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OF RARE AND CURIOUS DESIGN

Down came the snow, white upon white, and white again; a blanket of frozen fleece between all sound and the scarf wrapped ears of the people of Dublin.

Only in the ever-beating heart of the city had the ice been scraped away from the walking stones, and the click-clack-click of the hurrying heels rapped sharply through the Yule-Tide evening.

Like a sentinel, stood the streetlamp on the corner, its gas light glow reaching outward, forming silver shards of faint colour, a glowing halo through the darkening day.

Domnall O'Corrain uncoiled his frozen fingers, cramped now for many hours over the great love of his life. Roisin Dubh, the Black Rose, sat silent now upon his lap, her last song still faintly ringing upon the air.

“’Tis far too cold for music this late in the day” Domnall mumbled to his harp. Out of the crumpled leather bag at his feet, the old man pulled a patchy woolen cloth, wrapped it about his instrument and slowly rose from his stool in the corner shelter. His corner it was today, leaning against a flight of stony stairs which reached into the mouth of one of the city’s finest halls. The outcropping afforded at least some meager shelter.

“Och”, he cried as his ancient bones complained of the change of angle. Sore as he was, he reached for the bag and the small tin plate he had set beside it.

“Only two coins, and but one of them mattering “he lamented out loud.
“Whatever shall we tell our Muirne?”

Putting the coins in his pocket, the bag on his shoulder, and tucking the three-legged stool beneath his arm, he lifted the small, covered harp to his breast.

“Come Dubh, home it ‘tis.”

He did not have to walk far this evening, a blessing to his stiff old bones. By the time he had reached the Jumbled Muse and climbed the long and creaky stairway up to his little room over the print shop, he could hardly direct one shoe in front of the other. Setting the harp down just long enough to pull at the old iron handle on

the door, he sighed in expectation of the welcoming warmth that was sure to be his in a moment's breath.

The door swung open, but all was dark within. Only the brief glow of a single candle lit his way inside. "Domnall, it 'tis you, is it?" The edge on his sister's voice gave way when he stepped inside the small circle cast by the lighted tallow. Up she looked at him, her dark eyes still bright in a face bound now with fine feathery lines, like sparrows' feet on a new field of snow. Silver tendrils of hair that once shone like a sable's pelt curled around her cheeks, and as Domnall reached to brush one tenderly aside, he felt the damp.

"Tears Muirne?" he questioned. "Oh Domnall, we've used the last of the wood for the stove. And I've naught but this spare piece of dried cheese for your supper. It will be sore cold tonight. Whatever shall we do?"

Domnall reached around the back of the chair and pulled her old maroon shawl up to her chin. "Din'a always watch o're ya Muirne? We'll make do, we will so."

When had he first said those words? It seemed now a lifetime ago. He recalled so easily the day of his parents' funeral; the cold gray wind racing over the hills behind the cottage. He remembered stepping out into the road a week later, the sunlight warming Rosin Dubh upon his back and himself ready to make his way in the wide world. Halfway down the lane, just at the turn where the hollyhocks hid the view of the high bell tower of the parish church, he had heard her.

"Domnall," she called, running up the lane behind him. "Don't leave me behind. Domnall. I'll follow ye, I will so!" He swung his little sister up in his arms and pressed her close. "Alright then, though I dare say the good Sisters will no like ye traipsing' about the land with naught but a harpers luck fer yer supper. But do'na worry Muirne, we'll make do, we will so." And they had, ever since.

She looked up at him as she had then, eyes still bright with love and trust. "Well then", she said, "You'd best eat this cheese, so you'll have the strength to play tomorrow."

Domnall thrust his hands into his pockets and pulled out the two coins. "See Muirne, just a bit more and we'll have enough for more wood. Tomorrow I'll be home with bread and potatoes and a carrot or two for soup, you'll se." "And so I will" She said.

Morning came with a bitter fierceness, born of wind driven sleet. Its sound woke the old couple, huddled together near the water pipe, faintly warmed as it led downward on the wall to the print shop below.

Domnall rose stiffly and slowly stretched out his hands. Old fingers creaked and knots slowly unwound from the cramped clutch of the one blanket they had between them.

“Ye canna go on such a morn as this.” He turned at Muirne’s soft whisper. “I must me old dear, or we shall’na eat. Besides, look now, ‘tis beginning to clear.”

