

# THE PLACE I GREW A MAN

## EXCERPT FROM THE BLEEDING HILLS



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**THE** band had left the small stage in a hurry, not waiting for the applause to subside, tiptoeing through the jungle of cables, microphones, speakers, and instruments, rushing over to the bar at the far end of the pub, yearning for a beer during their well-deserved break. Then, unexpectedly, all remaining lights went out, leaving the room in utter darkness for a fleeting moment until a single beam of light emerged from the ceiling, focusing on the young man they had left behind. He sat in an antique, wooden chair in the center of the stage with his eyes closed and his head down as if meditating. His arms covered his instrument, the Uilleann pipe.

His long, brown hair was neatly parted and bound into a ponytail. The bright Red Sox T-shirt, a tribute to a local passion, was in piercing contrast to his otherwise plain clothing, the dark brown corduroy trousers and black shoes. The small set of bellows was wrapped between his waist and right arm. The three drones—tenor, baritone, and bass—lay across his right thigh. The presence of another set of three regulators, as any expert would notice, revealed the musician's impressive talent.

Oblivious of his surroundings, the young man did not move, did not attempt to play or even respond to the presence of his audience. After a few calls from several tables, addressed to those in the audience still engaged in whispers and giggles, the room grew quiet and, slowly, the young man came to life, opened his eyes, straightened his posture, and used his right elbow to begin moving the bellows, pumping air into the pipe bag.

Finn had read about the young musician's exceptional talent and, sitting in a dark corner alone with his drink, unnoticed by most of the patrons, had been waiting expectantly in anticipation of a performance that involved his favorite musical instrument with its sweet tone and the wide range of notes.

The first song was simple and light, yet enchanting, over the constant background of the drones accompanying the tune of the chanter, as is characteristic of the national bagpipe of Ireland.

Finn relaxed, closed his eyes, and let his mind wander, preparing himself for a journey back into time, to a place he had not seen in nearly three decades. Shortly thereafter he saw himself, a boy of fourteen, sitting on the top of a grassy knoll on a bright and warm Sunday morning, the wind swirling his hair, looking down on the Whelan farm in the far distance, so far away that all the sheep appeared like little white dots on a large, colorful painting. The dark blue ocean was quiet, and from where he was sitting, he could even see the beautiful beaches of Inch.

Sunday was his only day off from farm work, and he would spend his time reading, sitting on a rock, or lying in the grass until the daylight faded. Being aware that he might spend hours without food, Mother Whelan would not let him leave without a basket full of homemade brown bread, butter, and milk.

As on every Sunday morning he had been to church, and after Mass, he would spend an hour or two in the priest's library, where he was offered tea while reading newspapers with passionate intensity, keenly absorbing every little detail. At times the study was supplemented by lessons on Irish history or the current status of the Irish Republic in cases where the young man lacked the background information on the topic about which he was reading.

When he had finished his readings, he had a choice of one book from the library's extensive selection, which was to be returned the following Sunday. These were usually works by Jonathan Swift, James Joyce, Oscar Wilde, William Butler Yeats, or, on occasion, even English literature such as Winston Churchill's "The River War."

"You need to know the enemy's thinking," Father Connelly, a stern Republican, assured him on more than one occasion. "The enemy's greatest mistake is their view—based on downright ignorance, I might say—that the Republican movement is nonexistent."

Father Connelly was famous for his colorful Sunday night speeches at the local pub where an exclusive group of local farmers, Brendan Whelan being one of them, gathered in the back room to discuss the Irish situation, especially that of Northern Ireland.

The general sense of the discussions was that the violence in Northern Ireland was committed against Republicans, and not, as it should be, by Republicans.

"The Republican movement has no real policies," Father Connelly once announced during one of his speeches. "We are talking a great deal about fighting for the freedom of Ireland, but we do not succeed. What will it take, what disaster must happen? How many lives will it take before we officially prove our position?"

Finn was only an innocent bystander in those discussions, torn between listening to the heated arguments and the Sunday night sessions at the pub in front. He remembered one night

where the party went to a nearby barn, where they inspected a new shipment of Thompson submachine guns, stored in their wooden boxes, oiled and ready for use.

It was the first time in his young life that he had seen such weapons, and at the time he was unable to grasp their use. Ironically, only a few years later he would be an expert with any weaponry, including the legendary AK-47, and there would be no doubt about his understanding of their use and the reasons behind it.

His thoughts were quickly drawn in a different direction as the music turned to another piece in a faster tempo as the musician's fingers went flying rapidly over the chanter, producing an occasional staccato by working the chanter's bottom hole with his knee. He was now accompanied by another band member sitting on a white plastic chair to his left, a glass of Guinness positioned on the floor in front of him, lifting the music with his bodhrán, the traditional Irish drum, and creating surprisingly intricate rhythms.

