A Scarf

Doireann Ní Ghríofa

Last year, during long-delayed works on our home, our family struggled to find anywhere to rent. My husband's father agreed to lend us the twenty-five-year-old campervan he had recently purchased. For an uncertain number of months its three beds, chemical toilet, two-ring gas hob, child-sized sink and mini-fridge would accommodate the six of us.

We did our best to adapt. I took to loitering in the schoolyard long after everyone else had left, so the children could play and shout and run. My husband hauled our ancient washing machine onto a table in the garage and improvised a rickety slide from old gutters and twine, rollercoastering suds out to the drain. The van's side window, slightly ajar, became our letterbox; we thanked the postman through mouthfuls of cereal. I grew used to fetching water from the fresh-water pipe that lay in the gravel outside, but not to the stiff valve that

always sprayed my shins, nor to the grit that inevitably found its way into my coffee. It's only for a few months, we said, as the six of us showered in a local gym. Any time a cheap Airbnb became available within a ninety-minute drive, we hurried to its heaters, oven dinners and hot water – but such occasions were rare, and winter was approaching.

It grew cold. Storm clouds gathered; the van flinched from the gales. I flinched too. No matter how long I bent over that small sink, scrubbing, always scrubbing, our belongings felt grimy. If two of us stood upright at once, the van felt intolerably crowded. I didn't scream, but I often wanted to. When I dug out our box of hats and gloves, I held the familiar darkness of my favourite scarf to my face, inhaling deeply. It smelled like home. I began to wear it all the time, taking it off only while I slept.

An invitation to spend the Halloween midterm at a friend's empty cottage in Mayo seemed too good to be true: a week of warm beds would be luxurious, not to mention a dishwasher. There was something else, too: a half-remembered family myth from Mayo.

Stray threads began to come back to me as we drove the tunnel deep under the Shannon. My young great-grandfather on the run; soldiers surrounding a church while he was at mass; and his escape disguised as a woman.

In Clare we paused for lunch at my parents' home. While the children squabbled over pizza, I poked through bookshelves until I found what I was looking for. The first folder had been compiled by my grandfather and incorporated reminiscences of his own youth, a vast family tree, and recollections of his father, Pádhraic Ó Gabhláin. Pádhraic was the subject of the second folder too, a college project submitted by my mother as part of her teacher training. This included an appendix of photocopied sources: handwritten letters, old maps, obituaries, and copies of articles from the *Freeman's Journal*, *An Claidheamh Solais*, the *Western People*, and the *Irish Independent*. Having little time before we had to get back on the road, I flicked through the obituaries until I found a trace of the story I sought, documented in newsprint by his friend Aodh Ó Nualláin. The obituary described events that had occurred one Sunday at Aghamore church in east Mayo during the War of Independence, when 'a company of military arrived and surrounded the church'. Pádhraic – a member of what was initially known as the Irish Volunteers and later as the IRA –

> by dressing as a woman and walking out of the church with as much dignity as possible among the women members of the congregation. Apparently there was some delay in getting the proper fit in clothes and shoes, but the celebrant of the mass, the late Reverend Father Garvey, was a staunch Republican, and many in the congregation

> noticed that on that particular Sunday the prayers after mass were unusually long.

I wanted to know more, but it was nearly time to leave. I made a quick run to the copy-shop and then hurried the folders back to the shelf.

As we drove onwards to Mayo, I held my photocopies close. It was dark by the time we found our way to the cottage, unpacked, and put the children to bed. I poured a glass of wine, opened the documents, and began at the beginning.

Born in 1892, Pádhraic left primary schooling to work on local farms and bogs, travelling alongside his neighbours to labour seasonally in England. This cluster of families had worked side by side for generations – the Bolands, Greallys, Spellmans, and Forkans had been neighbours since pre-Famine times, my grandfather wrote, their names marked on landlord's maps 'of linen in Indian ink and watercolour with lists of tenants and holdings'. He and his best friend Hugh Nolan (who, decades later, would sign his obituary as Aodh Ó Nualláin) were sometimes overheard chatting about characters from Dickens in terms so familiar that passers-by presumed they were speaking of locals. Together, they started a pamphlet that was posted from house to house, with each recipient filling an empty page with a new story.

