

Something About Ireland (from FATHER MUST)

by Rick Rofihe

“Come with me, brother, let's take a leak.” That was just about the first thing Michael said to me as I came through the swinging doors after clearing customs at Kennedy.

“I just took one on the plane before we started down.”

“Then come with me while I take one. Come with me, anyway. Mary'll watch the luggage.”

Of course, first he'd introduced me to Mary, his American girl. So earnest-looking she is, and pretty at the same time—not such a bad way for him to ease into the immigrant life.

Inside the washroom, as I started to lean against the long wall opposite the urinals to wait for him, he put his arm straight out and pressed his hand to the tiles by my ear.

“Timothy, she's going to go on about something. She might start in the car on the way in, or at home, or at the restaurant tonight. Because there's something she wants to know, and when she asks you, say that you don't—you don't know.”

“About?”

“About Ireland—it's probably what they say over at Galway Bay that she's looking for, what they say about the islands. What Grandfather said to us that time.”

“Just that? Michael, it's not much to want to know. And you could tell her yourself.”

“But I didn't. Right when I met her, that night when she asked, I told her I didn't know. So now you don't know.”

After turning and taking a few steps, the same palm he'd leaned on while talking to me he pressed about the urinal on the opposite wall. When he was through, he brought it down on the handle to flush, and turned to walk about.

“Aren't you coming?”

I was still leaning back.

“Maybe I will take one after all. You and this new land have my kidneys at work.”

Well, most come to stay. They're not coming to look around, or think about it. They say it openly, to themselves and to theirs when they leave their green Ireland. Myself, I just came for a visit to see my own brother, but for most my age on the plane, it's leaving for good. It's the way Ireland works; it's that, not the rain, that's keeping it green—for every one born, one goes away.

Something about Ireland, about islands? Not in the car on the way in, she didn't ask. Not as she made tea for us all as I unpacked my suitcase beside the foam-rubber mattress on the floor that she'd laid out and made up for me.

And not during tea, and not after, when they walked me around to show me the neighborhood, and not that evening at the restaurant they took me to.

And not the next day, Tuesday, when they both got up before me and were off to work, leaving me a note saying we'd all meet at a bar downtown at six.

And it wasn't an Irish bar—in the two weeks I was there, I noticed how my brother, with Mary along, avoided Irish bars; avoided places where anyone just might on the off chance be able to answer one American's question about something Irish.

It's true what they say; flying is tiring. I slept late and got up slow at ten in the morning. And not out until noon. Noon in New York, that would be five in the afternoon Dublin time. Then out all day by myself—quite a city. Sharp and fast, yes, but I suppose that if one's willing to put a few old things to the back of the mind and a few new ones up front, that then someone coming from Dublin might stand half a chance.

I found my way to the bar about a quarter hour early. High ceiling and dark clothing; that's probably what everybody new to it

must notice about the sleeker bars of New York. This one had a long bar top that came from the wall near the front window and then curved around and went straight and long all the way to the back, except for a break in it, a flip-up sort of thing, about halfway down.

It's in the blood, that between the near section of the bar, which a fellow was tending, and the far, where an attractive young woman was, I'd choose a barstool at the far. But I sat myself close to the break, so it wouldn't be hard for Michael or Mary to spot me from on the bar top than the bartender, she says to me, "You must be Michael's brother. Timothy, right? I'm Ann. He called here to say you'd be coming in, that I should take care of you if you got here early."

"So you know Michael?"

"I know him, and you look like him."

"And you know Mary..."

"I see her when she comes in with him—you really do look like him."

"Well," I said, "we are brothers."

Looking at her, I had all kinds of strange thoughts, that my brother's lonely for family in New York, that he's trying to mate me up with a cute American thing and get me to stay. When neither he nor Mary showed up sharp at six, I thought, they're not coming at all, this woman tending bar's going to take a very drunk me home at closing time. But then Michael and Mary arrived, one on each side of me.

Michael, on my left, says, "Go ahead and ask him, Mary."

Mary says, "Timothy..."

Something about Ireland? I didn't know what to expect. I put my eyes on Michael and, to try stalling Mary a moment, I say, "Here in America, I think I'll go by Tim."

"All right," she says. "Tim. Tim, Michael says that when a female in Ireland says she's going to the washroom, she says, 'I'm going to spend a penny.' Is that true? I never know when to believe him."

"I don't like to admit that anything Michael says is, but this time, Mary, it's so."

"Then," she says, "I'm going to spend a penny."

Mary turned to walk beside the high backs of the barstools to the washroom at the rear. I watched her go, then turned to look at Ann across the bar. But Ann wasn't looking at me; she had her head turned to Michael. And Michael wasn't standing right next to me anymore. He was in the break in the bar, with the flip-up part up and out of the way, behind him. Michael wasn't looking at Ann or me, but watching the washroom door, so, whenever Mary started back our way, he could resume his place beside me. I figured that out when, with no place to look, I just stared down at the bar top—and there were both of Michael's hands, but just one of Ann's. Now, in Ireland, as in America, we can't see through wood, but I'm sure that her other hand was low around the corner of the break in the bar, with Michael pressing against it.

Wednesdays Mary had off, so I had two Wednesdays with her showing me around. We were hardly into breakfast on the first one when she began.

"I've been trying to find out something about Ireland—I asked Michael, but he didn't know. I thought you might."

"Something about Ireland?"

"About islands. Something they say in Ireland about islands."

