

# The Weight of Him

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*In loving memory of Nathaniel J. Bergman*

I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out;  
and I thought how it is worse, perhaps, to be locked in.

—VIRGINIA WOOLF, *A Room of One's Own*

# The Weight of Him

# One

BILLY BRENNAN OVERDID IT AGAIN WITH THE FAST food. After, he hurried as best he could along the street, fighting the need to stop and recover—he didn't want to draw any more attention to himself. Strangers looked twice at his massive bulk. He pretended not to notice. Those he knew seemed inclined to stop and chat, but he issued only passing hellos and pressed on. He was in no mood to suffer further condolences and awkward exchanges, all of which set his heart racing.

A woman overtook him on the footpath, walking fast and with force. She must have just come off a foreign holiday or a session of sun beds. Maybe she had slathered herself in that fake lotion. More noticeable than skin the color of mahogany, though, she was sickly thin. Billy had never seen a woman so skinny; her arms and calves could snap like sugar sticks. It seemed impossible she could move that fast, could have the strength to even stand up.

She marched ahead, her arms swinging back and forth with

alarming range, her body jerking in a way that didn't make sense. It was as if different parts of her insides were struggling to get out. Billy felt eyes on him, a group of gawking schoolgirls. They looked from him to the woman and back again, a mix of humor and disgust on their faces. He walked faster, still hunched forward with the full, too-tight feeling in his stomach.

As he neared his car, he spotted Kitty Moore coming at him like a bullet in slow motion. He planted himself in front of a shop window, his reflection a thick column of flesh beneath a head of dark curls. His heart squeezed and released in time to, *Please don't see me*. Kitty neared in his periphery. Billy braced himself. *Keep going, that's it. Don't look this way. Don't—*

"Billy." Her sad tone pressed on his chest.

He swung around, faking surprise. "Ah, Kitty! How are you?"

Her eyes moistened. The gray-black of her loose, knotted bun made him think of a little heap of ashes. He couldn't hold her watery gaze. Felt as though he was trying to breathe through a pillow. Kitty's chapped lips moved, but he couldn't make out her words above the ringing in his ears.

She glanced at the shop's colorful window display and back at him. "I'll let you get along, Billy. You mind yourself, now."

"You, too, Kitty."

Her pale mouth remained open, as if she intended to say more, but she moved off. It was Kitty, of all people, who had found Michael that chill morning back in January. In the five weeks since, Billy had managed to mostly avoid her, even though they both lived in the neighboring village and just a couple of miles apart.

In her wake, his attention fell on the snow globe in the window's center display. The ornament contained a blond girl in a

red dress, a black dog by her spindle legs, and a cottage with a navy door and straw roof. Two yellow birds completed the scene, perched on the skeleton of an ice-blue tree. Billy wanted to shake the globe and bring it to life.

Behind him, a tour bus whooshed past, its red and white reflection streaking the shop glass. He tried to remember back to a time when he was small and thin, and able to feel the undertow from passing traffic. His hand pressed the side of his head, as though trying to keep the egg of himself together.

Billy sped over the twelve miles from town in his black Corolla, sucking traces of grease and hamburger from his teeth. As he entered the village, he told himself to slow down and get it together before he arrived home. The car cruised past the pub, shop, church, and graveyard. He pushed away the image of the dark earth heaped over the fresh grave.

Twenty-two houses dotted the village, a mix of gray stone, red brick, and whitewash all listing to the left. The entire scene dappled with weak, wintry sunshine. Its background colored in various greens courtesy of the trees and rolling fields. Another tour bus approached, a silver-haired driver in front and a load of schoolchildren in back. They were likely returning from Newgrange, centuries-old testimony to a time when the country was supposedly heroic and great. The Land of Saints, Scholars, and High Kings. Billy didn't want to think about the sad state of the country now after the end of the Celtic Tiger, with so much snatched from so many.

Home. Theirs was a redbrick dormer bungalow on a landscaped acre lot. His parents had given him and Tricia the site



twenty-one years ago. The wedding present yet another thing his father liked to hold over him. Billy tried not to look, but his eyes went straight to the trees behind the football pitch—those trees, all trees, ruined for him now.

He entered the kitchen. The radio was tuned to that country music station Tricia liked so much, some lament with an American twang playing. Not so long ago, he might have pulled her by the hand into the middle of the kitchen and twirled her around beneath his fingers. She would likely have pushed him away, laughing, and called him daft. Or on another day, in a sharper mood, she might tell him, “Stop, you’ll give yourself a heart attack.” Either scenario was better than how they tiptoed around each other now.

She stood at the sink peeling potatoes, all five-foot-nothing of her. He was six-foot. She glanced over her shoulder, a strip of potato skin hanging from the peeler like a diseased tongue. “You weren’t long. Town must be quiet?”

