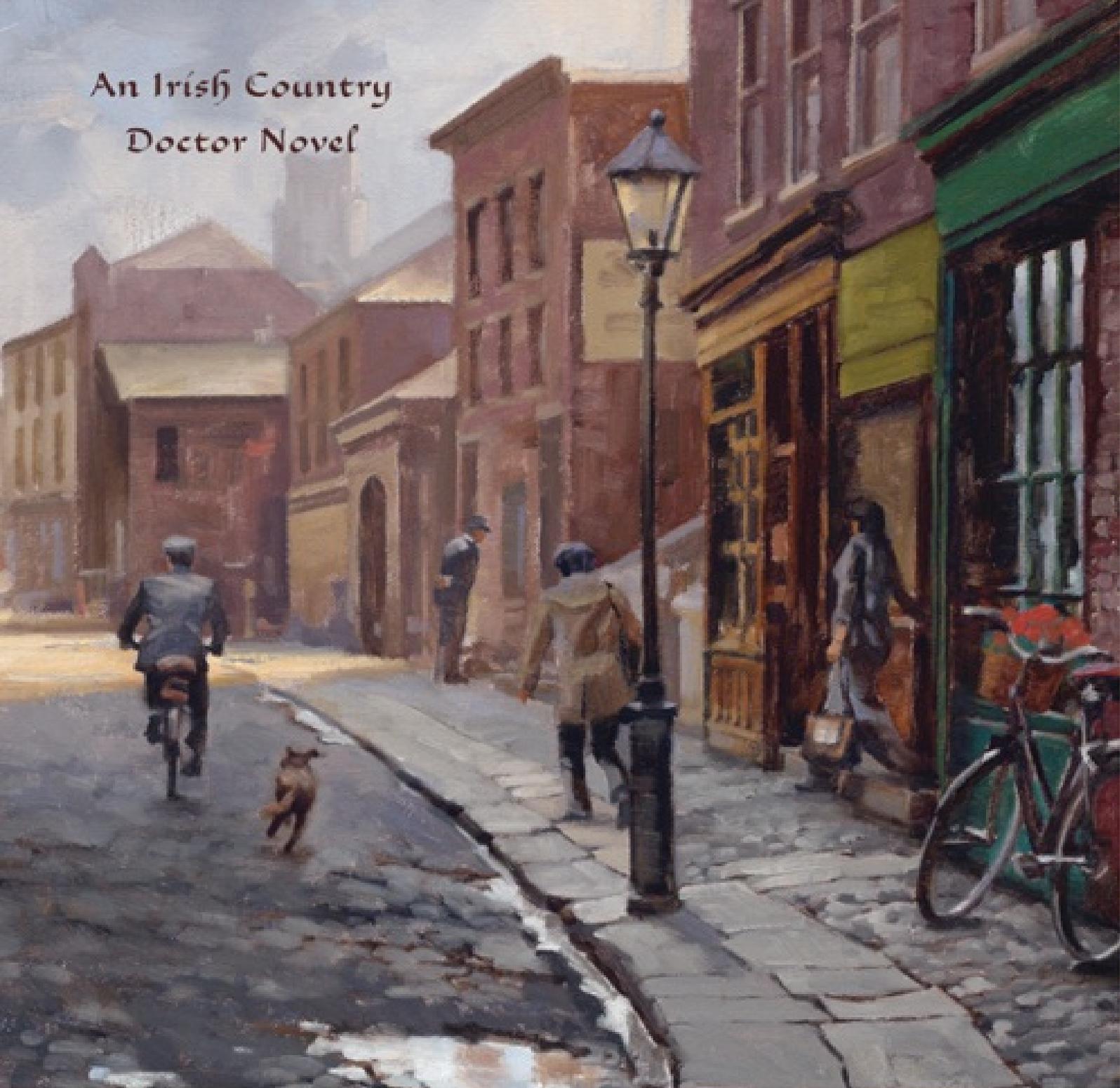


*An Irish Country
Doctor Novel*



A DUBLIN
STUDENT DOCTOR
Patrick Taylor

New York Times Bestselling Author of *An Irish Country Doctor*



*A Dublin
Student Doctor*

❖ *An Irish Country Novel* ❖

PATRICK TAYLOR



A Tom Doherty Associates Book
New York

To Dorothy

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The Librarian of the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland,
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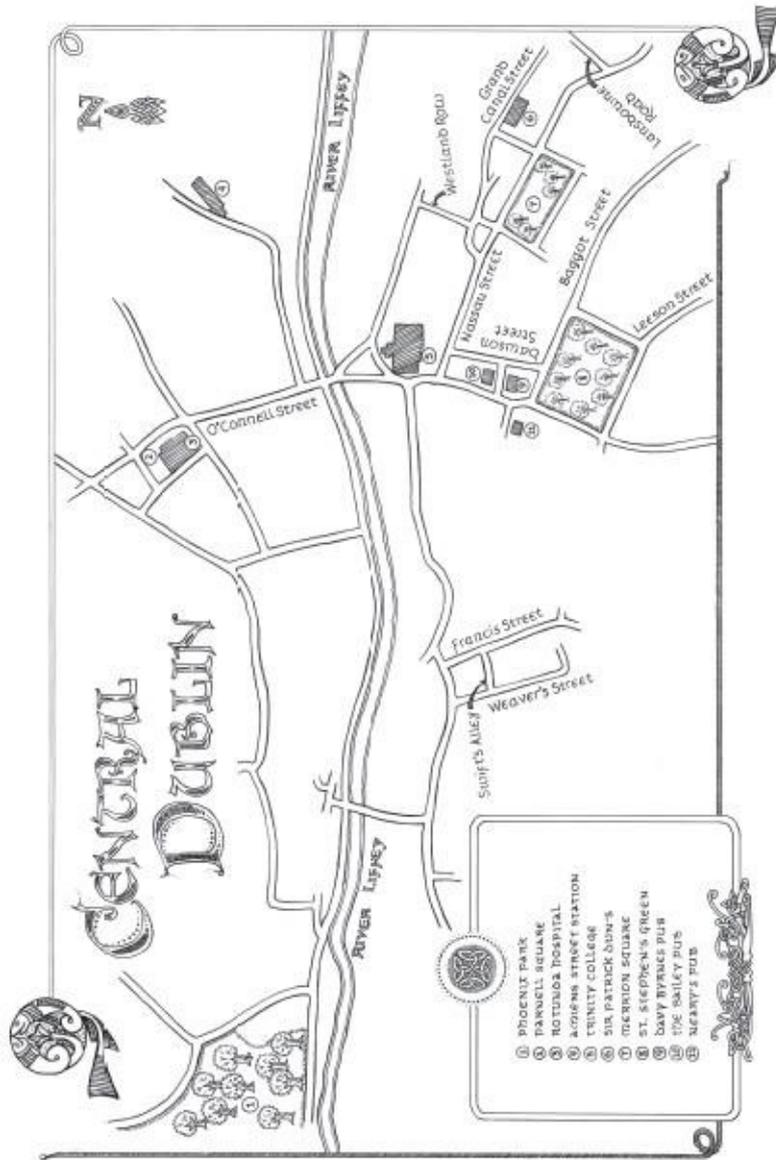
The Librarian of the Rotunda Hospital and her staff.

My limitless questions and requests for photocopying were dealt with by all of these experts with the grace of nobles and the patience of Job.

The people of Cootehall, County Roscommon, and Dublin City who allowed an Ulsterman to renew his feel for the life and the speech patterns in the Republic's rural and metropolitan regions.

To you all, Doctor Fingal Flahertie O'Reilly and I offer our most sincere thanks.





CONTENTS

[Title Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Maps](#)

[1. It's a Long, Long Road from Which There Is No Return](#)

[2. It Is a Wise Father that Knows His Own Child](#)

[3. I Feared It Might Injure the Brain](#)

[4. A Memory of Yesterday's Pleasures](#)

[5. The Fleeting Image of a Shade](#)

[6. Mother Will Be There](#)

[7. Social Comfort, in a Hospital](#)

[8. City of the Soul](#)

[9. There Shall Be Weeping and Gnashing of Teeth](#)

[10. For This Relief Much Thanks](#)

[11. Nazi Germany Had Become a Menace](#)

