

Bridget and the Forty Foot

Bridget Murphy was “just a girl,” they said, but that wasn’t the end of her story. No, it was not. Bridget lived in Sallynoggin, a poor neighborhood a few miles south of Dublin city, with her ma and brother. She was better, smarter, and faster than any boy she knew, but people said she was just a girl anyway because, well, this was Ireland. Her parish priest, Father O’Connor said on several occasions, “Bridget, when you grow up, you will marry a lucky man and have many children.” That was not her plan, plus, he always had whiskey breath, so she never considered him much to be worth listening to, but her ma told her to respect the Father as insurance to prevent her from going straight to hell. She never uttered the word, but *shite* always came to mind when she saw him or stepped inside the church on Sunday.

She had no intention to marry any lad, as she didn’t like them very much, and for good measure, she would beat up this or that one in the school yard if they got a bit carried away trying to prove that they were better than a girl. Her da, who had died a few years earlier, was the only man who said otherwise. “Don’t let anybody say that they are smarter or better than you are, Bridget. Ye got to fight for it.” She was a girl, but she didn’t let anybody think any less of her for it or they would pay a price.

Bridget was a loner, of sorts, ever since her Da was killed. She loved the sea and specifically, the Irish one and she loved to sit on a stone wall overlooking the water just south of Dun Laoghaire, where the land jutted out into the sea. She and her Da sat on that spot, looking out and talking about what was on the other side of the sea. She once heard that the famous writer, James

Joyce, describe her favorite place as looking “snotgreen,” and she thought he was an eejit for saying such a thing, even if he was kind a right.

Every day after school and weather permitting, she would walk down Sallynoggin Road to the sea, find a dry spot to sit and look out on the ocean. In the distance, not too far away really, was Sandycove, and beyond it, the Forty Foot. The Forty Foot was a popular swimming spot for men only. It was somewhat obscured from the shore, allowing the lads to swim in the nude.

Women were not allowed there. As she looked in the general direction of the men-only swimming spot, she would think, *What a bunch of shite that the lads could swim there and she could not.*

If it wasn't too windy, Bridget would do her homework assignments from her spot, and after that, she would read whatever book she had with her. Sometimes, she could hear the sea, the waves lapping on the rocks, a ship's horn, and the noises of the seagulls. It all gave her a sense of calm and happiness, if not a bit of sadness too.

In the summer months, when the weather was warmer, Bridget would walk down to the shore and would carefully climb out on the slippery rocks and jump into the water. The water was always cold, but it was refreshing, and she could get out whenever she wanted and sit on a rock until she was dried off. Sometimes, the sea was a bit rough and so on those occasions, she would wander along the shore and find a calm spot to take her plunge.

On one of these occasions, she wandered some distance along the shore, and found herself at the Forty Foot. She was small and she wasn't noticed by the lads enjoying their dip in the sea. She ignored them but soon, the lads saw her, and the grumblings began. “It's a lass!” a fella shouted. “Hey lassie, get outa there. Go on!” The boyos started shouting as well, and in short

order, they all returned to the shore, wrapping themselves in towels, covering up their bits and pieces. Bridget found it rather funny that the lads would get so excited about a girl in their midst, but she didn't care. Eventually, she had enough of the water, and climbed up onto a rock to let herself dry off. Unfortunately, the shouting of the other swimmers grew louder, and she noticed that a garda had shown up. He was talking to some of the fellas as they pointed in her direction. Then she noticed the garda coming her way.

"Hey lassie. Yer not allowed here. You're just a girl," shouted the man.

Ah fer fucks sake, she thought.

Before she could utter a word though, the garda grabbed her left arm and started to drag her up on dry land, not only causing her pain but making her mad as hell. "You gobshite!" she shouted and gave the fella a right hook to his mickey.

The garda dropped to one knee and gasped for a breath. Recovering, he grabbed her hair and twisted her arm around to her back. This fella was much bigger than the lads on the playground and Bridget knew she was no match for him, so she relented. She could hear cheering from the lads down on the Forty Foot, shouting obscenities at her. She was still raging but she felt a bit defeated as she was taken away in the garda's car.

Before she could sort things out, the car pulled up to the front door of the station. The fella she had punched turned around in the front seat and asked her, "Are ye gonna be startin again?" She thought for a moment, then shook her head from side to side.

Inside the station, Bridget was told to sit on a bench. "We're gonna fetch your ma, she doesn't have a phone, does she? Stay put until she arrives," said the garda in charge. About a half an

hour passed, then in walked her ma with another garda. She was not lookin happy. “What te ye done Bridget? You go and hit the man? You have te say you’re sorry right now.”

The garda who had arrested her came over, looking to be in a bit of discomfort.

“I’m sorry for punching you in your bits, sir.” She said it loud enough that the other gardai could hear her. The station house started to erupt in laughter and the fella turned scarlet.

He told her not to do it again and retreated to another room in the station. Finally, the fella in charge told her and her ma that they were free to leave.

Once outside, her ma told her, “Geesh Bridget. What have I told ye about wackin lads in their private parts?” and with that, they walked back to their house in Sallynoggin, not speaking another word.

