

The Soldier's Song

Written by Ciaran English

'Mairead! Seán's coming up the road with some other fella!'

I remember well how my brother's cry started me awake. I don't actually know what hour of the night it was. I just had it in my head that it must have been the witching hour. There was something off about the way my brother was shouting. I got a bad feeling off it. Years later, when myself and Tomás finally talked about what happened, we put it down to it being one of our 'twin things.' You might call it foolish of us to believe in such tales, but, in my experience, I've found that we know too little about the world we live in for us to say that anything is impossible. Life is full of unexpected happenings and, that night, it wasn't just some other fella my eldest brother Seán brought into our house.

'Some other fella?' Mairead called out.

'Yeah,' Tomás confirmed. 'He's drunk I'd say.'

'Seán is? Or the fella?'

'Too hard to see. They're both walking funny though.'

‘Go down to Mícheál, will ya?’ I heard my sister say, ‘He’ll be wondering what all your shouting’s over.’

‘I wasn’t shout-’

‘Just go to him.’

The speed at which Tomás ran down our little hall had me on the edge of our little bed before he came in the door.

‘Mícheál?’ He called from the door.

‘Tomás, what’s happening with Seán?’

‘He’s coming up the road and there’s some other fella with him!’

‘And what’s the-’

‘Shh! They’re coming in, now.’

The door creaked open and, with me believing in it being the witching hour and the sense I was getting from Tomás, I imagined that all the banshees, fairies, and púcas Aunt Kathleen told us about were sneaking in the door after Seán and the other fella. I heard someone stumble, and another person coughed. The rapid bodhrán beat of my heart felt like it shook the room.

‘Help me get him up on the table, Mairead.’ Seán’s voice was a hoarse murmur.

‘Seán,’ Mairead whispered good and sharp. ‘You can’t be bringing a man into the house like this would ya look at the cut of him.’

‘He’s been hurt, Mairead. He’s been shot.’

‘Jesus Christ,’ I was stunned to hear our Mairead curse like that. ‘Sure, what are we supposed to do?’

‘We’ll try help him is what we’ll do now come on and get him up on the table.’

Chairs were moved around. There was a bang without warning and I felt Tomás jump like it was the very shot Seán spoke of.

‘Mairead?’ He called.

More shuffling, no response.

‘Mairead?’ He went again.

‘Tomás, just mind your brother,’ she answered, ‘and stay below in the room.’

I knew Tomás wouldn’t like that. Even when we were that young, Tomás had to know all the goings on. Now, that’s not to say he’s one to stick his srón into everything. My brother only needs to know because he cares about the people involved and he worries if he’s not in the know. Of course, on that night he was getting worried when we were below in the room because he was as blind as myself on an ordinary day – desperate to see what was occurring in our kitchen.

There was another spluttering cough before an unfamiliar voice said:

‘Who’s here? No one can...’

‘No one can know you’re here,’ Seán finished. ‘You’ve said it enough times.’

‘Who’s home?’

‘Tis only the twins, Tomás and Mícheál, and they’re small,’ our brother assured. ‘Mairead here’s my sister. Now, let’s get you up on the table.’

‘Parents?’

‘Our father left to make sure his brother’s family is safe. They’re not far from Kilmallock. I’d say he won’t be back for a few days yet. Mairead looks after the house and the boys since Mam died.’

‘And the boys?’ The man wheezed.

‘Tomás will keep quiet if we tell him to. Mícheál doesn’t talk all that much and I wouldn’t worry about him describing ya.’

‘He’s blind,’ I heard Mairead explain bluntly.

Tomás tightened his grip on my hand at that.

There was a ‘one, two, three’ and the man must have finally been laid out on the table as planned because the movement from the kitchen sounded surer of itself and was less staggered. My brother and sister pulled drawers open from cupboards and presses around the room. I could make out the sound of metal – probably whatever tools they thought might be needed – hit the table. The smell of poitín wafted down the hall like a spectre come to haunt us and a part of me wished it was only a drunk man going to sleep on our

table for the night but, young as I was, I was old enough to know that wish would stay a wish.

