

'THERE WAS A BOY came while you were out, Father Pearse,' Mrs Reilly said. And stood.

The woman wanted strangling.

'Yes?'

'I told him you were out on your walk.'

'As I was, Mrs Reilly. As I was.'

'I told him that you'd be back about now.'

'As I am, Mrs Reilly. As you see I am.'

They continued to look at one another.

His walk had taken him on the old forestry road out to the dam. It had been hot, and a gusty late-afternoon wind blew the white powdery surface of the road up into his face. Beyond the abattoir he'd turned down to the creek and rested there for a time. The willows were newly out and he'd sat and looked on as their long girlish tresses trailed and swayed this way and that on the slow moving water.

'I told him as how you always walked at this time,' for once it was Mrs Reilly who cracked first, 'unless it was a Sunday and you had Benediction.'

'And the boy, Mrs Reilly? What did he want?'

'I suppose I shouldn't call him a boy. A young man he'd have been—sixteen, seventeen, I'd say. Tall but not much to him, not what I'd call a well set-up lad at all...'

She was settled in now, planted to her shinbones in the doorway of his study. His eye stole to the clock on the wall opposite his desk. It had been a farewell gift from the Brothers and the Board at St Barnabas when he'd finished up there. He hadn't enjoyed his time at St Barnabas, working alongside Stanislaus and his austere little band of Brothers. And they'd displayed a scant collegial regard for him, only tolerating him, he suspected, because they needed him. Needed a priest like him to say Mass, to administer the sacraments which, as mere Brothers, they didn't have the power to administer themselves. Offering communion, conferring the Last Rites on the dying, hearing one another's confessions or those of the children in their care...

'*Constitutionally*, so to say,' Mrs Reilly dragged his attention back to the matter of this boy. Who'd come today.

‘The poor lad’s boots were the only solid thing about him. Not to mention the layers of dust. You could see he’d walked miles to get here...’

She would go on in this way, doling out these momentous parcels of inanity as if they were relics of the Holy Cross itself. He tried to summon the necessary mite of patience but found his mind drifting back to the creek, to the slow water, and the fresh, green fronds of the willows entwining on its surface.

‘You know what I think, Father?’

Eighteen minutes to his dinner. He wondered whether he should lengthen his afternoon walks.

‘I think he came to ask for your blessing. It was his boots, you see. They were a giveaway if ever I’ve seen one.’

‘You’re saying he came to ask me to bless his boots?’

‘Now, now, Father Pearse, I know when you’re teasing me.’ He’d grown used to these feigned reproaches from Mrs Reilly. They were, he believed, the closest the two of them ever came to real understanding. ‘You needn’t think that I don’t.’

‘I’m sorry, Mrs Reilly. What exactly was it about the boy’s boots that made you think... whatever it was you thought?’

‘Don’t you see, he’s probably gone and enlisted too, Father. He’s way, way too young. He’s a boy, he’s that thin you’d reckon him consumptive. Only his face is old.’

‘In that case you needn’t concern yourself, Mrs Reilly. By your diagnosis, he would never pass the medical.’

‘Oh, no, Father, don’t you believe it. They’re taking anyone now, and few questions asked. Why, think of the boys from Sale alone who’ve already gone. And most of them lying through their teeth about their age. The Donlan boys, can you credit it? Their own mother never knew until the photo card came. And there they were, all knitted out and ready to board the boat...’

*Kitted*, on another day he might have corrected her.

‘Why, the sight of the rifles alone nearly killed her,’ Mrs Reilly soldiered on regardless. ‘That and the stupid grins on their face. She’s still beside herself.’

‘But this stranger, this boy who came today—are you telling me he’s coming back?’

‘I couldn’t say for sure one way or the other, Father.’

It was ten to the hour. At six Mrs Reilly would lay the

table in the dining room, set out his dinner with a decanter of wine and the day's newspaper beside his plate, and make her way home for her own dinner. God knows what she ate herself, but his dinner was never a surprise: a grilled chop, a hindquarter of rabbit or a leg of chicken, fish on Fridays, and alongside it a boiled potato or two. Some heavily punished greens. Nourishing food, he supposed. There could be no other excuse for it.

