

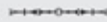


GRAHAM
JOYCE

Author of *THE SILENT LAND*

SOME
KIND
OF FAIRY
TALE

some
kind
of
fairy tale



A NOVEL

Graham Joyce



Doubleday

NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY AUCKLAND

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Jacket design by Emily Mahon

Jacket photograph © Angus R. Shamal/Gallery Stock

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Joyce, Graham, 1954–

Some kind of fairy tale : a novel / Graham Joyce. — First edition.

pages cm

1. Missing persons—Fiction. 2. Memory—Fiction. 3. Fairy tales—Fiction. 4. Psychological fiction. I. Title.

PR6060.O93S67 2012

823'.914—dc23 2012001946

eISBN: 978-0-385-53584-7

v3.1_r1

To my daughter, Ella

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CHAPTER ONE

But we are spirits of another sort.

OBERON, KING OF SHADOWS. WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

In the deepest heart of England there is a place where everything is at fault. That is to say, that the land rests upon a fault; and there, ancient rocks are sent hurtling from the deep to the surface of the earth with such force that they break free like oceanic waves, or like monstrous sea creatures coming up for air. Some say that the land has still to settle and that it continues to roil and breathe fumes, and that out of these fumes pour stories. Others are confident that the old volcanoes are long dead, and that all its tales are told.

Of course, everything depends on who is telling the story. It always does. I have a story, and though there are considerable parts I've had to imagine, the way I saw it was as follows.

It was CHRISTMAS DAY of that year and Dell Martin hovered at the double-glazed PVC window of his tidy home, conducting a survey of the bruised clouds and concluding that it might just snow; and if it did snow then someone would have to pay. At the very beginning of the year Dell had laid down two crisp twenty-pound notes on the bookie's Formica counter, just as he had done every year for the past ten. The odds changed slightly each year and this time he had settled good odds at seven-to-one.

For a White Christmas to be official—that is, to force the bookmakers to pay—a flake of snow must be observed to fall between midnight on December 24 and midnight on December 25 at four designated sites. The sites are the cities of London, Glasgow, Cardiff, and Manchester. The snow is not required to lie deep nor crisp nor evenly upon the ground and it doesn't matter if it's mixed with rain. One solitary flake would do it, fallen and melted, observed and recorded.

Living in a place somewhere between all of those great cities, Dell had never collected any of all those ten years, nor had he seen a single flake of Christmas Day snow hanging in the air of his hometown.

"Are you going to come and carve?" Mary called from the kitchen.

This year they were having goose. After decades of turkey dinners on Christmas Day they were having a change, because a change is as good as a rest, and sometimes you needed a rest even from Christmas. Nevertheless the table had been laid out, just as in previous years, with crisp linen and the best cutlery. Two heavy crystal wineglasses that, year round, were kept in a box and stowed at the back of a kitchen cupboard.

Dell always carved, and he carved well. It was an art. He'd carved well when the kids were small, and he carved well now that there was only Mary and himself to carve for. He rubbed

his hands together in a friction of delight, passing through to a kitchen warm and steamy from simmering pans. The cooked goose rested under silver foil on a large serving plate. Dell pulled a blade from the knife block and angled it to the light at the window. "Gone a bit dark over yonder," he said. "Might snow."

Mary was draining vegetables through a sieve. "Might snow? You haven't put money on it, have you?"

"Hell, no." He whisked the foil cover off the goose and rotated the plate to get a better purchase with his knife. "Just a thought."

Mary tapped her sieve on the lip of the sink as Dell began to carve. "Hasn't snowed on Christmas Day in ten years. Plates warming in the oven. Bring them through?"

When Dell had finished carving, each plate boasted a plump goose leg and two neatly carved slices of breast. There were roasted potatoes and four types of vegetables, all steaming in serving dishes. The gravy boat was piping and there was stuffing and sausage wrapped in bacon, and cranberry sauce.

"I went in for an Italian this year," Dell said, pouring Mary a glass of ruby-red wine and then one for himself. He pronounced the *I* in Italian the way you might pronounce *eye-witness*. "Italian wine. Hope that goes well with the goose."

"I'm sure it will be lovely."

"Thought we'd have a change from the French. Though I could easily have had a South African. There was a South African on offer. At the supermarket."

"Let's see, shall we?" Mary said, offering her glass for the clinking. "Cheers!"

"Cheers!"

And it was the cheers moment, that gentle touching of the crystalware, that Dell hated the most.

Feared it and detested it. Because even though nothing was ever stated and even though the faultless food was served up with wide smiles and the clinking of glasses was conducted with genuine affection from both parties, there was always at this moment of ritual a fleck in his wife's eye. A tiny instant of catch-light, razor-sharp, and he knew he'd better talk over pretty damn quick.

"What do you think of the Italian?"

"Lovely. Beautiful. A good choice."

"Because there was also a bottle from Argentina. Special offer. And I nearly went for that."

"Argentina? Well, there's one we could try another time."

"But you like this?"

"Love it. Lovely. Come on, let's see what you make of this goose."

