

Shovel Kings

Edna O'Brien

In one lapel was a small green and gold harp, and in the other a flying angel. His blue jacket had seen better days. He wore a black felt homburg hat, and his white hair fell in coils – almost to his shoulders. His skin was sallow, but his huge hands were a dark nut brown, and on the right hand he had a lopsided knuckle, obviously caused by some injury. Above it, on the wrist, he wore a wide black strap. He could have been any age, and he seemed like a man on whom a permanent frost had settled. He drank the Guinness slowly, lifting the glass with a measured gravity. We were in a massive pub named Biddy Mulligan's, in North London, on St Patrick's Day, and the sense of expectation was palpable. Great banners with Happy St Patrick draped the walls, and numerous flat television screens carried pictures of the homeland, featuring hills, dales, lakes, tidy towns, and highlights of famed sporting moments down the years. Little votive lamps, not unlike Sacred Heart lamps, were nailed in corners to various wooden beams and seemed talismanic on that momentous day. Only three people were there, the quiet man, a cracked woman with tangled hair gabbling away, and myself.

Adrian, the young barman, was chalking up the promised delights, large Jameson at less than half price, teeny dishes of Irish stew and apple cake for free. Moreover, the governor had left a box full of green woolly hats and green scarves that were reserved to be given to the regular customers. Adrian was young and affable, asking if I needed more coffee and wondering if the quiet man, whom he called Rafferty, would like a refill, in honour of the day. Much to the chagrin of Clodagh, the spry young assistant, Adrian indulged his nostalgia by playing 'Galway Shawl' on the jukebox, over and over again.

The coffee that I had been served was dire, but I lingered, because of being early for an appointment, and picked up a newspaper that was lying on the vacant table next to me. Disaster and scandals featured prominently. Further unrest was reported in a northern province of China; an actress was pictured being helped out of a nightclub in a state of inebriation; another photograph showed her arriving only a few hours earlier wearing a white clinging dress and perilously high heels. A hostage who had been released in some African bush after sixty-seven days in detention seemed dazed by the posse of journalists who surrounded him. I looked at the weather forecast for New York, where I had often spent St Patrick's Day and stood among milling crowds as they cheered floats and bands, feeling curiously alone in the midst of all that celebration.

My appointment was with a doctor whom I had been seeing for the best part of a year and who had just moved to this less salubrious part of London, leaving his rooms in Primrose Hill, probably because of the rents being exorbitant. This would be my first time at this new abode, and I dreaded it, partly because I had left, as I saw it, fragments of myself behind in that other room, with its stacks of books, an open fire, and an informality that was not customary between patient and analyst. Sitting there, with an eye on the wall clock, I kept checking on this new address and asked Adrian about such and such a road to make doubly sure that I had not gone astray. Yes, he knew the man, said he had been in several times, which I took to imply that my doctor liked a drink.

Meanwhile, Clodagh was bustling around in an emerald-green pinafore, reciting a verse for all to hear:

Boxty on the griddle
Boxty in the pan
If you don't eat the boxty
You'll never get your man.

The light from the leaded-glass panels danced on her shadow as she flitted from table to table, extolling the miracle of the boxty potato bread and dragging a duster over the round brown tables which bore the mottling of years and years of porter stains.

That done, she began to pipe green tincture onto the drawn pints of Guinness to simulate the emblem of the shamrock, something Rafferty observed with a quiet sufferance. A noisy group burst in, decked with leprechauns and green gewgaws of every description, led by a tall woman who was carrying fresh shamrock still attached to a clump of rich earth. In a slightly affected voice she described writing to her old uncle several times since Christmas, reminding him that the plant must not be detached from its soil and, moreover, he must remember to sprinkle it with water and post it in a perforated box filled with loam.

'Was it holy water by any chance?' the cracked woman shouted out.

‘Shut your gob,’ she was told, at which she raised a hectoring finger, claiming, ‘I was innit before you was all born.’

As the single sprigs of shamrock were passed around, they somehow looked a little forlorn.

A second group followed hot on the heels of the first group, all greeting each other heartily, spreading coats and bags on the various tables and commandeering quiet nooks in the alcoves, for friends whom they claimed were due. A cocky young man with sideburns, wearing a black leather jacket, walked directly to the fruit machine, where the lime-green and cherry-red lights flashed on and off, the lit symbols spinning at a tantalising speed. Two youngsters, possibly his brothers, stood by, gazing and gaping as he fed coin after coin into the machine, and as they waited in vain for the clatter of the payout money, the younger one held an open handkerchief to receive the takings. The elder, who was plump, consigned squares of chocolate into his mouth and sucked with relish, while his brother looked on with the woebegone expression of an urchin.

I had put the newspaper down and was jotting in a notebook one or two things that I might possibly discuss with my doctor when, to my surprise, Rafferty was standing above me and almost bashfully said, ‘Do you mind if I take back my paper?’ I apologised, offering him a drink, but he was already on his way, detached from the boisterous crowd, carrying himself with a strange otherworldly dignity as he raised his right hand to Adrian in salutation.

Three or four weeks passed before we exchanged a few words.

‘What’s the harp for?’ I asked one morning when, as had become his habit, he made a little joke of offering me the newspaper.

‘To prove that I’m an Irishman,’ he replied.

‘And the angel?’

‘Oh that’s the guardian angel . . . We all have one,’ he said, with a deferential half smile.

