

The Red Boots

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There 's something in the core of me

That needs the West to set it free.

'Connemara'

by Oliver St. John Gogarty

Chapter One

Dublin, Ireland

A tall figure dressed in black paused in the shadows as a Dublin Gar-da patrol car passed by. Illuminating his watch, the figure checked the time. Quickly, he darted across the street, being careful not to break the silence before dawn.

The Pearse Gallery was dark except for a spotlight on a statue near the window. The light illuminated a poster announcing the premier show for Shannon O'Toole's world art tour.

While walking to the back of the gallery, he removed a small com-puter with wire leads from a black canvas bag. He carefully connected the leads to the alarm keypad outside the door. After disabling the sys-tem, he used a three-inch metal blade to enter through the metal door.

In the faint light coming from the next room, he could see the bins of surplus art and statues. Walking around a large desk in the center of the room, he went through the doorway to the front of the building.

On a pedestal to his right stood the small bronze statue of a nude woman gleaming under the single light overhead. The body was athletic and elegant. Her long hair flowed out around her, as if blown by an un-heard wind. Her head was turned to look over her shoulder, where a few strands fell, covering her left breast.

He reached over and flipped off the light over the statue.

In the darkness, he picked up the statue and stood for a moment holding it gently in his hands as if it were a priceless gem, his breath the only sound.

He knelt down and set the statue on the floor. Taking a dark cloth from his bag, he wrapped it carefully and placed it into the bag. Again, he checked his watch before lifting the now heavy bag to his shoulder. He started to leave the room, but stopped.

Turning to look back at the empty pedestal, he reached over and turned the overhead light on, then left through the back of the gallery.

Chapter Two

Dublin

Shannon pressed the heels of her hands across the clay cheekbones on the jaw line of the man's bust, which was mounted on a slab of bog-oak. She'd found the rare piece of wood, preserved in the Irish peat bogs, during a short visit to see her grandparents in Clifden, County Galway.

She sat back, looked at the bust, and frowned. After a moment, she picked up more clay from the small pile next to the statue and began to fill the cheeks back in.

"Damn!" Frustrated, she pushed a stray lock of auburn hair from her forehead with the back of her clay-covered hand. She'd been struggling with this particular statue for over a year.

Looking around her studio, Shannon sought inspiration in the myriad of shelves containing statues, some finished, others, still in progress. Her studio was the only place she felt free to be herself.

She saw a sculpture of a rearing Appaloosa she'd created from memory and sighed.

"I'll not finish you today," she said to the bust of her father, a lilt in her voice. "I'm not sure I'll ever finish you. It seems horses come easier to me than the image of your face."

Outside her window, she watched the water of the River Liffey slowly flow past her apartment in Temple Bar. The vibrant colors of the fall leaves reflected in the water. She'd lived in Dublin for years now, but it really wasn't her home – she didn't know where her home was.

Her eyes landed on an unframed black and white photo, one corner folded over. The three people smiling back at her took her back to the year when she was eight – the day when her life had changed forever.

She'd gone riding with Jake, the boy in the photo. He was a couple of years older than her and was her best friend then. They'd ridden to the pond on her ranch in Oregon, where she was born. Until that day, it had been her home.

"You ride like a girl," she remembered Jake had said as they dismounted.

"I AM a girl, you dork!" She'd laughed, ran to the dock that hung over the clear water, and plopped down, dangling her small red cowboy boots over the water's edge. Mount Hood was reflected near the other shoreline.

She watched as Jake skimmed flat rocks across the water's calm surface. They jumped and danced until the rocks plunged into the pond, creating continuous rings that grew around the point of entry. A cloud crossed over the sun as young Shannon's thoughts turned to her parents.

"I heard them arguing again last night," she said, looking up at the mountain.

"Everybody heard!"

"But, you live in the cottage away from the big house. How did you hear?"

"Kid, everyone can hear when they're going at it—" Jake stopped, then added, "I'm sorry."

"You'd better just mind your own business...and...and don't call me 'kid'." Shannon was jealous of the love that Jake and his parents had.

Just then, the cloud moved and the sun beat down, warm and bright. Shannon ran her fingers through her hair. "I hate the way my mother always keeps my hair cut short."

"Then, let it grow. That'd make her crazy."

"I would if I could." Shannon smiled, looking down at her boots. She jumped up and stood next to Jake.

"She already hates my boots, but I love them."

Shannon could feel Jake's dark eyes on her. She turned and saw the expression on his face, one she'd never seen before. His eyes stared into hers. Before she knew it, he pressed his lips softly to hers, then quickly pulled back.

"What was THAT for?" she exclaimed.

"I-I-I don't know..." Jake stammered, thrusting his hands deep into his pockets.

Before she could think, Shannon punched Jake in the stomach, then ran to her pony.

"Race you back!" she yelled as she jumped on Skye and tried to ride like the wind. She knew that her pony couldn't outrun Jake's tall gelding, but it was a game they'd played since her father gave her Skye. Jake always let her win. But, today was no game. She pressed her lips together, still feeling the tingle from his kiss.

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As they neared the barn, they pulled their horses to a stop and watched as Shannon's father was putting luggage into the ranch's van. Shannon's stomach started to hurt as she recognized her own sapphire-blue bags.

