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Opening extract from
**The Hounds of
Morrigan**

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Prologue

RISING up into the air, they took to the sky and flew. From west and beyond west, into the wind and through it, they came past countless moons and suns. One laughed and briefly wore a scarf of raindrops in her hair, and then with wicked feet she kicked a cloud and caused rain to swamp a boat.

At times, they dived into the track of the moon in the dark sea-water and opened their mouths to swallow the silver. At times, they plunged into the path of the sun in the green-blue ocean and opened their mouths and drank the gold.

All the time invisible; except once, when they swooped down on a basking shark and frightened it silly by making faces at it. Then they showed it their *real* faces and it dived down, down, to the bottom of its world and stayed quivering for hours.

All the time silent; except when they tapped their teeth with their finger-nails and sent lightning; or when they laughed with elation and caused thunder.

They had been silent for so long.

Silent, while man followed man as tiny blushes of life.

They laughed when they flew in over Connemara, where the wild, greedy Atlantic takes long, blue bites out of the green land, and that laugh alone destroyed a field of yellowing oats, turning it ash-grey.

They reached Galway city and for fun sculpted three super-sonic bangs out of thin air, so that all the people ran into the streets and looked up to see a plane that wasn't there. Then they turned left, spinning and rolling up the east side of Lough Corrib *until they reached a certain signpost, ordinary and artless, which they blew on and set spinning like themselves*, before a final dive to earth behind a small hill. There they paused and took

form, and rapidly emerged into view, *two strange women riding a powerful motor-bike.*

All the time, their hounds followed them.

When they conversed, they called each other Macha and Bodbh, and they were in advance of and watched for the coming of the third one—The Mórrígan—who is the Great Queen. They made for a place called Kyledove, changing their names and their characters as they went

All this, because a boy was about to try to buy a book in the second-hand bookshop, in the small grey city of Galway.

Part One

Chapter 1

AFTER making sure that the shopping for Auntie Bina and his folded jacket were safely stowed in the saddle-bag, Pidge wheeled his bike through the crowded streets. The day was unpleasantly hot. People were moving slowly, as though drained of energy, and even the young Garda on point-duty looked half-asleep. He was swaying on his feet, beckoning the cars forward with only small movements of his wrist; and when at last he raised an arm in the air to stop the traffic, and turned to allow the waiting people to cross the road, Pidge saw a large damp patch of sweat on his shirt. It looked like the map of Australia.

The clock in the steeple of St. Nicholas' Church struck the half-hour.

Only half-past two, Pidge said to himself. I don't have to start for home for a good while yet.

He walked on, pausing once to stare after two nuns who walked through the lightly-dressed crowds.

How hot they must feel in their heavy clothes, he thought. And they have to wear stockings as well. It can't be much fun.

He turned into a side-street and saw, with pleasure, the newly opened second-hand bookshop. The window was pasted with red stickers announcing the event; and books of all sorts were displayed to their best advantage. Three brass balls still hung above the doorway.

That place has been boarded up for years and years—for as long as I can remember, anyway. It used to be a pawnshop long ago, he reflected. I'm really glad it's a second-hand bookshop now.

The outside of the shop hadn't been touched; the signboard under the brass balls was still impossible to read, just the same old flaked blue paint that had once said a name.

He wheeled his bike to the window and looked through the glass.

Inside all was bright and cheerful with fluorescent lighting; the shelving that was already well-stocked with books was of new wood, and from the parts of the floor that were visible, he could see that a new dark-brown carpet had been laid. The counter was just inside the window and the bookseller sat behind it. He was arguing with someone over the phone.

A small sign on white card at the front of the window offered to buy books, but stipulated that they must be in a good, clean condition. As Pidge examined the contents of the window, the bookseller covered the mouthpiece of the telephone with his hand and shouted:

'Don't lean that bike against the glass!'

Pidge was taken aback. He felt like answering:

'I wasn't going to!' But he was far too polite and instead, he wheeled his bike a little further on and propped it against the shop wall, thinking: They're all the same, these shopkeepers. I wouldn't mind but I've never actually seen anyone break a window with a bike.

The picture that this conjured up made him smile. He was still smiling as he went into the shop through the opened door. The bookseller scowled.

