



CELINE  
KIERNAN

IN  
THE  
GREY

# Into the Grey

CELINE KIERNAN



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# 1. Nan Burns the House Down

**W**e were watching telly the night Nan burnt the house down. It was March 1974, and I was fifteen years of age. I thought I lost everything in that fire, but what did I know about loss? Nothing, that's what. I would learn soon enough.

I think the fire changed us—me and Dom. Though I didn't feel much different at first, I think something inside of us opened up, or woke up. I think, all at once, we began to understand how easily things are broken and taken and lost. It was like walking through a door: on one side was the warm, cosy sitting room of our childhood; on the other, a burnt-out shell of ash and char.

I think that's how the goblin-boy was able to see us. Though he'd been there for every summer of our childhood—mine and Dom's—we'd only been stupid boys until then. Stupid, happy, ignorant boys. And what in hell would he have had in common with two stupid boys? But after the fire we were different. We were maybe a little bit like him. And so he saw us, at last, and he thought he'd found a home.

The night of the fire, Ma had brought chips home and we were eating them from the bags, our feet on the coffee table, our eyes glued to the TV. Looking back, it's weird to remember that we were watching *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Looking back, it seems prophetic—but at the time I just remember hating it. It didn't feel like a proper war movie at all. It was all about the Germans, for one thing. Sure, they were the bad guys! Who wants to watch a war movie about the bad guys? And they weren't even acting like bad guys. They just acted like normal lads—though it had to be said they were a bloody dismal bunch. That was another thing I hated. Who needs a dismal war movie? Where were the heroics? Where was the excitement? What was it with all the mud and confusion? I flicked a glance at Dom, who was lying on the floor sucking the vinegar out of the bottom of his chip bag. He was frowning uncertainly at the screen.

“Are they Nazis?” he said.

“No,” said Dad. “They're just lads.”

Dom turned to look at him. “But they're Germans!”

Dad went to say something, but just then Nan came in from the kitchen, and he went quiet. I think he was hoping she'd just sit down and fall back asleep, but she didn't. She stood at the back of the sofa instead, staring at the TV and fluttering her hands, kind of horrified. “Oh, no!” she said. “No, no! That's not nice! All that mud! Oh, bless him. *Bless* him! That's not *nice*!”

Ma sighed and stood up and went around to her. Nan blinked, startled, as Ma took her by the elbow.

“It’s all right, Cheryl love,” said Ma. “It’s only a film.”

Dad reached behind him and touched Nan’s hand. “Tell you what, Mam,” he said quietly, “why don’t you come sit in your chair and have a nice cuppa?”

I looked away, because Nan’s confusion made me angry.

I think she must have shuffled from one foot to the other for a moment; I could hear her muttering and sighing. But then that ad came on the telly—the one for Old Spice with the waves in it—and the music made her happy again, like it always did. Next I knew, she was sitting in her chair, smiling and taking a cup of tea from Dad. We all kind of relaxed a bit.

The film started again and Dad sighed. I don’t think he was enjoying that movie any more than I was. The next ads came on. Nan murmured in her sleep, “Oh, love, were you here all this time?”

Dad leapt up, rubbing his hands together. “Right! Pee then tea.”

He kissed Ma on the way out the door, and she called after him to bring in the Jaffa Cakes.

We didn’t notice him backing into the room until he’d got to the end of the sofa and grabbed Ma’s shoulder. She swatted him in annoyance, thinking he was messing. Then she saw his face, and her expression went all flat and ready for anything.

“What’s wrong?” she said.

“Get Mam out into the front garden, Olive. Just take her out as calm as you can. Don’t come back in. I’m going upstairs for Dee.”

They looked at each other and my ma's eyes got enormous. "Dave," she whispered, "is that smoke?"

Dom leapt up from where he was lying. He had been drawing his comic book and was still clutching a purple marker. There were purple smudges all over his fingers, and his face was covered in purple fingerprints where he'd had his chin resting in his hand. I began to stand up. Our front room never seemed so small as when the three Finnerty men all stood up together.

I wanted to ask, *What's wrong?* As usual, Dom did it for me.

"Dad?" he said. "Is something . . . ?"

"Listen!" said Dad. "Just *listen*. Dom, help take Nan outside. Keep her calm and act like nothing's wrong." He turned to me. "Pat, I'm going upstairs. Once everyone's outside, don't let them come back in this house. Do you hear me? I don't care *what* happens."

I nodded.

Dad went into the hall, glanced towards the kitchen, and motioned us to the front door.

Ma was waking Nan, a slow process at the best of times. "Come on, Cheryl love. Get up, me old darlin'. Up you get now."

"Where we goin'?" asked Nan, her quavery old voice fuddled with more than just sleep. "Are we late for Mass?"

