

## **FALSER THAN VOWS MADE IN WINE**

The snow deadened all sound in Clogherhead. Even the sea had gone quiet, lying still and dark in the cold. All was shut up. The inn was in darkness, the fishing shacks were quiet, and not a soul stirred. Even the birds seemed still asleep beneath their wings. As the boy approached the cliff, he heard the slightest sigh, which was not a sound he was used to hearing from the sea. Most days in winter, it was a raging demon throwing itself at the foot of the cliffs, determined to pull them down so it could snatch at those who refused to leave the safety of the hearth. But this winter's night had defeated the sullen beast.

Cormac O'Hagan's favourite thing was to walk the cliff path just before sunrise, when he had the whole world to himself. As soon as the cock crowed, he threw off sleep, took his cloak from his straw pallet and fastened himself into it. Then he slipped his still-warm feet into cold clogs, and made for the door. His jobs would wait till he got back and his sleeping family had roused themselves.

He went to the fire and stroked the dog's ears until she opened a grumpy terrier eye, showing no desire to leave the warmth. But the old cat stalked away from the embers on stiff legs, so Cormac opened the door a crack. Snow had drifted against the door, and a little fell over the threshold as the cat brushed through it. Cormac stepped out, pulling the door shut behind him, leaving everyone sound asleep under cloaks, rugs and whatever else they could lay their hands on to keep warm through the cruel night. The few plants outside were swaddled in white and the moonlight made everything look friendly. He followed the cat's paw prints until they vanished near the high wall on the way to the sea.

‘Gone down to the caves in search of a fishy breakfast, have you, old girl?’

The cold air made the boy gasp, so he buried his mouth back in his muffler, and crunched through the immaculate snow. It was not far to the cliff, certainly no more than a half-mile. As he walked, his warm breath made his muffler damp.

Every day, as the sun began to rise, Cormac would hold out his arms, uncurl his stubby digits – and, in the same way that his hand could blot out the sun – his fingers could touch the surrounding shorelines of County Louth. With outstretched arms, he would twirl and trace the horizon with his fingertips. Today, he took up a position a little further back than usual for fear of slipping in the snow and falling into the silent sea. He waited, with arms wide open and eyes closed, for the sun to announce its arrival by casting a golden glow across his eyelids.

When warmth finally bathed his eyes, he opened them to watch the sun shimmer into life on the eastern horizon. But something was wrong. He rubbed his eyes with his knuckles, wondering whether he had left his pallet at all, wondering whether he might still be dreaming. But all his rubbing changed nothing. When Cormac looked again, his heart began to pound and his hands began to tremble. He wondered whether he should fall to his knees, but his legs had locked, holding him in place. The boy held out his trembling hands and blocked out two of the monstrous suns that had risen. But it was impossible to block out the third sun. This solar triptych, of course, was God appearing to Cormac in his three forms. Father. Son. Ghost. The boy shivered in the glorious presence of the Holy Trinity. This must be a sign from God. But what sign could God be sending to Cormac O’Hagan, the boy with an eternally snot-ridden nose, and one so badly cursed with the sin of greed? Was it on account of his greed that God had shown Himself? Or was it, perhaps, that other thing? Cormac closed his eyes, his cheeks alight with shame. But all boys did that. They all tried hard not to. But still, surely God would not come down from on high for that? It must, then, be a good sign. God must have a special message of sorts, just for him. He swallowed the huge lump that

had taken hold in his throat and tried to speak. His voice betrayed him, coming out in that terrible squeak it had taken on of late.

‘Dearest Father, I do not know if it is me you have come for. But as there is only me here, then you must want me. Holy, holy, Father, if it is me that you want, then whatever it is that you want me for, I will do it. You have my word.’

Cormac squinted into the three suns, bracing himself for the booming voice of God, but none came. He nodded, thinking to himself for a moment.

‘So, then this must be a sign... a sign like the burning bush. I have to work out what sign you are sending me, Father.’