[12. Even My Lungs Are Affected](#)

[13. We Will Go into a Public House](#)

[14. Have Felt My Soul in a Kiss](#)

[15. 'Tis the Season to Be Jolly](#)

[16. We'll Keep Our Christmas Merry Still](#)

[17. Why He a Wauling Bagpipe](#)

[18. Heal What Is Wounded](#)

[19. The Heart No Longer Stirred](#)

[20. The Feathered Race with Pinions Skims the Air](#)

[21. Too Late, Too Late](#)

[22. In Poverty, Hunger, and Dirt](#)

[23. Eating the Bitter Bread of Banishment](#)

[24. And Great Was the Fall of It](#)

[25. That Where Mystery Begins](#)

[26. The Stag at Eve Had Drunk His Fill](#)

[27. The Fever and the Fret](#)

[28. These Things into My Ear](#)

[29. The Sensation of a Short, Sharp, Shock](#)

[30. Children Casual as Birds](#)

- [31. It Is Never Good to Bring Bad News](#)
[32. Examinations Are Formidable, Even to the Best Prepared](#)
[33. A Disinclination to Inflict Pain](#)
[34. A Time to Every Purpose Under Heaven](#)
[35. You Can Cut That Right Out](#)
[36. Windy Night; a Rainy Morrow](#)
[37. Must Often Wipe a Bloody Nose](#)
[38. I Am Disappointed](#)
[39. Success Is Counted Sweetest](#)
[40. The Foxes Have Holes](#)
[41. From His Mother's Womb Untimely Ripp'd](#)
[42. Give Crowns and Pounds and Guineas, But Not Your Heart Away](#)
[43. To Change What We Can; To Better What We Can](#)
[44. Home and Rest on the Couch](#)
[45. Blood Will Have Blood](#)
[46. This Is the Beginning of the End](#)
[47. Vaulting Ambition, Which O'erleaps Itself](#)
[48. If You Can Meet with Success and Failure](#)
[49. The Wheel Is Come Full Circle](#)

