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I'm From Here

A Thesis Presented

by

Patrick Michael Hanrahan

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Abstract of the Thesis

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I'm From Here is a novel set in a small Irish town. The main themes are small town life and the draw of home. Two of the main characters left and came back and the third tried to leave but failed due to circumstances beyond her control. Chapters are not sequential but are connected. The novel is divided into three sections featuring each of the main characters.

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Chapter 1

PART ONE

I'm John Fitzgerald and well aware that, more than likely, you don't know who the hell I am. I was going to use another word but my father has told me to watch my language. That's right, at my age, in my forties, my old man is telling me to clean up my act. I get that a lot these days.

Why? I'll tell you why.

Here I am back living at home and no one seems to know me. O.K. I left when I finished school but I only moved thirty miles away. Still, it was a different world. To us Limerick was and is a different world. Even Limerick people think so. Shift work at the airport and access to free foreign travel meant I didn't come home much. But you'd think people would nod or say hello at least. Now and again on the Main Street I would hear "Is it yourself?" and I can tell they're not sure. Of course, I'm not too sure who they are either. Familiar faces but I can't put a name on them. They were old when I was young and they still look the same.

I can walk up one side of the street and down the other without so much as a nod of recognition. Mind you, they turned out in force for my mother's funeral. It was only a few months ago but, since then, a lot has changed in my life.

I had grabbed the generous redundancy package offered at the airport and was deciding what to do next. I hadn't a clue, by the way. My wife Grainne and I split up before Mam died, but I didn't let on, so I stayed with a friend near the airport. I didn't want to upset her. Mam, that is. I didn't give a toss about upsetting Grainne. She turned out to be a right little bitch. It took me years to cop her on. My

father never even asked if she was at the funeral until it came up in passing a few nights ago. You can imagine what he thinks.

After the funeral things went downhill rapidly and, before I knew it, I was standing on the top step, at our hall door asking if I could come in, as I needed a place to stay. I'll never forget the look of puzzlement on his face. It was as if he didn't know who the hell I was. Maybe he was still shook from Mam dying and being alone and all that goes with it. He looked at the suitcase and eventually it dawned on him that he had company. Somebody, his son, would be staying with him, under his feet, was probably how he saw it. This would take some getting used to, for both of us.

One evening not long after he asked me straight out about Grainne. He was hemming and hawing.

“What happened between you two, anyway?” was how he put it.

I tried to explain to him as best I could how we had grown apart, shift work, different interests, that sort of thing.

“How could you have grown apart when you never grew together?”

I must say I admired his astuteness. That was a good one. I told him she had friends from school and they all went to work at the airport about the same time. They were like a gang or a cult, as I sometimes called them, who did everything together. She worked at the Information Desk where she got to know everyone and everyone knew her. She had a nice manner, was very popular and was invited to every get-together. Her short blonde hair, like a boys haircut, and blue eyes helped. She treated strangers far better than me, I thought, but maybe that was my own fault.

Honestly, I don't think marriage suited me at all. The lads were always heading off somewhere to play golf, to Rugby internationals or to the races, any excuse to get away. Their wives and girlfriends didn't seem to care. Glad to be rid of them, probably. In all honesty, I felt the same way. I hated being

stuck in the house, hanging around waiting for her to come home. Oh, for some of the time we got on famously but we had dreadful rows as she wanted the house done up, a better television, she hated her car, the list went on and on. You'd think it was all my fault.

Speaking of my mother's funeral reminds me to mention Helen Kennedy. She runs the family business now that her father, Des, isn't around anymore. She came to the removal with her mother. She told me how sorry she was to hear of my mother's passing and how she used to pop in to the shop regularly on her way to see Paddy Daly and always had a friendly word. Helen would be a good few years younger than me but very nice, I thought. She had dark frizzy hair and an outgoing friendly personality that served her well in the shop. I asked around but no one seemed to know much about her apart from herself and Margaret Hogan being great friends. Her young sister Louise is studying in Dublin. A bright spark, I'm told and all set to take over the business. We'll see about that. These things don't always work out as planned. That's only my opinion, mind you.

Some nights I can't sleep and wander around the old house. How did this happen? How did it come to this? My marriage is over and Mam is dead and buried. My old man and I circle each other and try to keep out of each other's way. I must admit he has made an effort to include me in his little circle when he notices I'm at a loose end. He has two friends Bob and Carmel whom I find very interesting. Bob is a Christian Brother who spends most of his time outside the Monastery and Carmel was the headmistress of a girl's school in Dublin. Bit of a story there I'm sure, but no one is saying anything. They seem to be very tight.

My mother, the Lord have mercy on her, was cute enough and I found she knew only too well of the difficulties I was having with Grainne. In fact, while she said she was reluctant to pry, she often brought it up. Asked harmless questions really and sometimes she got answers. Not always. I was very surprised when she phoned me one day about a month or so before she died and asked me to drop by. She had something to show me, was how she put it. Something was right. I was shocked when she

asked me to bring her up to the Nursing Home and proceeded to introduce me to Paddy Daly. So this was Paddy Daly.

“Paddy, love,” she said. “This is young John.” Both my mother and father still referred to me as young John, even though I was their eldest son and no longer young. I found myself confronted by a stranger who looked remarkably like an older version of me. Balding, glasses, neatly dressed in a suit and tie and a bit of a scowl on his face.

“I see what you’re saying,” Paddy said, looking me up and down.

“What are you on about?” I asked but got no answer.

“This is Paddy Daly, John. He was great friends with your Dad and myself when we were young. They were in the same class in school and we went everywhere together. Paddy spent most of his life in England. He said he had to get away here. He’s home now and he’s grand. I drop in to see him when I can.”

“Not often enough,” said Paddy. “Company is hard to come by in this place. Too many people sitting in silence, staring out the window and feeling sorry for themselves.”

“Ah come on now, Paddy. Don’t start,” said Betty. “I know it’s not the Glen, but you could do worse.”

The rest of the visit was small talk. She reminded me that Paddy was the one who wrote the letter that got me the job at the airport so long ago. Paddy just shrugged it off and said it was nothing. He knew the right people at the time. That’s probably when it dawned on me that my mother had been writing to Paddy ever since he originally went to England. The letters became few and far between but she remembered lots about them and lately she would talk to me about Paddy and Dad and herself. Funny how my father never brought up Paddy’s name, I remember thinking. They went to the pictures,

as she called them, hurling matches and dances together. It looked as though Paddy didn't have a girlfriend back then. Or if he did she was never mentioned.

After that first visit to Paddy, on the way back to the house, Mam asked me:

“Well, what did you think of him?”

“I dunno. He seems to be sad,” was all I could think to say.

“He's a nice man, you know. You remind me of him sometimes.”

“Is that good or bad?”

“Oh come on, John. There's no need to be like that.”

Another day she showed me a picture of herself and Paddy that she carried in her purse. It was taken in the Tower Ballroom, the day of the excursion to Tramore, when my father had to work, she said. I wondered if there was something going on, even back then, between my mother and Paddy. Nah, I didn't think so. She's my mother, for crying out loud and what of it. It was years ago.

When she died, my father told me about the late night phone call from Paddy. Then I decided to call round to the Nursing Home and bring the poor man to the funeral. I often wondered if my father was annoyed at me for doing so. What did it matter? He was an old man, with no friends and no one to look after him except the Nursing Home staff. Nice as they were to them he was just a job and a wage packet. Some day I'll bring Paddy's name up and see what he has to say about him.

I often had the feeling that Mam wanted to tell me something but couldn't bring herself to do so. She'd mention Grainne and ask about the two of us. I told her again and again, but gently, that we were done. Grainne was fun while it lasted but, in recent years, we were both very unhappy and angry at each other. Life's too short for unhappiness, Mam insisted. Most people only get one chance, she said. Another time she said, “If I had to do it all over again?” but stopped short of answering her own question.

I pushed a bit but it was a waste of time and effort. She wouldn't budge. My God. Maybe she felt she should have gone to England with Paddy when they finished school instead of marrying Dad and staying at home. I don't suppose I'll ever know.

BETTY

Sean could hear the phone ringing as he put the key in the lock.

“Sean? She's gone,” he heard picking up the receiver.

“O my God! Are you sure?”

“She died shortly after you left, Sean. Sorry for your troubles.”

“Thanks for calling, Sister. I'll be over as soon as I can.”

Standing in the dark hallway, with the door still open, he put the phone down and reached in his pocket for a cigarette. Then he remembered he hadn't smoked in a few years, but he still had the habit. He closed the door, made his way to the kitchen, put on the kettle and sat down. What would he do now? Betty was gone. That's what they said. “She's gone.” Would he rush back to the hospital or would he try to reach the boys? He still called them the boys even though they were in their forties.

He had left her less than an hour ago and come home for his tea stopping into Kennedy's for milk, eggs and bread on the way. Helen had asked him how Betty was doing. “She's grand,” he had answered but he knew better. Jesus! It was only a few weeks since they were told about the tumour. “Aggressive” and “inoperable” were the words he barely heard, but would remember forever.

She had spent a full week upstairs in bed unable to look after herself. It was for everyone's benefit that they'd moved her to the hospital. He was surprised to find he couldn't cope. She was heavier than he expected and had to be lifted in and out of bed, even to the bathroom. The steep, narrow stairs in the old house didn't help either, with the bathroom on the landing, three steps up and three down. She insisted it wasn't his fault. But she would, wouldn't she? A pity the local hospital had closed due to cutbacks. That's all one heard these days. Cutbacks. From the boom days of the Celtic Tiger to this. How did that happen? Luckily the Hospital in Cashel was still open and not too far away.

He made up his mind, took a quick look around to make sure all the doors were locked - the house would never feel the same - and headed out. As he sat into his car a passerby said: "Evenin' Sean." He just nodded. He didn't even look up to see who it was. He headed down the hill in first gear, turned left onto the Main Street at the traffic light and slowly drove through the town. Most of the shops were in darkness, closed for the night, with only a handful of people on the street. The new streetlights didn't help but he was glad there was no harsh glare. He wouldn't be noticed. The few cars around were either heading home or just passing through and the locals would be having their tea..

The road sign said Cashel 20 kilometres. He knew it to be 12 miles and it always would be to him and his generation. He knew what 12 miles felt like. Never came to grips with kilometres. He liked this road. Tree-lined. Out past the graveyard. That's something he would have to think about. Toby O'Brien, the undertaker, would handle everything on that score. Still, he'd have to write a death notice and probably an obituary. They were easy enough to dash off when they were about someone you knew vaguely but a different story when it's your wife. He'd think about that later.

He drove past the stud farm in Ballyhurst and up the hill of Kilfeakle. Finally, they had a decent colour for the church. It used to be pink, standing out on the top of the hill for all to see for miles around, then duck-egg blue and recently they decided on a shade of beige. He and Betty often wondered who was behind the colours. More than likely a local hardware shop, that had paint left over or as Betty said,

the priest's housekeeper, who held all the power anyway, picked the colour. Betty always laughed at that. It even made him smile, now. On through Thomastown and past the statue of Father Mathew, who founded the Temperance Movement in Ireland. There's an achievement for you, he thought shaking his head. He reached in his pocket for a handkerchief, as a few tears streamed down his nose. Soon after the bridge at Golden, he would see the shadow of the Rock of Cashel looming in the distance. Hold on. They've finally installed the new floodlights. Spectacular, he thought. That would make a nice front-page picture for the paper some week soon.

Up through the town, turn right and out to the hospital. He wondered where she'd be. Would they have moved her to the mortuary already or would she still be in her room? He opted for the main entrance.

"Good evening, Mr. Fitzgerald. I'm sorry for your troubles. We didn't want to move her until you got here. You might want to spend a private minute with her."

A bit late for that, Sean thought, but he knew what she meant and appreciated the gesture.

"No, No, I'm fine, Sister" he said. "Do whatever you have to do. I'll wait here until you send for me."

He sat in the deserted lobby for a little while, then stood up and walked over to the window. The view outside was much better. The lobby was painted an institutional green, as it was called, with worn black plastic chairs. They weren't made for sitting on for a long wait, as was usually the case. Outside he could see the majestic Rock in the distance, a castle on a hill built during the middle ages and lots of cars speeding by heading to the by-pass and the main Dublin to Cork road.

It occurred to him that he hadn't thought about Betty's death the whole way out to Cashel. Oh, he noticed little things all right. They'd been together since their school days. Married forty-something years. Young John was forty-six on his last birthday. They had gotten used to each other over the years

and she let him get on with the business without interfering. A lot to be said for that, he often said. But now she was gone. He'd have to face up to it. He decided he'd ring the boys when he got home. He had a mobile but preferred to talk to them from home, where he could sit down and no one would be listening. The boys were never in anyway and he knew he'd be leaving a message on some recording device or other.

"You're mother is dead" sounded a bit abrupt and unfeeling. "Mammy's gone" wouldn't cut it either. He assumed he'd have no trouble telling them, but here he was trying to find the right words and it wasn't easy. "I have bad news." Yes, that's what he'd say and they would get the message straight away. They knew well she was in hospital and unlikely to recover. Gerry, in Limerick, would be busy with the girls and his business. His mother in law, a nice woman, would more than likely answer the phone but he'd rather talk to Gerry. Young John, who was very close to his mother, would be a different story. He'd have to be very careful how he'd word the news. Funny how he always thought of him as young John, even though he was older than Gerry. Oh yes, and Paddy Daly. He'd have to get word to him first thing before he heard it from someone else. That wouldn't do at all.

Paddy had been a friend of his and Betty's since she went to the Convent while they were at the Brothers. They did everything and went everywhere together. They'd go to Thurles to see Tipperary play and Tramore on the annual excursion. The seaside at Tramore was great fun and Sean always smiled when he thought of it. You'd see people from the town that you saw every day of the week and you'd stop and chat as if they were home on holidays. Paddy and Betty even went together once when Sean had to work. They had a great day they said, when he asked about it.

"Mr. Fitzgerald, you can come in now. I've packed her case for you, so you can take it with you. She didn't have much with her, as you know."

Sean followed into a bare room, where Betty lay on the bed. She looked dead. For some reason he was surprised. Maybe he was shocked. He wasn't sure. He had never imagined her like this with the

life gone out of her. He could see the familiar face but she was no longer the Betty he knew nearly all his life. Her purse stood open beside her suitcase. He noticed what looked like an old photo with the corners bent sticking out of an inside pocket. Looking closely he saw it was Betty and Paddy Daly taken on the Promenade at Tramore. It must have been that day they went without him. She looked so happy. She loved the Promenade. She often said so. He stared at the photo for a while, shoved it in, picked up the handbag and suitcase and left the room.

“I’m sorry,” he said to no one in particular “but I must get home.”

He remembered nothing about the drive back and was sitting in the car outside his front door when he realized he was home. For the first time, he felt he was going into an empty house. He tiptoed in as if making a noise would disturb somebody or something. He switched on the lights, reached for the radio out of habit but pulled his hand away without turning it on. The phone rang. It startled him. It was young John.

“Dad. I’ve been calling and you’re not answering your mobile.”

“I know John. I was at the hospital. I had to turn it off. I have very bad news for you. Your poor mother...”

“Don’t tell me,” young John pleaded.

“This evening about tea-time,” Sean said. He could hear his son sobbing at the other end of the phone.

“Jesus, Dad. Didn’t anyone notice she was so sick? Why didn’t the doctor spot it before it was too late?”

“All I know is what I’ve been told, John. Apparently, your mother hadn’t kept an appointment with the doctor in years. Oh, she made them all right but always cancelled and rescheduled. She seemed fine to me. She was eating a bit less and slept a bit more, but I put it down to age.”

“But Dad, she was dying and nobody noticed. How could that happen?”

“I know, John. I’m sorry, but your mother was very private about everything. Only I insisted on going with her, I wouldn’t have found out about the tumour when I did. John, son, I have to call your brother, unless you want to give him the news.”

“Yes, Dad. I’ll call him. Sorry for raising my voice. I know it can’t be easy. I’ll call you back in the morning about the arrangements. Try to get some sleep.”

At about eleven, after another cup of tea, Sean was starting to get ready for bed - he’d try to sleep anyway – the phone rang. It sounded so loud in the empty house. He picked it up on the second ring.

“Sean, is that you?”

He didn’t recognize the small, weak, sad voice.

“Who is this at this hour of the night?”

“It’s me, Paddy. Paddy Daly. Oh Sean, I’m so sorry. I’ve just heard the dreadful news. I can’t believe she’s gone and left us. She was so good to me when everyone else turned his back on me. Every Wednesday without fail she’d drop in for a visit.”

“Did she now? Well, thanks for calling, Paddy. We’re all shocked. She lasted no time at all. Listen, would it be all right if I call up to see you sometime after the funeral and we’ll have a chat.”

“That will be fine, Sean. Sure, I’m not going anywhere. Again my condolences.”

“Thanks for calling, Paddy and good night.”

Sean fell into a deep, if short-lived sleep. He tossed and turned and at one o'clock – he looked at the clock-- he was wide awake again. Paddy's call was bothering him. Never mind that poor Betty had died, how did Paddy know? Who had told him?

And what was this about Betty visiting him every Wednesday at the Nursing Home? Did the whole town know and he was the only poor fool who didn't? He'd have to make a few enquiries. He was sure someone would fill him in. It's not as if Betty kept secrets from him. Or so he thought. And it's not that he questioned her about the films she supposedly saw on Wednesday afternoons. He had always been too busy to ask anyway, getting the paper out the next day and all. Oh well, he thought, it's too late to worry about that now.

SHEPHERD'S PIE

Before I went to see Paddy Daly, after the funeral, I rang ahead to find out the best time to visit. The disembodied voice that answered the phone should have been warning enough.

“No time is a good time with Paddy, I'm afraid. You never know from one day to the next what kind of form you'll find him in. Come after breakfast some morning, about ten o'clock say and, if you can, bring an English paper with you. He'd like that.”

When I rang the bell at the Nursing Home there was no sign of him anywhere. I thought he might be in the hall waiting for me or sitting outside in the sun, on one of the wooden benches. It's not as if he didn't know I was coming, as the woman who answered the door told me. She looked me up and down trying to figure out if she knew me.

“He’s expecting you. He ‘s in the conservatory. Did you bring him anything?”

“I brought an English paper, as you suggested,” I said.

“No problem. We have to be careful about food and such like, as they stash it in their rooms and forget about it.”

Paddy was sitting in a sunny corner, dozing, with today’s paper folded in his lap. He was smaller than I expected. Thinning hair, nearly bald, in fact, not unlike myself. He had shaved, a bit unevenly, and wore a suit and tie. Very dapper, I thought. I tiptoed over and quietly pulled a chair up beside him.

“Do I know you? What do you want?” were the first words out of his mouth.

“I don’t want anything, Mr. Daly,” I said quietly. “I just came for a visit.”

He was scowling and looking around him, as it were, like he felt cornered.

“You don’t remember me but I did call ahead. I saw you with my mother a few weeks back, not long before she passed away. I’m John Fitzgerald and my father told me I should have a chat with you.”

“You mean the printer? A decent man. We were in school together.”

Paddy shifted in his seat, making himself more comfortable.

“So he told me. Helen Kennedy told me you might enjoy an English paper.”

“She’s right about that.”

When I handed him the paper he seemed to relax a bit more. He had a quick look at the front page, folded it neatly and held it on his lap.

“I thought you were working in Shannon, the last I heard,”

“Oh, indeed I was. Spent more than twenty years there. I suppose you could say I got tired of it eventually,” I answered quietly.

“What age are you now? You must be in your forties.”

“I’m forty-four, Paddy and living at home with my father. How sad is that.”

“You could do worse,” said Paddy with a sly grin. “I suppose you took the severance package that I read about in the paper.”

“I did indeed and now I have to do something with myself.”

“My father asked me to write a column about local people for the paper and he suggested I should talk to you as you might have an interesting story to tell.”

He looked me up and down and I thought I saw a slight smile.

“And why would I want to tell everyone my business?”

I could see we were getting somewhere but it would be a hard slog.

“I know you’re a private person, Paddy. You don’t mind me calling you Paddy, do you?” Not waiting for an answer, I took the plunge. “I’m hoping to do a piece that would interest the locals. People like yourself who left, as compared to those who never went anywhere. My father thought you’d be a good place to start. Tell me, why are you living here and not out at home in the Glen.”

“The Glen isn’t safe for anyone any more. That’s why.” Silence.

“They told me they’d come back and get me if I went to the Guards.”

“Who told you that, Paddy? I asked.

“The young blackguards who wrecked my nice little house and kicked the living daylights out of me. That’s who.”

“And did you ever tell anyone?”

“What could I tell them? They were wearing Balaclavas on their heads and they didn’t sound like locals. You wouldn’t believe the language out of them.”

“Jesus, Paddy. You must have been shit-scared, if you’ll pardon the expression.”

“Of course I was. Who wouldn’t be? I’ll never be the better of it.”

He sat looking out the window and started folding the newspaper neatly.

“It’s a nice day out. Would you like to come out for a drive and take a look at the old place?” I said quietly.

“I’ve thought about going back but I’d be afraid. It’s a curse when you’re afraid to go back to your own home.”

He looked as if he was going to break down, fumbled for a handkerchief and blew his nose loudly.

“I’ll tell you what, Paddy. Why don’t we take a run out to the Glen, in one end and out the other? We won’t stop at the house if you don’t want to. No one will be the wiser and we’ll be back here in an hour, as if nothing ever happened.”

I stood up and reached out to help him. He looked very old and frail, and I realized he was only the same age as my father, who still worked every day. He accepted my helping hand, linking his arm in mine and I steered him towards the front hall, in case he changed his mind. Mary the housekeeper moved towards us and I told her I was taking Paddy out for a spin.

“We’ll be back for lunch,” Paddy assured her. “What are we having today, Mary?”

“Go on out of that, Paddy Daly,” she laughed. “You know well. Your favourite, Shepherd’s Pie.”

We were no sooner in the car, than Paddy piped up:

”Would you mind going around by the Barracks and down by the new Post Office to the Main Street, John. Maybe I’ll see someone I know.”

We went across the Priest’s Road and made a left.

”That’s the new Post Office,” he said, as if I wouldn’t know.

We had to stop at the red light at the Main Street and he had a good look around.

“This bloody light is always red,” he said and I had to laugh. He was right.

For someone who got out very little he knew what went on. As we drove down through the town he gave a running commentary,

“The hotel could do with a coat of paint and there’s a “B” missing over the door. A sure sign of neglect.”

“I see Peggy whatsername finally bought herself a new coat. She had that pink mac for years. Des Kennedy’s girls have done a nice job with the shop. ”

Not wishing to interrupt, I asked gently “You haven’t been out much, have you, Paddy? Have you anyone left around? Cousins, that sort of thing.”

“There’s a few around the town but, as you can tell, they’re not exactly queuing up to visit the returned emigrant.”

“Where were you in England?”

“London and Birmingham. I was never happy there but couldn’t come home. There was nothing here for me.”

“The last time I came, you must have been about a year old,” he said quietly, as though there was someone listening. “I told them I was coming and all, and not one of them could be bothered to come to the station to meet me. I waited an hour, with my big heavy suitcase, saw a train coming through on the way back to the boat and I hopped on. That was the last they saw of me. Didn’t come back for years. That was more than forty years ago. Where does the time go?”

“Was that the last time you were home, Paddy?”

“I came for the mother’s funeral and after that not until my brother Tom died. The Lord have mercy on him. He had stayed at home in the Glen all along. I came for his funeral and never went back.”

“Never went back, Paddy? Had you planned it like that?”

“Not at all. I just couldn’t bring myself to leave the Glen when the time came.

It was very easy for me to do. I just picked up where the brother left off. Living in digs in England for all those years made it easy enough to do. I had no roots there, you see.”

I said nothing. Heading out the main road, I noticed Paddy looking around him and taking it all in. The rhododendrons were in full bloom at Kilshane, climbing half way up the hill to the tree line. The yellow of the furze looked golden in the bright sunlight and Paddy shaded his eyes with his hand.

“Who’d want to live anywhere else?” he asked rhetorically. “I’ve seen the best the Brits have to offer. The Lake District, Devon & Cornwall and to be honest, only Scotland comes close. I can’t wait to see the Glen. I haven’t been back there, you know, since my trouble.”

“Where do you want to go first, Paddy?” I asked when we turned into the Glen.

It was breathtaking when the sun shone, with the green fields rising on both sides and the Galtee Mountains towering overhead.

“Heffernan’s Shebeen,” he answered without a moment’s hesitation.

“Are you sure?” I asked. “I don’t know if it’s still there.”

“Of course, it’s still there,” he said with a laugh. “Where else would it be?”

“Well it’s a fair few years since you were out here last, Paddy. What is it five or six?”

“About that. I hear they even serve pub-grub there now if you don’t mind. Bud Heffernan is a go-getter and even has music at the week-ends.”

“How do you know all this, Paddy?” I asked laughing to myself.

“Oh, I have my sources.”

We made a sharp left turn up a boreen with grass running up the middle of the road and there, in the trees, stood the Shebeen, with a Budweiser sign in the window.

“I ask you,” said Paddy laughing, when he saw the flashing sign. I could see he was pleased.

“They’re making Budweiser in Ireland, now. Would you credit that?”

“Will we drop in for a quick one?” I asked.

“I don’t know. We might be better off to leave well enough alone.”

“We’ve come this far, Paddy, why don’t we have a look around?”

I got out of the car in the little parking lot and peered through the open door at the dimly lit premises. The television over the bar was on but there was no sound. Paddy came around the car and

stood behind me with a hand on my shoulder. I could feel it tighten as I stepped down into the bar.

Paddy stumbled in on top of me.

“Jesus,” he said. “I always forget about that bloody step. I don’t know how many times I’ve tripped on it and still, I always forget.”

“Be the hokey,” said the man behind the bar. “As I live and breathe, it’s Paddy Daly, back from the dead. Jesus, I never thought you’d darken the door again, Paddy.

Christ, but you’re a sight for sore eyes,” he laughed as he came around the bar with both hands extended in welcome. “Lookin’ well you are, too.”

I got a chair for Paddy as he was quite overcome with the welcome. Delighted but overcome, all the same. “This is Bud, the youngest of the Heffernan’s,” he said by way of introduction “and this is John Fitzgerald. I suppose you know his father. He came to see me and took me for a drive. He’s living back in town now.”

Bud, a barrel-chested man with a shaved head and wearing suspenders as well as a belt, was obviously thrilled to see Paddy. He turned to me without missing a beat.

“How are you, John” said Heffernan politely. “I know your father well. A decent man.”

“So everyone tells me.”

“Paddy you’ll have a small one in honour of the occasion. Of course, you will.”

Sparkling clean glasses were produced and a bottle of Paddy taken down from the shelf.

“No ice, Paddy, the way you always liked it.”

Paddy looked at me with a big grin.

“Thanks. I’m glad we came in. I didn’t think I’d ever see the inside of the Shebeen again.”

“Thank you, Mr. Heffernan,” I said. “Very decent of you.”

“Call me Bud,” he said. “Everyone else does. It’s not my given name but no matter, I’ve been answering to it for as long as I can remember. Whatever possessed them to call me Aloysius, I’ll never know.”

I whispered to Bud that Paddy might like to take a quick look at his home place. He scratched his head, looked at the floor and said it might not be such a good idea. “Can I have a word with you in private like, John?” Bud asked quietly.

“Paddy, I’ll be back in a minute. A man about a dog.”

“What’s going on,” I asked Bud out of earshot.

“Squatters,” was his one word answer. “They’re a curse. They’ve been living in the cottage for a few months now. There’s a light on every night. Two young non-nationals and we think they have a baby. She’s been seen out collecting firewood with a rickety old pram when he’s at work in the quarry. Casual labour, like. That sort of thing.”

“Do the Guards know about it?” I asked

“Oh, I’m sure they do, although they’re not inclined to do anything about it. At least they have a roof over their heads and they’re not causing trouble in town, going around begging and annoying people.”

“But what about poor Paddy?”

“What he doesn’t know won’t trouble him. If I were you I’d give the visit home a miss this time and we’ll see how it goes later on.”

“What time is it? John. John. We’ll have to be getting back. It’s nearly lunch-time.”

Back in the car, Paddy had a faraway look in his eyes. “Can we go round the long way and come into the town from the other side?” he asked.

“Of course, we can. It will only take a few extra minutes.”

“What did young Heffernan want?” he asked quietly.

“Oh, the usual. How’s my father keeping? How’s he coping since my mother died? How well you looked. That sort of thing.”

When I got back to the office, my father, was practically standing at the door waiting for me. He let on to be busy but I knew he was curious.

“Well,” he said, “how did it go with Paddy?”

“Grand,” I said. “Not very talkative, mind you, but he enjoyed the drive. We took a run out to the Glen and called in to the Shebeen. Bud Heffernan made him feel very welcome.”

“Did he talk about your poor mother? Many’s the dance the three of us went to together. She loved dancing, you know, your mother. He’d come home from England and with the long evenings we’d find something to do every day after work. You should ask him why he stopped coming home. He never said.”

“Well, he told me he stopped because no one wanted him. He came one time and not a sinner met him at the station. He said he went straight back and never came home again.”

“That’s a load of rubbish,” Da said, looking annoyed. “He was always made welcome and he’d always be welcome here, anyway. Your mother would turn in her grave if she heard that. She was very fond of him and spoke of him often. In fact, she wrote him the odd letter to keep him up to date.”

I headed off to my desk to make a start on my story, not knowing where to begin. I knew one thing, though, that I'd have to have a few more chats with Paddy before I'd be happy.

“Do you have any old photographs of the three of you from those days?” I asked my father across the office.

“They're around here somewhere. I was having a look at them only the other day.

There's a couple you might be interested in that were taken in the old Tower Ballroom. A few of the local characters that like to see their faces in the paper are in there too. You can't go wrong with the local angle.”

I could see it was up to me to find them and that was fair enough. I had to wonder, though, why he was looking through them himself. Maybe it was because I was going to talk to Paddy. Or maybe that's what gave him the idea that I should talk to Paddy.

The box was easily found. He hadn't exactly hidden it and I was smiling and laughing to myself in no time. This was a trip down memory lane for me too. The old familiar faces of people who were old when I was young. And they were still old. I'd see them on the street and it was like a flashback. It seems every week a different ShowBand came to the Tower Ballroom. They played all the hits of the day. Some specialized in Country and Western or Country and Irish as they call it. Most of the bands had a girl singer who tried to sound as if she was from Tennessee. I was too young to remember it but I used hear about it afterwards. Many of the black and white pictures had captions naming the smiling dancers in their skinny suits and ties and the girls with their hair up, apparently the fashion of the day. Sure enough there they were, the three of them together. My mother and Paddy all smiles and Da looking none too pleased. The date on the picture said 13 July 1964.

“Have you seen this one?” I asked him. But when I looked around he was gone. Must have slipped out to lunch.

The following morning over scrambled eggs, I asked if he knew how long my mother had been sick before she died suddenly, as the paper said.

“I don’t know,” was his answer, “but I think she knew herself for a while. I never said anything about it but she was a bit strange for the last few years. Wasn’t in her usual form. Kept to herself a lot.”

I let him go on, as it was unusual for him to talk this much, especially in the morning. I busied myself making toast.

“She had little routines that couldn’t be broken. Every Wednesday, the half-day in town, when I was putting the paper to bed and I’d be home late for my tea, she’d go to the Excel, to the matinee if it was raining, or take a walk in the Hills or down the Lake Road if it was nice out. Nothing could break her from that routine. She had to get out of the house, she said. Sometimes your brother would offer to bring the girls in from Limerick for a visit and she would insist it could be any day but Wednesday. And you know how much she loved those girls. Never dawned on me before, but now I think it was a bit odd. Maybe not. Maybe it’s me.”

“I’m going to pay Paddy another visit today. I’m going to bring my notebook and try to interview him about his life in England. Do you mind if I bring a few of those old photos to show him?”

“Not at all,” I’m sure he’ll be delighted to see them.”

“I particularly like the one of the three of you together taken at a dance.”

“Oh yes,” said Da.” I was looking at that. It was taken after the excursion to Tramore. You’d be too young to remember but it used be a day out for the whole town. A day at the sea-side. Packed trains would leave after first Mass on Sunday. The whole town would go, it seemed like. Anyway on that particular Sunday we had a big job here at work and I couldn’t get away. Paddy and your mother went off and had a great day and we all went to the Tower Ballroom that night when they got home. Your mother was in great form and I think I must have been a bit tired myself having worked all day. You can

tell from the photo that I wasn't too happy, I suppose. I have a bit of a puss on me. It's a pity, because it was the last dance we all went to together."

I picked up an English paper at The Rendezvous and headed up to see Paddy.

Mary answered the door, all smiles, and said:

"He'll be delighted you came. He has something to show you. Don't say anything. Let him surprise you."

Sure enough Paddy was all smiles, thanked me for the paper and said

"So you're going to interview me. That's a new one on me, young man."

"Not at all, Paddy. We're only having a chat and I'll take a few notes.

Tell me about London Airport," I continued. "What kind of place was it to work in?"

"It was a great spot if you were in with the right crowd and I have to say I was the lucky one. A nicer bunch of fellows you couldn't meet anywhere. We even had our own Gaelic football team. Played regularly and always a few pints after the game."

"But what about the work, Paddy."

"Work is work," he said. "You make the best of it. It was serious stuff but you couldn't bring it home with you. Sure, you know yourself. Weren't you doing the same thing at Shannon? Weight and Balance, trimming the aircraft, making sure it got off the ground all right."

"How in the name of God do you know what I was doing at Shannon?"

“Didn’t your mother write to me when you applied for the job. She was so worried about that you mightn’t get it. She was afraid if you didn’t you’d head off to England or worse still, America. So, I knew a few people, the right people, kept my name out of it and sure enough you got lucky.”

“Paddy, I can’t believe this. You had been in touch with my mother all along.”

“That has to stay our little secret, John. Don’t breathe a word of this to anyone. She thought your father would be vexed and he was always very busy, anyway. She was very good to me. When she heard about my trouble in the Glen, she came to see me here once a week, usually on a Wednesday, like clockwork. She’d call in to Helen Kennedy, in the shop, get me the Daily Mail and a bar of chocolate or a packet of crisps and spend an hour or two here in the conservatory. As you know I was heartbroken when she died.”

I was trying to decide what to write. I had written down what he said about work, as I thought it interesting, even profound. Anyone who worked Weight and Balance at an airline knew how serious the work was, but you had to shake it off. He was quite right about that. Having the responsibility for hundreds of lives in your hands even for a short time was big stuff. But Paddy being in contact with my mother all those years was even bigger.

“Paddy,” I said, “I have something to show you,” reaching for the photo I had found the previous day.

“And I have something to show you,” he said, holding out the exact same photo. But, and it’s a big but, with only himself and my mother in the framed picture. No sign of my father. He had been cut out.

“Your mother gave me this on one of her last visits here. I think she knew she was dying then. She said it reminded her of the happiest time in her life.”

I went to see him as often as I could get away and he seemed to look forward to the visits. Any bit of blue sky and he'd ask to go for a little drive – a spin he called it – but never by the house in the Glen. I think he didn't want to be tempted. He liked to drive up the Coach Road – a throwback to Bianconi's time – and look down the length of the Glen. That way he could take it all in, without seeing the house, which was well sheltered by the trees. I found myself checking in every now and again with Bud Heffernan to see if there was any news with the squatters. I'd come to the door and he'd shake his head. That's all it took. Paddy seemed more settled, probably because he had a regular visitor and I was able to do a few nice pieces on his life in England. He said he liked reading them, as they seemed to be about someone else and not him. Someone he knew, mind you and not too personal. The story I liked best was about Christine Johnston. Before he told me he made me promise not to publish it until he was dead and gone.

