

*By the same author*

FICTION

The South

The Heather Blazing

The Story of the Night

The Blackwater Lightship

The Master

Mothers and Sons

Brooklyn

NON-FICTION

Bad Blood: A Walk Along the Irish Border

Homage to Barcelona

The Sign of the Cross: Travels in Catholic Europe

Love in a Dark Time: Gay Lives from Wilde to Almodóvar

Lady Gregory's Toothbrush

PLAY

Beauty in a Broken Place

*B+*  
*The Empty Family*

Stories

COLM TÓIBÍN

VIKING

*an imprint of*

PENGUIN BOOKS

Univ-Bibl  
Bamberg

realm. He thanked her and said that he would note the story once he reached his study that evening and he would perhaps, he hoped, do justice to it in the future. It was always impossible to know, he added, why one small spark caused a large fire and why another was destined to extinguish itself before it had even flared.

She realized as the guests around her stood up from the table that she had said as much as she could say, which was, on reflection, hardly anything at all. She almost wished she had added more detail, had told James that the letter came from a poet perhaps, or that it contained a set of sonnets whose subject was unmistakable, or that the wife of the clergyman was more than thirty years his junior, or that he was not a clergyman at all, but a former member of parliament and someone who had once held high office. Or that the events in question had happened in Egypt and not on the way to Paris. Or that the woman had never, in fact, been caught, she had been careful and had outlived the husband to whom she had been unfaithful. That she had merely dreamed of and feared being sent home by him or kept apart, never touched.

The next time, she thought, if she found herself seated beside the novelist she would slip in one of these details. She understood perfectly why the idea excited her so much. As Henry James stood up from the table, it gave her a strange sense of satisfaction that she had lodged her secret with him, a secret over-wrapped perhaps, but at least the rudiments of its shape apparent, if not to him then to her, for whom these matters were pressing, urgent and gave meaning to her life. That she had kept the secret and told a small bit of it all at the same time made her feel light as she went to join the ladies for some conversation. It had been, on the whole, she thought, an unexpectedly interesting evening.

## *The Empty Family*

I have come back here. I can look out and see the soft sky and the faint line of the horizon and the way the light changes over the sea. It is threatening rain. I can sit on this old high chair that I had shipped from a junk store on Market Street and watch the calmness of the sea against the misting sky.

I have come back here. In all the years, I made sure that the electricity bill was paid and the phone remained connected and the place was cleaned and dusted. And the neighbour who took care of things, Rita's daughter, opened the house for the postman or the courier when I sent books or paintings or photographs I had bought, sometimes by FedEx as though it were urgent that they would arrive since I could not.

Since I would not.

This space I walk in now has been my dream space; the mild sound of the wind on days like this has been my dream sound.

You must know that I am back here.

The mountain bike that came free with the washing machine just needed the tyres pumped. Unlike the washing machine itself, it worked as though I had never been away. I could make the slow dream journey into the village, down the hill towards the sand quarry and then past the ball alley with all the new caravans and mobile homes in the distance.

At the end of that journey I met your sister-in-law on a Sunday morning. She must have told you. We were both studying the massive array of Sunday newspapers in the supermarket in the village, wondering which of them to buy. She turned and our eyes locked. I had not seen her for years; I did not even know that she and Bill still had the house. Bill must have told you I am here.

Or maybe not yet.

Maybe he has not seen you. Maybe he does not tell you every bit of news as soon as he knows it. But soon, soon, Bill and you must speak and he will tell you then, maybe just as an afterthought, a curiosity, or maybe even as a fresh piece of news. Guess who I saw? Guess who has come back?

I told your sister-in-law that I had come back.

Later, when I went down to the strand, using the old path, the old way down, when I was wondering if I would swim, or if the water would be too cold, I saw them coming towards me. They were wearing beautiful clothes. Your sister-in-law has aged, but Bill was spry, almost youthful. I shook hands with him. And there was nothing else to say except the usual, what you often say down here: you look out at the sea and say that no one ever comes here, you say how empty it is, and how lovely it is to be here on a bright and blustery June day with no one else in sight, despite all the tourism and the new houses and the money that came and went. This stretch of strand has remained a secret.

