The Lake of Being Human: Dead Sea Fruit

Place: Lough Nasool, a Lake in the West of Ireland; Dublin
Time: Some years ago in summer 1978
Characters: The Storyteller
Sorcha, the storyteller's mother's lover
Ruden, Sorcha's son
Lar, a workman and writer
Freddie, a teacher in Dublin
Glossary:
Lough: lake
Easkey: a seaside beach

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Of course. Why not? We continued to swim in Lough Nasool after finding the body. With more enthusiasm really, if anything. I saw it—him—first, marooned among the reeds, lazily bobbing, looking both aged and ageless. He was floating on his back, and was inclined a little toward me as I calmly breast-stroked nearer, his mouth open and giving on to a darkness that suggested an infinity of night, like a black hole breathless. He was dressed only in thermals, and the one visible arm was curved crookedly along his body in a way that looked both coy and guarded. I treaded water for a minute, something I'd not properly mastered up till that moment since being taught to swim by my mother's lover the previous spring, and, fascinated, I watched the lakewater play with his hair, the colour of burnt corn, and buoy this capsule of dead flesh.

The first thing I thought was that he looked like my father. Or more exactly, I suppose, as I'd often wishfully envisioned my father before the wish was unexpectedly realised. His feet—the floating dead man's—were encased in heavy woollen socks, whose saturation could not disguise the fact that they were an oatmeal pair like ones I owned; and his half-open eyes were flat, blearily opaque, with a look at once of querulousness and a kind of insensible acknowledgement of the uselessness of complaint. They were the sort of eyes, I remember thinking,

that were created to be carried by a corpse. Against the bared upper part of his chest the grey-on-black hair was splayed like a water-logged nest. Gripped in his bloated hand, which was an off-white like the hand of an over-inflated rubber man, was a curled-up colour photograph.

It was the sight of the photo that brought home to me with a shock that all of this had been foreseen. The photo made me wheel about and stare across the flat black of the lake to look for my companion, Ruden, and call. I saw him somersaulting in the water yards away with a flash of the puce drawstring trunks almost identical to mine. "C'mere, c'mere quick, there's a body here dead, dead!" My voice, I suppose, sounded entirely disbelieving in the reality of death, although death was not something I was unused to.

For, as I have already suggested, my father had died, but my experience of mortality was not limited to his largely unmourned demise. It was a stroke that killed him. A strange way to go, it was said, for a man so relatively young. The idea of my father being taken in any way as young I thought bizarre since, for as long as I could remember, he had insisted, with an unchallengeable self-veneration in his voice never otherwise present, that he had never been without the ways of a man, a grown man, with emphasis on the adjective, and from this I had imagined him carrying from the start the traits of stale middle age, and not the dauntless virility which, as I see now, he was trying to convey.

I was seventeen when this specimen of unquestionable manhood that had fathered me, and me alone, suddenly stopped existing, a time when I was on the verge of falling rather desperately in love with Ruden, who is my mother's lover's son. It was all very complicated. Horrible at the time. And in most ways hilarious, for precisely that reason now, nearly ten years later. My father died on another continent, somewhere in Australasia, according to my mother, though I never cared to discover exactly where. He had always said, to the mostly sceptical of those who knew him, that he wanted to travel; but it was the actual learning of my mother's love for Sorcha, her old colleague from the art college, which gave him the shock he needed to jumpstart him into realising a dream he, doubtless, had not the courage of fulfilling otherwise.

His face had wrinkled prematurely, and since his marriage

and becoming a father, the lines of his cheeks and eyes and forehead had intensified to a fretted network, like a human graph baldly schematizing the confused frustration and emotional disillusion that charted his responses to his own life. He seemed to me to live in a constant state of confoundment caused and complicated by an expansive, restless, and unpredictable wife, as well as by a son who was clearly like no other male he had ever previously encountered or conceived of, a son whose failure, for instance, to fit the mould of someone unquestionably ready to "kick football" with him at every instigation floored him irrecoverably.

