

# THE DECADES

by John Boyne

---

10

He hides under the blanket and presses the palms of his hands against his ears so he can't hear the sound of shouting from the kitchen; it makes him feel as if he's underwater. His father came home drunk again, spoiling for a fight and when his mother fought back he called her a name, she called him a worse one, and he hit her. Slapped her in the face so hard that it sounded like two pieces of wood falling flat on top of each other.

'That was your own fault,' he told her, wiping a strand of spittle off his lower lip. 'You were askin' for that.'

She waited a moment or two before throwing herself at him with a scream, her fingers curled into talons, ready to tear into his skin, to draw out his blood, but he was too strong for her and he had her wrists in his hands. He was snarling as if he was enjoying the passion of the moment and that was when they noticed him standing in the doorway, watching them, his eyes wide, his mouth open. He said nothing, just breathed tiny gasps in fright. They roared at him together. *Get to bed, you!* He took off at a pace and ran to his room; he's taken refuge under the sheets where he can pretend that the things going on downstairs aren't going on downstairs at all.

On his bedside table are some pencils and a sketch book; he wants to draw a picture but if he does he'll have to sit up and then he'll hear them again.

20

Two years of college are over and he's celebrating with his friends. He's telling them a story about a game he played the previous Saturday. The defender on the other team, he'd been trying his luck throughout the whole match, coming at him whenever he had the ball, never giving him a chance. But hold on, he says, that's not the story.

At half-time he'd collared the guy on the way back to the changing rooms and told him he better lay off him in the second half or he'd take him out. Your man had just told him where to get off and he'd been about to grab him and shove him up against the wall but there was the coach standing in front of him and he'd had to let him go. But hold on, he tells them, that's not the story either.

He'd given him fair warning but when the match started again he was still at him all the time so he made a tackle himself and took the legs out from under the guy and someone thought he'd broken one of the guy's legs and the referee had blown his whistle and sent him off. No wait, he says, even that's not the story.

The story is that he'd seen the ref the following night, late, walking down a street in the city centre, so he'd come up behind him and given him a pasting that he wouldn't forget. *That's* the story, he tells them.

He's been working there for six years and she's only new so he tried to be friendly, he said he'd show her the ropes, and it looked like she appreciated it too. He showed her how to fix the photocopy machine when the paper jammed and how to patch calls through to other phones if they came to you by mistake. He was the one who told her to come along to the pub with them when it was that girl from marketing's birthday and she'd sat beside him all night and got a little drunk and didn't seem to mind when he leaned over a little closer than he should have done and told her that she was a lot nicer to look at first thing in the morning than the foreign piece who'd been there before her.

And now here she is, strolling in like she owns the place and telling everyone who'll listen about the wedding she went to over the weekend down the country, her boyfriend's brother, and it was in some castle in Mayo because he comes from money, and this is the first he's ever heard of a boyfriend. He thought she was alright but she's just a tart like the rest of them.

He waits until she goes into the kitchen for a coffee and then he stands in the doorway when she's trying to leave.

'Howaya,' she says, as if nothing's happened, trying to get past him. He moves when she moves. He blocks her way. 'Excuse me,' she says then, smiling as if it's a joke and stepping to her left. He moves in front of her again.

'What are you doing?' she asks, her smile fading a little as she sees his expression. 'Can I get out?' He moves when she moves again and she's blocked again.

'Is this supposed to be funny?' she asks and now he steps aside slowly but only a little so she has to brush past him. She looks back at him, confused, and he just stares at her.

40

He swore he wouldn't do it again, she'd made him promise after the first time, and he'd meant it too. He walks around the kitchen wondering what to do for the best, whether he should go up and speak to her or not, but he can't make his mind up and before he does she's downstairs anyway, with the two kids on either side of her, staring at him as if they don't even know him, and a couple of bags in her hands.

'I'm going to my mam's,' she says, more out of sorrow than anything else.

'Don't,' he says, stepping forward and although she doesn't step back, she holds a hand out to stop him. 'Please,' he says. 'I don't know what came over me. It was a mistake. I'm under so much... I just lashed out, that's all.'

'I told you last time,' she says, stepping over to him now and speaking quietly so the kids won't hear her. He listens and marvels at how controlled her voice is; she's not frightened of him at all. He has to admire that. She's nothing like his mother; she was a woman who fought back. This woman, she'll just leave. 'Once was a mistake, and I told you then that if you did it again I'd be gone. And you did it again. So I'm gone.'

