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Dead Man's Embers

Written by Mari Strachan

Published by Canongate Books Ltd

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DEAD MAN'S EMBERS

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CANONGATE
Edinburgh · London

This paperback edition published by Canongate Books in 2012

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First published as *Blow on a Dead Man's Embers* in Great Britain in 2011 by Canongate Books Ltd, 14 High Street, Edinburgh EH1 1TE

www.canongate.tv

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available on request from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 84767 532 3

Typeset in Goudy by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd, Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

I

Adam, Llio, Cai, a Rachel hefo cariad mawr

1

Something is weighing on her breast, squeezing her heart. For a moment Non cannot move, not sure if she is awake or still in a dream. She breathes evenly to keep panic at bay, and her heartbeat steadies. The dream vanishes but the weight remains. She recognises it: it is a sense of dread that is becoming familiar, though quite what it is that she dreads she does not know.

She opens her eyes, then narrows them against the brightness streaming into the bedroom with its threat of another scorching day. In four, no, three days it will be the solstice, so it must still be early for the sun to be this low in the sky. When she is able to move and put her hand out to Davey, all she touches is the cool sheet on his side of the bed. Again.

The open sash window lets in the sweetness of the honeysuckle that clambers around it and the industrious drone of bees moving from lip to lip on the flowers. Non breathes deeply, stretches until her calf muscles tingle, then swings her legs sideways and sits up on the edge of the bed. She reaches for the small, dark brown bottle, uncorks it, tips out thirteen drops of the liquid it contains into a glass, pauses, then adds one more drop, pours water from

the jug onto the drops and swallows the draught in one gulp, grimacing, as she always does, at the bitterness of it in the back of her throat. Every morning she hears her father's voice tell her that her lifeblood is less bitter than the death that will surely claim her if she does not swallow it, the death that is constantly at her shoulder. It is what gives you the gift you possess, Rhiannon, her father would also say. A gift that is as bitter as the drops, a gift that is no gift at all.

As she sits on the side of the bed her heart begins to calm, but the dread that woke her still weighs upon her. She feels as limp as a rag doll as she stands and walks towards the washstand. The heat is enervating; it lies like a thick blanket over every day. She pours water that is already lukewarm from the large jug into the bowl, and splashes her face and neck with it.

She remembers the time before the War when the quiet and warmth would engender a sense of deep contentment in her. It now seems far in the past, that time early in their marriage when she had discovered that Davey was impossible to wake in the mornings, when she would take up her book and tiptoe downstairs to sit in the kitchen or at the open door to the fresh morning garden, breathe deeply of the promise of a new day, and read – until it was time to put her coarse apron on over her nightdress to rack the range and light the fire and wake the house with the noise. A rumpled and sleepy Davey would descend from the bedroom and pretend to chase her out into the garden. That has all gone. The War has taken her husband as surely as if it had killed him, and returned a stranger to her in his place.

She lifts her hairbrush and draws it through her hair. Forty long strokes. Non has no recollection of her father teaching her that rule; that must have come from her sister. She gathers the hair together at her nape and ties it into a large knot. She pulls her

work dress on, fastens the buttons with nimble fingers and neatens the collar in the looking glass above the washstand. She studies her reflection. She, too, has changed: she sees it in her eyes. She has turned into a timorous creature, as different from her true self as Davey is from his. You mouse, she tells herself, are you going to be defeated by this mystery, this puzzle of what is happening to your husband? She stands up straight. She, who has beaten off death every day of her twenty-nine years, will not be beaten by this.

2

Non makes her way downstairs and pushes open the kitchen door. The sunlight in the hallway streams into the room towards Davey who is crouched beneath the table. The fringe of the blue chenille tablecloth dangles in front of his face, and he peers out through it into the light, shouldering an imaginary rifle.

