

The Shore Men

by Rob Fahey

In Carraigfirtragh, at the age of ten, my father brought me out on the night of the lowest spring tide to see the Shore Men.

You have probably never heard of Carraigfirtragh, which is no surprise. It disappeared from maps some time between the wars, and from people's minds not long after. Normally even a deserted village will be remembered a while, but at that time, after all, a great many things disappeared in Ireland, and a great many people tried hard to forget them.

My first memory of Carraigfirtragh, and as such my first memory of life itself, for I was born and raised among those rough stone walls, is of the Shore Men. Rather, it is not of the Shore Men themselves, but of my mother crying - not weeping, now, but merely crying. Her face was set and resolute, her eyes fixed upon me, her hands working ferociously over the worn rosary beads in her calloused fingers, and tears were rolling down her cheeks.

In my memory, it is dark in the draughty living room of our old fishing cottage home, except for one tiny, flickering votive candle set below a chipped and faded woodcutting of the Blessed Virgin. I can remember the curtains all drawn tight across the windows, and black cloths covering them over; and my father, drawn and pale, with his back to the front door, staring at my mother intently across the dim room.

Things happened in Ireland between the Wars which were only ever to be related in the darkest nightmares of those who took part. With such events unfolding, who had time to concern themselves over the fate of an obscure and unremarkable fishing village on an inhospitable shoreline?

One last thing I recall from this memory. It is a sound; a shuffling, dragging sound, mingled with a swish and slap of wet cloths. It is at once both similar to the familiar noise of an armful of seaweed being dragged over rocks, and completely, terribly different.

It is the sound of the Shore Men. To this day, it sends a chill down my spine and inhabits the sorts of dreams which signal an end to any hope of further sleep.

Carraigfirtragh was, I suppose, not unlike every other fishing village which dotted the coast of Ireland. Six stone cottages arrayed around a donkey-cart track, with a few outbuildings to store turf or tools; each cottage home to a large family, or a few small ones. It was separated from the sea by a strip of ground, all stiff grass and lichen-

covered rock outcrops, which was covered with nets to be mended in summer, and colonised by upside-down currach boats in winter, like giant black beetles sitting still on the grass.

My parents and I lived in the fourth cottage from the sea, and since we were a small family - a rarity in those days, and I suppose now that it probably only happened due to some unknown complication with my birth - we shared with another, larger clan. I didn't mind; the whole village was extended family, in a way, and our sharing of the house brought me a close playmate and partner in crime, a boy named Caomhin who was a year my junior.

Life was not, as the tourists who now stomp over the countryside of the west of Ireland may assume, idyllic. It may have been a beautiful landscape, populated by the raw elements of stone and water and air, but it was a tough place from which to eke a living. It is no coincidence that the memories I hold of my mother feature prominently the callouses on her hands, nor that my father's skin was beaten to a fine leather by the wind and salt of the sea even though he was still young. However, by and large, it was no different to life in any village along the seaboard - except on one night a year. The night of the lowest spring tide.

On that night, every single year, the doors of the village would be barricaded, the windows shut tight, with thick drapes pinned over them. The men would frantically check their houses and families before sunset - and by the time the golden disc of the sun touched the Atlantic ocean, every family would be indoors, every door bolted. They would not sleep all night; they would pray, and listen, and wait in terror for the sun to rise and the ordeal to be over for another year.

To explain this night to the children - to silence them from crying out or causing a sound - they would tell them of the Shore Men. They would explain that the Shore Men were uncovered by the low tide, and awakened, and would walk through the village - returning to the waters before the dawn came. The Shore Men, they would tell wide-eyed infants barely out of the cradle, were long-dead, walking only on this night. But they would reassure them, too; telling them that that the Shore Men would not stop to enter houses, except where they saw lights or people - for the dead despise one thing only, and that is they who still possess that which has been taken from them.

So children would behave, terrified into silence; and the damp, shuffling sound would pass, and pass again in the opposite direction. Morning would come - a morning more crisp, and bright, and delicious than any other morning of the year, when the sun sparkled off the bay like a basket of diamonds and the turf smoke from each chimney was like the finest perfume.

However, at an age usually no less than ten, but certainly no more than fourteen, every child would discover that the old certainties of the world no longer rang true. Before this, their world was populated with entities magical and ancient, both wonderful and terrible. Each of these small gods had their role and their place - from the cautiously welcome visits of the fairies and little people to the various banshees and dark creatures who stalked the night.

Each of them, too, shared a common fate. They were the first casualties of the inevitable battle between Reality and Innocence.

