

Honeymoon in Tramore

They stayed in a boarding-house, St Agnes's, run by a Mrs Hurley. 'You have it written all over you!' this woman said when she opened the door to them. She eyed a speck of confetti on the lapel of his navy-blue suit and then glanced briefly at the rounding of Kitty's stomach. It was the summer of 1948, a warm afternoon in July.

Mrs Hurley was a middle-aged landlady in a brown coat, who apologized for the wellington boots she was wearing: she'd been brushing down the yard. Her fingernails were enamelled a vivid shade of pink, her hair was contained by a tidy blue hairnet which partially disguised an arrangement of pins and curling papers. They would be very happy in St Agnes's, she said: they'd have the place to themselves because there was no one else stopping in the house at the moment. When they were carrying their two suitcases upstairs she said that marriage was a God-given institution and added that her husband went to Mass every morning of his life, on his way to work with the county council. 'Your tea'll be on the table at six on the dot,' she said.

On their own, they embraced. He put his hand under his wife's skirt and felt for the warm flesh at the top of her stockings. 'Jesus, you're terrible,' she murmured thickly at him, as she had on the bus when he'd pressed himself close against her. She was sweating because of her condition and the July heat. Her face was sticky with perspiration, and small patches of it had developed on her dress, beneath each armpit. 'Jesus,' she whispered again. 'Oh Jesus, go easy now.'

He didn't want to go easy. They were free of the farm, and of her father and her aunt and her Uncle Ned Cauley. He had a right to his desires.

'That woman'll be listening,' she whispered in the same slurred voice, but it didn't matter if the woman was listening. It didn't even matter if the woman opened the door and walked in. The bed made creaking sounds when she wriggled away from him, saying again that he was terrible, giggling as she said it. The bedroom smelt of flies, as if the windows hadn't been opened for a long time. 'God, you're great, Kitty,' he said, his own voice thickening also.

He was thirty-three, Kitty two years older. At fifteen he had been taken from the orphans' home in Cork by Kitty's father and her Uncle Ned

Cauley. The two men had let it be known that they could do with a young fellow on the farm, and Father Doran, who was their parish priest at that time, had made inquiries of Father Lyhane at the orphans' home on their behalf. 'Davy Toome's a good lad,' Father Lyhane had said, and a few weeks later, after the recommendation had been passed on to the farmers and after Father Doran had been assured that the candidate would be strong enough for farm-work, a label with that name on it had been attached to the boy and he'd been forwarded by train. 'And did you never do farm-work before?' Kitty's Uncle Ned Cauley had asked, sitting beside him in the cart as they slowly progressed on the road from the railway junction. But Davy had never even seen fields with corn in them before, let alone taken part in farm-work. 'I'm thinking,' said Kitty's uncle, who'd spent an hour in Doolin's public house at the railway junction, 'that it could be we bought a pig in a poke.' He said it again in the kitchen when they arrived, while his wife and his brother-in-law were examining Davy, silently agreeing that he was not as strong as the priest had claimed. 'Will you for God's sake take off that label!' the woman said to him, and then, in a gentler voice, asked him about his name. She'd never heard of Toome before, she said, so he told them that his name had been given to him when the orphans' home had taken him in as an infant, that there'd been a priest connected with it then who'd had an interest in naming the orphans. His first name was in memory of St David. Toome meant a burial mound. 'Is he right in the head?' he afterwards heard Kitty's father asking his brother-in-law and her uncle replying that you wouldn't know, the way he was talking about burial mounds.

'Will you come on now, for heaven's sake!' Kitty rebuked him in the bedroom at St Agnes's. 'And let me take off my hat.'

She pushed him away from her and told him to open the window. It was she who had chosen Tramore for the weekend of their honeymoon, saying she'd heard it was lovely, with a sandy little beach. Kitty knew what she wanted, her aunt used to say, and you couldn't budge her when she made up her mind. 'Would you accompany me to Cork?' she had suggested one day four months ago. 'I'm a stranger to the city, Davy.' He hadn't been back to Cork since he'd come to the farm, and he didn't really know his way around it, but it turned out that Kitty had never been there at all. 'We'll fix it to go on a Saturday,' she said, and on the bus he felt proud to be sitting there with her, a big handsome girl, the daughter of his employer: he hoped that on the streets they'd maybe meet someone from the orphans' home. She'd looked out the window most of the time, not saying very much to him, her round face pink with excitement. She was good-looking in a way he admired, better-looking than any of the other girls at Mass,

