

## Eireann go braugh

THE LANE WAS NARROW, just fourteen feet between walls of dark grey stone dry-laid in thin layers that stretched unbroken from gate to stile, stones set in place hundreds of years ago, and now patched with lichen and moss, whose green or grey softened the wall's face. The lane itself was mostly unpaved, with only a few large slabs laid down here and there in low spots to protect travelers' feet from mud. The flags were of the same stone as the walls, grey and dark, flecked with lichen and wet spots that twinkled in the sun that now winked through the clouds. For it had rained again this day, and the grass in the lane was soaked with the soft wetness of grass when every blade protects the soil underneath from the wet by holding the rain.

And the grass was thick and low, with occasional tufts near the base of the wall—grass like green wool poured down the lane and then smoothed into felt that embraced the stones around which it grew, and softened the footsteps of all who went this way.

For this was the lane to the west, and as the lowering sun felt its way under slate-grey clouds, its beams shone along its green floor and grey walls so that every puddle glistened and gleamed, and the drops clinging to the walls looked like diamonds spilled onto a counter of green velvet under those brilliant lights designed to further dazzle the eyes of lovers contemplating how best to publicize their commitment and their intentions.

No wheels had used this lane for several generations, only the feet of men and women, their horses and sheep with their guardian dogs, and an occasional bird hoping for a meal. There were only two slight tracks, shallow indentations where centuries of wooden wheels carrying heavily laden carts had compressed or pushed aside the soft soil, and in some spots dark gravel—clearly the offspring of the same rock as in the walls and flags—could still be crushed underfoot, although those spots were narrow and few, so that walkers had to search in order to hear and feel the pebbles. The soil was light enough that even after a heavy shower these ruts (although they weren't deep or defined enough to be called such) held puddles for only a few minutes, although in spots where their lane ran down a slope, they resembled tiny streams until the fallen rain sank into the soil.

Walking along the lane, one felt the company of those who had trod this way for generations, heading west for many reasons—to take their flocks to or from pasture, to tend their fields, checking the walls and gates for the wear of weather and use, to visit their neighbours and friends, to attend worship services on Sunday, to court those whom they loved, and to attend the weddings, baptisms, and funerals of those whom they knew—and they knew everyone that used this lane, for they and their ancestors had lived in this place time out of knowing.

It was the lane that bound them together, giving them passage from one farm and field to another, from their scattered houses to the church, the pub, the grocer, and, in the last few generations, to the post, their contact with the rest of the world. Without the protection of its guardian walls, they would have been housebound in winter, when snow and the wild northern winds, blowing cold and raw across thousands of miles of sea, made travel hazardous to all but the most hardy, and even they were glad enough to get into the smoky warmth of cottage or pub, or even the chill stillness of the church. Those blessed with a horse had some advantage in such weather, not having to slog through the wet on foot, but it was a mixed blessing, since horseback raised them above the walls' protection, and there was the need to care for their mount before going indoors themselves.

And it was the lane that had seen them dwindle, dying more quickly than they were born, fleeing the plagues that they called the judgment of God (or the work of wicked men), looking for work that would keep life in their bones, until funerals outnumbered weddings and baptisms, and the store grew smaller and the priest lost weight, and there was talk of closing the post and delivering the little mail

addressed to this far place only when there was enough to justify the cost of the round trip in the little van—the smallest van that the postal service had, for they never needed anything larger. But for now, the post remained, the pub glowed warm and welcome—if scarcely busy—in the evening, and the church welcomed those who came.

Even the mice and voles who lived in the cracks and crevices of the walls, and the moles who burrowed in the fields, were unwary of humans, for so few now traveled the path that they were in no danger of being attacked by companion dogs, and the cats that had served many farms seemed to have left with their owners. So, with an occasional eye cocked to the sky to watch for kestrels, the tiny creatures of field and wall lived their own bustling lives, scarcely noting that they now had much of the land to themselves. Walkers, footsteps cushioned by grass and sod, would thus often surprise entire families sunning on the rocks or gathering mouthfuls of grass to line their nests and burrows against the coming cold.

