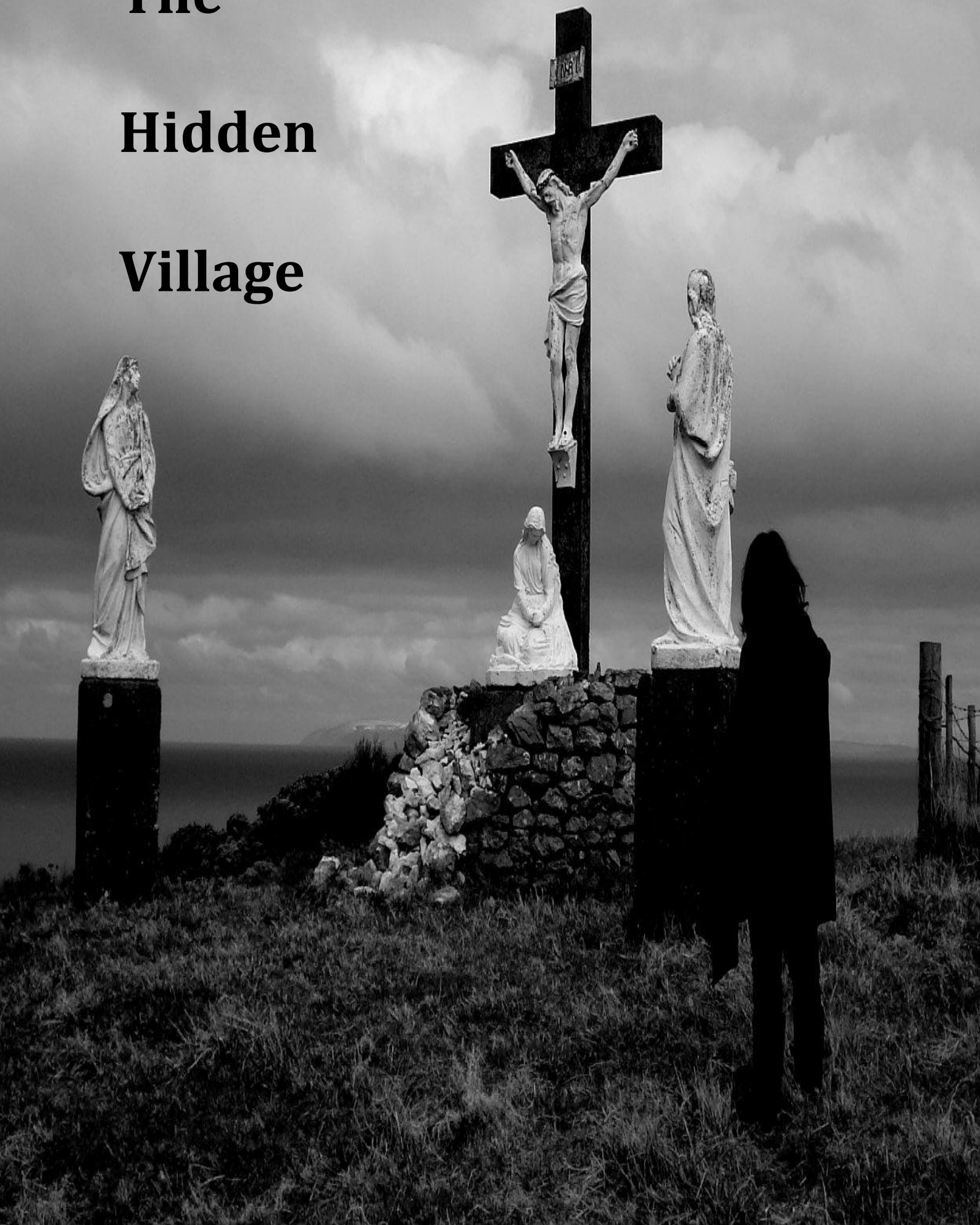


The Hidden Village



The Hidden Village

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Chapter 1

A Knock Came to the Door

Monday 1984.

