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Opening extract from

A Cage of Roots

Written by

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Published by

O'Brien Press Ltd

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First published 2015 by The O'Brien Press Ltd,
12 Terenure Road East, Rathgar, Dublin 6, Ireland.
Tel: +353 1 4923333; Fax: +353 1 4922777
E-mail: books@obrien.ie
Website: www.obrien.ie

ISBN: 978-1-84717-681-3

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20 19 18 17 16 15

Cover image: Matt Griffin
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY
The paper in this book is produced using pulp from managed forests.

The O'Brien Press receives financial assistance from

the arts council an chomhairle ealaíon
funding literature
artscouncil.ie

{EXTRACT P10-27}

CHAPTER 1

A Lingering Nightmare

Ayla was having a nightmare. The most vivid, horrifying nightmare.

She woke because she could not breathe. She was in stifling, hot darkness; like when you fall asleep with the heat on but a hundred times worse. What little air there was tasted of mud, and the darkness was absolute. Her room was never this dark. She couldn't even see her hand in front of her face.

There was something else too that made her realise this wasn't her own room. She could sense the closeness of the walls. Even though she couldn't see, she knew that where she was lying was small and tight; when she reached out her fingers she found the walls around her all too quickly. Her nails scratched at hardened muck, and the dust hissed as it fell from her touch to the rough, cragged floor. She started to grope blindly and frantically, and tried to stand too quickly, banging her head painfully on the low ceiling. She could only hunch. A tremor of panic grew deep in her stomach as she searched for an opening but found none. She covered every centimetre again and again, finding that she could move just less than a metre on either side and never stand to her full height. The desperate search sucked the adrenaline from her and she stopped, spent, and lay against one of the walls.

So, she decided, she was in the middle of the worst nightmare she had ever had: a horribly realistic, graphic one of being buried alive. All she had to do was clench her eyes shut, as tight as she could, and go back to sleep. But sleep just wouldn't arrive, and she couldn't escape the feeling that she was just about to run out of air. It was so uncomfortable, and the hard, knotty ground she lay on was just too real. As Ayla slowly accepted her situation as fact, her screams for help morphed to sobs in the blackness.

She felt that there was no sense of time in this waking grave, but it seemed like she had been crying for hours. Her throat was raw from shouting for help, and her chest ached from heaving. Her hands and feet hurt too, from kicking and lashing at the walls.

When she accepted defeat at last, and lay jolting with those sharp breaths you can't help but make after crying, rational Ayla began to wake. She told herself: *lying here sobbing is going to get me nowhere*. Punching walls of muck and stone wasn't particularly helpful either. She had to think – to cast her mind back to every single minute of the day and try to guess how she had come to be buried alive. Did she fall? Ayla loved to walk in the woods. Maybe she had tripped into a ditch or badger hole and the memory of it was knocked out of her? She did her best to calm herself and recall the steps of her day, starting with a rushed breakfast with her beloved uncles.

Breakfasts were always eaten in panic, because Ayla always overslept. Every school day played out the same way too: Uncle Lann, cross and rushing her; Uncle Taig, tutting sarcastically and winking; and Uncle Fergus, himself a sleeper, dropping off again at the table. Thinking of her uncles helped ease the worst of the terror. She indulged the memories, lingering in their warmth.

They were her only family. The day they rescued her was still so clear four years later: they pulled her from the torment of St Sophia's Holy Home for Girls in New York State. Before that day she did not even know she had any family at all, let alone that they, and therefore she, were as Irish as spuds. Lann, Fergus and Taig were giants of men, each as tall as two-and-a-half metres. When she was called out of the blue to the cold visitors' room, they were there, stooping under the ceiling. Straight away they sent beaming smiles Ayla's way and she would never forget the look of defeat in the sisters' cruel faces. She would have leapt into a tiger's arms to get away from those nuns, but three hulking goliaths from an island she had barely heard of? It was nearly a more frightening prospect. It took more visits, and a lot of talk, before she would trust them. In the end, it came down to a simple choice: stay incarcerated with the sisters, or leave for a new adventure in Ireland. The day they drove away and St Sophia's faded into the distance was still the most magical of her life. The long flight over the Atlantic was a rebirth, plain and simple, from despair to hope.

Underground Ayla bit her lip and focused. *This morning was no different than any other*, she thought. *Breakfast was only half-eaten*. *I ran out the door with toast hanging from my mouth, and we sped off in that dirty old jeep*. *Fergus's snoring was louder than the engine, like always. And I was dropped at the school gates with only a minute to spare before the bell, like always*.

