

JOHN McGAHERN

That They May Face the Rising Sun



'That They May Face the Rising Sun stands McGahern
above any contemporary Irish novelist.' *THE TIMES*

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The morning was clear. There was no wind on the lake. There was also a great stillness. When the bells rang out for Mass, the strokes trembling on the water, they had the entire world to themselves.

The doors of the house were open. Jamesie entered without knocking and came in noiselessly until he stood in the doorway of the large room where the Rutledges were sitting. He stood as still as if waiting under trees for returning wildfowl. He expected his discovery to be quick. There would be a cry of surprise and reproach; he would counter by accusing them of not being watchful enough. There would be welcome and laughter. When the Rutledges continued to converse calmly about a visit they were expecting that same afternoon, he could contain himself no longer. Such was his continual expectation of discovery that in his eavesdropping he was nearly always disappointed by the innocence he came upon.

'Hel-lo. Hel-lo. Hel-lo,' he called out softly, in some exasperation.

'Jamesie!' They turned to the voice with great friendliness. As he often stole silently in, they showed no surprise. 'You are welcome.'

'Ye are no good. I have been standing here for several minutes and haven't heard a bad word said about anybody yet. Not a bad word,' he repeated with mocking slowness as he came forward.

'We never speak badly about people. It's too dangerous. It can get you into trouble.'

'Then ye never speak or if you do the pair of yous are not worth listening to.'

In his dark Sunday suit, white shirt, red tie, polished black shoes, the fine silver hair brushed back from the high forehead and sharp clean features, he was shining and handsome. An intense vividness and sweetness of nature showed in every quick, expressive movement.

‘Kate.’ He held out an enormous hand. She pretended to be afraid to trust her hand to such strength. It was a game he played regularly. For him all forms of social intercourse were merely different kinds of play. ‘God hates a coward, Kate,’ he demanded, and she took his hand.

Not until she cried, ‘Easy there, Jamesie,’ did he release his gently tightening grip with a low crow of triumph. ‘You are one of God’s troopers, Kate. Mister Ruttledge,’ he bowed solemnly.

‘Mister Murphy.’

‘No misters here,’ he protested. ‘No misters in this part of the world. Nothing but broken-down gentlemen.’

‘There are no misters in this house either. He that is down can fear no fall.’

‘Why don’t you go to Mass, then, if you are that low?’ Jamesie changed the attack lightly.

‘What’s that got to do with it?’

‘You’d be like everybody else round here by now if you went to Mass.’

‘I’d like to attend Mass. I miss going.’

‘What’s keeping you, then?’

‘I don’t believe.’

‘I don’t believe,’ he mimicked. ‘None of us believes and we go. That’s no bar.’

‘I’d feel a hypocrite. Why do *you* go if you don’t believe?’

‘To look at the girls. To see the whole performance,’ he cried out, and started to shake with laughter. ‘We go to see all the other hypocrites. Kate, what do you think about all this? You’ve hardly said a word.’

‘My parents were atheists,’ Kate said. ‘They thought that all that exists is what you see, all that you are is what you think and appear to be.’

'Give them no heed, Kate,' he counselled gently. 'You are what you are and to hell with the begrudgers.'

'The way we perceive ourselves and how we are perceived are often very different,' Ruttledge said.

'Pay no heed to him either. He's just trying to twist and turn. Thought pissed in the bed and thought he was sweating. His wife thought otherwise. You'll get on good as any of them, Kate.' He took pruning shears from his pocket and placed them on the table. 'Thanks,' he said. 'They were a comfort. Pure Sheffield. Great steel.'

'I bought them from a stall in the Enniskillen market one Thursday. They weren't expensive.'

'The North,' he raised his hand for emphasis. 'The North is a great place for bargains.'

'Would you like a whiskey, Jamesie?' she asked.

'Now you're talking, Kate. But you should know by now that "wilya" is a very bad word.'

'Why bad?'

'Look at yer man,' he pointed to where Ruttledge had already taken glasses and a bottle of Powers from the cupboard and was running water into a brown jug.

'I'm slow.'

'You're not one bit slow, Kate. You just weren't brought up here. You nearly have to be born into a place to know what's going on and what to do.'

'He wasn't brought up here.'

'Not too far off, near enough to know. He wasn't at school but he met the scholars. Good health! And more again tomorrow,' he raised his glass. 'The crowd lying below in Shruhaun aren't drinking any drinks today.'

'Good luck. What's the news?'

