

Gerald Lynch / SEAMUS AND THE CROW

Christopher sat squirming in the middle of the hedgerow out behind the big stone house, fighting to draw his knees nearer to his chest, to remove his protruding feet from daylight. Cramped in the undergrowth, itching and sweating and unable to scratch, his elbows dug into his ribs as his heels pushed into the groove deepening beneath them, foiling his efforts by causing him to slip even farther into the betraying light. He cursed his feet as he had heard Jem curse him, knowing that his retreat would prove futile. It was too late. Jem would find him whenever he bothered to look. Jem had probably already descended from his loft and was now on his way out back, eyes darting. Christopher knew it was hopeless to hide . . . as hopeless as a stupid Minchelin. His panic rushed back and he again began the losing battle with his own size. He cried as quietly as he could, the salty sweat in his eyes, his genitals aching from the squeeze.

It was enough that he was bothered by his feigned disinterest when he and Jem had killed the snake the evening before, enough that he was worried by his inability to resist Jem's threats, and more than enough that he was frightened by his growing awareness of Jem's difference from the other men on the farm. The incident with the snake proved all: Christopher's bothered discomfort, his worried defencelessness, Jem's difference.

The evening before, they had gone down to the cowpond to drive the herd home. Jem had talked nonstop, rambling on in his usual manner, spouting about the cost of maintaining a family in Korea, a leap from that to the origins of leprosy in the United States (how African elephants were to blame), leapfrogging from that to cosmology: "The sun, cod, is a match that was struck by the devil, and all the stars and moons are wee bits that flew off when the match was struck, and so're we in a way . . . Jesus, I wish I'd worn a cardigan, it's getting colder already, and this only September . . . anyway, as soon as the match burns out — and it must, you know — everything will get cold again and we'll all go to sleep forever. . . . Do you understand me?"

A frightening challenge, but Christopher had by this time learned discretion, what he felt was respect for his elders, even for Jem whom, he knew, was more like a child. "But what about God?"

"God?" Jem laughed, his face cringing. "Is it a theological debate you're wantin'?"

"Uh — I don't know. . . . It's just that God rules the devil, even when this world ends or we die, 'cause —"

"Will you just look at that old snake lying up there on the bank," Jem interrupted, stumbling, spittle flying from the corners of his mouth. He ran to the mucky bank of the drying pond, picked up a small snake and flung it into the centre of the pond. When it returned to the bank he flung it again, high in the air, end over end. This time the snake wove a slower return to the opposite side.

"You stand where I was, cod," Jem shouted, frenzied as he ran to the other side. "And watch your side. When it comes out, throw it back into the middle. And don't stand idle or I'll throw you after it." He held the snake aloft by its tail: "Here's to your God and all his blessed saints in heaven." He whirled his arm like a windmill and let fly the snake; it rose until it was but a speck against the darkening sky, then fell, into the dead centre of the stagnant pond.

Christopher took up his position in the thick sole-sucking muck of the bank and did as he had been told. The cold evening descended quickly as he slopped back and forth on the rim of the pond, reluctantly sending the snake airborne, praying that Jem would soon tire of this sick game and leave the snake alone. Insects buzzed his ears, droning: home . . . home . . . home. But it was Christopher who sent the snake on its last flight, and Christopher who watched achingly as it came weaving back in a barely discernible convoy of ripples to the spot where he and Jem had converged. It struggled into the healing muck, lay still, a bubble of blood at the corner of its parted jaws.

"D'ye see what I mean? D'ye see? . . ."

Jem calmed after a short vigil and they went about their work, herding the few cows up to the barn. Work, it was work to Jem, but Christopher enjoyed the herding. He liked being near the familiar animals, had named his favourite cow and pig. He had even invented an animal the three-legged Minchelin. To the delight of the farmhands he would often hold a stick in front of himself and gallop

about the yard braying, "Minchelin-Minchelin," stumbling each time the stick stabbed the ground. A clumsy animal, the Minchelin inevitably stumbled and fell. But Christopher believed that it rose stronger, having sucked strength from the earth through its lone probing foreleg. Winking at each other, enjoying the game more because known, the farmhands would ask Christopher what the Minchelin was always doing in the dirt. And Christopher would give the ritualized reply: Looking for his lost leg.

