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THE MOTHER OF ALL LOSSES

(pp. 31-46)

There's a gentle breeze coming from somewhere, as if something big had just gone past or something had just opened. Where? I can't see what it is. The sheet covering the body is lifted up. I wonder if it's going to fly away, the air catches the sheet and unfurls it like a sail. It reminds me of some sheets somewhere outside on a washing line once, somewhere sometime. The breeze dies away, and the sheet falls neatly, but it leaves the body's face exposed.

"Mum," I blurt.

My stomach churns, it's turning into a set of bagpipes, it's droning a long, murmuring sigh from the pit of her stomach to my mouth and then out. Mum's face is a whale, mum's face is calling to the ocean. And I am that ocean, all the edges melt away in an internal bath, there's no more small bucket, no plastic bowl, no zinc washtub, no rainwater tank, no brook, no brook at all, no lake at all, no sink, no sauna ladle, no ditch, no river, there is just one primordial sea engulfing everything, from which, I think, some reptile or other will soon be dragged onto the only muddy island that juts out from the water.

There's music in my head. A spirited rendition of He's Got The Whole World In His Hands, Albinoni's gentle Adagio, Bach bombastically on church organ, the sound of a musical box, Raindrops Keep Fallin' On My Head, I wonder why that of all things, I shake them all off. But then there's nothing, only silence. Hey, hold on a minute, maybe some background music would have been good after all.

Sentences pass through my head, some radio or other is turned on.

She looks serene.

Rest in peace.

She's alright now.

I will always love you.

She has moved on to pastures green.

The Lord has disrobed her and clothed her anew.

Lord with me abide.

And all kinds of other bullshit. But I am not thinking that. I am thinking that no one can be stripped of their mother for fuck's sake. This is what I am thinking. A lame practical joke in an already shitty situation. That someone would have put someone else's mother to die there on the stage, in that place. I mean, that really is my mother.

This is where it starts, now it has started, the thing one never wants to experience is now right here. I am almost shitting my pants when some bloke begins to talk, apparently some very eminent bloke, his voice sounds like that.

"The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord. I said in the cutting off of my days, I shall go to the gates of the grave: I am deprived of the residue of my years. I said, I shall not see the Lord, even the Lord, in the land of the living: I shall behold man no more with the inhabitants of the world. Mine age is departed, and is removed from me as a shepherd's tent."

"Hey, do you have to?" someone calls out. Who the hell is talking here? That eminent bloke can be heard somewhere on the radio, just as if someone - who was it? a certain Bible basher, to be precise - had turned on the church service in the break room during the morning shift. But sod that, he just goes on.

"I have cut off like a weaver my life: he will cut me off with pining sickness: from day even to night wilt thou make an end of me. I reckoned till morning, that, as a lion, so will he break all my bones: from day even to night wilt thou make an end of me -"

"Shut up!" I thunder, and he does shut up.

Maybe I have been kidnapped and taken to a kind of Christian torture house. Maybe in retaliation for all the blasphemies I have uttered so devotedly. And that began at birth. The old boy's voice, he swallows and it seems there is most likely more to come. Something has to be done, I can't stand that passage, like, at all, some odd words form in my head and I sing: "A girl's on the floor, a raven on her lap, an itch on her chee-EEK, she can't lift her arm, the raven sleeps on her hands, her knuckle pecked by its bea-aak, no need to understand, it's quick to adjust, without waving goodbye-ee, just a placid nodding, when all ends in a sigh-ee, that's how it is, what can you do?, that's how life is-mmm, unnoticed for a long time when life's your own, unnoticed your life too for a long ti-ime."

So I decided to hum such a chant then. I wonder where these words have come from so suddenly. Did the old boy hear? At least he shut up. I wait in case he starts to babble something again. Nothing for a long time. Nothing.

If only there were a condition where there was nothing.

There is such a condition.

Just utter emptiness.

And yet there isn't. Not really. No one.

I don't look at mum's face. I look at her body under the sheet. She is there. Mum is there. Just there. She's lying there so peacefully, she is captivating like a crackling fire. It's in there, every moment, suddenly alive inside that body, and yet all completely gone.

When I was a child, I stared at mum while she slept, I used to get a pleasant feeling when mum lay there still. I certainly didn't disturb her, I just looked at her.

