



JO PESTEL

Jo was born in a little, historic city in Ireland, and brought up on Irish myths and Grimms' fairytales. As a child, she played among the ruins of a neglected Viking watchtower, squeezing past the 'Danger. Keep Out.' sign. Her city had crumbling walls, seven churches with tolling bells and the tower where Strongbow married Eva. The past was always present.

After studying Irish and Latin at University, she had four children, taught for years at a north London comprehensive, ran a teashop and worked as a hospice ward assistant. She's had poetry anthologised and published in various magazines, and several nonfiction articles in Irish Tatler. *The Night Writer* is her first story for young people.

About *The Night Writer*

The time is 586 AD. The place is Ireland.

Cahal's passion is to draw and colour; his father's vow forces him to live in the monastery of Clonbray.

Cahal is desperate to work on Clonbray's greatest treasure – a vellum Book with illustrations – the only Book of its kind in Ireland. Instead he has to spend long, lonely hours toiling in the fields. When Columba – monk, artist, prince and Clan ally – comes to Clonbray and arranges for Cahal to work in the Scriptorium, Cahal helps him defy the abbot, and secretly copy the book at night.

But then Columba demands a price Cahal cannot pay ...

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THE NIGHT WRITER IRELAND. TIR EOIN. A D 586

Chapter One

Revenge raid

Soon. It will be soon.
My horse quivers and shifts
My father holds up his hand
We watch for his signal

Bryn is riding beside him;
Bryn – four winters ahead of me
already a fearsome warrior
eyes blazing, axe raised.
My insides tighten. I lean forwards
Somewhere in the silence a curlew cries

My father twists in his saddle
looks each and every one of us in the eye
I long to please him, earn his praise
Fionnbrua and his men stole our cattle
We are going to take back that which is rightfully ours

I shiver, not from cold
The air sings with excitement
Yet I dread this coming battle
I long to be far from here

I long to be with Malachy
in the forge
bending and shaping the iron
peaceful

I look at my axe lying in its sheath
I have practised throwing it; my aim is true
I can bury it in wood
exactly where I want—
but to bury it in living flesh?
I shrink from that picture
I have seen a man return to our fortress with half an arm
hugging his useless, bloodied stump

I dare not let my father see my dread
He would despise me.

My father's hand drops and
'Clan Davnet Abu!'
Our battle cry roars into the morning
thwack and snap of our colours in the wind
my father first down the hill, axe aloft
Bryn straight after him, long hair streaming
I crouch over my saddle, my knees grip

Shrieks rend the air
A horse squeals
Children run, fall, are trampled
Axes swing and cleave all round me.
Sweat blinds me
I can hardly hold the reins
Bodies thud and fall. The gurgle of death cries.
My horse leaps over a man. I see his terrified eyes
The ground is slippery with blood
The air reeks of blood

Someone gallops across me
tosses a torch high on a roof
Up and up leap the yellow-red hungry flames
Heat blasts my face
A wail of terror – and three women burst from the house
One stumbles. Falls. I see hooves kick her face
Next moment her face is not there
'Clan Davnet Abu!'
Try not to hear
Try not to see or smell or taste this swirling madness
All I want is to get away
My father yells, 'Your axe. Use your axe, boy!'
I look at the axe. For a moment my fingers half grasp it
then I thrust it from me.

'Cahal! In God's name!'
A child flees past, wild-eyed.
'Get him!'
I cannot move
My father swoops, runs his spear through the child
swings him high
I see arms and legs squirm in the morning sunlight
Little. So little
My father blood-spattered. Laughing
'I knew it! Finnbrua's son.'
laughing
pulls the child off the spear
throws him at me
laughing

My arms reach up
my arms hold tight
hold the smallness of him
hold his aliveness close to me
feel his warm blood
soak right into me.

Afterwards I could not move. Afterwards they had to wrench him from me.

Chapter Two

Homecoming

All the way home my father railed. In the name of God Almighty what was wrong with me? Had I forgotten I was a chieftain's son?

How could he ever again hold his head high?

On and on and on. And, of course, 'Why can't you be like your brother? Dear God in heaven, what have I done to deserve a son like you?'

Slumped in the saddle, I had no answer.

All the way home I could see the child's face, feel the imprint of his body.

I lay on my bed, re-living.

I had washed as though I would never again be clean; still the smell of blood tainted my skin. Rising heavy-eyed, I washed again. Aoife, my mother's servant attended me. Her face was kind, her hands were gentle. A pile of fresh clothes lay on the chair and I held them close, inhaling their faint sage smell.

Slowly, I dressed and went down to the courtyard.

Around me, the morning bustled. A cartload of turnips rattled along to the kitchens. Bent double, a workman lurched, his steps unsteady under a great bag of grain. Hens moaned and squawked. I watched a kitchen slave pause to eye a maidservant. Three fat hens lolled over his shoulder, their necks wrung.

Over by the far barricade shouts came from a group of boys practising combat skills. They swung their axes and hurled their spears, but stopped when I approached and I heard them muttering. I knew it was about me.

Inside the great hall, the air reeked of wine and vomit. I tried to breathe lightly. Dozens of indoor servants were clearing greasy platters off the table, righting chairs, sloshing buckets of water over the unspeakable mess on the floor. Yesterday's evening meal had lasted long into the night. I heard my

father roaring, his voice huge and strong; wild cheering accompanying his every declaration. Then the battle cry, *Clan Davnet Abu*, louder and louder, feet thumping faster, ever faster, until they became a continuous drumming.

