

THE CLOUDS THAT TEASED LIKE BARKING DOGS

Kevin McManus

I really liked this beautifully told story about an emigrant returning to clear out his late father's house and meeting a long lost love from 40 years ago. While expressing regret and self-recrimination for decisions made and paths not taken, it's sad but not in the least maudlin. He describes the two characters so well, you can visualise them easily: John, the taciturn, socially awkward man and Lizzie, the tired local woman with the wispy grey hair. Powerful writing.

ADJUDICATOR, FERGUS MULLIGAN

A PERSON'S LIFE ends up in a small box, John Mahon thought to himself as he sorted through his father's possessions and placed the items of value in a small cardboard container, stopping to stare at old black and white photographs and occasionally read some of the yellowed and faded newspaper clippings.

John's neck was stiff from arching over the table all morning and his mind was growing weary of his task. He walked over to the window to reflect on his surroundings. Placing his large hands on the brown frame he peered through the net curtained window. Outside, the grey concrete yard was dry but overhead the clouds teased like barking dogs. The sky was heavy and black with the threat of rain.

He had always hated this place with its dark rush infested fields and its drumlin hills that seemed to act like a barrier to the wider world outside. It was a place where he never felt at home, where he felt uneasy. John Mahon never felt at home anywhere. A cold and distant man he found it difficult to make friends. 'A bad mixer' as the few people that knew him would

often say, 'a bit odd', and 'a loner'.

Something in the distance caught his eye, someone approaching, walking swiftly up the lane towards the house. It was the figure of Lizzie Brady. John gulped. He was not prepared for Lizzie.

"Oh Christ." He whispered to himself.

John stepped outside to meet Lizzie. As she came closer, he could see the thin and wispy smile on her face. John greeted her in his quiet and tepid manner. "Come in, sit down."

The pair sat across the table from each other in awkward silence. Lizzie was the first to try and make an attempt at a conversation.

"Terrible Summer."

"It is terrible, yes, surely terrible."

"How long are you staying?"

"I don't know maybe a few days" John replied as he nervously tapped the hard table.

"It was a quick twelve months since your father passed away. I suppose you have plenty to sort out here, I heard that the house is sold"

"Is that right, you heard that

did you, news gets around"

"News gets around Laragh quickly. An Englishman bought the place I hear"

"Is that so Lizzie, you seem to know plenty"

Silence returned to the kitchen as the couple sipped their tea and sighed, sitting across from each other like two cautious animals. John awkwardly searched throughout his head for words to say, rehearsing them on his silent mouth and gently moving lips before discarding them.

Avoiding eye contact, John studied Lizzie's long greying hair and her sinewy hands. The years had not been kind to her. Decades of pain were carved in wrinkles that circled her forehead and her neck, and flowed like tributaries from her tired eyes and down turned mouth.

Eventually John took a deep breath. He was never one for small talk, never saw the point to it.

"I'm sorry," began John in apologetic tones, "I'm sorry Lizzie."

Lizzie turned her eyes towards him and they widened. For a moment he could see the

brown eyes of the girl he loved forty years before.

“Sorry for what?”

“For leaving you all those years ago here in this damned place”

Lizzie’s mouth opened to speak but she turned her face towards the window and swallowed her words.

“You know I had to go Lizzie, I had to go to England. I hated it here.”

“You could have brought me with you; you could have waited a few more years. You knew my father wasn’t well. Two years later he was gone and so were you. What had I then? Nothing. Christ, John Mahon you ripped the heart out of me.”

“Look Lizzie, I had to go when I did, I had no choice. I wrote to you. I told you to come over, but you wouldn’t”

Lizzie stood up and held her hands to her eyes to cover her tears.

“I couldn’t leave my father, he was dying. Do you still not understand? Two years later it was too late. You stopped writing. I knew then that you had met Cathleen.”

“Life went on Lizzie; I said I am sorry. You met someone too and had a good life. Four sons and six grandchildren I heard.”

“Yes, but I had no choice but to marry Frank what else was

I going to do. I was getting on at that time I was twenty six and you didn’t want me.”

“I heard about Frank, I am sorry for your loss. He was a good man. I knew his cousins in Manchester.”

“Yea, Frank was a great husband, god rest him, and a great provider. But...”

Lizzie bent over as her emotions got the better of her and she cried desperately. John, unsure what to say or do eventually and instinctively stood up and stretched out his arm to comfort her.

“Frank, he was a lovely man and a great father to my boys, but I never loved him. I couldn’t love him. I tried to but I wasn’t able to. You stole that from me John, I could never love anybody. My life ended that New Years day you left me 41 years ago.”

John Mahon couldn’t think of anything else to say and instead he took Lizzie’s hand and they walked outside and down the lane. After a few minutes Lizzie’s trembling and tears stopped. She placed her head on John’s shoulder as he wrapped his arm around her. They walked in silence, listening to their slow steps on the gravel underfoot, feeling the touch of misty rain that dropped from the teasing clouds above.



KEVIN MCMANUS published his first novel, a work of fiction entitled ‘*The Whole of the Moon*’. It has been well received. Here he is pictured on the launch night in Charley Farrelly’s bar in Carrigallen in March 2016. The guest speaker was Eamonn Daly. He has a second book entitled ‘*Damaged*’ that has just landed on the bookshelves!



■ At the launch of his book ‘*The Whole of the Moon*’—Kevin McManus, Philip McIntyre, Eamonn Daly & Cathal Farrelly.