

# The Girl from Tir-na-nOg

Gary Hope

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No matter how chaotic it is, wildflowers will still spring  
up in the middle of nowhere.



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# 1

THE JUDGE LOOKED at me and asked, “Do you have any questions, Mr. Alfred?”

I tried to look as heartbroken as possible as I answered, “No, your Honor, I understand completely.” He banged his gavel and walked out of the courtroom.

My lawyer shook my hand and said, “I’m sorry Paul, not a very good birthday present for you.” And so, the first day of my 31<sup>st</sup> year began. My now ex-wife and her lawyer (who is soon to be her new husband) hugged and kissed and laughed.

I hung my head and slowly shuffled out of the courtroom as I began to celebrate my 31<sup>st</sup> birthday the way I’d been planning it for a year now. You see, one year ago is when my wife (now ex-wife) informed me she had become pregnant, had an abortion and wanted a divorce. Two of those three events took me by great surprise. Since I hadn’t had sexual relations with her in over two years, I was pretty sure I wasn’t the father. That she’d had an abortion also surprised me, since I had no idea she was even pregnant.

It did not surprise me she wanted a divorce. That, in fact, was a relief. We were never really suited or compatible with each other, except that I liked a pretty face and long legs, which she had. And she liked a lot of money, which she THOUGHT I had. We both became quickly disappointed. Once she figured out that I wasn't the rich guy she thought I was, her entire personality changed.

She thought by marrying me she would have unlimited credit cards, new cars, a nice big house, and unlimited vacations all over the world. It took about eighteen months before reality truly sunk in and she realized the fairy tale life she dreamed of had evaporated.

I'm a building contractor here in Winston-Salem, mainly building houses and a few small office buildings. I built the house where we live; though on paper, it is actually owned by my company, not me personally. She never figured that out. Also, my truck and the cars we both drove are owned by the company. When the economy was booming, our business boomed. People wanted new houses and everything seemed rosy. Conversely, when the economy slowed, our business slowed and my wife became unhappy—very unhappy. I have four large houses under construction and one small office building nearly completed, all of which are financed through banks with liens and mortgages out the wazoo.

If I could hang on and eventually sell the houses and office building, everything would be grand and all the debts would be paid off. That was a big "If." The economy turned south; the buyers backed out and I was



left with unfinished properties and huge debts. On paper, I still looked good. Gina (my now ex-wife) thought I looked good; everyone thought I looked good. I probably could have endured this downturn and re-financed this and that and eventually come out ahead. That was one year ago. Things changed.

I knew our marriage wasn't working out. We were both unhappy but I was hoping that when the economy picked up, our fortunes would change. I was dreaming. I came home from work one day to find Gina and her lawyer, Charles, waiting for me in the living room. At the time I didn't know Charles, but I knew his kind. In every profession there's good people and bad people. You'll find good truck drivers and careless ones, good baseball players and minor leaguers, good guitar players and hacks, good lawyers and snakes like Charles.

This was the night I found out about Gina's pregnancy and abortion. Charles informed me that the abortion had been completed at a local clinic run by his brother, and he preceded to show me the documentation when I told them I didn't believe it. It wasn't that I didn't believe Gina had an abortion—with Gina, anything was possible. What I didn't believe was that I was the father, unless her pregnancy had lasted over two years.

Since the abortion clinic didn't take any DNA samples from the fetus to prove who the father could have been, it was now Gina's word against mine. Charles also informed me they would be filing for divorce and suing for half of my company, half of our total assets, the entire

house and a huge financial payment for Gina's emotional and physical abuse from me "forcing" her to get the abortion. Wow, Charles was good.



As I started processing all this information, I also started looking at my options. There weren't many. I talked to several friends and learned some valuable information along the way. Apparently, Charles and some of his "posse" had been spreading rumors and innuendos about me and my solvency throughout the business community in our town. He also convinced or coerced all the customers I had for the houses and commercial property that I would soon be declaring bankruptcy. He suggested they should all bail out before it was too late.

Fortunately for me, I had total confidence in Charles's ability to make me look like the worst husband and worst businessman in history. Forcing his wife to have an abortion—how cruel can I be? That night is when I started planning my escape. Each week I began taking a little money out of the checking accounts, both the personal and the company accounts. Not enough to raise any eyebrows, but enough. I started paying the minimum (or less) on all the bills owed by the company and our personal credit cards. Then I asked all the creditors to lend me some time. Since I'd been a long-term customer, they all accommodated me.