I should touch mum. At least I ought to want to touch mum. How do I know that, I don't know, this is a situation just a tad more special, there is no code, no rules of etiquette or anything like that. But if there was, like, a person and then they'd see their mum dead, then they'd definitely cry and stroke that mother a little, like her hand. Maybe her cheek.

I try without meaning to, what am I actually doing? I pull my hand away as if I was doing something else, stretching for example. I raise my arms and stretch. Yeah. I don't know what should be happening here. How the hell am I not crying? Am I a monster?

What is this situation even supposed to be?

I am in a place like this together with a body and it has become clear that the body is my mum's.

This I know.

But when I weigh up what to do, only stuff from the movies springs to mind, that a character would cry, touch and reminisce. Their mother's face is holding the character spellbound, that character being me, fuck that, I am not a film character at all, what the fuck is a character anyway? A character is someone who is there when I can't be. Well alright then. Let the character be then. Go on and be that character there and see how it feels.

Mum has thick skin, she looks quite young, she is not that young, but she looks it. People told her that she had kept herself in good shape. Her corpse is being kept in good shape too, it must have been preserved somehow. Who did it? Who has preserved her that way? Were her internal organs taken out? My mum's guts? Why wasn't I asked first? Is she going to become a mummy? What is expected of me?

There is no-one in the darkness. If you look into the darkness, nobody is there. If you look into the darkness, you'll notice that nobody is there. And maybe that's why it is better to think that there is some monster or other there. Because what can you do if you see that nobody is there? Where are you supposed to head to then, if there is nobody there, not even in the darkness? The fact that there is somebody there, however, no matter how monstrous, means that you know in which direction to go, but if there is nothing or no-one, where is this person supposed to go then? That monstrosity is like a beacon of light for a person and if that beacon of light goes away nothing is there any longer, things no longer hold together anywhere, nothing anywhere holds together any longer.

I can look at mum. I can -

If I assume that nobody is watching, then I can do whatever I want.

Is death infectious? If I touch mum, will she give a hollow echo? Have her guts really been taken out? What a gross thought. But it's not going to be any nicer if she starts to bloat and putrefy here. So if I touch her will I become part of my mum's death too?

"You idiot, of course a person is always part of their mother's death in some way, she is their mother."

Apparently this is what suddenly comes out of my mouth. Even my voice sounds totally unfamiliar, I haven't spoken for a while. When you spend a long time on a stage in the darkness and in the company of your mum's corpse, apparently you start jabbering to yourself. And do some singii-ing.

I have to think now. Let's have a little walk, have a think. Ouch! Jesus fucking Christ! I bash my toe against one of the wheels of the stretcher. My goddamn fucking stupid toe. But I also caught hold of the stretcher and, accidentally, my mum's hand, because now I am holding it tight. Am I expecting some kind of solace?

I can't let go right now. I'll keep holding on to it for a moment now that I've started, I guess you can't keep changing what to do, can you? A heavy hand, totally flaccid. Rubbery. Sweaty. My sweat.

There is a deep-rooted clumsiness in my genes like in my mother's, so much so that even if a space contained just one piece of furniture, say a stretcher for a corpse, then it is very likely that at some point I would bump into it, and that point was now. I feel embarrassed by this hand thing, can I let go now? It's as if I am waiting for mum to give my hand an encouraging squeeze, a caress or a comforting word, or blow where it hurts, I sure am a piece of shit. Just like a little girl, I am, just like a little girl.

Why do I get the feeling that mum is not actually dead? I suddenly feel certain that mum is alive and really close. Everything is messed up. My mum is here. She's right there, I am totally sure. So maybe she is just sleeping. I pat her gently on the shoulder.

"Wake up mum, morning! A new day is here! Wake uuup! Breakfast is readyyy!"

Gosh, she's sleeping soundly. How have I grown to be so big myself? I'm scared. Can I slip in next to you mummy? Cuddle up close mummy, I'm scared.

There is no space here, surely you can see that.

But if I'm very quiet, I'll make myself very small and very quiet on my side, mummy I'm scared.

Now is not the time. You're a big girl now and big girls sleep in their own bed.

