

FINITE TIME

Habitually, every Sunday morning, Pajo would fry some Boxty with a couple of slices of bacon and a duck egg. The duck egg was to him the most vital component of the trio. Methodically, he would crack the white shell with a tablespoon and ease it into it's awaiting solo pan, pedantic with the action so as not to spoil the yolk within. The yolk was only to be broken once it had been fried and by a thinly cut corner of the Boxty which would then be used to pierce it and allow the rich yellow flow of fat and cholesterol to cover and seep into the accompanying food. Nothing less of this was acceptable to him and, on the rare occasion of failure, a black refuse bag would be the recipient of the breakfast with a peevish rage, barring the rashers, they would be cut and served to his terrier, Wags, whilst Pajo would settle for a cigarette and tea, the regular breakfast during the other six days of the week.

On this morning, the paragon aspired to in preparing the meal had been achieved successfully. Pajo sat at his kitchen table in anticipation of slicing that first corner of Boxty to be used in setting free the egg's runny yolk with Wags occupying his usual spot of under the table, casually and affectionately pressing his snout against the right leg of Pajo to remove all fear that he would be forgotten and not get his usual pieces from the plate. A pot of tea was always made to join this weekly meal, and each time Pajo always wondered why the tea tasted so much better when teamed up with a fry.

Before the meal was consumed and he had gotten his share, Wags left his post and walked towards the back door with a low growl, his head tilting back and forth between left and right as though he were trying to exit a great annoyance from his head. Pajo looked to the dog and thought *she's early today*. Each Sunday, his sister, Breege, would call to see

him, and each week Wags would know of her arrival long before his master did. Pajo began to hear the tyres of her car roll over the gravel of the lane-way to the house. He finished what was left of his grub and scraped what he had for Wags into his bowl; the rinds of the pig meat and a corner of the Boxty which was always sliced and left aside on the plate for this purpose. The sound of the knife and fork assisting the drop from plate to bowl made Wags desist all quiet growls and head-tilting in order to wolf the scraps with relish.

Breege gave the backdoor her usual three familiar knocks and walked into the kitchen, never was the knocking used to obtain some aural affirmation that it was okay to enter.

“Well, have ya news for me?” was her usual greeting with only the odd variation from week to week.

“Divil a haite of it was ever known,” he replied, turning his attention away from washing up his pans and plate before outstretching a hand to receive the white carrier bag that Breege was holding. He could see the discomfort Wags’s presence was having upon her as the mutt circled his now empty bowl with his tongue, flashes of pink repeatedly seen with great attempts to savour all remaining flavour of what had been eaten. Breege had always had a fear of dogs for as long as Pajo could recall, the origin of such feelings towards them was never clear but Pajo suspected a retriever who belonged to a neighbour and snapped at Breege as a child played a hand in it, although she herself had no recollection of the incident.

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Pajo indicated to Wags to leave and he did so with quintessential obedience, a sway of unreciprocated affection with his tail directed towards Breege as he made good his departure.

"I would have had the dog outside before ya landed only for you're early," was said with an apologetic tone as he re-buttoned the sleeves of his shirt that he had opened and rolled back in order to do the wash up.

"I wanted to give meself the extra few minutes so as I can do be a bit of tidying around Mammy's headstone while we're out there," she replied, turning her focus back to the bag she entered with and which Pajo had placed atop the kitchen table.

"I rinsed an' pressed your good white shirt with a few other bits for ya, might be nice to stick on now if ya wanted".

For a long number of years now, Breege would visit with some laundry she had attended to for him, shirts mainly, the odd pair of trousers. Pajo was the one family member of six who had not married, though it was not a case that he had not known love in life. Although far from insufficient in attending to any of his own personal needs, he knew Breege enjoyed inhabiting the matriarchal role and, in the seventh decade of her life, she now behaved and looked very much like the two siblings mother, something Pajo never verbally acknowledged but which brought him a great sense of comfort.

Breege removed a duvet, bed sheet and some pillowcases from the bag.

"I'll just throw these on for ya quickly," she said while heading towards the hall and stairs.

