A moth at the glass

Mogue Doyle

Chapter 1

1960

There was a time, and a right good time it was, when I loved the black of night and thought that everything about evenings was magical. As soon as twilight's dark pollen dusted out the last of a day's light, all tiredness would lift and a fresh vigour flow through my veins.

Badgers, foxes and old owls went on the prowl the one hour as I'd begin my wanderings. They were, in a way, my accomplices; we had something of the same hunting instinct, a feel for the kill. From the stage of evening that the blue-black of the Blackstairs mountain would rise to cover the bloodred of the sun, eventually blotting it out completely, my expectations for the night ahead would likewise rise and quickly soar to match the height of the mountain.

Yes, night in this neck of the woods always began with a blue-black patch in the middle of the Blackstairs, then rose like dark dust spores, spread itself over the countryside and settled thickly down here along the valley. The bright enamel of the sky would give way to light charcoal, and one deeper shade gradually overlay another till all was pure black.

The thing about the night was how alive you'd feel; the body's senses on high alert, searching out what was close by. Who's that walking the road ahead? The sound of the voice, or that particular footfall, would be the giveaway. The scent from a room, too, before you'd even touch the door handle, would let you know that a certain lady was in there - ah, sweet expectation!

In those early days, thirty-three years ago, it was the sense of touch that gave most pleasure. The accidental brush against a sprouting, maybe even a full, bosom, a nudge of knees with the person sitting alongside and that touch of fingers on the dance floor all spoke loudly, promised so much. The memory of those moments - by heavens, their very warmth yet - is almost enough to remove the chill from this night. For cold it is that's all about nowadays.

To be honest - if such a thing is possible - what I liked most about the dark was the absolute freedom, the freedom most undercover creatures have, to take part in the wild goings-on of night. To pull the door behind you on leaving the house, down the lane and out onto the open road under cover of darkness; it was possible to turn right or left, go up or down the road, without prying eyes wanting to know your business or keep you under heel. It was helpful, too, when calling to a neighbour's

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house, to know who was inside ahead of you; so I'd tell myself to have a little look in the window first, and then decide whether to go in or not - and what harm is there in being careful, before you jump to conclusions? Indeed, the dark was a young man's best friend when it came to dealings with the ladies. Ah, the ladies . . . but we'll keep that for later.

I wish it were otherwise, but certain things can't be changed. It just wasn't my lot to become a butterfly under the warm summer's sun and flit from one flower head to the next, but instead to flutter like mad: a moth against the window pane, hell-bent on reaching the flame of some half-light inside. The fact is I was a creature of the night; still am.

I know this road like the back of my hand. From the end of our lane, I can make out every rough stony patch of ground, every last briar sticking out to tear at my trouser legs. And here we are: this place up ahead, the farmyard on the right. Slow down now and listen: the initial check. There's a dim glow at low level across the road, a patch of borrowed light from the yard inside.

I ought to have the picture in my head by now: after all my winters of coming, unseen, to this place to watch her. Wonder if she's wearing that blue bib, the one with red flowers and a red border, that tightens so severely about her body - still curved, firm after all the years. With a scarf to cover her hair, her head is tucked in against the cow's big right flank, pushing the animal's weight onto its other hind leg to make room for her to squeeze away on the teats. The cow tugs on the neck-chain, screws back its great head to smell and eye her up - make sure it's Kate - before consenting to take part in this rite. The moment that happens, she reassures the animal: Yes, Betsy, it's only me; over onto your other leg now, good girl. The familiarity of the voice eases the tension in the dumb beast's frame, and the bulbous eye softens.

I feel my way off the stones of the cowhouse gable: hard as flint, cold to the touch. Over to the corner granite with that sharp-cut edge; never lost its shape either. Turn right, stay in by the wall, and up to the door. It's open; January or June that door is open. Must mind now not to step into the light - still not used to all this electricity business: such sudden brightness at only the flick of a switch, since we got connected up three years ago. There's the spatter of milk now: it's safe to move further.

And there's Kate. The pale flesh on this side of her face, the flushed red on the back of the left hand and the curved calf of her left leg. Such lines, colour! Look at the way she sits, tilted forward on that three-legged stooleen, so absorbed with what she's doing. She has the knack of applying herself totally, and with such ease, to the work in hand; just like her brother. The powers of concentration that that fellow had! No, mustn't think of her brother. There's already enough going on in my head.

It's a craze that has me driven demented. The craving to be close to what was, a long time ago, the centre of my world and the main house-of-call for many local people. There's this queer sort of hope that, through some miracle, time will change and I'll get back to that fatal year to undo what happened. There's a yearning to retrieve lost days, and nights, of unending excitement, the whirlpool of craic . . . and music. Yes,

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the music: that one tune, St Anne's Reel, forever going round in my head. I can't reason away the impulse to be at this door - this entrance to the world of the bygone. And the more time passes, the stronger it gets, the more urgency there is to do something about the craving; possibly even take that gigantic step into the light - no, not this accursed cold electric light, but the other brightness: the one we had before.

