

NIGHTLAND

Chapter One.

It was morning break, and the boys in Claire's class were hurrying with tense excited faces towards the back of the sports block. There, a long windowless wall was the only witness to those little acts of school existence which were not for adult eyes. It wasn't just the usual band of secret smokers who were heading that way, it was *all* the boys, so Claire assumed it must be a fight.

"Who is it?" Claire said to Ronnie Whalen as he jostled past her.

Ronnie's breath made a grey cloud in the cold November air.

"Bobser and that new Irish kid in 8L."

He grinned, and hurried on.

Claire's friend Katy caught her up.

"What is it?" she said, winding her long red scarf around her like a mummy's bandages.

"Bobser as usual."

"Who's he picking on now?"

"The new Irish boy."

"Aidan?"

"I don't know. Is that his name?"

"Yes. Aidan McCaffrey."

"How do you know?"

Katy's mouth and nose were now under the scarf, but she arched an eyebrow expressively.

"He's cute!" came a muffled voice. "I asked Holly in 8L who he was. I hope Bobser doesn't hurt him too much. He makes me sick."

"Product of a broken home" Claire pointed out, in fairness to Bobser. Apparently his Mum had run off when he was little, and he lived with his Dad, who he always referred to as "the Hefay", whatever that was. Bobser was half Spanish.

"Serves him right. He probably broke it in the first place. Don't make excuses for him Claire. He's a bully."

"Do you want to see?" Claire said, hoping Katy wouldn't, but she did.

"Might as well. Come on."

They joined the mixed group of boys and girls at the corner of the sports block. Further along was a tight circle of boys only, shouting and whistling. You could only glimpse Bobser and his fair-haired opponent occasionally in their midst. That was enough for Claire. She hated it when the boys had a fight, which wasn't very often, fortunately. But somehow she always felt drawn to watch them from a distance.

However, it wasn't long before Mr Rowan and Mr McEwen came galloping cavalry-style around the corner. Not for the first time, Claire glanced up to see if there were hidden surveillance cameras somewhere. There weren't. Teachers just seemed to be able to scent trouble. Like sharks.

The group at the corner, as innocent bystanders, stayed put. The circle of boys around the fighters scattered guiltily. Bobser and Aidan were revealed, still trading blows, oblivious to the disturbance. Mr Rowan bellowed like a bull.

"Stop that fighting at once! Do you hear me? Stop it *now!*"

Then Mr Rowan, red-faced and scowling, and Mr McEwen, all bustling goodwill and propitiating smiles, were into the ring like referees, pulling the combatants apart.

The scattered boys set up a ripple of hand-clapping as Bobser

and Aidan were led away in invisible chains.

Claire studied Aidan as he walked past. He was tall, although not as tall as Bobser, and had wavy blonde hair which he wore a little longer than most of the boys. His eyes were a pale blue and his jaw was set at a defiant, unbowed angle. Katy nudged Claire's elbow and giggled a little under her scarf.

"Look at Bobser Claire! He's got a bloody nose!"

After this incident had brought Aidan to her notice, Claire found herself vaguely looking out for him at school. Usually she was deeply involved in some gossiping or mucking about with Katy and the rest of their gang. But she glanced around occasionally to see what Aidan might be doing. Sometimes he joined the other boys in their endless games of football. Bobser was always at the centre of these games, but he had evidently left off trying to bully the Irish boy. She had the impression that Aidan was accepted by the others but that he hadn't really formed any particular friendships. Often he hung about on his own, wandering around the playground and field with his hands in his pockets. It was impossible to tell if he was happy or not.

One day he looked up unexpectedly when she was observing him, and their eyes met. Claire was on her own, heading towards the tuck shop where the rest of her friends had gathered. Aidan had been walking the other way. To Claire's surprise and confusion he smiled, then stuck his tongue out. Feeling herself blush, she gave him the benefit of her special gargoyle face, the one she used when she wanted to give her younger brother Ben a fright.

Aidan had an excellent answer to that one, bugging out his eyes like a frog, pulling the corners of his mouth outwards and

downwards, and letting his tongue loll out. He looked like a boxer dog abandoned by its owner.

Claire laughed.

"What's your name?" Aidan said. "Miss Ugly?"