Wine was one of the fixtures of Christmas dinner that had changed over the years. When the kids were small both he and Mary had been content with a glass of beer, maybe a schooner of lager. But beer had been displaced by wine on the table for Christmas Day. Serving dishes were a recent addition, too. Back in those days everything was heaped on the plates and brought to the table, a ready-assembled island of food floating in a sea of gravy. Cranberry sauce was exotic once. When the children were small.

"Well, what do you think of that goose?"

"Bloody beautiful. And cooked to perfection."

A tiny flush of pleasure appeared on Mary's cheek. After all these years of marriage, Dell

could do this. Just the right words.

“You know what, Mary? All these Christmases we could have been having goose. Hey, look out of the window!”

Mary turned. Outside, a few tiny flakes of snow were billowing. It was Christmas Day and it was snowing; here, at least.

“You have had a bet, haven’t you?” Mary said.

Dell was about to answer when they both heard a light tapping at the front door. Most people rang the electrical bell, but today someone was knocking.

Dell had his knife in the mustard pot. “Who the hell is that on Christmas Day?”

“No idea. What a time to call!”

“I’ll get it.”

Dell stood and put his napkin on his seat. Then he went down the hall. There was a figure outlined in the frosted glass of the inner door. Dell had to release a small chain and unlock the inner door before opening the porch door.

A young woman, perhaps in her early twenties, gazed back at him from behind dark glasses. Through the dark glass he could make out wide, unblinking eyes. She wore a Peruvian-style woolen hat with earflaps and tassels. The tassels made him think of bells.

“Hello, duckie,” Dell said briskly, not unfriendly. It was Christmas Day after all.

The woman said nothing. She gazed back at him with a timid, almost fearful smile on her lips.

“Happy Christmas, love. What can I do for you?”

The woman shuffled from one foot to another, not removing her gaze. Her clothes were odd; she seemed to be some kind of hippie. She blinked behind her dark glasses and he thought she looked familiar. Then it occurred to him that she was maybe collecting for some charitable cause. He put his hand in his pocket.

At last she spoke. “Hello, Dad,” she said.

Mary came bustling from behind, trying to peer around him. “Who is it?” she said.

The woman switched her gaze from Dell to Mary. Mary stared hard at her, seeing something familiar in the young woman behind the dark lenses. There came a slight gagging sound from Mary’s throat; then Mary fainted clean away. Dell stumbled and only half caught her as she fell. Mary’s unconscious body hit the stone tiles at the threshold with a thud and a sigh of wind.

ON THE OTHER SIDE of Charnwood Forest at a ramshackle cottage on the road to Quorn, Peter Martin was stacking the dishwasher. Christmas dinner had been trashed a couple of hours ago and he was still wearing an acid-red paper crown from a Christmas cracker but he’d forgotten it was there. His wife, Genevieve, had her bare feet up on the sofa, exhausted by the responsibility of coordinating the domestic crisis of Christmas in a house with a dream husband, four kids, two dogs, a mare in the paddock, a rabbit, and a guinea pig, plus sundries invading mice and rats that kept finding inventive routes into their kitchen. In many ways it was a house weathering a permanent state of siege.

Peter was a gentle, red-haired bear of a man. Standing at six-four in his socks, he moved everywhere with a slight and nautical sway, but even though he was broad across the chest there was something centered and reassuring about him, like an old ship’s mast cut from

single timber. He felt bad that they'd had Christmas dinner without having his mother and father over. Dell and Mary had been invited, of course, but there had been a ridiculous dispute about what time dinner should be served. Genevieve wanted to sit down on the stroke of one so that they could all get their coats on in the afternoon and drive up to Bradgate Park or Beacon Hill for a healthy blast of wind. Mary and Dell liked to eat late and at leisure, and certainly not before three; they'd done all the walking and blasting they cared for. There wasn't actually a row. What followed was more of an impasse and a sulking followed by a default decision no party was happy with, that this year they would sit down to separate dinners.

Peter and Genevieve anyway had a daughter who was fifteen, a boy thirteen, and two more girls of seven and five. Whenever they went over to Mary and Dell's they garrisoned the place, moving in like a brutal occupying army. It was always easier and more relaxed to stay put in the cottage, and this year that's what they did.

Meanwhile Peter had bought thirteen-year-old Jack an air rifle for Christmas, and Jack was sitting in the yard hoping for mice or rats to turn up. He lounged on an old exploded sofa his dad hadn't gotten around to taking to the dump. Like a grizzled old-timer from a shotgun cabin he held the butt of the gun on his thigh and pointing skyward.

Peter put his head outside the back kitchen door. "Don't wave that fucking thing around. If you catch anyone I'll rip your head off for sure," Peter said.

"Don't worry, Dad, I'm not gonna shoot my fuckin' sisters."

"And don't swear. Right?"

"Right."

"And don't wave it around."

Peter went back inside to stack the dishwasher. He went through to the trashed dining room and was dithering what to do with the carcass of the turkey when the phone rang. It was Dell.

"All right, Dad? I was just going to call you. When I get the kids lined up to say happy Christmas and all that."

"Never mind that, Pete. You'd better get over here."