It is happening again. Is this what woke her? Is it this that she dreads? Non has grown used to the nightmares Davey has at times since his return from the War, when the bedclothes churn into a battlefield as he fights and thrashes and sweats his way through some private torment – nightmares that wake her and drive her from the bed but which Davey denies when she asks him about them. Now, it seems the nightmares have changed from dreams into something more real, more fearful. The first time it happened was Wednesday morning; she will never forget it, she thinks, not for a sparrow's heartbeat. She had woken to find Davey gone from their bed and found him sprawled under the kitchen table, deadly quiet in his concentration as he aimed his rifle at some unseen foe. Non had crawled under the table to him and he had given her a look that chilled her heart and froze her tongue. She had crept away and left him.

She knows that there is nothing to be done now except to leave him. But has she not just resolved that she will not be beaten by the mystery of what is happening to her husband? She knows that he betrayed her when he was away – and it pains her to think of it – but she senses, no, she knows that is not what is haunting Davey through his nightmares; it is something else, something that has to do with fighting the enemy. She draws a chair back from under the table, lifting it to stop it screeching on the flagstones, positions it so that she can see Davey, and sits on it. She smoothes the tablecloth with the back of her hand. Like life, she thinks, smooth and rough, worn thin so that it is almost a hole in places, plush as if it were new in others. She is uncomfortable. She does not want to sit here on a kitchen chair to watch her husband fight the enemy all over again under the table, but believes she must if she is to understand what happened to him.

This man on the floor is as unlike himself as possible. His hair and his clothes are dishevelled as he crawls around on the flagstones in the confined space. His eyes are wide open with the whites showing all around, as if he is mad with fear, like a horse Non saw when she was a child. The farmer had shot the horse, said it had turned wild and dangerous. Non flinches each time Davey fires the rifle he imagines he has on his shoulder, the recoil sending him sprawling backwards. He is sweating profusely, his shirt already soaked under his arms and on his back, from whatever endeavours he thinks he is attempting. He mutters and calls out, words and phrases Non cannot understand, which sound sometimes like commands, sometimes like entreaties. He shouts, 'Down, down', and flings himself face down on the flags. She hears his face thump on the stone and she cringes.

'Oh, Davey,' she whispers. Her Davey, the real Davey, is a small man, and neat, and this was part of what she had loved about

him from the first time she saw him. Small herself, she did not feel overpowered by him. He was far from being a moneyed man, but he had always made sure that the clothes he wore were clean, mended and ironed. His hair that had a will of its own, springing up from his head in dark brown spikes, was always carefully brushed, and his moustache with its glints of red neatly trimmed and combed.

When she first met him it was as if she had always known him, and yet, it was his son she knew first. Wil was in the Infants class when she came as a student teacher to the local school, as sturdy and quiet a boy at five and a half as he is now at fifteen. She remembers being saddened that first winter when he seemed unmoved by the sudden death of his mother from a cough that had turned rapidly to pneumonia. She had felt a greater sadness at some of the tales that came her way about Grace, tales of callousness and cruelty towards Wil and his small sister.

She looks down at Davey, lying flat now on the flagstones, his shoulders twitching as he sights down the length of his rifle, his forefinger squeezing on the trigger. She had not met him until the following spring; he had come to see if Meg could begin school a little younger than was usual. He had looked into her eyes and smiled at her and she had been lost. She had never thought that she would marry; she had never met a man she would wish to marry. And what man would wish to marry a woman like her who could not bear a child of her own for fear that it would put too great a strain on her weakened heart? Over the year he spent courting her, Davey told her that he had children, he did not need more. He wanted her, she delighted him by being so clever, so different.

And they had been happy, hadn't they? She loved Wil as if he were her own child. Meg she found a little harder to love. Davey's

mother had been glad to relinquish Wil to them, but refused to part with Meg. She'll come round, Davey had said, but Catherine Davies had not done so for a long time. Perhaps there had been a little dark patch creeping in to dampen their happiness even then, Non thinks; perhaps that first year before Osian arrived had not been the idyllic time she had thought it was.

She starts. Are those footsteps on the stairs? She does not want the children to see their father like this. She jumps to her feet but before she can reach the door it opens and Osian comes through into the kitchen, dressed in nothing but his drawers and flicking his penknife open as he walks past her towards the back door. He stops when he sees Davey, and Davey retreats into a crouch, staring at the light glancing from the penknife's blade. Non puts her hand on Osian's arm to guide him away, although she knows that he will cry out at her touch. And so he does, a high-pitched scream that ricochets off the whitewashed walls and reverberates from the flagstones beneath her feet.

