

All Our Sons

By Mary Rochford

Tackler slung his alpaca jacket over his shoulder and swaggered towards the mirror. He struck his smouldering pose, allowed a ghost of a smile to flit across his face, and raised his left eyebrow as though quizzing his own image. Pleased with the response he swung towards the door. Brass monkeys. That's what Baz had said on the blower, so he had to wear something warm. He didn't want his Mum burning his ear-hole if he made his escape in his gear. And he had to escape. He was eighteen today. It was time.

'Turn it up, will you? I love this song. It's only gorgeous!'

'What? What did you say, woman?'

'I SAID, WILL YOU TURN IT UP?'

'YOU MUST BE FECKIN' DEAF, TO SAY NOTHING OF BEING DEMENTED IF YOU WANT TO LISTEN TO THAT EEJIT CATERWAULING. AS SOON AS WE'VE MOVED THIS SOFA I'M OFF FOR A PINT.'

'THERE'S NO NEED TO SHOUT, TOM BRADY, AND DON'T USE THE MUSIC AS AN EXCUSE FOR GOING TO THE PUB. DON'T YOU LIVE IN THAT PLACE, AND I DIDN'T EXPECT TODAY TO BE ANY DIFFERENT.'

The past month had been grot. Tackler had felt like a fish wriggling helplessly on the end of a tangled line. He knew he had to tell his Ma about his plans, but the glow of love in her eyes, the pleasure of her anticipation which he could almost smell, made him bottle out each time. He wished the family thing didn't mean so much to her, that she'd let him get on with what he wanted to do, that she'd just let go. It was like been loved by an octopus: tentacles tightening round him until he could hardly breath. And he found no solace in sleep. In his dreams he spent his eighteenth birthday cavorting madly with his Aunt Maggie in a wild jig which changed to a reel, then to a hornpipe and back to a jig again until he became a river of sweat. His mates couldn't see the problem. To them it was simple. 'I'm going up town for a few drinks with the lads, Ma. I'll be home on the last bus.' That's all he had to say. But they hadn't the whole bloody clan camping out all over the kip. As he stepped onto the landing the house trembled to the rhythms of his Ma's favourite reel. The fiddle, bodhran and banjo combined in a riotous bowing, beating and plucking and built to a deafening crescendo. Shit! They'd hear him coming and he'd have to 'pass himself', which meant kissing his Ma, his Gran and Aunt Maggie. He was not going to kiss his Da or Uncle Bren, and the poxy neighbours could take a run and jump. He checked the strides, brushed his hand through his long dark hair and sauntered downstairs.

Breda let her end of the sofa drop and hurried past Tom to the kitchen. He could shift the friggin' thing himself. A mixture of emotions jangled through her strong, sinewy, body. A sense of pleasure, of something achieved, battled with a feeling of rejection. Back in the strange environs of Derry she'd always felt nervous about the safety of her sons. Unease stalked her at a distance and then, as Eamon started secondary school and the civil rights movement grew, it pounced, gripped her heart in a vice of fear and refused to

let go. The battle of the Bogside had frightened her so much she'd had a seizure. For years she hadn't dared think of her sons growing to maturity. Each birthday, as Eamon notched up another year, she ticked off the secret calendar she'd locked inside her. Where they had lived many boys didn't get to grow up. So many of them had little to celebrate if they did. But since they'd moved to Birmingham, she'd allowed herself to dream and she'd woven her dreams into a warm blanket of love and hope. So it was time to celebrate. She'd decided she'd have all the family - grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. They would hire a hall to fit them all in. They might even have the Kilfenora Ceilidh Band – the best in the whole of Ireland - and they would get private caterers to do the food. She'd let Tom organize the drink: he'd be good at that. She'd had to modify her dreams, but she refused to relinquish them altogether. She was certain that on this night, if god spared them, they would spend the evening together celebrating the coming of age of her first-born. And he had spared them, and Eamon was going up town with his friends and Tom was going to the pub for a pint.

'I'm off now, Mum.'

'Are you sure you have to go? Can you not stay here and ask your friends to come over?'

