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'Dark and brutal, its power is undeniable . . . channels mythology into modern teenage life with energy.'
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‘I loved, loved, loved this story . . . fresh and interesting and powerful.’
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‘Think *The Hunger Games* meets *Lord of the Flies*. Truly an original . . . The story is so gripping, you can’t put it down.’
Serendipity Reviews

THE CALL



PEADAR O'GUILIN

FICKLING
dfb
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For my sister, Klara.

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is a
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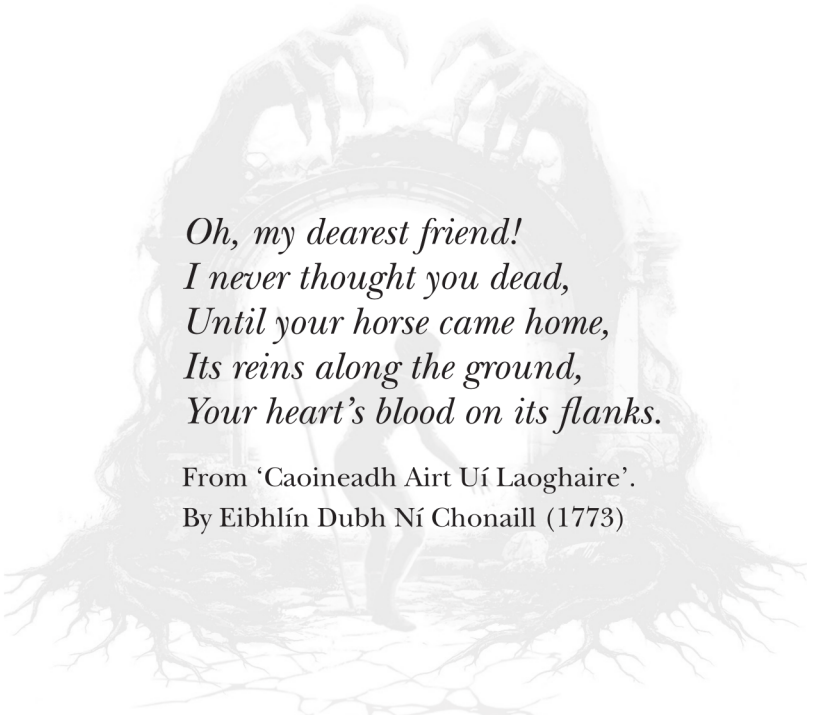
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Oh, my dearest friend!
I never thought you dead,
Until your horse came home,
Its reins along the ground,
Your heart's blood on its flanks.

From 'Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire'.
By Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill (1773)



Four Years Ago: the Three Minutes

On her tenth birthday Nessa overhears an argument in her parents' bedroom. She knows nothing about the Three Minutes yet. How could she? The whole of society is working to keep its children innocent. She plays with dolls. She believes the lies about her brother, and when her parents tuck her into bed at night – her grinning dad, her fussy mam – they show her only love.

But now, with ten candles on a cake in the kitchen behind her, that's all supposed to change.

Dad can't know his daughter is right outside the door, and yet he whispers. 'We don't need to tell her,' he says. 'She . . . she isn't able to run anyway. She's a special case. We could give her a few more years to be our baby.'

Baby! Our baby! Nessa bristles at the thought. She's struggling to stand still, because with her twisted legs she makes quite a racket when she walks. However,

once her mam, Agnes, starts sobbing, she decides she's had enough.

'Oh, for Crom's sake,' she says, 'I'm in the hall. I'm coming in and you'd better not be kissing!' She means that last part as a joke, but it falls flat.

'Come in then,' Dad says. He still possesses enough greying hair to cover his scalp. Almost. He's even older than Mam, and on a bad day Nessa wonders if that's why she was born weak enough to catch polio. Her cousin told her that once, and Nessa often thinks of it.

'I know about Santa Claus,' she says, walking in. 'If that's what this is about. I've known for years already, but—'

Agnes starts heaving like she's been punched in the stomach. She shakes hard enough to rattle the bed beneath her. Dad wraps her tight with his long, skinny arms, and for a moment it's like this hug is the only thing stopping bits of her from flying off.

