



## ME AND MAM: ON THE LAKE

*Place:* A country lake in the West of Ireland

*Time:* Autumn, the present

*Characters:* Me, the Storyteller

Mam, his mother

*Glossary:*

**Gunning:** a school bully at Abbeyview Academy

**Corncrakes:** an endangered bird important in the West of Ireland

**oul:** old

# MICHAEL WYNNE

## ME AND MAM: ON THE LAKE

**J**nd we rowed out on the lake that day near the end of summer, me and Mam, and she told me of what she called the murder that she done. I wasn't shocked, no, well not much, and she told it with tears in her eyes like the time she said her mother never kissed or cuddled her. I was sorry for her that time, and sorry this time too. I'm sorry for Mam, my poor mother, all the time, and wonder sometimes if my love for her is all pity, and hope it's not because she deserves more despite the harm she done which was only done because she was fierce harmed herself by a mother who was cold, it's as plain as that, and sure her mother was cold because she was hurt the same, of course that's it, cause I understand these things.

That day we rowed on the lake with all around the sounds of the birds, *corncrakes*, Mam called them, though it took her several frustrated minutes to get the word. We talked again about her mother who never I remember wanted to be called "Granny" but only "Mum" so she could feel younger and neither had she let her own kids call her "Mum" or "Mammy" but wanted people at Mass and at the market or wherever to mistake her daughters for sisters. *Never once did she introduce me as her daughter*, said Mam, *she was vain like that, very vain, snobbish too*. When Mam gets goin it all comes out. *Though she'd her good points, so yer grandmother did*, Mam would say, *very clean, yes, like her husband, clean, and loved nature, little animals and knew all the names of the holy trees and healin plants around about, great like that she was*, and

you can hear the admiration in my mother's voice when she says it and the longin, the longin, the longin in her voice still for her mother's approval though the woman's dead this years, this years, but anyway it was talk again of her, and her oul coldness, that led to talk of murderous feelins and people we'd liked to have killed once upon a time.

I told her of the Gunning fella that gave me such grief for bein girly up at Abbeyview the first three years and used to spit into my mouth in the long corridor and piss on me from a height on the way home from school where the high wall was and break all my pencils in the woodwork class and me who never was inclined to do woodwork at all, forced into it by dad who boasted about havin *never been a child but a grown man from the earliest age, a fine man among fine men*, fine men all, in his time, as he'd have us imagine, pushed into it anyways with this Gunning wanker who made me aware of how I talked and acted and never was I aware of it till I met him. "Girly" and "Mary" and "gayboy" he called me all the time, and I used to make up elaborate plans durin Mass to do with lyin in wait for him on the high wall with a loose jagged rock and droppin it down on his crown when he passed on his way home down toward Gallows Hill. I used to even hear him pleadin *no, ah, no, don't*, then I would, and I'd even hear his skull crack and see his brains runnin down the footpath, or I'd think up schemes about feedin him sweets with rat poison injected in them, *here have a few, Gunning*, I'd imagine me sayin and see him thinkin, *ah this sissy, this sucker*, and grab them as thick as anythin and I'd imagine me seein him wander home thinkin, *ha ha*, he'll be in agony in no time now, and be dead tomorrow and no I won't go next or near his funeral but shite on his grave and I never did nothin about it unfortunately, and I told Mam all about this for the first time and I could see her thinkin, *oh God, sure I can relate well to this*.

Then for a while we were quiet, with the island risin up behind her as we rowed toward it with the lovely lappin sound of the oars as I rowed and the threatened corncrakes goin crazy with their harsh raspin sound and the water all lovely evenin colours, navy and silver and inky and shades of blue I wouldn't have a clue of the name of, and the leafy hilly island behind a certain blue, like another colour altogether, not much like blue at all, yet blue at the same time, and then she

came out and told me of the nurse she'd worked with, *a devil, oh a demon, she was*, my Mam said, *a pure basterin demon, God she asked for what she got, by God did she, and God she was the whole time at me that one, gettin at me for bein from the country, bein a blow-in, makin me feel dire, that I couldn't do my job, and sure wasn't I just as good as her, just as good, and oh a terrible hate for her I had and all of a sudden didn't she get sick, cancer it was, cancer it turned out, well wasn't I delighted, oh I was, delighted, and she was in bed the whole time. She lived in, yeh see. And one night I was on, the skeleton shift it was called, so it was, and wasn't I asked to look in on her, give her her pills mixed in with her soup or whatever it is she was eatin, well not a pill will I give her, the oul so-and-so, says I, and I didn't, not at all, not a hate of a pill did I give her, why would I, the hateful old, hateful old thing, and down to the ward she was brought the next morning, and she died the next night, well, I cheered.*