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Despite his self-sufficiency in life in regards to feeding himself and maintaining optimal levels of kempt, Pajo was more than happy to let Breege play the motherly role in relation to tackling the onerous task of changing a duvet cover. He poured the last amount of tea left in the pot from the breakfast and joined Wags in the yard to drink it and smoke one of the two cigarettes he allowed himself daily.

Pajo adorned himself with his good white shirt as Breege had suggested, despite his contentment with what he had on previously. As the brother and sister drove in the direction of their destination she threw a glance to him, filled with quiet approbation of her advice been followed. Although he was a man of a large frame, she worried that he seemed to be gone somewhat gaunt in the face. As was the case every week, she would invite him later to her home for a share of the Sunday dinner, confident it would be declined as always, but with appreciation of the offer.

A local broadcast of a Mass came from the car radio.

"Ya can switch over to something else if ya want?" she suggested, breaking a what seemed to be a long silence between them.

"Ah no, you're grand," he replied, fiddling with a ready to fall quick.

Breege knew the broadcast was not to his liking, but respected it was something she wanted to hear and so would not object. The gesture, though would seem small to Pajo, meant a lot to her and prompted her to glance towards him again, this time to simply see the brother she loved.

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Their mother had been the wrong side of the clay for fourteen years on this week. Pajo stood rather awkwardly at her headstone as Breege, with vigour, knelt and removed some weeds and rehoused them in the white carrier bag that had earlier held his clothing. It had always been Pajo's default stance to put his hands in his pockets while standing, but he felt an onus not to in the present surrounding, the long arms of his lanky frame switching frequently from hanging by his side to hands resting on hips, a pose which he took an instant dislike to and began to wish the quick from earlier had held on longer so as to do battle with now.

Content with her work's success, Breege returned to her feet and lowered her head slight to pray silently. The overt display of faith by Breege allowed Pajo to settle on having his hands together and hanging by his thighs to adopt a stance of what he felt was appropriate reverence. He was not a man without belief, though could not commit to the concept with the same certainty that Breege did. He offered the occasional furtive gaze to her as she softly mouthed words, not devoid of envy at the clear conviction displayed. Once she'd finished, he resumed his repeated not knowing where to put his hands movements.

"Yon was a nice picture ya had of her put into the paper, for the anniversary. Never seen that one before," he said.

"That was taken not long before she went, one of her good days," was the reply as Breege tied the handles of the carrier holding weeds together into a bow, an action that seemed to speak that it was time to go.

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The sound provided by the key rattling in the door as Pajo returned home resulted in Wags briefly raising his head from resting on an armrest, stretching his four limbs across the well worn chair where he had been sleeping, a welcoming flutter of the tail offered for a greeting before resuming his sleeping position.

The remainder of the Sunday proceeded without deviance from others past. A watching and flipping through a few stations on the telly, a chicken sandwich made from the pickings of a bird roasted the day before, a cup of tea with it, not comparable in taste to when drank with the fry he thought, yet thoroughly enjoyed all the same.

He lit his second of his two allowed daily cigarettes when he felt a sudden tiredness hit him near the end of the day's final hour. He didn't crave a nicotine fixture, yet inhaled the first drag as though he did, exhaling the blue tinted smoke into the fire place, disappearing into the smouldering embers of the small coal and turf fire that had burned throughout the evening.

The silence the late hour afforded seemed to heighten the words pancreatic cancer in his thoughts, along with the memory of the inflection placed on those two words by his doctor earlier in the week, an inescapable tremble in the delivery helped by the plentiful number of years that he had been a patient and the doctor's fondness of him as he set about explaining more plainly what the specialist had said when Pajo had first received his diagnoses.

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The low sizzle the spent smoke made as it was stubbed into the ashtray was a familiar one to Wags which resulted in him leaving his comfy chair to perform a stretch and yawn on the floor before joining Pajo in bed. Routinely, the canine would nuzzle his snout to Pajo under the duvet and he allowed himself a ludic smile as he thought of Breege and how she'd view the image of the dog enjoying the new linen.

At some point in the night, Wags would always make his way to the floor and sleep on the makeshift bed of old jumpers provided, but for now, Pajo rested his hand on the dog's belly as he lay next to him, comforted by the swell and decrease of it as he gently breathed. His eyes grew heavier in the pitch black of the room. The Sunday provided the contentment it had always for him, and he drifted longing for another, for one more of the number never known.

THE END