A chill steals up Nessa's spine. She can't know it, but this is the first hint of the fear that will never leave her again; that will ruin her life as it has ruined the life of everybody in the whole country.

Now Dad is crying too. His tears barely show: a hint of moisture about the eyes, his sobs thick, as though squeezed through a wad of cloth.

Nessa takes a ragged breath. 'Whatever it is . . .' she says – and deep inside a part of her is begging her to shut up, to stop, to turn around! 'Whatever it is, I want to know.'

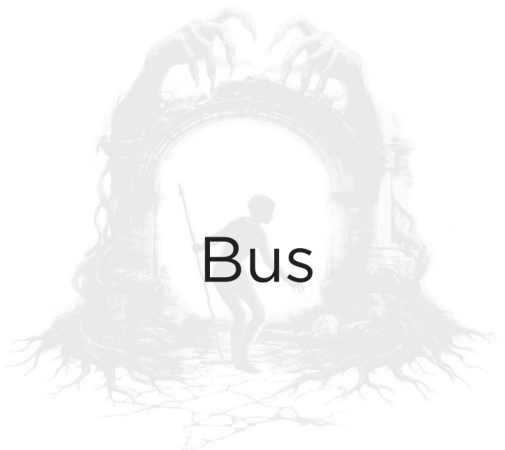
So they tell her. About the Three Minutes and what has happened to her older brother. And she laughs, because that's her nature and the whole situation is absurd. It's one of her dad's stupid pranks! Of course it is.

But they keep the horrible story going and the fear builds up and up inside her until she screams at them, hysterical, horrified, 'You're lying! You're lying!' She falls, her awkward left leg giving way.

For the next two days Nessa refuses to play or to talk. But she's too intelligent not to recognize the truth. The clues have surrounded her for a lifetime already, and only the monstrousness of it, allied to the trusting nature of her now-ended childhood, has allowed her not to see it before. She has never asked herself where all the teenagers were. Or why she has almost never spoken to anybody who is seventeen or eighteen or twenty.

But if she refuses to let the doctors put her to sleep, this is the future: some time during her adolescence, the Sídhe will come for her, as they come these days for everyone. They will hunt her down, and if she fails to outrun them, Nessa will die.

On the third day her twisted legs carry her out of her bedroom. Her eyes are dry. She says, 'I'm going to live. And nobody's going to stop me.' She believes every word of it.



Bus

Four years have passed, and Nessa is standing in the sunshine at the bus station in Letterkenny. Everything is old and everybody is old too. Except for herself and the red-haired, red-cheeked Megan, openly smoking 'greenhouse' tobacco and daring the adults around them to interfere.

Nessa wants to say something to her friend. Along the lines of: 'We need to stay fit if we're to survive.' Only one in ten children makes it through their teenage years as it is. But the warmth on her face is too nice to let her spoil the mood.

They buy their tickets from the granny in the office and head outside to get seats.

'Will you look at that bus!' says Megan. The tired engine burps fumes of recycled vegetable oil so that everything smells deep fried. 'We'll be lucky if it can hold the weight of the rucksack you brought.

It's gonna strand us halfway to nowhere.'

A big, middle-aged sergeant waits by the bus, brandishing an iron needle ten centimetres long. Sweating under his cap, he swabs it with alcohol and jabs it into the arm of everybody getting on.

'Do I look like a Sídhe to you?' growls one old woman.

'I hear they can look any way they want, missis.'

'In that case, they wouldn't want to look like me!'

'True enough,' he says.

She curses as he stabs her anyway.

He grins. 'My apologies! Iron's supposed to hurt them.'

When it comes to Nessa's turn, the guard stares at her legs and can't keep the pity off his face. *Didn't your parents love you enough to kill you?*

Nessa's own expression stays bland. 'Was there something else?' she asks.

