

Northern Ireland

excerpt from Patrick Chamoiseau's School Days, in which
~~learning the language of the oppressor becomes the battle a~~
~~small boy must win.~~

Everything in This Country Must by Colum McCann

It was a summer flood when our draft horse was caught in the river and the river smashed against stones. The sound of it to me was like the turning of locks. It was silage time, and the water smelled of grass. The draft horse, Father's favorite, had stepped in the river for a sniff maybe, and she was caught, couldn't move, her foreleg trapped between rocks. Father found her and called, *Katie!* above the wailing of the rain. I was in the barn, waiting for drips on my tongue from the ceiling hole. I ran out past the farmhouse into the field. At the river the horse stared wild through the rain; maybe she remembered me. Father moved slow and scared, like someone traveling deep in snow except there was no snow, just flood, and Father was frightened of water, always frightened. Father told me, *Out on the rock there, girl.* He gave me the length of rope with the harness clip, and I knew what to do. I am taller than Father since my last birthday, fifteen. I stretched wide like love and put one foot on the rock in the river middle and one hand on the tree branch above it and swung out over the river flood.

Behind me Father said, *Careful now hai.* The water ran warm and fast, like girl blood, and I held the tree branch, still able to lean down from the rock and put the rope to the halter of the lovely draft horse.

The trees went down to the river in a whispering, and they hung their long branches over the water, and the horse jerked quick and sudden, and I felt there would be a dying, but I pulled the rope up to keep her neck above water.

Father was shouting, *Hold it, girl!* and I could see his teeth

clenched and his eyes wide and all the traveling of veins in his neck, the same as when he walks the ditches of our farm, many cows, hedgerows, fences. Father is always full of ditches and fright for the losing of Mammy and Fiachra and now his horse, his favorite, a big Belgian mare that cut fields once in the peaceful dark soil of long ago.

The river split at the rock and jumped fast into sprays coming up above my feet into my dress. But I held tight to the rope, held it like Father sometimes holds his last Sweet Afion cigarette at mealtime before prayers. Father was shouting, *Keep it there, girl, good!* He was looking at the water as if Mammy was there, as if Fiachra was there, and he gulped air and down he went in the water and he was gone so long he made me wail to the sky for being alone. He kept a strong hold of one tree root but all the rest of his body went away under the quick brown water.

The night had started stars. They were up through the branches. The river was spraying in them.

Father came up splutter spluttering for air with his eyes all horse-wild and his cap lost down the river. The rope was jumping in my hands and burning like oven rings, and he was shouting, *Hold it, girl, hold it, for the love of God hold it, please!*

Father went down in the water again but came up early, no longer enough in his lungs to keep down. He stayed in the river holding the root, and the water was hitting his shoulders and he was sad watching the draft horse die like everything does, but still I pulled on the halter rope so it would not, because Molly in the sweet shop told me it is not always so.

One more try, Father said in a sad voice like his voice over Mammy and Fiachra's coffins long ago.

Father dipped under and he stayed down as long as yesterday's yesterday, and then some headlights came sweeping up the town road.

The lights made a painting of the rain way up high and they put shadows on the hedgerows and ditches. Father's head popped out of the water and he was breathing heavy, so he didn't see the light. His chest was wide and jumping. He looked at the draft horse and then at me. I pointed up the road and he turned in the flood and stared. Father smiled, maybe thinking it was Mack Devlin with his milk truck or Molly coming home from the sweet shop or someone come to help save his favorite horse. He dragged on the tree root and outstruggled from the river and stood on the bank, and his arms went up in the air like he was waving, shouting. *Over here over here hat!*

Father's shirt was wet under his overalls and it was very white when the headlights hit it. The lights got close close closer, and in the brightening we heard shouts and then the voices came clear. They sounded like they had swallowed things I never swallowed. I looked at Father and he looked at me all of a sudden with the strangest of faces, like he was lost, like he was punched, like he was the river cap floating, like he was a big alone tree desperate for forest. Someone shouted out. *Hey, mate, what's goin' on?* in a strange way, and Father said, *Nothing*, and his head dropped to his chest and he looked across the river at me and I think what he was telling me was *Drop the rope, girl*, but I didn't. I kept it tight, holding the draft horse's neck above the water, and all the time Father was saying but not saying, *Drop it, please, Katie, drop it, let her drown.*

They came right quick through the hedge, with no regard for the uniforms that hide them. One took off his helmet while he was running, and his hair was the color of winter ice. One had a moustache that looked like long grasses, and one had a scar on his cheek like the bottom end of Father's barn hay knife.

HayKnife was first to the edge of the river, and his rifle banged

against his hip when he jumped out to the rock where I was halter-holding. *Okay, love, you're all right now*, he said to me, and his hand was rain-wet at my back, and he took the halter and shouted things to the other soldiers, what to do, where to stand. He kept ahold of the halter and passed me back to LongGrasses, who caught my hand and brought me safely to the riverbank. There were six of them now, all guns and helmets. Father didn't move. His eyes were steady looking at the river, maybe seeing Mammy and Fiachra in each eye of the draft horse, staring back.

