

DARRAGH MARTIN

All day long, the boy has been labouring in the sandy fields. Only yesterday, she overheard her grandfather saying “ he works like a grown man, that one.” It is 1963. She is eight years old and he is twelve; a big, strong boy for his age. He is one of the Irish “tattie howkers”, who come over to this small Scottish island every summer to help with the potato harvest. She is an only child, living with her widowed mother and her grandfather at a farm called Dunshee. The house is perched high up on the windy spine of the island, with its fields sweeping down to the sea. It frustrates her that there are no other children on the farm and only a handful down in the village. There is so much to tell, and there are so few people to listen.

Today, when she comes running up the hill from school, in her red summer sandals, with her little satchel on her back, she sees her grandfather in his cap, his overalls, his muddy green wellies, leaning on the field gate, staring down at the dusty workers, with a frown on his face. She distracts him by running to him, and he swings her up in the air, her pigtails flying. She likes to feel his big hands birling her round and round like this. Fields and sky blur around her and then she is on her feet, holding onto his legs to steady herself.

“Ceit, my little Ceit!” he says. “Did you have a good day?”

It is almost holiday time, but they never go away. There is too much to do about the farm at this time of year and her grandfather seldom leaves the island except to go to the cattle market on the mainland. Once or twice her mother has taken her to Glasgow, to stay with relatives there, in October, or perhaps in the spring, but summer holidays are invariably spent at home.

When he has set her down, her grandfather singles the boy out from the others, and calls him over.

“You there! Come here to me!” he shouts.

The boy shambles up to the gate, wiping the sweat from his face with a grimy hand.

“Yes mister?” he says. He looks wary, as though expecting a reprimand, but instead her grandfather tells him to knock off early, have something to eat, take a rest.

“For God’s sake” he says abruptly, almost angrily. “Take a rest for God’s sake!”

The boy looks puzzled but obediently follows them in the direction of the farm, veering towards the barn where the tattie howkers always sleep.

In the summer, when the nights are light, she is allowed to stay up late and wander where she pleases, so long as she stays away from dangerous machinery, (they have drummed the danger of tractors into her so thoroughly that she cannot see the old red Ferguson without a little thrill of horror) or the precipitous cliffs on the far western side of the island. But there is no-one to play with. There are only half a dozen children at the island primary school, and most are much older or younger than she is. Miranda, at the big house, is just a little older than Ceit, a year maybe, but she already goes to boarding school on the mainland. She spends most of her holidays in London, and only visits the island occasionally. Even then, she hardly acknowledges Ceit's existence, but once she sat in church and pulled faces at Ceit during the whole long sermon. Ceit responded in kind, indignant but enthralled, until her mother noticed, and shook her by the shoulder, hissing "Will you stop that nonsense!" It might have been the start of a friendship, but afterwards Miranda swept past on her way out of the kirk with her parents and her brother, and didn't so much as glance in Ceit's direction.

Tonight, Ceit climbs up the rocky slopes behind the farmhouse, scrambling through heather and bracken that is almost as high as she is, scratching her bare knees, rousing unpleasant clouds of crane flies that blunder about her head, till she reaches the summit, a wide saucer of land, which slopes gently to a tumble of rocks in the middle. From the furthest lip of this saucer, she can see the great blue-grey expanse of the western sea, pied here and there with patches of wind. Her grandfather calls this place Hill Top Town. That's what she calls it herself, though sometimes she wonders why there is no town here at all: only this shallow bowl of land with jagged rocks, a thin covering of lumpy turf, and drifts of purple thyme papering the crevices. It is her favourite place on the whole island. Her secret place. Her palace, her fortress, her sanctuary.

Except that tonight, there is an intruder. The Irish boy is sitting on the western lip of this hill top depression, looking out at the sea, shading his eyes against the setting sun. She is not dismayed by his presence, only curious. His shoulders are hunched, and even from behind, he looks dejected, so because she is only eight and not yet shy of boys, she goes and plumps herself down beside him.

