

Fear

Terry McGarry

On ascension day, Bridget was the last to struggle through the bent and scarred opening into the world. Her eyes could not resolve the blur of gray and brown at first, and when she looked up she nearly fell, her eyes watering; the sky was not blue with a golden sun but flat and gray and so vast she felt it must crush her. She sat down and then lay flat, pressing into the floor--the ground, she must remember to call it, the Irish soil--which was soft and made of grains of earth and woven strands of growing things. She heard the shouts of the others, some afraid to move away from the hatch, some running wildly about with Mr. Fitzhugh ordering them to stop; but they all sounded as if muffled through the wall hangings that decorated the nuclear-war survival capsule she and the other members of the textiles group had just emerged from, and she began to understand what distance was.

"Oh, God," her mother was crying, softly, repeatedly. She had fallen to her knees and drawn handfuls of the green growth to her damp, red face. Bridget moved closer to peer at the short-stemmed, delicate plants. "Mam?"

"The clover, Bridget. It should only have three leaves, but four was considered lucky, and Bridget, even after the blast and a century's time, it's

stillhere...."

Bridget grew uncomfortable with the unexpected emotion and turned her eyes to a row of black stumps surrounded by tufts of baby trees, recognizable though none exactly fit the videos she had seen. The air was thick with odors, sweet and acrid, and she opened her mouth to breathe as if she could unravel its components with her tongue.

After her seven years in the caps below, the last seven wakes were clearest in her mind. She clutched the leprechaun embroidery in her pocket--leprechaun, Mrs. Simmons the schoolteacher had corrected her, telling her gently that they were not real--and remembered the day in class when they had discussed the coming ascension in real terms for the first time, because the communication cap had announced that it was really going to happen. In preparation she had rehearsed to herself the forbidden words for rain and sun and sky-- báisteach, grian, spéir --and counted in her mind the colors in the tiny rainbow thrown on the all by her brother David's bit of angled glass, so that she would recognize the big ones when she saw them.

"My father says we don't know if it isn't all water above and no floor at all anymore, that the heat melted the ice at the top of the world and flooded our islands," David had said.

"My father said that was a bomb the IRA could understand," Jimmy Hanlon had put in, not to be bested in father-quoting.

The words had blurred into meaningless babble to Bridget, although she was trained to memorize instead of using limited paper and disks; when Mrs. Simmons wasn't looking, she had slipped out a book of fairy stories and let the stuffy workroom fade away.

The next thing she had known, David was yanking the book from her

hands. "Lesson's over and Jesus will you come out of that dreamworld of yours."

"Leave her," Glenn Fitzhugh had said softly. "She's just a wee wane, and you're a bully, Dai."

Bridget had followed the altercation absently, her eyes still on the yellow page. She appreciated Glenn's kindness and had been sorry when David hit him, because Glenn couldn't fight back without hurting. David had cursed her, which stung because it meant that Father did it. He had said she was unwanted, she was the third child, Mother broke the rules, Mother was a Catholic and they were bad and stupid but nobody wanted any more trouble so they pretended that Great-great-grandfather hadn't smuggled Great-great-grandmother down here, taking the Compact in bad faith, and Father pretended he wasn't sorry because everyone had to marry according to genetics and lots of times it didn't work out and no one else complained, and he worked extra hard as if it could make up for the extra mouth to feed, and the one good thing about ascension was being rid of Them....

"You're half one if what you say is true," Glenn had said with bovine, implacable logic from the pile of cloth into which David had pushed him. David had had a tantrum then and Mrs. Simmons had come in and scolded them for not being at tea and Bridget had squeezed her leprechaun tightly and looked up from thesewing benches and fiber recyclers to the smooth gray walls and lighting tubes above, above, where there wouldn't be any fighting anymore.

"It's not that they're bad and we're good, Bridget," Mother had whispered later, fastening the hangings over the alcove opening and switching on the white-noise generator. Bridget associated the fuzzy hiss with the rows it was turned up loud to drown out--rows about her. "It's just that we're different; we're the ones they were trying to keep out when the capsules were made, and although most of these people are good people, and our friends, there are some who still resent us even after all this time. Hate dies hard, love." She had smoothed Bridget's hair back and braided it, deftly, gently. "Now say a Hail Mary for me."

