



Excerpt-Where a Wave Meets the Shore

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I

On the day he met Brigid O'Sullivan, he caught her by surprise. That was hard to do, but Tom McBride wouldn't realize that until later, when he knew her better. On that afternoon—a brilliant one, the sky bluer than the Virgin's holy robe—he knew only that he'd happened upon the most beautiful girl he'd seen in all his twenty-two years, and that he'd frightened the life out of her.

In fairness, she'd startled him as well. He hadn't expected to see anyone half so lovely when he'd set out on the water that day, ferrying a government officer over to the Great Blasket Island.

The fellow had been at Regan's the night before, arriving just as that evening's session was getting underway. In the low-ceilinged pub, it seemed half the town had gathered, in the way crowds often form—responding to one man's opinion that grows to a rumor before swelling to the firm expectation of a mighty night. Regan himself was sweating behind the bar, serving out pints as fast as the barman could pull them. There was hardly the width of a floorboard left to stand on, but

until a few minutes earlier, the space next to the door had remained empty, protected by an invisible boundary that few would dare cross. It was the musicians' corner, and if you sat in it you'd better be planning to give out a tune.

Tom was planning exactly that as he squeezed in between the regulars and pressed his back against the unforgiving oak bench. He'd already lifted the fiddle to his shoulder when the stranger entered, a pudgy, round-faced man, punched through the door by a dose of the wind that had been blowing off Dingle Harbor all day. The cold gust followed him in, but had no chance against the air inside, which had grown tropical with the collective breath and bluster of a packed house. It took a final swipe as it retreated, lifting the feathery hair on the man's head until it stood out like the ruff of an orange tabby. Tom lowered the fiddle and stared.

"Will you look at yer man in the suit." His uncle Patsy's gravel-edged voice rose to a squeak, as if an exotic zoo animal had stepped into the pub and asked for a pint. "That's a Dublin man, and no mistake. I'll wager a week's catch he's one of de Valera's jackeens."

Along with every man present, Tom reflexively tensed as he eyed the middle-aged stranger. He was clearly from the city, but it was hard to see how Patsy had connected him with their Taoiseach—the prime minister, Eamon de Valera.

"What's he want with us?" Tom asked.

Patsy snorted. "What do they ever want? Our money and our tears."

In this instance, the stranger wanted neither. He confirmed Patsy's intuition, but he wasn't there to

trouble any of them. He was from the Irish Land Commission, and his business was with the islanders on the Great Blasket, which he intended to visit the next day. Tonight he was no government officer. He was Dan O'Brien from Tralee and he was there for the craic.

Dan was fond of music and stout in equal parts, and after several pints of the latter he proclaimed himself a dab hand with a pair of spoons. The musicians allowed him to sit in, providing he bought them a round and stopped trying to speak to them in Irish. Although game in the attempt, the Dubliner had only a schoolboy's grasp of the language, and their ears couldn't bear the unholy mess he made of it.

By the end of the evening they'd adopted him as one of their own. Nursing a final pint while the barman stacked chairs around them and wearily called "Time, please," they took turns quizzing him about his plans.

"You'll get no boat to the Blasket tomorrow if this wind keeps up, and that's a solid fact." Dennis O'Connell pulled a powerful sniff up through his prodigious nose, indicating no opposing view was worth considering. Patsy gave Tom a private wink.

"Who have you lined up to take you across?" Tom asked.

Fixing an eye on his own private horizon, Dan took a pull from his glass before answering. "Nobody."

Patsy hooted. "Nobody, is it? Sure you've done well, Dan. 'Nobody' is a fine sailor. You'll be safe as houses with him."

The remark prompted a unified roar of laughter, but Dan only shrugged. "I thought perhaps one of you lads might take an interest. The landlady where I'm staying

told me this pub is crawling with fishermen."

"I'd say you've left it too late," Patsy said. "The fishermen are after crawling home to their beds, now."

