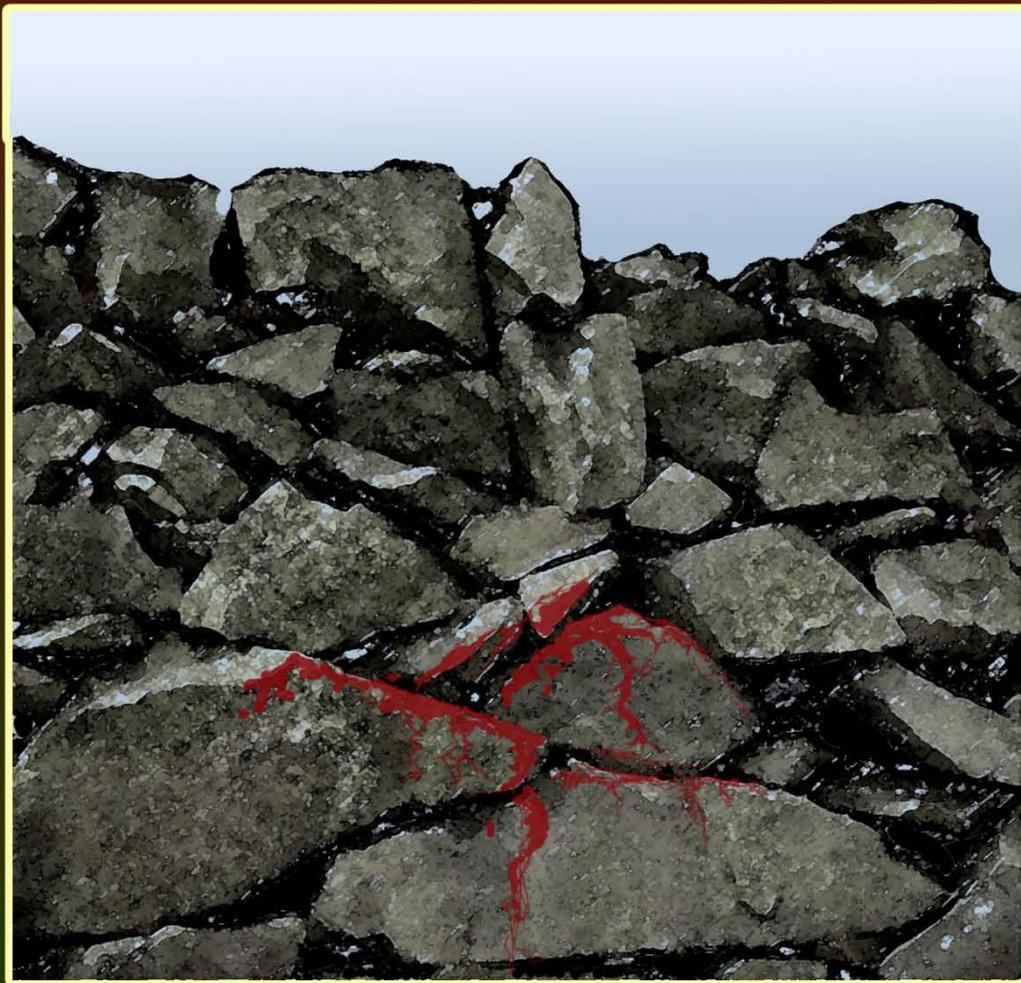


SHERRY MARIE  
GALLAGHER

MURDER ON THE ROCKS!  
A Felly Van Vliet Mystery



From the author of  
Boulder Blues and Dancing Spoons & Khachapuri

**AISLING BOOKS**

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## ONE

I turned over and kicked my Persian cat off the bed. The duvet, I noticed, had half fallen to the floor, its blue-cream colour matching the same lustre of the feline's silvery fur. I pulled it up and caught sight of golden eyes. Like little moons, they were, staring back at me. The feline grunted, hardly meowing, springing back my way. I glided my hand across her back as she continued on to the window's ledge, her body pressing against the pane and fur sticking out every which way. I laughed, thinking of a puffer fish in a museum aquarium. It was a tight squeeze, yet there was room enough for the cat to perch and gaze across the waters that rocked my houseboat in a gentle sway, a womblike feel.

It was chilly for summer, and I was soon growing accustomed to rain wet weather drenching everyone from top to bottom, from fingers to toes and neck to knees. The humidity penetrated even indoors, and I was feeling every movement of bone, which was rare because I was still young enough not to have rheumatic complaints. I breathed out and could make out puffs of breath in the night's darkness. Then I tugged the duvet to my chin, its warmth lulling me back to sleep. It wasn't till sometime later that I woke up again in a half snore, hearing voices. Their heated pitch rose then fell, and I heard their words, though undistinguished, bounce from houseboat to houseboat. My lights went on. I sat upright and wrapped the eiderdown quilt around every exposed part of my body not covered by my nightshirt. I pulled it close to me, wishing I'd worn flannel instead of silk, and shivered slightly. Then I zigzagged, dragging the quilt piled round me across the bed mattress. My cat was still perched on the custom made sill, as this houseboat was an exception where most were built with only tiny bay windows to peer out of. I was lucky with such large windows to fill an otherwise dingy barge full of light, and I stuck my face to the glass beside my cat's warm fur. She didn't budge an inch, her eyes fixed on the tiny waves that cuffed the rocks across the shoreline. A seagull flew by, its mewling matching the screech of voices I heard coming from a lighted cabin of the flat bottom boat beyond. There was a shatter of glass sounding across the water, a door slamming and angry voice calling to feet that made a clattering noise across a gangplank. I thought I heard boots but wasn't sure. A dog barked from somewhere up the strand. Then I heard a splash. Or did I? My eyes strained beyond the window glass, searching. I cocked my ears, unsure of what I'd heard. Nothing more. No, nothing. All was quiet except for the lapping sound of continuously breaking waves along the mouth of the River Blackwater. My Persian leapt from her spot and curled up closer to the middle of the bed. I lay back down myself and drifted off to sleep.

