

# Dr Brendan's Bar

A fantasy around a true story



ROBERT  
**CLUTIER**



# DR BRENDAN'S BAR

*Robert CLUTIER*

This is a work of fiction. A fantasy around a true story. Most names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents in this story are the product of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner.



# Prologue - 2017 - Castledoon

*Hey Kyle! You never pick up!? Quick voicemail then from my side, buddy. Still in good old bloody Ireland! Back in two weeks I guess. With my second cousin Alex on a bike trip. The wild one, you met him in LA two years ago.*

*So we happened upon this Bar in some rough-neck fishing town in the South West of county Cork and started to talk to the owners, two nice older ladies, twin sisters. Identical twin sisters, but only in looks, they are as different as chalk and cheese.*

*They tell the story of their Pub and then one comes down with some script. They have a young guy named Cian who tours with the sisters' father's story - a medical doctor who survived World War Two in the Pacific. Incredible narrative. Lived through Jap camps, torpedoes, nuclear bombs, came home safe to run a Pub! You can't make it up. Saved many people. Hero.*

*The real story is about the influence it had on his Pub. This Cian wrote it all down, his recital, it is a script. I read it in one go. Un-put-away-able*

*really. He is now touring the 'Continent', as they call it here. They come in droves to listen to him. Hahaha...*

*I am holding it in my hands as we speak. Printed and nicely bound in a plastic spiral binder. Old school, like the tale. It is a ready-made story Kyle! Absolutely perfect for you mate! One could literally start shooting tomorrow. I will have it scanned somewhere in the coming days and forward it to you.*

*We need to start looking for money, buddy, hahaha. Strike while the iron's hot!*

*Will call you in the coming days. Having a ball here! Ireland is cool...*

*Take care!*

*This is your mate Rory signing off for now.*

# Solicitor - 2017 - a town near Castledoon

The twin sisters, although no strangers to the anachronisms of their rural Irish countryside, were surprised by the Victorian looks and ambiance of the interior of their solicitor's office. They sat down looking at a vast antique wooden desk behind which Kevin O'Donahue had installed himself, after having them let in by his senior secretary. With their small pug dog, inaptly named Lassie - he clearly disapproved of dogs in his offices, but had forgotten to instruct them about. And his ageing assistant did not care, well, about anything in fact.

The ladies looked around the office uneasily while Kevin shuffled through his files in the large and dented grey metal file cabinet. Weird landscape paintings all over, oil clearly, but artistically from an inferior quality. Wasn't his father a painter in his spare time? Brooke, the youngest of the twins by thirty three minutes, chatty and outgoing, would have started to converse straight away

and ask questions - but not today. Today was a solemn business. Barbie, the older twin, more serious, was busy retrieving writing stuff, a crumbled pad, two pens, out of her purse.

“Ladies,” Kevin commenced, “the situation is dire.”

Brooke felt that she started to blush. Barbie kept rummaging in her bag. They were most at ease in their own ‘public place’, never really somewhere else; definitely not in a solicitor’s office.

Kevin conducted at least five of various ‘dire situation’ conversations per day nowadays. Times were tough. Inflation, higher rents, people out of jobs, cost of living rising, the mortgage crisis, super-greedy banks... As he knew the sisters since he was a child, he continued without any qualms.

“Long story short. The mortgage has not been paid for seventeen months. Bank is ringing me every other week now. Eileen, your cook who left, spoke to me the other day. She waives her claims of overdue pay as she loves you both and knows that it is not easy, but still... The place is not insured anymore. And, yes, if you go into arrears, the

bank might push for having your pub licences revoked..."

The sisters were nodding silently and docile as if they saw themselves in a strange nightmare. Which it was, in fact. They both knew the facts.

"Any ideas girls, to do something about this?" The girls looked at each other.

"Well," uttered Barbie, who, stern and sensitive, was always the formal spokesperson, "we will - starting next week - serve food on Sundays as well."

Kevin looked at them, stupefied. He leaned over and lowered his voice:

"Guys, you don't realise the landscape at all. The bank can foreclose your mortgage loans - there is quite some left to pay, but not insurmountable - and just take over the place. Completely! They kick you out and sell it to a developer. They will just build another mini-supermarket here. From your shop and the Bar. A convenience store on hallowed ground. Can you imagine? Feel it? A twenty-something year old banking desk jockey will call you and will cold-bloodedly give you the bad news. Out! After four, or is it five, generations? I came to your Bar when I was three weeks old... Is this what your Dad



would have wanted? After he survived that terrible ordeal?"

"I remember that hahaha, you in your diapers..." Brooke, spokesperson on human affairs, tried to lighten the mood.

Kevin continued his coarse acting: he slammed - not really hard, but still impressively for a non-pretentious office like his - with his flat hand on the blade of the wooden desk.

"Fleck it, girls, you really don't understand! You must come up with a plan. More money needs to flow into the Bar. Try everything. Music, more food, increased prices, special evenings, parties, whatever..."

Barbie looked at Brooke, who tried a stingy smile behind her large yellow glasses. Brooke smiled and took Barbie's hand.

"I am sure we will come up with something, Kevin."

"Within two weeks. Bank will wait, but only a little bit longer. I know Michael, the boss there, he was with me in the Gaelic Football. He owes me a few, hahaha."

Dead-serious, he continued: "Wanna see a clear plan within two weeks! No bargaining. I will come to the Bar, it's been a while anyway, and if I agree with your ideas, I will buy you half a year with the bank, but no

more than that. Also, in that half year you can simply try to sell the place yourselves. Would be my recommendation. Enough takers. The breweries would be interested. They see the bars as electronic printers. They are valueless, but they love to sell the cartridges. Print after print. Pint after pint. Get my point?"

They did not get the print-pint point, but they got the main message. OK. There was a crisis now. The Bar's future was in peril. No money. And also still no successor, Brooke and Barbie realised at the same time. Kevin had failed to mention that. We are getting older; a successor could drag the place out of its debts and continue the Bar. The Bar and the vision of the Bar. Its personality, its lifeline. Everybody is served, everybody is welcome - no matter where you are from.

Hospitality is about people, after all.

As they got up to leave, young Lassie barked excitedly. Was somebody gonna take her out on the street again? Yeah? Fun!

## Hell-ship - 1944 - somewhere in the Pacific

Imagine a well-lit backroom of an old 'public house' in Ireland...: the room is separated by two sliding doors from the larger pub in the front. It is mainly used for the famous weekly chess nights, where everybody is welcome, even anonymously, to come play chess with whoever feels the urge. Or it hosts private drinking or dinner parties, or events like the quarterly meeting of the Castledoon Literary Society. A small town cultural venue.

Tonight there is just a small group, not more than ten people, awaiting a performance. They are looking at an emptied stage space in front of them: tables and chairs have been removed. There is a single door on the left, coming from the long corridor running at the side along the long pub building.

That door opens slowly and a young man walks in. He is dressed up in an old-fashioned military uniform from a light-brownish fabric/colour; it has a tropical touch. He wears

some make-up, perhaps the moustache is fake? The cap he has on his head sinks over his eyes.

Somehow the appearance doesn't match him - not in size and colours. Age. It is slightly unrealistic, dream-like.

He takes the cap off with both hands and holds it respectfully in front of his body. Then, he scans, like a searchlight, twice over his audience, relaxes visibly, is at ease, and starts his monologue:

"The rat is more scared of me than I am of the rat - was what I remembered after that disastrous night. While that panicked rat saved my life! The rat had tangled itself in my mosquito net, had wrapped it around my legs and I was trying to get it loose. For that reason I was sitting right up against the steel wall of the hold, when the torpedo hit, about fifty metres ahead of me. All the guys around me, sleeping - all were lying down flat - had their unsupported heads violently twisted by the tremendous shock and died instantaneously by a broken neck. My sitting-up position buffered the impact. I survived the torpedo attack!

I was lucky enough to swim out through the gaping hole of the fast sinking Tamahoku

Maru and managed to get about two hundred metres away when she sank, very swiftly, with loud bangs and explosions. Found some of the other guys, who I did not recognize at first, and joined them hanging onto wood flotsam coming from our torpedoed convoy ships. Our convoy, full of Allied prisoners of war, POWs, had been decimated. By an Allied, American submarine!

Earlier, we had been put on sea transport from the island of Java in the Dutch East-Indies to Taiwan, then still called Formosa. Initially, it felt like a relief to be out of the tropical prisoner camp and the unforgiving jungle. But the deception of being better off at sea, or for that matter, being guarded by Korean guards instead of the shameless Japanese was soon replaced with a new reality: these ships were not called 'hell-ships' for no reason... No food, no water, no medicines, hardly any latrines. Crowding. Far too many men in cramped airless spaces. Falling ill meant death. The jungle camps were soon paradise compared to our new floating homes; false sweet memories.

From Java, after a stop in Singapore, we were supposed to go in a straight line to Formosa, also under Japanese occupation, to

unload aluminium building materials for some obscure or secret war machine, and support its construction. Instead, a few days after having left Singapore, we were stalked by one or two American submarines and the convoy admiral decided to seek a few days' shelter in Manila - in the Philippines, also Japanese-ruled, like all of South East Asia by now.

Back on our way to Formosa, in a small convoy of twelve cargo ships carrying POWs - well, in fact our status had now changed to 'slave labourer' - plus two tankers and one passenger ship with regular Japanese troops sailing home, we were attacked every night. By the same sub, it seemed. Every morning, when we were allowed, we got our daily ten minutes of fresh air on deck in groups. We counted the remaining ships around us. Three days out of the Philippines, and we were down to a meagre total of five... Five left of an initial fleet of twelve ships.

Most of our guys had given up by now, being imprisoned for two years under duress and hardship, in the endless dangerous primitivity of the jungles of the East. They laid ill, or depressed, most often both, in their long flat lines in the cargo hold. When they

died, they did it quietly, preferably at night. Their bodies were only allowed to be dumped in the sea on some, not all, mornings. The smell was awful, for days on end, in the unforgiving tropical heat...

Treading water and holding on to a cracked large wooden deck bench, we grouped together with two Aussies. Jovial fellows usually, I recognized them vaguely from the Java camp. Understandably, they were a bit overtaken by the circumstances.

I could not suppress a sarcastic smile: death had now become a given, not an unknown fate - as it should be - but a fact, just a matter of time. Being in Britain, on my assignments with the British Royal Air Force as a doctor, death was present, but not as likely and sure. I nearly lost my life later when that plane came in, in flames. With brash bravura I stormed into the burning wreck. Stupid - but got away with a medal. But before that, we were sent to France, all of us; living through the hell of Dunkirk.

Dunkirk... the first revelation of how life can fastly turn into a non-personal coincidence in a rapidly developing global mess. We were in France to help out against

the all-invading, territorial Germans - saving Europe for civilisation. We thought it was going to be an easy one, our Imperial Army was unbeatable. We were flat wrong. We were chased away like rabbits. Here, death became a much more stable factor, a reliable friend. A 'given' you could count on...

Later, rescued from Dunkirk and assigned on that sea trip from Britain to Asia, on transport to Singapore to help out against the Japs, it was the German submarines that were after my insignificant life - they were everywhere. The jungle followed with the cruel Japanese, then disease, dysentery, dengue, malaria... And to drive the nail in my soon-to-be-irrelevant sea grave coffin: now Americans, fellow Allies, had joined in on trying to get me... The world as we knew it was over.

After the torpedo, we spent three days floating around - holding on for dear life - in that unforgiving tropical seawater. Nothing to eat, nothing to drink - in blistering day-sun and dark windy nights. A few lads died, or drowned themselves - who will ever know? I tried to stay busy with swimming from raft to raft and help the wounded with their injuries. Made splints from floating bamboo. Sutured



deep cuts with fishing line, no need to wash the wounds out, the sea water had turned them into paper-white easy-to-stitch floppy meat. I think I learned true doctoring those days. I knew I was fastly getting indifferent to the overall medical situation. I cared for those within reach, but I blinded myself for the larger picture. We were all going to die anyway.

