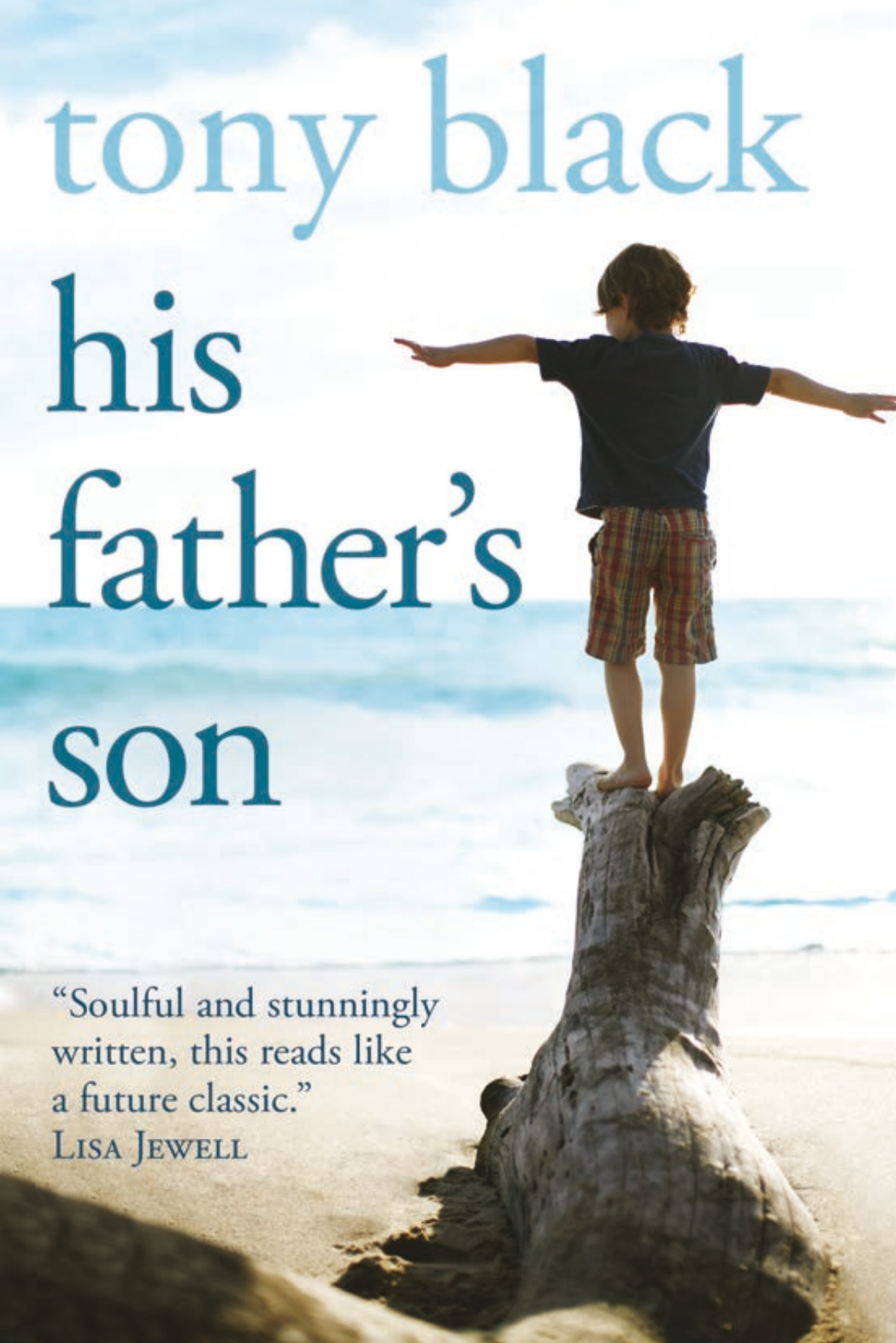
tony black

his father's son



"Soulful and stunningly written, this reads like a future classic."
LISA JEWELL

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For my son,
Conner

Prologue

Marti didn't get it. He knew when Dad said it was "just one of those things" it was because he couldn't be bothered explaining.

"But why, Dad?" said Marti. It was burning hot outside and Dad was stretched out in the yard under the coolibah tree. Marti had seen him put the newspaper over his face when the sun broke out from the shade. He was still under the paper when Marti asked the question again. "Dad, why Blue?"

"Like I say, son, it's just one of those things."

Dad must know, thought Marti. He had never heard him say he didn't know about something. He must know, really. "Just one of those things" was something grown-ups said when they couldn't be bothered. It was like, "Go away and play with the cat's eyes on the road."