"I suppose we took care of that ould crawler," Jem said as he locked the big barn door. "You know, cod, I'd be willing to bet that that ould snake felt about the same way as I did when I left that lunatic bin they call a hospital. . . . Ah well, well-well, how many wells would make a river?"

"I don't know."

"Now that's the mystery. . . . So, up with the birds and tomorrow we'll show you the other ways to skin a cat. Would you like that?"

Christopher said nothing. Jem disappeared through the inset door and left him to his own feelings and unformed thoughts, stirrings that had confused him since his last picture of the battered snake lying in the oozing muck with blood, red as his own, exhaled from its parted jaws.

He walked down the incline to the house, entered quietly and went to bed, where all night he soaked his sheet with a cooling sweat. *How could he save the many cats?* They were everywhere. He lay all night on the ragged edge of his nightmares, raving between sleep and wakefulness, dreaming fitfully of a massive herd of Minchelins being driven off the edge of the world by a dark figure standing on the seat of a massive silver tractor. The Minchelins, which he had always imagined covered with a soft auburn fur, and big as kangaroos, were naked as plucked chickens, millions of mice-sized Minchelins stampeding into cold dark space. In the morning he woke to a colder stiffness in the damp sheets, drank a quick cup of tea and went immediately out back and into the hedgerow.

As the morning wore on he continued his struggle in the hedge, still hoping somehow to telescope his shins into his thighs, to collapse

his legs like the accordion gate that coralled his younger brother on the porch. He heard someone moving in the garden, then Jem's voice approaching the hedgeside. He froze, a perfect stillness that sawed still like a hive of bees in his head.

"Where are ya, cod?" came the question. "Hiding in the hedge? Come on out or you'll be a sorry little sinner for it. Come on out and face your punishment. Come on, you're coming out one way or another."

He maintained his perfect stillness in the damp darkness, hearing only the thumping of his heart and the padding of Jem's feet along the hedgerow. Just as he realized the approaching sound had stopped, his feet were gripped and he was torn from his hiding. Hanging upside down, he looked up into Jem's triumphant face.

"Oh cod, you'll be paying for this," Jem said. He swung Christopher over the ditch and proceeded into the adjoining cowpasture. "Perhaps a little dip in some dung will be teaching you to mind your elders when they call. That's the thing, a wee bit of cowpie for the soul to teach you some manners. Would that suit that pretty empty head of yours?"

Jem moved briskly across the field, chuckling and glancing worriedly over his shoulder, his catch quivering like a strained inverted wishbone before him, an ankle held in each hand. He jerked anxiously toward the freckled corner of the pasture with the boy held in a taut Y-shape, a man with a human divining rod moving in the assurance of paydirt.

Draining blood reddened Christopher's face as the half-cropped stubble of the pasture raked his head. But he neither spoke nor whimpered, though he had been scraped when pulled from his hiding in the hedge. Even now, out in the open air, he felt as suffocated in the rush of the artificial breeze as he had in the hedgerow, as he always felt in Jem's presence. And yet, with all about him threatening, he still experienced a certain exhilaration in the man's company. It was not simply the release of facing an inevitable confrontation; it was a quickening, the sure surge of spirits that had bound him to Jem from their first meeting, despite the continual gnawings of guilt, shame and fear since. It was an excitement, and more than excitement: the man's mystery, secrecy, the confession, confidences, and conspiracies shared with *him*, a boy; the undeniable thrill of this swing through Jem's topsy-turvy world as he bobbed ahead of the man like an extra limb.

Jem, whose real name was Seamus Daly, had been working at the Kisbey's farm in Brigden for three weeks. He had come from somewhere in Southwestern Ontario (working his way as a farmhand, he claimed) and endeared himself to Christopher's mother with exaggerated Irish piety, then paying for his meal with some light yard labor, an eruption of gratitude and, most impressively, a boisterous string of prayers. Taken in by the appearance of simplicity, Mrs. Kisbey saw to it that Seamus was hired on for the harvest and allotted a makeshift room in the barn loft. Although Seamus never did harvest with the other men, it soon became obvious to the farmhands that Seamus was crazy, maybe dangerously so, at best a halfwit, though definitely not an idiot or simpleton. Still, within a week he was known to everyone as Simple Jemmy and blamed for every mishap that occurred within hearing distance of the space he occupied. It was soon rumored that his odd ways were a result of the war — some shrapnel that he had caught in the head while fighting as a Canadian volunteer for the Americans in Korea — and that he had been recently released from a long stay at the psychiatric hospital in St. Thomas. Some versions had it that Seamus had escaped.