‘Peter, are you coming to see Aunt Etta? She is asking about you.’

‘No, Mum, I’ve got stacks of homework to do.’

Tuesday.

‘Peter, Aunt Etta is not well at all, she asked if you were coming to see her.’

‘I will but I can’t go today, I have to finish this project.’

Wednesday

‘We’re heading off now, are you sure you can’t come too?’

‘Yes, Mum, I really do have to finish this.’

Thursday, 2.30pm

Our French teacher, Mademoiselle Coutore, had long dusty hair. Her full lips danced between syllables and formed large ovals with words and phrases such as *de plus* and *amuse-bouche*. She dressed to the colour of the season. My favourite season was autumn because she wore knee-high boots the colour of conkers. On colder days she wore a charcoal beret that matched her scarf. With her southern France skin tones she reminded me of an acorn. When she leaned over with one hand on the back of the chair and the other on the desk to point out a spelling error, the smell of apples, not quite ready for picking, and cool breezes of distant freesia would entice you closer so that your cheek and ear would itch red from the warmth of her proximity. She was explaining that, although we were under eighteen, we would

be able to order a bottle of wine in a restaurant in Paris, when a knock came to the door.

The door opened, Mr O'Neil walked over to Mademoiselle Coutore and whispered in her ear. Looking concerned, she called me to the front of the class. Mr O'Neil asked me to follow him to his office. My head buzzed with negative thoughts. Had he found out about the Mars bars I stole from the tuck shop or did Barney squeal about the time I locked him in the boys' toilets?

I stepped down from the portakabin, turning up my blazer collar against the cold rain. Rain bounced off the playground, soaking the inside of my trouser legs. I looked up and wondered where Mr O'Neil had gone.

A concrete path to the principal's office and staffrooms was cut, straight and narrow, into the fertile soil. The converted farmhouse looked down on the portakabins and playground, its stout boulder walls seeming to roll upwards as the rain pelted down. How could he have walked up the path so quickly? Soiled water raced down, slapping my leather brogues and soaking my nylon socks. I walked through the courtyard, the cobbled stones rolling me towards the large farmhouse door. I knocked. Mr Fullerton opened the door and said, 'Ah, Peter, Mr O'Neil is in his office, you can go straight up'. I walked up the stairs and into the corridor. The sound of hundreds of marbles colliding came from a small window as rain pinged against the surface. My socks squelched and my brogues made more noise than I wanted them to. They stopped at the door. I raised a damp, knuckled hand but the single word 'Enter' pre-empted my hesitated knock. There he sat behind a rosewood desk, clasping a beaten bible.

'Peter, you may sit down, you look drenched.'

I looked around, then realised that he was referring to me. He never called anyone by their first name, neither teacher nor pupil. I sat timidly on the leather-cushioned chair.

‘Peter, there are times in our lives when we will need a helping hand to confront, and ultimately come to terms with, a loss. The Lord brings us forth into this world but we must also be prepared for when he calls us from this world. The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away.’

What is he on about?

‘I would like you to join with me in prayer for those dearly departed.’

He bowed his head, clasped his hands and started the rosary, and I followed suit.

After what seemed an eternity, we both said ‘Amen’ and blessed ourselves.

‘Now, on you go. Your father will pick you up downstairs.’

Mr Fullerton showed me in to the waiting room, where my Dad sat with his pipe prepped but unlit.

‘Dad, what’s going on?’

‘Did Mr O’Neil not tell you?’

‘Tell me what? It was really weird, we just said the rosary for the dearly departed souls.’

‘Aunt Etta passed away this afternoon, in hospital.’

After a long pause, he added, ‘Are you okay?’

I lied, and said, ‘Yes.’

