
Opening Extract from...

The Boy That Never Was

Written by Karen Perry

Published by Michael Joseph

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KAREN PERRY

MICHAEL JOSEPH
an imprint of
PENGUIN BOOKS

MICHAEL JOSEPH

Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London wc2r orl, England
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA
Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada m4p 2y3
(a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)
Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland
(a division of Penguin Books Ltd)
Penguin Group (Australia), 707 Collins Street, Melbourne, Victoria 3008, Australia
(a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)
Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India
Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632, New Zealand
(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)
Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, Block D, Rosebank Office Park,
181 Jan Smuts Avenue, Parktown North, Gauteng 2193, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R ORL, England

www.penguin.com

First published 2014
001

Set in 13.5/16pt Monotype Garamond Std
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

HARDBACK ISBN: 978–1–405–91290–7
OM PAPERBACK ISBN: 978–1–405–91291–4

www.greenpenguin.co.uk

Prologue: Tangier 2005

A storm is rising. He can feel it in the strange stillness of the air. There is no movement, no flutter of clothing, not a whisper of a breeze along the narrow streets of Tangier.

Beyond the lines of washing strung between the buildings, above the tiled roofs, he sees a patch of sky. There is a strange luminous quality to it, a bluish hue and lights that look almost like auroras.

He stirs a cup of warm milk, blinks, and looks out again on to the changing and otherworldly colours of the sky.

Setting the spoon down on to the counter, he turns from the open window and crosses to where the boy is sitting, his face tightened in concentration at the jigsaw puzzle before him.

'Here,' his father says, holding out the cup.

The boy does not look up.

'Come on, Dillon. Drink up.'

The boy looks at him and frowns.

'No, Daddy, I don't want to.'

His father hands him the cup again. The boy hesitates before reaching out, and in that moment, Harry feels the faintest beat of indecision. He ignores it and nods his head at the boy in encouragement. The boy takes long, slow gulps. A small dribble of milk escapes from the corner of his mouth, and his father wipes it away. Dillon gulps again and hands the cup back. 'Here, Daddy,' he says. 'Finished.'

Harry takes the cup and walks to the sink to rinse it. At its

bottom there is a fine residue of powder. He fills the cup with water and watches the residue flow up and out of it and down into the drain.

Leaving the tap running, he fills a pan and sets it on the stove. The gas is not easy to light, and he pushes the knob and presses the ignition switch several times before it takes.

The couscous is out. Next, he takes a handful of raisins and places them in a bowl. A half-full bottle of brandy stands on the counter by the olive oil. Harry takes the brandy and covers the raisins. Before placing the cap back on to the bottle, he holds its opening to his nose and inhales. Then swiftly, almost surreptitiously, he drinks from the bottle before screwing the top back on to it and returning it to its place beside the olive oil.

He looks out again at the changing colours of the sky. He wants to say something to his son about it, but he does not. Dillon is completing his puzzle, becoming drowsy.

Harry returns to his cooking. He pours a small amount of olive oil into his right hand and smears the chopping knife with it. He chops dates, gathers them into a bowl, and slides his finger across the knife blade before placing the apricots on the chopping board.

Beyond the window, the streets are quiet. Usually, at this time of the day, in neighbouring apartments, there are the busy sounds of people preparing meals, but this evening there are no raised voices, there is no clanging of dishes, no hissing of cooking fat, no cries from hungry babies. A hush has descended upon this part of the world. It is as if all the inhabitants of Tangier are holding their breath.

He turns to Dillon. 'Time for bed.'

There are no protestations from his son, just a vague nod of consent. Harry picks him up and carries him to his room.

There he undresses the boy. He leaves him in an undershirt and underpants and eases him under the covers. He strokes his cheek and leans over to kiss his forehead. 'Night night, sweet prince,' he whispers, but the boy does not answer. He is already asleep.

Back in the kitchen, Harry fixes himself a gin and tonic. The day has been long and difficult. The heat, his son's demands, and his own inability to concentrate cling to him, making his skin feel tight.

The air remains heavy, although the heat has dissipated. Now that the boy is asleep, he can finish cooking dinner. It is Robin's birthday, and he has planned a special meal to celebrate.

