

TURNING THE TIDE

'It's the most awful thing!' Patsy told her twin sister.

'Do you think that it's true?' Mauve had a more suspicious nature.

'The whole story is too strange not to be,' Patsy said.

'He was such a lovely man and they seemed so happy together,' Mauve pondered.

'And to think, we were just there a few months ago,' Patsy said.

'What did she say happened?' Mauve asked.

'It's all very confusing. Here you read it.' Patsy had printed out the email for her sister.

Tide in**Late September, 2015**

Yvette de Bourbon Driscoll sat alone on the top deck of the *Sea Sprinter*, the smallest of the Aran Island fleet of ferries. Finn, her husband, was below in the hold. There were only ten other travelers due to the delicate nature of the trip and its swift, unscheduled departure from Galway. Yvette's son, Michael stayed with his father. He was the one who had encouraged her to sit up on the outdoor deck. She was feeling queasy and hadn't argued. The boat sped across the Atlantic swell; it had to get to Inishmore Island while the tide was still in so that it could dock directly at Kilronan Harbor. The sea spray blew stray hairs into her face and her gloved hand brushed the damp, blonde wisps back into the black cap, which she'd bought with the black raincoat and black jumper in Penneys in Galway. She already had black boots and trousers. Yvette had gratefully yielded to the

traditional demands of ritual, this was the least she could do for Finn, the least and the last thing she could do for her husband, who lay below in a wooden coffin.

Tide Out

Two weeks earlier

Finn Driscoll stood at the kitchen window and watched his wife walk over the fields in the direction of Dun Aengus. By her stiff back and determined stride, he knew she was still angry. He turned away from the window and set about making breakfast for the two Americans, who were staying in their B&B for a few nights. He hoped she'd return in better form and then maybe he could find a way to tell her.

'Good morning,' one of the American women knocked politely at the open kitchen door.

'Patsy, isn't it?' Finn waved her in. 'How did you and your sister sleep?'

'Wonderfully, thank you. Mauve will be up soon. Can I help you set the table?'

'Not at all, just sit down there and I'll make you a cup of tea,' Finn pulled out a chair for her.

'Oh, thank you, kind sir,' the elderly lady blushed at his gallantry and he went to put up the kettle.

He looked back out the window, just in time to see Yvette disappear into the morning mist.

'Where is your lovely wife?' Patsy asked.

‘Oh, she’s gone off to do some messages, but don’t worry, she’s left you in good hands,’ Finn blocked his concerns and turned on all his charm.

The American women were twins in their seventies and were on an ancestor trail; seemingly their great-great-grandparents came from Connemara and had fled to the United States during the Famine in the mid-nineteenth century. They had never married and lived together in a small apartment in Manhattan, not far from Yvette and Finn’s first home.

‘Life can be so strange,’ Mauve had joined the kitchen table while Finn was describing their first year of married life. ‘You two love birds lived just a few blocks from our apartment and now you live here and we end up visiting your beautiful island and staying in your B&B. What a coincidence!’

Finn didn’t miss the small, pokey apartment in Manhattan but he missed the Yvette from back then. She had been working as an archivist for the National History Museum and he had been managing a bar in the West End, which is where they first met. They couldn’t have been more different, an Irish man from a remote island off the West Coast of Ireland and a French woman, directly descended from Louis XIV, but ‘opposites attract’ and in the beginning the attraction was ‘mighty’, as Finn liked to say. He sometimes called her Princess Yvette, but in the end, all Finn saw was a down-to-earth woman with a delicious French accent who could make a gourmet meal out of nothing. They used to buy fresh produce from one of the local markets and together cook up feasts in their tiny kitchenette.

‘So how did you end up back here?’ Patsy asked.

Finn had always planned on returning to the island. That is, until he met Yvette, an urbane, exotic woman who loved to window-shop and wander around museums. Finn knew that the woman he loved would wilt and die on the Aran island, where the delivery of basic supplies depended on the weather and the tide. He had no big plan when he proposed to her; he just knew that he couldn't live without her.

An Elvis impersonator married them in Las Vegas and their honeymoon was divided between Inishmore and Versailles, visiting their families and announcing their nuptials. Paraic and Mairin Driscoll were in awe of their beautiful daughter-in-law and they hovered over her for most of her stay, offering her warm griddle bread with rich cheddar cheese and fresh, orange slices and things that Finn had never seen before in his mother's house.