The shop was filled with books. The shelves were all tightly packed; and boxes and piles of books were stacked in low walls almost everywhere, allowing only a bare passage by the shelves and down the middle. Pidge moved along, picking out a book to dip into from time to time.

At length he was right at the back of the shop. Here a door stood open, leading into a small back room. Intrigued, Pidge went inside.

It was dark in the little room. The one source of light was a small lancet window set very high up; and with the light having been so bright in the new shop, it took time for his eyes to adjust.

It was full of junk, all sorts of junk; there were boxes and bags of it. Some of the things had once been elegant, made of silks and satins and bedecked with sequins, but all was tarnished and spoiled now by time and dust. There were tea-chests full of mouldy shoes and boots. On top of one of these

there was a concertina with a rip in it, and on another there was a collection of old fans, some with feathers that had moulted ages ago, leaving only the once-white ribs with a few tattered wisps of their former glory. There were tennis racquets that looked wavy and were without strings, a mirror that was dim with grime and a pair of rusted ice-skates.

'This must be all that's left of the old pawnshop,' he said quietly, feeling saddened.

At this point there were three loud bangs in the sky.

In the shop the bookseller leaped to his feet, and when Pidge craned his head to look, he saw him rush into the street. Just as he was about to follow after the bookseller to find out what was happening, a thin finger of sunlight beamed in from the little window above.

It was incredibly bright and it shone on a small package on the ground. Pidge picked up the package and found that it was simply some pages from an old book, tied in a bundle with string. The covers were missing but there was still a title-page. He examined it to see what the book had been about, to find out if it was worth reading. Even though the print used had an unfamiliar, squashed look about it, he saw that it said 'A Book Of Patrick's Writing'. All of the pages were dog-eared and had chewed edges; the top and bottom pages were rather grey.

It might be very boring, he thought.

While he was looking at the title, the finger of sunlight moved and lit up the pages in his hands. Pidge thought nothing of this, knowing that light moves all through the day, even though this seemed a bit fast; but suddenly he felt that he must have them! He must have these pages!

Not even caring now about the cross bookseller, or the sudden bangs in the sky, he marched back into the brightness of the shop.

The bookseller had not yet come back, but someone else was behind the counter, a thinnish old man with a great white moustache. He was deeply engrossed in the study of a paper with strange foreign writing on it.

He's a scholar, thought Pidge.

He stood for some moments waiting to be noticed. Just as he was about to speak, the man looked at him.

'Are you serving now?' Pidge asked.

The man nodded and smiled.

'I've always served,' he said.

Before Pidge could say anything else, the man added:

'You want to get rid of that in your hand? It's condition is bad—any price would be too high.'

'Oh no, you misunderstand,' Pidge hastened to say. 'I found this package in the back room. How much do you want for it, please?'

'Ah,' the man said softly. 'An old pledge from far-off days. Are you sure you want it?'

'If it doesn't cost too much,' said Pidge.

'Cost—ah, cost,' said the man thoughtfully. 'The price could be great, as I've said before. But money isn't the thing, is it?'

'No,' Pidge answered, not quite understanding his meaning.

'All that will burn in that back room is for burning, but we don't want that burned, do we? You would save it from the fire?'

'Yes, I would,' Pidge said.

He looked at the package. I don't know why I want it so much, but I do, he thought.

'Is there anything I could say that would stop you wanting this?' asked the man.

'No,' Pidge said, wondering at this peculiar question. 'I feel it's important to me.'

'Take it then and good luck to you,' the man said.

'No money?' Pidge asked.

'No money.'

At the front of the counter there was a small pile of cards, saying:

The New Second-Hand Bookshop Tel: 7979

I'll take one of those just to show that I mean to be a proper customer in the future, he thought; and he slipped one into his trouser pocket.

'Thank you very much,' he said as he left the shop.

'Thank you,' the man replied, rather fervently, Pidge felt.

There was no room in the saddle-bag so Pidge stuffed the pages inside his shirt, flat against his chest. The bookseller

passed him by without noticing him, and he was muttering 'Supersonic Jets or similar rubbish!', in an angry way as he went back into his shop.

I'm glad that *he* didn't serve me, Pidge smiled to himself, while he carefully buttoned his shirt.

The clock in the steeple struck four.

'Good heavens!' he said. 'How time has flown—and if anything, the day has grown hotter!'

