

# **The Muse**

**Tar**

**by Norman Turrell, 1963-**

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My new home. Patrick, my cabby, peeped his horn as he drove off and I gave a smile and a wave before turning back to take it all in. Absolutely classic: thatched roof, white walls with the chimney stack on the outside, little square windows, brush leading up to trees on the hill and Muckcross Lake in the background.

*The Land of Heart's Desire.* Okay, so Yeats wasn't talking about this place but surely he of all people would understand poetic licence. I got my map out. His quote was for Sligo. Couldn't be much further away on this tiny island if you call that distance. I don't see how they can call a place so small a country being just

an eighth the size of Texas. Never liked Texas mind; not many New Yorker's do. Anyway, all of that is far away. It's time to immerse myself in my roots.

The skies didn't look quite so beautiful and I thought it might be best to get my bags moved in. The door wasn't locked and when I entered I saw why; pretty basic. Just the one room to live in with a rough stone floor and a huge blackened hearth. I guessed why the bed was set against the wall closest to the fire and that would be useful; it was still pretty chilly these March nights and no central heating here. But the desk was perfect, set in front of a window looking out onto the lake. I picked up a note left for me.

Welcome to your holiday home, Mr Devlin. You'll have read all the essential information I sent you about how to get on. I'm afraid the generator is acting up and I've asked my son, Conall, to pop over and have a look at it. He's a good lad, but a bit forgetful.

Someone will help you from the village if he's tardy. I hope you'll have a pleasant stay.

Mrs McGuire.

The windows didn't let in much light and the sun would be down soon enough. I tried the old brown Bakelite light switch, following the line of the wires running up the wall to the bulb hanging bare in the centre of the ceiling. It gave a flickering tease, just to give me hope, then failed.

I sighed instinctively, but actually, that's just fine; it'll all add to the atmosphere. I had to duck down to go through the doorway into the kitchen. The small extra area was tacked on to the side of the house and I wondered how long the original builders had taken to think of that good idea. It had a bench with a camping stove and gas canister, a metal sink which had seen better days, and a shelf with a couple of pans, plates and bowls. I'd memorised Mrs McGuire's inventory, sitting in my apartment in Manhattan, excited about my trip, so I knew there were candles in the draw and oil lamps in the cupboard. Something told me the generator behaviour might not have been unexpected.

By the time the light had faded I had strategic lighting in place and the great satisfaction of smoke rising from the pile of wood and paper in the fireplace after the challenge of the damp matches. I took out my notebook and wrote *matches* at the top of my shopping list. I'd take a trek to the village in the morning. Two miles is not a stroll for a city boy. I'd persuaded myself not to get a hire car as the temptation to go sightseeing would be great and that wasn't the goal. The pen in my hand had reminded me. Writing.

Okay, so I'm no Martin Amis, but I have my dreams. I'd a couple of respectable competition near misses on my author C.V. and maybe that short story wasn't a dead duck. Just unlucky to choose seventeen foolish publishers in a row. I carried a lantern over to the desk and got out my beautiful new, leather bound writing book, fountain pen and ink. I sat up straight in the seat and looked out the window. Pitch black, overcast night. I opened the cover of the book to a pristine white page and looked at it. I unscrewed the end of the fountain pen and checked the ink. All good. I looked at the page again. I got out my rough notes and flicked through some of the ramblings I'd scribbled on the plane. I looked out of the

window at the blackness. I looked at the clean, blank page. Maybe it was time for dinner.

The morning was cold. I pulled the woollen blanket up over my head and wondered how long I would be able to ignore the call of nature that had woken me. It had to be faced. I jumped out of the bed and grabbed my coat. I shivered as I pulled on my boots. A couple lessons learned for my next night: bank up the fire before dropping off and see if I can find a suitable container to act as an indoor toilet. This morning, since I was up, it would be the outdoor option. Full bladder and brisk though it was, I had to stop and gaze out over the lake. No wonder so many poets came from Ireland.

I felt truly alive when I got back to the cottage. First order was to rekindle the fire, but my new skill was well in hand and it took no time. I was inspired. I forsook the beautiful view from the window to take seat beside the hearth, not even bothering to dress. Notebook and pen in hand, I was ready to begin.

"Maidin!" The shout from somewhere out front made me jump.

"That's morning in Irish by the way," said the man, not much younger than me. He didn't look up as I opened the door, remaining bent over a little shed outside which I presumed must contain the malfunctioning generator.

"It's Conall, isn't it?" I asked.

"That's me alright." He stood, wiping his hands with an oily rag. "Did ye sleep okay then?"

"Very well, thanks."

