

Celtic Rewards by William Benson

Chapter 8 Should I Stay or Should I Go

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The house was beautiful. Its white washed wood exterior on a modern A frame design gave it a vision of a snowy peak amongst the background granite peaks. Inside was a high lofted ceiling, with long plate glass views of the mountain directly behind. It was much too large for just one person, with its 3 bedrooms and 2 baths, but it made him feel at home, something his New York apartments never did. He preferred the extra comforts, and since he had not lived in a house since he left for college the large space was a nice change. The house was already furnished by the owner, yet Dan was still looking forward to adding a few pieces of his own. The truck carrying some of his stuff from New York arrived that Sunday, so there wasn't much unpacking he could do until then.

Since he first saw the house he somehow felt attuned to it. Everything about the place beckoned him. The house, the hot tub, the lawn and the woods. Behind the house, past the yard, lay deep woods that were untouched as they made their way up the very steep and tall mountain. Dan sat on his new wraparound deck staring into the blackness of the trees that Friday night. It was past midnight, and the only sounds he heard were his and the forest's breathing. He sat drinking, gazing hypnotically into the trees and their shroud of darkness. He felt a strange closeness with the forest, which compelled him so much that he almost went in to its calling, but the darkness frightened him enough to wait for daylight.

Clery awoke the next morning with a slight hangover. He was getting used to the minor repercussions from a previous night's indulgence, but his body reacted worse and worse as he drank more and more often. The drinking got progressively worse. Instead of the standard two glasses of Merlot Dan upgraded to several glasses of Irish Whiskey or sour mash to induce uninterrupted sleep. Since coming to Vermont the dreams came and went sporadically, but certain nights Dan just wanted to be left alone. After breakfast, he settled down in the large western styled sofa to go over some T&E reports. By late afternoon he finished most of the analysis, but became distracted. He felt a pulling sensation, as if someone called to him from a far distance. He heard nothing, yet still there

was the enticement. Cleary tried to ignore it but the urgings would not leave his mind. Finally he got up and went out on the deck. He stared deep into the trees. They looked more natural and earthly in the daylight, so he decided to take a healthy walk.

The huge foliage seemed to form an apparent pine leafed wall across his property line, until he noticed a small hiking or game trail. The trail led right into his backyard, but was concealed by the outreaching branches of a large pine tree. He knew the Appalachian Trail ran somewhere nearby, and wondered if his trail led to the famous path. The trail was hardly 3 ft. across, with long 6-inch wide ruts running down. The ruts made it difficult to walk wearing only sneakers, and Cleary wished he'd worn his old work boots. He followed the trail upwards, as it wound its way up the mountain. The slope of the trail increased and he could feel a strain on his Nautilus trained body. Dan was not a nature nut and never did much hiking through the wilderness. But this was different. He felt as if he was following something. He hiked in search of a goal. Something called to him and although it confused him, it caused no fear. He had to find out why he felt that way, so he continued.

The trail kept going up, leading him for over thirty minutes and onto a much wider track that seemed to ascend diagonally. He looked back toward the house, feeling both apprehension and curiosity at continuing. Cleary ignored any trepidation and kept going. As he hiked, he heard in the distance a muffled whining sound. The noise increased in decibels as he went on. Dan felt that the sound was familiar but his occupied mind could not place what it was. He could tell it was getting closer however. He hiked on for another nine minutes before deciding to rest. The noise was louder and much closer. It was a menacing, mechanical sound. Its source was on the edge of his memory but he could not place it. As he neared the top of the mountain's tree line he saw a deep gully in the trail. Cleary stopped in the middle of the two large mounds that the trail crossed over. He stood in the bottom of the trough, waiting. The sound became a piercing, whining scream that was very close. Cleary searched for the source but his eyes focused on another concern. The trees on the uphill side of the trail were odd. He was accustomed to seeing birch, maples and pines surrounding him, but the mammoth trees there looked to be oak. He thought it strange to see such colossal trees so high up. They were also thicker than Dan thought possible. He could barely see through their coverage. They formed a barrier in front of him so dense that he could not see more than three yards deep. He did not understand how they could survive being so close to one another. He then looked upward from the trees. Hundreds of yards in and directly above the oaks stood a cliff about a hundred feet high, a small plateau and then the utmost peak. He immediately knew where he witnessed the scene before, and why he made the journey.

