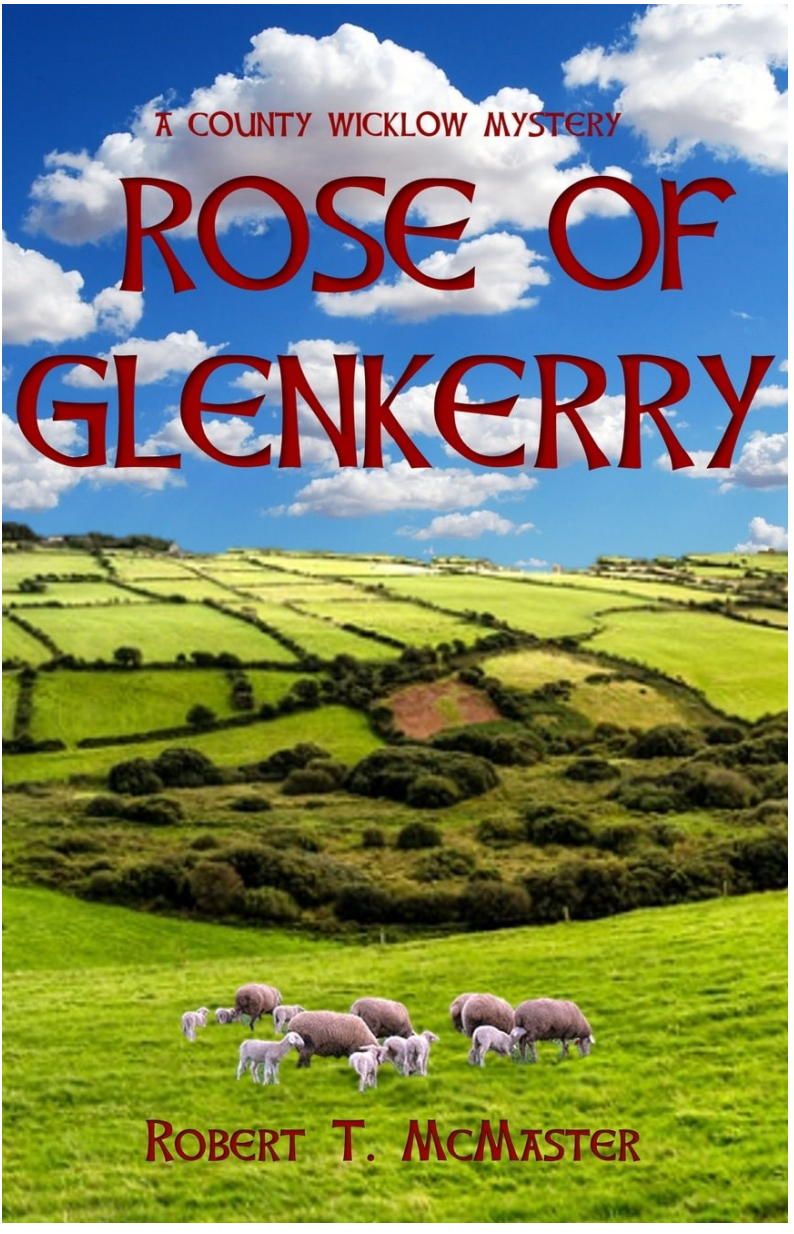
A COUNTY WICKLOW MYSTERY

ROSE OF GLENKERRY



ROBERT T. McMASTER

Rose of Glenkerry

A County Wicklow Mystery

by Robert T. McMaster

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ROSE OF GLENKERRY

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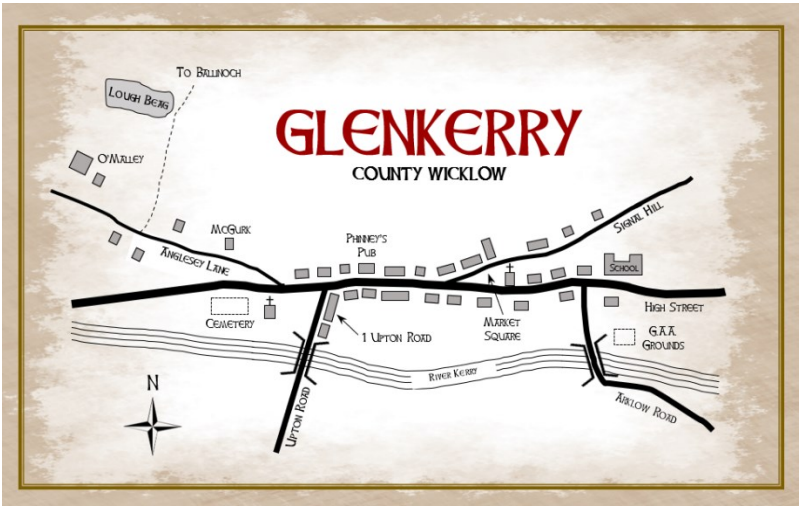
Dedicated to

Nancy Mosher McMaster

(1954 – 1990)

CONTENTS


GLENKERRY
COUNTY WICKLOW
To Ballinoch
Lough Beag
O'Malley
McGurk
Anglesey Lane
Phinney's Pub
Shaul Hill
School
High Street
Cemetery
1 Upton Road
Market Square
G.A.A. Grounds
River Kerry
Upton Road
Arklow Road
N

I WILL WALK WITH MY LOVE

I once loved a boy, just a bold Irish boy
who would come and would go at my request;
and this bold Irish boy was my pride and my joy
and I built him a bow'r in my breast.

But this girl who has taken my bonny, bonny boy,
let her make of him all that she can;
and whether he loves me or loves me not,
I will walk with my love now and then.

Traditional Irish love poem

1

DUBLIN AND BEYOND

Cary McGurk stood outside a pub on O'Connell Street in Dublin at half six of a Saturday evening in early June. He'd been waiting nearly twenty minutes and a light rain was just beginning to fall. He stepped into the entryway out of the rain to check his mobile for messages. There were none.

Siobhan Sullivan had texted him that afternoon and invited him for a pint. He was knackered and would rather be home in bed, but she had something to tell him–some news–some important news. Cary was weighing his options. Should he head home?

She's always late–give her a few more minutes, mate.

Just as he was about to give up and start for home, he heard a familiar voice.

'Cary.'

It was Siobhan waving as she made her way across the busy thoroughfare. When she reached him, she smiled as she always did,

hugged him, which she sometimes did, and apologised, which she did when she was late, which she so often was.

Siobhan had come straight from her part-time job as receptionist at a small hotel a few blocks away, still in her work kit, a black skirt and white cotton blouse with a gold silk scarf wrapped around her neck.

'I got tied up at work. Last minute stuff.' She looked into his eyes apologetically. 'I'm so sorry.'

Cary shrugged it off. 'No worries. What else am I doin', anyway?'

Siobhan Sullivan was tall, brunette, with bright hazel eyes flecked with gold. She was American, although like so many Americans she had Irish roots–that is if you counted roots that were more than a century-and-a-half old. She had arrived in Dublin three years ago to attend Dublin City University. She and Cary met at a party at the home of a mutual friend that first year, then ran into one another again and again around the DCU campus until they felt like old friends.

Over the next two years they met often for drinks and light meals, went to concerts, and watched movies at his flat or hers, sometimes alone, sometimes with classmates. They were friends, friends who hung out, friends who enjoyed each other's company, but just friends. When they were together, they carefully avoided mention of one another's love lives. Neither it seemed wanted to know those kinds of details. Why, if they spent so much time together and enjoyed each other's company, had they remained just friends? It was a question Cary asked himself often.

That's just what it is, mate. Friends. Full stop.

Wherever she went, Siobhan was always the centre of attention. Men and women alike could not keep their eyes off her as she spoke,

those flashing eyes, those lips that never stopped smiling, and that American accent that provided endless amusement to Irish ears, a delightful counterpoint to the voices of their countrymen and women.

Ask Siobhan what it was like being an American in Dublin and you were in for a real treat.