"A little bit, darlin'. We need to hurry. Ups-a-daisy now. Up we go."

Ma knew. I could tell by the way she herded Nan past

Dad and didn't look back down the hall. Dom ran ahead. He already had the hall door open and was standing on the porch, his hand on the porch-door latch when Dad roared, "STOP!"

We all froze. Dad held his hand out, as if to keep us all from moving. He wasn't a broad man, but he seemed to fill the entire hall right then, a living barrier between us and whatever lay hidden in the kitchen. "Dom," he said, "don't open that door yet! It's very important. Let everyone into the porch *first*. *Then* shut the hall door behind you, and *then* open the porch door. Have you got that?"

Dom nodded, his brown eyes huge. Ma hustled Nan in beside him, and they all stood crammed together on the porch, staring back at Dad. Nan began querulously looking for her handbag, and Ma hung onto her without speaking, her eyes glued to Dad as if afraid he'd disappear. I could smell the smoke now. I could actually hear the flames. Somewhere behind my dad, something huge was on fire. Dad pinned me down with the same look he'd just given Dom, and it hit me how serious this all was.

Our house was on fire. It was on *fire*.

"Patrick," said Dad, "shut that porch door after everyone's outside. *It's very important*. I'm going upstairs for your sister and I don't give a shite what happens when I'm up there, you are *not* to let your ma or Dom or your nan back into this house. Do you understand?"

My eyes slid past him, and I nearly fell over with shock at the sight of the kitchen door. The cheap wood was glowing, its paint all bubbled up and hissing. Black fingers of smoke

were twisting through the gaps of the doorjamb, reaching for the ceiling and spreading up the walls. I opened my mouth to yell, but before I could make a sound Dad had shoved me onto the overcrowded porch and slammed the hall door in my face. I was left staring at my own reflection in the glass.

Nan was demanding to be released from this telephone box, and Ma yelled at Dom to open the porch door. He did and they all tumbled out into the coal-fire smell of the suburban night, leaving a cold space whistling at my back. I stayed where I was while Ma ran screaming four doors up to the Reids', who had the only telephone on the road. Dom was left to corral Nan, who was trying to wander down the street to catch a bus to Galway.

I could see Dad through the rippled orange glass of the hall-door panels, lashing it up the stairs to Dee's room. I stared through the glass, willing him to come back down the stairs, Dee in his arms. I could still see that kitchen door as if it were right there in front of me. The brief glance I'd had of it had been enough to lodge every detail in my mind.

I heard Dad come barrelling down the stairs, saw his wobbly shape through the orange glass and recognized the pink bundle in his arms as my sister. As he was hitting the hall carpet, I realized I hadn't done my job. The porch door was still gaping open, and the old man was reaching for the door handle.

*Dad. No.*

My heart stuttered in my chest. I opened my mouth to warn him and lifted my hand to close the door. All late.



Too late. But Jesus, Dad paused, his hand on the latch, his head bowed against the glass as if listening to the outside air. I heard him, muffled: “Pat?”

The world slammed back full-colour and me standing there with my mouth open. “Hang on, Dad! Hang on.” I slammed the porch door shut with a force that would have earned me a clatter at any other time, and my dad almost instantly banged open the hall door. His face was pulled down in a frightened mask, the skin under his eyes stretched thin and whiter than milk. The hall behind him was perfectly normal, apart from the huge black ball of smoke that filled the far end of it. It had rolled up the walls and was spread in a rippling fan across the ceiling, and through the smoke, an eye, an evil eye, pulsed hot and red at the entrance to our kitchen. Flames were shimmering across the surface of the door, a simmering wash of heat.

At the threshold of the porch, my dad turned and looked back. Outlined against the flames and smoke, he was like some medieval hero—like something bigger than just my dad. For a moment he glared at the fire: man to dragon, mortal to elemental. Then he slammed the hall door, pushed out of the porch, and shoved me ahead of him into the night.

Ma raced screaming out of the dark and grabbed Dad and Dee in a death grip. Dee woke up and started bawling, and Ma took her in her arms, gabbling about fire brigades and phone calls while Dad pushed all of us out onto the path. Mr. and Mrs. Reid and their gang of girls came crowding down the road from their house, goggle-eyed and excited,

as if expecting to see all of us standing in flames in the front garden. They stopped in a confused little huddle at the gate, and we all stood staring at the house.

“Looks OK, Dave.” Mr. Reid sounded defensive, probably beginning to suspect some kind of joke.

“Jaysus, it’s bleedin’ freezin’.” That was Naomi Reid’s harsh nasal whine.

“Shurrup, Naomi, right?” Maureen’s equally grating reply.

“*You* shurrup.”