They dissipated from the consciousness of the child like morning mist, returning only in dreams, and nightmares, and sometimes in the darker, more frightened moments of adult life. Like dominoes lined up in a row, once the child reasoned that one of the small gods of childhood could not exist, the others inevitably fell in quick succession. It was the first victory of reason over magic, and no less necessary or tragic for it.

This moment in a child's life could also be dangerous - and nowhere was this more true than in my village. When the certainties of the childish world came crashing down, the child's fear was freshly tempered with curiosity. It was no longer enough to know that a parent said he *should* be afraid; the child now wanted to know *why*.

Which is why, when a child turned ten, parents in Carraigfirtragh stopped telling them tales about the Shore Men. Instead, they showed them.

On the night of the low tide, my father took me to a thicket which lay near the village, a little back from the road. It was dense and prickly, made of gorse and brambles; but my father had laid an old fishing net thickly across a hollow in the middle, and an old woolen rug over that. As the sun slid behind the sea, we settled into this hiding place - a vantage point over the road, and the village.

My father was normally a man of few words, but this evening he was perfectly silent - his lips set in a grim line which discouraged any plans I may have had to speak to him. In retrospect, I realise that he was terrified; although a gruff, invincible giant in my ten year old world, he was in truth a gentle sort of man. The best he could do on this duty was not to convey his fear to his small son. His own father, after all, had showed him the Shore Men in the same way when he was ten; this would be only the second time in his life that he had seen them with his own eyes. I don't doubt that he probably still had nightmares of the first.

So we settled in, and watched as the village locked its doors and draped its windows. The stars came out as the sky dimmed - and then it was perfect silence and

silvery darkness, but for the yelps of distant foxes and the gentle swoosh of breakers beyond the bay.

This time I saw them before I heard them. Our vantage point showed us all the way down to the shoreline, which seemed almost indecently exposed by the unusually low tide. I saw them first as normal men, walking in from below the high tide line as though they had just been to collect winkles or mussels. Then, as they came over the ground which separated the village from the sea, they seemed drunk, dragging their feet and staggering as they walked, dressed in ragged clothes.

Only as they came closer did the noise reach us; the shuffling, dragging sound of their footsteps, the soft slap of wet cloth against wet cloth, the sucking squelch of waterlogged boots or breeches. Frozen to the spot, my ears picked out new sounds which had been indistinct from indoors; tiny noises, like the sickly creaking of worn out joints, or the slither of fronds of seaweed dragged behind.

There were dozens of them; perhaps fifty or more, although it was hard to count in the silvery half-light of that distant evening. They slouched and staggered unhurriedly through the town, as I struggled to peer through the thicket and truly see them; a sight which I was spared at that time. I could make out only rough details; enough to tell that although most were clothed in rags, some appeared to be naked, or almost so. Some even seemed to be dragging broken and useless limbs along.

They gave the cottages no notice, and continued slowly to their objective - the hilltop. As a child, I could run from hilltop - where a flattened circle ringed by small upright stones indicated the summit, a faery ring where we children played in spite of dire warnings concerning the little people - to shoreline in a minute or less. The agonisingly slow gait of the Shore Men made their journey far longer, and hours seemed to pass before they were gathered on the hilltop.

When they were, by some unseen signal, each one simply looked up - directly at the stars - and a second later, a noise somewhere between a sorrowful sigh and a long breeze of wind howling around the gables of a house reached our ears from the top of the hill. It continued for many long minutes, and then died away. The Shore Men remained there, frozen, for how long I do not know. I too was frozen to the spot; an eternity could have passed, and I doubt I could ever have moved or made a sound.

Then, just as suddenly as before, they all looked away from the stars - and began their slow descent, returning to the shore.

Just as they reached the cottages, I felt my father start next to me, and jumped at the unexpected motion. He touched my shoulder, signalling me to be still - and just then, I saw it. A chink of light was escaping from the window of one of the houses,

the tiniest sliver of flickering red light. I counted cottages with bated breath. The sliver was in the window of the fourth cottage in. Our home. My mother.

No sooner had I realised what this meant, and turned to my father with my mouth open in a perfect O of shock, than a ripple of terror ran across his features - and I knew, before I even looked, that the Shore Men had seen.

Their formerly unhurried, shuffling gait lost none of its awkward staggering, but it gained an intent, and a purpose. They converged on the window with its sliver of brightness, their broken bodies eclipsing the light from our view every few seconds; and now, the shuffling and wet slapping noises were joined by another; tapping. Incessant tapping, of fingernails - or bone - on glass, a dozen of them all rapping in different times, building to a cacophony.