'Before I came to Dublin,' she told a group of uni friends one night at a popular campus watering hole, 'all I knew were those stupid stereotypes about the Irish–leprechauns, rainbows, pots of gold, yeh know? And I thought all the Irish ever ate was corn beef and cabbage, 24-7. Then I get here and I can't believe all the different foods–Indian, Laotian, Cape Verdean, Italian, Scandinavian, Estonian, Szechuan, Cantonese, Hunan. Do you know I heard that in Wexford Town there's a Mexican restaurant called Wex-Mex? How hilarious is that?' Everyone laughed.

But Siobhan could get some laughs at the expense of her Irish friends as well. 'One thing Ireland lacks is a good American style burger. They have no idea what a real burger on a bun is like. The first time I ordered a burger here, I asked for medium-rare. The waitperson acted like she'd never heard of such a thing before. She goes, "Well, like, it's already cooked, yeh know, in a big pan?" I thought to myself, Siobhan, this is not gonna end well. What I got was meat loaf.' Everyone roared.

Siobhan could be equally voluble regarding Irish notions of Americans. 'Cary here is always ordering Budweiser for me, like that's the only beer we Americans drink. And there was this little boy in a school in Phibsborough where I used to volunteer–when he heard I was American, what was the first thing he wanted to say to me? "Miss," he says with a long face, "I'm so sorry about Michael Jackson." Like Michael Jackson was a personal friend of mine.'

Again everyone laughed long and loud.

But the tone this evening was entirely different. It was early yet and the place was quiet–the younger crowd, the boisterous and rowdy eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds, had not yet arrived. They found a small table by the window and Cary ordered two pints, a Guinness for himself and, of course, a Budweiser for Siobhan. Plus a platter of scampi fries.

He looked at Siobhan. In the muted light her face was lovely, her skin satiny and tan, her dangly gold earrings brought out the flecks in her eyes.

'Shiv, you look so nice all dressed up, you make my baggy Dockers and T-shirt seem a little bit outta place.'

Siobhan blushed, then flashed that smile. It was a beguiling smile, Cary had to admit to himself. But tonight her smile was exceptionally wide, her eyes had a particular sparkle, her face a certain glow. She was excited about something, he could tell.

'So, what's up?'

She looked into his eyes, those dark, deep-set, soulful, puppy eyes. And his hair, dark brown and wavy, usually on the long side since he refused to pay Dublin prices for a haircut. He definitely was not the typical college lad who wanted only to mimic all his male classmates–Cary's look was all his own. And there was no guise there, no pretence–Cary McGurk never pretended to be anything he wasn't.

Siobhan inhaled once, loudly, for emphasis. 'Car, I am so stoked–I couldn't wait to tell you.' She paused.

'Well, give it up then,' he said with a dimpled grin.

'I got a job. The *perfect* job, Car, the *absolute perfect* job.'

Cary smiled a broad smile. 'Shiv, that's grand. Is this the one in Cork with that wind energy company?'

Siobhan made a face like she'd tasted some bad cheese. 'Oh, no, thank God–I would've hated that.'

'What then, the one with the e-tailer in Belfast?'

She blushed. 'I can't believe I even applied for that–no, not that one either.'

'Right then, enough of the twenty questions–spill.'

She drew another deep breath. 'It's a little start-up company that designs software for web-based businesses, mostly user interfaces, but they're doing really creative things. You know, multichannel retailing, links to social media, voice activation, all kinds of slick animation. And they want me to work directly with customers, what they call a Client Service Specialist, to try to improve the user experience.' She paused, her jaw dropping. 'Can you imagine? It's like my dream job, Cary. It really is.'

'Wow, that is grand, Shiv–it's brilliant.'

Just then their pints arrived. And the fries.

'Well, this calls for a toast,' said Cary. And they lifted their glasses and clinked them.

'*Sláinte*,' he said, 'to Siobhan Sullivan, Client Service Specialist–soon to be CFO or CEO of–what's it called?'

'Greater London Software Systems.'

Cary stopped sipping and set his glass on the table, his eyes riveted on hers.

'London? You mean London, as in England – Buckingham Palace – Carnaby Street – that London?'

'Yes, Cary, that London. Isn't it amazing?'

She could see a vague look in his eyes, as if he was trying to take in and process this news.

'I did all my interviewing on Zoom so I haven't even seen the place in person, but they took me on a video tour. It's really

beautiful. My office will have this incredible view of the city. When I'm there, that is. They say I should be able to work from home two or three days a week. How awesome is that?'

He nodded, his eyes wide. It was awesome, for sure.

'Have some scampi fries?' offered Cary, pushing the plate toward her.

Siobhan declined, then took another sip of her Bud.

'And Cary, you are not gonna believe my salary.' His jaw dropped. It was way more than any job he'd ever aspired to–or even dreamed of, for that matter. And here she was, just about to graduate university.

'That is unbelievable, Shiv.'

'When the guy told me I had to ask him to repeat it. I mean, I could not believe it.'

Suddenly Cary's delight at his friend's good fortune presented its darker side, an unsightly underbelly of jealousy. He of course hid that, buried it, covered it with an especially wide smile and another pull on his Guinness.

Happy for her, right?

'Congratulations, mate. You deserve it, you totally do. I mean, look at how hard yeh've worked these last three years.'

Siobhan nodded and smiled but blushed. 'I'm sorry, I've been going on about me and this job. I'm just so buzzed. So, what's up with your job hunt? Any news?'

Cary shook his head. 'Not really. Yeh know, journalism's not exactly hot these days, especially print journalism. It's like the *worst possible time* to be looking for a newspaper job,' he said with a grimace. 'Except for advertising. If I'm willing to write advert copy, there are jobs, but they're crap jobs for crap pay. I'd be earnin' like a fraction–a tiny fraction of what you'll be getting.'

Siobhan reached across the table, touching the back of his hand briefly. 'Something will break for you, mate, I'm sure of it.'

Cary shrugged. Then Siobhan hesitated, biting her lip as if unsure of what she was about to say.

'Listen, Car, I've been thinking about something. How about if you come to London, too? We could find a two-bedroom flat. And I'd cover the rent until you got a job. Which you will so get in London.' Her face lit up. 'I mean, it's the business capital of the world, right?'

Cary was momentarily speechless, gazing out the window as he contemplated this idea–moving away from Ireland, his homeland, to one of the biggest cities in the world? And moving with Siobhan Sullivan? And sharing a flat with her? A flat that she was willing to pay for until he had a job–and even then how much could he afford to chip in once he had a job, that hypothetical crap job, whatever it turned out to be?

Siobhan could tell her friend was having a hard time grasping the idea.

'So, whatta you think, Car? Tick yes?' Her eyes were like saucers now, a shadow of doubt creeping across her face as she awaited his reaction.

Cary shook his head.

'I–I don't know, Shiv. That's a–a lot to digest, yeh know?'

Siobhan knew Cary well, and she knew that kind of digestion–cognitive processing she liked to call it–was slow for him.

No, not slow, downright glacial.

Even decisions that seemed small to her took him days, sometimes weeks. Like the time he bought that new rug for his flat. It was beige, no pattern, no design…

No anything to get hung up on, right?

And yet he spent nearly two weeks walking around that rug on his bedroom floor, keeping it clean in case he decided to return it. And even when he finally made the decision to keep the rug, he still brooded over it for the longest time, wondering aloud whether he'd made the right decision. No two ways about it, Cary McGurk was a faffer.

She said, 'Well, just think about it, okay? No pressure.'

'Does this mean you'll be leavin' right after grad?'

Siobhan nodded, her mouth drooping Buster Keaton style. 'Yeah, they want me to start A-S-A-P.'

An uncomfortable silence fell over the pair. They took several pulls on their pints before Siobhan broke the ice.

'Listen, Ciaran.'

Uh-oh, red flag, her calling you Ciaran–prepare yourself, mate.

'Now, don't think that, because we'd be living together, that–well–you know, there'd be expectations–it'd just be an arrangement of convenience between two friends. Right?'

Cary nodded. 'Oh yeah–yep–sure,' he said with a casual shrug.

