

The Blow Ins: Triptych Part I

by H. W. Moss

The woman who rented her sons' room was slight of build with a determined stance that suggested, there in the doorway greeting us in that crepuscular air that lasts from seven to eleven of an evening in June in Ireland, she owned the moment. Farm stock, you might say.

“Ah, I see the blow ins have arrived,” she said with that lilt in her voice that immediately identifies the speaker's country of origin to American ears.

We had phoned from the car to inquire if the Lenihan's B and B had room. Daylight promised but never quite failed to lead us along the narrow winding road in Kilkishen in county Clare. We were on our way to O'Callaghan's Mills for a family reunion of sorts the next day, the two of us, brother and sister, planning to meet distant members of our family in a part of the world that would never become familiar to us but that already had a familiarity to it.

On the phone Charley Lenihan said sure, two rooms, come early, come late. Searching out the address, I found a sign above their mailbox proclaiming apiaries lived there. I asked my brother if he knew what an apiary was. The word was unfamiliar to him. Beekeepers, I explained.

Peg Lenihan stood in the doorway beaming at us and offered to take a suitcase saying come in, come in, as she lead the way to the parlor where I introduced us adding, “and you have hives.”

Charley had joined us by then and they both laughed at my double entendre. “I do,” he said with a twinkle coming from the crinkled corners of his eyes, thumbs twisted in his

suspenders at shoulder level, “and they’re out back and I’m taking medicine to get rid o’ them!”

It was late, but our hosts appeared in no hurry and quite willing to stay up and chat. However, I begged off and we were shortly shown our rooms. As we passed through the hall where there hung numerous family photos, my brother paused in front of one and asked the name of the priest who was pictured presiding over what were most probably nuptials.

“Ah, that’d be Father John,” Charley explained. “He’s there officiatin’ at our son Declan’s weddin’ ta Madelyn some ten years back.”

“Thought I recognized him,” my brother said matter of factly. “Father John’s one of our distant cousins we’re going to meet.”

The apparent coincidence was the last thing to be remarked upon by anyone as we found our beds, were shown the bathroom down the hall and where the light switches were in the rooms and the hallway.

In the morning Peg was up early. I found her in the kitchen frying thick rounds of blood sausage with eggs cooked hard in the middle, offering me big slices of buttered bread that was, naturally, lathered with honey. Charley was also at the table, but ate little more than the bread which he took big bites of while pulling on his boots and swallowing hot tea in huge gulps from a well-worn mug that was cracked on two sides and might well have been glued together. “Mended,” Charley told me when I asked.

My brother appeared, took a seat at the table, asked why Charley seemed to be in both a great hurry and quite excited.

“Ohhh. Charley’s goin’ ta Quin fer bees,” Peg said between puffs on a cigarette and herself sipping tea from a mug. “Do you two want to go along?”

My brother jumped at the chance and immediately said yes, but I declined. I had not showered and was worn out from our cross country drive. I would stay behind and take it easy, study the map as navigator and prepare for the long anticipated meeting we were to have that afternoon between people who were related, but with a gap of four generations, a succession of great and great great grand parents who had fled their land of birth in search of a future with a modicum of security, food and shelter.

“I have something special for ye,” Peg told me with a conspiratorial wink as the two men departed and the door shut behind them. “I know what ye Americans like.” Then she set about fixing me a cup of instant coffee.

The jar must have been left behind by a former boarder who long ago passed through because the brown granules were no longer loose and able to be mastered with a spoon. They had melded into one big chunk which Peg chipped a piece off with a sharp knife and plopped into a tea pot which she then filled with hot water straight from the kettle whistling quietly on the rear of the oil burning stove.

It amazes me what people in other countries assume about Americans. We can all ride horses; we drink whiskey in the afternoon; we are all fast food junkies and think British food is bland. Also we must have coffee, never tea. And not being coffee drinkers themselves, it’s all the same to them whether it is instant or perked, filtered or dripped.

As she poured a thin brown liquid into my cup, I gazed out the window and remarked on the spacious and beautiful back yard with its neatly mown lawn. Off to one side was a cabbage patch and in the rear what I took to be boxes of bee hives.