'She wants to impress you,' he told Yvette as they walked over the headland. 'It's the king in your cupboard,' he teased her.

It was 1995 and so far the hottest and driest Irish summer on record. Yvette was enchanted by the island. The days in the west of Ireland stretched far into the night, the sun shone from a clear, blue sky and the great Atlantic Ocean stretched out into the distance.

'How could you ever leave such a gorgeous place?' Yvette asked her husband, and he hadn't the heart to disenchant her, so he just smiled.

They had reached Dun Aengus and Finn held her hand as they explored the Iron Age fort. When they got to the edge of the cliffs, which plummeted down to the rocks and sea

below, Yvette gasped, 'Mon Dieu! C'est magnifique!' and Finn clasped her to him and kissed her passionately.

'If you keep that up, we may never leave,' Yvette whispered.

They linked arms and continued along the cliff; Finn said he had another surprise for her. His large, warm hand held hers and she let him pull her along, giving into the feeling of being led by her confident, handsome husband. The tide was out when they reached the Serpent's Lair, a large, rectangular rock pool.

'It can't be natural,' Yvette said.

'It is,' Finn explained, 'karst limestone always breaks in straight lines.'

The water in the pool rolled slowly back and forth, glistening in the morning sunshine. Finn showed Yvette how the pool was connected to the sea by a subterranean passage which allowed the sea water to wash in and out from under the rocks. When the sea was rough, the waves crashed and thundered against the sides of the pool, giving the impression of a great serpent thrashing about in its lair, hence the name.

Twenty years on, Yvette stood at the same spot, high up on the cliff edge and drank in the view. A large golden sun rose up over the mainland and stretched its rays over the cobalt ocean as far as the island and beyond, clearing the haze with one warm sweep of light. It was going to be a glorious day. 'Typical,' she muttered out loud, 'after months of lashing rain, gale force winds and overcast clouds, the day I finally decide to leave, the sun comes out.' Anyone visiting Inishmore for the first time, could easily mistake it for a Greek island, Yvette thought bitterly.

At the same time that her husband was explaining to the American women how they had ended up on the island, Yvette was thinking back with regret about what she now knew and had known for some time, was a rash and foolish decision. After the birth of Michael, their only child, they had moved from Manhattan to Dublin where she got work in the Chester Beatty Library and he managed one of the more popular restaurants in the city. Dublin wasn't New York but it was closer to both their families, even though, despite the greater distance, it was actually quicker to reach Versailles than the Aran Islands. They used to spend Christmas with her parents and a month in the summer with his. Strangely, the sun always seemed to shine when they visited Inishmore and this deception is what swayed Yvette into making a decision, which she had paid dearly for and was probably going to cost her her marriage.

'Well, no doubt you ladies heard about the banking scandal in 2007,' Finn went on to explain the ins-and-outs of the great Irish economic downturn and the ensuing bankruptcies and unemployment.

Around the same time, Finn's parents had died, within six months of each other; he had been an only child. They had two choices, to sell the family B&B or to return to Inishmore and run it. Yvette had been laid off during this period and Finn's salary wasn't sufficient for their small family.

'Let's make a go of it?' Yvette suggested.

'Yvette! It's not for you!' Finn thought her royal ancestors would turn in their graves if he took her to live on a rock in the middle of the ocean.

‘What do you mean? Do you think I can’t survive without shops?’ Yvette sounded peeved.

‘No, luv, no. It’s just you won’t like Inishmore in the winter, I promise!’

‘I think that we can make a go of it, you and I. What choices do you we have?’ Yvette asked.

Of course, they had other choices but when she set her mind to something, there was no budging her and besides he didn’t want to be budged, he wanted to return. So they did.

‘It seems to have been a good choice,’ Mauve said happily.

‘Oh, indeed,’ Finn nodded.

