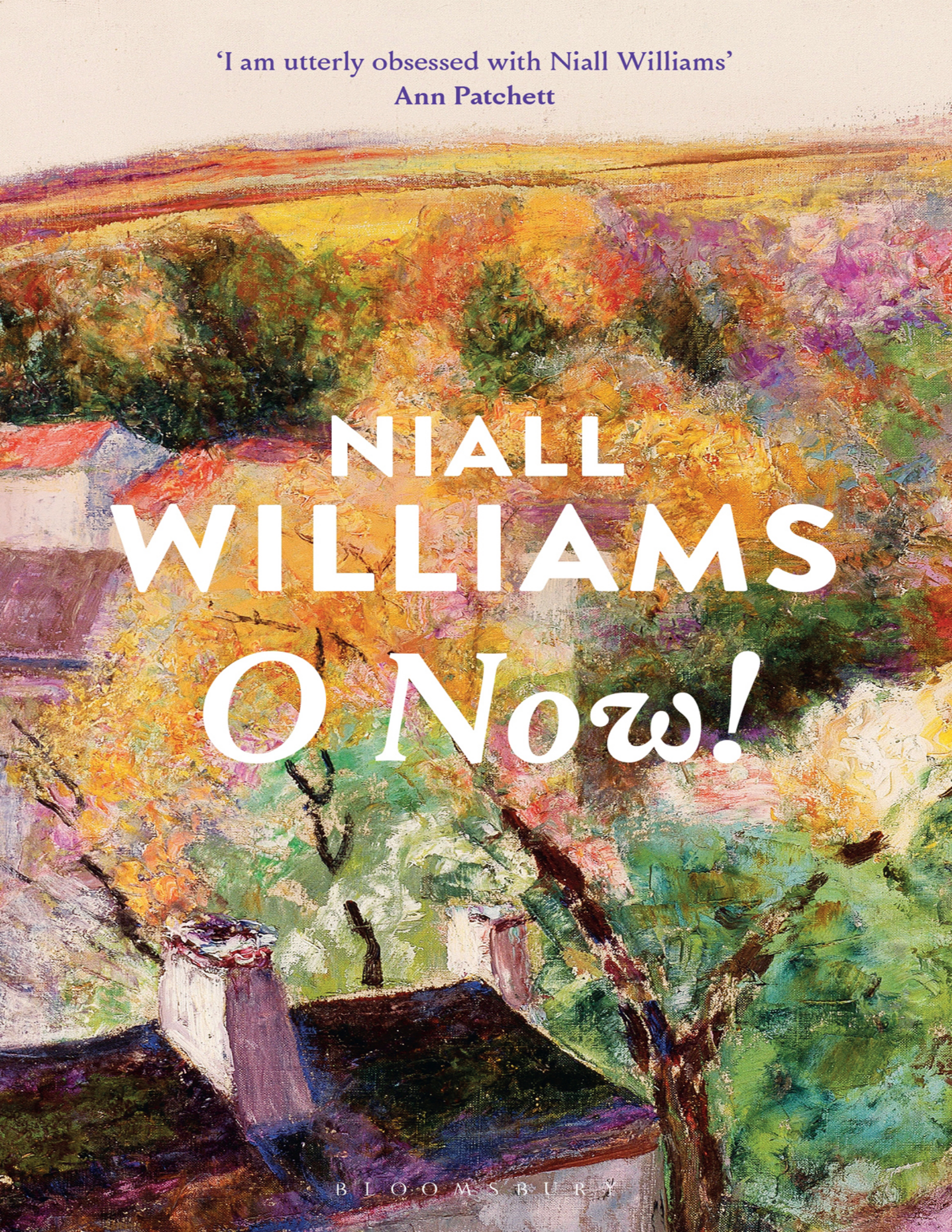


'I am utterly obsessed with Niall Williams'

Ann Patchett



NIALL WILLIAMS *O Now!*

BLOOMSBURY

O Now!

For Martin Keane, Forty years calling on the cuaird.

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O Now!

NIALL WILLIAMS

B L O O M S B U R Y P U B L I S H I N G
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Theirs was a simple arrangement. It was born out of the end of conversation, when, the ashes of evening fallen through the grate, Bat Considine had no more to say to Mossie Crowe, who everyone in Faha called Ganga. The two old men sat across the fire from each other in Ganga's, a thatched farmhouse of four rooms that had not taken the electricity when it was passing. This was the end of October, a month so needled with rain it seemed the heavens wanted to stitch themselves onto the earth and make life and afterlife all the one.

Bat was short but deep. No wife and sixty-eight years of living had given him hunched shoulders and a head so low you couldn't chop it off. He had

small furtive eyes, wild eyebrows, a fierce intelligence and the bachelor's certainty of his own opinions.

Four nights a week he came to Ganga's on the cuaird. Which four was his own prerogative, so it wasn't until he came in the back door without a knock, down the two steps onto the flag floor where the turf-smoke came to meet him, that Ganga knew tonight was another one. 'Wet,' Bat'd say, or 'shower' or 'bad shower' which was the same as saying nothing in a parish where rain had passed remarkable, what God was at He was at, and mystery the only answer to the profoundest questions on earth.

Because habit is the best shield from the uncertainties of life, when Bat came in his part looked rehearsed. He always placed the lamp on the dresser, snapped down the two sides of the long coat, two sharp little snaps like that, to release the rain he'd brought crossing the back fields. Then he lifted the coat onto the hook on the door, taking from the inner pocket the rolled scroll of whichever of the Sunday papers he hadn't got to the end of yet. This he carried over to the lumpen armchair that had been Doady's when she was living. He unrolled the newspaper, gave it a smack in its middle to right it, angled the page to the paraffin lamp and read. The cap he left on his head.

All of this Ganga watched without any more comment than Joe, his black-and-white sheepdog. Well in his seventies now, Ganga still retained his sweet nature, had the florid face and blue eyes of the Atlantic Clareman. But after the death of Doady he had slowed down, and all his ailments had caught up with him. Something had made its nest in his chest, and it wanted his air.

Bat read with commentary. Ganga's hearing was long gone in one ear and what was in the other was the buzzing of Radio Éireann when it was gone off-air. So there was no point in conversation, only the semblance, Bat throwing a phrase or two every so often to make believe they were in relation in mind as well as body. 'Second Programme of Economic Expansion' and a huff of scorn, or 'Cork flooded!' or 'Paisley out of jail!!' To which Ganga, knowing the triviality of fact, occasionally gave back the equivocal answer that had become his signature 'O Now!'

So it was four nights of the week, Bat Considine keeping Ganga Crowe company while waiting to see which of them would die first.

Tonight, after a duration that was not clocked but arrived in the way of all time between men, without the one making the decision over the other,

Ganga rose and bent the knee to knock a little life into the turf, moved the kettle over, and waited low like that for her to sing. Then he scalded the teapot, dousing the water into the grate and quick-spooning three heaps of Lyons Green Label, filling the pot, stirring down any floaters and putting the teapot on the iron trivet.

He had to get up now. That was the thing.

Bat was not three feet away, his black boots out to the fire same as always. He kept his face in the paper. He was on the death notices now, which was the best part. In the national papers were deaths from the whole country, not just your own county, and you could travel from place to place in mind, a tourist of extinction, see who had died in such a town and was deeply regretted by such and such, with the funeral mass at such a time, and in this way share the mortality of all things while enjoying a pulse of triumph at not being dead yet yourself.

‘Frawley, at the County Infirmary, Navan. Kathleen, relict of Seamus.’

Ganga put his two fists in front of him onto the hearthstone, for a moment the image of a sprinter at the starting line, only heading into the fire. Then he pushed himself up and stood in a weakness waiting, as though the vitality inside him was becoming transparent. Joe cocked the head and watched in the knowing way that dogs do.

Ganga waited for the world to right itself. Bat didn’t raise his head from the paper, though he knew what was happening. He suffered from a common conundrum: when he witnessed an ailment in another, he felt that each of his own got worse. The moment passed and Ganga went to the scullery. He got out the teacups and saucers, put the damp sugar and the cow’s milk in them, spilled four broken biscuits onto a plate and balanced it on top. He brought all with a small rattle to the three-legged stool between both chairs, then he poured the tea.

‘Tea,’ said Ganga and sat, extending a fist to Joe who smelled the biscuit inside it.

Bat folded the paper. ‘I will so,’ he said, the same as every night. He leaned forward, took his teacup in-hand, then tipped it a small way, letting a good sup into the saucer. Putting the teacup to the side, two-handed he raised the saucer to his lips. He drank with a cow’s slurp, the sound a translated satisfaction, and uncurbed in that company of men.

They had their tea and ate their biscuits, both of them looking into the fire that was low now, a glowing only, the ashes subsiding so slow as to

make it seem time was forever. As was their way, the men had no second cup and sat on in one of those vacancies that fall throughout life, when nothing seems to be happening, yet the moment is travelled by invisible immensities and what lies just beyond saying.

Then, whether because of a contagion from the death notices, or the calamitous state of the world, without taking his eyes from Ganga's hearth, Bat said, 'There's only one thing I'd like to know.'

He waited for the obvious, and when it didn't come, Bat pushed the head out a little and raised his voice a shot to say, 'What I'd like to know is why the world exists.'

He waited a second time, still not turning to see if his statement had landed. He looked into the white ashes and added, 'What I'd like to know is the mind of God.'

This time Ganga heard him, and this time Bat turned to look at him.

Ganga's face was shining. 'O Now,' he said softly and held the knees and rocked some.

The rain that was forgotten came to the window with a brush of wind and reminded them they were entering the season of spirits.

Let out now, Bat's thought circulated in the small room. It went from the fire to the dresser and back again like a thing of wings woken. It came back to the two men and Bat hunched his head down some more. He drew back the boots from the fire that was near dead. He let his eyebrows off on a little internal debate that made it seem someone was talking and someone answering though there was no sound. Then at last he said: 'We could make an arrangement, I suppose.'