‘Seán,’ Mairead said. ‘How are you going to go about this?’

‘Am...’ Seán paused, ‘well, make sure he has enough of that.’

‘The poitín,’ Tomás whispered.

‘See the bullet? I can pull it out look, d’ya think?’ Seán continued in the kitchen. ‘Then, Mairead, you’ll have to stitch him up.’

‘I what?’

‘Sure I haven’t a clue of doing stitches. You do.’

There was no sound for a moment.

‘The man will die if we don’t help him,’ Seán said firmly.

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The following morning, Tomás shook me awake. Mairead and Seán must have gone to sleep a while. Before Tomás even said a word, I knew exactly what he had planned. I knew because my restless dreams were plagued by the same thoughts as my twin’s.

‘Come on, Mícheál,’ he whispered. ‘We’ll go down to the shot man, will we?’

We knew better than to bother with any footwear from previous experience. Daddy heard us going out the back one time before: when we’d planned to catch a banshee the night after Mrs. O’Shea died. He said everyone

down in Cork could have heard Tomás grunting to put his shoes on he was so loud. Well, if Daddy didn't hit right cracks over the backs of our heads that night, and we knew too well neither Seán nor Mairead would stop before doing the same while Daddy was gone. Barefoot was our safest option.

I crept after Tomás down the hall and into the kitchen. By the time we got to the doorway, I could tell the man was laid out on the ground somewhere on the other end of the room. The man smelled of sweat, blood, and drink. Mairead must have given him Daddy's blankets because I smelled them too.

'Where's he hurt?' I breathed.

'Leg I'd say,' Tomás whispered, 'The blankets have his blood on 'em.'

'Daddy won't like that.'

We leapt in fear to hear the soldier on the floor groan at that, 'I doubt he'd like knowing he's got two invasive boys under his roof either.'

'He's awake.'

'Of course, I'm awake, lads,' the soldier growled. 'I've just had a bullet pulled from me leg and there's not a drop of poitín left for me.'

'Does it hurt?' Tomás wheezed.

There was another groan from the soldier, 'Jesus Christ. Are all young lads in Limerick as thick as the pair of ye?'

Neither of us said a word back but I knew my brother would be angered by his remarks.

‘Ah, I’m coddling ya,’ the soldier coughed. ‘Ye twins ye are? What age are ye?’

‘Six,’ Tomás mumbled.

‘Be glad you’re blind for once, lad,’ he then said to me, ‘that you don’t have to see a man dying on your kitchen floor.’

‘Are you dying?’ I asked.

The soldier didn’t answer.

‘Our Mam’s dead,’ Tomás said.

There was a stirring from one of the other rooms and the sound of heavy feet.

‘Tomás. Micheál. Leave your man alone will ye?’ Seán was shouting as his footsteps got closer.

The soldier moaned and spluttered on the floor.

‘Jesus Christ, lads. Have ye nothing better to be doing than bothering this fella? He’s in no form to be putting up with either of ye.’

Seán must have found some water for him nearby because next I heard the man gulping and swallowing and I started imagining him being like a bucket with a hole in it leaking everywhere. I wondered if Mairead’s stitches

would hold if the man kept drinking so much water or would they burst and have a mixture of blood and fluid on our kitchen floor?

‘Thanks,’ the soldier gasped when he finished. ‘Now, come here, have ye any music in the house?’

‘Music?’

‘Any instruments like?’ He asked, ‘I should like to play somethin’ before I die.’

‘There’s a fiddle over there,’ Tomás was saying, ‘and we never heard anyone play it. It was Mam’s.’

‘A fiddle? Sure, that’d be perfect. Bring it here for me will ya?’

A moment later and the soldier was sussing out the strings on Mam’s fiddle. I was worried then. The whole thing was mad. A few hours ago the man had been bleeding all over our kitchen not wanting to be known and now he was sat up in a chair ready to play a song. I knew Mairead was sure to come down to add to Seán’s complaining and my beliefs were soon confirmed.

