

Where Are the Kings

NOT FOR CIRCULATION

Also by Donal Ryan

The Spinning Heart
The Thing About December
All We Shall Know
From a Low and Quiet Sea
Strange Flowers
A Slanting of the Sun: Stories
The Queen of Dirt Island
Heart, Be at Peace

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For Thomas Ryan, with love and pride

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- What is he doing now?
- Oh! he is fighting the waves.
- He sees King Conchobar's crown on every one of them.
- There, he has struck at a big one. He has struck the crown off it, he has made the foam fly. There again another big one.
- Where are the Kings? What are the Kings doing?
- They are shouting and running down to the shore, and the people are all running out of the houses, they are all running.

—*On Baile's Strand*, W. B. Yeats

1

tempus edax

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the good boy

He was always a good boy.

Even before he was born. He never caused his mother a twinge of pain while she carried him nor was she ever sick in the mornings or sleepless at night like so many other women. He arrived in the world with a single shout, like a little hello, and that was how she knew he was out. She hardly felt a thing. He never caused her the slightest bother.

Jack wishes he could remember those times, being carried inside her, being part of her, floating in her warm space. In moments like this, sitting on her lap in the kitchen with the wind blowing outside and the rain running in rivers down the window-pane, he can feel her heat joining with his, her heartbeat in his ear, his own heart beating in rhythm, their breaths in rhythm, the gentle up and down of her lap in rhythm with their heartbeats and their breaths so they're a single being in the small kitchen by the stove on this rainy day in winter. A good boy and his mother.

By the window now he stands and Mam is in the kitchen making dinner. Up the windy rainy avenue comes Dad. His bicycle has red and blue insulating tape all along the crossbar keeping the brake line in place. It's an old bike with only one gear but Dad loves it. It's never once let him down except the one time that the brake line came loose and he was nearly killed out near Hogan's Pass but the car that was coming stopped in time and it turned out to be an old pal of his from the slate quarry that he hadn't seen in a long time. That was the silver lining to the cloud of his broken brake.

Dad would have taken the car if he'd known how wet it was going to be cycling home. He hasn't even his waterproofs on. His hair is wet and his clothes are sopping and he drags in water and muck across the floor but Mam says nothing, just sighs and tells him to take off all his clothes and put them in the wash basket. Dad stands naked in front of the stove. He's hairy all over and white as a ghost. His eyes are closed and he's breathing deeply through his nose. Oh boy, he says then, like an American. Oh boy, oh boy, that's some smell. It's only chops, Mam says. Chops, Dad says, and his voice is wet and his eyes are still closed, like the chops are something he sees in a dream and not in the frying pan on the cooker where Mam is standing, looking at him, smiling, saying, Jesus Christ Almighty. What a sight.

There doesn't have to be a reason for crying. Sometimes crying just starts itself up in a person and the person has no control over it. Mam's shoulders move up and down when she cries and she covers her face with one hand and the other hand acts like it doesn't know what to do, like it's embarrassed, like it's trying

to act busy, reaching for things that aren't there. He sympathizes with Mam's embarrassed hand. He doesn't know himself what to do. He asks her if she's all right. She makes a sound behind her hand and nods her head yes. But still she's crying. He shouts in his head: KURVA! DO PRDELE! He thinks the words in Dad's voice, in Dad's funny elastic accent, the words from home that Dad only uses when things are going really, really wrong. Jack would never say them out loud but they're good words to have inside, to be able to say in an inside voice, like Dad's.

Nana comes to stay sometimes and she and Dad are the best of friends these days, and Nana loves to hear Dad's stories about what it was like to grow up in Czechoslovakia, about his grandfather's pig farm and the giant sow who ruled the pens and the fields. Lord, Nana says, it's a sight, she sounds so like a pig we had at home. In the outer space of time before Jack was born, when Mam and Dad lived in photos with their hair long and their clothes flowery and a shine in their eyes and from their cheeks, there was something between Mam's family and Dad. Bad blood. Bad blood there was between them but that has all been forgotten now. Dad is even nearly friendly now with Mam's brothers, Theo and Haulie, when they meet by accident the odd time on the street downtown. They're gas men, Dad says, speaking in their voice but not in a mocking way. Mam says, They *are*, they're funny all right, but in a voice that makes you think she's thinking something different to what she says.

Nana is coming tomorrow, Mam says, and Dad says, Good. Good, good. And he looks at Mam across the table and she looks back and the good boy eats his dinner and thinks about the things that Nana might bring. A Dinky car, maybe, or a Lego set, or a book about animals or space. He secretly kind of

hopes not a book but if it is he'll say thanks anyway, and hug her like he always does. He came out of Mam who came out of Nana who came out of another woman and back and back and back to Eve, Adam's wife, the first woman. Not the best woman, though. She caused murder, that lady, and everyone's been paying the price ever since. What about Adam, though? Nana would say, Yerra, what about him? He wasn't much of a man, anyway. He couldn't keep his house in order, the dopy prick. Set us all on the path to ruin.

