

**DRIVING
INTO
THE SUN**

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‘Thinking I think of you and me.

Our empty spaces where fathers should be.’

— *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*, Eimear McBride

Cold and still, the moon overhead, and the track from the sheds to the farmhouse overhung by trees. It isn't far. They're walking up ahead of him, eager now that it's all over. He can hear them joking about, shoving one another, laughing. He'd smile, too, if he could. Because it's hard dirty work, this work, best done at night. And that means they've all been here, the other lads and him, for the past three nights, and he's not been getting home till dawn, falling into bed beside Henrietta, falling into a dead sleep, woken groggy and nauseous by the kids an hour later. Snatches of sleep through the past two days — they were Saturday and Sunday, weren't they? — while Henry's been at work herself. Then a nap when she gets back, a shower — leaning against the wall, the hot water pouring on him — and off to work again.

He'd smile now if he could because the job's finished. But his legs are lead, he's short of breath, queasy, more tired than he can recall ever being. He'd smile because now it's Monday, the important day, because there were moments he wasn't sure he'd — well, the ten o'clock appointment is almost here, so ... He'd smile because it must be nearly dawn (though he's not sure; he left his watch in his car) and the stinking job is over and he can begin to believe that he will, he will turn up in his suit beside his Henry and sign the contract. If he could stretch out his arm he could almost touch it, and he wants to smile; he does. This important day.

From up ahead he hears one of the lads yawn extravagantly and say it's nearly three and that makes sense, and then mid-step he's

pain, he clutches his, opens his, staggers; he pitches forward, makes the aarrgh sound of all breath leaving, his legs already gone from him, and he hits the ground hard.

And he hasn't been kind to his girl, his good girl, Orla; he hasn't; he hasn't been kind to her.

2

One long Sunday afternoon, the year before, when they still lived in the hills, Orla had come in from the light and heat, from the clicking forest, its bushes, its pointy leaves, its tiny plants between stones festooned with flowers; from lizards scurrying and glossy in the sun, from trails of ants; from birds calling in the big warm air. She brought her bush-ears with her, ears she used in slow walks between trees, her feet cracking twigs; ears for the rustle of snakes, the flit of a low bird's wing, its sharp beak ready.

The house, when she entered, was dim and cool and quiet. Her arms radiated heat. She walked slowly with her bush-ears listening. For an instant, a fear clutched at her — they had disappeared while she had been among other creatures; they had disappeared and left her alone. Then a sound she had heard before, mechanical; she had been curious about it then, had asked her mother. And her mother had said, in a firm voice, that her father was writing and was not to be disturbed.

Orla loved the idea of good, so she had done what she was told, had pressed her curiosity down inside her, had just listened to the busy, clanking sound, its joyous bell. And when her father had re-emerged that time, she had studied him in the first moments, studied him closely as he crossed the lounge room. He had looked like the same man — same clothes, same hair — but she saw at once he was not. His face was different. Something, she knew, had happened to him. For those first few

moments, until he spoke, until he sat down for lunch, he was glowing, electric.

This time her mother was not in the kitchen to ask, and there was no need to ask anyway. This time she was radiating so much heat into the cool, dim house she felt like the sun, filled it with the hot thrill of flowers and lizards, ants and birds, bush-sounds and bush-scents and bush-colours of banksia, eucalypt. She was not just a girl and the idea of good had loosened in her. She tiptoed to her parents' room. The door was wide open, as in fairytales. Which meant only one thing. When the mesmerising mechanical sound paused so did she. When it began again, loud and ringing — taptaptaptaptaptataping — she held her breath, crept closer.

