

FAO LoveReading
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THE COUNTING GAME

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THE COUNTING GAME

INTO THE WOODS.

COUNT TO TEN.

ONLY ONE OF US
COMES HOME AGAIN.

SINÉAD NOLAN



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To my Mum and Dad, who always
believed in me

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Drumsuin, Ireland
1995

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The Rules

1. Count slowly to ten with your eyes closed. One player hides.
2. The seeker or seekers call out: 'Creature of the forest, will you play the Counting Game?'
3. Try to find the hidden player while seeker(s) counts out loud. Walking only. No running.
4. Once you find the hider, they must tell a scary story about what the Creature was going to do before they were found (e.g. steal their voice box, bury them alive).
5. The game is a test. To figure out if the players have been good to the forest. If they haven't, the hidden player won't be found.

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Prologue

Branches rustle in the wind. They speak to Jack. They say something, but he cannot understand what. At times, he does not understand the forest; other days he understands it perfectly, like when it sends him messages about himself, telling him he has been wrong or bad.

Jack's fingers cover his eyes. It is dark underneath. Muggy breath fills the cavern of his palms. The seconds pass as he counts. *Two potato, three potato, four ...*

The blanched October light streams through a gap in the trees and when he opens his eyelids from behind his hands, he can see the flesh of his fingers lighting up. In the afternoon air, he can taste the pine musk on the tip of his tongue. Drizzle floats through the forest and finds its way to the back of his neck, where he feels it crawl. A trail of ants on his spine, geese on his arms. He hears a screech close by and he starts – drops his hands on *nine-almost-ten*. He opens both his eyes fully and looks up. It is an owl or a mourning dove. He calls out into the cold, still air. His voice shakes.

'Creature of the forest, will you play the Counting Game?'

Jack turns and looks around at the landscape.

'One!' he calls out as he begins to walk up the mountain. 'Two!' he shouts even louder. Birds flap away, startled. 'Three!'

He scrambles uphill, breathless. He is near the tractor now, far from the treehouse. 'Four!'

He can hear the sound of the river from here. The wind howls and booms like smoke up a chimney. He stops, turns around and looks down the hill through the myriad of trunks.

Jack lowers his voice. 'Five ...'

He can see a shadow to his right, hiding behind branches. He can hear voices now. Then, as suddenly as they had started, the voices stop.

'Six,' he whispers.

Jack is dizzy. He is now looking down on himself from above. A little boy, all alone and lost between hundreds of pines. Then his stomach drops. In the distance, there is another scream – this one is prolonged and howling. Livid as the goat Jack had seen dragged into Fergal Duffy Junior's barn for slaughter, one day when he was not meant to be watching. The kind of scream which his mother would have said had a weight to it; a cry made from fear and agony. This scream sounded like it belonged to a person. The sound would stay in Jack's nightmares for weeks.

Perhaps Saoirse heard it too. They'll stop the game and together they'll find the scream. After all, it was too far off to be Saoirse – a field's length away, or more. She can't have got that far in so short a time. But Jack knows that the scarlet scream, between the waves of sound, the tidal, earthly graveness of it – he knows in his bones that it *is* Saoirse.

Jack feels a hollowness inside himself. She isn't nearby any more – he can feel it. They are always connected, like people talking on the phone. Now it's like she has put down the receiver. Disappeared. The very same way he felt when his mother died. Jack needs to search now but the trees feel closer, more crowded than before.

Thunder rumbles. Left and right there are only the brown bark teeth of giant monsters, the dark gaps between them full of eyes. The Creature is watching him. Jack can feel it. What comes next is a far worse feeling. Like he is under threat. Like whatever had

caught his sister is about to catch him too. He turns and looks up. There it is all at once. The shrouded figure. It hovers above. Black, human-shaped, but much larger than anything human. Terrifying.

He can feel warm water trickle down his inside leg. So scared, he has wet himself. He pinches his own hand to check if he's having a nightmare, but it stings. He is not asleep and he cannot stay here; he must run away – but where to? As he sprints downhill, he gasps for air. He is surrounded by firs now. The air is hazy, and filled with a ghostly hunger. *Samhain*. One week now until the souls will return to roam the earth.

