

Throwing in the Towel

Billy O'Callaghan

I had seen him years before, back when he was still in something like his prime, when he was trying to make a name for himself as if that were a thing which mattered worth a damn. And it's funny, but he looks the same as I remember, more or less, anyway, except that the edges are gone, all that finesse and guile. Time, I suppose, turns everything soft. Now he has become just another old fighter, sloshed on one too many hits to the head. He looks the same, if you can see beyond the fur of bad or at least questionable living, but even from a long way off you can tell that damage has been done.

He is sitting by the window but with his wide back to the fogged glass, and he smiles a wide-open smile when the waiter finally brings the tray of food, his big round face mangled with happy creases. Even before the plate has been set down he is picking up his knife and fork in anticipation and holding them spread apart in his huge fists, sharp ends at the ready. The white light of early afternoon pours through the window and dissects the part of the table that lies untouched by his shadow. The tines of his fork flash a signal across the room, full of some intent, as they lean into and away from the light.

"Stop staring," Jenny says. She is whispering, in a way that scrapes the high back of her throat, which always makes her seem harsh until you look at her and realise that she's not.

I look at her, then without enthusiasm cut into my omelette. The menu had made it seem so enticing, but the reality is flat and lacking in imagination. Overdone eggs, chunks of onion diced far too thick, entirely the wrong sort of cheese for easy melting. And the side portion of ham is stringy. I poke at the omelette with my fork, rake it asunder and eat a piece for the sake of doing so.

"You're staring again," she says.

"So, I'm staring. So what?"

"So, some people don't like being stared at. Some people take great offence to it, in fact." She pauses here, and steals a glance herself. "What is it? Do you think you know him or something?"

"Something," I answer, knowing this will annoy her. But I am instantly sorry. Sorry for everything. I give up on the omelette, lean back in my chair and take to sipping wine. The food might not be up to much here, but they do serve a decent Chablis. "I've seen him before," I say, at last. "In Paris. He was a fighter. A boxer, I mean. And a good one."

His name was Doherty, and I had watched him at the Palais, in Bercy, as one of the opening acts propping up a bill headlined that particular night by a fighter named Mike Culbert, whose pedigree had once put him in the ring with Roberto Durán. Our man went in as the long-odds nobody against a Mexican, name of Ortiz, who was one of the most fancied middleweights of his time, a real contender. The story doing the rounds was that Ortiz had only scheduled the fight because his numbers were a little lacking and that he'd been told to pad things out if he was serious about wanting a shot. You couldn't put a penny down on him, he was that locked on. No one was expecting anything from the match-up so the entire place was stunned when it turned out to be seven-and-a-half rounds of the most brutal fighting any of us had ever seen. A real brawl. But it was obvious at a glance that Doherty had the stuff. He could dance when he needed to dance and could mix it up, too. He had a right jab that clipped away like a jackhammer and never let up, and a left hook capable of stopping a man at foundation level. The Mexican knew within ten seconds of the first bell that trouble lay ahead. But there's no back door in the ring. That night, he took the beating of his life, lost an eye and his career. I remember that they had to wash the ring down with buckets of water before the next fighters could come out, and after the bout most of the crowd left, figuring correctly that Culbert would have nothing left in his game to match what we'd just seen.

Outside, the streets were packed, even though it was raining, and the bars and cafés along the Rue de Pommard did a roaring trade. It was one of those nights when we were all feeling something, and nobody wanted to go home.

Across the restaurant, he is eating slowly. Everything really has gone soft. He's no middleweight now; he is heavy turned to mush. He chews his food well, even though it is only beans and buttered slices of white bread, and his eyes stare ahead into a far distance. At some point, a daub of sauce seeps from his lower lip and spools across his yellow stubble-ridden ball of chin. He wipes at it but misses, his thick fingers too out of shape for neat work. He mutters something that comes loud and hoarse across the restaurant floor but which makes no sense, and the waiter who brought the food tosses him an anxious glance and slips behind the safety of the counter. I pour myself a second glass of wine, and wonder if the old fighter is a regular in this place or merely a passerby. He looks comfortable enough at the table, and the waiter's nimble footwork seems to speak of past troubles. Time slips quickly by but it leaves its share of scars. Most of us, maybe all of us, wear our histories as shackles around our necks. Out of some duty I don't quite understand, I take another piece of omelette and try to forget that I am not twenty anymore, and haven't been for a long time.

Jenny sips coffee. At thirty-nine, six years younger than me, she has a sad sort of prettiness. Always did, actually. I don't quite mean beautiful, you couldn't exactly put her in the movies. But still, not bad. Nice. The kind of pretty that some women have without knowing it. When she was young she could smile without moving her mouth. Her whole demeanour suggested it, as if the happiness came seeping through from underneath, though it's possible that I was reading something more than was truly there. A word can mean one thing to one person and another thing entirely to someone else. We have been married a long time, my second shot at the title, her first. Now that I've long since gotten used to seeing it, the smile which is not a smile, my thinking is that it has always been just a peculiar confluence of cheekbones and chin.

And whether made more pronounced by the few pounds gained in a brief pregnancy or diminished by diet after diet, it has endured. A nearly-smile that's just another in a conga line of lies, one of those tricks of birth that works as either lucky or unlucky, depending on your point of view.

A month ago, the doctors removed her right breast; this morning they spoke of taking the left one, too. She sat in that office as though made of wood, stared them down and said in a voice that was all one flattened tone that they should go right on ahead with whatever needed doing because she had no more tears to cry. I'd felt a nearly crushing urge to reach out and take her hand when she said that, but I couldn't. For more than a year now, we've been fighting one another to a standstill. With this early supper we're merely killing minutes before the moment of final goodbye. We have already thrown in the towel. By eight, I'll be on a train, with a cardboard suitcase full of shirts and books, and by tomorrow, I will be in another city, holding some other woman's hand. ∞