

Our Father

My mother has always been superstitious about the things the lodgers bring back. She smiles and nods as they tell their story. Asking questions, all interested, about how old they think it is and isn't it pretty and where exactly did they find it? But when they go back off on the boats she's across the moor to the old house with whatever the relic to put it back in the ground. If she takes you with her you'd best be quiet and no messing about or you'll be washing old Peigi's undies for a month. It's like we're laying the items to rest, paying our last respects to gravy boats, spoons, cups, even a wrinkled old boot once.

I put it down to her fear of our Father. Not our father because he's soft as a lamb and calm as the loch when the wind sleeps. But 'our Father'. The same one that has us kneeling by our beds every night and going to the church twice a day on Sundays, dressed in our best and looking proper sorry for all the badness we have inside us. Not that He seems to be paying any attention. Some people can't stop the bad creeping out even there and He doesn't do a thing about it. Like the butcher's boy, plucking the hairs out of your head one by one if he's in the pew behind. Or The Cherubs, you'd think they'd been shining the sandals on Jesus's hairy feet all day the way folk treat them. Giving them sweets, enquiring after their health, slipping the minister a coin for his 'wee angels'. Everyone must be blind or daft if they can't see the girl sticking her tongue out at the other children. Or the boy, smiling, as he wipes his snotters on the Psalms and delicately smooths the page over like it's a book of rare, pressed flowers. But you can be sure that if you pull a face at that tongue-flashing angel then you'll be going straight to hell and, worse than that, you'll have everyone and their dog telling you what to expect when you get there and why you deserve it. Ma's the worst, going on about how it's disrespecting Him above and her and da and the minister and silent, strange Cailleán with his one eye and his stubs for fingers. Though God knows how he'd be seeing it with his good eye looking down at his boots all the time and why we should be caring when he doesn't speak anyway.

Mum isn't exactly fierce. Not like Murdina's mother who makes her walk up and down the dirt road in her bare feet if she's caught doing anything that's not to her liking. But there's no doubting she's tough. I've seen her cut peat as fast as any of the men folk and be raising the next heap before they've wiped the sweat from their brows. She'll have you slogging as well, carrying and stacking until you're near falling off your feet. And you can forget about running to her if you get a dunk in the loch, or skin your knee or lose your footing in the bog. She's got no time for bawling, not even from my little sister, Ceitidh, who is such a sweet wee thing. The spit of our father. Our father, not 'our Father', she doesn't wear a halo, though she surely deserves one. And that makes me cross too. Not cross at Ceitidh because I could never be that and not cross at da because he loves us both the same. But cross for being like mum, more serious and prickly round the edges.

Ma doesn't much like me going to the old house with her but it's good when she takes me along for the walk. The stories she tells on the moor are different than the ones she tells at the kitchen table peeling tatties. The best one, the one that makes her happiest in the telling, is about a soldier returning from the war. He'd had a terrible time, wounds on the outside that had been patched up as best they could (but not great, mind) and wounds on the inside that would never be fixed. Well, he was coming home on the boat and started getting awfully anxious about seeing his family. In his mind, all he was bringing them back was a battered body and the other bits of him they'd known and loved had been sucked into the mud at Flanders. Just as the boat passed a bay, he took this notion to jump. So he did and he swam to shore and he went home. But not quite home because he didn't tell his family. He looked in on them though, when they didn't know, checking they were safe. And he loved them harder than he ever had. And that brought him peace.

The old house itself isn't much to look at with the roof gone and the walls trying to scramble back into the earth but it has a gnarly old rowan tree in front of it and that is a rare thing. You can sit up in the branches and watch the comings and goings down at the harbour without anyone even noticing you're there. One day I had this idea to write my name on it. I figured it was mine anyway, since me and ma are the only ones who spend any time there, and I'd seen the village boys carving patterns into blocks of wood and it looked quite fine. I knew there was a blade sitting on the lintel in the old house I could use, so long as I put it back where I'd found it. Well, as luck would have it, my mum appeared in the middle of this and saw me there, steel in pulp, like some murderess of leaf and stem, and it felt wrong then, all of a sudden. We stared at each other for a time and then big, fat tears started falling out of her like lashing rain through a leaky roof. "You're a disgrace to your father, Magaidh" her voice high and strange, "don't ever come back here again".

I stamped home across the heather, cursing my God-fearing, gravy boat burying, hard as stone mother. Dad was sitting at the fire when I charged through the door. He took one look at the scowl on me and wanted to know what happened. I told him what she'd said like I didn't really care but after he was looking into the fire for such a long time that I fretted then, that maybe it was true. When eventually he spoke the look on his face put my stomach in knots.

