

THE BURREN

By Mark Cornell

This was the last part of the County to explore. Kathryn had been told that somewhere around here lay the bones of her great grandmother. She shivered as the lunar landscape opened up around her. Brendan pointed his skinny hand across to a handful of deserted cottages on the crest of a distant grey hill.

The Youth Hostel was a run down manor house. It had a note on the front door saying the owner was away, but travelers were still welcome to stay. Kathryn staggered upstairs, crossed a ward lined with bunk beds then tossed her pack onto the bed closest to the bay window. She dragged a lounge chair across the wood floor towards the window to collapse into what felt like the softest cushion of her journey. She listened to the hissing ocean.

Kathryn saw Brendan march down a trail that led to the beach. A bloated sun was plunging into the Atlantic. Red flares of sunlight flooded the horizon. An image of her Auntie Dolly suddenly came into Katherine's mind. Silver haired Auntie Dolly, was bouncing a tiny Kathryn on her skeletal knee. Her warbling voice telling Kathryn she should be proud to have Bushranger blood coursing through her veins. Auntie Dolly's uncle was Joe Byrne, Ned Kelly's lieutenant.

She struggled on her aunt's lap when she was shown sepia photographs taken of Joe the day after they killed him. His body was strung up like a puppet; his hands were scorched by the fire that burnt down Glenrowan Inn. Those charred fingers had once scrawled a defense of the Kelly Gang, and written ballads for the little people. Those fleshy stumps, had squeezed the trigger to blow away his old mate, Aaron, to Christ knows where.

Hazy memories, dead auntie Dolly's unfulfilled dream to get back to County Clare. Kathryn had forked out many a pound note to spend the day sifting through birth and death certificates. She and a silent Brendan had explored graveyards dotted with weeping angels and Celtic crosses, to find no record of the Byrne's.

Brendan hunched over an open fire, slurping and stirring a pot of soup. Red embers flared each time the arctic wind rushed down the chimney.

His glazed eyes mirrored the flames as he murmured away to himself. A yawning, stretching Kathryn suddenly floated through the doorway. She quietly knelt down next to the flames.

'G'day sleepy head. How's it going?' Brendan's weather beaten face crinkled when he smiled.

'I've had the best sleep of our trip. No snoring or smelly armpit tourist disturbed me. How was it down there?' Kathryn yawned again.

'It was bloody amazing. The sun reflected off the mountains and sea, everything merged into red. I've still got blind spots in front of my eyes. I wrote four poems while you slept.' Brendan rubbed the black stubble on his chin.

He leant down towards Kathryn and began to stroke her long dark hair.

'Your ears are on fire, it's what's his face. He's sending words, twelve thousand miles across the ocean. He's saying come back home to the nest of wealth acquiring drones.'

'Just leave it, eh? I'm over here with you. Isn't that enough for God's sake?' Kathryn took a swig from Brendan's Guinness bottle. He chuckled then turned back to nurse the soup.

A lighthouse from an island across the sea suddenly lit up. Their room flared with white light at regular intervals. Kathryn sipped Brendan's soup. She recalled the way David, her husband, squirmed on the edge of the couch when confronted with the Byrne family for the first time. His puzzled, 'You

understand that gobbledygook?' after Kathryn translated her sister's toddler language for him.

She thought of David's snooty response to Kathryn's father, Brian, who chain-smoked and

nattered about the gee-gees. She remembered the silence of the streets of Templestowe, after the swarm of voices at the Housing Commission Estate. And David, always outside when the Byrne's visited, pretending to do renovations to their house that looked like a Masonic lodge.

Brendan nodded towards the window, 'That's the Aran Isle out there.' Kathryn looked up to see the islands' cottage lights trace fluid trails on the black sea. Brendan scoured his dog-eared map. 'I reckon this town we're in is Fanore, Katie.'

Kathryn remembered how she'd rediscovered her childhood friend, Brendan sleeping in a bus stop in Templestowe. He was living like a gypsy and studying literature, in a decayed old weatherboard cottage on the back blocks of one of the last orchards.

'Stuffed if I know,' was his response when she asked him what he wanted to do with his degree.

'Listen !' Brendan suddenly shouted one night to David and Kathryn. His brown eyes were wild with excitement. The melody of a Willy Wagtail drifted through their dining room window. Brendan went out to the front nature strip to sit below an old man gum tree. Kathryn followed him.

'This place used to be teeming with these little fellas, until those bastard developers came along and pulled every tree down. Look after him Kathryn eh ? He's the last of his mob.' The dancing bird sang beneath a canopy of stars. They sat outside for hours; talking and watching the north wind brush the night sky. David's television threw its blue sheen along the marble hallway behind the screen door.

