

1.

The night the Chief died, I lost my father and the country lost a battle it wouldn't confess to be fighting. For the no-collared, labouring class. For the decent, dependable patriarch. For right of entry from the field into the garden.

Jurors were appointed to gauge the casualty. They didn't wear black. Don't they know black is flattering? The truth isn't. They kept safe and silent. I didn't. When is a confession an absolution and when is it a sentencing, I'd like to find out. I suppose there's only one outcome for souls like us—heavy-going souls the like of mine and the long-lost Chief's—and not a good one.

But I'll lay it on the line, if only to remind the People of who they are: a far cry from neutral judicial equipment. Determining the depth of rot that's blackening the surface can't always be left to deities or legislators—sometimes what's needed is to tie a string around the tooth and shut the door lively.

2.

He was a bright young thing. My brother, Cormac. His mind was a luxury. The face was rationed, it must be said, but there's not a body with everything. Part t-rex, part pelican. Picture that menace of features! Close-eyed, limb-chinned, skin thick as the red carpet he imagined laid down beneath his wellies. Tall as the door he expected to be let in. When he was twelve, he looked twenty. The mind was ahead too, as I said. The odd girl went in for such a harrow of a fella (the odd girl and not the even) on account of his brains and chesty conduct. Not that he was liberal with his cleverness. But there was the atmosphere of it, knowing at any

moment something you'd say would be turned inside out like a child's eyelid to traumatise you, to show you the violence behind it that you never meant, or maybe you did.

I might have voiced some innocent idea. Some vague concern about a spray the Chief was sampling, and Cormac would go, 'Yeah yeah yeah. Atrazine. It's no fucken DDT, but it's been proved to be an endocrine disruptor. Environmental protection agency done a tonne of research on amphibians, showering them in the new compounds, and the creatures wound up with extra pee holes. A surplus set of balls, or quarter fanny, two-fifths bollocks—scrambled their sex organs, so it did. Foul stuff, in high doses.' And then I'd nod and mutter a bit, dizzying with the image of the two pee holes, as if a snake bit itself in its artichoke-green scales, and I'd be caught up in the symbolism to do with a snake snacking on its own tail, nodding along because Cormac didn't abet attention-wandering, and I'd get a clobber on the head if I asked was a snake an amphibian. He'd have clocked my yea-saying, and he'd go: 'So you're anti-pesticides, would you say?' On the main, I might answer, I am. There's natural ways to rid a field of pests—letting birds eat the ladybugs and all that—isn't there? Some of them chemicals do more harm than good. I might not be a fan of dogs, but teeny frogs are adorable. Then he'd look down his bucked nose at me, like a horse that couldn't be fucked to lep the last fence for the sugar cube reward. 'And I suppose you think seven billion people can be fed on a batch of organic carrots? Ya privileged, gentrified, self-serving colonial twit,' he'd say, 'letting billions starve, so long as they're out of sight, all to spare a few extra cunts on a toad.'

As I say, I didn't resent him his mind. Early on, its potential was fearsome, but he cached it away too long, until it curdled. He could have his intellect. I had the looks. The Chief's mud-coloured locks, yellowing now like a stack of cut grass drying out for haymaking, hey! Square skull, cultured nose, the kind of eyes that might be described as pea and mint soup, best served cold. I was shorter

than my brother by a foot, but divvied up as good as David. I'd the emotions of every girl in the County Roscommon over a barrel. A fact he found hard to swallow, in spite of—or maybe because of—the pelican chin. Excepting gobshites, I liked people. And I was well liked—for no good reason, far as Cormac was concerned. I'd zilch to contribute in the way of knowledge or guile or points for the home side, and sure, how else can a person be of use? Sport lent him an absence note for the farm work that needed doing. For the care work. For the life sentence. His absence meant my containment. Stay put, Hart, he was telling me. Stay a mile wide of my circle.

There's only so many circles in a town the size of a souterrain. What I did and said reflected on him, so he wanted the sticks brushed from my hair, the charm wiped off my face. He wanted me capable of summing sums and changing tyres. To be mad on mechanics—Newtonian and Fordian both. To know a stock option hadn't to do with cattle. But I wasn't after his or his boys' approval—that panel of experts. Where we're from, infants get swaddled in hessian sacks. I never bought into an alternative reality, no matter how low the interest rates limbo'd for the new millennium, no matter how you could go the whole way to Dublin on a test drive and, if you weren't satisfied, no one would lambaste you or demand a tenner for petrol. Cormac *did* clinch a deal with the new reality. Nothing daft: he didn't barter his youth, as many did, for a barge on the Shannon or a conservatory extension or an interior decorator or a rotary milking parlour or a personal stylist. No. He wanted a college education. A new way of life, less like subsistence—one that didn't stink of fear and survival. A challenge that called for grey matter and not gruntwork. He did fast maths on how the island was transfiguring—one of them scenarios like if a train is going at such-and-such a pace in the direction of a stone wall but it's absolute gas craic on the train, what are your options?

