

The pilot flew in over North Kerry and brought the plane in from the east to land at Shannon. The cloud was thick at first, allowing only occasional glimpses of the land below, but it thinned out as our altitude decreased and I began to get my first proper look at the country that I had once called home.

We were by this stage turning to the left and passing over what I imagined might be the Silvermine Hills, a dull brown mass of wasteland, the only colour provided by occasional patches of softwood plantation. But the land soon levelled out and the familiar patchwork of fields and farms appeared, irregular in shape, to all intents and purposes random in design. Farmhouses dotted the landscape, seldom more than about a quarter of a mile apart, a testament to the relatively small size of the landholdings. Small certainly in comparison to those found in the place from which I had travelled. A mosaic of small roads twisted their way across the countryside, occasionally converging at a crossroads where I could see groups of houses huddled together in anonymous villages.

I kept my eyes on the unfolding picture beneath me as I stretched out in my seat to relieve the discomfort of a five hour flight. There was space to stretch because I had turned left as I entered the plane, unlike twenty years ago when I had spent the journey huddled in cattle class, squeezed between a fat nun and a small, bird like woman who sat hunched in her window seat, her fingers nervously clutching the clasp of her handbag. We had been half way across the Atlantic before she'd spoken to me.

'Is this plane going to Boston?' she'd said, her voice trembling.

I'd looked at her speechless, too young to recognise Alzheimers or dementia, or whatever the hell they call it. Fortunately, the nun had heard and she'd taken over. She reached over me and took the woman's hand, squeezing it tenderly.

'It's OK, dear,' she'd said. 'Wait there and I'll get someone.'

She'd stood up and disappeared into the galley and shortly afterwards reappeared with what was then called an Air Hostess. They'd spoken to the woman and taken her bag. After sifting through it for a minute, they'd found her passport and the Air Hostess had gone up to the cockpit. Twenty minutes later she'd returned and explained to the woman, slowly and gently, that her son would be waiting for her at the airport in Boston. Then the nun and I had exchanged seats and the two women finished the journey quietly talking to each other.

This time I was on the window seat. My travelling companion on the aisle seat was a tall, thin woman of indeterminate years. We'd exchanged greetings when we boarded but I wasn't interested in conversation and had feigned sleep for most of the journey. Now however, she saw me looking down.

'Are you from here?' she asked.

I hesitated before answering. 'Yes,' I replied eventually. 'I was born and raised in a village about fifty miles north-west of where we're coming in. I lived there for the first nineteen years of my life.'

'How long have you been away?'

'Twenty years,' I said. 'This is my first time back since I left.'

I waited for her next question but it didn't arrive. I realised that she'd picked up on some reticence on my part. I didn't want to seem rude, so I asked, 'It's out of season in Ireland. I assume that you're not a tourist. Are you here on business?'

She smiled. 'Yes. I'm head of HR for a pharmaceutical company. We're based in Boston and we have a large manufacturing facility near Limerick. I guess that we're part of the Celtic Tiger that everyone's talking about. We're looking to expand, which is what's brought me over here.'

'They'll be pleased with that. You'll be bringing a good present to usher in the new millennium.'

'Yes indeed, although there are so many companies locating their manufacturing to Ireland now, we're having to fight to get access to enough workers. Who would have thought that we'd see that day?'

I remembered the queue of young people at the boarding gate two decades earlier, a testament to the economic failure which had then blighted the country.

'Yes,' I said, 'who'd have thought it?'

We both fell silent and I looked out the window again. We were lower now, no more than a couple of hundred feet above the ground. I could see the clumps of gorse, or furze as we used to call it, dotting the land, and then what appeared to be a sea of single storey industrial sheds stretching off into the distance.

A young woman in a turquoise uniform and a practised smile walked slowly down the aisle checking that everyone was buckled up and then retreated to her own seat as a voice over the intercom announced five minutes to landing. I heard the clunking sound as the wheels were released and locked. We passed over a dual carriageway and a large roundabout and then, with a last, sudden lurch, the wheels touched the tarmac and I was home.

It seemed to take forever to get my baggage and to clear customs, but I eventually got there. I waited outside arrivals for the three men who'd gotten on the plane with me in Boston. I might be well off, but I'm not made of money and so they'd been stuffed into cattle class. We spoke for about ten minutes and I made sure that they knew what to do. And because they were capable men, I left them to do their job.

I went to the car hire desk and got directions as to where to pick up my transport. I had earned my driving license in America so this was to be my first time diving on the left hand side of the road. I was nervous but the car was big and comfortable and, most importantly, automatic, and I soon got the hang of things as I left the airport and headed north.

It was almost dark by the time I reached Galway and I knew that the roads ahead of me would be difficult. I decided to stop for the night and booked into a small hotel near the centre of the town. After dinner I spend an hour wandering the streets before heading for my bed and an early night.

