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Boyle

by Martin Bourne

The old man hunched up his shoulders as it started to rain. His faded blue jacket had a car brand name across the back. A matching cap allowed a few stubbly bits of grey hair to protrude at the back. A chilling breeze caused the old man to stoop lower. They walked past a row of shops and the old man went into a newsagent. Tom stood outside and looked through the window. His gaze settled on the ice cream cabinet and he was back.

Hot sun on his legs walking proudly holding his dad's hand. He was seven and oldest, and got to walk with his dad. Davey and his mum followed with his sister Sarah in the pushchair. Even then he knew Sarah was not like other kids, something to do with a vaccine they said. Tom felt the sea breeze on his face and looked up at his Dad.

“What you say we get an ice cream when we get to the beach, aye Tommy. Would you like that?”

Tom skipped and nodded enthusiastically.

“Patrick, you can’t be giving them ice cream, they’ve not long had their breakfast.”

“Ah come on Colleen, we’re on Holiday. Aye Tommy, we’re on holiday. Everyone deserves ice cream on their holiday, especially the first day.”

Patrick only used his wife’s full name when he was serious, otherwise he called her Colley. Tom knew this. Tom’s mum let out a loud sigh. They had just left the guesthouse, and were walking towards the seafront. Tom hoped the ice cream would be the soft type rather than a scoop with bits of ice.

Patrick shivered as a cold drip of rain ran down his neck and he shuffled into the doorway of an adjacent closed down shop. He pulled the familiar shape of the quart bottle from his overcoat pocket and turning his body toward the door took a deep swig of whisky. Then another gulp. The burn trickled down his throat His insulator, his trusty friend.

“Why have one when you can have two. Boyle the bruiser, Boyle the boozer,” he muttered. A fight insulates just as well as the bottle.

The old man emerged. Tom followed. Closer now.

“You’re the man of the house now Tommy. Look after your mum and the others.” Uncle Billy had said six months after the holiday. Tom didn’t know how to be a man.

At the seafront his dad had said, “hey Peggy lend us a few bob, I’ve only pound notes.”

“Well, I’ve only two shillings in my purse.”

“That’ll do, I’ll give it back at lunchtime. Right Tommy, I’ll get you an ice cream and lollies for the others, stay here.” And he was gone.

They waited on a seafront bench. They waited for hours. Tom and his brother started to run about. Peggy had no money and was not allowed into the guest house until 3.30. When Tom was older, his mother had told him that she had begged the landlady to use the telephone. The next day uncle Billy came down on the train and they all went home.

Now he was following his father with fifty-six years of hatred ready to be unleashed. Over the years he'd said, "I'll cut his throat if I ever find him," and now he had. His thoughts came to words, "how does it feel to be followed?" he said, "I've been followed by these thoughts all my life."

He felt for the knife in his coat. His Dad turned around.

"Did you say something?"

Tom looked into his Dad's eyes, like a mirror. His father stared back.

"Do I know you?"

Tom stared hard and turned away.

"No, no you don't."