I was about four years old when he said the first words I can distinctly remember him putting to me. He had come into the bathroom to take over from Mum the chore of bathing me while she bandaged the gashed shin of our next-door neighbour, a widowed dress-making tippler who was in the habit of shambling bloodily over to our house whenever she took a tumble down the stairs. In the middle of clumsily soaping my shoulders, he gently took the toy-cow sponge I was splashing about with and, drawing the cow upwards so my eyes met with his, said simply, "Do you like me?" in that heavy toneless voice that, in me, could only inspire indifference at best. He said it again, "Do you like me?" before I rather nastily pried the sponge from his big fingers and, not answering, began busily bubbling it between my legs, hoping, no doubt, that he would go away, a wish I sustained until the day he finally did, forever.

Because the poor deluded man's accepted standards were built around the longing for a family life of blissfully ordered convention—a vague idealism as lofty as it was impossibly outmoded—nothing ever turned out in the least as he hoped or imagined. His peevish, unthinking resistance to the wonderful random chaos of free life prevented him from gaining a modicum of worthwhile wisdom, or the least peace of mind, and kept him struggling neck-deep in that mire of perplexed, perpetual, and petulant disappointment to whom those who refuse to learn empirically are doomed. It was this floundering of his that disabled me from granting him even a fraction of the respect my mother would repeatedly advise me he deserved almost in the same breath as she'd describe him, with irritation and pity in her voice, as green as grass, as weak as water, or some such remark that only confirmed

my damning view of him.

On such occasions Sorcha would usually be sitting with us in the kitchen swathed in her purple, crystal-beaded smock, smiling quietly while her acrylic-stained hands thoughtfully stroked the side of her long neck in the way she had. If asked for her opinion, she'd say something in neutral compassion like, "Ah, he's not a bad man. He's just a bit out of his depth, I suppose. He's always sound as a gent to me even though he knows, he knows, he knows what the score is." She'd exhale a small laugh and glance at my mother, her co-conspirator, through the steam from her fruit tea.

This was around the beginning of their relationship, my mother's and Sorcha's, a relationship that was not especially kept secret from me, even from the tentative, incipient stage. I had known anyway, the instant I was together with them for the first time, that these women were soulmates and more, that fortune, as Sorcha said, steered their stars to share as much life as humanly possible.

I would make them tea in the evenings after school as they took turns drawing or painting one another in the garage Mum had converted into a studio the autumn she returned to work with students in their foundation year. I sat and listened in to them during their breaks as they discussed everything from the general tedium of landscape painting compared to, say, studies of the human figure, to the importance to oneself as an artist-as-a-human-being open to the influence of both the masculine and feminine impulses, and on to subjects specially close to Sorcha's heart like divination or mind reading. These things I disdained while feigning interest, out of a purposeful sensitivity to the importance of accepting at every level the woman who had made my mother happy.

When it came to my father, Sorcha was right. He wasn't a bad man. There were times when I hated myself for not loving him. But while he lived, I never could. I disliked him the more for being so incorrigibly unlovable. I was a hard, callous child toward my father, driven that way by multiple disappointments with my world, driven at points almost insanely angry by fear of being rejected for what I knew myself to be. At the age of fifteen, reacting against all this, I went through a tight-lipped phase of being a puritanistic, righteous little prig, exemplified by my attitude at the time of the '86 Divorce

Referendum, when I cellotaped into my journal a flyer put out by the "Vote No" lobbyists with a misanthropic little comment I'd scrawled on the back that read something like, "Prevent happiness from coming to those who don't deserve it!" That says something, I suppose, about how the oppressed can be drawn, through self-hatred, into a general collusion with their oppressors. In this regard, I was lucky in that I soon realised the limited truth of that and better, because such determinations presuppose one is a predestined victim.

It was Sorcha who played a large part in my awakening. She made the effort to befriend me at a stage when I'd become prematurely cynical about my worthiness to be a friend to anyone, and so it took her a long while to make any headway with me. But she persevered, and I think I responded finally because in time I saw that she recognised in me someone who had suffered similarly to herself. Before she taught me to swim, she painted my portrait a couple of times in her flat above a boutique on Wine street, persuading me to model for her through insistent appeals to my vanity. For short periods she'd get me to sit on a high stool opposite her big bay window while the music of Mahler or Handel played from a tiny cassette recorder on the window seat. During extended breaks, she'd make us herbal or fruit teas, over which she'd do all the talking for about the first hour until I was so relaxed that I forgot myself and grew as voluble as she.

