

BALLEA WRITERS

Bealtaine, the annual national festival, promotes the participation of adults in the arts. This year, the festival organisers launched the fourth publication in the series titled 'The Consolation and other Short Stories'. One of the writers featured in this year's publication was Pat Goulding of Ballea Writer's Club.

A Different Voice

By PAT GOULDING

Sean stood back and took a last look at the cottage. Sadness threatened to overwhelm him as he locked the door and put the keys in his jacket pocket. The dog ran in circles around his feet. 'I suppose you want a last run on the beach, Billy,' Sean said.

It seemed as though the dog understood, as he immediately set off down the dunes, bounding over clumps of sea grass. Billy was a dog of doubtful parentage but certainly there was a touch of a Collie in him. There had always been a dog in this place called Billy, Nan called all her dogs by the same name after the first one she had had as a child.

Standing on the dunes, Sean could see the dog running at speed along the sand towards the rock pools. He remembered the first time he had come here from England with his mother. He too had run down the beach, amazed at the vast expanse of freedom ahead of him. The steady roar of the Atlantic rollers had held spellbound the boy who had only ever experienced the drone of traffic on the streets of London.

Sand filled his shoes as Sean slithered down the bank to the magnificent strand below. He had come here every summer for as long as he could remember. When he had turned seventeen, he had made the journey on his own. His father's job took his parents all over the world, but Sean was always happy to come to Kerry for the holidays. He felt drawn to this place by bonds and threads he could not even define.

His English granny had been kind but could not be compared with Kerry Nan. As a small child he had climbed onto her lap and instantly felt safe and warm, enfolded in the cushions of her comfortable body. Her soft crooning voice drifted at times to the Gaeilge, but he understood that her words spoke of love and security.

The sea was calm today. Little wavelets ran easily and quietly to the shore. As Sean walked, the sun broke through the clouds and reflecting on the smooth sea, created a kind of mirage. For an instant, Sean thought he saw Aisling dancing at the water's edge. The moment passed, but he could still see her in his mind's eye, could see her as she had been, back in the early sixties. A young girl, twirling like a ballerina at the edge of the water, arms outstretched, head thrown back, abandoning herself to the sheer joy of life.

There had been so much joy in both of them back then. They had been young, in love with life and each other. The world seemed a safe place then. He remembered the singsongs in the pub, where everyone had a ballad to sing. They sang of Ireland's struggles, its heroes and its legends. And they

danced. Oh, how they danced. He remembered walking on the beach at night with Aisling. One night she had been singing. Singing for the young man who did not know the historic events that had taken place here. She sang in a sweet, clear voice. He could almost hear her now as she repeated again and again the haunting words 'on the lonely Banna Strand'.

Sean shook his head to clear the bittersweet images. Those summers he had spent with the girl he hoped to marry had come to an abrupt end in 1969. He could still remember his grandmother's face as she said those awful words: 'Sean, a leanna, I'm thinking this should be your last summer visiting here with me for a while.'

'Why, Nan? Don't you want me anymore now that I've grown up or what?'

'Will you whist child, as if I wouldn't want to see my lovely boy. No boyeen. I'm afraid there are those hereabouts that don't take too kindly to the English people right now.'

'But Nan, you know I'm not English.'

'Aye, lad, I know that, but your accent and your name say different to some folk around here and Aisling Connors' father be one of them. I've heard the talk in the village. No lad, best you don't return until things up North settle down a bit.'

He had protested long and hard, had almost shouted at her, his beloved Nan, but she was adamant. Parting from Nan that summer had been heartbreaking and he had brushed away angry tears as he walked to the bus.

Sean had ground out his frustration in letters to Aisling and Nan, the two most important people in his life. Aisling's reply gave him no comfort. While she wrote of her love and longing for him, she too advised him to stay away. Nan wrote every week. She wrote about the little day-to-day happenings, the weather, the storms at sea, scraps of local news – but she never wrote of the sense of loss they felt. When he closed his eyes he could hear her soft voice, and almost smell the scent of lavender that had clung about her person. That was all he had now of the grandmother he loved so much.

When Sean finished University he got a job as a Civil Engineer. He begged Aisling to come to London and marry him. Sean knew what it cost Aisling to break the bond with her family, but she did come and they had been very happy together for some years.