“No, *you*.”

“Both of youse shurrup.” Sharon, skinniest and scariest of them all.

The Reid girls in all their ladylike glory.

Dom was herding Nan back up the road, and I was just beginning to think we’d all imagined it when the glass in our front door suddenly got a whole lot brighter.

“Jesus,” said Dad.

The sitting room, where we’d only just been eating chips and watching telly, was hidden behind heavy curtains. For a moment we could see no difference there. But gradually a steady, cheerful glow began to suffuse the window, as though a great big fire was burning in a great big hearth. There was no such thing as a great big hearth in these houses, no sir, just crappy, asthma-inducing central heating. I watched the jolly orange warmth seep through the thick material of the curtains, and I imagined the dragon in there, lapping at our furniture with its seething tongue.

A thread of illumination ran along the hem of the curtain.

At first it was just a thin, creeping embroidery of gold—and then *whoosh*, a window of naked flame. Just like that. One minute an innocent curtain, the next a roiling, smoke-laden landscape of fire filling the window of our front room.

The upstairs windows began to light up. First Dee's room. Then ours.

Ours.

I imagined Dom's desk. His drawings curling up and blackening—page after page of his comic books, his hard-won paintbrushes, his pencils. I imagined my notebooks, my copybooks full of short stories, my novel. All those handwritten pages being eaten one at a time, crisping, blackening, curling away from each other, the words scorching and rising up in soot, never to be read again.

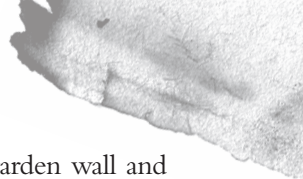
We were losing it all.

My eyes were burning, but I couldn't blink. Looking up at our window, I could see the corner of our bunk bed. As I watched, the top mattress—Dom's mattress—began to smoke, and the wall behind it lit up in dancing light. I saw our Horslips poster, its edges starting to smoulder. Then suddenly it ignited, drifting up in great curls of flame. It floated away from the wall, dissolving into orange butterflies and black feathers.

"Jesus," said Dad again.

We could hear it now—the dragon—roaring its way through the house, eating, eating its way through our house, and leaving us nothing.

I looked over at Dom, my mirror, my reflection, my



identical twin. He had sat Nan down on the garden wall and was standing behind her, his hands on her shoulders. His eyes were fixed on our bedroom window, his face a blank slate of shock.

“Dom,” I said.

He looked over to me at once. I wanted to say, *Our stuff, Dom. All our stuff.* But, as usual, I couldn’t find the words. I remember his big eyes glittering then, and the beginning of realization creeping into his expression. He looked down at his hand and took something out of his pocket. It was his purple marker. He held it up to me, a rueful expression on his face, and shrugged as if to say, *Oh, well. We’ve got this.*

A fucking purple marker.

“I’ll have butter, but no jam,” murmured Nan, complacently settling herself down to watch the show. Ma sat down beside her, Dee already asleep again in her arms.

Something huge burst inside the house with a cartoon-like *POP*.

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph,” said Dad. He backed up to sit beside Ma and took her hand.

Mr. and Mrs. Reid and the girls were a row of gaping mouths and shining eyes behind them. Dom swung his legs over the wall, and I went over and sat by his side. Far away, the first wails of the fire engines could be heard threading their way towards us. And as we waited, we watched, our faces all lit up with fire, as the dragon finished its complete and terminal consumption of our home.



## 2. The Old Biddies' Place

**E**very year we went to Skerries on holidays. For a whole month, sometimes longer, my ma and her sisters, Pet and Breda, would rent two old houses next to the fairground's hurdy-gurdies and we'd move down there, lock, stock, and barrel. We'd spend a chaotic four weeks at the heart of those two huge families, roaming Skerries with our close-knit pack of cousins, invincible, wild, and free. It was heaven.

Usually we drove down in blazing sunshine. The car windows would be open, our hair fluttering, the air vivid with fresh grass, diesel fumes, and the crusty-bright smell of the sea. We'd swig Cidona from the bottle. Ma would pass back bags of iced caramels and Emerald toffees. Dom would sing. We'd all sing.

Us kids'd be stuffed into the back seat along with too many bags and blankets and all sorts of crap at our feet. We'd arrive squashed and sweaty. A tide of cousins would screech towards us across the sand-filled gardens of the adjoining houses—the swing chairs and bumper cars and penny arcades a multicoloured, noisy blur behind them—and we'd laugh as we tumbled from the car.

This time was very different.