or the tinker girls whom he'd caught once stealing turnips from the field, who'd shouted over a hedge at him that their sister would marry him. Her hair was very fine and very black, like a dark mist encircling her face. He'd heard her aunt calling her sullen, but he'd never noticed that himself, even though sometimes a blankness came into her face and stayed there till she roused herself. Her three brothers had all been born with something wrong with them and had died in childhood, before he had come to the farm. Nobody mentioned them; he hadn't even known about her brothers until one of the men who came to help with the harvest referred to them in passing. Her mother had died giving birth to the last of them.

'Are you OK, pet?' Kitty said, putting lipstick on at the dressing-table. 'Isn't it great we're on our own?'

He leaned against the window-frame, looking at her, seeing her in the looking-glass as well. She had to go to see a Mr Minogue, she'd said eventually on the bus, a chemist in McHenry Street.

'Great,' he said from the window.

'Can you hear the sea there?'

He shook his head. They'd found the chemist's shop, having had to ask for directions to McHenry Street. If her mother was alive she'd have accompanied her, she said all of a sudden, and then she said she couldn't go into the chemist's shop alone. Her voice became different. Her legs wouldn't have taken her, she said, and then she told him she was in trouble. Her aunt had found out about the chemist, she said, only she'd refused to accompany her. 'Take Toome to show you the way,' her aunt had said.

'Will we go down, pet?'

He moved to where she stood by the dressing-table but when he put his arms around her she said sharply that she didn't want to get messed up again. She'd spilt powder on the glass top of the dressing-table, the same peach shade that was on her cheeks. She'd put on perfume he could smell, a strong sweet smell that made him want to try again to put his arms around her. But already she had crossed the room to the door. She opened it and he followed her downstairs.

'I've done you black puddings,' Mrs Hurley said in the dining-room, placing before them plates of fried sausages and fried eggs and slices of the delicacy she spoke of.

'God, I love black pudding,' Kitty said, and he passed her his because as a boy in the orphans' home he had developed a revulsion for this dark composition of pig's blood and entrails. The table they sat at was empty of other guests, as Mrs Hurley had promised. He smiled at his bride across it. On the way downstairs she had kept repeating that this would be their first meal as husband and wife. She attached importance to the fact. She'd

said it again as they sat down. Through the wooden hatch that opened into the kitchen the voice of Mrs Hurley could be heard raised in abuse, speaking about a greyhound.

'Are you hungry, pet?'

'He wasn't; he shook his head.'

'D'you know what it is,' Kitty said, cutting into a soda farl, 'I could eat the head off of a horse.'

A low mumble of protest had begun in the kitchen, which he guessed must emanate from Mrs Hurley's husband. 'Errah, have a pick of sense, will you?' the landlady stridently interrupted. 'Would any animal in its sane mind keep getting into a cement mixer?'

Kitty giggled. She'd nearly died, she said, when Mrs Kilfedder gave her a kiss at the wedding. 'One thing about Kilfedder,' she added, 'he keeps his hands to himself.'

At that moment a man in shirtsleeves entered the dining-room. He greeted them and introduced himself as Mr Hurley. He inquired if they'd like another pot of tea, already seizing the metal teapot and moving towards the hatch with it. They'd find St Agnes's restful, he said, no children for miles around. The hatch opened and Mrs Hurley's freshly rouged face appeared. She had removed her hairnet, and the hair it had controlled, now seen to be a shade of henna, fluffed elaborately about her head. 'Have they butter enough?' she demanded of her husband, in the same uncompromising tone she had employed when protesting about the activities of the greyhound. 'It's good country butter,' she shouted at her guests. 'Fresh as a daisy.'

'We have plenty,' Kitty replied. 'It's good butter all right, Mrs Hurley.' The teapot was handed back through the hatch and placed on the table. 'There's a big attraction in Tramore tonight,' Mr Hurley said. 'Have you ever heard tell of the Carmody's?'

When they said they hadn't he told them that the Carmody's ran a Wall of Death that was reputed to be great entertainment. She had never seen a Wall of Death yet. Kitty said when he'd gone. 'D'you like the sausages, pet?'

He nodded, holding his cup out for tea. Under the table the calves of their legs were pressed together.

