

DON MCLELLAN

TOY SOLDIERS

THE BODY OF THE REBEL Darcy Corrigan had been dumped outside the armoury, a signature of the new provost. Keep it up, it said, you could be next. The provost prances through the village surrounded by a security detail, medals swinging from his lapels like a mighty pair of breasts.

The rebel leadership decided to hold the memorial service in a derelict farmhouse on Cobble Hill. Its tenants had been run off or jailed, the sheds torched. An ideal location, it was thought, for a safe house.

In the days leading up to the service rebels trickled in from every direction. A few—McCabe and Joyce—were grandfathers, men of strong views and loyal hearts. But most, like the deceased, were schoolboys. In another time and another place they might have passed an evening such as this one practising knots for a Scouts badge or corresponding with pen pals. Mates said Darcy had never kissed a girl.

His mother, an empty shell of a thing, keens behind a veil. She is accompanied by a stout priest, who has huffed and puffed his way to the summit, the reason for their tardiness.

“There’s broth, bread and a swallow of ale,” Riley, the rebel leader, tells each new arrival. “When you’ve had your fill, we’ll begin.”

But before the priest can light the candles, a lookout bursts into the room.

“Jesus bleeding Christ!” he hollers before scampering out the rear. They’d heard dogs, a trailing lookout elaborates, and marching boots. He, too, exits speedily.

“Follow them, lads!” Riley orders. “Rendezvous at McDonough’s Bog.”

Kevin tipped the tin box: toy soldiers tumbled like jacks across the linoleum floor. His ma was in the kitchen making meat pies. If he ate the greens and proved accurate with his numbers there’d be pudding afterwards. The smell of frying onions wafted along the hallway, ducking into the sitting

room where he played most afternoons. Until his lungs improved, if they improved, one of the Brothers would drop off his lessons.

Each toy soldier was the height of a matchstick, and each struck a different pose: some charged, some fled, some kneeled. This one wielded a blade, that one levelled a rifle. Most were plastic, but a few—those from an earlier era—were made of metal from lead moulds, or carved in softwood. There were cowboys and Indians, torsos pierced with arrows, tomahawks embedded in limbs, the faces of settlers and savages contorted by victory or injury.

Kevin kept the Roman legionnaires and gladiators in an empty butter tub. They carried spears and truncheons, their pectorals taut, biceps bulging. The Second World War set, a Christmas present from his da, came with tanks and jeeps. Imagination supplied what the sets didn't.

Individual pieces were sometimes inserted into a packet of crisps, a promotion of some sort, or advertised on a cereal box, one of a collection. For Kevin's last birthday Brother Mahoney had given him a secondhand set called *Rebels on the Run*. He'd spotted it at a flea market in McArthur Rd.

"There might be a few pieces missing," the Brother said, "but they don't make these anymore. The government forbids it."

"What government forbids play?" Kevin asked.

"Ours. They say it inflames the passions."

When he was setting up a scene, and when he didn't have enough toy soldiers to make an engagement seem real, Kevin conscripted pawns and bishops from the family's chess set to serve as extras. He arranged brigades and divisions atop the mantle, which he fancied as high ground, positioning the combatants on the dresser (a forest), or in a flanking manoeuvre on the floor (the battlefield). By the time his da returned from work, the tea thermos clanking inside his lunch pail as he came up the alley, the room would be a cauldron of exploding missiles and flying shrapnel. Corpses would be everywhere.

Kevin invented dialogue and mimicked death throes, sprawling across the sofa, a fallen warrior. These make-believe clashes could transport him to the far side of the world, to military campaigns centuries away from the damp, windowless room with its low ceiling and peeling wallpaper. When rockets were exploding, a cavalry charging, Kevin was oblivious of the affliction ravaging his body.

