

BALLEA WRITERS

Bealtaine, the annual national festival, promotes the participation of adults in the arts. This year, the festival organisers launched the third publication in the series titled 'The Barn and other short stores. One of the writers featured in this year's publication was Joe Kelly, Chairman of Ballea Writers group.

We called her The Hag, simply because it suited her. My only memories of her were in winter, in the mist that only seems to hang this close to the sea. When I think of her now I can almost hear the waves crashing against the rocks below, as she stands staring out at the vast expanse of the wild Atlantic.

She would be wearing the same old cloak' black, draped down to her feet, hood pulled up tight in defiance of the weather, casting her face in a shadow which only served to scare us all the more. Her beaky nose angled down over thin lips, but her most striking features were her eyes, as blue as the ocean on a sunny day, but piercing.

'Those eyes can see into your soul,' Ma would often say. Even Father Hogan kept himself at a safe distance, for it was said that on the rare occasions when she spoke, acid spat from those cruel unforgiving lips. It was rumoured that she had cursed Fr. Hogan many years before. Nobody knew if it was true but he certainly avoided her.

Francie, my older brother by twelve years, frightened me on many a dark winter's night with tales of The Hag and her curses and the terrible things that had happened to people who dared to cross her.

'Don't listen to Francie and his tall tales,' Da would say to me on the nights that I lay awake, afraid to close my eyes, but I knew that Francie spoke the truth. Why else was the village so afraid of her? Even Fr. Hogan, with all his talk of fire and brimstone, couldn't look into those cold, penetrating eyes and that was enough for me.

I remember one particular occasion when Da offered to do some repairs to her old stone cottage. Francie and myself watched nervously from a distance as he knocked on her door. A brief exchange of words took place before she raised her arm and pointed a long bony finger towards the gate. Later as Da puffed sadly on his curly pipe of tobacco I heard him say to Ma, 'I won't speak ill of her. She's a troubled soul and there's far greater sinners amongst us.' It would be many years before I would realise the truth of those words.

I can recall one occasion when I was young. Da and myself walked past the little stone cottage and heard a most pitiful cry. Da made the sign of the cross and quickened his pace considerably until we reached the church. 'Isn't there anything you can do for her, Father?' he pleaded.

'Sure I'd only be wasting me time,' Fr. Hogan replied. 'Even the Bishop himself can't get through to her. I fear those cries are for the eternal loss of her soul.' Da replied, 'Forgiveness is mine said the lord,' and looking Fr. Hogan straight in the eye, he added, 'and some people here will need that forgiveness when their day arrives. Da withdrew the smoking pipe from his mouth and spat at the feet of Fr. Hogan. We walked home in silence.

'Stubborn oul bastard,' Ma called him, but we all knew she admired his principles. 'Rain, hail or snow he'll stand outside that church, too proud to enter,' she would say. And she was right. But whether it was from pride, principle or sheer stubbornness, Da refused to go back into that church.

They made an unlikely pair, Da and the Hag, he standing on the chapel steps in his Sunday best, cap in hand, one knee bent to the ground, the other serving as a shelf to rest his elbow on and his head as always, bowed. She, outside the church gate, standing poker straight, head buried inside the black hood, cloak down to her feet, bony hands gripping the crooked stick of bramble, sometimes two, maybe three of her scrawny cats circling her feet. Every Sunday morning they were there but never spoke. He always nodded in her direction but she just burned him with her eyes.

Francie told me that she'd escaped from an asylum many years ago. He said they couldn't cure her, hopeless she was, howling and screaming every night. 'My baby, my baby, they took my baby,' were the cries.

'I heard her scream once,' I said, recalling the day Da had argued with Fr. Hogan. 'Bloodcurdling it was.'

'Well the story goes,' Francie went on, 'that she was beautiful and deeply religious but she fell pregnant,

THE OLD STONE COTTAGE

- By Joe Kelly -

nobody knows by whom, or so legend has it. They say she bore a daughter who was never to breathe the salt air of this fair land of ours. She took to hiding in that old stone cottage, only to be visited by a young priest, who prayed for her poor lost soul. But salvation didn't come and the asylum beckoned. After her escape she returned to the cottage and it is said that she spent her time standing at the gate waiting in hope for the return of her baby.'

The years went by and Francie left home for work, only returning that fateful winter when Ma died. Da busied himself more than ever in the fields, helped by Francie and myself. We looked after Ma in her final hours. It saddened me greatly to see how quiet Da had become at this time.

He just worked by day and sat silently at Ma's bedside every night, holding her hand. 'Go get the priest,' was his instruction to me that stormy night as Ma struggled to take her final breaths.