The peak was high above all else, with three large trees resting on its plateau. Dan knew the sight not from a physical viewing, but from a vision in a dream. An all too

familiar dream. It was the spot where he beckoned the Light and where the Light obeyed him. A cold raced through his spine as he remembered that night, and its new implications. Cleary tried to block out the memory of that scene but it came flying back like a piercing arrow. It struck him square and the pain was penetrating. He tore his eyes from the peak and back toward the wall of oaks. The impenetrable wall opened before his eyes and he could see. The trees hid something. A path. A path leading through the thickest forest he ever saw. It was not there seconds earlier but appeared just then, waiting for him to follow. It spiraled upwards, directly to the cliff at the bottom of the summit. His fear was paralyzing but his fascination and curiosity ruled his emotions, giving him the strength to move. He took a step forward when the screaming sound that followed him finally found its target.

Realizing too late what it was, he jumped to his right as the monstrous sound came down upon him. The creature came off the first dirt mound in flight, soaring directly towards his skull. The rider of the shrieking killer peered down through golden eyes at its defenseless victim. His vision blurred and his mind confused, Dan put his arm out to stop the beast. The front tire stuck his hand, knocking him down and the monster off course. Cleary hit the ground face first, as pain burst from his wrist. Dan clamored to his feet, worried that the vehicle would attack again, but the beast had crashed. He turned to hear the screaming whine of the motor hit a new pitch, and then slowly lower until stopping completely.

The motocross bike lay on the ground, silent. The rider was sprawled across the trail, still rattled from the unforeseen obstacle. He jumped up, his young body unhurt due to full plastic body armor. The rider immediately checked his bike for damage. Paranoia slightly calmed, Dan collapsed to his knees and began to massage his left wrist. After seeing no physical damage to his vehicle, the rider turned to Cleary.

“Hey Mister, you okay?” he asked, nervous, the voice muffled by his full face helmet.

“I’ve been better,” Dan said, his back to the rider and still in shock over all that occurred.

The rider removed his helmet, realizing the situation. “What the hell were you doing under a goddamn double jump? I mean for crissakes, didn’t you hear me coming? Jesus Christ! I could have taken your fucking head off! How dumb can you be?” The rider ranted, thinking how stupid some of the hick locals were.

The voice sounded familiar to Dan. Very familiar. He turned around to match the face with the accent.

“Stupid enough to hire you!”

Vince Castille’s face went white yet again. He dropped his helmet and stumbled backwards.

“Oh shit.”

“Uh huh.” Dan nodded his head and grinned slyly.

“Oh God. Mr. Cleary, I’m so sorry. I would’ve never yelled at you like that. Oh Christ, I mean I would never hit you like that. Not on purpose anyway. Are you all right? Are you sure you’re all right?”

“Yeah I’m fine Vince. Just a sore wrist and a good scare.” (*A real good scare.*)

“Oh thank God. But if you’re not I can get you to the hospital right away. I know a short cut. Take us 10, 15 minutes tops, and . . .”

“Really Vince, I’m fine. It’s okay.” Dan was amused at his new employee’s reaction.

“You’re sure?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Man, I make some great first impressions don’t I?”

“Your sarcasm is understated Castille.”

“Right, catastrophic is more like it.” Vince was relieved that his new boss was neither dead nor pissed off. “But honestly Mr. Cleary, it’s dangerous to stand under a jump on an enduro bike trail. You could have really been hurt. Not just by me, but anybody really.”

“Well Vince, I had no idea I was standing under a jump, *or* on a motorcycle trail. I thought it was a hiking trail.” Cleary looked back at the trees. The path that led to his peak was gone. He only saw the dense oak trees that blocked his vision before. He turned back to Vince, hoping the terror he felt in the pit of his stomach wasn’t noticeable in his eyes.