"What? I've had a few drinks. We're about to go for a walk."

"Come over anyway. Your sister's here."

"What?"

"You heard me. I said your sister's here."

"What?"

Peter felt dizzy. The room swam. "Dad, what are you saying?"

"She just showed up."

"She can't have."

"Come over, Pete. Your mother's had a bad turn."

"Dad, what the hell is going on?"

"Please come over, son. Please come over."

There was a note in his father's voice he'd never heard before. Dell was clearly very close to tears. "Can you just tell me what's happened?"

"I can't tell you anything because I don't know anything. Your mother fainted. She fell badly."

“Okay. I’m coming.”

Peter put the receiver back on its cradle with a gentle click and crashed down onto a hard chair that lived beside the phone. He stared at the debris of Christmas dinner still littering the table. Pulled Christmas poppers and plastic toys and paper crowns were strewn across the room. He suddenly remembered he was still wearing his paper crown. He took it off and held it in his hand, between his knees.

He got up and moved through to the living room, swaying slightly as he went. The television was broadcasting softly while the three girls were sprawled on the carpeted floor playing with Lego bricks and dolls by the lopsided Christmas tree. A cozy coal fire burned in the grate and two staghound lurchers lay on their backs before the fire, their legs in the air and their teeth bared in grins of pure canine pleasure. Genevieve snoozed on the sofa.

Pete went back into the kitchen and filled the electric kettle. He stood watching it boil, and contrary to received wisdom it boiled pretty damn quick. He made a cup of tea for Genevieve and one for himself, gazing at the tea diffusing from a teabag. At last he was roused by the snap of an air-rifle pellet as it struck the outside wall.

Carrying the tea through to the living room, he kneeled before the sofa, then leaned across Genevieve and woke her with a kiss. She blinked at him. Her cheeks were red.

“You’re a sweetheart,” she said sleepily, accepting the tea. “Did I hear the phone?”

“You did hear the phone.”

“Who was it? ”

“Dad.”

“Are they still speaking to us?”

“Yes. I have to go over there.”

“You do? Anything wrong?”

Peter exhaled a puff of air. “Tara came back.”

Genevieve looked at Peter for a moment as though she didn’t know who Tara was. She had never met Tara, but she’d heard plenty about her. She shook her head quizzically, knitted her brow.

“Yes,” Peter said. “Exactly.”

“Who is Tara?” said Zoe, their fifteen-year-old daughter.

“That’s impossible,” Genevieve said. “Isn’t it?”

“Who is Tara?” asked Amber, the middle daughter.

“I’ve got to go over there.”

“Should we all come?”

“There’s no point in us all going.”

“Who the heck is Tara?” Amber asked again.

“Your dad’s sister.”

“Dad has a sister? I never knew Dad has a sister.”

“No, we don’t talk about her,” said Peter.

“Why don’t we talk about her?” asked Josie, the youngest. “I talk about my sisters. All the time.”

“I have to go,” Peter said. “Is there gas in the car?”

“Is Dad leaving us on Christmas Day?” Amber said.

Genevieve got up off the sofa and winced as she stepped barefoot on a Lego brick. “H

won't be gone long." She followed Peter out into the hallway and waited while he put on his shoes and his coat. "Will you?"

"No."

"Do you want a hug?"

"Yes. No," said Peter. "Not right now."

There was another slap as an air-gun pellet hit the wall outside.

CHAPTER TWO

Wonder has no opposite; it springs up already doubled in itself, compounded of dread and desire at once, attraction and recoil, producing a thrill, the shudder of pleasure and of fear.

MARINA WARREN

Peter drove to Anstey via Breakback Lane. It wasn't the direct route. He had an idea that he should call on Richie Franklin and tell him the news, but he knew he wouldn't. Shouldn't. Couldn't. It didn't stop him driving that way.

The roads were almost deserted, it being Christmas Day. Picked out like lonely ships on a ocean, one or two isolated vehicles passed him along the way, tires hissing on the wet road. The sky was laden with snow but it fell only in brief flurries, not settling, instantly melting on impact with his windshield, barely enough for him to activate his wipers.

At the Outwoods he slowed down and turned into the parking area. It was empty and lonely. He had some cigarettes hidden in the glove compartment. This was what passed for contraband in his life now: he'd given up because the girls had been counseled that smoking kills and they cried whenever they saw him spark up a ciggie. But he kept a stale pack hidden for moments like these. He got out of the car and surveyed the bare winter trees grouped around the clearing of the parking area. The trees were golden and gray and somehow asleep, off guard. It was bitterly cold. He tasted a flake of dry tobacco on his tongue and his first drag on the cigarette made him cough. The cigarette smoke hung like a gray rag in the cold air, and so did the sound of his cough.

The Outwoods was one of the last remaining pockets of ancient forest from which Charnwood took its name. It nestled at the spot where the three counties of Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire, and Derbyshire touched, and seemed neither to belong to nor take its character from any of them. It was an eerie place, swinging between sunlight and damsel, flaring light and shadow; a venue of twisted trees, its volcanic slopes of ash and granite ruptured by mysterious outcropping crags of the very oldest rocks in Britain.

