

Father and son

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The teacher loomed above the class to declare that the history of modern Ireland is the history of young men. And history, remember, especially the history of young men (he would stare at Sully, unwavering, as though to say *young men like you*), is never just history. It is each name and face and shape of each man's shoe as he treads, and where he treads, the footprint he leaves, and how he, the one man, becomes they, the many men. Boys, do you understand?

History is not a line that can be drawn from one battle to another. You must see that to push is eventually to force, and to force is inevitably to fight. And young men have fought many fights. How have they fought? Knife fights, gun fights, Tommie-fights, Thracian fights, dogfights. Do you know what a dogfight is? Look here, sit up boy, and stop dreaming or you'll be dumb as'n oxen on market day.

What's a market day, Father?

Questions, however inane or obtrusive, would make the teacher earnest.

Well, that's an interesting question.

What's an oxen, Father?

You know what oxen are, McCready. They are the plural – one plus another – of an ox.

What's an oxen, Father?

Sully's father left him for the last time on September 20, 1962. He'd been skulking in his room all afternoon. Sully had gone in to ask if he'd like to eat his eggs in the living room or if he should bring them in. His father's body was turned away from the door, smoke rising from the ashtray where he had balanced a cigarette. There was the heavy smell of liquor. He said to forget

about the eggs and to close the door and sit down. When Sully sat on the floor across from him with his knees arched, as he'd done since childhood, his father shook his head and said 'Hopeless' and had him stand up again. He said he wasn't like his brother. Sully stood silent. He asked him to open the dresser drawer and pick out the book, which had a tea-stained yellow cover. Ernie O'Malley. *On Another Man's Wound*.

'Open it up to the first page, to the introduction. I know you're a reader, son. Read it out.'

Sully had only ever read aloud for school or church, and the experience was always nauseating. The idea of reading in front of his father, who himself worked with few syllables, seemed even worse. 'But I -'

'Go on. It's only me here.'

Sully, with a slight tremor in his fingers, began to read. 'This book is an attempt to show the background -'

'No, no. Skip down. To the second part.'

A passage in pencil had been underlined. 'My attitude towards the fight is that of a sheltered individual drawn from the secure seclusion of Irish life to responsibility of action. It is, argh, sorry, it is a narrative against the backgrounds of the lives of the people. The tempo of the struggle was -'

'Read slower now. Much slower.'

Sully coughed at the smoke, before continuing. 'Life went on as usual in the middle of tragedy and we were intimately related to this life of our people. The people's effort can be seen only by knowing something of their lives and their relationship to our underground government and armed resistance. We who fought effected a small ... a small part of the total energy. This is not a history. Dates I considered unimportant. Our people seized imaginatively on certain events, exalted them through their own expression in song and ... argh, song and story. These are what concern me, my part and theirs, and my changing relation to them.' At the bottom of the page there were initials - *E. OM.* - and a date: 1931-34.

'See what he's saying there?'

'I'm not sure,' Sully said.

'They have a fire, those words.'

His father lit another cigarette, tapped his lighter on the side of the bed. 'Like your Uncle Ogden said when he told me to read this book, most memoirs of 'RA members aren't any good. It's all 'Then we blew up the lorry and hid in the bushes.' Or it's 'I was a wee fat lad. I drank and drank and then I shot someone.' But O'Malley can actually write.'

Sully nodded, breathing in his father's voice.

'Every road you walk down, every shop, every postbox, it's all controlled by the Brits. And voting changes nothing, they have it rigged, tied up in advance. They'll never leave Ireland unless we make them, unless we push them out.'

That night, Sully was asleep when his father raised the latch on the gate.

In the morning he awoke early to commotion downstairs. The uneasy clank of cutlery. Taps turned on and off with force, blasted then withheld. When he and Fergus appeared, having raced down the stairs in their socks, Uncle Ogden was embracing their mother in the front room. He was wearing blue overalls, having come straight from a job. His eyes were restless. He patted the boys hard and drew them in. Sully and Fergus didn't look at one another. They were told to sit down.

As Uncle Ogden came to the words 'Your Da is dead', their mother broke down and moved away from them, hiding her face. Sully called after her as she moved into the kitchen, but Uncle Ogden held out his palm.

Surveying the room in a panic, Sully's eyes fell on his father's church shoes resting on a sheet of newspaper, having been shined the day before. The brush lay by them, its bristles still lightly caked with polish.

