

The Hollow Morn

Dublin 1915

The young Connal walked beside his mother, careful with every step over the slick cobbles of a January morning. Rain had darkened the streets like ink spilled over the city's bones, pooling in the hollows between stones. Cold rose from the wet soles of his boots, settling deep into his spine, heavier with each tentative step. Their breath came out in pale clouds, vanishing almost before it had form. He brushed the edge of her marsh-green, moss-streaked shawl— Eileen, his mother, a fragile anchor against the weight of the waking city. Between them stirred something unnamed: a ripple of dread threading the quiet, faint but insistent, pressing against him, patient and absolute, marking the hour with unease yet to be understood.

Dublin was not yet awake. It lingered in that fragile hour between night and morning, when the lamps dimmed and day had not yet found the courage to rise. The Liffey wound past shadowed bridges and empty streets, black and slow, glinting along its worn paths. Broken glimpses of the waking world caught in its surface — a slate roof, a crooked chimney, a shuttered window, a strip of pale sky. And carried them away, without mercy. The waters whispered in a distant voice. Bleak, silent. Remembering mornings before sorrow had settled into the streets, before despair had learned the names of those who walked them.

Their footsteps echoed against the stone, mingling with the distant clatter of carts, the iron cry of wheels, and the dull shudder of a tram, as the city's desolate sounds began to stir. Rain blurred the streetlamps, turning reflections into shifting shapes that flickered across the wet lanes like ghosts unwilling to leave. A grey shroud drifted up from the river, curling between streets, softening doorways, walls and corners, leaving the city half-veiled, indistinct, caught between waking and lingering sleep.

Far away, a bell rang — sharp, lonely — and then dissolved into the sea-smoke. Another faint clang answered somewhere beyond the rooftops. Perhaps St. Michan's. Perhaps nowhere at all. Slow, muffled, almost underwater. The sound drifted through Connal like a memory from before grief had claimed his family. Something like Deirdre's lament mourned beneath the veil of ashen hair, fragile and distant. Hushed like a mother breathing in quiet. It faded before he could seize it.

Eileen walked close beside him, her hands whispering with the faint scent of peat smoke and boiled tea, gripping his sleeve. He felt her trembling beneath the dark wool shawl before he

allowed himself to look, and knew that today the city would weigh which names would survive and which would vanish. Judgment hung in the hoary folds of the air — slow, certain, and unyielding.

She moved with care, placing one foot before the other, swallowing prayers she did not speak, filling the silence where his father's name should have been. Her hand found his arm, barely warm, achingly alive. He felt the pulse at her wrist. She was steady, present in the smallest motions, yet even her love could not halt what waited beyond the mist. The cold letters. The wings of abyss. The sentence that had already begun to fall.

He remembered his father's hands. Strong hands. Patient hands. Hands that had built ships and sent grain across seas, whose names Connal had never cared to learn. Hands that steadied him as a child. Hands that might soon be gone from the world.

And with that memory, his father's voice neared, low beside the river, steady as stone:

“Níor gabh a leithéid de chroí i bhfad.” - No heart like this will ever be taken.

The words stung him more than the January breeze. He did not know whether he believed it. He did not know whether belief mattered anymore.

The Liffey still ran like a dark ribbon through the quays. Steam coiled above the river, soft and slow. The bells faded. Somewhere above them, unseen wings loomed, patient, immense.

And the waiting went on. Not ending. Not for him. Not for his mother.

Not for anyone.

The streets smelled of coal smoke, wet ash, horse dung — and beneath it all something colder, metallic almost: iron, fear, the long taste of waiting.

Dublin breathed around them.

Not sleeping.

Not waking.

Listening.

Behind shuttered doors, families huddled in narrow rooms, sharing what little warmth the night had left. Behind curtained windows, pale faces may have watched them pass, then vanished into shadow. The city had learned the discipline of silence. It held misery indoors. It let the poor disappear into the morning mist. It let boots pass. It let bells ring. It let men be taken.

“All say he is guilty,” his mother whispered, her voice scarcely rising above the rain. “But in their hearts they know he is innocent. He only helped. He only tried to protect people.”

Connal wanted to believe her.

More than that — he wanted the world itself to bend toward the truth of what she had said. He wanted truth to be simple and clean, like bread broken for the hungry, like a hand held out in mercy, like a door opened to a man pursued.

But the morning was not clean.

And the water flowed... dark as iron, slow and sullen. The stones underfoot were slick and cold. And somewhere ahead the courthouse waited, stern and blind, with its soldiers, its doors, its polished language of paper, judgment, sentence.