As dawn broke the following morning, I drove west, along the shore of Galway Bay and into Connemara. The day was bright and clear, the low rays of the winter sun lighting up the breath-taking beauty of the landscape of low mountains, glistening blue sea and the patchwork of small, high walled fields. I carried on the main road, taking my time, stopping regularly and then, past Toombeola, I descended into the maze of small, single lane roads that criss-crossed the landscape. I travelled slowly, taking in the sparsely populated hills, bogs and rivers, only rarely meeting someone coming in the other direction and occasionally having to squeeze up against the walls to allow someone on a 4x4 to pass in a cloud of dust.

Three hours after leaving my hotel, I pulled up in front of a sign that announced that I had arrived at Ballydalock, or to give it its Gaelic name, Baile dhá loch, the town of two lakes. I was back where I'd started.

To call it a town was an exaggeration. It was a village of no more than two or three hundred people, squeezed into a broad isthmus between two bodies of water. Locally they are distinguished as the northern lake, thuaidh, or the southern, theas. There were hundreds of these in west Galway, so many that most are not even given names.

I got back in the car and drove slowly onwards. On the surface, little had changed in twenty years. The houses were still the same, although it was noticeable that none of them were thatched now. The name above the village shop and petrol pump was different. The gentle old man who had owned in my day was gone and it was now owned by someone who went by the name of Aodhán Ó Braonáin. I'd known someone of that name a few years ahead of me in school and I wondered idly if it was the same person.

Both pubs were still operating. The names above the doors hadn't changed, Ó Sé and Ó Corráin were still in business. The facades were brighter now than they had been in my day and I saw that they were advertising food, an indication perhaps that it was more than the locals that were using the facilities of the village now.

I drove on and reached a low slung, yellow painted bungalow surrounded by a well-tended lawn. I turned into the driveway, got out of the car and rang the bell. The door was opened by a woman that I judged to be in her early sixties, trim, dressed in slacks and a heavy, orange coloured jumper. Her hair was a grey perm and she had a ready smile which extended to a pair of bright blue eyes. She held out her hand in welcome.

'Mr Lynch, I presume,' she said.

Her accent was English and I tried not to look surprised. I suppose that I must have succeeded because she continued, 'Come on inside and I'll show you the apartment. Would you like a cup of tea?'

'That's very kind of you,' I replied, 'but not just at the moment. I have to get settled and out the door reasonably quickly.'

She nodded her head. 'I understand. Well, in that case, please follow me.'

We walked through the house. What she had called the apartment was a one bedroom studio annex tacked onto the side of the house. It had its own external entrance and was self-contained, with a small kitchen area and bathroom. It was ideal for my purposes and I told her so.

'Well then,' she said, 'I'll leave you to get settled. I'll lock the door into the house to ensure your privacy and if you need anything, just ring the bell on the front door.'

I gave her my thanks and she left. I went out to the car, got my suitcase and spent the next half hour unpacking. Then I walked down the road to the shop to get some provisions. I saw a couple of people, but nobody that I recognised and the young girl behind the counter spoke in an accent which indicated that her origins were somewhere in Europe. I was pleased. I was not quite ready yet for the gossip that would accompany my reappearance.

After I'd made myself some lunch I wandered to the west end of the village. My sister's house was the last one before the fields began and I hesitated before deciding that the moment couldn't really be put off. There was a car on the drive, an ancient looking Ford Focus, so I knew that she was probably at home. I went to the front door and was getting ready to press the bell before I remembered that this was not how things were done in this society. I went round to the back of the building and found the key in the lock. I turned it and entered a scullery area, complete with a washing machine, a dryer and an ironing board supporting a basket of clothes. I walked forward and opened the door into what I knew would be the kitchen.

She was at the cooker with her back to me, the radio turned on to some popular music program. She was unaware of my presence until I spoke.

'Hello, Bridie,' I said, speaking in the old language for the first time in almost two decades.

She jumped and turned around, her hand to her chest and her eyes full of alarm. She took in the intruder, her eyes wide, and then I saw recognition in her eyes. Her hand dropped and she took a deep breath to steady herself before she spoke.

'Hello, Seán,' she responded, also in Irish. 'This is an unexpected surprise.'

There was a moment of silence and then she strode forward and gave me a quick, fierce hug before stepping back to take a better look. She took a deep breath before speaking, which was good, because I was struggling a bit to hold things together myself.

'You've changed,' she said. 'You've broadened out, become a man.'

'You mean I'm fat,' I said with a smile.

'No, not at all. When you left, you were this skinny little thing. And now you're a man. I mean well built. And you've kept your hair.'

I touched it self-consciously. 'It's going grey but it's stayed in place. Unlike Dad. He was bald by the time he was my age.'

'Sit down, sit down,' she said, pulling a chair away from the table. 'It's great to see you. But why didn't you give me any warning you were coming? Is everything all right?'

I took the seat as she went to the sink and filled the kettle. 'Yes,' I said. 'Everything is fine. I decided to come at short notice so I didn't really have time to get in touch.'

'How are the children? Is Lauren making life any easier?'

We discussed my problems with my ex-wife for a few minutes. She'd begun to thaw in recent years since she'd found a new man, and the children were starting to forgive me for walking out on them. So, overall, things were on the up.'

