Those That I Fight I Do Not Hate

Ranelagh on a summer Saturday, the pavements scattered with blossoms, the air pulsating with the rhythmic thrum of lawn mowers. Kevin stood at the window of the Millers' living-room, watching a dozen or so little girls pose for photos in the front garden. His own daughter was among them, her blonde curls straightened and pinned in a plait, so that at first, in the midst of so many other plaited heads, he hardly recognised her. The Millers lived in a Victorian red-brick near the church, and Fiona Miller had insisted on the party. It was no trouble, she told anyone who attempted to cry off. It would be a treat for the children, and she and Bob were happy to host it, knowing as they did that not everyone was as fortunate as themselves. The girls shrieked and giggled, buzzing with sugar and summer, and then, remembering themselves, they smoothed the skirts of their white dresses and raised small, careful hands to adjust veils and tiaras. 'Lovely, aren't they?' Kevin said, turning to the woman behind the drinks table. The woman frowned. She wasn't the caterer, but one of Fiona Miller's friends, perhaps even one of her sisters, and this placed her firmly in the ranks of people who hated him. 'Great that the rain's held off,' he said, because she could hardly find that objectionable, but she began to move bottles around the table as if they were chess

pieces, taking them by the necks, setting them down in their new positions with unmistakeable hostility.

Sun angled through the slatted blinds, igniting the glitter of cards on the mantelpiece, bouncing off the guns of Bob Miller's favourite model plane—a WWI Sopwith Camel—displayed on a stand beside the door. Bob's great-grandfather had served in the London Irish Rifles, losing an arm at Flers-Courcelette. His uniform, and his cap with its badge of harp and crown, was displayed in a large glass case at the end of the Millers' hall. Also in the case were things belonging to other dead men: bullets, armbands and letters that Bob had purchased on the internet. Bob liked to joke that he'd been a military man in a previous life, though in this one he was senior actuary for an insurance company. Kevin turned again to the window. His wife was in the garden also, talking, he saw now, to the man who'd once been his boss. Earlier, he and the man had exchanged terse hellos in the hallway. He'd asked Kevin—and why did everyone feel obliged to ask?—if anything had turned up yet, and with that out of the way, had retreated to a suitable distance. Kevin watched the man rest a hand consolingly on his wife's arm, while she dabbed at her eyes with a hanky. He needed a drink. He'd hoped the woman at the table might have gone to join the others in the garden, but she remained at her post, arms folded across her chest. On his way out of the room, he touched a finger to the propellers of the little plane, sending the blades spinning into a blur of wood and metal.

He'd brought a naggin of vodka for this eventuality, stashed in the inside pocket of his jacket. But he'd been relieved of the jacket as soon as he'd arrived by Aoife, the Millers' older daughter. 'It's okay,' he'd said, 'I'll hold onto it, it's a bit chilly,' though it was late May, the day warm, the

air thick with pollen and silky parachutes of dandelion seed that blew in white gusts down the avenue. Aoife—outraged at being on cloakroom duty—had man-handled the jacket off him anyway, and now he felt the missing naggin like a phantom limb. As he walked towards the kitchen, the front door opened and the small girls came hurtling down the hall, one of them with a parasol tucked under her arm like a bayonet. He flattened himself against the wall as they went by, a battalion of miniature brides, their white sandals clattering over the tiles. A veil brushed against his arm, the scratch of gauze surprisingly rough. At the end of the Millers' hall, before the glass case with the disembodied uniform, the girls veered left into the music room, and from there out to the garden to race in circles around the house, their cries rising and falling in Doppler effect.

Fiona Miller was in the kitchen squeezing oranges. She was a dark-haired, tanned woman a few years his senior. 'You shouldn't have come,' she said. She was using an electric juicer, feeding plump oranges in at one end, harvesting slow dribbles in a jug at the other.

'You invited me.'

'I had to invite you. But you shouldn't have come. What were you thinking, Kevin?'

She had always made him feel small; small and red-necked and lacking in etiquette. What about all that fucking we did, he wanted to say, where was the etiquette in that? Instead he said, 'Does Bob know?' knowing very well that Bob didn't.

'Don't do this to me, Kevin,' she said, 'because if you do, I'm warning you, you'll be sorry.' She picked up two more oranges and flung them into the juicer. She was wearing a low-cut black dress and he couldn't help thinking that her breasts were like two small oranges, and that the nipples

pressing against the fabric were like little hard pips. He remembered how they used to feel in his hands, and when his eyes moved back to her face, he saw that she was watching him watching her, and he looked away, out to the hall where his wife was talking to one of the other mothers. She was holding several parasols, none of which belonged to their own daughter; his mother-in-law, who had paid for the outfit, thought parasols tacky. His wife glanced in his direction. It was one of the advantages of being with someone a very long time that he could tell instantly, even at a distance, that she was angry.

