

WE ALL GET HURT BY LOVE

by John Boyne

I'm waiting for her at home; I'm always waiting for her. She comes through the door just as I'm putting the place mats on the table, setting the knife and fork down beside them, moving the salt and pepper to the centre and then changing my mind, putting them closer to her side so that she can reach them without having to ask. I smile when I see her, I come towards her, I kiss her, I place a hand against her stomach for a moment but she pulls away sharply. *Don't*. She's starting to show at last. Every day my ties to her grow stronger and every day I know that I'm losing her a little bit more. She didn't think I was anything special when we met, I know that. But now she's stuck with me. She's settled. For now.

'Just in time,' I say.

'Just in time for what?' she asks, taking her jacket off and throwing it on a chair. I go over and pick it up; I bought a coat-stand over the weekend and set it up in the hallway and that's where items like this belong in a home. She hasn't mentioned it.

'Just in time for dinner,' I tell her. 'It's nothing special, I'm afraid.'

The smell coming through to the living room from the kitchen makes a liar of me immediately. I've been chopping vegetables and reducing tomatoes for most of the afternoon. I know the types of food she likes – nothing spicy, nothing pretentious – but she's been having mood swings lately, cravings. It's hard to know what to cook for her.

'Busy day?' I ask her and she shrugs.

'They're driving me crazy,' she says, or mutters to the room anyway as she's not looking in my direction.

'Who are?'

'Those bloody students. I worked my way around the class today, asking each one what they were reading and they looked at me as if I wanted them to list the security council members of the United Nations. I don't understand them. They want to be writers but not one of them ever picks up a book. Does that make any sense to you?'

I shrug. She can see I'm thinking of something to say but then I don't read much either and she won't like it if I defend them. It's best just to change the subject.

'How are you?' I ask her. 'How are you feeling?'

'Fine,' she says, turning away from me. 'Better than I was this morning anyway.'

She was sick this morning; nauseous and noisy. That's normal, they say. I've started reading the books so I know something about it. I tried to hold her hair while she threw up in the toilet but she pulled away from me and told me to get out and close the door, to just leave her alone. If she wasn't pregnant she wouldn't be with me, I know that. But she is. It has no future, I know that too. She'll leave me soon. When she feels more confident about being alone. But not yet.

'Did you take anything?'

She shakes her head. 'I ate some dry biscuits in my office between classes but they made me feel worse. I don't know why people say they're good for you.'

'They settle your stomach,' I tell her. 'It's something to do with the starches, I think.'

'How would you know? Have you ever been pregnant?'

No, but I've developed an interest in the chemistry of biology. I wonder whether her sudden mood changes have anything to do with the way the blood traffics through her system. Or whether it's a hormonal matter inflicted by the life within. And I'd like to know why I feel so alive when she's standing near me, despite the lack of love in her eyes. This has no future, I know that, but I'm clinging on. It aches to be around her.

As we eat dinner I tell her about Pete's phone call.

'I don't have to go,' I tell her. 'I could stay in if you'd prefer it. We could rent a movie.'

She shrugs. 'I'm probably going to have a bath and an early night anyway,' she says. 'I wouldn't be very good company.'

'I don't like leaving you on your own.'

'Why not?' she asks, looking up with genuine wonder on her face.

'In case...' I think about it. I say those two words without knowing how the sentence will progress. 'In case you need me,' I say finally.

She stares at me. 'Why would I need you?' she asks.

'You might feel sick again.'

'If I do, there's nothing you can do to help me. No, you go out with Pete. Have a good time. I don't mind.'

The first time I asked her to dance, she used that phrase. *I don't mind*. She only started seeing me because she wanted him to know that she could move on. It was only a couple of months after he left her. She only kept seeing me because she knew he'd hear about it. She

thought he'd come back but he was with someone else by then. It kills her, I know it does. She loves him. And then this happened, so she stayed with me. Sometimes I wonder what I can do to make her love me. Leave her, perhaps.

