

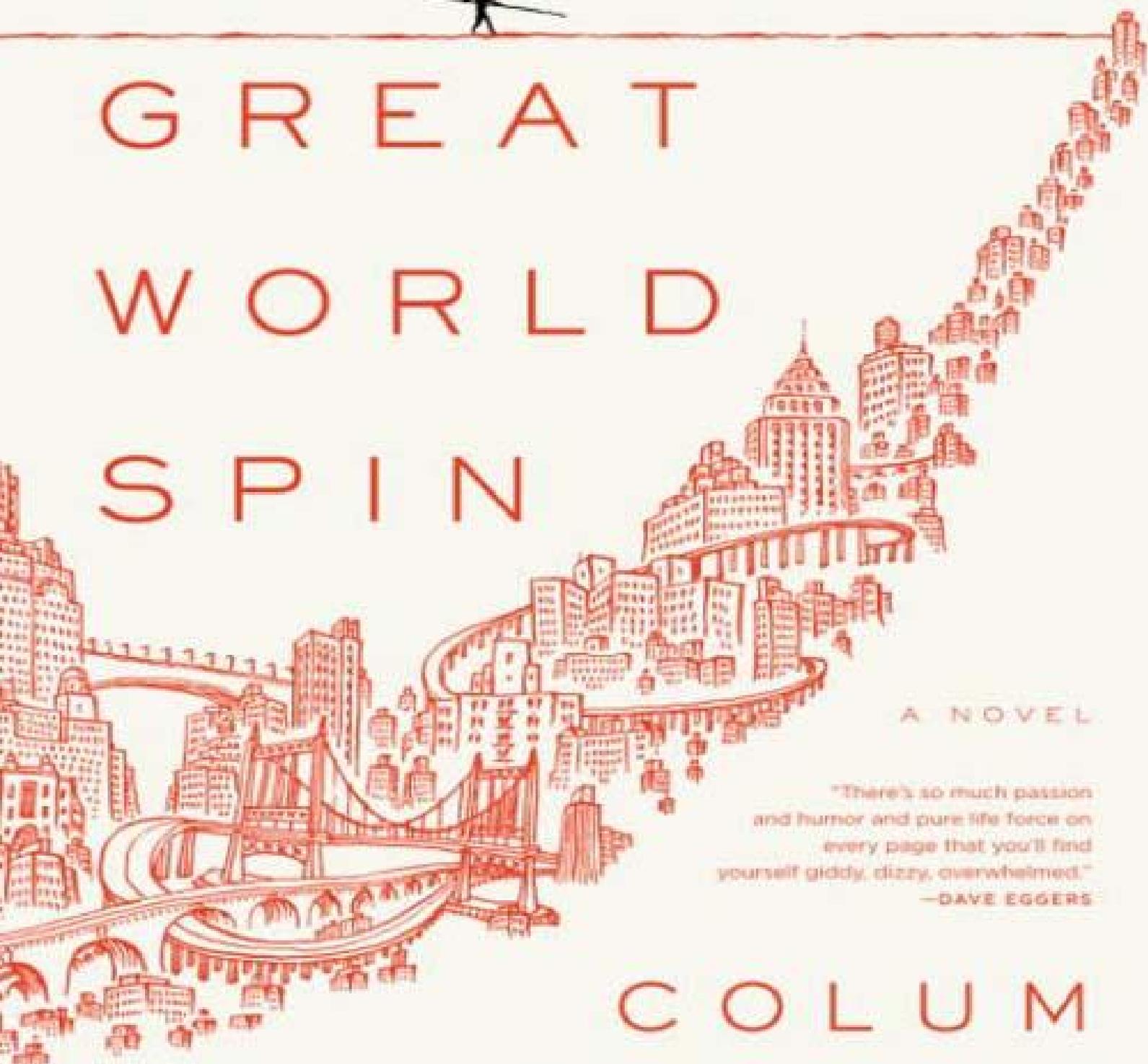
LET THE



GREAT

WORLD

SPIN



A NOVEL

"There's so much passion and humor and pure life force on every page that you'll find yourself giddy, dizzy, overwhelmed."

—DAVE EGGERS

COLUM
MCCANN

AUTHOR OF ZOLI AND DANCER

— Synopsis —

Let the Great World Spin

2009 National Book Award Winner
Amazon.com's "Book of the Year"
Oprah.com's "Books You Can't Put Down"
Summer Reading Selection

In the dawning light of a late-summer morning, the people of lower Manhattan stand hushed, staring up in disbelief at the Twin Towers. It is August 1974, and a mysterious tightrope walker is running, dancing, leaping between the towers, suspended a quarter mile above the ground. In the streets below, a slew of ordinary lives become extraordinary in bestselling novelist Colum McCann's stunningly intricate portrait of a city and its people.

