

“The Hounds of Ulster”

Maggie Stiefvater

This is not my story.

My name is Bryant Black. I'm nineteen years old, I worship Paddy Keenan (you don't know who he is, and I'm okay with that) and I don't embarrass myself on the guitar. I lift weights, I like to think I am moderately talented with my tongue (if you take my meaning), and around my left bicep I have a tattoo of the ouroboros -- a snake eating its own tail. I consider myself pretty interesting, although I'm a bit on the biased side of the department.

But this story still isn't about me. Nobody's interested in the ones that got away.

This story is about my best friend, Patrick Sullivan.
(I miss him, still).

This is the scene: we are seventeen and we are going to change the world. Sullivan -- no one who knows him worth a damn calls him Patrick, which is his father's name and his grandfather's name, and if he is nothing else, he is not his father or his grandfather -- has his fiddle and I have my guitar named Cú Chulainn and we are punk Irish gods in our D.C. suburb.

I should tell you about Cú Chulainn, because, like most things that are cool, you probably haven't heard of him. Cú

Chulainn means “the hound of Culain” but most people called him The Hound of Ulster -- not that you care, but that’s okay. In Irish legend, he was a mighty warrior who was famous for, among other things, his warp spasms (these are fits of rage). During a warp spasm, Cú Chulainn’d grow so agitated that his body parts would move all around by themselves. He’d get an arm coming out his chest or his eyes wandering down to his neck, his legs all changing sizes and shapes, his skin boiling, and then he would go out and kill his enemies.

Must’ve been some pretty freaky shit to behold. Can you imagine pissing off some massive Irishman and right before he kills you, you can literally see his balls in his eyes?

Some days, being an Irish punk god in D.C. is not the easiest thing in the world, and on those days, I wish that a warp spasm was in my future.

Okay, see, that. That is the sort of thing I used to say casually. That I’d like a warp spasm or a lucky charm or a bolt of lightning to strike mine enemy to the ground. The usual turns of the phrase. But now, I’m more careful. You never know when you might get what you wish for. But back then, when it was me and Sullivan against the world, I hadn’t learned that yet. Seventeen is criminally younger than nineteen, and I knew everything I needed and nothing about using what I knew.

But like I said, we are seventeen, we are gods, and we are slowly taking over the hearts and minds of D.C. with wickedly fast reels and power chords. Oh, I know you are doubtful, but that is because you haven’t heard Sullivan on his fiddle. When Sullivan plays a sweet set of jigs, girls’ clothing *literally* melts off. It’s pretty fantastic. There is no one that can bend a tune like him in fifty

miles. A hundred. Nobody this side of Baltimore, anyway, and definitely no one down all the way to Richmond. I think it's a fact that his has the fiddling crown pretty much sewn up for the tri-state area, and it's not just me that thinks so. To hear Sullivan play is to have a story to take home and tell your friends.

I know no one sees me when we are playing together, even if I did use a sharpie to draw a gnome blowing fire on my guitar, but I'm okay with this. I am utterly confident in my Irish punk guitarist status, and a good guitarist knows when to hot dog and when to just stand back and support the wickedness that is your best friend's musical wizardry. And let me tell you, there is nothing sweeter in this world than the moment when it is the two of us on some greasy stage of some open mic night, him leaning toward me and me leaning toward him, and we are riffing off each other, Cú Chulainn howling with electric fury and Sullivan's unnamed fiddle singing high above it. Together we are so much more than either one of us is alone.

I never thought the music was dangerous.

Should I back up and tell you about us, or should I tell you about Them? I don't know how long they were listening to us. Months before we earned our place at Mullen's, I think. Way before Sullivan applied to Julliard, that's for sure.

Ha, look at me, even now. I still can't bring myself to say what They are -- just this word, so coy: "Them." I can't name Them. Not out loud. I know that They hate the word we use, that hearing it spoken infuriates them, and fury is a terrible thing when

They have it. But I should be able to say it, now, with impunity.
They have no interest in me. Not any more.

So here it is. This was all because of the --
I still can't bring myself to say it.

