

FAERIES OF LEINSTER RAILS

COLLIN BROWN

By no intention of my own, an obsession blossomed in me. Lustful for the heat of adventure in my veins, the sight of Leinster grasses through foggy panes, and some relief from the sting of woe in my chest, I gathered up my few belongings, stuffed them in a suitcase, and strolled down to Kingsbridge Station to be on my way.

A short walk down the street brought me within the ghostly shadow of its white walls. Bootheels clicked on cobblestones. Tailcoats fluttered in the breeze. I felt a heron amidst the downturned heads of the masses as they corralled beneath the archways and inside. The usual smells of the station came—sweat from the bums in the gutters and the faint stench of alcohol on the breath of those nearby. Nervous fingers wiggled my scarf over my nose, a poor defense against their assault. No trouble, I thought. I would be out of the common rabble soon.

To my left, the open tracks sat in a wide rut. Bundled men and women stood beside their stops, tickets clutched in-hand. To my right, grimy walls ran along the length of the building. The more permanent occupants of Kingsbridge curled in their patchwork coats in the nooks and crannies, where alcoves put distance between their beds and the stomping boots of passersby. Greasy hair fell over their faces, scrunched and wrinkled like trolls. Saliva dripped from unwitting mouths, dangling agape. Few cast glances up to me as I carried onward. Their pupils caught no light. Their lips quivered. Scant few wore pallid medals on their breasts. The same medals were clipped to the bag slung over my shoulder. I dare not dwell on them long. Already knots tied up in my gut. I'd not come to think of old demons.

Catching sight of the ticket booth, I hurried over with fingers already digging through my bag. Perhaps overestimating myself, I came to the counter with one hand stuffed elbow-deep in my luggage; the other motioned for a single ticket to the man at the register. Flat cap drooping over his furrowed brow, he slid a hand beneath the glass divider and wriggled his fingers.

“Payment.” His voice growled from too many smokes, though it was not unbecoming of his goblinish appearance. A bushy moustache squirmed with his lips, and his eyes were dark slits beneath half-closed lids. “Be needin’ payment ‘fore I can give ya a ticket.”

“Oh yes, of course.” I returned a grin. Shoving my hand deeper

between my knickers and slacks, I cast a glance behind me. Already, two businessmen rapped their steel-tipped boots. They too returned grins, though I could not help but feel they lacked genuine content. Warm leather slid between my fingers, and I wrenched forth my wallet. After toying with the clasp, I slid a few coins to the register.

“I am sorry for the inconvenience. One to Kilkenny, please.”

He forced a thin smile.

“Not unexpected from your ilk. Been too—”

I lay a hand on the counter.

“I’m sorry. Who might you be referring to? My ilk?” Leaning away, I jut a proud chin in the air.

The man clipped a ticket from its kin with unnecessary force. “Young kids thinkin’ the world belongs to ‘em.” He nodded to the businessmen behind me. “Kind gentlemen have to wait for you like you’re some king. You Oberon? Where is your Titania then?”

A heavy breath shot from my nose. Blood burned in my cheeks. “Well, I am truly sorry.” Turning to the businessmen, I nodded and summoned my best impression of their grumbling frowns. “And sorry to you too for being such a terrible annoyance.”

Heavy steps carried me from the ticket booth to my place along the rails. I walked with stooped shoulders. Heat lingered behind my eyes, clouding my thoughts. What did he know of me? It’d nearly been a millennia, I was sure, since he could count himself among the young. A proper shame that he had to be such a snob. Father had always told me a worker would do well to be kind to customers. I found myself glad that I would never have to be one of them—never much of one for kindness. An artist, like myself, had not to be polite.

I lingered by a bench, leaning on a single leg. The other tucked behind it. Tense hands rest on my hips. My nose protruded into the air. Down its arch, fiery eyes watched those who passed me by. Oberon, I thought. What right did he have to call me a faery? If at all, I was just a king.

A whistle pierced the air, then the hiss of steam, and a train screeched into its stop before me. The cars shook as men and women clambered out of the single doorway at either end. The wheels of their suitcases clicked down the stairs, then thunked on the stone and rattled away. A crowd began to form near the entrance as the last of the passengers filed out. Cold bit at my fingers. The air nipped my neck. I would not wait back here—not behind the masses.