'No news. Came looking for news,' he cried ritually and then could contain his news no longer: 'Johnny's coming home from England. He's coming home this Tuesday. Mary got the letter.'

Every summer his brother Johnny came home on holidays

from the Ford factory at Dagenham. He had left for England twenty years before and never missed a summer coming home.

'I'd be glad to run you to the station,' Rutledge offered.

'I know that well, and thanks, but no, no.' He raised the hand again. 'Always go in Johnny Rowley's car. Jim is meeting Johnny at the airport and putting him on the train. Jim is taking time off.'

Jim was Jamesie and Mary's only child, who had been clever at school, had entered the civil service, where he had risen to a high position, and was married with four children in Dublin.

'There was a time Johnny spent the night with Jim and Lucy in Dublin.'

'Not any more. Johnny and Lucy don't pull. He's not awanted. It's better, better by far the way it is. I'll meet the train with Johnny Rowley. We'll have several stops on the way from the station. When we get to the house, Mary will put the sirloin down. You can't get meat in England. You'd just love to see Johnny's face and the way he says "God bless you, Mary" when she puts the sirloin in front of him on the table.'

The house and the outhouses would be freshly white-washed for the homecoming, the street swept, the green gates painted, old stakes replaced in the netting wire that held Mary's brown hens in the space around the hayshed. Mary would have scrubbed and freshened all the rooms. Together they would have taken the mattress from the bed in the lower room, Johnny's old room, and left it outside to air in the sun. The holy pictures and the wedding photographs would be taken down, the glass wiped and polished. His bed would be made with crisp linen and draped with the red blanket. An enormous vase of flowers from the garden and the fields – roses and lilies and sweet william from the garden, foxglove and big sprays of honeysuckle from the hedges – would be placed on the sill under the open window to sweeten the air and take away the staleness and smell of

damp from the unused room. The order for the best sirloin would already have been placed at Carroll's in the town. The house couldn't have been prepared any better for a god coming home to his old place on earth.

'Johnny was the best shot this part of the country has ever seen. On a Sunday when all the guns gathered and they'd be blazing away, all Johnny had to do was to raise his gun for the bird to fall like a stone. He had two of the most beautiful gun dogs, Oscar and Bran, a pointer and a red setter. He had the whole world at his feet,' Jamesie said. 'He didn't have to lift a hand. All he had to do was go round and oversee what other men were doing. Yes, he could be severe enough and strict, too, in his own way . . . too exact when it wasn't needed. The whole country was leaving for England at the time and if any of them had a hope of Johnny's job there'd be a stampede worse than for a gold rush back from England. If anybody had told us what was going to happen we wouldn't have believed them. We'd have laughed.

'He went after Anna Mulvey. He and Anna were the stars in *The Playboy* that got to the All-Ireland Finals in Athlone the year before but neither of them was fit to hold a candle to Patrick Ryan. He had Donoghue the solicitor in town down to a T as – I forget rightly who it was . . . Patrick had the whole hall in stitches every time he moved. Johnny was wild about Anna. We were sure Anna left for England to get away from Johnny. The Mulveys were well off and she didn't have to go. Then when she wrote to Johnny that she missed him and wanted him to come to England I don't think his feet touched the ground for days. We wanted him to take sick leave and go and test the water and not burn all his bridges but he wouldn't hear. If he'd heeded our words he could be still here.'

'Why would Anna write for him to come to England when she wasn't serious or interested?'

'She was using him. She could be sure of adoration from Johnny. She had only to say the word and she'd get anything she wanted.'

'That was wrong,' Kate said.

'Right or wrong, fair or foul, what does it matter? It's a rough business. Those that care least will win. They can watch all sides. She had no more value on Johnny than a dog or a cat.

'Poor Bran and Oscar. The gun dogs were beautiful. They were as much part of Johnny as the double barrel, and they adored him. The evening before he left he took them down to the bog with the gun. They were yelping and jumping around and following trails. They thought they were going hunting. I remember it too well. The evening was frosty, the leaves just beginning to come off the trees. There wasn't a breath of wind. You'd hear a spade striking a stone fields away, never mind a double-barrel. There was just the two shots, one after the other. We would have been glad to take care of the dogs but he never asked. I wasn't a great shot like Johnny but I would have kept the gun and the dogs. They were beautiful dogs. That evening a man came for the gun and another for the motorbike. He had sold them both. You'd think he'd have offered me the gun after all the years in the house. I'd have given him whatever he wanted.'

'Why didn't you ask to buy the gun?'

'No. I'd not ask. I'd die before I'd ask.'