'Leave the lad alone, Breda. He's a man now. It's only right and proper that he goes out with the lads for a few pints.'

'Isn't he going to do that on Saturday with a whole crowd from college? It wouldn't hurt him to stay in tonight.'

'Mum, Dad, I've gotta go. The lads just want to go up New Street and buy me a drink for my birthday. I'll be back early like I said.'

'Remember, Eamon, no later than nine. Your grandma likes to be in bed by eleven and she wants to see you blow out the candles.'

She had to stop mollicoddling the lad. It was comin' the heavy to expect a young man to do cartwheels at the prospect of spending an evening jigging and reeling with a crowd of ould ones. The thought of it made Tom feel queasy let alone a strapping lad like Eamon who had lots of young ones making eyes at him. But sure wasn't he a chip off the old block? When Tom had been a wee lad in Derry he'd had his fair share of mots. Young women with pale skin and grey-green eyes and an abundance of rich black hair that blew wildly as they walked by Lough Foyle. He no longer remembered their names. Over the years the melody of their soft voices and the music of their excited laughter had melded together, and what came to him when he turned his thoughts to those times was a feeling of warmth, a feeling of gratitude.

'EVERYBODY WAS KUNG FU FIGHTING. THOSE STEPS WERE FAST AS LIGHTNING. EVEN THOUGH IT WAS A LITTLE BIT FRIGHTENING.' Tackler, Baz, Dave and Paul yelled in unison as they strutted towards New Street. Up on her plinth, like a Christmas pudding with a crown, Victoria scowled at Dave as he stopped suddenly, and with knee bent, lifted his right leg to his waist and aimed for Paul's groin. Paul had seen it coming, executed a dazzling pirouette, reached out his hand, caught Dave's heel and brought him to the ground.

'Don't mess with the big boys, titch,'

‘Big shit, you mean.’

‘Right, where are you guys going to buy my first legal drink?’

‘What about Yates’s?’

‘That’s too far. I’m dyin’ of thirst.’

‘Let’s start at the Windsor. The night is but a pup.’

‘EVERYBODY WAS KUNG FU FIGHTING. THOSE STEPS WERE FAST AS LIGHTNING...’

Tackler hadn’t told his friends about his curfew. Their great guffaws of laughter played like a kettledrum in his head as he imagined himself announcing, ‘Our Mum says I’ve got to be home by nine o’clock so my Gran can see me blow out my candles.’ The lads were studying together and they played football for the college team. It was Dave who’d given him his nick-name. He no longer answered to Eamon, except at home. Tackler was who he was; was what he did. He would take the ball, and run like the wind, weaving and dodging, selling dummies, and then running again. But what he enjoyed most was thieving the ball from another player. No rough stuff. Just skill. ‘Go for the ball, not for the man’, that’s what his Da had told him when he first started playing soccer on the windswept fields of Derry. ‘Sure any eejit can hack another player. It takes a good footballer to steal the ball before his opponent cops on.’ Bobbie Moore was his hero. To see Moore was to see music - harmony, rhythm and tempo. He’d watched Moore play at Villa Park. After The World Cup he’d pestered and pestered his Da until he’d caved in and taken them to stay with friends in Birmingham. His Da, his younger brother and himself had stood squashed in the Holte End amongst thousands of fans, lashed by the winter rain and buffeted by the wind. He was ten, and his young heart had almost burst with joy and pain as Moore performed his magic right there in front of his eyes.

‘He’s not going to be the ghost at the feast, is he?’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Well, you’ve gone to all this bother and he’s not even here.’

‘He’ll be back by nine. Now stop your blatherin’ Maggie Maguire and help me make these sandwiches.’

‘Does Eamon still play football, Breda?’

‘Of course he does, but he’s more interested in his studies these days, so he only plays on Sundays.’

‘Ah, it’s a shame he didn’t make the grade.’

Breda took a plate from the cupboard and let the door shut with a bang. She slammed a pile of sandwiches onto the plate and, with a deft flick of her strong wrist, tore a sheet of greased paper from its roll and wrapped it tightly round the food.

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Sure didn’t he always want to be a professional footballer?’