'And what about yourself?' asked Bridie. 'Is there anyone else in your life?'

I shook my head. 'No. I was a one-woman man. It was either Lauren or nobody. And I've found out as well that there are compensations in the single life. I am my own boss now in all ways and I don't have to answer to anyone, except the tax man.'

We chatted then for what seemed like hours, exchanging information on life in America and the village. So much had changed in west Galway, but also so little.'

‘There’s more of everything now,’ she said. ‘It’s like the country had found a money tree. The prosperity is great and the youngsters are staying at home, not emigrating as soon as they finish school or university. There’s lots of work around and we’re having to bring people in from other countries. And the tourists are flooding the place. Every summer we must have a dozen coaches passing through the village, and most of them stop. The B&Bs are full and there’s talk of a hotel being built just down the road.’

‘What about the language? Is it still being spoken?’

‘Oh yes. It’s not like the old days of course, when some people only spoke Irish and that was that. Everyone speaks both languages now. It’s a proper bi-lingual society. We have loads of kids from the cities visiting during the holidays. The biggest problem is the second home owners. If Antóin and myself put this place up for sale we’d get a fortune. But none of those people speak anything but English and don’t have any intention of trying to learn.’

‘I’m staying with a woman called Lesley Owens up the road. What’s her story?’

‘She lived in England most of her life but her mother was from here and she came all the time when she was young. She’s a generation ahead of us so you wouldn’t remember her. Her husband died about five years ago and she came here to retire. She’s trying hard to learn the language but not making great progress. But she’s made friends and taken up with one of the old bachelors around the place and seems happy.’

I looked at the clock above the cooker. ‘I have to go,’ I said. I have to meet someone. Would you and Antóin be up for going for a few pints later?’

‘I’ll tell you what,’ she said. ‘Why don’t you turn up for supper tonight? The kids will be back from school then and you can meet them. I’ve told them all about you and they’ll love to meet their only uncle.’

We made arrangements for me to return at seven that evening and it was time for me to go.

My appointment was with Dáithí Ó Conchúir, an estate agent from Clifden. I was early so I had the time to look at the building. I’d gone through its doors for eight years, from nine in the morning to three in the afternoon, five days of the week, for almost forty weeks of the year.

It was built from grey local limestone and stood alone, about a quarter of a mile from the edge of the village, the opposite end from Bridie’s house. A lot of people, I suppose, would have called it beautiful. It was built on a square footprint and, looking straight at it, the outline was in the shape of an inverted W. The entrance door was in the middle and I knew that this opened into a wide corridor that in turn led to four large rooms, two on the right and two on the left, each large enough to hold over twenty children in two classes. Light was supplied to each of the rooms by three high lancet windows. It was surrounded by a large, open space which had acted as the playground. This seemed smaller than it had in my memory but, looking at it now, it was probably three or four times the area of the building. More than enough to accommodate over eighty children expending their energy, even allowing for the area taken up by the primitive toilet block.

Dáithí pulled up in a black Volkswagen Passat and got out apologising for being late. I stopped him, explaining that it was me who’d been early. We shook hands and he produced the keys, opened the front door and held it open for me. I walked in for the first time in almost thirty years.

It was pretty much as I had expected. The rooms had been cleared of course but the wooden partitions that had subdivided the interior were still in place. The corridor still had the rows of hooks on which generations of children had hung their coats, caps and bags and the open fireplaces were still intact in every room. No such thing as central heating in my day of course. It was assumed that the children would be cold and uncomfortable during the long winter days. The heat from the fires penetrated only a few feet into the room and this had usually been absorbed by the teacher standing in front of it.

Dáithí was rabbiting on but I was only half listening to him.

‘The potential of the place is enormous. It will take a good bit of work and won’t be cheap of course but if it is done sympathetically, it will look wonderful. It was built in 1910 but it’s sturdy and the roof is sound. The only thing that you need to be aware of, of course, is that it has protected status. This means that the planning authority considers it to be of special interest. In this case, I understand that it is based on it having merit from both an architectural and social point of view. As the owner, you are legally obliged to prevent it becoming threatened, either through damage or neglect. Also, if you make changes to the exterior without proper consent, you may be forced to put things back the way they were before.’

It sounded as though he was reading from a manual and I turned and smiled at him. ‘I don’t think that that will be a problem, Dáithí,’ I said. ‘I have big plans for this building. I just need to get a few things sorted first.’

He nodded. ‘I’ll just wait in the car then until you’re finished. Take as long as you want. I’m not in any hurry.’

‘There’s no need. We’re done here. I have an appointment with a solicitor in Galway tomorrow to sign the documents and then it’ll be mine.’

We walked out and he locked the door. We shook hands again and I watched him get in his car and drive away before making my way back to my apartment.

Supper at Bridie’s that night was a raucous affair. She had literally married the boy next door. Antóin was a year older than her and five years older than me. They’d been engaged before I left for America and married a few months later. They’d waited a while before having a family and then gotten it over with quickly. Now they had three boys aged fourteen, fifteen and seventeen, all in secondary school in Clifden, with the oldest due to sit his school leaving exams later in the year.