"Well, if you count Ireland as an island I do know one old tale. About an Irish chieftain who returns from what they called then the Unseen Land. To lure his beloved to Ireland, he cries: 'Oh, wouldst thou come along with me to where summer's cool, winters are gentle, spring comes early. Lovely is the island I speak of; here it is as if they young people grow not old. Warm and sweet are our streams that flow, with waterfalls and natural bridges. The notes of birdsong, the flapping of wings are in each glade and thicket. Everywhere softness. Everywhere tenderness. Stop with me. Live with me.'"

Mary said it was a beautiful tale, but the one she was trying to remember wasn't so elaborate. "Mary," I start to say, "I'm afraid I—"

"I think it was more like a saying. It was in a letter I got one time. Where I went to college there was a boy I liked, but he lived with a girl—everybody said they were high-school sweethearts. Maybe I shouldn't have let that stop me, but sometimes I'd be almost ready to say something to him to let him know how I felt, and then I'd think: Don't get between high-school sweethearts.

"Then one day in the mail there was a letter from him. From Ireland, they'd taken a trip to Ireland. When I opened it, at first I just looked at all the words in it—there were probably more there than we'd ever spoken. But when I read it, it didn't seem to be *about* anything. It wasn't about *him*, and not about *them*, and not about *me*. Just all about Ireland. I don't remember much of it, except there was one thing that stood out at the time, something to do with islands.

"I thought to myself, when he gets back, I'll watch—the situation between him and her. After they returned, I did thank him and all, but as far as I could see, things between them seemed the same—high-school sweethearts.

"When college days ended, like everybody else I packed up everything and got on with my life. I came here, met new people. But one day I ran into a woman I knew from then. She was talking about who was where, and she mentioned them—well, who she mentioned was *her*. And what about *him*, I asked. Oh, he wasn't with her anymore, they'd split up the last day of college. She met somebody new, and he just went back to his hometown at first, but then he went by himself to live in Ireland. After a while he met someone there, got married, started a family."

Then Mary says to me, "Tim, I didn't care too much when I heard all that; I mean, I didn't feel it was a big missed opportunity or anything. After that, I even came across the letter he'd sent me. I took the letter from the envelope and just kind of looked at the words without reading it. Then I folded it and put it back in.

Because, what did it have to do with me anymore? So I threw it out with a lot of other old things. But the very next day after it was gone, I started to think about it, and was trying to remember some of it. At least the part about islands. It was something the Irish say about islands.”

“Mary, why don't you plan to make a trip to Ireland? Maybe you'll see some islands.”

“Ireland? Oh, no, I couldn't. I...”

Well, where did Mary and I go that day? The Statue of Liberty, the World Trade Center, Saint Patrick's Cathedral, the Natural History Museum, then back down to meet Michael at six at the bar—Ann's section of the bar.

My second Wednesday with Mary was quite different. We were just walking from breakfast when I said, “ Could use some more tea.” I looked around for a coffee shop. “Let's try in there.”

That's the way it went all day with me—didn't get far, didn't see much, just, with Mary, drank tea here and there. A fine day it was, too; not cloudy, not raining. Yes, that's the way it went all morning and afternoon. At one point, laughing, she even said to me, “You might as well be in Dublin.” Which was odd, that she said it, because that was exactly what I was wanting to say to her.

Before I went to the departure gate just now, I did say, “Have Michael bring you across. Or have him buy you a tick, and leave him at home. Hey, Michael? I'll take her over the bog, rock, moss, and heather all the way to Connemara.”

“Good, Timothy, good,” he says to me, afraid I'd say more. And Mary's all the while watching with serious eyes, yet smiling at us, two Irish brothers with their private language of parting.

Even if Michael does a thing or two in ways that I wouldn't, he's really not such a bad fellow. What Mary wanted to know, yes, he could have told her. But I suppose he was thinking that by telling her he'd either win her for good or lose her right then and

there to an old idea she'd always miss. And neither way was what he wanted—that is, if he ever knows what he wants at all.

I notice when one travels how things fall off of one. Even on my way to Dublin airport two weeks ago, even before I got on the plane, little things on my mind—the extra key I'd meant to get made, the dry-cleaning I'd wanted to take in—little things like that began to fall off. And by the time the plane touched the ground in New York, for me the whole of Dublin was gone.

Then, when you're in a new place, of course new things attach, but when you leave, it happens again—now, on my way back to Dublin, bits and thoughts of New York have begun leaving me. I wonder if by the time this plane touches down, Mary, too, will be gone.

Mary—not an Irish name in this case, but it could become one. Though who knows but if after a while she'll want anything at all to do with whatever's Irish, or at least whatever's Irish with our family name.

I don't really believe in saving, but then, I just might have to keep saving it. Until I'm a husband in Ireland, a father in Ireland, a grandfather with grandchildren in Ireland. Say if they're boys like we were, I'll take them over the bog, rock, moss, and heather, over to Galway. Down to Connemara on the coast. I'll say to them as Grandfather said to us: “Me lads...”

Yes, Irish grandfathers really do speak that way, and when you're lads just over for the first time from built-up gray Dublin, you catch and remember every new thing; every word, every color of brown, blue, and green as you stand on each side of Grandfather, who puts a hand on your shoulder and looks out to the Aran Islands in Galway Bay.

“Me lads, when you can see the islands...”

And if I'm going to stay in Ireland until I'm a grandfather, I'm going to speak that way, too. And I'm going to say what he

said, which is what everyone there says as they look out over the bay on days when you can see the islands, that when you can see the islands it's going to rain, and when you can't see the islands, it's raining.

