

PADRAIC O BEIRN

## *The Turfcutter's Medicine*

Jimmy Kavanagh often feared he was cutting into flesh when he sank the slane in the wet earth. He heard tell of many bodies disappearing in bogs, drifting with their screams and coming to rest among the rotting trees. Plenty of times he'd dreamt of coming across a swollen finger pointing out, or a bloated foot, and he'd pictured faces in the blackness with O on their mouths and hollows in their eyes. Some evenings he saw as many as twenty with arms outstretched, pleading.

Jimmy worked faster to blot them out. On a good day he could turn 900 sods. There was an art in it. He'd been cutting turf nearly ten years by the time Pat Madden bought land next to his. Pat was dead four years and his daughter who upped and married the Greek was easily thirty by now so he was slaning the best part of forty-five years.

He left down the slane and surveyed a day's work. He was slowing a bit but then he was no young chicken either. He spat into his hands and looked up. Moist earthy smells always raised his spirits and made him a cheerful giddy. He blinked away the sweat seeing lots of colours in the sky, greens and blues and patches of pink.

The sun had gone a while. The ground was still warm but the long evening's waltz with summer was nearly over. Jimmy walked back to the lines of turf he'd footed the previous day. There was good drying, a lot of the sods were turning to a lighter brown at the edges. He filled the wooden barrow and led it to where he had the stacks. Rows of waist-high bee-hived stacks of turf lined a stone track that ran to his house. It was just possible to see part of the black slate roof from here. The rest was guarded by a big gnarldey hawthorn which was flat-headed from the prevailing wind.

He topped off some of the stacks with care and precision, making sure they were nicely rounded. When the barrow was empty he set off for home.

Smooth stones pressed and tucked into the soles of his feet through worn boots. He knew the feel of every ridge and at times he'd give a half hop out of his stride to see if he'd come across one he hadn't met before. The first thing when he got into the house was dispense with the boots and into the slippers. The fire was going grand. He poked it and threw on a few more pieces of turf. Jimmy kept a fire year in year out. He couldn't remember a fire not being on the go. Every night he banked it by burying a fresh sod among the embers. A pot of beef and barley was simmering on the stove. He'd tell P.J. the next time he came that there was one of the best cuts of meat he'd given him ever. P.J. came on the Tuesday with the travelling shop, rain or shine. Even the time when he burst his ankle jumping down off the van P.J. was there on the day. Tuesday was the day of plenty. P.J. had everything from eggs to alcohol on his shelves.

Jimmy always ate supper looking at the fire. Two tinkers came to the door one day trying to sell him a television. He told them to go away as he had his own station. Small bright tongues of orange and yellow stuck out and he saw the same people from the bog dancing in the flames. They seemed happier, livelier at least. Little pieces of his own past mingled with the different molten figures. He saw his mother's hands rubbing together and the shape of his father's shoulders. It was comforting. Jimmy had heard of men who could tell the future by gazing into fires. He looked hard at the burning shapes and tried to concentrate. Nothing more came. He smoked a cigarette, had a cup of tea with a drop of whiskey in it and went to his bed. He imagined the sky lighting up with an explosion and became afraid. Then he slept.

He woke with the wind pushing against his bedroom window and remembered part of a dream with him in Ryan's dance hall as a young man. He looked sharp in a fresh white shirt that

glowed under his chin. There was a woman looking over at him. He was startled by the dark gaze of her. Then she was gone just as he'd built enough courage to ask her up.

Raking squawks of crows surrounded the house. Jimmy put porridge on the stove and a couple of eggs in the pan to tempt his appetite. He brought out the boots for a polish. Greet every day with a pair of shining shoes – his grandfather's advice. The morning was cold for August. Through the window the scutch grass and furze were glistening a heavy dew. The sky was a motley of toffee brown, grey and white. Jimmy was an early bird, always was. Catching each sunrise was like learning the quietest new secret. The sun began to stretch long angular beams over a grumpy hill in the distance and its slopes became a velvet baize.

