

The Storyteller of Inis Mór

Prologue

Bondi Beach

I'm not sure when I first realized that the life I'd been living was over, but I know it came gradually, like an awakening memory from a long forgotten dream. A broken relationship behind me, an unused life in place, the work I'd once enjoyed now a meaningless, repetitive chore. I opened my eyes reluctantly each morning, tired before my day had even begun.

And yet, every time I thought of the island, an irrational hope surged in my chest, some inner sense of longing drawing me backwards towards the unknown. Over a period of a few months, it returned in a dozen different ways. Appearing in a magazine article one day and then in a casual conversation with a stranger that same afternoon. The following week, I met a man from Inis Mór on a busy Sydney street and then, a few days later, I ran into him again at a Halloween party. Synchronistic events that brought the island back into focus.

At first, I tried to dismiss it all as coincidence but, when I received a letter from my grandmother saying that she was dying and wanted to see me, I wondered if there was more to it than that. As I traced her spidery handwriting on the single sheet of pale cream foolscap, I felt a vague sense of remorse.

*Dearest
Conner,*

I pray to God you might receive this letter in time. I have been ill for some while and know I'm not long for this world. I have no fear of death, only some regrets that I need to address. If you are to read these words before I pass, please come home, there is something you must know

Grace O'Rourke.

As I stared down at the cryptic message, an age old memory stirred within: a tall, handsome, grey-haired woman standing upright and alone beside a cottage gate, the sea behind her, dark blue with white capped waves. I tossed the letter back on the table, the idea was ridiculous, I hadn't seen my grandmother since childhood, the memories tarnished by the bitterness of a long-standing family feud.

But that night, as I lay restless in my bed thinking back to earlier, simpler days, I was transported back to the last time I'd ever seen the island, falling away behind me in the mist from the deck of an ancient Irish ferry on a winter's day some thirty years before, and I knew in my heart that my destiny lay there, whatever that destiny would be.

Chapter 1

Bondi Beach

I woke early the next morning, the first streams of sunlight across my bedroom window pulling me up from a restless night's sleep. My waking thought was of the island, followed immediately by doubt. I was in more debt than I'd ever been in my life, I could hardly go running off to Ireland on a whim.

I dragged myself out of bed and headed for the bathroom, hoping to wash away the demons that had haunted my sleep for months but, as I stepped into the shower, I saw her dressing gown hanging on the back of the door. Put it away, I told myself but I told myself that every day, it was as if I kept it there as a talisman, hoping that one day it might lure her back to me.

The last few years of the marriage had been pretty bad. Shouted arguments, mostly about my drinking, followed by long periods of silence where she couldn't even look at me. There had been a few good months, usually after I'd been abstinent for a while. But then the first tentative awakenings of hope would be crushed by another needless row. We'd tried counselling, but eight hours of therapy and a thousand dollars later all we'd ended up with was a bunch of New Age tags to taunt each other with. I'd been relabelled as an 'emotionally unavailable, borderline alcoholic,' whilst Nicky was 'enabling my addictions with her co-dependent behaviour'.

When I told the therapist we could have got that much and more free of charge from the pop psychology section of the Kings Cross library, she'd told us that her professional opinion was that, as long as I continued to overwork and drink on weekends, we were wasting our money and her time and recommended a six month period of total abstinence.

I did quit drinking eventually but by that time, Nicky had lost all faith in me and, when her mother was diagnosed with cancer, she'd gone back to France taking our eight year old son with her. We'd called it a trial separation but that had been a year ago and I was beginning to wonder if they were ever coming back.

I turned the water on cold. If I allowed myself to dwell on my wife for too long, I could spend the rest of the day immobilized by remorse. Focus, I told myself, we're nearly there. The Pepsi Cola account was ready to sign. The final meetings with their marketing people had gone exceptionally well. This one account would swing us back into the black in a big way.

Nicky had been a great partner; she'd looked after the artistic side of things whilst I'd handled sales. We'd started our own agency a few years after our son was born. It had looked promising at first but we'd run into problems the second year. Some of the old clients from Reynolds & Co. had transferred their accounts to our new company but a clause in my original contract had forbidden that and the legal proceedings that ensued had dragged on forever,

draining funds and straining corporate relationships as the barristers strutted about the Supreme Court at three thousand dollars a day.

