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A YOUNG MAN STOOD IN THE DOORWAY. The scar on his face was the shape of a bird. A birthmark, raised, and bubbly blue, he fingered it, nervously.

It was a habit of his to finger the scar when he was nervous. And now he was very nervous. Nervous about entering, nervous about not entering. Caught between these two fears, he stood, without moving.

He watched the woman's leg.

It was bare, the bare back of a woman's leg. The sole of her foot was the palest of yellow. And all the rest of her was the palest of white. It was the time of the dawn, and there was no colour in the light. Just different shades of white. And among all those shades, her skin shone out the brightest, the very whitest.

He watched. The pretty ankle. Two bangles there. The pretty curve of her calf. The back of her knee. Two more bangles just above the knee.

He watched.

The bangles glinted, tight, and the flesh curved to their tightness. His eye moved on.

There was a blue tattoo on her heavy thigh. He knew what that meant.

But nonetheless he would have looked further if the covers on the bed hadn't put a stop to his eye.

The Storyteller lay in the bed, watching, this young man at his door. He recognised him, knew him. A messenger. One of those lads who hung about the place, relaying messages, running errands. All sorts of things. Important messages, some were, while some were not. Some were just... messages! But while the messages were very different, these lads, the messengers, the } themselves were somehow similar. Yes of course not all had scars on their faces in the shape of a bird, but they were all of a certain look, and a certain age, and bright, and clever. But not too bright, not too clever. A message is information, and information is power. And the wise man picks his messengers among those who cannot make that connection.

The Storyteller nodded, vaguely satisfied. If nothing else, he thought, there was at least that much wisdom left in the place. Wisdom enough to pick the right messengers.

'Boy, what is it?' he called out suddenly, 'come in, or go out, talk, or don't talk... but please... do... something.'

First words of another day!

One day there'll be the last words, of the last day!

The Storyteller nodded, listening, hearing the words he had just spoken, hearing them again in his head. And what he heard was the voice of an irritable man, himself, his voice, and the shock of it in the silence was like one of those reflections suddenly seen... and the thought that follows... oh by the gods is that me... and do I look like that?

The young man took a careful step inside.

And as he moved away from the doorway the light came rushing in behind him, like he was dragging it, or like it was a breeze about him.

Morning.

The Storyteller shook his head.
Not particularly enthusiastic about another morning. Where do the nights go?
Where do the days go, for that matter?
And, wherever they go, do they go to the same place?
He smiled at this notion, and chuckled, and the young man said `why are you laughing?'

`Why not, Boy? Aren't I better to start with a smile? Won't the day make me cry in its own good time?'

`I don't understand... your words. . . .`

`You're better off. Knowing enough not to think... sure that is half the knowing.'

`I don't understand that either'

`Well don't worry about it. Just tell me. Why are you here?' The Storyteller followed the young man's eyes, and they led him to the bare leg of the woman stuck from out the covers on the bed. The back of the woman's leg. And it bare from the toe to the thigh. And two broad silver bangles around the ankle, glinting. And two thin silver bangles above the knee, glinting.

`I have a message.'

`And?' prompted the Storyteller, thinking it strange the ways of things, how a young man may not understand too many words, or complicated sentences, but he will always completely understand a woman's leg.

`The King will see you now.'

`That's good of him... very good of him... very very good of him. ..' The Storyteller stretched... and yawned. ..`Only thing is... I didn't ask to see him.'

`Now. He will see you now,' said the messenger, still looking at the woman's leg. The Storyteller's stretching had moved the covers, slightly, and there was one bare buttock to be seen now. And that there was the blue tattoo of a married woman, glowing.

`Aahh... I hear his order in your words. ..'

The Storyteller squeezed the flesh of the buttock, squeezed it tight, and loose, and tight again. The woman stirred, and muttered something, but did not wake. ..`So. .. the King sends for me, but why? What happened over there. . . in his house? What is he doing, up and about, at this time in the morning?'

`Men came.'

`Men came?'

The Storyteller stroked the buttock.