"Except for you, Patsy."

All heads turned towards the piping voice of Donal "Tiny" Quinn, who sat wedged into a corner, pinned against the bench like a beetle under glass. At eighty-two, Tiny was still the best accordionist in all of Kerry, but now he pulled the cherry-red instrument around on a wagon, too small and too old to lift it on his own. For the pleasure of hearing him play, his friends were happy to hoist the thing onto his knees, but they sometimes forgot to remove it when the music stopped.

"Jaysus." Patsy rolled his eyes. "Tom, pull it off him before he's smothered."

Tom was a step ahead of the command, hurrying to the rescue and doing his best not to laugh. "Sorry, Tiny."

Ramping up the charm, de Valera's man from Dublin aimed a smile at his target that could have lit the dark side of the moon. "You've a boat yourself then, Patsy."

"I do, Dan." Patsy lifted his own glass. After draining it, he stood and stretched, drawing himself to his full six feet. "And I've been ten days without a day off, so I'll not be putting a foot on it tomorrow, not even for a fine fellow like yourself, but Tom here will bring you over, so."

"I'll what, now?" Tom nearly dropped the accordion back onto Tiny's arthritic knees.

"He's only a farmer," Patsy continued, ignoring his nephew's yelp, "but he can manage a boat. He's been out on the sea with me often enough, from the time he could walk."

This was certainly true. Mixed in with the smell of silage and manure, Tom's earliest memories included the oily reek of his uncle's trawler—the first diesel-powered boat on the Dingle peninsula. With no interest in emigrating and limited options at home, his father's six brothers had divided themselves between two equally difficult livelihoods—three had decided to fish for a living while the others stayed in farming. Most were scattered across three counties now, from Kilrush to Skibbereen, but Tom's father had stayed in the area and settled on a farm above Ventry Harbor, and Patsy had remained as well.

"Go on, Tom." Patsy's voice trembled with laughter, enjoying his nephew's consternation. "Do you not want to help this poor man get to his meeting? The two of you will have a great day out on the water."

"Not if this wind keeps up..." Dennis started in again.

"Oh, you shut up now." Patsy waved him away, still grinning at his nephew.

Tom gave a noncommittal shrug, knowing the idea of a "day out on the water" would surely draw fire at home. Of his parents' four sons, Tom had been the only one to remain on the farm in Ventry, and while this came as a relief to his parents, both were skeptical—for different reasons—that he was cut out for the life of a farmer.

"He's a hard-working lad, but he hasn't the strength for it," his mother said to anyone who would listen. "It's because of the asthma. It's knocked him about since he was a baby."

"It's because he's a dreamer," his father insisted, often to the same audience. "The fiddle and the craic, that's all he cares about, but a fiddle won't hoe spuds or put his

tea on the table, will it?"

Tom resented both arguments. He wasn't nearly as wheezy as when he was a boy, and although the time he spent with the fiddle was the best part of his day, he never picked it up before the work was done. He loved his parents, but at an early age he'd known his mother's anxious pessimism and his father's materialism and pride were nothing he wanted to emulate. His own cheerful temperament tracked closer to that of his uncle, who'd taught him to sail and fish, and to play the fiddle.

As Patsy well knew, Tom was always ready for a lark. He wouldn't mind bringing Dan over to the Basket, but he wondered if it was worth the lecture he'd have to endure for bunking his chores.

"I'm meant to be moving the cows into the back field tomorrow," he mumbled.

"Sure I'll be happy to go at your convenience." Dan turned his smile in Tom's direction. "I wouldn't dream of interfering with your work."

"I'm not sure how long I'll be."

"How's twelve o'clock, Tom? Will it suit you?" Dan was starting to sound more like a government man, hearing only the things that helped him and ignoring whatever didn't.

"I suppose twelve o'clock would be—"

"Grand, grand. We'll make it twelve, so. Now, where will I meet you?"