One of the locals came round the next morning in the slightly unnerving way that the culture I now visited had of popping in unannounced. I'd been up and showered already when I felt the boat rocking, ever so slightly. Out of breath, and breathing heavily, my visitor walked up the gangplank and onto the front deck. The sound of the accompanying hobble of steps made for a strange symphonic mix. Oh no, was my fleeting thought.

"Hello, hello. Hope I'm not disturbing ye."

I recognised the singsong voice of my landlord, the Widow Donnelly, and frowned at her large silhouette. The woman's reputation seemed to follow me into every shop, café and grocer I entered on the Market Square, and I was now reluctant to leave the interior shadows.

"Where're ye stayin', luv?" the green grocer would ask.

"The Swallow," I'd answer.

"Aye, the Donnelly's 'Gabble', ye mean?"

The joke was the same everywhere I went, but I was being unfair. The aging crone wasn't at all ill-natured. It was just that she liked wagging her tongue, and that she did. I stepped out from the shadows and opened the front deck's sliding door, and the first thing I noticed was

the fine aroma escaping from the basket tucked under her arm. Words cannot describe the delectable dance that the scent of freshly baked scones does on one's taste buds. Add a dollop of creamery butter to Irish marmalade and you have a taste of Heaven in a sweet biscuit. The Donnelly foot was already over the threshold when I realised the clever crone had baited my senses hook, line and sinker. There was nothing left to do but let her in.

So what was I doing on *The Swallow*? I'd found the houseboat to let through an old family friend living in Kenmare, a lovely Irish town in its own right and situated at the head of a long sea inlet. Aidan Robinson had visited me several times on my houseboat in Holland, where I lived permanently amid the canals of Leiden. Humouring my penchant for flat bottom boats, Aidan had searched the throwaway papers seen next to supermarket checkout stations, and it was his dogged persistence that caused him to stumble across the Donnelly boat so close to the college. It was a sweet deal and lovely location. He went to look at it himself and thought it ideal; and, after picking me up at the Cork Airport, he took me to meet its owner. The old widow was agreeable at the sight of me, especially when I told her with a wink and a smile that I was a polyglot traveller involved in a five-week seminar at the local community college up the hill from her. She also loved cats, having three of her own in her small pensioner's flat just off the village square. I knew that the deal was clinched when she grasped my hand. Without letting go, she told me that she wouldn't let to just anybody.

And there I was, renting the old widow's freshly renovated dwelling on the water, which she had decorated quite nicely and referred to as her pension plan. I supposed that, for her, *The Swallow* brought in a nice bit of pocket change. Its flat bottom she had painted in black, which included a rainbow coloured side panelling. There was a skiff moored to the side with a woman's touch added in the pink life preserver. For me the houseboat was a convenience, comfortably laid out – as all floating houses should be – with a panelled living room and cosy bay windows curtained round in chequered patterns of butterscotch and brick. The kitchen was compact but roomy enough for a small dining table and chairs. And it was given the Irish taste for the green, as the wall by the sink tiled in the colour of Chartreuse liqueur.

I now glimpsed the elderly owner removing her floral scarf and fading jacket of Harris Tweed. She draped her coat atop multiple cushions on an end sectional of the double-ended couch. My Persian leapt atop the furniture, and began sniffing and sneezing the faint smell of the widow's cats before kneading the hemline with her claws. I made a motion to shoo her off, but the widow stopped me with a smile and shake of the head while the fat little body of fur roosted in her jacket, pleased as a hen in a nest full chick eggs.

The elder then turned to me as I rose and went into the small kitchen. "Have you heard the news, about the accident?"

I was in the process of making us tea. "What did you say, Mrs Donnelly?"

"The accident," she repeated.

I took the teapot from the range and poured into two mugs what was the cultural favourite, a golden variety of tea that smelled to me of strong and humid Irish soil boiled to full-bodied perfection. I had to dilute mine with water though, as I never got used to its dank and tangy aftertaste. Nor could I appreciate the milk often mixed in to cut down the bitterness. I left the kitchen and went over to her. "What accident?"

She fixed me with her eyes, as though to make sure that I comprehended her. "The drowning," she said, and more loudly this time.

I gathered that she thought I had problems with my ears, or maybe it was the hearing of my slight accent that made her raise her tone of voice to me, which others often did as well. But my thoughts were momentarily elsewhere. I was thinking back to the sounds of last night and what might have happened only just metres away from us.

The widow hobbled over to the cherry wood dining table and pulled out one of the matching high back chairs, making the slight grunting sound that comes with age as she dropped her large frame into its seat.

"Sorry, I'm being rude," I said. "Yes, do sit down, please. And what have you brought me this time? You really shouldn't go to all the bother."

She smiled as she unfolded the cloth of her basket, exposing four plump and crispy scones. "No trouble a 'tal. Any excuse, and there's nowat to bake for now, just me and the pussycats."

I leaned over her fresh baked goods, taking a whiff. "They smell yummy. Milk and sugar?"  
"Aye, grand, girl."

I returned with condiments – milk, sugar, butter and jam – and two small plates. And so did another visitor. The cat had left her position on the couch and was now on the table, which caused the old lady to break into coos. Ears back, the mischievous cat lifted her nose to the air and sneezed before I scolded her in Dutch, shooing her away once again. The missus snorted with glee, throwing her a crumb. The Persian merely sniffed and looked up to us with what I could only describe as an expression of disbelief.

The widow snorted again. "There's no pâté here for ye today, little Queenie!"

The cat soon lost interest in the strange fare and scampered off as the widow turned back to the news that I believed brought her to me that morning. What followed was an outpouring of local dialect, the rising and falling cadence of which, to the ears of a foreigner, was barely intelligible. I leaned in, trying as best I could to understand till resorting to half-reading her lips before leaning back and giving up altogether.

"Sorry, Mrs Donnelly. Would you mind speaking more slowly?"

"Ach, I keep forgetting that you're from Holland darlin'." She raised her voice, enunciating in the most painful way.

I groaned but smiled kindly. "It's your lovely regional accent," I said. "My ears need getting used to it, I'm afraid."

