

MY DAD
IS TEN
YEARS
OLD

and it's pure
WEIRD

MARK O'SULLIVAN

MY DAD IS TEN YEARS OLD

Mark O'Sullivan is an award-winning writer whose work has won a Bisto Award in Ireland, the Prix des Lecteurs in France and an International Youth Library White Raven Award. His books have been translated into many languages. He is married with two daughters and lives in County Tipperary.

Books by Mark O'Sullivan

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PENGUIN

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3 (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd)

Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)

Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India

Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

penguin.com

First published 2011

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-141-96132-3

For Joan, Jane and Ruth – and in memory of Della

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My dad is ten years old.

One evening last year when he was forty-two, he went jogging along our street. A quiet street leading down towards the river that passes through town. I used to like it here. Old three-storey houses, steep banks of steps up to the front doors. And lots of trees. And in the autumn, wet and deadly leaves. ‘Worse than black ice,’ the Guard said that evening, ‘those leaves’.

So, he’s running, my dad. He’s wearing blue retro tracksuit bottoms. He’s over six feet tall so they don’t look too baggy on him. And one of his Zinedine Zidane jerseys. He has a collection of them. The club jerseys. The black and white stripes of Juventus. Real Madrid’s white. An assortment of blue French national jerseys. That October evening, he was wearing his World Cup 1998 French jersey. His lucky jersey.

So, he’s running. And he’s listening to his MP3 player. His jogging music. The Undertones, Derry punk band from the late seventies. Loud, catchy guitar riffs, a tearaway beat. And not angry Sex Pistols punk but, as he used to say, *joie-de-vivre* punk. Happy to be alive punk. Sometimes I wonder which track he was listening to when it happened. Like it matters. ‘You’ve Got My Number’ or ‘Teenage Kicks’ or his anthem, ‘Jimmy, Jimmy’? We’ll never know now because his MP3 player was lost in the chaos after the accident.

In my mind it’s always ‘Jimmy, Jimmy’ that’s playing when I think of that terrible day. His name is Jimmy. They told us not to call him Dad any more. It might freak him out. More than he’s already freaked out, if that’s possible.

So, he’s forty-two and running. Clearing his head after another day in his workroom. Coming back from school, I’d look up at the first-floor window on the left where he sat when he worked and that smile would be there to greet me. It was like the sun breaking through on a cloudy day or a street light on a misty winter’s evening. It was like he sat there all day waiting for his little girl to come home.

So. Running. On the return leg of his five-kilometre run out the Borris Road and along by the River Walk and back. Dad loved the river. When we were small, he used to take me and my older brother Sean for walks down there. We’d feed the ducks, big busy families of them squabbling over the bits of bread, but still floating away in convoy after the squabbling was done. We’d watch the swans drifting gracefully along the water. He’d get us to look below the surface to where their webbed feet paddled like mad. ‘Looking cool is hard work,’ he’d say.

He’s zipping back through Cathedral Street now. It’s getting dark and the cathedral clock is lit up like a yellow moon high above. Twenty to seven, give or take a few minutes. He crosses Blackcastle Bridge and jogs through the Town Square. Most of the shops have closed for the day and there’s not many people about. He turns into the Long Mall, passes the charity clothes shop, the rows of redbrick houses and, among them, our favourite sweet shop where he used to take me and Sean for treats.

It’s one of those cool, old-style kind of shops. All dark timber and high shelves and old Mr

Casey, who happens to be our slightly peculiar next-door neighbour, shrinking a little more behind the counter every day. It's our kid brother's favourite sweet shop now. Except it's Mam who takes him for treats.

Tom, our two-year old. Also known as 'The Surprise Addition' shortened to Saddo by Sean. Also known as Snot – Sean's idea again, needless to say. Also known briefly as Zizou – Zidane's nickname – but only by Dad and not any more. Mam used to say Tom would end up with multiple-personality disorder, but she doesn't joke about stuff like that any more either. I wonder what we would have called the baby Mam lost a month after the accident?

What's Dad thinking about as he jogs by the shop? Some new angle for the series of books he was working on back then? That's what he did. Illustrated his own and other people's books for young kids. Like early readers, five- to seven-year-olds kind of thing. And he did freelance graphics for ad agencies. Logos for companies and organizations and such. When we were younger, he worked on animated films. We watched *All Dogs Go to Heaven* and *The Land Before Time* a hundred times to see his name come up on the credits, and he still did some work on cartoon shorts and other bits and pieces.

Or maybe he was thinking about some of the future projects he sometimes mentioned? A graphic novel, that set of books for kids with disabilities, some kids' books without texts he always wanted to try. That was Dad all over. Always wanting to move on to the next thing, always wanting to try something different to what had gone before. So, who knows what's on his mind as the junction into our street comes into view?

It's pure weird to think that I saw the kid on the bicycle maybe thirty seconds before our world exploded. I was in my bedroom directly above Dad's workroom. It was the last night of our school show and I was a bundle of nerves. Every year the final performance is filmed and released on DVD for parents who want to show off their little darlings – it's a joint production with the boys' school my brother goes to – or for those particularly sad little darlings who like to show themselves off. And I had another reason to feel nervous. Mam and Dad were coming that night. They'd wanted to come earlier and more often, but I wouldn't let them. I'm sorry now I didn't.

I can't remember why I looked down at the street at that moment. It was dark and the street lights were on. The kid on the bike was racing and looking back over his shoulder. There's a speed bump below our front gate that was put in after some joyrider crashed into the River Walk wall at the end of our street a few years ago. I knew the kid on the bike was going to hit the bump hard. He did. Then he went sailing over the handlebars.

