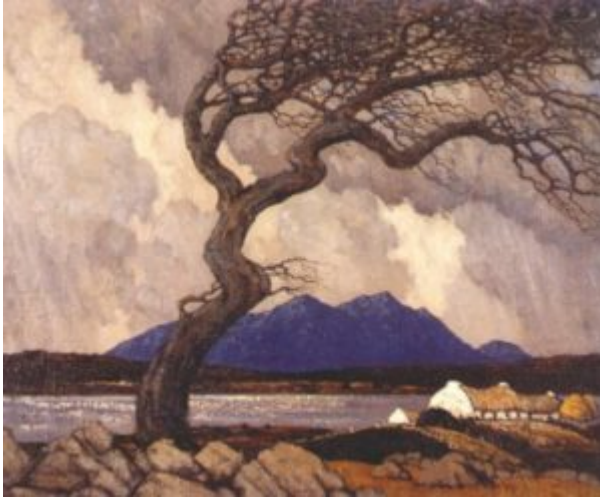


Old Arthur



I was four years old when I went to spend Halloween on the island with my Great Aunt Catherine. Old Arthur lived in the house too. He wasn't a relation, but a neighbouring man who had become so disabled with arthritis that Aunt Catherine had taken him to live with her. Old Arthur sat in the corner caring for the hearth, with its open fire. This was his kingdom; a pot of boiling water ready for tea at all hours of the day and night.

But his real talent was as a storyteller.

My favourite story was about the Fairy Tree on the hill behind the house. Old Arthur would take his stick and we would slowly walk to the bottom of the hill while he recounted how the fairies could be seen dancing round it on moonlit nights and, how they flew with the souls of the blessed up to heaven. These were the good fairies that took care of the island but, he always warned, we must never touch the fairy tree or bad things would happen.

Did you really see the fairies, Old Arthur?

Course I did. Little they were, all shiny with white dresses. Just like as if they were wearing cobwebs. And, look, some mornings you can find a little scrap of a dress caught on the branches.

I looked and looked every morning when I got up but I never found a sign of the fairies.

On Halloween night the cottage filled with neighbours. My aunt baked all day with me helping to decorate the apple tarts. Only one would have the silver sixpence hidden in it. Whoever found the sixpence in their slice would marry within the year, or, if already married, then great good fortune would surely come. I thought it might be me as I tried to remember which apple tart it was in!

Soda bread was griddled over the fire and Boxty fried with dripping. Lakes of tea were consumed. I was spoiled with little gifts of fruit and sweets; it was like Christmas, only better. Someone produced a fiddle, Old Arthur took

out his tin whistle, and the singing began. I was asked to show off my new Irish dancing skills. I had only just begun to learn but I hopped around the floor doing my 'One, Two, Threes' to calls of *Great girl! Good on ye!*

As the night drew darker the mood turned to talk of those who had passed. A bottle of whiskey was opened then, and glasses handed round. I was given a small glass of a dark blackcurrant liquid, sweet and thick on the tongue. It made me sleepy and my aunt wrapped a rug round me and took me onto her lap.

Old Arthur settled in his armchair beside the roaring fire and the tales of spirits walking the night began.

A house, just like the one we're in, was having a Halloween night, just like we are, he began. Everyone was in good spirits, just like we are. Then, a loud knock at the door. He lifted his blackthorn stick and smote the hearthstone once.

"Who can that be?" they asked. "Everyone on the island is here in this house tonight. Who would take out a boat to cross the Lough on All Souls night, of all nights?" Then it came again. Two ringing blows, louder than the first. Not a sinner dared to answer the door. They all listened but there was not a word from outside. Then... Old Arthur rained down three blows on the stone, At three knocks Paddy McMaguire stood up. "I can't stand it no longer," he shouted. The others pleaded with him to sit down but nothing would do him but he'd go for the door.

I drew the rug up to my eyes hardly daring to listen to the rest. *McMaguire stands a moment behind the door and then ... he flings it open. Old Arthur took a long, slow sip from his glass. Silence reigned, we waited. First he doesn't see it. The thing that had knocked. Then, it floats towards him. A bloody hand.*

People gasped and I heard a woman say, *The Hand!*

Aye, said old Arthur, *The Hand it was. The bringer of death.*

I never heard the end of this story; at this point my aunt lifted me and carried me up to her bedroom. I sank into the middle of the vast feather mattress. *Don't pay Old Arthur's stories any attention. Sure he makes it all up. There's nothing for you to be afeared of.* She sang to me softly as I slipped away into a land of dancing fairies and floating hands.

Sometime during the night I half woke to the sound of people talking, furniture being moved about; there was a sweet smell that reminded me of the church on Sundays.

The next morning my aunt woke me with my favourite mug full of warm milk and a slice of soda bread. She pushed my hair out of my sticky eyes and began: *It was a good night last night, wasn't it?*

I nodded as I drank the milk, running my tongue over my lips to get the last drops.

Old Arthur was in great form. The very best I've seen him for a long time. She took me out of the bed and sat me on her knee. She started to brush my hair.

Well, last night, it was his time to go. So, the angels came and took him to heaven. He'll be happier up there. She turned me to look at my face.

You mean the fairies came for him? Can he still see us?

Better than that! Look, he has given you something to keep for him.

From her apron pocket she took out the silver sixpence and placed it carefully in my hand. Now, you have to take great care of this for him. He wants you to have the good fortune it brings.

I was bundled into my clothes and my aunt walked me to the landing where a neighbour was waiting with the boat. She hugged me and whispered; Say a wee prayer for us all.

The boat pushed off and, as we rounded the shoreline, I saw the fairy tree on the hill. And there, fluttering like a tiny flag in the early morning sunlight, was a small piece of a white fairy dress.

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