He turns the oven on, removes the cover from the lamb on the counter, and seasons it with roughly ground salt, then massages the meat with rosemary and oregano and slides it into the oven. As he does so, he glances at the sky and wonders when the clouds will break and the downfall begin.

Rain in Tangier can be biblical. The torrential downpours can last for days. It is one of the things that surprised them most when they moved here, five years ago. He longs for one of those rainstorms now to clear the air and lift this dull, oppressive atmosphere.

The pain around his head has not abated, despite the gin. He glances at the old clock above the stove and refills his glass.

The phone's ring startles him.

'Everything all right?' asks Robin.

'Yes. Dillon's asleep, and I'm getting dinner ready.'

'He's asleep?'

The surprise in her voice unnerves him.

'He was exhausted.'

'Listen,' she says then, and he can tell from her tone that

she has some favour to ask. 'Simo has gone home sick, so I told Raul I'd stay on a while longer to cover.'

'But it's your birthday.'

'It'll just be a couple of hours, that's all.'

He is silent.

'It'll still be my birthday when I get home,' she says.

He drains his glass and agrees that yes, it will still be her birthday when she gets home.

He says goodbye, hangs up and makes himself another drink. It will have to be his final drink before she arrives. He doesn't want to get drunk and spoil things for her.

Tonight, with his headache, with the uneasy feeling in the air, he is as jumpy as a cat and craves the reassurance of her presence. For some reason, he does not want to be alone. So he distracts himself by putting away toys and gathering up books and returning the cushions to the sofa.

He clears clutter from the coffee table and sweeps the tiled floor. The place is coming back to itself, back to the tidy space that has become their home – the shabby yet comfortable sofa, the bead curtain that separates this room from the cubbyhole kitchen, the corner by the window where stacks of canvases are propped up against the wall. Even the wooden table they dine at is cleared. Harry is annoyed at Robin; perhaps he would not have made Dillon go to sleep so early if he had known she was going to be late.

Still, he tries not to be downbeat and goes about setting the table. Knives, forks, napkins, but where are the candles?

Earlier that day, he'd bought four white unscented candles at the souk, a roll of saffron-coloured linen to throw over the sofa, and a large, ornate serving tray cast in silver, decorated in a fine filigree of scrolls and curlicues. The tray is a gift for Robin, one he spent twenty minutes haggling for, but it is

only now that he realizes he has left it and the other items at Cozimo's.

He had not planned to go to Cozimo's. It was a spur-of-the-moment thing. Almost immediately, Harry had regretted bringing Dillon. Cozimo was not used to having children around, especially in his own home. Dillon had grown bored and irritable while Harry sat chatting with Cozimo, and as the time passed, the boy began pulling at his arm, complaining loudly, so that their visit had ended abruptly, Harry sweeping the boy up into his arms and carrying him away, leaving his friend in a grateful peace.

'Fuck,' he sighs, trying to think what to do.

The obvious thing is to call Cozimo. But Harry knows what this would mean: Cozimo would insist on delivering the forgotten items, request a drink for his efforts, and before either of them knew it, they'd be deep in conversation – the dinner spoiling, Cozimo settling in, the evening on its way to being ruined.

Harry goes to check on the boy. He is in a deep sleep, and Harry knows better than to disturb him. Besides, Cozimo's house is not far – a short walk down the hill. He can be there and back in ten minutes. Best to go now, quickly, before the rain comes.

Taking one last look at the sleeping child, he hurries down the stairs and into the empty bookshop, which is cast in shadow now that the evening light is fading and the sky beyond has grown dark and brooding. He steps outside, locking the door behind him, and strides purposefully through the narrow street.

The lingering quiet in the streets unnerves him. He looks up and catches sight of a veiled woman peering down at him. Quickly, she draws back from the window, disappearing from view.

Somewhere nearby in the warren of alleyways a dog is barking, and he cannot shake the sense of unease. The gin, instead of taking the edge off things, has somehow sharpened his anxiety.

But what has he to be anxious about?

He has left the boy alone. Pangs of guilt make him increase his pace, and he half-walks, half-runs to the corner.

The neon sign above the bar gives off a loud, sibilant hum as he passes. He is aware of the strange figure he cuts – a white man hurrying through these streets. He doesn't stop until he reaches the ornate gate, where he leans heavily on the doorbell.