The 1911 census noted that Pádhraic's parents spoke both Irish and English, whereas he and his siblings spoke English only. There, he was

documented under the name he grew up with: Patrick Forkan. Shortly thereafter, in his early twenties, he and some friends were chatting by the roadside when a passing teacher greeted the group casually in Irish. My great grandfather felt such shame at his inability to reply that he began to attend Irish classes. He quickly took to the language. Such was the demand among young people wishing to do likewise at that time that anyone who had gained a minimal fluency in Irish was asked to volunteer to instruct new students. In those slapdash classrooms he found his vocation; and henceforth he always used the Irish form of his name. Teaching was to become what Ó Nualláin's obituary described as 'the pleasure of his life'. Beyond those classes, his days were spent in farmwork, reading, and writing.

By April 1917 Pádhraic was secretary of a local branch of Conradh na Gaeilge and had established a company of the Irish Volunteers in Crossard. Photographed at the Sinn Féin ardfheis with neat tie, crisp collar, and hair swept to the side, he smiled with earnest eyes. He did not know what was to come. No one did. I found that my own grasp of what was to come was lacking too, so I turned to the internet to fill the gaps in my knowledge of the War of Independence. By 1920, I read, attacks on the constabulary were growing so common all over the country that supplementary forces were deployed. So many of the Black and Tans and Auxiliaries arriving in Ballyhaunis had fought in the First World War that the area in which they were billeted was nicknamed 'The Dardanelles'. Incidents of cruelty, drunken violence and torture were soon reported across Mayo. In response, local

resistance groups grew, companies of the Irish Volunteers proliferated, and both ambushes and retaliatory acts of violence intensified.

Ó Nualláin noted that Pádhraic took a very active part in the organisation of the Ballyhaunis Battalion, a fact that was apparently noticed by the Occupation Forces of the area, for from early in the troubled times he seemed to have attracted their particular attention. From documents captured by the Dublin brigade and forwarded to the local volunteers it became clear that he was a marked man, and he was obliged to go 'on the run' and remain constantly on the alert.

The next morning, I cleared the children's breakfast bowls from the table and searched groggily through the online archives of the Bureau of Military History, hoping to find Pádhraic's story recounted in his own words; but it seems he did not provide testimony to the Bureau. I did find his name in documentation from the Military Service Pensions Collection, dated 1935, in which those who fought in Mayo battalions were listed retrospectively. His name is among those recalled by Captain Seán Carney, who listed him as Patrick Forkan of the 2nd Western Division, I Brigade (South Mayo), 5th Battalion, B Company. Many of the surnames my grandfather had noted on local pre-Famine maps were also listed in this company, suggesting that he was among friends and neighbours.

In the absence of a description in my great-grandfather's own words, I sought out accounts by the others. Ernie O'Malley's oral history of the War of Independence in Mayo was available online, and there I

read how Johnny Greally – a man who was born, grew up, lived, and fought by Pádhraic's side – described the day their commanding officer, Seán Corcoran, was murdered:

> We heard that Curley's house was to be burned, and we went to get rifles to defend it. Seán and Maurice Mullins were supposed to call at this house, but when he was coming over Seán ran into a patrol of Tans. His revolver jammed at the first shot and he was shot dead, and Maurice, who was unarmed, was beaten almost to death. They beat him there and they threw him in on top of the dead Seán Corcoran in the turf house of the Barracks.

Later that day, a sniper shot one of the Black and Tans in retaliation. As vengeance, the Black and Tans murdered a local man named Michael Coen, mutilating his corpse: 'they cut off his private parts and pinned them on his breast, and they cut the flesh of his legs and arms. They cut off his ears and left him out on the road. They were night and day in that area in Crossard townland, searching, for they must have had information. [...] The people stiffened their resistance.'

