

# FIACH RUA



WHEN THEIR WORLD IS UNCHAINED...  
OUR WORLD WILL END

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## **Guide to pronunciation of Irish Gaelic words**

Fiachra – FEE-uch-ra

Fiach Rua – FEE-uch ROO-ah

Uinseann – Uhn-shen

Oinseach – Own-shock

Labhras – LOW-rawce (‘low’ to rhyme with ‘now’)

Aodh – Ay (rhymes with ‘day’)

Samhain – Sow-uhn (‘sow’ to rhyme with ‘now’)

Bóthar Loch Bradán – BO-her Lock Brad-awn

Lochlainn de Courcey – LOCK-lin de COOR-see

Áine – AWN-yeh

Fianna – FEE-ah-na

Fionn MacCumhaill: Fyun (rhymes with ‘run’) Mac COO-uhl

Oisín – UH-sheen

Sadhbh – Sive

Gráinne – GRAWN-yeh

Diarmuid – DEER-mud

Tóraíocht – Tow-REE-ucht

Uisneach – ISH-noch

Muirne – Mwir-neh

Tír na nÓg – Teer na n-og (‘og’ to rhyme with ‘rogue’)

Saint Breasal – BRASS-ehl

Lasairfhíona – Lah-sir-EE-uh-nah

Cúchulainn – Koo-CULL-en

Caolán – Kway-lawn

Iománíocht – Im-aw-NEE-ucht

Sliotar – Slittur

Amadán – OM-a-dawn

Buachaill maith – BOO-uh-kill MAH

## **Prologue: Dying**

The first time they tried to kill Fiachra was on the Monday before Hallowe'en, although he didn't realise it had happened until later. The Faceless Death had appeared out of nowhere and made an attempt on Fiachra's life. He was the first. This was five days before the school windows exploded outwards as if a bomb had gone off in there and Fiachra came flying through the air in a maelstrom of glass. This was still Monday.

He had been waiting for this event for years. His friend Rune had been waiting for centuries. Now the two of them were anxiously counting down the hours to Saturday. They thought nothing would happen before then. They thought they were safe for at least five more days. They were sure that the enemy needed Fiachra alive.

They were wrong.

This was Monday, when the enemy made their initial assault. It didn't work so they tried again, throughout the week: different methods, different attackers, different strike angles. By Tuesday Fiachra understood that he had to defend himself. By Wednesday Rune was still insisting, 'Wait, wait, he can't kill you until Hallowe'en' – but Fiachra was pretty sure they wanted him dead right now. And by Saturday evening he had seen the true face of the man behind it all.

But that first attack, on Monday, he didn't suspect. He thought they had more time.

He hadn't a clue how close he'd come to dying.

By the end of that week, Fiachra was fighting for his life inside the school and outside it – fighting for everyone's life.

Saint Uinseann's was the only secondary school in the small town of Toomlake. Some of the kids called it Oinseach's, after the old Irish word for a fool. Two storeys in concrete and glass, a flat roof, three aerials sticking up like metal branches. A carpark and low wall out front; and this side of the building was mostly windows, with a large double door in the

middle and a stone plaque beside that, the school motto – “TRUTH AND BEAUTY, BEAUTY AND TRUTH” – engraved in an ornate typeface.

A regular-looking place. Nice, safe, almost boring. Not the sort of place where you expect to see the upstairs windows shatter to smithereens one black October evening. And this was a Saturday, around eight on Hallowe'en eve, so the school was empty – or should have been.

Nobody was out front when it happened, which was good; that way nobody knew what was going on here. The townsfolk of Toomlake could carry on with their uneventful, contented lives, unaware that the future of their universe was being decided. That everything was balanced on a knife-edge, about to fall: into triumph or disaster. It was better they didn't know. It was better that just one man, four kids and one strange bird knew exactly how high the stakes were.

If someone had been walking past, though, they would have got an incredible shock. One minute they're looking at Oinseach's, same as it always is; the next a gigantic shower of glass fragments is erupting into the air. And the sound of those windows blowing out: like something from the end of the world.