Muirne leaned to the small dark window and brushed the film away from its face with the edge of her sleeve. Indeed, the sleet had stopped, but the sky was still the colour of cold, grey, iron against the jagged outline of the roofs which faced them.

“Maybe so” she said. “But it could turn fast upon ye. Don’t be goin’ too far today. Ye may need to come home quick.”

Without so much as breakfast tea to temper his belly, Domnall took up his harp and his pack, and made his way to the door. “I’ll be back soon my old dear, and then we’ll eat.”

Muirne patted his arm and sent him down the stairs to the street. She kept watch a long time after he turned the corner and was lost to her view.

He went slowly, carefully stepping along ice covered walkways. Making his way to his favorite corner, he found it claimed already. Green Johnny the fiddler had early on, gathered the few folk braving the streets, his lilting, happy music lifting the spirit, if not the temperature of the day.

Domnall was disappointed, but he did not begrudge Green Johnny. First come, as they say. Besides, every man was entitled to make a living where and when he could.

Yet this was the day of Solstice Eve. Many shops were closed, and there were few about the streets. Where could he go? Domnall looked to the right, up the main road towards the market cross. Most of the remaining shopkeepers had brought in their wares and were beginning to lock their doors, even at this early hour. The square looked desolate and decidedly unfriendly.

Domnall's old bones were already aching with the cold. "I'd best get out of it for awhile anyway" he thought. Turning widdershins he began to make his way to the church. "That at least is sure to be open, and I can stave off some o' this chill."

Now this lane led to the church alright, but it led in from the North, past the graveyard, dark on a good day, and guarded 'round with ancient yew trees. Their great, black boughs stretched over the graves protecting and hiding the carved stones, and yes, what lay below.

As he passed, Domnall got the feeling up the back of his neck, that he was being watched...a cold, unforgiving watch, a watch without joy, a watch without love, a watch that had never been young. "This is the shade of the city religion" he thought. Pious and stern it was, greatly unlike the beliefs of his homeland where the tinkling of faery bells could be heard softly on the summer wind.

Suddenly an icy gust caught him unawares and raced 'round his neck and down his back. Drawing his muffler more tightly around, he glanced to his left.

Leaning into the wind was an old woman, her black skirts whipping about her. Even with her walking staff of gnarled apple wood, she was fighting for her footing against the ice.

Domnall couldn't see her face, for it was hid behind a billowing hood. The folds of fabric were drawn fast about her neck and fastened by a large penannular broach, a broach of rare and curious design.

Slow as he was himself, Domnall hurried toward her just in time to reach out his hand as her foot slipped out from under her. Down she went, and more softly that would have been if not for Domnall's care.

"Are ye hurt Grandmother?" he asked, raising her to her feet.

"Grandmother yerself" she muttered, pulling back her hood to look upon him. Old she was...old and more old. The tanned leather of her face gave way to line upon line, etched so deeply that there was scarce a patch of smooth to be seen. Her mouth had turned completely inward, disappearing upon itself until she spoke, and then the words rumbled out of that ancient cavern like hordes of musky bats fluttering out into the dusky evening. Craggy outcroppings of snowy heather overshadowed the ridges of her brows, lifting gently in the rising wind.

“Come” said Domnall. “We must away out of this gale. Let us make for the church. ‘Tis the one place we’ll be welcome on such a day as this.”

“’Twill be the world’s fair ending afore I’ll be getting a welcome there, and ye can be sure ‘o that.” She spoke so softly that Domnall missed the steel of her tone.

“Well then” he said. “Let’s make for the grove across the lane. It’ll be a wee shelter but shelter nonetheless.”

Leaving the lane, they pushed their way across the flailing grasses into the cover of the trees. Entering the Grove, the wind seemed to rein in its bitter whine, the sound seeming somehow far away. Sighing leaves pressed inward to catch their conversation. Surrounding them were oak, and ash, and thorn, and Domnall felt deep down in an old place within himself, that he should be wary. Yet reaching for that small brown nut of his being, kept far from all the world, he felt a pin prick, a tickle, a bubble, struggling to free itself.

The old woman spoke as she seated herself on a grizzled root, drawing Domnall up from himself to the surface of thought. “There now, this is better” she wheezed.

“And what may I ask are ye doing’ out in such a storm as this?” Domnall’s indignant complaint fought its way through his ragged breath. “Have ye no family to watch for ye?”