Dashing my foot on the cobblestones like a bull, my shoulder lowered towards the crowd. I made like an icebreaker towards the poles, plowing past those who packed together in the door. An elbow buried in my ribs. A finger jabbed my eye. My footsteps grew shorter. Bodies packed tighter. No—I dug my heel into the stone and pushed forward. Shoving aside a last passenger, I found myself at the head of the crowd. Looking back on my triumph, grumbling men and women gathered their belongings from where they’d fallen. One lady

muttered as she dusted her sunbathing hat. A man batted his bowler. I stood: King Oberon regarding the throngs of men. Fitting, I thought. The title grew on me.

Metal rasped against metal as the doors slid open again. I paraded aboard and found a window seat through which to watch the grasslands roll by. Leather squeaked as I wormed my way in, tucking my bag beneath my feet. Then, I rested my elbow on the window sill and waited for the sound of the engine to grumble and our journey to begin.

I twiddled thumbs. I stared at the car beside us. I hummed ol nan's tune.

We remained still. The engine hummed with me.

Only a few passengers shuffled around the car when a girl climbed the steps. Her sunbathing hat seemed to rest above her rosy hair. I thought it a nice addition to her appearance, if not a tad pompous. Freckles dotted her pale skin. Seaweed eyes darted between vacant seats. I could not deny her beauty, but I tried to avert my gaze. I did not want to appear as if any girl could catch my attention. A frown curled her lips as she saw me, and her piercing gaze brought a chill to my veins. She stomped over, heels rapped on the aisle floor and she cast her bag onto the seat across from me. Picking up her skirt, she slumped down and tried her best to not meet my gaze. Instead, she watched the view. To no one's surprise, it remained unchanging. Heavy breaths rasped in her throat. It sounded like some banshee. The quiet howling shook her slender frame. After a moment, she shot a fiery glare my way.

"You dirtied my hat, bastard." She tapped her fingers on the armrest. I watched them. They could have fit into keyholes. She flicked her gaze between her hand and my vapid stare. "What're you lookin' at? You a creep, bastard? Well are ya?"

I fumbled for words. My tongue felt numb in my mouth.

"No, well, I don't think. No."

The tips of her lips bent up. The fire dimmed in her eyes. "Bastard—" she began, then chuckled. A dainty hand covered her mouth. "I'm sorry. I cannot keep it up. I tried. I truly did."

Rubbing a hand over my face, I let my shoulders slump and leaned back in my seat.

"Had me worried that I'd wronged you something terrible. What was that all about?"

She produced a drawing pad from her bag and plopped it into her lap. Nimble fingers plucked pencils and erasers from the pockets of her coat.

"You mind if I draw you?" She'd already sketched my nose by the time I stuttered out a reply. My lips fumbled, but she shot a finger in the air. "You're here lookin' for something," she said. "Can see it."

The train hissed. The engine growled. Wheels clicked and we heaved into motion as I searched for an answer. She carried on, recreating my likeness

on her massive sheet of paper. "Glad someone's noticed," I said. "Looking for inspiration. Something to get my creativity flowing."

Her eyes on the paper, she nodded. Curls of red draped down her cheeks, bobbing with her movement.

"Takes all types a' things to get ya going." The tip of her pencil flicked towards me, making me flinch. "Take you, for example," she said. "Always loved to draw a right, proper bastard. Just had to find ya."

"I'm no bastard." Quivering arms crossed over my ribs. I puffed out my chest. "I'm going through enough already—" I pointed to the medals on my bag, the ones given to me by my father on this very train, "don't need some girl calling me a bastard."

Three breaths huffed out her nose. One edge of her lip tightened. The other grinned.

"If it looks like a bastard, walks like a bastard, and talks like a bastard, then—"

A loud sigh slipped from my lips.

"I'm beginning to see the point."

She held the sketch pad at head-height, then let it down and returned to working.

"Reckon you consider yourself above the rest of us." She pointed to the medals on my bag. "Pa tol' ya you were somethin' special n' you took it ta heart. Then he passed n' you made his words the basis of your identity."

"My father fought for us." I shuffled deeper into my seat, curling in the corner where it met the wall. "I've a notable heritage. You ought consider who you're talking to."

"And who might that be?" She smirked. "King of the faeries?"

I deflated in my seat, leaning on the window like a worn-out doll.

She smiled. "Ought know that anyone can be a bastard, even a king."

A swift hand flipped her sketch pad shut. Tucking it into her bag, she regarded my feeble form and nodded. "I'll be seein' ya, bastard," she said, and strolled away to another seat.