“Very quiet, I was in and out.” He didn’t say he’d done little more than stuff himself. Didn’t mention Kitty Moore.

“You just missed your mother,” Tricia said.

“Everything all right?” he asked.

“Fine, she was just checking in.”

A fresh bouquet of lilies sprang from a vase on the table, their smell sickly familiar. The flowers looked beautiful, but seemed tainted, like black age spots in the glass of an antique mirror. That was the way with so much now—tarnished, loaded. Bird-song that sounded like a child screeching. The creak of a door like groaning. Overhead power lines that could string you up.

He read the sympathy card, from Tricia’s aunt in New York. “That was very nice of her.”

"Yes, God bless her." Ever since they'd lost Michael, in addition to coffee, cigarettes, and sleeping tablets, Tricia had also taken hard to Catholicism. "Although," she continued, still skinning the potato, "I almost wish the cards and flowers, the people, would all stop coming through the door now. It seems endless."

He understood, but the alternative didn't appeal, either—people forgetting, and the everydayness of life without Michael taking hold. He opened the fridge door, despite still feeling full, and scanned the shelves. Every time he entered the house he walked straight to the fridge and looked inside, and every time he felt this strange disappointment, as though expecting to find something else.

As Tricia stripped the last potato bare, her shoulder blade moved faster beneath her T-shirt, bringing to mind a calcified wing. He watched the hypnotic movement, tempted to touch her, but he knew she wouldn't want that. His touch no longer comforted her the way it had in those first few days after Michael. The last time he'd reached for her, she'd flinched and pulled away.

"Did you want a hand?" he asked.

"No, thanks, I'm almost done."

The clothesline beyond the window tugged. Billy refused to look. Michael, at all of seventeen, had left the house in the dark of night, cut down the previous clothesline, and walked to the band of trees behind the football pitch. Billy pictured the rope on the ground, trailing Michael like a snake.

Up and down Tricia's shoulder blade sliced. She had lost so much weight in five weeks. Her straw-colored hair was brittle now, too. A glassy look in her eyes. She added the naked potatoes to the saucepan and walked to the back door with her

cigarettes and lighter. She had given up the killers for eight years, but the day they lost Michael, she had gone back on them worse than ever.

In the living room, John, Anna, and Ivor sat together on the couch, still in their school uniforms, their eyes locked on *Dine About Town*, that cooking show the whole family liked. Only now they weren't whole. Billy's attention jumped to the red floral rug in front of the fireplace. They'd waked Michael there in his mahogany coffin with its shiny gold handles and crucifixes. Michael's walnut guitar still leaned against the wall in the corner, just as the boy had left it. The fast food pushed against Billy's stomach, bloating, hurting. He thought about bursting wide open and how good that would feel.

"Did you want a cup of tea, Dad?" Anna asked.

"No, thanks, love. I'll get myself a cup after the dinner." He smiled, hoping to ease the worry on her little face. At twelve years old, Anna cut a miniature of her mother in old photographs—thin, pale, and short, with bright yellow-blond hair, almond-shaped eyes, and plump lips.

He suddenly wanted the children up and out, doing. "It's such a fine evening, how about we all go for a drive before dinner?"

"No thanks," John said, deadpan. At fifteen, he was now the eldest. He bore his brother's likeness, at least physically, and stood tall, lean, and broad. The defiance in his wild dark curls and penetrating blue eyes was all his, though, Michael a gentler and more agreeable young man.

"We're watching this," Ivor said, his eyes never leaving the TV. He sounded younger than nine, his words thick when he

spoke, as though every tooth he'd ever lost sat in a pile on his tongue.

"I'll go, Dad," Anna said, trying to please him.

"Ah, no," he said, not letting his disappointment show. "If this is what you'd all prefer to do." He remained with them, telling himself it didn't matter what they did as long as they were together.

The door to the boys' bedroom stood ajar. Billy shuffled past Michael's empty bed and opened the wardrobe, its hinges creaking. He ran his hands over the shoulders of Michael's shirts, and down the empty arms. He pressed Michael's favorite gray sweatshirt to his face, breathing deep. With each passing day, Michael's earthy, almost spicy scent was fading.

Billy recovered and moved into his room. He was looking forward to a long, hot shower and washing away as much as he could. After he stripped, he dropped onto the side of his bed to remove his socks, his stomach heavy on the pale, hairy slab of his thighs. He clapped his hands to the sides of his huge belly and jiggled it. He tried to lift its mound off his lap. He slapped and squeezed its rolls. Grabbed hunks of himself in his hands and twisted the fistfuls of fat till he hurt. It felt good. It felt awful.

