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John the Revelator

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‘And I John saw these things, and heard them.’

Revelation 22:8

I

I was born in a storm. My mother said the thunder was so loud she flinched when it struck, strobes of lightning and slam-dancing winds and volleys of rain for hours until it blew itself out and sloped off like a spent beast.

'I knew you were a boy,' she said. 'Heartburn. Sure sign of a man in your life.'

My name is John Devine. I was christened after the beloved disciple, the brother of James the Great. Our Lord called them the sons of thunder.

'John was Jesus' favourite,' my mother told me. 'The patron saint of printers and tanners and typesetters.'

When she got started on this, it could go on for hours. We were out walking the fields at the back of our house. I was still in short trousers. My mother strode ahead, hell bent on where she was going, and I had to trot to keep up.

'He was the only one to stay awake in the garden while Our Lord sweated blood,' she said. 'After the crucifixion, the emperor brought him to Rome to be flogged and beaten and thrown in a cauldron of boiling oil. They tried to poison him with wine, but the poison rose to the surface in the shape of a snake. In the end

they banished him to Patmos, where he wrote the Book of Revelation.'

She took out her handkerchief and dribbled on it.

'The only apostle to escape martyrdom.'

And she wiped my face. The smell was like when you lick yourself, a compound of saliva and tissue and skin. I tried to pull away, but she wouldn't let go until she was satisfied I was clean.

'He died in the year a hundred and one. People believed that once a year his grave gave off a smell that could heal the sick. Just before John passed away, his followers carried him into the assembly at the church of Ephesus and asked him how to live. You know what he said?'

She stuffed the tissue up her sleeve.

'Little children, love one another.'

'That's all?'

'It's enough to be going on with.'

Said my mother, I was still an infant when we moved from the caravan near Ballo strand to a house a couple of miles outside Kilcody. Her mother and father willed it to her when they died. It was always so cold there you could see your breath hang in the air. Vines of ivy crawled across the pebble-dashed walls; weeds strangled the few sticks of rhubarb. There was a sandpit out the back, broken toys and mustard minarets of turd, an orange clothesline dripping laundry.

Every day after school I dragged my schoolbag home like it was a younger brother, let myself into the house

and snapped on all the downstairs lights. There was a cactus on our kitchen windowsill, swollen green fingers and prickly white spines. Beside that was Haircut Charlie, the clown's head for planting seeds in, grass growing out of the tiny holes in his skull. A sacred-heart lamp glowed atop the mantelpiece. The floor was new blue linoleum with black patterns. One time a pipe under the sink leaked and we had to tear up the old stuff and underneath was crawling with bulbous pea-green slugs and brown fungus, like deformed bonsai trees.

My mother was still at work when I got home. She cleaned people's houses, and sometimes she took in clothes to be washed or mended. She said you could tell a lot about a person from their dirty laundry.

I'd sit over my homework at the kitchen table, anticipating the squeak of the gate, the parched bark of her cough. If she were late I'd start to worry that she'd been taken, and I'd be sent to an orphanage or made to live with her friend Mrs Nagle or someone else old. But she always came home, shrugging out of her coat and saying she was choking for a cup of tea and a fag.

After the kettle went on she set the fire, placing bits of Zip under the briquettes, blue and orange flames licking at her fingers. Then she hefted the big pot onto the cooker.

'What's for dinner?'

'Pig's feet and hairy buttermilk.'

She spread the tablecloth and set the Delph. There were Polish cartoons on television, followed by the Angelus' boring bongs. My mother looked out the window and smoked while I ate. Her green eyes went grey

whenever it rained and her hair was braided halfway down her back. After the washing up, she sat by the fire and read her Westerns. Gusts sobbed in the chimney and the fire spat and crackled.

'Book any good?'

'Ah –'

She slapped it shut, shook a Major's from the box and broke the filter off.

'Too many descriptions. I know what a tree looks like.'

The long nights were hard going. There was nothing to do but stare at the fire or listen to the wind howl around the eaves. The sound reminded my mother of the night I was born.