From her I learned the possibility of socialism, and also through her learned indirectly that it was the ideals of the left which I had, in my ignorance and lonely self-detestation, temporarily rejected for the very reason that they were so harmonious with my nature, and that what I'd been gravitating around instead was the comforting facade of a conformity as desperate and primitive as it was false and fundamentalist and like my father's. With an instinctive trust of my deeper understanding, she touched, usually quite casually, on subjects like her own feminism, her lesbianism, and her mistake in marrying young.

She even told me of the abortion that she'd had after an encounter with an Iranian man whose intelligence and humour had attracted her, but whose completely unvanquished chauvinism had ultimately nauseated her. She told stories of her work in the art college with students she instructed in life

drawing, and, with a unique idealism, as I feel now, she set out to teach me, while still pliant, of the drive and energy and spiritual beauty of the young. She confessed her own misspent youth, as she ironically put it, in order, as I suspected even at the time, to sound my own anxieties.

One weekend around this time, Sorcha and my mother took me for lunch to a tearoom they frequented at Drumcliffe not far from the churchyard where with picnic and poetry they sometimes visited the bones of Yeats. Over dessert they officially confirmed that they were seeing each other as a couple. Something like misplaced ego made me want to disguise the shock I felt on being hit by the reality of this, which was about them, and not about me, and the only way I could triumph over this was by my stoutly coming out to them in turn. At this, we all three burst out laughing. They smiled at me and at one another with sympathetic knowing. Then Mum picked up my hand and pressed her lips to my palm, before ordering me another helping of cheesecake.

A fortnight later Sorcha took me out for the first time to Easkey to teach me to swim. Because of her gentleness, her undemanding confidence in me, she succeeded in getting me to overcome my fear of water within a month. After each session in the sea, she would walk me to a tiered concrete embankment that connected the strand with a short esplanade. Here, with water running down our legs, we would drink mint tea out of an old candy-striped Butlins flask while she would tell me about her twenty-four-year-old son, Ruden, who, the following Easter, was coming over on holiday from Surrey where he grew up and now worked and studied.

It was during these times on the concrete steps at Easkey beach that we would sing old musical numbers together, or discuss our schooldays which for the first time I talked about in any way that was humourous; or else we'd lose ourselves in tarot readings through which Sorcha would divine my state of mind. She made great business of calling upon the help of a backup Buddhist pack she called Osho Zen and swore by with what seemed to me a somewhat ambiguous solemnity. Each pack she kept wrapped in silk material which, she said, preserved their energy. The cloth for the regular pack was mauve with a pentacle design picked out in silver thread at its centre, while the Osho Zen pack she kept wrapped in a

frayed vermilion fragment.

At other times after our tutorial, she would press me to put questions to an amethyst crystal which she dangled by a piece of gold chain over her left palm and which to my startled eyes would, in response to my initially ironic queries, either rotate or swing back and forth. Either movement could be taken, according to Sorcha, as a *yes* or *no* depending upon the mood of the gemstone or upon that of the querent, and could be confirmed by first asking a simple question such as Is grass green? or Is the sun blue? as Sorcha, excited by my amazement, demonstrated over and over.

After one of these sessions, we took ourselves to a thatched pub where Sorcha ordered us one Irish coffee after another. The more she had, the more political her speech became, and soon she was angrily denouncing the pro-life mob as old-fashioned men and fundamentalist women who, she added, were shameless breeders whipping up their men into frightened and insecure yobs.

Her radical arguments didn't very much interest me, but she flattered me sharing her passionate ideas. Because of this, I revealed to her my deepest shame—not anything to do with my sexuality, nor my self-hate, nor the early ostracism I'd suffered at the hands of my peers, but the fact that I entertained fantasies about my father's death: when he would die, how, where, why. Despite her strong social opinions, she said she had nothing direct to say, but hoped I would have no severe future regrets.

"No regrets," she said. "Let me tell you something."

She spoke about her own parents' lives of restriction and disappointment, drawing a parallel with her own life up till quite recently, referring to the emotional dead sea fruit, as she phrased it, that was her first marriage, whose one immeasurable compensation was her son, whom she loved and understood so well. She predicted we would be inseparable once we met, because of our similar temperaments, senses of humour, and intensity. "Ruden loves to swim," she said. "Now you've the knack, you can swim together." She promised how, when Ruden came home, we could stay each and all at her mother's house overlooking Lough Nasool.