He bit the inside of his cheek, hoping it would stop the tic that had flared up there. God would not want a boy with a tic, of that much he was sure.

‘Dearest Father, this must be my calling. Straight from heaven. Is this my calling? You want me to work it out for myself, then? Well, Father, it is not something I hoped for, in truth, but here is my answer. Holy Father. I will do it. I will serve you, God, for all of my life. Amen.’

As fast as the miracle had appeared, the second and third suns vanished, leaving only a single watery sun to continue rising into the sky. Cormac watched it for a while, then, newly promised to God, he ran straight home to break the news to his bleary-eyed family.

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‘Mammy, I have had a sign from God. I am to be a priest and will soon be away to the seminary.’

His mother hugged him hard. ‘Cormac, I am filled with such a desperate joy. See, the eldest son is always destined for God.’

‘Sure. One way or another, if you don’t stop half-strangling the lad,’ intoned his father. ‘I suppose the useless lump may as well put his blather to some good use.’

Naturally, young Cormac could not wait to explain his new-found vocation to his friends and the hefty nun who taught them. He arrived at the schoolroom, breathless and untidy, bursting with his tale, but he was forced to contain himself until after morning prayers.

When the class had finished mumbling into their chests, they got to their feet and Sister Bronach glanced at Cormac with her hard, blue eyes. ‘Go on then, O’Hagan. Tell your tale, since it seems we must all suffer until you do.’

His broad face alight with being chosen, Cormac O’Hagan stood at the front of the class. With a full range of explanatory hand movements, he demonstrated how God had made His sign by showing Himself in the form of three suns.

‘So now, I am called to give myself to God and become one of His priests.’

His honest, brown eyes shone with wonder as he gazed around the schoolroom, waiting for the adulation to begin.

‘Jesus, Mary and Joseph, O’Hagan!’ The nun’s jowls wobbled with mirth and the whole class smirked at Sister Bronach’s interjection. ‘Why on earth would the Holy Father waste His precious time talking to you when He has wonders to perform? You did not see God. You saw sun dogs, you thundering great ingot, two false suns that dog the real one. It was seen up and down the coast by the fishermen, and I doubt many of them are to give over catching fish to take to the cloth.’

This set the class sniggering. Cormac stared forlornly at these boys with their holey jumpers, piss-stained britches and running sores. His own scabbed face burnt while the sister took vicious delight in explaining the parhelion that he had witnessed.

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So that was the day Cormac O’Hagan knew that God had not revealed Himself in His infinite majesty. Now his vocation was gone, he would stop going to the cliff. No more would he trace the halo of his homeland with his fingertips. God had not spoken to him. God had not singled him out. There was no God.

But still, the notion of becoming a priest hung over the boy. Each night, he lay awake, hot-eyed and fidgety on his straw pallet, until he determined that he would still become a priest. What else was there to do on these shores for a boy who could read and write? It would mean living a lie, with eyes downcast, but then so did half the congregation at church. And it would be a lie based on the best of intentions – how could he crush his dear mother’s desperate joy?

He would not do it in Ireland though. Far better to spread his lies where the congregation had not watched him growing up. Surely, a mother could tell a lie on her grown son's face at fifty feet because she had seen his first baby lies, watched them grow, seen the tics, and the lines they made as falsehood etched its worm-casts into the man’s face. Juries should be composed of mothers.

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The priest suggested that Cormac start by serving as altar boy. He would have to go to the church and practise for his first service. The honour made his heart race. Although he had almost changed his mind when Sister Bronach opened the vestry door to him. During the preparation session, the nun puffed between orders.

‘Hang your own clothes here, on this peg. Wear this robe, the white one. Fasten the rope just so. Hold the candle still. Stand up straight. Sing along to all the hymns, don’t just mouth the words. Hang your head and look suitably penitent. Keep your eyes shut during prayers. Do not peer under your eyelashes to see what the girls at the back are doing. Stop that now. No impure thoughts in God’s house. Kneel right there. Rise without using your hands. Be filled with grace at all times. The Father looks after the wine. You do not touch the wine. And do not drop that candle. It is a sacrament, most particularly since it will be Candlemas. I do not know what the Father was thinking. But there you are, it is not for me to have an opinion on these matters.’

