

The ROAD to KILNABRACKEN

**ON A ROAD DEEP IN THE COUNTRY
MORE OR LESS HOPELESSLY LOST, I SEARCHED VAINLY
FOR ROAD SIGNS EITHER TWENTY YEARS MISSING
OR TWISTED SENSELESS BY POOKAS
WITH NOTHING ELSE TO DO IN THAT LONELY PLACE.
I HAD A JOB TO PLAY, A CÉILI IN A TOWN
I HAD NOT VISITED BEFORE
FOR PEOPLE I DID NOT KNOW WELL ...
IT WAS LIKE A BAD DREAM. I PINCHED MYSELF ONCE OR TWICE
BUT NOTHING CHANGED.**

**AROUND A BEND I CAME UPON
WHAT ONCE HAD BEEN A TOWN, BUT NOW
WAS NOT, NOR BY ALL APPEARANCES
HAD IT BEEN FOR MANY YEARS.
THERE WAS A CHURCH, VERY SMALL AND VERY OLD
A CLUTCH OF EMPTY HOUSES
AND ABANDONED SHOPS, NOW DISPLAYING
NO MORE THAN BROKEN GLASS AND RUSTED METAL
(BUT IN ONE WINDOW A FLOWER POT
FILLED GOD KNOWS HOW OR WHY
WITH SOME KIND OF RIOTOUS PURPLE BLOSSOMS.)**

**YES, THIS HAD ONCE BEEN A TOWN, BUT HOW LONG SINCE
IT WOULD HAVE BEEN HARD TO TELL; NOW, IN ANY CASE,
NO MORE THAN AN EMPTY SPACE ON A MAP
OR PERHAPS AN OLD MAN'S MEMORY.**

**I SLOWED THE CAR TO LOOK WITHOUT MUCH HOPE
FOR SIGNS OF LIFE, ANXIOUS NOT TO BE LOST
FOR TOO MUCH LONGER IN THIS UNKNOWN PLACE
AT TIME OF SETTING SUN AND RISING MIST.
COWS AND SHEEP GRAZING IN THE PASTURES NEARBY
WATCHED WITH THE BAREST OF INTEREST
AS I KNOCKED ON THE LIKELIEST-LOOKING OF DOORS
RECEIVING ONLY ECHOES AND SMALL SCURRYING NOISES
IN REPLY.**

**I CROSSED TO THE LITTLE CHURCH, AND WAS SURPRISED
TO SEE BOTH GATE AND FRONT DOOR OPEN
AND CANDLES BURNING INSIDE. IN THE VESTIBULE
WAS A SHRINE: THE VIRGIN AT LOURDES
BEFORE A KNEELING BERNADETTE.**

The ROAD to KILNABRACKEN

I COULD NOT HELP BUT MARVEL
AT THE TALENT OF SOME NAMELESS COUNTRY ARTISAN
WHOSE CREATION STOOD BEFORE ME IN ALL ITS BEAUTY
SHOWING SCARCELY LESS SKILL, AND NO LESS LOVE
THAN ANY WORK OF CLASSICAL MASTER
SO RECOGNIZED AND PRAISED BY MEN.

IN THE FADING LIGHT
I TRIED TO READ AN ANNOUNCEMENT POSTED ON THE WALL.
I COULD MAKE OUT ONLY THE WORDS "OCTOBER"
AND "1943".
BUT THERE WERE FRESH FLOWERS
AT THE VIRGIN'S FEET; I GUESSED THEY WERE NOT MORE
THAN A DAY OR TWO OLD.

THE LITTLE CHURCH WAS EMPTY, COLD, AND DARK.
THE SETTING SUN HAD FADED INTO A BANK
OF HEAVY GREY CLOUD, AND LEFT
A DOZEN OR SO SCATTERED CANDLES
TO PROVIDE WHATEVER LIGHT AND WARMTH
THE LITTLE CHURCH MIGHT REQUIRE
FOR THAT NOVEMBER NIGHT.

