A Spell of Winter

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Extract

'I saw an arm fall off a man once,' said Kate. She turned the toasting-fork to see how the muffin was browning, then held it up to the fire again. We stared at her.

'Yes,' she went on, 'it was in my grandfather's house in Dublin. They were bringing my uncle Joseph down the stairs. Narrow, twisty stairs they put in houses where they'd given no thought to the living or the dead. You couldn't get a coffin up them. But my grandmother had kept the body too long in the house. She was mad with grief, she didn't want him to go. She kept putting more flowers in the room, shovelling flowers in on top of him to hide the smell. Then she'd be sitting with him all night long.'

'Was that your grandmother O'Neill?' I whispered to the flames.

'Who else would it be? You know my daddy was the eldest of the twelve. But this one, Joseph, was his next brother and the favourite. If there was meat or meal, it would be Joseph got the meat.'

'Did you know him before he was dead?'

'Who's telling this story? He was twenty-six when he died with a kick from a cart horse. How could I not know my own uncle?

'Well now, Joseph must have been up there a week or more, with my grandmother lighting fresh candles round him and saying prayers enough to wear out the saints. No one else's prayers were good enough for Joseph, only hers. I remember the talk in the house. We were giving scandal. It was the middle of summer, and hot. My mother wouldn't go near the house in her condition, and the smell had driven everyone

but my grandmother from the room. That was when it was decided that they would force her to have him brought down and taken out of the house for burial. She wouldn't even see the priest, so it was my father had to go up and talk to her. But she wouldn't listen. In the end four of them had to take her by the ankles and elbows, kicking and screaming to wake the dead. They shut her in the scullery until it was done.'

'Did they lock her in?'

'There was no lock on the door. My aunts sat in with her and there were two men set to guard it so she couldn't burst out. But the noise she made was terrible. So it was left to my father to bring Joseph down, with only Dodie to help. That was his next brother after Joseph.'

We nodded. We knew about Dodie, who never held a job or went out of the house if he could help it.

'They were bringing him down the curve of the stairs,' said Kate. She laid the muffin down on the hearth and showed us with her hands how the men eased the body round the narrow top of the stairs. 'There we were, all of us looking from the kitchen.'

I saw them in rows, Kate with her bold eyes staring the most.

'And the noise of my grandmother from the scullery, with her shawl thrown over her head though that didn't muffle the screeching at all. And then there was a smack where Dodie stumbled. I heard my father curse and the wall shook as the pair of them fell to their knees trying to get their balance and keep poor Joseph from falling. And we heard a terrible soft sound like the leg being sucked off a cooked chicken, and there was Joseph's arm bouncing down the stairs to the floor below. It lay on the floor in front of our very eyes,' said Kate.

'What did it look like?' asked Rob. His voice had gone growly with excitement. I said nothing. I stared at Kate, and

I saw white strings like roots coming out of the arm as it bounced down the wooden stairs.

'It had a silver shine on it,' said Kate, 'like the shine on money. But underneath the flesh was puffed up and purple. And the hand was swollen bigger than any hand I'd ever seen.'

'Did they pick it up?' I whispered.

'Oh yes, they had to do that. You can't be burying bits of a body here and there. But for a long while no one moved, and the only sound was my grandmother drumming her heels against the flags in the scullery. Of course she knew nothing of what was happening, nor ever did, for no one told her. Not even the youngest child that was there that day.' Kate held her empty toasting-fork up to the flames, forgotten.

'It was my aunt Kitty who picked up Joseph's arm. She took one of the white baking cloths from the drawer and went forward and laid it over the arm. Then she picked it up wrapped in the cloth like a shroud and took it out of the house. As she went past us we saw a stain seeping through the white.'

'Was it blood?' asked Rob.

'It was black,' said Kate. 'Black like tar.'

We sighed deeply. There was no sound but the puckering of the flames. The muffins were singed and dry, but who would want to eat them now? Then I thought of something.

