

The Tin-Kin

Extracts from a Novel

JOCK

Bars on the window split the moonlight intae squares. The sky's far away. There's cold flagstone on the floor and a dark ceiling that folds in on me. I look for the door, get just a sense ae it, a solid blackness shut tight in the pit ae my stomach. The place reeks like a dirty close.

I shiver. Cold. But my jacket smells warm. It's smoke and spilt whisky. Pain circles the back ae my heid, pressin down, oil-like. I'm in a corner, one arm stretchin out so my fingers just stroke the light and turn silver at the tips. I try and sleep, pretendin it's summer and that I'm in one ae the caves near the beach, warm sand for a mattress. But it's too quiet. Nae waves crashing or gulls crying here. I'm swallied alive.

A chair scrapes the floor somewhere, metal, grindin like machines at the scrap yard. The sound rakes up my throat. I try and work out where it comes from but there's echoes in this place. Echoes and drips. Slether trickles cool on my cheek but I cannae lift a hand tae wipe it. My arms feel deid from the elbows down. Footsteps get nearer, stop, and someone keeks through the letterbox hatch. He grunts, drops it back so the hatch swings in and out, playing with the light from the corridor like a moth, showing up the flagstones. The cell flickers like the newsreel countdown at the picture house. Three, two, one...

WEE BETSY

Monday is the best night of the week. The wireless stays in Granny's room, but tonight we've shifted it cause she wants a bit of shush. Uncle Jock has heaved the old thing into his room and we'll sit on the bed and listen together, just me and him. When Uncle Jock fiddles with the dials he gets creases in his forehead, but Jock's wrinkles don't stay there all the time. He can wipe them off with a hand, not like Granny with her mashed-tattie face.

'Not a peep, pet,' Uncle Jock says over the buzzing wireless. 'Maybe it'll nae work here.'

I'm already on the bed waiting and I fold my arms over my chest and kick a heel into the mattress. But he hasn't stopped trying. He twiddles away and I watch the wee orange marker sweep left and right over the dial. It crosses names of places we only hear of in the news and at the picture palace: Paris, London and Rome. There's a strange one, Bud'p'st, and near the middle is Scotland, where *Journey into Space* should start. But all that's in the box tonight is a swarm of bees.

AULD BETSY

Ah met the Batchie Woman when ah wis ainly a young dilly. It wis the same summer ah met George, an ah wis already carryin oor first, wee Georgina. Ever since then ah've been sure the Batchie Woman's got the gift, an fer better or worse, ah aie heed her visions. They're fairly clearer than the few ah've had myself ower the years. O ho!

Yesterday my nephew the Bissaker came back fae work sayin the Batchie Woman wis needin a word wi me. 'A wee bit ae bother she's wantin aff her chest,' that's whit he cried it. That wis aw ah could get oot ae him, though, an since then ah cannae think ae ony ither thing. Ah've sat wonderin whit her 'wee bit ae bother' means.

The Bissaker cries the Batchie Woman's work 'auld wifey's footerin'. He doesnae tak ony ae it tae hert. Ainly believes in things he can sell. O ho! Ho! Ha! Rags and scrap metal are that loun's ainly faith! But the Batchie Woman foretelt his ain birth, years ago. She kent aw aboot his scrap yard, even then. She kent afore abody that he'd buy thon place and mak a winner ae it, an that a year later he'd hae jobs tae gie aw oor breed. Sure enough, within a year ae him takin oan the yard we were aw speakin ae leavin the camps, comin aff the road, shiftin intae hooses in the toun. When the Batchie Woman tellt his mither aboot that vision, she said she saw it aw happein in the shadow ae Lady Hill.

DAWN

At the bottom of the parcel sat a pair of beige shoes. Someone had tied the laces. Dawn put her fingers inside. Whenever she packed a suitcase she always stowed little things in her shoes, socks and jewellery. Sure enough, stuffed into a toe was a white envelope and inside it was a pair of gold earrings, a chain and a pendant. The last time Dawn had seen the pendant it was hanging round Shirley's neck. She'd never taken it off except to have a bath.

Now, holding it close, Dawn could see a tiny crack. She lifted the pendant to her ear and shook it. She looked again. There was a tightly pressed seam and in the centre was a notch just big enough for a fingernail.

In the garden the birds were falling asleep one by one. It was getting darker. The clock ticked in the other room and she heard raised voices int eh downstairs flat. A car started and then drove away at a pelt out the front. But Dawn's attention was on the pendant.

It needed a little coaxing, but soon it lay on her palm, split open like a walnut. Inside was a single lock of hair bound with old thread. Dawn looked at it for a long time, admiring its sheen in the darkening kitchen, and inside a feeling danced around her. A tiny searchlight on a wide sea.

The Sweet Root

Extract from a Novel in Progress

I am not tempted to make an idiot of you. So I have not even begun the story and before I do, I am going to reveal something important about myself.

I am a building.

I like this word, 'building'. It is one that humans get all romantic about. You think of great cities, Rome and Athens, palaces of glittering stone and columns pock-marked by time; all your doing, your invention, your cleverness.

Something else you should know is that I am a magnificent building, and you may think it lofty of me to say so just like that, but modesty is another of your inventions, and what's more it is a symptom of the English. Let me make things clearer. I am not magnificent like the buildings of Paris. I cannot match the beauty of the Basilica of the Sacré-Coeur, with its milk white *tetons* thrust in the face of God. I am not considered a feat of engineering, like the spearing Eiffel Tower, which is somewhat redundant if you ask my feeling, serving only to prod the soft bellies of idle clouds. I am not even winked at in the pages of history books, but I at least have a purpose, and more importantly I have a talent. It is something very special, a gift, and I found it because of a little girl, who was also magnificent. She was extraordinary.

Before going any further, I should introduce myself, give you some sort of name as is the custom among humans. *Je me presente*. I used to believe I was built with only one purpose: to be a factory, the sole producer of *Le Chaudron*, sweet and succulent liquorice in *billes* and *batons*. This is exactly what I was doing to the best of my ability at the turn of the last century, when this story begins. But this is not a tale of architects and engineers, nor is it a manual on the upkeep of ancient monuments. It is not even a recipe for the best liquorice in the world, though I do know all the secret ingredients. Do not be mistaken. I am made of brick and timber, and glass and clay, and my bones are wooden as a puppet's. I am chilled by rising damp and I creak and groan. Yet you should not judge me on these things.

This is a love story.

The Sweet Root

Extract from a Novel in Progress

The yard was silent as a painting. Blue steam spiralled skyward from the great chimney, a thin trail, gentle as the final breath before sleep, and where it dissolved into darkness the stars twinkled brighter.

The shutters had been left wide to allow a first glimpse of the new girl, and when hooves strummed the cobbles, their lace-trimmed faces leant out to see. Taller girls peered over the heads of the smallest, while the elderly, the ones with long silvery hair and shoulders strong as farm men, were flanked like cattle, backs against the dark, clammy walls. They drew on black clay pipes and nodded to one another.

She was tiny, a cloaked figure with a deep hood pulled like a lid over her forehead. All that could be seen below the cloak was a pair of unremarkable farm boots laced to her shins. While an old man tied the horse to the railings, she made her way ahead as he had told her to, climbing a step, dragging a case.

“Psssst!”

The new girl jumped and stumbled, the case bumping into her ankles. From under the hood all she could see of the factory was a long building, bricks blotted with purple, mustard and crimson as her eyes adjusted to the moonlight and the stillness. To the left and right were more walls, shadowy spaces for doors, and above the doors, small square windows and a hundred sets of eyes.

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