ONCE MY EYES HAD ADJUSTED TO THE LACK OF LIGHT
I RECOGNIZED MOST OF THE STATUES:
THERESE AND DOMINIC, JOSEPH AND FRANCIS,
THE SACRED HEART; IN ONE SHADOWED CORNER
A LIFE-SIZED CRUCIFIX, IMAGE OF AGONY SO REAL
I WAS AFRAID TO BE ALONE WITH IT.

I TURNED INSTEAD TO FRANCIS.
ALTHOUGH I HAD NOT INTENDED TO,
I KNELT TO SAY A FEW PRAYERS
(AND DID NOT EVEN MIND THE HARD UNFORGIVING KNEELER).
I PRAYED FOR PRESENT AND FUTURE
BUT MOSTLY, AS I RECALLED LATER,
FOR PAST. IT WAS STRANGE:
IT SEEMED SO EASY IN THAT PLACE
TO BRING FORGOTTEN NAMES TO MIND.

IN SPITE OF MY PRESSING ENGAGEMENT
AND PREDICAMENT IN NOT KNOWING WHERE I WAS
I SEEM TO HAVE LOST TRACK OF THE TIME.

The ROAD to KILNABRACKEN

**WHEN I OPENED MY EYES
THE CHURCH WAS EVEN DARKER
DESPITE THE VALIANT EFFORTS OF THE CANDLES.**

**I ROSE TO LEAVE, TRYING TO RUB PAIN FROM SORE KNEES,
BUT THE FIGURE OF A MAN APPROACHED
FROM OUT OF THE DARKNESS. I WAS TOO SURPRISED
TO BE AFRAID, OR TO CRY OUT, OR OTHERWISE TO DISTURB
THE SERENITY OF THAT LITTLE CORNER
OF SPACE AND TIME.**

**HE INTRODUCED HIMSELF AS THE PARISH PRIEST,
FATHER PAT DONNELLY. HE WELCOMED ME
AND LISTENED HALF AMUSED AND HALF CONCERNED
TO MY TALE OF MISSING ROAD SIGNS
AND UNCARING CATTLE.**

**- IT'S EASY TO GET LOST AROUND HERE, HE SAID WITH A LAUGH.
HEAVEN KNOWS IT HAPPENED OFTEN ENOUGH TO ME
WHEN I WAS FIRST POSTED HERE FROM MY HOME IN SLIGO.
SOMEHOW IT SEEMED INDECENT FOR A PRIEST TO GET LOST
AND SOME SAID 'T WAS BRINGING SHAME ON THE PARISH
SO DIDN'T MY LITTLE FLOCK DECIDE TO TAKE A COLLECTION
FOR A SPECIAL PRESENT FOR ME:
AN ORDNANCE SURVEY MAP OF THE ENTIRE COUNTY
FULL OF RIVERS AND HILLS AND ROADS AND TOWNS
ALL LAID OUT NEATLY ON SQUARES AND GRIDS...
BUT I SAY TO YOU THAT EVEN IN THOSE DAYS
THIS TOWNLAND WAS NO MORE THAN A DOT WAY OFF IN A CORNER.
MY PARISHIONERS WERE VERY UPSET - IT SEEMS THEY FIGURED
THAT THIS PLACE SHOULD BE RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE OF THE MAP,
OR MAYBE HAVE A SPECIAL LITTLE PANEL ON THE BACK
LIKE DUBLIN AND CORK AND GALWAY AND OTHER CITIES HAD.
I TRIED TO TELL THEM, FOOLISH YOUNG KNOW-IT-ALL THAT I WAS,
THAT ONE CROSSROADS, ONE STREAM, AND TWO COW-PATHS
WOULD PROBABLY NOT DESERVE THE ORDNANCE SURVEY'S SPECIAL
ATTENTION
BUT THEY NEVER BELIEVED ME.**

**HE LAUGHED AGAIN. - THEY WERE SO INDIGNANT, GOD LOVE THEM,
IT WAS YEARS BEFORE THEY STOPPED BLAMING ME.
BY THEN I KNEW MY WAY AROUND.
I HUNG THAT LOVELY MAP ON THE WALL OF MY ROOM
AS A REMINDER OF SOMETHING OR OTHER ...
IT'S STILL THERE.**

The ROAD to KILNABRACKEN

**I ASKED FOR PARTICULARS OF KILNABRACKEN,
THE TOWN I WAS HEADED FOR WHEN I GOT LOST.**

- YOU'RE IN LUCK, HE SAID.

