Everything in this Country Must

COLUM McCANN



PHOENIX

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A summer flood came and our draft horse got caught in the river. The river smashed against stones and the sound of it to me was like the turning of locks. It was silage time and the water smelled of grass. The draft horse, Father's favourite, had stepped in the river for a sniff maybe and she was caught, couldn't move, her foreleg trapped between rocks. Father found her and called *Katie!* above the wailing of the rain. I was in the barn waiting for drips on my tongue from the ceiling hole. I ran out past the farmhouse into the field. At the river the horse stared wild through the rain maybe she remembered me. Father moved slow and scared like someone travelling deep through snow except there was no snow, just flood, and Father was frightened of water, always frightened. Father told me, *Out on the rock there girl.* He gave me the length of rope with the harness clip and I knew what to do. I am taller than Father since my last birthday, fifteen. I stretched wide like love and put one foot on the rock in the river middle and one hand on the tree branch above it and swung out over the flood.

Behind me Father said, *Careful now hai.* The water ran warm and fast and I held the tree branch, still able to lean down from the rock and put the rope to the halter of the lovely draft horse.

The trees bent down to the river in a whispering and they hung their long shadows over the water and the horse jerked quick and sudden and I felt there would be a dying, but I pulled the rope up to keep her neck above water, only just.

Father was shouting, *Hold the rope girl!* and I could see his teeth clenched and his eyes wide and all the big veins in his neck, the same as when he walks along the ditches of our farm, many cows, hedgerows, fences. Father is always full of fright for the losing of Mammy and Fiachra and now his horse, his favourite, a big Belgian mare that cut the soil in the fields long ago.

The river split at the rock and jumped fast into sprays coming up above my feet into my dress. But I held tight to the rope, held it like Father sometimes holds his last Sweet Afton at mealtime before prayers. Father was shouting, *Keep it there girl good!* He was looking at the water as if Mammy was there, as if Fiachra was there, and he gulped air and he went down in the water to free the draft horse's hoof, and he was gone so long he made me wail to the sky for being alone. He kept a strong hold of one tree root but all the rest of his body went away under the quick brown water.

The night had started stars. They were up through the branches. The river was spraying in them.

Father came up spluttering for air with his eyes all horsewild and his cap lost down the river. The rope was jumping in my hands and burning like oven rings, and he was shouting, *Hold it girl hold it hai for the love of God hold it please!*

Father went down in the water again but came up early, no longer enough in his lungs to keep down. He stayed in the river holding the root and the water was hitting his shoulders and he was sad watching the draft horse drown, so I pulled hard again on the halter rope and the horse gave a big scream and her head rose up.

One more try, Father said in a sad voice like his voice above Mammy's and Fiachra's coffins long ago.

Father dipped under and he stayed down as long as yesterday's yesterday, and then some headlights came sweeping up the town road. The lights made a painting of the rain way up high and they put shadows on the hedgerows and ditches. Father's head popped out of the water and he was breathing heavy, so he didn't see the lights. His chest was wide and jumping. He looked at the draft horse and then at me. I pointed up the road and he turned in the flood and stared. Father smiled, maybe thinking it was Mack Devlin with his milk truck or Molly coming home from the sweet shop or someone

come to help save his favourite horse. He dragged on the tree root and struggled out from the river and stood on the bank and his arms went up in air like he was waving, shouting, *Over here over here hai!*

Father's shirt was wet under his overalls and it was very white when the headlights hit it. The lights got closer and in the brightening we heard shouts and then the voices came clear. They sounded like they had swallowed things I never swallowed.

I looked at Father and he looked at me all of a sudden with the strangest of faces, like he was lost, like he was punched, like he was the river cap floating, like he was a big tree all alone and desperate for forest. They shouted out, *Hey mate what's goin' on?* in their strange way and Father said, *Nothing,* and his head dropped way low to his chest and he looked across the river at me and I think what he was telling me was, *Drop the rope girl,* but I didn't. I kept it tight, holding the draft horse's neck above the water, and all the time Father was saying but not saying, *Drop it please Katie drop it, let her drown.*

They came right quick through the hedge with no regard for their uniforms and I could hear the thorns ripping back against their jackets. One took off his helmet while he was running and his hair was the colour of winter ice. One had a moustache that looked like long

grasses and one had a scar on his cheek like the bottom end of Father's barn hayknife.

Hayknife was first to the edge of the river and his rifle banged against his hip when he jumped out to the rock where I was halter holding. *Okay luv you're all right now,* he said to me and his hand was rain wet at my back. He took the halter and shouted things to the other soldiers, what to do, where to stand. He kept a hold of the halter and passed me back to LongGrasses who caught my hand and brought me safely to the riverbank. There were six of them now, all guns and helmets. Father didn't move. His eyes were steady looking at the river, maybe seeing Mammy and Fiachra staring back at him.