One day he said: "I don't think I have too long left. The doctor is a bit worried about my ticker and I can feel the old bones beginning to freeze up. He wants me to take some tablets, but I'm not a bit keen. Never was."

"Paddy, you'll have to look after yourself and do what he tells you. What will I do for stories when you're gone?"

"You'll do fine," he laughed. It's time you took a look around and found a real job instead of hanging around here. Is your father not tired of you yet?"

"Never mind that. It's time you told me about Christine Johnson," I asked taking out my notebook.

Nothing.

One day I ran into Mary from the Nursing Home on the Main Street.

“Your friend, Paddy, isn’t so well,” she said quietly. “Picked up a bit of a chill and can’t seem to shake it. It has put him off his food and the Doctor has been in to see him a few times. He might welcome a visit from you.”

“Thanks for telling me, Mary. I’ll be up to see him in the next few days.”

So I dropped by Helen Kennedy’s shop for the paper and a bar of chocolate. He liked Cadbury’s Fruit and Nut and Helen had to go into the back to get a new box.

“How’s Paddy doing?” she asked as she opened it. “I hear he’s not well, poor man.”

“So Mary told me. I’m on my way up to see him now.”

I must admit I was a bit apprehensive ringing the bell, but Mary let me in no problem.

“He’s in his room and hasn’t touched his breakfast. I don’t know what I’ll do with him. See if you can talk some sense into him. Try to cheer him up for God’s sake.”

I was shocked, I must admit, when I saw him. His face was thinner than ever, he seemed to be even balder than before and his eyes were dull, even glazed over a bit.

“Paddy,” I said, “how’s she cuttin’?”

All I got back was a little wave of a thin white hand sticking out of the sleeve of his striped pyjamas.

“I’m not well at all, Sean. I think I might be on the way out.”

“Oh come on, Paddy. Don’t talk like that.”

“What did the Doctor say?”

“He’s inclined to agree with me. He said I’m losing weight and if I don’t eat a bit and get some exercise, there’s not much he can do for me.”

“I don’t believe he said that at all, Paddy. You’re having me on.”

“You can ask Mary. She has my heart broken, hounding me morning, noon and night. Eat this, eat that. You must eat it. It’s good for you. It’ll put hair on your chest. I’m telling you one of these days I’ll throw something at her and then we’ll see.”

“Well, I can see you haven’t lost your spirit, Paddy. Listen, some of us have work to do and can’t lie around here all day waiting for visitors. I’ll call up to see you this day week. Tell Mary to make sure you’re dressed and we might go out for a little spin. We might even drop into Heffernan’s for a sandwich. Would you be up for that?”

“Indeed I would. It’ll be something to look forward to.”

GRAINNE

Grainne and I were crazy about each other but it had to end somehow, I suppose. We were spending less and less time at home and when the airline offered a severance package to cope with the falling passenger numbers since 9/11, I began to have serious thoughts about trying something else. I had

no idea what I wanted to do but that didn't stop me. One night after a few pints with the lads, I brought up the subject when I got home. Grainne went ballistic.

“If you think you're going to walk away from a good pensionable job, you have another think coming,” she yelled. “Are you drunk or something?”

“I might have a few drinks taken, all right,” I said “but I know what I'm talking about. This is a chance to get forty or fifty thousand Euro into my hands and invest it in something worthwhile. It's the only chance I'll ever get.”

“Invest it?” she shouted, “you wouldn't know an investment if it bit you in the arse. You do this and I'm telling you, you're out of here. I've had enough of your shit. It was fun while it lasted but it's not going to go on any longer. This is the last straw.”

“You can say what you like,” I said “but I'm giving this serious thought.”

“That'll be a first,” she shot back. “I'm off to bed.”

She had changed over the years. God, I remember how much I fancied her in the early days. I'm not sure it was ever love, but it was just as good, as far as I was concerned. When I first met her all she wanted was a few laughs and a good time. She worked at the Information Desk at the airport and everyone knew her and thought she was great fun. And she was. The customers always left the desk with a laugh and their questions answered. She was very good at helping out during delays and disruptions and would know as much as the airline employees about what was going on and more importantly, what was likely to be the outcome.

We knew each other to say hello to and would end up next to each other now and again when a crowd of us would go to Durty Nelly's for a few jars after work. One year a few of us rented a mini-van and went to the Irish Open in Killarney. She knew nothing about golf but all the sponsors seemed to know her. She was invited into every Hospitality Suite and told to bring her friends. To top it all, she

was the lucky winner of a raffle for a trip for two to Spain. The Costa del Sol, if you don't mind. She was so excited. Not working for an airline, she had never been and everyone else had, as far as she was concerned. I was standing beside her when her name was called out and without hesitation, she turned and laughed and said: "Will you come with me?"

"Go on up yourself and collect your prize," I said.

"No," she laughed. "Will you come to Spain with me?"

She was gone like a flash, appeared on the stage, giggling and laughing, said something about how this win might change her life and she had to be helped down she was so excited. She made a beeline straight for me.

"Well?" she said. "What's your answer? Are you coming with me or what?"

"What?" I said, "I don't know. Don't you think we should have a drink or a bite to eat first and talk it over?"

"Oh come on! I thought you had a wild streak in you. It would be fun. We'd have a laugh. I've always fancied you, but you knew that, didn't you?"

"Look" she went on, "don't make a big deal out of it. I really don't want to go with a girlfriend. It would be such a waste. We could have a great time, see how we get on together and no one would be the wiser. If it doesn't work out we'll get over it."

I was flabbergasted, to put it mildly. Here was a very attractive girl practically throwing herself at me and I was screwing around feeling awkward.

"There's nothing I'd like better," I heard myself say.

She threw her arms around me and said: "Brilliant!"

Grainne handled all the arrangements through the sponsor. We flew to Barcelona, with its glass airport terminals, took in a game at Camp Nou (what a stadium!) “to shut me up” she said. We wandered up and down Los Ramblas, I had my pocket picked in broad daylight on an escalator and took the train to Valencia. As we settled into our train seats she snuggled up against me and said, “now the holiday really starts.” The train ride was beautiful with mountains – Sierras - to our right and the Mediterranean to our left. We were surprised to see films being shown on screens mounted above the seats on the luggage racks. Made sense though and free, what’s more.

“You’re going to love this hotel in Valencia,” she whispered. “No more single beds. We have a suite with a balcony overlooking the ocean. The hotel has it’s own private beach with a bar on the lower level in the pool.”

In true Irish fashion she and I hadn’t even discussed the likelihood of sharing a bed. In Barcelona, after the trip, it wasn’t an issue as the room came with twin beds.

Now it would be different. Wide awake, rested and excited. I wondered how we’d handle it. The hotel greeted us as Senor and Senora Fitzgerald, the prizewinners. She just grinned when I said I was the lucky one. I could feel her squeeze my arm as we waited for the lift. The young boy who carried our bags just grinned. He spoke no English and that was fine with us. He knew to wait for a tip, though.

“Gracias,” he said and his smile got even wider.

We went into town that evening and saw the bullring in the middle of the city directly across the street from the new Marks and Spencer, the British store. We laughed at that, I can tell you. We found narrow pedestrianized streets, teeming with people, tables and chairs everywhere, and everyone talking a mile a minute. We had never heard such chattering. We thought Limerick people were bad. They weren’t a patch on the Spanish. Could they ever talk.

When we got back to the hotel Grainne said she was going to have a shower before going to bed. I lay on the bed waiting for her and before I knew it, I had dozed off. At the first sign of light, she leaned over and kissed me. She was wearing a tee shirt she had bought in town with a raging bull on the front. I excused myself and headed for the bathroom to brush my teeth. When I got back the tee shirt was on the floor and she was under the duvet. I hesitated, briefly, before I got into the bed.

“Are you waiting for an invitation?” she asked cheekily, “and please don’t tell me you’re a virgin. I’d be very disappointed.”

“Not exactly,” I muttered “but I’ve never been this sober with a girl before.”

We were gentle and careful with each other. She obviously enjoyed sex and this helped me. Up to now I always felt I was forcing myself on a girl. I’m sure that was my problem but it was the impression I had. Why do they bother if they’re not enjoying it? This was different. We went from the bedroom to the pool and back for the next few days. We saw very little of Valencia apart from joining a group for the bull fights. We ran into a hen party from Manchester and couldn’t wait to get away. We didn’t need anyone else. We had each other and it was more than enough. We laughed most of the time, or so it seemed. The Mancunians wore sky-blue tee shirts and all they wanted to do was talk about their team, City. At one stage, one of the girls followed Grainne into the ladies room and told her that she thought we were a cute couple and wondered if we were up for a threesome. Maybe it was the wine talking. Grainne could hardly keep a straight face when she told me and when I said it was a pity they supported the wrong Manchester team, she let on to hit me.

We weren’t home a wet week when we moved in together. We rented a small house at first and then bought it cheaply before the housing market took off. One of the few good decisions we made, I’d say. She’d say it too, I suppose.

Hard to believe now it’s the same Grainne, years later, yelling at me and telling me to piss off. The standoff went on for weeks. I even spoke to Gerry, the brother, on the q.t. He advised me to have

sense and put it out of my head. He wanted to know who was behind this foolish idea. Did I owe somebody money and what the fuck was I thinking? His business was fine and no, he wasn't looking for drivers. I think he slammed his phone shut. I know I did.

Anyway, like lots of things in life, the decision was made for me. Some time later Grainne told me that I had pushed her over the edge, that I would never change and she was now seriously making plans.

"I've been talking to the girls at work and a few of them are thinking about it, too. They're all sick and tired of their stupid husbands and partners and their carry-on. They don't know how I have put up with you for so long. There are nice, affordable condos being built out towards the airport and I'd prefer to get out of this house of ours anyway. You've never done a thing to improve it. I think we should give it a try. It might be good for both of us. We can sell the house and split it between us. You can take your money and do what you like but I know I'm keeping my job."

"That's it? I can do what I like? You can tell your stupid friends they got their wish and good luck with getting a divorce in Holy Ireland. It might be legal but we'll see how long it takes."

In the heel of the hunt Grainne and I hated each other's guts.

SEAN & PADDY

The morning after Betty's death Sean heard from his younger son, Gerry, while he was having his tea and toast. That was all he could face. Gerry lived near Limerick, only twenty-five miles away but it might as well be a different planet. He was a very successful businessman and a widower who still played golf to a single figure handicap.

"Dad, I don't know what to say. I miss her already."

"So do I Gerry. I don't know how I'll go on without her. She was a great woman. Everyone loved her and why wouldn't they?"

"As soon as I can get away today, I'll be in to see you. I might bring the girls just for the spin. I haven't told them their Gran has died yet, as I don't want to upset them before they head off to school."

"OK, son. Thanks for calling and I'll see you later."

Sean opened the Irish Independent, which had been dropped through the letter-box at about seven o'clock. Out of habit he immediately went to the death notices and realized it was another thing he'd have to take care of today. First he'd have to call the undertaker, Toby O'Brien, who'd handle the announcement, the Church and burial arrangements. He had nothing to worry about there, as it would all be done routinely and without fuss. Easy enough in a small town. Few enough choices.

He stood in the kitchen looking out at the untidy back yard, with his cup of tea in his hand and thought about his promise to visit Paddy Daly. It was nice of him to call when he heard the news, even if it was a bit late but he wondered if he'd have the heart to say to Paddy what needed to be said. Whoever said no time like the present knew what he was talking about. Like taking off an elastoplast, or band-aid as they're called now, only one way to do it. Quickly. And sooner rather than later

Sure enough a few weeks later, he decided to drive up to the Nursing Home, even though it was only a short walk away and avoid being stopped on the street, as the whole town would want to offer their condolences. Mary answered the door, he knew her to see and he found Paddy sitting in the sun-room, with a cup of tea beside him, waiting for him. He looked very tired and maybe even agitated.

“Sean, thanks for coming,” he said “I’m sorry for your troubles.”

“Thanks, Paddy. I’m sorry it has taken me so long. As you can well imagine I’ve been very busy. You look a bit tired. Are you not sleeping?”

“Devil a wink,” smiled Paddy. “Will you have a cup of tea? Mary, bring Mr. Fitzgerald here a nice cup of tea,” he said without waiting for an answer.

“This is a fine place, I must say,” said Sean looking around. “I’ve never been in here before. It’s the old Parish Priest’s house, isn’t it? A fine building. Nice and airy. So you’re telling me this is where Betty used spend her Wednesdays when I thought she was at the pictures.”

“Aye,” Paddy said quietly. “She hardly ever missed a visit. She always had a bit of news from the town. She told me about young John and poor Gerry’s wife dying and leaving him with two young girls. He’s a lucky man to have his mother-in-law available like that to help with the girls. Otherwise, I suppose, he’d never be able to run his business and make it the success he has.”

“Is that all ye talked about?” asked Sean feeling a bit uncomfortable talking about his wife of more than forty years. “You could have knocked me with a feather when you told me about the visits. I suppose she had been writing to you while you were in England, too.”

“She’d send the occasional letter. Not too many, mind you, but enough to keep me going. I thought I’d see more of the two of you when I moved back to the Glen, but it didn’t work out that way. She never said.”

“Look Paddy, I could never figure why you took off the way you did all those years ago. You never even came to the wedding and I know you were invited. We were both disappointed. Betty was very upset but said she understood with your new life in England and all that. What happened Paddy? Was it something we did? Was it something I said? We were all such good friends.”

“I thought down through the years that Betty would have said something to you. Are you telling me she never said anything? Never talked about the day in Tramore. Nothing?”

“True as God, Paddy, she never said a word. I often wondered about that day and regretted ever since having to work while you two were off enjoying yourselves. Betty was never the same afterwards. Straight away she was talking about getting married and settling down. You were barely on the boat to England when she started talking about it. I was puzzled at the time but delighted to hear she had picked me over you. I always thought she liked you more than me, but I was never sure. And, of course, I’d never ask her. Wouldn’t do at all.”

“I’m asking you again, Sean, are you telling me she never said anything about that day and what happened?” Paddy looked puzzled and Sean decided that he hardly believed him.

“You’ll have to believe me, Paddy. As true as God, she never told me anything about Tramore.”

“Well, I suppose I’ll have to tell you, so. It’s only fair but have you ever noticed how like me young John is? He’s thin and wiry with a receding hairline. He’s not a bit athletic like his brother Gerry. Betty wrote and told me she was expecting a baby and you were getting married. She wondered if it might be mine after the day in Tramore. I’m sure you’ll hate me and never talk to me again, but it was a long time ago, Sean and we were all young and foolish. I was mad about Betty but knew I’d never have her. No, no, don’t try to stop me now.”

He stood up and walked slowly towards the window as if he was trying to see something. He pulled out his handkerchief and blew his nose loudly.

“ Listen to what I have to say Sean, please. She wanted the stability you could give her, a respectable home and you had the family business waiting for you. I’ve spent my whole life regretting and wondering and always hoping I’d find some peace here at home after all these years. When Betty called to see me she’d bring photos of young John. She was very upset when he told her he wasn’t happily married. I suppose you knew that.”

“I can’t believe my ears, Paddy Daly. I’ve been a fool and more than likely living a lie all this time. No, my wife never told me,” he almost shouted. “Why the fuck would she? She had everything to lose when you pissed off to England with your tail between your legs. Jesus Christ, my wife has died and now I have to listen to this load of shite.

I need some air. I came here to ask you a few questions, mend a few fences and now I don’t know what to think. Look I’ll see you again when I’ve calmed down. I have to get out of here. Good-bye.”

Sean shut the front door firmly behind him and sat into the car. It didn’t even occur to him to put the key in the ignition. He just sat there staring at the street in front of him and St. Michael’s Church a few doors down. Was he the last to know? Did everyone else, the whole town, know and were they sniggering behind his back? Was it any of their business? Fuck ‘em. Betty and he had a good life and just because spineless people hadn’t the nerve to confront him, what difference did it make? No, he decided. People didn’t actually care anymore. Times have changed. It wasn’t important. It was their life and their private business. John had been a good son and so what if Betty loved him more than Gerry. He felt the same way about Gerry. What harm did it do? He’d have to get this out of his mind. He had an image in the town to uphold. Paddy Daly could go and shite. Fuck him and the horse he rode in on.

As he pulled up outside the house young John was going in the front door. He had never noticed it before but he’s the image of Paddy.

CHARMING

Sean knew he couldn't put it off for another day. He simply had to talk to John's wife, Grainne. He had to find out what went wrong. Try as he might he couldn't get a word out of young John. From the day he arrived at the door looking for a place to stay, he would talk about anything except Grainne. Sean tried every which way to provoke him but John never rose to the bait. Even when Sean asked him about the "sham-wedding" as he called it, he wouldn't say anything more than:

"That's your opinion, Dad. Thousands wouldn't agree with you and certainly no one under the age of forty would"

"For Christ's sake," Sean went on, "no one around here ever heard of the Dublin Registry Office."

"Maybe if you hung out with real people besides old farts and men of the cloth you'd hear about it. It was featured recently on "Capital D."

"Capital D" my arse. A programme for Jackeens about Jackeens. Nothing to do with us in the real Ireland."

"I'm surprised at your narrow-mindedness, Dad. Shocked, in fact."

Shortly afterwards when John slammed the hall door behind him, Sean realized the conversation wasn't going any further. It was time to make the call. He'd have to be calm. He'd make himself a cup of tea. That would help.

Grainne answered the phone in a sleepy voice.

“Who’s this?”

“Grainne? It’s Sean Fitzgerald.”

Silence.

“John’s father.”

“Yes, sir. I know who you are. Can I help you?”

“I was hoping we could chat.”

Silence. Sean turned to the cooker and lit the gas under the kettle.

“Chat! Chat? After all this time you want to chat with me. Do you even know my second name? I don’t suppose you do. Jesus! You have some nerve.”

“Grainne, I know we’ve had our differences.”

“Differences. Is that what you call them? I suppose you’re calling to ask me to take your lousy son back. Well not a chance. You’re stuck with him now.”

“Grainne, that’s not why I called and there’s no need to be so difficult and insulting.”

“You think I’m insulting? I’ll tell you what’s insulting. That shit of a son of yours is insulting. He pissed off and left me high and dry after getting a golden handshake. That’s insulting, if you must know. Thank God there are no kids involved. I suppose I should thank him for that. Not that he was that interested.”

Sean didn’t know what to say. The kettle began to whistle.

“I was hoping…” he trailed off.

“No. Let me tell you what I was hoping, Mr. Fitz. I was hoping he’d end up in a ditch somewhere and we’d all be rid of him. That’s what I was hoping.”

“I was going to say... I was hoping you and I could meet. I didn’t see you at his mother’s funeral and wondered if he had told you that she had died.”

“Oh he told me all right, the night before the funeral. Probably hoping I wouldn’t come. But I did. I felt I should as she never did me any harm. I stayed at the back. I didn’t want to embarrass anyone. No one noticed me and I was fine with that. No. I’m not at all sure meeting you would be such a good idea, sir. No disrespect but I wouldn’t feel comfortable coming all the way into town to be given the once over by the locals. I was glad to get away from small town life and move to a place like Limerick. No one stares at you here and you can do what you like.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way, Grainne. I think John is very unhappy and I was hoping to get to the bottom of it.”

He was standing with the kettle in his hand and put some boiling water in the tea-pot to heat it.

“Well he was already unhappy when he met me, sir. I can tell you that. I thought I could cheer him up, but he wasn’t having any of it. The lads and the races and free flights were all he wanted. Stay on the move was his mantra. When he took the golden handshake he said he was going to use it to get as far away from here as possible. How far did he go? Twenty-five bloody miles. That’s how far. What does that tell you about him, Mr. Fitz?”

Sean emptied the water in the sink, put in two tea bags in the pot and filled it.

“Do you have any idea why he’s so unhappy? He seemed happy enough as a youngster. But then he couldn’t wait to get away from here and was delighted to get the job at Shannon. We saw very little of him after that. Since his poor mother died I’ve been thinking about it. I suppose living here under the same roof with him brought it home to me.”

“I’ll tell you what, Mr. Fitzgerald, I’m not very interested in opening old sores. I’m trying to live my life as best I can and would prefer not to get involved in your family matters. I was never included or made welcome by either John or you. You should leave me alone, Mr. Fitzgerald and you and your son should get on with your lives. Good night.”

He heard a click on his line. Charming. She’d hung up. The little bitch. The cheek of her.

Sean poured the tea, rooted in the cupboard for a biscuit and went in to watch the nine o’clock news. He couldn’t help thinking young John is well rid of her.

CARMEL

Since she announced she would be taking a leave of absence Carmel Doyle had had very few visitors. Everyone at work regarded her as a very private person. Not to put too fine a point on it, she kept to herself. She felt it made her job easier by not being thought of as having friends and possibly treating some differently from others. Being Principal in an all-girls school (run by the nuns) was difficult and fast becoming unbearable. She was the point man (woman) for all dealings with the dreaded Department of Education. She handled the rules and regulations, all serious disciplinary matters both with teachers and students and her instructions were to keep such problems away from the Mother Abbess. Just like a regular company, Carmel thought.

In Carmel’s absence, Anne Marie Collins, her secretary cum personal assistant, would handle the administrative side of her job and a senior teacher would be assigned a certain number of free periods for

the more difficult situations and departmental affairs. And, of course, Carmel would be readily contactable, at least for the time being. The nuns, in their wisdom, saw no need for the added expense of a Vice Principal.

Carmel knew the Mother Abbess was taking a very dim view of her time off, even though it was unpaid and in fact, the school would benefit monetarily. That said, Carmel felt her health would break down completely if she didn't take a break. She had missed so many days in the past two years from flu and strep throat, that she was becoming seriously concerned about her physical, never mind her mental, wellbeing.

She wondered how Anne Marie would cope. She was fine with the day-to-day stuff and had quite a good relationship with the other teachers. So much so, that they seldom saw the need to involve Carmel to resolve problems. And Carmel made sure she complimented Anne Marie on a regular basis and had no hesitation about giving her an hour or two off whenever she needed time. She wondered, however, how Anne Marie would handle the pressure of not having Carmel around to back her up. Carmel had heard around the school that Anne Marie considered her a great boss. We're all great, she thought, as long as we do our jobs.

The school, on the South side of Dublin, not far from the Grand Canal, would re-open at the end of August and while Carmel had had some of June as well as July to herself, she knew there was a lot of work to be done before the opening Monday. Now they'll see what's involved, Carmel thought and braced herself for the onslaught of phone-calls during the last few weeks. However, only Anne Marie called and she seemed very calm, friendly and chatty. What would Carmel do about this? What would the Mother Abbess think about that? Some of the parents had been on the phone about the new footwear regulations. The nuns, especially, had become very concerned that some of the girls were wearing inappropriate shoe styles. More suitable for nightclubs than school, was how they put it. High heeled ankle boots and platforms were the main culprits it seemed. With pants they were fine but did not look so

well with the uniform skirts. So why can't we have uniform pants? It's the twenty first century, after all. Carmel was glad she wouldn't be involved in that decision.

Anne Marie, who had always called her "Miss Doyle" at work, now called her "Carmel." Carmel this and Carmel that. Carmel wasn't sure she liked it -- a bit too friendly for her liking. Then she received a saccharine get-well card, telling her how important she was and to feel better and hurry back. So when Anne Marie arrived unannounced outside her building one sunny Saturday in her Mini Cooper, Carmel was surprised more than shocked. She was sunning herself on her balcony, in a colourful sundress she had picked up in Spain, when she heard the high-pitched beep of the horn and saw Anne Marie waving up at her. She looked like a teenager with her hair in a ponytail, a striped tee shirt, white Bermudas and flip-flops. Carmel slipped a grey sweatshirt over her bare shoulders on her way to buzz her in. She was very proud of her body, walked and exercised regularly and had no problem showing it off when in Spain. At home in Dublin was different, though. And decorum was called for when dealing with workmates, especially underlings, even on a Saturday in Summer. That's how she was.

Anne Marie was carrying what looked like a picnic basket and gushingly told Carmel, when she met her at the door, that she had brought lunch and maybe they could eat on the balcony, it was such a lovely day. Carmel was quite taken aback but decided Anne Marie would be disappointed if she didn't make her welcome after all the trouble she'd gone to. So she gave her a big hug hello and said she'd be delighted. She went into the kitchen to get plates and put on the kettle while Anne Marie set up on the little table on the balcony.

"What a nice place you have here, Carmel. Been here long?"

"Too long, I'm afraid. I should have gone for something fancier and roomier before the boom. But it's very convenient."

"Where do you live, Anne Marie?"

“Oh, at home with my parents, over on the North Side near Croke Park. I can’t afford my own place, yet. Maybe one day. It’s nice though and they leave me to myself. Well, apart from nagging me about my degree. I still have a few credits to do at DCU.”

“You should finish, you know. It will look good on your C.V. Not that it’s any of my business. I’m not your mother.”

“I bought the sandwiches at O’Brien’s on the way over,” Anne Marie said opening the basket and changing the subject. “They’re nice and fresh and I know we both like turkey and ham on brown bread with a little bit of mayo.”

“Will you have a glass of wine with that?” Carmel asked.

“No., thank you I’m fine with tea or coffee. A bit early in the day for me.”

The sun seemed to get warmer as the afternoon went on. Carmel had decided it was indeed a nice surprise and Anne Marie was a welcome guest after all.

“Have you ever been married, Carmel?” she asked suddenly.

“Never got round to it. Never even came close. I suppose I was too interested in my work.”

“Never anyone, even in college?”

“Well, I must admit, there was a young man in Galway, from my own place at home. We were friends, you know, but when he graduated he was snapped up by an American firm and whisked off to California. He wanted me to come with him, but I just couldn’t bring myself to go. San Diego, I think. I read somewhere it has the best climate in all of the States. No doubt he has a blonde wife and blonde kids, by now. I think of him now and again, usually when I hear the Beach Boys on the radio. It just wasn’t for me.”

“Oh Carmel, I’m sure you’d have loved it. Mind you, I couldn’t see myself heading off either. Dublin is good enough for me.”

Anne Marie passed behind her on the way to the bathroom and put her hand on Carmel’s bare shoulder.

“You’ve got lovely skin, Carmel,” she said. “You must like the sun.”

Carmel smiled, pulled the sweatshirt back up on her shoulders as she stood up to clear the last of their things into the kitchen. She was closing Anne Marie’s picnic basket when she saw her come out of the bathroom or was it the bedroom? She noticed the door was open. Maybe she was just having a look around.

“I was just admiring your bedroom, Carmel. I like Laura Ashley, also. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Not at all. It’s time to call it a day, though, Anne Marie. It was delightful and a lovely surprise.”

Anne Marie looked a bit disappointed but collected her basket, leaned over to kiss her on the cheek but found Carmel’s hand extended. She took it and smiled.

As she got into her car, Anne Marie looked up to the balcony to wave, but Carmel must have been inside, in the kitchen, more than likely.

When she didn’t hear from Anne Marie by the middle of the following week, Carmel sent her a nice card thanking her for her thoughtfulness. Anne Marie called on Friday, told her she received her card and that she had been very busy in the office that week. Carmel thought she was a bit distant, but said nothing.

Shortly afterwards a series of cards with handwritten notes from Anne Marie began to arrive. Plaintive was the only way Carmel could describe them. She began to dread the sound of the letter-box in the morning. Anne Marie missed her at work. She couldn't stop thinking about their lovely lunch together. Would she come to the Abbey some night to see some American actress in a revival of an O'Neill play? When was she planning to go to Spain again and could Anne Marie come with her? They would have such fun. By now Carmel was concerned that Anne Marie was reading something into a working and very casual relationship that wasn't there. This poor girl was a lost soul, she thought.

Next came a phone call from the office of the Mother Abbess. Would she please come and see her at six o'clock tomorrow? It was a matter of urgency. Not during school or office hours as it would be better if she wasn't seen at the school. Carmel thought this very odd, but felt she had little or no choice. She said she'd be there.

The following day was so nice she decided to walk to the school. A young nun opened the convent door, ushered her into what was called the parlour and left her sitting there. She heard the quick steps and the flapping of the habits in the corridor before Mother Abbess and another nun came in, nodded in her direction and sat at the head of the well-polished mahogany table.

"Miss Doyle," the Mother Abbess said. "We have a problem and it's a very awkward matter. I hope you won't make it more difficult than is necessary."

Carmel was surprised to hear herself addressed as Miss Doyle. The Mother Abbess always called her Carmel in private. Maybe it was because the other nun, a stranger, was there.

"This is Sister Philomena," the Abbess said pointing to the other nun. "She's from the Mother House and advises the various convents on legal matters. She has read the documentation."

"Documentation?" Carmel asked. "What documentation? What is this about?"

“I see you’re going to be difficult or is it obtuse, Miss Doyle. I think you know exactly what I’m talking about.”

“I have no idea,” Carmel protested. “Please tell me what I’ve done wrong or show me. Something. Anything.”

“This refers to an inappropriate relationship between you and an innocent co-worker. As a nun I find it very distasteful to even acknowledge it. Anne Marie Collins has complained in writing that you invited her to your residence and made advances -- inappropriate, is the only word I can bring myself to say. Miss Collins is a daily Communicant, has talked to me privately about possibly becoming a nun and is so distraught that she is now undergoing counselling. She comes from a good family and is very concerned that because she didn’t respond to your advances, she may be in danger of losing her job. To put it bluntly, Miss Doyle, I am shocked. I thought I knew you to be a God-fearing person. And I never imagined such a thing happening in our school. Thanks be to God it wasn’t one of our young girls you interfered with or we’d be all over the news.”

Carmel was stunned. Where did this come from? She had done absolutely nothing. She remembered clearly that Anne Marie had touched her shoulder and admired her tan. How could this be happening to her?

“Do you have anything to say for yourself?” Mother Abbess asked fixing her with a steady cold gaze.

“I have plenty to say for myself,” Carmel started. The other nun, Philomena, had a notebook and a pen ready to take notes.

“First of all, you have a short memory Mother Abbess. When the school was featured on television, thanks to my connections and efforts, you were very happy to bask in the plaudits. When the Department of Education had visitors from overseas wishing to study our methods, you had no hesitation

in welcoming them and putting me at their disposal. Now, without even contacting me, you believe a scurrilous story blackening my good name. Number one, it's not true. I have an unsullied record in all my years in education and I am deeply disappointed that you believe what you hear without checking with me first. This will not end here, I can assure you. I will be consulting my solicitor and you will hear from him. Good day to you, Mother Abbess."

Carmel stood up from the table, pushing back her chair, swung the parlour door open and left it so as she headed for the front door. She could hear her footsteps clicking on the parquet flooring and slammed the front door of the convent behind her. She imagined it echoed all through the house.

She was trembling with rage. Her first thought was to call that little bitch Anne Marie and ask her what the hell she was playing at. But that would be hasty and she'd probably regret it. She'd go for a walk along the Canal and allow herself to think clearly. She didn't have a solicitor, but knew it would be easy enough to find one, especially one who would be interested in the publicity. The Catholic Church already had a black eye with the Irish public and another story, especially one that smacked of lesbianism, would be too much to bear. The media would have a field day. She stopped in a cafe in Rathmines for a bite to eat and by the time she got home, she felt calmer. She decided she would do nothing for now and wait and see if she'd hear from the Mother Abbess.

She eventually received a solicitor's letter outlining the terms of the settlement. She was surprised at the amount – the equivalent of a couple of year's salary – and the acceptance form demanding confidentiality. That worked both ways she reasoned. She contacted her only brother, an accountant in Galway, told him what had happened and asked for his advice. She told him she was on a contract that was due to expire in two years anyway and the chances were that the Mother Abbess would refuse to renew it.

He agreed she would be as well off to take the offer, what with her health and Ireland being such a small place, if it got into the papers she'd have difficulty getting another job. Soon afterwards she heard Anne Marie was no longer employed by the school. Ireland, indeed, is a small place. Dublin is even smaller.

This all seemed so long ago and yet only a few months had passed. Despite the recession, she had no problem selling her flat. She hadn't paid a high price for it so she made a tidy profit. Here she was in a cozy cottage down the country, where no one knew her, living comfortably, thanks to her brother, on her savings and investments. Much cheaper than Dublin. She loved the town and people left her to herself. She liked that. Always had. She had her little part-time job in the hotel that got her out of the house a few days a week. She had even made a few friends in Sean Fitzgerald and Bob.

Once a week or so Carmel went for a good walk. She literally walked around the town. Down by the Lake Road, up Fr. Matthew Street, out the Bansha Road, a right under the railway bridge, up by the Hospital and the old Sports Field and back into town by the Galbally Road. She estimated it was a good four miles and usually took her a couple of hours or close to it. Not only was it good for her body but she used the walk to get some thinking done.

Today she was trying to imagine how she'd tell Bob about her experience with the nuns. She liked him and wanted to tell him herself before he heard it from someone else.

BROTHER BOB

John Fitzgerald thought his father's friend, Brother O'Brien, would be an ideal subject for an interview. Certainly, being a Christian Brother, he qualified as an interesting character around the town and had taught in the school for what seemed like forever. Everyone seemed to nod and smile as he passed by on the street and, while most of his students had to leave the town to better themselves and further their education, those who stayed behind hadn't a bad word to say about him. A friendly wave never did anyone any harm, he was fond of saying. When Sean asked him if he would be willing to talk about his life, Bob, as he liked to be called, jumped at the opportunity.

"It's not often we get the chance to talk about it," he said. "The life, I mean."

Young John didn't know what to expect and arranged to meet Bob in the Monastery grounds. Must be the quietest place in town, he thought, as they had the garden to themselves on a nice sunny September afternoon. Bob was wearing his black soutane and smoking a cigarette as usual. The fingers on his right hand were a light brown, like smoky bacon. John thought he could detect some yellow in the front of Bob's silver hair. The garden looked particularly well kept with more plants and shrubs than flowers. Even some vegetables thrived in one shaded corner. Obviously, some of the brothers were keen gardeners and saw it as a nice past-time.

"So you're a smoker?" John asked casually.

"I've tried to quit so many times but it never takes," he laughed. "A while back I was off them for two years and the day I went back I smoked forty."

After more small talk about the weather, the town, and the school – John went there but before Bob's time - he asked him if the place reminded him of his home town. That got him talking.

"I'll tell you a good one," he said. "It does, but only because I could hear the trains in both places. I have always had a soft spot for trains, songs about trains, that kind of thing. You've set me off now, John."

“That’s what I was hoping to do. Off you go.”

“One particular train journey stands out in my life. I remember it well. I was about fifteen at the time and left home to join the Brothers. Apparently, I had what was called a vocation, it later turned out to be what was called a mother’s vocation, but that’s another story for another time. How was I to know? As I said, I was only fifteen. I remember it as clear as a bell. I wore my new black suit and shoes and socks, a white shirt and black tie and to this day can see the look on my mother’s face as she proudly walked with me to the station. I can’t speak for my father’s expression, as he said he had to work. No last man to man chat by the fire or quiet walk in the country for us. I found out later he wasn’t a bit pleased that he had lost the battle for his only son to the Church. One of many lost battles, I imagine.

At the station I hoisted my suitcase onto the overhead rack and I politely nodded hello to an older couple and a teenage girl, who was whimpering in the corner of the carriage. She had been on the train when it got into town and I had no idea what was bothering her. I remember shaking my mother’s hand on the platform and when the train pulled out of the station I realized why the girl was crying. She was homesick, already. She could cry. I couldn’t. I was a boy.”

“This is a very sad story, Brother,” John interjected.

“There’s plenty more where that came from,” Bob said without smiling.

