



The Odyssey of Papa Roach

Papa Roach, Papa Roach!’ Two pairs of bright brown eyes peered into the darkness of the shack, illuminating it instantly like four round torches.

Despite the disturbance the old man smiled as he dragged himself reluctantly from his dreams.

‘Where’d yo’ go, Papa Roach?’

‘Why chil’un, I right heah,’ he chuckled.

Thomas clambered onto his lap unmindful of the crippling arthritis which had plagued the old man for the last twenty years of his life.

‘Easy son.’ Papa Roach lifted the squirming child in his wiry arms and settled him more comfortably on his knee. He held a hand out to the other child, George, standing shyly at the door. ‘Com’ heah to I boy,’ he said ‘aint gonna bite no chil’un today.’

Four year old George advanced slowly keeping his back towards the rude walls of the shack. ‘Looky heah,’ Papa Roach said ‘yo’ brother aint afraid now,’ and George swivelled his large, serious eyes around the shack finally resting them on Thomas. He jammed a fist in his mouth and for no accountable reason his luminous eyes filled with tears. ‘Hey now,’ the old man said ‘wha’ all them tears for? Aint never seed a chil’ cry fo’ no reason befo’.’

‘Aint yo’ Papa Roach?’ Thomas asked curiously.

The old man gave the question serious thought. ‘Well no sir,’ he said finally ‘no I aint. Seem ever’ chil’ cry ‘cause him got reason to.’

Spurred by the words, Thomas clambered off Papa Roach and examined his brother. ‘Wha’s up Sprout?’

The younger child hid his face in the grubby dungarees of his sibling. ‘Aint not’ing,’ he said softly.

Thomas pulled him over to the old man. ‘Tell we a story Papa Roach,’ he said ‘bout how yo’ got yo’ name –‘

George placed a grubby hand on the old man’s knee. ‘There’s dreams in heah,’ he said wonderingly.

Papa Roach chuckled, and George watched the laughter leave his chest and manifest cloud-like around the room. ‘Yo’ laugh look like cocoa beans.’

'Him only a baby,' Thomas explained his brother's weird behaviour as best he could but Papa Roach only laughed louder and the golden brown cloud thickened and when the old man stopped laughing and the cloud disappeared George found himself sitting with his brother on the bony old knees.

'George pay attention, yo' heah?' Thomas said sternly. 'Papa Roach gonna tell we story 'bout –'

'How I got I name,' Papa Roach said. 'Now it was a long, long time ago. Long befo' yo' chil'un's own grandpappys was even thought 'bout, an' it the hottest day Mama could ever remember when her gave birth to I. Now, I youngest o' fifteen chil'uns Mama an' Papa had an' Mama wadn't young no mo' so I guess, her kinda surprise,' Papa Roach laughed lightly and George stared at the old man's skinny ribs but no cloud came out. 'Anyways, there I is, 'nother mouth to feed and not'ing nobody could do 'bout it and I guess after using up fourteen names Mama jest couldn't t'ink o' one fo' I so fo' a time them call I Baby.'

'Baby? Tha' yo' name?' George shone his eyes on the old man's face. 'Fo' a while,' Papa Roach agreed 'but time came when I too big to be call Baby. Why, I remember working fields with I brothers an' Papa too an' they still callin' Baby. I needed to put a stop to tha' somehow.' 'Wha' yo' do?' Thomas asked although he'd heard this story many times before.

'Well,' the old man said slowly, as if he'd never told the story before 'I guessed I'm a hafta tell they. Us worked till sundown in them fields, 'cause landowners then could do pretty much as them liked.'

'Why?' George piped.

Papa Roach scratched his head. 'Us didn't have no fine workin' conditions they is today. No sir, long's there work to do us be out there in them fields all the hours o' God-given daylight.'

'Yo' a slave Papa Roach?' Thomas asked.

