

Secrets of Our Hearts

Sheelagh Kelly

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Extract

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He had been dying to tell them all day. But, also dying for his tea, he had saved his announcement for later, as one might reserve the best bit on one's plate until last. Now replete, Niall Doran gave a little groan of satisfaction, a leisurely stretch, and prepared to regale his family. Then he remembered what day it was.

Perhaps this was not the time for frivolity. His thoughtful blue eyes moved to the fireplace, half expecting still to see the old Yorkshire range, but that had been ripped out weeks ago and replaced by a modern one with shiny beige tiles. Upon its mantelpiece, twixt two posies of flowers, stood a soldier's photograph. Today marked the eighteenth anniversary of Brendan's death; killed one week after his birthday on the Somme in 1916, forever twenty-five. Twenty-five, thought Niall with a mental shake of head – why, even the blasted sideboard had been allowed to survive more years than that! Without turning his head, he felt its

dark presence. It seemed to glare at him, as if knowing he had always hated it – this heavily carved Jacobean-style monstrosity that took up an entire wall, its funereal bulk alleviated only by scraps of white lacework and the photographs of his children at their confirmation. Having his mother-in-law living here was oppressive enough, without putting up all her old-fashioned stuff too. It felt like a blasted funeral parlour . . .

Still, he noted, the occupants of the household didn't appear overly sombre. From the front room came the sound of female muttering: his wife, Ellen, her younger sisters, Harriet and Dolly, and their sixty-five-year-old mother having converged there a few moments ago, probably to spy on some neighbour, as women were prone to do. But Niall would soon have them pricking up their ears.

'You'll never guess what I saw today,' his deep Yorkshire voice called teasingly, 'not even in a million years.'

Seated at the table alongside him in the living room of their small terraced house, five brown-haired, blue-eyed children waited expectantly.

'A wolf!' came their father's grandiose announcement.

Whilst his offspring gasped in awe, only a half-amused reply came from the other room. 'I thought they were extinct in this country?' Ellen remarked.

'Obviously not, for I saw one today with me own eyes!' Niall sounded pleased with himself.

'You know what happened to the boy who cried

wolf,' jeered Nora Beasty, his mother-in-law, her concentration still fixed on the street beyond the window.

'I'm not having you on!' objected Niall, with a laugh. 'I swear I saw it.' And he began to recount today's adventure on the country line, all five children leaning on the table, their pixie-like faces holding him with rapt attention – the girls, Honora and Judith, with their delicate bone structure, the youngest, Brian, too, whilst the remaining pair of boys were more robust – all paying respectful heed. 'I'd just chased an old moorjock off the line—'

'What's a moorjock, Dad?' interrupted Bartholomew, a rascally-looking five-year-old.

'It's a sheep, Batty – and I were bending down with me spanner to tighten a crossover rod, and I looked up and there was Mr Wolf, jogging across the line as bold as brass!' His thrill conveyed to the children, Niall delighted in watching them hang on his every word. There came a display of excitement from the women too, but not because of anything Niall had said.

'See! I told you – he's off to meet a woman!' declared Nora, her flint-like eyes piercing the lace curtain and following the suspect's passage up the terrace.

The three younger females, who craned their necks beside their mother, gave angry murmurs of agreement. Then one of the disembodied voices manifested itself: Dolly thrusting her toothy,

unattractive face round the brown varnished jamb to summon her brother-in-law. ‘Go after him, Nye, and see where he’s off.’

‘Who, in God’s name?’ He showed slight exasperation, which was mirrored by his informant.

‘Your Sean!’

‘Spy on my own brother? That’s a bit devious.’ But Niall had turned grim, annoyed as much that his own bit of glory had been spoiled as over his brother’s purported wrongdoing, though he spared a warm and grateful smile for his eldest, who removed his empty plate and brought him the evening newspaper.

‘There’s your press, Dad.’

‘By, you’re a good lass – thanks, Honor.’ He touched her affectionately. Quiet and conscientious like her father, the eleven-year-old merely smiled back, as Niall raised his voice again for the benefit of those in the parlour. ‘Anyhow, he said he’s off to play billiards with a chap from work!’

