

A LOVE SONG:

*Walking on the edge of myth in Ireland*

By K.M. Churchill

Snow rarely fell in Ireland. When it did the dusting was so light it looked like confectionary sugar had been sprinkled all over the green ivy and winter-blooming roses. So I knew our first winter storm in Union Hall, a tiny fishing village on the remote southwestern tip of County Cork—where I'd moved with Francis, my Irish chef husband, and our two young children to open a restaurant—would be nothing like the New England blizzards I was used to. The joyous, drunken raucousness of the Irish holiday season was upon us and, even with dark storm clouds spreading out against the sky, our seaside village seemed festive rather than pensive.

Pensioners made their way slowly along Main Street. Stopping every few feet to chat with passersby, "Are ye well?" and to marvel at windows trimmed with shiny silver, gold and green tinsel roping. In some were ceramic or hand-carved manger scenes: Mary and St. Joseph, along with shepherd boys, flocks of sheep, donkeys, camels, and the Magi journeying.

Sometimes there would be a little drummer boy or an angel with a trumpet. All carefully

positioned facing a tiny crib that was empty but for a bedding of hay, where the baby Jesus would be placed on Christmas morning. And a gold star, the Star of Bethlehem, dangling from a wire above the scene.

So it must have been a few weeks after our second child had been baptized—first by my mother-in-law using a bottle of Holy Water she kept in her handbag, then by an angry priest in a ceremony at St. Brigid’s stone cold Catholic Church on the outskirts of town, across from the blue Virgin Mary grotto and the winding rutted laneway that leads up to the village witch’s cottage.

The storm came slowly. Brooding out over the Atlantic before blowing into town. The fishermen were the first to know. Securing their boats in Union Hall’s snug harbor, they made their way to pubs to recount mariner’s tales over pints. Stories of boats caught in raging storms with winds that shrieked and howled. And giant waves that swept the ocean ashore and the shore out to sea, before tucking men’s boats into bed at the bottom of it.

A couple of *auld ones*, sitting at the back, took turns among the men. Shaking their heads in disbelief and wonder they spoke slowly, as though they had all the time in the world, about what *they’d* seen and heard: the otherworldly roar of a voiceful wave at the mouth of Glandore Bay. Not just any wave mind you, but *Tonn-Clíodhna*, an ancient thunderous wailing wave that foretold death and disaster. “T’was nothin’ less than *Tonn-Clíodhna* I tell ye!” When the old men finished speaking each man sat quietly staring down into his pint. Until someone called to the bartender for “another round.”

\*

When I'd lived in Dublin, years before my children were born, I would take the train from Connelly Station and head north. The raised tracks ran through neighborhoods I had never seen before. Row after row of "attached" houses became wastelands, then fields and pastures, then sandy beaches. After half an hour the train arrived at its final destination, Howth Railway Station. Where, I disembarked and walked out along the Harbor Road.

Sometimes, if I was hungry, I'd stop by The Waterside & The Wheelhouse pub for a plate of fish and chips and a half pint of lager. Like a local I'd sprinkle the chips with salt and vinegar and eat them while staring out the window at a small island that lay like a voluptuous woman reclining in the sea. Once I'd asked the plump waitress who brought my lunch what it was called.

"Ireland's Eye," she said, holding my plate of hot food aloft while answering. Then, with the quiet pride of a good student, she repeated it in Irish, "*Inis Mac Neasáin.*"

"Anyone live there?"

"Ah no. Birds and seals is all. Though there's a ferry goes out soes you can picnic and walk about."

She leaned in to set my plate down and I could see that her wavy auburn hair was streaked with gray.

"Then, of course, there's the murder cave."

"The murder cave?"

She lowered her voice. "Sure didn't a man kill his wife out there in 1852? And didn't they find that poor woman's body lying stone cold in a sea cave? He swore he hadn't done it. Said she'd accidentally drowned and been washed ashore. But no one believed him." She stood up then and, putting her hands on her ample hips, looked around to see if there was anyone else needing her attention. There wasn't. "Sure I could get you the ferry schedule if you'd like," she suggested, smiling down at me.

I declined the offer and, when I'd eaten my fill, I paid and said goodbye. Then went outside and followed the green arrows pointing towards the cliff walk.

The climb from the harbor road was slow but not steep. On one side, the green cliffs of Howth's Head fell gradually away into the sea. On the other, a sloping wild heath bloomed bright with yellow gorse bushes. A well-worn path trimmed the cliffs closely. At times too closely so that it slipped off the edge and I could see where others had plotted a new path, a little bit higher up, on the grassy verge.