At first, I thought he'd been racing some other kid, but the panicky way he scrambled back on the bike, his head snapping in the direction he'd come from, convinced me that someone was chasing him. Then he was gone. I waited a few seconds to see who followed him, but I heard the screech of car brakes in the distance and I thought, because there was no loud bang, he's just about missed getting wiped out.

I told Mick Dunphy about this after the accident. Sometimes I wish I hadn't. Like it matters why this kid, Clem Healy, was cycling so fast and recklessly? Now, I have to give evidence at the court case in October. Sean got right thick when he heard me tell the detective sergeant what I saw. Or what I thought I saw.

'Great,' he goes. 'Now the little bastard can blame someone else and he's off the hook.'

Dunphy calmed him down. He knows Sean pretty well. His son, Brian, and Sean are best

drinking and, I suspect, hash-smoking buddies. Well, he knows about the buddies bit anyway. He dresses like a character from a seventies cop show, which is how he got the nickname Starsky. Leather bomber jacket, shirt opened down a few buttons, white sneakers and, worse again, white socks. He hasn't changed his hairstyle since about 1975.

Clem Healy has always denied anyone chased him that evening. So, I imagined it? Or he's too afraid of whoever was following him to say? The story around town is it had something to do with drugs. His father, Trigger Healy, is a well-known pusher and they say he used his fourteen-year-old son to move stuff sometimes. Still does, probably. He did the same thing with his older son, Sham, who ended up doing time in juvenile detention for handling ecstas tabs. Some father.

So, running, thinking, listening. Dad's close enough now to see the name plate of our street. He'd have seen the cars revving up at the junction to take off as soon as they got the green, but not the kid cycling like crazy on our footpath to avoid the speed bumps. 'Jimmy, Jimmy' or 'You've Got My Number' or 'Teenage Kicks'? Each song louder and faster than the last so it didn't matter which one was playing. Dad wouldn't have heard the slam and whine of brakes as the lights before the kid turned red, or the bicycle tyres screaming like a bag of cats to find a grip on the wet leaves along the path.

Then Dad turns the corner into our street and gets the flying missile of a fourteen-year-old kid, complete with hard helmet, into the forehead. He's thrown back and his head slams into the pebble-dashed gable end of the corner house, splitting his skull open. And he falls through the years like he was spinning down some sick time machine.

A few minutes passed, I don't know how many, before the whine of the ambulance siren reached me. I can't honestly say I knew straight off that Dad was in trouble. I heard the crunch of gravel on our drive and looked down. It wasn't Dad coming in. It was Mam going out. When she got to the footpath, she broke into a run. That was when I knew. I raced downstairs and out. Up ahead on the footpath, I saw some stranger kneeling and holding Dad's head like it might come apart if she let go. My memory blanks out after that. Dad's too. Except his never came back.

When he woke in the hospital he had a mental age of ten with no clear recall of anything that had ever happened to him. So far as the doctors and psychiatrists can tell, his memory is a broken jigsaw, the pieces scattered, too many of them lost forever. Much of the time, as Dr Reid at the rehab centre explained it, he's constantly bothered by the kind of dread you feel when you wake from a nightmare, but can't remember the details. He still doesn't know who we really are. Not Mam. Not any of us. He doesn't know who he was or is. And today Mam's bringing him home.

Sean's out and up to no good with Brian Dunphy as usual these evenings. Scooping pints of cider and playing pool in the backroom of Brady's Bar, no doubt. The Surprise Addition is asleep on my bed and snuggling up to his green plastic tractor. His fair hair's wringing with sweat after a couple of hours of jumping mad around the house. Some kids have mad half-hours. Tom has mad half-days. I don't mind. The thing is with little kids, you're so caught up in minding them, laughing with them, even getting thick with them, that you can forget what's bothering you. For a while anyway.

In the calm after Hurricane Tom, I'm at my window, but I'm not looking down at the street. I'm looking at my reflection in the glass. This pure loopy wig of orange-red curls on

my head from last year's school show. And I'm humming 'Tomorrow'. I put on the wig every now and then to give Tom a giggle. Sometimes, it's the only way to make him laugh these days.

There's a car moving along the street outside. I don't see it but hear its slowing-down sigh and I know the car is ours. How weird is it that you get to recognize the sound of a car like the way you recognized your tiny brother's cry in a roomful of babies at the maternity hospital?

The car pulls into our short pebbled drive. I take off the dumb wig and put on a smile. The kind you're never fully dressed without. I pick up Tom and he doesn't even wake. For a moment, I think how lucky he is to be so young and innocent. But, of course, he's not lucky. At least I had Dad for sixteen years. That's something to be thankful for.

Isn't it?

Dad's afraid. He stands with his hands hanging by his side in the hallway. His shoulders are hunched. He has on one of his blue French jerseys under the khaki green parka he always loved. Not the lucky 1998 jersey. They'd had to cut that off him after the accident. He's like a kid waiting outside the school principal's office for a ticking-off. For as long as I can remember, he's kept his head shaved, but over the last few weeks, he's let his hair grow again. The glossy black straggle of curls is dusted with grey and doesn't hide the long scar above his right temple. Nor does it hide the bald patch on top. His Zidane tonsure, he used to call it.

'Jimmy's here,' Mam says. I can see she's as gutted as I am that the house hasn't sparked some light of recognition in him. 'Isn't he looking well?'

She winces and I know why. It's so easy to slip into talking to him like he's a kid. But you can't exactly talk to him like he's forty-two either. So it's like trying to invent some new language in between.

'Hi, Jimmy,' I say and already I'm stuck for words.

'Awright?' His sweet cockney greeting stabs into my heart.

His voice is timid and shaky. Tom's forehead rests on my neck and I don't know if the perspiration is his or mine.

'I'll get the rest of the bags from the car,' Mam says. 'Is Sean here?'

