

Life

Roscommon Gaol, Connacht, Ireland

1807

They say I killed my son. That's why I'm here. My other boy died still a babe. We buried him on the road. I couldn't tell you where now. All I know is that the fields were sparse and lumpy, and there was a tree - I remember that - a large oak tree. We left him there, barely a hands breadth of earth above him, a broken little sparrow of a thing.

We'd sat a while after that, Pdraig and myself. He climbed into my lap. I stroked his head, wisps of hair coming away in my hand. There were blotches on his skin and his breath was as foul as a slops pot. I cursed my dead husband.

He'd been older than me. Already two wives buried by the time we married. He had some land though, a few cattle. Still, I'd go limp when he'd crawl in beside me, pretend to be asleep.

He remembered the great hunger of the forties. It made him mean. He caught me once, throwing potato water to the pigs. I remember the smell mostly - the heavy stench of rotten grain - as he pushed my face into the swilling mush.

I was glad when he died. He'd left instructions for his wake with the priest. And coin enough for a decent send-off. I drank and ate and keened until my stomach bulged and my eyes grew raw with effort.

The sheriff's men arrived a few days later. We were to leave, no rent in months. I begged, pulled at a booted leg. I'd sell the cattle. Kill the pigs. Not enough, he'd said, kicking me to the ground. A crowd had gathered. Someone pulled the childer off me. Get up, Betty, c'mon now, gather a few bits before they knock the place to the ground. I might have

moved, tried to stand, but I was on my knees when the thatch went up.

We stayed the night in a barn. We slept in ditches, only the dark above us.

I'd saved a small cooking pot from the house - 'twas all I could carry with Seamus tucked against me, crying and moping for the breast – and a small knife. I made broth from nettles, mushrooms and things. I'd send Padraig to find milk. But it was never enough, the little bit he got. Seamus stopped crying after a while. But his head would hang funny, and he'd look through me.

We weren't long on the road when he died. I didn't notice 'til I felt a chill on my neck, it getting cold without the scrap of his breath again it. I said nothing, just kept on walking.

The leaves of the oak tree were ruby, like crushed velvet. Up close they were thin and veiny, like the back of my hands. I put Seamus down, started clawing at the earth. Padraig helped me. We didn't speak.

We covered the ground with as many of the fallen leaves as we could find, just to soften the look of it. I scratched some swirls into the bark. Then we slept.

We were heading north. I took to carrying Padraig for a bit. He didn't stop me. I washed his feet at night, after I'd stuck his blisters with the hot blade of my knife. We kept to the river. I knew where I was going now.

My husband had a son, up in Roscommon somewhere. Owen, his name was. They hadn't gotten on - my husband used to curse him - so I guessed he might be alright. He'd gone back to his mother's kin after she died. My own parents were dead. I could think of nothing else.

We had water aplenty. We'd try to wash, but we only had the clothes on our backs. I could smell the growing sweetness of our stench. It drew the midges. They'd rise in a cloud at evening, coming off the river. In your ears they'd get, or down your neck or in your hair, and drive you mad with itch. I don't know how Pdraig did his bit of fishing, the way they swarmed about him. But he'd stand, still as a heron, not moving 'til something flashed in the water beneath him.

There'd be evening's too he'd get nothing. And I'd have to call him, 'cos he'd go into a sort of a trance and I was afeard he'd vanish into the greyness that fell with the dusk, and be gone from me too.

But he stayed with me, my silent boy, though his flesh shrank and tightened around him, and his eyes grew large and dull.

The road got busier as we moved away from the lake. We passed a few scattered cabins. There was a smell in the air - thick and meaty like a herd of cattle - that turned my stomach. The broken walls of a castle rose in the distance. Plumes of turf smoke dirtied the sky. I stopped, not wanting to get too close with the night nearly on top of us. There was a lane ahead, a narrow turning off the road.

'Twas there we found it. A knocked-asunder little place. But it had a roof, of sorts, and four walls, and a door that limped on its hinges, and that air of neglect that told me that there'd be nobody looking to turn us out.

I roamed the inns and the streets looking for Owen. They'd look at me with narrowed eyes, the innkeepers, and the market sellers, ask me to repeat myself, that they couldn't understand the quickness of my speech. And they'd shake their heads and turn away and

that was all I'd get.