It was so hard to get comfortable in the blackness, thinking back got more difficult with every minute. Even warm thoughts of saying farewell to St Sophia's were no match for the rocks and twigs that were now knuckling into her back. But sharpening her thoughts was essential; piecing together the day should, must, reveal some clues as to how she got here and how she could get out. So Ayla calmed herself again, sucked in a sip of stale air, and brought her mind back to the morning, and the first hours of school.

She had just avoided Mrs Marnagh, the principal, and made it to her first class before everyone had settled in their desks. Sean and Benvy sat tapping their watches and grinning, by now a morning ritual. She threw her eyes to heaven, smiled, and took her seat at the opposite end of the classroom. Ayla had long been separated from them because of their fondness for talking, laughing and distracting each other as much as possible.

That morning, Irish was their first class: a favourite. While there was no joy for her in history or geography, Irish was something she was good at. It just came naturally to her, albeit with a mild New York twang, and it helped that her uncles insisted on speaking it to her at home. That morning, she remembered, Mr O'Ceallaigh was writing on the whiteboard, but she was engrossed with something outside. She noticed a harmless movement in the bank of trees across the pitches: just wind making the leaves dance. But it looked so strange. The leaves made lithe shadows that scurried like a troop of skinny baboons, leaping through the branches. They were so realistic she had laughed out loud.

She rubbed her eyes and opened them to find that Mr O'Ceallaigh had stopped writing and was staring at her. She was sorry because she liked him, but allowed herself one more glance to confirm that leaves were just leaves and wind was just wind and her head was just having fun with her, as it so often did. The trees swung, fanned by the late autumn breeze – and there was no sign of any baboons leaping through the branches!

The rest of the day, as far as she could remember, went by without incident. She strained to think of anything out of the ordinary, but nothing really of note had happened. It was Wednesday, and that meant finishing off with the Seventh Hell of double-maths. Double-maths always seemed like a time-stretching purgatory of dullness, where even clocks seemed to fall asleep, and Mr Fenlon's voice became like the drone note on Taig's uilleann pipes. At last, after an age spent confused by Xs and Ys, the bell went and it was time for home.

Now Ayla really had to concentrate because, despite her best efforts, the memories from this part of the day seemed to dance around like moths, impossible to hold. She squirmed on the rugged floor, stamped her feet in frustration, and had another bout of tears. But this was Emotional Ayla fighting

for dominance, and she forced Rational Ayla back into the driving seat. ‘Calm, Ayla,’ she said aloud, and repeated the words until the sobbing stopped.

She had messed around with Sean and Benvy at the wall beside the parking area. They were jostling about, play-fighting: a blessed relief from maths-boredom. Sean was playing ‘Poke the Tiger’ with Benvy, holding his finger just a few centimetres from her face. Benvy, at nearly twice Sean’s size and with a fuse a tenth as long, was an easy target. Ayla was distracted by the noise of the wind in the leaves. It seemed so loud. Like every single leaf was shouting at her. She was snapped out of it when Sean knocked her over onto the grass, launched by an angry Benvy. He had committed the mortal sin of teasing her about her size – the one thing she could never stand – and Sean was punished accordingly. *We were all laughing about it, though. They got on their bus and I walked. Just a normal day*.

Was this when I went to the woods? She often took a detour through Coleman’s Woods, as it edged onto the back of her house. She loved those cool minutes in the whispering green trees. It gave her time alone to let her mind drift. In her own company she was never the ‘different one’. Ayla the Yankee. Ayla the orphan. Ayla the big fellas’ niece. She was just Ayla. But she had not taken that route this time. She remembered now, she had felt so *tired*. Not just sleepy but … weary. Spent, even. It was such a strange feeling. *So this isn’t a badgers’ set or a dark ditch, and I haven’t just slipped in the woods and hit my head*. That was not good news, for there went the most plausible and normal explanation. All that was left was fear.

At least she knew now that this option was off the cards. She could move on in her memories to the next step: the walk home. And, yes, here things became clearer, briefly. The walk through her hometown of Kilnabracka took her away from Main Street to John’s Lane and past Daly’s sweet shop, but she didn’t go in, for once. Up on Synge Hill, she walked past the rows of tiny bungalows where old ladies lived, but were never seen. It brought her down to Lee’s Valley Road, where her estate, Rathlevean, and two other estates her uncles built, edged up the next hill. She was too tired to notice the wind had picked up in the branches of Coleman’s Woods, beyond the houses.