A Korean guard, whom we had nicknamed Willy - one of the most notorious sadists earlier on board - swam, for unclear reasons, to our small group of rafts. Looking for a slot to survive. Counting on human commiserations. He had no clue. He was hoisted aboard and while being small-talked and smiled to, hit ruthlessly from the back with a broken oar. His skull split open in the middle. Revenge. Blood, brain and body pushed in the sea. Sank to the bottom.

It was the most impressive moment in my War. I did not agree with killing him. It is not right. We shouldn't kill. I warned the guys, but they went ahead anyway. Luckily, it was a lightless night so a patrol boat happening upon us would not have witnessed it. Willy stayed with me the rest of my life. Willy saved somebody else's life later. What is revenge other than a very primitive

instantaneous lust for a kill? Gut-thinking rather than brain-thinking. A revenge kill is entertainment, a primitive orgasm, it has no meaning nor goal.

We got lifted out of the water by the crew of a very aggressive, small Japanese minesweeper. We were the last, of quite a large group originally, on our broken raft with three men. The very moment we stepped on board, the Japanese sweeper crew simply started killing us survivors! We did not hesitate a single second and jumped overboard straight away. We were on our loyal raft-lifeboat again. We anticipated being shot at, but they did not seem to have any more ammunition. We obviously preferred to stay in the sea for a little bit longer! We were fortunate that they did not see us slowly disappearing out of sight. They were still occupied with killing the few tens left of the original survivors of our torpedoed POW hell-ships. With wooden clubs, steel pipes. It turned out later that our raft's team of three were the only ones who came out alive from those days in hell. From a human cargo of over two thousand...

Eventually, we were saved from the lethal salty waters by a Japanese whaler. The crew was, understandably, not very sympathetic to us English speaking barbarians - Americans had bombed all the big cities in Japan by now, with tremendous raids - but, sailors to sailors, they gave us something to drink (even a bit of alcohol, as they were celebrating to go home after a long trip) and to eat. At least, when we just boarded - until they fully realised that we were Allied POWs. We had been under Jap power for over two years already. Routine random beatings were back...

The whalers returned from a long whaling trip. Carcasses from varied species origin were decomposing on deck, probably with some use for the rotting remains on shore. In a war economy, one could use any material. The morbid scene made me think of my youth in Castledoon. The abundance of alive whales, especially in summer: dolphins, minke, porpoises, bottle-noses, humpbacks. All hunting together, playing joyfully after a good catch - harmoniously, happy. This gory scene of carcasses was also in a way harmonious, in death that was. In death all is harmonious again.

When we came into the port of a larger city, visible in the background, the whaling ship was apparently instructed by harbour authorities - through an immense shore loudspeaker - to sail out again immediately and to kill and dump us overboard. (I found this out much later). No filthy foreigners on shore please! The whaler captain ignored the orders from shore. He feared an instant mutiny of his crew - they were desperate to go home after months on a dangerous ocean. And they were worried to death about the fate of their families under the recent relentless American bombing carnage. We were therefore disembarked and handed over to two cranky policemen, who - by now this was customary in their great culture - greeted us with fierce beatings, mainly on the head.

The three of us were walking behind a slow driving truck to a heavily barbed-wire fenced camp. We were welcomed the Korean way, slightly different: instead of on the head, beatings on the back and upper arms. The familiar beatings made us feel at home.

“Welcome to Nagasaki.” We felt kind of relieved to have a new home again - on dry land. And relieved, but strangely enough just a secondary feeling: that we were still alive...”

The imaginary young man in the uniform takes a sip of water from a glass on the only table on the empty, spartan floor stage, then sits down on his wooden stool.

He continues the illusion, relaxed. One with the audience. Nothing is real. Just the story is.

# Stand-up historian - 2017 - Castledoon

“Have you done this before?” asked Barbie. She was sitting in the snug shop area near the window. A cosy, and confidential place. She displayed her welcoming, genuine friendly smile.

“No,” answered Cian. His anxiety was disappearing. “Somebody told me about the ad, and it kind of excited me. But I am willing to take the chance. If you will have me. Always wanted to do something like this.”

“Well,” said Barbie while she sent a welcoming smile to a customer walking in. “We don’t have a lot of choice, really. Nobody else showed up. So let’s just try it. The idea, Cian, is that we need to get more customers to the Bar, with some regularity, if you like. Word of mouth advertising, sending people here through an old fashioned oral reference. That’s the only thing that works with traditional pubs, I have been told.” She chuckled. Cian started to feel good about it

all. These people are nice! They are giving me a chance.

“Do you know the story of our Pub?” Barbie turned serious again.

“Just bits and bobs. Your father Brendan was a medical doctor in World War Two, correct? Pacific, that area, Japan et cetera. He survived and then he inherited the Pub.”

Barbie laughed in a moment of lightness. “Yes, that would be the story, in a nutshell. You could make it a bit longer though, hahaha. Wait.”

She walked over to the counter, bent down and came back with a book. Well, rather a kind of personal, bound notebook. She handed it to him. It was crumpled with stains on the cover, well read... Dog-eared. It had a large handwritten title on the cover: ‘Doctor Brendan’s War’. A photograph glued on it. A picture of a stoic but happy and surprisingly well-fed face of a man in military uniform. An Air Force cap. Their Daddy, Dr Brendan O’Keeffe.

“This is a must-read. Written by my father, in his first years of retirement, when he started running the Bar in earnest. It got ‘discovered’ here by a travelling author, who rummaged through our files. We gave him lots of free drinks, and he wanted to push it to

publication. It never really materialised. The poor fellow died, that did not help of course...”

Wow, Cian thought, he was not aware. “Can I read it?”

“Take it with you, but don’t forget that this is the only copy we have, years of reading already. It falls apart. His story is starting to be forgotten. No, it is worse, the story of how Brendan, my father’s life, created this Pub, the Bar’s ‘lease on life’ I call it - is at risk of slipping away. That is the part that worries me most.” Barbie was very serious.

“How are we...”

Barbie - not her style, but these were unusual times -, interrupted him. Cian realised with a smile that he hardly knew his brand-new employers.

“Find your style Cian. We will be waiting for you.”

Brooke and Barbie. Always mentioned in that order, sequence. Never ‘Barbie and Brooke’, although Barbie was older by half an hour. Identical twins - their personality and interests could however not have been more different. While running the Bar, Brooke would be going through the proposed playlist for the evening, with a newly visiting



travelling guitar player, Barbie would be negotiating a volume discount with the mighty beer provider. A visit to the Post Office or bank would be done by Barbie, but a trip to Bantry for the new Christmas decorations was typically something Brooke would do. Barbie's work attire was a pair of nice clean jeans and Bar T-shirt, Brooke would always dress up to kill. Brooke had more fancy pairs of glasses than Elton John. Barbie wore contact lenses.

Both lied awake over the future. The Bar. Barbie financially, Brooke culturally. Its heritage. Where would it all be going?

"Brooke's idea actually. We love to see somebody bringing the story of the Bar, through Brendan's story, to life. Stand-up storytelling. No Irish esoteric folklore stuff in Gaelic, but somebody literally standing up and happily, easily telling a story, like 'listen to me guys, I have a story to tell...' A Pub is about people, stories, talking, and listening. Like in the old days. No high tech. From the heart. Ah Cian, I cannot tell you what to do - you need to give an interpretation to it. Let's just try it out. You can't go wrong. Next Thursday?"

Driving back over the windy, long and rainy roads to Cork, Cian felt elation as well as a slight threat. Was this the break he so desperately needed? His current job, work, yes it was lucrative, but it was not going anywhere. Boring, really. Another thought overtook him: not just about work, but could this be the break with Betty he longed for, but so far was not able to conceptualise? Sweat broke out. Indecision, guilt, his life running ahead of him.

He embarked on reading the musty notebook as soon as Betty was lying asleep next to him. He read for two hours. Beautiful, clear, neat old-fashioned handwriting. All very legible. Finished it in one go. Written seriously, still a page-turner. He did not grasp that this story was ever going to be forgotten. Why did the publication not work out...? It was too good to be real! Classic heroic tale. Factual and not literary. The narrative got a grip on him just by the sheer journey tale. You couldn't make this up... Wasn't reality often stranger than fiction?

Just before his sleepiness took over, he suddenly had a vision of the Bar, the background as he left it this afternoon. It mingled, in his dreamy twilight with

Brendan's unbelievable story: the place had been full with people from all walks of life. At the back side of the Bar, there were three Filipino fisherman-sailors drinking their lagers and sending messages home through their phones on the free internet. Two rather artsy American tourists next to them, with a whisky. A couple of real old local guys were having their pints in the back and laughing loud, free and unaware of their surroundings. Brooke was watching a tennis match on the big screen with a few teenagers who had come to see the game. He had felt something of human perfection when he had walked out. Absence of human condition. Human perfection, as humans are not perfect. No need for perfection. Just understanding. Freedom, respect, in fact.

Or was he asleep and fully dreaming already?

The next morning, he called in sick to work. He did not even bother to give them a reason. They would not miss him anyway; the bosses had all gone on off to a posh golf retreat - he was not invited. Just because he was 'too young'..., even though he was the top ranking junior, making good money for the bank! The only 'junior' bringing in money

- in fact. He loved the business of mortgages, the insurances, the loans, the work with the small enterprises. He felt terrible, however, if he had to foreclose a house that had been lived in by a family for twenty years, often several generations, who had slipped into heavy arrears. It made him nearly cry to halt a small business, built up with bold sweat and tears. He was good at figures and his commissions, at his desk, retreated with music on a headset, but rather did not encounter the real people behind the hardships.

It is not good, Cian thought to himself. I cannot go on like this forever. I want to be a human, not a banker... I like people, even if they have no money.

He ordered another cappuccino from the little coffee-bar he picked outside his apartment building. He pulled a computer tablet out of his office bag. Do the 'Cian equation' as he called it. Whenever he slipped into some decision making environment, he made his lists, calculated and compared - and decided.

For 'GOOD' he punched in the keyboard, in abbreviations and signs, or simple one

letters: 'Money', 'flat', 'health'. He didn't come very far there.

For 'OK': 'Betty' (but he put a question mark there...), 'work'. Feck.

For 'BAD': 'Bored, bored, bored'. 'Cork'. 'Workweeks', 'weekends', stupefying boring useless hollow rhythm routine. Yuck. The list got longer. No travel. No romance. Hardly any sex.

The morning had suddenly turned into eleven o'clock. Not noon yet. He called the waitress and ordered an Irish whisky. Who gives a feck anyway... He sipped it away, enjoying the booze-boost to the fullest. After he finished it, he looked at the passers-by with different eyes. What are all these people after...? He dug his mobile phone out of his bag (surprised it had not been turned on that day yet - now that is a good sign! Nature is helping out!) and phoned the Bar. It rang quite long, but then he got Brooke on the line. Friendly, relaxed, as usual. But a tiny distance was in the air still - they did not know each other so well. There were things to learn from these ladies, he thought. They chit-chatted, then he asked for Barbie. She's at the bank, Brooke said, her voice turning slightly grave.

This is indeed the moment then, thought Cian - a banker quits. It all falls together...!

“Can you tell Barbie that I will do it?”  
Silence - which could mean anything.

“That is so great, Cian, that is so great.”  
Emotion in Brooke’s tone. “Barbie will call you back straight away when she walks in. When will we see you here?”

“Tomorrow,” he heard himself saying.  
“Need to talk. Read. Wanna know all those stories. See pictures. Details. Memories.”

Because tomorrow Cian’s new life begins, he said to himself.

He drove to Castledoon the next day. The station played Mozart on the car radio as he daydreamed his way there. He was in much better shape than when he drove back to Cork the other day. His life started to take content, shape, and format. As was his Bar show. Cian on stage! He was surprised he could think so creatively. Cian was happy.

His mother Sylvia died nearly ten years ago. She had drowned on a cold, premature beach party in the spring with her nursing colleagues from the University of Cork hospital. Poor thing. She suddenly went missing from the crowded barbecue set near the water. Some had gone swimming and

they thought she was with them. But no, she had swum away alone.

