulder. I am carrying the shovels. “She was only young,” he adds, when he can't stop the rest from coming, “and she didn't even seem that bad. A cold, maybe. But nothing worse than 'flu. How could it have already been too late? How were we supposed to know?”

I don't begrudge him his grief, even though it challenges my own in scale. Michael and Beth were close, not just uncle and niece but friends. He's like the rest of us in almost every way, but a part of him has remained relentlessly childlike. Maybe because he has never married. Maybe that's what put him always at such ease with her. He'd act the fool for her in ways that I couldn't, and was never short of time to spend on games. I did what I could, and Beth and I laughed plenty when we were together, but my duty was to work, and to provide. I've never had Michael's freedom, but also never wanted it. And other than that, we are the same. Cut from the one cloth. He is older than me by a few years that doesn't matter in the least, and his hair where it has been cropped nearly into his skull at the sides of his head is already showing flecks of grey. Early thirties is snugly middle-aged here, especially on men. By then our skin has already tightened in against our skulls, and our bodies, especially across the shoulders and chest, have set heavy. From hauling nets and turning earth. And we speak sparely and in a raw hush, having grown used to bending beneath the wind.

“They weren't blaming us,” I tell him, my voice soft as dust. “It was no one's fault.”

“No,” he says. “But she was only young.”

We follow the road up the hill, unhurried, leaning into the incline, and it feels as if all the weight of the world is on us, pressing us down. There's a chill in the air but we are both used to it, and it fills

our mouths with something better than talk and freshens our minds. Ten or fifteen minutes later, we reach the graveyard. The side gate opens just enough for us to pass through, fanning into a rut in mud that has been parched nearly to stone by a fortnight of dry weather and westerly wind. Knowing the way even in the dark, I lead us among the slumped stones and through long, stringy wisps of footpath grass towards the east wall, back to where the older graves lie. My thoughts are full of my father, and of the day we buried him, how the light had been, the peppered light of dusky, wet October, with a wind that caused the words of the priest's murmured prayers to flap like bunting flags around us. I remember the sensation of my tears squeezing from some tight place, but not falling, even though I wanted them, and how it had hurt to breathe and to swallow when the time came for us to lower his coffin down into the dirt. For others, friends, relatives, men and women who'd known him all their lives, it was part of the ritual, that shining pine box the closing down of an existence, another dropped stitch in the tapestry of our island; but my mind was full of the man himself, the person I'd loved most in the world from before I even had any idea of what the word meant. And it was not so easy to let go. I could feel him there with me, by my side and all around, and I didn't need to see to know his face, his stories, his heart. Such details were burnt into me.

Now, at his graveside all these years on, I pick open the buttons of my shirt and strip to the waist. The dark has softened around us and the cold feels good against my skin after the uphill walk. Michael watches me in silence, then steps back a few paces, understanding how much room I need, and I move into place, heft the pickaxe high above my right shoulder and begin to attack the dirt.

I have always enjoyed reading, but it is a pleasure that has deepened in recent years. Sleep comes hard for me; if I can get three hours then I'll count that as a decent night. So, after Margaret has gone to bed, and so that I won't disturb her by burning a light, I'll sit up in the kitchen and for a while get into a book, in order to put myself down. I've lived this way since before we were

married, and I always have an old paperback in my pocket. It's about filling the empty moments, I think, blocking out the spaces between acts. Sometimes, when I am out in the boat and after I have cast my nets, there'll be a period of calm, and I'll have a chance to sit a while and simply watch the sky, and to enjoy the flashing colours of the light on the water, and to ponder. Summer days start early, and two or three miles out to sea the only sounds to be had are often those of the calm swell lapping at the sides of the boat and maybe the occasional scream of a gull or gannet or the splash of something missed by the eye breaking the surface for air before going back under. I'll breathe then and look up from the page, and I'll feel at once both at home and violently dislocated because my mind has its own way of lingering in far-off lands. A thousand stories crowd my head, maybe a hundred thousand, and I understand if I think about it that I've made worlds of the places in which those stories play out every bit as much as their creator has; I've flushed them with the reek and music of life, I've filled them with voices. My Texas Panhandle, my Tartar Steppe, my Society Islands exist for me as vividly as they will for those who have actually felt the grass and dirt and dust of such places beneath their feet. Thoughts like that flip reality into the chaos of a spinning coin so that in the same instant everything is true and nothing is. Our surround is there as we perceive it, and our dead are at once gone and everywhere.

