

THE CHANGELING'S DAUGHTER

By Mark Cornell

Ceri inherited her mother's fiery red hair, her father's sea blue eyes, and their pearl white skin. In her green bikinis she'd always be out in Pea Soup Beach flying down the curling walls of a silver wave. Some of the good folk of New Brae thought she was too wild, and needed the firm hand of discipline, but were always told to mind their own 'bloody business!' by Ceri's mother, Sally Greendale, the head bar girl of The Drumcondra Hotel. Ceri's father, Morgan, disappeared in the ocean over a decade ago.

Sally was devastated, she knew his spirit lived on, but missed his dent on the pillow, his ocean fragrance, his dreaming breath hissing at night like a pebbled shore, his sunny disposition, his philosophical conversations, (Morgan's mind was seldom on planet earth,) his snort of laughter, their joyful nakedness. She shook her head at the bog of men immersed in dreary conversation at The Drumcondra. She was determined to shelter her daughter from this slothful, wasteful, culture. But it wasn't easy. Ceri was wolf whistled, or touched up by men twice her age sometimes when she walked through the lanes of New Brae, coming home in tears. Uncle Tally, Morgan's closest mate, usually went to the predator's house and abused them, but he was off on his country's behalf fighting another fruitless war in Asia.

However there was also Nana Alexandria; who emphasized what she called the third way, the importance of Mother Nature.

'The first way is your way Ceri, your life, your concerns my love, the second way is the way of other people in your life, then there's the third way, Mother Nature who tends to plough on regardless of what we humans think. She's always there, and can be of great comfort to you.' Nana Alexandria often took her granddaughter for long rambling walks through the nearby, Hills of Tara national park. By the time Ceri was thirteen she could tell you the name of every plant, bird and animal that eked out a living in this remnant refuge. Ceri often took seedlings to plant them around her mother's cabin at the rear of The Drumcondra. The locals called Sally Greendale's house the Amazon. The three generations would walk at night out to the New Brae pier, one of Morgan's favourite spots. Nana often

pointed out the name of the burning constellations; her two favourites were the ladle, and the eagle star Bundjel. Nana could tell you stories from the land before the coming of the Europeans. A seal came every night to spout water from his mouth as he frolicked below the decking's and respond to their words.

Then the gas company started drilling on Jim Fearnley's farm. Jim was in his sixties by now a thin lean man, who got around in the same flannel shirt, beanie and gumboots. First the truck came, then a gas rig, then men who built a fence around the rig.

'What the fecking hell do you think you're up to?' Jim stormed up to the strangers.

'It's not fecking old man, it fracking we're pretty sure you have gas on your farm, if we do you'll be a rich man,' replied the red helmeted man wearing a tie.

'I don't want your fecking money, now just get off me land you swine!'

'You'll find this patch of land is no longer yours. We have permits see?' The gasman showed Jim some official looking paper together with a map that had red dots sprinkled through the South West Coast. The exploratory work began. Jim saw his precious earth churning below the huge metallic drill. It was like watching an open wound. Tiny wrens fled the machine's teeth shattering noise.

An angry Jim Fearnley drove into town and demanded to speak to his local member, Terence Laptine. Terence had been the local member for over thirty years now, but wasn't noted for doing anything. He was good at long, rambling speeches but the locals always scratched the heads, hard pressed to think of any great reform Terence had done.

'I thought you'd be pleased Jim,' a bespectacled red cheeked Terence declared, 'think of the money and jobs that will come into the district once all these wells get up.'

'You've got no idea what goes on in the earth below, what about our artesian basin?'

'Perfectly safe you know and I know the basins huge. I can hardly see how a few pinpricks from the surface can impact on it.'

'Fecking rigs, they gave us the same shite about the oil rig that your giving to me now, but remember what happened to it, spewing it's black filth and death all over our water?' Jim pointed to the rusting oil rig out in New Brae Bay.

‘That was a long time now; things are a lot safer now.’

‘Thanks for nothing Laptime you’re as useless as the rest of your mob.’

Sally sat out on the veranda of her cabin wondering what Morgan’s spirit would be up to now. Would he talking to his family in their thatched house below the kelp? Would he tell them the sun is a fiery orb and not the jellyfish shape his people see? And only a handful of surface people have a love of their land. Sally sighed then smiled at the two magpies drank from a clay bird bath she’d placed on the stump of a tree.

Ceri flew through the dusk waves; Nana Alexandria was always amazed by her Granddaughters’ fearlessness. Ceri would race bare footed over the rocks of the Lighthouse, plunge in the water, then paddle out to the biggest waves in Peas Soup Beach. The crimson walls of wave stretched all the way back to the shore. ‘She’s a natural like her father,’ Alexandria smiled to herself. Ceri would ride until the first stars broke through the dark blue vault, then she and her Grandmother loved to watch the Shearwaters come in from the ocean after a day’s fishing to shroud the lighthouse with grey mists of bird.