As soon as he began to ride his bike through the town, he at once saw that a change of some kind had taken place. There was an unusual atmosphere and the crowds in the streets were wildly excited, as if it were Race Week again, or some sort of Festival time. People were rushing everywhere and the young Garda on point duty was as frisky as a racehorse. He was leaping about with flailing arms as if he were trying to herd quicksilver. One or two people stood looking and pointing at the sky, gabbling, but not listening to each other. Pidge looked up but there was nothing to see.

As he made a right turn after he had passed the Franciscan church, he glanced back and saw the two nuns again, and he had the illusion that one nun was turning a cartwheel and another was trying to stand on her head.

He pulled up, got off his bike and really looked back. Disappointingly, all was normal.

'I could have sworn I saw it,' he said. 'It must have been my imagination unless they were men dressed up. Mummers or such.'

He cycled on. Very soon he turned up the rough track to The Dyke by the side of Lough Corrib, making his way to Terryland and then on to Shancreg where he lived.

Now he was alone, with only the mild wind from the lake and the scratching, rattling sound it made in the dry rushes that grew so thickly by the water's edge.

For no reason at all, he shivered.

He had left The Dyke and was well into the country when he realized that darkness seemed to be creeping in very early in the evening for August.

He looked west towards the lake which was now at some

distance, and saw that the sky beyond the Connemara mountains was dark blue with darker streaks of purple, and the waters of the lake were coloured violet and mulberry, and the mountains themselves were a blurred mistiness of astonishing darkness. These near mountains were the familiar Maamturks. Beyond them stood the Twelve Pins, a region of mountains which Pidge had visited more than once on days out.

His mind drifted from one thing to another, the strangeness in the city already half forgotten. His father would be coming back from Dublin to-morrow. He had been at the Horse Show all the past week.

He was going to buy a magnificent mare who would be the mother of wonderful young horses. She would be the best mare in the whole country and her foals would be the wonder of the world.

Pidge hoped that she would be the colour of milky coffee with a long, blonde tail and mane. He knew that she would have a beautiful head and that her muzzle would be a soft warm velvet. He could hardly bear to wait until he looked into her gentle and intelligent eyes for the very first time. Then there would be the lovely gradual friendship, growing stronger day by day.

'Could I have a few syllybyls with you, young sir?'

Pidge looked round him.

Sitting on the wall in amongst the bushes, so that he was almost hidden from view, was a very ancient looking man wearing the appearance of an angler. His face was as wrinkled as dried apple skin; his tweed hat was stippled with artificial flies and there was a basket and rod standing up against the wall beside him. His eyes were a bright blue colour and they twinkled as dew drops lit by the sun.

Pidge got off his bike and walked over to him.

'Are you the young sir who's just been buying in Galway?'

'Well, I'm one of them, there must be dozens of others,' Pidge answered politely.

'That's a fair oul' catch you've got under your jumper,' the angler said, in an admiring way.

'That's not a catch at all,' Pidge smiled, thinking that fishermen all have one-track minds.

'Isn't it?' the old angler said with some doubt.

'No. Just some books.'

The man looked satisfied for some reason.

'I'm to tell you to watch out,' he said, 'there's danger at the crossroads.'

'At the crossroads up ahead? What kind of danger?'

'Too soon to say—but danger there is.'

Pidge could think of only one possible danger.

'You can't mean traffic, it's so quiet round here?'

'I can't mean traffic, young human sir—but you are to use the eye of clarity when you get to that spot. There's deluderings at the crossroads, such as would confound Geography and Cartography; such as would make Pandora's Box into a tuppenny lucky bag,' the old angler said earnestly, and added: 'Bad work and not many knowing it; quiet as water under the ground. You be careful, young mortal sir, as there's more than one kind of angling and you could be sniggled in a flash! There's lures and lures. That's my message!'

What a lot of strange things he said and I don't understand the half of it, Pidge thought. Aloud he said:

'Who told you to tell me? Was it the Gardai?'

'Couldn't say it was. But that's the chatter that's filling the place and I was to put you wise.' The old angler looked with dreadful earnestness straight into Pidge's eyes as if trying to impress the importance of his words on Pidge's brain. His concern was clearly very great.

'Well, thank you very much,' Pidge said.

'All the small wild things know it,' the old angler said. 'It's them that chatters.'

