THE TIGHT-ROPE WALKERS

DAVID ALMOND

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CANDLEWICK PRESS

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To David Battye

I was born in a hovel

on the banks of the Tyne, as so many of us were back then. It was a three-room dilapidated upstairs flat, in the same terraced row where Dad had been born, and just upriver from Simpson's Shipyard. Rats slunk under the floorboards, mice scuttled in the walls. The bath hung on a nail on the wall, the toilet was at the foot of steep steps outside. The river slopped against the banks and stank when the tide was low. There was the groan of engines and cranes from the yard, the din of riveters and caulkers. Sirens blared at the start and end of shifts. Gulls screamed, children laughed, dogs barked, parents yelled.

All hackneyed, all true.

By the time I remember anything clear, the slums were gone and we'd moved uphill into our pebbledashed estate built on a wilderness just above town.

It's said we travelled there like refugees. We came from crumbling terraces with tiny yards, from riverside shacks, from tumbledown cottages next to long-abandoned mines.

They were still completing it all when we arrived. There were trenches in the earth for pipes and cables. White markers showed where the pavements and roads would be. There were half-built garden walls and gateposts. Our dads roped furniture to their backs or pushed it there on handcarts. Our mams lugged rolled-up sheets and blankets. Retired pit ponies were used as cargo-carriers, Alsatians hauled pallets of boxes and bags. What did we have to bring anyway? A few sticks of furniture, enough clothes to dangle loosely in little wardrobes. Some brought beasts on leads and in boxes or baskets: chickens and ferrets to house in back gardens. Ponies and pigeons and rabbits and dogs.

I was one year old when we arrived. Dad carried me there in a wooden box. The box became a cradle, then my bed in which I slept until I was three years old.

Men closed the holes and chasms in the earth as we settled in and as I grew. They laid kerbstones and paving stones. They raised lampposts and telegraph poles. Men with scorched faces and with holes burned into their clothes tended fiery engines, braziers and steamrollers. They spread asphalt and tarmacadam with huge black brooms and great black shovels. Men in white overalls painted the doors and window frames. And kind men in brown with soft green caps stood on scaffolding by our walls and brought us pebbledash.

"True artists," Mam murmured, as we stood in the rubble garden to watch them work. I must have just begun to walk, but I believe I recall these things.

The pebbledashers laid tarpaulins beneath the wall. Then brought wet plaster in buckets and spread it on the wall. Then dug their trowels into sacks of tiny stones and flicked the stones

towards the plaster. Beautiful sounds: the ring of the trowel, the chink of the flick, the dash of the stones against the wall, the scatter upon the tarpaulin of those that fell. Time and again and time and again they plastered, flicked, and dashed, then gathered up the stones and began again until the wall was covered and they moved to other walls.

They kept turning, winking at me, proud of what they did.

I remember one of the men who came to me and tweaked my cheek.

"What do you think of that then, kidder?" he said.

"He thinks it is just marvellous," Mam answered. "Don't you, son?"

"Yes," I think I whispered as I turned my face into her skirt.

When I was small, I loved to press my palms against the walls, to feel the points and edges against my skin. I'd press until it was almost painful, then lift my hand to see the pattern of the stones on me, to see it slowly fade, then press again to bring it back. I'd touch tenderly with my fingertips to feel the tiny smooth and gleaming surfaces. The rectangles of the walls were lovely, with the flaring-outward at the foot of each one, the three-inch gap left between the pebbledash and the earth as protection from the damp.

It seemed so finished, so perfect, so modern, once the earth was closed, once the roads were laid, once the heaps of waste had disappeared, once all the men had gone away and we were left alone, to be ourselves, to grow together in our bright new world.

This is where these things happened, to me, to Holly Stroud, to Vincent McAlinden, in a time and place that seem so long ago but are not so long ago, in a time and place that lay halfway between the river and the sky.

Pebbledash

Chapter 1

McAlinden made his first mark when I was five years old. It was a bright spring day and I was with Holly Stroud. She lived across the narrow street, in a house that was a reflection of our own. We were walking on the garden walls. Her dad, Bill Stroud, was at our side, ready to catch us if we fell.

Holly high-stepped, danced and spread her arms like wings. I followed her, less certain.

At the two-foot gap between the gateposts, Bill lifted her up and carried her high in a perfect arc and put her down again.

She bowed to him, to the estate and to the sky.

Two kids trundled by on homemade stilts. A bunch of girls played hospitals, their orange boxes arranged against a garden wall.

"Now your turn, Dom," said Holly.

Bill helped me onto the gatepost. Invisible boys were yelling, playing football up on the high fields.