One night his da brought home co-workers from the shipyard. They got into the drink; tobacco smoke filled the kitchen. Their shouting faces were

soon bobbing like red apples around the table as they discussed first football, then the pony races and finally the rebellion that years later still inflamed the passions. The commotion woke ma, who got up and made a batch of chips. Kevin's da sang a loyalist ballad so lovely some of the men teared up.

Of those who'd bolted from the farmhouse, only seventeen rebels make it to McDonough's Bog. McCabe and Joyce are among the missing. The capture of a senior insurgent is celebrated by the military authorities, as oldtimers know who's who in the movement and where the explosives are hidden. Intelligence, they call it, a curious term, Riley always thought, for what is often preceded by the bashing in of a brain.

The rebels have nine rifles and four revolvers, no match for the bunch pursuing them. Provisions amount to a single water can, nuts, apples and some sausage. In calculating rations the rebel leader remembers the boys are not of a generation accustomed to going without. For some, this would be the first night away from their beds.

Before joining the struggle Riley had taught school. It was the reason they had him working with the new recruits. He and Marion had lost a son, their only child, a week after he'd graduated St. Helen's Collegiate. John had bristled with anger—not just about the occupation, but anger at the world, at what it wasn't and never would be. Very much like his father at that age.

Marion disapproved of his decision to avenge the death. It won't bring him back, she wailed. And how will we survive on such a meagre stipend? But she learned to accept his absences, or at least to hold her tongue, and she never asked what, exactly, he did on behalf of the cause. She took a job in a pastry shop.

Riley catches sight of the moon poking through the forest canopy. At this hour he supposes she'd be fresh from the bath, running a brush through her hair, a thought that excited him still.

"Can we smoke?" At home, such impudence would earn the boy a cuffing.

"It could be your last," Riley replies. He speaks softly to the recruits, as though he's teaching mathematics again. He'd not been so considerate with John. The rebel leader was different then, more demanding, as young fathers sometimes are with their own.

“When the enemy lights a fag, a sniper loads his weapon,” he warns. “When the smoker reaches over to light a second cigarette, the shooter adjusts his scope. The third man to share your match will get it between the eyes. His girl won’t recognize what’s left.”

McGinnis, one of the new boys, asks, “What do we do now?” He’s shivering. Or trembling. Riley waves them closer.

“We can head for the mountains and divide ourselves into groups,” he says. “If yours is followed, divide again; they can’t get us all. Or we can take the ravine to the shore. Some of the fishermen are patriots.”

“You don’t sound very optimistic.” McGinnis again. Riley appreciates his brashness.

“An optimist invented the airplane,” Riley says. “A pessimist gave us the parachute.”

Back on Cobble Hill, in the chaos of flight, most of the rebels hadn’t time to collect overcoats and caps, a problem if they elect the higher altitudes. As for the shore, Riley wonders how many, including himself, have the stamina. The terrain is steep and uneven, treacherous in the dark. Any injured will be left for the provost.

Several of the boys can recite the poetry of the struggle, and they do so now, fleeing through the forest for their abbreviated, uneventful lives. Wars couldn’t be waged without such eager fools, their hunger for glory and adventure. Young and dumb, McCabe liked to say of them, and full of cum.

“Those are our options?” asks McGinness. “The mountains or the sea?”

“We can pray,” says Riley.

“For what?”

“For fog. A fog as thick as your mother’s stew.”

“Why fog?” queries another.

“Because a bullet can’t find its mark,” Riley tells them, “and it confuses the dogs.”

The rocks tiling the floor of the ravine are slick with algae; progress is slow. An hour into the retreat and movement is heard in the bramble. Riley signals a pair of boys to investigate, but before they can something sails over the ledge. The impact empties a shallow pool.

The boys lean in. Matches are sparked.

“It’s Dempsey.”

Riley remembers him. Son of a pig farmer. None too bright, but a grand marksman.

“I called for a rendezvous,” Riley says. “You’re a long way off.”

“Aye, sir,” Dempsey says. “But I don’t know that word.”

“Rendezvous?”

“I know pigs, sir. I didn’t study the foreign languages.”