"Ugly yourself!" Claire replied, and moved on. It wasn't a great retort, but it would have to do. She couldn't risk hanging about long enough for Katy and the rest to spot her talking to Aidan. They'd tease her to death.

"Mine's Aidan!" he called out after her. She glanced back. He was smiling again. She gave him a little wave and carried on.

They started smiling shyly at each other after that, when their paths crossed. One day, a week later, Aidan was sitting on a wall that Claire walked past every day on her way home from school. She was on her own, so she slowed down and looked towards him.

"All right there?" Aidan said as she drew level.

Claire stopped.

"Yes thank you."

"So what *is* your name then?"

"Claire."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance Claire." Aidan held out his hand in a mock formal gesture and she shook it. His hand was warm, and grasped hers firmly.

"The boys and the girls seem to keep apart at this school," he observed. "Wasn't like that back home. I used to like talking to the girls. Some of them, anyway."

Claire looked cautiously up and down the street. He was right about their school. At least, the early secondary years. In the junior department the boys and girls mixed together, and so did the older teenagers. But most of the twelve and thirteen year olds

seemed to stay fiercely and exclusively in their own groups. She didn't want to be seen breaking the unwritten rules.

"Why's that then?" he went on. "Don't you *like* boys, Claire?"

Claire felt a blush coming. How incredibly stupid! But it wouldn't stop.

"Yes. I do," she said, "but...none of my good friends are boys."

"Why's that then?"

"I don't know. It just happens that way. I stick to my pals."

"And you're scared stiff they might come along the road now and see us talking. Aren't you now?"

"No"

But he was nodding his head sagely, like a psychiatrist in some film. "Oh yes. That's it. You're scared of what they'd say now."

"I'm *not!*"

"Oh yes."

Claire decided it was time to change the subject.

"Where are you from? Where were you at school before this?"

Aidan jerked his head over his left shoulder. "Over there - over the water. Near Cork in Ireland."

"Was that in a city?"

"No. Countryside."

"So - what did you do I mean, were there shops?"

"*Shops!*" Ronan's voice expressed a mixture of horror and disdain. "What would I be wanting with shops?"

Claire struggled with this alien concept. Shops were her idea of heaven. And her friends' too. She tried another topic.

"Do you have brothers and sisters?"

"No. Only child. What about you?"

"A brother." She expressed with a grimace that this was a misfortune. "What music do you like?" she tried.

"All sorts."

Claire reeled off a few of her favourite bands and singers.

Aidan nodded noncommittally. "Oh, they're all all right. I play my own music mostly."

"Yeah? What do you play?"

"The harp."

Claire goggled at him. "The *harp*?"

"Yes. What's wrong with that then?"

"Nothing. No. It's just that....."

"You've probably never heard harp music, have you now?"

Claire racked her brains. Little angels sitting on clouds were lurking in there, playing harps. But she couldn't hear the sound they made. She shook her head.

"It's a popular thing in Ireland there. You think I'm a bit weird, don't you?"

There was something about Aidan's directness that made Claire uncomfortable. She shook her head again.

"Well. Maybe I am. Anyway...." he jumped off the wall, "I'm away to walk home now. I thought maybe I'd sit on this wall, from time to time. When it's not raining, you know. And maybe I'd see you here as you walked by. From time to time."

Claire smiled. "Okay. Can't stop you, can I."

Chapter Two.

Aidan wasn't at the wall every day. But he was there quite often,

and Claire took to hanging back slightly after the end of school bell, to avoid any possibility of having to walk home with Ben, her younger brother. She didn't need him running around the school telling everyone she'd got a boyfriend. Fortunately Ben preferred walking home without her anyway, so he never waited.

Aidan was an unpredictable conversationalist. Claire could see why he slightly unsettled the other boys, and continued to be on the fringe of their groups, without special friends. He was interested in such unusual topics, and jumped sideways from one to another so frequently that you found yourself struggling to keep up sometimes. His talk revolved around strange things he'd read in the newspapers about alien abductions, or Irish myths of transformations, or whether or not the Minotaur ever really existed. Sometimes he seemed to be half living in a fantasy world, and when they talked about books he revealed that he'd read *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings* several times each.

His fascination with mythical other worlds amused Claire, but what really appealed to her was that he was a good listener too. He was always ready to hear about all her friends and their fights and reconciliations, and the details of their sleep-overs or shopping trips, and contribute his own observations. In fact he seemed genuinely interested in *people*. Being new, and slightly excluded, had also made him an acute observer of the school which Claire had taken for granted all her life.