Over time, Bridget the little girl turned into a beautiful young woman. She had long red hair and green eyes, and was becoming quite popular with the young lads in Sallynoggin, and the attention was not lost on her. But she was also aware that she was considered “just a girl,” as the lads would say. She played camogie with other girls, a kind of field hockey, while the lads played hurling, the male equivalent of the game. She knew she was as good if not better than most of the lads on the field, but she was relegated to the girl’s field.

She would still walk down to the shore, enjoying the sounds and the smells of the Irish Sea.

Occasionally, she would stroll over to the Forty Foot, but often, her anger about the unfairness that allowed the fellas to enjoy swimming but not the lasses angered her, and she had to walk away.

After she finished secondary school, she told her ma that she wanted to go to college. That would have been impossible if it weren't for the fact that her brother won a lot of money some years before, in a lottery of sorts.

Bridget took the entry exam and the following term, she was admitted to University College Dublin. Her studies were hard, but Bridget was flourishing in her new environment. She often met with friends and talk about what was happening in the world. The Troubles, the unrest in Northern Ireland was discussed, as well as the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement and other topics of the day. But what got Bridget's attention, not to mention her passion was discussing women's rights in the country.

Her ma was quite aware of Bridget's temper and sense of justice and worried that her daughter might take up with the Irish Republican Army, which was gaining popularity on the local college campuses. "Don't worry Ma, I'm interested in women's rights." Unfortunately, that didn't sit well with her mother, "Don't burn ye bra and don't get arrested, do ye understand?"

"Yah, Ma," she replied, knowing she had already sacrificed a bra and narrowly escaped the gardai on more than one occasion.

A few months past, and one day a girlfriend invited Bridget to come along to a women's group meeting near the college. The women talked for hours about the writings of feminist scholars and planned for protests in front of the Dáil Éireann, the National Assembly of the Republic.

Bridget thought that was all grand, but remembering an American politician famously say, "*All politics is local,*" she would set about doing something important for the rights of women, closer to home.

She never forgot her experience many years before at the Forty Foot and thought that was a fine place to start, but what would she do?

A girlfriend mentioned in passing about a new women's group that was forming. "Did ye hear about The Irish Women's Liberation Movement, Bridget? Want ta go wid me? We're meetin tomorrow night at Gaj's restaurant on Baggot Street."

"That'd be grand," replied Bridget and the next night, she attended the first of many meetings at the café.

In time, Bridget volunteered to join the Contraceptive Train, a Dublin to Belfast train that left one Saturday morning. Their plan was to purchase condoms and birth control pills that they planned on bringing back to the Republic of Ireland, where birth control for women was banned. The train from Dublin pulled into the Lanyon Place station, then the lasses broke up into small groups of two or three and began searching for chemists. Bridget took charge of her group and they headed off to a chemist shop they had mapped out.

The three women walked in the well-worn front door of a chemist shop and stood there for a moment. Bridget suppressed any embarrassment she had about asking for condoms, and asked the fella behind the counter, "Do ye have any johnnies?" The chemist stared at her for a moment. "Ye know, lifesavers!" Still nothing from the old fella. "Jasus, CON-DOMS," she finally said.

"Eh lassie, why din't ye say so." He paused, "Wadda ye gon ta do wid those?" he snickered.

"I'm gon te ride me fella, fer fecks sake!" Bridget was incredulous that the man would ask such a question.

The old lad had his fun and got a bit more serious. "How many do ye want?"

Bridget hadn't thought about how many she wanted so she blurted out, "A hundred of em."

He appeared surprised. "Anything else?" he asked.

Oh yeah, I want some birth control pills. Got any?"

"Yea ... do you have a prescription from your doctor?"

There was silence. "Um, I don't got one. I'm from outa town, Dublin."

"Sorry, ye need a prescription from yer doctor, or I can't sell em to ye. That's the law. So do you want the condoms?" She nodded her head and paid for the condoms, and he handed her a rather large paper bag containing the condoms.

Well, that was fecking embarrassing, she thought. "Okay ladies, let's go," as she opened the door and walked out.

A prescription was something they hadn't thought about, and on the train back to Dublin, all the women shared similar experiences, but it was agreed by all that it was an adventure and more importantly, they would get the attention they wanted from the public.

Bridget caught one of the last busses down to Dun Laoghaire and saw a couple of other women who had joined in on the event, sitting in the back of the bus. "Eh, I saw ye on the Contraceptive Train today. I'm Bridget!" The two women invited her to sit with them.

"Hi, I'm Sophie and my friend here is Molly." The two women were older than Bridget, probably in their thirties. They shared their experiences on the train then in Belfast, then Molly asked, "Er ya goin to the protest at the Forty Foot?" This got Bridget's attention.

"I haven't heard about it," Bridget replied. "But I know a bit about the Forty Foot, got arrested there when I was a kid."

This got the two women excited. "What the feck did ye do?"

Her lips pursed, Bridget said in a dead pan stare, "I swam."