Let the Great World Spin is the critically acclaimed author's most ambitious novel yet: a dazzlingly rich vision of the pain, loveliness, mystery, and promise of New York City in the 1970s.

Corrigan, a radical young Irish monk, struggles with his own demons as he lives among the prostitutes in the middle of the burning Bronx. A group of mothers gather in a Park Avenue apartment to mourn their sons who died in Vietnam, only to discover just how much divides them even in grief. A young artist finds herself at the scene of a hit-and-run that sends her own

life careening sideways. Tillie, a thirty-eight-year-old grandmother, turns tricks alongside her teenage daughter, determined not only to take care of her family but to prove her own worth.

Elegantly weaving together these and other seemingly disparate lives, McCann's powerful allegory comes alive in the unforgettable voices of the city's people, unexpectedly drawn together by hope, beauty, and the "artistic crime of the century." A sweeping and radical social novel, *Let the Great World Spin* captures the spirit of America in a time of transition, extraordinary promise, and, in hindsight, heartbreaking innocence. Hailed as a "fiercely original talent" (*San Francisco Chronicle*), award-winning novelist McCann has delivered a triumphantly American masterpiece that awakens in us a sense of what the novel can achieve, confront, and even heal.

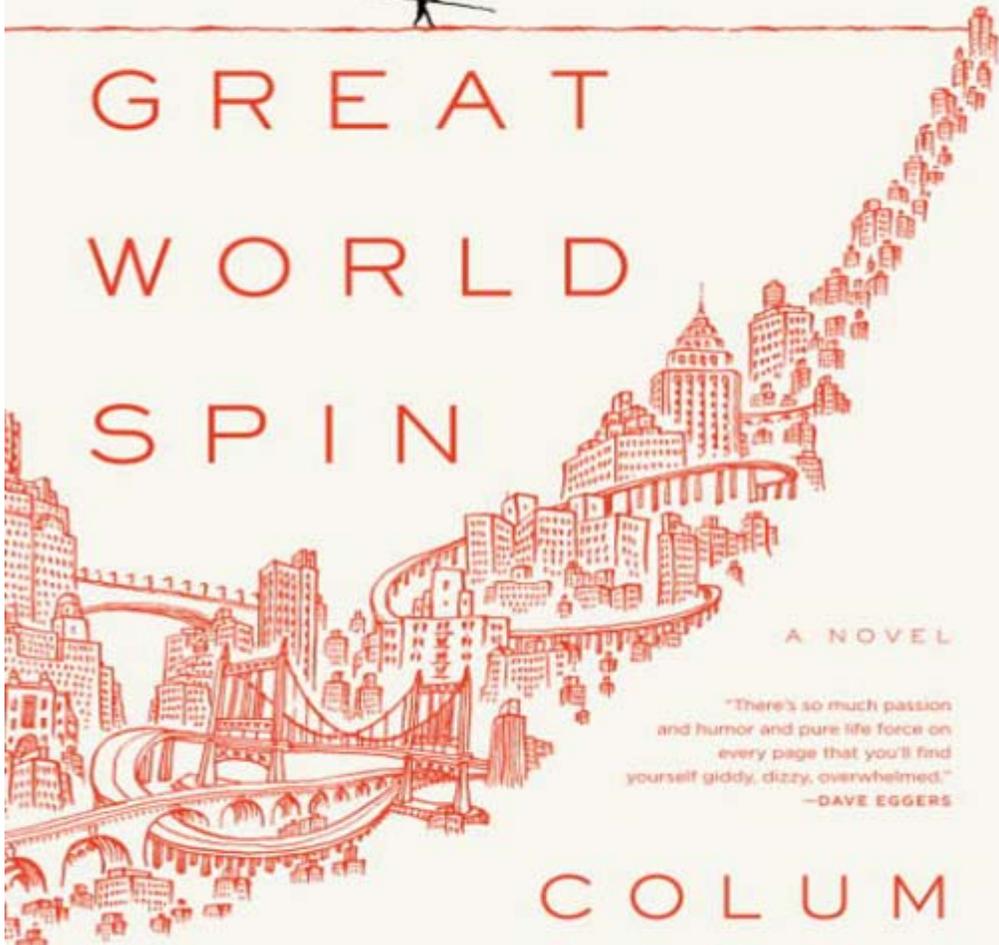
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AUTHOR OF **ZOLI** AND **DANCER**

