

Penance

Last night the streets had been noisy with people going to dinner, getting take-aways from the chipper and shifting from pub to pub. Westport was a busy place for such a small town, full of Irish tourists there for a weekend break from Dublin, Galway and Sligo. Sarah hadn't heard a familiar American accent since she'd arrived there a few weeks before. She had a solitary dinner at Sol Rio Mediterranean Restaurant. She tried to look busy, not lonely, by Googling information about Clare Island on her phone. There wasn't much. She watched the busy pub across the street as she ate her dinner. They didn't change the pasta from fettucine to penne as she had asked, but she didn't complain. She could hear the traditional Irish music coming in waves every time the glossy red door of Matt Molloy's Pub opened. She decided to go across the street after dinner and slip through that red door behind a larger group, so she appeared to know people and not seem like a tourist from Oklahoma traveling solo. She would blend in and just listen to the music and the accents, maybe squeeze up to the packed bar and order her first Guinness.

Finished with her fettucine, she went out into the mist and took a few steps towards the music, but quickly lost her nerve. *It would be better to get a good night's sleep and be early to the tourist centre to get a seat on the bus*, she thought. Turning away from the happy hum of people intent on having a good night, she returned early to the youth hostel.

The next morning, she spread her new favourite thing, Kerry Gold butter, on a piece of toast and set out for the tourist office to ensure she wasn't late for the bus to the ferry.

“Don’t worry, Mick’s bus is always a little late. He’s not so good with early mornings,” the woman in the Westport Tourism blazer informed Sarah.

Is 9:18 a.m. really considered an early morning here? And 18 minutes isn’t only a little late, Sarah silently mused.

Concerned, she replied. “I got here early in case there was a queue. I didn’t want the bus to fill up. I’ve got my ticket here” Sara offered, as she reached into her backpack.

The woman laughed and replied “Oh, now That’s not necessary. There’ll be no tourists going to the island this time of year. There’ll only be a few locals, I’m sure. Oh look- there’s Mick now! Enjoy yourself!” she said and whooshed her hand towards the exit.

The ramshackle bus shuddered to a crooked stop just as Sarah went outside. She pushed her auburn hair behind her ears again, noting that the waves were turning into curls in the cool humidity of Ireland. She looked around for others that might be getting on the bus, though the street was still sleepy and quiet.

The bus door screeched as it moved to the left and the driver stepped into the opening. A can of Guinness rolled down beside him like a loyal hound, but whereas Mick stopped, the can lurched and clanged down to the ground, splashing it’s leftovers onto Sarah’s new shoes. The stale, boozy smell of last night’s party crept towards her. It wasn’t just from the can. Mick, The Bus Driver, was breathing out a cloud of both drunk and hungover. His stainless-steel coloured hair stood wildly on his head and matched the great tufts of grizzled chest hair that could have been contained behind his untucked business shirt. After three

buttons from the bottom, he had given up or become distracted, leaving way too much chest and a demure gold cross necklace on full display. He was missing a shoe.

Mick extended his hand, bronzed with the residue of rolled cigarettes. He waited expectantly to help her across the large chasm between the curb and his bus. She fumbled through her purse and pulled out her ticket.

“Wha’s that?” he asked seeming surprised by his own voice.

“My ticket,” she reluctantly mumbled.

“CHRIST!” he bellowed. “I’ve never seen one of them! Hurry, Miss, you’ll make us late.” *We’re already late. Surely he’s still drunk?* Sarah wondered, yet she felt too awkward to walk away. She took his rough hand as he hoisted her onto the bus.

Mick sat down with a heavy sigh, kicked a can from under the brake and wiped the windscreen. Sarah was thankful she wasn’t the only person on the bus. *Surely these locals would know if he’s a safe driver.* Two other women had were already seated, even though the brochure listed Westport as the first stop followed by Murrisk, Lecanvey, Louisburgh and Roonagh Pier. After that, a quick 20-minute ferry to Clare Island. *One ferry a day so you had to spend the night.* Sarah checked the time on her phone. 9:24 a.m.. *Come On!*

She noticed the tiny woman with an old-fashioned scarf covering her hair, so short that her feet didn’t touch the sticky floor. She could have been 100 or a really worn 60, it was impossible to tell. The other woman was a bit younger, mid-fifties. She had short, practical black hair and a spectacular amount of plastic shopping bags from Supervalu grocery store. She nodded in a friendly way as she looked Sarah from head to toe.

"You're a yank." she said flatly.

"Um, yes?" Sarah answered quietly as both ladies looked at her expectantly. Not knowing what they were waiting for, she quickly took a seat at the front of the bus behind the driver.

"Right now, we're off!" Mick shouted as he ground the bus into gear and careened into the slow traffic, creating his own opening between the slow-moving cars. When Mick took a sharp curve too quickly, all the cans on the bus clattered to the left. Sarah clutched her backpack to her chest and frantically searched for a seatbelt with the other. There wasn't one. She caught Mick's eyes in the rear-view mirror. *Were they redder than before? Was that possible?* His pale blue irises were lost in a spider web of pink veins. He waggled his messy brows at her as she shifted in her seat, trying to get her balance. She went to move, but one foot was slightly stuck to the floor. As she yanked it up, it made a loud, sticky, tearing sound.