In strange, odd moments I have come here over all the years. I have imagined this encounter and the sounds we make against the sound of the wind and the waves.

And then Bill told me about the telescope. Surely, he said, I must have bought one in the States? They are cheaper there, much cheaper. He told me about the room he had built with the Velux window and the view it had and how he had nothing there except a chair and a telescope.

Years ago, as you know, I had shown them this house, and I knew that he remembered this room, the tiny room full of shifting light, like something on a ship, where I am sitting now. I had cheap binoculars to watch the ferry from Rosslare and the lighthouse and the odd sailing boat. I cannot find them now, although I looked as soon as I came back. But I always thought a telescope would be too unwieldy, too hard to use and work. But Bill told me no, his was simple.

He said that I should stop by and check for myself, anytime, but they would be there all day. Your sister-in-law looked at me warily,

as though I would be needing her for something again as I needed her all those years ago, as though I would come calling in the night once more. I hesitated.

'Come and have a drink with us,' she said. I knew that she meant next week, or some week; I knew that she wanted to sound distant.

I said no, but I would come and see the telescope, just for a second if that was all right, maybe later, just the telescope. I was interested in the telescope and did not care whether she wanted me to come that day or some other day. We parted and I walked on north, towards Knocknasilloge, and they made their way to the gap. I did not swim that day. Enough had happened. That meeting was enough.

Later, it became totally calm, as it often does. As the sun shone its dying slanted rays into the back windows of the house I thought that I would walk down and see the telescope.

She had the fire lighting, and I remember that she had said their son would be there, I cannot remember his name, but I was shocked when he stood up in the long open-plan room with windows on two sides that gave on to the sea. I had not seen him since he was a little boy. In a certain light he could have been you, or you when I knew you first, the same hair, the same height and frame and the same charm that must have been there in your grandmother or grandfather or even before, the sweet smile, the concentrated gaze.

I moved away from them and went with Bill, who had been standing uneasily waiting for me, to the small stairs, and then down towards the room with the telescope.

I hate being shown how to do things, you know that. Wiring a plug, or starting a rented car, or understanding a new mobile phone, add years to me, bring out frustration and an almost frantic urge to get away and curl up on my own. Now I was in a confined space being shown how to look through a telescope, my hands being guided as Bill showed me how to turn it and lift it and focus it. I was patient with him, I forgot myself for a minute. He focused on the waves far out. And then he stood back.

I knew he wanted me to move the telescope, to focus now on Rosslare Harbour, on Tuskar Rock, on Raven Point, on the strand at

Curraclae, agree with him that they could be seen so clearly even in this faded evening light. But what he showed me first had amazed me. The sight of the waves miles out, their dutiful and frenetic solitude, their dull indifference to their fate, made me want to cry out, made me want to ask him if he could leave me alone for some time to take this in. I could hear him breathing behind me. It came to me then that the sea is not a pattern, it is a struggle. Nothing matters against the fact of this. The waves were like people battling out there, full of consciousness and will and destiny and an abiding sense of their own beauty.

I knew as I held my breath and watched that it would be best not to stay too long. I asked him if he would mind if I looked for one more minute. He smiled as though this was what he had wanted. Unlike you, who has never cared about things, your brother is a man who likes his own property. I turned and moved fast, focusing swiftly on a wave I had selected for no reason. There was whiteness and greyness in it and a sort of blue and green. It was a line. It did not toss, nor did it stay still. It was all movement, all spillage, but it was pure containment as well, utterly focused just as I was watching it. It had an elemental hold; it was something coming towards us as though to save us but it did nothing instead, it withdrew in a shrugging irony, as if to suggest that this is what the world is, and our time in it, all lifted possibility, all complexity and rushing fervour, to end in nothing on a small strand, and go back out to rejoin the empty family from whom we had set out alone with such a burst of brave unknowing energy.