‘He did not. He loves doing his ‘A’ levels. He’s a born academic: that’s what they’ve said at the college. When he’s finished there, he’s going to do English and Philosophy at university.’

‘Study can be very stressful. Many’s the one has a complete mental breakdown from the pressure of it. I think it’s best avoided if you’re not really suited to it.’

‘Will you pass me the mayonnaise?’

Nothing changes and everything changes. Growing up in Dublin Maggie had been the sister who attracted attention and had been indulged. Breda had learned early that her dark hair and pale grey eyes could not compete with Maggie's abundant blond ringlets and her blue eyes which were the colour of the sea on a warm summer's day. Maggie's beauty blossomed as she matured and at the peak of her perfection she was claimed by Brendan Maguire, a young student from County Derry. Breda had met Tom at Maggie's wedding. Tom, the carpenter from the Bogside, was an unlikely friend for the rich, landed Brendan, but it was their love of football that brought them together. Resisting the pressure to play Gaelic, Tom had opted for soccer. Resisting the pressure to play rucker, Brendan had made the same choice. And they were good: they played for the county. And they were good friends and Breda would always be grateful to Brendan because it was this friendship that saved Tom.

The warm, smoky atmosphere of the Windsor wrapped them in a comforting fug. Baz had been right, it was brass monkeys outside and he was glad that they'd made this pub their first watering-hole. The upstairs room was long and narrow with walls the colour of sick but it was warm and snug and it reminded Tackler of the homely bars in Derry where his Da used to drink. He sipped the pint of Guinness his mates had bought him. Usually, when he could get served in a pub, he drank bitter, but tonight for his first legal drink, he'd chosen stout. Throughout his childhood, at every family occasion - celebration or wake - he'd observed his Da's ritual as he prepared to drink a glass of creamy porter. First his Da would search in his pocket for the small brass bottle-opener he carried at all times. 'A man's not properly dressed without his wee opener,' he'd say. He'd unfold his large white hanky and wipe the opener until it gleamed. Then he'd take the bottle in his big rough hands and gently prise the top off. The next step was the most important. His Da would hold the glass at a slight angle and pour the dark brown liquid, slowly and carefully: taking his time, never rushing, until eventually he would hold the glass aloft, assessing the balance of the brown liquid and thick creamy top. He would take his first sip, sigh with deep satisfaction and lick the residue of foam from his top lip. Sometimes he'd let Tackler and his cousin Vin have a sip and they would strut about, little men cut short, with foam moustaches. Vin and himself were the same age and they'd done everything together: hiked in the Scalp Mountain, played football, thrown stones at the Brits. Sometimes now, as he played football, he thought he could hear Vin urging him to get 'the lead out and get the feckin ball.' Sometimes he thought he saw him running like a hare as he'd done countless times through the back streets of Derry. But he wouldn't be seeing Vin again. The battle of the Bogside had drawn Vin to the barricades where he'd been hit by a bullet. His young blood had left a crimson stain on the street that took weeks to fade.

'You're a noisy lot.

Tackler turned at the sound of the voice. The girl he'd spotted when they'd first come in was standing next to him at the bar. She was slim: tall for a girl, with long dark hair. Her face was small and oval and she had intelligent eyes which, as she met his gaze, seemed to hold something in reserve. He liked the way her face softened when she smiled: he liked the glint of her ear-rings as she brushed her hair back from her face, and he liked the freckles sprinkled across her cheeks.

‘I haven’t made a sound for the past ten minutes.’
‘Your mates are making enough noise for twenty.’
‘Sorry about that, we’re celebrating. Can I get you a drink?’
‘No, ta. When I finish this we’re off.’
‘Stay for another. It’s early.’
‘We’re meeting some mates across the road. We said we’d be there by eight and we’re late already.’
‘Tell you what, I’ll get the lads to drink up and we’ll come and join you. How’s that?’
‘Yeah, great, bostin’. See you soon. Tarar, a bit.’
‘Hey, I don’t know your name or where you’re going.’
‘It’s Julia, and we’re going to the Tavern in the Town.’