She went straight over to her road, trudging now and dragging her feet with fatigue. She lifted the key to the door, shaking off a momentary relapse into her ‘monkey’ daydream when the wind made funny shapes resembling baboons in the big sycamore leaves. She threw her bag under the stairs, and on her way up to her room decided to ignore a text from Finny, and just collapse into bed. The memory stopped before her head was halfway to the pillow.

A spark ignited: a flash of a thought. Her stomach fluttered at the prospect. My phone! Frantically, desperately, she fumbled about her pockets, patting herself down, cursing at every empty pocket until – there in her back pocket! What she had mistaken for a rock or branch digging into her was her phone. Sobbing again, this time with relief, she pulled it out and pressed the button. The screen lit up. But almost as quickly, just long enough to see there was no signal, the device beeped once and slipped into darkness, along with her hope.

Ayla just lay there then, staring into nothing. Time loped along half-dead again, until from something (her phone? No, it was the wrong kind of glow) light appeared again. A chink of orange in the blackness by her feet, and it grew. Struggling to sit up and not knowing whether to laugh, cry, scream or sing, she watched the glow spread, and the chink widen. But instead of some friendly Garda’s hand, or, please God, a great hairy ham of an uncle’s paw, something totally different blocked the light. It froze her blood.

Obstructing the glow, suddenly, was a head, but such a strange one – a horrible one: black with two bulbous, glowing white eyes. Ears darted out either side like wrecked kitchen knives, and the mouth? When it opened, it was like looking into a furnace, burning red, stinging her eyes. And it spoke, or made a sound anyway. A sound like metal dragged on stone, and a long, thin, twisted claw of a hand reached in to drop something at her feet, something that smelled of rotting leaves, and withdrew. The hole snapped shut, and Ayla was left again in pitch, hot blackness, too stunned to cry.

CHAPTER 2

An Empty Bed

As another freezing bluster of hail threw itself against him, Fergus hoisted a pile of blocks onto the first bay of scaffold. He didn't need a ladder. Huge, mountainous Fergus, with pond-green eyes and a bulbous nose set in a bracken of red hair and orange beard. His hands alone were the size of a normal man's chest, and he delighted anyone who asked with feats of strength. But this was work-time, and great Fergus was hard at it, over-enthusiastically, as was his way.

There was a famous photo over the turf fire in Greely's of Fergus holding a bunch of patrons aloft, three on each arm, while balancing a pint of stout on his head. In this photo, which was the pride of the pub (although no one seemed to remember when it was taken), Fergus's two brothers can be seen behind him: Taig, fairer than him, and smaller too, although himself well over two-and-a-half metres and a hundred and fifty-odd kilos, laughing his blond head off, and Lann, the eldest, scowling at yet more foolishness from his brother. The picture summed them up pretty well.

Fergus was a behemoth, who loved all the attention he could muster. He was always the loudest voice in Greely's, the core of the craic. His voice was like a storm in summer, a low boom crackling with drama, so the hairs on your neck would stand up when he spoke, and yet it was full of warmth.

Taig was the musician: expert at the bodhrán, guitar, uilleann pipes and whistle, he could get any foot in the world tapping, and silence it in the next minute with an old air of breathtaking beauty. He was like Fergus in that he loved laughter, and whenever the big man was making a scene, you could be sure Taig would be in stitches beside him.

Lann was different. It wasn't that he was grim, just that he always seemed like he had serious matters on his mind and no room left for joking. He was renowned as a fair man, a good employer of anyone with decent skill in building, and if you had him build you a house you'd never have to move for the rest of your life. But he was not entirely merry, that was for sure.

Lann's brow was a ploughed field lined with furrows. His thick, black eyebrows sheltered iron-coloured eyes, which sat deep in his face, ever watchful. They could bore through a man at fifty metres; the lads on the site often joked that he could shoot lasers out of them! But alas, that wasn't true. His dark mane was long and tied at the back, his nose and mouth set into his square face like they were carved out of stone. Like Taig, he kept the whiskers off his chin, but his angular jaw was curtained by dense side-burns. He stood just over two metres, with wide shoulders to carry whatever burden it was that kept his mood so serious. He was fearsome to see, for sure. But anyone who knew him knew he was fair, honest and good, and they didn't fear him unless they were late for work more than once. Like the other two, you wouldn't be able to guess his age. They all looked young and old at the same time, and in fact it was a common game to guess their age in Greely's, but the big fellas never told.