“At various stops, on the way to Dublin, Thurles, Ballybrophy, Port Laoise, there were white-faced boys, about my own age, dressed in black and being put on the train. Lots of teary-eyed mothers but not too many fathers, it seemed to me. I remember thinking how odd it was that the sun was shining and no one was laughing or smiling.

I was surprised to see that it looked almost exactly like the country down at home, where I came from. Cows stared impassively at the passing train, men on bicycles stood and waved at level-crossings and the

wife of the couple in the carriage never stopped knitting the whole way. Clickety-clack, clickety-clack. No going back, no going back. I can still hear it.”

“Do you want me to go on?” he asked.

“Yes, do,” said John. “I’m getting it all. I’m keeping up with you.”

“On arrival in Dublin we were easily identified, gathered into a group and whisked away in cars to the Juniorate, as it was called. Three or four shiny, black cars. It must have looked like a funeral to the casual observer. Our destination was about ten miles away. It was a forbidding rectangular collection of low, grey, cement buildings, that we heard was called Siberia, it was so cold. Only the new arrivals were there that evening and there was much talking about home and school, hurling and football, as well as a surprising amount of sobbing when the lights went out. The next morning the Heavens opened and it poured rain all day. I remember a lot of days like that.”

“Do you think about those days very often?” he asked him not wishing to break the mood.

“Some times a lot and then I go ages without thinking of it at all.”

“I had to ask,” said John. “I hope I didn’t put you off.”

Without missing a beat, it seemed, Bob continued.

“It may not have been sixty below zero, as in the real Siberia, but on many a winter’s morning we had to break the ice in our basin of water to wash. Heat, apparently, was a softening agent and not good for the soul. Friendships were frowned upon. So we were encouraged not to become too attached to each other, as many changed their minds about the religious life and went home in the darkness of night, never to be spoken of again. It could be very upsetting.

Work, it seems, keeps one pure even if it means slaving at a coalface all day long. A different kind of coalface, I’ll grant you, but living the monastic life, getting up at six o’clock every morning,

teaching or should I say controlling fifty ten year olds all day and coaching, for the want of a better word, sports teams until dusk, will both give you an appetite and keep you out of trouble.”

John was fascinated. He had never chatted with someone in a religious order before so he had written a few questions in his notebook.

“Was it all work and study? Did you ever let off steam?” he asked quietly.

“Not really,” Bob said, lighting another cigarette. “In the Juniorate, as it was called, we had sports, of course, but we weren’t encouraged to go in hard. We’d have the occasional flare-up and the participants would be sent in for an early shower and told to cool down. Some of the lads, the cute Kerry men and the Jackeens, weren’t above using this as an excuse to get in off the field on wet days. All in all it was a healthy enough lifestyle but served to separate you from your family and the outside world, more than anything else. The Manchester United crash in 1958 occurred when I was inside and I knew nothing about it until I had a visit from my mother. The same with Buddy Holly who was killed in a plane crash the following year. He died and I didn’t even know who he was, as he had become famous only in the year before he died. It coincided with my time in the Juniorate and the Novitiate. Visits from family were few and far between. Letters were allowed only once a month and the Brothers in charge read incoming and outgoing mail. We had no secrets, I can assure you.”

“Jesus,” said John, surprised. “Excuse the language, but that sounds very harsh.”

“We didn’t know any better,” Bob said, shrugging his shoulders. “It was all part of the deal and we understood it prepared us for the religious life. The life was never going to be easy and we had hours of prayer and contemplation most days. We were encouraged to read the lives of the saints and anything we went through was nothing compared to what they went through. The founder of the order, Edward Ignatius Rice, was seen as a very holy man. An ascetic was how he was described to us, trying to follow in his footsteps.”

“Excuse me, Brother, but personally, this is fascinating stuff. I’m sure our readers will just eat it up. Do you think the Order will be upset with you talking freely like this?”

“I think it’s time everyone got to hear the truth. We’re all human and live our lives as best we can. None of us live in a vacuum, although sometimes it’s easier to pretend that we do. This is my chance to get something off my chest finally and to inform the public about the religious life and what it entails. I’m just glad of the opportunity.”

“Tell me, so,” said John, “what does it feel like to have ten or twenty men living under the same roof, eating the same meals and keeping the same hours day after day?”

“It’s not as easy as it looks to outsiders, I can tell you that. There’s lots of tension and pent up emotion. First of all, being men, never mind being men of the cloth, we’re never good at expressing our feelings. Of course, in the religious life, we are supposed to rise above that. Easier said than done. I won’t name any names but we have a few nut cases up here in the Monastery. They’d pass for normal but you wouldn’t want to be living with them in close quarters. For example, a couple of them carry their own knife and fork around in their pocket, all day, every day. More of them stay awake until all hours reading and smoking and then can’t get out of bed in the mornings. The Brother Superior has to go around knocking on doors to get them out to Mass. Always the same people, it seems.

I suppose we’re no different to the general population as we have a few secret drinkers, who are supposed to be living under a vow of poverty and neither vodka nor gin is cheap anymore. One of these days something will happen and it will hit the fan, as they say. The media will have a field day. It’s better not to think about it. It’s a shame because I think we did a really good job when the people of Ireland were behind us and supported us. They appreciated the importance of education. It’s all changing now.”

John sensed he was winding down.

“Thanks, Brother,” he said. “I have enough to be getting on with. Let me listen to what I have and I’ll get back to you, if you don’t mind, if I have any questions. I’m sure we’ll talk some more later.”

“You’re welcome, John. Thanks for the opportunity to talk. And as I said before, it’s not often we get the chance or at least have someone listen to what we have to say.”

SEAN AND BOB

Sean had known Bob casually for years – a nodding acquaintance - but recently they met up on a regular basis for a quiet pint in a pub a safe distance from the town and found they had a lot in common. Bob had approached him not long after Betty’s funeral to offer his condolences and his companionship, should Sean need it - if you ever need to talk, that sort of thing. Sean quickly realized that it was Bob who needed the company. Bob wasn’t his real name, as he was known only as Brother O’Brien, a Christian Brother who had been teaching in the town for nearly ten years.

Sean understood it couldn’t have been easy living in a Monastery with ten other men, mostly middle-aged and older with no ties to the locality. Most of them spent their spare time in their rooms, pottering around the garden or pursuing their fanatical interest in sport. Good for the soul was the excuse given when they disappeared for hours on end. Bob often wondered where they went and how they spent their time. Were they on the sidelines screaming at the local teams or were they sitting somewhere watching matches on TV, with a pint in front of them?

Bob, on the other hand, had his own problems but it had nothing to do with sport.

The first time he sat down with Sean for a chat, he said it straight out.

“I suppose you heard about the accident,” he asked Sean.

“What accident? What are you talking about?”

“You see this bruise on my face and the cut near my ear?” he said, “it’s going to take some explaining up above.”

“I suppose you mean in the Monastery.”

“There too,” he laughed. “I might be in big trouble.”

“So you had an accident,” said Sean. “What’s the big deal?”

“It’s who I was with, is the big deal,” Bob said with a thin smile that could only be described as rueful.

“You know Carmel, she works lunches at the hotel,” he said quietly.

“Of course, I do. Only to see, mind you. She’s not from around here.”

“She told me you have your lunch there every day but that you keep to yourself.”

“She noticed, did she?” Sean said with a grin. “It’s the only bit of peace I get. No phones ringing and no one asking me questions. The office wants me to get a mobile, but I won’t hear of it. There’s very little they can’t handle without me.”

“Yes. That Carmel. No one is supposed to know this but Carmel and I have been friendly, some might say a bit too friendly, for some time now. We have more in common than you’d think. She used to be a Headmistress in a girl’s school in Dublin. It became too much for her. The politics, the Department of Education, the demands of the job and she was so run down she was susceptible to every cold and flu going. She asked for a year off to get her strength back but before the year was up she was told they

weren't renewing her contract. It's a too long a story to go into here. From what she told me they were a spineless shower, to say the least. Anyway, she found her way here, where she knew nobody and nobody knew her, bought a little cottage and is quite happy with her lot. She had a bit of money saved and the part time job suits her down to the ground. Gets her out and about and she gets her shopping done in town without having to make a special trip.

We have a common interest in literature, plays and films. She's a voracious reader, as the fella said. Of course, we don't go to films locally. The Excel is a bit public. We were on our way back from Limerick, where we usually go, when we had a bit of an accident. The Guards were very good about it and told us it was nobody's business provided there was no court case involved. There was no drink taken and we weren't speeding. An elderly couple, with the sun in their eyes, rolled out too far onto the main road. A bit of a bump, more than anything. No harm done. It never got into the papers and no one was injured. I had the young Guard in school a few years back and he was very nice about it. He recognized me straight away and gave me a knowing wink. The other car had a bit of damage but it has been taken care of. Carmel was very good about it. Very understanding. I'd like to help her with a few pounds, but it won't be easy. She knows all about the vow of poverty and all that."

"Sounds like it could easily have been a bit of a mess," said Sean.

"Oh indeed aye," said Bob as he shook his head. "I've been getting funny looks in the Monastery as you can imagine and I'm just wondering if someone will put two and two together."

"Not at all," said Sean. "Sure, no one's the wiser. I noticed Carmel had a bandage on her wrist but it never occurred to me to tie the two of you together."

"I'm glad to hear that, Sean. I'd hate to think we had drawn attention to our -selves. We're very good for each other. After your sad loss, I'm sure you understand the importance of companionship at our age. The life I chose for myself is very lonely and even more so, as you get older. I heard myself mentioning, only the other day, that there's such a thing as a mother's vocation. When you're my age in

the religious life you find yourself questioning why you joined to begin with. It's a bit late, I know and there's not much I can do about it now. But still, it's not easy. We have none of the compensations of children and family. The kids in school come and go and get on with their lives. No wonder some of the Brothers are nearly basket cases. The older ones, especially."

"I often wondered about that," said Sean. "Their private lives and if they had any. You're all from somewhere else, I imagine. I know you're a Cork man. Do you ever have visitors or people calling to see you, past pupils and the like?"

"Hardly ever. Some of them don't want to know with all the stories about abuse in the papers the last few years. It's very sad because the vast majority of us are good God-fearing men who never abused anyone, man or beast."

"Listen," said Sean. "Don't worry about it. The accident I mean. If I hear a whisper around town I'll give you a heads-up immediately. We all need friends and someone to talk to. Your secret is safe with me and tell Carmel to say hello to me the next time she sees me sitting there supposedly reading the paper. Will we have one for the road before we call it a night?"

"You're an easy man to talk to, Sean," Bob said as he settled down again with two pints. "That's something I miss. In my last posting up the country we had a few gas men who laughed and joked all day long it seemed. Their spirits brightened the Monastery. They were involved in the local musical society; one of them even started a school band. It was great fun while it lasted. But then one of them left the Monastery and within a year was married to a local woman with three kids in the school. The Superior General of the Order, as well as the local Bishop, went wild. Eventually he was paid a princely sum to move somewhere else out of their sight and not be creating a scandal. He took the money all right but never moved. He just defied them. Had them over a barrel, as it were. Said he couldn't drag the poor woman and her kids out of their home and away from their friends. Before you knew it, he was nicknamed "The Local Hero". It was a popular film at the time and secretly we all had a good laugh. It

didn't last long though and we were all shipped out to other places. We were told we were a bad influence. That's how I ended up here, for my sins."

"You should tell that story to John when he talks to you. I mentioned your name the other night and how you might have a good story or two to tell. He was very interested and said he'd been in touch with you, already. Hope you don't mind my putting him on to you."

"Not at all. Sure, I'll be glad of the chance to have my opinion heard."

YAKKING

Sean and John were in the kitchen with the radio playing in the background. It still looked a bit bare even with the new Sharp toaster oven and microwave Sean had just bought. He thought young John would get some use out of the microwave, anyway. It must have been a Tuesday evening, in early March, as John Kelly was on the radio talking about the anniversary of Dusty Springfield's death. It was hard to believe it had been ten years already since she died. She was very popular in the Fitzgerald household and Sean had all her CD's or albums, as he still called them.

They were having their tea together when John asked his father for his opinion on what he had written about Paddy Daly for the paper that week.

"I wouldn't have put it in if it wasn't any good," was the testy reply.

"Yes, I know, but did you find it interesting? You're the one who told me to interview him because he is one of the most interesting people in town."

“Oh, he’s that all right. But I was hoping to hear more about what makes him tick. I was going to ask you, also, if he ever mentions your poor mother. They were great friends growing up, you know.”

“He does, indeed. I suppose you know she used to write to him in England.”

“In the early days, I’d see the odd letter with English stamps come through the letter-box but that didn’t last long. I remember her mentioning she was going to write to him when you were trying for that job in Shannon.”

“I don’t think he was that great for writing but I think she kept him up to date on myself and Gerry. I know she sent him a Memorial Card when Gerry’s wife died. And of course, as you know, she used drop in on him regularly at the Nursing Home.”

“Funny that,” Sean said “but I didn’t even hear about it until she died. She never let on. Paddy, himself, had to tell me that.”

Sean reached over and turned up the volume on the radio.

“Listen to this,” he said. “*Breakfast in Bed*, one of my all-time favourites. He must be playing *Dusty in Memphis*. We’ve missed *Son of a Preacher Man*. That John Kelly. Where would we be without him? We’d be listening to crap. That’s where we’d be,” he said answering his own question.

John got the message that the subject was being changed and got up to get another cup of tea and to make sure there were no sausages left over.

“ Can I get you anything else?”

“No thanks. I’m fine. All the same, while you’re up I’ll have a refill,” he said holding out his cup.

It was one of the few nights in the week that they would sit down together and have a chat while having something to eat. Most nights Sean worked late and John didn’t like rattling around the house on

his own. It was very empty with dark wood paneling and very poorly lit. He'd take a run into Limerick, occasionally, to see Gerry and the girls, go out to the Glen for a quiet pint or go to Excel for the latest film. He always liked "the pictures" as they used call them in town. He had no friends left around, as all his age group had left years before to better themselves or go to England for work.

He, also, found his father wasn't easy to talk to. Never was, he remembered as a young lad. Always felt there was something, something in the way that he couldn't put his finger on. John wasn't a bit like his father, even though he was named after him. Gerry, his brother and their father got on well. Funny that. He often thought about it. He remembers asking his mother about it and she said to take no notice. And the time his brother Gerry said:

"I don't know where they got you. You're not a Fitzgerald at all."

It wasn't his fault that he wasn't good at or even interested in sports like Gerry.

These days John spent many hours working on his interviews with Paddy. He was seriously thinking of putting them in book form, well a pamphlet really which might be of local interest. He was going to ask his father if he had any advice about publishers and printing, when he caught him in the right mood. However, he often wondered if Paddy would go along with that. He felt Paddy would want him to hold on to some of his stories until he passed on. That said, Paddy seemed in good health and had a fine appetite.

Funny he thought that his father would bring up Paddy and his mother like that over their tea. Ever since the funeral he thought he had felt a touchiness in his father. It was understandable, he thought, after all the man had lost his wife of forty plus years. He wondered if it was because he had personally brought Paddy up to the front pew at the Funeral Mass. This was usually reserved for the immediate family, but there was plenty of room with only himself and Gerry and Gerry's kids. Grainne stayed well away from the family and sat towards the back. Gave them a wide berth, as they say in the country. She had brought one of her friends along so that she wouldn't be seen to be on her own. Poor

Paddy was in bits. John had had a call from the Mary at the Nursing Home that morning telling him Paddy was inconsolable. That's when he decided to pick him up and bring him to the funeral. And he was able to park in the Church yard without getting a hard time from anyone.

Mind you the only objection would have been from the Parish Priest and he stayed well away from the Fitzgeralds on the day. He had dirtied his bib with them when he refused to even consider playing *Slievnamon*, his mother's favourite song, as the coffin was being wheeled down the church. "We can't have secular music in the house of the Lord," was how he put it. Sean was furious and called him a cigar-smoking hypocrite who spent his life dining out on the goodwill of the parishioners. He had them eaten out of house and home, never mind the brandy. Who was he to deny the request of one of the leading business families in town? Sean wanted to phone the Archbishop but decided against it. Sometimes you have to swallow your pride and get on with it. His turn will come. The gobshite. Such is small town life.

John sat down at his desk and tried to concentrate but couldn't get the funeral out of his mind. He didn't think he'd ever get over it. He knew his mother was held in high esteem by everybody, as was his father, but he was totally unaware of the interest of the town in Paddy Daly. Most people hardly knew he lived in the Nursing Home. Time and again people, without putting a tooth in it, came up to John and said; "I thought Paddy had died in England." Someone said they knew he came home for his brother's funeral out in the Glen but didn't know he never went back. Someone else had heard a rumour about Paddy's cottage being broken into and everything he had was robbed. However, no one seemed to know if that happened for a fact. No doubt this was all very interesting and made more so by Paddy's prominent position with the family at the funeral. John put this down to happenstance. If he hadn't heard from the Nursing Home, Paddy would just have been one of the mourners. Then he realized that was a lie. It was his intention all along to invite Paddy to come and sit up front. He had developed a fondness for him from listening to all his stories. And the poor man had no one else around to keep an eye on him.

Neither could John shake what he overheard after the burial, while walking from the grave at the far end of the graveyard out to the main road:

“Would you look at the two of them? Sure, he’s the dead spit of him.”

John looked around but couldn’t figure out which of the women had said it or whom she was talking about. Of course, he didn’t know all of their names, anyhow. He had been away too long and had lost track. He looked at his father who was walking ahead with Gerry and the girls and realized he too had overheard the comment. Sean looked past John and stared hard at Paddy, who was linking his arm. The old man tried to smile at him but it was a sickly grin, more a grimace, in fact.

John felt sure that his father would bring it up one of these days. He hoped he would, as he really wanted to get to the bottom of it.

“I’m off out for a while,” he heard his father say from the hall door. “Going to meet Bob for a quiet pint. You can join us if you like. We’ll be in the Hotel.”

Not long afterwards John decided to slip out for a drink himself. He headed down to the bar at the hotel, where he knew there would be a few people watching the Champion’s League on TV. The hotel bar wasn’t exactly his favourite place, but it was convenient. It was off the lobby, with a couple of television screens over the bar, a few tables and chairs and four comfortable booths along the far end. Even though he knew they’d be there, he was still surprised to find Sean and another couple sitting in a booth with a table full of empties in front of them. His father waved him over, introduced him to Bob and Carmel and asked him to join them.

“Bob is a Brother up in the Monastery and Carmel here helps out in the hotel at lunchtime a few days a week.”

John thought Carmel must have been a looker in her day. Tall, well dressed and kept herself well. A little make-up and a nice hairdo. Bob, on the other hand, looked like a typical Christian Brother, a red face with horn-rimmed glasses and grey hair, nearly silver.

John signalled to the barman for a pint of stout and sat into the booth across from Carmel. He hadn't met her before but she seemed to know a bit about him and offered her condolences on the death of his mother. She then mentioned that they had just been talking about poor Paddy Daly up in the Nursing Home. Sean had told them John was writing pieces on Paddy's life in England and she said was looking forward to reading them. She had heard mention of Paddy but she knew nothing about him.

Sean jumped in, "You know Paddy and myself were in school together, Carmel. We were all great friends in the old days. Poor Betty was always very fond of him but him going to England and being away didn't help, I'm afraid. He's a different man now, it seems."

"Not at all," said John. "Once you get him talking it's like he never left. He spent all his time in England wishing he were home here. Bought the Sunday Indo every week to keep up with the goings on. It's just that he never felt welcome when he did come home. I think his brother, the Lord have mercy on him, resented him leaving. It meant he was stuck looking after the parents. A sad life, eking out a living in a cottage in the Glen."

"Didn't he come home for the brother's funeral and never went back?" Bob asked. "At least, that's what I heard, although I never met the man either."

"Indeed he did," Sean said quietly. "The saddest thing you ever saw. Betty and myself went out to the funeral. To pay our respects, like. It rained all day and the wind blew, a typical March day. We were soaked to our skin. Anyway, the gravediggers screwed up royally and when they went to lower the coffin the grave wasn't wide enough, so they had to get the shovels out again and dig some more. If it weren't so sad, it would have been funny. Only a handful of people standing around and they passed a bottle of whiskey from one mourner to the next. A tradition in the Glen, I heard at the time. You

couldn't refuse. You had to take a slug or it would be seen as an insult. Poor Betty thought she'd faint, never having tasted the stuff in her life. Not that she was a teetotaler or anything, but whiskey never was her drink."

"I can only imagine what it must have been like," said Bob. "Funerals are hard enough without that kind of thing as well."

"Are you saying he never went back to England after that? He just stayed with what he had in his bag when he came home?" asked Carmel.

John ordered a round of drinks, as there was no sign of anyone going anywhere.

"From what he's told me, he was happy enough to stay. He had retired from his job, had a decent pension and had been living in digs for years. More importantly he had no desire to stay in England. He found it very lonely with no work to go to. It's like the opportunity fell into his lap. It's a pity the cottage didn't work out for him. Anyway, he's better off in the Nursing Home."

"So all that about being beaten up and robbed is true?" said Carmel.

"True as God," said Sean. "And they never caught anyone for it either. Mind you I don't think they tried very hard. Didn't try very hard to get the squatters out of the cottage, either. It's a shame really to see a lovely, lived-in and well-kept cottage gone to wrack and ruin. Everyone in the Glen knew there was a young pair of foreign nationals with a baby living there, but they all turned a blind eye."

"That's such a sad story," said Carmel. "Poor man. No one deserves that."

"I tried to get him talking about the robbery, or the incident as he calls it, but he wouldn't budge. He's still afraid they'll come after him, whoever they are."

“I don’t suppose he has any interest in football. I’m surprised after all the years in England that he doesn’t think about coming down here the odd evening to watch a game on TV,” Bob said looking from Sean to John.

“Not a chance,” John answered. “He told me he was in Wembley for the World Cup Final in 1966 and nothing would ever beat it. England beat Germany after extra time. He said he was so excited it was embarrassing for an Irishman. It was great but ruined him for football ever since.”

“Holy God,” said Sean “will you look at the time? We’re the last ones here. Bob do you need a lift up to the Monastery?” Sean asked finishing his drink and reaching for his jacket.

“No, I’m grand,” said Bob. “Carmel said she’d drop me back on her way home.”

Laughingly they pointed at the table full of empty glasses.

“It looked much worse when we had full ashtrays as well as glasses,” said Sean.

“Those were the days,” Bob piped up as he helped Carmel on with her coat.

John and Sean exchanged glances but said nothing.

GERRY & ADELE

“Daddy, don’t you know a Mr. Murphy in New York?” Orla said, pointing at the newspaper on the breakfast table.

“Of course, I do,” said Gerry. “I just saw him. A nice man. A good man.”

“Not anymore he isn’t. Looks like he’s in big trouble.”

Gerry took the paper and could hardly believe his eyes when he saw a mugshot of his friend Tom Murphy at the top of the back page. Red-rimmed, tired eyes, hair all over the place not a bit like the Tom Murphy he knew.

“Jesus Christ,” he said, “what happened?”

Prominent Irish American attorney charged with the murder of his wife. The body of Mrs. Adele Murphy, the wife of Thomas J. Murphy, was found in her car in a parking lot at JFK. Her husband has been taken into custody. He has played a prominent role in Irish American affairs and is a regular visitor to Ireland. His lawyer insists he is innocent and is to appear in court tomorrow for a hearing.

That was it. No further information. Gerry was gobsmacked. Adele is dead. His Adele. How could this happen? He just got back from New York and she had dropped him at the airport. He called out to Mrs. O’Brien, his mother-in-law, who was fussing in the pantry.

“Have you seen this, Granny?” he asked.

“I’m too busy to be reading the paper, not like some people. Get those girls out to school and don’t let them be late. Their lunch-boxes are packed.”

“I will. I will,” he said, “but you have to see this.”

Mrs. O’Brien snatched the paper, glared at it and muttered: “I always knew she’d come to a bad end. Now off with ye.”

He must admit, though, that while Mrs. O’Brien was a bit severe, she was great with the girls and took a lot of pressure off Gerry. She doted on them and wouldn’t hear a word against them from anybody. They were still doing well in school but, understandably, missed their mother.

That said, he had noticed that they spoke less and less about her. Every now and then he would hear one of them call “Mammy” before realizing she wasn’t there. The child, especially Ashling, the youngest, would then look a bit sheepish and say “sorry” even though there was nothing to be sorry about.

He started to run towards the car: “Come on girls, I have to get to work. I can’t be late no more than you can.” They tumbled in, laughing at his antics.

“Daddy, you’re the boss,” said Orla. “You can go in to work whenever you like. You can’t get in trouble.”

“Oh yes, I can,” he laughed. “What about all my customers and the drivers? They won’t accept any excuses from me.”

With the girls gone, he was in the car alone and shuddered when he thought of Adele. It was beginning to hit home. He felt like he’d been kicked in the stomach but couldn’t let on in front of the girls. He found his grip tightening on the steering wheel. Only two days ago he was sitting in her car in New York. Yes, she was mad at him and mad at Tom, her husband and probably mad at herself. It wasn’t his fault that things had gone so completely wrong. He must ask Mrs. O’Brien about the phone calls and messages from Adele. She insisted she had called repeatedly but he hadn’t been told. How could he call her back when he didn’t even know she had phoned. Adele just wouldn’t believe him.

He dropped in to the office, saw everything was under control and told Margo, at the dispatch desk, that he was going to be out for an hour or two. She could call him on his mobile if she needed him for anything.

The newspaper story brought everything back. He sat in the car and wanted to cry, but knew he couldn’t. Not yet anyway. What if somebody saw him? He didn’t want to think about it

again, but this brought it back. He would never forget the morning, when Katie came into the bedroom after her shower, opened her robe and said: “Feel this.”

“You’re kidding,” he said. “You know it’s Monday and I have a busy day ahead of me.” She wasn’t smiling and reached for his hand.

“I think I have a lump in my breast,” she said

“Have you noticed it before,” he asked with concern in his voice.

“I have, but I put it out of my mind. Now I think it’s getting bigger.”

From that day forward it was a round of doctor’s visits. X-Rays and mammography’s, blood samples and a battery of tests before they were finally told. A phone call from the doctor’s office while they were having their breakfast. She was already at stage four, which meant it was too late to treat her. He remembers feeling cold all over and when he put his arms around her, he noticed for the first time she felt like skin and bone. She had already lost her appetite and slept very little. Six months later she was buried on a hillside overlooking the River Shannon. It was the saddest funeral Limerick had ever seen. A picture of Gerry walking behind the hearse carrying his two little girls, six and four, was on the front page of the local paper.

He had planned to make a few calls having been away for a while, but this morning’s news changed everything. He needed time to think and thought he’d go for a drive in the new BMW. The company car, he called it. A bit of fresh air, the smell of the Atlantic and a visit to a few old haunts would do him good. He noticed the road sign for Lahinch and Ennistymon for the first time in ages. He knew the way everywhere, so he never bothered looking. But today the word Lahinch jumped out at him. God, it seemed so long ago. It was only last Autumn – October, was it? Already the memory was fading. It was there that Adele gave him the first sign that she might be interested in more than sightseeing. He remembered sitting in the parking

lot at the Visitor Information Centre by the Cliffs of Moher reading the paper and watching her walk back to the car. The sun lit up her hair. He had always fancied short blonde hair like hers.

“You’re going to send me off on my own with a crowd of strangers?” she said laughing. “I don’t think so.”

He grinned sheepishly. “There’s nothing new for me to see here, Mrs. Murphy,” he laughed, turning the page of the paper. Then she pulled open the car door, reached in, grabbed him by the arm and said

“Come on. Don’t “Mrs. Murphy” me. You’re coming with me. Tom paid for the car for the whole day and as far as I’m concerned that includes you.”

He thought she was being very fresh and then decided she was just being her pushy self like so many of the American tourists he dealt with. Then, to his surprise, he found he enjoyed the day immensely. She was fun to be with and had a playful way about her. More than once he thought she put her hand on his arm, even in the car when she sat into the passenger seat. Then he decided it was wishful thinking on his part. He hadn’t been this relaxed with a woman in ages. It felt nice.

“I envy you living here,” she said that first day. “What a beautiful country. What scenery. Even the Atlantic looks different here.”

“You’re inclined to take it for granted when you grow up around it,” Gerry said. “I must say the tourists love it here. And, of course, they all talk about the people being so nice.”

“I feel that way myself,” Adele said laughing. “You’re such charmers. You could turn a girl’s head, you know.”

“Only if she wanted,” Gerry said, feeling a bit brave. “And what’s this about the Atlantic. Sure, you have the same sea on Long Island.”

“Doesn’t look or smell the same” Adele shot back. “You’ve got these enormous waves and cliffs that have been shaped over thousands of years. The Cliffs of Moher are known the world over. We have nothing like that. But we do have good shopping.”

Gerry felt himself laughing out loud. He gave her a playful push and she put her arm around him to steady herself.

“I’ve seen the U.S. Open, the golf you know, from Long Island. That’s a place I’d like to visit some day. I’d like to play the Black Course.”

“Maybe we could arrange that, too,” he heard her say quietly.

He smiled to himself as he remembered the first time she tasted Guinness:

“O my God, how do you drink that stuff? It’s awful,” she spluttered, as she tried to get it out of her mouth with a paper napkin and a glass of water. They both thought of the scene from *Big* at the same time.

“Remember in *Big* when Tom Hanks tasted caviar for the first time,” he nearly shouted and she was nodding her head and laughing hysterically.

“Oh my God, I love that movie,” she said.

“Guinness is an acquired taste, “ said Gerry, when things quieted down, “you have to get used to it first, like a lot of things in Ireland.”

“I think I know what you mean,” she laughed, giving him a knowing look.

As they relaxed she told him about Tom working long hours with a high-powered firm of attorneys and travelling to Washington or Boston nearly every week. He liked how she didn't beat around the bush. They had no kids and no, before he asked, they never talked about it. He, also, learned that she had been married before, when she was much younger.

"A big mistake," she called it. "A doozie. It was a boy I met in college. He had a permanent hard-on and I got high, whenever I could. Then I got scared and thought I was pregnant. We told no one, not even my roommate, spent a week-end in Vegas and got married in one of those Wedding Chapels, with an Elvis Impersonator as our witness. My father was furious that I could be so stupid and got me out of it, as soon as he could. In fact, Tom's firm handled the divorce. That was the first time I met him, when my Dad introduced me to his good friend Thomas J. Murphy. Now here I am, in my mid-thirties, married to a much older man, a friend of my father's, for Christ's sake and seeing the sights in Ireland with a handsome, successful Irish businessman."

"Are you referring to me?" Gerry laughed. "I'm not such a great catch if you knew the whole story."

"Guess who's going to New York for the St. Patrick's Day Parade?" Gerry announced at dinner one evening. He had already run it by Granny, before springing it on the girls. Of course they wanted to go too, but he was having none of it. Some day he'd take them, but not this time.

"You can't be out for a week or ten days in the middle of the school year," he insisted.

"Tell me again which one of them invited you. Was it Mr. Murphy or the lovely Adele?" Granny asked sarcastically. "I'd be surprised if her ladyship called here again," she said with an icy smile.

He was shocked to hear this but didn't want to create a scene in front of the girls.

"No. No. It was Tom," he said. "The man himself."

Then it dawned on Gerry. He had never thought to ask if she had called. He had to confront Mrs. O'Brien. Calmly he told the girls to go finish their homework and then turned on her.

"What do you mean, you'd be surprised if she called here again? Did she call before?" Gerry all but shouted. Mrs. O'Brien looked away and mumbled:

"Don't raise your voice to me. She might have. I think she called a few times, not long after they went back."

"And what did you say? Did you take a message? Did you think of telling me?" Gerry was beside himself. This was all news to him.

"I told her not to be calling here day after day and bothering you. I told her you were a married man mourning the loss of your poor wife and wouldn't want any truck with the likes of her. You already have a husband, I told her. God help him."

He thought she had a slight smile when she said it. She knew she was hitting home. God damn her to hell. Gerry kicked his chair back and slammed the back door behind him as he went out for a smoke and a chance to think.

He thought, at first, that she was upset when he mentioned he was taking them up on their invitation to New York for St. Patrick's Day. But, within a few days she was encouraging him to go and have a good time.

"You work hard. You deserve it."

Those were her exact words. She even bought him a new lined raincoat for the trip. She could have asked him, mind you, as she was spending his money. However, he appreciated the gesture. A pity she wouldn't shut up about it though.

"I've seen that parade on TV," she said. "It's always snowing or raining or something. I don't want you to catch your death. Just bring them back something that says New York on it. They'd love that."

Showing up at Shannon reminded him of the day he dropped them off after their trip. Adele had been very quiet, seemed preoccupied with her make-up and then refused to take off her sunglasses even when she gave him a quick kiss good-bye.

He had decided to treat himself to business class on the flight to New York. He had three or four main courses to choose from and all the wine he could drink. He watched a movie that he had heard about but never bothered to go see in the cinema, dozed a bit and before he knew it, the Captain announced that Cape Cod was on their right and they'd be landing in JFK on schedule. He could feel himself getting excited at the prospect of seeing Adele again after nearly six months. Maybe she'd come to the airport to meet him and say Tom was too busy. He was sure she would. Would she want to go straight to an airport hotel? He'd be up for that, as he hadn't been with anyone since. He smiled to himself when he thought she had ruined him for other women. He wondered what she'd be wearing under her winter jacket, as the pilot said the forecast was for cold and windy weather. He could feel his palms getting sweaty and used the bathroom to freshen up before he landed.

"Gerry," said Tom. "Cead mile failte," in his poor attempt at an Irish accent.

"Howya, Tom. Great to see you. Where's Adele?" he said looking around the Arrivals area.

“Oh, she’s off upstate visiting her sister. She goes to see her about this time every year.”

Gerry tried to hide his disappointment.

“That’s a pity. I felt sure she’d be here. We got on so well in Ireland. I was looking forward to having a laugh with her.

He kept driving west, towards the Clare coast. He could smell the sea air through the open window, as he headed for Ennistymon and stopped outside the Hotel. A grey dull, unattractive building with the windows and doors painted white. This was where he and Adele had lunch, while Tom played in a member-guest at Lahinch, a few miles away. She had excused herself to go to the ladies and returned holding a room-key. She seemed to be daring him with a big wide smile, put the key on the table and said:

“The next move is up to you.”

He’d never forget the excitement he felt. He hadn’t done this with anyone before. He looked around the restaurant carefully to make sure there was no one there who’d recognize him. Then he thought what does it matter? I’m single. I can do what I like. He could hardly breathe as he made his way to Room 17. He was so excited he was afraid. She was already in bed and sure enough, when he undressed he barely had time to admire her naked body.

“You’re trembling,” she said laughing as he apologized.

“Yeah, I know. It’s been a while.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Adele said. “I’ll get a washcloth.”

“You’ve been in this situation before?”

“Once or twice,” she said with a smile. “So would you if you were married to a schmuck who can’t get it up. Even Viagra doesn’t work for him. He’s more interested in getting shit-faced. I suppose you know what a schmuck is?”

“I think so. I think they’re what we call gobshites.”

“Sounds about right.”

“Sorry about the accident. As I said, it’s been a while and I don’t remember ever being so turned on.”

“Lie back and relax,” Adele said. “It’s not the first time I’ve seen it happen.”

He lay back and admired her tanned body as she moved around the room.

“Are those real?” he asked staring at her breasts. She grinned.

“What do you think and what a rude question?”

“They look real enough to me. Jesus, they’re gorgeous.”

“The best that money can buy,” she said. “Knock yourself out.”

Katie, to be fair, always tried to satisfy him in bed, but she was often too tired and took it very seriously. But he had never met a woman like this, who enjoyed it so much and wanted to be on top. And she talked about sex as though it was fun. He wondered if all American women are like this.