"I'd rather say a poem. I read it in a book about the fairies. 'Up the airy mountain, down the rushy glen, we daren't go a-hunting, for fear of little--'"

"You and the fairies. You're as bad as my mother was. Still, it's our tradition, and if we don't preserve it no one will."

"We're the last, aren't we, Mam?" Bridget had said quietly, the poem forgotten.

"Ah, now, Bridget, I don't know that. We're the last in this cap, anyway."

"And David and Anne? Glenn said..."

"Glenn's a good lad but he doesn't know everything. No, I was young when David and Anne were born, I let the Compact have them. I was afraid they'd do to me what they did to your grandmother when they found out she was teaching me the old ways. You're our last chance, Bridget. That's why I had you and that's why you must remember the words and prayers."

"I'm afraid, Mam."

Her mother had made a clucking sound. "What can they do, with

ascensionso soon? The whole cap knows about us anyway, and there's bad feeling aboutwhat was done to your grandmother." She had paused, and swallowed.

"Do you think...above..." Bridget had wanted to ask about the fairies, buther mother had misunderstood her.

"No oneknows, mo chroí . But I'll tell you what I think. Our people wereleft up there to die by those with the money and the industry to build the caps. But our people are survivors, Bridget, and I believe they're still there. I believe they took back the land that was theirs when all the Orangemen hid underit, and that they--"

"You'd best lower your voice before the whole cap hears and lynches youafter all." Father's voice had preceded him through the heavy cloth over the alcovedoor. Bridget had glanced at her mother's tight face and scurried past himto the outer chamber, where David and Anne were breathing softly in their dreams. The thirdsleep tape of a thunderstorm had looped just audibly between theircots. Bridget had crawled in next to Anne and thought how learning that waterdidn't always come from synthtanks but fell from above in little drops thatmade the sound on the tape was not quite the same as learning that Mother andFather hated each other. But she had learned them at the same time, and they wereboth just things to know. It was all right. She knew about leprechauns, too.

Bridget remembered how long the next six wakes had seemed to stretch beforeher. And now, miraculously, here they were....

Then she saw the leprechaun. At first she thought it was one of the otherchildren who had wandered off, but it was an odd shape and didn't walk properly. It seemed to sense her stare and, with a wild look, disappeared.

Mam had gone off to talk to Mrs. Simmons; Bridget made sure she wasn't paying attention and began to run toward the trees. She had never run on ground before; it was harder than the treadmill, and her short legs carried her as haltingly as her tongue pronounced the old words. By the time she reached the trees there was no sign of the small creature. Her heart fell, but she remembered that they were shy and decided to sit on a stone and wait. She was far enough into the woods to feel concealed from Mam and the rest, though it was hard to know what could be seen from far away. It was chilly here, but in a new way; she realized that the air was blowing against her with water in it, not quite rain but a fine dampness, and she raised her face and closed her eyes and smiled into the breeze.

She sensed its presence almost before she heard the crackle of its steps, and opened her eyes slowly, holding her breath against her beating heart. It was dirty, and no taller than she was, and she knew at once that it was a leprechaun, because they were the worst-looking fairies.

"Fear," the creature said.

The sound startled Bridget, so little had she expected him to speak. She frowned. "No, I'm not afraid."

He shook his head at her, so vehemently that his matted hair swung back and forth. "Neel, iss fear may."

Bridget, no more confused by this than she often was by Mrs. Simmons, memorized the sounds and then tried to fit them to English. "Are you afraid? Don't be afraid--" She reached out to him and he nodded vigorously.

"Fear, fear," he said, pointing to himself and smiling. He certainly looked unafraid, although his awful teeth succeeded in scaring Bridget. Then he pointed to her. "Colleen."

"My name is Bridget," she said. He didn't seem to understand, so she pointed to herself and repeated her name until his rheumy eyes widened and he grinned.

"Bridget!" he said, delighted. Then, pointing once more to himself, he said, "Shay!"

He jumped up and down with obvious glee and then sat and pointed systematically to everything around them. She understood that he was naming things, but the sounds made less and less sense, and Bridget had stopped trying to mentally catalogue when he pointed up and said, "Spare."

