

SAINT BRÓNACH'S SHRIFT

GRAHAM MASTERTON

“God has forgiven you, Michael,” said Father Bernard. “Now you have to find it in your heart to forgive yourself.”

“And do you honestly think that I haven’t tried?” Michael retorted. “I’ve even tried mortification of the flesh. Stubbing out cigarettes on the back of my hand. Hitting my head against the wall again and again until I couldn’t see for the blood running down my face. I had to tell Kate I hit myself on a cupboard door.”

Father Bernard shook his head. “That’s not the way, Michael. Castigating yourself now isn’t going to change what you did all those years ago.”

Michael was standing by the window, looking out over the steeply sloping garden. It had started raining again, and he could hear the raindrops crackling through the hydrangeas. At the end of the garden ran the River Lee, the colour of badly-tarnished silverware, and beyond the river rose the misty hills that led to the airport, and beyond, to Riverstick and Belgooly and Garrettstown. And of course to Kinsale Sands, where day and night the grey Atlantic washed, and washed, but could never wash away Michael’s guilt.

Father Bernard said, “Nobody blamed you, Michael. Your parents didn’t blame you. The Gardaí said there was no cause to think that it was anything else but an accident so. Even your Kate didn’t blame you.”

Michael turned away from the window. He had celebrated his thirty-fifth birthday only last Thursday, but he looked much older. His light brown hair stuck up like a cockatoo’s

crest but it was beginning to thin and recede at the temples, and there were deep creases in his cheeks as if somebody had cut him with a craft-knife. When he sat down the daylight was reflected in his rimless spectacles which made him look blind.

Father Bernard leaned forward and laid a liver-spotted hand on his knee. "Would you care to pray?" he suggested.

Michael said, "What's the use? The only person who can answer my prayers is me."

"You're still having the same dream?"

Michael nodded.

"Are you not still taking the pills the doctor gave you?"

"Twice the dose, father. Washed down with two glasses of Paddy's."

Father Bernard sat back. He steepled his hands and stared at Michael for a long time without saying anything. He was obviously thinking hard. Behind him, the pendulum in the long-case clock wearily swung, but the passing seconds couldn't help Michael, either.

"Try once more tonight, Michael," said Father Bernard. "Try it without the pills and the whiskey. If you have the nightmare again, come back to me in the morning, early. Before ten if you can. I have to be visiting Mrs O'Leary in Ballyhooly. Poor old girl may not last another week."

They both stood up. Father Bernard's knees clicked like two shots from a cap-pistol. His eyes were a very pale agate, as if they had been leached of their natural colour by all the years of pain that he had witnessed, and the endless rain.

He laid his hands on Michael's shoulders. "O my God," he intoned, "we love You above all things, with our whole hearts, because You are good and worthy of our love.

We love our neighbours as ourselves for the love of You. We forgive all who injured us and we ask pardon of all whom we have injured.”

Michael said, “Amen.” When he looked up, his eyes were glistening with tears, and he had to wipe his nose with the back of his hand.

Little Kieran had been fractious all day and Kate was exhausted by the time Michael put the key in the lock and stepped into the hallway.

He hung up his coat. He could hear Kieran upstairs, honking in his crib like a baby seal. Kate came out of the kitchen in her apron, all red and flustered, her russet hair awry. She smelled of frying onions and ground lamb so he guessed it must be shepherd’s pie tonight. He kissed her and then he said, “Sounds like he’s teething again, poor little beggar.”

“It’s those two big back ones,” Kate told him. “I gave him Calpol to take his temperature down but he’s still so miserable. He nods off but then the pain wakes him up again.”

I know the feeling, thought Michael. It’s the pain that can follow you everywhere, no matter how many glasses of whiskey you drink, no matter how many Sominex tablets you swallow. It comes after you through the fog of your exhaustion like the crocodile coming after Captain Hook and its ticking is the ticking of your bedside clock.

He went into the living-room and unscrewed the half-empty bottle of Jacob’s Creek shiraz that was standing on the sideboard. He could see himself in the mirror as he poured out two glasses. He didn’t think that he looked like himself at all, more like some rat-

faced private detective who had been hired to see what he was up to. His eyes were so dead and watchful, in spite of all the turmoil that he was feeling inside.