'Bless yo' chil',' the old man laughed 'how ol' yo' t'ink this ol' body is? Lord naw! Slav'ry long gone by time I speakin' 'bout but still conditions awful hard fo' fieldhan's like I folks.'

George shuddered. 'I'm a hate to be a slave.'

'An' me,' put in Thomas.

'Listen heah,' Papa Roach said 'slavery aint nothing but a mindset.'

'What yo' mean Papa?'

'Aint no man cain make yo' a slave lessen yo' wants to be one,' he explained.

Thomas laughed at the thought of a person actually wanting to be a slave. 'Cain't happen,' he said.

'But it do boy, even now there be folks all 'round held in slav'ry to one t'ing or another.'

'Folks right heah?' George wanted to know.

'Heah an' all ever'where,' Papa confirmed. 'Remember chil'un lotta things cain mak' slaves o' men, don' gotta be masters.'

The boys blinked. That's what was so good about Papa Roach's stories. They always wandered off and away somewheres else. 'What cain mak' a slave?' asked Thomas.

'Way I see it,' the old man replied 'a man cain be a slave to money, to power, to beauty – almost anything cain fetter a man iffen him let it.'

'Like Mr Darnley?'

Papa Roach smiled. There was nothing he liked more than instructing the young 'uns. 'Good example Thomas boy,' he replied 'now who cain say tha' man aint enslaved to money? Look at he any day o' the week, see him wife and chil'un dress right raggedy an' eatin' all manner o' cheap an' nasty food. They the richest folks on the island and them aint hardly got a pot to piss in.'

Thomas rubbed his eyes in amazement. He saw Mr Darnley almost every day knocking on folk's door and prising out of them rent for the small shacks they lived in. Mr Darnley reminded him of a shark, big sharp teeth and only smiling when his hand was fed with coins. He thought of his own Mama, worrying whenever he was due to come calling. 'Where all the money?' he wanted to know.

'In a tin box under he flea-bitten mattress,' Papa Roach replied.

'Mrs Darnley looks mo' worried than we own Mama do,' Thomas realised, thinking of his own smiling Mama and banishing the thought of worry Monday, rent day when the only person to put frown lines on his Mama's face was Darnley.

'Folks are affected by wha's goin' on around they,' Papa said 'so mind I now, always be kind to yo' brother.'

'Yo' sayin' yo' a slave Papa Roach?' put in the younger boy as if only just catching up with the conversation.

'Why no, young fella,' Papa Poach laughed, patting the boy on his neatly cornrow head. 'Hmm, hmm. No siree chil', I never a slave.'

'But Papa, yo' jest said –'

'I just said chil', that lessen a man want to, him cain't never be made a slave. Now cain't yo' young 'uns hush up now an' let a ol' man git to the end o' he story? Aw right now. Well, there I is lookin' fo' a fine name an' I had all day workin' the fields to t'ink heavy 'bout it.'

'Did yo' find one, Papa Roach?'

'Not right away. I t'ought 'bout all kinda names.'

'Like Thomas and George?'

'Well I guess, but see them good names all used up by two of I older brothers,' Papa explained 'so I racked I brains all day an' into the night an' when us'd finished the mealie mash Mama served up I'm a stood up in front of the entire fam'ly an' made a mighty statement. Declared I too big now to be call Baby an' 'deed I wadn't gonna respon' to it no mo'. 'I be call after the very next thing tha' come t'rough tha' do', I announced and so I was. Us waited fo' hours, watchin' the do' but it late an' folks all bedded down fo' the night. I jest 'bout ready to t'ink I made a mistake when out o' the corner of this ol' eye, I seed it.'

'Wha' yo' see Papa Roach?' George breathed.

'A creature jest like I son, small, black an' very, very fast,' the old man laughed and this time George forgot to watch for the cloud.

'A cockroach!' Thomas screamed.

'Is it Papa? Are yo' called Cockroach?' George wanted to know.

'Well it went thisaway, Cockroach too much of a mouthful fo' a little bitty scrap like I so them call I Roach instead.'