**- SURE IT'S NOT TWENTY MINUTES FROM HERE
STRAIGHT THROUGH THE GAP ON THIS SAME ROAD.
YOU WEREN'T SO LOST AFTER ALL.**

**MY RELIEF BEING EVIDENT, HE INVITED ME IN FOR A CUP OF TEA
WHICH I DIDN'T REALIZE UNTIL THAT MOMENT
I HAD NEEDED FOR A WHILE. - YOU'VE LOADS OF TIME, HE SAID,
AND I DON'T GET MANY VISITORS, ESPECIALLY NOT MUSICAL ONES.
NOT UNTIL LATER DID IT OCCUR TO ME
THAT I HAD NEVER MENTIONED ANYTHING TO HIM
ABOUT BEING A MUSICIAN.**

**BEFORE WE LEFT THE CHURCH, HE KNELT FOR A MOMENT
UNDER THE SANCTUARY LAMP. I NOTICED HE PRAYED IN IRISH.**

**- WELL NOW, ANOTHER LOVELY DAY GONE, AND PLEASE GOD
ONE JUST LIKE IT TOMORROW, HE SAID AS WE BLESSED OURSELVES.
AS WE CROSSED TO THE RECTORY
HE ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT MY JOURNEY.**

**- THE CÉILI DANCING IS MARVELLOUS, HE SAID WHEN I EXPLAINED TO HIM
MY REASON FOR BEING IN HIS PART OF THE WORLD.**

**- WE HAD OUR OWN VERSION OF IT
WHEN I WAS A BOY GROWING UP. MY MOTHER, GOD REST HER,
WAS AN ANGEL OF GRACE, BUT MY FATHER, GOD REST HIM,
WAS NOT WHAT YOU WOULD CALL GIFTED IN THAT PARTICULAR ART FORM.
NEVER COULD GET THE HANG OF WHAT TO DO WITH HIS FEET
WHEN A SPADE OR OTHER AGRICULTURAL IMPLEMENT WASN'T INVOLVED.
(ALTHOUGH, FAIR PLAY TO HIM, NOBODY IN THAT PART OF THE COUNTY
COULD BEAT HIM FOR GROWING CABBAGES.)
ONE TIME, FOR SOME REASON I CAN'T RECALL IT
MAY HAVE BEEN A WAGER OR A DARE OF SOME SORT ,
OR HE MAY HAVE THOUGHT HE WAS DOING MY POOR MOTHER A FAVOR DIDN'T
MY FATHER SIGN UP FOR LESSONS FROM THE LOCAL DANCING MASTER
A HARD UNSMILING MAN WHO SPOKE VERY LITTLE
AND WHOSE STUDENTS WERE ALL TERRIFIED OF HIM.
THE MASTER WAS A MAN OF FEW WORDS, ALL RIGHT,**

The ROAD to KILNABRACKEN

AND BEGOD WE SOON FOUND OUT WHAT THOSE WORDS WERE ON THE NIGHTS HE AND MY FATHER WOULD TAKE OVER THE PARLOR FOR THE DANCE LESSON. MY FATHER HAD A FEW CHOICE ONES TOO, BUT MOST OF THE TIME YOU COULD BARELY HEAR EITHER OF THEM ABOVE THE SHRIEKS OF LAUGHTER FROM SÉAMUS MÓR THE FIDDLER WHO CAME ALONG TO PROVIDE THE MUSIC FOR THE LESSONS. HE WOULD TAKE NO MONEY FOR IT, AND WHEN SOMEONE ASKED WHY, SÉAMUS SAID HE BELIEVED IT WAS UN-CHRISTIAN TO MAKE A LIVING OFF THE SUFFERINGS OF A FELLOW HUMAN BEING. HE NEVER SAID IF HE MEANT MY FATHER OR THE DANCING MASTER TO JUDGE BY THE SOUNDS WE HEARD COMING OUT OF THAT PARLOR, HE PROBABLY MEANT THE BOTH OF THEM. ... BY THE WAY, THE DANCING LESSONS LASTED ONLY UNTIL MY BROTHER PETER NEEDED THE MONEY TO GET TO ENGLAND.