This drew sounds of faint contempt from the other room, his mother-in-law’s answer relaying a sneer. ‘I heard what he said, but you don’t get dressed up like he is to knock a few balls about – and he couldn’t look us in the eye when he said it. It’s a woman, I’m telling you.’

‘It’d bloody well better not be or I’ll flatten him.’ Despite the Irish name and facial characteristics, the Celtic knick-knacks and shamrock-laden, proverb-bearing plaques that dotted his house,

Niall was Yorkshire personified in his tight-buttoned, blunt-speaking manner. Irritated, he snatched a mouthful of dark brew from his glass and unfolded his newspaper. It had been a long hot day, he had laboured hard on the railway and, with his tale about the wolf overshadowed, all he desired was to be left in peace to finish his Guinness and read the press. Trained to accept this, his boys scrambled off their chairs and went to play outside. But, as ever, the women wouldn't let him rest.

Ellen broke off spying to bustle in and urge her husband persuasively, 'Go on, darlin', before he gets too far ahead. He's the one who's devious – he knows he's in the wrong otherwise why would he lie?'

'We don't know he is lying.' But at the back of his mind Niall knew they were right: his brother *had* looked shifty when questioned as to his intended whereabouts. Sean had rarely ventured out since his wife had died three months ago; then, last evening when he had come over for tea – which Nora had kindly taken to cooking for him since his bereavement – he had made an announcement that he wouldn't be over the next night, would just grab a quick bite at home as he was going to meet a friend from work. Niall recalled how he had offered to accompany his brother, for he felt like a night out himself, but had been met by a hasty refusal, Sean explaining that his workmate was not the sort to welcome such an intrusion. Niall had put little significance on this at the time,

for past experience had shown that Sean's choice of friends was not his. But now, with his glass of Guinness only half drained, he abandoned it, wiping the froth from his long upper lip and casting aside the newspaper as he went to join the suspicious tribe by the window.

The front room was strong with cocoa, emanating from Harriet and Dolly, whose clothes and hair – even their skin – seemed impregnated by the factory in which both worked. The grey head with its severe parting, and hair tied in a bun, moved aside so that Niall could take her place.

‘Now will you go after him?’ bawled an impatient Nora, once he had seen for himself.

Far from being cowed, he responded with sour amazement. ‘Don't me legs carry me enough miles a day?’ But even as he said it he knew he would cave in for the sake of a quiet life, as he always did against this unforgiving wall of women.

Still, he vacillated, unwilling to do their underhand bidding, yet inquisitive to know himself. ‘Well, I might just go . . .’

‘Can I go with you, Daddy?’ Unnoticed, six-year-old Judith had followed him in here and, fond of such cloak-and-dagger shenanigans, dragged at his legs and tilted her face at him pleadingly. ‘Aw, can I?’

‘Eh, Juggy Doran, what are you doing creeping up behind me? You're as bad as this lot!’ Much as he joked, he did not care for the example being

set for her. 'You should be out playing on a lovely night like this.'

'Go on!' nagged Ellen with a helpful push. 'You'll lose him.'

Niall was still looking down with fondness at Juggy, whose warm little body was clinging to his thigh. This morning she had sported a neat bow in her long, dark brown hair, but the latter was now tousled from play, and the ribbon dangled loosely about her face as she tried to seduce him with those shining blue eyes. '*Please!* I want to hear about your wolf.'

'I should be glad somebody does!' growled her father. Judged on this unsmiling appearance Niall could have been a wolf himself – sharp of feature, keen and intelligent of eye, his dark, wiry hair grizzled around the temples, at thirty-three in his prime, lean and raw-boned and rather menacing. In nature he was quite the reverse. Not exactly a sheep in wolf's clothing, and as far from being meek and mild as one could be, he was nevertheless as moral a fellow as ever stood, anything untoward or underhand offending him deeply, and he was not averse to using his fists in defence of those values. However, this side of his character was never visited upon his womenfolk, whose every whim he chose to grant in order to enjoy the quiet life he yearned. All in all a soft-hearted soul, especially at the hands of his children, Niall would take much goading before his teeth were bared. Yet here now before him was the one thing

guaranteed to raise his hackles, and it was his brother who provided it.