About six months after our first meeting I came upon Rafferty unexpectedly, and we greeted each other like old friends. I was on the Kilburn High Road outside a secondhand furniture shop, where he was seated on a leather armchair, smiling at passers-by, like a potentate. He was totally at ease out in the open, big white lazy clouds sailing by in the sky above us, surrounded by chairs, tables, chests of drawers, fire irons, fenders, crockery, and sundry bric-a-brac.

Offering me a seat, he said that the owner believed his presence perked up an interest in business, because once, when he had been singing ‘I’ll Take You Home Again, Kathleen’, passers-by had stopped to listen and, as he put it, had browsed. Nearby, a woman haggled over the price of a buckled sieve, and a young mother was in vain trying to get her son off the rocking horse to which he was affixed. The white paint was scraped in several places, and the golden mane a smudged brown, but to the boy his steed was noble.

Rafferty rolled a cigarette, folded his tobacco pouch, and, impelled by some inner recollection, began to tell me the story of coming to London forty years earlier, a young lad of fifteen arriving in Camden Town with his father and thinking that it was the strangest, sootiest place he had ever seen, that even the birds, the fat pigeons that waddled about, were man-made. Theirs was a small room, which his father had rented the year previous. It had a single iron bed, a thin mattress, a washbasin, and a little gas ring to boil a kettle.

The next morning at the Camden tube station, where lorries and wagons were parked and young men waited to be recruited, literally hundreds of them, hundreds of Irishmen, hoped for a job. A foreman eyed Rafferty up and down and said to his father that no way was that boy seventeen, but his father lied, insisting that he was. More heated words were exchanged, about effing cousins and so forth, but eventually Rafferty was told to climb onto the lorry, and he did. I believed (Rafferty said) that a great future lay ahead of me, but the look of despair on the lads left behind standing in that street was awful, and one I can never forget.

They were driven a few miles north to where a group of young men were digging a long trench, for the electricity cables to be put in later on. The paving stones were already taken up and stacked in piles. At his first sight of it, it was hard for him, as he said, not to imagine those men, young though they were, destined for all eternity to be kept digging some never-ending grave. He was handed a shovel and told to get to work. The handle of the shovel was short, shorter than the ones he had been used to at home when he dug potatoes or turnips, and the blade was square and squat. And so I was (he said) put to digging the blue clay of London, as it

was then called, blue from leaking gas and sticky, so sticky you had to dip the shovel in a bucket of water every so often, then wedge it in under the soil to try and shift it. Lads in a line, stripped to the waist because it was so hot, each man given a certain number of yards to dig, four foot six inches wide and four foot six inches deep. The foreman in his green Wellingtons walking up and down, putting the fear of God into us. A brute, and an Irish brute at that. After an hour of digging, I was half asleep over the shovel and only for Haulie, I would have been fired. He covered for me, held me up. He was from Donegal, said the mountains and the hilly roads made him wiry, and that I'd get used to it. Two Connemara men nearby spoke only the Irish and didn't understand a word others were saying, but they understood the foreman and the ruthlessness of him. I didn't feel hungry, only thirsty, and the cup of milk at half past ten was a godsend. Tea was brewing all day long in a big bucket, but Haulie said it tasted like senna. Teaboy Teddy was in charge of the grub, and men were given potatoes and cabbage for the dinner, except that I couldn't eat. By the time the whistle went in the evening, my hands were bloodied and my back was ready to break. In the room, I fell fast asleep at the little table, and my father flung me onto the bed, boots and all, and went out.

The same drudge every day (he continued), but they talked and yarned to keep the spirits up. They would talk about everything and anything to do with home. One lad caused riots of laughter when, out of the blue, he announced that turnips needed the frost to taste sweet. He got christened Turnip O'Mara instantly. Nicknames meant for greater camaraderie, down there in the trenches, a brotherhood, us against them, the bull of a foreman and the contractors and subcontractors, who were merely brutes to us, downright brutes. We might chance upon treasure. The legend was that someone had found a Roman plate worth hundreds, and someone else dug up a wooden box with three gold crosses, which he pawned. All we found were the roots of trees, embedded and sinewy, the odd coal bill, and rotten shells of gas piping that German prisoners of war had laid in the forties. On Thursdays a Cork man arrived in a green van to hand out the wages, his bodyguard, also a Cork man, wielding a cricket bat in case of robbery. Men felt like kings momentarily. I got four pounds, which I had to hand over to my father, who also made me write a letter to my mother to say how happy I was and how easily I had settled in to life in London. So much so that she wrote and said she hoped I would not acquire an English accent, as that would be faithless.

I really knew nothing of London (Rafferty said, apologetically), nothing except the four walls of the room, the broken springs of the bed, the street that led to where the wagons and lorries picked men up, and the big white, wide chapel with three altars where the Irish priest gave thunderous sermons on a Sunday. I was full of fears, thought everything was a sin. If the Holy Communion touched my teeth I thought that was a mortal sin. After Mass we had a cup of tea in the sacristy and biscuits dusted with sugar. Sundays were awful, walking up and down the streets and looking at the dinginess of the shop fronts and dirty net curtains in upstairs windows, and the old brickwork daubed black. My father went off very early of a Sunday, but I never knew where to.