- I WAS MAKING GREAT PROGRESS WITH IT, MY FATHER WOULD ALWAYS SAY AFTERWARDS. TOO BAD I HAD TO STOP. I WAS JUST STARTING TO TAKE TO IT ... AND MY MOTHER - WISE WOMAN THAT SHE WAS - WOULD ALWAYS AGREE WITH HIM.

AFTER TEA, FATHER PAT SHOWED ME AROUND THE RECTORY. ONLY ONE ROOM HAD ELECTRICITY; THE REST WERE DARK OR LIT BY GASLAMPS. I SAW NO RADIOS OR TELEVISIONS OR COMPUTERS OR VCRS OR ANY OF THE FAMILIAR MACHINERY WE TAKE FOR GRANTED. BEFORE I COULD ASK ABOUT THIS, HOWEVER, I SAW A FIDDLE IN THE ROOM HE CALLED THE LIBRARY HANGING CAREFULLY FROM A PEG, WITH A BOW NEARBY. IT SEEMED WELL CARED-FOR AND RECENTLY PLAYED.

I COULDN'T CONTAIN MY CURIOSITY.

- YES, I PLAY A BIT, HE CONFIDED. - MIND YOU, NOTHING TOO FANCY LIKE THOSE LADS FROM BACK IN MY PART OF THE WORLD. I LEARNED A FEW TUNES FROM MY UNCLE MARTIN AND I LEARNED TO READ A LITTLE MUSIC IN THE SEMINARY. NOW I PLAY JUST TO KEEP MYSELF OUT OF TROUBLE THE ODD TIMES WHEN I GET TIRED OF WRESTLING WITH SAINT PAUL. THIS FIDDLE BELONGED TO ONE OF MY PARISHIONERS; WHEN HE PASSED AWAY, HIS WIDOW ASKED ME TO CARE FOR IT. SOMETIMES I THINK IT HAS ITS OWN TUNES IN IT - EITHER THAT OR MY MEMORY IS FADING BECAUSE SOMETIMES NOTES COME OUT OF IT THAT I DON'T RECOGNIZE OR RECALL.

The ROAD to KILNABRACKEN

I ASKED IF HE WOULD PLAY FOR ME. - *I CAN ALWAYS STAND TO HAVE A FEW NEW TUNES AROUND*, I SAID. IT WAS ONLY THEN THAT I NOTICED THAT HIS LEFT HAND WAS BADLY SCARRED. I WAS SORRY I HAD INSISTED, AND ADDED SOMETHING LIKE "BUT ONLY IF YOU WANT TO" OR SOME OTHER SILLY THING TO COVER MY EMBARRASSMENT. HE SAW ME LOOKING AT THE HAND AND SMILED. - *NOT TO WORRY*, HE SAID. *NOTHING WOULD PLEASE ME MORE.*

GENTLY HE TOOK THE FIDDLE OFF ITS PEG, ADJUSTED THE TUNING, APPLIED ROSIN TO THE BOW, ADJUSTED THE TUNING AGAIN, ASKED IF I WOULD LIKE A DROP OF WHISKEY (I WOULD), WENT TO GET BOTTLE AND GLASSES, Poured AND TOASTED, ADJUSTED TUNING AGAIN ... AFTER A FINAL TIGHTENING OF THE BOW, AT LONG LAST HE AND THE FIDDLE BEGAN TO PRODUCE SOUNDS.

- *I'LL PLAY ONE OF THOSE STRANGE TUNES I CALL THE FIDDLE'S OWN*, HE SAID.

