

CHAPTER ONE

The Stirring

Sebastian was flying. Oh, it was glorious! The seagulls cawed as they swooped and dipped, and he flapped his scarlet wings and dived with them. Far below lay the foam-flecked sea, in the distance the rugged coastline. In between, a fleet of ships headed for the shore, their great sails billowing. Sebastian steadied and stilled his wings, capturing a current to glide on. He hung for a moment then turned and sped away, out, out, out, into the misty unknown. He was supposed to stay with the fleet, that much he knew, yet he was drawn back, back to where it had all started. As he dived down to sweep across the immeasurable sea, the turquoise waves rose to greet him. Fantastical creatures lurking beneath shot up to break the surface—beasts that would terrify him in future life, where memories were unforgivably erased—shoals of giant carnivorous snails with poisonous spiny shells, flying sea spiders with great gummy nets, and long-necked serpents with multiple heads encrusted in barnacles. He weaved in and out of them, heading joyously towards a land even farther than Tir Na Nog. A land with cities of crystal and mountains of glass. The land of his birth. His scarlet wings began to fold. It had not been his intention, yet he allowed it to happen. A giant kelpie rose from the water. Her equine head reached out and flipped him in the air. He landed on her back as she wafted her great fins and dived down, taking him with her.

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Sebastian woke with a start. He sat bolt upright, bathed in perspiration. No sooner had he done so than he remembered where he was and settled back down. A vague and vanishing

disquiet, the last hurrah of a dream he could not recall, prompted him to pull his blankets higher. He yawned and stretched and squeezed, soothed himself with a long waking moan, batted open his eyes and peered into the inky depths. The swollen silhouettes of familiar objects pulsed back reassuringly.

‘It’s Sheffield, England, 1973. I’m in my bed, and everything’s okay,’ he said aloud.

Sebastian was a compulsive dreamer. In his twelve short years, he had had more dreams than most have in a lifetime. He was a particular connoisseur of dreams about treasure hunts, flying, and magical lands with amazing creatures. He could return to them on different nights, though he never knew which one he would end up in, and they felt so real he was convinced he was awake whilst he dreamt. Each morning, his dreams were as vivid as events of the day before, and while their sway subsided within hours the accompanying dream-tone lingered on; an exciting dream kept him thrilled all day, a happy dream, warm and fuzzy, while an adventure dream left him so exhausted he felt as if he had been running all night. Dreaming consumed his entire life. He would whittle away his waking hours daydreaming about dreaming or just plain old daydreaming, and in this he way pretty much buffered himself from reality.

The downside of all this dreaming was the nightmares he endured, frightful ordeals from which he would wake in a blind terror convinced something was lurking in the room. In a single, fluid movement he would leap from his bed to the light switch. The illumination always flooded him with relief though a return to bed was only possible after a clean sweep of the room, and he could only get back to sleep if the light remained on, arms tucked firmly beneath sheets lest he be pulled under the bed by some terrifying apparition. The pervasive unease that settled on him the following day diminished only by evening, the brief reprieve followed by the dread of impending sleep and further nightmares, for they often came in clusters.

It's strange, I can't remember a thing about that dream, he thought, shifting on his side.

Other than the disquiet on waking, nothing else had leaked through the sleep membrane, no hooded figure at the foot of the bed, no hobbledehoy beneath. Not a thing. He turned to the receding membrane in an attempt to retrace his steps, but it hurried from him and was gone. The grumble of a distant goods train captured his attention. He followed its progress until it was engulfed by silence. The house was very still, very quiet.

Sebastian yawned extravagantly. 'What time is it, clock?' he asked aloud.

The clock ticked back inscrutably.

'Well, you're no help. Not in the dark anyway. What's on tomorrow? I—'

He groaned as he remembered that the following day was the last of the Easter break. The last day of freedom. The last day of peace. The holidays had been such fun. Two weeks of children's TV and secret codes, making maps and devouring books. Dreamy pursuits. Solitary pursuits now that Flynn had gone. It had been two years since his only brother had been run over by a bus. Flynn had been Sebastian's idol. The one who stood up to the other kids and looked out for him at school, who had taught him to skim stones and to keepy-up, to climb trees and hang from branches, to ring doorbells and run. The one who had shown him it was okay to fail, for Sebastian was notoriously uncoordinated and terrible at sports. It was Flynn who comforted him when things got bad at home, Flynn who took a hiding from their father when it was neither his fault nor his go, Flynn who held him when their mother had exhausted her cruelties. And it was Flynn who heard his cries at night when the terrors came, who dropped from the upper bunk to curl around him, his own human security blanket. Sebastian's ability to recall his dreams with such clarity had followed the accident, that and an alarming increase in nightmares, recollected in spine-chilling detail. Flynn's absence had made their presence unbearable.