Thomas remembered his Mama's never ending war on cockroaches and beetles at home. 'Yo' like bein' a cockroach Papa Roach? Wadn't it be better iffen somet'ing else came t'rough the do' that time? Like maybe a real special kinda dog or a wolf or even a lion?'

But Papa shook his head. 'No son,' he said 'and I definite on that point. A cockroach is jest wha' this ol' man is. Small, black and completely indestructible.'

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Daylight was a rare sight in winter and the islanders spent these long, dark months close to hearth and home, women spinning, weaving, cooking and men telling once again the age-old sagas and singing the songs of their forefathers. Cautiously, Donal inched closer to the fire. He watched the faces of the men closely but they were deep in their cups and singing lustily so he moved still closer. The heat from the flames made a rosy glow spring instantly onto his pale cheeks and he laid his palms across his knees, inviting the heat in to thaw his frozen body. He had to move carefully for if one of them noticed him there taking warmth meant for pure islanders, then he would be grabbed by the neck and flung back to his dark, cold corner.

His white-blond hair was instantly recognisable amongst the browns and auburns of the islanders so he pulled his plaid across his tousled head and slid his lightest of blue eyes sideways, watching for his mother. Instead of sitting with the women at the far end of the hall Jean sat alone, old long before her time, hands pressed wearily on her knees watching the men, ready to refill drinking cups or carry more mutton from the cooking fire.

Donal wondered, not for the first time, just why his mother was so despised, even her own parents refused to speak to her and she was treated no better than a slave by the islanders. He wondered again why this should be. Wasn't she a pure islander like them? Was it because of Donal himself? Because he had no father, well none he knew of anyway. 'Your father is dead,' is all Jean would say whenever he broached the subject which was, of late, more often.

He drew his brows together making a fair but definite furrow above the eyes. He knew this was his twelfth winter because she had told him so, whispering quietly and urgently in the night, cautioning him to be more careful now he was a man. He shifted again, defiantly moving closer to the welcoming heat. Why was it this way? He

resolved to speak to his mother and determined this time he should have an answer.

He stretched out his legs and felt a familiar hand grab roughly at his neck. 'Out runt!' Again he was flung away from the fire, but instead of creeping away this time Donal got to his feet, ignoring the frantic but silent gestures of his mother.

'Why?' He addressed the hall in general. 'Why do you Robert, you James, you Angus,' he flung an arm towards three boys around his own age who were allowed into the warmth by their fathers 'why do you sit and yet I'm flung away? I'm doing no harm,' he advanced, blue eyes blazing and from her corner Jean's own eyes widened in surprise at how tall her boy had become. The ring around the fire closed against him and he stood raging ineffectually at the hunched backs of the men and when he'd used every word he knew and his tirade came to an end the biggest of the men, a man called Robbie McNeill, climbed almost wearily to his feet and with the whoops and cheers still ringing in his ears Donal found himself smashed onto the ground a fair way from the hall, snow in his mouth and tears stinging his eyes.

'This is only a small island Donal,' Jean explained some time later when she was allowed out of the hall to collect her frozen son and take him to the almost derelict stone cottage they shared half a mile from the village. 'This is not Mainland where such things are more easily accepted.' She wiped at his face and mouth gently with a rag soaked in a concoction of herbs.

'What things mother?' Donal pulled away from her assistance in anger. He grabbed her roughly and was saddened to feel through her threadbare shawl how frail she had become. 'I'm a man,' he said seriously 'you told me so yourself and as a man I ask – no, I demand to know mother *why* we are treated no better than slaves and *why* you choose to accept it.'

Jean sighed. She'd always known this day would come but did it have to be so soon? She was unprepared, and had no words for what she must say. 'I – I hardly know where to begin son –'

'At the beginning,' he suggested and although calm now, his ice blue eyes held her own hazel ones steadily and she knew she would have to tell him.

