

# The Stoat

(1978)

John McGahern

emotional: sadness or pain

growing unease.

student with time for leisure; relaxed.

elegant in comparison to father.

stylish

unknown animal or human

playing golf

A long-legged student in a turtleneck was following a two-iron he had struck just short of the green when he heard the crying high in the rough grass above the fairway. The clubs rattled as he climbed towards the crying, but it did not cease, its pitch rising. Light of water from the inlet that ran to Ballisadare and was called the Calm Sea blinded him as he climbed out of the coarse tussocks, and he did not see the rabbit at once, where it sat rigidly still on a bare patch of loose sand, screaming; and at the same time he glimpsed the long grey body of the stoat slithering away like a snake into the long grass. He took a slow step forward but the rabbit still did not move. Its crying ceased, and he noticed the wet slick of blood behind its ear, and then the blood pumping out on the sand. It did not stir when he stooped to pick it up, but never before did he hold such pure terror in his hands, the body trembling in a rigidity of terror as the heart hammered away its blood through the cut in the jugular vein. Holding it up by the hind legs he killed it with one stroke, but when he turned it over he could find no mark other than where the vein had been cut. He took the rabbit down with him, picking his way more cautiously through the long grass than when he had climbed. He left the rabbit beside the clubs while he chipped and holed out, but as he crossed from the green to the tee he saw the stoat cross the fairway behind him. After watching two simple shots fade away into the rough, he knew he had lost his concentration, and decided to finish for the morning. As he made his way back to the cottage his father rented every August in Strandhill, he twice glimpsed the stoat behind him, following the rabbit still, though it was dead.

constant, persistent  
 Tx calm and unpleasant noise.  
 violence increasing  
 sibilance  
 malevolent serpentine

foreshadow McCabe's heart attack.

continues playing golf, not particularly fazed.

inevitable, inescapable monstrous force / fate

like father, cannot escape death, unavoidable.

unnatural, morbid, petrified

graphic violence

stoat stalking him

IRELAND

evil, sneakily escape  
 surreptitious, elusive  
 afraid, cautious

extreme distress, horrific  
 conventionally evil  
 cautious

vivid, specific  
 evil, specific

start to see significance of symbolic stoat.

All night the rabbit must have raced from warren to warren, he thought, the stoat on its trail. Plumper rabbits had crossed the stoat's path but it would not be deflected; it had marked down this one rabbit to kill. No matter how fast the rabbit raced, the stoat was still on its trail, and at last the rabbit sat down in terror and waited for the stoat to slither up and cut the vein behind the ear. He had heard it crying as the stoat was drinking its blood.

vampiric, horrifying.

rabbits cute fluffy, no hope at all.

3rd repeat in one page

knows exactly where to kill.

stoat is parasitic, vampiric

not hugely empathetic

kind but oddly cold.

amplified sense of horror  
 instantaneous, death  
 evil precision scientific examination  
 stoat's killing.



The son saw much of him that spring term, as he met many of the women in Dublin, though he had to go to Cork and Limerick and Tullamore as well. In hotel lounges he met them, hiding behind a copy of the Roscommon Herald, which was how they were able to identify him.

'You've never in your life seen such a collection of wrecks and battleaxes as I've had to see in the last few months,' he said, a cold night in late March after he had met the lady from Dagenham in the Ormond. 'You'd need to get a government grant to do them up before you could think of taking some of them on.'

'Do you mean in appearance or as people?'  
'All ways,' he said despairingly. Because of these interviews the son was able to spend all that Easter a surgeon in a county town, who had encouraged him against his father in his choice of medicine, the father wishing to see him in a bank. After dinner, on the first night, the uncle suggested a long walk. 'It's one of those clear frosty nights. We can circle and come back through the town. It's about four miles.'

'That's fine with me.'  
A car passed on the road as they set out. The headlights lit the white railing and fleshly boles of the beech avenue down to the ragged thorns of the road below. They did not start to stride out properly till they reached the road. The three-quarter moon and the stars gave light enough for them to see their breaths in the frosty night.

'My father's going to get married, it seems,' he confided, in the ring of the footsteps. 'You're joking,' his uncle paused.

'I'm not. He's had an ad this long while in the papers.'

'An ad. You're surely joking.'

'I'm not. I'm in deadly earnest.'

'An ad,' suddenly the uncle became convulsed with laughter, and was hardly able to get the next words out, 'And did he get ... replies?'

'Bundles. He's been interviewing them.'

'And have you seen any of the ... applicants,' he had to pause again on the road.

'No, but he said you'd need a government grant to do some of them that he's seen up before you could think of marrying them.'

'A government grant ... stop it. This is high farce. The man must finally have gone off his rocker.'

'Apparently he's just found someone. A schoolteacher in her forties. She's no beauty, but a shining light compared with the wrecks and battleaxes he's been interviewing.'

'Have you seen this person?'

'Not yet. I'm supposed to see her next week.'

'My god, if you hang round long enough you see everything,' he combed his fingers through his long greying hair as he walked. 'At least, if he does get married, it'll get him off your back.'

