

THE OLD TIN CUP

BY GEORGIA HILTON

Siobhán turned off the road in her hired Peugeot and into the driveway of the Airbnb. A handsome-looking former farmhouse, meticulously restored, according to the website. It seemed perfect, but something was missing – some ivy on the façade maybe, or mature growth in the garden. For an old building it looked almost sanitised.

Perhaps it's for the best, she reasoned. A blank slate.

Siobhán was on a sabbatical from work and planning to finally finish her novel. This was to be her personal writing retreat, and she had spent a hefty sum on renting the farmhouse for a month. It was too big really, but Don was joining her tonight and Siobhán would invite friends to stay at weekends. She would treat the novel as a day job, spending her free time entertaining, drinking wine, and going for long walks.

There had been rain overnight, gravel squelched underfoot as she walked to the front door. Siobhán had the curious feeling that she was being watched and couldn't help but glance over her shoulder as she entered the pin code into the small metal keyholder by the front door. Don't be silly, she said to herself, you're not in London now. The box sprang open, and the key fell to the ground. Siobhán stooped to pick it up, glancing around her again. Nobody was there but a couple of wood pigeons pecking in the grass.

Turning the key in the lock, she entered a hallway with a tiled floor. To the left was the kitchen with a large, scrubbed pine table – exactly how she had pictured it. There was a range at the far end of the kitchen, cast iron pans hanging from hooks to one side. To the right of the range was a stable door. Siobhán went to unlock the top half and leaned out to admire the view of the pastureland beyond, with the brooding presence of Gortaclare Mountain in the background.

She swallowed a deep lungful of air. The sky was a bruised purple, boding more rain. An old, battered tin cup lay on its side on the step. It looked incongruous next to the immaculate presentation of the house. Perhaps it had been left there on its way to the bin. Siobhán unlocked the bottom half of the door and picked it up. The cup looked like it had once been coated in enamel, now entirely scraped off. It was pockmarked and battered, having been thrown or dropped too many times on a hard floor. Siobhán stepped outside and dropped it into the

bin. Then, arms crossed against the cold and wind, she hurried back indoors.

She put the kettle on and made a cup of tea, using one of the teabags from the welcome basket on the counter which consisted of tea, soda bread, biscuits and a bottle of wine. Nice touch. The hosts had also left a litre of milk and a carton of orange juice in the fridge. Along with the welcome basket was a note.

We hope you will be very comfortable here. Please keep all gates closed as our neighbour is grazing cows. If any cows break into the garden, you can call Kitty on the number below.

Siobhán smiled to herself. The perils of the countryside! She felt she would be very happy here. No car alarms, no sirens, no litter, no stress. It had been three years since Siobhán had last returned to Ireland, for her mother's funeral, just before the pandemic. She had coped since then by throwing herself into work, and hadn't paused to catch her breath, feeling like she was running from something. Not just sadness, but some part of her that couldn't settle. Now she would stop, take stock, finish her story.

Siobhán settled into the large leather armchair by the kitchen window. She would go and explore upstairs soon, but first she would put her feet up for a few moments. The hosts had left a cashmere blanket on the back of the armchair. They really had thought of everything! Siobhán wrapped herself in the blanket, savouring the soft caress of it on her face, and promptly dozed off.

When she woke, it was starting to get dark, and the kitchen was enveloped in gloom. Siobhán shivered now, noticing the top half of the stable door was ajar. She must have left it open by mistake – there was a cold draft. With the blanket wrapped around her shoulders, Siobhán crossed the room to bolt the door and switch on some lights. Turning back to the armchair, she was startled by the sight of an old, battered tin mug sitting in the centre of the kitchen table. It was the same mug she had put out in the bin earlier, or one just like it.

Siobhán froze. Don wasn't expected until later. Maybe he'd arrived while she was napping. He probably didn't want to wake me, Siobhán thought. He came in through the back door, saw I was sleeping. But why take the tin cup out of the bin?

As she said this, she knew how ridiculous it sounded. The alternative was too creepy to contemplate. Someone local, a stranger, had walked into the kitchen while she slept in the armchair, and for some reason put the old tin cup on the table.

Siobhán went to the window. Most of the large gravel drive was visible from it, and there was only her car outside. So, Don wasn't here.

She took her phone out of her pocket and texted him, keeping it nonchalant.

Hi Don, I've arrived! Where are you? S

A few minutes passed. Don wrote.

Sorry, been held up, leaving Dublin now. Can't wait! D

Siobhán checked the time on her phone. Five o'clock. It was at least two and a half hours from Dublin, and that wasn't including the time spent leaving the congested city at rush hour. Throw in a toilet break and she'd be lucky if Don got to her before nine. Suddenly she didn't relish the idea of being alone in the house.

Wrapping the cashmere blanket tight around her shoulders, Siobhán picked up the old tin cup and took it outside again. She shuddered. It was an unsightly thing that belonged to another time – it made her uneasy somehow – just by existing here in this pristine rental house.

The purple brooding clouds that had hung low over Gortaclare Mountain a couple of hours earlier had turned black and rolled further inland. As she stood there, Siobhán felt the first fat drops of rain fall. The light was quickly fading, soon it would be completely dark. Siobhán dashed to the bin, flung the cup in, and slammed the lid shut decisively. Then she ran back inside, shut and locked both halves of the stable door, drawing the large bolt across too for good measure.