He took the wine through to the kitchen. Kate was standing over the range, stirring the lamb in a large saucepan. The kitchen floor was only half-finished and every time she wanted to go to the cupboard she had to step over a missing floorboard.

“You should have booked a baby-sitter,” he told her. “We could have gone to Isaac’s for dinner tonight, and given you a break.”

Kate said, “You’re joking, aren’t you? I wouldn’t wish Kieran on anybody right now. Besides, we can’t afford it. And you look like you could do with an early night.”

He intercepted her as she stepped over the missing floorboard and picked her up in his arms. “Hey!” she said, with a wooden spatula in one hand and a jar of dried thyme in the other.

“You’re the one who suggested an early night,” he smiled, and kissed her on her perspiring forehead.

“Not *that* kind of an early night. I’m totally flahed out.”

“We’ll see.” He kissed her again and let her go. She went back to stirring the lamb and he pulled out a kitchen chair and sat down to watch her. He never tired of it, she was so magical, even when she was hot and messy like this. Her red hair, her high forehead, her wide-apart blue eyes, so blue that they were almost indigo. Her little straight nose with the spattering of freckles across it.

Most of all he loved her slight overbite, the way her top teeth rested on the moist pink cushion of her lower lip.

She was small and trim with narrow hips and she could dance when she danced like a flame-haired fairy, her eyes full of mischief, spinning around and around and always seeming to be teasing him because she shouldn't be his, not really. Not that she should have been Sean's, either.

They ate on their laps in the living-room, watching television. Upstairs, Kieran was sleeping at last, snuffling as he slept, his cheeks as red as tomatoes.

"Did you sell that gorgeous house in Lover's Walk yet?" asked Kate, flapping her hand in front of her face because her mouthful of shepherd's pie was so hot.

Michael shook his head. "They wanted me to drop the price by another two thousand. I told them to stuff it. Not in so many words, though. Polite, like."

"How's your old mamó?"

"Oh she's grand, except for her knee."

"You should see her more often."

Michael didn't answer. Calling in to see his grandmother in Glanmire had been his pretence for visiting Father Bernard at St Dominic's Retreat House. He had confessed only to Father Bernard what he had done, nineteen years and two months ago. At the time, he had told the Gardaí what had happened, blurting it out between his tears, but he hadn't told them that he had done it deliberately, nor what had provoked him to do it, and he had never admitted it to Kate.

He had never told Kate what he had seen through Sean's bedroom door, either. Sometimes he wondered what would happen if he did. But it didn't take much imagination to realize that it would bring down every ceiling in the house, and their marriage would be over, and little Kieran, like Michael, would be fatherless.

He placed two Sominex tablets on his nightstand, next to his alarm clock, just in case he really needed them, but Father Bernard had given him the courage to try to sleep without them. *God has forgiven you*, he told himself. *Now you have to find it in your heart to forgive yourself.*

By the time he had climbed out of the bath and towelled himself, Kate had climbed into bed, switched off her bedside lamp and turned her back to him. The freckles on her bare shoulders looked like a faded map of the stars. He eased himself into bed, leaned over and breathed in deeply, just so that he could smell her. Chanel Eau Premiere, light and flowery.

He knew that he wouldn't be able to go to sleep immediately, so he propped his pillows up behind him and watched a nature program about fishermen somewhere off the coast of east Africa, keeping the volume muted so that he wouldn't disturb Kate. After a while one of the fishermen came walking along the glossy wet sand, holding up a feathery-looking fish. It seemed to take him hours to approach the camera, but when he finally came close enough he gave a gappy smile and waved the fish from side to side in front of the lens, and shouted at the top of his voice, *'You see this, Michael? This is a devil firefish, Michael! It stings! Very dangerous to humans! A fish like this can take a terrible revenge on you.'*

Michael jerked and opened his eyes. The nature program must have finished almost twenty minutes ago. It was 11:00 pm now and the RTE weatherman was predicting another day of soft weather tomorrow. Michael got up and switched the television off. The bedroom was engulfed in darkness, and all he could hear was the rain sprinkling

against the window and the deep throbbing of oil tankers moored on the opposite side of the Lee.