~

She lay there, presented in your favourite dress – blue, with white lace stitched around the neck. She had your shawl on. Her face was milk-bottle white and her lips painted red, long grey hair tied and knotted back, your rosary beads clasped in her praying hands. I kissed her on the lips; they were cold and dry, not like yours on my first day at school. I wondered what they would put on the headstone. Would it read, ‘Here rests Rosetta Agnew, Born 1907 died 1984, loved by her daughter Mary Agnew and her eleven grandchildren, forever in our hearts’? or would it simply read, ‘Rosetta Agnew, 1907 to 1984, Rest in Peace’? Or better still, ‘Rosetta is not here, just a pile of bones and rosary beads’.

She is all boxed in with her motionless pearl hands tied together with your rosary beads. Your fingers were always so busy. If they weren’t kneading, sowing or knitting they’d be running a fine comb through our nitted hair. ‘Awch! That hurt, please Aunt Etta, that’s sore.’ Then you’d show us the lice on the yellow bone comb and after one look at the wriggling parasites, we’d once again accept its teeth, what’s worse, the teeth of the comb or the bite from lice?

I stood and looked down. I knew it wasn’t you below me; you were somewhere else. It was a cold inanimate figure that was presented to me, in a fine dress and layered make-up. I wondered why she was wearing your glasses, for you always took them off before you slept. They’ll never be used again, to thread a needle or read an article from Woman’s Own or follow a knitting pattern from People’s Friend. Have you gone to another world and taken with you all your thoughts and memories? And what about those love stories that you read? Will you take them with you or will they be buried and packed away forever?

They all said that you spoiled me. I was known as ‘Aunt Etta’s pet’ and begrudged, for I could do no wrong in your eyes, but I did pinch spare change from

your purse once. Well, ah few times. Sorry. The priest forgave me and told me to pay it back in instalments, which I think I did. I don't know why I stole it in the first place, for if I asked you, you would have given it to me. On my thirteenth birthday, Sinead gave me the evil eye as I unwrapped a brand new bike from you. It was a Raleigh MK1 Grifter in gleaming red. Dad always bought second-hand bikes. I hadn't realised until then that bikes gleamed. The leather was uncreased, no one had sat on that seat before; the pedals were unblemished for neither brother nor sister had rested a foot there. The wheels had never been kerbed, the tread was thick and chunky and the brake pads solid rubber blocks. There was the clean smell of unsoiled rubber, leather and oil. There were three gears on the handlebar grip, while everybody else had just one. I ran to and fro between you and the bike. 'Is it really my bike? No way.' But it was. It wasn't passed down to me because my brother had outgrown it, it wasn't purchased, nearly new, at Smithfield market stall. It was new and unwrapped by me for me. I turned the bike onto its handlebars and spun the wheels; they ran clear. You held the back door open for me, so I flipped it upright and I pushed it through the yard and out onto the road. The sun was young and the roads were wide and empty. I left everybody standing there: you, Mum, Dad, Sinead, Finola, Shea... and I cycled and cycled until the sun aged and the day ran out of light.

Before the lid went on, mother kissed her goodbye. She leaned over and whispered something, maybe a lullaby or a hymn, for I could just make out tiny rhythmic head movements. As she ran her fingers down a cheek, I wondered what she had written in the faded envelope and why she then slipped it under those praying hands.

Chapter 2

Flaxtown Farm 1932

Molly stuck the tip of her tongue through the space between her two front teeth. 'Why dho I haff a hole hie?'

Rosetta smiled and said, 'Careful Molly, you might lose that tongue of yours. Sure, that's because the fairy didn't have any big teeth left to replace the ones you lost.'

'Linda at school says it's because I kissed Brian.'

'Did you kiss Brian?'

'Away on. He kissed me.'

'Don't be letting those boys kiss you anymore. Brian ought to know better. I'm in the right mind to tell his father.'

'Rosetta, please don't, it was only a wee kiss, that's all.'

'We'll see. Those Braid boys can be wee hallions at times.'

'When I grow up, will the hole fill in?'

