

See You Next Friday...

It is Friday evening in the busy café at the quiet end of the High Street and the sun is warm on the window, showing up the dust on the glass and the streaks left by a cleaner on tip-toe. The strong curves of the café bar are reflected in the glass and a car heads up the street and along the counter top, pulls up inside a serviette dispenser. The waitress watches the boy get out of the car and the lap of his unfathomable mother.

The chef is as subdued as the town, and instead of his normal service, reading aloud snapshots of news, disgusted, amused, to anyone who wants to listen, he has hidden the local paper out of sight and is glad to be busy. There is a pale imitation of talk in the place but it is enough.

The boy waves goodbye without looking back, enters and goes to the same table as always and the waitress escorts him, needlessly. Her arm hovers at the small of his back, and today his eyes are uncertain and say to her, is it ok to smile this week? And I adore you. And her smile says, it's more important than ever, and I adore you. The mother's car drives away too quickly for the mood of the town, too eagerly. Only she has arranged a date this week.

The boy watches the waitress. She stands at the window looking at the street, the way he knows she likes to do in a lull. She looks at the shape of the world outside and he does the same and notices two plump women sunbathing on the steps to their building in the low light. One of them is wedging cotton between her toes, the other is on her back on a wide brick ledge. Her legs dangle over the end of the wall and she wiggles her back to get comfortable as she pulls the straps off her round shoulders. The door to their building is half open and the boy watches carefully as the straps come off.

Silent and mounted high in one corner of the café is a TV and on it children are handed gold trophies, blinking in flashlight. The waitress brings the boy his tall glass of cold milk and sets it in front of him, then a tumbler with a low measure of Whisky the other side of the table. She sits opposite him on the edge of the seat, her legs crossed and angled outwards so she can vacate the seat quickly and not look like she's slacking. She forgets she's the boss

now. When she landed heavily in this town as a twenty-five year old she planned to work here for one summer, correct the axis of her earth, then move along. Now, after twenty years waiting these tables, she's not yet used to being the manager. She and the boy look aimlessly at the TV and read the caption across the bottom of the screen that tells them the children are getting awards for bravery.

"I wonder what they did," she says.

He pulls a who-knows face, and pictures himself diving in to a fast-flowing river to save the woman across the street with the straps off her shoulders.

The waitress looks forward to Fridays and sitting with the boy in the twenty minutes his dad is always late. The boy is thirteen. She knows because his dad once turned up with ten candles in the palm of his dusty hand and asked the waitress to put them in a slice of cake, and that was three years ago, twenty minutes late. She picked the candles out of his hand delicately and could have fallen into the cracks in his skin.

"What's the bravest thing in the world you could do?"

She asks this not too seriously, to prolong her time with the boy. His pretty face and the cowlick of his fringe is a break from the cloying sadness of the week. She wasn't sure if he'd come. In a town like this, people yearn for a change to the routine then dream of getting life back to how it was before change called their bluff. The boy looks at the Whisky in the glass and doesn't dare say to her what he would like to be brave enough to do. He glances at the clock above the kitchen and then he and the waitress catch each other's eye and she looks at the clock too and smiles, not at the boy but for him, if he wants it. In truth, the boy enjoys his time alone in here every Friday when his Dad is late. His dad can do no wrong in the boy's eyes, and can do no right in his own.

The father stops in the entrance to wipe his feet on the matt and rub the palms of his hands against his equally weathered jacket. He and his son share the same mouth and a smile that keeps turning up uninvited at the oddest times and suggests a private joke. But their eyes are different, the father's lead heavy sad, despite the resilience in his face, the boy's young and startled and traced by hope. The

boy is eating, which is something his father does rarely. The father stops short of the table to take in the prospect of the boy, who knows he is there but is anchored, momentarily, to the table by a length of melted cheese connecting his mouth to a deep-sided lasagne. The father takes a pair of scissors inside a roll of tape from his jacket pocket, wipes the scissors on his jacket and cuts the cheese like a ceremonial ribbon. The boy sniggers, and sucks the cheese up into his mouth as his father sits down and draws the glass of Whisky towards his chest. This is just the sort of thing his dad thinks to do and no one else's would and it makes up for everything.

