

Beaghmore – Secrets of the Stones

A damp bitter wind blew mercilessly around the standing stones as Hillary, for the fourteenth time, circled them in curiosity. She had flown across the Atlantic to Northern Ireland, after saving her hard-earned dollars for three years, just so that she could stand here among the ancient stones of Beaghmore. She screwed up her eyes against the dull light and wind, looking at the many small standing stones, cairns and stone circles.

They were not as impressive to look at as she thought they would be – something had pulled her to come here and sit among the stones for some reason, and now here she stood, dripping wet from the rain that never seemed to leave this place. The anticlimax almost drove her to tears. The stones seemed dead, lifeless in the face of her enthusiasm as she went from stone to stone, kneeling down to touch them with her forehead. Nothing.

A lone bird flew overhead, calling to her in her stupidity. This was the third day that she had ventured out of Cookstown, the local town, to stand in the peat bog and be with the ancient stone alignments. They were small stones, their height hidden beneath the depths of the peat, leaving only their heads showing – somewhere in her mind she had imagined them to be tall, impressive, and mysterious. Rain dripped off the edge of her chin, taking all her hopes and longings with it as it fell to the ground, leaving her with nothing. What had she expected? She was not sure.

For years she had read books about Celtic stone circles, Celtic history, and Irish myths. The blood of her father's family pulled at her to discover the island of Ireland for herself, to walk the paths that her ancestors had frequented. But now that she was here, the rain and incessant aroma of damp peat was the only thing that had impressed itself on her.

Driving back into the town, she nodded to the old man sat outside the pub. He was always there regardless of the weather, and Hillary had concluded that he never went home, but simply lived on that wet bench under the Guinness sign. He smiled as she drove past and Hillary cringed. She was convinced that the whole town were laughing at her, the American who sits in the rain staring at stones.

The following morning, her last day in Cooks town, the sun graced the world with its presence and shone down upon the stones of Beaghmore. Hillary went to the stones straight after breakfast. She parked her car and carried a blanket through the wet grass to the collection of stone circles and cairns. Standing to catch her breath, she covered her eyes from the sun and looked around the moor. In the mist and rain, she had not been able to see much. But now, in the sunshine, the vastness of the stone alignments became frightening clear to her: they went on seemingly for miles, mostly hidden except for the very tips of the stones that peeked out of the wet peat.

The heavy blanket proved to be a good barrier against the damp as she sat in the center of the largest circle and began to sketch the alignments. The curlews called to her as sat in the weak sunshine trying to absorb as much as she could from this magical place before the long flight home.

Shielding her eyes from the sun, Hillary squinted as she systematically looked at the alignments in sections. Not only did she want to draw them, but she wanted to fix their appearance in her mind

forever. There were three apparent clear circles among a jumble of other stone alignments and beside the circles stood small collapsed cairns that could serve well as perches. Hillary had been tempted to sit on one rather than on the grass. But as she had approached the collapsed pile of stones, some instinct warned her off. What if it was a grave? she asked herself.

Beyond the clear circles, stretching out into the peat bog were numerous stones that lay half hidden beneath mud and grass. She was tempted to follow the stones and explore just how far the alignments stretch. But the voice of the local pub owner emerged in her head.

She had popped into the local pub the night before for a Guinness and the bar man had asked her why on earth she was in Cookstown of all places. When she told him that she was here to visit the stones, he had roared with laughter. When the laughter had finished, his face grew serious;

“Don't you be going beyond the circles now, de yar hear? Strange things happen out there and people vanish. Now you mind yerself and take care”.

Hillary had smiled but fear slid sideways into her previously confident thoughts and she nodded quietly. As she had drunk her Guinness, she had caught the old men in the pub looking at her and shaking their heads sadly. As each man got up to go home to his meal and his wife, they first stopped at Hillary as she sat at the bar, and patted her shoulder solemnly while shaking their heads.

Sitting now in the midst of the stones and drinking in the view of the sparse terrain that stretched off as far as the eye could see, she did not feel any danger or fear. Taking their advice, she had not wandered off, but remained within the circle that drew her the most: the larger one at the far end of the alignment, on the edge of the bog.

