Reassurance

Nought Rael

My mother left the hall light on. I could see it from the corner, a narrow yellow piece of the evening, and sometimes I stopped there until I was cold. In a few steps I should have to be her son again. All afternoon I had managed without crying. She would open the door, she would say, "There you are," and the careful arrangement of my face would come to nothing.

There I was. The same boy who had been shoved against a wall, who had heard his name repeated in a voice so unlike a name that he looked behind him before he answered. At home the sound was familiar. My father called it from another room because he needed someone to hold the end of a shelf. I went to him, still wearing my coat, and held the wood level. He moved it a little. "There. Keep it just there." We stood like that while he found the screw.

Mother, you asked why I had come home by the long road. I told you I liked the walk. You looked at my shoes. You had just washed the kitchen floor and I had brought the road in with me. I remember this because I am tempted, when I think of you, to remove everything except tenderness. But you were tired; you had a floor to keep clean; and you loved me while telling me to take my shoes off. I was allowed to be a nuisance without becoming unwanted.

I had no such confidence elsewhere. There were boys who waited for me, and others who watched them waiting. Once my books were passed along a row of desks, each person taking one before I could reach it. Someone told me to ask properly. I did. They wanted me to ask again. The room grew very large. I remember the sunlight falling across a page which none of them was reading.

Afterward I understood that some of the people in that room had done nothing. At the time, their doing nothing had filled the room. Even the person who looked away seemed to have somewhere to go which was closed to me. I called this the world. The world hated me. It was

waiting outside in the morning, and when my father asked whether I had everything, I said yes, though I had been looking for something I could not put in my bag.

He came with me after the afternoon I returned without my books. He spoke to the teacher; I waited in the passage, wishing he would speak more quietly, wishing he would never stop. On the walk back he asked what had happened before they took them. I thought he was about to discover that I deserved it. He listened to the whole account. Then he said we would go again if we needed to. I had wanted him to make the next morning disappear. Instead he ironed my shirt that night because my mother had fallen asleep in her chair.

Father, I watched you press the sleeves flat. You had never learned the easy movement my mother made with the iron. You turned the shirt about, frowned at a crease, began again. I should like to say that I understood you then. I mostly wished that you were someone who could frighten them. You held the shirt up to see whether you had spoiled it. I can still feel the shame of having wanted a different father while you stood there doing that for me.

Their love did not prevent the morning. The shirt was clean; I went out in it. At the corner I began to listen for footsteps. There are kinds of fear which make the body older than the child inside it. My shoulders knew what to do before I had seen anyone. When nothing happened, I did not call that safety. I called it a day on which nothing had happened yet.

And in the evening there would be the question about food. Had I eaten? How could she ask me that, when I had spent the day trying to discover whether I ought to exist? But she was putting a plate on the table, and the question required me to sit down. There was something to eat which I liked. She remembered that I disliked the skin on the milk. Such a small knowledge of me, kept through all that vast ignorance outside.

I sometimes wanted them to explain why they loved me. I did not ask. I was afraid that an explanation would contain a mistake, some quality they had attributed to me which I could not find when I was alone. My father thought me patient. I knew the things I imagined doing. My

mother thought me gentle. I knew how carefully I watched for someone weaker when I could no longer bear being weak. If they loved only what they believed I was, I would have to keep the rest away from them.

There was a younger boy whose way of speaking I copied. I made two others laugh. For the remainder of that afternoon I was almost happy. At supper I repeated the imitation, hoping to bring the laughter home. My mother put down her fork. "Don't do that to him." She sounded disappointed, and I began to tell her what had been done to me. She let me finish. Her answer was the same.

I went upstairs without eating much. Later my father knocked and asked whether I wanted the rest. I said I did not. He waited, then told me where it was. No one came to announce that I was a good boy after all. When I went down, my mother was mending something beneath the lamp. She moved her sewing so I could sit beside her. I had been wrong, and there was still room.

I return to that evening more often now. There was no great reconciliation. I do not remember what I said to the younger boy afterward, and I will not give my childhood a virtue merely because I have learned to regret it. What remains clear is the space beside my mother, her bent head, the thread she could not get through the eye. I took the needle. She brought the lamp nearer.

Why did I believe contempt so readily? Love had years of evidence. Hatred could arrive with a sentence and be believed at once. I have asked this of myself often, without finding an answer that holds through a bad evening. Sometimes I suspect that I thought the cruel person more disinterested. He owed me nothing; surely he saw me clearly. My parents were compromised by affection. Yet those boys had wanted their laughter. It took me years to notice that they too had wanted something.

I grew up. The words changed, and there were exclusions for which no teacher could be fetched. I learned to leave gatherings before anyone could make it evident that I was not

needed. Then I went home and was asked why I never stayed out. I was impatient with the question. They could not understand everything. They were still my parents, with their own days behind them, and I had begun to expect an impossible understanding from the two people who had never required it before loving me.

I have seen my father asleep with his mouth open, his hand still resting on the arm of the chair. My mother wakes him because his neck will hurt. He says he was awake. They have had this disagreement for as long as I can remember. Listening from the doorway, I am overtaken by a fear of the years ahead which I cannot bear to explain to either of them. I want to preserve the whole foolish conversation. I want him to deny being asleep again tomorrow.

They cannot give me that tomorrow. I know. Nor have I become a man who walks easily into a room. Some evenings I still reach the corner and stop. The light is on. My mother opens the door before I have worked out what to tell her. "There you are," she says. Behind her my father asks if that is me. I answer him, and step inside.