I remember those nights of half-light. Paraffin lanterns and tilley lamps outside; inside, black oil lamps on nails in walls, with trout-brown smokedup globes. A time when the silver Aladdin and its cone-shaped filament glowed on the oval table in the middle of the parlour floor. And because of it, the damask linen tablecloth had changed from white to yellow clay. Flickering candles would sway the shapes on the whitewash - turned sepia - and there were shadows everywhere, and that tune played on . . .

Stolen kisses in the porch while passing in or out, and awkward touches not so instantly repelled there in corners of lesser light and behind doors. The half-whispered Will you meet me outside later? plea, and that longed-for Yes following a moment's wait, the scarcely bearable moment's wait. And later, outside, shadows would merge along the ground or arms reach out to be clasped: couples on their way to the haggard to take the longings off each other. The haggard - the large area of yard beyond the main yard that only ever came into its own during the harvest and, of course, at night. And the dwelling-house over there at the top of the yard was then a half-lit trout pool teeming with young life, in those years before nineteen twenty-seven.

She ought to be finished by now, surely. I'll move back into the yard - careful where you put your feet: there's a lot more puddles than there used to be. Ah, the light's on in the kitchen, while the cowhouse and dairy below have turned to darkness. So many lights, so much bloody brightness, ever since the Scheme came round. The yard lamp, though, is the one to mind; I nearly got caught out, once or twice, before getting the hang of things. Its switch is inside the porch. Must get over to the kitchen window and watch out for her opening the porch door, and be ready to scamper off.

It's all right: she's sitting by the fire, where her mother used to sit, turning the fanners. She has the kettle down on the lowest notch of the crane, boiling water for the tea. It never changes, this nightly routine. Having let the tea draw for an exact five minutes in the hot greesach of the hearth, she carries the enamel teapot over to the table and sits in. Soda bread is buttered with a bone-handle table knife on a blue-rimmed plate, which she then smears lightly with a coating of blackcurrant jam; all her own produce, 'cept the tea.

The time of the Emergency made her that way, made everybody like that: all the coupons and rationing. But afterwards, she stayed spartan, while everyone else went back to the ways of plenty. And you could set your watch by her; you'd think she was a Protestant. The one luxury, if you can call it that, is the shocking-red leather car seat raised off the ground on a timber frame over by the fanners. It's not that it's grotesque or anything like, but, among the other, more severe, simple pieces of furniture, is there not a certain out-of-place look to this one fad that, maybe, borders on bad taste? I just don't like the lurid thing.

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After supper she turns on the wireless for the halfsix news and Michael Dillon for the cattle prices; then switches it off. Kate will sit there in silence looking into the fire till bedtime - of a Wednesday night, she won't go to bed till after Farmers' Forum ends at ten o'clock. This is our spell, when she and I can think about the same things - though I never think of anything else. Kate beside the warm crackle of burning logs inside, and I out here on the sill - in the less warm night air, I can tell you. It's our dream time . . .

Shhh, there it is. Listen now, can you hear it rising: that tune? The reel, St Anne's Reel. And there he is coming into focus at the table, the same table; smiling, I'm sure - forever damned-well smiling - playing the box. Oh no, excuse me, not playing it, he never actually played the cursed thing; the fellow just flitted his hands effortlessly up and down the keys of that old Hohner; the long bony fingers only talked to one another through sounds the buttons made. Philly's eyes, black holes for eyes, look out at me from beyond the empty space, and are gone.

Philly Kelly's shape it is, right enough, at the corner of the table. His laughing face and freckled cheeks are just like his sister's, but unlike his sister he has jet-black curly hair, straight off some old Greek statue. His tall, lean-as-ever frame bends over the box to listen to its sounds, and tells it to make clarion notes this way or that. The way old Jigger Nowlan used to shape iron on the horn of an anvil: the same immaculate control working with a purpose.

I know the purpose: he's calling the others, through the second part of that tune. The reveille goes out to all who came to this place back in those heady days - nights, I mean nights. And they respond. Time for an old session.

Here they are on cue out from the shadows, blustering onto the floor; their feet flicker up and down to the reel. There's the full foregathering of them now. The steel toe and heel tips as piercing as soldiers' bayonets, thanks to Jim the Shoe or Mylie Fitz - each as good a cobbler as the other: one-anda- half pairs of working boots a day, finished. The best, oh, only the very best, will do for such company. They move onto the centre flag, the special one - spot the change of sound when you listen closely: something of the timbre of a bass drum to it, Philly used to say, with the beat of a heart. And no wonder.