Sean tried every way he knew how to make it up to Aisling for the sacrifice he had made for him. He suspected she was often lonely when he was at work. Then the children were born, one soon after the other and their lives were busy and fulfilled. When the bombings started in England, Aisling became morose. He found her in tears one evening and pleaded with her to tell him the reason.

In a small voice he told him. 'It's not you or the children. It's the people here. Whenever I go into a shop, they hear my Irish accent and say horrible things to be about the Irish. Today a woman said: "Why don't all you Paddies go back to your own country?" I've tried to reason with them and say that the majority of the Irish people hate what is happening here, but they don't listen. Oh, Sean, I want so badly to go home to Ireland.'

Sean scoured the Irish newspapers for a suitable job, but to no avail. Meanwhile he watched his wife grow old before his eyes. Hair that once hung in an auburn cascade around her shoulders was tinged with grey and lay limp about her thin face. The light had gone from her lovely green eyes, to be replaced by a deadness that never lifted. He berated himself constantly for his selfishness in bringing her to London. Eventually he turned to Nan for help.

Aisling returned to Ireland with the children. His grandmother welcomed them into her cottage while Sean continued to work in London, sending home money and hoping that soon we could be able to join them. The months apart turned to years and he worked longer and longer hours to try and abate his loneliness.

The phone call to tell him his grandmother was seriously ill and calling for him shocked him out of his numbness. He had to see her again. There was so much they had to say to each other. Sean got the first available flight, rented a car and drove through the night, his mind in turmoil.

The news when he arrived was not good. She had weakened considerably and was now close to death. Sean sat by her bed and held her thin, frail hand, trying to let her feel all the love that was in his heart. Nan opened her eyes, smiled and squeezed his hand.

'Lift me up, Sean. Put that pillow behind my head. I want to see you properly.' He feasted her eyes on his face while they spoke. 'I missed you so much, a leanna, during those dark years, but God sent Aisling and the two

little ones to me and they have brought me so much happiness in my old age. God bless you all and say a prayer for me when I'm gone. I'll be going to heaven soon, lad, but I think I'll just have a little sleep now.' Still holding his hand, Nan slipped peacefully from the world, and Sean cried heartfelt tears at her passing.

A few days later at the funeral, Sean found people shaking his hand, expressing their sympathy at this loss. They were people he never thought to shake hands with ever again. The Connors' family were conspicuous by their absence, and he could only guess at Aisling's pain. She seemed happier and healthier and the children were thriving, but the thought that he was the cause of the estrangement from her own people lay heavy on his heart. A conversation with an old acquaintance left Sean with a possible contact for a job in Cork. Within a month Sean had the job and moved his family there to live with him. The letter from the solicitor telling him that his grandmother had left him her cottage posed a problem. He didn't think he could ever live there again and yet he hated the thought of selling it.

By now the sun was sinking in the sky and casting long shadows on the beach. It was time to leave. He whistled for Billy.

'Look at you, soaking wet. I'll have to get something to cover the car seat. The boot is already full of Nan's things.' Billy shook himself vigorously, spraying water in all directions. Returning from the cottage with a blanket, Sean noticed a figure standing by the gate. 'I suppose you'll sell the place now that herself is gone,' said a voice in the gathering loom.

'I don't think we've met,' Sean said. 'Then the fault lies with none other than myself. I'm Mike Connors. Your grandmother was well respected in these parts and I was sorry to hear of her passing. We were too ashamed to come to the funeral. Her grandson could be nothing if not a decent man, and I'm sorry I have been such a stubborn fool for so many years. Is there any chance, do you think, that Aisling could forgive me and maybe come to visit us sometime? Her mother's heart is fairly broken by all this foolishness. Would you ask her, Sean, please? I'd be very grateful.'

'Yes, I'll ask her,' replied a stunned Sean.

'I'll bid you good night then, and God speed your journey.' Mike Connors moved away and was swallowed up in the darkness.

Sean looked back at the cottage one more time, then raise his eyes to the sky and fancied he could see a new star twinkling there.

'Well Nan', he thought, 'you're only up there five minutes and already you're producing miracles.'