Let me tell you about Sullivan's dad, the one Sullivan was so sure he wouldn't be. Patrick John Sullivan, II, or P. J. as he was known. Sullivan's mom told me once -- oh she was a good one for talking, specially with one or two drinks in her, she was hilarious, if platinum blonde, fifty-year-old women saying stuff they shouldn't is your idea of a good time -- that Sullivan's dad grew up so poor that his house back in Ireland didn't even have a real floor, just a dirt one. I googled that shit, because I didn't think that people still had dirt floors in this century. Because even though Sullivan's father looks old as a block of rock (they'd had Sullivan really late, I guess) he was definitely born sometime in the twentieth century. Dirt floors seem pretty feudal (now there is an adjective you don't get to use very much). And Ireland is not exactly the African bush. But Google supported Sullivan's mom's story, so dirt it was. Sullivan's dad, had officially been dirt-poor.

Sullivan's mother told me that back then, they were superstitious. They put out bowls of milk for luck and tucked iron nails in their pockets when they had to walk out on Midsummer's night. And there was all this stuff about things you threw over the threshold on the New Year's Eve and places you just didn't go because it was not done. I always thought all the superstitions

were sort of cool. I mean, what did they think was going to happen?

“Bad luck,” Sullivan’s mom -- her real name was Dolores -- said. “Or worse. Probably worse.”

Definitely more intriguing than terrifying. There is a fairly recent slip jig I know -- it’s a pretty tight slip jig, from the fifties -- that was supposedly given to the musician by the -- I can’t say it. I still can’t say it. Anyway, he said he didn’t write it. He said it was *given* to him. And I have to admit, I was attracted that that idea. I mean, sublime music handed over by supernatural creatures? You don’t have to be a punk Irish god to appreciate the coolness of that.

But Dolores Sullivan, platinum blonde businesswoman of the future, doesn’t believe in any of that stuff, now. There are no bowls of milk or upside down horse shoes over the doors or open scissors hanging from strings. There is just Patrick Sullivan, II, who is not the nicest of people. He doesn’t curse or throw things or hit, but he does drink, a lot, and he also . . . broods, I guess. Dolores calls them his “dark moods.” Sullivan calls them “being a lazy asshole.” I can see how both interpretations are correct. When he’s brooding, P. J. has two tendencies: he remains for hours in the frayed ivory wing-backed chair in the living room, and he says nasty, true things. Once I came over to get Sullivan so we could go cruise the streets by the college to eyeball hot undergrads, and as we left, his father told Sullivan that he’d been an accident. That he and his mother never meant to have a baby so many years after his older brothers, and that if P. J., known back then that he’d be supporting a kid when he was sixty that he would’ve wrapped the cord around Sullivan’s neck when Sullivan came out.

It's a pretty terrible thing to say, looking back on it.

But his father said it in that joking way that guys do, so that you can't be sure if they're just trying to be funny. We both knew that he wasn't trying to be funny. But because he said it that way, I couldn't get properly defensive on Sullivan's behalf.

Sullivan never got angry, either, no matter what P. J. said, whether he said that Sullivan had a monkey's face or that he was destined for prison. Sullivan would just get glib and high-strung. I kind of liked him, actually, when he was keyed up like that, because when he was, he got really funny and very, very good when we played music, but it wasn't a good idea to let him drive. Because when he was like that he drove too fast and too far and once, we ended up near Philly with a tenner in my pocket and a quarter tank of gas and we both had to dig under the seats for change to have enough gas to get back. And we laughed like crazy people and busted illegally through one toll booth because we didn't have the change, and Sullivan was wild and high as a kite and never said a thing about his father. And I didn't say anything, either, because I didn't want to ruin his mood with that crap.

So we were the wild, brilliant punk brothers of Alexandria, and we never said anything about Sullivan's family. I didn't want anything to change.

(I know, okay? I know.)

Sullivan kept getting better. He was a genius on that fiddle, man. At school, he played it as a violin, and he did the shock-and-awe thing with dead Europeans like Vivaldi when he was supposed to, but if you wanted to lose yourself, you asked him for a reel.

God, he was good.

I used to be jealous of his fiddle. When we were nine, I broke Sullivan's arm with a baseball bat from his brother's room. He'd been practicing his fiddle all summer and I had come over to confront him about it, and we'd fought. I hadn't meant to break his arm.

I'd meant to break his hand.

Sullivan told his parents that we'd been wrestling and that he'd fallen on the headboard of his bed. His father called him a clumsy little bastard. I didn't argue. Later, I drew a picture of Cú Chulainn on Sullivan's cast and he told me that I owed him a broken bone, someday. I knew it was true.

