

Books by Sherry Marie Gallagher....

Murder On The Rocks!

(1st of the Felly van Vliet series)

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(2nd of the Felly van Vliet series)

The Poisoned Tree

(3rd of the Felly van Vliet series)

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Sherry Marie Gallagher

The Poisoned Tree

A Felly van Vliet Mystery series

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For more information please contact:

MEDIATOR MEDIA
R. SCHUMANLAAN 73
4463 BD GOES
THE NETHERLANDS
E: info@mediatormedia.nl
W: www.mediatormedia.nl

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For my granddaughters
Maya, Mia & Alia



ONE

What made Thijs Brugmans the artist that he was? A man with an ability to shift emotions into hyper drive and carry me along with him in his merry dance was contagiously good fun. He could whirl animated words and expressions about his head and raise up a smile from somewhere deep within, but was best left alone when not in such a mood. As a child growing up, I'd skateboard in-between him and my twin brother, as if only I could perceive the invisible thread weaving us three together. I would be in the middle observing him spin his board round and round with Filip on the outskirts practicing his more skilful manoeuvres. Thijs never had the accuracy of my brother's moves, but even back then he had a flair for the dramatics, his leaps and jumps being my favourite to watch. This also made him more accident prone, and he took a lot of bruising from all those fancy twists and turns of showmanship just for a laugh. Ah, but Thijs was good for the soul.

As we grew into our teens, my brother replaced rollers with sails and used similarly angled moves to glide him across river waters that fed into the North Sea. Thijs joined him as well, but only on occasion. Divided interests began to separate us all a bit further apart. Filip had gone corporate and used his talent for precision in the legal world dealing with financial transactions and mergers. Thijs invested his flair in learning the craft of theatre and filmmaking through an exchange programme at Julliard in New York, which he brought back to show mostly his students and fellow thespians. And I, the second born of the twins, was a social linguist who up till now had a rollercoaster profession that carried me across land and sea as an international teacher.

Of our gang of three I would say it was Thijs who craved the most attention. And I would often see him playing his audience like a tanked shark hungering for feedback. Sometimes I found him devastating to watch, knowing how criticism was a spear gun aimed at the heart. To Thijs, a rightly timed joke was gold in the hand, and he'd turn fool for a laugh, villain for a gasp and martyr for a tear. A bad review would simply hole him up for days. But weren't most performing artists this way? They who would sell souls to the scrutiny of a public executing its praise or disapproval in one swift blow. Such exposure I'd imagine required of performing artists would make tender anyone's skin. That was why, with some misgiving, I let out my classes early to attend a dress rehearsal of the end of school year play that Thijs was putting on at the Lak. This was the school theatre catty-corner from my office, where I shared space with two other professors in the language building of Leiden University. Their desks and mine merged as one, an arrangement that up till now I thought little of as I was often abroad collecting notes for a scholarly work on language acquisition in multicultural settings.

Yet, there comes a time in a vagabond's life when they tire of the sights and sounds of unfamiliar shores and long for the milk and butter of home. These days I grew weary of traipsing around the globe and wanted to settle into a routine of teaching students of my own homeland and culture rather than those of others. I had finished my paper, which was published in one of those obscure literary journals that

no one ever reads. Yet, I was proud of myself that it was actually done, 'done and dusted', as my boyfriend Kieran was fond of saying.

My sneak preview of what Thijs called his 'avant-garde play' was one of personal imagining and choreographed by his students. Thijs's position was in the media branch of our language faculty. Our dean, Dr Ernie Huijsman, with his shock of white hair in his early fifties was a real suit and tie scholar. Rumour of the school grapevine variety had it that the dean's once thick brown curls had been French fried in the Latin Quarter from too much consummation of fun during a tour as a road scholar at La Sorbonne. He was too young to be called an 'old hippie', but our doctor of the softer sciences was quiet and easy to work with. We all knew we were lucky to have someone who was not a rigid perfectionist wanting to make a name for himself and his department. Huijsman was more likened to one enjoying the creative factor in individuals, a man extending long ropes for each of us to swing by, hanging or shining.

As for Thij's play, what he had done was to handpick a few graduate students to script with him a series of soliloquies. I entered the Lak, waving to Thijs who was downstage from me. The theatre consisted of a floor stage with permanent seats rising up in a half circle around it. And, as I watched the performance, I thought of a wild and untidy Samuel Beckett play, thinking of the existential one-acts that merged into the absurd and collided into one another as they spit out short and pithy one-liners. I laughed at Thijs's characters who performed in front of a minimalistic backdrop that represented a sidewalk scene. The only props were placards displaying a variety of oddly anarchistic sayings, and I believed they were written to illustrate a particular form of social satire. One character, a female dressed for the streets, came up to a man holding a sign, reading: 'Community cynicism'.

"Spare change?" she said to the man.

"The only change," he responded, "is in the tip jar at Jan's café, divvied up with a partial share going to the taxman."

"That's no change, that's joint possession."

"Same as it ever was," he told her.

This is My Town was the programme's title, and I later told my boyfriend Kieran that, in my opinion, it had a limited appeal to those intellectuals and quirky artists who enjoyed the hell out of one another's company while poking fun at classism. Had I told the selfsame to Thijs? Not in so many words.

"*This is My Town* is a good idea," I said at the dress rehearsal's conclusion. "I had a few laughs with it too."

He beamed. "Oh yeah? Where, exactly?"

I was then urged to painstakingly rehash each and every chuckle, which proved difficult because there were no scene or costume changes and too little movement to attach any recollection to. I did my best, ending with; "But I don't think it has much of a plot."

I focused on his listening face, seeing all those shadows of a grin fade and lose form. He pointed out aspects and nuances he thought I'd missed, suggesting; "Perhaps it all just went over your head, Felly?"

"Perhaps." I sighed. *What a bother friendships could be.* I then wished him and his crew of grinning actors well before exiting stage floor right and heading back outdoors.

It was late spring but nippy all the same in Leiden, which was situated in the south province of Holland. I put on my leather jacket and walked over to a rack full of what always reminded me of metal octopus legs. I unlocked a black frame city bicycle at

the far end and threw a linen pant leg over its leather saddle. I was meeting Kieran at our usual rendezvous for coffee and noontime chat; and, if time permitted, we'd end up having a bite together.