LET THE GREAT WORLD SPIN

A Novel by

Colum McCann

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*For John, Frank, and Jim.
And, of course, Allison.*

*“All the lives we could live,
all the people we will never know,
never will be,
they are everywhere.
That is what the world is.”*

—Aleksandar Hemon,
THE LAZARUS PROJECT

LET THE GREAT WORLD SPIN

THOSE WHO SAW HIM HUSHED. On Church Street. Liberty. Cortlandt. West Street. Fulton. Vesey. It was a silence that heard itself, awful and beautiful. Some thought at first that it must have been a trick of the light, something to do with the weather, an accident of shadowfall. Others figured it might be the perfect city joke—stand around and point upward, until people gathered, tilted their heads, nodded, affirmed, until all were staring upward at nothing at all, like waiting for the end of a Lenny Bruce gag. But the longer they watched, the surer they were. He stood at the very edge of the building, shaped dark against the gray of the morning. A window washer maybe. Or a construction worker. Or a jumper.

Up there, at the height of a hundred and ten stories, utterly still, a dark toy against the cloudy sky.

He could only be seen at certain angles so that the watchers had to pause at street corners, find a gap between buildings, or meander from the shadows to get a view unobstructed by cornicework, gargoyles, balustrades, roof edges. None of them had yet made sense of the line strung at his feet from one tower to the other. Rather, it was the man-shape that held them there, their necks craned, torn between the promise of doom and the disappointment of the ordinary.

It was the dilemma of the watchers: they didn't want to wait around for nothing at all, some idiot standing on the precipice of the towers, but they didn't want to miss the moment either, if he slipped, or got arrested, or dove, arms stretched.

Around the watchers, the city still made its everyday noises. Car horns. Garbage trucks. Ferry whistles. The thrum of the subway. The M22 bus pulled in against the sidewalk, braked, sighed down into a pothole. A flying chocolate wrapper touched against a fire hydrant. Taxi doors slammed. Bits

of trash sparred in the darkest reaches of the alleyways. Sneakers found their sweetspots. The leather of briefcases rubbed against trouserlegs. A few umbrella tips clinked against the pavement. Revolving doors pushed quarters of conversation out into the street.

But the watchers could have taken all the sounds and smashed them down into a single noise and still they wouldn't have heard much at all: even when they cursed, it was done quietly, reverently.

They found themselves in small groups together beside the traffic lights on the corner of Church and Dey; gathered under the awning of Sam's barbershop; in the doorway of Charlie's Audio; a tight little theater of men and women against the railings of St. Paul's Chapel; elbowing for space at the windows of the Woolworth Building. Lawyers. Elevator operators. Doctors. Cleaners. Prep chefs. Diamond merchants. Fish sellers. Sad-jeaned whores. All of them reassured by the presence of one another. Stenographers. Traders. Deliveryboys. Sandwichboard men. Cardsharks. Con Ed. Ma Bell. Wall Street. A locksmith in his van on the corner of Dey and Broadway. A bike messenger lounging against a lamppost on West. A red-faced rummy out looking for an early-morning pour.

From the Staten Island Ferry they glimpsed him. From the meatpacking warehouses on the West Side. From the new high-rises in Battery Park. From the breakfast carts down on Broadway. From the plaza below. From the towers themselves.

Sure, there were some who ignored the fuss, who didn't want to be bothered. It was seven forty-seven in the morning and they were too jacked up for anything but a desk, a pen, a telephone. Up they came from the subway stations, from limousines, off city buses, crossing the street at a clip, refusing the prospect of a gawk. Another day, another dolor. But as they passed the little clumps of commotion they began to slow down. Some stopped altogether, shrugged, turned nonchalantly, walked to the corner, bumped up against the watchers, went to the tips of their toes, gazed over the crowd, and then introduced themselves with a *Wow* or a *Gee-whiz* or a *Jesus H. Christ*.

The man above remained rigid, and yet his mystery was mobile. He stood beyond the railing of the observation deck of the south tower—at any

moment he might just take off.

Below him, a single pigeon swooped down from the top floor of the Federal Office Building, as if anticipating the fall. The movement caught the eyes of some watchers and they followed the gray flap against the small of the standing man. The bird shot from one eave to another, and it was then the watchers noticed that they had been joined by others at the windows of offices, where blinds were being lifted and a few glass panes labored upward. All that could be seen was a pair of elbows or the end of a shirtsleeve, or an arm garter, but then it was joined by a head, or an odd-looking pair of hands above it, lifting the frame even higher. In the windows of nearby skyscrapers, figures came to look out—men in shirtsleeves and women in bright blouses, wavering in the glass like fun-house apparitions.

