WINNER OF THE
LEITRIM GUARDIAN LITERARY AWARD

# Swimming Donkeys

*Adjudicator: Lovely tale of growing up on a farm with all the tasks and rituals of same, all under the shadow of the narrator's omnipresent father. Some wonderfully evocative images and phrases such as the mare with her feet sticking up to the sky and describing an important visitor thus: "her talking like someone off the wireless".*

Jo Nestor

HIS THUMB TUCKED into the crook of his right index finger, he knocks at our door, head bowed, familiar face hidden. Rain slants in from the hill, muddy yard water splashes up onto his boots. 'Are ya there?' Grey gales carry off his words like crows at a carcass. I know he's crying, his face all sleek with tears, rain all over his beard. You couldn't tell by looking, but I know: I've watched him other nights and for a lifetime before that.

He knocks again, leaves his knuckles resting on the door, rain spitting down inside his sleeve; he doesn't notice, but I do. It's funny, me worrying about him catching his death; more fool him, back again on this sopping wet rag of a night. He doesn't know I'm here, in beside the mare, peeking through a gap in the wall where the rasp is kept; I can smell the wet leather of his boots, the tangy wax of his oilskin, his whisky breath. I want to shout, 'She's never going to open the door to ya!' I stay quiet, my tongue worrying a cold-sore on my lip.

He wouldn't hear me anyway. It's not the whining of the wind, or the rattle of rain on the tin roof, it's his ears, all flaky skin and stubble; they're tuned only to her footsteps in the hall, the clunk of the door fob, the creak of the hinge.

I watch his hand slide down the blistered paint and dangle at the end of his sleeve, a weak and limp thing. I remember his hands different, full of life to their fingertips when he'd played the fiddle, when he'd taught me to tie knots, when he'd shown me how to pare a sheep's hoof. He turns away now, hand on cap; unsteady on his feet, he slips and slides and mutters across the yard, one arm out for balance, and then he's swallowed whole by the wind.

It wasn't always like this, but like dandelions drooping in a jar, I know that nice things never last. I have to close my eyes tight now to remember those days, otherwise I might split and crack open, like an ash log in the shed. I can remember sunny summers lying under the bracken above the house, watching clouds shift and butterflies flutter; tiny see-through worms squiggling on my eyeballs, 'floaters' Mam calls them. Taking a grass stem I'd pulled from its stalk, I'd nibble a bit first for the sweetness before using it to poke beetles. Always listening for Dada's shout, 'Come here, Sonny, right now.'

Then there was Conal, small for his age, light as a sheep's fleece; Mam said it was his bad chest was to blame. He'd stand on my shoulders, lean over the lintel in the byre, holding his breath to peek in at the jackdaws' stinking nest.

'How many?' He'd climb back down, gasping, 'Five.' Then, I'd pull over the saw-horse, climb up, lean over to check and, right enough, there they were, five of them gawking at me. The 'cag cag' then of the parents. 'Come on! Let's skedaddle before they kill us!' And we'd run and laugh our way out of the byre's dusty half-light into the bright sunshine of the yard.

Another day, Conal and me were squatting in our yard over a puddle rippling with rainbows. He says, 'We've found an oil well! We'll be rich forever!' And me only after asking Dada that morning for a watch for my birthday. 'No, I can't afford one.' Me gawking up at him, 'Are we poor, Dada?' Him going, 'How can we be poor when we have hens layin' eggs and a mountainside of sheep? Haven't we food in our bellies and warm beds to lie in? Having no money doesn't mean we're poor.' And me crying because Dada was vexed and I was too wee to understand.

A winter's morning, me and Conal grinning at the gift of snow stretching like an invitation all the way down the footpath from the top byre to our bottom yard, us clinging onto each other for fear of falling. How long it took us, I can't say, but we wheezed up and down yon footpath like two steam trains 'til we had it polished good-oh, like Mam's glass mirror. Conal polished away with his feet while I fetched an empty fertiliser bag from in among the cobwebs behind the bales. We flew down then, our faces on fire, puffing out steam clouds on our way back up. 'Christ, Conal, aren't we having some craic now!'

I don't remember rightly when it started, only that after a while it was regular; Mam'd be riddling out the Stanley range, its enamel creamy as buttermilk; Dada'd be raking cold ashes from the dark yawn of the open hearth, their backs to one another, shouting curse words and everything. Her going, 'I wish you wouldn't shout at me...' Him going, 'You'll know when I'm shouting!' Me upstairs biting my nails, knowing better than to let on I'd heard.

The time Conal's baby sister was christened, a squad of us in Michael Mick's afterwards for bottles of minerals and ridges of sandwiches. Conal's aunt and uncle home from England, him standing as godfather, her talking like someone off the wireless; Conal's uncle introducing her to everyone, her shaking Dada's hand, 'Pleased to meet you, Mr Cunningham.' And Dada snatching himself away like she'd scalded him. 'I never seen 'Mister' on a tombstone yet...call me Willie.'