Antóin drove a lorry for the Council and covered the length and breadth of the county. Theirs was a simple life but they appeared content and if there was any discord in the house, it wasn’t apparent that night.

The three boys of course wanted to know all about the uncle who’d disappeared to America before they were born. I had been poor at keeping in contact; a letter at Christmas and an occasional postcard from wherever I was on holiday had done little to dull their curiosity. The questions came thick and fast.

‘What’s Boston like?’ Big and brash and beautiful.

‘Is everyone rich in America?’ No. There’s an awful lot of poor people.

‘What sort of business are you in?’ I have my own construction business.

‘Is it true that you’re rich?’ I’d say that I’ve done OK.

‘Have you ever met anyone famous?’ Not personally. Although I’ve seen quite a few famous people.

‘Do you go and see any sports?’ I watch basketball and American football if I can get a ticket. They’re like gold dust sometimes.

‘What are the crowds like?’ Loud, very loud. And often very drunk. But there’s rarely any trouble.

‘Are there lots of Irish people in Boston?’ A few. Not as many as in New York. But there’s a large area in South Boston that is full of people of Irish descent. It’s a tough place.

It went on like that for a good while but quietened down when the supper arrived. Bridie was a fine cook and all the men had the Irish belief that the best praise that you could give to good food is to concentrate on it. So we had half an hour of near silence, which was ended only when the boys cleared the table and the plates disappeared into the dishwasher. My sister had her lads well trained. When they had finished, she ushered them, against their will to their rooms to do their homework.

‘Your uncle’s not going to disappear,’ she said. ‘He’ll be here for a while yet. You’ll get another chance to talk to him.’

When the three of us were alone around the table with steaming cups of tea in front of us, Bridie and Antóin got the chance to ask what was really on their minds. It was Bridie who kicked off.

‘Why are you here, Seán? You’ve been away for twenty years with only the occasional word. You didn’t even come home when Dad died. What’s brought you back?’

I leaned back in the chair, balancing on the two back legs while I considered the question. I decided to tell them part of the truth at least.

‘Despite everything that happened to me in this place,’ I said, ‘it’s always been a part of me. I have an affection for it and sometimes a great longing to be back. I’ll tell you something now because if I don’t tell you, it’ll be all over the village soon and you’ll hear it from others. I’ve bought the old schoolhouse.’

They both looked nonplussed. Clearly, this was the last thing that they had expected. Antóin broke the silence.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘that’s a surprise. Is it how you’re thinking of doing it up and making a second home of it? I must admit, it’s a handsome building and would look great if you had a lot of money to spend. It’s been lying idle for the best part of ten years since the Department of Education built the new school, but I know the man who’s been looking after it and he says that it’s still structurally sound.’

‘I had a look around it this afternoon,’ I said, ‘and I can confirm that it’s still in good condition. I will be going into Clifden tomorrow to sign the documents.’

‘I’m as surprised as Antóin,’ said Bridie. ‘Don’t get me wrong, I’m delighted that we’ll be seeing more of you, but my memory of your life here before you left for America was that you were never happy and couldn’t wait to get away. And your time in that school, all our time there in fact, was wretched.’

‘The only answer I can give Bridie is that I’ve matured. I have children now, even if I’m also divorced. The young lad that you knew twenty years ago is gone. I’m a different person.’

I didn’t tell her exactly how I was different. That would happen in its own time. I decided that it was time to lighten the mood a bit.

‘Will we go to Ó Sé’s,’ I asked. ‘I have a mind to see Donnchadh again.’

Antóin looked at Bridie with an eyebrow raised. She shook her head. ‘I won’t this time,’ she said. ‘You two go on. You’ll have men’s talking to do and I’d only be getting in the way. And you’ll want to speak to Donnchadh as well. I’ve not forgotten that he was your best friend for a long time. Go on now, and don’t be late back or in a state when you come through the door.’

We laughed and stood up. Antóin got our coats and we made our way to the pub.

The place was busy, given that it was a dull, misty night in late winter. There were maybe twenty people inside. A couple of young lads playing pool and there was the inevitable six old men gathered around a table in the corner working their way through the latest in an infinite number of games of cards, their voices raised in argument and discussion as to who had made what mistake. There were two middle aged men throwing darts at a board and maybe half a dozen parked on stools at the counter, a couple of them head to head in muttered conversation with the man behind the bar.

He looked up as we entered and I saw that he hadn’t changed that much. The thatch of blond hair, something which had made him a rarity in the west of Ireland, had dulled to a light brown and had thinned a little. His face had filled out a bit, but not much, and he still had the narrow, pointed chin, wide mouth and high cheekbones which had made him so attractive to the girls of the parish when we were younger. He stood stock still for a few seconds and I waited for him to make the connection. Then recognition dawned in his eyes. He came out from behind the counter, walked up to me and put out his hand.

‘Seán O’Loinsigh,’ he said. ‘You are like a man risen from the dead. I thought that I’d never see you again.’