He didn't like it.

The last time he'd seen Tara was here in the Outwoods. It had been May of that year and they had walked through the woods, and the bluebells at that time had been astonishing. They had sat on the golden lichen-stained rocks and talked about the future.

Peter flicked his cigarette to the ground half smoked and stamped it into the earth. Then he climbed back in his car.

Sometime later he parked right outside Richie's house but left the engine running. It was almost a challenge, inviting someone to come out and ask him what he was doing; but no one came. No one even so much as glanced out the window. Richie's house was a council property

in what might once have been a row of houses tied to a local land owner. Squat, badly built and grimy little peasant hutches. Peter knew them well because he'd been raised in an identical house five doors away. Richie, having inherited the property from his mother, still lived there.

There was a light on in Richie's house, but deep, low, and at the back. There was a single living room that ran the depth of the house. The dim light only made the house look cold and uninviting. Just go up to the door, Peter told himself, and when he answers the door just say *Tara's back*, that's all you have to do. *Tara's back*.

But he couldn't. He and Richie hadn't spoken in a long, long time, and two words might as well have been two hundred thousand words. He couldn't do it. He cursed under his breath and drove away.

“COME IN, LAD.” DELL spoke in a strange kind of whisper.

“Where is she?”

“Are you going to take your coat off? And your shoes? We've got the new carpet.”

Peter took off his coat and handed it to his father before untying his shoelaces. He felt a wave of frustration with his father, that at a time like this he was concerned with clean carpets, but said nothing. He made to move down the hall but he felt the flat of his father's hand on his breastbone.

“Don't go upsetting anyone. Your mum's had a fall.”

“I'm not here to upset anyone!” Peter tried to keep the keening note out of his voice. “she through here?”

“Come on.”

Peter took a step into the living room and stopped just inside the doorway. His mother lay on the couch. She was sipping tea and had an ice pack on the knee she'd cracked when she slumped to the floor. But Peter was more interested in the woman nursing Mary from the armchair next to the sofa. Even though she wore dark glasses, it was his sister, Tara: of that there was no doubt.

Tara stood up. She seemed an inch or two taller than he remembered. Her soft nut-brown hair was maybe a darker shade, and still fell around her face in a tangle of curls. Behind the shades and around her eyes there might have been one or two lines but she hardly seemed to have aged. She just looked pretty grubby, like she'd been living rough.

“When did you cut your hair?” she said.

“Oh. That would be about fifteen years ago.”

“You had such lovely long hair!”

“Everybody did then. Do I get a hug?”

“Of course you do.”

Peter stepped forward and he held his sister in his arms. She held him tight. He inhaled the smell of her. She didn't smell like he remembered. Now she smelled of something belonging to the outdoors he couldn't identify. Rain, maybe. Leaf. Mushroom. May blossom. The wind.

It was a long time before she broke the clench. Peter looked over at his mother stretched out with her ice pack and her leg up on the couch. She gave him a pained smile and dabbed her eye with a tissue.

“So where you been, Tara? Where you been?”

“She’s been traveling,” Dell said.

“Traveling? Twenty years is a lot of travel.”

“Yes, it is,” Mary said from the couch. “And now she’s come back home. Our little girl has come back home.”

WITH TEA BEING THE drug of choice in the Martin household, Dell concocted more of it, thick and brown and sweet. After all, they’d had a bit of a shock; and whenever they had a shock or experienced a disturbance of any kind they had poured tea on it for as long as any of them could remember. The fact is they poured tea on it even when they hadn’t had a shock, usually six or seven times a day. But these were extra-special circumstances and Peter knew he had to wait until the tea had arrived before he could begin any line of questioning. Even when the tea did arrive, the questioning didn’t go well.

Peter had hardly taken his eyes off his sister since his arrival. The same half-smile hadn’t escaped the bow of Tara’s lips since he’d walked into the room. He recognized it as a disguise of some kind, a mask; he just didn’t know quite which emotions it was intended to camouflage.

“So where exactly has all this traveling taken you, Tara?”

“Goodness! All over.”

“Really? All over?”

She nodded solemnly. “Pretty much, yes.”

“Tara already told us some of it, Peter,” said Dell. “Rome. Athens. Jerusalem. Tokyo. What was that place in South America?”

“Lima. In Peru.”

“Really? Traveling all this time? Constant traveling?”

“Pretty much, yes.”

“Always moving?”

“Well,” Tara said. “I might have settled here or there for a few months, but always with a view to moving on.”

Peter nodded, but he was only pretending to understand. He scrutinized his sister’s clothes. She wore threadbare jeans with huge bell-bottoms, of a kind that had strayed way out of fashion when he was a young man and had probably come back in again. She wore a grubby dress over the top of them and long strings of beads. A woolen cardigan was a couple of sizes too big for her, the arms of which reached to the tips of her fingers but failed to hide her dirty fingernails.

Peter couldn’t help himself. “You look like you could do with a bath.”

“Steady on,” said Dell.

“But Tara,” Peter said. “No word? Not even a postcard? No good-bye, no announcement, nothing?”