This time he didn't wait for the obvious. He knew he was on ground infirm and because he was unsure of his footing he spoke quick.

'There'll be a moment,' he said. 'I'm certain. A moment when you are neither here nor there, you're on your way across, migrating, and as you're crossing everything will be made clear to you. You'll have the whole picture. You'll understand like that. He clicked his fingers, and Ganga looked at them, as though the imponderable was there. 'In the time it takes to click your fingers you'll have it, the whole thing. The why of it all. You'll know,' he said, 'the mind of God.'

It was the second time he had said the name, and at once it seemed an enormity had entered that farmhouse in Faha.

Doady's flowery curtains on the front window were not drawn and through the gaps in the old joinery the rain sounded. The smell of it breathed down through the thatch like the earth was above them and the world upside down. The mice who had come in before the time of ghosts kept to the dark under the dresser but in the stillness could be heard at minute business.

Bat stood. He went to his coat on the door hook and put it on, tucking the rolled newspaper into the inside pocket. 'Do you know,' he said, doing up the buttons and speaking as casually as he could, 'the one of us that goes first, who finds out the answer, he should try and send back word to the one left behind. We could make that arrangement.'

He chanced a look across at Ganga then. The old man hadn't moved. He still had that same shining to him, like he'd shaved too close or shed an outer skin, that lucent vulnerable beauty of those old men who refind the face of their boyhood. Ganga sat, rubbing Joe between the ears, smiling his closed-mouth smile, and by response lifted his chin and pushed back his head in a single nod upward. 'O Now!' he said once more, as though the subject passed all understanding, and the immensity could head away now for itself and trouble the likes of them no more.

'O now is right,' said Bat, in a tone of lightness that made out he had only been passing the time with talk. He'd meant nothing by it. He had meant nothing at all by it.

'Right says he,' Bat said, which was his version of go now.

But he didn't go right away. For a coldness came through him, it came through the entirety of him in less time than it takes to say that. It came while he was standing facing the back door, his hand reaching for the latch but pausing now in the air because at first it had to be a draft from somewhere, it had to be, but then how had it got inside his clothes, no, inside his skin? And yet when he dropped the hand going to take the latch and placed it on the other wrist it was not cold.

In beside Ganga, Joe raised his head and pricked his ears.

What was it?

No sooner had Bat formulated the question than the thing had passed. The cold was gone off him, or through him, and off elsewhere.

Still, it had been something. What?

Wet socks, he thought. In wet socks you'd catch your death.

He took the handlamp from the dresser. He pressed the button. It clicked down alright but no light came on. He looked into the glass of the lens, as if there was some trick to it, or by looking, he could make the light come on. He shook her a bit, he depressed the button. The third time he gave the lamp a sharp knock on her side, and then another. And this time a wavering light came on.

‘Goodnight so,’ he said quickly then, drew open the door and went with timid light into the utter dark.

The following night Bat Considine didn’t call on Ganga.

The one after that, the rain was pure cat and Bat didn’t call either.

The river came up into Faha. When no one was looking, it came into the old graveyard. When the day rose, it showed shallow canals of light between the gravestones, like the sky had come down and lay in pathways through the dead. Tom Joyce the sacristan sent in two of the Kellys with yard brushes to send the river back into the sea, but the water was coming under the wall he was told, and nothing could turn it back.

That’s the news Bat Considine came to tell Ganga on the third night, which was Halloween.

He came softly in the back door, playing the ghost, but before he could say Boo! he saw that no lamp was lit. The room was in the darkness of night, and only ashes in the grate.

But he could make out Ganga on the couch.

With Joe nestled in beside him, he was sitting in the very same spot where Bat had left him.

But he was dead.



Ganga was dead.

Bat Considine didn't need to check. He was dead because nobody living could be that still and because death made its own mark in any room it entered. It left a vacancy where the living was, was how Bat would tell it, absence a presence real as flesh and blood. He stood where he was in that crooked kitchen and looked over across the dark at the lifeless body of the only friend he had known in the world.

That Halloween night it took some moments for Bat to move. He stood in the stillness as it dawned on him that he carried in his person now the existence of time. All that was consequent, the formal and ritualised time-honoured sequence of proceedings that in Faha would commence the moment he picked up the telephone to call Doctor Troy were held suspended in him. It was as if between the tick and tock of recorded history he reached up and stopped the second hand from pulsing. He felt the pulse in him and through him, but he did not let go. He stood, holding time, and his eyes grew used to the dark so that he could see that Ganga was seated where Bat had last seen him. Could see that he was wearing the same

clothes, the same white shirt with the button missing over the bell of his stomach, the same boots with the laces tied at halfway for easier entry. His two big hands were on his thighs, easy and tranquil, his head back a bit but only so much as resting, no more, and his mouth closed with a small pull at each corner so that at ten feet across the dimness it seemed to Bat that big Ganga Crowe had a faint smile.

Still, Bat did not move.

He was trying to take in knowledge and accommodate it with understanding, but this was impossible, because not only was his gentle friend dead, now he was certain that Ganga had died the night that he himself had last visited.

We don't know how we know what we do. In Faha all knowledge tasted of sea-salt and there it was when Bat pressed the tip of his tongue onto his lower lip. Yes, he was certain. Ganga had died even before Bat had crossed the fields home. As before, Doady's uneven flowery curtains at the front window were not drawn. There, unbearably, on the stool were the two teacups and the plate that had served the broken biscuits. Maybe the mice had come for crumbs, but otherwise everything was as on the night Bat had said he wanted to know the mind of God.

Bat Considine stood, like one attendant on revelation or command. In the room there was no light but for what escaped from a portion moon in passing raincloud.

It occurred to him then that Joe the dog was dead too.

But that story was too sad for any creator, he thought, and mercy was not invented by man.

Softly so he said, 'Joe? Here Joe?' and peered at the shape of the animal that was lying in against his master. And he said again, 'Joe? Good boy Joe?' and this time saw the ears flicker and the head rise and he knew then that out of the fathomless love of dogs Joe had not moved from Ganga's side since the life went out of him.

Bat went and cupped water from the bucket into the dog's bowl, cracked two eggs into another one the way he had seen done countless times. Then he said again, 'Joe? Here Joe come on now good boy good boy come on that's the boy that's the good boy' in a cajolment without form only feeling. And that was what reached the dog's heart, for he stood on the

couch and stretched himself back into being, then climbed down and passed Bat without a look, as if to say *Don't talk to me*.

At the bowl he lapped. The water was the sound of life and the rhythm of the dog's tongue its beat.

While still holding time at bay, one part of Bat's mind went outside. There might be some children out at apples and nuts, but only the neighbouring ones, Kelly's, Quinlan's, maybe Cotter's, and they would come to Ganga's knowing the sweetness of his nature and that he had never learned the word no.

Bat went across and drew the curtains tight. The dark was darker still and at once lent the room an air of otherness, as if it was not quite in this world, or at least not in one with the living in it.

Joe hopped back up on the couch and resumed his position next to Ganga.

Bat went around to his own chair and sat back in his place too. His head was low and shoulders up and his two hands held each other in his lap. He kept his look straight ahead on the ashes in the grate.

Then he said, 'Bad rain tonight.'

He waited the pause for the O Now, and though it didn't come he acted same as if. 'The graveyard below is flooded,' he said, resuming their habit of a conversation of one.

Again, he allowed the pause, but not one look did he send across to Ganga.

Though the dark was deep and the cold that was in the house was not the cold of a fire gone out, Bat Considine found it companionable. In that sloping kitchen in Faha, the world did not move forward. Time remained suspended, and in that suspension his old friend was not yet gone from him. Doctor Troy, Father Coffey, the neighbours, the relations, the whole machine of death was not yet set in that motion which would end in a wet mound of shovelled earth.

He sat. Into his mind came the notion that the hand might come on his shoulder and the life be taken from him too.

Then there was a knock on the door.

It was more a tapping than a knock. He heard it and Joe heard it, and the mice heard it, the hearts of all jumping into their throats.

Tap-tap! Tap-tap!

He gestured shush to Joe, and Joe turned the head sideways looking at him.

Then Bat heard the voices.

They were outside the window.

At first, he could make out no words, only a whispering mixed with small wind that was the same as the imagined talk of spirits. He tried to hear past the thumping in his heart. He lowered his eyebrows and tried to hear with them.

One of the voices said, 'He's in there' and another said, 'Knock again!' and another, 'I want to go home.'

And the children that were walking ghosts in torn-up sheets appeared to him in mind and he knew they were two of Pat Quinlan's and one of the Cotters and when they knocked a last time his heart had already righted. The voices went away, and Bat knew they were safe from the reality of time again.

He thought of other things that might give him away. But Gerty, Ganga's milking cow, had died the month before; his cattle were out on the land. There were only hens for feeding and they'd be in a feathered huddle now.

Bat Considine sat. He thought to say a prayer and thought better of it. There would be plenty of prayers to come and said by holier than he. No, what he wanted to know was where was Ganga's soul now?

If by some arcane mathematics someone had calculated the journey time between earth and heaven, Bat did not know it. The fact was, he was three days behind the event, and as he sat there all the theorems of Euclid might as well have been floating in and out of each other overhead, so many times did he try to reason the speed of soul-flying versus the distance to eternity.

In Faha at that time there were still many old people who played the part of earthen jars in which were preserved antique beliefs. When you approached the house of the dead, you came on the right, to let the ghost go out on the left. You stopped the clock, covered the mirror. You drew aside the curtain and opened a window because a soul without a body could be flighty and didn't need to use the door. These and many more like them existed in that place between story and belief, and, because they could not be disproven, and because since infancy everyone in the country had had instilled in them a history of divine mystery, it was no surprise that Bat Considine thought of Ganga's soul as an invisible reality. So, raising his

eyebrows first and then his head, in a tentative whisper that used the same tone as a child's prayer to his guardian angel, he asked the air above him:

'Are you there yet?'

