

TINKERS

When Kehoe the landlord comes looking for payment, he drags in clay from his fields, all over the kitchen floor. If I did that Ma would go apeshit but she says nothing to him, makes me sweep it up. He's a tall lean man with dangly arms, hands twice as big as me own. Black dirt's chiselled in around his nails, even at mass on Sundays. It's said he never takes a wash or drinks or smokes, lives on cans a dog food and stale bread the baker in town gives out for half-nothing. And I'm thinking I believe it too, 'cos when he comes here he eats enough for two men.

He stands in the middle a the kitchen floor, more crab apples with him. A plastic bag a twenty or more with two dirty plates inside. It's me job to peel the crabs for the tarts, the jelly, but Ma hasn't stewed up the ones from last week yet. He leaves the bag on the table, throws off the black waistcoat to the settee. The smell a his oxters is worse than the bacon and cabbage boiling on the stove. He leans, sniffs four new tarts cooling on the wire rack, the arse a his corduroys shiny. He knows that two a the tarts are for him to take away and every Tuesday

The Girl Missing from the Window

I have to cycle down to his place with two more fresh ones, then leave with the dirty plates.

Sweet, he says to himself, sliding over to the stove to lift the lids a the saucepans, to sniff the steam.

Sit down there, John, will ya? Ma says, bumping into him when she turns from the sink.

Ya have the cabbage in with the bacon, he says. Is it in long? He talks slow like he has to make up the words all the time.

The last hour, Ma says, too hot, her cheeks red, her hair the colour a chestnut from the sweat.

Yer a right one, Winnie, diya know that? he says, turning, smiling, making his way back to the table.

Over there Michael, Ma says to me. Do under the table an' ya at it.

Kehoe sits in the usual spot, his back to the wall. When he takes an apple from the bag, he haws on it, starts rubbing it down the side a his trousers, the tip a his tongue slipping in and out. When I stoop to brush under the table, he changes to pumping the apple again his fork, just below the buttons.

Who's yer daddy, young Dempsey? he says to me.

John, Ma says to him like how she does me when she's cross.

I was only askin', Winnie, Kehoe says. But sure the lad never talks to me.

Ma lays a pile a spuds, bacon and cabbage in front a him, surely enough for Breslin's sow. Kehoe lathers it with butter and salt, tears into it before either a us have a chance to sit. After, Ma sends me out with scraps for Trigger who I can't find. I hope he's not up Kehoe's field again. When I come in Kehoe's over be the sink, where Ma's drying up. He's rubbing up again her, whispering, his hand on her arse.

When he sees me, he smiles, leaves the hand where 'tis, says, Did ya know yer father, young Dempsey? Or sure, maybe ya shouldn't be called Dempsey a'tall with him gone so long like. What diya think, Winnie, will we change his name to young Kehoe?

John, she says, pushing him away. Stop now, will ya? I'm serious.

She turns, wiping her hands in the tae towel with the picture a Santy on it. Her face is still red, even with the steam gone, her eyes dead because a what comes next. Folding the towel, she can't look at me when she says, Go on up to Breslin's now with the two tarts and get the few eggs. We'll want them the weekend.

It's the same every bloody week. But it won't be long now before I'll be big enough to grab Da's hurl Ma still keeps in the bedroom, in case the tinkers call at night, to beat auld Kehoe to a pulp, back into the fields he dragged himself out a. I turn and leave, call for Trigger. The two of us head for the crossroads where Kehoe has left his High Nelly lying again the signpost for the Breslins to see.

Tuesday evening Ma sends me off on her bike, two fresh tarts in the basket. Trigger hops along beside me, in and out a ditches, sniffing, cocking on every tree, barking at crows, snapping at midgets. At the bridge I stop, look over the stone wall to see if there's anything jumping. The water from the mountain is clear, as if it isn't there. Trigger runs down, drinks, then looks up at me, waiting on the word.

Go on da Trigger, I shout. In he goes, up to his neck in it. After a while I put two fingers in me mouth, whistle and up he dashes to the road where he shakes, the way he shakes after Ma washing him with the suds.

She reckons it's a mile from the bridge to his house, that Kehoe owns the land on both sides a the road the whole way. When the farmers he's leased out to were saving the hay, I used to come watch them in them fields. I loved the smell a the black fumes, the yellow dust that filled the sky and I loved watching the machines do their thing. I loved picking stones from the side a the road, berries from the *sceachs* and throwing them at the birds left rooting in the dirt when the tractors had gone.

I climb through the barbed wire fence at Kehoe's orchard for a piss. His house is next. The sheepdog that lives with him always barks

when we're getting close. Trigger barks back but they hardly ever meet 'cos Kehoe says he keeps his locked up so's the tinkers won't get her.

Kehoe's gate is open, some a the thistles in the yard are so thick you'd think they might go for you. I step over the pebbles a sheep shite. There's a scythe leaning again the house. He's sitting outside under the kitchen window on an up-side-down galvanised bucket, sucking on a blade a grass, the sheepdog still barking inside. An oily Massey Ferguson cap pulled down over his eyes, Kehoe lifts it, hocks and spits when he hears me on the stones.