Right–a course–what else?

After another round, Cary walked Siobhan to her flat just a few blocks away.

'Hey, some friends are coming by at nine,' said Siobhan. 'We'll probably go to Twenty's. Come along?'

Twenty's was a popular club near campus, and Cary knew it well enough. But he had learned to be wary of such invitations. Once when he first knew Siobhan, she had invited him to go to that club with 'friends.' As it turned out, he was the only bloke there. It felt like Girls' Night Out, the unspoken assumption being that he would fit right in. How emasculating was that? So he politely declined. He had laundry to do. And ironing.

You are probably the last guy in Dublin who does ironing, mate–and on a Saturday night?

As they parted, he promised he would think over the London proposition. And think it over he did, all the way home, and once at home then far into the night. He sat in front of the telly snacking on bacon fries and Club Orange, half-watching an old episode of 'Derry Girls' while contemplating his future. And then, in bed, still wide awake, he brooded.

He had to admit to himself that the London idea was tempting. Siobhan was right–the job situation would be much better for a journalist wannabe in London than in Dublin. It worried him, of course, the idea of pulling up stakes and moving away, out of Ireland, without a job. But, he reasoned, if it didn't work out, he could always come back, back to Ireland, back to Dublin.

And then there was the offer of a shared flat–that was hard to turn down. He had a sense that he and Siobhan would be good flatmates. They were compatible in so many ways, their interests, tastes in food, music, even sport. Somehow, she had developed a genuine passion for Gaelic football. They had watched several footie matches together and she had quickly become a devoted follower of the Dublin team known as the Dubs.

Who coulda predicted that?

One thing rankled him, though, like an earworm in his skull, or maybe lower. It was the thought of Siobhan Sullivan welcoming other blokes to their flat, stepping out with them, even bringing one back to spend the night, while he sat alone in his room like some pathetic lonely loser. True, they were just friends, he and Siobhan, but how would he feel about watching her social life, her love life, heat up before his very eyes? Of course, she must have thought the same about having him as a flatmate, but if she had, it apparently

presented no obstacle for her.

We are, after all, just friends, right?

One more consideration–his parents. Patrick and Catherine McGurk lived in Glenkerry, a little town in County Wicklow, just twenty miles or so south of Dublin. His father had been owner and publisher of a small newspaper, *The Glenkerry Gazette*, for nearly thirty years. But like so many print publications, the *Gazette* had lost the battle with online news sources and social networking. The final issue went to press about five years ago. Since then Patrick had been working in the office of a brewery in Bray. Cary's mother, Catherine, once an operating room nurse in a Dublin hospital, gave up her job before the birth of their first child, Aiden, and never returned to work outside their home.

Aiden, now twenty-five, had moved to New Zealand after university, and there was little prospect of his returning to the Old Sod any time soon. But Patrick and Catherine still harboured the hope that their second child would one day come back to Glenkerry, or at least live close enough to visit his parents now and then.

Siobhan had travelled to Glenkerry with Cary for a weekend the previous summer, and not surprisingly, his parents were besotted with her. Ever since that weekend, his mother referred to her as that 'sweet little colleen,' regaling Cary with pleas for a return visit. And inevitably whenever he called or visited, she would probe him for news of Siobhan and what she imagined was an ever-deepening relationship. Which it was not. And Cary told her as much.

But does she listen?

So breaking the news of his move to London, if he decided to make the move, would be painful. In fact, as he weighed the decision, he began to see his parents' opposition as the biggest obstacle to overcome.

Cary shared a small, sparsely furnished two-bedroom flat in Glasnevin with another DCU student, Niall. The living room walls were decorated with posters of their favourite bands, Green Day, the Cranberries, the Saw Doctors. Cary's bedroom wall bore a photo of his DCU rugby team and two large posters, one a colourful guide to 'Fishes of the Irish Sea,' the other a full-length portrait of Van Morrison with one of the Irish legend's most famous lines scrawled along the edge: 'Go up to the mountain, go up to the glen, where silence will touch you, and heartbreak will mend.'

On his bedside table stood a small watercolour on a wooden stand. It was a view of Glenkerry, a row of brightly-coloured houses set against a backdrop of emerald green pastures above, dark blue waters below, all in subtly shaded pastels. Inscribed in the lower right corner and visible only to the discerning eye among the rippling waves were the initials 'RO.'

Early the next morning, a Sunday, Cary stepped from his flat wearing a rugby shirt, sweatpants, and trainers, and went for a long run. It took him south a few k's to the Royal Canal, then east along the tow path for several more. Fishermen were seated on the banks, their lines hanging lazily in the quiet waters. Ducks and a few swans paddled silently along, briefly following him in hopes of a handout. After several more k's, he stopped and stood in the warm June sun, stretching his legs.

He was warming to the London idea, he admitted to himself, but he hated to present it to his parents as a fait accompli. He would have to talk to them first, before making any decision. Maybe, he

reasoned, his mother would see the move as a step forward in his relationship with Siobhan.

W*hich it is not. But maybe she'll see it that way.*

As he started his return run his mobile vibrated, but he was in the running zone and decided to wait until he got home. Just a few blocks from his flat, he ran into Siobhan. Smiling, he pulled out his earbuds.

'I was just about to call round, mate,' she said.

'Yeah, I decided to have a run,' replied Cary, trying to catch his breath, 'along the canal.'

'Good day for it, eh? Not too warm, not too cool.'

Cary nodded, still huffing. After a few seconds, his breathing close to normal, he stood, hands on hips, flexing his leg muscles.

'Today's Whitsunday, Shiv–the seventh Sunday after Easter. A lotta people think this day is unlucky–they stay at home to avoid accidents and ward off evil spirits.'

'I suppose it's also a bad day to make big decisions?' asked Siobhan.

Cary chuckled. 'I haven't decided about London, Shiv, if that's what yeh're wonderin'.'

'Okay, I understand–it's big–real big–and you need time. No rush, Car.'

'Listen. I wanna do it–I really do. It would be scary, a little risky, but I need to learn to take risks now and then. I know I do.'

Siobhan was smiling.

'But…'

Her smile quickly faded. 'But what?'

'It's my olds. I hate to spring it on 'em just like that. I might have to make a trip to Glenkerry–yeh know, talk to them face to face.'

Siobhan was disappointed, try though she might not to show it.

Secretly she had her suspicions that this was just a delaying tactic, putting off a decision–more faffing.

'Maybe next weekend?' he asked warily.

Siobhan's forehead wrinkled. 'But my job starts in a fortnight. So we need to leave by next weekend, take the ferry to Holyhead, then rail to London. I Facetimed with my friend Ellen in Camden last night. She says we can stay with her while we look for a place of our own. But it's gotta be next weekend, Car.'

'Yeah, okay, yeh're right. I'll talk to Ma and Pa tonight. Sunday night's usually when I call 'em, anyway.'

Siobhan was relieved. 'That would be grand. And if they're okay with it, you're okay?'

Cary bit his lip, then nodded. 'I think so, Shiv.'

She hugged him, the way she did. 'I'm excited, mate, really excited. Call me, or text me, after you talk to your parents, okay?'

Cary nodded and smiled. 'Yep, will do.'

'Well then, guess I'll see you at grad.'

Graduation–in two days–God, everything's happening so fast, mate.

Back at his flat, Cary showered, then made himself tea, trying to be as quiet as possible for the sake of his flatmate, Niall, who was snoring loudly from his bedroom only a few feet away. Niall was a business major in his second year at DCU. He was a big fellow, several inches taller than Cary, heavy set. When he snored, the walls of that little flat shook.

As Cary sat sipping his tea, he remembered the call he got while running. He stepped into the front hallway, picked up his mobile, and found a voicemail message from his mother.

It was graduation day at DCU. Siobhan was standing with a group of her business classmates, all in black robes and cream-coloured hoods, waiting for instructions to queue up for the ceremony. She was talking and laughing with her friends, all the while watching for some sign of Cary. The journalism majors were assembled a short distance away wearing white hoods; she recognised several of them from parties and other social events she had attended with Cary over the last few months. But he was not among them.