'They usually do,' Pidge replied, thinking of forest fires and how animals are said to scent danger from a silent wisp of smoke.

Not knowing what Pidge was thinking, the old angler looked surprised at Pidge's apparent knowledge.

'You know more than the Minister of Education,' he said and he swung his legs in behind the wall with great agility. He began to walk off.

'Don't forget your rod and basket,' Pidge called after him and put them over the wall.

'What rod and basket?'

He turned and came back. He smiled just a bit ruefully,

Pidge thought, when he saw that he had forgotten what should have been his most treasured possessions.

'Time has made a Nutmeg of me Brainbox, I fear,' he said and picked them up. 'My thanks to you and a safe journey.' 'My thanks to you and goodbye now,' Pidge said.

The old angler vanished from sight in the bushes. Probably on his way to the lake, Pidge decided.

He got back on his bike and rode on, his head turned towards the lake to try for a glimpse of the old man. He stood up on the pedals and looked at the expanse of fields and bushes. There was no sign of him anywhere and the only person visible was a distant youth with flowing fair hair, dressed in something white that looked like a tunic, who was running at an exuberant and impossible speed, just for the joy of it.

It must be the distance deceiving me, he thought. He's probably wearing some sort of sports kit and is running fast all right but not impossibly so. But I wonder where the old man has gone? He was nice. I liked him and he was so odd and interesting.

Before he could puzzle further about the old man, he was surprised by a large, freshly painted signboard stuck in by the side of the road. It said:



**THIS IS A VERY SAFE ROAD
A BOY CAN CYCLE ON IT WITH HIS EYES SHUT.**

And then there was another almost immediately after, saying:



**THIS ROAD HAS BEEN AWARDED THE
VERY SAFE ROAD PRIZE
IN
THE ALL-IRELAND COMPETITION
FOR VERY SAFE ROADS.
ANY BOY CAN CYCLE ON IT WITH HIS EYES SHUT
TRY IT TODAY**

Pidge burst out laughing.

'It's just like a students' trick, although it isn't Rag week and they are all supposed to be gone home for their holidays. Maybe some of them are back early and they've got some kind of game going on for Charity. I wish I knew more about it and where the real fun is.'

He reached the summit of a small hill, stopped and got off his bike. The road rolled down ahead of him, and there below him and not too far away, was the crossroads.

And it was just the crossroads.

There was nothing there.

All was just as usual: the signpost, the stone walls and the few trees, growing slender and young in the corner of one of the four fields bordering the road. They were too few to be a good hiding-place for a would-be trickster.

A sense of disappointment was beginning in Pidge until he realized that he was standing in the middle of a dead silence.

There was no lowing of cattle in distant fields; no barking of dogs from farms even further distant; no southing of the wind in the solid old trees growing right beside him on the hilltop; no birdsong or chatter; no clicking of grasshoppers in long grasses. No thing made any sound at all and there was only a stretching and continuing silence; stretching all round him and continuing far away.

Everything seemed to be holding its being in check, waiting for something to happen.

'My imagination again,' Pidge reflected. 'I wonder how many dead silences I've been in before and just not noticed because my head was busy with my own thoughts? Anyway, there's my road home—and home I must go.'

The silence persisted as he freewheeled down the hill.

It magnified the sounds of the bicycle; the squeaks that needed oiling; the whirr of the wheels and the click-clicking of the chain as he rested his feet on the pedals. Small stones rattled sharply against the inside of the mudguards as they jumped out from beneath the pressure of the wheels.

Each one sounded like a sharp handclap.

The bike sounds like a real old rattle trap; I'm sure it can be heard for miles, he thought.

A moment later he was there—at the crossroads at last and

about to cycle on when he happened to glance at the signpost.

It was all turned round the wrong way.

All the four fingers were pointing in wrong directions.

'So that's it!' he exclaimed. 'Those rascals of students are trying to send people astray! What a funny idea and won't Auntie Bina have a good laugh when I tell her!'

He got off his bike again and inspected the signpost.

The finger that said 'Shancreg' was pointing in the direction of Kyledove.

Shancreg was the place where he lived and Kyledove was a great, tangled wood, dark and wild and frightening even in the bright middle of a summer's day. In its heart and centre there was an ancient, moss-covered ruin that had slipped and crumbled over long ages of time until its stones had the texture of old, damp biscuits.