The father is lean and muscular. There are broken vessels in the whites of his eyes and what was once and still could be a noble face. His body is strong and it trembles. Beneath the shared jokes with his son he carries a permanent expression of apology. When he lifts the glass to his mouth he sees how dirty his hands are. He puts the glass of Whisky down and looks at them, shows them to his son and tells him about a house out at Blackbrook he cleared today, to explain the dirt.

"Anything good there?" the boy asks, working on his food. They both have a habit of leaning close over their food whilst they eat, as if it might be taken from them.

His dad nods and thinks about it. "This and that..." he says and goes to the bathroom. If a job sounds interesting he keeps it for Saturday so the boy can come with him and root around. The boy enjoys being on the road with his dad, going some place, windows down, the respectful atmosphere his father creates around a house clearance, the conversations he strikes quietly with the owners or their bereaved off-spring, people they discover in common. "Are you related to the Connells in Ashurst then?" "Sure, Dave Connel is my cousin." "I did my carpentry exams with Dave, thirty years ago." "You did? Dave's still there, Dave doesn't change." A laugh that tells you Dave Connel is his own man. Sometimes the boy can see the eyes of these people asking the question, what happened to you, but they seem to like his father these days and to wish him well enough, and mostly they accept what he can risk paying them for what they want rid of. The boy spends Saturdays on his feet and that feels good. He knows his mum is great but she works so hard that her luxury is to be on the sofa with him and watch the TV and sometimes the boy wants to burst out of

his own skin. When she has a boyfriend upstairs she will text him from the bedroom and he finds that funny. She'll throw the TV remote to him without warning, across the room, or an apple or a carton of drink, and he's expected to react, to catch. She gives no warning. Life with her is sink or swim. This is their idea of humour, but sometimes it feels as if she spends all her energy everywhere but with him. If she's in a mood when she can take it, he'll mock her; "we're not married Mum, you're meant to do stuff with me." But he has to pick his moments.

Two brothers take a seat across from the boy. Flynn Radford unzips his coat and takes out the puppy he has smuggled in. He pets it. His big brother, Will, coos at it. Both boys have cheeks flushed with smiling and suspect they know why after years of begging, this is the week their parents let them get a dog. The puppy licks Flynn Radford's face and the boy stares from his table of milk and whisky. The boy watches Will Radford lean across the table and run his hand against the grain of the dog's coat and the dog yelps and the boys double over to hide it and stifle their laughter. The boy watches the puppy's head reappear between Flynn Radford's hands and is caught smiling at the animal by Will Radford, who nods coolly to the younger boy he recognises from school but whose name he doesn't know. Then he thinks twice and looks back at the boy and smiles at him and says "Hi" and his little brother joins in, "Hi" he says. The Radford boys have made a resolution to be nicer and to get along since what happened to Tommy Stone.

The boy smiles back and his right hand flinches in a small, table-top wave as he thinks of the times Will Radford and his mates have terrorised him and Tommy Stone and others of their age. He takes a sip of his milk, sucks it in through the gap in his two front teeth that everybody's mother finds so cute and that he would like to brace out of existence if his mum or dad had any money. He watches the puppy and thinks that if he had a dog then everything in the world would feel alright, the gap in his front teeth, the way he worries about his dad, the way all the people being so respectful and nice this week behave when the world's not watching them. Everything would melt into nothing if he had a puppy like the Radford boys. He remembers the fever he fell in to when his dad first moved out. He got so ill his Mum called his dad back. They kneeled either side of the boy one long evening, resting their hands together on the boy's stomach. Their hands,

touching, became heavier on his stomach as they fell asleep, and he felt certain that he could keep them together. He tried to stay awake as long as possible, lay in a state of joy at the weight of their hands, until sleep took him and delivered him to a new day and an empty bedroom.

The waitress comes over to take the Radford boys' order and she pets the dog and tells them to keep it out of sight. The brothers thank her. They are so in love with the world today that politeness comes easy. The puppy blinks its big brown eyes at the waitress as she walks away and the waitress winks at the boy and the boy imagines sleeping at night with the weight of a small dog on his stomach. He would never ask for anything else the rest of his life.