Ironically, the school had had all its windows replaced little more than a decade before. The then-principal, Labhras Lynagh, had fundraised for three years: sponsored walks, cake sales, fashion shows. He even appeared in one, wearing a summer frock with make-up by Miss Fennessy the secretary. He looked silly but didn't mind.

He was sorely missed in Toomlake after he died, exactly thirteen years ago that day, in a car crash at a lonely point near Big Seat Rock. Some of the nastier students spread rumours that the poor guy's head had been sliced clean off in the accident, but nobody believed them. Much.

By then he'd raised thousands which was eventually spent on double-glazed windows. No more leaks. No more 'flu epidemics running through school like Chinese whispers.

And now, no more windows across a large section of the top floor at the front of the building. The explosion was *big*. Not some half-hearted little 'krump' that might have rattled old windows. This was a thunderous

‘KAROOM!!’ which destroyed two panes of strengthened glass and hard-plastic frames.

It gets stranger. The windows had blown apart when a massive wooden bench came hurtling through them. If this passer-by was a student, they’d have recognised that bench. It was from the Chemistry lab, a long, heavy thing made of oak, so old it seemed to have become longer and heavier as each year pressed down upon it, flattening it, making it denser. And harder to throw through double-glazed windows.

Yet that’s what someone, or something, had just done. They’d torn one of those benches right out of the floor, ripped it clear of iron rivets and copper pipes. They’d lifted it above their head – but how was that even possible? – and yelled like a maniac and grit their teeth and then...

‘KAROOM!!’ An observer would have heard the roar and seen the glass cloud and then, flying through the storm, the wooden bench. They might have rubbed their eyes in disbelief, or looked around to see if anyone else saw it. Or maybe shook their head and smiled, deciding: That’s it – no more eating in bed. It’s giving me weird dreams and I’m stuck in one right now.

Then, about ten seconds later, they’d have realised this wasn’t a dream, it was really happening. But they’d probably rub their eyes one more time anyway.

And when the whirlwind of glass blew out of Saint Uinseann’s, they might have seen something else (though it all happened so fast that maybe they wouldn’t): a boy, wrapped up in the middle of it. A boy with red-black hair, black-red eyelashes, eyes the colour of dark-grey marble shining underwater. A boy called Fiachra on his sixteenth birthday.

A boy who twisted and spun and flew through the glittering air like a red raven.

**Monday**

## **Not dying**

That was Saturday, and a lot had happened in the meantime. One hell of a week: fantastical, amazing, terrifying...and true. All true.

This was Monday, the first day they tried to kill him.

He was saved by that idiot Dandy, which was pretty ironic. They didn't quite hate each other – Fiachra didn't hate anyone, and Dandy was too dumb to feel an emotion that deep – but they weren't exactly best friends. Dandy was loud, hulking and obnoxious. Nobody liked him. He liked nobody. He didn't have friends, just a bunch of weaselly losers who followed him around, followed his orders, took his crap. They didn't like him either.

But Dandy saved Fiachra's life. It happened at lunchtime, outside the nearest shop to Saint Uinseann's. The school was on the outskirts of Toomlake, so it was a ten-minute walk to the shop if you hadn't brought a packed lunch. And that day, Fiachra had been delayed because Loss said something to him leaving Double French. It was the first time she'd spoken to him in two months since arriving at their school during the second week of the new term. In fact he thought it might have been the first time she'd spoken to anyone besides teachers.

She stopped him by the arm as they exited the classroom and said, 'Hi. Did I hear you say you had a spare French dictionary? At home.'

He looked at her hand on his arm. He looked at her. He didn't speak. She did.

'Would you mind if I borrowed yours? I can't – I don't know where I left mine.'

He reached into his satchel, found it and pulled it out as if by magic, handing it to her without a word.

'Thanks,' Loss said. 'Your French: it's quite good. Your pronunciation. Have you been there?'