These rumors alarmed Mrs. Kisbey, though she knew that their source was Simple Jemmy himself, "talking himself up." She cautioned her children to stay clear of the new man, insisting nevertheless that he was "one of the Lord's poor unfortunate creatures," one who was assured of a spot in heaven with those babies who died baptized.

Mrs. Kisbey relaxed her censorship after Seamus had passed a couple of uneventful weeks at the farm, rediscovering in the man an innocence unassailable by the sticks and stones of gossip. After three weeks Seamus had lodged himself as her personal yard hand, taking up permanent residence in the loft. Mrs. Kisbey no longer snapped her head up in maternal concern when Seamus' voice broke

her silence, finding instead a restfulness that disarmed in the man's chanted outbursts of prayer. Being too busy with breakfast one morning, she asked Christopher to run up to the barn and call Simple Jemmy in to eat (she too used the nickname, but made it clear to her children that it was a title rather than a slur).

Although only peripherally acquainted with the strange new man about the place, Christopher had been fascinated by Seamus' peculiarities, the musical gibberish, the energy. He had often hid near where Seamus was working and eavesdropped for hours. The drone of the man's continuous chant could lull him behind a bush or wall as the cool water of the millrace across his feet could launch him into hours of lost daydreaming. Christopher had been eager for an excuse to approach the source of this hum and was grateful for the opportunity to go and call Simple Jemmy to breakfast.

He ran up the incline to the barn but approached the door with the caution of a prowler. He quietly opened the inset door and froze at the sound from the loft. He had heard the nonstop murmur many times before, the familiar, but he had never been in the man's presence. The smell of the barn, the dusty air, hot even now and sliced by swords of sunlight through the wall boards, all of it had an arresting effect. Kicking off his heavy shoes, he stole to the foot of the ladder and began a slow silent ascent. Holding his breath, he reached for the top rung and cautiously raised his head above the floor of the loft, ready for anything, the madman conversing with the devil. Instead he saw Simple Jemmy bent over his cot in the rigid fervor of his prayers, ejaculating *Our Fathers* in spasms. Awestruck, Christopher concentrated on the knobs of vertebrae on the man's sweat-soaked back until the rungs of the ladder began to hurt his bare feet, drawing him back to his errand. He leaned away from the loft, fearing the consequences of disturbing the enraptured madman.

"Simple Jemmy," he called, forgetting that the name was never used directly. "Mom says to come and eat now."

Seamus twisted from the waist, the shock of sound and sense on his face, eyes reddened by the knuckles of his fists. His eyes met, locked onto and held Christopher's. The man's forehead was a furrowed white, from the centre of which his hawk's nose seemed to hook into his thin-lipped mouth. Christopher was a blank, as unyielding of information as is an empty blackboard.

"What did you call me?" Seamus whispered, beginning a grin that drew his nose even farther into his mouth. "Speak, cod!"

He stood up, stepped over to the ladder, grabbed and swung Christopher into the loft, where the boy's toes curled and uncurled about the scattered straw. Seamus returned to his knees in front of Christopher, gripped his shoulders and stared directly into his eyes, not questioning or entreating but prying, probing like a shaft sliding in to sample.

For the first time Christopher experienced the overpowering effect of Seamus' eyes. They had the size, shape and lustre of his big clear marbles. Christopher could feel those eyes move in and through him, tingling in the back of his throat like ice, holding his tongue and reaching on down for his heart. He stared blankly at his own face reflected in those eyes, afraid he was about to wet himself.

"So, that's what they're calling me now, is it?" Seamus reflected. He rose to his feet and began pacing, but soon knelt down again in front of Christopher. "And do you think I'm a . . . a Simple Jemmy, codface?"