Land had been the Chief's idea of a fortune up to then. He was

jubilant to get two extra acres in 2003 for twenty-two grand, on a five-year loan. High milk prices coupled with favourable weather conditions meant banks were lending freely for farmers to expand their livestock, upgrade machinery, to purchase double chop silage over single so the animals could eat shorter grass. Didn't they deserve it! Fatten them quicker. Growth, ladies and gentlelads. The Feelgood Factor.

Cormac wouldn't have advised our father to buy land. Not that year. Not in Roscommon. Not if all he planned to do with it was to work it himself and not let someone else's livelihood be exposed to fickle conditions and soil that would've needed gold in it to be amply mineral-rich. But then, he could respect the challenge that the Chief had lived up to when he'd been the same age, when his parents and small sister had burnt alive in a hay fire and he'd had to take over the farm. There followed a stretch of the Chief's life that was toilsome and lonesome. He had been left behind. Until he married Nóra in '82, when he was thirty-two and she thirty. By then, he had turned the arid earth over and over until it was fertile. So how could such a man's son see fit to question his choices?

3.

One muggy August Sunday the year following, after mass, we drove fifty miles to Offaly for the agricultural show. The four of us away together was a rare thing. (That said, our final trip together would be infamous, would be played out in the courts, reported on the telly. But back then, we were culchie innocence incarnate.) I was a yoyo-voiced fifteen, in my Junior Certificate year. It sank in then I mightn't do the Leaving Cert., but Cormac—nearing seventeen—would do it well enough for the pair of us. It was the last stretch of holidays before his last year in school, and he was jockeying up

accordingly. We hadn't gone to Tullamore since it was cancelled in 2001 thanks to foot-and-mouth (the year Cormac collected my Easter eggs in a bin liner, saying 'twas all over the news that Nestlé chocolate had mad cow disease and your brain could get infected; it took the sight of his brown teeth later for me to cop on to my robbing), but by 2004 the Celtic Tiger was on the prowl even in the midlands, and the place was a big trough of milk for her to lap up.

Sixty thousand country people the colour of rain turned out in complicated hairdos and rosette-augmented breasts. They sashayed between alpaca-shearing competitions, pig agility exhibitions and Herefords with weird clean arses being spruced for the stock judging. A new fad among the women was to wear skirts atop trousers—the height of meanness, leaving no view to take in but drooping peach udders mocking us from every angle. Needlework, arts and crafts, fashion shows, food stands, cookery demos, bread-baking tournaments and flower-arrangement tents were in among hundreds of trade stands, advertising everything from insurance to religions to hypnotherapy tapes, soaps, sausages, jams, universities for the high and mighty and jammy. Cormac carried his six-pack from one trade stand to the next, conversing with fellas in pinstriped suits that weren't even Adidas. He opened beer bottles with his belt. Since we'd each been given twenty-five euros to spend, it was an economy I couldn't fathom, bottled beer when cans were half the price. But what did I know about economics? Only that it's a creed we're all baptised into against our will, and our heads can be pushed back underwater and held there if ever the fealty wavers.

'Agribusiness,' Cormac declared to the Chief later, who was stationed at the vast machinery exhibition at the heart of the fair, 'is not the same as agronomy.'

Another father might have clipped his ear. But the Chief clutched his wrists behind his back and squinted at his son's puffed chest, inviting a lesson on the difference between agri and agro,

and it nearing forty years his occupation. There were youngsters in Monaco majoring in Luxury Studies, and yet the Chief hadn't taken a day of luxury in his life, to get some distance from his work, to see where efficacies could be won. Cormac was telling him: 'If the old combine harvester's on the bust for even a pair of hours on the wrong day, the tiny margins in tillage mean you're well and truly—you know yourself, Dad. *And* it's versatile, like.'

The Chief heeded Cormac that afternoon because it was fine to have sons who wanted your ear. Because of the report card that had come in the post, marking his eldest the first family member bound for university. Because of the Excel spreadsheet that had been a Father's Day gift in the early summer, by which Cormac had made the case for various technological investments—a new power harrow with trailing serrated discs, for example, whose loan could be paid off quick 'if Hart contracted himself out with the machine when it's not needed on our own farm. New streams of income.' My brother's sums had my submission worked into them.

'If we're flush enough to buy new machines,' I said, 'what about a holiday abroad?' A thing we'd never done in our lives. As I suggested this, a few tractors paraded past like blown-up toys, shiny red and green, the tyre nodules pleasingly Lego-edged. 'I want to go to Barcelona, with the skull balconies and lizard-skin roofs, and Athens, with the crumbly anfitheatres ...' I paused then, thinking up a joke to do with Excel columns versus Roman, but Cormac was off again, saying we were all so wet for *buildings* and *holidays* because any stunted eejit can understand them things, and the government could only fathom factories and stadiums besides—more of the same. There's more helicopters in Ireland than high-speed modems. Yeah yeah yeah, it was normal to covet our own places after a century's occupation, he said, but we'd need to get wise if all this luck wasn't to be idled away. He flung his arms out to the fair, like a ringmaster whose arena encompasses

the far reaches of the imagination. But he wasn't imaginative. He was a ledger.