“No sir. The hiking trails are about a quarter mile west and east of here. In fact there’s a sign down at the bottom that says so.”

“Well I kind of cut in the trail by my house near the bottom,” Dan said, slightly embarrassed and greatly relieved that Vince showed no signs of suspecting a problem.

“Is that your white house down there?”

“Yes, I’m renting it while I’m here.”

“Wow, impressive.”

“It’s one of the benefits of hard work Vince.” Dan was happy to save some face with his young assistant.

“I bet. So, I really am sorry about hitting you and I hope your hand feels better.”

“Don’t worry about it. It was my fault, and the wrist will be fine.”

“Do you want a ride back down the mountain? If you walk it might be dark before you’re all the way down.”

“No that’s okay. I’ll start heading back now and be fine,” Cleary said, not quite realizing what the darkness would mean.

“Okay. I have to go too to finish the trail’s loop before dark, but you should be all right. I don’t think anyone else is riding today.”

“Fine. I’ll see you Monday, 9 a.m. sharp.”

“You got it boss, oh and Mr. Cleary?”

“Yeah?”

“Be careful.”

Dan nodded as Castille put on his helmet, kick started the yellow dirt bike and took off with a wheelie and a roost of dirt.

With Vince well out of sight, Dan looked back at the trees. At first the oaks blocked his sight, but then it appeared. It was there for him and possibly him alone. The path presented itself for his eyes so he could follow. He believed that Vince wouldn’t have seen the path even if he had the guts to ask him. He feared that it was a hallucination, that his fears made him see what wasn’t there. Frightening as that thought was, it was better than accepting the vision before him as reality. The Anam Fís would no longer allow such denials however. It called to him again. He could feel its energy luring him forward. Cleary wanted to go. Its enticements were undeniable, like a gnawing addiction. He wanted to find out what came next. He again tried to step toward the path. That time he was stopped not with speeding machinery, but with a softly spoken voice. His mother’s words filled his mind. He could see her face in his mind and hear her warnings. ‘Stay away from it Daniel. Don’t give in to its temptations.’ The words echoed in his mind until he could bear the remembrance no longer. He turned from the path and ran.

The burn in his shins and lack of air in his lungs forced him to stop running as day gave way to darkness. The moon illuminated his steps as he walked quickly down the trail. Dan felt that he put enough distance between himself and any temptation or danger that lay behind. Cleary started to calm down when the sensation began again. It was different from before. It wasn’t a lingering pull and it wasn’t enticing. It was *pissed*. He could sense invisible energy all around him. Dan actually felt it touch him, or more accurately, go through him, like an electrified breeze. It brushed past his body, making him turn directions several times. It whirled about his head, buzzing him until he stood still. Then it descended upon him, circling his body so fast and with such force that it knocked him down. The horror in Cleary’s stomach crawled up his throat, so much so that he was sure he would vomit. The energy continued to fly around him as he lay horrified on the ground. Dan’s terror turned to anger, as his helplessness infuriated him. He could feel the energy taunting him with its power, but he could see no trace of it. In an act of complete desperation he screamed out to it, “Show yourself goddamit!!”

The buzzing stopped and the air became deadly still. He waited on the ground, praying it was gone. He rose to rise his feet and instantaneously the Light manifested itself before him. More real than his dreams, truer than the courthouse, the Light from the robbery was back. It hovered inches from his face, waiting. Cleary needed to know if his hallucinations were real. He gradually raised his hand to the Light. It did not flinch as he reached out to feel its essence. Dan touched its edge and it had substance. As if passing his hand through an electrical surge he could feel the energy it exhumed run through his body, exhilarating all parts of his nervous system. He moved his hand to the center of the being, and without thought or reason, moved his first through its core. The energy jolted through his body with a high voltage burst. He felt glorious. It magnified every sensation he could endure, pain, pleasure, fear, security, love, hate, emptiness and knowledge. The knowledge, most of all, was mesmerizing. He reached into the soul of another and knew its being. Dan yearned for more, and as he opened his eyes to take it the transformation he saw shocked him back to reality.