The dream began as it always began. He was walking along the upstairs corridor of The Far Horizon Hotel, where the O'Connor family stayed every summer for two weeks. Outside the day was blurry and hot, but inside the hotel it was always cool and smelled of damp.

All along the white-painted corridor hung wooden-framed photographs of the few survivors from the *Lusitania*, which had been sunk by a German submarine in 1915 only eight miles off the Old Head of Kinsale. Michael had often stopped to study these survivors, wrapped in blankets and surrounded by local fishermen, their faces strangely expressionless as if they accepted that one day they would be dead, too, nothing more than pictures of themselves on a hotel wall.

Michael was returning to the room he shared with Sean because he had forgotten his towel and his swimming-trunks. He knew what he was going to see when he reached the door, because he had dreamed this dream so many times before, but somehow he always felt the same shock when he saw it, like scores of cockroaches scuttling down his back.

He heard Kate sigh a second before he saw them, a high sweet note of happiness, almost as if she were singing. The door was only an inch or two ajar, but he could see them reflected in the mirror in the huge mahogany press – Sean lying on his back, his skin as white as the sheet he was lying on, and Kate sitting upright on top of him, her elbows raised, both hands buried in her tangled red hair.

“*Sissikins*,” said Sean, and he made her pet name sound so lubricious.

Michael stood breathless in the corridor, watching with horror and fascination as Kate slowly rose up and down, as if she were wading in the sea.

Neither she nor Sean could see him, and he stayed completely still, barely breathing, not knowing what he should do. Eventually he took one careful step back, and then another, and then he turned and hurried softly downstairs. He crossed the hotel reception area and pushed his way out of the front door and stood on the porch in the wind and the sunshine with the sea almost blinding him.

It was then that he realized that he was not only shocked but grievously hurt. Ever since the O'Connors had brought him home when he was six years old, he and Kate had always been close, playing make-believe games together while Sean was out kicking footballs with his schoolfriends, telling each other stories, sharing secrets. He had never articulated the thought before, but he had assumed that he and Kate would stay together for the rest of their lives, and it had never occurred to him that she might feel such affection for anybody else, especially her own natural brother.

The dream continued. He sat on the steps as the afternoon passed, and the shadows of the clouds fled across Kinsale Sands, rising and falling as they crossed over the dunes like the steeplechasers at Leopardstown. After twenty minutes or so, Sean appeared, his shirt hanging out of his crumpled khaki shorts, his carrot hair tousled and his cheeks flushed. He sat on the step next to Michael and gave him a playful push on the shoulder. "What's the matter with you, boy? I thought you were going swimming, like. You left your badinas upstairs."

"I changed my mind," said Michael, standing up.

He started to walk away from the hotel, toward the beach. In the dream he always walked very quickly and jerkily, like a speeded-up film, and Sean followed him, about twenty yards behind.

He walked over half a mile, until he reached the dunes. He wanted to be alone but Sean kept following him. He sat down and covered his face with his hands. Sean circled around him, kicking at the sand. The sea looked like smashed-up mirrors, and the inside of Michael's head felt the same.

"We should dig ourselves a hideout like," Sean suggested.

Michael looked up at him, one eye closed against the sunshine.

"We could pinch some bottles of beer from the bar, see, and sit in the hideout and drink it and nobody could see us."

Michael thought: *that was exactly the kind of stupid idea that Sean was always coming up with, ridiculous impractical plans for shoplifting from Dunne's with plastic bags safety-pinned inside their coats or making a periscope to spy on the women's changing room at Mayfield swimming pool.*

He said nothing, but Sean picked up a flat piece of driftwood and started to dig into the side of the dune.

"You could help," he panted, after he had been shovelling sand for over half an hour.

Michael looked up at him again. He hated him so much he could have jumped up and grabbed him by the throat and strangled him.

"Oh well, please yourself," said Sean, and carried on digging.

The sun was sinking and the wind began to rise, whistling thinly through the grass. Sean had dug a tunnel into the dune almost two metres deep, so that only his rubber

dollies were showing. He came crawling back out of it and brushed himself down, shaking his head like a dog to get the sand out of his hair.

