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The Weight of Him

Written by Ethel Rohan

Published by Atlantic Books

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The Weight of Him

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Atlantic Books
London

First published in 2017 in the United States of America by
St Martin's Press, New York.

First published in trade paperback and e-book in Great Britain in
2017 by Atlantic Books, an imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd.

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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the
British Library.

Trade paperback ISBN: 978 178 6491909
E-book ISBN: 978 178 6491916

Printed in Great Britain

Atlantic Books
An Imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd
Ormond House
26–27 Boswell Street
London
WC1N 3JZ

www.atlantic-books.co.uk

In loving memory of Nathaniel J. Bergman

I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out;
and I thought how it is worse, perhaps, to be locked in.

—Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

The Weight of Him

One

BILLY BRENNAN OVERDID IT AGAIN WITH THE FAST food. After, he hurried as best he could along the street, fighting the need to stop and recover—he didn't want to draw any more attention to himself. Strangers looked twice at his massive bulk. He pretended not to notice. Those he knew seemed inclined to stop and chat, but he issued only passing hellos and pressed on. He was in no mood to suffer further condolences and awkward exchanges, all of which set his heart racing.

A woman overtook him on the footpath, walking fast and with force. She must have just come off a foreign holiday or a session of sun beds. Maybe she had slathered herself in that fake lotion. More noticeable than skin the color of mahogany, though, she was sickly thin. Billy had never seen a woman so skinny; her arms and calves could snap like sugar sticks. It seemed impossible she could move that fast, could have the strength to even stand up.

She marched ahead, her arms swinging back and forth with

alarming range, her body jerking in a way that didn't make sense. It was as if different parts of her insides were struggling to get out. Billy felt eyes on him, a group of gawking schoolgirls. They looked from him to the woman and back again, a mix of humor and disgust on their faces. He walked faster, still hunched forward with the full, too-tight feeling in his stomach.

As he neared his car, he spotted Kitty Moore coming at him like a bullet in slow motion. He planted himself in front of a shop window, his reflection a thick column of flesh beneath a head of dark curls. His heart squeezed and released in time to, *Please don't see me*. Kitty neared in his periphery. Billy braced himself. *Keep going, that's it. Don't look this way. Don't—*

"Billy." Her sad tone pressed on his chest.

He swung around, faking surprise. "Ah, Kitty! How are you?"

Her eyes moistened. The gray-black of her loose, knotted bun made him think of a little heap of ashes. He couldn't hold her watery gaze. Felt as though he was trying to breathe through a pillow. Kitty's chapped lips moved, but he couldn't make out her words above the ringing in his ears.

She glanced at the shop's colorful window display and back at him. "I'll let you get along, Billy. You mind yourself, now."

"You, too, Kitty."

Her pale mouth remained open, as if she intended to say more, but she moved off. It was Kitty, of all people, who had found Michael that chill morning back in January. In the five weeks since, Billy had managed to mostly avoid her, even though they both lived in the neighboring village and just a couple of miles apart.

In her wake, his attention fell on the snow globe in the window's center display. The ornament contained a blond girl in a

red dress, a black dog by her spindle legs, and a cottage with a navy door and straw roof. Two yellow birds completed the scene, perched on the skeleton of an ice-blue tree. Billy wanted to shake the globe and bring it to life.

Behind him, a tour bus whooshed past, its red and white reflection streaking the shop glass. He tried to remember back to a time when he was small and thin, and able to feel the undertow from passing traffic. His hand pressed the side of his head, as though trying to keep the egg of himself together.

Billy sped over the twelve miles from town in his black Corolla, sucking traces of grease and hamburger from his teeth. As he entered the village, he told himself to slow down and get it together before he arrived home. The car cruised past the pub, shop, church, and graveyard. He pushed away the image of the dark earth heaped over the fresh grave.

Twenty-two houses dotted the village, a mix of gray stone, red brick, and whitewash all listing to the left. The entire scene dappled with weak, wintry sunshine. Its background colored in various greens courtesy of the trees and rolling fields. Another tour bus approached, a silver-haired driver in front and a load of schoolchildren in back. They were likely returning from Newgrange, centuries-old testimony to a time when the country was supposedly heroic and great. The Land of Saints, Scholars, and High Kings. Billy didn't want to think about the sad state of the country now after the end of the Celtic Tiger, with so much snatched from so many.

Home. Theirs was a redbrick dormer bungalow on a landscaped acre lot. His parents had given him and Tricia the site

twenty-one years ago. The wedding present yet another thing his father liked to hold over him. Billy tried not to look, but his eyes went straight to the trees behind the football pitch—those trees, all trees, ruined for him now.