"I wish you could have known your mum when she was a girl, Magaidh. Back then she was like the breeze that carries over the loch in summer, warming every soul she touched. Hardy then as well, of course, out working with her da whatever the weather. But she was so kind, so quick to smile and share a friendly word with folk. I got to know her through my pal, Dómhnall. His family and your ma's were near neighbours and they had cut their teeth together. The three of us were firm friends and we'd be off on the boat fishing whenever we got the chance. We didn't really give much thought then to life beyond the island but, eventually, it came and found us. When the war began, many left to join the fighting, Dómhnall and I included."

Da dropped his eyes to the floor then, running a shaky hand over his face.

"I'll not talk much on that time, Magaidh, the rest of what there is to say is cruel enough. Through those years I gave up believing that I'd ever get to see these shores again though. We'd watched the war tear too many men to pieces. So when they did finally relieve us of duty I could scarce believe it. Dómhnall could hardly sleep, so excited was he about seeing his wife and the baby he'd not yet set eyes on. He said he couldn't wait to hold that little girl in his arms and kiss her sweet head.

"It was only on the last leg of the journey, when we boarded at An Caol, that I felt I could start to dream of life back home. It wasn't to be a comfortable passage. The boat was packed with so many people you could hardly move and the sea was growing wilder by the hour. But it didn't dampen our spirits. Dómhnall and I met a group of lads we knew from the village and we passed the time below deck, reminiscing on times gone, reminding each other of the boys we'd been. When we were drawing close to the island, Dómhnall was keen to get up on deck. He said he wanted to have his eyes on home as soon as he could. I didn't think there was much point since it was the middle of the night and there'd be no light to see by. We bid our goodbyes then and agreed to meet up in a few days. But, for some reason I can't explain, I couldn't settle back into the conversation going on round about me so I went on up the stairs too. It was blowing a gale up top and I figured Dómhnall would've found a sheltered spot somewhere. I was walking the deck looking for him and then, just I turned onto the port side, there was an almighty bang. Almost immediately the boat started to list.

"None of us were strangers to the sea, we all knew she would sink. Most men were dashing for the lifeboats and I followed after, thinking I'd probably find Dómhnall there too. But there were only

two rafts for the near three hundred bodies on board. The first boat was overfull and no sooner had it touched the water than it was hurled against the rocks and smashed to pieces. Round about me people were jumping off the side of the boat, only to be swallowed up by the sea. I started shouting Dómhnall's name but the wind kept snatching the words from my mouth. Then someone grabbed me by the arms, fixed my hands to a rope and pushed me off the boat. I could make out the shapes of other men in the water, holding fast to the line. I tried to count them to mark my progress along its length but then a wave would come over and there'd be fewer there than I'd counted before.

"At some point, I remember thinking that I couldn't hold on any longer. The waves were so violent and unrelenting, determined to rip us from the rope and dash us against the rocks. Then this flash of colour to the left of me caught my eye, red against black. A doll, dress spread out on the water, sweet, innocent face turned up to the sky, oblivious to what was going on around her. I thought of Dómhnall then, and his wee girl. I ached to think he might not have managed to get off, to think that she might never know how hard he would have fought for her, how much he'd longed to be her daddy. I used every last bit of strength I had remaining to just try to get myself a little further along that rope. The next thing I feel is ground beneath my feet and hands pulling me out of the water.

"That dawn was the first of a new year and the sea marked it with the delivery of the islands men, washed up on the shore. Christmas gifts they'd brought for their families, like that dolly, were scattered among the rocks. We searched for Dómhnall every day for weeks but never found him. His mum went mad with grief. He was all she had left, after losing her husband and eldest son in the fighting. That's her house across the moor, the one where Dómhnall grew up. Three months after the lolaire went down she threw herself on the rocks at Holm. Dómhnall's wife, well, she had no choice but to roll her sleeves up and get on with working the croft and caring for Magaidh, their little girl."

Dad stopped then and looked me in the eye. I don't know what he was expecting. More tears, maybe, but I wasn't crying anymore so he went on.

"You might be wild at your mother and me, for not telling you sooner, and I'd understand a bit of that. But for our men to be taken in that way, after all they'd endured, and the losses the island had already suffered...well it snuffed out any hope left in our hearts. People can't bear to speak of it. To try to explain the tragedy to you young ones, without passing on that despair, that blackness...Your ma wanted to protect you from that as long as she could."

Now, you'd think I'd be shocked by this revelation about my father not being my father. But, actually, it was a relief, because all the jumbled up pieces finally slotted into place. I know that my mum is not the one she was meant have been and my dad isn't the one I'm supposed to have but we're all of us better for the knowing. In the church now I'm good and quiet. Not for God, because he has too much explaining to do, but for my mother and my father and for Cailean with his one eye, so that they can do their remembering. And sometimes I try to do some remembering of my own.