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Four days after the escape

Biddie Tynan stood in a soft morning mist with her nose stuck to the keyhole of the red kitchen door belonging to the farmhouse of Bab Treacy, her neighbor and best friend, for all their sixty-seven years. Capturing the warm aroma of fresh baked rhubarb tart, she knew instantly that she'd won last night's argument. Rhubarb tart was Biddie's favorite sweet. It was as close to an apology as she'd ever get from the mule-headed likes of Barbara Concepta Marie Treacy. Snuggling her nose against the keyhole, Biddie savored the sweet and sour scent of victory.

That Biddie and Bab had quarreled was hardly unusual. Best friends were bound to disagree now and again, especially two widows like themselves, who had spent their whole lives doing what the other was doing. In fact, ever since they'd been able to crawl, neighbors referred to them as two peas in a pod. Biddie dearly liked being two peas in a pod with Bab, though for many years, it seemed as if she was the lesser of the two peas. Bab had always been taller, prettier, smarter, the first married (although they had both married lads named Tim), and the only one of them to bear a child. (Bab had even beaten out Biddie in miscarriages, four to two.) For the longest time, it bothered Biddie greatly to be the barren one. But with each passing day, Bab's son, Mattie Joe, grew into the devil himself, and Biddie long ago stopped considering herself the lesser of the two peas.

Last evening's row had been over utter nonsense, in Biddie's opinion. Who cared if there were faeries living beneath the scrawny blackthorn, known as the Rag Tree, growing upon a small knoll at the edge of the Treacy farm? Not Biddie, and she had said as much to her superstitious old fool of a best friend, too. Anyway, she'd won. The rhubarb tart was proof of that.

The long and short of the Rag Tree of Bamford Cross story was, if someone were to tie a scrap of cloth to the tree and make a worthy wish, that wish would come true, if and when the rag fell to the ground. Down through the years, people were after claiming cures for all classes of ills and diseases as well as changes in personal fortunes, all on account of the Rag Tree. Biddie figured that half of these claims were bunk, and the other half were due to good Catholics having their prayers answered. For her money, Biddie would rather put her chances with a good Padre Pio relic.

Throughout the parish, Bab Treacy was known as "the Faery Woman of Bamford Cross" because she knew all there was to know about the old spirits and even older legends. To hear Bab tell it, she was the "guardian" of the Rag Tree, so entrusted by the Daoine Maithe themselves to keep away all trespassers. Daoine Maithe, meaning Good Folk, was the proper Irish term for the faeries. Bab said the words "faeries" and "little people" were disrespectful terms. Little people, good people, it mattered not a tuppence to Biddie. She pulled her nose from the red door's keyhole just long enough to peer over at the tree with its strange collection of rags that reminded her of Joseph's coat of many colors, torn to shreds and hung out to dry. She'd half a mind to hang a wishing rag herself, if it would help Bab to cease believing in such mindless superstition. It would be one less source of contention between them.

In Biddie's view, it didn't take much to be deemed a trespasser at the faerys' Rag Tree. She'd seen Bab chase away old men with canes, on account she didn't trust the look of the dog that followed them.

Why just last evening Biddie *herself* had been declared a trespasser, and she hadn't even gone near the blasted tree. She very carefully rubbed a finger over the wound on her neck where Bab had smacked her with a spatula. It still stung to the touch. She couldn't be too angry with her best friend, though. Bab was always a bit more irritable when Mattie Joe was away, and the lousy drunken creature had been gone now for a fortnight, no doubt boozing it up and chasing loose women. But loneliness didn't suit some people, and arguing with them when they were in such a state was to take one's own chances. So, in a way, Biddie only had herself to blame for getting smacked with the spatula. Taking a final, satisfying whiff of the rhubarb tart, she stepped through the red door. "Fine day," she said.

Bab stood hunched at the cooker, frying eggs. "It's raining," she said, not bothering to turn and offer a "hello." Bab was wearing her familiar blue, flowered housedress. Unlike Biddie, her best friend had never taken to the styles of the day; you'd sooner see the Pope in a pair of jeans than you would catch Bab wearing a bit of denim. A blue ribbon tied back Bab's chestnut hair, which somehow had defied turning grey. Biddie herself had turned to the bottle years before. She now was a Summer Sunset blonde.

"Mind you don't make that egg too runny," Biddie cautioned. Then she hastily added, "Please," when she saw Bab gripping down on the lethal spatula.

Bab said nothing, rather she let the clang of the spatula against the fry pan announce her mood. Biddie shouldn't have had to tell Bab how to cook her egg at all; but going back nearly a year now, Bab had taken to cooking the eggs a bit runny, as she used to do for her husband. Sometimes Bab would put a piece of black pudding on Biddie's plate, too. It was Bab's Tim who had liked the black pudding, not Biddie, though she'd swallow it just to keep the peace. She didn't like eating someone else's eggs, though.

