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Opening extract from

The Watching Wood

Written by

Erika McGann

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The Watching Wood

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12 Terenure Road East, Rathgar, Dublin 6, Ireland.
Tel: +353 1 4923333; Fax: +353 1 4922777
E-mail: books@obrien.ie
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Flaming feet

Grace Brennan's feet pedalled furiously in the air below her. She was exhausted. Sweat dampened her shirt, and all she could think about were those women who sat on exercise bikes in the window of her local gym, spinning like their lives depended on it.

'Don't slow down, Grace, you're nearly there!' Ms Lemon's voice sounded from the ground beneath.

The effort of staying airborne in one spot was starting to wrench at Grace's gut and her legs were ready to give in, when a sudden spark singed her ankle and a sweeping blue flame surged from the heel of each foot to the toe.

'Agh! My feet are on fire!'

'Excellent, that's perfect!' Ms Lemon yelled. 'Now, run!'

Grace lurched forward, her tired legs feeling detached from her body as she raced just ahead of the fire. The hot blue cooled to orangey yellow as she left a trailing flame across the dusky sky, ducking to avoid the curly fire-trails left by Rachel and Jenny's flame-running contest.

'Watch this one,' Jenny called from above, her athletic frame silhouetted by the sun.

Picking up speed, she ran downwards then back up, fast enough to turn a tight loop-the-loop, leaving a fading circle of fire in her wake.

'Aw, come on,' Rachel complained, shaking her layers of shiny dark hair. 'That's it, I'm going back down. I'm wrecked.'

In a gentle slope towards the field below, Rachel slowed her pace until the fire at her feet extinguished in two puffs of smoke, and she landed gracefully in the grass. She was rewarded with applause from Ms Lemon, and a derisive snort from Mrs Quinlan. Grace envied Rachel's elegance. She was like a cat, always landing on her feet. With her own limbs barely under her control, Grace felt like a flying St Bernard. Wiping a sheen of sweat from her freckled cheeks, too late she spotted a speeding object, with a short black bob, that came suddenly thundering towards her.

'Look out in front!' Una shrieked before smashing into Grace hard enough to snuff out both their flames.

They spun towards the ground, arms and legs akimbo, until Grace, with the last bit of strength she had, hissed a verse and produced enough of a flying spell to slow their descent. They still hit the ground pretty hard. Una rolled off Grace, groaning in pain.

‘That hurt!’

‘You landed on *me*,’ Grace replied, rubbing her bruised head.

‘Oh, I’m sorry,’ Una’s hand went back, but didn’t quite reach Grace’s. ‘Are you broken?’

‘I’ll live.’

Una rolled towards her, wrinkling her little upturned nose with a smile.

‘You’re a legend.’

‘I know.’

‘That was pathetic,’ Mrs Quinlan’s voice growled behind them. ‘Get up and give me fifty star jumps.’

‘What?’ cried Una. ‘They’re not magic.’

‘Well, you’re obviously not fit enough to handle basic flame-running, so I think it’s about time we added some circuit training to your lessons.’

‘Extra P.E.?’ Una’s grey eyes watered. ‘That’s worse than *torture*.’

‘I can always arrange both.’

‘Maybe we’ll start the more energetic lessons with a warm-up jog from now on,’ Ms Lemon said diplomatically. ‘We don’t want anyone pulling a muscle.’

‘They’ve got no muscles to pull,’ Mrs Quinlan said over her shoulder, her pale eyes frosty as she walked off the field.

Una lifted her arm to flex her bicep and squeezed it, pulling a face like a boxer in the ring.

‘Yeah? Any more mention of star jumps and I’ll bring out the gun show.’

‘What?’ Mrs Quinlan turned.

Una ducked behind Grace.

‘Nothing.’

Jenny’s purple doc boots slammed into the ground, making them all jump.

‘Catch that loop, Rach?’

‘Couldn’t really miss it,’ Rachel said flatly. ‘You win this one.’

Jenny interlocked her fingers and stretched her arms to crack her knuckles.

‘Ah, nothing like some aerial gymnastics to wind down after a long day.’

‘Adie and Delilah,’ Ms Lemon called upwards, ‘time to come down now.’

‘Two minutes, Miss!’

‘We’re losing daylight here, Adie.’

‘I know, I know, Miss, but watch this!’

Grace leaned back on her elbows and watched as Adie and Delilah, hand-in-hand, ran a double trail of flame through the air. Adie wasn’t tall, and Delilah was shorter still, and yet they managed to run in perfect sync. Grace watched them work, feeling a little glow at how well Delilah had fit into their group.

Increasing their speed, the two girls turned tightly upwards, making a helter skelter shape that ran almost two storeys high then, at the top, Adie gripped both of Delilah’s hands as the smaller girl kicked her legs up and snapped her heels together, topping the giant cone with a burst of bright orange flame.

‘Woah!’ Una clapped wildly.

Grace sprang to her feet and joined in the cheering.

‘Awesome,’ Rachel yelled.

