BBC Education Scotland

Scottish Short Stories

The Face

by Brian McCabe

He didn't want to see the face.

It was like a railway tunnel, except this tunnel sloped down the way, down through the dripping darkness, down into the deep, dark ground. He could see the dark shine of the rails and he could feel the ridges of the wooden sleepers through the soles of his gym shoes. It was very dark. He was glad his father was there with him.

It would be good to go back up to the daylight now, where the miners were sitting round a brazier, eating their pieces and drinking hot tea from big tins with wire handles. One of them had given him a piece and let him drink some tea from his tin and had pointed to different birds and told him their names, while the other miners talked about the pit and how it was closing. One of them had said he'd be quite happy never to see the face again.

He remembered the first time he'd heard about it: his father came in late from the pit and walked into the kitchen very slowly and sat down still with his coat on. Then he took off his bunnet and looked at it and put it on the kitchen table and talked to his mother in the quiet voice not like his usual voice. Like he couldn't say what he wanted to say, like when some of the words get swallowed. Because somebody had got killed at the face, John Ireland had got killed at the face, so he'd had to go to Rosewell to tell his wife. That was why he was late. Then his mother took a hanky out of her apron pocket and sat down and started crying, and his father put his hands on her shoulders and kissed her like it was Christmas except this was a different kind of kiss. Then his father looked up at him and nodded to him to tell him to go through to the other room, so he went through and watched TV and wondered how the face had killed John Ireland, the man who ran the boxing gym for boys, and how something terrible could make people need to kiss each other.

He could hear the water from the roof of the tunnel and trickling down the walls and the scrape and crunch of his father's pit boots on the ground. They sounded too loud, but in the dark you had to hold on to sounds, like when you shut your eyes and pretended to be blind, hold on to them to stop yourself hearing what was behind them, where it was like the darkness was listening.

Every few steps he could see the wooden props against the walls, but they were nearly as dark as the walls. And he could just make out the shapes of the wooden sleepers and the rails, but he didn't like the darkness between the sleepers and the props. If you looked at darkness like that too long you started seeing things in it: patterns, shapes, faces….

He listened to his father's voice. It sounded too loud, and crackly like a fire, but you could hold on to it. He was telling him about the bogeys that used to run up and down on the rails in the old days, taking the coal up to the pithead. It was good to hear his father's voice talking about the old days, but he didn't like the sound of the bogeys. He asked what a bogey was and listened as his father told him it was sort of like a railway carriage on a goods train. He knew that anyway, but he wanted to hear his father telling him again, just in case.

There were other bogeys – bogeymen. He asked if there were bogeymen down the pit. His father laughed and said that there weren't. But he knew different, he knew that it was dark enough down here for bogeymen, especially now the word had been said out loud. Bogeymen.

Sometimes if you said a word over and over again it started to sound different. It started to mean something else, to mean what it sounded like it meant. Then, if you kept on saying it over and over again, it started to not mean anything, the word started to be a thing. And the thing didn't mean anything except what it was.

He tried it now, saying it under his breath over and over again, bogeymen, bogeymen, bogeymen, bogeymen….But before the word could lose its meaning, his father stopped walking. He stopped too and turned, glad that they were going to go back up to the light, to the ordinary world.

'You go on,' said his father.

At first he wondered what his father meant, then he knew: he wanted him to keep on walking down into the dark. Alone. He pretended not to have heard and took a step towards the entrance of the tunnel, then he felt his father's hand on his shoulder and his heart pounding in his chest.

'Down you go,' said his father.

He didn't move. He didn't say anything, hoping that his father would lose his patience with him and change his mind.

'Are you feart?' said his father.

'Naw, but…'

'But what? He turned to the darkness. He could still see the rails and the props and the sleepers, but only just. He didn't want to see the face.

'Go on.'

He started walking down into the darkness. He had sometimes seen it in his dream, after his father had come home late and spoken in the quiet voice to his mother about John Ireland: at first there was just the dark, the pitch-black dark that was blacker than the coal, because even coal wasn't always black, because sometimes it was blue or grey, and sometimes it had a dark shine to it, like the cover of the Bible, and sometimes it had seams – of fool's gold, or the thin, brittle, silvery seams of mica – but the darkness in the dream had no shine to it, no seams, it was pure black. Then you felt it there like a shadow in the dark, a shadow that went long and went wide, went thick like a wall and thin like a thread, then the shadow had the shape of a man and the man had a face and the face was the face of John Ireland.

He stopped walking, turned round and looked back at his father. He called to him and asked if he'd gone far enough.

'Further.'

It was good to hear his father's voice behind him, but it didn't last long enough to hold on to. Why didn't his father walk down further too? Why did he have to walk down on his own? Sometimes his father liked him to walk in front of him along the street. 'Walk in front of me,' he'd say, 'where I can see you.' Like the time he'd taken him to the gym to see John Ireland and he'd seen John Ireland's face. It looked like a bulldog's with a flattened nose and a crushed ear and big, bloodshot eyes. In the dream it looked worse. In the dream, somehow you forgot it was the face of an old boxer. John Ireland had given him a pair of boxing gloves. He'd tied them together and put them round his neck on the way home. And his father had told him to walk in front where he could see him. But that wasn't the reason, not the real reason he wanted him to walk in front. It was because he wanted to dream about his son being a champion boxer. He hadn't gone back to the gym because his mother had put her foot down, but he still put the gloves on sometimes and pretended to be a champion boxer. Now there wasn't a gym because of what happened at the face.

Maybe it wouldn't be like the face in his dream, but he still didn't want to see it. He stopped and turned round. He could still see the dark shape of his father against the light from the start of the tunnel. He shouted to him and waited.

'Go on.'

His father's voice faded to an echo.

He turned and walked further into the dark, the pitch-black dark even blacker than coal, then he felt it there, a shadow in the dark…. He stopped, turned and shouted to his father. He could still see the dim, greyish light from the start of the tunnel, but now he couldn't see his father. He shouted out again. His own voiced echoed and he heard the fear in it, then all there was was the listening darkness all around and the pounding of his heart. The shadow had the shape of a man and the man had a face….

As he turned to run away he was lifted in the air and his father's laughter filled his ear. He was laughing and saying he was proud, proud of him because he'd walked down on his own, proud because now he was a man.

He rubbed the bus window with his hand and looked out at the big, black wheel of the pit. He watched it getting smaller as the bus pulled away, till it was out of sight.

'Why are they gonnae shut the pit? Is there nae coal left in it?' he asked.

'There's plenty coal,' said his father, angrily.

'Why then?'

'The government wants it shut.'

'Where'll ye go tae work then?'

'Mibbe in Bliston Glen.'

'Is that another pit?'

'Aye.'

He waited a minute, then he asked, 'Has it got a face as well?'

'Aye, it's got a face.'

'Is it like the face in your pit?'

His father shrugged. 'Much the same.'

'Ah saw it.'

'What?'

'The Face.'

His father shook his head and smiled at him, the way he did when he thought he was too young to understand something.

'Ah did see it.'

'Oh ye did, did ye? What did it look like then?'

'It looked like the man who ran the gym.'

And he knew he'd said something very important when his father stopped smiling, turned pale, opened his mouth to say something but didn't say anything, then stared and stared at him – as if he couldn't see him at all, but only the face of the dead man.

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