He pushed himself in front of the full-length wardrobe mirror. His reflection appeared pale and sickly, older than forty-seven. His eyes looked bruised, too, as if he'd taken punches. The man of himself was hidden behind the droop of his purple, stretch-marked belly. Thanks to the press of the steering wheel, a permanent purple bruise also marked his middle,

like a supersized sneer. His breasts hung larger than Tricia's. He raised his arms out from his sides, their sagging flesh quivering like two blue-veined jellyfish. He turned away from the mirror and rushed into his clothes.

In the days after Michael, a social worker had come out to the house. A brunette, save for the single blond curl at her forehead, and her eyes soft and kind. One of her pamphlets maintained that people lost weight with grief. That was true of Tricia, but not of him. He wasn't even getting grief right. He recalled the anorexic woman earlier, trying to escape her skeletal body. He was the opposite, hiding inside his massiveness. He returned to the wardrobe mirror. His reflection stared him down. He raised his hand and made of his thumb and finger a pointed gun. His reflection aimed. Fired.

Beyond the window, the crows cawed, as if mocking. He lumbered across the room, lifted the net curtain, and watched the birds' black flight. The view of the village and the town beyond rarely changed. Except for the birds and the weather. The furling and unfurling of the Meath flag from windows. The sometimes hurtle of an airplane, streaks in its wake like ocean whitecaps.

The haphazard scatter of the buildings in the village made them look thrown down rather than built up, like dice shaken and rolled, landing where they may. Billy's childhood home stood on the hill, the straight line between him and the farmhouse just five hundred yards across the fields. It seemed much farther away. Smoke puffed from the kitchen chimney, as gray as rain clouds. He dropped the curtain.

Billy followed the smell of oil and fried meat to the kitchen. Tricia stood at the stove, prodding the chops with an orange spatula long deformed by the heat. The oil spat and sizzled, filling the small room with the distinctive waft of browned lamb and rosemary.

Tricia moved to the door and called the children. The three filed in and took their places. Billy avoided looking at Michael's empty chair. Tricia plated the food. The meat pink and juicy. The fried potatoes black-gritted and glistening.

She carried more food to the table. So much food, as if she were still cooking for a family of six. Billy sliced open his lamb chop and found himself hesitating.

Tricia took her seat opposite him. "How is everyone?" she asked, trying to sound casual. The social worker had emphasized the importance of checking in.

"Yeah, what did you all get up to today?" Billy asked. The school counselor had said the children seemed to be doing as well as could be expected, but he and Tricia would never again trust the surface of things.

John gripped his knife and fork hard, his knuckles yellow-white. "Why do you both keep asking how we are? All the time now, it's the same old thing—"

"Hardly all the time," Tricia said, still trying at casual. John's attention remained on his meal, but his cheeks flared red. Anna and Ivor looked out from wide, sad eyes.

"Eat up," Billy said gently.

John's knife and fork tore into his chop, as though he were killing it again. He had his grandfather's hard, square jaw. His temper, too. The boy's knife screeched across his plate, making the roots of Billy's teeth hum.

"Take it easy, can't you?" Billy said, too sharp. Tricia's eyebrows shot up. A warning. They had to be careful. They had to do a better job with the remaining three.

The Beatles' "Yesterday" floated out of the radio. Tricia crossed the room and powered it off. John chewed his meat as though still slaying it. Ivor's chubby hand pushed a wad of bread into his mouth, his chin shiny with butter. Anna inspected the lump of potato on her fork. Tricia remained at the window, her back to them and her arms wrapped around what was left of her. Billy pushed away his plate, his dinner untouched. A first.

Tricia returned to the table and mentioned her morning shift at the chemist. Some strange fella had wanted them to sell his homemade potion, a "cure" for rashes related to measles, chicken pox, and the like. "He couldn't understand why we refused."

Anna chimed in about the Sullivan twins in her class, home sick with the mumps. "Their necks swelled like melons."

The banter went around the table. Billy sat smiling and nodding, adding the odd comment. Inside, though, he couldn't stop the churn of panic, awful sensations that had descended after Michael and which were getting worse by the day. The more he ached to turn back time and undo the unthinkable, the more the torment built. As his family chatted, clocks ticked in his head like bombs, their black arms turning wildly forward, carrying them forever into the future and farther away from Michael.

His attention jumped to the vase of lilies Tricia had moved to the counter, in the farthest corner. He could still catch their

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smell. The slice of the spades filling in Michael's grave started up again in his head, a wet, rhythmic music. He saw his naked reflection in the wardrobe mirror upstairs. He was killing himself—not nearly as swiftly or brutally as Michael, but killing himself just the same.



