

# **Wandering Soul**

By Jack Lambert

It's not a 'mist' or a 'fog', not round here. Once maybe, but these folk know something more. The old ones, what few are left, still whisper the old name: 'An t-Anam Caite', the 'Wandering Soul'. We know what fog is, and what I describe to you now, this isn't it. Fog doesn't make the hairs on your arms stand on end. Fog doesn't make the water in the stream at your feet turn silent. This is a different beast that even Mother Nature fears. She did not create it. She cannot control it. The birds go quiet. The roots of the oak in the ground begin to weep. You daren't whistle. You daren't take a step. You daren't breathe. The children in the street skip along to the tunes they've heard:

“Once it knows you, there's nothing to be done.

You cannot hide, and you dare not run.

It creeps in through the floorboards, along the ceiling overhead.

It hides inside the darkness, in the gaps beneath your bed.”

There's this story they tell, about a lad who moved here from County Kildare. His name's long been lost, but they say he was scrawny and pale, sixteen or seventeen years old with a head of straw-coloured hair and eyes large and blue. He stayed in a cabin near the river where the water narrows, although now all that's left are piles of rotten wood and mud. They say he was a quiet sort, calm and gentle. Never raised his voice, never sought trouble. He tried to get on with folk, turned up at chapel on a Sunday and sat on a bench at the dances with a glass in his hand, tapping his feet to the music. The town didn't take to him too well. They didn't turn against him or cause him any harm, he was viewed as an outsider, and that's not a feeling that a person can ignore with all the will in the world. After a time, he accepted this, and so he simply stopped trying. He hid himself away and kept himself to himself. He wasn't angry or resentful. He just settled into a life of quiet isolation. He'd take his rod down to the water in the evenings, and walk back up the hill with his catch under his arm. He liked the simple life, and if simple was to be quiet then so be it. He was that kind of boy.

Soon it was Lúnasa season, and the harvest dance was the event of the year. Folk of all ages would take a partner by the hand and dance to welcome in the harvest season and bless the growing crop. Everyone wore flowers from primroses to shamrocks and buried them at the summit of the hill to mark the end of the summer. For weeks, he watched the others practice, stumbling through jigs and giggling at missteps. Even the older fellas were brushing the mud from their boots and asking about ribbons and shirt collars. He waited until the week before the festival, when the blackberries had just begun to turn, and gathered his courage like a tight fist in his chest.

He asked Siobhán, the baker's daughter, She was lovely as anything, so they say, with eyes that shone brighter than the sun. Her hand had already been claimed, but she told him gently, and smiled in a way that made it hard to feel too hurt. The next day he tried again with Maura,

daughter of the schoolmaster, who was again committed to another, but said it soft and kind. This continued with a third and a fourth, each time picking himself up, thanking them for their time and making his way back home.

After that, he didn't ask again.

The morning of the festival, he stood at his door and watched the others head off in carts and on bicycles, their arms full of bread and flower garlands. Their laughter floating on the breeze with the wheels turning on the cobbles, a sound so far away it barely touched him.

He didn't mind.

That evening, while the music rose on the far hill like smoke up to the sky, he took his rod and walked down to the water's edge. The trees rustled soft overhead. The stream ran quiet and cool. He set down his bag and cast out, far across the water, before taking a seat on the bank.

"I sat withing a valley green,  
I sat there with my true love,  
My sad heart strove the two between,  
The old love and new love"

He sang along with the echoed music rolling over the fields, tapping his feet and nodding his head to the beat. Then he felt the rod pull, just gently. He looked across the surface and could see the hook jerk once, sharp enough to still his tapping foot. He leaned forward, eyes narrowing, rod in hand. Another pull, gentler this time. He stood firm, steadying his grip. But when he tugged the line, there was nothing. There was no hint of resistance. He reeled in, slow and puzzled, and when the hook rose above the surface, there was nothing.

He looked down at the ripples, hoping to see the culprit. The sky was dark but the moonlight shone through the water, making the stream almost crystal clear.

