

## The Son

The night his father died he smelt brandy on his mother's breath. The syrupy stench added as Jonathan rushed to hold a limp hand.

Father's life stuttered as he lay flat against the bedsheets. It was the 29<sup>th</sup> of December, 20 days since his dad's 59<sup>th</sup> birthday. A young man, a dad of four, a person people called The Life of the Party. The family followed the ambulance to the hospital but he was pronounced dead shortly after.

At home, his brown leather shoes were kicked off under the coffee table. The definition of cruel casualness. Nobody moved them for weeks. Jonathan was 23 years old but shared a bed that night with his smallest sister. Cheek to cheek he told her, shivering, that everything was going to be ok.

The morning of the funeral, his sister shaved Mother's legs. Neither spoke a word. Struck dumb with shock and sadness they padded themselves in black armour and went to put him in the frosty ground.

The night Jonathan was born, Father returned from the hospital to the village where they lived, tear-streaked and awestruck. He turned every light on in the pub, a corner building on Main Street called *The Rise*. Locals understood the beacon and a Hooley ensued – even the Gardaí in the police station next door joined the celebrations for the first son of a proud man.

When the family moved five years later to a house overlooking the sea, home was always bustling – fires lit, friends over, lights blazing, easy laughs. But Father's death extinguished

every light in an instant. The house, too big suddenly, thick with nothing, exposed. Like a sleeping rock, overturned, and crawling with ugly things.

A few weeks later, the dignity of ceremony gave way. The hidden bottles Jonathan had carefully ignored all those years began being placed on countertops. Blatant, un-ignorable, meaningful. While they were dripping in grief, Mother was drowning in it. Together almost 40 years, her loss was immeasurable. Yet she began to think she could measure it by the glassful. Her fragile relationship with alcohol, one they'd whispered about since they were teens, exploded into a full-blown session that threatened to overshadow everyone's right to grieve.

She felt justified in seeking some kind of solace in the amber liquid found by her bed. Her drunken tears heartbreakingly moving yet repulsive to them as the grown-up children struggled to find Mother beneath this haggard woman with the swollen face. *My loss*, she'd mutter meanly as John steered her towards her bed. *Nobody could possibly understand what I'm going through. Puff*, she'd add cruelly, slurring. Then forgetting. The truth is that once Father died, Mother died too. Since his death, her ghost haunted Jonathan. Ever-present, entirely emotionally unavailable, forever tormented. Like every good son, he mopped up the mess. Hid bottles, drained cans, made excuses and gently brushed matted hair. He was simply Son back then. Not yet a father himself. Roles were reversed. He spooned her soup and organised bills. But beneath the drinking lay dormant emotional problems nobody could have fathomed. The Father's death had exposed them to things the man had always sought to protect.

Jonathan sniffed the air now each time he entered the tall house next to the LexIcon library in Dún Laoghaire, instantly deciphering whether or not she'd been drinking. Her lies were extraordinarily sophisticated. In her mind, a protection of sorts from the only way she could

function through such ragged pain. He'd stare at the sea for hours, believing that the answer might ride in on the next jagged wave. But Jonathan still had to function in the actual world. His job as a photographer taking off simultaneously. Should I lock her in her room in case she falls down the stairs? He asked his away-at-college sisters. All the way to a shoot he'd imagine scenarios that would result in her harming herself. Would he find her at the bottom of the stairs? He'd hold his breath as he turned the key in the door of the tall dark house. How *are* you? Friends asked kindly of their recently-bereaved mate. But where could he start? How could he put into words what was happening all around? He called doctors and hospitals, dragged her to waiting rooms and counsellors' offices with sad chairs and powerless faces that nodded back at him sadly. He wrote devastating pages at family day at rehabilitation centres and read them out shakily in a room lined with red couches and more silent faces. Afterwards, she hissed at him to stop embarrassing her. He found her drunk three days later. His carefully written words stung like bile in his throat.

Fool.

Then he had his first panic attack. The thought of what he'd find when he returned home in the dark, mixed with the misery of missing his dad and the powerlessness to fix the situation shorted his fragile circuits. One May evening, as he curled around the coast road in his tiny red Mini, he temporarily lost his mind. He pulled over by the pier and tried to breath slowly into the salty night air . Instead his breath came out ragged as sobs. Huge, unadulterated gulps of sadness and fear. He was all alone, stuck in this world of grief mixed with worry. An orphan by circumstance. And for those few moments, in the privacy of his adult toy car, Jonathan cried for his dad, for his poor sick mother, for himself and his devastation. He let himself remember the song they used to duet to at parties – *House of the Rising Sun* – a nod

to the family business, and a pretty great song all the same. He on guitar, Dad's gravelly voice to his right, perfectly keeping time, closing his eyes to hit all the high notes.

*My mother was a tailor*

*She sewed my new blue jeans*

*My father was a gamblin' man*

*Down in New Orleans*

He remembered the day he finally opened up to him about his life. His choice to love men.

And Father telling him fiercely that he should be who he wanted to be, that he was proud of him no matter what. And that he would make sure no one would ever hurt him. *Hold your head up, always.*

But in a tragic roundabout way, Father had broken his heart simply by dying. And now he didn't know how to fix it.