I do not know what part, if any, Pádhraic played in the events of that day, but Greally's account allowed me a glimpse of the environment in which he was engaged. Pádhraic was one of many who survived by stealth in those years, hurrying from safe-house to safe-house. His continued evasion of the Black and Tans became a source of local bafflement. Ó Nualláin writes:

> In spite of the special enemy attention he took part in all the activities of the area and was never captured, although his many hairbreadth escapes made him almost a legendary figure in his native district. On one occasion when visiting his own home he was

> suddenly told that a large force of police and military were surrounding the house. He slipped out, however, and although the enemy opened fire, his knowledge of the country enabled him to escape.

Greally explained to Ernie O'Malley that their small group 'had no arms save shotguns. There were a couple of rifles but you couldn't be sure of them. We fired off ammunition from Seán Corcoran's rifles, but only an odd round went off. We had very few short arms.' The best resource at their disposal was the goodwill offered by neighbours, whether through shelter or sustenance.

Within a month of Corcoran and Coen's deaths, I read, the men found themselves in peril again, having been traced to a remote area of bogland. Greally described how the Black and Tans had information that we would be in the bog, the six of us, myself and Paddy Boland, the company O/C, Pádhraic Forkan, a Gaelic teacher, Austin Kenny and Jim Kilkelly. They wanted these six of us. We were in a neighbour's house where we used to stay, when Paddy Mullins, the Brigadier, sent over bombs with me. The Master sent word to us by a young lad, who came across the fields, and we had just time to get out. They, the soldiers, fired shots, and they went into the house again, and they bayoneted poor Paddy Boland who was an only son. They bursted the bayonet in him and they almost cut his nose off with a bayonet also.

The neighbour in whose house they had sheltered was my great-great-grandmother: Pádhraic would marry her daughter. I remembered her from a section of my grandfather's reminiscences I'd read the night

before, a memorable passage that skipped from amusement to dread within a single paragraph: My grandmother looked like a grandmother. She was fat and comfortable and dressed in black. [...] She said very little about 'the troubles'. The only thing I remember was her account of the day when Paddy Boland was shot. 'The boys' had run from her house as the troops approached and scattered across the bog. Paddy Boland was shot dead a few hundred yards from the house. She watched from a window as his body was carried on an improvised stretcher covered in a blanket. It was only when she could see the boots that she knew it was not one of her own sons.

The date of Pádhraic's escape from Aghamore church is not recorded in any document I have seen; all we know for sure is that it must have happened during the year and a half between the arrival of the Black and Tans in Ireland, at the beginning of 1920, and the truce that was agreed in the summer of 1921.

After the truce, and the treaty, and the split in the republican movement, Pádhraic couldn't bring himself to participate in the civil war that com menced in the summer of 1922. Another obituary, by C. Caimbhéal, noted that 'He was a respecter of valour and worth in any who had shown faith in their cause. I recall his yearly buying of poppies from an ex-army captain on Armistice Day. He was no bigot.' He married. He wrote. He worked. His children were born. He returned to his beloved books. He secured a job at Ballyhaunis Vocational School, and filled his summers with further teaching at

Coláiste Chonnacht, in the heartlands of Conamara. He loved to read, to write, to teach, and to laugh.

My grandfather noted that 'a straightforward description of my father's subsequent career might make him sound like a worthy, earnest and dull character. This is as far from the truth as could be. One of the most obvious things about him was his sense of humour – wild, anarchical humour in his youth; warm and witty in his later years and never fully subdued by old age.' Reading this line, I wished that I could have heard him laugh. When Pádhraic died in 1965, his coffin was draped in the tricolour, and his surviving comrades, Johnny Greally among them, formed a guard of honour. A passionate graveside oration was delivered by John P. Jordan. Of this funeral, C. Caimbhéal wrote: 'There were no tears on any face for it was the honouring of a warrior, and none weep when a soldier sleeps when his fight is over.'

After closing the folders and all the tabs on my phone, I couldn't stop thinking about what I'd read. I woke that night thinking of how the young Pádhraic had sent his little pamphlets from house to house, always including empty pages in which recipients could add a new story. So far, his son and granddaughter and several obituarists had filled pages with their writings on his life; perhaps I could add a page, too. 'Cloch le carn' is the phrase used for the traditional act of adding one's own stone to a cairn made in memory of another. Rather than a cairn, however, I found myself thinking of the story as a beloved scarf, a garment whose stitches I had already begun to unpick into a soft

mass of unravelled facts. As a girl, the story of his escape from Aghamore church had seemed a neatly woven tale of adventure, prudently tailored to a child's ears: no torn flesh, no torture, no terror. Now that the dark red of Greally's voice had seeped in, however, there could be no erasing it. I wondered what other threads might add themselves as I set upon knitting my own telling of it.

