Stones

Seán McPartlin

"Pat! Come ye out here to the yard. There's a job for ye!"

It was his father from outside down in the yard. Sometimes he pretended he had the headphones on and couldn't hear him.

"Pat! I've a job for ye, come on out—it needs the quad..."

He was getting cute in his old age.

Pat had been on at him for months to buy a quad bike—everyone had one these days. He was having none of it.

"We don't need one of them yokes. We haven't a flat field around the place. They're death traps, so they are. Sure, not a week goes by without some poor lad dying because he overturned one! It would surely end up in the ditch or down the bottom of the bog."

Eventually though, he relented, and Pat was delighted. He could see himself leaping the ditches and racing the lads. He should have known better. First thing Daddy said when it was delivered:

This is for farm work only, me laddo—not for you to be galivanting all over like...like... one of them rally drivers!"

He kept it in the old shed under a new lock, and he had the only key. He was keeping it safe from "them robbers from the North", but his intent was really to keep it out of reach of someone closer to home!

There was method in his madness, as usual. The only way Pat could get to ride the thing was if he used it for farm jobs, as his father wanted.

So, reluctantly, he went downstairs and out the back to the yard, where his father was waiting with that clever wee smile on his face. They both knew what was happening, but neither of them said anything.

"Ah, Pat—I was thinking ye was wearing them earphones. Right, son. You've seen the state of the ditch up at Peg's field? It's them construction lorries. If one's cut the corner, a dozen have, and we need to build it up again. Now, how do ye think we should do that?

He's was not asking advice, he was setting a test.

"I'd say we need stones, rocks, some aggregate, and build it all up with daub and hedging, making sure it's firm and secure—maybe a few posts in front of it for protection at first."

You would swear the old man was disappointed to agree.

"You're right. Good man! Now—where to get that stuff?"

"We could go up the quarry—they'll give us a good price."

He almost jumped on him.

"Not at all! God, no! Is it made of money we are?"

Pat shrugged. They always came to these moments. His Mammy said it was 'fathers and sons', but he wasn't like that with the brothers.

"Jeez, Patrick—there's stone lying all over these fields—why would we buy it?"
He wanted to say "To do the job properly," but he didn't. Obviously.

"Here's what ye do. I've the trailer wired up to the quad yoke. Go ye down to the Bartley house and load up any good sized stones ye can find. But don't take any from the hearth or chimney, and for God's sake watch what you're doing when ye move them. Ye don't want the whole house coming down on ye. Then we can go up tomorrow and build up that ditch.

There was no point arguing.

The Bartley house was down the hill past the Rynne's and over by the stream, between Baragh More and Drumnafaughnan. There was an old forestry track that would get him most of the way there. He would have to work out a way to cross the water. He could go up the top road and then the long way down through Greaghnaslieve and Tullyveame—but the fields he'd need to cross to get to the house wouldn't take the bike, they'd be more water than earth.

As he steered the quad and its trailer out of the yard, along the street, and down the gravel slope to the road, it felt like a kind of freedom. But he knew every task his father set him had an ulterior motive.

There was nobody about when he passed the Rynne's, and he fell to thinking about the Bartleys.

There were none left, Myles was the last to leave, in the 60s. The family were all far flung, the parents long dead. The house had been empty almost forty years before Pat was born, but, as was the way round Drumkeerin, the family were always mentioned in the present tense. A visitor listening would have few clues that they were fifty years away from the house. His daddy told tales about all of them, and his mammy always

had kind memories of the granny, Mary Kate.

So Pat had grown up knowing people in a family he had never met, and the Bartley house was a regular mention in conversations about old times, or to explain a certain field's position. He had never actually been right down to the site, but it had always been part of his mental geography of the area.

He arrived at the big wooden gate at the end of the track, and had to lift it on its hinges to swing it open and then close it after riding through. He couldn't remember Coillte being active here, but there was still a thin line of sad looking spruce left behind at each side of the path, which was more or less overgrown with grass.

Keeping below the site of the old sweat house, he reached the stream and turned off the quad engine. The silence left by this was far greater than it should have been. He could hear a dog barking way down at the Animal Rescue, and a flutter of small birds rising out of the ditch on the far side of the water.

He walked over to the stream. The water was low down and the sides were deep and steep. There were always a few planks in the trailer in case they needed to get out of a bog, but he had never used them. Truth was, they hardly used the quad off road; a lot of their fields, as his daddy had said, were unsuitable.

Shaking his head, he measured the distance. It was clear there was no way to make a safe crossing. He closed his eyes, seeking inspiration. He would have to go over to the house himself, choose the stones to be taken, pile them up ready, and then ride up to the top road and down the lane through Drumnafaughnan. Then he would need to find a way across the fields.

He took a run and jumped, landing ankle deep in the daub on the other side. The house would be half way up the slope ahead — built for closeness to the water and shelter from the winds. They learned their lesson from *An Gaoithe Mór*.

Concentrating on his footing, he bumped into the old gate post and looked up to see the Bartley house. There was much more to it than he had expected.

The roof was gone, except for a few rotting, darkened beams, but the outer four walls, and the chimney seemed to have largely survived the years. The bushes around it had become small trees, as if protecting the house in the family's absence. He leaned on the gate post and took it all in—this house with no people.

It was the same shape as their old house—where he was born—the shed now—so he could imagine the way it would have been.