'But where was your grandfather, Kate? Wasn't he in the house to make them bury Joseph before his arm fell off?' I knew that all twelve of them were afraid of their father, Kate's grandfather. I could close my eyes and see him plain from what Kate had told me. A little, wiry, jockey of a man. He should have been tall, but he grew up in famine times when there was no food for a child to grow on, said Kate. His tall sons and daughters stood over him and he lashed them with the whip of his tongue as if they were slow horses.

'He was away,' said Kate. Her face closed up and we knew she would tell us no more about where her grandfather had been. 'They got Joseph out of the house as quick as they could, and into his coffin. I heard Aunt Kitty say it was God's mercy he didn't fall to pieces entirely, there on the stairs. He had a quick burial.'

'How old were you, Kate?' asked Rob.

'Oh, eight or so. A little younger than you and a little older than this one,' she said, tapping my head. She leaned forward and poked the fire. 'These muffins are like leather. Away down to the kitchen, Cathy, and ask Mrs Blazer for fresh.'

I hesitated. 'Kate . . .' I wanted to ask more, but I didn't know what questions to ask. Was she going to tell Rob, when I was out of the room, because he was older? And besides, there was the long flickering passage, and the dark turn of the stairs to go down . . .

'Well, are you going or not?' she demanded impatiently. 'It's you that's eating these muffins, not me.'

I moved slowly to the door. I looked back at Kate and Rob in the circle of firelight. A cold draught felt at my ankles. Kate's strong white arms speared the dead muffins and tossed them unerringly into the wastepaper basket. She looked so sure and brave, even though she was the one who had seen the dead arm with her own eyes, when she was just my age. I wondered if I would be as sure as Kate when I was older, when my skirts were down over my boots the way hers were. I would wear stays then, like Kate, and have a shape that went in and out and made you want to put your arms tight around her waist to feel its narrow springiness. I was Cathy and she was Kate. We had the same name really. I was Catherine and she was Kathleen, but no one had called her that since she was baptized at two days old.

Mother was gone, and Father was away. There was Kate to look after us, and Eileen in the sewing-room, and the kitchen

warm and humming with people. There was Grandfather in London. There was nothing to be frightened of here. The fluttering shadows only startled me because they were sudden, like moths' wings.

'What's wrong with the girl?' snapped Kate at the fire, and it snapped back a slim tongue of flame, as sharp as hers. I went.

One

It is winter in the house. This morning the ice on my basin of water is so thick I can not break it. The windows stare back at me, blind with frost. Inside my nest of quilts I am warm, and Rob's coat presses down on me like two hands. I huff out my breath and watch it smoke.

I can see nothing through the frost flowers on the glass. I wonder if it is snowing yet, but I think it is too cold. It will only take a minute to rake out last night's fire and build up a fresh pyramid. There is always enough wood. All I have to do is walk out and gather it. There are five years of rotting trees and fallen branches which have been left to lie in the woods.

The coloured cloth spines of our childhood books look at me. Grimm, Hans Andersen, *At the Back of the North Wind.* But to get something to read I'd have to skate across the icy sea of oilcloth between me and the bookcase.

I kneel up in bed and put on Rob's coat. Its thick, stiff wool is becoming supple again from the heat of my body night after night. I put the sleeve to my face and sniff. The smell is still there, undiluted. The coat crushes my nightdress to my body and prickles my breasts. I button it up the boys' way and feel about on the floor for my slippers.

The paper is dry. I put paper and kindling by the fire last night, so it will light with clean blue and yellow flames as soon as I put a match to it. I coil the newspaper sheets into little balls without reading a single word. They are old newspapers, covered in long, thick columns of names. I never look at them. Then I make a pyre of coils and balance the kindling into a tent around it. I was always the best at making

fires. It's an instinct, knowing where to lay the flame of the match so that it catches the draught and flares up against the rough, flammable cheeks of white kindling.

I hold my hands to the flames as they begin to jump. There is no wind at all in the chimney, and this has always been an awkward grate. The flames lose heart and shrink back into the wood. I spread out a double sheet of newspaper and hold it over the grate to make it draw. The paper sucks in and I plaster it tight against the edge of the fireplace. In a couple of minutes the fire stirs behind it and begins to roar. I wait until it glows big and yellow behind the paper, singeing the newsprint brown. It would be so easy to read what was written, but I don't. Not one word. My fire is roaring like the big range down in the kitchens, which is never lit now. It has hunched there for months, dusty as winter soil. No one has blackleaded it.

