

Through the Sea of Grass

By Clare Lauren Kelly

The Festival

I'm not really that sure why Declán insisted on going to the Puck Fair since he doesn't even drink which happens to be a big part of the festival. Whatever his reason, Declán wanted to go which meant that Nessa and Fergal then decided that they also wanted to go to the Puck Fair. Since I knew Devland was likely to go along with whatever the others were planning on doing, that meant I would be going with them to the festival, or be left on my own where we were staying until it was time to go to the next place

Not really the most interesting sounding idea to me, so off to the festival we went and as I thought, there wasn't a whole ton to do other than eating, socializing, and drinking. I mainly just tried to make sure the others weren't being idiots. If they wanted to drink that's fine, even with Declán not drinking I didn't plan to either, better to have two sober people to help with the three drunk ones. Especially since we were planning on going camping right after the festival in a field that Fergal's cousin had told us about, which apparently was a place we would not want to miss out on going to no matter the weather.

The only interesting part of the festival for someone who wasn't drinking was at the very start when the "Queen of Puck" crowned the goat "King Puck" and as soon as the goat had been crowned, that's when the drinking and partying started. For me and Declán, we just followed around behind the other three, trying to make sure they didn't wander off anywhere they weren't supposed to or get hurt somehow by not paying attention. Honestly the Puck Fair was a bit overwhelming with how loud it was, the amount of people that were around and with almost all

those people being drunk, that makes it a little worse. For me at least, I don't think Declán minds that much but that's most likely because he is more used to being around big groups of people with a lot of drinking going on, he's always been more social than me. And his family is bigger and a lot closer than mine, holding family get togethers and things like that which normally involve a lot of drinking, and a lot of food.

Declán and I have managed to keep the other three from going too overboard with their drinking, but they are all going to have some bad hangovers tomorrow, and knowing that doesn't bother me none. They are the ones who wanted to drink as much as they did even though they knew what the next activity of the day would be, Fergal is one of the main ones who wanted to go camping in the field his cousin told us about. Something about it being a wide open space with a lot of groves of trees, tall grass, flowers and animals that would not pay much attention to us unless we got too close.

Getting to see different animals out in the wild and not closed in behind a fence or some glass is also an experience I know I won't say no to if I'm given the opportunity, even if it means getting a lecture from Fergal about respecting nature. He was also going on about folktales and other stories like that his grandmother would tell him when he was little, and while I don't think much of those stories I know that Fergal believes in them just like Declán does, so I won't say anything. If I'm remembering correctly, some of those folktales are part of the reason Declán has the golden pendant of some Catholic saint that doesn't come off no matter what.

It took a bit to get Nessa, Fergal and Devland into the van, but once they were inside and sitting on chairs I made my way to the drivers side while Declán got in the front passenger side, the sun making his short blond hair even lighter. The drive to the open field we will be camping

in should only take us about an hour and a half, and we don't need to stop anywhere to fill the van up or pick up supplies since we managed to remember to get that all sorted out and packed up yesterday. Soon as I check my mirrors I look back to see Fergal, Nessa and Devland sitting and strapped in, each with a bottle of water next to them and some trash bags in an open box near their feet. The road will be more of a dirt path with a lot of twists and turns, and I know at least one of them is going to end up emptying the contents of their stomach on the drive, which they seem know based on how Nessa is tying her long brown hair up away from her face. I just hope all three don't need to make use of the trash bags before we get to the field, until we get there I just need to focus on driving and staying in the correct lane.

The Field

The field Fergal's cousin told us about is worth whatever trouble will come from the three still feeling the effects of what they drank, there are some trees but it is not a thick forest that hides beauty from us. The field is very open and seems like it is endless with small clumps of trees scattered around, tall fescue and giant feather grass growing together throughout the endless field. While walking around the vast countryside with Declán after first getting to the clearing our camp will be, we had come across a small grouping of five black alder trees without any grass or green weeds in a three foot circle around their bases. These five trees were massive and they looked much older than any of the other trees we had walked past, the wood of these old giants looked darker, rougher, more scared and worn from the toll of time.

Taking a moment to look up at the black alders, I can see what looks like a bird nest high up near the top of the largest of the five trees, and I find myself wondering what bird had made

it. There had been plenty of birds I have seen a lot of birds flying around, darting from grove to grove, and I have definitely heard them singing their different songs. But I haven't had the opportunity to see any of them up close. I'm about to take another step forward to try and get a better look at the nest when Declán is grabbing hold of my jacket and pulling me backwards away from the black alders and into the swaying grass behind us.