'Then what the devil did he come here for in the first place?'

'Father!'

'I'm sorry, Mrs Reilly, but I confess I am puzzled. You tell me he's come a long distance, he's walked, his boots are dusty, and he wants my blessing...'

'The blessing was by way of *assumption*, so to say.'

'Even so, he obviously wanted something. Did he not leave his name? Did he not say when he was coming back?'

'He didn't say anything, Father. He just wanted to be sure as it was you. That he had the right Father Pearse.'

'The right Father Pearse?'

'Heaven knows what he meant by it, Father. How anyone could tell what was going on behind a look like that.'

'Like what?' he snapped, and the sharpness of this almost dislodged Mrs Reilly from his doorway. She took a step back into the corridor. She should be getting on back to the kitchen, her face said, to check on his dinner, so. Instead of standing there, prattling on.

'Have you ever seen a wolf, Father?'

Wild horses wouldn't drag the woman.

'Wolf, Mrs Reilly?'

'One running loose in the wild, like?' Not that Mrs Reilly had ever seen one herself. Or ever expected to—what, *here in Australia*? But she had seen one as a girl back in Ireland. Not a flesh and blood wolf, to be sure, but a painted one in a golden frame over the hearth in her mother's and father's cottage. A hunter in snow, the heavy furs about his chest and shoulders thrown back to free his arms for the musket he was in the act of raising. While above him, poised on a small rocky peak, not twenty yards distant, a long, hollow-ribbed grey wolf stood looking down. Unafraid, it seemed. Not snarling and wild-eyed like the cringing, brindle dog by the hunter's side,

but simply watching. Following each movement which the hunter made with its patient, yellow eyes.

Just as Mrs Reilly now found Father's Pearse's sharp blue ones watching her.

'Still, he seemed content enough in the end...' On the point of going, she kept on ladling out this miserable stew of half-facts. 'He went off directly he'd seen your photograph.'

'You're telling me you showed him my photograph?'

'That one on the little table in the front room. The one from the cathedral—you and your mother on the steps with the Bishop after the special Easter Mass. It's old, but it's nice of you both.'

'What did he say?'

'Nothing, Father.'

Strangling wouldn't be sufficient for Mrs Reilly. 'He must have said *something*.'

'No, Father. He just looked at it. He stared and stared that hard you'd imagine he was bent on swallowing it. I cleaned the glass after. His nails were fair filthy.'

'Not a single word, you're telling me?'

'No, Father. He just said, "Yes, that's him. That's the one."'

'And then...?'

'Nothing. He gave this little smile, and marched himself off down the path.'

Father Pearse got to his dinner late after checking that Mrs Reilly—the presumption of that woman—had locked up properly before she left. He liked to apply himself to *The Age* as he ate, to read the latest news from the Front. The train which brought the newspaper up from Melbourne had been late again, and he was already angry as he shook it out and found that Mrs Reilly had forgotten for the third time in as many days to take the flat iron to it and smooth out the creases. Today's reports discharged their usual cargo of misery. The losses in Belgium and France—or at least the ones the censors allowed them to know about—piled up and up without pause or cease. And all to what end, in sweet Jesus' name? The temporary possession of two or three yards of fetid French mud? They called that a good day's work, did they?

He mumbled a rough grace under his breath, and set about his meal. It was Friday, and the fish—battered but unspoil for

once—ought to have been redemptive. But tonight, with the War news as bad as ever, he couldn't get his mind to settle. He thought briefly of the Donlan twins, two ordinary Australian farm-boys with not one complete brain to separate the four ears between them. And here they were, the pair of them, now waiting their turn to be tossed into the slaughter. Much good their grins would do them when that happened. He thought too of other boys from the parish, each one full of the same bravado and fit to be tied at anything which blocked their headlong dash into the same hell. The same charnel-house of wasted young flesh. He thought of the line, the regiment, of Requiem Masses he'd be saying in the weeks and months to come. Without, for the mothers, the comfort of so much as a coffin.