Higher still, a weather helicopter executed a dipping turn over the Hudson—a curtsy to the fact that the summer day was going to be cloudy and cool anyway—and the rotors beat a rhythm over the warehouses of the West Side. At first the helicopter looked lopsided in its advance, and a small side window was slid open as if the machine were looking for air. A lens appeared in the open window. It caught a brief flash of light. After a moment the helicopter corrected beautifully and spun across the expanse.

Some cops on the West Side Highway switched on their misery lights, swerved fast off the exit ramps, making the morning all the more magnetic.

A charge entered the air all around the watchers and—now that the day had been made official by sirens—there was a chatter among them, their balance set on edge, their calm fading, and they turned to one another and began to speculate, would he jump, would he fall, would he tiptoe along the ledge, did he work there, was he solitary, was he a decoy, was he wearing a uniform, did anyone have binoculars? Perfect strangers touched one another on the elbows. Swearwords went between them, and whispers that there'd been a botched robbery, that he was some sort of cat burglar, that he'd taken hostages, he was an Arab, a Jew, a Cypriot, an IRA man, that he was really just a publicity stunt, a corporate scam, *Drink more Coca-Cola, Eat more Fritos, Smoke more Parliaments, Spray more Lysol, Love more Jesus*. Or that he was a protester and he was going to hang a slogan, he would slide it from the towerledge, leave it there to flutter in the breeze, like some giant

piece of sky laundry—NIXON OUT NOW! REMEMBER 'NAM, SAM! INDEPENDENCE FOR INDOCHINA! and then some-one said that maybe he was a hang glider or a parachutist, and all the others laughed, but they were perplexed by the cable at his feet, and the rumors began again, a collision of curse and whisper, augmented by an increase in sirens, which got their hearts pumping even more, and the helicopter found a purchase near the west side of the towers, while down in the foyer of the World Trade Center the cops were sprinting across the marble floor, and the undercover were whipping out badges from beneath their shirts, and the fire trucks were pulling into the plaza, and the redblue dazzled the glass, and a flatbed truck arrived with a cherry picker, its fat wheels bouncing over the curb, and someone laughed as the picker kiltered sideways, the driver looking up, as if the basket might reach all that sad huge way, and the security guards were shouting into their walkie-talkies, and the whole August morning was blown wide open, and the watchers stood rooted, there was no going anywhere for a while, the voices rose to a crescendo, all sorts of accents, a babel, until a small redheaded man in the Home Title Guarantee Company on Church Street lifted the sash of his office window, placed his elbows on the sill, took a deep breath, leaned out, and roared into the distance: Do it, asshole!

There was a dip before the laughter, a second before it sank in among the watchers, a reverence for the man's irreverence, because secretly that's what so many of them felt—Do it, for chrissake! Do it!—and then a torrent of chatter was released, a call-and-response, and it seemed to ripple all the way from the windowsill down to the sidewalk and along the cracked pavement to the corner of Fulton, down the block along Broadway, where it zigzagged down John, hooked around to Nassau, and went on, a domino line of laughter, but with an edge to it, a longing, an awe, and many of the watchers realized with a shiver that no matter what they said, they really wanted to witness a great fall, see someone arc downward all that distance, to disappear from the sight line, flail, smash to the ground, and give the Wednesday an electricity, a meaning, that all they needed to become a family was one millisecond of slippage, while the others—those who wanted him to stay, to hold the line, to become the brink, but no farther—

felt viable now with disgust for the shouters: they wanted the man to save himself, step backward into the arms of the cops instead of the sky.

They were jazzed now.

Pumped.

The lines were drawn.

Do it, asshole!

Don't do it!

Way above there was a movement. In the dark clothing his every twitch counted. He folded over, a half-thing, bent, as if examining his shoes, like a pencil mark, most of which had been erased. The posture of a diver. And then they saw it. The watchers stood, silent. Even those who had wanted the man to jump felt the air knocked out. They drew back and moaned.

A body was sailing out into the middle of the air.

He was gone. He'd done it. Some blessed themselves. Closed their eyes. Waited for the thump. The body twirled and caught and flipped, thrown around by the wind.

Then a shout sounded across the watchers, a woman's voice: God, oh God, it's a shirt, it's just a shirt.

