First published 2017 by Brandon,
an imprint of The O'Brien Press Ltd,
12 Terenure Road East, Rathgar,
Dublin 6, D06 HD27, Ireland
Tel: +353 1 4923333; Fax: +353 1 4922777
Email: books@obrien.ie
Website: www.obrien.ie
The O'Brien Press is a member of Publishing Ireland.

ISBN: 978-1-84717-907-4

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
22 21 20 19 18 17

Printed and bound by Gutenberg Press, Malta.
The paper in this book is produced using pulp from managed forests.

A NOTE ON THE COVER

When I was approaching the cover of *The Woodcutter and His Family*, I had in mind the bridge, as it were, that James Joyce's work now is, between an older literary tradition and a new one, and found we were immediately presented with the chance to do something letterpress-inspired. And so I decided to mix a serif (Caslon) with a sans serif (Frutiger) wooden-cut typeface. The serif represents traditional letterform and the sans signals a modernist typeface. The work was carried out in The Print Museum, Dublin, in May 2017 with the assistance of Mary Plunkett and Declan Behan. The concept, coupled with different printing processes, gives a special resonance to the imagery.

Emma Byrne, designer

The Woodcutter and His Family receives financial assistance from the Arts Council

Published in
DUBLIN
UNESCO
City of Literature

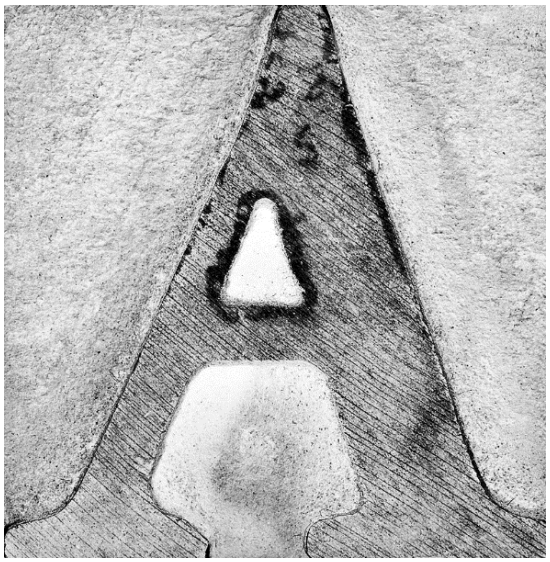
FRANK McGUINNESS

THE WOOD CUTTER AND HIS FAMILY

CHAPTER ONE

Son

Archie



Zurich, Switzerland

On the day I was born my father set himself the task of learning to lip-read. Why a man so prodigiously talented in the acquisition of the earth's languages should undertake such a challenge has always and ever baffled me. Perhaps it baffled himself. Who can say?

He never spoke of it again, so it fell to my mother to confess this strange feat many years after he had committed himself to this pursuit. There was no necessity for it. None of us was deaf, and neither was any of his family dumb. Did he wish us to be?

Could that be what he was looking for, silence? The great man of letters, celebrated the globe over, did he above all else wish to escape from our chattering and retreat where nothing could trouble him but his meanderings and motives, known only to his own sweet self? I cannot tell you an answer to that, for I failed to ask him when he was hale and hearty enough to reply. It was one of many failures which he forgave me. Indeed he forgave us all without complaint, no matter how many times we had let him down – in thought, in word, and in deed. The most benevolent of famous men, Papa.

He forgave that I was born too early. Poor Mama had such a fright. She'd firmly maintained I would not arrive until the end of August. Even September. When she started to feel sore and sick in her stomach, she cursed what she'd had for breakfast. I blame the Famine, the Irish Famine, she said, I blame it for everything that afflicts us as a race, but more than anything I blame it because I can never ever waste a morsel of food, and the consequence is I have nearly poisoned myself on numerous occasions, forcing down rancid meat a rat would not digest, and that's what I did this morning, choosing not to throw into the bin a slice of ham but instead smothered it in butter between two bits of bread and convinced myself it was fit to eat. Look at me now, poisoned – all my own fault, don't pity me.

Father didn't.

