

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.