The following day, Dan O'Brien's breezy confidence was much diminished when he arrived at the pier. After apologizing for being an hour later than expected, he

watched in alarm as Tom hopped from the landing into a small wooden dinghy tied next to it.

"I'd an idea of something a bit larger than this, Tom."

"Did you?" As he secured the outboard motor, Tom squinted up at him, maintaining a neutral expression. "Well, we keep our boats fairly light and sporty out here in the west. I hope you aren't bothered by the odd shark? I thought maybe you'd sit in the bow and keep an eye out for them."

Already pale from the previous night's indulgence, Dan's face dropped a shade closer to transparency. Unable to keep a straight face, Tom hoisted himself from the small boat into the fifty-foot trawler tied in front of it, and then—still laughing—he extended a helping hand up to his passenger. "The dinghy is only for the last hundred yards, Dan. The Basket has no deep-water pier."

When they pulled away, the sun was directly overhead, its reflection on the water almost too bright to look at. The trawler scattered seagulls as it chugged along, with the dinghy trailing behind, slapping against the waves in its wake. As might be expected of someone carrying the title of land officer, Dan wasn't happy on the water, nor was he comfortably dressed for the occasion. Before they were even out of the harbor he'd become too warm in his brown tweed suit, and his matching brogues were already wet. Sitting on a bench in the wheelhouse, he gripped the metal handrail next to him, lips pressed together in grim patience.

"About how long a journey would you say, Tom?"

"I'd say an hour. Maybe less if it stays calm."

"Ah. It's a calm day, is it?" The boat bounced out of a

shallow trough. Dan bounced with it and landed with a groan.

Standing at the wheel, far more comfortable in waterproof boots, a thin flannel shirt and twill pants, Tom gave him a nervous glance, and reached for the cooler near his feet. "I've a few bottles of red lemonade here, would you like one?"

"I would, Tom. Thank you." After several healthy slugs of the fizzy stuff, some of the color returned to Dan's cheeks and he seemed more fit for conversation. "We've a fine day for it, at any rate. It was lashing rain the last time I made this trip."

"You've been there before, then?" Tom shot him an amused scowl. "Who brought you over that time?"

"The government hired a ferry. On that occasion, we were a great crowd of officials and dignitaries." Dan handed back the bottle of lemonade, two-thirds empty. "Have you been to the Great Blasket yourself, Tom?"

He shook his head. "I've seen every side of it from a boat, but I've never gone ashore."

"But you've a grasp of the island's history, of course."

"I do. Of course."

Of course, because, as Dan almost certainly knew, the memoir of the Blasket's legendary storyteller, Peig Sayers, was a required text for every secondary school student in the country. Tom's reading of it had given him an instinctive aversion to the place. He felt sorry for Peig's descendants, if any still existed; he couldn't remember how many had succumbed to disease or gone over the island's infamous cliffs. The story of her life—gothic in its unrelenting hardship and written in a turgid style of Irish Gaelic—had won few fans, and much

uncharitable commentary. Among his own mates, they'd speculated that Peig had lost so many relations because they'd run to the cliffs to get away from her.

He'd been left with an impression of the Great Blasket as a place of endless misfortune, filled with mournful, wizened people who believed in leprechauns and lived centuries behind the times. He'd never been inclined to pay it a visit, and thought it odd the Irish government would want to.

"Tell me about your meeting, then," he said, trying to distract his passenger from the motion of the boat as it headed into open water. "What sort of business do you have with the islanders?"

"Oh, it's a sad business, Tom." Dan sighed. "Heartbreaking, altogether."

"Sure it would have to be, wouldn't it?" Tom said dryly. He adjusted course, moving farther away from the peninsula's rocky coast. "They've come to grief again, have they?"

"It will come soon enough. The Taoiseach gets fairly romantic over notions of pastoral Ireland and the simple folk with their tales and traditions, but there's no future for the people out there anymore. Sooner or later, they'll have to come away, I'm afraid."

