Bog Child

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Extract

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One

They'd stolen a march on the day. The sky was like dark glass, reluctant to let the light through. The only sound was the chudder of the van skirting the lough. The surface of the water was colourless. The hills slumped down on the far side like silhouettes of snoozing giants.

Fergus yawned. It was still before five as they turned off up the mountain road. Uncle Tally chewed on nothing as the tyres lumbered over the ruts. Fergus cradled the flask of sweet black tea. There'd been no milk in the fridge that morning.

'Too early for you, huh?' mocked Uncle Tally, changing gear.

'Too right,' said Fergus. 'When I go running, it's not dark like this.' His throat was furred up. The words came out stretched by a yawn. 'It's unnatural being up before the birds.'

They approached the border checkpoint and the van slowed. The soldier by the hut stood with a rifle but did not move. He was young-looking and pale, with freckles. He waved them on, tipping the butt of the gun, and they drove past without having to stop. Uncle Tally laughed. 'I could have a truckload of Semtex for all that wee squaddie cares,' he said.

Fergus grunted. 'Yeah,' he said. 'Deus would be delighted.'

Deus, Latin for 'God', was the local nickname for a rumoured bomb-maker, said to be active thereabouts.

'So he would.'

'Only you'd be going in the wrong direction. We're leaving the Troubles, Unk, not joining them.'

Uncle Tally thumped the wheel. 'So we are. We're in the free state now. Free as a bloody bog-frog.' They both laughed like clowns. Going over the border always had that effect. Without your knowing it, your jaw-bone would stiffen and adrenalin pump through your veins as the checkpoint approached. Then, when you were through, hilarity would erupt at the relief.

The van turned up onto a steep road with grass growing up the middle. The gorse got yellower as they climbed, the sky brighter. 'The border. Even a nun would be nervous crossing it,' suggested Fergus.

'And we'll be crossing back over it at the top.'

'Will we?'

'If you look at the map. You can see.'

Fergus opened the map and saw the dotted grey line, almost invisible, meandering across Ireland's north, but leaving a thin tract of land to the west that was Donegal. 'The most northern bit of Ireland's in the south,' he quoted.

'One day, one day . . .' Uncle Tally muttered like a mantra.

'One day what?'

'One day the only border will be the sea and the only thing guarding it the dunes and the only people living in it Republicans. One day, Fergus.'

'Where will the Unionists go, so?'

‘They’ll be beamed to outer space, warp factor five.’ Uncle Tally drove round a loop of road, heading back to where the light was growing on the horizon. ‘Lucky them. Now, here’s the spot to park, Fergus. Get cracking. The JCB crew will be down on us before you know.’ He pulled up and they got out the shovels and bags from the back and walked over a track for a hundred yards. On either side, brown grass sprouted out of black, wet earth, and bright green weeds spread like mildew over the soggier areas. The first skylark of the day darted from cover. Fergus approached the JCB, which was still, abandoned. Earth was churned up all around it, the leftover diggings from the day before. But ‘earth’ was the wrong word. It was turf, rich foaming peat, made from the things that had lived here in millennia gone by and pressed by time into a magic frieze of the past. You could dig up wood from primeval forests, find resin with insects of another age frozen in it. And what you dug up you could burn as fuel.

And, as his da said, there was nothing like the smell of the turf on a hearth to bring comfort in a dark world.

A pink tint grew on the horizon as they dug and filled the bags with uncut clumps. Dawn intensified. The sky was clear and close up here, the mind uncluttered. Uncle Tally grunted as he shovelled, his taut, fit frame enjoying the work. Fergus held the bags open for him and then they swapped over. They’d sell the bags for ninety pence and Fergus was promised a cut of thirty per cent. But the JCB crew would be arriving soon and they’d have to be well gone by then.

A cry made Fergus swivel round. It was only a wild kid with a creamy coat, bleating at its mother fifty yards away or more.

‘Get the flask, Fergus,’ Uncle Tally said. ‘I’m parched. I’d a skinful last night.’

‘Did you?’

‘Yes. Your da and Pad McGuire. They came down to Finicule’s for one. And you know how it is.’

‘Were you singing, Unk?’

‘We were so far gone we were singing Three Blind Mice. I ask you. And your da couldn’t get beyond See how they run. And it was only ten o’clock.’

‘I don’t believe you.’

‘OK. Maybe not quite so wild.’

Fergus went to the van and found the flask of tea. He brought it over and they strolled down to an outcrop of rock and shared a capful. The rim of the sun came over the mountain. A wind picked up.

‘Christ, it’s quiet up here,’ said Uncle Tally.

‘It’d be a strange place to live.’

‘You’d have to be a hermit.’

‘There’d be nothing to do but pray,’ said Fergus.

‘Aye. You’d have plenary indulgences made for every last sinner by the time you died yourself. And then you’d be whisked up straight to heaven.’

'You should move up here.’

‘I would too. Only it’s a bit far.’

‘Far from where?’

‘The nearest bar.’

‘You could make your own distillery, Unk.’

‘But what would you distil?’

‘The prayers. What else?’

Uncle Tally clipped his ear. ‘You’re too sharp, Fergus McCann. Pass me the flask.’

After tea, they filled another ten bags. When there was no loosened turf left, Uncle Tally left the shovel prodded into the earth and they began to load the bags into the van.

‘Not a bad haul.’

Fergus wandered off to the other side of the JCB. He watched the skyline and listened to morning getting under way. There was a hum of insects now, small movements of birds and, far off from the floor of the valley, the sound of the odd truck. The sun was up, white and smooth behind a whisper of cloud. The track led back to the road, and the road truncated the bog-land and headed straight to the horizon. Up here was borderland too. He was looking back into the North, but behind him was the Republic.

‘Ferg, shake a leg,’ called Uncle Tally.

‘Will we do another few bags?’

‘What time is it?’

Fergus looked at the watch he was minding for his older brother, Joe. ‘Not seven yet.’

‘OK. But we’ve to make a fresh cut of it.’

A shovel apiece, they scrambled into the cut the JCB had made last thing the day before.

‘You work that end, I’ll work this. You’ve to ram the sharp side in straight and up in a line.’ Uncle Tally showed him how. ‘Then down along.’

‘Like a grid?’

‘That’s it. Once you’ve the first line out, it’s easier.’ It was slower going than working with the JCB’s leavings. But the smell of the fresh peat was clean and the springy consistency strangely satisfying to cut into.

Fergus finished a good-sized grid and worked down along the cut, away from his uncle.

‘Hiyack!’ he shouted as he brought the shovel hard down at a fresh angle. One inch from the wall of brown turf, he froze. A foreign colour stopped him, a dull, tawny glint. He let the shovel topple at his side and his eyes blinked. Then he stretched out a hand to touch the surface. Maybe it was a trick of the light. Or a stone. Or—