

THE RETURN OF OISÍN

I am fallen here, in this Wicklow glen, like a dead leaf on the floor of the forest. I am the dried husk of summer, waiting to be crushed into the earth, unable to move without the help of those who, a moment ago, thought me some kind of god. They look down at me, horrified; one minute they were seeing a fine warrior on a white horse, the next minute an ancient withered man, transformed as soon as I touched the soil of Ireland. The people's faces are coarse and cowardly, their limbs puny; I have seen no one here that has a quarter of the strength or nobility of my companions of old. But every one of them is stronger than me now.

Yet the summer is as sweet as it ever was, though the noise of the forest is torture to me now, in this woody glen, so full of life. Full of sap rising, birds building, bees humming, linnets, thrushes, and ringdoves. All is flowering, all is alive and full to bursting. And the bells of the Christian priests tell me over and over again that my world has gone.

It was in another such beautiful glen, in autumn, that I hunted with my father, Fionn Mac Cumhaill, and my son, Oscar, near Loch Leane in the south. In autumn, that place has the saddest beauty, the beauty of a world about to change. It was a clear, cold morning that we started out.

'Oisín,' my father called out. 'You take your company down by the lake. I think there are the tracks of a young fawn down there.'

I nodded, although I resented my father telling me how to go about the hunt. I knew I still had things to learn from him about woodcraft and magic, but he was no longer the man he had once been; bitter lines had been etched on his mouth since Diarmaid's betrayal of him and his of Diarmaid. Lines were on his forehead from the long battle with his old companion, Goll. Yet still I felt as if I walked in his shadow. But as I made my way down towards the lakeside, I forgot him in my joy in the beauty of the mountains and the water and the excitement of the hunt.

Then I stopped, for riding towards me over the hillside was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. Her skin was whiter than a white rose. Her hair was the gold of the sun, her eyes the colour of a thrush's egg. She rode a fine white horse, with golden reins and saddle, and as she came towards me, I could see that her eyes were shining with joy.

'I have found you at last,' she said as she approached me. 'Oisín, I have sought you long, and come so far to find you, for I have seen you in dreams



Opposite:
Killarney woods.