She turns to look at Davey as she draws Osian through the door into the garden and sees him fling himself flat again onto the floor beneath the table, yelling as he prostrates himself, 'Down. Whizz-bang coming. Down, Ben, down.'

3

Osian's scream ends as suddenly as it started once they are through the door and Non lets go of his arm. The garden shimmers already but the sun has not reached into the back of the house yet. There is a foul stench on the air, and Non realises where it is coming from when she sees Maggie Ellis rushing out the closet at the end of her garden, still in her voluminous nightgown and wearing a nightcap on her head. Though what she wants with a nightcap these hot nights is beyond anyone's guess.

Maggie Ellis stops when she catches sight of Osian, and tuts at him. 'Out in your drawers again, boy?' she says. 'And was that you screaming, or was it that old crow of yours? Well, never mind. It's your mam I want. Where is she?' She clutches her stomach and moans.

Osian pays her no attention. Non's new found resolution fades a little. Is it not enough that her husband is on his knees under the kitchen table fighting a war that has been over for more than two years? But she walks from the shade into the sunlight. 'Are you not well, Mrs Ellis?'

'Not well, Non, not well? Of course I'm not well. Look at

me.' Maggie Ellis clutches her stomach again. 'It must be something I ate. Everything's going off – the milk's sour, the butter's rancid – and the flies, well, they don't bear thinking about.' She leans over the garden wall, snagging her nightdress on the clambering rose. 'All night, Non, backwards and forwards to the closet. Do you think you could mix me a little something to stop it?'

Non suspects that Maggie's problems stem from eating too much, her gift that is no gift does not show her any illness in the woman. 'A cup of strong tea will help bind you, Mrs Ellis. No milk or sugar, mind.' She has lost count of the number of times she has told Maggie Ellis this.

'Oh, I can't abide my tea black like that, Non. No – you mix me a little something.'

'You know I've long stopped doing that.'

'I won't tell Davey, I promise you, Non. It'll be our little secret.' Maggie reaches over the roses to try to pat Non's hand where it rests on the stone wall, and Non hears her nightgown rip on the thorns. It would be so easy to mix a little something for her, but Davey has extracted a promise from her to make no more remedies. Other than her own dark drops, her lifeblood.

'Make yourself some black tea, Mrs Ellis. It's as good as anything.'

'Non, Non, we share so many secrets, don't we? And they're perfectly safe with me, don't you worry your pretty head. So one more little one won't hurt, will it?'

Non knows that Maggie Ellis has more to lose than she does from the telling of any secrets. She watches Osian who, in turn, is watching a flock of ravens wheel above him. Is he looking for Herman among them?

Maggie Ellis heaves herself off the roses leaving a shred of her nightgown hanging like a ragged white flag on one of its branches,

and rubs her stomach. 'I think it's easing, you know. Maybe there won't be any need for me to take anything after all.'

'That's good,' Non says. 'Have you run out of ashes for the closet? Some marjoram on the floor would make it pleasanter in there. And a bunch of lavender to hang up.'

'I'm sure you're quite right, Non. Breathing in that terrible smell can't be doing me any good. I put plenty of ashes down. It's this weather that's to blame. Have you got any whatever-you-said to spare for the floor?'

Non has none to spare, but what is she to do? 'I'll gather some later,' she says. 'When the sun has been on it to draw out the oils.'

Maggie Ellis squints at the sky. 'The sun's not very high yet. What are you doing out here?' She glances from Non to Osian who is now busy whittling a piece of wood, and back again. 'It was him I heard screeching, wasn't it, not your old crow?'

'We haven't seen Herman for a few days,' Non says. She shields her eyes with her hand and looks up at the wheeling birds. She cannot see Herman's squared wings and flat-tipped tail. 'He flies with the ravens sometimes, but I don't think he's up there.'

Maggie Ellis nods at Osian. 'Is he really safe with that knife?'

