

For Love O' Me Brother

Me brother Jamie he done some funny things in his day. It was voices speakin' to him that made him, kneelin' b'fore the mirror, stick needles in his arm an' walk barefoot on cigarettes their tips still burnin' an' crack his knuckles 'gainst the stone o' statues an' rile ol' Mulligan's dog into sinkin' its teeth into his skin.

"Blood there is to see do you see it Barney?", madcap he would say each time, "but never will you see me wince with the pain of it."

An' another time he shaved his head an' somewhere laid a hand upon a cassock an', all in black, he clambered to the roof settin' there to rise, ascend all glorious in a chariot o' fire, an' that he might ha' done if me mother she ha' not seen him an' shooed im down with a broom, cryin' "What will you be thinkin' of next m'blood m'soul m'son?"

Jamie he was me brother an' I want to speak no evil 'bout him even if he did string me 'gainst the gum in the yard an' put a crown o' thorns 'bout me head an' gave me frights in plenty by placin' seaweed in me bed an' snails an' moths an', one time I shall never in me life forget, a rubber snake he'd been coolin' in the freezer.

"Slunk here all the way from the Garden o' Eden Barney," he tittered, an' I should ha' tittered with him like I usually done an' o' course I should ha' said "Well now you had your joke send the creature back there again", but me wits they was so addled I screamed instead 'cause the snake its colour shape an' fangs an' all it looked so livin' real that I set to such howlin'

that me father who he was the slaughterer in the meat works where they called him Big Mort he pounded in, an' 'cause he had been sleepin' he was madder'n hell, an', sizin' the matter up he gave Jamie the wallopin' of his years shoutin' the while "Do I have ta' throw ya' out to become a man an' think man-nish thoughts an' do mannish things?!"

An' Jamie - would any livin' eye believe it? - he was not sheddin' the slightest tear but Lord he was gigglin' like a mutton-head, he was gigglin' an' he was rantin', too, rantin' all transported-like 'bout the blood o' Sain' Peter an' the blood o' Sain' Sebastian till me mother too she came runnin' in, scarcely there the blinkin' of an eye b'fore she set to such a shrillin' "Oh Lord on your children ha' mercy!" that me father, caught all aback, he stopped the beatin' while me brother he went on gigglin' an' me mother she went on shrillin', shrillin' "He's sick the boy he's flyin' he's unscrewed it's the doctor he's needin' not the sting o' hands!"

But me father he found his wits again an', shoutin', shoutin', beetroot-red fillin' his every pore, "It's a kick in the pants he needs not a doctor me foot!", he stepped a step closer to Jamie again, but me mother she took me brother's hand though he was all o' fifteen, him gigglin' still like some pixie was ticklin' his ribs, an' they went out the room the two o' them, me mother leadin' Jamie to the bathroom there to put salve on the welts, while me father he stomped through the rooms like a bull seein' red and down the passage to the verandah he pounded there to light up a cigarette an' snort out spirals o' smoke an' kick at the flower pots me mother she had planted with ferns an' things an' spit at the stars an' curse with a curse that must ha' woke half the neighbours up, cursin' hard and might-like whoever it was out there that had made those flamin' lights o' heaven an' had so blessed his days with such a bad egg as Jamie, with such a feeble-minded simp who would as sure as fire was fire blacken his ev'ry minute o' breathin' with shame an' odium an' contumely.

Me mother she was a haloed woman but with a will of her own, an', spite me father's roarin' an' rantin' 'bout what Jamie

needed more'n a quack was a beatin' a day, she took me brother to Dr Graham who listened like he was all made o' ears an' sent him on to Dr Daniels that me father he called a money-guzzlin' shrink, but the truth o' the matter it was that Jamie poor Jamie he was seein' things no other eye could see an' he was hearin' things no other ear could hear an' Lord knows I should ha' guessed it 'cause sometimes when I was not even speakin' he would say "What?" or he would say all earnest-like "Last' night our brother Lazarus after his risin' he walked right in through that door", or he would say, too, marvellin' in gladness, "I touched the hair o' the Virgin an' Lord was it soft an' fine an' smooth like it was the purest silk."