There had always hung a cloud of suicide suspicion on that terrible accident. Nobody would ever know. No note, no obvious warning signs. She washed up the next day after a long night with police, flashing lights, and very loud walkie-talkie transmissions. She was not depressed, no, only gravely unhappy at times.

It was not important to Cian anymore. He had cried over it for two years, as that was the decent thing to do, then student-years kicked in. Love, booze, and new friends took over. Frankly, as he knew himself, he had always been a bit of an orphan type anyway. Sylvia had refused to tell him who his father was - sometimes he even wondered if Syl was his mother... Never talked much about it. Facts of life. Other kids had a father, he did not. It really didn't bother him anymore. Like so many of his orphan peers, he never had that blinding urge to go find out who his father was, where he could be and what he would be doing now. Life is life. One adapts to a changing landscape. There is no other way.

When he was fifteen he had stopped asking difficult questions all together. He really was on his own, after his mother died.

He was going to grow up with so many questions that guaranteed no answers. At age eighteen he was perfectly fine with all. It was nice not to have too much of a past, a family to descend from. Freedom in a way. No links, no obligations, no past. A new start really. Clean slate type of thing. He had grown to like that more and more. There is no past, there should be only the future.

Betty's family never even asked about it, which was equally fine with Cian. They were obviously embarrassed with Sylvia's fate, therefore with him. Single mother, unknown father. Suspicious death. Very humble descent; lower class, on top of it all. Social stigma, unrepairable.

At first he loved Betty. Love like 'in love'. When they started to live together, very quickly, after dating for just a few months, he wondered if he was under the spell of her family's riches. Their houses, money and the yacht. Lifestyle-love. Betty genuinely loved him for what he was. A strong young man, self-made, quite good-looking. A year ago the first cracks appeared in their glass house. Stains on the windows... Was it the routine driven by lifestyle that had seeped into their home? Routine, boredom, and then: talks



about money, the most destructive killer of any relationship.

He often thought that he had the wrong impression of Betty, or rather: Betty might have given the wrong impression to him. He was sure she saw herself as exciting, lively, entertaining, lovely. Cian knew she was genuine, not faking anything, but she also kept her head way high up in the privileged clouds. Betty most likely had no inkling of being perceived as boring. A protected life gives limited opportunity for self-reflection.

Cian was invited to the graduation party of Betty's younger and only sibling brother Stephen (sorry, not 'Steve' please). He had just qualified from Dublin University as a medical doctor - aiming at becoming a well-paid cardiologist consultant. 'Private patients only' he told everybody, already now, trying to fake a comical stern expression - but he meant it. Serious and greedy as he was.

Betty had never bothered to inform Cian, but the family had recently acquired a centuries' old English colonial estate on the Kenmare River bay in county Kerry. Grass lawns manicured by Polish immigrant workers; new clinker-built wooden rowing boats and modern fibreglass electric engine-

powered tenders moored at cutely designed floating docks. A large beige-white marquee stood near the house. It was a movie set. He thought he felt at home, and was welcome there; until he overheard that conversation while he was waiting for a slot in the domestic servants' toilets. Betty's father, slightly inebriated in the late morning - while taking a piss in one of the urinals, unaware Cian was present - chatting with a stranger next to him. He picked up the same narrative, the familiar old few words. Single mother. Suicide. Orphan. Father unknown. And a new one today, ha! 'Social climber'. It turned a bit stale, the branding on his forehead, he thought when he pissed away at his turn...

He wanted to talk to Betty. She was busy with guests, laughing, gesturing him away. 'Later Cian, I'm a bit busy now'. Jeez she was gorgeous. He felt lust, not love.

Cian sank into bored contemplation. He walked away over the green lawns. Not sombre, actually he somehow got energised by the overheard urinals conversation. He strolled to the manicured bank at the river. I don't want to be a social climber, I just want to be social. Climbing is dangerous, you can only fall down - not up.

That afternoon Betty was over. Done with. He just needed the right moment... Which never came. He never told her. He just left: quiet quitting. Not only the wedding, early, and therewith definitely her world. Privilege and entitlement. Someday soon would be the right moment to talk, to explain.

Cian returned to the Bar the next day. He was now convinced his journey was going into another - the right - direction, as it took a clearly different turn. Liberation. He was mesmerised by the stories Brooke and Barbie told him about their father Brendan. He had read more letters, postcards, military discharge documents, authorities' statements, browsed through picture albums, and had made his notes on his laptop while listening. He still lacked a storyline though, which he needed for his show. Brooke told him that the large handwritten document 'Doctor Brendan's War' was scribbled by Brendan on advice of a colleague doctor to write away his war pains and sleep better..., 'The Doctor's War' - because it was just as much about the War as being a Doctor in the War, at war...

He read it a few times, made more notes, had Brendan's tone of voice identified, but

could not get a clear format to be used on stage.

One night, alone in his new and empty tiny flat in Castledoon, he watched - out of pure boredom - a television show where an Irish celebrity interviewed 'ordinary people'. The host's strength was letting people talk after only asking a few questions and to not interfere after that. Cian had his idea. He would ask an imaginary Brendan a few imaginary innocent starting questions and then he would slip into the persona and let him simply talk.

What about going on stage in his uniform? Dressed up like Brendan, being Brendan? He visualised a first monologue, the first encounter with the audience. This helped him a lot in formatting his show. Brendan was long dead. This would bring Brendan's story to life and give Cian his tone of voice.

Suddenly, the idea was crystal clear: ignore time! Brendan is, unseen by the audience, interviewed by Cian and this results in snippets of monologue. Brendan's voice in fact. Sometimes 'I', sometimes 'he'. Then references to the time after the War could also be included. But maybe no, dressing up like Brendan is not good, too dramatic - but he must imagine he is Brendan!

He will talk to Barbie, for structure. Or would Brooke be better suited? For a bit of artistic emotion? The next morning he started to practise and write. Draw a storyline, get documents bound, prepare the scenario. The show will go on stage! On stage we go!

## Well before the War - Castledoon

A difficult child! Not at all. But I did get punished a few times in boarding school. I often spoke out against unfairness. Therefore teachers told me I was 'cheeky'. And far too verbal. Always the last word! Sometimes with a joke on the edge of what was tolerable back then.

The best aspect of boarding school was (it is a bit stale, as they say the same for 'travel'), that you could go 'home' every once in a while. My long-time Castledoon mates were not sent to boarding school and I missed them dearly. Summer however made up for the long absences. Fishing, on the pebbly beaches near the Doonboy castle-ruin, campfires... Even girls joined; we lived in a free paradise. Classically, we went home when we were hungry and stayed out as long as we wanted, until dusk. Mothers knew then that you would always come home, at some stage. Especially when the stomach was empty.

It was in those paradisiacal years that I developed my passion for swimming, which gave me my long lasting 'physique', and, in a way, saved my life several times - best illustrated when we got torpedoed on our way to Japan...

Swimming was not a pastime that I personally invented. The soothing effect of salty water, even when freezing cold, was long known in our familiar maritime environment. There were people from Doon Island that swam year round, regularly to Castledoon! Back and forth. Even old folks. They still do this, until this day, as a matter of fact.

I discovered the addiction of distance swimming, but also competitive short track racing. The adrenaline and endorphins worked as a drug on me. It became a most addictive hobby. My favourite long track was just back and forth, along the south shore of Beara above Doon Island and raked up five to ten kilometres, easily. Hours of hard work, but a rewarding delight. Alone.

The best race was doing the traditional town regatta in early August, on the Bank holiday - a few weeks before we went to school, later university. There were short track competitions, prizes, and more

importantly, a cheering audience - with lots of girls watching hahaha. I loved it and I still miss it today.

If there would have been medical doctors in the larger O'Keeffe clan, I would have stayed in Ireland. Very simple. Doctors yielded their practices to their sons, or relatives, younger cousins, nephews, in-laws. In the late Thirties there was no network that I could tap from to find a good spot to practise. After half a year on a pittance salary working for the government in the slums of Cork (although I learned the first steps that came in handy later in the Pacific: splints, casts, sutures, yes and... death), I needed to make up my mind and look for a more stable professional environment.

Working for the British military, as a proud Irishman - while it took us centuries to get rid of them Brits! - might nowadays look controversial. It was not. First of all, the Irish had a very long and well appreciated tradition of fighting along with their 'masters' - some kind of common root interest in being all on the 'British Isles' perhaps, which of course included Ireland. Secondly, being a doctor, with the vocational component of healing and saving human lives, took the



political burden away. I was not bothered at all, neither was my family. It was 1938, not that far from 1922, when we were still British subjects. I joined the Royal Air Force, as they were desperately looking for doctors for their fast expanding services. All Commonwealth applicants were welcome. They offered quite good packages. War was looming...

I moved to England in 1938, settled in and had a good hard-working bachelor life.

My doctor's war started in 1940 - well after the failed touristic exercise in 1939 that became known as The Miracle of Dunkirk, or just short 'Dunkirk' - all the while formally based in England.

For most of my mates, Dunkirk had been the Apocalypse. The one and only, and hopefully last reckoning. For me, Dunkirk had been a wake-up call. Our forces, me included, were sent to France and were so numerous, that being encircled and kicked back home by the Germans seemed simply surreal, a bad dream of an overly tired young boy. Yet it happened. We were all reduced to a sorry number, statistics, a logistic liability waiting to be repatriated. Dunkirk took the doctor-feeling temporarily away from me. I never felt in any sense useful. Surrender, sent

home, mission unaccomplished, introspection, homework piling up.

Returned to England; a foreboding accident followed: one of our base's planes came back from a bombing mission over Nazi Germany, with a failing landing gear, plus being hunted very closely for a kill by an audacious lone German fighter. Our plane crashed big time into a field nearby and burst into flames. The fighter pulled up and disappeared, probably proud of its achievement. With the help of some colleagues from the tower, we were able to pull the surviving crew out of their instant hell. Most, although badly burnt, survived.

We got medals for it later. I would have done it for nothing. It was my RAF baptism and the first personal life threatening event in 'my' war.

There were many more to come...

I was happy like a child, elated, when the new order came through to transport out to Singapore. It would surely bring me fulfilment and adventure. Leaving the scared British Isles, wrecked stalemate Europe... Now the RAF village practitioner would enter the real man's world. As a fighting doctor.

On our spartan troop transport ship, on a steamy morning, having well progressed on the Southern Atlantic, we were all called on deck: Singapore had fallen, succumbed to a very rapid innovative Japanese invasion. Now, as we were told, we would be a great help to our Allied friends, the Dutch, the colonial ruler of their still war-free Dutch East Indies. After rounding the Cape of Good Hope we would change course and reset the compass. Off to the island of Java we were.

It excited me at first (would I be a person again, a doctor? Or become a canon fodder number in a ledger?), but when the Jap submarines started chasing - going after us the moment we arrived in the Pacific - the questions left me pretty fast. At least we were on the move. Some of my shipmates called it Dunkirk all over again. Evading the invaders. But we couldn't go home this time. We could solely be on the run. And fight!

## Cian and Zoë - 2017 - Castledoon and beyond

To say that Cian was nervous, was an understatement. He was terrified. There was a crowd of no more than ten in the chess-room in the back of the Bar. Brooke observed that Cian was tense and had put him upstairs, where he could watch the news on TV. Instead, there he was rumbling through his cue-card notes, written down on multiple small strong scratch papers - most of them nicked from the supermarket notice board stock.

A few minutes past eight, it was dark outside, Brooke came to fetch him. His mouth was dry and his heartbeat was up. Coming in from the backdoor of the chess-room, he counted the heads - nine. Not bad for a first night. Three elderly couples, local and Irish most likely, a big bearded young man, probably an American, and two Asian-looking young men, sailors? Nah, they were too well dressed to be sailors. Cultural

tourists. A broad audience, he chuckled, in spite of his nerves.

“Well,” concluded Brooke in her introduction, “it’s his first time, so don’t be too hard on Cian. If you want to order a drink just press this button here.” And she was gone. He was all by himself.

Cian stood up, smiled at the audience. Only the Asian guests smiled back, and he suddenly heard himself talking. But he mostly perceived himself thinking: feck... am I really doing this? What am I after? An unusual doctor from seventy years ago?

