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'He's not breathing,' Mick announced to Ronnie. His wife was standing motionless behind the granite-topped kitchen bench, a flannel nightgown spread out on the towel in front of her and the iron in her hand revealing its shining base. The old man was lying on the slate floor in the dining area where he had fallen. The colonial oak chair that had tipped with him still supported his back and legs. Mick, kneeling next to the old man, thrust his ear towards the old man’s face and tried to hear or feel the movement of air above the pale-lipped, slack mouth.  

‘Oh, fuck,’ he said. ‘He’s not breathing.’

The skin of the old man’s face was flecked with tan-coloured spots, and he had a helmet of thick, bryl-creemed, grey hair, which made his head appear large and round. Under the yellow glow cast by the glass light-fitting, Mick thought that the old man, with his knees held up by the wooden seat, his meagre stomach pushed out by the arched back, and his thin arms spread-eagled on the dark tiles, looked like an alien that had been hit by a car.

Mick hesitated, and then he slid his hands between the old man’s head and the slate floor. He moved his palms and fingers over the old man’s scalp and through the old man’s hair, remembering how, almost two decades ago, he had briefly held his son’s head, coated in dark hair, white mucus and blood, a misshapen cord trailing from the creature’s belly to the flesh between its mother’s legs. At the doctor’s urging, Mick had cut the strange rope with what looked like his wife’s silver sewing scissors, before the midwife removed the crying child from the doctor’s gloved hands and placed it on Ronnie’s naked breast.

As Mick cradled the old man’s head, he touched, with the pads of his left middle finger and ring finger, the unmistakeable wetness of hair matted with blood. Mick withdrew his hands, the old man’s head turning to its side as he released it onto the hard floor, and looked at the blood on his fingers.

‘Jesus Christ,’ he said. ‘I’ve killed my fucking father.’

The blood began to trickle down his ring finger towards the square-cut underside of his gold wedding ring. Mick could see the dark hair from the front of his finger protruding from the sides of the band and quickly wiped his bloody hand on the old man’s nearest shirtsleeve. Then he recognised that the pale-blue business shirt was his. It had a magenta-coloured stain below the chest pocket. A couple of months ago, his son had failed to show up at the printery, and he had to get out on the floor himself and run a machine. Ronnie had made excuses for Shane in the kitchen that evening, as she always did, growing smaller with each
gravely spoken word as if she was prepared to give away her miserable body for her son, but Mick could not understand how he had fathered a nineteen-year-old boy who was so love-sick that, each time his flat-chested, uppity girlfriend left him, his flat-chested, pathetic mother was left to account for his drinking.

Mick realised that Ronnie must have given the stained shirt to the old man rather than throw it out. Ronnie, it seemed to Mick, would never leave behind the frugal habits of her Preston upbringing or the petty sacrifices of Catholicism, even though he was one of the three proprietors of Westside Printing and the owner of a large home in Caroline Springs. Last year, he had to make her leave her rusty ironing board on the nature strip for the hard-waste collection so that she would stop taking in washing. Two years ago, when they found the old man living by himself in a run-down commission house in Sunshine, beer bottles spilling from weathered boxes next to the outdoor toilet and a Penthouse poster sticky-taped to his bedroom wall, it was Ronnie who had suggested they build a flat for the old man in their backyard, adjoining the brick garage. The flat was self-contained, and while Mick had resented the expense, he had also recognised that the lounge area and kitchenette would save him from the old man’s company.

Mick did not know why Ronnie insisted on doing anything for the old man when he never did anything for her or anyone. Last weekend, when they had come home from the football—a wasted day that his son, hungover after being dumped again by his difficult girlfriend, had spent on the bench—Ronnie had complained that the old man must have watched the rain fall on the clothes hung on the hoist outside his window. Mick doubted that the old man would have been watching anything other than his TV.

‘Let’s get him out of here.’

Mick stood up and took hold of the old man’s ankles, which were dressed in white sports socks beneath brown pants, hefted his legs and body to the side of the fallen chair and dragged him around the dining setting and towards the sliding door that led to the backyard.