"Come away?" Startled, Tom dropped his hands from the wheel and turned to the land officer. "What, all of them, do you mean?"

"All of them, yes," Dan said, "but it's no great number. There's not more than a few dozen living there now, many with more years behind them than they have ahead. Most are ready to leave, I think. The younger generation have emigrated already—to London or

America. They've hardly any women living there at all. The old men can't get out to fish anymore, and the supply of turf is running low. There's not a tree growing on the entire island, so they've nothing else to burn—"

"Sounds fairly desperate," Tom interrupted. Dan's litany was beginning to sound like a reading from the life of Peig. "But what's the Taoiseach got to do with it?"

Before Dan could answer, a wave broke against the trawler's prow, sending a heavy spray of water against the wheelhouse window. He shifted, his tweeds catching and scraping against the splintered bench. "Do you not need a hand clapped on to that wheel, Tom?" he pleaded. "Just the one, at least?"

He didn't, for the next several minutes anyway, but Tom humored him, wrapping his hand around a spoke of the mahogany wheel that his uncle kept polished to a high shine. "Go on, so."

"Well, it started five years ago, really. You remember the poor lad who died in '47?"

"I do. Sean Kearney." Tom grew more solemn. "Everyone around here remembers that."

It had happened at Christmas. They'd had dirty weather all over Ireland that month, but from Christmas Eve to the Epiphany, the storms never stopped. The wind tore the roof from a house in Ventry village, and the water breached the sea wall in Dingle, flooding the lower town. Usually there were evenings with the neighbors throughout the holidays, but nobody went visiting that year. Everyone stayed huddled inside, knowing nothing about the tragedy unfolding on the Basket. Young Sean Kearney, only twenty-four years old, lay dying of meningitis, and with the radio phone

knocked out and the mainland inaccessible, his family could only sit at his bedside, powerless to help him. He died before any boat could reach the island.

"Everyone in Dublin remembers it as well," Dan said softly. "It was in all the papers, and only a few months later the island was socked in again. They were out of food, but at least the radio was working. They wired a distress telegram straight to de Valera, begging him to send supplies. He got a boat over to them two days later, and made a visit to the island himself that summer—along with myself and others from the government—to see what could be done." Dan fell silent for a moment. "So *that's* what the Taoiseach's got to do with it," he finally added.

Tom bobbed his head, acknowledging the tone of mild reproach. "And now he's sending you, to see what can be done."

"He is, but sure we all know what needs to happen. A sad business," Dan said again, and turned to face forward.

Tom followed his gaze. The Basket was in view now, and he watched the island grow larger as they approached. It was beautiful, but also desolate and pitiless. No wonder they're ready to go. Tom thought. Why would they ever have wanted to stay?

2

Viewed from the nearest mainland village of Dunquin, much of the Great Blasket couldn't even be seen. It was a long, finger-shaped piece of land, with the tip pointing to America and the high ridge-line of its knuckle facing Ireland. Compared with the smaller islands farther out, it didn't appear very far away. On a clear day, anyone could look across at its white sand beach, and the little stone cottages sprinkled over a blanket of green, and think it looked a lovely spot to live.

Its looks were deceiving, though. Only after drawing near did it become clear the island might not be as benign as it appeared from a distance. It was actually three miles out in the North Atlantic, across a stretch of ocean that could turn treacherous in an instant. The one and only village that looked so inviting from the mainland looked less so upon closer inspection. It sat on an acute, downhill slope several hundred feet above the shoreline. The rest of the island was even more steeply pitched, and all routes eventually ended with an abrupt drop into oblivion. The high cliffs on every side were so sharp and vertical that it seemed as though the land had

been sliced away with a surgeon's blade. At the base of the cliffs, the wind and sea pummeled the surrounding rocks, turning them into perilous, ragged shapes that no navigator in his right mind would approach, unless he was headed for the island's tiny harbor.