I didn't leave the theatre with the happiest of feelings, though I understood why Thijs had wanted his childhood friend to critique his play. Still.... I was a linguist, not a playwright. I merited the worth of signs and symbols by how they were used to communicate information and neither understood the silliness of Beckett nor the absurdity of Sartre, his mentor. Oh my, oh performers. Being around Thijs that morning left me with the feeling that I was skirting around a delicate flower melting in the sun. It was doomed to wither and die no matter how many pails of praise I poured over it. Should I have said more positive things when catching sight of his disappointed face? I could have commented on the costuming and stagecraft, saying they were brilliant, but they weren't. When Thijs returned from America he was accepted at Leiden U to teach drama, having had his fill of New York. "It's been shot up with bullet holes instead of wormholes!" was his sole comment of the 'Big Apple' experience. He was just glad to be home and loved his job at the university. As for me and my comment, to his credit, he'd brushed away the letdown in regained exuberance, much like a designer has when sure of his project. So let the audience decide, not me. My brother would no doubt show up at opening night; and, his opinion, if asked, would be fair-minded but full of a diplomat's tact.

I crossed the raggedy Patersbrug log bridge over the canal from the university's botanical gardens to Witte Singel with my thoughts still on Thijs and his avant-garde production. I didn't see the street artist setting up his makeshift stand at the end of the bridge till I was almost on top of him.

"I'll paint you for a good price," he said. "Only because a beautiful face is such effortless pleasure."

I almost fell off my bike at the rich timbre of his voice. I laughed and set myself right again, catching sight of the rich collection of acrylic tubes cushioned in his aproned lap, the rough cotton fabric full of stains and looking much like a toddler's paint and splash presentation of earth and sky. The colour choices he had tucked into his fabric folds were browns, reds and yellows. I wondered if he had seen me coming and singled them out in anticipation of capturing the hues of my hair in sunlight? "Sorry," I said. "No time today."

He winked, wishing me a good day and watching me pedal off before turning his attention to the two bridge goers crossing after me. I caught some of his words, luring them in with practiced banter. His busking was playful, and they broke into easy smiles, laughing as he calculatingly cajoled along with them. Yet who would fault the manipulative painter for wanting to make his bread and butter? There was a fine line drawn between what he and what all the rest of us did for play and pay. Illusions, delusions – the slip of tongue and sleight of hand – all balancing acts done by ants who believe themselves little less than lions and bears.

I spotted the snack shop where Kieran, love of my life, and I rendezvoused for lunch. After my summer spent in Youghal as a visiting guest lecturer, I had lured Kieran away from the local Guard. Yet, he was no small town lackey but one degreed in criminal law at Trinity College of Dublin. He'd climbed the ranks to inspector when we'd met, and it had been his choice till then to stay in the small community of his birth where so many of his relatives remained to this day. It was when we fell in love that we, together, began envisioning the move back to Holland. Still, I was honestly surprised when he followed me home. Talk was cheap and often more flattering than

anything else in a land of dreams and fairy mists, and I just hadn't been convinced that he'd really make the move. When he did I was over the moon.

I ordered two cappuccinos and listened to the screeching of forced air on cold steel. I swear the sound would scare away any time traveller from the recent past. Ah, but the foam came out near perfect that way. With an added dash of cocoa, the taste was ecstasy. I took a sip while waiting for the other, feeling a sudden wind kick up and tickle loose strands on the back of my neck. I wore my hair long but gave it a twist and secured it in a hair clasp when cycling or teaching.

I smiled, seeing Kieran approach on his black frame bicycle. He leaned it against the kiosk wall and pulled out a slim leather wallet from inside the jacket of his tailored suit.

"Too late, schat;" our Dutch word for 'love'. I paid the clerk and handed him the second cup only to watch sumptuous lips smack the rim of his cup. I wanted to kiss them right then and there.

"Why is Dutch coffee always good?" He sighed with pleasure.

I took another sip of mine. "It's those dark Arabic beans. So how has your morning been going?"

"Well...we're in the midst of several immigration cases. One in particular is a little dicey because of the client having spent the past week in a holding cell."

"Really? What for?"

"He was picked up for robbing a storeowner at gunpoint."

"My god. With our strict gun laws? That should get him booted out of the country with no offered citizenship."

"Only he swears he didn't do it."

"Don't they all?" I nodded in a half-smile to the clerk who was handing me change for my twenty.

Kieran took another drink. "The owner had the bejazyzus scared out of him and isn't talking."

I frowned. "How does that affect your client's residency status?"

"I'm thinking he'll walk on this one. No evidence without a testimony. There was no security camera installed in the shop, either."

"What? That's unbelievable."

"Right. My same reaction. Now there's nothing but a hospital report to show that the victim required six stitches from a skull fracture that evening."

"Which is the very evidence needed to prosecute, I'd think."

He shook his head, no. "Still not enough to go on, not without a testimony. The gobshite did it, I know he did."

I heard another sigh, not as pleasant as the first. "I'm sorry, Kieran."

"Me too. We just don't need more thugs like him immigrating to this already overcrowded country."

"What can you do about it?"

He shrugged. "I'm legally bound to assist him through it all. Otherwise, I'll be liable for misrepresentation."

"But with all this happening wouldn't you be able to dismiss him as a client?"

"On what grounds? He continues to claim his innocence."

"That just isn't fair."

"Tell me about it. I can't drop a case I've been assigned to because I don't like the crook that's getting away. It's quite the thing, isn't it?"

"I'll say."

"And I didn't spend all this time and effort to practice law just to let criminals like him

walk.”

“You certainly didn’t.”

He eyed me, smiling.

“What?”

“I’m just feasting my eyes on the loveliest of woman, knowing I’m the luckiest man alive.”

“Oh, stop it, Irish.” He could still make me blush and I never got used to it, not even after all this time we’d been together.

“Nice vest you’re wearing. Rabbit fur, is it?”