The window panes grew misty as we passed into the rolling hills of Leinster. Green blades blazed from the car wheels to the horizon, only interrupted by puffs of white, like clouds, sheep grazing in their lonely pastures. I watched an old man hobble between the low walls which trailed across the landscape. Stones stacked on stones made great walls over the earth, and required he take them down piece by piece. Withered hands lay them in the dirt, ushered through his rough woolen friends, then put them back together again. Groaning, he would arch his back and stare at the sky. Muscles seared. Bones cracked. An umber cap hid his eyes and the barren scalp beneath. Dark patches blotted his sandpaper skin. Yet, he smiled and waved as the rail cars clattered by.

He looked happy. He looked fulfilled. I did not want to become that man.

My father had tended sheep in the fields beyond our old home. In keeping with tradition, he led them down the same trail his father had, and his father

before him. He'd reach a patch of uneaten grass and linger till the creatures had their fill. I went with him, only once or twice that I still remember, until they called him to war a second time and the fields were left for me to attend. I never mustered the courage. The trail was too long; the sheep, too stubborn. I would tell myself these things to justify selling it to someone far more invested in tradition than me. Perhaps I could sum them up: these things were below a king.

I pictured myself, only ten, sitting in this seat with my father across from me. Mother clutched his hands, her breaths thick from crying. His distant eyes watched the fields roll by. He let go of her hand to lean towards me.

His words still echoed in the train: You know, your great grandfather was a great man. He looked to mother, resting a hand on her knee. She returned a soft chuckle, tears brimming in her eyes. He forsook a crown of gold. At this, I perked up in my seat. Instead, he took the hand of a girl and the life of a shepherd. Turning to me again, he rested his hand on my head and ruffled my matted hair. That, my son, is yours now—a life of freedom and peace.

Like a mirage, my father dissipated in the air.

An old man rested where he'd sat. He reminded me of my grandfather, old and wrinkled. A wool cloak of grey draped over his thick frame. A lone eye watched me. The other hid beneath a patch. His cracked lips sealed tight. In one hand, he clutched a walking stick made of gnarled wood. At its tip, two raven heads were carved. One's beak was petrified half-open. The sight of him brought a cold tingling to my skin, but when he smiled it gave way to comfortable warmth.

His lips moved beneath a thicket beard that wound down to his navel.

"You've been going from Dublin to Kilkenny," he said. Each word wormed through the mass of hair, and sounded as if he spoke with his mouth pursed. "Might've been better suited heading to Galway, if it's love you're looking for."

"Not lookin' for a girl," I said, casting my gaze out of the window again. "Just for something to bring the spirit back to my work."

"And what work might that be, son?" He shuffled in his seat, placing the butt of the walking stick between his feet. "Are you an artist? Perhaps we've the next Joyce in our midst."

Brushing a length of hair from over my eye, I returned a faint smile.

"Nothing that spectacular, much to my dismay." I patted a hand on my bag. The leather slapped under my fingers. "Havin' to find what it is I'm going to write about first."

His brow creased and he leaned forward.

"Have you had the joy of reading a bit of Shakespeare? Always manages to grip my interest, exercise my mind." He rest a grizzled paw on my knee, patting it twice. "Had a son who was fond of him, more so even than I. He's the one who told me about him in the first place."

"Where's he—" I caught my tongue. Turning my gaze to the Leinster fields, a heavy silence hung between us. The mumbling of other passengers faded to dull static. He wrung his hands. I stared off across the grasses.

When he spoke again, I flinched.

"If you'll forgive me, I've been listening from the next booth over. It would be wise for you to remember something," he said. A thin finger pointed to the medals on my bag. "In times of sorrow, we have only that which we can create. Some create facades to alleviate guilt. Some create pride with which to strut above others. Some—" He bit his tongue, rubbed a finger around his lips, and let out a raspy sigh. "Create beauty, my boy. If you wear no crown, you wear no chains."

Through foggy window panes, the Leinster grasses swayed in gentle breeze. It nipped at their blades and bit the bare legs of sheep which trampled them underfoot. It carried whispers in the air, not of words nor voices, which sang across the hills and between valleys where flowers unfurled their hueless petals. The train clattered on towards Kilkenny, where grey stones jutted from earthen flats and interrupted the pale blue sky. And I watched them go, content to think in the isolation of myself. When the old man had hobbled down from the car, I remained.

Leinster passed by and soon the coast of Munster province replaced the hills beneath the rails. Further south we went. On and on, till turning back again, we travelled towards Dublin. When my bootheels clicked once more on the cobblestones of Kingsbridge Station, I released a gentle sigh into the musty air of dusk and headed home among the masses. Beneath the shadow of my apartment, I lingered for a time. By no intention of my own, a realization fell upon me—me, who put his father's medals in a bedside drawer and left them till he'd come to terms: perhaps there are no faeries of Leinster rails—and thus, no king.