

THE ROAD TO MANRESA

"Now, there are those who claim Donovan ne'er enjoyed bein' a funeral director. On the other hand 'twas the only way he could keep his business goin'..." Tom Ryan paused and raised his hand as if to make a point. Then, without bringing it down, he continued. "Without the funeral agency his flower shop wouldn't make it.

"Donovan learned the flower business in America, though he couldn't understand why, since Americans had made their cities unfit for flowers, they'd be so concerned for 'em that they'd pay to have 'em - e'en at funerals. Another thing Donovan could ne'er understand either was why people who all their lives had lived in overcrowded city poverty had to spend three nights in as plush a place as an American funeral parlor at a time when their bodies could no longer enjoy 'em. Donovan tried to treat the dead here the same way, but he just didn't make it, though he did make a pretty pence when he sold the house which the English used as barracks when they were still here, protectin' us against enemies who had no cause with us. Not that we asked the English to come, mind ye, but they had to protect us anyway, as they had insisted eversince they came in the first place.

Furthermore, the funeral business ain't been that good lately. People just don't seem to die like they used to. They just want to go elsewhere, that's what. Granted they all promise to come back, mind ye, but, if they do, then it's a case that they see us without us seein' 'em.

"Though Brian O'Donnell claims he did see his uncle. Poor Brian. Stayed so shocked by the sight that for a week he'd not show up at Callaghan's. Feared returnin' home afterwards. Strange he'd ne'er seen anyone buried here pop out o' nowhere, e'en though he'd been passin' the cemetery on the way to an fro for years. And then he got the letter from Canada, where some lawyer sends this document which he had to take all the way to the Westminster Bank in Dublin. To hear 'im tell it, 'twas just a piece o' paper that the bankers looked at and, after makin' 'im sign a few documents, paid 'im three hundred and twenty pounds for - after tellin' 'im how sorry they were his uncle had died. O'Donnell didn't know which uncle it was they were talkin' about, though it did gi' 'im reason to mourn the loss while still in Dublin. O'Donnell's no different from the rest o' us.

Occasionally we all need a drink to celebrate, or forget.

"And, naturally, Donovan lost another client when the uncle died away from home, though he insisted, now that O'Donnell had enough money to pay for his own funeral, that he put some down in advance and assure 'imself he'd have a lovely funeral and not be a victim of inflation after he's dead. O'Donnell said he'd think it over, though he never did tell anyone he had. In any case, the night was calm, but one of those winter nights when it gets dark early, though the moon shone and the clouds were few.

O'Donnell had awailed at Callaghan's and perhaps he'd had one too many, or the pipe smoke had gotten to 'im. We left together though and, don't know if ye noticed it on the way, what with the dust yer motorcycle raised perhaps ye didn't, but, just down the road at the bottom of the hill, a batch of trees blocks the view to the cemetery which in English

churches is generally behind 'em, where the garden should be, but which we prefer to keep a bit away from the house of the Lord so that if souls pop out they'd have room to move without hindrance 'til they return to wherever they belong, though we doubt they'd ever get out of hell, as well they shouldn't.

"In any case, O'Donnell turns down the road which is the best shortcut to his cottage, otherwise he'd have to climb the hill which that night was a little bit too much, his legs bein' not too strong that evenin'. But, then, as I said, he's been shortcuttin' for years without incident, though this time 'twasn't just to be. Not that his uncle's figure said anything, mind ye. But poor O'Donnell was left without a drop of warm blood when he saw the movin' shadow bounce off the headstones, just as the moon passed through the sparse clouds above.

"Ye should ha' heard 'im tell it when he finally decided to revisit with us.

"When he suddenly stiffened strongly enough to run, he took off like a snake wearin' legs, without e'er lookin' back. He was sure 'twas his uncle, whichever he was, probably criticizin' 'im for havin' ignored Donovan. And so the followin' week, in plain daylight, he paid for his funeral, flowers and all. And, just to make sure everythin' would go right, he dropped by Callaghan's and stood right here, where he bought a round for ev'ryone. "Twas really a funeral a man could be proud of. O'Donnell will never ha' a better one than that when he dies. That I assure ye. Besides, now that Donovan no longer owns the big house, there's no place to celebrate in O'Donnell's cottage, just as there weren't when O'Brien died and we'd all have to pay last respects while standing outside. Fortunately, though 'twas damp all week, it didn't rain, or O'Brien would ha' to be dead all by his lonely self with only his widow to see 'im off. Terrible when a body is dead all by himself. 'Tain't no fun. Nobody to talk to, for one thing.

