



FLIGHT

Place: Los Angeles International Airport (LAX); University College, Cork, Ireland; and the Beach at Youghal, Ireland

Time: Present and 1978

Characters: Brendan O'Mahoney

Cathal, the Storyteller

Glossary:

Aula Maxima: grand hall, auditorium

Leaving Cert: certificate granted on completing education

Youghal: pronounced "Yawl"; an ancient town in County Cork, a fishing port

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[HOW TO LEGALLY QUOTE FROM THIS BOOK](#)

PETER PAUL SWEENEY

FLIGHT

I saw him. Near the magazine shop in the busy departure lounge of Los Angeles International airport. Loudspeakers announced gate changes and Aer Lingus flight departures. Luggage-toting passengers scurried to and fro. There he was, quiet, above it all, standing on a ladder, in a stream of businessmen and holiday travelers, adjusting a light fixture above his head. The paint-splattered work clothes, the unruly hair, the baby face, the sad eyes. It *was* him. It was Brendan. Not the Brendan of today. No. It was the Brendan of twenty years ago, the blond Brendan of my youth.

“Get it together,” a lady in line behind me said, “by the time you buy those magazines, they’ll be back issues. Keep moving. This is L. A.”

Was she talking to me or into her cell phone? I turned to apologize and my armload of magazines cascaded to the floor. I knelt to gather them, while the woman stepped around me, still talking into her phone, and made her purchase.

When I looked up, Brendan was gone. For one insane moment, I considered running into the corridor to search for him. But what if it weren’t him? And worse, what if it was? I regained my composure, paid the Korean cashier, and trekked to the gate for my flight to Dublin. In the waiting area, I was beyond reading, shaken really, shocked actually that old lust could come alive in one unguarded instant. Ironic. I’d been afraid of California earthquakes, and here I was shaken, shocked, trembling, my mind rewinding back twenty years to Cork to one particular defining night on the beach at Youghal. Worse than ironic. My dick stirred. I thought that phase of my life a closed chapter in my past.

Memory rushed back. My heart rose up. Clear it came to me: a stretch of wooded land ran beside the River Lee as it flowed through the campus of University College, Cork. The river bank was the perfect place for a couple of young men, boys really, to share a cold bottle of cider and smoke a cigarette on a warm Indian summer night. We walked in the fading evening light that October night in 1978. I swung our bottle of cider. Brendan O'Mahoney clutched a pack of cigarettes he'd pinched from his father's shop. We had climbed down the steep hill from the University quadrangle and sat down on a smooth river rock that had ages before been uncovered by the River Lee. I uncapped the plastic cider bottle. Brendan fished a cigarette from his pack. He lit it, took a puff, and handed it to me. He lit one for himself.

"Yer some doctor—smoking and drinking cider," he joked.

"Ah, they're just little sins," I replied.

Three days earlier the wooden floorboards of Aula Maxima had creaked beneath my feet as I'd marched up to receive my medical degree from the President of UCC. I had secured a training position at a hospital in Dublin, and in a few days I would be leaving Cork.

From Dublin, fate was to take me to the Emergency Room of the Martin Luther King Jr. Hospital in Los Angeles, and, from there, to a successful private medical practice in Southern California. My links to Cork were to weaken and break. But on this unusually warm autumn evening, I did not know the future. Instead, I enjoyed the cider, the cigarette, and the company of my friend along the banks of the River Lee.

I handed the cider to Brendan. He pressed it to his lips. It was fairly early in the evening, but the northern night comes quickly in autumn in Ireland. Brendan wiped his mouth with his hand, and thrust the cider bottle over to me. He had worked at his father's shop that day, knocking a wall and carting away the rubbish. A thin powder of white dust covered his jeans and his faded denim jacket and his pale skin and his blond hair. He smelled chalky like hammered brick dust was mixed into the sweaty man-smell of himself. Dried paint speckled his heavy boots. He was perfect, or the cider was, or the night. My head swam as I studied the shimmering reflection of streetlights in the River Lee. I dared not touch him. He was bricks and I was books and bricks always look

good to books, but bricks don't care.

"Remember," Brendan said, "that time at school? We turned Mr. Duggan's desk upside down."

"How could I forget?" I said. "I thought my parents would never let me out of the house when we got caught."

We ran through memories from our school days until the cider and the cigarettes left nothing but the still of the night, and something unspoken, between us. The wind rustled the trees behind us. Brendan broke the silence.

"Cathal," Brendan said, "before yeh go off..." He lit a cigarette. "...I need to ask yeh something." He always chose his words, *need* to ask *yeh*, and his tongue rolled a bit thick with drink and his hard day's work.

"Ask me anything."

"In school, did I ever do something to make yeh angry at me?" he asked. "When yeh went to university, we weren't friends any longer."

Was he really insecure, or was he sniffing around the edges.

"Yeh think that?" My voice was not yet a doctor's Beverly Hills voice. My fingers gripped the sharp surface of the rock on which we sat.

"In school, always we were together," Brendan said. "I was at yer house, or yeh were in my dad's shop. I thought maybe I'd done something..."

"Brendan O'Mahoney!"

"...or maybe I wasn't clever enough among yer friends..."