As I age, I find myself favouring novels and stories that I know will end happily, not because that makes them more believable but because the very inverse of that is true, because their sense of reality softens and they again get to be something more than the world as it has shown itself to me. Not bad all the way to its core and rarely intentionally so, not without its beautiful moments, but neither naturally set up, it seems, for happy endings. Because in the end there's always death, and always broken hearts. Happy stories, at least, get to hold the air of magic.

Some years back, I read something about a Chinese boatman that made a deep impression on me. Since then, I've thought of it often, sitting out in my own boat on still mornings, and it has been a constant in my head these past few days, though I can't recall its title or whether it was even a

story or a novel. It retains the scope of a novel for me, and yet I seem able to sum up what little plot there was in a few brief sentences, understanding of course that, sometimes, plot is the very least of what constitutes substance. Part of the reason why that boatman resonated with me, I think, and probably the main one, was due to his being in almost every way and essence like my father, who'd known little of the world beyond working the waves and who found himself already old and hunched at thirty and ancient as the stones at forty-one. By then, his skin had been baked the yellow tan of summer dirt and weathered coarse as the bark of holly oak, and his eyesight, eroded to ruin from years spent facing into the morning's glare, made do with shadow play and a melancholy awareness of his own end filling the near horizons. In the boatman, I recognised patience, stoicism, a propensity for silence, a certain stone hardness from a life spent bearing pain, and an innate understanding of the witchery that possesses those who balance their lives on something bottomless and who can accept the floating existence of a life on the water as akin to flying, feeling that same melding sense of the precarious and the euphoric and waiting always for the fall.

Any comparisons with me in all of that have limited themselves largely to surfaces. The difference has to do with courage. In what I'd read, the boatman's only daughter had also died, succumbed to some sweeping fever. That tragedy was for his wife and him a deep one because they'd been blessed to parenthood only late on, nearly twenty years into their marriage. Following a long weekend of mourning, the boatman chose Monday's breaking to slip from the family shack. Carrying the little girl's body wrapped in muslin cloth down to where his homebuilt sampan sat moored among the rushes, he paddled soundlessly out into the dawn-still sea, feeling his way along in the dark. And when the land was a thin black stripe beneath the western sky, and with the crown of the sun coming up as a rust-brown bloodstain ahead of him, he lifted his daughter again, cradled her a moment in his thin arms, then kissed her cold face and her shut eyes and lips, and lowered her body over the side of the boat so that the sea could be her graveyard. His sense was that she'd go into the tide and be lost and absorbed and made a part of everything. And in that

way she'd surround him always. Each morning ever after, in rowing out and spreading his nets, he'd think of her and feel her near. His daughter, within the waves, at one with the creatures of the deep. Every drop of the ocean is itself but it's also the ocean.

If I had the courage, I'd follow that lead. My father would have, because when you don't fear death then you fear nothing. Except living. And when you can simply exist, in full acceptance of your world, then you are immense. Fear is what brings us down and makes small things of us. In truth, I don't fear death for myself, but that is nowhere near enough. And I am not the man my father was. The Chinese believe in reincarnation. That's an idea he'd have liked, if it had ever occurred to him or been put to his mind. He attended Mass because he'd been brought up to do so, the same as everyone else on our island, mumbling the Catholic prayers that we'd all been taught by heart, the strings of words in two languages and stripped of meaning or worth in either one. But anyone who knew him knew that his heart beat for other things. Superstitions, reading signs everywhere, counting particular types of birds at certain times of year, listening out for frogs in the ditches or the wailing of vixens in the night, watching the ruts in the sand, always feeling the air for omens. And, in between, quietly musing about the beautiful details of the world and how they must have come into being, and where certain traits in people came from, and talents. He knew the sea like it had been forged with him in mind, knew the tides and currents and where the reefs lay, and when the shoals of mackerel or herring would come and into what waters, as if the hundreds of his line who'd learned the waves inch by inch had educated him through blood and by some unwritten right, gifting him the knowledge.