'Caddy Donnegan wanted to take me once, only I said I couldn't watch it.'

'Maybe we wouldn't bother in that case.'

'I'd watch anything with yourself, Davy. Maybe we'd walk down by the sea as well.'

He nodded again and she leaned forward to say she was feeling fine, a

reference to the fact that she had recently been subject to bouts of sickness in her stomach. They'd have a few drinks after the Wall of Death and the walk, she suggested, in case it wouldn't look good, coming back to the bedroom too soon. She winked and nudged him with her knee. Under the table he put his hand on her lightly stockinged leg. 'Oh Jesus, lay off now,' she whispered.

It wasn't Cuddy Donegan, she'd told him in McHenry Street, standing outside the chemist's shop. She'd never been in love with Cuddy Donegan. She'd never been in love until the other thing happened, until there was a man taking her hand in a way Cuddy Donegan wouldn't do in a million years - a cousin of Father Tolan's, who was destined himself for the priesthood. He'd been about in the parish for the summer holidays; she'd have put down her life for him, she said. 'He'd marry me if he knew, Davy. He'd give up the priesthood, only I'd never tell him.'

They finished the meal Mrs Hurley had prepared for them. 'I'll just go upstairs a minute,' she said. 'I won't be a tick, pet.'

Waiting in the hall, Davy examined the pictures on the walls. A light burned beneath the Virgin and Child; there were reproductions of Victorian paintings, one of a match-seller, another of a shawled woman with a basket of lavender. He turned away from them, and the face of the chemist crept into his recollection: the jaw dark, the chin pimpled beneath a raw shave, eyes magnified behind heavily lensed spectacles, cheeks as pale as the white coat he wore. 'Come in,' Mr Minogue had welcomed them that day, knowing what they wanted although nothing had been said yet. It was the afternoon when his shop was closed, and he led them through the stillness of it into a room at the back, where there were no chairs to sit on, only a table with a rubber sheet on it. 'I take a grave risk,' Mr Minogue announced without preamble, his unsmiling countenance reflecting eloquently the gravity he spoke of. 'The assistance I offer you in your distress is offered for humanitarian reasons only. But the risk must be covered, you understand that? It is not of my own volition that I charge a fee.' While he spoke he did not remove his bulbously magnified eyes from their faces, revolving his stare in a circle around each, sliding it from one to the other. 'You may know the fee?' he said, and when Kitty placed the money before him his grey, closely barbered head bowed over the notes he counted. 'Yes, this is correct,' he said, speaking directly to Davy, clearly assuming him to be the father of the unwanted child and the source of the fee. He placed the notes in a wallet he'd taken out of the back pocket of his trousers, and jerked his head at Davy, indicating that he should return to the shop and wait there. But before Davy could do so both he and the abortionist were taken by surprise because without any warning whatsoever Kitty cried out that

she couldn't do it. She would burn in hell for it, she shrieked in sudden, shrill, unexpected emotion; she could never confess it, there was no penance she could be given. 'I'd rather die as I stand, sir,' she said to Mr Minogue, and gave way to tears. They flooded on her flushed, round cheeks; the humane abortionist stood arrested, one hand still in the back pocket of his trousers. 'Hail Mary, Mother of God!' Kitty cried, shrill again. 'Sweet Mother, don't abandon me!' The money was handed back, no further word was spoken. Mr Minogue removed his white coat and led the way to the door of his shop, glancing before he opened it around the edge of an advertisement for liver salts pasted to its glass. The street was empty. As there had been no salutation, so there was no farewell.

'Are we right so?' Kitty said, descending the stairs. He opened the hall door and they stepped out into the evening. It was warm and quiet on the terraced cul-de-sac, in which St Agnes's was the last house. They still couldn't hear the sea and Kitty said the waves wouldn't be big in that case. 'I'm sorry,' she'd said outside the chemist's shop, still sobbing, and then they'd walked for ages through the streets, before having a cup of tea in a café. She was calm by that time; it had never for a second occurred to her that she couldn't do it, she said, but the sin when she'd handed Mr Minogue the money had been like something alive in the room with them. 'I swear to God, Davy.' He'd said he understood, but in fact he didn't. He was confused because there was so much to take in - her being in trouble, the purpose of their journey being revealed, and then the episode with Mr Minogue. He was the man on the farm, the labourer who worked in the yard and the fields; it had been strange enough being asked to go to Cork with her. In the café, after she'd drunk two cups of tea, she said she was better. She ate a bun with currants in it, but he couldn't eat anything himself. Then he brought her to the orphans' home just to look at the outside of. 'God, Davy, what am I going to do?' she suddenly cried when they were standing there, as suddenly as she'd said in the back room of the chemist's that she couldn't go through with it.