Cian had let go of the idea to dress up as his persona - in full military uniform, cap, insignia and medals. He mentally built his show around that fantasy. But he had once fit on the real original Brendan RAF jacket. Far too big! As actors go into others’ skin, it helped him a lot to prepare for his role, in fact, in many subsequent performances he felt like he was Brendan, felt the strains of War, felt the challenges of history. He was glad however, that the audience saw Cian, not Brendan. Although he hoped they would hear Brendan, not Cian.

The second show, three days later, went even better than the premiere. Cian started to look his audience straight in the eye, registered reactions and played around with those. He noticed which spectators were difficult, potentially critical and needed to be convinced and who were supportive and positive. He smiled at one person, looked stern and serious at others. He developed a gut feeling for it. In the third and fourth performance, he looked forward to the audience's body-language interactions and he had started to twine it into his way of presenting. On some evenings, depending on the guests he played for, he felt he had to explore details of Brendan's story further, other evenings it was clear he better shortened or skipped some episodes entirely. This was much more fun than 'work', where he had to wait two weeks before getting the chance - if ever - to speak up as a junior in a meeting. This was real life: instant reward. From humans, not spreadsheets. No 'performance evaluation', happy people was the measurement.

The Bar (Brooke's idea and work obviously) had printed and stuck a small poster on the display windows at the street side, with a prominent picture of Brendan.

Brooke had simply copied the words of an anonymous visitor from the Bar's guestbook:

"Went to listen to this unique story-telling event. Cian was great in delivery and enthusiasm. A simple concept, but so powerful. No PowerPoint slides, but a real human talking! Learned yet new things about Dr Brendan's (and the Bar's!) journey."

The show was not publicised at all. Still every night there were more guests. First the entire Bar population went through it, then ordinary Castledoon citizens, - even those who never came to the Bar - then in version five, six and so on people from out of town materialised. Faces he did not recognize. Strangers.

It was always the Doctor's story, they all agreed when asked, but moreover Cian's style. So natural, so relaxed, fun... Regularly heard remark: we haven't seen or heard a good story being told for ages. Told, not shown! The guy is talented. I bet he could tell any story!

Cian was asked by the management of a posh hotel in Kenmare, a town half-an-hour drive away, to do the show in the ballroom,

where two hundred medical doctors had gathered at an international congress. He took them by storm. Half of the doctors visited the Bar the next day. They wanted to see the place with their own eyes.

At the cultural story-telling festival in Killarney, he saw Zoë for the first time. With his continuous radar over the audience, he got stuck on her eyes a few times, and he felt he was attracted to those. She did not look like the rest, she was different, smooth, skin, hair... So tall! A radiant freshness in her looks. Her eyes did not disappear when he fell asleep in his hotel later that night, they stayed with him.

A week later in the high school in Limerick (how had she procured a ticket for a high school night...?), she was sitting in the front row and radiated yet more energy into him. Was this a conspiracy? Cian asked himself. He felt positively unsettled. The staring turned into a friendly blinking contest. He had never experienced this before. Exciting.

It was inevitable that she was going to reappear. Cian was not surprised at all that the girl came to see his regular act in the Bar. She walked in as the last guest of the waiting audience one busy evening, a broad smile on



her beautiful sharp face. She took a standing place at the door-near-the-pints-button and looked at Cian, as if (Cian's interpretation) she owned him. He glanced at her so often during the show that some front benchers turned their heads, curious whether they had missed something in the back of the room. Cian was mesmerised. That night's show was one of his best.

"I am Zoë," she simply said with a universal smile, when Cian drew a stool next to her at the far end of the Bar, close to the chess-room. They shook hands and it felt as if they did not need that step. As if they had known each other forever. They drank, talked, laughed, and they talked, laughed and definitely drank too much.

Cian did not drive home that night. Brooke, with a naughty eye wink, had stealthily given the key of the guest room in the attic to Zoë. They consummated their new friendship there without hesitation. There was simply not a single reason to wait.

Zoë. Zoë! Exotic Zoë. Zoë's mother was from Ireland, her father was from India. Her father was a medical doctor, lured to the country in the last century's Nineties, when

medical care and organisation started to expand. Zoë's mother was a traveller. A gypsie. Even worse names existed: a 'tinker'. A controversial identity in this country...

Zoë grew up partly in urban Cork City; partly with her mother's large extended family, in the countryside of various counties. Her parents did not always live together - which saved their love and marriage, she often said with a twinkle in her eyes. Winters were in town - studying hard, her father's biggest wish was for her to become a doctor as well. She tried academia for one year, with great results, but the only extracurricular subjects that attracted her were drama, theatre, writing, reading, museums, and art. There is no comfortable living in those, Father said sternly. Never did he impose his opinion on Zoë's life, though.

Summers with the tinkers could be anywhere in Ireland. Horses. Beaches. Cosy caravans. Campfires. Storytelling, music. Guitars, flutes, harmonicas. A parallel universe. Her traveller relatives, especially her grandmother Fran, encouraged her to pursue the medical profession. We are living a vanishing medieval life, her relatives told her. We are dying out, puked out. We live on the road. We don't have houses, mortgages,

or taxes. We don't surrender to rules, banks, governments. Society can not handle us. In their eyes we are useless. We do not conform. We are free. Therefore we cannot go on. Like this, now, I mean.

Zoë's beauty was undeniably exotic. Tall, slim, with a most classical large nose and blue-green eyes. One could not stick any clear ethnic tag on her. She was a universal arch-beauty. Cian loved the way she dressed and appeared. It was not Indian, not 'traveller', but something in between, flowery-colored outfits, her fair hair put up, with those nice loose strands playing in the wind around her perfectly-cut face. A strong person she was, not by pose, but by character: she did not need any help to impress people. Self-understood power and stability. If Zoë would walk into a half-crowded shop she would normally be served straight away, and if that would not happen, she would not notice, let alone get annoyed. She had class out of strength.

She accompanied Cian wherever the stand-up story show brought him. Dublin, Northern Ireland, then Britain, even Amsterdam and Paris. Cultural festivals, embassies, arts and history television, a new

frontier. Cian captivated his audiences - with Dr Brendan's unbelievable story, but equally with his unique style and the re-discovered way of personal story-telling. With the brains and with the mouth. Language with the body, no electronics, no documents. With the audience, not to the audience.

Zoë introduced the idea that eventually saved the Bar. The television experience gave way to something even more daring, eventually better. The first time Cian was not even aware. Zoë filmed his show live on her mobile phone and streamed it straight away, in real time, onto the internet. Initially the audience were her traveller relatives, all sitting in their caravans, watching small hand-held screens. Twenty-three viewers in total. Second show streamed: a hundred and eight. The ones sent straight from the Bar turned out to be the most popular. Show number ten ended up having more than four thousand hits!

Cian liked this approach! No travel. Just to live in his nice Castledoon apartment, a gig three times a week, with a global audience from the chess-room... He missed the physical interaction with those anonymous people at the other side of that globe. Still, guests came flowing in to watch him in the

Bar - those shows continued with more success than ever. Some returned within the town, some from afar. The perfect combination of old- and new-fashioned. It was fascinating.

# The clock ticks - 2017 - Castledoon

Her father Brendan suddenly walked in. Wow, he looked so young and healthy. He held a piece of paper in his hand.

“The bank, the bank, always the fecking bank.”

She could not really figure out if he was angry or sarcastic, or plain joking.

She tried to say something, but he shut her up by changing the subject:

“While it should be the Bar, the Bar, the Bar only. What are you girls going to do with my jewel? Hahaha, you won’t believe it... I inherited a Pub, hahaha.”

He laughed, friendly, loud, not threatening at all. He danced around with the paper in his hand and then he turned slowly into Cian. Cian in the uniform, Cian in his normal clothes, then suddenly Zoë was there, dancing around with Cian. They kissed. Why is she folding his hands around her belly?

She told Barbie about her dream later at tea, before they opened the Bar. Barbie smiled.

"I also saw him last night, he was so happy, I cannot remember him this happy. Dreams are not real, but they are telling."

Barbie walked to the Bar and picked up a ledger. She moved a piece of paper out of it.

"This was what Dad was showing in my dream," she said.

She put a bank statement under Brooke's nose.

Brooke's face turned.

"Ouch," she said and blushed. "That is far from enough...!"

"It might be the end...," Barbie remarked and looked away, depressed.

"I can't believe it," Brooke said red-eyed. She had started to cry.

They were not talking until the phone rang. Brooke looked at Barbie. Brooke picked up the phone behind the Bar.

Kevin dropped the same bomb, as the figures in the bank statement had. The conversation remained very short. Time was now really running out, frighteningly.

## Another camp - 2017 - countryside

"I love you Zoë, but I don't know you so well," said Cian, cuddling up with Zoë on a late Sunday morning, after a successful Saturday night Bar session.

Zoë smiled, kissed him on the forehead, then reached out to their apartment (the former Bar guest room) curtains, from the front windows, opened one of them. Outside it was a rainy, grey November morning.

"Great day to get to know me. So, let's visit Granny Fran. No other way."

Early afternoon. Country roads. Away from Castledoon. Zoë drove her old Volkswagen Golf, a rusty antique. Cian had since long given his Audi 8 back to the firm. Typical for a rural Ireland Sunday: quiet on the roads, no milk tankers or animal feed bulk trucks, no tractors. Rain up until Bandon, a dry spell when entering the outskirts of Cork. The radio was on, they did not speak much, enjoying the views of the countryside. Cian



had no inkling where he was being taken to. In his new life he could handle surprises - he actually liked them.

Before Cork City, they turned left, crossed the river and entered an older, rather run-down industrial park. Zoë slowed down, said: "Jeez, it's been quite some time since I have been here. Where is the entrance again?"

There were caravans everywhere. Old tourist ones, rounded shapes, aerodynamically designed for being towed behind a simple car. Also larger ones, still visibly on wheels, and vast mobile homes, fixed on the ground. It had the impression of a regular tourist camping, but Cian immediately saw it was different. This was not a campsite, it was a camp. Different. There was no holidaying, this was living.

Fran made tea for them. She had cried when Zoë greeted her: "I knew this morning when I woke up that you were coming to see me, I must have dreamed it. Everywhere it said 'Zoë'. The birds sang Zoë. The radio said Zoë."

Cian sat back in the long coach, covered with synthetic orange fabric, patched up with brown fabric scraps. The interior he observed was, well... full! Stuffed with 'things'. Useless

things. Or were they? Portraits, pictures and amateur paintings of relatives, endless ancestors, dogs, ponies, the walls were like a shrine. Plastic flowers everywhere, broken musical instruments, the 'piece de resistance': an enormous antique oil lamp hanging in the middle; the only object that looked meticulously clean, at least without visible dust.

Fran looked very happy and became chatty, after her first emotional statements. She addressed Cian.

"Yes, hahaha, so you are the lucky one, Cian. When Zoë described you, I knew we were onto something. Welcome to our world."

Cian enjoyed his tea, the most classic tea he had for ages. This tasted like the tea he got at his own grandmother's place, when he was a little boy. Nice heavy black English tea.

"They took us off the road somewhere in the Seventies, I don't recall the exact date, we are not so good at dates. Ireland was a mess, continuous troubles in the North, corrupt prime ministers, poverty worse than in Portugal, kids without shoes going to school, in the rain. Dragging their fathers out of the pub, bare feet.

We had no choice, it was forced. But we also had to - we were starving. Nobody would give us jobs anymore, we had no future, we lost our trademark business, repairs, kitchenware, working as day labourers on the land. The men disappeared to England or Europe or became drunks. For us mothers it was not so bad. To take a step back and settle down. Leave the road. Our spirits couldn't cope though. If one is born restless, one will die restless - nobody can change your heritage."

While Fran talked - she had lit a filter cigarette to support her in her monologue - Zoë quietly went through the caravan.

"At first, it was not so easy and not so funny. Guards at the gate of the camps, everywhere, a paper pass to get in and out! Prisoner in our own country. And obliged to be thankful for charity, the free meals, clothes, money. They even tried the goddamn church on us, inevitably. We had been liberated from a wrong lifestyle, you see." She blew a full fog of smoke out of her lungs back into the stale air of her caravan.