'Probably not, but it's great to have a space. You'll be able to whistle louder than Henry.'

A wide smile burst through. 'Really? Rosetta, you must be a great whistler then.'

'I used to be when I was your age, though I'm a bit rusty now.'

'Will yeh teach me to whistle like Henry?'

'Alright. But we can't practice here, Mary would be up in arms, so she would.'

'Where can we go then?'

'I know a quiet wee spot, where Patrick Close and I used to practice. It's a special place beside a cairn, below Slemish. Now that's enough talkin' for one day. You'll need your sleep if we're going up to Slemish tomorrow.'

'Can we really go up tomarra?'

'Tomorrow, not tomarra, yes we'll head up first thing in the morning. Now get yourself some sleep.'

The next day, Rosetta edged along the flax dams while Molly skipped over the rocks and sods that lined the bank. As they weaved their way between the stalks, the flowering flax waved to and fro like royal gloves. They climbed over a fence and followed the boarder of the bramble until they came to the cairn. 'This is my favourite place, nobody comes here. It'll be a great spot to practice our whistling; we can hear the echoes bounce off the mountain.' Rosetta inhaled, put a forefinger and thumb in her mouth and whistled. Molly's eyes beamed as the bracken shook and a trail of Blackbirds and Magpies sprang from their perches and flew off into the distance. Molly placed her forefinger and thumb in her mouth and blew but only managed a squeak.

'Oh, Rosetta, please teach me, I want to be able to whistle like yeh and scare away the birds.'

'I promise, before I leave for England, with one whistle you'll be able to sweep the blackbirds from all the trees in the Braid.'

~

Flaxtown Farm looked up at Slemish Mountain and the seat of St Patrick. It followed the Carnlough Road around two bends before stopping short of the Half Way House pub. The warm breeze arched the bluish-grey flax towards Slemish and the flax bowed, giving thanks to its guardian saint.

Across the road from the farm Molly filled two tin pails from the spout. The spring flowed over and under rocks and stones, undressing branches and cleaning and smoothing pebbles. Her hands tickled the icy silvers as the water spouted magically up through the rock's lips. Molly heard Barney bark and looked up onto the stony Carnlough Road. It seemed to wait patiently for the company of travellers: horse carts, sheep with snapping collies and long-faced cattle with long-faced farmers on their way to the Shedding Market Fayre.

'Mornin, Molly, ar'ye goin to the fayre?' Brian nodded in the direction of the fayre revealing a small tuft of hair unwilling to be waxed down.

'Aye, I'll ride down later.'

As Molly smiled, warm autumn light weaved through the branches of the bush and skipped across her face, revealing droplets of spring water.

'Ar'ye takin Dander?'

'He could do with a wee scoot.'

‘Well, I see yeh later then.’

‘Not if I see yeh first.’

Molly looked on as Brian waved and ran to catch up with his dad, who gave Molly a tight smile. She splashed across the road and through the open gate, her knees and nearly-white socks now damp as she swayed with the pails.

‘Mornin’ Henry, mornin’ Dander.’

They both nodded back as she passed.

Two thuds followed by two splashes told Mary that Molly had returned. Without turning round, she said, ‘Be careful, if you spill any more we’ll have a spout inside the house’.

‘Why can’t we have one? Brian said they have running hot and cold water in the house.’

‘Sure there’s no need for the likes of that, you can have as much water as you want, hot or cold. There’s always water on the heat for whatever the needs be. Now run along, Molly, before I trip over you. Henry said he could do with some help in the yard.’

Molly hopped sideways over the welcome mat and doorstep, leaving behind the warm smells of turf and coal smouldering under damp-slack. She sidestepped Barney the dog and skipped back to Henry and Dander.

‘Molly, just the girl. Come over for a second and give me a wee hand. Naow hold the reins tight while I tighten the saddle, Dander seems a little frisky this mornin’. Yeh’ve still got them wee nicks on your brow ‘n’ chin where he caught yeh with his shod.’