"Sorry about the mess, Miss." he said, not sounding sorry at all. "I took the lads to the Rugby finals last night. Mighty craic! Twas a great night, but we're a bit late getting back. There's still a bit left on the bus, I'm afraid...." He was interrupted when the bus hit a large and very avoidable pothole. Everything on the bus was airborne for a moment. The cans, the scarf lady, Sarah and her backpack, the shoe Mick wasn't wearing- all of it just popping up and jolting back into place in a moment.

"Jesus and Mary be with us!" said scarf lady as she crossed herself.

"Wisha!" Mick said while adjusting the cross around his neck, "Tis more excitement than you've had in a long while, Bridie.... enjoy it!"

Now that they were outside of Westport, the grey, rock walls that followed the road were never more than a few centimetres away from the scratched sides

of the bus. She squeezed her eyes shut and waited for the high-pitched scraping sound when they got too close to the wall, but it never happened. She glanced again at her phone.

9:31 a.m... Had it only been a few minutes? Now she really had a view of Clew Bay stretching out on her right and the endless patchwork of greens and greys as the small fields divided out to the left. Ahead, small hills lead up to a distinct mountain that looked out of place. Sarah wondered if they'd pass right beneath it on the way to Roonagh Pier.

In the bay, Clare Island almost mirrored the mountain, the only larger island nestled amongst little ones. *According to Google there were 365 of them.* Even through the perpetually foggy windows, Sarah could see the tiny cream-coloured dots on the islands and realised they were sheep.

Her voice stuck nervously in her throat as she tried to ask how the sheep got out there, but only a strange sound came out. The Supervalu lady looked at her and waited. Sarah cleared her throat and tried again.

"How do the sheep get on those tiny islands? Are they wild?" she managed to ask.

Mick was quick to answer and prove himself a helpful guide. "Sure, they swim out, Sally" he joked. *Sarah*, she silently corrected.

A disapproving noise came from Supervalu. "No," she informed Sarah, "the farmers row them out on the small black boats you can see there, the currachs."

Seems like a lot of trouble for a bit of grass. As if she said it aloud, Bridie, the scarf, quietly answered “Well, we haven’t the great acres of grass like in America, we use what we’ve been given.”

Sarah felt slightly chastised, but she still asked if it was dangerous transporting the sheep. “Wouldn’t they panic or kick holes in the thin-skinned boat? “

“If they kick a hole in the currach, they all drown, they do.” Mick explained. “They all drown?” Sarah asked as she glanced at the ladies, sure they would say it wasn’t true. They didn’t.

“Not all of them.” said Mick, “At least the sheep have the sense to swim!” They all laughed for a moment and Sarah joined in even though she wasn’t sure if it was a joke.

For some reason, Mick suddenly slammed on the brakes and they all pitched forward wildly. Supervalu’s bags slid down the aisle. Bridie, oddly, just rocked back and forth with ease as if she were already on a boat in a swell. A loud, queasy groan came from the back of the bus. The three women looked back in alarm. A huge man was on the floor. He must have been stretched out on the last row of seats, either asleep or passed out. Now, he was on the floor. His top third was hidden behind seats G1-2, his legs behind G 4-5 and his blue-white distended belly filled the gap in between. Supervalu swivelled herself to the right to assess the chaos.

“Have ye no dignity, Mick Og? You’re after giving us a fright! Get yourself situated now.” she said sharply.

Another Mick? “Another Mick? Is that your son?” Sarah asked Mick, sounding more shocked than she meant to.

“Ah...no...my nephew, my sister’s boy. Og means young, young Mick” he explained. A heavy, rhythmic sound came from Bridie as her face literally cracked into a warm smile. She was laughing.

“What poor devil would let that amadan whelp a child onto her? HA!” she chuckled as she pointed a bony finger at Mick, as if to curse him.

“Quit your squawking, Bridie. Do you want to be dropped at Murrisk with Mick Og?” Mick threatened, still smiling as he glanced at Bridie in the mirror . She stared ahead serenely, ignoring him.

Turning his attention back to his road, he took the old, stained cloth from the dash and frantically wiped the condensation that was clouding the windscreen. Again. He did this every minute or so. The windscreen wipers waggled back and forth even when the drizzle momentarily ceased. The closer they got to the bay, the more frantic his wiping became until he was working as hard on the inside of the screen as the wipers worked on the outside. The salty musk of the sea air mixed with the warmth from the heater and cocooned the people on the bus.

With the metronome beat of the wipers, Sarah played peekaboo with the mountain. She wiped at her own window with her scarf, trying to get a complete view of the peak. She tried not to breathe and create another veil between herself and the mountain. At the sight of a cheerful yellow pub, Mick pulled over with a jerk. He simultaneously pulled the lever for the bus door. “Murrisk,” he stated, officiously, to no one in particular

He pulled out his flip phone and punched out a number. "I'm just ringing my sister," he told the passengers, rolling his eyes to the heavens as if it would be a painful experience. After a moment, Sarah heard the woman's voice at full volume.

