

The Great Wall of Ballygall

With everything planned, arranged and rehearsed, Pascal Doherty sat into his favorite armchair to admire the eastern beauty of The Great Wall of Ballygall. Ten feet high, six feet thick, its exorbitant Kilkenny stone now enclosed the town, offering protection from the coastal road, the ugly beach beyond it and, of course, that untrustworthy Irish Sea. The town, two fine pubs and a terrific bustle of shops, seemed more itself now to Pascal, no longer disturbed by traffic or wayward tourists, allowing him and his fellow Ballygallians some peace. It had even improved the local wildlife, deterring the impudence of birds, badgers and those dirty, rabid foxes. Even the insects, a plague during the early summer, had vanished, as had the rats and mice; improvements surely obvious to everyone, especially its founder and enabler.

Finn McCormack.

His unofficial nephew.

Due in a few minutes. A Sunday afternoon drink. His idea, a pretext about the poor health of Pascal's mother, but obviously the Wall. Its protection. Its security. Those despicable attacks recently, vandalism, graffiti, those lewd murals. But still the Wall rose. Six more feet to go.

Pascal drank deeply. Vodka and Lucozade. Glad to host the meeting upstairs in his flat and not below in his Tax Consultancy office. Something more personal, more persuasive, with a nice slice of the Wall. He took his daily photo of it. Peered through his trusty telescope, wishing it was Monday, which would return the builders, hard-hatted and loud but skilled, nevertheless. And respectful, even reverential.

It was a religious Wall after all, a replica of a fourth century fortification, constructed to safeguard the newly converted Irish from the savage pagans outside. A part of history. Discovered by

Finn and his father, may he rest in peace; what was that line from Yeats he would use, that the Wall would be a defense against that *rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouching toward Ballygall to be born.*

Pascal stood.

Turned.

Surveyed with satisfaction his little flat. On his left, a noticeboard of photos of the Wall, dozens of them, taken on different days at different times. The Monet of Ballygall. On the dinner table stood a small Lego model of the Wall, surrounded by books authoritative on the conversion of pagan Ireland. Tomes on medieval construction sat on the chairs. The small kitchen counter was similarly encumbered, with the addition of engineering plans, exuberantly annotated. On the tiled walls, posters of other celebrated walls, Derry, Dubrovnik, Lugo, but mostly Monteriggioni, three of them, early morning, afternoon and evening. Exquisite, but not a match for Ballygall.

He waltzed himself to the rear back window, which allowed an attractive view of the western reach of the Wall. An additional camera and telescope already positioned there, with another favorite armchair. With a pillow and blanket. Even a small kettle. He checked via the telescope. Took a quick photo.

All was silent and in order.

But beyond the Wall, a tangle of wildness. Predators moving through the trees.

He returned to the eastern window. Sat. Drank quickly. Re-filled his glass. Ate freely from his bowl of crunchy appetizers, concocted and copyrighted by Brady's Supermarket of Ballygall. Not a shop like it, anywhere.

It would be good to talk with Finn, he thought. Close when the lad was younger. Good listener. Those great drives they used to take, in that Camry, sold now – no need to go anywhere. Yes, long drives. Radio off. Safe speed. Except, that time around the Dalkey roundabout. Fast. Must have been five times. Laughing, the two of them laughing like madmen. It became a habit. A part of every drive. The circular speed seemed to loosen Finn, soon talkative on the latest round of domestic warfare, at first grimly, then with humor, then with exculpatory insight. The poor lad. Caught between his warring parents. Cautious about returning home. Three stages, always. A drive past. Then a sit-outside in the car. Then a last breakneck lap of the town before skidding to a final stop outside his home. Out he would jump, as if propelled. Revived. Ready for the next bout. What was that Muldoon poem about the roundabout? Ah, about the Brits, that ‘O’ in his forehead from the gun. Dangerous world up there, even now, though dangerous everywhere.

Except Ballygall.

The landline rang. Pascal glancing, confirming the number. His sister, again, eager to whine on about his mother’s health. He placed his glass cool against his forehead, newly satisfied that he had discontinued his mobile.

The phone rang itself into silence.

He stood.

Took another photo of the Wall, for fun, the light not all that different. Straightened his tie. Retucked his shirt. Heard Finn’s footsteps circling through the office, up the winding stairs. At speed. The stairs trembling at his ascent. The flat itself shaking. The photos flapping. The posters perturbed. Even the books seemed to shift in their seats.

They shook hands, half hugged. Sat by the window, in the armchairs. Drank. Newly abashed by how similar they looked. A pale, cow-licked, chipmunk-cheeked boy, the man an older match.