An' it happened that in the hospital where Dr Daniels he sent him, Jamie he said to me all private-like, "Don' tell no-one Barney but me blood me blood is the blood o' Peter an' o' Sain' Sebastian an' the blood too of all that has suffered on earth, an' only you an' me an' God above we knows it."

An' perhaps I should ha' told, but I didn' 'cause I liked the sharin' o' secrets with him an' 'cause that made me feel big an' importan' an' I guess 'cause, 'spite o' all the awful things he done to me with them snails an' seaweed an' snakes, when he said "Barney you deserve to be sittin' by the right hand o' God", I had to love him an' he was more than me brother then, he was me friend me idol me hero me guide.

So I kept private as private as me breath all o' the later things he done like pilferin' a book from the library all magnificen' an' gorgeous an' with pictures o' madonnas an' saints an' prophets an' demons which I saw in them of a sudden as sure as me eyes were true was the source o' all his crazy flyin' utterin's and of the other things he done like whippin' his back with sprays o' bramble or collectin' ol' bones that he said were the bones o' the holiest men that ever lived.

But when he took to settin' the shed on fire to drive out the sinners that were revellin' there, or drownin' Elmer our tabby in baptism intendin', or callin' Mr Judd the headmaster the scurf o' Satan, or standin' one day in the blowy shade o' the

Public Library scarecrow-like crumbin' crumbs for the pigeons hi'self raw an' unstitched to the last black hair o' his naked crotch, all me silence 'bout his doin's it couldn' help him from reelin' an' careenin' from the fist o' me father to the claws o' the law an' from the pink junket-like hands o' Father Glamorgan to the reachin' grasin' tentacles o' the hospital wards.

An' over an' over it went, the same again an' again in a ring-a-round o' devilry for another year, another two, the hands o' none o' them helpin' any, Jamie the while swallowin' this pill an' that, rainbowed beads o' purple an' green an' blue' an' red, an' me mother rufflin' his hair sayin' "What is to become o' you m'child so possessed?", an' me father ev'ry day growin' more ropable an' mad, barkin' at the quacks an' at the law an' at the starch-collared Father, an' flushin' in the cistern Jamie's gatherin' o' pills, clamourin' "He don' need these his brain is addled more th'n enough", hi'self shamed to vexation b'fore his friends, 'fraid to look fellow mortal in the eye, an' swearin' oaths in plenty like they was the height o' fashion, "The day's gonna come Jim so help me God the day's gonna come!"

An' the day he meant -I guess it was the day he meant - it did come, comin' with the comin' to school o' Barbie Baker, she lovin' nothin' more than to tease the boys their zips stretched to breakin' an' their buttons to burstin'.

An' one day she took Jamie behin' the toilet, lurin' him with Lord knows what flashin'-eyed charms, an' there the two o' them not gone five minutes but Mr Judd he found 'em out an' she, Barbie, her hair in the sun gold an' all glitterin', like a halo in the book that Jamie he pilfered from the library, her nose twitchin', an' the tears o' crocodiles rollin' from her eyes, she kicked up a ruckus drownin' all other ruckus, an' cried for even the heavens to waken, "He tried to rape me 'e did 'e did sayin' keep yer' trap shut or I'll smash ya' to a pulp finer'n any machine it can do to ya'"; while Jamie me brother me brother Jamie he jus' stood there like some clobbered mullet shakin' his head an' rollin' his lips, with pain an' denial an' bewilderment in his ev'ry line, an' his face all like the Lord's lookin'

down from the cross an' he said - an' this was more like me brother talkin' - "She has the hair o' Mary an' I touched it with this hand an' Lord it was fine an' soft like a gift o' God", an' seein' a nail it stickin' out from the wall he drove that hand o' his upon it an' tore the flesh till it spurted rich an' red, an' in a tone as pleadin' as it was to me noble an' beautiful 'e said, "By the blood o' ev'ry saint that ever lived an' by their love an' mercy an' holiness I w'd never touch a hair o' that glorious head."