“Imitation. It looks real though, eh? I suppose I’ll have to keep an eye out for any animal rights fanatics wanting to spray me red for wearing it.”

He chuckled. “Just plead the ‘fake’.”

I groaned at the bad pun.

“They wouldn’t dare do that in my country, not unless they wanted to have a real fight on their hands, even with someone as small as my little sis.”

“I wouldn’t want to tangle with Sinead.”

“Not bloody likely too, either. She adores you, you know.”

“Sure, Kieran. Delude yourself on my account, and for your endearing love of your sibling.”

“Seriously now.”

“Say, I know this is leaving a bad taste in your mouth, but you’re not having second thoughts, are you? I mean, perhaps if you’d stuck with international law you might have had a chance to work with the Union in Brussels.”

“Not a ‘tal. I especially love working close enough to your school and to be able to sneak out and meet up like this. I’m going to have to cut it short today, I’m afraid.” He glimpsed the face of his black sport watch. “The boss has a meeting scheduled that’s probably going to take up most of the afternoon.”

“That’s not a problem, schat. I’m in the mood to cycle over to the shopping street, anyway.”

“Could I buy you a sausage roll to go, at least?” The gesture had been out of politeness, knowing I’d never been too keen on greasy snack food. He ordered one at my decline, biting into the roll. “Are you sure, darlin’?”

I nodded my head. “Positive.”

He reached over, his lips tasting of slight grease as he kissed mine. I kissed him back then watched a dark grey pant leg saddle the roadster bicycle. My maverick, my ex-garda. He shot me a two finger salute and smiled, pedalling off to the offices of De Veer and De Wit, which now included the added junior partner, McNeela.

Kieran would turn thirty-one this August, right before our planned wedding. Though he was just a few years older than me, he managed to maintain those boyish good looks that came naturally to him and he took it in stride. When I fretted over my November birthday, realising this would be my last year in my twenties, he reminded that each life phase had its place and should be enjoyed just for that, nothing more and nothing less. I thought this such a practical outlook, though I knew intimately of his romantic side too. This was pronounced in the little things he never seemed to forget. Was it prejudice on my part to think such a quality unusual in a man? He’d bring me a bouquet of exotic flowers out of the blue, knowing I loved them so, more than roses or carnations. We shared a fondness for soft jazz, and Kieran would often send new finds to my iPhone. These were such simple acts that provoked a smile and made the workday brighter. Had training as a police agent drilled in him an importance of remembering trivia that others might have overlooked, left neglected or

forgotten? If so, I counted myself lucky to be on the receiving end. And I swore I would have scratched any woman's eyes out that ever came close to stealing Kieran's heart away from mine.

As I cycled into the older and leafier section of town, not too far from where my parents lived, I thought of a poem in a throwaway magazine left on my office desk. The poem opened in a silly way, the first line boasting of a tree and its roots that, in the poet's words, 'sucked the earth's tit from a firmly planted position'. A blurb was written in as an aside about the author, a woman struggling with terminal cancer. This bit of news was what caused me to read on. After the boasting bit about the tree, the poet confided how she yearned to whisper into its leaves her innermost secrets. I read on about her belief that the tree would hold her whisperings snug to its core even though it was braggadocios of itself. She admired the tree's branches that bent with the wind and rain, its flexibility in all kinds of inclement weather. And her respect gave way to a personal disclosure that she said she had once concealed within herself. Letting go, she was no longer afraid. And the tree, she believed, would remain a constant while the world whirled about it in the unsteadiness of ever-changing time.

I thought of the poet and the secrets she bore and how the release gave her the freedom she sought in the midst of her debilitating cancer. So beautiful yet so sad.

I breathed in the crisp, unpolluted air blown inland and tinged with a salty aftertaste. My university town was just 36 kilometres (22 miles) from the North Sea, its sandy soil and freshwater canals luring in seagulls to roost among the geese, swans and ducks and cohabitating with everyday sparrows, finches and doves. Many remained throughout our milder lowland winters, but some canal birds would have problems during a cold snap like having their webbed feet stuck in ice and unable to move till breaking free. If not for locals finding them and chiselling them free they would easily freeze to their deaths.

I glimpsed the sky and spotted a few gulls mewling and circling round. Perhaps they were hunting for discards among the kiosks. When I was a little girl I fancied myself with wings of a bird. My life was ready to soar with adventure, like the characters of favourite childhood stories, of *Pippi Langkous* and *Kuifje*, our Dutch version of *Longstockings* and *Tintin*. When I grew up I travelled by way of international assignment, such as accepting invitations as guest lecturer or teacher on special assignment at varying universities. Now, close to thirty, I suffered a weariness felt by those living too long on the open road. 'East, west, home is best,' was a Dutch expression. And these days I wanted that self-same rootedness of the poet's 'boasting tree'.

The year I returned from China, Kieran had graduated from UvA (University of Amsterdam). When he passed the bar he qualified to practice international law anywhere in the EU. He chose to return to criminal law, which was no surprise to me because that was really where his interests lay. His decision did cause me to reflect on the notion that one never walks too far away from their own shadow.

Kieran was still on paper as a police inspector taking a long sabbatical from the Garda. His near fatal shooting had been a major factor in the force's agreeing to this. Yet, I couldn't help thinking that they must have assumed he'd be returning to Dublin's Trinity College to study law. Were they surprised then that he'd gone all the way to Holland?

Every summer, so far, we returned to Kieran's home in Youghal, County Cork, where he grew up and where his family and friends were. And, if anyone at the Garda was less than supportive we'd not heard one whisper. Recently, though, I read of

cutbacks within the Irish force. Like everyone and everywhere else in this global crisis, they were economising by closing down many locally run operations. In their place, auxiliary police were being dispatched to temporary sites from Dublin headquarters. This caused me to wonder if there'd even be a place for Kieran if he'd stayed on at the local station in Youghal. In hindsight, returning to school could have been the most intelligent move after all.

