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A Summer Job

Colm Tóibín

The old woman, when the baby was born, leaving a neighbouring girl in charge of the post office. She sat by Frances in the hospital, looking fondly at the child even when he was sleeping, and holding him tenderly when he was awake. She had not done this when any of her other grandchildren were born.

"He is lovely, Frances," she said gravely.

The old woman was interested in politics and religion and fresh news. She loved meeting people who knew more than she did, and were better educated. She read biographies and theology. Her mother, Frances thought, was interested in most things, but not children, unless they were ill or had excelled in some subject, and certainly not babies. She had no idea why her mother stayed for four days.

Her mother, she knew, was careful with her own grown-up children, even Bill who still lived with her and ran the farm, asking them few questions, never interfering in their lives. Frances watched her now maintaining silence when the subject of a name for the baby arose, but she was aware that her mother was listening with interest, especially when Jim, Frances's husband, was in the room.

Frances waited until late at night when her mother had gone before she discussed the baby's name with Jim, who liked names that were ordinary and solid, like his own, names that would cause no comment now or in the future. Therefore, she was sure that when she suggested John as a name for the baby, Jim would agree.

Her mother was jubilant. Frances knew that her mother's father had been called John, but it did not occur to her that her mother would now think the new baby was to be christened in his honour. It had nothing to do with him. She asked her mother not to discuss the name of the baby with Jim, and she hoped that her mother might soon stop saying how proud she was that the name was being carried on in the family in a time when the fashion was all for new names, including the names of film stars and pop stars.

"The Irish names are the worst, Frances," her mother said. "You couldn't even pronounce them."

John was cradled more warmly by her mother now that he had a name. She seemed happy to sit for hours saying nothing, rocking him or soothing him. Frances was glad when she could go home, and happy when her mother suggested that she herself might return to Williamstown to her small post office, her books, her daily Irish Times, her specially selected television and radio programmes and a few kindred spirits with whom she discussed current events.

Once John was home, the old woman began to pay more attention to his siblings' birthdays, no longer merely sending a postal order and a birthday card, but, having arranged a lift, coming

40 personally the 40 miles from Williamstown, staying for tea, bringing the postal order in her
handbag. No matter whose birthday it was, however, all of the children knew that their grandmother
had come to see John. The old woman, Frances saw, made sure not to try to lift him or cuddle him
or demand his attention when he was busy playing or sitting in front of the television. She waited
45 for him, she was on his side. By the time he was four or five, he was often speaking to her on the
telephone, and was looking forward to her visits, keeping close to her once she came, showing her
his schoolwork and his drawings and asking his parents' leave to stay up late so he could fall asleep
beside her on the sofa, his head in her lap.

50 Soon, once Bill was married and she was alone in the house, the old woman began to invite Frances
and her family for Sunday lunch once a month. She made sure that her grandsons were not bored in
the house, suggesting that Bill take them to hurling or football matches in the locality, or knowing
what they might want to watch on television. By the time John was seven or eight, his grandmother
would send Bill down to collect him so that he could come on his own to stay on the Saturday night
55 before the lunch. Within a short time, he had his own bedroom in his grandmother's house, his own
boots and duffle coat, pyjamas, books and comics.

Frances was not sure what age he was when he began to go to Williamstown for a month in the
summer, but by the time he was 12 he would stay in his grandmother's house for the entire summer,
helping Bill on the farm, working in the post office, and sitting with his grandmother at night,
reading, or talking to her, or, with his grandmother's full encouragement, going out with some local
60 boys his own age.

"Everyone likes John," her mother said to Frances. "Everyone he meets, young and old, he always
has something interesting to say to everyone, and he is a great listener as well."

Frances observed John move effortlessly through the world. There were never complaints about
him, even from his sisters. He was quiet most of the time, he did his share of the housework and
65 knew how to negotiate with his mother and father if he wanted money or permission to stay out late.
He seemed to Frances self-contained, unlikely to make mistakes or misjudgments. He took most
matters seriously. When, a few times, she tried to make light of his relationship with his
grandmother and his special place in her house, he did not smile or even acknowledge that she had
spoken. Even when she made remarks about the more comic customers of his grandmother's post
70 office, people who did not seem to have changed since she had worked there 30 years earlier, John
did not share her amusement.