‘That *was* awesome,’ Jenny lamented.

‘Ha! You’ll win the next one.’

Jenny sighed and joined in the applause as the two flying girls slowed to a stop above them, snuffed out their flames, and hovered for a quick bow. Adie blushed, her almond-shaped eyes sparkling, as she let go of Delilah’s hand and dropped towards the ground.

But her feet never touched the grass. As she came in to land, something tubular erupted from the soil underneath her. It sucked in her legs and then the rest of her, before disappearing beneath the ground. There was a yelp, a swish of her black curls, and she was gone. Silence.

Grace stared at the space where Adie had been, then at Ms Lemon. The teacher looked aghast.

‘I don’t … I don’t know what–’

‘*Run*!’

Grace spun around to see Mrs Quinlan sprinting towards them from the gate. She turned back towards her friends – just in time to see Rachel’s horrified expression as she too was sucked down a wormy chute.

‘Run, run!’ Mrs Quinlan shrieked.

‘What’s happening?’ shouted Grace.

‘Shut up and *run*!’

They shot off in all directions, squealing with fright. The ground belched another chute that lunged for Jenny’s feet. She just avoided it, reaching the edge of the field and scurrying up a tree. But the tube snaked up the bark, weaving between branches and reaching with swollen lips, until Jenny screamed and launched herself into the air. But she wasn’t fast enough. Grace saw Jenny’s auburn hair vanish into the mouth of the squirmy cylinder.

Her own collar was snatched by Mrs Quinlan and she was thrown violently onto one of the large rocks that lined the edge of the field. Mrs Quinlan pulled a wooden charm from her pocket, rubbed it vigorously on the stone, and shoved it into Grace’s hand.

‘Stay there.’

‘What are those things? What’s going *on*?’

‘I don’t know,’ the woman replied. ‘But whatever it is, it’s not good. Don’t move an inch off that rock.’

Mrs Quinlan took off, grasping Delilah’s tiny waist as yet another chute sprang out of the grass. She hurled the small girl in Grace’s direction and Delilah scrambled over the stone to clutch her hands. They watched Mrs Quinlan charge across the field with unlikely speed, shouting to Ms Lemon and Una, who were zig-zagging through the trees on the other side. Her long, moth-eaten coat flew out behind her and her frizzy grey hair bounced up and down as she pounded forward. For a second, Old Cat Lady – as the girls had long ago nicknamed her – looked to Grace like a superhero. A beam of light intermittently flew from her hands, striking a wormy shape that was aiming for Una’s feet, and Grace recognised the magical boomerang-like weapon that had saved her from the clutches of the wicked Ms Gold earlier that year.

Riveted by the scene, Grace suddenly lost her balance. Something had hit the rock from beneath, hard enough to split the stone. She toppled to the ground but was pushed back up before she knew what had happened.

‘Grace!’

Delilah’s wide, brown eyes caught hers for a second, before the tiny girl was sucked into the soil.

‘Delilah, no! Mrs Quinlaaan!’

Across the field both teachers stood frozen, staring at the ground. Una was nowhere to be seen.

‘Where’s Una?’ Grace cried. ‘Where are they all gone? What’s *happening*?’

The two women looked towards her and started running. But it was too late. Another blow from beneath, and the rock splintered into pieces. Grace felt a powerful vacuum at her back, and blue sky was the last thing she saw before everything went dark.

* * *

‘Grace, wake up. Wake *up*.’

Grace swatted at the grip on her shoulder.

‘Stop. What are we–’

Adie’s worried face and dark curls swam into focus. Past her Grace could see an arched ceiling, supported by huge wooden beams, like the roof of a cathedral. Rachel’s porcelain features came into view, then Delilah’s dark complexion. Grace was now being shaken by several eager hands.

‘Stop!’

‘Shh!’ Jenny grabbed her beneath the arms and hoisted her to her feet. ‘Don’t make a sound. We don’t know what the hell is going on.’

They were in the middle of a large crowd, broken into groups, surrounded by the stone walls of a grand hall. It wasn’t a cathedral – Grace couldn’t see any religious stuff anywhere – but there were steps at the front that led to a platform. There stood a rotund woman with thinning blonde curls, wrapped in layers of dark-coloured velvet, gesturing wildly and giving an impassioned speech. Behind her stood an incredibly tall woman, her hands clasped in front. Beside them slouched a diminutive man, so hunched over that the lapels of his brown tweed jacket fell forward.

‘– and not without good reason.’ Grace was beginning to make out the stout woman’s speech. ‘Death. Death is the curse and the blessing. Death is what separates the fools from the heroes, the large from the squirmy, and the trees from the teeny whiney weeds. Death is … These Trials are what bring you closer to the … to the honour of the glory, and the glory of the honourable, most honourable glory–’

The tall woman quickly stepped forward.

‘We would like to thank Madame Three for her wise and encouraging words.’ She deftly steered the shorter woman to the back of the platform.

Grace grasped Jenny’s arm.