'He's on his way,' I lie and silently curse him.

'Sean,' Jimmy says and brightens up some more.

Ever since we mentioned Sean, Dad's been asking when he can meet him. He knows nothing much about Sean except that he's tall and good at football and is into computer games and stuff. Mam thinks he's built up this big picture in his mind of some perfect pal. She's warned Sean about this and I swear I'll tear him to pieces if he doesn't play his part. I change the subject.

'Tom's tired out from jumping around all evening,' I say. 'He's getting to be a real handful'

'Will he wake up soon?' Jimmy asks in a whisper. 'Can he talk yet?'

At the rehab centre Tom never made a sound. We didn't bring him often. The visits unsettled him too much, so he hasn't seen Dad for maybe two months.

'Talk? He never stops,' I say and then I suddenly realize I haven't kissed Dad like I did every time we visited him.

For me, everything was easier in there. The greeting kiss, the talking, even playing the games of matching shapes that helped him get back some of his hand-eye coordination or the child-like wordplay that got him speaking again. Our visits lasted only a few hours and not every day at that. It was like you always knew there was an escape hatch. I feel bad for thinking I needed one, but that's how it was. Now there's no escape for any of us. Except for Sean.

I kiss Dad on the cheek, but it's Jimmy I link with my free hand into the kitchen. I wish I could be the two-year-old sleeping through all this. Jimmy doesn't walk like he used to. He's

take a few steps that seem perfect. Then he drags the toe of his shoe along the ground for one step. Hemiplegia they called it at the rehab centre. The weird thing is that there's something really familiar about that walk and I can't figure out what it is.

'Are you hungry, Jimmy?' I ask.

'Yeah,' he says and I can see that the kitchen is yet another strange new world to him in spite of all the meals he's cooked here over the years in that 'Housewife of the Year' apron he designed and got printed for himself. It's got this drawing above the slogan. A bleary-eyed woman, her hair in curlers, a cigarette dangling from her lips. Nowadays, I wear it.

'What do you fancy eating?'

'Wha'ever,' he says but hardly pauses before he asks, 'you got any chocolate biscuits? And milk?'

'I'm sure we have. But not too many biscuits, OK?'

Damn. Now I'm at it. The kiddie talk. He lowers his head. He's hurt. The thing is Dad has put on a lot of weight. Before the accident, all the jogging and the five-a-side football he played twice a week kept him in shape. Now his stomach stretches the blue football jersey to its seams.

'Take off your coat, Jimmy,' I say. 'And make yourself at home.'

He gazes open-mouthed around the kitchen, and in my head I'm screaming. *Surely you remember something here? The cream-coloured Aga you baked brown bread in, the wine shelves you put up over by the door, the fridge magnets you were always buying: 'You don't have to be crazy to work here – but it helps!' and 'Never do today what you can do tomorrow!'*

'There you go, Jimmy. We're nearly out of biscuits.'

He's disappointed with the two chocolate rings on the plate before him. Mam sweeps in like it's another normal day coming towards an end. Putting the messages away, filling the kettle, talking for the sake of talking.

'... And the traffic wasn't bad until we got to Abbeyleix ... but the petrol light was coming on and we had to leave the motorway and go into Urlingford ... there's a nice new Italian restaurant there now, I never knew about ...'

I don't know how she keeps it up. Dad follows her every word as though she's telling us something of vital importance.

People think Mam is cold, that she's too rational about what's happened. I've seen it in their eyes. But she was never the touchy-feely type. I prefer it that way, no matter what people might think of her. We never had to put up with that awful smothering-mother crack. She had her own life and didn't need to live every minute of ours. Her job as a social worker. Her passion for the choral group she sang with. Granny Rogan was the same. Practical, independent, busy.

Granny Rogan died when I was eight. I didn't know her very well. She'd moved to New York years before when her husband passed away. I saw her maybe three or four times in my life. Mam went over to New York a few times, but didn't like the man her mother lived with. He was way too loud and right wing for Mam's liking. She and her mother agreed to disagree. Granny Rogan got on with her life and Mam got on with hers. That's Mam all over.

But I watch her move around the kitchen and I see the change in her. She never did anything fancy with her long blonde hair and was never one for pots of make-up or expensive clothes. She didn't need them. Now, though, it's like the skin is so tight on her cheekbones

and forehead you'd swear she'd had botox treatment or something. She doesn't look real any more. Her face looks like mine feels. Stiff and sore from pretending to smile.

I remember she told me once about the November day they got married and how bitterly cold it was when they went out to have the wedding photos taken in some hotel garden and how her face was frozen in this mad smile all through the reception. And Dad chips in, 'To tell you the truth, Eala, I thought I'd married one of the witches from *Macbeth!*'

'I'm finished,' Dad says. 'I'm still hungry.'

'How many biscuits did you have?' Mam asks him. She brushes a few crumbs from the corner of his mouth and pulls her hand away quickly when she realizes what she's done.

'Just the one,' he says, dead serious.

I don't know whether to laugh or cry. He's a kid who wants another biscuit, I tell myself, not my father telling a lie. There's a funny side to everything. Isn't there?

'You're a chancer, Jimmy,' I tell him. 'You had two.'

'Maybe it was two small ones,' he says quietly.

His head goes down again. He's doing the wristwatch thing. I know from the rehab centre that it's a sign he's getting agitated and he'll have to be popped up with more drugs to settle him down. The oversized digital watch he timed his runs with was about the only thing that survived the accident. Now he won't take it off day or night. When he's stressed he starts beeping the little buttons and looking at the watch like he's late for an appointment or waiting for someone to arrive. He's got this hangdog look on his face, his gaze flitting from the watch to the biscuit tin on the table.