It was this curiosity that led me to bring the whole family to the church at Aghamore the following day. We are not a family of mass-goers, and I can't recall how I sold them on this road trip. As soon as we parked, I hurried ahead, certain that I wouldn't have much time before the kids lost patience, before pausing in the porch, suddenly nervous. I would be alone, if only for the length of time it took my husband to wrestle coats and hats onto our children. A residual whiff of sanctity haunted the air. My breath was short and growing shorter – I had wound my scarf too well, I realized, tucking a finger between fabric and throat until it gave a little. I drank a deep lungful and watched my breath hurry away, a small fog, or a ghost: glimpsed, then gone. I pushed the door and stepped into the story.

The church was empty. I moved quickly up the aisle, snapshotting details on my phone as I went: a statue, an altar cloth, a dent worn into the floor by many decades of footfall. Outside, clouds broke and blew; when shards of sunlight met stained-glass eyes, I wondered whether those glassy faces had felt alive to my great-grandfather, too. Above my head, the intricately crafted timber roof was neat as a ribcage. All his life, Pádhraic returned to pray here, surrounding

himself with the same people, all standing and kneeling in unison, their voices murmuring a warm chorus around his. Together and alone, they aged. Theirs were the eyes that met his in worship, on feast days, at funerals and baptisms, on the day he escaped from the Crown forces, and on his wedding day.

My children flung open the door and galloped toward me, raucous as ever, with coats flapping open, hats and scarves forgotten, shouldering into each other, giggling and squabbling, their cheeks already reddened by cold. I rolled my eyes at my husband – it is a running joke between us that while I mollycoddle the children with mittens and vests and thermal underwear, he believes that a little cold will toughen them. Sitting in the pew with a child on each knee and another in each elbow, I began to adjust the story for their ears; but soon they were whingeing for the car. The only one who insisted on staying was the boy who always stays by my side when I lead my family on such jaunts, the child who at seven is skinny and bold and bright and always fights to hold my hand. I continued to photograph the little details that surrounded us, and that had once surrounded Pádhraic: the dinged brass of the altar bells, the dark lustre of the confessional box, the altar that had never figured in my imaginings until its inscription loomed before me. Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus: a male figure was carved there, each fold of his gown whittled from cold stone. Holy, Holy.

Only when my son whispered 'I'm cold, Mám,' did I notice that his coat had been forgotten altogether. I was glad of the warmth my body

had pressed into the weft of my scarf as I wound it into a pullover of sorts, criss-crossing its endings into his waistband: snug. I pressed my lips to his forehead and on we went with my hand in his, or his in mine. When he asked what we were looking for, I couldn't answer because I didn't know, beyond the sense that he and I had entered the story, and now we had to find our way towards some sort of an ending. Perhaps the gesture of leaving a little flame in our wake might do it? No, all the wicks were unlit, and I could see no matches.

My son shrugged and asked me to finish telling the story, and I did, and was surprised on approaching the ending to find myself saying, 'and if it weren't for that moment, would we be here today, you and me?'

I was smiling as I turned towards the door, until my son broke away to dash a giddy circuit of the room, hee-hawing the chorus of 'Old Town Road' and cackling over his shoulder. From the porch I called to him in exasperation, then called again, my voice growing colder now, cold and cranky. While I waited, I lined up one last photo of the aisle, the door ajar to show its neat symmetry of empty pews; but just as I got the framing right, my son hurtled through the shot, blurring past me and sprinting out towards the car. Little trespasser. I arranged the photo again, and then turned to catch up with him. The door of the church thumped heavily behind us.

