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MAGGIE O'FARRELL



HAMNET

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I



boy is coming down a flight of stairs.

The passage is narrow and twists back on itself. He takes each step slowly, sliding himself along the wall, his boots meeting each tread with a thud.

Near the bottom, he pauses for a moment, looking back the way he has come. Then, suddenly resolute, he leaps the final three stairs, as is his habit. He stumbles as he lands, falling to his knees on the flagstone floor.

It is a close, windless day in late summer, and the downstairs room is slashed by long strips of light. The sun glowers at him from outside, the windows latticed slabs of yellow, set into the plaster.

He gets up, rubbing his legs. He looks one way, up the stairs; he looks the other, unable to decide which way he should turn.

The room is empty, the fire ruminating in its grate, orange embers below soft, spiralling smoke. His injured kneecaps throb in time with his heartbeat. He stands with one hand resting on the latch of the door to the stairs, the scuffed leather tip of his boot raised, poised for motion, for flight. His hair, light-coloured, almost gold, rises up from his brow in tufts.

There is no one here.

He sighs, drawing in the warm, dusty air and moves through the room, out of the front door and on to the street. The noise of barrows, horses, vendors, people calling to each other, a man hurling a sack from an upper window doesn't reach him. He wanders along the front of the house and into the neighbouring doorway.

The smell of his grandparents' home is always the same: a mix of woodsmoke, polish, leather, wool. It is similar yet indefinably different from the adjoining two-roomed apartment, built by his grandfather in a narrow gap next to the larger house, where he lives with his mother and sisters. Sometimes he cannot understand why this might be. The two dwellings are, after all, separated by only a thin wattled wall but the air in each place is of a different ilk, a different scent, a different temperature.

This house whistles with draughts and eddies of air, with the tapping and hammering of his grandfather's workshop, with the raps and calls of customers at the window, with the noise and welter of the courtyard out the back, with the sound of his uncles coming and going.

But not today. The boy stands in the passageway, listening for signs of occupation. He can see from here that the workshop, to his right, is empty, the stools at the benches vacant, the tools idle on the counters, a tray of abandoned gloves, like handprints, left out for all to see. The vending window is shut and bolted tight. There is no one in the dining hall, to his left. A stack of napkins is piled on the long table, an unlit candle, a heap of feathers. Nothing more.

He calls out, a cry of greeting, a questioning sound. Once, twice, he makes this noise. Then he cocks his head, listening for a response.

Nothing. Just the creaking of beams expanding gently in the sun, the sigh of air passing under doors, between rooms, the swish of linen drapes, the crack of the fire, the indefinable noise of a house at rest, empty.

His fingers tighten around the iron of the door handle. The

heat of the day, even this late, causes sweat to express itself from the skin of his brow, down his back. The pain in his knees sharpens, twinges, then fades again.

The boy opens his mouth. He calls the names, one by one, of all the people who live here, in this house. His grandmother. The maid. His uncles. His aunt. The apprentice. His grandfather. The boy tries them all, one after another. For a moment, it crosses his mind to call his father's name, to shout for him, but his father is miles and hours and days away, in London, where the boy has never been.

But where, he would like to know, are his mother, his older sister, his grandmother, his uncles? Where is the maid? Where is his grandfather, who tends not to leave the house by day, who is usually to be found in the workshop, harrying his apprentice or reckoning his takings in a ledger? Where is everyone? How can both houses be empty?

He moves along the passageway. At the door to the workshop, he stops. He throws a quick glance over his shoulder, to make sure nobody is there, then steps inside.

His grandfather's glove workshop is a place he is rarely allowed to enter. Even to pause in the doorway is forbidden. Don't stand there idling, his grandfather will roar. Can't a man do an honest day's work without people stopping to gawk at him? Have you nothing better to do than loiter there catching flies?

Hamnet's mind is quick: he has no trouble understanding the schoolmasters' lessons. He can grasp the logic and sense of what he is being told, and he can memorise readily. Recalling verbs and grammar and tenses and rhetoric and numbers and calculations comes to him with an ease that can, on occasion, attract the envy of other boys. But his is a mind also easily

distracted. A cart going past in the street during a Greek lesson will draw his attention away from his slate to wonderings as to where the cart might be going and what it could be carrying and how about that time his uncle gave him and his sisters a ride on a haycart, how wonderful that was, the scent and prick of new-cut hay, the wheels tugged along to the rhythm of the tired mare's hoofs. More than twice in recent weeks he has been whipped at school for not paying attention (his grandmother has said if it happens once more, just once, she will send word of it to his father). The schoolmasters cannot understand it. Hamnet learns quickly, can recite by rote, but he will not keep his mind on his work.

