

Roll the Stone Away

The plane touched down at Belfast International Airport and taxied to a stop. A 40-something passenger with a heart problem removed his carryon from the overhead compartment and exited. Despite thinning hair and a silver-flecked beard, he was aging well. A tall man, frequent exercise kept him in good working order and no longer having Maire's home cooked meals was helping his waistline.

Looking around the terminal he didn't spot her. She hadn't responded to his emailed flight number so he wasn't really expecting to find her waiting. Maire used to say all she ever *did* was wait for him. Now he was waiting for her. They weren't divorced; she was being the good Catholic. But she hadn't spoken to him in 2 years. She would email arrangements for the 4-5 times a year Hugh and Kelly came to stay with him, but she kept her sentences ruthlessly efficient. Nothing personal.

Going to the counter he rented a small Toyota. The drive was nostalgic, and bitter. Glancing at the exit sign for Donegall Street, he flushed and felt something grind painfully against his aorta.

Arriving at his sister's house, he nervously rang the doorbell, still wondering what to say.

"Seamus!" Bronagh wailed as she flung herself into his arms. She was light for having delivered 9 children. She sobbed as Seamus stroked her hair. "I'm so sorry," he said, holding her tightly. Bronagh's husband Ian stood by the door, his once-beaming face haggard, his eyes drained.

"Good of you to come," Ian said thickly when he'd released her. The two men gripped each other tightly. Bronagh dabbed at her eyes and waved him to a chair.

"Can I get you anything?"

Seamus shook his head. "Bronagh, I...," He searched vainly for words.

"I know, dear brother. Don't try. There are no words. And Danny is not here to explain."

He was the youngest Sullivan at 18. He'd taken his life 3 days ago. Driven to it, some said. Since the Protestant majority provided Belfast's Catholics with little law enforcement, Catholic paramilitaries assumed the role; brutally. A year earlier, as punishment for a joyride in a stolen car, men from the Irish National Liberation Army snatched Danny from his bed and beat him viciously. Trussing him up with electrical wire, they dropped him in a manhole and left. "We're going for a gun," they said. Desperate, he chewed through the wire, and fled to his sister's house covered with blood. His terror led to depression, anxiety, and then he descended into deep paranoia.

Danny's was the 12th such suicide in 6 weeks in the Ardoyne area of Belfast. Seamus had been fond of Danny. Throughout the evening's conversation with Ian and Bronagh, the ancient stone grew. All alone in the guest room he fumed, "God, if you *do* exist, why are you everywhere but Belfast?" Ireland had made him something of an agnostic though he occasionally went to mass. The way he saw it, no mess like *this* world could possibly have a god in charge of it. The stone squared its shoulders.

He checked his office voice mail and made some notes before turning in. Like a whirlwind his thoughts swirled round and round: Donegall Street, James Connolly, Maire, Hugh and Kelly, Danny. He balled up his fist in the blankets and tried to sleep.

The day for the funeral was miserable. Skies were grey and the rains came during the service. The torrents momentarily distracted Father Aiden Troy. With Kelly and Hugh flanking him in the pew, Seamus watched his sister's anguish and felt guilty for enjoying a Father's moment with his children.

Maire sat in the pew behind him. With forced politeness she'd nodded when she and the children arrived. Children? Adults now: Hugh was 17, Kelly 19. He was proud of who they were becoming. He turned back as the priest closed his homily, led some more prayers, then said the benediction. Umbrellas appeared, and the family went to the cemetery to say goodbye to Danny.

Seamus didn't hear much at the graveside: he watched the priest, the casket, the people, the flowers, the beautiful façade of Holy Cross church, the tears—although none were his. Everything was here, but God. The beautifully oiled box was lowered and covered with dirt. Everyone left, many heading for the modest Sullivan house to celebrate Danny's life. Toasts, stories, and sober memories kept tears and laughter flowing most of the night. Seamus collapsed in bed about 4:00 and slept fitfully.

After lunch the next day Ian and Seamus were chatting when Ian suggested, "Seamus, why don't you stay here the rest of the week, visit with your children, and see a soccer match. Linfield's got a good one tomorrow and you can have my tickets."

He misread Seamus' hesitation. Warmly slapping him on the back he insisted. "It'll do you good. Look, Broghnah and I are going to get through this. The other kids will help. But we've been worried about you. Maybe this is just what you need."

It didn't suit Hugh or Kelly so Seamus drove to Windsor Field by himself. It was an awful drive. In the stands he found his seat, nodding to the stubby man in a sweater next to him. The day was comfortable, with occasional sun peeking through the clouds. Third place Portadown came on the field to a chorus of boos. But the crowd of 19,000 erupted as one voice when *their* team took the field. Their pride was warranted: Linfield was in first place in the Irish Football league.