Jimmy heard a scratching at the door. He opened it and in strolled Hughie the cat, bold as you like. 'Good morning Master Hugh, nice of you to drop in.' Hughie ignored him and padded into the room, rubbing against the legs of the chair and table. He climbed up to a commanding perch on top of the dresser and peered down at Jimmy. He was a wild tom that sometimes took to sleeping indoors. He had lime-green marbled eyes that spoke in a stare. His coat was jet black except for the dab of white on his chin, the nape of his neck and the spotless gentleman's gloves on his paws. Jimmy reckoned there was something noble about the cut of Hughie and on occasion took to calling him 'your lordship'.

With the slane over his shoulder Jimmy walked the path to the stacks. From thirty feet away he saw something askew. Some of the stacks had been disturbed as if the tops had been blown off but there'd been no storm last night and there was no missing turf lying around. The thought hit him like a blow to the head. Somebody had stolen his turf. Someone had lifted a few bags for themselves. Never in all the years this, never before, never, bastards, dirty bastards, dirty filthy dirty dirty stinking dirty bastards. He saw where feet had trampled grass near the stacks and found some discarded sods on the ground.

The choosy cur had taken his time for sure. Jimmy hadn't felt as furious since he knocked John Keogh to the ground in a row over slating the roof at the back of the house. John Keogh had asked him for more than the price agreed and then called him a name. Jimmy put him down on the flat of his back with his right fist. Again he felt the sickening anger in his stomach. And the roof still leaked in places.

He followed the path to the road. He picked up two fallen sods. Oh yes he'd taken the lazy man's load as well. There were tyre marks in the grass margin of the small road. He would have heard the car coming and going. Not if the crafty bugger came the back road with the engine switched off. It was downhill from Pat Madden's to well past his house. He could coast down with the incline to get back on the main road at Bowden's pub. Like cowardly vermin coming in the dark, snapping at your heels. The anger was close to tears. I'll have you, bastard.

He went back to the stacks and counted the damage. About five bags worth at the most. That would have taken at least two runs up the path at it. He'd make that up in a couple of hours but that wasn't the point. The poison. The sheer poison, like a snake had slithered off leaving some of it in him. He set to work like a demon and nearly wore himself out after half an hour. He propped himself against the handle of the slane. He felt dizzy and his legs were going from under him. Pull yourself up straight man. Keep the chin up. Don't let it take anything out of you. Then he cursed the slow-moving clouds and the scattered trees and the stone walls and the mountains and the birds and God for watching an old man cry.

He started cutting again, going at his own steam remembering 'the hastier you are the behinder you get'; and other words his mother said flowed over him like a soft balm.

There was a full moon that night. Jimmy sat by the window and looked hard at it. He'd heard of men going mad for less. Slowly a face became clearer looking down at him. There could be hundreds looking up at that face at the same time, or no one at all. He felt like a silver statue. The moon throbbed and grew

bigger. Jimmy opened his eyes wider. So what would you do mister if someone stole your turf. A dull cloud in the shape of a horse and chariot slipped past the moon and rode on. The moon had a disinterested smile. Thank you. The chant of a lone hawk stabbed the silence.

Jimmy looked at his reflection in the window. He saw himself again as a young man with a proud face, not vain. The determined look in the glass gave him courage. The sky was full of cloud, blackberry seas and oceans tossed before him. The moon stood back in a blue- and brown-ringed frame. A tiny star flickered in black. Outside hawthorn and furze and bush were frozen in a silent vigil. Jimmy felt a light, tingling energy surge through him. Then he apologised formally in his thoughts to each and every thing he had cursed that afternoon. P.J. was due the next day. Better to say nothing or the whole county would be laughing at him. Jimmy slept in the chair by the window with Hughie in his lap.

