
SUITCASE
NUMBER SEVEN



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A rugby story with a difference

Ursula Kane Cafferty

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PART ONE

Ursula

PASSING

“SORRY for your troubles ...”

“Thanks.”

“Sorry for your troubles ...”

“Thanks for coming...” *What exactly does that mean, sorry for your troubles?*

“Your uncle was a gentleman ...”

“Thanks, I appreciate that ...” *OUCH. What a bone-cracking handshake. A rugby player for sure! Thank God I took off my rings.*

A silent sympathiser came next, a gentle touch, a tender gesture.

“That’s the girl who broke Tom’s heart,” someone whispers beside me. I hardly get a chance to look at her as wave after wave of sympathisers alternatively squeeze, pump and shake my hand. I hope I meet her later. Isn’t it odd that people travel all this distance and then we don’t have time to talk to them?

“He was my hero ...”

“Thank you ...” *Hero?*

“Many’s the drink I had with him ...”

“Thanks for coming, Johnny ...” *I know, I know!*

“What a character” *...Could bore the backside off us at times but he was a character alright.*

“He was indeed”

And on and on they go, filing past us, as we sit in the front row of St. Paul’s Church, Mullingar. It should have been the Cathedral, but that was closed for restoration. Tom liked space. He deserved the space of the Cathedral, the church where he so often prayed. He was at least entitled to that long walk of mourning down the Cathedral aisle, I thought.

“FRIENDSHIP” A man, whose face I know vaguely, saluted, tears in his eyes. “He’ll be sorely missed.”

And on and on they go, sympathising and paying their respects.

When everybody has filed past us, we follow his coffin up the short aisle of St. Paul’s into the autumn sunshine and lay him to rest in Ballyglass cemetery outside the town.

It is October 1997.

* * *

Ireland is a great place for mourners. You have to be invited to a wedding but anybody can go to a funeral! As it turns out, about 100 people assemble for a meal in a local hotel following Tom's burial. Friends, family, and lots of people from his past. Stories are told, matches replayed, various occasions are recalled and there is lots of chat, backslapping and laughter.

The morning after Tom's burial, an in-law of an in-law¹ of his, who has stayed at my house, is sitting at the breakfast table, no doubt a little worse for wear after the previous night's indulgences. Despite how he feels, this large, solid man tucks into a huge feed of a fried Irish breakfast.

"Great night," says he.

I can see his wife getting edgy at the other side of the table.

"You were at a funeral," she reminds him.

"Still a great night," he spits, biting into a sausage. "But, who the hell was he anyway?" he goes on. "I mean, I heard so many stories about the bastard yesterday that I can't make them all out. Was he a fucking saint or what?"

"Hardly a saint," I muttered.

"Please, don't start," his wife pleads.

"Start what?" he thunders, "I was only asking a question. I didn't really know the man and I am simply asking a fucking question here, IF YOU DON'T MIND."

Silence.

"Well...?" He looks around at us all. "All those well known rugby players, but it turns out most of them haven't seen him since God's own time – what's the story?"

"It's a long story," someone says.

"You haven't enough time to hear the full story unless you decide to stay another night," someone else jokes.

"If you ask me, nobody knew him," he says and he starts scraping the clotted egg off the plate.

As it happens, I am beginning to think the same thing myself.

Over the following few weeks, as we read the letters of sympathy, some from people we don't even know, a picture of the younger Tom begins to form in my mind. Then copies of the obituaries from various magazines and newspapers arrive and we read them too:

There were few better scrum-halves on the Ireland scene in the fifties and early sixties than Tom Cleary, the former Bohemians and Munster² scrum-half, who died in October.

1 Some details have been changed. This memoir is partly fictional.

2 The province of Munster is comprised of 6 counties in the southern part of Ireland, namely Clare, Cork, Kerry, Limerick, Tipperary and Waterford.