A moment passes before he hears the *shush shush* of soft leather slippers on the stone paving beyond the gate. A small figure clothed in a djellaba appears, and, as Cozimo approaches, his wizened features clear of confusion and he raises a hand in greeting.

'My friend,' he says, and opens the lock.

It is as the bolt is drawn back, sliding through the return with a rasping clink, that Harry hears it: an answering sound, louder, more violent and more frightening than the first.

This is no crack of lightning, no roll of thunder. The break, when it comes, is not above his head, as he imagined it would be. Instead, he feels it in the soles of his feet.

A low rumble rises from the bowels of the earth. The ground begins to shake. He reaches for the wall, but the wall shifts, and the gate jangles on its iron hinges.

The ground beneath his feet moves like liquid. There is a sickening swaying of the earth. The world is filled with a guttural roar and the sounds of breaking glass and falling roof tiles and the shrieks of rending wood.

Beneath Harry, the ground is pulsing, the earth slipping away from his feet, his heart catapulting in his chest.

Somewhere on the street, he can hear gas hissing out of broken pipes, and as he turns himself against the wall, he can see the building opposite veer and sway. It rocks back and forth on its foundations, smoke rises in the distance, the air fills with the smell of gas, and just as he thinks the building will topple, it stops.

The ground grows still. The roaring is silenced. The rage beneath the earth recedes.

He stays where he is, flattened against the wall, his hands splayed on either side of him. The building he has been watching settles.

His whole body is paralysed by fear, and it takes a few moments for him to calm himself. His muscles unclench; movement returns to his joints.

'That was a bad one,' Cozimo says, his face ashen, his eyes still wide with fear.

Harry is about to say something, but does not.

What? Cozimo wants to ask, but his throat is parched and Harry is already gone.

He runs past the bar, where the neon sign has fallen on to the road. It fizzes and spurts with bursts of electricity before going dead. All along the street, the lights cut out. There is silence now, a veil of uneasy calm, but it does not last.

The fragile peace is broken as people begin to stream past him. Down the hill they go, fleeing their homes, propelled by fear: fear of the aftershocks that will come, fear of the imminent collapse of these flimsy buildings.

He alone seems to be charging uphill, his breath caught in his chest, his heart beating like a madman's.

As he runs, Harry hears the shrieking and the crying begin. Doors open, and people emerge from their homes, some dazed and confused, others driven by panic. A man rushes past him, carrying three children in his arms. A woman stumbles on to her doorstep, crying and bloodied, a crimson gash above one eye.

On the corner, a man calls out over and over again, 'Allah sent it, Allah.'

Harry stops to catch his breath. A woman throws her arms about his neck. He pushes her away and flees.

All around him, buildings are rocking and flames shooting up. People on all sides are crying, praying and calling for help. Animals too, fowls and beasts, are crying out.

He runs on frantically. And then at the Hotel Mediterranean, there are three men on the roof. Rather than see the crazed men fall in with the roof and be roasted alive in the blazing building, a military officer on the scene directs his men to shoot them, which they do, quickly and accurately, before a dumbfounded crowd of spectators.

It feels like the end of the world.

Everywhere there is dust.

He inhales it, coughing and spluttering, his eyes streaming, his mouth dry. Smoke invades his nostrils. He sees buildings alight, flames licking at windows and doors.

In the distance, there is the whine of sirens. Other sounds too: sudden crashes as buildings collapse in on themselves, the thump of bricks toppling on to the street, the snapping of wood as eaves buckle and crack.

Still he runs. A building slumps against its neighbour, as if tiredness and old age had weakened it, and it could simply bear up no longer.

From cracks in the pavement, water bubbles up – water and sand. A foul sludge fills the alleyway and sucks at his feet.

At the corner to his street, the bakery's façade has fallen away, revealing rooms with their furniture still standing.

He sees a bed and a sofa, curtains fluttering in the open air.

As he reaches the street he lives on, the dust in the air thickens. A great cloud of it rises to meet him.

He stands still.

About his feet, there is a shuffle and flutter. He looks down and sees hundreds of books strewn about the road.

In the clearing, the sky is flat and dark. The buildings that have remained standing look yellow and barren.