"In any case, Donovan got rid of the big house, what with people wantin' to be buried from home, and the English wantin' a place to stay, but the agency did thrive with the flower business. Not that they'd be real flowers, mind ye. Thanks to his connections abroad, Donovan knew where to get the best artificial specimens that ye could stick at the gravesite and know they'd never die, like the real flowers. Ne'er let it be said Donovan lacked for imagination, which is really what the world needs to convince anyone that dyin' is worthwhile, though I ain't never seen anyone jump into somebody else's casket prior to its closin' just to accompany the dead into the great beyond. But imagination is important, and Donovan couldn't be blamed for havin' it. Like the time Squire Deneher's brother died. What a crazy bugger he'd been. Never cared much for work, mind ye. But, oh, what a dresser he was. And so Donovan had no trouble convincin' the Squire that his brother had to be laid out in different outfits each night, just as the dearly departed would ha' wanted if he could hav'only had some say about it.

"Then there'd be those who'd say Donovan had no respect for the dead, that all he wanted was to make money off 'em, somethin' he'd learned abroad, which wasn't true. Had it been, then Donovan would ha' never introduced Mother's Day and those pretty imported cards from America

which are now printed in Ireland. Granted the poetry ain't too good, but one can always sing to it. 'Gi' Mother Flowers For Her Day' he'd tell everyone. Now, is that wantin' to make money off the dead? Granted by the time most people had spare money to buy flowers, most mothers would already have gone on, but Donovan wasn't responsible for that. Life is life, my friend. And so what if Donovan encouraged everyone to write to the migrated relatives askin' them to remember Mother on her day by sneakin' a quid or two the next time they wrote - some of which ne'er made it to their destination given the English-style thievery at the Post. 'Tis said that, from the same kettle steam that proved the water was hot enough for tea, the Post workers at Dublin would open the envelopes, just to see what would fall out. A thieving bunch, they are, I tell ye. Thank God the English ain't no longer here, even if the letters openers be Irish.

"Naturally, because of his profession, Donovan always wore black suits and hats, which is as it should be out of respect for the dead. Though his tie was somewhat on the dark blue side to prove that tragedy hadn't befallen 'im. I hear tell, however, that in America there are some Africans who wear white when their own die. Heathen. Disrespectful heathen, I say. Black is the color of death and there ain't no gettin' away from it. If the Lord hadn't wanted it otherwise, he would not ha' invented it. Now, why does Father at St. Margaret's wear black? Because that's the way it is. That's why. The same way that when young people become priests the church honors them for their knowledge by shavin' a zero on their heads, to remind 'em not to put on airs, for above 'em there's nothing. Priests, I tell ye, are superior people leadin' the good life, even if they have to do it with no sex - in absolute purity, so they can forgive those who have it occasionally.

"And if ye think sex ain't a sin, then ye don't know much, I tell ye. Forgive me, Father, I say as I make me confession. And it won't take long before Father is askin' how many times I had it in the month and in what position. Respect yer wife, he always says, though one time I almost forgot. Someone like ye stopped off at the pub and, as he finished his cigars, left the empty pack on the table without crushin' it. I opened it after he left, hopin' he hadn't consumed all the smokes, when I noticed he had left some pictures - probably taken in England - of people in several positions of immorality. At first I hid 'em, figurin' I shouldn't entice nobody. Then, in the privacy of the cottage, I had a look. 'What're ye lookin' at?' The wife says. 'Nothin','" I replies, probably turnin' ghostly white. But she insists on seein' em. Her mouth dropped open, like that of someone havin' a stroke. 'Tom,' she says, 'oh, Tom. Ye devil, ye.' That night she insisted on snugglin' close with her back toward me, the softness of her body arousin' me. I thought of what they showed in the pictures. Sinful, I tell ye. If the Lord had wanted God-fearin' people to do it that way, He wouldn't have protected the woman by givin' her larger buttocks than man's. Though they say that in China women don't have larger buttocks, though they do it a different way because of how they're cut. Which I can't vouch for since I've never met a Chinese in my life. Nor would I care to, or to marry one, for that matter. For had the Lord wanted me to, He would ha' seen that the Chinese were born in Ireland, where they eat spuds, rather than rice.

"Now, as ye were sayin' when ye stopped to ask for instructions and get away from the rain, ye're headed for Manresa. Well, it ain't far, though ye'd better back up for a head of steam if ye want the machine to make it up the Shore Road hill, 'less ye wish to push once ye're

half way. Granted ye won't see Manresa once ye get to the top, but ye'll see the fork on the road, the left prong goin' north into the interior, the right downhill into Rochdale, down along the sea. 'Tis a town like this one, though, whereas ours pulls in as if in a bay, Rochdale sticks out to challenge the sea. Whate'er ye do, though, don't go there, or ye'll never see Manresa, unless ye double back to the hilltop. Can't miss it.