I NEVER HEARD IT ANYWHERE ELSE, BUT I LIKE IT.

IT WAS INDEED A STRANGE TUNE - A REEL - BUT HIS PLAYING WAS EXCELLENT.

I COMPLIMENTED BOTH; HE THANKED ME. I ASKED FOR ANOTHER.

AS HE PLAYED, I CLOSED MY EYES, NOT DARING TO LOOK AGAIN AT THE INJURED HAND.

THIS TIME IT WAS A JIG.

I THOUGHT I RECOGNIZED A VERSION OF "PAY THE RECKONING" BUT HE SAID HE HAD ANOTHER NAME FOR IT THAT HE EXPECTED TO RECALL SHORTLY.

IT WAS THE SAME

WITH "LAKES OF SLIGO" AND "SAILOR'S BONNET".

- *NO, THOSE AREN'T THE NAMES THAT I HAVE FOR THEM*, HE SAID. *BUT GIVE ME A MOMENT AND I'LL REMEMBER WHAT WE CALLED THEM.* THEN MORE REELS AND A HORNPIPE, ALL UNFAMILIAR AND WONDERFUL, AND ANOTHER TOAST TO MUSIC.

I SUDDENLY REMEMBERED THE CÉILI I WAS SUPPOSED TO BE PLAYING.

- *DON'T CONCERN YOURSELF AT ALL*, HE SAID. *THERE'S PLENTY OF TIME. IN THAT TOWN THEY NEVER START DANCING BEFORE HALF EIGHT.*

ACCORDING TO MY WATCH, IT HAD JUST GONE SEVEN.

The ROAD to KILNABRACKEN

I ASKED IF HE HAD WRITTEN THE TUNES DOWN SOMEWHERE.

**- AH NO, HE SAID, AND I COULD HAVE SWORN I SAW HIM BLUSH.
I NEVER BOTHERED TO, NOBODY BUT MYSELF
WAS EVER INTERESTED IN THEM, AT LEAST UNTIL TONIGHT.
AND TO BE HONEST, I DON'T KNOW IF I COULD DO THE NOTES EVEN IF I
WANTED TO ...
YOU KNOW, THE OLD EYES AREN'T WHAT THEY USED TO BE.**

**IF HE WOULD PLAY THEM SLOWLY, I SAID,
I WOULD TRY TO WRITE THEM OUT.
HE AGREED. THERE WAS NO MANUSCRIPT PAPER IN THE HOUSE
BUT PLENTY OF ANCIENT "SERMON PAPER", AS HE CALLED IT
AND A BATTERED OLD RULER THAT LOOKED AS IF
IT HAD SERVED TIME IN CROMWELL'S ARMY. I DREW
WHAT WERE SUPPOSED TO BE STAVES ON A DOZEN SHEETS
AND, AFTER ANOTHER TOAST, WE WERE OFF.**

**HE PLAYED, AND PATIENTLY REPEATED
PHRASES I DIDN'T GRASP AT FIRST HEARING.
I THINK WE STOPPED AT ABOUT TWENTY TUNES:
THE FINGERS OF MY WRITING HAND WERE NEARLY FALLING OFF.**

**- I LIKE TO THINK I KNOW A LOT OF TUNES, I TOLD HIM.
BUT I HAVE NEVER SO MUCH AS HEARD ANY OF THESE, MUCH LESS PLAYED
THEM.**

**- AH WELL, YOU KNOW HOW IT IS, HE SAID WITH A SHY SMILE.
I'M SURE YOU HAVE MANY MORE THAT I'VE NEVER HEARD OF ...**

EVENTUALLY I MADE READY TO DEPART. HE POLITELY CONCEALED A YAWN.