"Sure, sure." And she again increased her volume without slowing down. "What with that golden brown hair ye could pass fer one of our own."

"But with a surname name like van Vliet," I said with a wink, "how could I be thought of as Irish?"

"Lovely name, that. And does it have a meaning, like? Fleet of ships, perhaps?"

"It actually means 'stream'."

"And ye here now on the river like?" Her grey eyes lit up. "Ah, that's grand."

"And such a pretty harbour too." I sipped my tea and broke apart the scone she'd offered me. "I do love it here in the south-west."

"And yer English is right elegant, if ye don't mind a silly old woman fer saying so."

"I do my best." I was feeling a rising flush that comes to one not expecting compliments, as praise had never been given so freely in my country. I had to admit, I rather liked it.

"It were one of them boat people finding the body," she said over a mouthful.

"A body, you say?"

"By them boat people."

"Boat people?"

"Aye."

"Who are they? I've never heard of them before."

"Them's that got all the painted up boats, like. Tinkers on the waterways – river rats – some call them. It were one of their own, their Declan, that found the body washed up with the incoming tide."

I tried making some kind of connection to the sounds that had awakened me, but I could not. "That's dreadful," I said.

She coughed hollowly, gesturing her hand as if shooing away the cat as I had done. But my Nikki had left us long ago and was now sleeping between the coat and multiple pillows atop the double-ended couch opposite us. "I never trusted the lot," she muttered.

"No, I mean about the body found downriver. That's dreadful news. Surely you don't think those boat people had anything to do with it?"

"And why not? They make it their business to know yer own, sure as Father Christmas."

The widow stuffed the rest of the biscuit in her mouth and ruminated. I felt privileged to be a socio-linguist by trade. And, whenever I could, I'd try to study the culture I was visiting while surmising its various expressions through the signs and symbols around me. These were not

always spoken communications, as quite often the body expressed – even screamed out – what the spoken word did not. And it gave me a secret thrill when one of these very ‘boatpeople’ that the widow now spoke of had invited me in for tea just the day before. Rita, as she called herself, was a small built woman and dark as one of the shadow people of the imagined Pictish tribes of long ago. Yet, other than a tattoo of a small, unrecognisable bird I spied etched below her collarbone, I found her moderately decked out in jeans, trainers and pink crocheted jumper. She’d sat me down on a plush couch with white lace doilies and presented me with a teacup from a porcelain service that I couldn’t help but admire. As I rubbed a finger over the glazed and daintily painted shamrocks, I was told the make was Belleek. The design was Ireland’s own, the woman informed me, and she smiled at this bit of disclosure through badly stained teeth. It was a charming smile, nonetheless, and I couldn’t help but feel in her a sense of pride in ownership. Soon afterward she did what I thought an odd thing. She insisted on reading my cup leaves, an experience of which, uncanny though the reading was, I felt somewhat unnerved by. I supposed it had to do with her presence, so odd to me that I felt I was being entertained by a raven like creature that might have bewitched me as she stood ready to peck my eyes out. And I caught myself shuddering involuntarily.

The old widow broke into my train of thought. “Someone walking over your grave?”

I refocused on the large frame still seated at the kitchen table beside me and now eyeing me curiously. We often use a similar sort of expression in Dutch, which means to have ‘kippenvel’, literally translated ‘chicken skin’ and meaning the English ‘goose bumps’.

When we first met, the widow mentioned how she and her husband had spent what she’d called ‘many a happy day together’ on The Swallow. Yet, those days may not have been as happy as she let on, as there could have been good reason for her bias against this clan of water travellers I knew so little about.

I pushed my plate and cup aside. “Tell me about the accident.” My elbows on the table and chin resting in the palms of my hands, I listened eagerly for her to continue.

She glimpsed over her shoulder as if there was some apparition behind her. “It were the young Tricia Calloway.”

The feeling returned, and once more I felt I’d rubbed against a chicken’s cold and bumpy skin.

“That were Tricia Calloway,” she repeated, “the very one staying on her father Brendan’s boat yonder. Oh, the family’s takin’ it poorly, as ye can imagine, she being so young and all.”

“Do they, I mean, the police, or these boatpeople, do any of them know what happened?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “My Jimmy and me, we knew Brendan’s father Teddy and the missus very well. We have the Calloways to thank for building a fair share of the houses here, which are dear enough now. Yer man Brendan’s on the board of realtors, and them children all grew up – good kids, the lot of them – but not a one hurting for money. Little Patricia, the one that’s, ah me....” She paused, crossing herself. “The one that’s drowned, like....” Pausing again, she murmured; “All them kids were raised on the sea. Seals they were, like the rest of the lot here. Three of the lads are Lifeboat Station volunteers. And their Chris, he’s with Cork’s Garda C osta.”

I said; “What a coincidence. My friend Aidan and his cousin work for the coastguard in County Kerry.”

“Is that so?” Her voice warmed, as if the connection meant something to her. “Is he yer sweetheart then?”

“No, no, no.” I choked on my words as if swallowing a fly. “He’s just a friend, our families are old friends. They all bred dogs, you see.”

“Well, that’s all right, darlin’. You’ll find a man yet. Yer young enough still.”

What was this habit of her for bringing out the colour in my face? And I was finding this yet another awkward moment. “Believe me, Mrs Donnelly, male friends suit me just fine. Lovers are such high maintenance.”

She let out a laugh that seemed to travel from her bowels and explode through her belly. I laughed too at the sight of her. “Yer a wonder, a ripe wonder,” she said, drying her eyes. “But

it's no coincidence that many here make their living from the water. It's a part of us, it is. Runnin' through our veins, like. The Calloway's are no different from the rest. So how could one of their own have drowned, and all growing up in the water, so?"

My scone began tasting drier in my mouth than it actually was. I coughed and reached for my teacup, sipping the strong liquid that only made me wince. Tricia had been one of the language school employees teaching where I was currently lecturing. Or, I should say, she was one of the group of young teachers hired to teach in a holiday programme by the institute renting space at the community college for the summer. It was an adequately housed facility but not one of the larger ones, as in Cork or Waterford. So Tricia Calloway's death would not go down easily. Most assuredly, it would be in these villagers' hearts and minds for some time to come. But what had actually happened? Was it truly an accident or, more to my thinking, foul play? That's what I wanted to find out.