‘Tomás and Mícheál, I shoulda known ye’d be sneaking off down here and couldn’t trusted down in the room ‘til morning,’ she descended the hallway despairing.

‘Ah, ‘tis morning enough by now miss,’ the soldier spoke for us, ‘and the boys only wanted to hear a song.’

‘A song in your state? Are ya mad?’

‘A dying soldier’s wish it is,’ he argued. ‘To play my song before I go.’

‘The soldier can play his song,’ Seán gave in after some thought, ‘and then he can go. We can do no more for him.’

The soldier began to play and the world as I knew it changed forever as the unexpected took control. I cannot describe what happened in any other way except that I *saw* the soldier’s song. It was fantastic. The music flooded my head with pictures and they told a story. Not like the stories I was used to hearing – the ones people told to scare children into behaving. No, not like them. But the moving pictures, the shock of my sudden sight, and the truth of it all scared me ever more so.

The merry tune introduced the light of the sun shining down on farms and castles alike. Small children were listening close to an elderly lady telling a story. Young men and women were dancing at a crossroads. I felt Tomás move warily beside me. He knew the song was doing something to me, but he never could have known what I was seeing and it wasn’t until decades later that I explained my experience of that morning.

The song started to change tone then and it began to lose its joy. Young lads went from hurling in the fields to go to work and they got next to nothing in return. A little girl was praying beside a cross stuck in the ground. I saw families starving and holes being dug. People were getting on boats never to

return and I saw many of those not making it to land ever again at all as the fiddle wailed on like a banshee.

The soldier started playing the strings faster and the pictures I was seeing matched its violent pace as they became aggressive flashes in my head. A man was standing in front of an angry crowd. Then an explosion. A woman was screaming. Guns were firing out of windows onto the street. A house was on fire. Armies were stood in their uniforms with their rifles aimed at the enemy, waiting for commands. Women were imprisoned and men were executed. A soldier saw his brother go down as he took a bullet in the leg. He crawled some distance under cover and waited. A young man came across him at night and offered to help. There was a terrified family, but they helped all the same and the soldier was grateful.

As the soldier's song slowed I saw the rubble of a building destroyed. In the midst of the ruin, I saw a broken harp. I imagined it was a beautiful thing before but I saw it there in front of my eyes with broken strings. Whoever had loved that harp was either dead or had long forgotten about it. The soldier's song finished and the pictures were gone as fast as they had come. Darkness returned to my world.

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I only ever got to see the song one more time. The soldier didn't die in our kitchen and he ended up staying a little longer than we'd expected. Seán

and Mairead did their best to care for the man. Seán would even stay up 'til all hours talking with him. Daddy came home and himself and Seán had an argument. I cannot remember what was said but I remember Tomás telling me that Seán and the soldier had gone back up the road the same way they'd come in a few nights before. Daddy didn't talk about Seán again after that.

It was at Seán's funeral half a year later when I saw the song again. Mairead brought the fiddle with us. She said she'd a 'feeling' that the soldier would be there – and her feeling wasn't wrong. None of us said a word about what happened when he'd been under our roof. He only played and we listened – and I saw the music again. That time the pictures had changed a little and instead of a broken harp, I knew what I was seeing was my brother Seán laid down at the bottom of a hill with a bloody circle in his forehead.

I don't know whether it was the fiddle or the soldier that was responsible for me seeing the song. I don't think the answer to that question is important. Both of them are lost and it was a long time ago now but I do remember them. I don't know what side of the war my brother fought in and I don't think that answer is important either but I remember him. I've travelled all over as best I could in search of that song. I've heard poems, stories, and ballads in all the corners of Ireland.

Maybe it's been in front of me – beyond the blind man's sight. Or maybe it follows me, like how I imagined those myths coming in after my brother and the soldier all those years ago.