Jack races through the forest away from the Creature, trying to find Saoirse. He runs for what feels like hours. He stops from time to time, hunting for signs of her in the gloom. His back is sticky with sweat. He calls her again and again. Big sister Saoirse. *Sir-shaaa*. Roaring and desperate, then fitful and quiet. Whispering, shouting, howling, sobbing. Yelling her name. She can't be gone, he won't believe it.

Jack finally reaches a gap in the trees and stumbles out onto the winding country lane. He waits there until nightfall and listens carefully for a sound of someone, anyone, but all he can hear are the birds. Eventually, as light turns to dusk, a car comes with a person inside. All the person sees is a little boy, standing in the middle of the road.

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PART ONE

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Day One

Jack

Things start and things end. When things start they are usually happy, and when they end they are usually sad. One is for start, ten is for end. When you reach ten, the game is over.

Jack's hands are bright from the orange poster paint. He's in the kitchen painting a picture. Footsteps make him jump. Older sister Kate appears in the doorway, her face pink, her eyes swollen shut from crying. Her blonde hair has been chopped short like a boy, uneven at the ends. She is wearing the same green jumper she had on yesterday evening when he saw her passed out asleep. When he had crept back in without Saoirse.

Jack can tell by her expression they are no longer alone in the house. They must have a visitor.

The Garda bends as he comes through the doorway even though he doesn't need to, holding his hat in front of him with flat palms. He nods a hello to Jack and sits next to Pearl's empty bed which is rumpled, covered in flecks of white fur. The chair makes a loud creak like it is complaining about the weight.

'My name is Garda Morris. Mind if I smoke?'

Kate shakes her head. She starts to tidy the kitchen table, shuffles the old newspapers into a pile, and throws a piece of turf onto the dying fire. The Garda lights a cigarette as the kettle shrieks. Jack watches as the bags float to the surface of the cups

like little bodies in the sea. Tea sloshes over the cup's rim as Kate passes it to the Garda, who takes it from her, places it down, and begins to root in his briefcase. After putting his painting in the corner, Jack washes and dries his hands at the sink. Jack picks up his stuffed toy and takes the seat furthest away at the table. He can see now that one of the Garda's eyes is missing. A sunken bed of skin. Jack has lots of questions about how it happened, but he also feels worried that this is the person who has been sent to help. How could anyone be useful in searching for a missing girl with a missing eye? The Garda gives Jack a blank stare with his remaining eye and nods to Jack's lap.

'Who's this little fella then?'

Jack tightens his fingers around the sloth's woollen fur.

'Wilberry.'

'And does he go on adventures?'

'Ye.'

'Not ye, yes,' Kate corrects.

'Yes,' repeats Jack.

The Garda looks between Kate and Jack over his glasses.

Jack turns Wilberry around, to check he is not upset, and arranges his blue floppy feet next to one another. His mouth is a sewn-on, straight line with a little twist upwards on one side. He has a steepled nose and red tartan dungarees – a glassy button eye and an X where the other one fell off in the forest yesterday.

Jack says nothing. He draws an invisible S for Saoirse on Wilberry's front with his finger. Picks at the quick of his fingernails. There is still bright orange paint in the crease.

'And how old are you?' the Garda asks.

'Nine and three quarters.'

'A big lad altogether. And your sister Saoirse, who is missing?'

'Thirteen.'

'Bigger than you – is she the boss of you both?'

Jack nods.

The Garda laughs a little.

'Aye, I've a big sister too and she's the very same. And how did you get separated from Saoirse yesterday?'

'I lost her in the forest.'

The Garda writes something on his notepad, then takes another drag of his cigarette.

'Kate tells me you were playing hide-and-seek, and your sister was hiding at the time?'

Jack nods.

The Garda pauses.

'Why didn't you tell anyone last night that she was missing?'

There is a long silence.

Kate leans in and whispers to the Garda. Jack can't hear what exactly, but the Garda nods. He makes his voice softer.

