

The Truth About Love

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Extract

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Often I've asked myself, but found no answer,
Where gentleness and goodness can possible come from;
Even today I can't tell, and it's time to be gone.

Gottfried Benn

. . . and the sky rolled, rolling over me, heavy light. And bright too. Is it bright? Yes. And I lift my face to the light and I am flying towards it but I cannot reach it. And now I am falling, hurtling fast to the ground. And now the ground is close, closer, rushing hard. Please! Not yet! Please wait, ground. But the ground is now. And I am soft, me on so hard ground. And I am all wet on such a dry day. And the wet is cold. I am cold-wet on a hot-dry day. And the sky rolls, rolls over me again. No birds, I can hear no birds. Were there birds before the sound? Can I make sound? Can I make words, sound? Can I see? What can I see? Is this dream-world? Are my eyes now the eyes of dream-world? No. It's not dream-world. I see something real in the real world. I see a bit of face, hers, sister-face, up close. An eye. Her eye. I see her eye for a second and my eye is hurt by what I see. Call out! Call out words! 'Get a priest and a doctor! Quickly! Quickly! Get a priest! Confession! Get

priest first!’ ‘Bless me Father, for I have sinned.’ ‘How long?’ he will ask. ‘How long since last confession?’ Last confession? Is this my last confession? No! Please. No. But I must make last confession to save my immortal soul. I remember first confession. Had no sins. Made them up. Told lies, at confession. Will I be able to tell my sins – my now-sins – now? Can anyone hear me? Sound? Am I making the sound for the words? My sister is bending over me. Close. ‘Turn me over quickly! Don’t let my mother see me! Mama mustn’t see me like this.’ Have the words come out? Look at sister-face. Can I hear anything? From her face? Must try to make my sister hear the sound of me. ‘Turn me over quickly. Don’t let Mama see me. Mama must not see.’ And she hears me! I can see she hears me, above Mama’s scream. Is it a scream? It’s a sound. Sounds like a scream. Is it because my arm is gone? Can Mama see that my arm is gone? Yes! That’s why sound is screaming. Mama must not see other parts gone as well. Gone where? Where is my arm gone? That sound again. Oh please don’t Mama! That scream is hurting me. And now Olivia is pull-dragging Mama away. It’s hard for Olivia because Mama is strong but Olivia holds on and pulls-drags Mama to the gate. Goodbye Mama. Can you hear me calling out? Goodbye kind Mama. Is it forever-goodbye?

And the sky rolls again. Rolling over me. And now I press into the ground. I hard press into the ground because the sky

might roll me up into it and fly me away. Wait, sky! Olivia is running back to me now. She is here. I tell her 'arm is gone'. 'I know,' she says. 'I felt it fly away,' I say. And she says nothing. 'It's not only my arm,' I tell her. I don't tell her that all down stomach-way feels strange. But maybe she sees. It feels like a nothing place. And my leg. Can I tell her about my leg? 'Gone – arm-side leg feels all soft. A leg shouldn't feel soft.' 'No,' she says, 'leg is all right.' 'No! No! It's not all right.' Am I fighting with my sister again? Want to call out to Mama, 'She won't listen to me Mama! She won't believe me.' But Mama isn't here to hear me.

Sky is rolling faster, helter-skelter. Suddenly. No warning, am sleepy. I am so sleepy. Then sister says 'Blanket!' Did she hear me think-say 'sleepy'? Then she says, 'For shock. Must get you a blanket for shock.' 'No,' I cry, 'don't go. Don't leave me! Please don't leave me, Olivia.' 'I must go.' She's determined. Mama often says 'she's very determined, your sister' and Mama smiles when she says that. 'I'll be back with blanket from bedroom. Back very quickly.' She is gone. Running. 'Don't fall! Don't fall!' I cry out to her. Does she hear me?

What's happened? Am I sick? No. I'm injured. No arm. Can't play rounders now. Was no good at hurling anyway. Now I see blood. I am injured. Yes. There's always blood when injured. Olivia's back with a sheet and a blanket and pillow. She's putting arm, part-arm on pillow. No hand.

