

BALLEA WRITERS

Bealtaine, the annual national festival, promotes the participation of adults in the arts. This year, the festival organisers launched the fourth publication the series titled 'Consolation and other short stories'. One of the writers featured in this year's publication was John O'Connell, a founder member and Vice Chairman of Ballea Writer's Club.

"Dad, there's a fire in the shed," I said. "What?"

"A Fire in the shed," I shouted, over my shoulder this time, as I rushed outside. He caught up with me as I stood at the shed door in the rain. It had seemed a small light from across the yard, but by the time we had the door open it looked like everything would soon be ashes. He stepped into the inferno. "Wet that," he said, pointing at the tarpaulin.

I tugged it to the rain barrel and fed it in hand over hand. The water spilled over my slippers, my sleeves were wet up to my elbow, and there were goose bumps all the way up my arm. I hauled it out and it soaked my jeans and my jumper. Frozen, I dragged it by a corner back to the shed.

"Good lad," he said, as he grabbed another corner and together we half-pulled, half flung it over the fire. We stamped out the flames and steam rose from my slippers and the tarpaulin. "Lucky you saw it so soon, another minute and the whole place would have gone up.

It was the most credit he'd given me in years.

"Bloody fag butts," he said. "What kind of waster would be smoking near sawdust and wood shavings?"

You do, I thought, but all I said was "It wasn't me."

"No, I wasn't saying that. Did you see anybody, though?"

"It wasn't any of my mates either."

"Strangers, then?"

"The holiday park is getting busy, but they'd hardly bother us here."

He must have gone down there and made a fuss, because he was red-faced and muttering in the kitchen when I got up next morning. The patchwork of scars on his forearms gleamed white against his freckled tan.

"What's the damage?" I asked.

"The bow is charred and some of the shed is scorched. Lucky you saw it."

The repetition was like a question so I explained that there'd been a noise outside that had made me look out, and that I'd thought the door was open and swinging in the breeze. I'd seen the fire flickering through the gaps. Hearing about it calmed him and soon he was fit to cook my breakfast.

"Hey, mister," I heard a high-pitched city accent in the yard. I looked up from washing the dishes and saw him storm out of the shed.

"What do you want?"

"That's your shed, is it?" she said, as she sauntered towards him and out of my earshot.

She had piercings in her nose, lip, ears and God knows where else. She was dressed all in black, and had what looked like white paint on her face, with black around her eyes. She couldn't have been more than fifteen, trying to look twenty.

He told me later that her name was Francie. She'd come to apologise about the damage and to see if she could do anything to make amends. They'd been taking shelter in the shed; she'd supposed someone must have left a cigarette

The Boat Maker's Apprentice

By John O'Connell



smouldering. The lads were too scared to come with her, it seemed.

He set her to work. First clearing out the debris and then sanding the damaged hull of the boat. He was a great one for keeping people busy; should have been a drill sergeant. I wondered what he'd look like without his mop of grey curls dropping sawdust every time he bent over. Salvation through work might have been his motto.

I didn't like going into the shed when he was there, but sometimes I brought him tea and biscuits, when the mood took me. The dirty dishes made a good excuse to get away. I was bringing a tray with refreshments and I heard them.

"What ya doin' with that?"

"I'm working the rib to size."

"Me Grandda would'a used this."

"I never mastered the spoke-shave. I find the plane and chisel easier to use."

"It's dead easy. Here, it's like this." She spotted me watching. "Oh, hiya."

"I brought tea, didn't realise you had company," I said to Dad. "Will I get another mug?"

"Yes, Francie will have tea with plenty of sugar."

"Why's she around here so much? I asked him during lunch.

"Her mother's not well and she's been staying with her cousins for the summer. She's volunteered to come in regularly to help me." He got up, lifted the kettle and put it under the tap. "Do you want another cup?" he asked, before deciding there was enough water.

I nodded. "Checking to see what's worth stealing more likely."

"Nonsense. She's bored with the cousins and doesn't like the beach much. She's a good worker. It keeps her mind off her mother's condition."

He returned to the table with the fresh tea and stood there, rubbing his back and wincing. "Her family were wheelwrights before the car put them out of work."

"Not much demand for timber trades these days." The animation left his face and I regretted what I had said.

When I was a boy I used to help him. There was a shambles of a shed where he worked. It was made of timber planks butted together on a timber framework, the way he built boats. I always thought he must have built it himself. I liked the smells of the timber and glue and varnish, and the silky feel of the sanded planks, and the roughness of the sawn timber. It amazed me that you could take a dead lump of wood and, with a little effort, make it part of something so majestic.