"But Dad, why Blue?" Why did they call Dad 'Blue'? Pete, their neighbour with the swimming pool with the leaves in and the car with no wheels, had called Dad 'Blue' every time he passed by. And Pete wasn't even a very good friend of Dad's, thought Marti. Pete didn't even support Liverpool, so Dad couldn't really be good friends with him.

"Marti, it's an Australian thing, all right. That's what they call you in Australia when you have red hair like me, *Blue*."

Marti really was confused now. "Well, why don't they call you Red?"

"Because Marti, it's Australia and they do things differently here. It's the other side of the world."

Marti knew Australia was on the other side of the world from Ireland. Dad had shown him on the map, and on the globe in the library he had shown him where the boat had come across all the ocean and how it was the best money he'd ever spent. He told him the story about how they needed men like him because the country was so big they had to fill it up and he paid all his money for him and Mam to come on a boat from Ireland.

"But why because it's the other side of the world?" Marti knew he was pressing his luck. Dad put down the paper and tipped back his cap. It was bright sunshine outside and he had been trying to sit in the shade of the coolibah tree and read the news, but he was there so long the sun had followed him and the shadow was on the other side of the tree now.

"Right, Marti," he said, and picked up the rug he was lying on and moved it into the shade again. "If I explain this thing for you, will you give me some peace?" Marti nodded. "Right, now first things first, get out of the sun – *eleven to three, under a tree,* remember." Marti moved over into the shade of the coolibah tree with Dad.

"Now, in Australia everyone – well, mostly everyone in Australia – comes from Ireland or Scotland or the Other Place." The Other Place was England; Marti knew Dad didn't like England, except for Liverpool but that was as Irish as Molly Malone, he said, whoever Molly Malone was. "So, Australia is on the other side of the world. Australians think this is a funny thing, it's like everything is the opposite. It's summer in Australia when it's winter in Ireland and the water goes down the plughole the other way." Marti's eyes widened. "Ah now, forget that about the water, son, that's a whole other story, but so you see what I'm saying? That's why red becomes blue in Australia. Do you get me? Do you see it now, Marti?"

He kind of got it. He didn't know why the Australians wanted to call red blue, but he got the bit about doing things the other way around. It made him wonder because he had black hair like Mam, maybe they would call him white.

He was still a bit confused, then Dad leaned forward and lifted him up on his knee. "Don't worry your head about this nonsense, son. Sure won't you get it all for yourself when you go to Ireland."

"Are we going to Ireland?" said Marti.

"No, son, we've no plans to go to Ireland. Australia's our home now, but sure, won't you want to go and see the place one day, to see where your mam and dad were born and where the giants come from, and sure won't you have to try the Guinness on home soil. There's nothing like a pint of Guinness poured on Irish soil, son – when you're a man, of course."

"Will you come with me, Dad?"

"No, Marti, I won't be going back to Ireland."

"Never, not even when I'm a man and I get the Guinness?" He knew Dad would never go back to Ireland. Mam had said it was because he was too fond of foostering his days away in the sun, and didn't Ireland only remind him of himself.

"No, Marti, I never will. Sure why would I want to – would you look at this place? Isn't it God's country entirely; you can't grow oranges in your yard in Ireland."

"Then I won't go, Dad. I'll stay here with you." Marti hugged him and Dad laughed.

"Son, you're choking me – that's some grip you have there. Do you fancy yourself a wrestler?" Dad pretended to bite Marti's arm, and the pair rolled around on the grass. "That's enough now. There could be trapdoors around here," said Dad.

Trapdoor spiders were sneaky bleeders, Mam had said. They bury themselves in the yard and then jump out of their little grass trapdoors to bite you if you're not careful, she had told Marti.

"Do they have trapdoors in Ireland, Dad?"

"No, son."

"Then could we wrestle in the yard if we lived in Ireland, Dad?"

"You'd be soaked through in a millisecond, Marti. Sure, there's no sunny days over there. It's all rain, rain and more rain. No, this is the place, Marti, God's country, like I say. Now away and play."

"Dad."

"What?"

"Will you show me the flower dancing?"

"No, son."

"But, Dad, please."

"No, son. Come on now. I think I hear your mam calling you. Is that a cake she's been baking?" Marti knew there was no cake. He had never known Mam to bake a cake. Dad was having him on.

"Dad, can I see the flower dancing, in the wind like you say it, Dad?"

"Aren't you getting a bit big for that, Marti?"

"No, Dad. Please, please, Dad." Marti felt sad when Dad said this. He really was getting too big at eight to see the flower dancing, but he liked the way Dad did the trick. It was his favourite trick in the world.

Dad looked at Marti. "And if I show you the – what is it?"

"I know it's not a flower, but I forget. Is it a sha . . . sham-m—"

"A *shamrock*. What is it?"