The noise of a bird in the sky can make him cease speaking, mid-utterance, as if the very heavens have struck him deaf and dumb at a stroke. The sight of a person entering a room, out of the corner of his eye, can make him break off whatever he is doing – eating, reading, copying out his schoolwork – and gaze at them as if they have some important message just for him. He has a tendency to slip the bounds of the real, tangible world around him and enter another place. He will sit in a room in body, but in his head he is somewhere else, someone else, in a place known only to him. Wake up, child, his grandmother will shout, snapping her fingers at him. Come back, his older sister, Susanna, will hiss, flicking his ear. Pay attention, his schoolmasters will yell. Where did you go? Judith will be whispering to him, when he finally re-enters the world, when he comes to, when he glances around to find that he is back, in his house, at his table, surrounded by his family, his mother eyeing him, half smiling, as if she knows exactly where he's been.

In the same way, now, walking into the forbidden space of the glove workshop, Hamnet has lost track of what he is meant to be doing. He has momentarily slipped free of his moorings, of the fact that Judith is unwell and needs someone to care for her, that he is meant to be finding their mother or grandmother or anyone else who might know what to do.

Skins hang from a rail. Hamnet knows enough to recognise the rust-red spotted hide of a deer, the delicate and supple kidskin, the smaller pelts of squirrels, the coarse and bristling boarskin. As he moves nearer to them, the skins start to rustle and stir on their hangings, as if some life might yet be left in them, just a little, just enough for them to hear him coming. Hamnet extends a finger and touches the goat hide. It is unaccountably soft, like the brush of river weed against his legs when he swims on hot days. It sways gently to and fro, legs splayed, stretched out, as if in flight, like a bird or a ghoul.

Hamnet turns, surveys the two seats at the workbench: the padded leather one worn smooth by the rub of his grandfather's breeches, and the hard wooden stool for Ned, the apprentice. He sees the tools, suspended from hooks on the wall above the workbench. He is able to identify those for cutting, those for stretching, those for pinning and stitching. He sees that the narrower of the glove stretchers – used for women – is out of place, left on the bench where Ned works with bent head and curved shoulders and anxious, nimble fingers. Hamnet knows that his grandfather needs little provocation to yell at the boy, perhaps worse, so he picks up the glove stretcher, weighing its warm wooden heft, and replaces it on its hook.

He is just about to slide out the drawer where the twists of thread are kept, and the boxes of buttons – carefully, carefully, because he knows the drawer will squeak – when a noise, a slight shifting or scraping, reaches his ears.

Within seconds, Hamnet has darted out, along the passageway and into the yard. His task returns to him. What is he doing, fiddling in the workshop? His sister is unwell: he is meant to be finding someone to help.

He bangs open, one by one, the doors to the cookhouse, the brewhouse, the washhouse. All of them empty, their interiors dark and cool. He calls out again, slightly hoarse this time, his throat scraped with the shouting. He leans against the cookhouse wall and kicks at a nutshell, sending it skittering across the yard. He is utterly confounded to be so alone. Someone ought to be here; someone always is here. Where can they be? What must he do? How can they all be out? How can his mother and grandmother not be in the house, as they usually are, heaving open the doors of the oven, stirring a pot over the fire? He stands in the yard, looking about himself, at the door to the passageway, at the door to the brewhouse, at the door to their apartment. Where should he go? Whom should he call on for help? And where is everyone?

Every life has its kernel, its hub, its epicentre, from which everything flows out, to which everything returns. This moment is the absent mother's: the boy, the empty house, the deserted yard, the unheard cry. Him standing here, at the back of the house, calling for the people who had fed him, swaddled him, rocked him to sleep, held his hand as he took his first steps, taught him to use a spoon, to blow on broth before he ate it,

to take care crossing the street, to let sleeping dogs lie, to swill out a cup before drinking, to stay away from deep water.

It will lie at her very core, for the rest of her life.

Hamnet scuffs his boots in the grit of the yard. He can see the remains of a game he and Judith had been playing not long ago: the lengths of twine tied to pine cones to be pulled and swung for the kitchen cat's kittens. Small creatures they are, with faces like pansies and soft pads on their paws. The cat went into a barrel in the storeroom to have them and hid there for weeks. Hamnet's grandmother looked everywhere for the litter, intending to drown them all, as is her custom, but the cat thwarted her, keeping her babies secret, safe, and now they are half grown, two of them, running about the place, climbing up sacks, chasing feathers and wool scraps and stray leaves. Judith cannot be parted from them for long. She usually has one in her apron pocket, a tell-tale bulge, a pair of peaked ears giving her away, making their grandmother shout and threaten the waterbutt. Hamnet's mother, however, whispers to them that the kittens are too big for their grandmother to drown. 'She couldn't do it, now,' she says to them, in private, wiping tears from Judith's horrified face. 'She wouldn't have the stomach for it – they would struggle, you see, they would fight.'

