Bourne toWrite...
creative writing workshops

Café De Change

by Patrick Hyland

My father is of the new age. That is to say, he's a new-age man. On the surface at least. My mother is the bread winner- disability allowance on account of the bipolar. He bakes in his spare time. Hands smoother than a frog's armpit.

Peel back a layer or two and you'll find a traditionalist. Didn't very much know his own father: my grandfather. Functioning alcoholic, pissed away every penny. Would come home most evenings half-cut and beat the shite out of his wife: my grandmother. The children hiding in the box room. My father the eldest would put an ear against the door and they'd play Chinese Whispers. "I think he's gone to bed" my father would say. And by the time it reached the bed Uncle Pádraig the youngest would scream out "Mammies dead?". And my father would push the chest of drawers against the door and they'd all cry themselves to sleep.

She was strong though, my grandmother. One day my father played a sour note on the tin whistle, and Sister Mary cracked a wooden ruler across his hand. Broke two fingers. She marched into the school the very next day. Grabbed the nun by the throat. Told her if she ever so much as lifted a finger toward one of her children again, she'd be back with the rifle.

Another time they'd gone three days with the cupboards bare. Uncle Pádraig laid up in bed, the stomach inside out with hunger. The cheeks on him sunken and he feverish, the siblings taking turns to dab his forehead with a cloth. She marched down to O'Reilly's with my father in tow. Found the grandfather next to the Smithwick's tap, pulled him off the stool by the ear. Took a bread knife to his throat and told him to empty his pockets. The father cupped his paw and swept up every last bit of shrapnel: brought home six days' worth of corned beef.

Thick as thieves, they were. You could imagine the damage it did when he came home from school one day to find her half-conscious on the kitchen floor, bread knife by her side. Scarlet ribbons snaking across the floor and he ran toward them. Wrapped a tea towel around each wrist and called for help.

Sure you wouldn't be right after it. Kept his emotions under lock and key. Never seen him cry. I'd nearly rather he drank, come home late of a Friday evening and give me the leather off his belt. Beat me black and blue. Some visible proof of the pain I've endured. Some acknowledgement of my existence then.

When I found out I was going to be a father, he was the first person I thought of. And it made me sick. An anti-role model. The kind of person you look up to and think, *nah*. I knew what kind of father I wanted to be: the one I'd never had.

Success would be measured by whether my adult son still wants to spend time with me. Now, I wouldn't go so far as to call nineteen an adult, but here we are. Gives me a shout of a Wednesday evening and asks if I'm around that Saturday. More of a text actually, that read:

Free for a coffee?

Success comes in many forms. I waste no time responding:

Definitely.

He meets me at Tottenham Court Road and we walk towards Goodge Street, past Muji and down Hanway Street to our favourite coffee place, Café De Change. We sit outside.

He's getting on well in Uni, he tells me. Attends all his classes. Sleeps through the night, thank God. Smokes a bit of weed now and then for his anxiety. I'm nodding between sips of a coconut milk flat white.

"There's this girl", he says.

I put my cup down, unfold my legs.

"It's nothing serious, but she had a bit of a scare."

I pick up a fork and work it into the slice of carrot cake we'd been sharing. Take another sip of coffee.

"She changed over to a different pill and it fucked with her hormones."

I'm halfway through the carrot cake - head spinning from the caffeine and cream-cheese frosting. I stick a baby finger in my left ear and wiggle it around. His voice comes at me all muffled, as if I'm buried alive.

“She’s not keeping it, Da. It’s fine.”
“Da?”