We had one book on the small shelf in our room. It was by Zane Grey. I must have read it dozens of times. I was so familiar with it that I could picture swathes of purple sage and cottonwood in Utah, outlaws, masked riders, and felons trailing each other in the big open ranges, one area peculiarly named Deception Pass. I think I swore that I would go there, because I missed the outdoors, missed roaming in the fields around home and hunting on Sundays with a white ferret. My poor mother was writing at least twice weekly, pleading with my father to come home, saying that she could not mind children, do farmwork, and take in washing, and, moreover, that she was suffering increasingly from dizziness. Eventually my father announced that he was going home, and shortly before he did, something happened. We were in the room, and the landlady called my father to the telephone, which was in the kitchen. I thought that maybe my mother had died, but no, he came back in whistling and smiling, handed me two and six and told me to go to the Italian restaurant on the high street and stay there until he picked me up. I lingered for three hours, but no sign of him. The place was shutting. They were putting chairs up on the tables, and a woman waited, the mop already sunk in a bucket of water, to wash the floor. When I got back, the bedroom door was locked. I knocked and waited and knocked, and my father shouted at me to go down the hall, into the back garden. Instead I went towards the hall door. Not long after, a tall, blonde woman, wearing a cape, emerged from our room. She was not a patch on my mother. The way she picked her steps, so high and haughty, I could see that she thought herself way above us. She threw me a strange condescending smile. My father went mad when he saw where I was standing. He said nothing, just drew me into the room by my hair, pulled my pants down and beat me savagely. He kept saying the same thing over and over again as he was belting me – 'I'll teach you . . . I'll teach you honour . . . and I'll teach you obedience . . . and I'll teach you to respect your elders. I'll teach you I'll teach you I'll teach you,' raving mad at having been found out.

A good bit after my father went home (Rafferty continued), I started going to the pub. I was feeling more independent then. I'd go to the Greek café that had been renamed Zorba and have rashers and eggs and fried bread. The kitchen was behind the counter, and the Irish lads had taught Zorba to forget the kebabs and stuffed vine leaves and master the frying pan. Then I'd go straight across to The Aran pub, pure heaven, the warmth, the red table lamps, the talking and gassing, getting a pint, sitting down on a stool, without even exchanging a word. Weeknights were quiet, but weekends were rough, always a fight, because everyone got drunk. The fights could be about anything, a girl, a greyhound, grudges, because a foreman had got rid of six men in order to hire men from his own parish, one wrong word, you know and the punches started. First inside the pub, then in the vestibule and finally out onto the street, the two heavyweights vowing murder and the crowd of us on either side of the pavement egging them on, not unlike the time of the gladiators. When things got really bad and they were near beat to a pulp, someone, usually the landlord, would call the cops. If two cops came on foot they did nothing. They stood by, because they wanted to see the Irish slaughter one another. They hated the Paddies. When the Black Maria pulled up, the two men with blood pouring out of them were just thrown into the back, to fight it out before they got to the station. That's what gave us a bad name, the name of hooligans.

You see (he said apologetically), you had to be tough, on the job and off the job, even if you were dying inside. That's how the sensitivity was knocked out of us. But it was still there, lurking. One night in the bar (and here his voice grew solemn) I saw grown men cry. It was like a wake. They were a gang from Hounslow, and they came in shaken and sat silent, like ghosts. Something catastrophic had happened, and they were all part of it, because they saw it with their own eyes. A young man by the name of Oranmore Joe was up on the digger when the hydraulic gave way and the lever slipped. He didn't realise it for some seconds, not until he saw the big steel bucket full of earth hurtling through the air and crashing on top of a fella that was standing underneath. Knocked him to the ground and cut the head off him. Bedlam. Foremen, building inspectors, cops, a blue plastic sheet put around the scene, and men told to go home and report for work the next morning. Not seeing it (Rafferty said), but hearing about it, at first haltingly and then in a burst, brought it to life, the awful spectacle of a severed head and the young man's eyes wide open, as one of them put it, like the eyes of a sheep's head in a pot. The worst of it was that Oranmore Joe and J.J., that was the young man's name, came from the same townland, and Joe had actually got him the job. Was like a brother to him. A collection was taken in the pub to send the remains home. Lads gave what they could. A pound was a lot in those days, but several pound notes were flung into the tweed cap that had been thrown onto the counter. From that night on (Rafferty lamented), Oranmore Joe was a different man. He wouldn't get on a machine again. The company bought a new machine, but he wouldn't get up on it. He took ground work. He'd sit in the pub, pure quiet, just staring. Lads would try to cheer him up and say, 'No problem Joe, no problem, it wasn't your fault.' Except he believed it was. We'd see him thinking and thinking, and then one evening he comes in, in the navy blue suit and the suitcase, whistling, walking around the pub like a man looking for his dog, calling, ducking under the stools and the tables, and then we hear what he's saying. He's saying, 'Come on J.J., we're going home,' and we knew, we knew that he'd lost it, and we wouldn't be seeing him again. A goner. 'Not one, but two lives lost,' Rafferty said gravely.