“Family.... yea, I do have...family.” As she replied slowly, she lifted her chin, and for the first time Domnall beheld her eyes.

Now beheld is perhaps not the right word. Held by them, fixed by them would be more to the truth of it. Out of that eldritch visage, a face upon which endless winters and summers, and winters again had chased each other down the hillsides of her cheeks, shone the oldest and the youngest, and the bluest eyes Domnall had ever seen.

Sharp and clear as the gaze of a falcon, high and wide as the sky to fly in, cool and deep as the sea to fish in, rich and true as a dream to dream in, were the eyes of the woman before him.

Into his very soul they looked, and Domnall knew that he had never been truly seen afore, until now. Before he could recover from the shock of it all, she raised a

bony, crooked finger to the harp on his back, which ‘till this moment, he had quite forgotten.

“Are ye a Harper then?” She croaked?”

“Aye” said Domnall, recovering himself. “Tis my Rosin Dubh, my heart of hearts. Many a season we’ve journeyed together. I fear this cold is no good fer her, though I try and keep her warmer and dryer than myself. Her strings now crack as do these old joints.” He held out his knotted hands to her and she saw the long, twisted nails of one who plays the ancient music.

“As ye saved me from a fall, and as ye sheltered me from the wind, I ask of ye a third favor. I would have of ye one of the old songs, a song of exile, and the bittersweet of the longing, the journeying, and a song of all the freedoms lost in the days when the world was young. Play me a song of Home.”

Domnall’s thoughts could not give answer, but his heart leapt up in reply, and so he took his harp, his heart of hearts, and tuned her to the old tunings, and set his aged fingers upon her strings, and stroked her like a well-loved cat, until she began to purr beside the hearth of his imagination.

It was dark when he finished. He did not remember what he played, nor how he played, only that he had played as he never had before, fixed and sustained, and fed by the depths of the eyes that held him warm.

As he wiped away the tears which had sprung into his own, and wrapped his Rosin Dubh, and held her close against his back, he spoke for the first time into the feint echo of the music.

“I must go. Muirne will be waiting.”

“And so she will” replied the old woman. Slowly with shaky fingers she unpinned the broach from her cloak, the broach of bronze, the broach of rare and curious design. She placed it in the hands of his own.

“We reward our Bards” she said.

Domnall could not recall their leave taking, nor how he made his way home in the dark, nor how he climbed half frozen the creaky stairs which led to the room above the print shop. He pushed open the door to find Muirne looking up at him from the dim glow of the single candle set near the water pipe.

“Oh Domnall, I was half out o’ my mind with worry over ye! What has happened, where ha’ ye been?!” Rising, Muirne flung herself into Domnalls’ icy arms. “Mary Mother o’ God yer almost froze” she cried. “Come here next to the warmth of the pipe. I’ll get the blanket.”

Slowly he let her set him down and drape the blanket round his shoulders. As she kneeled in front of him and looked into his face illumined by the flickering flame, her eyes grew round and wide.

“Domnall, what has happened? Ye have the Look Domnall, ye must tell me.”

“Oh Muirne, how do I begin? I have had the most extraordinary day!” Bit by bit Domnall unfolded the tale of his meeting with the old woman. As he drew to the end of the days’ events, he cried, “But the music Muirne, the music! Never have I felt its like, not on my very best o’ days. Try as I can now, I canna recapture it. I still feel it in me blood, but I canna hear it in me, mind. But I know it Muirne, I know it. I do so.”

Unable to speak even if she had known what to say, Muirne took the leather pack from Domnalls’ hand and lifted his harp from his back. Laying Dubh beside him, she opened the pack, and as if it were called, out fell the broach, the bronze broach, the broach of rare and curious design.

“It’s what she left me, the old woman.” Domnall reached for it, took it up, and bent over Muirne. “I am ashamed I earned no coin today, and came home to ye with no wood, nor bread, nor potato fer yer soup. Yet this is what I have, and so this is what is yours.”

Gently he pinned the broach to her old maroon shawl. “’Tis a glorious fancy my old dear. It suites ya fine.” Muirne looked down at the broach, awash she was in the pride, the love, and the care he had shown to her all these years. “Yes” she murmured softly, “’Tis a fine pin indeed. Never fear my Domnall, for tomorrow ye’ll play and tomorrow we shall have potato and carrot and onion besides. Now come, sit here next to me. Take up yer harp and play for me, for us. Play a song of Home.”