"What is it, Mick? Not another accident?" his annoyed sister asked.

He held the phone a few centimetres from his mouth, his voice booming. "I've still got your lad, he was a bit worse for the wear, so he stayed on the bus. I thought he could do with a cuppa and a lie down. If you'll come collect him, I'll wake him."

"Right so, be there in a jiff. Bye.... bye...bye..." And then the voice faded to nothing.

Sarah checked the time again. 9:39 a.m.. *Hurry lady! Still just enough time to get the ferry.*

Sarah glanced back at the lump of Mick Og, and willed him to wake up and get off the bus. His green and red striped County Mayo rugby shirt had settled halfway down his belly. She waited impatiently for Mick to walk back and wake him.

"Get yourself up, Mick Og, you great fool!" rasped Supervalu. "Go on, Mick! Wake him!"

"Give the lad a wee moment, Mary. He's had an eventful night.," Mick replied with a slight sound of pride in his voice.

Mary Supervalu stood immediately, called to action. She zipped her sleeveless, navy puffer jacket and pushed her array of shopping bags to the side. She made it back to Mick Og in two determined strides.

"Up, now, Mick Og. Far from sleeping on the floor of a bus you were reared. You'll scare the tourist!" she hissed as she put her sturdy leather shoe on his exposed belly and pushed him

back and forth. Mick Og muttered, and Sarah saw a pale hand weakly grip the back of seat F2. After a moment he surfaced. He had the same red eyes and ghost-blue irises as Mick and stared at Sarah without blinking.

“Is me Mam comin’?” he just managed to croak. Mick grinned at him and teased in a loud voice, “While we wait, why not tell young Sally here about the Reek? The mountain?”

SARAH, Sarah silently corrected again.

“Feck Off, Mick.” Mick Og said while rubbing his head.

Bridie was happy to fill the gap.” Croagh Patrick, the great holy mountain

where St. Patrick climbed to light a bonfire and Christianise Ireland. Tis a special place,” she said reverently.

“Sure, people climb it year-round, but on Reek Sunday, hundreds climb it at the once,” added Mick.

“Thousands.” Bridie corrected firmly. “Those that climb it get a special blessing from the Bishop of Tuam at the top.” They all looked up to the top then. *It wasn't 'so' high, it was just so much higher than the hills beside it. It did indeed look special. Maybe even holy.* It was visible for kilometres in every direction. The moss green of the peak was littered with grey shale shards.

“40,000 people a year, Sarah,” added Mary Supervalu, “be careful if you climb it, they have to use the helicopters to rescue people every year.”

“Bah!” Mick grumbled, “NOT people...Tourists! Bishop Neary gets up there every year for that farce of a blessing. If he can drag his old, dry bones up there, sure, anyone can. It’s a very special day, all right.”

“Bishop Neary retired YEARS ago. It’s Bishop Francis Duffy now. When’s the last time you heard the Mass, Mick?” Bridie crossed herself as she asked.

“It’s been a fair few Sundays since I’ve been in a church, Sally.”, Mick whispered loudly, winking at Sarah. “And the day is special because Campbell’s Pub has a dispensation to start serving pints at 6am that Sunday.”

“That’s only for the faithful, as you well know, Mick. People go up for their blessing and earn themselves a pint. There’d be hundreds of walking sticks outside the pub” Mary added in a frustrated tone.

Sarah could see two walking sticks outside of the pub. The sign read ‘Campbell’s Pub’ and had a comical toucan drinking a Guinness on it. It wasn’t Reek Sunday, so no chance of an early pint, but the smell of breakfast cooking made her stomach rumble. *It’s 9:45 a.m.*, Sarah observed, starting to lose hope of being on time. Mick wasn’t done complaining about the Reek.

“What sensible person would climb all that way on those woeful sharp rocks, some of them barefoot, for a blessing they can get right here at Our Lady’s Church every Sunday?” Mick demanded.

“Barefoot?” Sarah asked as her toes curled in her waterproof hiking boots. She could practically feel the rocks slicing through her feet.

“Ochone. As penance.” Bridie leaned forward to answer further. *“Some go up on their knees or barefoot as a sign of faith and for penance.”*

Sarah noted Mick’s silence, loud for someone who always had something to say. Just then, a sharp rap sounded on the bus window.

“MICK OG!” Mick Og’s mother demanded. *“Out with ye!”*

Surprisingly obedient, Mick Og unfolded himself to upright and shuffled silently through the door. With a dancer’s grace, Mick pulled the lever in perfect time so that the door just nipped the back of Mick Og’s wrinkled trousers as he exited the bus.

As she glanced at all the Guinness cans on the floor, Sarah asked Mick if he had ever climbed Croagh Patrick with bare feet.

Without missing a breath, Mick set his pink eyes on her and said *“No, Miss, that’s only for sinners.”* Without signalling, he merged out onto the road and pointed his bus to Roonagh Pier.