Opening extract from

Carry Me Down

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I

It is January, a dark Sunday in winter, and I sit with my mother and father at the kitchen table. My father sits with his back to the table, his feet pressed against the wall, a book in his lap. My mother sits to my right and her book rests on the table. I sit close to her, and my chair, which faces the window, is near the heat of the range.

There is a pot of hot tea in the middle of the table and we each have a cup and plate. There are ham and turkey sandwiches on the plates and, if we want more to eat or drink, there is plenty. The pantry is full.

From time to time we stop reading to talk. It is a good mood, as though we are one person reading one book – not three people apart and alone.

These kinds of days are the perfect ones.

Through the small, square window I can see the narrow country road that leads to the town of Gorey and, beyond the road, a field of snow. Beyond the field of snow, although I cannot see it now, is the tree I pass every morning and two miles beyond the tree is Gorey National School, where I will return at the end of the Christmas holiday.

On the corner of the road, to the left of the front gate, there is a post with a sign pointing to Dublin and another, smaller sign beneath it, pointing to the cemetery. For two more days we will be together, the three of us, and that's what I want. I don't want anything different.

* * *

When I see that my mother is near the last page of her book, I take a pack of playing cards and move it towards her elbow. Soon, she will put her book down and offer me a game. I look at her face and wait.

Suddenly, she closes her book and stands.

'John,' she says, 'please come with me.' She is taking me out to the hallway, away from my father. She is taking me out of his sight as though I am the rubbish. 'Come now and leave your book behind,' she says.

We stand at the base of the steep and narrow stairs that lead up to my parents' loft-bedroom – the only room upstairs – and she leans against the banister with her arms folded across her chest, the skin on her hands cold and white like chalk.

'Do I look different today?' she asks.

'No. Why?'

'You were staring again. You were staring at me.'

'I was only looking,' I say.

She moves away from the banister and puts her hands on my shoulders. She is 5 feet 10 inches tall and, even though I am only one and a half inches shorter, she bears down on me until I sink lower. Her body hunches over and her bottom pokes out.

'You were staring at me, John. You shouldn't stare like that.'

'Why can't I look at you?'

'Because you're eleven now. You're not a baby any more.'

I am distracted by the cries of our cat, Crito, who is locked in the cupboard under the stairs with her new kittens. I want to go to her. But my mother presses harder.

'I was only looking,' I say.

I want to say that there is nothing babyish about looking at things, but my body shakes beneath the weight of her arms and I am trembling too much to speak.

'Why?' she asks. 'Why do you have to stare at me like that?'

She is hurting my shoulders and her weight is surprising. She

looks lighter and smaller and more beautiful when she's sitting at the table or at the end of my bed, talking to me, making me laugh. I'm angry with her now, for being tall, for being so big, so heavy and for making me so big, far too big for my age.

'I don't know why. I just like it,' I say.

'Maybe you should get out of the habit.'

'Why?'

'Because it's unnerving. Nobody can relax when you stare at them like that.'

'Sorry,' I say.

She stands up straight now and releases me. I lean across and kiss her near the mouth.

'All right then,' she says.

I kiss her a second time, but when I put my arms around her neck to pull her in closer so that we can hug, she pulls away. 'Not just now,' she says. 'It's cold out here.'

She turns and I follow her back into the kitchen.

My father's dark, curly hair is messy and his fringe has fallen down over his eyes. 'Shut the door,' he says, without looking up from his book.

'It's already shut,' I say.

'Good,' he says. 'Keep it shut.'

He smiles in the direction of his book: *Phrenology and the Criminal Cranium.*

My father hasn't worked for three years, for as long as we've lived here, in his mother's cottage. Before we moved in with my grandmother, he worked as an electrician in Wexford, but he hated his job, and said so every night when he got home. Now, instead of going to work, he reads. He says he is preparing for the entrance exam at Trinity College, and that he shouldn't have too much trouble passing because last year he sat the Mensa test and passed with flying colours.

'Look out the window,' I say to my mother. 'It's snowing sideways.'

'So it is,' she says. 'Doesn't it look like flour coming through a sieve?'

'Flour doesn't go sideways through a sieve,' I say.