On the day of the funeral men came to the door. Sully only faintly recognized them. His mother spoke to the men quietly and it was explained to him and Fergus that they would help Uncle Ogden carry the coffin. Each of

the men wore ironed black trousers with black jackets zipped to the top. Their starched collars concealed scars or tattoos or rose-hued birthmarks. They were solemn, with sallow cheeks and plain polished wedding rings (although one of them made a joke about a 'Cockdipper'). Sully looked at them carefully, and then again. Their tight-lipped expressions and short answers were familiar to him.

One of the men turned to the two boys. 'He was a good man, your Da,' and the others chimed in, 'A good man.'

From out of the church they began as a small procession, moving up the hill by the clock above News & Bait. Uncle Ogden walked as lead pallbearer, flanked by the men in black jackets. Their mouths were taut. Sully and Fergus walked either side of their mother although she never looked down at them. Her eyes were lost. A light rain fell, its mist forming a thin film on Sully's face. Cars slowed at their edges. Inside the cemetery gate others joined them. The group swelled to about thirty and Sully saw his mother draw further within herself at the larger crowd. She pulled on her jacket and began to shiver. Uncle Ogden gave her an umbrella.

When they lowered the coffin, Sully was shocked at the narrowness of the grave: a whole life only worth this small cut in the earth.

Inevitably, church bells in the distance rang through the weak foliage.

The walls of the house were never so thin as after his father had gone. He would lie curled in bed trembling at the sound of his mother's crying from the room down the hall. Ten steps. That's all it had ever taken. His parents' bedroom was a still compartment, a safe pocket. The lamp by the bed. The scratched chest of drawers he was never to touch. A coffee stain on the beige rug that had been brushed and cleaned but never erased. His father's rough shape beneath the bedsheets on a Saturday afternoon, heavy rain wetting the roof outside.

On the third night, his mother wailed suddenly and brokenly. He and Fergus ran to her bed and sat by her. They brought tea and water and salt bis-

cuits. But she refused them and they sat growing cold and stale at her side. Her hair was cold. The skin on her forehead stretched tight and glossy, a twisted blue vein pressing on the surface.

By the end of the week she wouldn't leave her bed. The doctor came and gave her a bottle of pills. Grey circles grew darker beneath her eyes. Fergus went out to drink and Sully was left alone with her. He sat on a chair by the chest of drawers and watched her sleep. She slept so silently he would occasionally get up and bend down to see if she was still breathing. It was as though her body, still beating, was an affront to his death, where the only acceptable response was paralysis.

Sully dreamt of a thin magic light that he could place down inside her that would light up her eyes and skin and make her head warm and tender and when she opened her mouth she would say, 'Sully, let's dance.' And they would dance around the room and knock into furniture and open the curtains and let the light flood in and sing a song from his childhood.

They soon learned his death was an accident. No barracks raid or bomb plot. No guns. Only a car, alcohol and speed. His father had left Appleroddy's Bar shortly after 11 with Lewis Breen and Sean McVerry, also volunteers. They must have driven fast from the area because the police report, which Sully glimpsed years later among his mother's bank statements, recorded a Mrs Maguire of Brookvale Street who had heard a terrifying noise.

MRS MAGUIRE: The car exhaust was banging and I looked out to see it smoking, from the exhaust.

SGT HATTON: Would you say the car was backfiring then?

MRS MAGUIRE: Aye. There was singing too, from the car. I could hear their voices.

On many nights he would imagine his father moments before the crash. He saw him in the driver's seat, singing, his lips still wet with bourbon. His face was animated: brow wrinkled, a wide smile, the gap between his front teeth clearly visible. His back was arched and, after a hump in the road, his

body slightly raised from the seat. There was no seatbelt. As the others joined him in song he took the corner too fast and when they emerged onto the outer road from the bend the speed gathered around them and made Lewis in the back begin to laugh at the thrill of pressing harder along the flat. His father felt the thrill and nodded a little on the pedal to head away from the buildings, whose shadows lifted higher at their tail, and as he tried to dodge the branch lying on the road the others reached a higher drunken note in the song to distract him. The right tyre hit the branch and sent the car reeling and skimming. Sully saw it in one total flash, the speckled square of light. The car hit a tree and his father's chest was crushed by the weight of the steering wheel.

For a moment, his father was still breathing. The engine whirled wild and hot and burnt slowly down to silence. The twisted hunk of metal wrapped to the stubborn thick of a tree and his father dead inside, his body lost to the ruin. A wheel was missing.

When his father was pulled from the wreckage there was the blood of other men on his face.