The Cursed Son

1

What nobody ever knew - the mystery nobody spoke of on Sundays after the match with a cool beer, the feeling that old ladies tried to shed come the evening, buried under the sheets; the heaviness, the horror that was stashed away behind every sentence, every move, covered up by soda pop tops, stained by the mustard from the hot-dogs sold at concerts; the intolerable fear, hushed up by families, school kids, bus drivers and prostitutes - what nobody could have known was what Thomas had felt when the greasy-haired police officer had thrown the handcuffs on him, squeezing his wrist so hard that blood had spurted onto his shirtsleeve.

That man, in his new uniform and reed boots, did not smile. He carried the two metal rings on his belt like baubles hanging from a Christmas-tree branch. Thomas was just another crook, a

kind of vulture that should have been crushed in the egg. *Bingo. I'm gonna send you to a place where you'll taste iron bars the whole day through. Believe me, if I'd had the chance, I'd have given you a hiding long ago.*

Nobody ever knew.

When Thomas's mother rushed outside, with her dress in disarray, they didn't really understand. She hollered louder than all the station sirens in the county. Old Puppa, sitting in his scruffy old armchair, did not budge an inch. His eyes remained shut and his mouth let out a funny kind of whining like the hinges on a saloon door. Puppa had known Mary since childhood. They had played billiards, found hide-outs to smoke their first cigarettes and eaten hamburgers with the other dolls from town. They had all rubbed up against each other on top of blankets smelling of deal wood and neat whiskey.

She cried out like a colt whose throat was being slit. When her voice had broken into a

whiney of despair, the old man's memories had risen up all of a sudden. They whispered and buzzed within him, like bees around a dandelion. While Mary was losing her wits in the middle of the high street, Puppa realized that he didn't know why Thomas had taken a wrong turn just when everything was smiling down on him. *There was no reason*, he told himself, *for this saga to end like this.*

Mary was taken to the station by three police officers.

O'Brien, the family doctor, waited for her. It was he who had looked after Thomas when he split open his brow. The doctor couldn't speak, he didn't yet know. Besides, none of the townsfolk knew exactly why Mary had cried out quite like that, but all were certain that a tragedy had occurred. But not O'Brien, or Puppa, or the police officers, not anybody knew how that poor woman had come to tear at her clothes in public. She was taken to the nearest hospital and only set foot in town a month later.

When she returned, they knew.

When she went into the grocer's in the center to buy red beans and garlic chicken breast, women lowered their eyes. Just as she took out her purse, the store manager took her hands in his and let her have what was in her basket. Mary thanked him, her words were strained, her tongue barely moved between her teeth. Howls longed to erupt. Beneath the stare of the customers, she clutched the wicker handle of her basket, turned on her heels and walked away. They knew why Mary would no longer be the woman they had known. But they did not ask any questions about Thomas. They all felt that he must not be spoken of, nor even his name uttered. At that moment, they wondered what a disappearance of this kind could do to mother's heart.

Until Mary's death, Puppa stayed slouched in his chair, a cigarette butt between his teeth, without so much as muttering a word. It was only

after the mother's funeral, one Thursday afternoon, that the old folk began to stop mincing their words. Puppa was the first to speak of Thomas. O'Brien, standing very straight in his dark suit, admitted, "I saw the body. Nobody should see their son in that state".

The others agreed with a nod of their heads. Mary's aunt, a woman with gaunt hands, served cheese buns from a copper dish.

From that day forth, not an hour passed without somebody mentioning the 'cursed son'. Each person stuck to their story: the women said that he was more handsome than a Chevrolet just out of the factory, the men spoke about his muscles and evenings where the liquor flowed freely. Around cups of tea and glasses of beer, during lunches in the sun and in front of fireplaces, young girls told Thomas's story, spicing up their accounts with gory details and filthy ideas. Their peers would burst out laughing. In the baseball club changing rooms, the players made up bad jokes about the

event, then undressed before resting their bodies under a trickle of barely warm water.

Nobody really knew what had happened. The shutters of the house remained closed. The wooden beams rotted away. No relative had come to open up the shack since the funeral. Little by little, the town swallowed up what was left of the Hogan family. Soon, Thomas's story became a market-town legend: a bad memory which scared the kids and sustained the conversations over shop counters.

