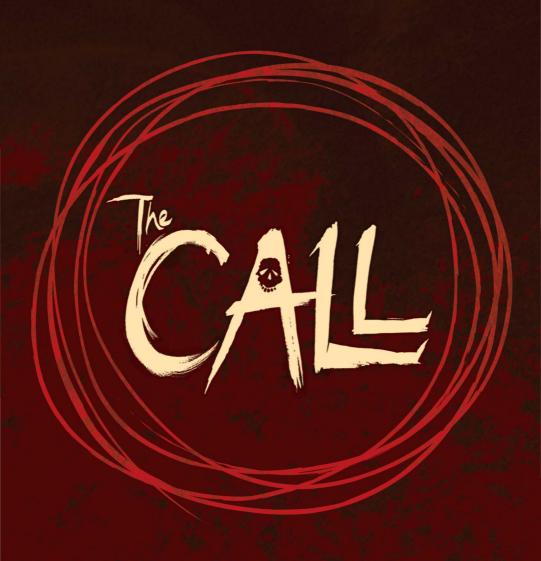
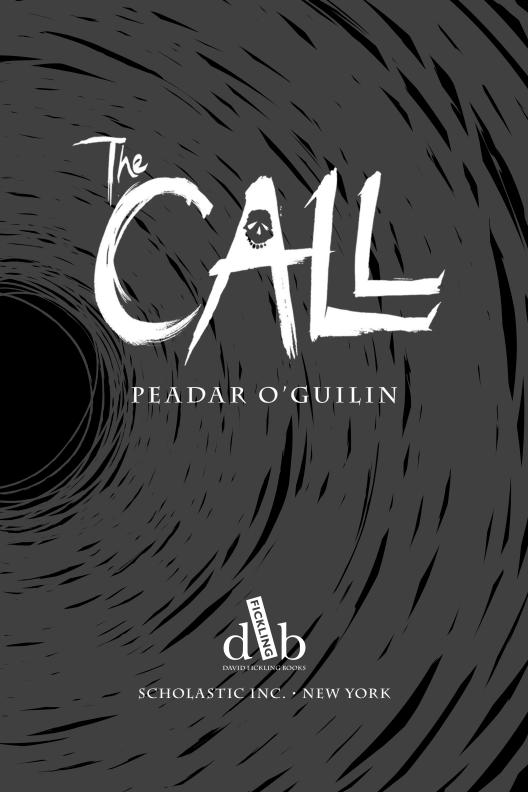
## PEADAR O'GUILIN



3 MINLITES TO SAVE YOUR LIFE



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n her tenth birthday Nessa overhears an argument in her parents' bedroom. She knows nothing about the Three Minutes yet. How could she? The whole of society is working to keep its children innocent. She plays with dolls. She believes the lies about her brother, and when her parents tuck her into bed at night—her grinning dad, her fussy mam—they show her only love.

But now, with ten candles on a cake in the kitchen behind her, that's all supposed to change.

Dad can't know his daughter is right outside the door, and yet he whispers. "We don't need to tell her," he says. "She . . . she isn't able to run anyway. She's a special case. We could give her a few more years to be our baby."

Baby! Our baby! Nessa bristles at the thought. She's struggling to stand still, because with her twisted legs she makes quite a racket when she walks. However, once her mam, Agnes, starts sobbing, she decides she's had enough. "Oh, for Crom's sake," she says, "I'm in the hall. I'm coming in and you'd better not be kissing!" She means that last part as a joke, but it falls flat.

"Come in then," Dad says. He still possesses enough greying hair to cover his scalp. Almost. He's even older than Mam, and on a bad day Nessa wonders if that's why she was born weak enough to catch polio. Her cousin told her that once, and Nessa often thinks of it.

"I know about Santa Claus," she says, walking in. "If that's what this is about. I've known for years already, but—"

Agnes starts heaving like she's been punched in the stomach. She shakes hard enough to rattle the bed beneath her. Dad wraps her tight with his long, skinny arms, and for a moment it's like this hug is the only thing stopping bits of her from flying off.

A chill steals up Nessa's spine. She can't know it, but this is the first hint of the fear that will never leave her again; that will ruin her life as it has ruined the life of everybody in the whole country.

