The Secret Room

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I was 10 years old when we moved to the 30 acre farm in Carrickmore, having uprooted ourselves from our comfortable haven in Cork city.

My father had suddenly decided to resign from his permanent and pensionable job with the Civil Service to try his hand at farming. It had always been his dream, he told us. My mother, bemused by the upheaval in her life, frequently muttered about 'middle age madness'. But for my two older brothers and me it was all a great adventure, for we were nothing if not adaptable.

It was a hot summers day when we arrived in Carrickmore and tempers were frayed after the long arduous journey from Cork. I decided to make my escape and yield to the temptation to explore, before my assistance would be sought to sort through the confusion of cardboard boxes and their contents.

I had not ventured more than a few hundred yards from the front gate when a voice barked from amidst the profusion of greenery.

'Well! And who might you be, then?'

I jumped involuntarily on hearing the unexpected growl. It did not comfort me to observe that the owner of the fearsome tones was leaning on a lethal looking pickaxe. Regaining my composure, I returned his stare levelly, lest he get the impression that I was the cowardly type.

'I could ask you the same question!', I replied in as stern a voice as I could muster, drawing myself up to my full height.

He gazed at me, frowning fiercely. My tossled ginger hair, dirty freckled face and grazed knees probably conveyed the impression that either I had just done some mischief or was about to do so.

'I'm Bart O Sullivan' he spoke at last, a twinkle lighting up the half closed eyes. 'Live down the road there a ways.' He appraised me critically. 'Have ye come t' live here or are ya jes up to no good?'

'Sure an' I don't bite', he went on when I didn't reply. 'Ya might as well tell me yer name, anyways.'

The corners of his mouth twitched and I had a distinct feeling that he was laughing at me.

'I'm Tommy Moran', I answered reluctantly. I was about to add that it was none of his business but thought better of it. Instead I continued to stare at him boldly. In all of my ten years, I had never seen anyone like him.

He was maybe sixty or seventy, I wasn't sure, but anyway it made no difference. To me, anyone over the age of thirty was ancient. His shoulder length grey hair escaped in all directions from under the confines of a large, yellow straw hat. The hat looked just like my mother's Sunday best except that it was not as clean and it didn't have a pink ribbon tied around it. The craggy wrinkled face reminded me of an old, dried up vegetable. An unkempt goatee beard dangled from his chin. The half closed eyes unnerved me, even though I knew he was squinting against the glare of the sun.

A half smoked cigarette hung perilously from the corner of his mouth and another lay in waiting behind his ear. His shirt was torn and dirty, the top buttons opened to reveal an equally dirty vest. A yellow Afton box peeped out from behind the shirt pocket. His sleeves were rolled up to the elbows, as if he were in the throes of a gruelling days work. The beads of perspiration on his face added to this assumption. His braces were straining to keep the shapeless trousers in place.

Despite the warmth of that summer day, he wore thick black wellington boots - an unnecessary hardship, I would have thought. The few teeth he had were yellow and misshapen from decay. Overall, he was rather a

forbidding sight, but yet something prevented me from running away.

It was to be the beginning of a somewhat uneasy friendship. Gradually, I spent more and more time with Bart, much to my parents dismay. Bart was not well liked. People were wary of him, mostly, I suspected, because he was different. Bart had no friends, probably because he was not disposed to be polite or courteous. He was gruff, aloof and said exactly what was on his mind. Much as I did, come to think of it.

Bart was also regarded as a crank and something of an eccentric. Rumour had it that Bart was involved in some unsavoury shady activities. What these activities were exactly, no-one knew, but the gossip persisted nonetheless.

I didn't know what all the fuss was about. I didn't like it when life was complicated, so I set out to get to know Bart better and discover the truth for myself. Sometimes he told me a little snippet about himself but this undoubtedly was in a vain attempt to quell my endless barrage of questions. I felt very grown up on these occasions even though sometimes I didn't know what he was talking about. It all seemed very exciting, consorting with a villain, as I liked to think of it.

My first visit to Bart's house was to be a memory not easily erased. He lived alone except for Betsy, a huge black labrador who was his constant companion. His abode could only be termed a tumbledown shack. It had neither electricity nor plumbing and the door was practically eaten away by rot. The windows, all of them either cracked or broken, were almost obscured by rampant ivy.

We beat a path to the door through the myriad of untended shrubbery and overgrown weeds. The house itself was almost hidden behind half a dozen or so massive oak trees. I felt momentarily uneasy, almost regretting my impulsive decision to come. But Betsy welcomed me, her huge tail thudding on the hard brown earth as enthusiastically as the sweltering heat would allow. Silently, I admonished myself for being nervous.

