

Hook

by **Danielle McLaughlin** (published in *The New Yorker* – September 6, 2017)

You wake to the squabbling of pigeons, the scratch of their claws on the window ledge. You wake, but keep your eyes tightly shut; it is not yet 7A.M., too early to start seeing things. Your mother stirs in her bed on the other side of the room. Soon you will hear her moving around the flat as she gets ready for work. You wait until she's gone, closing the door quietly behind her, and then you jump out of bed. You put on your tartan skirt and polo neck, the Bay City Rollers bobby socks your aunt sent from Boston, your black shoes. You go down three flights of stairs and out onto the street. You walk past the grocers, the pub, the church, and the house beside the church where the priest lives with his housekeeper. Now you can run: down the avenue of big houses, past the new apartments and the old flats. In the fields by the canal, cowslips wet your legs with their white spit. Grass seeds stick to the wet, and your legs are like the loaves of bread in the window of Thompson's bakery, dusted with sesame seeds. You're headed for the far field to count the horses; you've been counting them for four weeks and three days.

When you get near, you shut your eyes but keep walking, like a blind person. You climb the gate, measure the distance to the top of the hill by counting steps. Then you take a deep breath and open your eyes. One, two, three, four, five. Two palominos, a piebald, two grays. You release the breath. Now you must search for the hook.

One Saturday, four weeks and four days ago, your mother took you fishing. The people who lived in your flat before you had left a fishing rod behind. The reel was broken, but your mother said there was no need for a reel, and anyway you'd only get your fingers caught. You took cheese for bait, rolled it into little balls like márla. At the canal, your mother lay back on the bank and closed her eyes. Your eyes were on the river, watching for fish. When you turned to ask if there was more cheese, you saw that one of the horses had come up close and was snuffling at your mother's hair with his velvety lips. You shouted and he broke away in a gallop, his ears flat, his hind legs high enough in the air that you could see his hooves, and you jerked the rod out of the water so suddenly that it caught in briars and the line broke. That was when you lost the hook.

This morning, like all the mornings before, you don't find it. You wonder if it will soften as it rusts, if soon it will be so soft that it will be harmless, like Mr. Gordon in the ground-floor flat, or if it will be in the wrong place at the wrong time, like your mother's friend Colette. You walk home, put your copybooks in your schoolbag, sprinkle sugar on a slice of bread to take for lunch. You wish you didn't need to use the toilet, you would rather wait until you got to school, but it's an emergency. You take the roll of toilet paper from the cupboard and go down one flight of stairs. You're only in the toilet two minutes when Mr. Gordon starts banging on the door. Your mother says that he's supposed to use the ground-floor toilet, but if you tell him that he'll only say that it's blocked, like he always does. You pee as fast as you can, and when you open the door Mr. Gordon looks at you, at your face and your tummy, and down at your legs, and says, "What have you done with my razor blades?"

"Nothing," you tell him. He is always saying that you've stolen things.

"I bet I know where you're hiding them," he says. At the front of your tartan skirt there are two pockets and he squeezes his hands into them, makes his fingers wriggle back and forth. "How old are you?" he asks. "Nine, ten?" But, before you can answer, he spins you around and puts his hand on your bottom. There are footsteps on the landing. Mr. Gordon steps away from you and picks up a towel. He rubs it all over his face and neck even though he hasn't washed himself. Miss Hegarty from the first floor, who usually stays in bed all morning, puts her head around the door. She frowns. "Out!" she says. "Now!" And you think she is talking to you, but she isn't.

At school, you try to learn your tables, but all you see in your head is a field of dead horses. They have eaten your fishhook. They are lying on their sides, their tongues hanging out, and there are flies crawling on them, the flies that feed on dead things and land on your bread when you leave the window open. In death, the horses have multiplied—there’s a whole row of them when you close your eyes—and you think it must be like the loaves and fishes, because there was only one fishhook. It’s a miracle, and it isn’t fair. Maybe the hook split in two, like division; maybe it split in three or four or ten. At small break, you go up to Miss Carey in the yard and say, “Miss? How many horses could one fishhook kill?”

“What’s this about, Lillian?” she says, but one of the senior infants falls and cuts his knee and she has to rush off.

Back at the flat after school, your mother is cross but won’t say what about. At teatime, she says, “I think we need to get away, you and me. I think it’s time for us to move on.”

“Where?” you ask.

“Maybe to your Granny’s,” she says. “Or to Aunty Ellen, in Cork.”

You drop your fork and your sausage falls on the floor. You tell her that you can’t go, that you haven’t found the fishhook. She says that she’s sick and tired of hearing about the bloody fishhook, don’t you have anything bigger to worry about? But you can’t imagine anything bigger than a field of dead horses.

Later, while your mother packs, you push open the sash window above your bed. By moonlight, you inspect the pigeon droppings on the window ledge. Tonight, they are gray and runny, with a couple of little pink balls. The pink balls are as beautiful as pearls, and you would like to lift one out, but already a picture is forming. The ball, you are sure, is the head of someone or something, maybe even the head of someone you know. You leave it where it is, you don’t want to risk it; you are already a killer of horses. Tomorrow you will ask Miss Carey if fishhooks dissolve in the grass like apple cores and peach stones, and how long it takes for that to happen. You’ll ask her if she wouldn’t mind checking on the horses on her way to school. It wouldn’t be hard for her to drive that way in the mornings, to climb the gate. You will explain about counting them. As your mother rushes about, you consider the moon, notice how prettily it illuminates the pigeon droppings. You wonder what it is that keeps it up there, and what will happen when it falls.

Danielle McLaughlin, from Ireland, is the author of the short-story collection “Dinosaurs on Other Planets.”