For him it had been easy, he would never forget the elation he felt on that boat ride eight years before, when he knew he was returning for good. It was like the fulfillment of a dream, and in the beginning it had been wonderful. Yvette had all sorts of ideas on how to brighten up the B&B and he was happy to paint whatever wall she wanted painted, and move furniture ‘til kingdom come – her enthusiasm was infectious. They went on a few shopping expeditions to Galway to get material for curtains and buy some new bedspreads. It was fun to have a common project and it brought them even closer together. Michael usually joined them on their trips. He would sit on his father’s shoulders and his mother would scold Finn ‘to be more careful’ when entering low doorways. Finn would laugh and Michael would hang on tight to his father’s head and laugh also. They always ate in a restaurant before catching the ferry back to the island.

‘Sounds like you two have it made,’ Mauve was smiling at his stories.

‘We should move here,’ Patsy pinched her twin’s arm.

It was on the tip of his tongue to come clean and confess to the two, sweet old ladies the whole, horrible truth, but he just smiled instead. Then he used the excuse of making more tea to check the window and see if Yvette was coming back.

Yvette had climbed down to the Serpent’s Lair and was dipping her feet in the cold water. She then lay on the warm limestone and closed her eyes. The cool morning breeze made her shiver so she turned over onto her stomach and peered down into the lair, her eyes searching for the serpent. Finn used to laugh when she told him that sometimes she could see a large reptile head deep under the water, looking up towards the light.

‘It’s just a rock, you goose, an optical illusion,’ and he’d make as if to push her in.

She feigned fear and clung to him laughing. Those were the good days, but they had long since gone. Finn had become morose. Michael was studying in a boarding school in the Dublin area and she guessed that the combination of expensive fees and empty nest syndrome didn’t help matters. The sun warmed her body. She turned over and shaded her eyes with one of her arms and looked up at the clear, blue sky. If only it could be like this all the time, she thought, I could bear it if the sun would always shine and Michael was still here. Her son’s absence was like one of the great rifts which divided the giant karst limestone rocks on the island. Michael was a large, handsome boy with an infectious laugh. There was always laughter when he was around and constant chatter. She knew that Finn missed Michael, just as much, if not more than she did. In the summer, the B&B was always full of guests and Finn was a different person with strangers, full of chat and jokes, they loved him. He’d tell stories about the Aran islands and the great serpent that

lived in its lair. She watched in amazement as her somber, silent husband became the life of the party. But the summer season was ending and for the few winter stragglers, it wasn't worth keeping the B&B open. She had been doing some freelance work for the Chester Beatty Library which entailed her travelling to Dublin for a week or two, whenever there was a new exhibition. Now they'd offered her a more permanent job. She wanted to sell the B&B and to resettle in Dublin. The night before, they'd argued quietly, so as not to wake the guests, into the early hours of the morning, but she couldn't budge him.

'That way we can all be together again, all the time,' Yvette pleaded with her husband.

'But Michael loves the island, he may want to settle back here when he's older,' Finn argued.

'God forbid, Finn! Please see reason,' Yvette was exasperated. 'Why don't you want to give it a try? What are you scared of?'

'I'm not scared and I don't want to lose you but let's face it, buyers aren't exactly beating a trail to our little B&B. Yvette, please, give it another year or two and let's see what happens.'

The very idea was abhorrent; she didn't know what to say. Finally, they agreed that she would go to Dublin to work for a week and Finn would join her and Michael at the weekend. Then Yvette told him she needed to clear her head, and that's when she got dressed and went for the walk.

Turning Tide

Finn encouraged the American women to go off and explore the ruins, ‘and if you see my wife, would you tell her that her tea is going cold,’ he waved them off with a laugh. He was standing at the sink, washing the breakfast dishes, when he saw Yvette walking back towards the house. God, she was a wonderful woman and he was so lucky to have her. He wished he could tell her everything, but he had to be patient just a bit longer. There was no point in worrying her unnecessarily.

Yvette saw his anxious face watching her from the kitchen window and she felt a sharp pain in her gut. Finn was a good man and there weren’t many of them about, she knew that, and she did love him, but without his warm companionship and humor, she had nothing to sustain her through the cold, dark winter days and the too short, unpredictable summers. She wasn’t returning to Inishmore but she would wait to tell him in Dublin.