Zoë had found what she was looking for. She browsed through the album and put it open in front of Cian.

"Here Ci, that is her."

A stunning, wild looking woman, in her early thirties, long dark curly hair, a cigarette, in the corner of her mouth, holding a little girl up as if she was going to throw her playfully high up in the air.

“Wow,” said Cian, as he didn’t know what to say. He was straight drawn into the visual. Zoë and her mummie.

“Don’t ask, Cian - it’s OK. We don’t know, really. She is alive, this we know, but where is she? We have no clue to be honest. She is ‘freedom’, always on the road. Couldn’t fence her in. It is also OK, you know. She disappeared, like your Mum. Not all Mums are always there, not always forever. Dads and Mums also have lives. We have to cope with that. And maybe it gives us our lives.”

It fell quiet, but not awkwardly. How we all share experiences, and how is all normal in our condition, how all fits together, Cian wondered. Just open ears, eyes and hearts. We will understand. We are all so different, we come from everywhere, yet we are the same. A tremendous warmth fell upon him.

Fran came back from the back of the caravan and opened a carton pack of red wine. Outside it started to rain. The photo album was their movie today, they could cry if they wanted to - until they laughed.

Driving out, Cian saw a caravan he had not seen when entering the traveller camp. It was a classic, originally horse-drawn gypsy house on wheels, made out of wood. An Irish postcard specimen. He asked Zoë to stop, so he could study it a bit more in detail. He saw smoke coming out of the small metal chimney, peat smoke, thick and yellowish. He was tempted to knock on the door and have a peep inside. But that would break the spell of the day. The fairy tales continue, the world will always take its own turns, thought Cian. The wagon, the chimney's language illustrated the human condition. Dense, smelly and not to everyone's taste. Smoke signals for freedom.

Zoë's world made him good beyond description.

Still, happy or not, that world is mad, Cian calibrated his thought. Brendan is forced to travel and ends up losing his freedom in a camp. Fran wants to travel, but is stopped in her wild tracks, and ends up losing her freedom in a camp.

He struggled with the paradox.

## 1944 - Nagasaki

Camp life again. Already a few months in Nagasaki. It was hot, hot, hot. I remembered the Dutch East Indies being warm, but the temperature here was unbearable. The sun shone straight through the worn-out winter fabrics we were still wearing - cheap British army issue, salvaged somewhere by the Japanese on the high seas from sinking ships. Dumped on us. They would otherwise not have bothered - we were worse than garbage, but good enough to prevent that filth of Allied POWs from going naked. Dress the bloody slaves!

We were mere slaves now, very simply. We were beaten by a random guard nearly every day, more often not fed than fed. More hit than fed, in any case. Our men kept dying by the scores. Strangely enough, the Australians accounted for the extremes. Some of them were strong men, ex-professional sports players, some were roughnecks, like miners, ranchers, but others were office boys. But all died just like you snap your fingers. They went - again - at night. From joking to

choking. Death knows no difference. Dysentery, but mostly just starvation. Human organs throw in the towel if the fuel runs out. The engines stop. What could one do...

I tried to do what I could. Makeshift infusions, with needles recovered illegally from the Japanese hospital where some of us worked in garbage hauling. Forced feeding through old engine fuel hoses... I was very privileged and lucky not to get affected; not to get sick myself. The Lord looked over me - as he had always done, I guess. He was often rather absent here, but once in a while He gave unforeseen - but very much needed - support.

We got a new assignment: repairing air force runways. The Allied bombers flew over daily for their fire bombing raids on all bigger towns in Japan. The Japanese still thought they would win their Pacific War if they could recapture their dominance in the air. A dream.

That day we were working outside with around twenty guys. In our lunchbreak (only ten minutes allocated for water), we rested outside the dug-out airplane hangar that doubled as bomb shelter. The Japanese had allowed us to use it as our main protection

for... well, the sun actually. But now we waited outside, sitting on our tired asses (normally not allowed!), while a Korean guard instructed one of us to get water from the truck which had just arrived.

A few Kiwis at the rear of our impromptu sitting and squatting queue suddenly began to talk excitedly - shouting nearly - pointing with stretched arms into the air.

A rather weird object was coming down, of a make I had never seen before. Hanging in parachutes? It was slowly descending: the contraption under the parachutes was big, so one would expect a faster fall. All my Royal Air Force experience and knowledge could not tell me what was happening.

Although no formal leader yet, I suggested with an alarmed raised voice, that we all go inside the hangar. I did not trust this thing a single bit. A strange and very scary but consistent rumour had traveled around the camp: the Americans had dropped a large new type of bomb on the capital, or another big town - only a few days ago!

Less than half of the guys, but actually all Brits, and only some of the Dutch followed me. The ever manly and cheerful Aussies and Kiwis stayed outside and wanted to 'watch the show, mate', as they said.



We never saw them back.

It went bright, so bright that you couldn't see. Then it went dark, so dark that you couldn't see. There was not a trace of our comrades outside when we dared to come out after four-five hours of fright and insecurity. No burned bodies, no bones. Nothing. The face of our earth had changed. Everything around us had literally disappeared, no, vanished is a better description. Only some short tree trunks, black and broken, still stood. There was crying and shouting from the nearby village. No birds, no wind, no sound. The apocalypse had materialised. Hell had come to Earth.

Much later I heard that the bomb had been given a 'nick name': Fat Man - named after that fat big mouth Churchill - dropped on us, the skinniest creatures in the world. Fat met Thin.

The devastated world around us was mentally so disturbing, that until today I don't know if my memories are genuine, or recreated later from photographs, drawings, films and documentaries - and pumped later in my unconscious brain. Nothing was left standing. Colours were reduced to black, grey and dirty white. All vegetation was gone,

burned to elements. We had days in a row filled with dust in the air, darkening the daylight. Corpses everywhere, children, adults, babies; twisted in the most bizarre configurations. History and culture has predictions of the end of the world everywhere, but nothing had shown more fantasy and creativity in creating it than this atomic bomb. As we later learned it was... A nuclear explosion: the Devil incarnate. A crazy metal, bulky, exploding Devil, Fat Boy coming down from the sky.

Our last Christmas celebrated in Asia was in the cathedral of Urakami. More correctly, between some of its walls that were miraculously still standing. The church itself was gone in fact. I had convinced our camp commander - together with an Australian lay priest - into letting at least the Catholics among us have a prayer service on the blessed site. We twisted our words and approach and made the Japanese feel bad - as far as they were capable of that - if we could not make it to our 'shrine' for our auspicious and essential 'buddha day'.

We kneeled with a group of thirty prisoners before the altar and said our prayers. Most loud and in small groups,

others privately. A few who were not of the Catholic faith had joined, simply to be out of the camp and also out of pure curiosity. The Japs could not verify our faith motivation. They mocked us however and some Korean guards, to please their Japanese superiors, kneeled with us and drew funny faces.

In the meantime back in the camp, a wonderful event had materialised. In a rare moment of mercy, the new Japanese camp command had decided to release some of the Red Cross parcels they had kept away from us. Most valuable food items were gone, stolen by our captors, but stuff they did not understand were left in the parcels.

We set up a big table and were able to make some hot coffee, smoke real tobacco cigarettes and ate some of the spam meat that they had not confiscated. It was the first unique and good Christmas of, we hoped, many more to come now. We were kind of 'happy' - as far as the circumstances would allow. Inevitably, in the late afternoon some of us were sick with stomach cramps, our gut flora could not readily adapt to a diet much richer than rice with industrial fish powder...

If I look back at it now, with a cynical smile on my face, I have to admit that most of us, reduced to bones and skin, were in fact

more enticed with the soap and toothbrushes  
than with the canned food...

# The Raider - 2017 - Castledoon

The vast man kept coming back. He joined three of Cian's performances, in a row. There were often recurring visitors to watch the show, some taking notes, others just enjoying themselves, but they were always girls or women. To have this large, sturdy, stern looking man back in the audience a few times in a short period of time was unusual. He did not ask questions, did not imbibe, just sat there and stared at Cian. After the hour was over, he would sit in the back of the Bar and type notes into his mobile phone. He would radar-scan the place, suddenly see something and then make another note. Or a stealth picture with the same phone. A very diligent administrator indeed. Or a researcher? Or maybe he was just out of his mind.

After the second night he had noticed the man coming back, Cian talked to Brooke about it.

"Barbie recognized him. John the Raider. Cork."

Cian looked puzzled.

“We haven’t seen him for a long time. He buys up pubs. Raid them. Middleman. Speculator. For the banks or for other traders, breweries. Sometimes even with his own money. Never thought he had an interest in our place. Now that you made it famous, perhaps. He surely likes the show!”

They laughed.

His third night, John the Raider looked tense, angry. He had taken a seat on the second row fixated on Cian. Cian felt uncomfortable, but worked confidently through his act without any glitz. He tried to avoid eye contact with the man, which was not always possible, as John kept looking straight at him. His expression changed towards the end of Cian’s story from aggressive to neutral, friendly even - did the Pub’s stories have any effect?

The man was big, not fat but tall - slightly beefy. In his late fifties, the stage in life when age starts to confront the boundaries of what body and mind can achieve with moderation. He always wore the same type of cheap jeans, heavy leather boot-type of shoes, with thick shoe laces, a cotton shirt covered by a pullover (red or green) with a V-neck. Never

well shaven, but also never with a days-old stubble. Longish hair with early grey strands combed neatly greased to the back. A latter day Elvis, Cian had thought when he spotted him the first time.

Pubs were in fact common trading and speculation material, commodities, especially when they were in financial need, battling for survival. John had apparently made half of the pubs in town change hands over the years, sometimes so discreetly that hardly anybody knew he was behind the deal.

But nobody could guess his true interest here... The financial state of O’Keeffe’s Bar was very confidential, and actually, with Cian’s new impetus it now seemed that the Pub might head to a commercial success.

Cian pinched some further John the Raider stories out of Brooke and Barbie, there were also a few oldies in the Bar who had something to contribute about him. Bit of an enigma, this Mr Raider...

Castledoon had seen a great economic boom in World War One, followed by a great decline after Irish independence and a long depression after World War Two. Only to climb out of misery after the volatile

Seventies, Eighties, when it became a central place for North Atlantic fishery. As one could walk over the American and British naval vessels to Doon Island in 1916, so one could walk over the fishing trawlers to the other side in the mid Eighties. Castledoon was home to more than forty pubs! Spanish, Russian, British, Dutch fishermen with their Indian, Filipino, South-American, Chinese crews fought for a place at the bar counters in each pub. When the week-trawlers were back in on Friday night, the place would look like London's Soho on a Saturday night. A town of less than five hundred people, supplemented with three hundred thirsty throats from all over the world - fighting for drinks. Fist fights, fun, song, international camaraderie and bitter rivalry.

Cian had heard the stories.

John started his empire in a vast period of opportunity. When the Cold War ended in the Nineties a large contingent of fishing ships forever disappeared over the horizon, especially the Russians and Poles. Their government-controlled ships got called back and sucked into obscure innovative capitalist ownership. They never came back to Bantry



Bay. In the old East-block they stopped eating mackerel, Atlantic cod, haddock, herring...

In this fishing confusion, John founded his business. He bought pubs with money borrowed from his rich farmer friends, managed them for a few months, maybe a year. He ran them himself from behind the counter or had them run, then sold them off to private investors, banks and, obviously, breweries. Later, the English gambling syndicates and chains got interested too. The big breweries would look for a hired landlord, fake management on their payroll, and lease them out - only interested in the flow of beer, stout and cider going continuously through the pumps. The ambiance in many places died overnight. Patrons shifted their loyalty; but many ended up in O'Keeffe's Bar.

The last twenty years, his pockets filled, John had disappeared. He was rumoured by the Castledoon pub community to have moved to Thailand, where he lived with a local young bride. Never married in Ireland. He was rich. Gone for years, then suddenly showing up unannounced and stayed for months. Cork, Bantry, other port towns in the South West. Castledoon. He left an uneasy

feeling everywhere he went. A mad, foreboding dark angel.

