ENGLISH

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Oh Danny Boy

REFLECTION STATEMENT

'*Oh Danny Boy*' was, in a large part, a story of self-examination. Based loosely on the journey of my mother's family in emigrating from Northern Ireland, the story was heavily influenced by an ever-changing understanding of the reality of migration as well as the nuances of Northern Irish behaviour. What started out as curiosity about a rarely-spoken family history became a deep dive into metaphysical destruction of displacement and the importance of acknowledging history but not being defined by it. This excerpt is probably the best way I've found to put it into words:

> *"Our very ability to live is grounded on the laughter, tears, songs, and stories of our forefathers. Through their lives, we can live. And through our living, they, too, survive. But it only means so much. To remain steadfast in one's past, or, more accurately, steadfast in one's identity, is to put this history to the sword. Our identity requires changing and adaptation in order for us to survive trials and tribulations such as migration. Just as our body must bend to conquer hurdles, so too must our identities bend to conquer our lives, so that we, too, can continue singing."*

I'd like to express truly sincere thanks to Mrs Lobsey, Mrs Williams, and everyone else who acted as a golden sounding board to shape this. Especially though, I'd like to thank Mrs Comastri. Her devotion, attention, and especially criticism were truly the greatest gifts, and for that I'll be forever thankful.

NARRATIVE

Sydney, 1976

A soft breeze carries the sounds and smells of a suburban summer morning. Children's cries to their father through peculiar, hybrid accents and roses – well past blooming – fragrant and bucolic. Neighbours line their verandahs merely to observe the chaos of early morning orange, watching as a quiet old Italian man puts a hand around the young Irish lad, somehow still smiling, grateful for the gift of a new day.

"De singing won' stop soon, ah, boy?" Nonno smiles.

You know as well as I do, only when those roses die.

Roses Sing at Night-time

Danny

In the heat of Sydney summer, the concrete streets of Five Dock made Da's roses sweat and sulk, collard petals still battling in day's dying light. They were jewels of white on bushes of green which stood out the front of the two bay windows of a red brick house, stoic; struggling floral bodyguards watching carefully over a usually well-manicured lawn that had succumbed to a patchwork of paspalum.

They looked flat, Da would say, but he'd rebirth them, guiding them for hours on a Saturday, shears in hand, snipping and tying and straightening their helmets and rifles with a touch so delicate for such coarse hands. It is nature's fault that makes us first full, he'd remark.

But today they just looked sad. Fair enough. It got hot today. 37 degrees. I collapsed on the lawn just staring at them, struggling to tug off each black leather rugby boot before slowly feeling around my neck and shoulders for the sunburn left red-raw and throbbing. The curse of the emerald-isle skin. In the book we looked at in history today, it had all the settlers in full-length shirts and trousers. Worn white cotton stained with red dirt from the day's work and riding boots worn through on the toe. These were the first white-man to suffer the great southern sun. What do you think was more dangerous, overheating from the clothes or heat stroke from the sun? I pick heat

stroke. At least there's a remedy for that, an ice-cold Sunny Boy waiting impatiently in the fridge.

I manage to haul myself up and go over to the doormat, lifting it up to find the spare key. Chris has a football game at Ryde tonight so Ma has taken all the other kids to watch straight from school. Perhaps another Friday night alone. Almost definitely a songless night. The Fridays when the Irish family sing are the good nights. They're usually so looked forward to. Fordham Street line their cast-iron laced verandahs and lawns with deck chairs and tables on which sits a drink of choice, all to hear the pluck of the mandolin and a host of songs in the native Irish Gaeilge. Of course, none of them can understand the language, but it's the music they appreciate. With an arboretum of wattles, orchids, lotus, and, now, roses, living door to door, the street has learnt to appreciate a tap on the canvas or a snap of the fingers or a hand-picked melody much more than the words and their meaning.

Óró, sé do bheatha bhaile anois ar theacht an tsamhraidh, then *Too-ra-Loo-Ra,* then *Rosc Catha na Mumhan* which would meld into *Come out ye Black and Tans* later in the night and Ma would head inside.