'You were a typical boy,' she muttered under her breath. 'You came early.'

She screwed the truncated cigarette into a holder, lit it, took a deep breath and hawed a coil of smoke rings.

'It was about the thirty-fourth week.'

Then she leaned down and cranked the bellows, sending firefly flurries up the chimney. The fire blazed and crackled. She let me climb onto her lap, and her long fingers latticed across my stomach.

'There was a storm waiting to happen. The air was full of it.'

Her voice was deep and hypnotic, her breath warm against my crown. I closed my eyes and could almost smell the bonfire smoke as it drifted through the halting site, could see children running around with no trousers on, dogs tearing plastic bags of rubbish asunder. Air

pressure like a migraine, pitchfork lightning and growls of thunder.

My mother described how when the storm struck she covered all the mirrors and crawled under her quilt and spread her hands over the swell of her belly, as though to protect me from the flashes of light and the noise. Fear churned her insides, travelled downward and became a clenching of pelvic muscles. She prayed it was a false alarm, tried to will the pangs away, but they intensified.

Her waters broke, soaking her leggings. She grabbed the bag she'd packed and out she went into the furious night and knocked on caravan windows. Nobody answered. Fear came upon her in great black waves. Panic welled up in her chest. But just as she despaired of finding help, a man appeared, unsteady and reeking of stout and sweat, but a man all the same, and he said he'd oblige her with a lift.

He was so jarred it took his Fiat three goes to exit the roundabout. Raindrops burst like pods against the windshield and water coated the road in a gleaming slick. My mother screwed her eyes shut and tried not to vomit or pass out as the waves of pain broke inside her lower parts.

They barely made it. A nurse helped my mother onto a trolley and wheeled her into the elevator cage and up to the delivery ward, no time for an epidural or any of that, just gas and air, my mother gumming on the apparatus like a suckling calf, hair plastered across her forehead, grinning at the midwife.

'You wouldn't happen to have a Baby Powers in your bag of tricks there,' she slurred.

'Be quiet and keep pushing,' said the midwife.

Breathing and pushing and moaning, gas and air and more breathing and pushing and moaning, and then I slithered out. The midwife scooped me up and the obstetrician cut the cord.

'A boy?' my mother asked, lifting her sweaty head.

'Aye,' said the midwife, as she wrapped me in a terry-towel.

'Any extras? Harelip? Flippers?'

'Whisht,' said the midwife.

The obstetrician looked me over, pronounced me hardy as a foal.

'He used to kick like one,' said my mother, and sank back into the pillows.

The recovery ward was full of nightgowned, slippered women, their faces flushed with fatigue. The rooms were warm and stuffy and my mother couldn't sleep. Soon as she could walk she called a taxi and took us home to the caravan. She padded the top drawer of an old teak dresser with blankets for a bassinet and placed me in it. Then the trouble started.

'You were a holy terror,' she said, mashing her fag into the seashell at her feet. 'You got in a knot with the colic and wouldn't let me sleep a wink. No sooner fed than you had to be winded. Then you'd poss up, and you'd be hungry again, so I'd feed you a second time, and as soon as I'd put you down to sleep you'd dirty your nappy, so I'd have to take you back up, and you'd be wide awake

and hungry all over again. You had me vexed, son.'

For weeks she didn't get to finish a cup of tea or sit down to a proper meal. She barely spoke, and when she did it was through a veil of exhaustion, with a two-second satellite delay. Bad thoughts came. Fear for this tiny thing in her care, all kinds of wicked shadows snarling and pawing at the door. Some nights her moods got so moribund she harboured thoughts of putting a pillow over my head so as to get it over with quick.

'What stopped you?'

'You weren't baptised yet.'

Night after night I wailed my beetroot head off, and my mother walked the floor and patted my back in time with the songs playing on the local radio station, her walking, me bawling. One night, maybe three or four in the morning, the news came on. The man reading the headlines said the Met Office had issued a storm warning: gale-force winds, possible flooding. People were advised to stop home except for emergencies.