One soldier was talking to him all loud and fast, but Father was like a Derry shop window dummy and the soldier threw up his arms and turned away through the rain and spat a big spit into the wind.

Hayknife was all balance on the rock with the halter, and he didn't even hold the branch above his head. Icehair was taking off his boots and gun and shirt and he looked not like the boys from town who come to the barn for love, he looked not like Father when Father cuts hay without his shirt, no, he looked not like anybody, he was very skinny and strong with ribs like sometimes a horse has after a long day in the field. He didn't dive like I think now I would have liked him to, he just stepped into the water very slow and not show-

offy and began making his way across, arms high in the air, getting lower. But the river got too deep and Hayknife was shouting from the rock saying, *Stay high Stevie, stay high side mate.*

And Stevie gave a thumb up to Hayknife and then he was down under the water and the last thing was the kick of the feet.

LongGrasses was standing beside me and he put Stevie's jacket on my shoulders to warm me, but then Father came over and he pushed LongGrasses away. Father pushed hard. He was smaller than LongGrasses but LongGrasses bashed into the trunk of the tree and hit against it. LongGrasses took a big breath and stared hard at him. Father said, *Leave her alone can't you see she's just a child?* I covered my face for shame like in school when they put me in class at a special desk bigger than the rest, not the wooden ones with lifting lids, except I don't go to school any more since what happened with Mammy and Fiachra. I felt shame like the shame of that day in school and I covered my face and peeped instead through my fingers.

Father was giving a bad look to LongGrasses. LongGrasses stared at Father for a long time too and then shook his head and walked away to the riverbank where Stevie was still down in the water.

Father's hands were on my shoulders keeping me warm and he said, *It'll be all right now love,* but I was

only thinking about Stevie and how long he was under water. Hayknife was shouting at the top of his voice and staring down into the water and I looked up and saw the big army truck coming through the hedgerows and the hedge was broken open with a big hole and Father screamed *No!*

The extra lights of the truck were on and they were lighting up all the river. Father screamed again *No!* but stopped when one of the soldiers stared at him, *Your horse or your bloody hedge mate.*

Father sat down on the riverbank and said, *Sit down Katie,* and I could hear in Father's voice more sadness than when he was over Mammy's and Fiachra's coffins, more sadness than the day after they were hit by the army truck down near the Glen, more sadness than the day when the judge said, *Nobody's guilty it's just a tragedy,* more sadness than even that day and all the other days that follow.

Bastards, said Father in a whisper, *bastards,* and he put his arm around me and sat watching until Stevie came up from the water swimming against the current to stay in one place. He shouted up at Hayknife, *Her leg's trapped,* and then, *I'm gonna try and get the hoof out.* Stevie took four big gulps of air and Hayknife was pulling on the halter rope and the draft horse was screaming like I never heard a horse before or after. Father was quiet and I wanted to be back in the barn

alone waiting drips on my tongue. I was wearing Stevie's jacket but I was shivering and wet and cold and scared because Stevie and the draft horse were going to die, since everything in this country must.

Father likes his tea without bags like Mammy used to make and so there is a special way for me to make it – put cold cold water in the kettle and only cold then boil it then put a small boiling water in the teapot and swish it around until the bottom of the teapot is warm. Then put in tea leaves not bags and then the boiling water and stir it all very slowly and put on the teacosy and let it stew on the stove for five minutes making sure the flame is not too high so the teacosy doesn't catch flame and burn. Then pour milk into the cups and then the tea followed at last by the sugar all spooned around into a careful mix.

My tea fuss made the soldiers smile even Stevie who had a head full of blood pouring down from where the draft horse kicked him above his eye. Father's face went white when Stevie smiled but Stevie was very polite. He took a towel from me because he said he didn't want to get blood on the chair. He smiled at me two times when I put my head around the kitchen door and he held up one finger meaning *One sugar please* and a big O from fingers for *No milk please.* Some blood was drying in his hair and his eyes were bright like the sky should be, and

I could feel my belly sink way down until it was there like love in the barn, and he smiled at me number three.

Everyone felt good for saving a life even a horse life, but Father was silent in the corner. He was angry at me for asking the soldiers to tea and his chin was long to his chest and there was a puddle at his feet. Everybody was towel drying except Father because there was not enough towels.

LongGrasses sat in the armchair and said, *Good thing ya had heat lamps guvnor.*

Father just nodded.

How was it under the water Stevie? said LongGrasses.

Wet, said Stevie and everybody laughed but not Father. He stared at Stevie then looked away.