Looking back to the widow, I saw her showing no sign of leaving. So, I looked at the wall clock as I rose from my seat, complimenting her once more for the sweet biscuits she'd brought over.

"Not a 'tall, not a 'tall," she replied.

I'd hoped that she'd take this as the cue I'd meant it to be and rise with me. Instead, like old ladies can do, she stayed put while making a remark totally out of the blue, something about one superstore having a price war with another. Patient I was, yes, but there's a limit to anyone's good nature. And mine was fraying when she went on to discuss the morning's incredibly warm sun. I managed to have her politely out the door in the middle of her commenting on Ireland's twenty-seven shades of green. I didn't wave but thanked her again for the scones before quietly slipping the latch in the deadbolt lock and sighing with relief. Now I could finally ready for my day. I paused to glimpse the small flotilla docked outside my window, smiling a satisfied smile. Despite the tragedy of Tricia Calloway's death, I reminded myself why I'd come visiting with only a lame excuse for work to warrant my summer stay. It was simply for the view. From where The Swallow was moored I could just make out Youghal Bridge. Built of old stone before being modernised with fortifications, the bridge crossed the mouth of the River Blackwater and its inland waterway.

With a population of less than 10,000 inhabitants, the Irish Tourist Board designated Youghal as an Irish heritage port because of its many historic buildings and monuments within its town walls, dating back to a ninth century Norse settlement when the town was used as a base for raids on monastic sites along the southern coast. It was situated on the coastline of East County Cork, and the local Catholic church of St Mary's, seen on a hill overlooking the town, still bears a stone of the etched outline of a Viking longboat.

There was even more history to the town, as it was steeped in rebellion and bloodshed. Supported by English kings and queens, the Irish chieftains of this popular port fought terrible battles with the Normans who later overran them. Yet I saw little sign of the sleepy village's turbulent past as I glanced beyond the bridge and to the sky, marvelling at the sun breaking through recent rain clouds, the remaining moisture gleaming across hills and dales like morning dew flies set alight. Did I count so many shades of green? Well, at least four or five, I reckoned. The sunlight fingered through shadows of tiled rooftops – no doubt some of the homes Brendan Calloway and his father had built – creating a vibrant lustre of blues, reds and browns. Heaven on earth was 'Youghal' to me. And I loved it too for its name, meaning 'yew wood' in Irish Gaelic, its pronunciation a delight to my linguistic ears and one sounding more like a hillbilly greeting than the name of a town. 'Yawl, come back now, y'hear!' I could hardly say it, not even to this day, without cracking a smile.

On yesterday's walk through town I came across Eochill's Rent-A-Scooter, a shop just a stone's throw from the clock tower on the market square. When I returned the next day to rent a moped I learned from the shop clerk that 'Eochill' was the Gaelic spelling of the town's name. I also discovered The Nook, a well-stocked liquor store and small café serving the best homemade apple crumble I'd ever tasted. And I didn't forget my fat little Persian on my shopping spree, finding her cat food favourite along with a ceramic bowl, reading 'puisín', which the pet store owner told me simply meant 'pussycat'. Because I occupy myself with

language, I've known all the Celtic tongues to each have their own branch on the Indo-European language tree. Latin words don't occur in Gaelic. Yet, 'pisces', the Latin word for 'fish', is so close to what my cat loves most. And the bowl was, in any case, an interesting language curio for a linguist and her spoiled cat.

After doing a bit of washing up from tea with Mrs Donnelly, I slipped a linen jacket over my French cut sweater underneath. It was then an image projected itself onto me of a young and sassy Parisian named Amélie. She was the ingénue in a film with the same name who, just like me, didn't quite find her way in love. No, I thought, and shook from my head such a juvenile projection. Surely, I appeared more businesslike with a tailored down look that suited me better than the choices made by slightly older colleagues that tended toward skirts and jackets of Polyester blends. I was too eclectic for such synthetic weaves, and slightly more artsy. Besides, I'd always had a sneaking suspicion that Polyester 'fried the brain'.

I locked the deck door, which the old widow assured I never needed locking. After the disturbing news about Tricia Calloway, I felt uneasy and secured shut all the bay windows as well. Down or up the gangplank depending on the tide – this time down – I exited the dock and into the warmth of the summer sun. It was a fickle sun that I wished would stay put and chase all the clouds away for the day. For the moment, it had cast a brilliant sheen upon the moped I'd slid onto. I revved its engine and took off in the direction of the community college.

The dean of Communications and Scholarly Affairs was hosting a lecture-based seminar on popular culture, which was a somewhat supercilious theme for critical thinking, inviting me as a – twice a week – guest lecturer throughout the five week programme. And I jumped on the invitation. Central Europeans don't offer summer programmes in education, as summers are viewed as national R&R periods prepaid throughout the year in vacation stipends which are included in end of school year salaries. Yet, I thought it a sweet contract that covered additional travel expenses like airfare. And what a super way to go 'native', I thought.

To fit in with the seminar's theme I labelled my lecture series 'Signs of Modern Thought in the Western World'. I wanted to keep the label as broad as possible to be able to blend in different linguistic and cultural ideas. I wanted to start off with a bang by bringing in something interest catching. As a culture with near recent histories of famine and mass emigration, food issues have always been dear to the Irish heart. And I thought it'd be fun to talk about the modern fast-food culture and the adverse affects of advertising. The students enrolling in my series appeared relaxed yet engaged, and I liked studying their faces as they participated, asking thoughtful questions and bringing up significant points. I found it great fun when one man, owner of a fish and chips wagon, even debated a point with me. And when students lingered for follow-up discussions I thought it brilliant.