Shivering a little now, Siobhán shook out the cashmere blanket and draped it over the kitchen chairs to dry. She decided to search the upstairs, make sure she was alone in the house. Siobhán took a large kitchen knife with her for courage. If Don were here, he would take the stairs two at a time, chuckling at her fear.

Don was her long-distance partner. In the early days of their relationship there had been pressure on them both to decide if they

wanted a conventional commitment – marriage, children, the works. But now that Siobhán was past her childbearing years they had relaxed into a pattern where they spent intense bursts of time together before retreating to their solitary routines for a few weeks. It suited them both, most of the time. Occasionally Siobhán wondered if Don saw other women while they were apart, but she couldn't imagine it somehow. Don was all-or-nothing. When they were together, she had his full attention, the rest of the time he was hermit-like, head down, buried in work.

The master bedroom looked very much like it belonged in an interior design magazine. Luxurious, but with rustic details like the floral jug and bowl that were a nod to the roots of the house. After a cursory search of bedrooms, bathrooms and wardrobes, Siobhán began to relax. All the same, she left the knife in a bedside drawer. She changed into pyjamas and dressing gown and got out her laptop. Might as well make a start while she waited. Her work in progress was set in County Clare during the famine. Not far from here, she knew, there were famine roads. Roads leading nowhere, built by starving people in exchange for food. Siobhán was planning to walk them later in the week, though she couldn't say she was looking forward to it. She knew an unspeakable sorrow would greet her there.

As she typed, some figures appeared before her. A woman and a child dressed in rags, their eyes deeply sunken hollows – their bony arms stretched out to her, beseeching. From behind the woman's ragged skirts another child emerged, too weak to stand, keeling forward on its knees until its forehead almost touched the ground. Siobhán shook her head. The vision was disturbingly real. But then she had always had an active imagination.

She didn't know how much time had passed when she finally heard Don's car on the gravel. Siobhán ran down the stairs, threw open the door and flung her arms round his neck. He kissed her cheeks, nuzzled her neck.

Don went ahead of her into the kitchen, dumping bags of food and a bottle of wine on the table. Then he turned to Siobhán, whose face had drained of colour.

'My love, what's wrong?' he asked.

Siobhán pointed to the far end of the table, where the old tin cup lay on its side, reproachfully.

‘Did you bring that in here?’ she asked.

‘Ah, no – why?’

Siobhán, trembling, picked up the cup. Before Don could stop her, she went to the back door and stepped out into the night. It was raining properly now. Still in pyjamas and dressing gown she traipsed barefoot through the sodden grass to the low fence at the back of the garden and hurled the cup with all her might towards the mountain. An owl screeched. Siobhán felt as if a thousand small eyes were upon her. Fear prickled at the nape of her neck, but even though it rained she forced herself to walk slowly back to the house where Don’s figure was framed in the light of the doorway.

Despite the reassuring warmth of his body next to her, Siobhán passed a restless night. The rain and howling wind kept her awake, and when she finally slept, she saw the mother of the two starving children again in her dreams. The woman’s face resembled a skull, dull skin stretched taut. Her voice was a low keen, and in her outstretched hands she held an old tin cup. Siobhán woke in a cold sweat before falling into another nightmare where a snaking queue of huddled, ragged people stretched from the back door to the mountain beyond.

Morning couldn’t come quickly enough. As soon as the first blue light appeared, Siobhán shook Don awake, asking him to go downstairs. Sure enough, he returned and confirmed what Siobhán already knew – the old tin cup was back on the kitchen table. Don, convinced it was a prank by someone with a key to the house, offered to call and confront the owner. Siobhán knew better and shook her head.

In the kitchen she made a cup of tea, running her hand over the smooth surface of the scrubbed pine table. Then she picked up the tin cup and studied it, holding it in the pleading posture of the woman in her dream. It was a supplication. The tin cup, cold to the touch, gradually warmed in her hands.

Siobhán went out the back door again, the cup tucked under her arm. The morning was bright and fresh from last night’s rain. Some cows were grazing in the field behind the house, and a figure in a woollen hat, tatty fleece and wellies was walking the fence that divided the two properties. This must be Kitty.

Siobhán walked over to say hello. Kitty had dyed red hair and a deeply lined face. A cigarette was dangling from her lips. She raised a hand in greeting as Siobhán approached.

‘You must be the writer from London’.

Siobhán grinned. News travelled fast in the townland.

‘I am indeed, and you must be Kitty.’

‘I am, for my sins’, laughed Kitty.

Siobhán held up the tin cup.

‘This keeps appearing in the kitchen. I’m wondering if you’d have any advice for me, Kitty? I want to stay here the full month, but...’

Kitty grumbled. ‘Sure, didn’t I tell them this would happen?’

After a pause she went on. ‘You’re living off the fat of the land here. Maybe offer a small token to the, you know, to the, ah...’ Kitty couldn’t finish her sentence. Instead, she just said: ‘There’s a terrible hunger’.

Siobhán nodded.

‘And what do they like?’

‘A cup of milk does the job I’d say’. With that she strode off, raising her hand in farewell.

That night Siobhán filled the old tin cup to the brim with creamy milk and placed it on the back doorstep. ‘There you go’, she whispered.

The next morning the old tin cup was no longer on the kitchen table but lay on its side on the back doorstep. When Siobhán picked it up, she found a smooth round pebble inside. Smiling, she put the pebble in her dressing gown pocket, then sat down to write her book.