Yeah, I won't fit in there, no way, what shall I do now, mum is also so rigid, I won't have room. Ho-hum, what I was thinking about?

But the sheets are cold mummy and the night is long, in the night the darkness spreads, in the night I melt away. In the night they traverse the cloak of the sky, from one fringe to the other, they are looking for me. Help mummy help mummy help mummy help me now will you please -

I don't have any more time to think about your help mummy, I have to get ready for them, I have to get ready for when they come. Find a way. Attack, hide or play dead. Or talk, talk yourself out of the situation. Or a trick, come up with some trick or other and stump them.

Mummy, am I really an orphan now? Don't I have a mummy anymore?

A sound, someone is coming, someone is dragging something. My hand lets go of my mother's. Someone groans. Some teeny-tiny person is walking backwards into the light, towing a red toy box behind them. Well well, who have we here? That's my daughter, apparently she is doing fine. She tilts the box over, a glob of all-sized plastic whatnots spread out on the black floor of the stage looking like a comic-book character's puke. There are loads and loads of colours in the world, my head hurts.

"Mummy let's build the Death Star," she says and stares at me. She then goes and sits down cross-legged and starts building. She is focused, she is on the alert.

"Come on! Start building!" she says. "Mummy, the Death Star."

What death star? What fucking death star?

"Play with me! Right now!" she shouts at me, my ears are fit to burst. I have to try something.

"Yes sweetie, but we don't have the Death Star building set," I point out.

My daughter says nothing. At some point she's turned into such a big girl already, I think as I go closer to her. Can I just ask her what the hell is going on here? I look at her, can she see the body? She sees everything, that's how she is. She doesn't necessarily show it, but she sees and hears and gets every bloody thing, she doesn't let anything get past her. But she must not see mum, I slink off to move the stretcher out of her line of vision and I pull the sheet over mum's face.

"Mummy come here!" the girl roars.

Fuck did she notice anyway? I look at her, she is pressing Lego bricks onto the baseplate. I think she meant me, I am her mother after all. I sit down without really knowing what I should do. But hey, I'll definitely have to escort my daughter out of here, she'll go back home for sure, I'll tag along. Well then, I'm getting out of here, that's what you are meant to wish for in this kind of situation. I'll get out and I'll forget about this like I've always done before – how is this like before? I'll forget about this and I'll call mum as soon as I get out of here and I'll get to hear her voice and I'll get to hear that she is alive and everything is just like before. More or less. Why not pretend. I take a few Lego bricks, I start pressing them together, I'm trying to do something here. My daughter has some kind of idea. I have no idea what to do about this either. Am I trying to look too damn casual? Yeah, I'm even humming away rather forcedly, like here's an ordinary mum playing cheerfully, gently humming along -

"Don't sing," she orders and I shut up.

"What could I make?" I ask.

"You can make the mast ship," my daughter replies.

Right what the hell is a mast ship then? What is it? I could just make whatever I think a mast ship might be or I could ask what she means by a mast ship, but I wouldn't be able to make one that's good enough anyway, since I don't have a clue what it is. And then there will be an argument. My daughter will get angry and then there will be an argument because I am rubbish at it. She completely freaks out if something doesn't go as it should. At the children's clinic they just say that it's typical for her age, it'll pass, but I don't think so. I am quite certain that it won't pass. Luckily I didn't start going on about that certainty of mine there, I get the feeling they are keeping an eye on her as it is. Nor do I wish to talk more than necessary in front of the girl, at the clinic they talk about the child as if she were a load of pats of butter, although she is in that same room sitting stock-still on her small chair, and why don't you go and do some drawing on that tiny table a metre away, so we can talk about you while you are right here. They think she is shy, but I can see that she would rather land that woman in her ergonomic chair a punch in her mug, so that the chair would spin that lady around a couple of times. She doesn't like it either when they give her advice or talk rubbish. Straight after the children's clinic, a trip to get pink-glazed doughnuts with my daughter is always a must, it's such a bloody relief that we survived again, but there is no way of getting rid of that tension in the body. We stuff our glaze-dripping cheeks with doughnuts very quietly, both somehow still with lingering anger.