“Pascal, I brought the van,” said Finn. “Know you’ve no car now. Know, been a while since you left the town, but we can -”

“What? No. We need to talk about security, Finn, lad. I have a few ideas. Those vandals. Brazen. Armed security, we need. Pistols. Watch dogs. Our heritage, a religious artifact that will -”

“Pascal, your mother is very, very sick. I’ll take you. No builders today. And it’s not far. Won’t take long. And no traffic on Sunday. Don’t have to stay long either. Can’t probably.”

“What are you going on about, Finn?”

“Your mother,” said Finn, leaning, the blueness of his eyes matched by Pascal’s. “She wants to see you.” Noticing the shock and distress in Pascal’s expression, even though Finn had been clear and repetitive on the phone. “Give you a hug, she wants.”

“See? But, phone, Zoom, or could she come here, Ballygall, so safe now, revive her.”

Finn took a long drink. Gazed balefully at the wall. What had the Germans called it, *Mauerkrankheit*, Wall Sickness, a feeling of being imprisoned, confined, though Pascal, his beloved albeit unofficial uncle, had always seemed to thrive on a confined, orderly life. Living alone. Working alone. Working from home. Getting everything at Bradys. Habits only worsened by the wall. Finn’s wall. His fault. The whole town had gone savage. Gone savage at each other. Some inside, some outside. Their civility, their common decency, roughened by the wall.

Pascal walked to his gallery of photos. Talked via them. “Liars, Finn. Both she and my mother are liars. Not easy to say. Same lie this whole last year gone.”

“Why would they lie, Pascal?” said Finn, turning, but staying in his seat, allowing space between them. Wary of Pascal’s reddening face. What was it his father called him, The Great P.

“Always trying to lure, ah, it’s probably money. Usually is, with them.”

“I was over there yesterday. At the old folk’s home. Your Mum, confused to only see me. She didn’t look well, Pascal.”

Pascal sat at the table. Took up a few yellow Legos, added them to the Lego wall. “Families, Finn. You of all people should understand what I am going to say. We were not close. Never. And never understood me, that woman. Dragging me everywhere. And prefers the sister.”

“But,” began Finn, standing.

“Ah, I’ll be honest, Finn. We were always honest with each other. I have a hard time with people. You know that. And sick people. That’s incredibly... I want to remember my poor mother as she was. Not shrunken, tied to a machine, sick, weak, at the mercy of everyone. Anyone able to just walk in on her. The indignity. When I am at that stage, quick pistol to the head, make no bones about it.”

“Not at all, Pascal, she was pretty lively. And a private room. Your sister there all the time. Flowers galore. The van is just outside.”

Pascal ventured into the kitchen, spoke to the huge poster of Monteriggioni, a famed, medieval walled town. “Terrible time for driving, Finn. Sunday. Everyone and his granny out raging around. Roads are slick too. Rained last night. And the pollen. Cars these days, too fast, too big. Beasts, they are.”

“You can drive, Pascal. Like old times.”

Pascal walked to the rear window.

Finn stopped at the table, taking Legos off the wall. Quick layers of them.

Pascal sat into his armchair. Sighed. "Look, the truth, Finn. Should resonate with you, the bold discoverer. Look around. At me flat. All this stuff. This is my job now. Haven't had a tax client since it started. It's wonderful. How did Kavanagh say it. Lifted to importance our town, this Wall has. And you saw the vandalism, the opposition against the Wall. And the builders, some of them are cowboys. This is important to me, Finn. Get this Wall around me. Around us. Sixteen feet high. God, and six feet thick."

Finn could only nod, though he vehemently disagreed. The wall was a curse. Bringing out the worst of people. Even the religious ones. The Born-Again Ballygallians.

Pascal lowered his voice. Looked into Finn's blue eyes. "And yes, I am afraid. That if I leave, I know, I know, irrational, especially given the value of what I do here, that if I leave Finn, they will never let me back in."

Finn was quick. "We'll go fast then, Pascal. Look, you *are* doing a great job. Everyone appreciates it. But it's only half the job. You're monitoring the inside, the interior of the wall, but what about the outside? The exterior? You know you've thought about this."

A cow-licked, chipmunk-cheeked smile passed between them.

"The outside of the wall," continued Finn. "As important if not more important. Keeping out those pagan savages, right. That's where it starts. Look, we'll do a few spins around the town. Like the old days. Same rules."

"Same rules?"

"Yeah, just driving. No destination. Windows up. Wipers on. Seat belts on. Radio on RTE. Few laps. Bring the camera. Record the whole thing. The workmanship. The structural integrity and that. Check the whole thing. Come on. I drive fast now."

Finn did drive fast. Even on the first lap of the town, but especially the second, and the third lifted them both into laughter. At nothing at all. Just the propulsive, loosening speed. Pascal reminded of his mother's Formula 1 driving.

Who they did visit.

In three stages.

Just a drive past that first day.

The next day a sit-outside in the car.

And on the third day, out Pascal jumped. Propelled. Emboldened. Finally, hugging his mother.

But always those first, fast laps, around and around The Great Wall of Ballygall.