It's only like yesterday, that Philly and I went to Glasslacken Quarry for that flagstone. We spent hours mulling through stockpiles of uncut slate in the sludge and muck of a mid-February to select the right shape, one big enough to take a dance set. That section of quarry where the flags had been stacked in groups, a dozen per group standing on their edges and leaning against each other like dominoes, seemed our best bet.

This one here doesn't look too bad, says I, having turned over at least twenty of them heavy shaggers. Philly strolled over, looked at it sideways, with one eye closed, and ran the palm of his hand round the nape of his neck. The exactness with which his brain clicked hadn't changed one iota since our schooldays, when we'd been the best of friends.

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I don't like the way the grain tapers off, says he. It might split. He was right of course; the trouncing that stone would get, it wouldn't last. A carpenter like myself, used to the grain-runs of wood, should have seen that flaw. Philly, used only to drill-runs and hobbing-off horses along them, had spotted it. My enthusiasm for the venture slipped; he could pick his own blasted stone. My job was no more than to lay it in place; what I'd agreed to do when asked. An hour passed before he settled on one, and even then he wasn't quite satisfied - all bloody perfectionists are the same; they'd get to you. Or was he dallying on purpose, just to show what a big fellow he was?

Back here afterwards, I lifted some small flags from the middle of the kitchen floor and scooped out a hole to an exact depth. It was Philly's notion that a horse's skull be laid in the hole, and propped so that the bone would touch the underside of the new flag in a certain way. I layered small stones around the edges, and a coating of sand over; then with a few last, levelling adjustments the flagstone was set in place. Be the hokey, it's there yet, look.

The reverence at the final act was like that shown for baptism in church. Philly called Kate, pointed her onto the new stone and lilted a hornpipe. He stopped after a few bars, but Kate kept dancing in time to some music beyond hearing. She sure could move. So caught up was I with the sound of her foottap that what should've been relished wasn't: her ease of movement, the sight of an ankle and the graceful curves of high-flying legs. But that didn't stop those shapes before me from being implanted in my head, like marks on stone from a mason's cold chisel.

Then Philly joined in, easily merging with his sister's step. 'Cept, to protect his bandaged right arm, he danced but lightly. It was obvious that the sound was . . . well, different. Not sure, I searched his face for a sign, but none was given. When they finished, it was exactly on the beat together, as if they'd spoken to each other in the secret language that only music people understand. You'd feel out of place with them.

That'll do, says he then. The horse's head underneath is the thing all right. He didn't look at anybody while saying it, or afterwards; he didn't need anyone else's nod. Once Philly said the sound was right, well, there could be no more about it. His verdict was what mattered, the ultimate stamp of approval. And wasn't it well he knew it too, as he strutted out of the kitchen? You'd think nobody else had an ear or taste in such matters.

What was all the fuss about anyway? A special bloody flagstone, a hole dug out and the horse's head stuck down, to get a little more clickety-clack during a dance. Or was there more to it than sound? Some ancient rite, maybe, that Philly was once again carrying out. You'd wonder what went on inside that fellow's head. Could it have been he was part of some old pagan sect who'd had their beginnings way back in the mists of time, long and ever before religions were heard tell of?

There'd always been something to Philly that I couldn't quite put my finger on, and this was it. Pishoguery. He was in league with the other world, the fairies. You'd see

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it in the small things, the little observances he'd keep. Saw it for myself like: the way he'd lift a finger to his forehead in salute of a magpie, and he'd hesitate for an instant passing the well-field gate, as though paying his respects to some unseen thing there under the old whitethorn. And the way a bush was put up every year for Beltane: the end of it stuck down in the dunghill at the bottom of Kellys' yard. The bits of rag and eggshells hanging from its stark twigs would blow and rattle at every puff of wind of early summer. You'd know it was Philly who'd put the thing there. Hard to believe it, like, from a grown man.

The trouble there was over that, though. At least we hadn't seen much wrong with cutting the head off Doran's dun cob - and such an amount of blood. Had I planned it better, I'd have made a cleaner job of it, less gory. In a way, I was doing the animal a favour by putting it out of its misery. It was nearing its day for the knacker's yard anyway, and old Doran had stopped working it long and ever before. By sacrificing itself to us in this way - though it hardly had much choice in the matter - it would become part of something big, with a more important role to play than any it'd ever had, and with a lot more lasting to its new existence. A dance was planned for after the District Final, and win, lose or draw that match, Philly had said, our hurling team's achievements were going to be celebrated. The dance must go on.

