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Kevin O'Hara: Noeleen's Christmas journey

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By Kevin O'Hara, Special to The Eagle

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WESTPORT, COUNTY MAYO, 1917

Snow had shrouded that Irish seaside town when young Noeleen escaped the orphanage's infirmary that long-ago Christmas Eve. "Twas a bold and foolish enterprise, for she wore neither coat or cap, nor had a penny in her keeping. Furthermore, she was ill -- gravely ill -- her sad watery eyes fading like pools of December light.

She had lain delirious on her deathbed since the solstice, proclaiming in a fevered rant of hearing a distant organ playing, "Angels We Have Heard On High." Her caretakers, gruff but kind, opened the drafty windows but could only hear the bitter skirling winds, all agreeing the poor child was raving.

Yet this melodic air continued to thrum sweetly in Noeleen's head, giving the foundling strength to rise from herbed, elude her keepers, and escape the Home's towering gray walls by crawling through an old wicket gate tucked behind an overgrown garden. That done, the urchin scurried through a maze of fox-runs amongst thorny brambles, and arrived scratched and breathless to the surprising source of that enchanting hymn -- a brightly lit carousel at the edge of town.

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Hiding in the merry-go-rounds' near shadows, Noeleen watched the town's children-dressed warmly in tweed coats and furry caps -- gleefully mount the colorful steeds, as loving parents waved from outside the carousel's green rails. Suddenly, the organist -- an orange-whiskered gypsy with a marmalade cat in his lap -- turned abruptly toward the darkness: "If it's a ride yer after, me little stowaway, I have a vacant donkey who'll do you kindly."

Noeleen emerged hesitantly from the gloom: "But I haven't a farthing, dear sir. And it's not your lovely wheel of painted ponies that has led me here, but the beautiful music ye've been playing." She wrapped her bare arms around her shivering body. "But I do love donkeys."

"Well, then, hop on me little Missie, can't you," he coaxed her aboard the carousel, "though I must warn you she can be a wee bit mulish at times."

The gypsy hoisted the sickly child upon the donkey's back as though lifting a basket of feathers, as the others fell silent at the sight of this frail waif with scraggly chestnut hair, torn nightgown, and skin paler than goat's cheese. "Now, hold on to the mare's pole, lassie," instructed the gypsy, "so ye don't go spilling out onto me floor."

Back at his organ, the gypsy set the ride in motion, whereupon Noeleen closed her eyes and quickly fell into a dizzying whirl.

"Best take hold of my reins," a gentler voice instructed her.

Opening her eyes, Noeleen was startled to see the donkey's wooden ears stir to life. And rather than organ music -- or laughing children reaching giddily for brass rings -- she heard only the jingle of harness and patter of hooves, as the pair traveled amongst a heap of dreamy blue-powdered hills.

The colleen wrapped the reins securely about her wrists, and gazed out upon the wondrous scene.

"Where are ye headed, my Missie, for we're a long way from Westport, I'm thinking."

"My master has directed me to take you home."

"But I have no home. I'm an orphan, I am."

"Nonsense!" chortled the toothy mare, stopping at a crossroad where a jumble of fingerposts pointed crookedly to every point of Ireland. "We all have a home to go to in the end."

"And how is it you're able to speak, tell me?"

"Have ye no learning, child," the donkey playfully scolded. "Donkeys have been given the gift of speech on Christmas Eve ever since our humble breed carried an expectant Mary into Bethlehem."

"Rightly earned, so," proclaimed sweet Noeleen, a dab of rose flushing her cheeks.

She patted Missie's withers, "Well, then, my dear, dapper friend, giddy-up wherever you may, for all me aches and ailments have escaped me, so they have."

Soft winds embraced the duo as they journeyed through that blessed night, passing mirrored lakes, silent bogs, and checkered glens. Church bells tolled throughout the countryside, and the sky was speckled with radiant stars. Onward they trotted, passing sleepy villages where children, long in their beds, rose to windows upon hearing the clip-clop of that sacred beast, and exclaimed, "Happy Christmas, Missie! God Speed, Noeleen!"

A band of angels traced the heavens the moment Missie stalled at a seven-arched bridge to point her tufted ears to a lone thatched farmhouse on the crown of a majestic knoll.

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"Noeleen, do ye see that grand house with candles aglow?"

Noeleen dismounted, filled with inexplicable gladness: "I do, aye!"

"On this Glorious Night, all within that dwelling await you. Yes, a loving family beyond anyone's earthly comprehension. Now, hurry lass without tarrying, and may the angels you have heard on high forever sing your praises."

Noeleen wrapped her tender arms around the donkey, bubbling in gratitude.

"Go on, hop it, I say," beseeched the mare, "or ye'll have me weeping in me morning oats, ye will."

So, amid the blast of heavenly trumpets and Missie's occasional blare, Noeleen raced up to that farmhouse. And there, at its gold-gilded door, she smoothed out her threadbare nightgown, tidied her locks of chestnut hair, and joyously entered Paradise.

Kevin O'Hara writes an annual Christmas story for The Eagle.

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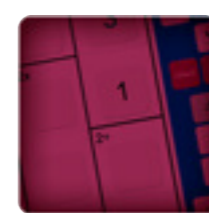
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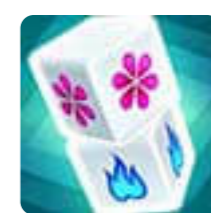
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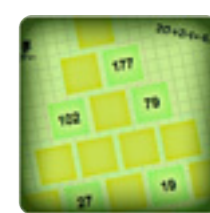
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