

The Time Machine

by MaryPat Campbell

The yeasty smell of the Guinness brewery catches my nostrils, then makes its way up into my brain. My memory sparks into life as I walk up through the Liberties, in Dublin City. If the wind is blowing up river there is no escaping it. The familiar stink takes me back, not to my childhood but to my weekly visits to my little sister up in the madhouse back in the 70s.

Good old Dean Swift, who saw the need for such a place back in the dark ages, so dark he christened the place 'the house of fools and mad'. My little sister was neither foolish or mad but she was a bit strange.

She used to watch for the seagulls who landed on top of the chimney across the road from our house, convinced every time she saw one that it was the same one every time. It soothed her, for a while, to think it was the same gull who came back time and time again to keep watch with her, to join her in a kind of vigil, to keep all the mad and bad things away.

When she was a little girl she would rock herself to sleep chanting out all our names, one by one. And when she came to the end of all six of us she would start all over again, as if summoning us to her bedside to keep another sort of vigil with her as her bedtime in the dark winter evenings turned to night.

She was secretive and kept old bits of stuff in the upturned orange box by her bed. The orange boxes that I used to feel ashamed of, painted by our mother with a dark wood stain and rigged up with a curtain suspended from a wire across the top. A place for my sister to keep her own special things in.

Being the last one of our big family of six, she had no other private place to dream herself into being. Those old converted orange boxes had an air of make-do-and-mend, but sturdy at the same time and spoke of our mother's resourcefulness in looking after us all.

What put my sister in the mad house was that she ran away and was nowhere to be found for days on end. Until a priest's housekeeper found her hunkered down behind the presbytery, silent and shivering and unable, or unwilling, to speak. Eventually they discovered who she was, and delivered her home to us. Everyone was relieved although puzzled and we all fussed over her, put her to bed, fed her warm soup and the doctor was called. But she never said a word. This went on for weeks, as if she had already left herself behind and had gone off somewhere else.

The doctor was called again, and this time he said she should be admitted to St. Patrick's Hospital, on the edge of The Liberties, a place that people said was inhabited by the ghost of the Dean himself, to see if the doctors could fathom what had happened, and how they might fix her.

They tried all sorts of things, and when talking didn't work they tried medicine. And when that didn't work they tried electricity. The kind they used to put through peoples' brains to shock them back into some kind of reality. I don't know how many doses of it they gave her, she was a bit vague and secretive about that too.

To me, her big brother, it all sounded Dickensian and barbaric, in what was supposed to be the bright modern age of the 1970s. Why didn't I know about it at the time, I asked myself, as I turned the corner at the top end of Thomas Street, and saw for the umpteenth time, the tall pillars and entrance gates to the hospital.

She told me some of this many years later after she had recovered enough to come out, and managed to fend for herself in the big world. She trained as a dressmaker, landed herself a good job in the costume department of the Abbey Theatre, and became something of a celebrity there. She is still secretive and a bit strange, but she's still my little sister and I will look out for her as best I can, until I can't anymore.