

The Secret Scripture

Extract

When I was ten or so my father in a fit of educating enthusiasm brought me to the top of the long thin tower in the graveyard. It was one of those beautiful, lofty slim buildings made by monks in a time of danger and destruction. It stood in a nettled corner of the graveyard and was not much remarked on. When you had grown up in Sligo it was just there. But no doubt it was a treasure beyond compare, put up with only a murmur of mortar between the stones, each one remembering the curve of the tower, each one set in with perfect success by ancient masons. Of course it was a Catholic yard. My father had not got that job because of his religion, but because he was deeply liked in the town by all and sundry, and the Catholics did not mind their graves being dug by a Presbyterian, if it was a likeable one. Because in those days there was often much greater ease between the churches than we give credit for, and it is often forgotten that under the old penal laws in vanished days the dissenting churches were just as harried, as he often liked to point out. At any rate, there is seldom a difficulty with religion where there is friendship. And it was only later that this distinction in him made any difference. At any rate I know he was exceedingly liked by the parish priest, a little perky darting man called Father Gaunt who loomed so large later in my own story, if a small man can be said to loom large.

Those were the days just after the first war, and maybe in those ditches of history as it were, minds turn to strangenesses, quirks of education such as he was bent on that day with me. Otherwise I cannot explain why a grown man would take his child to the top of an old tower with a bag of hammers and feathers.

All of Sligo, river, churches, houses, radiated out from the foot of the tower, or so it seemed from the little window at the top. A passing bird might have seen two excited faces trying to peer out at the same time, myself heaping my weight onto my toes and bumping the underside of his chin.

"Roseanne, dearest, I shaved already this morning, and you won't shave me anyhow with the top of your golden head."

For it was true I had soft hair like gold – like the gold of those selfsame monks. Yellow as the gleams in old books.

"Pappa," I said, "for the love of all things, drop the hammers and feathers and let's see what's what."

"Oh", he said, "I am weary from the climb, let's just scope our eyes over Sligo before we attempt our experiment."

He had waited and chosen a windless day for his work. He wished to prove to me the ancient premise that all things fall at the same rate, in the realm of theory.

"All things fall at the same rate," he had said, "in the realm of theory. And I will prove it to you. I will prove it to myself."

We had been sitting by the spitting anthracite of our fire. "All may fall at the same rate, as you say," my mother piped up from her corner. "But it's the rare thing rises."

I do not think this was a cut at him, but just an observation. At any rate he looked over at her with the perfect neutrality she herself was mistress of and had taught him.

It is strange to me writing this, here in this darkened room, scratching it all out in blue biro ink, somehow to see them in my mind's eye, or somewhere behind my eyes, in the darkened bowl of my head, still there, alive and talking, truly, as if their time was real time and mine was an illusion. And it touches my heart for the thousandth time how beautiful she is, how neat, agreeable and shining, with her Southampton accent like the pebbles on the beach there disturbed by the waves, rushing, shushing, a soft sound that sounds in my dreams. It is also

true that when I was bold, when she worried that my path was veering from the path she wanted for me, even in small matters, she was wont to whip me. But in those times children were routinely hit.

So now our two faces were jostling for position, framed by the ancient frame of the monks' little look-see window. What vanished faces had peered out there, sweating in their robes, trying to see where the Vikings were that would come to kill them and take their books, their vessels, and their coins. No mason dikes to leave a large window for Vikings, and that window spoke still of old nervousness and peril.

At length it was clear that his experiment was impossible with both of us there. One or other of us would miss the outcome. So he sent me back down on my own by the dank stairway of stones, and I can still feel that wet wall under my hand, and the strange fright that grew in me to be separated from him. My little breast beating as if there was an uncomfortable pigeon trapped there.

I came out from the tower and stood away from the base as he had bid me, for fear of the hammers falling and killing me dead. The tower looked enormous from there, it seemed to stretch up to the filthy grey clouds of that day. To heaven. Not a breeze stirred. The neglected graves of that section of the yard, the graves of men and women of some century where the people could only afford rough stones, and not a name writ upon them, seemed different now on my own, as if their poor skeletons might rise up against me, to devour me in their eternal hunger. Standing on the ground I was a child on a precipice, that was the feeling, like that scene in the old play King Lear where the king's friend imagines he is falling down a beetling cliff, where there is no cliff, so that when you read it, you also think there is a cliff, and fall with the king's friend. But I peered up faithfully, faithfully, lovingly, lovingly. It is no crime to love your father, it is no crime to feel no criticism of him, and especially so when I knew him into my early womanhood or nearly, when a child tends to grow disappointed in her parents. It is no crime to feel your heart beating up to him, or as much of him as I could see, his arm now stuck out the little window, and the bag held suspended in the Irish air. Now he was calling to me, and I could barely catch his words. But after a few repeats I think I heard him say:

"Are you stood back, dearest?"

"I am stood back, Pappa," I called, I nearly screamed, such a distance the words had to rise, and such a small window to enter to reach his ears.

"Then I will let loose the bag. Watch, watch!" he called.

"Yes, Pappa, I am watching!"

He loosened the top of the bag as best he could with the fingers of one hand and shook the contents free. I had seen him place them there. It was a handful of feathers from the feather bolster on their bed, plucked out against the screeches of his wife, and two mason's hammers he kept for when he repaired the little walls and headstones of graves.

I stared and stared. Maybe I heard a curious music. The chattering of the jackdaws and the old scratchy talking of the rooks in the great beech trees there mingled like a music in my head. My neck was straining and I was bursting to see the outcome of that elegant experiment, an outcome my father had said might stand to me in my life, as the basis of a proper philosophy. Although there was not a breath of wind, the feathers immediately drifted away, dispersing like a little explosion, even rising greyly against the grey clouds, almost impossible to see. The feathers drifted, drifted away.

My father was calling, calling, in enormous excitement in the tower, "What do you see, what do you see?"

What did I see, what did I know? It is sometimes I think the strain of ridiculousness in a person, a ridiculousness born maybe of desperation, such as also Eneas McNulty – you do not know who that is yet – exhibited so many years later, that pierces you through with love for that person. It is all love, that not knowing, that not seeing. I am standing there, eternally, straining to see, a crick in the back of my neck, peering and straining, if for no other reason

than for love of him. The feathers are drifting away, drifting, swirling away. My father is calling and calling. My heart is beating back to him. The hammers are falling still.

This extract was found at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/book-extract-the-secret-scripture-by-sebastian-barry-815109.html>