[Afterword](#)
[Glossary](#)
[Author's Note](#)
[By Patrick Taylor](#)
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1

It's a Long, Long Road from Which There Is No Return

Fingal Flahertie O'Reilly, *Doctor* Fingal Flahertie O'Reilly, edged the long-bonnetted Rover out of the car park. "Lord Jasus," he remarked, "but this twenty-fourth day of April in the year of our Lord 1965 has been one for the book of lifetime memories." He smiled at Kitty O'Hallorhan in the passenger's seat. "For all kinds of reasons," he said, "and now that the Downpatrick Races are over, it's home to Ballybucklebo." He accelerated.

Kitty yelled, "Will you slow down?" then said more gently, "Fingal, there are pedestrians and cyclists. I'd rather not see any in the ditch." The afternoon sun highlighted the amber flecks in her grey eyes. She put slim fingers on his arm.

"Just for you, Kitty." He slowed and whistled "Slow Boat to China." "All right in the back?"

"Fine, Fingal," said O'Reilly's assistant, young Doctor Barry Laverty.

"Grand, so." Mrs. Maureen "Kinky" Kincaid was O'Reilly's housekeeper, as she had been for Doctor Flanagan. Fingal had met Kinky when he'd come as an assistant to Thómas Flanagan in 1938. She'd stayed on when a thirty-seven-year-old O'Reilly returned in 1946 from his service in the Second World War and bought the general practice from Doctor Flanagan's estate.

They'd been a good nineteen years, he thought as he put the car into a tight bend between two rows of ancient elms. So had his years as a medical student at Dublin's Trinity College in the '30s.

"Jasus thundering Murphy." O'Reilly stamped on the brake. The Rover shuddered to a halt five yards from a man standing waving his arms.

O'Reilly's bushy eyebrows met. He could feel his temper rise and the tip of his bent nose blanch. "Everyone all right?" he roared, and was relieved to hear a chorus of reassurance. He hurled his door open and stamped up the road. "What in the blue bloody blazes are you doing standing there waving your arms like an out-of-kilter semaphore? I could have squashed you flatter than a flaming flounder-fish."

The stranger wore Wellington boots, moleskin trousers, and a hacking jacket. He had a russet beard, a squint, and was no more than five foot two. O'Reilly expected him at least to take a step back, apologise, but he stood his ground.

"There's no need for youse 'til be losing the bap, so there's not. There's been an accident, and I'm here to stop big buggers like youse driving into it, so I am. See for yourself." He pointed to a knot of people and the slowly rotating rear wheel of a motorbike that lay on its side.

"Accident?" said O'Reilly. He spun on his heel. "Barry. Grab my bag and come here." He turned back. "I'm Doctor O'Reilly. Doctor Laverty's coming."

“Doctor? Thank God for that, sir. A motorcyclist took a purler on an oil slick, you know. Somebody’s gone for the ambulance and police.”

“Here you are.” Barry handed O’Reilly his bag. “What’s up?”

“Motorbike accident.” He spoke to the short man. “You’d be safer back down the road where drivers can see you before they’re on top of you.”

“Right enough. I’ll go, sir.” He started walking.

O’Reilly yelled, “Kitty. Kinky. There’s been an accident. Stay with the car.” Kitty would have the wit to pull the car over to the verge. “Come on, Barry.” O’Reilly marched straight to the little crowd. Time to use the voice that could be heard over a gale when he’d served on the battleship HMS *Warspite*. “We’re doctors. Let us through.”

Ruddy-cheeked country faces turned. Murmuring people shuffled aside and a path opened.

A motorbike lay on the road, an exclamation mark at the end of two long black scrawls of rubber. The engine ticked and the stink of oil and burnt tyre hung over the smell of ploughed earth from a field and the almond scent of whin flowers.

A middle-aged woman knelt beside the rider. The victim’s head was turned away from O’Reilly, but there could only be one owner of that red thatch. A duncher lay a few yards away. It irritated O’Reilly that Ulstermen wouldn’t wear crash helmets but favoured cloth caps, worn with the peak at the back.

He knelt beside the woman and set his bag on the ground. “He’s unconscious, he’s breathing regular, his airway’s clear, his pulse is eighty and regular, and he’s not bleeding. There don’t seem to be any bones broken,” she said, and added, “I’m a first-aider, you know.”

“Thank you, Mrs.?”

“Meehan. Rosie Meehan.”

O’Reilly smiled at her. “Donal? Donal?” he said gently. Fifteen minutes ago he’d seen Ballybucklebo’s arch schemer, Donal Donnelly, riding the motorbike from the car park.