“I know,” said Tara. “It’s unforgivable.”

“Do you know what you put these two through? What you put us all through?”

“Before you came, I said to Mum and Dad that I will understand it if you hate me.”

“We don’t hate you,” Dell said. “No one hates you.”

“But—” Peter tried.

Dell cut him short. “Peter. I know there’s a lot to get into. But I won’t have you say

anything to scare her away again. Okay? I won't have it."

"I'm not going away again," Tara said.

Peter ran his hands through his close-cropped hair.

"What about you?" Tara said. "Tell me about your life."

"My life?" Peter said. "My life?"

"Mum says you have children."

"Get the photos, Dell. Get them," said Mary, too quickly.

"Tell me yourself," said Tara. "I want to hear everything."

Peter sighed. "I married a lovely girl I met at university. Genevieve. We've got three girls and a boy."

"Tell me their names!"

"Well, my eldest is fifteen going on twenty and her name is Zoe and—"

"That's a lovely name."

"And then came Jack, he's thirteen. Running wild. Then a bit of a gap because we weren't ... well, we did, and we had Amber, who is seven, and Josie, who is five."

"Amber has webbed fingers," Mary said.

"Mum, please."

"Small thing," Tara said, smiling. "A very small thing." Then her smile dropped for the first time. "I'm sorry I missed it all. I really am." Suddenly Tara vented a huge sob. She squeezed her eyes shut and her lip trembled. She wiped her eyes with the back of her sleeve and sniffed. "I'm sorry I missed it all. They sound so wonderful. Are they like you?"

"God help them if they are."

"The boy is the spit," Dell said helpfully. "The girls take more after their mother."

There was a silence. Dell had a photograph album that he handed to Tara. "These are all old. It's all digital now, isn't it? Things change so fast."

Tara studied the photographs. "But they do look like you!"

Dell turned to Tara. "Zoe even looks a bit like you."

"She's almost the same age as you were when you left," Peter said. He looked at Mary. She shook her head at him in fierce warning.

"Will I get to meet them?" Tara said.

"Of course. If you want to."

She held up the photo album. "Where was this photo taken?"

"Oh, that one's in Greece. Before we had the kids. You said you were in Athens, didn't you?"

"Not for long. Couldn't get out quick enough."

"So where were you in Greece?"

"Crete. Some of the islands."

"Really? Genevieve and I lived for a whole year in Crete. Were you ever in Mytilini when you were on Crete?"

"Yes, one or two nights I think. But I just passed through."

"Wouldn't that be amazing? If you were there the same time we were there?"

"These things are possible."

"What year was it?"

"Peter, stop interrogating the girl, will you?" Dell was wringing his hands. "Look, she

hungry and I'm going to rescue what I can of Christmas dinner and we're going to sit down and enjoy it, and you can sit down with us, too."

"I've had my Christmas dinner, Dad."

"Okay, but no more questions."

"Don't you think this is a day for questions? You realize we are going to have to tell the police?"

Tara looked startled. "Is that really necessary?"

"You bet it is!" cried Peter.

He explained to her what had happened after Tara had walked out of their lives some twenty years earlier. He explained how everyone had feared the very worst, feared that she had been abducted or killed. That there had been wide-ranging searches conducted. That the neighbors and friends had, along with a huge force of police officers, carried out searches of the Outwoods and at every other place they could think that she might have gone. That her photo had appeared in all of the local newspapers and some national ones; that her face had appeared on national TV; that known sexual offenders had been dragged in for interrogation; that not a clue had turned up, not a hair from her head; that the search was eventually scaled down; that her mother and father went into a state of shock and mourning from which they had never entirely recovered; that he and her boyfriend at the time, Richie, who had himself fallen under a cloud of suspicion, had continued to search the countryside and local beauty spots for months and even years afterward.

"They had frogmen searching the pools and the lakes, Tara. It went on for days. Weeks. Yes, even after all this time I think we have to inform the police, don't you?"

Tara looked ashen at these reports.

Suddenly Mary was on her feet, the ice pack slithering to the floor. "Stop it! Stop it! All I know is that Tara has come home for Christmas Day and it's a miracle to have her home and I don't want to hear any more talk of it! I want no more questions today! Peter, you can stay here and be pleasant or you can go straight back to your family. That's an end to it." And with that she collapsed back on the couch.

"You don't have to go," Tara said gently. "I'm the one who should go."

"No," Peter said. "It's just ..." He didn't want to say any more, because he couldn't think of a single thing to say that wouldn't be a direct criticism of his sister's outrageous and hitherto unexplained behavior. He hauled himself to his feet. "Look, I should get back. The kids. It's Christmas Day. Maybe you could meet them. Tomorrow. What do you say, Dad, do you want to bring Tara over tomorrow?"

"That sounds perfect. All right with that, Mary?"

It was all right with everyone; it was all right because for the moment it got Peter out of the house.

Peter went to the door and Tara followed him. She hugged him again, and with her back to Dell and Mary she narrowed her eyes at him and made a shape of her lips, as if to tell him she had something to say to him, but not in front of Dell and Mary.