I continued to empty all the accounts and kept all the proceeds in cash, well hidden. I was also able to secure

second and third mortgages on my house and properties. I also got what personal loans I could get from banks and credit unions, based on my past histories with them, using our house as collateral. All of these loans were also converted to cash over a period of time. It wasn't a lot, but it would be enough to get me away and settled until I could find employment. In the meantime, my lovely wife had maxed out all her credit cards, which she and her lawyer/lover thought I was paying off. I also discovered they had been carrying on their secret affair for almost two years while skimming money from my savings accounts in the process. And they were now living together in MY house, completely unaware of what was just about to happen to them.

I was preparing to not only give Gina half of everything, I was going to give her the whole enchilada. All the bills, all the debt, all the liens and all the trouble! I was sure she and Charles could figure it all out when I was gone. Where was I going? I was going somewhere I'd never heard of. Somewhere I'd never be found, someplace where I could disappear and live happily ever after. I was going to Dungloe, County Donegal, Republic of Ireland.

I walked out of the courtroom that day, got in my car, which was on the verge of being repossessed, and drove to Norfolk, Virginia. I had a suitcase packed with essential clothing and another smaller bag stuffed with cash. I'd been going to Norfolk for several weeks in the hopes of meeting someone I could bribe. It didn't take long. I was looking for someone who worked in the

freighter business. There were several bars in the dock area and it wasn't hard making acquaintances, especially when you floated around hundred dollar bills.

I met a guy about my age, with similar features who volunteered to let me use his visa for the next voyage back on a working freighter to Hamburg, Germany. When I say "volunteered" I mean bribed. A couple of thousand dollars is a lot of money to a drunk in a bar. I promised to mail him the visa back to Norfolk when I arrived in Hamburg. We both knew that was a lie. These freighters don't check things very closely. They just want someone to work on the ship for low wages and not ask any questions. The same thing I was looking for.

I board the ship with no problems. They simply scan over my "visa," and I start my job as a cook's helper and cleaner as I wait for the ship to leave port in two days. I was pretty sure my car wouldn't be found any time soon, since I threw the license plate away and stole one from another car in the port parking lot to replace it. Just before boarding the ship I went to the sleaziest used car lot I could find and sold the car for considerably less than it was worth. But, I didn't care; I just wanted a little extra cash. If I can make it these two days until the ship sails for Hamburg, I'll be free and clear. I did.

Aside from getting sea sick and hit on by a young ship mate, the ocean crossing was uneventful. I bought a Rail Pass in Hamburg and took the train to France, then through the Chunnel to England and up to Liverpool where I hopped a ferry over to Belfast. I'd researched

Ireland beforehand. I want a country that speaks English and has very rural, out-of-the way settings, thus the northern reaches of Ireland. I want to be away from the tourist spots in the south and west. I want to be beyond the reaches of anyone. In fact, I want to go to the back of beyond.

Dungloe was nowhere anyone wanted to go—except me.

## 2

GINA AND I had no children and I was an only child, except for an older brother whom I don't claim because he's a cheat, a liar, and a bum. Our parents died several years ago in a car accident and he tried his best to cheat me out of our inheritance. He nearly succeeded. There are a few remote uncles and aunts whom I haven't spoken with in years and maybe a few so-called friends. But honestly, no one will miss me except Gina and Charles. And they won't actually miss me. They'll only miss me paying their bills for them.

I'm sure old Charles will have all the authorities trying to track me down. They'll check all over the state and my hometown and maybe even a few bordering states. Gina will tell them, truthfully, that I never had a passport. And, I never did. I never travelled outside the U.S. before, except one ill-advised trip to Tijuana and once to look at the Canadian side of Niagara Falls. That's why I'm pretty sure that as long as I lay low and don't cause any problems here in Ireland, Gina and her lover boy will never find me. Of course, I'll have to change my name and have some half-way believable reason why I'm here in Dungloe. That should be easy enough, right?

My birthday was July 14. It took me a few weeks to make the ocean crossing and get to Dungloe. I wrongly assumed it would be summer in the far reaches of Ireland. It was not. When I exit the comforts of the train at the Dungloe station, the wind is blowing about 25 mph. It's also raining and feels like 40 degrees outside. Actually, I have no idea how cold it really is because all the temperatures are in Celsius. I should have paid better attention in science class my freshman year in high school.

Dungloe is situated on the west coast, in the northern part of Ireland. Aside from being cold, damp and windy, I know very little of my new home. Ever since I landed in Hamburg, I've been thinking of various stories I can tell people when they ask why I'm in Dungloe. The one that makes the most sense, and probably the easiest to explain is this:

I was born and raised in Toronto, Canada where I was a supervisor in a company that made GPS systems for cars. I was promoted and transferred to the sister plant in Birmingham, England where I trained for about six months before being permanently transferred to Belfast, Northern Ireland. My story is that I'd been working in Belfast about three years when the owners closed the factory.