No, nobody ever *truly* knew.

2

Around the property, tall fir trees stretched out, their branches swayed in the haze. They seemed to dance together. The smell of sap and damp bark escaped from their trunks, crept in among the weeds and embalmed the air like a sheet washed in warm water. Between the trees, clumps of ferns, a few wild raspberry bushes and hundreds of forest flowers grew over two or three hectares. The vegetation gave way to a dirt road, but the tall grass devoured what was left of the forest tracks. Here and there, you could see the old huts which had been used by the gamekeepers when the Hogan's land was still public property. Sometimes foxes would come from the breeze-swept dens nearby, to shelter from the wind.

The doe had claimed the hidden-away places where humans no longer went. The stags hardly ever showed themselves in the light of day. Since the property had been sold, hunting had been outlawed, but hunters reserved the right to help

themselves to game when the surrounding fields and forests did not allow them to feed their families. Meat was expensive, difficult to keep and even more so to cook. You had to let it simmer for hours before you might have a decent stew. The inhabitants reveled in those casseroles at traditional fetes, during which men and women would down liters of foul-tasting liquor. They guzzled piles of finely sliced potatoes, fried fish and beef shanks cooked to perfection. Men puffed on their cigarettes like men condemned to death on the morning of their execution. They coughed out black smoke and the smell mixed with the perspiration of the young girls who had come to dance and to find their future husbands.

The Hogans too took part in these kinds of fetes: they prepared the chard gratins, the salads, the tuna, the rhubarb pies and lemon cakes drizzled with maple syrup.

It was William Hogan who had bought the property. He was an only child, and his father had

left him the most part of his possessions, which included a fine collection of firearms, some of which were worth a good lot of cash. William had sold the rusty old guns, and put his money away to secure a happy future. His mother died seven years after her husband. Their son then sold the family home to a couple of young farmers: two newly-wed simpletons who were planning to have a hoard of kids before they could even afford to dress them up warm.

The market town property, with its fir trees, its tracks and its foxes which crossed the road at dawn, a baby rabbit in their jaws, had made him dream for years. When he was out on long walks he would stop in front of the door, gawping and frowning, swearing that he would live there. After his mother's death, torn apart by the usual sorrow of bereavement, he left the crimson rooms of his shack and bought the residence, which was no longer maintained by the local authorities. All his savings went into it, as well as the money from the firearms.

William moved in without a dime in his pocket. He very quickly asked the town's sergeant, who was an old friend of his father's, if he didn't have a job for him at the station. His work as chief sawyer wasn't enough for him to do everything up, or to maintain the land at the side of the high street. The sergeant, a man with a moustache shaped like a naked woman, employed him at the weekends. William Hogan set to work seven days a week, from six o'clock in the morning to five o'clock in the evening.

During the week, he transported logs, held together with thick ropes, to the huts where the machines were stored. At about one o'clock in the afternoon he would take his break, slumped against the truck tires with the other workers. Tired, he ate sandwiches made the night before with pieces of cooked turkey and a few grubby-looking salad leaves. He finished off his lunch with a warm beer and, in the summer, went back to work just as the sun burnt down on every square inch of skin. At about five o'clock, after stopping the machines,

parking the truck and cleaning the site kept for the cutting tools, he went back down, stopped at the grocer's to pick up his orders (meat, eggs and liquor), and then, heavy on his feet, headed out of town.

He closed the door behind him. For a few seconds, his whole body cried out for him to stop, to sell the property and go back to the center. With a shake of his head, William chased away those ill thoughts. He sniffed, took his shoes off and swung his jacket over the banister, which needed a good lick of paint.

Only then did he turn his eyes towards her. William looked at her with an intensity that only his wife could recognize. A blinding and violent light shot out from his pupils and suddenly struck her. So still, she looked like a poppy stem. William knew he could not have found better. Despite her tiredness, Mary held herself upright. She comforted him, made cat-fish and red bean stew, rubbed his shoulders and pulled the splinters out of his hands.

