

An abstract painting of a tree with a thick, textured trunk and branches. The colors are vibrant and varied, including deep blues, greens, yellows, oranges, and pinks. The brushstrokes are visible and expressive, giving the painting a sense of movement and energy. The tree is the central focus, with its branches reaching out in various directions. The background is a mix of these colors, creating a rich, layered effect.

THE LIGHTNING BIRD

A NOVEL BY KIERAN MARSH

Chapter 1: Mayo, October 1915

A craggy finger of rock, a mile wide, pointed out into the rough Atlantic, culminating in the raw finger bone that was the vertiginous sea-stack of Downpatrick. On the hill above this swell-spat seascape, young Caer Munnelly was hidden in a copse of trees at the roadside, and she was up to no good, no good at all by the view of any decent man.

It was market day in the town of Ballycastle, and it was Caer's chore to take the eggs to sell for a few pennies. It was a long and lonely road and the load of eggs was heavy, so she took a ride in a pony and cart with a neighbour, Jimmy Moran, who was bringing a load of dillisk, one of the best fertilisers for spuds. That was fine for the way out, but coming back there was no lift to be had as Jimmy was spending his profit in Polkes bar, and she had that road ahead of her with a long stretch across the bogs where there was not a house nor a soul where you might chat to or beg a cup of tea. She took the shortcut over the top of the hill, which meant a fierce climb, but the worst of it was that it would take her down by the Considine farm, and most likely Seamus Considine would be out and he'd spot her. That wasn't something she wanted.

In this part of the country, perched as it was between the withering wind and the battering waves on the north coast of Mayo, there were families that had been here for a very long time. Long before Saint Patrick had tended sheep as a slave in the nearby village of Foghill, long before the Pharaohs had learnt to build their pyramids a thousand miles away, there were farms on this land. There was a tight coupling between the spirits of the land and those ancient families. Here on the sharpest edge of Europe, man and spirit watched each other over dry stone walls, and some of the families learned to hum the tunes that would bind those shades to their will. When Christ's priests came they condemned such lore and those who practised it. In Deuteronomy, God had commanded all good people never to suffer a witch to live, and more than once, across the years, they had obeyed that solemn commandment. Those who knew the music hid themselves from sight, but they never lost the knowledge.

Caer's name was Munnelly from her father, but an altogether different name, unspoken outside of their family, came to her from her mother, and from an unbroken line of women a hundred generations old. They knew the deep truths buried in the clays and twisted in the gnarled branches of the rowans; they knew the hidden things that only women knew and often times went to their deaths so as not to reveal. Truths were whispered over cooking fires, or when pulling on a cow's udder, or on the bog road carrying turf.

Caer had, of course, been brought up to be a decent girl, and the message was that the ancient ways should only be practised in the marital bed. Yet, every generation believed that theirs was the first to truly taste the air, and not every lesson taught was learned. Every girl believed she was the first to crawl into a copse and stick a hand down her skirts, and explore herself with all the fervency of passionate youth.

As she worked, her breath began to come quickly, so she felt that the blood coursing

in her veins was mixed with the blood of the land, and the fire that burned across the sky was caught in the wick of her belly. She muttered the words over and over which could not be written, for they were ancient. And, as her practised fingers found their journey coming to an end, the dark heavy clouds dipped low onto the land and let forth their burden.

Great splotches of rain, big as gooseberries, slapped down on her head as she pulled herself out of the ditch and took again to the road, legs wobbling. The rain was chill, but it was a joy to her, it would surely drive a sensible farmer to take shelter.

She was soon proved wrong, for when she rounded the bend to the Considine farm, the four brothers were still turning the cocks of hay in the rain. They were a rough bunch, hairy and smelly, and talked all day of land and spuds and cows. The youngest, Seamus, had killed his mother while being born, and seemed to go through life looking for the next thing to kill.

She put down her head and ran to get past without being seen, but again there was no joy for her that day.

'Well, now, what have we here?' Seamus leapt the wall and stood in her way.

'It's wet, Seamus Considine.'

He took a step closer. She went to duck past but he snatched her wrist with a painful grip.

'I know when it's wet,' he sneered. 'And I know when a woman's wet.'

'Let me go.'

'Not till I taste you.'

'You... I...'

'Now, you listen to me, Caer Munnelly, I've had me eye on you since we were in school, and you thought you were all better than me with your reading and your sums. You're

nothing now, and I have my share of the farm coming to me. It's me you'll be marrying, you'll be Caer Considine before the year is out.'

'I'll die first.'

He laughed. 'You would that. And they'd have to bury you outside the graveyard for your sin. Mind you, things I've heard about your mother, maybe you'll not get into the graveyard anyway.'

'Don't you dare speak ill of her.'

'And you, put a civil tongue in your head. By God, I'll beat that spirit out of you. Now, come here, I've a feeling I might sample the goods.'

With his free hand he reached out and took a snatch of her breast. His grip was sharp, painful, yet Caer felt something stir inside, a thrill that elated her, sang to her. She pulled that thrill up and, whispering the ancient words, twisted it into her knee, driving it deep into Jimmy's groin. He was lifted off his feet by her blow, and landed heavily.

She was away then, and his screams of curses were punctuated with howls of animal pain.

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She was soaked when she ran up the glen and broke in the door of the cottage that was her home; it was half from the rain and half from the crying. Her mother, Brigit, took one look at her and swung the kettle over the fire to make a good cup of strong tea. Her father was asleep in the chair, tired from digging and exhausted by a bottle of porter. After Caer had put on her dry clothes, the two women huddled over the fire with their tea. Her mother put a small stick of candlewood to lighting, and let its visceral aroma haunt the air around the hearth.

'Your father thinks the Considine boy is a good match,' her mother said.