No reply.

O’Reilly grabbed the man’s wrist. Good. Mrs. Meehan was right; the pulse was strong and regular. “Donal,” he said more loudly, “Donal.”

Donal’s face was chalky. He wore his raincoat reversed and buttoned over his back. It was the practice of country men when riding motorbikes. It stopped the wind of passage getting through.

O’Reilly was hesitant to move Donal. He could have a broken neck. Better to wait for the ambulance. The first law of medicine was *Primum non nocere*. First do no harm. O’Reilly bent lower. “Donal?”

Donal’s eyelids fluttered. “Numuh?”

Better, O’Reilly thought. Donal might only be concussed. If that were the case he should start regaining consciousness. But you could never be certain about head injuries. The damage might range from a simple concussion with complete recovery through to serious brain injury leading to paralysis, permanent brain damage, and even death. O’Reilly gritted his teeth. Donal had a new wife and a wean on the way. O’Reilly’s heart went out to the pregnant Julie Donnelly, née MacAteer. He heard the *nee-naw* of an approaching siren. O’Reilly leant over. “Donal?”

Donal's eyes flew open. "Doctor O'Reilly? What are youse doing here?" He struggled to rise. "I shouldn't be in my bed."

Donal recognised O'Reilly. That was a good sign even if he was unclear where he was. O'Reilly put a restraining hand on the man's shoulder. "Lie still. You had an accident."

Donal put his hand to his head. "I must have hit my nut a right clatter," he said. "It's pounding to beat Bannagher, so it is."

"Do you know what day it is?" O'Reilly asked.

Donal frowned. "Uh? Saturday. We made a wheen of money on the oul gee-gees at the races." He grinned like a small boy who had answered the teacher's question correctly. "And this here's the road to Ballybucklebo." A look of concern crossed his face. "Jesus, is Paddy Regan's motorbike all right? It's only on loan." Donal tried to rise.

"Stay put," O'Reilly said, and smiled. If Donal knew about events immediately preceding his accident it was probable he had suffered only a minor concussion. Even so, O'Reilly would never forget a footballer who'd been knocked out, recovered, gone back to finish the match, and died from a brain haemorrhage two hours later.

The *nee-naw, nee-naw* grew louder.

"I don't need no ambulance," Donal said. "I'm for going home, so I am."

"Sorry, Donal," O'Reilly said, "but you'll be spending tonight in the Royal Victoria Hospital."

"Och, Doctor—that's daft. I've a motorbike to get back to—"

"The Royal. For observation," O'Reilly said. "No arguments. I'll take care of the bike."

"But—"

"Donal, you're going to hospital," O'Reilly said as if speaking to a not overly bright child. "That's final." He stood and spoke to Barry. "I'll do a quick neurological exam once he's in the ambulance. Establish a baseline in case he gets worse. I'll go up to the Royal with him. Kitty's the senior nursing sister on the neurosurgical ward there. She'll want to come too. She can go with Donal in the back of the ambulance. God knows she's observed a hundred times more head injuries than you and I put together. She'll keep an eye on him and warn me if his condition deteriorates. You drive Kinky and the Rover home."

"I'll go and get Kitty." Barry started to turn as a yellow Northern Ireland Hospitals Authority ambulance drew up and its siren was turned off.

"In a minute," O'Reilly said. "Once the police have come and done whatever they have to do, measure things, take photos and statements, they'll have you fill in forms. When you're done, get them to give you a hand to load the bike into the boot of the Rover. At least Paddy Regan won't need to come all the way here to collect it."

"Paddy? I'll let him know," Barry said.

O'Reilly turned. "Do you hear that, Donal? We'll get the bike home for you."

"Thanks, Doc. But what about Julie? She'll go spare if I don't get home too."

O'Reilly frowned. "You've no phone, Donal, have you?"

"No, sir."

"I'll nip round and see Julie," Barry said. "Tell her what's happened. That she's not to worry."

“Thanks, Doc.”

Barry turned to leave as two men approached wearing peaked bus drivers’ caps, silver-buttoned blue uniforms, and carrying a stretcher. The bigger one, a burly, open-faced man, spoke to the first-aid lady. “What’s the story, Rosie?” Of course he’d know her. They’d both be Downpatrick locals.

She nodded at O’Reilly. “Better ask your man there, Alfie. That there’s Doctor O’Reilly.”

The man turned to O’Reilly and grinned. “From Ballybucklebo, the wee village near Hollywood?”

“That’s right. How did you—?” He frowned. Alfie did look familiar.

“I met you at a rugby game, sir.” He pointed at Donal. “What do you reckon about your man?”

“He came off the bike and hit his head. He was unconscious for a while but he’s awake now. Concussion at least and I’d like him in the Royal for observation. You know head injuries can—”

“I do know. Too bloody well.” The ambulance man frowned. “My brother, God rest him, got a smack on the nut with a hurley ball. He bled into his skull and died.” There was a catch in Alfie’s voice. “He was only nineteen.”