Kyledove means Black Wood and that was because it never saw sunlight.

Just to think of it gave Pidge a cold feeling because of its darkness, its whippy thorny traps and its great age, stretching far, far back in local tradition.

I hate to spoil the students' joke, he thought, but I'd better change that back in case any stranger would get lost.

He hesitated for a while, looking round to see if he could see someone to explain how he felt about strangers getting lost, in case such a thing had not occurred to the jokers; but there wasn't a soul to be seen.

Still the silence was unfailling.

It began to annoy Pidge a little bit. He tried to break it and attract someone's attention by shouting out as powerfully as he could 'Hallooooooo!'—but there was no resonance so it was like shouting into cotton-wool.

The sky changed to a strange green colour. There was a curious mesmerizing atmosphere as the green light filled the pools of the brown bog away at a little distance to his right. Something nudged at the borders of his mind and for a little while, he was puzzled. Then he realized that his surroundings held a definite element of menace.

'It's not the students,' he said suddenly and loudly. 'It's magic.'

Just then, the pages seemed to move of their own accord, inside his shirt.

The skin tightened on his head from shock and freezing goosepimples stood out all over his body.

'I *must* change it back!'

He threw his bike down and ran to the signpost. He gripped it and the sky began to spin; and Pidge *knew* that if he didn't put it right, the country would somehow obey the signpost and twist round and that, even though he was headed directly for Shancreg and home, he would end up in Kyledove. Pidge knew this with his whole body though he didn't understand it with his mind.

As he gathered his strength together and prepared for a hard struggle, the sky went even faster and the clouds raced round and around above his head. There was a low zooming sound like the whirring of a toy paper whizzer.

He gave the signpost a good, hard twist.

To his amazement, it spun round quite easily, as if turning on oiled wheels. Pidge set it in the right position and the sky became blue and tranquil and the countryside all round him woke up. There was no more soft silence.

In the near-distance, he could hear the sound of a motor-bike. It seemed to be going cross-country from Kyledove to join with the road up ahead of him.

'The old angler was right,' Pidge said quietly to himself, there was danger at the crossroads and I was all but sniggled, whatever that is. But for him, I wouldn't have given a single thought to the crossroads and I would have just cycled on and ended up at Kyledove. And whoever painted those daft notices was just trying to snare me and undo the good the old angler had done. Goodness knows why. But, as to the pages—I must have joggled them somehow and imagined they moved, because there was a funny feeling about, with the sky so strange and everything; I'd have jumped at my own shadow, just then. I won't stop now because I don't want to hang about in case the sky means there's to be a storm—but I'll have a good look at them when I get home.'

Cycling on home, he searched in his mind for a reasonable explanation. He was begining to think that he had made much out of little and that, really, there was nothing sinister about

the signpost or the excitable people in Galway, or the sky or anything, and that he was only having a wonderful day full of interest, when he arrived at the roadworks.

There were two big signs standing smack in front of him on the road. One said:



HALT! ROADWORKS AHEAD

The other one had a big, yellow arrow on it and the word:



← DETOUR!

The arrow pointed to a gap tumbled carelessly in the roadside wall.

There was a simple barricade cutting off the road. It looked as if it had been thrown together in a hurry; only some barrels placed at the sides of the road with planks laid across them. Nothing else. No materials or tools of any kind. Not even a shovel to work with.

'I'm not going to be put about anymore,' Pidge said firmly and he was off the bike in a flash. He pushed the planks off the barrels and cleared a way through for himself. While he was doing this, he heard the motor-bike again in the distance. It seemed to be going further on, past his own house, which was now not *too* far away.

Only five minutes or so, thought Pidge, and I'm home—if I put my head down and go fast. The same thing that wanted me to go to Kyledove tried to stop me just now and get me off the road and into the fields. Maybe then, I would have been wrapped in a sudden mist rolling down on top of me from nowhere and I would have been lost in a whiteness that could be worse than any darkness. But the trick with the signpost hadn't worked, thanks to the old angler. And there hasn't been enough time for *it* or *them* (he gave a small shiver because he didn't know which and both ideas were frightening) to do the job properly and make that road-block look convincing enough to fool a hen. Or maybe I'm being plain daft?

Determined to look neither to the left or to the right, he rode on.

'I'll soon be home now and a good job too,' he said loudly.