I laughed. ‘Is it that you didn’t want to see me?’

‘It is delighted that I am to see you boy. How long has it been since you set foot in this place?’

‘Twenty years, Donnchadh.’

‘Well, they’ve been good to you. You’ve kept your hair on and the weight off. America must be agreeing with you. Come and sit down at the bar and I’ll talk with you.’

We took a pair of stools at the counter and Donnchadh went out the back door. I heard him call to someone and a few seconds later, he reappeared with a young lad of probably no more than fourteen and fifteen years of age, fair haired and slim, just as Donnchadh had been at his age. He was introduced as his son, Eoghan, and he was given instructions to look after the place for the next hour.

‘Now,’ said Donnchadh, ‘what is it you’ll be having?’

Both Antóin and myself asked for pints of Guinness. The order was transferred to the young lad and, when the drinks arrived, I reached for my pocket to get the money. Donnchadh held up his hand. ‘Your money’s no good here tonight, Seán. Leave your wallet where it is.’

I thanked him and took a long, slow draught from the glass. It was as good as I remembered and Donnchadh looked on approvingly.

‘Don’t they have Guinness in America?’ he asked.

‘They do indeed. But it’s different here, and better.’

He laughed. ‘That’s what they all say.’ Then he continued. ‘Tell me about yourself, Seán. What have you been doing? I see your sister every now and again but when I ask about you, all I get is a shrug.’

So I told him about arriving in Boston at nineteen years of age and linking up with my Uncle Paddy, who’d owned a small construction company. How eventually I’d bought him out and expanded the business. How I now employed over a hundred people. How I’d married too young and in too much haste to an American girl and how I’d walked out on her after ten years. I told him about my children and where I lived. When I had finished, I asked him to tell me about himself.

‘It’s been an ordinary life,’ he said. ‘Nothing special or noteworthy.’

You’re married thought,’ I prompted. ‘And you have children. Tell me what’s happened.’

So he did. As the only son of an older father, he was offered the pub when he was twenty one. He had decided to take it up, but first of all, he went to work in bars in Dublin to see how things were done in the modern world.

‘The way of it was,’ he said, ‘my parents ran this place and made a decent living for the family. But between them, they were working over a hundred hours a week. That wasn’t good enough for me. I wanted to build the business in a way that would enable me to pay people and have time off. And I wasn’t going to learn how to do that by staying here.’

‘And did it work? Going to Dublin.’

He nodded. ‘I learned what I needed to learn. And I brought back a wife with me as well. She’s a girl from Mayo that I met working in one of the bars. I’ll introduce you later.’

‘And what about your family?’

‘I have three,’ he said. ‘You’ve seen the oldest. I have two girls as well, Saoirse and Áine. They’re too young for the bar at the moment and I don’t think that we’ll be putting them behind the counter. I’m old fashioned like that. It’s not a place for young girls.’

‘What about your parents?’

‘They’re doing well, although I don’t get on too well with my father these days. We ran the bar together for five years but you can’t have two bulls in a field. He resisted the sort of changes that I wanted to make because he was afraid that we’d alienate the men who’d been coming in since the time he’d inherited the place from his own dad. Eventually we were arguing all the time and it was a case of one of us had to go. My mother wanted out and she made sure it was him.’

We talked some more about the tourists, and how everyone seemed to have money now, and the prospects for the local football team, and whether Galway had any chance in the hurling this year. Time passed quickly as people came and went around us and when, eventually, I looked at the clock, I was surprised to see that it was almost eleven o’clock.

‘We’ll have to go,’ I said. ‘Antóin has work in the morning and I have business to attend to in Clifden. Are you able to meet up tomorrow to continue the conversation?’

‘I’ll tell you what,’ he said. ‘Why don’t we meet tomorrow outside the Ó Murchadha house at two o’clock. We’ll go for a walk up Bencullagh and you can see what you’ve been missing for the past twenty years.’

I agreed and, with a handshake, Antóin and myself departed.

The following morning at ten am in a solicitor’s office in Clifden, I signed a series of papers which confirmed me as the new owner of the old schoolhouse at Ballydalock. Afterwards I travelled back and made some lunch. At two pm, I met Donnchadh and we set off on foot up Bencullagh. It was the highest point for some distance, although still a little less than a thousand feet above sea level. It was a two mile walk to the top, along a good track and against a steady slope which didn’t present a particularly onerous challenge for two reasonably fit men.

We continued our conversation from the previous evening. Who had married whom. Who had left the area and who had stayed. Who was alive and who was dead. Time passed quickly and in less than an hour we’d reached the cairn which marked the summit. I took off my rucksack and pulled out a flask of tea, two cups and a couple of slices of cake.

The day was clear but chilly and a brisk breeze encouraged us to seek the shelter of the lee of the hill. We ate and drank slowly, taking in the view. The winter sun glistened off the many small lakes and the network of small fields with their high stone walls formed a patchwork to the east and south. To the north and west, the character of the land was different, rolling and barren, a limestone desert whose uniform greenness was broken only by the occasional white blob of a mountain sheep or the glitter of a pond.