'Could she still be hiding?'

Jack does not respond.

Garda Morris sighs.

'Could someone have taken her? Did you see anyone nearby at the time?'

Jack tries to recall what he had seen but it quickly disappears, like a ghost. Something is stopping him remembering. He had been so upset yesterday – it is like he can't see it now, as hard as he tries.

'The forest was the last place you saw your sister, was it?'

Jack thinks back to yesterday before they had started playing the game, standing near the clearing in the strong breeze. Wisps of hair dancing, feet planted solid like trees. He had covered his eyes then and counted. The Garda repeats the same questions Kate asked him this morning, though the Garda doesn't shake him by the shoulders like she did.

'Where could she be?' *I don't know.*

'Could she have run away?' *I don't know.*

'Did anyone take her?'

Jack wants to go back to the closet and sit among his mother's dresses. To hide away until it's all over.

'Do you know any other details, anything at all?'

Jack lowers his chin. Peers out from under his eyelashes.

‘What was Saoirse wearing when she went missing?’

‘Blue jeans, a red jumper, a navy coat,’ Kate replies. ‘Isn’t that right, Jack?’

Jack nods. Kate bites her lip, traces a finger over the back of one hand. She still has blackberry juice under her fingernails from the jam they made two days ago. Jack had the same reddening purple colour around his mouth earlier in the week, as though he had been eating tar.

‘She has snakes for hair,’ Jack says. ‘Like Medusa.’

‘I’m sorry, Garda Morris, he has a wild imagination.’

Kate gives Jack a stern look, her mouth in a firm line.

‘Have you got a photograph of her?’ Garda Morris asks her. ‘Just so I can confirm her hair is not *really* made of snakes,’ he says, giving Jack a small smile.

‘Of course,’ replies Kate. She goes into the other room. Jack looks out of the misted window and down at the logs near the fence at the back of the house where the chicken coop used to be. Now it is just grass.

‘Here,’ Kate says, coming back into the room.

Jack looks at the photo Kate has chosen – it is one of Saoirse. In it, her smile looks frozen on, lips parted in an unsure way, like she does not trust the person behind the camera. Her red wavy hair is loose about her shoulders, rather than in her usual plait. Her shirt collar is two bright white triangles, in contrast to the blue of her jumper and the brown paper backdrop.

‘Blue eyes, red hair, freckles ...’ Garda Morris mutters, looking at the picture and writing on his notepad. ‘You say she was wearing a navy coat – how did it look?’

Kate’s eyes dart to one side.

‘It is tweed, with wooden buttons and ... a hood.’

Jack thinks of the coat. He remembers seeing it when he and Saoirse went to play on Fergal Duffy Junior’s land. They were not supposed to be there, annoying the cows. Fergal stood at the edge of his barn, in the mud, hand-bellows for smoking bees in one hand, mesh hat in the other.

'The shoes she went out in yesterday were her only pair, apart from her wellies,' Kate says. 'They are canvas, not great for the rain.'

'Any health conditions?' Garda Morris asks.

'Asthma.'

Fergal had been watching them from the barn. Jack had given him a wave, but he had not waved back. He had just glowered, face ruddy, like an angry bee himself who had been disturbed from his hive. Was that the same day as yesterday, or not?

Garda Morris is still asking questions. 'Would she have had an inhaler with her?'

'Yes, a blue one, I think – Jack, do you remember?'

Jack tries to think about yesterday, as they sprinted towards the forest in the drizzle. Saoirse had sprayed the inhaler into her mouth. He could hear the wheeze of her breath. They had climbed over the metal fence of Fergal's field and then ducked under the boundary of gorse, scraping their hands.

Jack nods.

'Does Saoirse have any favourite hiding places in the forest? Any kind of shelter, like a treehouse?'

This is a new question. The Garda puts down his pen and watches. The seconds pass slowly and the air is thick with a feeling Jack has never felt before. It stretches on.

Jack is careful to keep his eyes focused away from Kate.

'They do have a treehouse,' Kate says, 'not far from here. I can tell you exactly where it is.'