The door jammed up again. Shake the key, up, down, in, and twist, and the latch pops open. Every time Da's back, Ma tells him he needs to fix it.

> *"Shouldn't be any trouble at all now will it, Sean? For a talented carpenter like yeself no less."*

He'd respond with something like:

> *"Oh no trouble love, I'll get to it."*

But it hasn't been got to in the last four years and I wouldn't say it will be got to in the next four either.

Ma must've fully closed up the house when she left this morning because the inside is dark and cool. Through the door the red house opens into a corridor, room on the left – number 3 and 4, Cathy and Rachel – room on the right – the three youngers, Hannah, Brid, and Clare – then room on the left again – the two boys.

Chris' wall is bare and his dresser top spotless. A dogeared Eagles poster was stuck above my bed and the top of my dresser is littered with golden trophies draped in "lost" homework and various bowls and glasses. Chris gaffa-taped down a line through the centre of the room to mark the boundary, but even without it, you can see where the

mess of clothes stops and the spotless floor begins. I like to annoy him so I kick my boots off onto his bed. He'll find them later tonight and complain to Ma. Worth it.

After the corridor, the house opens out to a kitchen. Most of the room is taken up by a large flat mahogany table, tonight's homework sprawled across, and two wooden church pews. Ma's first job when we moved in was to find a church. St. Marks at Drummoyne was happy to welcome us in. Fr. Devlin brought us up after Mass one Sunday and all nine of us stood there shaking hands and tentative smiles and nods gave way to an army of dads coming back to the unfurnished house and bringing with them beds, sofas, chairs, bed-side tables, and two wooden church pews from the nun's chapel that had just been recently renovated. Ma volunteered every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at the parish's after-school-care for the next few months for that. Put it up to Irish guilt. A smart man, Fr. Devlin – a countryman, says Da, but he's not really Irish, his parents are I think. He was born out west somewhere and speaks with a tough Australian accent like Mr Haynes at school. Da says anyone whose family hails from the island of Ireland is Irish and therefore kin to him an' me, but Ian Paisley was born just down the road from Ma and his Orangemen are just British tyrants according to Da.

Anyway, Ma says he's a true blue Aussie, Ah-zee is how she says it, kind of like Mr Pham down the street from Saigon.

"He's an ah-zee like yer an ah-zee, Danny."

"But I'm Irish Ma."

I'd retort.

"Yeh live in Sydney, don't-ya-now. That means yer an ah-zee."

The word was taxing to her mouth.

She tried to get us to sing Waltzing Matilda one Friday night. She printed out the sheet music on the Gestetner at work and Da spent the afternoon practising it. He's really good on the mandolin and so it didn't take him too long. It took us a while. The street enjoyed it nonetheless. A thick Northern accent raving about swags and billabongs and the troopers one, two, and three, it's a hell of a story, no doubt, but it wasn't like Da's songs. They were words which meant nothing to us. Soon he resorted back to my siblings and I's de facto Irish lessons. I love the songs. Mainly for the melodies as my Irish isn't really good enough to understand. Da learnt all of the songs from his summers spent in the Gaeltacht out in Dhun Na nGall so he's a good teacher. But, anyway, I don't need words to know what they mean to me.

At the end of the night, when Ma has taken all the rest to bed, Da slows into more and more English-slandering English-tunes, the Troubles types. As the neighbours head in and what is now Johnnie Walker Red but what used to be Powers Gold takes hold, the songs quieten and slow and move from ballads of love and adventure to those of bombs and bullets and heartbreak. *Eirinn go Brach. The Ballad of Joe McDonnell. Only our Rivers Run Free.* These aren't the songs I like.

I was only young but I still remember the nights the then-five of us huddled in Ma and Da's room as shots rang out around Lurgan.

I still remember Sunday mornings when we'd walk down the street to St. Paul's and Da would walk on the gutter side of the path because on the other side the people were walking the other way wearing scarves of orange.