“I’m a genius,” he announced. “I’m the greatest digger of hideouts that ever was. All I have to do now is make it just a bit more wider. Then we can go and pinch ourselves a few bottles of Satz and have us a party.”

He got down on his hands and knees and crawled back into the tunnel. He had only been digging for a few minutes, though, before Michael heard a very soft thump, and a muffled shout. He looked around and saw that the sand had collapsed, and that Sean was buried. He couldn’t even see his rubber dollies.

He stood up, his heart banging.

“Sean!” he called out. “Sean! Can you hear me? Sean, are you all right?”

A brief flurry of sand was kicked up where Sean’s feet must have been, but then there was nothing but absolute stillness. Michael knelt down and frantically started scooping at the sand with his cupped hands, but the more sand he scooped, the more slid down from higher up the dune, faster and faster, like a nightmarish parody of an hourglass, and he soon realized that he was making things worse.

He stopped, and stood up. “Hold on, Sean! I’ll go for some help! Just hold on!”

He started to run along the beach toward the hotel. His long shadow ran in front of him, with a tiny head. At first he ran as fast as he could, but then he slowed down to a trot, and then a walk, and after a while he stopped.

There was nobody in sight for over half a mile, only a woman in a billowy red dress walking her dog by the water’s edge. Three seagulls circled overhead, crying like lost children. Michael looked back at the dunes. He hesitated for a moment and then he took a

deep breath and held it for as long as he could, timing himself with his wristwatch. A little more than a minute. Even if Sean could hold his breath for twice as long, he must have suffocated by now.

Michael started running again. As he approached the hotel, he could see his father climbing the front steps, smoking his pipe. He waved his arms and screamed out, "*Da! Da! Come quick! It's Seanie! Seanie's been buried in the sand!*"

He opened his eyes. He thought at first that he might have been shouting out loud in his sleep, but if he had, he hadn't disturbed Kate, who was still breathing softly and evenly and hadn't stirred.

He lay on his back for nearly an hour, staring at the ceiling and listening to the rain chuckling in the gutters outside. He knew where he would have to go tomorrow. Prayers hadn't helped. Years of counselling hadn't helped. He couldn't imagine what Father Bernard had in mind, but he doubted if that would help, either.

He said, "Holy Father -- " but then he stopped himself, and stayed silent with his lips pressed tightly together until he heard the clock in the hallway strike two.

The following day was one of those dark Cork days when the rain holds off but the sky remains relentlessly grey from morning till night.

Father Bernard was sitting in his study drinking a cup of coffee when Michael knocked at the door. He unhooked his spectacles and said, "Michael! I was hoping against hope that I wouldn't be seeing you this morning."

Michael sat down in the leather-upholstered chair on the opposite side of Father Bernard's desk. The chair was so low that he felt like the schoolboy Stephen Dedalus

explaining to the rector that he had broken his glasses on the cinder-path. “I was hoping so, too, father. But I had the dream again. And just as vivid as always.”

Father Bernard sat back with his hand pressed over his mouth as if he didn't trust himself to say any more. But after a short while he stood up and went across to his bookcase, lifting out of his soutane a bunch of keys on a long chain. He unlocked the front of the bookcase and took out a grey porcelain jar with a lid that was fastened with twisted wire. He brought it back across the room and set it down on his desk between them.

Michael could see that the jar was decorated with a pattern of green leaves and small purplish flowers. Father Bernard said, “Inside this jar is a powder that was made up for me by a very dear friend, at a time in my life when I had my own ghosts to lay. It's a compound of bishopswort, more commonly known as betony, and marigold petals, as well as numerous other ingredients including the dried and ground-up hearts of several moles.”

Michael didn't know how to respond to that – whether he ought to make a joke of it, or look serious, and nod. He settled for a brief twitch at the sides of his mouth, and an interested frown.

Father Bernard prised the lid open, and tilted the jar so that Michael could see the soft purplish-grey powder inside. “They call this Saint Brónach's Shrift, because it was first compounded by Saint Brónach the Virgin of Glen-Seichis in the sixth century. She was an abbess, with great mystic powers, and according to legend she was very beautiful.