"The teachers now, they're more into keeping their distance here, I'd say," Aidan said, when they were discussing differences between Ireland and England. "Back home, they were more like friends of the family or something, or relatives even. They all had their own little qualities, and they weren't shy about letting their guard down."

"Like how?" Claire asked. She was sitting beside him on the wall, as she usually did now.

"Well, there was Mr Sweeney for example. Hair the colour of tomato ketchup. Freckles like you've never seen. The most red-haired orange-speckled Irishman in the world. And he was twenty five, he told us, and it was time he had a wife he said. So he joined some computer dating thing and told us all about the ladies he met. He never told us their names, but he told us everything else. As far as was decent."

"What did he teach?"

"Oh, this was in domestic science."

"Cookery? You had a man teaching you cookery?"

"Sure we did. He made a mean Irish Stew, Mr Sweeney. And a great Murghi Lamb with Ginger. That's another thing. We don't get domestic science in this school. That's a shame."

"Yes. I'd like to learn to cook properly. Mum usually puts things in the microwave."

"My Mum does sometimes, but she still does some of the old traditional Irish dishes too. Pizza. Spaghetti Bolognese. Chilli con Carne... what are you laughing for? All those dishes originated in Ireland! The Italians stole them!"

"Chilli con Carne isn't from Italy."

"Well - that's what I'm telling you. They're *all* Irish."

"Oh yeah!"

"Anyway. I've got to go now. I want to do a little bicycle maintenance before teatime." Aidan jumped off the wall and stretched. "I'm doing a bit of cycling at the moment, you see."

"When? You don't cycle to school."

"No. At night. I go cycling at night. After dark."

"You're having me on again, Aidan. You just make stuff up to

see whether I'll fall for it, don't you?"

His face took on a pained expression.

"Would I do that, Claire? Lie to my best girl?"

Then he was off, and Claire wondered what the expression *my best girl* meant.

For a couple of days Claire didn't see him on her way home, but around the school she noticed he looked pale and silent, and didn't join in the football at all. On the third day he was sitting on the wall, and looked as white as a piece of paper.

"What's the matter with you?" Claire said, studying his face.

"Are you ill?"

Aidan smiled broadly. "I'm not ill at all. I'm just tired. It's all the cycling at night."

"What? Come on - are you serious Aidan?"

He nodded. "It's true. But I can't tell you everything. You'd just think I was making it all up."

"Well - try me."

"No. I can do better than that. I can *show* you!"

"Show me what?"

"You've got a bike, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"Could you get out one night with it, and meet me?"

"I don't know. When? What time?"

"It has to be late. When your parents are in bed."

"Why?"

"Well, would they *let* you go cycling in the dark with me?"

Claire thought about it for a moment. She couldn't imagine the suggestion being well received.

"I doubt it."

"There then. But it has to be late anyway, when everywhere's gone quiet. It has to be at midnight."

"You want me to sneak out of my house at midnight and come cycling with you?"

"Yes."

"You're mad."

"But will you do it?"

Claire got down off the wall. She didn't feel like talking any more this evening. She felt annoyed with Aidan for asking such a peculiar thing. And annoyed with herself because she wanted to say *yes*.

"I'll think about it," she said, and walked off.

Chapter Three.

It was half past eleven on a Wednesday night, and Claire had heard Mum and Dad go chuntering up the stairs to bed about twenty minutes ago. Ben's gentle snoring drifted to her ears through his open bedroom door and, as always, the sound made her think of a black pot-bellied pig. When she was little, and Mum and Dad told her there was a new baby on the way, she had secretly hoped it would actually *be* a little pot-bellied pig. Ben had been a disappointment ever since.

"Claire is now sitting on the edge of her bed and putting on a tee shirt and fleece. Now she is standing up and getting into jeans." Claire commentated quietly on her own actions as if they were happening in some wildlife documentary on television. The whole scenario struck her as ridiculous.

She crept downstairs as quietly as a creeper, and slipped on her trainers. Then she opened the front door, which creaked

alarmingly in the silent hall. She peered out. There was a slight halo of yellow mist around the street lights. The air felt cold and moist. She almost shut the door again straight away, it looked so uninviting out there.