He scans the wreckage. An image from earlier in the evening returns: he is standing in the narrow passageway, holding his sleeping son in his arms – he can almost feel again the softness of his flesh, the warmth of his body.

And yet another astonishing reality confronts him. The building where once he worked, slept, loved, fathered, painted, put his son to sleep, where he lived and called his home, is simply and irrevocably no more; it is sunken into the earth, swallowed, gone.

Dublin
2010

1. Harry

Robin was still asleep when I left the house. I wanted to wake her, to tell her about the fresh arrival of snow. But when I turned from the window and saw her lying there, her hair spread over the pillow, the gentle rise and fall of her breathing, eyes closed and her face at peace, I decided against it. She had been tired lately; at least, that is how it had seemed to me. She had complained of headaches and of not sleeping well. And so I let her be, closing the bedroom door softly behind me. I walked downstairs, took the empty wine bottles from the kitchen table, placed them outside and went out without breakfast or coffee. There was no need to leave a note. She would know where I was.

The cold air was refreshing. I had the same regret having drunk so much the night before that I've had on many other occasions, but in the crisp, cold air, I experienced a renewed sense of well-being. I was full of good intentions. I was going to turn over a new leaf, get healthy, live my life more fully and honestly. It wasn't just the morning air. Hadn't I said as much to Robin the night before?

'You're a man with good intentions.'

'The best of.'

Robin smiled when I said this. Hers was a generous smile, a smile that recognized the weakness within me and forgave it all the same. After Dillon, her gentleness had not dissipated, when it easily could have. I would not have blamed her. She had not become hardened. She had mostly remained herself, despite everything we had been through.

Though there were times when something she said or did came as such a surprise that it gave me pause and made me consider my wife anew.

'That's what you call being married,' my friend Spencer once told me. As a single man, or *bachelor*, as he liked to insist, he often had insights into married life. To the complaint one day that my wedding band was too tight, his pithy reply was: 'It's supposed to be.'

Robin and I still talked the way we used to, still opened up to each other, but like with any couple which has been together for a long time, there comes a point, sometimes, in a night's conversation when you anticipate what the other person is going to say and you stop listening and you go to bed. And that night – last night – well, that was exactly what happened. I was mid-flow when Robin stood up abruptly, leaned over and silenced me with a kiss before saying, simply and blankly, 'Good night.' I shouldn't have let it bother me. I had been gabbling, talking nonsense most probably, and her sudden departure from the kitchen turned me to another bottle of wine and another late night.

Today, however, was different. Today was to be a day of new beginnings. The snow was there to announce it, to wake and remind me of our fresh start. I was closing up shop and locking the doors to my central Dublin studio. 'The end of an era,' Spencer had joked. From now on, I was going to work from the garage at home. It would save us the much needed cash to renovate the house we had recently moved into. It had once been Robin's grandparents' house, and now it was ours. For Robin, the house held memories. And though the suburbs of Monkstown were a far cry from our time in Tangier or even the times we had spent in Dublin together, I was not ungrateful. It's a big old house. And Robin had

plans. She wanted to get her hands dirty. Her excitement was infectious. What could I say but yes, yes, let's get our hands dirty.

The crunching sound as I walked through the snow put a smile on my face. There must have been two or three inches of it, and, by the looks of it, I was the first to venture out on our street. When I got to the van, the old Volkswagen's door wouldn't open. I tugged at it, finally wrenched it open, started the engine and went back for a kettle of water to pour over the windscreen. I loved the old orange van. Robin had pleaded with me not to buy it. Had it broken down once? Had it stalled, stuttered or wavered in its time? No. It had been fail-safe and hardy. We had even slept in it. I won't pretend that it was comfortable, but it could have been. I put the key in the ignition and turned the engine over a couple of times before backing out of the driveway slowly, cautiously, feeling the snow compacting under the tyres.

I got into town that cold, beautiful morning with little bother. The roads were deserted, and I made good time, parked outside the studio on Fenian Street and walked down to the basement for what would be, I imagined, the last time.