Kathryn floated in and out of sleep. Sometimes she'd see the peat collapse into grey mounds of soot. At one stage she saw a silhouette squatting in front of the fire. 'Is that you Bren?' Kathryn leant up. The shade turned to face her. Kathryn sensed it was female. It silently went back to study the dying fire.

‘ You remember your dreams once you’re away from work,’ Brendan said to her the next day. Their old bomb of a car put-putted up a rocky ridge. His dark eyes stared up at the sun which was a faint orange smudge behind a wall of mist.

‘ Last night I dreamt I stepped up into the sky. I felt I had springs on my shoes. I soared over a flat grey landscape. I felt strangely detached as I flew like a phantom towards a yellow smoking sun. That detachment’s been haunting me all morning. ’ Kathryn’s forehead wrinkled. She stared at rocks that squatted like sentinels on top of a distant hill. A nearby cottage merged into a broth of low-lying cloud.

‘ Turn right up here, I reckon that’s the ringfort, jutting out like a pimple on the edge of that mountain. ’ Brendan tossed his map into the back seat. Kathryn turned the car to crawl along a white road full of ruts. Rain bands swept in from the powder blue ocean.

Brendan and Kathryn resembled a pair of monks while they staggered around the walls of the ringfort in their black raincoats.

‘ What can you see Bren ? ’ she shouted through the wind. He didn’t reply. A burst of rain forced Kathryn back into the car. When she last saw Brendan, he was leaning down to poke his head into the beginning of an underground passageway.

Kathryn squinted through the streaming windscreen towards the figure of someone slowly coming towards the car. It was an old man shuffling along a stone path, she could just make out his ancient black cap and oak walking stick. His clay-coloured face looked like it had been chiseled out of the local rock. He raised his stick towards the car, then muttered in a sing song voice, ‘ Hello lass, you look like you’re a long ways from home, what brings you here? ’

‘ We’re exploring the fort. ’ Kathryn wound down the car window.

‘ Oh me fort, oh well you’re most welcome to have a look around.’

As she stepped out of the car, the old man slowly turned his watery blue eyes to the now clearing sky and uttered, ‘ We’re standing in the belly of a glacier lass. ’

‘ What do you mean ? ’ Kathryn peered towards a band of mist that had enveloped the ringfort, Brendan wasn’t around.

‘ During the old days, a glacier stretching hundreds of miles from the north, sat here like a white giant, carving out the Burren. There’s still some arctic flowers to be found, if you spot blue star shaped wildflowers perching in the rock shelves you’ll know that’s them.’

*‘ The Burren, The Burren,
where the green roads do run,
over hill, over dale they sing
tales of the magical ring.’*

The ditty her father used to sing in the shower, suddenly popped into her mind. Kathryn studied the old man’s face while he spoke; he had the same huge brow and square head she’d seen in photographs taken of her great grandfather in Melbourne, after he’d stepped of the boat from Ireland.

‘ My name’s Kathryn Byrne.’

‘ Mine’s Tom O’Loughlan. How do you do child ? ’

‘ Do you know any Byrne’s in this neck of the woods ? ’

‘ No, most of them left for the New World many moons ago.’

Jesus, Kathryn thought to herself, I’ve searched everywhere in this God forsaken County, not finding one member of my bloody family. Was Auntie Dolly right, or was she a notorious yarn spinner like all the Byrnes ? Sensing her disappointment, the old man mumbled, ‘ Doesn’t matter anyways child, home is here the heart is.’

Brendan suddenly appeared out of nowhere, jumping over a maze of potholes towards them. Yellow strips of sunlight chased shadows over the silver ridges behind him.

‘So what do you think of our Burren? A lot of travelers hate this place. ’

‘It reminds me of the desert country where I was born.’ Brendan’s curly black hair blew in the wind. ‘I love the stillness...the only thing you hear is the sound of the wind whistling through stone.’

A wren hovered overhead; its intense melody wove through their conversation. They finally parted company when another wall of dark cloud loomed nearby. ‘ Looks like a black wind’s on her way, ’ warned Tom as they said their farewell.

‘ Did you hear Tom call the wren the king of all birds? ’ Kathryn shook her head.

‘ That’s because they reckon he was in a competition with all the other birds to see who could fly the highest. He hitched a ride on the back of a stronger bird. When the other bird tired the wren soared off and beat everybody else. I admire the little fella. ’ Brendan put his rainbow-coloured beanie on his head. A sudden downpour of rain clattered on the roof of their car.

