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The Repentance of St Peter

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Just after it happened, a car stopped right outside the window and revved violently. Once, twice, three times. Each time slightly longer and more aggressive than the last until she could taste the hot, burned tang of petrol coming through the vents.

At her feet he was kneeling almost in penitence, but not quite, and her fingers were locked in his and heavy in her lap.

She sat as still and quiet as she could and she wasn't fooled. She saw that his knuckles were red. He had, after all, put some weight behind it when he punched her. Yet she felt only a mild, wavering sort of surprise, as if looking down on them both from a distance. Shock, perhaps.

"I'm sorry," he said finally, the words nearly lost on a breath. "I'm sorry."

People say sorry expecting always to be forgiven. People say sorry when they've broken or lost something of someone else's. When they haven't return something they borrowed. This was how he said sorry. A slightly exasperated lilt at the end of the word.

But she told him it was ok and her face hurt only a little. It felt more numb and strange than painful she said. Her top lip sang with pain when she said the words though.

Repentance was such a weighted and biblically dark word. It says what it means, and it means what it says:

'To accept responsibility for the sin or the crime. To confess to it, to own it.'

She suddenly remembered a picture she'd seen as a little girl; a picture taped to the kitchen door in her Granny Irish's house. Cut from a book, 'The Repentance of St Peter'.

How unrepentent St Peter actually looked in it, seeming instead to be looking skywards for an excuse, vaguely embarrassed.

Similarly, Ian was anxious to explain that what happened hadn't really been his fault.

He spoke like a father explaining to his small daughter why he'd smacked her for running out into a busy road. He hit her out of fear, he said. She'd made him angry. That it upset him to do it more than she could ever know. She must never do that to him again.

And now it seemed Ian was absolved. When he reached up to ruffle her hair, he pretended not to notice when she flinched.

Her favourite picture in Granny Irish's house had been the framed stitchwork on the bedroom wall. She would lay eating red apples on Granny Irish's bed, creeping her feet up the wall and whispering the words aloud because she liked the sound of them. She thought one day she might make them into a song:

'Call on me on the day of trouble;
I will deliver you and you will honour me.'