It rained the whole way there, and the car was a steaming claustrophobic headache. There was no warm burr of conversation from the front seats. Ma sat silently smoking, staring out the front window. Dad just drove. They'd been quiet like that since the day before, and I was beginning to get a familiar knot in my stomach about them. I told myself it was just that they were tired. Ma's brothers and sisters had done their best for us; they'd opened their arms wide and taken us in without a word. But their families were big, their houses were tiny, and we'd spent nearly a week shunting between them, sleeping on floors, crammed into narrow shared beds. We were all wrecked for want of a good night's sleep.

I shifted about a bit in the back seat, trying to get some room without waking Dee. She was sprawled between me and Dom, her feet on my lap, her head on his knee. Dom was looking out the window at the driving rain, humming to himself and absently stroking her silky hair. It looked light as feathers between his fingers, curling and dropping, curling and dropping around the ragged tops of his fingernails. He had been the usual soul of patience as she garbled her nonsense at him. He'd tolerated her tugging at his face with her fat little hands and let her "comb" his hair. He'd even taken her games of I-spy seriously, despite her thinking every word started with *M* and none of us understanding half of what she said. When she'd tired of him, she'd flopped onto her back and shoved her pink sock-clad feet in my face.

“Mell, Pap,” she’d ordered. “Mell my pongy feets.”

I’d sniffed and gone “Paaawww!” as though they stank like old cheese. This kept her in giggles until she’d subsided into a doze, and then—thank God—a full, boneless, drooling sleep.

I watched the movement of Dom’s fingers slow until his hand came to a standstill on Dee’s head. His chin began to drop forward onto his chest. I turned my attention to the rain-soaked road and listened to the silence crackle between our parents.

We came up the main street of Skerries with the sky pressing down on the houses and the rain pummelling all the colour from the air. As we turned up a side street and onto the deserted beachfront, Dom and Dee were still unconscious. I was limp and heavy from the long drive, my head bobbing against the window. When we pulled up to the garden gate, I no more wanted to move than I wanted to eat my own hair.

Dad switched off the engine and sat there a moment, his hands clenched around the steering wheel. Ma said nothing. The rain hammered the roof of the car.

“I’ll go in to the old biddies and get the keys,” said Dad.

Ma didn’t answer him.

He sighed. There was a blast of cold as he got out of the car, then the abrupt slamming of the door. Ma sat like a stone in the front seat as he walked away. Dom’s and Dee’s sleeping breaths filled the silence between us, and I assumed Ma thought I was asleep, too. She stabbed out her fag. As

Dad ducked under the apple trees and disappeared up the side alley that led to the old biddies' house, I was shocked to hear her mutter, "Fuck you, Finnerty."

As if remembering us, she glanced in the rear-view mirror. Our eyes locked. Then Ma looked away. Not quickly, or shamefaced. She just looked away—cold and imperious—as if she didn't care that I had heard her.

I stared at the back of her head for a minute and swallowed something huge back down into my throat. Behind us, to the right, the swing-chairs creaked in the wind. I turned my head against the glass and watched them swaying above me. Still locked up from the winter, their chains were knotted and tied with big padlocks, their gaily coloured seats snagged upside down. Rain flowed from the ride's tent-shaped roof, down the knotted sinews of the chains, and hammered the sullied earth below. Everything was grey with rain.

Ma had just taken another fag out of the packet and was rooting for her lighter when Dad came running back down the garden, his jacket held up over his head. She sighed and slammed the fag back into the pack. Tossing it into her handbag, she gathered stray sweets and wrappers and flung them in after it. By the time Dad got to the car and opened her door in a shock of wind and rain, Ma was ready to step out. She brushed by him without a word, hoisted her handbag onto her shoulder and went around to the boot.

"Olly, get in out of the rain, love. You'll be soaked."

She went ahead as though he hadn't spoken, pulled the



boot open, and yanked a big box up and onto her hip. Dad gestured in exasperation. “Olive! I’ll do that! Go in out of the rain.”

She shifted the box and walked off up the garden with it, taking her time, her head held high. The rain had already plastered her hair to her head, and soaked her trouser-suit to the skin.

Dad stood and watched her, frustration evident in every taut muscle—in his clenched fists and the furious rise and fall of his chest. Then he moved around to the boot, grabbed a box, slammed a bag down on top of it and stamped off after her.

I glanced at Dom. His eyes were open, his head still leaning against the glass. He was following our parents’ progress up the garden with an angry frown.

“They’re fighting?” he said. “I can’t believe it! What the hell is wrong with them?”

And I was angry with *him* then, for not having noticed the tension earlier. For having pointed it out, instead of ignoring it. For just bloody well being there and available when I needed someone to be annoyed at. “Jesus, Dom,” I snapped, “what fucking planet do you live on?”

He gawped at me, a *what-did-I-say-wrong* look on his face, and that made me angry all over again. “How can you not have seen it coming?” I said. “Is your head that far up your arse?”