“A fiery young Irish chieftain named Fergus had wounded a rival named Artan and left him for dead. However, he was overcome with remorse for what he had done and became

a pilgrim of penance until he was a very old man. He was so wracked with guilt that he finally came to the abbey to seek the help of Saint Brónach, and she gave him an infusion of this powder to drink.

“That night Fergus had a dream in which he returned to the skirmish in which he had wounded Artan, and Artan, as he lay bleeding on the ground, forgave him.”

Michael peered into the jar again. “And what you’re proposing is that *I* should drink some of this stuff?”

Father Bernard said, “It’s a very powerful mixture, Michael. It might have some side-effects, mystical as well as physical. The physician to the Emperor Caesar Augustus used a similar preparation of betony to protect the emperor from epidemics and to guard him against witchcraft, but one of its greatest benefits was to give him peace of mind.

“Peace of mind could be yours, Michael, if you’re prepared to try it.”

“And you say that you’ve tried it, yourself?”

Father Bernard nodded.

Michael hesitated. But then he thought about those endless dreams, flickering through his head almost every night like a flicker-book. The wind, blowing through the grass. The soft thumping sound as the sand collapsed and Sean was buried. The woman in the red billowy dress, and the sea continuing wearily to whisper to itself because the sea was like his aging grandmother and had forgotten who he was.

“Well, I’ll try it, like,” Michael agreed. “What do I have to do?”

Father Bernard with shaking hands poured some of the powder into a white envelope. “Three teaspoonfuls should be enough, stirred up well with hot water. Drink it about an hour before you go to bed.”

“You said something about side-effects,” said Michael, as he opened the door to leave.

Father Bernard laid a hand on his shoulder. “Everything we do in life has side-effects, Michael. God be with you.”

Kate was too tired to cook so they ordered a margherita pizza from Valentino’s and when it arrived they sat in front of the television and shared it out of the box.

“You’re awful quiet,” said Kate.

Michael wiped his mouth on a paper napkin and swallowed a mouthful of warm red wine and then he leaned over and kissed her on the cheek.

“You don’t think I’m a bad person, do you?” he asked her.

“Of course not! Whatever made you ask me that?”

“I’ve never meant to hurt anybody, Kate, not ever. And if I have, they’ve been sins of omission, if you know what I mean. Not deliberate.”

“You’re strange,” said Kate, looking into his eyes with those wide-apart blue eyes of hers that were almost indigo. “When you first came to live with us, Sean told me that you were a goblin child that none of the other goblins wanted. I suppose in a way it was kinder than crowing that your da and your ma had been killed in a car crash.”

“Maybe Sean was right,” Michael told her. “Maybe I *am* a goblin. I don’t remember my parents at all. What they looked like, of course, from the photos. But I can’t hear their voices, not at all. I can’t remember what they *felt* like.”

Kate went upstairs for a bath first and Michael went into the kitchen and made her a mug of chocolate. He took out the envelope that Father Bernard had given him and tipped the

powder into a tumbler. He sniffed it but it didn't smell of anything at all. He poured hot water over it and stirred it until it dissolved.

He held the tumbler up to the light. Saint Brónach's Shrift was a pale agate colour, the same colour as Father Bernard's eyes. Perhaps it would give him the same insight, too. He drank it, and it tasted very slightly bitter, but nothing more.

After his bath, he and Kate sat up in bed and watched television for a while. He glanced at her sideways from time to time and wondered if she had really been in love with Sean and how young she had been when they first went to bed together – questions that he could never ask her.

At the end of *CSI: Miami*, Kate twisted herself into her sheets and her blankets as she always did and went to sleep. Michael sat up a little longer but he was beginning to feel oddly light-headed, as if he had taken too many flu tablets.

He switched over channels, and found that he was watching the same nature program about east African fishermen that he had watched last night, or *thought* he had watched. Here was the same wet shoreline, and the same fisherman walking slowly towards the screen, holding up that spiny devil firefish. Michael switched the television off while the fisherman was still a hundred yards away.

He lay in the darkness for over half an hour, not moving. There was no wind tonight and no rain, only the throbbing of the oil tankers. The river amplified the deep drumbeat of their engines and sometimes he felt as if the whole house was throbbing, as if everything was going to be loosened, nuts and bolts and dovetail joints and screws, and finally shaken apart.