‘For heaven’s sake, will you stop faffing and get after him – please!’ This addendum was swiftly issued, for Nora knew him well enough to know that he did not respond to bullying. But she could not hide her exasperation and, unlike her son-in-law’s, Nora Beasty’s appearance was not so deceptive. With those cold grey eyes, she looked as if she’d enjoy torturing people and, by God, Niall knew if he didn’t do as she wanted now she’d make his life a misery for weeks in all manner of small ways.

But it was from a sense of curiosity rather than obeying Nora that he finally agreed to act, and, with a gasp of aggravation, also to take Juggy with him. ‘Flamin’ ’eck, if it means I’ll get some blasted peace, all right I’ll go!’ Juggy laughed in triumph. ‘But keep your gob shut,’ he warned her. ‘We don’t want Uncle Sean thinking we’re after him.’ Even if we are, he fumed to himself. Still in his grubby shirtsleeves, he hauled his grinning little daughter by the hand and left.

Outside, he paused only to sling Juggy onto his shoulders, then set off after his brother. She was a delicate, gangly creature, and no more than a featherweight to bear. On consideration he was glad to have her with him for it might look less suspicious. If Sean should turn and confront his pursuer the latter could always say he was only taking his child somewhere – though why he

should lie when Sean was obviously the one at fault . . . However, he had not been found guilty yet and must be granted the benefit of the doubt.

Employing the bat his father had painstakingly carved for him, Dominic was now involved in a game of cricket with a dozen other raggie-taggle young residents of this slightly impoverished but happy area, his smaller brothers hovering in the avid hope they might be allowed to run after the ball. So concentrated, none of them noticed as their father went by with their sister on his shoulders.

‘Ooh, just the very fellow!’ old Mrs Powers accosted him as he was passing her open doorway. Mr Doran was a man who kept himself to himself, but knowing him to be charitable too, she entreated him, ‘Could you just give us a hand to get a lid off, if you’re not in too much of a rush?’

Unable to ignore the elderly widow’s smiling plea, the chivalrous Niall turned to follow her lame figure indoors, only remembering he had Juggy on his shoulders when she yelled in alarm, and ducking swiftly to avoid injuring her.

With the lid removed, and the old lady’s thanks ringing in his ears, Niall did not tarry but called over his shoulder, ‘You’re all right, love!’ Then he hurried to regain surveillance of his brother, who had now turned a corner, the bony little buttocks grinding his shoulders as he jogged.

Thenceforth, he loped along Walmgate in the manner of the wolf that he had seen crossing the

railway line that morning, occasionally responding to his daughter's questions about his encounter with it, though his mind was on other things now.

Well, Sean wasn't going to play billiards, that was for sure. He was travelling in the wrong direction. Still, Niall conceded that the local billiard hall was not the only one in York, and to be fair to his brother he tried his best to keep an open mind as, with the ancient limestone bar to his rear, he shadowed him towards town.

A tram came gliding past, the odd motor car, and argumentative voices from the Chinese laundry, but apart from these intrusions the way was quiet. If not for the task in hand it would have been a very pleasant walk. This evening, with its occupants basking peacefully in the sunshine – gentle old Irish grandmothers in black dresses, shawls and bonnets, seated upon chairs on the pavement and puffing on their clay pipes – it might be hard for a stranger to imagine that he was in one of the roughest quarters of York. Contained on two sides, the east and the south, by a medieval limestone wall, the rest of the area was enclosed by the River Foss, as it snaked its way to meet the Ouse at Castle Mills; the road that Niall trod was its main artery, a network of veins to either side.

Notwithstanding the garish posters daubed on every space, the odd smashed windowpane and derelict property, Walmgate itself did not look particularly rough. In fact many of its structures

were immensely graceful, and it boasted a fine array of shops. Even the dosshouse looked genteel nowadays, the dirty crumbling stucco Niall remembered from his youth having been removed to expose fifteen-century timbers, and the gaps between them whitewashed. But Niall kenned that, with a few drinks down them, those same old grandmothers who waved to him so benignly might be tearing out each other's hair, and their sons trading blows. Likewise, behind those Victorian establishments with their sedate awnings to ward off the sun, and the symmetrical Georgian façades, at the other end of those narrow, urine-reeking alleys that ran between them were the most appalling courtyard slums.