And he was not going to encourage her to rant further on the Famine. It was one of her dominant topics of conversation. She could link it to every misfortune that befell our family – even Hitler. I cannot for the life of me remember how she forged a precise connection between the two, but can recall that, when she did, Papa told her she was the most ridiculous woman he'd ever married. She burst into tears as he was correcting himself and said he meant met, not married.

She took this to imply that all the years he'd kept her from a state of wedlock, they had nothing to do with his hatred of the Catholic sacrament but were merely another way of humiliating an innocent poor Galway girl who'd abandoned all to serve him, the dirty Dublin rogue.

You only wanted me for my stories, she accused him. No, he corrected her, it was to save you from the Famine. That would have been a kindness years ago in 1845, she said, are you implying I am over a hundred and I look it? Yes, he said, if it pleases you. It didn't.

A similar row was threatening to develop on the day of my birth, 27 July. I mentioned the ham she had been wolfing, didn't I? But did I let slip that my father had no intention of staying with her that day? No, he'd planned to go swimming, and she'd happily let him, because he always returned in peaceful mood; immersion in water seeming to placate him, as if he'd endured another Baptism, welcomed into the fold of civilised men who could show a modicum of respect to their wives. Go on, enjoy yourself, I am fine, she informed him. He believed her for there was not a chance in hell she was in labour.

But she was. As soon as Papa closed the door, she knew it for sure, yet would she give him the satisfaction of calling him back to convince him why she was so certain? How many babies had she seen born in the west of Ireland? How many women had she witnessed in the throes of their agony? Strong, strapping lassies, full of devilment and laughing fit to burst their sides. Well, boyo, birthing put a stop to their smiling.

Still, she maintained she was cut from Connemara granite. She was no soft caramel. She could endure it. And she prayed he would come back to be with her. Prayed to the Virgin most pure, Star of the Sea, pray for the wanderer, pray for me. And whether it was indeed the Virgin worked her miracle and let him hear, or whether it was he found a hole in his red swimming costume that rendered it indecent, back he came to the second-floor flat, Via S Niccolo, 30, Trieste, to find her in deepest agony. He called for the landlady, Signora Canarutto, to assist them like a good woman – for the love of the divine Jesus, my mother added, forgetting in the panic the Signora was Jewish.

Not that such things mattered in times of this nature, although when we'd last crossed the border into Switzerland my father had to convince the relevant authorities we were indeed Aryan. A long way down the line of my life till that would happen. Now the necessity was to make preparations for my birth. The presence of my papa and her neighbours calmed my mother, she said. All her life her greatest dread was that she would die alone, or, more specifically, that she would bleed to death and no one there to stop the flow. She felt sure now she would not have to endure such a death. Hence, she was more than content to let everything be done for her. Quite the lady of leisure, am I not? she joked. No one found it funny.

Of course the midwife must be in attendance, and so they fetched her, a Giuseppina Scaber. She looked like a reverend mother, but not one to put the fear of God in you, nor had she the look that, at a moment's asking, the devil and all his demons would possess her and allow her

tear you limb by limb for having the cheek to pry into what was not your business by asking for something – anything – to relieve your pain.

No such relief was forthcoming, and my mother told me she would not complain, because it was right and proper a mother be tough enough to tolerate whatever spasms, twists and turns of torture her child in the womb inflicts for its pleasure on her, since the infant is only fighting to be free and into this world, roaring its lungs out. She kept changing specific details as to how I had conducted myself through these hours of labour. The last time she talked of that day, and she does often, it would seem I leapt piping out of her, revelling in the light, beaming at the sun. I have never known a little one more in love with the first day of his existence, she'd observe, and my father, he would say, then it is a pity the same bambino was not able to settle the quarrel where the bed should be.

In Italy there is always a row brewing, and Trieste prides itself on providing its citizens with the best of rows. Something in the air, the water, or even the bread – maybe all three – ensure tempers are explosive. At first everything seemed methodical and calm, though since my mother thought there was at least another month before she would be due at the end of August, nothing really had been prepared. But Signora Canarutto was Italian, she had in her permanent possession all that could be necessary and needed for the birth of a baby. These were quietly summoned and assembled. No chance of anything going amiss. But she did not like where the bed was placed, and so much furniture surrounding it. Things must be moved.

