

Barefoot Over Stones

Liz Lyons

Published by Transworld Ireland,
an imprint of The Random House Group Ltd

Extract

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An imprint of The Random House Group Limited
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London SW1V 2SA
www.rbooks.co.uk

BAREFOOT OVER STONES
A TRANSWORLD IRELAND BOOK: 9781848270541

First published in Great Britain
in 2009 by Transworld Ireland
an imprint of Transworld Publishers
Transworld Ireland paperback edition published 2010

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Extract on p. 7 and p. 195 from the song entitled
'Never Be The Sun' by Donagh Long

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Typeset in 11/13pt Sabon by
Kestrel Data, Exeter, Devon.
Printed in the UK by
CPI Cox & Wyman, Reading, RG1 8EX.

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

PART ONE

You may not always shine as you go
Barefoot over stone
You might be so long together
Or you might walk alone
And you won't find that love comes easy
But that love is always right
So even when the dark clouds gather
You will be the light

'Never Be The Sun', Donagh Long

MICHAELMAS HOUSE, CAHAROE, CO. CORK
2005

Today I buried Dan. I wore a blue dress that he always liked and I was careful with my hair, curling it softly around my face to cover the hollowness I knew it showed. I shook every offered hand and murmured in appreciation at the slow river of kind and sympathetic words. My eyes were red and sore, bitten by three days of constant tears. The harrowing spectre of grief has come to settle like a silent friend at my side.

I felt the heartbreaking shudders of my daughter's body against me as her dad's coffin first bobbed and then disappeared out of sight. I held her tightly as she stood overwhelmed by the flood of unexpected loss. Mam and Dad flew home to be with us within hours of hearing the news. They stand at either side of me. They fear I will fall under the weight of this. All three of us united in a parent's instinct to take the part of our suffering child, to stop the pain before it enters the heart of our cherished charge.

It is more than a decade since the summer it all began. I knew in my heart you would not come. But I still scanned the crowd for your face and looked back one

last time to the deserted grave before we were driven back to Michaelmas, to the house that has always been home.

Even tonight if I close my eyes I can take myself back to those evenings on the beach at Aughasallagh. I could not believe it when you turned up at the cottage there. I hadn't even told you exactly where we were going. His uncle's place somewhere in Kerry was all I said. But in truth I didn't know myself. I left all that to Dan. I was in the kitchen drinking tea, still half asleep and lulled by the soft low voice of the morning radio. Dan's textbooks and notes were strewn across the breakfast table and his abandoned cigarette was smoking itself out on an overflowing ashtray. You bustled into the kitchen ahead of Dan as if you owned the place. Your ancient purple knapsack was slung over your shoulder and you had a plastic carrier bag struggling to contain the shuddering cackle of a few bottles of cheap wine.

Dan was furious when he followed you through to the tiny kitchen. A week to his final exams and you, of all people, had arrived on the doorstep of his hideaway. He blamed me for inviting you even though I absolutely hadn't. I put it down to the fact that you guessed I would be lonely while Dan studied day and night and you had made it your business to ask around and find out exactly where we were. You always knew the right thing to do; one of the reasons you had me in your thrall. As much as I loved Dan and wanted to be with him, sitting with him as he smoked and cursed about how much study he had left to do had not exactly been the holiday of a lifetime. Then you arrived, filling the house with chatter and gossip and driving Dan up the wall. His face wrinkled in unspoken anger and I knew we had better get out of the house before he blew a fuse.

The weather was glorious and we headed giddily to the beach every day of that week. We swam lengths together along the line of the strand, both terrified of the rough currents of the Atlantic and their merciless strength. From the depths of your backpack you would produce some mangled and dog-eared bodice ripper and in full dramatic voice read out the more jaw-dropping passionate encounters. I collapsed in heaps of helpless laughter. We got disapproving looks from the locals with whom we shared the beach but that merely egged you on, your delivery gaining confidence with every aggressive sigh.

We walked the mile or so to Daly's shop when hunger struck and made makeshift lunches with their fresh white bread and hunks of cheese and ham. I made sure that we bought enough so that I could make a supper for Dan when he arrived pale-faced and exhausted from hours of study. He would devour every last scrap of food and then produce slabs of Dairy Milk chocolate from our cottage stash. When you thought the time was right you would wordlessly nudge a picnic mug of wine in his direction and he would drink it greedily; our three-way harmony thankfully restored.

And I picture now the three of us sitting there preserved in the treasure box of returning memory. The punishing heat of the sun has long since subsided. The taste of the too-sweet wine is on my lips. Sand is gritty between my toes and the excited shrieks of children in the water beyond can be heard like grace notes to our idle chatter. Dan's head is cradled on my lap. The wine is taking hold in all of us and I am becoming quieter while you two are just getting started, as usual. That night, like many others, the topic was the state of the nation.

'Charlie Haughey was a gangster and he nearly ran

this country into the ground. Sure even Gay Byrne said this morning on the radio that it will take years to undo all the mistakes of the last decade.' Your face crumples in disdain at Dan's wine-fuelled righteousness and I know that you revel in fanning the flames.

'That man talks through his hole, Dan, and you'd want to catch yourself on 'cause you're beginning to sound a bit like him.'

Dan rises gleefully to the bait and on you both go until the incoming tide drives us back reluctantly to the darkness of the cottage.

I think now that it is always like this. All is clear and certain the moment before our world changes. A day, an evening or maybe just a single hour when we think we can see for ever.

Tell me, Ciara, can you remember it too?