'It's down at the strand,' a man told them when they asked about the Wall of Death. He pointed out the way, and soon they heard the music that accompanied it and the roar of the motor-cycle's engine. '... to see again the moonlight; over Clara,' moaned a tenor voice, robbed of its mellifluous quality by the scratching of a gramophone needle. '... and to see the sun going down on Galway Bay'. They paid the admission charge and climbed up rickety stairs, like a ladder, that led to the top of the circular wooden wall. A platform ran around the circumference, with a balustrade to prevent the jostling audience from falling into the pit below. 'God, it's great,' Kitty shouted above the noise, and Davy gave her arm a

squeeze. A small, wizened man in red gaiters and black leather clothes, with a spotted red neckerchief, mounted the quivering motor-cycle that stood on its pedestal in the centre of the pit. He pushed it forward and ran it on to the incline at the bottom of the wall, gradually easing it on to the wall itself. Each circle he made increased the angle of his machine until in the end, close to the balustrade over which the audience leaned, he and his motor-cycle were horizontal. The timbers of the wall and of the platform shuddered, the roar of the engine was deafening. Waving above his head, the performer descended, the same circular motion in reverse. The audience clapped and threw coins into the pit. 'Are you OK?' Davy shouted, for in the excitement Kitty had closed her eyes. In the pit the motor-cycle was returned to its stand. The man bowed his gratitude for the money that still lay on the ground, and then threw out an arm in a sudden, dramatic gesture. He was joined immediately by a woman, dressed in red-and-black clothing also, who climbed on to the pillion of his motor-cycle and when it reached the centre of the wall clambered on to his back. She stood on his shoulders, with his spotted neckerchief streaming from between her teeth. Kitty screamed and closed her eyes again. More coins were thrown.

'Is she his wife, Davy?' Kitty asked as they walked away.

'I'd say she was.'

'Wouldn't it be shocking if she came off?'

'I'd say she wouldn't.'

'God, I love the smell of the sea, Davy.'

If she hadn't been wearing stockings she'd have paddled, she said, and he told her about a time they'd been taken from the orphans' home to the seaside at Courmasherry. He continued to tell her about this while they walked back to the town and went in search of a public house. They found one that was as quiet as St Agnes's, a murky place that Kitty said was cosy. Two elderly men sat at the counter, steadily drinking, not conversing. The publican was shifting sacks of meal in the grocery that adjoined the bar. Davy called out to him, ordering bottles of stout.

'Was it terrible in the orphans' home?' Kitty asked when he'd carried them to the table she was sitting at. 'Did you hate it the whole time?'

He said he hadn't. It hadn't been bad; he'd never known anywhere else until he came to the farm. 'Jeez, it looks like a prison,' she'd said that day, looking up at the orphans' home from the street.

'It's terrible, though, no family to turn to,' she said now. 'I have the half of it myself, with no mother.'

'You get used to the way it is.'

A week after their visit to Cork her aunt said to him in the yard that Kitty would marry him if he asked her. Her aunt stood there in the early-

morning sunlight, a heavily made woman who was always dressed in black. She more than anyone, more than her husband or her brother or Kitty herself, knew that ever since he'd arrived at the farm with a label on him he'd had a notion of Kitty. The aunt was the sharpest of them, her eyes as black as her clothes, always watchful. She had noticed him looking at Kitty across the table when they all sat down to their dinner; he'd never been able to help looking at her, and it embarrassed him every time her aunt caught him. Did she guess that he lay in bed at night imagining Kitty's lips on his own, and the lovely white softness of her? They would have the farm between them was what she omitted to say in the yard because it was not necessary to say it: Kitty would inherit the farm since there was no one else, and if he married her he would no longer be the hired man, with the worst of the work always reserved for him. 'I'll ask her so,' he said, and because of the day there had been in Cork it was easier to pluck up the courage. Before that, Kitty had always ordered him about in the way her father and her uncle did when they all worked together at certain seasons, making hay or lifting the potatoes. He had never disliked her for it, any more than he'd ever felt he had a right to resent Caddy Donnegan's rusty old Vauxhall arriving in the yard and Caddy Donnegan waiting in it, and the way he'd push open a door of the car when he heard the sound of her heels tip-tapping across the concrete. Father Tolan's cousin had never come near the farm; all that was a mystery.