It was falling, falling, falling, yes, a sweatshirt, fluttering, and then their eyes left the clothing in midair, because high above the man had unfolded upward from his crouch, and a new hush settled over the cops above and the watchers below, a rush of emotion rippling among them, because the man had arisen from the bend holding a long thin bar in his hands, jiggling it, testing its weight, bobbing it up and down in the air, a long black bar, so pliable that the ends swayed, and his gaze was fixed on the far tower, still wrapped in scaffolding, like a wounded thing waiting to be reached, and now the cable at his feet made sense to everyone, and whatever else it was there would be no chance they could pull away now, no morning coffee, no conference room cigarette, no nonchalant carpet shuffle; the waiting had been made magical, and they watched as he lifted one dark-slippered foot, like a man about to enter warm gray water.

The watchers below pulled in their breath all at once. The air felt suddenly shared. The man above was a word they seemed to know, though they had not heard it before.

Out he went.

ALL RESPECTS TO HEAVEN, I LIKE IT HERE

ONE OF THE MANY THINGS my brother, Corrigan, and I loved about our mother was that she was a fine musician. She kept a small radio on top of the Steinway in the living room of our house in Dublin and on Sunday afternoons, after scanning whatever stations we could find, Radio Éireann or BBC, she raised the lacquered wing of the piano, spread her dress out at the wooden stool, and tried to copy the piece through from memory: jazz riffs and Irish ballads and, if we found the right station, old Hoagy Carmichael tunes. Our mother played with a natural touch, even though she suffered from a hand which she had broken many times. We never knew the origin of the break: it was something left in silence. When she finished playing she would lightly rub the back of her wrist. I used to think of the notes still trilling through the bones, as if they could skip from one to the other, over the breakage. I can still after all these years sit in the museum of those afternoons and recall the light spilling across the carpet. At times our mother put her arms around us both, and then guided our hands so we could clang down hard on the keys.

It is not fashionable anymore, I suppose, to have a regard for one's mother in the way my brother and I had then, in the mid-1950s, when the noise outside the window was mostly wind and sea chime. One looks for the chink in the armor, the leg of the piano stool shorter than the other, the sadness that would detach us from her, but the truth is we enjoyed each other, all three of us, and never so evidently as those Sundays when the rain fell gray over Dublin Bay and the squalls blew fresh against the windowpane.

Our house in Sandymount looked out to the bay. We had a short driveway full of weeds, a square of lawn, a black ironwork fence. If we crossed the road we could stand on the curved seawall and look a good distance across

the bay. A bunch of palm trees grew at the end of the road. They stood, smaller and more stunted than palms elsewhere, but exotic nonetheless, as if invited to come watch the Dublin rain. Corrigan sat on the wall, banging his heels and looking over the flat strand to the water. I should have known even then that the sea was written in him, that there would be some sort of leaving. The tide crept in and the water swelled at his feet. In the evenings he walked up the road past the Martello Tower to the abandoned public baths, where he balanced on top of the seawall, arms held wide.

On weekend mornings we strolled with our mother, ankle-deep in the low tide, and looked back to see the row of houses, the tower, and the little scarves of smoke coming up from the chimneys. Two enormous red and white power station chimneys broke the horizon to the east, but the rest was a gentle curve, with gulls on the air, the mail boats out of Dun Laoghaire, the scud of clouds on the horizon. When the tide was out, the stretch of sand was corrugated and sometimes it was possible to walk a quarter-mile among isolated waterpools and bits of old refuse, long shaver shells, bedstead pipes.

Dublin Bay was a slow heaving thing, like the city it horseshoed, but it could turn without warning. Every now and then the water smashed up against the wall in a storm. The sea, having arrived, stayed. Salt crusted the windows of our house. The knocker on the door was rusted red.

When the weather blew foul, we sat on the stairs, Corrigan and I. Our father, a physicist, had left us years before. A check, postmarked in London, arrived through the letter box once a week. Never a note, just a check, drawn on a bank in Oxford. It spun in the air as it fell. We ran to bring it to our mother. She slipped the envelope under a flowerpot on the kitchen windowsill and the next day it was gone. Nothing more was ever said.

The only other sign of our father was a wardrobe full of his old suits and trousers in our mother's bedroom. Corrigan drew the door open. In the darkness we sat with our backs against the rough wooden panels and slipped our feet in our father's shoes, let his sleeves touch our ears, felt the cold of his cuff buttons. Our mother found us one afternoon, dressed in his gray suits, the sleeves rolled up and the trousers held in place with elastic

bands. We were marching around in his oversize brogues when she came and froze in the doorway, the room so quiet we could hear the radiator tick.

