



*FERRYMAN*



LAST NIGHT HE woke to squall thunder and the thud of something falling and he thought one thing—snow—and forced himself to sleep again so he wouldn't wake and worry about what fell and what might break in the night. And in the morning, it's here: fluffs of white on the car and roof and grass; hunks of blue-white ice blown and slapped onto the sides of the letterbox and the birch trunks and the wrecked stone wall; snow gone wet with rain and frozen again in the back and forth of the thrashing night; the trees strung with icicles, the lane turned into a back-breaking fairy-tale ice rink. Twice he's fallen, and twice he's gotten up and kept on going because if he doesn't walk he's gonna die. That's what the doctor said, that he's gotta walk his big fat gut off, he's gotta walk his plugs clean or he can just go and

drop dead because if he won't look after himself then why the hell should anyone look after *him*? Eh? *Eh*?

He'd hated it at first. He was too slow and too heavy and everything hurt and he'd had enough of hurting, but it turns out it's his brain—not his body—that needs to be washed and washed in blood because every morning, warm and dumb with waking, he feels it all begin to shift in him. The words. The faces. Every morning he lies there numb and stuck in some sort of a forever *déjà vu*, watching everything that's happened remember itself and uncurl itself and begin to circle itself around his head. Their words. Their faces. All of it starts circling, faster and faster, till his brain begs him out of bed because it learned quickly that if it pushes him into the cold and beats his feet on the ground his blood will pound in his ears and his breath will rasp out his mouth and his body will deafen itself from the inside out, from the outside in.

It's his first winter up here, the first time he's woken to a frozen storm and the first time he's walked on ice. He can't get the hang of it and he's shuffling sideways like a crab, shuffling slowly down the slipping lane. Too slow. The thoughts circle and circle, speeding up, spitting things out and sucking things in, like the morning radio and its drugs crashes rapes wars frauds tortures murders, a kid gone missing, and an old guy found dead—months dead—in his flat. And a baby, a baby shaken and shaken till its ribs got crushed and its neck clean broke in two. Though he's looking at his feet, all he can see is some

stranger-man's hands around a baby's bird-chest and the baby's head flipping back, cartoonish, and how come the man's on trial when they said the mother might have done it too? How can that be? How can that be? And then he starts thinking of his girls and their tiny chests and necks and soft sweet heads and he thanks God he's reached the end of the lane and he thanks God someone came out in the night to grit the wide black road across the lane's end. He can walk properly now. He kicks up a stride and the salty gravel crunches rude and loud in the dead-dawn street and he scuffs his heels harder so it's louder and it carries him away, carries him away and over the hill and down to the steely water.

He turns right at the water's edge, his usual way. He swings his arms, punching the sky like an idiot but so what, so what. His blood races, chasing itself, washing him from the inside out, from the outside in. He swings and strides and stares across the cobalt water stretching from his feet to the far mountains glowing under the moonlit, dawn-lit caps of new snow. A turquoise streak cracks open the sky, widening and stretching, stealing the stars, igniting the day. Two ferries move back and forth, back and forth, luminous red against the silvery wet that pulls and puckers in their wakes, throwing back balls of white that fall from globes strung—row upon cold iron row—across the ferries' fat bellies, lighting the way from here to there, there to here. One of them draws close, speeding in to the launch, swinging its square bulk around—too fast, too fast—throwing

up a foaming storm as it grinds to a stop. That's Kurt at the helm, having fun. Jim and Mick jump out with ropes and tie everything up and flip thumbs to Kurt and stand back as the steel drawbridge creaks down and the milk truck and the paper van and one lone car drive off and on their way. He marches by and waves to Jim and Mick and Jim and Mick wave back. As he goes he hears one say something and the other laugh something but he shrugs it off, he shrugs it off because they're the only guys he knows and they let him alone on his shifts and he likes them, he does, he does. Even if they don't like him, he likes them, and they're the only guys he knows.

He's walking hard, trying to pump warmth to his rubbery lips and prickling cheeks and frozen, gloved fingertips. He's finding his rhythm: the beat of his feet, the rasp of his breath, the arcs of his arms, the swing of his legs. On and on till his racing thoughts begin to slow to the tune of his movement, so he can see the faces, and hear the words, and attach the words to the faces. It's Millie and their girls: his daughters, her daughters. It's his sisters, Anna and Ellen, and his nieces, his nephews. It's his mum gone mute and his dad—understanding and not understanding, believing and not believing—caught between and spat out. It's his dad's heart—his own heart—pushing him through those flapping white doors. It's his dad waking up different, an old man. It's a three-line email, from his mother, last week. It's the radio news. And always, always, it's that little slut who started it all.

He walks faster. The oystercatchers stop for a second, pointing their stupid carrotty beaks at him, checking him out and then turning back to the smooth black pebbles at their feet. Near them a crow hops back and forth, back and forth, stabbing at a plastic rubbish bag. The gulls wheel and cry, watching and waiting, watching and waiting, hanging out for whatever they can get and why not and who isn't? He walks on, sifting through those last few months, trying to lay them out, lay them bare. Trying to see what was right and what was wrong and what was real and what was not because it was those last few months—when he'd proven he'd done nothing; when that bitch admitted she'd lied—that really messed him up. And still, still, *still* he feels it, the sickening wave of horror as he'd realised it didn't matter that she lied because once they'd heard his name and that word—that filthy fucking word against his name—they'd never forget it.

