

FEELING SOUND

By Babette Gallard

The heat of the cows sat like rotting fruit in Daniel's throat. He gagged. Ryan thrust the hose at him without looking up — the gesture clear and commanding, the way all language was for Daniel: a pressure, a vibration, a shape in the air. He followed it. He always followed it. The slap from two days ago still lived in his skin.

His gut coiled. Why did Niall have to go?

Without Niall, his eldest brother, milking was just another chore that ground the days into dust. Without Niall, nothing was the same. The laughter was gone. He remembered walking with Kate to the gate the day Niall left — how Niall had turned and said, "That's far enough, Ma. Otherwise, you'll be catching the bus back." He'd been laughing. Daniel had felt the laugh more than heard it, the way he felt everything: in his chest, his jaw, the soles of his feet.

"Army," Daniel recalled the burr in Kate's voice when her body had stiffened to mimic the firing of a gun. "It's like when yer da shoots rabbits, 'cept Niall's off fightin' for the British and their World War instead. But don't you worry, he'll be back soon." Then she held her thumb and forefinger together, leaving a slice of light in between. "Soon."

How long was *soon*? He made the shape again and saw the slice of light. Felt the shockwave of gunfire. The boom of it mixed with the rush and hush of Ryan's sweeping slurry. Daniel pressed his hands flat against his ears, feeling the painful moan rise, sharp as bile, in his throat.

"What's up with you now?" Ryan shouted, as the cows skittered away, frightened by the boy's noise.

Boom! Boom! Slush! Hush!

The sounds slithered like worms across Daniel's back.

Slush! Hush!

"Where're ye goin'?" Ryan called after him.

Daniel felt the question but ran out all the same, spider-legged and lopsided in oversized boots.

He was gone for three days, hiding like a hare, sleeping in sheep dugouts, rolling in wet grass.

"How far did you ride, Ryan?" Kate asked.

"Over twenty miles, the mare and I. But Daniel could hide behind any tree, and I'd still not see him when I passed." His voice wavered. "I won't find him if he doesn't want to be found."

Brendan, the middle brother, had been searching, too, but he preferred to walk. "He'll be back like the bad old penny you can't get rid of."

"And what would you know about that?" Kate's voice was sharp, red flecks sparking in her cheeks.

"Maybe I know how he feels," Brendan said, pulling a letter from his pocket.

"Anyway, it doesn't matter now."

The letter was a day old; the English postmark clear.

Ryan leaned down from his mare. "One son is enough. The English can look elsewhere for their soldiers."

"Too late for that," Brendan replied, his eyes bright.

"You promised." Kate's voice was tight, her hand at her neck as if to hide the butterfly pulse fluttering there. "Niall, but not you, our only son left."

"And Daniel?" Brendan stepped closer. "What's he?"

“Half a boy. And deaf, too.” Ryan chewed on his lip. “But God help me, I’ll not complain.”

Brendan left, and the weeks passed quietly enough afterwards. In the mornings, dawn mingled with the chill air as always, while the mares huffed hungrily into their troughs. Those early hours were Ryan’s time, his voice the only one in his head, counting yearlings and selecting sires for next year. The rest, milking and feeding, could wait for the waking day when he would answer to Kate.

“Is it time?” Kate stirred beside him.

“No hurry,” Ryan rolled away to hunch on the bed’s edge. “I’ll get Daniel to help with the feed.”

“Well, you’ve a short memory.” Her eyes were wide and accusing. “Wasn’t it just a month ago you said—”

“He’s all we’ve got,” Ryan cut her off, his head in his hands, “and he’ll have to learn until the others come back.”

Daniel woke as they woke, the house rhythms nudging him like a hand on his back. He stretched, long and taut, his skin tingling against the cold sheet and the rough hair of Cass, Brendan’s dog.

“Have you got her in with you again?” Ryan leaned around the half-open door. “Your ma’ll kill you if she sees.”

Nudged, the dog slipped out, shadow-soft.

Ryan watched the boy pull on his clothes, struck by how he seemed to grasp things said beyond spoken words. “You understood that well enough. Now up and out, you lazy scamp. The horses need seeing to.”

In the yard, father and son plunged their heads into the teeth of the trough’s frosted water.