'He's been making things out of wood since he was old enough to handle the knife. You know that, Mrs Ellis. There's no need to worry,' Non says, though she herself finds the sharpness of the knife a mite worrying at times.

'What I know,' Maggie Ellis says, wagging her finger at Non, 'what I know is that he's a great worry to dear Mrs Davies. Being odd the way he is.'

It is highly unlikely that her mother-in-law would confide in Maggie Ellis given the remarks Non has heard Mrs Davies make about Maggie. And Non would not have said that her mother-in-law

was worried about Osian, or about anyone else other than herself.

'And the poor woman has had enough worries,' Maggie Ellis says. 'More than anyone should.'

Non tries to avoid thinking about Mrs Davies unless it is an absolute necessity, and when she must, she tries to avoid thinking unkind thoughts, because Mrs Davies is a sick woman.

'That old War's left its mark on us all.' Maggie Ellis beckons Non to come closer and lowers her voice. 'Poor Elsie Thomas has started having her turns again. Of course, it's the time of year, Non. But this time she's convinced herself that the body they brought back to bury in that big abbey in London is her Benjamin. Wants anyone who'll listen to write to Lloyd George for her and ask him to send Ben home. I told her not to be so silly.'

Poor Elsie, Non thinks. When the letter – no, it had not even been a letter – when the filled-out form came from the War Office, Non read it to her; Elsie could not read English. Died, it had baldly said. Elsie was still waiting for her son's body to come home, she couldn't understand that it never would, that no one came home. No one, Non thinks, not one of them, except that single unknown soldier. Not even Davey.

'I said to her,' Maggie Ellis says, 'I said, How can you have a picture of his grave with a cross on it hanging on your wall in that special frame Davey Davies made for it, and still think he's buried in that big place in London? But she's not quite the full yard is she, Non? She never was, that's where Benjamin got it from. It runs in that family, she had a cousin just the same.'

Maggie Ellis drones like the bees, but less productively. Non is too occupied with the thought that has occurred to her to pay Maggie much more attention. She has realised that Davey's waking nightmares have begun at about the same time of year as his nightmares did last year, and the year before, too, she is sure of

it. As if it was somehow all tied up together, which would not be surprising since Davey and Benjamin were in the same section, though Davey said he had not been there when Ben was killed and could not tell Elsie Thomas any more about what had happened than the official form did.

'Non,' Maggie Ellis's voice cuts in on her thoughts. 'Non, I said, your Davey's all right now, though, isn't he? Back to normal?'

Non has to suppress a hysterical sob she feels rising in her throat. She sidesteps the question. 'He's busy with the Festival preparations, Mrs Ellis. Working all hours.'

'He's lucky to have the work, Non. He's a good carpenter, I'll give you that. I remember him making things from bits of wood when he was younger than your boy there.' Maggie glances at Osian again, narrowing her eyes at him and shaking her head. She would not be the first to wonder where he came from. Non no longer allows herself to wonder.

As she watches Osian's knife shaping the wood, she realises with dismay that she has completely forgotten it is his birthday today. She has been absorbed by the horror of what is happening to Davey inside the house, but it is no excuse. What kind of mother forgets to wish her child a happy birthday?

Seven years, she thinks, since Davey brought him home. Osian was a poor, mewling thing when Davey brought him to her, a newborn, long and red like a newly skinned rabbit. Davey said there was no need to know where he had come from, or who, he was now her child, as if he were somehow making up to her for the fact that she dare not bear a child of her own. Though she had not, then, felt the need for a child of her own. She had wanted to know more about the boy, but all Davey would tell her was that the young mother was dead, she had not told her family who had fathered the baby, and the boy was unwanted. But why had

Davey taken him, she had asked, suspecting that her husband knew more than he was telling her, and he had replied, For you, Non, as if that was the end of the matter. So, she had kept her questions to herself, and named the boy after her own father. To all intents and purposes Osian is hers, and to this day she does not know what to do with him.

She watches him fold his penknife, blow the dust from the wood he has been whittling, and set a tiny carving down on the wall. A perfect miniature soldier.

Maggie Ellis gasps with surprise. 'It does make you wonder where he gets it from, doesn't it?' she says.