“Well,” she said, as she knelt to the ground in front of us. Her face spread out in a grin that seemed to pain her. “Come here.” She kissed us both on the cheek, tapped our bottoms. “Now run along.” We slipped out of our father’s old clothes, left them puddled on the floor.

Later that night we heard the clang of the coat hangers as she hung and rehung the suits.

Over the years there were the usual tantrums and bloody noses and broken rocking-horse heads, and our mother had to deal with the whispers of the neighbors, sometimes even the attentions of local widowers, but for the most part things stretched comfortably in front of us: calm, open, a sweep of sandy gray.

Corrigan and I shared a bedroom that looked out to the water. Quietly it happened, I still don’t recall how: he, the younger one by two years, took control of the top bunk. He slept on his stomach with a view out the window to the dark, reciting his prayers—he called them his slumber verses—in quick, sharp rhythms. They were his own incantations, mostly indecipherable to me, with odd little cackles of laughter and long sighs. The closer he got to sleep the more rhythmic the prayers got, a sort of jazz, though sometimes in the middle of it all I could hear him curse, and they’d be lifted away from the sacred. I knew the Catholic hit parade—the Our Father, the Hail Mary—but that was all. I was a raw, quiet child, and God was already a bore to me. I kicked the bottom of Corrigan’s bed and he fell silent awhile, but then started up again. Sometimes I woke in the morning and he was alongside me, arm draped over my shoulder, his chest rising and falling as he whispered his prayers.

I’d turn to him. “Ah, Jesus, Corr, shut up.”

My brother was light-skinned, dark-haired, blue-eyed. He was the type of child everyone smiled at. He could look at you and draw you out.

People fell for him. On the street, women ruffled his hair. Workingmen punched him gently on the shoulder. He had no idea that his presence

sustained people, made them happy, drew out their improbable yearnings—he just plowed along, oblivious.

I woke one night, when I was eleven, to a cold blast of air moving over me. I stumbled to the window but it was closed. I reached for the light and the room burned quickly yellow. A shape was bent over in the middle of the room.

“Corr?”

The weather still rolled off his body. His cheeks were red. A little damp mist lay on his hair. He smelled of cigarettes. He put a finger to his lips for hush and climbed back up the wooden ladder.

“Go to sleep,” he whispered from above. The smell of tobacco still lingered in the air.

In the morning he jumped down from the bed, wearing his heavy anorak over his pajamas. Shivering, he opened the window and tapped the sand from his shoes off the sill, into the garden below.

“Where’d you go?”

“Just along by the water,” he said.

“Were you smoking?”

He looked away, rubbed his arms warm. “No.”

“You’re not supposed to smoke, y’know.”

“I didn’t smoke,” he said.

Later that morning our mother walked us to school, our leather satchels slung over our shoulders. An icy breeze cut along the streets. Down by the school gates she went to one knee, put her arms around us, adjusted our scarves, and kissed us, one after the other. When she stood to leave, her gaze was caught by something on the other side of the road, by the railings of the church: a dark form wrapped in a large red blanket. The man raised a hand in salute. Corrigan waved back.

There were plenty of old drunks around Ringsend, but my mother seemed taken by the sight, and for a moment it struck me that there might be some secret there.

“Who’s that, Mum?” I asked.

“Run along,” she said. “We’ll sort it out after school.”

My brother walked beside me, silent.

“Who is it, Corrie?” I thumped him. “Who is it?”

He disappeared towards his classroom.

All day I sat at my wooden desk, gnawing my pencil, wondering—visions of a forgotten uncle, or our father somehow returned, broken. Nothing, in those days, was beyond the realm of the possible. The clock was at the rear of the room but there was an old freckled mirror over the classroom sink and, at the right angle, I could watch the hands go backwards. When the bell struck I was out the gate, but Corrigan took the long road back, short, mincing steps through the housing estates, past the palm trees, along the seawall.

There was a soft brown paper package waiting for Corrigan on the top bunk. I shoved it at him. He shrugged and ran his finger along the twine, pulled it tentatively. Inside was another blanket, a soft blue Foxford. He unfolded it, let it fall lengthwise, looked up at our mother, and nodded.

She touched his face with the back of her fingers and said: “Never again, understand?”