“You see to the mares, but don’t get under their feet,” Ryan warned. “They’ll not thank you if you make ’em skittish.”

In the paddock, four youngsters were restless and ready for sale, their value rising as petrol grew scarcer. A strange blessing for the farm amid the curses of war.

Ryan leaned on the fence, watching them feed. He had considered putting one of the older horses to the plough for another field of corn, but for that, he needed help — another son.

Daniel walked over to his father, touched his nose twice, and then touched it again.

“What’s that for?” Ryan slapped the back of his son’s head. “Sure, but there’s nothing in that brain of yours. Now, off you go and see to the chores.”

But Ryan watched as Daniel stopped by the old mare. Something was wrong. Her flanks were heaving and wet.

He walked over and saw why. “Placenta’s stuck,” he said, nodding at the red mass sticking out from under her tail, its scent rising thick and earthy. “We’ll lose the both of them if we don’t move quick.” Ryan made a slashing gesture with one hand. “Go and ask Ma for a knife.”

But Daniel’s eyes drifted away, as silent and stubborn as the stones under his feet.

Ryan was silenced, too, not by words but by the weight of their absence. A tremor of uncertainty slipping through him as he watched Daniel lift the mare’s tail. Then he stared, rooted and helpless, as his son, with fingers still slender as saplings, tore through the blood-slick membrane and let the viscous fluid flood over his boots.

The mare’s body quivered with contractions. Daniel pressed his cheek against her boiling flank.

“Move away,” Ryan warned, his voice sharp-edged with concern. “I’ll need to help the foal out, and the mare’ll kick when I start.”

But Daniel stayed.

Ryan found his son's eyes. "I can't do this alone." He pulled Daniel's hand into the dark, slippery space under the mare's tail. "Can you feel the head?" He pointed to his own with his free hand. "Can you feel it?"

Daniel moaned.

"Push it toward me," Ryan instructed, using his own head to indicate the direction. "Slowly now. Easy."

The foal was a pulse of life between them, moving from one hand to the next, turning in the dark current of the womb. Then, they saw two dimples in the taut skin poking out between her hind legs.

"Nostrils." Ryan breathed heavily, his relief cracking like sticks through the tension. "We've got him."

One more pull and the foal slithered out onto the ground, still bound in its bag of skin. Daniel scored the membrane with the edge of his nail, a swift, tender violence that parted it like wet silk, then knelt down to bite through the swollen umbilical.

Later in the evening, Ryan sat across from Kate, drinking the hoppy dregs of a home brew, the day's events settling like silt in his mind.

"Daniel must've been watching me with the mares at foaling time. It's like he already knew what to do, though I've never taught him."

"But what he did — with the sack..." Kate's words fell over each other, half-formed. "With... his bare hands."

Ryan dropped his head, weariness tugging at his features. "He tore it open like the wild animals do. Like the fox or the hare. Daniel, our son, Kate. Our wild son."

"And where is he now?" she asked.

"I don't know, Kate. I don't know."

Ryan went out after that and stood a long time by the paddock fence. The foal was on its feet now, knocking against its mother's side. He thought about the sight of Daniel's hands in the dark — steady, certain, reading something Ryan couldn't. The boy knew. Had always known, maybe. And what had Ryan ever done but swat that knowledge away like something that bothered him?

He pressed his palms flat on the fence rail and held them there until the wood's cold came through. He could have said something to Kate. Something that matched what he'd seen. But the words, when he reached for them, were gone.

He went inside and said nothing.

When Daniel wasn't there, he was here, lying on the hillside, where the earth smelled sweet and free, in the space where the wind whispered secrets he knew the stones would keep. He pressed his cheek against the old oak and felt the world's pulse move through the bark and into his jaw, the way it always had: not sound exactly, but its shadow. The colt was strong now, following Daniel to the fence each morning like a debt repaid.

The sun was high. Thirst pricked at the edges of his thoughts. He rubbed soil off his cheek and went down to the stream on all fours to lap like a dog.

His reflection wavered in greeting, and with it came the skin-prickling echo of Niall's voice, light and bubbling like spring water over stone.

"That's you, ye eejit. Your own big, ugly mug looking back for all the world to see."

