

OUR LADY OF GREENWICH VILLAGE

A Novel

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SKYHORSE PUBLISHING



1.

It was to be a quick trip. Wolfe Tone O'Rourke had flown in from Dublin to stay with his friends Liv and Willie Blumer in their Central Park West apartment. At noon, he took the number 1 train downtown to Christopher Street. He emerged from the subway in front of Village Cigars, which had been there since he was a kid. Instinctively, he looked for the World Trade Center. It should have been just to the right of the slanted slate roof of Greenwich House on Barrow Street, but it wasn't. The twin towers had been immortalized by the politicians and the pundits. The truth, O'Rourke knew, was that they had never really been taken into the hearts of New Yorkers before they died. They had been tolerated, but not cherished like the Empire State or the Woolworth and Chrysler Buildings. Stunningly sterile in their simplicity, most referred to them as cereal boxes. The only time O'Rourke was ever really glad to see them was when they punctuated the flatness of the Jersey Turnpike like paired lighthouses, their beacons reassuring him that he was close to home. O'Rourke could see them from his walk-up tenement on Charles Street. He had watched the towers fall from his living room. When the second plane hit, in fear, he made a Perfect Act of Contrition for himself. Then, feeling ashamed of his solipsism, he said another for the innocents who had been tricked into another dimension. And on September 12, 2001, he had smelled them. As the air from Ground Zero drifted north to the Village it had brought its own pungent scent. At first O'Rourke couldn't place it, but then it came back to him, in a replay from his horror days in Vietnam. It was the smell of incinerated flesh. The aroma made when extreme heat vaporizes human beings. In Vietnam napalm did the trick; here in New York it took Boeing jets. And as O'Rourke stood in Sheridan Square on this clear day and gazed, there was only a ghostly slot where the Twin Towers had once stood.

He had come downtown to say goodbye to Hogan's Moat, the great saloon at 59 Christopher Street. Standing in front of Village Cigars, waiting to cross Seventh Avenue, he could not escape the grip this

little square, bordered by Seventh Avenue, Christopher, West Fourth, and Grove Streets, had had on his life. He had crossed it at least once a day for nearly fifty years. His parents had crossed it and his friends had crossed it. They were all gone now, all dead, but if they were to come back they probably wouldn't recognize it.

Sheridan Square had been made possible by the city's growth. During World War I, the city had plowed right down the middle of the Village to make way for the new IRT subway line and the new street that sat on top of it, Seventh Avenue South. Instead of making the street fit the buildings, the city just sawed them off, sometimes right in the middle, to make them fit precisely to the sides of the new thoroughfare.

Still waiting for the light to change, O'Rourke thought back forty years to how the Square used to be. The Starbucks on Grove Street used to be Jack Delaney's, a saloon housed in a wonderful nineteenth-century brownstone. Delaney's was an old speakeasy, and its most distinctive oddity was the sulky cart hanging from the ceiling in the main dining room. The great character actor, the late Jack Warden, had lived in an apartment above. Everybody knew Jack's face, but no one knew his name. He was the trusty enlisted man who protected sub captain Clark Gable in *Run Silent, Run Deep*, and Paul Newman's mentor in *The Verdict*. Most famously, he was Juror Number Seven in *Twelve Angry Men*, the guy who wants to get out of there but fast because he has tickets to the Yankees game. Jack, too, used to drink at the Moat.

As O'Rourke looked at the banal green trademarked veneer of Starbucks he remembered how animated Delaney's façade used to be with its red, green, blue, and white neon sign of jumping steeplechase horses. As a small boy, after shopping at the A&P on Christopher Street with his mother, he would stand absolutely delighted, mouth agape, as the horses hopped incessantly, always clearing the hedges, never falling or hurting themselves.

Next to Starbucks was the Chase Bank. Originally, it had been the Corn Exchange Bank and if you looked closely, you could still see "Corn Exchange" bleeding through the stone, stubbornly refusing to be washed away by time and progress. On the other side of Starbucks had stood the notorious Duchess dyke bar. The doorman was his friend Harry Whiting, who resembled a refrigerator in a pork-pie hat. When

men saw women going in they would try to follow, but they would not get past Harry. "This is a ladies' bar, pal," Harry would explain. O'Rourke looked at the sign over the door and began to laugh out loud. Jamba Juice, it said. Yeah, thought O'Rourke, there used to be a lot of Jamba juice going down at the old Duchess.

O'Rourke shook his head. He still didn't like change. They tell you change is good, but the ones who tell you that are always making a buck out of it. "You know," O'Rourke's wife liked to chide him, "for a so-called reformer, you're pretty conservative." She was right, of course. Still, change was mostly good for nothing, life had shown Wolfe Tone O'Rourke.

