

The Wild Laughter

Caoilinn Hughes

1.

The night the Chief died, I lost my father and the country lost a battle it wouldn't confess to be fighting. For the no-collared, labouring class. For the decent, dependable patriarch. For right of entry from the field into the garden.

Jurors were appointed to gauge the casualty. They didn't wear black. Don't they know black is flattering? The truth isn't. They kept safe and silent. I didn't. When is a confession an absolution and when is it a sentencing, I'd like to find out. I suppose there's only one outcome for souls like us— heavy-going souls the like of mine and the long-lost Chief's—and not a good one.

But I'll lay it on the line, if only to remind the People of who they are: a far cry from neutral judicial equipment. Determining the depth of rot that's blackening the surface can't always be left to deities or legislators—sometimes what's needed is to tie a string around the tooth and shut the door lively.

2.

He was a bright young thing. My brother, Cormac. His mind was a luxury. The face was rationed, it must be said, but there's not a body with everything. Part t-rex, part pelican. Picture that menace of features! Close-eyed, limb-chinned, skin thick as the red carpet he imagined laid down beneath his wellies. Tall as the door he expected to be let in. When he was twelve, he looked twenty. The mind was ahead too, as I said. The odd girl went in for such a harrow of a fella (the odd girl and not the even) on account of his brains and chesty conduct. Not that he was liberal with his cleverness. But there was the atmosphere of it, knowing at any moment something you'd say would be turned inside out like a child's eyelid to traumatise you, to show you the violence behind it that you never meant, or maybe you did.

As I say, I didn't resent him his mind. Early on, its potential was fearsome, but he cached it away too long, until it curdled. He could have his intellect. I had the looks. The Chief's mud-coloured locks,

yellowing now like a stack of cut grass drying out for haymaking, hey! Square skull, cultured nose, the kind of eyes that might be described as pea and mint soup, best served cold. I was shorter than my brother by a foot, but divvied up as good as David. I'd the emotions of every girl in the County Roscommon over a barrel. A fact he found hard to swallow, in spite of—or maybe because of—the pelican chin. Excepting gobshites, I liked people. And I was well liked—for no good reason, far as Cormac was concerned. I'd zilch to contribute in the way of knowledge or guile or points for the home side, and sure, how else can a person be of use? Sport lent him an absence note for the farm work that needed doing. For the care work. For the life sentence. His absence meant my containment. Stay put, Hart, he was telling me. Stay a mile wide of my circle.

There's only so many circles in a town the size of a souterrain. What I did and said reflected on him, so he wanted the sticks brushed from my hair, the charm wiped off my face. He wanted me capable of summing sums and changing tyres. To be mad on mechanics—Newtonian and Fordian both. To know a stock option hadn't to do with cattle. But I wasn't after his or his boyos 'approval—that panel of experts. Where we're from, infants get swaddled in hessian sacks. I never bought into an alternative reality, no matter how low the interest rates limbo'd for the new millennium, no matter how you could go the whole way to Dublin on a test drive and, if you weren't satisfied, no one would lambaste you or demand a tenner for petrol. Cormac *did* clinch a deal with the new reality. Nothing daft: he didn't barter his youth, as many did, for a barge on the Shannon or a conservatory extension or an interior decorator or a rotary milking parlour or a personal stylist. No. He wanted a college education. A new way of life, less like subsistence—one that didn't stink of fear and survival. A challenge that called for grey matter and not gruntwork. He did fast maths on how the island was transfiguring—one of them scenarios like if a train is going at such-and-such a pace in the direction of a stone wall but it's absolute gas craic on the train, what are your options?

[.....]

8.

'You can't downsize a potato field ... *agus sé sin an fhadhb*, 'the Chief called from his tractor that night when I went out with a sandwich. The Chief's parents—who were burnt to slags in a hay barn when he was a youth—were Gaelgoirs. He kept on the bit of Irish to honour them. I made my way along the mud bank towards him. I wanted him inside in the sitting room with the paper flopped across his wide lap like a dead stingray and me sprawled sleepily on the couch, pretending to read *Philadelphia! Here I Come* (the Leaving Cert. play text, all about what Private wants to say but Public can't manage to get out because of the Indian cobra between his thighs and for fear of how the outside world would react, and couldn't we all relate to those obstacles?). I wanted to put an end to all this. To get straight to the point with the Chief, like the garrulous Private, and make frantic recommendations to do with the properties:

Wasn't there some poor illiterate creature who doesn't get out much or have the internet, who by some miracle doesn't know the home soil has gone to slurry, who'd happily lap up a villa in Malaga with a shared swimming pool and a dishwasher and a motorised awning and oversized tiles? Alternatively, wasn't there investing to be done, now that we were all in the pits and could only crawl upwards? Wasn't it time to let go of this outdated life? If we could *sell* something—I'd live without a kidney, I had my looks—or arrange a countywide poker championship for my brother Cormac to work the odds of with the Brobdingnagian brain on him ... for us to win ourselves back, slowly but surely? What I ended up saying, holding out the sandwich, was:

'There's lamb in that. '

He laboured out of the tractor. It was dragging a disc-type hiller behind for bringing earth up to the potato vines. Though the engine was turned off and its Hoovering noise had fallen silent, the pattern of it carried on: the angled discs scooping in soil like a child's hands gathering sand to make a castle. The vines bowing down to let the tractor pass over them and then springing up behind—seeming renewed, devoted.