One soldier was talking to him loud and fast, but Father was like a Derry shop-window dummy, and the soldier threw up his arms and turned away through the rain and spat a big spit into the wind.

HayKnife was all balance on the rock with the halter, and he didn't even hold the branch above his head. IceHair was taking off his boots and gun and shirt and he looked not like boys from town who come to the barn for love, he looked not like Father when Father cuts hay without his shirt, no, he looked not like anybody; he was very skinny and strong with ribs like sometimes a horse has after a long day in the field. He didn't dive like I think now I would have liked him to, he just stepped into the water very slow and not show-offy and began making his way across, arms high in the air getting lower. But the river got too deep and HayKnife shouted from the rock, saying, *Stay high, Stevie, stay high side, mate.*

And Stevie gave a thumb up to HayKnife and then he was down under the water and the last thing was the kick of the feet.

LongGrasses was standing beside me and he put Stevie's jacket on my shoulders to warm me, but then Father came over and pushed LongGrasses away. Father pushed hard. He was smaller than LongGrasses, but LongGrasses bashed against the trunk of the tree. LongGrasses took a big breath and stared hard at him. Father said, *Leave her alone, can't you see she's just a child?* I covered my face for shame, like in school when they put me in class at a special desk bigger than the rest,

not the wooden ones with lifting lids, except I don't go to school anymore since Mammy and Fiachra died. I felt shame like the shame of that day, and I covered my face and peeped through my fingers.

Father was giving a bad look to LongGrasses. LongGrasses stared at Father for a long time too and then shook his head and walked away to the riverbank where Stevie was still down in the water.

Father's hands were on my shoulders, keeping me warm, and he said, *It'll be all right now, love*, but I was only thinking about Stevie and how long he was under water. HayKnife was shouting at the top of his voice and staring down into the water, and I looked up and saw the big army truck coming through the hedgerow fence and the hedge was broken open with a big hole and Father screamed *No!* The extra lights of the truck were on and they were lighting up all the river. Father screamed again. *No!* but stopped when one of the soldiers stared at him. *Your horse or your bloody hedge, mate.*

Father sat down on the riverbank and said, *Sit down, Katie*, and I could hear in Father's voice more sadness than when he was over Mammy's and Fiachra's coffins, more sadness than the day after they were bit by the army truck down near the Glen, more sadness than the day the judge said, *Nobody is guilty, it's just a tragedy*, more sadness than even that day and all the other days that follow.

Bastards, Father said in a whisper, *bastards*, and he put his arm around me and sat watching until Stevie came up from the water swimming against the current to stay in one place. He shouted up at HayKnife, *Her leg's trapped*, and then, *I'm gonna try and get the hoof out*. Stevie took four big gulps of air and HayKnife was pulling on the halter rope and the draft horse was screaming like I never heard a horse before or after. Father was quiet and I wanted to be back in the barn alone, waiting for drips on my tongue. I was wearing Stevie's jacket but I was shivering and wet and cold and scared, because Stevie and the draft horse were going to die, since everything in this country must.

Father likes his tea without bags, like Mammy used to make, and so there is a special way for me to make it. Put cold cold water in the kettle, and only cold, and boil it, and then put a little boiling water in the teapot and swish it around until the bottom of the teapot is warm. Then put in tea leaves, not bags, and then the boiling water, and stir it all very slowly and put on the tea cozy and let it stew on the stove for five minutes, making sure the flame is not too high so the tea cozy doesn't catch flame and burn. Then pour milk into the cups and then the tea, followed at last by the sugar all spooned around into a careful mixture.

My tea fuss made the soldiers smile, even Stevie, who had a head full of blood pouring down from where the draft horse kicked him above his eye. Father's face went white when Stevie smiled, but Stevie was very polite. He took a towel from me because he said he didn't want to get blood on the chair. He smiled at me two times when I put my head around the kitchen door, and held up one finger, meaning *One sugar, please*, and a big O from fingers for *No milk, please*. Some blood was drying in his hair, and his eyes were bright like the sky should be, and I could feel my belly sink way down until it was there like love in the barn, and he smiled at me number three.

Everyone felt good for saving a life, even a horse life, maybe even Father, but Father was silent in the corner. He was angry at me for asking the soldiers to tea, and his chin was long to his chest and there was a puddle at his feet. Everybody was towel-drying except Father and me, because we had not enough towels.

LongGrasses sat in the armchair and said, *Good thing ya had heat lamps, guvnor*.

Father just nodded.

How was it under the water, Stevie? LongGrasses said.

Wet, Stevie said, and everybody laughed but not Father. He stared at Stevie and then looked away.