This is the way that Cú Chulainn got his name: when he was young, he killed the guard dog of Culain out of self defense, and Culain got all snively and sad over the brute's death, so Cú Chulainn promised to guard his castle in the place of the dog. So he changed his name and became the hound of Culain.

I told Sullivan that we ought to change our names after I broke his arm, like Cú Chulainn changed his name after killing the hound. Sullivan said he was going to be just Sullivan, no Patrick. I said I was going to be Bryant, after my favorite guitarist's last name. We spat and swore on it.

Usually it is me that goes looking for Sullivan. I'm not saying he never comes over to my house before we head out to make trouble, but I know I'm the needy one. Plus Dolores makes killer peanut butter cookies (my mom's allergic to peanuts, which should be a felony) and there's always the chance that I can pinch some when I drive over. But one sticky summer evening, as I am cleaning the garage (even punk gods have chores) and my kid brothers are kicking ball and riding their bikes in the street because Mom told them not to, I hear their joyous cry: "Sulllllivan!"

And there he is, striding down the sidewalk with his hands in his pockets, shoulders hunched, striding fast in that way that tells me that tonight he will be playing like the devil. His fiddle case is strapped over his shoulder. I leave the lawn mower orphaned in the middle of the garage and come out to meet him. My kid brothers are riding their bikes around him in circles.

"Hi," I say, wiping my greasy hands on my pants. I smell like rocket fuel.

Sullivan's eyes have a hooded look. He stands there, hands still stuffed in his pockets, and he says, in a dangerous way, "Let's go to Mullen's."

Let me tell you something about Mullen's. It's a pub, the sort of pub that is legendary, that hosts sessions every Thursday night. A session, or a *seisún*, if you want to be all Irish and snobby about it, is basically a pissing contest for Irish musicians. Okay, it's not really. A real session is supposed to be about a bunch of Irish traditional musicians jamming together, playing common tunes

and having a great time. But the session at Mullen's, which is the best in D.C., isn't like that. It's about who can play the fastest and who can sing the highest and who can say *you play like cow shit* in Irish. It's an elitist club for Irish music geeks, and both of us want desperately to be in it, just to say we are.

"Ha," I say, even though it is clear from the way Sullivan is just standing there, oblivious to the bikes circling him, that he isn't joking.

A year ago and a half ago, before I had my full license, my dad had driven us to Mullen's when we heard they had a rocking session. We'd been to a couple of lousy ones at other pubs, all old drunk men squeezing accordions and singing *Danny Boy*, so we were psyched to find a good one. Once we got there, though, and found the session in the back of the pub, we hadn't even gotten to take out our instruments. Lesley Nolan, the bastard fiddle player who leads the session, paused between tunes to chew out a concertina player who missed the B part on "The Apples in Winter," telling him to get out of the pub before he embarrassed himself. Then he noticed us standing there, hopeful with our instrument cases, and he snarled at us, "the session's closed to new players."

We'd popped back in a few times since then, lingering at the door to listen, but it was the same old regulars, whipping along with proficiency along sets that they had all played so often that the seams between tunes were invisible. The only time we saw anyone new was when they let in that new bodhran player, but I heard he played for a pro band back in Chicago, so he didn't have to prove anything.

But for us, Mullen's stayed out of reach. We were relegated to open mic nights and college bars. Bookstores, cafes, sidewalks, train stations. We were good, good, good, but we never even got the chance to show what we had at Mullen's. Even watching the musicians of the Mullen's session talk and laugh together, conversation for no one else in the pub, rubbed my hairs the wrong way. They could all screw their traditional selves, that's what I thought. Fucking Mullen's and their club. The lot of them and a bus token would get you a ride.

Now, standing in my driveway, Sullivan says, "It's time." He jerks his chin up and I see that his eyes are wild and intense. To not play with him tonight, somewhere, would be a crime. I can talk him out of Mullen's on the way.

"I'll get Cú Chulainn," I reply.

At first, it is not *Them*. It is *She*.

She is beautiful. When I first saw her, I thought she was too old for Sullivan, though when I looked again, I couldn't say why I thought that. She makes my chest feel strange -- when I first met her, I thought, so this is what heartsick means. She made me feel . . . wanting. Not like wanting a specific person or thing. It was that I wanted everything, anything that I couldn't have, everything out of reach.

