

Connor Clancy

Mount Sinai wasn't that bad. The food was definitely better than home. *The Home*, that is. The New Jewish Home on the Upper West Side. The poor house. Which had been my home the last, how long was it?

At the top of my lungs I shouted, "Nurse, Maria!"

Silence.

Where is she?

"Nurse Maria! Nurse Maria! Nurse Maria! Nurse Maria!"

"Sí, Señor Clancy. Qué pasa? What is it?" came an unseen, irritated voice from outside the room. And then, "And, I not Maria! I'm Nurse Ana."

Spics! Isn't this the Jewish Home? Wait, I'm in a hospital. Isn't this the Mount Sinai? The Eymie Hospital? So, where are all the white nurses? Where are all the white doctors? Where are all the Kikes?

They are all in Florida. Hymie Heaven. But me? I'm stuck here. In New York. Only the extremely rich old folks or the excruciatingly poor old codgers stayed in New York.

Laying on a Puerto Rican accent, I shouted, "Ana-María! What year's this? Twenty what?"

"No twenty, Mister C. Eighteen! Two thousand and eighteens!"

Why had I wondered that? My right foot was itching like crazy. It was hard to focus. Pulling at the sheet, I was startled even if I knew what I would see. Or not see.

"Call me Stumpy." I said to my mutilation that for 87 years been a perfectly good knee, calf and foot.

But that was then.

This is now.

"Damned diabetes," I grumbled and a bit of saliva got caught in my throat, causing a coughing fit. My eyes welled up with tears as the fit claimed control of my body. Concentrating to regain some composure, I sent a prayer to Saint Jude. As Jude's name was a bit too close to Judas', Jude was only contacted by the most desperate, most wretched lost causes.

Once the spell passed, there was a wet spot.

“Feckin Jude. Some help you are. No wonder the Romans got Jesus. Useless eejit. María!?”

Silence.

“Maria! Maria! Maria! Ana-Maria! Nurse Ana! Nurse somebody!?”

“Sí?”

A young Latina nurse popped her head in the room.

“You have to change my sheet.”

“Why?”

“There’s arse juice on it.”

“I coming soon, Senor Clancy. Very soon. Just one minute.”

And the head was gone.

“Arse juice,” I said softly to myself and smiled while wiping phlegm from my mouth with a clean spot on the soiled sheet.

What else did Pepa say? *I’m no spring chicken. But I’m still tippin’ away like a wee tractor.*

And

Watch where ya’ goin’, ya’ wab. Take your balls outta your eyes.

“Ah, Pepa. God Love ya. Hope you saved me a good spot. You, me and Michael. The unholy trinity that never was but will be forever more.”

If you’ll still have me?

Then, as clear as day, I heard his voice.

“Connor? Now, don’t worry. I’ll be watchin’ over ya, Lad. Count on it. I’ll be your angel-protector so troubles neglect ya. Go on with yourself. Do great things. I’ll clear a way for you. Don’t you fret about that old witch. The one that cast that spell. She took it back. I made sure of it”

It was the last thing that I remember him saying to me. My grandfather had believed in the fairies and witches and other things. He wasn’t crazy. Just Irish.

We called him Pepa, my sister Rose and I. He was born in rebel-county Cork, Ireland. He’d be embarrassed to see me like this. No better than a beggar. Not a penny to my name, no kids and even worse, no legacy... and no left leg.

I looked down at my sorry state again.

“Correction. No right leg.
Feckin’ diabetes.”

Pepa was the strongest man that ever was. A veritable superman. A proud man. A great man. My own father had been weak. Very weak. Walked with a cane. Slowly.

He had been incorrectly diagnosed with polio before I was born. What he had had was GBS, or, Guillain-Barre's Syndrome. Plus, Dad suffered pernicious anemia. Pepa, however, said my father was truly the stronger man. A giant. I wasn't buying it as a kid though. But, I never dared say so.

My father was a lawyer for Paramount Pictures which was a good thing. Getting into the moviehouse for free to see the Saturday matinées was a good thing too. A very good thing. My sister Rose and I were the envy of Flagg Court, Brooklyn.