That was when he saw it.

Not a fish. Not a shimmer or trick of light. It was a face.

Just beneath the water, inches down. Pale as milk, with hair that waved in the water like weeds with its eyes open and calm, gazing up at him through the current.

He didn't shout or panic. He didn't move at first, almost unsure of what he was seeing. The face was unmoving, hovering in the dark. He would've called for help, only the face looked unperturbed, as if it belonged there and always had.

He lowered his rod to the ground and stepped forward, crouching at the edge. The water was suddenly calm, almost like glass if not for the occasional slight ripple. Not a breath of wind disturbed the surface. He reached out slowly with his fingertips brushing the top of the stream.

And then he slipped.

His boots slid from beneath him on the mossy ground and he fell forward, hands grasping air. The water swallowed him in an instant and the cold tore through his skin and turned his bones to ice. First came the bite, sharp and sudden, like a thousand needles into his skin. The breath was stolen from his lungs and his limbs turned solid. The water became a weight across his body, dragging him down. His arms flailed, grasping at the night air, but they were heavy now. He pulled in a breath, and inhaled the icy water. Cold and thick, choking him from the inside. His chest heaved. His throat tightened. He twisted and writhed and reached for a surface he could no longer see.

And then when the fight was lost, came his last breath. As he sank beneath the surface, the last to submerge was his mouth, as the breath left him like a heavy sigh, turning into a cloud in the warm spring air.

The water grew still and silent again, and all that could be heard was the sound from over the hill where the music still played and the dancers still twirled, unaware.

No body was ever found or retrieved. It has been said that they searched for days but the water was too deep. Some say his absence wasn't noticed until years later, his cabin left to decay and his body with it.

That breath, the last to leave his lips, that rose like a sigh from his soul and hung above the water like a sheet. That breath never left. It grew and it spread and it thickened. It lingered on the current, soaked into the soil, and curling slow through the grass and the reeds.

It was not of the stream, nor the mountain chill. This was different. This was heavy and sorrowful...wrong. All life left the valley. The birds stopped singing and the leaves dried and fell. The air grew still, as though the world itself had drawn breath in horror and could not let it go.

Nobody dared step foot in the hills. Nobody went to the stream or walked through the flowers, and over time the cloud grew thicker and darker. They began covering their windows, ashamed to set eyes on it, feeling it staring at them and into their souls. Any animal that ventured off the path and into the mist did not return. The sheep would not graze, horses reared at shadows no one else could see. It was all-consuming, sat on the hill, staring at the streets and the houses which trembled in fear.

On certain evenings, in the warmth of the summer nights, it left its confines and slid along the hedgerows and over the stone walls into the streets, skimming over the cobbles, coiling round doors and window frames like fingers trying to claw their way inside. If you dared peek out, folk swore that in the midst of the fog, right in the heart of it, almost too shrouded to see, was a walking figure, striding slow and weighted, dark as smoke. A tall, thin silhouette where no man should be. It was said to be a cursed sight, that those who had laid eyes on it would stumble on bad fortune, or lose something beloved.

They say it waits throughout the year, for the sound of songs and the smell of the harvest. At a time when the dancing once began and laughter carried on the wind, the mist seeps into cracks and pores in the ground. It sinks beneath the hill like melting snow and is not seen until the harvest season has ended. Maybe the air at that time of the year is too warm for it to thrive, maybe it's too dense for it to rise. Or maybe...maybe its hiding itself away. Maybe it hurts too much to be forced to witness what it cannot enjoy. Perhaps it would rather hide itself away to give the town a single time of peace and happiness, rather than burden them with the fear and superstition it brings, allowing itself to slip from their minds for just a short while.

Now, no one speaks his name. It's been swallowed by time and silence. His cabin rotten and softened to mulch. His belongings long disappeared. All that remains is the town, and the cloud, and the story, and the rhymes that the children sing:

“It walks alone through bog and moor,  
still seeking what it lost before.  
It takes your hand, so cold and tight,  
and pulls you soft into the night.”