Fiachra was struck dumb: partly in surprise, mostly because of this tingly-delicious feeling of panic fizzing through his body. He gazed at her oval-shaped face, ice-blue eyes, the sprinkles of freckles on her nose. It seemed a long time before he realised he was staring, regained his

composure and replied, ‘Um, yeah. But years ago; with my parents. I mean, I couldn’t speak it then. Have...um, have you...?’

His voice trailed away. Loss gave a little smile and looked at the ground. He felt it in his heart, he physically felt a squeeze in there: painful but pleasurable too. He shut his eyes and thought, *Please don’t smile any more than that. Please, or I might pass out right here in the corridor.*

Then he smiled himself. *Real smooth, Barden. Oh, yeah. Smoooooth. You’re the lady-killer for sure.*

He opened his eyes. Loss said, ‘A long time ago. I travelled there once. This was... Mm. A long time.’

She lifted her eyebrows and nodded in the direction of the principal’s office. All the kids knew she was staying with Mr Cantillon; nobody was exactly sure what their connection was. She was his second cousin’s orphaned child, or the wayward daughter of an old friend, or an exchange student, or something. Her surname was different to his, anyway.

Loss Murren. Jesus, what a name. Sounded like she’d just stepped out of an old poem. It was short for something, he presumed.

She said, ‘Told Mr C I’d have a sandwich with him. Might see you later.’

‘Sure.’

‘And thanks for the dictionary. I’ll give it back soon, promise.’

‘Sure.’

With that she was gone. Fiachra nodded at her receding form. Her fair hair moved like a waterfall down her slender back as she walked. He swallowed hard. It felt as though he had a tennis-ball obstructing his throat. He grimaced and muttered, ‘Uch. *That* went well.’

Then he grabbed his bag and hit for the shop. He passed open fields and bungalows, cars coming the opposite way, one or two flashing their headlights in greeting, and didn’t notice a thing. He was picturing her again, wondering what it was about that girl...

Because she wasn’t gorgeous. Loss was pretty, yes, but not classically beautiful or crazy-sexy or anything. There was just...something about her. Something in her way of moving, how she appeared to glide instead of walking, as though she hovered two inches above the ground.

Something in her *way*, full-stop: at times it seemed she was there but not there, all at once. That sly sideways smile she gave, albeit rarely. The sense that she knew more than she had a right to know. *Something*.

*Aw, quit it, Fiachra. 'There but not there'? Yeah, thanks for the poetry, Lord Byron. What's that even supposed to mean, anyway?*

'She walks in beauty like the night.' That was Byron's sweetheart, wasn't it? But there was also something nocturnal about Loss, something shadowy-beautiful...and an almost old-fashioned aspect, as if her face was out of its time.

Nobody else seemed to fancy her. He'd heard a few lads make cracks about her: she was stuck-up, a lesbian, frigid (like they even comprehended what that meant). A lot of students, male and female, seemed intimidated by her, though Fiachra couldn't understand why. He didn't find her intimidating so much as intriguing; but that didn't make talking to her any easier.

There was a big crowd outside Mrs Pettit's Newsagents & Deli by the time he got there: clusters of kids talking, mooching around, hanging out. Boys shoved baguettes into their mouths and threw bits of salad at their friends. Girls ate in a more civilised manner, chatting, checking text messages. Two of Fiachra's female classmates were sitting on a bench, one consoling the other: right, he'd heard she'd broken up with that guy in Sixth Year, the final year of Irish secondary school. He was too old for her anyway. They, and Fiachra, were in Fifth Year. And he was a repeat, must have been eighteen at least.

Fiachra crossed the road and spotted Nolan leaning against a tree, all in black, his hair like a giant spider, smoking and looking incredibly cool. As he always did. His first name was actually Aodh, but everyone had called him by his surname for as long as Fiachra could remember, even his closest friends. Nolan's mam and dad were about the only people who used Aodh, as far as Fiachra could tell, maybe a few teachers sometimes. Pity, really – it was a good name.

