

I Dreamt I Dwelt

MONICA CORISH

He carved mice while they waited, simple creatures with curved tails, whittled from a sally rod. He lined them up on a flat stone on a patch of bare earth, nose to tail, nose to tail. When the call came to move out, he pocketed the mice and shouldered his gun. After the ambush he placed a small mouse on the earth, one for each felled Black and Tan, as close to the body as was wise.

As a reminder that the Black and Tans are the mice in this game, Tom supposed. Are the people of Ireland the cat, he wondered, or is the IRA the cat? Maybe we are the fleas in the fur of the cat, leaping over and biting a mouse before scuttling away into a safe-house.

The Micer was a man of unnatural silence, calm as a stone. When they gathered in Harvey's after the ambush, the other men talked themselves down.

"Did ye see the look on his face?" Tom asked his brother Mick. "He wasn't expecting us, that's for sure."

Mick hushed him. "We wouldn't be so brave if it was us. We've been lucky till now."

"True enough," he said, sliding over Mick's unspoken words, someday our luck will end. "God rest them, they're mostly only fools."

"Fools in the wrong place, fools in the wrong country. Don't ever forget

that." That was John Joe McBrearty. He always had to remind them why they were fighting — as if they were likely to forget. But they let him at it, they knew that John Joe's patriotic sermon was his way of settling himself.

They each had their way. Jimmy Mac flirted harmlessly with Harvey's daughter as she served them food and drink. Peter sang, Down by the Glenside and Sliabh na mBán, his tenor sweet and high, almost like a boy's. I Dreamt I Dwelt in Marble Halls was the sign, Peter was ready for bed. And through it all the Micer said nothing, only stared into his pint, not even joining in the chorus, Glory O, Glory O, to the bold Fenian men. He didn't whittle mice in Harvey's either, Tom noticed. That was for before, for the waiting.

Once Tom asked the Micer what he'd do when the fighting was done, and he answered him:

"America."

"What about America?" Tom asked.

"A fish bar on the docks in Boston. My sister is there already, she says they serve beer and crabs, that they need men for fishing and lifting."

That night, in their top-and-tail shared bed, Tom whispered to Mick: "Isn't it strange that the Micer is dreaming of America when he's fighting for Ireland? Wouldn't you think he'd be dreaming of here, in the new time? Don't you think it strange?"

Mick was lying on his back, smoking a last cigarette. "Most things about Barney are strange, Tom. But maybe they won't be strange in America. Maybe he's only strange here

because we're all bred from the one stock, and anything different seems strange to us."

Of all the men, only Mick called the Micer by his given name. But whatever about his strangeness, and his silence, and his mice, he was a good man to have at your back. The best, Tom thought, sure as a stone. Until the day when John Joe McBrearty was felled by a stray Tan bullet.

John Joe and Tom had made a good blind for themselves, behind thick yellow gorse. The Tan shot wildly but his panic found its mark and John Joe fell, a bullet straight to the side of his head. Tom knew he was dead before he put the tips of his fingers to the curve of John Joe's bristled neck.

He stood up out of the gorse, took slow and careful aim, and the Tan shooter died. When the ambush was over, the Tans either dead or gone, Tom found Mick and they crept back into the gorse to carry John Joe home.

The Micer was there before them, looking down at the dead man. John Joe had been thrown back against the gorse, his arms splayed wide, his sleeves snared on thorns. His hair was dark with blood, his eyes still open, staring at the sky. Then Tom saw, tucked into John Joe's breast pocket, the head and the pointed ears of a small wooden mouse.

He looked at the Micer and saw that he was crying. Tom felt the ground tip beneath him, saw a line of mice that went on forever, every bloody death since the beginning of bloody time.

Tom touched his brother's sleeve to shake the vision out of his head. "Here, Mick," he said, "shouldn't we close his eyes?"