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The Rising of Bella Casey

Written by Mary Morrissy

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THE RISING OF BELLA CASEY

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BRANDON

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EASTER MONDAY, 1916

'A skirmish,' Bella Beaver declared with more certitude than she felt. 'That's all it is.'

'*They* said it was a rising,' her daughter, Babsie, shot back. 'Isn't that what they called it, Starry?'

Babsie had been stepping out with Starry Murphy for a couple of months. His given name was Patrick but a doting aunt had likened him to a celestial gift, being the only boy in a clutch of girls, and the name had stuck. He was one of *them*, a Catholic, an RC, but though she disapproved, Mrs Beaver had held her tongue.

'That's exactly so,' Starry said.

A dapper boy, he reminded Mrs Beaver of her dead husband. Something about his dark tossed hair, his jaunty manner. Her

Nick as a young man, that is. Before he'd been tainted, before she'd been destroyed . . . but no, she would not dwell on sorry history for it was a wound to her.

Starry had been on duty at Jacobs for the holiday weekend to keep the ovens ticking over and Babsie had gone to meet him when he came off shift. 'He was on the fitter's floor,' Babsie began for she was in the habit of speaking for Starry even when he was present, 'when he and the other lads heard this ragged bunch galloping up the stairs, taking them two at a time, all business. They marched right into the "King's Own" room without a how do you do, full of bluff and declaration and, I swear to God, waving guns they were. Isn't that so, Starry?'

Starry nodded.

When Mr Bonar, the overseer, approached the belligerent band to sort the matter out, he was pushed roughly aside.

In the name of the Irish Republic . . . one of them announced unscrolling a parchment and reading from it.

'The Irish Republic, whatever that is when it's at home,' Babsie said. 'Starry thought it all some kind of a caper or a crowd of travelling players putting on a free theatrical. Then the tricked-up soldiers rounded everyone up, bar Mr Bonar and the watchman, and herded them out on to the street saying there'd be no more baking biscuits in Jacobs this fine day.'

A crowd had gathered. Women mostly, howling like Revolution furies at the pretend soldiers.

'Youse boyos should go off to France and fight, instead of

turning guns on your own,' one of them hollered waving her fist as a couple of them appeared on the roof of Jacobs and ran up a strange flag of green, white and gold. And then a shot rang out.

'And that decided us,' Babsie said, speaking again for Starry.

On their way home they passed the General Post Office. All shuttered up and sandbags built up at the entrance, and the self-same declaration pasted on the doors with stamps.

'The Post Office no longer belongs to us,' Babsie reported. 'It's the headquarters of the New Ireland.'

'The New Ireland,' Mrs Beaver repeated wonderingly. Then she retreated to her original position. 'It's a skirmish, that's all.'

They lived through the rest of the day and the day following by report alone – or the hiss of rumour, though it was a principle of Mrs Beaver's to discourage idle gossip. The Germans were coming, Mrs Clarke said, whole battalions of them to prop up the rebels. The length and breadth of Sackville Street was destroyed. And further afield, too, according to Sadie Kinch, second next door. Chancellor's, the opticians, gone, she said, Court Photographers a pile of smoking rubble and Pickford's all but demolished, its windows all blown in.

'And the looting!' said Sadie. 'My husband saw it for himself. Doxies parading about in fur coats from Marnane's and ropes of pearls filched from Hopkins and Hopkins.'

'Sure that's nothing,' Mrs Clarke piped up, 'I heard there was

a crowd of scavengers in Manfield's windows, brawling in full sight. And sure everyone knows they only display the left shoes.'

'And hats,' Sadie Kinch countered, 'there were blackguards going round with three and four piled up on their heads, as trophies for their wives.'

As she listened to her neighbours, Mrs Beaver wondered how they were so knowledgeable about such lawless behaviour. She would keep a sharp eye out in case said Sadie Kinch might sport some new and unexpected millinery in the near future.

When she awoke on Wednesday morning, the rumours flying up and down the lane had been replaced by a solemn Sabbath calm. Mrs Beaver wondered if the tall tales were something she'd dreamt up, a feverish kind of fantasy like one of those moving pictures at the Royal. After two days behind closed doors, there wasn't a morsel left in the house and they were reduced to tea grounds used twice over and drunk black. She would have to venture out. Valentine offered to escort her.

'You'd never know, Mam, it might be dangerous out there.'