"A shamrock." Marti spluttered out the word and knew it as soon as he said it. He knew he'd forget it again, too. It was the green flower thing on Dad's arm that he could make dance in the wind.

Dad rolled up his sleeve over the shoulder and showed Marti the shamrock. "Here it comes then, son." The shamrock stood there, square in the middle of Dad's arm.

"Once there was a lucky little shamrock that stood in a field," said Dad. Marti laughed. He loved to see the shamrock. It was something he could never grow tired of. "A lucky little shamrock in a lucky little field," said Dad, "and all through the day he'd stand in his field, thinking, What a lucky little shamrock am I, am I, what a lucky little shamrock am I, to stand in a field and grow strong, said he, to stand in a field and grow strong." Dad turned his arm and the shamrock's stem straightened.

"He's starting," said Marti.

"And when the night turns to day, I go wild, he said, when the night turns to day I go wild. Wild for song and the dance of a song, and I dance in a field all night long!" Dad turned his arm back and forth, making the shamrock dance. It rolled and reeled on his shoulder like a proper cartoon, thought Marti. Then Dad tugged his sleeve down again. "Right, son, that's enough. Now off and play like a good boy."

Marti grabbed Dad round the shoulders. "I love the shamrock, Dad," he said.

"And the shamrock loves you too, son. Now off and play, before your mam really is calling you in."

Marti loved playing in the yard.

He could remember when there was just a yard and Dad took them to buy the house to put in the yard. It was a big field full of houses all up on big tree stumps and Mam said she liked the one with the white rails that went all the way around. "I like that one too," said Marti, "because you could walk under it and I could climb out through a secret passage." But Mam said you couldn't because the big tree stumps would go away and you wouldn't be able to walk under the house anymore.

A man in a hat and a vest, with a big belly and freckles on his arms, said Mam had an eye for a bargain and she could look around the house if she wanted, but Dad said he wasn't made of money.

"You wouldn't need to be, mister. This is a repo'," said the man with the freckles on his arms, and Dad went over to talk to him. When he came back everyone went to look around the house. Dad had to lift Marti up over the big gap and the wood made a noise like a twig snapping, but Dad said it was all right, and the man with the freckles on his arms shouted out, "No worries, sonny. You're as safe as houses." And Mam smiled.

Inside Marti ran around the empty house. There were some things left behind, like a big wooden chest, which was nailed shut. He thought it might have treasure inside and told Dad, but Dad said they nailed everything down when they moved the houses. "How do you mean?" said Marti.

"They move them on the road, like a big lorry comes for the house and you take it to where you want to live."

"Isn't it the strangest thing, son?" said Mam.

Marti didn't answer but Dad said, "Sure, how's he going to know any different. Isn't the lad an Aussie? You only think it's strange because your imagination's running wild with the big old house driving up the Connemara Road!" Mam laughed, and Marti went off to explore the rest of the house.

In one of the bedrooms there was a picture of Superman and Marti decided this would be his room. "Can I have this room, Dad? Please, *please*?"

"Calm down, son. Haven't we hardly had a chance to check the place now."

"But Dad, someone else might buy it – look, there's Superman!"

"Where, where?" said Dad, and he looked out the window, putting his hands over his eye like a telescope. "I don't see him. Have I missed the man of steel again?" he said, and everyone laughed.

"It's just a picture," said Marti.

"A picture of Superman, here? Well why didn't you say sooner? That seals it for me. Mam, what do you say?"

"Well, the boy's right. If there's a Superman picture up we better move fast. Where's the man?" said Mam, and they went to find the man with the freckles on his arms. The man wrote something in a big blue book and gave Dad a piece of paper. Dad said that it was a chit, and they couldn't lose it because it meant the house was theirs, then he put the chit in his back pocket and there were smiles from everyone.

Marti liked to think of the day at the big field full of houses all up on big tree stumps. He liked to think of the day when the house with the white rails that went all the way around became theirs and there were smiles from everyone. He liked to think of these things because when the house came to the yard and everyone moved in to live, there were no more smiles.

1

Joey sometimes wondered, had Australia been a good move? God yes, had it ever. Sure wasn't it all blue skies and sunny days, he thought, and weren't the people just the best of craic, even the bosses. There were no bosses in Ireland would give you the steam off their piss, but sure Macca there was all right. Hadn't Macca been the greatest lately, even after all the bother with Shauna? Wasn't Macca the first to say, "Take some time, Joey. Get her right." No, Australia was the Lucky Country all right, and wasn't it the best of places to be raising young Marti. It was a million miles from Ireland and talk of Banshees and little old women with shawls and wispy beards who would only be scaring the b'Jaysus out the boy.