"That's not true at all."

"...to be yer friend?"

"Yeh amaze me. How could yeh think such a thought."

A light appeared on the pathway around the corner of the rock. Brendan and I fell silent. An old man carrying a torch, pulled along by a large dog on its evening walk, approached us from the entrance gate at Western Road.

"Evenin', lads." He raked the light from his torch across us. The dog strained at its leash to investigate. "Nice evenin', thank God."

Brendan stood up, pushed his hair from his face, put his cigarette in his mouth, and chatted about the weather with this old man who once worked in his father's shop. In the beam of the torch, Brendan shined blond and solid with a face that

took faces at face value. My other friends, the friends who confused Brendan, never took anything at face value. Brendan was pulling his world against mine the way the owner pulled back on his dog. The two men were laughing. Blue smoke billowed out of their mouths and haloed their heads. The dog began barking and dragged its owner down the footpath.

“God bless,” the departing figure called out.

I prayed the distraction would stop Brendan’s line of questioning. Instead, he stood over me, big as he was, and resumed exactly where he’d left off, as if he had been planning this conversation for a long time. “Maybe someone,” he said, “working in his da’s shop would embarrass yeh in front of yer med student friends.” The drink made him bold. “Before yeh went that time up to Dublin, I was surprised yeh wanted to see me that time up on the beach in Youghal.”

“Yeh know I’m not like that.”

“I felt yeh cut me. Yeh were busy, yeah.” Brendan grabbed the cider and took a long pull on the bottle. “Tell me, Cathal, what did I do to make yeh stop being my friend?”

My heart hurt for him. He was genuinely suffering.

“Yeh didn’t do anything,” I said. “It wasn’t about yer father’s shop.”

“So it was something.” He sat down facing me dead on, inescapable, cornering me, wily dodger me, for whom flight had always been survival.

“Give me the bottle.” I took another shot of courage. “I don’t know how to say this.” Truth fears rejection. “How I always wanted us to be friends.”

“My ears have ears,” Brendan said.

“Remember when the Leaving Cert results were announced, and I learned I’d get to study medicine?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I was happy for yeh.”

“Truth is? Leaving didn’t make me that happy.”

“What are yeh saying?”

“Some of us went to Youghal, like yeh said, for a couple of days to celebrate.”

“My one night in Youghal,” Brendan laughed. “I had fun.” He was not a wild boy. “My da killed me for staying gone all night and not telling him.”

“Actually,” I said. “My own first night in Youghal, before yeh arrived, when all my friends were clapping me on the

back? I wasn't really that happy." I reached over and lifted the cider bottle from between Brendan's legs. My hand brushed his thigh the way you can touch a man so ambiguously he takes no account that you're sampling. My blood warmed even before I lifted the bottle, put its neck to my lips, and tasted the sweet cider.

"The next day, I sat on the beach, staring out at the sea," I said, "when suddenly, I realised I was actually, really, truly happy."

I hesitated. He was made of brick and hammers and engines, but he was smart and men like him were no less divergent than men like me.

"Why was that?" Brendan asked. He sat knee to knee straight on with me. Or were we sitting knee to knee on a big rock of ambiguity on the bank of the River Lee? His concerns, his posture, the night itself made him seem...finally...possible. Maybe all the time, all along, he had wanted me, stupid me, to pop the question.

"I was happy because I was thinking yeh were coming that day to be with me..."

"Cathal," Brendan was laughing, "do yeh need such a big bush to beat around?"

"All that day, knowing yeh were coming, I was happy. The sun shone brighter, the food tasted better..."

"In Youghal?"

"...even the stupid jokes my friends told seemed funny to me. I didn't notice my hangover. And when yeh showed up...." I took a final swig of the cider.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. And when I showed up with the cannibis..."

"That night," I said. "That night, remember, we slept next to each other on the beach. At least, yeh slept. I lay awake listening to the waves..."

"It was good grass."

"...the waves made a voice. A quite human voice. A most human voice that said, over and over, *congratulations, congratulations*. Not for my Leaving Cert. Not for medicine. Not for my awful friends. *Congratulations* because the person I loved most in the whole world was next to me, under the same blanket, on that cold night. I stared at yer face in the moonlight. I was happy, happier than before or since."

We shut up for a minute, long enough for stars to derail off their tracks, for the river to boil, for the night to turn cold, for Brendan to leap down off the rock and grind out his cigarette with the toe of his boot.

“I wish yeh hadn’t told me that,” he said. He walked down the footpath towards the Western Road exhaling blue smoke spewing around his big form silhouetted in the streetlight.

Brendan never spoke to me again.

An announcement brought me back to the Aer Lingus lounge in Los Angeles: “First-class passengers may board the aircraft at this time.”

I gathered up my magazines and searched my jacket pocket for my boarding pass. The woman with the cell phone stood ahead of me seeming to talk to herself loud enough for everyone to hear she was a producer heading to Ireland to capture film development funds from the government.

So I walked onto the plane, wrestling my carry-on’s into the overhead bin with the ghost of Brendan O’Mahoney, whose contents would certainly have shifted during the flight I’d had to offer.

If it had been him.

Or not.

He had his chance.