He closed his eyes. When he opened them again it was daylight and the sun was shining through the windows and he was walking along the corridor at The Far Horizon Hotel, past the framed photographs of the *Lusitania* survivors.

He heard Kate let out that sweet high cry of pleasure. He heard Sean say, '*Sissikins*'. He looked in horror through the open doorway and saw their reflection in the press, Kate with her fingers buried in her curly red hair.

He ran downstairs and out through the door and into the wind and the sunshine. He felt as if he had been in the same head-on crash that had killed his father and mother on the N25 at Churchquarter. He was too shocked even to cry. He was still sitting there when Sean came out with his shirt untucked, his cheeks flushed, his upper lip beaded with clear perspiration.

"What's the matter with you, boy? I thought you were going swimming."

He didn't answer. Instead, he stood up and started to walk quickly towards the beach. He prayed that, this time, Sean wouldn't follow him, but without even turning his head he knew that Sean was only ten yards behind him.

He reached the dunes and sat down. Sean circled around him, kicking the sand.

"We should dig ourselves a hideout, like."

"No," said Michael.

"Don't be so soft. We could pinch some bottles of beer from the bar and we could sit in our hideout and drink them and nobody would know."

"No," Michael repeated.

Sean picked up a piece of driftwood and started to dig. "You're not going to help me, then?"

“No.”

“All right then, please yourself so.”

Sean went on digging and the wind began to rise, keening through the grass like the banshees that were supposed to wail whenever an O’Connor was close to death. When Sean had excavated a tunnel into the side of the dune that was more than four feet deep, Michael stood up and said, “Stop, Seanie! Don’t! Don’t dig any more! It’s too dangerous!”

Sean wagged his head and crossed his eyes and stuck out his tongue. “You’re a header, Mikey. It’s a hole in the sand, that’s all.”

“Just stop it. I’ll go tell da what you’re doing, else.”

“Go on, then! What do you think *he’s* going to say? We’re on a seaside holiday and I’m digging in the sand. What else are you supposed to do on a seaside holiday?”

Michael stepped up to him and tried to grab the piece of driftwood away from him but Sean hit him on the elbow with it, hard, right on the funny-bone.

“If you don’t want to help, then you can bog off. I mean it. And if you try to do that again I’ll drop you.”

Michael stayed where he was, rubbing his elbow. He had got into fights with Sean dozens of times, and Sean had always beaten him, because he was a year older and at least a stone heavier. He should have turned around and walked away and left Sean to the fate that was waiting for him, but he knew that he couldn’t.

Sean dug and grunted and dug and grunted. Michael sat down on the side of the dune while the sun began to sink and the cloud-shadows fled across the beach. Eventually Sean came crawling out of the tunnel, sandy backside first. He scrabbled sand out of his hair

and said, "I'm a genius! The greatest hideout digger ever known! All I have to do now is make it a bit more wider. Talk about *The Great Escape!*"

"No, Seanie!" Michael shouted, standing up again, but his voice was snatched out of his mouth by the wind, and Sean was already elbowing his way back into the tunnel.

In three long leaps, like an astronaut walking on the Moon, Michael bounded across the side of the dune and seized Sean's ankles, twisting his fingers into the laces of his rubber dollies so that he couldn't get himself free. Sean bellowed, "Let go of me, you gowl! What the do you think you're feckin doing? Let go of me!"

Sean struggled and twisted and kicked at him, but Michael held onto him and tried to drag him backward. He wasn't strong enough or heavy enough to pull him more than a few inches, but in the end, Sean grew so furious that he struggled his way out of the tunnel himself, and stood up, and punched Michael on the left cheek. Michael staggered backward and fell over, rolling down the side of the dune and landing on his back, winded. Up above him he saw ragged white clouds, and seagulls.

Sean shouted, "You're a feckin eejit, do you know that? You're the biggest feckin eejit I ever knew! I wish to God that my da and my ma had never took you in, you gimp!"

He stalked back toward his tunnel, but as he did so it collapsed, with the same soft thump that Michael had heard so many times in his dreams.

Sean stood in front of the dune with his arms spread wide. "Now look what you've done! Now look what you've feckin done! I spent all feckin afternoon digging that hideout and that's it!"