Mary kissed him; nobody had ever kissed him like that. She smelt good. Her fingers slid over him like logs tumbling down a waterfall, never to return. She took off his jacket when he came back at dawn, his eyes reddened, and his arms dangling. He shouted out against everything and anything, grabbed the objects around him and threw them against the walls. At those times, Mary had taken one or two slaps. But William knew just how to handle it. The next day, he would take her to the cinema, buy ice cream, jewelry and floral dresses. His wife forgot. Little by little, the fire would go out in her, and was relit as soon as he gazed on her. William had black, piercing, provocative eyes. His first conquered hearts remembered. "That boy has money, but he is stark raving crazy! What's more, his hands are filthy. And his eyes! My God! They'd even make a horse bolt", they said.

On the weekends he would get up early to be at the station before the first patrols arrived. He cleaned the floors, the desks, and filed the

documents which were ready and waiting on the wide concrete counter. The inspector would show up at eight o'clock. When the enquiry he was dealing with did not leave him time to go home for lunch, William would make him black coffee and order sandwiches for him. Sometimes, he was asked to answer calls. He had to reassure old ladies, comfort mothers and holler at little shits who played jokes and spat out insults that he would not have dreamed of at their age. Around six o'clock, the administrative staff came to the end of their shift. William continued filing green forms: a grim notebook full of all the on-going trials within a fifty kilometer radius of the town.

From time to time he would take a glance. And each time he found himself face to face with the photo of a dead kid, with his skull smashed up by a baseball bat, he could not help but hate all that surrounded him. Anger rose up to his nostrils, fat cream-colored tears escaped from under his eyelids and collapsed onto the tiles of the office floor. Despite the slaps that Mary had received when he

returned on such evenings, he was convinced that he could never be one of those men, of those whose names were registered on the forms. William loved his parents, he mourned them on Sundays. His wife was happy with him. The only thing missing was a kid to start a family worthy of the name. The Hogan son delved into his furthest memories to see what wrong he could have done. His actions, his outbursts and his struggles came back to him like old faithful dogs who return to their master after being abandoned. But he could not imagine what would have justified his name appearing, in bold letters, on a green form. Despite the mistakes he had made - a slap, poached game, a few broken speed limits - he found nothing to reproach himself for. He felt strong compared to those guys sent up hundreds of kilometers away from home. He had nothing in common with this type of individual. Little by little, his anger fell away.

On the weekends, he did not go directly home. On the way, he would stop for a drink with Puppa. This business with the forms was nothing other

than a bad memory, an unpleasant sensation that he tried to smother as he listened to Ed go on about how his wife farted in bed the first Sunday of the month. He didn't want anybody to speak to him about the trials; he didn't want anybody to ask him any questions. He wanted to bury his dark ideas, go home and lie down next to Mary's warm body, stroke the curve of her perfect hips and then sink into a dreamless sleep.

Mary and William had met early. They weren't in the same class, but the two teenagers lived in the same neighborhood, went out at the same time on Sundays and had lunch with friends at the same restaurants.

The young girl had worked as a secretary at the station, and then had found a job at the private school in Leeno. She looked after the little ones, cleaned the classrooms, and kept an eye on the schoolyard when the kids started to get over excited.

She had flirted with William at a dance which

had been given in honor of Doctor O'Brien, who had cured a kid with yellow fever. William was twenty five years old; she was a little younger. The Hogan son already lugged a hell of a reputation around with him. Still, he invited her to dance and whispered words of tenderness which swirled against her ears. He bought her beer and took her for a walk around the corn fields. That was all he needed to do. That man, people said, had more money than any worker could earn in a lifetime. William was broad-shouldered, worked hard, and never went with whores: a good catch.

Two months later, they were married in the church on Relindes Street. Mary packed her bags and moved into the house in the market town.

She no longer went to work in the school. Like William's mother, she stayed indoors, washing sheets, ironing shirts and hanging out the washing on a line stretched between two fir trees behind the house. In the evenings, when she got into bed,

William's hands quickly ran over her breasts. Sometimes, while he went to sleep, she stayed awake; her eyes wide open, no longer knowing if the man by her side loved her as on the first day, if he loved her at all. Again she saw his face as it was when they had made love the first time. She relived each walk, remembered each sweet word uttered to draw her to his chest. Little by little, those kinds of memories became shrouded in a thick fog. And suddenly, Mary hated that place. Once, she even made up her mind to take back her job at the school. Next to her, William was snoring more loudly than a tractor revving up. She didn't want to wake him. By early morning, her courage had disappeared and, as he got ready, his saddle-bag over his shoulder, she thought *It's better this way*. Mary was able to smother her sorrow. After closing the door behind him, she watched him leave, her forehead pressed against the windowpane. Then, without hesitating any longer, she rushed upstairs. The bedroom, plunged into the shadows, smelt of dry wood and bad whisky.