Tom kept a wary eye on the rocks as he steered the dinghy to the landing spot, which was no more than a stretch of uneven stone. A group of four men stood waiting for them, and he found it impossible to guess their ages. From their faces, patterned with a network of lines and creases etched by fierce weather, he thought any one of them might be thirty-five or seventy.

The men had sized up Dan O'Brien before they even reached the shore. For a minute, they focused all attention on him, murmuring encouragements as they deftly lifted him from the boat and set him upright on a patch of dry rock that served as the island's pier. Far from feeling slighted, Tom was grateful. Getting Dan into the dinghy had been hair-raising enough. He'd been dreading the prospect of trying to get him out of it. Unaided, he hopped from the dinghy himself, and as he secured it, the eldest (maybe) of the men approached and offered a shy greeting.

"God save you," he said, in English.

"God and Mary save you," Tom replied in Irish, smiling at the man's surprise.

"You have some Irish?" his host marveled, continuing in that language.

"It's what we speak where I come from, sir. I'm not from Dublin. I'm only a farmer from the Gaeltacht. Ventry, over across the way."

The others greeted this news warmly, coming forward

to shake hands. They were dressed very much alike, in dark zippered sweaters, wool trousers and hobnailed boots, the only diversity in fashion being their hats. All had flat caps, but two wore them unfastened, and one wore his cocked at an angle. As they continued talking, Tom was struck by the difference between his speech and theirs. He understood them perfectly, but the Basket dialect sounded strange to his ears. It gave him an odd feeling. He had little patience for the superstitions and otherworldly legends some of his brethren loved so well, but listening to the courtly, antiquated form of Gaelic these men spoke, he felt as though he'd stumbled upon *Tír na nÓg*—the “Land of Youth”—and into the presence of long-dead ancestors.

Dan, who had very little Irish himself (and what little he had was painful to hear) was at a greater disadvantage. Tom saw he would need to facilitate, and soon realized it would be a delicate business.

“Such a suit of clothes. I’ve never seen the like.” The man with the angled cap, whose name was Petey, was gently teasing the Dublin man. “Did it come from America?”

“He’s, ehm...admiring your suit,” Tom said, answering Dan’s questioning glance.

“You’d make a fine diplomat, Tom. I’ve no doubt he’s having a laugh at it, and so he should. I haven’t a clue why I’m wearing the bloody thing. Now, should we walk up? If you’re ready?”

This last question Dan addressed to the men in tortured Irish with a bright smile, and Tom liked him all the better for it. Their hosts appeared to share his opinion. They laughed and nodded, then led them to the

steep, slick crevice in the hillside that would bring them up to the village.

On the way, they passed the island’s small armada of *currachs*. The wooden boats were upside down, carefully perched on sturdy wooden stands. Tom caught a whiff of the tar covering their canvassed hulls. They lay glossy black, like the skins of seals, growing hot in the afternoon sun. Petey ran his hand over one of them as they passed.

“As good as any motorboat. Light and fast.” He winked at Tom. “We’ll set a good price if you’re wanting to take one home with you.”

Tom laughed. “I’ve no need for a currach, but I’ll pass the word. Do you build them to sell?”

Petey briefly squinted, as if in pain, but then shrugged. “*Och*, no. We built them for ourselves, but each needs four strong men on a rough sea. We’ve enough for only two crews, now.”

He continued walking, but Tom stopped and turned to look again at the boats lining each side of the slipway. There were at least a dozen.

When he caught up with the others at the top, he saw the village was divided into two parts. The first group of houses were arranged on the slope near the path they’d just climbed, and a second cluster sat higher up and a bit to the north, giving the entire hillside a terraced appearance. Almost all were simple dwellings of stone and mortar, each pressed into its own hollow, some so low they looked half-buried. Several were in ruins, roofless and crumbling, and among those with their

roofs intact, many appeared deserted. The homes still occupied were easily identified. Thick streams of smoke poured from their chimneys, infusing a loamy scent of peat into the air's seaside tang.