The studio had at one time been a basement flat, but Spencer had gutted it. The walls were bare, the floor concrete. The toilet cistern gurgled all day and all night too, whenever I slept over. I had an old mattress, a couch, a kettle, and a camping stove. I liked the place to be this bare, and I stretched my canvases and stuck them on the floor to work on them. I didn't use an easel. I didn't use a palette. Sometimes I didn't uses brushes. I used sticks and knives or broken glass to create the paintings. The sparseness of the place let my imagination do its work, and I'd sketched, drafted and completed canvas after canvas here. And now it was all over.

I didn't have a system as such, but I spent the morning packing the van with canvases, frames, paints in pots and tubes, brushes, sticks, catalogues and finished and unfinished paintings. I don't consider myself sentimental, but I did feel a twinge. The studio had served me well since we had moved back from Tangier. I'd produced all my new work there. It had added up to two solo shows and a bunch of group efforts. Spencer, who had made some shrewd business decisions in the past, owned the building and lived on the top floor. He'd rented the studio to me for a song. He also liked to remind me that he was my landlord and that I was his tenant. By eleven a.m., I had been there for over two hours. That was when he rang.

'This is your landlord speaking. Eviction orders are in motion.'

'You're a funny man,' I said.

'I don't need you to tell me that.'

He arrived ten minutes later to help, wearing a black silk dressing gown and a pair of old leather slippers, a cigarette dangling from his lips. I say he arrived to help: he brought a snare drum and a crate of beer. 'I'm the boy who bangs the drum,' he said.

'Start lifting.'

'I could have been a wealthy man if I had charged you what I should have for this place.'

'You *were* a wealthy man.'

'I worked it out last night. I could have had quite the stash put away.'

'I'm afraid renting one small basement to a friend was not your downfall.'

'Here we go – now you're going to tell me . . . you, the lowly tenant.'

My phone rang.

It was Diane, the manager of the gallery I show at. 'You won't reconsider?'

'I'm packed.'

'You know I think it's a mistake.'

'So you told me.'

'And not only because I won't be able to stop by . . . but business-wise.'

'It's done.'

Diane wanted all manner of things then. I told her I had to go.

'Who was that?' Spencer asked.

I wasn't inclined to hear the tirade he would inevitably deliver about Diane if I told him it was her, so I lied. 'Just Robin,' I said.

'The lovely.'

When Spencer had lifted his last box and chosen a painting he liked the look of – 'Either I'll sell it for you or take it as a Christmas present' – I stopped what I was doing and made us a pot of coffee.

'The strongest coffee this side of the Liffey,' Spencer said. He took a silver flask from his pocket and poured.

'Whatever that means.'

'This is what it means.' He held the flask out to me, but I covered my cup.

'Driving,' I said.

'Why anyone would want to drive on a day like today is beyond me.'

'Have you forgotten? I'm moving out.'

'Now, listen to me. I have a question for you.'

'Go on,' I said, wrapping a number of brushes in a rag.

'You'll please tell her ladyship, queen of the damned, that

you have vacated the crucible of creativity and forsworn my great generosity.'

'Has anybody ever told you that you are a verbose fucker?'

'Don't insult me.'

'I don't mean to. Are you talking about Diane?'

'If that's what you want to call her. I like –'

'She knows well I'm moving out,' I said, reaching for Spencer's flask and splashing a dash into my cup. I felt, in that moment, in need of something to steady the sudden and unexpected quiver of nerves.

'But you know what I'm afraid of? Late at night, she'll come round here looking for you. She'll find me instead, and then what? She'll try to sink her teeth into me as well. She will try to suck the blood out of me.'

'The way I see it, someone's already beaten her to it. Have you looked in the mirror?'

'You cruel fucker.'

'I tell the truth.'

Spencer shook his head. I watched as he lit another cigarette, then stood up and sauntered around the empty space. A hollow feeling had come over the room; and I felt lonely. The whiskey burned a hole in the coldness of my stomach, and I watched as Spencer stopped and peered into one of the few boxes still waiting to be loaded into the van. Plucking the cigarette from his lips, he reached down and began rifling through the sheaf of drawings held there, and I felt my insides contract with grief and rage. They were my drawings of Dillon. He picked one out and held it up in front of him, examining it through narrowed eyes. Before he had a chance to comment, before he could say anything at all, I was on my feet and crossing the room, snatching the drawing from his hands.