In the winter of 1962, two years after his father had gone, he almost had to follow. The snow began to fall on St Stephen's Day and continued unabated for weeks. All outdoor work ceased. Roads and pavements were iced over, the ice so thick that it would break any sledgehammer, and the trenches were heaped with snow. Men were laid off without pay and many headed for the boat. His landlady, a woman from Trinidad, gave him a few weeks' grace, and as luck would have it, he met up with Moleskin Muggavin in the pawnshop, where Rafferty was pawning a pair of silver plated cufflinks, with a purple stone. Moleskin was looking for men to do renovation on a hotel over in Kensington. The work was altogether different. Feeding sand, gravel, cement, and water into a hopper, the knack being to get the mixed concrete out before it settled, while it was still fluid. He and Murph, a two-man band, easier, as Rafferty said, than shovelling the blue clay of London and no foreman. Moleskin was boss, walking around with a pencil behind the ear, slipping out to the pub and the bookmaker's from time to time, since he fancied himself a keen judge of bloodstock. After work Rafferty accompanied Moleskin to a cocktail bar that adjoined a casino. It was there, as he said, that he got the liking for chasers. Moleskin was on first names with all sorts of notorious people and, moreover, had a friendship with a divorcée who lived in a big white stucco house with steps up to it. Every evening around nine or ten they repaired there, with bottles of porter, and the divorcée, in peacock-coloured dresses and ropes of pearl, would be waiting for Moleskin. Pairs of brown felt slippers were inside the door, as their boots were crusted with snow and wet ice. The brown felt stuff (as he said) reminded him of a tea cosy they had at home, the same material, with a white thatched cottage embroidered on it. Large rooms, leading off one another, carpeted heavens. A party was always in full swing, people dancing

and sitting on each other's laps, the cocktail cabinet thrown open and, as a particular feature, Moleskin standing by the piano, to give a rendering of 'I'm Burlington Bertie, I Rise At Ten Thirty'. At midnight, a girl dressed as a shepherdess would enter, ringing a glass bell, announcing supper. All sorts of Austrian delicacies, Wiener schnitzel, goulash, apple strudel with spicy jams, and, in deference to Ireland, boiled pigs' feet and cabbage.

The hotel work was expected to last at least nine months, but it unfortunately came to an abrupt end the day Moleskin socked Dudley, the boss's son, and flung him between the joists of a floor onto a bed of rubble. Dudley, in his Crombie coat and tartan scarf, would call unexpectedly to make sure we weren't slacking. He was a namby-pamby, always spouting about Daddy, every other word being Daddy. Daddy was a great man, a compassionate man. Daddy loved Ireland so much that he flew home every Thursday evening, so as to step on Irish soil and be reunited with wife and family. This particular day, when he said that Daddy deserved to have a plaque erected in his honour, alongside the liberator Daniel O'Connell and famous dead poets, Moleskin erupted and said to cut out the tripe.

After the fracas that ensued, he and Moleskin kept away from the London area for several weeks. Moleskin knew a man who kept a caravan above the beach at Hove, where they holed up, living on bread and sardines. Passing himself off as a landscape gardener, Moleskin got them piecework, and (Rafferty said) he was once more at the mercy of the shovel.

The last he saw of Moleskin was one evening in The Aran after the frozen ground had thawed and he was working for a different set of contractors, jumping on a blue wagon instead of a brown one (he said). Moleskin arrived in a green trench coat and announced that he was leaving London to attend on a lady in Lincolnshire, then proceeded to borrow from all before him and promised to invite them for a shooting weekend.

At times over the years, Rafferty was put to work out of London. Once near Birmingham, where they were building a motorway, and another time outside Sheffield, for the construction of a power plant. The men lived in huge camps, sleeping on straw mattresses and fending for themselves in a communal kitchen. But I always (he said, quite shyly) missed Camden. Camden was where I first came, and though I cried my eyes out in the beginning and walked those hopeless sullen streets, it was where I had put roots down. The odd thing was that you can be attached to a place, or a person, you don't particularly like, and he put it down to mankind's addiction to habit.

It was only when he took his leave of me that I realised that darkness had fallen. The white clouds of a few hours earlier had sallied off, and a star flickered wanly in the heavens. People on foot, in cars, and on bicycles were hurrying with that frenzied speed that seizes them at rush hour, and Rafferty had nothing more to impart. I suggested buying him a drink, but not then, nor at any time in the year that I would come to know him, would he accept hospitality. His last vestige of pride.

After Christmas, in the pub, Rafferty was buoyant. He had had a haircut and was sporting a maroon silk handkerchief in the top pocket of his jacket. He had been 'away', as he put it. Away was only a few miles north, but to him, confined to his own immediate radius, any journey was an adventure. I knew a little of his movements by now. He drank the one pint in Biddy Mulligan's each morning, returning in the evening to have his quota of two. In the day he walked and, as he said, could be a census collector, if only anyone would employ him. At noon he went to the Centre where he, along with several others, were given a cooked dinner and coffee. Roisin, the woman in charge, was a stalwart friend, and every so often gave him a jacket or a pullover, as consignments of clothes were sent from a Samaritan in Dublin, to help the downtrodden Irish in London. Sometimes he helped out a bit in the garden and was even enlisted by Roisin to give sound advice to other young men who might be in danger of slipping.

Christmas he had spent with Donal and Aisling at their pub in Burnt Oak. They were, he said, gallant friends. The pub shut early on Christmas Eve so as to entertain the visitors, which included him, Clare Mick, who lived over Fulham way, and Whisky Tipp, who had had a stroke, but luckily his brain wasn't affected. Also the lodgers upstairs, three Irishmen, a Mongolian, and a black. Pure heaven, as he put it. Up behind the counter and pull your own pint or whatever you wanted. The light in the pub dimmed, the steel shutters drawn, carols on the radio – 'A partridge in a pear tree' – bacon and cabbage for the Christmas Eve dinner, and then, on Christmas Day, as he put it, a banquet. At the start of the dinner, Donal plonked a bottle of champagne in front of each guest, although he and Aisling never themselves touched a drop. What with the roast goose, potato stuffing, sage and onion stuffing, roast spuds, the children larking about, crackers, paper hats, jokes, riddles, and gassing, these

dinners were unadulterated happiness. This was how you imagine a home could be, Rafferty said, his voice surely belying the melancholy within it.