He thought of this other boy, the one who'd come to see him today. To be blessed, according to Mrs Reilly, before he too headed off for the adventure of a lifetime. *Wolf boy*, he snorted, and poured himself another glass of the wine. He'd grown used to Mrs Reilly's little flights of fantasy. From the day he'd arrived—could it have been nearly three years already?—she had made it her personal mission to bring him her own version of the news. Gobbets of town gossip, of events, of goings-on, affairs. To keep him *apprised*. What with him living so isolated here, alone and on the very edge of the town. One part of him wasn't fully convinced that today's visitor had existed in the first place. That he wasn't merely a figment of Mrs Reilly's own widowed grief and loneliness.

And yet, elsewhere within him, he sensed that this wasn't the case. He recalled the frisson of shock he'd felt when Mrs Reilly said the boy had wanted to be sure that he had *the right Father Pearse*: how deeply that one phrase had unsettled him. And to top it all off there was this other distressing business of the photograph. How the boy had been satisfied once he'd seen it—the oddness of that. He still couldn't credit the sheer gall of the woman parading his private mementoes around before strangers. And then calmly proceeding to tell him all about it. As if it were something to celebrate, or be congratulated for...

He pushed his plate away in disgust and slapped the flat of his hand down so hard on the table that the plate lifted off its surface. The wine glass, empty now, fell and rolled across the

tablecloth, leaving a spatter of dark red drops on the white linen. Though distracted by its fall, Father Pearse imagined he caught the echo of his slap, a hollow *whump* reverberating deep somewhere within the body of the house. He sat for a moment thinking about this, his fingers frozen above the fallen glass. He glanced quickly at the door, at its blunt oaken face. He pushed back from the table as if about to rise, but then stopped and sat perfectly still.

Nothing came to him. No sound at all. Only a sense of the house holding itself as rigidly to attention as he was. He went on listening. He heard a trap passing on the road at the front of the house, the grating of its wheels and the bright clip of the horse's hooves ringing clear and familiar on the night air. As the sound of the trap faded, he shook his head, coughed aloud, and then with the heels of his shoes, half-pulled, half-rode his chair back into place at the table. He righted his glass. The angry red stains glared at him briefly from the starched white linen, before relenting and forgiving him. *Accidents will happen, Father*, they seemed to say. Anxious, as ever, to be seen to be of service.

He was about to refill his glass—his fingers were already on the neck of the decanter—when the sound came again. That deep, muffled *whump*. Not the echo of any noise he'd made. Not this time. He strained to identify it. Something falling off a table or a desk? No, it was louder, more definite than that. More like a door slamming. Perhaps the door to one of the other rooms along the corridor had blown shut. But he'd checked the windows himself, hadn't he? Besides, the afternoon wind had long since died.

He sat still once more, straining every sense. The fingers of his right hand still gripped the decanter. Could it be Mrs Reilly returning for something she'd forgotten? Her bag? Some shopping list she'd left in the kitchen?

He knew it wasn't Mrs Reilly. The insinuating swish of her carpet slippers—a constant attendant on his daylight hours—was nothing like the heavy-footed clump of whatever it was that was now making its way, room by room, along the corridor. It wasn't a sound he'd ever heard in the house before. But he knew that whatever danger or omen it brought, it was brought for him. He looked again at the door, at the key—unturned—in its heavy brass lock. And was on his feet

without thinking.

Never a brave man, Father Pearse couldn't later say why, instead of simply turning the key in the door, he turned its handle and stepped out of the light and into the gloom of the corridor.

'Mrs Reilly?' he called.

Wrong about so much, Mrs Reilly had been right this time. The face *was* old. Though what drew him immediately into it were the eyes—less glitteringly green than he recalled, tinted as they now were with those strange yellow flecks and currents in the weak lamplight. The rest he might have predicted: the child grown into a lad, a young man. The same long, unfillable limbs, though the tall, stick-like frame was now anchored by the heavy, black weights on his feet. The wrists which protruded from the sleeves of his red and white check shirt were bony but strong-looking, as were his hands—hard-worked hands, their backs scabbed and scarred—the fingernails black with oil or dirt. But it was the face that dominated everything else. Its sharp, triangular hunger. The watchful, devouring eyes.

'You,' the priest said, when his voice returned.

'Me, Father,' said the boy, the lad, the young man. And smiled.