"Is he after us?" Cian asked the girls sternly after closing one night. The three of them were having a glass of red wine.

Brooke laughed. Huh?

"You say 'us'."

Cian blushed. "Sorry."

"We like it. When you say 'us'."

Us.

No, he was not after 'us', the twins convinced him.

He is just looking for trouble. He is bored, they say.

"I don't like the guy - he scares me," Brooke confided.

"He is up to something, I am eager to know what," Barbie dissented slightly.

"I wish he just disappeared, feck off to Thailand," Brooke said.

"The door is open for everybody," Barbie concluded. "That is what we are, after all. Open for literally everybody.

All are welcome."

# The sword - 1945 - Nagasaki

All prisoners were lined up at the exercise yard, a field half the size of a soccer pitch. No grass, but burned soil, compacted by endless daily counting calls.

Prisoners...? The Japanese and the Koreans were the prisoners now!

Dr Brendan O'Keeffe had been officially put in charge by the occupying forces under General MacArthur, as the Camp commander of 'POW Camp 9A'. He had received a very formal letter confirming his responsibilities.

Kusuno, the Camp commander before the Japanese surrender, had a few weeks before Fat Boy made its entry, replaced Yamamoto, a cruel dog-like person. Kusuno, an intellectual and much softer man, had fled from the Camp in the aftermath of the Emperors' resignation and disgraced fall from divinity. Just yesterday they had found him back, Kusuno, disguised as a farm labourer, in the close-by hills, where most of the local

population had sought refuge. He was brought to justice today.

In most other camps, the ex-POWs had summarily and immediately executed the most important leaders of their prisons. They had not waited for 'justice' - especially the Aussies were very short tempered. They unceremoniously cut off their heads, hung them, or simply beat them to death. There was a rumour going around that in a Chinese camp nearby every ex-prisoner was allowed to take one blow on the head of their ex-commander... which was obviously beyond recognition later.

Brendan had allowed the Australian contingent in 'his' Camp to erect a gallows. At least the work on the wooden structure would perhaps dampen their fanaticism for instant justice, he had reasoned. Buy some time. He had lost good sleep the last few days on the hard decisions to be made.

Most of the ex-POWs had already left, their own nationality armies within the allied forces had started to round them up in port cities and had organised transports back to their home countries - via Singapore, Manila, or just straight home. The Aussies were late - and had too many of their countrymen still present. Around fifty were left in 9A. The

Dutch had left, and most Brits. Brendan had asked a few of them with officer rank to stay to help him run the Camp. He could use his position to formally request them to remain with him.

Kusuno was brought in by three men. He was shackled, with rusty chains and old-fashioned heavy padlocks; they had shaved his head, he walked in rags, old camp attire from an ex-POW. He looked miserable, more impressed than scared, determined to die courageously. They had destroyed his glasses, so he could not see clearly what was going on. It was however crystal clear to him that these were his last minutes in this world. He was allowed to carry something, a rather long package, in his left hand. It clanked with the shackles, metal sound.

He was brought to Brendan, and he was made to kneel before his Camp commander. He expected the blade of a weapon any moment coming down in the back of his neck. Brendan gestured for an interpreter to come close, a Korean guard who spoke English and Japanese.

Brendan had not made up his mind.

“Do you have any remorse?” he asked Kusuno through the interpreter. The moment

he launched his question, he realised that remorse might be a pure Western concept, a Christian value; looking for redemption, a trade deal. He saw the interpreter struggling with the word, one of the Aussies, explained it to the interpreter again in a longer definition. They did not know what the final question was that Kusuno got, but he reacted in a submissive way, without answering, he bowed as deep as he could, put his face on the dirty ground. And then, unexpectedly, he offered the package to Brendan, by pushing it on his hands, off the ground, who - against protocol, and perhaps showing weakness - squatted before Kusuno and took the parcel off him. He stood up and gave it to his adjutant, who took off the ropes around the dirty overused packing paper.

Out came an antique sword, in a leather sheath. Brendan, educated as he was and culturally sensitive, understood what it represented. Kusuno, in a last ditch effort to save his life or to placate the gods that were going to receive him momentarily, offered his samurai sword to Brendan.

No samurai would ever part with his weapon. Never. Brendan knew this. It would go from father to son, stay in the family, end in a mausoleum, but will never be given to a

non-samurai. Let alone a filthy, red-necked smelly foreigner.

Was it to thank him in advance for a heroic respectful execution - as far as they could be respectful? Was it indeed to buy his life? Kusuno was not the worst, Brendan thought, and he wondered if he himself had become soft with all the emotions of the War being over. Kusuno had allowed a share of beatings, but under him there had not been any summary executions, the rations had improved and he had eventually rather gracefully collaborated with the change of power. Disappeared from the scene, that was all. Absorbed in the hills of history-free anonymity. A fugitive of catastrophe - like millions all over the world. Being discovered, is that punishable by death?

Brendan took the sword in his own hands and studied it. He suddenly knew what to do. A bit of risk, but buying time and deflating the situation was indicated. He called one of the three Australians and whispered something to them. The unshaven skinny guys did not look happy, but they obeyed.

They walked Kusuno to the gallows and made him kneel in front of it. They let him do this for two minutes, then they kicked him to stand up and walked him back to the

confinement barracks. The other white-face onlookers, waiting for a long-promised, overdue spectacle, murmured disappointedly. They felt justice was not served. Most, however, couldn't care less. The War was over; let the killing also be over.

Brendan's conscience was clear. Thou shalt not kill. No more Korean guard scenes on a desperate raft. He could not murder like this. There will be punishment, maybe later. Let others decide. Not summarily by a fecked-up mob's court. The man had given his sword away. The equivalent of giving his life, his personality, his heritage, his all.

Brendan slept well that night, for the first time in a while. Now he just wanted to go home, nothing else.



# Patricide - 2017 - Castledoon

That early afternoon - a few hours before a big show (a touring car full of Americans, lifted from a visiting cruise ship in Bantry; they had booked the event exclusively) - John walked in. In a suit, tie and jacket and everything, shiny black shoes. His hair was flatter than flat and slicked back over his skull, lots of grease! Brylcreem, very rock and roll...

He was also quite drunk. He looked kind of scared, hunted, looking for mayhem perhaps. 'Fecked-up', they would say. Trouble ahead.

The Bar was empty, except for Timmy, a retired farmer from Doon Island, who sat in the corner near the front windows. He drank his first of many pints of that day - quiet, harmless, very much at home in the Bar. At the start of each month he gave three-quarters of his meagre state pension to Barbie, who served him pints, and kept meticulously track of his expenditure - until the month ran out

on him. And even then, the flow often continued.

Cian was helping Brooke fix a decorative storm lantern that had mysteriously fallen from the ceiling the other night.

John placed himself, standing, at the middle of the counter and shouted with an irritating commanding voice - to nobody in particular: "Pint o' Guinness!" No 'please'.

"Yes John, good afternoon to you too! On its way. Coming right up!" Brooke mocked him, but John didn't perceive the slight irony in his blurred state.

He turned to Cian.

"What time is the show, pretty boy?"

Cian took a few steps to John to answer him.

"Sorry John, tonight is sold out for a private group."

John's pint was served. He nearly downed half of it in one swift thirsty gulp.

Timmy in the corner burped softly. It sounded like one of his cows passing methane gas through the mouth.

Brooke laughed. It triggered John.

"What the feck! I wanna watch it." He slammed his now nearly empty pint on the wooden counter.

"It's OK, John, tomorrow afternoon I will do another one, actually. Coz' it is Sunday. We will book you in. Front row."

"I will be gone tomorrow." Silence. Anticipation.

Completely out of the blue now, he took Cian - who got very scared - by the collar of his polo-shirt and drew him close to his face.

"You, movie star - you don't run the place here, you hear me?"

Cian looked around - saw Brooke kind of still out of the corner of his eye. Timmy was not paying attention, in love with his pint as he was. Cian hoped Brooke would sneak out and look for help, possibly phone the Guards. Always a problem, just having only two girls running a place like this. Hardly ever any trouble, but if there was, who would assist?

When he looked back at his predator, John slapped Cian in the face. John's own face was red, he was sweating from his forehead, it dripped on the floor.

"This Pub was mine, goddammit! I had it all lined up. Now some good looking Colin Farrell comes along and steals my business. You little bollocks."

John slapped him again. Flat hand, but hard, aggressive and painful.

Cian was at a loss to grasp what was going on. His fear was replaced by sudden primitive anger. He contemplated what to do. He made eye contact with Brooke and like it was telepathy she understood.

"Hey John, come on, let's talk about it." She came a bit closer, and fetched an arm to him in an invitation to guide him away. To a neutral place.

John, still having Cian firmly in his grip, looked away to Brooke. Barbie, alerted by the noises from below, had come down from their apartment above the Bar and had invisibly joined behind the counter through the back gate. Support troops had arrived.

"I will talk, if you kick this piece of shit out of here, son of a self-murdering blue nurse. Fecking losers."

Nobody understood what he was talking about.

Cian now - in a pure blind and indeed angry impulse - punched John in the face with a fist he had prepared for a few seconds behind his back. He had intended to hit him straight on the nose, but John had turned his face and Cian hit him on the temple. Far too hard. John's glasses flew off and dropped on the floor. Where John joined them in the next

second, as he went down also. He was bleeding out of his ear. He did not move.

Cian's heartbeat doubled and he started to sweat. Brooke, who had not seen Barbie coming down, opened the door to the staircase to the apartment and shouted for her. Then suddenly she saw her. She was already there... Fights were rare in their Bar. Misunderstandings. This was a full crisis!

In a few minutes they had John folded, well rather stuffed, on the backseat of Barbie's small Panda car and they were now racing to the small town hospital near the harbour, Cian sitting nervously in the passenger seat next to Brooke. Leaving Barbie in the Bar doing damage control on the upset clientele. Timmy was crying.

"Killing your father is a mortal sin, Cian. It's called patricide. The classics condemned it already. It is unacceptable in any culture."

Cian was too taken by the events to appreciate that an educated person was talking to him. At first he had no idea what this nurse was talking about. He thought she was a bit unstable.

"How...? He is not my father," said Cian, irritated. He continued staring at John, who

started to move his eyelids. Good sign. Recovery.

“Yes,” the nurse answered sternly, with her back to Cian, while she arranged something on the medical tools table beside the bed. “He is your father. The resemblance is striking, isn’t it, my dear boy. Also, I just happen to know all about it.” She chuckled, adding mystery to the statement, while trying to push John back flat on the hospital bed.

John groaned and tried to roll on his side, to which he was prevented by the nurse. Cian looked at her and recognised her vaguely as a Sunday Bar audience member. She was going to O’Keeffe’s Bar every week on Thursdays to play bridge in the same small chess-backroom where he held his performances. Never talked to her. But he remembered vaguely she had come to his show, at least once. Or was it more often?

“John was my sweetheart too, once, Cian.” (She knew his name! Well not that surprising, he was a minor town celebrity by now... or was he?).

Cian sat down on the visitor chair on the other side of the bed in the small room. He listened. He suddenly felt very tired. John made more and more promising sounds of

waking up soon. He could smell his heavy old alcohol breath.

"Then he disappeared for a beauty in Cork. The beauty is dead now. Very dead and she was also your mother."

Cian tried to say something, but the nurse stared at him as she continued.

"I am not angry, nor frustrated. Things like that happen. My life has been great. Thanks to her. I wish I had told you earlier. Surprised your mother never told you." Mother, Cian thought, bless her soul.

"I don't know who your father is," Mum insisted whenever he asked her about it - as a small boy. Her routine answer.

"We were both nurses, the hard-working types in the big hospital in Cork. Hahaha" (whispering), "Barbie also worked there, for a short while before she went home and took over the Bar. When your mother Sylvia drowned, I was devastated. We were the type of colleagues that kept each other going in difficult situations. Better friends than loyal, honest colleagues don't exist. When she was at the end of the line, without money, but with you, with the non-understanding world around her, I helped her out. She did the same to me, when all my loves crashed,

continuously. We were like twin sisters. A rock in the river disappeared when she left. My better half.