I smiled for a moment before I turned. I could have told him that the wave I had watched was as capable of love as we are in our lives. He would have told your sister-in-law that I had gone slightly bonkers in California and indeed might, in turn, have told you; and you would have smiled softly and tolerantly as though there was nothing wrong with that. You had, after all, gone bonkers yourself in your own time. Or maybe you have calmed down since I left you; maybe the passing years have helped your sanity.

\*

On Saturdays before I came back, through the winter and right into early June, I would drive out from the city to Point Reyes, my GPS with its Australian accent instructing me which way to turn, which lanes I should be in, how many miles were left. They knew me by now in the Station, as the GPS called it, in the cheese shop there, where I also bought bread and eggs, in the bookshop, where I bought books of poems by Robert Hass and Louise Glück, and one day found William Gass's book *On Being Blue*, which I also bought. I bought the week's fruit and then, when the weather grew warm, sat outside the post office eating barbequed oysters that a family of Mexicans had cooked on a stall beside the supermarket.

All this was mere preparation for the drive to the South Beach and the lighthouse. It was like driving towards here, where I am now. Always, you make a single turn and you know that you are approaching one of the ends of the earth. It has the same desolate aura as a poet's last few poems, or Beethoven's last quartets, or the last songs that Schubert managed. The air is different, and the way things grow is strained and gnarled and windblown. The horizon is whiteness, blankness; there are hardly any houses. You are moving towards a border between the land and sea that does not have hospitable beaches, or guest-houses painted in welcoming stripes, or merry-go-rounds, or ice-cream for sale, but instead has warnings of danger, steep cliffs.

At Point Reyes there was a long beach and some dunes and then the passionate and merciless sea, too rough and unpredictable for surfers or swimmers or even paddlers. The warnings told you not to walk too close, that a wave could come from nowhere with a powerful undertow. There were no lifeguards. This was the Pacific Ocean at its most relentless and stark, and I stood there Saturday after Saturday, putting up with the wind, moving as carefully as I could on the edges of the shore, watching each wave crash towards me and dissolve in a slurp of undertow.

I missed home.

I missed home. I went out to Point Reyes every Saturday so I could miss home.

Home was this empty house back from the cliff at Ballyconnigar, a house half full of objects in their packages, small paintings and drawings from the Bay Area, a Vija Celmins print, some photographs of bridges and water, some easy chairs, some patterned rugs. Home was a roomful of books at the back of this house, two bedrooms and bathrooms around it. Home was a huge high room at the front with a concrete floor and a massive fireplace, a sofa, two tables, some paintings still resting against the walls, including the Mary Lohan painting I bought in Dublin and other pieces I bought years ago waiting for hooks and string. Home also was this room at the top of the house, cut into the roof, a room with a glass door opening on to a tiny balcony where I can stand on a clear night and look up at the stars and see the lights of Rosslare Harbour and the single flashes of Tuskar Rock Lighthouse and the faint, comforting line where the night sky becomes the dark sea.

I did not know that those solitary trips to Point Reyes in January, February, March, April, May, and the return with a car laden down with provisions as though there were shortages in San Francisco, I did not know that this was a way of telling myself that I was going home to my own forgiving sea, a softer, more domesticated beach, and my own lighthouse, less dramatic and less long-suffering.

I had kept home out of my mind because home was not merely this house I am in now or this landscape of endings. On some of those days as I drove towards the lighthouse at Point Reyes I had to face what home also was. I had picked up some stones and put them on the front passenger seat and I thought that I might take them to Ireland.

Home was some graves where my dead lay outside the town of Enniscorthy, just off the Dublin Road. This was a place where I could direct no parcels or paintings, no signed lithographs encased in bubble wrap, with the address of the sender on the reverse side of the package. Nothing like that would be of any use. This home filled my dreams and my waking time more than any other version of home. I dreamed that I would leave a stone on each of those

graves, as Jewish people do, as Catholics leave flowers. I smiled at the thought that in the future some archaeologist would come to those graves and study the bones and the earth around them and write a paper on the presence of these stray stones, stones that had been washed by the waves of the Pacific, and the archaeologist would speculate what madness, what motives, what tender needs, caused someone to haul them so far.