One appointment in March with my doctor had been switched to evening. The night was dark and foggy when I got out, and the warm lights of the pub were indeed inviting. The atmosphere was completely different from that of daytime. Such hub and gaiety that, as I entered, I already felt a little intoxicated. Moreover, it was packed. At a large round table a birthday party was in full swing, and a young, obese woman was literally submerged by bunches of flowers and basking in her role as guest of honour. I made my way to the counter where Rafferty was standing and ordered a glass of white wine. Once I had been served, he moved me along to a second counter, where no one was drinking, to avoid the crush. For a while we did not exchange a word. Instead, we studied the array of bottles that were stacked on the top shelf, with their proud labels in gold or black or russet, scored with ornate lettering and coats of arms, testaments to their long lineage. On the lower shelf were the bottles placed upside down, their necks fluting into the clear plastic optics. Every pub, Rafferty said, gave a different measure, and Biddy's was popular because they gave five millimetres extra on a small whisky or vodka. Pondering this for a moment, he said that with drink the possibilities were endless, you could do anything or thought you could. Moreover, time got swallowed up, or more accurately, as he put it, got lost.

A few years after his father went home, his mother died. His father, as he believed, had killed her, had worn her out. The telegram came with the sad news, and he set out, as he said, for Victoria Station, to catch Slattery's coach that fetched passengers to the boat at Holyhead. Never made it. Went on benders along the way in various pubs, lads sympathising with him and saying maudlin things, until the day had turned to night and the coach had left. I'll always regret that I didn't go, he said.

It was quite a while after that the drink got a hold on him, but he knew it was all connected, all part of the same soup. He'd work for six weeks and then booze. Then he'd work the odd day, get a few bob to buy cider, and before long, he was loafing. Mattresses under the bridges, men from every corner of Ireland, gassing at night, talking big in their cups, then arguing and puking in the morning, delirium tremens, seeing rats and snakes, sucking on empty bottles.

One morning (Rafferty continued), I crawled out from under a quilt to go and get a fix. Usually a few people were in the streets going to work or coming from night work, and they'd give you something, especially the women, the women had softer hearts. On the other side of the street I saw a woman in a belted white raincoat looking across at me. It was Madge, who'd married Billy.

She came over, and I can still see her thinking it but not saying it, 'You should see yourself, Rafferty, your dignity gone, your teeth half-gone, your beautiful black hair gone grey, and your eyes glazed.'

I said, 'How's Billy?' and she said, 'Billy's dead and gone,' and her eyes filled up with tears. I could hardly believe it, Accordion Bill that had been such a swank, the two of them such swanks on the dance floor, winning medals and drinking rosé wine. Billy had left the building work after they got the franchise of a pub over in St Martin's Lane, which, as she said, was the ruination of him, of them. Then all of a sudden, she pulled a little notepad from her pocket and thrust it into my hand. This was the chance encounter he believed she had been waiting for, to meet someone from the old days, so that she could show it. Her history, jotted down at different times, often a scrawl and with several coloured inks.

Badly beaten up again. Internal bleeding, rushed to hospital and nearly lost the baby.

Bill not home for three days and three nights, searched up and down the high street, found him in an allotment with other blokes drinking cheap cider, didn't even recognise me, brought him home, cleaned him up, washed him, shaved him, promised to get him new clothes when I got my pay packet.

Billy wept in my arms half the night and I plucked up the courage and I asked him why did he drink like that and his answer was to blank things. I said what things. He said something happened, and that's all he'd say. Something happened. Took it to his grave he did.

Another time I wakened, and he was stuffing pills and whisky down my neck, half unconscious at the time. He wanted to be dead and he wanted us to go together because we loved one another. 'Go together,' I shouted, 'and two young children in the very next room'.

His mother was an Aries. On her seventieth birthday I got him the ticket to go home. I said have a drink, have a few drinks, but promise me you won't get blotto, if you love me, promise me that, and he did and we hugged.

He got to his sister's house very early in the morning, and the little niece was pulling at him to put on a CD, and his sister went into the kitchen to put on the kettle when he collapsed in the doorway. Never wakened again.

I handed it back, and she said, 'I still love him . . . Will you tell me why I still love him, Rafferty?' I couldn't. As she ran to catch the bus she turned back and shouted, 'No one is given a life just to throw it away.' It done something to me. I went back to the tiny room beyond Holloway that a priest had got for me. I rarely set foot in it, because I preferred being under the bridges with the bums, but I went that morning. There was a mirror I got off a ship and seeing how I had fallen, I turned its face to the wall. I started to clean up, emptied things, worn tubes of toothpaste, eye lotion, old socks, and jumpers and put them all in a bin bag. Then I got the Hoover from under the stairs and hoovered, and I poured bleach into a can of water and scrubbed the windowsills and the woodwork. Standing in the shower, watching the pictures of little black umbrellas on the plastic curtain, I made this pact with myself. I couldn't quit the drink. You could say that I half won and I half lost. I set myself a goal, one pint in the morning and two pints at night and not a drop more, ever, except maybe for a toast at a wedding.

'A woman,' he said, looking at me almost bashfully, 'a woman can do something to a man that cuts deep. Madge did it, and so did my mother.'