We got to know John when he was the supervisor on a new construction on our hospital. Smashing looking man, then still shy, a bit distant even. I know he changed later, became assertive and self-assured - maybe a sign of insecurity, looking for something. I fell in love with him, but he wanted Syl. Sometimes I think that with me chasing him, I drove him into your mother's arms. She liked him, but he was not the man for her. When she became pregnant with you, it did not drive us apart, on the contrary. It looked like we got closer. Until you were born. John disappeared. Somewhere in the Midlands. Later Asia. Syl and I drifted apart, ever the best of respectful colleagues but no more blood sisters."

John woke up. He tried to sit up, Cian now helped him gently and pushed him up with an arm around his back.

John looked a bit fresher in his eyes. Cian extended his hand to him. "Good morning John! Good morning dear father," and tried to laugh.



John displayed a pained smile and spoke softly: "I overheard you guys. It is all baloney. Do you believe her...? Shit! Shut the woman up!"

"Yes, Dad," Cian said. "I believe her."

The nurse leant over to Cian when they walked out to Brooke waiting in her small car, and whispered, in his ear: "But I am grateful I did not marry Mr John, your father. You would not have been there."

She paused, switching to another train of thought: "I have not told a lot of people, because it is a shame to talk like that about Dr Brendan, but he was my true shining light. The doctor who survived so much and did so much good. Weird for a young woman as I was, to be so taken by an older man. Not in love, but I worshipped him. He made me become a nurse. He gave me my vocation, when that was expected in this profession. I think now I was in love with him, with his human medical legacy, his heroism."

She looked Cian straight in the eyes. Cian saw that she was coming back to the reality of the hospital. She smiled, chuckled.

"Oh yes, this John, he definitely pushed for it! He is attractive, oh yes, but driven by something impossible. A thing he will never reach. A weird jealousy, like, based on

nothing. Looking for something unattainable. Striving for harmony with a permanently conflicted mind. He always wanted to settle something in his life. But I feel this is the last time. He is longing for forgiveness and understanding. You can repair him, Cian, I know, you have that gift."

Cian felt as if he had also received a samurai sword. John's sword. A surrender to reality. He stopped walking, hit by a sudden insecurity. The nurse paused. Something was bothering Cian.

"Does Barbie know? About John and me?"

The nurse giggled. She was embarrassed.

"I don't know Cian, I really don't know, swear to god. She was already in the Bar when all this happened."

Strangely enough, with this new insecurity imposed, Cian felt content with the situation. He accepted John's sword. John had surrendered something, for most people it is a problem to part from.

Past and pride...

## Going home - 1945 - the Pacific Ocean

As I had been an officer in the RAF, hence the allied British military, I was entitled to access the officers' mess on the American ship. It was a kind of makeshift place, formerly the crew mess of the Liberty ship, converted to a luxury bar, with new leather seats in the corners and a large dinner table, seating thirty-odd people for three meals a day. Simple meals, but good company. And endless streams of free booze.

Sailing from Japan, most officers were obviously Americans, as we were heading to San Francisco. Australians were picked by their own transport ships, often also converted freighters, but we Irish and Brits did not have a lot of choice. We could go waiting in Singapore for an unpredictable final direct line to 'good old Albion', or join the Yanks to their country, cross the USA overland to the East Coast and then continue over the - by now safe - North Atlantic to the Motherland. Or is it Fatherland? So I opted

for the American route, not in the mood to wait, and - a funny thing, but I could not get it out of my mind - my sweetest fantasy was to sail home along the South West Irish coast line, and slip in eyesight of my hometown, Castledoon - and Bantry Bay, Doon Island and all the surroundings of the dear Beara Peninsula of my youth. They should have dropped me off there, in a private launch with a suitcase in my hand, like in romantic movies, but I had to stay on the ship until we landed in Liverpool and travel back to Ireland, train to Bantry and take the country road back home. I anticipated that trip over and over and it gave me a mood lift. Going home!

Five days or so out, it was getting hot again, they played games in the mess. Some enjoyed bridge, but most Americans preferred poker. Money on the table, cigars in mouth and a lot of bluff. I loved to watch them but never joined. Instead I sat at the end of the large bar in a comfortable high stool, smoked, perhaps drank a whisky and observed the players. With a big smile on my face. It was like a Saturday night in my family's Bar. Heated games under a cloud of soothing cigar and cigarette smoke. Lovely.

What better than to be in one's own Bar...  
That's what life is about!

A tiny, rather slim fit American guy - he was wearing his full uniform; the Americans requested this from their officers - sat himself down next to me, said hello or something like that and ordered a whisky from the enlisted Filipino bartender. He inquired if I wanted one as well. I was running low, so of course I accepted. What else was there to do than drink and converse? Like in a real Bar...

We toasted, lighted up our cigarettes and embarked on the usual gratuitous conversation:

"Bit of sightseeing in the Dutch Indies, the inevitable camps, Slave transport to Formosa, yes Taiwan, but never got there. Torpedoed. Sank. Japanese whalers brought us to Nagasaki. A handful of us survived, out of at least two thousand. The Nagasaki fireworks. Hahaha. Camps changed overnight. Got into politics and became camp commander... Yeah, you know we all have a story." But the relaxed tone of our conversation changed in a heartbeat:

"When was this sinking? You know the name of your ship?"

I answered him casually, triggered by his sudden interest.

The American had nearly choked on his whisky and put out his half smoked cigarette in the ashtray in a frantic movement. His face had turned red as a coal fire. His hands shook when he lighted a new cigarette.

He admitted straight away that he had sunk us. I knew submarine captains keep meticulously track of their hits and tonnages - often knew them by heart - and he was no different. At the time of the attack he was not aware of the ship being used for POW transport and was instructed by the sub fleet admiral to 'just do it'. There was always doubt about cargos and no time to think.

"What if you would have known?"

"I think I would have done it again," he stated candidly. "I really don't know, it was War. The Japs were doing atrocious things. I think I would have talked myself into the argument that you were better off in the water then in a rat infested hold... Better die on a raft, then suffocate in a clogged slave mine..."

I could not hate this man, Captain Marc O'Hare, Irish descent, who had killed so many of my comrades and doubtless many

others. He was honest, still remorseful. He displayed the human condition nearly perfectly. What could he have done differently?

I told Marc the next day, when we met again at the ship's bar, that last night I received the transcript of a cable from Cork, through Dublin, through New York, through Los Angeles that my youngest brother Patrick had died apparently, quite a few months ago. Perished violently at German hands by the very last V2 bomb of the eternal London bombing Blitz... He cried with me. Through my tears I told him that I and my family were the proud owners of a Bar in rural Ireland - and that he must visit me. We became friends for life.

Later - when we were both retired - he indeed visited the Bar with his wife and his youngest son. I showed him Kusuno's samurai sword we kept in the Bar. He was silent for at least an hour.

My entire family - except my mother and of course without my little, now deceased, brother Pat - waited for me in Dublin as I arrived by ferry from Holyhead. Mother had sent me a personal telegram the night before. She was very sick, I knew.

Back in Ireland! We hurried back to Castledoon. In two weeks it would be Christmas. We were - in spite of all the recent tough years, the separation especially, and all the current bad news - in a cheerful Christmas mood.

What I did not know - in the sparse Red Cross camp mail I had received they had many other things to talk about - was that Mother had developed a 'tradition' over the last few years. As always she had been very concerned about the poor. She herself is not from a rich descent. In 1938 I had disappeared into the British empire, she had invited the poorest families in town over for Christmas. Around fifty odd people, with their kids, their grandparents, unmarried uncles and aunts. They all sat at a large table, brought in for the occasion, in the Bar. Mother and Father personally served them their pints, ales and wines. No money spared. It was unique as nobody really cared about the poor, back then. They continued this through the difficult war years.

1945 was a sad Christmas in Castledoon, but at the same time a very fulfilling one. Mother's last... She died a few days into the new year, as they call it 'peacefully',



surrounded by us all in the beautiful large front room above the Bar. Her bed was put next to the windows so she could overlook the Square and enjoy the hustle and bustle of this small provincial town even in her last days.

The smelly, noisy cattle market on Wednesdays had always been her favourite.

## Castledoon - 2017

September was Brooke's favourite month. She slept well again, as the daylight stayed away from her bed in the morning. A promise for months to come of undisturbed sleep and dreams. Funny enough, this didn't work for Lassie. She scraped at her door, crying to come in.

Come on my child, she thought, after she opened the door for her and the eager dog jumped on her bed. Would she sleep again? Thoughts, of the positive type this part of the day, had already taken over. She looked at her watch. Went to bed early last night, the pub was empty, a rainy night and the onset of autumn had made folks go home early. Nice early start of the day. Let's go for a walk Lassie.

The Square was quiet, damp with the earlier produced drizzle. Lassie could be off the leash - cars had not woken up. She walked to the ferry pier - the boat from Doon Island had not come in yet. All port lights were on. She took a break on the covered bench and scanned over the sky. The beam from the big

lighthouse on Doon was going around in its eternal guidance, she could see the higher light in the humid air from the smaller beacon on Sheep's Head.

They had herbal tea after all the patrons had left. Barbie had gone through the rough proceedings of the day. Then they had their conversation, a bit reflective this time.

Their age, the problem with the bank, crazy John who had come along, now their hardest worker, Cian and Zoë. They never mentioned their father, but it was as if he was guiding their conversation. Time to leave that war behind them, he consulted. Not my War, but it must be your duty and drive to give the Bar the place it deserves.

Barbie was often reluctant to talk about letting go, but Brooke thought otherwise.

They had made a great team ever since they took over from Dad in the Seventies. Wild Brooke had forfeited her ideas of her own restaurant - caring for people -, stern Barbie gave up her early career in nursing - caring for people - they had now achieved what they wanted. Servant players in people's lives. Barbie, the business person, wanted to put the place on sale soon. The highest bidder, Brooke, we have to think of ourselves.

We could retire in nice newly built tiny houses, at the seaside, close to each other. Her face was stern, while she calculated what would be required financially on the backside of an order slip. She guessed with all the new income, the bank paid off soon, they could just make it happen. Barbie tried to visualise their twin houses on the pebble beach overlooking Doon Island, but she could not get the picture clear. She fantasises while Barbie went through the figures again. Her beach bungalow disappeared from her vision, she only saw the Bar, with people laughing, talking, playing chess on Tuesdays, dancing on the tables on Saturdays. Foreign customers coming back from all over the world every year, elderly Americans looking for their roots, Irish Englishmen talking about their grandparents leaving Beara for hard sought work in the United Kingdom. But most of all she saw the regulars, with all their authentic names, sitting in the full Bar, on a rainy night, the islanders carefully waiting for a ferry to miss so they could stay longer, the Castledoon regulars talking gossip and laughing about their seaside small town lives. The visiting fishermen. The laughter, the warmth... She could not follow Barbie's figures.

Lassie woke her up again, now from her early daydreaming. She was competing with an urban seagull for something yucky that had washed up on the low tide ferry slip. She barked happily. The gull was excited and doing what it liked most, scavenging. Both bird and dog were aiming at a washed up dream, not sharing the trophy. Life. She chuckled. She thought of herself and Barbie. They never fought, never had, never will. Always shared. But my god they were different. Splendidly complementary.

She watched the lights over the water once again, the lighthouses, one close, one far away, the flickering signals from the harbour buoys, the now faint street lanterns near the ferry slip.

Those lights shined when Dad started his life here, and they are still shining today - in the same place. But the morning was taking over and would condemn them to visual silence for a long day soon. We are not important, she whispered to Lassie who had eventually decided to share the fish with the gull, the latter digesting the bounty peacefully on the water nearby, winking at them both.

The Bar is important. And the people. We have to share what we got. Brooke had an

idea. The task at hand was getting Barbie on board.