I still remember the phone ringing and Da clutching me in his arms, running down to Market St to find our Fish shop as a burning pile, squeezing me close, leaving me to choke on his tears.

> *"They're important songs, Danny, 'cause you got t'know where yeh come from. Yer a man from a family who stands against what is wrong wit the world."*

Da told me.

> *"The past shapes who yeh are, Danny."*

He'd say.

My favourite song is the song that puts the street to sleep. When the mandolin grows too heavy to hold, and Da's glass replaces it, it's time the night ends. Da sings my song to jewels of white, and tells me to head in while he sits a bit longer. You can never be sure what he is thinking about but his eyes seem to say that it's at that point he becomes tired of trying to drown out the racket in his head with the melody in his heart and he sinks back into a world he tried so hard to escape.

The Books you Read at Home

Danny

A ring had formed around the glass of Mr Carey's iced tea, seeping into the grain of my white wooden seat on the verandah. It always reminded me of a travelling salesman's tonic like in a John Wayne western. A few years back I thought I was sneaky by grabbing one of Da's tumblers and pretending I was making a cocktail. Two ice cubes, juice a lemon, and add the tea. Ma nearly had a heart attack when she saw me parked up in the backyard with the tumbler in hand. Da nearly had a heart attack when he saw the ice cubes in it.

"Gah, Danny yeh not s'pposed to drink it wit ice, have I taught yeh nothin' boy?"

It's still warm at 8:30pm and I'm still waiting for Ma. The hard green cover of *Dubliners* was made in the cool Dublin air and has started to curl in this humidity, seams of cloth peeling away from the spine. Dog-eared pages feel heavy under sweating palms. Ma says she wants to put a big ceiling fan on the front verandah – it's part of the lottery list, the ever-growing list of things to do and buy when Da's scratchies finally pay off – so on Friday nights we can sit out comfortably.

"But comfort doesn't make for good songs,"

Da says,

"the heat hits a nerve so the music does too."

Ma calls him names like Yeats and O'Flaherty and others that line the spines of our bookcase.

"Stories are written with pain and only pain can breed stories that are written well. The Gaels of Ireland are the men that God made man. All their songs are sad."

D'you think so, Chesterton?

Ma bred my love of the old greats and the work they birthed. She and I have always read together.

Books are pretty much all she packed of her own when we came over. We had a huge library in Lurgan. An entire wall covered in books that Uncle Paddy brought back from

Queens during the term breaks. When we packed up the house, she packed the trunk that Da had made for her full of the best of the bookshelf. She and I spent the six weeks aboard the *S.S. Australis* with the likes of Wilde and O'Flaherty. Ma's favourite was W.F. Marshall – 'The Bard of Tyrone' she called him. He was only born down the road from her and he wrote poems that she knew, about people that she thought she knew. She probably did know them to be fair, it's a pretty tight-knit county. A community and family that is a rarity in this new land; a love and care so warm. Despite this, it's one of those places where a great amount more people are born there than die there and it wouldn't surprise me if Tyrone initiated the journey of the Irish Emigrant.

James Joyce was always my favourite. He wrote a story called *Eveline* and it was the last one Ma read to me the night before we left for Southampton. Our library in Lurgan was a truly soft room. The rectangular bi-fold doors would open up into a thick beige carpet, often a mattress to me when Ma would read at night. The room wasn't big, probably ten feet in any direction, but it fit the lot of us. On the left-hand wall sat a large golden lounge and opposite it two large golden tub-chairs placed in the corners, the entire set built by Da. He would have his intricate wooden side table – Celtic knots winding all the way up the legs – sitting next to him, with two tumblers – only ever Waterford crystal – sitting on the top next to a bottle of some sort. The entire far wall was a wooden bookcase, split in the middle by a fireplace that looked like it had rudely interrupted the brickwork of leather-bound tiles. He'd sit on the door side of the wall and Ma, near the books. This particular night, I was sat in his chair, opposite Ma. She told me to sit there – I was grown enough then and Da was down at Clann Eireann with Richie McCavanaugh and the boys. We sat there and she read to me. She burnt through collections and memoirs and stories. Verses upon verses of men and women from the north and the south, chapters of Catholics and paragraphs of Prods, Williams and Seamuses and Shankill and Falls and she finished the night then with *Eveline*.

