



Bruised

CHILDREN'S LAUREATE IRELAND

SIOBHÁN PARKINSON

Bruise

Uncorrected Manuscript

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Chapter One

MY GRANDMOTHER DIED.

I know this is not what you would call a dramatic opening. It's what *happens* to grandparents. They get old (jeez, they *are* old to start with, or they wouldn't *be* grandparents, would they?); they die. (My grandfather died too, actually, but that's another story.)

Mr O'Connell – who is my Creative Writing teacher, which is to say he's my English teacher, but he is into Creative Writing (capital letters deliberate) – he would say, *Not intriguing enough, Jonathan. You need to hook your reader.*

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But, frankly, I couldn't be bothered with the hooking part. See, I don't think you need to start on the premise that your reader (if you have one) is a *fish*.

There used to be a song about that; Gramma used to sing it, about how uneducated fish are, how they can't write their name or read a book – which may or may not have been put in for the rhyme with *brook*. That's where the illiterate fish in question lives, allegedly. Come to think of it, maybe it was the other way round. Maybe *brook* was put in to rhyme with *book*, I mean, because you would think *river*, wouldn't you, in association with fish, not bloody babbling *brook*, like a feckin' poem.

In any case, I don't need to do any hooking, because this is not Creative Writing. This is what really happened, and if you are reading this you will have your own reasons that have nothing to do with fish.

I could have begun by telling you that my

mother was a drunk. Or that my father had left. I could have begun by saying, *My mother brought home a bag of apples one night for dinner.* Sounds kinda cutesy, that.

Except that was *all*. A bag of apples. There was nothing else to eat in the house. Not even a loaf of bread. Not a crumb. And we hadn't had much for lunch either.

'Keeps a doctor away,' she said, poking her fingernail in the side of the polythene bag to open it.

Right, yeah, very healthy, apples.

When she'd gouged a big enough hole in the bag, she shook the apples out all over the coffee table. Most of them rolled to the edge and then clunked on to the carpet, where they rolled some more.

'Have you heard about the food pyramid?' I asked, fishing for apples under the sofa.

'Pyr-mid?' she said. She stuck a finger in her ear, to represent thinking. Very amusing.

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‘Egypt, right?’

Then she went off into these howls of laughter.

I knew where that would end, so I got ready for it. And by the time I come back into the living room with the basin from the kitchen sink and a dry tea towel, she’s already got to the sobbing stage. Sure enough, as soon as she sees me, she clutches for the basin and pukes up half a litre of sherry. Not the cooking kind. She prefers Fino, she says, which is supposed to make her not a drunk but a connoisseur.

She’s not a connoisseur. She just knew a Spanish word for a kind of sherry that is not so sweet it’d curl your teeth.

I might as well have started this story with the bag of apples after all, because I’ve got there pretty fast, though I didn’t mean to. I meant to explain about my grandmother. Gramma, we called her, because she didn’t like *granny* – made her sound like a granny, she said. That was the

kind of humour she had. Dead unfunny. (A small voice in my head wants me to revise that last bit, edit out the insensitive word, but on second thoughts, I don't think so.) Appreciated only by a select group, she used to say about her sense of humour. Of one, I said. That made her smirk. Old ladies don't go in for smirking, but Gramma did. She liked a good smirk, did Gram.

She didn't live with us or anything like that. She lived near enough. Near enough to supervise, I mean. She went in for supervision. Supervision and smirking. Makes her sound like the granny from hell, but she wasn't. She was sound.

I did miss her. I missed a good hot dinner that didn't come out of one of those microwave Pot Noodle tubs for a start. I missed my five clean shirts every Sunday night, all ironed and on hangers for school. Yes, I *can* iron my own shirts – I may be sad, but I am not a sad bastard – but

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only *if* I have remembered to wash them in the first place, and to take them out of the machine before they go manky with mould, and hang them up to dry. And, see, that sequence of events didn't happen many weeks, and never two weeks in a row. So of course I missed my grandmother.

But mostly I missed someone who knew what to do about Julie. I haven't mentioned her before, because I just don't know what to say. That's the real bitch about all this.

That came out wrong. Julie is not a bitch. She's just a little girl whose grandmother is dead and has no parents to speak of. And if you think it's bad for me – I am fourteen after all; I can find *some* sort of way to get by – it's a whole lot worse for an eight-year-old with a big imagination and a tiny understanding and a great gaping hole where the love should be.

God, I dunno where *that* came out of, a great gaping hole where the love should be. Maybe

I could get a job working for a greeting card company, writing the prayery kind of words they have on the insides of cards that have a photograph of a bluebell on the front, or a sunset.

Anyway it was the apples that started it, but it wasn't because of the apples that I rang the police. (I am not that thick.) It was when she hit Julie.