'Why?'

'He might think I wanted the gun for nothing. I didn't mind the gun so much though it was a smasher. It was the poor dogs that killed me – and Mary . . . far worse. She adored the dogs.

'Johnny took the train the next evening. That was the move that ruined his life. He'd have been better if he'd shot himself instead of the dogs.'

'Wasn't it a courageous thing compared to what happens in most of our lives? To abandon everything and to leave in the hope of love?'

'No, Kate. You don't know what you're saying. He didn't know what he was doing. He'd have gone into a blazing house if she asked. Compared to what he saw in her he put

no value on his own life. He thought he couldn't live without her.'

'Why was she using him if she didn't want him?'

'You must know, Kate. You're a woman.'

'There are as many different kinds of women as there are men.'

'Mary says the same,' he struck the arm of the chair for emphasis. 'Johnny'd have bought her drinks, cigarettes, God knows what, we don't know, and he gave her money. He had a lot of money when he went to England and he'd have given her the clothes off his back if she asked. He'd be at her every beck and call. We heard afterwards that Anna went to England after Peadar Curren and got burned. I suppose Johnny put her back on her feet after the gunk she got with Peadar and then she got rid of him. Johnny didn't come home that first summer but came without fail every summer since.'

'Was Anna mentioned when he came?'

'Never once. We don't even know how it ended. Then we heard she married a policeman in London who turned for her.'

'Converted to Catholicism,' Ruttledge explained. 'Turned his coat. I'd have turned my coat for you, Kate, but I had no coat to turn by that time, and you never asked.'

'Spoken like a true heathen. They'll all turn, Kate. If they have to pick between their religion and the boggy hollow, they'll all turn,' he laughed exultantly.

'We've all been in Johnny's place, except maybe not to the same extent,' Ruttledge said.

'Speak for yourself, Mister Ruttledge. I haven't been there,' Jamesie said.

'Then you haven't been far.'

'I've never, never moved from here and I know the whole world,' he protested.

'You're right, Jamesie. Pay no heed to him,' Kate said.

'What do you think, Kate?'

'I think women are more practical. They learn to cut their losses. They are more concentrated on themselves.'

'Enter lightly, Kate, and leave on tiptoe. Put the hand across but never press. Ask why not but never why. Always lie so that you speak the truth and God save all poor sinners,' he said, and greeted his own sally with a sharp guffaw.

A loud sudden rapping with a stick on the porch door did not allow for any response. 'God bless all here!' was shouted out as a slow laborious shuffle approached through the front room.

'Bill Evans.'

'It could be no one else,' Jamesie rubbed his hands together in anticipation.

Bill Evans did not pause in the doorway but advanced boldly into the room to sit in the white rocking chair. The huge wellingtons, the blue serge trousers and torn jacket, a shirt of mattress ticking, the faded straw hat were all several sizes too large. The heavy blackthorn he carried he leaned against an arm of the chair. His eyes darted eagerly from face to face to face. 'Jamesie,' he grinned with condescension. 'You are welcome to this side of the lake.'

'I'm delighted, honoured to be here,' Jamesie laughed.

Tea was made. Milk and several spoons of sugar were added to the tea and stirred. The tea and biscuits were placed on a low stool beside the rocking chair. He ate and drank greedily.

'How are you all up there?'

'Topping. We are all topping.'

'You are managing all right without Jackie?'

'Getting along topping. Managing fine.'

He had been schooled never to part with any information about what happened. There was much to conceal about Bill Evans's whole life. Because he knew no other life, his instinct to protect his keepers and his place was primal.

'Do you think will Herself get married again?' Jamesie asked jocularly, provocatively.

'Everybody says that you are far too nosy.'

'News is better than no news,' Jamesie answered, taken aback.

There are no truths more hurtful than those we see as partly true. That such a humble hand delivered it made it more unsettling. Though he pretended not to care, Jamesie knew that his curiosity was secretly feared and openly mocked. He became unusually silent.

Bill Evans finished the tea and biscuits. 'Have you any fags?' he demanded when he put the plate and cup away and rose out of the rocking chair.

Ruttledge gave him five loose cigarettes that had been placed in a corner of the dresser. 'A light?' Bill asked. Some matches from a box were emptied into his palm. Cigarettes and matches were all put together into the breast pocket of the large serge jacket. 'Not faulting the company but I'll be beating away now,' he said.

'Good luck, Bill,' Jamesie called out amiably, but Bill Evans made no answer.

Ruttledge accompanied him to the gate where he had left the two buckets in the hedge of fuchsia bushes.