'He's a brute, Mammy.'

'Many's a good man seems a brute at first.'

'I was in school with the boy. He has a smile that a granny would love.'

'Not a bad thing.'

'If his heart matched his smile.'

'How bad can the boy be?'

'He was a terrible bully in school, and a sneak. Caught Blackie O'Reilly on the ear from behind one time and the lad can't hear since. And he was always up to something, hitting dogs with stones or pulling frogs apart. He was forever drowning cats.'

'Well sometimes it's the merciful thing, if you have too many kittens.'

'Maybe, but you should see the look in his eye when he was holding them under.

T'would put the fear of God in you, so it would.'

Her mother pulled out a cake of bread that was staying warm by the fire and spread some new butter on it. As they ate, she pulled out a letter.

'From my sister, your aunty Maureen, away up in Dublin,' she said.

'And is she any better?'

'Divil a bit, full of woe and worry is all she is.'

'You should visit her,' Caer said.

'Maybe, but I was thinking of something else.'

Caer knew that she was up to something. 'And what would that be?'

'She's after asking me if I would know of any girl that would do a year or two of service, away up with her. Oh, she has a house full of servants, she does, but I fancy she wants a tale of home and a decent accent about her for a bit.'

'You mean me?'

It seemed she did. She thought of that fevered city, so far away, and then she saw in

her mind's eye the bleak old cottage full of Considine men, and thought of the marriage bed she might have to lay on. So it was that, a week later, Caer found herself at the station in Killala, her mother in tears, and a ticket and a trunk clutched in her hands.

Chapter 2: Dublin, October 1915

The great, bright bird gripped the scruff of the world and shook it free, ripping and tearing it. Lightning spewed about the thing, and fire burnt from it, for it was not of this earth, but of some greater place untold. Vast talons wrenched into flesh, pulling, wrestling.

The creature lifted away and disappeared into the swirling fog, leaving Alex alone, naked.

Dead boys lay about him. Thick smoke swirled, turning day into caliginous night, stinking of gunpowder and decay. Shells flashed incandescent, terrifying explosions hammering his chest.

He was standing in a crater, while howitzers flung unholy hell. His comrades, merely children, were burnt, bald, scalded stumps.

Something was moving through the mist. The bird returning? No, it was man shaped, yet huge.

From the lip of the crater, a giant of a creature descended on him slowly, pacing like a demon being conjured. It looked like a man, with black clothing matted with blood, yet

somehow monstrous. There was a glow in the thing's eyes, hellfire. Alex tried to run, but the mud sucked his feet down, consuming him. The beast approached, he was gaunt, twisted yet impossibly strong, with arms thick as steam pistons.

Now he towered over him. Alex felt something in his hand; a knife. He stabbed out, it broke like pig iron on the rock leg. The creature raised his powerful fist. Alex's death descended brutally and slowly, yet cracked the air like a whip.

In his last moment, he saw the lightning bird perched on the huge man's shoulder, burning, then...

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...Then he woke screaming in the dormitory, in his school. His blood hammered. His pyjamas were sweat-soaked and he had thrown his bed clothes off. As consciousness returned, he tried to grab his sheet and pull it over, but Stokes the prefect was up already. In the dim gas night-light, Alex was exposed, lost without hope.

Stokes stamped over to Alex and grabbed his sleeve viciously. 'Come on, you little shit.'

He hauled Alex out of his bed and shoved him towards the door. Three beds down, Finn sat up anxiously and began to climb out of his covers. Stokes caught him with a flat hand across his exposed ear, then followed through with a boot up Alex's arse that rattled his spine. Neither boy cried out.

The hallway was dark, but Alex knew where they were going. At the end was a small room, the Fever Room, as it was called. He walked in and Stokes slammed the door behind him.

The room smelled of wee and was pitch black. There was a bed, but it was hard and there were no covers. If a boy was dangerously ill, he went to the sick bay. If he was merely

sick but was definitely going to survive the night, this was where he was dropped. It discouraged malingering. More often it served as a handy place to dump anybody who annoyed the prefects. It was not strictly a punishment, that would come in the morning.

#

Alex got no sleep. He was damp with sweat, cold and uncomfortable, but, most of all, the horror of the dream remained with him, making him curl his fingers into the stiff bunk, twisting his back. The dreams had started when he had first come to this school, but in the last month they had gone from intermittent nightmares to frequent, all-consuming terrors, a devastating and overwhelming affliction. So he lay, eyes open to spite the darkness, shivering equally from the cold and the nausea of the experience.

Even as he closed his eyes the images danced, bringing dread. Fear infested his core. Was this the truth of war? Viscera spattering, bones breaking, screams of the dying, moans of the dead. Ghosts that were real, carnal, shadows of some bitter world of pain. That awful creature, part bird, part storm planted in the roots of time. It was evil incarnate, savage, primitive.

Lying in the dark he thought of home. It seemed to shine like a bright light, a beacon that warmed him as he trembled. Despite his father's drinking, and his mother shutting herself away like a hermit, he felt a peace there that was denied any boy in the school. The military school was a place where only strength and violence seemed to be valued, and the bullies were the top of the chain. It was only Finn, really, who was a true friend, even risking Stoke's brutality to offer a tiny gesture of support.

In the morning, he heard Stokes shouting at the young boys, getting them up for parade. Stokes had locked him in, and had clearly decided to let him stew a while. He heard the Reveille played on the bugle outside, and still nobody came for him. So he was to miss

breakfast, go hungry. The prefects were only a year or two older than the senior boys like Alex, but they were a tough bunch; something happened when they took power, a mean streak invaded them.

Yet the Fever Room and the missed breakfast were only annoyances, the punishment was to come.