One day she wore a summer dress with a halter-top. That was the day Tom played the Old Head of Kinsale, the gourmet capital of Ireland, as it is known. Adele and Gerry had a wonderful meal in a beautiful restaurant overlooking the harbour, but could hardly wait to get out

of there and find a hotel room. She sat opposite him at a corner table and he was convinced he could see her breasts, certainly her nipples, through the thin material. He decided so could everyone else in the place. He was so excited. No dessert or coffee that day and they joked about it afterwards. She told him she knew that dress would turn him on.

They took their time though, as they didn't want a repeat of the near disaster in Ennistymon. They were so late getting back that Gerry had to call in a favour and have the golfers delayed at the clubhouse while he and Adele scrambled to check out and drive to the golf course. The barman did the trick and offered complimentary Irish Coffees to the visitors. First, of all, he demonstrated how to make them and came up with some story about Shannon Airport claiming to have invented the drink, but everyone in Ireland knew they were first made in Kinsale.

For whatever reason she never wore that dress again.

As he drove towards the ocean, he felt the tears streaming down his cheeks. He just knew this would happen and he was glad no one could see him. His anger had subsided and changed into sadness. He had to hold it together for the girls and his business, of course. Twenty or thirty people were dependent on him for a living. The two women who had meant the most to him, for different reasons, mind you, had been snatched away. He blew his nose and tried to think of something else. If he had a cigarette in the car, he'd have lit up. Not in the new Beamer, though. He'd never do that. He was thinking about the parade in New York when his mobile rang. It was Margo in the office.

“Gerry, the Guards are looking for you. They want you to come down to see them as soon as you can. I told them you were out but they said it's important.”

“Thanks, Margo. Was it the local station?”

“That Sergeant O’Riordan, the Cork man. You know him well.”

“So well that I have his number on my phone. I’ll give him a shout.”

He and Tom had taken the train in to the city. It was a boy’s day out and there was no question of driving home. They went in early and had breakfast at a place Tom knew near Penn Station. Then they made their way up Fifth Avenue to 44th Street where the counties gathered for the start of the Parade. All he could see for what seemed like miles were Police and Firemen’s uniforms, High School Bands and bagpipers in kilts. He noticed all the county banners and was relieved when he saw one that said Limerick, with a picture of the Treaty Stone on it.

“Come on,” he said to Tom. “Let’s March with Limerick and maybe I’ll meet someone I know.”

Tom’s eyes lit up, as he hadn’t been to the Parade since he left High School. Back in those days the schools closed so that everyone could attend. For the Catholic School boys it meant a license to drink beer all day and get away with it. With that, the band struck up and before they knew it they were out on Fifth Avenue surrounded by thousands of cheering people on either side of the street.

“This is great,” Tom said, laughing. “Watch out for the TV cameras and be sure to wave. Wouldn’t it be something if they saw you on TV at home? They’re bound to have the highlights on the evening news.”

Up near the Cathedral, everything came to a halt for a while as the Grand Marshal and his Aides paid their respects to the Cardinal. Gerry had time to look around him and saw Saks Fifth Avenue, FAO Schwartz and Rockefeller Center. He recognized them from films and TV. Only a short time ago he had laughed with the girls as Tom Hanks danced on the big keyboard in the

film “Big.” He knew that was filmed in FAO Schwartz. A short time later, Tom said: “I’m dying for a drink. Let’s cut down the next block and head over to Third Avenue.”

By then, Gerry had also had enough and was glad to get away. Even though the sun was shining it was freezing on the Avenue. The wind was whistling between the tall buildings and he was glad the famous raincoat had a warm lining.

“Well done, Granny,” he thought to himself. “You think of everything.”

They settled in to a pub named after an Irish poet and immediately had two hot whiskies to take the sting away. Two more quickly followed and then two creamy pints of Guinness were added to the tab. Even though Gerry seldom drank pints at home it seemed like the right drink under the circumstances. Tom was looking up at the television and noticing the stock prices.

“Looks like a quiet day on Wall Street,” he said and swallowed half his pint in one gulp.

“Easy on there, Tom,” Gerry said. “We’re in no rush. It might be a good idea to order a sandwich.”

Over lunch Tom relaxed and out of the blue said:

“I suppose you’re surprised Adele wasn’t here to meet you. At least the look on your face at JFK said so.”

Gerry nearly choked on an onion ring:

“Well, yes. To be honest with you, I was. Is everything OK?”

“As OK as it will ever be,” Tom said looking down at his plate of food. Things aren’t good between us, you know. Haven’t been since our trip to Ireland.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Well, she moved her stuff into a separate bedroom shortly after we got back and when I questioned her about it, she said I wouldn’t understand. I was hoping if I invited you over, she might relent and cheer up a bit. She really took a shine to you and talked about you for weeks afterwards. I think she fancied you and she even phoned you a few times. I don’t think she ever got through though. Then I noticed she wasn’t paying as much attention to her appearance and she quit her job with the dentist. I suspected she was drinking more than usual when she was home alone, which was far too often.

“Jesus,” Gerry spluttered. “This is very serious. Do you mind me asking, but did she ever say why?”

“Well, she accused me of being a workaholic, that I was always tired and had no interest in going out and having a good time. That might be true but it has as much to do with the age difference between us as anything else. She’s twenty years younger than me, for God’s sake. What does she expect?”

“That makes sense,” Gerry said beckoning to the waiter for another round.

“I have to work my tail off to keep up with the twenty-somethings in the office. I may have seniority but they’re all waiting for me to take early retirement so that they can move up.”

Tom looked downtrodden. Beaten, in fact. it seemed to Gerry.

“Let’s give this some serious thought with some serious drinking,” he said with a wry smile, raising his hand to order another round.

Before long Tom had poured out his suspicions about the dentist she had worked for. She had given up her job there, so he no longer thought he was a threat. He still thought something had happened but couldn’t put his finger on it.

“What would you say if I told you I thought I was in love with her?” Gerry heard himself say.

“Everyone loves her,” said Tom “and why wouldn’t they?”

“No, no. I mean it,” Gerry said, looking Tom in the eye.

“That’s the Guinness talking, isn’t it?”

“No. Honest to God. I have loved her since the first time I saw her in Ireland. I think about her all the time and I came here to confront you. Fortunately or unfortunately, depending on which side you’re on, it looks as if she doesn’t feel the same way, so I feel safe telling you now. “

“Well, fuck me,” said Tom with a big laugh. “You had me going there for a minute.”

“No, no. You’re not listening to me. I really love her.”

“Come on,” said Tom. “Screw her. Let’s have another drink.”

A few days after the Parade, Adele showed up in Garden City. Tom seemed pleased to see her and downplayed her absence. Gerry had gone into New York each day and wandered the streets, sometimes taking a sightseeing tour. “Hop on, hop off, my arse,” he said over and over. He had no interest.

It was time to go home unless Adele showed up. Himself and Gerry had gotten along fine and studiously avoided discussing their long conversation at the Parade. Sleeping dogs and all that, Gerry thought. Then she walked in unannounced one evening and he didn’t know where to put himself. A quick “Nice to see you, again, Gerry” and she was gone upstairs to unpack. Nothing! It was like they were strangers or worse still, acquaintances! What had happened? Is it possible that that mother-in-law of his had said more than she had let on to him? How many calls exactly had she received? How curt had she been on the phone?

After what seemed like ages, Adele appeared downstairs and said she was exhausted and she'd see them tomorrow. Tom offered to make her a cup of de-caf tea before she went to bed and she reluctantly agreed to sit down for a few minutes. When Tom went into the kitchen and left them alone, she told Gerry between clenched teeth: "I want you out of here as soon as possible." She went on to tell him she'd had enough of his shit and his refusal to return her calls. How many messages did she have to leave? She didn't want to know about his witch of a mother-in-law. That was his problem and shouldn't have become hers. How often was she supposed to humiliate herself by calling like a schoolgirl and begging to talk to him? She thought they had something real in Ireland and as a result she had fallen out of love with her husband, if she had ever been in love with the son of a bitch, in the first place and the sooner he was out of her sight the better. She just went on and on. Gerry's protests fell on deaf ears.

She'd talk to Aer Lingus about his ticket and she would regard it as money well spent to get him out of the country as soon as possible. There was no reason for him to stay, now that the Parade was over and he could go back to his life in Ireland as if nothing had ever happened. What went on between them, apparently, had nothing to do with real life. She had now moved on and he should do the same. He must be out of his mind if he thought she would be stuck with a jumped up taxi-driver, in a third world country like Ireland, for the rest of her life. He could see her mouth trembling, as she tried to hurt him by insulting him.

He couldn't believe the words coming out of her. The soft, warm smile was gone and her lips were thin and stretched tight. He, also, noticed her hair wasn't as blonde as he remembered it. She had changed. She was harder. She might even be bitter. He tried to get a word in but was interrupted by Tom coming into the room.

"Gerry has decided he wants to leave tomorrow. He misses his girls and wants to get home," she blurted out as she reached for the cup of tea.

“Well I can’t take him to the airport, as I’m in the city all day,” Tom answered off-handedly.

“Can you run him in?”

She nodded yes and stood up to leave the room taking her tea with her.

“I’ll leave you two boys alone, so. Gerry, I’ll be here to pick you up at about five o’clock and we’ll have to leave straight away.”

“I’ll call about your ticket in the morning and take care of everything,” she added without even looking at him. This was her parting shot.

With that she was gone and he found himself following Tom into the den to watch Sportscenter. They had a few stiff drinks and he thanked Tom for his generosity. He had enjoyed the trip and was sorry it was over so soon. Tom seemed to understand or, at least, wasn’t surprised by the earlier than planned departure. Then he asked Gerry again about Adele.

“Did you two have an affair in Ireland when I was off golfing? And before you answer, I don’t blame you if you did. How could anyone resist her when she turns on the charm?”

Gerry decided not to answer and maybe his loose talk the other day at the Parade would be blamed on the Guinness.

“If you did, it explains a lot,” said Tom with a tight smile on his face. “Jesus, I am such a fool. I thought giving her her independence was the right thing to do. But she wiped my eye, as my mother used to say. Goddamn her anyway.”

He’d better see what the guards wanted.

“Sergeant O’Riordan, It’s Gerry Fitzgerald. You were looking for me.”

“How are you, Gerry? Thanks for calling back. Nothing too important but could you drop down to the Station for a few minutes. We have the police in New York asking a few questions about your recent trip and you know, that woman that was found at JFK. Mrs. Murphy, that’s her. A friend of yours was she?”

“Hold on a minute Sergeant. What’s this all about? It has nothing to do with me.”

“Oh, I know that, Gerry. It’s just that your coat was found in her car and there’s a few details that need to be cleared up, like.”

So that’s where he’d left the fucking coat. Shit. Granny will be furious, but at least it wasn’t lost. It’s in safe keeping now.

Gerry found the next day very long, rattling around the big house and lingering over packing. He went into Adele’s bedroom for a look around, lay on the bed and stared at the ceiling. He could smell her. He must have dozed off, but when he awoke he found himself brushing away tears. He felt like he’d been head-butted by life. His hopes of a new life with a wonderful woman had come crashing down. Not that he’d ever give up the girls, but he thought she would have brought so much joy to their lives. Being so fun loving, she’d want to travel to Italy and Spain, even EuroDisney and all the other places that their friend’s parents go to on a regular basis. He was too busy with work to get away and take them on a proper holiday. Somehow, if she were there, he’d find a way. He could feel the disappointment welling up inside him. Instead, he and the girls were about to be let down again by another woman who was going to leave. The girls didn’t know her from a hole in the wall, but she’d make him very happy and he just knew they’d be happy, too. He was sure they’d learn to like her and even one day love her.

He must have dozed off again, because he woke up to a phone ringing. It was Tom apologizing yet again for not being available to take him to the airport. Once more, Gerry thanked him for the invitation and assured him, he had enjoyed every minute of his visit. Maybe they'd see each other in Ireland, some day. He turned over to face the wall, as it was only three o'clock and felt his head sink into her pillow. He could smell her perfume as he closed his eyes.

On the dot of 5 o'clock a car honked in the driveway. Gerry was in the kitchen rinsing the cup after his last cup of coffee in Garden City.

"She wouldn't even come in and face me," he thought.

He wheeled his case out to the top step and pulled the door behind him. He threw his coat in the back with the case and sat in beside her. He hadn't even fastened his seat-belt when she pulled away with a screech of tyres.

"Hold on. What's the big rush?"

"I want you out of here as soon as possible," she snapped angrily.

"Don't dare show your face here again or contact me in any way. That fool husband of mine thought he was doing me a favour by inviting you over. But I know what he was playing at. He was trying to get back in my good graces. It's too late for that. I've been thinking about it all day. He blew it when he invited me to Ireland and then left me on my own for two weeks. He can live his life and I'll live mine. That's how it's going to be from now on."

Gerry sat there flabbergasted. Where was this coming from? She was left on her own for two weeks in Ireland! She wasn't on her own for five minutes and he saw to that, personally.

"What do you mean, left on your own?" he laughed. "You were never on your own. You were either with Tom or me the whole time."

“You know what I mean,” she snapped. “We should have gone with another couple so that I would have had company. Instead I was thrown into your arms and left to fend for myself.”

She was darting between cars and he was relieved when he saw the sign and they turned on to the Cross Island Parkway. She had to slow to 10 miles an hour due to the congestion.

“Look at this fucking traffic,” she yelled. “It will take us an hour to get to JFK.”

He had never seen her like this. She had never displayed the slightest sign of anger in the two weeks in Ireland. She really had an ugly side and he didn't like it one bit. With that she veered off and swung on to a side road.

“I want to get this trip over as soon as possible.”

Within twenty minutes they were pulling in to the airport parking lot. She had driven into the multi-level lot, found an open spot at the front facing the terminal and screeched to a halt.

“I'm dropping you here,” she said “I have no intention of going inside to see you off. If I'm out of here within fifteen minutes there is no charge.”

He braced himself and asked: “Does it have to end like this?”

“Absolutely,” she said. “It's over. You're over. We're over.”

He grabbed his case from the back seat, walked slowly into the Terminal and looked for the check-in counter for his flight home.

“Good evening, sir, and welcome to Aer Lingus.

Gerry headed down to the Garda Station and casually asked for Sergeant O'Riordan.

“Howya, Gerry,” came the thick Cork accent. “Thanks for coming down.

Come into the office here, as I need to talk to you privately, like.”

Gerry looked around at a metal desk, two chairs that had seen better days and a filing cabinet, more mismatched than matched.

“We have an interesting thing here and our friends in New York have asked us to clear it up for them. They have a video – CCTV, you know – of your friend Mr. Murphy watching you checking in at Aer Lingus for the flight home. I have it here on the laptop. Take a look. Did you know you were being watched?

I don’t suppose you did. Mind you, he made sure you didn’t see him. Look you can see him, leave the terminal, cross the road and approach the wife’s car in the parking lot. He sat in and a row broke out. You can see the hand waving, that sort of thing. She goes to drive away but pulls into a spot at the back of the parking lot with the car facing away from the walkway and the camera. You can still see the car as plain as day. Next thing we know, look at him, Murphy gets out of the car, after a good while mind you, goes round to the driver’s side and lifts the wife into the back seat. We think she’s already dead, at this stage. Anyway, he shoves her in and uses a dark coat or a blanket to cover the body. That was your coat, wasn’t it Gerry?”

Gerry was relieved.

“Jesus, Sergeant, you had me going there for a while. I’m sure it is. I left mine behind me in New York and I haven’t told the mother-in-law since I got back.”

“No problem, Gerry, I’m sure they’ll send it over when they’re finished with it. Anyway, the case is open and shut. Actual evidence the fancy lawyers won’t be able to refute. He used a knife from his own kitchen, the eejit. The rest of the set is sitting on the counter at home, I’m

told. He had it all planned out. I suppose he was sure he'd get away with it. He wasn't as smart as he thought he was. Was he?

Gerry couldn't wait to get out of the Garda Station and sat into the Beamer with a relieved look on his face. Then he began to cry in earnest.

Chapter 2

PART TWO

Paddy Daly's the name. And whatever else you do, don't call me "poor" Paddy. That's all I hear these days, poor Paddy this and poor Paddy that.

"Poor Paddy came home from England for his brother's funeral and never went back, the poor man."

That's right, I never went back. The truth is I didn't want to go back. I stayed here of my own free will. Who wouldn't want to live in a comfortable cottage in the Glen of Aherlow at the foot of the Galtee Mountains? It was where I grew up, for God's sake and I have always loved the place. I remember well standing at my brother's graveside, the sun shining and thinking why would anyone want to live somewhere else? This is far better than England and boarding houses and bed-sitters with single-bar electric fires. I was sick and tired of that scene. Nearly forty years of it. I never settled long enough to buy a house or put down roots, as they say. Maybe I would have if I had met the right girl, but I wasn't lucky that way.

Anyway, you can see where I'm coming from. I'm not poor and there's no fear of me. This nursing home I live in used to be the old Parish Priest's house and it's a grand place. A bit grey on the outside, mind you, with a steep slate roof and I don't know how many chimney-pots. You could nearly call it a mansion. I can sit out on the terrace in the morning and admire the dark blue Galtees. Sometimes they're purple. A sign of rain, I'm told. The old joke around here is if you can see the Galtees, it's going to rain and if you can't see them it's already raining.

The house, I must say, is very comfortable, with central heating and high windows and ceilings. Those old priests knew how to live. Fair play to him though, when he died the P.P. left the house to the parish to be used as a nursing home. A nice thing to do. There's a conservatory at one end that catches

the sun in the morning, on the odd morning that it shines, that is. This is Ireland, after all and I needn't tell you it's not known for fine weather.

Yes I stayed on in the Glen when my brother, Tom, passed on to his eternal reward but I'm afraid I didn't stay long. But that's another story for another time. Suffice it to say I had the life frightened out of me and couldn't get out of there fast enough. One of these days I'll go back to see the place but I'm not ready for it yet. I don't know what to expect. I'm finding this new Ireland a bit hard to take. It's not the same anymore and it's certainly not the Ireland I left long ago. Even the people are different. Selfish and self-centered it seems to me. Not that anyone cares what I think.

But it was another funeral, Betty Fitzgerald's that got me thinking. I still can't get over it. Betty used to visit me regularly and we always had a laugh and a cup of tea. We talked about old times, the good old days, as they were called. She'd bring me an English paper, a bar of Cadbury's or a packet of Tayto's from Kennedy's. She remembered what I liked. She was such a nice girl when I knew her in school. I was mad about her and why wouldn't I be? By all accounts, she was a fine woman all her life. She and Sean Fitzgerald, the fellow she married and myself were inseparable when we were young. We went everywhere together. Sean and I were in the same class in the Brothers and she went to the Convent. We did the Leaving certificate the same year. Mind you we didn't kill ourselves studying or anything but we felt we'd get the exam no problem.

Then, even before the results came out, everything changed. Betty and Sean decided to get married, out of the blue, as they say and I took off for England. It seemed to me there was no point in hanging around town on my own. It all happened so quickly and I felt I had no choice. I tried talking to the priest in confession but that only made it worse. Betty did her best to explain it to me but I knew it would be better for all concerned if I just went. My poor parents took it very hard but they had Tom to stay home and keep an eye on things for them. He wasn't that interested in school and was planning to stay anyway. I wrote to them every chance I got in the early days and sent a few pounds when I had them

to spare. That helped a lot and when they heard I was working for the national airline in London, well, they felt I was set for life. That's how it was in those days.

I had the occasional letter from Betty after the baby was born but they fizzled out too. She said they called him John after Sean and that he was a little dote. In the early days I came home now and again but never felt that welcome around the town. Sean was especially distant. So much so that we never even met for a pint. I remember being both surprised and disappointed that I didn't see much of Betty either. After a while I stopped coming. There was no point and I had my own life in England.

I was in Birmingham when my mother died and the Parish Priest had to contact the airline to track me down. No one had an address for me, not even Tom. I had just moved up there from London and wasn't settled in yet. They even delayed the funeral so that I could get home for it. God, it all seems so long ago and it's like it happened to someone else. But it didn't. It happened to me and it's my story.

Getting back to Betty's funeral, sad as it was, young John came through for me, picked me up at the Nursing Home, brought me to the Church and had me ride in the first car with the family. I don't think Sean, his old man, was too pleased, although he walked behind the hearse with young John and his other son, Gerry. The shops in the town turned out the lights and closed their doors as a mark of respect when the cortege passed by. I heard afterwards that it's hardly ever done anymore. A throwback to better times.

I mentioned earlier how this new Ireland doesn't suit me at all. I suppose now is as good a time as any to tell you what happened to me in the old place in the Glen. Well I was sitting at the fire one winter's evening, minding my own business and watching the nine o'clock news when I thought I heard a noise outside in the yard. I had a look out the window by the front door but all I could see was a car parked on the road by the gate. No sign of anyone. Then I heard a dog bark and made the mistake of opening the door. Two big fellows pushed in shouting: "Where's the money?" or some such thing. They didn't sound like locals to me. I had heard the country was full of non-nationals, as they were called.

Foreigners we called them in the old days. Anyway, they knocked me to the floor and kept shouting about money. I told them I was a poor man with no money, but they weren't having any of it. "We know you have money in the house and we'll tear the place apart until we find it," they yelled. They had wool caps pulled down over their faces like, what do they call them, balaclavas. They rooted in drawers, pulled the mattress off the bed and the cushions off the sofa but found nothing. Then they gave me a few belts and left me lying on the floor. When they left they told me they'd be back to get me if I called the Guards.

After a while, I phoned Bud Heffernan at The Shebeen along the road and told him what happened. He was down like a shot and brought me up to the house. He insisted that I stay the night, not that I slept a wink but I felt safe and that was the main thing. The next morning the Guards were told all about it. Apparently, I wasn't the only victim as they had done the same to other old people living on their own in the area. No one knew exactly who they were but everyone was sure they were non-nationals, probably from Eastern Europe, the worst kind. They moved around the country, victimizing poor defenseless pensioners, like myself. Bud Heffernan, God be good to him, pulled a few strings and got me into the Nursing Home in town and I've been here, happy as Larry, ever since.

Now if only I could get a good look at the town. I haven't laid eyes on the Main Street since I got here. Young John Fitzgerald has promised to take me out for a spin one of these days but there's no sign of him yet. I suppose he's very busy since the funeral and all. I wonder if any of the old shops are still there. God, I remember well the morning Woolworth's opened. It was a school morning and the start was postponed because the Brothers knew everyone would want to have a look around first before they came in to school. The street was mobbed and you couldn't draw a leg in the shop when they opened the doors at nine o'clock. Finally, a shop where you buy nearly everything you'd ever want, if you had the money that is. There it was right in the middle of the Main Street, across the road from the Post Office and dwarfing The Black Rock that was the biggest shop in town up to that. It was big to me at the time, anyway. Now I wonder if Lipton's is still there. Probably not. And what about Coman's and

Costigan's, the chemist and Kiely's Bakery? All the old names. They were all such fine establishments, as they were called. I'm nearly afraid to see the town now, after all these years.

I remember wide streets with plenty of room for parking. I noticed though, on the way to the cemetery, that the streets seemed very narrow with cars and vans on both sides, the buildings looked smaller too and everywhere could do with a coat of paint. I think the hotel was missing a letter in its name. Ah sure, maybe it was my imagination. I'll get a better look when young John comes to take me out for a spin, one of these days.

BLESS ME FATHER

Paddy thought his parish church would be nearly empty and hung around the gate trying to pluck up the courage to face in and get it over with. It was usually deserted, but strangely not today. Then he remembered it was the First Friday, a particularly busy time for Confession. It would be, wouldn't it? Inside, by the dim light of the sanctuary lamp, he had a look around to see if the usual nosey biddies with their big ears were sitting near the Confessional trying to hear what was being said. Mind you, as a rule they sat near Fr. Dwyer's box as he was hard of hearing and asked people to "speak up." As youngsters, Paddy and his friends thought this was hilarious.

In fact, that's how the whole town heard about Sonny Ryan blaming his wife for fiddling a raffle he held in the Travel Agency. Sonny had a sign in the window celebrating twenty years in business. Anyone who bought an airline ticket from his agency in the next month would have their name entered in a raffle for one hundred pounds. It was a lot of money in those days. It would buy two round trip tickets

to London, for example. Anyway, one evening when they were having their tea, Sonny's wife told him she had a winner for his raffle.

"No you don't," he insisted, "it's going to be done fair and square. If you get up to any of your tricks you'll have to tell the priest in Confession."

And she did, but unfortunately Fr. Dwyer was having a particularly hard day with his hearing aid batteries running low and could be heard shouting at her all over the Church.

"What? You what? Oh Holy God."

Today would be a different story. After all the years of more or less making up sins, he actually had something to confess and would not be wasting the priest's time. He now had a big one. Finally, he thought, a mortaller, as they called it in Dublin. He'd just have to get it over with and hope for the best. Maybe, just maybe, the Parish Priest would be in a good mood and give him a light penance. The line was moving very slowly and he noticed that the boys, especially, when they came out of the box were looking up to heaven indicating he was in a foul humour and doling out decades of the Rosary as penances. Paddy expected the worst but no penance would make up for what he had to confess.

"Bless me Father, for I have sinned. It's a month since my last confession."

"Hurry up young man," said the priest, "I haven't got all day."

"Well Father, it's like this."

"Are you going to make your Confession or will I have to drag it out of you?"

"No, Father. Sorry, Father. I had sex, Father."

"Holy Mother of God! Do you know what you're saying?"

"I do, Father and I'm very sorry."

“Not nearly as sorry as you’re going to be when I’m finished with you.”

“Father, it was my first time and I didn’t mean it to happen.”

“But you let it happen didn’t you, young man and I dare say you enjoyed it.”

“Father, I said I’m sorry. I feel dreadful about it and now I’m afraid the girl might be pregnant.”

“Well, it’s a bit late for sorry now, isn’t it?”

Paddy thought the confessional was stifling and could smell the wax burning on the shrine right outside. He thought he could hear feet shuffling back and forth as they were supposedly lighting votive candles. Was that sniggering he heard? There was no stopping the Parish Priest, though.

“Do the Brothers teach you anything? What will your poor parents say when they hear about it? And they will, you know. You can be sure of that. You’re going to break your poor mother’s heart and bring shame on your whole family.”

“But Father, I…”

“Don’t interrupt me when I speaking to you. What about the poor girl and her family? Have you thought about that? Next thing we know, the pair of you will run off to pagan England and never show your faces here again. I’ve seen it happen too often.”

“I don’t know what to do, Father. I need your advice. Should I go and tell her father? He’ll kill me, you know.”

“And so he should, you young pup. If you were mine I’d thresh you to within an inch of your life. Have you no respect for the Commandments or the Blessed Virgin? The Catholic Church doesn’t want any truck with the likes of you, Sonny. I have a good mind to run you out of here now and tell you never to come back.”

“You can’t do that, Father. You must give me absolution. Aren’t you supposed to forgive sinners?” Paddy thought he had a good point there.

“I’ll tell you what, Sonny. First and foremost I don’t have to take lip from you. I’m not supposed, as you say, to do anything. The likes of you keep me awake at night. You and your equals think you can ride roughshod over the Ten Commandments without a bother on you. Well, you’re wrong about that, too. Get out of here and I never want to see your face again. Do you hear me? I know who you are. Now get out!”

Poor Paddy was speechless. He never expected this. He could feel himself blushing. He was sure everyone in the Church could hear the priest. He had no option but to get up off his knees, leave the confessional with everyone staring at him, nearly run down the side-aisle and out the door to the street.

He knew he couldn’t tell Betty what had he’d done, although she was sure to hear about it. And certainly he couldn’t tell her that he told the priest in confession about what had happened. “You’re such an eejit,” she’d say. He knew he had a big decision to make and the sooner the better. Jesus! What a mess.

THE LETTER

Paddy had a routine. Every night he watched the nine o’clock news and then made himself a cup of tea. Then he would sit in the armchair under the standard lamp in his room and either read from a collection of stories by William Trevor or opened his battered suitcase, which he kept in the wardrobe.

He had a shoe-box full of letters. They all had the same handwriting and he estimated there were more than a hundred of them. He never counted them but felt sure there had to be that number.

This particular evening he again pulled out the grubbiest, most dog-eared letter in the box. He knew it well and loved reading it. It always gave him a kind of glow and he found he had to blow his nose every time he read it. He couldn't wait to read it again.

Dear Paddy,

I hope this finds you well. I'm sure you're surprised to hear from me after all these years. I'm sure I told you Sean used to get upset in the early days when he'd see your letters arrive in the post. "What does he want now?" he'd ask. "Why doesn't he leave us alone? He's the one who decided to go to England. He made his bed, he can lie on it." It made life easier for me, I must say, when the letters stopped coming.

Well here I am, years later, asking for a favour. Young John has left school. He's eighteen now, as I'm sure you know and has applied for a job at Shannon Airport.

I wonder if you know anyone there who could put in a good word for him. I'm very worried about him, Paddy, as he and his father don't get along at all at all. He's like a red rag to a bull and very unsettled at home. He has no interest in sport or the family business. I recall you were never one for sports yourself, Paddy and he reminds me of you every time I look at him. His brother Gerry is a big strong lad, tough enough for hurling and football, but young John is much different. Wiry. That's what I'd call him. Not unlike yourself at his age.

Anyway, I didn't mean to go on and on like this. Maybe I'm getting soft in my old age. Where did the years go, I often wonder? Sure, you're the same age yourself. What am I talking about? If you know anyone in Shannon it would be great. I'm sure you'll do your best.

I'm like an owl, Paddy, and can't stop myself. I often think about the old days when we were all together. We had such fun. I'll always remember that day in Tramore when I told you Sean and I had decided to get married. I don't ever bring it up with himself. I think he's still raging that he couldn't go. I felt I had to tell you our news and I wanted to be alone with you when I told you. I knew you'd be disappointed but I never expected you to take it so hard. Neither did I expect what happened to happen. I don't know about you but I never went to confession again. I had to tell Sean what happened and it changed him, for the worst, I'd say now. He was very angry, got a bit rough with me and said if you can do it with him, you can do it with me. I was very shocked and then not long afterwards I was expecting a baby.

Sean had the family business with roots in the town, Paddy, and I needed something stable like that. I had no home life of my own, as my father was a martyr to the bottle and my mother was "delicate" as they used to say. She suffered from her nerves. You had no idea what you wanted to do with yourself. I heard someone say you had the makings of a Brother. What a waste of a good man that would have been. Mind you, Sean and I had to get married in a hurry as young John was born the following St. Patrick's Day. A bit premature was the word around here. Let them talk all they want. It's none of their business. It never was and never will be.

I can't believe this letter is so long, Paddy. I was just going to write and ask you for the favour but I have so much to say to you after all these years. Young John is the spitting image of you, Paddy and I often wonder to myself if he was the result of our day in Tramore. I would never say that to anyone but you know what I mean, Paddy. Sean would kill me if he saw this letter. I hope you destroy it the minute you've read it.

God bless you, Paddy and maybe one day you'll pay us all a visit.

All my love

Betty Fitzgerald

Paddy always hated finishing the letter, as he never wanted it to end. Every time he read it, he felt the same way. It was a combination of joy and disappointment. Hard to believe, he might have a son after all these years. He had often wondered but to him this was proof positive. He remembered when he got the letter originally he was still in London working at the airport. Oh, he put the word in for young John and he got the job all right. And for ages he thought about coming home for a visit. Eventually, he decided against it. He'd leave well enough alone. No one would ever be the wiser.

CHRISTINE JOHNSON

One day when John took Paddy for a spin they went up the Coach Road – a throwback to Bianconi's time - where they could sit on a bench with the town behind them and look down the length of the Glen. They couldn't see Paddy's old house, as the trees were in the way. This suited him fine. They could see the smoke rising from the chimney of The Shebeen and the sun shone brightly. Paddy seemed in good form.

"I love this place," he said quietly. "I used think about it all the time when I was in England. I always said I'd want my ashes scattered here when the time comes. I don't think I have too long left. I have something to tell you, John. The doctor is a bit worried about my ticker and I can feel the old bones beginning to freeze up. He wants me to take some tablets, but I'm not keen. Never was."

"Paddy, you'll have to look after yourself and do what he tells you. What will I do for stories when you're gone?"

“You’ll do fine. It’s time you took a look around and found a real job anyway instead of hanging around here. Is your father not tired of you yet?”

“Leave him out of it, Paddy. For one thing you’re not going anywhere until you tell me about Christine Johnson.”

“I suppose this is as good a time as any,” Paddy said, opening his jacket, making himself comfortable.

“She was very important to me for a while. I met her at the Belfry outside Birmingham. I told you how I moved up there from London. A nice promotion and a big change of scenery as Birmingham isn’t a bit like London. It’s much smaller with a different immigrant population for one thing. Anyway, in those days the Belfry was a dance hall, more of a nightclub, in fact. Now it’s a golf course and country club. A few of us used go out there on Saturday nights to hear reggae music and that’s where I ran into her. Christine, I mean. I can see you smiling, but reggae was really big in Birmingham with all the West Indians about. The Irish loved it. Always have. Did you know Bob Marley used to fill Dalymount Park in Dublin when he toured over here? 40,000 Irish people jammed in swaying to the beat. Jimmy Cliff was a regular at the Belfry in my day and it was always a great night out.”

“I can hardly believe what you’re telling me, Paddy Daly. You and reggae. Are you serious?”

“Never more serious in my life. Your poor mother, God rest her soul, wasn’t too keen when I mentioned my new friend in a letter. That was a big mistake. I should never have told her anything about her. I think I might have upset her. She never brought her up again after I mentioned her. Never asked about her. Who she was? Nothing.”

He was sitting with a faraway look in his eyes soaking up the bit of sun.

“Are you comfortable, Paddy? Do you want to move down the hill to the hotel and sit on the terrace?”

“No, no. I’m fine here. Catch a bit of sun while we can.”

“O.K. Back to your story. Were you still writing to my mother regularly? My father let it slip that you used to write to her in the early days.”

“Oh yes. I found it very hard to settle away from home. England is a strange place for an Irishman, especially one without a family and if you’re not fond of a pint.

When I think of all the lads I knew who pissed away their wages in the pubs at the week-end rather than go back to their digs and sit alone in a room watching the box. It was very sad. In fact, I saw a programme about it only last month about it. The forgotten emigrants or unconsidered something or other it was called. Very sad and it could easily have been my lot. Your mother was a great help and I used look forward to her letters.

Christine changed all that. Her mother was English but her father was from Jamaica. There was a lot of prejudice in those days. But I kept to myself. Didn’t leave myself open to any smart remarks. I think a lot of the airport lads, who knew about her, envied me as she was beautiful and really enjoyed dancing.

She used to call me Paddy the Irish-mon and would make a beeline for me when she’d see me arrive at The Belfry. She spoke to me the first night because she said I had the Jamaican colours, green and yellow, in my tie. It must have been the light. I thought it was blue and gold for Tipperary. Then she said she recognized me from the number 16 bus. I’m sure I must have been twenty years older than her but before long I found myself wondering if she would be there at the week-end. I couldn’t get her out of my mind. The lads used give me a hard time about her. Remind me to tell you about the time I took her to Germany for the week-end.”

“You’re a cute hoor, Paddy. You’re having me on, right?”

“Not at all,” he said smiling broadly. “It was a great time and probably my happiest in England. It didn’t last long, though.”

“Why? What happened?”

“I found she lived not far from me in Handsworth, a big West Indian community, with bars and clubs going until all hours of the night. I saw her on the bus a few times, but never sat beside her or spoke to her. She was always talking and laughing with her young friends. Anyway, one night her mother and herself came round to my digs and rang the front-door bell. I lived in a very nice, red brick house, with a nice family. They respected my privacy. I always paid my rent on time and I never came home drunk or caused a fuss. I had the back room downstairs which opened onto their little garden. However, when the Johnsons called to the door the landlady, Mrs. Simmons, nearly had a fit.”