‘It wasn’t his fault. I pulled his tail as I slid off him.’

‘The next time yeh decide to ride him out of the barn, don’t forget to juke that nut of yers, or yeh’ll lose it.’

Molly held the reins and whispered into Dander’s twitching ear.

‘Easy boy, that’s a good boy, easy naow.’

Dander nodded a few more times and then settled down.

‘Henry, is it true that yeh and Maggie are going to New Zealand?’

‘Aye, but not for a wee while yet.’

‘Where’s New Zealand, Henry?’

‘It’s the other side of the world.’

‘How long will it take yeh to get there?’

‘A wean of weeks.’

‘When will yeh be back?’

‘Oh, Molly it will be a long time before I can touch the shores of Ireland again.’

As Henry fastened the buckle tight under Dander’s firm buttermilk gut, he caught a little look of distress in Molly’s eye.

‘Rosetta left me when I was six. Why?’

This wasn’t a subject that anyone talked about and the question caught him off guard. Henry bent down and met Molly’s watery gaze.

‘She hadtee go to England to find work. She wanted to stay with yeh but there was no work here to be had. She’ll be hame soon.’

‘On my seventh birthday she sent me over a dress and a card, on the card that’s what she said – she would be home soon. That was in April and now it’s October. I’ve not seen her since last Christmas.’

‘She hastee work, I’m sure she’ll be hame soon Molly.’

‘Well I want to go to New Zealand. Can yeh take me too?’

‘Not yet. Yeh hav’tee finish school here and help Ma with the farm. Besides, Rosetta will be back soon and she wouldn’t want yeh on the other side of the world, would she?’

‘I suppose not.’

‘Come on, Molly. Yeh’ve a face as long as a Lurgan spade. I promise, when yeh’ve finished school I will send yeh the fare to come over.’

‘Yeh promise, Henry?’

‘Yeh hav’me word, as sure as I’m standing here with the greatest wee girl in the Braid and the friskiest horse in County Antrim.’

Molly ran her hand down Dander’s chocolate-stained nose.

‘He’s a good horse. I know he’s frisky at times but that’s just because he’s excited.’

‘Molly, I think yeh’re right. He’s a wise auld horse, he knows yeh’ll be taking him to the fayre this morning. Naow up yeh go, we don’t wantee disappoint him.’

Henry slipped his trough hands under Molly’s armpits and lifted her effortlessly, placing her firmly on the saddle.

She sat high in the fresh breeze above the warm and musty yard, hungrily breathing in the smells of crunchy leaves that replaced the stench of compost and manure.

‘Naow young girl, don’t be racing Dander, and take no nonsense from him. Just before yeh get to the fayre, jump off and point him back this way and give him a good auld slap on the rear. Bella will be there with her scones and soda-bread, she’ll whizz yeh back in Dan’s cart.’

‘Henry, can I tell yeh a wee secret?’

‘Well it wouldn’t be a secret if yeh told me.’

‘It would be our secret.’

‘Mmmh. Molly, a young girl shouldn’t need to have secrets; there are too many secrets in this world.’

‘Henry, can yeh keep a secret or not?’

‘Of course I can.’

‘Well promise yeh won’t tell, not even Maggie.’

‘Okay, I promise.’

‘Shssh, let me whisper it to yeh.’

Henry tilted his head and raised a large lug and a saddle coloured cheek; before he knew it, Molly stole a kiss and kicked Dander with the inside of her foot.

‘Easy naow,’ Henry shouted after her as they raced away. He shook his whiskey coloured hair, his left cheek now ruddy, and mumbled something before tending to the cattle in preparation for the fayre.

Mary walked briskly towards him, wiping flour off her knotted hands and onto her faded apron. ‘For the love of God! Molly has just scooted past the farmhouse like the hammers of hell. She needs to know that Dander is a wild one if he’s given a free rein.’

‘Molly, likewise.’