Occasionally, a small, one-story house, often in ruins, would appear, set back from the lane, and the wall, without interruption, would dodge away from the lane, skirting the house and its outbuildings at a remove of a few dozen yards before returning. These low dwellings, built of the same stone as the walls and roofed with slate, seemed to have been hewn from the bedrock rather than built upon its back. A weathered white door and the black squares of glass windows—often laid out symmetrically to form blind faces—were the only signs that they were meant for human habitation, rather than being merely walled enclosures for their beasts.

Behind the walls, the fields stretch narrow and long, separated by more walls until it seems that one could almost walk across them by stepping from one wall to the next. Generations of sons dividing their fathers' lands, which in turn had divided *their* fathers' lands, and all needing to know just which plot of ground—which crops and pasture—were theirs, had created this maze of no longer tended, although not quite unkempt, plots, each filled from wall to wall with the same lush short grass that now lined the lane, as flat and even as though tended by invisible legions of gardeners, with only a slight dip at each field's gate where generations of feet and hooves had worn away the soil. A child, unable to see over the walls, would have found these fields a maze, as would any stranger, even one of considerable height, for they were so divided and parceled that they lacked any rhythm or rhyme, although at one time any of the elders could have explained whose sons had farmed which pieces, and just why each one was shaped as it was. Barrenness or miscarriage or the death that had threatened every young child—or, more happily, marriages between those whose fields were adjoining—had led to gates being broken through walls that no longer needed to separate properties singly owned.

And these fields, miniscule and inadequate as they seemed, had sustained their families, which were often far larger than would appear could live in such small homes, for the death that threatened infant and child led many to have families as large as possible, parents never knowing which child might survive and which join those already buried. For this soil was rich, as the green grass showed, well-drained and soft with generations of workers who had raked and hoed their crops by hand, so that the soil had not for many decades known any foot heavier than that of a large man. And the same hands had removed every bit of stone, adding it to the surrounding walls, so that a strong man could thrust a shovel full-depth into the soil with next to no effort.

Now, some distance down the lane, a larger shadow interrupts the horizon. A manor house, set well back from the track, seemed nearly royal in its isolation, until one was close enough to see the blind window-spaces, the gaps in the walls, and, once parallel to its long side, to realize that most of the roof was long since gone. Its outbuildings, most set well away from the house (as was only fitting for the servants of such a fine mistress), mouldered as well, and some were only shapeless heaps of stone. But there were signs that someone had again taken an interest—neat piles of timber and loose stone near the great front door, a

few farm animals, and one cottage with a repaired chimney from which smoke drifted, a new roof, curtains in the windows, and flowers by the door.

There had, of course, been the inevitable rumours that it had been purchased and was being put to rights, but these rumblings had been repeated for so many years that one no longer paid them any heed. Perhaps it would yet again be a home for feasts and celebrations, for weddings and funerals—not for the lord of the manor only, but for any who lived nearby, for he and his descendants had ever been generous and good-hearted—but none knew for certain who sought to make of this ruin a home.

Nearby, the lane crossed another, almost a road, running north and south. Here, at the crossroads, the walls had been drawn back into a circle, making enough space for loaded wagons meeting to pass each other, or even to turn around. Four wedges of turf marked the corners between the road and lane, themselves lined with a low curb of stones laid on edge, just high enough to mark the border between the paved paths (for the cross formed by the path and road was formed of great flags, laid wide and deep and interlaced with gravel, so that the crossroads—necessarily traveled twice as heavily as either path or road—would not turn to mire in the damp) and the grass. Nor was the larger road paved, although its ruts seemed somewhat more traveled and worn than those of the lane, and the grass that also filled its width was perhaps a little less sprightly.

Past the crossroads, past more fields and houses, past the last house, the walls began to shrink in height until they were only waist-high, then to the knees, and finally, petered out altogether. It was not the end of the grass, however, which now seemed to rejoice to join its fellow from which it had been sequestered. The grass seemed to run on for ever, as far as the eye could see, north and south, and toward the west.

At last, however, there was a change in the flat and level landscape. A great shape, far taller and more vast than the manor, reared up against the sky. And standing before it, near the lane, a shorter pillar slowly appeared.