"That's great. Personally, I don't understand anyone who'd want to shack themselves up in these little hovels, but we ain't complainin' about taking your cash and it takes all sorts. You're from the Big Apple I hear?"

I smiled. "Yes."

"Well, you listen to me. This ain't your city. You best be safe indoors of a night. You hear?"

"It's dangerous? Animals?"

"Ah, all sorts of things in this old land. We grow up here and we know the nature of things. That's all I have to say."

I didn't know how to respond, but Conall didn't appear to want one.

"You'll be wanting a ride into the village now, so I suggest you put on some of your fancy clothes. It just our way, not wearing pyjamas in public. We're old fashioned sorts."

"Err... Yes, of course."

He was in his Land Rover with the engine started by the time I returned. I would have been more than happy to watch out of the windows at the countryside passing by as he drove, but what he'd said played on my mind.

"Conall. Do you mind, but what exactly did you mean earlier?"

"Ah, I can't kid around with you now, ye seem like a straight up fella. What's yer name?"

"Michael."

"Well, Michael, it's our way with new sorts around and I'm sort of obliged. Okay, we might take a little pleasure in pulling yer leg to hear the bells ringing, but this land is built on our stories and there's a bit of pride in the colour they bring.

Myself, I've not seen ought, but I'm not saying they're all bog mist mind. Plenty say's they have and some of them are too big for me to take the Mickey. So you pay no heed, but play safe and no midnight roaming, okay?"

"Okay." I didn't feel I was going to get any sense out of this conversation and went back to my sightseeing.

He dropped me in the town centre. Apart from being old and quaint, it had the touches of the modern world: A branded coffee house, a thrift store. I'd built up a few more items for my list during the previous evening which were easily satisfied by the variety of shops. What did catch my eye was an old bookshop that couldn't be missed.

A bell rang as I pushed open the door, not electronic, but clapper striking metal. Perfect. The shelves were in disarray, books of all shapes and sizes making a colourful mosaic. They didn't seem to be categorised either: I found *The Odyssey* sandwiched between a sea food cookery book and Hoyle's *Rules of Games*.

"What you want?" I couldn't see the owner of the voice until I turned the corner of a ceiling height bookshelf. An old man wearing a black Trilby and a raincoat sat at a small desk.

"Hello. Your shop is wonderful. I'm visiting from the States and when I noticed your place I had to come in. I'm a writer you see and..."

"Do you want to buy a book or not?"

"Oh. Yes, of course."

He picked up the nearest book to him and held it out: a children's story book.

"Here," he said. "One pound."

I took it from him to be polite and flicked through the pages, even though I had no interest in it. I handed it back.

"Delightful, but not what I was looking for."

"What were you looking for then?"

"Oh, I'm not sure."

He picked up the next nearest book and held it out: *How to stop smoking*.

"One pound." I hadn't smoked since I was a teenager. I shook my head.

"I'm sorry, I'm not being very helpful."

"That's right," he replied.

"Okay. How about something local?" I thought of the conversation with Conall. "Local stories?" I added.

He coughed as he took pains to rise. His coat was stained and an unpleasant, stale smell wafted over. He searched across the binders of the books on a shelf to his right, drew one and plonked in on the table.

"One pound?" I asked.

"Two pound", he said, returning heavily to his seat.

"Have a nice day," I said as I put the money on the desk, picked up my purchase and left.

I was soaked when I got back to the cottage; the rain on the walk home had been heavy and persistent. I rekindled the remains of the fire and hung my clothes around it to dry, leaving me back in my dressing gown. I'd bought some fresh veg and bread and went about making myself a broth. It felt cosy being

inside with the downpour around my shelter. While the pot simmered I sat by the fire and flicked through my new book.

I'd only briefly looked at the title and cover in the book shop, so it was a surprise when I found it to be about local folklore. I preferred factual: history. There were the various fairy folk that everyone would recognise, creatures of the woods. There were some more interesting specific characters I hadn't heard of. The red haired man and the dark man who abduct people to the fairy realm. The grey man who creates fogs to crash ships. The man of hunger who blesses those that give alms. And the women. I'd always thought the Banshee a horrific character, but it seems she just announces a death with her wail. Teasing mermaids who become obedient wives when captured. And a beautiful muse, but it doesn't end well for those inspired, of course.

Being a bit of a pragmatist, I could see reasons for these tales. Some just entertain on a quiet night. Some to explain what they found unexplainable. Some to strike fear to manipulate behaviour or even to hide their misdeeds. There was a burning smell from the kitchen and I dropped the book to rush and save what I could of my lunch.