Joey took the trailer to be washed before the afternoon smoko with Macca and the men from the transport section. The cab was hot inside and the wheel felt like it would scorch his palms if he didn't spin it quickly enough. Driving a trailer filled up with iron ore day after day mightn't be the best job in the world, he thought, but it was a regular wage and there was a lot to be said for a regular wage in this day and age, was there not?

Driving the trailer mightn't be the highlight of his thirty-four years, but it had bought them a grand enough house and it had kept Shauna from sitting at a checkout or behind some counter or other. The family was looked after, Marti especially wanted for nothing, money was being set aside for his education and Joey was proud

enough. The boy had a brain on him and if he were raised right and there was money enough for an education then there would be a fine job waiting for him when he was ready. Who could want more than that?

When the water from the hose hit the trailer there was hissing and steam raised off as the splashes evaporated. It was a blinder of a day – even the corellas that flew in from the bush were too hot to scratch about for a feed and sat hidden under branches and leaves in the gum trees for a bit of shade. The air seemed to hum when it was this hot. It was as thick as soup to walk through and the light played tricks on your eyes, making the road and the paddocks and the trees quiver like they were about to disappear in a shimmering mist.

On days like this Joey sometimes thought how different his life had become since he left Ireland on that wet May morning in 1968. He remembered his first job at Gleesons Bakery in Kilmora and the days spent carrying the flour in and the bread out. The faces and the air as white as a maggot, the men opening the windows and hacking out floury spit to the street, the pigeons below pecking away at it. He'd felt grand the day Gleeson had shown him the door – wasn't the job only a favour to his father, the mighty hurling player Emmet Driscol. He felt glad to be turning his back on the pair of them.

Bitterness was all he felt for his own father. Bitterness and hatred was what he'd been made to feel. It could never be that way for Marti, he'd make sure of it. Joey had nothing but a pile of desperate memories left over from his own childhood, which in darker moments would come back to haunt him. It was always the way of it. The darker things looked, the more he remembered. It was at the core of him. He could still see his father now, the whole family living in fear and awe of him, mealtimes held in silence in case a noise tipped him into rage.

Joey could only have been about the age of Marti himself when he brought the whole family close to despair. His sister, Megan, younger still, had appeared at the dinner table in tears. She was covered head to toe in muck and carried a stench that made the room seem suddenly emptied of air. Emmet stamped his fist on the table, swearing before God he had been pushed beyond the beyonds this time.

"What is this ye are bringing to my house?" he said. His voice was trembling so much that it seemed his next word might hurl the plates and dishes to the floor. No one would look at him. All six children kept their heads down, even the babe Clancy buried himself deeper into his mother's arms and scarcely dared breathe.

"I was looking for the fairies," said Megan. She was crying and blurting out her words. "Tis a fairy rath we have in the yard. Joey showed me."

When Megan pointed at Joey all the eyes shifted on him. He was the eldest and used to being looked on, but he could only see his father's gaze racing towards him as he was lifted from his chair by one great hand. He knew he was in for trouble as his father dragged him by the hair into the yard. The fairy rath was the midden, he understood that now, but then he had been told about it by grown-ups and thought he was doing no wrong. His own mother had laughed about the midden being a fairy rath when he told Megan, but he knew this would have to be their secret now. He was glad it was him and not his mother or Megan being dragged out.

"Do ye see them?" said Emmet. He grabbed Joey's head – his whole hand fitted round it – and he pushed him face down in the midden. There was the sound of his brothers and sisters shuffling into place to see what happened next, and then there was his father's roaring. "Do ye see them yet? I'll put ye through it, I will," he said as Joey's mouth filled with muck and potato skins. "I'll put ye through it," said Emmet again and again. Joey tasted the muck and the rotting waste. His nostrils and his eyes filled with thick black soil that stuck to him and then the earth was frozen and hard where the midden ended.

He cowered from his father where he lay. Grown men had flinched from Emmet Driscol on the hurling field, but to a mere boy he was a terrifying sight when the rage was on him. His father looked lost in his fury, then a mouse scurried out from the midden and he shouted, "Vermin." Even with his eyes full of muck, Joey could see his mother and his brothers and sisters watching as Emmet's great boot was stamped, catching the creature's head. The children screamed at the sight and his mother gathered the little ones around her and led them back to the house. They had seen too much already.

Joey was left alone with the sight of his father bringing down his boot again. He could still remember the way the mouse's little legs kept going, it wasn't dead yet. Then his father brought down his boot again and again, until the mouse was no more than a bloodied tangle of flesh and tiny white bones.

The whistle shook Joey out of his memory and he saw Macca come out, smiling and waving for the men from the transport section to follow. "G'day, Bluey," he shouted.

Joey flicked the hose in a salute and Macca tapped twice on the packet of cigarettes in his shirt pocket to show it was time for smoko. "Come on, Bluey," shouted Macca. "What's the story today, mate?"