Joe raised his head, but Bat wasn't looking at him. The rain came at the window and down the chimney, but Bat wasn't listening. He closed his eyes in case that helped. To be nearer the stuff of his own soul, he tried to make himself not a body, holding his breath and shutting off his faculties to see if Ganga could reach him better.

When he had to take a breath, the mice went back under the dresser.

Bat had not stopped the eight-day clock on the wall, but it had given up the ghost with both hands at two, day or night who could say. The big key was on the hook on the side. All the watches Bat had owned were dead in a drawer, so he did not know what time it was, only that he was trying to keep it from existing.

Given the season that was in it, it was no stretch to imagine the air between heaven and earth thickly trafficked. He remembered as a boy seeing the great slanted oak in the grounds of the Parochial House gaily loosening her autumn leaves into a southwesterly, the wild brown flock of them going in every direction, populating the air with their dying, and he wondered if it was like that, the souls in the traffic jam to heaven.

'Are you there yet?'

Maybe Ganga was not.

Maybe the distance was immense and could not be graded by human measure. Maybe there was sequencing. Maybe it depended on who, when, and why, and how. The world after all was enormous and tragedy somewhere every moment.

No, Ganga was not with God yet. He felt sure.

Once he was, Bat Considine would know it.

He looked across the dark then. 'You're not there yet,' he told Ganga. 'You're on your way, but you're not there yet.'

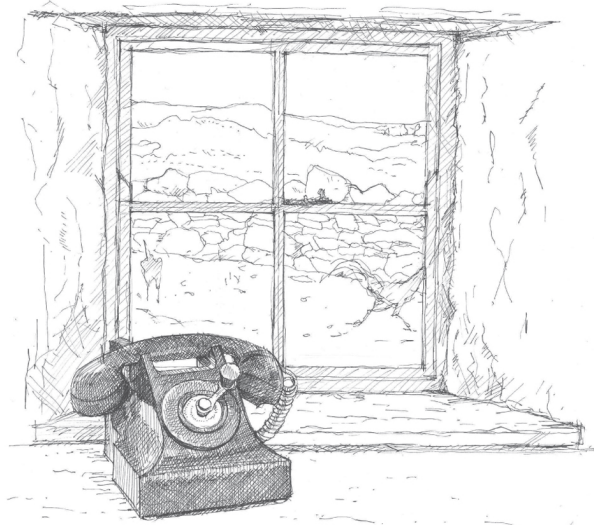
He got up from his seat. Or he got to get up and found that his body had fused and that he had aches where he had moving parts, so he seemed a thing of apprentice mechanics, stiff and jarry, stepping the four steps across the hearth to the couch.

'Don't worry, you don't have to move,' he said to Joe, who wasn't worried.

Bat sat down then on the far side of Ganga. He was still in the coat in which he had come, but he folded his arms for heat and tapped his boots together three times.

‘No,’ he said. ‘You’re not there yet. I’ll stay here with you until you land. And when you do, you’ll let me know. You’ll let me know when you know the mind of God.’

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After the ghosts, the saints. That was how it went.

Sometime before the dawning of All Saints' Day, Bat's head fell forward onto his chest, and he woke and remembered where he was. He was in Ganga Crowe's house, sitting beside his dead body on the couch. That's where he was.

How long he had been sleeping he didn't know, and didn't want to know, because he was still trying to stop time from happening. It was dark always, but darkness and November were the one and no indication. The exact time was not the thing. The thing was whether Ganga's soul had reached heaven yet. The thing was whether he was trying to send down a sign.

Waking fully now, Bat felt the guilt of Saint Peter. 'Sorry about that,' he said, and tapped Ganga on the knee.

The knee was like rock, and it struck him then, there is a clockwork in the body if not the soul, and it cannot be stopped.

'Are you there yet? You must be there by now,' he said to the rafters above. 'Even with traffic.'

Only Joe answered. The dog got down off the couch and looked at him.

‘Fair enough,’ said Bat and he rose and filled the water bowl and cracked the two eggs same as yesterday, and same as yesterday Joe lapped and ate and then hopped back up to his place alongside Ganga on a death watch that needed no explanation but proved once more the boundless nobility of dogs.

Bat watched him, not for the first time thinking that continuance was not mere or lesser, but perhaps the most desirable thing in life. For a flash he had the fantastical vision of coming and going from Ganga’s as he always had, four times a week, calling in on evening cuairds with his newspaper, sitting down to read it by the lamp forever after, Ganga never appearing in the death columns, but all the time sitting right there on the couch beside Bat, not only enduring but prevailing in the imperishable way of saints. *O Now.*

Not being a saint himself, Bat unlatched the back door and went out across the gravel to relieve himself at the gable. Like all men at that business outdoors, he did not look where he aimed but angled back his head to participate in the privilege of a panoramic pee.

The sky was not starless but cloud-blinded, the dark no longer dark the more you gazed but rather a slow but continual experiment of dissolution, as though a myriad of tones were being newly invented and which grey that November day would wear was by its maker to be decided by trial. Bat, who by habit kept his head low in his shoulders, who by instinct had tried to get through life without ever doing anything that brought attention on himself, stood at that angle of relief looking upward in amazement.

The heavens were that bit open at this juncture of the year, he had heard tell. It was to do with the way the world was made, there was a joint in it, he’d heard tell, and the join didn’t match up perfectly, so in the season of Samhain there was much coming and going through the aperture. That’s what he remembered when he was standing at his angle letting off his water and looking skyward.

‘BAT?’

Mrs Crowley’s voice was sharp as a whip. She had been going to the back door when she heard his waterworks and came around to see for herself what was the leakage.

‘Bat Considine, is that you? What are you at?’

He flipped himself inside, two quick upjerks of his general person, and was all thumbs at the fly-buttons. He turned his back, as though buttons

were indecent.

‘Now I’ve seen it all,’ said Mrs Crowley. ‘What’s wrong with your own wall?’

He turned to face her. She was a straight-speaking widow of sixty-three winters without a sentimental bone in her. The undertaker’s daughter and a teacher until she was married, she was a solid woman, brown curls flattened under a headscarf, eyes black buttons and her mouth the tightest one God made. It lent her a look of calculation and brought out guilt like hives.

‘I was calling on Ganga,’ Bat said, and scratched at a neck itch.

‘At this hour?’

He ducked the head low and let that pass. If he could help it, he never met the eye of another human being, so his guilt was hard to deduce.

‘I’m here for my eggs,’ she said.

He’d forgotten about the hens, forgotten that Ganga had an arrangement with Mrs Crowley and that every few days she collected what he didn’t need, as long as the girls were still laying.

‘Come back for ’em. Aren’t you going to mass?’ he said, recalling the holy day.

‘What world are you in? What time do you think it is?’

He didn’t tell her he didn’t know the time for the best reason: because he had been thinking of eternity.

‘Sure I’m coming from mass now,’ she said. ‘He was cross saying it, Father Coffey. I went up and told him after.’

‘You did, I suppose,’ said Bat.

‘I did,’ said Mrs Crowley. ‘It was a shame for All Saints I said to him. A quick cross mass he said. But he was vexed because of the graveyard. It’s flooded, you know,’ she told him.

‘Is that right?’ said Bat, but without the conviction of a liar.

‘Well, I can’t be talking all day in a men’s toilet,’ Mrs Crowley said. ‘I came for my eggs. Where’s Ganga?’

‘Oh he’s inside,’ said Bat.

‘Ganga!’ she called as she turned.

‘He’s not feeling himself,’ he said.

She turned back on that. ‘What’s the matter with him?’

‘He’s a bit off.’

‘What bit?’

‘General. Generally, you know, off?’

‘I don’t. If a woman has a complaint she knows where ’tis.’ She turned to go in and investigate. ‘Ganga?’

‘No! Wait!’

The tone and volume were to stop her, but Mrs Crowley knew her own mind and was in the door before Bat could get ahead to block her.

He came in behind where she was standing on the flagstones staring.

She said the names of the Holy Family.

Then she said them again only slower.

She blessed herself.

‘O poor Ganga,’ she said.

‘Poor Ganga,’ said Bat and blessed himself.

Then, eyes narrowing in calculation and mouth small as the sights on a rifle, she turned to Bat. ‘When did he pass?’

‘Three days ago.’

Her eyes not leaving Bat, one by one, she said the names of the Holy Family.

‘But I only came on him yesterday, last evening.’

‘And you called the doctor?’

‘I didn’t.’

‘The priest?’

‘No.’

‘Because?’

Even Joe was waiting for this answer.

‘Because?’ Mrs Crowley asked again.

‘I was waiting till he got into heaven.’

Whichever of the saints was for dunces must have been passing, for Mrs Crowley consigned it to the idiocy of men, gave no more thought to answering than a shake of the head and strode over to draw back the curtains and open the window.

‘We’ve to get him into the bed,’ she said, taking off her coat and headscarf. ‘We’ve to make him decent.’ She was already back at the couch and shooing Joe off. ‘You go round and get under his arms. I’ll take the legs.’

Joe went out the back door to do his business.

‘Bat Considine!’ Mrs Crowley snapped and then Bat moved alright. He came up on the couch and got his hold in around the back of Ganga. While

living, they had never touched, and the shock of it went through him and lodged in that place beyond language.

‘Come on now, come on, grab hold!’ ordered Mrs Crowley.

He gave a heave and drew the body over, and with two whooshes improved the hold he had. The problem was the legs. They wouldn’t straighten. They stayed in the same angle of sitting. Mrs Crowley tried to tease them out, but they were beyond teasing.

‘We’ll have to take him like this so,’ she said.

And so they went, in a backwards throne transit, Bat bearing the weight of the torso and Mrs Crowley the sitting legs. Carrying kingly, they went through the parlour into the bedroom, all of it darkneses and shadows, Ganga’s left boot bumping off the doorjamb and falling off to show a thick woollen sock.

They got him sideways on the bed and stopped for a suck of air. Bat went back and got the boot.