Hamnet wanders over to the abandoned pine cones, their strings trailed into the trodden earth of the yard. The kittens are nowhere to be seen. He nudges a pine cone with his toe and it rolls away from him in an uneven arch.

He looks up at the houses, the many windows of the big one and the dark doorway of his own. Normally, he and Judith

would be delighted to find themselves alone. He would, this very moment, be trying to persuade her to climb on to the cookhouse roof with him, so that they might reach the boughs of the plum tree just over the neighbour's wall. They are filled, crammed, with plums, their red-gold jackets near to bursting with ripeness; Hamnet has eyed them from an upper window in his grandparents' house. If this were a normal day, he would be giving Judith a boost on to the roof so that she could fill her pockets with stolen fruit, despite her qualms and protestations. She doesn't like to do anything dishonest or forbidden, so guileless is her nature, but can usually be persuaded with a few words from Hamnet.

Today, though, as they played with the kittens who escaped an early demise, she said she had a headache, a pain in her throat, she felt cold, then she felt hot, and she has gone into the house to lie down.

Hamnet goes back through the door to the main house and along the passage. He is just about to go out into the street when he hears a noise. It is a click or a shift, a minute sound, but it is the definite noise of another human being.

'Hello?' Hamnet calls. He waits. Nothing. Silence presses back at him from the dining hall and the parlour beyond. 'Who's there?'

For a moment, and just for a moment, he entertains the notion that it might be his father, returned from London, to surprise them – it has happened before. His father will be there, beyond that door, perhaps hiding as a game, as a ruse. If Hamnet walks into the room, his father will leap out; he will have gifts stowed in his bag, in his purse; he will smell of horses, of hay, of many days on the road; he will put his

arms around his son and Hamnet will press his cheek to the rough, chafing fastenings of his father's jerkin.

He knows it won't be his father. He knows it, he does. His father would respond to a repeated call, would never hide himself away in an empty house. Even so, when Hamnet walks into the parlour, he feels the falling, filtering sensation of disappointment to see his grandfather there, beside the low table.

The room is filled with gloom, coverings pulled over most of the windows. His grandfather is standing with his back towards him, in a crouched position, fumbling with something: papers, a cloth bag, counters of some sort. There is a pitcher on the table, and a cup. His grandfather's hand meanders through these objects, his head bent, his breath coming in wheezing bursts.

Hamnet gives a polite cough.

His grandfather wheels around, his face wild, furious, his arm flailing through the air, as if warding off an assailant. 'Who's there?' he cries. 'Who is that?'

'It's me.'

'Who?'

'Me.' Hamnet steps towards the narrow shaft of light slanting in through the window. 'Hamnet.'

His grandfather sits down with a thud. 'You scared the wits out of me, boy,' he cries. 'Whatever do you mean, creeping about like that?'

'I'm sorry,' Hamnet says. 'I was calling and calling but no one answered. Judith is—'

'They've gone out,' his grandfather speaks over him, with a curt flick of his wrist. 'What do you want with all those women anyway?' He seizes the neck of the pitcher and aims

it towards the cup. The liquid – ale, Hamnet thinks – slops out precipitously, some into the cup and some on to the papers on the table, causing his grandfather to curse, then dab at them with his sleeve. For the first time, it occurs to Hamnet that his grandfather might be drunk.

‘Do you know where they have gone?’ Hamnet asks.

‘Eh?’ his grandfather says, still mopping his papers. His anger at their spoiling seems to unsheathe itself and stretch out from him, like a rapier. Hamnet can feel the tip of it wander about the room, seeking an opponent, and he thinks for a moment of his mother’s hazel strip, and the way it pulls itself towards water, except he is not an underground stream and his grandfather’s anger is not like the quivering divining rod at all. It is cutting, sharp, unpredictable. Hamnet has no idea what will happen next, or what he should do.

‘Don’t stand there gawping,’ his grandfather hisses. ‘Help me.’

Hamnet shuffles forward a step, then another. He is wary, his father’s words circling his mind: Stay away from your grandfather when he is in one of his black humours. Be sure to stand clear of him. Stay well back, do you hear?