She took her son up on the offer although she did not credit the talk of cannon roar and devastation and fully expected to find everything as it had been. She would go as far as the Pioneer Stores for a loaf of bread and a twist of tea. But when she and Valentine arrived at the shop, they found the shutters padlocked and the double-doors bolted giving the place a bereaved air as if someone had died within.

Having made it this far with not a hint of trouble, she suggested to Valentine that they might light out towards town in the hope of finding some other establishment open. They could do with kindling and paraffin for the lamp, else they'd be sunk in darkness for the rest of the week. They saw nothing untoward, bar every other huckster's shop showing closed doors, until they got as far as Amiens Street. Deserted, not a single omnibus running and the train station silent as the grave. They halted at the mouth of Talbot Street. There was a strange smell in the air, singed and sulphurous, as if a fire had been guttered out. As they stood there, a man accosted them, putting his hand up like a constable.

'Take your mother home direct, Sonny,' he said to Valentine, 'for youse are in mortal danger here.'

He was a portly fellow with pot belly and ruddy cheeks.

'But we're in search of bread,' Mrs Beaver told him.

'Bread, is it? There's no bread getting gave around here, Missus. The place is in a state of chassis and youse should not be out.'

But the eerie quiet gave a lie to his pronouncements. And he was out, was he not, if only to be a prophet of doom?

'There's a gunboat pounding the bejasus out of the Custom House, not to speak of snipers on every rooftop.' He pointed in the general direction of heaven. 'Better to be home with your belly growling than be shot down on the street like a dog.'

Men like him, Mrs Beaver thought, can get all puffed up with calamity. He knew no more than they did, going only on the overheated gossip of the last ignorant person he had

come across. And he was enjoying himself too much, issuing his florid warnings.

'I'm not for turning,' Mrs Beaver told him sharpish.

'Please yourself, Missus,' he said. 'But I advise youse not to be walking out so brazenly. Youse should creep along and hug the walls for there are gunmen everywhere.'

Valentine drew her aside.

'Maybe yer man's right, Mam,' he said, 'maybe we should go home.'

'We'll go as far as Gardiner Street,' she said, reckless with authority.

By right, it should have been her son itching to see some action and she, his mother, staying his hand. Instead, Mrs Beaver sounded, even to her own ears, like a bargaining child, come too late to the bazaar but trying to wring the last iota of enjoyment as the stalls are being packed away.

'Youse'll be turned back,' the nay-sayer said. 'Or worse.'

They hurried down Talbot Street, no longer strolling as they had been, and turned on to Gardiner Street. On any other day of the week street walkers would have been abroad here, congregating on the footsteps and brazenly showing off their wares, the windows of the lower floors thrown open so the passer-by could see their squalid boudoirs on display. But it, too, was eerily unpeopled, except that lying in the middle of the street, where the people should have been, was a horse. A black carcass, a bloodied hole in its haunch, glittery with flies. Its dead eye

seemed to observe them. Valentine hung back and Mrs Beaver took the lead.

'We'll go as far as Abbey Street,' she said sensing that each stage of this journey would have to be negotiated for Valentine was waxing nervous. They made it almost as far as Butt Bridge before they were stopped. A couple of soldiers were lodged there behind a barricade of sandbags laced with wire.

'Move back,' one of them yelled, waving his rifle at them. 'Move back, I tell you. There's nothing to see here.'

But he was wrong. All along Abbey Street, the once erect buildings and fancy shops were full of gaping wounds. The floors above the shops had sagged in places, the masonry like the roughed-up lace on the tail of a petticoat. When she looked up, fine parlour rooms on the upper storeys were exposed where the glass had all been shattered. Curtains billowed raggedly. The houses left standing were reduced to nervous wrecks as if they had suffered from the jitters of war. Mrs Beaver had heard reports of war from afar – her eldest, James, was in colours and the newspapers were full of dispatches from Verdun – but nothing prepared her for the ruinous complexion of it on the streets of Dublin. She had never been a gawper by nature but there was something about this wreckage that mesmerised her. Despite all the evidence of ruin, there was barely a sound. This must be what the Great Silence is like, she thought, this dreadful peace. While she was thinking this, a vast boom emanated from Sackville Street making the very ground under their feet shiver. It was answered by the puny rat-a-tat-tat of

gunfire. For the first time, Mrs Beaver was afraid.

'Come on, Mam,' Valentine said and grasped her hand.

They clung to the hems of the buildings, ducking from one doorway to the next, their journey punctuated by sporadic firing, which though not close, made them dive for any shelter they could find. In one such respite, they shared their billet with a young man in a dusty grey suit and muffler. A second boom rang out.