Sebastian sighed. Two years. Two years and thousands upon thousands of lucid dreams, yet not one of Flynn. How could that be? At least he had stopped replaying the final moments: Flynn darting across the street, the silent, deadly bus. He cringed as he recalled glancing up from his Airfix kit when the police knocked at the door, the faint annoyance he had felt. Then, the rising, sickening panic swallowed by dreadful calm, the news rippling through the walls, neighbours appearing from nowhere. Arms and tears.

Sebastian turned his pillow to the cool side and pressed his face against it. The accident had left him an only child, a priceless gift, easily broken and to be handled with care. He was no longer allowed out to play with friends and since they had never been invited to his house—his mother too proud to reveal their dreary poverty—his isolation was complete.

‘It’s five and twenty past two,’ hissed a male voice.

Sebastian shrieked as he leapt from the bed to rugby tackle the switch. The light steadied his nerves but provided no clues as to where the voice had come from.

‘Who’s there?’ he asked weakly, buying time as he scanned the room.

His eyes came to rest on the crayoned remains of the *magic* door he had drawn on the wall when he was four. What a beating he had got for that.

‘I’m awake, I’m awake,’ he repeated as he crept around the room, heart in mouth, checking the usual spots. When he was satisfied he was quite alone, he sat on the bed and considered the voice. Whoever it was had had no time to leave, his quick-witted cowardice had seen to that. Two twenty-five it had said, barely five minutes ago. His eyes darted to the clock.

‘Three o’clock,’ he gasped with relief.

It had been two fifty-five when the voice spoke. Thirty minutes out. Ha! It was a dream! A stupid dream vaporized by the light. With a sudden yelp he dived under the blankets. How could he be so dumb? His mother set all the clocks in the house half an hour fast. The voice

had been right after all. It took an hour of uninterrupted silence to convince himself that the voice had been no more than a dream echo, a pocket of slumber. At last he turned back towards sleep. Snuggling against the winceyette sheet he worried he would never get off, yet within minutes he was overcome by an irresistible drowsiness and was out like a light.

As if seizing its chance, the still night began to stir. A brisk breeze turned to whipping wind. Low clouds scudded across the rooftops, rumbling menacingly, fortifying the rich darkness. The laburnum beside his window bent and swayed. Its branches scraped against the window, casting ebony shadows that crept across the room and congregated above Sebastian's bed. Their twisting forms danced about him. The wind was in song now, the soughing tree its instrument. Boughs and limbs rasped and creaked, leaves rustled in chorus. Sebastian could not hear the tune, though the lament inveigled itself into his dreams.

'Come to us. Come to us. Help us.'

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Drip. Drip. Drip. Sebastian woke with a start.

'Dad!' he shouted, bringing his hands to his face.

'Up yer get den, sleepyhead.'

His father straightened the mug and the trickle of water ceased. Sebastian wiped his cheek with his pyjama sleeve. He thought of school but for some reason felt incredibly happy.

'I'm off for a walk if you're after coming,' said his father.

'Sure,' said Sebastian, and leapt from his bed.

Sunday morning walks were the only time Sebastian felt close to his father. Neither parent encouraged or displayed affection so he had to divine it obliquely. He was never

hugged or held or told he was loved, indeed his parents barely spoke to him unless he was in trouble. His parents hailed from County Mayo in Ireland but had met in England. His father drifted over in the fifties, crisscrossing the country as a navy before settling in Sheffield as a steelworker. State handouts buffered his father's measly income and things were always tight or tighter. His mother was a secretary before Flynn was born, then stayed home to raise the children. She began to suffer from nervous exhaustion and spent prolonged periods in bed. When Flynn died she was admitted to hospital for a month, barely communicating with her grief-stricken family. She was much better now, though the tragedy had done nothing to subdue her mood swings and anger outbursts.

