

'A cuppa tay and a wee chat.'

'It's good to see you Father.' (She pronounced it *farder*.) 'After all these years. Please, take a seat.'

I chose an armchair by the window; the rare Kerry sun slanting through the lace curtains illuminated a small cloud of dust, raised as I sank into the old upholstery.

'I never agreed with you being transferred, Father. It was a great loss to the parish.'

'Ah! God giveth and God taketh away, Mrs McLoughlin. He moves in mysterious ways.'

She nodded silently, and gave the pot a stir.

The room was full of Catholic memorabilia. Well-intentioned, but tat, nevertheless: The Virgin Mary rising from an oyster-shell, her eyes and hands raised in supplication; a gilded miniature Vatican, that played *Ave Maria*; a framed 'Our Father', sandwiched between a portrait of Pope John Paul II and a coachload of pilgrims disembarking, newly arrived at Lourdes.

'So, how are you keeping?' I asked, as she poured, then handed me, a cup. Strong tea slopped into the saucer.

'Bearing up, Father, y'know. They've all gone now of course. Sean...' she stifled a sob, 'went last year-'

'I'm sorry-'

'It was his time,' she said, regaining her composure. 'And the children...well, they have to find their own way, don't they?'

'Indeed.' I said and took a biscuit. The clock chimed two. 'There were three, as I recall?'

She nodded. 'Patrick, Caitlin, and Declan.'

'And Patrick, what's he doing?'

'Patrick ... aye ... well, he fell in with the wrong crowd. Always trying to be everyone's friend. The class eejit. Do y'know what I mean, father?' I nodded. 'Well, it wasn't long before The Garda were feeling his collar; so, to answer your question: five years. Should be out in eighteen months if he behaves himself.'

'Ah.' I didn't know what more to say. 'And Caitlin?'

She shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

'The wee hussy. Got herself in the family way, didn't she? Netted a physiotherapist in Killarney. Cured half the cripples in Kerry. So, she's done alright for herself. But she never shows her face around here.'

She bristled - a good time to move the discussion on.

'Declan?' she said. 'He excelled at school, got a sackful of A-grades, and landed a scholarship to Oxford University. Being the county rugby captain helped, as did French, Spanish, and German. But he decided to follow his main love, mathematics, was headhunted for a top job with Deloitte, and has never looked back.'

She became quiet and rested her hands in her lap.

'And these? Would they be the grandchildren?' I asked, pointing to two pretty faces flanking that of a giant Mickey Mouse.

'Oh yes. That's Aoife and that's Siobhan. Six and eight. Like so many, now living in the States.

'And Declan's wife?'

'She's beautiful, a talented artist, and a highly successful lawyer. And a Protestant.'

She eyed me over the top of her spectacles.

'*He*, of course, is a *great* disappointment to us all, Father.'

'Mmm...of course,' I replied, and took the last biscuit.

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