

The Holly Bush - An Irish Christmas Story

The old man parked at the gate. He got out and pulled his coat tight 'round him. The wind groaned up from the ocean far below. He trudged up the hill. His right shoulder hunched towards his ear. A pair of clippers in his pocket. He walked slowly. Carefully. Picking his way on the soggy, mud soaked ground. Once he would have run up this hill. No more. The hill was empty except for ghosts and lonely birds that wheeled and shrieked with hunger. It was dark and dreary, as bleak a December Sunday as any he'd seen. And he'd seen many. His back was stiff. "No matter," he said out loud, "No matter." But his words were weak and powerless.

It was a hard slog. The hill torn up by cattle. His thirty acres rented out for autumn grazing. The cattle gone now. Housed below or grazing on the fat green coastal fields. The hill rose from the Atlantic. Pock marked by hooves. Each round print a puddle of water, mirroring the uncertain sky back at the uncaring heavens. The silent clouds wept a neverending mist on the forlorn hillside. The land was sodden. The stone walls oozed. The only sound the sludge of mud sucked steps. "Tough going," he thought. And the wind sighed in agreement.

He was looking for holly. The bright red berries and hunter green waxy leaves a customary decoration. Once a pagan plant to celebrate the solstice. Now the prickly leaves commemorate the crown of thorns. The bright red berries memories of blood shed on Golgotha. The Christian tradition but a thin veneer of respectability splashed like white wash on the stone walls of pagan beliefs and superstitions that reached thousands of years into Ireland's distant past.

Life had leaned on him. Many times. Tried to squeeze him. Dealing blows that would have buckled a lesser man. But the man, until recently, had no memories of defeat. For all his long life he had only ever looked forwards. Now, at 75, he could no longer see the future. The hill tired him. Everything tired him. His face clouded. He continued. Step after tiring step.

There were no red berries this year. No blood was left. The hillside anaemic with dull browns. And dull greens. There was no color anymore to life. The hopes he once had as lost now as the berries from the trees. "No matter," he said, "no matter." The words fragile as his cold body. He trudged onwards. He tried to remember that it was good to be out. That it was good to feel the wind lash his face. To taste the salt on the air. But it was hard to will those feelings into existence.

As he walked, other recollections washed over him. Of time spent hunting for holly with his grandfather. Dead now for near 50 years. Of his father. Who lived to 94. And dead now these

past 11 years. Death it seemed was all 'round him. His older sister died just this last year. And her son, his nephew. The poor boy, barely old enough to be a man, eaten by cancer.

He remembered old friends. And the dreams he once had. And his children's broken relationships. He thought of his grandchildren living far away. One in America. And one in Asia. He leaned on a broken stone wall, one of many that ran like varicose veins up the ancient hillside. The old man shivered and an empty nothing gnawed at him, desolation filling the spot where his dreams once lived.

He put his hand above his eyes. To better peer at the holly that clung to the hillside. Each tree as dull and empty as the next. "No berries this year," he said solemnly. He turned and trudged along the hillside. His back no more to the ocean. No longer going upwards. But traversing the side of the hill. Splashing and sludging through the small minded mud that longed to hold him fast. Delay his progress. Keep him back. But he trudged on.

And then he saw it. The holly bush. It was ablaze in red. He didn't trust his eyes. "Almighty God," he said. The simple words a simple prayer. A heartfelt expression of faith. In the new Christian God. In the old pagan Gods. And in life itself.

He walked down past a broken stone wall. The distance to the holly bush closing with every step. The mud no longer sucking; slippery now, willing him forward, sliding him towards the bush. He reached it and looked up; he took out the clippers. Then stopped. He looked at the holly tree. In awe. He dropped the clippers back into his pocket. His empty hands reaching again. He touched the berries gently. Caressed them. In a sea of broken browns and sluggish greens. One bush aflame with blood red berries, beautiful against the dark green leaves. Clumped in bunches big as his fist. Berries untouched by man or beast or bird or cold Atlantic breath.

He stood looking at the bush. It was life. And the old man felt the familiar glow of hope wash over him. He looked again. "Should I take some for luck?" he wondered. He didn't move. "Twould be a shame to cut it," he said out loud. Strength coming back into his voice. He looked at the bush and far beyond it at the bay. The grey sea as cold and unforgiving as the grey sky. He looked to his right, to the county capital. The ever present mist hung in the air. But through it now a rainbow. He smiled at it. The future coming back to him. "We'll have holly next year," he thought. He stood thinking of all the things the future promised. His face no longer clouded. He looked back towards his car. Far down the hill. "Next year will be a good one," he said with a strong clear voice. And hope swelled within him.

(1000 Words)

A Surprise in Red - A Christmas Story of Hope - 500 Words

The wind groaned up from the ocean far below. The hill was empty except for ghosts and lonely birds that wheeled and shrieked with hunger. It was dark and dreary, as bleak as any December day he'd seen. And the old man had seen many. He walked slowly. Carefully. Picking his way on the soggy, mud soaked ground. Once he would have run up this hill. No more. His back was stiff. "No matter," he said out loud, "No matter." But his words were weak and powerless.

The silent clouds wept a neverending mist. The land was sodden. The stone walls oozed. "Tough going," he thought. And the wind sighed in agreement.

He was looking for holly. Once a pagan plant to celebrate the solstice. Now the red berries memories of blood shed on Golgotha. A thin veneer of respectability splashed like white wash on the stone walls of pagan superstitions stretching thousands of years into a distant past.

Life had squeezed him. Dealing blows that would have buckled a lesser man. But the man, until recently, had no memories of defeat. For all his long life he had only ever looked forwards. But now, at 75, he could no longer see the future. The hill tired him. Everything tired him. His face clouded.

There were no red berries this year. No blood left. The hillside anaemic. The hopes he once had as lost now as the berries from the trees. "No matter," he said, "no matter."

Recollections washed over him. Death was all 'round him. His older sister died just this last year. And her son, his nephew, the poor boy, barely old enough to be a man, eaten by cancer.

He leaned against a broken stone wall, one of many that ran like varicose veins up the ancient hillside. The old man shivered. "No berries this year," he said aloud.

And then he saw it. The holly bush. Alive with berries, a surprise in red. "Almighty God," he said. The simple words a simple prayer. To the new Christian God. To the old pagan Gods. To life itself.

He pushed himself off the stone wall. The distance to the holly bush closing with every step. He reached it and looked up. In awe. He touched the berries gently. Caressed them. In a sea of broken browns and sluggish greens. One bush aflame with blood red berries, beautiful against the dark green leaves. Berries untouched by man or beast or bird or cold Atlantic breath.

He stood looking at the bush. It was life. And the old man felt the familiar glow of hope wash over him. "Should I take some for luck?" he wondered. He didn't move. "Would be a shame to cut it!" He smiled. The future coming back to him. "We'll have holly next year," he thought. And

stood thinking of all the things the future promised. "Next year will be a good one," he said with a strong clear voice. And hope swelled within him.

(500 Words)