

THE ONE TREE

By

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(Actor standing under a tree, rural setting. He speaks for himself and the tree.)

JAMSIE : The tree starting speaking to me the night I got locked on account of the virus.
She, the tree spoke when I pissed up against her trunk.

“Only animals have leave fer that.”

“What?”

“Only animals have leave fer pissin on me, not men, not men of any class”

I wet myself so fast was I trying to get me dangler in as tis not every day a tree does speak to you. Well speak, not out loud like, but in me head she spoke, clear as a bell.

“I’m sorry”. I was pissed. I had just apologised to a tree.

Ach now, to be fair, not any tree. The One tree. The one tree so called as tis the only wan at the centre of a four cross roads in a lonely spot in the center of the county everyone knows about but no one goes to. She was a hawthorn tree, white blossom and lovely of herself.

“Thon virus is the earth spitting in yer face” she said. I went home still drunk.

The next morning, I had a head and Mammai was agitated and aerated on account of nothing but scientists speaking doom on the radio in every language even Irish. Christ alive there was no escaping thon virus.

“The shops Jamsie, we will go to the shops and get the messages.”

“ But Mammai, them men on the telly say that this sickness is bad when you are...”

Sure how could I say it to her, old, old. My Mammai thought she was Maureen O’hara twenty five forever and she eighty four. Shopping done, I had a real urge to go back to The One tree, so I did.

“Thon virus is the earth spitting in yer face” the tree said.

No doubt about it now, sober out, that tree was speaking to me.

“Why is the earth spitting at me, and me doing no harm at all”

“All yis humans are ejjets”

She was cross, her tone had the edge of a razor.

“What do you want tree?”

“The whole lot of yis to be gone”

We were silent then and I started to remember me first shift under the One tree with Gracie Reilly.

“I remember you tongue tickling her” the tree said.

“Jesus, can a man not have his own memories in his own head without a tree interrupting”

Ach Gracie Reilly, Gracie Reilly, pitch black hair and a turned eye. I was fifteen and she was holding me hand and half looking at me, well lookin as well as she was able in any event. She left me feel her breasts twas sinful, so soft but sinful. I got a plank on me would support any house. Aye Gracie Reilly and aye, tongues were exchanged. It was the month of May and I put wee white blossoms in her dark hair plucked from The One tree.

“She would have married you”

“Maybe, but what would know about it and you a tree”

I knew she would have married me, but fer I couldn’t make a decision, a plan, I lost her through diddering, she drifted away, Gracie Reilly.

“She would have married you”

“I know, Jesus, leave me be.”

“She would have married you”

“Stop now tree, me head is bustin’, stop”

“She would have married you”

“Shut up, shut up tree, or I’ll, i’ll,”

“What?”

“Cut ye down, I’ve a chain saw, I got on offer in Lidli.”

Then the one tree laughed at me, true as god and me standing here, the one tree laughed at me.

“Stop now Tree.”

“You’ll chain saw nothin’ fer yer the man couldn’t decided on a life with the fine Gracie Reilly, I’ve no fear ye can decide to axe me. Go Home Jamsie Toal and see will thon virus make a man of ye”

When I got home that evening Mammai had the telly on, that nice lady from the weather with the fancy frocks and wild complicated charts was giving good weather for the rest of the week virus or no.

“Mammai will I get ye a cup of tea?”

She gave a wee cough and tea slouched onto the saucer.

“Silly me”

“Are ye well Mammai?”

“Fine Jamsie”

She looked away from me then, kind of shamed or something, wouldn't meet me gaze.

“ I may phone Dr Brady”

“Nonsense, no fuss, Jamsie”

I went out in the kitchen, the dishes washed but not put away, abandoned, refugees on the draining board, another sign. What to do? Gracie Reilly, chain saw, What to do? Decisions.

The ambulance man pulled at the door. He stepped inside. I stood well back from him, social distancing, as he pulled out a white space suit and donned it under the statue of St Anthony over the door, like he was fixing to go to the moon.

“Where is the patient?”

Into her bedroom and he fluttered about with beeping gizmos. At last.

“Now Mrs Toal, I think it would be best to take you to hospital for a wee rest, it will be all better there.”

“Jamsie” I said nothing, my mouth full of bog cotton and thorn and me head scrambling with the speed of his decision.

“Jamsie” She was afraid.

Quick as a flash he had a cotton bud up my nose and in my mouth, same with Mammai and away with her into the shining ambulance.

The clock still ticked in the kitchen and St Anthony was still standing sentry at the front door but hadn't done much to quell this space suited invader.

What was I to do?

I went out to The One tree.

“The Mammai is sick” I told the One tree. But she was silent now.

“The Mammai is sick”

I needed her to speak to me.

“People get sick” She said.

“Will she die?”

“We will all die in the end up”

“But will she die now?”

“I don’t know, I’m a tree, grow, leaf, flower shed, stand, die. I’m just a tree, I’m just a tree, don’t know it all”

I was at the One Tree two weeks later when they rang to tell me Mammai was dead.

A fella met me at the back door of the hospital, in a mask, with sad eyes.

“Jesus, Jamsie, tis yerself”

“Brendan”

Brendan Donnolly, he was in me class in the primary school.

“Jesus Jamsie, Jesus”

“Ach”

He had tears in his eyes running down into the white mask. I had no tears. I had nothin’ but the empty feeling of a stopped clock, can’t be wound.

“I’m wild sorry Jamsie, Jesus, she went quick”

“She did.”

He was holding a black bag in his hands and didn’t know where to put his eyes, embarrassed, at the tears, at the black sack.

“They say I can’t see her, they say there is too much risk”

“I know Jamsie, tis terrible, terrible, shockin’ altogether”

Tears came in his eyes again, while I still had none.

“Tis alright Brendan. “ I whispered this.

“Tis not, tis not, tis nothing about this bastard virus is alright”.

“I know”

The black bag again a barrier between us. He held it up. I reached out, arms length.

“Jamsie”

“Yeah”

“Her things, don’t go through the bag straight away. They say this fucker can live on things for a few days. Be careful”

“I will Brendan, I will”

A virus funeral is none at all, social distancing, social isolation. No one to attend. Not allowed.

Arty Flynn owned the crematorium and it a grey slab of a building. Inside he played some classical music off of a Sunday supplement, cheap. Mammai always wanted an Uillen piper to send her off.

The room was empty save me, Arty Flynn, and a coloured priest from Toomebeg.

“May the angels lead you to paradise”

Mammai in a simple box on a conveyer belt, red curtains all about, on stage at last, Maureen O’Hara, at last.

Then a touch, warm, so warm, a summer sun on my skin, someone took my hand.

Gracie Reilly.

She held me gaze with her turned eye as best as she could and gave me a wee sad smile.

Gracie Reilly.

Was she even real?

I squeezed her hand, she squeezed mine. Oh aye, she was real alright. Mammai drifted away behind the red curtain and I cried. I cried and so did she.

The One tree never spoke to me again. Gracie and I went visiting her often. I put wee white blossoms in her pitch hair when the season allowed. The One Tree never spoke to me again.