Jean took a deep breath and began her story and when she finally finished she moved to the door of the cottage without looking at her son, levelling her eyes at the village. 'I must go,' she said 'the men will be wanting to break their fast –'

'Let the other women tend to them.'

'I cannot – they will not –'

'Then they can go hungry,' Donal replied. 'For you owe me mother, all my life you've kept this from me and allowed me to live as an outcast. We will talk mother, over and over we will talk because surely there is a better way we can live. On Mainland perhaps. Didn't you say things would be easier there?'

Jean passed a careworn hand over her thin hair. 'Look at me,' she said softly 'I'm already old and my strength is failing. What work will I find if not here? At least on Scarrap we won't starve.'

'But we'll be worked to death,' Donal pointed out 'and if not for us then who would be blamed for poor harvests, stillborn babies and any other misfortunes? No mother, I say we leave this damned island. There are others, Mainland or even further. I'll look after you -'

His passion brought tears to her eyes and she stroked his face, the first time he could ever remember her doing so. 'My good son,' she sobbed 'I know how much you mean what you say but I'd be nothing but a burden. You go, for I see now you must but allow your mother to spend her remaining days on Scarrap,' she coughed, a loud, hacking cough which Donal had never heard before. 'I cannot go with you son, although there's nothing I'd like better.'

Donal's thoughts flew chaotically in his head. 'I won't go without you,' he said finally.

Jean grabbed his wrist with two bony hands. 'You must,' she whispered 'there's nothing for you here except misery and isolation and none of it your own doing although I'd hoped that as you grew they would forget but I know now this will never be. You look too different with your white hair and eyes the colour of the sea in summer. You've all of your father in you Donal and for that reason alone and long after I've left this world they will never cease to hate you for it.'

Donal nodded heavily. He knew this was true. The inhabitants of the wild isle of Scarrap were provincial by nature and fiercely proud of their own heritage, although the islands of Orkney were no strangers to invasion; first by the Norsemen hundreds of years before, and again by the lairds of Scotland who thought to tether the islands to their own lands in Sutherland and Fife and fatten their own purses in the process, and more recently by the damned English who thought to swallow up the whole of Scotland and her islands too. These parochial people deeply resented all invasion and stubbornly adhered to their own Gaelic tongue, rejecting the Norse and English words which seeped like a canker into the language of the neighbouring islands. So for one of their own to have lain down - and willingly - with one of the hated invaders and for a child to be borne of their union, it was better that neither mother nor child lived. But live they did and the islanders learned after a time to put up with them, use them as free labour with no land or farm to call their own, but they never, ever forgot. Donal remembered Jean pointing out one of the men as his grandfather and the young Donal toddled up to him with Jean egging him on, hoping the baby would melt her father's cold heart. The man looked down at the child who held out a chubby hand 'Papa?' Carefully he pronounced the word recited to him over and over by his mother, but the man ignored the child, his eyes roving desperately over another ruined harvest. 'Get away from me bastard,' he growled.

Donal watched his mother run across the field which separated their cottage from the village. He lifted his gaze to the shore, south towards Mainland. The islanders rarely, if ever, left Scarrap and they welcomed incomers coldly. He knew all of the other inhabited isles which made up Orkney had integrated with both the Norse and the Scots so there was a fair chance he wouldn't stand out so much. Across the flat land he saw Jean scurry into the hall and the wind blew the jeers and complaints from the empty-bellied men across to him as clearly as if he was there. No matter his mother's feelings now, Donal was sure he could persuade her to leave. He was strong enough to look after them both and perhaps on another island, if he worked hard enough he could have his own farm or a fishing boat perhaps, and the secret hope he nursed in his breast was that maybe away from this place Jean would more readily tell him about his father. Ignoring the biting winds and the snow on the ground, he cut away the long grasses around the cottage but his heart was not in the work. He swung the scythe almost lazily, his eyes on the darkening sky overhead.