On this day I'd planned a discussion surrounding the topic of MTV culture, where I'd be speaking on what made it particularly European in contrast to its initial American broadcast. Besides the fish and chips man, there was only one other student in her early forties, a nurse who was changing her profession to advertising. It wasn't as rare a career change as one might think, because she was moving into administration, involving herself more with the local hospital's community affairs. Most of the rest of the class were as young as, or even younger than, the language school teachers hired to teach the summer school programme. So I wanted this topic to be just as appealing as the previous one had been, or hopefully even more so. I'd end with a reiteration of how – in so many different ways – perception and interpretation influence a community and its individual culture.

If I hadn't have rented the moped, I would've ended up walking a good distance to the college. Having a scooter with me meant my being about eight times faster than a person on foot, which was worth any rental expense I had to pay. I parked in the campus lot and secured a U-shaped lock between frame and wheel before walking up the asphalt drive to the open doors of the cafeteria, where I was immediately accosted with smells of school – watered down coffee, burnt toast and overripe fruit mingling with chalky smells of classroom dusters, pencil lead and fibred paper. I skirted over to the double doors of the main hall, but even then had to meander through a small congestion of Spanish teens on break between language courses. Those lurking within the building shadows should have been sunning

themselves with their mates that I saw having tea and coffee, which they'd perched atop the low lying brick wall in front of the school. With skin bronzed from a lifetime of Mediterranean living, they looked to me like garden gnomes belonging elsewhere. They were joined by a few other stragglers below their feet who'd escaped the four walled prison to lie down beside others on sun-baked stretches of lawn just beyond the car park. They were learning quickly, like I was, that in Ireland one snatches up each and every offered patch of sunlight that seems to mend the hallowed out depressions caused by too much mist and rain.

I walked through the semi-deserted halls and took the broad cement steps to the first level painted a primary yellow, crumbling and slightly faded. What was it about educational buildings worldwide and their penchant for primary colours, even at institutes of higher learning? The scent of school permeated the corridors as well: discarded apples turning brown juxtaposing the more chemical smells of board markers and printing ink.

Directly above the large garden level cantina, the café bistro was set apart as a quieter place for teachers and regular clientele where none of the vacationing teens, I'd noticed, had been allowed to linger. And there I spied out their teachers, some with packed lunches, sitting on a vinyl couch close to the tables. They looked up and greeted me as I ordered a cappuccino. They'd been so friendly to me on my first lecture day, smiling back and waving me over. Yet the present mood was more sombre. One of them was even crying and another consoling her, looking teary-eyed herself. For me it was an awkward moment as I, after all, was a stranger in their midst. They'd no doubt heard about their colleague's death and had been speaking in low voices when I joined them.

"You're renting the Donnelly barge, aren't you?"

I eyed the pretty blonde addressing me. Straightforward as a Dutch woman was my first impression of her. She'd stuck out a hand, introducing herself as Sinead McNeela.

"For a week now," I answered.

"That old cow, what a gob she has. She'll talk your ears off."

"I noticed," I said, cracking a smile. "You should have warned me."

"Believe me, I would have if I'd have known you before."

"It's a queer thing what that happened." My eyes travelled to the brown haired, bushy browed girl, looking like one of the students. She was so petite looking that I wondered how she'd been getting along in a language school full of rambunctious teens.

Sinead said, "Did you hear anything?"

"Funny you should mention that." Before I could say another word we were interrupted by a student rushing in and calling the blonde away to help locate a missing iPod thought to be left in the classroom. After they'd gone, I repeated. "I did hear a few noises."

"What kind of noises?" They were all ears.

"Arguing, a door slamming. And later on I thought I heard a splash."

"A splash?" The one named Ellen raised a brow, her coppery hair reminding me of a cousin's of the selfsame name.

"Yes, but I can't be sure. I was sleeping when the noises woke me."

Sinead returned, rolling her eyes. "Problem solved, thank God. We found Lina's iPod tucked under her seat." She glimpsed her watch, with an expensive brand name, I noticed. Its large, silver-etched clock face held by a band of soft leather died green. She sighed. "Time to go, lads."

The linguist in me adored such colloquialisms, and sometimes I'd catch myself slipping into their usage. This would often make me the brunt of jokes back home, such as when I was in a pub drinking Jenever, a well-known brand of Dutch gin. A few friends had popped in and coaxed me into a dart game. "Okay, lads," I'd replied without thinking. They laughed at me good naturedly, calling me 'lad' for the rest of the evening. Yet, I thought the expression so quaintly Irish, as there were no other males present in the bistro that day except for a grumpy looking maintenance technician at a small table across the room that Sinead had nicknamed 'Gabe O'Phun'. I don't know how she'd thought up that one, or where she'd heard it first, but I knew that I could never again look at the man I saw before me slurping his tea in the same light.

I said my 'goodbyes' and exited out the bistro with a mind filling up with thoughts about the small lecture hall's projector. I crossed fingers, hoping that all was working properly. In summer this could be a problem, as schools were short staffed. Being foreign could also be prove difficult, especially if one heard the mild accent and decided not to take me seriously. I remembered one school I guest lectured at where the maintenance technicians would hole up most afternoons and play solitaire – with two it could have been rummy or poker – and I soon got the feeling that they were telling me to go fish whenever the lights didn't work or the computers wouldn't accept log in codes.

Back in the hall of the first level, I had to pass through a set of double doors designed like two ends of sealed rubber, making a cush-cush sound as the ends came together and snuffed out all extraneous noise below. I walked on and brushed shoulders with a man who wasn't paying attention to where he was going for all the paperwork he could have been holding and stacked up all the way to his lifted chin. Yet he had none. Nor had he thought to iron his clothes, it seemed. I knew the Irish were not especially known for trend setting fashions, but this slept-in combination of tee-shirt beneath wrinkled jacket and corduroys was an eyesore. Only the man's black trainers matched anything, which was his belt.

I paused, studying the quick up and down movement of his chinless goatee.

He gave a curt nod and walked on. I came to the locked door of my classroom and turned the key before glimpsing over my shoulder. And I saw him sneering at the one coming up behind me. "You should try making it to class a lot earlier than this, Ellen," he said with contempt.