His desk faced the window; he sat with his back to her, shoulders hunched. She could see the muscles and sinews flexing in his arms and neck. One more step and, over his shoulder, the whole metal contraption — the carriage and keys and casing — came into view. And there, the trapped white paper, the punched black letters, words appearing from the tips of his fingers, like magic. She squinted, took one last step and the phrase came into focus: *The Arab stood in the shadow of the doorway. From the fold of his robe he removed a knife. Light glinted along its blade.*

Her father's head turned sharply towards her. 'Get out.' He scowled at her. She gasped, rocked on her heels, spun away. She was good, had always been good; who was this other daughter, disobeying? She had done what she knew she shouldn't, and it was too late, too late now. His words, their tone, had lodged in her gullet — she could feel them there; she swallowed her sobs and they slipped deeper, stuck in her chest.

'Get out,' he'd growled. She had barely recognised him.

How could she have known what her father carried in him, a world like that, full of Arabs and shadows and knives.



Her father had been silent all day, had been silent more often lately. He sat on the divan with a book, his legs tucked up alongside him. Orla was cross-legged on the carpet in the centre of the room. Her mother called it the central carpet. Orla loved the central carpet; it was thick and soft and covered in a pattern of flowers — rose-pink, apple-green, gold, powder-blue. Like sitting in a garden.

Her book was spread open in front of her. Ahead, the big lounge room windows faced west; afternoon sun poured in. She looked at her pages but watched him. Heard him turn his pages, heard the kitchen clock tick. Sunlight edged further and further over her. All around, the carpet shone. She had to close her eyes.



She heard him stand. She watched him leave the room. Heard her mother come in the back door. Heard her father speak, his voice too low. Her mother said, ‘How long will you be?’

Her father crossed the room. Orla stood. She said, ‘Where are you going?’

He didn’t answer. He reached the front door. Orla turned towards the kitchen. Her mother was already standing by the table, watching him. Orla asked, ‘Where’s Daddy going?’

‘For a walk.’

Orla turned back to him. ‘Can I go, too, please, Daddy?’

He opened the door. Orla looked at her mother. Henrietta gave a small shrug, shook her head a little.

Orla looked back to her father. 'Please, Daddy?'

He stood in the open doorway, his hand on the lock, his back to them. He was perfectly still. He was looking outside. Orla's mother said, 'Your daughter is talking to you.'

Orla looked hard at his back. He shrugged. He took a step. Orla looked at her mother again. Her mother's mouth made the shape of a smile. She nodded.

Her father stepped onto the porch; Orla followed him.

At first she walked by his side. She said, 'Where are we going?' He didn't look at her. He didn't speak. She dropped back a little. She couldn't see his face. He turned onto the main road. It was a long incline. From a few steps behind, she watched him. He might realise she wasn't beside him. He might wonder where she had gone, might turn to see if she was all right, slow his steps, say, 'Sorry, Tweety.'

Instead, she watched him steadily draw away. He walked with head bowed, arms swinging. He walked fast; so did she. He didn't run so she didn't either. She didn't call out. As much as possible, she stared at his back, willing him to turn, and afraid to look away. In case. She walked as fast as she could but she couldn't. He was far ahead of her. And this wasn't right, was it. This wasn't normal. She had known to watch him, to follow him. Someone needed to. Because this was. Something was. Wrong and now he was even further away, becoming smaller and smaller as he climbed the incline, and he wasn't going to stop for her, was he, wasn't even going to glance behind, she knew, and she wasn't going to be able to catch him, and although she couldn't see it yet she knew the crossroad up ahead, and what would happen when he reached it, she wouldn't even be close enough to see which way he went. And then he crested

the top of the slope and vanished. For a minute or two she kept walking hard and then she slowed. By the time she reached the crossroad, she knew, he'd be gone. She slowed some more. And then she stopped. She stood, staring at the crest of the hill. In case. Any moment he. Remember. That she had sat near and quiet. That she had followed him.

She looked around. On both sides of the road the bush was dense and black and grey and green. She sat. The gravelly earth was hard but her body was tired. She waited. The sun dropped behind the trees and the shade was cold. No cars passed. After a while she stood up and walked home.

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In the kitchen, her mother turned with a smile. 'Oh!' she said. She blinked. 'It's you. That didn't take long.'