'Please,' he says, his voice cracking. 'If you'd just... let me...' He wants to explain to her. This is his moment. His pain is so much at times that he can't bear it. He has memories. Of before. Of when he was a kid himself. He wants to tell her, to ask her to help him, but she's turned away. And she's picked up the bags. And she's taken the kids by the hands. And she's out the door.

He sits in the pub and watches the fight on the telly. He can't believe that a lad from his own home town is out there in Las Vegas, taking on the best in the world.

'I've got fifty quid on him taking that black bastard out in three rounds,' he tells Mick, the barman who's wary of him.

'Ah here now,' says Mick, running the cloth over the counter before him. 'Tone that down there, if you please.'

He glances across at him for a moment and turns away with a snort. He didn't mean anything by it. Everyone is so on edge these days that you can say nothing, nothing at all. He thinks for a moment. Did he hear that Mick was married to a black woman? Or an immigrant, maybe? Something like that. It doesn't matter. He orders another drink and watches the fight.

It's the third round now, the round he has his money on, and the lad from his home town is ducking and diving, weaving in and out. *Come on*, he says, punching his arms a little in the air himself, as if he's shadow-boxing. *Hit him low*. He watches the ticker on the side of the screen. Time's running out. A punch is thrown and he's down, he's down, and his heart jumps but it's the wrong lad on the canvas. The black bastard is strutting around like the king of Las Vegas and he knows it's all over, fifty quid is wasted, honour is lost. *For fuck's sake*, he shouts, screams, at the top of his voice and every head in the place turns his way and he's embarrassed by it. He'd like to go home but to what? There's no one there.

The walls of the new place are paper thin but it's all he can afford now. The pension is gone the first day and the money he saved is barely enough to live on. She bled him dry and the kids bled him dry and he's got nothing for himself now only this new place. It's warm though and that's something.

A new couple have moved in next door, they're only young and they're at it all the time, day and night, and he can hear every twist and turn and grunt of their rutting, and sometimes he likes to sit and listen, like something on the radio, and other times he gets angry and thinks will they not just leave him alone, stop tormenting him with their dirty fun. Tonight it's gone to hell. It's a joke. He storms over and bangs on their door.

'Shut up in there, will you,' he roars. 'There's people trying to sleep.'

There's silence for a moment, then he hears their feet scampering down the hallway towards the door, like two mice in a kitchen cupboard. He can feel them pressed up against the door, taking turns to look at him through the peephole.

'Fleck off,' says the lad inside but he doesn't sound sure of himself; he doesn't open the door anyway.

'You pair keep the noise down, youse dirty feckers, or I swear I'll make you regret it, do you hear me?'

He hears whispering now and then a girl's voice laughing and they scamper off again and he goes back to his flat, tries to read the paper, but they start again and he's too tired to do anything about it. He goes into his bed and pulls the covers up over his head. He's fully dressed. He rotates his palms against his ears to block their sounds out. It feels like he's underwater.

It's years since he was here and it takes him a long time to find the grave. When he does he's surprised by how neat it is as he can't imagine who takes care of it. There are no flowers here, nothing as grand as that, but the grass is trimmed and there aren't any cans lying around either, or used rubbers, which he saw once before at a cemetery in Donnycarney. Six of them together; he'd thought about that for days.

He prods his stick into the ground over the coffins and leans on it a little. His breath is gone. It was a walk from the bus stop to here and his legs aren't good anymore. He squints his eyes and reads the dates on the stone. She only outlived him by two years in the end. His father went when he walked into a bus on Talbot Street and his mother got the cancer soon after and that was the end of her. She'd been set free by that bus but it wasn't to be.

He remembers his father. A tough, proud man. He starts to feel a little dizzy. Will his children visit his grave when he's gone, he wonders. It's unlikely. Sure he hasn't laid eyes on either of them since the millennium. He knows he has a grandchild but for the life of them he can't remember which of them had it, or what they had. A boy or a child.

The ground isn't even beneath his feet and he steps down as hard as he can to level it. His shoes don't make enough of an impression so he stamps harder. He presses down on the earth, wanting to kick through, wanting to grind into dust the bones of the people who lie below.