I put down the paper, sit back on my heels and open Rob's coat. The flames are strong and they make yellow shadows on my white nightdress. The milky cold of the room is beginning to thaw. Soon the windows will grow little circles of plain glass.

I am getting hot. Rob's thick coat tents the heat. The smell is coming out more strongly now. Wool and sweat. Although I've brushed the coat I have never cleaned it. The earth smell is still there, like the smell on a bundle of tramp's clothes you find in the woods.

Little prickles of heat run down my sides. I feel my face flushing, and I push back my heavy plait. I kneel up and wriggle out of my nightdress under the coat, the way we used to do when we were undressing on the beach at Sandgate, while Nanny knitted and watched. It is decent to dress and undress beneath a tent of bleached cambric. My nightdress slides into a small white heap. I tug Rob's coat close around me. A row of spare buttons in the side seam presses into my

hip. They will leave a mark on my flesh that will last under my clothes all day, secretly. He never needed to change the buttons. They are still held on with strong dark thread, the way they were when the coat was bought. The label scratches the top of my neck and the first bone of my spine. I remember how cool the air felt against the nape of my neck when I first put up my hair. I wore a white dress which I hated, and Rob came up behind me and touched the skin I had never seen.

'It's so white,' he said. 'It's never had the sun on it.'

Then I twisted away from his fingers and picked up the skirts of my dress and ran down the staircase like a girl who could not wait to get to the party.

Now I move my body inside Rob's coat, so all my skin will touch the lining which has touched him. My breasts tip forward, catching on the hairy wool of the coat's opening. My fire dances and grows strong, stronger than the worn brown oilcloth, bought for hard wear, stronger than the iron frames of our two beds, stronger than the chain of the gas lamp over the table. I prop two dry logs into the flames and sit cross-legged, naked to the heat of the fire and the heat of the coat. I listen to the scuff of mice in the attics above me, the creak and settle of long rows of rooms beneath me, the cry of rooks beyond the frost-bound windows.

I never wear Rob's coat out of the house. I put on my thick navy-blue wool skirt with red braiding, and my black squirrel jacket. A big red sun hangs above the trees, catching in their spiky branches. I walk up the rhododendron path and through the Spanish chestnut grove. I climb over the gate into First Field. It should have been ploughed by now so that the frosts can break up the big clods of earth into sweet-smelling, crumbled spring soil. There is an awkward turn here by the hedge and the plough always swings out in a curve and spoils

the clean line of furrows flowing up to the horizon. In a frost like this I could have walked on the wave-like crests of the furrow without crumbling them. The earth is iron hard, the frost a week deep. But no one has ploughed. The Semple boys are gone. Next year it will all come right, old Semple told me, spitting out of the side of his mouth as he's done since he'd had his stroke. He will plough the field himself, he said, rather than see the land go to waste. But I know he never will.

The field is lumpy with half-remembered patterns of cultivation. It is fine soil, well-drained and rich. This is where we stood to shoot the pigeons that took the grain. They came out of the woods, never seeing us or remembering the deaths of a previous season. We must have shot hundreds over the years. Rank heaps of weeds blacken in the frost. The rabbits are bold enough to take the gun from your hand now, said old Semple. It will take years to root up the corn-cockle and poppies. We don't need to call him old Semple any more, I think suddenly. There are no young Semples any more. George went first, then Michael, then Theodore. The Semple boys never had their names shortened, even when they were children in big boots kicking up the dust on their way through the lanes to school. They did not go to church with the other families in the village: they walked three miles across the fields to a tiny chapel where the same six families met week after week to share their passion for the Lord.

I think of the spittle running down the side of old Semple's mouth and hanging in his rough beard. The beard is greyer than the hair on his head. It is a dirty ash grey, and bobbles of spittle tremble in it with the trembling of old Semple's body. He has always been clean-shaven, but he will not let his wife shave him now.