'I'd like to stay in,' I tell her then. 'I haven't seen you all day.'

'Honestly, I just want a bath and a book and to try and get some sleep.'

'Well if you're sure,' I say. 'He did sound quite down on the phone. Said he needed to talk to me and it had to be tonight.' I didn't pay too much attention when he said this; Pete's known for his dramatics.

'Just try not to wake me when you come in,' she says. 'When you and Pete and Jake get together, you always come back drunk and make a racket.'

'Jake won't be there,' I tell her. 'It's just Pete and I, apparently.'

'How come?'

'I don't know. He said he needed to talk to me privately.' She raises an eyebrow but doesn't say anything. 'I'll stay in if you want me to.'

'But I don't want you to,' she says.

I stare down at my plate. I've spent a lot of time preparing this meal but I can't face eating any of it. She thinks I've trapped her. It drives her crazy that everything I want is in this room and that everything she wants is somewhere else.

She'll leave me sooner or later. But not yet.

He's waiting for me in the pub when I get there and when he looks up and sees me I notice that he sits forward slightly and puts a hand to his stomach as if he's not feeling very well either. I feel like I'm surrounded by sick people. He's got the table we prefer, the one by the fireplace where we can watch people coming in and out. I nod in his direction but go to the bar first, ordering two beers because I can see his pint is nearly finished. He must have been here a while which is odd, because I'm ten minutes early myself.

'Thanks,' he says when I sit down, taking the pint from me and setting it down beside his first one, which he raises to his lips and almost drains.

'Steady on,' I say, because everyone knows Pete can't drink much. 'It's early yet. What time did you get here at anyway?'

‘Not long,’ he says. ‘I had a stressful day. I needed this.’

I guess that he must have come straight from work because his fingernails are still a little stained with engine oil; they look as if he gave them one quick wash in the garage sink and left it at that.

‘You didn’t mind coming out, did you?’ he asks me. ‘You’d nothing special on?’

‘Well we were going to have a quiet night in,’ I say, as if this is what she wanted and saying it will make it so. ‘But it’s fine. It’s good to see you.’

‘Right,’ he says, looking away for a moment. ‘How’s that going anyway?’ he asks and I shrug. I don’t like to let on the truth.

‘It’s good,’ I say. ‘She’s not been too well lately though. Morning sickness, you know how it is.’

Pete nods and looks over towards the fruit machine, where someone has just struck the jackpot. I can see flecks of grey in the sides of his hair. He’s twenty-six now – we both are – and it surprises me that the signs of ageing have become apparent already. I see him too often to know for sure whether his face is growing older. I wonder whether mine is and whether he notices such things.

‘Just the two of us then?’ I ask him and he nods.

‘Yes,’ he says. ‘I had a few with Jake last night and I think he was the worse for it today. He’s probably at home.’

I frown; this surprises me. Jake’s the third point in our triangle; we’ve known each other since we were kids and it feels strange that we’re here without him. That’s not something we usually do. ‘I didn’t know you were going out last night,’ I say.

‘We just ran into each other in town,’ he explains. ‘Went for a quick one and it just seemed to go on and on. We hadn’t planned it.’

I nod. I feel aggrieved and hate myself for it. It’s ridiculous. I’m the one who’s always saying how we should be allowed to do things with each other without the third one feeling left out but when it’s me I always assume there’s some motive behind it. I’m paranoid, I know that. And I’m wrong, I know that too. They’re my oldest friends, my closest friends. There’s nothing that can come between us.

There’s an uneasy silence at the table. Pete looks uncomfortable and I don’t know why. There’s an atmosphere and it must have something to do with last night, with whatever Jake

and he were talking about. I want to know but I can wait. He wants to tell me, I can see it in him. But not yet.

‘So what happened with that bloke?’ I ask him.

‘What bloke?’ he asks, turning back to face me and looking at me as if he’s just woken up out of a deep sleep and has no idea what either of us are doing there.

