

The Shadow Lurker *by Gene Murphy*

The stooped figure emerging out of the shadows glared at me and I almost fainted. Thinking now of that night, fright flushes over me in waves. I see nothing but stillness. I hear the wind warn of danger. The feeling of isolation returns. I shudder at the thought of meeting him again.

It's a year to the day that it happened. The first night of Féile Lughnasa had ended and I was making my way home from O'Connor's Guesthouse. Whatever reverie I enjoyed on that walk, the illuminated statue of St. Brendan in the church lawn broke it. Whether it was the glowing granite against the black night backdrop or my tipsy curiosity, I felt drawn to him.

Then, as I galumphed in drunkenness, something moved to my left. I turned and tried to focus my eyes. I shifted my feet in its direction, climbing the concrete steps in stomps. I got to the holy water font and dipped the tips of my fingers for fear it could be a vampire. Adjacent the church gable, a figure shifted. I felt my breath slow to a drag, scraping through my dry throat. The figure shifted again, closer this time.

It crept towards me as if I were defenceless prey. I staggered from the steps into St. Brendan's dimming lamplight. How I wished at that moment he would have invited me to sail with him to Paradise.

Into the peripheries of light, the figure glided as if in control of time. So many thoughts flashed through my mind as I watched it. Was I seeing a ghost? Had the lamplight blinded me? Were my

celebrations too extravagant? Doubtful, this was the first night of Feile Lughnasa, a night of easing in of sorts.

I searched in all directions for help; Cloghane village, Siopa An Phobail, the house on Drum Hill. Even to the tide beyond which throbbed like my own panicked heartbeat. I looked every which way I could in hope of seeing someone, anyone I could call to. Nobody appeared.

The stooped figure drew closer as my hands gripped the wall. Like a cornered thief I was trapped with no way out. I was inches from this shadow lurker, screaming inside as it rose its face.

It became him, and under dishevelled hair, the dark features of a well-travelled wanderer emerged. His lips protruded, his nose swelling in size as the seconds passed. Into his whitewashed eyes, all surrounding light seemed to vanish.

‘Who...who are you?’ I said, swallowing the words of defence I couldn’t say. His gaze turned to mine, serious but inquisitive.

‘Is it he?’ he said in a drawn-out voice.

‘What? He? Is who he?’

‘Is it he?’ he repeated, raising his hand from a staff. A finger extended, pointing beyond my shoulder. I turned to follow his fixation and saw he was pointing at St. Brendan.

‘He?’ I said, ‘St. Brendan?’

‘Yes. Is it he?’ he asked again.

‘Yes, yes that’s St. Brendan!’

To this, he groaned the groan of a vengeful soul. His displeasure deepened, and for the first time I saw emotion in his face. He brushed past me as if I were the ghost, a minor character in a play.

Raising his gaze to St. Brendan, I heard him say something in a language I didn't understand. All the while, no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't move my feet to run. I seemed to be bound to this man and the moment, trapped in a waking nightmare. And then, the speaking ceased.

He turned and faced me with a look of dissatisfaction. I drew in choking breaths as he took a step closer to me.

'Is it he?' he asked again.

'It...it is. You mean St. Brendan, right? You mean is it St. Brendan?'

'Yes.

'Then yes, yeah, it is St. Brendan!'

'He does not speak.'

'I...I don't know what you mean! He can't speak! He's a statue!'

'Statue?'

'Yeah, a statue, like, stone. He's made of stone!'

'Stone? He is stone?'

'Yeah, it's just a statue of him!'

His face adjusted in folds from dissatisfaction to anger. A colour rushed his entire being like a glow emitting from within. I felt myself turn pale, my Adam's apple dropping like a boulder in my throat.

The glow grew to overshadow St. Brendan's light and I heard beneath my feet the cables of electricity buzz. I covered my eyes to shade the blinding brightness and, staggering backwards, kicked a curb and fell. On the ground with my hand in the air, I began screaming out 'Who are you! Who are you!'

He dropped his head and looked into my eyes, and within his I saw a tormented soul toil in agony. There was no calm in this man, no morsel of peace.

'I am Crom Dubh.' he said with thunderous volume. 'I come from the underworld for St. Brendan. You have proven yourself useless. You have meddled with my conquest.'

I squirmed on the ground as he rose and struck his staff into the night. It weighed heavy on the top end and in the depths of fear, I shielded my face from the impending blow.

Before he could strike, the sound of an engine echoed from Cloghane's sleeping street. I turned to look and saw two headlights emerge. I kicked at Crom Dubh in flurries and scurried to my feet. I ran into the road and towards the village with my arms flailing in the air.

The car stopped a few feet shy of me and I ran to it, pulling at the driver's door until it opened. He began shouting at me in a foreign language; French from what I can remember. In my haste, I gave his questions no consideration as I bundled my way across him into the passenger seat. With his door ajar I started shouting 'Drive, drive, drive!'

Without hesitation he slammed his foot on the accelerator and the car roared off. We tore past the church and a menacing Crom Dubh; the French man oblivious to him.

As we turned the corner, I looked back and saw Crom Dubh approaching St. Brendan. Over trees and houses, as we raced away, I saw his glow increase, rage and then, nothing.

As I said, it's a year to the day that it happened. I've repeated the story many times since, but I'm yet to find a believer.

Tonight, the first night of Féile Lughnasa, I will venture to Cloghane to celebrate as I do each year. On the walk home I will pass the church and scan its sacred grounds. I will study the scene and surrounding fields, listen to wind for whispers of warning, and watch for any shape lurking in the shadows.