The skies had cleared by the time dusk came and I sat admiring the view, back at the desk and in front of my blank page. I'd toyed around with some ideas of American history: the Wild West, New York during prohibition, but everything I thought of seemed to be a rehash of old movies I'd seen and I didn't have the resources to hand for any research. As I gazed out to the lake, I noticed a woman strolling across the stones. She had on a green coat with an ankle length white dress underneath. I didn't imagine that was very practical for her walk; the hem wouldn't stay white for long. She knelt to pick up stones, throwing them into the still waters, pausing until the ripples had faded before throwing another. Her hair was long, black and curled around her shoulders. Her repeated action made her progress towards the cottage slow and it was becoming harder to see in the fading light.

There weren't any other cottages near here for miles. If she'd come from the village, it would be a dark walk back. Who was she? A local girl, a wild spirit who walked alone, drawn to wander in the evenings by herself to feel the earth and air around her? A solitary creature, disconnected from society, woven into nature, the land and the waters.

She turned to track back the way she came, and I stood up abruptly from my seat, leaning towards the window, my soul shouting *No, please, come back*. I wanted to see her continue forward, come up the shingle to my little house. Have her disappear from view only for the moment it would take me to open the door and see her standing at the eaves, smiling in the light from the room. But it grew dark quickly, and she was gone. As I sat back in the seat, my mind was filled with images and stories of her. I was flooded with fantasies of her touch, her kiss, the overwhelming pleasure of our bodies entwined. I began to write furiously.

By the time morning light came I'd filled half of my book with hastily scribbled writing. The flow had stopped suddenly and nothing more would come. My eyes retreated into my skull at the golden sunrise. The fire had burned out long ago, and I hadn't realised how cold I'd become. I went over to the bed and curled myself

beneath the blankets. I tried to think of her, imagine her in the bed with me, but I couldn't form even the vaguest image. I was tired. I slept.

It was late afternoon when I rose; too late to do anything with the remaining day. The previous night's events pushed their way back to my forming consciousness, and I rushed over to the book to see what I'd written. The light was dim, so I picked it up and walked to the light switch. A few clicks gave no result. I took it to the front door and opened it for the daylight, ignoring the cold. I turned over page after page. It was garbled nonsense; a cascade of words forming no rhyme or reason. I tried to picture the woman again, but the visions were pathetic inventions. Even the feelings that had obviously overwhelmed me were just echoes. I felt misery forming... but this wouldn't do. I was a practical sort and not one for flights of fancy. Last night was some sort of aberration because of the long journey and the strange surroundings. I put the book on the table, closing the cover on the event. I got my clothes together, brushed myself down. I'd fix myself a good meal and set off to the village before evening fell.

The pub was called THE BLACK CAT, the swinging sign above the door showing a literal translation in its picture. It had a green painted double door which I could only just get through with one half opened. The smoke hit me. It was an avenue of stools in front of the bar, only room for small round tables against the wall. Signs advertised Murphy's and Guinness. The stools were all occupied with men, drinking and chatting. I stood at the bar for quite some time, holding out my money and trying to catch the landlord's eye. Nobody had paid any attention to my arrival.

"Excuse me," I said timidly. No effect. "Excuse me," I said more forcefully. This sort of customer service wouldn't happen in the U.S. The conversations stopped and everyone looked round. The landlord approached slowly. He was a red faced man, tall and well built, with a face that would have cracked if it smiled.

"No need to lose your patience there, fella. I was getting round to you."

"I could see you were busy. Can I have a drink please?"

"And what sort of drinks would you American's be having? This is a simple bar for simple people mind."

"And none more than you, Shaun."

There was a snigger round the assembled, but the man who'd spoken up buried his smile in his pint when Shaun gave him a glare. They went back to their conversations.

"Just a beer, please."

"A beer." Shaun shook his head and began pulling the pump nearest to him, delivering the finished brew and taking my money without further comment, returning to the focus of the group and joining in the chatter.

I took a seat at one the small tables and wondered if this had been a good idea. A few minutes later the door pushed open, and I was relieved to see Conall, smiling and waving as the men greeted him warmly. I tried to catch his eye, but he was already talking with everyone and being served. I went back to my drink. It tasted watery and unsatisfying.

"Now, gentlemen." Conall had his hand on my shoulder and was addressing the room boldly. "This here is Mr Michael Devlin, and he's my guest. He might be an

American sort but he's got true Irish roots. You wouldn't have him sittin' here all lonesome. Let's show him some hospitality. What d'ye say?"

The men looked round, finished their drinks hurriedly and raised their glasses.

"I suggest you buy a round if you want some company," whispered Conall.

"Oh, yes. Drinks for everyone please... Shaun."