When whistles blew Portadown quickly showed they'd come to play. Momentum surged back and forth and only late in the period did David Larmour finally find the back of Portadown's net. Portadown had just kicked off when one of their attackers took a high kick to the head from midfielder Mark Picking. Seamus groaned as the umpire's red card appeared. The man on the ground didn't move.

"Looks serious doesn't it?" asked the man in the sweater. "I imagine we'll have a bit of a break. Can I get you something from the refreshment stand?"

"Uhm, no thanks." Seamus moved as the man slid past him. He sounded like a Yank. Returning with his drink, the man asked, "Any change?"

"No, it's bad. Still no movement." Just then the ambulance rolled onto the field.

"Looks like he needs prayer," the stranger observed.

Seamus arched his eyebrows, "You Protestant?"

"Actually, Catholic. You?"

"Catholic, sort of."

"Sort of?"

"More like an agnostic I guess. You serious, you pray?"

"Yes."

"At mass?"

"That too, but often alone or with others." He held up his hand. "Hold on a minute." Seamus stared as the man fell silent and looked at the field. Finally, he asked, "Thought you were going to pray for him?"

"I just did."

"But you didn't close your eyes."

"I can see better that way."

Seamus gave up, concluding the man was certifiable.

"You American?" he asked.

"Dual citizenship. Moved from Monaghan to Wisconsin in 1980. Name's Nyle Farraday."

Seamus shook the offered hand. "Seamus O'Brien."

Nyle nodded. "Pleasure. I'm here on holiday, tracing my family roots. My wife and daughter are with me but they wanted to do some walking along the coast today." He shook his head. "If I'm gonna walk, I want to be riding something."

Seamus grinned with appreciation.

Lights flashing, the ambulance glided off the field onto Glenmachen St., then raced east on Donegall toward the hospital. The stone shifted just enough to increase his discomfort. Play resumed and both men turned their attention back to the game.

When the break came the American asked Seamus where he was from. "Balbriggan for now. Used to live *here* but my wife and I split up 2 years ago. I came back for my nephew's funeral. Took his life."

"Pity, that. Young man?"

"I'm afraid so. Youngest of my sister's nine children."

"Dear Lord. What's your sister's name?"

"Bronagh, Bronagh Sullivan."

"Mind if I pray for her?"

Seamus cocked his head, "Listen, do you do a lot of this?"

"I guess so. God is listening, so I take advantage of it. You object?"

"No, I guess not."

"Good." This time Nyle prayed out loud. "Lord, comfort Bronagh and her family. Amen."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

"But, don't you have to say things before and things after you pray? And don't you have to say a lot more in between?"

"No."

Seamus thought of the masses he attended and shook his head. "I don't know what kind of Catholicism you have in America, but it's definitely not the Irish kind."

The second period was about to begin. "You ever hear of an Irishman by the name of Paddy Finnigan?" Nyle asked.

Seamus shook his head. Instead of filling him in, Nyle pointed to the field. Play had begun. "Better watch the game."

Seamus glared at him but the conversation was clearly over for now. Linfield overpowered Portadown in the second period and won handily 3-1. As the crowd left the stands, the two men made small talk.

Finally, Nyle said pointedly, "Forgive me but you seem like a man who has a stone in his heart." Nora Connolly O'Brien's great-grandson turned red and froze. 32 years of backbreaking weight seemed ready to crush him.

Nyle saw it all. "Ah, I believe I am right," he kindly patted the other man's shoulder. "I'm staying at the Stormont Hotel. If you'd like to drop by I'll buy you lunch tomorrow, say 12:30? Perhaps I could even pray for *you*." He waited. Seamus finally mumbled something Nyle took for agreement; he handed him a card.

"Here's my cell phone number. Call me if you run into a problem."

Seamus hurried to the parking lot, the stone trying desperately to seal the entrance.

The following day he was in the Stormont lobby thinking maybe he should leave when Nyle appeared and greeted him warmly.

"I wasn't sure you'd come."

"Why not?"

"Complete stranger, religious fanatic."

Seamus laughed nervously. "Actually, I *was* thinking about leaving."

Nyle didn't seem surprised. "But you didn't. Let's find a table."

In the hotel restaurant Nyle asked for private seating. After ordering, he filled Seamus in on his research.

"Farradays go back quite a ways in Ireland. I've traced us back to my paternal great-great-great grandparents. I'm finding out some very..., *interesting* things about some of my ancestors. Not sure I want to claim *all* of them though," he admitted with a twinkle in his eyes. "More than a few rogues, I'm afraid."

Their food came and Nyle opened his napkin with a flourish. "Mind if I pray?"

Exasperated, Seamus offered, "Look, how about if you just feel free to pray whenever you want; that will save us a lot of unnecessary conversation."