Like a family returning home at the end of the day, the house was slowly filled with Pat's memories of the tales he had heard.

He looked at the window ledge, the dirt of decades making it discoloured and uneven. It would have been whitewashed back in 1962 at Myles's American wake, as he perched on it, playing the whistle, as only he could, while the Gallaghers and Rooneys sat on chairs in the street, the flute and the fiddles flying, through one of the greatest sessions ever known in these parts. How did it feel to know it was the last time? Daddy had often spoken of that night, and of how he'd seen Myles years later in the back room of a bar on McLean Avenue in Yonkers, when he was over to watch Leitrim play in Gaelic Park.

"His whistle playing was grand so, but he looked like he'd had a hard life. I think it was him, anyway. "

Pat ducked through the doorway, stepping over the rotten wood lying on the step. The press and the table were still there, sagging, with gashes in their sides as if wounded by time, and a couple of chairs overturned, like Myles had left in a hurry. Pat felt it was intrusive to look too carefully, in the way the family might come back at any moment.

There was a piece of rusted black metal lying in the debris on the hearth below the chimney, amongst bits of stone, droppings, and cold grey dust. It was the hook on which Myles's granny, Mary Kate, would hang the cooking pot. Everybody knew she always had soup on the go.

When the OC of the North Leitrim Brigade had arrived late in the day with the Column, during the Tan War, she had fed them all and let them sleep for the night.

Two years later the Irregulars made a similar visit. They knew there were Free Staters in her family, and when they found only herself in the house, discussed taking her as a hostage to flush out the men. Then, Ned Bofin, leader of the volunteers, remembered her as the woman who had given them soup three years before, and she was saved. They had soup again that night, and she vowed there would always be soup ready for anyone who called at the house for the rest of her life. She lived to be over 70 and kept to her promise.

There was picture frame on the wall, its wire, and the nail it hung from, rusted. The glass was gone, and inside the frame was just faded paper, water marked and curling, its original content lost with the years. The Sacred Heart, Pat imagined.

He had thought to find a pile of rubble, half sunk in the ground, gravestones for a house that had gone. There were a few stones lying around the outsides of the house, certainly, but none seemed big enough for rebuilding that ditch, and he could not see how he could remove any stones from the walls without some kind of collapse of the structure.

And he realised now he could not take any of the stones.

He would tell Daddy that he had been unable to shift any of them. Which was true.

But it wasn't the weight of the stones. It was the memories those stones contained that were too heavy, and had lain too long, to be shifted from their natural place.

What he did know was that leaving the stones was the neighbourly thing to do. In Leitrim you didn't refurbish the past, you respected it. He would not disturb the cabin's integrity.

As he headed back up the road he could only guess at his father's reaction.

The old man was waiting for him. Pat was so nervous, he had hardly turned off the quad engine before he started stammering out his excuses.

"I'm sorry, Daddy. I got no stones, they were too heavy, they'd been lying there too long..."

His father put up his hand to stop Pat in mid sentence; then, with a smile, he let it fall on the lad's shoulder.

"Ceart go leor, son! Ceart go leor!"

And Pat could have sworn he saw him wink.

Seán McPartlin was the winner of the 2019 Leitrim Guardian Literary Award *winning the* Leonard Perpetual Trophy *and the M J McManus award for his story* 'Understanding'

The Christmas Conspiracy

Monica Corish

– No way, Elinor whispered. It's four in the morning. Do it once and we'll be doing it for years. Ignore them. They'll go back to sleep.
He listened to her soft snores and to the awake-sounds from across the landing. He knew his two daughters were squirming like worms in their shared bed, wriggling and whispering and wondering whether to wake him. They wouldn't dare creep downstairs alone, having listened, wide-eyed and serious, as their mother tucked them in.
– And don't forget, she had said, Santa could come at any time in the night. If little children wake up and go downstairs by themselves, Santa might have to miss their house entirely, no matter how good they've been all year.
He lay on his back, hands clasped behind his head, remembering his own childhood Christmases, the five socks suspended from the mantelpiece in the chilly dining room, the sparse tree. He could not imagine leaving his bed or waking his parents before the appointed hour in that austere house. And he remembered the Christmases of the busy years, when he and Elinor were permanently exhausted and the space beneath the tree had overflowed with glossy presents. Back then, all Joe had wanted for Christmas was a single day of rest.
This year he had time enough to make a wooden train-set, carved and painted by hand. He studied the crack in the ceiling, faintly visible in the light from the hall. He wondered if it was spreading and whether he could fix it himself, or what he could afford to do about it.
He heard the sound of small bare feet. His daughters stopped outside the bedroom door, their breaths held on a nervous giggle. The bed creaked as he sat up and found his slippers. He raised a finger to his lips and they settled into a conspiratorial silence. He beckoned them across the landing to their brother's bedroom, then stood back while they whispered, one in each ear.
– Wake up! Santa's come!
The boy opened his eyes, groggy and confused.
– Maybe, Joe said, Santa brought you a train set?
Joe lifted him out of the cot, loving the sleep-heavy warmth of his son's small body, and the four conspirators crept downstairs. He opened the door of the sitting room.
– Look, Daddy! His eldest daughter pointed to the mantelpiece.
The empty glass of whiskey; the crumbs of Christmas cake; the carrot munched down to its green, feathery top: more proof of Santa than all the glossy presents in the wide busy world.