Her tongue comes out to lick the corner of her mouth and it stays out. I lean across the table to touch it.

'Your tongue is cold,' I say.

My father looks at us, and my mother's lips clamp shut.

'I'm like a lizard,' she says.

She smiles at me, and I smile back.

'A strange pair,' says my father.

Crito is quiet now. She's probably glad to hear us talking and to know we are near by.

I return to reading the *Guinness Book of Records*, my favourite book. I own every edition with the exception of the 1959 edition and it is one of my Christmas presents every year.

I have a few pages left to read of the new edition for 1972, and I have almost finished reading the Human World section for the fourth time. The *Guinness Book of Records* is full of wonders, like the Chinese priest who holds the record for the longest fingernails. It took him twenty-seven years to grow nails twenty-two inches long and in the photograph they are black and curled, like a ram's horns.

Best of all are the escape artists and men like Blondin, who crossed Niagara Falls on a high wire, and Johann Hurlinger, who walked on his hands for more than fifty days. He walked for 871 miles on his hands.

One day I will be in the *Guinness Book of Records*, along with all the other people who do not want to be forgotten or ignored. I will break an important record or do a remarkable thing. I don't see the point of living unless there is something I can do better

than anyone else can or unless I can do something that nobody else can do.

I fold the picture of the shortest woman in the world so that she's up against the tallest man. His name was Robert Pershing Wadlow, and he was 8 feet 11.1 inches. By the age of eleven he was already 6 feet 7 inches tall.

I used to wonder if his voice started to break early the way mine has. I used to wonder whether I would become a giant. I still worry about these things but less now that I have decided that I won't end up in the *Guinness Book of Records* for being a freak. I will get in there for a much better reason.

The shortest woman was Pauline Musters, and she was 1 foot 11.2 inches. When I fold her picture against the tallest man, she looks like something that has fallen from his pocket, not like a person at all: a person does not stand next to another person and reach the bottom of that person's knees.

'Look,' I say to my mother. 'This midget looks like an ormamint.'

I already know what she is going to say.

'Ornament,' she says.

'Don't bend your book,' says my father.

'OK,' I say.

'And you've hardly touched your sandwich,' he says.

'I don't want to touch it,' I say.

My mother taps my hand. 'Did you leave half your sandwich uneaten just so you could say that?'

'No.'

'Then eat it.'

But the bread is stale now and it's six o'clock, time for tea. My mother stands up and looks out the window. The snow has stopped falling. She wipes her hands on her jumper and puts a

pot of water on the range. She opens the fridge and removes a package.

'Do you want this?' she asks my father.

He rubs his chin and doesn't answer. He shaved his beard off yesterday and his shaving has revealed a dimple; a dark vertical slot in the flesh on his chin. He has been rubbing at it all day as though he hopes to flatten the crease.

'Michael, do you want this for tea or not?'

He looks at the package. 'No,' he says. 'I'd prefer kippers.'

'We have none,' says my mother. 'We have no kippers.'

My mother hates to cook.

'Then I'll have that fish 'n a bag,' he says.

'That you will, then,' she says.

They smile at each other, with a smile that is different from the one they use for me. What my father calls fish 'n a bag is a meal cooked in boiling water: a square piece of fish in a clear plastic bag full of white sauce.

'Can I hold it?' I ask.

'If you really want to,' says my mother.

I take the bag from her and squish the plastic, which is soft, like wet felt. 'It feels like that goldfish I won at Butlins,' I say.

'Come here to me,' says my father, and he hugs me, but his arms are pressing hard against my neck, and his grip is too tight.

'Stop hugging my neck,' I say. 'It hurts.'

'Give the bag of fish here,' he says.

I give him the fish 'n a bag and he fondles it. 'I'm going to have to disagree with you,' he says. 'This bag feels more like a bag of snot than a goldfish.'

My father laughs, and I laugh, although I don't like it that he has compared my dinner to snot.

My mother confiscates the fish and puts it in a pot of water. I face my father.

'Da, can you tell me a story?'

'What kind of story?'
'Any kind.'