Finally, a steward spoke to the group, instructing them to queue up and prepare to march. As Siobhan took her place, she shot one last glance toward the journalism majors, hoping to see Cary. No sign of him. Just then her mobile vibrated. They had been warned to turn off mobiles and keep them out of sight during the ceremony, but when she saw who the call was from, she answered it.

'Where are you, Car? We're just starting to march.'

'I'm in Glenkerry.' His voice sounded weak.

'What? But you're gonna miss…'

'It's my da, Shiv. He died. Last night. In hospital. His heart.'

'Oh, Car, no.' She stepped out of the queue and walked away, hoping to find a quieter place.

'Ma called me, Sunday morning. She said he had a bad night so she dialled 9-9-9.'

'Siobhan, come on, we're marching,' rang out a voice that Cary could hear over the phone in the distance.

'Go, Shiv, get your parchment. Have a great day. Talk later.'

'Car–I am so sorry. Patrick was a good man, a good father, I know he was.'

Cary's voice cracked. 'Yeah, he was.'

'I'm comin' down to Glenkerry, straightaway after the ceremony. Okay?'

'Okay, Shiv.'

'See you soon, Car. All my love–to you and your ma.'

2

THE BRIGHT SIDE OF THE ROAD

Glenkerry is a town of barely 2000 residents in the southern part of County Wicklow. Wicklow has long been known as the Garden of Ireland, and if that is so, then Glenkerry is the perennial border of Wicklow, every cottage yard bristling with colour–daffodils, iris, and violets in spring, poppies, roses, and foxglove in summer, asters, astilbes, and chrysanthemums in autumn. The village itself consists of a few dozen buildings of granite or slate along the High Street housing little shops, a pharmacy, a tailor, a grocer, a fish store, and at least a half dozen small restaurants, many of them featuring exotic foods from faraway lands.

Spanned by a high stone bridge, the River Kerry runs through the village before winding its way toward the Irish Sea barely six miles distant. At very high tide each month you can tell the river is tidal from the sulphurous scent of briny seawater and decomposing sea detritus that hangs in the air.

Surrounding Glenkerry are pastures, mostly in sheep but some dairy cows and a few horses. And there are fields of barley and corn as well, each crop with its own signature colour and texture to the discerning eye. Narrow lanes lined with wild foxglove and fuchsia diverge from the main thoroughfare up the hillsides between the stonewalls, marking off the pastureland in a neat grid.

Anyone comparing Glenkerry today with a century-old photograph must be struck by how few changes are evident. Of course, there are some new houses along the main roads and several large school buildings of recent origin. The shops in the village now include an espresso stand, a day spa, and a computer shop. And farm vehicles still rumble up and down the roads–huge harvesters, combines, tractors pulling haywains–though nowadays such muscular vehicles must thread their way among Priuses, Volkswagens, Skodas, and Hyundais.

The funeral for Patrick McGurk was held at St. Brigid's Church in Glenkerry. It was well-attended. Patrick was remembered fondly here, as a boy, as a young man, but more recently as editor and publisher of *The Glenkerry Gazette*, the newspaper he started when he was just a few years out of university. Father Desmond gave the eulogy, reminding the congregation of the life of this man, his many qualities as a son, husband, father, friend, newspaperman, and Catholic.

After Mass Cary stood outside the church with his mother and several aunts and uncles, greeting people, thanking them, and reminding them of the afterparty that would take place at the family home on Anglesey Lane. Siobhan Sullivan was present but stood apart, not wanting to intrude on the family while they spoke to friends. When Catherine saw her all alone, she spoke to Cary: 'Son, ask Siobhan to come and stand with us, why don't you?' Which he

did and she took up a position next to him at the end of the queue, greeting people after the family and introducing herself as a friend of Cary's from Dublin.

Except for the summer after his first year when Cary lived at home and worked for a haulage company, it had been three years since he had spent much time in Glenkerry. So he found himself caught up at length with nearly everyone he saw, telling them about university, about Dublin, about the trials and tribulations of his DCU rugby team, and introducing them to Siobhan. There were his parents' friends, his father's business associates, and a few of Cary's old classmates from secondary school–John O'Neill, heading to med school, Sarah Healey, creche teacher soon to be married, and Delbert Samuels, now Garda Samuels.

At last the line of well-wishers dwindled down to just one, a young woman in a dark pleated skirt and white blouse standing alone and looking uneasy. It was Roisin O'Malley. She was slight, her face pale with many freckles, green eyes, and long red hair that glistened in the sunlight. She had never been one for broad, toothy smiles, recalled Cary, and today she was even more subdued than he remembered her. She stepped up to him, tilting her head as she spoke.

'Hello, Car,' she said softly. Tears welled up in her eyes.

Cary stood awkwardly for a moment. 'Rosie,' he said softly. Then he held out his arms and drew her to him.

'I'm sorry, Car, I am so sorry,' she said into his ear. Cary nodded as they separated. 'He was a good man, your da.' Again he nodded. 'Everyone should have a da like 'im.' She winced as she spoke those words, just barely keeping her composure.

At that moment Cary was far away, walking with that self-same lass along the River Kerry one summer's day five years earlier,

admiring her softness, her shy, sweet way, all the time conscious of that air of melancholy that seemed to drape around her like a shroud.

Sweet memories, mate, sweet but sad.

Then he remembered Siobhan. 'Rosie, I'd like you to meet Siobhan, Siobhan Sullivan, a classmate from DCU. Shiv, this is Rosie O'Malley, an old friend from Glenkerry, and a classmate at *Coláiste Gaeilge*, our secondary school.'

Siobhan smiled, then reached out and shook Rosie's hand. 'Pleasure meeting you, Rosie. Thanks for coming today. It means a lot to Cary and his family.'

'Siobhan read Global Business at uni. And she's goin' to London next week to start a killer job.'

Rosie smiled. 'London, so. Congratulations, Siobhan.'

'Yeah, well, it's very exciting, but we'll see. It's an awfully big town, at least compared to Dublin.'

'But Siobhan grew up in Los Angeles,' added Cary, implying that she could handle London.

They all laughed. Siobhan blushed. 'Well, I don't know as growing up in LA necessarily prepares you for life in London. I may crash and burn.'

Cary shook his head. 'Siobhan is amazing, Rosie–she'll succeed wherever she ends up, count on it.'

'So, Rosie, where are you these days?' asked Siobhan.

Rosie shrugged modestly, raising both hands, palms up. 'Right where I always been–in Glenkerry.'

'You workin' now, Rosie?' asked Cary.

She shook her head. 'Not really a job. I'm takin' care of my da. He's been poorly for some time now. Won't see a doctor–quacks, 'e calls 'em.'

'Well, he's lucky to have you, I'd say,' replied Siobhan. She was about to ask about Rosie's mother but thought better of it.

'Well, I'll let you lot get going. Sounds like you'll be busy at 'ome.'

'Yeh're coming, right?' asked Cary. 'Good *craic*, Rosie, for sure. Maybe some old friends.'

'I don't know, depends on how my da's doin'. I'll try to get away for a while.'

As they walked to the car, Siobhan said, 'Rosie's sweet, eh?'

Cary nodded. 'Yeah, she is.'

'So, history–you two?'

'Well, at one time, yeah. But mostly just friends.'

'Did she go to uni?'

'Nah, the old man nixed it–said he needed her at home. A shame–she wanted to go to art school in Dublin–but that old buzzard wouldn't have it.'

'That's so sad.'

'She's like a caged bird in that house, I swear,' said Cary.

'What about her mother? I hesitated to ask.'

'Yeah, well, that's just as well. I'll tell you later.'

C*aged bird–yep, that's Rosie, all right.*

The McGurk home was a modern, one-storey house set on Anglesey Lane a short distance from the centre of Glenkerry, looking down on the village. It had many windows that afforded lovely views of green pastures and, in the distance, a glimpse of the River Kerry. Their neighbours had sheep, but the McGurk property was devoted to flower gardens, especially a rose garden at the back that was

Catherine McGurk's particular pride and joy. They had recently installed a hot tub on the deck at the rear of the house and Catherine had just put in a flower bed around it so that you could have a soak while resting your eyes on lilies, foxglove, monkshood, and hollyhock.

