SHORT STORY

Understanding

SEAN MCPARTLIN

I'd come in from the haggard. It had been warm and dry for a couple of weeks, the hay was saved, but there was a coldness in the air, a breeze starting up, so I closed the bottom of the half door, the way it would keep the draft out.

I was sat at the table with a cup of tea, and threw the dog a bit of biscuit, and I seen her ears were up, head on one side, and she was looking at the doorway.

I hadn't heard anything, like. There'd be nothing up the lane at that time of night, and even when I listened, it was almost silence I could hear, just a crackle from the fire and a holly branch clicking against the window.

Then the dog got up and crouched down and I saw there was a pair of eyes just above the half door. It gave me a shock, I can tell ye, made me jump.

When I went over, I could see it was a young lad. He looked up and smiled, so I let him in.

In he comes, quite the thing, looking around him, gave the dog a pat, and sat in my chair by the range. Quite at home, he was, like, and I asked him if he'd like some tea.

"I would!" says he — and his eyes slid over to the biscuits.

So I poured out the tea and gave him a couple of biscuits.

"So, who are you, sonny?"

"Michael James Rooney Reynolds!" says he, dipping his digestive in the mug.

"And how old would ye be, then?"

"I'm ten and three quarters on Saturday!"

"And where are ye from? I've not seen ye round here."

"I'm from Glasgow, in Scotland, but I haven't got a Glasgow accent because I grew up in Manchester. In England."

He was a comical wee lad — very precise in his answers — like he had it all rehearsed. When I heard his name I knew who he was — but i was enjoying the chat

"Well, Michael James Rooney Reynolds — it's a long way from Glasgow ye are — ye must have started walking very early this morning!"

He knew I was joking him, and burst out laughing. The dog was up sharp to get the crumbs he spat out.

"Nah — I didn't come from Glasgow today. I'm staying here —down below in Barragh More, with my granny and my uncle — the Rooneys."

I minded then that Liam had told me they'd a lad coming home to stay for a few weeks — for the holidays.

"So your dad is Pat Reynolds and your mammy's Celine Rooney?"

For the first time, he looked a bit unsure of himself.

"How did ye know that?"

Now it was my turn to laugh.

"Well, sure, if your uncle's Liam Reynolds and yer granny is Lizzie

Mary, then it's easy to work it out!"

He looked down at the dog for a moment, as if he was trying it out.

"Oh, I see — because my dad is Uncle Liam's brother?"

"Got it in one, Mastermind!"

He was looking all round like he was a surveyor. I nearly offered him a tour, but I could see it was just a child's interest. When ye get older, ye hide things like that, but children are much more open.

"Well — do you like it in Drumkeerin?"

"I do, yeh — well, I think so."

"How do ye mean, ye think so?"

"Well — it's very quiet, and it's a long way down to the town — but I like helping on the farm — I brought the cows to the next field last night. My uncle said he'd make a farmer of me yet!"

"Ye never know! Is there a Mart in your town?"

"Sorry — a what?"

"A Mart — where they buy and sell the animals."

"No — well, I don't think so."

He was quiet for a minute — thinking like, then he said:

"There's no farms in Glasgow — they're all out in the country. But I did go to a farm museum once. With my school."

"A what?"

"A farm museum. Out in East Kilbride. That's just a town with lots of houses and a shopping centre — but it's got this kind of country museum — in fields, just outside the town. It was good — it had a café and lots of games you could play."

"I see — a farm museum, eh?"

"Yeh — there was a big shed with lots of tractors and machinery from the old days. And then we went up to the old farmhouse, which was just like it had been when the last farmer lived there — about a hundred years ago."

He frowned a little, then said:

"Well, maybe sixty years go. I don't remember. But it was good. It had lots of things we don't have anymore."

Looking round the room, he brightened up a bit.

"It looked a lot like this actually. You would have liked it!"

I fixed him with my eye — but he was still looking about the room. I wondered if he was acting the maggot, like, but I don't think so. He was quite serious. I didn't know what to say, and I could see he maybe had a point. If Mammy and Daddy came back, they wouldn't see much difference in the place from the 1960s.

"Do you like being a farmer?"

