

The Sad and Bloody Stones of Kerrigan's Keep

by

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When I was much younger, I'd not been a believer. My universe articulated quite nicely, organized and comprehensible. But yes, stories abounded with shadows slouching through the dark places. History brims with such tales. I'd seen these stories as guideposts, beckoning fingers enjoining me to youthful adventures, no more than secret maps to locations far

off-trail. I've gone to many such places, when I was younger. I'm different now.

When my great uncle was just a boy from Oranmore, a village outside Galway, he had been detained by leprechauns. Or so the family story goes. He had climbed into the cellar of an old stone cottage, a place he had been told not to go. When he attempted to exit at his mother's call to dinner the little people emerged from the walls and stopped him. When finally they'd allowed him to leave, midnight had come and gone. He received a terrible whipping. Not solely for climbing into the abandoned cellar, but for lying and blaming the leprechauns.

All his life he never wavered in his claim, until even when on his deathbed, well into his 80s, he grabbed his son's collar to pull him close. "It's all true," he said with his very last breath.

This is a family story. My great uncle's generation believed it. My parents' generation nodded and winked; some gave it a tolerant chuckle. As for my generation, they forgot. But not me, I did not forget.

I'd found an old book years before. It would be dishonest for a story's sake to refer to this book as if it had the appearance of a grimoire or some arcane hornbook. Poor taste to imply that it was bound in some suspiciously soft and fine leather. It wasn't. The book, still sitting on my shelf, is

clothbound with a time-dulled acorn-squash and tan cover. Tendrils of fraying threads snake from the spine. A squat crudely drawn map of Ireland, much wider than tall, extends oddly from the inside cover across the first page.

As distorted as the map clearly was, it still held clues to what I looked to find, interesting and little-seen places. That is to say, guideposts toward the locations with stories attached. History that insisted on being heard. History that refused to die. Not that I ever expected to find anything as much as experience a place where a story got its start. And if there were anywhere in the world where these stories would enrich my experience, it would be the Old Sod where bits of my DNA swirled through the island's blood.

"We're gonna find such cool shit there, I might just stay," I said. Drawing my thumbnail across my upper lip, I swiped away the foam from my last quaff of Guinness. I already felt the spirit.

Brad nodded, smiling, then took his own deep gulp of stout. "That part's up to you. I just want to go to Ireland and see some of that cool shit you keep talking about." He swept his pint glass toward the open book sitting on the varnished tabletop. "So, let's plan."

The map had long since faded into the page, contrasting weakly with the time-yellowed paper. The pub's hanging Tiffany

lamps, designed with harps, shamrocks, and brass-buckled high hats -- Ireland's own cultural invasion -- spread colored shadows through the violet clouds of tobacco smoke. Spinning the book toward me, I squinted at the hand-penned town names. This was not the first time we'd spoken about the goal, and a name that seemed to rise again.

I'd been open about my great uncle's story and gave the supernatural aspects of the trip a nod. I downplayed it, so as not to seem off, but the fact is that I talked about hauntings and fey all through our plans. Brad never really took it seriously. And that was fine. But I wanted to see...something. And ghosts stories were the easy to find. But I wasn't interested in the fleeting shadow of a widow's spirit watching from a high window, or the shadowy wisps of some eternal wedding party gliding along garden paths. I found myself drawn to something more.

"Somewhere in there," I said, jabbing at the map between the names Kinvarra and Ballyvaughn, "Kerrigan's Keep. I still vote for Kerrigan's Keep."

At a time in Ireland when all that was needed to be a king was a castle and someone to fight, Kerrigan built his battlements on the Atlantic coast and quickly got to the business of bloodshed. During a treaty negotiation at his castle, Kerrigan murdered a visiting king and all his

gallowglass retainers. Then he had his men inter the bodies under the floor stones in the keep and conceal the treachery of his actions.