Garda Morris turns a new page and scribbles something in the corner. He reaches into his pocket and takes out a packet of Black Jack sweets.

'Do you like these?'

Jack nods. 'But I'm not allowed.'

Older sister Kate glances at him sideways. 'Don't worry, the Garda is safe.'

Jack takes one slowly. He unwraps a Black Jack, and puts it into his mouth. Jack likes Black Jacks, especially because they

share his name. He strokes Pearl's coarse fur under the table with his bare foot, examining the strands of fibres in the wooden table, how the pattern curves and spirals into knots like the number eight.

There is silence. Jack rewinds like a cassette tape in his mind. They had been playing their usual game. He draws a selection of invisible numbers on the table. Then he draws a big circle around them. Kate places the cup down near the number three. She sits between Garda Morris and Jack on another chair. Jack's fingers crawl over his arm and hand, and he remembers the feeling of pine needles against his skin.

'It sounds like, you were playing hide-and-seek, and you never found her?' the Garda says, gently.

Jack doesn't nod or shake his head. Instead, he spins around in his seat and kneels up, teetering on the edge. He grips the chair, looks out of the window into the garden. Fear rises in him again, a suffocating feeling – so much, he can barely breathe. From here he can see a line of trees in the distance. Kate touches his shoulder.

'Come down now, the Garda needs your attention.'

Jack keeps looking towards the trees, waiting for a sign. Eventually, he sees it. Black pieces of something soar and dive. Into the wind, flapping their wings, swooping and scattering wide across the sky until they move closer to Jack and he cannot watch them any more – they are warning him not to speak. He turns away quickly and sinks low down in his seat so they cannot see him. He presses his chin on his chest, breathing fast. When he turns his head to look back, they have gone.

Visitors come and go, and Kate paces up and down. Everyone is worried and upset. They keep asking Jack why he never told anyone until this morning. Jack doesn't know why, only that he hadn't wanted to worry Kate, what with her sleeping at strange times, and he hadn't wanted to get Saoirse in trouble. Jack himself hadn't slept well at all. He kept waking and thinking he heard her

coming home. Her key in the door, her soft steps creeping up the stairwell. Her whispering in his ear that it was okay, she was home now – but it never happened.

A few hours pass in the stuffy kitchen with Garda Morris, and outside the wind is picking up. Jack rubs his bare feet together, hides a black toenail like he is burying a clue, wraps his arms around Wilberry and squeezes. They are still asking him questions. She has been gone for twenty-four hours now – ‘a long time’, said Garda Morris. On the radio, beside where Kate’s music cassettes are kept, a melody plays. It is interrupted with headlines of a missing girl. The world had got wind of his sister’s disappearance. The news had spread around Drumsuin and the whole south-west of Ireland like flames in a tinder fire.

Kate had been asleep yesterday evening when Jack got home. Snoring on the sofa after a long day at work. The man who had found him on the road had dropped him off outside the house and Jack had pleaded with him not to come to the door and not to speak to Kate.

Jack had run inside, waving to the man, before he watched out the window to make sure he had driven off and his car lights had disappeared down the lane.

This morning, Kate was so angry with him. Angry for not telling her Saoirse was missing when they could have still found her easily last night. *How could you do that to her? To Saoirse?* she had exclaimed. Jack could tell that he was not just bad, he was very bad indeed. So bad, Gardaí are here now and might arrest him.

Jack closes his eyes and tries harder to erase any memory of yesterday. He feels the wool of Wilberry’s dungarees running along the inside of his arms. When he opens his eyes again, he sees Garda Morris lean back on the chair. Garda Morris pushes his half-moon glasses up on his nose, takes a gulp of tea, puts the mug down and reaches for a new packet of sweets. The packet rustles. It has been there a while, a promise or a bargain. He chews with a slack mouth, extends the packet of red, yellow, and

violet worms and offers them to Jack. They look like a mass of squirming fish, all wrapped around each other's bodies, their tails long, spineless and small with telescoping eyes. *Whipsnout sorcerers. Muddy arrowtooths. Pelican eels. Barreleye fish.* The Garda is a barreleye because he looks like he has one eye closed. Like the men in Western films, staring down the barrel of a gun, and the barreleye fish is camouflaged, like Jack.