3

Thomas was born three years later.

William was working just as hard. Harsh lines dug themselves into his forehead and around his eyes. The fire diminished and tiredness grew in him. The house was well-kept. The old forest tracks had been cleared. At the beginning of fall, the workmen's huts were demolished. He spent his weekends at the station. The sergeants respected him: he worked more than two police officers put together. He was no longer in charge of the green forms; he had been posted to the family claims office. All he had to do was wrap thin elasticated cord around large cardboard packages and put them into the correct pigeon hole. The walls were covered with big deal wood boxes, boxes which had been ordered from him years earlier. Each one carried a number engraved with a knife between the handle (secured with a metal screw) and the base (lined with a protective resin film). William no longer thought about the trial forms. It was July, a

green-eyed widow, who was in charge of them. She never read the conviction lists. Photos of murders did not interest her. July wore a grey uniform that showed off her wide hips and squashed her breasts. William was sometimes surprised to find himself staring at them when he left the office at closing time. July had a deep, monotone voice. She spoke little, moved a lot and nobody ever asked her to dinner. July lived in a small apartment above the Laundromat, on the third block, opposite the lawyer's office.

The winter was short. Mary's child slept in the room adjacent to his parents. William pinched his cheek before leaving for work, and Mary sang Loretta Lynn songs to him, taking care to support his head on the warm blanket that she held against her bosom. For a new-born, Thomas cried very little and suckled no more than he should have. The couple had named him after his great grandfather: a man hard as nails, who fleeced his friends at cards and downed liters of bourbon without getting

a hangover the next day.

Another mouth to feed. Even if William was delighted at the idea of having a son with his name and his hair color, he had a feeling that the kid would never have the strength to do all that he, William Hogan, had accomplished. He imagined Thomas behind a desk, tapping away on some damned machine from the State instead of in the forest, in thirty degrees, pulling down pine trunks with his old classmates. Thomas slept sixteen hours a day and kept his eyes shut when his father showed him pictures drawn in his old school exercise book. Mary, for her part, had not changed her habits: each morning she would watch her husband leave and then busy herself in the house. She stopped what she was doing when Thomas awoke upstairs.

In the late afternoon, she would take him out onto the veranda, show him the pine trees, the raspberry bushes, and the fox tracks in the sand around the vegetable patch. Then she would sit in her armchair, the one that William had salvaged

after his mother's death, and rock the child, murmuring the lyrics from old songs, *The Coal Miner's Daughter*, *Green Grass of Home*, *The Hobo Song*, until Thomas fell asleep. She stayed in her chair then, and for a moment forgot about making the beds, keeping an eye out, polishing the staircase. She dozed, rocking back and forth. And suddenly, broken from her day dream, she got up, went upstairs and put the infant in his tailor-made crib. She no longer knew if she cursed this place or if, in the end, she had dissolved into it, like an invisible woman who had taken on the look of the furniture. William arrived, his arms laden with shopping, and as dirty as a colony of cockroaches. He stared at her, then went up to pinch his son's cheek. The saw-dust left a nasty black mark on his skin, which Mary hurried to rub off as soon as he turned his back.

The child stammered his first words late.

He looked at things inquisitively, but his lips didn't move. Simply observing objects seemed to be

enough. Sometimes, Mary would try to teach him the basic vowel sounds, but Thomas didn't care. He pointed at the hares which rushed about in front of the veranda and opened his eyes wide when a deer came near the vegetable patch. Every so often, wobbling on his legs, he would go to pick raspberries from the bushes that grew at the edge of the dirt track. Mary watched over him, she showed him photos of her parents, comics to learn to memorize the alphabet and playing cards with pictures of animals printed on them. Thomas smiled as if his jaws would unhinge, but until his sixteenth month he did not say a word. His mother was worried. She held him against her and repeated endlessly, "Mama, Mama", as if her strength of will could untie her child's tongue.