Megan butts in. 'Sorry, Sergeant.' Her tone is polite and respectful. She has the sweetest face in creation: rosy cheeks and sparkling green eyes. 'What my friend is trying to say is, Mind your own business, you goggle-eyed turd sniffer.'

When Megan steps up to face the needle, the sergeant makes *extra* sure that she's no spy. She takes the iron well enough, but the second he withdraws it, she kicks his feet from under him and twists his arm up behind his back so that the adult, twice her size, is on his knees before her.

'Megan,' cries Nessa, 'enough!'

'They train us pretty well,' Megan says with a wink. She releases him and gets onto the bus.

The coach rattles off towards Monaghan, with Megan chatting every step of the way, mostly in English. Nessa tries to keep her own responses in Sídhe, not because she loves it, but because her ability to speak the enemy's tongue may one day save her life.

She knows she should find a better friend: somebody who won't smoke or grow her hair dangerously long. But Nessa's not quite ready to sacrifice all the world's happiness and fun to the ancient enemies of her race. Not yet.

Shortly after Lifford, they roll over a bridge into what used to be Northern Ireland. Nobody cares about that sort of thing any more. The only border recognized by the Sídhe is the sea that surrounds the island from which they were driven thousands of years before. No human can leave or enter. No medicines or vaccines or spare parts for the factories that once made them; nor messages of hope or friendship; nothing.

A veil of mist hangs off the coast, and all those within, whatever their passports used to say, now belong to the same endangered species.

The boy gets on at Omagh. He's fit-looking, of course, with the body of a runner. Most teenagers are the same,

but it doesn't look awkward on him, despite the fact that he has more growing to do. He smiles at the sight of them. 'Off to Dublin, girls?' The Sídhe words spring naturally from his tongue. Nessa likes the look of him, and his bright, friendly confidence. He likes her too, she thinks, but won't have seen her legs yet.

As usual it's Megan who answers. 'Our survival college is in Roscommon.'

'The one in Boyle? Aye, I heard of that one. Didn't one of their boys make it through two nights ago?'

The girls gasp. 'Who?' says Nessa.

Twenty-five years ago, when the Sídhe began taking teenagers, less than one in a hundred survived. These days, with constant training, with fitness and study, with every spare cent in an impoverished country aimed at keeping them alive, the odds have improved tenfold. But it is still low enough that the thought that somebody she knows has made it through fills Nessa with excitement.

'Ponzy, I think. Is that even a real name?'

'No way!' squeals Megan. 'Not Ponzy! Not that wee turd!' But she's laughing, because she likes Ponzy – everybody likes him. Nessa is smiling hard enough to hurt her own cheeks, and the strange boy lights up in response, but not as much as he should.

'It's just . . .' he says. 'It's just he came back a wee bit . . . *different*.'

'Different how?' asks Nessa. Behind the boy's head

they pass a neat little bungalow with trimmed hedges and a lawn full of lettuce. She'll never forget it, because rather than answering her, the boy disappears and his empty clothing falls to the floor.

Everybody else takes a second to gasp, but not Nessa; she's on her feet straight away. 'Stop!' she screams. Then, realizing she has spoken in Sídhe, she repeats the command in English.

'We've had a Call,' she cries. 'Driver! You have to reverse! Reverse!'

Megan, proud owner of a wind-up watch, has already started the countdown. 'Twenty seconds,' she says. 'I . . . I may have missed a few at the start there.'

Half a panicky minute has already passed when the bus starts to go backwards and Nessa has to hold on for dear life. A government car has come up behind them and the passengers at the back of the bus wave frantically to make it move. A whole sixty seconds are wasted in this way, but soon they are back beside the house with the lettuce garden and Nessa calls the halt.

Was it here? she wonders. Or were we a little further on?

'How long?' she asks aloud.

'Two forty-five,' Megan says watching the murderous second hand. 'It's three minutes now!'

That's when the boy returns. Strictly speaking, the famous 'Three Minutes' are three minutes and four

seconds. Everyone knows this, because many Calls were caught on CCTV cameras in the first terrible year.