I went on caterwauling, and my mother rocked me in the crook of her shoulder, breathing my newborn smell. She held me to her breast and murmured into my pink cockleshell ear, 'It's an ill wind, son.'

And for no other reason than to drown out my squalling, she began to sing, the first thing that came into her head. As soon as I heard that sound, I fell silent. The song died in her mouth and she stared, stunned, as my eyelids came down and my body went limp. She laid me in my crib, checked my breath with her compact.

'At last,' she sighed, and crawled into bed.

It was the queerest thing, said my mother, but ever after that, I slept peacefully, ten hours a night. Provided she sang.

And I believed her, because a mother's word is gospel to her son.



Sundays we put on our good clothes and walked two miles to Mass in the village, a starched shirt collar gnawing into the back of my neck, my mother's perfume more potent than any incense. Father Quinn droned the First Letter of St Paul to the Corinthians like a dozy circuit-court judge, and I was bored stupid from listening to desultory hymns, the Eucharistic prayer, the mutters of people receiving Communion. The old ones took the Eucharist on their tongue, the young ones in their palms.

'Body of Christ.'

'Amen.'

More hymn-singing. An early haemorrhage of dossers. The blessing.

'Mass is ended. Go in peace.'

My mother sighed.

'Thanks be to God.'

Every Sunday night after bath time I'd bend over and touch my toes while my mother shone a torch up my scut. The blood-rush made my head swim.

'What you looking for?' I said.

She was sat on the floor, a fag burning in the seashell ashtray beside her. I was about yea big.

'Worms.'

'How do worms get up my scut?'

'They don't.' Her voice was faint, distracted. 'They go in your mouth.'

She cleared her throat.

'*Steer clear of swine and creeping things and eaters of carrion and fish that have neither fins nor scales. These are unclean and harbour abominations in their flesh.* Leviticus, something-something.'

She switched off the torch and tapped my backside with it, the signal for me to pull up my pyjama bottoms.

'Do people die from worms?'

'It's been known to happen.'

She ran her fingernail along the teeth of a fine-toothed comb. It made a sound like Chinese music.

'But Our Lord said it's not what goes in your mouth that does the damage.'

She began to scour my hair for hoppers.

'It's what comes out.'

I plagued my mother with so many questions about worms she banned the subject. But one day she came home with a book – *Harper's Compendium of Bizarre Nature Facts* – containing loads of facts and figures about lizards and squids and duck-billed platypuses, and a whole chapter on worms entitled 'The Secret Life of Parasites'. The illustrated plates made my scalp tingle, like the time my head got ringworm. Mrs Nagle told me that ringworm is not actually a worm; it's a fungal infection. The

medical name for it is dermatophytosis. You can get it on your body, your groin, your feet, your nails, even your beard. The kind I got was called *Tinea capitis*.

My mother started in on dinner and asked me to read aloud from the book, said the big words were good practice for school. I flipped straight to the part where it explained that a parasite is an organism that lives on or in another organism, known as the host. Big parasites can grow to dozens of feet in length. Some of the little ones are so tiny you can only see them under a microscope. Some parasites lay eggs; others duplicate themselves like bacteria.

Hunched over the sink, my mother unwrapped grease paper from around a gutted fish. I continued reading.

In ancient Asia and Africa, the book said, the cure for guinea worms was to lie down for a day, or two days, or a week, as long as it took, and slowly wind the worm around a stick to get it out alive. If you jerked it out, it'd break in half and die, infecting your insides. This is where the symbol for medicine comes from, two serpents wound around a staff, the *Caduceus*. In the Bible, serpents plagued the Israelites, but some people thought that was a poetic way of saying they had worms. In Edwardian times, they laid out the infirm and the consumptive in a room alongside troughs of flesh-fed maggots, believing the smell of ammonia and methane to have healing properties. They called this room the Maggotorium.

'That's the smell that came off St John's grave and healed people,' I said.

Peeling spuds, my mother grunted. I read on.