‘Where the *hell* are we?’

‘Who spoke?’ Madame Three spun out of the tall woman’s grip and darted towards the top of the steps. ‘Who spoke?’

The crowd turned as one to face Grace. They were mostly kids of secondary school age, and Grace had the familiar and uncomfortable sensation of being singled out at assembly.

‘You!’ Madame Three jabbed a finger in her direction. ‘You *spoke*.’

The tall woman stepped forward with a curious look.

‘I don’t recognise your coat-of-arms.’

She glided down the few steps to the floor and the crowd parted silently as she made her way through, her heavy skirts of grey lace sweeping over the floorboards. She stopped in front of the six girls and scratched the crest on Jenny's jumper.

'Which school are you?'

Jenny seemed too bewildered to speak. The woman raised her voice sharply.

'Which school are you?'

'St John's,' Grace croaked. 'From Dunbridge.'

The woman's face, creased in confusion, suddenly smoothed as she called out,

'New blood!'

She swept back to the stage and raised her arms with an eerie smile.

'For seventeen generations we three, the Supreme Heads of the Lyceum of Wicca,' she gestured to her companions on the platform, 'have hosted the Trials, and for seventeen generations we have tested the skill and fortitude of the very best students of Wicca. You were hand-picked by your tutors as the fiercest, the most talented, the most intuitive witches in your schools, and now a brand new school,' she paused, glancing upwards as if to remember the name, 'St John's of Dunbridge, have sent us their most esteemed students to compete, to fight and perhaps to die, for the glory of winning this year's Witch Trials!'

Grace raised her hand.

'Eh, sorry … to what?'

'We didn't get sent,' Una whimpered, also raising her hand. 'We got took.'

The woman either didn't hear or deliberately ignored them.

'In the coming days, those of you more familiar with the challenges that lie ahead may test the fortitude and knowledge of the new bloods. And we, the Supremes, will watch with–'

Una snorted loudly, then clapped her hand over her mouth.

'You dare to interrupt again?'

Una shook her head, but her shoulders were shaking and tears of laughter were forming in her eyes. The woman's colour was rising.

'You dare to interrupt the Lady Hecate during the welcoming speeches. You dare to interrupt the Supremes!'

Una pressed both fists into her face, like she was trying to jam them up her nose. Grace gave her a sharp dig in the ribs.

'Una,' she whispered. 'Don't.'

'They're called the *Supremes.*' Una's voice was muffled. 'Like that girl band from the 60s.' She looked at Grace pleadingly. 'You know, *Stop in the Name of Love* and all that. My dad's got all their CDs.'

The enormous candelabras lighting the hall suddenly flickered all at once, and shadow spread from the platform as Lady Hecate raised her arms.

'SILENCE!'

The sound was more than just voice. It boomed from the walls and the floor, reverberating through the hall and making Grace weak at the knees. There wasn't a sound from the crowd as the echoes and shadows retreated, and the purple hue faded from Lady Hecate's cheeks. She lowered her arms slowly, her gaze fixed

on the girls from St John's. Grace could feel the seething stare of every person in the room. Whatever this Trial stuff was, they were off to a bad start.

'Raise your eyes and pay tribute to those who have gone before you.'

As Lady Hecate spoke, light filled the arched ceiling, illuminating a balcony that ran both sides of the hall. Between the wooden beams stood giant busts – the head and shoulders of various figures – carved in stone.

'Lucinda Grey,' Lady Hecate gestured, as one bust was illuminated brighter than the others, 'Captain of Hawk Falls, the very first champions of these Trials. Grey was champion a second year, before being decapitated in the Blade Room in her third.'

Grace gulped.

'Denton Malorous,' the woman continued, 'led his team to victory no less than three times during his illustrious career. Determined to compete one last time, he was devoured whole by a globular serpent in his final year. Atraya Neubelbaum, victorious in more individual trials than any other competitor in history, though she never held the trophy; impaled on the battlements during an airborne skirmish.'

Jenny squeezed Grace's arm.

'There's a pattern emerging here, and I don't like it.'

'Let's just get through this 'welcoming' thing,' Grace whispered, 'and then figure a way out of here.'

'I got a quick look out the window. Wherever this is, it's nowhere near home.'

Grace stretched onto her tiptoes, just able to get a glimpse of the outside world through one of the arrowslit windows. Back in the field with Ms Lemon and Mrs Quinlan it had still been daylight, but it was well into evening now. In the starlight she could see barren landscape, with a forest in the distance, and a river that snaked through both. It could have been somewhere wild like the Burren if it weren't for the green hue that permeated everything, bleeding through the glassless windows and into the stone of the great hall. Panic grew in the pit of Grace's stomach. Jenny was right. They were nowhere near home.

'So remember the great ones who perished in the name of glory, and brought great honour to their schools.'

Lady Hecate levelled her gaze in the girls' direction.

'And, new bloods, get whatever sleep you can. For tomorrow, the Four Hundred and Twenty-Sixth Annual Witch Trials begin.'