

It's a Long, Long Way...

It was here, on this very bench, that they first held hands – taking a break from the frenzy of the dancing at the Liscannor Mid-Summer Ceilidh. And then they'd edged forward, and he'd held her, arms tight about her waist, as she peered at the crash of waves far, far below, and he'd told her (though in truth, she didn't need to be told) that the cliffs of Moher were 'the highest in all Christendom and a true Wonder of the Irish World!'

'And where in the World are *you* from, Eamonn?' she'd asked, when they sat down again.

'Doonbeg', he'd replied.

'Doonbeg? Sure, that's a long way, and twenty miles you've come! Was it a donkey you rode, or have you one of those new-fangled motorcars, perhaps!'

'Neither!' he'd grinned. 'I pedalled m'auld bicycle, so I did. She doesn't complain and doesn't need feedin'!'

'And so,' she'd smiled shyly, 'you must like the dancing...?'

'The dancing? Well, there's nothing doing in Doonbeg; and besides, I like dancing with *you*, Siobhan...'

She'd blushed, her face already flushed and bathed in the glow of the sun dropping slowly towards the horizon, and led him back inside.

That was to be the first of many trysts – and always here, on '*our bench*' – on the brink of the cold Atlantic. And at each meeting, their love grew deeper, deep as the unplumbed depths of the sea, their thoughts turning always to the future they would share.

'America! New York! Boston! That's where I'll take you, and we'll have children, lots of children, and grandchildren of our own!'

'How many, Eamonn, how many?'

'Ten – *no*, fifteen! *No*, twenty! All together, in a great big house!'

'You're *mad*, Eamonn Fitzpatrick!'

'I'm mad for *you*, Siobhan Dooley!'

They'd had their anniversary dance, a year on, when Siobhan turned to Eamonn, her brow furrowed not by the glint of sunlight on the swell, but by the knowledge, an unsaid understanding, that something was wrong.

'Eamonn. Sweetheart. What is it? You've hardly said a word, this twenty minutes since. What ails you? Are you after being sick?'

Eamonn hung his head, then looked into her eyes from beneath the rim of his old flat cap. 'Not sick. But I have *this*,' he said, thrusting a letter towards her and turning his gaze once more to his boots.

Slowly (for her reading was not a strength) she read, running her finger haltingly along the print, then put her hand to her mouth. 'Jaysus! Eamonn, you've enlisted! You're to join the British Army?'

'Aye, I have,' he said, just above a whisper, 'I have to go and do my duty.'

'Duty? Duty to *whom*?! To the *English*? And what duty would you be owing *them*?'

At this, Eamonn stood up, tears in his eyes but his jaw set and his knuckles white. 'Tis a *man* thing, Siobhan, something a woman just wouldn't understand! We have to give the Kaiser a bloody nose, so-'

'What I *do* understand, Eamonn Fitzpatrick,' she'd silenced him, 'is that the King, sitting on his throne in London, doesn't give a tinker's cuss for the likes of us bogtrotters! You'll all go the same ways, and be slaughtered, like cattle from the Aran Islands, yonder! And if you love me, if you *really* love me...' Her sentence left unfinished as she fell, sobbing, to her knees.

That afternoon, they had gone their separate ways – she back to the white-walled cottage, to her parents, siblings, and the pigs; he, to Doonbeg and then to Fermoy, in Cork, training depot of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers. Before he left, he'd promised to be faithful, promised to write whenever he could; and she'd promised, for herself, to read his letters, and wait for his return.

And so, the letters came: *Belgium, January 1916; Belgium, November 1916; Flanders...* each one a litany of complaints about the weather, the food, the boredom of waiting. And always the same ending: *I'll love you forever, Your Eamonn, XX* – the kisses a reminder of the twenty grandchildren they'd have when he came home.

It was late summer, 1917, when Siobhan sat, alone on the bench, the letter Mrs Fitzpatrick had saved for her in her hand. There was rain in the air (when was there not?) the cries of the terns on the cliffs below competing with the moans of the keening wind. She opened it once more and read: 'I regret... near the village of Passchendaele... didn't suffer...' then held it up on her open palm and let the air take it – take it aloft, on the wings of the angels, to New York, Boston, Pasadena; anywhere but here.

Then she'd stood, tidied the cuff of her blouse, pulled on his old flat cap, and walked forward.

Twenty short paces.

To meet him again.

800 words