‘You have visitors,’ she said severely when I answered her knock on my room door. ‘I don’t want these people in my home and I don’t want them ringing my bell again, ever. There’s a crowd of them outside looking for you. I hope there won’t be any trouble. Do I make myself clear, Mr. Daly?’

I went out to the sidewalk to talk to them and pulled the front door after me. Christine was very upset and said: ‘I’m sorry, Paddy, but my mother wants to talk to you privately. One of my brothers followed you home when he saw you getting off the bus. He recognized you from the Belfry. That’s how we know where you live.’

Her mother, in a thick Brummie accent – that’s what they call it there, you know, Brummie, short for Brummagen, the old name for Birmingham – said:

‘I’m sure you’re a very nice man, Paddy, but I want you to stay away from my daughter. She’s very young and doesn’t see the problems ahead. Look at what happened to me. I fell in love with her Dad and my life changed immediately. My own family, more or less, threw me out and his family thinks I’m some kind of - I don’t know what they think I am. But they’ve never accepted me and I don’t want

that life for our Christine. Do you understand what I'm saying, Paddy?' she asked, on the verge of tears. "As I said, I'm sure you're a nice man but you're old enough to understand what I'm getting at. Do you see yourself bringing our Christine home to Ireland to meet your family?"

I couldn't answer that question.

Christine was standing to the side and I could see she was crying.

'I'm sorry, Paddy,' she sobbed, "'but when my Dad found out I fancied you, he wouldn't hear of it. He threatened to send me off to Jamaica to live with his family, if I don't stop seeing you.'

"Well, John, I didn't know what to say. I had never met any of her family and here I was causing a problem at home for her. I didn't even know she fancied me but it felt nice to hear her say it, I must say. I promised her mother I wouldn't cause any more trouble in her house and would give the Belfry a wide berth from there on."

As they walked away I could hear Christine say: "Are you happy now?"

"And did you stay away?" John asked.

"Did I stay away from the Belfry? Of course. I had given my word, hadn't I? Then one day on the way home from work, I saw her sitting on her own on the bus. She smiled, came over and sat down beside me."

'I'm sorry about what happened, Paddy. My Mum thinks you're a lovely man,' she said. 'But I think she felt she had to do what she did.'

She put her hand on my arm: 'What about you? Are you OK?'

"I was," I said, "until I heard you fancied me. You never said that to me when we were dancing. Of course, we were laughing all the time and we didn't exactly chat, did we? I miss seeing you. What are we going to do about it?"

‘There are other places we can go,’ she said quietly, handing me a card from a club in Handsworth. ‘I’ll be here this coming Saturday. It’s not far away and I don’t want to go back to the Belfry, unless you’re there. Tell the bouncer you’re with me.’

“We had a few nice quiet nights there, we had our week-end in Heidelberg, but she didn’t seem to be relaxed the way she used to be. She danced all right and had a few rum and cokes, but she was always looking over my shoulder or hers as if she was afraid someone she knew might see her. She told me I was imagining it. But a few weeks later the bouncer told me ‘Paddy the Irishman is not welcome here’ and that Miss Christine, as he called her, wasn’t there. I never saw her again. Probably, just as well. I often wondered if her father had actually sent her to Jamaica for a while. Her mother was probably right. Either way, I couldn’t see myself bringing her home to Glen of Aherlow or out to Heffernan’s, as you can well imagine. I’d probably be condemned from the pulpit.”

HEIDELBERG

One day I showed up at the Nursing Home unannounced on the off chance that I’d find Paddy in a chatty mood. He was sitting by a window staring out at the Galtee Mountains. He wasn’t his usual dapper self but was wearing a cardigan and slacks a bit the worse for wear.

“You look like you’ve had a late night, Paddy.”

“Don’t talk to me, I was up late watching *The Student Prince* again. I just love that film. Brings me back. Do you know Ann Blyth is of Irish stock? I don’t suppose you do.”

“Never heard of her,” I said. “Before my time. What do you mean, it takes you back?”

“When I told you about Christine Johnson in Birmingham, I suppose you suspected I left out bits of the story. I’m sure you thought as much but didn’t want to say anything.”

“Yes, well you read my mind there. I was going to bring her up again and ask about the untold story. What has *The Student Prince* got to do with her?”

“Well, you mightn’t know about this, but working for an airline has its perks. We had access to lots of free, cut-price trips, going everywhere. I decided to risk it and ask her to come on one with me. A little adventure I called it and she was game.”

He settled himself comfortably without taking his eyes off the Galtees and launched into the story.

“One night in the Belfry, I had a brochure about a long week-end in Heidelberg in my pocket and showed it to her when we sat down after a dance.

She said ““Germany? Are you crazy?””

I told her I was never more serious. This wasn’t Berlin or Munich. This was Heidelberg, which is unlike any other city in Germany. Everyone who goes there loves it. We’ll fly to Frankfurt and it’s only an hour away. There’s a beautiful castle and they set *The Student Prince* there. Very romantic, I said. She never heard of *The Student Prince*, either. But she was intrigued that I knew all about it.

‘How much will it cost?’ she asked. Flights are free, I told her and hotel accommodation the same. We’ll only put our hands in our pockets for some meals and a few jars.

‘Sounds like a good deal to me,’ she said laughing. ‘When are we off?’

Hold your horses, I said. I have to make a booking but I’m looking at next weekend. Is that good for you?

‘Of course, it is,’ she said laughing. ‘I never go anywhere, as you know.’

“On Monday at work, I took care of the trip and told her I’d meet her at the airport nice and early the morning of the flight. She had to come up with a story for her mother and father, that she was going to London for the week-end and certainly couldn’t tell them she was going to the Continent with me, Paddy the Irish-mon. She rang me at work a few times during the week. That was a surprise, as she hadn’t done that before. She was so excited and asked about German money, who else was going, that kind of thing. She said she wasn’t going to tell her friends until she got back. She wanted to know who else was going and I told a group of about twenty, some I knew, some I didn’t. She said she didn’t care as long as she was with me. I liked that.”

“So what happened,” I asked. “I can’t wait to hear all about it.”

“The morning of the flight she was a vision. She wore tight jeans, a nice sweater and a leather jacket with boots. I got some razzing I can tell you. Me with a young bird, is how they put it. Mind you they all said she was gorgeous and wanted to know who she was. What airline did she work for? Little did they know. She was outgoing as usual, smiled at everyone and hung on to my arm tightly. She was nervous on the flight and ate nothing, as she had eaten at home. Her father insisted on her having a good breakfast before her train trip all the way to London. She spent the flight reading the brochures about Heidelberg. She wanted to see everything.

At the airport in Frankfurt we boarded a special bus for the trip on the autobahn and saw the German countryside with the mountains on one side and, as we approached Heidelberg, the River Neckar on the other. We were staying in one of the most luxurious hotels in the old part of town. Our floor was all suites. At the desk the clerk, a very tight-lipped German, ignored Christine when he heard her English accent and had me register for both of us. She just shrugged and turned away as I signed us in for a double room.

‘What’s his problem?’ she asked as we headed to the lift, ‘the World Cup was twenty years ago. You’d think he’d be over it by now.’

We had the rest of the day to ourselves until the reception at five o'clock. This gave the hotel a chance to welcome everyone and sell its services to the travel industry. Then we would all have dinner together in the hotel dining-room and go out on the town for some fun, as the stuffy spokesperson instructed us."

"So, go on. Tell me. What did ye do?"

"Christine and I spent the afternoon exploring the old streets, riding on the tram and we headed up to the castle for a look around. We agreed we'd do the tour the following day, Saturday. It was the first time we had spent any time together away from the Belfry and we both got to see each other differently. Up to now whenever we were alone there was always noise, music and people interrupting. We were getting to know each other and I learned she was going to college at night and was studying to become a teacher. She had never even mentioned it before. Even though I was twenty years older than her, she had an old head and was very interested in my working life and where I came from.

'Not too many Jamaicans in Tipperary, I imagine' she laughed.

"Not that I've noticed," I said. "I must say you'd stand out."

She laughed out loud when I told her there was a small village in Tipperary called New Birmingham. She even suggested we might visit it some day.

"Give them something to look at," she said.

'Speaking of standing out, I'm standing out here, too, Paddy. Apart from a few American servicemen, everyone is very white and even blonde. Teutonic is the word, isn't it? Now I see what they mean.'

Does it bother you? I asked.

‘In a way it does. It’s not like Birmingham, where everyone seems to fit in. Or at least they do in their own neighbourhoods. Don’t you think so?’

We headed back to the hotel to change for the evening. I had even brought a suit with me. A big step for me. I felt like dressing up. Christine had a colourful, tailored trouser suit she had just bought in Lewis’s. It looked expensive to me and it would look great on her, I thought. She got dressed while I was in the bathroom and I must say she took my breath away when I saw her in it for the first time.

‘I bought this specially for this trip, Paddy. Do you like it?’

I put my arms around her and kissed her and told her it was smashing.

‘Easy,’ she said. ‘Be careful. Don’t wrinkle it.’

She was pleased, I could tell.

In the lift on the way down, while we were alone and she said ‘I have something to tell you. I hope you won’t be too disappointed.’

With that, the lift stopped and four people got on. I was wondering what she had to say. But she smiled at me and said nothing. Crossing the lobby she tried again but someone from our group stopped to chat. Where had we gone? Did we take the tour? All I could think was why don’t you leave us alone? We’re fine.

Later during the reception and dinner she tried once or twice to get me on my own but without any success, as the crowd was in rare form and talking about what we would all do for the evening. A place called “Nelly O’Brien’s Irish Pub” was the choice. We were told it’s a bar run by an Irishman, needless to say and catering to all kinds of music. That night they had a country and western band on stage with a lead singer who fancied himself to be Johnny Cash. Christine got a great kick out of hearing me singing along to “Folsom Prison” and “The Green Green Grass of Home.”

It was well after midnight when we made our way back to the hotel. Everyone was hanging, I can tell you, except young Christine who was wide awake. We headed up in the lift and found our rooms. As I said, we were all on the same floor. We were no sooner in the door to our room than I hung the “Do Not Disturb” sign on the door and took off my jacket and tie. I asked her if she wanted a drink from the bar and she nodded yes.

‘I’m going to change. I want to get out of this suit and relax,’ she said and a few minutes later came out of the bathroom wearing the hotel’s towelling robe. She looked great with her dark skin contrasting with the bright white colour of the robe.

Paddy stopped talking and got up to saunter around the room.

“John, I’m not sure I can go on from here. I’m feeling a bit uncomfortable.”

“I want to hear the rest of the story,” I said. “You can’t stop now. Maybe I’ll leave the recorder with you and you can add on the rest when I’m not here.”

“Not at all,” said Paddy. “I could never use one of those yokes. Would you mind turning it off?” I obliged and waited for Paddy to speak. Paddy stood up from his chair, turned away and stood staring out the window. He cleared his throat and went on.

“I never thought I’d say this to anyone, least of all to you, John. What she was trying to tell me all day was that she had never been with a man before. We spent that night together and only left the room for meals on Saturday. We didn’t even bother with the castle tour. On Sunday, we all went to an outdoor performance of *The Student Prince* in the grounds of the old castle. It was magnificent. The castle overlooks the old part of town.

It was a lovely bright sunny day, with the audience seated around the courtyard. They used the castle with the stairways and archways for the set and in one scene had the horse drawn coach, full of

students, gallop up through the audience into the yard. We were seated at the front and Christine held on to me tighter than ever. I don't think she was ever that close to a horse before. In one scene I'll never forget, the young woman playing the Ann Blyth part, sang to the Prince from a window in the castle. Magnificent was the only word for it.

Then we went home to Birmingham and that was the end of that.

A few days later her mother came round to my digs, as I told you already and warned me to stay away from her. I don't know if she knew we had been away together. One last thing, because I know you're curious, in Heidelberg, that first night, she told me she had been trying to tell me she had been saving herself for a good man like me. Probably the nicest thing anyone ever said to me.

I think I'll go for a bit of a nap now, John, if you don't mind. Call round to see me again when you get the chance."

GILLIAN WITH A "G"

Talking to John Fitzgerald had set Paddy thinking about his days in Birmingham. Christine was one thing but he hadn't thought about Gillian for ages. In fact, he could barely remember what she looked like. They lived in the same house but he seldom saw her. Hardly at all for the first year but then the trip to Canada seemed to open the door for their regular chats. One Saturday morning, sitting in his armchair in the sunroom, as it was called, staring out at the Galtee Mountains, it came flooding back.

Something had happened to her. He could tell. There was something odd about her look. Not sad, but wistful. He had neither seen nor heard her for a good week and now she never smiled, just nodded. She seemed paler than usual. He wondered if she wasn't sleeping. That look. He used to see

her on the stairs nearly every day. Once or twice in the early days he thought he heard her say his name. He might have been mistaken. She was the daughter. She went to work in town and stayed in every evening. That's how it looked to him.

Her mother, the landlady, once referred to her as Gillian, with a G, she said. That's how he thought of her – Gillian with a G. There had to be a story. When she smiled she was beautiful. Otherwise she looked sad. Disappointed, maybe. She looked at the ground avoiding eye contact, went to work and came home on the bus. She always wore a black leather coat with a hood. She didn't look like the others on the bus and would sit on the outside of the seat hoping no one would ask her to make room. But the bus was nearly always full, so that didn't work.

One day they walked home from the stop together. Well, not exactly together.

She walked about five yards in front of him. He didn't speed up and she didn't slow down. When they got to the front door, she used her key and held it open for him. She smiled. Beautiful.

Paddy lived downstairs in the back room, with a window opening on to the garden. The bathroom was directly over his room and Gillian lived on the top floor. He was allowed use it Tuesday and Thursday. Occasionally he would see her in her pink towelling robe coming or going. She always smiled. Beautiful. He didn't have a robe but decided he'd better get one. That way he could take his time instead of running up and down the stairs with a towel around his waist, hoping she wouldn't see him. Or was he hoping she would?

One sunny day, must have been a Saturday afternoon, he was sitting reading the paper in the garden when Mrs. Simmons asked him if he'd like a cup of tea. Of course he said yes. It was one of the few times she had ever spoken to him except when he paid his rent. Even then it was only; "Punctual as usual, Mr. Daly. Everything alright?"

Anyway, on this day she sat down, asked him about his job, did he have any family left in Ireland and told him that Gillian's young man, Jonathan, had gone to Canada. On a project, she said. He had never met anyone whose job was a project, so he was suitably impressed.

"They're saving up to get married. He knows Gillian would only want the best of everything, like she's used to. She went to visit him in Toronto, you know."

Paddy said he was surprised that anyone would go off and leave an attractive young woman like Gillian standing around waiting for him in England. Mrs. Simmons said she was surprised herself, but that's what Gillian had told her and she had no reason not to believe her daughter. He asked her if she ever hears from him and she answered occasionally. Odd the thought but decided not to press the issue.

"You're such a nice, serious young man, Mr. Daly," she said. "Not a bit like the other young men around here. Do you mind if I call you Paddy?"

"Not at all," he said. "All my friends call me Paddy."

A few days later he met Gillian in the hallway and she said her mother was wondering if he'd like to come in on Sunday evening and watch television with them. It was the first time she ever actually spoke to him.

"Very nice of you, Miss Simmons," he said. "I'd like that."

"Call me Gillian," she said. "That's with a G, by the way."

"I hear you went to Toronto. You know I work at the airport. What airline did you fly on?"

"BOAC" she said. "Only the best."

"And how was Toronto?"

She shook her head and looked away.

“We’ll see you on Sunday then?”

He decided he’d pop in to see *Sunday Night at the London Palladium*. It had all the big stars of the day, Kathy Kirby, Tom Jones, Tommy Cooper, Frankie Vaughan, Jimmy Tarbuck and his favourite, Dusty Springfield. Now and again they would feature a big American star like Sammy Davis Junior. When he opened the sitting-room door they were sitting in a semi-circle in front of the television and everyone moved a few inches to make room for him. Gillian nodded and smiled. He felt welcome.

It was a good show for a Sunday night, but a bit uneven. Some weeks he couldn’t wait for it to start and sometimes he couldn’t wait for it to end. Too many of the artistes, as they were called, were very impressed with themselves. Gillian and Mrs. Simmons seemed to enjoy it. Mr. Simmons, Percy, sat quietly smoking and said very little.

The Wednesday play was his other favourite. Mrs. Simmons didn’t like it at all as she thought it was too crude for her sensibilities. Yet she sat there, not willing to miss a word, while pretending to ignore it. Percy, Gillian and I loved it. All the top British actors appeared on it, before they became famous and looked down their noses at television.

Gillian would head for the kitchen to make tea when the play ended. One week her mother whispered to me: “Ask her about Toronto.”

When she brought the tray in, I asked her straight out.

“I’d rather not talk about it,” she said.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I said, “I was hoping to hear about your flight. The word is BOAC have wonderful service on the Transatlantic. I’ve only ever travelled into Europe. Frankfurt, Rome and Athens, places like that.”

“You’ve been to all those places,” Mrs. Simmons piped up. “I am impressed.”

“It’s easy enough when you work for an airline,” I said.

“Apart from London and Manchester, I haven’t travelled much,” Gillian said. “I was disappointed in Toronto, the bit I saw. “

“What about Jonathan, your young man?” Mrs. Simmons jumped in. “Didn’t he show you around?”

“I don’t want to talk about it. I don’t want to hear his name mentioned.”

“Keep a civil tongue in your head, young lady,” Mrs. Simmons snapped. “That’s no way to talk when we have company.”

Gillian scraped her chair back, stood up and said:

“Good night. I think I’ll have an early night.”

When she left, her mother rolled her eyes and said: “Something must have happened. I can’t get her to talk about it. Percy? Has she said anything to you?”

Percy shook his head.

Later, I heard the water running as she filled the bath overhead. I imagined her lying back and relaxing and wondered what had happened in Canada. I must have dozed off and woke to a tap on the door. It wasn’t locked, so I said: “Come in.”

She was wearing her bathrobe with a towel wrapped around her head. No make-up. Beautiful.

“I’m sorry, Paddy” she said. “But they’re driving me crazy. I didn’t mean to snap at them or you and just popped in to apologize. I think they’ve gone to bed, finally.”

“Do you want to sit down for a minute?” I asked. “We never get the chance to talk. Do you want to tell me about it? What happened?”

She had never darkened his door before and here she was smiling and smelling of talcum powder.

“I’ll tell you all about it another time,” she said. “As I said, I just popped in to apologize for being so rude.”

The following Saturday morning she tapped on his door again. He hadn’t seen her on the bus or around the house all week.

“Paddy, are you doing anything? Do you have time for a chat?” she asked.

“Sure. Come on in, Gillian.”

“I’ll just put the kettle on. It’s all I can offer you, I’m afraid.”

She looked around the room and opted for the only armchair.

“I need to talk to someone, anyone, about my trip to Canada to see Jonathan. It was a disaster. I hate to say it but I came home after a few days without seeing him.”

“Do they know? Have you told them?”

“Oh, God, no. I’d be too embarrassed. I haven’t even told my friends.”

“You didn’t see him? Where was he? Milk and Sugar?”

“Yes, please. One spoon.”

“Well, it’s a long story but when I got to the address he’d sent me, I found it was a small hotel. They were very nice but didn’t know where he was. When I told them I had come from England to see him, they told me he had moved on West, to Calgary or somewhere and handed me a bundle of the letters addressed to him. His mail, they said. They were the letters I had written. I had sent one a week for a

while and then every few weeks. They were all there unopened. I didn't know what to say. I was mortified. Here I was in Toronto, knowing nobody. The hotel offered to put me up for a few nights until I made up my mind."

"That was nice of them. What did you do?"

"I sat in my room and cried. I was exhausted after the flight and now this."

"I felt like such a fool. He had told me his company asked him to go to Canada to work on a special project. It would mean extra money and would help us get married sooner. I thought it would be worth it."

"Was he having you on, do you think?" Paddy asked.

"Was he ever," she spat out angrily. "He even persuaded me to sleep with him before he left. We were always very careful. You know what I mean, Paddy. Well, I was, anyway. But in the weeks before he left, we didn't bother. I was terrified for weeks that I might be pregnant. When I think of it, now. Oh my God."

"I can't believe you're telling me all this, Gillian. But it probably helps to say it to someone. Anyone except your parents."

"I'm sure you're right. Thanks for listening to me. I had to tell someone. I won't keep you any longer. Maybe I'll pop in another day and you can tell me all about you."

The following Saturday she knocked on the door again. She was wearing a tight tee shirt and jeans. Very nice.

"My Mum and Dad are gone to the open air market. They go every Saturday unless it's raining cats and dogs. I have to ask you. I saw you on the bus chatting with that West Indian girl. You seemed very friendly." She was smiling, interested.

“Oh, you mean, Christine. That’s a long story.”

“I can imagine,” she said. “How do you know her? Is she the girl that came round here one night and set my Mum off?”

“Yes, that’s her. Her family wasn’t too keen on yours truly. We just bumped into each other on the bus by chance the other day.”

“So it’s over, is it?”

“I’m afraid so but it was fun while it lasted.”

“What will we do, Paddy?” she asked, sitting on the floor by his armchair. “Do you listen to music. Do you follow football? Aston Villa is my team.”

“Mine too, of the teams around here. In London I used go to Spurs but these midland teams aren’t up to much. The Villa are the best of a bad lot.”

“Listen to you,” she grinned. “The expert on all things British. What do you think of us English girls, then? Do you think we’re all like your Christine?”

“No, I don’t. Some of you are very standoffish. Don’t want anything to do with us Paddy’s. Others are like you, nice and friendly, when you want to be.”

She laughed. “Cheeky bugger!”

She reached up, pulled his head down and kissed him.

“There,” she said. “I’m one of the friendly ones.”

“Now you are, but for the longest time you hardly noticed me and I was dying to talk to you.”

“I knew that,” she said. “I was told to keep my distance from the lodgers. But I get very lonely, especially now that Jonathan’s gone. That day at the airport I asked a few people if they knew you and someone told me where to find you. I was too shy to knock on the office door. I didn’t want to shock you,” she laughed.

“You should have. A few of my mates would have been very impressed to see someone like you asking for me.”

“What do you mean? You’re being cheeky again.”

“No I’m being honest. I’ve had you on a pedestal for ages. I think about you all the time. It’s not easy lying here at night knowing you’re in the bath upstairs.”

“Stop!” she said. “You’re making me blush.”

She reached up again, pulled him down on the floor beside her and they kissed again. Longer this time.

For the next three Saturday’s there was no rain, so her parents went to the open-air market and Gillian called on Paddy. He’d have spent the week wondering if she’d come down to his room. One week she brought him up to show him hers, with the pink bedspread and rose patterned curtains, just as he had imagined it. They laughed a lot, made love carefully and refused to talk about where this might be going, his first real English girl, a Protestant, more than likely. She thought Paddy was just being a careful older man while Paddy knew from experience that this couldn’t last forever. He wasn’t going to get his hopes up. Not yet, anyway.

Then she didn’t show. Not a sound in the house. On Saturday when there was no sign of her he glanced out the window and saw her parents sitting in the garden. Percy was reading *The Evening Mail*. Mrs. Simmons was sitting staring into the distance. She looked as if she had been crying.

“Oh my God,” he thought. “Maybe they’ve found out about us.”

On Sunday evening, without being asked, he went in to join them for “Sunday Night at the London Palladium.” No Gillian. No empty chair. Just the two of them.

“Where’s Gillian?” he asked.

“She’s gone,” Mrs. Simmons said. “Gone to Canada after that Jonathan fellow. He phoned early in the week. There was no talking to her. She got up one morning and just went. Seems she had bought a ticket some time ago, when she was flush and went straight to the airport. I’m surprised she didn’t tell you.”

Percy just sat there, didn’t take his eyes off the screen and said nothing.

It all seems so long ago, Paddy thought. And to tell the truth it was. He never saw her again. He moved digs not long after, to be closer to the airport. He didn’t know if she stayed or came home. All he knew was she never tried to get in touch and she knew well enough where he worked. It was nice while it lasted, though.

Paddy smiled to himself. He would always think of her as Gillian with a G.

HOME IN THE GLEN

Some nights Paddy would sit staring into the turf fire. Here he was, home after all those years in England, in his parent’s house in the Glen of Aherlow. He never tired of saying May the Lord have

Mercy on their Souls and poor Tom's. This was where he spent his childhood. He was still shocked at the turn of events.

His old job at the airport in Birmingham had called his digs and said his Parish Priest in Ireland was trying to find him, as there had been a death in the family. The only family he had left was his brother Tom. Tom had always been in good health, as far as Paddy knew, but he hadn't been in touch with him for a while. Not since Christmas. Tom never bothered with a phone and Paddy knew he could always ring The Shebeen, if he needed to talk to him urgently about something.

He wouldn't even recognize Tom's handwriting if a letter came. Not that Tom ever wrote a letter in his whole life, Paddy had decided. Their mother died a few months after their father. She always said she'd never be able to go on without him. How long ago was that? Years. Good God could it be that long?

So he rang the number he was given. The priest's housekeeper, a bit snippy, mind you, said the Parish Priest was out but that arrangements had been made for his brother's funeral to take place the minute he, Paddy Daly, got home. He remembered her asking if there was any chance he could hurry up and not be delaying everyone. She had no other information and wasn't at all sure she should be telling him anything, anyway. The Parish Priest would be furious if she gave the information to the wrong person.

Paddy packed a suitcase, headed to New Street for the train to Holyhead and the ferry to Dun Laoghaire. He took a bus into Dublin and then the train down home. He said nothing to anyone when he was leaving. He found it easier that way. His digs were paid up to the end of the month, so no problem there. He'd phone and tell them he wouldn't be back. He had made up his mind already. That surprised him. At the station he asked the taxi driver to take him to the Glen and drop him at The Shebeen. He asked for twenty euro and Paddy paid him without an argument. No tip. He asked for twenty and he got twenty. More than enough. Bud Heffernan met him at the door, filled him in and

showed him the death announcement in the newspaper. Obliginglly he then called the Presbytery to let them know Paddy was home.

Tom had been found dead in bed. No one knew how long he'd been there but a few of the lads, having a pint in The Shebeen, noticed the lights were out in the house and heard the dog barking. The dog had been barking the day before, too, someone said. When they approached the house he growled and snarled at them, showing his teeth. They decided he hadn't been fed and broke in the door when they didn't get an answer. As Bud said of the lads: "they're not the better of it yet."

A day or two after Paddy got home a Mass was said and Tom was buried in the old graveyard. They didn't waste any time. A small turnout of neighbours, most of whom shook Paddy's hand and said "sorry for your troubles, Paddy." A few said, "tis well you're looking" and "will you stay around a while?" They didn't wait for an answer and just drifted away, with their heads down.

Bud Heffernan ran Paddy into town the next day, where arrangements were made to have his pension from England paid into the local Bank of Ireland. The Bank Manager was both friendly and efficient. He offered his condolences when Bud told him the circumstances and asked Paddy for some proof of his identity.

"Sure, I'm from here," Paddy said while fumbling in his pocket for something to prove that he was. Tom, like his father before him never had a bank account. His father kept his money under the mattress, like everyone else, as far as he was concerned. He father didn't want anyone knowing his business. Paddy was the same way, but not as bad. At least he didn't think so.

"Are you telling me Mr. Daly that you've lived in England all these years and never had a bank account?" the Bank Manager was at a loss for words.

It dawned on Paddy that he'd better have a good look around the house before he threw anything out. Who knows what might be stashed away?

When he got home he fed the dog and started tidying the house. It could do with a good cleaning after all the years of neglect. Tom had taken to living in one room and the kitchen. What surprised him were the shelves and shelves of books. He couldn't get over his brother Tom being a reader. The same Tom, who left school at fourteen, because he hated it and said he wanted to help out at home, had dozens of books carefully arrayed on homemade bookshelves. Paddy had noticed a few on the dresser in the kitchen, propped up beside the willow-pattern cups and saucers, but most were in the back room and away from prying eyes. It was nobody's business, anyway.

Paddy had seen them when he first arrived but paid no attention. Now he was amused to see that nearly all of the books had been made into films. This may have been Tom's way of making them come to life. Then he found a carton full of videos in the back room. All well-known films made from books, such as *The Great Gatsby*, *Of Mice and Men* and even *Doctor Zhivago*. One of these days he promised himself he'd sit down and go through them carefully. He'd enjoy many of them himself, he knew. Tom must have used the old Morris Minor to run into town to the cinema before he got the video-player. The old car was now sitting in the shed outside gathering dust with chickens and who knows what else living in it. It was of no use to Paddy. He didn't drive.

He noticed the Charles Dickens books with their old-school brown binding and gold lettering including *Oliver Twist*, *Great Expectations* and *A Christmas Carol*.

He was surprised to see Elmore Leonard so well represented. Surprised because he was one of Paddy's personal favourites. No fuss, the opposite of Dickens, in fact, in his mind.

Morris West, Edna O'Brien, William Trevor and Walter Macken. Great for the long winter's evening.

He'd have to get some new bulbs. You couldn't see your hand, as it was, once the sun went down in the Glen,

Roddy Doyle's Barrytown Trilogy – *The Commitments*, *The Snapper* and *The Van* represented Ireland. He even had a copy of *Dubliners* by James Joyce and a tape of *The Dead* by John Huston. “Snow was general all over Ireland.” He loved that line and could hear Donal McCann's voice so clearly in his head. He opened the book at the last page of the story and read; “It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried.”

He wiped a tear away as he couldn't help thinking of poor Tom, in his freshly dug grave just down the road. Then it dawned on him that he'd be there all day if he didn't get a move on and not be distracted so easily. So he took his glasses off and put them in their case. That would put a stop to his reading.

Later, after his tea, he found his mind wandering again. This was where he grew up and left at eighteen, the summer after his Leaving Certificate. He didn't even wait for the results. Things would never be the same again. Him, Sean and Betty. Well, him and Betty, really. It ruined everything. Changed everyone's life.

While he couldn't see himself staying at home, he never planned on going to England. Most of the time now, he's glad he did. Worked away. Never went to Night School even though he probably should have. Not much point as far as he was concerned. Big mistake that. The company should have insisted. He had a decent enough job, if not much of a life. Living in digs is hard. You're alone more than you'd think and the landlady wouldn't want you hanging around the house. No wonder most of the lads spent their spare time in the pub. He had never learned to drive, which probably worked against him and never saw any prospects of being able to afford a car. Then again, if he had settled down no doubt he would have bought a car for the family. A family car sounds nice.

London was one thing. Birmingham another. He was younger in London and still played a bit of football with the lads from work, had few pints, some music and a bit of fun. A trip up to Archway to

see Joe Dolan and the Drifters and other showbands from Ireland was a highlight, although there were few enough of them, he remembered.

Birmingham was another story. He had very few friends outside of work, as most of them were married men and women. Of course, there was always Christine, but that didn't last long. Too good to be true, probably. He wondered about her and if her Dad sent her back to Jamaica. He never saw her or her brothers on the bus afterwards. They made each other happy even if it was only briefly. Heidelberg was great and to this day he couldn't hear a Bob Marley or Jimmy Cliff song on the radio without smiling. Mind you, he could never see her sitting here with him in the Glen, looking into the fire and talking about old times.

This was when he would look around at the spare furnishings, the scrubbed, square wooden table under the window and the three kitchen chairs. Cushions on two of them, probably put there by his mother and father for a bit of comfort in their old age. Tom hadn't made any changes other than to the roof. Finally got rid of the thatch. Must have been the last one for miles around, as the tourists used stop and take pictures. Not a good sign. Had to wait for the old folks to die before he did it. The Sacred Heart lamp was always lit on the wall above the Aga cooker that was still going strong. Not that he used it much.

Still he couldn't get over Tom being into books and how he used the videos to make them real. Good man, Tom. Your going-away present, to me, your older brother.

ERIN JOHNSTON

“Paddy. Paddy Daly. You’ll be the death of me.”

Mary was standing at his room door, arms folded, glaring at him.

“You can’t stay in bed forever. They’re back. They’re downstairs waiting and I don’t know what to say to them anymore. They’ve decided you’re avoiding them and they’re right about that.”

“Leave me alone. I’m not feeling well. I haven’t been sleeping or eating or anything.”

“Well I can’t have them around here all day, every day, waiting for you to make an appearance. For the last time, what do you want me to tell them?”

No answer.

“Paddy. These are nice ladies. You should see the robe, that’s the only word I can think of to describe what the older woman is wearing. She’s like someone out of a film, very exotic, if you ask me. The younger one is becoming impatient and getting angry at this stage and I don’t blame her. You’re going to have to do something. You can’t hide here in your room all day every day. Would you not put on your dressing gown and come down and say hello?”

“My dressing gown? That tatty old thing. You must be joking. I can’t let anyone see me in that.”

“Well then, put on your suit and tie, have a shave and you’ll feel better.”

“What did you say her name was?”

“I didn’t say, Paddy and she didn’t tell me. That’s up to you to find out.”

He turned over in the bed and faced the wall.

“Tell them I’m not well and ask if they’d call back at another time.”

Mary stomped down the stairs and Paddy could hear raised voices.

“No. No. You can’t go up there. I’ll call the Guards.”

“Excuse me! Excuse me!”

Footsteps on the stairs. He turned over. She was standing at his room door. The cheek of her. A young one in boots and a leather jacket.

“Who are you?”

“Excuse me, but my Mum wants to see you. She’s come all the way from England to find you. The least you could do is say hello. We’ve been in this one-horse town for days and no one wants to help us.”

“What are you doing in my room?”

“My name is Erin Johnson and my Mum wants to talk to you. She’s downstairs.”

“Johnson is it? Are you from Birmingham by any chance?”

“I think you know exactly who I am, Mr. Daly.”

“Is your mother’s name Christine?”

“Look, Mr. Daly, my Gran told me about you before she died last year. She asked me to bring my Mum over here to Ireland to see you. Well, what she said was, find out if he’s still alive. Well, I found out all right and here we are. As I said, Mr. Daly, you know well who she is and she’s downstairs waiting to see you.”

Paddy felt even worse. He never thought this day would come. There was no getting out of this.

“Tell your mother I’ll be down as soon as I can. I have to make myself decent.”

She turned away and headed for the stairs. Paddy could hear her stomping on her high heels. Voices raised again and the front door closing loudly.

Mary came back up.

“They said they’d be back in an hour, Paddy. We better get you cleaned up.”

Paddy fussed over his clean shirt and best tie. Mary tut-tutted around the room, brushing his jacket with his old clothes brush and then tried to straighten his tie. He was having none of it.

“I’m not a child,” he said, sounding like a child. “I can dress myself.”

“You’d still be lying in bed, if you had your way,” Mary snapped at him. “Come on downstairs and I’ll make you a nice cup of tea, while you’re waiting for them. Who are they anyway? What did you say their name was?”

“I didn’t say,” Paddy snapped and then laughed. “I’m sorry, Mary, but I’m a bit bothered by all this fuss, meeting strangers and all that.”

“Surely you know who they are, Paddy. From your past in England, I suppose.”

“Oh, indeed, from a long time ago. Must be twenty five or thirty years at this stage.”

“Nice of them to search for you,” Mary said giving him a strange look. “I’m glad they found you.”

“Oh, so am I. But I hate them seeing me like this, on my last legs. I don’t feel well at all.”

“Oh come on, Paddy. Have you tea and a Jaffacake and you’ll feel better in no time.”