After only a short time, her hand became heavy and her eyes struggled to stay open – the pencil she had been sketching with dropped from her hands, and her loose leafed notebook slid down to the wet grass, its thick papers instantly absorbing the moisture. She had only been awake a few hours and yet Hillary fought the sleep that crept upon her, threatening to take away her precious last few hours with the stones. Rubbing her eyes, she began to sing in an attempt to wake up. Rabbits darted past and something, perhaps shadows in the low hung sunshine, moved around the edge of her vision as though watching her.

The battle waged until finally Hillary closed her eyes and lay back in the damp warmth. The sketches lifted from the grass and danced around the circle, carried by a strange wind that only blew within the stone circles. Hillary did not notice as she fell deeper and deeper into a dark sleep. The wind grew stronger, pulling at her hair as though to tease her and whispering a song in payment for Hillary's song.

The sound of the wind's song carried only to the edge of the stone circle and no further. Beyond the stones, all was stillness and calm. The song pulled Hillary from the depth of her sleep, keeping her on the edge of awareness, but not allowing her to open her eyes. While she was trapped in the twilight of half sleep, the wind carried words that moved around the stones;

Ringstone round, ringstone round,

*bring rain and wind and thunder sound,
storms will dance when you do tarry
and only stones your heart will marry
What ever shall it be, what ever shall it be...*

Hillary drifted on the threshold of sleep. *What ever shall it be*, the words circled around her head, digging for memories. Quite suddenly, without warning, Hillary was transported back through time into a memory of her childhood in California. At only eight years old, she stood on top of a hill near her home town of Petaluma and held her arms up to the sky.

Hillary remembered the taste of the memory. She was playing out on the top of upside-down hill, her name for a towering hill where water was fabled to run up hill and where lanes vanished to confuse the drivers. Something had stopped her game of tag with the butterflies and caused her to stare into nothing. A rush of power formed a wind that blew only where Hillary stood and the little girl held her arms up to the sky in wonder.

In that second, Hillary saw in her mind a terrible storm with flooding and mudslides. She watched as her Grandmother's house, on a steep hill by Tomales Bay, slid into the water with Grandmother trapped inside it. In terror, Hillary screamed out for her Grandmother and looked up to shout at the storm. The powerful being that was the storm looked down in anger at Hillary: its rage centered on the humans who had desecrated sacred power lands. Suddenly the wind ceased and the vision faded, leaving the little girl shaking and crying on top of upside-down hill.

Hillary jerked awake, finding herself back on the damp blanket in the stone circle. She lay for a second trying to orientate herself. The dream of her childhood had been very vivid, and she had forgotten about that incident until now. The wind had stopped, but her drawings were scattered all over the circles. It had left a strange scent in the air, a scent that she could almost taste: and a scent that she remembered from that childhood day on upside-down hill.

She sat up, pulling her knees under her arms and placing her chin on her knees: her thinking position, particularly when something had frightened her. The storm she had seen in that vision as a child happened two weeks later. She had told her Grandmother about the vision which had caused her mother to react angrily towards Hillary. Hillary's Grandmother and mother had argued for hours while Hillary lay outside on the lawn weeping. She always seemed to cause trouble and she hated that. It was not as though she did it on purpose.

Two weeks after, when a storm whipped up and began moving into the bay, Grandmother put the cats in the car and headed inland to her daughters house, just to be on the safe side. The house did slide down into the bay but Hillary was not allowed to talk about it. The day after, when her mother returned with Grandmother to what was left of the house, Hillary's mother had spun around and pointed a finger into Hillary's face.

"Don't you ever speak of this to anyone, do you hear me? Not ever. You saw nothing and said nothing".

Hillary nodded dumbly, unable to understand what she had done wrong. Had she not saved

Grandmother's life?

Some of the residue pain from that time bubbled up in Hillary's eyes. Her mother had been distant with her from that moment, her father was always away, and only Grandmother seemed thankful for what Hillary had seen. Now, as a mature woman, she sat and wept for her mother and her lost childhood. All because of a strange day and a strange wind.

