

OLIVER WAKELIN

Dublin

I could see the first white flakes of snow landing on my brother's jacket. I knew that if our clothes got wet there wouldn't be a chance to dry them out before school in the morning. I watched as Andrew turned his face away, swung his conker, and missed the horse chestnut at the end of Daniel's shoestring. Andrew was too short, too little. Daniel towered over him.

"Miss," Daniel said, his breath billowing around his face like steam.

It was a cold winter night. Daniel looked chuffed. He had held his conker too high. Andrew was too young to work out how to swing his one to hit upwards at that angle.

"What is that thing now?" I asked.

"It's a sixer," Daniel said.

"What's that?" Andrew asked.

"Means it's beaten six others," I said. "Smashed them."

"Oh." Andrew's shoulders slumped. He was too good natured to display more frustration than that.

"C'mon then," Daniel said.

Andrew held up his right hand with the shoestring wrapped around it, his conker dangling beneath. Daniel had to crouch down. The end of Daniel's string was wrapped tight around his right palm. He held his conker in his left hand. He pulled the string tight, creating a lot of tension.

"Oh jeez," I said, feeling for my brother.

I hoped Daniel wouldn't miss and strike Andrew's knuckles or his forearm or something. Andrew scrunched up his eyes and turned his head away. Before I knew what was happening Daniel had swung his horse chestnut with all his power, ripping his right arm backwards, smashing Andrew's conker into two pieces. One of the pieces fell away from the string. Andrew looked down at the remains.

"Ow," Andrew said. He put his right hand into his left armpit. "Ow, ow, ow."

He looked up at me. I didn't know how to help. I should have stopped it early. Shouldn't have let Daniel make Andrew an easy target.

I said, "I guess it's a sevens?"

I was ten years old then, and Andrew was seven. We'd been collecting conkers all day with Daniel, Angus and Micheál on the streets outside St Luke's Hospital. Every year certain streets in Rathgar would be absolutely chockers with the things. Best of all, they were free. Da said there wasn't any money to go to the films since Ma got sick. That we wouldn't be able to stay in our house for long. He said the central heating was too expensive, but I said that couldn't be the reason.

We spent the day wading through ankle high piles of chestnuts. Most were still in their spiky green shells, about half the size of a fist. Sometimes the fall from the branches would break them free and I'd find them sitting on the ground, brown and

glistening like polished wood. My hands still smelt like the conker shells, like raw potato.

“Are these things poisonous?” Daniel asked.

I said, “You’re not supposed to eat them.”

“I thought you could eat chestnuts,” Andrew said.

“Did you eat one?” I asked.

“No.”

“Okay.”

Andrew was gripping the bottom of his shirt and crouching down, loading the rest of his haul into the little pouch that made. I was already carrying mine in that way. We had about thirty each to take home. The rest we’d stored in green bins in Daniel’s back yard. There were some really big ones in our shirts. Daniel didn’t want us taking all the big ones. He’d told us when we had enough.

I turned back to Daniel. I flicked my head towards his back yard and said, “So we own some of those?”

He said, “You can have some.”

I said, “But we collected them together. They’re ours too.”

“Yeah, but they’re at my house.”

I took a breath. I looked at the two enormous mansions Daniel’s parents ran as a BandB. I looked across the road at our small house. At the black plastic bag that was keeping the snow out of the broken back window of Da’s car. At the rose bushes which had died.

“Fine,” I said.

Daniel said, “Come over on the weekend. Get Colin too. We can play again. I’ll bring some people from school. We can charge them to use the conkers.”

“How much do you think we’d get?” I asked.

“I don’t know ya eejit.”

I turned towards the rush hour traffic and nudged my brother with my fists while gripping the front of my shirt.

“Wait, before you go,” Daniel said.

The street we were standing near had been bumper to bumper for the last hour, but was starting to clear as rush hour came to an end.

Daniel said, “I’m not supposed to tell you this.”

“Okay,” I said. I felt my heart beating.

“You won’t tell anyone?”

“No.”

“What about you?” Daniel asked Andrew.

“I won’t tell anyone.”

“My dad found a dead girl on the second floor.”

“Oh,” I said. “Why did she die?”

“She was taking drugs. On the second floor in the BandB. She didn’t come down for breakfast for a couple of days. When Dad knocked, no one answered. So he went into the room and he found her dead on the bed. Heroin.”

“I’m cold,” Andrew said.

He was shivering. He was looking about as if someone might come and help him. There was a big hole in his jacket under his arm. I stuck my finger into it and tickled him.

“Don’t,” he said

“Hold on,” I said to him. I turned back to Daniel. “What’s heroin?”

“Drugs.”

“How long had she been dead?”

“I don’t know. A couple of days.”

“Whoa. Have other people died in your house?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Okay. I won’t tell anyone. Were there any drugs left?”

“I don’t know.”

“I’m really cold,” Andrew said.

“All right, all right,” I said. “C’mon.”

“See yas.” Daniel began walking back to his house.

“Why does he get all the conkers?” Andrew asked.

“He’s bigger than us. And we don’t have a garden to store them in.”

“Not fair.”

“We’ll just go over and take some if we need them,” I said. “But we’ve got lots, don’t we?”

“Yeah.”

We were standing by the edge of the road. I looked left and right carefully. I couldn’t see a gap in the traffic. It was moving quick. The lights were bright and everything was blurry the way drizzly winter evenings sometimes seemed in Dublin.

I couldn’t work out whether it was better to wait for both sides of the road to come to a standstill and thread between the cars, or just wait for there to be a space big enough to run through.

I spotted a gap in the traffic on both sides.

