

## A Poet and an Englishman



'We'll shortly see the broad beaches of Kerry,' he said, smiling, the van ricketing from side to side and Limerick's fields passing, pastures of golden, or near golden, dandelions.

His hair swung flamingly over his face, a wild red gust of hair, and his tinker's face narrowed like a gawky hen's.

'Peader.' She swept her hand across his forehead and he laughed.

'Behold the Golden Vale.'

They got out and looked. Sandra's legs were white after winter, white as goat-skin. A sort of vulnerable white Peader thought.

Her body was tucked into a copper dress and her hair, red like his, performed little waves upon her shoulders. She looked so handsome. After a winter in Belfast that was strange. One would have thought a winter in Belfast would have changed one, broken-down factories and hills, arching with graves.

Yet in their little house off Springfield Road, they'd hid out, guns going off occasionally, televisions roaring, an odd woman calling.

Peader was working as a tradesman-carpenter-cum-electrician. A strange trade for a tinker one might have thought. Peader had picked these skills up in London when he ran away from Michael Gillespie, his tutor, in the west of Ireland.

He was seventeen and his hair was more gold than red and he'd run away from the harbour village where he'd been brought up and partly adopted by an English Greek teacher who'd retired to Ireland on the strength of a volume of poems, a hard-bitten

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picturesque face in *The Times* colour supplement and an award from the British Arts Council.

There in the west he stayed, making baskets, sometimes taking to the sea in a small boat, writing more poems, winning more awards, giving lectures in Greek to students at Irish colleges.

Peader thought of Michael now, thought of him because somehow the words framed in his head were the sort of words Michael would use.

'A sort of vulnerable white.' Yes, that was the state of Sandra's legs; they were pale and cold. Ready for summer.

'Let's make love,' Peader thought in his head and he didn't need to say it to Sandra. There were bushes and leaving their van there on the open road above the Golden Vale, they hid behind bushes where Sandra could have sworn there was honeysuckle just about to appear and made love, Peader coming off in her, rising like a child caught in an evil but totally satisfying act.

'Banna Strand.' Peader murmured the name of the beach. Roger Casement had appeared on that beach in a German submarine in 1916 and was arrested and hanged.

'Our first sight of the sea,' Sandra said.

'It's lovely.'

It stretched, naked, cold.

'I'd love a swim,' Sandra thought, thinking of last summer and tossing waves off the Kerry coast.

Peader didn't really notice how pale and beautiful the beach was. He was observing the road, his head full of Michael Gillespie's mythology. 'Roger Casement, a homosexual, arrived on Banna Strand, 1916, was arrested and hanged.' Items of Michael's history lessons returned.

When Peader was twelve, he was adopted by Michael, brought to his house near the pier and was given a room, alien to him, told by Michael to be calm and often, a little harassed, make his way back to his father's caravan where his father beat his brother Johnny.

The first time Michael referred to Roger Casement as being a

homosexual Peader didn't know what the word meant. He must have been twelve or thirteen when Michael spoke about Casement and it was probably spring as spring was a penetrating season in the west of Ireland, lobster pots reeking of tensed trapped lobster.

When he was seventeen and running away, Peader still knew little about the word, more about a love affair with Michael.

A donkey stood out before them. 'I'll tell him to go away,' Sandra said.

She got out, hugging the donkey's brown skin, kissing his nose, and Peader watched, silenced.

Why was he thinking of Michael now? Why the silence between him and Sandra?

Perhaps because he felt he'd soon see Michael again.

They were going to a festival in Kerry; Peader had given up his job in Belfast and Sandra and he had bought antiques cheap and with a van full of them were going to sell them at the festival which included plays, dancing, lectures, music, drinking and most of all the picking of a festival queen.