For me, no, I wasn't shocked, Mam was right, she had it rough, and *yer wan had it comin*, and *yeh were dead right*, says I, my poor Mam with her life like a long string of dismal disappointments and let-downs and a weak-as-water husband despite all this claptrap about never bein anythin but a man, a big man like his dad and uncle, who was in the RIC as it was called in his day, *the oul traitor*, as Mam called him, *wor-kin for the queen*, and Mam with her other useless children, except me, who stood by her when all else up and left or died on her, and, yes, we were like allies, me and her, and she never minded about me bringin home the odd man from the jacks in the town, not a hate did she care.

Even when she walked in on me that New Year with yer man from Scotland I picked up and we suckin away at each other suckin away like babies we were and goin at it goodoh. God he was good, goin at it wild-like with good dirty passion and everythin, and not afraid to whisper inta my ear what he wanted or how he wanted it or anythin like, *fuck me slow* or *lick me balls all over gently*, all this, I was well into him. Well she, she let on she saw nothin, went out quietly, left us at it, *hope yeh a good night* was all she said the next day when I brought her her tea and *True Crime* and *did yeh see who's made Bishop of the diocese* she says later the same day, and who was it but this gobshite taught us civics at Abbeyview

who did nothin but advise us to always wash our penises but not to get excited rubbin ourselves down with a towel afterwards, *don't get excited, and don't get excited when yeh think of girls and get hard, of course sure, yeh wouldn't be right not to think of girls but don't touch yerselves or think too much about it, boys, don't get excited* he'd say over and over, and he'd be leanin back on the back legs of his chair stabbin his desk with a pen as he raved away, his bald crown grazin and greasin the blackboard and him beamin around at us all with this big stiff grin on his big bloated shiny face, the lenses of his black-framed glasses shinin with a flat white light, and the only beatin I ever got ever at school was from him for flickin a bit of paper on the carpet without thinkin after he got us to hoover it, and "Butch" was his name cause he was burly and big, but no more butch than I was, and *the Bishop he is now*, she says and she talked away about him and kept away from the subject of seein me with yer man altogether fair play to her.

That day we rowed out on the lake, when I turned us around in the boat and made for the shore with the little bats skitin like shadows so close they nearly grazed the crowns of our heads, she said, *I don't have a bad family, indeed sure, yeh could be miles worse*, and I thought of me sister who she fostered out as an infant to a family, some sorta half cousins of ours, livin at the other side of the lake, and me other sister she sent away to her own flat when she got pregnant by another cousin of ours, and me older sister I barely knew who threw herself off the waterfall when Mam wouldn't let her marry the Prod, and me brother she never had a heed on who grew up joyridin and womanizin and who fecked off to England without any exams or nothin and who hasn't been heard of since, and the other brother who's a porter in the mental hospital who doesn't talk except a bit about soccer, and I thought as well of, when she used to call me *sissy* but that's well behind us I thought and I pulled the oars lookin at her as she said that about us with pride, and that she's content now cause of me cause I've stood by her and listen to her and get her to speak like she wasn't a mother at all but more like a lover or friend from old days and I think of the privilege that it is sittin here with my Mam in the deepenin twilight and the lovely smells and sounds of the lake in the dusk and to chat away with her about everythin after all we've been through and as we

head back to our lives on the land, dad is brought up out of the blue, and we talk about visitin him in the nursin home where he was just after havin his second stroke and where he sits wrapped in an afghan ravin through bubbles of spit, and *from the way that he had with the men, Mam said, his way o' talkin and lookin at them, I'd a notion a long time he was one of yer kind, never mind all the childer we had,* and she left it at that and I'll always remember that time and that day we chatted about our murderous sides as also bein the closest she ever got to talkin about me, what I am.