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A knock on the door

by Rosalyn Hurst

It was a distant cousin who had lent him the keys of the cottage, up in the hidden glen in the Galtee mountains. He knew the place from childhood when they visited old Tommy Keating, a bachelor like himself. When Tommy died no one in the family was keen to take it over, and, with the Irish dislike of second hand houses, no buyer ever showed interest.

He had fled from Belfast using the old military road that ran down the spine of Ireland, straight and now little used. It by passed quietly, unobtrusively, and occasionally deviously the towns and cities along the way, faster to the knowing motorist than the dangers, the cameras of the motorways.

He stopped in the little town where his mother had come from and where she had returned to die a few years ago. In the supermarket, a voice rang out, 'Well, is it great to see you, I suppose you are doing a visit to you dear old mother's grave, God bless you,' and he looked with some horror, not at the speaker but the man beside her who was looking at growing recognition, who unusually for this town kept silent. Panicking, grabbing the shopping and running to the car, he drove out of town and up the long road into the glen.

Evening, the long summer evenings, and living so many years in the city where the night time sounds were so different, he was more alert.

Tap, tap, tap, and then a scurrying sound. He crept near the window and in the dying light he saw a squirrel giving the alarm in the nearby rowan, as a deer wandered by, unused to an occupant in the cottage running his antlers against a tree. Swish, swish, the movement of the branches knocking against the roof. These natural sounds reassuring, for who could know about this place he was safe but oh so lonely.

He never got used to the loneliness. When he first was qualified, he took a job as a ship's doctor and no one ever commented that he was gay. He had some lovely but very short-term relationships. Following his mother's advice he returned to Ireland and took further qualifications and this in fact was what put him in danger. He had managed to keep his personal life hidden but could not avoid giving testimony in a murder trial which resulted in conviction with a man with known IRA connections. And he had been informed the "boys" in Belfast were out to get him.

Tap and tap again this time more persistent, he looked wildly around for cover, then saw the jackdaw at the window. Had this old bird been a pet of old Tommy? And just as he was laughing with relief and starting to unpack his things, he saw the bird had flown off. Aware of the growing silence knew the deer and the squirrels had gone for there were the lights of a car bumping it way up the borreen.

He knew it would happen, it was in the tradition, a knock at the door, nothing could be done, resignation, impossible to resist and just, hope the death was clean and quick, not knee capping, at least he had no family that could be harmed.

He sat looking at the door. One car door slam, unusual, only one person then or was the other waiting to make a quick get away? The door handle moved and the door opened, as he feared the guy in the supermarket.

'Be still, he said, 'this is no knock on the door. I have come to tell you that you're safe here. The boys in the town knew your old mother and wasn't she a great girl when she was young. We'd never let those gobshites in Belfast get their hands on you, brave fella for your stand there at the trial. We'll watch your back.'

And for once, Frank knew he was safe, he had friends, for he had come home but then got to wondering what his mother had done as a young girl.