“I’m sorry,” O’Reilly said.

“Aye well.” Alfie tugged at his tie. “Standing here both legs the same length won’t get your man there to the Royal. What do you want us to do, Doc?”

“Before you move him, I’ll give his fore and hind legs a once-over. Then I want you to take him, me, and Sister O’Hallorhan, she’ll be here in a minute, up to the Royal. We’ll radio ahead to arrange for him to be seen in casualty, get things rolling, then have him admitted to the observation ward.”

“Right, Doc. Come on, Bert.” The ambulance men aligned their stretcher alongside Donal as O’Reilly examined Donal’s arms and legs through his clothes. “You’re right, Mrs. Meehan. There are no bones broken,” he said, and stepped back to let the attendants do their work. “Thank you, Mrs. Meehan,” O’Reilly said. “You did a great job. Now go on home and get your tea.”

She smiled, bobbed her head, and left.

O’Reilly climbed aboard the ambulance. “For crying out loud,” Donal said, and tried to sit up. “This is daft, so it is. Going to all this trouble. Sure couldn’t I just get the bike—”

O’Reilly made a noise like an enraged gorilla, one whose last banana had been stolen. “For the last time, Donal Donnelly, you’re going to the Royal. This is not a bleeding debating society—so shut up, lie down, and let me examine you.”

“I will, Doctor O’Reilly, sir,” a clearly chastened Donal said—and did.

Fingal satisfied himself that Donal’s reflexes were normal, that his pupils were equal in size and reacting to light, his pulse was strong and steady and his blood pressure was normal. The only worrying thing was a bruise over Donal’s right temple. The parietal bone there was thin. There was a chance the skull was fractured. O’Reilly didn’t need to reassure himself that getting Donal to hospital was the right thing to do. The middle meningeal artery lay beneath the parietal bone. O’Reilly climbed out to meet Kitty.

Barry was providing information to a uniformed Royal Ulster Constabulary officer.

The man had a heavy pistol in a hip holster. Good for Barry, O'Reilly thought, one less chore for me, and frankly, the sooner we get Donal to hospital the happier I'll be. If his condition did deteriorate, speed of intervention was critical.

The second ambulance attendant climbed into the back and offered his hand to Kitty.

"Hop in," O'Reilly said. "All his baseline findings are normal, but please keep an eye on him. I'll be in the front, so if he starts to go downhill, let me know."

"I will," she said, taking the proffered hand.

He watched her climb in and as she did so her skirt rode up. God, but she had a well-curved calf, O'Reilly thought, but then, he grinned, she always had.

Barry finished with the officer. "Thanks for seeing to that, Barry," O'Reilly said. "You'll have to look after the practice tomorrow too because Lord knows what time I'll get home."

"That's all right."

"Off you trot." O'Reilly noticed his bag where he'd left it on the ground. "Take my bag to the car while you're at it. The ambulance will be fully equipped."

Barry paused. "How will you and Kitty get home?"

"Kitty lives only a short walk from the hospital. I'll get a train. Now go on. It's time we were off."

O'Reilly stuck his head into the ambulance. "Everything okay, Kitty?"

"No change."

"Good." As O'Reilly walked to the front of the ambulance, the last colours of the sunset flared and died. A straggling clamour of rooks flapped untidily across the dimming horizon and Venus rose, a glittering forerunner of the myriad stars that would spangle the sky's dark dome.

He climbed into the passenger side and shut the cab's door. "How's about ye, Doc?" Alfie, the driver, asked.

"Grand," said O'Reilly. "The lad in the back's a patient of mine." And, he thought, as close to being a friend as I'll let any of my patients be. "I think he'll be all right."

"Right," said the driver, "let's get going." He switched on his flashing lights, but not the siren, put the vehicle in gear, and started for Belfast.

"Can we radio ahead?" O'Reilly asked. "Let the neurosurgery people know we're coming?"

"Aye, certainly, sir." The driver lifted a microphone, depressed a button, and announced, "Ambulance despatch, ambulance despatch. This is delta alpha two sixer, over."

In moments O'Reilly had relayed the details to the dispatcher, who would contact the neurosurgery registrar on call. "Who is the senior neurosurgeon on call tonight?" Just in case, and the thought niggled at him, just in case that bruise at the side of Donal's head was a sign of more ominous damage.

"Mister Greer, sir." The voice from the speaker was distorted.

"Thank you, despatch. Delta alpha two sixer. Out." O'Reilly handed the mike back. "Thank you," he said.

Charlie Greer. He and O'Reilly went back to 1931, and that wasn't yesterday. He hoped Donal would have no need of Charlie's services, but if Donal did deteriorate he couldn't ask for a better brain surgeon.

“How long until we get to Belfast?” O’Reilly asked.

“About an hour and a half—and if you’ll excuse me, sir, I’d better concentrate on driving. The road’s twisty here.”