The harsh ringing of her telephone startled Shannon from her memories. She wiped her hands on a towel and looked at her watch as she walked to answer it.

"Oh, my god," she exclaimed. "It can't be that late!"

She thought of her show tonight. Suddenly, she froze, remembering that she'd totally forgotten her appointment with her mother. With a shaking hand, she picked up the receiver.

"Shannon, here."

"The gallery was burglarized!" the voice on the other end said.

"Thomas?"

She was rarely glad to hear his voice, but was relieved it wasn't her mother. Thomas was the manager of her step-father's gallery. He was also her fiancé.

"Your nude was stolen," Thomas added.

"What? That's absurd. Who would want—"

"It doesn't matter - the important thing is the burglary. I can't tell yet if anything else is missing.."

Shannon thought of the statue. She hated that piece, but she'd had no choice. Thomas insisted she complete it for this upcoming tour. Now, more than ever, she dreaded seeing him tonight.

"Has anyone seen Nikki, yet?" Shannon asked.

"I have no use for Nikki Conroy any longer."

She heard her front door open and slam shut.

"Where are you?" she heard her mother call out in her shrill voice she used when she was upset.

Shannon realized she was holding her breath and sighed. "In here," she yelled.

"I've got to go," Shannon said into the phone, then quickly hung up.

"I thought I told you to meet me..." Sarah Pearse began, entering the studio, an attractive woman in her mid-fifties, slender and elegantly dressed, with artfully-placed blonde streaks in her short auburn hair. She was also a woman who liked to get her way.

"I know, Mother. I'm sorry. I just got busy and...and forgot."

Shannon became frightened as she watched the anger rise in her mother's face on seeing the bust.

"What the bloody hell..." Sarah began, placing her hands on her hips.

"You can't come in here!" Shannon said, in a small attempt to protect her sanctuary, but was immediately sorry.

"Watch your tongue!" Sarah snapped, raising her hand.

Shannon cringed, but no strike came. She picked up a cover for the statue, then stopped, surprised that for the first time in her life, Shannon simply didn't seem to care what her mother thought.

Sarah nodded toward the bust. "I thought we were through with HIM!"

"Maybe you are, but I'm not." She dropped the cloth next to the base of the statue, then got up to wash her hands.

"D.J. Hamilton was a liar. He tricked me into marrying him, and you know how impossible he was to live with."

"No, I don't. I was only eight when we left, remember?" Shannon was surprised to see a rare hint of sadness in her mother's eyes. "Didn't you love my father – when you married him?" she asked.

"I was young..." Sarah began. "I doubt I really knew what love was then. He promised me the world. Instead, he ruined my life!"

As Sarah pulled off her gloves, Shannon looked at her mother's expensive clothes and large diamond ring. "It seems you've landed on your feet."

Shannon quickly walked past her mother and went to the kitchen, putting some distance between them. She rarely stood up to her mother and usually lost when she did. She filled a glass of water from the tap and slowly drank it down in an attempt to slow her beating heart. She cringed when she heard her mother's footsteps.

"William is the best thing that happened to me," Sarah said from across the counter.

"I don't trust him." Shannon looked past her mother into her living room.

"How can you say that after all he's done for you."

"For me? He bought that gallery for his own schemes. You just don't want to see it."

"He did it to give you a venue to sell your art."

"I hate being on display in that awful place. And, the thought of this tour makes me sick. Why don't you just take the pieces to Paris – you're better with those people than I am."

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“But, the public wants to see you. William has gone to a lot of trouble to set this up. You’ll do as you’re told, young lady, and will show some gratitude.”

Shannon was amazed at how her mother’s words could make her revert back to feeling like she was ten again. *Will I never grow up?* she thought to herself.

“I’m sorry,” Shannon finally said.

“That’s more like it.” Sarah put on her gloves. “Now, I want to talk to you about what you’re going to wear tonight. I don’t want you showing up in those damned boots you insist on wearing.”

Shannon looked down at her red cowboy boots, one of the small gestures of independence she’d kept throughout her life. She and her mother had been circling back to these same crossroads for years.

“I’d prefer—” Sarah continued.

“I know what you want,” Shannon interrupted, knowing it was futile to argue. She wondered if she should mention the theft and decided against it. Her mother probably already knew and was simply ignoring it.

“And, you’re hair! Look how disheveled you look in that long mess.”

“I like it this way.” Shannon looked at her mother and added, “But, I’ll put it up tonight – the way you like it.”

“You were going to meet me at the bridal shop,” Sarah said as she sat on the sofa. “How’re we ever going to get you fitted for your wedding gown if you don’t—”

“Mother, there isn’t going to be any wedding—”

“Shannon, stop this instant. We’ve been over this a hundred times. Thomas is—”

“Your choice, not mine!” Shannon said, then walked into her living room. “I’m never getting married – to Thomas or any man.”

Sarah crossed her arms over her large breasts and waited.

Shannon sighed and added, “I don’t want to end up like you and my father.”

“But, you saw how miserable we were in Oregon on that filthy ranch of his.”

Shannon thought back to the rolling green hills behind her father’s house that led up to Mount Hood, then looked sadly at the large, white-capped mountain in the painting hanging over her mantel.

“You may have been unhappy...,” Shannon said in a small voice, “but it was the best time of my life.”