The waitress goes to the counter as the father returns from washing his hands. Unusually, they stop and talk a little, in the same spirit of appreciating everyone else that is the town's unspoken resolution this week. The boy knows what they're talking about because everyone knows that he and Tommy Stone were good friends. His father does not look people in the eye, not properly, but despite this he and the waitress make a good looking pair, in a faded, left-for-dead way, and the grace and poise that they have each fought to retain through the blows are evident. The boy can understand why his mother fell for his father a hundred years ago, and that's a good feeling, that's a nice thing for a boy to see in his father.

The boy watches as his dad returns to the table, raising one eyebrow high on his forehead with a gothic stare. It makes the boy smile inside. It used to make him wriggle with laughter, but the more you understand the less you laugh. The father suggests some fishing tomorrow after a house clearance at Paggs Track that he thinks his son will find interesting. The boy doesn't answer, which is unusual. He watches the father turn the glass around in his hands. He hasn't started his drink yet and the boy suspects he might have taken a flask from his pocket in the bathroom. He is wrong about that. The father's delay is merely his attempt to decipher the boy's silence about their plans. The father stares at his Whisky and remembers a dream the previous night in which he found a new door in the hallway of his flat and on it, in chalk, his name and inside a long, narrow room lined with shelves and on the shelves was every bottle and glass of alcohol he had ever consumed.

The father lives too deep inside his skin to make proper contact with anything. Dregs of froth clung to the insides of the beer bottles on the shelves, and a brown translucent Whisky sheen to the glasses and he walked in silence as if they were old masters on a museum wall or a line of headstones. Never before in his pockmarked life had he met the humiliation of dreaming of drink. It is making him hesitant with his glass and the boy notices. He lives in a one bedroomed place in a large old clapboard house with fine, wide stone steps to the front door. It was once a rectory, with wide doorways and broad floors and unreachable high hollows. It got carved up and filled with bedsits and flats and then it emptied itself and now there is only him, alone in one corner of the building, renting cheaply from a landlord who can't face up to the repairs that any other tenant in the world other than boy's father would demand. There is a sofa bed in the living room and the father makes it up as the boy's room every other weekend. He prepares the bed impeccably before he heads out to work on a Friday morning, gathers his son's belongings around the bed. He often sleeps on a chair in the kitchen with a pillow wedged behind his head, as his bedroom is next to the living room and he has a suspicion that he cries out in his sleep.

The father looks at the boy and asks him what's up. The boy tells him that the new guy his mum is seeing has offered to take the three of them to the coast this weekend. He only has time to eat. His mum is going to pick him up in a bit. The father can see that the boy is torn and he is grateful for the opportunity to say the right thing: "You must go to the sea, son. That sounds good." The boy refuses to look pleased, out of respect. He does a good job of looking pained. The father wants to add that his mother should have told him herself, but he doesn't want to get in to all that, and he doesn't want to suggest he wouldn't have chosen to have this half hour together, had he known.

The phone in the café rings and they both welcome the distraction. The sound of a landline is a curiosity to the boy, the father can see that. The waitress takes the call and for no reason he can grasp hold of, the father wonders who she is talking to. He watches the way she stands for clues and steals a glimpse of her face.

As the waitress finishes the call, a man and a woman enter the café. They are wearing their Sunday best, she some make up to hide the recent history on her face. They are in their mid-fifties and holding hands and they walk stiff as boards, trying to go unnoticed and yet presenting themselves to the town. As they look for a table the cafe falls quiet and the people in it become one treacle thick, amorphous body turning to look at them and creating the silence that is precisely what no one wants. The couple walk through the thick air to a seat in the window and immediately regret their choice of table as they take their seats. The waitress gathers two menus from the rack by the door and rehearses her words and finds herself on the cusp of fainting. She steadies herself and looks down at her feet and the father sees all this. The chef shuffles out in to the café and takes the menus from her. He goes towards the man and woman but stops half way across the room. He intended to get closer but has stopped short and now he finds himself in a no man's land and has to project his voice a little, and everyone hears him say, "We're all thinking of you, Eric, Mary, every minute of every day. Not that it helps." People nod. A tear crawls down the face of a woman standing at the door to the bathroom, where she froze. Eric Stone looks to his wife, protectively. "It helps," Mary Stone says, her voice paper thin. She even smiles at the table-top. She has one arm out of her coat, the other still in it. Eric looks at the chef and nods his thanks. He gets out of his seat and the chef flinches in anticipation of him coming across to him, but Eric helps his wife get the other arm out of her coat. He tries, then, to take the coat from behind her so he can hang it up but she is sitting on it and she cannot move because the effort of being in this place is all she has, so he leaves the coat behind her, snagged and creased. He takes the menus from the chef, both men at full stretch, and places a menu in his wife's hands, wrapping her fingers around the edges, to get a grip. The chef doesn't know how to step away and waits to be swallowed up. The waitress takes the chef's arm, just above the elbow, and leads him back to work.