Kerry had many festivals, at all times of the year and since Peader's family originally came from Kerry he'd make his way back there at odd times, like the time in London he threw up his job on a site and went to Dingle for the summer, sleeping in a half-built house, a house abandoned by a Dublin politician who had thoughts of living there when it was fashionable and when it ceased being fashionable with his mates, he abandoned the place in time for summer and Peader's stay there.

'We'll have a good time,' Sandra thought. 'We'll have a good time.' She was smoking a cigarette she'd picked up in a café in Limerick, her head slouched so that her hair fell across her face.

'How long is it?'

'Ten miles.'

Her mouth pouted. Her resistance was low; there was a strangeness about Peader. This she knew. Her silence deepened. Cigarette-smoking was a token activity.

Maybe it was because of his return to roots Peader was silent. Perhaps he felt sad on coming back to Kerry and the towns of

big houses and the verandas of hotels which held rare flowers because it was warm nearly all the year round in Kerry, a Gulf Stream climate.

'There's a rhododendron,' she shouted.

The first she'd seen that year but Peader wasn't interested and she said to herself, 'Maybe there's things I don't know.'

She wasn't really a tinker; she'd grown up in Ballyfermot in Dublin. Her father sold junk, broken furniture, broken chairs, broken clocks and her cousin played a tin-whistle and was married to a Mayo tinker, playing in Germany for a living.

He was famous now, having gone to Berlin, barely knowing how to sing but by some fluke ending up in a nightspot in a West Berlin bar. Now he had two records and his wife often sang with him, a wild woman with black hair who gave Sandra's family an association with tinker stock.

Sandra had met Peader at a Sinn Féin hop. Neither Sandra nor Peader had any interest in politics but both had cousins and uncles who supported Sinn Féin and God knows what else, maybe guns and bombing and the blowing up in the North.

Sandra had a Belfast side to her family, her mother's side, and though her mother was silent about Belfast grief, Sandra knew of cousins in the North who wore black berets and dark glasses and accompanied funeral victims, often men who'd died in action. Sandra's main association with the North was tomato ketchup spilling the day she heard her cousin John was dead, a little boy run down by an ambulance which had been screaming away from the debris of a bombing.

She'd seen Peader at the Sinn Féin hop, a boy sitting down, eyes on the ground. A woman with dyed hair sang 'I Left My Heart in San Francisco' and a girl with biting Derry accent sang 'Roddy McCordy', a Fenian ballad.

Peader asked her to dance - they'd hardly spoken, his hands left an imprint on her back and on ladies' choice she asked him up; his fingers tightened a little awkwardly about her. The girl from Derry sang 'Four Green Fields' as the lights dimmed; a song about Mother Ireland's grief at the loss of her fourth field, Ulster.

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People clapped and there was a collection for internees in Long Kesh but Sandra and Peader slipped away; he slept in her house, on the sofa in the sitting room.

He told her he was just back from England, his first time in four years. He seemed upset, gnome-like as he was drinking coffee in her home.

She sensed a sorrow but sorrow was never mentioned between them, not even when they were going to films at the Adelphi or when they eventually married, the wedding taking place at the church in Stephen's Green, her family outside, black-haired; his, the remnants from Connemara and Kerry, his brother dressed like Elvis Presley and his cousins and second cousins in a mad array of suits, hair wild on women in prim suits bought at Listowel or Galway for the occasion.

Come winter they went to Belfast, Sandra's Uncle Martin providing Peader with work. Springfield Road where they lived ran through a Catholic area, then a Protestant area, again a Catholic area.

Its colour was dark and bloody. Like its history. Catholic boys walked by in blue. Protestant boys walked by in blue. One wouldn't know the difference. Yet they killed one another, violence ran up and down the road and on in the hills at the top of the road a boy was found crucified one day, a child of ten gagged to a cross by other children of ten, his hands twisted with rope and he half-dead and sobbing.

'We'll leave Belfast,' Sandra said one day, crying over the newspaper. A little girl had been killed down the road by a bomb planted in a transistor set.

'Where do we go?' Peader brooded on the question.