‘ Old Tom reminded me of your granddad Katie, the way he’d point out things to us. Like the night he told us, when we were little kids, that magpies are the spirits of our dead relatives. Or if you look hard enough you can see the face of God in a full moon. ’ Kathryn thought of how David used to ridicule her, everytime she tried to share her grandfather’s insights with him.

The Atlantic droned as Brendan crawled out of their bed. She watched his huddled shadow merge into the darkness of the doorway. His thoughts were of the afternoon, and how he’d managed to crawl into a tiny chamber of the ringfort. Brendan recalled when he knelt down and placed his ear on the ancient fortress wall to listen to the wind’s tune. He made out his book in the crimson light. Brendan tossed more peat onto the fire. The flames caressed away the chill in his fingers. He sat and watched the moonlight revealing the outline of a distant peninsula. The Aran Isle lighthouse illuminated the pages of his book; Brendan composed a poem.

Kathryn spent the next morning in Ennis. ‘ B, B, Bloody B. ’ She muttered while she thumbed through yellow cardboard records of the families of Clare. ‘ Barrett, Boyle, Brady. ’ Flick, went the cards under her angry hands. ‘ Buckley, Burns, God where are you? I’ve blown another twenty quid on these useless bloody records. Butler, Byrne! Resident of Fanore !’

‘ So this is it eh? ’ a gasping Brendan asked, as they staggered up a

nearby hill. The clay coloured ocean below them churned.

‘ The graveyard’s behind these empty cottages you pointed to when we first came into Fanore.’ They walked past the shattered homes and stumbled through a stone ring, towards a clump of weather-beaten tombstones. The rain and wind had defaced the inscriptions.

‘ She’s supposed to be here somewhere, Mary Byrne !’ Images of her dead relatives swirled around her head. Her giggly grandmother, Leila, with her generous kisses, the way she’d talk through her nose when she’d had a bit to drink. (‘ You do the same Katie ’ Brendan once observed.) Her bull-headed grandfather, Alan, splashing around their back-yard pool chasing Kathryn’s little sister, unaware his exposed testicles were dangling out of his shorts. The way her grandfather used to call David a Methodist wowser. The hurt look on Alan’s face when she once angrily replied, ‘ I married him because he’s a gentleman, not a pig like you and your bloody son.’

‘ Doesn’t matter Katie.’ Brendan took his beanie off. ‘ Unlike my family, the important thing is you found her.’

‘ No I haven’t, you can’t read the tombstones I don’t know which one she is.’

‘ Yes, but you know her spirit’s here.’

A cormorant dived into the ocean below her. The Burren mountains began to slowly turn from a rust colour into silver. The wind blew through Brendan’s hair while he picked a handful of tiny blue flowers and sprinkled them over the graves. Kathryn rubbed the knot in her stomach.

She leant into the jet’s window. The coastal city’s light reminded her of an amoeba. The neon glow was eventually swallowed by the darkness of the Indian Ocean. Kathryn looked at her watch to realize that Brendan would be flying over southern England towards London to find work. She lifted her feet off the cold floor and tucked them under her thighs. Kathryn leant back and stared into the black belly of the sleeping jumbo. Already her journey to the Burren with her absent friend was starting to feel like a dream.

The jet banked. She opened a book she'd bought in Ennis. A blue gentian and a foolscap page fell onto her lap. She stroked the flower and squinted through the cabin light to read Brendan's poem:

Wind Gifts

*Moonlight straddles the edge
of the dark peninsula,
curling ribbons of white
swell to break this leaden darkness.*

*Waxing winds coil through
the shattered shore stones, hissing
tidal songs coldly brew
behind our glowing faces leaning
for relief into the flaring hearth:*

whistling tunes flow from our thawing hearts.

Kathryn sent 'Wind Gifts' off to publishers. It took a couple of years to get into print. Brendan never replied to her letter announcing the good news. The last she ever heard of him, he was working in a cannery somewhere along the Dingle Peninsula. She'd kept her promise to him not to return to David. She remembered the shrieking seagulls, as he waved from the ferry taking him to the Aran Isle. She recalled his brown face merging into the purple light of dusk. He'll soon lose that sad look on his face, she told herself; not realising this was the last time she'd see Brendan.

Bio:

Mark is of Irish ancestry. As a child he grew up listening to stories; either in the form of tall tales told by his extended family or the lyrics of his favourite songs on the radio. He started writing poetry when he was seventeen. He has traveled to Ireland twice and during one of these visits was married to Kimberly in a Registry Office in Dublin. Mark has been writing Short Stories and Novels for a number of years. He took family leave for three years to look after his son Thomas. He now works as a Conciliator with Consumer Affairs.