William said nothing. He came home in the evenings with ever dirtier and more disgusting hands. He sent his work boots flying across the hall and waited until Mary took off his jacket. At the beginning, he seemed concerned and asked, "Has the little one spoken today?". But the more time

passed, the more William seemed to close in on himself like a shell rotten at the core. He still went up to see his son, but Thomas's silence confirmed his first thought: this child would never be strong enough to take charge of the forest tracks. In town, nobody could say, "Look, there's the Hogan son. He's so strong, the spitting image of his father". Thomas was too puny, too much of a dreamer to maintain the property and take care of his parents in their old age. Although Mary kept telling him that a child of two could change, William did not believe it. He looked at the little pink head. It was a puppet he had no wish to play with. Sometimes, he caught himself thinking that his only son would be the family doctor or lawyer; but when he saw O'Brien or Samson, he realized that those men emanated incredible physical and mental strength. Although their professions distanced them from other folk, they themselves were made of the same ilk. They had a pure and spotless nature.

One day, as Mary was hanging out the washing

in the sun, a very thin, brown snake, long as a chestnut leaf, slid under the wooden steps that led from the porch to the garden. It curled itself around the main pillar, just opposite the stool from where the infant was watching his mother. With a smooth, slow movement, the snake slid down the pine slats and then onto the foot of the stool. Thomas spotted the animal. He fixed his sight on its skin; it seemed he had never seen anything so beautiful in all his short life. Then, just as the reptile gracefully looped itself around a left foot, Thomas started to laugh, shouting "Mama" and pointing to the snake. Surprised, Mary turned her head, dropped her wide, woven basket and ran to the veranda. She was just in time to grab Thomas before the snake had completely wound its way to the top of the stool and, while she was suffocating in panic, Thomas smiled and repeated "Mama, Mama" beneath the dumbfounded stare of his mother.

She carried the child to his room, put him down in front of his multi-colored wood blocks,

and then went downstairs to look for a poker to kill the animal. When she returned to the porch, the snake had disappeared. She walked around the house; she couldn't hear it slithering in the tall grass.

William came home late. At the table, when he asked them how their day had been, Thomas burst out with a hearty laugh and Mary joyfully announced that their son had at last spoken his first word.

From this day forward, she avoided leaving her child alone on the veranda. Thomas talked more and more, sometimes too much, as if he were trying to make up for his tardiness. His father was delighted, his son seemed inquisitive. Little by little, a faint light shone through. It was like the light that William radiated when Mary had met him. Although Thomas seemed weak for his age, he learned the names of things quickly. Soon, he accompanied his mother when she went to check if

anybody had set baby rabbit traps out on the tracks. This kind of event occurred sometimes. At night, poachers managed to find the paths that led to the burrows and would leave sharpened blades in the bushes. William hunted very little. In winter, he might sometimes bring back a rabbit or two, but his wife and son hated surprises of this kind. When he had reached home, William had sometimes found himself face to face with hunters on his own land. Nowadays, those who came did not take any risks. They would set their traps at night and return at dawn to collect their prey.

Mary did not see them, but she knew where to look. The young woman knew the property better than anyone. In the evening, after dinner, the couple had often taken walks on their land.

Since Thomas's birth, Mary Hogan wandered the length and breadth of the tracks with her son, who was delighted when he unearthed bunches of wild fruits after hours of intensive searching. He

swallowed the berries before settling into his mother's skirts and staining her floral dress with blackcurrant juice. After a good hour's walk, they would turn back and find William asleep on the veranda, a bottle of beer balancing on his belly and his leather hat lowered over his puffy eyes. Mary put Thomas to bed, closed the shutters and took off her dress. Then she stood in front of the mirror in the double bedroom. She looked at her white, warm body, wondering if William liked the shape of her hips and the dark furrow her breasts made just under her neck. When she heard her husband climbing the stairs, she quickly threw on a long night gown and slid under the covers. Worn out, she buried herself in her pillows in order never to come out again. William took off his clothes, glanced at his wife's buttocks and pressed himself against her, groaning words Mary did not want to hear.