‘That bloke you were telling me about,’ I say. ‘Richard or Raymond or something.’

‘Robert,’ he says quietly.

‘Yeah, Robert,’ I say. ‘What happened with him?’

He shrugs and sighs deeply as he takes a long, slow drink and then stares at the glass before setting it down. ‘Nothing much,’ he says finally. ‘He called me, we went out, the usual.’

‘Are you seeing him again?’

‘No,’ he says quickly. ‘I didn’t like him. He keeps calling me but I’m not interested.’

I laugh. Pete’s black and white; it’s one of the things I like most about him. ‘You said you did like him,’ I point out. ‘You told me two weeks ago you thought there was something there.’

‘I always think there’s something there,’ Pete says. ‘And there never is.’

‘Ok,’ I say and I think that maybe I should change the subject. Pete’s relationships never work out. He hasn’t had it easy. The only guy he ever really liked, as far as I know, was a book illustrator called Mike who was horrible to him and made him miserable for a couple of years. Jake and I couldn’t stand him and he hated us too. He was a nasty piece of work, that Mike. Everyone could see it. Pete could see it too but he didn’t care; he loved him, I guess.

‘What’s up?’ I say finally, because I can see that there’s something on his mind. This isn’t just a friendly drink. There’s something going on.

‘Nothing,’ he says, but he can’t look me in the eye.

‘Don’t give me that,’ I say. ‘I can tell by looking at you. There’s something wrong.’

He hesitates and I think I see him nod his head but I’m not sure. He bites his lip a little and his eyes close. When he looks up again, he seems pale and nervous.

‘Do you love her?’ he asks me and I sit back, surprised by the question.

‘What?’ I ask him.

‘I said do you love her? Just tell me the truth, do you or don’t you?’

If anyone else asked me that, even if Jake asked me that, I’d tell them where to stick it. But this is Pete. And he can ask me anything.

‘Of course I do,’ I say. ‘You know I do.’

'But does she love you?' he says immediately, as if he'd been anticipating this reply.

'She's pregnant,' I point out, as if that's any kind of answer. 'We're... you know. We're having a baby.'

'Jake says -'

'Here we go,' I say, sitting back, starting to feel a little aggrieved. I don't like the idea of the two of them sitting around bad-mouthing us. Bad-mouthing her.

'No,' he says quickly, raising a hand, interrupting me. 'Jake likes her, you know that.'

'But what? You don't?'

'I like her,' he says in an unconvincing tone.

I hesitate and feel like laughing. 'It doesn't matter,' I say. 'You don't know her very well, that's all it is. You'll get to know her. She doesn't change things, you know. Between us. Between any of us.'

He shrugs and can't hold my gaze. I don't know what's the matter with him tonight. He's always been quite emotional, I know that. But our friendship is a loving one. We don't keep secrets from each other and we like to talk about our feelings. We're like a bunch of girls, that's what Jake's girlfriend says, and she's right. I can see how much pain he has bottled up inside him. He has so much to give and can never find anyone who wants to accept it.

'I have to talk to you about something,' he says finally, exhaling so deeply that he sounds like a deflating balloon. 'And I need you just to hear me out and not say anything until I'm done, ok?'

I sit back and frown. My stomach churns with anxiety. All I can think is – he's gay, he's caught something. Even though I hate myself for buying the cliché. 'Shoot,' I say then, and he does.

I walk towards the bathroom, even though I don't need to go. I hope there's no one else in there and there isn't. I think about going into one of the stalls for a moment and just sitting there and thinking about all of this, but instead I stand at the sink, my hands on either side of the bowl and slowly turn my face up to stare at my reflection.

She doesn't love me. And having a baby isn't going to make her love me. Love is not something she feels for me. She knows *how* it feels, of course. She's experienced it. It's still there in her head. For him. It doesn't matter to her that I love her. It's simply irrelevant.