He crossed Seventh Avenue to the uptown subway island in Sheridan Square that had always had a newsstand. In the movie *Serpico*, Al Pacino had triumphantly bought the *New York Times* here and read about the Knapp Commission. O'Rourke picked up a *Daily News* and turned towards the Moat. He looked up Seventh Avenue and saw his old building on the corner of Charles Street. He heard they had sold his rent-controlled apartment to some hot-shot young actor with a ring going through his nose for \$2.5 million. The real estate industry calls it gentrification. What they ought to call it is murder. At first you hardly notice it when the corner deli becomes an antique shop, but then the Chinese laundry becomes a bistro and the corner shoemaker becomes a Marc Jacobs. Soon a movie house like the old Loew's Sheridan is torn down and replaced by a gym for anorexic yuppies. When he was a kid it was always the "Low-ees" where the neighborhood kids went on a Saturday morning—a quarter to get in and fifteen cents for a soda and a bag of popcorn.

Instead of walking straight to the Moat, O'Rourke went into Christopher Park. Everybody thought it was Sheridan Square Park, but it wasn't. Sheridan Square was actually a triangle wedged between Washington Place, West Fourth, Barrow, and Grove Streets, just to the south of Christopher Park, a mystery in plain sight. In Christopher Park he watched tourists taking photos of the oddly-whitewashed statues, two standing male gays and two sitting lesbians, monuments to the Stonewall riots which happened just across the street in 1969. The Stonewall was still there, "the gay GPO" O'Rourke called it. Sometimes the tourists mugged with the statues, or sat in their laps.

O'Rourke thought these pale WASPy figures were the oddest tribute ever paid to a besieged minority.

"Isn't she beautiful?" a middle-aged woman enthusiastically asked O'Rourke. He turned to see that a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary had been installed where the old drinking fountain used to be, just a few feet from the gay icons. She was a serene presence in the bustle of the Square and her sky blue robe stood out in stark contrast to the gay albinos across from her. It was almost like she was trying to upstage her queer colleagues. O'Rourke smiled at the contrast. He then looked beyond the Virgin Mary to the stern stare that Civil War general Phillip Sheridan, glorious in his patina, was directing at his fellow statues. O'Rourke thought it was ironic that the notoriously politically incorrect Sheridan—the man famous for saying "the only good Indian is a dead Indian"—should be put in charge of this group of motley castings. "They call her Our Lady of Greenwich Village," said the Virgin's guardian, as she offered O'Rourke a brochure. "Do you know her story?"

O'Rourke smiled at the woman and said, "Intimately." He turned before she could proselytize and exited the park on Christopher Street, just across from the Moat. To the left of the Moat was the Duplex, now home to Joan Rivers and other talents. The site had once housed the offices of the *Village Voice*, where many of O'Rourke's friends had found employment. There was longshoreman-turned-writer Joe Flaherty; the poet laureate of the New York Mets, Joel Oppenheimer; the chronicler of New York's soul, Pete Hamill; and the mad gay writer Arthur Bell, who probably would have pissed on the gay monument and pronounced it golden. They turned in their pieces, got their checks, and went next door to spend them at Hogan's Moat. The next-door presence of the *Village Voice* had actually made the Moat successful. That was in the 1960s and '70s, a long time ago. Now Hamill was the only one of the four left with a pulse.

O'Rourke walked across Christopher Street and down the steps into Hogan's Moat Saloon. "Tone O'Rourke," said Saul Shipman, the long-time bartender, as he put the *New York Times* crossword puzzle away. Shipman, heavily bearded with lugubrious but penetrating eyes, was a former sea captain and served as the Moat's own irascible version of Ahab.

“I flew in for the last day,” said O’Rourke. “How are you, Saul?” They embraced across the bar, drinking buddies of thirty years.

“Fine,” said Shipman, “except for this tragedy.”

“What happened?”

“Times change,” said Shipman pensively. “The yuppies don’t drink. They don’t smoke. It’s a wonder they fuck. And if they do drink,” he continued, passion suddenly in his voice, “they want concoctions called ‘Orgasms,’ ‘Blow-jobs’ and ‘Slippery Nipples.’ Who do I look like? The fucking Mayflower Madam?” Somehow, O’Rourke couldn’t see anyone in their right mind ordering a Slippery Nipple from Saul Shipman. He was from the old school where drinking was a religious experience. Now in his mid-sixties, he could still drink men half his age under the bar. “You can’t make money,” he continued, “on a generation that thinks a swizzle-stick is a coffee stirrer. Then Hogan died and the joint went down the tubes.” Saul paused, then brightened as he surveyed O’Rourke. “You look like a gentleman farmer.” O’Rourke was dressed in tweed from head to toe. “How’s the family?”

“Fine.”

“Cognac?” asked Shipman.

“No, coffee will suffice.”

“Ah,” said Shipman, this time with feigned anger. “Another fucking yup.”