By the time the case was over, my enthusiasm for the advertising world had soured. I was tired of it all by then. Tired of the mindless jingles we created to sell anything to anyone, tired of repackaging tobacco companies' images, tired of the endless cutthroat competition and, more than anything else, sick and tired of myself for being trapped in the whole glitzy, superficial nature of the thing.

As I stepped out of the shower, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. My hair could have done with a trim and my skin was paler than usual, the crescent shaped scar above my left eye, a souvenir from my days in the ring, adding a slightly rakish air to an average sort of face. A bit rough around the edges, I conceded but not bad for a thirty-eight year old.

I pulled on a shirt and went through to the kitchen. The day was sullen and overcast. The heat wave that had sweltered Sydney for weeks was all but done. As I opened the coffee container, the heady aroma of La Esperanz came swirling up to greet me like a Genie from Aladdin's lamp. I'd been hooked on Colombian coffee since spending six months in Bogotá as an exchange student. That's where I'd met my wife; she was studying fine arts there. Nicky wasn't what you'd call a beautiful woman, not in the conventional sense, but she had a way about her that had me intrigued. She was tall and graceful with a tousled mass of jet-black hair and a lingering trace of a French accent left over from her childhood days in Brittany.

I set up the percolator and flicked on the radio. The weather forecaster was warning that a southerly depression was bringing storm activity to the Central and Northern Coasts. No surprises there, my left ankle had been throbbing steadily since the previous morning, an infallible indication that heavy weather was on the way.

I poured the coffee into a mug and took it over to the bay window. The beach was all but deserted, just a few old diehards jogging along in shorts and anoraks by the water's edge. Over to the south, swollen masses of slate grey cloud were approaching stealthily from behind the rocky headland that defines the southern extremity of Bondi Beach.

A sudden scream wrenched my eyes downward. Directly below, a group of teenagers in school uniforms were bullying a smaller boy as they waited for the bus to Dover Heights. He was trying to fend them off but the biggest lad, an overweight lout with spiky hair, was shouting and jabbing a finger close to his face. I felt a surge of anger. Smack him in the mouth, son, I thought, one good punch and he'll never trouble you again.

I hated bullies, I'd had too much of it myself. I'd turned eight the day we arrived in Australia and, after finding a small flat at Bondi, my mother had enrolled me at the local primary school. I'd arrived mid-term with red hair, a gammy leg and an Irish accent and the first few months had been hell. The second year, my gym teacher suggested joining the boxing team and that had changed everything. In the next school tournament, I'd landed a wild punch that put my opponent on the canvas for a ten count; nobody ever bothered me again.

As I grabbed my mobile and jacket, the Vaucluse bus appeared and, just as quickly, it was over, whatever had been happening, forgotten, as the boys shuffled reluctantly on board for one more day at school.

* * *

Thirty minutes later, my secretary was heading towards me, wearing a glazed, professional smile.

“Good morning, John. Mr. Bannister’s called twice, he said it’s urgent ...”

“Slow down, Janine.” She’d only been with us a few weeks. “You know the routine. Breakfast first, the Bannister’s of this world later.”

“I’m sorry but he’s so insistent”

“Don’t take it on board,” I told her. “If I’m not here, tell him to call back. If he wants to go beyond that, you can give him a dial tone with my blessings.”

I watched as she disappeared down the hallway, the strain was starting to show.

I sifted through the mail quickly then tossed it back on the table and stared out the window. The rain was still holding off but the sky had taken on a heavy, threatening tone and out across the water, wispy trails of low-lying mist were beginning to round and blur the sharper edges of the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Someone was tapping on the glass partition.

“There were no croissants so I got a ham and cheese baguette.”

“That’s fine. Keep the dogs at bay for a while, would you? I’ll be taking calls later.”

Ten minutes later, as I was finishing off the coffee, my mobile rang; private number.

“John Carlyle.”

“Paul Reynolds, John.” My old mentor’s voice came across, smug and patronizing. “Is this a good time to call?”

“I’m busy,” I told him, “I can’t talk for long.”

“That’s fine.” He sounded amused. “I just need a moment or two.”

“What is it, Paul?”

“I thought I’d let you know that we signed off on the Pepsi Cola deal last night. They loved your presentation, said it was brilliant but just a little too daring. Traps for young players, John.”

“You arrogant bastard ...” The line went dead.