Orla filled a glass with water. Out of the corner of her eye she could see her mother looking at her.

Her mother said, 'Is Daddy here?'

Orla gulped the water. She shook her head.

Her mother nodded. 'Oh.' She looked away. 'Where is he?'

Orla stared at the sink. She turned on the tap to fill the glass again. 'I don't know,' she said. Water crashed into the glass. Orla was glad it was so loud. Maybe her mother wouldn't hear the strange wobble in her voice.

Alongside her, Henrietta was silent. Then she reached over and patted Orla's arm. As if she knew.

3

From the hills it was a long drive to the beach but, if their father felt happy, he would sometimes take them. Orla's little sister would stick her head out the window, stick out her tongue like a dog. Their mother would say, 'The wind will dry your mouth and then what will you do.'

Their father would laugh. 'Sit down before you're decapitated.'

And Deebee would laugh: 'De-cab-it-at-ed!' And their father would laugh even more.

Orla would laugh, too, because laughing is like that, sometimes you can't help it, but the word made her shiver. She would laugh and put her face closer to the window for the air to blast the word, the idea, its picture, out of her head.

Their mother would scowl at their father. 'Will you give over with that talk!'

There was a public pool in the hills where they lived but their mother was allergic so they didn't go. She was allergic to other things, too. Some days she said she was allergic to children. Those days Orla and Deebee would stay outside as much as they could.

On the way to the beach they would pick up Aunt Kit, who was not their real aunt but a friend from before Orla was born. Kit's hair was pale as sunlight and curly all over her head. She had

been married once but there were no kids — which puzzled Orla. At the beach, Kit would set off on long walks, come back with a handful of shells, hold them up to the Orla's ear. 'Listen,' she'd say. 'Iya.' And Orla would hear the iya, the water, of her first-ever home, the place in the jungle where her parents and Kit had lived, and where she had lived with them, too, they told her, where the inlet water swished calmly onto shore, in that sheltered place they talked and talked and talked about, that place which, no matter how hard she pressed the shell to her ear, Orla couldn't remember. Still she smiled at Kit's smile, and replied, 'Iya.'

It was always afternoon by the time they arrived at the beach. Families would be leaving, the water ruffled and dark. Orla knew — didn't everybody know? — morning was best for swimming. But she never said it; better the ocean in the afternoon than never the ocean at all.

Deebie would climb their father's legs and their father would say, 'Come here, my monkey,' and sit her on his hip, carry her though the white water while their mother would watch, her lips pressed together, her hand shading her face. Orla would stand at the water's edge and suppose their father used to do that with her before Deebie but she couldn't remember that either. She'd push her toes into the wet sand, watch the water well up between. Sunlight flashed; shadows rippled over the sandy sea-floor; other kids laughed and chased each other; sea-foam hissed and popped and vanished.

Kit wore a one-piece bathing suit and a rubber cap on her head with rubber flowers all over it. She looked like a bouquet. She breaststroked in circles close to shore, her head up. When she stood, her suit clung. Orla would look at her shape, long and lean, so different to her mother's short, curvy body. When Kit bent to pick up her towel, she kept her back very straight, pointed her

toe like a ballerina, and Orla would look at her mother then, but her mother's face was always stern and looking straight ahead, watching her husband slip his hands under Deebee's arms, raise her up and lower her, dipping her gently into the cup of the sea as if she were a ginger snap. Deebee kicked her legs and squealed. Their father's slicked-back hair fell across his eyes and nose, so that all Orla could see of his face when he turned her way was his grin. He lifted Deebee high, onto his shoulders — 'Climb up, little monkey'. And Deebee would squirm and giggle, her father holding her knees with his big hands, striding away from the solid world. Like this, he would swim the two of them a long way out; it seemed to Orla they would surely disappear, and she would stand frozen, watching them move further and further away from her until they were out in the deep where she knew even adult legs could no longer stand, where, she had read in encyclopaedias, the sea floor plummeted and strange creatures lived: sharks, whales, giant squid that upturned ships. All her insides would clench.