“Hello!” she says. “What are you doing here?”

He turns to look at her. “Just sitting” he says. “Why? Am I not allowed?”

“Why should you not be allowed?”

He doesn't reply. She knows that it is because there are so many things the visiting Irish are not allowed to do. They are allowed in the public bar of the hotel, but not in the lounge. They are not made welcome in the shop. “Only two of you at a time please” the shopkeeper tells them, implying that any more than that will run off with half her stock. They are not supposed to light bonfires, or stray too far from the farms where they are working. If anything goes missing, however small, they are blamed. The most that has ever gone missing on the island is a clutch of eggs or the odd turnip out of the fields, but they are blamed anyway. They must always be watching their step for fear of putting a foot wrong. That's what her grandfather says.

“And why not?” says her mother. “You know as well as I do what they are like!” But her grandfather will never agree.

“We are the same blood” he says, strangely, and Ceit has no idea what he means.

She looks sideways at the boy. It doesn't seem to her as though they can possibly have the same blood. He is very dark, very foreign, with sooty hair like her favourite cat and a face burnt by exposure to sun and wind. He has beautiful dark eyes like little fishes or almonds. He seems too old to her, suddenly. Too old and grown-up to be a playmate. But he looks very sad, and she sees that there are tears on his eyelashes, and her own eyes fill up with sympathetic moisture.

“Ooh don't cry” she says, and watches as he rubs his eyes fiercely with a grubby hand leaving dark smudges around them.

“I'm not cryin'” he says, angrily. “The wind's in me eyes. That's all.”

She doesn't know how to reply to this. Surreptitiously she lifts the hem of her skirt and pulls a faded blue handkerchief out of her navy knickers. “Here” she says. “You can have my hankie anyway.”

“I don't want it.”

“But look at you, you're all muddy.” She licks her hankie, and wipes briskly at his cheeks, the way her mother sometimes cleans her own face and hands when there is no soap and water near.

He starts to laugh. “I'm alright” he says pushing her away. And his accent is funny. He takes the hankie from her however, and rubs his eyes. When he hands it back

to her, it is streaked with the sandy marks of soil from his face and fingers. Later, her mother will say “What do you *do* with your handkerchiefs?” But she won’t tell.

“What’s your name?” she asks him.

She is a great one for names.

“You have to know the names of things Ceit - trees, plants, birds, flowers.”

That’s what her grandfather tells her. “They all have their own names, and you should know what they are. It’s no good being careless about such things.”

Her grandad knows the names of all the wildflowers which grow on the island and she files the words away in her mind. Bogbean and ladies tresses. Speedwell and celandine. She likes to say the words aloud. She likes the sounds that they make on her tongue. Almost as though she can taste the words themselves like the sweet blaeberry, the luscious bramble and the glossy but bland crowberry.

“Darragh” says the boy. “Darragh Martin.”

“Darragh” she repeats, the way he has said it. “Da-ra.” Liking the sound of that as well “Are you from Ireland like the rest of them?”

He points to the south west where the sea glitters in the late sunlight and nods. “Somewhere over there. “

“Are you homesick?”

He considers this for a moment. “Maybe I am. But I don’t know why.”

“*Why* don’t you know why?” She is a persistent child. She will follow a question to the bitter end and beyond.

“Because it’s not very homely. My home.”

“Oh.” She nods sagely. He must know what he’s talking about. But she doesn’t really know what he means. Surely all homes are homely?

“Is your mammy not here with you?” she asks. The women and men who come over from Ireland for the potato harvest work together but they sleep in separate barns for decency’s sake.

“No. She’s not with me.”

“You must miss your mammy though” she says after a little pause.

“Yes, I miss her. But I don’t live with her.”

“Do you not? “

“No. They won’t let me. She’s in Dublin. I live on a farm in Donegal.”

“Is it nice?” she asks.

“No it isn’t.”

“Is it anything like this one?”

“It’s smaller than this one. But the people are....” He hesitates. “They won’t let me go back to Dublin to see my mammy,” he tells her, simply.