Her heart jumped as if he had uttered an obscenity, and she automatically looked around for eavesdroppers. Then she stared at him. "Spéir," she said, pointing up. He nodded, encouraged, and held his hand to her head (it was so filthy and crooked she flinched) and then high above it. "Colleen. Ban. Colleen anish. Ban amawruck."

"Cailín," she repeated slowly. "Girl."

"Colleen."

"Fear," she said, pointing to him, and as he nodded she visualized the Irish spelling in her mind. "Fear! Man! You're trying to say you're a man in the old language! Oh, but you say it so oddly. Is fear tú ! Is cailín mé !"

He laughed, a hacking sound that would have frightened her had she not been so pleased, and she began to laugh herself, the movements of the muscles unfamiliar in her stomach, so long had it been.

Shay and Bridget sat laughing among the black stumps of the old forest, repeating the shared words until the rain came.

She met Shay regularly the next few wakes--days, she learned to call them, just as she learned to accept the coming and going of light without switches. It was easy to slip away; the task of erecting shelters was heavy and hurried, and she was told to keep out from underfoot.

In the beginning they shared vocabulary, since she knew only a few fullphrases. After a while they were able to carry on a simple conversation, while munching on berries and strolling through the sparse woods. His Irish was distorted, with distorted English mixed in, and all of it was garbled by his queercrooked mouth, but it was easier to learn than Mam's because with Shay she could speak aloud and often.

She did not tell her mother about Shay; she was not only jealous of her secret but afraid. She had asked if there were others like him; nodding, Shay had explained that he was alone because he was crippled and could not hunt ("the extra mouth to feed," David's words echoed in her mind), and he had hinted darkly that the others would not be friendly.

They came on the fifth day. They were silent and terribly fast, appearing just at twilight as Bridget started back for supper. The leaves did

not crackle under their feet, and the first sounds she heard were a sickening thwack and Shay's yelp of pain. She turned as they were upon her and saw blood on Shay's face, made more grotesque by rage and panic. He tried to wrest her from them but was driven off with stones that thudded with a rustle into the bracken after hitting him. She drew breath to shriek and inhaled only the stench of the hairy hand that clamped over her mouth and nose. She had never passed out before; she struggled violently against it, with bursting lungs, until the glittering blackness filled her mind and she couldn't see Shay anymore.

Bridget had never before felt anything like the cold terror that filled her when she came to. She told herself that these short, ragged men were trouping fairies, friendly folk who wanted perhaps to swap a fairy baby for a real one. But their hands were too rough, their voices too harsh, and they had tied her up as if she were a bag of mending. She was carried through the forest, through darkness so complete that she wondered if she'd really woken up. After a while--perhaps a hundred precious breaths--a flickering light began to grow, and she heard voices. She was dropped to the ground, dragged past a huge, scorching fire, and left in a damp stone structure. A man stationed himself at the opening; in the firelight, his white hair and pale eyes made her cringe.

Shay had not followed them. By dawn, that realization ached inside her almost as much as her need for Mam. But she looked up from her misery and saw

that the guard had gone, and she was able to roll herself to the opening and
lookout.

There were eleven other huts, no two alike, standing in a ring around
the hole where the fire burned. Near it, animals picked and grazed and several
tiny children played.

She found that someone had left her some food, but she was sick after
she ate it. Her retching drew a group of silver women to hover over her, and she
felt comforted when they stroked her hair and cooed over its red color .

"Are you banshees?" she asked in Irish. They drew back in surprise at
these first words from her. One of them, apparently the youngest though they
were all wizened and hollow-eyed, offered her a carved bowl of water and sat
before her as she drank.

"We are not banshees," she said slowly, as if sensing Bridget's
newness to their tongue. "I am Mora. Are you of the Tuatha?"

Bridget thought about the legend of the Tuatha and said she didn't
know. "Bridget is my name."

This elicited a solemn nod. "They said you would return and take the
land one day."