My indecisiveness is taking over, the multicoloured stick in my hand is growing in size. Why am I even stacking up these bricks, was I this shitty at playing as a child too? I was, I was if I didn't get to come up with or lead a game. I don't know how to play other people's games.

I should apply some logic to this task. If I make the rule that the same colours can't be next to each other, or that all pieces of the same colour must be put next to each other and then the nicest ones next and then whatever's left after that, because these blocks cannot be just stuck together like this, there should be some sort of logic, this is making me damn anxious. If I make some kind of square and put some kind of upright pole on it and then start to make some kind of noise, some kind of mast-ship sound needless to say. Here comes the mast ship, where to Princess Leia? But then she would get angry because I am not saying Black Knight, and if I say Black Knight then she gets angry because the Black Knight is not a girl and she is a girl. At times I think that she just wants to pick a fight, to really go all out, she is able to do it over just about anything, she has such a strong need for one. Hell no. I can't do anything, because I just can't take any shouting and punching right now, I just can't. I'm starting to get tired, I can't help it, I'm almost dozing off, I can't help it. I'm just a piece of shit.

I flinch when my daughter pats me insistently on my head.

"Wake up mummy!"

Doing it feels like an utterly impossible thought, I'm feeling as heavy as lead my dear girl. Mummy is an orphan now. If I could only explain the toughness of this adult life, put into words how difficult it suddenly is making a mast ship in this kind of situation, how hard it is to learn the ropes and how few mast ships come into this world. Your little nut would just go into overdrive. Now you can just blame me, for mummy being a piece of shit, for mummy being a piece of shit because she just sleeps. And in saying that you are right on the beam.

"I love you Sylvi," I say simply and I sink deep into the earth.

I wake up, feeling battered, my left hand has gone. I mean, it's gone numb. I'm still on the stage, but my daughter has vanished together with her toys. But mum is still lying on her stretcher, as if she were awaiting rescue by a golden retriever. I have lost the game and the opportunity to get away from here. The opportunity has gone, there's no playing anymore, no getting away anymore. I can't play anymore, nor can I get away, my opportunity has gone already. I'll no longer get away, my opportunity to play has gone, nor do I have the opportunity to play or get away anymore.

The sight of mum's dead face is starting to get to me.

It is difficult to describe what my inner self kind of makes of it and what sort of stream of emotions is being led by the sight of that face through a rural Irish landscape like that. I have never been to Ireland, sure, but it looks like that. The image must come from some film. Why can't I remember which film? Why from a film? If from a film then from which film? Why do I no longer remember anything? What is this all about?

Mum. Mum what has happened to you?

I probably have to make my mind up here. I'm feeling strangely distant from you now. You are there and you are not there. But this is indeed a bloody weird situation, I don't have any experience of this stuff or do I mum? This really feels like a cinefilm about the life of some ancient relative. The kind of film that nobody is interested in apart from that distant relative.

There are people who imagine everything in their lives is enormous interest. Do you know those people mum?

We are not saying empty words, are we?

Do you know that person who shares some childhood memory about something whatnot at the edge of a field, or shares the experience of making cows out of pine cones for hours on end?

I have seen the expression on your face when someone is talking to you, for instance when I am talking to you and you force yourself to listen because that's how it is supposed to be, but you are thinking about something totally different and before long you are looking at something totally different and you start doing something different and in the end you cut all of that short by suddenly remembering to do some other totally different practical thing. But yeah, I know, people don't read what kind of situation it is anyway, they don't read people, they just don't care whether another person is interested in hearing some of their flannel, they just flannel on. I am not that deeply interested in people's affairs for the most part either, unless these are linked to something terrible, death or the like. A malignant tumour is nasty, but I don't know what to say about it. And then someone could be speaking about stuff I find interesting with such humdrum tedium that I can't go on listening to that with my head bursting and all kinds of violent ideas flocking to it, and I have an urgent need to smash something. It's sort of that people generally talk too much and not enough. That is what I think.