She wonders who “they” are and how they can be so cruel. But although she wants to pursue this line of questioning she realises that it might not be polite so she sits still for a moment and thinks of something else to say. He has not asked her name. She is surprised by his lack of curiosity, but she ventures the information anyway. “I’m Ceit. You say Kate but you spell it c-e-i-t.” She spells out the letters the way they say them at school. “Ceit Galbreath.”

He nods but says nothing. Just sits there staring out to sea and picking at the purple thyme flowers and the little grasses. .

“It’s nice up here, isn’t it?” she offers, after a bit.

“It’s alright.” He looks around as though seeing it properly for the first time.

“This is the best place on the whole island. This is Hill Top Town.”

“I thought it was Dunshee.”

“No” she says, “Not the farm. That *is* Dunshee. I mean this bit. Up here. Hill Top Town. That’s what my grandad calls it. That’s what everyone calls it though there’s no town here that I can see.“

“There is no town. You’re right.”

“I asked my grandad and he said there might once have been one, a long time ago.”

“Maybe so. You mean down there?” He turns to look into the shallow bowl of land with its scattering of grey rocks, which forms the summit of the hill.

“That’s right. And do you see the part where the flags grow, the yellow irises there. That usually means water. A spring maybe.”

“Is that so?”

“My grandad says so.”

“And he’s always right, your grandad?”

“Of course” she says, and he doesn’t have the heart to laugh at her.

“Is this your first time here?” she asks him.

“It is.”

“And how long will you be staying?”

He shrugs. “A few weeks. We’ll be working on the other farms and maybe going to some of the other islands, but we’re to stay here at Dunshee mostly.”

“That’s good” she tells him. She stands up, levering herself off the ground with her hand on his shoulder.

“Why is it good?”

“Because I don’t have many people to play with and you can come out with me so long as you’re here.”

“They won’t let me do *that*.”

“They will so. My grandad will. He’ll let you if I ask him You don’t work on Sundays, do you?”

She can twist her grandad around the smallest of her small fingers. “Leave the child be” he often says to her mother. “She’s alright. Let the child do what she wants. She’s doing no harm.”

“You spoil her” says her mother.

“And why not? What else would I be doing with my one and only grandchild? Besides. How can you spoil someone by loving them?”

Do you like fishing?” she asks him, on a sudden inspiration.

“Maybe.”

“I’ve got a rod. We can go fishing. There’s a loch with trout. It belongs to the estate but my grandad’s allowed to fish there. It’s not far. “

“I don’t know ...” he hesitates. “I’m here to work.”

“You’ll get a bit of time off to go fishing though” she tells him. “You finish at five, I know. I’ll ask my grandad if you can come with us.” He will say yes. She is the apple of his eye. “Listen, we’ll take you fishing. Me and my grandad. And there’s the beach down there. We can go to the beach some days. Make sandcastles. Swim. It’ll be good. You’ll see.”

As an adult she often finds herself rehearsing this first conversation in her mind. Polishing the story like a beach pebble. Making it perfect in her memory. What is it about him that so draws her to him? Is it pity for his loneliness? Curiosity about the stranger – for there are few visitors to the island? Or just a childish perception of his need; the same instinct that makes her so anxious to bottle feed the orphan lambs for her grandad? And she’s good at it as well. “Nobody can bring them through like my little Ceit” he tells everyone proudly.

Darragh Martin looks up at her as she stands over him, small and ingenuous, her red hair in two fat crinkly plaits hanging on either side of her freckled face, and he grins at her. The smile lights up his whole face, transforms it, makes him look much younger, much happier. “Alright” he says. “If you like. I don’t mind if I do. ”

A day or two later she persuades her grandfather to take him fishing..

“Is this wise?” asks her mother, but Alasdair just shrugs.

“Why not? He’s only a young lad. He needs a wee holiday now and then. The work’s back breaking. Even our own lads have a spell once in a while. He’s young to be over here – God knows why he was even sent here with nobody to keep an eye on him. The money I suppose. It could only be the money.”