"Alright. Father, thank you for this food, speak to the waiter, and speak to my new friend. In Jesus' name, Amen."

Seamus frowned as he began to eat, "The waiter do something wrong?"

"No."

"Then why did you pray for him?"

"For his soul."

Seamus chewed on his beef, more confused than ever. They recapped the football game then traded information about their families, occupations, and activities. The meal was good but after they'd finished, conversation floundered a bit. Preoccupied, Seamus looked down at his cold coffee and stirred it mechanically. "Your Irish history any good, Nyle?"

"Adequate. Why?"

"Does the date 1916 mean anything to you?"

"Of course: the Rising. The failed attempt by the Irish Republican Brotherhood to toss out the British. The ringleaders believed that if they *began* the fight, the people would join and the Brits would run. Instead, the empire viciously crushed the revolt in a week. 1500 dead including civilians, countless Dublin homes burned to the ground, ringleaders executed."

"Remember the names of any of the ringleaders?"

"Uh, Patrick Pearse, James Connolly, Joseph Plunkett... Why?"

"James Connolly was my great grandfather."

Nyle's eyes sparkled with interest. "Why, most agree he single-handedly launched the *serious* effort for independence," he said, gesturing southward. "In life he couldn't sell the masses on his socialist vision for Ireland. But in death..., even those who didn't support the Rising were outraged. So badly wounded he couldn't stand, they tied him to a chair to execute him. It created an outpouring of Irish sympathy that added significantly to the pressure for independence.

Seamus nodded approvingly, "Not bad for a Yank. With all that history, hatred is in my genes. *Purposeful* hatred, mind you, but hatred nonetheless. Funny though, I don't have it; never did. As a boy I remember listening to the venom of those gathered around our kitchen table, and wondering why I couldn't get as worked up. I was a descendant of Connolly, people

assumed I hated, I loved revolution. Even Bronagh—sweet as she is, was something of a viper in her early twenties."

The Irishman with the heart condition paused, hoping to stop this. *Why are you telling some total stranger things even your wife and children don't know?* he berated himself. Then he noticed that at the moment the stone did not seem so heavy, nor as abrasive.

Nyle interrupted his reverie, "So, were you adopted?"

"Was I *what?*"

"Adopted. Since you didn't seem to think like the rest of your family."

Seamus sipped his coffee, "Oh, no. I was blood alright. I thought maybe it would take some sort of involvement to change me, to get me to see things like the rest of my family. So when they asked me to do the job, I thought it might be what I needed..." Seamus stole a look around him. No one was within earshot.

"They?" Nyle thought he had missed something.

Still scanning the room Seamus whispered, "The IRA. I had a knack with circuitry, electronics. Even that young. They asked me to make some items for them."

"How young *were* you?"

"15. I made remote control devices, timers, detonators; lots of them. It was pretty sophisticated stuff. I had the expertise, they had the suppliers. It was incredible what I got my hands on." Seamus noticed his hands trembling slightly and dropped them safely out of sight in his lap.

Nyle was measuring him. "Let me guess, you're 47-48 years old." Seamus hung his head and nodded as Nyle did the math, "1972, bombs go off all over Belfast, some remotely controlled."

Seamus confirmed it, "6 dead, 147 injured in just the one bombing on Donegall Street."

It was quiet for a bit. Nyle tried to see the stone through eye contact but Seamus wouldn't look up. "Anyone else know?"

"My father. He's dead. A couple of Provos are still alive who were part of it. But when I was asked to help again, I said no. At the time I didn't know a refusal is normally a death sentence. Guess family ties helped. No one ever came after me."

Seamus finally looked up. He'd just done what he'd wanted to do for 32 years. But this booth was not a confessional and this man, not a confessor. In fact, he really didn't know *who* Nyle was. He had just placed his life in a stranger's hands.

As he fished for something in his pocket Nyle adopted an Irish lilt, "You're a brave man Seamus O'Brien. Why tell me this? Is this the stone you've been carrying?"

Seamus nodded, "It destroyed my marriage. The blood on my hands kept me from getting close to my wife and children. I think constantly about the dead. I see them in my dreams. Protestant, Catholic, they're all Irish, all human. ...All dead. I know the rhetoric but what I participated in was not war; it was murder." Without fear he asked, "Will you report me?"

The waiter came to refill the cups. When he'd gone Nyle skipped Seamus' question to ask one of his own, "Seamus, do you remember the date the Rising began?"

"April something."

"It was a bank holiday. Do you remember which one?"

"Of course; it was Easter Monday."

"That's right; day after Resurrection Sunday. What do you know of Easter?"

Seamus leaned back, "Essentials: Son of God died, rose again."