The juicer sputtered to a stop. 'I'm out of oranges,' Fiona said.

'I'll get some,' he said, sensing an opportunity, because there was an off-licence in the village.

'Aoife will get them. She can go on her bike. It won't take her a minute.' Fiona banged on the kitchen window. Aoife was sitting on a swing in the back garden, talking on her phone. She looked up and pulled a face at her mother, but didn't budge. Her mother banged on the glass again. Aoife slid slowly, insolently, off the swing and began to walk towards the house.

'How old is she now?' he said. 'Sixteen?'

'Eighteen next month. Which means we'll have to do this whole bloody thing all over again.'

'Well I won't come,' he said, 'so you needn't worry.'

'I'm not worried,' she said. 'You're not invited.'

Aoife arrived in from the garden, slamming the back door behind her. She snatched the ten euro note her mother handed her. 'Oranges,' Fiona said. 'Two nets, and make sure they're properly ripe.' Aoife rolled her eyes and left.

There came the sound of feet plodding down the hall, and a wet, wheezy sigh. Bob Miller was unlikely to take anyone

by stealth. 'Beer, Kev?' he said, opening the fridge, and then, before Kevin could answer, 'I mean, Coke?'

'No thanks.'

Bob cracked open a can for himself. 'Long time no see,' he said. 'I was only saying to Fiona this morning: when was the last time we saw Kevin, and we couldn't remember, could we, Fiona?'

Fiona was slapping a wet cloth—randomly, it seemed to Kevin—over kitchen surfaces. Now she went to squeeze the cloth out in the sink, at the same time running fresh water noisily into a basin.

'So,' Bob said, 'what've you been getting up to?'

'Nothing much.'

'Anything turn up yet?'

'Not yet.'

'Have you tried Fás?'

A small, weeping child with a grazed knee came into the kitchen. She was followed by four other children who formed a circle as Fiona applied ointment—none too gently, Kevin noticed—and a plaster. No sooner had the children been dispatched outside, than Aoife arrived back, her cheeks flushed from the cycle, wisps of dandelion seed caught in her hair. She flung a plastic bag onto the kitchen island. 'These are mandarins,' Fiona said, peering into the bag, but Aoife had already flounced out to the garden to resume her position on the swing. Bob winked. 'The joys, eh Kev?' he said, and he flopped into a chair in the corner. Fiona took the oranges, or mandarins, to the sink and began to scrub them with a wire brush as if they'd been rolling around the floor of a nuclear waste facility. She piled them into a bowl, before proceeding to drop them one by one into the juicer, and the slow dribble started up again.

'Excuse me,' Kevin said, pretending to check his phone. 'I

need to take a call.' Once in the hall, he went to the door of the living-room and looked in. The woman at the drinks table still hadn't moved from her station. She was busy now; the caterers had set out trays of salads and cold meats, and everybody had come in from the garden. He considered where Aoife might have put his jacket. He'd been in this house many times, mostly times when he shouldn't have been.

On the half-landing, he paused to inspect the photographs. He didn't recall noticing them before, but then before, his mind would have been on the curve of Fiona's hips as she climbed the stairs ahead of him. They weren't the usual snaps of sea-sides or birthdays, but black and white photographs of war. Biplanes rose from scorched airstrips, into skies black and hellish with smoke. Hollow-eyed soldiers in steel Brodie helmets lay on their stomachs in the mud. How he envied Bob Miller. He didn't envy him the photographs, ghoulish things that already had triggered the early stirrings of nausea. Nor did he envy him his wife, or his house, or his job, though there'd been a time when he'd envied all of these things. No, what he envied most was Bob Miller's want of imagination, a want that saved even as it failed, that allowed Bob to make a hobby of war, to gaze with complacency upon the horror of others, happy it hadn't come for him, certain it never would. Lucky, lucky Bob who knew so little pain that he must order it neatly packaged on eBay, to hang in lacquered frames on his wall.

In the spare room, the coats lay on the bed in a writhing mass of empty sleeves. Several had slid from the heap onto the carpet. He went through the ones on the bed first, lifting them, setting them aside until, halfway through, he found his jacket. When he picked it up, its lightness registered with him on some subterranean, animal level before the thought

had even formed in his brain. The naggin was missing. He searched beneath the remainder of the coats on the bed, then started on the pile on the floor.

