

The Greatcoat – Katja’s Story

Did I ever tell you, my dear grandchildren
About the Irish soldier who came upon me
Shaking with brimming fear and icy cold
In the harsh rain on a road in war-torn Serbia?
I was separated from my parents, but huddled
Amongst a rag-taggle band of lowly refugees
Fleeing from fierce fighting and starvation.
His cohort thundered along that rutted road
In boots that surely had stormclouds in them
With the noise that rattled the forest trees.
Our group hurried to the side of the track
And cowered in fear and blank submission.
One of the men broke away from his ranks
And cast a fitful eye upon my presence;
I shrunk further into the group in apt terror.
But he smiled as he took off his greatcoat
Wrapped it around my bone-thin shoulders;
I had not even the breath then to thank him.
It wasn’t until many days later, as we rested
That I found his wire-framed spectacles
In a soft leather pouch in a coat pocket
That my short arms could barely reach into.
There was also a notebook full of writing
That I couldn’t read as it was a foreign script
But still proved magnetic to my curious eyes.
I would wear the spectacles, though too large;
They slid down my nose and fell off my ears
Until a woman tore a rag and tied them on me.
The coat was huge and it dragged along the road
But at night it cocooned my whole frail body.
After the war and re-uniting with my parents
I went back to school and learnt English tongue
So that I may read the words of my saviour.
I discovered he was a poet of the blessed soil
Who often wrote of his home in faraway Ireland.
I dreamt of visiting, but it proved too far for me,
To say thank-you to the man who gave me my life.
My end now nigh, wrap the greatcoat around me
Let me lie in the soil, shallow, with the Sun’s rays
And caress of rain to be felt on my reposed face;
My Irish soldier’s greatcoat, keeping me warm.

Francis Ledwidge, on a road in war-torn Serbia, generously gave his greatcoat to an unknown girl, amongst a group of refugees on the roadside as they were passing. The poem takes that story and speculates what may have happened to that girl, whom I have called ‘Katja’.

John Llewellyn James