

Desmond Hogan · *Ireland*

ALAN IN ROME, FROM *A CURIOUS STREET*

AFTER EILEEN was gone Alan went on teaching. Little girls loved his blackberry curls and little boys loved his white shirts. There were photographs of robot-like priests and nuns eaten in Africa on the wall, requisite ikons of the time, and an inscription from Paracelsus by a prize winning pupil. "He who knows nothing, loves nothing. He who can do nothing understands nothing. He who understands nothing is worthless. But he who understands also loves, notices, sees . . . The more knowledge is inherent in a thing the greater the love . . . Anyone who imagines all fruits ripen at the same time as the strawberries knows nothing about grapes." Alan's favorite subject was the coming of the Cromwellians to Ireland and his children never tired of hearing about it. He'd always look to the Shannon before beginning, wander around the class, hands in his pockets, stopping to toss back a curl as he described how Oliver Cromwell played chess with a Jesuit priest in Dublin in July, 1649. It was not uncommon in Athlone at the time to hear little girls munching chocolate discuss Cromwell's home life outside sweetshops in the rain-soaked streets after school.

He developed a reputation for literariness and as such was called to advise the drama group on difficult matters. He himself directed Strindberg's "The Father" in 1947, and it won many prizes at drama festivals. During this experience he formed one of the rare friendships of his life, with a blond, slightly balding bank clerk who was from Dublin. This boy was the son of a revolutionary gunned down on the Republican side in Dublin during the civil war. Together the boy and Alan sat on the red velvet couches of Athlone lounges. But friendships fade. Alan was thrown up again on the skyline, a solitary figure in a long coat walking the edge of the town, regularly appearing in people's dreams among the town's farthest lights.

January 22, 1949. I feel so alone. Is there anyone in the whole of Ireland who can understand? I feel I am falling, falling through the air but there is nowhere to land.

In September, 1949, his mother died. He sat over the corpse. Tall

candles flamed, unreal against the harvest sunshine in the fields outside. She looked Southern, severe, in death, hands joined on her black cardigan, her nose sticking up. Alan sat over the corpse, a child.

The following year he had his notorious nervous breakdown. He became obsessed with Our Lady, Queen of Ireland, keeping his children in after class, describing one particular statue of Mary left in the bogs near Athlone since the penal laws, caressed by bog cotton, still drawing a flotsam of wet pilgrims as it had in the penal days.

He was given leave from school in October, 1950 and travelled to Italy. He was still wearing his long coat when he descended from the plane. A nun brushed past him. "I wonder how Sister Aloysius is?" she said to a companion. There were dark glasses on Alan's nose.

On the way into Rome nuns gabbled about homes in Mayo or Roscommon, far-flung farm houses, sapling farm children. They passed a half-fallen facade with a poster of a bullfight, a flaring, red cloth in a toreador's hand, advertising a film.

Alan got a hotel in Trastevere, the woman of the hotel giving him a table in the cobbled square outside where he sat drinking red wine. He began a postcard "Dear—." There was no one to write to.

The first place he went to was the graves of O'Neill and O'Donnell in the Franciscan Convent of San Pietro, Montorio, tracing the fundamental richness of his own imagery, standing under Raphael's "Transfiguration"; but the sweaty air proved distasteful and he left, going instead to Keats' grave in the Protestant Cemetery, standing there, his short-sleeved shirt red, dark glasses on his nose, the vines broiled at his feet, the sun sweeping through the cypress trees. "Here lies one whose name is writ in water." Alan wept.

Rome was like a house after a supper. War had provided the feast and people were glad to be alive. Women chattered at doorways. Chickens scattered in front of boys on scooters. G.I.s swayed by in cisterns of light. Boys stood at doorways, their eyes a realm of darkness.

Alan walked on. He walked for days and weeks, wandering down steps, up alleyways. The Indian summer increased in dimension, glistening on his arms under his red, short-sleeved shirt, marked by black patterns, obliterating the expression on his face under his dark glasses. Here Keats lived. Here Keats saw a princess who had posed half naked for a famous statue. There were green patches of lichen in white walls. The time came for him to go and he stayed. Finally Alan realized the true nature of search. It wasn't what you were searching for which was important. It was the search itself.

At night he'd sit outside. German music sounded from somewhere. Stars tumbled into the Tiber. Boys waited in dark alleyways, merrows in Irish legend, the creature half female, half fish who lured you to your doom. Alan's fist tightened on a bottle of red wine.

He familiarized himself with cobbled squares where fountains merged into one another, crossing them in a newly-bought, orange t-shirt, his hair newly cropped. A woman turned sidewise to look at him. A little girl offered him a lick of her ice cream. He accepted.

The woman of the hotel became friendlier, sitting with him in the square outside at night, telling him in English picked up from Americans about the Nazis in Sicily where she was from. Alan reciprocated with stories of the Black and Tans, priests' bodies in bushes, priests dragged by horses across fields.

The Indian summer changed, an arc over the Tiber. Alan strolled alongside it.

He sat in his room in his orange t-shirt, drinking red wine, wondering how he could ever have lived in it, a town of grey spires. Bottles accumulated.

A woman held up a last bunch of purple Saint Martin's daisies, and an old man handed him a worn postcard of mother and child by the Tiber.