But Mr Judd never forgettin' Jamie's slur 'bout him an' Satan an' likin' me brother not the slightest bit, he snorted down his nose like some flamin' dragon out to get Sain' George while me I gave me brother a hankie for his bleedin' hand the two of us settin' after him to his cold foul-smellin' office where he sent for me father an' sent for me mother an' also for Barbie Baker's father an' said all dark an' menacin'-like that if me brother Jamie he is not taken out o' school there'n' then an' once'n' for all he would bring in the police an' lay serious charges 'gainst Jamie for wilful assault an' attempted rape. Barbie Baker's father hi'self a school inspector pettin' his Barbie an' coddlin' her an' callin' her "my baby my precious my angel", he was satisfied sayin' "A scandal is the last among our wishes" but not me own father who drivin' home held fast-like to the silence o' rage that like one o' them waterfalls I seen in a film crashin' an' breakin' an' shatterin' crashed out o' him as soon as we reached inside our house, an' there, b'fore Jamie he could breathe to three me father he seized his collar an' cracked his fist upon his head an' another 'bout his face an' Jamie wherever he ran me father he ran after him shoutin' "Yer' a disgrace to the name an' for me I had enough o' ya'" till they came upon the kitchen, me mother an' me trailin' but a step b'hind, me mother screamin' "Ha' mercy O Lord he's your truest child!", while me father an' Jamie they was facin' one another like ravin' bulls an' as red like I never seen 'em before an' I never seen neither o' them so crazed neither, me father lungin' out me brother escapin' in his escapin' pullin' over a chair an' tearin' down the tablecloth

an' sweepin' a kettle to flyin', not laughin' like he done long b'fore but shoutin' this time "She is Mary, God be me eyes, an' I done nothin' but touch her hair He take me if that ain't the truth" but me father like I said he was the slaughterer of the meat-works where they called him Big Mort and he was like no bein' I ever seen not on this earth nor in the heaven nor in the hell that was in Jamie's book that he had pilfered from the library, me father he grabbed a carver from the mantel an' with me mother pleadin' an' me addin' me own share an' the bottles o' spices rattlin' where they were an' even the light in the ceilin' tremblin' an' the curtains shiverin' me father he slashed after Jamie an' he slashed an' he slashed the blade o' the carver it fallin' towards Jamie, an' me I screamed I know I screamed 'cause me own ears like the shell o' eggs they were splittin' an' crumblin' an' pulverised to smithereens an' how I screamed, for me mother she reached out at that moment out to him to Jamie aimin' to cradle an' coddle an' pet like Barbie she was cradled an' coddled an' petted, an' it was she the blade it hit, an' where she ha' stood there she fell, an' her neck it was all bleedin' and her neck was all bleedin' an' her neck was all bleedin' an' . . .

An' Barbie Baker I will never forgive you as long as I breathe the breath me mother she gave me, an' from your grave Mother I hopes you hears me, an' in your prison-cell Father I hopes you hears me, an' in your hospital ward Jamie inside them walls o' brick an' concrete I hopes that you too you hears me, 'cause know that when I leave here this cursed goddamn'd sickenin' home for orphans I shall go out there an' even if I hang for it an' be the martyr Jamie that you me brother you never was, I shall hunt her down an' with that carver that cut our home to smithereens with that carver shall I go after her so help me God so help me the Lord so help me all them angels an' martyrs an' saints that ever went to heaven on account o' the wrongs an' evils an' the hurtful things done when they were breathin' the breath o' this earth.

An' pray to the Lord Jamie he should be me witness an' he should be me strength 'cause I will go after her that Barbie

Baker 'cause I will go after her O Lord I will even if I hang I will even if in hell I burn I will . . . O Lord be me guide me light me strength an' turn away your eyes when the moment of Barbie's destiny I bring it about for love for love yeh for love o' me soulful lovin' so-ill-done-by brother 'cause the routin' o' the Philistines will be as nothin' 'gainst her comin' despatch into the waitin' bosom o' Satan in the heart o' the fire . . .