A tale unforgotten is still a tale for today. It is said that across the centuries their murders at the hands of Kerrigan's men has served to bind those fallen to the earth. Exorcists and adventurers sought out the Keep and the souls trapped within. For each that disturbed the uneasy resting place, the slain gallowglasses rose up in red-hot hatred. They assaulted careless adventurers, and those few that managed to escape death fell to madness. But if eyeless sockets cannot clearly discern friend from foe, the dead should be forgiven for that. Although now I see mercy for the living may be too much to ask even of those who have conquered death.

Storytellers recounting the tale of Kerrigan's Keep must have changed the details down through the centuries. It is something the Irish do. But even so, the Keep is there, and something did happen inside. The book said things still happen today. I dismissed the hyperbole.

"Kerrigan's Keep it is!" he said. We saluted Kerrigan with raised pint glasses.

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We rendezvoused in Paris and left by car for Ireland. Somewhere along the way La Manche became the English Channel,

then beyond to the Straits of Saint George and the Irish Sea. Finally, the car rolled down the iron ramps in Ireland, leaving the sleek-hulled catamaran behind for Dublin's cobbled streets.

A large banner fluttered over the departure ramp, "Fáilte!" it welcomed in runic lettering. Ireland has experienced a reawakening of interest in its culture, from the inside as well as out. In spite of finding ourselves one car in a long line of tourists, the douane officer told me, "Welcome home," as he returned my passport.

We drove to town and walked along the waterfront while waiting for the banks to open their exchange bureau. Delivery trucks, or lorries now I suppose, rumbled along cobbled streets. Drivers, whose hats slung at precise angles sat close to their scalps, lugged huge trays of steaming bread or dented aluminum kegs. And everywhere English transformed to music by the brogue.

"Oh, man, look at that," Brad said. A slow-moving line snaked along the sidewalk. "We should've come by the bank right away. Let's go."

The sudden and unexpected crush of tourists at the exchange bureau promised to keep us in line for over an hour. But we had only just arrived in Ireland and so I for one felt no need to rush.

"We'll be out of town soon enough," I said. "Outside the city it'll be better. Stick with the plan. Stick with the plan." For me just being in Ireland held magic. I didn't need more.

Once we folded our handfuls of new Irish Punts into our wallets we went directly to a tiny corner restaurant. The tables were chock-a-block and the air surprisingly thick with American, British, and French accents. I'd come for Gaelic and found all but that.

After a heavy Irish Breakfast, we took the winding road west toward Limerick. Outside of Rosslare we saw directions to the new John Fitzgerald Kennedy Arboretum. The world loves JFK, and the Irish would beatify him if they could. Later, entering Limerick, we drove along the reconstructed battlements of King John's Castle. The ancient battlements, fortified with muzzled cannon, brooded over the city, glaring across the River Shannon. This had been one of the last strongholds of British rule in the Republic, and yet the Irish have rebuilt it as well. For the tourists.

Ireland's roads were not designed to accommodate the number of cars descending from the Continent. Each town and attraction funneled traffic to the main arteries where movement tended to slow to a halt.

"This isn't what I expected," I said, tapping my claddagh ring against the steering wheel.

"I don't know, man. Maybe we want to stop at a few of the sights along the way? It's better than slogging from one traffic jam to the next." Brad wrestled with a map, refolding to a new section up the coast.

"I think we ought to stick with the plan for now," I said. "We might not find Kerrigan's right off. And that's the goal."

"We're here and blowing past a lot of things looking for some ruins we don't even know still exist or not."

I didn't respond immediately. He was right, I knew that. Peering ahead for some break in the jam, I saw little respite through the exhaust and noise. "We can see whatever we want on the way back."

He groaned, frustrated with the traffic or my response, I couldn't tell. Double-decked tour busses stopped in the road or no, I focused on keeping the car rolling ahead as best I could.

In early afternoon we pulled up to the Cliffs of Mohar. Past the crowded souvenir shop, we hung our heads over the granite precipice above the sea. Fog-laden winds blew in from the Atlantic where the cliffs redirected them into a vertical river of heavy cloud, as if a rent had opened in reality. Wheeling seagulls faded in and out of the mist like fey voyagers through curtains between worlds. In those moments Kerrigan's Keep felt very close. I sent postcards of the cliffs from the kiosk on the way out, of course. It's what you do.