The wind was whipping sleet from the west onto the men who worked on the build. It was a big renovation job: Sheedys', an old farmhouse that sat nestled in thick oak and birch at the foot of some small hillocks near Knockwhite Hill, about five kilometres out of town in the area of Dundearg. A couple from Limerick had bought the old place from Pat Sheedy and they had big changes in store. A new extension built here, outhouses transformed there. If you were lucky on a day like this you were a carpenter or electrician, working inside on the first fix. For the bricklayers outside, it was less pleasant, especially for Tom Skellig, whose toes were nearly crushed by another row of blocks dumped at his feet by over-zealous Fergus.

'Mind Tom's feet, for God's sake, Fergus!' Lann shouted, as the red giant hoisted yet another row of seven blocks onto the scaffold and slammed them down to be met, as Lann had expected, with a holler from poor Tom.

'Ah, Jaysus, Fergus!' Tom squealed, clutching his foot and trying to get the boot off. 'Even with steel-toed boots I'm not safe!'

He got the mangled boot off and began to blow on his foot.

‘Ah, did Poor Possum hurt his little toe-toes?’ Fergus chided, while laughter trickled down from Taig, skipping between the higher levels of scaffold.

Lann brought his fist down on the plans in frustration. He had been using a pile of blocks as a table. Several of them cracked.

‘Stop!’ yelled Lann, with a keen edge of anger in his voice. It was a rare baring of teeth from the oldest brother, and it was enough to quieten the whole site, including his brothers.

‘Sorry, Lann,’ said Fergus, and he gently lifted just a couple of blocks onto the platform, well away from Tom.

Lann frowned down upon the now-torn plans. He knew it was unusual for him to be so quick to temper. Sure, the architect was proving to be a bit of a pain in his neck – a posh fella from Dublin, and prone to change his plans – but something else was agitating him, and what it was he couldn’t say or put his finger on. He just had an ill feeling about the day, and this was a feeling he had learned not to ignore over the years. For now though, he just couldn’t nail it down.

He took out his phone and looked at the photo of Ayla, for the picture always calmed him. He stared into the green eyes, glimmering between the masses of amber curls, and checked himself for losing his temper. He knew Ayla would disapprove if she were there. ‘Sorry pet,’ he muttered, and put the phone back in his pocket. Before he could return to the plans, he heard a polite cough behind him.

Mr Fitzgerald, the architect, stood beside him wearing all the gear: hard hat with built-in ear-guards and visor, hi-viz jacket, vest and pants, and brand new boots without a single scuff. Behind him were the couple that had bought the house; all three held umbrellas pointlessly against the sleet. The wind swept up and under and from the side, and paid no heed to brollies.

Lann barely noticed the rain bouncing off his face. This was a scheduled visit; he had just uncharacteristically forgotten about it. It was the last thing he needed today.

‘What can I do for you, Mr Fitzgerald?’ he asked.

‘Hello Lann. How’s it going? Horrible day so it is,’ the architect replied in his tangy South-Dublin drawl.

‘Soft enough alright,’ replied Lann, as the icy wind broke another wave of hail against his cheek.

‘Well, you’ll remember I let you know we would be coming by to discuss a few adjustments. We have a small change or two anyway.’

The changes were anything but small, and the architect’s voice seemed to shake with pride at his own visionary abilities.

‘It’s all been approved at the planners. Here’s the USB with the new plans, and of course a printed copy – we know you don’t like computers!’ he finished with a smile. The couple attempted to grin expectantly behind him, but they just ended up wincing against the pelting wet.

Briefly, Lann considered shouting at all of them, but withheld his frustration and simply announced to the site: ‘Tom! Stop. Fergus, take the blocks down. Taig! Put that scaffold back up!’ He turned to the three visitors. ‘No worries.’

Mr Fitzgerald smiled, satisfied his power over such a giant had not waned. ‘Good man, Lann. Now, we also wanted to look into the structure in the northeast corner, the little rocky hillock. We talked about this bef—’

But before he could finish, Lann held up a great slab of hand.

‘That’ll be all for now, Mr Fitzgerald. We’ve enough to be getting on with.’

‘But, eh, Lann, we’ve been wanting to talk about this before and …’

Lann had returned to his desk of grey blocks, turning his back to the three drowned visitors.

‘We’ll talk about it again. We have a lot to be doing. Mr and Mrs Moran, feel free to head on in to the main house and take a look around, but take a hat from the office first and no going into the extension. We’ll be taking half of it down now.’

There was a tone in his voice that said ‘This is not up for negotiation’, and the three headed to the prefab office to fetch another couple of hard hats. Lann muttered under his breath, crumpled the torn plans into a ball, and sighed, casting his iron eyes to the stony hillock in the northeast corner.

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