He came up with an answer, drove back in their van one day loaded with antiques from a bombed-out shop. Together they procured more; 'My father used to buy and sell things at the Ballinasloe fair,' Peader said, 'I can take a hint.'

His father and his father's father sold things like grandfather clocks in North Kerry. His father moved to Connemara on marrying Brigid Ward, his mother, and she dying on a wild Connemara night, after he, beating her, left her two children, John,

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Peader. Peader was the one taken by the poet; Peader now with what Sandra observed as ancestral intelligence returned to the feel of country things - clocks, paintings of women in white writhing as though in pain - to the purchasing and reselling of these items.

A man waved. Women wandered through the streets, country women, all loaded with bags and with the air of those who'd come from fresh land and flowered gardens. They'd arrived.

'Let's park the van,' said Peader. Sandra had long since forgotten her troubles but on seeing a young man, a Romany maybe, with black falling hair, a cravat of red and white and an earring pierced in his right ear, gold, she wondered at their purpose in coming here and felt what she could only decide was fright.

Through the day women with plants walked past their stall, geraniums dancing in pots and women laughing. Business went well.

Craftily Peader sold his wares, producing more, the mementoes of County Antrim unionists disappearing here in the Kerry market town.

Relatives of Peader appeared from nowhere, his father's people. Mickey-Joe, Joseph-James, Eoghan-Liam. Men from Kenmare and Killarney.

They'd been to Kerry for their honeymoon, Sandra and Peader, but for the most part Kerry was unknown to Sandra apart from Peader's accounts of childhood visits here from Connemara, to Dingle and Kenmare, to the wild desolate Ballinskelligs peninsula full of ghost villages, graves, to Dun Caoin and the impending view of the Blaskets and Skellig Mhicel and the Sleeping Monk, an island which looked like a monk in repose.

'Sandra, my wife.' People shook her hand; grievously some did it, men were hurt by lack of sex. He took her hand. They were in a crowded pub and Peader stroked first Sandra's thumb, then took her whole hand and rubbed it.

'You've had too much,' said Sandra, but already he was slipping away. She was far from him.

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In his mind, Peader saw Michael Gillespie making his way through the crowd that day. Michael hadn't seen him but Peader remained strangely frightened, fearful of an encounter.

All the poets and playwrights of Ireland seemed to be here for it was a festival of writers too, writers reading from their work, writers lecturing.

In the pub now Michael entered. He stood, shocked. His black hair smitten on his forehead. There was no sense of effiteness about him as there used to be. He was all there, brooding, brilliant in middle-age, ageless almost.

'Hello.'

Peadar shook his head – tremulously. So tremulously that he thought of shaking rose bushes in Michael's garden in Connemara when Peader was fourteen or fifteen, frightened by rain, by shaking things.

'Michael, this is my wife, Sandra.'

Michael looked towards her and smiled. He had on a many-coloured T-shirt. 'Your wife.'

Five years since they'd met; it all cascaded now. Peader asked Michael if he wanted a drink but Michael insisted on buying drinks for both of them, Guinness heavily topped with cream.

'To your beautiful wife,' Michael toasted Sandra.

He was here to read his poems he explained, he had a new book out.

'Did you win any more prizes?' Peader asked.

'Not recently,' Michael replied. But he'd opened a crafts shop in Connemara and anyway he lectured widely now, streaming off to universities in Chicago or in Texas. He had a world-wide following.

'Good to be famous,' Peader said.

'Alone?' Michael questioned.

Sandra was now talking to a boy with a Dublin accent; he had on a cravat and they chatted gaily, obviously having found some acquaintance in common.

'Your wife is lovely.' Remarks loaded, laden with other comment.

Eventually Michael said – sportingly almost.

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'How was it?'

'What?'

'London.'

'All right.'

'Big?'

'At my age, yes.'

'You managed.'

'I was careful.'

Michael looked at him. 'You look OK.'