Though we'd been engaged since the end of my summer's teaching in Ireland, we had put our wedding plans on hold till after my return from China and Kieran's graduation. And the marriage would have been all but forgotten if not for our parents and their occasional but firm reminders. Kieran's mother would ask: "Shall we hint to Aunt Mary and Uncle Dom to keep this summer open for fitting a wedding into their holiday plans?" And my more direct parents took to the habit of toasting in each New Year, adding: "Will it be this year then?"

So we set a date with plans to marry a week after Kieran's birthday, on the eleventh of August. The wedding would take place in Holland, not Ireland, which thrilled my parents to no end. Kieran's larger, extended family were saddened by the news, as every one of his siblings had been wed in Saint Mary's Collegiate Church of Youghal, even his parents. Only Kieran would be breaking with tradition. And, no, I kept assuring the Widow Donnelly, it would not bring the two of us any bad luck. After all, it was my own family's church, and my parents, having wed there themselves, were two of the luckiest in marriage I'd ever known, bringing luck and love to their offspring as well. I would always feel fortunate in that.

At least the families – both Irish and Dutch – were in agreement with our choice of date. Late in summer planning was popular with the Irish, who had a saying that they were born in rain slickers. The rains weren't always heavy in Ireland, but continuous. Whether drizzle, mist or downpour, it was mother's milk to a land made lush green, and fairy-tale like, especially when the sun came out to dance and sparkle atop the dewy wet foliage like in celebration of a rare event.

August in the Netherlands was generally warm; and, crossing fingers and toes, as Kieran would say, it would remain so. Our spring, this year, had turned out with little sunshine at all, mostly because of the unseasonable cold. Almost every day had been windy and wet, but weather was the least of our worries. If it rained we'd do what the rest of nature does – seek shelter – simple as that. Travel arrangements would be made for certain extended family members. I wasn't sure if the boatpeople, Declan and Rita Costello, would be coming. I had a feeling they'd want to celebrate with us after we returned to Youghal. There Brigid McNeela, Kieran's mother, would be planning a second celebration at the Leisure Centre.

And the Widow Donnelly wouldn't be with us in Holland, either. She was growing so old that travelling was no longer a pleasure for her. On our last visit to Kieran's home, the ageing widow made her houseboat a wedding gift to us. We thought it much too generous of her, but she couldn't be persuaded otherwise. "I'm the last of my line," she said, "and I can't be leaving the 'old love nest' in better hands."

Esther Ruth Donnelly was not just some daft old thing. The Swallow had been the 'happy home' of her man Jimmy, foreman of a local and long running textile mill, and she, the town midwife, those oh so many years. The couple were known socially throughout as great party goers and throwers in their day, and had lived quite contentedly in the Swallow till Jimmy's death and Esther's move to the senior complex around the corner.

In summers I got used to the widow dropping by with her basket of freshly baked scones. "But only if ye can spare a bit of time for tea and company," she'd insist while

popping herself down at the kitchen table. Like many elderly outliving their spouses, Widow Donnelly had too much time and too many more stories on her hands. Yet it delighted this foreigner to no end that she'd taken an immediate liking to me. In the days before Kieran, I wondered what the Irish truly thought of my company and Donnelly was a welcomed respite from the loneliness of living abroad. Still, I believed it was actually my cat she was fond of. The fat little Persian she coddled from the moment she laid eyes on her, and the savvy feline played into her hand. Opportunist that Nikki was, she'd sit on her haunches and bat at the air like an overstuffed bear for attention. Her flat face expressions were seriously ludicrous but never failing to bring goodies to her bowl, such as a broken up scone and clotted cream the old woman carried along in a jam jar.

Kieran and I loved the Swallow as much as the widow and her husband had. She'd made the houseboat not only charming but comfortable with all its quaint furnishings. It was conveniently located as well, and not a great distance from the house that Kieran owned on Copperalley. He'd initially bought the home as an investment, perhaps with plans of settling down with a future family there. Currently, his youngest sister, Sinead, and her husband, Mick Gleason, occupied it, and they were showing no signs of moving out any time soon. They were both public school teachers, and Kieran's mother was minding their firstborn so Sinead could continue working at the local primary school. There'd been a recent announcement, however, that another was soon on the way. The second child had been unplanned but they were glad for it all the same, even now making an offer to buy Kieran's house outright. He finally agreed after talking it over with me, as raising children was not in our plans, and Kieran had accrued some hefty student loans while attending law school. The price the Gleasons offered was not extravagant, but fair, and enough to all but wipe clean the loan debt from the sale of the house.

I enjoyed having Kieran's young nieces and nephews around me, and I was just as relieved when they all packed up and left for home. My twin had also never married, though I believed that if anyone would be having children it would be Filip and Moira. Once they decided where they wanted to end up – living in Leiden or Kerry – they were just as likely to set a date after Kieran and I married.

Up until now, my fiancé and I had been like the *Wild Swans at Coole*, a poem of William Butler Yeats I knew by heart. The last stanza was my favourite, which I thought best described our relationship:

'Companionable streams or climb the air / Their hearts
have not grown old; Passion or conquest, wander where
they will / Attend upon them still. But now they drift on
the still water / Mysterious, beautiful; Among what
rushes will they build / By what lake's edge or pool /
Delight men's eyes when I awake someday / To find
they have flown away?'

We'd been just too flighty of a couple, especially with me being often away on assignment and us spending every summer in Ireland.

Yet now I was glad, no, relieved, to lose the wings of the world for once and regain the roots of my homeland. Kieran too had settled in more after finding work upon graduation and passing the Bar. As for Filip and his girlfriend, Moira was busy running Taisce, the family farm, and he was still very much occupied in building his reputation at Price Waterhouse Coopers.

My views of domesticity were admittedly lofty for someone childless and perhaps, I confess, clueless. I could only think of my mother's 'hippie poem', the one taped to

her fridge that my brother and I always teased her about, though it was an insightful thought written by the Sufi poet Kahlil Gibran, entitled: *On Children*.

“Your children are not your children,” he’d written. “They are the sons and daughters of Life’s longing for itself. They come through you but not from you / And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.”

Brought up on this philosophy, I imagined babies conceived as gifts of responsibility. Time was demanded to raise them properly, time that I’d, so far, had too little of. My life had been caught up in career and travel, though I’d done enough of it now to find living from a suitcase more wearying than glamorous.