Demarking the boundary between properties was a rod and wire fence and beyond that a farmer rode a tractor with a tilling device attached. He churned up a considerable amount of dust as he cut the soil, just like in the States.

“What’s your neighbor getting the fields ready for? Shouldn’t he have already planted?” I pretended to take a sip, was repulsed by the fake coffee odor and put the mug back on the table with fingers laced around its warmth.

“Ye know, I don’t know. Don’t pay attention, really, and we’re not all that friendly with that man and his family. Consider themselves too good for the likes of us, y’see. But he has his own bad seed, don’t y’know.”

I did not know and said as much. “What do you mean ‘bad seed’?”

Peg leaned toward me, again with that conspiratorial wink, and this is the story she told:

The neighboring family was one of the first to farm the area, had been working their plot of land so long no one knew exactly when it was acquired nor even in what century. This was the Republic of Ireland where there was only one religion, Catholicism, and the family maintained two front row pews at the church. They were prosperous members of the community and highly respected.

There was a beautiful daughter, a raven haired Colleen who at nineteen was in love with the son of an equally well connected and highly regarded merchant in town. The two made no attempt to hide their affection for one another and it was generally believed they would eventually marry. Farm girls are familiar with procreation, so it was that she seduced the boy. However, she took no precautions and a month later announced to her

lover that she was pregnant and they ought to break the news to the parents so that the banns could be published, announcements sent and wedding arrangements made.

The young man paled. He blinked, shook his head and said, “But I’m going away to Cambridge in a week. I can’t get married. It would ruin my entire future if I married you.”

She was thunderstruck. It had never occurred to her the boy would not become her husband, that he would have any reticence whatsoever about settling down in an abandoned rubble wall house on her father’s farm and begin raising a family. That was just how things were done. You got pregnant, you got married, you worked the land. Simple as that.

She ran home with tears in her eyes and into her mother’s arms. The woman did her best to console the girl, but she would not be calmed. When her father came in from the fields it was obvious by how distraught she was there was something he should know. When he learned she had been jilted and by whom, instead of picking up a fowling piece and setting off for town, he declared the boy was not good enough for her. He said no member of his family would marry into that lot and then he made a fateful decision: The baby would be born in America.

“Oh, and didn’t that come back to haunt them,” Peg said with an odd leer as she lighted another cigarette and poured more tea into her mug. She picked up the coffee container and mimed pouring some into my cup, but I shook my head no. “So they put her on a boat and sent her to New York where there were relatives to take care of her during the time of her confinement. Eventually she became the mother of a healthy boy. The woman never married and they were a couple unto themselves. The boy grew up

knowing his heritage and with a good Irish last name, his mother's maiden name, for she refused to dignify the father of the child with even the hint of patrimony."

I smiled at the delicate way Peg described a mother's ultimate revenge.

Peg said the boy was intelligent and grew up to be a doctor. He married and became the proud father of three, the oldest being a headstrong daughter who graduated college and decided to make the pilgrimage to the country of origin, the county of her grandmother's birth, to peer into the home of the man she would have called "great grand papa" if she had known him.

Instead of a long boat trip, she flew to Shannon airport in Clare and rented a car and made her way to Kilkishen where the family name was easily located. She turned up at a bed and breakfast much as we had, late one night but at least with a room reserved.

"She set about introducing herself," Peg said, "to all these people who had no idea who this young American woman was nor why they were being bothered on the telephone and at their front doors as she made the rounds to visit as many as she could in a short length of time. But no one would have anything to do with her. She was snubbed and her calls not returned nor was she invited over to dinner or to participate in any of the family activities nor to meet the cousins, such as they were."

"But why was that?" I asked with genuine disbelief. My brother and I had already been invited to stay at the homes of a half dozen people we had never met, had corresponded with by mail and who were, for all intents and purposes, perfect strangers. But they welcomed their American cousins with open arms and genuine warmth like the long lost relatives we really were.

“Because she was the daughter of a bastard child, don’t ya know? And they weren’t about to forget that even if 60 years had gone by.” Peg crushed her cigarette and drained her tea cup and stood to take it over to the sink for washing. I sat there with what must have been a dumb expression on my face because Peg decided she had to explain a littler more fully.