“Watch where you are going Balor, you almost stepped in a fairy ring. I know you don't believe in the same things that me and Fergal do, but at least have some respect for nature instead of just trampling through the bushes and trees. Pay more attention to where you are walking and what you might be stepping in or through, since this is also the place animals live.” Even though he has stopped talking, Declán has not let go of my jacket, so I don't try to move away from him and just stay in place while looking at the ground to see the circle of mushrooms that surrounds the large tree I was getting closer to. After a few minutes with the two of us just standing somewhat awkwardly in place and me waiting for Declán to let go of my jacket, I decide to say something when it seems like he doesn't intend to let go of me any time soon.

“You can let go now, Declán, I won't step into the fairy ring or disturb it or the tree in any way. I still don't understand why you believe in all that stuff, but I'll be more careful where I step since you get to believe what you want to and as a friend it's only right I respect what you decide to believe in.. I won't even try to get closer to this group of trees, we can just head on back where the others are probably still sitting around waiting for us to get back so they don't have to set up the camp on their own.”

It takes him a moment longer to make up his mind, and then Declán is letting go of my jacket allowing me to take a step away from him, but making sure I am careful to not walk into

the fairy ring. Turning around to look at Declán it is clear he isn't really paying too much attention to me right now, probably thinking about the stories about fairy rings and other magical mystical beings he was told when he was little.

Now its my turn to take hold of Declán's jacket and start to walk slowly back through the field and tall fescue and giant feather grass towards where the others will be waiting for us. I'm betting that they haven't done anything to get our camp set up other than maybe gotten a few chairs out and some of the simple snacks. It is a little harder moving back through the tall grass now that I have to look out for uneven ground, holes, and make sure I'm leading Declán with me carefully, but I just go slow. Even if the sun goes fully down before we get back, the moon should still be bright enough for us to make our way slowly to where the others are waiting for the two of us. Looking back at Declán again, I see that the only change in his behavior is that now one hand is holding tightly onto the golden pendant of a saint that I have never not seen around his neck.

The Night

The birds were singing in the small groups of trees and bushes scattered all throughout the field louder than before. It didn't sound as pretty as it had before Devland said, that he was out in the field and suddenly the birds singing wasn't really singing. The bright moon still easy to see above him with the stars shining all across the dark sky, and the birds of the night still calling out to fill the air with chirping and warbling, but it wasn't the same song as before. Now the birds song was disturbing, shrill, ear-shattering, and loud. So very loud Devland had to cover his ears with his hands like a scared child would at loud noises.

That was about an hour ago that Devland told me his little story after he had stumbled into the campsite on his own to fall heavily into one of the hard wooden chairs set out near the small fire pit. Once he told me about the changing of the birds song after soothing his throat with cold water, I had risen from my perch on the small old stump and walked in the direction Devland came lumbering from. Walked away from the warm little fire I had made nearly two hours before, and out into the dark field of shifting fescue and feather grass on my own. Declán had been out there with Devland along with Nessa and Fergal, and none of the others had walked back into the clearing they had all left together earlier, while the moon was still rising in the sky. Nessa, Fergal and Devland had wanted to see the field like Declán and I had, but I wasn't going back out when they had been given the choice to join Declán and me while the sun was up, and they didn't. Declán said he would go with them as a sort of chaperone, but now Devland is here in a hard wooden chair and none of the others are with him. Devland wouldn't have left them behind. Right?

That isn't what I'm thinking about while walking into the sea of knee high grass, my footsteps muffled by the thick layering of plants I'm wading through, it can't be what I'm thinking about, not now. The twinkling moon in the sky making shadows swirl and dance while I move through the ever shifting fescue and giant feather grass. No footprints in the dirt or markers to guide me. No birdsong from the black alders or different bushes. No singing, no screeching, and no Declán, Nessa, or Fergal. It's time to go back, Devland will help me look in the morning when the sun will make it easier to see, maybe the others got back while I was in the sea of grass. Maybe they walked too far enjoying the openness of this expanse of nature, got lost and couldn't

find their way back only by moonlight, then thought it would be better to pick a spot to stay in until the sun lit up the sky. That's probably what happened, it's what makes sense.

So I turn around on the spot I had been standing still before immediately stopping completely. Not lifting a foot, not shifting side to side, no moving anything that isn't my head. Looking one way, looking the other, looking at the grass under my boot covered foot. Where is the path that I had made while wading through the shifting sea of green and black? The grass is not damaged like it should be from me walking through it, rough treads from my boots under my weight more than enough to crush and flatten any of the plants hiding the dirt. The rapid high pitch warbling of a single nightingale rings out so close to me I flinch away from it, falling into the thick grass with the strong, heavy, and earthy scent of dirt, plants, and something else I can't name filling my nose. It takes a moment before I manage to get back to my feet and look towards where the birdsong had split the silence in the hope my friends might be there, but there is no sign of Nessa, Fergal or Declán and there isn't another birdsong.