Kieran and I were in agreement in settling as a childless couple, and I thought that it would have been a strain on our relationship, otherwise. No matter how much a couple is in love long-term relationships can be difficult business. My parents’ affinity for each other over the years had been a good model for me, not that they hadn’t had their share of arguments. I remember one time, in particular. They were showing Rua, our Irish setter, and she’d placed all-champion in the Central Europe sector. So they decided to take her to Ireland. There they’d hoped for the UK title when Rua got sick and had to be disqualified. My mother blamed Papa for letting the dog sample his stew the night before, and she was furious. ‘The food was too spicy,’ she spat.

‘Perfectly good beef!’ he spat back.

My brother and I were snickering in the corner, and I was hoping they couldn’t hear us. I think they did, though, because they grew suddenly silent and didn’t speak to each other for the rest of the day. The following morning my parents seemed to find their humour again, even laughing at such a frustrating occurrence.

This afternoon I was heading over to the *Heuvel Hovel*, a second-hand bookshop one of the adjunct faculty sharing my desk had mentioned. Christina said it reminded her of Paris’s famous *Shakespeare and Company*. It was a rare find, she told me, of wall-lined shelves cluttered up with interesting works of a variety of writers. Spread out and stacked on rickety old tables were countless paperbacks with dog-eared pages so appetising that, she confessed, at one time had even scooped up a handful just to breathe in their scent. More books were stuffed in corners behind old cushioned chairs. And, from her detailed description, I felt the gnawing hunger of an insatiate bibliophile. How wonderful to shower one’s self in the world of old books, their yellowish-brown colour releasing smells of almond and vanilla that mixed with the oily tang of decomposing wood. I wanted to get high off these aromas of intoxicating reads and envisioned myself reading book after book till the sun began to set and I was back home making dinner for Kieran’s return.

The bell tingled above the door as I entered, but no one rushed out in frenzied greeting. I knew there was someone in the backroom by the faint aroma of roasting tobacco. I was thrown back in time, reduced to the little girl I was when visiting Opa, my grandfather, who smoked a pipe filled with a cure of burgundy. I inhaled more deeply, catching a telltale odour of the fruity exotic. And I was in book lovers’ heaven with all these stacks of reading material.

I searched unfamiliar authors and titles for language finds, browsing a fun read about common non-English expressions. I always loved our Dutch word ‘moederkoekje’, a colloquial term for ‘womb’ and literally meaning ‘mother cookie’. Another mentioned in the text was the Japanese ‘yoko meshi’, translated as a ‘meal eaten sideways’. It was an idiomatic expression, describing the stress brought about by speaking a language other than one’s own. I smiled at that. I’d made English my life’s study and believed myself proficient. Yet, on occasion, a native speaker such as

Kieran could catch me in a comical slip up, such as when I'd suggested that a formal email he'd been writing to his boss still needed a 'refinery' in place of 'refinement'.

Soon tiring of my own topic, linguistics, I meandered over to the fiction section and skimmed titles of works by favourite authors. I found a few interesting paperbacks there and sat myself down in a high arching chair of plush green velvet. I glimpsed the first and last pages of a work by Somerset Maugham and another by Katherine Mansfield. It's a cheat, I know, but I've always liked reading beginnings and endings of classical literature. Still, it's a treat to read them all the way through.

I wandered over to the history section, and my eyes caught site of a set of local pictorials. They were high on the shelf and I had to use a ladder stool to reach them. This was one occasion where my love of stilettos could prove dangerous, and I stepped up gingerly while reaching for one book in particular, which was about the student squatters' movement, called 'krakersbeweging', that began in Amsterdam in the late 1960s. The word 'kraker' in my native tongue meant 'to crack', and squatters received this nickname because of their forcing open locked doors to occupy empty flats.

Breaking and entering was a criminal offense in the Netherlands, but those in my small country were aware of how real estate investors had bought up and left vacant these buildings for the sole purpose of raising property values. The 'krakers', or squatters, weren't necessarily the poor and downtrodden of Amsterdam either. Many were sons and daughters of the well-to-do classes living in high-end neighbourhoods, such as Wassenaar, Heemstede and The Hague. These cities were just south of Amsterdam and easy commutes for students riding the rails to school.

Kieran would often take the train when he was studying law at UvA, mostly because of the convenience. North and South Holland roads were often congested and parking expensive. As for the rich '60s kids raised in the traditions of parents who'd gone through a harsher era of occupation during the Second World War, their move was more an act of a desire for freedom. They wanted nothing more of their parents' rigidly Calvinistic convention, and many preferred a squatters' existence to that of overbearing elders who might interfere with their Bohemian lifestyles.

Even after my precautions, I almost fell out of my heels reaching for the text, which was tucked away high on the shelf. It was a clumsily oversized hardcover that ended up being full of striking images. Getting my bearings, I found the cushy chair again and flopped into it, kicking off my heels and tucking my feet under my legs. I loved wearing linen. It breathed so nicely. The only pain was that linen wrinkled easily and needed a lot of ironing, but to me it was worth the bother for such a lovely natural fabric. I sunk further into the chair and flipped through page after page of mostly black and white photos, stopping at one and taking it in before moving onto another. The scenes were striking photos of what I believed to be courage and conflict. I imagined that, in such times, it must have been chic to live in communal flats. Yet, personally, I would have hated it. I'd had enough of dirty, uncomfortable squalor riding the local rails during my teaching year in China.

One photo in particular captivated me – a later shot, I read, from the 1980s, not the '60s. It was a graphic scene of police breaking through a barricade of protesting squatters, and I wouldn't have compared its imagery to some of the brutally vivid shots photographed, say, during the student uprising at China's Tiananmen Square. Yet it appeared malevolent enough for some to have been badly injured on the day. I read on to where it mentioned how an unknown individual had thrown a dynamite bomb at the police as they dispersed protesting squatters while the photographer snapped away.