Slowly, she got herself up and started to pick up the drawings that were scattered untidily around the stones. But each time she reached out for one, a breeze picked them up and moved them. She chased the pictures around the circle until the breeze turned into a wind, carrying the drawings high up into the air before dropping them just out of her reach.

A laugh echoed from behind her and Hillary spun around to see an old man and his large black dog leaning against one of the taller stones.

"I see they like you. Wind's.... aye.... a good un, means they've woken up. About time so it is".

His accent was deep and broad, causing Hillary to look blank as she tried to figure out what he just said.

"What do you mean, they have woken up?"

Hillary was excited, but she tried very hard not to show it. The old man waved a hand around the stones as he spoke.

"This lot. When the wind blows around here and nowhere else, it means they want to work with whosevers in the circle. It's easy. Just walk round the circle til you're fit to drop, and then go sit yerself down in the middle. They'll show you the rest. Have to go, mi dinners getting cold".

The wind blew Hillary's hair across her face and it took her a second or two to get the hair out of her eyes. She cleared her face and looked around but the man had vanished. Hillary turned in all directions. It was impossible for him to vanish so quickly; the moor was flat for miles before it hit the rolling hills in the distance, and there was nowhere to vanish to. She should have been able to see him walk away for a least a mile in any direction. But he was nowhere to be seen. The hairs on the back of her neck stood up to attention in terror.

Her hands fumbled for the scattered pictures as her eyes kept watch for the disappearing man. Hillary was frightened and excited all at once. She had read about such encounters in her Celtic books. Of course! She slapped her forehead in recognition of her stupidity. The legend of the guardian with the black dog: the guardian of the stones. She must have read about such apparitions a hundred times, and when it happened to her, she did not recognize him.

There would have been so many things she could have asked him, so many things she could have learned. Swearing under her breath, she caught the last picture and weighed them down with a stone. What an idiot, she thought to herself. And yet, did he not tell her something? Her mind filtered through the details of the conversation until she remembered what it was that he had said.

Circle the stones until you are fit to drop. Then sit down and let them do the rest.

Hillary looked around her, just to make sure there was no one to watch what she was doing. When she was sure that she was alone, Hillary began to walk clockwise around the stones. She had chosen the biggest circle which was surrounded by small cairns. Around and around she circled, trying hard to concentrate on what she was doing.

An hour passed and Hillary's legs were beginning to hurt. She had given up concentrating, and instead, amused herself by mulling over her life in America. She had looked into the possibility of moving to Ireland and she had been excited to find that she would be able to get an Irish passport on the strength of her Grandfather's birth in Cork. Maybe she would move to Cookstown and live on the edge of the bog. Then she would never have to leave the stones. Reality came crashing back with her footfalls when she admitted to herself that she could not afford to move and that there was no way for her to make a living out here in the middle of nowhere.

The resentment at her trapped life caused Hillary to walk faster. Why did life always do this to her? Why did things never work out? Why did she always lose things when she loved them? Her heart ached for permanence and love: she needed to belong and be loved. Unhappiness punctured every footfall as she marched around the circle deep in thought.

Her legs started to tremble from the unaccustomed exercise, but Hillary pushed on, circling and circling as she thought of the time when she lived in Manhattan for a while, the city where she had settled after college. Everything was fast, young, successful and, unhappy. Manhattan had hidden her from herself, allowing her to function in the world of frenzy. But here, among the stones and birds, Hillary could not hide.

It was the knees that buckled first. The pain shot through both her knees, bring Hillary to an abrupt halt. She walked gingerly into the center and lay down upon her blanket, cushioned by damp rough moorland grass underneath it. Exhausted, she allowed her body to slump as she lay watching the clouds scurry past overhead on an intent mission to rain upon some poor unsuspecting soul. Her body lapped up the well needed rest, and her skin soaked up the moisture from the damp air and weak sunshine; she pulled the sides of the blanket around her and lay in wait for what was to come.