The living room was bright now. I liked the green of the uniforms and even the red of Stevie's blood. But Stevie's head from the horse kick must have been very sore. The other soldiers were talking about how maybe the army truck should take Stevie straight off to hospital and not get dry, just get stitches, and not get tea, just come back later to see about the draft horse if she survives under the heat lamps. But Stevie said, *I'm okay guys, it's just a scrape, I'd kill for a cuppa.*

The tea tasted good from long brewing and we had biscuits for special visitors, I fetched them from the pantry. I bit one to make sure they were fresh and I carried out the tray.

I was sneezing but I was very careful to sneeze away from the tray so as to have politeness like Stevie. Stevie said, *God bless you* in his funny way and we were all quiet as we sipped on the tea but I sneezed again three four five times and Hayknife said, *You should change out of them wet clothes luv.*

Father put down his teacup heavy on the saucer and it was very quiet.

Everyone even the soldiers looked at the floor and the mantelpiece clock was ticking and Mammy's picture was staring down from the wall and Fiachra when he was playing football and the soldiers didn't see them but Father did. The long silence was longer and longer until Father called me over, *Come here Katie,* and he stood me by window and he took the long curtain in his hands. He turned me around and wrapped the curtain around me and he took my hair and started rubbing not tender but hard. Father is good, he was just wanting to dry my hair because I was shivering even in Stevie's jacket. From under the curtain I could see the soldiers and I could see most of all Stevie. He sipped from his tea and smiled at me and Father coughed real loud and the clock ticked some more until Hayknife said, *Here, guv, why don't you use my towel for her?*

Father said, *No thanks.*

Hayknife said, *Go on guv,* and he put the towel in a ball and made to about throw it.

Father said, *No!*

Stevie said, *Take it easy.*

Take it easy? said Hayknife.

Maybe you should all leave, said Father.

Hayknife changed his face and threw the towel on the ground at Father's feet and Hayknife's cheeks were puffing and he was breathing hard and he was saying, *Fat lot of fucken thanks we get from your sort Mister.*

Hayknife was up on his feet now and pointing at Father and the light shone off his boots and his face was twitching so the scar looked like it was cutting his face. LongGrasses and Stevie stood up and they were holding Hayknife back, but Hayknife was saying, *Risk our fucken lives and save your fucken horse and that's all the thanks we get, eh?*

Father held me very tight with the curtain wrapped around me and he seemed scared and small and trembly. Hayknife was shouting lots and his face was red and scrunched. Stevie kept him back. Stevie's face was long and sad and I knew he knew because he kept looking at Mammy and Fiachra on the mantelpiece beside the ticking clock. Stevie dragged Hayknife out from the living room and at the kitchen door he let go. Hayknife turned over Stevie's shoulder one last time and looked at Father with his face all twisted but Stevie grabbed him again and said, *Forget it mate.*

Stevie took Hayknife out through the kitchen and

into the yard towards the army truck and still the rain was coming down outside and then the living room was quiet except for the clock.

I heard the engine of the army truck start.

Father stood away from me and put his head on the mantelpiece near the photos. I stayed at the window still in Stevie's jacket which Stevie forgot and hasn't come back for yet.

I watched the truck as it went down the laneway and the red lights on the green gate as it stopped and then turned into the road past where the draft horse was lifted from the river. I didn't hear anything then just Father starting low noises in his throat and I didn't turn from the window because I knew he would be angry for me to see him. Father was sniffling, maybe he forgot I was there. It was going right down into him and it came in big gulps like I never heard before. I stayed still but Father was trembling big and fast. He took out a handkerchief and moved away from the mantelpiece. I didn't watch him because I knew he would be shamed for his crying.

The army truck was near out of sight, red lights on the hedgerows.

I heard the living room door shut then the kitchen door then the pantry door where Father keeps his hunting rifle then the front door and I heard the sound of the clicker on the rifle and him still crying going

further and further away until the crying was gone and he must have been in the courtyard standing in the rain.

The clock on the mantelpiece sounded very loud so did the rain so did my breathing and I looked out the window.

It was all near empty on the outside road and the soldiers were going around the corner when I heard the sounds, it wasn't like bullets, it was more like pops one two three.

The clock still ticked.

It ticked and ticked and ticked.

The curtain was wet around me but I pulled it tight. I was scared, I couldn't move. I waited it seemed like for ever.

When Father came in from outside I knew what it was. His face was like it was cut from stone and he was not crying anymore and he didn't even look at me, just went to sit in the chair. He picked up his teacup and it rattled on the saucer so he put it down again and he put his face in his hands and stayed like that. The ticking was gone from my mind and all was quiet everywhere in the world and I held the curtain like I held the sound of the bullets going into the draft horse, his favourite, in the barn, one two three, and I stood at the window in Stevie's jacket and looked and waited and still the rain kept coming down outside one two three and I was thinking oh what a small sky for so much rain.