His father had said this to him on his last visit, when they had been helping unload a cart from the tannery. John, his grandfather, had dropped a bundle of skins into the mud and, in a sudden fit of temper, had hurled a paring-knife at the yard wall. His father had immediately pulled Hamnet back, behind him, out of the way, but John had barged past them into the house without a word. His father had taken Hamnet’s face in both of his hands, fingers curled in at the nape of his neck, his gaze steady and searching. He’ll not touch your sisters but it’s you I worry for, he had muttered, his brow

puckering. You know the humour I mean, don’t you? Hamnet had nodded but wanted the moment to be prolonged, for his father to keep holding his head like that: it gave him a sensation of lightness, of safety, of being entirely known and treasured. At the same time, he was aware of a curdling unease swilling about inside him, like a meal his stomach didn’t want. He thought of the snip and snap of words that punctured the air between his father and grandfather, the way his father continually reached to loosen his collar when seated at table with his parents. Swear to me, his father had said, as they stood in the yard, his voice hoarse. Swear it. I need to know you’ll be safe when I’m not here to see to it.

Hamnet believes he is keeping his word. He is well back. He is at the other side of the fireplace. His grandfather couldn’t reach him here, even if he tried.

His grandfather is draining his cup with one hand and shaking the drops off a sheet of paper with the other. ‘Take this,’ he orders, holding out the page.

Hamnet bends forward, not moving his feet, and takes it with the very tips of his fingers. His grandfather’s eyes are slitted, watchful; his tongue pokes out of the side of his mouth. He sits in his chair, hunched: an old, sad toad on a stone.

‘And this.’ His grandfather holds out another paper.

Hamnet bends forward in the same way, keeping the necessary distance. He thinks of his father, how he would be proud of him, how he would be pleased.

Quick as a fox, his grandfather makes a lunge. Everything happens so fast that, afterwards, Hamnet won’t be sure in what sequence it all occurred: the page swings to the floor between them, his grandfather’s hand seizes him by the wrist,

then the elbow, hauling him forward, into the gap, the space his father had told him to observe, and his other hand, which still holds the cup, is coming up, fast. Hamnet is aware of streaks in his vision – red, orange, the colours of fire, streaming in from the corner of his eye – before he feels the pain. It is a sharp, clubbed, jabbing pain. The rim of the cup has struck him just below the eyebrow.

‘That’ll teach you,’ his grandfather is saying, in a calm voice, ‘to creep up on people.’

Tears burst forth from Hamnet’s eyes, both of them, not just the injured one.

‘Crying are you? Like a little maid? You’re as bad as your father,’ his grandfather says, with disgust, releasing him. Hamnet springs backwards, thwacking his shin on the side of the parlour bed. ‘Always crying and whining and complaining,’ his grandfather mutters. ‘No backbone. No sense. That was always his problem. Couldn’t stick at anything.’

Hamnet is running back outside, along the street, wiping at his face, dabbing the blood with his sleeve. He lets himself in through his own front door, up the stairs, to the upper room, where a figure lies on the pallet next to their parents’ big curtained bed. The figure is dressed – a brown smock, a white bonnet, the strings of which are untied and straggle down her neck – and is lying on top of the sheets. She has kicked off her shoes, which lie, inverted, like a pair of empty pods, beside her.

‘Judith,’ the boy says, and touches her hand. ‘Are you feeling any better?’

The girl’s lids lift. She stares at her brother, for a moment, as if from a great distance, then shuts her eyes again. ‘I’m sleeping,’ she murmurs.

She has the same heart-shaped face as him, the same peaked brow, where the same corn-coloured hair grows upwards. The eyes that fixed so briefly on his face are the same colour – a warm amber, flecked with gold – the same set as his own. There is a reason for this: they share a birthday, just as they shared their mother’s womb. The boy and the girl are twins, born within minutes of each other. They are as alike as if they had been born in the same caul.

He closes his fingers about hers – the same nails, the same shaped knuckles, although his are bigger, wider, grimier – and he tries to flatten the thought that hers feel slick and hot.

‘How are you?’ he says. ‘Better?’

She stirs. Her fingers curl into his. Her chin lifts, then dips. There is, the boy sees, a swelling at the base of her throat. And another where her shoulder meets her neck. He stares at them. A pair of quail’s eggs, under Judith’s skin. Pale, ovoid, nestled there, as if waiting to hatch. One at her neck, one at her shoulder.

She is saying something, her lips parting, her tongue moving inside her mouth.

‘What did you say?’ he asks, bending nearer.

‘Your face,’ she is saying. ‘What happened to your face?’

He puts a hand to his brow, feeling the swelling there, the wet of new blood. ‘Nothing,’ he says. ‘It was nothing. Listen,’ he says, more urgently, ‘I’m going to find the physician. I won’t be long.’

She says something else.

‘Mamma?’ he repeats. ‘She – she is coming. She is not far away.’

*