Peadar remembered the times he was thirteen, Michael minding him, giving him honey in the mornings, eggs fresh, little banquets of eggs with yellow flowing tops.

He remembered the time he was fourteen, by which time Michael had seduced him. He remembered the white pillow and in summer the grey morning that would merge into the big room and afterwards the excitement of sailing a boat or running on the sand.

'Your daddy wouldn't like it!' Michael said one day and Peader thought back to winter and the roadside caravan and his hairy father frying mutton chops that smelt like rabbits dead and rotting.

'You're more handsome than ever.'

'Am I?'

'Tough!'

'Married.'

'Your wife is lovely.'

'You said.'

'I can't say it too much. She's got a gorgeous smile.'

'What have you been doing?'

'Working, writing, lecturing. For two years I lived with an American student from Carolina, a Spanish-American girl.'

'Black-haired?'

'Yes.'

'I thought you preferred them blonde.'

'Who?'

'People.'

'Peadar, you've become harsh.'

Harsh. The winters were often harsh in Connemara; when Peader was fifteen it snowed and he and Michael freed a fox from a trap near a farm-yard. Peader's hair was quite blond then and rode his head like a heavy shield against the elements.

'This won't last forever,' Michael said one day, weeping.

Peader had emptied a bowl of chestnuts into the gutter at Hallowe'en. In a temper, often Peader could be brazen and perhaps it was his brazenness which drove him to run away.

It was after he'd had an affair with a girl from Clifden, cut through her thighs in a barn near the sea; in a corduroy suit with his trousers down found woman nearer to satisfaction than man.

He ran away to London, a city of many women, and found no one there interested in him.

No one beyond the odd foreman on a building site and a man from Kerry who gave him rudimentary training in carpentry and in skills of tradesmanship.

'Are you going to see the festival queen crowned?' Michael asked.

'Yes.' Peader nudged Sandra. 'Will we go and see the festival queen crowned?'

Sandra turned to him. 'Yes. Here's John from Dublin.'

The Dublin boy shook hands with them. They made a party, trailing off.

'Is that the man that brought you up?' Sandra nudged Peader.

'Yes.' His reply was drowned by the crowd, noise, mingling, bunting shaking in the bustling avenues, old women crying raucously and the young holding one another.

They made their way to a square where the queen was just being crowned, a woman who looked like Marilyn Monroe, her smile big and awkward. Cheers rose about them and fights broke out.

Peader felt himself stirring with an old passion: how many times in bed with Sandra had he longed again to be fondled by male hands, and the points of adolescence, his knees, his genitals, to be fondled in the old way.

Instead of having a mother, he'd had Michael. Instead of adolescent tears and rashness, there'd been an even flow, card games, winkle-picking, mountain climbs, a spiral of strange fulfilment.

As the crowd jostled Peader felt Michael's nervous hand on his shoulder. 'Is your wife having a child?'

'Not yet.'

'Someday?'

'Seed is a strange thing,' Michael said; his words nearly drowned. 'The seed that seems lost but is devoured by an artist's vision, an artist's uncertainty, the uncertainty of reaching to people, the feeling of trying and failing and trying again and loving someone - anyone.'

'Me?'

'Yes - you were the one.'

A balloon went into the air. It slipped into the air, red, against a rather retiring-looking moon. The fireworks went off, splattered against the sky.

'Like a monstrence at mass,' Peader thought, remembering childhood and the times his father would take him to mass in Clifden, the priest turning with a golden, sun-like object to his congregation and the people bowing like slaves.

Peader virtually hadn't been to mass since he was seven - except the odd ceremony - like his wedding.

'Let's go somewhere,' Michael said.

'Peader, I've missed you, I've missed your arms and your body. I've waited for you. You can see poems I've written about you and read at Oxford and Cambridge.'

'Sandra,' Peader was going to call out to her but she was lost among the crowd with the boy from Dublin.

