

Leonard and Hungry Paul

by Rónán Hession

Chapter 1: Leonard

Leonard was raised by his mother alone with cheerfully concealed difficulty, his father having died tragically during childbirth. Though she was not by nature the soldiering type, she taught him to look at life as a daisy chain of small events, each of which could be made manageable in its own way. She was a person for whom kindness was a very ordinary thing, who believed that the only acceptable excuse for not having a bird feeder in the back garden was that you had one in the front garden.

As sometimes happens with boys who prefer games to sports, Leonard had few friends but lots of ideas. His mother understood with intuitive good sense that children like Leonard just need someone to listen to them. They would set off to the shops discussing conger eels and have a deep conversation about Saturn's moons on the way back; they would talk about tidal waves at bath time, and say goodnight with a quick chat about the man with the longest fingernails in the *Guinness Book of World Records*. But Leonard grew up at a time when quiet, imaginative children did not yet enjoy the presumption of innocence. His mother often found herself having to take his side against ornery teachers who complained that they found it impossible to get through to him. With patient maternal endurance she would sit by herself at parent-teacher meetings explaining that, like his late father, he 'just lacked a Eureka face'.

Even into his thirties, Leonard's mother still liked to fuss over him, buying his favourite ham for lunch—the one with fewer veins running through it—leaving tea by the bedside for when he woke up, and ironing well-meaning creases into his jeans, which Leonard would quietly iron out later. He repaid her thoughtfulness by keeping her company through her later years and generally including her in the uncrowded bandwidth of his life.

Leonard was not exactly sure, but there must have come a point when their relationship grew from a purely filial one into one of partnership. Though an adult son loving with his widowed mother is a situation about which society has yet to adopt a formal position, it is clearly seen in second-best terms. In so far as anyone

noticed, they might have assumed that she was overbearing or that he lacked initiative and possibly a sex drive. In reality, neither sought to limit or interfere with the other, both being independent people who liked their own space and who, quite simply, got along. Leonard did recall some awkwardness around the suggestion that they go on holidays together, though he was not entirely certain which of them had first proposed it. Mother/daughter holidays are normal of course, and father/son trips are famously storied as a way to come of age. Mother/son holidays, though, have the connotation that one of them must be a burden on the other. But truth be told, they were well suited as travelling companions. She was a keen walker and had good gallery feet, being able to wander around any reasonable exhibition in its entirety without being distracted by the gift shop honey-pots that drew in tired women half her age. They both liked churches and even though Leonard was not religious himself, much of the world's art is. He would enjoy visiting famous paintings and sculptures in European cathedrals, while his mother would busy herself lighting a candle in the side chapel for her fragile, long-departed husband.

She had never really asked Leonard about girls, knowing the delicacy of the subject for him, and also because of her own doubts about whether his apparently celibate life was due to a lack of interest or opportunity. For Leonard, the fact that he still lived at home with his mother led to a certain self-restraint on practical grounds. He had wondered what would have happened had he brought a girl home only for them to wake up to two cups of tea at the bedside the next morning.

His mother passed away unexpectedly one midweek night in her sleep, tucked into a duvet with all her clothes all laid out for the next day, her neatness being a sign of her respect for the small things in her life. The doctor noted the cause of death as a heart attack, but emphasised that there were no signs of suffering or drama. He said that her heart must have simply 'run out of beats'.

As Leonard was a shy only child of two shy only children, it was a small funeral. The front of the church was practically empty with the exception of Leonard, as people tended to underestimate their relative closeness to the deceased and sit several rows further back than they should. With no extended family to rely on, Leonard had to multi-task at the funeral: reading the prayers of the faithful, bringing up the offertory gifts, and taking care of all the other minor jobs that are usually done by cousins and in-laws. The priest's sermon was a generic one about death and hope, which was a relief for Leonard, as his mother disliked it when people summarised a dead person's life in a glib caricature. Had he the courage, Leonard would have spoken up and said that his mother looked after everyone in her life as though they were her garden birds: that is to say, with unconditional pleasure and generosity.

At the crematorium, her coffin was launched through the red drapes on a set of rails in a slightly halting motion, fittingly reminiscent of the Ghost Train she so enjoyed at the funfair. With her fear of heights and contests, she had often found funfairs a bit of a trial, but went for Leonard's sake and enjoyed the Ghost Train as it was basically a slow drive through a dark fluorescent art gallery. As the curtains closed over the coffin to the strains of 'Nothing Rhymed' by her favourite singer, Gilbert O'Sullivan, Leonard wiped a tear from his glasses and headed back to the family home, now his home, as an orphan.