O’Reilly said, “Pay me no heed.” He sat staring through the window as rays from the dome flashers flickered and the headlights’ beams picked out fluttering moths, the verges and hedges, and dry stone walls draped with straggling brambles. He wondered about Donal. O’Reilly knew that no amount of worrying was going to help anything. Kitty would let him know if anything changed, and if it did, Donal was well on his way to being in the hands of a bloody good neurosurgeon. Charles Edward Greer, M.D., F.R.C.S., from Ballymoney, County Antrim. A long time ago he had been a rugby-playing medical student like O’Reilly at Trinity College Dublin.

O’Reilly had met student nurse Kitty O’Hallorhan while he and Charlie, along with their friends Bob Beresford and Donald Cromie, and a nasty piece of work called Ronald Hercules Fitzpatrick who now practiced in the Kinnegar, had been working in Sir Patrick Dun’s Hospital. Back in 1934.

He’d been twenty-five years old and had completed nearly three years of his medical studies at Trinity College Dublin.

Dublin had been richly described by the playwright Denis Johnston as, “Strumpet city in the sunset. So old, so sick with memories.” The place had memories for O’Reilly, all right.

Trinity College with its Library’s Long Room wherein resided the Book of Kells and the Brian Boru harp. The pubs, Davy Byrnes, the Bailey, Neary’s, and the Stag’s Head. Great broad O’Connell Street crossing Anna Livia, the Dubliners’ name for the River Liffey. The tenement districts like the Liberties, the Coombe, and Monto, filthy, squalid, vermin-plagued, but with indomitable inhabitants. O’Connell Street and, halfway up it, Nelson’s Pillar beside the General Post Office, from the steps of which Pádraig Pearse had read out the Proclamation of the Irish Republic at Eastertide 1916. Its façade and Ionic columns were still pockmarked with British bullets from the siege during the Rising.

O’Reilly was distracted by a sudden movement ahead and leant forward to see the bushy tail of a badger scurrying for cover and its home.

Dublin had become O’Reilly’s home in 1925 when his father, young for the job at forty-five, had been appointed professor of classics and English literature at Trinity. O’Reilly had been born and brought up in Holywood, County Down, Northern Ireland, still part of the United Kingdom, but for eleven years had lived in the Irish Free State. Sometimes he thought he was neither fish, fowl, nor good red meat. He’d loved Ulster all his life, particularly Strangford Lough, where he and his older brother Lars had spent their winter Saturdays wildfowling. But he loved Dublin too.

The ambulance slowed then halted to give a large lorry right of way. O’Reilly turned and slid back a window between the cab and the rear of the vehicle. “Everything all right, Kitty?”

The lighting was dim and he had difficulty making out her features.

Kitty said, “Everything’s fine. Donal’s sleeping.”

If the middle meningeal artery had burst, Donal would be deeply unconscious, not asleep, but surely a nurse with Kitty’s experience—

“It’s all right, Fingal. I’ve no trouble waking him up and there’s no change in any

vital signs.”

O'Reilly exhaled. He hadn't realised he'd been holding his breath, and damn it, he should have known better than to doubt. “Grand,” he said. “We'll be there soon.” He closed the window as the ambulance began to move. Donal was going to be all right. Of course he was. O'Reilly looked out the windscreen to see the ambulance taking the left-hand fork of a Y junction.

Ireland was full of strange road confluences, the Six Road Ends in County Down, the Five Road Ends at Beal na mBláth in County Cork where Kinky had grown up on a farm, and Michael Collins, head of the armed forces of the Irish Free State, had been assassinated in August 1922.

O'Reilly had come to a crossroads in his own life in '27. If he hadn't made his choice about which road to follow, he'd not have Charlie Greer and the others as friends, nor Kitty. Nor would he have been a rural GP, a life he loved, if he'd meekly caved in when Father had decreed over breakfast in the family house on Lansdowne Road in Dublin that no son of his was going to be a physician. The ambulance lurched over a pothole and a goose walked over his grave as he shuddered and remembered that day, September 17, 1927.

2

It Is a Wise Father that Knows His Own Child

“So, Fingal,” his older brother Lars said, refusing another slice of toast, “you’re convinced Sir Malcolm Campbell can beat Major Henry Seagrave for a new land speed record?”

“Seagrave did 203 miles per hour,” Fingal said, digging out the yolk from a soft-boiled egg, “but Campbell’s tenacious. I admire that.”

“I think,” said Father, “you are forgetting that fragments of miles per hour can be critical. The major’s actual speed was 203.841.”

Fingal shook his head and looked across the table. Father was a professor at Trinity, a breed who tended to be inward-looking, but he had always been interested in the world around him and a stickler for accuracy. He was a tall, slightly built man with a neatly trimmed black moustache. His high forehead was scored with three horizontal lines, his nose aquiline. He wore a three-piece pinstripe suit, wing collar, and Old Harrovian tie.

