

*Full fathom five thy father lies;
Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes:
Nothing of him that doth fade,
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.
Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell:
Ding-dong.
Hark! now I hear them—Ding-dong, bell.*

Prologue

Charley's dad has two faces. Charley will know, when he walks through that door, any moment now, from his face which dad she's dealing with today.

She's sitting at the kitchen table eating her breakfast. She really wanted Weetabix, but the milk was running low so she decided not to risk it. She thought she really should go around the corner and get some, but she didn't dare in case he came while she was gone. So, she settled for a banana sandwich.

Charley is facing the door. From here she's got a clear look out. She'll see him coming. She'll see him open the gate, close it behind him and walk up the path. Apart from his face, there are other signals that will tell her what to expect. If he's swinging his keys around on his index finger, she can relax. If he ignores it when the gate sticks, they'll be OK. If he gives her a little knock on the window before he unlocks the door, there's no need to worry.

But if the gate sticks and he looks to the upstairs window, or if he has to brush aside that overgrown tentacle of hibiscus and looks to the window, or if he stops at the door and waits a moment before unlocking it: then her heart will start to beat a little faster. The fight or flight switch in her brain will flick and instruct her legs to get moving. But she must resist it. Because there is another instinct, even stronger, growing stronger by the day: the need to protect.

She watches the second hand sweep around the kitchen clock. Watches the objects of the kitchen become more and more solid as the sun asserts itself. Watches the hibiscus trembling in the late summer breeze.

And right on time, twelve minutes past six, he arrives. What the neighbours see, the ones who are up, is Teddy Hardwick returning from another night shift at the hosier

factory. Hard working, right neighbourly Teddy Hardwick. Barely a living resident of Shooter Street hasn't got Teddy to thank for getting them out of a hole at one time or another. Digging their car out of snow, or changing a flat tyre, or unblocking some guttering, or tuning in a TV, or helping to assemble a shed, or locating a fusebox, or moving furniture, or carrying shopping...

The Hardwick house is an end terrace. The house it is adjoined to belongs to Mrs Travers. Mrs Travers, a widow of nineteen years, who does not believe in remarriage, is as deaf as the proverbial post. She has hearing aids, but she finds the background noise so confusing that she refuses to wear them. She has a budgerigar named Tyson whose killer impressions of Rob Rinder, Jeremy Kyle and Dave Lamb have gone hitherto unnoticed. On occasion he can also manage a mean Teddy Hardwick.

"Where's your mother?" Charley's dad asks her. No greeting. That's a sure sign.

"I didn't wake her. She had a bad night."

"A bad night?"

"There was a little blood. I said we should go to St John's, but she didn't want to waste their time. It was only a bit. Not like last time. I think she just needs rest."

"*You* think she needs rest?"

"Well that's what the doctors said, isn't it? Bed rest for the rest of –"

"I know what they said. They also said to go back immediately if it happened again."

"Yeah, but, it wasn't as bad. It stopped on its own this time, so –"

"So?" He takes her chin in his hand, "so?" But she refuses to look him in the eye. Whatever look she chooses he will read it wrong. There is nothing – nothing – she can do or say now to appease him.

"I'm going to take my son to the hospital now," he tells her. "Get my flask and lunch ready and tell Sam to wait for me here." That's going to make her late for school, but she bites her tongue.

He heads upstairs. Charley freezes. Listening. His deliberate footsteps on the steep, narrow stairs. Above her now, moving towards their bedroom. The door opening. He's pacing across to the bed. Her mother's voice, muffled. Her father's more insistent. "I said get *up*."

Charley puts on the kettle and goes out to the porch to get his flask and lunch box. The flask is tartan and when she unscrews the lid it releases a distant memory of coffee. The lunch box was a Christmas gift from her, although her mother must have

found it as she could only have been two or three at the time. It has a faded picture of a man clutching a gigantic pike, as if they are locked in a macabre waltz, and above it the punchline, 'you shoulda seen the one that got away!'

As she tips boiling water into the flask to rinse it out, there is a thud from upstairs, followed by a heavy dragging sound. Her knees buckle and she has to grab the side of the sink for support.

"One way or another, my son's getting checked over. You gonna stand the fuck up now?

"No? You don't wanna make this easier on yourself?

"Oh! Now you're seeing sense. That's the way. On your feet. You been long enough lounging in that bed of ours. Like the Queen of Sheba. It's time you put your feet back on the floor and remembered how to walk among us mere mortals. That's the way: one in front of the other.