Paddy was sitting in the sun-room when they came back. Not that there was any sun to be seen. A dark grey showery day, like every other day. They shook out their umbrellas and left them inside the hall door. Paddy would have known Christine anywhere. She still had her lovely smile and big brown eyes. She laughed when she saw him.

“Oh Paddy. It’s so good to see you.”

That’s all he wanted to hear. He felt weak, even though he was sitting down.

“I wanted you to meet Erin and I wanted her to meet you. She has heard all about you from my Mum. She was born in Jamaica where they sent me when they found I was pregnant. I had to agree to go. I had no choice really, as my Dad and brothers threatened to come round and do you, as they said, if I didn’t leave Birmingham.”

Paddy couldn’t stop staring, first at Christine, then Erin and back to Christine. This was amazing, he thought. I have both a son and a daughter that I never knew about and they’re both here in my hometown and no one knows except me and them. Young John will get a kick out of this when I tell him. Then he realized that Mary had been hovering the whole time.

“How about a cup of tea, Paddy? For you and your visitors, I mean.”

Paddy nodded his head. Speechless.

Christine crossed the room, put her arms around him and kissed him on the head.

“My lovely Irish-mon,” she said laughing. “So this is where you ended up.”

Erin stood behind her mother and reached her hand out to Paddy.

“We have a car outside. Do you want to show us around the town and set a few tongues wagging?”

Everyone laughed.

“Oh now,” said Paddy. “I don’t think I’d be up to that at the moment.”

They chatted for what seemed like hours. Christine told him about her time, five years, in Jamaica. She didn’t come home until her Dad died, suddenly. A heart attack. Then she and Erin stayed with her Mom. Her Mom adored Erin and always said she and Christine reminded her of her circumstances. They moved away from Handsworth, out to Aston and got on with their lives. Christine qualified as a teacher eventually and Erin worked in a bank. All in all they were fine. In recent years she had wondered about Paddy, made a few enquiries at the airport and heard he had retired and moved back to Ireland. From there on it was easy enough to find him.

She’d come again. Maybe before Christmas when he might feel a bit stronger.

BLACK CREPE

Not long afterwards I pulled the car up to the kerb outside St. Michael’s and saw a piece of black crepe pinned to the door. Someone had died. Could it be? The door was ajar and I pushed it in. Mary was nowhere to be seen and the hall was empty.

“John Fitzgerald, is that you?” Mary asked from the top of the stairs.

“Yes, it is,” I answered quietly.

“Come up here as I want to show you something.”

“Don’t tell me. Has poor Paddy has passed away, Mary.”

“He has indeed. Died during the night. Very peaceful he was. May the Lord have mercy on him.”

I entered the room with great trepidation as I half expected to find Paddy in the bed.

“He’s downstairs,” said Mary, “being laid out. We’re taking him to the church tonight and he’ll be buried after ten o’clock Mass in the morning.

“That’s very quick,” I protested.

“Those are poor Paddy’s wishes. He doesn’t want a wake. He said if they couldn’t come to see me while I was alive, why would they bother when I’m dead.

He was such a nice man. It’s a shame to see him go. He left these for you. He wrote your name on them and told me a few days ago to make sure I gave them to you.”

Two Clarks shoe-boxes tied with string. I opened one carefully. Letters. Dozens of them, in my mother’s handwriting, still in the envelopes. He had kept every letter she had ever written to him. I didn’t know what to think, but I decided I better do some reading and make a decision before I showed them to Da.

“Oh yes” Mary said, “he also left this envelope. You’re to take it to the solicitor’s office and they’ll give you the keys of the cottage. He wants you to have it. He wants it to stay in the family, was how he put it. I think that’s what he said.”

Chapter 3

PART THREE

HELEN KENNEDY

Most people call me Helen except, of course, some of the youngsters who come into the shop still call me Miss Kennedy. To them I look old, I suppose. Here I am awake early, as usual. I look at the clock and check my mobile. Still no message. I don't know how she could just up and go like that, without a word to anyone, not even to her brother Tony. He said she told him she'd be in touch when she settled. He wasn't even sure if she went back to London or headed out to New York.

I fancy it was New York or somewhere in the U.S. So far away, though. A bit too far, for my liking. She often mentioned how much she loved it there. Her father being an American citizen made it easy for her. A few phone calls and a few forms and she could get a visitor's visa no problem. I wouldn't be surprised if she already had a Green Card from her last stint there. She never said and I never asked her. Living alone out in the country, who'd be the wiser about what came in the post.

Still, I was disappointed that she never let on to me, of all people. We had always been such good pals. Well, until that night at her house. The next day she was all smiles and looking forward to us being together. I can see her now grinning, sipping a cup of coffee and holding my hand under the table in *The Rendezvous*. At least, that's what she said and I believed her at the time. Now I wonder. Maybe we pushed too far.

But, and I didn't say this to her, I didn't kiss her. She kissed me.

God, I'll never forget it.

I remember it well. I, too, was all smiles until it occurred to me. What do we do now? This can't go anywhere. Not in small town Ireland even in this day and age. I knew we couldn't just up and leave. We couldn't leave Mam on her own and we'd be still waiting for Louise to come home to run the shop. Neither could we let on nothing happened. That wouldn't do at all.

I never mention the two of us to anyone, although I've come close to telling John Fitz. Only yesterday he and I were talking about her. We often chat about things.

I nearly told him but thought better of it at the last second. Everyone seems to think I'd know where she went as we were such good friends. But, I swear, I'm in the dark like the rest of the town. John wondered out loud if something had happened.

"Don't be such an eejit," I said. "Of course something happened."

I went on to remind him that both her parents had died and she was stuck living in a farmhouse on her own. Why wouldn't she try to get away? Anywhere.

Then John changed the subject and began talking about Paddy Daly. The moment had passed. He had moved on. Paddy and his story fascinated him. He had promised, after the funeral, that he'd pop in to see him now and again and take him out for a spin, but he didn't get round to it for a while. Paddy wanted to have a look around the town. He wanted to see how it had changed since his day.

John found him good company. He had lots of stories about all those years in England but they had to be dragged out of him. He had never married and here he was living back in the town he grew up in. Well, not exactly but the Glen is only a few miles away. He said he felt a connection to Paddy. He liked him and they seemed to get on well together.

His mother, it seems, was very keen on the two of them meeting, especially in the time before she died. John told me about Betty bringing him up to meet Paddy in the Nursing Home and of course, about the photograph of herself and Paddy taken all those years ago in the Tower Ballroom. I didn't know what he was on about but I said nothing. He even mentioned that he wondered if his mother had been in love with Paddy all this time. Understandably, he was a bit awkward about bringing it up, but I find people confide in me when they get the chance. They see me as trustworthy and reliable. Sensible is the word they use. If only they knew the whole story they mightn't be so quick to think so. Anyway, one of these days I think I'm going to tell him.

I could hear Mam's alarm go off in the next room. Reality.

"O.K. Mam. I'm up. I'll put the kettle on.

There's no stopping John when he starts into a subject. Get him talking about airlines and places he's visited and it's one story after another. He has my heart broken to tell him about my experience in Gander at the time of 9/11, as everybody calls it now.

Someone had told him I was on one of the flights that diverted to Gander when the towers were hit in New York. He wanted to know about Gander and what it looked like and the people and all the planes that ended up there. I promised to tell him some time if he'd leave it alone for now.

Where would I start? It makes me shudder to even think of it now. I was such a young fool thinking I could make a run for it and take off like that. I wouldn't have lasted a wet week in New York. I certainly hadn't thought it through and fair play to Mam, she never mentioned it afterwards. She probably felt I got it out of my system.

God, I hated the shop back then. Dad had me run ragged, bringing in the vegetables and newspapers before I left for school in the morning and then leaving me alone for the evening to tidy up

and do everything that he hadn't got round to. Poor Dad, he didn't last too long after that. Didn't take care of himself and afraid to go to the doctor. Mam said there was no talking to him. She didn't have to tell me. I have to stop thinking about him. I get too upset.

“O.K. Mam. I told you, I'm up, I'm up. I'm on my way down.”

HELEN & JOHN

Shortly after Margaret made her decision to clear off, Helen made one, also. She was staying put. This is where she was from and this was where she wanted to spend her life. If she remained single, a spinster as the locals called it, so be it. She'll be fine with that. In the ways of love, she was very inexperienced. Mind you, she often wondered about “the guy on the plane” as she called him. She

wouldn't have been surprised to see him walk in for a coffee some day. It might even be funny. She wondered what he'd think, never mind what she'd think.

Tony, Margaret's brother, was obviously keen on her sister Louise and to this day he was uncomfortable around Helen. That could have been very awkward. Her and Margaret, that is. The night in the Glen. But herself and Tony were only kids at the time and she had long ago forgiven both of them. He still seemed embarrassed. A pity.

Very slim pickings around the town, she thought. She did have her eye on someone but had decided not to show her hand. She didn't want to scare him off, although he wasn't going anywhere. A nice fellow, a bit thin on top and reminded her of someone, but she couldn't put her finger on it, a good bit older but not weighed down by children, even if he was still married, according to Rome. He'd do fine, as far as she was concerned. She wasn't the romantic type. She thought of herself as more practical, really. She didn't expect to be swept off her feet at this stage and was more interested in contentment. Not too easy to find any more. She thought she loved Margaret. Well she did, but she couldn't see a future for them in small town. Margaret obviously felt the same way, so she took off. They'd both get over it eventually. They hadn't kissed each other, after all, she had decided. Margaret had kissed her. Helen figured that wasn't the same thing. It was nice, though.

John Fitzgerald, who dropped in every day for a coffee and a muffin, was very interested in getting her talking about Gander and America and 11 September and all that went with it. Everyone seemed to focus on what happened in New York, while Helen thought what had gone on beforehand in her life, in her head, was much more important. Well, to her, anyway. She hadn't wound up on that plane while doing a runner, as it was called, by accident. She had thought about it, planned ahead and was foiled, probably by the grace of God. That's what her mother would think, anyway. Her father, Des, would think she did it just to annoy him, even though he had no idea what was going on. He would, wouldn't he?

John wanted the whole story. Helen thought it would take days to tell it properly and John seemed to like that idea. I can get it down on tape or write notes or you could write up your own version and I'll clean it up. Clean it up is right, she thought. I'll tell you what, he said one day in the shop: "Why don't we sit down and talk it out over a drink some evening." Very smooth, she thought. "I'd like that," she said.

Not long after, she was closing up when he pulled up outside and said: "How about that drink?" Off they went to the Glen, to the hotel, to "the scene of the crime" as she jokingly referred to it, found a table for two in a corner of the bar and John started talking about his wife, Grainne, living at home with his father, at this age, his brother Gerry's business and his scrape with the scandal in New York. He had launched into Paddy Daly's story when Helen said: "Will you look at the time."

They both laughed. She had hardly got a word in, as he had done most of the talking. "I think you needed to get that off your chest, more than I did," Helen joked.

"I don't know what came over me," he laughed. "I suppose I haven't had a chance of a proper chat in ages. Now we'll have to do it again."

"By the way did I mention my old man asked about you in his usual roundabout way?"

"I heard you're friendly with young Helen Kennedy," was how he put it.

"You could do worse."

"That's a nice thing to say - a back-handed compliment if ever I heard one."

"Ah you know well what I mean," he went on.. "I've often spoken to her when I drop in for something for the tea. A very nice, sensible young woman. Her father and myself were the same vintage. We weren't friends but we knew each other in school and around the town. I'll tell you what, a funny thing happened in his shop one day. Helen would have been too young at the time, but I was in

there for a few messages when I noticed Cissy Ryan Cobbler picking up something and putting it in her coat pocket without paying for it. Do you remember Cissy? I don't suppose you do. Her brother Paul was a shoemaker, like his father before him. That's where they got the name. Anyway, I challenged Sissy and she shouted for Des. He rushed over and asked what was going on? I told him I saw her stealing something and he took my arm and pulled me aside. He told me she can't help it. She hasn't a halfpenny to her name and, while he knows what she's up to, he turns a blind eye to it. It won't break the bank, is how he put it. Cissy never said a word and walked out the door, head held high as if nothing had happened. I must say I was shocked but thought it very nice of him. I'd have called the Guards."

Helen was shaking her head as she headed back to town. You learn something new every day. There was more to old Des than she ever imagined.

NO MORE MR. NICE GUY

Helen knew only too well that many, if not most people, in town regarded her father, Des Kennedy, as a bit of a chancer. "Wouldn't trust him as far as I'd throw him," they said. Others rushed to his defence. He was one of their own, after all.

"He might be a bit of a gobshite, but there's no real harm in him."

And, of course, "how does his poor wife, Peggy, put up with him and his antics? He has her heart broken and the same with their two lovely girls, Helen and the young one.."

His few cronies weren't happy unless they were supping pints in O'Brien's snug, up the street, and running down all around them. Des, the businessman, should know better, but some people, as they say, never learn.

Very early on the word was out to be careful with the scales in Kennedy's. You'd never be sure of getting your full measure. It was well known Des weighed the soil with the vegetables, especially the potatoes, before he sold them in the shop. Most shopkeepers had the decency to rinse or shake the muck off before putting them out for sale. Not Des, though. He must have thought they were all eejits.

When Helen, the eldest, was old enough he had her run off her feet. She had to open the shop first thing in the morning, untie and stack the newspapers and then later, keeping up with the times, make and sell the coffee. When the deliveries came for the day she needed a strong back as the sacks and boxes were left at the door for her to carry in. The bould Des would be inside in the kitchen reading the paper and having his breakfast. He'd emerge, that's the only word for it, as she left for school.

At the other end of the day, he'd slip off up to the pub to slake his thirst.

"You'll be alright on your own for a while, love," he'd say without looking at her.

He was exhausted, the poor man. The lads, his cronies, would drift in one by one keeping an eye on the clock, not to get in trouble with the missus by being late for their tea. God forbid they should miss a meal. In the meantime, poor Helen would be at the shop totting up the books.

"Sure, I'd be lost without her. She's a great girl for the figures," was how Des put it.

On the odd day when she'd ask to finish early he'd complain about his condition and her Mam would have to intercede to get Helen a few hours off for herself. She'd defend Des and mention a doctor's visit and that would be the end of any discussion. Margaret would threaten to give Des a piece of her mind every time she heard about it. It was all Margaret could do to get away from looking after her

own mother for a few hours once or twice a week. The poor woman was never the same after the accident. Margaret enjoyed encouraging Helen to talk back to him.

Tell him to piss off,” she’d say. “Tell him to pay you a decent wage with holidays. Threaten to report him. That’ll shut him up.”

Helen was reluctant to be cheeky, as she knew her mother would be the one to suffer. She had heard about something that had happened to him as a boy. Her mother nodded knowingly but wouldn’t be drawn on it.

It seems when Des was about ten years old he was seen as a bright spark in school. His teacher, a Brother Power, had encouraged a number of boys to enter an essay competition being run in a Sunday paper. They were all a bit afraid of Brother Power. He had horn-rimmed glasses and his face would redden if they annoyed him. He told them they were giving away twenty new bicycles – ten for the boys and ten for the girls. Des was told he had a great chance of winning because his handwriting was so neat. “You’re a great man for the up light and down heavy, Kennedy,” Brother Power said.

Des did his best with the essay and the Brother told him he’d put his money on him, if he had any. Weeks later the day came when the winners were announced in the newspaper. There was his name – Deasmumhan O’Cinneide for the whole world to see. He was delighted, as were his mother and father. He knew well that this would be his only chance ever of getting a new bicycle. Anxiously, he went with his father to collect his prize at the Post Office, as they couldn’t wait for the parcel post to be delivered in the Post Office van, later in the day. The unopened package was carried shoulder high down the Main Street and of course, everyone knew what it was. Des was beaming while his father looked on proudly.

His mother got out the good scissors to cut the string and saved the corrugated wrapping. And there it stood on the kitchen floor - a pink and purple bicycle with streamers on the handlebars. They had sent a girl’s bike, by mistake. Des kicked at the bike furiously breaking some of the spokes. He didn’t care. He was mortified. Tears streamed down his face. He opened the kitchen door and flung the bike

out into the yard, scratching the paint and bending the handlebars. He hated the stupid bike. The whole town knew about his win and now they'd know about the girl's bike and they'd be laughing and sneering, the lousers. He could never face out the door again and school would be awful. The boys would take the piss forever.

Brother Power, fair play to him, contacted the organizers but they wouldn't take back a bike that was scratched and damaged. Helen could well understand how something like this would change someone. But fifty years later, it was a bit much.

“Come on, Des,” she thought, “get over it. You've let it affect your whole life.”

No one had ever brought it up to his face. It was a shame how something that happened by accident so long ago could colour a man's whole life. Still it wouldn't have killed him to rinse the spuds before putting them up for sale in the shop. He didn't care but Helen had to live with it.

DEATH IN THE FAMILY

They used say: “Poor ould Des, he's not the worst of them.”

Mind you, a few pints had to be consumed before it would be uttered. One night Helen was sitting in the kitchen with her mother trying to figure out how she'd cope with Des' latest scheme – he wanted to buy a deep fryer for the shop for making fish and chips. Helen saw the implications and especially how it would affect her life.

“We’ll be open ‘til all hours, Mam,” she said, on the verge of tears. “He said he wants to catch the late crowd coming from the pictures, as well as those making their way home when the pubs close. When did he get like this?”

“I don’t know,” said her mother. “He wasn’t always like this. Something happened to him when we lost your baby brother. He was never the same.”

“We didn’t lose him, Mam. He was stillborn.”

“Yes. But it was a boy. We already had you two girls and he had his heart set on having a son. He doted on you two but I can understand, every man wants a son. We were never able to talk about it. My fault, I suppose, as much as his. But, as I said, he was never the same afterwards and especially when the doctor told me it would be dangerous for me to try again.”

“Mam, it’s OK. I didn’t mean to bring it up like that. Don’t be upset.”

“Here we are all these years later and it still stings. They say time heals all wounds. Well it takes longer for some and there are wounds that never go away.”

“He’s not happy unless he’s making money, one way or another,” Helen went on. “I’d love to be a fly on the wall when himself and the lads are sitting in the pub, with their pints, discussing the affairs of the day, as he calls them. The rest of the world is wrong, especially the politicians. You’d think they had any say, to hear them talking.”

“Despite his faults and he has a few, your father’s a good man. He’s always looking out for our welfare. Isn’t he putting Louise through University in Dublin? That’s costing him a pretty penny, I can tell you.”

“Yes, Mam, I know. But he’s doing it as an investment. He wants her to learn about business so that she can come home and take over the shop. He has some big idea that the shop could make more

money and even expand. Where does that leave me? I'll tell you where it leaves me. It leaves me high and dry. I'll be gone like a shot out of this place. I know you don't want to hear it but, mark my words, that's what will happen."

"Listen, Helen. Don't upset yourself about it. He means well and I want you to make allowances for him. He's had a hard life, working since he was fourteen and hardly ever taking a break. A holiday would be out of the question for him. Cut him some slack. He's not getting any younger, you know and I've been on at him to make an appointment to see the doctor. Not that he listens to me."

"OK, Mam. I hear you, loud and clear. I'm going to my room to make a quick call before I settle down for the night. Another early start ahead of me tomorrow. What else is new?"

YOUNG LOVE

She knew Tony liked her and it wasn't his fault she baulked that night in the Glen. She thought she was ready. Maybe they were too eager. Too young maybe? Maybe he had a few pints too many. Maybe she hadn't had enough. Anyway, it was a disaster. It had gone from laughter to tears and back again in no time. She was seventeen, for Christ's sake. What did she know? She had thought about it for a while. But she hadn't thought it through. How far was she prepared to go? Did he feel as she did?

She had always liked him. After all, he was the brother of her best friend, Margaret and it was a small town without too many choices. That was probably why so many people she went to school with left and never came back. She and Tony held hands when they went to the pictures with a group of others

from school and walked home afterwards with a peck on the cheek as they said goodnight. But nothing more, ever. Margaret knew she liked him but never mentioned if Tony said anything.

That night she felt like such a fool in the back seat of his father's car, with her blouse undone, her new bra showing and tears streaming down her face. It all started as fun. He told her a dirty story he heard in school. Well, she thought it was dirty. He thought it was hilarious. It had to do with breasts and underwear. Typical boy stuff. She told him girls took them very seriously and that they were no laughing matter. He must have heard at home that herself and Margaret had gone in to Limerick to buy new underwear, recently. Nice fancy stuff they had seen advertised in a magazine in the shop. Before she knew it she was accepting a dare to show him. She must have been drunk. She remembers stumbling into the car and wondering what she had gotten herself into. But it was Tony. Her friend. What harm could come of it? It must have been the drink. She hoped it was but she was surprised he was so aggressive. He had reached around behind her and was fumbling awkwardly with the clasp.

“Haven't you ever opened a brassiere before?” she asked him laughing.

“Not one like this I haven't,” he muttered. “Jesus some of the lads say they can open them with one hand. They must be having me on.”

“Stop! Stop!” she yelled. “You'll tear it.”

With that, he yanked down on a shoulder strap and her right breast fell out.

He grinned when he saw it and said: “This is what all the fuss is about?” For a split second she wasn't sure if he was talking about the new bra or her breast. Then she didn't care, she was so furious. She could have hit him. Instead she broke down in tears. He was so rough. Not a bit like the Tony she thought she knew.

And, it was one of the first times she had used mascara. She must have looked a fright. Tony thought she was having some kind of breakdown and loudly threatened to throw her out of the car and

leave her in the parking lot if she didn't shut up. That wouldn't do at all. What would people think? Did you hear about Helen Kennedy and that Tony Hogan fellow? Half naked they were out in the Glen, in his father's car.

She pulled herself together eventually, checked her face in the rear-view mirror straightened her clothes and went back inside to the Ladies room. Tony left fuming, without a word and in all honesty, she didn't blame him. He should have been kinder and he could have offered her a lift. But, if he had, she would have probably refused. God! She'd never live it down. Or forget it, for that matter. Fair play to Tony, though, he never breathed a word about it, as far as she knew. Certainly not that she'd heard. If he had it would have spread like wild fire.

Now he shared a flat in Dublin with her sister Louise. She wondered if they ever talked about it. She can imagine Louise sniggering. Sometimes she hated her younger sister.

Helen had always loved everything about Margaret. She was glad to have her as a friend. They had been in the same class in secondary school and had paired off very easily. Margaret lived a few miles outside the town and had to hurry home on her bicycle immediately after school as she had work to do every evening on the small farm. Her father used to sell eggs and vegetables to Helen's father for resale in the shop, so they had that in common. Girls from the town had it easy, Margaret thought, even though Helen had to work hard in the shop and seemed to understand. Every now and again a few of the girls went to a film together, but spent most of the time chatting and annoying the others in the cinema. There was little else in the town for their age group in the way of entertainment.

Eventually the girls decided en masse to become coffee drinkers and after school, sat in the Kickham Koffee Kitchen on the Main Street nursing cups of coffee for what seemed like hours on end. Cigarettes were passed around when they could afford them and, of course, laughing at or taking the piss and making remarks about the boys who braved the other tables until they lost their nerve and slunk away. Margaret would occasionally join them but had no interest in even teasing the boys. Helen

remembered her saying she wouldn't let any of them near her. Such was small town life as far as Margaret was concerned. Sometimes she was glad she lived in the country.

At home she had let it be known early on that she wasn't staying and would be heading to New York. She had decided to take advantage of her father's U.S. citizenship. As a young man he had emigrated himself, joined the U.S. army and had spent two years in Korea. This entitled him to U.S. citizenship and he had told Margaret one day, that he'd be happy to help her with the paperwork. He had come home when he found his parents couldn't cope with the small farm and was nearly fifty when he married her mother. There was a twenty-year age difference, not at all unusual in the country, especially, at the time. Her brother Tony, a year older, had already said he was going to University in Dublin, so her parents would have to fend for themselves. They were very good about it and didn't raise a fuss. Maybe she just wanted to get away. And who could blame her?

PHONE HOME

Margaret was well settled in New York when she got the call about the accident. She had worked odd jobs, in Manhattan, moved to Boston where she found the winters too severe. It seemed as though she had a cold all the time. She had tried Orlando in Florida but didn't settle. She came home on a regular visit every year but, apart from Helen, found there was nothing there for her. The town was

getting smaller and her parents, especially her father, older. She sensed that her infrequent visits were the highlights of Helen's life, also. Other than that it was work, work, work. Helen's shop (she always thought of it as Helen's) seemed to be thriving. Helen told her that the work days were getting longer, the shop busier and hardly a day went by without her father coming up with another idea, scheme's Helen called them, to make more money. Margaret couldn't wait to get back to her own life, but she missed Helen. Once they even discussed Helen coming for a visit. Margaret would love to show her around New York.

Eventually she decided to go to school, earn her degree and try Nursing School. The best decision she ever made, she thought, as it gave her a purpose in life. She was having breakfast in the hospital cafeteria one morning when she was called to the office and told she should call her brother in Ireland. He had left a message, as she couldn't receive incoming calls. It was a rule that was strictly enforced. Her immediate reaction was what was wrong? Was it their Dad? When Tony answered he told her he had bad news. Their mother and father had been in a car accident. There was no other car involved. They were turning in their gateway at about seven yesterday evening. The sun was going down at the time and for an instant Dad must have been blinded by the glare. He crashed the car into the gatepost and had a heart attack. Their mother was OK but had a broken leg. The car was in bits. Tony wouldn't stop talking.

“Tony, stop! Did you say our Dad is dead or he had a heart attack?”

“I'm only telling you what the Guards told me. No, he's not dead. They were both taken to the Community Hospital.”

Tony thought she should come home for a while straight away to look after their mother when she got out of hospital. Their Dad was still unconscious and the Guards said it was touch and go. Margaret knew what that meant. Little or no chance of living, but we don't want to say so.

She threw what she had into her two suitcases. What didn't fit, she could live without. As she took off from JFK she could see the lights of Manhattan disappear through the clouds, something told her it would be a long time before she'd see them again. Tony met her in Shannon the next morning. It was still dark and she shivered as the automatic door opened and let in the damp morning air. They by-passed Limerick on the new road and headed straight to the hospital. As they drove in the main entrance they both sensed that their Dad was dead. They said nothing. Just looked at each other. The Chaplain was in the lobby.

"Tony and Margaret Hogan?" he asked with his hands clasped together.

"Thank God you're here. I was just enquiring about you."

Margaret and Tony looked at each other and hung their heads.

"Your poor father is in heaven," he said with downcast eyes. "He put up a brave struggle, but it was time for him to go. I'm glad I was there to give him the Last Rites. May he rest in peace."

Margaret felt the tears coming but instead asked: "Where's our mother? Does she know?"

The priest waved a nurse over and introduced them.

"They'd like to see their mother," he said not looking at either one of them.

The nurse offered her condolences and led them down a long corridor. They followed behind and both tried to form the words they would say to their poor mother. Their parents had been married nearly thirty years and while their mother was only in her sixties, they both wondered how she'd survive without their Dad. The nurse stopped suddenly at an open room door and waved them in.

"Someone to see you, Mrs. Hogan" and off she went.

Their mother took one look at them and knew immediately that the news wasn't good.

“Is he gone?” she asked. They nodded. No words were needed.

Helen was Margaret’s great support through the removal, the Funeral Mass and at the cemetery. Her mother wasn’t well enough to attend. In and out of consciousness was how the doctor described it. No question of her getting out of bed, never mind attending. There was a huge turnout, as they were a popular and respected family with deep roots in the community. Tony accepted Helen’s words of condolence with a handshake and a small smile but that was all. He didn’t make free with her. She noticed Louise had a death grip on Tony’s hand and seemed extraordinarily upset. As far as Margaret knew she hardly knew Mr. Hogan at all. She was both surprised and disappointed but decided to ask Helen later when they’d have a bit of time on their own when everyone would be tired of talking and drinking tea. Helen noticed the old traditions being upheld with a number of shop doors closed out of respect when the funeral passed by. You don’t see that very much anymore, she thought. In fact, it was the first time since Betty Fitzgerald was buried as far as she could remember. Mr. Hogan was buried in the town cemetery as the Church and graveyard in their townland had fallen into disrepair after the old curate died and wasn’t replaced. A sign of the times, thought Helen.

Helen called out to see Margaret a few days after the funeral. Her mother was still in hospital, as her leg hadn’t set properly. She found Margaret sitting in the kitchen looking like she had been crying for days on end. Tony had gone back to Dublin earlier in the day and she was now alone “contemplating her future,” was how she put it.

“What the hell am I going to do?” she asked Helen the minute she saw her.

“Poor Margaret,” said Helen, putting her arms around her. They stood hugging for what seemed like ages.

“Do you have anything in the house to eat?” Helen asked her.

“Well, I haven’t been to the shops, if that’s what you mean.”

“Well we could go into town and have a nice quiet meal, or better still slip out to Heffernan’s. We won’t be disturbed there. Hardly anyone knows us.”

Margaret threw an old anorak over her sweater and jeans. Her heart wasn’t in it but she looked forward to spending some time with Helen.

They were no sooner in the door than Bud Heffernan made a bee-line for them.

“Helen, me oul segotia.” he laughed as he gave her a big hug.

“Bud, how are you? Long time no see. I suppose you know Margaret Hogan.”

“We haven’t met, but I knew your father well, the Lord have mercy on him. A decent man. The town did him proud with such a turnout for the funeral.”

Margaret thanked him as Helen let it be known they were looking for a quiet place to sit and a bite to eat. Not too many choices on the menu but they settled for chicken and chips with carrots and parsnips mashed and gravy on the side. Helen spoke very little during the meal, letting Margaret tell her about the long lost relatives who showed up and who said what to whom. They laughed a lot and were glad of each other’s company. Bud Heffernan arrived at the table with two glasses of port.

“I’m told it’s a great way to finish a meal, not that I touch the stuff myself. I wouldn’t be long in business if I did. Have one on the house, girls.”

“Thank you, Mr. Heffernan. Very decent of you. I haven’t eaten so much in ages,” Margaret said. “I must say I’m glad I came out tonight. I couldn’t face another night in that empty house.”

As Bud was walking away he said; “You’re a lucky woman to have Helen here as a friend. By the way, Helen, did you hear we had a visitor yesterday? An English woman asking about Paddy Daly. I told her she should enquire in town. She caused a bit of a stir, I can tell you. We don’t have too many

dark skinned people around the Glen. She had her hair braided, dreadlocks, I think they're called. A nice looking woman,

if you don't mind my saying so and she had a younger woman with her. I'd say she was her daughter. As I said, she caused a bit of a stir. I'm surprised you didn't see her around the town."

"I'll keep an eye out, Bud. I'll let you know if I hear anything."

Helen was reluctant to leave Margaret on her own when they got back to the house. There was no fire in the fireplace, so it was cold and dark. They put the kettle on and switched on the tv and sat staring at the screen. Talking heads. Margaret had produced a packet of biscuits from the cupboard in the kitchen.

"You can't have tea without a biscuit," she laughed.

"Look at the two of us," Helen said. "Did we ever think it would come to this?"

After the late news, Helen stood up to leave and Margaret walked her to the door. It was pitch dark outside. The only light to be seen was Sadler's, across the field, a couple of hundred yards away. They stood in the doorway facing each other, looked into each other's eyes and kissed. A long, slow, soft kiss.

THE MORNING AFTER THE NIGHT BEFORE

The next morning when Helen opened the Coffee Shop it was cold, wet and dark.

She couldn't help smiling.

The bundles of newspapers felt heavier than usual and her Mam said breakfast would be a little late.

Still, she smiled.

“An early start again today, Mrs. Cummins? How’s himself? I hear he hasn’t been well?”

“Don’t talk to me. He’ll be the death of me yet.”

“Oh, that’s not a nice thing to say. I’m sure he’ll be his old self in no time.”

If only Mrs. Cummins knew why she was smiling.

“Morning Jack. The usual? I have it here for you.”

If she closed her eyes she could still feel it. The tingling.

Any minute now the new lad, Kevin, will be here to help out and she’ll duck inside and maybe have her breakfast in peace. He would have been a Godsend if it weren’t for his mobile and the constant stream of messages from his friends. His mother is an old friend of Mam’s, so she had to tread carefully when she pulled him up about the phone. She even had to ask him not to use it when dealing with customers. Imagine.

Last night they had kissed for the first time. Halleluia!

She decided to get everything sorted before she went in for her breakfast. The boy seemed eager to ensure the new papers and magazines were in their proper places. The weekly’s had also arrived, which meant extra traffic, as the country people who didn’t get a daily paper would be in for theirs.

Fifteen years it had taken them.

She'd daydream when she was inside in the kitchen, as there was too much to do in the shop. Was that a red Honda she saw going by the window? It's the only one around. I wonder why she's in town so early.

Mam waved from the kitchen so she left him to fend for himself.

Could her mother know?

She seldom asked her what time she came in, as she knew she could depend on her to open the shop on time, no matter what. On the other hand, chances are Mam never went to sleep until she knew she was home safely.

Last night was different, though.

She could already smell the bacon and two eggs scrambled, two rings of white pudding and buttered toast. She never liked sausages or black pudding.

How nice it would be if they were having breakfast together. Together!

From the kitchen Helen could hear the bell ringing as customers came and went.

A bit early for the lap-top crowd. But they'd be here soon enough ordering their fancy coffees and muffins. Scones Mam called them and she baked them, so she'd know. They'd sit for ages, reading, writing and God knows what else. She never got into it herself although her sister, Louise, was a slave to it. Never let her lap-top out of her sight.

I had always wanted to do that.

A quick look at the newspaper to check the date. A date she would always remember. She never thought the day would come.

She was glad they had waited.

She must keep an eye out for the car passing back down the street. Maybe she'd come in for something. She hoped she wouldn't feel awkward. Why should she?

They'd been friends forever.

She didn't realize she felt like that. O.K. herself and Tony had had a bad experience, but that was years ago. Then of course, there was that yahoo on the flight to Gander. That's a bit unfair, though, as he was probably a nice man who lost the run of himself. I'm sure he wasn't the only one who tried to take advantage of nine eleven.

Shopping for underwear together in Limerick was one thing. She'd always liked that but, so what.

The bell rang. Another customer. She was back in the shop. Breakfast over.

"Morning, Teresa. Miserable isn't it? Are you off on the early bus?"

"I will, I will. I'll tell her you were asking for her."

Maybe she'll come in for a coffee and a quick chat.

"Morning. Do you have a minute?"

She's here. I never even saw her come in.

"Hold on, Margaret. I'll be right there."

She hurried in to the kitchen to check her face in the mirror. Called herself an eejit and came out smiling.

"Howya. Dreadful morning isn't it?"

"Can we sit down for a minute?"

“Of course, we can. Let me get you a coffee.”

They sat at a table, around the corner of the L-shaped shop.

Just the two of us together.

“What will we do?”

“We’ll do nothing.”

“Are you sure?”

“We certainly won’t do anything that would draw attention to ourselves.”

My God, you look lovely.

“I didn’t sleep a wink.”

“Me neither. You should have seen me driving home. A big grin on my face.

I swear to God I was halfway in the road before I remembered the headlights.”

“I can imagine. I was nervous and happy and excited all rolled into one. I tossed and turned all night.”

When I saw your car go up town, I felt like a teenager.

“My poor mother would be wondering why I was up and dressed at seven o’clock.”

“I was afraid you wouldn’t come in, that you couldn’t face me.”

I couldn’t wait to see you.

“What will we do?”

“I told you already. We won’t do anything.”

Last night was so unexpected.

“I mean what will you and I do now?”

They were holding hands under the table.

No one can see us here. Can they?

They were squeezing as hard as they could bear. Their fingers hurt.

I've never felt like this about anyone.

“What did you say?”

“Nothing.”

”Oh yes, you did. You said something about anyone.”