'See if there's anybody watching in the lane,' he demanded.

Ruttledge walked out into the lane and looked casually up and down. Between its high banks the narrow lane was like a lighted tunnel under the tangled roof of green branches. 'There's not a soul in sight.'

'There's no one watching above at the gate?'

'Nobody. You were very hard on poor Jamesie,' Ruttledge said.

'That's the only way to give it to him,' he grinned in triumph. 'He's too newsy.' He lifted the two buckets out of the fuchsias and, gripping the blackthorn against one of the handles, headed towards the lake.

His kind was now almost as extinct as the corncrake. He had fled to his present house from the farm he first worked on. When he was fourteen years old he had been sent out from the religious institutions to that first farm. Nobody knew now, least of all Bill Evans, how long ago that was.

One cold day, several years earlier, they had gone away, locking him outside, warning him to watch the place and not to wander. They were an unusually long time away. Towards evening he could stand the hunger no longer and came to Ruttledge. 'Get me something to eat. I'm starving.'

'What's happened?'

'They went away,' he admitted reluctantly.

There was little food in the house. Kate had gone to London and Ruttledge was housekeeping alone. 'You're welcome to anything in the house but there isn't even bread. I was waiting till tonight to go to the village.'

'Haven't you spuds?'

'Plenty.' He hadn't thought of them as an offering.

'Quick, Joe. Put them on.'

A pot of water was set to boil. The potatoes were washed. 'How many?'

'More. More.'

His eyes glittered on the pot as he waited, willing them to a boil. Fourteen potatoes were put into the pot. He ate all of them, even the skins, with salt and butter, and emptied the large jug of milk. 'God, I feel all roly-poly now,' he said with deep contentment as he moved back to the ease of the white rocking chair. 'Do you have any fags?'

The small ration was taken from the shelf. A cigarette was lit. He smoked, inhaling deeply, holding the smoke until the lungs could no longer bear the strain, and then released the breath with such slow reluctance that the smoke issued first from the nostrils before gushing out on a weak, spent breath. So deep was his pleasure that watching was also a dismaying pleasure. For once, he was in no anxiety or rush to leave, and Ruttledge began to ask him about his life, though he knew any enquiry was unlikely to be welcomed. Already he knew the outlines of such a life.

He would have known neither father nor mother. As a baby he would have been given into the care of nuns. When these boys reached seven, the age of reason, they were transferred to

places run by priests or Brothers. When he reached fourteen, Bill Evans was sent out, like many others, to his first farmer.

They were also sent as skivvies to the colleges; they scrubbed and polished floors, emptied garbage and waited at tables in the college Rutledge attended. He recalled how small the boys were in their white jackets, the grey stripes of their trousers, their crew-cut heads, the pale faces tense and blank. No words were allowed to pass between them and the students. They brought huge trays of fish or meat, bowls of soup and vegetables, baskets of bread, and on Sundays glass siphons of red lemonade with silver tops. The place was so bleak that the glass siphons were like flowers on the table for the one festive day of the week. What went on in the kitchens behind the heavy oak partition was a hubbub of distant sound from which the occasional crash or cry or shout emerged. In his long black soutane and red burning eyes under a grey crew-cut, the dean of students was a sinister figure, never more so than when he smiled weakly. He walked up and down between the rows of tables or stood under the big crucifix between the high windows. He read out notices and issued warnings and with bowed head intoned the prayers of grace before and after meals. As he walked slowly up and down between the tables he read his Breviary, pausing now and then to cast an unblinking eye on any table where there was a hint of boisterousness or irregularity. Such was his reputation that cutlery was often knocked to the floor or scattered in the nervous rush towards correction. Then, with a chilling smile, he would pass on, returning to his Breviary, resuming the metronomical walk, until pausing to rest his gaze on an upturned salt cruet. Around him the boys in their short white coats hurried between the kitchens and the tables.

One morning a boy turned quickly away from a table and found the Dean unexpectedly in his path and went straight into him with a tray. Plates and bowls went flying. The soutane was splashed. Only the students who were seated

close to the accident saw what happened next, and even they weren't certain. In the face of his fury it was thought that the boy broke the rule of silence to try to excuse the accident. The beating was sudden and savage. Nobody ate a morsel at any of the tables while it was taking place. Not a word was uttered. In the sobbing aftermath the silence was deep and accusing until the scrape of knife and fork on plate and the low hum of conversation resumed. Many who had sat mutely at the tables during the beating were to feel all their lives that they had taken part in the beating through their self-protective silence. This ageing man, who could easily have been one of those boys waiting at tables or cleaning the kitchens if he hadn't been dispatched to that first farm, sat at ease and in full comfort in the white rocking chair, smoking, after having eaten the enormous bowl of potatoes.