With the benefit of crystal-clear hindsight, I think I knew, right off, that she was no ordinary girl.

What I definitely knew was this: when I saw the way she looked at Sullivan, that first night, the ground beneath our friendship felt suddenly fragile. It was the first time I considered the idea that our ascendancy to punk god status might not be as inevitable as I had thought.

And I saw him look back, his eyebrow quirked, thinking. She scared me for so many reasons.

So here we are at Mullen's, because I couldn't talk Sullivan out of it, and we're heading back through the building towards the session, because Sullivan is high on his mood and can't be talked out of it. The pub is full of cigarette smoke and the scent of a decade's worth of spilled beer. It is hot as the Dominican Republic outside the pub and several degrees warmer than that inside. I'm already sweating. We do the perp walk past the bar, and the heads turn to watch us, expressions curious at best or sardonic at worst. We're young and unfamiliar, and we're carrying instrument cases. Last year, I ducked my head and stared at the floor as I walked past the bar stools, but this year is different. *We* are different now, Sullivan and I. I stare back at the onlookers and Sullivan gives one of them the finger.

As we approach the back room, I can pick out the tune of the reel they're playing -- "The Hare in the Heather" -- and it's clipping along nicely. Maybe a little too fast to be really sexy, but hey, that's how some people roll. Last year, this was the bit where

we'd come in and hung at the side of the room, waiting for a pause between tunes to ask Lesley if we could sit down.

This time, Sullivan has already pulled his case in front of him and half-unzipped it by the time he strides in the back room, like it's a weapon case and he's a Mafia hitman about to pull out his Tommy gun and waste everyone. In a way that's true. His fiddle is a weapon. He draws it out in the space of a breath. Half of the session players have their backs to him, unaware of our presence, and the other half hesitate slightly when they see him. But they don't stop. It would take more than us to stop a set in midplay.

Sullivan draws his bow across his strings and it wails a long, slow note from a high, high E down to the E that begins the measure they are playing. It's a battle cry, that note. He rips into "the Hare in the Heather" with them. He doesn't wait for permission. He doesn't move from his place just inside the door. He just hauls ass on his fiddle, it singing loud and sweet and fast, rolls falling from his finger like a bird calling to the heavens.

I sure as hell am not leaving him there on his own, so out comes Cú Chulainn -- no time to really tune, though the B string could afford to come up a bit -- and then I am half-strumming, half-fingerpicking my way along with him. The strings sound watery and clear under my pick. All of us playing together sounds like something you'd buy off a rack. It sounds like nostalgia made flesh.

At the end of the reel, everyone else stops playing and Lesley drops his fiddle from his shoulder. He gives Sullivan a look which clearly means *okay, now stop, you pissing usurper, I'm going to kill you*, but Sullivan doesn't stop playing. He charges into another

reel, and I follow him, counterpoint my swagger to his sweetness, and then let his fiddle chastise my guitar into submission. We two are louder than all the other session players combined. We fill the room. We fill the pub. Sullivan is sawing away so hard that there are loose hairs floating from his bow. I am sneaking a bit of sly tuning in between riffs, my hand snaking up to twist a peg to brighten my B string. Sullivan buys me time with some dirty bowing -- the bow goes *scuff, scuff, scuff* on his fiddle like someone laughing in time with the music. People have come in to stand behind him in the doorway to listen. It is wild and brilliant, everything that the fever in his eyes had promised before.

We come to the end of the set -- Sullivan doesn't have to tell me we're done, I know it, because we've jammed together so often that his fiddle and my guitar are nearly one instrument -- and we stop.

Lesley Nolan looks at Sullivan and I. He's a square, gray-haired man, sharp corners and deep set eyes. Beside him the bodhran player is surrounded by a cloud of smoke from a cigarette that dangled from his lips even while he was playing the drum. There's a long pause, during which the accordion player takes a mouthful of beer. We can all hear him swallow.

"Sit down," Lesley says.

Sullivan says, "what?" although he knows perfectly well what Lesley said.

"Sit down," Lesley says again. And to the others, "make some room for them."

The others shift and push around on the chairs and the corner booth. The table in front of them is a mess of full and half-full beer glasses; the glasses are jostled together, impossible to tell

whose is whose. There are hands shaken, names exchanged (I remember none of them), we are brought sodas by a waitress who doesn't ask to see our licenses.