Perhaps that would have been an end on it; perhaps they would have tired of this, seeing no response, and returned to their watery tomb for another twelve months. But as I said, every child reaches a point where curiosity overcomes fear of the small gods; and while few children reach this point before ten, for some it comes sooner.

As I stared, praying to every god small or large I could think of, I saw the curtain in the window twitch open suddenly, and Caomhin's small inquisitive face peered out, then twisted into a perfect scream of terror. The Shore Men were upon him in an instant; the glass smashed, and the screaming boy pulled bodily through by bony hands that served dual purpose as tearing, ripping claws.

There were no triumphal shouts, no roars of murderous bloodlust - only Caomhin's frenzied screams, which quickly weakened and then died entirely. There was another sigh, like the one on the hilltop; like a howling wind around the gables, full of sorrow and hatred, and terribly, terribly ancient. Then, as if noticing them for the first time, the Shore Men were upon the cottages; beating down doors, smashing windows, and finding soft, living flesh for their cold, dead hands to rend.

The screaming lasted, it seemed, for a very long time. There was so much of it that I could not tell if I heard my mother cry out - but then a woman's high cry was choked off, and my father gripped my shoulder like an iron vice, and I knew.

When it finally ended, the Shore Men stood around, as though uncertain what to do next; and although I thought I could be no more terrified, I found some extra reserve of fear and adrenaline as I saw them fan out a little and stagger around the village fields. One came within feet of our thicket; and this was the first time I saw a Shore Man up close.

In the starlight, details were obscured; but I could see that he wore a strangely ornate jacket, moulded away to patches, and breeches which had moulded so that

only the belt and some scraps remained. This would have been indecent - indecent, ha! As though the events of the night had not already been enough to wash all decency from the world! - but that the creature no longer boasted such parts, nor indeed flesh on many parts of its putrefying legs.

Its face was no better; bloated and decayed flesh covered the skull, and while one eye was intact, albeit clouded and sickly, from the other side of its face it peered out blindly (or so I hoped) through a dead socket, from which the ragged remains of an eyeball hung limply.

Forgive me for such details, which may seem horrifying and unnecessary; but this is the face which has haunted my nightmares for eighty years. This, and one other thing; the creature's hands, seawater-stained bone through putrid flesh, but dripping with fresh, red blood, gore and ichor. I could not drag my eyes from them; could not stop wondering into whose flesh those hands had plunged.

The Shore Man walked within three feet of us; but perhaps because it was half-blind, or perhaps because dawn was nearing on the horizon, it did not find us. Called once again by a silent signal we could not see, the Shore Men all turned and marched towards the sea; and by the time the sun peered over the hills behind us to view the devastation of the night, the rising waters of the bay were calm and rippled only by the wind. The Shore Men were gone.

I shall spare you the detail of what we found in the cottages; but suffice it to say that my father spent a solid day of labour at digging before we could carry out our first instinct, which was to flee, and never look back. I have never returned; nor even considered it.

Which of course, begs the question - if one might leave Carraigfirtragh, and live a full life, as long as mine has been, then why should anyone have remained there and faced the terrors of the Shore Men each year? My parents, I suspect, would have told any outsider who asked (although none were ever told of the Shore Men, and thus the question was never proposed) that the village was a good one, the village of their fathers and forefathers, and it was worth one bad night a year. They may even have believed this, to some degree.

I think I found the truth, however, seven years later in a tiny flat in Dublin, 200 miles away from the screaming memories of Carraigfirtragh. I shared this flat with my father, who had found employment in the building trade in the city, and insisted on using some of the money he earned to pay for me to be Educated, such that I might have a Profession.

On this evening - a night in spring when the tide was so low that the River Liffey itself looked like a muddy brook between its huge stone embankments - I returned to

the flat to find my father locked in the bathroom. He did not respond to knocking or to shouting, and eventually, in a panic, I kicked through the flimsy lock on the door.

There, in the cold bath water, I found my father - stone dead, his eyes wide open and staring at the stained and cracked ceiling above him. A heart attack, the coroner pronounced after barely casting an eye over him.

But no heart attack can cause a man's mouth to contain a long, dangling strand of seaweed, still slick as though fresh from the sea; and no heart attack can cause the noise I heard as I broke through that door. A sigh that sounded like the howling of wind around the gables; filled with sorrow and hatred, and terribly, terribly ancient.

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