'A good soldier does not complain. He looks for opportunities.' The school principal, Major Trunch, had little time for the weakness of childhood. Soldiering was all he knew, and soldiering was Alex's ambition.

In a few years, with luck, Alex saw himself in a lieutenant's uniform, a commissioned officer. He would have to cope with worse than these minor privations and provocations if he walked that road. So he sat and he shivered. Whenever his mind dimmed, he drifted towards that awful dream again, and sat up coldly.

From the silence outside, a clomping of boots approached, then the lock clicked and the shattering brightness of daylight blinded him.

'Out, you bleeding maggot,' shouted Stokes. 'Get your ass dressed. On the double.'

#

The water in the wash bowls was delightfully warm. When they woke on these mornings, as the days compressed towards winter, there would often be a film of ice over the wash water, and no mercy was shown to any boy not willing to press his face into its bracing surface. Now, after three or four boys had washed in the same water, it was almost pleasantly lukewarm.

He was still trembling when he pulled on his course cadet's uniform; it would do no good to appear afraid, not in front of Trunch. Alex pulled on his round spectacles, glad the world was sharp again. He screwed up his fists as he followed the prefect through the dull

halls of the Royal Hibernian Military School.

The school had been founded a century and a half previously to support the children of soldiers who were off at war and the orphans of those who did not return. Today, there were nearly six hundred boys here, arrayed in a maze of buildings erected across the years, some terribly old and shoddy, others modern and grand. The finest building of all, excepting the chapel, was reserved for the half dozen officers that ran the school. These were the only true army men in the school; the schoolmasters were officially non-commissioned officers, and had a nominal military training, but they had little standing in the eyes of the army. The officer's wing was all polished wood and brass, hung with royal colours and paintings of dramatic battle scenes and inspirational soldiers. It was immaculate; Alex had often spent mornings keeping the wooden floors and panelling polished in the name of physical exercise.

Stokes went ahead of him into the office, closing the door while he delivered his report, then he called time while Alex marched to front and centre of the desk. Stokes pulled the door closed behind him.

Major Earnest Trunch was seated behind his desk. The desk was empty, indeed, the room was empty apart from the portrait of King George bringing the focus of Trunch's piercing eyes all the more closely on Alex. He sat stiffly, with a military rigour that was reflected in the creases of his face. His uniform and hat were steamed and pressed, the badges brought to a shine. Trunch's Sam Brown belt was polished and gleaming; his revolver was out of the holster and sat on the desk, his moustache waxed to a fine point. No man for the people, this was a dedicated career army man, King and Country, Death or Glory. His standards were high and woe betide anybody that did not meet them, which included most of the school.

He sat regally, calmly, a storm waiting to break.

'So, Slane. Night terrors?' Trunch had a way of speaking so that each word came out like a distinct sentence, each syllable over-pronounced, overworked, as if letting it away with anything less would be like admitting defeat. Like the majority of officers in Irish regiments, he was English, a product of some small public school in the southern counties, Trunch had never lived up to the promise of his past, and carried his cross with malice. Each time he opened his mouth, he sought to diminish and undermine.

'I... Yes, sir.'

Trunch stared at him. For twenty, thirty seconds he said nothing and that silence was more disconcerting than anything he could have said.

'Night...terrors...' he repeated slowly and deliberately, as if tasting something foul. He rose slowly from the desk, picked up his revolver and paced around to stand behind Alex.

'Is my revolver loaded, Slane?'

'I... I don't know, sir.'

'Wrong answer.'

With a start, Alex felt something cold pushed into the back of his neck. His belly dropped, and he gasped.

'Is it loaded?'

'I... I...' Alex had no idea. Was this some initiative test? Would an officer know how to answer this? 'Sir, no sir.'

'Oh? And what makes you think that?'

'Sir, you wouldn't point it at me if it were loaded. Against regulations.'

'Against regulations for an officer to point a gun at a miserable excuse for a school boy. Oh, I don't think so. Tell me, Slane. You have no problem with me pulling the trigger? You're happy the gun is unloaded?'

'Sir, I'd rather...'

'You'd rather I didn't? So you are lying when you say it's not loaded? Or maybe you don't trust me to know if it's loaded?'

'Sir, no, I... sir...'

'You little shit.'

There was a cold, hard click, the unmistakable sound of a hammer closing on an empty chamber. Alex's knees failed; he fell to the floor, barely catching himself.

'Get up, you pathetic little coward.'

His heart was pounding. Had he really believed that Trunch would harm him? It did not matter; there was a coldness to the man, a precision to him that brought a dark reality to his every threat and antagonism.

By the time Alex was on his feet, Trunch was back behind his desk.

'Look at you, scrawny little runt, weasely glasses, no backbone to you. If I'd had you in Natal, I would have tied you to a damn cannon for shooting practice. Do you understand?'

'Yes, sir.' Alex searched for words to defend himself, to assert his strength, but he could find none.

Again, Trunch let the silence fall between them, drilling into him with his stare.

'Your father,' he pronounced the words as if he were naming some kind of disease, using his Oxford English accent to its greatest extent, 'he is... well?'

'Yes, sir.'

'He served under me.'

'Yes, sir, I...'

'He was a private, then suddenly he was a colonel. Do you know how he did that, Slane?'

'No, sir.'

'No? Not even a hint?'

'No, sir.'

'That's a shame. I don't know what he did, Slane. I know only that the good Lord did not rain down miracles upon him, oh no, some other force was involved. Some much more diabolical force that still haunts me, wakes me up at night. And what a terrible shame you don't know what it is, Slane, because you're going to need some of that same medicine if you're going to make a half decent private.'

'Sir, I want to be an officer.'

'What?'

'Sir, I...'

'I heard what you said, I just didn't believe you had the gall to say it. You little fucking runt. I look at you and see a failure.'