## Two

BILLY HAD SLEPT BADLY, HIS HEAD A MESS OF thoughts, like an overheated radio about to blow. The same questions had chased him throughout the dark. Why had Michael taken his own life? How could he have done that to himself, and to those he left behind? Why hadn't he, the boy's father, noticed that Michael had felt so depressed or scared or heartbroken—whatever it was that ailed him? There must have been signs.

The social worker had said there are usually indications, especially in hindsight, and always reasons, even if they only make sense to the victim. Billy and Tricia had agonized, going over everything for any clue, but nothing stood out. Yes, Michael was sensitive, and could be troubled at times by his various fears—of exams, of the dark, of water, of bridges, and who knew what else—but there had been nothing to suggest any deadly extent to his anxieties. Billy could only imagine the stories going around. Drink, drugs, a fallout with family, friends,

a girl. He and Tricia had asked the same questions of everyone they could, but no one could explain. No one could believe.

He burrowed deeper on the bed and covered himself completely with the comforter, letting the darkness swallow him. His hot, damp breath surrounded his head like a welcome fog. The social worker had assured them they had done nothing wrong. "People can be great actors," she'd said. "They can hide a lot." Billy hadn't been able to meet her gaze, knowing how much of himself he'd always hid.

He grabbed at the bottom sheet on Tricia's side of the bed and scrunched it in his fist. During the long, sleepless night, he'd felt her breath on his arm. Two cool streams from her nostrils that he'd counted up to one hundred, two hundred, three. He'd thought about waking her up, but that had seemed unfair. She should get whatever rest she could. He wasn't just being considerate, though. He hadn't wanted her to see him so distraught. So weak.

The ache to have done better by Michael, to have saved him, set on Billy again. There was one thing he could do, at least. His resolve from last night returned. He was done killing himself slowly. He was going to lose his weight, once and for all.

The motor in the fridge made its whirring sound, as though getting a surge of electricity. It seemed to call to Billy, inviting him to plunder its laden, condensation-fogged shelves. Shelves that shouldered roast chicken, creamy coleslaw, bars of chocolate, a block of sharp red cheddar, cheesy pizza topped with meat and mushrooms, and lots more salvation. Billy's empty stomach called back, almost as loud as the noise of the motor.

He glanced at Michael's empty chair, and out at the clothesline, steeling himself. "Just one scrambled egg, please," he told Tricia. "And only one slice of toast, with the barest lick of butter."

"Are you feeling all right?" she asked.

"I'm back on my diet. I'm going to lose this weight, for good this time."

She worked on his breakfast in silence.

"You don't believe I'll do it," he said.

"I didn't say that."

"But you don't think I will." He had a lifelong pattern of losing and regaining his weight and then some, up until the past five years or so when he'd wearied of the struggle and had given up altogether.

"I'm done trying to figure out what people are and aren't capable of." Tricia fetched her cigarettes and lighter from the window ledge and stepped outside, closing the back door with a sharp click.

A gray-blue ribbon unraveled across the window. Something about that thread of smoke and breath, both having come out of Tricia and now floating up and away, gave Billy a feeling in his throat like food caught. The morning they lost Michael, Billy brought a towel from the bathroom and he and Tricia sat on the side of their bed together, crying into the two ends of cloth. How did they go from that to this? He swallowed hard. Tricia was disappearing on him, too.

Inside Dr. Shaw's office, Billy struggled up onto the exam table. Beneath him, the sheet of white paper made its scratchy sounds.

His embarrassment grew as he wrestled out of his too-small jacket. Shaw moved toward him, his liver-spotted hands gripping the ends of the stethoscope hanging from his neck. The thought rang in Billy's head. *Hanging from his neck.*

After checking Billy's blood pressure, Shaw placed the stethoscope on Billy's chest and then his back, pressing hard to hear the wheeze of lungs through the walls of fat. The skeleton in the corner was missing its left arm. Billy's last visit, it was intact.

Billy gestured with a nod. "What happened to him?"

Shaw, pulling an impatient, confused face, removed the stethoscope's right earpiece.

"Its arm?" Billy repeated.

Shaw gave a soft chuckle. "Would you believe the dog got in and ran off with it?"

Billy could believe almost anything now.

Shaw finished his check of Billy's vitals and moved back to his desk. Billy tried to work up the courage to tell the doctor he wasn't here for a second stress cert, to get more time off work. Shaw reached for his notepad.

"Actually, Doctor, I'm not here for that."

"Oh, no?"

"I want to drop all this weight, and get fit and healthy."

Shaw's gray eyebrows arched and he pushed on the bridge of his glasses. Their family doctor, he had cautioned Billy on his weight many times over the years, and his lectures had largely gone ignored.

"I mean it," Billy said.