"Back straight," said Holly. "Pointed toes, head held high."

Bill held his palm against my back to help me understand.

"Like you're dancing, Dom!" cried Holly. "Yes, nearly right!"

She turned to the half-open first-floor window of the house. Dark curtains wafted on the breeze there.

"Mam!" she called. "I'm with Dominic Hall, Mam!"

"Wonderful!" replied her mother's voice.

"He's doing great, Mam!"

"Marvellous!"

Mrs. Stroud began to sing: "*'O for the wings, for the wings of a dove . . .'*"

Bill lifted me and swung me, and held me high and steady in the air. A bunch of boys ran past, screaming that they were off to bomb Berlin. A pony whinnied and a cockerel called. I stretched my arms and tried to lose myself in weightlessness.

The stone came spinning through the air and hit my brow. I flopped. Bill laid me down. He dabbed the blood with his handkerchief.

"What's your name?" he said.

"Vincent *McAlinden*!" yelled Holly.

"Dominic," I murmured to Bill Stroud.

"What on earth d'you think you're *doing*?" yelled Holly.

Vincent stood further down the street. He'd moved here just a few days ago. Squat, black-haired and filthy. He had his hands turned upward in regret.

"I didn't mean it!" he shouted. "I aimed to miss!"

"Get back home," snapped Bill.

He held Holly back from running to him.

"Leave him," he said. "He's just a daft tinker."

His white handkerchief reddened with my blood. He spread his hand before my face.

"How many fingers?"

"Three."

"What month is it?"

"March."

"Good lad. Lie still."

Kids were gathering. *He's bust his skull. Is his eye out? He could've had his bliddy eye out.* Then Mam was here, reaching down to me.

"We'll have the bliddy polis on you!" someone called.

"Bugger off out of this estate, ye little sod!"

"How many fingers now?" said Bill.

"Two."

Mam held me and I sobbed.

"He needs a cuddle," said Bill. "And an Elastoplast, and a nice sweet cup of tea."

He stroked my brow.

"You'll be all right, son. You'll survive."

Then here was Dad in his black work clothes, with his knapsack hanging from his back.

"It was the new kid, Mr. Hall," said some child.

"Him that just moved in the other day."

"Vincent McAlinden, Mr. Hall."

"He threw a stone," said Bill. "The little sod."

"Are ye aal reet?" Dad said to me.

"Aye, Dad."

"And ye done nowt about it?" said Dad to Bill.

"Not yet," said Bill. "He's been . . ."

Dad took me from Mam and stood me up. He took the handkerchief from Bill and pressed it to the wound. He set off down the street with me. I could smell the shipyard on him, the oil, the grease, the river, the filth. He drew furiously on a cigarette.

"What were ye up to?" he said.

"Just playing, Dad."

"With the Stroud lass?"

"Aye."

"Diyin what?"

"Walkin on the walls, Dad."

"Walkin on the bliddy *walls*?"

We came to the house at the foot of the estate. The rocky pathway that led out of the estate ran right beside it. A pair of dogs snarled through the fence. The back door of the house was open, a fire blazed in the grate inside.

"Where's that lad!" shouted Dad.

Mrs. McAlinden came to the door. She wiped her hands on a piece of cloth. She lit a cigarette and drew on it.

"Look at this!" snapped Dad.

I lifted the handkerchief away.

She came to the fence and looked down at me. She yelled at the dogs to stop their bliddy snarling. Kids wailed inside the house, and she yelled at them to stop as well.

"Vincent?" she said.

"If that's his name, that's him," said Dad.

I could smell the sweat on her. Could see the grease in her hair shining in the sun.

"Is it sore?" she said.

I squeezed back my tears and nodded. Yes. The blood was trickling down past my eyes now.

"The lad's a terror," she said.

"Get him here."

"Vincent!" she yelled at the house.

"Keep down!" she yelled at the dogs. "I dunno what to do with

him," she said to Dad. "Be different if I had a man like you to give him a proper thrashin now and then."

"Get him out and I'll diy it now," said Dad. "At least I'll scare the little sod."

"I doubt it," she said. "Vincent! Vincent!"

She leaned closer and her huge breasts swung inside her loose black blouse.

"Would you like a cup of nice warm milk, son?" she said.

"No!" I gasped.

She looked at me fondly. Wiped blood from my cheek with her fingertips, then wiped them on her skirt.

"How d'ye get them to be so nice?" she said.

Dad threw the stub of his cigarette away. She gave him another and for a few seconds they just smoked, watching the fumes rise from their lips and towards the bright sky.

"Vincent!" she yelled.