In those years as soon as spring began her mother would telephone to say that she was already
looking forward to the arrival of John.

75 That summer when Frances drove him to Williamstown, she went upstairs with him as soon as they
arrived. His bedroom, she noticed, had new wallpaper and there was a new bed. On the chest of
drawers lay a stack of shirts, all freshly ironed, a few pairs of jeans, shaving cream, a new fancy
razor and special shampoo.

"No wonder you come here," she said. "We don't treat you properly at home. Ironed shirts! Done by
your special girlfriend!"

80 As she laughed she did not notice that her mother was waiting outside the door. She realised, as they
went downstairs, that both John and her mother wanted her to leave, both were careful not to

respond to anything she said. They were almost hostile, as though she had left a gate open in a field, or given too much change to a customer. Neither of them came to the car with her as she departed.

85 Soon, she learned that her mother, while making the farm over to Bill, had set aside a field and convinced Bill to build goalposts at either end so that John could play hurling there. John rounded up enough locals to form a team and they found other teams to play against so that almost every evening there were games or practice sessions. Even spectators came, including Frances and Jim one evening, but the old woman herself was too frail to walk up the lane to see John playing.

90 Frances noticed that she seemed deeply content that John had a large set of friends now and something to do in the evenings so that he would not, as she put it, get fed up listening to her.

Frances watched one evening as John came in from a game, rushing to go back out again, with just time for a shower and a change of clothes. He barely looked at his grandmother.

"John, sit down and talk to us," Frances said.

"I have to go, Mammy, the others are waiting."

95 He barely nodded to his grandmother as he left the room. When Frances looked across at her, she saw that the old woman was smiling.

"He'll be back later," she said. "I'll be fast asleep when he comes in."

She purred, as though the thought gave her great satisfaction.

100 By the time he returned home in late August, John had grown taller and fitter. He began to play hurling with his school team where the talents he had developed over the summer as a mid-fielder were quickly recognised.

105 Frances had dutifully gone to watch her other children playing sport, anxiously waiting for the event to be over so she could go home. None of them ever excelled, or cared very much, but John that winter and spring trained every evening and played whenever he could with a view to making the county minor team.

110 John stood out on the pitch because he seemed never to run or tackle, but instead waited, remained apart. His father, who became excited about very little, could not be contained when John, standing alone and unmarked, would find the ball coming his way and make a solo run to score a point, brushing off tackles with real bravery and skill, or, judging distances carefully, lobbed the ball in a deliberate arc towards the mouth of the goal. It was clear to Frances that the spectators around her noticed him as much as his parents did. Although he was not selected for the minor team that season, he was told that he was being watched carefully by the selectors.

115 In May, as the school year was coming to an end, John remarked casually that he, along with several of his friends, had filled in an application form for a job in the strawberry factory in the town in the summer months. Frances remembered hearing him mention the factory, but put no further thought into it until he asked her for a lift into the town for an interview.

"How long will the job last?" she asked.

"All summer," he said. "Or at least until August."

120 "What is your grandmother going to do?" Frances asked. "Only yesterday she was on the phone saying how much she was looking forward to June and your arrival. We were there two weeks ago and you heard her yourself."

"Why don't we wait and see if I get the job?"

"Why do you want to do the interview if you know you can't take the job?"

"Who says I can't take the job?"

125 "She's old, John, she's not going to last. Just do one more summer with her and I'll make sure that you won't have to do another if you don't want to."

"Who says I don't want to?"

She sighed.

"God help the woman who marries you."

130 John arranged for one of his friends to take him into the town for the interview, and a week later a note came from the manager of the factory saying that he could start in the second week of June. John left the letter on the breakfast table for them all to read. When Frances looked at it, she did not speak. She waited until he came back from school.

135 "You can't go to her every summer, and then when she's old and weak, decide you have better things to do."

"I haven't decided that."

"I have decided you are going and that's it. As soon as you get your holidays you are going to Williamstown, so you can start getting ready."

"What am I going to tell the team?"

140 "That you'll be back in September."

"If I stayed, I could get on the minor team."

"You can hurl all summer in the field your grandmother set aside for you. And keep in mind that it might be her last summer and she has been very good to you. So you can pack your bags now."