So who took this photo? In answer to my question I found the photographer's name mentioned shortly thereafter. *Derek Brand*, it read. And I wondered if this photo of his had won any awards. It was that striking. I would have asked the proprietor, but still no clerk had appeared from out of the backroom, or anywhere else. I didn't feel like bothering one having a good smoke. So I continued reading about how the bomb blast with resulting gunfire had ended up taking the life of a police agent while wounding several others, mostly civilians. It mentioned the legal proceedings making national news.

Hmm.... My parents would have heard about this then. I'd have to remember to ask them.

The official hearing resulted in three anarchists being convicted of conspiracy. Yet, prosecution conceded that none of the defendants had thrown the bomb. *So who did? And what about the gunfire? A cold case, no doubt.* Two years imprisonment and subsequent release with community service was the sentence given the convicted. It wasn't a hefty fine but a typical one given in my country, a land too lenient, I felt, on its lawbreakers. We were called a tolerant culture. But were we really? Or did verdicts like this have more to do with assuring prison space for hardened criminals? In other words, not crowding in misdemeanour offenders with incarcerated felons.

I fought off a feeling I couldn't describe yet wanted to run from. It was a feeling someone would have when pledging their heart to a flag they no longer believed in. No one could go back to where they started, and change meant moving forward. But where were we going? The shifting climate of my land, I hoped, wasn't like that of our sandy soil, the silt that makes for easy quicksand. Leave it alone, leave it alone. And all will work itself out in the end. Was that the answer? I didn't think so. The topic quite frankly depressed me. There was no answer, only a 'wait and see' as the skies turn to sombre grey, filtering out light and casting too many unwanted shadows.

It was now getting late, and I rose to return the book to its proper place, tucked away from my depressing dreams. Let it lie, let it lie. I took the stool in stocking feet this time, hoisting the oversized book back to where it came from. One quick heave and I almost dropped the cumbersome thing. I got a better grip, and as I did, a thin sheet of paper fell from its midsection and drifted like a feather to the floor. I always loved finding forgotten treasures in old books. Once I found a sweet little pressed rose and pondered if it was given by a lover and cherished in secret. Another time I found a green grocer receipt dated from the early 1980s, which was around the time my twin and I were born. I scanned the recorded purchases and marvelled at the cheapness of things bought with the guilder, which was our Dutch currency before the euro replaced it and inflated prices to double their worth. Sometimes progress was not a good thing. My favourite find was the odd photograph or two, or a note stuffed deep into the core of a forgotten text or journal.

I stepped off the stool and slipped into my Stilettos as I reached for the slightly off-coloured sheet, flashing on the poet, T.S. Eliot, who'd written: "My life is like a feather on the back of my hand, waiting for the death wind." And I found it such an odd thing to say, as a feather was such a light and graceful thing, like a butterfly wing. How could one compare it to death? The ending of one's life was something else altogether. Cumbrous and uncouth it was, being no respecter of persons. No one but no one was exempt from its withering decay and ultimate demise. I was more in league with Emily Dickenson's view on feathers, who claimed that "it [comparing 'hope' to a feather] perches within the soul." Now that I could relate to.

But what a thing it was that I had picked up and begun to read. No feather, that,

rather a dated draft and confession to murder. I had to sit back down, my mouth clearly open while muttering out the words and reading:

'I, Ingmar Pretorius, confess to the gunning down of the police agent, meneer Kleijn during the Vondelstraat riots in early spring 1980. It was an accident on my part, committed in the height of passion during the tank demolishing of our barricades. In my memory, everything was mayhem. Yet what has occurred in my reckless folly replays for me as crystal clear as any shiny new LP. The case is as yet unsolved and, I hope, soon to be forgotten. Even so, my conscience won't let me forget what I have done, what I swear I didn't mean to do.

'Today I cannot sleep. I see tomorrow with little rest and no hope. So, I now plead to you, father, for counsel and hopeful reconciliation. As I write this, I am shuddering over thoughts of spending the rest of my years rotting in jail. Such an image of myself behind cold blue steel is unfathomable. I write this too because I am going mad from not knowing what to do.

'Where shall I go? Who shall I turn to? Oh, Father, I pray you don't abandon me in my need to tell in detail exactly what had happened. What led to the tragic accident of this police officer's death.

'I have yet to bring myself to submit a formal declaration of guilt to any authority but you. Forgive me and my 'Dutch courage', as the English say. Oh yes, I am very much the coward. For that I am not proud. If I don't have your counsel I fear what I shall do next. What is left for me to do then but to jump before a moving train?'"

I paused and involuntarily shuddered, reading on.

'As I write I periodically clutch this note to my heart, keeping it away from the stains of tears I cannot stop from falling. But, oh, what shall I do? What shall I do?'

And it was simply signed: 'You're loving son, Ingmar.'

I wondered what I should do with the note. Should I bring it to the proprietor's attention? I rose and glimpsed over my shoulder.

This is really something, I thought, feeling suddenly very much alone though surrounded by a musty mushroom odour of second-hand books. I sat back down and reread the note once more, deep in thought. I wonder if this...Ingmar Pretorius is still alive. And why wouldn't he be if all this happened in the 1980s? If he'd been a twenty-something student then, he'd be somewhere in his 50s by now. So what has become of you, our Mr Pretorius? And how did this note of yours come by this pictorial? Did it used to be yours? Did you present a final draft to your father? And were you arrested then? If so, are you still in jail? If that be the case, perhaps someone close to you has come and cleaned out your stuff, packing up and sending your books away without knowing of this note. Or maybe you've already sprung from jail, having done community service for the rest of your fine like your co-conspirators? Perhaps you've all but forgotten this note and how you'd tucked it inside your pictorial.

There was still no sign of the bookstore owner, only the scent of his aromatic pipe. It was then and there that I decided to do some investigative work of my own. Kieran wouldn't like it, I knew, but it was as if I'd been fated to find Ingmar's letter to his father. And who in their right mind would turn their back on fate? I slipped the thin sheet of paper into my pocketbook and exited the shop. Was this stealing? No, it was sleuthing.