He entered the kitchen. The radio was tuned to that country music station Tricia liked so much, some lament with an American twang playing. Not so long ago, he might have pulled her by the hand into the middle of the kitchen and twirled her around beneath his fingers. She would likely have pushed him away, laughing, and called him daft. Or on another day, in a sharper mood, she might tell him, "Stop, you'll give yourself a heart attack." Either scenario was better than how they tiptoed around each other now.

She stood at the sink peeling potatoes, all five-foot-nothing of her. He was six-foot. She glanced over her shoulder, a strip of potato skin hanging from the peeler like a diseased tongue. "You weren't long. Town must be quiet?"

"Very quiet, I was in and out." He didn't say he'd done little more than stuff himself. Didn't mention Kitty Moore.

"You just missed your mother," Tricia said.

"Everything all right?" he asked.

"Fine, she was just checking in."

A fresh bouquet of lilies sprang from a vase on the table, their smell sickly familiar. The flowers looked beautiful, but seemed tainted, like black age spots in the glass of an antique mirror. That was the way with so much now—tarnished, loaded. Birdsong that sounded like a child screeching. The creak of a door like groaning. Overhead power lines that could string you up.

He read the sympathy card, from Tricia's aunt in New York. "That was very nice of her."

"Yes, God bless her." Ever since they'd lost Michael, in addition to coffee, cigarettes, and sleeping tablets, Tricia had also taken hard to Catholicism. "Although," she continued, still skinning the potato, "I almost wish the cards and flowers, the people, would all stop coming through the door now. It seems endless."

He understood, but the alternative didn't appeal, either—people forgetting, and the everydayness of life without Michael taking hold. He opened the fridge door, despite still feeling full, and scanned the shelves. Every time he entered the house he walked straight to the fridge and looked inside, and every time he felt this strange disappointment, as though expecting to find something else.

As Tricia stripped the last potato bare, her shoulder blade moved faster beneath her T-shirt, bringing to mind a calcified wing. He watched the hypnotic movement, tempted to touch her, but he knew she wouldn't want that. His touch no longer comforted her the way it had in those first few days after Michael. The last time he'd reached for her, she'd flinched and pulled away.

"Did you want a hand?" he asked.

"No, thanks, I'm almost done."

The clothesline beyond the window tugged. Billy refused to look. Michael, at all of seventeen, had left the house in the dark of night, cut down the previous clothesline, and walked to the band of trees behind the football pitch. Billy pictured the rope on the ground, trailing Michael like a snake.

Up and down Tricia's shoulder blade sliced. She had lost so much weight in five weeks. Her straw-colored hair was brittle now, too. A glassy look in her eyes. She added the naked potatoes to the saucepan and walked to the back door with her

cigarettes and lighter. She had given up the killers for eight years, but the day they lost Michael, she had gone back on them worse than ever.

In the living room, John, Anna, and Ivor sat together on the couch, still in their school uniforms, their eyes locked on *Dine About Town*, that cooking show the whole family liked. Only now they weren't whole. Billy's attention jumped to the red floral rug in front of the fireplace. They'd waked Michael there in his mahogany coffin with its shiny gold handles and crucifixes. Michael's walnut guitar still leaned against the wall in the corner, just as the boy had left it. The fast food pushed against Billy's stomach, bloating, hurting. He thought about bursting wide open and how good that would feel.

"Did you want a cup of tea, Dad?" Anna asked.

"No, thanks, love. I'll get myself a cup after the dinner." He smiled, hoping to ease the worry on her little face. At twelve years old, Anna cut a miniature of her mother in old photographs—thin, pale, and short, with bright yellow-blond hair, almond-shaped eyes, and plump lips.

He suddenly wanted the children up and out, doing. "It's such a fine evening, how about we all go for a drive before dinner?"

"No thanks," John said, deadpan. At fifteen, he was now the eldest. He bore his brother's likeness, at least physically, and stood tall, lean, and broad. The defiance in his wild dark curls and penetrating blue eyes was all his, though, Michael a gentler and more agreeable young man.

"We're watching this," Ivor said, his eyes never leaving the TV. He sounded younger than nine, his words thick when he

spoke, as though every tooth he'd ever lost sat in a pile on his tongue.

"I'll go, Dad," Anna said, trying to please him.

"Ah, no," he said, not letting his disappointment show. "If this is what you'd all prefer to do." He remained with them, telling himself it didn't matter what they did as long as they were together.

The door to the boys' bedroom stood ajar. Billy shuffled past Michael's empty bed and opened the wardrobe, its hinges creaking. He ran his hands over the shoulders of Michael's shirts, and down the empty arms. He pressed Michael's favorite gray sweatshirt to his face, breathing deep. With each passing day, Michael's earthy, almost spicy scent was fading.

Billy recovered and moved into his room. He was looking forward to a long, hot shower and washing away as much as he could. After he stripped, he dropped onto the side of his bed to remove his socks, his stomach heavy on the pale, hairy slab of his thighs. He clapped his hands to the sides of his huge belly and jiggled it. He tried to lift its mound off his lap. He slapped and squeezed its rolls. Grabbed hunks of himself in his hands and twisted the fistfuls of fat till he hurt. It felt good. It felt awful.