However, of late there had been a definite change in the air. Along his way, Niall was pleased to note that a few of the worst offenders had gone, others in the process of being razed too, though the awful smell of their midden privies lingered on, overpowering the more pleasing aroma of fish and chips. Such dwellings had been there since he was a boy – his father and mother had said the same – and he would be glad when all were finally eradicated. How sad that it had taken a world war to instigate progress. Holding his breath and warning Juggy to do the same as they passed one such demolition site, he hurried on up Walmgate.

Linked to Fossgate by a small stone bridge that lay some way ahead of him, this was one of the longest thoroughfares in the city, its thriving

commercial premises interspersed by ironworks, forges, breweries and tanneries, all of which emitted a sooty effluvia that was indiscriminate in its resting place, coating elegant Regency pediment and sagging medieval beam alike. Amidst these grimy edifices were butchers' shops with attached slaughterhouses. A few ancient churches were outnumbered by public houses: the King William, the Spread Eagle, The Clock, and eleven others. The combined smell of beer fumes and unsanitary middens billowed out from every entry on this warm summer evening – too warm to be dressed up like a dog's dinner, came Niall's inner pronouncement, as he noted the carefree manner in which his brother walked. The bouncing, cocksure gait of his grey-flannelled legs, the swagger of his shoulders under the best jacket, the cap at a jaunty angle, the rhythmic clitter-clatter of his steel-tipped soles as he danced off the pavement and onto the cobbles in order to get round the small crowd that had gathered to hear the tingalary man – hardly the demeanour of a fellow recently bereaved.

Involuntarily, Niall's mind was cast back to poor Evelyn's death, for which he held himself partly responsible. It was from one of his children, the nephews and nieces on whom she doted, that Sean's wife had caught chickenpox. Whilst the youngsters had been barely incommoded, other than by an irritating rash, Evelyn had become critically affected. Her death had come as a complete

and terrible shock. Niall remembered how devastated Sean had been and unable, as some might, to take solace in his offspring, for, despite being with Evelyn several years, their marriage had been unfruitful. There was no sign of that devastation now, thought Niall with disgust, as the gay tune from the tingalary affected his brother's gait.

He shouldn't have been surprised. Sean had always seemed to get over things quicker than he himself did – he could still weep over the death of their mother if he thought about it too deeply, though she had been dead more than thirteen years. But then he'd always enjoyed a closer relationship with her. His father had died when he was twelve and Niall had become the man of the family, insisting that he leave school and get a job to support his mother and younger brother – younger by only three years but it made all the difference between their levels of maturity. Even in adulthood Sean had continued to be the less responsible of the two. It annoyed Niall slightly that their mother allowed the younger brother to get away with it, whilst demanding a more grown-up attitude from himself and going mad at him if not receiving it. Still, he had adored her and had been heartbroken by her death on his twentieth birthday.

Then, soon afterwards had come Ellen to stem his grief. Susceptible to her comforting arms, deeply grateful for someone to organise his domestic affairs – for there was no way this clumsy

labourer could do justice to the house he had inherited – he had married her within weeks of their getting together, their first child conceived on honeymoon. Yet, maintaining filial responsibility, he had not abandoned Sean, nor even tried to buy him out, but had welcomed him into the fold of newly wedded bliss, until, a few years later, Sean married one of Ellen's sisters. But even then, Niall's supportive role was not over, for, with great financial hardship to himself, he had taken out a mortgage in order to release Sean's half of the inheritance so that his younger brother could buy a house of his own. And, when Ellen's father had died, who was it took care of his widow and two unmarried daughters, and invited them to come and live under his roof, even though it was overcrowded already? Certainly not Sean.

With a snort of annoyance, Niall became aware that his little rider had slipped on his shoulders, and with one deft movement jerked her back into position. 'Sit straight, darlin'.'

'Sorry, Dad.' Juggy sat bolt upright, her hot little hands pressed to his skull.

The glazed brick frontage of the Lord Nelson signified that Walmgate was almost at an end. Thereafter came only a few shops, and two more public houses. Then, beyond the jagged, moss-coated roofs of derelict warehouse and broken Dutch gable that nibbled the skyline like rotten teeth, the Minster rose into view, its gargoyles and pinnacles defaced by the same centuries-old grime,

yet still towering spectacularly over all. Niall, barely aware of this colossus or any other antiquity, was deep in thought about his relationship with his brother, when a sudden cry made him jump in alarm that he had been found out.