The living room is always dark with Father grim, but it was brighter now. I liked the green of the uniforms and even the red of Stevie's blood. But Stevie's head from the horse kick must have been very sore. The other soldiers were talking about how maybe the army truck should take Stevie straight off to hospital and not get dry, just get stitches, and not get tea, just come back later to see about the draft horse if she survives under the heat lamps. But Stevie said, *I'm okay, guys, it's just a scrape. I'd kill for a cuppa.*

The tea was good-tasting from long brewing, and we had biscuits for special visitors. I fetched them from the pantry. I tasted one to make sure they were fresh-tasting and I carried out the tray.

I was sneezing but I was very careful to sneeze away from the tray so as to have politeness like Stevie. Stevie said, *God bless you* in his funny funny way, and we were all quiet as we sipped on the tea, but I sneezed again three four five times, and HayKnife said, *You should change out of them wet clothes, love.*

Father put down his teacup very heavy on the saucer and it was very quiet.

Everyone, even the soldiers, looked at the floor, and the mantelpiece clock was ticking and Mammy's picture was staring down from the wall, and Fiachra when he was playing football, and the soldiers didn't see them but Father did. The long silence was longer and longer until Father called me over, *Come here, Katie*, and he stood me by the window and he took the long curtain in his hands. He turned me around and wrapped the curtain around me and he took my hair and started rubbing not tender but hard. Father is good; he was just wanting to dry my hair because I was shivering even in Stevie's jacket. From under the curtain I could see the soldiers and I could see most of all Stevie. He sipped from his tea and smiled at me, and Father

coughed real loud and the clock ticked some more until HayKnife said, *Here, gun, why don't you use my towel for her?*

Father said, *No, thanks.*

HayKnife said, *Go on, gun*, and he put the towel in a ball and made about to throw it.

Father said, *No!*

Stevie said, *Take it easy.*

Take it easy? HayKnife said.

Maybe you should all leave, Father said.

HayKnife changed his face and threw the towel on the ground at Father's feet, and HayKnife's cheeks were ouppuffing and he was breathing hard and he was saying, *Fat lot of fuckin thanks we get from your sort, mister.*

HayKnife was up on his feet now and pointing at Father, and the light shone off his boots well polished, and his face was twitching so the scar looked like it was cutting his face. LongGrasses and Stevie stood up from the chairs and were holding HayKnife back, but HayKnife was saying, *Risk our fuckin lives and save your fuckin horse and that's all the thanks we get, eh?*

Father held me very tight with the curtain wrapped around me, and he seemed scared and small and trembly. HayKnife was shouting lots and his face was red and scrunched. Stevie kept him back. Stevie's face was long and sad and I knew he knew because he kept looking at Mammy and Fiachra on the mantelpiece beside the ticking clock. Stevie dragged HayKnife out from the living room and at the kitchen door he let go. HayKnife turned over Stevie's shoulder one last time and looked at Father with his face all twisted, but Stevie grabbed him again and said, *Forget it, mate.*

Stevie took HayKnife out through the kitchen door and into the yard toward the army truck, and still the rain was coming down outside, and then the living room was quiet except for the clock.

I heard the engine of the army truck start.

Father stood away from me and put his head on the mantelpiece near the photos. I stayed at the window still in Stevie's jacket, which Stevie forgot and hasn't come back for yet.

I watched the truck as it went down the laneway, and the red lights on the green gate as it stopped and then turned into the road past where the draft horse was lifted from the river. I didn't hear anything then, just Father starting low noises in his throat, and I didn't turn from the window because I knew he would be angry for me to see him. Father was sniff sniffing. Maybe he forgot I was there. It was going right down into him and it came in big gulps like I never heard before. I stayed still, but Father was trembling big and fast. He took out a handkerchief and moved away from the mantelpiece. I didn't watch him because I knew he would be shamed for his crying.

The army truck was near out of sight, red lights on the hedgerows.

I heard the living room door shut, then the kitchen door, then the pantry door where Father keeps his hunting rifle, then the front door, and I heard the sounds of the clicker on the rifle and him still crying going farther and farther away until they were gone, and he must have been in the courtyard standing in the rain.

The clock on the mantelpiece sounded very loud, so did the rain, so did my breathing, and I looked out the window.

It was all near empty on the outside road, and the soldiers were going around the corner when I heard the sounds, not like bullets, more like pops one two three and the echo of them came loud to me.

The clock still ticked.

It ticked and ticked and ticked.

The curtain was wet around me, but I pulled it tight. I was scared, I couldn't move. I waited it seemed like forever.

When Father came in from outside I knew what it was. His face was like it was cut from a stone and he was not crying anymore and

he didn't even look at me, just went to sit in the chair. He picked up his teacup and it rattled in his fingers, so he put it down again and put his face in his hands and stayed like that. The ticking was gone from my mind, and all was quiet everywhere in the world, and I held the curtain like I held the sound of the bullets going into the draft horse's head, his favorite, in the barn, one two three, and I stood at the window in Stevie's jacket and looked and waited and still the rain kept coming down outside one two three one two three one two three and I was thinking oh, what a small sky for so much rain.

from Coming of Age
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