He wished his parents a happy Christmas. Then he regarded his sister sadly. "Happy Christmas, Tara," he said.

"Oh, my. Happy Christmas, Peter."

CHAPTER THREE

A fairy tale ... on the other hand, demands of the reader total surrender; so long as he is in its world, there must for him be no other.

W. H. AUDEN

The light was beginning to fade when Peter let himself into his cottage. The door, swollen and damp, was still sticking. He'd have to fix that. Except that he'd repaired the door hinge recently, which was why the door was now sticking. "One job makes another" was a common saying in the Martin household.

Whatever was happening with Tara, Peter felt heartened to come back to the cottage, to the mess of kids and dogs, and a home permanently falling apart and finding new ways to demand maintenance. He liked to see Jack and the girls sprawled over the carpet, absorbed with whatever fad or kiddie toys were the interest or excitement of the moment. He never objected to untidiness in the way that Genevieve did. But Gen was his rescuer. She was the architect of his salvation.

He opened the living room door and they all looked up from what they were doing. Genevieve, with her large brown eyes and slightly freckled face framed by a tumble of unruly dark curls; the girls, who all really did look like her clones; the dogs. Then the dogs laid their heads back down.

"Did you see her?" Gen asked.

"Jack shot a rat," said Josie.

Peter flicked his head to indicate that Gen should come out to the kitchen. She got up.

"Are you going to talk about your sister?" said Amber.

"Yep," Peter said.

"Can we listen?"

"Nope."

"Why not?"

"Well. Now, then. Tell them why they can't listen, Gen."

"It's a touchy subject for Dad," Genevieve announced. "He'll tell you all about your aunt Tara after he's had a chat with me."

"We'll listen at the door," Amber said brightly.

"You'll get an ear infection," Peter said. "Listening to things you shouldn't."

"Rubbish," said Zoe. "Take no notice of Dad."

Genevieve closed the door behind her, and together they went into the kitchen. They sat down and she held his hand across the table. "You really do look like you've seen a ghost."

"Mum and Dad. They're sitting there like it's fucking normal. We all thought she was dead and she walks back into their lives after twenty years and it's like, oh, hello, have a cup of

tea and a piece of ginger cake.”

“They’re probably in shock, Peter. Did she say anything?”

The back door swung open and, along with a blast of wintry air, Jack came in. “I shot a rat.”

“Good man. Put it in the trash can.”

“Do you want to look at it?”

“No, I don’t need to look at it.”

Jack looked disappointed. “It’s a big one.”

“Are you in or out?” his mother said. “Either way, close the door. In or out.”

“I’m in. I’m getting cold.”

“Where’s the rat now?” said Genevieve.

“On the grass.”

“Put it in the trash.”

“I was thinking o’ hangin’ it up outside. You know, like a rogues’ gallery.”

“Absolutely bloody not! Get it in the trash.”

“What, pick it up with my bare hands? Not likely.”

“Just pick it up by the tail,” said Peter, “and chuck it in the can. You killed it, you dispose of it.”

Jack waited for a few seconds of routine defiance before going outside to confront the dead rat. Peter closed the door after him.

“Well?” Genevieve said.

“She said she’d been traveling.”

“Traveling where?”

“It was cock-and-bull.”

Jack came back in and went to the sink, where he made a great show of soaping his hands and washing them under the hot-water tap until they gleamed. They had to wait in silence until he was done. Peter slammed the door shut on the outside cold. “Were you born in a barn, Jack?”

Jack made a noise like a sheep.

Genevieve got tired of waiting. “How do you know?”

“I caught her out on a couple of details.”

“What’s that?” Jack said, drying his hands on a tea towel.

“Use a proper towel for drying your hands,” said Genevieve.

“Why?”

“You’ve just been handling a rat. And look at this muck you’ve trailed in.”

“Jack, give me and your mum a minute, would you?”

“Is this about our so-called Aunty Tara?”

“Yes, sod off, would you? And take your bloody shoes off before you go in the living room.”

“Did you get to actually see her?”

“Jack!”

After they’d got rid of Jack, Genevieve asked what Tara had said about disappearing without a word.

“Nothing. I wasn’t allowed to ask. They’re coming over tomorrow. The three of them.”

“Heck.” Genevieve looked round at the kitchen. “We’ll have to tidy the place up before they get here. It’s incredible.”

Peter was about to open his mouth when the door opened. It was Zoe. “The dog’s been sick,” she said.

ON BOXING DAY, WHAT with Dell, Mary, and Tara expected around midday, it was all hands to the pumps, or all shoulders to the wheel, to try to pull the cottage around to some semblance of order. Which meant that the children pitched in to lift one out-of-place object only to set it down in another out-of-place venue. In the end a lot of Christmas toys got scooped under the sofa or parked behind the curtains, all in the name of tidying. Genevieve supervised while Peter grumbled; Zoe hovered as Amber hovered; Jack put things in boxes and Josie took things out again.

All because Tara had come home. Peter’s confusion and resentment were growing by the minute.