"Glad to hear it," Shaw said, moving back to Billy. "I'm sympathetic to your situation, you know that, but it is about

time we had a serious talk, especially with everything you're going through. Your blood pressure is high, worrisome in fact, as is your overall condition. There's no easy way to put this, Billy, you're morbidly obese and on a very slippery slope. Headed straight toward hypertension, diabetes, cardiopulmonary disease, and you put shock and grief on top of all that . . . well, I don't have to spell it out."

"No, don't, thanks."

"All right, then. Let's get you up on the scales."

Billy shuddered. This would be his first time on a weighing scale in years. The number would feel like a sentence.

He dragged himself across the room. A detailed, multicolored diagram of the human body filled much of the wall above the tall, metal scale. Billy stared at the map of veins, muscles, bones, and vital organs. A geography of ourselves. Next to the human map, he looked like an entire, ailing continent.

"Best to take off your clothes," Shaw said.

"I'm all right like this."

Shaw looked out over his smudged glasses and leveled Billy with a cool gaze. Billy sighed. He should have known the death of his firstborn would only allow him to get away with so much with a man of the Hippocratic oath. He stripped down to his briefs. The underwear, riding obscenely low, was stretched to its max. His hands twitched to cover himself, but it was pointless. He took a deep breath, as though going underwater, and made to step onto the scale.

"Not there, here," Shaw said, pointing at a digital scale on the floor. Billy realized his weight must exceed the standing scale's capacity.

He stepped onto the digital scale, his breath held. The red numbers did a horrible dance and then stopped at four hundred and one pounds. Billy's heart thumped. He had topped four hundred pounds. Sweat bubbled from his every pore. He blinked, perspiration and the number on the scale stinging his eyes. The cloying smells of must, iodine, and nameless syrupy medicines worsened in the small, airless office. The beige walls moved ever closer. Shaw made a note of the terrible number. Billy did the math in his head, his stomach lurching. He weighed twenty-eight and a half stone. All these years, he'd sworn he'd never sink so high.

He hurried back into his clothes, trying to concentrate on what Shaw was saying about cutting calories and getting exercise. Four hundred and one pounds. The number seemed impossible to come back from. When he was fifteen, his weight had hit two hundred and fifty pounds, an all-new low he had sworn he would never sink past. Over the next several years, five pounds had climbed on top of that, and five more, and five more, till his weight reached three hundred, another number to which he'd sworn he'd never stoop.

Three hundred pounds. That's when people had started to stare. When he could no longer walk with ease. When he'd stopped fitting in regular clothes and on most chairs. When he was no longer seen for anything but his size. Oh, God. What he'd give to be back there now, though, one hundred and one pounds lighter. When he was three hundred pounds, Michael was still alive.

Shaw placed his hand on Billy's shoulder. "Go easy, okay? Start small and take it slow and steady. Build from there."

Billy left Shaw's office in a daze. He'd known, and yet it had still come as a shock—he was a ticking bomb and if he wasn't careful, he was going to put his family through another premature funeral.

Monday arrived, Billy's first day back to work in almost six weeks. The return to routine galled him. Damned if he could ever go back to the way things used to be. Could ever even pretend at getting back to some kind of normal. Yet the children had returned to school four weeks ago and Tricia had returned to her part-time job at the chemist's shortly afterward. It was past time for him to take the plunge.

Before he forced himself into the Corolla and headed to the factory, he walked around the perimeter of his house, sucking at the rain-sprinkled air and goading himself on like his father did the cows. *Get up*. For the fifth morning in a row, he managed to circle the house twice. Delighted, he pushed himself to brave another lap.

He struggled miserably through the third lap, however, his lungs burning and his breath coming in fast puffs, sending up tiny gray islands. Neighbors rattled past in cars and beeped in greeting, disturbing the stillness of the icy March morning. The low temperatures vicious, even for Ireland. Several passersby looked twice, no doubt stunned. The cattle in his father's field also seemed to look at him funny, as if they, too, could hardly believe they were seeing Big Billy Brennan on the move, on foot. Despite the sting of his chafed thighs, he pressed on toward the imaginary finish line at his car, fueled by a fresh burst of determination and the echo of Dr. Shaw's warnings.

In his car, the sheer pointlessness of everything stretched out in front of Billy like the hard road. He continued through the village and over the narrow, snaking tarmac toward town. The fields and hills were blanketed in a white frost that might make some think of God's breath, but all Billy saw was a gloomy, uninviting morning. The landscape seemed to shrink as well. The roads were too narrow, hills too low, and the fields like patches in a quilt. Even his car seemed too compact.