Their route took them through the local woods. The pale April sunlight splintered through the canopy, spotlighting the undergrowth as they crunched over the twigs and leaves that littered their path. They strode across a clearing fringed with blackberry bushes. At the far end, a frayed rope swing swayed from its anchor point on the bough of an old oak. Sebastian jumped on and propelled himself forwards while his father sat on a log and whittled a stick with his pocketknife, all part of the ritual. Back and forth Sebastian went, legs swung behind then flung forwards to gather momentum. The sky rushed to greet him as the ground retreated beneath his feet. The spirit of the woods began to sing, its gentle music whooshing in and out.

'Whoosh-too-whoosh, whoosh-too-whoosh.'

Sebastian tilted his head back, delighting in the sound.

'Whoosh-too-whoosh, whoosh-too-whoosh, whoomsh-too-ush, coomsh-too-ush, come to ush, come to us. Help us.'

Sebastian flicked his head up in alarm and let go of the ropes. He sailed through the air and landed in a sprawl on the ground.

'I'm fine,' he spluttered, when his father cocked a quizzical brow.

But he wasn't fine. He wasn't fine at all. The events of the previous night, blotted out by his father's rude awakening, had come back to him: the voice in his room when he was wide-awake, the subsequent visit to a land much dreamed of. Even though he had been surrounded by a thick white mist, he had known the place. He had *felt* it. As he brushed himself down, he relived the dream. Standing on moss in rugged terrain, he felt the damp, enveloping haze cling to his skin. It was cold and semi-dark, either dusk or dawn—he could make little out through the dense fog. Alone and afraid, he tried to call out but issued no sound. He tried to move forwards, but his legs felt leaden, and he remained rooted to the spot. A sudden, violent gust of wind struck him from behind, throwing his torso forwards, his feet still planted on the ground. Another gust hit him from the front, then another from the side. Several more came at random angles, tossing him around like a marionette, his arms flailing about. After a minute, it stopped as abruptly as it had started. He straightened up and looked around wildly. The fog swirled and retreated, higher and higher, thinning in some places, thickening in others. He could see tree-studded hills peppered with boulders but no path, no obvious means of escape.

A low murmur arose above him. When he raised his eyes, the mist condensed itself into dozens of shapes. Horror seized him when they morphed into skeletons. His mute mouth gaped open as he tried to move his unresponsive legs. The vaporous skeletons weaved above him, round and around, lower and lower now, through the thinning fog. One plunged suddenly like a swallow. No sooner did he panic than it transformed into a beautiful woman who swept before her a warm and soothing breeze. She sped past him, insinuating something he could not catch. He jerked his head around as she soared up to assume her skeletal form, then jerked it back to find another skeleton gliding down with its bony arms held out to him. It turned into a rapturous beauty trailing cascades of silvery hair. The channel of mist she flew down was trained on him, redoubling his serenity. As she swept by, her arm passed

through him producing a shower of golden glitter. She whispered to him, the same thing he was sure. One by one, they plummeted down, each as dazzling as the last, sprinkling luminous flashes whenever they flew through him, sighing in his ear as they passed. They were chanting an identical phrase, but he could not make it out. When the last diaphanous figure sped upwards, they turned and dropped together. As they transformed into the prettiest host he had ever seen, Sebastian thought he might faint with happiness. They danced and drifted gracefully about him, swimming and swooping, banking and weaving, through the crepuscular air. Sebastian laughed and cried in wonderment, for their channels of mist filled him with bliss and the whole scene sparkled with twinkling lights. His eyes darted joyously this way and that as he feasted unashamedly on their faultless forms.

‘Come to us, come to us, help us,’ they chorused.

He nodded repeatedly as fat tears rolled down his cheeks.

‘I’ll come,’ he promised, finally finding his voice. ‘I’ll come. I’ll help.’

‘Yer wat was dat?’ asked his father. ‘Help wid wat?’

‘Nothing,’ he replied shakily, trying to compose himself. ‘Think I’ll walk on a bit.’

‘No dilly-dallying,’ said his father. ‘We don’t wanna be late fur mass.’