He kind of interrupted my thoughts. I don't think I'd ever been asked that before.

"Like it?"

"Yeh — you know, do you enjoy farming?"

"I suppose I do — I'd want to, I've been at it for over sixty years."

"What's your real job?"

"Sorry?"

"Your real job? You know — like Uncle Liam works on the roads for the council, and Granny used to be a nurse in Sligo. What is it you do to make money?"

"I'm just a farmer. That's what I do."

"But my uncle says there's no money to be made on the farm, and everybody has to do something else unless they sell to the Forestry, to Col...Col..."

"Coillte."

"Yeh — that's what he said. He said it's the curse of the county!"

"Ah, well, it brings money to some. But, no, I don't do anything but keep these fields. I was a coal miner over in Arigna, but when the mines closed, I just stuck with the farm. Now I get my pension and I don't need much to live on, so I'm happy."

He drank some tea and ate another biscuit. I'll need to go down to the town to get more now!

"It's very quiet up here," he said. "Do you not get lonely?"

"No — not at all. I'm happy with my own company and I go down to Liam's or over to Chris McGirl's or even up along the top road to the Schmidt's — they're a German family who live here now. And we all help each other out in the fields. And I go down the town for my pension and the shopping once a week — and a few pints in Frank Davitt's. Then there's Mass on a Sunday, and I like going down the field to see the football. The lads are doing grand this year. I used to play a bit myself, ye know!"

Who was I trying to convince?.

"Why do you ask?"

"Granny says it must be awful lonely for you up here since your brother died. Do you miss him?"

"Well, it's five years since we lost him and yes, I do think of him, I say prayers for him most nights, and sometimes I talk to him — about things in the fields and what I should do, that kind of thing. It took time, but I'm used to it now."

"I see. I just wondered why you do still do it, being old and all."

He was looking at the clock — and he stood up so suddenly the dog growled.

"Oh — it's nearly eight o'clock and

I told Granny I'd be back down to help lock up the hens. That's my job now — in case the fox would get them in the night."

He moved over to the door.

"Thank you for the tea and biscuits, it was good to meet you."

"It was nice to meet you too, Michael James. Come in any time you're passing, Rooneys and Reynolds are always welcome here — our families go back a long way!"

He waved from the gate and ran down the lane. I could hear him singing to himself from beyond the ditch — and it did feel a bit quiet when I turned back to the room.

So I went round the end of the cabin and sat down on the old bench that's been there as long as I remember. The cattle were settling in the top field, and wee birds were flying in and out of the ditches, as if they had to get home before dusk. I thought I could hear doors being shut from down below by Liam's, but I may have been imagining that — it depends on the wind.

When I put my hand down on the bench beside me, I felt the hollow. When Daddy sat here each night, he would tap out his pipe there. Mammy was always sure he would set fire to it and burn the house down. It feels like a connection to him. After fifty years of weather the wood isn't black and burnt anymore — just a smooth dip, as if it had always been part of the wood, the grain of the wood is clear, like it had grown again.

In front of me was an open view down to the Lake, it was a good thing the Forestry did when they cleared that stretch last year — we got our view back. It's not the same as before, but, sure, everything changes, does it not? On the surface, anyhow.

This is my dad's bench — doesn't look like it did when he sat on it, but the grain's the same; those ditches, whins and fences have all changed with the years, but the daub's the same, the earth, the bog, the rocks — they still survive — the bits and pieces that make Drumnafaughnan what it was and what it is — aye, and what it will be.

And maybe I believe that's true of the people on Corry Mountain — those who make up the history of Seltannasaggart. We live and die, we change, but we remain part of this land.

Sentimental? Catch on to yourself!

It's a hard life, difficult questions with no easy answers, little recognition and less praise. Top of the league for old men living alone on a mountain. Kept going by love and hate of neighbours in equal measure, I'd say, and a few of the old EU subsidies. Ye could make loneliness an art round these parts, but, sure, what else can ye do?

Maybe that's what I should have said to the boy — there is nothing else, we are part of it, and it's part of us, we change as it changes, but underneath it's still the same.

The way he talked — about putting the hens in — maybe he would have understood.