At three o'clock that morning Sandra made her way back to the tent she and Peader had erected that day. How would she tell Peader? It had been so strange meeting John, a boy from Ballyfermot she'd dated at fifteen. He'd turned into a buxom motorbike hippie; his pink shirt had drooped open that evening revealing a strongly tanned chest.

'We're all gipsies,' John had said, 'we people from Ballyfermot.'

Ballyfermot, a working-class suburb of Dublin.

She'd lost Peader and the man he was talking to in a crowd, rather strange enigmatic Englishman, and found herself adrift with John.

They'd found their way to a pub which was situated beside a tin caravan where fish and chips were being served, and there in the pub had hot whiskeys, and recalled going to James Bond films in the Savoy together before John's motorbike vocation and Sandra's wedding. John had found money in his travels; he'd lived with an old rich Italian lady near Trieste.

'Festivals bring strange people together,' Sandra had said, getting drunker and drunker, leaning on John's leather jacket.

The tent was forgotten and Peader and the rather strange Englishman who had his arms about Peader, the man Peader had often referred to in rather sharp clipped sentences. She'd ended up lying on John's stomach.

'Let's go to the mountains,' John had said.

'No, to the sea.' Her order was relieved by her mounting the bike and making to the sea. Waves surged in and she ran beside them and John recounted more and more of his experiences in Europe, a night in Nice with a millionaire's daughter, striding by the Mediterranean on the sea-walk below the city with a bottle of champagne.

'Let's make love,' John hugged her.

She relapsed into his arms and lay with him on the sand but didn't stir to embrace him further, knowing that her faithfulness wasn't to John and the affairs of adolescence but to Peader and his toughness.

Making her way back to the tent, she thought of Peader and the difference between her and him, a difference she hadn't realized until that night, meeting John again; she'd realized and wondered at the fields of her childhood, fields on the outskirts of Dublin where tinker caravans were often encamped and which snow brushed in winter, fields grabbed by Dublin's ever-

expanding suburbs. Peader had come from a different world, a world of nature continued, ever-present, ever-flowing.

He came from the sea and the west, a world of fury.

There'd been different laws there, different accidents, a savagery of robins dying in winter snow and scarecrows looking like the faces of the people, faces starved for want of love.

Coming towards the tent she heard voices within, male voices. A thought struck her that Peader was inside with the Englishman whom he'd been talking to earlier in the evening. It had been a strange, packed way they'd been talking; Peader's clipped sentences returned to Sandra. 'The day Michael and I walked to the sea', 'the day Michael and I went sailing', 'the day Michael and I collected blackberries'.

Sandra stopped and listened outside the tent. There was a low moan of pain and Sandra began shaking.

It wasn't cold but she was sure now of Peader's past; she knew him to be a traitor. He came from a world of lies.

'Peader,' she pulled back the drape of the tent and inside she saw Peader, arm in arm with a young boy she'd never seen before.

She began running but there was a sudden clench, Peader stopped her.

He was naked and wet. He took her forehead and he took her face.

He kissed her throat and her neck and his tongue dabbed in her mouth. And she fell before him into the cold, dirt-laden path.

His big and eager face loomed before her. 'It's all right, Sandra,' he said.

'I had to do it and I couldn't hide it from you. There's things to be done and said in life; you must go back, sometimes.'

She'd never know how Michael Gillespie had tried to seduce Peader that night, she'd never know how Peader had repulsed him and walked away, drunk, through the crowd.

She'd never know how Peader had picked up a young boy from Cahirciveen who'd been drunkenly urinating and made

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love to him in the tent, kissed his white naked pimples as Michael Gillespie had kissed his years before.

She'd never know but when she woke in the morning between Pader and a young boy she knew more about life's passion than she'd ever known before. She rose and put on a long skirt and looked at the morning, fresh, blue-laden, as she'd never seen it before.

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*A Link with the River*

Desmond Hogan

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