“Run,” I shouted.

The cool night air rushed over me and I heard conkers hitting the road beside me. I guessed I’d lost a few when I’d jolted into the run, but I’d timed it perfect. There would be just enough space for us to make it through. I looked down at the road because it could be slippery. Sometimes at night I couldn’t see where the black ice was.

When I was halfway across I glanced back and saw Andrew was still standing by the side of the road, bending over to pick up some of the conkers I’d dropped.

“C’mon!” I yelled.

Andrew flinched. He stood up. I saw him look to his right and realise I wasn’t beside him. He jolted in surprise and started running across the road. He looked unsteady on his feet, kind of wonky, stepping heavily. The gap had almost closed and the car coming towards me on the other side of the road was speeding up.

I shouted, “No! Stop!”

Andrew skidded and his feet went out from under him. His shoes were my old hand-me-downs with no tread left. He landed on his backside, just across the central line of the road. I reached the pavement on the other side and I turned around.

The oncoming car's lights were very bright. The car tooted loudly and swerved a little. I saw there wasn't much the driver could do.

I needed to do something but there was nothing I could think of. I felt nothing. Empty and hollow. I watched to see what would happen.

The car sped past me, its tyres screeching. I looked to where my brother had been. He was still sitting there. Like a little teddy bear in the road. He looked up, conkers all around him. He pushed himself onto his feet and ran the rest of the way towards me. He stumbled onto the pavement and then stood beside me. I looked down at his face.

He'd always been the one mothers cooed over. Sometimes, his clenched hands used to come up to his chest and shake with excitement and happiness. Occasionally when I saw that happening I got a strange feeling in my chest, like I was a bit jealous I think. He looked so happy.

Andrew was quiet and pale now. I looked him over. His whole body was there. Normal and just as it should be. I kept seeing flashes of other worlds. The car ploughing into his body. Him being dragged along beneath it. Those big old tyres going over him. I felt a part of me was alive in that reality. I put a hand on my brother's warm shoulder and felt his collarbone. Solid and real. I stuck my finger in the hole in his jacket.

A voice down the road called out, "Hey!"

I flinched and turned. The car had come to a stop ten metres away. Then the driver started walking toward us. I had the urge to run, but I didn't have the energy. My decision had nearly got my brother run over. I guessed we were in big trouble.

"Where do you live?"

I knew I wasn't supposed to tell where I lived. Or was I? It was hard to remember in the moment when a serious, full sized adult started asking questions. I pointed dumbly to the door of the house we were standing in front of.

"Let's go inside," the man said. "I want to speak with your parents. Do you live with your parents?"

I said, "With Dad."

That wasn't a weird question because there were loads of foster kids on our street. We walked silently up to the front door. I rang the doorbell. We waited for what felt like a long time. It might have felt so long because I didn't have a clue what was happening. Was I in trouble? What was this man going to say to our da?

The door opened and Andrew and I pushed our way inside, past Da. I waited by the foot of the stairs and listened to the two men talking but I couldn't make out what was being said. I tried to listen to the tone.

Da invited the man inside. He was taken through to the kitchen and offered a cup of tea. Andrew and I watched telly in the next room while they talked. We were watching *ET*. Da had recorded it for us. For me actually, he'd said. I was surprised he'd gone to the effort. We didn't have Sky TV like my friends. Didn't have any of the good channels, or shows like *Roger Ramjet*.

I heard garbled conversation from the kitchen. Was this fella advising Da on the best ways to punish us? I thought a spanking was looking likely. Then the man started walking towards the front door. He turned to me and said, "Be careful when you're crossing."

I saw him looking around our place. He looked old and friendly now. I nodded. Da didn't keep the heating on so it was almost the same temperature inside as out. The man winked at both of us, while he rubbed his arms.

"You probably got a shock didn't you?" he said to Andrew. Andrew didn't say anything. "It was a bit scary wasn't it? But you're all right."

"Yeah," Andrew said.

I felt more relaxed when I heard the affable tone in the man's voice. Da took the man to the door, then he came and sat down on the couch between us. This was really brilliant but also frightening. I couldn't ever remember Da sitting on the couch with me. It felt so strange to have his huge warm leg touching mine.

"That man is a doctor," Da said. "He said you fell down, Andrew. That you were running across the road."

"Yeah," Andrew said.

"He drives a very big old car. It doesn't have much manoeuvrability. Do you know what that is?"

"Can't move it easily," I said.

"That's right," Da said. "He got a terrible fright. He said he thought he had hit you, Andrew. He said he wasn't sure how he missed you. That you fell down in the middle of the road."

"I fell down," Andrew said.

"That's okay," Da said. "From now on you cross farther up at the crossing, all right? Or you call home before you leave and I will come and help you cross the road."

"Yep," we both agreed.

I knew this would not happen. Our da was not the sort of da to take a phone call, and then follow instructions from his children to exit his house in order to shepherd them across a street. He was just being extra sensitive because he was a bit shocked. I guessed this would soon be forgotten, and we'd be running across that road again in no time. The closest crossing was hundreds of metres away anyway. We weren't allowed that far without permission.

Da took Andrew upstairs to get ready for bed. I sat on the couch by myself. I thought about Andrew sitting on the road and the headlights coming. Why hadn't the car slowed down at all until it had passed him?

I took myself up to our bedroom, where I could get warmer under the covers. When I closed my eyes I could still see the startled look on Andrew's face. He'd looked up at me, after he fell, with a look that said, "Help me. Please help me. I've done something wrong. Can you fix it?" It felt funny thinking about it. Like it was running around in my head. Like I could see this energy around it. That blue crackle of electricity.