Joey knew he had become a bit of a legend for his stories. The men who took the ore out and the men who moved it about never tired of hearing his stories. Joey thought the stories were nothing special, just the way people talked all the time in Ireland. He knew nobody back there would think they were anything special.

When the men had their afternoon smoko they were forever saying what a rare treat it was to see Bluey Driscol jumping down from the rig, a grin on his face, saying the words, "Fellas, ye'll never believe this one . . ." He felt more at home with Macca and the men from the transport section than anywhere else in the world, and when they looked at him for a story at afternoon smoko he always felt it was his duty to think of something.

"So there I was, five minutes off the boat from Ireland," he said, "and I swear to you fellas, I'd never had the shits like it before."

There was laughter and back slapping. Some men sat back to savour Joey's story like it was a fine wine he was serving them, and others sat forward with big expectant grins on their faces, waiting for the next line to follow.

"So, I'm running and taking off my belt at the same time, and my dukes are dropping," he said.

"Your what?" said Pando the Greek, scrunching up his eyes.

"My dukes, trousers . . . *pants*, man. Anyway, I find the dunny in the terminal and I dive in there – I swear before the Holy Mother I was about to explode, so I was – and I plank myself down on the lavatory."

"*And?*" said the men together.

"And nothing . . . well, not quite nothing. No sooner had my arse touched the rim of the porcelain but this bright green, slithering mass of thorns and teeth and horns and a forkey little tongue runs right under the door . . . and then the bugger spits at me."

"Ha-ha-ha," broke the men.

"What a welcome, mate," said Macca.

"I swear, I thought it was some mickey biting bog lizard and it was gonna have my old fella away in those teeth of his. I froze. I swear, I bloody froze, and do you know what the little bleeder did? From nowhere it opens up this bright red umbrella thing around its neck and starts the spitting again and snarling too. By God, I thought I was a goner."

Pando the Greek had tears in his eyes with the laughing and Macca and the other men were grabbing each other for support. It was a good story, the Lizard Story, thought Joey. Didn't it always get a laugh? Sure, they liked a laugh, the fellas, and wasn't there no harm in that. It would be a long day, the working day, without a bit of a laugh and a joke. Wasn't laughter the greatest medicine on earth?

Joey laughed with the men but he knew his heart wasn't in it. Truth be told, he hadn't felt like laughing for a long time. Wouldn't you know it, bloody Shauna's tricks were creeping up on him. He thought the sun would do her the power of good, and it did sure, for a while there. For ten years they had been in Australia, but a fresh start cannot last forever, that was the fact of it. You could leave the old troubles behind and start again but sooner or later they'd catch up and scare the b'Jaysus out of you.

"Bluey, you're not yourself, mate," said Macca.

Joey Driscol hated hearing the obvious. Of course he wasn't himself, who would be? If he wasn't himself it was because he didn't particularly want to be himself right now.

"Is it the television you're in training for, Macca?" he said.

"What?"

"The television . . . some game show or other. It's mental gymnastics you're at, giving the old brain a workout, no?"

Macca closed his mouth and gave a little shake of his head, and Joey felt a sudden pang of guilt. It wasn't Macca's fault. It wasn't *his*

fault either, he knew that well enough, but it was the way of things, so it was. People bark when they feel like dogs.

"Macca, mate . . . I'm sorry," he said. "I have my fair share of problems at the minute."

"Mate, we've all got them," said Macca. He was staring to the front. Joey felt he didn't even want to look at him.

"Macca, I know it, but sure mine are bad, real bad. Look, can you spare an hour for a few beers tonight?"

"Bluey, you're supposed to be keeping off the grog."

Joey knew he had sworn himself off the grog again. Couldn't he spend weeks off it, months even. It wasn't a problem, wasn't it only a little vice he had. He leaned into Macca's shoulder and directed his words carefully. "It's my wife."

Macca looked Joey squarely in the eye and Joey at once knew there was an understanding passed between them. He didn't like talking to Macca about his problems – they should stay his own, surely – but if Macca took a drink with him tonight then maybe he could forget about the problems for a little while. It was getting all messy again, he thought. Shauna had been the grandest catch of them all, with the face in a million, the black hair and half of Kilmora chasing after her. She was a beauty; they all said it. But weren't her lot known for the wildness, far and wide, as well. None of it mattered now though. Ireland was past, Marti was the future and Joey knew he had better start pulling himself together, for the sake of the boy. He checked himself suddenly. There was pity in him and that would never do.

"Fellas, ye'll never believe this one . . ." he said, and there were eyes dried around the table.

"You know the first day I got the trailer was the first day I ever sat behind the wheel of any vehicle."

"Nah, it is not possible," said Pando the Greek.