“Scratch an Irishman and you find a pagan underneath. The bastard child is bad luck and no two ways about it. And they don’t take well to strangers which is why that family and us don’t get along. We’re just blow ins as far as that lot is concerned.”

“Blow ins? You called us blow ins last night. You mean new arrivals? People who just got here?”

“Ya, of course. Blow ins is what they call Charley’s family and my family.”

“But how long have your families been living in this part of the country?”

“Three hundred years. But to them we’re just blow ins.”

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The Bee Hunt: Triptych Part II

by. H. W. Moss

Charlie Lenihan sat at the kitchen table and pulled on a pair of long black boots. His face bore a wide grin.

“What are you so happy about?” Kevin asked as he lifted a cup of strong tea full of floating leaves to his lips.

“Ohhh. Charley’s goin’ ta Quin fer bees,” explained Peg. They had been married for 35 years and their anniversary was only days away, but at the moment she was more pleased about the bees.

Bees meant honey. Honey was money to the Lenihans who derived their income from thirty hives, a cabbage patch and their bed-and-breakfast. Overnight it seemed Kevin had become fast friends with Peg and Charlie.

“Do you two want to go along?” Peg asked brightly. Kevin’s sister stood near the stove watching Peg fry four eggs to a solid yolk center and, although she was instantly taken with the idea, shook her head no.

Kevin immediately said yes, but Peg insisted they finish breakfast and have another pot first. Charlie, however, was in a rush. He stood and gulped the last of his tea and went to gather his gear. Kevin followed him to the end of the driveway where a Peugeot was parked next to a small shed where Charlie kept some of the tools of his trade. He filled the trunk of his car with a long overcoat and gloves with cuffs the length of his arms as well as a wide flat-brimmed white hat like a South American gaucho might wear. The hat had a long shroud-like veil attached. Charlie checked a plastic bucket’s lid for tight fit,

tossed it in the boot on top of the hat. He was ready in five minutes. He had to hurry, he explained, because the swarm might decide to leave before he could get there.

Kevin had done a lot of the driving with his sister and adjusted quickly to the rules of the road in Ireland. He was used to driving on the left side and heeded the advice to “sit on the white line,” as it had been described to him. Nonetheless, he went over to the driver’s side door and opened it, attempted to get in before realizing his error. Charlie chuckled at the American’s surprise to discover the steering wheel in what he thought should have been the passenger seat.

The narrow road was paved but only wide enough for one car. Charlie drove at what Kevin thought was high speed, his fingers wrapped tight around the waist band and shoulder strap of the seat belt for comfort. Charlie chatted nonchalantly as he drove the fourteen miles to Quin, his accent thick as the amber treacle he sought.

“We had a very bad winter, y’know,” Charlie explained. “What kills bees is the wet. Last year was the worst; we had 90% losses. The bees can’t bring in the pollen. A swarm of bees, they’re like gold this year.”

Charlie trilled his “r’s” and stretched the last syllable in many of his words: “Swarm” came out “swar-am” and “winter” was “win-tuhr.” He placed an emphasis on the initial word or words in a phrase, then tapered off in volume so that the last words were almost a whisper. This gave his English a melody no American vernacular quite approached as he explained that bees swarm because they are increasing in numbers and no longer have room. He likened himself to their moving van; he’s the real estate agent helping them find a new place to live. His reputation as an apiarist produced many calls from neighbors like the one from Peter this morning.

“Any other year you’d get a swarm o’ bees you wouldn’t be ast,” he reflected out loud. “Today I’ll probably have ta pay for the privilege of removing bees from the land where they trespass.”

Kevin was interested in business on this local level. “How much, you think?”

“Ummm. Oi might pay five and five. Two fives. Ten pounds, I would be willing. I won’t get away wit one or two but I might get away wit half.”

Charlie was prepared to bargain. It was late June and too late, he said, to get honey from the bees they were about to meet. “If you get a swarm in May, quite possible to get honey that year. There is an old sayin’:

A swarm in May / Is wort a cock o’ hay.