Pushing the memory away, I went up the curving stone steps, and walked towards my mother's chamber. Her tapestries brightened the walls, the bedcover she had embroidered glowed yellow and orange and brown like woods in autumn. She lay on it now, looking pale, but smiled when she saw me. I knelt beside her. 'How are you today, Mother?'

'You mustn't worry, my Cahal. The new life stirring within me is greedy. It wants my strength too. But when the little one is born I will once more be fierce. You wait and see.' She reached up and caressed my cheek. 'What troubles you?'

'My father says I disgraced him. That I am not worthy to be his son.'

She drew her fingers through my hair. 'Your father knows how to fight and lead men. Your hands have a knowledge and skill that does not destroy. He does not yet know how to value you.'

My laugh was shaky. 'He wants to disown me.'

'When he is calmer, he will wish he had not said that.'

I longed to believe her, but before I could reply I heard his step on the stairs. He stood in the doorway, looking at me.

'Our upstart neighbour has dared to cross our borders and make off with our cattle.' His voice was without expression. 'Your brother and I ride out today to defend our Clan's honour. Your brother has planned to get back that which is rightfully ours. I can rely on your brother.' He advanced, his voice getting softer, more menacing. 'But you care nothing for that, do you my lad? You are content to sit and let Bryn do all your work.'

He swung round and began addressing an imaginary audience: 'And meanwhile, what is the brave Cahal up to? Let me tell you! My son Cahal, my *son*, is busy traipsing round with a bit of charcoal, making likenesses of birds and beasts – or else he's plucking at his harp or idling his time with those beneath his station. And when I want him – where do I find him?' His voice was rising, anger breaking out of him. 'Hiding under his mother's skirts. That's where.'

'I do not hide from you, Father.'

He ignored me. 'You should have seen him, Emer. Sitting as though frozen

– with Bryn having to cover his back.’ He turned, jabbing his finger in my face. ‘You didn’t even see that, did you, boy?’

He began pacing, waving his arms. ‘You are fleet of foot – I’ve seen you win at the Games. And you can wrestle – so why in God’s name can’t you fight to defend us?’

Glowering. Pace. Pace. Pace. Anger so fierce I could touch it.

He turned to my mother, pointing at me without looking at me. ‘That *amadan* didn’t lift his axe once. Not once. And if that wasn’t enough, he began crying over the traitor’s spawn – actually crying – in front of everyone. When I think of it!’ He put his hands to his temples. ‘Never has any Clan Davnet chieftain been so humiliated.’

My mother heaved herself up. ‘Let him be, Hugh. One day you will be proud of him.’

‘Of *him*? Never!’

Ignoring my mother’s cry, he bore down on me. ‘Listen, boy! Do you mean to tell me you’d stand by and watch while enemies sacked and burned our home?’ He pointed towards my mother. ‘Attacked Emer?’

‘I would always defend my mother!’

‘So why can’t you defend our honour?’

I didn’t know how to answer.

Below in the courtyard, a trumpet blew. The sound made him stop in mid-stride. Thrusting me out of his way, he peered out.

‘Bryn is assembling the horsemen.’ He turned and looked at me. ‘I give thanks to the great God Almighty that I have one true son, my firstborn. I can have pride in him.’ His voice went tight. ‘As for you – you ride with us.’

‘No.’ I backed away.

‘Come here!’

‘Hugh! Do not force him. No good will come of it.’

Grabbing my tunic, he pulled me towards him, his fist huge, his breath hot on my skin. ‘I tell you, boy, you will come with us.’

The face of the dead child flashed in my mind, and something went hard inside me.

‘I am not a coward, Father,’ I said, my voice trembling, ‘but I cannot kill.’

He raised his arm as though to strike – then suddenly hurled me from him so that I staggered and toppled sideways. I lay unable to move. Making a

sound deep in his throat, he crashed one fist into the ball of the other. 'You should have seen him, Emer. Sitting, not lifting a finger, while Bryn fought like three men to protect him.' He towered huge over me. 'You'd have been dead but for Bryn – do you know that? Nearly got run through he did, saving your wretched skin. And for what? What use are you to man or beast?'

'Hugh – stop! In God's name – stop.' She had risen from her bed and was holding her hands out to him. Her voice was a sob.

Drawing deep breaths, he slowly stilled, then went over to her and held her close, enveloping her. 'I am too loud. Forgive me, my love.' His voice became gentle. He kissed her forehead and her mouth and held her face in his hands. 'I forget how this little one is sapping your strength.'

She raised her hands and laid them on his huge ones, her fingers white, thin.

The trumpet blast rose again, tearing the air.

'We shall be back soon after nightfall. Rest well today. With God's help this little one will live.' He turned towards me. 'As for you – I'll deal with you when I return.'

He clattered down the stone staircase, calling to Bryn. Below in the courtyard, the men were assembling. Some were swinging their axes and whipping the air, hungry for revenge.

He mounted, his horse restless and pawing the ground. The flag-bearer rode to the front.

Bryn was issuing orders, his voice clear. Everyone was listening. He looked up at me and nodded, this warrior – almost a stranger – brother of mine, who got praise for every single thing he did.

My father held up his hand. A moment of silence. The flag was raised.

'Clan Davnet Abu!'

Round and round the courtyard the cry echoed, bouncing off the palisade, ricocheting back from the fortress walls, and I could sense the blood-lust rising. My father's hand dropped. They surged forward.

I watched them thunder out the gate, their shouts shattering the stillness of the fields and hills.

I watched till every trace and sound of them had vanished.

For a long time I listened to the silence. When I turned back, my mother

had drifted into sleep. Quietly, I went down the stairs and made my way across the courtyard into the darkness of the forge.

I had until sundown.