The surface earth of the graveyard is stiff and dry, but two or three feet down the long build-up of old springtime moisture has held. I sling the pick with a measured frenzy, and the only sounds come from the constant, rhythmic thump of the tool's edge against the dirt and, with every swing, as the ground splits apart in clumps, my own grunting breaths. Michael stands back, watching, then falls in alongside me again with the shovels, and we dig, working in a steady tandem already

familiar to us from days spent dealing with things of less importance. We suck hard at the air, and now and then pause to wipe the sweat from our faces. The world tastes of mud, a dead, mineral grit that fills the lungs, coats tongue and teeth, and holds like an ache to the back of the throat. The sky above us is a dirty colour now, clear but not yet easy with either the swelling light or the loss of darkness, and even though it's still early we are less than halfway done. The funeral is set for eleven but we know that the priest will wait for us, everyone will wait, because waiting is part of it, too, just as much as prayers. Here, on the island, digging is in itself a kind of prayer, and even though weariness eats into us and turns our bones to lead, we won't stop until we've finished the work.

"He won't rot," someone had said of my father, the night of his wake. A cousin or neighbour, I forget exactly who, but someone known to him in that intimate way of people steeped in one another's lives. And meaning it well, not at all in a crude way but as a kind of deserved immortality. "Sure at this stage he's more salt than flesh." Those words had been spoken aloud as mere thought run loose, and others who were in our house that night nodded, and I remember filling my mouth with whiskey straight from a bottle of Jameson that I couldn't recall buying, wanting to be hurt by what had been said, or angry about it or even merely sad, instead of proud, though I'd never have shown it because that's not who we are. Proud that it was my father they were all thinking about, and feeling full of hope that there was truth in what I'd just heard.

I didn't really need the confirmation of this moment to know that no such truth existed. But waist-deep in the dirt, stinking of sweat and mud, I get to see that there is nothing left. Even the coffin's brass fittings are gone, either spat out by the rain of eleven years or else sucked down to depths no one would ever reach or ever want to.

I have been thinking about the Chinese boatman as a deflection, because he's a softer, safer thought. My father was not the stuff of stories. He had different trials, real-life struggles: the death of a wife early on, and having to see me raised from infancy with little or no help; the two days and

a night spent in the water three miles off the island's southern end and clinging to a piece of driftwood after going overboard in a storm; and finally, the stomach cancer that made a husk of him and put him, after a struggle worse than war, into this ground. But his dramas differed only in detail, as they do from the dramas of everybody else, and even though one life was real and the other a fiction, his soul and that of the boatman's seem to me essentially the same.

Remembering him now hurts bad enough to bleed. Yet time's passing has softened some edges because that is still easier still than having to face the facts of Beth, and how little I'd been able to do to help. In the hospital bed, while I stood holding her hand, she looked sad and very small, and even before she closed her eyes for the last time I understood that she and I had miles between us. I failed her, just as I am failing Margaret in not being able to open up, even though she needs me now in ways she never has before and even though I want to believe that I'd lay down my life and everything in it for her, because she's the one who puts air in my body. The problem is that I've been set adrift, and I've lost sight of who I used to be. On the surface I can be still, and the lack of tears gives me a demeanour of calm that, from a distance, must seem comforting. But my mind is a swept torrent, too packed with the real and the make-believe.

The more I think about that story of the boatman and his daughter, the more I can recognise and appreciate its reality, its sense of truth. Because I feel as if I have died a thousand times myself, and that I've known a thousand lives beyond this one. Maybe it's just that we're all the same, and perhaps we each get a turn at everything, until we understand. Even if my father is gone, even if there's not a trace of him in the dirt, he's here. Every drop of the ocean is itself but it's also the ocean. And a few few hours from now, Beth will be with him. There has to be comfort in that, when it's all we have.

At last, Michael clambers from the hole we've dug, then leans back over the edge and extends a hand. I stop digging and look up, wincing against the glare of the heightening day and shielding

my eyes with a filthy hand.

“Come on,” he says, his voice brusque with exhaustion. “That’s deep enough. If we go any further, we’ll strike oil.”

For several seconds everything is blackness and gold, and it is almost impossible to focus, but then I nod my head, accept the outstretched hand and let myself be hauled back into the world.