The night before I left home for good (he went on) my mother decided that we would pick fraughans for a pie. They are a berry the colour of the blueberry, but more tart, and they grew in secret places far up in the woods. It was one of those glorious summer evenings, the woods teeming with light, with life, birds, bees, grasshoppers, a sense that the days would never be grey or rainy again. We were lucky. We filled two jugs to the brim, our hands dyed a deep indigo. For some reason my mother daubed her face with her hands and then so did I, and there we were, two purple freaks, like clowns, laughing our heads off. Maybe the laughing, or maybe the recklessness emboldened her, but my mother squeezed my knuckles and said she had something to tell me, she loved me more than anything on this earth, more than her hot-tempered husband and her two darling daughters. It was too much. It was too much to be told at that young age, and I going away forever.

At times, he said after a long silence, he had toyed with the idea of going home, to visit the grave, when he saw Christmas decorations in the shop windows and raffles for Christmas cake, or got the cards from his sisters, who were now grown up and had married young and moved away. Except that he never went. 'If I went I would have had to kill him,' he said, his sad grey eyes looking into mine, unflinchingly.

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One Sunday in summer I was enlisted to help at a carboot sale in a warehouse outside London. Adrian organised it, so as to collect money to send deprived children to the seaside for a week's holiday. I was assigned to the bookstall – mostly tattered paperbacks with their covers torn off, a few novels, and a book about trees and plants indigenous to the Holy Land, pictures with panoramic views accompanied by beautiful quotations from the Bible. Rafferty was impresario, steering people to the various folding tables, to ransack for bargains. The offerings were motley – winter and summer dresses, worn blankets, quilts, men's shirts, crockery, car tyres, and stacks of old records.

A young nun, her blue nylon veiling fluttering down her back, did brisk business selling cakes, pies, loaves of bread, and homemade jams that had been, as she proudly said, made in the mother house of her order. The other stand that drew a crowd was a litter of young pups in a deep cardboard box, mewling and scampering to get out. They were spaniel and some other breeds. One child, whose birthday it was, lifted his favourite one out, a black and white puppy with a single russet gash on the brow of its head, and as the father handed over two coins, numerous children clamoured for a pet.

Though business was not great, Adrian pronounced it an out-and-out success. We packed the unsold stuff and swept up to give some semblance of cleanliness to the place. As we were being driven back to London in a van, Rafferty asked courteously if I would care for a drink before setting out for home. We got dropped off in a part of London that neither of us was familiar with and that was anything but inviting. Blocks of tall, duncoloured flats veered towards the sky. They were of such deliberate ugliness their planners must have determined that those who would live in them would do so in unmitigated gloom. A scarlet kite flew above them, sailing in its desultory way, now and then flurrying, as if a sudden swell of wind had overtaken it, and we could not but express the hope that it would never return to the ugly ravine from whence someone, perhaps a child, had dispatched it. Nearby was a playground, more like a yard, bordered with a line of young poplars, beyond which youths yelled

and shouted at one another as they played different ball games, the taller ones converged around a basketball net. Dogs ran around, barking ceaselessly.

We could see the sign for a pub, but the entrance eluded us. It was tucked in between a Catholic church, which we recognised by the cross on its grey-blue spire, and a community centre for youths, but though we went up and down several flights of concrete steps and under dark, foul-smelling concrete archways, we kept returning to the same spot. A young Irishman in shorts offered to be of assistance, but said we must first have a peep in the window of the Catholic church, because the altar, brought from Europe centuries previous, was priceless. The church was locked, as evening mass had been said. We looked through a long stained-glass window and saw an empty room with only a few pews. The altar, set back from the wall, had intricate sprays of gold leaf and was flanked with stout gold pillars. He was a most talkative young man, and pointing to the vista of flats, he listed the crimes that were rife there. He was a community worker and helped the local priest, whom he pronounced his hero. With ebullience, he produced a map of the area, where, with green drawing pins, he had highlighted the scene of three murders, all connected with drugs. Then he descanted, as might an aficionado, on the type of drugs that were being sold, their quality, and the astronomical prices they fetched. He asked us to guess how many languages were current in the neighbourhood and then answered for us, more than twenty languages, and the Irish no longer in the majority, many having gone home and many others having become millionaires.

We thanked him for conveying us, but he was already off on another tangent about some delinquent who passed himself off as blind and was actually a brilliant pickpocket. Inside the pub we had the greatest difficulty getting rid of him and only after Rafferty whispered that we had an important matter to discuss did he take his leave of us, but not before he gave us his business card, printed with his name, a degree in ecology, and his availability as a tour guide of the area.

The place was completely empty. The faint straggling rays of the setting sun came through the long, low window, and fiddle music filtered from the kitchen area. Tapping one foot, Rafferty listened, listening so he seemed to be hearing it there and then, and also hearing it from a great distance, rousing tunes that ushered him back to the neon purloin of the Galtymore Dance Hall in Cricklewood, where they had modern and fiddle. Saturday nights. Admission two shillings and sixpence. Scores of young men, including him, toggled out in the navy suit, white shirt, and savvy tie, standing at the edge of the dance floor, gauging the form. One girl was called Grania, after a pirate queen. Other girls wore bright flashy frocks or skirts with stiffened petticoats, but Grania had on a black dress with a white collar and inlaid white bib, giving the appearance of being a nurse. As he learned later, she was a seamstress in a shop on Oxford Street, making curtains and doing alterations. What first struck him, apart from her pure white skin and thick brown hair, with hues of red and gold like an autumn bogland, was how down-to-earth she was. Between dances she would sit, fling off her shoes, and mash her feet to ready herself for the next bout on the floor. Up at the mineral bar, other men would be buying her lemonade and pressing her for the next dance, and the one after that, and she was always saucy with them. He himself never got on the floor, because of an unconquerable shyness. Six months or more passed before she threw him a word, and as long again before she allowed him to walk her home. She lodged three miles beyond Cricklewood, near Holloway Fields. He recalled standing outside her digs till one or two in the morning, hearing her soft voice as she bewitched him with stories. Listening to her was like being transported. Her father was a tailor who had a pub and grocery, where people drank, mulled over the latest bit of gossip. She herself preferred when one of the old people, from up the country, happened to come in and told stories of the long ago, cures and curses, warts removed by being rubbed with black stones taken out of the bed of the river, and the wonders of Biddy Early the witch who, by gazing into her blue bottle, reached second sight.