A swarm in June / Is wort a silver spoon.

And a swarm in July / Idn’t wort a cald die.”

Kevin perked up with this sing-song rendition. “Yah? What’s a ‘cald die’?”

After a moment of silence while driving at breakneck speed, Charlie admitted he memorized the rhyme as a child and didn’t know exactly what it meant. He offered little enlightenment other than to point out it was “a wort’less ting.” Kevin suggested maybe the words were “cold day” which, if you thought about it, would be rather worthless to a bee man. Charlie agreed.

They rounded bends without slowing as the road rose and dipped beneath a canopy of arching tree limbs. The overgrown vegetation from the sides of the road met in the middle above them to form a sky-hiding green canopy.

There was no place to turn around nor much of a shoulder to lie-by on for safety if confronted by another car coming in the opposite direction. Charlie easily hit 50 miles

per hour on the straightaway. He did moderate his speed somewhat at blind corners or obvious bumps, but for long minutes at a stretch did not travel on true pavement, merely dirt paths that could barely accommodate the vehicle, and yet he did not slow.

Occasionally they passed a modern farm house. The front yard was usually a big well-kept lawn, its side and back yards given over to crops. Many older buildings, some as much as four centuries with durable four foot wide stone walls -- rubble walls as they were known -- stood firm but abandoned, their thatch or slate roofs having long ago fallen in on the living area. Families moved away entirely, leaving the land orphaned, to find a better life in the city or in another country. Just as often, though, the children who were heirs to the estate chose to erect a contemporary home on a different tract leaving these hollow old structures to be engulfed by the trees, bush and weeds that threatened to block the very roads Kevin traveled with Charlie at the wheel.

There was a dearth of street markers in this part of Ireland and many small lanes and drives simply went unnamed. Only the junctions where several roads crossed were labeled and numerous small paths, barely wide enough to drive down, jutted at an angle, not the perpendicular, off the main road. Charlie was indifferent to the scenery, which was a marvel to Kevin, and continued to make great speed, unerringly finding his way without benefit of a map or stopping to ask directions.

The swarm had lighted in Peter's back yard. Peter greeted them from the porch of his two story wooden house as they pulled into a long driveway and parked. Charlie retrieved his supplies, donned the oversized gown which flowed down to the instep of his boots, hefted the bucket, grabbed his gloves and veiled hat.

A lush herb garden ran along one side of Peter's property and paralleled a walkway that lead to the back yard. Kevin identified sage and thyme which delighted Charlie. Round white blossoms topped onions in a patch that had been left to seed, their cellophane blooms not yet open. The onions were planted in several rows in front of the chicken coop.

At least twenty red hens and a rooster ran at them in a wave, but the flock stopped in a group at the edge of their pen.

Peter guided them up the hill, his attention focused on the bees which had settled on the lowest branch of a small tree, no more than a sapling. The weight of this host sagged the branch and bees dripped to the earth a mere fifteen inches below the limb. Hundreds of insects were piled in a mound on the ground; the mound linked to the swarm by a ladder of crawling bees. The branch supported a thousand or more of the insects which formed a football sized mass that writhed in an organic dance accompanied by a throbbing drone.

The air was filled with brown bullets. There were enough to form a cloud but they were spread out, perhaps foraging, perhaps as a defense. Amazingly, not one attacked. Their flying maneuvers created a background zipping sound behind which Peter explained why he wanted them removed.

"Y'see, I have my own hives. But I've been stung so much I'm allergic to them. So I don't want to be around them, y'see. As a result," he added with typical Irish understatement, "I sort of lost a bit of zest for them."

The swarm was a ripe fruit ready for Charlie to pluck, but to Peter, it was a festering pustule. "You won't get them any lower than that now, Charlie," Peter observed.

Charlie donned his veil and armed himself with the bucket. He approached the cluster with deference. As Kevin and Peter watched, it appeared almost too easy for Charlie to gather the seething mass of insects.

