

The Call of Galway

It happened on a Thursday. Pastor Danny Murphy, of *those Murphy's*, remembered it distinctly because he'd just finished picking up all the hymn books from the pews after his choir practice when the double doors flew open as if a great gust of wind had aided the motion from God himself.

What with the snow inches thick on the ground in and around Colorado and no signs of it changing any time soon the weather was terrible and biting every second of the day unless he kept the heating turned at a balmy 70. His housekeeper was going to tan his arse when she saw the power bill. Danny was a little afraid of Cora when she got in one of her snits which was most every day, aye, she had a temper she did. But the woman could bake like no one's business and he was a slave to her honied flapjacks.

The blown doors brought in the bitter cold freeze and a person wrapped in so much coat it was difficult to discern who or what it was, only he knew it was someone looking for refuge from the cold and the Baptist Gospel church was open to all no matter the time of day or season. So, he left the stack of song books on the front pew, and watched the person struggle to close the ancient wood. Danny didn't shudder for the mistreatment of such old, antique historical pieces. He loved his church, his first and hopefully his for a long time to come, but he loved his flock more, and if one was in need he could overlook scratches on doors.

Taking the time to put away his very worn and very well loved fifteen-year-old black Fender guitar in its case, he kept an eye out for his new guest as they slowly made their way down the aisle. Shrouded in white puffy material and a woollen hat pulled low and a scarf wrapped high, only the sway-gait of the person alerted to the possibility it was a woman beneath the cloak of clothing.

“Hello.” He smiled in greeting. Sounds of his home back in Galway threaded through each syllable. Sometimes he was told he’d picked up Americanisms from his friends, but it only took one rowdy night of pints of Guinness and manic bouts of darts down at *Brannon’s* pub to have the Irish flowing through him once more as if he’d never left the green shores years ago. You can take the man from Galway, as his pa says, but you can’t take the Galway from the man. Aye, to be true. He would always be the alley-rat from back home, no matter how far he went.

Silver rings glinting on his fingers when he brushed his mop of brown hair from his eyes, he saw a set of crystal emerald eyes follow his hand, pausing as if she was startled to see him. He smiled again to reassure he was safe. “Cold out, aye? I can offer you a hot tea. Me mother says I make the best tea in Ireland, but I’m thinking she’s a bit biased. Nevertheless, it will warm you up.” He heard a muffled hello. The small lump shuffled forward, and Danny finally got a decent look at his guest. From the thread bare tennis shoes, one missing a lace, to the coat with several rips in both sleeves. Lord above, she’d been out in weather like this dressed like that?

He felt a lurch of sympathy in his chest.

Moving over to the trolley Cora always left off to the side with a tea urn, cups, plates and a barrel of homemade shortbread, her own family secret recipe he was determined to wrangle out of her one of these days, he poured a tea and dumped in three sugars, not that the woman was in shock, or that he knew of yet, it was just instinct. “Is there something I can be helping you with?” he asked over his shoulder, hearing a zipper, he popped open the barrel and fisted four biscuits, placing them on a plate.

Of late he’d felt a sense of—he didn’t want to label it detachment, but aye, that was how he felt most mornings when he pulled himself out of bed, went on his 7-mile run, saw to the day to day running of his church and then did his daily visits to those most in need in and around his community. Danny loved his work,

but most days, for the past months, and worse still over the holidays, he'd felt disconnected from everyone and everything. Going through the motions, oh, his faith ever strong, there was no doubt in that. His friends would say he needed to get laid, his mother would assume he longed for a wife and kiddies hanging off his belt loops. Being a man in his early thirties and a man of god no less came with its own troubles and temptations.

He loved his work and would always offer a helping hand as he was offered many moons ago when his heart was black and full of hate. He had a cousin once who came to these shores before Danny. Connor's life ended long before his time, only the grace of God intervening for Danny had put him on the right path.

The right path for him.

Some would ask what gave him the wisdom to counsel his flock as he did for such a young age. No one knew his past, and probably wouldn't ever hear the tales of a time when Danny Murphy of the infamous Murphy's of Galway answered only to his mistress; drugs.

It was the same disconnect in his breast bone he had from those days and even as he smiled carrying over the tea and snack, he wondered was God of a mind with a new path for the pastor. He knew one thing, he always listened when God spoke to him. Aye, he wasn't so daft these days.

The red scarf un-wound from her neck. Aye, at least the women felt comfortable enough to take a seat a while. If she needed a bed he was sure to find her one, he was well acquainted with the local shelters and no one should be desperate enough to sleep in the snow.

Next off came the oversized hat and Danny froze where he stood. The blood stopped circulating inside his veins.

If the devil himself had appeared and began to do the Irish jig he couldn't have been more surprised at the cascade of blood-red hair that tumbled out of the hat.

Cork screw red curls fell in rivers over slim shoulders as a face emerged. A face of freckles dusting over her nose.

He knew the numbers of freckles.

He'd counted them many times. Kissed, and sought them in crowds for years.

Moss green eyes met Danny's. Sure, the ground underneath him was rocking, he stalled, the cup swaying in his hand. A look of nerves on the woman's face, she too was stuck in place, but she wrestled with the zipper of her coat, her teeth chattering together.

"Aiofe..." his voice scratched, sure he was dreaming and not standing in front of the girl he'd loved at 6. And then at 12. And at 18. The girl who had broken his soul at 22.

Memories like a kaleidoscope swept through his vision, he didn't have one childhood memory that didn't involve Aiofe. The girl he'd loved before he knew what it was to love a person as deeply as he had.

Knees just about buckled out from under him.

Aiofe here in his church. What was God doing to him?

The first girl he'd kissed. The girl he'd climbed trees with and jumped over streams and hid her from her brothers and protected her from her drunk father. The girl who took all his firsts and gave him hers. The girl he'd loved and fucked and lost all in the same year. And the same woman who had walked away from him and married someone else.

The thump of his disbelief matched that of his heartbeat. Shaking the fog from his brain, he was a pastor first, a man second.

Oh, she was lovely as ever, he thought. Her freckles told stories only he would understand. Though her lips were straight now, he remembered when there was nothing but smiles and whispers of love and temptation on them. *Play with me, Danny-boy. Touch me, Danny-boy. I love you forever, and a day, Danny-boy.*

“I’ve come a long way, Danny-boy.” She spoke finally. Sounds of home in her tone put heat in his belly. The love he’d long since locked away began to peek through the cracks in his heart.

Danny cast a look to the ceiling, inhaling as a dying man would, in his mind he asked; “Lord, how could you do this to me now?” he was sure he could hear laughing.

Her coat unzipped all the way to her thighs, and he’d first thought the mysterious woman was on the thick side, was not at all. Aiofe was slender as always.

What bulked out her coat was the baby wrapped around her chest, a sleeping bairn no bigger than a sack of potatoes she kissed on the top of its head and then those Emerald eyes that could once bring him to his knees and make him beg turned on him.

Danny hadn’t moved an inch. His gaze going from Aiofe to the bairn.

“I seem to find meself in a bit of bother. Can you help me, Danny-boy?”

And that was how Danny Murphy of the infamous Murphy’s knew, God was setting him on a new, unknown path once again ... and shite alive, he didn’t have the first sodding clue how to feel when faced with the girl that not only got away, but ran and ran far...