> *"Tomorrow we go to a new world, Danny. It's-a place a long way away an' a place that you're going to know how t'love."*

She told me.

> *"Eveline was scared here, Danny. But I'm not scared and neither should you be. It's a world of adventure out there. Much bigger than Lurgan. Much bigger than Belfast or even Dublin or London or Venice. Ireland will always be here,"*

Ma said,

> *"and she'll be ready whenever you want to come back. But for now, she needs yeh to go. Go explore."*

"She'll be waiting."

It always seemed to me that I never had much choice whether to explore or not. The five months that followed that night were a journey I never asked to go on but one I don't think I regret. The land of the Lagan was a place which carried a hurt, but for me, it was a hurt easily squashed by my sunburnt land, unlike others. Éirinn Go Brách.

The pages are comfortable in my hand, and the air is thick around me. A northern tune floats through my head as it did through Fordham Street not too long ago. The pluck of a mandolin, a siren's song, lands heavy upon my legs and my arms drop to my lap. Tonight perhaps I'll dream of him again. And I'll wake in this chair in the middle of the night to my father's voice. And in the morning he'll be in his bed.

And in the morning he'll rise.

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Blinding light penetrates deep into my mind, reaching to the back of my brain and waking me with a shock to see Ma waving from the driver's seat of the yellow Ford Falcon station wagon.

"Danny, come give me a hand with Clare would you?"

She turned the car off and started to unwrap the two-year-old from her seatbelt which had snaked its way around her as she slept. I was cold now.

Chris, Cathy, and Hannah all rubbed tired eyes and stumbled out of the car and up into the front door which I must have left wide open. I grabbed Clare and Mum followed us in with Brid in a similar position.

"Did ye get the Cannelloni from Ms Fotea for Dinner?"

She whispered, careful not to wake Brid and subsequently the whole neighbourhood with her screams.

"Yeah no I got it. She dropped it off pretty much as I got home."

Hannah had already climbed into bed and we laid Brid and Clare down next to her and Ma kissed them goodnight. We could already hear Chris snoring from across the hall and Rachel and Cathy were talking about something or other from behind their door next-door.

Ma and I managed to stay wordless. It was the sixteenth night and both of us knew that walls are thin in this house and walls are thin around our hearts and tears need not be shed for him yet.

"Goodnight Danny."

She whispered.

"I love you, Ma."

I breathed.

It was a dark night. And roses start to falter on nights like these.

Cyprus Brig

Da

A dark street on a dark night is a welcome intermission from the labours of my one-man theatre. Traipsing across these cold asphalt roads, no costume or make-up, laid bare to this cold asphalt world. I'm the drunkard. The man who will walk down Formosa Street, then Day Street, down to the bay to laugh at the loonies across the water at Callan Park.

Then sound your golden trumpets, play on your tuneful notes
The "Cyprus Brig" is sailing, how proudly now she floats.
May fortune help the noble lad, and keep him ever free
From Gags, and Cats, and Chains and traps, and Cruel Tyranny.

How proudly now I float. A dead man singing MacNamara for a dismal audience of none. Sometimes one desires an audience so bleak. It's why bands play at 11pm on a Tuesday at *P.J. Gallagher's* in Drummoyne. Those cats chasing magpies and lazy fat kookaburras are other drunks stooped over a pint of mild at the bar, head in hands. These possums listen and they do not talk. I perform for the kookaburras who laugh in gleeful mockery. I talk to the cockatoos as a patient talks to a surgeon during a leucotomy at Belfast's *Mater*.

For sixteen days now I've followed the wandering Kookaburra, my Láeg. He's toured me around the streets as Richie McCavanagh used to after a night in the black stuff that came out of Dublin's eight. On those nights he'd be there to walk and wander and talk and glass the walls which were wet with Union Jacks and red hands and that'd be our night until the boat departed on Lough Neagh and the sun cut through the fog beaming off the water.