First, he removed the lid and placed the plastic container below the branch. Although it rested on the hundreds of bees which had fallen to earth, it was not so heavy it aggravated them and he left it there only briefly. Charlie held the branch with his left hand near where it joined the tree trunk and, with his right, slapped the twig sharply. The cluster fell as one into the bucket which Charlie quickly covered. Picking it up, he walked over to Kevin and said with a wide grin, “Would ye mind takin’ care o’ this fer me?”

Kevin was too astonished to say anything as the container with its live catch was thrust into his arms. He placed an ear to the lid and it sounded like a thousand cats purring. Most amazing, the bees were still not angry. He was thankful for their quiescence. After all, Charlie was the only one wearing any protection.

Charlie explained he could not be certain he had the queen. She should have been in the center of the cluster, although she might just as easily be among the group that had dripped upon the earth.

“You know,” he said with calm dignity, “a box would be mighty useful right about now if you have one, Peter. And a spade.” In a moment, Peter returned from his shed with shovel and a cardboard box.

Gingerly, Charlie dipped the end of the tool into the earth around the leftover bees doing his best not to disturb them. Then he used the blade like a spoon and lifted the mound whole into the box and folded closed the top flaps.

“Not a bad little bee, eh Charlie?” asked Peter. “They’re a bit darker than the Italian.”

“Ai, a cross breed, that lot. And what do oi owe ye, Peter?”

There was no bargaining. Charlie came out much better than he thought he would. Peter was merely glad to be rid of what, to him, had become a pest.

“It would be my luck to have a swarm land,” Peter said reminding them again that he still owned a number of hives. He said to Charlie, “Some day, you come back and we’ll go through them. They want cleaning out. Since I became allergic I put on the long finger. And the finger gets very long, y’know.”

Keven failed to ask Peter to explain what he meant by this, and the phrase stuck in his mind.

Charlie was pleased with the offer. He ushered Kevin back to the car and placed the bees in the trunk along with the veil. On the return trip, he taught more bee lore.

“Bees are in their best when they’re swarming,” Charlie said. “They’re not inclined to sting you. And if you put water on those, now, they’d stay for the day. But if you didn’t put water on them and the sun was shining directly on ’em, they’ll raise again. They’ll send out scouts and they’ll pick out a place before they start to swarm.”

Charlie said he keeps the bees from swarming again by locating the queen and marking her with white paint.

“Usually when you’re putting them into a hive, you put a board sloping up to the hive, a wide board, and a sheet. A white sheet. You tro ’em out of the bucket (he’s been pronouncing it ‘book-it’ so long now Kevin has become used to the word) onto the board and they’ll walk up and into the hive by themselves. Now, by doing that sometimes you

will find the queen. And in my case, if I find the queen, I would mark her and clip a wing. Clip one wing so I won't lose my swarm. After ten months, it's the old queen that will go. Having her clipped and marked she can't go. The swarm will go out, but what happens is she will come out of the hive and she will pitch down in the grass, she can't fly. And the swarm will come backin' in. You'll hold onto your bees that way."

A queen must have a certain amount of pollen and nectar, Charlie explained, or she will not reproduce. His queens stopped laying early in the year. He said that a queen lays between 1,500 to 2,000 eggs per day and the life of a worker bee is only 45 to 50 days which is why the queen needs to be constantly at work. The worker's wings wear out.

"We 'ad no young bees comin' on stream when all the old bees were dying away. So there was no bees left to generate the heat that they need. There was plenty food, but 'twas no good. I can do nothing to help them in a case like that. That's why they all died out. The month of Febr'rury was the coldest month we have got in years."

Charlie said the best bees are the cross breed like those he picked up today. He made distinctions between bee types.

"There's an Italian one that I had but don't any more because they are not a profit making bee for me. They are a yellow bee something like the wasp. They make honey but it takes twice as much to feed 'em in the winter time as it does the ord'nary cross breeds."

They pulled into the drive in Derra and Charlie led the way to his empty hives out back. There Kevin saw five rows of six evenly spaced wooden boxes on stilts, each with a hole the size of a silver dollar in its face and a short ramp that lead down to the earth. Kevin noticed the women watching through the kitchen window as Charlie pried the top off one of the boxes. Then he unceremoniously tilted the bucket over the box until its

living contents fell inside. He started to do the same with the cardboard box, realized it was full of dirt as well as bees, and settled with leaving it open beside the hive's new home.