'Take another then, Jimmy,' I say.

Suddenly he pops up from his crouched position, spreads his elbows deliberately wide and sends the biscuit tin crashing to the floor. I'm still holding Tom so I can't stop it from falling and all hell breaks loose. The bang of the tin on the hard ceramic tiles wakes Tom. He takes one look at Jimmy and starts screaming. He clings to me so tight, he's strangling me. Tom's screams startle Jimmy. He stands up and begins to back away.

'It's only D-' The word almost slips out. 'It's only Jimmy.'

'I didn't mean to,' Jimmy says. We've seen him throw wobblers in the rehab centre but this is different. This is home. This is where we have to live.

Tom's head comes up from my shoulder again and looks at Jimmy. He's recognized the voice, I'm sure of it. He looks up at me like I can make sense of all this. I can't. I hold him as tight as I can without hurting him.

Mam puts her arm round Jimmy's waist and gives him a squeeze and turns him away from the table. Her face is grey. Maybe all our faces are grey. That's what it feels like. We're the ghosts of the family who used to live here before the accident.

'Tom got a fright when the box fell is all,' she says and steers him towards the door. 'Why don't we go sort your room?'

He looks back over his shoulder at Tom and me.

'They don't like me,' he says.

'Course they do, Jimmy,' Mam tells him, and they're gone.

Tom's sleeping again, at last. I lie beside him, my mind turning and turning as I listen out for Sean, ready to spring up as soon as I hear the back door creaking open. I had to read the same book three times for Tom. Not one of Dad's. I can't bring myself to look at Dad's books, never mind read them aloud. I doubt I ever will. Anyway, all of his books are in the workroom on the first floor and none of us goes in there any more.

All his stuff is exactly as he left it. The shelves of books. The antique wooden mannequin he bought in a junk shop in Waterford. The reams of drawings stacked on the floor. The architect's drawing board he worked on. The big ceramic beer mug he kept his pens and memory sticks and stuff in. A motto encircles it. *What goes around, comes around*. The high swivel chair that was like a carnival ride for me when I was a kid. His last, unfinished drawing is still pinned to the board. Terry the Tank.

Terry's an army tank who doesn't want to go to war any more. He wants to go play with the elephants instead. So he pretends to be an elephant. In the earlier books, he'd pretended to be a giraffe, a teapot, an ostrich. In each book he gets sussed out and rejected. The message being, of course, that he has to learn to be himself. Dad's having to learn that all over again too. He's come a long way.

At first, they told us he might never come out of the coma. After two weeks, we began to believe them. And terrible as it was to see him lying there in Intensive Care, hooked up to a kinds of monitors and drips, it was still him. Still our dad. Still forty-two years old. When you saw the flicker of his eyelids every now and then, you could believe that he was still in there dreaming up new ideas. Then they told us that if he did wake he might be brain-damaged. We didn't believe them. Or only Sean did. Sean was tearing himself apart and we knew why. Like we don't all have regrets, Sean?

Long before the accident, I was well over the little girlie thing of believing in the perfect father. Secretly, though, I liked the fact that Dad was different. He didn't have some run-of-the-mill job for one thing. In looks and colouring he was different too. Dark-eyed and sallow skinned, it was easy to believe as he did that his roots lay in North Africa. And he was so laid back with that breezy *Eastenders* accent we'd tease him about while he mimicked our flat Tipperary accent and the phrases we use – 'fair lousy' and 'pure gutted' – that he found so hilarious. Sometimes he seemed more like an older brother than a father.

He told me once that he wrote those books of his because, inside, he was still too much of a kid to write anything else. When I think of that now, I so wish I'd asked him more about his childhood. It wasn't exactly a no-go area. He'd tell me funny stuff that happened to him, but there was never a mention of unhappiness and there must have been a lot of that. Never knowing who his father was, having little or no memory of his mother, who died when he was five years old, living in foster care and, at sixteen, making his own way in the world with no one to help him. Why didn't I dig deeper? Maybe I didn't want to risk losing that jokey, easy-going relationship we had. I knew I was lucky.

'I wish my dad would loosen up,' my friend Jill said once. 'And be more like yours.' In

fairness she had good reason. Her dad's a religious nut and a bit of a tyrant.

'We fight too, believe me,' I said.

And we did, though I never had one real stand-up row with him. Just the usual stuff. Like me looking to get a picture phone when they first came out because someone in my class had one, or wanting to go to the over-sixteen night club when I was fourteen. Or the teasing he got up to. He was always at it. In the weeks coming up to last year's school show he drove me demented singing 'Tomorrow' at me, lisping the s's and rolling the r's. I'd get so thick but I'd never totally lose it. I knew he was messing and not sneering. Sean didn't have my patience. The night before the accident he exploded. And for the dumbest reason you could imagine that had nothing at all to do with Dad. Unrequited love.

Somehow, the Surprise Addition had managed to get hold of Sean's mobile in the kitchen and took it under the table with him. Sean and me were in the sitting room watching a Champions League match on TV with Dad. So Tom had a good chew on the mobile, mashed up the keys and cracked the screen before dumping it on the ground and toddling off to wreck something else. When Sean eventually found the phone and recognized the little teeth marks, he went ballistic.

First he blamed Mam for letting Tom take the mobile. Patient as ever, she promised to get Sean a new mobile, but he was shouting by now.

'But I can't get any texts tonight. And I can't send any. And all my numbers might be wiped.'

'We'll get the new one tomorrow, OK?' Mam said.

'That little snot can do what he wants around here.'

'Why don't we lock him up in the garden shed for the night, Sean,' I said. 'Would that ease your pain?'

'Mind your own business, Eala.'