He came to the door at last and stood just inside.

"It was just a bit of carry-on," he said. "I aimed to miss."

"Well bliddy miss better next time," she said. "Now howay here and say sorry to this bairn."

"Not while that bugger's standin there."

Dad snarled.

"Get here now!" he said. "Or I'll come and get ye and I'll bliddy swing for ye!"

Vincent shuffled out. He took one of the dogs by its collar and held it at his side.

"Have ye seen what ye've done?" said his mother.

"Aye," said Vincent.

"Just look at that bliddy blood," she said. "He's just a little lad. Ye should be lookin after him, not hoyin bliddy rocks at him."

"I aimed to miss!"

"Say yer sorry."

His shoulders slumped. He curled his lip and looked down at the ground.

"I'm sorry."

Dad grabbed his collar and dragged him close. The woman kicked the growling dog away. Dad hauled Vincent till he stood on tiptoe.

"Say it like ye *mean* it," he said.

"I diy mean it. I'm really sorry. What's yer name, kid?"

Dad elbowed me.

"Speak up for yerself. Tell him your name."

I looked into Vincent's eyes, looked down again.

"Dominic," I said.

"I'm really, really sorry, Dominic."

"Are ye?" said Dad.

"Aye! Really. Aye!"

"So it won't happen again, will it?"

"No, mister."

"Cos if it does I swear I'll bliddy swing for ye. Do ye knaa what that means?"

"Aye, mister! Aye!"

"Good." He shoved Vincent away from us. "Now bugger off back into the house and diy something to help yer mother."

"Aye, mister. I will right now."

He scuttled back into the house.

Dad put his hand tenderly on my shoulder at last.

"Look at you," he said. "You'd think you'd been to bliddy war." He dabbed the tears and blood. "Ye'll need to toughen up, eh?"

"He'll learn," said Mrs. McAlinden.

"Will he?" said Dad.

Mrs. McAlinden shrugged. She shook her head.

"Kids!" she said.

We went back up through the estate. Holly and Bill and Mam were still standing there. Mrs. Stroud still sang.

"That bugger there," Dad said softly. "That Stroud bloke. He's a conchie. You know what that means, don't you?"

"Yes, Dad."

"So he'll not be much use to you, will he? And just listen to the lunatic upstairs."

"'Morning has broken, like the first mo-o-o-orning . . .'"

"You ever heard owt like that?"

"No, Dad."

"No. Anyway they'll not be stayin much longer. This is a place for the likes of us and not the likes of them."

Mam came to us and cuddled me.

"Better now?" she said.

"Aye, Mam."

I lifted the handkerchief away.

"What a mess," she said. "But look, it's stopping now. Soon there'll be a scab and then a little scar, then it'll be like nothing happened at all."

"Better now?" said Bill.

I nodded.

"Brave lad," said Bill.

"Come out again soon," said Holly.

We went inside. Mam cleaned me up with Dettol and cotton wool and put an Elastoplast on me. Dad went upstairs and changed his clothes, and came back smelling of toothpaste and Old Spice. We had pork pie and chips and peas. We all sat together on the sofa and Dad smoked and Mam waved his smoke away.

Dad laughed at her, cuddled her, kissed her and sighed.

We watched *The Lone Ranger* and the picture fuzzed and faded and crackled in and out of view. Dad imitated the voices of the Indians and of Tonto.

"Kemosabe!" he said. "Ungawa!"

Mam clicked her tongue and laughed.

"That's from *Tarzan*!" she said.

"What is?"

"Ungawa. Isn't it, Dominic?"

"Aye," I said. "It means, Cheetah, go and get an elephant!"

Dad snorted and stood up, ready to go to the Iona Club. He kissed Mam, he stroked my hair.

"Hoy the rock back at him next time," he said.

"Don't say that!" said Mam.

He stood with his back to the fire and pondered.

"Why not?" he said. "Seems to me there should be a bit more of that Vincent McAlinden in him, and a little bit less of that Holly bliddy Stroud."

Mam rolled her eyes and he went away.

"More of Vincent McAlinden!" she scoffed.

We stayed together on the sofa. She clicked her tongue, for there was blood again, showing through the Elastoplast. She peeled it free.

"The skin's that thin," she said. "That's the trouble."

She tried dressing it again, and soon put me to bed.

"Don't forget your prayers," she said.

She kissed me and left me. I lay and listened to the night. Listened for the ghosts and monsters that all we children dreaded in this place. And then I slept, and Dad woke me: his footsteps, the click of the gate, the click and clash of the front door. I heard my parents talking softly together, then coming up the stairs.