‘Well, don’t just stand there!’

Ronnie placed the iron on the towel and ran around the bench, making her body shrink as she did whenever there was trouble, and looking, Mick thought, more like a rat than ever. She pulled back the floral drapes, slid open the glass door and turned on the outside light.

‘Oh, for fuck’s sake!’

Ronnie quickly switched off the light, returning the yard to the night, and scuttled out of his way. Mick dragged the old man to the open door. He felt the icy air of the night press on his back and turned to look into the moonlit yard.

Mick observed the wrought-iron outdoor setting, shadowed by a tarpaulin that would be encrusted with frost by morning, and the
metallic-looking water of the in-ground pool, enclosed by the steel fence. Beyond the entertainment area was the narrow stretch of lawn, with the galvanized-steel clothes hoist, and the brick flat, with its dark windows. Attached to the flat, on the right, was the brick garage. He looked at the timber fences and latticed extensions that marked the perimeters of his land and at the sharply silhouetted, tiled rooves of the neighbouring houses, which glittered under a bright half-moon and the pin-points of winry stars.

Mick pulled the body across the doorway, feeling the old man’s head catch against the sliding-door runner and then land hard on the pebble-mix surface of the patio outside.

‘Get a shovel,’ Mick said to Ronnie, who had retreated to the kitchen bench. He looked at her in the warm, light-filled room, the old man’s body lying between him and the open door, and felt a familiar surge of irritation at her open mouth and front teeth.

‘God damn it, woman, get a shovel!’

Ronnie moved past him, and Mick watched her scurry across the patio and over the lawn to the brick garage. She opened the garage door and disappeared into a rectangle of black space.

Mick dropped his father’s legs, the white-sneakered feet landing heavily on the patio, and rubbed the knuckles of his right hand. His fist ached where it had connected with his father’s cheekbone. It would, he thought, be even sorer tomorrow, when the alcohol had worn off.

Mick looked through the open sliding door again. On the colonial oak table, the surface of which Ronnie kept oiled and polished as if it was an antique, Mick could see the bottle of Bailey’s Irish Cream and the two tumblers, one empty and the other full. He cursed the milky woman’s drink that had made him agree to have the old man inside, when he had been happy on the couch in the lounge room in front of the fire, watching the Friday night football, with Shane out—at his girlfriend’s again despite the latest scene—and Ronnie doing the ironing in the kitchen. He cursed Ronnie for knocking at the old man’s door and for reporting that she had found him drinking alone in the unlit flat. And he cursed his mother, who had died four years ago today, with Mick and his father in attendance at her hospital room. Mick remembered how he had stood there for an hour, his mother’s feeble body protected by brusque nurses, and how, even though he had always been her favourite, she had not once opened her eyes to look at him. He remembered when Ronnie, lost in her body, had given birth to Shane.

‘You fucking bitches!’ He kicked the left sole of the old man’s white sports shoes.

He suddenly felt tired. It had been a long day at work, and he had not slept much last night. He had stayed up later than usual, watching a Jean-Claude van Damme weekly on video from the couch, while Ronnie tended to the socks, underwear and towels in a laundry basket on the
floor. He had heard from Tony, one of his partners at the printery, that van Damme, in a training scene in the movie, performs the splits while suspended in mid-air with his feet propped on parallel kitchen chairs.

Ronnie had gone to bed before the movie was over, and just before midnight, Shane had appeared at the entranceway of the lounge room, his face and shirt streaked with blood. Mick had immediately remembered another evening, years ago, when Shane was four years old. The boy, naked after his bath, had fallen face-first onto a glass-topped coffee table, and Mick and Ronnie, crawling on the stained carpet of their flat in Altona, had been unable to find the child’s teeth. At the emergency ward, the nurse had found them buried inside his gums.