`What men?,'

'From the west,' said the messenger, watching the stroking of the buttock.

`Men? Men of the west... or are they our people, travelling from the west?' asked the Storyteller, thinking of his hand on the smooth skin of the woman, and how it was not his hand anymore, but the hand of the young man too. A hand without a particular person attached.

`Men of the west,' was the reply, `wild people.'

`Well just kill them!' That voice of an irritable man again. `Where are our warriors? Will you not be stirring me in my bed!'

`These are not fighting men. . . they are magicians. . . hairy people... and they have a woman witch... there's mud in their hair... and they come with a story.'

`What story? Oh for the gods! What story? What story gets the King out of his bed? Do we now listen to muddy savages from the dark places? More important, what story gets the king to send for his Storyteller, to get him out of his bed?'

`I don't know'

`Well. . .' The Storyteller rose, and swung his legs to the floor. That knee was still an ache. And the ache was the old man he would be in the future, reminding him that the body is a book. And the pages of the end are already written.

`Well. . .' He scratched himself. ..`This news. . . is it good, or is it bad?'

`It is not good.'

`Not good?,'

'The King has sent messengers to the east... and to the north... and to the south.'

`What message has he sent... to those parts?T 'I don't know.'

`You do know.'

`I cannot tell.'

The Storyteller looked at the boy, and smiled, and said 'alright, alright my boy, I will tell you. He has sent them to raise men, fighting men, to gather his people here, his sons and those who follow his sons, to bring an army here.'

`How do you know?'

`Because. . . oh. . .' The Storyteller paused, and sighed, and looked to his roof. And he counted the row of six hams hanging there. One two, three four, five six. Close together in twos, they looked rather like the backsides of three women. He sighed again. He thought of his three wives. Life would be simpler if they too hung from the ceiling like hams, waiting. He sighed yet again, and as he did he realised he had sighed three times, once for each of the wives.

He shook his head.

He looked over to another part of the roof, at the rows of herring hanging. Far too many of them to count... but he knew there was enough anyway. Yes, indeed. He was well set up. With ham and herring he was well set for any winter. But, he knew, and sighed again, he knew that no matter how well set up, a man was going to be disturbed anyway! By things of life, and thoughts of death. .. and messengers! 'How do I know' he said, putting tiredness into his voice like a man salting a meal, 'you ask me how I know, how do I know he plans to bring an army here?'

He rose to his feet and sighed for the fifth time and stretched his arms and looked at the young man. 'I know because I know. And I know because that's precisely what a king does when he gets bad news. He raises an army. I know that and, Unlike you my son, I can tell. Because I am the Storyteller. So. ..' He slung a cloak about him. ..`tell the King I'm on my way.'

The messenger moved to leave the room.

The Storyteller paused him with a gesture.

`Do you know, boy do you know what the penalty for seeing thenaked backside of the Chief Wife of the king's Storyteller is?' `I saw no nakedness.'

`Hah. . . he shall have his eyes plucked out.' `I didn't look.'

`Hah. . . that's worse. . . riot looking at the naked backside of the Chief Wife of the king's Storyteller is an insult... to both the wife. . . and the Storyteller. . .'

`You're tangling me in words.'

`It's what I do,' murmured the Storyteller, `it's what I do. Now off with you.'

The messenger left, and the Storyteller after him soon. And the woman left behind in the bed, she stirred, as if she were dreaming. As if she would remember the coming of a messenger, and the voices, and the movements, as if they were parts of a dream.

THE CATTLE'S LEGS were hidden, and for all the eyes could see the animals were legless things, carcasses, floating in the mist that filled the hollows. Legless, all of them, and some of them headless too, the grazing ones, their munching heads hidden in the mist. But others held their heads up high, watching the Storyteller as he passed. That is the way of cattle. Some guard, while others graze.

