

Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night: West Meath, February 1976

by T.S.Ollerhead

I caught up with her beyond the fallow field, hoar frost glistening blackened elms, ryegrass stems rustling to her listless tread, and in the corner of the next field, seeking the comfort of an overhanging blackthorn, a small group of heifers nuzzled closely for warmth, their condensing breath heavy in the chill morning air. As we walked in silence towards the stand of skeletal oaks, a solitary raven, late to catch the flock, flapped clumsily away from a high branch.

She had been this way for nearly eight weeks, fifty-something days of self-imposed silence, a deliberate personal catharsis. We headed for the gap between the dying hawthorns and the fallen gate, twisted and neglected, decaying into the land itself. I held her arm as she cautiously picked her way over its mud-slickened crossbeams, her eyes glazed, fixed now on the derelict cottage. It was silent as we approached, quiet in its heavy winter stillness, a chapel-like reverence. She held the blackened roof beam, twisted and weathered from generations of neglect, steady in her watery gaze.

As on many mornings, I would stand a little behind her, careful not to intrude on her silence, her pain. Faded wildflowers, baby's breath, meadowsweet and fireweed, their newspaper wrapping long gone, lay dead and scattered across the time-worn threshold.

This particular morning she took longer than usual, lost somewhere deep, struggling with an inner torment. Walking slowly forward, hesitantly, as though crossing an unseen barrier, she reached out, her pale, frail hand steadying against the rotting door frame, the crushing of underfoot glass the only sound in that cloying silence. It was the first time she had entered the cottage. Instinctively turning, half-shuffling, she ran her fingers along the edge of the overturned table, then slowly, deliberately, turned her gaze to the heavy roof beam, its sombre silhouette stark against the grey morning sky. I felt a desperate need at that point to hold her, to reach

out and comfort her, knowing instinctively that it would be wrong. She needed this moment, needed it so badly.

I waited over at the broken fence, sitting splay-legged on the twisted stile. The harsh alarm-call of a blackbird sounded somewhere along the bare hedgerow and a small spider-web delicately silvered in morning frost, slanting sunlight catching the top of the far hill. My cigarette smoke hung unsure, slowly rising into the still air, my presence in this place little more authority than a shadow.

We walked back towards the farmhouse, her step somehow now a little more positive, a subtle change. She stopped walking and turning to me, placed a firm hand on my arm, grey watery eyes, weather-beaten outdoor face.

“He never told me, not once, but I know in his own selfish way that he had some feelings for me.”

She held my gaze, defiantly. I slowly nodded my head, and that was it, the moment was gone, the soft trickle of water in the ditch, the only sound. The first time she had spoken his memory aloud since that fragile mist-filled autumn morning when the neighbour and his two boys had unfastened the clumsy barbed wire from around his neck, supported him, lowered him reverently from beneath the blackened roof beam.



Born at the end of World War II in the destroyed dock area of Merseyside, **T.S.Ollerhead** left home at fifteen years of age, travelling the world and working in over twenty countries, eventually settling in Australia. Now in his relaxing years he enjoys writing and has had several pieces accepted in international publications and over a dozen poems accepted in one of Australia's best-selling school magazines.