The new, two-story houses with oversized windows and gleaming slate roofs didn't seem to loom as large, either—state-of-the-art homes built during the country's all too brief economic boom. The size and showiness of these luxury properties brought scorn from plenty. Naysayers who said they hadn't let the country's short-lived upswing affect them. Hadn't moved into fancy houses or upgraded their homes, cars, or much of anything else. No, they gloated, they hadn't changed their ways or forgotten their place. Like some. They knew all along the good life couldn't last. Knew people should never get too big in themselves.

Billy fought the urge to turn the car around and go back to bed. He dreaded having to face everyone at work. Yet he couldn't shirk the responsibility any longer. Resigned, he steered the car around the final bend, feeling its tilt.

He parked inside the factory yard, his heart exceeding its speed limit. Two more cars joined him, crunching gravel. He reached for the glove compartment and pretended to search its contents. The two drivers, younger men from packaging, entered the factory. Billy took deep breaths, trying to rid himself of the



feeling his head was rising off his shoulders. He pushed open the car door and pulled himself free of the wedge of the steering wheel. He wanted the numb feeling back, the shock that had shielded him those first two weeks after Michael, allowing him to believe, if only for a moment, that none of it was real.

Inside the factory, the machinery hummed and clanked. All about, splashes of workers in blue overalls. Billy hadn't worn the factory uniform in over a decade. His supersized navy sweatshirt and navy elasticated pants allowed him to blend in about as well as he could. A fellow long-timer, Bald Art, rushed at Billy, and within moments everyone had gathered around, pumping his arm and clapping the meat of his shoulders. *Welcome back, Big Billy. Good to see you. Let us know if you need anything. You all right, Big Billy?* He thanked them, overcome by the fresh outpouring, then hurried to his station, his teeth biting hard on his sucked-in lips.

He took up position behind the production line, his right temple throbbing and his stomach rumbling. Tantalizing smells wafted from the canteen, pulling at his insides like calves to the trough. He had again skipped his usual breakfast of fried eggs and meats with buttered toast. Instead, he'd eaten porridge with fresh, sweet strawberries. Already, though, his diet felt more killing than his weight.

He trained his attention on the conveyor belt and the novelty toys coming toward him, a parade of palm-sized, hand-made wooden dolls and soldiers. Throwbacks to a time when more things bore the mark of their maker. Billy's job required him to quality-check the toys and place his inspector's sticker on each product before ferrying it on up the belt to packaging. He knew no one thought much of what he did—even his

children had long tired of the freebies—but he'd always taken pleasure in the toys, delighted by the patient, painstaking skill it took to make them, and by the joy they could bring. Now, though, there was too much memory tied up in them.

When Michael was a boy, Billy often brought home the seconds, those defective soldiers deemed not good enough for sale because of gouges, broken rifles, or missing parts. He and Michael had imagined tall stories about the damaged toys. The infantryman, for one, who had a grenade explode in his hands. He went on to become a superstar drummer. There was the lieutenant, too, with only one leg, courtesy of a land mine. He had become a world-class tap dancer.

There was also that time Michael's face had lit up beneath his dark curls on receiving the soldier with a defective eye. "This blind fella, he's a secret government agent, and his hearing is so advanced, he can tell when people are lying."

"Excellent," Billy said. "What'll we name him?"

"Billy the Blind and Brilliant!" Michael said, making Billy beam like a lighthouse.

Another of Michael's favorite seconds was the cavalry soldier with a missing ear. Michael attributed the loss to a mortar attack. After the maimed, deaf soldier recovered, he went on to become a celebrated horse-racing commentator. Michael, lending his voice to the soldier, would fast-talk into the TV remote control or anything else he could pretend was a microphone. His voice galloped in time to the horses, commentating on the entire imagined race.

The boy went so far as to make the thudding sound of the horses' hooves, banging a shoe on his free hand against the floor. Tireless, fired up, Michael recounted the hard-fought

hurtle of the invisible steeds and jockeys with great color. Billy smiled, remembering. All that time ago, and he could still hear his and Michael's ecstatic bursts each and every time a horse beat out all the others to win.

John and Anna, and later Ivor, showed no interest in the seconds or in playing with their father at such great lengths. It was a bond only Billy and Michael shared. Billy studied one such second now, his first catch of the day. The soldier, his chin strap missing from his camouflage hat, stood arrow-straight in his khaki uniform, his bayonet aimed toward the sky. Billy had prided himself on having a keen eye and catching these tiny omissions. Now the torment of what he should have seen in his own son crawled in his head like maggots.

Billy's grip tightened around the seconds soldier. He heard Michael talking in a rush, recounting how the soldier had used a pen to perform a life-saving tracheal surgery on one of his comrades. The soldier-turned-surgeon then ripped off his chin strap to hold the makeshift tracheal tube in place during his comrade's transfer from the battlefield to the hospital. His heroism later earned this soldier with no chin strap Ireland's highest military honor, the Medal for Gallantry.