When he and his mother returned from the church, Cary walked out into the pasture behind the house. He had fond memories of this place, especially in late spring and early summer when the gorse, eyebright, and pasture rose were in their glory and the skylark and meadow pipit were singing from the fenceposts. As a young lad he couldn't go outside in summer much because of his asthma. Back then, as soon as he stepped out the door, he'd begin wheezing and sneezing, then feel that tightening in his chest that was a warning. He'd retreat inside, take a few breaths on his inhaler, then lie on his bed reading or watching the telly. But miraculously those troubles subsided in his teens which was when he came to appreciate what it meant to be able to stroll a few minutes from his door, gaze across endless pastures, smell the sweet scents of summer, and listen to the birdsong. His favourite time was lambing season in March and April when the neighbour's ewes started popping. Within days of birth the new-borns could be seen bouncing around the pasture as if they came equipped with springs on their little hooves.

Good memories of an Irish boyhood, mate.

As he walked across the pasture toward his favourite spot, Cary realised that something was missing. It was a tree, an old, wizened hawthorn with gnarly bark. It had been bent low by an ice storm decades ago so that if he sat on a certain boulder the lower branches framed his view of Glenkerry. But where that tree had stood now there was only a stump, recently sawn clean at its base. He stood for a moment thinking of that old tree, how much a part of the place it

had always been to him, and now suddenly gone. He sat on the boulder looking out on the village, then buried his face in his hands and sobbed.

The caterers were busy setting up tables of food under a tent in the yard, mostly tiny sandwiches and finger food, sweets of all sorts, and lots of drink–lager, stout, wine, shandies, mixed drinks. A small combo of local musicians was seated in a circle, a fiddle, a tin whistle, an accordion, and a harp, warming up. When someone asked them when they rehearsed, the fiddler smiled: 'This is it, my friend.'

The band started out a little ragged, but gradually the music improved, or maybe it just seemed to improve with the quantity of alcohol consumed. As the afternoon wore on the tunes got livelier. Then the dancing began.

Siobhan had heard of Irish wakes. This wasn't technically a wake, this was an after-funeral party for the deceased, and despite the sadness of the occasion, she was enjoying every minute of it. She had changed from the long black dress she wore at the church to a short plaid skirt and a white blouse. One of the older single men, Chester Doyle, asked her to dance and Cary watched as the pair spun around, Siobhan's colourful skirt swirling up as she twirled. Then he looked beyond the dancers and spied Rosie O'Malley, standing appropriately enough in his mother's rose garden.

He took a shandy from the drinks table and brought it to her.

'Hey,' he said, 'glad you could make it.'

'I can't stay for long but I wanted to say hi again, maybe talk to your ma. She's such a sweet lady, I hate to see 'er sad.' Just then she looked out across the crowd and exclaimed, 'Oi.' It was Cary's mother, being swung about by old Billy Chandler. He had to be eighty if he was a day, but he could still dance a jig or a reel with the

best of them.

'Well, she's doin' okay, as you can see,' noted Cary with a grin. 'But I'm sure there will be some dark days still for her,' he added, thinking ahead.

Yeah, mate, not just for her.

'Siobhan's nice, yeah?'

Cary nodded in agreement.

'How long you two been together?'

'Oh, well, we've been mates for three years, since we were first-years at DCU.'

'Mates, eh?'

'Yeah,' replied Cary. Their eyes met. 'Really, just mates. Good mates.'

'What's all this 'mates' business about? You two sound like a coupla Aussies.'

Cary chuckled. 'Yeah, well, so many of our friends at DCU were from Down Under, and they were all like "mate" this, "mate" that, "crikey," and "blimey." Pretty soon we were all talkin' like Aussies or Kiwis.'

Rosie chuckled. 'So what's next for Ciaran McGurk, B.A.?'

'Well, I'm meant to go to London with Siobhan, look for a job, ideally a newspaper job. We're leavin' in a few days.'

'Wow, that's exciting.'

'Yeah, exciting. Except for the fact that newspapers are the new dinosaurs, yeh know? Soon they'll be extinct–and so will would-be newspaper journalists–like me.'

'Oh, I bet yeh'll find your niche, Car. I'm sure of it.'

'Well thanks, Rosie, but I'm not so sure. And now, this…' He paused, nodding toward the gathering for his father. 'It's been a bit of a shock, yeh know? Took the wind outta my sails.'

'Yeah, a course,' replied Rosie. 'It's bound to set yeh back a bit, eh? But you'll carry on.'

They both stood watching the festivities for several minutes in silence. Then Cary took a breath and spoke softly.

'Hey, Ma tells me your mom left town. Where's she gone?'

A pallor spread across Rosie's face and her chin trembled. She shook her head.

'Rosie, what is it?'

She turned away from the crowd to hide her tears.

'I know she's been unhappy for a long time. She finally decide she'd had enough?'

Now Rosie was crying and she started walking away. 'I gotta go,' she said through her tears. 'Tell your ma I'll call round in a few days.'

'Wait, Rosie, lemme walk you 'ome, eh?' She stopped. 'Gimme one sec.'

Cary found his mother and told her Rosie was in a bad way and he should see her home. But he wouldn't be any time at all. Then Cary and Rosie walked side-by-side without a word, up the lane toward Anglesey Hill.

As they approached Rosie's house, they both knew that he must go no farther–that his presence was not welcome, ever, not in that house, not on that property–thus decreed Rosie's father, Harry O'Malley, some five years earlier when he and Rosie were sixteen.

So much is unsaid between us, mate, you could write a book.

And that book started–and ended–right in this lane, not too many years ago. They had been friends since toddlers, playing together in his yard or hers. When they entered secondary school, they rode the bus together from the village centre. And very gradually the relationship changed. They often strolled together and

several times took long hikes along the Wicklow Way, Cary's father depositing them at one trailhead, then meeting them hours later at another miles away. Out there, high on the rugged Wicklow Mountains, they felt free to be themselves, free from Harry O'Malley's hostile leers, free from the fishbowl world of Glenkerry.

At the end of Fifth Year was Debs, the big social event of the year, a formal dance–pretty girls in long gowns with serious hairdos, gawky lads in tuxedos with cummerbunds and boutonnieres in their lapels. Cary wanted to ask Rosie, but he was nervous, of course. Then one afternoon as they disembarked from the bus and walked together up the lane, he mustered his courage and spoke. He'd been rehearsing his line for days: Was she going to the Debs, he had asked. If you will ask me, she answered. Cary nodded, Rosie nodded, they joined hands, and the deed was done. Cary recalled how his pulse settled down then for the first time in days.

But it was not meant to be. As soon as Rosie's father got wind of the assignation, he put an end to it. Not with that boy, not with any boy, yeh hear me? Rosie was heartbroken. Her mother consoled her but refused to intervene on her behalf. And Rosie's disappointment turned to anger at her father. When she told Cary she couldn't attend, he too was disappointed and angry. Their meetings from then on had to be surreptitious. He went off to a sport camp that summer and when he returned, by some unspoken mutual agreement they reverted to the friend zone. But truth be told, it was only when Cary headed off to uni the following year that he found some measure of relief from the pain of that forced separation.

They stopped and stood in the lane. Finally, Rosie seemed prepared to talk.

'Ma left, about a month ago now. A couple days before I took the bus to Wicklow for a dentist appointment. When I got back to

Glenkerry, she was standin' there on the footpath as I stepped off the bus. She told him she was goin' to the market, but she wanted to see me outta his sight. That's how scared she was.'

'She told me she was plannin' to leave soon. She didn't have to explain, I understood. I told her more than once she should go, but she stayed, mostly for me, and for Buddy. She told me she couldn't say when she was leavin' or where she was goin', that the less I knew the better. She didn't want Pa thinkin' I had anything to do with it.'