I had a Wifi connection on my computer at home and would look up everything I could think of that was attached to the name 'Pretorius'. I hopped on my bicycle and headed over to the Vliet canal, which by no coincidence happened to share my selfsame name. The city of Leiden had sprung up in the 12th century where the river

Vliet met up with the Rijn, and my surname's origins were rumoured to have come by way of an ancestor trading or fishing along the canal, as 'vliet' meant 'stream'. Despite the occasional teasing that van Vliet lives on Vliet, I was quite content to harbour my houseboat in one of the waterway's quieter sections, a pretty area with nice neighbours.

I still had time to research this other family name, meaning 'Pretorius', before Kieran came home for dinner. Since we both worked, Kieran and I split up the domestic duties. However, he was such a lousy cook that I was really glad when my turn came round to prepare the evening meal. Tonight I'd throw something simple on the stove, planning a stir-fry with plenty of chicken. As long as there was protein involved, Kieran was not a fussy eater. In the meantime, I'd look up the obituary of Police Officer Kleijn in the hope of finding more information and, if I was lucky, linking it to the Pretorius family.

Kieran returned home to the smell of cooking, which often put him in the habit of whistling, a habit of his that warmed me somehow, like when I heard my cat purring. And he'd fallen into a routine of slipping off his shoes and loosening his tie before meandering into the kitchen and reaching over with a peck of a kiss. I would laugh because it made me feel so old succumbing to this pattern, me being at the end of my twenties and he just over thirty. Sometimes I'd let Kieran sample whatever was bubbling on the stove. Other times, especially when I was trying out a recipe that taxed my culinary skills, I'd shoo him out into the living room. But we liked each other's company; and, most of the time, we'd just uncork a bottle of wine and fill our glasses as we watched the stove and chatted over our day.

There were moments, and this was one of them, when Kieran only wanted to put up his feet and listen to the jazz station after work. He was sifting through the day's delivered mail and catching up on local news when I re-entered the lounge to tell him in excited tones about the 'Pretorius note of confession', my big find at the second-hand bookstore that afternoon. This he received with a quiet nod and 'mm-hm' that slipped from his mouth, doing nothing to appease my mounting agitation over his lack of enthusiasm. What did 'mm-hm' mean, anyway?

I then made a flippant remark at having disturbed his downtime, which left him perplexed, his dark brows furrowing, such brows with blond features that were always striking on a man. Except for that evening, I thought, and repeated what I'd said before. He was anything but excited when I added my plans to follow up on such an oddly curious note. Drawing in a deep breath, he let it out then accused me of wanting to drag him into what he called 'another one of my crime solving adventures'. That, I remember, was the beginning of our first fight. No, I take that back. Our first was on the road to Kerry when Kieran lost it over my cat stuffed in her carrier in the backseat of his sport car and howling like an Irish 'bean sidhe', the wailing death fairy.

Now I thought him only patronising with his half-hearted interest and quick decision-making, a quality I didn't much tolerate in a man, especially the one I intended to marry. When I told him so, he grabbed his coat and headed for the door, saying he'd had a tough day and would be taking his tea at the pub. The evening meal went on permanent hold, and I swore in reply that if I'd been of my mother's generation I'd be hitting him over the head with a saucepan. I'd only read about this in childhood comic strips and had never seen my mother, nor any other woman her age, actually attempt such an outlandish act. But I thought it the funniest thing back then. In reality, such an act would be a case for domestic violence and true cause for a splitting up and parting of the ways.

There was murder in my eyes watching Kieran go. He could have his pint, even two or three or four, for all I cared. And the more I sat at the computer, planting myself there after shutting off the cooking range, the more I fumed. I felt as if the range fire had reignited in me and spread itself poker hot. I felt a sudden mania, like I wanted to jump off the side of the deck screaming at full lung capacity into the cold waters of the canal. Wouldn't that make a splash with all the houseboat neighbours? They could laugh about it all night and into the next day. No, I really didn't want to make myself their laughingstock. I could also call my mother, who I knew would only encourage me to go find Kieran and confront him instead of shouting empty words at her. I knew she'd say this to me, but I felt like calling her anyway. I wanted to scream murder into the phone until the pain of my anger went away. I could be vicious if I let myself be. I knew this well enough not to strike back when hurt. I learnt this in teacher training, to pace myself by calming down and waiting. One, two, three.... I wasn't really injured, just disappointed that Kieran hadn't been listening to me. I inhaled. Four, five, six.... And exhaled in one big primal scream, catching sight of my cat's furry little body making a beeline for the backroom. Sorry, Nikki. Persians loathe any kind of noise past sixty decibels, which is the normal level of conversation, and mine must have been well over a hundred.

I considered my choices. *Should I stay angry all evening?* Sod that. Wasted energy. I composed myself and decided to take action. I felt empowered by my own sense of sensibility, zipping up my jacket and cycling to the Café Barrera. Kieran was a creature of habit, and I knew he'd be slogging down whiskey at this trendy little restaurant bar not far from the houseboat.

And there I found him finishing off what looked to be a double shot of imported Paddys, a drink favoured by all those Cork boys I knew after working that summer in Youghal. I ordered red wine for myself and sat beside him.

He was eyeing me, calmer now. "That meeting today turned into a gobshite's nightmare."

"A what?"

He shrugged. "I'm not in the best of moods to be aidin' and abettin' you in this hobby of yours. We both have real jobs, you know."

"You'll think it more than just a 'hobby' of mine when I show you the note I found lodged into a book at the second-hand store."

He raised a brow and sighed, watching me rummage through my black leather purse till finding the paper I was looking for. I unfolded it and handed it to him.

"Cretan," he mumbled, reading it. "Killing a cop and going on the lam. Am I supposed to feel sorry for him then?"

"Gosh, you're in a mood. But I didn't come here for a fight."

"I think you should turn this into the station, Felly. Turn it in and be done with it."

"Well, I'm not going to do that." I sipped my wine when it came, wondering if this was the end of our relationship. "Do you want your ring back then?"

"Do I...what?" He looked stricken, like I'd just punched him in the face.

"I didn't ask you to solve any case for me. I just wanted to show you the letter I found. I don't like being condescended to either. If you think I'm some sukkel, I...."

"Sukkel, you say?"