The Storyteller's feet squeezed the silver dew out of the grass, and he left behind him dark footprints, and he thought yes, this is a beautiful morning. And then he thought another yes, yes he should get up earlier, and see more of these beautiful early mornings. But... he realised... to get up earlier he'd have to leave the woman in the bed. . . earlier. . . and he'd have to leave the drinking of the beer the night before. . . earlier. . . he'd have to abandon the conversation, and the laughter, and that particular revealing wisdom of men halfway between drunk and sober.

And was the loss of all that really worth it?

Not at all, not at all.

And the solution?

Well. Instead of giving up his simple pleasures... he could lie abed. And there he could quite easily imagine the beautiful morning, just bring a picture to his mind, a picture of the grass and it silver touched with dew, and the mist in hollows so the cattle turn into those strange legless creatures, he could picture all that. And the woman's backside would still be in his hands!

He walked on.

It was all a matter of choice...

The alternative was that he could give up his simple pleasures, and picture there in his mind while he walked in the early beauty of the morning.

Indeed.

A man chooses.

He chooses which way to live in the flesh, and which way to live in the mind. And the sum of the ways of the flesh, and the sum of the ways of the mind, they all add up to the same number. And that is life. And when that number is added to death, then the sum of life and death is existence. A man's existence.

He noddedd wisely to himself.

Pretty much pleased with this line of thinking! Yes, a man's life adds up to numbers.

And in actual fact the number that it adds up to doesn't much matter.

Any old number will do.

It's just a number he scrawls in sand, like an idle man on a shore will draw in the sand with his foot. A drawing for an idle wave to wash away.

And the wave, what of that, the idle waves?

They are the gods.

And that is the way of things.

And without the knowing of that, a storyteller has no story.

He walked on, grinning to himself at his early morning philosophy.

If . . . he realised... if... if the messenger had not come, I would now be fumbling for the woman in the bed... and my hands would be full of her hams... and I'd be thinking of the pigs' hams hanging from the ceiling, and the similarity .. and I'd be grinning to myself. . . happy!

If the messenger had not come!

But the messenger did come, and so he walked on. And as he walked he looked at his empty hands, at the palms of his empty hands. And he saw there how long he would live. And how lie would die. And how many wives would warm him, and the children of his sons, chuckling. He saw all that, written in his hands. And he realised... by the gods this early morning air is certainly good for the mind!

He decided yes, yes it was definitely best to be out and about. Because, if he were back abed, and if his hands were full of woman's meat, well then it would not be possible for him to see anything at all. either written in his hands or written anywhere else...

Is that the plan of women?

To stop a man thinking?

Perhaps.

Who knows the plan of women.

Who wants to know the plan of women!

The Storyteller walked on.

He walked to the mound where the ancestor waited.

They said he came from across the sea, that ancestor.

They said his name was Eremon. And they said his wife was Tea, and it was her name on this place. And it was from her they called it Tara.

They said!

But who are they, and who are they to say!

Eremon and Tea were silent now, dead for a thousand years, and there was no asking the truth of them.

Well, the Storyteller thought... there certainly was the asking of them.

But as for the answering?

He smiled, and then his thoughts of the ancestor wandered off as a girl came passing him, carrying water. Looking at her, she added to his morning, to the advantages of being up and about. Yes, he made his final decision on the whole matter... get up early in the mornings, see the beauty, see the girls carrying water and the first smoke of fires and the stirring of the place, get up and see all that. And bring along in the mind the picture of that fine woman's backside in the bed. . . that's having the best of both worlds... the world of the eye, and the smell and the touch... and the world of the vision too...

The girl carrying water smiled, as if she were smiling at his thoughts.

And he smiled back.

He recognised her.

He never forgot a pretty face.

And this one belonged to one of Irial's cumhals.

And Irial was a drunken man who slaughtered pigs and beat his women.

Though both seemed happy, pigs and women alike.

Fate... destiny. . . sure isn't a pig's throat born for the knife, and a woman's back for a whip? And isn't it only the fighting against fate, the argument with destiny, isn't it only that that brings the unhappiness?

`Good morning girl, the gods have given you today.'

`And a good day it is, Storyteller.'