'Would there be anything to eat in here, pet? Would they have biscuits?' At the bar he ordered two more bottles of stout and inquired if biscuits could be supplied. The publican said he had ginger-snaps and went to the grocery to weigh out half a pound.

'Oh, great,' Kitty said. She crumbled one in her mouth. He poured out the stout. The day before her aunt had made her suggestion in the yard he had noticed Kitty going up to Caddy Donnegan after Mass, and Caddy Donnegan had turned away from her as if they'd had a quarrel, which was understandable in view of her friendship with Father Tolan's cousin. After that, Caddy Donnegan's Vauxhall never again drove up to the farm.

'We'll never forget our honeymoon,' Kitty said. 'I wish we had a camera. I'd love to take snaps of Tramore.'

He knew what she meant. For the rest of their lives they'd be at the farm, milking every morning and evening, taking the churns down to the creamery, ploughing and sowing and ditching. No matter how you fixed it there was never enough time, except for the couple of hours you took to go to Mass. He always rode to Mass on his bicycle, and on Sunday afternoons he rode over to Doolin's at the old railway junction, where no trains came any more. A new road passed by Doolin's now and on Sunday

afternoons there would always be bicycles propped up against its window, and the same dozen or so faces inside. 'I hear you're marrying in,' one of the men said to him on the Sunday after Kitty agreed. 'More power to your elbow, Davy! No one was displeased at his good fortune, in Doolin's or anywhere else. Father Tolan came up to the farm specially and walked down to the mangold field to shake his hand and to congratulate him. Even Ned Cauley, who rarely had a good word to say on any subject, wagged his head at him in an approving way.'

'I love the taste of ginger-snaps and stout,' Kitty said. 'Did you know ginger-snaps were my favourite?'

'They're all the man had.'

Suddenly she asked him if he was happy. She repeated the question, putting it differently, asking him if he was contented in himself. He said he was.

'Will you ever forget the day we went to Cork, Davy?'

From her voice, he thought she was maybe getting drunk, that her condition made the stout go to her head. She was looking at him, giggling. She leaned closer to him and said that on the bus that day she'd thought to herself she wouldn't mind being married to him.

'You were good to me that day, Davy, d'you know that?'

'I always had a notion of you, Kitty.'

'I never noticed it till that day, per. That was the first time I knew it.'

He went to the bar for two further bottles of stout. He had wondered if the men in Doolin's knew the state she was in, and if they imagined he was the man involved. The same applied where her father and her uncle were concerned, and Father Tolan. He didn't know if there'd been talk or not.

'Didn't it work out OK, in the end?' she said when he returned with the stout. She asked if there were any more biscuits and he went back to buy another quarter pound. When he returned to where they sat she said:

'Were you ever jealous of Cuddy, per?'

He nodded, pouring his stout from the bottle, and she laughed because she'd made him feel awkward. He looked away, wishing she hadn't brought up Cuddy Donnegan. Then he turned and clumsily attempted to kiss her on the lips, but found them gritty with biscuit crumbs.

'Oh, Cuddy's the right romantic! It was maybe ten or eleven times he said 'would we get married.'

He frowned, feeling that something wasn't quite right, yet for the moment uncertain as to what it was.

'Did I tell you poor Cuddy cried?' she said. 'The day I told him I was marrying yourself?'

After that the conversation became confused. Kitty again mentioned her surprise when Mrs Kilfedder had embraced her at the wedding. She counted up the wedding guests, and said it must have been the biggest wedding for a long time. Her father had had to sell two bullocks to pay for it. 'Did you see the cut of old Feehy, without a collar or tie?' She went through all the guests then, commenting on their dress and wondering why other women hadn't embraced her. 'Will we take back a few bottles?' she suggested, nudging him and winking. 'Hey!' she called out to the publican. 'Put a dozen stout in a bag for us, Mister.'