Daniel dipped his hands into the slick algae, searching for fish breathing in their quiet, hidden places. Slivers of light danced across the current, evasive and weightless, like words. He watched his own tears join the stream and saw, for a fleeting moment, the shape of his loneliness. For the first time in his life, he longed to hear the sounds he had only ever felt in his silent world.

Daniel returned home as he always did now, quietly but still as unpredictable as the weather. This time, Kate, stepping tiptoed over the slurry puddles in the yard, felt the change in the air's rhythm as he emerged through the shadows. She saw his smile without looking and knew the shape of his mouth, long and loose like his hair.

"You had us worried there," she scolded, lifting a milk-wet finger.

Daniel's smile stayed, knowing her scolding was only for show because she'd seen how he didn't disappear to escape. He disappeared to remember. To sort and reset the world into pieces that made sense.

Kate smiled back at him, her long-limbed skinny son, who she loved more than anything, even though her chest ached with the weight of it all, not knowing how to protect a boy who the world refused to see for what he was. She reached up, brushing the side of her neck where her pulse fluttered. Her body speaking despite her commands to be still. "Lord, grant me strength," she whispered to herself. Then to Daniel, "Yer da's in the barn. He needs your help."

Help? His look tilted, questioning.

"The daughter of the new man up at Killglass House is here. Wants a horse."

If Daniel caught Kate's irritation, he didn't show it. But he recognised the word: *Killglass*. The name people bowed their heads for, even when they said they didn't.

He walked over to the open barn door, but the scent reached him first, sweet and sharp, like metal and flowers curdled into one. The girl, Ellen, stood in a slab of dust-busy light carved out from the air by the one and only window. She was examining her nails. Her arms gleamed, bare, bright and foreign in their smoothness.

"You'll not be ridin' him bareback, Miss," Ryan said, holding the bridle firm. His voice had softened into the rare politeness he kept for people with big names and money. "He's young yet."

“I don’t mind. Bareback riding can wait,” Ellen said, tilting her head in a way that hinted at expectation. “Though I hope he’ll be trained and ready for it soon. I want to show my brother what I can do.” The smirk that followed was small and certain, the kind that didn’t need an audience.

Daniel caught it. He didn’t know her brother, but he knew that smirk — the shape of it, the angle. He’d seen it on Brendan’s face a hundred times, aimed at him.

“He will be.” Ryan nodded as Kate came in from behind, carrying the saddle, oiled and polished, smelling of beeswax. Daniel moved aside to let her pass.

“Fine mornin’ for riding, Miss Ellen,” Kate said, her face caught somewhere between curtsy and defiance.

Daniel smiled and felt the shape of a sound form in his throat. Ellen glanced at him just once, a flick of her eyes that landed chill like rain.

Kate noticed and silently cursed the English and their uppity ways. Ellen’s father had bought Killglass House from the old widow, the last of a once-grand Irish family. He’d filled it with mirrors and help and strange fruit no one around here could name. People said the girl was only visiting for the summer, maybe longer, maybe not at all. She was in no hurry to decide.

Ryan led the young gelding out and stood him beside the mounting box he’d built for girls like Ellen. “You can use this,” he said, nodding down. “Better not to pull too much on a youngster.”

Daniel watched as Ellen climbed up like she’d done it a hundred times before, though she laughed awkwardly when the saddle creaked loudly. Daniel flinched. Maybe it was the sound, or maybe it was anger. Ryan had never let *him* ride. Backing the youngsters had been Niall’s job, then Brendan’s, for a time, until he’d been thrown once too often because he

didn't have what Ryan called "the feel". Now they were both gone and still no one thought to try Daniel.

"Do you like horses?" she asked suddenly, turning to him. Her voice had the easy confidence of someone used to filling silences that weren't hers to fill.

Daniel watched her voice curl in the air like a ribbon, but the words were strange on her lips and unfamiliar in their shapes.

"He's deaf," Ryan said, stepping in. "He lip-reads a bit, but maybe not so easily with your English accent." His voice was soft and suppliant. "Daniel loves his horses, especially the colt."

Colt. Daniel knew this word's shape and knew that the colt was his. Only his. No one else could touch him because he remembered who had reached into his mother's cave and brought him out with bare hands.

