

## FIONA AND TIM

By Betsy Hearne

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FIONA was slow and silent, but all children have their own ways. In an Irish family of eight girls, slow and silent are lost in the general din. Her mother paid very little attention to her. It seemed the best way to cope, overall, and Fiona did not demand attention. From the beginning the girl lived in a world of her own and looked different as well. In contrast to her seven redheaded, rosy-cheeked sisters, Fiona had mousy brown hair and colorless skin. Her sisters secretly believed that she was a changeling whom the fairies had swapped for their real baby sister, stolen away at birth. As for Fiona's father, he paid her no attention at all. The man was overwhelmed by a steady stream of daughters who subjected him to harassment at home and teasing from the lads when he retreated for a pint at the pub. What was wrong with Fiona, as far as he was concerned, was being female. Beyond that he didn't know—since in those days there was no money for doctors or tests—and perhaps he couldn't care. There was just the farm and the endless work on it. A slow child who listened no better than she talked, which was never, seemed useless compared to the others, who could at least help their mother. Fiona would never have found her work on the farm had it not been for Tim.

Tim was quiet, too, but not slow—one of a hearty litter born the same time as Fiona. The puppies were all black furred with white legs, white ruffs, white tail tips. But only Tim had large brown eyes ringed with tan luminous eyes. When his brothers and sisters went to other homes, Tim stayed, and he and Fiona played like twins. When she first crawled across the cottage floor toward the open doorway, he waited patiently outside where a dog belonged and nuzzled her as she came within reach. When she continued into the yard on all fours, he followed her toes. When later she rose to walk, pulling on the fur of his back, he stood steady, though only a yearling. When she learned to run, he ran ahead of her. One chased the other. The other chased the one. They

rolled in the grass and mud. They fell asleep piled in a heap of matted fur and sticky hair and bones as light as bird wings. Awake, Fiona watched Tim without a word—she seemed to have no words—and turned her head to look where he turned his head to look. And Tim watched Fiona, herding her around the yard or toward the door when her mother called. Tim paid attention.

Fiona began to wander, for where Tim went she went as well, and Tim went with the sheep.

“Born to it,” said Fiona’s father, and he began to train Tim for the work of rounding up the flock, sending him to circle them with a wave of his arm, dropping him to the ground with a drop of his hand. Fiona watched and imitated his signals and followed when she could, but their land stretched up a stony mountain and their sheep scattered along cliffs that dropped into the sea.

“Go home, Fiona,” shouted her father, and when he waved her away, she followed the direction of his hand, went back to the house, and waited for Tim to come home. If her father drove the sheep along the dirt road to another part of the mountain for fresh grazing, Fiona followed until they cut up over the steep rocks. Then she obeyed her father’s fierce hand waving her away, and she walked back alone, watching whatever came toward her, sometimes a furtive fox or a donkey-drawn cart, rarely a car. Cars were common in the city but still a new thing to the villagers, who stopped and stared as the dust rose along the road, encircled them, and settled down again—or else the mud sailed in wet sheets that made them jump onto the verge. Drivers tooted their horns at the backward farmers covered with dust or mud. Nobody in the village had a car yet, although they all wanted one. For Fiona’s family wanting a car was like wanting the moon. Yet she saw cars sometimes and watched them carefully, the way she watched everything, waving her hand if anyone in the car waved at her, copying their signals exactly.

Tim did not like cars. Their smell choked him. They were loud, threatening, and predatory strangers invading his territory. It was his obligation as a dog of honor to chase them away. When he heard a car coming he crouched by the road eyeing it intensely until it came close enough to rush. Then he ran, first alongside and then behind, barking furiously, despite the fact that he rarely barked, until it was a safe distance away. If a car came along the road while he was herding the sheep, he

confronted it with a snarl and then raced around behind the flock trying to herd them up the mountain out of harm's way, taking one last dash after the car as it rolled by. If Fiona saw a car coming, she tried to hold him back, but he struggled against her and was stronger.

The day they found out what was wrong with Fiona, it was too foggy to see a car coming. The fog had sneaked in off the sea, muffled each creature, and set every object in a world of its own. The purple foxglove, the orange crocosima, the flaming berries clustered on the rowan trees were all wrapped in gray. You could see your hand at the end of your arm and that was all. But sheep must eat whatever the weather. Fiona's father had planned to herd them farther along the mountain that day and only a gale could persuade him otherwise. He was leading the sheep down the road, with Tim bringing up the rear and Fiona trotting beside him.

The car swept around a sharp curve, the driver blind to all but the gray blanket wrapped around his windows. Tim heard it suddenly behind them. There was no time to confront the car, to snarl and bark and scare it away. He simply hurled himself against Fiona's body. She toppled into the ditch beside the road while the car caught Tim full on the flank and tossed him in the air as if it were a mad bull. Fiona lay in the ditch shaking and Tim lay still where he landed. Too late, the driver slammed on his brakes and honked the horn. The sheep scattered. Fiona's father turned back, peering into the fog, almost running into the driver as he swung open the car door.

"I didn't see her," shouted the man. "Could she not hear me coming?" Then he choked out an apology that was, in turn, strangled by the fog.

Fiona's father leaped into the ditch and picked her up in his arms. "Are you hurt, girl?" he breathed. "You're all right now, aren't you?" There was no blood that he could see, no broken bones that he could feel.

"I don't think she's hurt," said the driver. "She fell into the ditch. The dog knocked her out of the way"

"Tim?" called Fiona's father. Tim did not appear. They found him not too far away, and with him the blood and broken bones.

Fiona's father felt that it would be a kindness to kill the dog then and there, but Fiona, as if she sensed his plan, hovered over Tim, shielding him, in turn, with her own body. And so her father, seeing her demand something for the first time in her life, even

soundlessly, laid Tim on his coat and let the driver take them home. He would send a neighbor to check on the sheep, and he would do what he could to staunch the blood and set the bones.

Tim lay quiet on a blanket by the fire. For two weeks they did not know whether he would live or die, and for two weeks Fiona slept beside him, ate beside him, stroked his ears, lifted his head a bit to squeeze wet rags into his mouth. And for the first time her father paid attention. He watched her take care of the dog with a skill she had never shown in anything else. He puzzled over her silence. And he heard again and again in his mind the stranger's question: "Could she not hear me coming?" At last one day he stood behind her and clapped his huge red hands together just behind her head. Again, again, again. She did not move but sat silently gazing down at the dog, which had lifted its head without Fiona's help for the first time at the sound of thunderous clapping. And then Fiona's father knew that Fiona was deaf, and perhaps dumb, but not dim or daft or half-witted or any of the other things they had assumed. And he knew that she could work a dog. And he knew that even if he did not have a son, he had someone who could help him work the sheep. He put his hand gently on her head and she turned around, surprised at the touch.