Now Dad is crying too. His tears barely show: a hint of moisture about the eyes, his sobs thick, as though squeezed through a wad of cloth.

Nessa takes a ragged breath. "Whatever it is . . . ," she says—and deep inside a part of her is begging her to shut up, to stop, to turn around! "Whatever it is, I want to know."

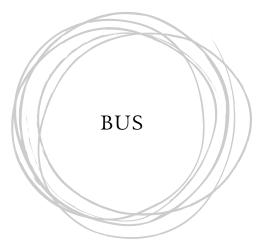
So they tell her. About the Three Minutes and what has happened to her older brother. And she laughs, because that's her nature and the whole situation is absurd. It's one of her dad's stupid pranks! Of course it is.

But they keep the horrible story going and the fear builds up and up inside her until she screams at them, hysterical, horrified, "You're lying! You're lying!" She falls, her awkward left leg giving way.

For the next two days Nessa refuses to play or to talk. But she's too intelligent not to recognize the truth. The clues have surrounded her for a lifetime already, and only the monstrousness of it, allied to the trusting nature of her now-ended childhood, has allowed her not to see it before. She has never asked herself where all the teenagers were. Or why she has almost never spoken to anybody who is seventeen or eighteen or twenty.

But if she refuses to let the doctors put her to sleep, this is the future: Sometime during her adolescence, the Sídhe will come for her, as they come these days for everyone. They will hunt her down, and if she fails to outrun them, Nessa will die.

On the third day her twisted legs carry her out of her bedroom. Her eyes are dry. She says, "I'm going to live. And nobody's going to stop me." She believes every word of it.



Pour years have passed, and Nessa is standing in the sunshine at the bus station in Letterkenny. Everything is old and everybody is old too. Except for herself and the red-haired, red-cheeked Megan, openly smoking "greenhouse" tobacco and daring the adults around them to interfere.

Nessa wants to say something to her friend. Along the lines of: "We need to stay fit if we're to survive." Only one in ten children makes it through their teenage years as it is. But the warmth on her face is too nice to let her spoil the mood.

They buy their tickets from the granny in the office and head outside to get seats.

"Will you look at that bus!" says Megan. The tired engine burps fumes of recycled vegetable oil so that everything smells deep fried. "We'll be lucky if it can hold the weight of the rucksack you brought. It's gonna strand us halfway to nowhere." A big, middle-aged police sergeant waits by the bus, brandishing an iron needle four inches long. Sweating under his cap, he swabs it with alcohol and jabs it into the arm of everybody getting on.

"Do I look like a Sídhe to you?" growls one old woman.

"I hear they can look any way they want, missus."

"In that case, they wouldn't want to look like me!"

"True enough," he says.

She curses as he stabs her anyway.

He grins. "My apologies! Iron's supposed to hurt them."

When it comes to Nessa's turn, the officer stares at her legs and can't keep the pity off his face. *Didn't your parents love you enough to kill you?* 

Nessa's own expression stays bland. "Was there something else?" she asks.

Megan butts in. "Sorry, Sergeant." Her tone is polite and respectful. She has the sweetest face in creation: rosy cheeks and sparkling green eyes. "What my friend is trying to say is, Mind your own business, you goggle-eyed turd sniffer."

When Megan steps up to face the needle, the sergeant makes *extra* sure that she's no spy. She takes the iron well enough, but the second he withdraws it, she kicks his feet from under him and twists his arm up behind his back so that the adult, twice her size, is on his knees before her.

"Megan," cries Nessa, "enough!"

"They train us pretty well," Megan says with a wink. She releases him and gets onto the bus.

The coach rattles off toward Monaghan, with Megan chatting every step of the way, mostly in English. Nessa tries to keep her own responses in Sídhe, not because she loves it, but because her ability to speak the enemy's tongue may one day save her life.

She knows she should find a better friend: somebody who won't smoke or grow her hair dangerously long. But Nessa's not quite ready to sacrifice all the world's happiness and fun to the ancient enemies of her race. Not yet.

Shortly after Lifford, they roll over a bridge into what used to be Northern Ireland. Nobody cares about that sort of thing anymore. The only border recognized by the Sídhe is the sea that surrounds the island from which they were driven thousands of years before. No human can leave or enter. No medicines or vaccines or spare parts for the factories that once made them; nor messages of hope or friendship; nothing.