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Come Candlemas, Cormac's humours were so out of kilter that he left his breakfast for the first time in his life, even knowing it worried his mother sick. Today, the villagers would carry their candles into church to be blessed. Together, they would celebrate the purification of the Virgin with a shoreline procession, carrying the Blessed Virgin shoulder-high. Back at home, there would be the lighting of candles and the illicit cheer of seeking omens in the flames to make predictions for the coming year.

The church was dark. There was no light shining from the windows, so Cormac walked round the back, shivering as he stepped through the graveyard, with only the moon and the snow for light. The stone angels and crosses were furred with frost, and the dead flowers were bowed under a coat of snow.

A thin, orange light glowed from the window, but the stout door was locked. Cormac thumped it with the side of his fist, and waited. Delicious icicles hung from the vestry roof, shining in the moonlight, so he stretched up and snapped one off to suck. It was pure, cold and smooth against his lips, melting in the heat of his mouth. It tasted of cold nothingness with a tang of metal. His reverie was suddenly broken when a wet thump hit him between the shoulder blades, and he nearly choked on the icicle.

'So, O'Hagan? We locked out then?'

'The very youngest O'Neill. I might have known it.'

'What was in your gob?'

'Nothing. An icicle.'

O'Neill snapped off two more, passing one to Cormac. 'Have you knocked?'

'Obviously, Fergal O'Neill, I am not soft-headed.'

'Then we wait. So, child, are you serving as well?'

‘Child, yourself.’ Cormac bristled. The O’Neill boy was scarce an inch taller than him. And he was the youngest of that dreadful brood.

‘My mother says it is a sin against God to even let an O’Hagan into the chancel, unless it is to char. Especially a snot-nosed one like you, she says.’

Cormac bit the end off his icicle, trying not to cringe at the pain in his teeth. ‘What is that supposed to mean? What would your mother know about the church, the chancel or charring? Or about us O’Hagans? At least I am the eldest, Fergal, and not the runt of the litter like yourself.’

But O’Neill was spared from answering by a grating noise as the door heaved open to reveal the verger.

‘Come on in, lads, before you catch your deaths.’

Fergal pushed through the door first, and they went into the vestry. Cormac opened a cupboard crammed with robes, sashes and ropes. How would he know what to wear? Sister Bronach bustled through the door just then. She was an unlikely saviour, but for the first time ever, Cormac was glad to see her.

‘Now, O’Hagan, don’t just stand there with your mouth open catching flies. O’Neill, pass him down a fitting robe.’

Fergal smirked and passed Cormac a robe that looked as though it might fit an infant.

‘Sure, Sister, O’Hagan will be wearing a Christening gown, no? He is so small!’

Cormac glared at Fergal, wishing for thunderbolts.

‘Now get ready, boys, since I must light the candles. Woe betide if either of you so much as think of raising voice or hand in God’s house. Be sure I will hear of it first.’

Sister Bronach bustled out, turning sideways so she could fit through the vestry door. Face burning, Cormac hauled the robe over his head to hide his shame.

So, finally, the time had come. Candlemas. Holy Communion. Cormac and Fergal trailed down the aisle after Sister Bronach and several villagers disguised in black cloaks. At the front of the procession, was the priest. The church had been transformed with hundreds of candles flickering from every ledge, sill and pew. Cormac inhaled. Good beeswax candles, not the nasty tallow ones from home. The flames gave life to the glass saints in the windows, and they seemed to dance and wave to him.