Still, beneath it all, something here went on beating: Dublin moving quietly, stubbornly, carrying on despite the burden of poverty, disease, and empire. A heartbeat under the stones. Every shuttered door, every narrow alley whispered of lives held too close. Every window held its private sore: cramped rooms, faces pale from cold, fevered beds, hollow-eyed children, women counting coins by candlelight, men with collars turned up against the winter wind — voices muted to whispers. Every sound — a footstep, a clatter, a distant laugh swallowed quickly — carried both vitality and doom, as though the city itself had learned to breathe with heaviness folded deep into its lungs.

Then Connal felt it. The wings. Vast, black wings stretching beyond sight above and behind them.

Abyss.

Not real. Not entirely.

And yet undeniable.

A shadow wide enough to cover the river, the roofs, the pale sky. A presence moved with them through the lavender-grey shroud, drawn from streets, water, smoke — from the very breath of the city. A shiver ran through him as his mother pressed close, her body taut with unease. Her fear brushed against him, cold and urgent, and a shadow of his own stirred in reply, tentative, unnamed.

For one terrible moment he could not tell what the abyssal wings belonged to.

Death. Memory. God. Empire.

Or perhaps to that dark thing born inside a boy when he first understands that the world can take and take, and never answer.

The brume thickened, drawing a silvery veil over gas lamps, tramlines, shopfront blinds, and the few hurried figures moving against the piercing gale - clerks, jarveys and cabmen, women and men. They appeared and vanished again, shoulders bent, faces lowered, each carrying some private burden through the mist-shrouded awakening, each already half-erased by the city that had made them.

The ashen pall lifted just enough to reveal the courthouse ahead, looming through a gossamer veil. Its granite face was dark with rain. Stern. Silent. Indifferent to the lives that passed beneath it. Connal felt the stillness of the city gather around him, laden with the threat of what awaited. His mother stayed close, her shoulder brushing his, her presence warm, quivering against the chill.

The dome of the Four Courts rose pale through the morning gloom, grand and useless as a prayer carved in stone. Heavy and austere, without mercy. Its steps and kerbs glistened with river-wash. Soldiers stood at the entrance in dark uniforms, rifles held still, boots planted with the stiff certainty of men guarding doors they did not own, enforcing judgments they had never questioned.

Connal's mother drew him nearer. Her lips moved again, but no prayer came. Only breath. Fragile breath. Frightened breath. The kind that comes when hope is still alive but already wounded, bleeding quietly where no one could see.

The bells had stopped ringing ... Or perhaps they had never rung at all ...

Connal braced himself against the courthouse wall. The stone bit cold through his coat. Rain ran down the facade, pooling in the cracks before sliding to the street. The air hung heavy with damp slate, leather, ink, and foreboding.

Somewhere behind the walls, behind shuttered doors, something had already been taken. He did not need to see it to know. A name drifted through the streets like smoke, mist folding into the cobbles, the heft of loss settling slow and certain through the mizzle. Connal felt it keenly. His father had been led away hours ago, yet it felt as if the world itself had slowed, caught in the long, unyielding hours, languishing in limbo.

No flourish. No final cry. No scene for the city to remember. Only a man taken past the eyes of Dublin, his shoulders straight, his name already beginning to move from mouth to mouth in whispers.

Aydun Bawn.

Connal did not say it. He would not have dared. Yet the name burned inside him all the same, small and searing.

His mother stood near the corner, frail and rigid beneath her damp shawl. Her hands trembled around a letter softened by long night and tears. Her eyes were wide, fixed on nothing. Her lips moved once, twice, as though prayer had risen to them and failed to become sound.

Connal said nothing either.

Words were useless here. Words belonged to clerks and soldiers. To judges. To notices nailed to doors. To men who folded other men's lives into paper and sent them away like driftwood on a river.

Around them the crowd shifted like smoke. Faces half-hidden beneath scarves and caps. Eyes bright with curiosity, pity, unease. Or the careful emptiness of those who had learned not to see too much. A few glanced at Connal — barely a boy, already remade by a morning that would not be forgotten. Others looked away at once.

Better not to look. Better not to know.

Better to keep one's own affliction buttoned tight beneath the coat and pass on.

The courthouse doors opened with a hollow metallic clang.

A soldier's voice threaded through the crowd:

"Out. Step aside."

They did not notice the hour pass, drifting among the crowd in the packed entryway, carried by the slow swell of murmurs and the quiet shuffle of latent angst.

Then, through the dark movement of uniforms and wet shoulders, a clerk appeared. Connal knew him. His mother knew him too. A small man, hurried, pale with nerves, eyes darting toward the soldiers, as if even kindness had become punishable.