...Like a dull blade with its edge
honed bright, Lough Beg half shines under the haze.

These are the memories that fortify under this land's melancholy sun. The years I spent enjoying the life I had, not regretting the life I wanted. Day after day from fifteen years of age until that day a month after my forty-first birthday.

She gave me a choice and I made my decision. Love is such a mighty drop, a mightier disease and it attacked my brain and made me believe that this godforsaken country was to be the land where I would raise my clan. It is terminal. I cannot regret the love I have for that woman and I cannot regret the love I have for the kids. On the day I decided, I couldn't have properly fathomed how my heart and how my mind would take that journey. I couldn't have imagined what it is to not see my mother's face. And I still can't imagine how her heart survived seeing her final boy leave the Lough.

The first one to leave was my father in '39. I was eight then. He fled south from the Brits after some anti-conscription plan went wrong and, after that, I only saw him when I was old enough to catch the train down to Wicklow.

My oldest brother found the power of books for a while there. He got a scholarship to a boarding school down south before getting another one to Queens. I still remember his bug-eyed face, his swaying corpse that I saw hanging from the rafters in an attic on the wrong side of Derry at sixteen years old.

My little sister found a man instead. A school teacher. He taught her mathematics in sixth form and the next year was sailing away with her back to his home in Southampton. The next time I saw her, that darling rose had wilted. Her school teacher was nowhere to be found, he'd given her a kid to look after and split, probably to the next country village in the Isles to find another young life to purge.

I found love and stayed. And it was love, well and truly.

I met Anne at a ball. Something or other for someone or other in the hall at Clann Eireann. She was young then, a year older than me, and had travelled from a little town

in Tyrone known mainly for the view from the graveyard. We would spend days and nights together, fantasising about the lands far away from Ireland and lying about how I longed for exploration so that I could see the twinkle in her eye when she thought she'd found her Shackleton. We were wed no more than six months later.

And she was now the most important person in my life.

And then she was the second.

Danny came into the world and kept me sane. Armagh was a firestorm and I was made to fuel it. It was either play my part in the provos or die in a ditch but instability was the way I was born and it is the way I was born to live. Funerals every Wednesday and retribution every Thursday. That is how I lived in Armagh in the 50's and 60's. That is how I lived when I was allowed to be a man. Before this country took what fight I had to give my son.

My children would've been brought up to sagas of souls leaching life, day by day. The percussion of rubber bullets pounding skulls would have gifted them their rhythm. The rhythm with which they, too, could sing the songs those legends wrote about Killeshandra and Derry and Fermanagh, the rhythm that I never chose to have but I was given nonetheless. That country embraced me wholeheartedly, dragging me down into the warm depths of deceit, where I too was compelled to plan like my father did and execute all the better or else it'd be my fish shop bombed early one Saturday morning, or else it'd be me they found with six bullets in the skull outside Castleblayney like J.F. Green.

Danny was what brought me back.

Danny was what brought me here.

Despite this, I can never not love him. This is why I haven't left yet. Sixteen days have come and gone and I had the grandest of plans to take my own Cyprus Brig. I'd take a yacht and head out past the heads. I'd aim for Japan with no faith that I'd make it because it was not a journey that I wanted to commence but it was the journey the world said I must embark on. But now I know that truly dead men can't sail. True death is the breaking of the soul. It is the corruption of feeling so deep that even your heartbeat itself is resigned to a numb melancholy like thunder rumbling on the horizon. The very tenets of human life, violated under a southern sun, become heavy and sunken. As heartbeat dies, so too does wit, and so too does rhythm, until the soul is dead and a shell of a body still potters through a life.

Six months after I landed on these shores, the world told me it'd be the place I go to die.

Cast a cold eye,
It said,
On Life,
On death, but the horseman won't pass by,
Instead,
His sharpened blade comes for my head.