Rosie sat down on the grassy slope and buried her face in her hands. Finally, she looked up at Cary.

'But she promised me she'd keep in touch. She said she'd bought a mobile. Can you believe it? My ma–with a mobile phone? I swear she's the lowest-tech person in Ireland. Anyway, she promised she would text me and arrange to meet. And she gave me a phone, one of those, whataya call 'em, prepays? She told me to hide it away, so that Pa could never find it. She figured, if he did, he'd find out where she was and come after her.'

'She's really frightened of him, isn't she?'

Rosie nodded, biting her lip. None of this was exactly new to Cary. Even back in primary school, he knew that Rosie's home life was fraught. For a time her health took a bad turn, though he never knew any details. Then after the Debs debacle it was clear that she hated her father.

Back then Cary was young and naïve and never stopped to consider the possible meaning of all that. They had both pretended all was, well, rosy. But he was older now, and wiser, and pretending was no longer an option. He knew too well what the word abuse meant, about the awful reality behind that word, how it shattered lives–and families. He reached out and took Rosie's arm. Their eyes met and locked. She knew what he was about to ask.

'Rosie, you gotta tell me, please.' He paused. 'Has that man–has he ever hurt you? In any way?'

Rosie's chin trembled. Then she shook her head slowly. 'No, Car, honestly, never. He's hit Ma, and he's been terribly cruel to her over the years. And he took a sick pleasure in walloping my brothers–which explains a lot about them and their troubles, yeah?'

She paused, gazing up at the hillside where sheep were grazing in the late day sun.

'But I was always his golden girl. Not that he was nice to me, or ever complimented me, or ever said he loved me even a little. But he never hurt me, not physically anyway. But, Car, it's been a month and I haven't heard from Ma. She said a couple weeks. But not a word.' Again her chin started to quiver. 'And I miss her, Car, and it's so lonely without her. And all I do is take care o' the man that mistreated her all those years. How sick is that?'

'Yeh're sure that prepay is well hidden?'

Rosie blushed. 'I put it in a box of tampons–figured it was safe there.'

Cary nodded and chuckled. 'Good one, Rosie.'

'But why hasn't she called or texted me?'

Cary was thinking and looking for ways to reassure his friend.

'There's lots of possible reasons, Rosie, I mean, maybe she's not settled yet and doesn't want to risk contacting you until she's sure of where she's gonna be living. Or–yeh know–maybe she got your number wrong? Or…' He knew he was grasping at straws now. 'Or maybe she left you a voice message–are yeh sure yeh've got the mailbox set up on that phone? She'll contact you in time, Rosie, of course she will.'

'Thanks, Car. I got nobody to talk to around here,' she said, gesturing toward her house. 'And no one else is supposed to know

she's left.'

'Listen, why don't you call round tomorrow, yeah? In the mornin', maybe eleven or so? And bring that prepay. Not that I know all that much about them either, but maybe we can figure out if your voice mailbox is set up. Or maybe it's full of spam, yeh know? That happens a lot.'

'I hate to keep you away from your ma–and Siobhan.'

'No worries. I'm takin' Siobhan to Wicklow at half eight to catch the train to Dublin. Me and Ma got some things to tend to, but in the afternoon.'

'Thanks, Car.' She mustered a meagre smile, then turned and walked slowly up the lane, a sad replay of that day five years earlier when they parted after she told him she couldn't go to the Debs.

He watched her for a moment, then walked back down the hill as the chorus of 'Bright Side of the Road' drifted up from the celebration for the dearly departed.

The music had taken a softer, more sombre turn by the time Cary rejoined the festivities.

'Everything all right with Rosie?' asked his mother.

He shook his head. 'No, not really. I'll tell you about it later. Wanna dance?' He took his mother's hands and they moved slowly to a sweet air.

'Thanks, love,' said Catherine when the song had ended. 'But don't forget…' Her eyes shifted toward Siobhan who was now standing alone, watching.

Cary went to the drinks table, retrieved another shandy, and brought it to Siobhan.

'Sorry I had to bail on yeh, Shiv. Rosie's not doin' too well.'

Siobhan nodded. In a few minutes, when a livelier tune was struck up, Cary held out his hand.

'Dance?'

Siobhan smiled and her face reddened just a bit. 'I'm a crap dancer, mate.'

'Oh, I don't know. You and Chester Doyle were cuttin' a pretty good carpet there.'

They both laughed. Then Cary put his hands around her waist, she put hers on his shoulders, and they moved ever so slightly to the music, no steps, no discernible rhythm–but neither cared.

'I know it's a sad day for you, Car, but this is so nice, you and your mom with all these friends around you, bucking you up.'

'Yeah, that's how this place is, Shiv. One big family. A strange family, maybe a bit dysfunctional…'

Siobhan gave out a loud guffaw.

'But mostly just real nice,' he added.

'I gotta tell you, mate, this is so different from the world I grew up in–the caring, the sincerity. It's nice to know there's a place like Glenkerry left on this sorry planet of ours.'

3

THE LADY VANISHES

The next morning Siobhan shared a teary goodbye with Catherine in the drive before Cary drove her to the rail station in Wicklow. It was early and the town was just beginning to come to life, shop doors opening, school buses rolling, fishing boats just returning at the harbour. They stood on the platform in the warm sun, waiting for the train.

'Thanks so much for comin' down, Siobhan. It means a lot, to me and to Ma,' he said, his eyes fixed on hers.

'No worries, mate. She's lucky to have you through all this, you know? Really lucky. But I wish you'd called me straightaway when your dad died. I could've come down sooner.'

'I didn't want you to miss grad, Shiv. You deserved that day.' The Dublin train was now approaching. 'Well, I guess I'll see you in London–imagine that?' he said with a smile.

'It'll be great, Car, it'll be deadly.' She gave him a quick hug,

then added, 'and you'll find your dream job, I'm sure of it.'

She picked up her suitcase just as the train drew to a halt, boarded, then found a seat by a window on his side. She waved as the train pulled slowly away and in that instant Cary was seized with a curious sensation, perhaps a premonition, he wasn't sure. The windows of the train moving past reminded him of frames of a film, maybe even a film of his life. And the image of Siobhan's face was one of those frames–it approached, passed, and moved on. He stood on the platform for several minutes looking down the track as the train shrank into the distance, then disappeared. Suddenly he was feeling quite alone.

Lonely with her, mate, lonely without her.

Back home Cary found his mother talking on the telephone. She was speaking with Aiden. Cary stepped out into the yard and walked along the perennial bed, now bursting with colour. A few minutes later his mother joined him.

'It's beautiful, Ma. Yeh've put so much work into these gardens over the years, eh?'

'Yes, and Pa, too. Aiden says hello, by the way. And he wants to talk to you. But he couldn't just now. It's late there.'

She paused, admiring the handsome young lad standing before her. 'Car, come, sit down. I want to talk to you about your father's affairs.' They sat on a rustic wooden settee nestled in among the roses. The morning sun was just burning though the mist and a dove was cooing in the distance.

'He left everything to me, Car, your da did. That's the way we set it up: whoever passed first would leave everything to the other. But we each made a list of requests for the other to honour. And that includes the Upton Road property, the newspaper office and all.'

'Oh?'

'He wanted you to have it.'

This was a surprise to Cary. Patrick McGurk seldom tried to influence the life choices of his sons. Not that he didn't care, but he had faith in Aiden and Ciaran. They were smart, they were motivated, they were fully capable of finding their own way, he said more than once to Catherine. So he did not feel it necessary or wise to try pushing them one way or the other. He was naturally delighted when Cary decided to read journalism at university, but even then, he employed a hands-off approach. If his younger son decided to follow in his father's footsteps, that would be fine, but no pressure.

There had been a few times in the last three years when Cary sought out his father's advice, on course selection, on writing. Once they even had a conversation about Cary's love life, or lack of one. But it was initiated by Cary, and his dad wasn't able or willing to offer much in return. Maybe it was his humility that drove Patrick McGurk's reticence with his boys–perhaps he was simply not sure that he had much wisdom to impart. Sometimes Cary wished his dad had been more forthcoming, more involved in his life. But that just wasn't Patrick McGurk's way. If his son wanted his advice, he'd ask–that was his unspoken mantra, and it had become Cary's mantra as well, with his parents and with his mates. There were times in his young life when it served him well–other times, perhaps, not so much.