"I swear to you, I had never so much as honked a horn in my life. I had my driving test in the morning and my interview at the top office in the afternoon, and if I hadn't passed my test, I wouldn't be standing here beside this trailer today. Sure wasn't it a stroke of luck entirely. You see, the fella doing the test was from County Kerry and recognised my brogue. He came over with a wife and five chisellers and landed the job the day he got off the boat. Isn't this a marvellous country?"

"Oh yeah, it's the best country in the world, mate," said Macca. "We know."

"I won't fault you there. I won't. I won't." Joey leaned forward and the men followed. "Sure the Kerry man told me the test consisted of five questions on general road safety and if I got the majority of them right I could drive a car that day with a new licence in my back pocket. Now, I tell you not a word of a lie here, I got three of them wrong . . . but didn't he pass me anyway!"

The men laughed at Joey's story, and Macca said, "You Irish, bloody mongrels."

Joey laughed too. "Sure, we are, we are, but I think the Kerry men are the worst. But now, maybe I'm lying there because couldn't I still never drive a car in my life, and when I got the job with the trailer that afternoon I had to ask the Kerry man to drive it home for me. I didn't know another soul in the whole country. He did as well, and do you know what he told me?"

"I wouldn't like to guess, mate," said Macca, his face was the colour red with all the laughing he'd done.

"He said, 'Set out in the early hours when there's no traffic about, to get a bit of practice.' So I did. For the first couple of weeks I drove into work at five in the morning and arrived for the job two hours early. Christ, they must've thought I was keen, or retarded, I don't know which."

Macca laughed so hard his face was wet with tears and sweat and he had to take off his hat and scratch his head. The whistle blew again for the end of the afternoon smoko and Joey found himself with a wide smile sitting on his face as he watched the men from the transport section head back to work. They were a grand bunch of fellas to have around, he thought. They were mostly gone when Macca put on his hat and turned to Joey. "Bluey Driscol, you are a bloody rogue, but a man after my own heart," he said. "You have no need to be going on the grog when you can laugh like that."

"Don't I know it," said Joey, his smile fading.

His work was done for the day and he went back to the trailer and parked it in the shade of the depot to save the paintwork and keep the fuel tank out of the sun, then he punched his time card and headed for home.

The house looked deserted when he approached it from the road. The curtains were drawn and the front door and the mozzie screen were both closed tight. He looked up and down the street. All the other houses had windows open and doors jammed with gumboots and shovels and crates to let the rare and blessed breeze pass through whenever it could. Joey put his key in the door and turned the handle, but there was no sound.

"Marti, are ye here, son?" he called out.

There was no answer and then Shauna showed herself in the hallway. "Oh, you're home," she said.

"I am. Where's the boy?"

"I don't . . . I don't know."

"You don't know? What do you mean you don't know? It's gone five o'clock." Joey slammed down his keys and felt his teeth clench tightly. "He should have been home hours ago."

"Well, I heard him come in. I told him to feed himself. He must be playing."

"Jaysus, Shauna, you should be feeding him. You're his mother." Joey shook his head. He could barely bring himself to look at his wife, standing there in her nightclothes. "Has this been you for the day, ye haven't even dressed?"

"Oh feck off, will ye?"

"The boy needs looking after. He needs his mother."

"He can mind himself."

"Isn't he only eight years old . . . Christ Almighty, will ye ever take a look at yeerself, woman." He grabbed Shauna by the arm and forced her to stare into the mirror hanging in the hallway. "Look . . . look, would ye?"

"I won't, I won't look," she said and struggled to free her arm from Joey's grip.

"Look, look at what you're doing to yourself."

"No. I won't. Leave me. *Leave me*."

Joey watched Shauna in the mirror, her face contorted, and then he threw her arm aside. "Gladly," he said and snatched up his keys, showing her his back as he walked for the door he had just come through.

2

When Mam and Dad had a fight Marti always missed what the fight was about. It was like someone had said, "Ready, steady, go," and they did. He knew he could listen forever, but there would be no clue to explain the fight. It was just what Mam and Dad did. Sometimes after a fight one of them walked off and slammed a door. If it was Dad who slammed the door, Mam would curl up on the sofa, start the bubbling with the tears and call for Marti to come and give her a hug. But if it was Mam to slam the door, Dad would sit at the kitchen table and smoke the cigarettes called Majors until she came home and say, "So, is that your tail between your legs now?"

This time it was Dad who slammed the door. Marti had come home to find Mam curled up on the sofa crying. He tried not to make a noise and creep past but Mam heard him and said, "Come here, come and give Mam a hug."

He didn't want to give Mam a hug. He felt too big to be giving her hugs all the time. He didn't want to feel too big to have Dad show him the trick with the green flower thing dancing but he wanted to be too big to give Mam a hug. Some boys at school were always getting hugs from their mam at the gate and they were called Mummy's Boys by the others, and he didn't want to be one of the Mummy's Boys.

