

# River to Run Away On, Trees to Run Between

**He** did not appear often.

When he did I ran inside.

I did not run with self-control.

I did not even have the courage to stand at my grandmother's gate. I stood behind the front door with heart in flux.

Had the sun turned black and flying monkeys swooped I could not have been more afraid.

As a nine-year-old boy in Ireland, somewhere nearby lived a child who had survived a freak accident when he was only two years old. He must have been eleven or twelve. He must have felt older than time.

Three times I'd seen him in boldest sunshine - afternoons that lured him outdoors, through the park where the rest of us played our games. For a few frozen moments I always felt as if I was the only one perceiving it. His face was not there. Eyes were the only recognisable feature: socket eyes, coming closer, blazing with anguish and simmering with something nameless.

Cunnigan. It was the only name I had heard for him. That he must have a first name never occurred to me, so unhuman was he in my blinded childish eyes.

Cunnigan was a blinding nightmare stalking daylight: something that, once seen, the mind fled and rejected.

I had a big mouth as a kid, but I didn't tell a single soul about my encounter with Cunnigan. I opened my mouth to tell my brother in the dark, and swallowed the words, unwilling to boost his growing theory that I made things up just to get attention.

**By** the river one Sunday Cunnigan's monstrous face stopped me cold but for once I did not run. Something held me - something other than paralysis. It was, I imagine, a sort of thrall, albeit appalled.

Shrouded by a belt of cattails, he turned and our eyes met and I averted mine and stared at the meandering current as if I'd never seen it before. I felt him take a good look at me. My fingers clenched into fists to signal I was not to be taken lightly. I stared into the woods. Felt him return his attention to the water. My head filled with images of

the tortures he'd inflicted on other kids.

I marched in his direction keeping my eyes on the grass between us. Two metres away I stopped and pretended to watch the stream again. He laid his stumpy fishing rod aside and shifted his crossed legs.

I sat abruptly. "Catch any carp?"

He did not answer me.

"Catch any eels?"

I picked at a stitch on my sneaker stripe. Maybe he couldn't speak. Or hear? I rifled through things I'd heard. On the road above and behind us traffic droned and swished.

"Any cod?"

"No eels, no carp, no cod." He sounded like anybody. "No mermaids. No messages in bottles." He spat at a Wine-Gums wrapper adrift like a tiny, gaudy raft, and missed, just. A large dragonfly hovering beside his line jerked downstream in zigzag.

There was something laboured about his breathing: now and again he would

suck at the air as if he were out of breath.

"Keep your eyes peeled." I assumed a sage tone. "Somebody caught a rainbow trout here only last week."

He hacked a cough. "Rainbow, yeah?"

"This long." I gestured a foot.

"What bait should I be using then?"

"Depends."

"On what?"

"Lots of things."

"Sure tell me one."

"I just - do whatever my brother says."

"Where's he?"

"At my cousins."

"Why aren't you?"

"They're all idiots."

"Sure maybe you're the idiot."

I looked at him and instantly averted my eyes. A hand squeezed my heart releasing sickening sorrow into my veins.

How to paint the face? How many times have we tried? A death mask? A movie

monster conjured by a mastermind? A canvass smeared and scorched with a thousand lifetimes misfortune?

I said the first thing I could think of.  
"Is it true you don't go to school?"

"Who needs to know?"

"What do you do all day?"

"Back-flips. What do you do?"

I looked again and looked away as quickly again. "Just . . . go to school."

He gave his line a restless tug.

"What else do you do all day?"

"Deep-sea diving. Ballet. Helicopter test-drive expert."

"Is that all?"

"Ride motorcycles record breaking speeds. French Cookery. Dabble in espionage, when I find the time, but who can find the time these days?"

"Espionage for who?"

He put his rod down and sprang to the balls of his toes and reached for the stream. "Top secret, that is. Classified, that is." He spoke with the same

swiftness and roughness as the housing estate boys in my class - boys who savaged the buns and milk and cheese sandwiches the school provided. But his words were not like their words.