'Doing lines? '

We both squinted back down the length of the row that had been turned a deeper shade of earth, illumed by a flash of moonlight, leading straight back to our lit house an acre off.

'A manner of lines, 'he said. 'I'll be doing it by hand before long. Spraying pesticide one squirt at a time. 'He took the sandwich from me.

'Out of a Mr Muscle bottle? '

He winked and put a quarter of the sandwich in his mouth at once. Opportunities come in all ways and sizes: this time, in the form of a stuffed gob? No, it was too soon. But then my mind was so filled with the large things I wanted to say, I was stuck for small ones. The Chief chewed away and swallowed dryly. Never one to force talk. He was happy enough in his calm refuelling.

'We're back to school Tuesday. Tomorrow's off, 'I said. He made a noise of acknowledgement. 'Cormac's doing college stuff. '

He looked at me sideways, then spoke with a full mouth: 'Have you enough to be doing? 'I cringed suddenly at my school talk, so late in the day. I'd scraped together three of the six Leaving Cert. subjects last year: Irish, Geography and pass Maths. Managing the others this year was doubtful. 'You could help me widen the pond below, 'the Chief said, almost optimistic, 'drain out the wet year that's in it. '

'Ya, I'll do that. I want to *do* something though, I don't know. 'Some variety of physical mastery would've been the thing to want, but I tried not to lie to him. 'I like *making* things. Woodworking

maybe, if I wasn't so tired from—' I looked from field to sky to lay the blame elsewhere for my wreckery. Huge iron clouds blockaded the moon. '*Gandhi* wouldn't've had the fortitude for stargazing in these parts. 'I heard the promising outbreath of a laugh. 'Home-brewing's inevitable, one of these days, 'I said. 'But maybe I should take that fiddle down from the attic. Learn to play a woeful recession tune. '

He grimaced. 'Woeful 'twould be. Don't be demanding fiddle lessons, is all I'll say. 'I saw his hand go to his pocket in the gloom. 'Always on about the travel, you might take a look at your own country before scarpering off to Germany or Cambodia or wherever it is you're thinking? Walking's as good a pastime as any, to know yourself. There's history in these flatlands to fill a sizeable mind. No elbowing tourists along the stone wall. '

I looked across to let him read my expression: the fear of dogs that doubly landlocked me.

'Oh. I do forget about the dogs. 'He took in the last of the sandwich. He didn't press me on it. I handed him a flask of grey tea in exchange for the kitchen towels. Then I gauged him loosened enough, so I took a deep breath and spoke quickly:

'We could declare bankruptcy. It was Cormac came up with it, so it'll be well thought out. The thing is, neither of us wants the farm, Dad. It's a good life but Cormac's too arrogant for it. He said he will in his shite work for government subsidies ... And ... you can go anywhere with a face like mine! I might meet a girl who won't want this. I'm thinking Australia sounds the job. And the thing is ... if you go bankrupt you could retire then, that was the point of the houses and the whole mess anyways? '

He had the mouthful long-swallowed and was looking into the restless landscape, sporadically moonlamped, as if the night was giving sign to a dangerous reef up ahead. He was six foot two and had another year of standing to his full height, then a five-year crash and collapse. I felt a gossoon stood by him.

'You lads and yer grand plans, 'he said, not to me but to the hours of work ahead. I was glad not to have his gaze on me then. There was no way of knowing how wrong I'd been, but I was relieved not to have the idea strangled in my skull any longer. 'You can tell your brother your ideas are for lining the pockets of men like Morrigan. And making them more self-righteous, while you're at it. '

I tried to understand him but it was a tone I hadn't heard. Then I knew he wasn't talking bankruptcy. Somehow, he must've found out what we'd done: avenged the bastard who'd led our father off a cliff. We'd butchered his lambs in the night. Fleeced them, as he'd done us.

'It was to get back at him, 'I said.

The Chief lifted his stubbled jowl, the cap shadowing his face. 'On the insurance claim them lambs went, and Morrigan unable to sell them for the price he was asking, the fierce market that's in it. He

was waiting till the last minute to get rid of them. He telephoned this morning, boastful of the Easter godsend. ’

The Chief would never have spoken so freely with Cormac. It was as if the night air and the waxy ears of his harmless youngest son were the particular conditions for talking. But I would’ve gone ignorant just then. Like a gomey, I said, ‘I’ll do an hour for you now. I’m used to doing lines. ’

He didn’t smile but threw the thermos into the tractor and hauled the new weight of himself up onto the seat. ‘What ye lads don’t understand—’ He stopped himself. ‘But sure, why would ye? Who’d have taught you? ’

The engine coughed up, and off he moved in his tired machinery, making lines as straight as humanly possible into the unknowable night.