Most of the houses had a uniform appearance, built with the doors facing south and their gables pointing at the mainland, but higher up, above all of them, a line of two-story whitewashed structures boldly faced the sea. They looked out of place in the landscape, as though they'd been built some place else and dropped from the air onto the island.

It was clear one of them had been chosen as the venue for the meeting. A group of men had gathered outside it, some standing near the side wall, others sitting on the grass next to it, smoking their pipes. Looking up at them, Tom wasn't sure what was expected of him. He hoped it wouldn't include trying to translate every Irish expression of hardship into English for the Land Commission's chosen man.

The matter got settled when the welcome committee took a break from the hike out of concern for Dan, whose round face was red and shining with perspiration. Mopping it with his handkerchief, he noticed Tom's uncertainty and appeared to read his mind.

"I can see you're worried, wondering what sort of holy show I'll be making of myself."

"I suppose you'll need help with the Irish..."

"It's all right, Tom." Dan put a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "They've English enough amongst the lot of them. Go on, enjoy yourself, and the sunshine. I expect we'll have finished in two hours, or so."

"Enjoy myself," Tom muttered, reviewing his options

after the group had moved on again. There weren't many to consider. He was on a hill, and he could either go up, down or across. He chose the latter, moving north along one of the village paths. The place looked deserted already, with most of the community gathered inside for the meeting. At some distance above him, he did see one elderly man sitting on a stone wall who nodded and lifted his hand in a slow salute. Tom returned it, and felt the man's eyes on the back of his head until the path dropped below a hump of grassland and put him out of sight.

He ended up on a long stretch of beach called the White Strand, the one spot on the island where the ground was flat. It was the most visible landmark to be seen from the mainland. It was low tide and the waves were tame now, collapsing in languid plumes of foam on the sand. The day had become hot, and the water looked enticing. Rolling up his sleeves he walked down to the surf and splashed some water on his arms, then retreated back up the beach, where huge strips of rock extended from the cliffs. Stretching over the sand like the claws of a giant paw, they created a series of shaded inlets that Tom thought worth a closer look. He scrambled over broken bits of stone as he explored each cove, until he rounded the edge of one outcrop and stumbled against a small dark rock that appeared to be alive.

The rock shot up from the ground and spun about, shouting something cryptic in its garbled rock language. Except that it wasn't a rock, of course. It was a girl—more precisely, it was a young woman.

At first, all Tom could see was a flying black shawl

swirling around a lithe figure, but when the commotion settled he stood facing a pair of dark, flashing eyes framed by waving black hair. He stared, struck dumb and entirely senseless.

Datbáil. Beautiful *Datbáil*.

He went on a few more times, swinging between Irish and English, but reciting the words inside his own head, thank God. At last, he saw that while he'd been gawking—silently, senselessly—she'd been saying something out loud with great force, but now the fire in her eyes abated a bit.

"Can you not hear me?" she asked, sounding curious. "Are you not able to speak?"

"I am. I can," Tom stuttered. "I'm just...surprised."

"Surprised are you?" Two spots of pink blossomed over her cheeks. "And what about me? Sitting here nicely, and you sneaking up from behind only to fall on top of me?"

"I wasn't...I didn't—" Frustrated by his incoherence, Tom stopped and took a breath. "I'm very sorry to have frightened you. I didn't mean it."

"Well? What did you mean?"

"Nothing. Sure I was only having a walk. I came around this bit of cliff, and...I thought you were a rock."

"Thought I was a rock!" she exclaimed.

"Well, you were on the ground, weren't you?"

Her eyes softened into amusement. "And what about yourself, then? Did you come out from under a rock? Or up out of the sea?"

He smiled, and pointed back at the mainland. "I came out from that rock. My name is Tom McBride. I live in Ventry. Do you live here on the Blasket?"