But Aidan would be waiting. On the corner of Beech Road, near the school. He would be looking up the street, checking his watch. She *had* to go. With great reluctance Claire pulled the house door shut behind her. If only she could be back in her cosy bed!

"Claire continues to act like a complete idiot," she muttered as she made her way to her bike. It was kept under the steps leading up to the front door. She undid the padlock and wheeled it to the gate. Looking up and down the road, she was relieved to see that there was no-one about.

Pedalling towards Beech Road, Claire stuck to the pavement in case any cars came along. She didn't want anyone to see her. The empty windows of the houses were black eyes that watched her go by. They looked like shocked faces, those comfortable suburban house fronts. *Where are you going, a girl who's barely thirteen, at this time of night?* they seemed to be saying in scandalised tones.

Her pedals creaked a little as they went around. They added their opinion, in Claire's head. *Stupid...stupid....stupid....!* The little dynamo that powered her lights whirred softly. *Sssssilly girl! Sssssssilly girl!* An owl hooted somewhere. Claire's imagination didn't reach as far as owl language, but she was sure it disapproved.

She reached the corner of Beech Road, after twice slowing down and being on the point of turning back and going home. Around the corner would be Aidan. She turned the corner.

Where was he? The long straight line of Beech Road vanished into the mist. It was deserted. She straddled her bike and breathed heavily, a surge of anger and embarrassment starting to gather in her chest. He wasn't here! It was all a stupid joke, this bike riding in the night! She'd been *had!*

"Boo!"

A hand landed on her shoulder, and she stifled a scream. She turned, and Aidan was grinning like a monkey.

"Got you there, didn't I?" he said.

"Aidan!" Claire hissed. "You idiot! You scared me to death!"

"Oh, sorry. It was just my little joke" Aidan said, looking crestfallen. "You were late, so I thought I'd hide behind the hedge here and give you a surprise."

"Well it wasn't the sort of surprise I like! This is bad enough without you acting like a prat!"

Aidan nodded. "You're right Claire. I stand corrected. I will eliminate prat behaviour from now onwards. Forgive me?"

He smiled at her, eyebrows raised in mute appeal for mercy. Claire found herself smiling back. She wished she could stay angry for a little bit longer, but she couldn't.

"Anyway," he went on, "Are you all ready for the riding now? Is your bicycle in peak condition there? I thought I heard some squeaking as you came along."

"The pedals squeak a bit," Claire admitted.

"Oh well. I suppose it doesn't matter as long as they go round. Come on then!"

Aidan slung a lanky leg over his bike.

"Where are we going?" Claire asked.

"That's for you to find out. First of all we go along Beech Road here."

He set off at an easy pace, and Claire cycled along just behind him. They went to the end of Beech Road, passing the school gates, and then Aidan turned right onto Crows Wood Lane. This was a surprise.

"There's no street lights along here!" Claire protested. "And this road just goes off into the middle of nowhere anyway. Right out of town."

"Trust me!" Aidan grinned over his shoulder. "It *does* go somewhere!"

Crows Wood Lane was not one of those roads that slink out of town furtively, with a fringe of straggling houses to disguise their exit. Instead, it immediately *was* a country lane, with no transition at all. No street lights. No buildings. Just a high thorny leafless hedgerow on either side and a swift embrace of darkness and isolation.

Once beyond the reach of the streetlights on Beech Road, what had been only a slight mistiness gathered itself up into a thoroughly thick, murky fog. Aidan was cycling faster now, and Claire pedalled hard to keep within a few feet of his rear lamp. If she fell just a little behind, the bright red circle grew faint and threatened to disappear altogether.

"Aidan!" she called out, her voice enfeebled by the moist marshmallow fog, "Don't go too fast!"

She could hear him call out something in response, but the words were lost, like stones dropped into a deep pool. He seemed to be cycling faster and faster.

"Aidan!" Claire protested again. Her legs were starting to ache, and the squeaking of her pedals sounded like a giant mouse running alongside her. *Squeak! Squeak! Squeak!* Its breathing laboured with the effort of keeping up the pace.