I touched my brow, licked my fingers. Blood again. I imagined

it bleeding forever, all the blood in me draining away through this narrow opening.

I slept again, woke again, heard more footsteps, rapid, soft.

Dared to go to the window and look out through my hands.

It was no ghost, no monster.

It was the tramp Jack Law. He leaned forward as he passed quickly beneath the orange streetlights, heading towards the upper wasteland and the fields. His long fair hair, pale as the pebbledash, glinted in the moonlight, then he was just a shadow and then he was gone.

I lay back down.

"'Our Father,'" I started, "'who art in Heaven. Hallowed be thy . . .'"

I licked my bloodied fingertips again. Put my fingers to the wound, whose mark would be with me forevermore.

"Our Father," I began again.

Chapter 2

Who made you?

Why did God make you?

Kind Miss Fagan said that these were the most important things we'd ever learn. We must learn the answers word by word. We must commit them to our heart.

"Who made you, Dominic Hall?"

"God made me, Miss Fagan."

"There is no need to include me in your answer. Who made you, Dominic Hall?"

"God made me."

"Good boy. And why did God make you, Holly Stroud?"

"God made me to know Him, love Him and serve Him in this world, and to be happy with Him forever in the next."

"Good girl. See how simple it is, children? We will learn a little every day until mistakes are made by none of us, until we can

answer the most difficult questions deep inside the book. For we wish to have no blemishes on our souls, do we, children?"

"No, Miss Fagan."

"We wish to go to Heaven, don't we, children?"

"Yes, Miss Fagan."

"And we wish to please Miss O'Kane, don't we?"

"Yes, Miss Fagan."

"Yes, indeed. Now, put away your catechisms and we will make some words and pictures. Would you like that?"

"Yes, Miss Fagan."

And she'd take a stick of chalk and reach up to the blackboard and start to write. Her fingers were slender. Her movements were deft. She curved the marks and angled them, and spoke the letters as she wrote, then spoke the words the letters made, then left a space and went on to the next word and the next until she dotted a stop, then spoke the words again to let us hear the meaning and the beauty of it all. And then we copied what she'd done, to make the shapes and sense and sentences for ourselves.

The grass is green.

The sky is blue.

The yellow sun is in the sky.

"No need to rush," she'd say. "Stay on the line. Remember your finger spaces. That's good, that's so lovely, children."

She'd gently tap the shoulders of some of us and whisper that yes, we had it right. She'd lean down to the slow ones, sometimes take their hand in hers, guide their uncertain clumsy fingers into the right actions, the right marks.

"Yes," she'd murmur. "Well done. Practice makes perfect. Remember that."

She never lost her temper. Her classroom was benign. We sat on hard steel-and-timber benches bolted to steel-and-timber

desks. There was a crucifix high up on the wall behind Miss Fagan's desk, and the alphabet, and numbers from one to a hundred, and a painting of poor Saint Lawrence being roasted on a fire. Through the high windows, we saw the scudding northeastern sky, occasional songbirds flying past, tight flocks of rushing pigeons, and far away, for those of us who knew how and where to look, the tiny almost-invisible dots of distant larks.

Miss Fagan had us for our first three years.

I loved to be in there. I loved to copy the letters and make the shapes, to hear the sounds and rhythms, to see the visions that the words made in my brain. *The ship sails. The bird flies.* To write with chalk on slate. To be among the group allowed to write with dip pens, to dip the pen into my own little pot of blue ink, to write into neatly lined red exercise books, to copy prayers and hymns and Bible stories from the board, to dry the ink with bright white blotting paper. *Infant Jesus, meek and mild, look on me, a little child. In the middle of the night He came to them, walking upon the sea, and told them, Do not be afraid.* I loved the books we read. *Here is Janet. Here is John.*

And to write, to be allowed to write words of my own, sentences of my own, tales of my own. *Once there was a boy carled Dominic, who warked acros the waystland to have an advencher.* I loved to learn that *waystland* must turn to *wasteland,* to learn the power of a comma and a full stop, to love the patterns made on paper by strings of sentences, blocks of paragraphs. There were many who couldn't do this. I sat for some time beside a boy called Norman Dobson. I was mystified by the way his words were scrawls across the page, no spaces between them, how they made no sense at all, how punctuation was random, meaningless, how he bent breathing wetly over his work as if in great pain. I would try to help him.

"Remember finger spaces, Norman," I'd whisper. "Stay on the lines."

He'd turn to me with furrowed brow and with snot trickling to his upper lip.

"You can do it, Norman," I'd whisper.

"I can't," he'd say. "I just bliddy cannot, Dom."

