

## Remembering

by Stuart Finegan

Val Ryan lay motionless in bed staring at the ceiling. He'd been awake for a while. On the far side of the bed the wireless was barely audible and in the deathly silence he could just about hear the presenter talk about the upcoming radio programmes later that morning. Sandra was curled up beside him. She was a deep sleeper. The remote location of their home had the advantage of no external noise and dark nights unpolluted by streets lights.

Just as the five-o clock news came on the radio he carefully lifted the duvet and climbed out of bed. Tip-toeing across the darkened room he lifted his dressing gown off the door peg, then gingerly released the latch. Sandra didn't move.

Stepping into the hallway he was greeted by a sharp morning chill. A cold sharp shock ran up his body as the soles of his bare feet touched the stone floor and for a moment he cursed the figurine on the cross in front of him. He was too superstitious to remove it, while his father had warned him some years before that it would bring bad luck on the house if he did. He had his morning routine and before heading into the kitchen, he paid a visit to the bathroom. This was the coldest room in the house. It was one of the original rooms that survived the renovation works when they had inherited the house some years previously. With its stone floors and walls Val didn't hang around long or any morning during this year's bitterly cold winter.

The kitchen was at the far end of the house. South Facing with large sash windows the views stretched far across towards the Sugar Loaf mountain and the Brosna river. But only on a good day. A welcome heat greeted Val as the door opened. The dogs didn't stir. First things first. Fill the kettle with fresh water and flick the switch. Turn on the radio, then tend to the fire. There was still some life in last night's embers. Rake out the ashes and lovely place new fresh sods of dirt brown turf into its heart. It won't be long until she's alive and the kitchen warms up. On the table last night's evening paper was folded carefully on page fifteen, it was waiting for him. He had to finish the cryptic crossword. Sandra always started it but left the final few questions for Val to finish.

"Jesus I'm sure she does this on purpose, who actually knows anything about archaeology?"

On the table under a tea-towel a homemade loaf of brown bread. Golden butter and a pot of his own Jam patiently awaited their time. Gripping the hard crust with one hand while the other dragged a sharp rugged blade back and forth, carefully cut slices fell on top of each other.

Two then three, enough for now. Sandra's yellow teapot was always on the top shelf. A small drop of boiling water filled its base and after swirling it around a few times to warm it up, Val dropped in the tea bags, replaced the lid and placed it in the centre of the table. Two cups, two knives and two small plates set the scene. He had a few hours alone before the dogs were due their walk.

On this particular Tuesday morning the rain was relentless. Grey dirty clouds blanketed the sky. At this time of the day, few words were spoken. Upon entering the kitchen Sandra lovingly placed her hand on Val's shoulder as she walked over to greet the dogs now sat bolt upright in their basket. As the kettle was re-boiled, a knife smeared in butter glided over her homemade bread.

"Have you finished?"

"You left me the ones you know I can't answer."

"Call it out."

"What's the point, you know the answer anyway, just fill in the words."

Later that morning and dressed suitably for the weather Val headed out across the fields. Up ahead the dogs excitably ran around in circles. Splashes of brown mud covered their once clean white coats, but they didn't care. Horizontal rain blew hard across the horizon, this wasn't what was forecast.

By the time he got home the rain had finally stopped. A late morning break in the clouds brought a welcome ray of cold winter sunshine. He wanted to put his arms around her and share the soaking from the rain that covered him, like he always did. Then smile and laugh out loud as she shouted at him and called him every name under the sun. But today, like yesterday and the time before Val had a darkness that seemed to stand beside him. Like an acquaintance that would not go away nor did he want her to.