"I'm Ellen," she said, looking at Daniel with the patience of someone performing kindness. Then she leaned forward in the saddle. "You must be the quiet one everyone talks about."

Daniel nodded. *The quiet one. The half-boy.* He preferred that to the other names he'd seen whispered after him at the market. *Moron, idiot. Shite.*

The gelding shifted beneath her. Ryan stepped in to adjust the girth.

Daniel moved closer, not just because he was meant to help but because of the scent of her hair, which was sweet like strawberries, or so he thought.

A flash of gold flickered on her wrist as she tugged at the stirrup, her leg caught in its leather.

He reached out. Not for her — not exactly — but for the sound he imagined thrumming beneath her skin. He could almost feel it: a warmth, a vibration, like the colt's throbbing veins when he pressed his palm flat against its neck. The gold bracelet swung and

caught the light and the light moved through him and it seemed, for just that instant, that if he touched it he might feel the sound of it against his palm — the way he felt the bees in the wall of the barn, the way he felt rain before it fell.

His fingers grazed the leather of the stirrup. The warmth of her leg was there, sudden and alive. He hadn't thought past that. He had no word for what he'd done, no frame for the look that crossed her face. She was staring down at him and her eyes were wide and her mouth was open and then came —

The scream. A high, thin wail, like a crow trapped behind glass.

"He touched me!" Ellen cried, wild-eyed, breath short. "He — he grabbed my leg!"

Kate ran first. Ryan behind. The gelding sidestepped.

Daniel stepped back, hand high in the air, palm wide and open.

"Jesus Christ, Daniel!" Ryan's voice cracked like a whip. "What the hell were you thinkin'?"

Kate reached out to Ellen and helped her slide down off the saddle.

"You're all right, love. He didn't mean — he wouldn't..."

But the damage was done. Ellen bit her lip, and tears prickled her cheeks like rain on glass.

The warmth of her skin still lived in his fingertips. He pressed them together, trying to hold it, trying to understand why the thing he'd felt had become the thing on her face.

Ryan's jaw clenched. "Inside! Now! Before I do something I'll regret."

Daniel ran. Out of the gate. Across the field. Through the long grass that hissed and whispered *go, go, go*, in green syllables. He didn't look back.

He curled beneath the hawthorn tree, where thorns caught in his shirt and tore at his arms. He pressed his hands to his cheeks to rub away the slap of Ellen's scream. He hadn't

grabbed her the way she thought. He'd only reached for the echo of the song that had shimmered like clouds over her body.

From his hiding place in the hedge, he watched her father arrive in a long grey car, the tyres grinding gravel as it turned into the yard. He walked over to Ryan, spoke a few clipped words and then gestured to Ellen to get into the back seat. She went without looking back — not at the yard, not at the barn, not toward the hedge where Daniel lay watching. She had already moved on to whatever came next. That was the thing about people like her. The world rearranged itself around their feelings and then continued.

Kate, in the parlour, scrubbed at the milk pail harder than she needed to, the cloth twisting beneath her fingers like rope. She could still hear the scream and knew how it would forever split the rest of their days into before and after.

The enamel of the pail was cracked in places, flakes drifting away like tiny white sailboats. Kate poured out the water and watched it spiral down the drain, wishing the past could wash away as easily. The past that had birthed Daniel and his silence. The past that had taken Niall first, then Brendan. The present that left her and Ryan never quite sure what for or why.

She knew Daniel hadn't meant harm. He'd reached out like a dog sniffing a pocket, searching for what the world kept hidden from him. But a hand is a hand, and a girl's leg is a girl's leg, and when they met like that, the story would write itself before anyone could speak. Kate felt the old rage then. Not at Daniel but at the way the world refused to learn his language because it was easier to fear or despise him.

Her mind drifted back to that day with the old mare and to Daniel working beside Ryan, steady and sure, just as he'd described. Daniel knew, she thought. He knew what to do, though no one had ever taught him. And yet, the moment his world collided with what he'd

never been given the chance to understand, that would be the only part of him they'd remember.

Kate dried her hands on her apron and stared out at the yard where Ryan was still with the gelding who had broken loose in the flurry. He was trying to calm what couldn't be calmed. Not speaking since sending Daniel off like a curse. And now, and no surprise, the boy had vanished again.