Hand gone. Gone from the elbow. And from my elbow something trails. White trail of something? What is it? She puts the sheet over my stomach and then the blanket. 'Have done it to myself this time, Olivia.' And she smiles – I used to call her Smiley-girl when I was small – and she cries at same time. 'Am not drowning,' I say to her. 'You were always frightened I would drown even though I'm a great swimmer.' And she smiles again and cries again. But she makes no sound. No, I didn't drown. Not me. I remember lake-day when I dived deep down to show off to the girl over the road and everyone was frightened for me. Her name is Tara and she smiled at me when I came up through the water, shivering and a hero. I was so proud. 'Tara's very shy,' Mama says, 'and she's very petite.' And when I heard 'Reet Petite' on the wireless one day when they had all the old number-one hits I thought, she's my reet petite. Tara's my 'Reet Petite the finest girl you ever wanna meet.' I make everyone listen whenever it comes on. I love songs. I love lines of words. Line after line of them, like soldiers on the page. 'Stand up boys and sing the national anthem, "S-O-L-D-I-E-R-S are we, whose L-I-V-E-S are pledged to I-R-E-L-A-N-D."' Next line? What's next line? Stuff is falling away. Out of my mind. Where do thoughts fall when they fall out of your mind? On to hard ground and break into little pieces? Is my mind out of me? Mind on ground? Where is my brother?

‘Where is Daragh?’ I ask Olivia. ‘We think he’s still at the lake. Bogus Brogan and Mr Brannigan have gone to get him’. Her voice is talk-rolling over me. What is she saying now? Doctor coming? Good. Because pain is somewhere and it’s coming for me. It’s a little wriggly-saw pain. Pain-saw. Noisy. And big-noise pain further down the pain-shaft is coming for me. I can hear it. Fly me away from the pain which is sawing me, pain –sawing louder and louder. And I’m going into some place of nothing at all only pain. Will anyone find me in pain-world? Or am I lost there? Can anyone save me? You can save the holy souls in purgatory years and years of pain if you pray for them, Brother Enda says. ‘You can get them out with your prayers, boys. The power of prayer can release them from their pain-prison.’ Jail-break? Love jail-break pictures. But I never said enough prayers for holy souls in purgatory. Now I have little second outside pain-world. Outside world! Am I going outside, world? No! I want the world. I want to stay in the world. Even pain-world.

Hear front gate banging now. ‘You must do something about the banging of that gate, Tom.’ Mama’s been saying that for months. Hear running. Someone is near and here now. A doctor! Know by his bag. That’s a great bag. But he’s not my known-doctor. Name? What is name of known-doctor? Dr Sullivan! Now black-white man is talking to me. ‘Son? Son?’ But he’s not my father. ‘Dada? Can’t see Dada.’

‘Dada is not here yet,’ says Olivia. Father Dwyer! It’s Father Dwyer beside me. He is kneeling, black-white, beside me. ‘Don’t let your mother hear you, son.’ Can she hear me still? She’s in the front, isn’t she? But perhaps am making too-sad sound? Must try to be a hero, not a cry-baby. ‘Be a soldier now, son.’ But am not a soldier and am not his son either. Will never be soldier. Will Father Dwyer whisper ‘Te absolvo’? Will he whisper ‘Te absolvo’ so that all secret sins will be forgiven? Will he want a list? But the others will hear! Olivia will hear! But if I don’t give a list all sins will not be forgiven. He hasn’t whispered ‘If thou livest’ so I’m in the world still. Bend low, Father, and I’ll whisper my sins. I don’t want to meet Word-Man-God with secret sin still on my soul. But now Father Dwyer is shaking his head. Don’t do that! I’m frightened.