What was the name of that movie theater? Why aren't you here, Rose? Why did it turn out like this? I was going to do great things. What had happened? Where is my beautiful wife? Where is my beautiful house? What is this, a Talking Heads' song? Why am I a one legged nobody and all alone? Why?

On Sundays, during the fairer months, Pepa would take me out of Brooklyn and around the city to show me what he had built and what he was building. Then he'd quiz me.

“Tell me?” Pepa asked

“Penn Station.”

“Year?”

“Completed in 1910.”

“And? Come on, Conner, I've told you this umpteen times. Don't tease me. Puff up a working man's ego a bit. There's a good lad.”

After clearing my throat, I did my best to imitate the voice of the news reader I'd heard so often at the picture show, “Construction of Penn Station began in 1905 and was not completed until 1910. The lives of many brave men were lost during its construction. But those who survived can proudly state that this monument, like the Parthenon in Rome, will outlive themselves, their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.”

I paused to reap some reward. Pepa was brimming with pride and urged me on.

“Go on, Conner. Go on! You're a master speaker. Where did you learn those words? More, Lad, more!”

“Penn Station was inspired by the Baths of Caracabella in Rome...”

“Caracella,” corrected Pepa, smiling.

“Carecella.”

“But it’s much more better than those baths of Rome,” said Pepa.

“It sure is,” said I, believing every word he ever said.

I continued, “using Milford Pink Granite...”

Pepa chimed in, “Milford Pink Granite! Finest there is. Better than marble!”

My grandfather was not known for being silent and he took over the show.

“My monument. My gift to the great city of New York. Just look at her! A vision of beauty. A useful vision of beauty. Conner, I’m glad you’re here beside me to witness this. And you know? I can’t wait see what you will give to the world when you are a whole man. A great lad like yourself? With all the potential in the world? You are going to do great things, lad. Great things.”

“Go on, Paddy!” said the old woman I hadn’t noticed before. “You and that boy are the pride of Ireland. God bless you.” She extended her hand from her tattered shawl.

Pepa looked at her annoyed.

“Don’t interrupt us begging for money! What are you beggin for? This is America, A-mer-i-ca! The land of opportunity. Quit beggin’ and start workin’, ya ol’ hag.”

He then reached into his pocket and dropped a few coins in to her ‘gimme’ hand. That’s what Pepa called a beggar’s hand. A ‘gimme’ hand.

The woman spat on the concrete but said nothing more aloud. But her mouth was moving. If looks could kill, tho.

“Don’t you curse me! Witch! I gave you coins. Take it back.”

The woman stuck out her hand again and then smiled. It was not a pretty smile.

“Ok. Here,” he said giving her one more.

“Curse be gone,” muttered the woman.

Pepa grabbed my arm and led me towards the station’s entrance. Looking back at the woman, I saw her pointing at me with that smile and then her lips mouthed something. I stuck my tongue out at her.

“Bloody beggin’ bitty. Embarrassing. An embarrassment to me and the fighting Irish of the world. You have to carry your weight! Am I right, Conner?”

“You’re right, Pepa.”

“Damn straight I’m right. Like me and your Da. We work. Tell me Conner, what do you think you will be when you’re a full grown man?”

“A famous artist.”

“A famous artist? Wonderful! You can paint me building this fantastical station. I can’t wait to see your art in the museum. Maybe even a museum I built! Like the Brooklyn Museum. Wouldn’t that be something, Conner? Two monuments together from one family.”

Staring up at the glass and steel roof of the main concourse of Penn Station was always dazzling. Dizzying and Dazzling. I thought about the beggar woman and Pepa’s reaction. It was not an unusual reaction for him. He detested sloth and was extra sensitive about Irish who took to the drink. Or begged. Or were poor and ‘didn’t carry their weight’ as he often said. Pepa always gave a coin or two if the beggar was Irish but did so grudgingly.

“Was she really a witch, Pepa?”

He looked at me and said, “I believe she was, Connor. I believe she was. It was a good thing I saw her mouth moving and got here to take whatever she had said back.”

I didn’t understand. At catechism I learned about how the devil could make people do bad things. But witches and fairies, they weren’t real. Everyone knew that. And there was no monster under my bed... anymore. Most of the time.