Nolan bowed and waved his hand in a Shakespearean flourish. 'Hey, Fiachra. Hey, you do know you're allowed buy a new jacket, right?

'Course you do. That old thing, God, I can practically smell it from here. You're late, by the way.'

Fiachra smiled fondly and gave Nolan the finger. 'I love you too, honey.'

'Has it started moving on its own yet? That scuzzy jacket, I figure with all the mould and funguses living in it, you know. It's gonna come alive one of these days.'

'Hey, I love this jacket. It was a gift.'

'You're a gift. How was French? The Gargoyle throw her phone at anyone today?'

'Nah. Nah, it was...usual stuff. I, uh...'

'Go on, go get your lunch. Beven can't come today, she's got...'  
He fluttered a hand. 'I'no. *Something*. Debating practice or something.'

'Alright. Givus two minutes.' Fiachra moved towards the door then stopped. 'Nolan. She, ah... Loss. She spoke to me. Just now. We had, you know. ...Not much.' He laughed, quietly and self-consciously. 'But we spoke. To one another.'

Nolan sighed theatrically and rolled his eyes to heaven. 'You young people. With your silly romantic notions.' He turned serious and added, 'Okay, man. That's good, that she spoke to you, I'm happy. But...for later. Yeah? Not...right now. Uh-huh? You know what I'm talking about.'

Fiachra nodded. Nolan was right. It was a bitter truth, but the truth it was. Loss would have to wait.

'Rune will tell us when. Soon it'll all be over and you can go mooning after your pretty Loss Murren all you like. Write her a sonnet if you want. I'll help with the in-line rhyming.' Nolan pointed at the door. 'Lunch, lunch. Food. You, go buy food. Eat. Andalay, schnell, mush, mush.'

Fiachra pushed his way into the shop and made for the deli counter. Mrs Pettit herself was on duty, which was irregular in that she was at least seventy and her legs were, in her description, 'fierce bad', whatever that signified exactly. Her son Pierce normally manned the hot counter. But there she was, smiling at Fiachra as he approached...except it was a sweet,

consolatory smile. A smile that said, I'm sorry to disappoint you but I have to do it anyway.

'Fiachra. How are you, sweetheart?'

'Hey, Mrs Pettit. I'm alright. Mam and Dad were asking after you.' He looked around. 'Where's Pierce? Is he off today?'

'Doctor,' she replied. 'Something wrong with his chest. Sweetheart, I'm sorry now but most of the hot food is gone. A mix-up with the delivery van this morning. We got half the savouries and twice the sweets. So there's not much left to make up a sandwich.'

'Oh. Uh, okay.' Fiachra didn't mind too much. He wasn't very hungry; and in truth, his stomach was still fluttering, just a little, after that moment with Loss. He smiled. 'It's grand. Honestly, don't worry about it. I'll have a cake or something.'

Mrs Pettit brushed aside his suggestion. 'No, no, I can't have you eating cake for lunch, sure there's no nutrition in that. Your mum would kill me.' She leaned in over the remaining scraps of hot food and lifted out a pie. 'Here – how's this? Chicken and bacon in cream sauce. Nice and warm on a chilly October day.'

'Cool. Sounds great, thanks.'

She wrapped it in greaseproof paper and handed it to Fiachra with a smile, saying, 'I'll have to pay a visit to your home one of these evenings. Just to say hello.'

'Sure, yeah. I'll tell them to expect you.'

He paid and exited the shop. Nolan was on the phone when he stepped into the cool air, so Fiachra moved to one side, peeled back the paper and prepared to take a bite.

Which was when Dandy saved his life.

He didn't know he was saving it, any more than Fiachra knew. Dandy didn't know much of anything. He was nineteen and still in school. This was his third year attempting the Leaving Certificate, the final exam in second-level education. If he didn't pass this time 'round, his parents had threatened to ship him off to the navy. Any navy. He didn't like that idea. And he disliked seeing anyone being happy, in any way. So when he spied Fiachra about to bite into a steaming pie, Dandy stomped forward,

grabbed it from his hands and held it in the air, laughing like a bull on steroids.

