

STOLEN CHILD (1996 words)

Nobody knew who the grave belonged to or why, each summer, a brand-new, die-cast model car was laid on it like a votive offering; to be slowly overgrown by grass and nettles, until replaced by the next year's model.

Everybody said Vincent was a Christmas gift from heaven. If Jerome had been allowed to choose he would have asked for Meccano but there were no presents this year, only a panic of relatives arriving by boat train from Ireland.

'Weighs scarcely more than a bag of sugar,' they said, and wore their knees out praying for Vincent's survival. Aunt Brenda whispered that the new baby was 'The living spit of Anthony.' Jerome supposed Anthony to be one of the Irish relatives (the English ones never got a mention). He asked his Dad what 'the living spit' meant and Dad said a dead ringer, like at the dog track.

For Christmas lunch Jerome had to make do with a burnt sausage and the wishbone from the tiny chicken. He wished for the Meccano set and wondered if the baby would die for his sin. Weeks passed with his mother gone, Pauline burning toast and breaking eggs all over the show. A great girl of eight and couldn't make a decent breakfast, the Aunts scolded. Gerald was excused domestic duties. He had the 11-plus to fret over. Jerome came and went like an unobtrusive lodger.

When he got home from school one afternoon his mother was back and a nurse was trying to drown a small red creature in an enamel bowl. The creature squirmed and screamed. The nurse wrapped it in a towel and gave it to his Mam who said

'Say hello to wee Vincent.'

So that was what all the fuss had been about. The nurse came every day. 'Which one is this?' she asked, staring at Jerome. She patted his hair cautiously.

'That one's our fourth – he's a puzzle to us all,' his mother said.

Jerome thought she'd forgotten how to count in all the ballyhoo.

The little Messiah took his first steps on an Easter Sunday, earning tears of adulation from the Aunts who showed up mob-handed to witness the miracle. Jerome reckoned the Good Lord got less for turning water into wine. The tiniest of shoves sent the baby sprawling and earned Jerome a fierce round of slaps. That night he dreamed of Vincent all lit-up like the Christ Child in the picture in the school hall, birds alighting on his finger-tips.

'He's strong enough to go over,' Mammy announced in July, and a summer in Ireland was planned.

Granna was waiting for them as they stepped off the coach. After almost suffocating the baby with kisses, she noticed Jerome.

'Mother of God, where did he get that hair? He'll be harbouring cooties, so he will,' she said and dragged Jerome down the street to the barber's.

'It doesn't come from our side,' she told the barber as he sawed away at the thick mat of curls. 'Go steady, you're like to find a pair of horns under there.'

Jerome shivered, his head shorn to stubble. The wind in Kilfinnan blew straight down from the Arctic, taking a right at the Irish Sea and down the High Street before laying waste to the Americas.

'Ears like taxi-cab doors,' shrieked his cousin Mary, who herself was a dead ringer for Bugs Bunny. Jerome clenched his fists under his chin, stuck his teeth over his bottom lip and wiggled his nose. Granna clipped his cold ear with the palm of her hand.

Everything he did annoyed his grandmother. She said he had a way of creeping into a room like a cat. 'Jesus, Joseph and Mary,' she said, every time he appeared. One wet Sunday morning Jerome sat under the kitchen table, listening to the adoration of the Maggie, and the Kathleen and the two Brendas (one by marriage). It seemed there was never such a child as Vincent, never one so biddable, so full of charm.

'And isn't he just the spit of Anthony?' Granna cooed.

That was agreed on; and did ever anybody see such lashes, mother of God the lashes the child had! And that dimple, didn't wee Anthony have just such a dimple? Their voices had taken on the hushed, mournful reverence of their favourite subject – the dead.

Jerome had found a piece of soap jamming up a mouse-hole and was carving a little squinty face on it with a sharpened lolly stick. Distracted by their eulogies the lolly stick speared his palm. He brought his hand to his mouth, tasted the burning soap, choked and scrambled up, banging his head. Hands pulled him from under the tablecloth.

'Jesus Joseph and Mary!' yelled Granna. 'He'll be the death of me, so he will.'
Jerome rubbed his head. 'But who the feck' he asked 'Is this Anthony?'

He couldn't understand what happened next. All hell broke loose but it was his mother they all went for, not him.

'Does the child not know?' Maggie was saying. As Jerome crept away he heard the words 'his own flesh and blood.'

Jerome went in search of his siblings. He and Pauline found Gerald in his bedroom. He was no more at home in Kilfinnan than Jerome was, but at least he had algebra to console him.

'Gerald,' Pauline was hesitant. 'Jerome wants to know about Anthony.'

Gerald stilled at the mention of the name. He removed his horn-rims and polished them carefully with a handkerchief that was way too clean for a nearly- twelve-year-old boy.

'Anthony was our brother. We're not supposed to talk about him.'

Jerome saw a fleeting image of a big boy, a kind boy, his presence no more than a shadow, and an ache passed through him.

'I think I remember.'

'You can't, you were just a baby – he was *my* brother. He died.'