I liked Ireland so I decided to stay and look for other work. I'd saved a bit of money and could afford to take my time and figure things out. While I was out exploring the region, I met a girl one night in a pub in the coastal town of Ballycastle. She was gorgeous—flaming red hair,

a body to die for and for some reason, she took a liking to me. At the time it never struck me as odd that a beautiful twenty-three year old woman would start flirting with an average looking man 8 years older than her. I would soon find out the reason why.

We spent the night together in a local hotel and the next morning she asked me if I would drive her over to Donegal so she could pick up some things from her parent's house. For the promise of another night with this beauty, I'd have driven her to London and back. When we got to the border crossing from Northern Ireland into the Republic of Ireland is when things went crazy.

Usually, these border crossings are mere formalities and they just wave you on through without stopping—not this time. The guards told me to pull over onto a side road, where they then started searching me and my car and my suitcases. My so-called girlfriend jumped out of the car and disappeared somewhere. The two guards started pushing me around, asking me if I had sexually assaulted the girl and making all kinds of accusations.

At that point, a young looking girl, about 15 years old, appeared from nowhere and the guards asked her if I was the one who assaulted and kidnapped her from Ballycastle. As you can probably tell, the whole thing was a set-up to rob me, threaten me, and scare me. It did. They took my papers, my visa, most of my money, my driver's license and told me to never come back to Northern Ireland again or I would be arrested—OR WORSE!



This was going to be my story. It could explain why I spoke with no English or Irish accent and why I have no visa or driver's license or any proof of anything. Those darn British rogues robbed me of everything! I'm hoping the good people of Dungloe will believe my story.



I arrive in my new home late in the afternoon, with two suitcases and nowhere to stay. Fortunately for me, the train station is only a couple of blocks from the city center, which is where I head. Almost immediately I see a sign for The Bridge Inn on Main Street. I don't see a "bridge" in any direction, but it looks like a nice place, so I go in and asked for a room. An elderly lady asks me how long I'll be staying and I tell her I'm not sure. She doesn't seem to understand my answer, so I try explaining to her that I am moving here and looking for a home.

She says, "Well you can't live here deary; we're just an Inn."

"I know that ma'am. This is only temporary while I look for a place."

Then she smiles and says, "Me husband and I have a small apartment to let over our place that's available, if you want to see it."

"Great," I tell her, "I'd love to see it in the morning if that would be okay?"

So far, so good. There is a pub just down the block called “The Bayview Bar,” which I intend on visiting as soon as I check in my room. I know we are near the ocean, but I don’t see a bay of any kind, anywhere in view. However, I know most Irish pubs offer meals as well as drinks, and I am hungry. I walk in the bar and all eleven people there set their drinks down and stare at me. It isn’t often a total stranger happens to walk in their midst. I nod to all and make my way to an empty table near the bar.

A middle-aged man, whom I assume works in the pub, comes to my table and says, “Plain?”

Having no idea what he means, I reply, “Excuse me?”

I think he then says, “Do you want a pint of Guinness, or something else?”

“Oh, yes, a pint of Guinness would be very nice . . . thanks.”

He goes to the bar and draws the black, foaming brew and brings it back to me asking, “You from Norn Iron?”

At this point, I can try to bluff with my answers, try telling him my story, asking him to repeat himself, or just say “No.” Which is what I did. I was pretty sure I wasn’t from Norn Iron, wherever that is. He just shrugs his shoulders and I think he says, “Okay, let me know if you need anything else.”

I had completely forgotten to order any food. After I’d drunk about half of the Guinness, I go to the bar and ask a

young girl if I can order something to eat. She smiles at me and says, “Of course you can darling. That’s what we do here. What would you like?” I still haven’t seen a menu, so I tell her whatever she chooses will be fine with me. She cocks her head and says something that sounds like “Go bother gibb sheek.” I return to my table and sit down while everyone else in the pub continues to stare at me.

After a few minutes, the young lady brings me a plate of potatoes, beans and some kind of meat. I have no idea what it is, but it tastes pretty good. I order another Guinness for dessert and drink it as the other patrons point at me and whisper. They are obviously trying to figure out who the stranger is in their little town. As I am eating I notice some movement from most of the others in the bar. Soon, two men produce guitars and a woman brings out a violin. A young kid then reaches in his coat and takes out what looks like a flute. Then they all drag their chairs over to a heavy set man who has something that resembles a large tambourine.

They never once speak a word amongst themselves, or tune their instruments. They just start playing—I mean REALLY playing. One jig after another. Occasionally the large man will sing along, but I can never understand a word he is singing. This goes on while I’m eating and finishing my second and third Guinness—my limit. I eventually finish the black brews, pay my bill and walk back to my room while the music plays on. As a light mist

is falling, I think to myself, “Well, I made it through the first day of the rest of my life. It feels good.”