"M-M-Mom says — "

"To the devil with mommy!" he roared, shaking Christopher so that his lower lip snapped tight again. "I'm asking you, you sniveling little killer."

Christopher couldn't answer. Seamus began muttering and ranting, kicking the straw and stubbing his big toe. He punched himself hard a few times in the stomach, then calmed as suddenly and relaxed onto his cot. He told Christopher that he was going to explain to him why they called him Simple Jemmy, because he could see that Christopher was an ignorant cod and didn't know what he was saying. He told how he had been a corporal fighting for the Americans in Korea, how one day an unexploded shell had landed in the swampy bunker where he and his men were holed-up, how he had found his way back to the command post to report the danger, and how his superiors had threatened him with courtmartial for leaving the line of duty while under fire.

"That's how they treat their volunteers," he whined. Then proudly: "Me, a major in the provisionals back home till it died down there. A Canadian then, and volunteerin' to fight for the bloody Yanks in their God-forsaken war. Ah, but they put me in charge of a troop of sorry niggers who, if the truth be known, knew more about that kind of jungle scrappin' than all their generals. But they wouldn't listen to them, or me, they never —"

"Who were you fighting?" Christopher whispered, finding his tongue as Seamus' attention grew reflective, turning from the boy and winding in upon himself.

"Who indeed?" Seamus sighed to his lapped hands. "Who was I fighting!" he shouted, snapping at the boy like a released spring. "What the hell difference does that make! Why, the Koreans of course."

Seamus rocked to his feet and began pacing again, striding nearer to the unrailed edge of the loft with each trip, stopping each time to peer down into the hulk of rusted machinery below. Balanced dangerously on the edge, he reached up into a cobwebbed corner of shit-covered rafter beams and pulled down an impressive gangling spider. He returned and sat on the floor in front of Christopher with his legs spread. Holding the spider by a few of its legs, he pulled off a free one and dropped it on the floor. It twitched and danced like a ball of spit on hot metal. He moved it about with his finger, giggling.

He raised his finger and pointed it directly between Christopher's eyes: "Now cod, stop with your interrupting. Just keep your eyes on that daddy-longlegs' lost part and you'll learn a few things that Bobby Bruce missed entirely."

Christopher stood mute and paralyzed, bracketed by Seamus' bristled shins which stretched a good distance past his own bare feet. Between the man and the boy the hair-like leg continued its nervousness as others fell to join it. The severed dance of the legs held Christopher's attention as the man resumed his low drone.

"Yes sir, I went back to my men like I was told all right. But just as I got within seeing distance the shell rolled into that stinking soaked hole and exploded." Seamus held the deserted body of the spider between thumb and forefinger, crushed and dropped it among the small pile of debris that twitched in its own spattering of blood.

His chin resting on his breastbone, Seamus whimpered: "Do you know, cod, there was no more left of my men to tell one from the other than what you see right there. . . . And it was me they made sort out the tags."

They remained silent, their vigil concentrated on the remains of the spider. For the first time since Seamus had sat down with the spider, Christopher looked at his face. His eyes had dulled, their sparkle gone, seemingly sore for tears; but his mouth was twisted in two different directions, one corner up and the other pulled down, gums bared in a leer.

"And do you know what I did, cod?" he continued, rising to his feet, rubbing his hands and chuckling. "I made a joke of it, a good story. I made out that I was crazy so as they wouldn't put me away. I had to make up something. You know, they tried to put the blame on me — it's the Mick, the crazy Canadian, volunteer, must be mad, can't be us! . . . They tried to say that I . . . so I kept on pretending to be a — uh — a Simple Jemmy, because I knew they'd be hearing about it back home, and everywhere, and be wantin' to blame me too. They always have to have somebody else to blame."

Seamus heaved to his feet and, reckless, walked to the edge of the loft where, punching, rubbing and pulling at his left shoulder, he stared intently down.

"I wouldn't blame you, Sim — Jem," Christopher called, finding a voice. It was the first time that he used the new name for Seamus. "I'd blame the ones who shot the bomb, the . . . uh — the Kores."

"You'd what?" shouted Jem, swinging around with a peal of mad laughter. "The who? The bomb? You'd blame who? The corpse? The corps? The rotten core of the corps' corpse?"