In the car, my husband was thumbing his phone and the children were munching chocolate biscuits. I felt satisfied as I clicked my

seatbelt – seeing this place felt like some small achievement to show for our cold months away from home. But back in the cottage, I couldn't sleep for incessant fidgeting: the story wouldn't rest. If I couldn't hear the story of this escape in Pádhraic's own voice, then maybe there was a way to hear it in the voice of one who had stood by him. My mother had once heard a man on the radio describe how, long ago, his grandmother had disguised a man at mass to save him from the Black and Tans. She had made a note of the man's name. Tadhg Mac Dhonnagáin was a publisher of Irish-language books, and I knew him a little from Twitter. He lived in Conamara, only an hour and a half or so away. I found his email address. I told him that I wanted to know how this story had been told in his childhood.

In the Buillín Blasta café in An Spidéal, Tadhg described his grandmother, Annie Kenny: a bright young woman who had been awarded a teacher-training scholarship in Belfast, but still travelled home at weekends to lead the church choir. The story he had inherited began there, with a young woman leading a chorus of voices, called to a sudden act of courage, then hurrying to save a life. It was a tale he had treasured as a child, Tadhg said, and he told it beautifully: Annie's quick thinking, her gathering of garments, her supervision of the disguise, her palms rubbing distemper from the walls to press on Pádhraic's cheeks. His favourite part of all, he said, was the importance placed on one detail: the height of the women chosen to escort him to safety. Those women: they were tall.

I thanked Tadhg for his time, wound myself back into my scarf and rummaged my car keys from my handbag. Driving back to Mayo, between mountains and bogs, over stone bridges and boreens, I pictured Annie on the church mezzanine, her hair braided and pinned high, her face among the crowd in the choir, alive and afraid. A wild, fearful whisper was flying through the church below. She watched as one person whispered in dread to the next: they were surrounded. The soldiers were outside with their guns.

When the whisper reached Pádhraic's ear, I imagine that he sat in silence a moment, assessing his predicament and that of the people around him. There were elderly people present, women, and children. If he surrendered, might others be spared?

The priest, knowing these soldiers as brutally violent and unpredictable, bought time by lengthening the prayers. Annie hurried down from the choir and gathered garments: a dark shawl here, a skirt there, perhaps a blouse. Pádhraic was urged to his feet and dressed. Palms were pressed to damp walls, and then to the shadow of his stubble. A black shawl was drawn over the crest of his skull, quick as a shadow. The priest drew the prayers to their end. The two tallest women stood by him, arm in arm, their trio folded within the close crowd. Elbows trembled. Down the aisle they all went, out the door, past the soldiers. Eyes lowered. Jaws tight. No flinching. A procession of bodies leaving the church gates and walking steadily away: almost an ordinary sight. On this Sunday, everyone leaves alive. The End.

Exhilarated and weary from driving, I fell into bed early, but my heart raced, and my toes twitched: too much coffee. Eventually I fumbled my phone from where it was charging on the floor and swiped idly through photos of our trip: playgrounds, mountains, the gift of a barmbrack, Harry Clarke windows in Ballinrobe, a little dog called Marcie. I came to the penultimate photo I'd taken in the church, the one that had vexed me when my son flung himself through it. I zoomed in by fingertip. There was the aisle, along which a male shadow hurried. By the next photo the aisle was empty. How brief, his presence: glimpsed, then gone. When I swiped back, though, he reappeared, wrapped again in a borrowed shawl, folded into the fabric of that inherited story – too big and too dark – in which we all find ourselves bound by those who came before us.

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Doireann Ní Ghríofa is a poet and essayist. *A Ghost in the Throat* was awarded Book of the Year at the Irish Book Awards, and described as "glowing" (Anne Enright), "spellbinding" (Joseph O'Connor), "gorgeous" (Lauren Elkin), "captivatingly original" (The Guardian),

“sumptuous” (The Sunday Times), and a “masterpiece” (Sunday Business Post).

Doireann is also author of six critically-acclaimed books of poetry, each a deepening exploration of birth, death, desire, and domesticity. Awards for her writing include a Lannan Literary Fellowship (USA), the Ostana Prize (Italy), a Seamus Heaney Fellowship (Queen’s University), and the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature, among others.

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