

He went to work every evening. He kissed my mother. He kissed me. He patted his coat, then left us. He sat on the landing floor outside and put on his leg. Then he was gone.

Off to his work.

Henry Smart, the tap tap man. He stood outside Dolly Oblong's kip house. Henry the Leg. In the week after my birth, he went at his work with new enthusiasm and vim. My birth had freed him. There'd be no more punishments; there never had been any. The earlier deaths had been bad luck. Just that. Dead children, thrown on top of all the city's dead children. Henry looked at the certainty barrelling through my arms and legs and decided that he could do whatever he wanted. He stood on the steps of Dolly Oblong's, a new man yet again. A new man with a new leg. The ships spat out ruffians and bowsies from far-flung, savage corners of the world, hard men tired of riding each other. They scoured the city with pockets full of itchy cash and found my father on the step of the brothel, between them and the women they dribbled for. They pointed at his leg and laughed and said things in languages that my father had never heard. They started up the steps, these nut-tough bastards, and suddenly the leg was gone and, even more suddenly, they were on their backs and bawling. They looked at my father rejoining his leg. They saw the warm gleam of the streetlamp purring in the wood, and the same warmth in my father's face. They went away, and carried the legend of the leg back to the creaking, tinder-built outposts they'd sailed from. Bollixes from Stoneybatter got the same treatment. Men who had never been to sea in their lives, who'd never even gone down to the docks to look at it, men whose only language was a few dozen words of nose-propelled English, crawled away from the steps of Dolly Oblong's with cracked skulls and wilting langers. Only the meekest and the mildest and, of course, the wealthy regulars got past my father in that first week of my life. He swung his new leg with a conscience as clear as my blue, blue eyes.

Roddy DOYLE, *A Star called Henry* (1999)