Jack does not move for a minute. Eventually, he stretches one hand out across the table to the gaping bag and picks out a few squirming worms. They cling to his fingers. He holds them in his hands until they turn sticky. When Garda Morris is not looking, he lifts one to his mouth and swallows it whole. Garda Morris jots some words in his notepad. Jack cannot read what they say.

'As we know, your mother, Lucy Kellough, has passed,' he says to Kate, who nods. 'So that'd make you the most senior member of the household at the moment?'

She nods again.

'And Saoirse and Jack are minded full-time by you ...' he says, as though he hasn't realised this until now.

She nods a third time.

'Right so,' Garda Morris says, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

'Any history of self-harm from Saoirse?'

'Not that I know of.'

Garda Morris looks up at other photographs hung on the wall. He rolls his shoulders back.

'We've already been in touch with your father, Cahill, in Dublin. Your Aunt Bronagh has told us she is on her way back from London, she is trying to get a flight as we speak. Anyone else she could be with – any other friends or family?'

Kate looks up to the ceiling.

'No. Most of our extended family are in Seancarrig. They're largely disinterested in us.'

Staring into the distance, Kate fiddles with her heart-shaped locket.

'You sure there's nothing you're not saying?' Garda Morris asks.

Kate suddenly looks more frightened and sadder than before.

'I think, somehow, I knew this would happen. I mean, I'm not surprised, with everything that's been leading up to today ...'

'What do you mean?'

'It's a long story.'

'I have time.'

He gestures around the still room, to the fire crackling away.

Kate clears her throat.

'Since our mother died, things have felt really ... out of control. This feeling of doom, the feeling of being watched by something in the forest – I can't shake it. I've tried everything. We even had the local priest, Father Maguire, around to the house to cleanse the place. This game our Mam taught them ...' Kate looks at the wall, as if looking into the past. 'It hasn't helped. Jack has been counting ever since our mother died, hoping if he does, she will come back.' She seems far away for a moment. 'The priest said it's us, not the house.' She takes a deep breath. 'We are haunted. I'm unsurprised she is missing because it feels like it would always happen this way, you know?' She closes her eyes. 'The missing women in there ... all of the ones in the past few years. I feel like it's connected somehow. That forest wanted one of us, and now it's got what it wanted.'

Kate gives him a searching look, her eyes full of tears.

Garda Morris looks back at her with a worried expression. 'It's been twenty-four hours. Although it's very concerning, she may just be hiding – the way children do. Let's hope so, eh?'

Kate puts her face in her hands. Jack hears a high-pitched sound like a sob escaping.

Next to the table, Jack watches the fish tank in the corner of the kitchen. The fish swims around, turquoise flecks on his paint-splatter scales. Into his cave and then out again, hiding under a log, changing to blue, then green, then gold. Jack remembers the day his mam bought him, what the woman in the aquarium said as she scooped him into a clear plastic bag full of water. *It is recommended the Jack Dempsey fish is provided with*

plenty of places to hide. Jack Dempsey had spun around in his clear plastic bag, searching for a way out.

Jack feels the sadness of Kate, deep in his gut. Wrenching around like his feelings are attached to something. Like a ghost has gone inside his stomach and is moving things about. It gets hot in his throat and behind his eyes, but he does not want to cry, not in front of Garda Morris. Someone is calling him now, as though in a dream.

'Jack,' calls Kate softly.

'Can I assume you won't tell me any more at this time?' asks Garda Morris. Jack's eyes feel wet now, but he does not say anything, he just nods Wilberry's head with his fingers and slides down off the chair. He puts him on the chair instead, Wilberry's face still smiling dimly, and walks over to the fish tank. He puts his hand to the glass. His reflection reaches out, from a backwards world. Plenty of places to hide, that was true. Jack can see Garda Morris watching him in the glass. Behind it, the fish looks out from under the log. It watches Jack for a few seconds until it turns and swims away.