But Sean was only calling to a woman on the other side of the street: 'Charlie's dead!'

Immediately interpreting the phrase to mean that her petticoat could be seen, the recipient of Sean's impudence automatically glanced down at her calf-length skirt, and made deft adjustment of its waistband, and the show of underwear was gone. Then, with an embarrassed laugh for her grinning informant, she minced off with a click of high heels. Niall scowled. What sort of respect was that to show a dead wife? Similar in looks, maybe, but the antithesis of his elder brother, Sean had always been a flirt; even when he had been married it had not stopped him. No, it hasn't taken you long to get over her, has it? Niall noted grimly.

Had this been Sean's only transgression that evening, it would have been bad enough, but he had just walked straight past another billiard saloon. As the tramlines and their overhead wires veered left, Niall carried straight on, his face even grimmer as he hurried across the road to avoid being run over by a car, his little passenger clasping tightly to his head. The street became narrower now, flanked by bulbous stone balusters, between which flashed glimpses of an oily river. The muscles

in Niall's thighs tensed effortlessly as they met the incline of Foss Bridge, and thereby began another series of pubs. 'King's Arms Hotel, Parties Catered For', shouted the huge advertisement painted on an end gable; whilst some fifty paces ahead, Sean was passing beneath a sign for Magnet Ales. And in between were narrow jetty-fronted shops and grand emporia, an exotic-looking picture house, a barber and a confectioner, fresh fish and iron-monger, wagon repair, garage and cycle dealer . . .

Finally reaching the Army and Navy Stores, which marked the end of the thoroughfare, his quarry rounded a corner. Niall rushed to catch up, and his mood darkened into fury. Nora had been right. Waiting beneath the gold-painted carving of a ram, which dangled from a bracket and was an emblem of the Golden Fleece public house, stood a pretty young woman, obviously well acquainted with Sean. At his arrival her face lit up, and she touched his arm with such familiarity that there could be no mistake.

'Sorry I'm late,' Niall heard his brother say as he himself made a swift diversion to avoid catching up with them, almost dislodging Juggy in the process, and pretended to be looking in a shop window.

'You're not, I'm early,' the woman replied. Then, to Niall's horror, she added curiously, 'Is that little girl waving at you?'

As Sean wheeled to face him with a guilty look on his face, a childish voice hissed, 'They've seen

us, Dad! But don't worry, I'll fix it.' And she called cheerfully from her father's shoulders, 'It's all right, Uncle Sean, we're not following you! Me dad's just come to buy summat from this shop!'

'Since when has he worn women's corsets?' muttered Sean, glaring knowingly at Niall.

For a few angry seconds the brothers faced each other, sharing the same defiant pose. Then, as ever, it was Sean who turned away first, steering his bemused lady friend from the scene and leaving an equally disgruntled Niall to return home.

'And where did they go?' demanded his outraged wife and in-laws, when he had reported all this to them several minutes later.

'How do I know?' Divested of Juggy, who had gone to get ready for bed, even though it was still light, Niall flexed his cramped shoulder muscles. 'I stopped following them.'

'Clot!' accused the cold-eyed Nora, to supportive murmurs from her daughters, who were gathered round him.

Already simmering, Niall fixed her with a warning glare. 'I wasn't going to have an embarrassing confrontation in the street!'

Ellen recognised that her mother had tested his good nature too far, and said hurriedly as he carved a passage through the women, 'Well, it's sufficient to know that Sean was with that woman, Mam. It doesn't really matter where they went, does it?'

'No, indeed, the snake-eyed traitor!' Nora

backed off from Niall, though it did not stop her venting her disgust on his brother.

Harriet too spoke her piece, obviously expecting Niall to listen. With strained patience he beheld her objectionable face, which was shaped like a cardboard shoe box, its expression and features similarly hard. 'So what are you going to do about it?' she demanded.