I don't know exactly what's stirring inside me. I can imagine that there is one hell of a hullabaloo going on while you mum are lying over there. Yet I somehow fail to reach any kind of conclusion. I do want to leave, I can tell you that. I want to be surrounded by furniture, shelving units, schedules, time, seasons, although when I was among them I didn't enjoy it, but after all they are sort of a somewhat soothing faded watercolour about what the world is like, a place where I could possibly go back to some time. Where is my husband for example? Where did my daughter go? Was I really thinking that I didn't enjoy living my life? I guess I was. It's certainly a great big lie. There must be some sort of radiation here, it's distorting my train of thought, because I have a good life right now. But if only there were at least a chair, my legs are trembling. I can't stand here on my feet any longer.

Why don't I head in the direction where I think my daughter came from. A short stroll on trembling legs, a test of sorts of how darkness feels. The light remains further away in the distance, it gets even darker. There's nothing anywhere, I have time to think, then some sort of iron grappling hook gets hold of me. There's an iron grappling hook, an iron grappling hook that is not letting go, there always is one. And it figures me out all at once, this iron grappling hook forces itself inside me. This is totally familiar to me, this sense of guilt. It's me who is walking away from my own mum's body without even a tear, leaving her there in I don't know what condition! It's me who is always just casting people off, regardless of where they end up being cast to! I make people cry just by existing, by being incapable of doing anything, and they run away sobbing while I stay put, a pillar of salt.

Right, okay then, I'll walk back towards the light, I'll walk as if I hadn't even been about to leave, as if I had just gone to stretch my legs. And I'll come and stay next to you, alright. Everything is as it was before. How would this change now? If this were a morgue. If this

body were in a coffin. Or in a church. An organ there and the like. Tissues, a bunch of people, some priest or other. Me, taken over by some ordinary emotion. Help I can't do this.

When I have visited someone close to me in hospital, I truly don't have a clue what you are supposed to do in that situation. I feel like just being silent, but it's possible to sulk while staying at home too. Someone may be in bed spending what may possibly be their last days in this world and someone else comes to visit, so now there's this expectation that this visitor would say something. So I really try hard to say something, ask a few questions, but which questions? Does it hurt? Are you scared? What is it like to die? Are you feeling calm? Are the nurses nice? Did you have a nice life? Are you having those bloody regrets about the things you haven't done? About the things you have done? Do you believe in God? Should I pass on a message to anyone? Would you like a magazine? Do you want some water? What about some chocolate? Do you still pass water at all? Are you getting enough painkillers? How about food? But I'm grasped by a kind of fitful crying bout, so this half-dead person has to pass me a tissue and pat me on the hand. It is terrible. And it is tough. I always go there to ruin what could possibly be that someone's last day. Just as if I were discharging some poisonous exhaust gas, all situations are killed by my presence. Usually they still wheeze something, like a nice of you to come, but I know for sure that they are so bloody relieved when I go, and if I manage to leave them with anything, then it's that feeling that death is actually quite a good alternative.

And I always reflect on the fact that it's curious how people have grown to be close, or how it has happened that I have people close to me and that I am holding them by the hand, and that this would somehow be mutual. Of course I care about them, I do know that I care about them very much, and yet I somehow have this rather stiff vibe. And of course I know that I need them. I would need much more too, but I know that they don't need me and that's why I just feel uncomfortable seeing them. Because we both know that they don't need me, that I'm quite the pain in the arse, always trying and failing to wash away that insatiable need, that I wouldn't just be an inconvenience and make life hard for anyone, especially if that someone is dying in some hospital ward. That's why I'd rather not see anyone. It's a sort of joke, being so close. Do the minimum that needs to be done. Even if they're not in the mood, a decent person who is close to someone always does what needs to be done anyway, even if they would like to be miles away.

Do you have that kind of feeling about life, mum, that nothing actually happened?

All sorts of things happen around you, but in the end some core chunk of yourself remained a tough and dispassionate lump, just as much as ever, nothing got to it.

Something small and roundish is lying at the edge of the light. Is that your soul, mum, or mine perhaps?

Let me go and have a look, there's not much going on here. And then I realise what it is. It's a potato, don't you know. A potato. I immediately want to start killing.

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"Right then mum. Welcome mum. So here we are then. This is our time together. You are being quiet as usual, that's just fine, say something when you feel like it.

You are motionless. I could even touch you now, now that you won't head off and do something.

So this is where you have been all these years, what an honour to finally get to hang you. No! I meant hang out with you. To hang out with you. To reach you, that is, to hang out with you.