But nothing happened. She lay waiting patiently, not knowing what to expect. The minutes moved on and Hillary was beginning to feel stupid. Maybe she imagined the old man. Maybe she dreamt him? her body was too tired to care and Hillary drifted slowly to sleep, serenaded by the birds and the light wind.

Just as she tipped over the edge of sleep, her mind plummeted downwards at high speed through the land. The rush terrified her as she fought to awaken, but something held her firmly in the grip of unconsciousness. A whirlwind ripped at her as she fell, twisting and turning her until she could feel nor see anything except the wind. At that point, the wind ceased but the falling continued. She looked down and saw the earth, the planet beneath her and she was falling towards it at high speed.

Hillary tried to cry out, but nothing would move. The planet was getting closer and closer as she tried to pull away from the imminent impact. Breath froze in her throat as the ground rushed up to

her face and Hillary closed her eyes in horror. There was no impact: everything was still and Hillary lay on the grass with her eyes still shut. She opened them slowly, sitting up so that she could look around her.

The damp blanket was still there, but everything else was different: the stones had gone and bright lights had replaced them. Hillary sat unmoving as the lights pulsed brilliant colors that seeped up into the sky and joined with the sun. In among the lights where the stones had been, Hillary could see people, almost shadows, moving between the lights. The people appeared briefly before vanishing, their place being taken by another human shadow that moved as though unaware of its predecessor.

Some moved randomly and others seemed to be conducting a ritual. Hillary watched in awe. Something, maybe instinct, told her that she was seeing through time: the shadows were people who had visited and worked with the stones over the centuries. Moving very slowly, Hillary got up and tried to approach one of the lights which, she now understood, were the stones. As her hand reached out and touched the light, a shadow moved swiftly around her. Her hand felt the cold stone beneath her touch, but all she could see was light and movement. Her eyes focused on the movement of the shadow, which transformed into the hazy image of a child. The child could see Hillary and was clearly frightened.

Hillary held her hand up to the child to tell her not to be afraid, but as she removed her hand from the stone, the child vanished, leaving only the bright light to blind her. This fascinated her. She touched the stone again, feeling its solidness through the light as its power coursed through her. Again, she saw shadows move around her. A shadow approached the stone that Hillary was touching. As the shadow touched the stone, Hillary could see it was a young man. She touched him on the forehead and the young man jumped back in terror, his face contorting as he clutched his head. She panicked, what if she had injured him?

She touched the stone again, this time closing her eyes from the distractions around her. As soon as her lids shut, the ground started to spin beneath her. Hillary felt nauseous but refused to let go of the stone. The spinning became faster and faster until the sensation became comfortable. She opened her eyes and looked up. Weather fronts passed over quickly and then vanished. Night and day moved rapidly, and the wind came and went.

She leaned into the stone which supported her as she looked up. The deeper in to the stone she leaned, the clearer her vision became. As the storm fronts passed over, Hillary became aware that they were conscious: she could feel the storm thinking and looking for something as it scurried on across the sky. She reached up towards one as it passed over, her mind searching for contact.

Immediately she was travelling with the storm as it passed over the land and sea. Its fury built within her as it sought to cleanse the land with its force. Rain was unleashed on the land and Hillary fell with the raindrops, touching everything around her and sensing the conscious awareness of the storm scattered in every drop of water. The land breathed in response to the storm, creating a conversation that had Hillary in the middle. The land and the storm communed, and Hillary joined in. Her body felt the interaction, lapping up the life-giving water and enjoying the feel of release as the land gave power to the storm.

It stopped as suddenly as it started and Hillary was back leaning against the stone. Her body felt heavy from the exertion and she slumped harder against the standing stone which seemed to absorb her. The feeling of absorption became more intense until Hillary slipped fully into the stone and joined with the rock.

Her breathing slowed, her thoughts deepened and her movements ceased as she joined in union with the sacred stone. All the other stones around her connected with her, communing together in their timeless vigil upon the land. The endless journey of the earth moving from season to season, from year to year, became like breathing for her.