Bridget remembered what her mother had said and stared at the
wrinkled, pale face before her. She thought desperately of something to say with
her small store of words that would show she was a friend; then she remembered
her leprechaun swatch, and reached out with her bound hands to tug at the
woman's rags. "More, I can fix these," she said, and managed to draw the small
needle from its sheath in her pocket. Mora's eyes grew wide at the sight of the
gleaming stainless steel, and she watched in fascination as Bridget unraveled a
long strand from her embroidery and threaded the needle deftly, barely hampered

by her bonds. "Look," Bridget said, and stitched up the largest hole in Mora's tunics neatly as she could. "See? Better." Some of Mora's clothes were woven, but some were of a solid cloth Bridget had never seen before, fastened with large, rough thongs. Bridget's whipstitching looked delicate and sophisticated by comparison, and to her relief, Mora smiled broadly.

Bridget spent the rest of the day with the women, who told her that the men were out hunting. She learned to milk a goat and to tell time from a stone's shadow. Mora had an ancient, crack-faced watch, and Bridget wound it for her, as amazed that they had forgotten this simple thing as they were that she did not know what animal skin was.

When the men returned, Mora told her she was to see the priest-king. Frightened, she struggled a bit as she was brought to the largest hut, this one made of blocks of earth with a woven grass roof, and she sat trembling by its cold fire hole, looking at the priest-king. He was almost bald, with one green eye and one milky blue one, and a great mauve splotch over half his face. He leaned down and untied Bridget's chafed wrists, then sat and kindled a fire, filling the room with a pleasant, turfy smoke.

"My daughter tells me you are a mender," he said quietly.

Shy and intimidated, though no longer shaking, Bridget looked down. "I want to help. Don't hurt me."

He did not answer, but his craggy, discolored face was somehow both grave and merry. "Do you know what a seanchaí is?" he asked then, in English.

"A storyteller," she answered.

"And more than that, as well. The books were all burned for fuel long ago, in the cold time; the seanchaí remembers all the stories and all the

history, and recites them so the people will know their past. There are tales of the Tuatha Dé Danann, gods who went into the earth thousands of years ago; there are many who think that is who you are, but more who say your people have arisen from the earth not as gods but as our true enemies who cursed and abandoned us." He seemed to see that she could not follow even his English, and frowned with the effort of simplification. "We mean you no harm, but we do not know your people. We took you out of fear that they would attack us, from similar ignorance. If you truly want to help, you will go home tomorrow and give your people a message of peace from us. It is very important and you will have to learn a lot of words, just like a seanchaí. Will you do that?"

Bridget nodded, the responsibility making her solemn. He left her then so she could sleep. There was no guard, and her hands were free; she curled up against the room's emptiness and the embers' unearthly glow, and thought hard about peace and Mam and the caps and what was real and what were stories, until at last she fell asleep.

Shay came for her that night. She woke to feel him bundling the furs around her and carrying her to the window. The fire pit was full of ashes, and from far away came the sound of many voices arguing. She tried to struggle as Shay lifted her out to the ground and jumped down beside her, but she was half-asleep, and by the time she untangled herself from the covers he had half-carried, half-dragged her well out of sight of the ring of houses. "Shay, let me

down," she protested. He let her stand but would not let her go. "I don't want to leave now."

Shay shook his head and jumped up and down, as he had when they first met. He said that she was just a trading thing, that they had taken her to buy safety, that they would kill her if her people tried to take away the land.

"No, Shay, that won't happen now, not if I go back," she said, but he would not be convinced, and he began to walk her in the direction of the caps.

It did not occur to her to run away from him. She tried to turn several times, but Shay would have none of it, and soon she was lost in the black, moonless woods and had no choice but to follow him. What would the priest-king say, she wondered miserably, when he found that she had abandoned them? Would there be another terrible war? If there was, it would be all her fault, and she began to cry as they walked. Shay patted her a little but would not stop, though they were both exhausted and ill-shod. She stumbled in the mud and bracken and began to shiver as her clothes were wet through by water shaken from the saplings as they passed. Strange animal noises made her hang nervously on Shay's arm, not sure he was strong enough to protect her. He couldn't walk that way, so he disengaged her clutching fingers and made her walk behind him. This small rejection brought a fresh flood of tears that lasted many steps, but when she was all cried out and trudging blind and numb behind Shay's rhythmic limp, it came to her in a flash of light that of course, she could give the peace message anyway, in her own words. It was going to be all right, she thought, and a spring crept into her step.