Everything changes and nothing changes. Tom ducked deeper into the collar of his donkey jacket. He felt the raw air slice at his face, but he was glad to be out of the house. It was his son’s eighteenth birthday, but he was not really in the mood for celebrating. He was making his way to the nearest pub, but he didn’t really want to go there. There was little to comfort him wherever he turned. He felt that fate was following him like a hungry hound and there was no chance of escape. He didn’t dare share his fears with Breda; couldn’t bear the thought of her pale grey eyes empty of love and full of accusation. It was her eyes that had enticed him when they’d first met, although his first glimpse of her had not been promising. She’d stood awkward and gaunt in her pink bridesmaid’s dress, like a giant stick of Blackpool rock. Her dark hair refused to be tamed by the piece of frippery attached to it, and escaped here and there in unbecoming tufts. As one of Brendan’s groom’s men he’d felt obliged to invite her to dance. A man of graceful movement and natural rhythm, he had no great expectations of the young women who held herself in such a stiff, unyielding manner. As ‘My Blue Heaven’ boomed around the red and gold splendour of the Shelbourne Hotel ballroom, Tom took Breda in his arms and was pleasantly surprised. She responded to the rhythm and tempo and her body softened and relaxed. She moved easily across the floor. She mirrored his steps and matched his energy. When the dance was over they stood laughing and breathless. She looked at him with her pale grey eyes and he could see the depth and the longing in them.

He’d taken her from her beloved Dublin to the northern town of Derry. She’d been unnerved by the fierce tribal loyalties. The menace and threat which he took for granted, as the Apprentice Boys marched and lit their fires every August, sent her scurrying to a darkened room. If she couldn’t hear the clamour, couldn’t see the great daubs of orange against the summer sky, she could feel herself and her family safe. He had inherited a long tradition of republicanism. His grandfather had been active in earlier struggles and his father, who believed fervently in a united Ireland had operated on the fringes. Like all teenagers it had been Tom’s instinct to challenge: he wanted no truck with the past. But he learnt that political conviction doesn’t necessarily grow out of family tradition. It’s born and nurtured as a result of personal experience, and the discrimination and harassment that he’d endured in his native city made a reluctant rebel of him. But he didn’t have the courage to stay and see it through. And he’d been forced to seek Brendan’s help, to flee to Birmingham with Breda and the boys, to stay a nightmarish six weeks with friends before they found their own place.

Everything was done. The salty, fatty smell of pigs' trotters set the juices flowing as it mingled with the earthy smell of porter. The music was leppin' and everyone was having a good time. To make the evening complete she needed her husband and her eldest son. She wished they'd come home; wished they'd come in out of the cold, damp night and enjoy the warmth and glow of a house filled with laughter and merriment. She knew she clung too fiercely to Eamon. She knew he yearned for independence and freedom: that he didn't want to hurt her, but that he needed to leave her behind and strike out on his own. But she wasn't ready yet. Not yet. It was too soon. So she clung to him like a limpet to a rock, resisting the waves of his struggle. Tom was struggling too and he would not talk to her about what was troubling him because she'd made it impossible for him to do so. She'd been glad to leave Derry. From the beginning the place had stifled her spirit and made her afraid, but she endured it because, when she married Tom, for the first time in her life she'd been the centre of someone's world. Tom loved her, and in gratitude she loved him back with all the power and strength of her hungry heart and her strong young body. She knew nothing of his activities until he came home, one afternoon, breathless and agitated, having been tipped off that the house would be raided that night. He told her nothing else, but he took a parcel from behind their wardrobe, left the house and drove to Maggie and Brenden's. And that's all she knew. Breda begged to return to Dublin, but Tom refused. It was too close and it was too dangerous. They had to get out of the country. Birmingham seemed a good choice. They'd friends there and Tom could get work. So that's what they'd done, and the boys had settled in and blossomed, glad to be away from the daily grind of harassment and fear. And she was glad also. She was weary of hearing of young men maimed, killed and imprisoned. She couldn't find it in her heart to rejoice when the enemy was shot. All of these youngsters were somebody's sons. Somewhere a mother grieved for each one of them. And she didn't want to have to grieve for her sons, so she put Dublin on the back-burner. Some day she'd return to its elegance, to its long, golden strands, and its soft, ancient hills. Until that time she was content to see her family safe and well.