He bought a suit. An American man mistook him for Montgomery Clift on the Appian Way, and an old Italian man raised a glass of red wine to him. Alan smiled back. But by now he was used to admiration and he walked on, overhearing fragments of gossip about marriages, affairs, film premieres, sitting with a German woman who'd been through, with an elderly Englishman who asked him if he'd been to Cambridge. Alan said he hadn't. One night Alan walked too far, into a cold dawn, paper handkerchiefs shuffling on aisles of white, empty tables, stubs of red wine at the end of glasses.

In spite of his friendship with the woman of the hotel he shifted hotels, fearing they would come and get him, the doctors, the headmasters, the little girls with bog-cotton hair. It was all his mother's legacy of course, the suits, the drink. Winter in this city was like winter nowhere else. Near his new hotel an old man sold horse chestnuts. Alan often stood beside him, hands in his trousers' pockets, a giant multi-colored leaf by his feet. "Once upon a time a boy lived in a town where storks didn't fly." Sometimes the past composed itself like a fairy story. In November a boy moved in, staying briefly, moving out again. In the

space in which he'd held him, there was an imaginary medallion. Alan stared at the wall.

One morning he woke and found it had snowed, nuns treading over the Vatican Square fearful lest they should perish, black dots on white.

He celebrated his birthday with wine. His one cherished memory of Athlone was swans, but even they seemed lacrymose. The bottles were like friends now.

He met Father O'Hehirly under Michelangelo's "Creation." Father O'Hehirly was a red-bearded man from County Mayo who lived in the Irish College. They had a cappuccino in a nearby trattoria. Very soon they found they shared a mutual interest—Irish history.

Father O'Hehirly was from one of the most far flung places in Mayo. He had four brothers, all "lusty, leaping, hurling players," he called them. They lived by the edge of the sea. There were gulls. He had a mother, if you were to believe him, who always had steaming cabbage and bacon on a tray in her hand. But his prime interest in life was Irish history. He brought Alan to see the museum in the Irish College. The flag of the Irish Brigade. Their motto "God and Our Lady and Rory O'More" written on it. Their boots lying there, black and brown. Their wine goblets. Young men who'd left Ireland for the armies of Europe. Alan thought of his ancestor, Lorcan O'Mahony, wandering Paris without wine, and of a moment in a museum in Dublin, his reflection on a glass case. Walking home from the Irish College one evening, Alan saw a young woman sitting on a doorway washing her feet in a basin. "As I walked out through Galway city at the hour of twelve in the night who should I meet but a Spanish lady washing her feet by broad moonlight."

Why this obsession with history? Why this novel in a drawer? Why the physical good looks, black curling hair, red lips? Alan didn't know. But he shouldn't have accepted the invitation of Father O'Hehirly—Anthony as he liked to be called—to dinner in the Irish College on Christmas Day.

Early one morning an American woman smiled at him. There was a leaf between them as both stood still. The American woman reckoned she was smiling at someone famous.

In the days immediately prior to Christmas, the windows of trattorias were even more fogged. Alan sat alongside them. The idea of another novel was coming—slowly. This time he wouldn't put it in a drawer.

Rome, Christmas morning 1950. City of martyrs, of idealists, of self

sacrifice, of purity. Pope Pius XII, cloaked in red, carried on a gold chair, metes out his papal blessing. "The fucker." Alan corrected himself. "At least he never met any lions." Alan walked over a cobbled square in Trastevere. He looked in on a crib. Italian cribs were more exotic than Irish cribs, gold-tinselled, wise kings looking on the red-lit infant like voyeurs, the exaltation of incense from the straw. Walking through Rome, Alan saw most vividly, for the first time in years, the face of Eileen Carmody. This time he did not see her in reference to history but as an Irish girl who had reached out for love and been rejected.

Christmas morning 1950. Pope Pius XII made a sermon, exhorting a greater volume of prayer to Mary. That very year he'd ordained that Our Lady had been assumed into Heaven. On his way to the Irish College, Alan thought of a statue of Mary in the bogs near Athlone, her cloak mildewed, her eyes blackened, but her secret the secret of Ireland, despite weather and historical outrage—survival.

Father Anthony welcomed him with a cold, white, double handclasp. Alan was wearing his best, a tie, a suit. He was ushered in. They had port together under a portrait of a consummate cardinal. Father Anthony saw his brothers racing onto a radiant field in a pre-Christmas dinner hurling match. He imagined Christmas dinner, a big, basted Mayo turkey, Limerick ham, boiled in water cress, shreds of it still clinging, brussels sprouts, roast potatoes. The smell wafted to Rome. The door was opened and Alan brought to the banquet. The table was most noticeably laden with green grapes. Everything was going smoothly—talk of Irish battles, Benburb, Scarifhollis, Aughrim—until a fat nun walked in bearing a turkey and recognized Alan from an Irish newspaper as someone missing from Athlone. He was brought back to Ireland a few days later in a straitjacket, the nuns from Mayo, the nuns from Roscommon, the nuns from Armagh, pouring through his head in the plane. He spent a few years going in and out of mental hospitals. He resumed his job as a National teacher. His tales of Cromwell no longer had the glitter. After a few years I no longer see Alan Mulvanney—he faded out of a portrait of a young man.