'Come on, boy,' Bart growled, forging ahead. 'I haven't got all day to stand around ditherin!'

I obediently followed him into the kitchen, which smelled of damp decay and a disdainful compound of aromas which, thankfully, I couldn't put a name on.

'Sit down there fer a bit,' Bart commanded, indicating a rickety, three-legged stool. He rummaged for miscellaneous items of food from amongst the clutter in the tired, paintless dresser.

'I'm jes goin' ta feed Betsy.' He placed the repast with care on a rusty saucepan lid and placed it in front of the dog. 'There y'are, old girl. Git that inta ya.' He caressed the dog's sleek head affectionately.

'Dogs are good friends,' Bart said then. 'Loyal, not like most people.' Sighing, he got to his feet with difficulty.

'Well, come on, boy,' he ordered. 'Come down and see me workshop. I call it me 'secret room". He gave one of his rare, yellow-toothed grins.

I followed him down a dark, narrow stairway, negotiating the journey carefully, whereupon he opened, with some effort and expenditure of breath, a heavy, creaky door. What lay beyond was a room filled to capacity with all sorts of wonderful things. I looked around in awe. Paintings, sculptures, ornaments, toys and books. What looked like hundreds of books, all of them old and probably valuable, even to my inexperienced eye.

'Where ...where did you get all this?' I queried, looking around in fascination.

'I made 'em all,' Bart stated proudly. 'Everythin' ye see here I made with these hands. Except fer the books, of course. I like readin', you know. History and the like.'

'But ...but why don't you sell them or something?' I was puzzled. 'Then you'd have money to do up the house. Er, not that you need to, of course,' I amended hastily. 'Or you could put them on display – sort of like an art gallery. Let everyone see your work. It's a shame to keep everything locked up down here.'

'An' why would I want to do that?'

Bart snapped ferociously, his eyes narrowing to slits underneath the bushy eyebrows. 'Sure, none o' them care a whit what I spend me time at. Anyways, I don't want ta sell them. Everythin' I own is what ya see here.' He slumped down on an old bench, looking around sombrely.

'I enjoy doin' this,' he continued, after a pause. 'I was always good with me hands. An' it passes the time on the long winter nights, especially since .....anyway, it passes the time, like I said.'

Suddenly, he laughed, an eerie, cackling sound and I realised that I had never heard him laugh before. I wasn't sure I wanted to now.

'They all think I'm up to no good, y'know. Think I'm doin' somethin' illegal, like. Ha! Why should I make them any the wiser, eh?' He winked at me conspiratorially and I nodded my agreement.

'Was there ever a Mrs O' Sullivan?' I had blurted out the question without thinking and he looked startled but quickly regained his composure, his eyebrows setting into their customary ominous scowl.

To my surprise, he answered me. 'She died. Thirty year ago now. Cancer, it was. She was expectin' our first an' all.'

'Oh.' I could think of nothing to say and the silence threatened to continue indefinitely until finally he spoke again.

'Would you like me to show you how to make somethin'?'

'Oh yes, please!,' I said with delight. 'If it's not too much trouble.'

'Come back on Tuesday and we'll get started, so.'

For many Tuesdays after that, I visited Bart's 'secret room' after school. He showed me how to make all sorts of things from wood and clay and pieces of scrap metal. I was allowed to do some painting and add the occasional finishing touch. Some of the things he let me keep but I had to hide them in my room to avoid an interrogation from my mother.

Until one Tuesday when I arrived and Bart wasn't there to meet me as usual. Only Betsy was there, half-heartedly wagging her tail and looking at me forlornly. Of Bart, there was no sign.

The following day I learned that Bart was dead. A heart attack, they said. He was found quite by chance when Phil Flynn called in to collect his overdue payment of rates. Bart was discovered in his secret room, slumped over his pottery wheel. A half completed horse lay beside him. I knew instinctively that he'd been making it for me because I had complained about how my father refused to buy me a pony.

A scrawled note, written in pencil and barely legible, was found in his clenched fist.

'Tommy – I want you to have my things. And take care of Betsy for me,' the note read.

My mother was horrified. 'You're not bringing that old rubbish into this house,' she said sternly. 'And a dog! what do we want with another dog?'

But I remained adamant and eventually she had to relent, although it was with bad grace. My mother considered the demise of an 'old rogue' to be a fortunate occurrence for everybody concerned and she was none too thrilled at the prospect of her home being set up as a shrine to his memory.

I didn't bother to explain. When I had assembled as many of Bart's things in my room as would decently fit, I sat down on the bed, exhausted. I hugged Betsy close to me the way Bart used to do. A tear slipped down my cheek as I looked into the dog's huge, sad eyes.

We were both in mourning for a good friend.