Doctor holding needle. Injection now. See it. Feel it. I never cried when I had injections. Ever. Daragh used to cry at everything when he was small. Said it was best because then you got sweets. Injection is in me. And now remember injection-doctor’s name. Carter! Protestant! Telling me ‘Good boy, good boy.’ And am hero on stretcher being carried out. Feel am floating up into rolling sky where the doctor is hiding the pain, and where Father Dwyer, I hope, has hidden my secret sins of impure thoughts and deeds, all hidden-forgiven on sky-rolling day. Am going through garage now, past

garden. Olivia is standing at the edge of the lawn between crying-kneeling Mama and me. Her head quick-turning to me then to Mama. To me. To me or to Mama? Her hair swings, her head swings, swings high-low in the sudden breeze. She is not certain which way to turn. Which way to stay turned? Which way to stay turned away? From me? Or away from Mama? 'Oh Mama' I hear floating crying sound from Olivia. And for just a sight-second I see her again, Mama. My Mama, in the front garden. Rocking forwards and backwards. Dancing! Not dancing. Rocking. Forwards. Backwards. Rock- rolling. Head down. Head back. Rock, rock, 'we're gonna rock around the clock tonight'. Round the clock on train of thought. Fast train. Going faster. Faster on train of thought. Can say nothing. Past sound-stations, hurtling.

Now going out the gate, and sister? She is staying with rocking Mama. Then I hear her call out 'Dada! Dada!' He's here! Is Dada here? Yes! I see him. Oh Dada! Oh! But Dada's quick-running towards rocking-Mama, towards crying-kneeling-rocking-Mama. 'See you later alligator/ After 'while crocodile/ Can't you see you're in my way now?/ Don't you know you cramp my style?' I cannot see him now. No.

And now am through banging gate. Just see corner of Mrs Garvey's house as they hurry- carry-rock me into ambulance, white-white ambulance. 'Rock-a-bye baby in the tree top,

when the wind falls the cradle will rock.’ Next line? ‘When the bough breaks, baby will fall.’ Baby falling. Mrs Garvey drops her babies before they’re ready. ‘Summer must be a bad time for me, Mrs O’Hara,’ I heard her say to Mama. ‘I feel guilty, as though I’d dropped them carelessly and spilled them, like milk out of a churn onto the dirty lane. That’s the fourth baby I’ve lost.’ Mama didn’t drop me too fast. She held on to me. Didn’t drop me too soon. But Mama, I think I’m falling now and you can’t catch me. ‘Rock-a-bye baby.’ The ambulance is moving. Stop! Let me back! Let me go home. Please. Please. Or even let me into Mrs Garvey’s house. I was there today, in her dark little back room. She was sitting there by herself, said she wanted to hide her crying face from the light. And she told me something that I was dying to tell Mama. What was it? She was crying when she told me. I asked her, should I put on the wireless to cheer her up? ‘Yes,’ she said, ‘you do that, lad.’ ‘Irene goodnight, Irene goodnight . . . goodnight Irene, goodnight Irene. I’ll see you in my dreams . . . last Saturday night I got married . . .’ ‘Oh Mrs Garvey! That’s my mother’s favourite golden oldie! She loves that song. She’s always singing it. Mama has a grand voice.’ ‘I know, lad.’ And we listened to it all the way through and then I had to go home ‘I’m dying to tell my mother, Mrs Garvey.’ What was it I was dying to tell my mother?

We're turning now. We must be in Mount Road; soon we'll be past the school. School passed. Passed my exams. Specially science with Brother Rory and history and English with Brother Enda. Moving fast now. Very fast now. I remember the day everyone was cross with me because I roller-skated down the Bridge Road so fast. Faster, faster down the road and I nearly went slide-falling under a car and hurt my elbow badly. Pain awful but was laughing anyway. Laughing. Dr Carter is looking close at me. He's not smiling. And I hear shouting from the front . . .

'For Christ's sake, Billie. Slow down. Not so fast!'

He's using the Lord's name in vain.

'Behold Saint Christopher – then go thy way in safety.'

'He wasn't talking of seventy-miles-an-hour, Billy.'

'The Man understands.'

'Dr Carter?

'He's going. We'll lose him if we don't get there quickly.'

'Jesus that was close!'

He's taken the Lord's name in vain. Again. Venial sin. Confession on Friday? Friday! So far away, Friday, from today, Thursday. Thursday's child has far to go.

'Mind out for that child! For Christ's sake who lets a four-year-old out of their sight?'