4

Non had returned to the kitchen to find Davey sitting at the table reading his *Cambrian News* as if nothing had happened. She had sent Osian upstairs to dress himself and hastily wrapped the new shirt she had sewn for him in brown paper.

Now, they are all sitting around the table. No one else has forgotten Osian's birthday. Davey leads the singing of Happy Birthday, which Meg complains is pointless because Osian is not listening. Her father silences her with a look and retreats behind his newspaper.

'You wouldn't like it if we didn't sing to you on your birthday,' Wil says. He delves into the pocket of the jacket he has slung over the back of his chair and produces an untidily wrapped parcel that he pushes towards his brother, who takes no notice of it.

'You see?' Meg says. 'No point.' But she, too, has a small parcel that she gives Non to pass to Osian. 'I bought my favourite sweets,' she says, 'so if he can't be bothered to open it, I'll have it back.'

Non places her own parcel next to Osian's breakfast bowl. She looks at him steadily eating his porridge. 'I'll help you open your presents,' she says, and unwraps Wil's parcel so that the pouch it

contains spills a handful of marbles to roll along the table. Osian stops eating to watch them bounce onto the flagstones. 'Your prize marbles, Wil,' Non says. 'Are you sure?'

Wil shrugs. 'When did I last play with them?' he says, and gets down on his hands and knees to gather them from the floor.

'Open my parcel for him, Non,' Meg says, and Non does as she is told. Osian immediately begins to sort the jelly babies into rows of different colours and puts a red one into his mouth.

'I'm afraid he likes them, Meg,' Non says.

Meg frowns and begins to complain that she is too close to the fire, she is too hot, what is the need for a fire on a day when the sun is blazing so hard yet again it is likely to set fire to the whole world. It is a marvel that all the while she scowls in complaint she looks like an angel, her golden hair a halo around her head.

'To boil the kettle for your cup of tea, Meg, to cook your oats, to heat the washing-up water for your dirty dishes.' Meg would try the patience of a saint, and Non is no saint and her patience is sometimes sorely tried. 'At least it stays cool in this part of the house in the morning. If you're too hot where you are, change places with me.'

'I don't want to sit next to him,' Meg says. She grimaces at Osian who would be oblivious to her disdain even if he were not busy eating the red jelly babies one after another.

'Osian,' Davey says. 'His name is Osian, Meg.' He turns over a page of his *Cambrian News*, folds the paper in half and leans it against the teapot.

Meg opens her mouth to answer; she always has an answer. Non breaks into the conversation before Meg can further annoy her father. It is difficult most times to know what to make conversation about. Every subject seems to lead to the War, and Non especially does not want that to happen now that Davey has

started having these turns. Turns! she thinks, there must be a better name for what happens to Davey.

'Maggie Ellis next door was up and down the garden all night to the closet,' she says. Maybe Wil, clinking the marbles back into their pouch one by one, will give one of his impersonations of Maggie. Then she stops; even that could lead to dangerous territory. She puts her hand in her apron pocket to make sure that the soldier Osian carved when they were in the garden, in the space of just a few minutes, is still there and not set down where Davey can be upset by it. She marvels at Osian's skill. Her fingertips trace the tiny details and the smooth finish of what he has made. How does he know what to do to produce such a thing? She cannot recall where or when he first acquired the penknife, he seems to have always had it. She hears again Maggie Ellis asking if he was safe with it, and knows what she meant. Osian is not always predictable.

Wil has not heard her, Non realises. He is smothering a hearty yawn. 'You stayed out late with Eddie last night, Wil,' she says. 'Did he have amazing tales of his great adventures on the Seven Seas to tell you?'

Wil rubs his cheeks with vigour, as if to wake himself. 'He did, Non. The things he's done! It sounds a good life, seeing the world like that. He's been all the way across the Atlantic to Newfoundland and back with only—'

'That's enough!' Davey bangs his knife down on the table, rattling the cups on their saucers, slopping the tea over their rims. 'Eddie's no hero, Wil. His father needed him to stay at home after his brother died. Eddie should have done his duty and stayed, not gone gadding about to please himself.'

