**On the Move**

**translated by Eilís Ní Dhúill**

**from Gluaiseacht**

**by Alan Titley**

1

Why? Why, you ask me. Why did I come here, and why am I leaving again? Why am I on the move again? And where am I headed? How much of the story do you want? I will have to get on the move soon, I don’t have much time. A piece of the night, I suppose. So, listen up. Not too many listened, and those who did listen didn’t hear. Those who heard didn’t care. But seeing as you asked, you deserve an answer.

I remember the town I’m from, no doubt. It’s not a town like the ones you have here. There was no street running through it. The houses were scattered. But neat, that’s how I remember them. But it was bright, bright from morning til night. The nights were bright too. The moon appeared every night. Sometimes like a smiling face. Other times like a slice of potato. But it was over my head every night, in a way that it never is here. The sun was always shining. I never thought I’d love to see a cloud again. But I would. I won’t have a choice in that.

I didn’t see the soldiers when they came. I wasn’t there. I was at the well getting water. Women’s work, I know, but my sister was too weak to go. My mother was breastfeeding the baby, and I was the only one who could go. I hated it. The girls skitting and making fun of me. At times I would have preferred to die of the thirst. Well, I wouldn’t really. Thirst is no laughing matter. Especially when you don’t know if you’ll ever get a drink again.

That’s why I went to the well. The thirst. And the sight of my mother laid out in the corner with the baby. My sister crying. My brothers as thin as rakes. Not a word out of my father. Everyone in the town petrified. Scared of being scared, I reckon. But I wasn’t afraid. I went to the well. The girls were already there. Skitting and laughing. You’d think they knew something I didn’t. Maybe they did. I hated them. I felt they were stripping me of something. I felt I wasn’t myself.

I remember now the tree above the well. I didn’t see very many trees for a while after that. It was a large tree with lots of hair. It was the only old thing in the town with any hair. Apart from the goat. But all the goats were old. They had beards, and looked hundreds of years old. The girls would gather around the well, while the boys stood around the tree. The boys and the animals. The boys and the animals and the flies. The boys and the animals and the flies and the smell. The girls didn’t like the smell. That’s why they’d stay next to the water.

I was in foul humour when I left the well. I wasn’t myself. One girl snarled at me, which made me feel as small as my little finger. I still don’t understand why I felt like that. I had a long walk home. A long, long walk. A three hour walk, as we’d say now. I was on my own, because I was the only boy at the well that day. Other days, there’d be one or two more. We wouldn’t say much, while we’d be there. We’d get the water, and head off again. A long walk, as I said, back to the village. I don’t think you’d understand the kind of place I’m from. There wasn’t much there. Mostly sand, and bushes, the odd tree here and there. There were no mountains like you have here. Or fields, or big towns. I walked but I wasn’t thinking about anything in particular. I walked because I didn’t really have anything to look at. I walked, because I had to get home.

When I got home, there was no one there.

Everyone was gone. My mother, the baby, my father, my sisters, my brothers, the neighbours. They were all gone. Without a trace. The animals were gone too, apart from a few dogs. And they were dead. There was one white goat behind a wall. The place was eerily quiet. Even the goat, there wasn’t a peep out of him. The sky was still blue over my head, but there wasn’t a bird to be heard. The entire village was empty. You’d think some kind of wind had swept through the place taking everyone with it.

I put down the water and wanted nothing more than to run away. But where would I run? Three hours back to the well? Instead of that, I walked around all the houses. Every house was as usual. Everything the same as ever. Shoes piled neatly in some houses. Clay pots with food in them in other houses. But not a sinner in any of the houses. At first I whispered.

‘Is there anyone here?’

But there was no answer.

‘Is there anyone here?’ I said more loudly.

A few minutes later I was shouting at the top of my voice: ‘Is there anyone here? Where is everyone? Where are you?’

I called out to my father and my mother. I called Hansa, the village chief. I called and I called and I called until I was hoarse. But no answer came, not even a trace of an answer. Even the goat stood still as a stone.

3

‘I’m Fatima’, she said, ‘I’m glad you survived.’

‘Me too,’ I said, but I didn’t have much time to think about it.

‘Where are you going?’ she asked me.

‘I’m told that I’m going to Europe,’ I said.

‘We’re all going to Europe,’ she said, with that same smile on her face, ‘but where exactly?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said, ‘but Europe couldn’t be that big.’

‘Europe is huge, full of people.’

‘Full of money too,’ I said, thinking of all the stories I’d heard. ‘I hear there’s gold in the streets, and that everyone is rich.’

‘I don’t know about that,’ said she quietly, ‘but I don’t care as long as there’s no war.’

I said nothing, but I thought of the corpses in the village, the dogs licking them and the smoke rising from a pot with no food in it. She noticed the silence. She sifted the silence.

‘You were in the war?’ It was a question.

‘I wasn’t in the war,’ I said, ‘but the war came to me’.

‘To me too,’ she said, ‘I didn’t invite it. The war comes uninvited, unsought. Your parents?’

‘I don’t know’.

‘They might as well be dead. Your brothers and sisters?’

‘I don’t know about them either’.

‘They might as well be dead too.’

‘And you?’ I wanted to turn the question back on her. It was too painful.

‘Same,’ she said. ‘The soldiers came’.

The phrase resounded in my ears. ‘The soldiers came! The soldiers came! The soldiers came!’

‘Some sort of gang came to my village too, and that was the end of the village. The soldiers came and the people disappeared. The people disappeared when the soldiers came.’

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‘That’s where you’re going!’ he said, as he pulled a machine gun out of who knows where.

‘Everyone into the water!’ he ordered. ‘The journey’s over! Europe is over there! If you can swim, swim! If you can’t tough!’ And he smiled snidely.

He caught the person closest to him, and flung him into the sea. He lashed out at someone who was yelling at him, and hit someone else on the head with the butt of his gun. By this time, some of us were already jumping in the water. Others standing around looking wildly at the sky. A large black shadow rose up from the back of the boat, a man who could rip out the moon you’d think, and he lunged at the one-eyed man. A thud was immediately heard from the gun, a suffocating deadly thud, the shadow was wiped out immediately. That was the end of any fumbling about. Everyone began jumping into the sea.

‘It will be cheaper if you come this way again!’ said he laughing, watching the people disappearing one by one into the sea.

‘Grab my arm!’ said Fatima, since she was the closest to me.

‘But I can’t swim!’ I said.

‘Doesn’t matter,’ she said, ‘I can swim well enough for us both.’

I thought I heard a shout of joy and a mocking laugh as I jumped from the boat. I thought I saw feathers in a man’s mouth. I thought I saw a claw scraping across the sky. I thought I saw a dark eye socket following me down and down and down into the depths of the great ocean…

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I followed the noise. There were cars and traffic going every which way. And I went where most people were going. I was still weak because I had fainted, because of the lack of air, because of the sea journey, and because of the confusion as to where I was.

Everyone here was wearing plenty of clothes, and I was quite bare. It’s not that it was particularly cold, but the dampness was getting into me with every step. I had no idea where I was. There were letters on the roads, and on the signs, but because I could neither read nor write they were of little use. I was in Europe, that much is true, but a wet and damp Europe, and dreary too, Europe without colour.

Fatima was gone, my travelling companion was gone, I was alone. I had no money, I had no food, I had no words. But still, I was alive. I was alive because I had survived. I was alive, because I didn’t see the terror in the eyes of those who travelled the same road as me. I was alive, because life is good, and I could sing or jump or dance or laugh. I could cry, but despite all that had happened, I didn’t feel like crying.

That night I slept on a street corner.