For the rest of the afternoon we hugged the coast road until arriving at the freshly painted town of Ballyvaughn. Here we took our second stop, for food, directions, and a campsite. I'd thought the final leg to the Keep might be on the following day. Then we got a break.

We pulled into a restaurant just before a group of masked Japanese tourists took the remaining tables. When I mentioned Kerrigan's, the waiter that served us the steamed fish and potatoes knew exactly where we needed to go.

"Sure I know where is the Keep. 'Tis a dark place people should've left alone," he said as he placed a pint of black porter in front of each of us.

Brad snorted. "We better find something after missing all we missed."

"We've come a long way." I told him. "Too far to turn back now." I waited for more of the story from the waiter, but he just stood there. After taking a long swallow of stout, I continued: "We want to see for ourselves if the story about..."

"I know well the story," he interrupted, nodding his head. For a moment he fixed his gaze on me. "I see the very map of Ireland in your face, boyo. Don't go there."

I looked over at Brad, who wolfed down his fish, and back to the waiter. Something twisted through the pit of my stomach, and the porter I emptied into myself never seemed to hit bottom.

“It’s close I’d guess?” I said. I’d hoped to change the tone and coax out a little more information.

“Go home,” he said. “Go home and keep your dreams intact. What’s happened there is a terrible sin.”

At that point, and with some relief, I knew we were talking about the same place. “All that was a long time ago. Whatever sin happened, at some point it has to die.”

“You’d think.” The waiter wiped his hands before looking at me again. “You don’t want to go there.”

I watched him move away through the small table-crowded restaurant, blending back into the brouhaha. “What the fuck was that?”

“What the fuck was what?” Brad asked. He reached for his pint.

I told him what the waiter said, that the Keep was dangerous and we shouldn’t go there.

“Whatever. I don’t even care anymore if there really are ghosts. As long as we finally stop long enough to see something on this trip.”

The more I thought about it, the less I wanted to let a stranger frighten me with vague worries about sin. He’d probably gone back to the kitchen and laughed with his buddies.

Later, the dreary gray sky seemed to reach down and press against our shoulders as we pitched the tent. We set up camp in

a tiny patch of lawn squeezed between two in-town houses, crammed amid dozens of other gaudy, nylon dome and A-frame tents. Heavy mist had soaked us both to the skin by the time we crawled inside and zipped away the night.

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In the morning, we wandered through the small village to a tea-room with a huge gravel parking lot. A tour bus had just pulled in and disgorged whorls of huddled Japanese tourists from the night before. They all wanted scones and Irish breakfast tea, leaving the espresso machine free for us. We gulped hot coffee and hurried back to the car.

Between the map and the back-handed encouragement from the waiter, I felt confident we would find the old castle. We drove away from Ballyvaughn and into the surrounding hills. The road got smaller the farther into the Burren we pressed, and lonelier.

Ireland rolled to the sea in great fractured slabs of stone and tumbles of shattered boulders. Anchored in scattered pockets of topsoil, brave trees bent to the perpetual wind from the ocean in twisted, hunching shapes. Clouds of heavy mist scuttled over the stone across this remnant of Ireland's spectacular desolation.

Away from the crowds, away from the busses and traffic, far from the pandering, the Burren seemed immune to the invasion

from the outside world. And there rose the lichen-covered tower of Kerrigan's Keep. As we rolled through the foothills, it dipped beneath the mist-bathed horizon, to jut into view again as we topped the next rise. As if the keep heaved in and out of time.

And then we drove up to the sign.

"Welcome to Kerrigan's Keep," it proclaimed in bold green lettering. "Come see the haunted Castle!"

For me this seemed the final, crushing disappointment. The garish sign a blasphemy against the rocky land and the stony walls of the keep.

"Shit, Brad," I said, "so much for that."

"Come on, man. It's a castle." He tilted in close to the windshield.