Tom wasn't helping the situation. He looked out from his hiding place behind Mam and grinned from ear to ear. Then, as Dad came into the kitchen to see what was up, Sean whacked Tom across the face. And I mean whacked. Tom had only recently started to walk and I don't know how he stayed on his feet, the slap was so hard. We were used to the pushing and shoving that most brothers and sisters get up to now and again, but this was way out of line. There was a stunned silence like everyone was waiting for Tom's screams to convince us we hadn't imagined what Sean had done. Then he started.

Sean tried to escape from the kitchen but Dad blocked the doorway. Mam picked up Tom. His cries turned to gagging and then coughing and I knew he was going to make himself sick if he didn't calm down.

'Let me pass,' Sean grunted. 'I'm going upstairs to finish my homework, right?'

'Do you feel better now, Sean?' Dad said.

'What?' Sean said.

'Now you've hit a small child, do you feel more like a man?'

Sean tried to get by but Dad wasn't ready to move yet.

'Did I ever hit you, Sean?' Dad said.

'Maybe you did ... when I was a little fart like him ... maybe I don't remember.'

'You reckon you'd forget somethin' like that?'

'Let me out, will you?'

‘No one gets so angry about a mobile phone, Sean,’ Dad said. ‘What’s all this about?’

‘Nothing.’

But I knew and I punished him with it. Fair lousy of me, I know, but the school show had me all uptight that evening too.

‘There’s this girl he fancies,’ I announced. The girl in question being my best friend Jill. ‘And today he discovered she’s going out with his best pal. How dumb are you, Sean?’

He fired off a couple of obscenities at me, found a gap between the doorframe and Dad, and made his escape.

‘I can’t believe he could do something like that,’ Mam said. She’s always had this major thing about violence and aggression. I mean most people do but Mam’s seen the damage upfront all her working life ever since her first job as a social worker in a refuge for battered wives.

‘I’ll talk to him,’ Dad said.

Which he did. We’d all gone to bed before they’d finished talking up in Sean’s bedroom. Or before Dad finished talking, more like. He’s never said, but I get the feeling Sean didn’t take the dressing-down too well. Next morning, the morning of the accident, he’d already left for school when I got up and before Dad drifted downstairs. That’s really getting to Sean now.

Over the last few months Mam’s tried to get him to talk about that incident but he refuses. She worries about his dark moods, his late nights, the fact that he’s even packed in the football, which was his main interest in life before the accident. Whole days go by when he doesn’t stir from his room and he’s up there reading those dumb fantasy books of his and the collection of *2000 AD* and *Judge Dredd* comics Dad passed on to him. He’s never come to the hospital or the rehab centre since Dad woke up. So he hasn’t watched Dad struggle to get his speech back. Or witnessed those faltering attempts to get a fully laden fork to his mouth. Or seen that pride on his face when he showed us for the first time how he could walk without a Zimmer frame.

‘I’m doing good, in’ I, Judy?’ he said to Mam.

That’s who we are to him now. Judy and Eala, his big sisters or something totally weird like that. And all this time we’ve acted out our parts. Always good-humoured. Always praising and encouraging him even when he turned narky on us in his frustration. Always making excuses for him on those days when he wouldn’t talk to us or, sometimes, even look at us. But on those hour-long drives down the motorway from Dublin we’d blank out. We’d look straight ahead and hardly exchange a word, no matter how well or badly the visit had gone. Only once did we ever cry and that was the evening Mam told me about her miscarriage.

‘You probably noticed the morning sickness,’ she said.

I nodded but the truth was that I hadn’t. *You’re nearly forty, Mam, I was thinking. What were you doing getting pregnant again, for God’s sake?*

‘I felt I shouldn’t keep you in the dark about it any longer, Eala, leave you wondering.’

Two months gone she was when she miscarried at work the previous week. At the hospital they’d wanted to keep her in overnight, but instead she came home and carried on as normal. While she spoke in the darkened capsule of our car, the steadiness of her driving never faltered.

‘It would’ve been too much to cope with anyway,’ she said. ‘We’ll have our hands full when

Jimmy comes home.'

The car sucked us forward into the night like we had no choice in the matter. I knew I'd lie awake later and, as I always did after these drives, feel I was still moving.

'I'm glad you told me,' I said. Which was about half true. Glad, yes, to release some of the tears that had been welling up in me for so long. But sad, pure heartbroken. And uneasy too because the miscarriage felt like a bad omen.

Dad's steady progress got me through the long winter months that followed. There was less of that awkward waywardness in his walk and his speech gradually became less slurred and hesitant. Mentally he was catching up too. Because words came more easily to him, he lost his temper less often with himself and with us. I started hoping again. In spite of Miss Understanding.

Mam likes Fiona Sheedy. I don't. She's around Mam's age but looks older. They both went to Trinity College at around the same time though they didn't know one another back then. She's a psychologist at the health centre where Mam works. Maybe it's because she's had to listen to so many lousy life stories, but there's a weariness about her and she dresses drably in lumpy jumpers and washed-out leggings, which I know shouldn't matter, but somehow it does. Since the accident, she and Mam seem to have become soulmates.

'She's trying to help is all,' Mam said when I let slip the nickname I'd given her friend. Miss Understanding. 'Trying to keep our feet on the ground so we don't, you know, expect too much too soon from Dad. And the reality is there's so little help out there, we're lucky to have her fighting our corner.'

But Fiona Sheedy smiles too much. She talks too softly. She listens too sweetly. Her head tilted a little to the side, a wide-eyed gaze, her lips parted a fraction. A face that seems to say, *I understand what you're going through*. I feel like hitting her sometimes.