I sat there, stunned. I’d spent four hard months and a truckload of cash on that one account: scriptwriters, storyboards, videos, expensive dinners, tickets to shows and endless, endless meetings. I called my accountant’s office and asked for Maurice Shaw.

“The Pepsi account’s gone to Paul Reynolds,” I told him. “He just called.”

“Are you sure?”

“For Christ’s sake, Maurice, he’s not going to lie about a thing like that.”

There was a pause.

“You needed that account, John.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I am aware of that.” There was a pause. “So what now? Any advice? Any words of wisdom?”

I could feel the cold, hard, steel fingers of stress groping at my heart as I waited for a response.

“You’re behind on your mortgage and on the payments for the Mercedes. We received a call from Lend Lease yesterday.”

“To hell with Lend Lease,” I told him. “I’m asking for your advice, for Christ’s sake!”

There was another silence and then he came back, his voice cool and impersonal.

“John, it’s pointless taking that tone with me. I advised against the leasing of that vehicle. I also advised against the purchase of the property at Bondi. That money could have been put to better use in your company.”

“Look,” I told him, “the last thing I need right now is a lecture, okay? Give me something positive. What about another loan? You know, just enough to tide us over until I can sign up some new clients.”

There was a pause.

“John, I know it’s not really any of my business but you’re not drinking again, are you?”

“You’re right, it is none of your business. But just for the record, no, I haven’t had a drink for twelve months. Now for Christ’s sake, get your accountant’s hat on. There must be some way we can raise another loan.”

He ignored the question and came back again in his professional straightjacket.

“You still have a few outstanding creditors, don’t you?”

“Yes but the total wouldn’t amount to much. Fifteen ... sixteen thousand dollars, max.”

“Who owes you the most? The Italian restaurant at Bondi?”

“Yes. He owes me seven thousand. I talked to him a few days ago. He’s broke but he’s genuine. He offered to pay it off in instalments.”

“Why don’t you start legal proceedings? That should smarten him up a bit.”

“No. He’s in enough strife already without me suing the poor bastard. Come on, think, there must be some way out of this.”

“Well, the best advice I could give you would be to surrender the Mercedes. That would be a good start.” He paused but I knew what was coming. “The mortgage on the apartment is an enormous strain on the company, perhaps you should consider letting that go too.”

There was another long pause and I sat there in the void, staring out across the city. If I lost my home and my car, everyone would know I was on the skids. Word would get out quickly, Paul Reynolds would see to that.

“My grandmother’s dying in Ireland,” I said into the silence.

“I beg your pardon?”

“My grandmother. My father’s mother. She’s dying. She’s asked to see me.”

“I had no idea you had family in Ireland. I’ve never heard you mention them.”

“No, we aren’t close. I can hardly remember her. She’s from Inis Mór. It’s one of the Aran Islands in Galway Bay.”

“You’re not considering going over there now, are you?”

“I’m not sure, she’s my only living relation.”

“How long has it been since you were in contact with her?”

I could hear his mathematician’s brain kicking in, adding, subtracting, separating out feeling, emotion and humanity, replacing them with logic, clear thinking and common sense.

“I don’t know. Not since I was a child. Thirty years or so.”

“John, you’ve been under a lot of pressure recently and you have made some rather unfortunate decisions. But running off to some God-forsaken place in Ireland now can only make matters worse. They’ll bankrupt you, John, and ...”

I stared out across Sydney Harbour as he continued. Listing the debts, issuing the warnings, stating the obvious in his pedantic, two by two makes four, school marmish way.

“Hang on, Maurice,” I cut in, “my family’s from Inis Mór so I don’t appreciate the God-forsaken bit. Okay?”

“Look, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to offend you. What I’m trying to say is that, if you go over there now, you’ll almost certainly lose control of the company. You have to be responsible at a time like this.” He hesitated again. “And whilst we’re on the subject of money, I need to tell you that we won’t be able to continue representing you without some form of payment. You do realize you owe us a considerable amount also, don’t you?”

* * *

I spent the rest of the morning chasing debts. The excuses were endless but I knew they were all in the same boat as myself and I didn’t have the heart to push too hard.

By 2.30, I needed a break so I pulled on a raincoat, took a brisk walk up to Kings Cross and found myself a table at the Tropicana. There were a few of the old hard-heads from AA there but nobody I wanted to talk to so I ordered a coffee and scanned a newspaper to avoid eye contact.