'Sir, no...'

'Shut up,' Trunch shouted, rising again from his seat. He began to pace slowly, very carefully about the room. 'It would be a pathetic gesture to defend yourself. Look at you, scrawny little pig, no backbone to you. Do you understand?'

'Yes, sir.'

'And how do you think you could possibly get to be an officer?'

'Sir, I hope that the excellent quality of education in this school will...'

'Shut up. Excellent quality, indeed. I'm not some Salvation Army visitor who needs to be impressed by lies. This school is full of runts like you. There's barely one in ten good enough to be privates, not a one that could be an officer. We're here just to take the mindless brats from the wives of soldiers when they can't be bothered to look after them themselves.'

What are we here for?'

'Sir, you're here to take us mindless runts...'

'And you'll repeat anything I say to you like a little parrot. Oh, Lord, what did I do that I have to put up with spineless toadies like you all day, Jesus? OK, Slane, let's get on with it. Hands out.'

Trunch swung the cane with ritualistic excellence, eliciting a sharp crack as he flicked his wrist on the downward stroke to bring the stinging tip on Alex's palms with maximum effect. On the first slap, Alex could not help but cry out, so Trunch only started to count on the second strike. He counted to six on both hands, then called for Stokes. The prefect came back in.

'Seven nights cleaning the latrines in your block. No bed before he's prepared to lick the toilet bowls, OK.'

'Sir, with pleasure.'

Trunch turned back to Alex, tears welling from the pain. 'Get out, you sickening twat.'

#

Stokes threw him into the classroom. Schoolmaster Broom, the history teacher, slapped him across the head for good measure. There were desks for thirty in the classroom, but over sixty boys were typically in each class, so even squeezing three into a desk for two, some had to sit on the floor. This was usually reserved for the dunces, who would pay no attention in any case, but being late, Alex was obliged to hunch down; he could not use his hands to help him sit. He picked a spot near Finn and, when Broom's back was turned to point out the battle sites on a map of India, Finn passed a piece of cold toast to Alex.

#

At lunchtime, a seething mass of boys descended on the refectory. Prefects marched up and

down with sticks, beating the crowd into a pandemonium which was nominally the queue for food. Since it was a Tuesday, there would be beef stew, meagre portions, but there was always plenty of bread. Alex's hands were still red raw, so he carried bread while Finn took two bowls. The tables would be overcrowded by the time all the boys were in, and finishing your own food would be a competitive sport, so the two found a quiet corner and squatted on the floor.

'Ow, my bloody hands,' said Alex as even the heat from the stew sent a fresh surge of pain up his arms.

'He got you good, eh?' said Finn, who was no stranger to Trunch's office. He was relatively new in the school, but was relishing a reputation as something of an oddball and troublemaker. His previous school, St Enda's in Rathfarnham, was apparently on the liberal side, and something of a hotbed of Fenianism. His Irish mother had sent him there, but she had died suddenly nearly two years before, and his father, an English officer, had wasted no time moving him to some place more suitable. Finn had covered up his grief with a sort of eccentric individuality. Finn and Alex had formed a friendship quickly; their fathers were both officers in a school that was predominantly the sons of privates and NCOs, and they could quickly become targets of somebody looking to take his frustrations out.

They sat in silence for a bit, shovelling stew, then Finn turned to him and said, 'Come, my friend, let us sup with the Queen?'

Alex looked at him, expecting some explanation but none followed. 'What in God's name are you on about?'

That brought a smile to Finn's face, like he'd scored some minor victory. 'Or going up with music, on cold starry nights, to sup with the Queen of the gay Northern Lights.' He pulled a dog-eared book out of his pocket with the title *Irish Fairy and Folk Tales*, by W. B.

Yeats. 'I only had this to read to pass the tedium of the so-called teachers. The rest of my books are in the Fever Room which a certain person made out of bounds last night.' Finn often used the Fever Room as his personal escape, huddling in there reading poetry. He kept a stock of books, mostly Yeats, hidden under a loose floorboard.

'So how come it's me that gets sent to Trunch, when you're the one reading Irish poets under the prefects' noses?' asked Alex.

'Well, that was going to be my question. What happened to you? Last night, you just screamed out.'

'Bad dream.'

'Must have been pretty bad.' Finn took his elbow and gave him a quizzical look. 'It was just a dream?'

'Yeah, no, nothing happened.' Tales were often whispered of prefects or masters with a predilection for boys, sometimes roaming the corridors at night looking for hapless victims. 'No, it was like a nightmare, except real, you know?'

'Not a clue. A nightmare, but real?'

'There was something different about it. I've had nightmares but this felt different. It couldn't be real, but it was. There was this bird. Except it wasn't a bird. It was something huge, and there was fire all over it, or lightning or something. And everybody was dead. It was a war, and everybody in the school was there and they were all just lying there slaughtered...'

'Jesus, Alex, relax.'

Alex realised his voice had been growing louder as he was immersed again in the terror. Some of the boys nearby had turned to look. Alex and Finn ate in silence again until communal attention drifted to a younger boy who had tripped and spilled his stew on an

angry prefect.

As the youngster was being thrashed to the enjoyment of all, a gang of boys took the opportunity to turf other boys off a table nearby so that they could sit together. Gangs were not discouraged by the schoolmasters, there was a sense that they might build esprit de corps, and a little competition and initiative was to be welcomed as good recruitment fodder for the army. This group, though, each had something of green on display, a slip of a ribbon, a badge peeping out of a pocket or hiding under their hats. Any kind of loyalty to Fenianism or any of the recently formed Volunteer groups was met with vicious retribution. The country might march in support of Home Rule, but in the walls of the school, only the King was to be saluted.