And this means that I do not have any love in my life because it's not enough just to feel it for her, I want to feel it pouring over me too, like a waterfall. I want to drown in it. And I don't. I wonder how long we will continue to pretend. I narrow my eyes now and look at my face, as if it belongs to someone else, someone I distrust or despise. Someone I'm going to pick a fight with. I wonder what kind of father I will be and settle on the words *a bad one*. I should walk away. I know I should. Instead I go back outside and while I've been gone, Pete has ordered two more drinks, perhaps out of worry that I would leave on my return. If that's what he thinks, he doesn't know me at all. I sit there and say nothing and then raise my drink and clink it against the side of his.

'Cheers,' I say.

He nods and takes only a sip from his glass now while I take a longer drink. I'd like to feel drunk. His hands are trembling slightly. We say nothing for a few moments and then he looks at me nervously. 'Are you mad at me?' he asks.

'No,' I say quickly, shaking my head, wanting to reassure him, even though I don't know what he expects me to feel or how he expects me to respond to what he's just told me. 'No, of course I'm not mad at you. I just... I don't know what to say, that's all. I'm kind of in shock. It just feels like it's come out of nowhere.'

'It hasn't,' he says. 'I'm just saying it for the first time. Well, for the second actually.'

I think about this. 'You told Jake,' I say quietly, knowing that's what he means.

'Last night.'

I feel almost embarrassed. This is what they were talking about? 'What did he say?'

'He said he already knew.'

I stare at him. 'He knew?' I ask.

Pete laughs a little but it's not out of amusement; he laughs as if he's disgusted with himself. 'He said he's known for years.'

'And have you?' I ask him. 'Have you known for years?'

He thinks about it. 'Since I was about seventeen,' he says.

'Nine years,' I say.

'Nine years.'

'Jesus.' I take another long drink. This is bad. This is a thing which is bad. I place my mind in the future and I can see that this friendship of ours, this friendship which has lasted for so long, might now move into a place where it could get lost altogether. I don't know what to say or do. I'm his friend and I love him. But I don't know what to do for the best.

'Why are you telling me this now?' I ask him. 'Why now, of all times? What's changed that you felt you had to tell me?'

'I don't know,' he says. 'It just came out last night. When I was talking to Jake. I've been very down lately. Ever since... ever since you moved in with her.'

'You don't like her,' I say.

'I don't *dislike* her,' he says and I think he actually means it. 'I have... very ambiguous feelings towards her. It's not her fault. You love her, I can see that.'

'Yes,' I say.

'But she doesn't love you.'

'No.'

'It's not really got anything to do with her,' he says. 'I was talking to Jake and I don't know... it just came out. He sort of dragged it out of me. He said I had to deal with it, to tell you.'

'But why?' I ask him and there's a part of me that feels angry now. Angry with Jake for making him tell me. Angry with Pete for telling me at all. Angry with myself for never allowing him to tell me before.

'He said nothing in my life works out because of this. He said my relationships are as they are because I've never dealt with this. And he said our friendship was a lie until I told you.'

I hiss through my lips. 'That's such bullshit,' I say. 'What does he know anyway?'

'But he's right,' says Pete.

'What, that our friendship is a lie?'

'No,' he says quickly. He looks so upset that I want to go over and sit next to him, but I can't. And why can't I? What's wrong with me?

'Then what?'

'He's right that I had to tell you.'

'Pete,' I say, laughing suddenly and leaning forward, struck by the absurdity of this. 'Pete, we've known each other for fifteen years. This is...' I think about it and I know I'm right.

'This is crazy,' I say. 'You can't... not after all this time...'

'Then how come I do?' he says.

'But you *can't*.'

'But I do.'

'But you *can't*!'

He hesitates. 'But I do.'

'You don't. You're just... you don't know what you're feeling.'

'I've known you for fifteen years,' he says then. 'If you think I don't know how I feel towards you, then you don't know me at all. You must have known anyway. Jake says you knew.'

