



The Lesson

At the end of his street, which is at the top of a hill, there is a church with tombstones leaning at all sorts of angles around it right up to the walls. Hundreds of years ago it would have been a neat parish cemetery with a garden of flowers between the church and its graves. It took those hundreds of years for the growing number of tombstones to tumble themselves across the lawn into the flowerbeds and up to the walls of the church on every side. Now, in April, jonquils and bluebells grow any-which-way from all sorts of surprising corners and gaps. The place is fenced off, but people still gather in the church to hold services, sometimes to hold a funeral where they squeeze a shiny new plaque between the old tombstones. There is still room for more, especially for anyone who is cremated. The names on the tombstones are the names of the streets around here. There is a Daniel Thorobold, barrister, who died in 1789. He has two Thorobold Streets named after him. There are two signs at the gate to the church and cemetery grounds, one listing the names of local men who died in the First World War, the other asking people to take away their rubbish when they leave.

Coming down the hill after cutting through the church grounds, he goes in at his own front gate and slips into the house, where he finds his mother. She is watching television and drinking beer. Slanted light

from the window falls on her. Her red hair shines. Her sleeves are short, her crumpled blue dress rucked up just above her knees. Around her eyes there is redness. The television laughs and laughs again. His mother doesn't laugh. 'Where have you been?' she asks.

'At the church,' he tells her. 'I didn't leave any rubbish,' (their small joke).

'And you didn't lie down on a grave? Never lie down on a grave. It'll bring you bad luck. And never sing in a graveyard either, that brings bad luck too.'

'What kind of bad luck?'

'You don't want to know.'

It would depend on the song, he thinks, for surely the dead still like to hear music, and would want to bless someone who brought the right song to their sad crowded hilltop. And he had in fact been lying down on a grave. He had enjoyed being down there at what he thought of as bone-level. He knew that the older boys took girls to those tombstones at night and lay down with them in the dark where shadows helped them do whatever wanted doing. He had seen them go up there holding hands and sometimes drinking, the boys usually looking like they wanted to pick a fight with anyone who noticed where they were going.

Beside his mother on the lounge chair is a box of tissues, one bright white paper bloom coming from its centre slit. Her hand hovers there above it, as though she is considering how much more crying she might have to do. The can of beer in the other hand is probably already going warm. There would be fish and chips again tonight or maybe a kebab from the corner shop. That's alright with him. Neither of them is much interested in food.

'What would you do,' he asks, 'if a homeless man camped on our front garden outside your bedroom window?'

'Don't start, just don't.'

'What if there was an old man in the street who had forgotten who he was and where he lived? What

would you do?’

She finishes her beer and gets up to get another one from the fridge, which is making a lot of mechanical noise. She shoves the door closed hard after retrieving a fresh can because sometimes this settles the fridge for a while. It is suddenly quiet.

Easter is coming but this year there will be no holiday on Beeston Road. He will not be able to go down to the murky North Sea and watch it coming in over those blue-grey shingles—so many of those stones, and each one placed there by the infinitely patient and repetitive sea. There’ll be no walking along the crumbling cliff top, waiting for some part of it to give way, imagining that eventually all of Norfolk could crumble into that dull sheen. Two thousand years ago, the story goes, Vikings had come across that sea and stepped out onto those stones, shocking the coastal villagers who never expected their beach would deliver this sight to them. Those mad pagan Vikings taught the men of Beeston how to make the boats that would make them famous, so you can’t know, can you, whether what you see coming out of the water in front of you is a dog of doom or an angel of salvation? There is just no way of telling until maybe a thousand years have gone by. He was a boy with sense of history, his mother had told him.

Everything changed when they were driving back from Beeston Road last August. His father had taken them away for a holiday after he had lost his job again. They had rabbit traps and fishing rods in the back, because his father recovered his dream of being ‘self-sufficient’ whenever he was without work. They were arguing, his parents, and they looked ugly when they did that. His father’s face became larger in a bursting kind of way, while hers stretched and twisted and the tears came springing out of her eyes.

‘Don’t, don’t, don’t,’ she had said.

‘Bitch,’ he answered under his breath.

He'd tossed his cigarette out the car window. He did it as though he might toss his own son out the window too at any moment. 'Your fucking brother,' he said. It was always her brother who had done something bad. 'I could murder him. He still owes me, and now, now...'

She put her palms out on the dashboard in front of her as if the car was a mad thing she had to restrain. The car was a poor thing that hardly worked. It coughed and plunged at hills so that you thought it would never get up them. It wobbled through corners.