The boy's body reappears and thumps down hard onto the floor. Nessa is relieved to see that it's not one of the really awful ones. There's nothing to churn the stomach here, other than a little blood and a set of tiny antlers growing from the back of his head. The Sídhe can be a lot more imaginative than that, and they even have what experts refer to as a 'sense of fun'. Nessa shivers.

'They didn't catch him for a long time,' Megan whispers. 'Didn't get a chance to *really* work on him.'

A few of the old people are crying and want to get off the bus, but it's not like the early days any more. They might disturb the body as they try to step over it, and that's just not allowed. The antlered boy will lie there until the Recovery Bureau agents have examined him properly in Monaghan.

'These girls have to get to school,' says the driver, and that's all there is to it.

Megan glares the weepers into silence, then sits looking straight ahead. Nessa too strives to appear calm, to gaze out at the passing countryside, trying not to think about all the murders committed by one faction or another in order to farm it.

She jumps as Megan grabs her by the shoulder and hisses, 'Stop!'

'Stop? Stop what?'

'You were banging your head again. Against the window.'

'Oh, yeah.' Nessa can feel the bruise forming on her forehead. She finds that she's gasping for air like a hooked fish and more aware of the handsome boy's body than she has ever been of anything in her life.

The Sídhe stole him away for a little over three minutes, but in their world, the Grey Land, an entire day has passed, panic and pain in every second of it.

'Is it because he looks like Anto?' Megan asks.

Nessa suppresses a shudder. 'He looks nothing like Anto.'

The redhead shrugs. She doesn't care. And neither should Nessa. Not if she wants to live.



College

They carry their own bags through the gate and go barefoot to toughen the soles of their feet. Nessa knows her friend is walking slower than she needs to, in order to spare her embarrassment. Neither speaks. It's a beautiful evening, coming up on autumn. The hooded crows, croaking as loud as they can, have filled the trees with grey and black feathers. Now and again a group of them will wheel out over the ivy-covered dorms and the monastic buildings that cower between them. Yes, Boyle Survival College is a clumsy hotch-potch of old and new, but Nessa is always relieved to see it. Much as she loves her parents, this is her real home, where everyone faces the same danger and fear, and shares the same hope too.

A hundred metres away from the main entrance, and Anto comes out to join them. He grins, a little shyly, Nessa thinks, and she has to clamp down hard on the smile that threatens to take over her own face. They

can't be together, and that's all there is to it. They can't.

'How's tricks?' he asks, his Dublin accent stretching the vowels in all the wrong directions. 'Seen any nice puddles up in Donegal?'

It doesn't matter that he's handsome, that he has a face full of mischief, Megan rolls her eyes at him. 'I have that Crom-twisted study to hand in to the Turkey,' she says. 'Can't be wasting my time on the likes of you, Anto, you filthy Dub.' And off she strides, leaving the other two to fall back into embarrassed silence together.

Nessa likes that Anto doesn't offer to carry her bag, that never once has she seen pity in his eyes. Mostly he just likes to laugh, a viral happiness that spreads wherever he goes.

But he's not laughing right now. They are walking closer together than they are supposed to, their breathing synchronized, their gazes straight ahead, and both of them are remembering the same thing: the time she accidentally kissed him for ten full minutes.

It was the day Tommy was taken. The first time she ever witnessed what the Sídhe could really do to you, could do to her. And all the pointless longings broke free at once, shattering the dam she had built to keep them out. She has rebuilt it since then. Stronger than ever.

They have almost reached the main entrance when he says, 'Why not?'

Nessa doesn't need to ask what he means. She stops,

forcing him to stop too.

'You told me you liked my hair,' she says.

'I did.' His left hand is fiddling with the crucifix his mother gave him. He already knows he's not going to enjoy this.

'I shaved it off.'

'Of course, Nessa. Nabil advised all of us to do so. I cut my braid.'

'Right, Anto. And I liked having hair. When I go home, my mother cries to see me bald. But now, nothing . . . *nothing* can grab it, you understand? When the Sídhe Call me, that's one less thing to worry about.'