Finn let his mind flow wherever it wanted to take him and after only a few seconds he was a young man of seventeen entering Durty McCarthy's, a pub near the town of Cahersiveen in the county of Kerry, only a few miles away from the house where his mother had lived. It was late afternoon on a Friday. The pub was packed and filled with smoke, and a session was about to start.

Durty McCarthy's provided him with reasonable accommodations after a long day's journey from home. He had learned of his true heritage only a few days before, and he needed to reflect as well as learn more. The events of the preceding days had profoundly changed his life, and little did he know that it was only the beginning. Before that day his life held no print or plan, but that was about to change.

He distinctly remembered the first time he noticed the publican's daughter Shauna staring at him. She was a beautiful girl with brown hair and green eyes, dressed in a kitchen apron, wearing rubber gloves and rubber boots. Even then, just like it had so many years earlier, his heart raced. The love he felt for Shauna began right then and it had never died.

He remembered her face as a mixture of surprise and immense joy when he asked her to marry him and follow him to live in the Northern provinces, where he would use his skills to fight for the Irish cause. Only a few months later they were married in the large garden behind the McCarthy's house in the same niche that was now the place of her grave.

Suddenly the musicians turned to a piece of greater complexity and darkness, emphasized by an enigmatic beating of the bodhrán, requiring the highest level of skill and concentration. The young man playing the Uilleann pipe had closed his eyes. His body moved in the rhythm of the music, and his wrists frantically worked the drones and regulators.

Finn began to have visions of bloody bodies leaving bloody traces on the ground as they were drawn away from the view of the shooters, screaming all around him, left and right, from the injured as well as those who tried to help them. He saw people carrying the dead body of a young boy, a priest walking in front of them, waving a white, bloodstained handkerchief at the soldiers with the red berets who, without mercy, kept shooting at them.

Finn squinted his eyes and struggled to fight off the negative images. This was neither the time nor the place for such dark memories. His attempt was defeated by similar images full of

screaming and yelling and the deafening sound of continuous shooting. He saw Shauna's bloody body on the floor. He could not handle the expression of disbelief on her beautiful face while he was struck with shock, trying to find a way to get her out of harm's way. Still, after all these years, he could clearly feel the intense pain of leaving her and being dragged away from her unconscious body.

He was surprised by the energy it took to fight off the images and force his mind to turn to more pleasant memories.

He finally found himself amid a cold autumn thunderstorm, rolling thunder and lightning in the distance, riding on the pony he had taken from his foster father's stable in the early morning. There was no money to afford a saddle or reins. He would merely rely on his physical strength and skill. He knew Brendan Whelan would be angry with him, but he also knew the man's great heart. He would understand and forgive him.

Horse and rider went striding down the hill, eventually reaching the beaches of Inch, where he steered the horse into the shallow waters. He kicked his bare feet into the horse's flanks and together they went flying over the water. He felt the freezing rain hitting his face and his clothes turning soaking wet, but he didn't care. He enjoyed the flight through the darkness, the lightning, and the noise.

He clung closer to the horse's neck, desperately holding on to the mane with both hands.

"C'mon, laddy," he yelled into the pony's ear. "You can go faster than that!"

He could feel the animal's body stretch under him, lengthening the strides.

"Yee-haw!" he screeched, stretching out his left arm with a closed fist high into the dark skies. His exaltation grew with every stride.

He had hoped to make it to the other side of the bay, but suddenly he felt his body slip, and his heart started racing. Trying to slow the horse, he adjusted his body into an upright position, and while he tried to use both hands to pull on the mane, he was caught in a massive gust. His upper body pushed off the horse, his feet high in the air, both arms stretched wide, he tumbled through the air, and after a less than perfect somersault, landed flat on his back, slumping into the cold and salty water.

There he lay for a few moments, stunned, trying to comprehend what had just happened, and then he burst out into thunderous, unrestrained laughter. He stood up slowly, stiff, pushing one arm into his back, water mixed with sand running from his hair and clothes, and then he limped toward the horse patiently waiting in the distance.

The music ended with the sole voice of the bass drone, gently and gradually subsiding into silence, followed by a thunder of applause. Finn slowly opened his eyes, a smile of satisfaction grew on his face, and in his mind he thanked the young man for bringing back memories of the one true love, Ireland.

He knew he would be back soon. There had been rumors, whispers, and signals that he could not ignore. He did not know when, but it would be soon. He did not know how, but he was willing to comply and finish his course.