We finished the food and sat in a companionable silence for several minutes. It was Donnchadh who spoke first.

‘Why are you really here, Seán?’ he asked.

I’d been waiting for the question and I had my answer prepared. ‘Like I said,’ I replied. ‘To visit Bridie and to touch base with the place I was born. A lot has happened to me since I left and life has forced me to change, to become a different person. I’ve realised that I’ve become harder and tougher, because I had to, and in a lot of ways I’ve become someone that I don’t like. I want to remember the person that I used to be.’

He considered this for a moment and then said, ‘That’s bullshit, Seán.’

I felt a flash of anger. ‘That’s a bit rough, Donnchadh,’ I replied, my voice tight.

‘No it isn’t. You and me spent the first nineteen years of our lives in this place together. We were in each other’s pockets. There was a time when I couldn’t imagine that I’d ever have a better friend than you, and if truth is to be told, I’ve never managed to replace you. We sat side by side all through school and even played beside each other for the football team. I knew how you thought and why you thought it and you did the same with me. I looked out for you and you for me. And I know the hurt that was caused to you in this village. I didn’t blame you when you upped and left. I sometimes wish that I’d had the courage to do the same, but I didn’t. I can’t believe for a second that you’d be back here unless you had a damn good reason. And what you just told me doesn’t make any kind of

sense. By the time you'd left here, you were already a hard person, with a streak of ruthlessness in you. To be honest, you used to scare me sometimes.'

It was a long speech and he had clearly given it a lot of thought. I considered storming off and leaving him on the hill, but I stayed put. I owed him that, especially since he was right. I considered my reply but he pre-empted me.

'I think about it all the time,' he said. 'The bullying that went on in that school. It makes me angry and sometimes it's a struggle not to take it out on my own kids. And I know that I'm not the only one. There's a lot of people feel the same. I wonder occasionally if a load of us have some form of PTSD.'

'Tell me,' I asked, 'is Tadhg O Cruadhlaioich still alive?'

'I hear tell that he is. He's in a home somewhere near Galway apparently. He must be well into his eighties by now. I'm told that he's suffering from dementia. Émer O Muimhneachain died a few years ago from a brain haemorrhage. Gráinne O'Riada fell off a boat during the regatta and drowned. There's a few lads around the place who claim that they pushed her but I suspect that she was drunk and didn't need any help.'

I remembered the woman, with her snarling, savage sarcasm, the stick on the desk and the flask of whiskey that she tried to pass off as tea in her bag.

'I think I'll go with the theory that someone pushed her,' I said. 'It'll give me a bit more comfort.' Then I asked, 'What about Meabh O'Muireachtaigh?'

'I heard recently that she's still alive and living in Roundstone with a sister.'

'How long were they all in that school together? It must have been over thirty years.'

'It was as near thirty as made no difference. My mother told me something once. Apparently, during the war, the number of teachers trained was reduced and many of the old guard had to be persuaded to stay on past their retirement dates. This meant that there were a lot of retirements within a short period of time in the years afterwards, which explains why our four came in at more or less the same time, give or take a few years, and grew old together in the job.'

'And destroyed generations of kids in the process. Gráinne Breathnach has spent a large part of her life in and out of various institutions. If you shook the poor woman, you'd hear the Valium rattle. Pádraig O'Suilleabhain got married about the same time as I did. We went to the wedding but the marriage barely lasted five years. She was a lovely girl but he took to belting her. Eventually her brothers arrived at the house one day, gave him a hiding and threw him out. He lives in Galway now but apparently has a drink problem. I drank myself for a few years and I started to find that it made the memories a bit easier to take.'

'That's dangerous,' I said.

'I know, which is why I stopped. I've been dry now for over ten years, which I suppose is a good thing anyway for a publican.'

We paused for a while to consider this and it was Donnchadh who spoke again.

'When we left the village to go to secondary school, we were known as being thick. Nobody expected anything of kids that had been schooled at Ballydalock. We were considered to be lost before we started.'

I nodded in agreement. 'Looking back, what I can't understand is why nobody did anything. I used to lie in bed sometimes unable to sleep because of the pain of the beating that I'd received that day and if I told my parents, all I got was a shrug. And it was the same all over the parish. Children were being abused and it seemed that the adults had no interest in protecting them.'

'And nobody seemed interested in picking up what was going wrong,' agreed Donnchadh. 'We were groomed for failure. Looking back, surely to God someone at the secondary schools should have realised that something was going wrong and alerted the Department of Education.'

I shook my head. 'They'd have done nothing,' I said. 'It was the times. Looking back, the only hope we had was that the Parish Priests might do something. They were the Chairs of the school board, but they all seemed scared of O Cruadhlaich.'

Donnchadh laughed, but without humour. 'He was a big bastard. I can't really blame them for being intimidated.'

We sank into silence again and then Donnchadh asked, 'Are you going to tell me what you're here for then?'

So I told him.