`You will have many of them. I can tell it in your smile.'

`I smile for today, not for tomorrow.'

`Aren't you the wise girl!'

`It has been said.'

She stroked her hair from her eyes, and looked at him silently.

`And will be said again,' murmured the Storyteller, looking her up and down, `among many other things!'

Her feet were bare.

There is something about a girl's feet, no matter how filthy. Would Irial sell her to him?

Yes of course he would. But for how much?

Three pigs?

Maybe.

Was she worth three pigs?

The Storyteller thought of his house, and the six hams hanging for the winter. And he thought of those hooks empty. And he thought all right, she was a pretty girl, and lively, and not afraid to jest.

But was she worth three pigs?

Two?

Two might be the sensible number.

Calculations...

If he bought the girl he'd have to feed her.

But then, of course, if he bought her for three pigs he'd no longer have to feed those three pigs. But, there again, to be positive, pigs breed pigs which can be sold... and, to be negative, women breed children which must themselves be fed!

By the gods!

Was the worry worth it!

The Storyteller nodded his goodbye to the girl, and she walked away, not looking back, but swaying a hip as if to say I know your mind. . . your calculating mind... and be it known I'm worth six pigs... you mean bastard!

He smiled.

Yes, he got the girl's thoughts, picked them up. From the morning air and the sway of her hips.

Yes maybe I am a mean bastard.

But times are hard and death. . . he shrugged... pretty certain! He walked on.

Laoghaire lived on the south side of Tara, the Storyteller on the east, and thus the simplest journey between the two raths would be a route running in a south-west direction. But the Storyteller never took this simplest route! It was his habit to walk due west from his house to the mound which was the grave of the ancestor and then, from there, to turn due south. He never broke this habit, even when summoned urgently. in

fact, particularly when summoned. A man may not choose his destination. But surely he has to be free to choose his own journey!

It was his habit also, when he got to the mound, the grave of the ancestor, the ancestor who now would never tell us whether he came from across the sea... or merely from over the mountains... it was his habit to walk around it. Three times!

And so he did, now, around that grassy mound, his morning ritual, three times. And when he'd done with walking, he stood there, and faced the north. He raised his left hand in a curse, and cursed the men of Ulster. That made him feel better. And then, his morning cursing done, he stooped down, picked up a bone that came to his hand like it was chosen. A leg bone, it seemed, come tumbled from the heap of sacrificial bones that lay on top of the mound.

Children!

I have told them!

Countless times!

I have told them not to play up there... but I might as well be talking to myself. . . it's the parents... I blame the parents... I've told their parents too... have they no control? What is the world coming to? Children running wild, parents taking no interest... they'd sooner be drinking. . . and gambling... and arguing about cattle... racing horses... when they should be bringing up their children properly. . .

It can't go on.

I'll talk to the king. He will issue an order.

But will they even listen to him? Children!

They've had it too easy.

And they have no respect. The little bastards!

The thought of careless children spoiled his mood and angered him but, as luck would have it, precisely at that moment a silly hen pecked its way across his path. He danced a step to get it right, and then he kicked the hen which sailed a fluffy squawk away and landed, bouncing in a ball. Felt better after that!

2

THE KING WAS in no mood for bones or talk of bones. The Storyteller realised that as soon as he saw him. Blood, the more like!

The king was in the mood for blood.

He paced his hall, going up, and down, and up and down again. And those that walked with him walked with him in an anxious little gather, and those that stood around opened a whispering path for him as he passed. And then they closed in behind him, watching for his return, and then opened up again like he was a saw through a tree, and his footsteps were the teeth of the saw and the people ~~ ere the dust of the wood, scattering.

The Storyteller watched, and saw all this, and waited for his moment. Not for the moment of his choosing, but for the moment that would be chosen for him. There is a difference in those two different waitings.

The king passed, one more time, and not a flicker of his eye noted the Storyteller's arrival. The moment has not been chosen yet. the Storyteller told himself, watching the king and his people walk by. The usual people, the ones who stay close to a king, advisors, lawyers, chiefs and warriors. The leaders of warriors. Dressed in the old way, traditional old men, they carried brown skulls hanging from brown belts.