"Marti, will you come over to me," said Mam. She was all puffy in the face and had black stuff round her eyes. There was some snot

too, some snot and a lot of wet tears on her big red puffy cheeks. She would probably give him a kiss with the hug and he might have to get some snot on him then, which wouldn't be nice, he thought.

"Marti," said Mam.

"I'm coming," he said, and when he walked over and put his arms around her she grabbed him and started the hard bubbling with the tears. Marti wondered why he had bothered, but he thought she would have started the even harder bubbling if he hadn't given her the hug. Mam hugged Marti so tight that he couldn't move, and when he even tried there were more tears and little cries like bird noises. Mam hugged him for a very long time and it started to get dark outside. He could feel his eyes closing but his mind was awake and wondering if Mam had the sadness that Dad called the Black Dog.

One time when Mam had the Black Dog Marti asked them what it was. "Sure, it's the curse of the Irish, son," said Dad. This made him confused, because when Dad had fallen in Pete's swimming pool with the leaves in it Mam had said something else was the curse of the Irish. "I thought the drink was the curse of the Irish, Dad?" said Marti.

Mam and Dad had both started to laugh very loudly.

"Sure, we're a very unfortunate nation altogether, son," said Dad when the laughing was stopped, and then he looked at Mam and spoke again. "Haven't we curses just queuing up for us."

When Marti woke in the morning Mam was still sleeping and hugging him tight. He thought maybe he should wake her to get him ready for school. Then he remembered Dad had said it was sometimes better to leave her when she had the Black Dog, because it was a bit like an illness, and when you have an illness, rest is the best thing for you.

He left Mam to sleep. He thought about saying a little prayer for her. That's what they would have said to do at school, but he knew they didn't say prayers in the Driscol house anymore. Dad said they were all a long way from a state of grace and that saying prayers at this stage would probably bring the roof down on their heads. Marti didn't want to damage the roof so he blew a little kiss to Mam and promised to be a good boy.

He washed and dressed himself and tried to make his lunchbox up and then Jono, who lived out the back, appeared at the kitchen window. "Shhh, you'll have to keep quiet. My mam's not well," said Marti.

"Okay, is that why you're so late today?" said Jono.

"I've got to make my own lunchbox."

"I wish I could make mine. You could have heaps of choco."

"I don't think we have any choco."

"Well what are you going to do? You can't make a lunchbox with no choco, Marti."

He looked around the kitchen. He could see his Mam's purse sitting up on the counter next to the empty biscuit barrel. He really wanted some choco now Jono had started on about it.

"Jono, you've got to keep quiet about this," he said, and started to reach for Mam's purse.

"Marti, what are you doing with that?"

He opened the purse and took out a blue ten dollar bill. He had never held a ten dollar bill before and it felt strange to have it in his hands. "Wow, ten bucks . . ."

"What are you gonna buy, Marti?"

"Choco!" he said, and the two boys ran out the kitchen door.

At the supermarket they filled their arms with choco bars and the counter woman looked at them like they were trouble. The most Marti had ever bought before was a big box of Froot Loops the time Mam had given him five dollars, and even then he had had to take the change back to her. When the counter woman leaned forward and asked him where the money had come from, Marti froze.

"He's buying for the whole week," said Jono.

The counter woman looked down at Jono and said, "Who's pulling your strings, matey?" Then she started to ring up the money on the till and Marti and Jono smiled. When they got outside the boys started laughing and cramming the choco into their mouths until their cheeks were full and their teeth turned brown. It was a great laugh, thought Marti, watching the choco squelch about in their mouths, and then Jono said they had better run or they'd be late.

School was all about Ned Kelly and his gang who were bush-rangers, which was like outlaws, and they had armour made from

ploughs like the kind they used to have in fields in the olden days. Marti liked the stories about Ned Kelly and his gang who went around robbing and shooting in the armour made from ploughs. He had heard all the stories about Ned Kelly and his gang from Dad, who said some people were down on poor old Ned.

"But sure wasn't that just because he had the good Irish blood in him," said Dad, and hadn't he seen the same himself. "No, Ned was just doing his bit. He was stopping the English getting the whip hand on this country, and isn't there many a man would thank him they never did."

Jono told Marti he thought it would be great to be like Ned Kelly and his gang, robbing and shooting and wearing the armour made from ploughs. Marti agreed and they both said they would like to be like Ned Kelly, then Jono said, "Do you feel a bit like a bushranger after stealing the money from your mam's purse?"

Marti felt his head go all hot. "No," he said. He knew he had been wrong to take the money and he knew he had eaten too many choco bars and now he didn't feel very well at all.