When Davy had paid for them they left the public house, Kitty talking about a girl called Rose she'd been at the national school with, wondering where she was now. She hung on to his arm; he listened vaguely. Turning into the cul-de-sac, they met Mr Hurley exercising a greyhound, a dejected animal which in the course of conversation Mr Hurley said was worth a fortune. 'Is it the one that gets into the cement mixer?' Kitty asked, and Mr Hurley explained that the greyhound only got into the cement mixer the odd time.

Kitty laughed shrilly. The trouble with a habit like that, she pointed out, was that the creature might get turned into concrete. 'Will you take a stout, Mr Hurley? We brought home a few bottles.'

Mr Hurley instantly fell into step with them and when they arrived at the house he led them round to the back, incarcerating the greyhound in a shed on the way. 'Sit down on a chair,' he said in the kitchen and his wife produced glasses, saying it was unusual to have guests bringing drink back to St Agnes's, but where was the harm in it? 'Good luck!' said Mr Hurley.

Details of the Wall of Death were given, and details of the wedding. The unexpected embrace of Mrs Kilfedder was retailed, and reference made to Kitty's father singing 'Lily of Laguna' and to old Feehy without his collar or tie. 'Poor Cuddy Donnegan hadn't the heart to attend,' Kitty said. 'He's a fellow from the slaughterhouse, Mrs Hurley. I went out with poor Cuddy for three years.'

'They take it hard,' agreed Mrs Hurley.

'He cried, poor Cuddy.'

'I had a similar case myself. A fellow by the name of O'Gorman.'

'A chancer,' said Mr Hurley beneath his breath. 'A real oiler.'

'O'Gorman could have charmed the leaves off the trees. I heard him called the handsomest man in Tramore.'

'The story is told,' Mr Hurley said in the same low voice, 'that he fecked a crucifix off a nun.'

'Well, I'll never marry now,' was what poor Cuddy came out with when I told him. 'I'll keep myself by for you, Kitty.'

'Where'd the point be in that, though?' Mrs Hurley interposed. 'Is poor Cuddy a bit slow?'

'It's only his way of putting the thing, Mrs Hurley.'

The dozen bottles took an hour to drink, during which time Mr Hurley gave Davy a number of racing tips. He talked about famous greyhounds he had known or had even had a hand in the breeding of, but Davy was more interested in what the two women were discussing and was unable to prevent himself from listening. He heard Kitty saying the husband she'd married would do anything for you. He watched her leaning closer to Mrs Hurley and heard her referring to the cousin of Father Tolan. 'Errah, go on, are you serious?' Mrs Hurley exclaimed, glancing across at him, and he guessed at once what she'd been told - that the lapse of the priest's cousin had determined him in his vocation, that God had gained in the end.

'Held back all summer,' Mr Hurley continued. 'Put every penny in your pocket on him.'

Davy promised he would, although he had never in his life backed a horse and hadn't heard what the one Mr Hurley recommended was called. Kitty stood up and was swaying back and forth, her eyes blearily staring. 'I don't know should I have eaten the ginger-snaps,' she muttered uneasily, but Mrs Hurley said a ginger-snap never did anyone any harm. Mr Hurley was talking about another horse, and Davy kept nodding.

'You're a good man,' the landlady whispered as he went by her. He had one arm around Kitty, holding her up. He shook his head, silently disclaiming the goodness Mrs Hurley imputed him with.

'Are you all right?' he asked Kitty on the stairs, and she didn't reply until they were in the bedroom, when she said she wasn't. He lifted the china jug out of the basin on the wash-stand and after she had finished being sick he carried the basin across the landing to the lavatory.

'God, I'm sorry, pet,' she managed to say before she fell asleep, lying across the bed.

Even though she couldn't hear him, he said it didn't matter. It had never occurred to him before that a cousin of Father Tolan's who came to the parish for his holidays must have attended Mass on Sundays, yet he had never seen him there. Nor had he ever heard anyone else but Kitty mention him. She had painted a picture of a saintly young man who had since become a priest, and in her befuddled state she'd wanted Mrs Hurley to

know about him too. She had wanted Mrs Hurley to know that it wasn't anything crude that had occurred, like going with Cuddy Donnegan in the back of a bloodstained Vauxhall.