"Patrick Sullivan," Lesley says, as if trying it out.

Sullivan says, "Just Sullivan. And this is Bryant. Black."

"And you want to play some tunes," Lesley says.

"That's all we want," Sullivan says.

Something draws my attention to the doorway, then, and that's when I see her for the first time. She's standing at the threshold, and like I said, the first idea I get of her is that she is a lot older than she really looks. I only watch her for a moment -- her hair is light, light gold and her eyes are the color of my father's blue work shirts, and she is beautiful in a way that hurts. She's so out of place that it is unsettling. Or dis -- discomfiting? Is that a word? Sullivan uses forty-point words like that and I try to remember to use them to make them my own. Anyway, I feel discomfited, if it is a word, with her standing there and Sullivan looking at her. Then someone says, "Bryant?" and the next time I think to look, she's long gone.

Sullivan calls me that night, at four-oh-seven in the morning. The phone doesn't wake my parents since it only rings in my room. I have held my good grades ransom and one of the concessions my parents had to agree to was a personal phone line. (my father said: *I thought I only had to worry about multiple phone lines if I had girly girl daughters*).

Sullivan's voice is hushed and it's clear he's come down from his musical high of earlier. "You sleeping?"

"Never," I reply. "You?"

Sullivan thinks this over. "That was something, wasn't it, at Mullen's."

"Something? That was nothing," I say. "They had it coming a long time. You could play circles round Lesley Nolan."

"Ha," Sullivan says, but I can tell he's pleased. He is silent again, but I don't hang up. Hours we've spent like this, on the phone in the short hours of the night, a dozen words exchanged over the course of a few hours. Sometimes it's just enough to know you're not alone with your thoughts.

Still, I have no deep thoughts to keep me awake and so sleep pulls at me. I am halfway dreaming, halfway to Mullen's pub again in my head, when Sullivan says, "I asked a girl for her number."

I open my eyes and watch the lights from a passing car stripe across my bedroom ceiling; it's still hot and the windows are open and I can hear the engine become louder and then softer. "Come again?" I say, because I am not sure if he's really spoken or if it was a Sullivan in my dream.

"When we were standing on the sidewalk, after, I asked a girl for her number."

I say, "I didn't see you talking to anyone."

"You were talking to Gerald."

I don't remember anyone's names. I talked to a lot of people. I hadn't really considered the idea that Sullivan was having equal but separate conversations at the same time. I have a

brief thought that he means the girl I saw standing in the doorway, and the concept fills me with horror. "Did she give it to you?"

"No," Sullivan says.

"Good," I say.

"Good?"

"No," I reply. "Not good. Why did you ask her?"

Sullivan doesn't answer. I wait for him to clarify, but there is nothing but heavy, heavy silence. I realize that this is the reason that he called. It was not Mullen's that was weighing on him, but this girl. I am preoccupied by this, actually, Sullivan giving some girl more importance than our long-awaited Mullen's siege. Sullivan has had strings of meaningless girlfriends.

There are bugs humming outside, and normally I would sleep through them, but they keep me awake now.

Sullivan says, suddenly, plaintively, "Bryant? Are you still there?"

I have never heard him ask me that before.

"I'm here."

His breaths are audible. I can feel the quiet stretching out long and thin again, so I interrupt it. "What is it, Sullivan?"

I think that he might not answer, but in the end, he says, "You wouldn't have let us go to Mullen's if it wasn't a good idea, right? I mean, even if I'd said I wanted to, you would've stopped me if it was a really ridiculous concept."

"Of course." I think this is true. "Of course, Sullivan, I got your back."

"Good."

I am aware that the hairs on my arms are standing up. I have a sudden, creeping sensation that I should shut my bedroom

window, because although I have not heard anyone approach, the insects outside have gone quiet, and I feel watched.

I say, "We're going to Mullen's next week, right?"

"Yes," Sullivan replies. He pauses. "Don't hang up."

I don't, and the morning is a long time coming.

Cú Chulainn has a lot of stories told about him -- when you're a guy who changes shape and flies into rages that make you kill both friend and foe, people tend to remember you. One of the ones told about him is that there was a prophecy about him (really, in the old stories, you're nobody unless you have a prophecy attached to you) that said he'd be a great warrior but that his life would be short. There's always a trade off in the old stories. You're wicked hot, but you have to turn into a swan overnight. You can have all the land in the country, but you have seven toes on your left foot. Or you are an awesome warrior, but you're going to die young.