With a few long strong strides Jem stood in front of Christopher. He picked him up and tossed him high into the air. "Jem, is it? Yes? Oh but you're the gem, cod. But aren't we going to be the greatest of friends. Didn't I know the moment I laid eyes on that empty head of yours poking up like a worm that you'd do me some good. And sure as there's a devil in hell you have. . . . Now, let's go in to eat before your mommy forgets we're alive."

Jem performed his menial chores that day accompanied by Christopher, who could only grow more fascinated as the man reintroduced him to a world which he had thought he knew as well as his bare feet knew the path from his back door to the millrace. Jem, the pace of his speech machine-gun, explained unthought of mysteries, redefined, and continually posed questions without pausing for replies. The soil, the ground, the entire earth upon which they walked was a dungball drifting rudderless in a universal pig-sty, ever ready to sink and allow Christopher to be swallowed into an eternity of suffocating hell. The cleared fields into which his father disappeared every morning now proved to be an insignificant scratch in a wilderness waiting menacingly just the other side of the tree line. All animals, even the chickens and cows, were beasts biding their time, their vengeance, eager to peck out Christopher's eyes or stomp his brains into the dust should he let down his guard for an instant. Jem cautioned him to fear what lies behind the tree line, warned that the woods were wild with flesh-eating monsters, beasts that were half-woman half-wolf waiting to devour snooping young boys. And when Christopher looked out to the line of trees that backed the fields, he agreed with Jem, who brooked no disagreement. When he gazed long enough at those woods that he had hoped to explore some day, he believed, thought he saw a flash of orange fur, a horn.

That first day with Jem, begun so companionably, conspiratorially, had ended with the torturing and killing of the snake. To Christopher, that first day felt confusingly related to this morning and his present predicament, swinging through the cowpasture, helpless, on the way to having his head dunked in a cowpie. His fear, strange taste of something bad, evil, his excited fascination, these were connection to the previous evening. But total helplessness, that was the sudden change, his inability to escape what he had welcomed. Although separated only by nightmares and the snatches of sleep he had managed in his damp bed, he felt the two days to be as different as black from white, distinct in terms of his willing participation; and yet, connected still by his curiosity to see what would happen next, what would be done to him, and what he would be led or forced to do.

"Oh, we're going to baptize you with cowdung. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Minchelin. And then I'll take a salt block and shove it down your throat. Yes-yes, and while your head's in the dung you can take a look around for that other leg you've lost. Then maybe you can stand up when I call and not go running off like a coward . . .

"Minchelin-Minchelin-Minchelin," Seamus brayed in imitation of Christopher. "I'll Minchelin you, turncoat, traitor!"

They arrived at the corner of the field. The cows turned to face the man staggering towards their droppings. The herd was gathered loosely beneath the roof of an open-ended metal shed, ruminating indifferently as the couple approached in their awkward symbiosis. The shed, which served as the animals' lone shield against the sun, was about twelve feet high; it was roofed with corrugated metal that distorted the space above with waves of heat reflected from the noon sun. The roof ran flat along the top, then sloped a few feet to the back eaves where a huge black crow perched, hunched and enfolded above the prone cows. The ground about the shed was bare, parched, and littered with the rusted remains of outmoded tools.

"Are you ready for this, cod?" Jem asked, holding Christopher by the ankles over a dropping baked black by the sun, smooth and blank as an unetched mandala. "You know, they say that this is the stuff that makes things grow. Well, I'm full of it, they all say that. Let's see what it does for you."

Christopher lost consciousness as his head met the hardened crust of dung. The vapors from below came fuming into his mind with the tepid sensation of cows licking the sweat from the back of his neck. All around him there was a pulsating murmur, directed at him, swelling from below, above and on all sides. He was engulfed by an urgent but hushed message, an indistinct and incoherent murmur, a soft but persistent warning. Silent blackness. Then the voices again, dark in confusion, staggered, so that only single words came clear. He was standing by the cowpond at night, black still pond, staring at its dead centre, the voices buzzing his ears with warning: -home . . . alone . . . no-home . . . alone. Words he had to put sense to, to pick out from the droning. The effort made him sick and he vomited into the pond. Choking, he was hanging upside down inside the hedgerow. But the hedgerow was now a wide ditch filled with cud-chewing cows grouped along a rail. Jem was moving along inside the rail, his prize hanging by the heels. Christopher felt the wet slap of each cow respectfully lapping the nape of his neck as he passed . . . and stopped choking. He was trying to shout up to Jem that this was a mortal sin, that his legs were coming out of their sockets, that he wanted to go back, home, that. . . . He began humming back to light, to the blended sounds of scattering hooves and Jem's distant screaming. He came to and found himself, soiled by vomit, chilled and light-headed, lying beside the slightly cracked dung.