145 For the next few days he did not speak to her, and thus she knew that he had accepted his fate and would go to Williamstown. She did not tell him, even on the journey there, what sort of welcome his grandmother had planned for him. Over the previous few months Frances had conspired with her mother to get John a provisional driving licence, finding his birth certificate and a photograph and forging his signature and then keeping the arrival of the licence a secret. John's grandmother had paid Bill for the old car when he was buying a new one. She was going to give it to John for the
150 summer and allow him and his siblings to use it thereafter.

Since John's mood in the car was so downcast and sullen, Frances was tempted to tell him what was in store, but she resisted the temptation. He would never be as silent and withdrawn as this with anyone else, but she did not mind. Her job was to deposit him at Williamstown. She would be happy when she drove away, leaving him there for the summer.

155 Her mother, she saw when she arrived, was walking with the help of a stick. Although she had had her hair done and was wearing a colourful dress, it was clear to Frances that she was ill. Her mother

noticed Frances watching her and looked back defiantly, as though daring her to mention her health. All her energy was being used to surprise John, first with the driving licence and then with the keys of the car.

160 "Bill says you can drive perfectly," she said. "So you can go all over the county now in this. It's old, but it flies along."

John said nothing, eyeing Frances and then his grandmother gravely.

"Did you know about this?" he asked Frances.

"I'm the one who forged the signature," she said.

165 "But I paid for it," his grandmother interrupted. "Make sure he knows that."

By something in her voice and her face Frances could tell that she was in pain. She stood out of the way as John started the car and drove down the hill away from his grandmother's house and turned and approached them again.

"Oh he's a great driver," his grandmother said.

170 John took his bags from his mother's car. As Frances left them, they were both still looking at John's new acquisition. Frances loved John for not giving his grandmother the slightest hint at his unwillingness to stay with her all summer, but as she waved at him before she drove away, he gave her a look which suggested that he would not forgive her for a long time.

175 Over the next month she heard various reports about John's driving, including his travelling the 40 miles to the town for a hurling match and not calling to see his family. Despite his consistent play, she was told, he had still not been selected for the minor team. She was glad that he had turned up for the match and played, thus his failure to make the team could not be blamed on her.

180 It was a beautiful summer. Each year, she and a group of women from the golf club took one day out to go to Rosslare Strand for a long and leisurely lunch at Kelly's Hotel after a morning's golf. If the weather were good enough, they spent the afternoon on the beach.

They had finished the first course before she noticed John and her mother at a corner table in the hotel restaurant; they were 60 miles from home. John had his back to the room and Frances realised that her mother's sight was too poor for her to be able to see them. Since none of her friends knew her mother, she decided not to mention their presence, to continue her own lunch without
185 interrupting her son and his grandmother. Nonetheless, she could not, as the meal went on, help noticing that her mother's voice was louder than any other in the restaurant. John's voice was loud too, raised so that the old woman could hear him.

190 Her mother began to laugh, causing one or two of Frances's party to turn and look at her. Frances watched as John stood up and, taking his white linen napkin in his hand, began playfully and lightly to brush against the old woman's head with it, as though he were assaulting her, causing her to laugh until she began to cough loudly, unable seemingly to catch her breath. By the time John returned to his seat, her gasping for breath made the whole restaurant pay attention and caused comment among Frances's group.

195 On their way out John and his grandmother saw her, and as they approached she explained to her friends that, although she had seen them all along, she had decided to leave them in peace for the meal. She noticed that a number of them seemed embarrassed at the comments they had made.

"You were making so much noise," she said to them, "that I pretended that I was not related to you at all."

200 "We are out on a spree, Frances," her mother said, and then greeted each person at the table as she was introduced to them. John nodded politely, but stood back and said nothing.

"And so far from home," Frances said. "Are you thinking of getting the ferry?"

"We'd be well able to," her mother said. "And why wouldn't we be? He's the best driver in Ireland."

205 Frances noticed her mother's summer dress, all white with a pattern of roses, and her light pink cardigan. Her mother, she saw, was wearing make-up, but there was something strained about her appearance, emphasised now by her cheerfulness, manifested in the way her mouth hung open when she was not speaking and a sort of deadness in her eyes. There was a moment's silence between them when her mother seemed aware that Frances was examining her face.