It was only as one drew near that the scale and purpose of the ruined buildings became clear. This had been a religious house, probably a monastery or abbey. The walls of the great hall were still standing to the height of three or four men, and those surrounding the cloister looked nearly intact, with only a few partial breaches. Here had opened the gate that would have welcomed pilgrims and asylum-seekers, petitioners and worshippers, now a gaping hole through which the courtyard could be seen, paved in grass that ran out through the gate to meet the lane. In one corner of the yard was what looked like the well that had supplied the stables and barns with water. On the far side of the yard a smaller gate yawned at what would have been the herbarium and kitchen garden. And round the whole stood pieces of a great wall, like a circle of standing stones from long ages before the coming of the Church, sentinels still guarding that which required no vigilance.

No pillar stood between the lane and the gateway to the hall, but a great cross, far taller than any man, carved with scenes now indiscernable, weathered by over a thousand years of wind and rain so that interpreting them was like seeing faces in clouds of stone. Nonetheless, something of their story could be hazarded, especially by those with some memory of the biblical stories and legends of the saints. This, the high cross, carved with its circle around the meeting point of the crosspieces, marked journey's end for many who had followed the lane across the land. Never bending from its course, the lane led due west for many miles, from the edges of the larger civilization to this forsaken place of grass and rain, wind and stone.

Now, however, it changed from two tracks to one, a single mark in the turf that pointed west past the monastery entrance.

And then, beyond the great skirting wall, near the end of the world, was a circle of standing stones, perhaps an eighth of a mile in diameter, erected around a smaller central circle with stones that looked as

though they might mark the earth's journey through the seasons or the stars through the sky. These had stood thus before Christ's first apostle had come to the land, before the monastery, before the manor had been built (and long before its ruin), before the raising of the stone walls that marked now-neglected fields, but after the making of the path that had become this lane. This was the original destination, the original goal of that single-minded track. Not only had it been the pilgrim way, but those ancient engineers who had raised this great circle had dragged or rolled its stones along the path before any walls lined it, before the fields began to be divided. Only with the coming of the Church and the building of the monastery and the carving and raising of its high cross had the way been shortened for all who claimed new faith, while those who clung to the old ways were careful to skirt the monastery, out of sight of the watchers at its gate or upon its walls.

One edge of the circle was nearly tangential to a cliff, the stones on the far side from the path only yards from the edge, so that nearly beneath their feet the sea—so far down that one did well to hold on—thrust at the shore, driven against the cliff by winds that rushed across thousands of miles of ocean, beating its waves into foam on the rocks that had fallen and lain, half-submerged and covered with moss, for years out of mind.

Here the true glory of day's end becomes clear, as the sun flares beneath the lowering clouds hovering over the sea, and lights a path from the cliff's foot to the horizon, which is why this place has been recognized as sacred for all the ages of humanity. Whatever one's creed or philosophy, this is the end of the land, as it was the edge of the known world for millennia. From the great stone the sun's path ran straight in spring and fall, at the equinoxes. From here, one looks out upon the sea, with a few fallen shards of cliff scattered among the waves, and the wind blows the spray high up the cliff, so that the rocks are dark, like the walls of the lane after a passing shower. Seabirds wheel and shriek far below, and daub the cliffs white. With good eyesight, one might descry a seal's head among the waves, or occasionally the splash of a whale breaching. But the land was silent and still, apart from the sigh of the wind, the suck and gibber of the surf, and the cries of the birds. No other voice, no other sound, intrudes. One is alone at the edge of the world.

The breeze now began to quicken to a gale, the clouds lowering over the sea, and the waves' blue-gray turned white with spindrift, spume lifted off their crests by the wind as they surged toward the cliff till it seemed that one or the other must surely be spent and destroyed before this clash had ended. Then came the rain, driven nearly horizontal by the wind, striking and stinging the skin like darts, slanting deep into the cracks of the walls, so that the track turned to a stream, running down the slight incline from the monastery to the cliff's edge, then disappearing into the many cracks and holes in the rocks atop the cliff.

The wind came, bellowing and belligerent across the sea, howling through the holes in the top of the cliffs and in the old walls like a choir of wolves, staggering the ears and stunning the mind so one's only recourse was to hunker behind one of the monastery walls—the best spots were those corners that had their backs to the wind so that one was protected on two sides. In a few places—usually at a corner where walls offered two-sided support to a triangle of one or two pieces of slate—a bit of roof was only a bonus, since the wind blew so hard that each wall made a tiny rain shadow in which a person or even a small horse would be protected. Thus might monks have huddled for shelter while erecting these walls, or when caught by a storm in field or garden or other work out-of-doors. For some minutes it poured as if the promise had not been made to Noah, as if every one of the millions of blades of grass required a hundred or even a thousand drops of water to quench its thirst, and the sky was determined to see that not one went unsatiated, and that the rocks had their full share as well. The roaring of the wind, the groan and smash of the waves against the cliff, the thundering rain that threatened to drown anyone foolish enough to draw breath and to flatten everything—rock and grass—till nothing remained to catch the eye, or interrupt the wind.