Nothing else was mentioned, until two years later he gave that blanket away too, to another homeless drunk, on another freezing night, up by the canal on one of his late-night walks, when he tiptoed down the stairs and went out into the dark. It was a simple equation to him—others needed the blankets more than he, and he was prepared to take the punishment if it came his way. It was my earliest suggestion of what my brother would become, and what I’d later see among the cast-offs of New York—the whores, the hustlers, the hopeless—all of those who were hanging on to him like he was some bright hallelujah in the shitbox of what the world really was.

CORRIGAN STARTED GETTING drunk young—twelve or thirteen years old—once a week, on Friday afternoons after school. He’d run from the

gates in Blackrock towards the bus stop, his school tie off, his blazer bundled, while I stayed behind in the school fields, playing rugby. I could see him hop on the 45 or the 7A, his silhouette moving towards the backseat of the bus as it pulled away.

Corrigan liked those places where light was drained. The docklands. The flophouses. The corners where the cobbles were broken. He often sat with the drunks in Frenchman's Lane and Spencer Row. He brought a bottle with him, handed it around. If it came back to him he drank with a flourish, wiping the back of his hand across his mouth as if he were a practiced drunk. Anyone could tell he wasn't a real drinker—he didn't search it out, and drank from the bottle only when it came his way. I suppose he thought he was fitting in. He got laughed at by the more vicious drunks but he didn't care. They were using him, of course. He was just another snotnose trying on the poorman shoes, but he had a few pennies in his pockets and was always prepared to give them up—they sent him to the off-license for bottles, or to the corner shop for loose cigarettes.

Some days he came home not wearing any socks. Other times he was shirtless and ran up the stairs before our mother caught him. He brushed his teeth and washed his face and came down, fully dressed, a little starry-eyed, not quite drunk enough to get caught.

“Where were you?”

“God's work.”

“And is God's work not looking after your mother?” She adjusted his shirt collar as he sat down to dinner.

After a while with the down-and-outs he began to fit in, slipped into the background, melted in among them. He walked with them to the flophouse on Rutland Street and sat slumped up against the wall. Corrigan listened to their stories: long, rambling tales that seemed rooted in a different Ireland altogether. It was an apprenticeship for him: he crept in on their poverty as if he wanted to own it. He drank. He smoked. He never mentioned our father, not to me or anyone else. But he was there, our gone father, I could tell. Corrigan would either drown him in sherry or spit him away like a fleck of tobacco from his tongue.

The week he turned fourteen my mother sent me to pick him up: he'd been gone all day and she'd baked a cake for him. An evening drizzle fell over Dublin. A horsecart went past, the light from its dynamo shining. I watched it clop away down the street, the pinpoint of light spreading. I hated the city at times like that—it had no desire to get out from under its grayness. I walked on past the bed-and-breakfast houses, the antique shops, the candle makers, the suppliers of liturgical medals. The flophouse was marked by a black gate, ironwork sharpened to points. I went to the back, where the bins were kept. Rain dripped from a broken pipe. I stepped over a pile of crates and cardboard boxes, shouting his name. When I found him, he was so drunk that he couldn't stand. I grabbed his arm. "Hi," he said, smiling. He fell against the wall and cut his hand. He stood staring at his palm. The blood ran down his wrist. One of the younger drunks—a teddy boy in a red T-shirt—spat at him. It was the only time I ever saw Corrigan throw a punch. It missed completely but blood from his hand flew, and I knew—even while I watched it—that it was a moment I would never forget, Corrigan swinging in midair, droplets of his blood spraying the wall.

"I'm a pacifist," he said, slurring his words.

I walked him all the way along the Liffey, past the coal ships and into Ringsend, where I washed him with water from the old hand pump on Irishtown Road. He took my face in his hands. "Thank you, thank you." He began to cry as we got to Beach Road, which led towards our house. A deep dark had fallen over the sea. Rain dripped from the roadside palms. I hauled him back from the sand. "I'm soft," he said. He wiped his sleeve across his eyes, lit a cigarette, coughed until he threw up.

At the gate of the house, he looked up to the light in our mother's bedroom. "Is she awake?"

He minced his steps up the driveway but once inside he charged up the stairs, ran into her arms. She smelled the drink and tobacco off him, of course, but didn't say anything. She ran a bath for him, sat outside the door. Silent at first, she let her feet stretch across the landing, then laid her head against the doorjamb and sighed: it was as if she too were in a bath, stretching out towards days yet to be remembered.

He put on his clothes, stepped out into the landing, and she toweled his hair dry.

“You won’t drink again, will you, love?”

He shook his head no.

“A curfew on Fridays. Home by five. You hear me?”

“Fair enough.”

“Promise me now.”