'What I don't get,' said Alex, 'is what's between you and those kids. The Volunteer gangs, you know. There's a whole bunch of them, and they seem to be as aggressive to you as the rest. I would have thought you would have some leeway with them, given your background?'

'Ah, you see, there's the Irish Volunteers, and the National Volunteers.'

'Oh, good God, now what the hell's the difference?'

'So, Redmond, MP with the Irish Party...'

'Heard of him.'

'Yeah, so he says to the Volunteers to go and join the army, fight the hun.'

'Seems reasonable.'

'And you get Home Rule as the reward, right? Except you have Carson and the Ulster Volunteers stockpiling guns and swearing they're going to fight any kind of moves.'

'Your lot brought in guns too, though? Wasn't there that thing in Howth?'

'Hardly a patch on what the Ulster folks brought in, and our boys got shot at. Anyway,

there's a bunch of folk think that we'll never get Home Rule, and maybe we want more than that anyway, you know, a Republic, like in France.'

'Good luck with that.'

'Maybe,' said Finn, 'but maybe while the English are busy, now is the time to strike for our freedom.'

'And you're one of those?'

'In fact,' said Finn, dropping his voice to a whisper, 'I'm in the Irish Republican Brotherhood.'

'Ah hell, I haven't even figured out the last two clubs and now you're in a third.'

'It's not a club, it's...well, just don't tell anybody I said that. So pretty much everybody in the school is in the National Volunteers, pro-Redmondite.'

'In fairness, Finn, their fathers are mostly off in France and Belgium fighting.'

'So, we all have to blindly follow whatever our fathers do?' said Finn with a note of annoyance. 'Maybe you need to start drinking heavily.'

One of the boys, a big thug by the name of Stevenson, pointed over at them, and several of the boys turned. It clearly wasn't a friendly gesture, but they turned back to their food again.

'It might do both of us good,' said Alex.

#

It was a long week. Stokes was assiduous in ensuring that Alex carried out his cleaning duties; the first couple of nights he even insisted that Alex actually lick the bowls of the toilets. After that, his cruelty sated, he lost interest, but Alex was taking no chances so did not stop cleaning till he knew he was safe. He was usually up scrubbing well after eleven while lights were put out in the dorm at nine. He was exhausted, and continued to sleep poorly,

haunted by the bird-demon and by hideous images of war, so that each morning he felt like a broken glass, edged and incomplete.

Stevenson and his gang of Volunteers cornered Finn in the hallways one night. Alex didn't get the full story, but Finn had to come in to the bathroom he was cleaning to wash the blood from his nose and eye. By the sounds of it, they had offered to let him in the gang, and from the look of it he guessed that Finn had been less than polite in his refusal.

The group began to target Finn, and by association Alex, with petty recriminations: peppering them with paper spit balls in class, tipping their food in the refectory, stealing the sheets off their beds. Alex knew to ignore such bullying, it was the only way to fight it, though he could not persuade Finn to be so passive, so the agitation continued.

Stevenson's gang began carrying out drilling exercises in the main yard during breaks, forming ranks and files, marching and turning. The school had no problem with it, after all, drilling was part of the curriculum. Somehow the school was also unaware of the nationalist leaning of the group, despite the ever present, though still quite surreptitious, 'wearing of the green' that they practised. With wooden rifle models borrowed from the gymnasium, they practiced moves that the Irish Volunteers had worked on before the war.

'I really can't see what the hell they are up to,' said Alex as they watched the formations from a safe distance one day. 'I mean, they're all for joining up and fighting for the King, yet they're risking expulsion or worse to pretend that they're Fenians or something.'

'Says the boy who wants to be an officer. What do you think you're going to be doing at Sandhurst or wherever you get to study? Drilling and killing, that's the army life.'

'I suppose, well, no. That's different. They're not following the orders of a teacher.'

'I guess they are following Stevenson's orders. Oh, look, who gives a damn, come with me.'

Finn pulled him off towards the chapel at the far end of the yard, though Alex knew he wasn't intending some midday prayer.

'Where are we going?'

'Oh, bit of a walk, breath of fresh air, that kind of thing.'

'I was going to ask you...' Alex started to say, then paused.

'Then you'd better bloody ask.'

'Christmas...'

'That's not a question,' Finn said.

'No, but your father, you see...'

'Not a question either. Come on down here.' He led Alex onto the path that ran between the chapel and one of the dorms.

'You might want to go home at Christmas, and, well, you said maybe your father would want you to stay here, and...'

'Look, spit it out.' Finn stopped and faced him. There was a darkness in his brow. He wasn't fond of his father, did not particularly like him mentioned in conversations, certainly not in a protracted manner.

'Would you come to my house? For Christmas? As a guest?'

Finn's face dropped to puzzlement, then curled into what seemed to be a dubious smile. 'Are you serious?'

'See, I don't want to interfere in your family...'

'My family, be damned. Since my mother, God rest her, was washed away by time's waters, the teachers at my old school were the closest thing I had to family, and I'm banned from seeing them.' He skipped away dancing. 'Oh, come away, human child, to the water and the wild.'

'Can I maybe take that as a yes?'

Finn stopped and put a mock serious look on. 'I'll think about it.'

They had arrived at the back of the chapel where there was a small copse of trees that ran down behind the dorms. There were a bunch of boys there ahead of them, and Alex realised they were smoking. While the teachers and prefects all smoked, they had to maintain a pretence that it was prohibited in the school in case the Salvation Army came to call. The smokers would find a place, out of the way, and would usually be left alone for a couple of months before the prefects would start to hound them and force them to move on. Apparently, this was the latest location.

'Ah, you're not smoking again?' said Alex.

'My boy, you must join me. It's a sensual pleasure.'