Cliffs fringe the whole of Ireland. In the northeast there's the Giant's Causeway where forty thousand smooth, hexagon shaped rocks jut up out of the seabed. It's a place of pilgrimage for school children: in Irish mythology The Causeway is the remnants of a land bridge built to Scotland by the gentle giant Finn MacCool. In modern science, it's a unique volcanic geological formation formed 60 million years ago. Like the school children, I preferred the first explanation. Either way it was a UNESCO protected World Heritage site, meaning that its significance transcends all national boundaries and belongs not just to the people of Ireland but to the peoples of the world.

So too do The Skellig Rocks, sharp black cliffs off the southeast coast of County Kerry that for centuries have been a site of pilgrimage for Catholic penitents who clamor aboard tiny boats, bobbing up and down on the cold and unforgiving Atlantic Ocean, to reach the Blue Cove. And from there, pick their way up the steep stone-cut steps leading to St. Fionan's abandoned beehive monastery where it sits alone and abandoned atop the jagged cliffs.

So harsh and barren and isolated a place is Skellig that when Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw visited, he wrote to a friend that it was, "an incredible, impossible, mad place...I tell you, the thing does not belong to any world that you and I have lived and worked in: it is part of our dream world." And that was the problem exactly, I thought, the thing about Ireland that both enchanted and confounded me—it *did* seem to be part of a dream world; myth and reality mingled so often that sometimes it was difficult to tell the difference between the two.

I met not a soul on the cliffs and when I crested the hill just beyond The Summit I stopped and down in the grass where it was quiet, but for the cries of gulls and the wind whistling in my ears. A breeze blowing up the hill came in salty gusts, tickling my nose and tugging at my hair. I stretched my legs out in front of me and my toes appeared to touch the green, green Irish Sea that was glittering all the way to the horizon.

From my hillside perch I could see the haunted Baily Lighthouse standing tall and sure on a high craggy tip of land reaching out into Howth Harbour. Looking southward I saw the whole of Dublin Bay, with its fleet of fat white ferryboats sailing to and from the UK and France, and beyond that too, all the way to the hazy purple Wicklow Mountains. What I could not see were the dark open-mouthed caves in the cliffs far below me, nor the bones of the smugglers

who had died there, nor the lichen-covered, storm-tossed ships that lay silky green and sunken at the bottom of the sea.

\*

News of the winter storm spread swiftly. We all knew it was coming, long before it was announced on RTÉ, *Radio Telefis Eireann*, the national news station. When I'd walked with my two-year-old son, Isaac, up to Fuller's shop to buy half a pound of salted butter, a loaf of brown soda bread, and some smoked salmon for lunch, Mrs. Fuller asked me if I'd heard about it. I hadn't. By the time we'd walked back home and I'd found Francis in the kitchen to tell him, he'd already heard it from Tom, the young Irishman mending our wall in the back garden.

"There's a big storm coming, Daddy!" Isaac shouted as we came in through the restaurant's side door. "Missus Fuller says so!"

"I know!" Francis said, lifting his son up and sitting him down on top of the box freezer next to his baby brother who was already asleep there in his infant car seat. "Isn't it exciting?"

Francis handed Isaac a slice of green apple he'd been about to sauté with pine nuts and currants to add to the duck stuffing.

Isaac took a big bite and nodded "yes". Then he looked down at his brother and gently poked his cheek to see if he might wake up. He didn't.

The restaurant phone rang.

“You remember to pick up peat and coal yesterday?” I asked, reaching over to retie the red silk ribbon that hung from the handle of the baby’s car seat. The ribbon was a practical precaution; red for protection and strung with small silver jingle bells to frighten away “baby stealing fairies.” (A notion I had no intention of arguing with.)

“Yep, there’s three bales of briquettes and a big bag of coal in the boot of the car. I’ll bring them down later.”

The phone rang again but it did not wake the baby.

“How many on the books?” I asked, swinging Isaac back up onto my hip and picking up our small bag of groceries to bring upstairs to our apartment.

“We’ve got three deuces and a four-top at six,” Francis said, giving the soup du jour a quick stir then turning down the heat, “a six-top at half seven, a three-top and four deuces at half eight and we just picked up a five-top—three adults, two kids—at six forty five. Oh, and they’ll be needing a high chair.”

The phone rang again and he slid a sauté pan off the burner, wiped his hands and came out from behind the line to answer it (*House Rule—never let the restaurant phone ring more than three times before picking up*).

“We’re off then.” I said, heading out the door with Isaac. “I’ll let you know when lunch is ready.”