Duty! What a hard word that is for any of them, let alone a boy of fifteen. Where did it come from? It is not a word the old

Davey would have used, although he, himself, had always been dutiful. Non holds her breath as she sees the look in Wil's eyes, a compound of misery and mulishness.

'He says he's changing ships, so there's a berth going,' Wil says. 'On the David Morris. Cook and boy. Sailing out of Port in a few weeks after the repairs are done. Eddie says me being a carpenter should clinch it if I want it.'

Wil has always been the quiet one, the dependable one, too much put on his shoulders that he has carried without a word of complaint. Non is fondest of him by far; Meg is a trial every day.

'David Morris?' Meg says. 'That's a funny name for a ship.'

'I don't want to hear another word about it,' Davey says, not shouting now, his voice even and reasonable as he re-folds his paper and lays it flat on the table.

Wil is not going to stop. 'I asked Eddie if he'd vouch for me. He says he'll talk to the Master, William Griffiths – he's from Barmouth – some sort of relation to Eddie's father, cousin or something, that's how Eddie got on the ship in the first place.' He looks straight into his father's eyes as he speaks. 'His father knew all about it, he was happy for Eddie to go, to do what he wanted. He knew Eddie hated farming.'

Davey is barely listening now. He has that look in his eyes that is so often there since he came home, as if he is staring into a distance that they are unaware of, and seeing things they would not recognise even if they saw them.

'If Wil goes, can I have his bedroom? It'll be too big just for him,' Meg says, glancing at Osian. 'Osian, I mean,' she adds, giving Davey a sideways look. 'He can have my little room. He won't care. He doesn't care about anything.' She turns to Osian. 'I mean, you don't even care it's your birthday, do you?'

'Wil's not going,' Davey says.

'He's fifteen, and there is no duty to keep him here,' Non says. 'He should have some idea of what the world has to offer before he settles down.'

'I've got to get a move on,' Davey says. 'I've promised to work on the seating for the Festival this morning. I hope it'll bring better work our way, Wil, more interesting to you than making coffins, anyway.' He gulps his tea. 'And, Meg – you can help Non make up a bed for your cousin Gwydion. When's he arriving, Non?'

'He's not really my cousin, though, is he?' Meg says, before Non can answer. 'He belongs to Non's family, not ours.'

Non suspects that her mother-in-law has had much to do with Meg's education on family matters. 'He should be here before dinner time,' she says.

'He's travelled, hasn't he, Non?' Wil says. 'Gwydion?'

'Not as far as Newfoundland,' Non says. 'He was in Brittany last summer with some university friends.' She turns to Meg and adds, 'Next door to France.'

'I know that,' Meg says. 'I'd like to go to France. I already know a lot of French words – je parle français un petit peu – and Mademoiselle Green says I'm her best student and she'll lend me some French novels over the summer. And she says that if we had any relatives in France during the War we should ask them to teach us some of the French they learnt. What did you learn when you were there, Tada?'

Davey puts his palms on the table and lifts himself up out of his chair. 'Nothing of use to you,' he says to Meg. 'What can your Mademoiselle Green know of words men learnt when they were fighting?'

'Her brother was a captain in the—' Meg stops when she sees the look on her father's face.

'An officer, then,' Davey says. 'Well, that would be different, wouldn't it?'

Meg frowns down at her plate. She's not sure what to read into this, Non thinks. Non is not altogether sure herself.

Davey pushes his chair under the table. 'I know it's Saturday, Wil,' he says, 'but I could do with a hand on this job, just for the morning.'

As Davey walks away from the table, Osian stands up, his chair skittering back along the flagstones, and holds his hands up to stop his father without actually touching him. Osian plunges his hands into Non's apron pockets and, before she realises what he is trying to do, pulls out the soldier he carved and puts it on the table.

Davey's face darkens and he grabs the figure from the tablecloth and throws it into the fire where it immediately begins to smoulder. 'Cannon fodder,' he says in a conversational tone. 'Cannon fodder, little Osian. We'll have no more of them.'

No one moves as Davey heads for the door. Non surveys her children's faces. Meg looks astonished, Wil despairing, and Osian has no expression at all.