Did I say that out loud? Oh my God.

“Will I see you after work this evening?”

“Of course you will.”

MARGARET'S MOTHER

When Margaret's mother died the death notice in the newspaper said she had died suddenly, Margaret didn't think so. Her mother had never fully recovered from her car crash injuries and some days she got out of bed for only a few hours and would sit by the fire watching television. She'd feel a bit better if the sun was shining and would ask Margaret to make her comfortable by the window. But those days were few and far between, especially in late October, with the days getting shorter.

One day Margaret couldn't wake her and called the doctor. He said he'd try to get out later in the day, as he was very busy. Margaret tried telling him it was an emergency, but he didn't think so. He said she'd be fine. He arrived just before teatime, and by then Margaret had her mother sitting up in bed. She had awakened around midday from a deep sleep and looked around the room as if she didn't know where she was. Doctor Hickey, putting his bag on the bed, asked Margaret to excuse them for a few minutes, sat in a chair and as she left the room, Margaret could hear him asking her mother questions about her life and general health.

“So how are you today, Mrs. Hogan? Not too well, I hear.”

When he came out of the room a while later he squeezed Margaret's arm and said:

“You'll have to do your best to make her comfortable. She's not a well woman.”

He said he didn't want to put her into the hospital as she would be lonely and there wasn't much they could do for her there. She'd be better off at home with Margaret to keep an eye on her. Margaret had figured that out for herself without the benefit of a medical degree. Her nurses training told her that, for God's sake.

From that day on her mother went down hill very quickly. Margaret called Tony and they were there together when she slipped away. Louise and Helen came out to the house that evening and were among the handful of mourners at the small funeral. Margaret wanted to cling to Helen but held her hand instead. Louise was very upset and hugged Tony repeatedly. People noticed. Compared to their father's funeral it was a small turnout. But that's the way it was in the country. Mrs. Hogan hadn't been well enough to go into town for ages and Margaret really only knew Helen and her family and a few neighbours..

Helen wondered what Margaret would do now that her mother had died. She'd hardly stay at home on her own. Maybe she'd move into town. Maybe she'd want to go back to nursing and travel.

Helen hoped she wouldn't. She'd miss her too much. She'd make sure she called in on her, make a nuisance of herself, if necessary.

As they were leaving Margaret embraced her and kissed her on the cheek.

"Be sure to come out one evening during the week. I don't know how long Tony will be staying but it's going to be very quiet here."

LOUISE & TONY

How could Louise allow this to happen? And Tony, he must be such an idiot. Helen was both surprised and disappointed. Surprised at Louise and probably disappointed in her, also. But she didn't know what to think of Tony. Louise was sitting across from her, on the train down from Dublin, dozing supposedly. Helen was thinking about the phone call:

"I have to see you. Can you come to Dublin, sooner rather than later?"

Not a bit like Louise, she thought at the time. Sounded a bit panicky.

And what a weekend it had been. Helen's eyes had been opened when she realized that she knew nothing of Louise's life in Dublin. Louise had met her off the train and they jumped in a taxi to

Rathmines. An old three-story, red-brick Georgian house divided into flats. The doorbell said “Hogan/Kennedy” she noticed. She hadn’t visited before nor was she invited, as far as she could remember. They were on the ground floor and it was nicely furnished. Very comfortable with a new flat-screen television. Homely.

She only knew what Louise had told her. She thought, as did everyone else, that Louise and a friend shared a flat in Dublin with Tony and a friend of his. What she didn’t know was that Louise and Tony also shared a bed and had done so for some time. There was no sign of another couple. She wondered if Margaret knew. She doubted it. She’d have said something. It had never been mentioned. She had noticed that Tony never came into the shop when he was down home and had remarked on it to both Louise and Margaret, for that matter, more than once. She put it down to him avoiding her because of their past, brief history.

Now Louise was resting on the train ride down home. Helen wasn’t sure if she was feigning sleep to avoid being cross-examined or if she was genuinely exhausted. She could only be two months along. With Tony’s baby! She couldn’t get over it. The little bitch! The watery sun made her hair look redder than ever. Even the freckles were showing.

This will put her MBA on the back burner and she wondered if she’d ever get to finish it. It would affect her big plans for the shop and expansion to other towns around. She couldn’t wait to get home and tell Margaret, if she didn’t already know. Would Margaret now become her sister-in-law? Looked like it. Mind you the word wedding hadn’t been mentioned yet. Not too many get married anymore as it’s all partners now. Probably just as well.

But, what about Mam? She’ll have a conniption. Luckily Louise will be in Dublin and not parading up and down the Main Street. However, everyone will know all about it. Helen knew that’s exactly how they’d think. She, herself, could care less. She’ll be curious to see if anyone will bring it up in the shop.

She'd ignore them or laugh it off, if they did. People didn't make free any more the way they used to. Everyone was very into themselves, between phoning and texting and the Celtic Tiger, Helen realized most people had become selfish and could care less about others. Tony meant nothing to her now, she was sure of that, but she worried about Louise. She still thought of her as her little sister. The same little sister who used to have her father wrapped around her little finger and bamboozled him with talk about classes and internships. The poor man hadn't a clue what she was on about. He just smiled and nodded whenever she spoke to him. She wondered if this whole thing with Tony started after their Dad died suddenly. She wouldn't be surprised.

She watched Louise and waited for the first chance to engage her in a chat. Sure enough she opened her eyes, stretched, and looked out the window of the speeding train. Helen pounced.

"So when did all this start with Tony? And when were you going to tell me?"

"I couldn't face it," she said sheepishly. "Tony was on at me every day to tell you about us."

"It's us, is it? How long have you two been together?"

"I don't know. We've always gotten along. Always told each other stuff that we couldn't tell other people. He was very kind to me when Dad died. I suppose it was around that time. Oh yes,, one night, very late after a few glasses of wine, he told me about yourself and himself."

"Oh Jesus, he didn't. What did he say?"

"He said how he always regretted it and how it had driven a wedge between the two of you ever since. He said he must have been drunk to behave like that towards you. He used to worry it would affect your friendship with Margaret. He knows better now."

"What do you mean he knows better?"

"He knows you and Margaret are very tight and he could never come between the two of you."

Helen looked out the window and tried to figure out how much Tony and now Louise, knew about herself and Margaret. She said nothing.

“I’m more interested in the two of you. Does anyone else know about you two?”

“All our friends in Dublin have known always, I suppose. We never tried to keep it a secret. There was no need to. He’s very good to me, helps me with my studies and tells me he loves me all the time.”

“Not your typical Irishman, I must say,” Helen smiled. “I’m surprised at him.”

“No need to be sarcastic. He’s a good man and will make a great Dad for our baby.”

“Have you said anything to Mam?”

“Not at all. I know she’ll be fit to be tied, but I have to face it.”

“Why didn’t you bring Tony with you?”

“He wouldn’t come on this train with you. He said he’d be too uncomfortable. He said he’ll be down tomorrow and we’ll talk to Mam when he gets home.”

“That will be some conversation. I could sell tickets to that.”

“See, you are a sarcastic bitch. I was hoping I could count on you to be there.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll have your back.”

The next morning Louise used Helen’s car to pick Tony up at the station and they drove straight into town. Louise’s Mam knew that something was up when she saw the two of them heading into the kitchen. She followed them in. Helen had one eye on the customers and the other watched the kitchen

door. She hated to miss it but this was Louise's problem and she have to resolve it herself. Within a short time the door opened and her mother beckoned to her.

"Do you have a minute, Helen?"

Helen told Kevin to keep an eye on things, wiped her hands and headed into the kitchen.

"What's up?" she said, all smiles.

"Oh you can laugh," her mother said. "Did you hear their news? I suppose you did. I'm always the last one to hear."

"Louise just told me and I must admit I'm very happy for them. Big news, indeed."

Mam was no longer smiling. She was crying softly as she sat down wearily.

"Your poor Dad would have been very happy and I must tell you even though I'm upset, so am I. Tony comes from a lovely family and you know I've always liked Margaret."

Tony and Louise held hands and it was all Helen could do to contain herself.

"Have you thought about Louise's degree and the shop and all our plans?"

"God is good," said her mother. "He'll take care of everything. Isn't it more important that they have a healthy baby? The shop will take of itself. Aren't you making a great job of it, Helen?"

"I can take a year off from college," Louise said "and help out here while I'm waiting for the baby to arrive. Tony can come down at the week-ends. We'll be fine."

HELEN

Six mornings a week Helen opened the shop at 7 a.m. On Sundays she went to first Mass, but left early so that the Holy Joes, as she called them, could get the Sunday paper on their way home. On weekday mornings, while she cut open the bundles of newspapers and readied them for display, she got the coffeemaker going. The early customers had little to say as they grabbed a cup of coffee and a paper apart from “Howya, Helen and seeya, Helen.”

From the kitchen she would smell breakfast being cooked for her father. Rashers, sausages, black and white pudding, the works. It was just amazing, the more pints he had the night before, the bigger the breakfast. It was after the morning rush, of course, before the great man put in an appearance in the shop and she could duck in herself for a cup of tea and some toast. Her mother was always happy to get it for her and have a quiet chat. However, after last night’s bombshell this morning’s should be interesting, Helen thought, groaning at the prospect as she sat down on the straight-backed kitchen chair.

“His lordship hasn’t much to say for himself,” Mam said with a little smile and giving her a sideways glance. “I hope what he said doesn’t make you do something hasty that you’ll regret later.”

“Don’t worry, Mam, it won’t be hasty. I can assure you of that. I’ve been thinking about it for such a long time and last night’s announcement only made me more determined than ever to go through with it.”

“Whatever you do don’t annoy him or set him off. You know how he gets. There’ll be no living with him.”

Mam seemed on the verge of tears. “It’s hard enough having only you here with Louise up in Dublin. I couldn’t stand to lose you, too.”

“I know, Mam, but this time he’s gone too far and that’s all there’s to it. Coming in half pissed and announcing that he’s going to change our lives like that, without so much as a by your leave, is no way to treat his family. Honestly, buying a deep fryer to make chips and stay open until nearly midnight to catch the crowd coming from the cinema, never mind the drunks making their way home from the pubs and falling in the door.”

“I know it will be hard, love,” said Mam in a kindly voice, “but there’s no talking to him when he makes him mind up about something. We’ll just have to give him a few days to cool down about it. Maybe he’ll see sense.”

Helen couldn’t get the night before out of her mind. There she was sitting in the kitchen listening to the radio and minding her own business, when he arrived in after his few pints with the lads. He pulled his chair up to the kitchen table and sat glaring at her. This was his usual form when he’d had a few. The mug of tea, poured out by Mam, sat steaming in front of him as he fumbled with his box of matches trying to light a cigarette to hide behind. He just blurted out that he had had a brilliant idea and was going to go into the chip business.

“It will be bloody great,” he said. “We won’t know ourselves. We’ll be on the pig’s back. We’ll be the talk of the town.”

“We’re already the talk of the town,” Helen said angrily, “open at cock crow and not closing until after dark.” Mam hated when they argued. “Please,” she said. “Don’t.”

“This is my house,” came the surly response, “and what I sez goes. You’re not going to tell me how to run my business, young lady. And if you don’t like it you can feck off. I’ll be well rid of you. There’s plenty of young ones around the town who’d be glad of a steady job.”

“Des,” her mother pleaded, “don’t say things like that. You’ll drive poor Helen away.”

“Poor, my arse,” he said turning purple, “she doesn’t know lucky she is. Where else would she get a good home and all the pocket money she needs?”

Helen stood up quickly, scraped the chair across the floor and slammed the door behind her as she headed for the stairs to her bedroom, under the rafters. She slammed that door, also, and sat by the window looking out over the houses on the edge of town at the Galtee Mountains in the distance. She was furious. “Fuck him, anyway.” There was a full moon and she could see their outline clearly. Tonight they were as clear as a bell and so were her options. She needed to talk to someone. Her mind was racing. She just knew something like this would happen.

The older of two sisters, she lived with her parents, over the shop. She had gone to the local Secondary School and he told her during Sixth Year, her final year, that she wouldn’t be going to the University.

“You’re needed in the shop, young lady,” he said without looking at her. “I can’t do everything myself.”

She could hardly believe her ears. He had already mapped out her life for her. She had done well in school even though she didn’t find study easy. But she put in her hours in the shop, which is more than can be said for Louise, who used every excuse to get out of it. Now it came down to this. Work in the shop until he’s gone and then look after her poor mother.

“It’s not fair,” and that was as far as she got.

“Don’t you dare question me, young lady, your sister is the brains of the family. She’ll get the schooling and we’ll all get rich from her business head.”

To him that was the end of the discussion. So she’d be stuck here, working in the shop from dawn to dusk, seven days a week and now he finally admits what she always suspected that her younger sister would be left the business. God forgive her but she hated him and this fucking place.

She'd call Margaret Hogan, the only one she could call at this hour of the night. Margaret would understand and would be glad of the chat. Her poor widowed mother, who was invalided, was probably asleep and Margaret always kept the phone handy so that it wouldn't waken her, if it rang late. Helen remembered when the shop used to be a little tobacconist with sweets, chocolate and soft drinks and was open from nine to five. They lived comfortably, she thought, from the income. Then her father decided to branch out into vegetables, groceries, tea, sugar, milk and the like. Newspapers and magazines were next and that meant opening earlier as the papers were delivered at the crack of dawn. Then, he suggested getting a coffee machine for the early morning traffic and before she knew it, the shop got busier and the workday longer.

Margaret answered in a whisper. "Hello. Who's this?"

"I know I'm calling very late," Helen said, "but I need to talk. You won't believe what he's gone and done. Just told me now, downstairs in the kitchen. We're going into the chip business."

"You're not serious," said Margaret, nearly shouting into the phone. "Has he lost the run of himself?"

"I couldn't believe it when I heard it," said Helen, who was now laughing to herself as she enjoyed Margaret's reaction. "He just came in from the pub and made the announcement. Poor Mam nearly fell off the chair and you could have knocked me over with a feather."

"Oh," said Margaret, "I can just see the bould Des and his cronies with their pints in the pub and coming up with bright ideas. Sure, they're just looking for a place to buy chips at this end of the town before they head home to face the music. They're just saving themselves shoe-leather by not having to walk up the Main Street, the lazy shaggers. None of them has held a job for longer than a few months and they think they're businessmen. At least your oul' fella knows what he's talking about, most of the

time. He's lucky to have you to fall back on and take care of business for him. I don't know what he'd do without you."

"Well he's in for a bit of a land, I can tell you," said Helen. "One of these days I'll be gone from here and we'll see what he'll do then."

"Helen, you're not serious," gasped Margaret. "Never mind him, what would I do without you? I'd be lost."

Helen realized that she didn't live in a vacuum. Other people would be affected by her actions. Her poor mother, for one and then Margaret and of course, Louise's education would be cut short, because Des would never pay wages to someone else when he had a daughter to fall back on. This was all very unfair, but she couldn't let him get away with it.

"Listen," she said to Margaret, "we'll go out for a drink at the weekend and talk more about it. Louise is coming home, I think and we might all get together and have a laugh."

"O.K." said Margaret, "Good night."

Louise had finished Secondary School with her Leaving Certificate and went off to Dublin to university. It was only a couple of hours away but it was another world. She'd come home one or two weekends every month, but wouldn't set foot in the shop. Their mother, Mam they all called her, would spend hours fussing before she arrived. Louise had her friends to see and according to her, papers to write and class work to do on her laptop. During the week she'd regularly phone Helen in the shop:

"Hello, it's me. How's it going? Has he turned it into a supermarket yet?"

Then she'd laugh and Helen would feel like hanging up on her. It was so unfair. She'd ask about their mother, but really she was just touching base. Helen was glad of the chat as she had few friends

around town. An occasional visit to the Excel, the local cinema with Margaret, who was in a similar situation, was her social life. She and Margaret had become friendly in secondary school even though she lived in the country, a few miles outside the town. She looked after her widowed mother, while her brother Tony was in the Civil Service in Dublin. She was glad of any excuse to get out of the house and never passed the shop without stopping in for a chat.

All the local girls Helen knew going to school had left to go to Third Level or Civil Service jobs in Dublin or Cork and here she was stuck behind the counter selling Tayto's and Mars Bars and bottles of Seven-Up. Oh, they'd wave as they passed by when they were home for a visit all right, or stick their heads in and say:

“Are you still here, Helen?”

“Of course, I'm still here, are you blind?” would be on the tip of her tongue, but she'd wave and smile and go on about her business. She'd smile at all of them except Tony, Margaret's brother. Tony passed by on the other side of the street giving her a wide berth it seemed. And she admitted, but only to herself, she didn't blame him in the slightest. Even her Mam noticed and mentioned it occasionally. Helen would brush it off with a shrug and an embarrassed grin. But she knew it would never go away and would have to be dealt with one way or another. It upset her to even think about it. Herself and Margaret avoided the subject.

She'd be lost without the cinema and the radio. She'd leave the radio on all day in the shop so that she'd feel in touch with the world at large. Her father would grumble that he “couldn't hear his ears” but he wouldn't dare turn it off. Even the customers would comment on the nice music she had on even though they'd never think to put it on themselves when they got home. In the long evenings, especially during the winter months when it was dark by five o'clock, she wouldn't miss John Kelly's programme of music from around the world. Mystery Train he called it and now there was talk of it going off the air.

That would never do. Bluegrass from Kentucky, Ladysmith Black Mombassa from South Africa, Yussou N'Dour from Senegal and Professor Longhair from New Orleans. She listened to the show with her old school atlas open under the counter. When he talked about calling his mother in Enniskillen on his cell-phone from the Great Wall of China, one evening, she thought she'd explode. It was one of her favourite moments. Then she read in the Irish Times that it was one of his too.

She loved geography in school and now enjoyed her own form of travelling. If she could get away from this place, the first thing she'd want to do would be to go to a decent concert in a proper concert hall. Louise often mentioned the weekend concerts in Dublin at the National Concert Hall and the Olympia. Helen would peruse the paper and see the famous American and British artists playing everywhere except where she was. They even had lunchtime concerts in Dublin, for God's sake. She'd sigh and get on with it. What choice did she have? She was stuck.

She resented her mother's failure to take her side in any discussion with her father until she realized the poor woman didn't have the will to take him on and as a result, he walked all over her. Often he'd wink at Helen near the end of the day and say:

“Will you be all right on your own for a while, love?”

Without waiting for an answer he'd be out the door and down the street to the Hotel Bar for a few pints. Helen imagined him yukking it up with his cronies and telling them what a great girl she was and what a hard worker she turned out to be. Taken after himself, no doubt. They were all worse than each other as far as she was concerned. Sometimes he'd be back in an hour and other times she'd lock the shutters, turn out the lights and he still wouldn't be back. Those were the nights she'd hear him talking loudly to her mother in the kitchen, looking for his supper, regardless of the hour.

Then it happened. One evening he came home from the Bar with a big smile on his face, a grin in fact. He was looking very pleased with himself. Too pleased, she thought. He called her into the kitchen.

“Helen, come here. I want you to hear this at the same time as your mother so I don’t have to have to repeat myself. I’ve had a brainwave. We, the lads and myself, were just chatting in the bar, when they said they were heading off up the town to get some chips before they went home. Stops the wife dead in her tracks if you offer her some chips when you get in, no matter how late you are, they said. Everyone loves chips it seems. Anyway, there they were, walking all the way up the town to get them. When it dawned on me, why don’t we get a deep fryer, I believe that’s what it’s called, and make chips here in the shop. We have the whole of this end of the town passing our door on the way home from the pubs, as well as the pictures. There would be no shortage of customers, especially at the weekends.”

His eyes were bulging out of his head with excitement.

“It would be great,” he said. “I could get the chips already cut or sliced and diced or whatever they call it. I’d buy a fryer and the money would just roll in.”

Helen couldn’t contain herself any longer.

“Hold on,” she blurted. “That’s a late night business you’re talking about. Drunks falling in the door and then the cinema doesn’t end till eleven most nights. How late do you plan on staying open?”

“As long as I can make money for this family, we’ll stay open,” he snapped, banging his fist on the kitchen table. Helen looked at her mother, but she sat there expressionless staring into her mug of tea. No help coming from that direction.

“If you think I’ll open the shop at seven in the morning and still be there at midnight, seven days a week, you have another think coming,” she heard herself say as she scraped the chair back and stood up.

“That’s enough out of you, young lady. You’ll do as you’re told as long as you’re living under my roof. Off to bed with you, now. You’ve an early start in the morning.”

The next morning, after a night of tossing and turning, the first chance she got she cornered her mother.

“Mam, why didn’t you say something? He’s lost the run of himself and I’m not going to stand for it.”

“You know how he is,” her mother said quietly. “You can’t talk him out of anything. I know what you’re saying. You’re going to be the one stuck with the extra hours. But he’ll kill me if I take your side.”

“Well, if you won’t, I will do something. It might be news to you, but I’ve already taken the first step. I have no intention of spending my life working like a slave with pocket money for wages. I didn’t tell you before, but I have applied for a passport and as soon as it arrives, I’ll be making plans. I have to get away from this God-forsaken place. It has nothing to do with you Mam and you can tell him if you like, but I don’t think you will. And don’t tell Louise either. I have to handle that side of it.”

“There was a time,” her mother said wistfully, “when your father was the nicest man you could meet. He was a real charmer, but living here and working so hard for all of us has changed him. I can’t believe he’s the same man I married.”

“What happened, Mam? What changed him?” Helen asked plaintively.

“I don’t know. He always wanted a son and I think he’s angry at me because I couldn’t have any more children. Not that he’d ever put it in so many words. Of course, I blame the money for

everything. Whoever said it's the root of all evil was right. He has become greedy and money-grubbing and has no time for anything except counting the takings in the cash register."

She pointed at the pile of ledgers and box of receipts sitting on the kitchen table.

"That's why he never talks to me anymore and barely answers when I try to ask him a question. Every night he just sits there and pores over the figures, always checking to see if someone is stealing from him. No wonder they hate him down at the bank, as he questions every printout and statement."

"I know," Helen said, smiling to herself for she hadn't heard her mother talk so much in ages.

"On the odd occasion when he asks me to make the deposit, they seem so glad to see me. It's a nice break for me and I never ask why. Even when they say;

"How's himself today? I don't let on to hear them. Anyway, not a word to anyone, Mam. I'll talk to you about it some other time."

A couple of weeks later the passport arrived and Helen got it out of the post before her father spotted the brown envelope with the harp on it. Her mother was sharper, though, and gave her a sly nod when she saw her tuck it in a magazine and hide it under the counter. Later, that day she sidled up beside her at the cash register:

"If I had a chance like you, I'd be gone like a shot."

MAKING PLANS

The next few weeks flew by. Maybe she should have stood up to him sooner. First, he found you just don't go out and buy a fryer. You have to deal with a supplier in Dublin, as they are made in Eastern Europe somewhere. This guy takes care of the installation, the carpentry and all the electrical work involved. Then, there's a waiting time of a few months, but the whole thing can be installed over a weekend. Frustrating maybe, but understandable. It's a big expense, nearly ten thousand euro but an investment, all the same. One night at the kitchen table, he said he figured he'd make the money back in two years and from then on it would all be gravy. She was surprised he was taking the delay so well. She noticed his manner on the phone with Dublin was very calm and he didn't lapse into his usual tirade of abusive language. Probably because he was dealing with someone who had something he wanted. Someone he couldn't bully. The man in Dublin had the upper hand.

Then, miracle of miracles, her father suggested she might like a break and spend a few days in Dublin with Louise. He was up to something. She wondered if her mother had told him although she found that hard to imagine. The break would be good for her, he said and she wasn't to worry, as they'd manage somehow. He might even get a local girl in for a week. A day with Helen and she'd learn the ropes. When Louise was home for her summer break from University they'd all sit down and discuss it.

First chance she got she pulled her mother aside.

“What’s going on? What’s up with him,” she asked. “He wants me to take a week off and is going to employ someone to fill for me.”

“He’d kill me if he knew I’d told you but he’s not well,” said Mam, with a serious look on her face. “He’s been to the doctor, who told him to take it easy. His heart isn’t so good. A touch of angina, the doctor said.”

“Oh, his heart” said Helen sarcastically. “At least now we know he has one.”

“Don’t be so smart,” said Mam. “It would be more in your line to say a prayer for him that he doesn’t keel over in the shop some day. Where would that leave us?”

Helen thought she was very quick to take his side.

When Louise called that week, Helen, for once, was glad to hear from her.

“Hello, it’s me. How’s it going?” and Helen stopped her in her tracks.

“I need to talk to you privately. I have to get out of here. When are you coming home?”

“What’s the matter? Are you in trouble? What has he done now?”

“I’ll tell you when I see you. But, I promise you, if you say a word, I’ll never speak to you again.”

“You’re not pregnant are you?” laughed Louise and Helen hung up on her. Then she had to call her back, as she never answered her question about when she was coming home. Louise was still laughing when she took the call.

“I’ll be home at the end of the month and we’ll have plenty of time to talk.”

“Don’t forget to bring your laptop,” said Helen “and don’t ask me why.”

July and August were busy and the shop, as usual, was hot and stuffy. Louise showed up occasionally, but Helen felt she was more a hindrance than a help. She insisted on chatting with everyone and telling them all about college life in Dublin. Sometimes she'd meet customers at the door on their way in and try to help them outside the counter. This unnerved some of them, as they weren't used to service like this. The locals could care less about university life, as Helen well knew and she could tell when they were only winding her up.

One day their father heard the two of them complaining about the heat and before they knew it, he had installed three big fans around the shop. To keep the vegetables nice and fresh was his explanation. Of course, they also blew the papers and magazines around when they oscillated, but that was easily fixed with some stones from the yard.

During a lull one day, Louise asked Helen what she wanted with her laptop.

"We'll finish early tonight whether he likes it or not and we'll go for a drink. We'll go out to the Glen. You ask Mam if you can borrow the car," Helen said with a grin, knowing Louise would be intrigued and her mother would say yes.

"You're pregnant, aren't you? Who's the lucky fella? Has Tony shown his face again?" Louise said laughing.

"Shut up," said Helen, "someone will hear you. And no, I'm not!"

That night, after the usual argument with their father about leaving early, the girls set out for The Glen. "Back to the scene of the crime," was how Louise put it.

"There was no crime," Helen insisted. "If anything I was to blame."

“You’re getting very defensive. Maybe there’s more to this than meets the eye,” said Louise on her way to the bar to order the drinks. No locals to be seen, so no one would bother the Kennedy sisters. Louise could hardly contain herself. Two Stella’s were on the table before them in no time.

“What’s the story? What’s up? Go on tell me. Don’t keep me in suspense.”

Very quietly and calmly Helen told her that she had made up her mind to leave and probably go to America. Louise looked like she had been shot with a gun.

“You can’t be serious. He’ll fucking kill you. What about Mam? She’ll lose her mind if you leave.”

“No, she won’t. She’s behind me in this. She hates what he has become as much as I do. She told me, in so many words. I don’t care what he says. I have to get away from here. I’m suffocating and he can’t stop me, anyway. I have my passport and have no intention of working like a slave for the rest of my life. Well, his life anyway.”

Louise had a stricken look on her face.

“What about me?” she wailed. “He’ll surely bring me home to work in the shop if you’re gone. Jesus! You’re ruining it for everyone.”

“No, he won’t. He already said he’d hire someone to fill in while I’m taking the week off in September. The only problem is he won’t get me back and he’ll have to keep the new girl. Imagine him having to pay a decent wage to someone.”

Louise waved to the barman for two more drinks.

“Jesus! You’re a bitch,” she said to Helen laughing. “I can’t believe it.

In an odd way, I find it exciting. I thought Tony Hogan had turned your head again. But this is even better. You’re getting out from under and the more I learn about business and economics the more I can

see myself managing the business sooner rather than later. It could be a goldmine and it will be all mine some day.”

You’re welcome to it,” said Helen resignedly. “I’ve had my fill of slavery working for our father. Soon the shop will be open from seven in the morning until midnight.”

“You’ll never find me behind the counter,” Louise said. “I aim to put my education to better use and concentrate on the bookkeeping side, profit margins and other stuff that he knows nothing about. I’ll turn it into a real going concern with three or four staff working shifts and bit by bit, ease him out. Mam should be glad about that.”

It slowly dawned on Helen that this was no longer about her, but about Louise. How did that happen? Here she was sticking her neck out with her big news and all Louise could talk about was herself and her plans for the shop. That’s when she realized Louise would do anything she asked to help get her out of the picture.

She outlined her plan very calmly and carefully. When she took her week off in September she would go to Dublin at the weekend and leave for New York as soon as she could. She needed Louise and her laptop to check the Aer Lingus website and find out how much her ticket would be. She’d withdraw the money quietly from the account that he didn’t know she had, and have Louise pay for it. God, he’d be raging if he knew about her secret account. She would call her mother from New York when she got there and give her the news. Mam would have to listen to her father rant and rave for a few days but he’d get over it, with all the excitement of the fryer being delivered and installed. She’d find a job and a place to live in New York. It couldn’t be that difficult as half the town had relatives over there.

On the way home, they stopped as usual on the Coach Road to look down at the town. The streetlights were on and they could pick out their own house with the upstairs light on. They’d be on their way to bed. Helen always made a point of stopping here and felt she would carry the view with her, wherever she went. Louise wanted to get home and couldn’t be bothered.

They got home giggling and laughing and sat in the sitting room for an hour or two with the television on low, drinking tea and sharing a sandwich.

Louise tried again to bring up Tony Hogan but Helen cut her dead.

“I don’t want to hear about him. It was all a long time ago and we should just get on with our lives.”

“Well, I only wanted you to know that I see a lot of him and he always asks after you,” Louise said with a little grin on her face.

“Cheeky devil,” Helen thought. “I don’t care,” she said. “He can go take a running jump as far as I’m concerned. I don’t care if I never see him again.”

That was the end of that. Their parents were already in bed and nothing was said in the morning. As long as Helen was up early to open the shop nothing else mattered, it seemed.

THE BEST LAID PLANS

The summer dragged. She couldn’t wait. The booking was made and the ticket paid for without incident. She’d be leaving the second Tuesday in September and she’d spend the previous weekend in Dublin. She’d get the train up, Louise would meet her at the station and help her with her suitcase. She’d have to remember to bring just one bag as any more might arouse suspicion around the house. The new

girl was a bit gormless, but keen to do well and might even be kept on if they get really busy. She had done some shop work before and knew how to work the cash register. Helen's mother knew her mother, so she'd be fine.

The week before she left was particularly touchy. She noticed her father yawning a lot and disappearing for an hour or two in the afternoon. Her mother said he was a bit tired and needed a rest. Training in the new girl, avoiding being alone with her father and trying to make her mother understand why she had to go so far away was a full time job. It seemed like Dublin would be OK or even England, but America was the other side of the world as far as her Mam was concerned. On the other hand, her mother offered her some money, asked if she was all right for clothes etc. etc. She was doing her best and needless to say, was terrified of the reaction when her father realized Helen was gone from his clutches. Louise had taken to calling on a daily basis.

"Hello. It's me" took on a very familiar ring and, to give her her due, she seemed as excited as Helen about the big adventure. Every phone call, ideas poured out of Louise. She was really thinking about the business and how she'd manipulate her father into handing it over to her sooner rather than later. She had already mentioned that she might look around for her own place to live. Helen smiled to herself, thinking she wouldn't want to work for Louise either.

The weekend in Dublin was like a blur. Louise met her as promised. They dropped her suitcase off at her flat and took the DART to Bray. As they passed through Dun Laoghaire and Dalkey, Helen felt as though she was in a foreign country. Beautiful expensive looking houses overlooking the Irish Sea. Famous people, rock-stars and actors live in those houses Louise reminded her. In Bray they walked along the Promenade eating ice cream with chocolate flake like kids. They were both giggling uncontrollably and speaking in jumps and starts. Helen wanted to talk about America and Louise wanted to talk about home. Helen realized she hadn't thought past getting away and in fact, didn't know what

she'd do when she went looking for a job for the first time in her life. Louise said she had a few friends in college who had brothers and sisters in New York. They'd meet them on Sunday at the concert.

“What concert?” asked Helen. “Mundy is playing at the Baggott Inn. All my friends will be there. They're looking forward to meeting you. They think you're very brave.”

Helen was delighted. Mundy was a small town person like herself, but he had made it big. He had played on the soundtrack for *Romeo and Juliet* and was on television every few weeks. She'll love that. She recalled John Kelly playing his version of “Galway Girl”, the Steve Earle song, with Sharon Shannon, a few weeks back.

“By the way,” said Louise with a grin, “Your friend Tony might be there. I told him you were coming.”

Helen was bothered, but let it go. She'd be in a crowd of strangers and no one would be the wiser.

On Monday night they stayed talking well past midnight. Louise made repeated efforts to bring up Tony Hogan's name but Helen wasn't biting. Yes, they had chatted. No, they didn't talk about what happened. It was nobody's business. Yes, he'd drop in the next time he was home and they might go for a drink together. That was it and that was all Louise was going to get out of her. Louise had insisted on Helen having a proper haircut, even had highlights put in, her nails done and brought her to a make-up shop on Chatham Street, where a friend of hers gave Helen some tips on improving her appearance. Helen had never been pampered like this before and loved her new look. They wouldn't know her in New York. Then she remembered, they wouldn't know her anyway. Now she was giggling to herself with excitement and tomorrow couldn't come fast enough.

Louise had no classes the next morning and was coming to the airport to see her off, whether she liked it or not. Two of Louise's friends had relatives in New York and they gave her their phone numbers and e-mail addresses. One of them worked in a successful Irish bar on Seventh Avenue and they were always looking for reliable Irish people. She hadn't envisioned working as a waitress but it would tide her over until she found something better. She thought they were all so welcoming and generous. None of the small town suspicion she was used to. Then she realized they were all from down the country and had put that kind of thing behind them. She'd do the same.

Before she knew it they were on the Blue Bus on the way to the airport on Tuesday morning. For once she had listened to Louise and was wearing jeans and a sweater for the flight. Louise said she looked great.

"Don't mess your good clothes," she had said.

They were having a coffee together in the Airport Cafe when she heard:

"Aer Lingus passengers for New York are now boarding through Gate 25B."

"That's me," she said. I want to get it over with. Call Mam and tell her you saw me off and that I'll be in touch within a few days. Not a word to the old man."

She hugged Louise for maybe the first time in her life and kissed her on the cheek. Their family was like that. Not a bit demonstrative. They had never seen their father hug or kiss their mother that they could remember. Louise had tears streaming down her face and pushed her away.

"Don't forget to call me, first chance you get."

She found herself seated in a window seat with a middle-aged man on the aisle. He was wearing a suit, which she thought was a bit much, but decided he was on business and wanted to look the part. He

was nice looking and friendly, and not too chatty. Lived in Wicklow and went back and forth to the States once a month or so. Had business interests in New York, was all he would say. That was enough for Helen, as she didn't need to hear his life story and certainly wasn't going to tell him hers. His name was Paul and he had two young children, Avery and Max, in a Gaelscoil. What kind of name is Max for a girl, she wondered? The wife's idea. She was sure she was having a boy and they had decided on Max. So she became Maxine. That's enough information, Helen thought and buried herself in the latest issue of *Hello*. She sold it in the shop but she never bothered to read it herself. Now it came in very useful. The cabin crew was friendly and attentive and before long they said they'd be serving lunch. About two hours into the flight she heard:

Attention ladies and gentlemen this is your Captain speaking. We have just received word that US air space has been temporarily closed to incoming traffic. We don't know how long this restriction will last, but we will continue as planned. When I get more information I will let you know. In the meantime, I hope you enjoy your lunch.

