

The Home Farm



A steady drizzle seeps across the island of Inishmore, soaking into an already sodden earth and choking the soil beneath. Wet fields and wet sky merge so easily together that the horizon is lost far beyond the curve of the earth.

And there sits the simple whitewashed cottage where my father grew up, nestling forlornly in the Fermanagh mist where giant beeches provide only temporary shelter from the elements. One hundred and sixty years of history were secreted within the walls of that modest, working class dwelling, home to ten children in my father's day and undoubtedly many more in the years before.

The front door, which was really a back door and always the most used, opened with the turn of a stout key in an upside-down lock. This door opened into a parlour where eyes would need adjusting to the dimness of the light even on the brightest of days.

A delicious woody aroma hung in the air as peat spat and gurgled in a hearth big enough for a man to stand in. More than a few times my father had been known to cook a duck egg under the smoldering ashes while I would sit mesmerized by the bigness and greenness of such a tasty treat. As the fire roared anyone within a few feet away ran the risk of being roasted alive, but to move out only the smallest of distances would likely threaten hypothermia; there never seemed to be any middle ground in that house where electricity was an unaffordable indulgence.

The parlour, even in its simplicity, was a feast for the eyes. Above the mantelpiece hewn roughly from an old oak tree, hung a double barrel shotgun. Horse brasses rested neatly in a row along the mantel shelf and an old crock swayed on a blackened hook hanging mysteriously from somewhere up the chimney. On the back wall stood more evidence of my grandfather's handiwork; a yellowing dresser, bursting with willow patterned plates that were chipped and cracked from years of use.

The only natural light came from a single window near the door, and only when the last vestige of daylight had faded would the mantle of the paraffin lamp be lit. This mantle was treated like a piece of gold by the adults, and children tampered with it at their peril.

It was not the only thing inside the house we children were warned about. For

many years I had been intrigued by a little door in the back hallway which was always securely locked. There was only one occasion when I was finally deemed to be 'responsible enough' for my father to allow me to venture up there with him.

It opened on to a set of stairs leading up to the attic where a makeshift dividing wall had, in the past, split the area into two bedrooms. I followed instructions to avoid the rotting wooden boards beneath my feet and was taken to a place near the chimney breast that felt both warm and damp at the same time. A strange odour permeated the still air and, the room was pitch black save for the light of my father's torch. Suddenly I saw what seemed like a hundred pairs of eyes staring at me through the gloom. Bats. My father waited a few seconds before guiding me back to the staircase. We never spoke of it again but it was a moment I treasured: me, my dad and the bats and not another soul to share the moment.

It always seemed strange that here were so many restrictions put on us within the house, because outside we were free to explore the twenty-six acres of land. Being the youngest I was often left alone in the bog during a game of hide-and-seek when my brother and sister thought it funny to scarp back to the house without telling me. There was the swamp where we captured newts in the summer and Lough Barry where we fished using improvised hooks attached to maggots dug from the silo. My sister and I galloped across fields on imaginary steeds, flying over ditches and landing in sheughs.

But most of all there was the silence. As a small child I would strain my ears to hear even the distant sound of a dog's bark or gentle mooing of cattle in a far-flung field, but the only noise to break the silence was the sound of wood being chopped in an out-house, accompanied by and my father's whistling.

At the end of a day when the timber had been stacked in the wood shed, I had carved yet another boy's initials on one of the trees and the smell of my mother's stew enticed us back indoors, we would gather together in the parlour. After supper I would be sent reluctantly to the bed I shared with my sister which was hard and lumpy and inevitably freezing. Later on in the evening she would join me and I took great comfort in snuggling into her back for warmth before finally falling asleep.

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