She looked around and then back at him, spreading her hands. "Where else would I live?"

"It's only I was told there were hardly any women on the island."

"Hardly any. It isn't the same as none."

"Right. Will I shut up now?"

"I hope not. You've only just learned to talk."

Tom burst into laughter, and after watching him for a few seconds, the corners of her mouth tilted into a small smile.

"Since it's settled you're not a rock, will you tell me your name?" he asked.

"Brigid O'Sullivan." She held out her hand to him. Once in his own, soft and warm, Tom wanted to keep it there for a good long time, but he reluctantly let it go.

"And what is it you were doing there on the ground, Brigid O'Sullivan?"

She opened her other hand to reveal a sea green cockleshell lying in her palm. He took it from her, examining it more closely. "This one's empty."

"It wasn't for the eating, I took it." She plucked it back. "This one wanted to be somewhere else."

"Ah. It told you so, did it?"

Brigid dropped the shell into a pocket of the apron she was wearing over a dark dress, both of which seemed quite damp. After giving him a flat stare, she turned her back and started up the beach. "I'll shift out of your way, now. Enjoy your walk."

"Wait. Don't go." Tom skipped a few paces ahead and turned, walking backward so he could keep looking at her. "I'm here for two more hours at least, and bored rigid. Will you not stay and talk?"

She came to an abrupt stop. "You came out with the man from Dublin."

From the look on her face, Tom instantly knew the view she'd take of any connection with the Land Commission. Quicker than Peter before the cock's crow, he abandoned the genial Dan O'Brien and everything to do with him without a twinge of regret.

"I don't know him, really. Not at all. He needed a boat so I brought him over, but he's nothing to do with me. It's not even my boat. It's my uncle's. I'm a farmer."

Lips pursed, Brigid studied the ground, moving a pebble around in the sand with one bare toe. "It's not a lot of time, but I suppose in two hours I could show you something of the island. If you'd like to see it."

"I would. Very much." Tom suddenly wanted to see every inch of the island, from top to bottom. He wanted to take it in from all sides, this fine cut gem he'd looked at for years and dismissed without knowing its worth. The Great Blasket. The name itself had become like a poem, or a piece of music rolling through his head. Sweet, and lovely.

Brigid walked him past the fields that covered the slope above the beach, describing how the islanders grew their crops, and then led him higher up the hillside, tracing a path that eventually ended at the north-western edge of the island. At a spot where the land thinned to a slivered peninsula above a rocky strand, she sat down on the grass with her feet tucked under her dress. Weighing his choices between how close he wanted to get to her and the distance she probably

thought was proper, Tom opted to split the difference. He sat at her feet with his arms on his knees, and looked out at the ocean.

To their right, closer to the mainland, he could see a flock of sheep grazing over the pancake-flat island of Beginnish. Farther out to the left, the lopsided pyramid shape of little Tearaght stood against the horizon, and straight ahead of them lay the island of Inishtooskert.

"It's supposed to look like a sleeping giant, but it's a bit like a fish from this angle, isn't it?" Tom said, which reminded him of something else. "Would you believe it, my uncle Patsy and I saw a sperm whale in this very spot a few years ago. We were out here one afternoon pulling lobster pots. Big as an island herself, so she was."

"Ah, I'd love to see one," Brigid said. "As often as I've sat with my face to the sea, I never have. You had great luck that day."

Tom laughed. "We never thought so. Sure the thing was no more than thirty feet away; we were afraid of our lives. It was just the other side of that little rock out there, the skinny one."

"*An natbair*," Brigid murmured. The snake.

"You have a name for all the rocks, then?"

Brigid gave Tom a sharp look to see if he was teasing her again, but he wasn't. He'd learned that lesson quick enough. Reassured the question was sincere, she relaxed.

"I suppose we do, really. Every rock and every cove. It's a bit like naming streets in the town."

"Have you always lived on the Blasket?"

