

the first place? Why? Why? You go back into class. The lecturer is in the middle of a discussion. She glances at you, smiles, but continues talking. Your peers do the same in a gesture of encouragement. You get your head straight into it and get on with the work. You slog it for the next while. Incredibly, you find yourself tapping into what it is you love to do, the thrill of creating, your way of telling the story. In time, you begin to feel safe again, find your fit, love yourself.

You're a fourth-year theatre designer; you're invited to participate in the forthcoming Abbey exhibition. Your work is good enough. You know this is a rare opportunity because this is the first and only third-level college with that partnership. Frank Conway and Fiach MacChongail founded it. Neil Murray and Graham McClaren continue to see the importance of the Abbey—Sligo—Yeats connection. You can compete for a six-month paid internship to work there in September after your four-year degree.

You know the potential this has for your career because you know those that exhibited in the past have done well. Darren McGranaghan—Costumer on *The Queen's Gambit*—Netflix, or Katie Lynch—An Assistant designer for the Shanghai Ballet's *Lady of the Camillias* performed in China.

The day of the exhibition has arrived. Your college peers, staff and management are here. The Abbey staff and Directors are here too. You've been a day and a half at the Abbey putting the final touches to your work. The boxes are lit beautifully, a proud display. Industry people, artists, other third-level representatives are arriving. Stephen Rea is about to announce

the Abbey bursary winner. You stand beside your model box, sweat patches coming through your shirt, heart pounding in your neck. There are speeches thanking those that have guided you through the process. Then Rea goes to the podium and calls the winner. It's not you. You breathe again. You're still glad you're here.

Your four years are over and it's a cliché to wonder where they went. The following October you get up early, do all the necessary TLC you can on yourself. Your smile is coming from inside. Your parents, supporters, guardians, friends are there too. You put on your cap and gown and get seated in rows beside your graduating year group. You all look the same but you've all made it there differently.

There's a large crowd in the auditorium. All will witness your moment. There's a live feed for family who couldn't make it. This is not the stage where you're saying a playwright's words. It is not the stage where you're embodying someone else. This is you. Your story. The one where you poured your life out onto that parchment you are about to receive. It may not be the First you were hoping for but it is a high 2.1. A result that will get you into the Masters programmes you want. The new MA in Creative Practice in IT Sligo, perhaps. And the journey of obtaining that mark has led you down far more interesting routes and experiences than you ever expected.

You go up the steps. You hear the applause. Embarrassingly, your Dad wolf-whistles. A cheesy grin crosses your face when you see his. Despite the knock-backs, the risks, the adversities, you hung in there.

CHURCH ISLAND NOVEMBER MORNING

Kevin McManus

THE FIRST BEAM of eastern light shone weakly down the jagged mountainside above the grey lake. The water shimmered in the pale glow, masking all that was sleeping within its still and shadowy depths.

A solitary figure toiled down the hollow mountain path, crossing steep and threatening cold grey and wet stone until she reached a valley of bare birch and oak with green bracken and dark heather. The ground was rough, like the bristles of unshaven stubble, and veiled the nakedness of the desolate soil. The muck and waste of the scrubland where nothing flourished, ignored the goddess and the saints as unborn shoots were threatened by a legion of dark and primordial creatures smeared in tallow.

A harsh and wintry torrent blew wild across the cumbered land towards the lower fertile vale. A curlew screamed its shrill song as it rose over mist and craggy limestone peaks until it descended into a river gorge as if swallowed by the jaws of the earth itself.

Upon reaching the dulled lake shore, the lone woman waited as the mist coated waters lapped close to her bare and exposed feet. They were blackened with grime, mud and filth, but hard and firm from years of walking upon the cruel and unforgiving terrain.

A gentle sound began in the distance but grew stronger as the moments passed. It was the rhythm of oak oars pulling through water. The splash they made intensified as the boat came into view. Four stout men plied the oars and a sail was rigged upon the mast.

Within the craft sat fifteen souls, stern of face, all closely packed and bound in shawls as black as nightfall. Rosary beads twined around their long, bony fingers, and from their lips, a prayer hummed, spiriting across the elemental water that acted like a channel to the gods of the mountains and lake.