“Heavens above! Why would anybody need to keep an eye on him?”

“You wouldn’t like to see our Ceit in the same situation.”

“That’s a different matter altogether and well you know it. But taking him fishing now... making a favourite of him.... I just think...”

“What?”

“Is it quite suitable?”

“Don’t be so po-faced woman.” It is the mildest of rebukes but her mother knows when she is beaten. Alasdair only ever bothers to argue with his daughter-in-law about points of principle but then he is unmoveable.

Alasdair often takes Ceit fishing to the little loch, at the back of Ealachan House, the “big house”. Alasdair Galbreath is on friendly terms with Malcolm Laurence, who practically owns the whole island, and has stocked the loch with trout. Alasdair is casually deferential, while his landlord is ever so slightly condescending. He would prefer it if he were not a tenant farmer, if the farm was his own. But what can’t be cured must be endured and permission to fish is one of the perks of the tenancy. He is teaching Ceit to cast. The rod is long and too heavy for her, but she manages, and is proud of herself.

Sometimes they meet Malcolm’s son, Miranda’s elder brother, Oliver. He is also away at school during term time but he spends at least part of his summer holidays on the island. The family have a house in London, but twelve year old Oliver is “chesty” and they send him north for his health. Ceit and her grandad often see him, walking the island

paths with his black Labrador at his heels, looking like a youthful version of his father. He wears the same tweedy clothes, the same polished brogues. His appearance always exasperates Alasdair.

“Jesus Christ!” he whispers, hissing the profanity at Oliver’s retreating back. This makes Ceit giggle, and her mother angry.

“The child, Alasdair!” she tells him. But Ceit cannot understand why her grandad gets so cross.

Tonight, they meet Oliver on their way to the loch. He whistles his over-exuberant dog to heel and bids them a polite good evening.

“Spot of fishing eh?” he says, like a little old man.

“Just a spot” says Alasdair and walks on.

“Nice evening for it.”

“It is indeed.”

“Would you look at that?” says Alasdair to Darragh, when he has gone past. “He’ll be my landlord one day! May the good lord keep Malcolm Laurence safe and sound.”

Darragh says nothing, just grins and whistles through his teeth.

“Don’t you *like* Oliver?” asks Ceit. “I think he’s a nice boy. Much nicer than his horrible sister.” She screws up her nose at the very thought of Miranda.

“Oh he’s fine” says Alasdair, patting her on the head. “Don’t you waste your time worrying about Oliver Laurence, my wee lamb. He doesn’t need *your* sympathy.”

At the loch, Ceit practises her casting, and then lends Darragh her rod very willingly. Actually it is her great-grandfather’s old rod, in smooth greenheart with brass fittings. It is too heavy for her to handle, but fine for Darragh who – so her grandad says – is very big for his age. She sits in the shade among the creamy meadowsweet and watches him fish. She notices that he is left-handed, like her grandfather.

Alasdair is being quietly kind to Darragh.

“Come on lad” he says. “Let’s see what you can do.”

It is very warm, almost breathless beside the loch. Ceit judges – with some satisfaction - that he isn’t quite as competent as she is. There are tiny green spiders among the meadowsweet and they scuttle over her hands and legs and tickle her as they

go. She lifts her hand and watches as one of them dives into space, swinging from its own silk, trapezing from her finger. Carefully she lowers it to the ground, making sure that it lands in a little hollow below a stone, not wanting to squash it when she gets to her feet. The smell of cut grass drifts across from the gardens at Ealachan and mingles with the musky scent of meadowsweet and the cool evening scent of water.

She raises her eyes and sees Darragh, a dark silhouette, obliterating the sun. Her grandad has been showing him how to cast properly. She is already proud of having a big boy for a friend. She hears the plop as the float hits the surface and sees the widening rings out on the water as fish rise to flies but not to her grandad's bait. Or Darragh's either, for that matter. She feels the nip of the midges on her arms and legs and slaps at them but they are persistent. She is afraid that they will have to go home before they have caught anything. Over in the woods beside Ealachan house she can hear the din of rooks beginning to circle, thinking about roosting, jostling for position.