Nyle rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "The *fact* of Easter stored among other facts in what I suspect is a remarkable mind. You couldn't run your electronics firm without it."

Seamus chuckled. "Ironic, isn't it?"

"What's that?"

"That I'm making a *living* doing the very thing that started me dying decades ago; doing the same thing that put that stone in my heart."

Nyle had found what he was looking for in his pocket. He placed it on the table and leaned forward. "Actually, Seamus, the stone would be there even if you'd *never* built a detonator, *weren't* partly responsible for the deaths of others, *never* neglected your wife and family, in

fact never did *any* of the things you blame for the heaviness, the dead weight in your heart. Had you not done these things, you might be less aware of it, but the stone would still be there.

"How so?"

"The heaviness, that abrasiveness comes from sin; not just *certain* sins."

Seamus put up his hands, "Yes, yes, I know. I should go to confession more often. It's probably been 9 months.'

"Did it ever help?"

"Not for long. Guilt is a brutal thing." Seamus swore. Then sheepishly apologized, "Sorry." Nyle ignored it.

"Wrong confessor."

"What?"

"You had the wrong confessor. You confessed to a *priest*. Now you're confessing to *me*. Neither of us can help you. Think about it, each time you get something out in the open you feel a *little* bit better for a *little* while, don't you?"

"Sure."

"Doesn't solve your guilt though does it?"

"No."

"That's because I can't bring you and God together, nor can your parish priest."

Seamus looked incredulous, "Are you *sure* you're a Catholic?"

Nyle laughed, "I am. But the only One who can bring any Catholic, any Protestant, bring *anyone* and God together, who can actually forgive a man's sins—*all* of them, as well as take the guilt, is the Man of Easter: Jesus Christ; the One who rose from the dead."

He opened the compact Bible he'd found in his pocket, turned it upside down toward Seamus so he could follow. "*There is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.* Seamus, only He can roll that stone away from your heart."

"I know about Jesus."

"Know *about* Him, or *know* Him?"

"What do you mean?"

"For example, were you there when your wife gave birth?"

Seamus swelled with pride, "Both times," he said.

"So, you know about birth. But do you *know* birth? Did you feel the contractions, did you bleed, did you push the baby out? No; you know *about* birth, you don't *know* birth. And you know *about* Jesus. You have facts in your mind: He's a historical person around whom certain events occurred. I on the other hand, *know* Him. He's my *Savior*, He's my *Master*," Nyle concluded passionately.

Suspicious, but curious, Seamus asked. "So how'd *you* go from being a spectator to a participant?"

"In 1972 when you were soldering wires for the IRA, God sent the fires of revival throughout the Church in Ireland—Catholic & Protestant. For 6 years God's Spirit blew until there were prayer meetings in nearly every town in the Republic. Best estimates say over 10,000 Catholics were either saved or renewed. In 1976, I became one of them."

"Saved,' from what?"

"From your sin; its punishment, and its power. Jesus died to save you from sin."

"Doesn't that happen by being a member of the church?"

Nyle shook his head and quoted Romans 10:9 from memory, "*If you confess with your mouth 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, [then] you will be saved.* Seamus, for God to save *you*, you must make Jesus *your* Lord, and *you* must place your faith in Him. Becoming a part of a church is a *result* of that, not the other way around."

Silence. Which soon became awkward. Seamus looked across the table at a man he'd known for less than 24 hours. A man who'd just learned the most private things about him—some of which could send him to prison. But Nyle's words had softened the stone's edges in his heart and that was help he wanted more of.

He asked Nyle, "By the way, who's Paddy Finnigan?"

"What?"

"Paddy Finnigan. You asked me yesterday if I knew him and then never told me who he is."

"Actually, he's someone I'd like you to meet. In fact, he only lives 40 kilometers from you in Dun Laoghaire. He's a Catholic layman, secretary of the Evangelical Catholic Initiative (ECI). He teaches an Alpha course you should take. Good friend of mine. Paddy changed from a spectator to a participant a couple of years after I did; that same revival. He now spends his time helping Catholic and Protestant churches in Ireland, serve Christ together."

"Does he pray all the time too?"

"Afraid so. Tell me, Seamus is there anything that's keeping you from right now telling God you're ready to turn from your sin to Christ?"

Seamus hesitated. He felt like a child trying to grasp nuclear physics. But he was sure of this much: this was big. Huge. Lifechanging. He already suspected a decision like this one would lead to others—also big. Like going to the authorities. Maybe it would mean prison. But maybe, just maybe it would be worth it all to have Someone roll the stone away.

"Not just yet, Nyle. Probably soon. Meanwhile, can you give me Paddy Finnigan's phone number?"

"Sure. But first, can I pray for you?" Both men laughed. And the stone tried desperately to seal the growing gaps to the heart.