Finn laughed at him. He pulled out two cigarettes, crumpled from being twisted into his uniform sleeve. Both eyebrows twisted upwards, askew, and Alex could not help but smile. Finn took this as a sign and handed him one.

He then took a light from one of the other lurkers and held it out for Alex to light off. Not sure of himself, it took a few pulls to get it glowing. He was expecting to cough and splutter, like he had seen other first timers do. Instead, there was a feeling of something noxious and solid invading him, dragging sharp nails as he inhaled. Carefully he held it, then gently exhaled, pleased that he maybe looked like he knew what he was doing.

Suddenly, he was floating, a thing apart, his balance fell away yet he was steady, he was momentarily huge, towering over them, then tiny, lost in his clothes.

'Ho ho,' laughed Finn, 'going to your head, maybe?'

'Fortescue!' A couple of new boys had joined them, juniors, a year or two younger. They had been drilling with the Volunteers a minute earlier. The one shouting, Moran, a short

boy whose father had been killed in Ypres, was pointing his mock-rifle at them. 'Fortescue, what are you doing with that English tart?'

'Ah, Moran, you big nancy.' Finn was enjoying himself now, waving his cigarette about. 'You're obviously here to kiss your boyfriend on the quiet, don't let us stop you.'

'I'm warning you, Fortescue, I'm going to...'

'Yeah, you and your boyfriend? Or maybe your father, if he's not dead already in France...'

Alex wasn't sure why Finn was being so deliberately inflammatory. He was about to try to pull him out of the affray when Moran lost it. He swung the wooden mock-rifle over his head, but he was half a foot shorter than Finn who was able to unbalance him. Moran tumbled and Finn was on top of him, but the other Volunteer, Murphy, brought his own rifle butt slapping across Finn's face. There must have been a knot on the weapon; Finn's face opened and blood burst out.

Alex was reeling. The nicotine toxins flooded his veins. Eyesight narrowed, worlds dimmed and twisted as he tried to rescue his focus. Red, blood red descended, and a roar filled his ears. Looking up, his heart filled with dread.

Something huge descended upon him, bright, wrapped in sparking lightning. Vast talons ripped into flesh, tearing. He looked down at his hands. They were aglow, powerful. Without intending to, he walked towards Murphy. Alex pushed the boy backwards, sending him sprawling. Murphy came back at him, driving the point of the rifle at his eyes. Alex took the rifle and, with a mere gesture, reeled it from his grip and brought it down across his arm. Something cracked, not the stick. Murphy crumbled.

Smoke cleared. The spirit left him, screaming as it went, a thousand times worse than the scraping of smoke as it tore itself from him. Murphy lay on the ground, whimpering.

Stokes had appeared from nowhere and had Alex by the arm. There was a crowd about them, curious for trouble.

'You're going to be cleaning loos for a fucking year, Slane,' said Stokes.

Chapter 3: Ladysmith, Natal, October 1899

They lay like children in the tent, glorying in the closeness of each other. The smells, the touches, lingering fingers, the softness of skin; it was like their first time. They were a year married, but a month apart as they had made their separate ways to this fierce cauldron in Africa.

'You...I can't believe you're here,' Jimmy said.

'You hardly missed me, sure what are you talking about?' Maureen wiggled his nose playfully.

'Every morning without you was a heartache.'

'Is it a poet you are now? Sure, I can't have the lads in the platoon thinking my husband is some sort of nancy boy.'

'God, you're as bad. Can't a man just enjoy his wife.'

'Oh, Jimmy.' She kissed his chest, hungrily. 'You can enjoy what you want of me, because I'm going to enjoy the hell out of you.'

She kissed again and again, driving her face deep into his skin till it hurt. He pulled

her against him, twisted her on top, feeling the slightness of her form.

Soldier, warrior, savage. As he rolled with her, she sang songs that were ancient when men first walked in Ireland, the songs that spoke to the spirits of the Daoine Sídh. Slender tendrils touched their bodies, ice cold, fire hot. He was consumed by them, sucked into her world, overwhelmed. She caoined as they danced a step old as the birds, the making of life. Each time she sang that weirdling song, it pulled them both scattering through consciousness onto some divine plane. Twisting, writhing, touching spaces that lived only in the point where their souls met. Sweat, spit, sinew and muscle.

He lay exhausted, all good gone from him. She took from her travel bag two totems wrapped in leather, and tied them around his saturated neck. The first was a Crom Cruach, all bitter and tinny and ringing with ancient tones, the second a cross of silver, newly blessed by the bishop, happy on its bed beside the pagan relic.

'That my song may go with you,' she whispered. Then she lay beside him, and they slept.

#

He woke with a start, she with a scream. She twisted feverishly, raving, shouting stupid foreign words to some hidden ear. He held her but she slapped at him, writhed and rose up, then collapsed, and curled in on herself.

'What is it, what's wrong, my love?'

'Oh, Jimmy...'

She was crying, broad tears that chilled him.

'Maureen, what is it?' He tried to pull her over to him, to cuddle her, but she was intransigent.

'Oh, my heart,' she whispered. 'The world, sure isn't it changing.'

'Of course it is, my sweet. Aren't we half way to hell in this God-forsaken country?'

'No, Jimmy, the whole world. Something is coming. It's... I can't see it, but it's awful. Oh, Jesus, no...'

Maureen's people spoke to the land and listened to its spirit. Her unholy song had awoken its voice. He knew that she was only a vessel into which the manifestation of the world poured, but he did not understand. He spooned around her and held her.

The evening bugle sounded eventually, so that he had half an hour till he had to report in. His uniform was washed and ironed but he had not eaten.

'Will you make me my tea?' he asked gently as he dressed, but she did not respond. He drank cold tea from the pot she had made earlier, and ate two rounds of bread with no butter.

He kissed her again when he was done.