His expression ate at me. It felt as if I’d just spat on my own reflection. But instead of apologizing, I grabbed Dee,

hoisted her rag-doll weight into my arms, and ducked out the door. I left Dom sitting in the car, a receding ghost in the rain, and sloshed my way up the garden without looking back.

The house was another shock in what was becoming a litany of shocks. All these years, I'd thought I'd known it, but stepping into the kitchen and looking around me, I realized I had only known the *atmosphere* of it—the steady, nonstop rough-and-tumble of a long and boisterous holiday. The house itself had only ever been a background to the bright tapestry of summer at the beach. Now, lit by the grey spring light and empty but for us, it came into focus like a slap with a wet towel.

The two downstairs rooms—a kitchen that you stepped straight into from the garden and a sitting room immediately to your left—were horribly drab and used-looking, threadbare and grimy. The two old biddies had obviously done their best to make the place welcoming: A jam jar of daffodils sat on the battered kitchen table and another on the deep windowsill in the sitting room; a rosy fire spat and crackled in the little sitting-room grate. It sounded like they'd lit the Aga, and the huge old kettle on the hob was just beginning to sing. But the biddies—or Mutt and Jeff as Dad called them, one being tall and grim, one small and bouncy—were old women, and their eyesight must not have been the best, because there was a soft layer of dust on everything, and every windowsill had its own brittle colony

of dead flies. The floor was gritty underfoot, and the smell of the daffs did nothing but emphasize the staleness of the air.

I carried Dee into the sitting room and went to lay her on the threadbare sofa, but then hesitated, frowning down at the slightly greasy texture of the upholstery. It just didn't look *clean*. I straightened with her still in my arms and looked around me. Last year I would have flung myself blithely onto that sofa, laid my head against the mouldering cushions, and kicked my feet up onto the arms. I clearly remembered putting my food directly onto the floor at my feet, while I turned a page or watched TV. I gazed at the scarred walls and the chipped cupboards and thought, *How have I never noticed this before?* I clutched Dee tighter to me.

*Nothing is the same*, I thought. *It's all gone*.

The house stood around me in a way it never had before, as something real, as something sharp and focused. I wondered if it sensed us moving around inside it—this sad, angry little knot of people. It felt to me as if it did. It felt as if the house and I were suddenly *there* to each other—that we were seeing each other for the first time. The stale air seemed to close around me like a fist.

I didn't like this. I didn't like it at all.

I wanted to go home.

Dad came up behind me, then, and flung a blanket over the sofa. He snapped it open in the air like a magician, tucked it into the corners, and left to head back out into the rain. He came and went with such a surreal deftness that it left me stunned. The ratty old sofa was gone, and in its place

there was now this cosy little nest of blue and cream. From somewhere behind me, either Dad or Ma threw a pillow. It landed perfectly into the crooked arm of the sofa, and I was able to lay Dee down onto it—safe and warm. She sighed and curled up like a cat without ever really waking.

I stood watching her, her tiny chest rising and falling, her yellow curls matted onto her flushed little face. I felt a sudden gush of tenderness for her—the type I only ever felt when she was asleep and not annoying the crap out of me. The world always seemed very big when I allowed myself to see her this way. It made me want to protect her forever.

Ma came back into the kitchen with another box, dumped it on the table and began unpacking with sharp angry noises. Dom shuffled in under the weight of a big suitcase, and she snapped at him, “Don’t leave it *there*, for God’s sake. Have a titter of wit and take it up to the bedrooms.” I heard him labouring up the narrow stairs behind the kitchen, inching his way around the dark twists of the windowless stairwell.

Dad pushed through the door, heaving a big box of groceries and trailing rain all across the kitchen floor. Ma stuck her head around the corner and glared at me.

“*Patrick*,” she said, “are you waiting for a bloody invitation or what?”

I slunk past her and out into the rain to help finish unloading the car.

We all traipsed around each other for well over an hour, putting things here and storing things there. It was a silent,

eyes-down operation, uncomfortable and tense, but blessedly free of further confrontation. All through it, Dee slept peacefully on the sofa and the unceasing rain fell outside. Finally Ma banished me and Dom to our room to change out of our wet things and unpack the rest of our clothes.

We had the room right at the head of the stairs, the one usually claimed by the four girl cousins and their assorted friends and hangers-on. It was a good room, big, with two windows: one overlooking the apple trees, the other looking out over the fairground and onto the sea. There was a huge old-fashioned dressing table with a darkly blotched mirror against one wall, and opposite it an ancient, creaking iron-framed bunk bed.

Dom immediately and without discussion claimed the top bunk. He did this by flinging his bag into the corner, climbing the ladder and lying down with his hands crossed behind his head, staring at the ceiling.