A veil of mist hangs off the coast, and all those within, whatever their passports used to say, now belong to the same endangered species.

The boy gets on at Omagh. He's fit-looking, of course, with the body of a runner. Most teenagers are the same, but it doesn't look

awkward on him, despite the fact that he has more growing to do. He smiles at the sight of them. "Off to Dublin, girls?" The Sídhe words spring naturally from his tongue. Nessa likes the look of him, and his bright, friendly confidence. He likes her too, she thinks, but won't have seen her legs yet.

As usual it's Megan who answers. "Our survival college is in Roscommon."

"The one in Boyle? Aye, I heard of that one. Didn't one of their boys make it through two nights ago?"

The girls gasp. "Who?" says Nessa.

Twenty-five years ago, when the Sídhe began taking teenagers, less than one in a hundred survived. These days, with constant training, with fitness and study, with every spare cent in an impoverished country aimed at keeping them alive, the odds have improved tenfold. But they are still low enough that the thought that somebody she knows has made it through fills Nessa with excitement.

"Ponzy, I think. Is that even a real name?"

"No way!" squeals Megan. "Not Ponzy! Not that wee turd!" But she's laughing, because she likes Ponzy—everybody likes him. Nessa is smiling hard enough to hurt her own cheeks, and the strange boy lights up in response, but not as much as he should.

"It's just . . . ," he says. "It's just he came back a wee bit . . . different."

"Different how?" asks Nessa. Behind the boy's head they pass a neat little bungalow with trimmed hedges and a lawn full of lettuce. She'll never forget it, because rather than answering her, the boy disappears and his empty clothing falls to the floor.

Everybody else takes a second to gasp, but not Nessa; she's on her feet straight away. "Stop!" she screams. Then, realizing she has spoken in Sídhe, she repeats the command in English.

"We've had a Call," she cries. "Driver! You have to reverse! Reverse!"

Megan, proud owner of a windup watch, has already started the countdown. "Twenty seconds," she says. "I...I may have missed a few at the start there."

Half a panicky minute has already passed when the bus starts to go backward and Nessa has to hold on for dear life. A government car has come up behind them and the passengers at the back of the bus wave frantically to make it move. A whole sixty seconds are wasted in this way, but soon they are back beside the house with the lettuce garden and Nessa calls the halt.

Was it here? she wonders. Or were we a little farther on?

"How long?" she asks aloud.

"Two forty-five," Megan says, watching the murderous second hand. "It's three minutes now!"

That's when the boy returns. Strictly speaking, the famous "Three Minutes" are three minutes and four seconds. Everyone knows this, because many Calls were caught on security cameras in the first terrible year.

The boy's body reappears and thumps down hard onto the floor. Nessa is relieved to see that it's not one of the really awful ones. There's nothing to churn the stomach here, other than a little blood and a set of tiny antlers growing from the back of his head. The Sídhe can be a lot more imaginative than that, and they even have what experts refer to as a "sense of fun." Nessa shivers.

"They didn't catch him for a long time," Megan whispers.

"Didn't get a chance to *really* work on him."

A few of the old people are crying and want to get off the bus, but it's not like the early days anymore. They might disturb the body as they try to step over it, and that's just not allowed. The antlered boy will lie there until the Recovery Bureau agents have examined him properly in Monaghan.

"These girls have to get to school," says the driver, and that's all there is to it.

Megan glares the weepers into silence, then sits looking straight ahead. Nessa too strives to appear calm, to gaze out at the passing countryside, trying not to think about all the murders committed by one faction or another in order to farm it.

She jumps as Megan grabs her by the shoulder and hisses, "Stop!"

"Stop? Stop what?"

"You were banging your head again. Against the window."

"Oh, yeah." Nessa can feel the bruise forming on her forehead. She finds that she's gasping for air like a hooked fish and more aware of the handsome boy's body than she has ever been of anything in her life. The Sídhe stole him away for a little over three minutes, but in their world, the Grey Land, an entire day has passed, panic and pain in every second of it.

"Is it because he looks like Anto?" Megan asks.

Nessa suppresses a shudder. "He looks nothing like Anto."

The redhead shrugs. She doesn't care. And neither should Nessa. Not if she wants to live.

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