That was when Kevin slapped his neck and leaped backward in fright. A yellow brown insect was squashed between his ring and middle finger. Charlie came over and said, "Hold still now." He examined the skin, pinched out the stinger. Then he brushed Kevin's neck with his rough hand and said, "Just one. Shows they like you. Now, let's go finish our tea."

Inside over tea Kevin told Nancy all about the expedition adding, "You can bet I'm telling that story in my next post card home."

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The Ride Home: Triptych Part III

by H. W. Moss

They shared a rental car, Kevin on her right behind the wheel doing most of the driving. This was just the opposite of the seating arrangement if they had been motoring in America. She had the uncomfortable feeling they were driving on the “wrong side” of the road.

She sat in the passenger seat and marveled at the ravens in the middle of the highway. The birds swooped down to land in front of oncoming vehicles with little or no fear of being struck even as they pecked at the roadbed. As cars approached they waddled or hopped away, then nonchalantly returned to their efforts, what must be food foraging.

“For what, I wonder?” Nancy asked out loud as three of the oversized creatures leaped into the sky upon their approach at 80 kph which was really only 50 mph when you thought about it. Not quite 63% of the kilometers per hour was the calculation she applied to various speeds in her head as a way to pass the time. Not that the scenery as they approached the coast was unappealing, but there was only so much of that she could admire.

“Seed grains and such. Blows in from the sides of the road by cars creating a vacuum traveling at high speed.” Kevin said this with such conviction she did not know if he was telling the truth or not. She suspected not.

“You made that up. Are you serious? A Bernoulli effect on the roads feed the crows?”

“I don’t know who Bernoulli is, and they’re not crows, they’re ravens. And, yes, I just made that up. But it sounds good, doesn’t it?”

That was the problem with Kevin. It all sounded good. Even the story of the beehive on a branch sounded good. But how much of the bee story could she believe? He got stung out in the back yard where the owner kept hives, at least that's what Kevin said was where he got stung, not at the place where the guy, Charlie was his name, where Charlie took Kevin to pick up a swarm and bring it back. No, Kevin had to get stung at the bed and breakfast, not at the . . .

On her left in front of them and out of the corner of her eye she saw a raven fly straight up from a clump of bushes growing along side the road. It looked as if the bird leaped into the air and, as they approached its point of departure, did a looping dive which brought it around and down to face the windshield of their small car. Instinctively, Nancy crossed her hands in front of her face in an instantaneous reaction that would have done nothing to save her had the creature actually smashed through the glass and connected with her eyes, nose and lips.

Because that was exactly where it was headed when it stopped dead, literally, with a loud cracking sound and a broken neck. It did not punch through the barrier nor did the safety glass crack, although the animal made a clean impression on the windshield, an etching carved from out of the dirty surface one might say, as the carcass bounced away and fell to the side of the road.

What was left behind, when Nancy was able to study the event, was an outline of the shape of a bird beak topped by the circular impression of a skull, one wing and perfectly identifiable feather tips spread out at the precise spot where the raven died.

Kevin reacted to the unexpected loud noise by turning his head in her direction. He did not slow nor lose control, nor swerve, nor jump in his seat, nor did he give any

indication anything was wrong, which there was not since the bird had smashed and fallen away in the distance of a few meters and the space of a few seconds.

Still, the broken necked impression remained imprinted in the dirt of the glass.

Kevin did say rather frantically: “What the hell was that?!”

It took her a minute to reply as she sat there with wide eyes and placed her index finger on the outline the bird left behind. “One of your ravens just committed suicide.”

His reaction was a combination of disbelief and amazement. “No. Not really. Birds don’t do that. Do they? I mean, lemmings and some rats maybe, but birds? I don’t think so.”

She did not respond to this statement and, frankly, did not know quite what to say. She told him how she saw the bird fly up and then make its fatal dive at the car. He asked if she was all right, then told her he had heard that kestrel falcons sometimes did that, “Dive on prey only it’s a lizard running across a highway and they’re so focused they don’t see the car that hits them.”