The Light morphed itself before his eyes, bit by bit changing form from an empty sphere to the shape of a face. The gunman's face. The man whose death he caused and whose death changed Cleary's life forever. The face smiled at him, as if the gunman knew he would obey but dreaded every second of it. There was consciousness in the glowing eyes. It smiled wider still and without warning opened its mouth, and bit down on Cleary's left wrist. The pain shot through his system like the courier's bullet. He never felt such gut wrenching agony before in his life. Dan reacted immediately, ripping his arm from the face and rolling away in all urgency. Jumping to his feet without thought, he sprinted in complete terror down the trail, tripping and falling and running again. The face laughed at the sight of its master, and chased him down, following behind, all the time echoing the Laughter of the Jackals. Cleary stumbled down the hill again on hearing its terrifying taunt. On the point of tears, he screamed, "Leave me alone!!" And so it did. The laughter stopped, and the glow of Light disappeared, leaving him in the darkness.

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The shivering would not stop. The blanket that covered him only brought forth more of the cold sweat that unearthed him so completely. A bottle of Southern Comfort, glued to his two hands, was the only relief he could find. He sat on the floor in the corner of his kitchen facing the back door, knees drawn up to his chest. Cleary had no idea how long he'd been sitting there. His only measurement of time was that the once full quart bottle of whiskey was half empty. Everything was a blur. What occurred two hours before seemed days or minutes past. He remembered everything. He would never forget it. After reaching the house he bolted into the kitchen, still stricken with absolute fear. Thoughts of continued running crossed his mind, but to where. The idea of a hotel or even farther

gripped him, but something deep inside told him there was no need for such cowardice, something inside which laughed at his fears. He felt that in the house he would be safe, perhaps the only place a secure sanctuary could be found. So he'd crawled into that corner, eyes locked on the door, and stayed there. Dan wanted to remain in the corner forever, but his kidneys would have none of that. He brought the bottle and blanket with him to the bathroom. He walked the short distance, eyes flickering back and forth looking for a disturbance, peering intently at the back door. He relieved himself and looked in the mirror. Cuts and bruised were scattered all over his face and hands, and his wrist throbbled from a severe sprain. The alcohol in him disregarded his injuries, so he found his way back to the kitchen, eyes once again on alert. He opted for a chair, sitting down at the kitchen bar and falling back to the bottle.

Cleary was sure the Light would come after him again, even though there was no sign of it since it disappeared. He kept reliving the ecstasy and agony it put him through. He went to the extremes with it and had come out the loser. Dan wanted no further dealings with the being. That was what scared him the most. He now fully believed that the Light was real. Up till then, he thought something strange or paranormal occurred in his life, but grasped at the idea that it could somehow be explained away with a physical explanation. That evening's festivities made it physical. Cleary had his hard facts. He actually touched it, and felt the pain it could emit. There was no way to rationalize that night's experience. He knew for certain that the Anam Fís was true, and could cause real pain and certain terror in his life. It followed him there to Vermont, or worse, led him right to its own home. His mother said to stay away from it, and absolutely nothing sounded better to him. If what he saw on that mountaintop was not a hallucination caused by the Light, than Dan was living right below the source of its power. He knew he should escape, run far away. But running from it was giving in, and the anger it caused him made him believe he wasn't yet ready to give in to anyone or anything. He just wished it would leave him alone.

"Maybe it will. I told it to," he said aloud and went to work on finishing the bottle.

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The chimes glistened in his ears, producing a calming effect. He heard them again, thinking he dreamt of a Cathedral in Paris or Rome. The banging on the door ended that mistaken vision. He raised his head too fast, realizing immediately what a mistake it was. The banging on the front door was almost as loud as the thunder from his temples. Dan rose again, slowly, from the kitchen table, steadily fighting one of the worst hangovers he'd ever experienced. He moved towards the door, not caring who was there or what it was about, only wanting to stop the torturous knocking. Cleary opened the door, and waited

for the sunlight to stop piercing his brain before he focused on the person before him. One look at the cigar toting bald guy in the gray overalls reminded him of the day's plan.