“Better check for flashlight batteries and storm candles!” Francis called after us as he picked up the phone. I waved my hand so that he’d know I’d heard him.

As the day wore on the wind, pushing whitecaps into the harbor, made the boats bob wildly at their moorings. In the pubs the fishermen's voices got louder and their tales grew taller. Until, as was so often the case in Ireland, the past and the present mingled—the borders of each obscured by drink.

By late afternoon what had been a soft mist turned into light rain. When I passed by Hayes' Pub, on my way back from another run to the shop before service, I could see a fire blazing in the grate and I heard a *bodhrán* drum and a couple of fiddles warming up. Across the street, both Casey's Bar and Maloney's pub were packed with people. Their windows fogged over with the damp heat of the bodies pressed inside.

I wondered if no one seemed worried about the storm because all the men were safe ashore. Even the older villagers, who were sensible and thoughtful folk, did not seem concerned. I knew that most houses had open fireplaces with "back boilers"—a clever system that used ordinary hearth fires to heat the house's hot water tank and sometimes the central heating too—and I found myself questioning the wisdom of having replaced ours with a more efficient gas-fueled system for the restaurant when we'd moved in.

I tried to take solace in knowing that the colorful buildings huddled together on Main Street had been built with outer walls three feet thick to withstand the weather. Those closest to the harbor had their backs to the sea and the others, like ours, their backs to the hillside. For hundreds of years, I reminded myself, these houses had endured Atlantic gales and still they stood, resilient and cheerfully candy colored.

On the hillsides across the harbor, windows that had been dark turned yellow and in the village, earth scented peat smoke, puffing up chimneys, drifted down and slid along the streets like low lying fog or wispy ghosts. I was pleased to see that the white fairy lights I'd wrapped around the potted bay trees on either side of the front door of the restaurant looked bright and festive in the gathering gloom. I ducked up the alleyway and in through the side door.

The kitchen was warm and smelled of roasting garlic and freshly baked rosemary bread. Francis, wearing a long apron and his chef whites, was just finishing his *mise en place* for service. He looked up when I came in but didn't stop speed-slicing vegetables with his Nakiri knife (one of his many impressive kitchen tricks that made me nervous).

"Did they have everything?" He asked.

"They did."

I set the bags of groceries down on the counter. Overhead I could hear the pitter patter of a toddler's feet running fast towards the bathroom.

"Brilliant! Thanks." Francis said. Then he smiled at me, his beautiful blue eyes holding my gaze for too long, while he *julienned* more vegetables into thin matchstick strips without looking down at his hands.

"Stop it!" I said. Then, trying not to laugh I turned my back to him and began unpacking the bags.

\*

I'd walked many cliff paths in Ireland before falling in love. Many were easy to get to from Dublin, but not the one that enchanted me the most. To get there I had to take a train into the west and hitchhike from the station. When my last ride deposited me on an empty country road at the foot of sloping farmers fields, "sure t'is a fine walk but, for the love o'Jesus, mind yerself." I'd climb up and up through tall green pastures—keeping an eye out for roaming bulls—until I reached the top, where the land dropped away, and I stepped out onto the wet grassy path that edged the Cliffs of Moher for nearly five miles. All along the western edge of County Clare, from Nags Head to O'Brien's Tower where the magnificent sheer gray cliffs rose up to their full dramatic height, 700 feet, above the cold Atlantic. So spectacular and shocking are they that Hollywood director Rob Reiner came here, to the far west of Ireland, to film "The Cliffs of Insanity" for his cult classic film, *The Princess Bride*.

The precipitous drops at the boundaries of Ireland are magnetic; they pull some and repel others. On the Cliffs of Moher there was no gentle slope to sit on, the water blown white and black did not glitter and the shrieking call of thousands of seabirds was as sharp and loud as the wind. Still I was drawn to them. From the highest point I would find myself searching the horizon for a glimpse of the New England beach where years before I'd sat digging my feet deep into the cool soft sand and staring longingly across the sea towards Europe. But I knew America was too far away and I could not see it.

On days when the wind blew too strong to walk along the cliffs, I would climb up as far as I could. Then, standing in a farmer's field, I'd close my eyes, lift my chin, and lean into the wind. I would lean into it the way, in a few years' time, I would lean into love—with my arms

out stretched like wings and only the tips of my toes still touching the land. And I would stay like that, hovering, until the wind shifted and dropped me to the ground.