Sebastian wandered along the path, thinking hard. He could have dismissed it as an unusual dream had he not just heard the self-same thing on the swing, and that voice with the time. What was going on? What did it mean? Two hundred yards from where his father idled, he turned off. A narrow track led blindly into thick gorse. He bundled and elbowed his way through to a grassy glade canopied by trees. He was looking for something, something he was sure only he had seen, something he had found within days of Flynn’s death. Crossing to the far corner, he moved aside the dense brambles. There it was, poking out of the earth. A red brick chimneypot. It was two feet high with a square neck scarcely wide enough to fit a child through. He peered down but could see nothing, put his arm in but could not reach the

bottom. Shovelling aside the loose soil at the base of the chimneystack, he dug away at the more compact earth until hindered by tangled roots.

‘Helloooooo!’ he hollered, his face to the opening.

He was convinced somebody or something lived down there, raised on Irish folklore as he was.

‘Well, it’ll have to wait,’ he said, realizing the time.

‘Bejaysus,’ moaned his father when he got back. ‘Yer’ll be late fer yer own wedding.’

‘Funeral,’ said Sebastian.

‘Ha? Yer wat was dat?’

‘Nothing.’

With that they ambled home. As they climbed the stile at the edge of the woods, a squirrel scampered past clasping an acorn. Sebastian turned to follow its progress as it ran up a tree. His gaze drifted up to meet a thin plume of smoke emerging from the foliage.

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Later that afternoon, while his father visited relatives, Sebastian sat in the front room and read comics. The house was quiet save for the occasional murmur of his mother in the kitchen. As he turned a page, a brief scraping sound made him look up. Thinking nothing of it he started to read again, but when it happened twice more he began to pay attention. The sound was close yet muffled and appeared to be coming from the piano. He rose and crossed to the upright. With a determined air, he opened the lid. As it flipped back, it caught the bust of Beethoven, tipping it on its base. The bust hovered precariously and might have swung back into position but for Sebastian who, with customary clumsiness, swooped and sent it tottering over the edge. It smashed into pieces.

Beethoven's last movement, thought Sebastian. The rasp of the door handle reminded him that quick wits were no compensation for slow reflexes. His mother burst into the room.

'What's going on?' she cried. 'Bloody hell, you've destroyed Ludwig, you little brat.'

Sebastian flinched as she thrust out an arm.

'Come here,' she said, with an air of ominous calm.

His unwilling limbs moved forwards. Too slow for her liking, she grabbed hold of him and shook him violently.

'You did it on purpose!' she yelled. She slapped him twice, hard on the legs.

'I didn't!' he shouted defiantly.

'Insolent cur!' she screeched.

Smack, smack, slap, slap, smack, smack, slap.

'Ow, ow, ow,' he whimpered, shielding his face.

'I know you it did on purpose,' she said, suddenly softening. She lifted his chin with her finger until their eyes met. 'It's okay. Just tell me.'

'But I didn't,' he protested.

'Despicable little freak,' she screamed. 'Why do you do this to your poor mother? To see me have a breakdown, is it? To see me cold in the grave? I'll bloody swing for you, I will.'

Sebastian blubbered as an assortment of blows rained down.

'You're not my son!' she hollered. 'Get up those stairs before I kick you up them.'

She pushed him out, slamming the door before he had cleared it. He felt a searing pain in his temples as his head caught between the door and the jamb. He wailed loudly.

'Shut up! Stop putting it on. There's nothing wrong with you,' she cried. 'If you don't shut up, I'll really give you something to blubber about, you little gobshite.'

Sebastian ran up to his room and lay across the bed. He felt his swollen temples gingerly.

‘I hate her,’ he muttered between sobs. ‘I wish she was dead. I wish I could wish her dead.’

He sat in the darkening room and waited for his father’s footfall. It was always an agony of torments, the wait. As the day finally gave up its light, he heard the gate. Seconds later, his mother tore into the hall yelling and carrying on, winding his father into a frenzy of fury. After a brief excruciating silence, his father let out a roar and bound up the stairs. Sebastian slipped from his bed, shrank into a corner and steeled himself. His father appeared at the door like a Maori warrior, face set in contorted anger, tongue fixed between teeth...belt secured between knuckles. As he held the buckle and let rip, Sebastian curled into a foetal position. He remained silent as the lashes rained down. As usual, it was exhaustion not compassion that signalled the end. He heard his mother’s voice and realized she had been watching.

‘Into the cellar.’

‘No. Please, no.’

‘Now!’