The pub had been worse than Tom had feared. Everyone was on edge. The talk was about the McDade funeral and the shenanigans at the airport. People were beginning to feel the heat. What with all the bomb scares in the city the Irish were not wanted, and there was a feeling that there might be a backlash. Most of the men just wanted to keep their heads down. They didn't want any trouble. Many had children who'd been born in the city and felt they had a stake in England, and consequently they suffered the pull and drag of divided loyalties. There were some who were pleased that the fight was being brought to the enemy but they were mostly young, unmarried, without children of their own. He'd not discussed the worsening situation with Breda. He knew she was blocking it out, focussing all her fierce love on her family and getting on with daily life. Besides, he was reluctant to re-open arguments that circled without end. He was sad, and angry too, that she could not see that his love for their sons was as warm as her own. That his greatest joy was to see them growing into healthy young men who enjoyed their football, did well at their studies and fitted in. He didn't want Breda and himself to drift apart; to drift like two ships on a blackened night sea. He wanted them to rediscover the intimacy of their earlier years when they would cross the border into Donegal, walk for miles on Bundoran strand and make wild plans. They would save hard and return to Dublin and buy a house

in Killiney, overlooking the sea. Or maybe they'd buy land outside Derry and breed horses. Or maybe they'd just travel the world; the two of them together, away from all the trouble and strife of their homeland.

Tom quickened his step. Suddenly, he desperately wanted to be home with his family. As he rounded the corner into his road a burly figure came out of the dark and almost sent him sprawling.

'Watch what you doin', O'Farrell.'

'Tom, I'm sorry Tom. Have you heard the news?'

'What news? What do you mean?'

'Oh, Jesus, Tom, it's desperate, it's feekin' desperate.'

The room shook with the sound of jollity. The fiddle, banjo, bodhran and accordion picked up the tune in turn, then melded together before soaring away on their lone riffs once again. Feet slapped and stomped the floor as the dancers swirled in abandonment, twirling faster and faster until the music reached a resounding crescendo. Breda collapsed onto the nearest chair, sweating and laughing. It was well past nine and Tom and Eamon hadn't come home, so she'd decided to go with the flow, to enjoy herself. She was not going to waste her hard work and effort. The music started up again and Brendan pulled her to him and they were waltzing to the strains of 'My Lagan Love' when Breda heard the front door bang. At last! One of them was back, or maybe they'd both come together. She abandoned Brendan and ran towards the hall.

'Is he home?'

'No, sure he's as bad as yourself, Tom Brady'

'Is he not home?'

Slowly, Breda realized that there was something wrong. Tom's usual ruddy complexion was ashen, ghostly. His deep-set eyes were bulging and he seemed unable to blink.

'Something terrible has happened, Breda. Something terrible ...' She didn't answer. She stilled herself, became rigid.

'There's been an explosion, two explosions, in New Street and...'

'Oh Jesus...'

'Two bombs...'

'Oh Jesus, no. Not my son.'

'In two pubs in the city ...'

'OH NO, JESUS NO, NOT MY SON, PLEASE, NOT MY SON.'

Breda's desperate plea was followed by a haunting banshee wail. Her strong frame lost its rigidity and bent double, and she screamed again, drowning out the strains of 'My Lagan Love' which played on and on in the background.

'DEAR GOD! DON'T TAKE MY SON.'

Tom moved towards her and suddenly she sprang at him. Like a cat mad with fear she attacked him, clawed at him, howling her anguish. He caught her arms and, exerting all his strength, pinned them to her sides. She struggled and fought as family and friends looked on, numbed and paralysed. She screamed again and again. At last the music stopped and Breda's piercing entreaty filled the silence.

'GIVE ME BACK MY SON. I WANT MY SON.'

Tom focussed all his attention on his wife. She needed him now, this minute. But soon, when she'd quietened, he would go and look for their son.