Father looked at his watch. “Fascinating as speed may be, boys, I have to be in the college in fifty-three minutes, and, Fingal, I should like to have a word in my study.” He rose.

Fingal glanced at Ma, who nodded encouragement. Lars rolled his eyes skyward. During their younger years, an invitation to the study from Father had always been a prelude to punishment or a dressing down. Father, with a capital *F*, never Daddy, Dad, or Da, had strict standards. Fingal had never been one for unquestioning obedience, so such trips to Father’s lair had been frequent. As Fingal walked along the high-ceilinged parquet-floored hall he wondered, and not for the first time, if his contrary streak was a reaction against Father’s standards.

Fingal went into the sanctum sanctorum, the holy of holies. He wasn’t in trouble, but he wasn’t looking forward to the interview. He knew they were going to replough a well-turned furrow and he was determined not to give in. He knew what he wanted from life and was not to be swayed.

“Please close the door and sit down.” Father sat in a high-backed chair in front of an open rolltop desk. There were neat piles of papers, an open volume of Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and today’s *Irish Times*.

Above the desk hung his M.A., 1904, from Queen’s University Belfast and his D.Phil., 1907, from Oxford. Degrees befitting his position as professor of classics and English literature at Trinity College Dublin. He’d moved the family here from Hollywood, County Down, when he’d accepted the post. The Victorian, sixteen-room, semi-detached house on Lansdowne Road was a short cycle ride from the college.

Fingal walked past floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. The room smelt of the dusty old

books. Father wanted an academic career for his younger son, a life, as far as Fingal was concerned, that would be as dry as this library. He had other dreams.

He glanced through the window to where the stands of Lansdowne Road Rugby Grounds loomed against a soft autumn sky. One day, he told himself, he'd put on the green jersey with a sprig of shamrock embroidered on the left breast and play rugby football for his country. For now he'd better pay attention to Father because this conversation was going to concern Fingal's other, more important, aspiration. Since their last discussion of the matter, Fingal knew that Father would be expecting his son to have changed his mind. He bloody well hadn't. He sat and crossed his legs, aware of Father's disapproving look at his son's scuffed boots.

Father's own shoes were brightly polished. "It's September," he said. "Your school days are over. You've very good marks in your Leaving Certificate. It's time to make the decision about your university future."

Fingal said, "I'm going to register at Trinity next week. I have the five-shilling fee."

"Good." Father steepled his fingers. "You've thought about what I said? You'll be reading for a science degree?" He smiled and there was warmth in his brown eyes. "You're going to make me proud of you, son."

"I hope so, Father." Fingal sat erectly. "I truly appreciated your advice. I've given it a great deal of consideration." You're not going to like what's coming, he thought, but I will not back down.

"I'm delighted to hear it. You owe it to your forefathers. We O'Reillys go back a long way, descendants of the O'Connor kings of Connacht. Our name, Ó'Raghallaigh, is taken from the Irish, *ragh* meaning 'race,' and *ceallach* or 'sociable.'"

Fingal had heard it all before. He knew Father was, in rugby terms, kicking for touch, slowing the pace by putting the ball out of play to give himself time to formulate what he really wanted to say. Take your time, Father. I'm in no rush for the fireworks to begin.

"In mediaeval days we were renowned traders," he smiled, "so famous the word 'reilly' became a colloquial term for money."

"You're a grand man for the names, Father," Fingal said. "You gave me 'Fingal,' a fair foreigner, and 'Flahertie,' a prince."

"I did," Father said. "You were born in 1908, eight years after Oscar Wilde, Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde, died."

"But Lars was born two years before me. If you thought so highly of the man why didn't you give Lars his name?"

Father frowned. "I thought hard about it. You do know Wilde had been imprisoned and died a disgraced man?"

"I know that he was homosexual. He and the marquis of Queensberry's son were—"

"Indeed." Judging by how Father's nose wrinkled he had not approved of Wilde's relationship with the poet Lord Alfred Douglas. "Your mother persuaded me that it was too soon after Wilde's imprisonment. She didn't want to cause a stir among our friends."

"I suppose people were a bit more—conservative back then," Fingal said. "I don't think it should matter what people do in that line, as long as it's in private."

"Good," said Father. "I should like to be able to agree, but old habits, the teaching of one's own parents, are hard to overcome."

But you can do it if you really try, Fingal thought.

“That is why I have tried to steer you and Lars along liberal lines.”

“And we both appreciate the direction, Father.” Fingal looked deep into his father’s eyes. “In most things.” He knew the real matter under discussion was going to cause a rift and now he wanted to get it over and done with.

Father was not to be sidetracked. “Instead we named your brother Lars Porsena O’Reilly, after—”

“The Etruscan king who went to war with Rome about 500 BC.”

Father’s eyes misted. “It seems like yesterday since I’d read the poem to you and Lars. The poet, Thomas Babington Macaulay, was the subject of my master’s thesis.”