**- THAT WAS A GRAND OLD SESSION NOW, HE SAID WITH A SMILE,
ALTHOUGH I DID ALL OF THE PLAYING. BUT IT FELT GOOD
TO HAVE SOMEONE HERE TO LISTEN TO THE TUNES WITH ME,
SOMEONE WHO COULD UNDERSTAND AND APPRECIATE
WHAT WAS INVOLVED ... FINE TUNES THEY WERE ANYWAY
MADE BY MUSICIANS THAT WE'LL NEVER KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT.
HE CLOSED HIS EYES. - GOD BE WITH THOSE MEN AND WOMEN
WHO HAVE GIVEN THE JOY OF MUSIC TO THE WORLD, HE SAID SOFTLY.**

**I OFFERED TO SEND HIM COPIES OF THE TUNES
AFTER I HAD WRITTEN THEM OUT
BUT HE DECLINED. - SURE THEY'D ONLY GET LOST
IN THAT PILE OF THEOLOGY OVER THERE, HE SAID,
INDICATING A HUGE DARK DESK COVERED WITH DUSTY PAPERS.**

The ROAD to KILNABRACKEN

*BUT MAYBE YOU COULD BRING THEM WITH YOU IF YOU COME BACK THIS WAY.
YOU'RE WELCOME FOR ANOTHER VISIT ANY TIME.*

BY THIS TIME THE FULL MOON HAD RISEN OVER THE MISTY FIELDS.
APART FROM THE SMALL GASLAMP ON THE FRONT OF THE RECTORY
THERE WAS NOT A LIGHT IN SIGHT FOR MILES.
OUR BREATH STEAMED; IT HAD GOTTEN COLD.
HE WALKED ME TO THE CAR, REASSURING ME
THAT I WOULD BE IN KILNABRACKEN IN PLENTY OF TIME FOR THE CÉILI.
MY WATCH SAID SEVEN-THIRTY.

BEFORE I DROVE OFF, HE GAVE ME HIS BLESSING.

*- GOD GO WITH YOU, HE SAID.
AND REMEMBER TO COME BACK SOME TIME -
I'LL HAVE A FEW MORE TUNES FOR YOU, I PROMISE.*

AFTER A FINAL WAVE, HE WENT INSIDE THE RECTORY
AND CLOSED THE HEAVY DOOR BEHIND HIM.

I ARRIVED IN KILNABRACKEN AT EXACTLY TEN MINUTES OF EIGHT,
AND AFTER INITIAL GREETINGS AND INTRODUCTIONS
WE GOT TUCKED INTO THE JOB
OF SETTING UP, AND AS USUAL
CONTENDING WITH ALL THE WIRES AND BOXES AND MIKE-STANDS
DIDN'T LEAVE MUCH OPPORTUNITY FOR CHAT
BUT EVEN IN THAT COMMOTION
THE THOUGHT OF FATHER PAT NEVER LEFT MY MIND.

THE CÉILI WAS A BIG SUCCESS (AND I LAUGHED TO MYSELF TO SEE
THAT THEY DID IN FACT START DANCING AT HALF EIGHT).
ONCE, IN A CALEDONIAN SET TOWARDS THE END OF THE NIGHT,
I TRIED TO START ONE OF FATHER PAT'S TUNES
BUT I MADE A MESS OF IT
AND SETTLED FOR "THE YELLOW TINKER" INSTEAD,
IGNORING AS BEST I COULD
THE LOOKS OF SCORNFUL AMUSEMENT FROM THE OTHER MUSICIANS.

LATER AFTER THE CÉILI I SAT TALKING WITH SOME OF THE LOCALS
IN THE LITTLE PUB ACROSS THE ROAD FROM THE HALL.

*- I WOULD HAVE BEEN HERE SOONER, I SAID, ONLY I GOT LOST.
IT'S A GOOD THING I MET FATHER PAT WHEN I DID, OR ELSE*

The ROAD to KILNABRACKEN

**I'D STILL BE WANDERING AROUND SOMEWHERE.
AND ISN'T HE A GREAT FIDDLER? THAT WAS ONE OF HIS TUNES
I TRIED TO START BEFORE...**

I STOPPED WHEN I NOTICED THAT LOOKS WERE BEING EXCHANGED.