My father clears his throat and sits up taller in his seat before he begins. 'Very well. Here's the story of Tantalus, who was sentenced by the gods to stand in water up to his waist. In winter the water was cold and in summer it was too warm. When Tantalus got thirsty and his mouth was very dry, he bent down to the water to drink and the water evaporated, and when he got hungry and reached up to the branches which were laden with delicious fruit, the branches lifted the fruit, and both food and water remained out of his grasp. And this happened to Tantalus for . . .'

'A few days,' says my mother, 'as punishment for not washing his hands before tea, and then he sat down to a feast of roast chicken and chocolate ice-cream and he never went hungry or thirsty again.'

He smiles and says, 'Wash your hands.'

As I wash my hands I see Tantalus licking his lips as he reaches down for the water. On the way back to the kitchen I go to the big bookshelf in the living room where my father keeps his reference and textbooks. I look in the encyclopaedia until I find the pages I need. There is Sisyphus with a red exclamation mark next to his name. I put that mark there last year. I go back to the kitchen.

'Tantalus is a lot like Sisyphus,' I say. 'You could say that both of them suffer in the same way.'

My father laughs. 'Did you remember that while you were sitting on the toilet?'

'I wasn't on the toilet. I was only washing my hands and that's when I remembered.'

I look carefully at his face. He is not laughing at me, so I join in.

'Yes,' I say. 'I could clearly see Sisyphus pushing the boulder up a big hill and the boulder rolling straight past Sisyphus and back down the hill. I could see Sisyphus standing there, watching the boulder roll down, all sad and silent, and then pushing the boulder back up and the boulder rolling back down where it came from, over and over again. I think he must feel just like Tantalus.'

'Straining to get the big brown thing where you want it to go,' says my father, laughing until there are tears in his eyes.

Now my mother is laughing. 'Good God,' she says, 'somebody get the poor man a glass of water.'

I jump up and get a glass of water for my father and when I sit back down my mother kisses me on the nose to thank me. 'You're nice to have around,' she says. 'I think we'll keep you.'

'Good,' I say.

When my father has finished with the water I see that the buttons of his jacket are done up the wrong way. He does this on purpose, and it's often a sign of good humour. I lean over and reach for the top button.

'May I fix your buttons?' I ask.

'No, no!' he laughs. 'You'll ruin my crooked and disarming looks.'

He's in the mood for button-fixing and so I go around the table and grab for the second button. He shouts and laughs.

'Get off me, fish face! Get off me!'

'Only four buttons left!' I shout in return.

I manage to undo one more button and then he gets up and goes to the window. He stand and looks out, his face suddenly serious; no more playing.

'Christ almighty. I thought she was back early.'

'Is she?' I ask.

He's talking about my granny, his mother, who'll be back from the Leopardstown races on Tuesday. I've only two days left alone with them.

'No,' he says. 'A false alarm.'

We sit down and he returns to reading.

I face the dresser so that I can look at the black-and-white portrait taken on their wedding day in 1960. My father was twenty-seven then, and even more handsome than he is now because his hair was longer. My mother was twenty-six. She is just as beautiful now.

Nearly all of Wexford parish knew of my parents' courtship and the way each broke off an engagement to be with the other. I've heard that there was nobody who did not stop to stare at them as they walked down the street: they were like movie stars.

They look happy in the photograph, my father behind my mother, four inches taller than she is and making her smaller. I like the way they cut the cake together, my mother's hand over my father's, both holding the long, white-handled knife.

I'm not handsome, too lanky, and my nose is already too big for my face. It must be hard for my parents to look at me, wondering whether there's any hope that I'll turn out to be as good-looking as they are.

I return to the *Guinness Book* and read on page 398 that the record for being buried alive in a 'regulation'-sized coffin is held by an Irishman by the name of Tim Hayes. He was buried for 240 hours 18 minutes and 50 seconds. He came up for air on 2nd September 1970. I'm surprised I haven't heard of him. Perhaps I could meet him one day.

It is nearly seven o'clock and I'm getting bored. I put my foot on top of my mother's foot and she pulls her foot out from under mine and puts hers on top. We go back and forth until my father looks at us and shakes his head. I don't let him see that I've noticed, but this slow head-shaking stops my mother

straight away and she stands up and looks at her watch.