'It's the McLoughlin child. Those McLoughlins! They're drowning in children. Makes them careless.'

Careless? With babies? So many ways to lose a baby. Even born-babies. I'm not a baby. I'm not a child. I'm a lad. A going-away lad. Oh Mama, Mama.

'Oh God Almighty the lad's crying for his mother. I can't bear that sound.'

Has he heard it before? Let me out of the ambulance. I'm not ready for eternity. Not yet! Not yet! I've got something I'm dying to tell my mother. If Mrs Garvey ever has a son she'll name him after me. Yes! Mama? Did you hear that, Mama?

'Oh God! Listen to him. He's groaning. Watch out! Watch out for the fucking lorry! Watch out, Billy!'

They're swearing! They're saying 'fuck'. Who's swearing? 'Not me Mama. I promise.' If only they wouldn't shout . . .

'Is he conscious?'

Yes. Yes, I am . . . Yes.

'What'll I ever say to Tom O'Hara? He's a lovely man.'

Everybody says that. 'Your father's a lovely man.'

'Tom O'Hara's a brave man too. Always trying to calm that mad neighbour of his, Jim Brannigan, and his terrible rages against Marjorie and the two little boys. She's always running to Tom to save them. The lad's bravery didn't come from nowhere.'

Dada! Dada! Dada! De profundis clamavi ad te/ Domine, Domine . . . Out of the depths to Thee, oh Lord, I cry.

Dada, Dada, I call to thee, Dada, Dada. I call to thee. From the depths. From the depths. I'm falling and calling to thee. Don't let me fall, Dada! Am not falling from the roof, Dada! Am falling from life, Dada! Am falling from life. Into eternity, Dada. Forever and ever amen. Am so very frightened of the loneliness, Dada.

'I saw worse wounds in the war. Some survived.'

The war? They say Dr Carter was a Major. On the English side. Dr Sullivan is our doctor. He's in Tipperary today with 'that hopeless son' of his. Heard that at the lake – was it today? When I met the German on his walk and I told him I loved his gate, his hero-gate. I've wanted to tell him before but I was a bit shy. 'I love your gate, Mr Middlehoff. It's a hero's gate.' 'What is it that makes you say that?' He pronounces every word like he loves the English language but he's afraid of it. 'The helmet on top.' 'Ah,' he said. 'And who is your hero?' 'Sarsfield is my hero. Olivia prefers Pearse. She worships him. She knows every word of his "Boys of Ireland" speech but so do I, but . . .' 'Are you one of the boys of Ireland?' he asked me. '*Mise Éire*. I am Ireland. Ireland is me.' 'And what else are you?' 'Nothing else. I try to live up to that precept, as Brother Enda calls it. Purity in heart and soul for Ireland. Goodbye, Mr Middlehoff, I have to go to the boat now. I hope I'll see you on your walk tomorrow.' But I won't. Not now. He's nice to me. He's nicer than Mr Pennington

who used to own Lake House. The German's more like Mrs Garvey, a grown-up who listens to me. Who will listen to me now? What's happening now? We're slowing down.

'Thank God! We're through the gates. There's Father Dwyer's car!'

I don't think Father Dwyer heard my confession properly. Am I in a state of sin? Think. Think. Secret sin. Oh, I'm so ashamed of secret sin. 'Bless me Father,' I try so hard not to commit secret sin. When it all comes over me I can't stop. 'Bless me father for I have sinned. 'Oh bless me. So hard to tell that other sin when I stroked the hair of across-the-road girl. Name? I had her name! Where has my mind gone for a name? Tara! 'Reet Petite.' Mama says you're petite. I'm so sorry Mama, so sorry. You'll be thinking of me. And crying all the time. Again. You're not well, Mama. It was too hard on you, everyone said that last year when you cried and cried all the time. I used to go off to my room and hide in corner when you cried so long last year after little sister died. And we all knelt and looked and looked that day at her as she lay white in her white communion dress and you wouldn't leave the room would you Mama? Dr Sullivan and Dada and Father Dwyer had to talk you out of the room. It took hours and hours. We sat outside waiting for you, Olivia, Daragh and me. And then after the funeral in the rain and cold we all came home and the house was full. And then it was quiet.