"No, but I was born here. Before I was a year old my

mother and I moved out to Kenmare. I spent every summer here with my aunt and uncle, and when I was nine years of age my mother died. I came in to the island for good, then." After a slight hesitation, she added, "I had no other relations."

"What about your father?" Tom asked.

"I hadn't any father." Seeing his startled confusion, Brigid's face tightened. "I think you know what I mean."

"Oh. Right. Sorry." He turned his face away to hide his surprise. He knew plenty of people his age who'd lost a mother or father or both, but didn't think he'd ever met anyone whose parents hadn't married. It shocked him how casually she'd revealed it, without any shame or fear. As he took in the extraordinary piece of information, Brigid stirred and started to rise.

"I expect that's all you're needing to hear about me, so. We'll go back now, will we?"

"No." Tom reached up to grab her hand. She raised an eyebrow, but didn't pull away. He tugged gently at her fingers. "Sit yourself down, Brigid O'Sullivan. I need your entire life story."

After talking for quite a while they noticed it was getting late, and started back to the village. By then, Tom had learned she'd just turned twenty, that she'd never graduated school but was taught by teachers who came to the island occasionally, that she had a small house in the lower village where she kept a cow and some chickens. He knew all about her aunt and uncle and the neighbors, and the places on the island where she liked to walk.

From some of her more solemn conversation, he also knew she was devout in a way that puzzled him. Tom

took in religion automatically, something akin to the daily dose of cod liver oil meant to keep his asthma at bay. He was used to an inflexible ritual performed within four walls, but Brigid had altogether discarded the idea of walls. Maybe because the community had no formal church with a daily Mass, she seemed to regard the entire island as a church. He didn't understand, and he didn't care. Tom just wanted to see her again.

"Will I come see you again?" He tried to make the question sound carefree, even though he felt his whole life hung on her answer.

"You can please yourself." Hands in the pockets of her apron, she kept her eyes on the path. Tom thought he saw a hint of color steal over her face. He took it as encouragement, whether she meant it or not.

He looked ahead, and in the distance saw Dan standing on the path to the slipway with a small group of men. Tom realized he was keeping them waiting.

"There's your fellow from Dublin, I suppose," Brigid said, an edge in her voice. "He wants his boatman."

Tom swore under his breath and turned to her. "I'm sorry, I have to hurry."

"I'd say you'd better. The Taoiseach and all the government are waiting to hear his news."

"But not you." He took one more long look at her. "You didn't want to go to the meeting."

"I'll hear all about it, soon enough." She swung her hands in her pockets and darted a glance at him. "Go on, now, Tom McBride. Maybe I'll see you again some time."

He walked quickly down the path to the waiting group of men, making apologies in two languages.

Dan waved him off with a smile. "With the lovely company you've been keeping, I'm surprised to see you at all."

At the bottom of the slipway, they said their farewells, and Dan gave a little speech in Irish about the Basket and all the good things the islanders could offer to Ireland and the wider world. It was heartfelt and fairly done, which made Tom think it had been well rehearsed ahead of time. When the dinghy pulled alongside the trawler, there was a harrowing moment when the land officer's off-balance pirouette nearly knocked Tom into the ocean, but they managed to get safely aboard. Once he'd secured the dinghy, they sat side by side on the roof of the hold, recovering, and eating the remains of their lunch.

"So?" Tom asked. "What's the verdict?"

"None today. Slow and steady, Tom. That's the only way. You can't pull a civilization up by its roots all in an afternoon."

"Fair enough."

Dan took a long drink from their last bottle of red lemonade. "I'll need another meeting." He passed the bottle.

Tom accepted it. "Makes sense."

"It would be good to have the transport settled ahead of time." Still facing the island, the land officer smiled. "I wonder, could you be persuaded, Tom?"

"I could, Dan." Tom scanned the beach, trying to see whether any of the rocks were moving. "Sure it's no bother at all."