I'd watch his hands trembling with the struggle of it, the fear of it.

Holly knew the joy of it. I loved the times we were allowed to work together, to see the pictures that she drew to supplement and intensify my words, to make our shared creation. *Sum people said Don't go. It is too danjerus. But the boy was very brayv.* And to see a boy shaped just like me setting out across the page's snowy waste.

The school, Saint Lawrence's, was a stone-built place towards the river. It stood upon earth that was riddled with ancient mines. We were close to the wailing and shuddering of engines in the factories and shipyards down here. We could smell oil and weird sweet chemicals and the foulness of the river when it was low. On hot days we gagged at the stench of the boneyard on the opposite bank.

The school was a place of ghosts. The older children told us tales of the children who had died below a hundred years ago, children killed in rockfalls and explosions. They rose to haunt this place above.

Beware of certain corridors, we were told.

Beware of that cupboard, of turning that corner.

Try this. Count the kids in your classroom. Sometimes you'll be counting more than there really are. You're counting ghosts. They come up from the dark to sit here in the light, especially with you, the younger ones. You haven't seen them yet? Keep your eyes

peeled. Watch and be prepared. There, look! Oh no. Just a shadow. There! Run!

And worse. Monsters roamed the schoolyard at night when we children were away. They that hid in the daytime in lairs in the earth.

They're things half human and half beast.

We'd stare and wonder. How could that be so?

You'll come to understand, when you're old enough to know.

They sniggered, rolled their eyes.

Dogs and women, mares and men.

Ask your fathers, if you're brave enough, but be ready to get clouted.

Holly was a sceptic, even in her infancy.

"All a load of nonsense," she would say.

I didn't dare to contradict her, didn't dare agree.

She put her hand up in class one day.

"Yes, Holly?" said Miss Fagan.

"There are no such things as ghosts, are there, Miss Fagan?"

Miss Fagan smiled.

"Some say yes, some say no."

"But there *aren't,* are there, Miss?"

"Well, I don't believe so, Holly. I believe God sends us on our proper way once life is done."

"And there are no such things as monsters, are there? They're just things for stories, aren't they?"

"Hmm. Jesus himself encountered demons, Holly. In truth, there are things we cannot really know and understand. That is why we need the Church and prayer."

"The Church and prayer!" Holly muttered.

Miss Fagan's face darkened, a rare occurrence.

"Holly," she said.

"Sorry, Miss."

"Be careful, Holly Stroud."

"Yes, Miss Fagan."

Saint Lawrence's was the school of all Catholic children in that town. Vincent McAlinden was one of us. He was three years older than I. He had few friends. For a time he took Norman Dobson to his side, until Norman came into the classroom one afternoon with tears in his eyes and a cigarette burn on the back of his hand.

"Vincent?" I whispered.

"It was an accident," he said. "He didn't mean it, Dom."

Later, as we worked, tears fell to his book and made his page even messier than usual. I put my arm around him. I whispered to him to stay away from awful Vincent. By this time we'd left the room of kind Miss Fagan and were in the care of cold, strict Miss Mulvaney.

"Dominic Hall!" the teacher snapped. "What on earth do you think you're doing?"

I took my arm away.

"Sorry, Miss," I said.

"Sorry, indeed," said Miss Mulvaney. "And stop that snivelling, Dobson. I can't bear a boy who snivels."

Fortunately for Norman, Vincent seemed to lose interest in him. He turned his attentions to a boy of his own age called Bernard, who lived on the far side of our estate. Bernard wore knee-length shorts and battered plimsolls and glasses with one lens blocked by grimy Elastoplast. It was said that he was even simpler than Norman, that he couldn't read, couldn't write, that even the kindness of Miss Fagan and the cruelties of Miss O'Kane had been unable to change him.

Like many children, Vincent and Bernard left the premises at

dinnertime. But they did not go home like others did, to lunch on egg and chips or tomato soup. They played games with fires and knives. They dug down into the ancient pit heap nearby. Vincent forced Bernard into tunnels in the earth, seeking the entrances to the ancient workings below. Sometimes Bernard encountered ghosts and came out screaming. The two boys had been seen swimming naked together in the filthy Tyne. They'd been seen struggling, grunting, wrestling, groaning. We even heard that Vincent drank Bernard's blood. And it was said that they committed sins so awful that they were beyond forgiveness, sins that would consign them both to Hell forevermore.