'Dear God,' the young man muttered, 'they're trying to blow our lads to kingdom come.'

From the way he said 'our lads', Mrs Beaver knew he was one of *them*, the insurrectionists.

'If I were you, young fella,' he said to Valentine, though the two boys were of an age, 'I'd take my mammy off home. This is no place for ladies nor civilians.'

He blessed himself then and darted out of the doorway. As he did, Mrs Beaver noticed the dull glare of gunmetal beneath the flap of his coat. All went deathly quiet again and she and Valentine were about to venture forth when a single shot rang out. The young man halted and staggered forward. He seemed to rise, levitate almost, his arms aloft in supplication before he folded decorously and fell. Even his cap stayed in place. He lay quite still, his eyes closed as if he were in slumber.

That could be my James, lying there, Mrs Beaver thought, but her son was out beyond in a foreign field, fighting for his country – where this boy should be, by all rights, instead of joining himself to this villainous mayhem. But her righteousness only lasted

a moment. In the lightning flash of the gunfire, she saw another one of her errors. How could she have let James go, when she should have lain down before him to stop him, to spare him *this?* The young man twitched and groaned, his fingers groping blindly.

'We should do something for him,' she said to Valentine.

'And get our heads blown off?'

'Still and all,' Mrs Beaver said thinking again of James.

'Still and all nothing, Mam.'

And while they were debating thus, the young man died, Mrs Beaver was sure, his life quenched out before their very eyes.

If she had been in thrall before, she was paralysed now. She had always imagined battle as a continuous and logical barrage, organised and stately. But no, it came in waves like the sea rushing to the shore, but unlike the tide, it was impossible to predict. The next report of rifle might be for her, or worse, her poor son whom she'd dragged into the middle of this danger instead of shielding him from it. So rooted to the spot had she become, that Valentine had to prod her to get her moving again. They crouched and began to make their painful way like crabs scuttling in the dirt, their eyes fixed at street-level. The thunder of field-gun and patter of rifle-fire continued at their backs. On Mecklenburgh Street they squatted in the porch of an ale house and Mrs Beaver, thankful of the glassy calm, closed her eyes. But Valentine would not let her rest.

'Come on, Mam, come on, would you?'

Reluctantly she opened her eyes and knew immediately something had changed. She blinked twice not sure if she had conjured up what she saw. A piano. Had it been there all along? Or had God rolled it on to the stage while her attention had been distracted? It stood in the gutter at the other side of the street, canted to one side. Against instruction, Mrs Beaver straightened.

'Stay low, Mam, stay low,' Valentine hollered at her.

But something reared up in Mrs Beaver. She had been low long enough.

It was a Broadwood, an upright Broadwood, intact in all this ruin, offering itself to her. Indian rosewood case, inlaid panels and candle sconces, the lid open to show a perfect set of teeth, a music holder with a scrolled inset in the shape of a treble clef. She laid her hand gingerly on it. The wood was silky to her fingertips and she felt a rush of the sublime.

'Mam!' Valentine shrieked.

She knew that she should follow him but she couldn't move. She wanted this so badly it made her throat ache. Valentine sprinted back and tugged her by the elbow.

'Come away out of that,' he said. 'Leave it be. It's looters' leavings. Some gurrier will be back for it, you can be sure, and we've had enough strife for one day.'

But she could no more have left it than she could have abandoned a child.

'Here,' she said, looking hurriedly around her, 'you catch it by the other end.'

'What?'

'We cannot leave it here like this. It'll only get destroyed.'

He looked at her aghast.

'Are you mad, or what, Mam?'

She *was* mad, maddened with desire, or greed. She was not even sure of the difference. Who knew what had taken hold of her, a respectable fifty-year-old widow eyeing up a piano in the middle of a battlefield and wanting it for herself.

'Are you going to let your mother struggle with this alone?' she demanded.

Her voice came out shrill and panicky to her own ears. But it galvanised her son. He put his shoulder to the piano and none too gently began to push. The strings let out a timorous screech. With Valentine at one end and her at the other, they loosed the piano from the rut which had obviously defeated their thieving predecessors and with enormous effort, they levered it on to the kerb and got it rolling on its brass casters. Valentine set his shoulder against it and began to push. Mrs Beaver pulled from the front as if leading a reluctant beast. Every so often she would halt their progress. The strings would issue a celestial sigh of relief. She would lift the lid and check the shivering keys. Then she would throw her shawl over the top. It looked pathetic as if she thought this would disguise what they were at.

'Ah Mam, give over with the inspections or you'll get us killed,'