I stare at him. Of course I knew. I always knew. I just hoped he'd never tell me.

'I didn't know,' I say, growing angry now. 'And I don't know what you want me to say about this.'

'It doesn't matter anyway,' he says.

'Of course it matters.'

'It doesn't. I know it's not going to lead anywhere. I just... I just had to tell you. I just needed you to know. And now you do. So there we are.'

I say nothing. He says nothing. We say nothing together for a long time. I want to hug him. I want to take him in my arms. And I can't. Because I'm a coward. I have to say something though. Something to make him know that it doesn't change anything.

'I do love you, you know,' I say quietly, leaning forward. 'You know that, right?'

He laughs. 'Not quite the same thing though, is it?' he says.

I shake my head slowly. 'I suppose not,' I say. 'I'm sorry.'

'You've got nothing to be sorry for,' he says, smiling now. 'It's my problem, not yours. I've been dealing with it half my life. Maybe it'll be easier now anyway. Now that it's not a secret.'

'Maybe... maybe that's why it seems so important to you,' I suggest, even though I don't buy this for a moment. 'Because it's been a secret.'

'Maybe,' he says, knowing that I'm just trying to be kind.

There's another silence. He closes his eyes and I watch him. I can tell he has one last thing to say so I keep quiet for now. When he opens his eyes again he leans across the table and it's all that I can do not to sit back in my chair, to pull away from him, but I don't; I stay where I am. I owe him that much at least.

‘Just tell me,’ he says quietly. ‘I’ve got this far so I just have to know and then we never have to talk about it again and I’ll know that I actually asked. Nothing could...’ He hesitates, starts to rephrase.

‘No,’ I say, shaking my head. ‘I...’ It breaks my heart to say it. ‘I’m sorry, Pete, I -’
‘It’s ok,’ he says, smiling and sitting back. ‘I just had to make sure. Once and for all.’
I sit back too and look at him. And the funny thing is, I love him more than she loves me.

When I get home, it’s almost midnight. She’s asleep but wakes up while I’m taking my shoes off and turns the bedside light on.

‘I didn’t know who it was,’ she says, her eyes half closed and I stare at her, wondering who on earth she thought it might be if not me, the only other person who lives here. ‘What’s wrong?’ she asks then, seeing the look on my face. She sits up for a moment but must feel the baby kick inside her, I think, because she grimaces and lies back down.

‘Sorry I’m late,’ I say.

‘It’s alright.’

‘Pete needed to talk.’

She snorts, as if this means nothing to her. ‘Pete...’ she says, like it’s a dirty word.

‘Yes, Pete,’ I say. ‘My best friend.’

‘Well what was wrong with him?’

I think about it, decide what to say. ‘He’s in love,’ I tell her.

‘God help the poor guy,’ she says.

‘Isn’t love meant to be a good thing?’

‘I meant God help the poor guy he’s in love with.’

‘Why do you say that?’

‘Because it’s Pete,’ she says, talking about him like she’s met him more than a half dozen times in her life. ‘He’s like a big child who needs constant reassurance and affection. No wonder you get on so well.’

I stare at her as if I’ve just been slapped. I hold her gaze and, strong as she is, she holds mine too. I pull my tee-shirt off over my head, and then take off my jeans and my boxers. I feel

completely asexual and walk over to the chest of drawers, naked, searching for the shorts I like to sleep in.

'That was a horrible thing to say,' I say to her when I climb into bed beside her.

'I know,' she says quietly.

'Really horrible,' I add.

She turns off the light and I lie there, staring at the ceiling, at the galaxy of tiny luminous stars someone pasted on the ceiling and that won't come off. If she can't feel towards me after nine months like Pete has felt towards me for nine years, then I don't know if I want her to feel anything at all. But she's asleep already, it never takes her long. Her body is rising up and down and her breathing is sounding deeply.

And this will never work, I think to myself. Because she doesn't love me. It will never work. And she'll leave me. Soon.

But not yet.