'Of course.' His face is pale. He hates this. Hates to talk about the inevitable day they will all be taken. But avoiding it is the problem everybody has here. They daydream. They sneak around forming bonds and distractions. Eating too much. Training too little. Speaking English instead of Sídhe.

She tells him the same thing she once told her parents: 'I'm going to live.' Her voice is as cold as she can make it, which is very cold indeed. 'That was a one-off, that time with Tommy. I'm not interested any more.'

Anto is not allowed into the girls' dorm. She leaves him at the bottom of the stairs, and her face is as blank as a new sheet of paper. She doesn't look back; her hands don't tremble even slightly. She's getting so much better at this. Nessa knows Anto. She can trust him to

leave her alone.

Miraculously she is still holding it together by the time she reaches the top of the stairs. There's a lump in her throat, but nobody can see that, and the speed of her breathing will be put down to dragging such a heavy bag after her.

The thing is, that in spite of what she has said about distractions, Nessa is far more of a risk for Anto than the reverse. Of all the people she knows, his spirit is the most gentle. Stupidly so. Pointlessly. By Crom it makes her angry! Nobody who thinks as he does will last a minute in the other world. He's going to die, and it won't be quick.

Stop it! Stop it! She can't afford such thoughts. More than once they have made her . . . *reckless*, made her do that stupid Romeo thing.

She passes through the swing doors into a long, well-lit room of thirty beds. Twenty-six of them are still needed, but this is Year 5, the crucial year when most of the occupants will be Called. The proof of this can be found one floor further up, where the girls' dorm for Year 6 boasts a mere ten beds, of which five are still in use. As for Year 7, it has lost all but two boys and one girl and none of these will see Christmas.

But nobody is acting like they believe any of that. Antoinette is even smoking out the window, grinning back at the rest of them with dark pudgy cheeks. At least fifteen of them are here already. Athletic girls

from every part of Ireland, whose birthdays happen to fall in September or early October.

Nicole natters at Marya; Squeaky Emma fades into the background while Liz Sweeney scowls at everybody from the far corner.

They've all been home for two weeks and have plenty to chat about. Aoife holds up a bag of sugary treats baked by her Polish grandmother. She got her blonde hair and a ridiculous level of generosity from the same place, but her accent is just as much dirty Dub as Anto's. 'You hear Ponzy made it?' she asks Nessa.

'I did!' and finally Nessa feels the tension easing from her shoulders. 'Good old Ponzy! Will he come back as a veteran?'

'Dunno . . . He's stayin' home for now. Can't wait to read his account. Hey, you having a biscuit?'

Nessa, of course, never has a biscuit. She shakes her head

As promised, Megan has gone to drop in her report to Ms Breen, the school principal – a.k.a. the Turkey. So Nessa can dump her gear on her friend's bed until she gets organized.

First out of the bag is her *History of the Sídhe*: a mere hundred pages that contain all human knowledge of the species that has sworn to make the Irish extinct. There are larger books about them, of course, running to thousands of pages in some cases. But their writers have little more to offer but fear and speculation. Nessa

prefers facts, and there isn't a paragraph in the *History* that she doesn't know by heart.

The next book is a heftier one. It consists of last year's Testimonies: the accounts of boys and girls who returned from the land of the Sídhe alive and with enough of their sanity intact to report on what they saw and heard.

The final book, a present from her mam when she first left home, is *Dánta Grádha* – a collection of love poetry. It's exactly the sort of thing she told Anto she has no truck with. She knows most of this one by heart too.

The double doors swing open again. Sarah Taaft stands there like a single block of muscle. The US Marine must be in her late forties, weathered by wind and sun, but it hasn't softened her in the least. 'We're going for a run,' she shouts in English – she has never learned a word of Sídhe. 'Tracksuits on.'

Nessa feels a moment of dread as that pale gaze swings her way. 'You coming, Nessa?'

'Of course I'm coming.' She feels herself turning red, all the more so when Taaft rolls her eyes.

'We won't hold up for you.'

'You never do.'