'It's all right, Kitty.' He spoke aloud, sitting beside her on the bed, looking down into her face. In the bedroom there was the rancid smell of her vomit; her breath as he pulled the dress over her head was cloyed with it. Again he looked down into her face, understanding why she had told the lies. When she'd approached Cuddy Donnegan after Mass that day he'd probably retorted that she'd let herself get into that condition in order to catch him.

Davy stood up and slowly took his clothes off. He was lucky that she had gone with Cuddy Donnegan because if she hadn't she wouldn't now be sleeping on their honeymoon bed. Once more he looked down into her face: for eighteen years she had seemed like a queen to him and now, miraculously, he had the right to kiss her. He straightened her slackened body, moving her arms and legs until she was lying comfortably. Slowly he pulled the bed-clothes up and turned the light out; then he lay beside her and caressed her in the darkness. He had come to the farm with a label round his neck; he had come out of nowhere, from rooms and corridors that were as bleakly anonymous as the orphan home's foundling inmates. He had been known as her father's hired man, but now he would be known as her husband. That was how people would refer to him, and in the end it wouldn't matter when she talked about Cuddy Donnegan, or lowered her voice to mention the priest's cousin. It was natural that she should do so since she had gained less than he had from their marriage.

William Trevor, Writer Who Evoked the Struggles of Ordinary Life, Is Dead at 88



By William Grimes
• Nov. 21, 2016

William Trevor, whose mournful, sometimes darkly funny short stories and novels about the small struggles of unremarkable people placed him in the company of masters like V. S. Pritchett, W. Somerset Maugham and Chekhov, died on Sunday in Somerset, England. He was 88. His death was confirmed by his son Patrick Cox.

Mr. Trevor, who was Irish by birth and upbringing but a longtime resident of Britain, placed his fiction squarely in the middle of ordinary life. His plots often unfolded in Irish or English villages whose inhabitants, most of them hanging on to the bottom rung of the lower middle class, waged unequal battle with capricious fate.

In "The Ballroom of Romance," one of his most famous stories, a young woman caring for her crippled father looks for love in a dance hall but settles, week after week, for a few drunken kisses from a local bachelor. The hero of "The Day We Got Drunk on Cake" repeatedly phones a young woman he admires in between drinking sessions at a series of pubs. The relationship deepens and, during a final call in the wee hours, takes a sudden, unexpected turn.

The emotional weather in Mr. Trevor's world is generally overcast, with a threat of rain. "I am a 58-year-old provincial," the narrator of the novel "Nights at the Alexandra" (1987) begins. "I have no children. I have never married." From this bleak premise, a mesmerizing tale unfolds.

"I'm very interested in the sadness of fate, the things that just happen to people," Mr. Trevor told Publishers Weekly in 1983.

His cast of characters, nearly all of the middling sort, was extraordinarily varied.

"Trevor has fashioned a remarkable gallery of contemporary figures," the critic Ted Solotaroff wrote of "Beyond the Pale and Other Stories" in The New York Times in 1982. "His farmers and priests and men of the turf are as convincing and suggestive as his Hempstead aesthetes, his suburban swingers, his old-boy homosexuals, his mod clerks and shopgirls. Nothing seems alien to him; he captures the moral atmosphere of a sleek

advertising agency, of a shabby West End dance hall, of a minor public school, of a shotgun wedding in an Irish pub.”

Although he wrote nearly 20 novels, many of which won top literary prizes, Mr. Trevor did his finest work in short bursts, and tended to be dismissive of his ventures into the longer form. “I’m a short-story writer who writes novels when he can’t get them into short stories,” he once said. On another occasion, he called his novels “a lot of linked-up short stories.”

His fiction could be wry, satirical, boisterously comic, lugubrious or pathetic. He delved deeply into the hearts of his struggling characters, whose imitations, frustrated ambitions and self-delusions evoked an authorial sympathy that became more pronounced over the years.

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As with Chekhov, the comic brio of the early stories mellowed with time, giving way to a more muted, sorrowful tone, although, like Chekhov, Mr. Trevor achieved some of his finest effects by blending comedy and tragedy.

Robert Cooper, a producer who adapted several of Mr. Trevor’s stories for radio and television in Britain, wrote in an email in 2009, “I shall always imagine him, diffident and comfortable in tweeds, arriving in a tranquil, well-ordered and beautiful place full of nice-looking people, and thinking, ‘This looks lovely — I bet it isn’t.’”