Oh my dear Láeg, I wish you could take me home. I know you know the way. Follow the bay and head up First Avenue and into Fordham Street and into my Anne's bed. I can lay beside her and she will turn and kiss me and in the morning we can take the kids across to Bronte and Danny would never know how he helped me survive and Danny will never know how he killed me.

Wilde's sort of Love.

Ma

Danny

> *Surely love is a wonderful thing. It is more precious than emeralds and dearer than fine opals. Pearls and pomegranates cannot buy it, nor is it set forth in the marketplace. It may not be purchased of the merchants, nor can it be weighed out in the balance for gold.*

Our love is Wilde's sort of love. A heavy love. A love that warms your heart enough to send bile scorching up your throat. A love like Sundays in your twenties, when tired eyes would stumble carelessly into a holy costume and you'd spend every hour on those pews praying purely for a soft bed to sleep away the thrills of the night before. A love describable, not by earthly matter, but by memories that only the greatest of those to wield a pen might gather.

Nights spent in a bed in a house in rural Co. Down which Sean's parents had owned since he was a child, lying still in the night, together. No words protruding and no sleep purveying itself to two bodies wrapped around each other.

My pensive Sara! thy soft cheek reclined
Thus on mine arm, most soothing sweet it is
To sit beside our cot...

He met the family around a fire in a drawing-room in Tyrone with a glass of Powers in hand. He had them laughing and smiling and crying for him and they knew, *they just knew now, Anne*, that he was a good man.

He was a good man.

Frank was very kind, manly, open-hearted. She was to go away with him by the night-boat to be his wife and to live with him...

Friday nights in '72 when kids would dot the lawn and Sean's voice thrummed across the asphalt and neighbours would sway in their seats between laughter and between tears. He'd put on voices and roar with Cu Chulainn and whisper and cry when rivers run dry or when he thought of the town he loved so well.

I think memory is the true fortress of Wilde's love. But now I can't remember him. My memory is filled with now. Now in a tub chair in the corner of our bedroom with a light over a radio reading 4:27 AM in brazen red, now staring at the window and now past it onto the street and now past that into the soul of the very woman staring back at me. She's an odd woman. Her eyelids are forced wide by something, screaming into the air of a summer's night with a mouth cursed in stoic smiling terror. Now when the wild woman buries herself in blankets and shakes her head and raises her glasses to continue on with *A Woman Young and Old*.

He. *Dear I must be gone.*
While night shuts the eyes
Of the household spies;
That song announces dawn.

Yes, He. He left sixteen nights ago and so far has yet to find his way back with the dawning sun, night in and night out. After a week is when concern unpicks the scar and sleep opens it wide and memory seeps to the floor. Is he a handsome man? With a full head of hair and a strong jaw? Is he a man like Kavanagh? Has he a beard and glasses and a frame skinny or large? Well, he was a fisherman, I know that. And Danny is starting to grow to look like him, that I remember. I must think of him as I knew him in days gone by now, for Wilde's love is the only sort of love I can have for Sean O'Flaherty.

Sleep is intimidating after ten or so days. The terrors grow and the thought of spending hours alone with my mind further whittles against my skull. When I steal the odd half an hour here or there, I wake up sticky, sweat sliding down my neck and gathering at my collar. It prompts nightmares. Dreams of creatures scaling down my spine. Or water pulling me under as it did in Third Form at St. Joseph's Convent in Donaghmore. Or sometimes blood, because rubber bullets crack skulls. Whatever way it happens, I wake up a mess, remembering why I don't sleep.

– *Derevaun Seraun! Derevaun Seraun!*

Leather soles break and bounce nearby.

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A flock of currawongs currawong in an pre-dawning eucalypt across the road. They whistle like sailors keeping rhythm on a boat across the Indian Ocean, nearing Fremantle in May '72.

"*Curra-wong! Curra-wong!*"

"GahahahahaHAHAHAHAHAH"

Replies the cackling kookaburra, laughing at the poor kid he's woken up in the red brick house opposite.

