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THE ONE CURRACH RETURNING ALONE

And thereupon imagination and heart were driven
So wild that every casual thought of that and this
Vanished, and left but memories, that should be out season
With the hot blood of youth, of love crossed long ago...
— W.B. Yeats

I lived in Ireland for nearly a year when I was in my early twenties. I arrived in April, coming by boat-train from London to Dun Laoghaire in the rain, then catching a bus to Dublin proper. I knew no one, and had no idea where I'd stay. But I had the reckless courage of the young, and sat by the window, watching the grey row houses with their lovely Georgian fanlights aglow in the smudged light of the traffic. A man sat beside me on the bus, and spoke in the accents of the Erin exactly as I had imagined, fresh from my Irish literature course; he told me he was a musician and that was that. He took me around to meet his friends, bought me my first pint of true untraveller Guinness, installed me in a raffish hotel with a good bar frequented by the music crowd, and got me a ticket for a Chieftains gig. I never saw him again. I spent three days in Dublin wandering the narrow streets, Georgian slums, and dark pubs where I somehow expected to see the characters of Joyce, Behan, O'Casey going about their business or stopping for a drink in a haunted corner at Davey Byrnes' establishment.

Someone at home, a printer and a film-maker, knew an old woman living in County Mayo. He'd gone to Ireland a few years earlier to make a film on the Troubles and had met Sheila because of her family connection to several heroes of the Easter Rising. If anyone can find you a place to live, it'll be her, he had said. I hitchhiked to Mayo in less than a day, across the middle of Ireland, lush farmland giving way to the rocks and Bens of the West. My heart leapt to the sight of stone walls and ruined cottages, camps of tinkers on the outskirts of towns. This was what I wanted and never had in the country I came from: the purity of low hills and hedges of fuchsia, men whose voices caressed my name and whose religion excluded me.

Sheila lived in a small caravan – she called it the Ark – in a corner of a stony field in rural Mayo. You ask to be let off at the round tower, I had been told in the letter she'd written to me that winter, and rounding the corner on a bus from Castlebar to Turlough, I suddenly saw it, grey and potent in its ancient churchyard where it had stood since the ninth century. Next to the churchyard, I sidestepped cow pats to reach her door. Smoke from a sweet turf fire bloomed from a chimney jutting crookedly out of the top of the caravan. Cats everywhere, concerned hens, a donkey. There was tea to drink and a narrow shelf to sleep on while she pondered where to send me. A friend in Louisbourg? The painters in Kerry? After a few days I realized I could easily listen to her stories forever and never leave the caravan at all so I set out on my own one morning in the rain for Galway and was sent by a fish dealer to a small island off the Connemara coast. I wanted to believe it was no accident – the house I rented, the fisherman who loved me, the blue and white teapot: I had waited all my life for them.

Each day, rain or shine, I climbed down the rocks to the sea. Sometimes I swam, or collected mussels for my dinner. Phlox surrounded my porch. I had a typewriter on a little wooden table in the scullery (the only room with good natural light and there was no electricity) and I wrote a book of poems. The men went out in precarious boats to drop lobster pots into the sea. The women knitted and gossiped. The islanders were the first generation of their community to speak English and they retained the Gaelic syntax. The past was spoken of in the present tense and history lived in each hour of the day. Everyone hated Cromwell and the rest of the English who'd sent them to the island in the first place; they repeated Cromwell's rallying cry To Connaught or Hell as though it had been uttered by a pesky politician that week and not three hundred-odd years earlier. When I said I was a poet, they asked: Did I know the poet on the Arans? Which one, I asked. Ah, the one who wrote *Playboy of the Western World*, had I heard of that play? I had.

Two old bachelors, brothers, were my neighbours. They let me use their well and they gave me potatoes. At night they argued because one brother had given me turf and the other was jealous. I was the only unmarried woman they knew and I was courted with fuel and banty eggs, a pretty red fish called a gunnerd, trashy novels pulled out of a suitcase kept under a bed and smelling of mildew, jugs of buttercup-flavoured milk for my tea. One brother had no teeth, the other had a glass eye. Sometimes I wish I'd married one or the other just to have lived in their smoky cave where chickens pecked crumbs underneath the table and the Virgin Mary cried gilt tears above the mantle.

A man on the island played a tin-whistle most evenings on the boreen that led to the quay. If the wind was right, the notes would enter my cottage and coax me out to stand with a few others, in the lee of a hedge, listening as he played a few bars of this, a phrase of that, one or two trembling airs in their entirety. Occasionally I'd take my recorder out and we'd play together, usually *The Raggle Taggle Gypsies* because that was the only one I could play quickly enough to keep up. I bought a tin-whistle at a news-agent's shop in the nearby town, hoping that Miceal could teach me the fingering, but he'd get impatient with me and would take it and play some complicated jig that I couldn't begin to decipher, handing the whistle back to me, glazed with spittle.