And then it was Christmas and I got a book. Was that my last Christmas?

‘God, the hospital’s drenched in sunshine. It’s dripping in it. What a day. Like they said on Radio Éireann this morning, “Days like this don’t come in twos.” What have I said? Don’t die on us all now, lad. Lad, can you hear me? Don’t die on us all! Though maybe it’s better. He’s destroyed, isn’t he? There’s Matron. Oh thank God she’s here. She’s one great woman with that starched headdress of hers and the rustling skirts. I’m surprised death ever defies her. I’m surprised she doesn’t bully death out of every bed in this hospital or laugh it out.’

Laugh death out of bed? Can I laugh it away? Can I laugh and be like the great hero of old Cúchulainn? who cried, ‘If I die it shall be from the excess of love I bear the Gael.’ Ah, what a line! I’ve left no lines behind me. If I die I’ll have died silent. Nothing to be remembered by. I could have written something A poem, even. Even one poem. Go away, Death! I’ll try laughing it away, like Cúchulainn, But now I feel a kind of rolling again and the woman is talking, the white and dark-blue woman.

‘Oh my God! Childie! Dr Sullivan and I delivered you. Ah childie, what have you done to yourself? Come here to me, childie. Darling lad, I helped your mother Sissy bring you into this world. Oh Sissy, what can we ever do for you now?

All right everyone! Now up the steps. Right. Lets get down to theatre. They're waiting for him. It'll be a long night whatever happens. Pray. All of you pray that Mr Connelly – the best surgeon in the county – does the will of God tonight. The lad may be better off if God takes him. God will decide. But we'll do our best. Hurry now. Hurry . . . '

Hurry! Run a race down the corridor. Down. Am going down life corridor. Into theatre. What play am I in? Real life. It's real life! What is real life? Reen. Irene goodnight Irene . . . Reet Petite . . . Irene goodnight Irene. Reet reen reet . . . the finest girl you ever wanna meet . . . I go to meet my maker. Not yet! Mama, Dada, where are you? Where? Last hours, like Pearse. Alone. But I have no last poem for you, Mama. Not like his for his mother before the British shot him. We all have to learn it. 'Oh mother dear the last few hours are slipping fast away/ They have told me that the hour must come/ With the dying of the day.' Pale Pearse, pale like me. Tried to be a hero to Mama. 'Turn me over, don't let my mother see me.' Not much of a hero. No-one will tell my story. Oh Mama, I feel all wet and cold . . . I can hear you Mama: 'Come in child. Out of the rain. You'll get drenched. Come over here by the fire, I'll hotten you up.' You always said that Mama. Oh thank you Mama for hot drinks on cold nights, for long-sitting through gasping asthma, for looking away from down there when you helped me out of the bath

because I was very weak once. Mama, Dada, am off to Tir-nan-Og. I'm sorry, but I think I will have to go there now. There's nowhere else for me. I can't stay here. Goodnight Mama. The land of Tir-nan-Og, the land of the young is bundling up the clouds, high, high. Am sky-flying. Hold on to me, Mama! Hold on! Don't let me fly away! Hold on to me! Catch my legs! Leg! Other one too soft. Bone soft. Something's wrong. Hold on to my good leg. Hold on Mama! Mama? Dada! Hold on! You're heavier, Dada. Heavier than Mama. So you hold on to me, Dada. Don't let go of me Dada. Dada? Irene goodnight Irene. Ireeeeeene goodnight . . . Goodnight Mama Irene goodnight, I'll see you in my dreams. Dreams. Dreams. Goodnight . . . goodnight. Oh Ireene goodnight Irene. Ireeeeeene goodnight . . . goodnight Mama . . . Irene goodnight I'll see you in my dreams. It takes some time to fall asleep. I'll see you there. Hold my leg Dada! Am floating all away. Dream dreaming. I dream of you. Irene goodnight Ireene, goodnight . . . goodnight Ireene . . . I'll see you in my dreams.