‘He won’t need that,’ Mrs Crowley said when he was about to put it back on.

Joe had returned and jumped up on the bed before either of them saw him doing it.

‘Get down! Get off! Go on you! Down!’ Mrs Crowley was not having it, but Joe was not having her either, and he went south when she was north and east west around the bed, so in the end she declared a truce by saying, ‘Get him off when the priest comes.’

She went and opened the bedroom window a crack.

On the bed, Ganga was curled over.

‘Get him straightened, I’ll phone the priest and the doctor,’ said Mrs Crowley. ‘Do you know where they keep the habit?’

‘I don’t,’ said Bat.

The machine was clicking fast now. Even as he heard her twirl the winder on the telephone in the kitchen, he knew that more than that was turning. The stillness of the night was no more. He had surrendered time to reality and now could only ride along with it the same as everyone.

Gently, he turned Ganga over onto his back, the legs still bent.

‘I’m sorry now,’ he said.

He put his right forearm across Ganga’s thighs and started to apply pressure. They moved only slightly. He gave it more force. He leaned into it with his shoulder and the legs went down some. He had them straightened a

bit. He removed the pressure to take a breather. The legs shot straight back up into the sitting position.

He turned to Ganga and saw that it was true: he had died smiling.

‘You were to straighten him. I found the habit.’ Mrs Crowley had it in her hand. ‘One of Marion’s. They must have bought one for each of them and had them blessed.’ She opened it out for airing. ‘Blessed or not, sometimes the moths get at them. Moth-holes in a habit there’s nothing worse. Here,’ she said. ‘You push, and I’ll pull.’

She was like an army officer of death, Bat thought. But he couldn’t help but be impressed.

She pulled Ganga’s legs while Bat shoved down on them. It was a slow-motion wrestling of three parties, in it an intimacy strange and primal. With Mrs Crowley below at the legs, Bat looked down and saw the white crease of her crown where the hair dye had grown out. And it moved him. It moved him so, he couldn’t say why, but the vulnerability of another is always a doorway and some part of him went through it.

‘Sit on, sit on him quick now!’ Mrs Crowley commanded, and he hopped up on top of Ganga’s straightened legs and sat like a small boy with his legs dangling.

Mrs Crowley went and came back with a hand shears. She went at Ganga’s trousers before Bat could say whoa!

‘What?’ she said, when she saw his consternation. ‘I’ve seen it all before. Wasn’t I married to a man who was nothing but a pair of mousy underpants.’

Bat had no reply.

‘Open your pants,’ Mrs Crowley said.

His *what?* didn’t make it into sound.

‘Your pants belt. Take it off. Tie it around the legs.’

The mechanics were slow but methodical, but at last Mrs Crowley was happy that dignity was preserved. She had found the metal crucifix on the small plinth but not the two candlesticks. ‘They must have borrowed some for Doady’s,’ she said. ‘I’ll bring mine.’ The white bedspread she found in the linen cupboard. It had been bought for Doady’s laying-out and put back in the cellophane after.

Soon Ganga was lying on the bedspread with the habit on top of him for decency, Joe nestling in by the hem. Carty would be coming to wash and

prepare the body and put it into the habit after. For now, there was a look of repose.

In Faha, the word of death travelled faster than birth, and soon the latch on the back door was clicking. The forgotten hens were remembered and came in to squat mournfully on the threshold.

Mrs Crowley hither-and-tithered but Bat stayed where he was in the chief mourner's seat beside the bed. She told him she had found the Eolaí an Telefóin and that in various pens and pencils over the years Ganga had written in the phone numbers of his sons, nine of them living still.

'Will you call them, or will I?' she asked, in her voice a tenderness that acknowledged Bat had been as close to Ganga Crowe as any human on the planet.

Bat cleared his throat some. 'You do it,' he said.

'People'll be coming in to see him shortly and start the prayers,' she said. And when he did not answer she touched his sleeve and went out.

Hands clasped between his legs, Bat Considine rocked a little. Then before he would lose the last private moment with his only friend, he leaned over to Ganga's smiling face, and whispered:

'Well? Are you there yet?'



In Faha, a funeral beat two weddings. That was the verdict of Sonny Cooney, and the subterranean reason why no one in the parish missed one. You might regret going to a wedding, Sonny said, but you're never sorry you attended a funeral. It was the reason the death notices were read before the entertainment listings, not just because funerals came with free food and drink but because all knew that in the shadow of death, life was at its most vital.

Ganga's funeral began the moment Mrs Crowley twirled the winder on the telephone and asked Mrs Prendergast to be put through first to the doctor, then Father Coffey, then Carty the undertaker. Mrs Prendergast had the postmistress's nose for bad news and didn't need the names of what Sonny called Faha's three horsemen to know the story. And because in that parish story was a currency whose value increased the more it was spent, the word of Ganga's passing was at the counters of Bourke's and Clohessy's before the phone calls were completed.

That the codes of death are unwritten makes them no less known. The near neighbours come first. From proximity to the passing of mortality they are granted a risen station. Death didn't stop at their door, but he might have, *Jeez he might*, so bless yourself and thank God and go now and pay your respects.

Those who Bat Considine heard lifting the latch and coming down the two steps into the kitchen of Ganga's were soon too numerous to count. Bat was still in the bedroom, sitting by the corpse, waiting for a sign. He did not know what form it would take. But because it had to come from the next life, where the languages of all living things, human, animal and plant, were understood, he reasoned it could come in any way God and Ganga could agree on. That his old friend was now at the gates, if not inside heaven itself, he was certain. He stayed in the seat, his extravagant wings of eyebrows lowered while he tried not to be distracted by the voices growing in the house.

When Doctor Troy came into the bedroom, he offered his hand and said the same *Sorry for your troubles* he said in every house in the parish at least once. Bat took the handshake, but more than that he took the inference, which was that between he and Ganga had been true friendship, and maybe even, Bat realised with the same shock as all who encounter it, love.

Mrs Crowley had come in behind the doctor. She watched Bat's brown eyes deepen with emotion and she pursed the small mouth. Though she had on the restraint that everyone adopted in the company of a medical man, she made small silent go-away gestures to Joe, who was lying next to the body and who paid her no attention at all.

'Sitting?' asked the doctor, looking at the belt.

'He was, Doctor,' said Mrs Crowley, and took his nod as acknowledgement of a job well done.

She saw the doctor out, and when she came back, she told Bat that Carty had appeared.

Like butter on a boiled egg, she tried to soften her nature. 'You should come out now, Bat,' saying his name for the first time. 'You've eaten nothing. I'll make you something. Would you have a ham sandwich, would you have an egg?'

'I have to stay with him.'

'You've already stayed with him.'

‘I can’t leave. I’m waiting for something.’ Bat lifted his head and then his eyebrows toward the rafters to indicate, and when Mrs Crowley only creased her brow, he clarified, ‘From him, above.’

‘O,’ she said.

Because it was the season of all souls, and the heavens that bit opened, because it was the time when that all in Faha would visit their dead, Mrs Crowley thought of her own T.J. and gave him the same little *go away now* wave of the hand she had used on Joe. She looked to the open window and thought to close it in case T.J. was passing.

‘Father Coffey won’t be for a while, he’s dealing with the flood in the graveyard,’ she said.

With the ingenuity that springs from emergency, down in the village Tom Joyce was laying scaffolding planks along the Venetian canals between the graves. It would make for pirate gangways through the dead, slippery and unstable, but it would also give birth to Sonny Cooney’s saying that Jesus wasn’t the only one who walked on water.

After a time, Mrs Crowley said, ‘I’ll let Carty in so.’

A burly man, Carty was a builder-undermaker with a melancholy mouth. His teeth tilted at off angles, like tombstones of ones who didn’t get on with who they were buried beside. He came into the bedroom in the black suit but took off the jacket and rolled the shirtsleeves to the elbows with an air of solemnity. He opened his bag of tricks.

‘Three days?’ he asked.

‘Three days,’ Mrs Crowley confirmed.

Carty blew a tooth-whistle. *How is he so good?* he asked no one. ‘The dog,’ he said, indicating scam with a jerk of his head.

Bat reached over and took Joe into his arms.

‘I’ll tell you when I’m done,’ Carty said.

‘Bat is staying,’ said Mrs Crowley with the firmness that forged her reputation and reminded Carty she was the daughter of an undertaker herself.

Carty made his mouth a little more melancholic.

‘Basin of water?’ Mrs Crowley said.

‘Basin of water.’

Although he whistled throughout, Carty worked with a surgeon’s care. The big mitts of his builder’s hands were transformed with sponges and linen, gently tracing invisible pathways up and down the body so that every

inch of flesh was washed clean. He removed Bat's belt from the legs and handed it over to him with two hands like it was an insignia of honour. He washed the white feet, washed them with a diligence that made it seem he was intent on removing every footstep they had taken on the earth since birth. You'd walk out in the next life with an immaculate sole, his undertaker's pun.

Through all of it, the ablutions, the manoeuvrings, the plugging and the closing, Bat Considine stayed hunkered. From the indignities he looked away, but moment by moment the physical realities of the human body made impossible the thought of the soul.

If God wanted us to think of above, why did he make us this way below? was the turn his thinking took.

And where was Ganga now? Their arrangement had been simple: whoever went first would send back word to the other. He would at last know the mind of God, the why of everything, and he would send back, what? Something.

But in three days, nothing.

If nothing came, then there is nothing, was Bat's conclusion. We are bodies only and there is no such thing as a soul.

When Carty was done and Ganga laid out in the habit, he stood back, whistled two toothy notes of appraisal and began rolling down his shirtsleeves. As if she sniffed it, Mrs Crowley came in.

'O doesn't he make a beautiful corpse,' she said at the foot of the bed. It was true for her. Though there were some who adjudged Carty heavy-handed with the powder when he made up the Faha Players for the drama festival, in the final round-up he was the man you wanted. There was none of the tallowed waxen look of the corpses of Mrs Crowley's father, who could never resist corking the eyebrows.