Genevieve had never met Tara. She and Peter had been together for three years before he had even mentioned to her that he had a sister. Tara was two years younger than Peter and she had doted on her older brother. He, in turn, had always been protective toward her, and in childhood they had been as close as the print on a legal contract. Then at the age of nearly sixteen one summer Tara had gone out of his life.

When he’d told Genevieve what had happened to his sister and that they had come to accept that she was dead—perhaps after some sexual predator or psychopath had abducted her and buried her body in a secret place—she had quickly understood what a mighty storm this was in his heart; that the experience had almost been enough, but not quite, to petrify a feeling inside of him. Tara was occasionally mentioned in passing, and Genevieve had always listened calmly whenever he spoke about her, knowing that even his sister’s name had been a plug, a cork to a reservoir of hurt that should be faced but never would be.

Tara’s name had occasionally surfaced in conversation with the children’s grandparents perhaps if they opened a family photo album; or referenced if they wanted to locate a particular time in the family’s history. But it was always a name that flared for a second or two and was ushered on, a spark from a burning log watched briefly for its danger and allowed to smoke out.

Tara was very smart, pretty, and intriguing, and she left a lot of people her own age and older way behind. She had a cool look about her: an unsettling calm, and nut-brown eyes that blinked with intense appraisal. She had her own effortless style and she was genuinely interested in other people at an age when most teenagers were passionately devoted only to themselves. Boys and girls were drawn to her, but she didn’t need them. She was a natural leader, but one who didn’t want any followers. Tara came across as someone with an agenda lodged elsewhere: a private agenda, mysterious and esoteric.

It had been Peter who had introduced her to Richie Franklin, her boyfriend at the time of her disappearance. Peter and Richie had put together a rock-and-roll band, of sorts. Pete kept strict time on drums while Richie, with front-man ambitions on guitar, marshaled various hapless and mostly useless teenagers in and out of the band. Richie was someone who could forgive anyone for playing a wrong note, but not three.

They allowed Tara to come with them to watch their band play in pubs, or to see other

bands in clubs, to camp with them at rock festivals, to smoke a joint with them, to let her pretty face and shy smile help them gate-crash parties. She never cramped their style; on the contrary, without even knowing it her simple presence loaned them a radical and chic appeal that neither of the boys had naturally. She plugged them into something. If only she had a voice to go with it, Richie had said more than once.

All of which made the loss of this fey but exciting creature doubly hard to bear at the time. After she'd gone from their lives many people repeated clichés about her being too beautiful for this world. It was said too often and by too many. She was nearly sixteen when she'd been spirited away. Or rather, as it now seemed, spirited herself away.

At last there came the sound of a car horn, a double toot, Dell's little signature of arrival, something he always did when he came visiting. And this time he would have with him not just Mary but also Tara, the now semi-legendary Tara, not, after all, a corpse rotting in some shallow woodland grave but living and breathing, and not, after all, too beautiful for this world but, in the blink of a lizard's eye, a mere twenty years older without looking it.

Peter sat at the kitchen table with his head in his hands.

"Come on," Genevieve said. "Pull yourself together. Answer the door."

With a great heaviness like that of clanking chains, Peter pushed back his chair and hauled his large frame upright. He took a deep breath and made purposeful strides to the door, seizing the door handle at the same moment that a finger pressed the doorbell outside. The door stuck in the frame and he had to wrench it open, and there was Mary with bags stuffed full of Christmas gifts for the grandchildren she spoiled, and she was in, kissing his cheek and pushing past him. And there was Tara, again with that shy half-smile and her burgundy lips slightly puckered, that shy kink, an incomplete curlicue at the corner of her mouth; he'd seen it before many times but never noted it, and now it had him mesmerized. But his momentary trance was broken when they were propelled forward by Dell, bringing up the rear, going *chuff chuff chuff*.

"Lovely cottage," Tara said, kissing Peter.

"It's falling down. Come in and meet everyone."

"Is that door sticking again?" Dell said.

And then they were all crowded in the tiny hallway, Dell and Mary taking off their coats, the kids all bug-eyed at the mysterious Tara, the dogs trying to leap up at Mary and Dell.

"Tara," said Peter, "this is Genevieve."

Tara stepped forward. She cupped a hand on either side of Genevieve's face and gazed into her eyes. "I knew it," she said. "Beautiful. I knew he would find someone absolutely beautiful."

Genevieve blushed. Away from Tara, Zoe looked at Jack and pointed a finger down her own throat. Genevieve was still trapped by Tara's fingers resting lightly on her face. At last Tara dropped her hands and leaned in to press her lips to Genevieve's cheek.

"Let me take your coat," Genevieve said.

"So this is Zoe," Peter said. "And here is Jack, and Amber and Josie."

"Hi, Zoe. Hi, Jack. Hi, Amber. Hi, Josie. I'm Tara."

"We already know that," Josie said haughtily.

Tara turned her smile on Josie, who instantly retreated behind the living room door.

"Why do you wear dark glasses?" Amber said, reasonably.

"I have something wrong with my eyes," Tara said, and Amber seemed satisfied with that.