'Ma, I didn't realise you still owned that place. I thought you sold it a few years ago.'

'Well, we talked about it. Your da had some inquiries from estate agents anxious to list it. But he couldn't bring himself to let it go. It had–well–sentimental value. You know he ran the newspaper out of there for nearly three decades. So it had special meaning to him.'

'It's right in the centre of town. I'm surprised he never considered renting it–to a chipper or a Costcutter or something.'

'It needed work, dear, plumbing, wiring, even the foundation. It seemed so overwhelming, he never found the time to get it done. So that's the thing, you see. We want you to have it, Car, but you may not want to get into all that any more than your father did.'

'Yeah, probably not, Ma. But let's have a look, anyway.'

'Well, that's one thing for our list for later this afternoon. Stop in, have a look around.'

'Yeah, a course, let's do it.'

'But yeh're moving to London, and you and Siobhan, well, yeh've got plans of your own, no doubt.'

Cary shook his head. 'It's not like that, Ma, I keep tellin' you. We're just friends is all.'

'Okay. But don't let her slip through your fingers, love. Or you'll regret it for a long, long time. Do you understand what I'm saying?' No response. 'And wasn't it nice of her to come down for your dad's funeral Mass?'

'Yes, it was. She thinks the world of you, Ma. Speakin' of that, Rosie might come by a little later. She was sorry to rush off last evening, but she asked if she might call round today–maybe eleven or so?'

'Of course, poor thing. I suppose she's missin' her mother, eh?'

'So you know?'

'Yes, Beatrice Foley told me, Devi Patel told her. I guess that good-for-nothing husband of hers is trying to keep it a secret, but there's no such thing in a town like this–full of curtain twitchers.'

Rosie O'Malley appeared at the McGurks' house shortly after eleven. Catherine greeted her at the door and the two sat in the parlour for a long while, mostly talking about Patrick. Cary was in the kitchen trying not to listen in, but he did hear Rosie say several times to his mother if she needed anything, to let her know.

As if that girl doesn't have enough on her mind without catering to a grieving neighbour.

It was almost noon when Rosie stepped into the yard and waved to Cary. He was clad in cut-off jeans and a T-shirt and working on the lawnmower. He looked up, smiled, then wiped the grease from his hands. They sat side-by-side on the wooden bench, now in the shade of several small birches. Rosie reached into the pocket of her dungarees and produced a mobile.

'So this is the prepay me ma gave me. I thought it was all set up to take messages. Can you tell?'

Cary fiddled with it for several minutes. 'Well, yeah, it looks as though it is. And yeh've got quite a few, but they look like adverts– life insurance, security alarms, online dating services.' He looked up at Rosie and winked. 'Just what you need, eh?'

Rosie smiled weakly.

'But I can't really tell if it's enabled for text messages.' At that he pulled out his own mobile. 'Watch, I'll send you a text.' They waited several minutes. 'Nope, nothing. I'm not really sure how this kind of phone works, especially for texts, but my message didn't go through.'

Rosie perked up. 'So maybe Ma's tried to send me a text?'

'Very possible. And she'll probably try again. How about if I keep it for a few days? It'll be safe here, and I'll ask Del to have a look at it.'

'He's a garda now, you know,' offered Rosie.

'Yeah, so he told me yesterday. But he's also a tech whiz, and he'll know how to set this up. I'll try to talk to him today. And a course I'll let you know as soon as I learn anything, or if you get any calls or texts. I can still call you on your regular mobile, right?'

With that Rosie departed and he watched her walking slowly up the hill. He would talk to Del Samuels, not only about mobile phones, but about the matter of reporting a missing person although he wasn't sure that the term accurately described Mary O'Malley. And perhaps he needed to ask, discreetly, about domestic abuse as well.

The Upton Road property, former home of *The Glenkerry Gazette*, Patrick McGurk, editor and publisher, was situated at the busy intersection of High Street and Upton Road, not far from the town's little market square. Like most of the buildings in the village, it was of limewashed stone but distinguished by cornerstones or quoins painted black. It was bounded by brightly coloured buildings, the tailor's a brilliant red on one side, the florist's a subtler peach on the other.

Catherine wasn't kidding when she said the Upton Road property needed work. It had lain empty now for nearly five years. Only a few odd pieces of office furniture testified to the building's past, and the rooms echoed as if offering a lonely greeting to the first visitors in months, maybe years. The paint on the walls was badly faded, some of the plaster cracked. Light fixtures hung from walls and ceilings on frayed flexes. The place had a distinct mildew odour as well, and Cary found himself sneezing almost as soon as he entered.

'Your da loved the *Gazette*, Car–it was simple, old-fashioned, like him. They had phones–land lines of course–and electric typewriters for the longest time. And then they finally got computers, long after everyone else had them. To him they were little more than gimmicks–it wasn't his way, you know?'

Cary nodded. 'Yeah, I remember him lookin' over my shoulder while I was doing homework on my laptop. He was amazed at what it could do, but he showed no interest in learning.'

'Well, at the brewery he finally learned to use a computer–he had to, to work on the books. But he groaned about it constantly.' They both chuckled.

They climbed the narrow stairway to the first floor, a small flat that had served for little more than storage space for most of the years that the newspaper was in operation. There was a sitting room, a kitchen, a tiny bedroom, and a loo.

'This is small but could be nice enough, with some work, don't you think?'

Cary nodded but could muster little enthusiasm.

'So what are you thinkin', son?' she asked at last. But she had a feeling she knew the answer. His posture, demeanour, and occasional sighs and groans spoke volumes.

'Well, I suppose the simplest thing to do would be to sell it, as is, wouldn't it, Ma? I'm sure the estate agents would come round like a swarm of bees as soon as they heard you were thinkin' of sellin'. It's a mess, but you know what they say: location, location, location.'

Catherine nodded but regret was etched on her face. 'You don't think, maybe a few years down the way, you might put it to use? Maybe move back to Glenkerry, live upstairs, rent out the ground floor?'

Cary knew where this was going. 'Ma, I know what yeh're thinkin', and like I've said a thousand times, we're just friends.'

Why bother, mate? She won't listen.

'Yes, I understand, and no that was not what I was thinking–love nest and all.' She reached out and patted his cheek. 'Listen, Car, whatever you want is okay by me. Just think it over.'

Catherine knew she had to tread very lightly on subjects like girlfriends and marriage with her younger son. She still feared that what she regarded as very mild and occasional encouragements of Aiden had been one of the reasons he had left Ireland and travelled about as far away as one could travel, to New Zealand, or, as her husband dubbed it, 'the arse end of the world.'

The subject was dropped for the time. They walked the short distance up High Street to the Bank of Ireland where Catherine showed Cary her safe deposit box, explained about keys and access, and showed him the contents, mostly just documents–deeds, mortgage papers, copies of their wills, and the like.

Before returning home, Catherine explained that there was one more stop she wanted them to make–the cemetery. They walked silently among the weathered stones carved with crosses, cherubim, weeping yews and willows. Toward the back of the cemetery, they stood among several stones engraved with the name McGurk. One of marble had fewer lichens and mosses than the others. It bore two names.

'Those are your da's parents, Car–John and Irene McGurk. You probably don't remember them. They lived most of their married life in Arklow which as you know is where your da was born. They moved to Glenkerry late in life but came to feel that this was their home.'

'So what about dad, should we get a new monument for him?'

Catherine teared up, then sniffled. 'We never discussed it, yeh know? He wanted to be cremated and we never went beyond that in our plans. So we could have his ashes buried here. But I'm inclined to simply have his name added below his parents. What do you think?'

Cary nodded. 'I think that would be fine, Ma.'

'But we'll leave a space for me, too, eh?'