"Don't stop now. Keep movin'. We gotta get that little fella to a doctor. Seems you can't do one simple thing your body's made for. Seems you got to mess him up before he's even here.

"C'mon. It's just stairs. Don't stand there like you don't remember how. It ain't been that long.

"You best get movin'. Grace, I swear to God, you best get down –"

When Charley hears the sound of her mother's body on the stairs, she knows it's the end for the baby. And she's glad. Glad he'll never have to stand helplessly by while his mother whimpers pathetically for mercy. Glad her father will never turn him against her and use him to make her feel like a bad mother. Glad she'll never have to look him in the eye and try to answer when he asks her why she stood by and let it happen over and over and over again.

"Get up! Grace, you get up now!" Charley peers round from the kitchen door. Her father is standing at the foot of the stairs with his back to her. He's bent over her mother.

"You best get the fuck up you useless bitch," he screams. He grabs one arm and starts to shake her, violently. Her head bangs repeatedly against the wall.

And then he drops her. "What the fuck? What the fuck did you do to my son, you bitch?" He stumbles back a step, looking down at his feet. Charley can just make out what he's standing in: her mother's blood. It's running down from the bottom landing where her crumpled body lies.

"You killed him! You killed my son, you bitch. You couldn't bear for me to have one thing, one thing that would make me –" He grabs her again, this time by the throat. But his feet slip in the blood and he ends up on top of her.

As he scrambles to regain his stranglehold, he fails to hear Charley approaching behind him. She is wielding his fishing rod tube like it's a katana. Her father only bought the best when it came to his fishing equipment. No canvas casing would do; it had to be carbon. Charley strikes him at the back of the head. He tries to turn and she strikes him again and again and again.

She would have kept going until her arms were too weak to carry on, but Sam put a stop to it.

Sam, despite being her father's 'best friend' and fishing companion of almost ten years, testified that Charley had acted in defence of her mother. That his 'friend' had indeed been strangling his wife, who was eight months pregnant and suffering from placenta previa. He had long suspected that theirs was not a 'normal, happy marriage.'

Charley stares blankly at her morning's work: a fisherman in a small boat out on a lake; beneath the surface of the water, about to bite the hook is a mermaid. But this is no ordinary mermaid; her neck looks to be broken and her eyes are as black as the Mariana Trench. If they ever made a horror movie at sea and wanted new kind of monster, this was surely it.

"Are you going to let her get away with that?" Her mother asks.

"I have to. If I'm ever gonna get out of this place."

"They'll never let you out. You're fucked up for good kiddo."

It had taken Charley a while to get used to her mother's post mortem penchant for profanity. She still found it more shocking than the way her head lolled about like a dashboard toy's, or the vacancy in her eyes.

Her brother is chewing at the chord again.

"Pack that in brat! What've I told you?" Grace rasps, collapsing into a coughing fit. When she recovers she tells Charley, "he's teething," producing a tube of hand cream from her dressing gown pocket and handing it to him. "Chew on that you little fucker."

"He's getting big, isn't he?" Charley says.

"He's a pain in the arse. But never mind him. What are you going to do about little Miss sabotage?"

"I've told you: nothing. Sandy says I'm doing really well. He's gonna put me forward for fostering at the next review."

"*Sandy says,*" Grace sing-songs back at Charley. "Forget it. That shrink will tell you anything to keep you quiet. He's a spineless shit. And he's turning you soft." She tightens the belt of her dressing gown across her still swollen, empty stomach.

Charley can't think of any worse way to spend eternity.

"Here's what you do," Grace tells her, "you get in that kitchen. And by the sounds of it, if their guard's down, that shouldn't be too hard. But just in case Barbara-blubber gives you any grief, ask her about all the shit she skims off the grocery orders; she'll shit in her giant sized bloomers. All the best weapons are in the kitchen."

"I don't want a weapon."

"That's the problem. You always were too fucking agreeable. I mean who would go to a fucking fishing rod as their weapon of choice? You got mad there for a while, I'll give you that. But now it's time to get even. You need to up your game. A rolling pin – now there's a weapon; you can do some damage with that. Or a kitchen knife–"

"I'm not stabbing Melanie just because she spat on my picture."

"Oh, you want me to sort her out?"

"No! Look what happened last time. Just leave it."