For one moment, because he carried a bundle, because he knew their names, because he had come close to them, Connal mistook him for hope.

"Eileen," he whispered, steady and unyielding. "The notice will reach you by my hand. Return home at once, and wait."

His voice dropped lower.

"Soon. The decision... has been made."

The words did not strike at once. They entered quietly, almost politely, and then began to gather in Connal's chest from within.

The clerk was already retreating. His narrow figure blurred into the crowd and disappeared among dark coats, wet boots, rifles, orders — swallowed by the rhythm of the court.

Connal felt the approaching terror of the words, and the wings shifted closer — immense, black, looming above their heads. His mother's fingers dug into his sleeve, and he felt her fear pass into him, his own rising to meet it, until he could no longer tell where hers ended and his began.

Hope had not died yet.

That was the cruelty of it.

It still breathed between them, small and terrified, as they stepped where they were told to step.

An indifferent courthouse gave them nothing, its halls echoing as soldiers moved with exact, mechanical gestures — pointing, blocking, turning aside anyone in their path. Their boots struck the floor with a strange cadence older than any of them. Orders travelled from mouth to mouth, clipped and bloodless.

Connal's father was nowhere.

And because he was nowhere, he was everywhere.

In the hollow of the corridor.

In the space beside his mother.

In the silence after every command.

Eileen cradled her hand to her chest, drawing a long, shuddering breath through air inside the building that had suddenly grown too thick to swallow.

A soldier stepped forward.

“This way. Out.”

His eyes did not rest on them. His voice held no anger, no pity. Only the dull efficiency of a man performing a task he had been given and had never thought to question.

She stepped forward, hesitant, the soles of her boots cold on the granite floor, each movement a silent answer to the soldier's command.

They obeyed.

Each step carried the slow, grinding echo of something already decided. The corridor stretched endless, grey and narrow, the walls leaning inward with the echo of boots, murmured names, suppressed weeping. One name was absent from all of it, and because no one said it, it became louder than the bells, louder than the void beyond the doors, louder than the dark tide gathering outside.

Aydun Bawn.

The doors opened.

The cold breath of rain rushed toward them swift as exhaled air.

Another group of soldiers moved them down the steps, not roughly, not gently, but with that firm, unyielding pressure by which power pretends it is only order. The stone was slick beneath their feet. His mother wavered. Connal steadied her by the shoulder, feeling the shudder run through her as if the cold had entered her bones.

For a moment they lingered there, clinging to one another in the frost.

The building exhaled in a long, quiet sigh, dark and slow, as though it too had seen men taken and had long ago stopped asking why.

Connal looked back at the courthouse.

He imagined his father somewhere inside its stone memory — shoulders straight, face set in quiet resolve, already carried beyond reach, already fading into walls, ledgers, orders, locked rooms. Gone before they could speak. Gone before anyone had allowed them the mercy of farewell.

For a fleeting instant, he thought he saw his father's eyes, still and steady behind the windows, catching the dim light like a reflection in wet glass. The gaze met his, and then it was gone, swallowed by shade and stone.

Then everything blurred: the deluge, boots striking wet stone, his mother's face, the darkened panes. Perhaps it was the weather. Perhaps it was tears.

Connal's hand steadied her as they moved through the soaked avenues, step by step, swallowed by rain and gloom. Wordless. The fog swirled around them, whispering of deeds done and those still to come.

Every splash beneath their boots sounded like warning.

Each shuttered window held its gaze.

And Dublin breathed on around them — alive with distant wheels, muted voices, coal smoke, hunger, history — carrying in its narrow streets the memory of things no bell could undo.

Connal's mother took his hand and brought it to her heart. Her warmth threaded through the worn wool of her shawl, small but insistent, as though she were trying to fasten him to the earth by the simple force of her heartbeat.

“Creid i do chroí, a mhic,” she murmured. “Is ann atá ár neart sa dorchadas”

Believe in your heart, my son. It is our strength in the darkness.

He looked at her then — truly looked — and saw the deep dread beneath the strength she had mustered for him. He saw the plaintive eyes, the way she held herself upright by will alone.

She cupped his face in both hands. Her thumbs moved once across his cheeks, as if to remember the shape of him before the world changed again.

“Feel it,” she said softly. “Do not let them steal what is inside you.”

Ahead, the street unraveled into the grey hush of hollow morn. Somewhere beyond it, their small flat waited: narrow, dim, familiar. A place that might give shelter for a few moments, though not peace. No answers. No comfort. Only the breakable warmth of being near each other while they still could.

The letter had not yet come.