I spent the next two days behaving like a tourist, albeit one out of season. I drove around the place and spent quite a bit of time either walking on beaches or climbing hills. I was fortunate that the weather stayed clear and bright, a rarity in the west of Ireland at the end of winter. I went to the pubs each night and met a lot of people I had known. The news was out now that I was the new owner of the old schoolhouse and there was curiosity as to what my plans were, although most of it was expressed politely. I gave nothing away.

On the third day, I received a telephone call, following which I travelled to Roundstone. At a small restaurant, I met the three men that I had last seen at Shannon Airport. I checked that they had managed to obtain everything that they needed and it was agreed that they would make their way to Ballydalock the following morning, aiming to be there before dawn. I described the schoolhouse, showing the photographs that I'd taken, both internal and external. They looked at them carefully and some of the conversation started to get very technical. Nobody questioned what I was intending to do. I confirmed that there was no electricity or gas in the building and that it was surrounded by several hundred yards of open space.

Within an hour, our final plan had been agreed. We parted with handshakes.

I was woken by my alarm clock at seven the following morning. I had spent the previous evening with Bridie's family and had fallen into bed before midnight. I had slept the sleep of the just and the innocent, which goes to prove that the world really is not fair.

I was at the school by eight, stamping my feet against the cold and the chill as the first streaks of red coloured the sky to the east, signalled the beginning of another day. Five minutes after I arrived, the first flat-bed articulated truck rolled up. The second one arrived ten minutes later. I helped direct both through the wide gate and around to the back of the building, onto what had been the football field when the school had been in use. The cargoes were carefully guided off and I looked at them with satisfaction.

Both were twenty-ton excavators with extended reach. The first had a multi-processor with interchangeable jaws for crushing, pulverising, demolishing and shearing; the second had a hydraulic hammer.

The three men gathered around me as I outlined again what needed to be done.

‘We have one day here,’ I said. ‘It’ll be dark here in about nine hours. By then, the building needs to be flattened, the site tidied up, the JCBs loaded and the flat-beds on the road back to Galway. It’s a tough ask, I know, but I brought you here because you’re the best people I have. You’ll have to work in relays, with one person off at all times and two working the equipment. You know how to do this better than I do so I won’t interfere. We don’t need to worry about clearing the site. I have other people coming in to do that tomorrow. I’ll be here if you have any questions. Good luck.’

I left them discussing the rotation, went back to the gate and levered myself into a comfortable position on the wall to watch the action. It took them about half an hour to get set. In that time several cars passed by and slowed down, the drivers’ faces taking in the scene, aware that something was happening and curious to know the details.

Donnchadh turned up just as the first of the JCBs manoeuvred itself into position. He leaned on the wall beside me and took in the scene. We watched in silence as the long, extendable arm with the terrible weight at its end was raised high against the skyline. We watched it drop against the roof with a dull thud that echoed through the village. The building shook and it was probably my imagination, but I thought I heard it groan.

To my surprise, the roof resisted the initial assault, a testament perhaps to the quality of the builders of almost a century previously. But the second blow did for it. A gaping hole appeared and I could hear the tiles crashing against the floor inside.

‘This,’ I said to Donnchadh, ‘will get everyone out of their beds.’

Shortly afterwards, one of the buses that brought children in from the outlying areas to attend the new school at the other end of the village passed by. The driver slowed to get a glimpse of the action and I could see the excited faces of the youngsters as they pressed their faces against the glass.

‘They’re going to have a story to tell when they get to school,’ said Donnchadh.

‘You can be sure of it. And here’s someone who’ll have another story to tell I think.’

Donnchadh turned and we watched a man in a dog-collar hurrying towards us. He was a rarity, a youngish man, probably no older than we were, in a profession which was attracting few entrants. He was tall and thin, with a prominent Adam’s apple, a receding hair line and an anxious look on his face. He paused in front of us for a few seconds to catch his breath and I filled the gap by saying, ‘Hello Fr. O Dunlaing. It looks like it’s going to be a fine day.’

‘What the hell is going on here?’ he asked. ‘What are you up to?’

‘I’m making some renovations to this building, Father. I’m the owner now.’

‘This doesn’t look like renovations. It looks like you’re knocking it down.’

I scratched the back of my head and tried to avoid Donnchadh’s grin. ‘I suppose that it might look that way to the uninitiated Father, but I’m only trying to improve the place.’

His face reddened and he almost shouted at me. 'This is a protected building. It's on the register. There are penalties for people who damage these buildings.'

I nodded. 'I know, Father. I looked them up. In fact, I can tell you what they are. Under the Planning and Development Act, the penalties for owners or occupiers of protected buildings who endanger the structure are fines of up to twelve million Euros or prison for up to 2 years.'

'And you're prepared to risk that?'

'The way I see it, they'll have to catch me first. Now, I suggest that you toddle off and make your call to the authorities.'

He glared at me before turning on his heels and heading back to the presbytery.

Shortly afterwards, we were joined at the wall by a woman in a headscarf who took in what was happening to the building in silence. After a few minutes she said, 'You must be Seán O'Loinsigh, Bridie's brother.'

I confirmed her assumption.