As the boat came close to shore a sinewy limb was stretched by a strong oarsman to guide the lone woman onto the vessel, which swayed gently as she crossed from land to board. No greeting was she granted by the flock of praying women who bowed their heads and maintained their soothing and dreamlike incantation. With a push from oak off gravelly ground the craft did continue outward to the vast expanse of the lake.

As dawn was breaking, heavy black clouds began to roll across the sky, driven by a strengthening wind which was morphing into a gale. Viscous waves began their lash as the craft swung from side to side in a frantic waltz. The crooning of prayers intensified from the caoineadh, from what was previously vaguely comprehensible to now clear evocations to the Lord. However, the lone woman had no Christian comfort to console her, no assurance from pain to charm the silenced and unspoken words. Instead, she sat in silence and appeared oblivious to the tempest.

Their destination was a solitary lake isle, known locally as Church Island. Originally the settlement for a twelfth century monastery, the desolate and decrepit ruins were still visible from the western shore. In its time it was a place of peace and refuge for brethren who feared attack from the Norse. However, their kind has long since passed, their bones and dust scattered wide. Their sacred sanctuary was not sacked by the barbaric hordes of Asgard, but instead by

time, by wind, by rain, by frost, by neglect and by ignorance. For time is the great conqueror of all matter, more savage than the sword, a brutal vanquisher that subjugates the living, the tree, the animal, the man, and even erodes the very ground, the rock on which we stand. Nothing is permanent, everything is in flux, in change, in metamorphosis. Today, All Souls' Day 1832, the Isle is a burial ground for the people from the mountains that veil the lake.

The swiftness of the stormy tide brought the craft into the semi-circle of the eastern cove and the safe harbour of the secluded island. The boat was tied by creaking ropes as above the grave sky hovered far and wide. The passengers of the boat slowly disembarked as they continued to keen their mournful lament, turbulently, like the waves of the lake. They solaced each other, they balmed their pain.

Church island had been the cause of many a tear for lives taken by the lake, which feasted on the mangled bones of the dead under heaven's lurid light. The stormy waters did overturn hundreds of crafts in centuries past, by wind and waves that roared like the hounds of hell and trembled the Gods themselves. Broken and grated timbers were thrown against the rocky shores with a deafening crash. Then the sorrowful winds did cry and bemoan the deaths as they whistled through loose window panes and keyholes, as if to beg forgiveness to the sorrowful for what they had done. For death is the harvester of sorrows.

Carrying a lantern on the dark November morning, a deacon led the way across the pass as the funeral cortege followed slowly and respectfully behind. In ones and twos, they trod towards the cemetery beneath a grove of majestic oaks and beyond to the

open, yawning grave. Above it stood a priest in black who held a book within his hands, and as the group began to surround the plot his words of consolation and tribute began to flow most eloquently. The lone woman bowed her head in silence as the rosary beads clasped in the hands of the keening women were turned. She glowered upon the body lying next to the grave; it was of her late husband whose life was taken by consumption. No coffin shielded his mortal remains now, just a grey shroud in this rueful and gloomy isle where he will sleep in the shadow of its grace. His widow would not pay or did not possess the six shillings for a wooden box.

The lone woman had shed no tear yet, not even in his dying hour. Many did whisper she was as hard as the rough skin upon her feet. His body had been washed and cleaned by local women after some time had elapsed and laid out on the kitchen table. They realised that to wash it too quickly may have prevented the soul from leaving the body. A letter addressed to Saint Peter was placed within the grasp of his stiff fingers and a coin placed upon his palm to pay for entry at the gates of purgatory if that would be his destination.

As the prayers ceased the corpse was lowered into the ground where it would rest. Soil and rock were shovelled down hard and fast on top of it. The task was carried out quickly and in earnest as the oarsmen were nervously eager to begin the two-hour journey home before the swell upon the lake increased.

As the void was filled and the shovels levelled and patted the mound, the lone widow bent low and caressed her hand across it as one single tear dropped from her old wrinkled cheek and soaked down deep into the grave.