

FAIRYTALES and ODDITIES

EZRA WILLIAMS



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Cyril Williams was a gravedigger. He had fought during World War II in Burma and had been court-martialed and imprisoned for driving a tank through the Officers' Mess Hall. His mental ailments had continued in civilian life, but he was not, at heart, a bad man. He beat his wife, Kathleen, for money to buy beer, it's true, but always in his heart he secretly thought he would change. He hoped to, and perhaps sometimes this is all we have. And hope is a good thing, possibly the best thing.

One cold evening — the kind that numbs your bones and makes you consider what your freezing point would be — Kathleen was waiting for Cyril to come home. She was by the fireside and their cat, Tom, who was white with a black spot on his chest, nestled in her lap. Tom was almost asleep, richly breathing with half-purrs on the exhalations; Kathleen's head nodded as she remembered the times before the war. Not quite the happy times, but certainly the happier times, for them.

She had waited for many hours but still Cyril didn't come home. He wasn't at the pub. She knew this. He was working, digging the grave of Father Smythe, the local priest who had 'passed away' the previous weekend. He had been found in a room above the local pub. A woman of 'ill-repute' had raised the alarm. No one had enquired how she came to know.

Finally Kathleen fell asleep, her chin resting on the buttoned neck of her now-grey nine-year-old blouse. Sleeves smocked at the wrists. Thinking of times before the war always sent her slowly to sleep. She would make up scenarios, or embellish pleasant real ones. This evening she had been thinking of when they had been trying for children. They had been happy then, briefly. Then war had broken out and he had come home with a kitten in one pocket and a loaf of bread in the other. Snow was curling in his hair. 'Bread is the staff of life,' he said, and placed the kitten on the floorboards where it flounced, unafraid. Kicking up dustballs. She'd loved him then.