A text message comes in on my mobile. Tom stirs at the message alert but settles down again once his hand finds the green tractor that goes everywhere with him. I don't check to see who the message is from. Jill, I suppose. She was here earlier and I came close to losing it with her. What happened between Dad and Sean isn't her fault, of course. She knows nothing about the row that's made a bad situation even worse, but hers is another of the faces I want to slap these days. It doesn't help that, for her, life is a game of *Snap*. I used to find it funny. I'd get a cold and she'd get flu symptoms. I'd get indigestion and she'd get suspected appendicitis. Now she's got a big tragedy of her own to rival mine. Her nineteen-year-old sister Win has had a baby and her parents are not happy campers. Like I'm supposed to care.

Another text rings in. Maybe it's Sean, I'm thinking. It's not. It's Jill again. I don't open her messages. I check the time. Nine o'clock and still no sign of him. Maybe he's out there somewhere, wearing a flowing cape and Y-fronts over a pair of tights like one of his comic-book heroes, saving the universe from destruction. The Boy Wonder. Wondering where he's going.

Half past ten. I head back downstairs. Mam and Dad are talking in the basement room below. I don't hear what they're saying. I close my eyes and try to pretend it's a normal, adult conversation, but I can't. All I can hear is the echo of Jimmy saying, 'They don't like me.' *Only a kid*, I tell myself, *and kids forget these things quickly, don't they?* Especially after they discover all the joys of a new room. The TV, the Xbox, the CD player, the treadmill exercise machine and all the rest.

It's a half-basement, really. Some of it below ground, the rest above. So, it's not like a dungeon or anything. Still, we hated the idea at first. The occupational therapist who came to give advice on Dad's 'living arrangements' reckoned it was the biggest space available and it is.

Our house looks big from the outside but the rooms are actually small and it's all a bit of a jumble with little stairs all over the place. The basement is one big open-plan space with windows to the front and back, and a door out to the garden. It's actually the brightest room in the house and was more or less ready for use before the accident. And how weird is this? Dad fixed up the room himself.

'I'm going stale in that workroom up there. I need a change of scene,' he announced one day last summer. 'So it's either the basement or Paris!'

'I'll book you a flight on the Internet,' I said.

'And I'll buy you a guidebook,' Mam added.

'Ha, ha. We're all very witty, aren't we?'

For three months Dad spent every spare minute down there. He knocked out a partition wall and dry-lined the outer walls. He put in a small shower room in the corner. Sean helped with the heavy work and I did some of the painting. Then we spent a few sometimes frustrating, sometimes hilarious days putting together the flat-pack shelving, and the new workroom was ready. But Dad wasn't.

He kept saying he'd move to the basement when he'd finished the Terry the Tank series he was working on. Usually he'd dream up a character, work up five or six ideas and be done with it after a few months. There were times when he'd slow down and I'd know he was struggling to keep the work flowing. He wouldn't exactly brood, but I'd notice him staring into the flames in the sitting-room fireplace for minutes on end. When I'd ask what he was thinking about, he'd put on his joky French accent and answer, '*Ah, les profundités de l'existence!*'

But the problem with finishing Terry the Tank was down to a whole series of distractions. A couple of advert commissions came in that he couldn't afford to pass up and the deadline for a pretty major book he'd been contracted to illustrate was brought forward. Then everything got totally complicated when his computer crashed and burned. Luckily he'd backed up most of his work, but it took ages to get sorted again on the new laptop. So, the Terry the Tank series will never be finished. Even if he remembered the book existed, he can't draw any more.

I start tidying up the kitchen. Below the chair Jimmy sat on, there's a layer of crumbs on the tiles. On the table his glass has left a pattern of milky rings like a wonky Olympic logo. I know it's pure stupid, but I'm irritated by the mess. After the accident, I went from being carelessly untidy to this freaky 'Housewife of the Year' – complete with Dad's apron. I can't sit still in a room if it's not spick and span.

Mam told me once about a client of hers who was obsessed with cleaning. She lived in a terraced house in Davitt Street that opened directly on to the public footpath. At least once a week, this woman would scrub the footpath like it was a floor inside her house. As soon as she did, of course, some young fellows would come and plaster it with mud or whatever. Sometimes at night, they even peed on it, but she couldn't make herself stop cleaning it again. Now I know how that woman feels.

Mrs Casey's German shepherd, Argos, starts up one of his howling fits next door. From outside the back door come hushed voices and scuffling noises. Sean and his boozing buddy, no doubt. I swing open the door and it's Brian I see first. He's tall, sleep-eyed and knows he's good-looking. His early-Bob-Dylan-style mop of hair is always carefully tossed. In the school show back in that other life, he played the part of my adoptive father. He looks worried. In the shadows behind him Sean is wavering from side to side and taking a leak against the back wall. I smell the cider.

'He hasn't had much, Eala,' Brian says. He's staring at my front and I realize I'm wearing the mad apron. How sad am I?

'Yeah right.'

Sean staggers over and falls against his best pal. The best pal who swooped on Jill while he was still thinking about it. Who's dumped Jill and gone through a few more dumb bimbos in the meantime.

'You're totally right, man,' Sean tells Brian. 'I have to roll the sleeves up and ... and ...'

'You're not coming in here until you sober up, Sean,' I insist, but he pushes me out of the way.

'I'm all right, man,' he says.

This 'man' stuff is always a sure sign he's pure twisted. Brian puts his hand on my shoulder like he thinks he's my new daddy in the school show again. Sometimes I hate being so small. I've had as much as I can take tonight. I take a swing at his face, but he catches my wrist before I make contact. He thinks he's hurting me and I let him think it for a few seconds more.

'Sorry,' he says and as he releases me, my bracelet catches in his finger and breaks.

It's a cheap string of blue beads, but I made it myself and I'm fair thick. He makes to stoop down and retrieve it, but I cut him off.