The leaders of warriors have white hair, thought the Storyteller, while the white skulls of their enemies have taken on the colour of young men's hair. And that is a strange thing to see, stranger to realise. As if the colour lives on, and does not care where it lives. As if the colour were like flesh, which rots in a grave, but lives on in the leaves that grow above.

The Storyteller waited, watching, thinking. -

Thoughts... of life... and death. . . but mostly death.

And then at the end of the hall the king turned, and walked back in his direction. And the people with him, they too turned, and started walking back alongside. Suddenly the king paused, held out his hands, and walked on. And his warriors and advisors and the old people about the place stopped. And the king walked up to the Storyteller alone.

'Did I take you from a woman's bed, Storyteller?'

'Laoghaire,' said the Storyteller, bowing his head, 'for my king.' His bow implied that nothing was too much trouble. Although in truth he didn't actually bow his head very much. Not because he lacked respect. No, perhaps more because he had found that those who bow their heads too low to kings tend to have them chopped off eventually. A king does not trust the bowers and the scrapers. A king likes to look in a man's eyes, not at the top of his head where he can't see what he's thinking.

'The news is bad from the west' said Laoghaire, King of Meath.

'What news is that?'

'The girls are dead.'

'The girls?'

'The daughters of this house,' said Laoghaire, father of children.

'Eithne. And Fidelma?'

'Eithne and Fidelma.'

'Eithne the Fair?.'

'And Fidelma the Dark. They are dead.'

'How?'

'That is for you to find out, Storyteller, the how and the why of this. There is a witch from the west, among the men who came. You must talk to her.'

'Why?'

'She has a story. I do not believe her. I'll put her to the fire. But first you must talk to her.'

'Why.. why talk to her. . . if you do not believe her?'

'Isn't a lie a step to the truth?' murmured Laoghaire, thoughtfully. 'Listen to enough lies, and the truth comes out. And anyway, something in her story . . .'

'So you do believe her?'

'Don't trick words with me, Storyteller,' snapped Laoghaire. 'Remember that the fire is big enough for her and you.'

The Storyteller smiled. But not too much. the girls were dead, not the time for humour. He spread his hands. 'I eat well. I drink beer. I have my wives about me. And a good roof. Horses. Cattle. My apple orchard. And fourteen pigs.'

'And?'

'All these things I have from my king. What I am saying is this, Laoghaire... I am paid well... I am paid well by you... to trick with words.'

'Hah! All storytellers trick with words. And not for their payment either. It is the way of them. And witches too. Storytellers and witches, you're seeds from the same field. So, that witch from the West... talk to her . . . I am a warrior... I am a king because my father Niall was a king. .. I have no understanding of witchery and magic things.'

Laoghaire walked away and, when they saw him go, his followers and retainers and advisors and servants who had waited still, they moved after him in a crowd. And the storyteller watched, Laoghaire alone in the crowd, a great king, the greatest of kings.

The Storyteller watched, and he saw the great king lonely.

THE WITCH FROM THE WEST WAS OLD.

Thirty five if she was a day.

She was ready for the fire. They had stripped her bare, and tied her to a post. And small boys were dragging branches to add to a heap.

But, although she was naked and tied, the witch had the air of someone who was dressed in the finest, someone quite free of the cares of people. She watched the children and the branches, with something of a smile. And although she was old, the Storyteller noted, because he noted women generally, an interest of his, he noted that she had the body of a woman who has had no children herself. Everything about her was young, and strong, and firm. And it was a pity to burn her. But then it's a pity too when the storm takes off your roof, and the waves wash away your fish trap, and the winds flatten the oats in a field. It's a pity. But pity and sadness and regret are things of the world of men. The gods have no pity. And the storm will blow and the witch will burn.

The Storyteller looked her up and down, silently And he reached out with the leg bone in his hand and lifted her dark hair

END OF EXTRACTS