When an only child loses their second parent, the calendar of the generations turns a page. There are practicalities and arrangements to take care of, but there is also a more general facing up to things. Ready or not, here they come. The result is an alloy of sadness and bewilderment. It was in this state, with his mood tuned down an octave, that Leonard spent his first few weeks after the funeral: staring at a pie cooking in the oven; lingering over a bag of sunflower hearts at the bird feeder; or pausing sadly with a highlighter over an entry in the TV guide. If, during that period, you were to ask him what was on his mind or otherwise use the commonplace ways of snapping someone out of it—that is to say, interrupting them for no reason—he would have been at a loss to tell you, his mundane consciousness returning like a cat who walks in after being away for a few days without any explanation.

After dinner each evening, he would sit on the couch in that customary way of single men for whom time is something to fill rather than spend. He would open one of the historical biographies waiting patiently on his bookcase, several of which had bookmarks just a few pages in, the subjects yet to get beyond their childhood. He found book shops to be comforting places and book buying a comforting activity, but he was an absent-minded reader these days, the act of reading that much more solitary without his mother pottering around the house in the background. He would sit at the table and try to copy sketches from *A Birdwatcher's Year*—a Sanderling scuttling along the shore, or a Guillemot with its eggs shaped like a pear to stop them from rolling off cliffs—but, with nobody to show the sketches to, he became careless about the details on the feathers and the subtlety of the colours. And of course there was always the TV: supreme among alternatives, though strangely distant when there is no longer someone else on the couch to talk about it with.

Had Leonard been a different type of person he might have gone to the pub to meet some friends for an evening of darts, dominoes, cards or other prison games, but nothing made him feel lonelier these days than the thought of spending time in the company of extroverts. It is at times like this that we find out who our true friends are, or in Leonard's case, we call upon our only friend. And so, to avoid

or fill that stale chapter of the evening, Leonard had made it a habit to take refuge in the company of Hungry Paul.

Chapter 2: 'Parley View' (extract)

Hungry Paul emerged from the bathroom, wearing a white fluffy bathrobe tied with a white belt, tracksuit bottoms and flip flops with some tissue paper stuck to them. He was shaking his wrists and wore the look of intense concentration that is characteristic of a man with wet hands looking for a towel. The fact that he was in the unlikely position of wearing clothes made from the very material he needed might have tempted a lesser man, but having already run the risk of doing a sit-down toilet while wearing white, he was not minded to capitulate under a lesser challenge. He resolved his difficulty by retrieving a t-shirt from the linen basket and drying his hands on it, his assessment being that clothes that were clean enough to wear only a short time previously were unlikely to have become too dirty to use in the meantime. There is much pleasure in relief and, as Hungry Paul noticed Leonard, he welcomed him with genuine warmth.

'Hi Leonard. They sent you up. Great, great. How are things?'

'Good thanks. What's with the bathrobe?' asked Leonard.

'Ah, I have begun training in the martial arts – how do I look?'

'You look like the real thing all right. What has brought this on? It's not like you to do something violent.'

'Oh, I haven't changed my mind about violence, but the martial arts are more about stillness in action. Calm in the midst of combat. It certainly is physical, but the mind remains still and peaceful. There is no mental violence; no ill will, which is the worst part of violence. And besides, it's judo, so there's no punching in the face or anything like that.'

'And how do you feel about rolling around with Neanderthals? I thought you didn't like people touching you, never mind twisting your limbs into a figure eight?'

'Well there is that. I actually thought it might help me with my personal space issues. As you say, it is one of the more intimate combat sports hence we wear sleepover gear rather than, say, black tie. But to be honest, there is also my personal fitness to think of. Can't very well tackle a black belt if I can't even tackle stairs without panting.'

Hungry Paul then dropped to the floor and started a push-up on his knuckles. There was a cracking sound, followed by some oaths, and then he started again, looking like a break dancer doing the caterpillar.

'How many do you have to do?' asked Leonard.

'My sensei says I should keep going until I find my limit, and then go beyond it. To be like water. It was easier in the class with the spongy mats, but my wooden floors are actually quite hard. Maybe I'll try it with grippy socks instead of flip flops.'

'You look good in all the gear though. A white belt – that's pretty impressive. What sort of moves have you learned so far?'

'So far, it's steady as she goes. The first thing they teach you is how to sign a waiver form, and then they teach you how to break a fall, so you don't get hurt, although I suspect whether I get hurt or not is as much up to my future opponents as it is up to me. Then we did some drills with the others. Most of them are a bit bigger than me, so I was mainly practising my defence.'

'I suppose it should be good for your mental strength too. The martial arts are known for emphasising oneness of mind and body,' said Leonard, who had actually written something on the martial arts in a children's encyclopaedia about the Olympics, though the combat sports only got a brief section at the back along with shooting, weightlifting and a fact box about steroids.

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This extract is as read by Rónán Hession for Literature Ireland's Talking Translations podcast.