'Get lost,' I tell him and I slam the door in his face. Sean's dodgy on his feet. He holds on to the table. 'You're such a loser, Sean. Make some coffee for yourself. And brush your teeth. Your breath stinks.'

'What you go trying to hit Brian for?' he says. 'If it wasn't for him I wouldn't be here, man. We talked it all out. I know what I have to do. Where are they?'

His head is slack on his shoulders until he hears their voices and it's like someone's thrown a bucket of water in his face and sobered him up. His eyes are half crazed. He makes for the kitchen door and I follow, trying to hold him back. He's too strong for me. His voice is mild

now, mellowed with hash.

‘It’s all right, Eala,’ he says. ‘I’m ready for him.’

‘Is that you, Sean?’ Mam calls from below as we scuffle down along the stairs to the basement.

‘You’re going to break Mam’s heart,’ I whisper fiercely.

‘No way, man,’ he mutters. ‘I’m going to make her proud of me.’

A few steps from the open basement door, Sean starts singing out loud.

‘*Jimmy, Jimmy!*’ Then he does the da-na na-na-na of the Undertones’ guitar riff and shouts again. ‘*Jimmy! Jimmy!*’

‘Sean?’ I hear the trepidation in Mam’s voice and my stomach sinks.

We’re in the basement room. Jimmy’s gaping at Sean, his eyes filled with wonder and worry. Mam gives Sean a dagger look, but he doesn’t notice. He goes over to Jimmy and wraps his arms round him.

‘*Jimmy, Jimmy!*’ he sings. His eyes are closed. It seems like Jimmy’s holding Sean up now and feeling pure freaked. I give him a reassuring smile like this is perfectly normal and he has nothing to be afraid of. Sean releases him from the bear hug. ‘Hey, why don’t we play some *Premiership* on the Xbox, Jimmy?’

‘Yeah,’ Jimmy says. ‘*Premiership?*’

‘Football, Jimmy, remember?’ Sean says and then realizes we’re not supposed to upset him by asking if he remembers stuff. ‘It’s this new game. I’ll show you how to play. Bet you’ll demolish me.’

Jimmy chuckles. He’s found his pal.

‘One game, OK?’ Mam says and it’s like her face is some kind of ceramic mask and it’s going to crumble any minute into dust or sand or whatever. ‘It’s getting late.’

So we leave them to it. I don’t believe in this new Sean and neither does Mam. We climb the stairs and it seems to take forever. We’ve had handrails put along each wall to help Dad climb. We need them now.

‘I can’t believe Sean’s gone and got tanked up,’ I say. ‘Tonight of all nights.’

‘I’ll have his life for this,’ Mam says.

She’s shaking. She holds on to the banister of the stairs with both hands. She presses her forehead against the timber so hard it must hurt.

‘At least he’s cheered Jimmy up,’ she says. ‘That’s more than I’ve managed to do.’

She lets go of the trembling banisters and pulls in a big breath.

‘We’re going to make this work, Eala. We have to make this work.’

Down in the basement, Sean and Jimmy are laughing their heads off. And I feel so stupidly jealous of Sean, I wonder if I should have tried the cider too.

When Dad was forty-two, he had lots of friends. His five-a-side football buds and people he worked with over the years. Mostly men. And sometimes I wonder if that's why all but one of them dropped out of sight during his months in hospital and rehab. Maybe if hospitals served beer the men might have done better, Mam said. Pub-talk is easier to hide behind than bedside chat.

Ten, maybe, twelve of them called to see him. A few couldn't bring themselves to visit a second time. Others stuck it out a little longer but eventually fell from the radar. I was there for some of these visits. It was pure torture. For everyone involved.

One guy's voice seized up as soon as he saw Dad and, when he went outside, he completely fell apart. Pat Dillon, a big, broad-shouldered builder with muscle-packed arms, thought he was speaking normally, but what came out was a whisper none of us could hear. The ones who could speak usually talked about football and when that didn't work, which was often, they were stumped. The fact that Dad had forgotten a lot of stuff about football didn't help. He couldn't remember the names of even the most famous players. Not even his hero, Zidane's.

'If they're my jerseys,' he'd asked us early on at the rehab centre, 'why's his name on them?'

Club names escaped him too. Real Madrid, Liverpool, Man U. Past games, who won what trophy in what year, and the complications of 4-4-2 and 4-3-3 and 4-5-1 or whatever, were a total mystery to him. But the real problem, when his old friends came, went deeper. Their visits left him in a sweat. Miss Understanding said it was probably 'the effort of recollection, the sense of failure and confusion that got to him'. But I felt sure there was more to it than that. In their presence, he was nervous, even suspicious of them. After each one left he'd clam up for ages. And it was an uneasy silence. If he heard footsteps in the corridor outside, he'd watch the door, full of apprehension.

'Why do those men have to come here, Judy?' he asked one day.

'They're your friends,' Mam said in her patient, this-is-not-too-weird-to-be-true tone. 'They miss having you around.'

'I don't want them to come any more,' he told her. 'Especially Martin.'

We couldn't figure this out. We still can't. Martin Davis had been the closest of all these people to Dad. In a way, he was sort of a crossover friend. He'd known Mam since their school days. When Mam and Dad started going out together, Martin was one of the gang they hung out with when they came here from Dublin for weekends. After they moved down permanently, Martin brought Dad along to the football club he played with and they teamed up alongside one another in central defence. People used to think they were brothers. They had the same sallow skin and black hair. After Dad's other so-called friends deserted him, Martin was the only one who stuck it out.