Fingal smiled. He had fond memories of a much younger Father sitting in the nursery, one boy on either knee. “You named Lars for your thesis?” Fingal smiled. “Was your doctoral thesis about Oscar Wilde by any chance?”

“It was.” He gazed out the window. “I wrote a dissertation on his children’s stories.”

“I remember them. *The Happy Prince*, *The Selfish Giant*, *The Remarkable Rocket*. You always made us laugh with that last one, and showed us how pride truly does come before a fall.”

Father was nodding very slowly. “Those stories have a lot to teach about care for other people, self-sacrifice, selflessness. I think, no matter what his sexual proclivities, Oscar Wilde was one of the greatest masters of the English language—and one of the most romantic. I was proud to name you for him, despite what Mother believed people might think.” He laughed gently. “I’ve always wondered if—remember I was still a young man when you were born—I didn’t do it with a touch of mischief too. It certainly raised some eyebrows in the faculty common room.”

Fingal sat back. Father? Dry old Father had had a mischievous streak?

The laugh faded. “It took me a while, Fingal, but I soon came to see that humour was all very well—in its place, but if you wanted to advance academically, and I did, it was better to be seen to be serious and not offend the establishment.”

Like you want me to toe the party line, Fingal thought. He took a deep breath. “What about someone who doesn’t give a tinker’s curse for the establishment? Wants to go his own way?” If Father wasn’t going to come to the point, Fingal wanted to, but that sudden glimpse of a different side to Father had weakened Fingal’s resolve. “Father,” he started, but it was as far as he could go.

Father sat forward, steeped his fingers, rested his chin on them, and looked directly at Fingal. “What are you trying to say, son? ‘Wants to go his own way?’” He frowned.

Fingal hunched his shoulders and rocked in his chair, then steeled himself and returned Father’s gaze. “I do want you to be proud of me, but I’m not as sure about having to preserve the O’Reilly name, and studying science is not what I want.” It was out. Again.

Father pushed back in his chair. “You are still being stubborn.”

“I know, and I really don’t mean to be.” Fingal didn’t want this to grow into a row.

Father held out his hands palms up. “Then take my advice. Study science.”

“Father, I want to be a doctor.”

Father pursed his lips. “So you’ve told me, many times.”

“Then why won’t you listen? Let me go to medical school. Please.”

“I am your father. It is my responsibility to advise you, and if you won’t take my

advice, I must do what I perceive as being the very best for your and your brother's futures."

"You didn't object two years ago when Lars wanted to study law."

"We are not discussing Lars. We are discussing your career." Father's voice was calm, the tones, Fingal thought, of a man who held all the trumps because he and he alone controlled the purse strings.

Fingal started to sweat. "I've wanted to be a doctor since I was thirteen in Holywood when Doctor O'Malley took out my appendix. When I was better he let me ride round with him while he visited patients at home, Father, you know that. I've been telling you for years. I told Ma—"

"I think you mean Mother." Father frowned. "Why must you let your language drop to the level of a street vendor?"

"Sorry," Fingal said.

Father's voice was cold. "I spent a great deal of money to have you properly educated. It was easy for a thirteen-year-old to be impressed by a rural GP who wore muttonchop whiskers and a frock coat and drove round in a pony and trap."

"He was kind. He cared about his patients. He was a real man, not a prince in one of Oscar Wilde's tales. You could see how he made a difference in the village. Father, I thank you for my education and for the time you spent teaching Lars and me about books, music, paintings. I know you're trying to give me good advice—I do know—but," Fingal put as much weight as he could summon into his next words, "I want to study medicine."

"You have a fine mind, Fingal. Don't waste it."

"I'd not waste it." Fingal felt his fists clench.

"I agree it's a respectable profession—"

"There *are* professors of medicine."

"And how many do research?"

"I don't know." And I don't care. Fingal uncrossed his legs and rubbed his thighs with the palms of his hands. I'd never get interested in research, he thought. I like people.

"Here at Trinity, medical research is done by Professor Bigger in bacteriology, Professor Jamieson in anatomy, Professor Fearon in biochemistry, and a few other basic scientists. Not very impressive."

"But I want to look after people, not laboratory rats." For God's sake listen to me. Hear what I'm saying. Try to understand.

"Fingal, you're only eighteen—"

"I'll be nineteen next month and I'm sorry, but why shouldn't a nineteen-year-old know what he wants?" He knew he was letting a sarcastic edge creep into his voice.

"Youth," Father said, and shook his head. "I've been around the groves of academe all my adult life. It is what I have tried to groom my sons for." He frowned. "Poor Lars. I don't think he'd have done very well," his smile reappeared, "but you, Fingal, you have exactly what it takes. Trust me." He leant forward and stared into Fingal's eyes. "You are special, Fingal O'Reilly. I'm a professor. Professors can make a difference too—but not in a small village like old Doctor O'Malley. In the whole world. Look at Einstein's work. He was awarded the Nobel Prize six years ago. Who can predict where his discoveries will lead—but you could be at the forefront of