Daniel came back a week later, but no one said a word about what had happened with Ellen. No one knew how. Kate busied herself, preparing for Brendan's first leave home.

"I'll make his favourite meal tonight," she told Ryan.

Brendan was still training somewhere outside Dublin — Kate didn't know exactly where — and due to ship out before the month was gone. It was Niall she'd written to about the girl, because she didn't know how else to say it. Niall must have passed it on, because when they sat down to eat, it was clear Brendan knew everything.

"Everyone's talking about the girl. You should do what the Father says and have him put away." He tilted his chin toward Daniel, standing outside by the fence. "He'll do something worse next time. You'll see."

Kate got up from the table and walked out to Daniel, tutting at the frayed shirt hanging loose over his scrawny belly. "When did you last eat? Anyway, I've apples to sort inside, and that'll keep you busy till it's time for bed."

A week later, Brendan walked down the valley with Ryan while Kate watched from the yard until the trees swallowed them both. Then she hunkered low on her heels like a cat and wept.

Daniel, in his tree, felt his father and brother coming before he saw them. He knew their steps. Brendan's new boots were sharp and clipped, leaving edges in the earth. Ryan's tread was uneven after a bad fall.

Daniel peered through the leaves, wanting to memorise the shape of their outlines as they walked away, shimmering and shifting in the sun, like the reflection of his own face in the stream.

This time, she hadn't walked him to the gate.

That Sunday, Father McBride came down the valley path for the first time in years. He'd got fat, and walked with the righteousness of a man who already knows the end of the story.

Kate made tea but didn't serve it. Ryan stood near the back door like he might bolt.

Father McBride spoke in soft syllables, their meaning blunt as a spade hit over the head. "Something must be done. There's a lot of concern."

Kate's mouth twisted. "What kind of concern would that be?"

"I've arranged for the boy to be enrolled at the school. They'll take him for a time. See what can be learned. He needs structure. God's order. Routine."

"He's not a dog," Kate snapped.

"No," said McBride. "But neither is he fit to roam free."

When McBride left, Kate peeled potatoes while Ryan sat on the stool by the back door and oiled the same boot over and over until the leather was slack and too slick to wear. Kate watched him, his head bent to the work, the lamp making his shadow long and shapeless on the wall. She wanted him to look up. To say: *not our son. Not while I'm standing*. But he didn't look up. And she didn't ask him to.

"You'll have to tell him about the school," he told Kate. "You know better than me how."

Daniel knew what was coming. He didn't resist. He knew the children who would be there. He'd seen their mouths at the market — the shapes they made when his back was turned, the way a mouth could be a weapon as easily as a hand.

The next morning, Kate packed Niall's old satchel with a pencil stub and an apple. Daniel held it by the strap and felt the leather — worn smooth in the places where Niall's fingers had been. He put it over his shoulder and felt the weight of it, which was almost nothing.

Ryan walked him to the turn in the road without speaking. At the fork, he stopped and pointed left, his face set and unreadable. Then he turned back the way they'd come.

Daniel watched his father's retreating figure until the road bent and took him. Then he turned and walked, feeling the gravel shift beneath his boots, the hedges pressing close on either side, the world narrowing to a path he hadn't chosen and couldn't name.

Then, one night, one of the bitterest, when frost silvered the trough and the moon rose, sharp-edged and mean, the colt came to him. Soft-eyed. Steady. Breathing his breath into Daniel's open hand.

Though the air was sharp, he walked with the colt down to the stream, where moonlight danced on the current in silver slivers.

Daniel watched as the colt drank from the place where the fish breathed in their quiet, hidden world. Then, from deep within, a sound rose in his throat that was as raw and bright, sharp and sweet as larks rising into the sky. He felt its vibration in his bones and sensed that this was something to hold onto. To repeat. To remember. Even now, after everything, the world had not cast him out and still spoke to him through water, breath, and skin.

Ryan sat bolt upright in bed, startled by the sound.

"Kate, did ye hear that? Like a wolf, if we could ever have such a thing here."

Kate turned her face into the cool side of the pillow and let the tears flow.