Maybe something had happened when Pepa was younger? Maybe a beggar had tripped him or something. I knew some things about my grandfather’s past, but not much really. Mostly we, or he, talked about the here and now and my future. He never talked to my sister Rose about her future. And she was the smarter of the two of us. He did ask her how many children she wanted and how many she would name after him.

We sat on a granite bench in the great hall and he caressed the pinkish stone.

“I put this here.”

“It’s perfect.”

“It is.”

“Pepa?”

“Aye?”

“Why did you move here?”

He looked at me a moment and then looked around the concourse and all the people hustling to and fro.

“You’re born here so I guess maybe you don’t see it. But Conner, New York City is the center of the world. Center of the Universe!

If I was born during the Roman Empire, I would have lived in Rome. New York is the Rome of our times. Milford, and Massachusetts, were fine places to start my new life in America.

But, after cutting stone there for a while, I was told to follow along and deliver a load of this fine granite here. To this very site. I was happy to go. Had to see it, you know? And when I saw her. When I saw New York. I knew. It was love at first sight. I knew, Connor, this is where I belong. This is the place where I could truly be the master of my destiny. Not some sheep being led to the slaughter. Not Me. No. And not you either!”

“But, why did you leave Ireland?”

Pepa put his arm over my shoulder. He smelled of soap, sweat and stone. No matter how much he bathed, he always smelled like stone.

“Oh... You want to know why I left Cork? You want to know why I left the island of my birth? A part of me is still there, ya know, but, that part’s nearly dead now.”

I leaned into him, breathing in his scent.

“Ok, Conner, I will tell you. But it may be hard for you to understand. You know? You’re a bit young to understand, but you’re a smart lad. You know all those ten-cent words but you haven’t lived long. Is that ok?”

I nodded contently and added, “I’ve never lived longer than I have today.”

He laughed in agreement and then began telling me his tale.

“It’s a funny thing. When I am on the job or strolling about the city, I see faces that I am sure I seen before. Why, there’s Doyle! He hasn’t aged a bit! But that would be impossible, of course, for Doyle is long gone. Rest in peace.”

Pepa made the sign of the cross and I echoed his movements solemnly.

“From when I first got off that coffin ship in Canada till I’d been in Milford a spell, I was sayin, ‘hello Mrs. O’this. And, good day to you, Mr. O’that.

This to people who hadn’t an inkling who I was.”

He looked at me to see if I was really listening so I repeated, “O’this and O’that.”

“You’re a fierce good listener, Connor. Fierce good.”

I beamed and tried to wiggle my ears like he had taught me but he didn’t notice.

“Do you know who I saw most of all? The face I missed the most in that ocean of strangers’ faces.”

“A girl?” I asked.

“What? No. Not a girl. Why, it was the face of the one and only Michael David Clancy. My big brother.”

“You have a big brother? Named Michael!? Like Dad?”

“Had. God love him.”

I signed. He nodded.

“Happy as Larry was he. Michael, my oldest brother. And dumb as a doornail. Dumber than a sack of hammers. Drove Ma and Da crazy. He had to be learned everything again and again... and again. A lost cause. They prayed and prayed to Saint Jude, you know?”

“Saint Jude. Patron saint of hopeless cases. I know. But you’re not dumb, Pepa.”

“No, poor Michael got all the dumb God was giving out to the Clancy family. When God was giving out brains, Michael thought he said trains and said, ‘give me a slow one! So I can sit back and enjoy the scenery!’ Hardy har har!”

I giggled.

“We called him Eejit. But not to his face. He was strong as an ox and quicker than spit. Call him Eejit to his face? He’d run you down and scare the bejeezus outta you.”

I had never seen or heard of my grandfather being scared of anyone and so, I was duly impressed.

“Wow.”

“Wow, indeed. But the thing is, he wouldn’t actually hurt anyone. He was really very soft at heart. Being it so, that he was his way, he didn’t really understand that he was slow upstairs. But he knew that word. Eejit. And didn’t like it one bit. You could call him dummy or half wit and he would just smile back at you. He did it in a way that made *you* feel like the dummy. It was the damndest thing...”

He trailed off and fell uncharacteristically silent.