Cary put his arm around her. 'Quit talkin' like that, Ma. Yeh're not goin' anywhere for a long time, hear?'

'None of us knows, love, none of us can say. Have you heard the old Yiddish saying?' Cary shook his head. 'When we make plans, God laughs.'

Cary chuckled and nodded. 'Uh-huh–I like that.' He looked around at the older stones. 'Who are these other McGurks, Ma?'

'Oh, those are your great-grandparents, John and Margaret. And John's brother and sister–they died very young as you can see.'

Cary smiled. 'It's nice to think that the whole family is together, in a way.'

Catherine looked at her son, shaking her head. 'But they're not, Car, not by any means. So many were lost during the famines, no one had the time or the money to have headstones carved. And many of the famine victims were buried in mass graves, so they say.'

Cary nodded.

'And so many others emigrated, mostly to America and Canada. One story your da used to tell was of Hannah Hughes. She married Bernard McGurk and they had four children. He was convicted of theft in an English court–for stealing a single loaf of bread.' She shook her head in disbelief. 'Tryin' to feed his family, no doubt.'

'Bernard was sent to prison in Tasmania. That left Hannah with her four children at the height of the famines. So they emigrated.

They had little more than the clothes on their backs when they arrived in Boston in October, 1849. But she made a home for them there and those children all grew up and lived long lives. The two boys fought in the American Civil War, so.'

'Gee, I suppose that means I have some distant cousins in America.'

'Without a doubt, son. And I'll bet they dream of comin' back to Ireland one day.'

Cary looked out at the rolling pastures beyond. 'Yeah, I bet they do, ma. Wouldn't it be somethin' to meet one of 'em some day?'

As they walked back to Catherine's car, Cary asked, 'So what about Pa's ashes? What should we do with them?'

'Well, Car, I had a thought.'

Finally, they drove the short distance back home. Catherine brewed a pot of tea as Cary stood looking at the copy of his father's will that she had removed from the safe deposit box. They sat at the kitchen table together, sipping their tea.

'What does Aiden think about all this? The Upton Road property, I mean. Have you told him?' asked Cary.

'No, I haven't yet. I had all of ten minutes with him on the phone last evening. And it wasn't the time or the place. But Car, your father wanted you to have that property, if you wanted it. And we agreed that we'd make some kind of arrangement for your brother. Either the two of you could own it together, half and half, or we'd set up something for Aiden, perhaps an annuity, of equal value.'

Catherine paused, took a sip of her tea, then placed the cup down with a sigh. 'Ciaran,' she began. He stiffened.

Prepare yourself, mate.

'I know about Aiden, dear. That he's–that he's gay.'

Cary nodded. He could have made light of her statement and mocked her for being the last person in Glenkerry, maybe the last person in Ireland, to know. But he cared too much for his mother to treat her like that.

'Did he tell you himself, Ma?'

She shook her head. 'No. I may be an old-timer but I'm not completely doddy.'

'I never thought you were, Ma. So you figured it out yourself?'

'Well, he told me that he couldn't come to Pa's funeral because his friend Tom had Covid and he needed to look after him. And last night he said that he and Tom were hoping to buy a house in Auckland.' She bit her lip. 'But I already suspected, partly because he never talked about girlfriends, and because you never mentioned anything about his love life.'

'It's too bad he couldn't tell you himself, Ma.'

She nodded, tears running down her cheeks. 'It's really a shame, you know? Here we are in the twenty-first century and young people still have trouble telling their parents such things. And parents still have a hard time hearing and accepting them.'

'Ma, if it makes you feel any better, I was in denial about Aiden's, uh, preference for a long while myself. So it's not just your generation.'

She smiled. 'Well, in a way that makes me feel better, dear. It really does. But you know, three of my lady friends have family members who are gay or trans. You remember Jonah Fallon from *Coláiste*? His mother is Muriel Fallon from the church. Well, he's now Joanne Fallon. I figure if my friends can deal with such things and accept them, so can I.'

'For what it's worth, Ma, my friendship with Siobhan has nothing to do with my sexual preference. I find her attractive, very attractive, and I like her a lot. But she doesn't feel that way about me, and that's the way we stand. I'm a little nervous about our living arrangement in London because of that. So if we live together, it will only be for a while, till I can afford a place of my own. I like girls, Ma. It's just that, honestly, they don't seem to like me back.'

Cary chuckled at this admission. But he could see a new sadness in his mother's face.

Here we go again.

'I know, Ma, "Siobhan–she's such a sweet colleen," right? Although I'm not sure an American girl qualifies as a colleen, does she? Well, she is sweet and pretty, et cetera, et cetera. But it's not going to happen. And I'm okay with that, heck I just turned twenty-one. I'm not withering on the vine…' He paused. 'Yet.'

They both began to laugh. Catherine stood up, leaned down and kissed the top of her son's head. 'Thanks for bein' so good to your mam, Car. I'm lucky to have you, especially now.'

That evening Aiden called again, this time to talk to Cary. When the call was finished, Cary spoke to his mother.

'Ma, I asked Aiden if we might Skype with him. Would eight o'clock Saturday evening be okay?'

'Oh, that'd be lovely, Car. What a good idea–while yeh're here.'

'Grand, I'll text him to confirm.' Cary hesitated for a moment, then he added, 'Ma? I asked him if Tom could join us, if he's feeling up to it. I hope that's okay.'

Glendalough

END OF SAMPLE

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert T. McMaster grew up in Southbridge, Massachusetts. He holds a B.A. from Clark University and graduate degrees from Boston College, Smith College, and the University of Massachusetts. He taught biology at Holyoke Community College in Massachusetts from 1994 to 2014. His parents' reminiscences of growing up in early 20th century America were the inspiration for four novels, *Trolley Days* (2012), *The Dyeing Room* (2014), *Noah's Raven* (2017), and *Darkest Before Dawn* (2022). He is also author of a biography, *All the Light Here Comes from Above: The Life and Legacy of Edward Hitchcock* (2021). He has at least two ancestral ties to Ireland: John and Katharine McMasters emigrated to America from County Antrim in about 1713; Hannah McGurk and her children lived in County Tyrone before making their journey to America in 1849.

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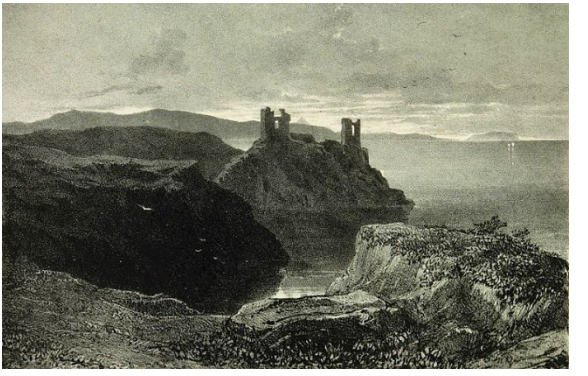

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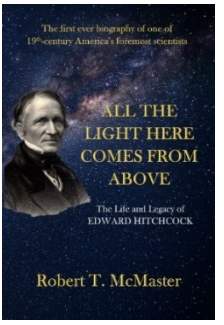

ALL THE LIGHT HERE COMES FROM ABOVE: The Life and Legacy of Edward Hitchcock

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EDWARD HITCHCOCK (1793-1864) was one of nineteenth-century America's foremost scientists. Best known for his pioneering research on the fossilized tracks of dinosaurs, he was also a geologist of international reputation, one of the first American scientists to embrace the theory of continental glaciation. A professor at Amherst College for nearly four decades, he took over the presidency in 1845 and saved that venerable institution from dissolution.

In ***All the Light Here Comes from Above: The Life and Legacy of Edward Hitchcock***, Massachusetts author Robert T. McMaster brings Edward Hitchcock to life, revealing the humanity of the man with dignity, charm, and humour. Relying largely on Hitchcock's own words from his letters, notes, and other unpublished manuscripts, McMaster presents an intimate view of Edward Hitchcock, his scientific achievements, his theological writings, as well as his battles with powerful personal demons that threatened him at every turn. For additional information please visit

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