Sometimes, when I was feeling brave, I'd lie flat on the ground, below the wind, and inch forward on my belly until I could see over the cliff's grassy lip to where Kittiwakes and Razorbills nested in the vertical rock face. Where nimble wild goats climbed out along slender shale and sandstone ledges. The birds were beautiful, the way they took to the air, but watching the goats walk along the precipice frightened me. People jumped from cliffs like these. I'd heard about women mostly, some with children in their arms, some with babies in their bellies.

There were myths that swirled about these cliffs. My favorite was about a beautiful mermaid, The Mermaid of Moher, who was tricked into marriage with a local fisherman when he stole her magic cloak and hid it so she could not escape. She stayed land bound, with her husband and children, until one day she found her cloak. Then, without a word, she put it on, left her family and slipped forever back into the sea.

Years later, after my sons had been born, when the entry to the path near the sleek new visitor center had been blocked with warning signs, memorial plaques, and bouquets of wilting flowers, and folks had begun to say that only crazy people ventured past the barrier to walk the ancient way—crazy people and intrepid tourists, I still wandered the cliff edge as I always had. And, in the throes of motherhood myself, I would imagine the mermaid riding seaward on the waves and wonder, could her children could hear her singing?

\*

By six o'clock the rain was coming down in big wet drops and the wind blew it hard against the restaurant's plate-glass windows. Inside the dining room hummed. The tables were filled with people, each in their own candlelit world of convivial conversation, secret glances, or awkward silences. Sometimes a laugh or guffaw, "Ah, gw'on!" escaped into the room and the other diners, smiling, turned to look.

Our restaurant was at its best on nights like these. When it was dark and cold and wet outside so that you only wanted to be indoors where it was warm and lit and welcoming. Where you could sit by the fire and order crocks of spicy seafood stew and pints of foamy stout. When the burgundy walls glowed with pretty colored light cast by stained-glass wall lamps and the slate floor disappeared into shadows as the firelight, picking out their bright patterns, turned the carpets into floating soft stepping-stones across the dining room.

As soon as one table was cleared and reset, it was seated again. A steady stream of customers jostled with each other at the door to get their names on the wait list so they could nip across the road into Maloney's pub for a pint while they waited. When a table became available, one of the busgirls dashed across the wet street, jumping over puddles, and made her way through the crowded pub shouting out the name of the next party on the list.

"Now, would ye say that the venison is a tough piece of meat? Would ye say it was tough, like?" the old man at Table 10 was asking.

"Oh no," I said. "The chef has slow cooked and marinated it so it's quite tender."

“Is it a good size chop though?” he asked, lifting up his hard hands and miming in the air for me the size he thought the chop should be. “How big would ye say it t’was, now?”

“I don’t know about you, Pat,” his wife interrupted, “but I can’t say I’d fancy any of that now; t’would be like eating Bambi!” She laughed. Then, snapping closed her menu, ordered.

“Right so, first I’ll have the leek soup. Then I’ll have the roast chicken,” she said, settling back into her chair. Then, as though confirming with herself that she’d made the best possible choice, “Yes,” she said, “that t’would be lovely.”

I thanked her, tucked the menu under my arm and turned back to her husband.

“And for you sir?”

Overhead I heard a thud, the sound of something falling, then a pause and then a toddler’s howl. The man pushed the open menu across the table towards me and tapped at the page with a short square forefinger.

“What sort of potatoes did ye say those were again?”

I made an executive decision. I promised to bring him the traditional three types of potatoes with his main course no matter which entrée he chose — *at no extra charge!* When he finally decided, settling on a filet, well done, (which I knew would annoy the chef), I went into the kitchen with the order ticket and called it out to Francis, whose head was bent in concentration over dishes he was plating. His hands paused mid-air when I said, “fillet, well done,” but only for a moment. Then I handed over the ticket, dashed out the side door and ran,

through the wind and the rain, up the back steps to our apartment to check that all was well with the children.

By nine o'clock the wind was gusting in short sharp bursts and rainwater was flowing like a stream down Main Street. I was on my way to Table 12, balancing a potentially lethal tray of flaming Sambuca shots with three lucky espresso beans in each, when the lights flickered. Then went out. A collective gasp swept round the room. Outside it was pitch-black; the electricity had gone out throughout the village. Tabletop candles made small pockets of flickering light around the dining room and the fire threw quivering shadows across the walls.

Then the wind came. Prowling down the street. Snarling, it knocked over the bay trees and rattled the front door; trying to get in. When it couldn't, it groaned and pressed itself up against the plate glass windows, almost as though it were peering in, looking for someone—the couples sitting by the windows leaned back. So physical was its presence that I fancied I might have been able to decipher a face, were it not for the rain and the darkness in which it hid.