'You don't like my father much?'

'He's a decent enough fellow but I find him dull. Probably not nearly as dull as he finds me.'

like job application  
similar profession  
accepts and respects Uncle  
manliness  
repetition  
disbelief  
CRUEL  
contempt  
anonymity  
derision  
not rude but damning with faint praise  
strained relationship  
self-centred  
cynicism

UNCLE IS teaching son too... not completely antagonistic  
The Stoat 301

They had circled the town. Lighted poles appeared in the thorn hedges, and then a paved sidewalk.

'We might as well have a drink in the Grand Central,' the uncle said as they came into the town. 'The trouble with being a bigwig in a small town is that there's either the Grand Central or nowhere,' and though he nodded to some people sitting in armchairs as they passed through the lounge, he headed straight for a corner of the bar. 'We'll stand. That way we can't be so easily cornered. You know, if your father does succeed in getting himself hitched, you'll be able to spend much more time here. I'd like that.'

'He'd like that too. With his uncle everything seemed open: 'Life seems to have no purpose other than to reproduce itself. Life comes out of matter and goes back into matter. We inherit it and pass it on. We might as well take as decent a care of it as we can. You cannot go against love and not be in error.' Nothing was closed. This freedom was gaiety, even though it seemed that it caused him to seem mostly lonely.

'I feel guilty about it but the truth is that my father bores me. I fear and hate the unconscious.'

A few Saturdays later he was to meet Miss McCabe in Dublin. Both his father and she were desperately nervous. It made him feel that he was the parent and they the children anxious for his approval. Miss McCabe wore pale tweeds and serviceable brown shoes. She was somewhere in her forties, rather frail, and excitable. He liked her, but he would have encouraged his father to marry her whether he did or not, as he was anxious for the whole play to be over.

'Well, what was your impression?' his father asked him afterwards. That she was so desperately nervous that she spilled both coffee and a small bowl of cream at the uncheon, that she was anxious for approval to such a point that no person should or ought to be from another ... these he did not say. Who was he to give or to withhold approval from one who had been wandering round in the world long before he ...

'I think Miss McCabe is a fine person,' he said.

'Of course not.'

'I'm glad,' he said and started to explain their plans.

She would come with them to Strandhill this summer, and stay in one of the hotels close to the usual cottage they took for August. If all went well they would become engaged before they went back to the schools at the end of the holidays.

They had been at Strandhill a week now, the boy golfing or studying, the father spending much of his time with Miss McCabe. Sometimes the son would see them arm in arm on the promenade from the tees close to the shore. The sight disturbed him, as if their defence was too brittle against the only end of life, and made it too disturbingly obvious, and he would try to shut it out with the golf ball.

'Will you be seeing Miss McCabe?' the boy asked as he put the coffee and sandwiches on the table.

'I might drop into the hotel. She's going to the salt baths.'

There was a hot salt bath close to where the old cannon pointed out on the ocean, asbestos covered, the yellow funnel of a ship for chimney from which plumes of steam puffed. She went every afternoon for the hot baths and a massage. She had rheumatism.

short sentence  
emphasise that points she is frail etc, needs support

omni, self-centred  
satisfied, arrogant  
narcissistic, braggadocious  
selfcenter back to him  
endear to son  
emotional manipulate  
vast, sweeping general advice, not strict directing  
perhaps alone  
uncle  
for father's everymin is closed  
practical, plain, unexciting  
selfish lack sympathy  
weak, dying forebodes her heart attack  
father always looks for approval.  
maybe there is love here.  
lack of sympathy  
feels uncomfortable by father's relationship  
death brought up again and again  
death is omnipresent.  
stout

carefree leisure activity  
more golf → golf helps him forget worries

offering to cook  
→ kind respectful to father

'And you? What do you intend? Are you studying?'

'No. I'll get in a round, and come back early to cook that rabbit. But ask Miss McCabe. It's just a folly on my part to want to cook it, and I don't mind at all if you'd both prefer to eat as usual at the Kincora.'

unity broken up aged, leisurely calm serene

They left the cottage together after lunch, the father with a walking stick, the son with the golf clubs, and parted at the lane that led to the clubhouse.

youth  
ominous that every thing seems so perfect

As he went round the course he climbed in that instinct that draws people to places that have witnessed murder or violence to where he had heard the crying that morning, but the blood had dried from the sand, and the place was uncannily still; the coarse tussocks rustling in the sea wind, the strand covered with the full tide, and a white sailing boat tacking up the inlet from Ballisadare to the mouth of the ocean.

death may change things  
malvolence remains  
survival like uncle

He skinned and dressed the rabbit that evening, clinically teasing out the dried blood where the vein had been cut, and Miss McCabe came at eight. The father was plainly uneasy until she exclaimed that the rabbit was delicious.

cold, unemotional detached  
MENACING?