The horse's head was boiled in a potato pot - see that big iron one in the corner opposite Kate, there against the hob. Slow-boiled it, we did, for a few hours, the same as you'd do a bouillon, so as not to damage the bone, if you don't mind; then picked off the flesh and cleaned out the innards. Would you like a taste? says Philly. Yuck! He ate a piece of flesh himself - again doing the big fellow on it, or was there something more grisly in his action? We spent surely a full day between going to the quarry, cooking the head and laying that stone in place.

Old Doran kicked up a fuss and went to the Guards. Don't know what he expected them to do. The long fellow, Guard Ryan, did go round on his bike all right, asking questions of anyone he met; that was his duty. Might you have any information now about the killing of Mr Doran's horse? says he, waiting to pounce with a pencil stub and black book on any scrap of information. But he got nowhere with his enquiries: people round here gave him short shrift.

There was no love lost on fellows in uniforms. Soldiers, RIC, Tans and the Free State Regulars had previously travelled these same roads, imposing themselves. Then another set appeared: the Civic Guards. All the bloody same. The Troubles might have been over, but people hadn't forgotten, least not for long enough to allow them to separate the new lot - supposed to be our own - from the old RIC. A question of trust, really: put a uniform on your best friend, and even he'd turn into a minion to make notes about you. Police, officials and informers, all that ilk - always prying - are best avoided.

No, nobody talked, only among themselves - and they certainly knew how to do that. Oh, I hear Old Doran has a search party out for the head of his horse, says Ben Rowe. The man wants to sew the missing part back on, and sell it the next time there's a circus in town. It should make a good fist of dancing a hornpipe.

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Everyone knows every blasted thing, I says. Can a body do one thing without half the country hearing about it?

'Cept for the Peelers and old Doran, says he.

Aye, I hope he finds his head, says I, cutting short the conversation.

Big Cha Cha Tobin, too, made the most of the caper. He asked Philly if he'd heard the latest ghost story. The one about the Headless Horseman, says he.

I did, says Philly, and so did the rest of the parish.

But now, says Cha, there's another version to that story.

Is there indeed? Philly's wry smile showed that he'd expected a smart quip, but wouldn't gratify Cha by asking him what it was.

Cha waited to be asked. But without the impact he'd hoped for, he eventually says: He carries his head round under his arm for safety sake, in case anyone might want to cut it off. Do you get it? says he. Cut it off . . . the head?

Philly laughed all right, not at the joke but at the slow, low voice of Cha; the meek way Cha had muttered it with his lips curled down at the edges like a sad clown. For the same Cha Cha Tobin was really no more than a big clown, an interfering lug of a clown.

Nobody had talked. And the fact that my brother, Mylie, had let it be known that he'd held on to his rifle since the '23 ceasefire - didn't bury it, like what others had done, in a boghole to rust - was a deterrent to any would-be informer. There's always one shagger in the woodpile who needs reminding, says he. People respected the likes of Mylie, who were known to have held on to their pieces.

Oh, Guard Ryan knew all right who'd done it. Three and four times on his rounds, he quizzed me and Philly with the same questions, letting on to have forgotten our answers while fumbling with the notebook on the handlebars of his bike. He looked me up and down a bit too suspiciously: I was tempted to floor him. I'd let him see quickly enough that there was another rule in these parts, a different sway to his kind. An independent people were rooted on these slopes, who'd always be here. I had a surge of what Mylie must have felt when he was on the run: a loathing for bullies in uniforms who called their business official and were convinced of their natural right to step on everyone else's toes. This instinctive, yet cold, hatred rose through me: could have done for him on the spot. But Ryan read well, I had to grant him that: he knew better than to press too hard with his questions. It wasn't the first time we'd crossed paths. With one last look at me, he closed the black book, threw a leg over the bike and pushed away up the road.

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Cha Cha and Philly, along with their old spectre friends, all fade back now among the shadows, and the floor is empty again. The music, too, slips from my head. I feel the chill; can't resist it penetrating my bones the way I used to. And the window sill is beginning to freeze over. This old army coat of mine is gone too threadbare - come the next fair of Borris and I'll get myself another good one; though they don't have the quality things there any more either. Nothing is the same any more.

Nothing is the same except the hauntings of spectres, and their tormenting my head. Life wasn't as difficult to put up with, in the early days that followed the event: there were so many other things to be concerned about. But as time passed, the haunting increased, and now almost all waking hours are taken over by it. Something will have to be done; this obsession can't go on.

But as far as this night goes, Kate can sit there on her own by the fire till bedtime. I'm going to take this bag of bones on home before the kinleen-roes start growing from my nostrils. An army coat calls for a soldier-like march. Left right, left right . . . but must be careful till I get out onto the road. Down the road, up the lane into my own small yard and I'll lift the latch on the door of my cottage.

Aye, and I'll find what's sitting there inside, waiting for me . . .

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