'You were sent out to that first farm when you were fourteen?'

'Begod, I was.'

'You worked for them for a good few years before you ran away to here?'

'Begod, I did.'

'They didn't treat you very well?'

For what seemed an age he made no attempt to answer, looking obstinately out from the white chair that no longer moved. 'Why are you asking me this, Joe?'

'Everybody comes from somewhere or other. None of us comes out of the blue air.'

'You'll be as bad as Jamesie soon,' he answered irritably.

'Weren't you in a place run by Brothers and priests before they sent you to the first farm?' Rutledge ignored the rebuke. A troubled look passed across Bill Evan's face as swiftly as a shadow of a bird passing across window light and was replaced by a black truculence. 'Before the priests and Brothers weren't you with nuns in a convent with other small boys? Weren't you treated better when you were small and with the nuns?'

This time there was no long pause. A look of rage and pain crossed his face. 'Stop torturing me,' he cried out.

Taken aback by the violence and ashamed now of his own idle probing, Ruttledge answered quickly, 'I'd never want to do that. I'm sorry there's so little food in the house.'

'The spuds were topping, Joe. They have me packed,' he said rising stiffly from the chair, leaning on the rough handle of the blackthorn. 'They left me in charge and could be home any minute now. I'd want to be above when they get back.'

Now, several years later, Ruttledge watched him toil slowly down to the lake with the two buckets. Every day since he and Kate had come to the house, Bill Evans had drawn water from the lake with the buckets. In the house, Kate and Jamesie were talking about him still.

'I told you, Kate, you are too soft,' Jamesie argued. 'The decenter you treat the likes of him the more they'll walk all over you.'

'What else has he ever known?'

'You'll be the one to suffer but you could be right in the long run,' Jamesie yielded in his agreeable way. 'What was done to him was wrong and they could never have luck. When Jackie was drawing to the creamery Bill had to ride on the trailer behind the tractor in rain and wet, get down at gates and throw those heavy cans up on to the trailer. When the cans were full he was barely able. They'd put a stronger man to the pin of his collar. As soon as the can touched the trailer, Jackie would lift his foot off the clutch and turn up the throttle. Bill had to run and scramble up on the trailer after the cans. There were times when he fell. Jackie would kick him if he had to stop the tractor and climb down. Christ hadn't much worse of a time on the road to Calvary except Bill always came home alive with the cans of skim. It got so bad that Guard Murray had to warn Jackie.'

'It's hard to understand. Couldn't he have waited a few seconds for him to climb back on the trailer?'

'Ignorance. Pure ignorance. There's no other way to describe

it. One day I was watching them turning sods. There were two other men in the field with Jackie that I won't name. I was watching through the hedge. Bill's job was to trample the sods into place with the big wellingtons. Every time they'd pass close with the plough to where he was stepping the sods they'd knock him with a kick or a shove into the furrow and kill themselves laughing. It was their idea of sport.'

'Couldn't you do something?'

'What could you do? If I went into the field they'd turn on me unless I went and knocked him into the furrow as well. That was the year he ran away. He never did a better act. Nobody knew how he got away. He must have walked and got lifts. He was gone two years. He'd be gone still but a crowd up for the All-Ireland stopped at a pub outside Mullingar for a drink on the way home. They didn't even recognise Bill. He had got fat and was in boots and ordinary clothes. They couldn't believe when he gave them this great welcome. He had his hand out of course for cigarettes. The place was a farm as well as a pub. He was a kind of a potboy and got to drink all the leftovers. They should have kept their big mouths shut. Jackie and two other men got into the Ford Prefect one Sunday and drove up to Mullingar and brought him back.'

'Did they force him?'

'Nobody knows. He could even have been delighted to see them. He could have given them the same welcome as he gave to the All-Ireland crowd. The next Sunday he was back at Mass with his hand out for cigarettes as if he had never been away.' Jamesie had risen to leave.

On the way out through the porch, Jamesie's whole attention became fixed on the four iron posts standing upright in their concrete base in the small garden between the house and the orchard.

'Lord bless us, but Patrick Ryan is a living sight. He starts everything and finishes nothing.'

'One of these years he'll be back,' Rutledge said.

'We have all been scourged,' Jamesie said sympathetically.