**- DID YOU SAY FATHER PAT? ASKED JERRY THE DRUMMER,
THE OLDEST MEMBER OF THE BAND.
HE HAD AN ODD LOOK ON HIS FACE.**

**- YES, I REPLIED, FATHER PAT DONNELLY, THE PRIEST IN
IT WAS THEN I REMEMBERED
THAT I HAD NEVER ASKED FATHER THE NAME OF THE TOWN
OR OF HIS LITTLE CHURCH...**

**- ANYWAY YOU MUST KNOW HIM, I PERSISTED.
A FINE FIDDLER. HIS PARISH IS NOT TWENTY MINUTES FROM HERE
BACK UP ONE OF THESE ROADS ...**

**THERE WAS SILENCE. ONE OF THE DANCERS
AN WOMAN WHO COULD NOT HAVE BEEN LESS THAT SEVENTY
BOWED HER HEAD AND BLESSED HERSELF.
I THOUGHT I SAW SOME OF THE OTHERS SHIVER
ALTHOUGH GOD KNOWS THE PUB'S ROARING TURF FIRE
SEEMED MORE THAN ENOUGH TO KEEP THE WINTER COLD AWAY...**

**ANOTHER ONE OF THE DANCERS, AN OLD FARMER,
SPOKE UP AT LAST. HIS VOICE WAS SHAKING, OR SO IT SEEMED.**

**- FATHER PAT DONNELLY, GOD REST HIM,
HAS BEEN DEAD THESE FIFTY YEARS, HE SAID SLOWLY.
JUST BEFORE HE DIED, HIS CHURCH WAS DESTROYED BY A FIRE.
MEN SAID THAT THE LOSS OF IT KILLED HIM;
OTHERS SAY THAT IT WAS THE LOSS OF HIS FIDDLE.
'T WAS A GIFT, THEY SAID, FROM SOMEONE VERY SPECIAL TO HIM
AND THE LOSS OF HIS POWER TO PLAY EVER AGAIN
WHEN HIS LEFT HAND WAS BURNED TRYING TO QUENCH THE FLAMES
BROKE HIS HEART ... GOD REST HIM, THE OLD MAN SAID AGAIN.**

**- I RECALL HIM WELL, SAID ANOTHER OLD MAN QUIETLY.
BORN SOMEWHERE IN SLIGO, HE WAS. CHRISTENED TWO OF MY NEPHEWS.
HAD A WEALTH OF GREAT TUNES
THAT NONE OF THE LOCAL LADS COULD EVER SEEM TO LEARN ...
BUT ... BUT YOU SAY YOU SAW HIM TONIGHT? HE ASKED**

The ROAD to KILNABRACKEN

AND TURNED TO LOOK AT THE OTHERS - NOT AT ME - AFTER THE QUESTION.

**I KNEW WHAT MY ANSWER WOULD HAVE BEEN
A HALF-HOUR EARLIER; NOW I WASN'T SURE WHAT TO SAY.**

***- I WAS LOST, I SAID, SOMEWHERE ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE GAP.
I NEEDED HELP AND STOPPED AT HIS CHURCH.
HE INVITED ME IN FOR TEA, AND I LISTENED TO HIM PLAY ...
HE HAD SOME MARVELLOUS TUNES.
I NEVER ASKED ABOUT HIS INJURED HAND.***

**LOOKS AND SILENCES AGAIN. THE OLD WOMAN WAS CRYING.
THE OTHERS FINISHED DRINKS AND HEADED FOR THE DOOR
WITHOUT A WORD. ONE MAN I HAD NOT NOTICED BEFORE
CAME OVER AND PATTED ME ON THE SHOULDER
BUT SAID NOTHING.**

**EVEN JERRY THE DRUMMER,
NORMALLY THE MOST SOCIABLE OF MUSICIANS,
COULD MANAGE NO MORE THAN A "GOOD NIGHT AND SAFE HOME"
ON HIS WAY OUT.**

**I SAT FOR A LONG TIME ALONE. FINALLY THE PUBLICAN
SUGGESTED SOFTLY THAT CLOSING TIME WAS NEAR
AND ASKED IF I WANTED COFFEE.**

- YOU HAVE A LONG TRIP AHEAD OF YOU, HE SAID.

