

ANGELA LONG

## Gaps

AS SOON AS HE STEPS onto the ferry, Sean realizes he's chosen the wrong look for the voyage. His shirt is too fitted. Too red. His trousers too flared. His hair is too long and curly and it's dyed platinum blonde. The black roots are showing. Thankfully no one can see the tattoos: the "Fuck the Queen" above his heart, the Celtic serpent writhing up his forearm. In the streets of his Dublin neighbourhood, Sean comes across as conservative. But this is the land of fisherman, of cable-knit jumper, cropped hair and jaunty cap, of colours that blend into grey skies like camouflage.

The sea is rough today. The locals stare at him as he braces himself against the deck, trying not to catch his hair on fire while he lights a cigarette. He feels them watch him as distinctly as he feels his stomach lurch. This is his first time at sea, and they know it. They stare openly, as simple folk do, catching his eye occasionally, allowing him to redeem himself with the right glance in their direction—an apologetic I know I look like a fop right now but I couldn't find my fisherman outfit at five a.m. when I awoke to catch the westbound train at Euston Station glance. They light their cigarettes with quick flicks as though seated in a plush snug at Fitz's. They inhale and exhale, the swell of the sea seeming to rise and fall, rise and fall, with the rhythm of their lungs.

Sean abandons all thoughts of smoking. He squeezes his eyes shut, willing the contents of his stomach to remain clenched in a tight fist. Why had he eaten those runny eggs for breakfast? Why was he on this boat? To become a fisherman? Is that what he had told his mother?

"Don't be an idiot," she said, surveying the open suitcase lying on his bedroom floor.

"Kate, you know as well as I that every son of Ireland belongs to the sea," he laughed and began to arrange his clothing into neat piles.

"But my son is a dandy. You haven't a sea bone in you. You're happiest lounging in your robe all the day, reading *Portraits of Artists* or some other rubbish."

She was right. Sean knew she was right. He was as Dublin as they came. He'd never been further west than the Finglas Mall. But, he had felt the calling, the call to the West. The same call that Synge must have felt, or Beckett. He knew there was something lurking out there. Something in all that rock and sea to forge the spirit in a man.

He looked at Kate's shock of dyed-red hair, her nose ring. She was the Irish nation's face-lift personified. She was riding the wave that was sweeping from East to West—from Dublin to Connemara. Gone were the days of a backwater country where sheep jammed the lanes. Gone was the thatch cottage with a turf fire burning. Kate embraced the grey dormer-style houses with pebbledash facades and central heating. She blossomed in the new Dublin that was breeding swank Parisian cafés, artist lofts, specialty food shops; the new Dublin that had finally hit it rich. She had waited forty years in a damp Northside flat for this to happen, eating Pan Bread and the odd slice of Madeira cake. Saying her prayers like a good Catholic. Praying that one day she would taste a different slice of the world.

But Sean had faith in what he imagined the real Ireland to be. He read only the Irish classics. He frequented only the pubs whose bar tops were at least a hundred years old, running his hand with a thrill along the same grain of oak as Oscar Wilde. He memorized the history of Ireland—how the English had stolen their country, banished the Irish to the inhospitable west. He studied the Irish language at Trinity College. And now he was ready for the West; he knew that was where he really belonged.

Sean had been conceived in the West, after all. His mother had told him as much. His parents had met on the island he was sailing to. Kate had told him of the the rocky fields, and endless lines of stone walls. “Your father couldn't keep his pecker in his pants,” she had said. “All that stone was like an aphrodisiac.”

Sean's father had grown up on the island. His family, the O'Grady's, had owned a big house there. Or so he had overheard his mother tell their neighbour once when he was a little boy. Sean had never met his father.

He touched the only photo he had of his parents: his dad with his black beard, his mother with her blonde hair. Sitting on a stone wall. Their eyes smiling at one another. And at Sean. Quickly, he slid the photo into the pages of *Riders to the Sea*. But Kate touched his shoulder, said, “Is that really why you're going?”

Kate had done the best a single mother could do for Sean. She had spent her twenties slinging beer in smoky pubs, waiting until he was old enough to tell him where his father was. She had stood above his crib when she got home at one a.m., stinking of beer and cigarettes, watching him

sleep. She had stood above his single bed, untying the strings of her apron, her feet aching, brushing the dark curls from his forehead. Waiting.

The years passed. She knew Sean told his friends that his daddy was a spy for the IRA on top-secret missions in Liverpool. Since the War of Independence in 1922—Sean had told her several times by the age of eight—their neighbourhood was proud to have harboured its members. They called it “Little Belfast” and there was enough barbed wire and anti-English graffiti to warrant the name.