The empty jars were back on the bar and being filled before I'd finished. The rest of the evening went well after that as I stood and joined the group, a couple more rounds being extracted from me. The guys asked me the odd question but didn't wait for answers, more eager to tell their own tales. It was good to listen and feel part of things. I told Conall that the lights still weren't working. He made some joke about me being bad luck and said it was no problem for him to drop round again in the morning.

When I decided it was time to leave, hearty *cheerios* and invitations for the next evening followed my stagger out the door. It was dark now, but I'd had the forethought to put a flashlight in my pocket. It wasn't entirely necessary as the moon was bright in the midnight sky. There was only one trail leading back to the cottage so it shouldn't be too much of a challenge to weave my way home.

I used the torch for the first mile until I found the turning off the road with the stile that started the track over the fields. The moonlight was beautiful and the artificial light spoilt its eerie effect on the landscape so I switched it off. On the hill, the trees formed ominous black shadows against the sky. I thought I saw a vague glow in the woods but as I tried to focus, it was gone. There was no light pollution out here and I stumbled as I tried to walk, looking at the myriad of stars above me at the same time. A high-pitched wail brought me back to earth, and I looked left and right, unable to work out where it came from. It was followed by a more recognisable barking noise and I guessed it must be foxes.

As I reached the peak of a hill, the lake came into view, its small waves sparkling silver, the cottage a black silhouette in front of it. There was a figure by the lake side. I caught my breath. It could only be her. I wanted to run, but I was far from sober and a modicum of reason told me a fall would be guaranteed on this rough ground. I walked swiftly though, willing her not to turn and head away again, before I could reach her and speak to her. But what would I say? Tell her how she had possessed me? Tell her my passion? What about 'Hi there, beautiful. Come here often?' I slowed my pace to try to work out what would be successful, those essential first words. She began to turn.

I raced forward. "Wait! Please wait!" Immediately realising the stupidity of my action. "I'm sorry, don't be frightened. I live in this cottage. Please wait."

I could see her shape, black against the shining lake behind. I tripped, tried to recover, my hand flying forward instinctively. My other foot skidded, and I went down, my head and face hitting the ground hard. I was dazed, a whirlpool of thoughts spinning in the alcohol still clouding my brain. I felt a hand on my head, then under my arm, helping me rise. It was her. Black hair, pale, thin face with dark eyes. My mouth opened... and closed again with no words to fill the void. She said nothing, just led me the last few yards to the cottage door.

I sat down on the bed. I wasn't sure whether it was the drink or the fall or both; I had no idea how hard the knock had been, but I was in a dream. A wonderful

dream. She seemed at home in the dark, finding the matches to light the lantern on the desk easily. She opened the book and flicked through the pages, slowly. And I just watched, like I had the previous night, in rapture of her ever move, her every small gesture. She turned to look at me briefly and then I saw the light and her beautiful figure float slowly out of the room and into the kitchen. I was alone in the darkness, a thin line of moonlight drawing a line on the floor. It felt like I'd been sitting for an age and was about to try to rise, when the glow from the lamp grew back from the kitchen as she re-entered, the large, sharp bread knife raised high above her head.

The rain spattered on the roof of the ambulance, the doors closing after the stretcher had entered. The girl's black hair lay wet and thick across her face as she was taken to the police car. She didn't resist. Conall looked shaky as he stood talking to Detective Brogan, pencilling notes into a small black notebook.

"Why was your sister out here? Had you not thought to keep an eye on her?"

"She'd been better of late. I didn't think she could do anything like... like this."

"She did attack your father, here. When you lived in this cottage."

"That was years ago, and she had enough provocation, don't you think?"

The officer gave a small, silent nod.

"She was under the supervision of Dr..." The detective flicked through his notes. "Dr Williams. And social services are still visiting."

"Yes, but even they said she was doing well. She'd been having her walks for weeks. I was sure that's what was doing the trick. She always seemed so much happier in the mornings. None of the screaming fits anymore. It's not against the law to have an evening stroll is it?"

"I don't think the services would have approved. Why didn't you go with her?"

"Well, I'm down the bar most nights." Conall looked sheepish. "But she was always back before I went to bed."

"Well then, you better come along. We'll sort out contacting the fellow relatives there. Shall I get another car?"

"I'm happy to ride with my sister, thank you. You have got her handcuffed, anyway."

"Okay then, I expect it's alright, and we don't have any other cars nearer than Cork. In ye get."

Conall sat in the back of the police car with his sister, moving her hair out of her face. The black, shadowed eyes gazed blankly ahead. Conall began to cry.

"Aww, beautiful leannain. You don't worry now. You'll be fine. You don't have any idea what's going on, do ye." He gave a sad, little laugh. "Away with the fairies."