Nessa doesn't need their charity. She is the first one changed. The first to reach the double doors. And *nobody* can catch her down a flight of stairs. She has developed a technique of locking her legs in place and

sliding down from step to step on the tough soles of her feet. She is never more than a breath away from disaster, with only her arms on banister and wall to keep control.

Taaft shouts down after her. 'No frickin' stairs in fairyland, kid! It's not gonna help you there!'

Nessa hits the ground floor at enormous speed, falling with precision to slide along the polished tiles almost as far as the main entrance.

Chuckwu is just arriving with his bags over his shoulder. 'What're you doing on the floor?' he asks.

'Going for a run of course.' She refuses a hand up. Already she can hear the rumble and laughter of the rest of the dorm charging down the stairs behind her. 'Gotta go.' From here to the trees she can only limp, and in no time at all the class passes her by. There's Antoinette, grinning and blowing her a tobacco-scented kiss, while Liz Sweeney tries to muscle past. Even Megan has arrived, one arm still out of her tracksuit. 'That dirty wee bitch of a turkey! Tell you later, Ness . . .'

And finally here comes Taaft, jogging past her, 'Seriously, kid . . .'

Then they're gone. Nessa's legs ache by the time she reaches the trees, but she doesn't allow herself to rest. 'Stick to the rules,' she mutters. 'Stick to the rules.'

She's an expert at this by now. She spots branches that are just the right size and knows too exactly how they should be broken, until, moments later, she has

created a pair of springy crutches for herself.

Nessa has stronger arms than anyone she knows. Over short stretches she can keep up with most of the runners in her class, male and female alike. But not today. This is going to be a loop run, as they call it.

It takes her an hour, down into the dip between the hills, her crutches skidding dangerously on the first fallen leaves of the year; then curving up the switchback, along the ridge, until, as twilight falls, she reaches the formation known as 'the Old Man'; the lone figure of Sergeant Taaft is sitting there, an illicit bottle of beer in her hand.

Nessa halts before reaching her. She trembles and sweats, panting far more than any of her classmates would have by this point.

'Just give it up, kid,' Taaft says. 'Go home.'

Nessa bites back the first reply that comes to her. It's dangerous to antagonize Taaft. There's a reason she's the only member of staff without a nickname.

'Why are you out here, Sergeant?'

Taaft looks up. She has an angry face, made of toothaches and crab apples. But amidst the pine smells and the forgiving rays of a dipping sun, she is as serene and lovely as the Madonna. 'Maybe I'm hoping to catch a fairy.'

'One of the Aes Sídhe?'

'Sure. You think I don't know that word, kid? The "People of the Mounds"?' She takes a long swallow

from the clay bottle. Several more lie at her feet. 'I even know where they got the name. I read that *Book of Conquests* of yours. How you drove them out of their homes and forced that treaty on them—'

'I wasn't even born! Nobody was!'

'Your people sent them "under the mounds". Whatever the hell that means. And thousands of years later they turn up again and they're gonna wipe you out.'

'They won't!' Nessa takes a deep breath. The sweat is starting to cool on her skin. She knows she should go, but will not give Taaft the satisfaction of rattling her. 'More of us are surviving all the time,' she says. 'It's up to one in ten from one in a hundred twenty-five years ago.'

'The fairies won't stand for it, kid. You can bet your life they're working on a plan right now to turn those odds back around. Whatever they come up with, I only hope it brings them here where I can snap their scrawny necks.'

And that's exactly what she does to the clay bottle. It cracks as loud as a gunshot, spilling beer onto the soil.

Nessa swallows. 'I have to get back, Sergeant.'

Stopping to chat was a mistake. She's given her arms time to remember how tired they are. She skids down the slope, her legs catching on stray roots and stones. By the time she makes it into the refectory, everyone else has showered and their spoons are already scrap-

ing the bottom of their plates.

Anto looks relieved to see her and then pretends not to notice as she heads for one of the girls' tables and squeezes in between Megan and Antoinette. Conor Geary, on the other hand, has followed her with his eyes all the way from the door. He towers over everyone at the boys' tables. He could squash her with one blow of his fists and always looks at her as though that's exactly what he intends. She will find out why soon enough, but it won't be today.

