

Echo in the Cistern

The following is an excerpt from Mick Kelly's novel *Falling!* which is due to be published in late 1995.

...standing on the concrete path, hand holding the railing to stop himself tottering in, noise of gushing water so deafening it obliterated all others leaving a boy with only sight to defend him from 'Old Ellis.' It was he who lay in wait for all who journeyed across the railway line and through the forbidden fence of the waterworks.

He had been warned. Boys had fallen and were never seen again, gone without a trace, perhaps just a shoe floating in the scum, but that was all. The air smelled of something but not shit. It had no animal richness just the grey-black smell of the dead rotting deep below. The pit was a hundred feet deep and to swim was useless. If you even touched its surface with your toe, you would be sucked under and die of polio and yellow fever, alone in a room away from others. Sometimes the pit beckoned to him, sometimes it called him home. What bliss, to lie, white nurses floating about, whispers of 'poor boy,' he won't last, but always he managed to escape its call.

Turning his back on the pit, he moved away into the tall dry reeds of untended land that stretched away to the market gardens and on to the coast. The thunder of sewage works faded quickly with each step to be replaced by the thud of his tread and sky larks and sticklebacks swimming in the ditch. Looking around, the low thorn hedges that hid 'Old Ellis' were far enough away to escape him if he charged. On through the fields, his path equidistant from the mad man's hiding places, he thought of birds' eggs and grass snakes and watched his step for devouring swamp. In spite of these distractions he was aware of something at his shoulder. He tried not to think of it. It was nothing, just the slightest weight of someone watching.

"There's no one there...there's no one there..." panted his step, wet footed tread becoming louder, soft earth sucking at the souls of his feet. He couldn't listen for the rustle of grass and the wind across his ears as he broke into a run, breath shortened, trying not to breathe, trying to listen, unable to look back. In the chest that held this breath, he felt the hollow boom of 'Old Ellis' behind him.

"No! No Old Ellis. Please not me...not me...."

The field grew and the hedge flew away and there was nowhere to go. The bog dragged at his feet and fear drained his blood and his legs cramped and he prayed to God. His answer came swiftly as the ground rushed up and hit him full in the face so hard that it felt like a snowball of ice and took all the will from him. A pain deep inside his skull throbbed to the tilting earth that turned over and over but never quite upside down. It felt like the nausea in the plastic smelling of the man who came too close and talked like a baby and the memory lurched in his stomach and still he didn't look round.

Behind and above him he heard the heavy breathing and smelled the grimy trousers of the one who chased. He still could not look he just buried his head and clung to the grass to stop the world turning over to drop him through space into the void.

The old man, maddened by years of torment and memories of two wars, leaned on his knees and watched the stricken child and wondered if it were dead and wanted to say, "Got ya! ya little bugger."

Instead he watched the shallow breathing turn to shuddering sobs and the head buried deep in the cool earth.

"Johnny! are ya alright kid. Are ya hit?... Johnny!"

The old man bent forward and stretched his filthy claws towards his fallen comrade's shoulder.

"Johnny... Johnny...the bastards won't get ya. Look they've stopped. Look Johnny they've stopped!"

He tugged at the child's shirt and the boy held on to the grass with his eyes tight closed.

"Come on John lad it's all right."

The boy against all reason responded to the care in the tramp's voice and allowed his powerful grip to turn him over onto his back. Against the sky he saw the great mass of Ellis's head his hair thick matted surrounding his face like a halo.

The look in his bright eyes was expectant, almost joyful.

They scanned the boy up and down and settled on his stomach. For a long moment they stared then tumbled into a headlong decline, struggling to comprehend what they saw, darting to left and right, trying to shake off what began to fix in his brain. His mouth fell open, his bulging eyes transfixed by the gaping hole in the fallen Johnny's stomach. He lifted his arms and waved them in frantic circles around and around his head then clenched them tight over his ears, his elbows pushed together to shield his eyes.

"Oh Johnny. Oh Johnny. Oh my Johnny..." and he began to spin slowly in a circle. Round and round.

"Oh Johnny. Not my Johnny." and the circles sped on, his body leaning forward, greatcoat flaring out behind him, crouching closer and closer to the ground with the agility of the insane. Despair slowed his spinning and his lamenting arms dropped to his sides. A look of confusion spread over his face as if he had forgotten what he did or why he did it. The boy lay in fear unable to move and watched this man descend from a black cloud above him to a small boy at his side, shrunken and sad. But still the fear gripped him and robbed him of movement. He felt himself pushing to leave, and he could not leave.

For an age time stopped, the tramp sat and the boy lay, as Ellis slipped from the memory of loss back into the nightmare of taunting and seclusion that was his life. His elbows parted and his compressed brow allowed cunning

eyes to peer once again at the stricken boy.

"Ha! that fooled y didn't it. Thought you could get one over on me. Well I'll tell ya...no one gets one over on me! Thought you could fool Old Ellis!" and he sprung to his feet, the effort expelling a great waft of stench from his soiled pants.

"I've seen better men than you. Thousands of them...better men than you!"

The boy felt the separation begin and was glad. Just a few inches was enough to escape the fear, but that freedom allowed more and soon he floated high above the tramp and settled to watch events unfold without contact or care for his earth bound remains.

Below Old Ellis stopped his tirade and looked hard at the boy's shell lying at his feet. His eyes glanced to left and right and up and down, a sly grin dawning on his face. The grin split, mouth opening wide to display yellow teeth and purple tongue around a hold that howled in enlightened laughter.

"You little bugger! You sneaky little bastard! Think you can fool Old Ellis?"

With that he stood perfectly still and the light left his eyes and the boy wondered.