"You've to put your clothes away!" I snapped. My heart sank at how angry I sounded. What was bloody wrong with me?

He shrugged. "I'll unpack when you're finished," he said. There wasn't a trace of acid in his voice. He settled deeper into the mattress and closed his eyes, really laying on the *I'm comfy* vibe.

I smiled. OK then. He had the top bunk. He got to lie down for a while. I didn't have to say I was sorry. A hundred little knots undid themselves in the pit of my stomach. Feeling lighter than I had all evening, I started shoving my

clothes into the musty drawers of the dressing table.

Every single item of clothing was brand new. Some still had the tags on them. Four days after the house had burnt down, the neighbours had done a whipround, and the whole sprawling estate had chipped in. Some families had only been able to afford a quid or two, but nevertheless, between the lot of them they'd managed to raise the unearthly sum of one hundred pounds. Stunned, my ma had simply handed us a wodge of dosh each and let us loose in the shops.

Until then, Dom and me had only ever worn our cousins' hand-me-downs. If it fit us, we wore it—the end. We had absolutely no concept of *individual style*. So when we finally got to choose our own gear, we were shocked at how different our tastes were. It turned out my brother was a bloody hippy! He even bought a shark's tooth on a piece of leather to wear around his neck. I couldn't believe it. He was all cheesecloth shirts and tie-dyed jeans and all that bleedin' Jim Morrison rubbish.

My clothes, however, were *dead* keen: poloneck jumpers, sharply creased trousers, a tweedy jacket. Steve McQueen wasn't half as suave as me. I looked like a brown-eyed, curly-headed Man from U.N.C.L.E.

I was lovingly smoothing the creases from my new pinstriped shirt when I looked up and caught Dom watching me in the mirror. He grinned. I couldn't help but smile back. He started to say something. Then the voices in the kitchen rose and the two of us went quiet.

It had been a low rumble in the background since we'd

come upstairs—a lopsided conversation, just Dad mostly, his voice insistent and low. A brief reply from Ma had, eventually, led to more silence. Things were moved around, cutlery rattled, dishes snapped into place. Then Dad spoke again, a deep questioning reverberation through the floorboards, and suddenly Ma's voice rose, rapid and hard—an uninterrupted flow of anger. The words were unintelligible, but the bitterness and accusation were palpable nonetheless.

Dom and I watched each other in the mirror as her voice went on. He wasn't grinning anymore. A sudden crash made us both jump: a cup being thrown, into the sink if experience served us right. We lost a lot of cups in our house. I moved wordlessly to the door. Behind me, Dom crept down the ladder and crossed the bedroom to join me.

We stopped halfway down the stairs and sat at the first turn. At home we would have sat side by side, very close together, like children, but these stairs were too narrow for that so Dom sat behind me, his legs pressed against my shoulder, his feet on the step where I was sitting. I fastened my arms around my knees and stared at the wall, my whole being focused on the voices coming from the kitchen. The dust and smell of damp wrapped itself around us in the dark. The house listened with us, breath held.

"It's just not *possible*, Olive."

"Why *not*? She's their bloody mother, too!"

"You know they don't see her like that, love."

"Shut up! SHUT UP, DAVE! Why can't you take my side? Fuck them and their big bloody houses and their

fucking cars and *We're too busy* and *How would we possibly?*  
FUCK THEM!"

"Jesus, Olive! *Stop that!*" The shock at Ma's terrible language was evident in Dad's voice. It was frightening to hear her talk like that; it didn't sound like her at all.

There was an inarticulate cry from my mother and the sound of something being flung *hard* into the other side of the wall next to our heads. Dom flinched and pressed closer to me. I hoped to God that Dee would stay asleep; the last thing we needed was for her to wake up screaming for her tea.

Ma was crying now; I could hear it in her voice and it surprised me. Anger didn't make my ma cry. Anger made her cutting. It made her scary. But it *never* made her cry. Her voice came floating up the stairs, wavery and broken, and I think it frightened me more than if she had been shouting.

"Dave, I can't have her here. How can I? *Look* at this place, look at those bloody stairs. There isn't even a proper bathroom. Dave . . ." She started to cry in earnest. There was a soft scuffling sound and then she yelled sharply, "Don't *touch* me. I don't want a bloody *hug*! I want some *help*. I want them to *take* her. Just for a little while! For God's sake, is it so much to ask?"

Dad's voice spoke, so softly: "Olly," he said. "Look at me."

"You won't even be HERE! You'll be off at work!"

Again, Dad, gently: "Ol, I *have* to go to work."

Ma's voice, much softer: "I think I hate her."

"Oh, Jesus, Ol. Please don't . . ."



