

Bone Deep

They found a woman's skeleton in a well at the Market Square. The well had been covered by a grey boulder I used to sit on while waiting for a school bus to turn the corner at the traffic lights. The council had moved in with bulldozers and donkey-jacketed men to put a new face with new EU money on an old landmark. But for that reason the skeleton would not have been discovered.

5 The expert on TV said that the skeleton was over a hundred years old, if not more. Experts never give precise answers to anything. They hedge their bets and in that way can never be totally wrong – never being wrong is extremely important to a lot of people. Especially experts. He also said that the skeleton probably fell in during the rising of 1798¹ and added that she might have been thrown into the well and left there to drown.

10 My father is tipsy. It is ten past nine on Sunday evening. He has been tipsy all day. He gets like this once a week. We are in the sitting room at the American oak table Mum's father left us. Earlier, Dad made ham and mustard sandwiches. None of us eat them; we don't like the thick fat he leaves hanging like curtain frills over the crusts.

15 Elly is eighteen; she is pregnant again but married this time. She lives with her husband in a mobile home in his mother's back garden. Ann is fifteen. She has a stud in her nose and a bar in her eyebrow. She talks about getting a tattoo. Terry is the twin who survived the car accident. He is sixteen, three years older than me. He cannot talk, nor move from the waist down. His blue eyes are clouded.

20 Mum is at bingo. She doesn't like leaving Terry and we don't like her leaving him either. His twin, Marcus, is with us in framed photographs on the mantelpiece.

"So, the skeleton made the evening news, eh?" Dad says.

He's a short round man with thick hairy forearms. His fair hair is coarse and badly cut. It is badly cut because he insists on going to Oscar Henry the poor-sighted barber on the main street. Dad goes to him because he never has to queue.

25 For months after the accident Mum and Dad didn't speak to each other. The anniversary is looming now and the brooding silence between Mum and Dad has returned.

30 That sunny May afternoon Dad said he was going to the Curragh Races², did anyone want to tag along? I hate horse racing, Ann too, so we stayed at home. We watched Terry and Marcus climb into Dad's car. Marcus ran his window down and said he'd bring us home a few bars of chocolate. Terry waved. They never made it home.

Mum wasn't five minutes in the door after having her hair done when the guards arrived, carrying the news in their grey faces: Marcus was dead and Terry was clinging to life in a hospital ward.

35 A week after Marcus was buried Dad arrived home from the hospital and told us all to pray for Holy God to take Terry. He said our brother was suffering too much. We started to cry and he changed his mind and said we'd to pray for him to live.

Ann and I look at each other. She wipes Terry's mouth. He can't keep the Rolos³ Dad buys for him in his mouth. He loves Rolos. Most of the chocolate gets on his chin and shirt. Terry has to wear a white-coloured shirt; he will not wear a shirt of any other colour. We don't know why this is so.

40 Ann wipes Terry's mouth again. She will do this a number of times. On each occasion she will scowl at Dad. She has told me that Terry is Dad's mistake and that he should be the one to clean his

¹ *the rising of 1798*: rebellion in Ireland

² *Curragh Races*: name of a racecourse

³ candy

chin.

"Did you get to see the skeleton, Ian?" Dad says.

"No, I couldn't get close enough because of the crowd," I say.

45 "I did. I'd say she was a young woman. She was very small. The archaeologist reckons she was fifteen or thereabouts."

He is talking to me because Ann won't talk to him. She talks to him as little as possible.

"How do you think the skeleton got there, Ian?"

50 I shrug. I do not know, or care. It has nothing to do with me. Dad works as a machine operator in a factory on the outskirts of town. He lost the small finger of his left hand to a press. If he concentrated on his job and didn't drift off to places and matters not of his concern, he would not be a finger short. Perhaps he would not be a son and a half short, either.

His big round face expects an answer.

"Was the skeleton a skeleton before it ended up in the well?" I ask.

55 He nods, says, "No."

I try to sound like the TV expert and say, "I think the woman got drunk and fell into the well. She was hidden from view by the water. The well was, of course, poisoned by her decaying corpse, and thus sealed."

"That's very good. Very good."

60 He looks at me with fresh respect. He is happy to be sending me to a private college. He says I'll do fine – I have his brains.