He begins to run. His heart hammers in his ears and his feet slam on the ground and his knees jar under his gut, his disgusting fat gut. He focuses on the pain splinting up his shins and the ice-burn of his throat. He focuses on the silk water unspooling beside him and the night sky unthreading above him, and again he tells himself to forget it, forget it: he's here and not there, he's now and not then—but he'll never forget his girls. He'll never forget that they're little enough to forget him and what will Millie say when they ask where their daddy is? Stop it, stop it! You're north, not south. You're

in the old world with a new name and a new job. You're a ferryman, a ferryman, just a guy getting people from here to there, from there to here, getting people across, keeping people safe, getting people home. But he can't stop anything, not while he's still struck by the paralysis that hit him as he watched the little slut wipe out his life—his *whole* life—with one single word. Still, he feels it, his moronic disbelief as he realised there was nothing he could do to stop her. Still, he sees them, the faces of all those people—so many fucking people—who suddenly appeared to help her, doing everything for her, everything, even afterwards, when she said she'd lied. How come no-one came to help *him*? He should have fucked her, fucked her dead. He should have fucked her dead.

The obelisk gleams ahead of him, its smooth marble bouncing back the hard white light from the clear sky and the snow, piled at its base. He reaches the memorial and seeks it out: that surname—the same one, repeated six times—in the middle of the list. For the hundredth time he presses his gloved palm to the chiselled and gilded letters, then bends down and digs out the wreath. He shakes the mushing snow from its fake and faded flowers and props it back against the stone and again he tells himself that he must bring something though he knows he'll forget because he always forgets. He turns and rests his back against the slab and looks down and across the water at the ferries moving back and forth, back and forth and tiny against the mountains they



lace together. He lets their movement and the freezing column slow his thundering heart but nothing can calm the rage that roars through him every time the worst bit hits him. How it all got into his head. How he couldn't go near a kid without thinking all the filthy shit he knew they thought he was thinking. And they'd given him that teaching job 'cos they wanted men for their kids, for their fatherless kids, for kids like that goddamned little bitch. That's what they said, but now he knows what they didn't say, what they forgot to add: all cocks are suspect, all cocks are suspect, always, always.

His palms slap back onto the stone by his thighs, and again and again, harder and harder, till the wet freezes through his gloves and his skin stings sore, and he's slapping Millie and Anna and Ellen and his own damned mother. He's slapping that look off their faces as they watch him, hover over him, monitor him with their kids and his girls, for Chrissakes, his *own* little girls. *They're* the fucking perverts, pouring the filth from their heads into his so it's all he can think about and he might as well have fucked the bitch. Messed-up kid, they said, looking after her, looking after her. A kid? With those tits and that arse? With all that flirting, touching, teasing? He should have messed her up. He should have fucked her, fucked her like she begged him to. Should have fucked her dead.

He turns back and makes for home, wondering if the lane will thaw up there, on the hill; wondering if the icicles are dripping and wondering if anything broke

in the night. He's lost his stride. His legs are weak and wobbly from jogging, his knees buckling under him, and he stops to rest again, watching the crow hop and tear at her rubbish bag; watching the oystercatchers search and search and the seagulls hover and cry, all of them out for what they can get and why not and who isn't? A gull lands near the crow and the crow rushes at it, cawing, her head low and her beak wide, her tail up, her neck feathers fluffed like a mane. She lunges and the gull trips and rises back into the air, floating up and down, while the crow returns to her bag, stabbing it and stabbing it and stabbing it with her granite beak. Then he's climbing over the rocks and down to the pebbles. The catchers scatter and the crow stops, staring as he comes closer. She hops slowly to one side, her head flicking and turning, watching him, watching him as he squats over the plastic bag and tears a hole in it for her.

A small blue fist. A small blue fist. A small blue fist clenched on itself; clenched on nothing. The ferryman watches two huge hands unglove themselves. They are massive, a man's hands. He watches them move the plastic away. He sees a baby's face, scrunched and bloated and blue. He sees a baby's face, brand new, brand new. The crow hops closer, curious, watching, wanting. The hands—pale and dry, disgusting—wave her back. The gulls lower, crying, watching, wanting. Again, the hands wave the birds back, then they slowly split the bag open along its length, unzipping it like a sleeping bag, from top to bottom, bottom to top. Gently, the bitten

fingers wipe smears of food and coffee grounds from the tiny, shut-eyed face. Hold him. Gently, the thick, coarse fingers push wet paper and shredded plastic and shards of broken glass from the tiny, shut-eyed face. Hold him. Hold him. The hands disappear. The ferryman feels them cup his own elbows. He feels them cross his arms and push him backwards, onto his heels, so he's staring up into the snowed-out sky. Hold him. Something howls into the crisp, clear white. The giant icy paws cover the ferryman's ears, but still he hears it, something howling into the glare. It deafens him—the howling—it deafens him, from the inside out, from the outside in.