Chris remains slobbering across the room, timing his whistles and snores with the crests and falls of his aviary accompaniment. Life finds its rhythm with the ticking of the clock in the middle of the room, its malformed hands crucified between a four and a five and a six. 4:32, he told me.

An orchestra of common life fills my tired ears as darkness fills my eyes or sticky air fills my nose or life slowly trickles into my brain for the day, drop after drop after drop in time with the tap-tip-tap on the footpath.

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Did Sean wear leather soles? Did he have a limp? When he and I walked back down an aisle at St Paul's in Lurgan, was it the uneven flooring that made him bob up and down, or was that only at the end of a long reception? Please, let me see!

But my arms and my legs are fixed in place and not a muscle in my body will rise. This curse has grown and seeped from a stoic smile to a debilitating lock and Yeats sits on my lap with the weight of the man himself and yet her eyes remain the same. Now when I long to look out the window into the street and into his eyes and now when all I can see is the horrible woman's wretched face, contorted and twisted in her ever-glowing grin.

Whether pride or fear, it is debilitating. But what is it I am proud of? What is it I could need to fear?

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It is a limp familiar to me. A tip-tap-tip. With a sway. An Irishman's waltz usually reserved for weddings or wakes or early Saturday mornings.

The tap-tip-tap that'd call this lad from the other end of a long hallway to tell him to sing because *you've got your father's voice, boy*.

A tip-tap-tip that'd catch Ma's hip and dip her down below her waist when the radio would play a song that needed to be danced to.

The tap-tip-tap that'd bring him back to tend to the roses and fix a door lock and sing the street the lullabies that it has so dearly missed.

The songman's limp that would finally put Ma to sleep and right this house to how it should be and leave the bottle at the door like we do for the milkman, never to be seen again.

That tip-tap-tip keeps time with Chris and the clock and the currawongs and the kookaburras and the drops of life that are slowly but surely rebirthing my brain.

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The leather soles have stopped. No longer breaking and bouncing but crunching across a lawn succumbed to a patchwork of paspalum. Feeling returns to my body as a tingle in my hand. A rock in my throat. Shaking legs. Empty stomach. Lungs scratching. Bile scorching. Walls breaking. Eyes fogging. Blood curdling.

Tears breaking. Hands throwing. Legs running.

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Heart pumping. Rose growing. Currawongs currawonging. Life building and building to crescendo. Linear time getting faster and faster. Seconds flying. Seconds dragging. And footsteps thumping out a door nearby in between violent sobs. Chris is awake. He looks at me. I jump. Footsteps thump out a door and Ma throws open the screen and stops.

Knees collapsing. Body falling. Voice breaking.

Lawn patchy. Lawn empty.

Air sticky. Air thick.

Jewels of white hit brown as dirt falls back to cold, brown dirt.

Thessalonians

Danny

The sun on the water is blinding. Sheets of early-morning orange bounce around Sydney harbour and from this dead-man's seat on this dead-man's bridge I can see three million lives begin to rise with the sun's touch, like roses to the first springtime sun after a cold, cold winter. They found his body overnight. And on the seventeenth day I was called to see a swollen shell wrapped in plastic and assure them of who it was. Ma had gone back to bed and was yet to rise, so when the call came, it was I who ventured down to meet them while Chris took care of the rest. A note was placed under an empty bottle of Johnnie, a single Fordham Street rose inside. Tears were spread but sparse, and the paper shrivelled through certain handwritten lyrics of a certain well sung song.

And it helped me to answer them. The how's. The when's.

The why's.

The dead-man's soul is home.

The pipes.

The pipes are calling.

A soft breeze carries the sounds and smells of a suburban summer morning. Children's cries to their father through peculiar, hybrid accents and roses – well past blooming – fragrant and bucolic. Neighbours line their verandahs merely to observe the chaos of early morning orange, watching as a quiet old Italian man puts a hand around the young Irish lad, somehow still smiling, grateful for the gift of a new day.

"De singing won' stop soon, ah, boy?" Nonno smiles.

You know as well as I do, only when those roses die.