A few hours later, Finn helped Yvette into the rowboat and handed her bag over to one of the men. The tide was turning and the men were in a rush to get out of the harbor before the big waves began rolling in. Finn had a feeling that his wife suspected something; she held tightly onto his arm and she looked like she was about to cry. He held himself not to say anything to her. It was not the right time. He nearly broke and confessed to her when they were arguing the night before, but he didn’t know how to begin to explain and, if he was truly honest, he couldn’t bear to see the shame and disappointment he felt, reflected in her face. He had arranged to meet the man in a pub off the main thoroughfare in Galway. He prayed that it would all work out and then he would go straight down to Yvette in Dublin and tell her everything. He knew that he hadn’t been himself for a long time, but once she knew why, he was sure she would forgive him. He couldn’t make any

decisions until he knew what the future held for him. She deserved a better life and he wanted things to return to the way they'd been before this all started.

Tide In

Two weeks later

Yvette expected a crowd to be waiting for them at Kilronan Harbour but she didn't expect the whole island. It looked close to a thousand people; she had never seen the village so crowded. She was grateful that the tide was still in and the boat could dock at the harbor. Otherwise, the coffin would have been lowered in an undignified fashion to a smaller rowboat and they would have had to climb down ladders to join it. They walked into the arms of the people of Inishmore, who closed around the small family. Then the procession, unrehearsed but perfectly choreographed, began. Men heaved Finn's coffin onto their shoulders and walked slowly up the hill towards the church. Friends of Yvette's, friends she had never confided in, propped her and Michael up at both ends and they slowly followed the coffin. The rest of the crowd trailed two steps behind, three or four abreast. There was a strange stillness, despite the movement of people. The priest stood at the door of the church and sprayed the coffin with holy water; Yvette nearly cried with gratitude—he was to be given Catholic burial rites and to be laid at peace in the land that he loved. The word 'suicide' had been bandied about and she knew this was considered a serious sin. She was convinced that Finn hadn't killed himself. Even the police agreed that it was physically impossible, but no one said anything about murder either, nor did anyone give her any reasonable explanation.

High Tide

The Wake

Finn was brought back to their cottage and his coffin was placed on a table in the main room. The top part of the lid lay open and people filed past to view his corpse and pray for his soul. Yvette knew that this was what he would have wanted. She watched her son talking to some of the men, and for a second she thought he was Finn. She couldn't shake the feeling that it was all a horrible dream and that soon she would wake up in bed with Finn by her side. The giant waves were rolling in and beating relentlessly against the rocks; she heard them roaring in the distance. She used to love to snuggle up against his back, when the tide was high and furious.

'Don't worry, luv, I'll protect you from the serpent,' he'd joke.

Who would protect her now? How could she ever have thought of leaving him? She wanted to scream and shout and beat her chest in frustration. While she was in Dublin making plans for a new life, her husband lay dying in the men's bathroom of a popular Galway pub. What was he doing in the pub? No one seemed to know, although someone said he had been seen talking to a man who worked for a big crime boss in the area. What was he doing talking to such a person? Was it by accident? The police clearly didn't want to get involved and it looked like she was never going to find out. All the time she had spent thinking about leaving him because he was quiet and sad. Why hadn't she nagged him for the truth? Why hadn't she clasped him to her and kept him safe? Two weeks ago, all she had wanted was to be free in a crowded, impersonal place. And now all she wanted was to lean her head against his shoulder and to tell him that she loved him. But it was too late.

The keeners began their mournful lament. Yvette felt Michael at her side, gently leading her away from what began to crash around her, like the great waves on the rocks below.

'He was found stabbed in the neck,' Mauve was quite pale. 'It seems an unlikely way to commit suicide.'

'Very unlikely, and there was no note or explanation,' Patsy agreed.

'No, but there was the unsavory character in the pub — I bet you, he did it,' Mauve said, 'and now Yvette is looking for a loan, from us?'

'Well, it seems that he left her with a huge debt,' Patsy sympathized.

'No doubt triggered by the fact that you were telling them all about our little nest egg,' Mauve sounded irritated. 'Well, we won't be sending her any money, that's for sure, but we will send a condolence card.'

'Yes, I agree, but she must be desperate if she turned to us for help,' Patsy said sadly.

'Yvette seems well able to take care of herself. I imagine she wrote to everyone who stayed in the B&B in the last year or two.' Mauve said and that, as far she was concerned, was the end of the story.