'I'm Siobhán Ó Gallachóir,' she said. I was in your sister's year going through this place.'

'I remember you coming round to the house when I was young,' I replied. 'You and Bridie were good friends.'

The conversation paused as the last of the roof gave up the struggle and collapsed in a cloud of dust. We gave it a minute before starting up again.

'Yes, I suppose we were friends. Although it didn't survive to adulthood. We just drifted apart when we married and children came along. But we still bump into each other now and again.'

She hesitated for a few seconds, clearly waiting for a response from me. When none arrived, she continued.

'The shit is going to hit the fan over this. But I assume you know that?'

'Yes. I've thought it out and I'm happy with what I'm doing.'

'I'm assuming that this is revenge.'

'You'd be assuming correctly.'

She sighed. 'I can't say that I blame you. I went through eight years of hell in that place, the same as the rest of us. I remember at one stage being so scared that my hand started to shake. I suppose that I was about eight at the time. O'Muireachtaigh noticed one day and the next day she brought in a small bell and tied it to my hand. Every time I shook, the bell rang and she'd come down the room and give me a belt across the head. In the end, I spent every day with my arm jammed between my knees. I learned to sit like that for six hours every day.'

It wasn't the worst story I'd heard from the school, but it was up there, probably in the top ten.

'That was an awful thing for a child to go through.'

‘That’s the truth. When my own children were growing up and going to the new school, I decided that they weren’t going to go through the same thing. Of course, by the time I had children of my own there were new generations of teachers coming through and they were different people. But I kept a close eye on things. One day, when my eldest daughter was about six or seven, she came home in tears because her teacher had been sarcastic to her. She’d made fun of her and the other children had laughed. That night I drove twenty miles to where that bitch lived, knocked on her door and when she answered, I grabbed her by the neck and told her exactly what was going to happen if she upset my child again.’

‘Did that put an end to it?’

‘Yes. The bloody woman disappeared at the end of the year and that was that. It’s all different now of course. The children are nurtured at school and cared for by good people who like what they’re doing. It’s a better world.’

‘That’s true,’ I said. ‘But it will only stay that way if people like us make it so.’

There was a roar as one wall of the school collapsed. A huge plume of dust rose up and began to settle all around us. I didn’t care and neither, it seemed, did she. She changed the subject.

‘It might be worth your while to look around you,’ she said.

I did as she suggested. While we’d been talking, what appeared to be the entire adult population of Ballydalock had gathered in the road behind us. They stood silently, almost respectfully as they watched the two JCBs go about their work. Nobody tried to intervene.

The woman who called herself Siobhán moved off eventually and left Donnchadh and myself by the wall with our audience. It was lunchtime when Bridie showed up. I was standing at my car eating a sandwich, looking on as my men changed the attachments on their machines to the shovels which would allow them to start piling up the rubble. She stood beside me, her hands in the pockets of an old cardigan, her shoulders hunched against the light rain which had started to fall.

We stood without speaking for a while and then she said, ‘Well, I suppose now I know why you came back.’

There was no response that I could make which could make things better so I decided to say nothing.

‘You know,’ she continued, ‘for a few days, I’d allowed myself to hope that you’d changed and that you wanted to come back. That maybe you wanted to build a relationship with my family and this place.’

I had known that this moment would come and I had my answer prepared, and this time there was no holding back. I meant what I was going to say.

‘I have changed,’ I said. ‘And I want to come back. And I want to be part of your life and the life of your family. But my life, and the life of everyone in this village was blighted by what went on in this school. It’s an evil place and deserves to be knocked to the ground. It should have been done years ago. This draws a line under what went on here and will enable every one of us to move on. I’m not going to ask for you to forgive me, but I am going to ask you to understand me.’

She remained silent for a minute and then asked, ‘What happens next?’

‘My lads will leave a pile of rubble. I’ve made arrangements for that to be cleared over the next few days and the site to be levelled. When I get back to America, I’ll sign some documents which will transfer ownership of the site to the Community Council. I’ll also provide funds to turn it into a playground for the children of the parish. It’ll be up to them to decide whether or not to accept, but I hope that they will.’

‘The County Council will come after you. They’ll take you to court.;

‘I know. And I’ll probably get a shed load of fines. I might even get a prison sentence but I’ve taken advice which tells me that it’ll probably be suspended. But I don’t care. I’ve done what I’ve done and that’s the end of it.’

‘Are you going back to America then?’

I nodded. ‘Yes. The lads will load up the machines tonight and return them to the place where they rented them tomorrow morning. We’ll be on the evening flight to Boston from Shannon in the evening.’

‘And that will be that I suppose.’

I turned to face her. ‘No,’ I said. ‘I meant what I said. I’m tired of being alone. I want to be able to come back. You are important to me and I want to build a proper relationship with you and your family. Next month, you’ll receive a letter from me. In it will be open return tickets for you and **Antóin and the boys to Boston**. I would be very happy if you’d come and stay with me.’

She stared at me for a few moments and then, unexpectedly, she smiled. ‘I’ll think about it,’ she said.