Once again that day, Domnall lifted his Rosin Dubh to his breast. His fingers began a slow air, a song of green-gold hills, and old songs from his childhood. The familiar strains of the melody rang softly in the darkened room, sweetly floating outward through the cracks around the window, into the velvet night. Muirne

closed her tired eyes, settling into the music, allowing it to conjure up her home, the cottage, the flowers of her youth.

She had worn flowers then, brought by village lads, shyly left on windowsills or handed bravely after school. There were meadows of flowers, clover, heather, and golden broom, garlands worn on May's first morn, tumbled roses climbing up the wall to her narrow window, buttercups to look within and find her true love. But there had been no true love from Muirne.

Yes, there once was Ian, the fisher boy who said he'd wait for her to grow. But off she went with Domnall, following the road and its fortunes until suddenly, one day, she had looked into a battered tin mirror and found she was old. But oh, she remembered the flowers.

Strange, she thought, that music could bring it all back. She could almost smell the flowers. The scent was so real, and the room seemed warmer somehow. No, she was now quite sure, she did smell flowers! And the room was warmer, and lighter! She opened her eyes and gasped at what confronted her.

Domnall was sitting in a meadow, amid mounds of lilies and wild roses. The air was gentle, honey sweet, and a soft golden light sprinkled the hillside. He played, eyes closed, rocking back and forth slowly with the tune. About his knees danced and skipped and pranced the most beautiful little beings Muirne had ever seen. Fair they were, but perilous too, and she knew them for the "Good People" which is what the wee folk are called by those who know them.

The music lifted, and faster Domnall played. As he played, the knots in his old hands unwound, his back straightened, and he opened his eyes in awe and wonder. "Muirne!" he cried, for sitting across from him, his sister glowed with wondrous most living light. No longer did the wisps of hair shine silver about her forehead.

Dark as a sable's pelt, the curls ringed her lovely face, and her swan-coloured skin had melted into smooth. "Do not stop yer playin' Domnall" she called. Rising up from her chair she joyfully leapt into the ring of faery as the little beings began to circle 'round him.

"What is this wonderment? Are we dreaming?" Domnall dared not voice the thought aloud lest he disturb the magic. Yet with the silent forming of the question, the golden air began to shape itself upon the hillside. Gently the swirls began to form, and presently Domnall beheld the form of a woman of wondrous beauty and

enchantment. High and proud, her hair flying in the shining wind, and her cloak streaming out behind her, she spread her ivory hands over the hills and meadows in ancient blessing.

“The Old Ones” Domnall thought, Guardians and Keepers of the sacred hills and silent places. The glorious lady looked now at Domnall, and Domnall looked back unafraid into the oldest and youngest and bluest eyes he had ever seen.

Sharp and clear as the gaze of a falcon, high and wide as the sky to fly in, cool and deep as the sea to fish in, rich and true as a dream to dream in, were the eyes of the woman before him.

She smiled a shimmering smile, a golden smile, a smile as wide as all the world. The birds of the upper air, their feathers all the colours of the rainbow swept down to sing the song that Domnall had made. The golden woman looked downward and all about the hem of her cloak came alive, and Domnall, all of a sudden, looked upon all his old friends, playmates from long ago childhood, and those who showed grace and charity to the harper upon the road.

There walked those he had helped, and those who had known and loved his music. And coming now, down the hillside through the flowers, Ian held his hands outstretched. He called....

“Come now Muirne, ‘tis time to join the Dance.”, his voice wavering in the brightening air.

Crowned now with apple blossoms, Muirne turned to him. She placed one hand in Ian’s and reached toward Domnall and held out her other. The air sang again. “We repay our Bards”. The golden voice flowed like honey around him.

Domnall rose, took up his Rosin Dubh, clasped his sister’s outstretched hand, and the three of them went up from the hill of flowers, and into the Dance of Dancing.

It is said in later days, that the owner of the print shop, hearing no noise above him for almost a week, ventured up the creaky stairs, pushed open the door with the worn iron handle, entered the little room with the film rubbed off the window, and a single candle burned to a stump set by the water pipe against the wall.

But no sign of the old couple ever did they find; not a shawl, not a harp, not an old leather pack... nothing but an old broach in the middle of the floor, a bronze broach, a broach of most rare and curious design.

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