Everyone remembers Cú Chulainn for the guy he was when he was whacking off people's heads or pulling dragon's hearts out through their nostrils or strangling random terrible hounds.

No one remembers the Cú Chulainn between the warp spasms. He could've been the nicest guy in the world.

If you are into that mother-son bond thing, the one between Sullivan and Dolores would make your black heart bleed happy. I

mean, I'm not saying that I don't get along with my mother -- I love her, I do -- but Sullivan and his mom are the sort of thing that Hallmark commercials love. He tells her that her new sweater looks really good on her and she dabs tears away from her eyes as she tells him that she's really proud of him. It's all very sappy and supportive and I'll admit it, it's a fine thing to behold.

Anyway, because Sullivan loves his mother so much, I love her too, and because I spend so much time over at her house, I like to think it's mutual. So when I come over one afternoon and Sullivan's not there, Dolores makes me a cup of tea and sits me at the kitchen table. I have to push aside piles of bills and magazines and Dolores' laptop to find a space for the saucer. Because it is after four p.m., Dolores makes herself a gin and tonic and sits across from me. It is several weeks after our conquest of Mullen's and though we've returned every week, we've discovered that it is more fun to conquer a kingdom than to hold it. I'm ready for the next battle.

"Bryant," she says, "Have you ever thought about, you know, doing something with your hair?"

In the middle ages, when foot soldiers needed to defend themselves against mounted soldiers, they would draw down into a ball and point their spears outward. It was called the hedgehog. My hair looks like that. I consider it my finest feature.

"Not really."

Dolores expertly tips back her gin and tonic. It's rewarding to watch a someone who's really good at it drinking. She says, "Sullivan got into Julliard."

I don't say anything. I mean, I knew he would, because he's Sullivan. But I hadn't really prepared for the actual event. The

thing is, I know I am invisible when I play with Sullivan, because I am a minor star to his brilliant sun. But the thing I am not sure about is whether or not I will stay invisible without him. I don't think I can handle that.

"I guess I'm hoping my New York college apps go well," I say.

Dolores gets herself another drink. "Do you know about this girl Sullivan is seeing?"

It is like this: I have no lungs.

"That's what I thought," she says. "She's different from the others, then."

He has always told me about his girlfriends. This feels like betrayal. I wonder if he is out with her right now. I wonder how many times when I've called over the last four weeks he has been with her. Mostly, I wonder if it is that girl from Mullen's.

Dolores opens her lap top, which powers up instantly, and turns it around to face me. It's an eBay page, and she's buying a horseshoe. There's another window open to a search engine, and she clicks over so I can see what she's been looking at. *Protection against faeries* says the text in the search engine. She can type it, even if she can't say it. I'd like to say I'm incredibly shocked, but I have an ouroboros around my arm and a guitar named Cú Chulainn. I could be convinced of a lot of things. And to see that girl at Mullen's was to be a believer.

She asks, "Do you think Sullivan is too good?"

I don't answer. We both know the answer to that.

That night, I dream I see them together. They are in a midnight garden covered with long, delicate purple flowers that look like candy. She sings a song into his ear and he listens, half a smile on his face. I hear strains of the song and it is wild and beautiful and *other* and even from far away, on the other side of the dream, it makes me crazy with wanting. I can only imagine what it is doing to him. He says to her, "I want to know more." She says, "*More* is not a safe place for you." He replies, "Safe has never been important."

I know this is true, but the fact that he's saying it to her instead of to me hurts. Not hurts like in a dream, but hurts like it's real life and I'm awake. I dream that he kisses her and it's the *way* he kisses her that makes me wake up.

Laying in dark, I reach for the phone and I call him, but he doesn't pick up. I know it's because the dream was real. He's not in his room but in some dangerous garden far away from a world that includes my guitar, Mullen's, and gin and tonics at his mother's kitchen table.

I get out of bed and go into the bathroom and in the ordinary silence of night, I shave my head. I feel invisible.

It is eight-thirty P.M. and the street in front of Mullen's is greasy with rain. It is our sixth week coming to Mullen's and Sullivan told me he would meet me here instead of riding with me. He had *things to do*.