A native of Carrick-on-Suir³, he first revealed his considerable talents in the colours of Castleknock College. Tom was cruelly unlucky that the ultimate honour eluded him in a distinguished career during which he toured South Africa with the Ireland squad in 1961. He played in several final Irish trials and was a reserve for Ireland on 17 occasions without gaining the distinction of a cap.

His career coincided with the days when replacements were not allowed in rugby and he was certainly among the best players of his generation not to be capped.⁴

Poor Tom, I think to myself, how or why did he let it all go?

* * *

3 Carrick-on-Suir, Co. Tipperary. Also referred to more simply as 'Carrick' throughout the book.

4 'Obituaries' – *Rugby Ireland International*, vol. 1, no. 3, December 1997, p. 8t.

Limerick

20/2/98

Dear Helen,⁵

Even though you already know of our heartfelt sorrow at the passing of your dear brother, Tom, I would like to place on record, at this late stage, the deep sympathy of my wife and entire family.

Those of us who knew Tom so well in the context of sport, be it rugby, tennis or golf, were, one and all, enriched for having known him. The good Lord endowed him with many gifts, not priced out in money terms, but which he shared with us all. I refer to the gifts of good fellowship, good friendship, a sense of fun and laughter, and compassion towards lesser-endowed people, in a spirit of true generosity.

Our journey to Tom's funeral, in its essence a sad occasion, was ironically, a happy, enlightening and rewarding one because it rekindled recollections of old times and happy memories amongst his friends from Limerick. (As I mentioned to you at the funeral, he was best man at our marriage.) It gave us all the opportunity to share in his funeral Mass which was most edifying, dignified and uplifting.

It would be remiss of me if I did not thank you sincerely for your so generous gesture of inviting so many of us to a beautiful lunch which we will always recall amongst our treasured memories of Tom.

With kindest regards and very best wishes.

Sincerely,

A true friend.⁶

Some time after his funeral the time came to go through Tom's "things". He didn't have much. His clothes were fit for nothing but the bin. His trophies were already on display in his sister Helen's house. A few little mementos were in his room, small tokens for nieces and nephews. One of his suitcases was heavy though. His brother, Gerry⁷, lifted it down from the top of the little wardrobe

⁵ Tom's sister. See list of Tom's relations in Post Mortem section of the book.

⁶ Some details have been changed in this letter.

⁷ There are three family members called Gerard/Gerry mentioned in this story. See list of Tom's relations in Post Mortem section of the book.

and brought it to the sitting room, and there we sat on the high, hard, old-fashioned couch, Gerry and his wife Ann, Helen and I, as we read the musty story and saw the long-forgotten pictures of Tom's life, the joys, sorrows, triumphs and disappointments. When we reached the bottom of the case, it was lined with a green plastic property bag from the hospital where I worked and where Tom had first been treated a year earlier. The hair stood up on the back of my neck and a shiver ran down my spine as I realised Tom had known he was dying during the past year of his illness and had sorted out what he wanted us to have and see. His story.

It was then I knew I had to write this book.

* * *

One of the first things we lifted off the top of your carefully packed suitcase, Tom, was a diary extract⁸ which came from the daughter of a man who emigrated from Tipperary to America in the late 19th century. It was dated 1928, when she visited Carrick-on-Suir while on holiday in Ireland from the States and she describes her visit to the Feehans in West Gate (your maternal grandparents). It gave me a good picture of what life in Carrick was like around that time, not long before you were born:

I trembled a bit when I entered the town through the old gate. It is a little town of about five thousand people located prettily on the river Suir. We walked slowly through the town and asked a young policeman how we could best see the town and he laughed and said "Look at it, it's here befinxt⁹ you". We found the castle that was built in the thirteenth century and the monastery ruins probably dating to the fifth century and the old bridge where my father sat and dreamed of far-off America. We went into the narrow streets and saw poverty and squalor and idleness that was appalling. How could it be otherwise? These people have nothing to do, no place to go. No incentive. The only interest in their lives is the Church and that is not sufficient for the youth. It is all very distressing and hopeless. Is it any wonder that America is a fixation with them? The picture changed however as we continued walking and came to the better part of town.