My father was foolish enough to resist, or at least to ask why. The Signora explained that the bed had to be moved to the centre of the room, since, many years ago, it had been brought from Jerusalem. My father did not follow her reasoning. It was quite simple. As every civilised person knew or agreed upon, Jerusalem, the city of God, was the centre of the earth. So it was very important, for all manner of things, that the bed carved there centuries ago and brought by her family at great discomfort and expense no matter where they wandered, this bed must be given pride of place at all great events. The Signora had specifically placed this beautiful object in my parents' apartment to encourage their fertility, and it had not failed them, as, for generations, it had not failed her own.

Do you mean to say, my father foolishly argued, that myself and my wife, both of us healthy as Irish trout, are only having this baby because of your bed? The Signora excused herself for her ignorance, but could he enlighten her what a trout, Irish or otherwise, had to do with this conception and delivery of a new baby? Perhaps it did, my father mused. Perhaps we were more wanton in the days of Noah's Ark than we realise or remember. Perhaps man, woman and child were fucking fish, as there can't have been much else to pass the time on that endless sea voyage.

Perhaps we can, if truth be told, trace our descent from a single herring or salmon, and that we are all family beneath the fin.

The Signora was not sure how, but felt she was being mocked. She was certain of it when he made his next speculation. This bed, this bed elaborately carved with mermaids, with doves, with fish, even a sail – might it not be part of the timber with which aeons ago Noah made his boat? Strange things have happened, stranger things survived. Here was where our species found the necessary push and shove, the Brace yourself, Bridget, all Irish men declare to their wives before the ride – they say it all over Roscommon, my mother informed us – this bed had evolved from the boards of that celebrated ark, could it be possible? My father asked the landlady would this be a question to perplex her rabbi?

That's when she was certain he was ridiculing her. She took no more action than to tell him it was time to join her menfolk for his evening meal and leave what work had to be done by the women. Go down now, go down instantly, there is enough food, she urged him. He offered first to give a hand moving the bed to the centre of the room as she required, but she abruptly refused, claiming it was essential only the women perform this task. My mother pointed out the heaviness of the bed, but she was scorned as a weak female. A female on the verge of giving birth, Mama retaliated, but the Signora simply observed, in her experience, pregnant ladies all had vivid imaginations and liked to fancy they suffered from every disease under the sun – hypochondriacs, that was the word she searched for. Now, she ordered, come along, put your shoulders to it, get this bed into the centre of the room.

The three of them – Mama, midwife, landlady – did so, Mama occasionally howling when one birth pang struck her more severely than others. A look from the Signora silenced her, but she was a happy woman to collapse onto the mattress, open her mouth and yell the house down at the agony in the garden she was now enduring for my sake, for my father's sake, for his father and all the fathers who walk this earth, bestowing her curses on each and every man whose cock found its way where it had no business being, damning her son, if son I should be, emerging from her womb, to be sterile, fearing to look at a woman, let alone touch one, wishing her own mother had taken a stick the day and hour she was born herself and lashed the life out of her so that she would not have to suffer the torments of hell burning in her belly. Fetch the father, she screamed, so that I can strangle the whore's whelp that has done this to me, I will crucify him on the Claddagh, roast the flesh off his bones on Taylor's Hill, eat him alive through the quays of Galway, give him to me.

All this, she told me, for the pain had imprinted every word on her memory, and if she didn't recall each word, who would? Indeed, the midwife told Mama afterwards she had been a very

brave and very beautiful girl who dealt with all she'd had to suffer in a most calm and dignified manner, enduring her turmoil with true grace and devout belief in the knowledge this ordeal must pass. The landlady backed up that story, and this, I believe, must account for the confusion in Mama's versions of my birth – how she could be at times so confident I had slipped into the world without effort or anger.

But maybe something had gone amiss. They did decide to send for a doctor, Sinigaglia, a pupil of English with my father. My mother has no recollection of a man being in the room other than a male voice wondering what it could be she was speaking when she found she was blathering to herself in what was most likely remnants of Gaelic that had lodged themselves from schooldays in her mind and would never be budged – maybe the chorus of an old song, or the Angelus they said at midday, always recited in the ancient language, an act of defiance against the English. She had gone beyond the limits of agony when my head started to emerge, and I was there, alive, welcomed, whole, into the world.