The sun, the sun. From where the trouble comes. The moon, the moon, with whom my waters run. The stars, the stars, to where my spirits rise. The earth, the earth, the apple of my eyes.

Dad looks up at the sky when he says his poem. He looks along the houses and across the road and he salutes the people that pass outside the garden on the path. Hello, Tom, the people say, and look away. No one stops to hear the poem. Mam calls for him to come in. Will you come in out of it, please. Tomáš, come in out of it. Jack, will you bring your father in? But he can't bring him in. He pulls on his hand but Dad isn't movable from the spot where he stands saying his poem. Someone shouts from down the road, Good man, Tom! And from the other end of the road someone else shouts, *Go back to Germany, you mad bastard*, but Dad doesn't reply, not even to correct his nationality, and the voices fade away on the wind.

Dad drives the Fiat too fast along the road to Birr. What's taking us to Birr anyway? The arsehole of nowhere. The castle, Dad says. The castle. The telescope. I want Jack to see it. The famous telescope. But you can't even look through the blasted thing,

Mam says, and straight after she says it she screams because Dad is overtaking on a bend and the man driving the car that's being overtaken is shouting something they can't hear and his eyes are open wide and they're round the bend now and back in by the ditch but Mam is still screaming at Dad that he's a bastard, does he want them all dead, if he wants to die that's his own business not theirs, not mine or Jack's, that's your own business, Tomáš Frištenský, if *you* want to die. And Dad says nothing back to her but he slows the car right down and after a little while of silence he says, Look here, and he nods smiling into the rear-view mirror, and when Jack looks back he sees the man they passed out on the bend and he's driving right up behind them now and flashing his lights and shaking his fist up and down and Dad is laughing and saying, Jeepers, this fella has his knickers in a mighty big twist! Jack laughs too, because the way Dad says things sometimes is just so funny.

When they get to the castle grounds the sun is out and the sky is mostly blue. The telescope is locked away inside a high narrow house with a dome on its roof but Dad stands there for a while with his hands on his hips and he tells Mam and Jack that the first time ever that a galaxy was seen besides the Milky Way was in that house. That *observatory*, Dad says, carefully, sounding the word out slowly, looking down at Jack while he says it. A man sat down in there one time years and years ago and he looked through the lens of a machine that he'd built himself, out past the sun and all the stars, and he saw that there were other galaxies besides our own, that the heavens were immeasurable and that galaxies turn, that they spiral around and around. And Dad drew on the air with a stretched finger a spiral getting smaller and smaller, and he said, The thing they spiral around

you know is *nothing*. A point of no volume but infinite mass. Imagine that! But Jack couldn't. He knew what the words all meant yet couldn't make sense of them. But Dad seemed happy with his words, and there was no one here to see him make the spirals in the air or to hear him declare his wonder, or to hear him say again, The stars, the stars, to where my spirits rise.

Mam says, Come on, we'll go see are the swans at home. And they walk along a path worn through the grass by thousands of other feet to the lake, where the swans float regally, ignoring them, and they stand all three of them, mother, father and child, in the dying day, in the safety of each other, at the lip of the well of their lives.

That's what he remembers now the most. When Rose or Theo or Haulie or his Nana sits down beside him on the bed and says, Good lad, try to go sleep now, good lad, he remembers the heat of his mother's hand that day by the lake at the far end of the path from the telescope, and his father's hand, and the snobby swans and the ripples on the water and the sound of the breeze through the stands of reeds and bulrushes. He remembers the pulse against his palms of his parents' hearts, and he imagines the spot at the middle of the galaxy with no volume and infinite mass, the impossibleness of that thing, but the fact of it all the same.

And he allows the other memory to slide down along the spiral arms of the Milky Way towards that spot, the memory of the Fiat reversing out the drive and swinging wide and out of the estate and up towards Stoney's Hill, and the burning in his chest as he cycled out onto the main road on his racer, and the feeling in his legs like they were on fire, and his chest *was* on fire

as he crested Portroe Hill and freewheeled down the other side. And he followed the road and the sawing sound of his father's car with its holey exhaust, rising up and up with the revs, and the sound stopped and he pedalled on, and he nearly fell on the downward fly towards the lake, and he did fall then on the last bend, skidding across the damp road on a skin of mulching leaves. And he left the racer and ran the last stretch to the lakeshore, along the narrow car park, empty save for one car, not able to feel his legs or his arms or to get from his mouth any sound though he was trying to shout out, Come back, please, wait for me, please, towards the place where the rusty Fiat was parked, but there was no one inside it, there was no one anywhere, on the forest path or by the swings or at the edge of the water, but there was something in the water, out a good stone's throw from shore, bobbing up then disappearing, reappearing, disappearing, and the waves were swapping places on the shingle beach, and the water was cold on his legs and on his body and on his mother's body the water was cold.