I easily located my uncle's friend, Mr. Feehan. He was the owner of a fine store well stocked with groceries and canned food and liquors. He greeted us cordially and with much surprise when I made myself known and was overjoyed at seeing anyone who belonged to his dear old friend, Andy. He introduced us to his wife

8 Extract from the diary of the daughter of Richard Ryan who emigrated from Carrick-on-Suir to America in the late 19th century (reproduced here by kind permission of Ms. Connie Miller, U.S.A. Great-niece of the visitor).

9 In front of.



Main Street in Carrick-on-Suir, Co. Tipperary in the early part of the 20th century.
(The West Gate’s Town Clock can be seen at the end of the street.)

Photo published by R. Cleary & Sons.



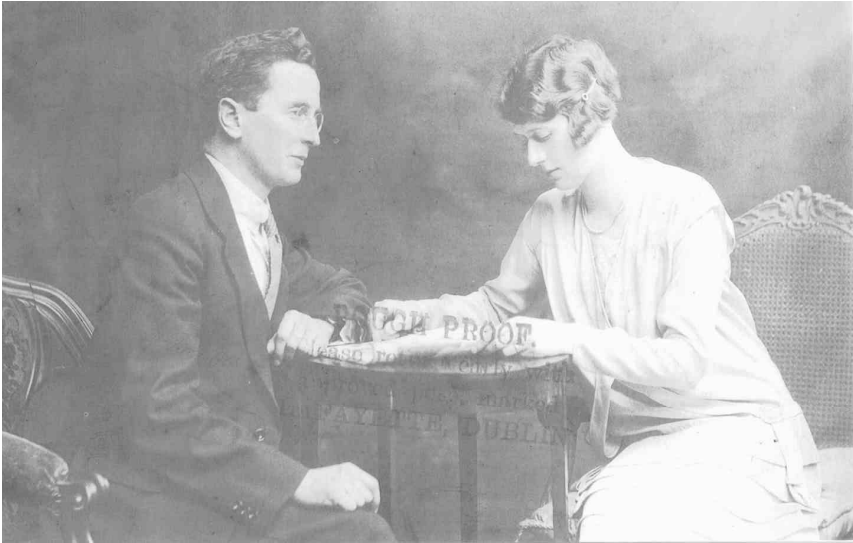
Feehans’ shop front, West Gate, Carrick-on-Suir, in the early 1900s.

These are the premises and house mentioned in the diary extract.

(The name over the door refers to Mary Anne Sheehan, Tom’s Great-Grandaunt.)

¹⁰Male shop assistant, female customer in background, John Feehan (1862-1945,
Tom’s grandfather), Kitty Feehan (1900-1977, Tom’s mother as a child.)

10 Unless otherwise stated, all group and team photos are named from left to right.



Dick Cleary and Kitty Feehan. Wedding photograph, 1927

and we had a long talk about old family changes that had taken place in the town. One of the things I spoke of was the sordid condition in the poor part of the town and he said, "That was always and I fear always will be".

We then went into his fine house and found a bathroom as modern as our own. There was a large conservatory which housed all sorts of growing plants and little indoor pools. We then went into the dining room to tea and it was a delightful affair. Mrs Feehan sat at the head of the table and served tea from a handsome silver service and a little maid did her bidding. We had tea and jams and hot breads and little fishes and scones and we observed that the teapot and hot water kettle were both covered with tea cosies.

We were then introduced to a young Franciscan Friar whom Mr. Feehan said laughingly was eating him out of house and home and he was a very delightful young man. He talked with a rich Dublin accent and spoke of affairs of the world in general and of the Irish "dilemma" and enlightened us on much of the situation. He was tall and fair and wore a brown habit and sandals. He certainly was a picturesque figure sitting at the table.

So this is what life in Carrick was like in those days! Of course you wouldn't remember it, because you weren't born until two years later.