This was where Rob shot the hare. It was bad luck to shoot a

hare, they said in the kitchens even as they took it from us and exclaimed over its size and the fine roast it would make. He didn't kill her cleanly. She came like running water over the rise in the field, her ears flat to her body, her big legs bounding in great sure leaps. We had only been after rabbits. Rob swung up his gun and shot her. We ran to where she was lying, big ripples running through her flesh as she felt the wound. She was hit in the back legs and there were white bits of bone bubbling in the dark mess of blood. She didn't seem to know where she'd been shot and her body quivered all over as she struggled to make her legs run. Her lips were drawn back over her teeth.

'I'll shoot her again,' said Rob.

'Don't, she'll come to pieces,' I said. 'Hit her on the back of the neck like a rabbit.'

I took Rob's gun and he got the hare by her ears and swung Grandfather's blackthorn stick. She gave a buck in his hands then she was still and her eyes began to film at once, though blood dripped steadily out from the hole in her thigh.

'You've got all blood on Grandfather's stick,' I said. I thought of the hare's form we'd come upon once, when it was still warm. I'd put my hand in it and felt it.

'She wouldn't have young at this season,' said Rob, as if he was arguing with someone. I thought of leverets lying still as death, waiting for their mother to come home. He bent down and pulled up a tuft of grass, then wiped the stick carefully with it until there was no trace of blood left.

'No,' I said, my mind full of the blind, skinny leverets, 'she won't have any young. It's the wrong time.'

'Do you want to carry her, Cathy?'

I knew that the hare sickened him. She was a bagful of blood, dripping, not the beautiful thing she had been. 'All right. Give it to me.' I took the hare by her front paws. She was heavy, and warm. Much heavier than I would have

thought, from the way she leapt down the field. My arm ached as we walked back to the house, and the hare banged against my legs. She would be staining my coat, but I didn't look down to see. It was black, and the blood wouldn't show. Rob carried my gun as well as his own. Two of the Semple boys were working in the woods with their father. Theodore and Michael. They were planting young beech where Grandfather had had to take down an oak that was rotten to the heart. It might have been there a thousand years or more, Rob said. When it came down we'd count the rings, we said, but we never did, and it was soon sawn up and carted away for firewood. The Semple boys were twelve or thirteen then, a couple of years older than Rob. A short while ago they'd been children like us, but now they wore working clothes, like men. They stopped digging to look at the hare.

'Give it to Mrs Blazer, she'll hang it and roast you a fine saddle of hare for Sunday,' said old Semple. Theodore looked intently at it, as if he were imagining what it would taste like. We often gave them rabbits, but hare was richer, different, darker meat.

I thought of it hanging in the pantry, with blood coagulating in a white china dish under it. It was always cold in there, because the pantry faced north and there were big, chill marble slabs on which meat rested. Wire mesh covered a small window which looked out to a bank of earth. There was always a faint, iron smell of blood. You had to know how long to hang each creature. So long for a piece of venison, so long for a pheasant or a hare. Grandfather knew everything about hanging animals. But you didn't call them animals once they were shot, you called them game. Like you called people corpses.

I walk up the frozen field. I cannot damage the earth, or anything that is in it. The rooks circle low, flapping their big

wings emptily. Cold stings my cheeks and I walk faster, tucking my hands under my elbows to keep them warm in the squirrel fur. I should have brought my fur gloves, too. At the top of the field I stop and look back at the house, where one thin plume of smoke goes straight up into the sky. It is my fire. All the other chimneys are cold. Later Elsie Shell will come up from the village and light the kerosene stove in the back kitchen and cook my dinner. She will bring butter and eggs in her basket, and a new loaf. I told her I didn't want fancy food. I am used to plain. When Elsie has gone I will tear off the crust of the loaf and spread it with sweet yellow butter and eat it walking from room to room, with Rob's coat round my shoulders. Elsie shudders exaggeratedly as she goes away in the early December dusk.

'I shouldn't care to be on my own in this great place all night, the way you are,' she said to me yesterday, planking down my mutton cutlet and gravy with her big raw hands. She wants to come and live here again, with Annie and Mrs Blazer and the others, the way it used to be. But I won't let her. It is never going to be the way it was. I tell her she ought to think of getting a job in the new drapery at Over Loxton. There is money there. They are setting up the shop in a big way, hoping to catch trade from half the county. Elsie could sit in a black dress behind the counter, waiting for the little cylinders of change to whizz back along the wire. But would they want Elsie with her kitchen hands and easy way of talking? And Elsie likes coming here.