Home was also two houses that they left me when they died and that I sold at the very height of the boom in this small strange country when prices rose as though they were Icarus, the son of Daedalus, warned by his father not to fly too close to the sun or too close to the sea, Icarus who ignored the warning and whose wings were melted by the sun's bright heat. The proceeds from those two houses have left me free, as though the word means anything, so that no matter how long I live I will not have to work again. And maybe I will not have to worry either, although that now sounds like a sour joke but one that maybe I can laugh at too as days go by.

I will join them in one of those graves. There is space left for me. One of these days I will go and stand in that graveyard and contemplate the light over the Slaney, the simple beauty of grey Irish light over water, and know that I, like anyone else who was born, will be condemned eventually to lie in darkness as long as time lasts. And all I have in the meantime is this house, this light, this freedom, and I will, if I have the courage, spend my time watching the sea, noting its changes and the sounds it makes, studying the horizon, listening to the wind or relishing the calm when there is no wind. I will not fly even in my deepest dreams too close to the sun or too close to the sea. The chance for all that has passed.

I wish I knew how colours came to be made. Some days when I was teaching I looked out the window and thought that everything I was saying was easy to find out and had already been surmised. But there is a small oblong stone that I have carried up from the strand

and I am looking at it now after a night of thunder and a day of grey skies over the sea. It is the early morning here in a house where the phone does not ring and the only post that comes brings bills.

I noticed the stone because of the subtlety of its colour against the sand, its light green with veins of white. Of all the stones I saw it seemed to carry most the message that it had been washed by the waves, its colour dissolved by water, yet all the more alive for that, as though the battle between colour and salt water had offered it a mute strength.

I have it on the desk here now. Surely the sea should be strong enough to get all the stones and make them white, or make them uniform, as the grains of sand are uniform? I do not know how the stones withstand the sea. As I walked yesterday in the humid late afternoon the waves came gently to rattle the stones at the shore, stones larger than pebbles, all different colours. I can turn this green stone around, the one that I carried home, and see that at one end it is less than smooth as though this is a join, a break, and it was once part of a larger mass.

I do not know how long it would have lasted down there, had I not rescued it; I have no idea what the life span is of a stone on a Wexford beach. I know what books George Eliot was reading in 1876, and what letters she was writing and what sentences she was composing, and maybe that is enough for me to know. The rest is science and I do not do science. It is possible then that I miss the point of most things – the mild windlessness of the day, the swallows' flight, how these words appear on the screen as I enter them, the greenness of the stone.

Soon I will have to decide. I will have to call the car hire company at Dublin Airport and extend the time I am going to keep the car. Or I will have to drop the car back. Maybe get another car. Or return here with no car, just the mountain bike and some phone numbers for taxis. Or leave altogether. Late last night when the thunder had died down and there was no sound, I went online to look for telescopes, looking at prices, trying to find the one that Bill had shown me, which I found so easy to manipulate. I studied the length of

time delivery would take and thought of waiting for this new key to the distant waves for a week or two weeks or six weeks, watching out from my dream house for a new dream to be delivered, for a van to come up this lane with a large package. I dreamed of setting it up out here in front of where I am sitting now, on the tripod that I would have ordered too, and starting, taking my time, to focus on a curling line of water, a piece of the world indifferent to the fact that there is language, that there are names to describe things, and grammar and verbs. My eye, solitary, filled with its own history, is desperate to evade, erase, forget; it is watching now, watching fiercely, like a scientist looking for a cure, deciding for some days to forget about words, to know at last that the words for colours, the blue-grey-green of the sea, the whiteness of the waves, will not work against the fullness of watching the rich chaos they yield and carry.