Donal avoided the village all day, his mind filled with a new dread which started deep in his belly, moving up his body like Eve's serpent until it rested gently in his throat and there it remained until he felt he couldn't draw breath. 'Go now,' a part of him said and although he racked his brains Donal knew this was impossible. They should wait until the good spring weather and by then he'd have built a boat and he'd paddle with his bare hands if he had to, to take them far away. Although this plan was a good one and the most sensible, the dread wouldn't leave him. Instead it coiled tighter around his neck and when Jean finally returned she found him on the ground, gasping for air and clawing at himself as if in the grip of some invisible enemy.

Robbie McNeill hauled his empty nets onto the deck of the small fishing boat. He cursed under his breath his eyes moving across the grey, rolling sea, which in summer looked bonny with the sunshine making the blue sea glitter but today was menacing and sinister enough to drag a man into its murky depths. He'd sailed a fair way off the island, further than usual in the hope that he'd come upon the shoals of haddock which had deserted their usual waters two miles off Scarrap. By narrowing his eyes he could make out the hazy line of the northern tip of Mainland and thought about sailing further south. 'Do you think the fisherfolk of Mainland will welcome sharing their catch with us?' said his brother-in-law and cousin Ewan McSpey. The big man frowned. Willie had a way of addressing a thought before it was spoken which annoyed McNeill intensely. 'So what do we do then Ewan?' he growled 'do we go back with empty nets again? I for one like to feed my wife and bairns.' His eyes darkened as he thought of the communal cooking pots which hadn't seen fish since the onset of winter.

'There's always the sheep, Robbie,' put in Tam Armstrong.

'Aye there's the sheep true enough Tam,' McNeill said thoughtfully 'but how long will they last?' He stared evenly down at the other man 'do we have flock enough on Scarrap to last the winter and still keep the ewes we need for lambing?'

The smaller man looked away. 'True enough what you say, Robbie,' he muttered.

'Last year I lost two bairns, stillborn both and my wife half starving to death,' McNeill went on, talking now to himself 'and I'll not let it happen this year.'

McSpey pointed to the darkening sky. 'Aye you have a point Robbie, no doubt about that but will we make for home now and try our luck again in the morning?'

The others agreed with no one meeting the big man's eye.

'Right,' McNeill said eventually, seeing he was beat 'home it is then but I'll tell this to all of you, something's got to be done,' he thought of his wife Flora, frail and pregnant again. 'This year I'll have a bairn that lives,' he promised. He stood at the front of the boat all the way back and it seemed his thoughts were dark and faraway for he spoke to no one. They tied up quickly and made for the hall. The smell of mutton in the pots meant the island had lost another sheep.

'What can we do?' McSpey said plaintively 'we have to eat.'

'Or maybe we could fill our bellies with snow?' McNeill replied tersely but he took his bowl and supped with the rest of them but the meat, stolen from a ewe meant for lambing, soured in his belly and he flung the bowl across the hall in anger. 'I'll have no more of this,' he said 'my God can you not see? We're cursed.' The words were spoken quietly enough but, spoken as they were at exactly the right time, nonetheless echoed the unspoken thoughts of every man there.

'But what do we do?'

'Our children will starve.'

'It's a long time until spring.'

'Let's ask the priests.'

'And what good was their prayers last year? McNeill replied, determined to make his neighbours see it his way. 'Remember last winter? And the one before that?' He flung an angry arm skyward as if blaming God Himself.

Silence fell as the people remembered. Three babies died, McNeill's twins, McRoberts' two-year-old and four of the old folk as well. The islanders were dying faster than they could breed.

'Seems to me,' McNeill boomed on 'that something has to be done and we are the only ones to do it. No use harping onto the priests because their prayers, which we pay dearly for with coin we barely have, fall on God's deaf ears and I tell you this, no matter how many bones the spey wifie throws or in what secret combinations they fall, this island is cursed.'

'Maybe not the island but someone on it,' another voice shouted.