According to Harper, a nineteenth-century doctor called Friedrich Kuchenmeister tried to demonstrate the evolution of the bladderworm into the tapeworm by feeding infected blood sausage to a convicted murderer four months before the man's execution. After the convict was put to death, they cut him open and found five-foot tapeworms in his stomach.

Eyes squeezed tight, my mother removed a slug from the heart of a cabbage and dropped it into the pedal bin. She plucked the cigarette from her mouth and looked at it.

'You know,' she said, squinting through fag-smoke, 'people say what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. Don't believe a word of it. What doesn't kill you just makes you sick. And what makes you sick –'

She ran a tap over her cigarette. It sizzled out.

'– Kills you.'

One school day Guard Canavan came to the Presentation Convent to tell us what happens to bad children when they die. He was a big tree-trunk of a man, dressed all in the same shade of navy blue, a voice so deep you felt rather than heard it.

'Do you know where bad boys and girls go, boys and girls?' he said.

No one answered except for Danny Doran, who put his hand up and said, 'England?'

Guard Canavan shook his head.

'No, but you're close. They get picked up and thrown

in the back of a big Black Maria that drives them down to hell, where the devil sticks them on the end of his toasting fork and roasts them over the hot coals and eats them alive, and what comes out his other end gets flushed down the drain and into a lake of everlasting fire. The only way to stop this from happening is to go to confession every Saturday. That means saying sorry to God when you do bad things.'

'God save all here.'

Mrs Nagle's benediction at the doorstep was my mother's cue to shoo me upstairs so I wouldn't be putting in my spake where there was grown-ups talking. As they supped tea in the kitchen, I bellied down on the landing and earwigged on the gossip. There were biscuits down there; I could hear them.

My mother heaved a great sigh.

'What am I going to do with him, Phyllis?'

Because we had a visitor, she was using her telephone voice, pronouncing all her -ings. I crept all the way downstairs and peeped around the door.

'He won't come out of himself. I'm afeared he'll grow up morbid.'

Mrs Nagle made sympathetic throat noises. She was a tall mannish woman with a loud hee-haw of a voice. Always went by Mrs, even though she'd never married. She lived in a draughty stone cottage about a quarter-mile down the road, right next to the freshwater well, the ownership of which was the subject of some dispute. Mrs Nagle maintained it was on her property and

erected a *Keep Out – Private* sign at the mouth of the narrow lane that led to the pump. This didn't go down well with the locals, particularly Harry Farrell.

At that time, Harry was an impudent jack-of-all-trades who could be seen riding his Honda 50 around the back roads at all hours of the day or night. He took a shine to my mother and was always offering to do jobs around the house. Every birthday without fail he sent me a tenner in an envelope. As I got bigger, it became a twenty. My mother made me put most of it in the post office. Said he was like the godfather I never had.

Harry was a hard worker when he was sober. My mother sometimes got him to chop logs or strim the hedge or take clippers to the overhanging trees. But when he hit the drink he'd hock his bike and tools and chainsaw and stay in the pubs until he ran out of money, at which point he'd sleep for a week, straighten up and go looking for work all over again.

Harry – or Har The Barrel as he became known when his weight ballooned after finally giving up the drink for good – was livid when he saw Mrs Nagle's hand-painted *Keep Out* sign. He could be heard arguing in Donahue's that the well had been public property since god was a boy and that old biddy had no claim on it. And when he was really jarred he'd brag that since the day that sign went up, he never passed the well without availing of the opportunity to tap his bladder, polluting its crystal waters with his own off-yellow tributary. When Mrs Nagle got wind of this affront, she flew into a rage and, according to my mother, requisitioned a hurling stick

from some young lad on the way home from school, stalked into the village and prowled from pub to pub until she found Har, whereupon she bet him from one end of the street to the other, bet him scaldy. Since that day, a savage grudge festered in Har's heart.

'What age is the chap?' Mrs Nagle brayed, adjusting her wool knit hat, the one that looked like the base of an acorn turned upside down.

'Seven,' my mother replied. 'No, eight.'