A short while later they found the address they were looking for along the four lane highway in a little coastal town called Spiddle. The hotel was on the seaward side and Kevin had to wait for a break in the northbound traffic before crossing over into the parking lot.

From the moment she stepped out of the car and into the building, Nancy knew she was miles away from the homey atmosphere of the Lenihans with their converted residential accommodations. This bed and breakfast, for that was how it billed itself as well, was almost large enough to be called a hotel even by American standards. And there was a separate restaurant, for which Nancy gave a sigh of relief.

They had stayed in a dozen lodging places since their trip began in Dublin and it was nice being catered to by family members, but sometimes it felt as if she were intruding on people, their lives, their private beliefs. A proper hotel and restaurant was a welcome change and a natural barrier to too much cultural intermingling.

The clerk smiled, asked the name under which their reservations were being held, said, “Ah, yesss. To be sure, you’re here now. Will that be a double or would a suite of rooms be to yer likin’?”

“Separate rooms, please,” Nancy said quickly, perhaps too quickly.

Kevin came to her rescue. “Yes. Two separate rooms. Please.”

The clerk asked for a credit card which Kevin provided. Then the clerk pulled out two sets of door keys, metal and heavy, from one of a multitude of cubby holes in a wooden cabinet behind him that could have been a movie prop it was so authentic looking.

“And we would like to keep your passports here in our safe, if you please.” This was a formality eschewed by all the mom ’n’ pops where they had stayed. However, it was common for international visitors to hand them over, so, with a resignation borne of fulfilling a sense of duty, each produced their American identification and watched as they were traded for the room keys.

The clerk opened each passport for a cursory examination, read Kevin’s name, opened Nancy’s, read her last name which was the same, expressed mild surprise, then said, “The twa rooms are at opposite ends of the second floor, just follow that stairway there,” he pointed nonchalantly, added, “here’s a pass to put on your car dash in the parking lot.”

They picked up their bags, Nancy carrying an extra in that she had a large heavy purse, and trudged up to the first room which Kevin located, noted the number on the key and the door, put the key in the lock and it opened. He beckoned her to go first, stood on the threshold looking at the other key as he counted doors to the end of the hall.

“Catch you after a shower. Downstairs in the dining room, okay?”

She removed her key from its lock and brought the door half way closed. Demurely and from behind the concealment offered, she said, “Half an hour. Forty-five minutes at most.”

The sun hung bright in the summer sky as they ordered drinks. “At this latitude it seems to never set,” Kevin said draining a beer glass. He checked his watch. “Eight-thirty and it might as well be three in the afternoon. Hot today. Wanna go to the beach tomorrow? Lie in the sand like when we were kids?”

Their waiter stood over them with plates in hand. They had ordered dinner, he the local equivalent of a working man’s meal consisting of mostly meat and potatoes, she the special, a fish dish that might have been reconstituted cod and did not appear to be the local fresh catch at all.

“If it’s warm enough,” she continued the conversation without breaking the thread when the waiter left. “But we’re only staying one more day here. I want to get to Galway City. I’m told it’s quite charming, practically a living history museum sort of place. But modernized.”

While she talked, Kevin shoveled food into his mouth. She fell silent and he continued to chew, forked in more pot roast and potatoes. When she was silent for half a minute and he swallowed followed by a long pull on a recently delivered second draught,

he said with an elbow on the table and using the fork to point with: “What’s a matter? Did I forget my manners? What? What’s up with that look?”

Obviously, her face betrayed how aggravated she was with him at the moment, and not for the first time. The same sibling annoyance had washed over her several times during the trip, brought on by an irritating way of walking he had or an abrasive turn of phrase he delivered without realizing how exasperating he was in selecting certain subjects to discuss. It was as if she had hidden hot buttons only he knew how to push without his being the least bit aware of or sensitive to the effect he had on her. Not all, but many of his actions, tone of voice, facial expression, choice of wardrobe, set her teeth on edge. None of these individually meant anything, but all of them together compounded her annoyance.