"Get over here quick, cod!" Seamus roared, in a condition of frenzy that Christopher had seen only twice before — the confession, the killing of the snake. "We've got this black bugger! He can't move, look!"

Seamus was pelting the crow with every stone and chunk of dirt he could lay his hands on. But the missiles had little effect on the crow. It sat unbothered, eyes closed, wings tucked tight. The cows lumbered away, haunches moving like sluggish pistons.

"Quick cod!" Seamus bellowed, nostrils flaring, "you'll have to get up on the roof and drop something on this dying devil, if he's not dead already."

Spittle flying from the corners of his mouth, Seamus gripped Christopher above the elbow in the bony vice of his hand and pulled him around to the front of the shed. Using his hands and shoulders he lifted Christopher to the top of the shed door that had long been packed open by seasons of accumulated dirt. From there Christopher pulled himself onto the roof and stood, curling and uncurling his toes,

unaware of his feet burning on the hot metal. Hot air filled his lungs and he could neither breathe easily nor see clearly.

"Wait on the edge, Jesus-mother-blackbird. I'll get something to hand up to you. Don't move from your station till I say or I'll come up there and throw you down on the ugly bugger."

Christopher lay flat, hanging his head and arms over the roof's edge, listening as Seamus disappeared in a fit of prayers, oaths and curses, actually hearing the sweat fizz out on his own back. He couldn't tell how long Seamus was away; the day appeared to darken, brighten, the sun seeming to wink in and out of clouds; day or night he couldn't tell.

Seamus returned carrying a short-handled sledge hammer with a blunt, oversized head. Reddish-brown scrapings of rust from the head of the sledge fell into Seamus' upturned and eager face as he handed up the weapon, making him blink and spit furiously as he gave the order: "Now drag this tool across the roof, codface, and slide it down on the ugly black bugger. And don't be a woman. You know you've seen your daddy kill animals when they're no good anymore."

Christopher listened to Seamus but heard only the hissing sweat on his own back. For the first time he hesitated in carrying out a direct order from Seamus, but he reached involuntarily for the hammer when he saw that Seamus' eyes seemed about to explode from their sockets. He gripped the hammer with both hands, pulled and dragged it onto the roof.

"Jesus Christ!" Seamus shrieked as he disappeared around the corner of the shed, his arms thrown above his head. "Run home to your mommy's petticoats if you're going to think about it . . . woman. You baby woman, you Dalila hooer! I'll tear your limbs off when you get down, I will. The black bugger can't move. Hammer it!" There was silence, then the shrill voice from the back of the shed: "Well? Hammer it! All you gotta do is just slide it down on top of him. I'll get it on the ground. Do it! Do as you're ordered or I'll come up there and bust your head then feed it to the woman-wolf."

Christopher stood and dragged the hammer towards the back ledge, leaving small drops of blood in his path where the heads of the roof screws tore the soles of his feet. When he turned he was standing directly above the crow, which sat sideways on the lower edge, its eyes now open. Staring into the one wide black eye that fixed him, he hoisted the hammer a few inches between his spread legs. On the third seemingly effortless swing he let the weapon fly. It cleared the crow's head by a foot. He was down in a curled position on the roof when the unmistakable sound of crushing skull penetrated his raving darkness.

The crow stretched its neck and turned its head from side to side. It broke the silence with a flutter of its blue-black wings, extending itself, then settling back, as though in trial of forgotten or awakened prowess. It cawed harshly, piercingly. Christopher opened wide his eyes in time to see it swoop like a piece of black cloth in the direction of the farmhouse.