At that moment I realized that I had been following a quest while Brad had been on vacation. And in a large way, we had both failed. "Maybe, but so much for being lost and off the beaten trail."

As we pulled close to the goal I'd held so long, my heart thumped hard against my ribs. At least Kerrigan's Keep did exist, very much as I had pictured it. Very much as I had pictured it, a crumbling tower alone in the broad expanse of shattered landscape. Tumbles of building stones scattered away from the long-fallen outer castle walls.

Only there was more. We found the ruins flanked by a new asphalt parking lot, souvenir shop, and soft ice-cream stand. We parked in the still empty lot and wandered toward a corrugated aluminum ticket booth. A Sky News truck, generator running, was parked near a Grand Opening sign.

There was a ten-punt entry fee, expensive but we paid. After the freckle-faced girl stuffed our bills into a shiny new strongbox, she smiled. She pointed toward a hole in the stone wall. Steps descended into shadows within the Keep.

"Right through there, with ye," she said. "Don't be too afraid." She smiled for us.

Brad leaned forward. "Just how scary is it inside?" he asked, clearly flirting with the Irish girl.

"Oh, it's not for the likes of me down there," she said. She produced a dramatic shudder following up with a wink.

Brad ate it up.

The steps disappeared downward into darkness. Maybe the same darkness I'd been searching for since before we'd ever left home.

My hand slid down a shiny handrail affixed to the old stone walls. Fresh mortar showed white in the gaps between the rocks of the tunnel wall. A deep-red glow suffused the approaching chamber, lit as if not to disturb sleeping bats. Our rubber-soled hiking boots squeaked on the time-polished granite steps.

Despite my preparation for this descent, when the rumbling began my footsteps faltered. And when the moaning started, I stopped outright. Shaking built up strong in my arms and legs until I had to grip the rail to stay on my feet. I saw Brad had stopped too. As we exchanged glances my breath hissed through my clenched teeth. I could have turned around then. But I didn't.

"What the hell..." Brad gripped the railing with both hands. "That ain't fake." He turned and bounded up the flight of steps, leaving a "Come on!" in his wake.

Me, I couldn't turn back. When I found myself alone on the descent, I felt the history of Ireland waited below. In hindsight I can't be sure what frightened me most, but it drew me on. Something wanted to see me. And my feet seemed to take those final steps of their own accord.

They were still boiling from the earth when I reached the bottom of the stairway. Stones flew through the air and crashed against a thick barrier of plexiglass erected between our world and theirs.

Waves of hatred and despair washed over me from those expressionless bone faces. Rusted weapons pulverized and skeletons fell to dust battering against the barrier wall. Those warriors reintegrated to hurl themselves at it again. They were prevented from enacting terrible vengeance only by the thick plexiglass barrier. Recoiling, I watched the cycle of

disintegration and resurrection roil impotently against the plastic. I watched until I wept.

My great uncle had been true all along. The fey existed. Most had left a changing world, but a few we'd chased down.

And no, before you ask, they did not frighten me, those ember-eyed revenants. I stood watching them, my fingertips pressed against the plexiglass wall. I was acutely aware of the banners snapping outside the refurbished keep, the flickering shadows of bloody neon glow within. The scents of time and mortar filled my head. I would have released the warriors if I could. Freeing them would have been right. A world guilty of betraying such devotion and honor, more powerful than the passage of time, did not deserve them.

I turned away from the onslaught against the barrier. I mounted the stairway as a tourbus pulled into the Keep's new asphalt parking area. The Japanese tourists from the village had arrived. With their mouths covered by cotton air filters and with cameras swinging from neck tethers, they flowed past me as if I wasn't there. In the darkness below, the viewing chamber soon filled with their chattering and the whirring of electronic cameras. That cacophony almost -- *almost* -- drowned the frenzy from beyond the wall.

As I exited the keep the pounding on the plexiglass grew louder. I pondered my own betrayal in leaving them there,

ensnared. Their anguished devotion, that transcended even time, exploited for greed and trapped in a plastic cage. I still hear them pounding. And I fear I always will.

The End