



Has it held the warm June weather?

'Has it Held The Warm June Weather'

He rambled home from Camden Town with drunken song and cheeks aglow, yet there was something in his air that told of kingship long ago. I sighed and inwardly sighed with grief, that one so high should fall so low. Yet as I walked slowly behind him, I saw him gently pluck some red blooded fuchsia petals and grinding them in his prayer palmed hands cast them upwards, slowly, as if in consecration - towards the sunset sky. Some old sweet rapture through him went and kindled in his bloodshot eyes. I turned and inwardly burned with joy, that one so low should rise so high.

I overtook him and walked briskly ahead towards Hampstead to the *Olde Bull and Bush*. It was not full summer yet but there was promise in the June heat of long hot days to come. Basking in the sun with my pint of lager, I watched 'my friend' negotiate the traffic on the road, ignoring the zebra crossing! and with such swift precision safely get to the other side; brushing past me he too went into the pub. When he came back out he reluctantly cast libations of his ale to the ground as he struggled to find a place to sit in the busy pub front. I pre-empted his predicament and eagerly responded to his eventual eye contact indicating for him to join me. Putting his pint down steadily and holding on to the wooden picnic bench and placed his right leg firmly under the table, keeping his left leg free outside. I noted that I was sitting in the same way at the other side, left leg out - hokey cokey! He wore a suit of charcoal grey, white shirt opened wide at the neck with large hands that indicated a life of hard work. It was difficult to put an age on him but that did not matter today as we both looked ahead towards Golders Hill Park, eyes and ears drawn by the lively jingle of the Ice Cream Van the man!



I had only been in London for three years, but long enough to know the Irish Emigrant greeting, so I tuned gently towards him and said “What county man are you”?, Looking straight ahead he said, “I’m from the parish of Clifden, County, Galway” .He took a pristine white handkerchief from his trouser pocket to dry off the wet ale from his fingers and turning briskly to me, he said “And yourself young man”? I’m from the parish of Drangan, Killenaule, Co. Tipperary. “A stone thrower then”! , I do like this summer heat , but the trouble about weather forecasting is that it is right too often for us to ignore it and wrong to often for us to rely on it” , he said. He wanted to know what a young man like me was doing over hereagain! I explained that I was a qualified nurse and as there was no work in Ireland I had got a job at ED in the Royal Free. He replied “ET phone home”. I stupidly interjected “I think its ET phone home”. “I know he said I’m only having a laugh anyway it’s not been the same since Brenda Fricker left Casualty!” – the ice was broken or well melted and I knew I had met my equal on this sun day on Hampstead Heath.

So I learned that Máirtín and his sister Peig had been made orphans in the space of two years in Ireland’s 1940, his father was drowned fishing off Clifden and his mother died soon after of cancer.

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It was only years later that he got the detail that it was breast cancer and he regaled at how advanced we have become even in this city of London on the great improvements of medicine. His conversation fluctuated from unintended comedy to tragedy when he said “Sure isn’t there one of our own, young Doctor Butler, putting new faces on people at your Royal Free” .He told me that when he was young so little was known of cancer that people called it ‘the lodger’ – like someone coming to stay, not paying any rent, overstaying their welcome and leaving a mess and you worse off in the end!. Máirtín, being older went to live with neighbours in Cliften, and his only sister went to live with a childless aunt and uncle, in Co. Clare. There was not much work for Máirtín at that time in Ireland so like so many others, in 1955 he became one of, in the words of John B Keane’s play ‘Many Young Men of Twenty said Goodbye’.

Máirtín told me that he kept contact with his sister over the years and used go home most summers, taking the car on the boat, driving to Galway and Clare. He used love to walk the roads and bohreens of those counties where centuries of wild fuchsia grow. Peig married a teacher from Galway and they had three children. “To tell you the truth I have lost contact since Peig and Michael died and the kids, they are not kids now; I suppose they are all at university. I’ve only myself to look after and they wouldn’t know where I am living in London. I don’t want to be bothering them now”.

He told me he was retired a number of years now and not short of a bob or two! , “In fact I spend a lot of my time now bobbing along”, catching up with my old mates I used work with all my years with British Rail, I ended up a train driver. I have seen a lot of *this green and pleasant land*. He told me his regular pub now is ‘Amy’s Winehouse’ in Camden, he had got to know me enough by now to recognise that confused look on my face and with another of his chuckles said “The Hawley Arms, on Primrose Hill Road, there is a signed picture of her in there and we call it Amy’s Winehouse, God rest the poor girl”.