‘Henry! You aren’t comparing Molly to Dander are you?’

‘No, of course not. But she is comin’ to that age naow that she wants to know certain things. She has been asking about Rosetta.’

‘What did she ask?’

‘Why she left and when is she comin’ hame.’

‘What did you say to her?’

‘That she had to go to find work but she would be hame soon. Mother, I’m nay sure we’re doin’ the right thing by not telling her about Rosetta.’

‘I know, I know. But there’s too much water under the bridge. We have to let things be.’

Henry nodded towards the large farmhouse. The morning sun shed little light on the cassock-grey walls. 'There're too many secrets in that auld house, too many shadows for me.'

Mary's stare held firm. A chilled silence floundered between them then she said, 'Son, you're not still scared of the dark, are you?'

'Not at all, Mother. But maybe, maybe yeh're scared of the light.'

~

Mrs Close, who owned the Half Way House, sat patiently. She hoped that Molly wouldn't be riding Dander. Every morning she waited and prayed. She prayed for those who were gone and those who weren't. A shawl covered her lifeless hair and merged into the long black dress that touched her laced boots. A white lace collar matched her cheeks. No laugh lines interrupted the contours in her face. Each bead she tumbled was another Hail Mary for tortured souls that were gone and tortured souls that weren't. She sat deep, upright and low. The free, unwieldy hedge was abruptly angled to accommodate the hard wooden bench and its occupant.

Dander's muscles tensed his pace quickening as he caught sight of her. She stood up and said, 'Good morning Molly. How are you? Are you going to the fayre?'

'I'm fine, Mrs Close, I'm on my way. Are yeh goin'?''

'No, I have things to sort out here. I'll say a prayer for you, but please say a prayer for me.'

Molly tried to offer a smile of agreement but fell short. As they moved on, she didn't have to look back to know that Mrs Close was as still as a statue. Molly felt her eyes following her long after she had slipped out of sight.

Dander's nose rose high in the air again as he trotted proudly alongside a donkey and cart, ignoring a barking Border collie, three boisterous fair-haired kids and a tweed-capped driver on their way to the fayre. Molly nodded across to the driver before giving Dander a nudge with her heel, which he acknowledged straight away with a half gallop that shunted them past the flagging donkey and cart. Up the hill they trotted, past the slate-grey church and priest's house, where St Patrick stood with open hands. He looked at Molly with a curious smile as she bobbed up and down alongside the evergreen hedge. The Braid School came into view, its whitewashed walls and barley coloured facia-boards flashing through the trees. The spacious windows reflected the autumn light, while the lush, manicured grounds gently rolled out a welcome. Dander hesitated for a brief moment, for normally this

would be the point where Molly would hop off, turn him around and slap him on the rear before running through the open gates of the school. But today was the day of the Shedding Market Fayre so she nudged him again and on they went.

The road dipped, twisted and weaved, ever narrowing and widening. Just ahead of them, the dark figure of John Hamil walked confidently behind a dozen sheep. His high-pitched whistle signalled his collie to edge the sheep close to the verge so Molly could pass. John waved her on with his willow and then whistled, and the road filled up again with sheep. Molly looked back and they had all disappeared out of sight. She glanced back again and there they were as before. Strange old road this, she thought. As the road widened, they both knew the Shedding Market Fayre would be coming into view. The sounds of bartering, friendly hellos and 'whadaboutyehs' began to feed through. She could hear the deep groans of cattle and stuttering bleats of sheep and kids. The smell of hot treacle being poured over apples merged with the tang of candyfloss. Molly imagined the floss being whipped around skinny sticks and then melting on her wet tongue. She thought of the sweet stall and the way Tommy stacked yellowman high on the red table. She remembered how the crunchy honeycomb had fallen like quarry rocks when she'd nudged his stall at the last fayre.

'Sorry Tommy, don't worry, I'll pick it up for yeh.' She remembered dusting the honeycomb clean and carefully stacking it as high as she could.