A family had been raised in the cottage I lived in, six children living there with their parents until the mother's mother died and left them another house, slightly larger, which came with a job; it was the house that had always been the post-office and no one would dream of changing that. Only one of the six children remained with his parents, the others marrying and moving away, several to America, and one becoming a police officer or Garda in a village on the other side of the county. That son would come home most weekends with his wife and small child, carrier bags bulging with jugs of illicit poteen he'd confiscated from moonshiners in his village during the week. His parents often hosted ceilis on Friday nights to celebrate his visits and everyone got blind-drunk on the poteen, stumbling away in the small hours, singing sad songs at the top of their lungs in rain. I'd lie in my bed, listening, until the last one found his way home. Occasionally one or two of the unmarried men would stand above my cottage and sing until their voices gave out. In daylight these were men who would pass me on the boreen, faces scarlet, too shy to say hello.

What did I want there, what did I find? I learned something of lobsters, where they lurk in the cold Atlantic, something of isolation in my north-facing cottage. I was

the only person living on the island who did not attend Mass. When I explained that I'd been raised by a Presbyterian mother and a lapsed Catholic father, I saw eyebrows raise and significant looks being exchanged. It was as though I'd told them my parents had never been married.

I'd come from a painful love affair and wanted to forget about men. But everywhere were those soft voices, the smell of peat and tweed and sweat. I could no more say no to the shy fisherman who visited me with his aging dog than I could say no to the dawn trips in the currach to set nets or look at the seals on the rocks to the west of the island. He'd come at night, bringing a handful of parsley from his father's garden or a pot of his mother's marmalade. I'd make some tea for us and we'd sit by my fire until the candles burned down to nothing. It took him ages to unlace his boots and he was beautiful in moonlight. I'd wake in the morning to find him gone and only the sweet peaty smell of his hair on the pillow next to mine. When I fished with him, he'd stay longer, waking first to make strong tea for me to drink while he brought his currach around to my beach. We'd head out just as the sun came up beyond the Bens of Connemara and come back late, cold and wet, with a box of lobsters clattering under damp burlap or a string of mackerel. He'd drop me in front of my cottage and I'd make myself some soup, drinking it quickly before falling asleep to the smell of the North Atlantic coming in through my curtains.

I remember how lovely the hills were in autumn, the russet and gold of the furzes, and how the wind smelled of sheep. My house was cold. The windows all rattled and wind came right under the doors until I put newspapers in the cracks to hold it back. Why someone had built it in its north-facing location was beyond me. It stood on a promontory and I felt as though we'd be lifted up in the fierce November gales, the house and I, to be taken far out to sea on the wind. And I wondered if anyone would miss me. The fisherman had begun to come less often, preferring his mother's warm kitchen with its big chairs and pot of mutton stew. He knew, even if I didn't want to, that there wasn't a future in our sort of union. His own uncle had married a woman from an island half a mile to the north and had moved there to live in a house she'd been left. This man was considered a "blow-in" by the other islanders and his children were isolated as a result. The uncle told me once, at a cattle fair in the mainland town where we all did our shopping, that he'd look from his house at night to see the soft gaslights of our island and wish to God he'd never left.

When I decided to leave, people came to my house to tell me they were sorry I was going. They brought little gifts – cards, a loaf of soda bread, a toque of Connemara wool which blew off my head during the ride across to the mainland and couldn't be retrieved with an oar. My fisherman rowed me across with my rucksack and shook my hand formally, wishing me safe passage home. I walked up to the road, wondering how soon a ride would come; my pack was heavy and the seven miles to the town was a long walk. When I turned to look at the island, it was as though it had never known me, hunched under the wind with a few wisps of smoke rising and the one currach returning alone.

Back in Dublin again I stayed in the same raffish hotel just long enough to give a few poetry readings arranged by a friend and attend a play or two. I bought books to take home and a record of Paddy Tunney singing Donal Og. When I walked along Grafton Street or through Stephen's Green, it was as though I was dreaming. I wanted to wake to my cold room and the smell of peat, wanted to wake from the decision to leave

and find myself still wrapped in the fisherman's arms or else climbing into his boat while a few terns mewed in the wind above us. From this distance, across the width of Ireland, the problems of background, isolation, religion seemed easily solved. But I remember boarding the plane with a weight that settled down through my throat into my heart and was so heavy I thought I could never walk with it, or be able to talk. This is so long ago now but thinking of it brings back the music of Miceal's tin-whistle as clear as anything and I ache to walk out to the boreen and learn to play along.