“I’ve had a good time working here in London young man, by the way what s your name? “Gerry” I replied. “Well Gerry I spent many a good night with another Gerry – O’Neill.” Máirtín told me that Gerry used run

the Wellington Arms in Islington back in the sixties and produced plays there in the pub, and they called themselves the Sugán Players which was one of the first fringe theatres in London. “Gerry was a bit like John B Keane they both wrote their finest work above the pub after closing time, Gerry the novels and JB – plays, novels, poems, short stories – the lot, he worked in England on the buildings in Northampton, I would love to have met him and someone is going to have to produce that play he wrote about working on the buildings in England – The Hut”. Máirtín’s eyes lit up as he remembered being cast by Gerry O’Neill as the Bull McCabe in *The Field*, and Captain Boyle in *Juno and the Paycock*, “I was even big then, but the hair was black and thicker”, good times, good times”. “The Wellington, a very English name for an Irish pub”, I said! “It was well named, well named because I don’t think the pub every saw as many wellington boots before or since!”

“So you like the written and spoken word Máirtín?” I asked. “My favourite Irish Poet is John Betjeman”, he replied. Cautiously racking my brain on my limited knowledge of Betjeman, I said “Was he not the poet laureate who loved his train journeys and slagged off Slough!”? The reply I got was; “You don’t need to be Irish to write an Irish poem and did you know Betjeman lived and worked in Ireland for a number of years”.

Then without prompting he pushed his chest out as though to fill his lungs and delivered.....

*“Has it held the warm June weather?
 Draining shallow sea-pools dry,
 When we bicycled together
 Down the bohreens fuchsia-high.
 Till there rose, abrupt and lonely,
 A ruined abbey, chancel only,
 Lichen-crusteD, time-befriended,
 Soared the arches, splayed and splendid,
 Romanesque against the sky.”*

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“ But you are right Gerry, Betjeman , like myself, did love his trains and a hat and coat statue they built of him on the new St. Pancras station , they have him looking up to the big iron ceiling and I can hear him say ” -

*“Rumbling under blackened girders, Midland, bound for Cricklewood,
puffed its sulphur to the sunset where that Land of Laundries stood”.....
Rocked passed Zwanziger the baker’s, and the terrace blackish brown,
and the curious Anglo-Norman parish church of Kentish Town.*



“Anyway, enough of that old rubbish! What’s your poison”? I responded with mouth open, “What are you drinking? he said”. “Lager” I replied, “Budweiser”. “Me, I like a London Pride, all year round” and off he went to answer his ‘call to the bar’. When he returned he put the drinks down and said “This is a good clean old pub, used to be an old Music Hall one time. You can always judge a pub by its toilets. I’ve been in some joints; I mean how can you ‘shed a tear for Parnell’ and a place stinking of piss”!

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Changing the subject! I said “I see you read the Irish World”, he had it folded in his jacket pocket. He took it out and spread it on the table away from him and focusing on it said “I can hardly read it now with my poor eyesight; it is an effort with all the blurred vision I have”. “It could be as simple as a cataract operation I said”, to which he replied “I’m not having a bloody eye operation at my age”. I decided to leave the subject in the hope that we would meet again, get to know him better and pursue the issue.

We finished our parting glass in the promise to meet again; he told me he was usually to be ‘found’ in ‘Amy’s Winehouse’ every Wednesday night about 8pm when he meets up with the other old mates from British Rail”. So we agreed to meet the following Wednesday at 7.30. ‘The Hawley Arms’ is just a ‘stones throw’ from Camden Town tube station and so easy to find ; true to form Máirtín, was sitting under the picture of Amy in the Hawley Arms on Wednesday night. “They don’t do Budweiser on draught here so got you two of them little bottles”, “That’s fine I said”. I had decided to cut to the chase on this night and boldly suggestion that Máirtín have his eye tested soon and explained to him at length that cataract removal is often only a half-hour local aesthetic procedure and does not require hospitalisation. He listened intently, ironically eyeballing me! and at the end nodded his head in approval. “So what do I have to do”, he asked? So within the next few months Máirtín actually had to have the cataract on both eyes removed and he became an authority on the procedure so much that one of his mates, Winston told me told me “Man it’s like having a pint with a doctor, we told him if does not shut up about lasers, eye drops and retinas – we are going to have him struck off”!.

We continued to meet and our friendship grew. Once Máirtín’s eyesight improved he took a new interest in reading and writing again – to his nieces and nephews. They were easy for me to find via the internet and Máirtín himself became very proficient with the ‘tinternet’ having attended some courses at the Camden Irish Centre. He cheekily told me recently that I “should try skypeing”! .He still likes walking through the flower decked parks of Hampstead, as they remind him in some small way to the wild fuchsia lanes of Co. Galway and Clare. He joins me now

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on many a Sunday as I take my son Máirtín Óg for a walk; for I married
and never went back.

Máirtín has told me that when the time comes! - which fuchsia we are to
gather by on Primrose Hill to lay his ashes and sing merrily -

*Come, come, drink some port wine with me, down at the Old Bull and
Bush – Bush- Bush*



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