'Naow watch, Molly, not too high, I don't want it falling down again. Take this wee piece with yeh, and try not to bump into any more stalls. Although his face had a tinge of yellow and a few creators in it, the kids called him the yellowman not because of his features but because he sold honeycomb.

As Dander trotted closer, Molly caught the rounded, warm smell of slightly charred soda bread, spud bread and scones and recognised the clinking and clanging sounds of Bella's griddle being repositioned on coal-heated plates. The cowering trees parted, revealing the light and energy of the market fayre. The colours of the canopies, awnings and red ribbon rosettes appeared in front of Molly, who gasped with excitement as she caught the twinkling golden crown of the twirling carousel and Mickey's rhyming words.

'Come on board, just a penny a go, ride a wee horse and be part of the show.'

Molly quickly jumped off Dander and ran to the fruit and vegetable stall where she was greeted by Mr Petticrew. 'Well, Molly, what can we do for you today?'

‘Could I have yehr finest, reddest apple? It’s for Dander.’

‘Nothing but the best for Dander.’

Mr Petticrew slowly examined and discarded a couple of apples before picking a full, ruby-red one, which he held up to the morning sunlight. When he smiled, she thought he smiled with apple cheeks.

‘Do you know what? I think we’ve found Dander his special apple. This one is on me, but don’t be telling the rest of the kids or they all will want one.’

‘Thanks, Mr Petticrew, I promise, I won’t tell a soul, cross me heart and hope to die.’

‘Naow; there is no need for that young lady, crossing your heart and hoping to die. Just keep it quiet.’

‘Too late naow, Mr Petticrew, I’ve already done it. But don’t worry, I won’t be dying any time soon for I’ll nay tell a soul.’ Molly grabbed the apple and ran back to Dander. She watched him closely as he crunched it and, when he had finished, she turned him around and gave him a spank. He trotted back the way they’d come and disappeared around a bend. Molly spotted Brian and whistled. He tried but failed to whistle back, and she smiled proudly. She thought of Rosetta and of the time they sat beside the cairn below Slemish. They couldn’t stop crying for laughing as Rosetta tried to whistle the blackbirds and sheep away. Now Molly could whistle as loud as Henry and as high as John Hamil.

A cool breeze lifted her dress and smile. She spread her arms, spun herself round a couple of times, and then glided deep into the fayre towards Mickey Marley’s jingling roundabout.

Chapter 3

Parting

The damp wind gathered the cries of rooks and fluttered the tails of dark suits. Slow paces and wet faces trailed behind men cheeked against angled mountain ash. Every hundred yards another six took their positions releasing the laden from theirs.

With a forefinger and thumb, she pulled one bead after another. With every bead, a Hail Mary was offered to ease her son's journey from this harsh world to a better one. *He had everything to live for and nothing to die for. Too young, but our Lord must've had his reason. Yes, only the good die young.*

It took three weeks to ship his body over, therefore an open coffin was denied to him and her. He was a fine son, a strong but caring son. He sent money home although she never asked for a penny. *And as for your letters, Patrick, how could I pass them on to her? She had her own life to live.* Doubts began to seep in through the cracks in her beliefs. *Why, why did I send you away to a new life in Canada that you never asked for or wanted? No, it was for the best, it wasn't just me. We agreed that would be the best thing for everyone.*

As tradition had it, the main service was held in St Patricks, the village church, then they walked from there to the hilltop church and graveyard, a distance of three miles. The procession snaked its way along the Carnlough road from the Halfway House past Flaxtown Farm and towards the beaten hill trail that led to the church. Molly held Rosetta's hand tightly. Every so often, Molly let slip a skip. It was the day Mrs Close's son was to be buried. Although she never knew him, she felt sad for his mother.