'You're a miracle worker. He's just like himself, God rest him,' Mrs Crowley said.

Bat and Joe looked at Ganga then. He lay in a serenity supreme, eyes closed, but still with a faint smile.

Joe let out one of those whimpers that, though in dog dialect, pierce the hearts of humans. He hopped across to his master and tried to burrow his head in under the dead hand.

'Was it the Vikings had their dogs buried with them?' Carty asked nobody, took his bag and, whistling, left.

Mrs Crowley touched Bat on the shoulder. 'They'll want to come in now and start the prayers,' she said.

Bat didn't turn to look at her. He was realising that only now had he arrived at the finality of death. That Ganga was gone, that never again would he come on his evening cuaird, never stretch his boots to that fire, read the paper by the lamp and hear Ganga's universal comment 'O Now!'

It desolated him.

'Bat?'

Mrs Crowley touched Bat's shoulder again, a little firmer this time, and abruptly he stood. The bubble in his spirit level gone down one end, he had to steady himself, so he put a hand on the nearest firmness, which was herself.

He took it back nearly as quick, but not before some transference.

'Let them in,' he said bluntly, and he marched out past her in the head-down low-shouldered stomp of one who had lost his last hope.

When Bat came into Ganga's kitchen, a world of neighbours had landed. The semblance of a clearance, the furniture had been pushed back against the walls. There were women ranged on forms, stools and chairs. Men standing by the walls and the dresser and the back step. Bottles of stout and sandwiches had appeared. Every man and some of the women with a cigarette, those who weren't near the saucer for the ashes balancing them in Pisa towers until in their bottle was dregs and they could be posted in. With his bit of breeding, Seamus Mac an Iomara tipped his ash into the cuffs of his trousers.

All knew the story that Bat Considine had found the body and had not wanted to be parted from it. They knew that Bat was peculiar, but in Faha this carried no liability.

'You sit, Bat,' said Patrick Quinlan, standing.

'I won't.' He went instead and stood at the threshold, where the door was open and the hens squatted, watching the rain thick and thin and the sad fields and the river beyond. The whole of the day rain had been seeping down, dissolving the sky so it seemed without substance, only pale air without beginning or end, to journey through it unimaginable.

Inside, the rosary had started and was an engine humming.

The two Tim-Tom Taltys came, and Mick Lynch, and Mary Falsey and Mrs Pender, and more along with them, some carrying bottles of whiskey or

beer or minerals or biscuit tins of homemade foodstuffs, but all stepping past with the nod of sympathy and the reticent manner of those entering the house of the dead.

Cheeks empurpled from the cycle, Father Coffey arrived even more hepped up than usual. He shook Bat's hand vigorously. 'The Flood,' he said as alibi, his 'God bless all!' going in the door like a wet blanket thrown over the talk.

It's all the same now, thought Bat. Ganga is gone.

He felt a small weakness and went out and sat on the windowsill, dug into his coat pocket for a bit of furred clove and sucked it.

Escaping suffocation by Hail Marys, Joe appeared at his feet.

'Well Joe,' said Bat. And they both looked out at November in Faha.

More callers came. And then more still, Ganga's house defying the laws of physics, proving once again that space was not finite when it came to human grieving.

The poor light of day went away while Bat and Joe sat sentry.

Mrs Crowley came out to find him and ask if he wanted a bite, and he said no too abruptly, and she went back inside.

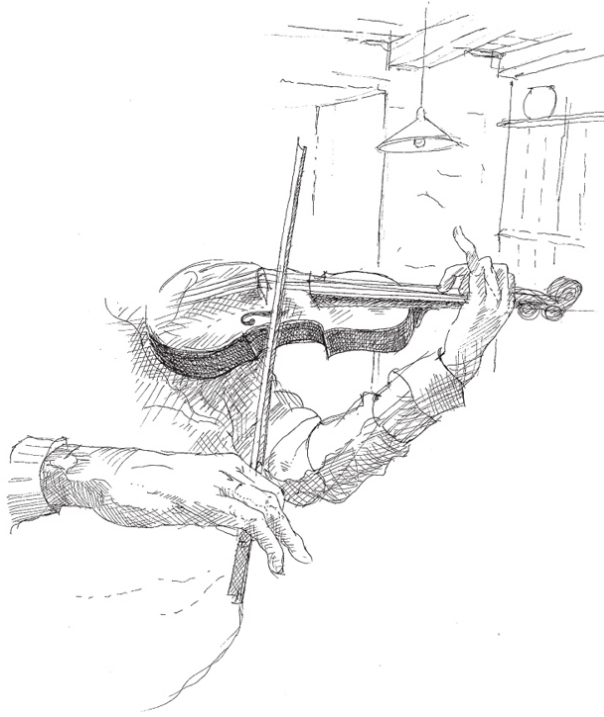
The next time she brought the cup of tea and the plate with the egg sandwich without asking. She put it on his lap with a defiant look. When she was gone, he tipped a sup into the saucer, let a bite of the sandwich down for Joe.

What time it was when the singing started, Bat couldn't say. He was outside on the sill always, the window open behind him and the smoke transiting past. The grey of the day gone into the blue-black of a starless dark, he had lost most of the feeling in his lower body. But then he heard the singing. It was Mick Madigan's voice, the first notes low and sad, sung down to the chest. The moment it began it quieted the room. But the moment it reached Bat on the windowsill he let out an 'Agh!' that was the same as heartache.

For the song was 'A Stór Mo Chroí' and Ganga's favourite.

Bat turned his face to the sky to well the tears.

When he lowered it, they fell. And he was not sure if he was living or dead then, for there, walking in the gate to his own wake, was Ganga.



Even in Faha, resurrection was rare.

Mostly it was reserved for animals. Marty Keane had two foals and one greyhound that died and walked after. Harry, the village dog, who played dead in the middle of Church Street until your bumper was within three inches of him, had one time not gotten out of the way when Doctor Troy's Morris came up next to him, and the doctor got out and realised Harry was not playing this time. He carried him fleas and all into the churchyard, whether for last rites or mouth-to-snout in dispute because Harry's heart pumped on again when he smelt the brandy breath, and with no acknowledgement of his own death, ambled back into the middle of the street and lay down in his spot.

No, resurrection for humans was rare enough in the parish. What Lazaruses there were didn't last jig-time. Back for a few blinks or a gabble

of nonsense like Con Lacey, three steps of a horizontal hornpipe like Mary Furey, and then goodnight again.

So when Bat Considine saw Ganga Crowe walking in his gate three days after Ganga had died, his first thought was that he himself must have left the known world. But his mouth dropped open in the O of amazement and he realised he was living still and had to decide whether eating a furred clove had given him hallucinations or the stories of revenants around All Souls were true, and spirits not only came back, but took on the bodies of themselves in their best health too.

Because when Ganga walked in just as Mick Madigan was singing ‘A Stór Mo Chroí’ at Ganga’s wake, he was no more than forty years, with his famous full head of curls, jovial eyebrows and rose cheeks.

In Bat’s lap, Joe raised the snout at once. He quizzed the air, interrogating with that exquisite instrument a scent familiar and strange. But before he had figured it out, the forty-year-old Ganga had extended his hand and said, ‘Bat, it is you, isn’t it?’

Bat affirmed himself by a nod only.

‘Tomas,’ said young Ganga. ‘You don’t recognise me. I’m gone a long time.’

Bat closed the mouth. He knew then that this was one of Ganga’s sons home from England and they were both in the real world in real time and that thoughts of anything other were nonsense.

‘I’m sorry,’ Bat mumbled. ‘I’m sorry for your trouble.’

‘Thank you, Bat. You were with him, I’m told, when he died?’

It was Mrs Crowley’s lie, Bat knew, and he knew that in Faha it would already be fact.

‘I was.’

‘Peaceful?’

The last consolation in life is when the leaving of it is as easeful as sleep, and this was in Bat’s gift now.

‘He just closed his eyes.’

‘Good, good. Thank you. Thank you, Bat. I’m glad you were with him. He often spoke of you.’

Bat could say nothing to that.

‘O Now,’ said Ganga’s son, remembering him.

‘O Now,’ echoed Bat in a whisper.

They stood there outside the house in the veiling rain.

‘I’ll go in and see him,’ Tomas said at last.

‘Do.’

He went inside. His brothers would be coming before long. Before long the house would settle, those who would stay with the body through the night taking their places.

‘I’m going home,’ Bat told Joe.

The hens had long since taken themselves back to the henhouse. Joe took their place in the shelter of the doorway.

‘Right so.’

Following the beam of his handlamp Bat went around the back, through the gate to the Big Meadow and over the black fields home. He took a portion of the rain with him in boots and socks, but it was all the same to him for with the death of his only friend meaning was gone out of the world.

No message was coming from heaven. If Ganga now knew the mind of God, and the reason for all of us, he was not sending down the news.

Bat came in home to his bachelor’s house of three rooms. He dropped into the chair without taking off his coat. Facing the ashes in the hearth, he pressed his hands into the pockets, then drew from them the two woollen socks Ganga had died wearing.

Ganga’s funeral was a famous one in Faha. Because of the flood in the graveyard, Father Coffey had been told it was best to postpone burial. But after Carty had drawn him aside and whispered his undertaker’s counsel, the priest sent an emergency delegation with buckets, sandbags, pipes and what-have-you, to drain and dam so that when the coffin went down there would be no splash.

He needn’t have worried. Once the word went out, there were more volunteers than buckets, the whole of the graveyard that morning populated by men and women doing their bit so as not to let down a man who had achieved life’s greatest triumph – being universally loved.

The church was full an hour before mass, Ganga’s sons in the front pew of the Long Aisle taking the condolences in fine suits, each of them with something of the look of Ganga or Doady, and, despite their legendary wildness as youths, a bearing of such dignity the general verdict was, *Aren’t they a credit to them?*

In the second pew of the Men's Aisle was Bat. He had chosen not to sit among the family and relations in the Long Aisle but over in his habitual spot, where, head lowered and shoulders hunched, he tried to be invisible.