Or else Sean told his friends that his daddy was living in New York, building skyscrapers, sending back loads of money like Gary Nealon’s dad. “Is that why your mom works at Fitz’s then?” they would ask, jabbing him between the ribs, laughing.

“Sean,” she said to him one night after dinner. “We need to have a talk.”

He looked down at his empty plate, drawing invisible waves with his knife. Last week he had seen the sea for the first time. They had taken the bus to Sandymount Strand. He had thought his daddy was probably a fisherman on one of those big boats, out in the open Atlantic.

“Your daddy’s not in the IRA, or building skyscrapers.” Kate tried to look at him, but she couldn’t. For nine years she had waited for this moment, and suddenly she knew she had waited too long. “He died Sean, just after you were born. A heart attack. He was young, too young, just turned thirty. Do you understand?” She watched him scrape his knife on the plate.

Sean made the waves bigger and bigger until they jumped from his plate onto the tablecloth. He imagined the surf crashing down on the prows of the big boats. Crash. Crash. Kate pried open his fist and put the knife on the table.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you earlier.” She tried to hug him, to finally cry with him, but he stiffened in her arms. He didn’t believe her.



One of the locals approaches, walking straight towards Sean while the deck see-saws.

“Nice day,” the man says, showing his hands into his pockets.

Sean nods. He doesn’t trust his mouth to open. He tastes sulphur. Eggs. He thinks if he can keep his body still enough, he can resist the heaving motion of the sea. “Bit windy,” he says with compressed lips.

“Good for clearing out the cobwebs.” The man points towards a dark shape breaching the cusp of sea and sky like a whale, disappearing with each swell. “Just about there,” he says.

Sean raises his head for a moment and looks, his gut falling into a deep trough, rising with a new swell.

“First time to the island?” Sean nods. “Family there?” Sean shakes his head. “On vacation?” Sean shakes his head again, watching the sea rise and fall, rise and fall. He’s mesmerized by the translucent blue walls. The man watches him. “Ah. A new blow-in,” he says, “Guess it’s that time of year again. When the swallows return, people like yourself start blowing in from all over.”

“I’m Irish,” Sean says.

The man winks at him. “Sound like a Dubliner to me. Have you a job lined—”

“I’ve gotta find the loo—”

“Just aft, over the handrails,” he yells after him as Sean rushes off holding his hand over his mouth.

“Mind the wind direction,” the man laughs. “She’s blowing south-east today.”

They sail into Kilonan Bay. The island grows bigger, until it towers above the swells. The sea is calmer here. Sean can hear the gulls. Soon he sees lines of stone walls disappearing into the horizon. Soon the gunwales bump against the dock and the locals disembark, clutching their parcels from Galway City. Husbands greet wives, driving off in battered Fiats and minivans advertising tours of Celtic ruins. Solitary men walk with their heads bent in the direction of the pub.

From the top of the gangplank, Sean surveys the island. For a moment he’s too shocked to move. There’s nothing here. He can barely perceive where the grey sky ends and the grey rock begins. This is where his father had grown up? He begins to feel a new sort of nausea. He wonders how anyone survives here. Instinctively, he backs away from the land like a cat resists water.

“You’re more skittish than a horse!” one of the deckhands laughs. “Come on now, down the plank with you.”

Sean walks towards the small crescent of a village hugging the bay. He follows the line of men through the doors of Tigh Joe Mac’s. Like any decent Irishman in need of pondering his fate, he orders a pint of Guinness. He sits up at the bar. He knows he’s being watched, but a pub in Ireland is a sacred place where differences are forgotten. It doesn’t matter anymore that he looks like a fop: Guinness unites them.

Sean listens to the sounds of Irish being spoken around him and feels like he’s entered into one of his sunlit dreams of the real Ireland. He tries to catch a word or two, but in college they never taught you how to

translate the rise and fall of a language when it's alive and surging around you. He fishes around his backpack for *Riders to the Sea*.

"First time to the island?" an elderly bartender, likely Joe Mac himself, asks him in English. Sean takes a swig of his pint and nods. "Family here?" Sean shakes his head. "On holidays?" He shakes his head again.

"I'm a blow-in," he says, and the bartender laughs.

"Well, that you are with that mop of hair, that you are," the bartender says, polishing a glass.

Sean looks out the window towards the West where stone walls splice the island into long strips. "I don't suppose you've heard of the old O'Grady place?" he asks.

"O'Grady place?" The bartender stops polishing and looks at him, puzzled. Sean takes a swig of his pint.

"Michael O'Grady," Sean says. "Grew up here, say, thirty, forty years ago."

"Michael?" the bartender looks at him more closely. "Your father?" Sean nods. "I can see the resemblance now. You're the spitting image of him. Your dad used to come in here all the time for bottles of Fanta," he says.