"Holy father, ya didn't!" howled Sophie. She leaned in, "Ya got ta join us this Saturday at the Forty Foot. A group of us women are goin fer a swim, so we are! We're takin a stand against those gobshites!"

Then they planned to meet that weekend. Bridget hadn't been this excited in years.

That Saturday in July, a group of about a dozen women met at People's Park in Dun Laoghaire.

It was a sunny day, and their spirits were high. Bridget was particularly excited about her chance at her revenge for what had happened to her more than ten years earlier. There was a lot of talk about what they would do but it was finally agreed that they would take a dip and have fun. The leader of the group, Bernadette, said that she would recognize Bridget as the pioneer for the cause in Sandycove when she spoke. A reporter from the Irish Times would be there and a camera crew from RTE would likely be there as well.

As promised, the press showed up. There was also a crowd of lads there as well, some nude, showing their bits to anybody who wanted a look. Bernadette gave a brief speech about the rights of women in modern society, while the men booed and shouted various obscenities.

Then it was time.

The protestors all peeled off their dresses revealing their bikinis underneath and charged into the water. There was the usual gasping and cursing as they ran into the water that was cold year-round and they began to splash a bit and tried to have some fun. Eventually, the cold sea water won out. The women didn't stay in the water more than a few minutes, but Bridget stayed in longer than the others, relishing the moment. She finally got out as well and wrapped

herself in a towel, when an older lad singled her out for his insults. “Eh ye feckin hoor, ye should be on your back workin, not messin things up here!”

“Big talk for such a tiny lad,” she replied as she studied the spot below the fella’s waist. The other women and some of the lads let out a collective howl. This set the lad off and he started moving toward Bridget and the other lasses. The fella was clearly angry, and she feared the worst. As the lad grew closer, he tripped and fell face down in the rocks and sand.

“Aw, fer fucks sake,” he whined. The festivities came to a halt and the only sound that could be heard were the gulls overhead. Bridget smirked but said nothing. The sand caked on the lad’s face was her revenge for his behavior.

“Ah Jesus, Patrick,” said another fella standing nearby, “Lemme give ye a hand.”

As the lad recovered, another fella broke the silence and shouted, “Let’s all take a dip ... you too ladies!” and with that, everybody, men and women alike charged into the chilly water.

After the protest, the women headed back to the park. There was a sense of jubilation with their protest, but it was short lived.

‘Hey lassie, I’d like a word wid ye,” it was a garda in his car pointing directly at Bridget. *Ah feck*, she thought, *what now?*

“We saw ye getting into it wid dat fella. You’ll need to come wid us.” The group of women stopped dead in their tracks and the crowd grew silent. As the garda and his partner got out of their car, a woman shouted, “Sit down, sit down! Protect our sister!”

Having done this before, the women sat down in unison and hooked arms. Bridget found herself in the middle of the group, feeling a bit protected from the inevitable injustice being thrown her way.

“Ah lassies, are we gonna have te deal with this shite?” sighed one of the garda. The women started to sing, “We Shall Overcome,” and in a few minutes, several more gardai cars and a van pulled up. With all the gardai cars double parked, traffic came to a halt and gawkers appeared out of nowhere. The media hadn’t left the scene and cameras rolled and reporters notebooks were flipping in the wind.

The gardai were trying to figure out what to do. The women weren’t stopping people from getting by as they were technically in a place open to the public but there was that one girl they needed to have a chat with. Added to that were the reporters swarming about. A few more gardai arrived, including the gardai superintendent. The singing continued and it was turning into quite the circus. The lads at the Forty Foot decided to watch things play out too, and the crowd grew.

Trying to sort things out, one of the garda had a conversation with the naked fella on the sand. People noticed that the garda and the fella seemed to be acquainted. Then the same garda waded into the crowd of women, assuring them that nobody was getting taken away. The pressure of the confrontation subsided and the garda explained to Bridget that if she apologized to the lad for getting into a tangle with him, all would be forgiven.

Bridget thought about it for a moment, knowing full well she had done nothing wrong, then said, “Aw, sure. I’ll apologize to the lad,” where upon she stood up and gingerly stepped around her supporters, following the garda to the older lad wrapped in his towel.

Bridget looked at the lad and thought she recognized him but couldn’t place the face. “I’m sorry for criticizing your bits, sir.” Chuckles could be heard from the crowd.

The fella started to turn scarlet, just as Bridget recognized him. He was the garda who's flute she punched years before, and he remembered her like it was yesterday. The obscenities he shouted at her pretty much covered the lexicon of Irish swearing to the point that at least a few in the crowd were impressed with his rantings. *Oh shite*, she thought. The garda told her to go as he tried to restrain the old lad. For once, she did as she was told and returned to her friends with a sly grin on her face, "I think we should get outta here." In unison, the women stood and began their brisk walk back to Dun Laoghaire.

The next day, on the front page of the Irish Times was a story about the protest at the Forty Foot. There was a photograph of Bridget a few moments after her encounter, along with a few quotable statements made by the women and the male swimmers.

For Bridget, the events of the day brought clarity to what she would do with her life, and for the first time, she showed lads what *just a girl could do*.

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