The street outside was practically deserted. Just a few shoppers in flapping raincoats, hurried along like discarded newspapers by the rising wind. I’d seen a lot of Sydney storms but this one was going to be a doozy.

“Spaghetti?” The waitress had more ink than the tattooed man.

“Thanks,” I told her, trying not to follow the flight of a red-eyed dragon emblazoned across her shoulders and cleavage, “and another coffee, if you would.”

I drank the second coffee but couldn’t bring myself to eat, so after rearranging a bowl of spaghetti for half an hour, I gave up, paid the bill and left.

* * *

I’d barely settled back into my office chair when Janine’s head appeared around the doorway.

“There’s a Mr. Haines from Lend Lease on line three. It’s about the Mercedes ...”

I waited for her to disappear before picking up the receiver.

“John Carlyle.”

“Peter Haines from Lend Lease, Mr. Carlyle. I’ve been trying to contact you for days.”

“I’m sorry, Peter. How can I help you?”

“Mr. Carlyle, you’re almost five months in arrears on the Mercedes. We spoke several weeks ago, as I’m sure you’ll remember. You assured me at the time that you’d be bringing the account up to date by the thirtieth of last month. To the best of my knowledge that hasn’t happened.”

I was juggling figures as he spoke. My credit cards were close to the max but there was four or five thousand in my personal account, plus what I was owed.

“My apologies. I’ll have a cheque out to you before the end of the week.”

“We’d prefer it if our courier could pick up a bank cheque tomorrow morning. Failing that, we’d have no option but to repossess the vehicle.”

“That’s ridiculous,” I told him. “You’ll have your money in a day or two.”

“I’m sorry, but you’ve already broken two agreements and I have my instructions. Those are our terms.”

The contrived civility of his tone was infuriating, an ingratiating manner imbued with a subtle arrogance.

"I understand," I told him. "I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you. Our courier will be there in the morning." He hung up.

"John," Janine was standing in the doorway, "Roger Bannister from Cinematics is on line two, he's really angry."

As she reversed back out the door, I picked up the phone.

"John Carlyle."

"Well, finally. I've been trying to get hold of you for days."

"How can I help, Roger?"

"You know how you can help. You owe us \$23,000 and I don't want to hear any more of your excuses. I'm giving you one more week. If I'm not paid in full by then, I'll serve a bankruptcy notice on you immediately."

"Calm down," I told him. "Look, I fully intend paying the account. I just can't do it right now. As I've already explained, we're experiencing a temporary cash flow problem. As soon as we sign up some new business, I'll be paying your account in full. You have my word."

"Your word? And what would that be worth?"

"Be careful, Roger," I told him. "And a word of advice. Threatening me with bankruptcy will not help this situation."

"I was warned about you, Carlyle. I should have listened. You have seven days. If I'm not paid in full by then, you're finished."

"That's nonsense and you know it. We're a solvent company with a cash flow problem. That's the situation here. But I warn you, if you go about telling people we're bankrupt, I'll not hesitate to take legal action against you. Do you understand?"

"You arrogant bastard!" he blew up. "You're threatening to sue me? If you had any decency, you'd sell that bloody Porsche you ponce about in and pay your debts."

"It's a Mercedes, you moron. And all you've succeeded in doing in this conversation is moving your bill to the very bottom of the pile!"

I slammed the phone down and stared out the window. You need to get to the gym, I thought. Punch the living Jesus out of a bag. Get some of the weight off your chest.

* * *

As I sat there trying to calm down, I found myself studying a small cluster of photographs on the desk. The largest was of Nicky, smiling into a camera on a beach somewhere, years ago. The one in the middle was an old shot of me in a boxing ring, crouched over in red gloves and black shorts. No designer stubble, no styled hair, looking young, fit and determined. My trainer had always said I could have turned pro but for my ankle.

"Give this lad a new hoof," he'd declare after every match, "and I'll give you the next middleweight champion of Australia."

The smaller one was of Tristan on his seventh birthday. We'd never been close. I don't know why. I loved him, there was never any doubt about that, but I always seemed to be letting him down. I'd spent most of one session listening to the therapist talk about absent fathers.

She'd gone on for so long that I'd felt obliged to point out that this particular absent father was working his ass off to pay the bills ... including her \$125 an hour counseling fee.

I sat there for a while, mulling over my options. Then I checked the time and called my wife in Brittany.