He would drink in the week evenings, but kept himself fairly sober on the Saturdays, to gaze at Grania, to buy her the minerals and walk her home. One night when they were parting she handed him a gift in a sheet of folded paper and whispered a few words in Irish. This was her way of saying she was his.

Next morning he studied the gift again and again. It was a smooth flattened seashell, the ribs on the underside, bone white, curving out into a fan, and in the interstices, tiny vermilion shadings like brush strokes, as if someone had painted them on.

They found a little flat above a hardware shop that was many miles from Camden. Friends donated things, sheets, bolsters, and a jam dish with a hanging spoon that carried a coloured likeness of His Holiness the Pope. Soon he learned what a fine cook Grania was, but she was also very particular. For their Sunday walk, she would not let him out with a crease in his shirt, having already cleaned the clay under his nails with a crochet needle. The thing

was (as he ruefully put it) Grania could drink any man under the table, but she knew when to stop. In the evenings when he got home, two glasses of milk would be on the table, to have with the dinner. But he was missing the pub, the noise, the gas, and before long he would be dropped off at The Aran and have a few drinks and arrive home late. Then later. Soon he pretended he was on overtime, and would not be home till midnight. A row would often follow, or else Grania would have gone to bed, his dinner, with a plate over it, on a rack above the gas cooker. One night he got back and found a note on the kitchen table – ‘You can have your overtime, now and forever,’ was all it said. He thought she would be back the next evening, or the next, but she wasn’t.

‘She took nothing, not even the jam dish with the hanging spoon and the likeness of the Pope,’ he said, then broke off abruptly. One of the dogs from the playground had come in and was staring up at us, panting wildly. Rafferty put his hand on its snout and kept it there until the animal’s breathing had quieted, and in the silence, I was conscious for the first time of a ticking wall clock.

Considering the plethora of crimes we’d been warned of, I suggested taking a minicab and offered to drop Rafferty home.

‘Most kind,’ he said, which I knew to be his way of declining, followed by his raising the large hand, with the black, wide wristband.

We were out of doors, sitting, as it happened, on a bench, in a graveyard that was anything but morose. A wide bordered path ran from a gateway to another at the opposite entrance, allowing a shortcut for pedestrians and cyclists, so that it was as much a haunt of the living as of the dead. The graves were neatly tended, the grass bank on the far side newly mowed, and there was the added gaiety of springtime in London. Borders of simmering yellow tulips, front gardens and back gardens surpassing each other in bounteous displays, the wisteria a feast in itself, masses of it falling in fat folds, the blue so intense, it lent a blueness to the eyes themselves. Adrian had said that Rafferty would love a few moments with me if it was possible and hinted that he had super-duper news.

He could not contain his joy. He was going home. For good. No more bills. No more hassle. Then he took the letter from his leather wallet that was worn and crinkled, but hesitated before handing it to me, since he needed to explain the circumstances. A benefactor, who had begun life digging, but who had bettered himself and accrued great riches, had contacted the Centre, asking for someone of good character to come home to Ireland and take care of an elderly relative. Roisin, being the stalwart she was, had suggested Rafferty, and after a ream of letters, his credentials, etcetera, passed on, he was accepted. Moreover, she had given him a new tweed suit and pullover, since a fresh consignment had come from the Samaritan.

The house, the dream house or bungalow to where he was going, would be shared with the elderly man, but a woman was coming in every day to do the dinner and keep an eye on the elderly man’s needs, since he suffered from diabetes, something which he contracted later in life. Rafferty must have read the benefactor’s letter dozens of times, as it had been folded again and again. Forty years previously, when he left Ireland, his mother, his lovely mother, had packed his things in a brown suitcase, and he had taken his belongings out, except for three sacred things: a missal, a crucifix, which she had had blessed, and striped pyjamas, which he never wore, but had kept in case he had to go to hospital. He was lucky to have escaped that, because many of his mates were struck down with chronic illnesses, asthma, lung diseases, skin diseases, and injuries of every kind. He said he would humour the elderly relative, whom he guessed would sleep half of the day, or at least doze. He would play cards with him, or maybe do crosswords. With a vigour, he contemplated picking up a shovel again and getting a bit of garden going – cabbage, sprouts, shallots, lettuce – and see what potatoes were native to that particular soil. ‘I’ll go to the pub,’ he said, ‘stands to reason, but I’ll pace myself, no going back to skid row for Rafferty.’ The bungalow was not in his own part of the country, but still it was home and he asked out loud if it was likely that he would once again hear the cry of the corncrake, that distinctive call which had never faded from his memory.

Birds in their truant giddiness were swooping and scudding about the gravestones, but a few pugnacious ones had converged on a plastic lunch box that had the remains of a salad, and were conducting bitter warfare by brandishing torn shreds of limp lettuce. Their beaks were a bright, hard orange.