But you know I still haven't even taken a proper look at you mum. I could take a look at you now, mum, a long and proper look. It's really you.

On your face there is... an ambiguous expression. I could say that it is indeed... a satisfied expression. So everything has been just fine for you all the time. For absolutely no reason, I have struggled with your troubles and felt guilty when I didn't make you happy. In fact, I have thought that you might be one of those people who'd rather be by themselves, it would be easiest for you if nobody were watching or demanding anything. You were probably surprised by motherhood. By the attention that a mother receives from her child, just as the attention she received from everyone.

The swelling on your face has subsided, the bruises on the edges of your face have frozen there. There you are."

Somehow I could cry just a little.

Loneliness, such loneliness, always loneliness. Nobody anywhere. Hopes that remain unfulfilled. Death. A life in the darkness and then death. A baby left in the woods. The death of others. The death of loved ones.

"The tears just won't come! But did you notice, I tried. To wring out a proper long dark cry, I would almost say the dark-cry aria of an abandoned child without any shadow of hope, without any restorative powers. A cry that only shows mercy in the exhaustion that it brings to people in the end. This cry exhausts people with its full-bodied nature and its long, tapering tail that stretches back thousands of years. A cry sounding like the world's longest fall into the world's deepest cavity. It just didn't come. I am not falling.

How do I get out of here if I don't let myself fall apart more? See mum, I'm a bit like you, I don't fall apart either. But what if I don't pull myself together anymore?

I'll stay here. Like this, echoing over and over again as if I were inside an empty water tank. But being trapped in the deepest cavities in the world doesn't last awfully long anyway. You can't take that kind of dark endless darkness for an awfully long time, nor is that sort of mush or slime intellectually stimulating. Yet I find myself in a place a bit like that anyway, that's why it's impossible for me to fall into that cavity, to journey into that cavity with a cry, because I am already there. There you go. Quite a convoluted way to put it! But it's good to clear this up too, I'll definitely never get out of here. You were always looking to see what the hell is going to happen now, what will come out of her mouth now, why does she have to be so damn weird, why can't she be like others, why doesn't she spare you from the embarrassment and be like others, is she taking revenge on you for something, does she want to humiliate you in front of everyone on purpose, why can't she be like others, she is doing it on purpose. There's always some weird thing... is it not possible to swap ourselves for someone else, mum?"

"I hate her so much that a fire sets ablaze in my chest, one that scorches and curls her up like a sheet of paper."

What the hell? Who is talking?

"That black curl makes me want to trample on it and kick it along the ground. I want to stick my hand down her throat and tear the tongue out of that throat of hers until it yanks loose and then squeeze that tongue in my palm, sink my fingernails into it and squash that tongue into a mash. She is like that. You'll notice it, if you just watch for a moment. Do you see?"

"What the fuck?"

Where is that voice coming from? This is not mum speaking. This voice comes from above.

"She is such a laugh. I feel like slapping her. A little energy if... but no, you can't expect such a thing from her. She isn't fighting, she is not even able to. She is always setting herself up on a pedestal when she speaks, look at her now. She believes that she is at the core of things and a profound person. Uu-uuh, how mysterious she is being, here she is standing on the brink of the world's truths. She doesn't think other people are as profound as she is."

"Shut up shut up shut up!"

How can this voice possibly be here? Where? Above, somewhere up above, I cover the fluorescent lamp with my hand, there's something next to it. Some lump or other. A black lump. Oh my fucking God. What is it? I have to get higher up, to see over that strip of light. Now you have to help me mum. Come here. I'll push you under here and I'm going to very carefully stand on the stretcher, is it even possible to stand on this? I have to check, sorry. I'll mount the stretcher on all fours without squashing mum. Then I'll get up carefully. A teetering trolley, but I manage to stand. Do these kinds of stretchers bear weight, they probably have to in case a corpse is, like, very heavy. I reach up to the black lump, my eyes start to see. How did I not notice it before? It's a loudspeaker. It is hanging there somewhere, there must be a ceiling then if it's hanging. I could still trust the light to dangle in the air, but this kind of lump, it cannot float mid-air. Then I feel the stretcher slipping from beneath me. Don't go mum I'm going to die! And then I die.