One sun-filled day I caught sight of them. I was alone, gazing through a fence towards Simpson's Shipyard. I was lost in thoughts of Dad. I tried to imagine him crawling through darkness and fumes. Tried to pinpoint the noise of the caulking hammers hammering on steel. Tried to imagine his own hammer jumping and rattling in his hands. To imagine the showers of sparks that arose around the welders' rods, the red-hot fragments of flying metal. I saw the goggles he wore, the oily cap, the battered knee pads, battered boots, the cigarette that dangled at the corner of his mouth. I heard him wheezing, coughing, hawking, spitting. Imagined him grinning at his mates, snarling at the foremen, cursing the timekeepers, the gate controllers, the managers, the draughtsmen in their offices, the bliddy owners.

Then I saw Vincent. He was kneeling in the field outside, just where it slanted down towards the river. Bernard was at his side, on all fours in the long pale grass. He was very still and his head was hanging downward like a beast's. Vincent leaned close to him, as if in tenderness, as if softly whispering something into his friend's ear. A few seconds of this, then Vincent touched Bernard's neck, and Bernard slumped into the grass and out of sight, as if he'd died.

Vincent gazed down and watched. Then turned, and it was as if he knew I'd been watching. I could see him grinning even from this distance. He raised his hand and beckoned me. I wanted to run, but couldn't turn. Tried to see some movement in the place where Bernard had gone. Vincent stood up and started to wade through the grass towards me. I couldn't move. Said a rapid prayer in fright, then saw Bernard rising, and I ran, and heard Vincent laughing, and calling out, "I'm comin! I'm just behind ye, Dom! Aaaaah!"

Vincent was in the class of the dreaded Miss O'Kane. Once we had left Miss Fagan's, all of us were taken to that room each Friday morning to be tested. We walked along a stone-paved corridor and up an iron stairway to the heavy wooden half-glazed classroom door. One of the clever ones would be told to knock. Miss O'Kane's cold voice would call upon us to enter. And so we entered.

Miss O'Kane waited, sitting on her high chair. The cane of Miss O'Kane waited also, resting before her on her desk.

It was so easy. *Who made you? Why did God make you? Where is God?* These were simple things to recollect. And there was even a degree of kindness in the asking, for it was only we clever few — myself, Holly Stroud, a handful of others — who were ever called upon to respond to the complicated questions. *What were the chief sufferings of Christ? What is Hope? What does the Fifth Commandment forbid? In how many ways can we cause or share the guilt of another's sin?*

Despite that, many failed, and kept on failing. Of course it was often nervousness as much as dullness, or the expectation of failure, or an acceptance of the habit of suffering. There were those who knew perfectly well one week what was meant by a Mystery, only to have totally forgotten just a few short days later. Those who did not know their answer, or who had forgotten, were called to stand

before us at the front. And it was then that the cane of Miss O'Kane was lifted from the desk.

"Yes, it is important," she would say, "to know your letters and your numbers. But it is more important to understand why it is that you were placed upon this earth, and it is essential to know what will happen when you die. Put out your hand."

One day when the sky outside was all tormented she turned with spite to Norman Dobson.

"What," she asked him, "will Christ say to the wicked?"

I and many others caught our breath. Surely Norman shouldn't be given such a question, which came from deep within the catechism and which needed such a complex answer. The school by now saw him as beyond help, or as one beyond the need of help, destined to become a labourer in the yard, or a cleaner, the lowest of the low.

But Miss O'Kane decided that day that his faith must be tested. Maybe her impatience was at a peak that day. Maybe there were troubles in her own life, a life that we children had no notion of.

"Come along, Norman Dobson!" she snapped. "What will Christ say to the wicked?"

Someone hissed the beginning of an answer. A glare from Miss O'Kane stopped that. Norman stuttered, stumbled, did not know.

"Oh, Norman," sighed Miss O'Kane. "Have you forgotten? Perhaps it is a sign that you are indeed one of those to whom God will refer on the Day of Judgement, when He says to you these words. Listen to them closely. Are you ready? 'Go away from me, with your curse upon you, to the eternal fire prepared for the Devil and his angels.' Did you listen, Norman? Did you understand?"

"Y-y . . ."

"Good boy. If you do not learn these things and live according

to God's will, you will spend a lifetime building your own fire, and in death you will walk straight into it. Do you understand that?"

"Y-y . . ."

"You do not. You are too dull. God's words must be beaten into you. Now repeat them after me."

She spoke them again, phrase by phrase. He stammered the answer, phrase by phrase.

"Go away from me . . ."

"G-go away f-from me . . ."

"Well done," she said when they reached the end. "Perhaps you will be saved after all, Norman. Would you like to be saved? Good boy. Now put out your hand and we will help you in that purpose."

And Norman presented his obedient outstretched palm to her. And she raised the cane so high and brought it down so fast, and she hit Norman's hand in time to her chanting of the true response.