Then, Dada took the fiddle from its green velvet nest, his fingers tapping at the strings like a robin pecking crumbs. In jig-time the pool table was pushed back and there was wans up dancing. Something wasn't right about the floor tiles but; I pulled Conal over to look. The wan working behind the bar came clearing tables, four pint glasses gripped in each hand, all pushed against her apron, the slops making them slip, she goes, 'Arragh, the day they laid them tiles... an autumn day it was; the lads couldn't wait to get dancing. Look at them, all crooked... sure, the cement wasn't near dry.' Away with her then behind the bar and this blocky fella goes, 'Why don't you shut up to fuck and pull pints, it's what you're paid for.'

Dada played a few tunes before laying the fiddle down nice and gentle in its case. He'd started spouting then, 'What I couldn't do with a horse and a bit of rope...' And I saw Mam watching him, all ears like the collie sheepdog back at the house, only pretend-listening to Conal's Mam beside her. 'Few can claim, as I can, to have swam donkeys on Christmas Day. Now for ya.' But it was all for show, hoping for a free pint. He was away with the drink altogether them days; Mam said he must've been carrying-on with the barmaid for he did nothing only talk about her whenever he'd get home. She'd shoot that at him for spite as he'd come tripping in over the doorsill. The donkeys got stranded in a flood, that I can tell you for nothing, down by the bridge; that's what happened them; Dada had no choice but to swim them out of it, once he'd sobered up on Christmas morning.

Nights when Dada was on good form, he'd say when he was a gossoon, he used walk miles to bring his she-goat to the buck; and many's the long day he'd spent being a cowboy on the neighbour's ass; how he'd gathered eggs in a paper bag to sell in town, replacing some with pebbles from the river... 'Mind you, never was I caught, hah!'

And I'd felt sorry then for our donkeys, having to swim the icy flood waters, their soft fur all stuck to them, looking like our cat when she was after giving herself a good licking. The donkeys shivered and trembled like soggy cardboard cut-outs of themselves, wobbling on their legs with their heads hung low while we rubbed them dry with straw in the byre.

Late summer, we'd gather the sheep from the hill, separating the lambs from the ewes. We penned the ram lambs in the crush and Dada showed me how to castrate them.
I never knew the meaning of that word 'til he took out the yoke for doing it, like a big heavy silver pliers it was, with two flattened pieces at the end, an inch or more across.
I was fit to hold the lambs by then; catch one by the shoulder, throw my leg over its back, grab its front legs and kick it over onto its arse with my other leg, all its tackle showing. Dada would crunch with one sharp movement; they'd waddle off quiet enough then, and I felt proud to be helping Dada, doing man's work, not feeding hens like a girl.

'We'll trim the ewes' feet while we're at it.' They were trickier to catch mind, but only one got past me that day. Dada took out his pocket knife, juniper wood handle, curved blade; I'd seen him sliding it over and back the whetstone earlier.

'You can't take too much off, it gets infected, in there, look: between the hoof and the pad. Like you and your goddamn fingernails.' But I wasn't bothering my nails that day; I was like the cat watching a gap in the hedge, ready to pounce, wishing Dada'd give me a go, knowing he wouldn't offer.

Over steaming mugs of black tea and slabs of Mam's soda bread, he'd say how he'd shared his bed with a calf or a dog when he was a boy, living with my grandparents in their tigeen; I never knew them, sure, they were dead before I was born. Dada would speak in gushes of hot air, like he was writing a story with his breath, just for the range and the table to hear. He was like that days he wasn't drinking.
He'd take Dole Day in stages, four or five pints and then home to sleep. Mam seemed cagey them days, away down at the washing-line, fetching turf, cleaning out the byre, anywhere but around him. He'd head back an hour or so later, as Mam said, 'For more of the same.'

Some days, I'd cycle down with Mam to Whelan's grocery shop. Always a crowd of women there, bustling about like fussing hens, scratching out their change on the counter, old Mrs Whelan pecking over it.
I was sitting there swinging my legs off the windowsill when one old hen goes, 'Was that your Willie's mare I seen this morning over at the Bog Pass?'

Mam's back straightened; she faced the woman full square. 'And what of it?' Her eyes like sparks on bonfire night, me saying nothing, only thinking, ya nosey old bitch...

'Well, she'll be horrid easy shod anymore.'
'And why's that?'

'And her on the broad of her back in yon drain, her four feet sticking up to the sky!'
I slid down then and started towards Mam; she grabbed my arm and we fair flew out the shop door, gravel skiting up from under my feet as she rushed us both to our bicycles.

Dada's been gone this good while now; my legs are all pins and needles, my vigil over, for tonight. I pat the piebald, 'You're a great girl, so you are.' Lifting the door latch, I hurry out, shoulders hunched; dodging raindrops, I'm across the yard in four strides. Indoors, I shake off my boots, hang up my coat and get the smell of dinner. But I've an ache in my belly, knowing he'll be back. There's Mam, slumped in a chair beside the range, and I think back on different times, when she'd be happy, making soda bread and singing 'The Black Hills of Dakota'.