“Cross my heart and hope to die.”

His eyes were bloodshot.

She kissed his hair and held him close. “There’s a cake downstairs for you, love.”

Corrigan took two weeks off from his Friday jaunts, but soon began to meet the drunks again. It was a ritual he couldn’t give up. The down-and-outs needed him, or at least wanted him—he was, to them, a mad, impossible angel. He still drank with them, but only on special days. Mostly he was sober. He had this idea that the men were really looking for some type of Eden and that when they drank they returned to it, but, on getting there, they weren’t able to stay. He didn’t try to convince them to stop. That wasn’t his way.

It might’ve been easy for me not to like Corrigan, my younger brother who sparked people alive, but there was something about him that made dislike difficult. His theme was happiness—what it is and what it might not have been, where he might find it and where it might have disappeared.

I was nineteen, and Corrigan was seventeen, when our mother died. A short, quick struggle with kidney cancer. The last thing she told us was to take care to close the curtains so the light didn’t fade the living room carpet.

She was taken to St. Vincent’s Hospital on the first day of summer. The ambulance left wet tracks along the sea road. Corrigan cycled furiously after it. She was put in a long ward full of sick patients. We got her a private room and filled it with flowers. We took turns sitting at her bedside, combing her hair, long and brittle to the touch. Clumps of it came out in the comb. For the first time ever she had a jilted air about her: her body was

betraying her. The bedside ashtray filled with hair. I clung to the idea that if we kept her long gray strands we could get back to the way we once were. It was all I could manage. She lasted three months, then passed on a September day when everything seemed split open with sunlight.

We sat in the room waiting for the nurses to appear and take her body away. Corrigan was in the middle of a long prayer when a shadow appeared in the hospital doorway.

“Hello, boys.”

Our father had an English accent on his grief. I hadn’t seen him since I was three years old. A stringpiece of light fell on him. He was pale and hunched. There was a smattering of hair across his scalp, but his eyes were a pellucid blue. He took off his hat and put it to his chest. “Sorry, lads.”

I went across to shake his hand. It startled me that I was taller than him. He gripped my shoulder and squeezed.

Corrigan remained silent, in the corner.

“Shake my hand, son,” our father said.

“How did you know she was sick?”

“Go on, now, shake my hand like a man.”

“Tell me how you knew.”

“Are you going to shake my hand or not?”

“Who told you?”

He rocked back and forth on his heels. “Is that any way to treat your father?”

Corrigan turned his back and laid a kiss on our mother’s cold brow, left without saying a word. The door closed with a snap. A cage of shadow crossed the bed. I went to the window and saw him yank his bicycle away from a pipe. He rode through the flowerbeds and his shirt flapped as he merged into the traffic on Merrion Road.

My father pulled up a chair and sat beside her, touched her forearm through the sheets.

“When she didn’t cash the checks,” he said to me.

“Pardon me?”

“That’s when I knew she was sick,” he said. “When she didn’t cash the checks.”

A sliver of cold moved down my chest.

“I’m only telling you the truth,” he said. “If you can’t stand the truth, don’t ask for it.”

Our father came to sleep in our house that night. He carried a small suitcase with a black mourning suit and a pair of polished shoes. Corrigan stopped him as he made his way up the stairs. “Where d’you think you’re going?” Our father gripped the banister. His hands were liver-spotted and I could see him trembling in his pause. “That’s not your room,” said Corrigan. Our father tottered on the stairs. He took another step up. “Don’t,” said my brother. His voice was clear, full, confident. Our father stood stunned. He climbed one more step and then turned, descended, looked around, lost.

“My own sons,” he said.

We made a bed for him on a sofa in the living room, but even then Corrigan refused to stay under the same roof: he went walking in the direction of the city center, and I wondered what alley he might be found in later that night, what fist he might walk into, whose bottle he might climb down inside.

The morning of the funeral, I heard our father shouting Corrigan’s first name. “John, John Andrew.” A door slammed. Another. And then a long silence. I lay back against the pillow, allowed the quiet to surround me. Footsteps on the stairs. The creak at the top step. The noises were full of mystery. Corrigan rumbled through the downstairs cupboards and slammed the front door.

When I went to the window I saw a line of well-dressed men on the strand, right outside our house. They were wearing our father’s old suits and hats and scarves. One had tucked a red handkerchief in the breast pocket of the black suit. Another carried a pair of polished shoes in his hand. Corrigan went among them, a little lopsided, his hand jammed down into his trouser pocket, where he was holding a bottle. He was shirtless and wild-looking. A