A sweet sickly breath warmed his ear and Ellis whispered.

"You don't escape me that easily."

It was said in confidence, in complicity.

"So you can fly can you? Never thought I'd see the day when a kid like you could fly."

He turned about in the air and positioned himself face to face with the boy, his body stretching out horizontally behind him. The grime in his skin and the foulness and nearness of his breath unsettled and Mikie began to fall gently back to earth. As his eyes joined once again with their earth bound sockets, he saw that Ellis stared back at him and the light in his dead eyes started to return. Up, up again! and Ellis laughed straight in his face. decayed matter attached to the junction between teeth and shrunken gums.

"I've been at it longer than you. How d'you think I'm still here? I wasn't much older than you. In the war it was. That bastard. I got him, I got the bastard!" For a moment he was gone, somewhere else.

"The others just stayed there...Johnny and the others. Come 'ere kid. Come 'ere!" The tramp's attention returned with a vengeance. His strong hand took the boy by the neck and gripped him til the pain spread and became a flight through a dark space that was longer than time. He had no part in it. It was the tramp's doing. Air sped by and the Mikie gave himself up.

"Look! Down there!"

He forced the boy's stiff neck forward and on to his chest, his knees lifting up like a dangled kitten.

Below a field ploughed by folly stretched for ever. Grey and black and clay, turds of warm porridge floating in a glistening lake of mud. A strong smell of copper and shit mixed with decay and chemical things he did not know, filtered into his nose and burned his throat.

"Look...Down there!"

The tramp shook him till he felt his head would fall off and he tried to see.

"Closer."

The turds grew to mounds of earth piled high, decorated with sticks and stumps and curling barbed wire.

"Look!!"

It was hard to see what the tramp insisted on. He turned back to him with the hope of seeing what was in his eyes. Ellis did not see. His face was in an agony.

"Ever one...Every one..."

The boy turned back and the trench had closed them. The walls stood high, slimy and studded in low relief with the grey remains of young men. The features of their faces and limbs were lit from above by a flare that hung like a weak sun behind a thick, all covering cloud. It did not move. It did not fall, it just hung there in a complete silence that held the memory of explosions and cries and gun fire and incomprehension.

In the boy a deep revulsion mixed with the sweet incense of rotting flesh and took him away back to the dry concrete font and plaster faced saints of the modern brick built Catholic church. Their blind eyes stared at him. Their welcoming arms stretched out from the walls in a promise of eternity. A tiny gold crucifix hung on a thread of skin that still held the lower jaw of a youth who stooped, in silent supplication. Two cupped hands, in mud at his feet, caught a pool of clear water and offered refreshment and succor.

Ellis, who had crept to the boy's side, lamented,

"Poor Johnny, poor Johnny. They've all gone. I wait, I wait, but they never come home."

The boy fell into the arms of the tramp who's dirt and stench was of another time. he was hardly older than he. No matted hair. No beard. Eyes as soft as a saint's. He took the boy tight to him pulling his cheek onto the coarse texture of his serge coat that held his tear on its surface. His hands clung to and fondled a thick and polished mahogany leather strap that stretched from shoulder to hip.

"There there lad...there, there."

He took the boy's chin and lifted his face up. A young earnest face tried to smile down at him, but could not.

"you see, if you know the secret, time is just like swimming. I'm here as I was, then I'm here as I am, and it's hard to know which is which. All there is, is back and forth, back and forth, watching and waiting for a chance that's always the same chance. Them others go on like cattle. They eat time. In one end out the other, one direction. They call that sanity. I'm crazy! Look at me boy! I'm crazy!"

Pity and weariness passed over his face.

"All that was their doing. That was sanity's best effort. Well this is what I do to their sanity. Just you watch boy! Watch what I do. Everytime I do it, everytime, I find the bastard everytime."

The boy felt the wind rush once more and he flew helplessly in the wake of the tramp's will. All around the landscape re-animated from its frozen spell with din and stench and life

that turned in a moment to death and a last remorseful prayer.

The wind dropped and they hung in the air behind a man, a little older than the young Ellis. He stood, uneasily balanced on the rump of a bloated carcass. This taut balloon was all that remained of a horse that had struggled from fear of the lash and habit to fall headlong to its final rest. It had witnessed wave after wave of men pass back and forth in the merry-go-round of war, an obstacle to curse and defile their paddling. Now it allowed clean boots and conscience to this officer who ranted of duty and the righteous, waving a pistol above his head, feet skidding on the rotting hide of his soap box. Below him a group of young men shuffled like a herd of swing at the doors to an abattoir. Their eyes rolled in their heads and they cried for their mothers and God. For all this they moved on and up over the edge of the trench to fall back, no longer hearing the thick slaps of death that thudded into soft flesh.

Boy and tramp hung close enough to the nape of the officer's

neck to smell sweet lavender and see the mass of lice that moved, but did not move behind his ear. The boy heard Ellis' breath quicken and saw the long barrel of a rifle lift up and its end nearly touch the stem of the officer's head.

In a complete silence of expectation, the officer's floral thought of his mother and the beating his father had given him for masturbating, flew, with the grey mousse of his brains out through a hole in his noble forehead to anoint the herd at this feat. In this gap they turned to stare in wonder at Ellis who hung illuminated by the flare above.

As the shell burst in their midst, the wonder clung on their faces for just the moment it took for them to take their places in the final tableau. They studded the walls with their limbs and the youngest of them took up his position in silent supplication, a tiny gold crucifix dangling from his jaw that hung by a thread of skin from his neck. On the surface of the quagmire, cupped hands received their first drips of clear rain water and the wind rushed as the last drip echoed in the cistern.

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