He pushed himself in front of the full-length wardrobe mirror. His reflection appeared pale and sickly, older than forty-seven. His eyes looked bruised, too, as if he'd taken punches. The man of himself was hidden behind the droop of his purple, stretch-marked belly. Thanks to the press of the steering wheel, a permanent purple bruise also marked his middle,

like a supersized sneer. His breasts hung larger than Tricia's. He raised his arms out from his sides, their sagging flesh quivering like two blue-veined jellyfish. He turned away from the mirror and rushed into his clothes.

In the days after Michael, a social worker had come out to the house. A brunette, save for the single blond curl at her forehead, and her eyes soft and kind. One of her pamphlets maintained that people lost weight with grief. That was true of Tricia, but not of him. He wasn't even getting grief right. He recalled the anorexic woman earlier, trying to escape her skeletal body. He was the opposite, hiding inside his massiveness. He returned to the wardrobe mirror. His reflection stared him down. He raised his hand and made of his thumb and finger a pointed gun. His reflection aimed. Fired.

Beyond the window, the crows cawed, as if mocking. He lumbered across the room, lifted the net curtain, and watched the birds' black flight. The view of the village and the town beyond rarely changed. Except for the birds and the weather. The furling and unfurling of the Meath flag from windows. The sometimes hurtle of an airplane, streaks in its wake like ocean whitecaps.

The haphazard scatter of the buildings in the village made them look thrown down rather than built up, like dice shaken and rolled, landing where they may. Billy's childhood home stood on the hill, the straight line between him and the farmhouse just five hundred yards across the fields. It seemed much farther away. Smoke puffed from the kitchen chimney, as gray as rain clouds. He dropped the curtain.

Billy followed the smell of oil and fried meat to the kitchen. Tricia stood at the stove, prodding the chops with an orange spatula long deformed by the heat. The oil spat and sizzled, filling the small room with the distinctive waft of browned lamb and rosemary.

Tricia moved to the door and called the children. The three filed in and took their places. Billy avoided looking at Michael's empty chair. Tricia plated the food. The meat pink and juicy. The fried potatoes black-gritted and glistening.

She carried more food to the table. So much food, as if she were still cooking for a family of six. Billy sliced open his lamb chop and found himself hesitating.

Tricia took her seat opposite him. "How is everyone?" she asked, trying to sound casual. The social worker had emphasized the importance of checking in.

"Yeah, what did you all get up to today?" Billy asked. The school counselor had said the children seemed to be doing as well as could be expected, but he and Tricia would never again trust the surface of things.

John gripped his knife and fork hard, his knuckles yellow-white. "Why do you both keep asking how we are? All the time now, it's the same old thing—"

"Hardly all the time," Tricia said, still trying at casual. John's attention remained on his meal, but his cheeks flared red. Anna and Ivor looked out from wide, sad eyes.

"Eat up," Billy said gently.

John's knife and fork tore into his chop, as though he were killing it again. He had his grandfather's hard, square jaw. His temper, too. The boy's knife screeched across his plate, making the roots of Billy's teeth hum.

"Take it easy, can't you?" Billy said, too sharp. Tricia's eyebrows shot up. A warning. They had to be careful. They had to do a better job with the remaining three.

The Beatles' "Yesterday" floated out of the radio. Tricia crossed the room and powered it off. John chewed his meat as though still slaying it. Ivor's chubby hand pushed a wad of bread into his mouth, his chin shiny with butter. Anna inspected the lump of potato on her fork. Tricia remained at the window, her back to them and her arms wrapped around what was left of her. Billy pushed away his plate, his dinner untouched. A first.

Tricia returned to the table and mentioned her morning shift at the chemist. Some strange fella had wanted them to sell his homemade potion, a "cure" for rashes related to measles, chicken pox, and the like. "He couldn't understand why we refused."

Anna chimed in about the Sullivan twins in her class, home sick with the mumps. "Their necks swelled like melons."

The banter went around the table. Billy sat smiling and nodding, adding the odd comment. Inside, though, he couldn't stop the churn of panic, awful sensations that had descended after Michael and which were getting worse by the day. The more he ached to turn back time and undo the unthinkable, the more the torment built. As his family chatted, clocks ticked in his head like bombs, their black arms turning wildly forward, carrying them forever into the future and farther away from Michael.

His attention jumped to the vase of lilies Tricia had moved to the counter, in the farthest corner. He could still catch their

smell. The slice of the spades filling in Michael's grave started up again in his head, a wet, rhythmic music. He saw his naked reflection in the wardrobe mirror upstairs. He was killing himself—not nearly as swiftly or brutally as Michael, but killing himself just the same.