

# Black Fruit From Thornbushes

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by Sheelagh Russell

This is a story to the good in man, that it might not be lost to his children.

The golden leaves lay captives of the grasping ferns and the dying wind gasped and sobbed around the mountain when first I saw the shadow of the mist. Alone among the sheltering pines, lost in the friendly aloneness only trees and children know, I watched the sun struggle in vain with the heavy evening fog and fall to its death in the valley below.

We were young and knew the day-joys riding in the cloud-chilled air; the night people were our minds' companions in journey. She appeared to us in the darkness, born into the damp stillness of an early evening or the deathly, dewy peace of dawn. But often, at play in the sunlit garden or at rest in the gentle greenness of the afternoon shade, I would hear her cry carried in the closepacked air, and, heeding the voice of freedom in my lungs and stomach, I found myself alone upon the mountain.

Childhood passes soon in our valley, and those whose early years I shared, those who with me yearned to leave their simple tasks and walk with the lovely lady of the mist and listen to her wise and gentle whisperings, find their tasks grow heavy and the time grows short:

The years passed unknowing. The story moved with the years, many winter evenings were fitted with the telling of it. The old men and women, those who had buried their mates and many of their sons and daughters in the soft and greedy soil of the valley, remembered. They said she was the mad daughter of the peddler who had passed many years before. She spoke only to the wind and to the dawn, and, in searching for their friendship, she had followed them to the cool pine forests. To us she seemed only a sad and lonely dream, a gentle woman upon a mountaintop.

The chill of autumn passed to winter and winter followed upon winter. Thus went the seasons. And no one turned toward the mountain. The religious men, those peace-murderers and thieves of youth, had called us together under the great pine roof. Our children, they said, our children forsook their duties to wander in the quiet forests. The young must not engage in idleness to neglect the serious thoughts of age.

No one now dropped his play to watch the sun fall behind the mountain. The ancient paths filled thick with dead leaves. The fields and homes filled with children, the silence of children. Faces were turned away from the

wooded heights, but thoughts and voices still met with the shadow of the mist.

The crops prospered and the cattle grew fat from the toil of many hands. When the dawn mists found the stripped carcass of a young ox, our hearts filled with fear. But sunshine broke through the shades of morning, and in the day terror lay forgotten.

Then came the day, the sudden awakening. The tall and quiet farmer went up upon the mountain; the valley watched the blaze of flame devour the ghostly pines. That day, his daughter, the fey, the tiny one, had run to find her peace in the black forests. With deadened eyes and firm step, the tall man carried her savaged body through the green and silent fields, and returned with a cedar torch.

The hushed scent of pine-smoke carried on the dying breeze brought whisperings to our weary ears and yearnings to our stony hearts. A cry, terrible, most terrible as of a child forsaken, thrust its tormented sound through the strong-barred doors and stony walls.

No one goes to the mountain now, no one dares to tell the tales around the smoky autumn fires. But sometimes I see her, somewhere in the smiles of strangers I see her walk upon the piny mountain, with her trusting secret eyes.

## The Children Are Laughing

a play for voices

by Sheelagh Russell

CHARACTERS: Sean Boyle - fiftyish, but voice still strong and young

Padraig O'Day - a younger man, perhaps in his late twenties

SETTING: sounds of a small, stone-walled prison: rattle of keys, doors clanking, footsteps sounding hollowly on the stone floors, loud but muffled voices, all occurring at intervals throughout the play.

(Footsteps draw near; a cell door nearby is unlocked and opened; a cry is heard; two sets of footsteps move away, one set strong, the other halting; the cries die away; then silence.)

SEAN: They've taken Flanagan. I know that cry, that coward's wail. Farewell, thou white-armed traitor!

PADRAIG: 'Twas he and his fair lies that brought us here. And yet, in the end, he shall go like all the rest. The trembling girl! He begs for mercy! Mercy! (sobs)

SEAN: There is no mercy on this blood-soaked soil. Not at their hands, nor at the hands of those we wrongly trusted. But we shall live to cry crimson tears upon their rotted graves. Pity them! Their eyes have never filled with the true salt of mercy. We shall live to pity them!

PADRAIG: (still sobbing) We shall not live, no! Oh, mercy! God in heaven must curse us! Save us, oh Lord!

SEAN: You must not weep for us. Weep for their poor striving souls. Weep for their wives and children, to whom their departing will leave no sad memories, only a false pride and bitter grief.

PADRAIG: (no longer sobbing, spits out words) I will not grieve for those who strike us. I will not weep for us who rot and die in Derry goal. My tears are for our well-loved parents, our wives and lovers, and for our children, and our children's children, who, after we are gone, will be no better for it. How will they remember us, who are fighting for their liberty, when years ahead they will be fighting too? (voice softens) I weep for them! And for Deirbre and Cuchulain and Emmett and Parnell whose tears and blood could not make this cursed island free!

SEAN: (fiercely) Ah, I see they cannot kill your fiery spirit with bars; words and gallows threats! If we could break through these iron bars and join our brave comrades, we would prove your sad prophecies wrong! And we will depart from here. The night is long and guards grow care- They will not put our fight out yet!

PADRAIG:

(calmly) We will depart, and we shall join our sorry comrades who have passed through these stone walls before us. But there shall be no wars where we go. And I am well afraid that our peace there will not be easy, when our sons are fighting still.

SEAN:

(whispers) Hsst! You must not talk so! 'Tis only faith, blind faith, I vow, but faith that keeps us breathing still. The fearful go soon enough. Remember Flanagan!

PADRAIG:

'Tis not fear that makes me speak so! Yes, I have faith. Faith in their blood-washed hands and faith in our deaths. (voice softens) Death-the word is not so bitter in my mouth now. (voice grows louder) I will not go like Flanagan! I curse his terrible cries just as I curse the men who caused them!

(Footsteps draw near. Both men are silent as they wait. Footsteps go away.)

SEAN:

Ah, 'tis a fool you are to curse so loud, though I myself have cursed silently with you. But they are damned already. Their guilt lies heavy on them and their fears will always plague them. Do you believe that in their beds at night their hearts and minds are peaceful in their cruel bodies? Their fear is greater than ours, and so their need is to oppress us.

(Silence for a few moments; a few steps toward the wall)

PADRAIG:

Look, the stars are almost gone. Morning soon will come, and with it... (voice breaks) Oh, I have damned my soul! I am cursed! I am afraid of death! (sobs) Save us, oh Lord! Oh Holy Mother! Help me, Sean!

SEAN:

You do not fear death, Paddy. Its pain is nothing to the pain of those still left. Your grief is mine - that we must leave the battle now. (voice trembles slightly) The night is long, and we shall never see the dawn. Oh, to be a child and see the morning through the misty sky!

(Footsteps approach; the door of the cell is opened)

PADRAIG:

The sun has risen now over Dublin's rain-washed streets. Listen, you can hear the children laughing.

(Three sets of footsteps die away, then silence.)