Aidan called back again. It might have been *I don't care!* or it might have been *Nearly there!* In any case, he was going faster and faster all the time. Reluctantly Claire pedalled her hardest to keep up. Before she knew it, they had passed an invisible and sudden crest on the road, and they were on a slope. A steep slope. The wheels raced around, and Claire couldn't pedal fast enough to keep up. She free-wheeled. The road grew steeper and steeper. Moisture and fallen leaves glistened on its treacherous dark surface. They were going too fast. The hedgerows were a blur. If she touched her brakes now, she'd skid helplessly out of control. The foggy air rushing into her face made her eyes fill with tears. She tried to blink them away, but couldn't. She felt utterly panic stricken. A disaster was inevitable. At any moment she'd be flying over her handlebars into the hedge, her limbs snapping like twigs! Bloody Aidan and his stupid bloody bike ride! Bloody, bloody, bloody hell!

"Aida....a....a.....a.....n!" she screamed, whether in anger or despair she couldn't have said. But her cry trailed behind her like a streamer of sound from a skyrocket, and Aidan, up ahead, couldn't possibly hear her. But she could hear him, shouting something.

".....the bridge!" she heard. "Look out.....bump....." she heard. Then she was flying through the air across a hump-backed little bridge over a dark river. She glimpsed murky water flowing beneath her, like black ink. She heard the sound of rippling and gurgling against the stones of the bridge, like a voice. Then, miraculously, she thumped back to the ground and started to slow down as the road ascended a gradual slope beyond the river. As she ran out of steam, she found herself pulling abreast of Aidan who had stopped to wait for her.

"You think that was funny I suppose!" she gasped out. She was shaking all over.

"Now, don't get cross Claire! We had to go fast to get here. Look up ahead!" Aidan said excitedly, his face dripping with fog moisture. Following his pointing finger, Claire could see a dazzling silvery light penetrating the murk in front of them.

"We're here!" Aidan said. "Now you'll see! Just up this next slope!"

Before she could reply, he pushed hard on his pedals again. She quelled her exasperation and did the same. A minute later they reached the top of the rise and burst out of the fog together as if smashing through a physical wall. There, swimming in and out of focus in her watering eyes, was a dazzling moonlit landscape.

"The Nightland!" Aidan said exultantly.

Chapter Four.

Claire had never imagined that moonlight could be dazzling. But hanging in the sky ahead of them was a huge brilliant disc that you couldn't look at directly. Below, bathed in silvery light, was a vast panorama. Her eyes travelled across the scene, but her brain failed to make any sense of what she was seeing. This was a wild landscape of forests and mountains, dotted with steep-roofed little villages and lonely towers. A long way off, a huge waterfall fell silently in a sinuous line from a distant craggy ridge. Far, far away, on the edge of vision, was a glittering flat sheet of frosted light that could only have been an ocean.

"How did we get here?" she said, unable to turn away from the magical scene.

"It's a mystery," Aidan said. "It happens the same way every

time. You go faster and faster until you go across that river, and then you're here."

"But...in the daytime...there's no waterfall...and we're nowhere near the sea."

"I've been along Crows Wood Lane in the daytime. There's no hill, no bridge, no river. It just goes across fields for a couple of miles until it joins the main Barchester road at a T-junction."

"So..."

"So we're not in our own country any more. This is the Nightland. It's all different. Come on, you'll see."

Claire hesitated.

"Aidan - this is so weird. Are we dreaming?"

"I don't think so."

"Is this place safe?"

"I've come to no harm. Come on! It's fun, honestly! You'll love it!"

They coasted slowly down the gentle incline ahead. Dark yew trees lined either side of the road , their dense forms bent over them like watching giants as they passed. The surface of the road was covered in a grey floating mist, only a few inches deep, so that they seemed to be cycling down a stream with their bicycle wheels half submerged in water.

"There's a bit of a surprise up ahead," Aidan said, half turning. "But don't be frightened."

"What sort of a surprise?" Claire said apprehensively.

"Well, you like animals don't you?"

"Ye..es."

"Just think of it as an animal, like any other. I've got a bit of cake in my pocket for it."

Claire tried nervously to see beyond Aidan on the road ahead.

They seemed to be heading into a dense wood of the yew trees. They grew taller and taller over the road, their branches now blotting out the moonlight, creating dense pools of shadow. There was a deep silence all around them, broken only by the squeaking of Claire's pedals. Eventually the road stopped going downwards, and they were on level ground, surrounded on all sides by the trees.

