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Bryan from Clonakilty

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PITTSFIELD

West Cork, 1 August, 1979

Missie was grazing on spear thistles one fine evening when a young boy came pedaling toward us, his eyes a gleam.

"Are you the American I read about in the papers going about Ireland with a donkey?" he gasped, dismounting from his high "Black Nellie."

"I am," I replied, settling my frightened beast.

He introduced himself as Bryan John, and immediately nuzzled up to my little brown mare.

"Where might you be nosed for tonight?"

"Timoleague."

"Five long miles, that. Will you find free lodgings there?"

"I will."

"That speaks well of our people, does it not?"

I treated him to a square of chocolate.

"It speaks very well of your people."

"What will you do with your lovely donkey once your journey is through?" the inquisitive lad next asked.

I fibbed to him: "I'm going to find her a good taxidermist."

He choked on his chocolate.

"You're joking, mister! Ya wouldn't go stuffing her, sure you wouldn't?"

"What else can I do," I answered, unmoved. "I can't fly her to America, can I? Once stuffed, I'll crate her home as a keepsake."

His face turned pale around his chocolate-marred gob: "That's bloody awful."

"Why so shocked? There's hardly a house in Ireland that doesn't sport a stuffed fox or pheasant in their window."

"They're not donkeys!" he spouted angrily. "Donkeys carried Mary into Egypt and Jesus into Jerusalem. They're even known to talk on Christmas Night."

"But all famous equines are stuffed," I answered with indifference. "Let my noble donk take her rightful place with other heroic mounts preserved for history; Roy Rogers' Trigger, Lone Ranger's Silver, and Napoleon's Le Vizir, displayed to this day in a Paris museum."

I caught sight of the lad's dampening eyes and thought it best to retrieve his troubled heart.

"Prince Bryan John of Clonakilty," I bowed, "answer seven questions correctly pertaining to the Riddle of Trees and I'll forego taxidermy, and promise to find my dear dapper mare a most congenial home when our journey is through. Are you ready?"

He bit his lower lip in determination: "There's many a tree riddle I know, and many I don't, but with the help of God I'll answer all seven correctly. Fire away, so."

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"What tree bears the most terrible curse?"

"The apple tree," he answered decisively.

"What tree is nicknamed the 'Irish wet nurse'?"

The boy blushed, but had a ready reply: "The honeysuckle."

"The warmest tree?"

"A fir."

"The unhealthiest tree?"

"The sycamore," answered the bright lad, draping a protective arm around my highway queen.

"The tree most fond of wine?"

"A cork tree."

"One most attracted to women's toes?"

"Sandalwood! Now, that's six, Mr. Donkeyman. One more and you must keep your promise."

I thought long and hard, hoping to advance the game by coming up with a stumper.

"Name the tree whose head is forever lost in a fog?"

He fidgeted in his muddy wellies: "I haven't heard that one before and, if I have, I've since forgotten it."

"Well?" I said, stamping my foot with impatience.

The boy looked far and wide, his blue eyes searching for an answer, until his gaze settled upon my walking stick. He clutched his bursting heart: "By the heavens, Mr. Donkeyman, but I believe it's the very stick you yourself carry -- the bewitching hazel!"

"Well, that I may be dead!" I declared, dropping to my knees. "You've courageously saved my long-eared darling from one royal stuffing."

I rewarded the relieved and triumphant lad with another block of chocolate and, in turn, he accompanied us down the Timoleague Road.

"Bryan John, do you really think I could harm my little brown jughead?"

"I was thinking ye might or ye mightn't," he answered candidly. "But now I know you're just a champion prankster."

I rummaged through my donkey cart and handed him a half-dollar.

"John Fitzgerald Kennedy," he exclaimed, clutching the large silvery coin as if a golden guinea. "Amn't I the lucky one to come biking into Clonakilty this evening?"

"No, I think Missie and I are the lucky ones."

Hearing that, Bryan shook my hand warmly, gave Missie a tremendous kiss to the snout, and went pedaling madly for home.

Kevin O'Hara writes an annual St. Patrick's Day column for The Eagle. His second book, "A Lucky Irish Lad," is now available in both paperback and Kindle.

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