I'd learned to always run my fingertips over the planks, before his bony hand picked

out the flaws. He'd be annoyed with me, as if he expected me to know what to do, without being told. "Paddy, you've ruined the piece," he'd say, or "you shouldn't be using the chisel like that," or "did you not clean the brush after varnishing?" "Worst of all was when he said nothing and three vertical lines became superimposed on horizontal ones over his nose.

I got frustrated with his correction and helped him less as I grew into my teens. Besides, it was monotonous. Space Invaders and football were more fun for a lad growing up in a seaside town with no nightlife all winter. I had little inclination to go back to it now that I had left school. At eighteen, I had my future hanging over me like a question mark.

Several weeks later, when Francie and he had finished the boat, he asked me to help him launch it. The beach was across the road from the shed so it wasn't a long haul, but it always embarrassed me, seeing the looks on the faces behind the windscreens. She came along when we were on the beach. "D'a need a hand?"

"Thank you Francie, that's very kind of you," he said.

"D'ya think she'll float?"

"She's a fine craft, she'll float all right." We slid the boat down the beach muttering curses when we stumbled on the cobbles. The work got less wearying as we eased it down to the sandy park. We stopped on the seaweed within a few feet of the water.

"That's far enough. The tide will do the rest." He took a rope from the boat and tied it to an anchor. "We'll come back in an hour or so and take her out to the moorings. Would you like a cup of tea, Francie?"

She nodded and accompanied us back to the house. He laid on tea and sandwiches and a plate of chocolate biscuits. He brought along a third cup when he realised I'd sat down too. He entertained her for ages like they were old friends. "You're welcome to drop in whenever you like," he said as we let her out the front door.

She hesitated and glanced at me. "I wouldn't want to be getting in the way or anything."

"No chance of that," he said.

Later that afternoon there was a loud knock at the front door. A gang of young lads shuffled around, a few paces behind her. She was panting. "The boat's sinking," she said.

"That's OK." I said. "Always happens. New timbers need to swell. She'll be fine in a few days." Francie turned and I heard the boys jeer at her before I closed the door. I realised that it had taken courage for her to come to the door with them in tow. I thought that I should have thanked her and

asked her in, but I was aware how that would be interpreted.

She called to the door a few days later to see if my Dad needed a hand with his latest project.

"What new boat is that?" I asked her.

"The big one, ya know, that" he was so excited about getting started on.

"Oh, yeah."

Dad was delighted that she turned up. He offered her breakfast, though he'd said he was too busy to make mine. "What happened your eye?" he asked. With all the makeup I hadn't noticed the bruising.

"I had a scrap with the cousins. It's nothing."

It looked fairly sore to me. As I left the kitchen they were talking about building the new boat. I would have liked to stay but he didn't ask me to.

"Do ya mind me coming by?"

"No."

"Am I not taking your place?"

"You're fine."

"It's just, he's great, ya know. Tells me all about what he's doin'. It's like me Grandda used to be. There's something about making things." Almost as an afterthought she added, "we could do with your help too, ya know."

"I'd only be in the way. You know what he's like."

"He's got his standards, I agree, but he's not able for it on his own. The works too heavy for him. He'll not bother ya, but he's struggling."

I'd never considered my dad as someone who struggled with anything. Later that day I offered him a hand and he was happy to accept. He was polite and reasonable, not like I remembered him; maybe it was having Francie around that had mellowed him. He didn't seem to be struggling, but I said nothing of that to Francie.

Over the next few weeks she and I cut the frames roughly to shape following Dad's instructions. He whittled the frames down to size and used the spoke-shave on the awkward bits. He showed us how to mark out and cut the joints where the frames met the keel. He eventually let us make a joint or two. With a nod or a frown he guided us through the stages.

He accepted me that summer, like it was the fulfillment of an age-old plan. I had expected sarcasm after I split the timber I was working on, but he was a model of patience. "You can always start again; we can use that piece further along with a bit of luck."

It helped that Francie made mistakes as well. We shared supportive nods and shrugs as if to say, "Better luck next time, or frowns that said, 'you clumsy eejit', Francie giving as many frowns as she got. I was reminded of my younger days, when I smelled the resin from the newly cut timber or ran my fingertips over the smoothed work. These were things of my childhood, whose textures reminded me of carefree times.

"I'll miss that girl all the same," he said later. "We'll get by on our own, won't we? The worst of it is done now."

"The worst is over all right." He slapped me on the back.