Sean can't help but grin; Fanta had always been his favourite too. "Orange?" he asks, smiling even more broadly. The bartender nods.

"But I thought the surname was Gray," the bartender says. "An English family." He picks up his polishing cloth again.

Sean looks down into his pint. "No, it's O'Grady. I'm sure of it," he says, taking another swig. "Irish," he says, thumping his Guinness down on the beer mat.

Kate hadn't told Sean much about his father and he had stopped asking her questions after he'd hear her crying in her bedroom afterwards. Usually Kate was a practical woman, too practical to waste time on things like sentimentality. It was in an Irishwoman's blood to mourn, but not to dwell. Mourning had its time and place, she would say, and then it was time to tie on your apron, straighten your back, and walk into the headwind.

"Sean," she had said to him just after he'd finished college and she'd caught him lounging in his robe again, staring at the photo of his parents tucked into *Riders to the Sea*. "Put that away now. Go snag candy wrappers on the barbed wire or something. Anything. Get up. Pretend you're alive!" she said, slamming the door, stuffing her apron into her purse.

I'm alive now, Sean thought, as he sat in Joe Mac's watching the hue of the sky darken, watching the wind lift the sea into white-capped peaks.

"What's your father up to now?" the bartender asks. He slides the polished glass into an overhead rack.

Sean looks down into his pint. A good bartender knows when it's time to stop asking questions and start pouring.

"Another?" he asks. Sean shakes his head. "The old Gray, I mean O'Grady, place has been turned into a hostel by an Italian couple. It's just 'round the bend in the road, past that old round tower. See it?"

Sean looks out the window and sees the base of a Celtic round tower jutting up from a tiny patch of green field. "Thanks for your help," he says, finishing off his pint.

"I'd better go before it gets too dark."

The bartender calls after him. "Good people, the Grays. Don't mind what some of the locals might say. That business is well behind us. An Englishman is as welcome here as a drop of sunshine these days."

Sean walks out into the dusk. O'Grady. Gray. He knows the bartender's memory is as reliable as the turning of the tides. It was Kate he couldn't rely upon.

The tide is out. He walks into the headwind, feeling the first wave of cold raindrops hit his face. The wind pushes against him, nearly knocking the breath from him. He bows his head. Sean has never smelled air that wasn't laced with diesel fumes and coal smoke. He breathes in the smell of kelp and wet sand. The smell is so fresh he can taste it.

He walks along the narrow gravel road, imagining his father walking this same route. He passes a row of whitewashed fishermen's cottages perched on a shelf of limestone, some still thatched, some sitting desolate in front of dormer-style houses with pebbledash façades. Sean sees an advertisement for high-speed internet service tacked to an electrical pole. The wave has reached here, the western edge. They were probably serving cappuccinos in the village now too. The real Ireland is disappearing. He stands still for a moment, listening to the wind whistling through gaps in the stone walls.

He wonders why he's really come here. Why he can't be more like Kate, embracing the wave, blossoming in the new Ireland. Going to the new clubs with lighting that made your clothes glow. Eating in restaurants that served free-range ostrich meat. He wonders why he misses a father he never knew. Kate has been good to him. He knew she had taught him more about strength than any man ever could have. But somehow, he feels as filled with gaps as the stone walls.

A crude wooden arrow points uphill: *Hostel*. Sean passes the round tower and turns the bend. The old Gray house grows larger and larger until there's no mistaking what it is. He recognizes the shape from his history books: the L-shaped wings, the gabled windows, the slate roof. Built from the stones of ancient Celtic monasteries the English dismantled in the 1700s. Built on the highest promontory available. Built to impose, to intimidate

the Irish peasants. An English manor house. His father was English. He stands in front of the tall burial monuments flanking the front gates reading the names of his ancestors chipped into the stone.

He turns around and looks at the village below: lord of the manor, surveying the Irish peasantry. He wants to run back down the hill and enter a thatched cottage. He doesn't belong up here. Fuck the Queen! he thinks, touching the spot above his heart. For the first time, he's happy he never knew his father. But then he thinks of the photo tucked into his book, of those smiling eyes so like his own. He knows it's too late to hate him. "Good people, the Grays," the bartender's voice echoes in his head.

He sits down on a stone bench beneath the eaves. His Ireland is disappearing, and Sean begins to mourn for all he's imagined, but never known. He wishes for something to pour into himself, slowly, that would settle into him as gently as Guinness in a pint: dense and fortifying. Something that would fill the gaps like mortar.

It's getting dark. In Kilronan Bay the lighthouse begins to flash, sending long tentacles of light through the rain and into the front window of the hostel. Sean imagines what Kate would say if she were here: "Get out of the rain and off your arse, son. See if the Italians have room for you."

He straightens his back, faces the headwind, and walks towards the door.