CHAPTER ONE

DUBLIN 1990

The Daisy May on Camden Street had definitely seen better days. The paintwork was scuffed and the windows were permanently steamed up. The menus looked as if they had survived the trauma of decades. But the café had its fans and a steady trade of coffee-slugging students who seemed to hold its comfortable shabbiness in real affection. Alison had fallen for the Daisy May during her first weeks in Dublin. She had clung to its friendly warmth between lectures on days when there was much to read and little to keep her in Mrs Duggan's miserable digs.

It was Rose, whose name and life she would later learn, who served her the first of many milky coffees and toasted cheese sandwiches and gave her enough part-time hours so that she could escape the clutches of the unbearably nosy Bea Duggan and her smelly little box room. Within weeks of starting work in the Daisy May she had found a flat to share with another girl on the first floor of a house in Ranelagh. The landlady, who lived on the ground floor, seemed cheerfully oblivious to

their existence except for every second Friday when she accepted their rent money.

‘Oh, is today Friday?’ she would enquire with feigned innocence as she grasped the notes out of their hands with poorly concealed glee. The gin bottles that sprawled around the black plastic bin on weekend mornings gave the girls some indication of their key role in Jean McDermott’s household budget. Alison was gone from Mrs Duggan’s two weeks before her father discovered that she had left.

‘What do you mean you have moved?’ Richard Shepherd was prone to sudden flashes of temper that subsided nearly as quickly as they rose. Alison stayed silent, hoping that if she didn’t aggravate him any further, this one conversation might be the end of it. She had told her mother as soon as she had found the flat and needed the deposit of a month’s rent. Cathy Shepherd had been terrified of her only daughter being lonely at Mrs Duggan’s and was in favour of the move if it meant she had company of her own age. She had promised to break the news to Richard the next time Alison came home for the weekend.

Here they were now at the kitchen table after Sunday dinner and he looked as if his switch had tripped and his entire fuse board had blown. ‘But it took us ages to find those digs,’ he spluttered, looking to his wife for solidarity. ‘Talk to her, Cathy, for God’s sake talk to her!’

‘Richard, you know Alison has a good head on her shoulders. I think she deserves our trust, don’t you? She has found a part-time job so it will actually end up costing us less than the digs. Besides, think of the company she will have.’

Cathy’s voice was soft like honey and Richard’s

deflation was more or less immediate under its gentle pressure. He muttered something about square meals and all-night parties while he rolled the newspapers furiously into an impossibly tight bundle. Alison pictured the last Spam and canned pineapple concoction that Mrs Duggan had allegedly ‘cooked’ and barely stifled a laugh. Her mother flashed Alison a conspiratorial grin as her father turned and went to the living room to read the paper. As the custard congealed on his untouched bread pudding Alison knew that the matter was over, for the moment at least.

An hour or so later she reheated his dessert for him over a pan of boiling water. In the living room the papers were strewn around him, tossed in untidy heaps. He accepted his daughter’s peace offering with an indulgent smile. ‘You will mind yourself, Alison, won’t you? You are there to study, not to carouse. Remember where you come from. Be careful who you hang around with.’

Alison interrupted him in mid flow before he started reminding her not to take sweets from strangers. ‘Dad, of course I will. I’m older now and I can take care of myself.’

His tears welled up but Richard forced a smile for this ever-so-grown-up girl that his daughter had become while he had been looking elsewhere. Years had passed, becoming a decade, with a second one now close on the heels of the first. It seemed to him like no time at all.

‘There must be loads of fine-looking men in that college of yours,’ Rose chirped on Alison’s second or third week at the Daisy May.

Alison pictured some of the earnest and dreary faces that had turned up to the tutorial on the Crusades that

morning. ‘Do you know what, Rose, I think the entire history department is sorely lacking a decent-looking man. I thought secondary school was bad but this is ridiculous.’ She felt very free, being able to indulge in this kind of talk, and relished the anonymity of her existence in Dublin. Nobody yet knew her past or what she had been like growing up. Rose didn’t know, as they chatted about men, that Alison had been painfully shy at Caharoe secondary school and had never so much as gone out with a boy, let alone discussed them in such a casual fashion with anyone. Up to now her love interests had been a painful mess of crushes and awkwardness.

‘Well, Alison, you will just have to look further afield to find a nice young man with prospects.’

‘I’m only eighteen. I think I would settle for the good looks and hang the prospects for the moment.’

Rose eyed her and was charmed by a familiar innocence. She too had had high hopes once but they had crumbled under the strain of experience. ‘I was married when I was barely older than you are now. I loved my Frank but cursed money was always scarce and there’s feck all romance in scrimping. Remember that.’

Alison thought for a second that Rose was going to cry and she wasn’t sure how she was going to comfort this grown woman whom she barely knew. Sensing the girl’s awkwardness, Rose’s face broke into her familiar grin.

‘Here’s one for you now,’ she said, flashing a smile at a gangly but gorgeous man who had just walked in. Alison was frying bread for a full Irish that had been ordered by a couple of builder’s labourers at a corner table. Typical, she thought. Here she was covered in grease, wearing a hairnet and an oversized cook’s jacket in a shade of tired and insipid grey. ‘The usual is it, Dan?’ she heard

Rose say. The fried bread needed to be rescued before it smouldered to the same colour as the pan but Alison was putting off any action that wasn't strictly necessary. She did not dare attempt to move because she feared nerves rooted her to the spot. Rose moved behind her to butter a mound of toast.

'It's a fry they were wanting not a cremation,' she said in a low-enough whisper, giving Alison an encouraging nudge of her elbow. Rose delivered the toast to the counter in front of Dan with a mug of steaming coffee as Alison finally plucked the bread from the pan. 'Oh, you haven't met my new girl, have you, Dan?' she said, giving Alison an animated wink. Alison turned her flushed face to meet the gleam of piercing green eyes as Rose introduced them. 'Dan Abernethy, meet Alison. Alison Shepherd.'