That's a rare evenin' young Dempsey, he says. Ya could nearly walk round with n'er a stitch on on days like them. No need for clothes a'tall sure.

I stand the bike again the hedge, Trigger cocks on the spokes. I take the tarts from the basket, a plate on each hand, walk slowly to Kehoe. I only do this 'cos I have to hand them over directly on orders from Ma, but I don't ever want to have to go into that house on me own with him there. I go to leave them on a rickety auld bird table like last time when Kehoe says to me, C'mere.

I step a bit closer, the sheepdog pining at the window.

C'mere, Kehoe says after I stop.

I step again. I can smell him now. I can see the dirt coming out a the pores. He leans and sniffs.

Sweet, he says. Yer Ma's a great one for the crosses, eh? She never makes a tart without a cross on it. Tell me, is she a holy woman? He smiles, today the butts a his teeth the cleanest thing about him. Still no word for me eh? he says. He's still smiling when he sticks two big dirty fingers into one a the tarts, gouging out a bit. He sucks on the fingers, breathing in and slobbering like a pig. Ah, he says when it's gone down. As sweet as yer Ma, young Dempsey. Ya know what I'm sayin'? Yer auld enough now to know what I'm sayin', aren't ya?

I want to tell him to fuck off back to his sheep with his filthy fucken mouth.

And is this one just as sweet? he says, making for to stick the

fingers in the other tart as well.

I step back.

C'mere, he says.

I step back again, feel Trigger be me leg.

Kehoe stands, wearing the same trousers as Friday, a cream shirt hanging out on one side, his boots without laces, boots with the stitching torn he must just wear about the place.

Come over here I said, he says.

I glance at the bike, his boots again.

He cracks the knuckles a the right hand, says, Ya know yer Ma is a rare one, young Dempsey. Sure 'tis a wonder there's a saddle on that bike there a'tall. He stops, breathes in till he can't breathe no more through the nose. Ah, he carries on, the smell a fear. And yer Da wasn't much of a man either. A weak fucker to go and die and leave a fine woman like that on her own. His parents never forgave him, diya know, for marryin' her. The kind she is and all. Did ya ever meet them even? Ah, I'd say not now be the look on yer gob. No Easter egg from the Dempsey clan, eh? None a them at yer communion. And what about yer confirmation? Who'll be there for that now? You'll be worse than the purebred tinker you will. There'll be more with him than with you, me bucko. I can tell ya that. There'll be a dozen girls round him like flies and the grannies and aunts'll be queuin' up to give him kisses and money. But nothin' for young Dempsey here. Nothin' only a fucken ...

He stops talking, looks down. I look too. Trigger is cocked and firing, the piss running down Kehoe's shiny trousers into the open boot. The sheepdog is yelping its head off at the window when Kehoe jumps back, What the fuck?

I drop the tarts, turn. The plates hit the ground. Crack. Crack. I charge for the bike as Kehoe makes a grab at me, then he chases, throwing kicks at Trigger who's running rings round him but the boot flies off over the hedge into the sheep field. I reach the bike, yank it up, run and hop on. Pedalling out the gate, Trigger gallops beside me

and when I turn down the road, I shout back over me shoulder, Ya wouldn't want to stand in the one spot for long with auld Trigger, ya auld bollix ya.

I can hardly pedal I'm laughing so hard, nearly out a breath, tears down me cheeks, me heart pumping, the bike wobbling, Trigger still cocking. At the bridge I have to stop, get off to lean on the stone wall, panting, nearly sick. On cue Trigger hurries down, takes a drink from the river. From there he looks up at me, his tongue hanging out, waiting on the word.

Already I don't remember me Da, his face, his smell, the way he sounded. Sometimes, after hearing people say he was a great player, I go in and grab his hurl to puck around in Kehoe's field when I knows he's away, trying to think what it a be like if me Da was here. Gone three years next January, me Ma says, only for Kehoe we'd be halting be the side a the road like the tinkers up past Breslin's. But I don't think that a be a bad thing. At least me Ma wouldn't have to cater for Kehoe and it's only a matter a time before he clatters me or worse, and I can't believe he hasn't come to the house since Trigger cocked on him.

Ma is cooking his dinner, four tarts cooling on the rack. She hasn't said much today. She never does of a Friday but today even more so. I'm still afraid to tell her what happened a Tuesday, after telling her the dirty plates just fell out a the basket and broke, when Kehoe comes whistling down the yard, kicking at weeds, the crows scattering, his hands in his pockets. He never knocks and today he stops at the kitchen door, smiles, looks around.

A grand evenin', Winnie, he says before making his way to the table where he stoops, sniffs the tarts. It's like Ma doesn't even see he's no bag and after Kehoe says sweet as usual, he straightens up to throw the waistcoat on the settee. I finally caught the hoor chasin' the sheep on me too, Winnie, he says. A right fucker he was to catch. But

I caught him. Sure any hoor like that would be fond of a bit a meat. Ain't that right, young Dempsey? He's up on the road there now so every tinker can see what happens mongrels that run riot on me land. Auld black mangy mongrels with a white stripe down the middle a their chest. He grins, the black a his teeth turns me stomach.