'You'd better get it over and done with,' she says to my father. She's talking about Crito's kittens, who must be killed before my grandmother returns.

'In a minute,' he says.

'Please do it before somebody starts giving them names,' says my mother. 'And, John. You stay here with me.'

'I don't care,' I say. 'I'm going to help this time.'

'I don't care either,' she says. She looks at my father now. 'Just get rid of those things before your mother gets back or we'll never hear the end of it.'

My father named our cat Crito after Socrates' closest friend, who cried the most at Socrates' deathbed. I like Crito's black-and-white face and her long white socks.

My mother shakes her head at my father and he stands. 'Come on then,' he says. 'Let's see what the boy is made of.'

I follow him to the cupboard under the stairs. He crouches in the sooty dark, between the Hoover and the shovel. He tells me to turn the light on and then he pulls six kittens by their tails to remove them from Crito's teats. He puts them in the pouch he has created by tucking his jacket into his trousers.

'It's OK,' I say to Crito, 'we're taking them for a walk.'

'Are you sure you're ready for this?' my father asks.

'Yes,' I say.

'Then go and get the sack from the coal-scuttle and bring it to the bathroom. I'll meet you there.'

He makes it sound as though we're going somewhere far away, but the cottage is a small place and nobody could ever get lost in it: you walk in the front door and stand in the hallway, and if you turn right, you go through the kitchen, and from the kitchen you can either go back into the hallway, or you can go into the living room. The living room has two doors and you can go out again

to the hallway where you will face the door to the bathroom and then take a few steps and you'll see my bedroom door and then, at the back of the cottage, you'll find my grandmother's bedroom. And at the very end of the hallway is the back door, which leads to the small garden. The only adventure is going up the narrow wooden stairs to my parents' bedroom.

I put the sack down by my father's feet.

'Right. Pop them in here for me.'

I take the kittens – all of them black and white like Crito – from the pouch in my father's jacket and put them into the sack while he runs the bath with hot water. The steam makes my face sweat.

'They're not wriggling very much,' I say. 'It must be cosy in the sack.'

'Don't be soft,' he says. 'Grab that chair for me to sit on, and grab that stool for yourself.'

He pulls his chair near to the bath, and I sit on the stool by the taps, in case he needs more water. He lowers the sack into the hot bath. The sack floats for a moment, then sinks to the bottom. As the kittens move around inside, the sack moves with them.

'How long does it usually take?' I ask.

My father shrugs. 'That depends.'

We don't speak. His leg is jumping up and down and air bubbles float to the top of the water. I'm unstable on the stool and there is nowhere for me to hang on. I'm going to fall off and I want to get down, but I don't say so.

'God, Da,' I say. 'They're moving around a lot. Maybe we should've given them some kind of injection or something.'

He doesn't answer. He stares at the water and chews the inside of his lip. The heads of the kittens are straining against the darkened cloth of the sack.

Now there are fewer bubbles.

'It's taking a very long time,' I say.

He turns on me. 'Are you able for this or not? If you're not, then go and help your mother in the kitchen.'

My mother is not in the kitchen; she's in my bedroom next door. I can hear her singing.

'I am able for it,' I say.

There are certain things my father says, when we are alone, that give me a feeling that is a mixture of excited and sick.

'Feck it,' he says. 'The water mustn't've been hot enough.'

He gets up from his chair and lifts the sack out of the water. I climb off the stool and watch as he struggles to undo the knot in the sack. The kittens are still moving.

'Quick,' I say. 'Let them out.'

The knot is hard to loosen, but at last the sack is open. My father is red in the face and neck. He empties four of the kittens onto the floor and they wriggle and climb on top of each other. Their small ribs heave up and down under thin strands of wet, dark fur. If not for their mewing, they wouldn't seem like kittens at all.

'I knew you'd let them out,' I say, 'I knew you couldn't kill them.'

My father turns to me, takes a kitten in his hand, swings it over his shoulder, and smashes its head against the edge of the bath. The sound of the skull cracking is loud and sharp; like a ruler being snapped in half.

'You stupid, soft little bastard,' he says.

He holds the bashed kitten by the tail over the bath. I want it to live and I still hope it might but blood drips from its skull and ears and it doesn't move. I know it must be dead.