'Bitch,' his father muttered as he glanced across at her. His job was gone and that meant they would have almost no money once again, and his father would be at home all day in his bad way. His father's hands were shaking too much to hold the steering wheel steady.

Yesterday he kissed Aileen Cowan on the way home from school. They did it in the churchyard among the gravestones as they cut through. He had stopped and she had bumped into him because as usual she was walking right behind him and talking wildly about a book she had been reading or it might have been about something her older sister had told her she was reading. Aileen had a lisp, and a huskiness about her voice, both of which he listened for more than for her words. They had been playmates in pre-school, and she was still so close to him she might as well have been his shadow. He spun round and grabbed her and kissed her because he had been imagining doing this for a month. She did not run away or turn away. She laughed a short, quick laugh and pushed him in the chest.

'Caarn, get goin',' she said.

He turned back to the path and they went on, past the list of war dead and the warning about rubbish, out onto the street where everything seemed normal but wasn't.

'Sorry,' he said before leaving her, not because he was sorry but because he wanted her to say something about what she thought about the kiss. She shrugged

and just walked away from him. As for him, he thought he had learned something important, or had taken an important step towards something. Whatever it was he had learned he could not say, for it wasn't clear to him; but he felt that there was something ahead for him now. He had his father's weak chin and his mother's red hair. He knew he would never be handsome. He would never stand on a corner with life coming right up to him wanting to take his hand. He was more like that North Sea going at those stones again and again, tasting each one over and over for thousands of years with its eyes closed, just doing what it does.

He would be like that, doing what was needed day after day, and Aileen Cowan would love him for it. Or she wouldn't.

'What if you could reverse your life like you reverse a car? Would you?'

'Go away, go away.'

He would not go away.

'The Vikings were pagans, weren't they, but you can't hate them for that, can you?'

He remembers the way his father had slammed the door of the car when they got back from Beeston Road last August. There was a banjo song on the car radio. He liked it and wanted to keep listening to it, but his mother took the key from the ignition and threw it towards her husband.

'Go on then,' she'd called in a ragged way. 'Get out of here, get away from the bitch and her loafing brother, the one you want to murder!'

'Bitch,' he'd said again, with his back turned to her as he went into the house.

'What if dad came back? What would you do about that?' he asks, but his mother is not there, she has gone into her bedroom.

'There's no such things as dreams come true,' his father used to say. 'There's only these hands and this street with those stones stuck in it and we'll be driving over the faces of those stones back and forward, back

and forward, till we die. Dream about that.' He'd pulled a cigarette hard into his face and blew smoke over the room. He was a man and everything about him was manly. He loved to show the muscles in his arms at home. This was his lesson, the one about stones. He said it whenever something went wrong, like some other man disappointing him, or her brother coming around for money, trying to charm the money out of them. His uncle's laugh was high-pitched and silly, but his eyes were dangerous in a way that made his mother and father give him money to get him to leave. Well, he guessed they gave him money because of the way it always ended with his uncle shaking his father's hand at the door while his father looked at the floor.

The box of tissues is still there on the chair with some used ones dropped around it, lipstick marks on some of them, as if she had been practising kissing. Tomorrow he would walk home with Aileen again. She might now walk beside him despite the narrowness of the path through the churchyard. Their hands might touch, and their bodies might wait for the meaning of this touch to take hold. It might take years or it might be instant. Why does the sea keep swallowing those stones on the beach at Sheringham, bleaching them and rounding them, testing them in ways that take thousands of years? It's as if there is something big for the sea to think about, something that has not yet occurred to him. If he could think of it too, he would be occupied like the sea for the rest of his life. He thinks of how the sea is locked inside itself really, imprisoned, and how his father looks like this sometimes, all the troubles of a whole sea inside him, but in the end his father is just a small man sealed inside a small prison made of himself. These aren't things you can say, he knows that.

I'm going to be me forever, he thinks, not quite miserably, but with the feeling of a trapdoor springing shut.

'What if there was a lesson you could learn at the

beginning of your life that would keep you safe, what would that lesson be, Mum?’ He calls so that she can hear him from her room.

She ignores him.

‘What if you got a phone call from someone who was about to commit murder, what would you do?’

She returns, sipping her can and sucking on a cigarette, glancing silently at the laughing television.

‘What if I was not here, where would you look for me? Mum?’

Sheringham, he guesses. She would drive to Sheringham and look for him down beside the volunteer lifeboat workshop just where the cliffs begin. She would expect him to have an ice cream in one hand and a grey sea stone in the other hand, a stone not much smaller than his boy’s heart.