I WONDERED ALOUD

ABOUT THE QUICKEST WAY OF GETTING BACK TO THE CITY:

***- FROM HERE BACK TO THE CHURCH, THAT'S TWENTY MINUTES,
AND THEN DOWN THE MAIN ROAD TO ...***

THE PUBLICAN, HIS BACK TURNED TOWARDS ME, WAS SHAKING HIS HEAD.

***- FROM HERE BACK TO THAT CROSSROADS IS AN HOUR OR MORE, HE SAID.
I'VE OFTEN TRAVELLED THAT ROAD MYSELF - MY WIFE'S PEOPLE LIVE OUT
THERE***

A MILE OR TWO PAST WHERE THE CHURCH ...

***- BUT I LEFT THERE AT HALF-SEVEN, I INTERRUPTED,
AND IT WAS SEVEN-FIFTY WHEN I GOT HERE. I KNOW
BECAUSE I CHECKED MY WATCH BOTH TIMES.***

***- AN HOUR, NO LESS, THE PUBLICAN SAID AGAIN
THE WAY YOU WOULD TELL AN OBVIOUS THING TO A CHILD.
IT WAS AS IF HE HADN'T HEARD ME.***

The ROAD to KILNABRACKEN

**(NOT ONCE IN THE CONVERSATION
HAD HE EVER TURNED TO LOOK AT ME
WHILE HE BUSIED HIMSELF BEHIND THE BAR.)**

**AS IT TURNED OUT, I TOOK ANOTHER ROAD,
OR MAYBE IT WAS THE SAME ROAD:
LOW CLOUDS MOVED QUICKLY NOW
ACROSS THE FACE OF THE MOON; IN THE CHANGES
OF LIGHT TO SHADOW AND BACK, I COULD NOT TELL.
IN ANY CASE, I CAME UPON
NO CHURCH OR RUINED TOWN.**

**DESPITE THE LONG JOURNEY, I SLEPT POORLY THAT NIGHT.
THE NEXT DAY I LOOKED FOR THE SHEETS OF PAPER
WHERE I HAD WRITTEN OUT FATHER PAT'S TUNES.
I NEVER FOUND THEM.**

**I WAS NOT ASKED TO PLAY IN KILNABRACKEN AGAIN,
NOR HAVE I BEEN BACK IN THAT PART OF THE COUNTRY
SINCE THAT DAY. I HAVE TRIED MANY TIMES OVER THE YEARS
TO REMEMBER FATHER PAT'S TUNES
OR HOW I GOT TO HIS CHURCH ... BUT SOMEHOW I KNEW
THAT I WOULD NEVER FIND THAT ROAD AGAIN.**

**THE LOCALS' ACCOUNT OF THE CHURCH FIRE WAS TRUE:
A FRIEND OF MINE FROM THE AREA CONFIRMED IT.**

**- IT WAS A GREAT LOSS, SHE SAID, BOTH CHURCH AND PRIEST.
I RECALL IT AS IF IT WERE YESTERDAY.**

**PAINFUL MEMORIES MADE FOR A SHORT CONVERSATION.
AND ONCE AGAIN, I FORGOT TO ASK THE NAME OF THE TOWN.
BUT IN THE END, TO ASK TOO MANY QUESTIONS
WOULD HAVE MADE NO DIFFERENCE, COULD NOT HAVE DRAWN
THE LINE WE LIKE BETWEEN WHAT IS TRUE AND WHAT IS NOT.**

**BUT I HAVE TRIED TO PRAY
EACH DAY OF MY LIFE SINCE I TRAVELLED THAT ROAD
THE PRIEST'S LITTLE PRAYER I HEARD IN THIS WORLD OR THE NEXT:**

***GOD BE WITH THOSE MEN AND WOMEN
WHO HAVE GIVEN THE JOY OF MUSIC TO THE WORLD.***

The ROAD to KILNABRACKEN

- 1997