Not more than half an hour later another announcement:

Ladies and gentlemen, we have been advised that due to an incident in New York City we will be diverting to Gander in Newfoundland. There is no cause for alarm and we have been assured our stopover won't take more than an hour or two.

Helen's traveling companion turned to look at her and said:

“This doesn’t sound too good. I wonder if the aircraft is having a problem and we have to ditch in Gander because we couldn’t make it to New York or somewhere else like Boston.”

Helen froze in her seat. This was her first flight and here she was in grave danger of dying. Now she knew she shouldn’t have done it. She shouldn’t have taken off. She laughed when she realized the pun. She had never even heard of Gander.

“Oh well,” said Paul “something to tell the kids when we get back. If we ever get back.”

She couldn’t believe it. This clown was joking about the plane crashing.

“Please,” she said, “it’s not funny. I don’t want to die and certainly not on this trip.”

She laughed herself when she realized what she had said.

“So, there’s some particular trip you wouldn’t mind dying on. Just not this one. Is that it?” he asked with a grin.

She was beginning to warm to him. He had a good attitude and it helped her relax. He wasn’t quite old enough to be her father, she decided and that was a good thing. Apart from the occasional chancer, who winked at her in the shop before he bought a packet of sweets to bring home to the kids, this was her first up close and personal with a good-looking, middle-aged, married man. He was nice and had already complimented her on her hair. He didn’t know it was new. How would he?

The girls brought the bar trolley around again and offered free drinks. Paul suggested they should stock up for later. She wasn’t much of a drinker but went along with him. The crew did their best to be easygoing about it but one could feel the tension. Some of the older, more experienced girls or women, really, put on their best, we’ve seen it all before, professional faces but she saw that some of the younger ones were nervous and giggly:

Ladies and gentlemen, we'll be landing in Gander in about twenty minutes. When we land we have been instructed to stay on board. Apparently, a number of other aircraft have already diverted here and the airport is very congested. There's nothing to worry about. Just try to be patient and cooperate with the Canadian authorities. I'll talk to you again when we are safely on the ground.

"I don't like the sound of that word safely," said Paul with a wink. She wanted to hit him, but laughed nervously instead. Soon they saw the coastline of Newfoundland. She thought Connemara was bad but this was the most God-forsaken place she had ever seen. There was nothing to see for miles, except rocks and fields and empty roads. At least, they have tourists and traffic in the West of Ireland. Then she saw a small town on the horizon. No bigger than her own, but this one had an airport tower.

"Jesus Christ," she said grabbing his arm. "Paul, have you ever seen so many planes in your life. There must be dozens lined up and just sitting there."

"Multiply the number of planes by three or four hundred," he said "and you have an idea how many people must be here."

"Must be at least ten thousand," she said making a quick calculation.

"Plenty more where they came from," Paul suggested.

They landed safely, she breathed a sigh of relief and settled back to wait for the next announcement. The Captain was far less formal now and he had very little information.

OK folks. I promised I'd get back to you. While the sun might be shining outside, I'm afraid we're being kept in the dark. All we've been told so far is a bomb has gone off in New York and

the airports are closed. As soon as we know more than this, I'll let you know. In the meantime, this airport can't possibly cope with the passenger numbers on the ground. They have begun clearing passengers into Canada but expect it to take some hours. As I said, as soon as I get any more information, I'll pass it on to you.

Rumours began to circulate through the aircraft. A plane had crashed in New York, a plane had been shot down, a plane had crashed into a skyscraper. A woman became hysterical and started screaming "No. No. I don't want to die."

Two of the crew came to calm her and eventually one of the stewards sat beside her to keep her in her seat and reassure her. Paul shook his head and smiled at Helen.

"You OK?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm fine," she answered. "You needn't worry. I won't make a scene."

"Ladies and gentlemen, it's me again, the Captain. We have just been advised that all American airspace is now closed and will remain closed to all traffic. Apparently, two planes have collided with office towers in New York and I'm afraid we can expect to remain here for a few days, at least. The local authorities are putting their emergency procedures into effect and will do all they can to make your time in Gander as comfortable as possible. Please wait for instructions from the cabin-crew. And thank you, again, for your patience."

After what seemed like hours, Helen and her newfound friend and drinking buddy, Paul, emerged into the cool Canadian evening, walked down the aircraft steps and followed a long line of other

passengers into the nearest grey building. They stood in a poorly lit, long and narrow corridor. They were told to take all their hand-baggage with them. God knows when they'd see their checked luggage again.

“This must be what Ellis Island was like,” Paul suggested. “It's worse than Dublin Airport at the weekend, with half the country travelling to and from Spain.”

Helen had never heard of an Elks Club, but that was where she and about a hundred others would be accommodated. Cots had been set up and mattresses placed on the floor in what seemed like a parish hall. There was a bar with a TV in the corner and a kitchen at the back. It looked like a place the locals held functions. They huddled together like refugees, but everyone was glad to be off their feet at last. The people of Gander couldn't have been nicer. Nothing was too much for them. They actually asked people what they would like for breakfast. Most said they'd settle for anything, but a few were ordering as if it was room service in a luxury hotel. Some fell asleep from exhaustion while others spent the night chatting, playing cards and just generally being restless.

The whole thing hit home the next morning when someone turned on the television. The same scene was repeated again and again of the planes smashing into the Twin Towers and their eventual collapse. They were already talking about thousands dead, even though there was no way to get an accurate figure. Everything was an estimate. The population of Gander had nearly doubled and Helen wondered what her hometown would have done under the circumstances. She couldn't see how they'd cope as they had no such facilities and no emergency plan that she knew about. Then again, the chances of forty Jumbo jets landing in Tipperary were slim and none.

Pancakes were the first choice for breakfast and within a short time Paul approached with two plates piled high and two cups of coffee.

“Breakfast in bed,” he said with a smile and Helen thought to herself:

“I’d better watch myself here. He’s really very nice but don’t be a fool.”

Everyone was so friendly among the other passengers. People who had stood in line glumly the night before were chatting away and having a laugh. The Captain came by, with a few of the crew in civvies and went around shaking hands and asking if everything was all right. Everything was fine except for the odd few complainers. Helen was well used to this from the shop.

“Aer Lingus knew about this before we left Dublin and let us come anyway,” one angry passenger shouted at the pilot. Keeping his cool, which was good to see, he responded:

“New York is five hours behind Ireland. This incident happened at about nine o’clock in the morning in New York - you can look it up - and we were more than halfway across the Atlantic at the time.”

“So why didn’t we turn back?” was the next question.

“Because, as I said, we were more than half way and airlines carry as little extra fuel as possible. We wouldn’t have made it back to Dublin.”

“Fair play to you, Captain,” Paul piped up. “You’ve given him his answer.”

With that Paul introduced himself and Helen to the crew. They must have assumed they were together because the Captain made an announcement before he left, that anyone who needed to have someone at home contacted, give their phone number and details to Paul or Helen and he’d get word back to Dublin. Aer Lingus staff there would phone their homes and reassure them. They still didn’t know when they’d be on their way but at least they could pass on word that they were all safe and well. That sounded like a very practical idea and Paul suggested she get her hands on a clipboard and pen and paper. This suited her, as this way she would only be relaying information and not expected to have any answers. She’d put Louise’s name and number top of the list, just to reassure Mam.

Before she knew it, Helen found herself involved in her first crisis. It involved an elderly passenger who hadn't been able to reach her hand luggage in the overhead rack and had left it and her medication on the aircraft. Paul suggested they contact the Police, as the airport and planes were now off-limits for security reasons. He left Helen to look after it as he was "dealing with lunch."

This made her laugh as they had just finished their delicious breakfast. It seemed the locals had asked if they'd eat hamburgers and hot dogs or did they want soup and sandwiches for lunch? Paul was canvassing people for a majority decision. So off she went in the police car with Mary, who was from Dublin and on her way to visit her daughter on Long Island. Mary thought it was great fun while Helen was a wreck. The policeman could hardly have been nicer, brought them out beside the aircraft in the car and helped Mary up the steps. She pointed out where she was sitting and in no time he had her bag. One of the few left on board, it turned out. Mary was then upset by all the fuss she caused and began to feel weak. So instead of going back to the Elks, she was taken to the local High School, where all the Lufthansa passengers were located, and where there was a Nurses Station with a bed in the office. Mary was quickly ensconced in the bed and Helen headed back to the Elks where lunch was being prepared. She noticed Paul had more or less taken over as chief bottle-washer. He was in his element, bossing people around and laying down the law. The local ladies thought he was great. Nice to have a man in charge, for a change.

Helen then became personally involved when some of the women suggested they needed to buy underwear and toiletries. She was immediately directed to the biggest shop in town, The Maple Leaf Store. She rounded up everyone interested and led the march down the sidewalk and across the main street at the lights. She had to remind herself that the traffic was coming from the other direction. Not like home at all. People even stopped and spoke with them on the street.

"Are you the Irish people?"

"All our relatives came from Ireland or Scotland originally."

“You look just like us.”

“You’re welcome! “

“Hope you have a nice stay.”

“Isn’t it just dreadful what happened in New York?”

She might as well have been on the streets of her home town. That said, she knew people wouldn’t be as welcoming at home. Reluctant to talk to strangers, they were. Shy. She couldn’t afford that luxury running the shop and talked to everyone. Their attitude lifted her spirits though and reminded her that she must call Louise, who’d be at her wits end worrying about her.

The Maple Leaf Store loomed large in front of them and she was nearly afraid to enter, it was so vast. Before she knew it, a red and blue vested young woman came towards them and asked them if they were from the planes. Before they could answer she said:

“Come with me, we have a special display of underwear and toiletries for men and women.”

We heard there were thousands of you and you might be stuck here for a few days. So we had a truck come up from St. John’s overnight with all the supplies we could find and we have a special discount for overseas visitors. Well done, thought Helen. What a marketing stroke. Louise would like to hear about this. They had their ear to the ground and knew how to take advantage of the situation. Her father, the old so and so would like that, too. Mind you, he’d probably raise the prices instead of reducing them. Before she reached the display Paul was walking along beside her.

“What are you doing here?” she asked grinning.

“I had to slip out to find a chemist, bit of a cold coming on,” he said.

He then led her, much to her embarrassment, to the underwear display and asked:

“What do you fancy here?”

She didn't know where to put herself, as some of the others had turned round to look. Then she noticed they were all grinning and nodding and she could clearly hear them tell her to go ahead and call his bluff. She didn't know what to do. He was making a show of her.

“It won't be much use to him in a cot in The Elks anyway, Helen,” one of them said. “If he wants to buy it for you let him. Men can be such fools. I have one at home just like him. If a girl even smiles at him, he goes all to pieces. I told him she'd be welcome to him. We'll see how long she'd put up with his antics. Twenty years I've been married to the fool.”

Everyone laughed. It didn't bother Paul in the slightest though and before she knew it, he was picking out bras and panties that he thought she'd like. All black.

“I never wear black underwear,” Helen protested. “I don't like the look of it.”

“How do you know if you've never tried it,” he shot back. “You might be surprised. I think it's very sexy.”

“Of course you do. All men think that, but only on their girlfriends. Not on their wives.”

“How do you know that?” he asked grinning. “I thought you didn't have a boyfriend.”

“It doesn't mean I live in a bubble,” she shot back. “And I get my fill of TV. There's nothing much else to do.”

Later they all walked back together laughing and talking and still marveling at the choices in the huge store. Such places hadn't arrived in Ireland yet, though it wouldn't be long now. They were already in England and, with the Celtic Tiger taking off, Ireland was an obvious market. Not alone the choices, but everything was far cheaper than at home. CD's were about half the price and the same with toys and clothes. They had to do a bit of figuring with the Canadian exchange rate, but it was obvious to Helen,

who was good with money, that this was a much cheaper place to live than Ireland. Paul seemed very pleased with his purchases even though he wouldn't show her what was in the bag. Again he said he thought he was coming down with a chill and went looking for a Pharmacy. He told her he'd see her back at The Elks.

That night after dinner, the locals put on a talent show. It was great fun and featured some of the school children as well as volunteers from the audience. The kids were there because school was cancelled for the week as the schools in town were being used to house the passengers, like the High School where Helen had dropped Mary. She must remember to drop in on her tomorrow. The bright spark that had had a go at Paul in the Mall was one of the first to get up on stage. Nothing would do her but to make a speech thanking the people of Gander and then launch in to "Molly Malone." They nearly had to drag her down from the stage.

The surprise of the evening was Paul, who got up and sang, first of all *Are You Lonesome Tonight* and then the old Johnny Cash song *Forty Shades of Green*. Every time he came to the line in the chorus "Most of all I miss a girl in Tipperary Town," everyone cheered and Helen blushed. She was mortified and grinned from ear to ear. She was finally admitting to herself that she fancied this guy. But he's a married man and she had no intention of starting her adventure in America by becoming involved in something that can come to no good. She would put it out of her mind and avoid being on her own with him, from here on. Easier said than done, more than likely.

After the concert, the bar stayed open for as long as they wanted. Locals did the bartending and were soon out of Guinness. They thought they were doing the right thing when they brought in a few cases of canned draught Guinness. But it only lasted an hour.

"What? You're out of Guinness! Jesus Christ! What do we do now?"

This became the cry for a while but before long substitutes were found. Budweiser, Michelob, Sam Adams, not to mention Canada's own Labatts. Sing-songs started around the hall and people were

very relaxed and enjoying themselves. A few of the locals asked Helen about Tipperary. They thought she was lucky to be from a small town, like themselves. She didn't think so and she let them know. They said the secret was to get involved and not be working all the time. That wouldn't get her very far when she talked to her father, she thought. She noticed Paul was nowhere to be seen and decided the poor baby wasn't feeling well, with his cold and all. He had probably found a comfortable armchair somewhere and was sleeping off whatever ailed him.

HEADING FOR HOME

Shortly before midnight the Captain came by again with some big news. It seems Aer Lingus was going to send in a special plane with a number of staff to help out and a new crew. If US air space hadn't opened by the time they got there, they would fly everyone back to Ireland as soon as they could. With so many planes on the ground in Gander it would take a day or two to get everyone away, so this seemed like a good idea to him. Oh and by the way, all the phone calls had been made and messages left. He also said he had asked the staff coming out to bring cell-phones or Mobiles, as he called them, that can be used overseas. She imagined herself calling Louise.

“Hello. It's me. You'll never guess where I am.”

She was settling down to sleep in her cot, when she felt someone touching her arm, then her thigh. Squeezing it, in fact. She opened one eye and saw Paul sitting on the floor beside her. His hair was disheveled, his shirt open to the waist and his mouth hanging open.

“Ish there room in there fo’ me?” he asked drunkenly.

“Get away from me,” she nearly shouted. “Go lie down and sleep it off.”

“Good girl, Helen.” She heard a voice nearby. “Don’t let him near you in that state.”

Now she was really embarrassed.

“Ssshhh. Get away from me,” she said again, only this time she sat up and pushed him away. He tipped over on the floor with a stupid grin on his face. She might have known, just when you meet someone nice and even think of letting your guard down, they screw it up and disgust you.

What would she do now? She thought of her father coming in drunk and yelling at Mam. He’d pound the kitchen table and demand his supper. Her mother once said:

“Ah sure, he’s harmless. He’s only hungry. If I make him a sandwich and a cup of tea, he sits in the chair by the fire and goes to sleep. I slip up to bed and it’s never mentioned again. The next day he wouldn’t be able to look me in the eye.”

Helen waited until she was sure he was sound asleep, put a jacket over her tee-shirt and got a blanket from the back of the hall, to put over him. He’d be fine and wouldn’t even remember in the morning. He still had the Maple Leaf Store bag near him and nothing would do her but to look inside. He had bought some very fancy stuff, a black silk camisole and what looked like an expensive sheer bathrobe and matching slippers. She hadn’t seen them in the MLS. The sly bugger must have gone to another shop. Chemists shop my eye, she thought. I hope his wife likes them. Then it dawned on her.

“Jesus! I hope he didn’t buy them for me.”

Her mother was right. The next morning he could hardly look at her.

“I hope I didn’t do anything stupid last night,” he said sheepishly over breakfast. “I had a bit too much to drink and probably made an fool of myself.”

“Oh, you made an fool of yourself, all right,” she snapped. “I hope you don’t think that kind of carry-on is all right from a married man. You embarrassed me in front of everyone. People are still laughing. By the way, I hope your poor wife likes what you bought her.”

Once again Helen found herself scraping a chair back as she stood up. She wanted everyone to see that she wasn’t going to put up with this. He tried protesting but it fell on deaf ears. She felt quite pleased with herself. He wouldn’t try that again. Not on her anyway.

Then the news came. The Aer Lingus plane had come in late last night and would be ready to leave later in the day. Looked like the last in first out rule would apply at the airport. A notice had been posted on the door of The Elks Club.

Aer Lingus is happy to announce that a flight will depart for Dublin later today. No specific time can be given yet, but it will not be before 1600 hours. U.S. airspace is expected to open up later to limited traffic and could mean a further two days in Gander. The people of this town have been more than generous and Aer Lingus feels we would be taking advantage of their good nature by staying longer than is necessary.

More information should be available and posted by 12 noon today.

Helen could feel the elation spreading around the room. Some were already packing up their few things and talking about heading out to buy souvenirs of their stay. There was no sign of Paul anywhere.

“Just as well,” she thought. “I have nothing more to say to him anyway. Fucking eejit!”

Then she remembered Mary, the lady up in the Nurse's Station at the school. She asked one of the locals, Rose, how to get there and before she knew it, she was sitting in her pick-up truck and being driven there. She had never been in one before and asked Rose why she had a truck rather than a car.

"Makes more sense up here," she said. "There's only the two of us, Jim and myself and you never know when you have to pick up stuff that wouldn't fit in the trunk of a regular car. Jim loves it and I suppose, that's all that matters."

"Tell me now," she continued. "Is Tipperary a bit like Gander?"

"It's about the same size," Helen answered, "but boring. Nothing happens."

"Oh, it's gets boring here, I can tell you, especially during the long winters.

Still it's home to Jim and me. We spent about a year in Toronto when we got married first. Thought we might start a family, but no such luck. We came back with our tails between our legs, we missed Gander so much and haven't left since."

"Really," Helen answered. "What did you miss about it?"

"We missed the people. We found we were living among strangers in the city. They were very nice, but we didn't know them and they didn't know us. The holidays were very lonely and we decided we'd rather be among our own sort."

"I can see that," said Helen. "I wonder will I feel like that in New York?"

"I expect you will," Rose said matter of factly. "Tell me about yourself. Do you have a boyfriend?"

"Not really although, I do have a friend from home who lives in Dublin. He's at University."

Helen could hardly believe her ears. She was talking about Tony Hogan as if nothing had ever happened and that they might be back together after just a short chat in Dublin. Rose didn't know any better and wanted to know all about this Tony. Why didn't she move to Dublin when he went? Did they sleep together when he was home or did she ever go to Dublin to visit him? Very personal stuff, Helen thought, but these were questions she should be asking herself anyway.

Rose ended the conversation by suggesting that she should do something soon or Tony would have his head turned by someone more convenient in Dublin.

"It always happens," she said. "It's one of the reasons we had to leave Toronto."

When they got to the high school, the place was teeming with Lufthansa passengers. They could hear announcements being made in German and no one looked too pleased. She noticed a couple of harried men, sitting at a desk in the lobby who seemed to be shrugging their shoulders and not being of much help. They followed the signs to the Nurse's Station. They asked about Mary from Ireland and heard a Dublin accent from behind the curtain.

"Howya!" she said in her Dublin accent. "I'm here. Is that you Helen? Are you coming to take me away?"

"Hello, Mary. How are you feeling?"

"I'm grand," she said. "Just get me out of here before they whisk me away to Frankfurt or Berlin or someplace. All I've heard for the past few days are announcements in German. I don't know what they're saying, but it didn't sound like good news."

"Not to worry, Mary" said Helen with a smile. "We might all be heading home before the day is out. Aer Lingus has sent a plane in to get us."

“Oh thanks be to God,” Mary laughed, “ I was afraid I’d never see Dublin again. That’s it for me for a while. My daughter can come home to see me the next time.”

Mary hopped down off the bed, grabbed her little bag, said good-bye to the Nurse and trotted away down the corridor, as happy as can be.

“It’s great to be free, “ she said. “I swear to God, I was afraid they were going to kidnap me and I’d never see home again. I know I’m repeating myself, but you have no idea.”

Helen put her arm around her shoulder and said:

“It’s all right, Mary. You’re safe now. Rose here will drive us back to The Elks and you’ll see everybody. They were all worried about you.”

“Were they?” she asked.” That’s nice to hear.”

It was noon when they got back and the new notice had just been posted.

They’d be taken to the airport by bus at 4 o’clock and hoped to take off shortly afterwards. They’d be heading back to Dublin and would have a better idea of circumstances when they were back in Ireland. The crew thought there might be a flight out to New York over the weekend. That is, for anyone who wished to travel. Some might want to stay home and wait a bit. Helen realized she wasn’t as dead set on New York as she was a few days ago, when it was all an exciting adventure. The more she thought about it, the more it seemed like a bad idea.

Later when the buses pulled up to take them to the airport, the Captain came by and thanked her for her help, especially with Mary.

“I see your friend Paul has gone his own way,” he said smiling.

“I don’t know,” Helen said. “I haven’t seen him since breakfast.”

“You won’t either,” the Captain said. “He asked for the OK to rent a car and he’s gone driving to Montreal, where he’ll catch a train to New York. I told him Aer Lingus would pay for the car, but I don’t envy him the drive. I believe it’s about ten hours and a ferry ride.

“He must have been the worst for wear this morning,” he said smiling. “He came to the crew hotel last night and had a few drinks with us. Feeling a bit sorry for himself, he was. Said he was miserable here and missed his family. I made the mistake of saying I thought he was with you. He took it badly I’m afraid. Got a bit annoyed and said he had a lovely wife at home in Wicklow, with two beautiful kids. Then, after a few drinks, told us confidentially, wink-wink, that he fancied you, but you were a small town girl and didn’t want to know about him, being married and all. We all told him not to feel badly and not to do anything he’d regret. He left us to make his way back some time after midnight. I don’t know what happened but he was back this morning and asked if he could rent a car.”

“Before he left I asked him if he wanted to leave a message for you, but he declined. Said something about it not being a good idea for a married man to put anything in writing. He might be right there.”

So that’s where he was and that’s where he got all that drink. She was shocked and even a bit disappointed that he had taken off like that, but somehow she wasn’t surprised. She was sorry he didn’t leave a note, as she was curious about what he’d say. He’d make some lame excuse or other blaming the drink, no doubt. Still. He was mortified that he had made a fool of himself and this way he could avoid any more slagging from the other passengers and dirty looks from herself. Oh well, she’s probably well rid of him.

Helen was afraid the airport would be like a zoo and was both surprised and relieved to find that the Aer Lingus passengers were the first in line. Mary had a wheelchair for herself with a young man to push it and everyone was in high spirits going through Canadian Customs. Again, everyone was so nice and thanked them for being such good guests and hoped they’d come back in the future under happier

circumstances. Boarding was a piece of cake as they had only hand baggage and everyone sat in the same seat they came over in. A different aircraft, but the inside was just the same. They had a new crew and their old crew was in civvies and seated amongst them like regular passengers. They were like old friends at this stage and so many seemed to be on a first name basis. The Captain and the other pilots had to stay behind to fly the original aircraft back to Ireland. That was the one they came in on with all their suitcases still in the hold. Helen, an inexperienced flyer, cheered and clapped with everyone else when the flight took off up through the clouds, leaving Gander behind and heading home to Ireland.

She sat staring out the window, with an empty seat beside her and thought about her plans. She was sorry Paul had taken off, but that was his choice. Gander had opened her eyes to a lot of things and while she wasn't superstitious, she was religious in a funny way and thought this whole thing might have been a sign. Rose's comment was still ringing in her ear.

Maybe she wasn't meant to go to New York and should be happy at home. Maybe Tony and herself were meant to be together. All men weren't like her father. She'd think about it. She'd talk to Louise when she got back to Dublin. She had to talk to somebody as she couldn't keep it to herself much longer.

HOME AT LAST

Aer Lingus had taxis lined up when they arrived back and the airport lobby was packed with relatives, as well as Television and Radio crews. This was a huge news event, after all. She made sure

she wasn't spotted by anyone at home and ducked out a side door to the taxi rank. She asked the driver if she could use his mobile to call Louise and was glad to find her in. Woke her up, in fact. She was sitting outside on the top step with a cup of coffee when Helen pulled up and this time gave her the biggest hug of her life. She was so glad she was back safe and sound.

"Tell me all about it," she asked excitedly. "What was it like? I looked it up on the map. Never heard of it before. Was it awful?"

"Slow down," said Helen. "Let me catch my breath. All I can say is it's great to be back in Ireland. That's enough travel and adventure for a while. Get me a coffee too and let's go inside and sit down."

"Where's your suitcase?" Louise asked.

"Still on the other side of the Atlantic, as far as I know. Aer Lingus said they'd deliver it as soon as they got it back. I gave them your address here."

They settled down on Louise's couch and grinned at each other.

"Jesus!" said Helen, "I can't believe what happened. Have you spoken to Mam? Is she a basket case? Does she know where I am?"

"Not at the moment, she doesn't. The news said you were all being flown home and would be back in Dublin this morning. I'm sure she's waiting to hear from one of us. I'll give her a quick call."

While Louise was dialling, Helen wondered if Paul's wife in Wicklow had heard from him. More than likely, he called her from somewhere on the road in Canada.

"Hello, Mam, it's me, Louise. She's safe and she's here with me now. I'm putting her on."

Hello felt her eyes fill up with tears when she heard her mother say:

“Thanks be to God, you’re all right. I haven’t slept a wink all week.”

“It’s OK, Mam. I’m fine. We were very well looked after. The people were really nice and in a strange way, we made the best of it, I suppose.”

“If your father only knew, he’d be raging,” she went on. “He has no idea other than you are in Dublin and coming back tomorrow. You’ll open the shop for him early Monday, won’t you?”

“No need to worry on that score, Mam,” Helen said between clenched teeth.

“Oh yes,” Mam said quietly, “Before I forget, he needs a permit for the chips, so it will be another few months before it will be up and running - something to do with preparing and serving hot food. He’s beside himself over that, I needn’t tell you.”

“Well, that’s a relief, “ said Helen. “I wanted to talk to you about that before I say anything to him.”

“Oh, for God’s sake don’t set him off. He’s upset enough as it is.”

“OK, Mam. I won’t, but I have a lot to discuss. Look, I’ll be home on the train tomorrow. Louise is coming too, as she has no classes until Tuesday. Let himself come out to the station and pick us up as if nothing happened. See you, then.”

“Bye, love” said her mother. “I’m glad you’re back in one piece.”

Helen’s suitcase was delivered to Louise’s flat early the next morning. At least she wouldn’t have to explain at home why it was being delivered with a big Aer Lingus tag on it. They got the midday train and settled down for another long chat. A planning session, Louise called it. Helen had done some serious thinking on the flight home and had made a few decisions about her life that she had been putting off. She admitted to Louise that she realized going to New York was a half-baked idea and she hadn’t thought it through. Much as she hated working the long hours in the shop, it was where she was from.

She loved the town and what it stood for and deep down she didn't want to leave. She knew everyone and everyone knew her. If she made a bit of an effort she could have a social life, but it was easier to wallow and feel sorry for herself. That would change. Louise sat listening to her with her mouth open.

“Here's the plan,” said Helen a bit breathlessly. “I'll go back to the shop and work away until you finish school next year. But I'll be on the lookout for a house for the two of us to live in. I have to get away from living over the shop. By the time you take over the business, I'll be on a proper manager's salary with holiday pay. He can say what he likes and give out all he wants, but he's on a hiding to nothing with me. I have to make a life for myself.”

Louise's eyes were glistening and she loved what Helen was saying. Finally things were falling into place. She could see herself running the business and making a go of it. Helen would look after the day to day stuff, make sure the staff were properly trained, with the emphasis on customer service and Louise would handle the ordering and stocking, book-keeping, hiring and firing and that kind of thing. Before long, the minute he retired, they would put a sign over the shop front saying - THE KENNEDY SISTERS - leaving no one in any doubt as to who ran the place. It was so exciting they nearly missed the trolley with the sandwiches and refreshments passing through the train.

They sat sipping their drinks and looking out at the countryside.

“He's not well, you know,” Helen said suddenly. “He's got a bad heart. Touch of angina the doctor said. “

Louise looked at her startled.

“Are you sure?” she said. “Who told you that? Mam?”

“Jesus, now I feel guilty for plotting away to overthrow the bastard. He's not going to drop dead on us soon, is he? That wouldn't suit at all.”

Helen was surprised at Louise's coldness and realized she was more like their father that she thought.

The sun was shining brightly and Ireland never looked so good to Helen. She began to describe the starkness of Newfoundland to Louise, the lovely people she met and even mentioned Paul, in passing.

"You're kidding," said Louise laughing. "A married man. Are you out of your bloody mind? Are you going to get in touch with him again?"

"I don't think so," said Helen, "but I must admit I enjoyed his company. Maybe there's someone like that around town that I don't know about. I must keep my eye out. Actually I told Tony I'd give him a call when I got back. It's just that I didn't think it would be so soon."

Louise could see that she was pulling her leg and let it go at that.

As the train pulled in to the station, they saw the car parked on the road outside with himself sitting inside, with his hat on.

"Jesus!" said Louise. "Look at the cut of him. You'd think he'd get out and help with the case at least."

He stirred as they approached the car, but made no move to get out to help with the cases. Sat there yawning and scratching his head.

"Nice to see things haven't changed while I was away," was all Helen could think of saying.

"I was in Dublin only the once," their father volunteered when they were settled in the car. "Went up for the All Ireland when Tipp were trying for three in a row. Didn't like it at all and never went back. Tipp won."

The girls looked at each other and nodded. That's him all over.

Her Mam greeted her with a two-handed handshake and a smile. She was obviously both happy and relieved to see her.

“Sit down,” she said “and tell me all about Dublin. Were you homesick?”

“No, Mam, not a bit. It was great. Louise took great care of me and introduced me to all her friends. I’ll tell you what, I’d love a cup of tea.”

The girls could see and feel himself hovering in the background. He wouldn’t give them the satisfaction of appearing to be interested, but he didn’t want to miss anything either. Their mother was hanging on every word and had to hear all about the concert and who was there and who she met. No mention was made of the flight or anything to do with it.

“Your hair wasn’t that colour when you left here last week,” she pointed out to Helen.

“I know. I had it done in Grafton Street. Isn’t it great?”

I dunno,” Mam said. “I liked it the way it was. But I would, wouldn’t I? Tell me now, what will ye have for your tea?”

The minute he heard food was about to be produced their father pulled a chair up to the table.

“Did you hear about the goings on in New York?” he said to Helen, as if she’d been on the moon for the last week. “I don’t know what the world is coming to. And those poor people on the planes set down in the back of beyond in Canada. Sure they have nothing there. Dreadful, just dreadful.”

Helen looked at Louise and Louise looked away.

Not long afterwards, Helen was working away one morning, with young Kevin helping out, when she heard a crash from the kitchen. It sounded like crockery breaking. The door opened a few inches and she saw her mother waving her in.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” she said to Kevin and rushed towards the door.

Broken crockery all over the floor and her father asleep at the kitchen table.

“I don’t know what happened to him,” her mother said. “I went to get something out of the scullery when I heard the crash and now I can’t wake him.”

Helen realized that her father might not be asleep after all. She reached for the wall-phone and called the Guards. They’d know what to do.

He was still unconscious and sitting in his chair when the ambulance arrived. The customers had to be cleared out of the shop when they wheeled the stretcher in. Poor Kevin was at his wits end. Now there was a crowd on the street outside trying to see what was going on. The ambulance driver, Pakie, was shaking his head and whispered to Helen:

“It doesn’t look good, pet.”

She had known him all her life and he had never spoken to her before.

Helen and her mother followed the ambulance to the hospital but by the time they parked the car and found their way in, they were stopped and asked to wait for a short time. The doctor on duty told them that Des had died nearly immediately and hadn’t suffered. He had already spoken with the doctor in town and had learned that he had long had a heart condition but said little or nothing about it. Her mother said she was shocked but not surprised. He would have the occasional dart, was how she put it.

THE RENDEZVOUS

It wasn't that long ago, but Helen was thinking of the last time she saw Margaret. It was the morning they had the "official opening" of The Rendezvous.

The sun was attempting to shine as Helen and Louise stood on the sidewalk looking up at the new sign. A car horn sounded behind them and there was Margaret pulling her Honda Civic into a spot right outside.

"The Rendezvous," she said loudly, "very posh indeed."

"Well, it's not exactly a chipper," said Louise, who gave herself credit for the name.

"Old Des would have been proud of the two of you, if he had lived to see the day," Margaret said, squeezing their arms. "It's hard to believe so much has happened since your infamous trip to New York, Helen. If he only knew what you've done with the place."

"I can only imagine," said Louise. "Helen, Mam is waving at you."

Inside their mother was holding up the phone and with one hand over the receiver was saying: "It's the Community Radio, they want to know if you're still OK for 5 o'clock this evening."

"Tell them yes, of course," laughed Helen. There was a sparkle in her eye, which wasn't lost on Margaret.

"I swear to God," she said, "you're a different person since that trip. Even your poor Dad passing away hasn't put a halt to your gallop. I've never seen anyone get so involved and make so many changes to their way of life."

“Oh, it affected me, all right, but in a good way. It gave me a new lease on life. Come in and sit down and have a cup of coffee. We’ll have a chat and I’ll show you around.”

Margaret had tried to stay away from the shop while the changes were being made. Every time she drove by there were workmen in and out, painters, carpenters, electricians, the lot. Now she could see why. Helen and Louise had gotten out of the grocery and vegetable business, turned the shop into a deli with a variety of coffees, soups and sandwiches on one side, a huge selection of newspapers and magazines at the other and converted the back into a seating area for lunch-time business with tables and chairs for twenty-four. Four tables for four and four for two down the middle. Most days they filled twice over – 12 to 1 and 1 to 2. The banks, the Credit Union and the Post Office supplied most of the lunch-hour customers, not to mention the country people in town for one reason or another.

Mam, smiling and looking years younger, supervised the food and made the soups herself from her own recipes. They were closed, except for the newspapers, on Saturday and Sunday. Helen had no problem finding suitable help locally who were prepared to work part-time in a nice business in a brand new, clean environment.

The first question out of Margaret’s mouth, after she tasted her coffee, was: “What about Louise? Is she fit to be tied?”

“Oh no, not at all,” said Helen laughing. “She visualizes a chain of these shops, if this takes off. She’s already talking about some of the surrounding towns and wondering what the competition will be like. There’s no fear of Louise. She’ll land on her feet.”

“I know it’s not my business, but you always said the shop would be left to her.”

“Well, it turns out, there was no will, or one couldn’t be found, might be more accurate,” said Helen. “Mam said if that’s the case, it all comes to you. You’re the one that put the time in and I’ll let

you run with the ball for as long as you like. If you make a success of it, fair play to you and if not, we can always go back to what we had before.”

“What’s this about the radio at 5 o’clock, then?” Margaret asked. “I suppose I’ll have to tune in.”

“Well it seems they were so pleased with the last interview, they want talk to me again about Gander. Apparently they had lots of calls asking to hear more stories about how the people in Canada looked after everyone. I suppose it has made me a bit of celebrity around here and it gives me a chance to get publicity for the Rendezvous. Even the Chamber of Commerce asked if I’d address them. Louise said go for it. And you know Louise, if I don’t do it, she will.

She remembered clearly how Margaret had waved as she drove away in the red Civic. She looked back, smiled and waved. That was the last she saw of her.

