

short story

7

Red Thursday

by Sheelagh Russell

Uncle Donald Connor was a strange and quiet man, with magical black eyes and curly hair that would not go grey until the day before his death. He was a lonely man and always surrounded. Aunt Connor, long before her years of child-bearing had ended, but not before she had presented her husband with eight wild dark-eyed pagans, had seen fit to pass away, and not, as we had once heard mother remark to our father, she was up there, or down below, (this said in a lower tone, not for our ears), laughing in her large and awful way at the fine joke she had played poor Donald. Poor Connor, whom she had loved and married for his distant look and midnight locks; who, she found, could never ask her into his strange world; and whom she had left willingly and bitterly with eight young mouths to feed and eight small hearts to fill. The youngest was nine weeks old, the eldest barely six.

Our parents took us, five brothers and sisters, up to Uncle's great stone house, much of a luxury to our three small rooms, and mother took upon herself the taming of eight small demons. But they were wild and free as the birds of the forest, and my brothers and sisters and I soon followed. The air, the water and the mud held all the secrets of the universe for us, and we made ourselves wise in their ways. Our father smiled. Thus the years passed.

Uncle Connor drank. It was whispered in the parlour by older voices as we laughed quietly under the quilts, seemingly asleep. "The man is not a fit influence for young children. They are already in danger. And poor Peth. He drove her to it." It was carried in his breath as we gathered round him Saturday evening for his terrible and beautiful tales. (On Sunday, our wildness would be scrubbed and powdered and shod, and imprisoned in hair ribbons and long trousers. Saturday evening we celebrated its weekly death in a midnight story.)

Uncle Connor drank, but many were the awful things he knew and told us, and much more, some said, were the black and horrible thoughts the whiskey killed. Many said in fear and enjoyment, "Just look into his eyes, and there you'll read reason enough why he should share his life with spirits." And black and dismal were the words he spoke.

Her hair was the colour of the wildwood leaves at that time of autumn before the ravaging winds tore them from the branches and the dawn rains made of them a sodden carpet. It glinted in the sunlight as if the sun had darted its shafts through the scarlet tops of the forest. The skin on her face and neck was whiter than cream scudded from new milk, and her eyes were like two grey sparrows, ever watchful of their freedom. She walked tall and safe in the forests.

For him she was the beginning and the end, life and death and he called her Red Thursday.

He was a tall man, a giant among the people of the village, tiny among the pines of the forest he loved. Huge, tough-muscled, roughened by the winds of winter and the damp heat of summer, he was strange to the ways of people and their transparent, perplexing speech. The mists and the evening shadows carried shapes and voices to him, and his wondering eyes looked past and through the human faces.

He met her upon the wet and ghostly heath, another like him, who had escaped from the burning conflicts of the crowd into the gentle whisperings of her soul. He spoke to her the first human words that in years he had uttered. "My strength is your weakness, and yours mine, you are me, and I am you. My strength is such that you will stay."

She looked back over her shoulder at the smoky rooftops, and she met his fantastic look. "I will stay," she said and turned away from the village. Together they saw the dawn and death of day and found, their minds entwined in its mysteries, the secret wisdom of the world.

He and Red Thursday became lovers and shared the dark and silent nights. He was a quiet man, and gentle, and many were the poems his mind would sing to her. But his searching eyes soon found that they could not pierce the intensity of her heart, as she moved farther in her puzzling and unceasing quest. Her eyes held pain and war and loneliness. She stayed with him through restless nights. But the world of man was not for her. He said to her, "Go. You may go and continue your journey. Do not rest here." She watched his hypnotic eyes and stayed.

The young man appeared to her cloaked in the piny scent of the afternoon. His youth was polished, as though of marble, and his blue eyes, like the pool at the bottom of a near-empty well, were flat and lifeless. But his tongue spoke of marvellous things, and they loved. From him she learned the pleasures of the world and the secrets of silent darkness. She knew the blackness of heart and mind, and from him she learned the terrors of man's anger and the depths of his hunger. But the pleasures were many, and many were the times she stole away from her gentle lover. She followed him back to the world of people.

He, the tall and gentle, also learned the pain of betrayal and the bloodiness of anger, and upon the deathly moor sunk his woodworn axe between those eyes as flat and blue as the watery heavens. And the heather ran red with blood. "Red Thursday, you are to me the beginning and the end, life and death." But still his ache tormented, until his body lay beside his spectral rival.

Red Thursday's startled gaze was seen no more under the lofty branches; her silent laughter died beneath the hungry waters of the gloomswept lake. But still her wandering heart returns to speak with the shapes and voices of the forest, and continues its solitary quest.

Of course, we never believed him. His tales were wreathed in whiskey and madness. But in those black winter nights, when lights glowed from the depths of the lake and the banshees wailed across the snow, it was good to be in front of the peat fire, under the eider quilts, with another's sleepy breath upon your neck.