'They said he caught many Jiters. They took him away to hospital.' Pauline said. 'Dad took us back to England. Mam cried all the time. Auntie Brenda said she was crying for Anthony and we mustn't talk about him.'

'But why don't Mam and Dad talk about him? Why didn't I know?'

One big tear rolled from under Gerald's specs. 'Because they keep secrets, don't they? Fecking grown-ups!' Then Gerald did the unthinkable. He threw his exercise book to the floor and kicked it into a dozen pieces.

Sunday tea-times went on forever in Granna's house, longer than forever if Father Dennis was visiting. Gerald had a new exercise book at his elbow, talking mathematics with the priest. A plan was hatching in Jerome's head. Vincent had been released from his high chair, still wearing his leather harness with reins attached. Furtively, Jerome tied Vincent's reins to a corner of the table cloth. He waved the toy giraffe at the toddler before tossing it across the room.

'Fetch, Vinny'.

He'd expected it to be like on the Palladium show when the magician whipped away the tablecloth leaving crockery miraculously standing, spoons still balanced on saucers, tea unspilled. Instead it all happened horribly slowly; hands reached out to grab a cake-stand, the teapot, while a lake of milk and a wedge of sponge cake slid by, stately as a glacier.

He thought he'd have time in to untie the knot but his guilt was confirmed as Kathleen flung herself on Vincent to save him from the scalding tea-fall. As Brenda-by-marriage grabbed Jerome he realised that he hadn't really thought things through. His feet didn't touch the ground as he was flung into his bedroom. It was dark when his grandmother came to stand in the doorway.

'Why?'

She didn't sound cross. Just puzzled. Jerome shrugged. She stood there for a long time, then walked into the room and lifted his face to the window, scrutinising him in the yellow light from the street-lamp.

'Eyes like a fox. I can't think where they got you from' she said. 'The old ones would say you were a stolen child, left behind by the fairies. They'd be doing us a favour if they stole you back.'

She paused in the doorway. 'Tomorrow we'll visit your brother Anthony.'

So she was to take him to the cemetery to teach him a lesson. In the morning Jerome slipped his favourite car into his pocket, a green Humber Snipe, to leave at the graveside. You were supposed to bring something for the grave and big boys wouldn't want flowers. When Granna asked if they understood where they were going, Gerald and Pauline muttered 'Yes' and Jerome just kept quiet. He'd be in trouble again if he gave the wrong answer. After they got off the bus a man in overalls unlocked some gates and there was a long walk up a driveway. Jerome looked all around for a church but there was only a huge building and a lot of nuns. The corridors smelled of disinfectant and dinner.

Gerald had gone as white as anything. Granna knocked on a door with a window in it. The glass slid back and Granna said, 'We've come to visit Anthony Marshall'. Pauline burst into tears, howling like a banshee. Gerald gave a moan and fainted clean away.

A nurse took Jerome into a room full of wheelchairs and huge cots. Big boys were strapped into chairs, some slipping sideways or lolling forward. Some shouted wordlessly. One was saying 'hello, hello.' It wasn't Anthony.

Jerome knew him instantly. His chair was tipped back so that Jerome had to stand on tiptoe to look at him. It was true, he was a dead ringer for Vincent, all grown up but different. He was Vincent with everything switched off. His lashes were so long they cast shadows on his cheeks. His eyes were a startling, deep, deep blue. He stared but didn't seem to see Jerome. His hands were folded one over the other, like a priest.

'Hello, Anthony.'

The boy didn't move.

'I brought you a present' Jerome laid the car on the tray. He lifted Anthony's hand. It was warm, and soft, and slightly damp.

'It's a Humber Snipe.'

He wasn't sure if the boy heard him. Time passed. A nurse came to fetch him.

'Goodbye, Anthony.' Jerome closed his hand over Anthony's, curling the soft fingers around the toy car.

Granna held a tea cup and Gerald was on a stretcher, still pale. Pauline was wearing a too-big apron and pushing a trolley. 'I'm going to be a nurse when I grow up, so I am,' she said.

Nobody spoke on the journey back. Jerome was thinking that Granna was wrong, it wasn't him that was the stolen child. It was Anthony the fairies had taken. Somewhere, in some other world - perhaps the one inside Anthony's head - the real Anthony ran, and laughed, and climbed trees.

On the last day of the holidays Granna took Jerome into Dublin to buy new clothes. She made him wear the new ones to the Shelbourne for tea. Jerome told her about the Humber Snipe he'd given to Anthony, how he thought perhaps Anthony had held onto it when he left.

'I'll bring him another when we come next summer,' he said. 'There's a new one out soon, a Super Snipe. I'll play with it first, then I'll give it to Anthony.'

Granna reached over to touch Jerome's head. But just in case it should be construed as affection, she frowned as she passed a hand over his curls.

'Grown back already' she said. 'Make sure your father takes you to the barber when you get home.' She twitched at the collar of his new blazer. 'I should never have taken Gerald to see Anthony. He's too... delicate. But you?'

She looked at him closely, smoothed the lapels of his grey flannel shirt and tipped up his chin. 'You're a different class of a boy entirely.'