

Night before the fair

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Night Before The Fair

By Dermot Sheridan.

To be quite honest, this isn't really a short story. It's just an account of an experience which sticks in my mind, and so, since it has interested me, I'm hoping that it will interest you. There's no plot, and — well, I could make a plot, but that wouldn't be honest, and without honesty, I see no point in writing. I'd better start — but I think it fair to warn you not to expect too much from this experience, just let me tell it to you because I feel that there's something important about it.

I had a job travelling around the small towns of Ireland. I was badly paid, and so I could only afford to stay in cheap lodgings. If any of you have travelled like this you'll know, that on a night before a Cattle Fair, lodgings are hard to find. This particular night, I was in Mullingar, and each place I enquired for lodgings at, just said, «We're full — there's a fair tomorrow.» Even the best hotel was full. I walked around the rainy streets wondering where I'd sleep that night. Then, I went into a bar, and had a drink. A man told me to try a house at the far end of the town, he said, «You'll surely get fixed up there, she's loads of room.»

I found the place. The woman who opened the door was young, untidy, and although her fingers were stained from smoking a lot of cigarettes, she had kind eyes. «I've got one bed, but you'll have to share a room with a double bed in it. Two others are sleeping there.» I agreed to stay, and thought, «They'll be cattle dealers and after tonight, I'll have the room to myself.»

The bedroom was much larger than I expected, and it contained a single and a double bed. I unpacked some of my things and laid out my pyjamas on the single bed. Then I looked through the big cracked window. In the distance I could see the last dregs of daylight caught on the surface of the lake. I stood there thinking of — oh just those thoughts that seem as grey as the winter landscape.

After tea, I wandered around the town. I had nowhere to go, but I just walked and walked, out of the town, stopping sometimes to look into the lighted windows where families sat around fires, unaware of the world outside their own circle. It made me more lonely. The dark road led me nowhere, yet I walked, hoping that perhaps accidentally, I might meet someone whose lonely eyes would look into mine. But, there was no one. I thought as I walked, that somewhere on some other lonely road another like myself would be wandering; but we'd never meet.

I got back into the town, wishing I had spent the time in a pub. At least I could have pretended that I was *with* people. It was eleven o'clock, the town was deserted except for an occasional straggler. Sometimes, a face would look into mine, the eyes would smile, and the mouth murmur, «Goodnight».

I would answer, then turn my head and watch, hoping their head would turn back to me, and we could just stop and talk. But all that happened was I'd see the dark shapes only as moving shadows, disappearing into doors, or around corners.

There was a glass of milk waiting for me. I drank it, and then went upstairs to bed.

When I got into the bedroom I switched on the light. At once, I saw a big bald headed man lying in the double bed. Beside him, was another head. It was covered with black curly hair, and the face was young. As the light came on, the boy's eyes opened quickly, then shut. Although he did it suddenly I had just time to see that look in the eyes. It reminded me of the look you'd see on a calf beside its mother, when the cattle are being sold at the Fair. It's as if it knows its childhood is over, and now it must be alone.

I began to undress. I looked across at the sleeping man and boy. The man's arms were around the boy, and the boy's head was leaning on the man's cheek. I wondered — were they father and son?

Lying in bed, I began thinking how nice it would be to be a father. Then I heard whispering, the boy was saying, «Joe — Joe — I'll write to you, I promise.»

«Yes — yes — don't forget», said an older voice.

«And you'll come over in three months won't you?»

«I might. What price do you think we'll get for the cow?»

«Joe, Joe — do you? Do you — really?»

«Sure I do — more than anyone else in the world?»

«Well hold me close to you . . . closer . . . closer . . . closer . . .»

I heard no more, for the bedroom window shook with the wind. I thought of Mullingar, exposed in the flat plain of the centre of Ireland. The wind raged, and cried at the windows like some unhappy soul lost in the night. It ran searching for shelter over the plain — the bare winter trees couldn't give shelter nor the lake overflowed with heavy rains. And into my mind flowed the thought of the Fair, next day, and how the calves would be sold. Then I must have slept for the next thing I remembered was the window framing a red patch of sky, and the boy and the old man were talking aloud.

They were lying in bed, and the boy was saying, «If you came on to Dublin with me, we could have another night together.»

«Hush», said the older man, «that fella in the single bed'll hear us.»

«He's asleep» said the boy, and yet, he lowered his voice to say, «You get up first and hand me my shirt.»

«No, you get mine», said the older man.

«All right» and the boy jumped out of bed. His naked body was well shaped, and he stood for a second looking out through the window. Then he turned around and faced me. My eyes were half closed, and the corner of the room where I was, was dark. He stood quite still, and then the older man called.

«Brian . . . Brian — come back into bed for a few minutes.»

But the boy didn't move. Instead, he lowered his head, and I heard him sigh deeply. The next moment, the older man was standing beside him, holding him in his arms.

«I love you, Brian . . . love you . . . don't you believe me . . .?»

But the boy said nothing, only held himself close to the older body.

«You know I can't come on to Dublin with you, don't you? Don't you, Brian . . . We'd have to say goodbye there just the same as here. And people would suspect us . . . When you get to London, I'll be coming to you, and we'll live together for always . . . Now Brian — now Brian . . . Well, say something!»

The boy without moving his body sighed and said quietly, «You'll forget me — there's others you like.»

«No one — no one in the world but you, Brian.»

«How about Jimmy . . . you went away with him once . . .»

«That was different. He's not like us.»

«And there was that woman. Joe . . . Joe . . . please don't ever fall in love with anyone else will you?»

«Don't be silly — how could I? Now come on, let's get dressed.»

They began dressing. The boy looked quite happy as he combed his hair, and he even began to hum a tune to himself. Then, at the last moment he took the older man in his arms and began to cry. The older man told him to be quiet, he would waken me up . . . Then, just before they left the room they stood close together. I knew they were kissing but I didn't watch them. From the street below came the sound of the cattle, the calves were lowing, and I kept my eyes closed to forget the cruelty of the world — but I couldn't for it was there in my own mind too.

That night when I went up to bed, I touched the sheets on the double bed, I touched the pillow and I stood by the window glad that I had the room to myself. But I was mistaken. I had been asleep when the light was switched on and in came the older man.

«I'm staying an extra night» he said, «I missed the bus home.» He began to undress. He offered me a cigarette, and as he struck a match, he touched my hand, and looked into my eyes. I avoided his look.

The light was out, and I heard him moving around in the double bed. He called out to me, «It's terrible cold isn't it?»

«Yes,» I answered.

«I'm freezing in here. Why don't you come over, we'd be warmer together.»

I didn't answer at once. I thought of the boy, on the way to England, and already — already he was being deceived.

«I'd rather sleep alone», I said. And as I said it, I thought of the boy. Had it been him alone in the double bed, maybe I'd not mind the deception. Yes, I wasn't being good or kind — just selfish.

The Swimming Pool

by O. F. Simpson.

Our invitations to the official luncheon had been put in vague terms: «The Mayor and Chamber of Commerce of Overby request the pleasure of the company of Mr and Mrs James Montfort to luncheon on September 15th 1957. Mr Derek Ironside O.B.E., M.C. will speak on a project of