"Go away from me"—*thrash*—"with your curse upon you"—*thrash*—"to the eternal fire"—*thrash*—"prepared for the Devil—" *thrash*—"and his"—*thrash*—"angels!"

She put the cane of Miss O'Kane back upon the desk.

"On your deathbed," she said to Norman, "you may have reason to thank me for this day. Now go away from me."

It was known that Vincent McAlinden had never been known to falter and had never once been caned. It was said that he was asked exactly the same question every week.

"To whose image and likeness did God make you?"

"God made me to his own image and likeness."

"Correct, Vincent McAlinden."

Chapter 3

The McAlindens. Their ancestors fled from Cork during the Famine. They'd been cast out during the Clearances from the Western Isles. They'd been tinkers in Yorkshire, seacoalers in Durham, rag-and-boners in the Glasgow slums. They were vagabonds, wastrels, wanderers, thieves. The father was in Durham Jail for murder. Been murdered himself in the Jungle at Shields. He'd strangled a bairn of his own, chucked its body into a Pelaw cesspit. He was Mrs. McAlinden's own damn brother, her own damn bliddy father. There wasn't just one dad but a clutch of them. Black-souled bliddy sinners, every single one of them. And her? Just had to look at her. Them whiskers on her cheeks, them moles, that sweat, that roll-up in the corner of the mouth. And that clutch of bairns that looked the same. The widow's peak that marked them out, the jet-black hair, the furrowed brows. Witchcraft in that family, had to be.

Mebbe worse. Hey, mebbe they weren't true human at all. Mebbe some weird thing twixt man and beast.

In autumn and winter kids gathered beneath a certain street light as the night came on. Some of us were little more than toddlers, some were already in their teens. We told each other ghost tales and gave accounts of nightmares as the sun dropped down over the estate.

We shuddered as the sky darkened and reddened and true night came on. A boy called Colin Moss called us into a ring within the pool of light and began to speak.

"Now we will tell of the father McAlinden. Prepare yourselves. For the father and his dog will walk tonight."

We shivered and gasped, our breath plumed into the icy air. He looked from face to face.

We giggled, goggled, gasped and gaped.

"The McAlindens need their human flesh tonight. Is that correct?"

"That is correct" came the reply.

"Now Mrs. Mac is turning on the oven."

"Click."

"Vincent Mac is sharpening the knives."

"Scrape, scrape."

"Mr. Mac is coming up from Hell."

"From damn and blasted bloody Hell."

"Now listen to the howling of the dogs."

"Aoooooo!"

"And listen to the gnashing of their teeth."

"Gnash gnash!"

"The father of the Macs will walk these very streets tonight."

"Tonight."

"He will wait till all bairns are asleep in bed."

"Asleep in bed."

"Whose door will he enter?

"Whose stairs will he climb?

"Whose bedroom will it be this night?

"Which child will be taken to the oven?

"Which child will be carried down to Hell?"

Colin raised his hand, extended his index finger and began to point to each of us in turn, one stab of the finger, one body to each syllable.

"They need a child to cook tonight. Will it be you? Will it be you? No — it — will — be — y-o-u!"

And, with one of us chosen, we suddenly separated and scampered below the inadequate streetlights towards our doors, towards our parents, towards cups of cocoa and chairs by coal fires, towards the thrill of being in there with tingling skin and racing hearts, with the thrill of the night still seething within us, towards our desperate nightmares and our soothing dreams.

The lower wasteland, down the rocky path, between the pebbledash and town, was left to Vincent. In the early years it had been a place for play. We dug our dens there, sledged in winter, we skipped and fought and dreamed that we were in a world far off from our homes, which were a few short footsteps away. But as we and Vincent grew, we used it warily.

He walked his dogs there, yanking at their throats with steel-and-leather chains. He squatted in holes in the dirt by smouldering fires. He wore a sheath knife at his waist. He smoked, he spat and snarled. When kids passed by he yelled that we were nancies, poofs, snobs, berks, teacher's pets and Holy bliddy Joes.

He gouged stones out of the earth and flung them at us. If we dared to face him he yelled, "Howay. Just bliddy try it, then."

One day I crossed the wasteland and heard wailing. Bernard was tied with a rope to a post. Vincent stood before him, snarling that he'd set the bliddy dogs on him if he ever dared do that again. Was he going to apologize? Was he going to bliddy apologize?

"What you lookin at?" snarled Vincent when he caught me watching. "What's it got to diy with bliddy ye?"

He laughed.

Untied the rope, set Bernard free.

"See? It's up to me exactly what I diy."