"How long have you been living here, Kieran? Surely long enough to know that, in Dutch, the word 'sukkel' means idiot."

"Right, a right eejit." He grew silent just then.

I knew Dutch culture had a habit of being direct, and I usually tried to curtail my tongue around him but I was infuriated. I breathed in and exhaled, crossing one arm over the other and frowning.

“Why ever would I want back the ring I gave you?” he said suddenly, softly. “You’re my life. That’s why I’m here and not in Ireland. I’m just having a lousy day, girl.”

“Do you want to talk about it then?”

“No, I don’t actually. It’ll be all right.”

“No it won’t, not like that. So what happened today, Kier?”

“I’m a little worried, is all. When you start digging into the lives of others, people can get hurt, especially the innocent.”

“Innocent? What are we talking about here? This is only a draft of someone’s guilty conscience,” I said, snatching the paper from him. “But it’s as good as a signed confession. I only want to find out what happened to the man. Did he turn himself in, or what?”

Kieran sighed, drinking from the second round he’d ordered along with my first glass.

I gave him a long look, his blues eyes slightly bloodshot. “But that’s not all, is it?”

He shook his head, no. “Remember the case I told you I was working on?”

“You mean the one about the thief who’s getting away?”

“Well, he isn’t a ‘tal.”

Now I was confused. “So that’s good, right? I thought you didn’t want him to.”

“He went back and murdered the shop owner.”

I gasped, my mouth dropping.

“And do you know why?”

I could only shake my head in disbelief.

“Because I as good as told him to.”

“You didn’t, I’m sure.”

“I did. I told him that if I were him I’d want to start my life in a new country with a clean slate, meaning that he should attempt to live it honestly.”

“So why did he go back and kill the shop owner then?”

“Because he’s the eejit who thought that as long as his victim still lived he could turn around and blackmail him, him wantin’ to live here with a clean slate and all.”

“But you said the shop owner was afraid of him.”

“Convince a jaded criminal of the fact. They tend to only see what stands in their way.”

“Tjee,” I swore lightly.

“Not only that, but the shop owner had since installed a store camera. So everything’s on tape: the confrontation, gunshot, everything. He had a family, the poor man.”

“That’s so sad.”

“Pathetic’s the word, which is also why I didn’t feel like poking my nose in someone else’s shite. It’s a cold case, needin’ no interference from the likes of ourselves.”

I always thought Kieran sounded more Irish when he was agitated. I suppose anger made me sound more Dutch too. “It’s providence,” I told him.

He wrinkled his forehead, whistling. “Providence now, is it? Well then far be it from me to stand in the way of God almighty.”

“Jeezus, Kieran. Then give me back the letter.” I grabbed it from him in a huff, sitting back down and pocketing it.

He downed his whiskey, staring at me. I stared back, finishing off my wine. Two could play this game.

He sighed, saying; “The mam warned me about redheads.”

“And just what did she say about them?”

“Fiery, single-minded.”

“And what does she say about stubborn blond sons?”

He broke into a hint of a smile. ““You got me there. So, why don’t we order something to eat? I’m half-starved.”

“The mussels are always good here.”

“Alright, mussels it is.”

“So let me tell you what all I found doing a Google search online. There was nothing on Ingmar Pretorius, per se. He seemed to have mysteriously vanished from the planet. But I did find a Dr Johan Pretorius, a once prominent figure of Leiden who’d owned and operated a nylon factory in the 1970s that had merged with one of the bigger textile corporations of Holland. They expanded further in the late ‘80s after acquiring a specialty chemical division from yet another company. This was where Dr Pretorius had made his fortune before retiring to the board of administrators, and he was fully pensioned in the mid-nineties. There was no mention of a son, however. Only something about a daughter marrying one of the employees and moving with him to America on some company-related business after the last merger.” My eyes lit up, adding; “There was a bit of a scandal around this too.”

“You got all that in your short search?”

I nodded my head. “Isn’t the internet great?”

“So what’s the scandal?”

I told him how the newlyweds had returned to the Netherlands with an adopted son, who would be the only heir to the Pretorius fortune.”

“Lucky little bastard. And this Dr Pretorius, is he still around?”

“I Google mapped his last known address to Wassenaar.”

“But with only a mention of a daughter I see no connection to your man, Ingmar.”

“You’re right. I don’t either, not yet, anyway.”

“A Roman surname, is it? Unusual sounding, but is it common enough here?”

“Not too, and there ARE differing branches of the extended families. I know this is just a long shot, Kieran, and everything could easily come to a full stop. But I still want to investigate it anyway. I’ve got this hunch. I mean, there’s something tugging at the recesses of my mind, something I may have heard somewhere but can’t put my finger on...not yet anyway. So, this address of the doctor’s is along the Landgoedere Route, which is a posh neighbourhood close to the sea. Would you like to pay the retired gentleman a visit with me?”

“You mean just show up at his door, like?”

I nodded my head. “Something like that.”

“Even I know, as long as I’ve been here...” he had to rub it in. “With the Dutch, it’s always ‘call first and schedule an appointment’.”

“Then there’s the off chance he’d refuse to speak with us.”

“And he’d have good reason for that, like, he doesn’t know us from Adam.”

“It’s a pretty drive, regardless. If you don’t want to go just say. I understand.”

He lifted a brow.

“Really. I’ll take my scooter out of the parents’ garage.”

“You’d ride that old thing all the way to Wassenaar? It isn’t safe.”

“I took it out the other day for a spin. It works just fine. And it’s only 15 kilometres, 20 at the most.”

“No sense trying to talk you out of it then?”

“No sense at all.”

“Right.”

“So are you ready to order dinner?”

Kieran nodded his head and motioned for the woman serving our drinks. He ordered a pot of mussels for the two of us and, afterwards, leaned over to me. “Shall we kiss and make up, darlin’?”

I brushed his lips with a kiss. “Absolutely.”

He kissed me back a bit better than I’d kissed him. “Grand. So you say the mussels are good here?”

“I did, but see for yourself. ‘You can’t believe everything you hear from fiery redheads,’ says the mam.”

He smiled sidewise. “So whoever listens to the mam?”