The *Irish Independent* lay on the table next to Biddie's cup of tea. "Oh, Bab! Did ye read Hennessy this morning, no? He says that the Taoiseach is giving away free tickets over the Internet to the Rock 'n Nua concert. Would you believe that there's going to be a rock concert just up the road at Kilkenny Castle?"

Bab switched her attention from the fry pan to the sausages warming on the cooker, as if she hadn't heard a word Biddie had just said.

Biddie shook the wrinkles from the newspaper and read, "The O'Hanrahan government hopes its spectacular Rock 'n Nua concert music will be the magnet that brings together tens of thousands of Irish young people in support of the Eire Nua. By no coincidence, the concert is scheduled just one week prior to the initiative vote, now only three weeks away."

Bab stood over the table holding the still steaming teakettle. Her face, beet red from a lifetime of working the farm in harsh Irish winters, held proud and square, like one of Ireland's castles. "We won't be able to go to any concert, Biddie Tynan. We'll be home calming the cows. The rock music would deafen a bat. Heat up your tea?"

Biddie held up her cup. "Bats are already deaf," she said.

Bab shot her a hard look. "Are you starting with me already, Biddie Tynan? Bats are blind, not deaf."

The dust of last night's row still clung to Bab. Then again, Bab had not poured the tea over Biddie's hands, nor had she flipped over the table—sure signs that Biddie and her best friend were well along the path to reconciliation. Wasn't the rhubarb tart cooling on the windowsill, after all?

"C'mon, Bab. We're not too old to go to any concert. Why Hennessy says here that Mick Mulvihill himself is coming out of retirement, just for this one night. You were mad for Mick

Mulvihill once, remember?" Bab dropped a plate of fried eggs, rashers, sausages, and beans onto the table with a clatter.

"I remember more about Mick Mulvihill than I want to admit," she said, wringing her hands hard inside an apron already dotted with smudges of the morning's earlier wringings. "I remember in the '60s Mick Mulvihill singing songs for the working man. In the '70s, he sang to free the oppressed peoples in the North. In the '80s, he sang for the hunger strikers. But devil the song about the troubles or the workingman or the republican movement you've heard from him since. Now he's after singing for Eire Nua. I tell you this, Biddie Tynan," Bab drew her hands out of her apron, and up into the air went the condescending index finger that Biddie detested. Bab's voice trembled at the edge of fever pitch. "Mick Mulvihill has always been and always will be on the front end of any down wind. I wouldn't walk as far as your farmhouse to hear the likes of Mick Mulvihill sing one of his protest songs, because by the time I got back to my own house, he'd be singing a song for the other side—if that's where the money was."

Her proclamation over, Bab sat down to a breakfast of grilled tomatoes and mushrooms—to lower her cholesterol, she claimed, though Biddie suspected high blood pressure, too. How else could one account for such an ill temper?

"But Bab, Mick Mulvihill hasn't been singing about anything, let alone the republican movement. He's after having been in alcohol and drug rehabilitation for the better part of two years. Besides, he's a legend, so. And you used to love his songs."

Bab had moved to the sink where she began banging around the pots and pans as she scrubbed. "What else does Hennessy have to say?" Bab asked, with the barest hint of a civil tone.

"Well, he goes on a bit about the escape from the Maze and the aftermath. The death toll is up to two, what with that poor detective being shot in Dublin yesterday. That's not counting the dead cat found in Lisburn, of course. The papers are suggesting there is some connection."

"Don't waste my time on the sidebar stories; I'm after asking what Hennessy has to say. Could you not stick to the point?"

Biddie hid her face behind the newspaper and heaved a heavy sigh. "Hennessy says that the captured IRA man named Liam Riordon is now sitting naked in Portlaoise gaol. He says Riordon is a symbol for the republican movement in the New Ireland."

"Naked IRA men? I thought they gave up on that sort of caper years ago."

"Well, apparently this Riordon fellow thought he'd give the prison nudity thing another go, on account of the Eire Nua referendum. I'll skim Hennessy, so. 'Riordon...fighting for a nebulous dream of an even more nebulous freedom...sits isolated—just as Ireland...a small nation haunted by its past...sits alone and hopes that other nations will come and invest in her economical freedom...'" Biddie folded up the newspaper. "You're right as rain, Bab. I don't think the IRA should have that man on protest when Ireland is trying to promote Eire Nua to foreign investors. It's a harmful distraction, altogether."

"What are you talking about, Biddie Tynan? The oppressed people of the north can't afford to miss the opportunity to gain notoriety for their struggle while the whole world has its eye on Ireland. Riordon is well within his rights to protest. I support him."

"Well, come to think of it, I can see the wisdom in what you're saying, Bab. I support Riordon being naked, too."