'Will you not come to see me out?' he said, both angry and desperately sad.

'It will all change!' she gasped.

He left, feeling empty despite the passion.

#

Outside the technicolor tent, the world was grey. The grey clay turned to sticky grey mud in the twice a day thunderstorms only to be baked back to clay under the unforgiving Natal sun. Khaki uniforms had been turned dun by the dust, all hint of pomp or rank concealed in the grimness of modern war. The sky darkened as the sun plunged below the horizon awfully quickly, close to the equator, Drummond had said. They had joined up together, they were both in training along with Maureen's brother Seánin, and they had quickly become buddies, but Drummond had been in the merchant navy, knew something of the world, and had no fear of the fighting to come.

Jimmy was less ready. True, the army had taught him to cope with anything: put one foot in front of the other and, when the sergeant screams, you obey. No need to think, no reason for worry; just do as you're told and you'll be OK.

This was different though. A hundred thousand Boers, by some accounts, were riding towards them with Mauser rifles in their hands and hatred in their hearts. For the first time, Jimmy would face the reality of fighting. As he stopped to light a cigarette, his hand was shaking; he had to hold his wrist with the other hand to steady it.

The platoon were all getting back from their furlough, an afternoon's ease before the dread of war, half of them staggering, drunk. They slipped into their tents quickly, but then Fusilier O'Reilly, a deep-throated tenor, began a round of "The Wearing of the Green", and the troops, warmed by whatever wretched distillation they had managed to buy, could not help but join in. In moments, the whole camp was roaring.

Two minutes later they were on the parade ground in their long-johns; Sergeant Tully was screaming. It got cold fast once the sun went down. They were left standing for twenty minutes, until they were all shivering.

Lieutenant Trunch marched onto the parade ground. His khaki fatigues were ironed to a crisp crease, his broad moustache waxed as was the habit among the English officers.

'Sergeant Tully, report please.'

'Sir, it has come to my attention that a number of men of this unit have been drinking, sir.' Tully was a big man from Offaly, good in a rumble, but he could turn on you without a qualm.

'Drinking?' Trunch raised his eyebrows in surprise, a little game to prefix the brutality they knew would soon come. 'Remind me, Sergeant, did I not express directly this morning that drinking was forbidden?'

'Indeed you did, sir.'

'And why?'

'We march to war tomorrow, sir.'

'To war!' Trunch walked slowly across the platoon rank. 'To war. I give you slimy worms a rest before your first ever turn to serve Her Majesty in the manner to which you have been trained, and you repay me by directly disobeying a clear order. You fucking paddies. Fucking drunken useless paddies. Jesus,' he looked to the heavens, 'why have you cursed me with this?'

He walked quickly back along the file, tapping every fifth man on the shoulder, 'that one, that one, that one...'

Eight in all, Jimmy was the last.

'Sergeant, have each of those men whipped, ten lashes, and dock every man in One Platoon a week's pay. The rest of you, crawl back to your tents and pray God you die tomorrow, 'cause that's all you're fucking good for.'

Thirty men dropped to their hands and knees and crawled away, eight stood stoically awaiting punishment, innocent and guilty alike. The pain was fierce, but the waiting was worse. Even Drummond cried out when his turn came, while Jimmy stood cold and shaking and alone.

#

Sergeant Tully slapped at the tents at a quarter to five, and the whole platoon was dressed and presented on parade to raise the Union flag at five. Fuslier Drummond, who was no stranger to punishment, had been one of those subjected to the lashing. He groaned as he had to pull on his pack, but he knew better than to hold back from taking the load.

'You OK?'

'Like fuck, I am. Don't know which is worse, my head or my back. That spirit they make here is bleeding lethal.'

Drummond showed him how to roll up his blanket and balance the pack on it so the weight of it didn't fall on the scars on their backs.

There was no time for Reveille or breakfast as they marched straight to the railway station and were loaded onto cattle wagons. Hot tea was handed into them as the train began to pull out of Ladysmith, heading north. Jimmy looked out at the sea of tents, hoping in vain he might catch a glimpse of her coming to see him off.

#

The war began, as so many things do, with a bang, an innocent explosion in the midst of the troops that blew the head off an artillery mule. The platoon had been shipped out by cattle wagon before dawn, ten miles north to the mining town of Glencoe where the rest of the army was gathered. There had been sightings of riders on distant hills that had driven the camp into a state of some anxiety. Nobody knew if the Boers had the heart for an attack or if the sight of the army ready for war would scatter them, or if they might try to slip past towards Ladysmith. When the mule died, the speculation was over.

Military organisation kicked in. Sergeants shouted, officers blew whistles, drummers rattled out a rhythm for the units to form up. The Boers had managed to haul some small guns onto a nearby hilltop, though they were too few and small to be decisive and the English howitzers were soon in play.

The order of battle: first, the artillery, pound the blighters back to hell. Then, the infantry march in close-order, boots pounding, scare the holy terror out of them and then, as they turn yellow and run for their mothers, the cavalry canter through and mow them down like a field of nettles. Talana hill was to be the battleground, three hundred feet high and flat

topped, two miles from Glencoe.

The rhythm of the marching was a blessed relief from listening to the smacks of the artillery with British guns thumping and Boer shells cracking death anywhere at any moment. It helped not to think about what was ahead, to simply let the muscle memory from endless hours of drilling guide their feet.

The rain greeted them with its cooling touch, heavy enough that Jimmy felt it trickling like a salve down the still aggressive abrasions on his back. The track became mud and then a thick ooze that you had to pull your feet out of as the troops in front pounded it.

There was a farm at the foot of the hill with a large, walled orange grove. The Royal Dublin Fusiliers were marched in and directed to form very close order at the wall. Suddenly from above, out of the grey wet hillside, came a hideous storm of rifle fire. They could not see their attackers, only the grass and mud splatting up as the bullets thwacked into the ground. Jimmy ran for the shelter of the wall.