'Those aren't for you,' I said sharply, turning away so that he couldn't see the burning in my cheeks or the tremble of my hands. I placed the drawing back with the others, my fingers lingering briefly.

I felt his silence and reckoned that he was considering whether to say anything. He knew me well enough to understand when to back off. Then I heard the slow shuffle of his slippers, the scraping of a cup against the table as he reached for his coffee and downed what was left of it.

'Does this have a name?' he asked, and I looked and saw him holding aloft the canvas he had chosen.

It was one of my Tangier paintings: indistinct figures, a market square, the sun's light beating weakly in the background. In the distance, the sea.

'No.'

'I'll give it one,' Spencer said. He pointed to his snare drum. 'And I'll pick that up later.'

'Mind yourself,' I said, and he was gone.

The door slammed shut, and I waited a moment or two before returning to Dillon's box. It was a large wooden container, aluminum hammered around the corners. I dipped my hands in and took out a handful of loose sheaves and looked at them. For a brief moment, I considered throwing them away, destroying them. I had a vision of a burning barrel. All those images turning to dust. *Put it behind you. Get on.* These are the things people have said to me. Reasonable people. People who cared about me and my well-being. People who cared about Robin, cared about us.

All that time I had kept my grief hidden, but still those sketches continued; something I didn't fully understand had drawn them out of me, guiding my hand across the page, time and again. Somehow, I couldn't seem to stop myself.

And I don't know how long it was, that day, I sat there looking at them. I didn't weep. Instead there was a wholly other feeling. I'm not sure I can describe it. A feeling of recognition. The sketches were the truest thing I had drawn in years. I don't believe in the soul, but if I did, I would say there was a soul within those penciled lines.

My sketches of Dillon were all dated. And I sat there sifting through the years, sifting through the hundreds of pencil drawings and charcoal impressions I had of the boy as he might have aged. *The boy*. Do you hear me? Call him what he was: my son.

These sketches were not something I had painted. They were not something I had shown anyone, not even Robin. Especially not Robin. The drawings were a secret. That is why I could not bear to hear Spencer's voice saying anything about them. I don't know why, but on some level they had kept me going.

So I didn't bundle them up and burn them. I laid them out carefully in their dated order, spread them out across the concrete floor. I had tried to capture my son as he might have been, getting older with each month, with each year. And as I stood there, looking from one to the next, there he was again, growing before my eyes.

Enough, I told myself, and, hunkering down, I picked them up and slowly returned them to their calendar of despair. The lid closed over the box, and I carried it out and locked the studio behind me.

I decided to leave the van where it was. The thought of driving home and having to empty the damn thing just made me feel tired. Instead, I walked along while following the hum of a low-flying helicopter as it circled above O'Connell Street. My

plan was to get something to eat, to fill the gaping hole in my stomach, but I was entranced by the whirr of blades overhead and found myself instead walking down O'Connell Street and meeting the demonstration against the government head-on. Caught up in my own private drama, I had forgotten that the protest was taking place at all. On another day, I might have made a point of being there, adding my voice to the collective exasperation at the government. Fury, even. I was as angry as the next man. All over the country, people were united in their feelings of frustrated anger at the bailout. The terms were stringent, so in a way I was glad to be walking down O'Connell Street, an accidental protestor of sorts.

There were no cars, no traffic, but thousands of people marching and chanting and bellowing in protest. News crews from around the world placed their cameras along the protesters' route. Tourists stopped to take photographs and video footage. Wherever they were from, what they saw can't have been that surprising. Ireland's financial woes were international news, after all.

The Guards were out in force, too. They wore luminous yellow jackets over their uniforms and huddled in twos and threes at intervals along the route, chatting and stamping the ground to keep warm. They didn't have much to do. The demonstration was good-natured and benign. For all the rage, there was a dignified restraint to it. As a protest, it was more mannerly than riotous. One protester held a home-made placard that read, REPUBLICAN IRA: EUROPE OUT, BRITS OUT. The letters had been scrawled in a black marker. On a piece of paper slipped under your front door, it might have looked threatening. But on the end of a stick in the middle of a peaceful demo, it just seemed pathetic and out of place.