'Nothing strange Jimmy?' 'Nothing much P.J.' 'I see you're building the great wall of China with the turf, you'll be doing sentry duty on it soon.' 'That was some cut of meat you gave me last Tuesday P. J.' 'Stop it, I'm too good to you - all right for the tea and sugar?' 'I'm sweet enough, how much can you do me for?' 'Ah, I'm too soft call it eighteen pounds even, and that includes the spuds.' 'Go on you larrier P.J. the softest part of you is your teeth.'

The travelling shop bumped up and down the track to the road and disappeared.

Jimmy had thought of asking P.J. in for a cup of tea or a stronger drop but he left it, thinking P.J. might find out there was something amiss, might catch a look in his eyes. If a man couldn't protect his property he wasn't worth a hen egg. And what if that thieving cur came back. Would he stop now? Like hell he would - an old man and a cat wouldn't stop him. Jimmy felt darts of pain in his chest. He had pain like it before. The doctor said it was to do with his heart and had a long name for it in Latin. Jimmy had kept the bottle that he'd got on the

prescription behind a picture on the mantelpiece. The picture was of two Highlander bulls in the wild that somebody had brought back as a souvenir from Scotland. Jimmy didn't know who had brought it back. It was there since he was a little child but for the first time the bulls didn't look wild any more. They looked sad and tired from standing on the same mantelpiece for too long.

The label on the brown glass bottle read: 'Mr James Kavanagh . . . glycerol trinitrate tablets . . . two to be taken twice daily . . . keep out of the reach of children.' The doctor had made efforts to explain the chest pains to him at the time, mentioning ventricles in the heart and valves opening and closing. Jimmy hadn't had much cause for doctors. He wouldn't even have taken the pills if it hadn't been for Mrs Clarke at the chemist's insisting that they'd work if he'd follow the instructions. There were two tablets left in the bottle. He'd never been able to believe that the pills were the cause of the pain going away but he'd no better explanation. He put the two pills on his tongue, swallowed and washed down the bitter dry taste with a mouthful of lukewarm tea from the pot. The small empty bottle felt snug in his hand and he squeezed it tightly, daring it to break and cut into his palm, gashing and hurting. He tried to imagine the face of the man who had stolen his turf in pain. The bottle stayed hard and warm in his hand. Jimmy sat in his chair for a while, his thumb and fingers rubbing the smooth contours of glass.

The afternoon was grey with thin drizzle coming from the north-west - a bad day for working outdoors. At the side of the house Jimmy lifted off some plastic fertiliser bags he used for covering his bike. He hadn't used it since Easter. There was a bit of rust on the rims of the wheels, everything else was sound. Jimmy looked up at the sky. Those clouds were down for the day but at least there was no wind and with a bit of luck he'd make it to Lonergan's petrol station and back an hour before dark. He closed the front door looking around for Hughie. There was no sign. Worse you're getting Jimmy, think-

ing the cat would look after the house. He set off at a steady pace with the squeak in a pedal keeping time.

Lichen-smattered stone walls and rain-laced hawthorns drifted by. Jimmy pedalled faster and felt rewarded with tiny warm streams trickling down his cheeks. Water welled in his eyes and brown slashes of open banks of bog quivered and merged with grassy patches and slender wisps of bog cotton. He passed Matt Mahon's cottage. There was no one in it now, Matt's widow was living with their daughter's family a few miles back. The cottage was badly in need of a lick of paint and there were black bags tied over the chimneys to keep rain and crows out. The curtains in the windows were faded and torn. Weeds sprouted from the bulging thatch roof.