"Hello, Nicky speaking ..."

Then the subtle change of tone when she realized it was me. The cautious, echoed silence as I told her of my grandmother's letter ...

Her soft, quiet guardedness like a stiletto in my heart - reaching up inside me to tear my soul apart - wondering how to reach her, praying she'd relent - praying she could leave behind the hurt and love me once again - praying we could put aside the silvered shards of glassy words - we used to cut each other with - praying that she'd turn again and bring me back the gift - the way it was before, no broken words no lies - when I'd least expect it, turning into eyes that held no blame - eyes that never harbored fear or shame - praying she'd believe in me again ...

"She's dying." Nicole's voice came back into focus, softer now, the last faint traces of her French accent stirring the pain of the distance between us. "Of course you must go to her. She is your only family."

"Look, if I go to Ireland, maybe I could come over to see you in France afterwards ...?"

"John." Janine was standing in front of my desk, her hands clasped together as if in prayer. "Mr. Bannister's on line two again. I told him you were busy but he said if you don't take the call, he's going to start bankruptcy proceedings today, immediately." I waved her away.

"Nicky, I'm sorry, can I put you on hold for ..."

She cut me off.

"Don't bother! What a bloody nerve! You wake me up in the middle of the night and then tell me you're too busy to talk? Nothing's changed, has it, John? Are you drinking again?"

"No, I'm not drinking. I haven't had a drink since you left and I don't appreciate you asking the same question every time we talk."

"Well, drunk or not, you're still the most self-centered person I ever met in my life."

"Try to understand, this is really important ..."

"Important to you, not us. I was up till midnight last night looking after my mother and I'm not interested in listening to any more of your nonsense. You haven't even asked how Tristan is. So, no, don't even think about coming to Brittany. You're not welcome here, is that clear?"

"Nicky?" She'd hung up.

The red light on line two had stopped flashing.

"Janine?" I called out. "Janine?"

I checked my watch; it was 4.50 pm. I buzzed the intercom, nothing. I went through to Reception. There was a note propped up by her telephone saying that she was sorry but she couldn't take the stress anymore.

I went back to my room and walked over to the bar, an extravagant red leather monstrosity we'd inherited from the previous tenant. Nicky had wanted to pull it out but it served a purpose and I didn't want people thinking I'd turned into a wowser just because I'd stopped drinking.

There were a dozen or more labels standing to attention across the mirrored shelves. Johnny Walker, Red Label, Bundaberg Rum, Vodka, Black Label, Gilbey's Gin. The one that caught my eye was a bottle of Krug Grand Cuvee 1990, its long, graceful neck topped with bright gold foil. How could that do me any harm? I didn't even like Champagne. When I drank, it was whisky with beer chasers, a Drambuie tossed in now and again to speed things up a little.

There was a sudden flash of lightning and I went across to the window. The horizon was completely obscured, purple black thunderclouds tumbling low overhead as the first deep rolls of thunder announced the beginning of the long-awaited deluge. And as I stood there mesmerized, the tropical downpour that had threatened all day burst its banks and swept in torrents across the darkened city like a tidal wave unleashed.

I opened the glass doors, stepped outside and stood underneath the canvas awning, staring at the city lights through the torrential rain. Every part of my life was in total disarray and I had no idea what to do about any of it.

A car horn was honking somewhere below and I peered over the railings. Directly across the road, the lights of the Beef & Bourbon Grill glowed warm and inviting through the slashing rain. Christ ... I thought, I need a few drinks. Not enough to get drunk, just enough to take the edge off.

A taxi had pulled up outside the restaurant and a group of people were screaming and laughing as they ran through the rain towards the entrance.

'Everyone's entitled to a few drinks.' The voices were back. 'You haven't had a drink for over a year, you can control it now. And besides, who would know?'

'You can't drink,' that one was weaker, less sure of itself. 'You're an alcoholic.' I'd realized that much from the AA meetings I'd been ordered to attend after my third drink-driving conviction. They had a questionnaire listing twenty symptoms. First time I'd scored 100% in anything. I knew AA helped a lot of people. Two of my friends were members. But I couldn't hack all the talk about a 'higher power.' It had really turned me off.

Three drinks. Three quick drinks and maybe a bite to eat. Who would know? A few beers to unwind then off home for an early night. What's wrong with that?