A little later, my father had taken early retirement on his forty-ninth birthday and embarked on his lonely world trip,

saying goodbye to my mother and me. That night, Sorcha revealed to me the true extent of her psychical gifts. The long-awaited Ruden was due to come home the following weekend and my mother had thrown an impromptu party at our house for all her women friends. I remember the details of that late afternoon with an intensity that is almost lurid.

We had, Sorcha and I, wandered with our plastic beakers of punch into the twilit garden, and were standing under a copper sycamore strung with small red lights. My mother, tall like Sorcha, could be seen through a window illuminated by a row of a hundred candle flames confiding something to a woman in a white linen suit. I kept my eyes on my mother's mobile features, haloed in the distance, as Sorcha, her huge cupreous eyes reflecting the coloured bulbs strung from the tree to the hedge rows, took a deep mystic breath and, for an impromptu seance to balance my father's subtraction from our lives, pressed my house key into her palm.

At first she halted, but then marvelously excited by her reading from my key, told me of the fruitless but enlightening love I would hold for flesh akin to hers, and of my encounters with death.

The first of these, she said, would involve a friend, whose life seemed, according to her vision, to rush to an early end. The second death was of a stranger whose dead hand would clutch the picture of an adored but abandoning only child who was the spur to his demise.

As an aside, she said, "Remember, there exists a future time when we are all already dead."

Such words should not have been comforting, though—by dint of their powerful fearlessness at the detached reality of death—that is exactly what they were. At that time, I could not bring myself to ask Sorcha if my father's life was soon to end. If she knew, she thought better of saying so.

Earlier that summer, I'd started hanging around with an older bunch of hippie types, who introduced me to dope, and 'shroom brew, and to absinthe which one of them had smuggled over from Prague. They were a harmless gang, eternally wise-cracking, mellow, quite literary, who had going for them the fact that they did not allow their village parochialism to prevent them being genuinely committed thinkers.

I'd fallen in love with one of them, Lar, an older boy with

whom I'd been infatuated for years before I knew him to talk to, or had become part of his set, years even before I fully knew it was men I exclusively desired. I would see him during my lunch breaks from school framed against the big display windows of the shop fronts in the town. Window washing was his job, and he worked one winter on a short-lived community magazine produced through one of those schemes set up by the government to reduce unemployment figures. He was office manager, so-called, and often wrote the magazine's editorial, usually about how crucial it was that cannabis be decriminalised, or exposing a local pub that actively discriminated against travellers. He also contributed some fiction.

One story of his I spotted in an early issue was a tale with "Disappointment" in the title and which, when he was dead, I wished I'd kept. It was about a man, a Walter Mitty-type loner, a pseudo-philosopher who fancied that all his conventional insights into society were the stuff of the purest genius, who could only function, hold his own, in solitude, who went to pieces as soon as he was among strangers. Lar's irony was, as the plot turned out, that everyone in the story was a stranger to him including himself as well as those who were linked to him by blood, or by way of some spent friendship from the distant past of school or the army. It sounded bleak, hopeless, and it was. Yet the tale wasn't without humour as desperate, demanding, and shockingly mordant as Lar himself could become when he was drunk or stoned, or downed, as he regularly seemed to be, by some new crisis. "You're serious," I once told him, "but you send it up."

On that, Lar brought me once to Dublin to a two-bedroom house, overlooking the railway tracks. The house, according to Sorcha, was the reputed venue for occasional gay orgies hosted by the middle-aged owner, Freddie, whose windows Lar said with a wink he'd cleaned once or twice. There was no orgy the evening we arrived. Instead, Freddie, quite nice in a turtleneck Aran sweater and cords, received us in a gentlemanly fashion. His face, tanned from a sunbooth, featured an amazing display of teeth capped while teaching in America. With his arms upraised, he swept us into a room separated from the kitchen by double doors inlaid with coloured glass. The tiny library was lit by revolving hippie lights mounted on the crammed book shelves stacked up three of the walls. Freddie took up a

standing pose next to a tall music center flanked by twin CD towers whose every slot was alphabetically filled.

Lar and Freddie talked about the night life in Dublin. Freddie served us citrus-flavoured vodka brought from the duty-free on his way back from holiday at Sitges. He was conscious over the fledgling chicken I was, but was politely solicitous. After a few minutes, he advised I sit away from the double doors, out of "a desperate draught," and sit on one of the heaped bean-bag chairs near the gas fire. Whenever our eyes met, we both grew uneasy, and I thought of my father on his lonely worldly trip, and remained silent nursing the shot of vodka in my two hands between my legs.