'Don't fret! The minute he gets home I'll be waiting for him. I'm not having this family brought into disrepute.' With a look of grim determination, Niall finally got to rest his aching body in an armchair, the brown artificial leather creaking as he slumped upon it. Purchased in a moment of rebellion against having his home cluttered with Nora's belongings, aside from the fireplace it was one of the few tokens of modernity about the house. Faced with that looming monstrous presence that was the sideboard, Niall bent to remove his boots, then thought better of it. Nora would no doubt start wittering at him, and besides, he'd only have to put them on again when he went to confront Sean. Contenting himself with loosening their laces, he threw an abstracted smile of gratitude at Ellen, who had replenished his glass with Guinness, and whilst she herself supervised the children's bedtime prayers, he opened the evening newspaper.

But, as before, he found himself reading the same line several times due to the angry commentary of his mother-in-law as she waited by the front window

for the perpetrator's return. Normally he could ignore her, but tonight his own annoyance with Sean made this impossible, and eventually he left the room to seek refuge in the outside lavatory. How could someone of five foot two make her presence so felt? For if there was one anomaly about Nora Beasty it was that she looked much larger in photographs than in real life. Niall recalled his first sighting of her, when his relationship with Ellen had grown serious and she had produced a family snapshot as a preview to what Niall could expect upon making their acquaintance. If he had felt intimidated then by those steel-grey eyes, the iron jaw and hawkish nose, he had felt even more so at meeting Nora in the flesh, for her personality filled the room – much like her sideboard. Yet he had been astounded at how short she was. Short and stout and determined. Wide those hips might be, yet there was barely a hint of femininity about Nora, rather an armour-platedness; and despite the scallops of lace at collar and cuffs, the delicate chain of the locket she wore, and the slender gold band of her wristwatch, there was a mannish strength to her arm. Niall had been quite alarmed, for was it not said that a woman grew into her mother?

Thankfully, Ellen's jaw was not so square, her face softened by a fringe of brown curls; she had a maternal tenderness in her clear blue eyes that Nora could never have possessed, even in girlhood. For although Nora had been very good to him in many respects, there lurked behind that

initial smile of welcome the hint of a nastier side, which he had quickly discovered could be evoked at the drop of some harmless comment, and woe betide anyone who crossed her. A much younger man then, he had avoided doing or saying anything that might upset his mother-in-law – not that Niall was the type to go around upsetting folk just for the sake of it, nor was he someone who shrank from a fight, it was simply that he couldn't see the point in disrupting an otherwise ordered life by indulging in petty squabbles with the matriarch, even if she did regularly test his patience. But short of hitting her, he could not alter her wilful character – and one could not hit a woman. So for the sake of keeping everyone happy, if things got too much he would simply leave the room, and for the next thirteen years this was the way he had orchestrated his marriage. He could not say that he himself was ecstatically happy – what labouring man could boast contentment with his lot? – but so long as he had a steady job, a roof over his head, and his children were healthy and well fed, he would never complain. It could have been far worse. The rest of the daughters – not just the younger pair, Dolly and Harriet, but also the other two who had flown the nest – all were quite plain, their eyes slightly protuberant and grey like their mother's, their hair nondescript and their figures unappealing, and he counted himself lucky to have landed the only one amongst them who was reasonable-looking. Whilst no

raving beauty, Ellen had the ability to look clean and trim, even when she was up to her eyes in housework, always having a tasty meal ready for him, and she was a wonderful mother to his children. The only characteristic she shared with her sisters was those thin lips, which showed a proclivity for intolerance and spite. Niall had come to know that this was not mere fancy, the amount of times they had ganged up on folk over the years. For a second he rather pitied his brother, who looked set to experience the full strength of their wrath; but for only a second. Never by any stretch of the imagination would he himself behave in such an overhasty manner should anything befall Ellen.

Which was why, the instant his lookout gave warning that Sean had arrived home, Niall was out of the door and over the road in the time it took to tie his bootlaces.

‘Don’t try creeping in!’

About to cross the threshold, Sean jumped and spun round, then retorted in anger, ‘Why should I creep into me own house?’

‘You know bloody well why!’ accused Niall.

Sean scoffed in disgust. ‘If you think I’m going to explain myself to you – you’re t’one who should be explaining, spying on me like that!’

‘I wouldn’t have to spy if you had any sense of right and wrong!’ Niall’s dark, shaggy eyebrows were arched in disbelief. ‘For God’s sake, your wife’s hardly cold!’