Water raced down one side of the track, soaking the left feet of three of the bearers. Silver birch lined the right side of the trail, the branches prodding the bearers and forcing the coffin over and keeping three legs in the cold stream. The procession stopped at a whitewashed cottage, with an oval sign that swung in the wind. Molly was intrigued by the old style writing – Kate's Cottage. Another six bearers manoeuvred into place as six ash suits swayed like birds on parallel telegraph lines. Molly yearned to run into Kate's garden and pick a few daffodils

while the bearers jostled for position. A feral mare looked on as the murmuring line made its way up through the grazing field. Ladies' boots sank into and slurped out of the soft wet soil, the men's brogues stamping confidently behind the coffin. They weaved around the tall evergreens and foliage that surrounded the church grounds before making their way through the open gates and along the yew lined path. Father Burn stood in front of the church doors and greeted the weary with a sprinkling of holy water and a Latin recital. The undertaker directed the coffin and bearers towards the hole in the ground and the raised soil. The coffin was lowered in silence. A chill wind buckled the surrounding trees as if in sympathy with the mourners who stared into the open grave.

'Grace, mercy and peace
from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ
be with you all.

'Though we are dust and ashes,
God has prepared for those who love him
a heavenly dwelling place.
At his funeral we commended Patrick into the hands
of almighty God.
As we prepare to commit the remains of Patrick to the earth,
we entrust ourselves and all who love God to his loving care.

'As our saviour taught us, so we pray,

**'Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name...**

Amen.'

Each member of the Close family lifted a handful of soil and scattered it over the wet coffin then took their prominent positions alongside the fresh burial ground. Sympathies were passed on, Mrs Close standing upright and accepting each hand with a firm grasp and thanking them for coming. Through their veils they looked at each other. When Mary held Mrs Close's hand she said, 'Too young, Patrick was too young'.

A tear ran down Mrs Close's cheek. *Too young, too young for what? Death, life, marriage, fatherhood?* Rosetta held firm and offered her sympathies. Mrs Close yearned to embrace her but again circumstances denied her this; the community were never to know their true connection. Her stomach tightened and her throat swelled with unspoken words.

Molly shook her hand. Mrs Close bent down and pulled Molly closer, searching her face for her son. She said, 'Oh Molly, you look lovely. Your father would have been so proud of you. Please say a prayer for me and I'll say a prayer for you.'

Molly thought of the day her father was buried. It was sunny and warm, not like today. She remembered the open coffin in the sitting room and how old and wrinkled he'd looked. At the head of the coffin, on a small, linen covered table, a large, bronze crucifix scattered the light of the candle onto the hard lines of their new piece of furniture. She had just been able to make out the dancing figures on the ash wood as they jigged to the flickering flame. She'd noticed that the polished lid propped against the wall had a shiny plaque, engraved with the name 'John Agnew'. The cabinets and settee had been removed and replaced with wooden chairs that boxed the room. Family and neighbours were whispering and drinking tea. She'd pushed a chair closer to the coffin and climbed up and kissed him. He was cold. His lips looked and tasted like dried dulse. At that moment she knew that the body below her was not her father; he had packed his smile, gathered his thoughts and left.

A warm breeze had tickled her cheek and ear. *I think that's Pa trying to whisper my favourite story, Amy The Rabbit. He's probably still in the room. He must've come in through the window. Father Burn said the window should be left open so that his spirit could come and go. He said he mightnee want to go straight away because he doesnee want to leave his family and life here. That's why we said all those prayers, to help him on his way.*

She remembered the pear drop that had run down his colourless cheek. She had watched fascinated as it slid down his waxy face to his starched collar before realising that it wasn't his tear, it was hers. *He's in heaven naow. Mrs Close wants me to say another prayer for her. I'll say four, one for her and three for Patrick Close. He may need some prayers to help him on his way. Hail Mary full of grace, the Lord is with thee...*

The invitation was open to all to come back to The Halfway House. The men were thirsty for whiskey and porter and the women thirsty for conversation. After three days of mourning and the long walk they were all ready for the parting glass of the wake.