I crouched over the stream and watched it fork through his fingers. "How old are you?" I said.

"One-hundred and thirty-seven."

The stream sparkled suddenly in a burst of sun.

He flicked water at me. "Blessed be the lame."

As I turned my face, a raucous call carried down from the top of the rise.

"BACK IN YOUR BOX, FREAK!"

From the path two kids on bikes watched. One was very slight with a small, tense smile. The other was fat and already kicking down on his pedals. Further back on the road a semi-trailer blew its horn as if to punctuate the incident.

"Do you know those kids?" I said.

He watched them go without moving a muscle. He looked as if he would remember them, as if he had all the time in the world to catch up with each of them.

"Do people do that often?" I said.

"No." He looked back at the current. "Never ever ever. Especially not just now. Go on home now. Go on." He waved me away.

I pulled a daisy out of the ground and threw it on the stream and looked back over my shoulder where the kids had been. Suddenly I wanted to crush them so badly I could feel it in every fibre.

He watched a knot in the stream. I began staring at it with him. It was about the size of a man's fist and looked as if it would never come undone.

I had the feeling, after a strange silence that stretched, and stretched, that he'd forgotten I was there.

Ten or fifteen paces back I did my best to look as if I was only going the same way by chance. The stream, twice as wide

here, moved without a sound, forking around rocks. He walked with a straight, proud back; eyes straight ahead. But his shoulders slumped and his arms hung heavy. He reminded me of somebody but I couldn't think who it was. He adjusted the bag on his back and saw me still following and sped up.

To our left was a high mesh fence. I ran a stick along the fence. By a factory wall two men in grey overalls smoked. The younger man saw Cunnigan and frowned, and stared, and nudged the other, who had already seen too, and was staring in the same wordless puzzled way. Cunnigan hurried again. I hurried to keep up. On the other side of the fence a dog on a chain ran at him snarling and saw the face and silenced. Cunnigan did something then which I remember as clearly as if it were yesterday. He broke into a song in Gaelic, in fullest cry. He sung to the sky, at the top of his lungs, and I had the feeling he was closing his eyes, because his course went slightly awry.

(Years later, in a Galway pub, I heard the song again. The singer gave me this translation.)

*Death without anointing*

*Death with bliss*

*Death with illumination*

*Death with consolation*

*Death without torment*

*Death without shadow*

*Death without sorrow*

*Death without dread*

*Death without death*

He stopped singing just as abruptly as he'd begun. I became excited at the thought of telling everybody about the day. A water rat whipped out of a patch of withered flowers and into the current under a weeping willow's languid arms.

Towards us walked a tall teenager with a red moustache and a girl laughing at something and pushing him towards the water. Gunning came closer. The girl's

fingers leapt to her lips. "Jesus what's happened to that boy's face?" Her boyfriend made no sound. Cunnigan ran. I kept up.

He crossed the river by leaping from jutting jagged stone to jutting jagged stone. There were seven in all and he seemed to know each as well as he knew his own hand. Then on the second to last he almost slipped.

Safely across he brushed his hands, and turned and faced me, tilting his head slightly - like he couldn't fathom or why I was still here or where he'd seen me previously.

He straightened up and stared without moving a muscle.

I stared back.

For the longest time we watched each other without a word or motion.

He held two fingers of one hand in an X. I shivered. He turned his back, took the lush rise and wended his way into the matrix of twisted trees.

My soles slapped down hard on the first rock. I leapt to the second. There was a bigger gap before the third. I lingered. A fat brown fish swept upstream! Spotted pale pink and white propelling itself with hefty strength! I swivelled to keep sight.

I bounced over the last three stones and scrambled the embankment. My gut-knot tightened as ventured inside Two-Woods. Shadowy, unwelcoming trees looked as if they did not wish to be disturbed. No track revealed his route. I heard a train hoot far away and had the crazy idea for one moment that he had orchestrated the sound. I forced myself to walk into the woods proper.