The boys' first job was to guard the big altar candles. Cormac's candlestick came up to his shoulder and the fat candle came up to his eyes. O'Neill's candle only came up to his chin, so his was an easier job. Normally, the church was freezing, but the flickering candles made it strangely warm today. Everyone else got to sit during the service, except for the altar boys who had to stand for the entire morning. Cormac stood so straight that his ankles rubbed together. Still, it kept him awake. Although staring at Fergal O'Neill's ugly mug for a whole morning without stopping was much more tiring than Cormac had expected.

The old priest was renowned for his long and horrible sermons, and there were far too many hymns. The strange Latin and the strong incense began to have a lulling effect on Cormac, which was made worse by the monotonous voice of the priest, who clearly thought it a mortal sin to change his tone up or down. Cormac started to feel hot, due to having a thick robe over his outdoor clothes and also standing next to a giant candle. When the congregation stood up to sing, they seemed rather far away to the sweating boy. Cormac tried to concentrate on the tiled floor for a while, but all the little squares of red, white, blue and yellow dazzled his eyes, and he had to do a few big blinks to clear the whirling rainbow from his head. The candle was soothing to look at, though, so he stared into the flame to keep his eyes off the moving mosaic on the floor.

During the singing, Cormac could hear the priest trying to keep up with the organist, who always played as if he were in a race against everyone else. Cormac could not remember

half the words to 'Te Deum', so he just shuffled his lips, turning his head a little so that Sister Bronach did not see. The congregation were slightly out of time and hugely out of tune, and the words span around him. The cherubim, the seraphim, all that precious blood, the redeeming and the glory – everything combined with the heat and the noise, looking at O'Neill's stupid sneer, and the eternally spinning mosaic.

Although now very far away, Fergal O'Neill was staring at him quite strangely. Cormac wished harder than ever for thunderbolts, but the effort made him feel peculiar, as if he had a head full of grey wool. It sounded as though the congregation were singing a different hymn to the priest. He could not stand still any more, and now the candle flame pulled him towards it, causing him to sway. The morning sun shone through the stained-glass windows, making patterns, and splintering saints all over the aisle. Cormac's face felt very hot now, and he could smell the acrid odour of burning hair. Black ash started to fall in front of his eyes and he wobbled. Fergal O'Neill's mouth was wide open. Everyone stopped singing and started chattering. Then the verger ran towards him and caught him as he sank to the hard floor.

When he opened his eyes, Cormac was in the front pew, looking up at the ribs of the church roof. His mother's face swam above him and there was a sharp smell of hartshorn, which gave him a cough and made his eyes water. The verger pulled him to his feet and hurried him back to the vestry. Cormac hung his head, trying to avoid the sight of Fergal O'Neill's grinning face as he went.

Back in the vestry, he slumped onto a wooden stool, hanging his head and watching the verger from the corner of his eye. The verger plucked a robe from the cupboard and wrestled his stout body into it.

'Now don't take on so, lad.'

Cormac blinked hard. He was afraid to open his mouth for fear his squeaking voice would betray him and his terrible lies.

‘Now then, son, it was only your first time. Plenty of lads come over as though they’d swallowed a poisoned pup on their first time out.’

The verger’s kind words made a terrible lump rise up in Cormac’s throat and it made his chin start to quiver. He forced himself to smile at the verger, his lips pressed tight together, his eyes gleaming and his chin quivering. But how could the verger possibly know? That if God existed, then this was a sure sign from God that he was not meant for the priesthood. Who would want a boy that could not even be trusted with a candle, let alone a baby, a bride or a body? It would have to be the fishing for him, after all, or the teaching.

The verger patted his shoulder. ‘Come, lad. I will take your place for now. Stay there till you feel better and you might be well enough for the shoreline procession after. And next time you have a turn at being altar boy, eat a hearty breakfast first. Your rumbling belly nearly drowned out the sermon.’

Cormac looked at the verger’s kind face and knew that he could never possibly understand. He rubbed the charred remnants of hair from his face. The humiliation of being mocked by the very youngest O’Neill made him heartsick and he just wanted to go home. His chin wobbled some more, and a traitorous tear finally ran down his face.

THE END