'I know the ways of that range like nobody else,' she says, looking at it as if she sees it pulsing with heat again, the blacklead on it glistening like tongues in hellfire.

'It doesn't worry me, Elsie,' I say. 'I like the kerosene stove. And I like being alone.'

I am going back into the silence my grandfather came from.

You have to keep on with a house, day after day, I think. Heating, cleaning, opening and closing windows, making sounds to fill the silence, cooking and washing up, laundering and polishing. As soon as you stop there may as well never have been any life at all. A house dies as quickly as a body. Soon the house will be as it was when my grandfather first came here with my mother still a baby. He had imagined the way it would be, with lights burning, and fires, and people moving to and fro, and births in the bedrooms. Everything had stopped when he stopped being able to imagine it any more. I should have asked him more questions when he was alive. If I shut my eyes I see him now, with my mother in his arms, wrapped in a long coat and tramping round the house he was going to buy, the future he was going to buy, the life he was going to buy.

'The man from nowhere.'

'Convenient place, nowhere.'

I ought to have made sure I knew more. He'd had a past, a geography of silence. None of us had ever mapped it.

My feet are beginning to hurt with the cold that strikes up through the soles of my boots. It is not a day for standing still. In summer you can't see the house from here, only a thick waving frame of green. But now through the black limbs of the trees I see the country of its tiles, where we sat and baked in the valleys on simmering hot summer days, where we hauled ourselves up through skylights, kicking wildly, where we clung to chimney stacks as we felt for the next foothold. I see long rows of blank, staring windows. I am too far away to see the paint curling on the window frames, the marks of damp and rot. When Grandfather was alive the struggle to keep out water and wind went on and on. There was never enough money for the army of workmen that was needed. One of the Semple boys would be taken out of the fields to slosh paint on to window frames, or scaffolding

would be cobbled together and a man sent up on to the roof to pour liquid tar on to the worst leaks in the valleys. Grandfather would go round the house with Rob, showing him where a patch of brickwork was crumbling, or the streak of a hairline crack was beginning to race and widen. All these things were like symptoms of a disease that could never be put right, only kept at bay for a year or two.

Grandfather never took my arm and pointed it up towards a missing tile, though I knew as much about the house as Rob did. More. I watched it, and he never did. I knew where its walls trapped sunlight and fed it back to you when you leaned against them after dusk. I knew where the pears ripened first against the kitchen-garden wall, and how to reach inside the apricot net, twist out a rose-freckled apricot and cover up the gap with leaves. I knew the long white rows of attics where Kate and Eileen slept, reflected in their spotted looking-glass. I knew the yeasty smell of the cellars where beer was brewed for the house. I put my finger into the head and sniffed hops and malt and once I turned the spigot and drank thin new beer out of my hands until the cellar walls spun round me. I slept all afternoon under the mulberry tree, and when Rob came to find me my dress was splattered with black mulberry juice. I knew the icy gush of pump water on a blazing July afternoon when Rob and I took turns to work the handle and let the water pulse out over our arms. It was my house, too. I had the smell of it in my clothes and on my skin.

The sky is not going to clear. Mist rises off the ground and mixes with the thickening grains of cold in the air. The sun is fading. Perhaps it is going to snow.

It is winter, my season. Rob's was summer. He was born in June, and I was born in the middle of the night, on the 21st of December. My winter excitement quickened each year with

the approach of darkness. I wanted the thermometer to drop lower and lower until not even a trace of mercury showed against the figures. I wanted us to wake to a kingdom of ice where our breath would turn to icicles as it left our lips, and we would walk through tunnels of snow to the outhouses and find birds fallen dead from the air. I willed the snow to lie for ever, and I turned over and buried my head under the pillow so as not to hear the chuckle and drip of thaw.

I look at the house, still and breathless in the frost. I have got what I wanted. A spell of winter hangs over it, and everyone has gone.