His language was precise, his narratives marvels of condensation. In an interview with *The Paris Review* in 1989, he defined the short story as “the art of the glimpse.” He continued: “It *should* be an explosion of truth. Its strength lies in what it leaves out just as much as what it puts in, if not more.”

William Trevor Cox was born in Ireland on May 24, 1928, in Mitchelstown, County Cork, to Protestant parents. His father, James, was a bank manager who took his wife, the former Gertrude Davison, and children from one town to another, as promotions and transfers arose.

An outsider by family circumstance and religion in a predominantly Roman Catholic country, Mr. Trevor learned at an early age to observe quietly from the sidelines, a skill that served him well as an Irish writer describing the British, and as an expatriate looking across the Irish Sea to the towns and villages of his youth.

“I was fortunate that my accident of birth placed me on the edge of things,” he wrote in *The Guardian* in 1992.

After graduating from Trinity College, Dublin, in 1950, he taught at a preparatory school in Northern Ireland. In 1952, he married Jane Ryan, whom he had met at Trinity. She

and their son Patrick survive him, as do another son, Dominic Cox, and a granddaughter.

In secondary school, Mr. Trevor had begun sculpting in wood, and his growing proficiency led to a job in England teaching art at schools in Rugby and Taunton as he developed a sideline carving statues for churches. He began showing in exhibitions and working in wood, terra cotta and metal, he embraced abstraction.

In 1958, he published a wispy comedy of manners, "A Standard of Behavior" (1958), which he later disowned. He also dropped his last name, to avoid confusion with his identity as a sculptor, although that chapter in his life was already drawing to a close. His abstract work, he later said, dissatisfied him because of its remoteness from human beings. "I sometimes think all the people who were missing in my sculpture gushed out into the stories," he told The Times in 1990.

To bring in income, he began working as a copywriter at Noley's, a leading advertising agency in London, where, he once said, he failed to produce a single usable line of copy. The job left him plenty of spare time, which he used to write fiction.

He grabbed the attention of critics in 1964 with "The Old Boys," a blackly humorous account of former schoolmates who resume their old rivalries when they gather for a reunion. Evelyn Waugh called the novel "uncommonly well written, gruesome, funny and inspired," and it won the Hawthornden Prize. As a writer, Mr. Trevor was on his way, and Noley's lost one of the least promising copywriters it had ever hired.

For the next half-century, most of it spent in the Devon countryside — he most recently lived near Shobrooke — Mr. Trevor turned out stories, novels and plays at a steady rate, developing an expanding world that readers came to recognize as Trevor territory, and a galaxy of characters that included the village sociopath of the novel "The Children of Dymouth" (1976), the fabulously boring Raymond Bamber in the short story "Raymond Bamber and Mrs. Fitch," and many variations on vacillating, timorous Prutrock Man.

"I don't think there is another writer from Ireland with his range," Gregory A. Schirmer, the author of "William Trevor: A Study of His Fiction" (1990), said in an interview. "With total conviction he has written about the rural Irish on their farms, about provincial towns, about commercial Dublin, about middle-class Protestants and the remnants of the aristocracy. He offers a complete picture of life on that island."

In 1982, Mr. Trevor told The New Yorker, which published many of his stories: "Each character is somebody that I know very well — as well as I know myself. You become very interested in that person. You become immensely inquisitive and immensely curious." He added, "I'm sort of a predator, an invader of people."

The settings changed. Most of the early novels and stories take place in English villages. On his attraction to England as a subject, he told Publishers Weekly, "I knew just enough about it to be fascinated."

As Ireland became more remote to him, he found it more congenial as a subject — observed most closely from a distance — although he often turned back the clock, writing about the Ireland of 50 or 100 years ago, but with a keen historical eye for the signs of sectarian conflict that would explode later.

The novel "Fools of Fortune" (1983), which opens in 1918, develops into a parable of the Troubles, and there are, inevitably, historical foreshadowings in the novels "Other People's Worlds" (1980), "The Silence in the Garden" (1996) and "The Story of Lucy Gault" (2002), which begin at the close of the First World War and the early years of Irish independence, and even in "The News From Ireland," one of Mr. Trevor's most celebrated later stories, set during the famine years of the 1840s.

"I have no messages or anything like that," Mr. Trevor told The Paris Review. "I have no philosophy and I don't impose on my characters anything more than the predicament they find themselves in."