As the days passed and seeing as we needed some ways to make a living, I did the only thing I could. I still had my figure, and my long dark hair and most of my teeth. The men didn't care how the cabin looked, and with the bit of coin, myself and Padraig set to making it right. I bought a few candles, cups and plates and things, some rolls of cloth. We gathered rushes to fill the gaps in the thatch and made some daub with clay and straw to patch the walls.

There were days Padraig would disappear. He'd return with bits and pieces, tools and the like, some coin, a bird or two for the pot. I'd never ask. He wouldn't tell me anyway.

I watched him grow into a quiet young man, with shadowed eyes and a crumpled brow.

I started to taking in lodgers. I was getting too old for the other thing.

I should have known with the last one though. He wasn't the usual sort. His breeches alone were worth a pretty penny; silk, I think, over a fine pair of leather boots. And his coat, a drenched red velvet thing, that nearly took the strength o' my arm when he handed it to me. And there were flecks of gold in his waistcoat, primrose yellow swirls of it, and a full pouch on his belt. He was bearded, but young enough behind it. He'd gotten caught in the storm, needed a bed for the night, and he'd stepped past me afore I had thought or time to think about it.

I was readying the room when a hand caught me about the head, pulling my throat back. I could feel the blade against the tight stretch of my skin, the wet heat of his breath in my ear. Padraig, he'd whispered, where is he? Where's the thieving bastard? I tried to reach for the knife in my pouch, but he had me pulled so tight against him, that I couldn't move. I could smell him - the damp, musk smell of him - feel the weight of his body against me, the

scratch of whiskers on my cheek. I couldn't think. I just hung there like a landed trout, face to the heavens, mouth open, trying to force the swallow down the bend in my neck. He pressed harder on the blade. But I couldn't speak. I wouldn't anyway. I closed my eyes and thought of my boys.

He let go all of a sudden. I stumbled, fell again the wall. There was scuffling, wet, sucking sounds, then nothing. When I looked up Padraig was standing there, blood dripping onto the rushes from the knife in his hand.

I knew I'd never see him again after that. I told him listen, made him help me as we undressed the dead man. I cleaned the blood off the waistcoat with some salt and water. The clothes were a good enough fit. There was coin aplenty in the pouch. I told him make for Galway, take ship to wherever he could get.

I held him one last time. He was stiff in my arms. Part of him was gone you see, left behind on the road, maybe beneath that oak tree with little Seamus. But I held him for as long as he let me, and there was a bit of softness in his eyes as he turned away.

I gathered his clothes, buried my face for a moment in his woollen tunic, then sat with a cup of poitín. The cabin was still cold and drab, despite our efforts. Yet as I sat there I was sickened for what I was about to lose. I pulled the cloak about me. I'd sit for another while, before seeing to the dead man.

I walked to town the next day. Told the Justice what I'd done. Killed my son, I said, he'd turned on me -on account of the drink- and I'd stuck him.

They believed me. The hearing was quick. People shouted and cursed and spat. I'd said

that I'd done it, so there was nothing to prove. And yet when they passed the sentence of death, I couldn't help but feel sorry for myself, though I didn't cry or beg for my life like some of them.

There was over two dozen of us to be hanged together. We stood a long time, waiting for it to be over, 'til a constable came out and shouted for someone to help with the hangings. The crowd surged and bayed for blood, but no-one had the nerve, so I shuffled forward. I'll do it, I said, 'til the hangman's found. The constable looked at me, then back to the crowd. He blew through his moustaches and scratched his head. The crowd roared and jeered. He had no choice really.

He took off my shackles, and showed me the bolt to release the trapdoor. The first prisoner struggled as he was pulled forward. I tried not to look at him, but then I needed to see, to remember. 'Twas the least I could do. He spat at me as the noose was placed around his neck. My fingers fumbled as I pulled the bolt, but it slid back with ease, and he was gone.

Twenty and four people I hanged that day. And plenty since. I draw them on my walls with a bit of charcoal from the fire, to remember like, so as they won't be forgotten.

I got to keep my life. But the only time I get to feel the wind on my face or the sun on my skin is when I'm at the scaffold.

I think about Padraig; if he ever made anything of his life.

This is it for me. I'll probably be buried here, unmarked, forgotten. But I write this so people might know that we weren't bad people.

I'll go to bed now. I'm tired.

There's more hangings to be done tomorrow.

The Chief Constable watched the paper burn. One of the guards had found it in her room.

History would record the death of Lady Betty, Hangwoman, in the year 1807, a most vile and treacherous woman.

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