"I said I support his right to protest, not his deviant behavior of going naked."

"Oh, the IRA is full of deviants. You know I've always said that, Bab. What with this cavorting with the likes of Libyans and Russians. Deviants. That's what they are, sure. I've no time for the likes of them."

Bab spoke as she scrubbed away at the breakfast dishes. "Oh, so it's the Russians and the Libyans that make the freedom fighters deviants, is it? Well, did they call the men of 1916 deviants

for cavorting with Germans? And what about the Yanks? People have no trouble at all with taking guns and money from the Yanks. Sure, what's the difference where the bullet comes from? It's where the bullet ends up; that's the only thing that matters.”

The old creeping feeling of being the lesser of the two peas was coursing on Biddie’s bones, and there didn’t seem to be any escape from the pod this time. “Well, I've always been for the freedom fighters of the north, just not ones that go around protesting naked. You know that to be true, don't you, Bab?” she said, her voice becoming embarrassingly desperate. “And I suppose a gun from the Russians is no worse than a gun from Libya or America. Sure, a gun is a gun. That's what I've always said. Yes, a gun is a gun is a gun.”

Just when Biddie thought she needed a miracle to save her rhubarb tart from the contrary Bab, she got one, but not before getting an awful fright, too. Bab turned from the sink wielding her weapon of choice.

“Trespasser!” Bab barked. “Outside at the Rag Tree.” She then shoved the spatula into Biddie’s shaking hands. “Chase her off before she upsets the Daoine Maithe and brings bad luck on my house.”

Biddie wanted to say that it was more than a little late to keep bad luck away from the Treacy farmhouse, but she didn’t dare. She took the spatula and moved outside into the soft rain, wondering why it was that she always did what bossy Bab Treacy told her to do. In her view, the Good folk weren’t good at all. The wee shites caused nothing but hassle. “Shoo. Go away,” she called, waving the spatula at a pretty red-haired woman holding a camera and examining the Rag Tree. The bossy Bab hovered just inside the kitchen door grousing about how the Daoine Maithe didn’t like redheads. Nor did they like to have their picture taken. Biddie wondered what the Daoine Maithe did like.

The pretty redhead turned and pointed her camera toward Biddie. “Are you the Faery Woman of Bamford Cross? I’d like to take your picture.”

Oh no, you don’t want a pic— Before Biddie could finish her thought, Bab had snatched the spatula from her hand and charged the Rag Tree wielding her weapon like Teddy Roosevelt charging up San Juan Hill. She struck across the redheaded woman’s arm. Blood swelled over a white blouse.

“You cursed woman!” the redheaded woman cried, racing through the corn and away from the pursuing Bab, who now screamed chastisements at her for having bled over the Daoine Maithe.

Once Biddie was safe inside her kitchen, she considered how the redhead had called Bab a cursed old woman. Biddie wondered if the woman had said it out of anger, or did she really know about the curse of the O’Neills of Bamford Cross? This troubled Biddie down to the very last bite of the rhubarb tart.

Bab Treacy couldn’t catch up with the redhaired trespasser, and Biddie had gone home—which was all well and good, because who needed a so-called best friend who hadn’t the backbone of a snail? She tried walking the anger out of her head instead. Swallows sprayed out of the thicket of yellow gorse and violet rhododendron, at the crunch of her determined step. It wasn’t until she’d gone fully two hundred yards—all the way to Biddie’s lane—that she realized she wasn’t wearing a jumper to shield her from the soft day, which clung to her skin like tiny wet kisses.

Passing beneath a cluster of trees nearby the old yellow pump, where all the families in Bamford Cross used to come for their water in the days before indoor plumbing, she found her feet beginning to drag as if they’d minds of their own. Before she could reach the old meeting spot, her feet veered off onto a cow path, so she could avoid seeing the neighbors’ sideward glances or hear their patronizing “oh hellos.” There was nothing she hated worse than being treated as an object of pity by people who couldn’t wait until she was out of earshot before they started their gossiping. “Isn’t that the Faery Woman of Bamford Cross?” they’d say, or, “Oh, there goes poor John

O'Neill's daughter. Isn't it terrible about the curse of the O'Neills?" And because people always took pleasure in hearing about someone else's troubles, they would listen for the millionth time to the story of a cantankerous priest placing a curse on the O'Neills, on account of their believing more in the faery folk than in the Catholic Church. For three generations the eldest son would not survive the father, that's what the old priest had said.

Bab ended her walk atop the humpbacked bridge in the village of Bennettsbridge, where she looked below into swirling waters that long ago had swallowed her uncle and brother. If the curse were true, then Bab's Mattie Joe was next in line to go. But the people along the lane didn't know what they were talking about, she thought. There was no curse of the O'Neills. Her dead husband was proof of that.