I cringed for her, the Dutch expression coming to mind that I could literally translate: 'You walk with your nose in the air'.

She looked suddenly startled then stopped and linked her eyes to his. I saw her grit her teeth. "I would if I had one, Dr Roche, she snarled, emphasising the 'doctor'. "But I don't have class again till this afternoon."

"Oh." He flustered, literally physically backing off. "Carry on then."

"That's the plan," she said in a huff and walked on.

I turned away, but not before the man caught my look of satisfaction. He eyed me sidewise and quickened his pace.

"Professor?" It was Ellen addressing me this time.

"Please," I corrected, "we're all colleagues here. Call me Felly."

"What a nice name. Is it shortened?"

"For Felicia, "meaning 'lucky'. I'd been the second of twins born to my mother that day, the first being male. She felt lucky, she told me, to have one of each gender."

"And let me guess your brother's name. Is it Fortunate, and Nate for short?"

"No, it's Filip," I said with a laugh.

She smiled back. "Would you mind me sitting on your lecture? As you've heard from himself, the all-mighty, I have nothing to do at the moment."

"Not a problem." I opened the door to my room, shaking my head. Did she know how off-handed that sounded? "You could do me a favour though, Ellen. Would you mind switching on the lights while I start the computer?"

"Not at all. So, do you like teaching here?"

"Oh, yes. It's quite nice. And you?"

"Grand. Well, except for having to work with our director."

"I noticed he's quite curt with you."

"He thinks I'm insubordinate, but I don't know where he gets off. You give someone a title and it goes to their head."

"He is your director."

"Don't remind me. And, no, I don't take it personal. How can I when he's like that with everyone else? Jaysus, Felly, that one really abuses his position."

No comment, as I didn't know any of them well enough to do so, not yet.

“But we have our ways of getting back at the peevish little man. We call him Dr Cockroach behind his back.”

I laughed. “Where did you come up with that one?”

“Sinead’s brilliant stroke of genius: Collin Roche – Cock Roach. It’s his wife that got him the job at our language school.”

“Really?” Now I was interested. “How so?”

“Connections, connections.”

“That would make sense.” I plugged in my memory stick, opening its file before turning on the projector. “Yay, it works!” I said with relief. “I couldn’t get it working the other day. I had to call in that grumpy maintenance tech.”

“Oh, yes. Another hottie, old Gabe O’Phun.” She rolled her eyes. “And he’s always been grumpy from day one. I don’t know, Felly.” She sighed. “I keep telling myself that I should be spending my holiday cycling around Spain instead of teaching Spanish kids summer school in Ireland.”

I eyed this girl who looked like my cousin. Yet my cousin would have never gone in for her retro-Victorian look, the tight tweed vest over the lacy button-down shirt with cameo that somehow worked for Ellen. With her hair pinned up in a falling bun, she looked more striking than plain. “So what changed your mind? And however do you manage to put up with these men?”

“One word: Daddy, who thinks I’m lazy, worthless and up to no good.”

I laughed. “And are you?”

She laughed back. “I do my best.”

“Teaching’s not such a bad job, surely.”

“Maybe not as a whole, but it’s hard working with these kids. Still, when you’re in the classroom it’s like your private kingdom. That is, when you’re not being observed by the powers that think they ‘BE’.”

“Like demigods. Yes, I know the like.”

Ellen sat beside me as I shuffled through my notes, her tone of voice hushed as if someone else was in the room, listening. “We all know that the cockroach was having an affair with Tricia Calloway.”

I stopped shuffling. “What did you say?”

“Ask anyone of us, except tread lightly with Sinead. She and Tricia didn’t exactly get along together. In fact, I think they hated each other.”

“But why?”

“An old rivalry is my guess. They went to the same Catholic school. It happens. Thank God I was raised Protestant.”

“I thought most everyone was raised Catholic in these parts.”

“Not everyone, Felly. I’m a pagan myself.”

I had to laugh at that. “Well, then you’ll like today’s lecture.”

She brightened. “What do you mean? Are you one too?”

“No, but I’ll make you think like one.”

“How so?”

“It’s called ‘logic’ of the Thomas Aquinas and Aristotelian variety.”

“Oh, that.”

Good, I got her to smile again.

## TWO

Ellen invited me down to the local before she left to teach her afternoon classes, which was where all the teachers were going after school. The city centre's *Gate* was the most popular youth hangout I was told, but the harbour pub to me had more character and quite a lot of history behind it. On the market square and in walking distance from The Swallow, my rented houseboat, it was a convenient stop for me. I'd been in *Moby Dicks* before but only out of curiosity. Screen director John Huston had spent a lot of time in the pub where he planned the 1956 filming of the original 'Moby Dick', starring Gregory Peck. What I liked most about the pub was not its somewhat dark and drab interior, but its typically Irish box house structure of brick and stucco, painted butterscotch with lime green trim. There were windows everywhere looking out to the River Blackwater, and they set the otherwise dark and dingy interior aglow with natural light. I imagined what a facelift such striking colours would give to all the brown brick row-houses of Holland. Painted so vividly, they'd make my homeland with its strong Calvinistic background look like a whole new country altogether. Not bad, not bad, I thought.

I ordered a Guinness, waiting for its contents to settle. Then I raised my pint glass to the girls.

"Slaínte," they all muttered.

"I've been to Amsterdam once," said Ellen. "I'm trying to think how they toast. 'Proost', is it?"

"Proost," I said, acknowledging her by clinking glasses.

"I remember 'dank you veel' too, which I always mispronounce."

"And I'm sure they thanked you back for trying."

Sinead groaned, ever so slightly, but I caught it. "So tell me about the splash you heard."

"Yes," they all chimed in.

"Not much to tell, really. I'd been sleeping."

"It were no accident," said the quiet one. The corners of her mouth turned down as she sipped at her cider glass.

"Widow Donnelly told me the same, saying that most everyone who lives here knows how to swim. But accidents can happen on houseboats," I said, my eyes resting on her, "like anyplace else."

She looked to her drink, growing silent.

I kept an eye on her as I made my point. "She could have slipped and fallen, for instance."