'You don't take the first drink,' that was the AA line. You heard it at every meeting. 'You don't drink for one day at a time.' What they didn't realize was that it was the drink that saved me. It was the only release I had. Without it, I'd have necked myself years ago.

I stared down through the pouring rain. Seven floors below, the concrete paving stones glowed dark, wet and inviting. It would be over in a split second ... over and done with. The voices were starting again. 'It's hopeless. You're an alcoholic, a loser. Your wife's gone. Your business is finished. You're fucked. That's the way it is.'

Having a drink would make more sense than killing myself. Even my therapist had agreed on that.

"Drinking's better than suicide," she'd said. "It's hard to come back from suicide, John."

Three drinks, no more. Three drinks then get out before the craving set in. As I stared down at the Beef & Bourbon, I realized that was exactly what I'd told myself before the last bust. I'd been dry for three months that time and it hadn't been easy.

Roseanne was a hard core AA I'd met at my first meeting. I'd told her up front that I had reservations about labeling myself an alcoholic and, as soon as I fulfilled the court order,

I'd be out of there. She was a middle-aged, big-bosomed, foul-mouthed ex-hooker with a wicked smile and a penchant for pithy one-liners. But she'd been sober since the ark ran aground and I was attracted by her no-holds-barred approach to sobriety.

"Reservations are for Indians, mate." We were at the Cosmopolitan Cafe in Double Bay, her favorite haunt. "If you want my advice, there are three things you need to do to stay sober. One, get your butt into a meeting every day. If you don't like the sound of that, make it two meetings a day. Two, put your cock in your pocket and leave it there, okay? You're a married man, stay away from the new women at AA. Half of them are neurotic, the rest are totally fucking insane. That means no coffees, no phone calls and no cozy little chats about spirituality. Okay? No nothing. And three, if you feel like taking a drink, call me." She pushed a scrap of paper across the table. "If you've already had a drink, don't bother. All you'll get then is a dial tone."

I'd completed the ten meetings but despite all the warnings, when the urge came, I'd pushed aside everything I'd learned and gone across the road convinced I was only going to have three drinks.

Those three drinks turned into a thirty-six-hour bender, most of which I couldn't even remember. I eventually came to in a taxi outside my apartment at 4.30 am, no wallet, no keys, no mobile.

Nicky paid off the cab and then spent the rest of the day ignoring me. I'd tried to explain a dozen times but she wouldn't even look at me. When I came home that Friday evening, she was gone, taking our son with her.

Standing in the teeming rain, I realized for the first time how totally meaningless my life was without them. I went back inside, called my travel agent and booked a ticket to Ireland.

Chapter 2

The Gresham Hotel

I flew into Dublin three days later, the last leg of my flight held up for seven dreary hours at Heathrow Airport due to the atrocious weather conditions. The gales that had decimated the English Coast were now hammering in across the Irish Sea, bringing torrential rain and deluging half of Europe.

As the taxi swung away from the terminal into the storm-darkened streets, I sat there wondering was it some sort of madness that had convinced me to return to Ireland or just an exhausted mind seeking refuge from the overwhelming problems I'd left behind.

"The Gresham Hotel it is then, sir." The driver was tossing comments over his shoulder as he wound his way through the evening traffic. "You've brought some fine weather with you now, as if we didn't have enough of our own."

"We had a heat wave in Sydney for the past three weeks," I told him. "So you can't blame me for any of this."

"Jesus Christ!" he exclaimed. "Sure a good day's sunshine would kill half of us here. Now what in God's name would any right thinking man be doing in Dublin at this time of the year when he could be cavorting around on a sunny beach with some of those half-naked women you have over there?"

"I'm on my way to Inis Mór to see my grandmother," I told him. "She's dying."

"Oh, my apologies," he said. "No disrespect meant to you now sir, and none taken I hope."

"No. Not at all. I hardly know her. I've been gone for years."

"Ah yes, but she's blood and the islanders are a close lot. Half of them are mad, of course, and the other half are a long way from sane. They've been over there too long, I suspect. God alone knows what they get up to in the winter time."

"You know Inis Mór?"

"No. I do not. I've never set foot on the Aran Islands and never will. They're still living in the dark ages over there or so I'm told."

He fell silent then, weaving his way through the evening traffic as I sat there, exhausted, staring out the side window at the endless sheets of water sweeping in westwards across the city, remembering my childhood, remembering the rains.