'By Crom, but you stink!' says Megan. 'Luckily this filthy stew is slowly killing all my senses. Look! I saved you just enough to keep you in the bathroom all night.'

'Why should I go to the bathroom at all, Megan, when your bed is right beside mine?'

'You're calling me a turd, Nessa Doherty.'

'I'm what?'

'If my bed is a toilet, and I'm in it, then—'

Antoinette interrupts them. Her plate is so clean it looks like it has just come out of the shop. She dips a fork into the rapidly cooling sludge. 'Always happy to help, my darlings,' she says.

There are eight to a table here in the massive hall, with each class in its own section, boys and girls separate. The biggest cohort consists of the Year 1s, the ten-year-olds. They look so tiny, so puny and sweet. They freeze like rabbits whenever the bell rings or

when one of the burly instructors so much as looks at them.

At the top of the room lies the survivors' table, where three of those who have come back from the Sídhe eat in the company of the instructors. Nabil is there tonight, although he doesn't touch pork. His great dark eyes always seem so sad in such a gentle face. Maybe the scars running through his beard hold the reason for that. He doesn't impress Taaft, however, who scowls on discovering that the only free seat is on the Frenchman's left.

Then there are the teachers' tables, where Alanna Breen holds court. A famous scholar, she wrote *History of the Sídhe* and speaks their language like a native. She is joined this evening by the cadaverous Ms Sheng, teacher of field medicine, and the portly, red-faced Mr Hickey – another actual survivor, one of the early ones – who instructs in hunt theory. He's laughing about something, but whatever the joke, he's the only one who gets it.

Many of the remaining teachers prefer to eat alone or in the nearby town of Boyle.

Alanna Breen clinks her glass and silence spreads through the room. She stands, uncaring of the way the folds on her neck wobble when she moves, even though this particular feature has earned her the nickname of 'the Turkey' among the students. Her appearance isn't helped by a tiny chin cowering in the shadow of a great

ski jump of a nose. However her voice is strong, and the words come easily, each one a perfect grammatical jewel of case and gender or tense and number.

'You'll all have heard by now that one of our own, that Ponzy, survived a Call.'

She waits for the cheering to come to an end. 'He won't be returning to join us here at Boyle, but his account will be published early next week. There'll be copies in my office, and Mr Hickey –' she bows to the red-faced gentleman at her side – 'Mr Hickey will be sharing the relevant parts with you all.'

'The relevant parts, miss?' This was from Bartley, one of Ponzy's two remaining classmates in Year 7.

'The relevant parts,' she confirms, and so stunned are the audience that nobody else speaks for a while. Survivor accounts are always published in full. But the boy on the bus this morning, the one who was Called, said something about Ponzy, that he had been . . . *changed*.

'We all knew Ponzy,' says Ms Breen, 'or Jack Ponsonby, as I suppose I should say. He has asked . . . he has asked that we remember him as he was. And having read his account, and in consultation with our master of hunt theory, I have agreed to leave out the final paragraph and any photographs of Ponzy's . . . um . . . *injuries*. Now, that's the end of the matter. We're glad to have him back. To have another living soul to keep the future alive for our dear country. We'll be serving

dessert in a moment. But first the toast.'

And she raises her glass, they all do, and cries, fervently, passionately, 'The Nation must survive! The future is ours!'

Nessa sees that the ten-year-olds haven't joined in, but instead they are resting their heads on the tables.

'Poor darlings,' says Antoinette. 'They're sleeping. They've been given the Welcome Tea.'

'It's pretty sick, if you ask me,' says Megan, and Nessa nods, despite the fact that she disagrees with her friend. The Year 1s are about to get the most important lesson the survival college can teach. In a few hours, each of them will wake up naked and alone in the forest. It is an experience that will terrify them, that will mark them for ever. It is meant to, because if it ever happens again, it means they've been Called by the Sídhe.