Billy's hand hesitated above the empty black bin reserved for the seconds and their ultimate disposal at the dump. It looked like a dark hole. After two decades of doing the task day in and day out, he found he couldn't throw away the damaged toy. With the toe of his shoe, he pushed the bin beneath the conveyor belt and out of sight. He slipped the seconds soldier into his trousers pocket.

Around noon, the factory's owner, Tony, arrived in front of Billy. "Good to have you back, Big Billy." He was wearing the same exaggerated look of sympathy he'd sported at Michael's funeral.

"Thank you," Billy said, also playing his part.

"How's the family?"

"Tricia?" Billy said pointedly. "She and the children are about as well as they can be, thank you."

"We don't know what we can bear until we have to, isn't that what they say?"

Billy didn't try to fill the silence.

"Well, I better let you get back to it," Tony said. "You'll let me know if there's anything I can do? I mean that, now."

Billy nodded, swallowing. Tony had sounded earnest for once.

The lunchtime bell rang out. Billy's stomach roared in response. Right as he headed to the canteen, though, fresh feelings of dread overtook him. He couldn't face everyone at lunch. The mournful looks. The same old condolences and well-intentioned attempts at humor and distraction. He was also afraid he wouldn't be able to withstand the temptation of the steaming, maddening buffet in all its glory. The creamy mashed potatoes. The fat, breaded fish cakes. Those flaky, buttery meat pies. The sugary, jammy desserts. It would be hell in heaven.

Despite all his promises, Billy found himself hurrying along St. Patrick's Street toward Seanseppe's. He entered the eatery through the side door, always with that feeling of being watched. Instantly, the familiar, soothing aromas of meat, hot oil, garlic, and oregano calmed him.

His hunger rose up and chased off the last of his willpower. He was putting in a hell of a day at the factory. The least he deserved was a nice lunch. He would eat something light for his dinner, soup or salad, and tomorrow he would again walk three laps of his yard. Maybe more.

He waited in the shortest of the long lines, avoiding eye contact and the stares of strangers. Dr. Shaw's warnings and his vows to himself wrecked his head. This would absolutely be his final feast.

Armed with his order, he drove to the relative seclusion of the car park down by the quays, away from most of the gawkers and that forever feeling of not wanting to get caught. His hands shaky, he started into the thick, salted, vinegar-drenched chips. The first delicious was burned the roof of his mouth, but he kept eating. The chips gone, he went at the onion rings, his teeth sinking into the succulent mix of crispy batter and crunchy vegetable. Between bites, he pressed his tongue to the newly formed blister next to his molars, liking its stubborn resistance.

He stretched his mouth around the loaded burger and its mess of cheese, bacon, onions, and coleslaw. He slurped the sugary cola, making rude noises with his straw, and enjoyed its icy swim inside him. He bit into the bread-coated chicken and sucked the oil and crumbs from his fingers. His greasy hands broke the breastbone with a snap, its white meat coming apart like wet teeth opening in song. This was church.

Billy's eyes fluttered with thanks and pleasure. His whole life, he could always count on food. From his earliest memories, he'd loved food's colors, textures, and tastes. The way flavors went off in his mouth. How food distracted. Kept his mind

still and his bad feelings quiet. Comforted. Pleasured. Sated. Filled him up. Made him feel in charge. A giant. Food made everything better.

At least it had made everything better. Finished, stuffed, Billy remained parked by the quays. His tongue pressed harder at the burnt bubble of skin on the roof of his mouth, flirting with the verge of bursting. His bloated stomach felt as though it were forcing his lungs up and into his throat. It was hard to breathe. He tried to reverse his seat, but it was already out as far as it would go. He shifted about, pulling his trousers bottoms off his middle and down around his knees. He slumped forward over the wheel with a groan.

Sweat turned his skin sticky. His heart was thumping so hard, he could feel its beat in his palms. Dr. Shaw's warnings went off in his head. Maybe he needed medical attention? What if his heart gave out? This was how someone would find him, stuffed and slumped, his trousers down around his knees. He would die alone, too. Just like Michael. He removed the soldier with no chin strap from his trousers pocket and gripped the toy in his palm. He leaned back against the headrest and ordered himself to stay calm and his breathing to slow.

He felt almost human again and tried to rouse himself. He needed to get back to work. Yet he stayed parked. The clouds had shifted, letting the sun out, and the river glistened gray-blue, the color of Michael's eyes. Billy had always thought it funny that the boy's eyes matched the color of something that scared him so much—Michael terrified of bodies of water and of heights, bridges in particular.