But Mrs Crowley saw him. She was across the transept in the front of the Women's Aisle, and when he stood for Father Coffey's entrance, he was plain as day.

By the time the brothers shouldered the coffin and came out along the slope of the churchyard, the whole of three parishes was in the street, Sonny Cooney said. Though Mrs Pender, with her bad leg, had been designated to stay in Ganga's house and keep Joe with her, when the coffin came to the gates of the graveyard, there was Joe waiting. He stepped in alongside Bat, sniffing his ankles then proceeding along the plankway in his dog's duty to the end.

Although Cleary and Connor, the gravediggers, had started in early on the whiskey bottles that were their payment, they had vanquished the flood. The air of emergency was absent. All went as decreed by rite and custom, and though Joe went over to the lip of the graveside when the first shovels of earth hit the timber, he did not jump in and came back under Bat's hand.

Mrs Crowley wept more than at her husband's funeral, and when Bat saw her, he realised he had misjudged when he thought her only an army officer of death.

Because, in the riot of their youth, each of Ganga's sons had been barred from one pub or another in Faha, Tomas, the eldest, declared no surrender and that the afters would not be in one of the public houses. He also declined Father Coffey's innovation, the hall, where a sober fare of sandwiches and minerals could be offered, and instead sent word that all be invited back to Ganga's.

So it was that the snake that had ended at the graveside now went back on itself, and the entirety of the parish of Faha headed out the road to the thatched farmhouse of Ganga. There were the Clearys and the Crowes and the Murphys and the Morrisseys, there were Frawleys and Fawleys, the Upper and Lower Kellys, the three Dicks, the Long Caseys, the Short Meaney's, the Keanes, the Considines, the Hehirs and the Hanrahans, more tribes of Macs and O's than God had fingers to count, and of course Eileen Occasions, who never missed a funeral, baptism, wedding or birthday, offering condolences or congratulations with the smallest variation of expression, sparing herself for the next one, but letting into her bag just the

few sandwiches or cuts of cake or whatever was going to bring home to her poor Mehaul in the bed.

There was a drizzle but that did not count as rain, and those who couldn't get the seat from loaded motor cars, back boxes of tractors or the bars of bicycles, walked away in their own time without haste, only the women decrying the damping of their funeral outfits and the good shoes that weren't made for walking.

Mrs Crowley travelled in the back seat of Maloney's Volkswagen. And though the windows were hawed from the human sandwich of six children, she smeared a view when they passed Bat walking with Joe. He had the head down in the same desolation, returned no wave, but marched on with the let-down look of one who thought his story had ended without satisfaction.

That the human spirit resembles nothing as much as the open sky over the low hills of Faha, was a saying of Sonny Cooney. It is unbounded. And something of that boundlessness was apparent from the moment the parish started flowing in the front street of Ganga's. Even before Mrs Crowley had put her coat on the door hook to resume her role of funeral commandant, the house was an engine of life. Signifying the dignity of the occasion, white sliced pans had been brought from Bourke's, Mamie Quinlan and Delia Morrissey plastering butter in the back kitchen faster than you could say bingo. The bottles that had emptied over the vigil were crated out the back, and, by a magic of generosity and need, full ones replaced them.

Out in the milking parlour, Tomas Crowe had had delivered a barrel of Guinness and there was already a cluster of lip-lickers out there trying to figure out how to get out the big cork. With his small patience and unslakable thirst, it would be Pat Quinlan with the sledge who would bust it open, the Guinness flowing out over their feet, caps and wellingtons turned into emergency drinking vessels, one of the young Kellys having his first taste, licking it off the stones.

In the house, Mrs Pender, God be good to her, had kept the fire going, and by the prime alchemy of a rising smoke had banished the air of extinction.

Bat Considine came in the back door, and stood on the top step, only staying the short while, but Mrs Crowley had the sandwich in his hand before he could say no.

‘He’ll go home with you,’ she said. And at first Bat didn’t understand she meant Joe, and his eyes came to hers in that start that opens a doorway and shows something inside.

‘Oh Joe,’ he said. ‘I suppose. Yes. If he will.’

‘Why wouldn’t he?’ Mrs Crowley said. And then she repeated it, in a conversation that had become about something else without either of them knowing it. ‘He’ll go with you alright. Take a bite of sandwich,’ she said, looking at him and waiting until he did, with a care so foreign to him it made his eyebrows rise.

He bit into it again in front of her, and she went away about other business but with a lighter step.

He watched her in the room serving everyone. A kind of marvel, he thought.

Then, even as the stories of Ganga were starting, even as his sons and the neighbours began to recall the comedy of one whose living had been so good-natured that some of it rubbed off on everyone who met him, even as each of Ganga’s misadventures and hardships were turning into the imperishable gold of story, Bat Considine had the sense that his old friend was there, back in his own house, smiling his round smile.

Because at all events in Clare there had to be music, two of the Dineens took out fiddles, and Ganga’s step-dancing was recalled, the nimble feet of the big man improbable and wondrous, and his laugh that made you laugh.

Now that story was let off, it kept going, and suddenly Ganga was everywhere. He was in all the talk and all the thinking. He was in the laughter and the drinking and then the dancing. The *life* of him was there, because of love.

And as Bat Considine looked from the step down across the throng, something overbrimmed in him, and he was flooded with beatific illumination.

This is it, he thought, this was what Ganga knew now.

This is the why of us.

He raised his head because, with the heat passing through him, he feared he would fall. The idea was too big for inside. He pushed his way out and smiled up at the sky.

‘I hear you,’ he said aloud. ‘By God I do.’

Joe was at his ankles, sniffing.

With a pinch of each of his trouser legs Bat lifted them an inch to show he was wearing Ganga's woollen socks.

'I know what was in the mind of God, Joe,' he said. He touched his tongue to his lips, because he hadn't said the word aloud anytime that he could recall, but he knew he was about to say it now.

'Love,' he said. 'That was it.' Then he raised his head out of the low hunch of his shoulders and said it aloud again, 'Love.'

'Bat?' At that moment, as if summoned, Mrs Crowley had appeared beside him.

'We're made for love, Mrs Crowley,' Bat Considine said. Just as plain as that.

Mrs Crowley blushed for the first time since she was a girl.

Then she looked directly at him as no woman ever had in his life.

'O Now!' she said.

END

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The Way the Story Goes

Or How to Get to Faha

The way the story goes, there's a visitor driving in the west of Ireland.

Let's say he's Tom, let's say Tom's from America.

Following an instinct for a more direct route, Tom has left the main road some time ago and is soon in the seemingly endless network of rural and local roads that vein each county. With hedgerows let off to do their own thing and stone walls or ditches grassy and brambled, they are roads without signposts, roads that seem made for going but not necessarily getting anywhere. They recall a time when the population was greater and the circumference of life smaller. Travelling through them, there is still some sense of that world. It is impossible to rush here. You are in a damp green dream without beginning or end. The roads follow the contours of the land and are secondary to it. If a field's bounds come out to here, then, fair enough, the road moves back to allow it. They are roads that exemplify the character of some Irish people, who are from here but want to go see what it's like over there. There is not a single straight line, but instead a rising and falling, a winding around and back, often blind, often sharp, with little sense that any progress is being made.

The way the story goes, after passing through any number of crosses, T-junctions, yields and forks where it was impossible to say which was the main road, Tom is confounded and must at last confess to being completely lost. He has abandoned the idea that *this will eventually come out somewhere* and now is ready to stop the first person he meets. The question he has is not *where am I?* but *how do I get out of here?*

At last, he sees a farmer, standing at a gate looking into a field.

Let's say the farmer is Pat. Pat is the unguessable age of those who live and work on the land, but he was born here, his father and his grandfather

and his great-grandfather were, and all of them stood looking into this field at some point. If Pat closed his eyes, he could picture them, he and they like fixtures of the place, their name and their blood married to the fields.

Tom pulls over.

Pat already knows what's coming. He knows this is a stranger, and that he is lost. But this is another human being, and there has been a shortage of them today. He looks down the field at his cattle, the flies and midges trafficking, and he waits for the stranger to get out and come to him.

Pat asks the stranger where he's from, then he asks his name. And when he has that much, he nods. If the surname is Irish Pat's mind is already trying to attach it to others of the same, if it is not, he's thinking of the place, and anyone from the parish that he heard went there. People and places, what family you are, and where you are out of, these are the oldest coordinates to everyone's story here.

After the niceties, Tom makes the usual mistake. He asks Pat is this the L- or R- something, the names for the roads on the map, but which mean little to those who live beside them, or worse, Tom asks what in Ireland is almost a redundant question, 'Where does this road go?'

Pat considers. His eyes narrow, his lips tighten. And because he enjoys the bit of talk, because he lives on a road where haste is not an option and watching cattle is not clockwork, he doesn't tell the incontestable truth – *this road goes everywhere* – but instead says the name of the next townland, or a crossroads, or a bridge, known by the name of a family long since deceased, but left after them on the landscape like imperishable remembrances. Lorigan's Bridge, Shaughnessy's Cross.

None of which will help Tom at all.

So, at last Pat asks, 'Where is it that you were wanting to go?'

Tom names a town several miles distant, and Pat pauses.

'Do you know it?' Tom asks.

'Oh I do, of course,' says Pat.

'It's not too far.'

The way this story goes, Pat looks at the road and slowly shakes his head. 'No then, it's not,' he says. 'But I'll tell you now,' he continues, and then he pauses. Pat enjoys the pause, his momentary dominion over time there on the road that he belongs to as it belongs to him, and he holds it as long as he can. He pushes a hand past the flies. He moves his mouth some. He considers the cattle in their standing.

At last Pat turns to face Tom with an expression unreadable except for its gravity. 'If I was going there,' Pat says, 'I wouldn't start from here.'