When I am sitting on a rocking chair over there, on the borders of Leitrim and Roscommon (he continued), and they ask me how it was in the building work, I’ll tell them it was great, great altogether, and I’ll tell them about Paddy Pancake. Shrove Tuesday we were all on site, itching to get off early, because we’d sworn to give up drink for Lent. Paddy Pancake sprung a surprise on us. Never touched a drink himself, and wore his total abstinence

badge for all to see. He was a night chef, somewhere in Ealing. From a black oilskin bag he took out flour, eggs, milk, caster sugar, salt, and a small bottle of dangerous-looking blue liqueur. He'd even brought a basin to make the batter. Then, looking around, he picked up a big shovel, washed it down a couple of times with a hose, and presto, he had his frying pan. Two lads were told to get a fire going, as plenty of wood from timbers and old doors was scattered on a nearby site. Paddy tossed the pancakes on the shovel like a master. He had an assistant to sprinkle on the caster sugar and a few drops of the liqueur, and lads grabbed and gobbled like wolves. To crown it all, a shy Galway boy stood up on a skip and belted out a rebel song, 'Roddy McCorley Goes to Die on the Bridge of Toome Today'. The words and his voice so beautiful, so heartfelt.

Tears welled in his eyes as he recalled that revel, a winter evening, the glow of the fire, the leaping flames of red and blue, dancing in that London wasteland, as if in some roman amphitheatre.

As he tucked the letters back in his wallet, a photo of himself fell out. It was a snap really, taken on some riverbank, where he and his friends had obviously been swimming. The sheer life in his expression was breathtaking. His hair was tousled. His eyes as youthful and moist as any young man's eyes could be. Not a single feature in that photograph resembled the man sitting beside me.

'Well, that's youth for you,' he said, suddenly bashful, as I had guessed, it was a fleeting farewell.

Less than two weeks later, when I called into the pub, for a moment I thought that I must be hallucinating. Sitting in his usual place, with a pint on the table in front of him, was a man the spitting image of Rafferty. Same wide-brimmed black hat, wrinkled jacket, and the pint. I looked away, but then Adrian gave me the nod, and I looked again. It was Rafferty. It was him. He was quiet and took his time before he acknowledged me, showing none of the warmth that he had on that day in the graveyard. 'It happens,' he said, then taking his leave, the unfinished pint on the table, he added that the rolling stone gathers no moss.

Adrian relayed to me what had happened. The bungalow was new and clean, too new and too clean. The old man, Denny, sat in his chair all day looking out at the low-lying fields, invariably shrouded in mist, checking his blood sugar every few hours, having an insulin injection, and taking four different sets of tablets. A Miss Moroney came to do the dinner, and drove them mad. The landing was like a shrine, with statues, Miss Moroney spouting homilies about the evils of drink and touching them for alms for unfortunate children in the third world. Even when he went to the pub, Rafferty didn't feel at home. It was noisy and brash, young people coming and going, no quiet corner to brood in, and no one had any interest in his stories. As for the garden that he had intended to plant, the grounds around the house had been landscaped with bushes and yellow flowering shrubs. Nothing was wrong, as he told Adrian, but nothing was right, either. The benefactor took the news of his sudden departure well, said he could come for a week in the summer if he wished, and that he had no hard feelings. The same young minicab driver who had collected him from the airport was the one to bring him back again, drove like a lunatic while also conducting a business transaction on a mobile phone, telling the would-be purchaser to get stuffed, that no way would he take two hundred. Seconds later he rang someone else to report on matters, saying that they would be mad to let it go for less and they would hold out for the jackpot. According to Adrian, Rafferty surmised that it was either a motorcycle or an old banger that was for sale. At the airport, the minicab driver mashed his hand in effusive farewell and said what a pity the holiday had been so short.

Roisin had persuaded the council to give him his little room back, and, as Adrian said, the brown suitcase with the missal, the crucifix, and the striped pyjamas was shoved back under the single bed.

'He doesn't belong in England and ditto Ireland,' Adrian said, and, tapping his temple to emphasise his meaning, added that exile is in the mind and there's no cure for that.

I was flabbergasted the day my analyst broke the news to me that he was leaving London and going to work in a hospital in Bristol. With solicitude he had procured a railway timetable and showed me how frequently the trains ran, saying I could come twice a month and have a double session.

I went back to the pub, to say goodbyes of a sort. Adrian treated me to an Irish coffee, and Rafferty came across and stood by us, as Adrian recounted his big night at the greyhound track in Wimbledon, picking four winners because of tips that he got from the barmaid, a Connemara girl, whom he hoped to be seeing again.

'Mind yourself.' Those were the last words Rafferty said to me. He did not shake hands, and, as on the first morning, he raised his calloused right hand in a valediction that bespoke courtesy and finality. He had cut me out,

the way he had cut his mother out, and those few who were dear to him, not from a hardness of heart, but from a heart that was immeasurably broken.

Under the pavement were the lines of cable that linked the lights of the great streets and the lesser streets of London, as far distant as Kent. I thought of the Shovel Kings, and their names suddenly materialised before me, as in a litany – Haulie, Murph, Moleskin Muggavin, Turnip O'Mara, Whisky Tipp, Oranmore Joe, Teaboy Teddy, Paddy Pancake, Accordion Bill, Rafferty, and countless others, gone to dust.

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'Shovel Kings: A Story by Edna O'Brien appeared first on *The Thought Fox*.