He kicked at the sandy depression where the tunnel had been, and then he came back down the dune and stood over Michael and kicked him in the hip. “Gimp,” he repeated, and then he started walking back along the beach toward the hotel.

Michael sat up, dabbing at his cheek with his fingertips. His eye was beginning to close up already. But he turned and watched Sean shrinking smaller and smaller and thought: *I saved him. I hate him but I did the Christian thing and I saved him, even if I made him so angry. I don't need God's forgiveness any more. I don't need Sean's forgiveness either.*

He hadn't felt such inner peace in years. He closed his eyes and the wind gradually died down and the sea whispered softer and softer. Soon there was absolute silence, except for the surreptitious ticking of a clock.

Somebody laid a hand on his shoulder and said, “Michael? Michael? You must have fallen asleep. Come on, Michael, we have to get to Togher before seven.”

He opened his eyes. He was sitting in a brown leather chair in a gloomy oak-paneled room, lined with bookcases. Through the windows he could see that the clouds were deep gray and that it was raining.

He looked up. Father Bernard was standing over him, smiling.

“I must be working you too hard,” said Father Bernard. “Maybe I should let you have a day off. Maybe we should *both* take a day off, and do some fishing. The salmon are running in the Blackwater.”

Bewildered, Michael turned his head. Beside him, on a side-table, there was a half-empty cup of milky tea and a copy of *Bethada Náem Nérenn*, the lives of the Irish saints,

open at the life of Máedoc of Fern, with a 30-cent-off coupon from Valentino's the pizza parlour as a bookmark.

"I'm sorry, father. I must have dropped off."

"Never mind. But we should be making haste now. We don't want to be late for the needy of Saint Arran's, do we?"

"No, father."

Michael stood up, and brushed biscuit crumbs from the front of his soutane. He couldn't think why he felt so disoriented. He couldn't remember coming into the library or where he had been before. He couldn't even remember getting up this morning.

"How's the eye?" asked Father Bernard.

"The eye?" Michael reached up and touched his left eye. It was swollen and tender, and it felt greasy, as if it had been smeared with butter to relieve the bruising. "I don't know. Better, I think."

Father Bernard laid a hand on his shoulder and steered him across the room. On the panelled walls around the doorframe hung several hand-coloured engravings of fish. A salmon, a gurnard, a John Dory and an ugly-looking tropical fish with staring eyes and feathery spines. *Pterois miles*, the devil firefish. Michael was sure that he had seen this before. Not just here, in the library, but somewhere else, although he couldn't think where. A house, somewhere in the city. A bedroom, where somebody else was sleeping beside him.

But then Father Bernard steered him out into the corridor and out through the front doors and into the rainy street outside, where his old blue Honda was parked.

He climbed into the passenger seat and the doors slammed and he forgot where he had seen the devil firefish before, for ever.

At the same time, which was 5:18 in the morning in New York, Kate was woken up by Kieran starting to grizzle again. She eased herself out of bed and out of the bedroom and walked across the living-room to Kieran's crib. She lifted him out and he was hot and damp and smelled of pee.

"There," she said, jiggling him up and down. "Is it those nasty teeth again?"

She carried him across to the window and looked down at East 13th Street. It had been raining during the night and there were stacks of sodden cardboard on the sidewalk. There was no traffic, although she could hear a firetruck honking somewhere in the distance, and the warbling of sirens.

"There, there," she sang, rocking Kieran from side to side. And then she sang, "*Chip, chip, my little horse. Chip, chip again, sir. How many miles to Dublin town? Fourscore and ten, sir. Will I get there by candlelight? Yes, and back again, sir.*"

She felt a hand on her shoulder, and then a kiss on the back of her neck, and then another kiss. She turned and said, "We tried not to wake you, didn't we, baby?"

"That's all right, Sissikins. I couldn't sleep anyway. Every time I closed my eyes I had dreams about Michael. I can't think why, like. I haven't thought about Michael for years."

Kate reached up with one hand and touched his cheek. "Poor Michael," she said. She kissed the top of Kieran's gingery hair and for a long moment Kieran was silent, as if she had given him a blessing.

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