"Jesus buddy, you look like shit," the mover announced.

(Couldn't be worse than I feel.) "Thank you. The movers I presume." Dan barely got the words out of his glue like throat.

"Yeah, and we've been out here banging for ten minutes now. We gotta get going. It's a long ride back to New York, you know."

"Sorry about that. I overslept."

"So I see, and with some help from Jack Daniels it smells like. Or was it SoCo?"

"Save the lecture, you're getting paid by the hour." Dan was in no mood. "Start unloading the truck. I have to take a shower."

"You got it," the mover said, whispering "shmuck" under his breath as he turned to his partner.

Relieved that he cleared room for the furniture and other necessities the morning before, Dan stumbled toward the bathroom. He undressed and immediately drowned himself in the hot water and steam. The five minutes of cleansing revived him somewhat. After drying off he looked in the mirror. *(I do look like shit.)* His bloodshot eyes and pale skin were evident from the hangover, but he expected to see something else. His skin was pale, but not bruised. Dan knew he'd fallen several times and witnessed the open wounds the night before. He looked down at his hands, which were also were unscathed. Even the pain in his wrist was gone. For the first time that morning the fear returned. He looked out his bathroom window toward the trees in the yard. The fear was there, but much diminished from the night before. A realization came over him. *(Was it real? Did it happen? Maybe I was just drunk, and dreamt it all?)* The signs of the attack were gone, but Dan knew it happened. It must have. *(Last night was real!)* The idea that the Light somehow healed his wounds came to him. That wasn't possible, but what of his life was those days. The idea intrigued him as he wondered what other powers the Anam Fís held. He shook his mind free of his thoughts, forbidding himself from questioning it further. Although he wanted answers, he knew deep down that continued digging into its workings could prove fatal.

After getting dressed, Cleary put on a pot of coffee, deciding that any other form of breakfast was out of the question. He stepped outside to see that the movers were done unloading his things. Dan walked over to the truck and saw that all of his stuff seemed to be in one piece. He felt bad about his attitude toward the movers earlier, and decided to give them a hand bringing everything in. The three of them carried in the few, heavy and fragile, items. It was a timely and strenuous job that Dan was glad to have. Other than lifting at the gym, he rarely did much in the way of physical labor, but that day it helped

him with the hangover and keeping his mind off recent events. The task took a couple of hours, and the three men were exhausted when it was finished. Cleary made sandwiches and offered the movers some beer with their lunch. They relaxed for a few, talking baseball, and then got up to leave. Dan gave them a very generous tip and the movers left him alone, thinking he wasn't quite the yuppie asshole he tried to be.

He spent the rest of the afternoon finishing up the files from the day before. He felt very at ease with himself when he was doing work. The bulk labor of the morning and the brain work of the afternoon helped him relax his mind. Only when it became dark did Cleary worry about uncertain possibilities. He went to bed early, hoping for undisturbed sleep, though he doubted he would sleep at all. He lay in bed trying to figure things out. After reviewing every encounter with the Light, he decided on the only answer possible at that time. The Anam Fís enticed him from the start. It played with him and tricked him into following its lead. He remembered that once he gave in to its biddings the Light did as he commanded. Dan knew that if he could resist its temptations he could remain in control, and control was all that mattered. By learning to steer the situation he could heed his mother's warning and keep his life going where he wanted as well.

Leaving Vermont would ruin his career, and that he could not allow to happen. He would take back the reigns of his life and not be intimidated by anything or anyone. He looked around the house. If the scene on the top of the mountain was real, then staying in the new house was suicidal. Yet Daniel felt that moving even a few miles away was giving in to his circumstances. He would stay in that place in defiance of all that his cautious side screamed against, in rebellion against the Light and whatever rested beyond his back yard. Something else lingered in the back of his mind however. Something he feared more than any ghostly apparition. Something he would not admit to even himself. None of it was actually happened, and he truly was losing his mind.

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