Mam must have felt fair lousy explaining the situation to Martin. It hit him hard. He drove around in a Mercedes and owns a pile of property but, as Mam said, you lose your best

friend, you're a kid again. He called to the hospital less often after that. When he did call, he never stayed for long. He hasn't been to the house since Dad came home two weeks ago. Last night, Mam told me he's coming over this evening.

'Do you think Martin and Kathleen might have stayed together if Angie hadn't died?' I asked her.

'Who knows?' she said. 'He never got over Angie, that's for sure. Threw himself into his work so he wouldn't crack up. He was trying to forget the trauma of losing Angie, but maybe he forgot about Kathleen too.'

Angie Davis was born the same month and year as me. She died of leukaemia two weeks after her second birthday. I've no memory of her or of asking Mam and Dad where she'd gone to, which apparently I did over and over again. When other kids had invisible friends, I had Angie. Sometimes when I'd get into trouble over doing stuff I shouldn't, I'd blame her. I tell Mam it was Angie who told me to draw on the walls or bring worms in from the garden to swim in the sink or whatever. She tried to get me to invent a different invisible friend, but I refused.

For some reason, Angie has come back to me since Dad's return. I've actually built up a picture of her in my mind. She looks a bit like me, dark-haired but prettier – and taller, which wouldn't be hard. And smarter in every way. And wilder, more streetwise. I imagine her telling me to loosen up, lighten up, grow up. I'm sure she'd have told me not to go into something so uncool as a school show and definitely not to wear that mad curly wig in public. I see her eating up guys like Brian and spitting them out when she's had enough of them.

But Angie can't distract me now, I feel so wired up about this evening. It's like this is another test for Dad. Will he overcome his strange suspicion of Martin and of men in general? If it wasn't for the strides Dad's been making since he came home, I couldn't even begin to hope that he might. But, to be honest, I'm wired up because of his progress too. The thing is I've had little or no part in it. For months I've been imagining all I'd do for Dad, all I'd do with him, how I'd devote myself completely to him. Instead, Sean's doing all the work. And Brian, which really bugs me.

Every afternoon Sean's buddie comes in by the door at the end of the garden and heads straight to Jimmy's room. Which saves me having to avoid him. They play games on the Xbox and it's definitely making a difference to Dad's hand-eye coordination and his reaction speed. We see it at the dinner table. Dad's still hesitant when he picks up a glass and stuff, but he doesn't spill or drop things so much.

And they don't sit in front of the screen all day either. For an hour or so most days all you can hear from Jimmy's room are grunts, groans, thuds and the whirr of the treadmill machine. They're working Dad back into shape. He's lost five pounds in two weeks. It doesn't show so much yet except that his face is less puffy and his eyes are more alert somehow.

Nothing I've heard about Brian Dunphy prepared me for this. Not that I trust gossip. But when all the stories are more or less in agreement, you have to believe there's some truth in them. Because his father is a detective sergeant, it's like Brian has a licence to do what he wants and never has to worry about the consequences. Cider, hash, whatever you're having yourself. He's done his Leaving Cert. and doesn't have a summer job, but he's always flush. He also happens to be a notorious two-timer with only one thing on his mind and it isn't love.

When Jill came over to watch a DVD the other night, I told her about his being here so

often. I don't know why I did. Maybe I needed a break from hearing about her sister's baby and how her parents, being so religious and stuffy, can't get their heads around the whole business.

'Watch your back, Eala,' Jill goes, looking up from painting her fingernails. She's no airhead, but she's so into pink and all the frills that go with it. 'He's on the loose again. He'll be sniffing.'

'Do I look like a moron?' I said and turned the DVD back on to cover up the blush that swept across my cheeks for no reason I could think of.

'I'm only saying. He hasn't gone out with anyone for a few months,' Jill said. 'Not that anyone knows of anyway. Then again, he's good at keeping secrets. I learned that the hard way.'

'Maybe everyone's copped on to him,' I said.

'I'm serious, Eala,' she said. 'You don't want to get involved with that guy.'

This is Jill at her most annoying. The drama queen. You'd think she was a thirty-five-year-old on her third divorce. I should be at the cinema with her tonight. We always went on Friday nights. Used to. It's a while since I've gone. She keeps asking and I keep making excuses and Mam keeps wondering why. 'Do you fancy sitting through some dumb romcom for two hours?' I ask her.

The truth is I never want to leave the house these days. It's like I have to hang around twenty-four/seven so I can snatch even a few minutes with Dad. Besides spending all his waking hours with Sean and Brian, he insists on Sean sleeping in the room with him. He doesn't like to be alone at night. I shouldn't blame Sean, but I have to blame someone.

'Do you feel angry about what's happened?' Fiona Sheedy asked me a few days before Dad came home.

We were in the sitting room and I was pretending to do a sudoku puzzle while she and Mam talked. It was one of those pure obvious set-ups where Mam is there one minute and then she's gone to check on Tom, even though I know he's fast asleep. I was thick at her, but I stayed put. Unlike Sean, who makes himself scarce every time Miss Understanding arrives.

'No,' I said. 'Why should I be angry?'

'You have every right to be, Eala,' she says, all sweet sympathy. 'Your dad is, well, in many ways ... for the present at least, very much a young boy and you've had to deal with stuff that no fifteen-year-old should ...'

'Sixteen-year-old.'

'Who do you blame, Eala? Who do you want to punish?'

'No one.'

'Not even Clem Healy?'

'He's some kind of special needs case,' I said. 'So Mam tells me anyway.'

This is another thing people don't get about Mam. How understanding she is – even of that little creep. She's told me that Clem is one of these slow kids with all kinds of learning problems. She's seen his file at the health centre. I don't care what's on his file. He ruined our lives. There's no excuse for that.

'Are you angry with Judy?' the psycho goes.

'No.'

'Do you feel angry with yourself?'

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