He still had four choco bars left, which would get him into trouble when he went home because Mam would say, "Where did you get them from, or do I not want to know?"

He opened up the last of the choco bars and started cramming them into his mouth, one after the other. The first two were hard to eat and the third was beginning to hurt his jaws because he had to chew so fast. When he tried to swallow the third choco bar it wouldn't go down at all, and then there was a funny feeling in his stomach that made him lean over and he was sick all over his jotter and all over his desk.

In the Nurse's Room Marti was told to lie still and wait until someone could be found to sit with him. He didn't know why it was called the Nurse's Room when there was no nurse. There never was a nurse, and then the man the teachers called Mr Spitz and the boys in class called Charlie came in and said he would wait with him awhile.

Charlie always wore the same mustard-coloured coat, except when he was in the playground or on the roof, then he would wear a big hat and a vest with holes in it. Marti liked Charlie because he

would always have a laugh and a joke with Jono and himself, and if he found tennis balls or cricket balls on the roof he would sometimes give them to the boys to keep.

"So you're a bit crook are you, sonny?" said Charlie.

"I've got a sore tummy. I ate too much choco and sicked it back up."

"Choco, eh? You can have too much of a good thing, you know." Charlie messed up Marti's hair with his big hand and said, "Well, maybe you had to learn your lesson the hard way." Marti didn't want to learn any more lessons the hard way, and he wished he had never taken the blue ten dollar bill. He wondered if he would be in trouble for being sick all over his jotter and all over his desk and if Mam and Dad would find out. If they ever found out there would be trouble for sure, thought Marti, and he curled over in the bed and groaned.

"Now, now," said Charlie, "I'm sure it can't be all that bad . . . and your dad's on his way to collect you. Doesn't that make you feel better? You can spend the rest of the day at home."

Marti didn't feel better at all. He didn't want to go home either because Mam might say there was a dear price to pay for Dad taking time off from working and earning their keep. Dad couldn't be taking time off to collect him because wasn't it the working and the working alone that kept the roof over their heads, like he said. Mam must be really bad with the sadness called the Black Dog, thought Marti. If she couldn't even come to collect him from school then she might even still be curled up on the sofa.

He didn't know what he would say to make it better. He knew Dad wouldn't give him a row, Dad never gave out the rows. It was always Mam who would shout and say, "That's you for the hot arse." Dad never gave out the rows, or the hot arse, and sometimes Mam and Dad would row because Dad wouldn't give out the rows or the hot arse.

Marti felt the guilt for taking the money now and he wondered, would he be the one to blame for another fight at home? One time when he had been really bad and caused a flood trying to sail a boat in the bath, Mam said he was a bold boy, which is what the Irish say when a boy is bad. He had gone beyond the beyonds and was in big trouble when his dad got home.

When Dad got home he didn't really get angry, though. He only said if he had done that when he was a boy his own father would have taken a belt to him. He said that money didn't grow on trees and that everything had to be bought and paid for and he couldn't afford to be flooding the place for a laugh and a joke. He said if he had so much as thought of causing a flood at home when he was a boy, his father would have made sure he couldn't sit for a week. He said his father played in the All-Ireland Hurling Final and could heft a belt like no man before or since, and if he had a drink in him you never knew whether you were going to get the buckle across your legs as well.

Marti felt sad to think of Dad getting the buckle across his legs when he was a boy and wished he had been good so Dad wouldn't have to tell him the story again, or to take the time off from working and earning their keep. He could see Dad shaking his head sometime soon and saying, "Well, this is a fine state of affairs with your mam sick abroad in the house."

A great lump swelled in Marti's throat, caused by the sadness he felt for being such a bold boy and adding to all the troubles they already had at home, because now he knew there would be more troubles to come.

his father's son

"A moving and evocative tale, a heartfelt examination of the bond between fathers and sons, and about the baggage one generation passes on to the next."
– Doug Johnstone, author of GONE AGAIN

Australia is the Lucky Country, and Joey Driscol knows it. It's a far cry from his native Ireland, but he believes this is the place he and his wife Shauna can make a new life and forget the troubles of the past. For a time, they do just that, and soon welcome their son Marti into the family.

But as the years pass, this new life thousands of miles from the Old Country comes under threat. Joey's wife has been struggling with demons of her own, their marriage is on the rocks and suddenly, Shauna disappears and takes Marti with her. Joey is beside himself, with no clues about where they are, with both his childhood sweetheart and his son – his pride and joy – now missing.

Then, when Joey gets word that his wife and son have returned to Ireland, he knows that he'll now have to do the same if he ever wants to see them again. And he also knows that he'll finally have to confront the ghosts of his past that he's been running from for years.

His Father's Son is a touching and beautiful story of a family struggling to come to terms with their past, their present and an uncertain future.

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