There's not much blood but there's enough to drip down the inside of the bath, enough to turn the water pink near the surface. The blood sinks, then fades. I don't look at my father and then, without warning, he lifts another wet kitten from the floor and bashes its head against the side of the bath. His face is redder

than I've ever seen it and, as he reaches for the next kitten, his hand shakes.

'Stop it!' I say. 'Please stop.'

He looks down. The kittens still in the sack have stopped moving.

'It's only nature,' he says, his chest rising and falling. 'You've got to learn that it's only nature.'

I look at him. 'Don't you feel sad?' I ask.

'Why would it make me feel sad?' He stands up. 'It's only what the farmers have to do every day of the week to get the food on your table.'

I look carefully at him and something happens. I know – I am certain – he is lying. There is something in his face, a flash, a momentary smirk, and then a frown. There is also something false about the way he said, 'it's only what the farmers have to do every day of the week' (something he has never said before). He's lying about not being sad.

'Do you really not feel sad?'

He stares at me and, as I stare back, his hazel eyes turn black.

'No, not a bit. They don't even have a soul yet. It's about time you toughened up.'

'But you bashed their heads. Doesn't that make you feel sorry for them?'

'No, sure I told you. There's nothing sad about it at all. They're only grubs with fur.'

'You're brave,' I say, and as soon as I've said it I am sick.

I vomit, without warning, on the bathroom floor, a few inches from a kitten's head and an inch from my father's foot. It is as though a bucket of yellow poison is coming out of me. He lied to me and it has made me sick. He stands back and calls out for my mother. 'Helen, come help us with this mess.'

I move my shoes away from the pool of yellow vomit and vomit a second time. I look down so that he won't see my face.

'Jesus,' he says. 'You poor, soft lad.'

My mother comes in with a dishrag in her hand and looks at my sick on the bathroom floor. 'Michael? What's wrong?'

'He was sick,' says my father.

I look at her shoes. They are my father's shoes. She shouldn't wear his shoes.

I want her to say something, but she stares at my sick and does not speak to me. I walk towards her and still she says nothing.

'They're all dead,' I say, as I squeeze between my mother and father and walk out the door.

My mother comes to my room at half nine and sits on the end of my bed. 'John, come and say goodnight to your father.'

'What about a puppet show?' I ask.

Some nights, before I go to sleep, my mother performs a finger-puppet show for me. There's a cardboard apple-box with curtains painted on it and holes in the side for her hands to go through. This box stays in my room, near the foot of my bed, and the puppets are stored in my cupboard.

'I don't think so. Not tonight, John.'

She stands up. 'Come. You need to say goodnight.'

My father is in his armchair by the fire. Usually when I come to him to say goodnight, he parts his legs, or uncrosses them. And even though I'm too big, I sit on his knee, just for the play of it, and he asks me whether I've combed my teeth, the same joke he makes every night, and we laugh.

But when he sees me walk into the living room, he keeps his legs tightly crossed, and looks at me as though he has never seen me standing by his chair before. He has swept his fringe away from his eyes and the artery on his left temple pulses in time with the grandfather clock; it looks like mercury pumping inside sausage skin, ugly and hot.

'Goodnight, Da,' I say.

'Goodnight then,' he says.

'Goodnight,' I say again, but he pretends not to have heard.

I go back to bed and read for a while.

My mother comes in. 'OK?' she asks.

'OK,' I say.

'Read for a bit longer tonight, if you want to,' she says.

She's wearing a pair of my father's pyjamas, and the hems drag on the floor.

'Why was everything different today?' I ask.

'Nothing was different today, John.'

'Oh,' I say. 'Are you sure?'

'Yes, darling. I'm sure.'

She steps closer to the bed. I sit up and lean forward. Instead of kissing me, she touches the collar of my pyjama top.

'Sleep well,' she says to the wall behind me. But her voice is kind, and after she leaves I am happy for a while, until I realise that there is something stuck in my throat and that the feeling is getting worse.

I can hear the melted snow trickling into the drain outside and I'm afraid of something, although I don't know what. I wonder what it means to be sure that a person has lied. I will check the *Guinness Book of Records* tomorrow to see if there is an entry for lie detection.