When Michael was nine, Billy took the family on holiday to Kilkee. A record heat, the sun had never seemed so near. So much so, as soon as they arrived at the caravan park, they broke with tradition and put off unpacking and settling in. Instead, they headed straight to the beach—everyone giddy and grinning, shiny with suntan oil and excitement.

Billy and Michael entered the water, Billy intending to teach Michael how to swim. Tricia watched from a blanket on the sand, Ivor on her lap. John and Anna played next to them, building sand castles with bright shovels and buckets.

The deeper they moved into the water, the more Michael knitted himself together—his shoulders pulled to his ears, elbows at his sides, and his clasped hands twisted beneath his chin. “I want to go back,” he said, his voice shaking almost as much as the rest of him.

Billy finally convinced Michael to stretch out on his back while Billy held one hand beneath the boy’s narrow back and the other beneath his slender thighs. “Look at you, floating already.”

“Don’t let me go,” Michael pleaded.

“You’re well able to do it on your own,” Billy said, only half aware of the three boys playing in the water close by.

“No, I’m not!” Michael said.

“Relax,” Billy told him. “I’m not going to let you go until you tell me it’s okay.”

“Promise?” Michael said.

“Promise. Now, keep your arms and legs straight, and your eyes on the sky, your lungs full of air. That’s it, perfect.”

The three boys messing about next to Billy and Michael grew

louder, splashing and shouting, trying to push one another underwater. Billy worried they would splash Michael and make him panic. "Take it easy, lads, all right?" he asked. "You're not the only ones in the water." He returned his attention to Michael, telling him to kick his legs as hard as he could. Michael obliged, tentative at first, but then slicing the water fast and strong.

"You're doing great," Billy said. "You're practically swimming already." Michael's small, shaky smile grew. "Okay, let's try this." Billy dropped his arm from beneath Michael's thighs.

"No!" Michael said, starting to struggle.

"It's okay," Billy said. "You're still floating. You're doing it." He had to raise his voice to get heard over the trio of boys—their playacting rougher now, their language and taunts to each other turning nasty.

"I'm sinking!" Michael said, grabbing at Billy's shoulders and trying to get upright.

"No, you're not, you're fine," Billy said, calm, firm. The three boys were almost on top of him and Michael now.

The tallest boy pointed at Billy. "Look! It's a whale!" He and the other two little gits laughed hard.

Billy tried to ignore them. Tried to keep his focus on Michael. "Okay, I'm going to drop my other arm now and let you float on your own, okay?"

"No!" Michael said, his arms and legs flailing.

The boys shouted, "Whale! Whale!"

"I want to get out," Michael said, scratching at Billy's arm.

"It's okay, relax," Billy said, his agitation building.

"Come and get us, whale!"



"I want to go back to Mam," Michael said.

"Wh-ale, wh-ale," the trio chanted.

Billy issued a roar and lurched at the boys, his arms swinging. The three took off, paddling like dogs. Billy gave chase, his thick legs plowing the water. The commotion behind him pierced his rage. He swung around. Michael's arms thrashed at the water and his mouth dipped below the waterline. He made terrible noises, gagging and grunting.

Billy threw himself onto the water and cut through the current. Michael's head disappeared below the surface and burst back into view. Billy reached the boy, but before he could grab hold, Michael went under a second time. Billy plunged with both hands and grabbed blindly. He touched Michael's hair and clasped his narrow shoulders, pulled him above water. Michael coughed and spluttered, unable to draw a full breath.

"You're okay," Billy said. Michael coughed harder, his small body jerking in Billy's grip. "I've got you," Billy said.

Michael's coughing jag ended, but he was still heaving, gasping. Billy tightened his hold on the tops of Michael's arms and looked him straight in the eyes. "Calm down, okay? Everything's all right." He wrapped Michael's arms around his thick neck and towed the boy toward shore.

They stood up in shallow water, the foam lapping at Michael's calves. "All better?" Billy asked.

Michael's face hardened and he punched at Billy's stomach. "Get away from me."

Billy held on to the boy's wrists. "Hey, listen to me. You're all right, okay?"

Michael freed himself and took off. Billy, breathless, chased Michael out of the water and over the hot sand.

Michael reached his mother and dropped into her arms. “Daddy let me go in the water. He promised, and then he let me go.”

The rest of the holiday, Michael refused to return to the sea. On the long drive home, Billy followed the same route he’d taken a week earlier, but this time Michael turned panicky as they drove along the cliff road away from Kilkee. The boy cried and screeched, demanding to be let out of the car. “We’re going to fall into the water,” he wailed. It was the same, too, every time they passed over a bridge.

“What’s gotten into him?” Tricia asked, her eyes wild. The boy had never before shown such fear.

Billy shook his head, but inside he’d known. He’d ruined the water for Michael. He’d ruined something between the boy and him, too.