'All right, Kev?'

He was holding a ladies green blazer in his hands when he turned to see Bob in the doorway. 'Grand, Bob,' he said, 'I was just looking for my car keys.'

'You're not thinking of driving, Kev?'

'I need to get something from the car.' He floundered about, mentally, for something plausible. 'An inhaler. For my daughter.'

'Well then,' Bob said, 'we'd better find those keys,' and he bent to lift a man's navy overcoat from the floor.

Kevin had a sudden vision of Bob finding the naggin. 'Ta, Bob,' he said, 'but I've already found them, actually.' He patted the pocket of his jeans. 'They were under the valance.'

Bob straightened up. He looked confused. 'Right,' he said.

Kevin realised he was still holding the blazer, and tossed it quickly onto the bed. They stood in awkward silence for a moment, staring at each other, while through the open window came the shrill laughter of small girls playing tag on the Millers' driveway.

'I guess we can go back downstairs,' Bob said.

'Okay then.'

'Okay.'

Bob gestured for Kevin to exit the room ahead of him, and when they were both outside, he pulled the door shut and took something from his pocket. There followed the excruciating sound of the key turning in the lock. The men descended the stairs together, careful not to make eye contact, neither of them speaking. When they reached the bottom, Kevin didn't stop but kept on walking, down the hall and out the front door, across the cobble-lock drive to

the pavement where his wife had parked their car by the kerb. He leaned against the garden wall and stared at the car. He didn't have the keys, his wife had them; these days, she was careful to keep them on her person at all times. He had a sense of somebody watching him, and knew that if he turned it would be Bob, but he didn't turn. Let him watch, he thought, because here on the street it was peaceful, the air clean and sweet-smelling, the only noise the yapping of a small dog further along the avenue. In the distance, beyond the village, beyond the city, he saw fields and hills, green un-peopled expanses not yet spoiled.

When he went back inside, a cake was being cut in the sunroom, a giant three-tiered confection, topped with a troupe of miniature white-iced girls in white-iced dresses. The real girls were seated around a trestle table, protective plastic covers over their clothes. His wife was at one end of the table, passing around slices of cake and plastic cutlery, but he didn't go in. Instead, he went to the living room where, with a heady feeling approaching joy, he found the drinks table deserted. It was a wasteland of empty bottles, wine, Pimms, prosecco, but in the middle of the debris was a bottle of vodka, practically untouched.

In the kitchen, he poured orange juice into a glass. Through the window he saw Aoife on the swing, her long legs dangling, the toes of her white Converse scuffing the dust. She was nothing like her father; Bob's genes had lost that particular skirmish. Instead, she was slim and dark and pretty, how he imagined Fiona must have been at that age. He watched her for a moment, then poured a second glass of juice and went out to the garden, taking the vodka and the glasses with him. The expression on her face bordered on a sneer, but she brightened when she saw the bottle. The day had remained fine, but there was something ominous in the

stillness of the clouds, as if now that they had stopped moving, they might suddenly drop to earth. Aoife hopped off the swing. 'This way,' she said, indicating a gap in the hedge, 'they don't like it when I drink.'

'They don't like it when I drink either,' he said.

When she laughed it was her mother's laugh, uncouth with a hint of scorn, and her legs, when she settled herself beside him in the grass behind the hedge, were her mother's legs, long and tanned and small-boned. She giggled as he poured the vodka, and when she turned to smile at him, he noticed her eyes were slightly glazed. They were sitting in a wilderness of long grass and weeds, a narrow strip of no-man's land between the backs of the houses and a walled public green. Dog daisies and poppies grew wild and riotous, spilling petals and seeds onto the ground. He felt the jut of her hip as she edged closer to him, and as her long hair brushed against his arm, he caught a scent of vanilla and something else, something young and girlish, like apples or berries. He drank some vodka and looked up at the sky. The clouds seemed greyer and darker and were no longer still, but moved erratically, bulging against their casing of sky. It was as if something behind them was trying to break through, pushing them forward in a thick, billowing mass, so that they blew not like clouds, but smoke. As he watched, he saw in their depths quick and sudden flashes of silver. It might have been a final rallying of sun, but it reminded him of the light glinting on the metal guns of Bob Miller's model Sopwith Camel. And as he touched a hand to her cheek, he knew the sound he heard in the distance was not the hum of lawn mowers, but the drone of low-flying aircraft.