The café cannot return to itself, even though the people inside will it to. They do not want the silence to drive the Stones away, but they cannot break it. The father bows his head as he turns back to his son, to avoid catching Eric Stone's eye, and reaches for his drink. He stops and whispers, "Do you want to go over there and... you know... say something?" The boy shakes his head fast. Then the boy

wonders if that would be the brave thing to do, to go say how sorry he is, comfort them, give them a smile. He wants to be brave but when he looks across at Tommy Stone's parents there isn't a bone in his body thinks they want him to do that right now. "You could say something, it might help them. You and Tommy were so close." The boy pulls a face of terror and shakes his head again, looks at his dad with pleading eyes which the father accepts. The father leans a little closer and whispers. "I won't make you..."

The whole world should talk in whispers, the father thinks. What a difference it could make.

I should be brave, the boy tells himself.

The chef breaks two eggs in to a hot pan and the fizz and bubble of the eggs returns a surface noise to the café which people use as cover to smuggle their conversation back in to the place. Beneath their table, Eric Stone reaches out and takes hold of his wife's hand and she squeezes it tight and her lower lip spasms. A family enter the café and their laughter hits a brick wall when they see the Stones. The waitress reacts quickly and greets them a little loudly, telling them what they already know, that there are five of them. "Yes, five," the woman gasps, thankful for the excuse to break the silence they have created. She shows them to a table. The boy taps his feet repeatedly and tells himself, you should say something. He catches the waitress watching him and his father, as she takes up position leaning against the counter. She glances across to see if the Stones are ready to order. They are looking at their menus but she has the impression it is a hiding place for them, that they are ready. She wonders how their bodies can negotiate the act of eating and digesting and the most optimistic corner of her sees it as affirmation that the Stones want to live. She puts her right hand in to her apron pocket and feels for her pen and pad. She has decided that as she reaches the table she will place her left hand lightly on Mary Stone's shoulder and then ask her firmly what she can get for her. She hopes this is the right balance.

The father watches the waitress go to that table and looks away before she gets there. He looks down in to his full measure of Whisky and refuses to even contemplate what it is that Eric and Mary Stone have lost. His hand trembles and he knows his eyes are watering at the thought of his

son ever coming to harm and he hears himself exhale. In an attempt to keep himself held together he lifts the glass to his mouth, but freezes at the sound of his son addressing him abruptly.

"Dad."

The boy has lifted his hand fractionally off the table. The father is dead still and doesn't want his son to see the tears forming so he does not look up, and stares instead at the glass.

"Dad..."

He has no choice now, so he looks at the boy and smiles an empty, ripped sail of a smile. The boy takes a deep breath and his mouth begins to tremble.

"I think it would be good..."

The boy stops. His mouth has run dry on him. It strikes him that they couldn't go fishing tomorrow anyway, seeing as how the river has run dry, then remembers it is his mouth that is dry. He swallows. His father is looking at him as if already beginning to react in horror to what the boy has not yet been brave enough to say. The boy feels that there is nothing to lose.

"It would be good, if you didn't drink that."

The boy looks at the glass in his father's hand and sees the tremors in those bony fingers intensify. The father looks at his son. His body is taut and his eyes are suddenly like black holes and there is not enough detail there for the boy to know if the blackness is rage or sadness. The father's shoulders rise on his back and his physique seems to thicken. He stares at the boy and, with a hand that feels a long way distant from himself, he puts the glass down. Both of them can hear the waitress coaxing a food order out of Mary Stone. The father's hand nudges the glass of Whisky away an inch or two. He and his son sit in silence, not meeting each other's eye. Eric Stone tells the waitress that he will have the same and that they will have two cups of tea. The father reaches across and drinks what's left of the boy's milk. It tastes bitter and odd, not how he remembers the taste of milk, and pleasantly cold.