## Bikers - 2017 - Castledoon

They looked scary to Brooke when they walked in. Shit, Hell's Angels, she thought. Recreational bikers were of course not uncommon on the scenic roads of the Peninsula, but these two 'gentlemen' looked like medieval knights-in-armor, leather armor that is, with skull patches and SS-like emblems and whatever other politically-wrong badges sewn on their outfits. They even had some ceremonial spurs at the back of their heavy latex boots. Hell's Angels perhaps indeed, looking for 'protection money'... She had heard a lot about that. They go after vulnerable businesses. But as so often: they turned out to be diamonds in the rough (they had ordered tea, not a pint!).

Brooke - as she always did with new customers - sat down with them and chatted them up. They were not at all as scary as they looked like. The older guy was Rory, an American actor on a sabbatical (he was actually simply without work, but did not want to disclose that); the younger man was his Irish cousin Alex.

Brooke, an avid nighttime movie watcher, Netflix, Amazon, HBO, did recognize his face, but she could not remember which films he was in. She had a weak association with futuristic sci-fi space movies. Not sure. It was not in her character to ask about this - impolite and infringing on people's space. The Bar was everybody's personal sanctuary. Freedom. No questions asked. All equal. All are welcome. But he looked vain enough to start talking about it himself.

Elisabeth, today's bar help, also brought her some tea, a large pot she could share with the bikers. Brooke heard herself telling the story of the Bar, a broken record, she had told it so often. It was never boring.

Rory remained genuinely interested, drew his mobile phone out of one of his many leather jacket pockets and asked if he could type a few notes. Brooke agreed of course, but also told him: "Once in a while there is a show here, Cian, our friend tells the story." Within a minute she had produced Cian's talking notes - which he kept openly behind the counter for all to consult, in a plastic binder - to Rory, who drifted away while browsing through the text. Rory took quite some pictures. Alex had left the table, restless. He was not really a historian, let alone a



movie man looking for opportunities (he was a lorry driver, after all). He stood before the wall with the samurai sword hanging on it.

“What the feck is this? Antique, huh?”

The story became intense. Rory soared in imagination. Saw his break, his movie play before his eyes.

He stayed in the Pub the rest of the day, gathering ideas, Alex went frustrated for a ride alone; coming back, Barbie had also joined the conversation. Rory downed pint after pint, no more tea, and gave rounds throughout the Bar. Not on a bike, he was still riding high.

Brooke found out which movies Rory had acted in, small roles, one supporting role, name number ten on the credits. He was not that young anymore, but young enough to find his ‘break-through’, he said. For years he had been looking for a new story he could play in, potentially direct himself. Now here, in the middle of nowhere he had found his new character. A chance encounter.

He couldn’t wait to meet Cian.

## Solicitor's call - 2017 - Castledoon

"Hey Brooke, hello girl, are you with Barbie? Cian there? Put me on the speaker please."

Brooke gestures to Barbie and Cian to join. They were having lunch and were nearly finished. John is, self-understood, also an invitee.

"So, - yes we could have met, always like your pints hahaha, but this is quite urgent really, I just dropped their call, it is still very early in the morning there, so we go by phone - well, long story short: they offered two, but I have made it three. They came back and it is now two and a half. Fecking huge bag of money. Million dollars. Yes, ladies, real hard money! As instructed I have accepted on your behalf. Cian, can you hear me?"

Cian hears him.

"Publication rights stay with you Cian, and the girls - equally divided by three. That is for books et cetera later. The movie rights are sold. But you always get ten percent on top of all ticket and streaming sales. Free

money. Ladies and gentleman: I declare the Bar as saved. Merry Early Christmas guys, and most definitely a Happy New Year! I will drop by later for a pint."

"On the house," says Barbie.

They laughed until they cried.

# Christmas - 2017 - Castledoon

It was Cian's idea to bring the large table back in again. It was resting on its side in the shed in the garden up the hill and hadn't been used in many years. The day before, John and Cian solicited the help of two idle early drinking Chinese fishermen - who were promised a few free new pints after their sturdy support - in getting the table pieces out of the shed, through the pouring rain. They cleared the Bar of all normal seating configuration and installed the table, right in the middle. They positioned all available chairs and small stools around it and covered it with all white table clothes they could find. Brooke had gone out to buy festive candles in the supermarket at the Square.

Cian saw to it that the Christmas Eve Bar tradition was reborn. Fifty people, children, old and very old, poor and rich, at least ten nationalities. The Polish single mother who had remained in Castledoon after the

economy collapsed, with her two toddlers; the German blind painter who had run out of life and luck; the English golf club green keeper whose wife had left him; the traveller family that had squatted the caravan near Doonboy Castle; five Filipino and Indonesian sailors stranded by the storm and rain that were raging outside; the two elderly gay Irish men who lived on the dole in a council house around the corner; the freshly retired nurse from the hospital; the ageing Dutch, smelly weirdo self-proclaimed writer who lived on the island but had made the Bar his living room... But also, Kevin the solicitor was there, seated next to Hollywood director Barbara Hopkins née Murphy, who had bought the movie rights; then the American actor Rory McNamara who was volunteering - well, scheming rather - to play Brendan (he had grown a Brendanish moustache...!); and... as the utter royalty guest Granny Fran headed the table on the street side, looking at Cian at the opposite. In short, all those who mattered in this life were there.

The most excited of all, not least, was Lassie, so taken away by all the human attention that she miraculously jumped on the table a few times and made her rounds, licking all friendly faces. She made them

laugh. The canine condition meets the human condition...

Brooke, John, Cian and Barbie served them drinks - it was still early but whoever wanted to imbibe was encouraged. The golden-brown Murphy's stout flowed freely, into the beautiful large pint glasses. The red and white wine glasses were never empty. The kids could take their drinks by themselves from behind the counter from the old fridge of the old shop in the front.

After the first sips - the atmosphere had become very relaxed and chatty indeed - Cian stood up, clang a fork loudly against his nearly empty pint. Not all understood the ritual, but it turned quiet with some helpful hissing. They all anticipated a special moment, a dedication.

"Here is my Christmas story," Cian started. "Not what you expect perhaps."

They all shut up. Cian had learned how to captivate an audience. In his first sentence, the door opened, with its characteristic creak. All looked at the street-direction. Betty walked in. He got a hot flash, then thought: of course she must be here! No-brainer. Not complete without Betty. After a split second he continued:

“Come with me, all. We are in Japan. The atomic bomb on Nagasaki fell four weeks ago. The Emperor has surrendered and is no longer god. The roles have been reversed. The Allies, Americans, Brits, Australians, now run the show. Dr Brendan is as newly appointed commander in charge of the big camp, but is also still very much a doctor. One night - lights are out already - a Japanese policeman comes to visit him, he bows and bows and asks through sign language if there would be an interpreter available. Brendan could have dismissed the gate-crashing policeman straight away, but instead gets a guy from the ranks who is fluent in English and Japanese. He, the interpreter, was already asleep, but he will be there in ten minutes.

The daughter of the Japanese police ex-superintendent of the prefecture is very sick. Dr Brendan is known for medical miracles. Could he be so kind as to visit the girl?”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Betty walking to Zoë, who stood up and embraced her, kissing her three four times on the cheeks. She got Betty a seat next to her. Cian’s flash thought recurred: some things do work

in life... Brendan's spirit is here. It filled him with Christmas...

"The same night, an hour later, Brendan steps into the house of the superintendent. He examines the girl, she is nine years old, and diagnoses a very serious double pneumonia. She is unconscious. She will most surely die."

The Bar was dead quiet. Cian, with a keen feeling for how to build up drama, sips from his glass, looks around the table silently and then suddenly continues, his voice raised, accelerating for a bit of added drama:

"Dr Brendan rushes back to the Camp, suddenly remembering the last parachuted supplies from the American planes. There was a new medicine in it, that he had vaguely heard of before the war, but never used so far. He only thinks as a doctor, a samaritan. The superintendent, weeks ago, was a proponent of the archenemy, the killers, their predators. But what does a nine year old girl have to do with that? Brendan administers to the girl his first ever dose of penicillin. Powerful antibiotic, they say. He stays two nights at her bedside, and she crawled back through the



gates of death. She lives. She will live up to the age of seventy-eight.

American penicillin saved the girl's life, given to her by an Irish doctor. A human life is important, even in the human condition. Not our human differences. We have all more in common than we have differences."

Cian smiles the biggest smile. He looks around the table. Raises his glass, they all follow.

"Merry Christmas everybody, from wherever you are, and whoever you are. Only love counts.

To Dr Brendan and his Bar! Happy New Year! Forever Brendan's Bar!"

The shouting, roaring, laughter, crying, kissing, hand shaking, back-slapping, the applause went on for many minutes.

# Epilogue - 2017 - Castledoon

That same Christmas Eve night very late - nearly Christmas morning - when all had left (with new-found authority Cian had sent Brooke, John and Barbie to their beds), Zoë and Cian closed the Bar, broomed the floor, and switched off the lights. From the first of January next year, they would run the place, a deal was made, they would gradually take over the Pub. There was nothing else that they would like to do better.

Late September in that first year of Zoë and Cian running their Bar, their son was born.

Of course they gave the boy Brendan's name.

Inspired by:

- ❖ **'A Doctor's War'** - *Aidan MacCarthy*
- ❖ **'MacCarthy's Bar'** - *Pete McCarthy*
- ❖ **'A Doctor's Sword'** - *Bob Jackson*
- ❖ **'A Doctor's Sword'** - Documentary
- ❖ **'The MacCarthy's Bar Experience'** - *Seán Buckley* (performances, 2021-2022)

Thanks to:

- ❖ *Seán Buckley* for ideas
- ❖ *Anna Bontekoe* for text editing
- ❖ *Roy Espiritu* for artwork

© 2022 Robert CLUTIER. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, printed, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the proper permission in writing from the author and proprietor(s).

Bere Island Publishing 2022

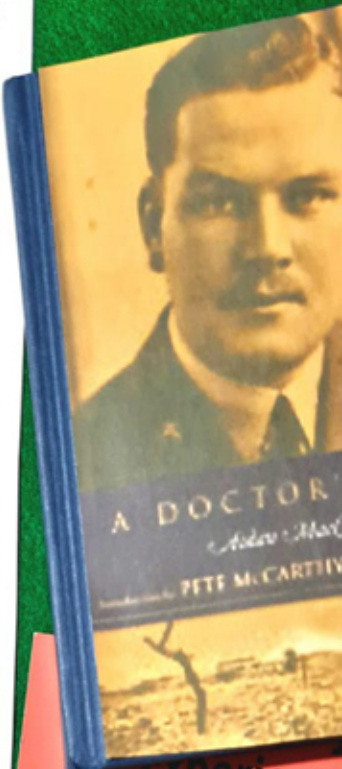
The centuries-old pub, **O'Keefe's Bar**, in the South West of Ireland is in a dire financial situation. The owners, middle-aged twin sisters **Brooke** and **Barbie** are without succession and have six months to come up with a survival plan...

Young **Cian** is unhappy with his predictable city life as a banker and wants to become a storyteller, a 'stand-up historian'. He discovers the rich war history of the sisters' father, **Dr Brendan O'Keefe**. A fascinating life story that eventually created the Bars' unique ambiance. Cian develops a captivating narrative that revisits Dr Brendan's many war travails. Such as surviving Dunkirk, and later Nagasaki - in the Pacific theater. His storytelling turns into a global success and Cian finds luck and happiness, just like Dr Brendan, - his origins, a new love and eventually, his destiny.

When a Hollywood producer comes with a surprise offer, **O'Keefe's Bar** is saved. Dr Brendan's war history, Cian's narrative and the heritage are bound together - the Bar will forever be a welcoming icon.

Cian has found his place in life - in **Dr Brendan's Bar**.

Dr Brendan's story is based on the true life of **Dr Aidan MacCarthy** (1913 - 1995) of Castletownbere, Co. Cork, Ireland.



Experience  
Dr. Aidan MacCarthy  
THE INCREDIBLE STORY



BOOKING ESSENTIAL  
Limited Availability

Admission €8

Venue: MacCarthy's Bar

Book in the bar or  
Phone: 027-70014  
Mobile: 083-8433092

Told by Irish Times  
featured guide

Seán Buckley