Then, almost imperceptibly, the gale lessened, the rain slowed, and the clouds began to lift, until, quite abruptly, all was done. The clouds were breaking up, and bits of dark sky began to show through windows in the grey, white, and black of the storm. The wind died to a whisper, and the whole creation seemed to ring, drawing breath to celebrate the power and the glory of the storm that had passed.

And now, at the golden hour of the day, when the clouds had lifted so that the light of the setting sun lay heavy as a giant's building blocks on turf, stone, and path, slanting across the land with a weight so palpable that it seemed that all things should be crushed out of existence, yet even in being lost would have met their death gladly under that joyous light; when shadows of wall and stone stood black against the green and gray; when the wind had died so that all the air was still—not with the stillness of death, when the last breath leaves the lips, but the stillness of birth, that moment before the first breath is sucked into new lungs—there was a movement not born of wind or water.

A figure, a vertical line in this mostly horizontal land, was coming down the lane, past the crossroads, past the monastery with its great cross, walking to the standing stones.

A young woman strode down the lane, scattering the voles and mice into their boltholes, from which their eyes peered, sparkling in the setting sun, but she, like a preternatural queen oblivious to her servitors, followed her ancestors' steps with her eyes fixed on the horizon. Her cape, drying from the storm, swung as she walked, her hair blew as the breeze again began to freshen, and her eyes—grey-green as the sea-sparkle—dared the sun to outshine them. She did not so much walk as glide across the grass with the grace of a dancer, and, when she came to a rivulet yet flowing with runoff from the storm, she did not overstep it but leaped, again with that unconscious ease of motion that showed the habit of years of controlling every movement.

Beside her, now before, now behind, stalked a dog, a wolfhound nearly her height, with a rough grey coat shaken nearly dry, a primeval boulder come to life. His eyes moved from his mistress to the openings in the walls, then ahead and back down the lane, always on guard.

On they walked, to the cliff's edge, where she stood looking out to sea with one hand shading her eyes against a setting sun who like an emperor or king robed in gold and crimson and surrounded with the clouds' purple, stretched his arms to embrace the horizon, a black line against his light. Suddenly she stood even straighter, and, still shielding her eyes with one hand, with the other waved madly, in an ecstasy of excitement. The dog, lying beside her, stood up and shifted his weight eagerly, as if awaiting a word of permission or command.

Below the cliff a sailing boat stood into danger. But her steersman knew the coast, guiding her between two great rocks into an anchorage worn out of softer rock by the waves of millennia. White-sailed and green-hulled, brass trim winking and glowing in the setting sun, she glided behind rocks that seemed impassable from both sea and cliff, into a tiny sheltered cove that afforded protection from the sea for any ship and crew that made that harbour. From the deck a figure waved back, although at this distance it was impossible to make out any features or form—even to tell whether man or woman waved.

A word, and the dog was off, loping eagerly over the edge of the cliff, down an invisible path that meandered back and forth across the face of the cliff, taking advantage of every break in the cliff face and every bit of cover from the wind.

Then, even before the little ship had been lined to the dock, her sails furled and tackle stowed, the girl—for she was not yet far into womanhood—was well down the cliff, flying along the path in the dying light of the evening, surefooted on the rock, cape flying in the ocean breeze so that she resembled a great seabird. A torch from her pocket lighted her way in the dusk, and an answering light came from below, bobbing and weaving as the sailor climbed to meet her.

He was the quicker and, despite having moored the ship and having to climb, met her halfway. They stood close without touch, delighted.

Then a quick embrace, a soft kiss, a swift walk up the cliff-path, following the dog that ran ahead and back, ecstatic that his home was again one. Along the lane, past the cross, the monastery, and the last houses (now first), till they turned into the manor lane, the dog racing ahead to welcome them home.

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