I walked along with the protesters and thought about joining in with the chanting and the singing. The crowd moved and flowed along the thoroughfare, pooling by the General Post Office, where a stage had been set up, and from behind the outstretched arms of Jim Larkin's statue, a large screen flickered with the black-and-white footage of demonstrations from the past. Ghostly images. The past resurrected, played out once again in a strange and unearthly light, sending shivers up my spine.

Then up on stage, where everyone's attention was now directed, a man took the microphone, rallied the crowd to cheers and boos and introduced a woman, who sang a long and ranting song of remonstrance. The guitar shook in her hands. A helicopter flew over the crowd, and for a few moments the noise of its turning blades drowned out the singing.

I was caught in a throng of people, swaying this way and that. I suppose I allowed myself to be carried away with it all. Joining in with the applause and chanting. Adding my voice to the chorus of others. The woman finished her long lament to cheering and whistles. 'We've been sold down the river!' the man with the microphone boomed. 'It's time we stood up for ourselves!' He introduced another woman; she told her story, about hospital cuts and waiting lists. And then a man took the microphone and told his story, about small communities and closing post offices. And another man told his story, and so on, a line of people on the stage, each with their own tale, and every tale greeted with roars from the crowd, applause and cheering, heads nodding and arms raised in solidarity.

Time passed; how much time, I don't know. But after a while, I began to grow weary and hoarse. Somebody somewhere was beating a drum, and I felt the reverberations of it

in my head and started to think about leaving. The strangeness of that morning – the surprise of snow, the clearing of my studio, whiskey poured into an empty stomach, Spencer's hands on those drawings, and now the push and roar of the crowd. *Bang, bang, bang* went the drum. It was too much. I was hungry and tired. I needed to get home, or to the warmth of Slattery's. I needed to see Robin.

As I turned to go, I noticed a flash of colour. A scarf wound around a woman's neck, the ends of it loose and billowing in the breeze. A diaphanous material, silk perhaps, the colour blue like smoke on the air. The woman, tall and attractive, was holding a boy by the hand, the two of them walking purposefully up O'Connell Street. The boy turned and looked at me, and everything slowed right down. The drumbeat stopped. The roaring hushed. The crowd fell away. In that moment, there was nothing but me and the boy, our eyes holding each other's.

Dillon.

My heart gave a frightened beat. I sucked in my breath, and the blood roared into my ears.

My son. My lost boy.

Someone passed in front of me, and for an instant I lost sight of my son, and into that sudden vacuum, it all came rushing back: the clamour and screech of the crowd, the thundering pulse of the drum, the push of bodies and the oppressive hovering of the helicopter above us.

I strained to see him again, sweating profusely as I began to push through the crowd. The blue scarf rose like a puff of smoke, and I felt a kind of panic. I pushed people out of the way, jostled and shoved to get past, driven by a new and unfamiliar urge. I was heckled: 'Hey, watch it, pal.' 'Calm the fuck down.' 'What's your hurry, chief?' But I didn't care. I

heaved and shimmied, dodged and darted my way through the slew of people. It was hard going. But it didn't stop me. Nothing, I felt, could stop me.

After all these years when I had hoped and wondered, searched and questioned, after all these years when I had followed the smallest of clues, walked through the solemn streets of Tangier, kept sleepless vigils in unholy places and been disappointed time after time by a trail gone cold, he'd presented himself to me. He'd walked past me. Now, of all times, when I'd least expected it, he was there, before me, in Dublin, a place he had never been.

The crowd seemed to thicken and clot about me. The atmosphere changed. It grew hostile and forbidding. I was working hard to keep them in my sights – the boy and the woman – to hold on to them as I battled my way through. Their pace had quickened. They walked at a clip; distance began to open up between them and me.

'Dillon!' I screamed. 'Dillon!'

I can't be sure whether he heard me or not, but there was a moment when it felt like he turned in response to my shout, and our eyes met. There, among the heaving crowds, his blue eyes somehow found mine, at least for a split second. Was there a hesitation, a moment of resistance on his part, an instance of recognition? I can't say, though I have asked myself since a million times or more. And as quickly as he turned to look at me, he was gone. Swept away from me all over again, my son, my disappeared boy, leaving me trapped in the crowd, caught like a piece of meat in a snake's body, stunned and struggling to get out.