I feel like I am nine again and I want to smash his hand with a baseball bat, but this time, it's not his fiddle that he's leaving me for.

I consider getting back into the car and driving home. But then I would just be sitting at home waiting for him, and that has been the story of the last two weeks. And let me tell you, it's a boring story.

The pub door shuts behind me and I hear someone thumb a lighter to a cigarette. "Bryant? Is that you?"

I turn and it's the bodhran player from the session, the one who had his big-ass band back in Chicago. He sucks in on the cigarette and eyes me. "I almost didn't recognize you without your hair. Well, if anyone can pull off the shaved head, you can."

"Thanks," I say. I am thinking about Sullivan kissing the girl.

"It's good job you're here," the bodhran player says. "Session's half-dead tonight and we could use a pulse."

"Sullivan might not be coming," I say.

"Psh," the bodhran player says. "We need another fiddler like we need a hole in the head. You're the one who rocks this place." He stubs out his cigarette on the dirty wall beside the door.

I'm not one for fishing for compliments, but I said, "Come again?"

The bodhran player flicks the cigarette off into the night. "You make him look good. Crying shame we didn't have you in Chicago." He holds the door open for me. I feel like my brain is exploding. I feel like I need to readjust the lens through which I look back on my entire life.

I follow the bodhran player -- I still don't know anybody's names, least of all his -- and they make a place for me at the table in the back. *Thank God* someone says. *We thought you weren't coming.*

We play so fast the notes trip over each other. We play so well the paint on the walls blister. We are so amazing that the whole city falls quiet and listens to us, from Baltimore to Richmond. We play so wondrously that other musicians write *other* tunes about how great our tunes were that night.

I hope that wherever Sullivan is, he can somehow hear us, and he knows that music can sound like this without *her*. Without Them. He only needs me.



At Cú Chulainn's worst, when he was in his warp spasms, his blood would start to boil. They used to put him into barrels of cold water to cool him down after he'd gone all battle-rage, and he would explode the barrels with heat until finally he achieved room temperature.

By the time I get to Sullivan's house after the session, my blood is just about hot enough to cook a chicken. Fifteen years I'd known him and never stood him up.

I sit myself on his front step and I wait. I am still humming with the music from before. When he finally appears, emerging from the night, hands in his pockets, he doesn't seem surprised to see me.

I stand up to face him, not letting him past me on the stairs. "You want to tell me where you were?"

I can smell it on him, though -- clover and spring and flowers, all of them out of season for a D.C. fall. He's been with her.

"I'm sorry," he says, but not in that way that means he actually is sorry. The way that means he's sorry he has to say sorry.

"You told me to tell you when you were doing something stupid," I say. "You're doing something stupid."

He stares at my hair. "I want something more," he says.

"Then we'll go find it."

"Something more than that," he says. "Something more than *here*."

"And I'm telling you that what's she's offering is a cheat," I say. "Short cut. Is that what you want? Or do you want to earn it yourself?"

Sullivan eyes are still fixed on my hair. "I'll never get to that place without her. Without Them. I'm sorry." And this time, I can tell that he really is sorry, because he's made up his mind.

I feel my blood reach boiling point. Everything inside me has shifted to something else and I'm no longer the same person I was five minutes before.

I smash my fist into his face.

I *hear* the bones in my hand hit his cheek, like knuckles being popped. Sullivan stumbles back, holding his face. I am ready to hit him again, fueled by the memory of him kissing her. What I can see of his expression around his hand is shocked as he realizes I'm about to hit him again.

"Anne," he says. "Anne, please."

I haven't heard my real name in a decade.

My fist slowly drops to my side. I'm aware that it's throbbing and painful. I think I've broken my hand on his face.

"Anne," he says again. "I'm sorry." And this is a third kind of sorry.

"I've broken my hand," I tell him. "On your face."

He lowers his fingers from his cheek; it's turning purple already. "Then we're even."

"We're not," I say. "Don't go with her, Sullivan."

"Anne -- "

"Don't call me that," I say. "I haven't been Anne in a long time. Should I start calling you Patrick again?"

He looks away. He's already changing, I see now. He needs a new name entirely. Maybe she's already given him one.

We were punk gods of Irish music and we were going to change the world. It was supposed to be the two of us against the world.

(I miss him, still.)