"Well, it was a great surprise to see you," Frances said, quickly filling the silence.

210 "We've been all over the country," her mother said. "And we're going over to Kilmore Quay now. And with the help of God we'll meet no one else we know. Isn't that right, John? We were planning to have a day out to ourselves. But it's nice to see you all the same, Frances."

John glanced at his mother uncomfortably. It was clear that he wished his grandmother would stop talking. As she was turning to go, leaning heavily on her walking stick, the old woman addressed the table.

215 "I hope now you are all as lucky as I am, having a grandson as handsome and helpful in your old age."

Frances noticed several of her friends looking at John whose head was now bowed.

"It must be the sea air has you in such good form," Frances said.

220 "That's right, Frances." Her mother turned back towards the table. "It's the sea air. And a good driver. But don't say anything else now, you're only detaining us."

She reached for John's arm as she said a final goodbye to them; she leaned on him and on her stick as the two of them slowly left the hotel restaurant.

225 The old woman died in the winter, barely surviving Christmas and lingering into the New Year, trying bravely to eat and drink what she could before she sank low enough not to be able to touch food. In the two or three weeks when it was clear that she would not survive, her children, now in their 50s, came and went, and a local nurse, home from England, spent much of the day in the house.

230 Frances brought John to see her a few times in the company of one or other of his siblings. She thought as the days passed that he might like to spend time alone with his grandmother, but she did not want to spell this out in case he thought she was putting pressure on him. Instead, she tried to ensure that he could have time with his grandmother if he wanted. She was certain every time she came that the old woman was looking out for John, waiting for him, but she noticed too that John always waited until someone else was going into the sick room and that he held back as his grandmother's eyes lit on him.

235 Her mother during those weeks was afraid. Despite her years of praying and her reading of theology, despite her great age, she struggled now to add these extra days to her life. In her last week, she was alert and restless. She was never for one moment left alone.

She died late on a Friday evening, her breath coming in great gasps followed by unearthly silence until the gasping ended and the silence held. Those in the room were afraid to move, afraid to meet
240 one another's eyes. None of them wanted to break the spell. Frances watched quietly as her mother lay still, all the life gone out of her.

When she was washed and laid out, they discussed who among them was the least tired, who would be most able to keep vigil through the night with the old woman's body which would not be put into a coffin and brought to the church until Sunday.

245 On Saturday morning, Frances and her sisters and brothers decided that the grandchildren, some of whom were already arriving for the funeral, would sit with the body in the candlelit room for all of Saturday night and into the small hours of Sunday and then on Sunday morning.

When John came to the house wearing a suit and tie, Frances went upstairs with him and stood back as he blessed himself and knelt by his grandmother's bed, touching her cold hands and her forehead
250 as he stood up. Frances waited for him on the landing.

"We're all wrecked, John," she said. "We're going to ask the children to sit with her tonight. I thought you'd like to do it as a way of saying goodbye to her."

"What about the others?" John asked.

"Some of them will sit with her too, but none of them was as close to her as you were."

255 He said nothing for a moment. They began to walk down the stairs together.

"Sit with her?" he asked.

"It's only one night, John."

"Have I not done enough?" he asked as they reached the hallway.

Frances thought he was going to cry.

260 "You were very close," she said.

"Have I not done enough?" he asked again. "Will you answer me that?"

He turned and walked out on to the road. Frances thought, as she watched him through the window, that he was about to burst into tears and wished to be away from her and from the people who were calling to express their condolences. But when she was able to see his face clearly as he stood
265 outside, she noticed a new toughness in him, a look of pure determination. She decided that she would not argue with him or approach him again until the funeral was over.

She stood at the window observing him as he shook hands with one of the neighbours; the expression on his face was serious and formal like an adult. She had no idea what he was thinking or feeling. Upstairs, the old woman who had wanted him so badly from the day he was born lay
270 dead. Frances did not know whether her going was the lifting of a burden for John or a loss which he could not contemplate. The more she looked at him, the more she realised that at this moment she did not herself know the difference. Suddenly John glanced at the window and saw her

watching him. He shrugged as if to say that he would give nothing away, she could look at him as long as she liked.