It was on the way back home with Fr. Hogan, as we passed the old stone cottage, that I saw The Hag move for the first time in my life. It wasn't a movement of any great magnitude but a movement all the same. For as long as I could remember, she always stood motionless, but this night she knelt on the ground. And as she blessed herself, the cats cried like babies. Later, as we all sat around Ma's bed to ease her passing, I was sure that from the corner of my eye, I saw The Hag moving again outside the window and the thought sent a shiver through me. Two days later when we buried Ma, I saw her again, standing as still as ever at the cemetery gates. Da saw her too and nodded.

After the funeral I thought Da had made his peace with Fr. Hogan, but I was wrong. The Sunday ritual remained as before, he on the steps, she at the gate and Fr. Hogan preaching piously from the pulpit.

'Can't you come inside, Da?' I asked him one Sunday, but as usual he refused, stating that he wouldn't share the Lord's house with a hypocrite. 'A sinner can be forgiven,' he said, 'but what hope for a hypocrite.'

Strong words indeed, I thought, for such a gentle man. When I asked him to explain, his reply was simple. 'When the time is right.'

Soon after Ma's funeral we heard that the Bishop was retiring. I was surprised when Da smashed his good pipe against the mantelpiece, but then I suppose I should have known. Fr. Hogan got a promotion. 'Lord God almighty, deliver us from all evil,' were Da's only words on the matter.

The winter of 1972 was long and hard. The rain battered the west coast of Ireland incessantly for three months. The

old cloaked figure wasn't to be seen standing at the gate in this weather. Nobody quite knew when she had stopped standing there. Nobody really noticed, except Da of course.

I watched from up on the hill that morning as he cupped his eyes with his big shovel hands and peered in the window. I wasn't surprised when he turned slowly towards the gate, removed his cloth cap, bowed his bald head and made the sign of the cross.

Before he had the chance to tell me, I was on my way, returning ten minutes later in the company of the now pompous Monsignor Hogan. We all stood at the gate in awkward silence until the Garda car arrived and Sergeant Malone put his broad shoulder to the door of the old stone cottage. The four of us trooped inside, bareheaded of course.

It was the smallest funeral I had ever seen. The Monsignor in all his ceremonial finery, Garda Malone, uniform freshly ironed, Da in his good suit and Francie and I neatly turned out at Da's insistence.

Francie and myself had dug the grave the night before, outside the cemetery wall of course. Da had made the little cross which now stood at the head of the grave; no names, just a simple carving - mother and child.

That night as we sat by the fire in the little stone cottage, I asked Da to tell us what he knew about her. 'You don't want to be bothering yourselves with our stories of the dead now,' the Monsignor said to me, but before I had time to draw breath, Da was standing. He stared at the Monsignor with fire in his eyes and, taking a long drag of smoke from the new pipe, slowly and deliberately spoke.

'Francie was right' he said. 'they took the dead baby from her body in this very cottage. The young priest instructed me to bury it. "Mind you dig the hole outside the wall," he added. Well, I carried that little bundle up to the cemetery with a heavy heart. The tears rolled down my face as I dug that hole outside the wall. But unknown to anybody, even the child's own mother, I dug a second hole. I opened my own parents' grave and buried that unfortunate baby with her grandmother.'

'I ask you all,' Da went on, 'not to feel sorry for that poor woman, for she's where she belongs now, with her own people.'

Even though Da was angry now, his voice portrayed an air of sadness as he continued. 'She was many things to many people to you younger ones' he said looking at us, 'she was The Hag. To you, Garda Malone she was just another citizen, never causing trouble, never coming to your attention. To me, she was Alice, my older sister.'

Da paused before wiping away a tear as it trickled down his wrinkled face, then turning slowly towards the priest, he asked the question. 'What was she to you Monsignor?' Monsignor Hogan shifted uneasily in his chair as he answered. 'She was nothing to me. She should have been one of my flock, if only she had asked for forgiveness. But what could I do? Without repentance, how could I accept her back into the church?'

At this point Da cut in again. 'Well she may have been nothing to you but you were something to her. Isn't that right, Monsignor? You were the father of her poor, dead baby.'

Silence filled the room. We were sent out of the old stone cottage, leaving Da, Garda Malone and Monsignor Hogan inside. When we returned, Da was alone and we never heard any more on the matter.

From that day on Da seemed more at ease with himself. Maybe he had cleared his conscience by speaking up for his sister. We will never know, for he didn't live much longer himself.

Whenever we visit the little graveyard now we often think of the lives of that past generation and the secrets that they kept from us. They've all got their own graves now. Ma and Da in theirs, our grandparents in theirs and last but not least, Auntie Alice and her little baby in the new plot, just inside the wall. We don't call her The Hag any more. It doesn't suit her.



Geraldine O'Connell, Joe Kelly, Chairman and Mike Whetton President, Ballea Writers Group.

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