Sebastian got up slowly, careful to use any available space to keep as far from his glowering parents as possible. The expected cuffs did not materialize. A minute later he watched his father disappear through the cellar door, light bulb in hand. As the bolt slid across, he sat on the second to bottom step, closed his eyes and wept bitterly.

He hated the dark, and his parents had always made the most of it. It had gone on for years. When he was younger he would scream blue murder, pummelling the door with his tiny fists. He had long since learned to endure in silence, so as to give no satisfaction to his tormentors. And if he kept his eyes shut and sat on the steps, never venturing beyond, he could minimize his discomfort. He inhaled the fusty air, then exhaled it through his nostrils. Shivering with cold, he reflected on his day. It had started so promisingly and ended so awfully, with nothing but the prospect of school ahead. He felt utterly crushed. He rubbed his

aching body as he allowed his eyes to open. He was on the threshold of the larger room. It was pitch-black, yet he could still make out the entrance to the other room, pulsing with absolute darkness. Petrified of the smaller room, he had not once been in, not even when he had gone down with fearless Flynn. As he shifted up a few steps, he heard his parents laugh at something on the television.

‘Don’t worry, it’s not long now,’ whispered a voice.

Sebastian yelped. It was the voice from the night before.

‘No need to take on so, young master,’ it continued. ‘I’m here to help.’

‘Who are you?’ said Sebastian, scuttling up the stairs.

‘I’ve orders to allow you one question today, and you asked the time, remember?’ said the voice gently. ‘You can have two questions tomorrow, three the next, and so on.’

Convinced it was a dream, Sebastian felt strangely calmed.

‘Why are you here?’ he asked, as he inched back down. ‘What do you want?’

‘Two tomorrow, three the next, and so on,’ returned the voice.

‘Sorry, of course,’ said Sebastian, peering into the room but seeing no one.

‘I must go now,’ said the voice. ‘You’re awake, so I’m weak.’

Sebastian found himself making a very unusual request. ‘Don’t...don’t go.’

‘I have to, young master,’ said the voice. ‘Don’t worry, I’m always here, always have been. Oh, and I’ve brought something to cheer you up. Won’t last long, mind, you’re awake, see.’

‘Will you be back?’ asked Sebastian.

But the voice had gone. As Sebastian stared at the space he had spoken to, there was a glint in the corner of his eye. A pinkish glow was coming from the smaller room. Sebastian shrank back, hardly breathing. The glow grew brighter casting a grotesque shadow across the cellar of a tall thin man with fizzing hair. Sebastian watched in horror as the shadow moved

forwards, looming ever larger as the figure reached the entrance. He was about to beat down the door when the figure finally emerged. Instead, he stared in disbelief. Stood before him was a firework with little arms and legs, and a head from which a cloud of pink smoke erupted. The firework smiled and gave a deep bow. It proceeded to cartwheel around the room, the sparking smoke changing colour with every turn. Over and over it flipped until it stopped at the foot of the steps. It raised two glittering eyebrows and grinned at him.

Sebastian moved down cautiously. ‘What, sorry, I mean who are you?’

In answer, the firework did a backwards somersault and then bowed again. Sebastian giggled as the cascade of green smoke subsided. The firework waddled back to the smaller room. He beckoned to Sebastian, who followed as far as the entrance. The firework made a dash for the far wall and, to Sebastian’s delight, ran straight up, across the ceiling and down the other side. A plume of shimmering, multicoloured smoke streamed behind it. Round and around it went, faster and faster till the plume became a continuous rainbow that lit up the room. For the first time in his life, Sebastian stepped into the room, no longer a place of fear but a place of wonder. He stared in awe at the magnificent circular rainbow, its vibrant beauty captured in his saucer-sized pupils. With a flash, the firework vanished and the room was plunged into darkness. Seconds later, the door was unbolted and his name called sweetly by his mother, who credited his blissful state that evening to her generous, forgiving nature.

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‘What on earth’s happening?’ he said to himself, as soon as he had escaped to his bedroom. ‘It’s incredible! That was no dream. No way. I was definitely awake. Wow! It was brilliant! A dancing firework! All these strange events. What do they all mean? And I don’t feel scared at all...well I did at first but not now. You’d be so proud of me, Flynn,’ he added,

realizing he had not felt this happy for two years. ‘What next? What’ll happen tonight when I go to sleep? Oh! I can hardly wait.’