Seeing that they haven't caught anything, Alasdair uses ground bait, which is something that he isn't supposed to do, and they catch two fat trout in a matter of minutes, which is the maximum he is allowed by the keeper. He despatches each fish with a single blow from his wooden "priest", the small but heavy cosh which he keeps in his fishing bag. Then they take them home to Dunshee where her mother guts them and cooks them in a frying pan on the top of the stove. The wireless in the kitchen is playing Scottish dance music. It is a big, boxy affair with magical names like Hilversum and Luxemburg on the dial. In use, it grows very warm, and the cat likes to sit on top of it with the music spilling out of his soft body. Darragh gazes at the wireless as though he has never seen anything like it before.

"I should be getting back to the barn now" he says, uncertainly.

"Not at all!" her grandfather tells him, pulling out a chair for him. "What's the point of catching the fish if you don't get to eat them afterwards?"

Ceit sees that her mother would prefer it if Darragh went back to the barn but she says nothing. He stays to eat with them: fried trout and boiled potatoes and scones made with buttermilk and baked in the oven at one side of the kitchen fire. All the bread and cakes are baked in this oven. Ceit likes to help, likes to watch her mother throwing flour into the bottom of the oven. If it burns, the oven is too hot. If it stays white, the oven is too cool. If it goes pale golden brown, the oven is just right. There is something infinitely satisfying to Ceit about this simple formula although she can't explain why. It seems to

her like a magic spell of sorts. Sometimes she lies in bed at nights, imagining herself as a grown-up woman, in charge of the house, tossing flour into the oven. Trying to get the temperature exactly right.

Darragh sits at their table and eats ravenously, glancing over his shoulder occasionally, as though expecting somebody to catch him unawares. As though anticipating some attack from behind. He holds his arms protectively around his plate and forks the fish into his mouth, hardly pausing to chew between mouthfuls.

“Steady lad” says Alasdair, watching him, his brow furrowed into a frown. “Steady on. You’ll need a wee pause between mouthfuls. You’ll not be wanting to choke yourself.”

Darragh looks up and Ceit thinks that he reminds her of the farm dogs when they hunch protectively over a bone, casting dangerous white eyed glances in all directions. But she says nothing. She finds herself blushing for him.

Darragh sees them watching him. He colours as well, his cheeks scarlet beneath the brown of exposure to sun and wind. He moves his arms away from his plate and slows down.

Isabel spoons out more potatoes for him but she snatches the spoon away quickly, Ceit notices, as though she is feeding a wild animal.

“Thanks” he says. “Thanks very much missus.” He looks up and flashes her his sudden disconcerting smile.

“Alright?” asks Alasdair.

“Yes thanks.”

“Good.”

Alasdair reaches out and pats him on the shoulders.

“Good lad” he says. “Good lad.”

And for the first time, Ceit feels something that she will always feel in Darragh’s company. She feels a sudden sense of proprietary pride in him, as though praise of Darragh was praise of herself, but it is compounded – as it always will be - by a sharp pang of jealousy. She wants him all to herself. But she wants her grandad all to herself as well.

“Am I not good?” she asks her grandfather, plaintively, to distract him.

“Of course you are. You’re my little Ceitag. My little lass!” he says, turning from his plate to tug at her pigtails, tying them into a loose knot at the back of her neck. Ceit is

ticklish. She hunches her shoulders and shivers but still she likes it when he teases her in this way. She glances up and catches Darragh watching her, watching her grandfather. He looks hungry. That's what she thinks. Hungry. But how can he be hungry when he is already in the middle of eating? When he has eaten so much already?

“Just eat your tea and stop your nonsense Ceit” says her mother. As always. “Just finish your tea and be quiet now. And then Darragh had better get back to his friends in the barn.”