"Every time I look at her now, I'm afraid I'm going to think . . . I'm going to think of my luh-little house and how . . . and how hard we worked for it. And how she buh-buh-burnt the place *dooown*."

The last word came out in a wail, and I could imagine my mother standing there, her face creased up and covered in tears. I felt sorry for her then, and I wanted to hug her. But my ma was a fierce woman. You didn't just go over and hug her—not in situations like this.

"OK, Olive. I'll talk to Conner again. I'll ask him to try and get Maureen . . ."

"No." This statement came flat and decisive. "No. I'm sick of them. Poor Cheryl. God, they're such . . . poor Cheryl." There was a scraping tinkle, shards of china being swept up. Even through the wall I could feel my mother pulling herself together. I could hear it in the tone of her voice. She was battenning down the hatches. "I'm not leaving her with them any longer than we have to."

"Olive—"

She interrupted him before he could finish. "Tell them they can bring her down on Saturday, like they planned. Tell them we don't need their help. Cheryl will be no trouble to me. She's a lovely woman; their dad was lucky to find her. They didn't deserve to have her in their lives. You *tell* them that, Dave."

There were gentle sounds now: a chair scraping; my dad's voice, muffled as though he had his face pressed against her hair. "I will," he said. "I'll tell them all that."

“OK.” Ma was barely audible. I knew he was hugging her now. She only came to his shoulder; her face would be buried in his chest. “I’m sorry.”

“So am I, love. I wish—”

“Go get some chips, will you?” She would have stood back now, cutting him short, scrubbing her face. “I’m damned if I’m going to cook.”

There was a gentle laugh, a moment of stillness, and then the sounds of Dad gathering up his keys and heading out the door. We could hear Ma tidying things up. Then, very softly, we heard her sobbing, the private, muffled sound of quietly desperate tears.

We slunk back to our bedroom, soundless as phantoms on the darkly attentive stairs.

For once, Dom didn’t even *try* to talk about it. That was just fine by me.

### 3. In the Darkness

**I**t is my birthday, October 30, 1917. I am twenty years old today and running for my life. It is raining. The duckboards are slippery as ice. My feet fly out from under me and I fall. As I go down, I catch the edge of my helmet on a support stake and it is jerked from my head, wrenching my neck. I leave it swinging on the stake. Then I'm down on my back, my rifle gouging into my ribs. I try to roll over, keep running, and scramble to my feet all at the same time. The other soldiers leap over me and pound past me, skidding and sliding on the treacherous boards. The rain is falling so heavy and my heart is pounding so loud that I'm deaf to anything else save my own ragged breathing. I get my feet under me and half run, half crouch, my hands supporting me on the slick wood. Someone grabs my collar and yanks me up so that I'm on my feet again. A shell bursts overhead and I'm blind but still running. That guiding hand stays on my collar, holding me up, pulling me on.

Dear God, don't let me run off the edge of the boards.

Sweet Mary, guide my feet and let me stay on the boards.

*Mud is raining down on us, sloppy great clods of it, splattering the backs of our heads and our shoulders. I keep running blindly until my vision clears and my unseen saviour releases my collar. It's my pal Shamie. He looks back at me once, finds the God-given heart to grin at me, and is gone, just a black shape amongst all the other black shapes running for their lives in the night.*

*I turn a corner into Black Paddy's Trench, and my feet go out from under me again. I go right over this time. I feel some huge bruiser go down behind me. He rams into me, sending me sliding. I reach back, feel my fingers brush his rain-slicker. But I'm unstoppable. His weight has sent me skating across the glassy wooden planks on a smooth plane of water, sliding towards the edge of the duckboards. The mud waits there, the silent glistening heave of it. Bottomless.*

*I scream, "Oh, Jesus! Help me! Help me!"*

*My voice is silent even to myself, my scream nothing against the roar of the shells and the thunder of the guns. I slide off the edge of the boards. My heart, my lungs, my stomach—all contract with fear. My eyes fill with tears at the terrible, terrible knowledge of how I am going to die.*

*The mud inhales me feet first. A cold gullet squeezing around my legs, my thighs, my belly, my*

*chest. It pulls me right off the boards and into its arms. It is very fast. Men run past me, their feet a blur as my chin and mouth and nose go under.*

*Before the mud wraps its blindfold over me, I find myself staring up into someone's eyes. There is a boy standing above me, a solemn-eyed child of ten. Untouched by the rain and the mud and the shells, he watches me go down. I know him; I know exactly who he is. No amount of years could have erased the memory of his face.*

*He says my name, and I am gone.*

I leapt awake with my heart hammering in my throat and the taste of rain and mud on my tongue. I flailed around for a minute, making small panicked noises before I realized I was lying in bed, doing battle with my blankets. Already the dream was gone, and I found myself lying there with a racing heart and no clear idea of why I was so scared.