Instead, the full moon shines its beautiful light on what can only be the darkly clothed Dullahan sitting astride a towering shadow-like black steed with green fire burning in its eyes, the human spine whip held in one hand unmistakable even in the moonlight. Clothing dark in the soft light, a hooded cloak pulled tightly around its shoulders and flowing down its back to slightly cover part of the fire eyed horse. The Dullahan's sinisterly grinning skull is held in the other hand, held up high in the open night sky above the Dullahan's body, turned in my direction, the skulls eye sockets that should be empty glowing from the little ball of white light right where the eyes would be. Little white lights that seem to be fixed unerringly on where he is standing staring up at the Dullahan, the dark man, sitting astride a horse like what would be expected in a

dream. The bone is blindingly white in the moonlight with the stars shining down on the nearly untouched field of black alders and grass.

The moment feels eternal and fleeting all at once as the eyeless skull stares straight through me, inside me, before the pale jaw of bone is opening wide to force out sound. “Balor.” The guttural, rumbling voice of the Dullahan is deafening in the silent night and my body collapses instantly into the grass, soul staying upright in its place to be claimed by the dark rider as a nightingale cries out once.

The After

Devland woke slowly, confused and stiff in the hard wooden chair next to the once burning fire pit that had been reduced to ashes with no one tending to the flames during the night. A job that Balor normally took, being the pyro he is and the only one that could tend to the fire without the fear of being burned, after having been burned before and no longer fearing it. Looking around the small campsite, Devland isn't sure why it looks like no one other than him had been in the little clearing overnight, and he can't see any of the others. No bags were open, no blankets spread out, no tents set up. He doesn't know what to do, doesn't remember what happened or why none of the others are there with him in the little clearing, surrounded by a sea of tall swaying grass. So he does nothing. So he sits. So he waits.

Nessa lays unmoving in the field surrounded by giant feather grass some distance from the clearing Devland waits in, she lays curled in a ball covered almost completely by the heavy jacket that is too big to be hers. A jacket that looks like it was thrown over her while the owner ran away from the girl laying curled in the sea of grass. She had heard the sound of pounding

hooves heading for them, had looked in the direction Devland had gone some time before leaving her with Fergal and Declán under the shining stars. The birds changing their sound had been unnerving, and Devland had gotten tired and decided to head back on his own to get some sleep. The sound of pounding hooves had approached quickly and her legs just gave out under her before she could see what was riding towards them, her body curling into a ball and barely registering the jacket being thrown over her. Then there was the voice she recognized but couldn't focus on calling out to her as it moved away to stay under the jacket and not move from under it until the sun was in the sky, a voice that had been filled with fear. So she kept her eyes closed. Curled up tighter under the jacket. So she stayed.

Fergal sits with his back to the old scarred trunk of the great black alder tree, the circle of mushrooms that form the fairy ring around the tree now surrounding Fergal as well. He sits there in the fairy ring with his eyes closed tight, arms wrapped firmly around himself to keep the jacket closed and the wind out. The ground is cold beneath him, thick pants providing some protection but it still is not enough to keep the chill out. Nothing he has can protect him or the others from what happened, all he could do is try and run to the fairy ring Declán had told him about under the great scarred tree. Hope that Nessa and Declán had gotten to a safe place or were able to find some protection from the headless rider, that Devland and Baylor were safe in the clearing their camp had been set up in, the camp he wished he hadn't left to wander the field. Nothing he could do but stay in the fairy ring and keep his head down. Sit in the fairy ring and pray for the protection of the fairies he always believed existed. Sit and wait.

Declán lays prone under the swaying branches in a small thicket of young black alders still growing to reach up to the open sky, his arms curled protectively around his head and body

that is only covered by a thin shirt incapable of keeping the cold at bay. The protective placement of his arms is too late, the damage has already been done and can never be undone when the Dullahan had caught up to him near the small grove. His golden pendant enough to keep his life, to keep his soul, but not enough to keep his sight. The rise and fall of the Dullahan's arm as the snow white skull grinned the last thing he would ever see, the human spine whip lashing out to take Declán's eyes and leave him blind, to leave him helpless. Blind and bloodied, Declán lays under the trees writhing in pain. His soul is his, his eyes are gone. So he lays where he fell. Trembling in the cold. Tears falling from empty bloodied eye sockets.

Balor's body lying in a heap on the ground with the thick grass swaying around it, his unseeing brilliantly blue dead eyes staring up at the cloudless sky lit by the sun's warm gentle rays. His body is cold, stiff, the skin an unnatural white with thin blue lips still open in a silent scream that no one heard, and that no one would ever hear. There is a thin layer of dew drops covering Balor's body, his shirt and pants darker from the added water acting as the only barrier between the pale skin of Balor's body and the world around him. The world that he can never return to, the world where the Dullahan took his soul. Unmoving, unseeing, unfeeling. There Balor's body lays. There Balor's body will stay.