Weeks later it was Freddie who was my acquaintance when the first death Sorcha had foreseen came to pass. What mystery mixes together men, disattached from the world, when everyone else attached to the world disappears? The night the doctor switched off the life-support machine on Lar—four weeks after he was hit by a Landrover on emerging, stoned, from a pub on Bridge street—the world had come down to Freddie, come up from Dublin, and me sitting in the corridor of the old folks' home. It was the only institution in the town that at that time had a proper ventilator.

Freddie sat with his long-fingered hands covering the greater part of his carefully tended face. He was full of speculation that Lar had nursed a death wish because of his alternating rage and guilt. Lar could no longer handle the manic-depressive wife he'd married while at college. He had vowed never to leave her or neglect their two young children. The pathos became bathos when Lar had a few on him. He howled about his sexuality, which, Freddie said, his wife knew about and wasn't, when manic or depressed, bothered in the slightest. As for me, Lar's death, predicted in Sorcha's foresight, bothered me mostly with considerations of predestiny and how fundamentally impotent we are in the greater scheme of things.

I had met Ruden by this time. He had shown up while Lar lingered on the life support. Ruden was there with my mother and Sorcha when the news arrived of my dad's death. Ruden took pains to console me by treating me like an old friend. He was six years older, bigger, athletic like Sorcha, and more experienced in love. He said it had never failed to amaze him,

until recently—when it had come merely to amuse him—how every life, no matter how careful or willful or brilliant or sad like Lar's or my father's was doomed by chance which was not the same as Sorcha's predestination.

Ruden seemed wise. I did not feel uncomfortable or out of my depth with him. He fit right in with my other, even older friends, the stylized hippies, whose intellectualism did not faze me. What Ruden ultimately did for me was open me up for the first time to the absolute acceptance of my impulses.

The summer day we came across the thermal-clad suicide in the lake was almost the first anniversary of our meeting. Earlier that day, Ruden had finally made clear to me that my desiring to continue on with him was "really," he said, "quite totally a useless lust." He finally persuaded me he could never really love someone younger, that despite a year's infrequent but often intense physicality between us, nothing permanent could come from it. "You are at least owed," Ruden said, "complete honesty in this." With our intermittent intimacy ended, I hoped to continue our companionship. "People," Ruden said, "always want to remain friends."

Swimming out into the lake, rejected and dismissed and disappointed, I felt the cool current pulling me in the direction of my father's lonely journey into the world. Sorcha had warned, "Remember, there exists a future time when we are all already dead." When first I heard them, those were fearless words.

Nevertheless, all that summer we continued to swim in the reedy section of Lough Nasool where we had come across the floating dead body of a man, dressed only in his thermals, who had embraced death in the middle of the night after his only daughter had abruptly run off for England with a lover. His child, he had often boasted to anyone in the town who would listen, had taken after him, and her image, as a very young girl, he gripped in his dead hand.

As we continued to swim there, we fed each other chunks of what I told Sorcha was our dead-sea fruit, our dead-sea histories. Eventually I told Ruden I never grieved for my father. I had always toyed with ideas of how and why and when my father might die. In fact, I had always considered him dead, but that, late as it was, late in the summer, and for what it was worth, a dull sympathy had actually begun to form for

him in my heart.

Our last night swimming in Lough Nasool, Ruden confessed, the way someone leaving on a journey will confess, that he secretly despised his mother's intuitive gifts. As a student he had often sneered at her for crossing the psychical and political. I laughed when he told of the embarrassing times she had, entirely unwelcome, earnestly practised her divination on him, and he had run from her table, her crystal ball, her house, her town, and her.

Thus Ruden reminded me how, with her genuine gift for the clairvoyant, Sorcha, his mother, had revealed to me, things about love and death—my key in her right fist, while she held my clenched fist enclosed in her left hand—on that spring evening under the copper sycamore, strung with red lights, in the garden where my mother, on the last night on earth I ever saw my father, could be seen through a window illuminated by a row of a hundred candle flames, confiding something sweet, charming, and, finally, I understood, magical to a woman in a white linen suit.