Genevieve ushered Tara through to the living room and waved Mary and Dell through after her.

"She's tiny!" Gen whispered to Peter. "And so young-looking!"

The next hour was taken up with the unwrapping of Mary and Dell's gifts and the merciful small talk that went with it. Tara helped Josie get her package open and congratulated Jack on his ratting, since, she said, she hated rats. She complimented Zoe on her taste in clothes and when Amber struggled to button up the new dressing gown her grandmother had brought for her she got down on her knees and buttoned it.

Though the kids all seemed to regard Tara as something akin to a unicorn, she easily charmed them. Peter noted how naturally she did that. It was always thus, he remembered. Though no one else but himself and his parents—plus Richie occasionally—saw the mood that sometimes stood in counterpoint to that effortless ability. *Yes, but there's a shadow*, he wanted to tell everyone.

She'd scrubbed up well, too. He didn't know how long she'd spent in the bath but she came up looking pink as a peeled prawn. All the grime had been washed away. Her hair had recovered its waves, and its chestnut sheen was there for all to admire as she tossed her head like a pony. The dirt had been scraped from under her fingernails. She used no cosmetics at all and her complexion was flawless.

She looked very good, and healthy enough, though a little tired. It was just that Peter knew that only someone barking mad would leave home without a word and then wash up at the door two decades later.

"I made a cake," Genevieve said, jumping out of her chair.

"I'll help you," Tara said.

Peter saw an opportunity to talk. "I'll come through, too."

Tara gently pushed him back into his seat. "Stay there, big brother. I want to bring you a cake."

He didn't know whether to resist. A glance from Genevieve told him to stay put.

"HE HATES ME NOW," Tara said, as Genevieve drew a big knife through her chocolate cake.

"He's confused, hurt, angry, puzzled, baffled, and above all he's been told he can't ask you any questions. But I know he still loves you."

"How do you know that?"

Genevieve sucked a sliver of cake from her thumb. "If he didn't love you, he wouldn't give a damn about any of it."

"Not only did I know he'd find someone beautiful, I knew he'd find someone very smart."

Genevieve took a step toward Tara. "You seem very nice to me. I think it's a time for honesty, not charm."

"That's fair. Very fair. I will talk and I will be honest. Right now I'm just trying to find a way to explain what happened. It's not as easy as you think. For one thing, when I tell him the truth he won't believe me and he will hate me even more than he does now. He'll despise me."

"I know him, and I know he won't despise you, whatever it is."

"Oh, yes he will. And you will, too. Though you may turn out to be my best hope. It

certainly not something I can tell Mum and Dad. In fact, I wouldn't even bother telling anyone, not a soul, except that certain people deserve to hear the truth, whether they believe it or not."

"Tara, I haven't the faintest idea of what you are talking about."

"Do you know his friend Richie?"

"I've never met him. He told me they had a falling-out before we met. They haven't spoken in all these years."

Tara put her hands to her face. "That would be my fault that they fell out. They were great friends. Before—"

"What happened, Tara? Why don't you just say in simple words what happened?"

The door opened. It was Mary. "Are you girls baking that cake, or what?"

CHAPTER FOUR

*Are you a witch
Are you a fairy?
Are you the wife
Of Michael Cleary?*

CHILDREN'S RHYME

FROM SOUTHERN TIPPERARY, IRELAND

New Year's Day. Tara promised to tell Peter everything on New Year's Day. Why? Peter had asked. Why couldn't she tell him there and then? She said because after she'd told him he wouldn't want to speak to her again, and that she'd wanted to get through Christmas for the sake of Dell and Mary. But, she promised, she would tell him all of it. Everything.

She asked if they could go for a walk together on New Year's Day through the Outwoods. He could bring Gen and the kids and the dogs. She pointed out that it used to be a great tradition in the Martin household. Dell, Mary, Peter, and Tara would always walk in the Outwoods, a couple of times with Richie, too, and always with Peter's terrier Nix.

"Where is Nix, by the way?" Tara had asked Peter.

"Hell, Tara, Nix died about fifteen years ago. Dad buried her in the garden in the rose bed."

"Oh, of course." Then Tara had cried bitterly.

"We had lovely roses come where we buried him."

"Don't."

The walks through the Outwoods had stopped after Tara had disappeared. It didn't seem right. There were more walks, but they went instead to Bradgate Park, where the spirit of Lady Jane Grey sighed in the ruins of her Elizabethan mansion, or up on Beacon Hill, with its Iron Age earthworks and its weird crags. The Outwoods forever carried the stamp of Tara's ghost. Peter had been sure for twenty years that she had haunted the place, and for some reason the sudden unpicking of that belief terrified him more than had Tara's ghost. Now that she was alive he quickly had to review his ideas about hauntings. Perhaps living souls had greater phantom powers than the dead.

"She wants us all to go for a walk with her," he told Genevieve. "All of us."

"What, she thinks we can drag this lot out walking? Doesn't know much about teenagers, does she?"

"Says she's going to tell me everything."

"You should go alone."

"You want to come?"

"I'd like to. I'd like to hear what it is she has to say. But I've got a feeling it ought to be

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