McNeill smiled quietly. At last, although it had taken many hard winters and the same amount of wet harvests, at last he had them thinking aright. 'Or two someones?' he put in.

'Aye.' The cry went up.

McNeill had started a witch-hunt.

He led the people across the pitch-black fields towards the dilapidated stone cottage with every man on the island in tow. The older ones at the back, moving as fast as they could to keep the dull glow of the fire torch McNeill carried in sight. 'Let's get rid of them once and for all!'

'Aye. We should have done it years ago.'

'Those who breed with outsiders are just asking for trouble.' This from Jean's own father.

'Our own wives and bairns come first!'

Donal leapt up when he saw the bobbing of the lighted flare crossing the fields. 'Mother!' He roused Jean from exhausted sleep 'They're coming.'

She rose stiffly, pressing a careworn hand to her throat. 'Oh God!' she said in fright 'you're right son. I should have listened,' and with the unselfishness found mostly but not entirely in all mothers she went on 'but it's me they want to see punished. Go on now, run out the back. Make for the shore, steal one of their boats and –'

'No!' Donal cried. 'I won't leave you.' But with a strength neither of them knew she possessed Jean shoved her son back into their small sleeping area. 'Choose your moment and escape when you can.'

'I'll get a boat mother – I'll come back for you –' Donal's eyes shone bright with confusion and fear.

'Never forget your mother loves you,' Jean whispered 'and I'm sorry for all the hurt I've put you through.'

The rotten wood on the door gave way easily and broken shards of it fell inside the cottage as the islanders, no better now than the invaders they so despised, rampaged into the small cottage. 'Come out whore,' McNeill bellowed 'you and your bastard Viking son. Out, I say!'

Emboldened by the words of their self-proclaimed leader, the other men burst into the curtained off sleeping area. They grabbed Jean manhandling her roughly and flung her into the centre of the room. 'Speak witch!' McNeill rained his hard stare down on her, his reddened face betraying excitement at this newfound power. 'Where is your accursed son?' he roared. 'And we'll have it in the Gaelic, mind. Speak none of your damned Norse talk here.'

'You ignorant wretches,' Jean cried 'it's the English I've been teaching my son, although it's no business of yours.' She could have told them she learned the English from Donal's father, some Norse talk too, and she could have said that with every English word Donal laboriously learned she harboured a secret desire that he would travel some day to Mainland or even further to Scotland after she was gone. She may not have had much to give her son but the English tongue was one thing she did have and in her own quiet way she determined to give him the best chance she could, but she didn't say that either. It was as if she now realised there was no point saying anything. For twelve years she'd battered against a closed door and the realisation that the door was never going to open finally hit her.

While the men ranted and raved Jean took her mind back to when Donal was a wee lad and mother and son would sit by the fire and she would smile as he struggled with the strange English language and after every lesson she'd always caution him 'outside the house speak only the Gaelic.'

'Bring the runt out of his hiding place, witch. We'll free Scarrap from his curse here and now. Bring him out or we'll go in and take him, do you hear?' The harsh voice of McNeill broke into her reminiscences, scattering them like snowfall.

'Send in the hero who cowers behind his mother's skirts,' called another.

'We want him off our island,' said another voice.

Jean never understood where the quiet dignity came from but it wrapped itself around her, protecting and warm like the best of woollen shawls. 'He's gone,' she replied 'where you'll never find him. You think to blame your ill luck on me, a woman whose only crime was to fall in love. You killed my man – oh yes you did, as surely as you plunged a dagger in his breast yourselves – for wasn't it you McNeill who gave him that leaky boat and sent it south in a gale? And wasn't it you, Gilfillan who made sure the provisions for the journey were addled with weevils? And you McRoberts, didn't you tell him I'd taken his boy and gone to Mainland to search for him there? You sent him to his death yet you blame me for your curse.' Her eyes flashed angrily at each and every one of them and for a moment they were silenced - and the moment was enough for it allowed Donal to escape.