I stopped beside a pungent mound of ashes. It took me a moment to recognise that the six beer cans laid across the ashes had been shaped as a crucifix.

I called his name and was unsurprised when nothing came back.

I sat down on an old car tyre by the fire. The sun cut through the clouds

unexpectedly and the woods were illuminated. I felt unreasonably thirsty. When I got moving again, in short, sluggish steps, I was glancing over my shoulder every few steps - as if I were the one being followed.

I found myself in the clearing dividing the two plots of trees.

Cunnigan slouched against a trunk at the edge of the second plot. Something about his stance felt staged. I had the feeling he was afraid of me, somehow. But I couldn't say how or why. I paced up and down like I was only looking for something I'd lost. I picked up a sodden, stick coated in moss and lichen and gave it a couple of flips and it broke in half. I hurled the half I was left holding at a tree and watched it disintegrate mid-air. I kicked apart a toadstool and a stink rose.

He said, "You've run from me, you have."

"Why do people run?" I poked around the stump with my sneaker. A creepy

suspicion that he was planning something malicious slithered up my spine. I stared at him for the first time and for the first time thought I could see what he resembled most: the featurelessness and the socket eyes made him seem a lot like one of the Sand Warriors in *Star Wars*. Somehow it was easier to look at him knowing this.

He clasped a moth and kept his fist closed around it.

He threw it over his shoulder and it flapped away in a rudderless daze.

I said, "What's it like living in the cottages?"

He took one of his sharp inhalations and sat on his haunches. "Why?" He dragged a dirty, sodden clump of newspaper out of the earth. "What do you live in? Yellow submarine?"

"A house."

"What's mine?" He turned - peeled - one of the pages. "Bleeding gingerbread house?"

I saw the kid between two trees behind us - he ducked behind a trunk. He wore a green sleeveless parker.

"What does that kid want?" I tried mustering a casual tone but it came out scared. "Turn around and you'll see, there's a kid up there."

"What if I don't care?"

"Is he your friend?"

"Is he yours?"

Something gave the tree directly behind him a violent whack! We startled at the impact.

The kid stood like a cowboy, legs wide apart, brandishing a catapult the size of a squash racket. Then he saw the face staring at him. He stared as if he couldn't work out if he was imagining it. He turned, and walked away in measured steps. And ran for his life.

The ground seemed to shudder as we belted after him. He looked over his shoulder and saw Cunnigan and flung the catapult away and shrieked: in startled response I bellowed something wordless.

He jumped a log and headed down a slope and pulled up at the stream, and dipped the paw of one sneaker in, and retracted it.

"Go on," breathed Cunnigan. "What's a little water?"

"Maybe we should let him go," I panted.

The kid would not look at Cunnigan. But he kept him in his vision. A shiny crow landed on a crooked branch over his head as if it had come to watch the violence unfold. We all watched it twitching its beak-blade, gripping and shifting and settling onto the branch with its spindly clamp-claws. The kid's move was bold - he ran right at me ducking his head like a battering ram.

I sidestepped but extended my left leg. My conscience squirmed as he thumped the ground.

Cunnigan hauled him up twisting his right wrist between his shoulder blades. The kid thrashed and kicked and even tried a backwards head-butt. He wilted

and blubbered. Cunnigan slung him down in sudden disgust.

"Empty your pockets!" I barked.

The kid, to my shame and wonder, did as he was told.

There was half a small Highland Toffee with the sticky wrapper folded over, a cumbersome rust-brown key, a small Swiss Army knife and 12p.

Cunnigan weighed the knife in his palm.

"You'll get it back," I told the kid.

"I don't care about the bleeding knife." He swiped a tear. "I mean how? How did it ever happen?"

Cunnigan plunged the longest blade into the grass and pulled it free and blinked at a raindrop and I glimpsed his real face and looked at the kid to see if he had he seen it.

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