Sinead said, "But the others told me you said you heard a splash."

"Maybe. At least it sounded like one, but I couldn't be positive."

I sipped the tasty cream atop my Guinness, feeling a bit sheepish, as the noise I made reminded me of a child with a straw. No one seemed to notice or care. My eyes roamed to the wall photos, many of which were scenes from John Huston's work. One stood out to me among the others, a village scene I recognised by the quayside. It was full of actors, main characters I from the movie, I remembered, who I saw mingling with extras made to look like family members clutching their beloved sailing men. They all wore dubious expressions. Anyone with the most elementary knowledge of literary device could see how the scene was blatantly crafted to foreshadow in the minds of the viewing audience the danger that lurked around the corner, of Ahab and his loyal crew whom he'd almost killed with his obsession and dogged pursuits. Though in my mind's eye, it was the book's adventures that danced before me and not those of the movie. I'd read Herman Melville's novel in Dutch, so long ago but, to this day, could recall the endless discussions in the gymnasium – a preparatory school for those planning to attend university – about the discomfiting moments of Ahab's

continued struggle, so valiant yet so humanly frail was he who came face to face with the overpowering nature of the great white whale.

"If it were just a drowning accident then Tricia's body would have sunk and not have been found so quickly down shore."

I looked up from my musing, seeing Ellen speaking. I took another sip of Guinness. "What about the tide? And who exactly are these folks that Widow Donnelly calls boatpeople?"

Sinead guffawed. "Feckin' knackers on the river, you mean?"

Ellen clicked her tongue to the roof of her mouth, shooting her a look of disgust. "That lot is harmless enough. They're just different is all."

"They live the old ways," said the quiet one.

"I see. Well, there's no crime in that." I took another drink. "So, what's up with that director of yours? Rather rude, isn't he?"

Two of the teachers coughed out loud as Ellen kicked me under the table, apology written all over face. She motioned her eyes toward the bar area where I recognised the wrinkled suit, the frame hunched over his stool murdering a whiskey glass.

"You know the two of them were riding each other like nobody's business," Sinead whispered, and a bit too loudly, I thought.

The quiet one flattened and raised bushy brown brows. "Be careful what you say, Sinead."

"So who turns left when he should've gone right, Mary?" She squinted back then looked to me, adding; "The cockroach is also married with two little daughters."

"Mary has a good point," I acknowledged. "Whoever may be suspect shouldn't be faced head on unless certain. Otherwise, it invites all kinds of trouble."

"Like slander, you mean?"

Ellen nodded her head. "Not to mention losing our jobs, Mary."

I agreed. "You need evidence, admissible facts."

Sinead finished the rest of her drink. "Or at least the skill to trick your man into spilling his guts like he's sloshing his whiskey."

"Well, if anyone can do it you can."

"I'm not mental, Ellen. So who's up for another? I'm buying the next round, lads."

I placed a hand over my half full glass. "This pint's already going to my head."

Ellen said. "I'm grand."

"I'm skint till payday," Mary confessed, "but if you're buying I'll take another cider."

Sinead flipped back her blonde hair, laughing. "Alcopops, the lot of you."

"Alcopops?"

"Don't mind her. She's just thinking that we don't take our drink seriously." Ellen poured more milk in her tea and drank it down. "But would you look at your man over there? He's right pissed."

"For focals sake, and she's heading right for him. Maybe I should...."

"Don't be thick, Mary. Leave her be. Sinead can handle her own."

With that I said my 'goodbyes' and bowed politely out of the picture.

When I returned to The Swallow, I lay down on the couch as I felt a slight headache coming on. I took an aspirin and spread out on the large, double ended couch that was pushed against one of the panelled walls full of large bay windows. I stared at all the colourfully chequered curtains, thinking the widow to be one who liked her creature comforts, as I did. Oversized cushions were thrown everywhere, their matching and contrasting patterns fitting into playful colour schemes. She'd done well with the interior décor of this houseboat, and I imagined she must have cut quite the interesting figure in her youth. Yet, in her aging decline, the old crone appeared to be thought little more of than a town gossip. Youth could be zany. Youth could dress retro-funk. In old age the very same qualities were judged as merely senile and dowdy. How unfair.

I picked up a book laid on the coffee table, a mystery novel, trying to focus on a page I'd earmarked. My eyes began to burn as a dull ache spread across my forehead. I went into the kitchen and came back with an ice pack, but not before swallowing another aspirin. Other than the headache it had actually been a good day for me. Perhaps it was the beer that had

brought the headache on. What a dreadful thought to be found allergic to Guinness. No, it was more likely the strain of being tired. I was in a new place and still acclimatising. I opened one of the bay windows and took in the fresh sea air. I wanted to smell the smells of Ireland. Yet, what I breathed in was the scent of fresh air mixed with river water flowing downstream, its odour of silt overpowering the faint briny scent of the Celtic Sea beyond. It wasn't unpleasant, just nothing special. And I felt tired from all the pub talk, though I liked being taken in by the language school teachers, especially being invited to drink with them after school. Still, I was the accepted foreigner. That was all, though I wasn't that much older than the others – just a few years – and the feeling of being let in the group was a nice one. I just wished I'd thought to bring a tape recorder to record some of the bantering I'd heard and had to laugh at. But 'alcopops'? That was a new one on me, more influenced by MTV than anything else, I'd gathered. And one of those words that, no doubt, died on the tongue as soon as it was uttered. Yet it was the local habits and perspectives that influenced dialog which always seemed to fascinate me, and I'd have been happy to have made regional dialect a long-term case study. Yet if I could have measured the habits of these particular teachers by the way they were behaving, I'd have said that they were playing with one another as children do when they poke at and chase each other around the schoolyard.

