



Her Dark Thicket

BRIAN DOYLE

Many years ago I was a newspaper delivery boy in our small town — five afternoons and two early mornings a week, every day of the year but Christmas, on my bicycle, with a cavernous canvas bag hanging from the handlebars; a bag of such admirable strength and endurance, no matter how many thousands of papers were crammed into it, and rain and snow and mud and launderings inflicted upon it, and gimlet-eyed dogs fended off with it, that I wish I still owned it today, just to be able to pull it out of a drawer occasionally to contemplate its bruised and sinewy dignity and grace.

I collected more stories along my route than there were addresses to reach, for even then, as the son of gifted raconteurs, I was eager to hear tales and details, hints and intimations, chapter and verse, and then happily try to imagine the back-

stories, as I rode home through the dusk, skiffing the oak leaves, wary of cars and owls. And here and there I have written some of those stories, for it seemed to me that there were amazing tales on every street — the family with thirteen pale gaunt

children who never spoke, but sat silently on their immense porch as I opened their mailbox; the old man who paid me in nuts and berries and vegetables, and never once did we discuss the unusual coin of transaction, though I had to cover his bill myself from my small profits; the seemingly rich man who never paid me at all in the years I delivered his paper, though he often promised to next week at the latest, and drove the brightest shining cars in town.

But this morning I tell you a story of the woman on Rugby Road. She seemed very old to me then, though I suspect now that she might have been all of sixty. She lived alone in a small mossy soggy sagging house set back from the street under brooding

fir trees. Her yard was the wildest tangle imaginable; bushes and ferns and saplings had long ago conquered what lawn there might have been, and the narrow stone path to her door was kept vaguely clear only by such deliverymen as me — the milkman, the meter-reader, the mailman, solicitors brave enough to enter her dark thicket, and surely eventually two ambulance-men with their gurney.

I never saw her, though I delivered her paper to her door (she had no mailbox) and often heard her shuffling behind the door. She paid meticulously every week, leaving me exactly the right amount in a small brown envelope inside her screen door, in exactly the same spot every week. The week before Christmas she would add fifty cents to the envelope, but never with a card or a note, as many of my other customers did. In winter I would hear music in the house; in summer I seemed to always hear twice as many birds around her house as around any other, a phenomenon I attributed to the prevalence of bushes and trees in her yard.

Yet finally there came a day when I met her, wholly by chance. Winter; several serious snowfalls, enough to clog the roads and make bicycling my route a terrific slog; and when I came to her

house, near the end of my route, the path to her house was snowed over as deep as my knees. I hesitated, and thought for a moment of jamming her paper in her fence, and riding home, having technically delivered the paper to her property; but I did not even need to imagine my mother's face, let alone her sigh of disappointment, if I did such a wizened thing, so I hauled open her gate, kicking away the drifted snow, and shuffled my way up and down the path until there was at least minimal access and egress, and then I kicked away enough snow on her porch to get to and open her screen

door, and I left the paper in the usual place.

But for once, for the first time, her door opened, and there she was, a small woman in slippers and what seemed to be three

But for once, for the first time, her door opened, and there she was, a small woman in slippers and what seemed to be three or four sweaters.

or four sweaters. She said hello, and handed me a cup of hot water, and said why don't you stand on the mat here for a moment and warm up, and I was glad to do so, as my feet were freezing, and also I was flabbergasted to actually see her face and hear her voice, which was clear and intent, like a grade-school teacher's, a voice that was used to saying things and having them inarguably heard.

I stood there for maybe fifteen minutes, long enough to warm up and have a second cup of hot water — a mug with what seemed like a medical logo of some kind, I noticed. I was worried about the snow on my legs melting into the mat but she said do not be worried about that, that's what mats are for, and it's time to clean it anyway. We keep it clean here as much as possible. Personal predilection and professional training. I am a nurse. Was a nurse. I suppose I still am a nurse. Once a nurse always a nurse. Like the priesthood. You are Catholic? You wear a school uniform sometimes when you deliver.

I said that yes ma'am I was Catholic and went to Catholic school and my father was a Catholic journalist and our whole family was Catholic except our sister who was tending toward Buddhism. She loves to read Thomas Merton, you see.

She says Jesus wasn't Catholic either.

I was a nurse in a Catholic context, she said crisply. For many years. I did my best. I believed that pain and fear can be assuaged and ameliorated by care and prayer. I believed with all my heart. That was our motto, care and prayer. But there came a series of incidents. One child and then several and then too many. A deluge of broken children. I grew exhausted. A darkness of spirit. A weariness beyond measure. I fled the hound of heaven. I huddled, I hid, I retreated, I retired. I retired too early in the eyes of the world. Reduced circumstances. But I could not go on as I had been before. Nor did prayer and supplication provide resurrection. I grew dark, I despaired. You cannot yet know what I mean. You are far too young.

The black dog, ma'am, I said, *madra dubh*. My family is Irish.

At this she was startled and she almost smiled but not quite.

I came to grips with it finally, she said. I learned that work is still prayer even if you do different work than you used to do, than you were trained for, work I loved with all my heart. I loved being a nurse. I am still a nurse. I will always be a nurse. I miss the people. I miss the wins. I miss my companions in the work. I can't bear to go to reunions or Christmas parties. But I am still a nurse. I have the garden out back. I help at the convent. The nuns need more help than they easily admit. Brave women, most of them. Lonely. People think celibacy is the problem but that's not so, it's loneliness. I minister to them informally. You can't stop being a nurse. You're a nurse until the day you die, and on that day you probably are thinking about what you would do for you if you were your nurse. I am sure that will happen to me. Would you like more hot water?

No, ma'am, I said. Thank you though. I had better get back out there.

Thank you for shoveling the walk.

Yes, ma'am.

That was kind of you to do.

Yes, ma'am.

Your mother would be proud.

Yes, ma'am.

Your mother is a nurse?

A teacher, ma'am.

And you have a large family?

Yes, ma'am.

Teacher and mother — she's a nurse.

Yes, ma'am.

My prayers for her and you.

Thank you ma'am, I said, and handed her back the cup, and apologized again for dripping so thoroughly into her mat, and away I went. If I was truly a memorious man, as I sometimes think I am, I would remember if we ever talked again, and if and when she died, and her house was sold, and the new owners cleared away her tangled thicket, telling cheerful stories ever after of the incredible disarray the yard had been left in by the previous owner, but I do not remember any of that. What I do remember is that snowy day and the crisp clear way she said I am a nurse and You can't stop being a nurse, and what I pray this morning is that she was right, all the way up to her dying day.

BRIAN DOYLE was a gifted and prolific writer. He described the mundane and magical events of his own and others' lives in poems, essays, articles and books. As a storyteller, he was long on the delightful details of his characters, short on the punctuation that might isolate them. He also was the editor of the award-winning *Portland Magazine*. Before he died in May 2017, Brian sent us "Her Dark Thicket" and said we could use it when the time seemed right. We thank the Family of Brian Doyle for allowing us to publish it now.



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