"There's a big building where the prongs meet that was once a shoe factory, although 'tis now silent. The English owners felt that, once the republic was born, there'd be no advantage to the factory here. Better to let us buy boots directly made in Scotland, or where'er the English Jack flies. Safer that way, they felt. Others say 'tis just the depression that's killed off the market, and point it out by askin' the last time we bought a pair of shoes. In any case, the building stands there and perhaps someday it'll be treated as another castle in the land, decayed, empty, and historical. Ireland has always been a monument to the past.

In any case, ye'll travel a level curved road for a time until the land slowly drops towards the east, although by that time, ye'll have lost contact with the sea. The road curves several times and occasionally ye'll see some thatch cottages, either alongside it, or further in that will ne'er let ye forget where ye are. Follow the stone walls as far as they go, and, when ye get to the end, well, ye won't be in Manresa, but what does it matter? It's up that way, somewhere. Have them orient ye at the pub."

Tom Ryan paused once again. He had not touched the stout that earlier in the morning had been poured into his pint glass. The stranger, on the other hand, had finished his. He put a coin on the counter and looked at Callaghan who throughout Ryan's dissertation had been leaning quietly behind the bar, his elbows firmly planted on the counter. The publican picked up the money. "Suppose I'd better be going," the stranger finally said. He had an American accent.

"May God keep ye in His wind," Ryan replied as the stranger moved towards the door. Once outside, he climbed on his motorcycle and pressed the pedal twice. The engine finally caught enough power to spark it into action. "And don't forget what I told ye about goin' back before tryin' it up the hill," Ryan shouted from the doorway.

"I won't," the cyclist said waving and smiling to the Irishman.

He turned the machine towards the direction where he had come from and moved a few yards until he felt far enough from the hill to develop his speed. As he passed the pub again, Ryan was standing at the door, waving. The cyclist waved back while his machine sped between the row of small stone houses that made up the town. Maureen looked out the window, as she always seemed to do, watching the passing scene as if she had been designated time's only witness. The door to St. Margaret's stood partly open, as if no one realized that there are places where it is no longer safe for icons, chalices, vestments and all that people hold in their faith to be left unprotected. The machine started gaining on the hill, straining towards the top, where the fork on the road awaited. Once it had reached it, the cyclist aimed towards the side of the road and came to a stop. He looked down, towards Rochdale. The town

reached into the sea as if looking towards a point that only ended where the sky met the water. Closer in, at the rocky black and brown shore, a white line of water moved back and forth as it tried to pierce the land. The man then looked towards his left and observed the empty former shoe factory, quiet and lifeless - a pile of bricks and stones that, no matter how long they were to last, would never reach the stage of a decent ruin. He wondered how many people had worked there. He then aimed his machine along the left prong, a level road which, except for the factory, lay unobstructed as it split the green land on both sides. His had been a strange morning, one of wonder and learning. He had stopped to ask directions, only to find himself little by little in Tom Ryan.

Surely Ryan was isolated, but, in a way, so was he. Ryan had been taught to see a specific aspect to his life and had learned it well.

For all his drawbacks, Ryan was a man who felt certain in his domain, even if forces beyond him constantly touched a life which he kept unchanged. Had Ryan met a Chinese woman riding a motorcycle who had stopped by for instructions, no force on earth would have persuaded him that her vagina was not horizontal, for that is what he had grown to believe since he first learned that Chinese existed. Nor would he ever dare find out, sin being a timeless norm that kept his life on the right, even if incorrect, path. And what if his stout got warm? Where did it say it must be enjoyed cold, as if enjoyment were something that could be determined by anyone except the one partaking of it? There was no difference between Ryan and anyone else, either. Like the motorcyclist, Ryan also moved through time and space, the only difference between the two being that Ryan did not have a machine to take him into the next stop-off point. His conclusions, therefore, fit his being, just as the motorcyclist's trip to Manresa would eventually fill a part of his own. That Ryan didn't seem to extend beyond where he was, therefore, was no different from those who search, eventually coming to the end of their journey. They, too, will never be able to discuss accurately and exactly what they had been unable to have seen, or known.

The road curved gently as the high plateau started flowing into a downward hill. The motorcyclist could feel the sun's heat on his head and shoulders as the gentle breeze of his forward speed cooled him simultaneously. He passed a horse-drawn cart coming in the opposite direction, a mongrel dog faithfully trailing behind unconcerned with his presence. He waved to a man sitting on the stone wall that lined the road and separated it from the fields. The man tipped his felt hat in response. The cyclist wondered how the man had gotten there until, as Ryan had predicted, he reached a point on the road where he could no longer see the sea. Away in the distance, a cluster of houses started coming into view telling him he was approaching another town.

Perhaps Manresa. Perhaps some other place. In any case, he'd ask, and ask - until there were no longer any answers. Until, like Ryan, he finally had his own version of a story to tell.

Manuel L. Ponte

St. Louis, Missouri.