And then he would turn and come back to her, swimming hard with his arms, his head up, and she would watch till she was sure they were safe, until she could see clearly her father's hands on her sister's knees, until she could see clearly her sister's open, laughing mouth, until he climbed them up the slope of the shore, streaming wet and smiling, his hair in his eyes. It was only then she'd feel her stiffened limbs, tight chest, her heart banging, and would open her mouth and gasp, gasp, the sea air pouring in. Sometimes, watching them swim back, Orla would stare at her sister's hands, her fingers that clung to the sides of their father's face and, once they were very near, Deebee would sometimes let go of him. She'd grin and wave and flap her arms. When she did that, she looked as if she were skimming across the surface of the sea, holding their father's head like a ball retrieved, holding it above water to bring it back, so he could live, breathe, gripped

in the bony lock of her knees, and for a moment Deebee was not a little sister at all but an ocean creature from a storybook, strong and winged and flying.

And then they were on shore, their father reaching up, swinging her down so her legs inscribed two quick arcs in the air before he set her on the sand, and Deebee was herself again, jumping, jumping, shivering, shrieking: 'Do it again, Daddy! Do it again!' And Orla would squint at her sister, at her bony knees and elbows, her legs wet and goosebumped, jumping, her hands open and beseeching, her face scowling and turning away as their father settled himself on his towel. As if, Orla mused, she had no idea what she had done.

But Orla was glad, too, that he sat beside their mother, pushed his wet hair from his eyes, his chest still heaving with the effort of going so far, among sharks and whales. She knew the sea was not a true friend. On the calmest days, she would walk in up to her hips, duck-dive, flip onto her back, spread her arms and legs, feel her hair tug lightly at her scalp. Her ears would fill, the sound of the world turned thick. The sun would beat her face; the inside of her eyelids glowed. She would feel her body begin to drift. Or, disconcertingly, she wouldn't feel it at all. She'd stand, and be shocked at how far she'd gone, turn to shore, blink the salty water away, glance once, twice over her shoulder in case of a fin, a surfboard, a tsunami. Kids she didn't know would splash water onto her and she'd run, up the sand, everywhere dazzling.

If she could, she'd lie facedown beside her father, turn her head from side to side, feel the sun heat her back, water trickle warmly from her ears, listen to the rise and fall of voices, closer, distant, the shouts and crying, the loud crunch of passing feet. She'd burrow deeper into her towel, the sand squeaking under her. 'Hello, little mouse,' she'd whisper to it, smiling.

Once they left it all too late: an hour's drive from the hills, sitting on their scratchy towels, peeling their sweaty backs from the green vinyl. They arrived at the deserted shore, flung open the doors, tumbled out, Orla and her sister, already running. The southerly gale snatched Orla's hat, spun it through the air. She took off after it, sand whipping the backs of her legs, her hair mad in her eyes, the roar of the wind and the sea and her sister's voice wailing. The hat flew and rolled and she chased and chased, then at last in a lull she pounced and had it, ran back as fast as she could into wind and sand, shielding her face with the crook of one arm, the brim of that hat gripped tightly in her other fist, and she reached her, her Deebee, hunched with her back to the wind. There was sand in her ears and neck and hair, her eyes screwed shut and wet with tears, her mouth open and sand in her teeth — Orla could see into her sister's mouth — and her howl came out like a cloud, all disappointment. In the distance Orla heard their parents' voices, looked up, saw them by the car, Kit too, beckoning. Deebee clung to her, and Orla hauled her up, arms clasped underneath her like a sling. She kept her mouth shut tight, trudged through sand, overbalancing, falling onto one knee, putting Deebee down, righting, pushing herself up, lifting her sister, sand blasting their skin, her own feet disappearing, swallowed up by the hungry mouths of the dune, up to her knees there was so much of it, a whole world of it around them, a desert, the Sahara, and Deebee was little and sad, and Orla the one who saved her.