Kevin threads a lace from his boot, stretching it into an arc on the linoleum – a half moon shoreline. Exhausted, the rebels dig a shallow trench there. Behind them, waves stroke the sand. Riley huddles with Allan, an older boy who’d distinguished himself on several missions. In the absence of a McCabe or a Joyce, he’s promoted to second in command.

Allan says, “This trench will soon fill like a pothole in the rain. What then?”

Riley addresses the boys, “Who’s the fastest runner?”

All look at McGinnis.

“You should see him move a football.”

Riley hands McGinnis a revolver.

“O’Brien’s shack is beyond the dunes,” he says.

McGinness swigs from the water can and takes a bite of sausage. They bid him safe passage, and off he goes.

Allan says to Riley, “Maybe they didn’t pick up our tracks. I haven’t heard the dogs.

In the sitting room Kevin rolls up one of his ma’s magazines and lifts it to his lips.

“Woof-woof!”

Riley gobbles an apple and chucks the core. The proximity of the splash concerns him. The soldiers have dug a trench facing the redoubt, settling in for a siege. Their campfires flicker along the beach.

“We wouldn’t be in this mess if more joined us,” Allan says, a challenge of sorts. Riley enjoyed a spirited joust, but preferably in the pub, and after a few. Not now.

“The struggle has been going on for a long time,” he obliges. “But you’re right, Allan: blindness has its advantages.”

He walks the length of the trench. Several of the boys are praying. A few weep quietly, and he suspects one has soiled his trousers. Riley wonders

how many will cross into manhood this night ... and how long they'll live to enjoy it.

"They'll come at first light," he says. "Those with revolvers, shoot the dogs first. The rest of you fire selectively when I give the order – everybody but Dempsey. You take the sniper's rifle, son. Look for the provost."

"I don't know what he looks like," Dempsey says.

"He'll be the one with all the medals, and the farthest from the fighting. Pop that pig and they might write a song about you."

The rebel leader had never been so forthright with the recruits. Why now? He hadn't been himself since the night they snatched a young lance corporal returning to his base. He was bold, probably from the drink, refusing to answer Riley's inquiries. It was a valiant choice: talk might have delayed the sentence; it wouldn't have commuted it.

Riley unholstered his weapon.

"Do it!" the corporal spat. "Fekking terrorist!"

Riley had asked John to stay home that night; he and Marion had a bad feeling. There were roadblocks all over the county. "I'm no coward," he'd said. Brave words ... a fool's words. They were also John's last.

The lance corporal was no coward either. They rolled his body into the ditch.

Kevin flattens a leaf of newsprint and spoons more sand from his pail: the beach. He'd brought the stuff back from a holiday. He imagines a strip of blue fabric as the rising tide.

"Wash up, luv," his mother, poking her head into the sitting room, sings. "Your da will be home shortly."

Kevin studies the scene. Seawater seeps into the rebels' trench. Opposite, the soldiers prepare for the attack. Baying dogs tug at their tethers.

"I'm almost finished here, ma."

The fog is drawn to land like metal to a magnet. McGinness crosses the dunes, desolate and damp in the hours before daylight. He wonders if he has any hero in him, if it's like broad shoulders and a sharp eye, a quality handed out at birth. He skips across the barnacled rocks, a striker charging downfield. A blow sucks the air from him. Men close in as he flails on the ground. Someone plants a boot on his chest.

“Where might you be going?”
A panting hound sniffs his crotch.

The fog makes landfall at dawn. It separates the adversaries, a wall of ambiguity. When the sky pales, it lifts; the soldiers advance. But they are too late. The rebels have vanished. Brine swirls between the provost’s boots.

The fishing boats fan out across the bay; Kevin’s da arrives home. “Your food’s getting cold,” his mother calls. On the deck of the trawler a pig farmer’s son takes aim. Kevin gazes down upon his creation. “Boom!” he says, and at the flick of a finger the provost topples into the sea.