I have had several reasons for thinking of this story recently. One day this summer I got a phone call from Allen Flynn, the owner of the wonderful Old Ground Hotel in Ennis. 'I have two guests here who want to go to Faha,' he said.

'You have to tell them they can't. Tell them I made it up.'

'I did,' he said. 'But they still want to go there. They've read the books and they want to go to Faha.'

Faha was invented on Easter Sunday in 2011. That day Christine and I were invited to our old friend Martin Keane's house for dinner with him and his sister Colette and her family, and sometime after a flotilla of desserts was vanquished, a large-scale Ordnance Survey map was brought out from somewhere.

The last novel I had published was *John*. It was a book I had felt compelled to write, trying to imagine the Apostle John: what it would be like if you met the most charismatic person of your long life when you were a teenager, and you saw him crucified. I also wanted to answer for myself the question of what the Apostle John was doing the day before he wrote 'In the beginning was the Word.' Two years of research had failed to answer it satisfactorily and so, as always in the gaps of reality, I had begun to imagine.

When published, the novel had met almost silent response. While my editor said it was clearly the book I was born to write, I couldn't help feeling that if that was true, there was no need for another. The book had spiritually exhausted me. I withdrew from writing into reading. Then my father died. In his handwritten will, where he designated his last possessions to each of his four children, he wrote simply: *To Niall, my books*.

It remains one of the most moving sentences I have ever read.

For although my father had started my journey into literature by bringing us to the library every two weeks and had supported my taking a degree in literature against his own advice that I do law, he did not read the books I wrote – nor did I want him to. In what is perhaps an Irish way between fathers and sons, when I brought him a new novel of mine, he said, 'Thanks very much, Niall, put it on the shelf there.' And we never spoke of it again.

And that was fine by me. So that sentence in his will, those four words of love, seemed a nod from heaven, an acknowledgement that although I had chosen a life of writing, which guaranteed only rejection, it was the right one for me. And to my father in heaven I have since often nodded back my thanks.

I drove across the country to collect the six boxes of his books. When I opened them back in Kiltumper two things happened. The first was my reader's response: these were not books I would have chosen, they were not ones I particularly wanted to read. The second was more powerful, for when I opened one – *The Salmon Rivers of Ireland* – I felt at once my father's presence, that his hands had held the book in my hands, his eyes travelled these pages. The book smelled of our home in Dublin, now sold. I could remember the exact place on the bookshelf in the living room where it had sat, four feet above my head when I was playing with toy soldiers on the floor. And although at first a profoundly sensory experience, the stiffness of the pages, the even stiffer black-and-white photographs of anglers and prize salmon, the heft of the volume in my hand and the unaccountable comfort there is in holding a well-made bound book – the *boundness*, too, a kind of promise delivered – the real power was encountering my father as a reader here, and so touching something of his mind.

This idea then, my father's presence in a book he had held and read, the idea of books as reliquaries of spirit, not just of those of their writers but those of their readers too, began to take hold of me. I began to imagine a girl whose father had died and left her his books.

I cannot write fiction with a plan. I only ever have a sentence, and I follow that, believing that the story is out there and I am following the way, sentence by sentence, toward it. Just so then, every novel is an act of faith, and like all such constantly assailed by doubt. On a blank page I wrote 'PART ONE, The Salmon in Ireland'. On the next page, the first sentence of what would become *History of the Rain*.

The longer my father lived in this world the more he knew there was another to come.

So I knew I had this girl – call her Ruth, for sorrow – and that her father, a poet, call him Virgil, had died, that she desperately wanted to believe in an afterlife where he had gone, that the oldest story of another world to come was true, and that all she had to help her as guides were the books her father had left her.

But where was Ruth?

That the answer is always there in front of you is a small step for those who believe in the reality of story. And there on the first page I had already written the prompt of the book from my father's library. *Salmon*. The answer was salmon, that most mythic of all Irish creatures, the one that could live in two worlds, both fresh- and saltwater, the one who swam away into the Atlantic, but came back too. Ruth was in a house from which she could see where the greatest salmon river in Ireland, the Shannon, flows out to sea. And because rain falls into the river, which in turn goes to the sea, and in turn again rises into the sky to become cloud and fall again, because rain is the thing that softly stitches sky and land, heaven and earth, at Ruth's house it was always raining.

(At this point, for those who cannot follow the twisting of the neck of logic that all story makers must resort to, I say, take a look at the map of roads in the west of Ireland. If they had a planner, he was a disciple of Polonius's 'by indirection find direction out'.) A story is a road you follow.

The way this one goes then, it is Easter Sunday and Christine and I are in Martin's house and a large Ordnance Survey map is brought out. It is a map of the southwest of County Clare and the Shannon Estuary. It is pure chance that this is the map, and that it is brought out. If you believe in pure chance.

My eye traces the coastline. I know I am looking for a place at a remove, not on a tourist route, but with that liminal quality of shore places where the waters come and go and the sense of threshold is palpable. There it is, I realise, down here, near the place that – unbelievable except to those who tell stories – is actually called *Paradise*. This is where Ruth's house is. Just outside the village, called . . .?

I know I won't use the name of an actual village. Generally allergic to personal attention myself, I won't inflict any on some innocent place. But I never believe in those invented Irish villages called Bally- or Kill-something, I need a simple, strong name, unshowy, a place name you see but pass by while you're trying to get to somewhere more celebrated. That this is true to my own nature, that in some way all writers find the place that is themselves I don't consider yet.

Poring over the map that Sunday I am amazed to see that, although Christine and I have lived in west Clare for nearly forty years, there are many names of townlands I have never heard. They each have their own mystery and music, the names alone summoning your imagination in the

same way that when living in New York I first heard the name *Kiltumper*, not yet knowing that it was the signpost of my life and would give me so much, not the least of which was allowing me to be myself.

I see some places that end in -aha, Bealaha, Doonaha, and I know that likely comes from the Irish *átha*, meaning ford, or crossing. And at once, for the story of a girl wanting to cross over to that place her father has gone, for a girl who lives beside a river, I know that is right. Then, who knows how, my brain perhaps jumping from *ah-ha!* to *haha!* and in the same instant to *far away*, I come to *Farha*, and within a blink, *Faha*.

The thing about going somewhere you don't know how to get to: you do know when you get there.

That Easter Sunday, I looked up Faha. I found there were at least six in Ireland, but none in south-west Clare. So that was perfect. It was both real and not, liminal.

In *History of the Rain* the reader only meets Faha through the eyes of Ruth who is confined to her bed with illness and never actually walks down the street. She knows Faha by its stories, by what her visitors tell her is going on. Which of course, as I am writing, is how I am learning about it.

In Frank O'Connor's classic book about the short story, *The Lonely Voice*, he writes about each writer needing to find his or her own 'submerged population'. In my own work, this had largely amounted to central characters who are at something of a remove, like William, the painter father, in *Four Letters of Love*, right through to Ruth or John the Apostle. But after finishing Ruth's story, I felt I wanted to write not just about individuals but yes, a population, a parish in fact, in many ways cut off (and yes, I hear the reader say, almost literally *submerged* with all that rain).

Also, the longer I have lived, the more I have come to appreciate what in *War and Peace* Pierre at last comes to embrace, 'the legitimate peculiarity of every individual'.

In Faha, peculiar is not pass-remarkable, for the simple reason that people are people and for human beings there is no such thing as normal. In my own experience, one of the great advantages of all places far from the centre is that here you are free to invent yourself.

At the same time, I had been thinking about form, and about the way, in a traditional Irish music *seisiún*, one tune flows into the next, and the one after that. How this reel responds in a living way to that one, and so on

throughout the evening. A natural form. And I began to consider what this idea, of an innate and responsive form, might look like as a narrative voice in Faha. It would mean digressions, it would mean drifts of story heading off and coming back around again.

Like the roads in west Clare.

A topography of narrative? was what I wrote in my notebook.

It seems to me that the places in novels exist in another dimension. They are not the place or places that inspired them. Although built of words, the setting quickly moves beyond the literal. First, because the reader is making it up as they go, in every instant attaching what they read to what they imagine; second, because vividness of detail dissolves in the everyday but a novel fixes it forever; and lastly because of the intensity of feeling that happens here. I can remember Miss Havisham's Satis House and Peggotty's upturned boathouse in Yarmouth better than many places I have been. But I don't think I have ever thought of going to find them, any more than I would want to walk in Yoknapatawpha or Macondo, Marilynne Robinson's Gilead or Wendell Berry's Port William. Because, of course, I have already been there, and no merely actual place could compare to those unforgettable visits.

Faha is not Kiltumper, where we live, but after forty years of being here with Christine in west Clare, living in its mercurial weathers among resolute and independent people of remarkable wit, turns of phrase and largeness of spirit, everything of that life has gone into the creation of Faha. And I agree with Flannery O'Connor, when, in her essay 'The Regional Writer', she says, 'It is a great blessing, perhaps the greatest a writer can have, to find at home what others have to go elsewhere seeking.'

The way this story goes then, sometime during the writing of *This Is Happiness*, something new happened to me. I didn't want to get to the end. For the first time in my life, I wanted to stay inside the story. Unlike our friend Tom, I did not want to find a way out of here, but a way further in. I never wanted to get back out to the main road. Without thinking of it as a radical choice, I realised that, for want of a better phrase, I was writing out of love and about love. I knew the risks of this, the pitfalls of sentimentality, nostalgia and all the rest, as well as the courage that would be needed during these fraught times to write this way, but this was the road I was on, wanting to write a fiction sustained by the local and the particular, believing that these were the coordinates to the universal. Generosity, largeness of

spirit, community, endurance, dignity and humour, these were the traits I had most often encountered in forty years in Clare, and so they would be in Faha too.

When I finished *This Is Happiness*, I knew that I was not finished with Faha, in fact I had barely made a beginning. I sensed that ahead of me was a whole network of winding roads, a series of books and stories set in Faha, covering all that happened to the parish during the second half of the twentieth century, the time between the coming of electricity and the coming of the internet. I could not see past the next bend, but I trusted the road.