He yelled to his gang, 'Look at this, lads! Barden's gone all fancy. A sandwich isn't good enough for you anymore, you wuss?' He waved his hands in an 'effeminate' way. 'Ooh, look at me! I'm Fiachra Barden and my mummy makes me a hot lunch every day! Lah-dee-dah, I'm so posh!'

One of his sidekicks sniggered and mumbled, 'Wouldn't mind giving *her* a hot lunch, heh-heh.'

'Idiot, that sentence would be offensive if you had the brains to understand what you were saying.' Nolan had materialised, as if out of nowhere. Now he held Dandy's pal in a wicked glare. 'What? Do you have something *more* to say? Duuh-duuh-duh-duuuh.'

Dandy shoved Nolan with his big meaty paw. 'And here's the other dickhead. Why don't you mind your own business, queer?'

Nolan raised an eyebrow. 'Queer? You sound like you know a bit about it there, sport.'

Dandy stepped forward, bristling with menace. 'Funny man, aren't you? Real funny. How 'bout if I slap that smile off your faggy face?'

Fiachra moved between them. He spoke quietly.

'It's alright, Nolan. Back off, Dandy. *Now.*'

Dandy snorted in derision. He could take this Barden clown any day of the week with one hand tied behind his back. Except...something was... How he was looking at Dandy. How his shoulders were set, and his whole body seemed to be loose but kind of coiled at the same time. How he talked so softly. Calmly.

Dandy tried to process this. He failed. Then he got annoyed and bored, and threw the pie on the ground. He pointed a finger at Fiachra and Nolan: 'Better *watch* it. Come on, lads.'

Nolan blew him a kiss. 'You'll get there, sweetheart. You'll get your Leaving before your pension. I just *know* you will.'

Dandy and his coterie shuffled off, a horde of mental dwarves following a lumbering giant.

Nolan called after them: 'Morons? Your bus is leaving.' He winked at Fiachra. 'That's from *Groundhog Day*. I love Bill Murray.'

‘Nolan, please?’ Fiachra said. ‘Stop talking.’

Nolan dropped his cigarette onto the ground, next to the pie which lay smashed on the pavement. ‘You still eating that?’

Fiachra laughed and thumped his friend on the shoulder. ‘Eejit. Nah, wouldn’t eat it anyway once that ape had got his paws on it. To hell with it, I’ll skip lunch.’

‘I never eat lunch. Lunch is for the bourgeois.’

‘Actually, *must* you cause trouble like that all the time? Seriously. Do you *have* to antagonise the likes of Dandy? What is it, a compulsion or something?’

‘More of an addiction, I would guess. Hey, what’s the problem? Nothing can happen to me when I’ve got my guardian angel, right? My fiery red angel.’

He smiled. Fiachra smiled too. He said, ‘Yeah. S’pose so’, and grabbed Nolan in a headlock, messing up his hair.

Nolan mumbled, ‘Hey, hey, watch the hair. I spent an hour on it this morning.’

‘I *know*, doofus. That’s why I’m doing it.’

They disengaged and moved off. Into their wake slipped a small dog, a rough terrier that everybody knew and petted, but nobody appeared to own. The dog trotted towards the pie, happy in that mindless dog way: free lunch. And hot lunch at that. He devoured it in thirty seconds flat.

Two hours later the dog was dead. The poison hidden inside the pastry had stopped his heart. He felt a mercifully brief spike of pain in his chest. Then his heart slowed and slowed more and finally stopped. The dog had passed into unconsciousness well before he died.

And two days after that, Mrs Pettit herself died. Her doctor was baffled. On Monday evening she complained of exhaustion and fell asleep and didn’t wake up. The old lady wasn’t in a coma – they took her to hospital for scans and all brain functions seemed normal. She just didn’t wake again, as though she’d been force-fed a thousand sleeping pills. She had no energy left, no spark. It was like she was emptied out.

That’s because she was. The Faceless Death left nothing behind once he passed on.