

## First Place (Joint) Dermot Kelly

### “Ogeous Handlin”

The boreen always looks half-asleep at dawn. Hedges hunched like they'd been up all night, puddles holding the last of the dark. I run it every morning.

Same route.

Same pace.

Same thoughts I pretend aren't there, curled up like stray cats I forgot to feed.

Proper frost that morning — the kind that cracks underfoot like stale bread. My breath came out in wee puffs, vanishing before I could see them. The air smelled sharp, metallic, like it was warning me. Somewhere off in the distance, a bird rattled itself awake, like it had urgent news it couldn't wait to pass on.

Halfway past McNally's gate, I heard it — another set of footsteps, soft, careful, behind me.

At first, echo, I thought. Sound bounces around these roads like it's lost. But these steps matched mine too neatly. A second heartbeat, tidy as you like.

I didn't turn. Didn't need to. Something in the back of my neck just knew.

With a living person, you feel the space they take up. When it's not... the air squeezes in. Someone told me that once. I laughed. Don't be daft. But there I was, feeling it, all the way down to my toes, like an old nerve twitching awake.

The footsteps stayed close. I sped up.

They did too.

I slowed.

They matched.

There's a crack in your chest you don't even know you're carrying until something taps it. That's what it felt like. A wee knock from the past.

Ciarán. Sixteen years gone, and the sound of him still found me.

We ran everywhere as kids — walking was an insult. Rain, mud, long evenings when light hung heavy over fields and stone walls — nothing stopped us. The last time we ran together, morning of the race up at Lough Muck, I'd been rehearsing something sharp, something to make myself feel bigger.

“You need me more than I need you,” I'd been ready to spit.

He laughed, big grin, shoulders bouncing, and tore off ahead before I'd finished. Show-off. Always had to be first. Always had to make the point.

Then he wasn't there anymore.

People said it was quick. Slip. Rock. Bad angle. Not my fault. All the things folk say so they don't have to sit with the silence left behind.

The footsteps stuttered — that wick half-trip mid-laugh. Tiny, stupid thing, and it winded me.

I stopped.

Stopped mid-step, chest heaving, breath puffing in clouds that hung, stubborn, like they had a grudge. The footsteps did too, just behind me, waiting. I didn't turn. Couldn't. Didn't want to see the shape, the face I hadn't beheld in sixteen years. Didn't want to prove it wasn't imagination, didn't want the lie of it to break.

“Ciarán?” I whispered, though I knew the wind would swallow it, scatter it across the frost. The name felt fragile in my mouth, like I might drop it and shatter it.

Then a breeze rattled the hedges, a low, shivering sigh, like laughter caught in a throat. The presence shifted. Sidestep. Subtle. Teasing. Like he was having a laugh, poking me, the way he always did when we ran.

I ran.

Not fast — nothing like the racing we did as kids — but I moved, slow, deliberate, muscles tight, eyes fixed on the frost-white ribbon ahead. And the footsteps followed, patient, playful, relentless.

I rounded McNally's gate. Air felt thicker here, heavier, like the world had held its breath, waiting to see if I'd piss myself or keep walking. The crunch underfoot was deafening in the silence. My chest ached — that same crack, the one I thought I'd sealed years ago. He was still here. Never left.

A crow took off from the far hedge, wings beating sharp and loud, and I flinched. The footsteps didn't stutter this time. Didn't have to. They were him. Just him, running in time with me, in the rhythm of some other world.

I slowed again, finally letting my shoulders sag, letting the frost bite at my cheeks. And then, I felt it: that old push, shove at the shoulder, playful and warm, the kind that made me laugh, made me run faster, harder.

“I see you,” I breathed.

Not loud. Not like I meant it for anyone else. Just for him. And maybe for me too.

And then — nothing. Footsteps vanished. No sidestep, no pause, no echo. Just the road, frost cracking, hedges hunched like they’d been up all night, waiting.

I didn’t turn. Didn’t look back. Couldn’t. But I knew. Knew he’d been there, found me, left me with the quietest sort of peace.

I ran the last mile home slower than usual, letting my legs feel every crack, every pull of the cold air, every shadow leaning over the road. And when I stepped into the kitchen, into the warmth, I let my breath fill the room, let it fog the window.

The silence of the boren stayed with me. The echo of steps, tiny, perfect, untouchable. Reminder that some things — some people — never really leave.

Not the ones you’ve lost. Not the ones who raced beside you, laughed beside you, made you feel bigger than you were.

I hung my coat. Poured a cup of tea. Stirred in the quiet. And somewhere deep down, in that cracked chest, I smiled.

Because I knew.

He had run with me again.