They lived in California, he in the south and she in the north, literally 600 miles apart. They were once so close but now saw each other only at Thanksgiving. The trip was paid for by their aunt who knew nothing about the relationship they shared, who simply wanted them to be able to visit the family’s country of origin together. It was a generous gift they would undoubtedly never repay.

Nancy had come to realize that close proximity to Kevin brought out the worst reactions in her. Meanwhile, he was completely oblivious to the effect he had on her until or unless she responded in some way. Usually, by then it was too late.

“Kev. I don’t know if this is working.”

“What working?” He looked like a surprised chipmunk with a mouth full of potatoes and big round eyes. “What, do you mean us, you and me? It’s working fine. We’re staying on the straight and narrow.”

“I don’t mean that.” She sounded somewhat exasperated. And it was clear he had not a clue that his mere presence was, in and of itself, almost enough to raise her ire. It was not desperation to get away or any of several potential emotions such as fear, anger or hatred. Rather, it was as if he mashed and pressed and crowded her until there was almost no room to breathe. But she could not come right out and say this because, even in her mind it sounded silly. It sounded petty. It sounded petulant and cry-babyish. Nor could she explain it except . . .

She came back to the present to find he was asking the waiter for directions to a beach. Afterwards, once a map had been drawn on a napkin and distances calibrated, Kevin confided in her: “Couldn’t understand a word he said, his accent was so thick. Might as well have been speaking German.”

She wanted to tell him the same was probably true of the waiter who rarely heard American accents. But she knew that not only would Kevin fail to see the relative perspective, he was quite incapable of realizing other people had a perspective at all.

Mid-morning, not too early and after a leisurely breakfast prepared to their specifications for a change with runny yolks, they drove one mile north back along the same road they had come down yesterday. At the appointed distance they came to an unmarked side road they must have passed the day before, but certainly did not recognize. After all, there were quite literally thousands of similar dirt roads that had once been paths leading down to the water all around the island.

After a few minutes of bumpy dust, they arrived at a flat parking area occupied by several other vehicles. Wood steps had been chiseled in a short cliff face and these led to

a sandy beach just beside the water. There they spread a thick wide blanket and began undressing down to their swim gear.

Several yards away a family of four was ensconced under an umbrella. Nine or ten other people dotted the surrounding sandlot. All of them had white skin that threatened to turn lobster red within a few hours.

“Can you believe it?” Kevin said as he settled back in sunglasses, an arm beneath his head. “Just like Huntington Beach in summer. I bet these people don’t get a week a year of weather like this.”

He rolled on his side and put his hand in hers. She withdrew it immediately.

“No, Kev, we mustn’t. Not ever again.”

“Right,” he said and rolled over on to his other side.

Two hours in the warm but not overly hot sun was enough. They gathered their things, dusted off accumulated sand on their legs, retraced their steps back to the car. They drove up the dirt road from the sandy shore to the highway where he waited patiently for traffic traveling at high speed to pass and finally he turned to her and said, “Can you reach me the post cards? I think I remember a mail box along the way.”

“I put them in my purse.” She undid her seatbelt and turned toward the back seat. She retrieved the purse just as he pulled out.

American drivers are the cause of many accidents in England and Ireland. They are notorious for drifting over to the right side of a two lane road which, basically, means they aim themselves directly into oncoming traffic. In Kevin’s case, he was in the wrong lane from the git go as he sat waiting to pull out from the dirt road where no stripe reminded him to wait on the other side.

Thus, as he entered what he thought was the correct lane of traffic, there was an instant of frozen panic on his part as well as on the part of the couple in the vehicle coming toward them at a high rate of speed who were at that moment pulling off the highway to go down to the beach for a picnic lunch. The Irish driver was familiar with his country's rules, but totally unprepared for anyone to be coming straight at him from a stand-still.

The cars collided. Ordinarily, it would have been a survivable accident with perhaps fatal damage to one of the vehicles. Nothing more.

However, Nancy was in the process of shifting in her seat, of turning back to her forward position in the rental car when the accident threw her forward into the windshield. Not wearing a seat belt, she hit head first followed by her whole body.

The last conscious thought she had as her neck broke was that she would probably leave an impression on the glass just like the raven had.

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