Her thoughts guided those who wished to commune with the sacred land and her joy was immeasurable as the power of the Underworld flowed through her reaching for the sky, while the power of the stars flowed down through her on its way into the Underworld. This was what she was born for, this was the purpose of her existence.

The breath came suddenly and a dull light crashed into Hillary's brain. Voices echoed all around her as someone called her name. She felt her body being moved and sharp needle pricks in her wrist. Hillary tried to open her eyes. A voice shouted in her face; its noise deafening in its coarseness.

“Can you hear me, miss, miss, can you hear me?”

Hillary tried to turn away from the noise as she sought the peaceful stillness of the stones. But she could not move her head. Reluctantly, she slowly opened her eyes, and looked at a face peering into hers. Everything was dull. The sky, the face, everything. Nothing had light or color. Hillary wanted to die. The face spoke to her again as she tried to focus on the intruder.

“We are going to put you in the ambulance now, everything is going to be OK. It was a good piece of luck that Mr. Henry found you eh?”

Hillary did not want putting into an ambulance, she wanted to be left with the stones. As they carried her out of the circle, Hillary felt the stones pull on her to stay. But there was nothing she could do but cry as she was driven off away from where she belonged.

II

The male nurse bustled around her as Hillary stared out of the window. After a battery of tests over many days, they had finally agreed to let her go. Words like ‘epilepsy’ and ‘drugs’ had been bandied about between the doctors which had made Hillary very angry. And yet she could offer no alternative explanation without exposing the secrets of the stones.

The male nurse watched Hillary closely as she packed her bags. He looked towards the door and then back at Hillary. He spoke to her in a low voice, keeping one eye on the door and one on Hillary.

“Miss, mi name’s Fra. I was born near Beaghmore. It’s a very special place isn’t it”.

He waited for Hillary's reaction. She sat down and looked at him more closely. There was something in his eyes that she had not noticed previously, a brilliant fragment of light. She nodded slowly in response to his comment.

“Did you work with the stones then? Is that why you were there?”

He turned as he asked her the questions, making sure that no one could see him from the corridor. Hillary nodded and Fra watched the nod in the room mirror.

“Well” he continued, “if you want to work with them properly, there are ways of doing it without killing yourself. Call me, and my grandad will teach you”.

Fra shoved a piece of torn paper with a scribbled telephone number on it into Hillary's hand and then darted down the corridor and out of sight before she could speak to him. She fingered the paper in her hand and looked back at her bag that contained her air ticket. Hillary reached into her bag and pulled out the wallet that held her passport and plane ticket. without a second thought, she tore the ticket into bits and threw them into the bin.

The sky darkened, lowering the light in the room; Hillary got up and looked out of the window. Clouds were gathering; she could feel the power of the storm as it edged nearer, calling on her to join it.

She slung her bag over her shoulder and picked up her suitcase that had been dropped off by her hotel. On the threshold of the hospital, she looked again at the sky and breathed in its scent as she stepped out into a new world. There would be no going back now.

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Note: Beaghmore is a large complex of Bronze age megalithic structures, circles and cairns north of Cookstown in County Tyrone, Northern Ireland. It is a place I visited a few times in the early 1990's and is one of the stone circle sites that essentially taught me how to work with stone circles and cairns using visionary work, uttering, sleeping and walking. Not all stone circles are magical, some are social. And with the 'switched on ones', they often have different 'powers' or focus – some are places of communion, some are places of death, some are places of healing or fertility, some are tribal places of focus, and some are connected to the weather and power of the storms.

If you are ever visiting a stone circle, always treat such places with respect – they are not there for your own baggage or agenda, or your own rituals/beliefs. They are of themselves. If you want to take a gift, honey is a good one (for the creatures and land beings), but simply showing up, communing and showing respect is enough. Do not leave candles, tealights, plastic ribbons, plastic figures, chocolate (poison to most animals) or any other new age bullshit stuff, do not paint or carve the stones, *and take nothing away*. The stones are not there for you, you are there for them.