They emerged from the woods as dawn seeped redly into the eastern clouds. The shelters looked large and smooth and clean now to Bridget, compared

withwhere she'd been. She took a deep breath and started toward them, but Shay hungback, shaking his head. "It's all right," she told him. "I'll tell them you'remy friend..." But he would not listen, and she finally let go of his hand, saying a reluctant goodbye-and-thanks as he turned.

There was a shout from the shelter behind her and the flash of an energyweapon; Bridget screamed as Shay fell, stunned, and her father came runningout to grab her up roughly in his arms. "It's all right now, Bridget, we gotthe little bastard."

Torn between the love in his first words and the cruelty in the rest, Bridget froze for a moment,then clawed her way free to bounce on the springy turfand into her mother's arms, at the same time pulling toward Shay, who was alreadymanacled by Mr. Hanlon. "Stop it!" she cried helplessly, grasping at Shay's coarse tunic." Mam, make them stop it!"

"We've found her, Fitzhugh," Father said as the cap leader joined them. "And Jamie here has located their camp; we can attack in an hour, before theyhave a chance at the other children."

Mr. Fitzhugh made a sign at Mr. Hanlon, and Shay was released to tumbleat Bridget's feet. She crouched down next to him and watched Mr. Fitzhugh turn toward her father.

"Looks more to me like she found you."

"Ah, she's not light; she'd brought us a hostage, I'd say, and we'd be stonemad to let the chance slip by."

Bridget tried to object, but her mother shushed her, though her own handswere tense with anger on Bridget's shoulders.

"I didn't want to live up here, but now that I have I'm damned if I'll livein fear," her father finished.

"But they're afraid of you!" Bridget burst out, and at last Mr. Fitzhugh turned to her.

"Let's hear from wee Bridget before we go off half-cocked," he said, and looked down at her.

"This is Shay," she explained quickly, desperately. "He's my friend, I met him on ascension day, he wouldn't hurt anyone. The clann took me away because they were afraid you would try to take the land away again like in the old times. But they're good people and they were nice to me. I can speak to them-- Mam, they speak Irish!--and the priest-king told me to bring you a peace message, but--"

"Catholics." Mr. Hanlon spat the word into the turf. "I'd figured as much. Macdonald, let's go--"

"You will not." Bridget's mother stood up slowly, and something in her face made the others fall silent. "David Macdonald, the concern I've seen in you for our daughter has made me wonder if we've quarreled for nothing all these years. But you will not start this hell on earth all over again. Did we spend five generations in a hole in the ground for nothing? During the Troubles they used little bombs; have we not seen what the big ones do that we must start it all again?"

"No one's talking about bombs, Mary," said Father uncomfortably, but more gently than Bridget had ever heard him speak to her.

"Mrs. Macdonald has a point," said Mr. Fitzhugh. "I say we go to them, respond to their peace offer, maybe even learn--"

Mr. Hanlon swore. "Walk right into their trap."

"It's been many years since we had soldiers, Jamie. It suits us badly

now. We're the foreigners up here." Mr. Fitzhugh scratched his beard and turned to the crowd that had gathered. "Everyone here should get back to work. I'll leave in an hour to take Bridget to Shay's people, try to make some sort of agreement."

The crowd erupted into loud debate, but Bridget wasn't listening. She helped Shay out of the metal cuffs and to his feet, then told him in Irish that he had a home with her if his people wouldn't take him back. He nodded and grinned his awful grin, and they turned together to Mr. Fitzhugh.

For that day, at least, there was no fighting, and Bridget refused to be afraid even when her mother warned her not to hope too hard, that people were difficult and sometimes did not keep their promises. That night in her own cot, after hours of more talking than she had done in a lifetime, Bridget listened to the patter of real rain on the shelter roof. "You believed in legends, and you became one yourself, my wee changeling," her mother said as she fixed the blankets around her. "I lost a human baby and had a fairy girl returned to me." Through the window, Bridget watched the streaks of rain weave into gleaming pools on the ground and hoped there would be a rainbow in the morning. In her mind she traced a droplet's path back up into the sky, above which even her imagination could not go.

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