Uncle Tally came back from the war; the first thing people noticed was that he’d lost his smile. He was no longer the young gasbag who used to sit in The Drumcondra Hotel and talk to Morgan about everything and anything under the sun. Sally and Alexandria observed the man they loved brooded too much. He refused to open up and spent his time in the house alone with the blinds pulled down. Poor Tally couldn’t sleep and started to drink too much. His guitar and song book gathered dust out in the garage. ‘Poor old Uncle Tally’s turned into a ghost,’ Ceri shook her young red head.

One day the Moyne River caught fire. A local fisherman threw his cigarette into the river then yellow flames lunged back to singe his beard. The people of New Brae were baffled. The Moyne valley stank of gas. SES and Country Fire Association people turned up but couldn’t explain it. Then another strange thing happened, New Brae experienced her first earth quake. The South West Coast is nowhere near a fault line. It is a big chunk of the most ancient and stable crust you’ll ever find on this planet. There was no earthly explanation.

Then flames started spurting out of the water taps of New Brae. Uncle Tally scolded himself one night as showered with a cigarette a yellow flame lunged out of the shower head to burn off his eyebrows and moustache.

People started seeing and hearing strange things. It would be clear at night but the people of New Brae often heard the sound of thunder and saw lights flashing from Tara Hill. Whenever Senior Constable Fitzpatrick investigated he'd see bugger all. But the strange phenomenon always re-appeared after he marched back to the lock up. Under a full moon people would see strange shadows floating through the forests of Tara Hill, and hear the thunder, as if some mad host had taken up residence in the wilds surrounding New Brae.

Jim Fearnley sold half of his farm to finance his costs of taking the gas company to court. He'd yet to get an injunction on the rig as it kept piercing deeper into his land. A convoy of water trucks came and went from the site transporting thousands of gallons of water to keep the fracking going. The trucks started wrecking New Brae's roads, not to mention the enormous strain it was putting on the township's dam. A cloud of dust obscured Fearnley's farm like a battle.

'I feel like I'm been abused,' Fearnley said down at The Drumcondra to anyone who would listen. 'You know these gobshites use over forty thousand chemicals when they blast through the shale? Forty thousand! Most of which we know nothing about, how many poisons are in this devil's brew? When they spray that shite down on the aquifer it's got to bubble back somewhere. It's one of the laws of nature...I feel like finding the nearest tree.' Sally Greendale polished the beer glasses and wondered what she could do to help this old farmer, whose farm had been in his family for generations.

Ceri swam with a family of seals who'd lodged around the rocks of the lighthouse. Her long red hair curled in the water like kelp. The sun glistened on the water tricking down her snow white body. Her smile was like a crescent moon. At night she and Sally bought cooked food over for Tally and tried to engage him in conversation. Tally muttered about his lack of sleep, and how his medication wasn't working. Though one day they all did manage to laugh, they were all sitting beside Tally's window, when they saw the neighbours ginger cat run down the driveway chasing a shrieking blackbird, only to be chased himself by

Tally's black cat Nugget. Nugget was a coward and when he realized what he was doing he ran straight back up the driveway. It was the first time Tally had smiled since the war. 'The third way, Mother Nature,' Ceri giggled.

Torchlight danced near the drill sight. One shadow knelt near the hole and packed down the earth. Another held the torch. The two shadows raced to a nearby rock. Then there was a god awful explosion. As if in response the heavens opened up.

Tally and Jim Fearney tossed their heavy gloves in the fire.

'I suppose the army can be useful after all,' Tally chuckled as the light twinkled in his hazel eyes.

'That's the most beautiful display of fireworks I've ever seen Tally,' Jim snorted then offered his accomplice a beer. The two men clinked their stubbies and laughed as if there was no tomorrow. The South West Coast was subject to torrential rain and thunderstorms for a fortnight. The drill site couldn't be accessed. When the gas men finally made it to the site, the rig had been completely smashed like it was made of wood. The drill hole had been packed down and sealed presumably by the rain.

The flames receded from the Moyne; the taps no longer burnt the good people of New Brae. The dam brimmed to overflowing. All the townsfolk opposed any further fracking. The useless Terence Laptine with his do nothing government was finally thrown out of office. And a new Labor government was elected opposed to fracking. New Brae turned back to a sleepy hollow, and it's from a deep sleep the best dreams are made of. Every night the ladle keeps scooping up stars and Bundjel offers us hope from above. All you have to do is look up.

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 favorite 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.