He ploughed on past Bowden's pub, past Willie Byrne's, not pausing for breath until he reached the outskirts of town. There was a young girl no more than twelve holding the fort at Lonergan's petrol station. 'Can I help you?' 'And who are you girleen and have you no school to go to?' 'My name is Annie Lonergan - Peter Lonergan is my Grandad, we've no school today because there's a teachers' meeting and I'm looking after the shop here while my brother goes and collects his good shoes that had to be mended because he was playing football in them and they were almost brand new.' 'Is that a fact? Well girleen you can do me a service. Do you see this little bottle here, see if you can fill it with petrol for me without spilling any.' 'Do you want super or regular or what?' 'Doesn't matter a whit girleen as long as it's petrol.' The girl held the nozzle of the pump carefully as the petrol dribbled into the small bottle in Jimmy's hand. 'I spilt a little bit.' 'I don't think it'll break the bank. How much do I owe?' 'Thirty-eight pence.' Jimmy handed her a pound note. 'Get a few toffees for yourself.' 'Thank you very much.' 'Thanks yourself.' Jimmy made sure the cap on the bottle was secure before slipping it into his coat pocket. Then he started the cycle home. It always seemed longer on the way back. The rain had stopped and there was a wind coming up with a cold bite in it. Overhead a flock of birds flew

by in a lazy wavering V, off to warmer places if they had any sense. He was in a strange sort of mood, not happy, not sad, and nothing in between. He whistled and sang the verses of any songs he could remember for most of the journey back. Before he reached the house he collected a large damp sod of turf from a stack and carried it back with him.

After tea, Jimmy rooted through the drawer of the dresser and found an old pen-knife. It was stiff to open. He ran his finger carefully along the blade – sharp enough. He sat beside the fire and started to carve a small rectangular hole in the damp sod of turf. He saved what he cut from the sod on a sheet of newspaper. He pared the edges slowly, stopped to inspect it, then continued on. When he was satisfied he went to his coat and took the bottle from the pocket. He turned the bottle upside-down and shook it to make sure there was no leakage from the cap. He pressed the bottle into the sod – nearly there. He scooped a bit more and widened the edges. This time the bottle slotted neatly in – perfect fit. Using a cup of water he moistened the small pieces of turf he had cut from the sod and worked them back in on top of the bottle. When he had filled the hole he looked at the sod closely and away at arm's length, then he propped it a safe distance from the fire to dry.

Jimmy saw some more figures from the bog in the fire that night. They were waving and enticing him to join them. There was a black door at the back of the fire and Jimmy saw himself opening it. There was another black door behind it surrounded in flames and another behind that. When Jimmy tried to shut his eyes tightly all he saw were tiny orderly flames like stars dancing around his head.

The thief was back a fortnight to the day. What surprised Jimmy was the lack of anger he felt about it. Again the stacks nearest the path to the road were the ones interfered with and there were sods strewn along the trail. He took a bit more this time, stocking up for the winter. Well good luck and sorrow mend you. He collected the fallen sods and brought them back to the stacks. The sod with the bottle was gone.

A week went by.

'That was a heavy fall of frost last night Jimmy. Did you hear about those two brothers back at Lough na Fuaidh the other night?' 'What about them P.J.?' 'Some kind of explosion in the house. The story is they are no strangers to the drop of poitin.' 'What happened to them P.J.?' 'One still in shock with minor burns and the other is in the Regional. He lost an eye. Joe Mac told me, his daughter's a nurse. The fellah who lost the eye was babbling about seeing faces in the fire and then it blew up in his face. Oh they'll be all right I suppose. Imagine a fire exploding like that. Scare the life out of you. I'll see you on Tuesday Jimmy.' 'Good luck P.J.'

Jimmy waited until the travelling shop was out of sight then walked back to the open door of the house. The shock of the news was beginning to wear off. The wind was cooling his forehead and the sweat along the side of his neck. P.J. hadn't suspected anything. Nobody was any the wiser. The relief from the trouble and the constant worry was starting to make him feel light-headed. They won't be back. All his senses were growing stronger and more aware. He took a few deep breaths quickly and felt slightly drunk with a ringing in his ears. He could hear every living sound clearly and the deep regular thud that was a great drum beating in his body.

The medicine had done the job. His heart felt fine.