I look to Ma but she's staring into a saucepan. I tear out the door, up the yard shouting Trigger, Trigger. Only an hour ago he was gnawing on a stick be the back door. I fall when I reach the crossroads, when I see him hanging from the signpost. The bollix used orange binder-twine, a noose round his neck, the bike leaning up again him. The tears are blinding me, me Ma's hugging me, crying as well as meself, saying sorry, over and over.

I's sorry, I's sorry Mikey, is all she can fucken say.

Go way, I roar at her. Go way and leave me alone. I wish me Da was here. I wish me Da was here to bait the fucker.

She leaves me, lying there, out a breath, sobbing. Me chest gets sore. After a time I make it over to Trigger. I push Kehoe's bike into the ditch, kicking at the tyres, stamping on the spokes till they're all bent. I don't want to face the signpost but I have to and I do. When I lift Trigger's head it flops down again, the tongue hanging out, the eyes like the brown marbles I got for Christmas, but these eyes have a darker tint to them all together. I lift the body, the coat still soft, smelling a the river. I try to open the knot but I can't. I pull at it but the signpost's too strong. I step back, still looking at Trigger, forcing meself not even to blink and then I feel older, stronger, like I know I'm seeing something now that will make a man a me. I wipe away me face, tear back to the house for the bacon knife, and on the way I decide I'm going to stick the bollix in the gut before I cut Trigger down.

Inside the house is quiet, the kitchen's empty, the hall door's open. I go to the drawer, take out the fat knife Kehoe himself last sharpened on the stone. I sneak down to Ma's bedroom, its door's open too. When I peep in, Ma's at the foot a the bed, packing a bin-liner, shoving away

shoes, knickers, dresses. She stops to bless herself with the rosary beads her granny left her, kisses the cross of it. Only when I go in do I see the bollix sprawled on the bed, the trousers down to the knobbly knees, a few gashes in the head. His eyes are open, black already, the nose lying sideways. Blood on the pillow, there's not as much as you'd think. He's looking at the ceiling, like he's just seen his dead ma or someone up there, and me Da's hurl is on the floor, the fat side a the boss red.

Give me the knife, Ma says.

What about Trigger?

She looks at me like she's forgot.

Right, she says. Come right back then.

Outside I take Ma's bike to pedal to the crossroads where I lie the bike again the signpost. I lift Trigger into the basket, cut him down. He just about fits. It's me best to pedal back to the house. We freewheel down the yard till we fall off. Trigger rolls out and be the time I'm standing, Ma's there lifting him into the house.

Where ya goin'?

She ignores me, says, Get all the straw and kindlin' from the shed, even the stuff in Trigger's bed and bring it inside.

Where ya goin'?

She scowls back at me, Just get the fucken straw, will ya? And then she's gone.

I'm desperate to follow, to argue, and if the bollix wasn't sprawled out down below on the bed I would, but instead I gather all the straw and kindling I can find, all of it given to us be Kehoe. I haul it into the house where Ma tells me to spread it under the curtains, the furniture. She makes nests under beds, douses them with spirits, sprinkles the rest on the walls, across the lino. She throws the last a the whiskey over Kehoe, Trigger at his feet. When I shout I want to bury the dog in the field Ma pulls me out the door, pushes me her hardest up the hall, strikes a match, lights the spirits and bangs the bedroom door. I hear a whoof and in seconds grey smoke comes from under it.

I'm in the kitchen when Ma starts a fire in my room, then the hall. She closes the kitchen door behind her, her face red, her hair damp, wiry, sticking up and out. She runs to the press, dumps jars and tins a food into another bin-liner while telling me to gather the four tarts from the table and stack them in the basket a the bike.

Outside the sky's orange, the day's dying. Black puffs a smoke are coming from under the slates at the far end a the house to a crackly sound. I'm stacking the tarts in the basket when Ma comes out coughing, struggling with a bin-liner on each shoulder, one a them rattling with tins and glass.

Come on, she says, without looking at me, heading up the yard like she's late for a fight.

I start after her, pushing the bike, me knees hitting off the pedals trying to keep up. When we reach the crossroads she flies past where Kehoe's bike is sticking out a the ditch, never once looking down or at the signpost, all the time looking straight on. When we reach the foot a Breslin's lane she stops, looks back the way we came, then up Breslin's lane, then up the road the tinkers are.

Where we goin', Ma?

She drops the bin-liners, takes two a the tarts from the basket, says, Go an' get the eggs from Breslin an' come right back.

I see black clouds a smoke over her shoulder. She turns, looks up and says, Tell her Kehoe's burnin' the rubber again.

I throw me leg over the bike, start down Breslin's lane.

And don't say nothin' about us leavin' mind, Ma shouts after me.

But I can't look back or answer with the shaking, me legs getting weak, the pedals stiff as I stare at the top tart, at the cross of it, afraid I won't make it to the house.

Hurry on Mikey, will ya? Ma shouts. And don't let them plates fall an' ya comin'.