After a novel full of sunshine, *This Is Happiness*, a Christmas one, set four years later, *Time of the Child*.

To Frank O'Connor's idea of a submerged population, I now discovered another extraordinary dimension. In writing about one community, I came upon another. One of readers. I began to get messages from readers far-flung from County Clare, many of whom had never set foot here. From Tasmania to Canada, from Japan to America, to England and County Kerry. A whole submerged population of readers who, much like all those who had left Faha to go abroad into the world, were, inside the pages of the novels, *at home*. It seems to me this remains one of the most hopeful things for the world, the road taken by all books and the readers met along the way.

With something of the same happy happenstance, in March, we were staying in a friend's apartment in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, awaiting the birth of our granddaughter. On the bookshelves there was a collected Czesław Miłosz. I had only read snippets of him before, and largely because of Seamus Heaney's championing. But while waiting for the birth, I read the poems day after day, and from them got some sense of what Heaney had called Miłosz's 'tender-minded susceptibility and melancholy understanding'. But more, when I closed the book, what I was left with was the simple but fundamental idea of wanting to know the mind of God. I made a note of it. But I didn't know who would be asking the question until after Penny was born and we were back in Ireland.

Then Bat let himself in the back door.

(Much like our friend Martin, who, although he is not Bat – he is much more handsome, he would say – does come calling, usually on Sunday nights. He lets himself in. Sits across the fire for tea and 'Anything sweet. I

can't have tea without cake or chocolate biscuits.' Martin has read all of my Faha work, in case I 'get anything wrong'.)

For the first time since my own children were small, I wrote at night. I was in Trinity College in Dublin for two weeks in June, teaching during the day and sitting in the quiet of my rooms at night. I wrote the stories from ten o'clock to one in the morning. There were no interruptions, and some nights I went out to walk around the cobbled squares after. The college gates had been locked for the night, and in the silence I was alone with Bat, looking up into the night sky.

I always knew that after Ganga's death Bat would have Joe with him. I knew too that something I had heard told with astonishment thirty-five years earlier about a crusty bachelor – 'Senan has a woman!' – would be the case. But for the rest there was only following the contours of the sentences and seeing where they led.

The challenge, as it emerged, was to write from death to life, to have the sadness, yes, but also the humour, to have the intimate scenes as well as the communal ones, and try to capture something of the world-renewal that can come in the wake of death. I wanted to have each chapter work on its own while retaining the serial element and of course bring alive the subterranean wordless love between two old men. Not to speak of dogs.

O now, indeed.

And what of our friend, Tom, the visitor, we left on the side of the road? I believe that he did, eventually – with event, that is – find his way back to the main road. But I also believe that what he remembers, the story he tells people, is about the time he was lost in the maze of briary back roads and boreens in the west of Ireland, and about the farmer he met whose name was Pat.

To those who came into Clare, and have come since, asking how to find Faha, I would have to say welcome, but the only way to really get there is this way, in the pages of a book.

Start from here, take your time and then get lost.

Because in Faha, that's the way the story goes.

Acknowledgements

Usually, I never know where a book comes from, or what starts it. But in this case, I do. Out of the blue, Michael Shannon, a celebrated producer at BBC Audio Northern Ireland, contacted me to ask for something of Faha. It would need to be a single piece but in five stand-alone chapters and would air in the first week of November. Did I have anything? Unfortunately, I am not the kind of writer who has ‘one I made earlier.’ So, no was the answer. I never write to commission, having a superstition about committing to something that doesn’t yet have even the substance of vapour. But, as always, my hand was nudged by Christine Breen, who showed that more than forty years of marriage had not run out of adventure by saying, ‘Dare yourself to do it.’

O now, indeed.

I am very grateful to Michael and his team for shepherding this into first life, and also to the wonderful Allegra Le Fanu, Grace McNamee, Paul Baggaley and all at Bloomsbury UK and USA for honouring Ganga’s passing in such a beautiful book. And as always, to the incomparable Caroline Michel and her extraordinary team at Peters Fraser & Dunlop, profound gratitude. All in Faha send their thanks.

The text of *O Now!* features the following words from other writers:

The line ‘It is a great blessing, perhaps the greatest a writer can have, to find at home what others have to go elsewhere seeking’ is taken from the Collected Works of Flannery O’Connor, published by the Library of America.

And the line on Czesław Miłosz’s ‘tender-minded susceptibility and melancholy understanding’ is taken from Seamus Heaney’s *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971–2001*, reproduced with permission by Faber and Faber Ltd.

A Note on the Author

Niall Williams was born in Dublin in 1958. His critically acclaimed and bestselling fiction has been shortlisted for the Irish Times Literature Prize and longlisted for the Man Booker Prize and the IMPAC Award. Williams' debut novel *Four Letters of Love*, an international bestseller, has been adapted by the author for screen and will star Helena Bonham-Carter, Pierce Brosnan and Gabriel Byrne. His most recent novel, *Time of the Child*, was an instant Irish Times bestseller and was awarded the Kerry Group Novel of the Year Award. He lives in Kiltumper in County Clare, with his wife, Christine.

niallwilliams.com

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Also available by Niall Williams

History of the Rain

LONGLISTED FOR THE MAN BOOKER PRIZE 2014

In her attic room, with the rain rushing down the windows, Ruthie Swain is trying to find her father through stories.

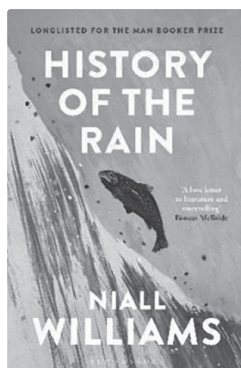
Brought home after a collapse, she lies surrounded by her father's library of three thousand, nine hundred and fifty-eight books. But Ruthie's story, and the story of the Swains before her, is rooted not in these books' pages, but in the land – fourteen rain-sodden acres of earth useless for farming, but teeming with stories.

From her bed, Ruthie writes Ireland, with its weather, its rivers, its lilts, and its lows. The stories she recounts bring back to life multiple generations buried in this soil - and they might just bring her back into the world again, too.

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This is Happiness

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LONGLISTED FOR THE 2020 WALTER SCOTT PRIZE

After dropping out of the seminary, seventeen-year-old Noel Crowe finds himself back in Faha, a small Irish parish where nothing ever changes, including the ever-falling rain.

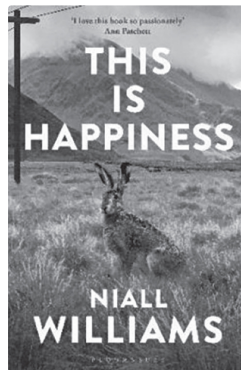
But one morning the rain stops and news reaches the parish – electricity is finally arriving. With it comes a lodger to Noel’s home, Christy McMahon. Though he can’t explain it, Noel knows right then: something has changed.

As Noel navigates his coming-of-age, Christy’s buried past gradually comes to light, casting a glow on a small world and making it new.

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Time of the Child

**WINNER OF THE KERRY GROUP IRISH NOVEL OF THE YEAR AWARD
THE INSTANT *IRISH TIMES* TOP TEN BESTSELLER**

Doctor Jack Troy was born and raised in the little town of Faha, but his responsibilities for the sick and his care for the dying mean he has always been set apart from his community. A visit from the doctor is always a sign of bad things to come.

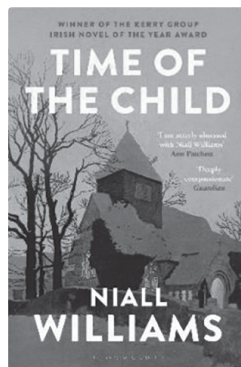
His eldest daughter, Ronnie, has grown up in her father's shadow, and remains there, having missed her chance at real love – and passed up an offer of marriage from an unsuitable man.

But in the advent season of 1962, as the town readies itself for Christmas, Ronnie and Doctor Troy's lives are turned upside down when a baby is left in their care. As the winter passes, father and daughter's lives, the understanding of their family, and their role in their community are changed forever.

'I am utterly obsessed with Niall Williams' Ann Patchett

'A rich and gorgeous book' *The Times*, The 10 best historical fiction books of 2024

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In Kiltumper

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When they were in their twenties, Niall Williams and Christine Breen made the impulsive decision to leave New York City and move to Christine's ancestral home in the town of Kiltumper in rural Ireland. In the decades that followed, the pair dedicated themselves to writing, gardening and living a life that followed the rhythms of the earth.

In 2019, with Christine in the final stages of recovery from cancer and the surrounding land threatened by the arrival of turbines, Niall and Christine decided to document a year – in words and Christine's drawings – of living in their garden and in their small corner of a rapidly changing world. Proceeding month by month through the year, this is the story of a garden in all its many splendours, and a couple who have made their life observing its wonders.

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‘A record, both honest and beautiful, of a sustainable but precarious way of life’ *Times Literary Supplement*



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John

‘An eloquent and moving statement of the power of love and the belief that it will triumph in the end’ *Guardian*

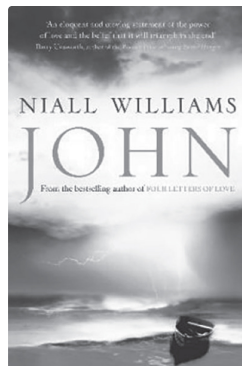
Aged, blind and perilously frail, John the Apostle has walked ten thousand miles to tell of love. In a hundred years he has lived to witness sights and scenes that now cloud his mind. Of his followers, there are few remaining, banished with him to an island where they wait as storm clouds whip the island with rain. They wait for the world to free them from exile. They wait for signs that seem like they will never come.

But eventually a sign does come and together the disciples leave the island. They embark on a journey that will change their lives forever: a journey filled with purpose and fear which will test their belief - in love and in each other - to breaking point, and John must face his biggest battle yet.

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