The kitchen becomes noisy again. Thank God for the kitchen. The place had fallen quiet and the chef starts making as much noise out of his orders as possible and he is thinking the same thing as the waitress, that there is something, somehow, heaven sent in some of this food being for Eric and Mary Stone. That the two of them still need to eat seems like an impossible gift to the town.

The boy smiles. When the father smiles back, it displaces the tear in his eye and it spills.

"You'll take care at the sea, won't you. You'll always be careful?"

A car horn sounds outside. The boy promises. He gets up. They nod imperceptibly at each other.

"See you next Friday," the boy says. His father hears him say this every week and replays it in his head just about every hour of his life.

The father winks at him instead of saying I love you son, but the boy hears it anyway and bends down and hugs his seated father. Then the boy slings his bag over his shoulder and runs out of the café past Tommy Stone's parents. The father looks at the glass of Scotch. He picks it up. Twists the glass in his hand. Smells the Whisky. He lays out a handful of paper serviettes from the dispenser and pours the Whisky on to them. He is mopping it all up when the waitress comes across to help him. The Radfords' puppy whimpers at the waitress and she beckons it to her and sits in the boy's place to allow the puppy on to her lap. It is an open secret now, a liquid balm poured over the café. The waitress decides that she will allow dogs in from now on. She'll put up a sign.

Eight-year-old Flynn Radford comes across and strokes the puppy with the waitress, his tiny, uncoordinated hand touching her hand as often as the dog. The father takes a look across at the older Radford boy, knows by reputation what he can be like, wants to set him straight but knows that one has to leave time to do such things. Flynn Radford takes the puppy from the waitress' lap and bundles it up in to his arms, leaning back to make sure he doesn't drop it. He walks carefully and decidedly around the tables and it is the waitress first, then the father, who realise where

the boy is headed. And suddenly, Flynn Radford is balancing the puppy in one arm and tugging the sleeve of Mary Stone's sweater and saying to her, "He's called Dash. Would you like to keep him?" Mary's face contorts into a smile, the white water of grief clinging to her teeth and lips. "You keep him for me," she says, and she laughs as she catches her breath, and she runs her hand through the boy's hair and breathes, proud at having touched the boy without breaking in two. She raises another smile for the boy and ushers him away. Flynn turns, carrying the puppy like a holy relic, and sees his big brother beckoning him back to their table. Eric Stone has stood to touch the boy's shoulder as he walks away and he and his wife both realise that they have to go now, that he cannot sit back down again and she is at the dead end of all the strength she could muster to come here. The door shuts behind them and seals the silence in the place, a silence which there is no longer a fear of. Twenty-seven different people think their different thoughts, but all are variations on one theme. The measure of the place will be how much of this silence they keep a hold of as the noise of life crowbars back in.

The waitress is looking over the father's shoulder, across the street at two women sunbathing on the steps in the sort of low, warm light that she thought as a girl made you tan quicker for being so orange. The father looks at the waitress' body. She knows he is doing it. The father turns and watches the sunbathing women on wide stone steps similar to his own building. He seems amazed by what he's watching, and that it's possible to just hang around and feel good, as if doing so is some old boyhood friend he thought he'd never see again and then there he is after all this time, just the other side of the road, waiting for him, laughing at him and saying what took you so long?

"That looks like a nice thing to do," the waitress says.

He looks her in the eye and all he can see is the deep blue diving pools at the sports centre when he and Eric Stone were teenagers and used to go to there every Saturday morning, and he remembers how they had helped each other pluck up the courage to dive from the high board. It had taken them two years to get up there and finally throw themselves off and they walked away like they were the kings of the jungle after they had done it. The memory has come from nowhere and is sharp and it feels good, and so does the realisation that this evening he will get

something right in his life and visit Eric, who he has barely held a conversation with in ten years. He will put his arm around Eric Stone and no longer use himself as an excuse not to be there for others. All this he sees in the waitress' eyes. Still he looks at them, incredulous at the absence of reproof. She asks him if she can get him another drink and he asks her, please, not to.