In the void beyond the wind we could all hear a rumbling. A dreadful low lament, like wailing, coming closer and closer. An impossible sound—roaring like a dragon off the bay. I felt goose bumps rising on my arms and the back of my neck prickled. "*Tonn-Clíodhna!*" I thought I heard someone whisper. And in the dark and the silence, we all listened hard to what we did not want to hear.

\*

There are many versions of the story of *Tonn-Clíodhna* or Cleena's Wave. The one I'd heard was that Cleena, queen of the South Munster fairies, was a *banshee*, a woman from the fairy hills, and a foreigner. She'd come to Ireland, fallen in love, and drowned while waiting for her lover on the strand near Glandore Harbor. In death her mournful voice became a wave, one of the legendary Three Waves of Erin: *Tonn-Tuaithe* in County Derry, *Tonn Rudraidhe* in County Down, and *Tonn-Clíodhna* in County Cork. Mythic, haunting, anguished waves whose woeful roar had for centuries forewarned local inhabitants of impending death and tragedy.

And death *did* seem to come easily and often in the west of Ireland. Coastal churchyards were dotted with worn gray tombstones and mossy Celtic crosses that read: "Captain," "Mariner," "Drowned with Son," and "Lost at Sea." In the waters off our village alone 18 ships had slipped below the rocky waves. Beneath the charming blue of Bantry Bay 30 boats lay sunken in their graves. And beyond the craggy cliffs of Baltimore lay the rotting bones of 44 more.

Fishermen, drunk or sober, drowned in the harbor or at sea. Farm accidents snuffed out children's bright spark. Grandfathers died from "the cigarettes," and lonely people from "the drink." It seemed that barely a month went by when we did not shut the restaurant's outer wooden doors and draw closed the curtains—the windows all up and down Main Street shuttered tight like the eyes of the dead—to show respect for slow, black funeral corteges passing on their way to and from St. Brigid's church.

\*

Across the street, I saw the lights flutter then come on in Maloney's Pub. In the dining room, everyone was quiet. Then ours came on too and it was as though the façade of adulthood slipped away and we were all children again—grown men and women sputtering and laughing: relieved and a little bit embarrassed at having been so frightened. The Van Morrison CD clicked on; picking up where it had left off *...it's a marvelous night for a moon dance*. And as quickly as it had come, the wind moved on, whirling and whooping down Main Street. And was gone. Leaving behind just the wet black night.

When the last customer left, Francis and I wrestled the battered bay trees inside. Then pulled closed the double doors and slid the old cast iron lock into place. Upstairs, we gathered the children and carried them into our bed. Where we hid under piles of feather duvets.

Outside the storm raged on and I slept fitfully, listening to the wind calling. *Is that Cleena or my child crying?* I drifted in and out of dreams. *What is it the poet from Michigan said? Something about measuring spoons...indeed, ridiculous!*

In the middle of the night, when the baby awoke to be fed, the rain was still crashing against the house in waves and the wind rubbing its back upon the windowpanes. With all of us in one big bed and the baby drowsing at my breast, it felt to me as though we were a family lost at sea. And in many respects we were, an urban fledgling family adrift in the wild Irish countryside.

I lay awake thinking of a story I'd heard about two Dutch tourists being swept off the Cliffs of Moher. A strong gust of wind swirled up and over the precipice then raced over the fields, flattening the grasses, and with nothing to stop it, scooped up the tourists and flew off

with them. Up and up they went, soaring like sea birds out over the edge of the land, the wind swinging them on currents of air high above the crashing Atlantic. Then, unexpectedly, dropping them into the sea.

In the morning, it was not the wind, but human voices that awakened me. The clamor and bang of men tossing empty metal kegs onto the sidewalk across the street. Isaac was awake too and together we climbed down from the bed and went hand-in-hand out the back door to see what the storm had wrought.

Outside it was wet and cold. The green grass and trees and dripping ivy leaves glistened in the sun and overhead a soft breeze sent white clouds sailing across a sea blue sky. I rolled the bottom of my flannel pajamas and walked to the top of the garden where I could see the pink and blue and yellow houses along Main Street still standing, the smooth water on the bay sparkling.

There would be time to put the kettle on for tea so I lingered, breathing deep the briny air and stretching—swinging my arms over my head as though I were swimming. I watched my son rummaging. In the garden there was red-brown seaweed. Isaac picked it up to show me. And when I turned to go back inside I was surprised to see, beside our kitchen door, bright red winter roses full blooming in the sun.

\* \* \*