"Aye!" called Bernard in a frail and high-pitched voice. "What's it got to diy with bliddy ye?"

He giggled as Vincent put his arm around him. Bernard leaned onto him and they faced me, arm in arm, cheek to cheek.

Another day. Bernard stood against a door that leaned against a stunted hawthorn tree. He had his arms stretched wide like wings. Vincent had the sheath knife in his hand. I watched as he took aim and raised the knife, and threw, and the knife spun glittering from his hand to thud into the door six inches from Bernard's side. Vincent punched the air. Bernard punched the air as well, then spread his arms again.

"Come to see the show?" said Vincent to me.

He took the knife from the door, walked away, turned again and flung the knife without a hesitation. It thumped into the door six inches from Bernard's thigh.

"What about that, then, eh?" he said. "Pretty canny, eh?"

He called to Bernard, "That'll do, old son. Bring the knife and let's go off and have some fun."

Bernard twisted the knife out from the timber, went to his friend.

McAlinden hugged him tight.

"Good lad, Bernard," he said. "Good brave bliddy lad. Howay, let's gan."

They passed close by. Vincent looked me in the eye.

"Why not come alang with us?" he said.

I didn't move.

"We'll have a laugh, eh? Me and you and Bernard."

"He hasn't got the guts," squeaked Bernard. "Not to come to play with Vincent McAlinden and his pal."

Vincent winked at me. He put one arm around Bernard's shoulders and raised his other arm, as if to take me to his side.

He lowered his voice, softened it.

"Naebody would knaa, Dom," he said.

He held my gaze.

"You want to, don't you, Dom? You really want to."

He shrugged.

"Ah, well. Mebbe another time, eh?"

"He's just a chicken," said Bernard as they turned away. "Squawk, squawk, bliddy squawk."

Vincent tightened his arm around Bernard's throat.

"No, he's not," he snarled.

He turned back towards me. He held Bernard's head down.

"No, he's bliddy not," he said into my eyes. "This one's got something special, Bernard. Haven't you, Dom?"

I said nothing.

"And one day he'll see it," he continued. "And he'll come to me just like you did, little Bernard."

He grinned, he turned the grip into a hug, held Bernard to his side. Then turned away downhill, towards the town and river.

Days later I was in town buying bread for my mam. I was beside Dragone's coffee shop. Here came Bernard, passing by.

I grabbed his arm.

Stared into his frightened eyes.

"What do *ye* want?" he said. "Let me bliddy go."

"Why do you let him do it to you?" I said.

"Let who diy what?"

"You know what I mean. Why do you let him treat you like dirt?"

"What he does and what I diy is nowt to diy with bliddy ye."

"He could have killed you with that knife!"

"Oh, no! Vincent could have killed his poor ickle Bernard!"

He sniggered. He pulled away, walked away.

"Squawk squawk!" he squeaked. "Squawk, squawk bliddy squawk."

He turned.

"And you're jealous!" he said.

"What?"

"Aye. Cos I've got a proper pal in him, and Vincent's got a proper pal in me."

I laughed at the stupid idea.

"And who've ye got, chicken?" he said. "That locked-up crazy witch's daughter! And I've got the one and only hard as nails and scary Vincent bliddy McAlinden." He pointed at me. "And I'll set him on you if you divent bliddy let me be."

He laughed.

"Mebbe you're the one he gets to kill!"

Then off he ran, uphill towards the waste.

And I walked by Vincent with Holly Stroud one day, and he was sitting on a stone, and fondling his dog.

"Dom!" he cried. "And his bonny lass!"

He jumped to his feet.

"Watch this!" he cried.

A hen must have escaped from his garden. He ran to it, lifted it up in both hands and held it squawking and frantic in the air

above his head. Then crouched and slammed the bird across his knee, twisted its neck, and strangled it right there in front of us. Then held it out to us again as it jerked and shuddered in its post-death throes.

"Tek it!" he said. "Tek it home and cook it for your tea!"

He giggled.

"You're horrible, Vincent McAlinden," said Holly, looking calmly at him.

"Ah well," he answered. "Nen of us is perfect, eh?"

And he lifted the hen to his open mouth as if about to eat it feathered and raw. He went on giggling as we walked away.

"Gannin for a little shag?" he yelled.

We were seven or eight years old.

"Yes!" yelled Holly, laughing loud. "We're gannin for a little shag!"

"I'll come!" he called. "Let me come and I'll join in!"

Holly went on laughing.

"Don't leave me!" yelled Vincent. "You're me mate, Dom! And oh how I love you, lovely Holly Stroud!"

The Tightrope Walkers

David Almond

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