For perhaps five minutes they cycled on through the dark silent wood. Then Aidan stopped, and Claire brought her bicycle to a halt beside him. Up ahead were two enormous trees bending towards each other to form a kind of gateway. Through the gap, Claire could see that they were at the edge of the wood, and moonlit fields lay beyond.

"What are we waiting for?" she asked Aidan, who was fumbling in his pocket.

He brought out a little parcel of tin foil, and started to open it.

"Ssh! You'll see. Just don't be frightened."

"I *wouldn't* be frightened if you didn't keep saying 'don't be frightened'! What do you need cake..."

Claire was interrupted by a sound in the distance. In the deep silence of the wood, a dog barked. No, not one dog. A number of dogs, barking in unison. All barking together, at exactly the same time. That was unnerving. How could the dogs all bark at exactly the same moment like that?

"Ah...here he comes!" Aidan said. "Now remember, he's just a big softy."

The barking grew louder, as the dogs approached. It didn't sound like friendly barking to Claire. She put her foot on her pedal, ready for flight if necessary. There was a rustling noise in the undergrowth as whatever it was got closer. Then, bounding

through the tree trunks towards them came a furry bristling vigorous shape. A dog of some kind, very big. As big as a Saint Bernard. But on its thick neck were three heads!

Claire grabbed Aidan's arm in alarm. "What's this thing?" she squeaked hoarsely.

"Ssh! Don't worry."

The creature had slowed down, and was now stalking towards them inch by inch. The middle head was barking loudly and menacingly. It looked like a huge angry Alsation. On its left, barking in a friendly kind of way, was the head of a black Labrador. And on the other side, yapping irritably, was the head of a Yorkshire Terrier.

It came to within about five yards of them and stopped suspiciously. Aidan threw a piece of sponge cake onto the ground in front of it.

"Here we are then boy! Cake!"

The barking stopped immediately, and the three headed dog nosed its way towards the cake. The black Labrador head bent down eagerly to gobble up the treat, but was angrily jerked away by the Alsation. Unfortunately for the alsation though, it jerked too far, allowing the little Yorkshire Terrier head to grab the cake.

Aidan threw down more pieces of cake, and all the heads managed to get some in the end, although not without a lot of growling and squabbling. Then the dog padded forward and allowed its heads to be patted. It only had one tail, but that was wagging hard enough for three dogs.

Claire leaned forward and patted each head in turn nervously.

"The first time I came here, this fellow wouldn't let me get past him," Aidan said. "I got to this wood, and he stood barring the way out to the fields. So the next time I brought him some

cake, and he let me go past. Now then boy! Good bye for now!"

The strange beast stood aside as they cycled on into the moon-bathed fields. Glancing back, Claire saw it snuffling hopefully on the ground for crumbs.

As they came right out of the trees into the full moonlight for the first time, Claire became aware of a beautiful warmth suffusing her body.

"It's warm! The moonlight is like the sun!" she exclaimed to Aidan. "Stop a minute!"

She took off her fleece and stuffed it into her saddlebag. The bare skin of her forearms gleamed white, like bleached bone.

Some of the fields were filled with glistening silvery wheat loaded with kernels of grain. In others bearded barley was growing, the stalks sagging like tired old men whose heads are too heavy for their thin bodies to carry around any longer. Away in the distance, a line of figures was moving along one of the fields, waist deep in the rich crop, wielding scythes.

"It's harvest time here," Aidan said. "Every time I've come they've been cutting down the grain. But the funny thing is, the fields are still full of the ripe crops. It's as if more springs up as soon as one lot is harvested."

"Have you spoken to any of the reapers?" Claire asked.

"You can't. Come and see."

Aidan veered off the road onto a rutted track across the fields, towards the line of workers. Claire followed. As they got closer, the figures seemed to become faint and insubstantial, as if they were made up of a fine mist. At last, when they had approached to within a few yards, they disappeared altogether. Aidan stopped and looked at Claire.

"Wraiths, you see. They just vanish into thin air."

"But who *are* they?"

"I couldn't say. Look behind when we cycle back to the road."

They headed back the way they had come, and sure enough, as Claire glanced back over her shoulders, there was the line of wraiths again, working as hard as ever cutting down the corn.

"They're scary." Claire said.

"Well, they seem to be harmless though. This country is full of them. What's more, I don't think *they* can see us either. There's a village up ahead. See what you think."