My mother wept with joy, with relief, and when Dr Sinigaglia told her I was a boy, she clapped her hands with happiness. He had not heard her diatribe against his sex, so he put this joy down to her desire she would mother a son. The midwife Scaber, she heard the applause, and my mother said she will never forget the smile they shared at their little secret. I asked her did she really mean those terrible names she pinned on me and Papa, and she assured me of course not – if she had been in earnest, she would never have let me in on what she'd said in the heat of her agony. Anyway, why was I questioning her, when she kept up the story of how little trouble I'd actually caused her, coming into this family?

Mama had this gift of causing confusion. I never knew when to believe her. My sister, I knew, never spoke the truth – she simply couldn't. My father could only tell you the same story in sixty different versions, being averse to any single way of giving a body the beginning, middle and end of a tale, a habit inherited, he said, from his own father who never trusted any being that could not believe both sides of the same story, and Grandfather could invent as many more sides of a yarn as were necessary to account for all the dimensions you could desire. It must, you might have imagined therefore, have been some hullaballoo to come up with a name for myself, their firstborn, the carrier of all their hopes and dreams. Were there ructions deciding?

There weren't any.

Archibald, for my father's little brother, who died years before. Archibald, Archie. Mama agreed to this, without quarrel. She knew how much my father lamented the loss of that child, my uncle I suppose. Knowing her as I do now, I am surprised she did not murmur some objections, fearing that I would be haunted by a spirit, or that some ghostly presence might find

its way inside me just for the hell of it. No such phantom was sighted, the dead boy remained in his grave. My father had his way in all respects concerning this affair, even so far as to Mama agreeing I would not be christened. Again, she surprised Papa. He expected at least a small confrontation, but none materialised.

With my mother, this might arouse suspicion, but it didn't. He really should have comprehended that by offering no apparent resistance, she was resisting most fiercely. I caught wind of this even at a very early age when it suddenly dawned on me she could call me by another name than Archie, and this would prove to be her revolt against Papa. She would at times take an age to comb my hair, lovingly stroke every strand, kiss my scalp a thousand times and, on very rare occasions, whisper into my ear, lest anyone should catch her, There now, Michael, that's you grand. I let this happen a few times before I cottoned on there was no Michael there – could not possibly be anyone but myself, so like any nosy little boy, I asked her, Who is Michael, Mama?

I remember this because it was the first time in my life I felt shock move through another human being. I could feel her body – do what? Sway? Stiffen? And I repeated my question, Who is Michael? She laughed out loud in a way I now, of course, recognise meant we were to share a secret I must at all costs keep from Papa. I would not be hushed, though. Who is – and before I said the name, she'd put her finger to my lips to silence me from saying it. Michael, he is your guardian angel, she told me, and a fine swagger of a celestial being he is, there at all times to protect little Archie and keep him safe. I can't see him, I told her, and again she laughed out loud. Well, naturally you can't, she explained, nobody is permitted to see their own, but I can see and speak to him when he allows me to. Is he beautiful? I inquired. Very much so, the picture of beauty, and pale, so pale as if his skin had never seen the sun, and I like pale men, she explained, they have the touch of death about them, God forgive me saying the like.

Does Papa see him too, the angel Michael? I innocently asked her. She tugged at my hair, hurting me a bit, taking her time before she answered. There is one thing I want you to promise me above all other promises, and if you are a good boy, you will do this – are you my good boy? she asked. I am your best boy, I assured her. Then you must never, ever let a word of this slip out when Papa is here; it is to be our big secret, and you will never let him know of it, do you swear that? she demanded. I nodded, but wanted to know why. Does Papa not like angels? He doesn't believe in them, she explained, he doesn't want us to believe in them either, and if he hears us talking about them, he will be very cross. Do you want to make Papa very cross? I assured her I didn't. Good, she sighed, and I was delighted I had pleased her.

***

End of Extract