A rat scurried along the wall of the enormous room. It stopped to inspect some rubbish and then moved on. Pepa continued.

“When Michael was old enough, about your age I believe, Da’ rented him out to a grand farm. A place where he could use his brawn and not his brains. Ma bought him a fourth-hand set of workers’ duds and, then I tagged along when Da delivered him.

“Wait,” I interrupted. “Fourth hand? I know second hand. What is fourth hand?”

“Oh, you could get second, third and fourth hand clothings then. Fourth was cheapest and usually stripped of some poor soul’s body in their grave.”

“Dead man's clothing? Gross.” I thought about how nice my great uncle on my mother’s side had looked in the open casket at his wake. He had very fine clothes on.

“Aye, itchy, dirty, stinky, poor people's clothing”

“But why?”

“Never mind that just now. I am not even halfway through my story of how it came to be that *you* were born *here*, Connor.”

“Sorry.”

“Now, when we got to the farm, the foreman looked at Michael sayin’ ‘you brought me this? He’s a boy? Rent him to the chimney sweeps! We needn’t any boy here.’

“But my father insisted and made the foreman a deal, ‘keep em a week for free. If he don’t work right. I will pay for his food and you’ll be quit him.’

The foreman considered this, being that it was the harvest and he needed all the bodies he could get, he countered with, ‘Two weeks’. And, they shook on it.

After two weeks my father took me with him to see how things had worked out for my brother. The foreman said that Michael could stay. That he was a good worker and said that he would pay my Da once a week starting with the next one, as Michael had only been in training thus far. My Da agreed and we left. You know, we didn’t even see Michael that day.”

“Did you miss him?”

“I did and I didn’t. See, he had always been there and now he weren't. Are you too young to get that?”

Thinking of my own sister I answered, “I’m not sure. But, I think so.”

“Fair enough. Now, the foreman's daughter was my age and I’d see her at school, church, out and about and she enjoyed a chat and would fill me in on how Michael was getting on. Her name was Mary. She said that her family and the farm owner’s family had him doing things for them around the house. More like a servant than a labourer. He got up before the rest of the household and did chores.”

“I hate chores,” I said.

“Anyone with any sense hates chores. That’s why they had him doing them. Up before the dawn, he’d chop wood and sweep floors, light stoves and feed horses, polish leather, copper and brass. Whatever they said, he did. Happy as Larry. Never a complaint. Or, so she said.

Every week, Da and I went to collect the rent. I liked to go with. See myself around. Have a chat with Da. It was ok. Sometimes we saw Michael. Sometimes we didn’t. Anyway, he, the foreman gave Da barely nothing this one time. ‘What’s this?’ Said my Da. ‘The boy needed

boots,' Said the foreman. Da was in a frightful temper after that. He went on about how that stupid boy was a good for nothin'. 'Wearing out his boot like that. Useless eejit,' said Da."

"Huh," I answered.

"That's how I felt about that as well. It hadn't costed Da any money and Michael had to have boots, right?"

"Yeah. Of course."

"Mary, the foreman's daughter, said she never seen anybody happier over a pair of boots. Michael had strutted back and forth and all about the place, happy as Larry, in his brand new boots. But, now get this, after he had had them on a bit, he was angry with his feet."

"His feet?"

"They hurt in his new boots."

"Huh."

"Huh is right. I've thought about that some. It still doesn't quite make sense to me. I get new boots, that sore my feet, and I get mad at the boots.

Anyway, he lived and worked there for a few years and that was how it was. Mary would tell me a thing or two, and every once in a while, I'd see him or at least his shadow when Da and I would collect the rent. He was always happy to see us and didn't give on that he was sad or nothing. So, it all seemed alright. But, if'n his pay was docked for clothes or whatever, Da would curse him to hell."

I thought on this a bit and asked, "Was he, you know, was Michael not lonely?"

"Funny you should ask. Time went on and one day, Mary tells me that there was a girl his age that had taken a liking to him. She was more or less in his same position. Rented out by her folks. Mary said she saw them together now and again at first. And then more and more. Walking, sitting, talking, working side by side, you know. So, she thought they must be keen on one another and said so to her Da, Mister Foreman. She told him that it would appear to be that these two teen workhands liked each other. Well, the foreman was havin' none of that! Liking leads to kissing and kissing leads to loving - and a pregnant working girl was of no use to the foreman."