The notice.

The fate.

The paper that would make death official.

They walked on, entwined against the chill, step by slow step through the soaked avenues, carrying the burden of the silent pause with them. Behind them, the darkness tightened, and the world had already shifted before they reached home.

The lane to their building was narrow and slick with damp. Smoke and years had blackened the walls. Ice lay in the broken places of the stone, holding the dim light like fragile, useless mirrors. Above them, frozen laundry hung heavy between windows: pale shirts, dark skirts, linen faded by weather. Drooping in the grey air like surrendered flags.

No one called out.

No neighbour leaned from a sill.

The house understood already. The whole street understood, hiding it behind shut doors.

Connal helped his mother up the shallow steps. She moved slowly now, the walk from the courthouse having leeched something from her bones. At the door she stopped with one hand on the frame and the other still holding his.

For a moment she did not go in.

She only listened.

Inside, the abode lay in muted gloom. A small table. Three chairs. The kettle cold on the grate. His father's coat still hung from the peg by the door, darkened at the shoulders, keeping the shape of him more faithfully than memory could.

Connal saw it and looked away.

His mother did not.

She crossed to it and touched the sleeve. Smoothed it once with her fingertips. Then let her hand fall.

No words.

There were too many words in the world already.

Guilty.

Sentence.

Notice.

Treason.

Words in ink. Words in mouths. Words borne by clerks and soldiers. Words that entered a home and emptied it.

His mother sat at the table. Connal stood by the window and watched the street blur beyond the glass. Rain and sleet tapped softly at the pane. Not hard. Not cruel. Only steady, as if the morning had draped itself over its desolation and meant to keep it.

They waited.

A cart passed below.

Then silence.

A footstep on the stair.

His mother lifted her head.

Another footstep.

Connal felt his chest tighten. The darkness that had withdrawn for a brief while in the poor warmth of the chamber opened again behind him. He did not turn. He knew they were there — by the sudden cold at the back of his neck, by the way the little enclosure drew inward, smaller, darker, listening.

The knock came softly.

Not the knock of a friend. Not the knock of someone asking for shelter or bread.

It was careful. Official. Almost ashamed.

His mother rose too quickly and caught the edge of the table. Connal drew close before she could move.

For one strange second he thought: *If I do not open it, it cannot enter.*

If the door stayed closed, his father was still alive somewhere beyond it.

Walking. Breathing. Waiting to come home.

A foolish thought.

A child's thought.

But it held him for that one second, bright and desperate as a match struck against the rime.

The knock came again.

Connal opened the door.

The clerk stood there, wet hat in hands, the dull sheen gleaming on his coat. The same clerk from the courthouse. The same narrow face. The same restless eyes that could not linger on theirs.

“Eileen,” he let her name escape, barely audible. And yet it shattered the room like a cup dropped on stone.

He held out the folded notice.

No one took it.

The clerk swallowed.

“I am sorry.”

Then the room seemed to shift. Nothing stirred, and yet everything began to tilt and turn: the coat on the peg, the cold kettle, the table, the window, the brittle patter of sleet on glass, the small square of morning light on the floor. All of it drew back from them; the world stepped away.

At last, Eileen took the letter. Her fingers were steady now as she unfolded it. That stillness frightened Connal more than trembling ever could: a hand too still, a face too pale, a silence deeper than any parlour should hold.

Her eyes moved once across the page.

Then again.

Slowly. Carefully. As if reading might alter the words. As if the burdened soul could plead with ink. As if somewhere in the hard black letters, mercy hid — a pause, a reprieve, one small human mistake.

Connal watched her face.

He knew before she spoke.

Outside, Dublin stirred in quiet rhythm.

A bell clanged somewhere on the tramlines, distant and indifferent. Water trickled along the stone gutters. A door clicked shut further down the street. And elsewhere, in neat uniforms, men carried out sentences penned by others, far from the frost and shadowed corridors.

His mother lowered the paper.

For a long moment she said nothing.

Then, almost calmly, she whispered:

“No.”

A small word. A child’s word. A mother’s word. A word set against empire, against ink, against judgment, against death itself.

“No.”

Connal’s hand went out to her, but she moved past him, her gaze gone beyond the room. She went to the coat by the door, took it from the peg, and buried her face in it.

Only then did the sound come.

Not a cry. Not yet. Something smaller. Something broken loose from a place so deep inside her, older than her body, older than the room, older than Éire itself. First a breath. Then another. Then the beginning of a quiet moan that would not yet allow itself to be heard.

Connal stood frozen.

The clerk remained at the threshold, soaked and silent. He was no messenger of hope now. Only a man who had brought the end into their home and did not know where to put his hands.