'The age of reason.' Mrs Nagle dunked a digestive and took a bite. Maybe a Marietta.

'Put him out in the fresh air,' she said, biscuit pulp bulging her cheek. 'Sunlight is nature's tonic. It cures rickets, goitre, skin conditions, ulcers and certain cancers. He'll grow feeble if he stays inside all day. Simple-minded.'

The sibilance sprayed soggy crumbs on the good tablecloth.

'He should be *vigorous*.'

'Vigorous,' my mother repeated, tearing the filter off a Major.

Mrs Nagle nodded.

'Mm-hm. The young men now are not like the young men in our time, Lily. They're pure fools in comparison.'

The rasp of a match.

'You're not wrong, Phyllis.'

My mother had her humouring voice on, like when I'd gab her ear off but she wasn't really paying attention.

'Know what I put it down to, Lily?'

'Tell me, Phyllis.'

'Porter. Drink is the proven causation of dropsy, jaundice, gout, colic, peevish irritability, catarrhs of the mouth and stomach. It's the ruination of young men. The reason they won't do a tap of work, god blast 'em for chaps.'

And my mother said: '*How much more abominable and filthy is man, which drinketh iniquity like water.*'

But Mrs Nagle always had to get the last word in.

'The devil has no end of work for those hands.'

So after that I got rooted out of bed early to help weed the flowerbeds and pick blackberries and all kinds of outside stuff. At that hour it was so cold the air tasted like it was doused with mint. Berry juice stung the briar cuts and nettle welts on my hands. And because the sky had been rumbling like a big belly during the night, my mother had mushrooms on the brain.

'The three things you need for mushroom picking,' she said, 'are thunder, rain and cow-dung.'

We struck off for the far bog. My mother took great yard-long strides across the wet grass and clutched a punnet to her chest. I hurried in her footsteps, hair cowslicked with morning mist. We squelched across marshy wallow ground, circumnavigating a still pond filmed with green scum and circled by midges and gadflies. My mother pointed out all the different kinds of moss and fungus, puffballs and toadstools, lichen and liverwort, reeds and rushes and bulrushes, wrack and bladderwrack. She grasped the top rung of a five-bar gate, about to mount it, but just before pulling herself up she stopped and cocked her head.

'Whisht.'

We took root, listening.

'I don't hear anything,' I whispered.

'Shhht.'

Some sort of mewling. She put her punnet down.

'A kitten maybe.'

Her eyes searched the humps of grass. Again, that sound, small and hurt and pitiful.

She peered into the gripe and pointed to a bed of briars. A hare, stretched out, its eyes swollen and suppurating, like soft wounds.

'Is it sick?' I said.

'Mixo.'

She took out her fags, cupped a match and sucked in smoke and contemplated the hare. Its hindquarters were caked with dried scutter.

'We may put it out of its misery,' she said. 'Break its neck.'

Her hand rested on my shoulder.

'You may do it, son. My nerves are not up to it.'

I stepped back, shaking my head.

'I can't.'

'You have to. It's not fair to let it suffer.'

My fingers were sweaty. I wiped them on my trousers.

'I thought killing was a sin.'

'Not if it's a mercy killing.'

I didn't want to go anywhere near the sick hare, but I had to obey my mother.

'All right,' I said.

She squeezed my shoulder.

'Good man. Do it quick.'

I crouched down beside the hare, peering deep into the bleeding wells of its eyes. I lunged and snatched it up by the scruff. It bucked weakly as both my hands closed around its neck.

'Not like that.' My mother rolled her eyes. 'I said *break* its neck, not choke it.'

She mimed snapping a stick of kindling.

I adjusted my grip and squeezed my eyes shut. I drove my knee into the back of the hare's neck and pulled the head and belly towards me simultaneously. There was a sound like a knuckle crack. The hare took fit. I tossed it on the grass and watched its body twitch and finally go limp. My mother got the toe of her boot under the belly, hefted her leg and sent the hare's corpse arcing into the ditch.

'C'mon,' she said. 'Those mushrooms won't pick themselves.'