'Form up,' shouted Tully. 'Come on, you bastards.' He started pulling at men, dragging them out of the lee of the wall, towards a gate that led onto the slope.

Fusilier Cummins was hit and went down foaming.

'Medic!'

'Jesus, Mary and Joseph,' said Jimmy. 'Did you see that? The poor fucker.'

'Christ, look what's coming now,' said Drummond, pointing to a half dozen men on horses, approaching. There was an ensign with a pennant. 'It's only the fucking general.'

They rode up to the wall, ignoring the enfilade.

'Who's in charge here?' shouted the general.

'That's me, sir,' said Trunch.

'Why aren't you up the hill? My plan says you should be up the hill.'

'Just forming up, sir.'

Tully was still trying to pull men to their feet. Even three platoon, next to them, who were all hardened combat veterans, were showing no enthusiasm for the ascent.

'Hell and damn it,' said the general. 'You want something done...'

The general climbed off his horse and drew his sword.

'Right, let's take this fucking hill.'

He ran through the gate, waving the sword and screaming. Three platoon found their battlefield legs and followed, howling.

Trunch blew his whistle. 'Get up that hill, you fuckers.'

One platoon, all first timers, did not move, each waiting on the others to start.

'Right,' said Trunch. He pulled out his service revolver, put it to the head of Fusilier Murphy and pulled the trigger.

Murphy went down like a sack of spuds, half the platoon were spattered with bits of him.

'Who's fucking next?' As Trunch waved the gun around, they scrambled to their feet and through the gate. Up the hill, running. Spang. Bullets whirring. Men everywhere, running, falling.

They passed the general coming down, clutching painfully at where black stains spread across the khaki from his belly. 'Carry on, men.'

The clay was slippery; Jimmy lost his footing in the cut up sludge. He stood back up, black with mud.

Above him, somebody fell, yelling, 'Fuck, fuck, fuck.'

A body barrelled down the hill past him. Gouts of hot blood sprayed Jimmy's face. Wetness dripped into his eyes. He wiped, smeared blood and rain.

From somewhere, the wail of a piper, the ancient music of war. Soldier, warrior, savage. As he ran, the rhythm twisted him. Writhing in time, foaming with the blood lust. Kill them, kill the fuckers. Maureen curled up. Oh, Christ and His Holy Mother, no!

Thud, thud, boot before boot. A hundred thousand years, man before man, woman before woman, while Maureen was singing and he was thrusting. Thud. And the whole world was spinning. Thud. And the Sídh and Christ Almighty were swinging from the thong around his neck. Thud. And one by one, the seven trumpets of the apocalypse were sounding. Thud. Bullets like metal cables twanging. Thud thud thud.

He ran, uphill, lungs burning, eyes burning. He could not see where he was going. Boots in front. Follow those. Stay low.

Thud. And Maureen, splayed across the world, the great mother, Síle na Gee.

The ground levelled out. Following boots into trenches.

'Where the fuck are...'

'They're over there,' screamed Tully. 'Fire at will.'

More trenches, the far side of the hill top. Spinning lead. And the shells, the bloody English shells still falling between them. Thunder and lightning, the music of hell, the devil was loose in the world.

Jimmy dived with the rest. The trench was shallow, hastily dug, water soaked. Thick mud dragged at his boots. Drummond was beside him.

'What about you, Jimmy, head down now.'

'This is shit, Drummond.'

Jimmy fired into the smoke, the empty, soulless enemy.

'Drummond, have you more ammo?' he yelled.

'Where now?' came a shout from the left.

'Drummond, have you ammo?'

'They've fucking gone again,' another shout. The shooting was dying off. 'They're riding away.'

'For fuck's sake. Drummond?'

Jimmy turned to his friend, but found him face down in the mud. He stood and lifted him, a dead weight, turned him over. There was a hole in Drummond's face, and the life had leaked out of it.

'Ah fuck...fuck. Medic. Shit, medic.' Jimmy screamed, he called, but there was no medic. It made no difference. Drummond was dead. The lashes on his back would hurt no more, God rest him all road ever he offended.

He looked around. There was a scatter of bodies on the hillside. Men lay groaning. There was a thick mud of dirt and blood and vomit and worse. A dark smell, indescribable, hung over the hilltop like a curse.

#

When the fighting was done, the digging started. Graves and trenches. He spoke prayers into Drummond's ears as they laid him in the wet hole.

'I'll tell your mammy,' he said. 'I'll tell her you died killing Boers, saving lives. I'll tell her you died clean, on a sun-splashed battlefield...'

General Symons was wounded, bullet in the belly, a terrible wound that would likely kill him. Half the officers lay dead. The cavalry had been misplaced, rumour was they had run into the main Boer column and had surrendered.

It was a victory, they were told, but as Jimmy shovelled wet clays onto his friend's face, it did not feel like victory to him. As dusk came down, Jimmy lit a cigarette, his muddy, blood-raked hand steady now. He stared out over the dark expanse, over a world that had

changed forever, towards Ladysmith.

He was exhausted, numb, saturated by mud, rain and blood. Trunch reappeared, screaming like a demon.

'Get the fuck up, you horrible little men. Close order. Now.'

He did not think his muscles would still move, but they did. The men of three platoon, ten men fewer than this morning, formed up close order on the hilltop. Off to the north, a shadow oozed across the dimming landscape. At first, Jimmy thought this some kind of illusion, but as he watched he realised it was people. There must have been tens of thousands of men on horses, with lines of carts following them.

'Oh, Jesus, Lord, protect me this day,' he prayed. 'Maureen, I love you.'

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