Above them, unseen but near, the abyss folded around the room.

Connal slipped the paper gently from his mother's slack hand and unfolded it with trembling fingers.

The ink lay black and absolute upon the page.

The words were ordinary words. Words he had seen before, printed and neutral - Court. Sentence. Death. Authority. Order. But here, in this room, with his father's coat held to his mother's face, they became something else. They cut the air. They struck the walls. They made the morning final.

He read aloud, though his voice barely belonged to him:

“HEADQUARTERS, IRISH COMMAND. DUBLIN. JANUARY 1915.

NOTICE OF SENTENCE.

The prisoner Aydun Bawn, having been tried by Field General Court-Martial for giving aid and comfort to persons engaged in armed rebellion against His Majesty's Forces, has been found guilty.

The Court has passed sentence of death.

The sentence has been duly confirmed by the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief.

The sentence is to be carried out by firing party in accordance with the hour and place set forth by the Military Authority.

By Order, Headquarters, Irish Command, Dublin.”

The words remained after his voice ended.

They hung in the room, dark and heavy. Connal's mouth went dry. The notice throbbed in his hands, as though it had its own heart — not a human heart, not his father's heart, but some cold official heartbeat made of letters, seal, command.

For a moment, nothing existed but that paper. Not the table. Not the kettle. Not the damned rain. Not the clerk in the doorway. Not even his mother kneeling by the coat.

Only the sentence.

Then horror came into him all at once. It entered his bones. It entered the floorboards beneath his feet. It entered the air above his head, where the brooding wings spread above him, vast and indifferent, into the abyss.

A sound rose from the walls, long and keening, a Gaelic plaint curling around the corners of the room, lifting, spinning — anguish, desolation, silent woe, all at once.

Bás, bás, bás ... Níl a dhóchas... Níl...

Death. Death. Death.

The word threaded through the walls themselves, low at first, then rising. A keening began somewhere beyond hearing, or inside the room, or inside his mother's body. Connal could not tell. It curled through the corners, climbed the damp plaster, and coiled beneath the ceiling.

Níl aon dóchas ann.

No hope.

Níl. Níl.

No. No.

His mother sank fully to her knees, cradling the coat in her arms. Her shoulders moved once. Then again. The sound that came from her was muffled, but it filled the room more completely than any scream could have done.

He could not approach. He could not move.

The notice shook in his hands, the words blurring, except for one line, black and merciless:

The sentence is to be carried out by firing party.

A firing party. Men with rifles. Men who would rise at an appointed hour. Men who would stand where they were told to stand. Men who would lift their weapons because a paper had instructed them to do so. Men who would go on breathing afterwards.

“No reprieve,” he whispered.

The words sounded strange in his mouth, too old for him, too final.

The clerk lowered his eyes. That was answer enough. He stepped back, almost silently, careful even of the sound his boots might make. The door remained open behind him. Through it came the frost-thin light of Dublin morning.

The room drew inward, the walls seeming to lean closer. The window dimmed, the light weakening. Rain tapped and tapped and tapped at the glass, relentless, patient as time itself. Connal felt it all swell and roar in his ears, a hollow ringing that left him nearly deaf to everything else.

Despair and hopelessness sank into every corner, filling the ceiling, blanketing everything. The room was alive with them, and Connal's mind struggled to hold the edges of it all — the sound, the dark, the cold, the knowledge, the fear — as though the world had gone liquid and he were adrift within it.

His father was alive somewhere.

That was the worst of it.

Alive now.

Perhaps standing. Perhaps sitting. Perhaps caught in some silent reckoning. Perhaps thinking of them. Alive — and already taken by death because men in warmer rooms had written it down.

“A Mháthair,” Connal breathed, as if the air itself resisted him.

But she did not lift her head. The mournful strain moved through her now, deeper than words, older than language. It was grief. It was rage. It was disbelief. It was the sound of a woman who had held hope in both hands and watched it turn to ash.

Connal could not move. Could not speak. Could not breathe. Every heartbeat struck loud, a drum of terror and fury. The blackness hovered, immense and indifferent. The burden of Empire, his father's absence, his mother's anguish — all of it came down upon him at once.

Bás ag teacht.

Death coming.

The words passed through him like cold iron.

Official. Certain. Without mercy.

The paper bent in his hands.

Outside, Dublin lay hushed beneath the January mist.

Rain moved softly over the glass, line after line, as though the city were writing its sorrow where no hand could stop it.

And in the small room, before any rifle had been raised, something had already been executed.

Hope.

The room waited with him.

And so did the city.