He gestured to the thriving gala, but me and the Chief looked past it to the real fortress behind the bouncy one—the gorgeous grey, gothic Charleville Castle, the land it looked over—and the truth was we both saw it as evidence of what he'd been describing. The national wealth and the luck. What it meant to prosper. Heritage worth restoring. 'Do they do bullfighting still in Madrid,' I said, 'with matadors and the pole through the pate?'

'A lance, it's called,' Cormac said, watching the Chief's gaze connecting the castle back to the big machine that had been in question—a sort of building, surely.

'Horns blowing for the start of the fight!' I said to myself, vaguely searching among the bulls for my slinky cousin Shane, who we'd given a lift to, and who'd made a needle of himself soon as we arrived at the haystack. (That he baled a fashion model, as he'd insist upon later, was a tall one. She was a twelve-year-old who came Highly Commended in the All-Ireland Farm Skills competition—in the First Aid category and not, as he'd try to imply, in Manual Handling. 'Ah ya havta throw some shnazz on it, lads.')

'Bugle,' Cormac muttered. He opened his last two beer bottles on his belt and offered one to the Chief, who declined. Cormac didn't press him, hoping it was because he'd be driving heavy machinery. A fine thing in a bright red fleece walked by, and we clocked her. I'd've held out the spare beer to her with a broody smile. Instead, Cormac took turns swigging from each bottle.

'The bulls'll be after her,' I said.

Cormac tutted. 'Bulls are colour-blind, you mong.'

That was no time to admit confusion. I pivoted. 'Why didn't Mam bring Big Red for the poultry competition?' Her prize-worthy rosecomb cock.

'Ah now,' the Chief said from his great height, with his arms

crossed so I could barely see his face. ‘Watching and appreciating’s more her style. She’s not competitive.’

‘Why not?’ I said.

‘Just, it doesn’t suit her,’ the Chief said. He spotted his pal, our neighbour Gerry, across the way and waved. The Chief had nothing else to say about our mother behind her back. A peculiar sort of romance, but largesse and courtesy can amount to the same.

‘She’s more private,’ Cormac said, as if to conclude the mention of her positively. He sympathised with her for what she couldn’t speak of—the same ordeals, he supposed, that explained her estranged siblings. She had four, apparently, but we didn’t know if they were alive or what. Cormac pitied that she’d never been given a challenge to live up to. The only challenge he knew she’d had was to keep on at it. Cormac must have deemed it too late for her, then, though I didn’t.

‘I’ll show her chickens for her next year,’ I said, ‘if it’s because she’s embarrassed.’

‘Then she’ll have every right to be morto.’ Cormac drained one of the bottles and put it in the back pocket of his jeans so he had a free hand to shake Gerry’s.

Gerry wore his cap low to keep the sun off him but the skin around his eyes was stuffed against the band of it with his smile. He nodded at each of us and said our names, as if to prove he could recognise us out of context. Then he jabbed his thumb in the direction of the big green harvester the Chief had been studying. ‘She’s the one?’ he asked.

The Chief shrugged gently. ‘It’s the bank has to say “I do”.’

Gerry twitched his head diagonal. ‘Well wear, Manus. It’s lovely!’ Then he stood side by side with the Chief and they looked at the machine.

I looked up too, at the sky that wasn’t a thing we could modernise or beautify. It emptied out onto our fields when it wanted to, having no mind for our buildings and brand-new plans or for timing.

‘Well, I’m getting a celebratory six-pack,’ Cormac said, even including me in his mirthy eye contact. ‘Any takers?’

‘Oh,’ Gerry said, ‘in actual fact, I’m for the road this minute. I’m too long gone as it is. Thanks all the same, Cormac. I wonder will it be yourself operating this fine outfit?’

Cormac shook his head and let out a small burp. ‘Excuse me,’ he said. ‘No, Gerry. I’m for college next year.’

‘Oh?’ Gerry said. Then he turned to me and pushed up the brim of his cap so all his moles were on display. It was a bit like the clouds clearing at night, showing a familiar constellation. Heralding nothing. Only constancy. The plough, the plough, the plough.

Cormac had left, and I don’t know if he said anything more. But Gerry hadn’t asked me the same question. He didn’t want to offend me and he couldn’t think of what to say. So there was a moment of silence, which was nice. Then the Chief said that he shouldn’t speak for me, but that I’d only been saying I’d like to travel the world, ‘and that *is* the other family tradition, so it is, Gerry. There’s a whole band of Blacks down there in New Zealand.’

‘So there is,’ Gerry said. ‘And I wonder ... how they pronounce Black ... do you think?’ Gerry was too shy to say it—*Blick*—but he and the Chief laughed at the sound of it in their heads.

‘’Tis a bit zany, the accent alright,’ the Chief said. He turned to me and put his heavy hand on my shoulder, like a loaded canvas saddlebag. Gerry said he thought I was more of a homebody. The Chief gave me time to answer, and when I couldn’t, he hummed a little, to put the silence at ease. I was looking at the harvester. At that huge worldly thing my brother had been able to convince him of. How many huge nebulous things had he convinced me of, and for whose harvest?

But there was one time three years on—a hair’s breadth of a moment in the tail end of our youths—when me and Cormac put our differences aside, pooled our minds and work ethics, and I’ll