'I never knew rabbit could be so good,' he added. 'I suppose it's just prejudice again. It was always known as the poor man's chicken.'

father happy  
afraid to try something different

'We must praise the cook too. As well as a future doctor we have also a good cook on our hands,' Miss McCabe was so much in her element that she was careless. 'It's much nicer to eat here than at the Kincora. Luke seems to have very good trout as well. Some of them look as fat as butter. You must allow me to cook them for dinner some evening soon. It's crazy not to have fish when at the ocean.'

OUR SON

'Miss McCabe likes you enormously,' the father sang after he had returned from leaving her back to the hotel. 'She has savings, and she says you'll be welcome to them if you ever need money for post-graduate work or anything like that.'

kind  
kind  
considers herself part of the family

hopeful for future  
offering selfless

That won't be necessary. My uncle said I can have as much as I need on loan for those purposes,' the son said cuttingly, and the reference to the uncle annoyed the father as much as Miss McCabe's offer had the son. Irrationally, he felt soiled by meal and rabbit and whole evening, as if he had taken part in some buffoonery against the day, against any sense of dignity, and he was determining how to avoid the trout dinner and anything more got to do with them.

not selfish unlike all others. She's kind  
JOYOUS

generous presumptuous  
intrusive competitive feels close to uncle

'Write then.'

UNCLE LOAN VS MCCABE GIVE  
loan

'I'll give you a hand so.'

strange relation w/ father

'No. I'll stay.'

matter of fact

As it turned out there was no need for avoidance. A uniformed bellhop came from the hotel the next evening to tell that Miss McCabe had suffered a heart attack in the salt baths that afternoon. The doctor had seen her and she was resting in her hotel room. She wished to see the father.

abrupt.  
sudden, unexpected.

no emotional adjectives

'Will you come?' the father asked.

seeks approval, reliance and support.

'It's you she wants to see.'

separation from father...

dismissive scathing no commiseration

When he got back from the hotel he was incredibly agitated. He could not sit still. 'She's all right,' he said. 'She just had a mild heart attack in the hot baths, but she still thinks we'll get engaged at the end of the month.'

apronoun, lack of feeling, care and more  
euphemistic

HE doesn't

'But I thought that was the general idea.'

widower from team experience  
COLD

'It was. If everything went well. Who wants to marry a woman who can pop off at any minute?'

UNEMOTIONAL  
widower

still feel pity for him  
son doesn't understand him.

It sometimes happened, even in the act, the son had heard, but he said nothing. 'Isn't it enough to have buried one woman?' the father

shouted.  
EMOTIONAL FRUSTRATED  
doesn't want to go through so much pain again

MORBID

stagnant, colloquial.  
surprising, sudden, blunt, unemotional

only thinks of positivity

'Did you tell her?'

'I tried. I wasn't able. All she thinks of is our future. Her head is full of plans.'

'What are you going to do?'

he's socked by father's cruelty and lack of emotion.

'Clear out,' he said, to the son's dismay.

cowardly

'You can't do that.'

'It's the only way to do it. I'll write to her.'

death inevitable, omnipresence of death  
running futile

'What . . . if she doesn't take it?'

'There's nothing I can do about that.'

As if all the irons were being suddenly all truly struck and were flowing from all directions to the heart of the green, he saw with terrifying clarity that it was the stoat the father had glimpsed in Miss McCabe's hotel room, and he was running.

trying to run away from death

'What'll you do about the cottage? It's rented till the end of the month.'

'It doesn't matter about the cottage. The rent is paid.'

'Where'll you go to?'

FATHER IS COWARD

'Home, of course. Aren't you coming?' he asked as if he assumed it was foregone.

'No,' he saw his chance. 'I'll stay.'

YOU CANNOT GO AGAINST LOVE IN ERROR

'What if Miss McCabe sees you?' the father asked in alarm.

'There's nothing I can do for her or she for me.'

He was not staying by the sea either. Tomorrow he would leave for his uncle's.

COWARDICE

They were all running. → total frantic terror, rabbits fleeing from death

'What if she asks about me?'

'Naturally, I'll try to avoid her, but if I meet her I'll say I don't know. That it's not my affair. How soon are you going?'

separate.

'As soon as I get the stuff into the boot of the car.'

COWARDELY

'I'll give you a hand so.'

desperate sense of urgency.

pathetic, dodging talking to this person directly.

'Are you sure you won't change your mind?'

'No. I'll stay.'

'Write then.'

laconic

'I'll write.'

uncle is dominant figure

Already he could hear his uncle's mordant voice. You have to take a test to drive a bloody old car around. But any pair of imbeciles of age can go and take a marriage licence out and set about bringing a child up in the world, which is a much more complicated activity than driving an old car around! There would be good talk for several days, and there was the story of the stoat and the rabbit.

biting & biting superior

cynical

All night the rabbit must have raced from warren to warren, the stoat on its trail. Plumper rabbits had crossed the stoat's path but it would not be deflected; it had marked down this one rabbit to kill. No matter how fast the rabbit raced, the stoat was still on its trail, and at last the rabbit sat down in terror and waited for the stoat to slither up and cut the vein behind the ear. He had heard it crying as the stoat was drinking its blood.

mocking father dismissive

to desire to escape, fleeing is futile.

repeated to remind us of omnipresence of death