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Kevin O'Hara: A wee, cheeky lad

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PITTSFIELD

Years ago, when I was tramping Ireland with my little brown mare, Missie, we came upon a farmhouse at the edge of a lonesome moor one dark November night. The dwellers were most kind, but their young son, Timothy, was a pure imp, who took great delight in hurling gibes in my direction.

"Walking the Erris Plains with a donkey is a fool's errand," braved the little rascal at supper upon hearing my itinerary. "Why, ye'll be bog-trotting in muck for days, and at night sleeping in ditches with a thick hoary frost over you for a blanket."

"You seem to take joy in my suffering," I answered, pretending hurt from his dire predictions.

He cackled on gleefully. "And the Willy Wisps tugging at your toes, or leading you with lit rushes into their bottomless hovels."

"Have you ever met a lad so cheeky?" asked the mother.

"Should I work the wooden spoon on him?" laughed the father.

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Thinking of tricking this brassy boy, I addressed the table with an air of solemnity.

"I'm here tonight because your son, Timothy, has been chosen to carry my donkey's feedbag to Weather's Curtain, where he'll remain for nine years."

"Oh, dear," said the mother, playing along with my hoax. "So it's you, after all, who has come to take away our saucy son."

"I'm afraid so," I answered, expressing condolence. "You see, I'm a bog creature who has taken on human form, and I've been walking these roads for centuries collecting brazen belly-buttoned boys like Timothy."

"'Tis only joking, you are," braved Timmy, fidgeting in his chair.

"Am I?" I pointed my fork at him. "Tell me, when was the last time a donkey traveler came knocking at your door? I'm truly sorry, all of you, but it's just that our kingdom is terribly short of bold lads with belly buttons at the moment."

"Short of bold lads with belly buttons?" the little lad repeated, his hands disappearing beneath the table to verify his own. "Why, if you yourself have no belly button, you're a strange creature entirely. A chicken or a duck, or maybe a stupid old goose!"

"What kind of place is this 'Weather's Curtain?'" winked the father.

"A world of gloomy mornings and bloody sunsets, reigned by our wicked king, Crom Dubh, 'the dark, stooped one.' "

Timothy spoke up defiantly: "Prove your blooming blather to me, so."

"Do you know your stars?"

He choked: "Of course, I do. Haven't they been gleaming over my head since the cradle."

I pulled away from the table and rolled up my left pant leg to show a cluster of moles on my left shin, the lad taken aback by the curiosity of this stranger's exposed thin white shank.

"This is the Constellation Bootes, the Great Bear," I pointed out my moles. "You'll see it tonight above the western eave of your farmhouse which, I'm afraid, is why I'm here to collect you above all other bold children with belly buttons."

"Dear God," gasped the missus, "is there anything we can do to break this horrible spell?"

"I have a few pounds tucked away," voiced the father.

I paced their kitchen floor in deep thought, my left pant leg still rolled high above the knee, as Timothy prickled at the table.

"I suppose we might try one thing."

"Anything," the loving couple held one another in a frightened embrace.

"To break this spell, Timmy will need to kiss my donkey on the snout."

"I won't go kissing no stupid donkey!" the boy protested in a froth of spittle. "You're only coddling me, but good."

"But princesses have kissed frogs, and look at the luck that came their way," cajoled the mother.

Dad piped up: "Sounds better than dragging a heavy feedbag for nine long years?"

"I'll do it, so, but I still say you're having me on," conceded the young pup, though his voice cracked with uncertainty.

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The four of us left the kitchen's warmth and ventured out to the byre where Missie snorted at our approach. I held her shaggy head close and whispered gibberish into her flickering ears, explaining how I was reciting an ancient imprecation to ward off Crom Dubh's evil powers.

"Okay, Timmy, you can kiss her now."

The boy gave Missie a light peck to her nose, and immediately wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "There, now, your stupid spell is broken."

"Not quite," I announced. "There's one more step in cleansing this curse from you entirely."

With that, I threw him into the hay and delivered a champion tickling beneath his ribs.

"Be off me, you jack!" he roared, trying to free himself from my grasp. "Be off me, I say, and go mucking across the bogs with your silly donkey for all eternity!"

Kevin O'Hara, winner of the JFK National Award in 2012, handed over his title last night in Holyoke to this year's recipient, Doris Kearns Goodwin. He writes an annual St. Patrick's Day column for The Eagle.

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