I mean, I couldn't have that, could I? She's only a little kid. Well, she's eight, but she's young for eight, if you know what I mean. She's not stupid or anything, she's good at school and all that. It's just that she's . . . well . . . it's as if you could break her if you dropped her. Maybe it's because of the *situation*, or maybe it's just the way she is.

She cried when Ma hit her. She may be young for her age, but she's not a crybaby, and I think it wasn't even so much because it hurt, but because she was just so totally *dazed*. No one

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ever hit her before. I mean, yeah, a smack on the back of the hand if she's reaching for one biscuit too many or a biff on the shoulder to steer her out of the path of some kind of disaster, but a blow full in the face, a blow so hard I could hear the impact – that is not on. That is *assault*.

So there's Julie sitting on the floor surrounded by apples, all snot coming down her face and her wispy, mousy hair catching in it so parts of it are wet and clumpy, and she's gulping with sobs and letting out this high-pitched wail, and Ma all rolled up tight in an armchair with her legs under her, her head tucked into her chest so you can only see the top of her hair, and her arms over her ears, and rocking, rocking, and me in the middle of it all with the portable phone in my hand, dialling 999.

She must have heard the pips, because she looked up before I even spoke and let out an almighty yell at me.

‘Garda,’ I roared over her yell, into the mouthpiece of the phone. I shouldn’t have roared, because that word, at that decibel level, really got to Ma, and she came bounding out of her chair and knocked the phone out of my hand.

‘Don’t you *dare* call the police!’ she snarled, pulling my ears so that I had to lower my face to hers and got the stench of booze and vomit off her breath. ‘Just don’t you dare. You are in my house, you are under my roof, and you do *not* . . .’ She couldn’t bring herself to name my crime, evidently.

She pushed me in the chest, so I staggered backwards and nearly fell on top of Julie, who was still howling on the floor.

‘Hello?’ came a squeaky little voice from under the sofa, where the phone lay on its back on the floor. ‘Hello?’ A lifeline.

I picked the phone up, but I didn’t grab the lifeline. Instead, I pressed the hang-up button.

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If the police came, God knows where it would end.

I know they try to keep families together when they take kids into care, but you can't count on it, can you? And who wants a teenage boy with attitude when they could just have a lovely little smiley girl? But for sure I wasn't going anywhere without Julie.

'Under your roof,' I said, 'but not under your care, and not under your orders either. From now on, I am in charge in this house. You will bring me your money every week and I will buy the food for us all, and I will cook it and serve it, and you can do the washing and cleaning.'

Nah, of course I didn't. (Come on, you didn't really believe that, did you?)

I did press the hang-up button, but I didn't make the speech. I just hauled Julie to her feet and walked her out of the room. She'd stopped wailing by now, but she was still

choking on her tears.

I put her up on the kitchen table and washed her face. I clucked over her, and she went on sobbing and sniffing. I tried to dry her face with the kitchen towel, but she said, ‘Aagh! It stinks,’ and pushed it away, so I got a tissue and dabbed at her face with that. All along the cheekbone on one side it was swollen, but the skin wasn’t broken.

‘You’ll be plum-coloured tomorrow,’ I said. ‘Miss Plum, the Grocer’s Daughter. That’s you.’

Julie loves Happy Families. I hate all card games, but I especially hate Happy Families. Still, I play it with her sometimes, like when she is sick.

‘Master Plaster, the Doctor’s Son,’ she said with a snivel and a little grin.

‘Nah, you don’t need a plaster,’ I said. ‘You need an ice pack. Which we don’t have. Or a packet of frozen peas, which we even more don’t have.’

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‘Peas!’ she murmured, as if she was talking about some fabulous, exotic, unattainable fruit. ‘I’d love some peas. And mashed potato.’

‘Don’t!’ I groaned.

‘It was because of the apples,’ she said. ‘I was crying because apples make me hungry instead of filling me up, they make my tummy water, and that was why she . . .’

That wasn’t why. It wasn’t Julie’s fault. But I just said, ‘Listen, I have some money. You and I are going out for a bag of chips, and then I will tuck you up in bed, and you don’t have to go to school tomorrow, because of that face. How does that grab you?’

She brightened up at this. In fact, she lit up like a Christmas tree.

‘No school?’ she sang. ‘Really? Are you sure?’

‘School’s not so bad,’ I said.

Her face dropped.

‘But I’m sure. You don’t need to go. In fact,

you *can't* go to school looking like that, you'd frighten the children!

It was touch and go. Was she going to burst into tears again, or would she think it was funny? I grinned like a lunatic to indicate that humour was the correct response.

She got it. 'Yay!' she said, and smiled.

She put her fingers very carefully to the tender place. The nails were all bitten down.

'Don't touch it,' I said, lifting her down off the table. 'You'll only make it worse.'

'I wish . . .' she said, and then stopped.

'Yeah' I said. 'I know.'

I knew what she wished because I wished it too. We wished we could go to Gramma's.

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