Mick had sat up on the couch and listened to Shane tell his garbled story from the plastic-covered hallway carpet. The boy had stayed at the sports club after training, and he had been talking to the new, blonde masseuse—Mick knew the one—when his girlfriend had come looking for him. There had been the usual scene, Mick suspecting once again that his son would be better off with someone older, perhaps with children. Then Shane, heading for home, had lost control of the Honda Prelude. It had landed upside down, wedged in an empty ditch. The boy had struggled out of the broken windscreen, cutting his face and arms, and walked home. The alcohol, Mick had thought, had saved him. Mick had sent Shane to bed and called a tow-truck driver from the football club, and it was the early hours of the morning before he slept.

Ronnie finally emerged from the dark opening of the garage with a spade. Mick picked up the old man’s ankles and pulled his body across the patio, between the wrought-iron outdoor table and chairs sheltered by the tarpaulin and the mercury water of the pool behind its steel fence. He could see his own breath in the frigid air and the old man’s shirt dragging out of his pants on the rough surface of the pebble-mix. The old man’s body slid more easily across the brittle grass, leaving a moist and flattened trail. Mick dragged the body beneath the clothes hoist, the dull silver of the post and wires as cold as the moon and stars, and to the grassy area at the left side of the flat, where he let go. The old man’s legs landed on the mown grass. The skin of the old man’s stomach, ribcage and chest had been exposed.

Ronnie ran towards him, holding the spade with both hands. Mick snatched it from her, without bothering to meet her eyes, and plunged into the narrow, night-filled space between the back fence of his property and the brick wall of the old man’s flat. Mick could barely see where the darkness ended and the earth began. He took hold of the spade and struck out with it near his feet. He hit rock, the impact jarring his sore fist, and cursed. He gripped the spade more fiercely, placed its blade on the ground and jumped on the rim. He heard the tearing of grass, and then the spade again struck stone. Mick lost his balance and fell against the brick wall of the old man’s flat.
‘Fuck you!’
He threw the spade into the thick darkness, hearing it knock the fence and scrape brick before it landed on the ground. He rubbed his shoulder and then his throbbing hand. It was his house, Mick thought, and the old man should have kept quiet.

‘I’m dry, Mick, I’m dry. Like an old whore.’
The old man, his chin slumped onto his chest, had broken the silence as they sat on the wooden chairs in the yellow light of the dining room. Behind them, Ronnie was finishing the ironing on the kitchen bench. Mick poured Bailey’s into the second glass that Ronnie had fetched. He pushed the drink across the gleaming surface of the table and noticed that the old man’s eyes were closed.

‘I’m dry, and there’s nothing for it,’ the old man slurred, swaying slightly. ‘She could never do it. Never did anything. Fucking useless.’
The old man lifted his head and tried to focus his swollen eyes. ‘You know what I mean, don’t you, son.’

Mick knew that he had made a mistake in allowing the old man in. He finished the rest of his Bailey’s. ‘Just drink,’ he told the old man, ‘and shut up.’
The old man’s eyes were suddenly focussed on him, and he was leering. ‘You know what I mean, don’t you, son,’ the old man said, speaking slowly. ‘How pussy makes you empty and dry. Leaves you so empty and dry you could fucking kill it.’ Spit sprayed from the old man’s jagged mouth. ‘You mummy’s boy. You little cunt.’

Ronnie’s iron hissed. Mick stood up, the legs of his chair scraping on the tiles, and punched him.

‘Mick!’
Mick, empty-handed, turned out of the claustrophobic space towards the sound of Ronnie’s urgent whisper. The backyard opened up before him, like a sports stadium in its sudden brightness. Mick looked up at the cold curve of the moon and the hard stars and then at Ronnie, hunched in her knitted jumper and leggings. The old man was lying at her feet among the glinting blades of grass, his chest bared to the night sky. He had opened his eyes.
The moonlight was shining on the old man’s round face, and Mick could see a matted patch on the old man’s grey hair, behind the left ear, where the blood from the back of his head had spread. The old man, Mick saw, was looking at Ronnie and, as she crouched down to him, Mick heard a strange, guttural exhalation as the old man wrinkled his face and started to cry.