"What did the foreman do?"

"He forbade it."

"Can you forbid love?"

"You can try. And Michael being Michael, he accepted it and just stopped paying his girl any attention. Or at least that is what Mary said.

Now, when I heard this I thought. Well, that is just too much. Here we have a lad and a lassie who have taking a liking to one another and they can't enjoy the only thing in their wretched lives that is free? It didn't seem right."

"No. It sounds really strange. Like they were dogs or something. Don't let them breed!"

"Exactly! Treated like dogs!" At this point, my grandfather got very agitated.

"It didn't seem right! So, I went up to that farm to see my brother. To talk some sense into him. To tell him that he had to just get the hell out of there. Grab his girl, steal if he had to and get on the bloody boat to America. This I was meaning to say to him."

Pepa was really riled up and it made me a bit antsy.

"Now hear this. When I got to the farm and knocked on the house door, they all looked like they had expecting me. No one said, 'What are doing here? What do you want?' I was just 13 or so at the time, mind you. So, a poor boy on a mission knocking on the big house door was not something normal. The housemaid said, 'Oh, thank God you're here. Come with me. He's in here. And, God bless him. Poor lad, and so on and so forth."

"What had happened?"

"Aye. Michael had been tending to a horse. The horse got spooked, or something, and it gave Michael a right hard kick in his head."

My mouth fell open, "Oh no!"

"Oh yes. There he lay. Very still and looking very dead in that very small bed. The drapes were drawn and his eyes were closed. I thought, he must be dead already. But he wasn't. The side of his head was covered with a towel. It was redish and a bit yellowy. It did not look good. You know? You can tell when it's bad. You just know."

Something choked in his voice. I put my hand on my grandfather's shoulder and then forced him to hug me. He was not much of a hugger.

And then he did something I never saw him do before.

He cried. Right there in the main concourse of the station that he had built. For everyone to see. And I cried too.

After a while, he gently pushed me away so he could reach his hanky.

"Oh. Dear me," he said.

"I have to finish the tale." He blew his nose and cleared his throat.

"Michael was lying there as good as gone. And I, well, I daren't say a word. But Michael, he opened one eye and looked at me and smiled. Happy as Larry.

Are you going to die, Michael? I asked him.

'Aye,' he said.

Oh Michael, why? Why do you have to die? You're still so... young.

And he smiled in the way he did.

And do you know what he said?"

I shook my head softly no.

"I'll tell you what he didn't say first. He didn't say, I should of taken off with my girlfriend. I should have run off to America and started my new life with her. We could have..."

Then he looked in my eyes and told me what had led him to leave Ireland.

"He said, 'Good thing they didn't let me be with the girl.' That's what he said."

We sat in silence together watching the people getting on about their business.

"So, there you have it." He said finally.

Although I didn't really understand what all this meant at the time, I understood that it had had a great effect on him and therefore, on me. Every so often, I think about this and wonder what Pepa didn't tell me. They way I saw it as a boy, I thought maybe he was scared of ending up the same way. Poor and alone. Used and discarded. A nobody. Was that it? I wish he was here so I could ask him.

Many years later, after he had left to meet his brother Michael in the great beyond, I took myself to witness the demolition of Pennsylvania Station.

That was 1964.

Some people grabbed pieces of the Milford Pink Granite to keep as memorabilia. But I just couldn't. Didn't seem right.

When they were done destroying my grandfather's monument, they built Madison Square Garden. On that very spot. I still haven't been in there. Didn't seem right. His legacy. Gone. Thank God he wasn't alive to see it. How did everything turn out so badly?

"Mister Clancy! You made a mess! Oh, Mister Clancy. Don't worry, I help you, It's ok. Don't cry Mister Clancy. I am here now. It's ok."

Nurse Ana patted my hand and I grabbed it.

"You ok, Mister Clancy? Mister Clancy?"

Then, it hit me like a ton of Milford Pink Granite.

THE CURSE!

"Maria, do you believe in witches?"