He sips at his beer. Sniffles. Sometimes he looks at Terry and there are deep creases about his eyes. He fell asleep behind the wheel.

"I wonder what colour hair she had?" Ann says.

65 "Dark haired," Dad nods, "I'd say dark hair... the odds are good that it was dark."

"If she were pretty?" Ann continues.

Dad is under the impression that Ann is asking him, while in fact her questions aren't aimed at anyone in specific. She is more thinking aloud than anything.

70 "Yes, very pretty, the angle of her jawline, her teeth straight and all present, the slope of her skull, yes, she was pretty. Then who really knows?"

If I had seen the skeleton I wouldn't have tried to fit a face and a body to its bones. Instead, I'd have imagined myself as a skeleton.

"Did they find clothes?" Ann says.

"God, aye, they did," Dad says.

75 "What exactly?" Ann is interested in clothes. She hopes to be a fashion designer.

"Black stuff."

"Shawl, dress, skirt, what?"

Dad glances at me and shrugs, "I don't know – they were in a Dunnes Stores⁴ bag."

He laughs. His cheeks shudder.

80 A spasm crosses Ann's face, "I'd say she was murdered."

"Murdered. What makes you think that?" Dad asks.

"Look at all the women being murdered today – men are just animals. Animals then, and animals now."

"Animals," Dad muses.

85 One day I am sure he will draw her out. There will be a row and Ann will go to live with Elly. Then on bingo nights Dad will sit alone with Terry and wipe his chin free of chocolate. I'll stay in my room with the portable TV Mum has promised to buy me for my next birthday.

Dad stares at Ann, runs a hand over his hair, and pinches the grey at his temple. Ann ignores him and hands Terry the TV remote. I ask a question to divert his thoughts.

90 "What will happen to the skeleton, now, Dad?"

He likes it when his opinion is sought; it makes him feel important. He likes to feel important. He

⁴ *Dunnes Stores*: supermarket

does not realise that we see him as the thorn in Daniel's lion, the ice that tore the Titanic, the driver who killed a brother, left another badly broken and crushed a mother's soul.

"They'll bring it to the..."

95 Ann says, "The Zoo... for animals to lick the bones."

Silence, apart from the TV, where Jerry the mouse is tormenting Tom the cat. The cartoon pair never talk. This sits well with Terry.

Dad's lips open and close but his words don't arrive. The can at his elbow is empty. The fridge is out of beer.

100 Finally, he says, "You're breathing the word "animal" a lot tonight – are you in double speak mode?"

Ann's cheeks redden. She has a triangular face with pretty pursed lips you'd think were always poised to kiss.

"I'm sick of it!" she snaps, throwing Terry's chocolate smattered tissue at Dad.

105 It is too late to stop the argument. The only hope is for Ann to bolt for the door. He may or may not follow her. He won't if I tell him she's been acting funny all day. Then he will put her mood down to woman trouble and make allowances for her. He will shout up the stairs after her and tell her how lucky she is to be a woman.

110 Ann doesn't leave. She wants to fight, "I think all men are animals. Drunken, lousy drivers of animals."

TV Tom is bent over the mouse hole, fingers in his ears, waiting for the bang from a red stick of dynamite which he does not know Jerry has moved behind him. I try to focus on the cartoon and point for Terry to do likewise, but he is looking at Dad and Ann.

115 Dad's hands come together and his eyes fill with tears. All his rising anger has suddenly dissipated. Ann averts her glare, proffers the Rolos to Terry, but he sweeps them from her and they land with a soft plop on the fireside rug. She goes to wipe his chin but he angles his head away from her.

120 His wet eyes are on Dad's. He tries to talk. It is an awful sound to listen to. A half tongue flapping in a broken head. Ann sighs. She thinks he is being difficult because of the row that had been shaping up.

Ann leaves the room in a huff. And I follow, shutting the door. Ann pounds up the stairs to her bedroom. I just can't listen to Terry going on and on. But we want to escape from more than Dad and Terry. It is our shame at not being able to do what Terry has done – to forgive. The accident may have taken much from him, but it hasn't taken everything.

125 Dad and he are alone. I wait in the hall and put my ear to the door. I hear Dad say to Terry that he has another packet of sweets. Not to worry.

There's not so much as a peep from my brother. Sometimes we forget how close they are. Bone Deep.

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