Ellen told me during my lecture hour that she was from Killarney; a Kerry girl, like my friends the Robinsons in Kenmare. And I was now teaching in what was referred to as the West Country. So all the other teachers I'd met so far were actually locals. Sinead, Tricia and Mary were from the immediate area, being born and bred in Youghal. The fact that Sinead and Tricia had been school rivals was interesting as well, if not significant. Had there been rivalries between them and their relationship with Dr Roche too? It was hard to figure, as to me he seemed more weasel like than dynamic. But this could have explained why the girls had been at odds with each other's company. Yet, according to Ellen, the contention began long ago. I probably should have stuck around Moby Dicks to see what Sinead was up to with the cockroach. If I'd only ordered tea I might have stayed the course. Or it could have very well been the morning's strong tea that brought on this headache.

Guinness, I'd been told, was brewed and exported from the same factories. Yet it never tasted better to me than in Ireland. So what was the difference between a Guinness here or there, in the homeland or abroad? The swelling perfumes of flora and fauna in the cool of the day and scenting up the night? Or perhaps the pungent smell of decaying sea life? How about the tangy odour of horse dung and sand dunes mixed with a more earthy scent of fermenting peat? It could even be the intangible feeling one got of walking on clouds from mist so thick that it concentrated near to the ground. Did all these attributes add up and affect one's taste for Guinness in Ireland? 'Guinness is good for you' claimed advertising campaigns since the Post-war era. I shut my eyes with the icepack resting on my forehead. "Guinness is good for you, all right," I moaned. "And tell that to my aching head."

When I awoke again it was dark. My fat little Persian was rubbing against my arm, which now felt strangely disconnected from the rest of me. My headache now gone, I massaged away the tingly feeling in my appendage and reached over to scratch the cat's long, silky fur. I yawned, dropping my arm to the floor and running fingers lightly across the carpet's short nap and bumps of protruding floral design. I wondered where the widow purchased such an unusual floor covering, its tan colour blending so completely with the rest of the interior's warm reds, yellows and browns. Perhaps she'd bought it long ago, back in the days when her husband was still alive. What it must have been like for them then as they lived along the swelling riverbanks, the gentle tides lulling them into a peaceful limbo as if their world together would never end. And there she was as I now knew her, a lone busybody with few others to keep her company than her three cats. I rose and stretched, rummaging around the kitchen for something to eat. I played with the idea of walking back to the pub for a bowl of fish soup. How lazy I was becoming. Perhaps I'd stir-fry the leak and carrots I bought from the green grocer to go with the boxed rice I had in the cupboard. If I added some of the soy-based Indonesian 'ketjap' I'd brought from home I could make a meal of it. Hmm, not all that tempting, really. I yawned again and peered in the cupboard for a small pot as I felt the

square head of fluff, my Nikki, butting against me. Rather than crying for her meal as most cats do, she chose to lock me into a staring game – her eyes bulging - with a comical expression like she'd swallowed some nasty bug. Drawing her ears back she sprung up and did a mad dance, as if momentarily losing possession of her senses. I laughed aloud, and she won me over, knowing as she did that I'd open one of the little tuna tins I'd bought for her. But who knows what a cat really has in its head, if much of anything, other than the instinct to eat, sleep and pounce on any moving object that enters its focused attention?

After the stir-fry I put the Persian into her cat leash, a silly looking contraption. And cats simply cannot be lead around like dogs. Her leash had both collar and attached body harness, and all this I snapped together before walking her along the strand – the weather now so clean smelling that not a drop of rain was felt in the air. Perfect. As far as walking cats go, mine wasn't half the bother of the few others I'd had in the past. They'd halt for every blowing leaf that crossed their path and swoop down on a few odd shadows here and there. Contrariwise, I felt that this Persian's walks were more of a social affair, as passers-by would inevitably stop to admire and pet her. She pranced alongside me, her tail held high, as if expecting all the fuss that would soon come her way. We covered several metres that way when I happened to gaze across the river and notice Rita, the boat woman, on a white and green painted skiff. She noticed me too, waving and barking to the young man beside her. It didn't take him long to row over to where my cat and I were standing. He tied the boat to the mooring as Rita got out and squatted down, scratching the feline behind the ears. The young man came up to us and gave me a shy smile as she introduced him as her son.

"Declan Costello," he said, shaking my hand politely. He looked very much like his mother and not all that taller. "And what is this bit of fluff, like?"

I smiled back. "Nikki, the fat little Persian who thinks I'm her slavey."

"Looking to be like right good stock. Do you show her?"

"She'd never sit still," I told them both. "This one's got a will of her own, which I've corrupted by spoiling her."

The son bent down to stroke her fur, my Persian basking in their affections.

"Little Queenie," I said, parroting the old widow's comment.

"In it just," they both agreed, laughing.

Rita rose first and dusted off her jeans. "Wudja share a cupper with me and the boi then?"

"Why, thank you, but no. I don't think my cat would much mind being on your skiff. I'd be too afraid she'd jump out for fright."

"Another day then?"

I nodded my head, smiling. "I'd like that."

I wanted to ask what they knew about Tricia Calloway's body, but I was leery, not wanting to cause offence with my snooping. It was becoming plain that these boatpeople had caught my attention, and I was captivated by them. Though they were clearly Irish, perhaps what was called the black Irish with Spanish features, Rita and Declan reminded me in part of the travellers back home, the gipsy-like folk, and many with migratory roots that could be traced back to the Balkans, places like Bulgaria and Romania. Perhaps such families were also the stem of the old Druids. Who knew? But I was sure the Guards – the Irish police – must have questioned them about things I wanted to know myself but felt somewhat awkward to ask. As it was, I feared I might project a bad image to these people, which I didn't want to do. I gathered that they were a group on the fringes of society and, thus, suspicious by nature. I might have very well appeared little more than the nuisance the old widow had seemed to me with my questioning. And what did I know of them and their ways? They were a people I hadn't even known existed except for these two I'd now met. No, I'd give my curiosity a momentary rest, as I had no clue as to how to phrase my queries without giving alarm. I'd feel I'd be policing without proper authority.

I bit my tongue and said goodbye, deciding that I would have that tea with them in near future, but not with my silly little cat on a leash. I walked back home with the feline princess, her tail still high and expression smug, that is, for two seconds before catching sight of a

moving bug and forgetting anything and everything that may or may not have been on her mind.