As the silence of the house settled around me, I became aware of a familiar sound coming from the bunk above me—a hoarse, scratching wheeze. It was Dom struggling for air, desperately gasping in a way that I hadn't heard him do in years.

"Dom!" I scrambled and half fell out of my covers. I stood on my mattress, pulling myself up to look over the edge of his bed. Dom was rigid and staring at the ceiling, his arms straight down by his sides, the blankets bunched in his fiercely clenched fists.

"Dom! Sit up!"

I tried to climb the side of the bunk and failed, scraping my belly on the battered side-rail as I slid back over the edge. Dom rolled his unfocused eyes towards me. His mouth was wide, his chest heaving, but it was obvious there was no oxygen getting to him. Just enough air to make that awful rusty-bellows heave in and out of his throat.

“Hang on, Dom! Hang on!” I took the ladder, missed the first step, took it again and scrambled to the top bunk, crawling up Dom’s straining body to the head of the bed. There was nothing in this world that scared me more than Dom’s asthma. I’d thought we’d seen the end of it two years ago, when the last of the really bad attacks had put him in the hospital. It was this damned house. It was this filthy, dusty house, bringing it all back again.

“Sit up!” I grabbed his shoulders with the intention of dragging him into a sitting position, but froze when I saw his face. His eyes were all pupil, and he was searching the ceiling with horrified desperation.

“Lorry . . .” he gasped, just a whistle of air meant to be a word. “Lorry!”

He wasn’t even awake. He was having an asthma attack in the middle of a nightmare.

“DOM, wake up!” I shook him so hard he’d have bruises in the morning where my fingers had dug into his shoulders. He took in a tremendous gasp of air and his head snapped up, nearly loafing me. I scurried back and the rickety bunk creaked dangerously under our combined weight as Dom bolted upright, wide awake.

“Jesus, Pat!” he yelled. “What are you doing climbing all over me in the middle of the night?”

“You were having an asthma attack.”

“No, I wasn’t.”

“Yes, you were!” But I had to admit, he didn’t look like he was anymore. There was no sign of a wheeze or a cough, no difficulties breathing. Just Dom, staring at me as if I’d grown two heads, rubbing his shoulders where I’d grabbed him.

He pulled his feet out from under me and clutched the covers to his chest. “Patrick,” he said, “I believe you may have had a bad dream.” He was doing what he called his “schoolmarm” voice, blatantly taking the piss. But damn it, I’d been bloody well awake when he was shredding the covers and gasping for air.

I gathered my dignity. “You were the one whimpering like a big girl’s blouse,” I said. “You were dreaming about a car crash.”

He almost snorted, but seemed to think better of it halfway through and suddenly looked thoughtful, as though remembering something.

I jumped on it. “You *were* having a dream!”

“No . . . well, yeah.” He looked at me, puzzled. “What makes you think it was about a car crash?”

“You said *Lorry*. Twice.”

Now he did snort, laughing at me, though obviously intrigued. “Lorry?”

“Yeah! Lorry! You must have been hit by a truck or something.”

“Oookaaay. I’ve had enough.” He shoved my knees with his feet and pointed at the ladder. “Good night, Patrick.”

I climbed back down, miffed, crept out, and mortified all at once.

I was crawling under the covers when he called down to me. “Pat?”

Expecting more slagging, I snapped my reply. “What?”

“Thanks for coming to my rescue . . . even if you *did* nearly kill me in the process.”

I smiled. “Shut up, you eejit. Some of us are trying to sleep.”

I bunched the covers up under my chin and settled comfortably into the pillow, but I didn’t sleep. I lay listening to Dom instead; the gentle, untroubled rhythm of his breathing was reassuring, but not quite trustworthy enough for me to let go.

I found myself watching the mirror over the dressing table. Its mottled surface had little to show me of the dark room, but I could just make out the lumpy silhouette of my sleeping brother in the shadows of the bunk above mine. Car lights occasionally travelled across the walls, sending crosshatched slashes of shadow from the apple trees, and hazy rivers of reflection from the rain-soaked windows. Each intrusion of light sent a flare across the mirror glass, and the bunk would leap into focus for a moment before the car passed on.

Despite myself, I began to drift off. Just before I fell asleep, another set of beams strobed across the mirror,



making me jump but not quite waking me. As I slipped under I heard Dom whisper, loud and clear as though he were calling warily into the room, hoping for but not expecting an answer.

“Lorry?” he whispered. “Lorry? Are you still there?”

# **Into the Grey**

Celine Kiernan

A Children's Books Ireland Book of the Year  
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