O’Rourke knew Shipman’s act by heart and smiled. He didn’t want to get drunk yet. It could turn out to be a long day and O’Rourke knew from experience that wakes take a lot of stamina. Shipman brought the coffee and O’Rourke went for a stroll around the bar. He looked at all the book jackets, now neatly framed, on the author’s wall. They ran the gamut from Fred Exley to Frank McCourt and, in a way, told the history of the bar. And although the bar was empty except for the two men, O’Rourke thought he could hear the laughter of another time. He drank in this bar, sniffed cocaine in its bathroom, fallen in love numerous times, but the thing he always remembered was the laughter. You can’t manufacture laughter like this. You can’t buy it. You can’t even steal it. Laughter, like love, is a kind of chemistry. He could almost hear the boisterous voice of Flaherty throwing another of his insane analogies—this time comparing the poetry of Yeats with the defensive wizardry of Willie Mays—at the ceiling where they

rebounded in laughter. He swore he could hear the booming voice of the long-dead Nick Pinto—"Goodness gracious, said Sister Ignatius, I'm shocked that the bishop has piles"—demanding jocularly out of depressed, drunken Irishmen. And he thought he could hear the young O'Rourke, freshly back from Vietnam, cocksure, shooting off his motor-mouth.

"Ghosts," he said to Shipman.

"There've been sightings," came the serious reply.

"Genuine?"

"Yes," said Shipman quietly. "Flaherty was here."

Flaherty was always here and always in O'Rourke's mind. Just after Flaherty died, O'Rourke had an exceptional dream. In the dream he was sitting down at the end of the bar when he saw Flaherty walk in. "I thought you were dead," he said to Flaherty.

"Nah," said Joe, "I was only fuckin' with ya." And with that the dream ended.

"Our Joseph," said O'Rourke, "God bless him."

"Yes," said Shipman, thinking of his old friend, "God bless him." Saul cleared his throat and changed the topic. "What are you doing in Ireland?"

"I'm a family man now," said O'Rourke, not revealing much.

"Who would believe it?" replied Shipman and O'Rourke joined him in laughter as they both thought of the young, feral O'Rourke. "But what do you do over there in County Wexford?" Shipman persisted.

"I think," said O'Rourke. "And I thank God I got out of this country with my life." He went into the rear looking for Flaherty's ghost, but everything was quiet. The back room was as handsome as the front of the bar. It was all brick and dark wood. Three rows of dining tables ran from the twin front windows to the back, their shellacked surfaces gleaming as the sun struck them at sharp angles.

The room was indeed filled with ghosts. As he looked at the big, empty round table in the back he thought he could faintly hear the Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem belting out "Brennan on the Moor."

Then it materialized to him, clear as the day. All the regulars were gathered around Liam Clancy and his guitar like a bunch of boozy Dutch Masters:

'Tis of a brave young highwayman
This story I will tell
His name was Willie Brennan
And in Ireland he did dwell
It was on the Kilwood Mountains
He commenced his wild career
And many a wealthy nobleman
Before him shook with fear

There was Pinto and Flaherty, the hunchback was Hy Harris, the one with the loudest voice was ace journalist Dennis Duggan, the quiet one Frank McCourt, and the most earnest, off-key ones were actor Val Avery and barman Al Koblin. Was that young Bobby Zimmerman, Liam's acolyte, in the corner? Harris and Koblin, the two Jews in the bunch, actually knew the words. O'Rourke laughed. It always seemed that the non-Irish, especially the Jews, knew all the words to Irish rebel songs best. Then he could hear Koblin's tough Boston accent emanating from under that thick, droopy, Vonnegutian mustache: "The Moat," he said with a crane of the neck, "is the only bar in New York where the Irish think like Jews and the Jews drink like Irish." Once, thought O'Rourke, it was true.

The memories of those happy winter nights faded as he thought of Bobby Kennedy. O'Rourke had been the youngest Moat regular when he rang the bar and told them that Senator Kennedy was on the way down. The kitchen help immediately descended en masse on the men's room wall, scrubbing the salacious graffiti away, as if to protect the emotionally wounded senator. When O'Rourke heard the story days later he could only muse what a middle-class Irish respectable gesture it was. "Didn't have time to procure some lace curtains?" he inquired.

His mood darkened further as he looked to table number one, up front by the window. That's where the filthy deed was consummated. For it was there one early March night in 1968, that as a punk kid, he had sat at a table with Kennedy and pleaded with him to run for president.

"The hottest places in hell," O'Rourke told Kennedy, as he threw one of the senator's favorite quotes in his face, "are reserved for those who in times of great moral crisis, maintain their neutrality."

O'Rourke's words—spoken with the rotten arrogance of the pure-of-heart—had clearly hurt the senator.

"You're right," Kennedy said. "I'll have to run." There was no joy in his voice, only dread at what he knew was coming.

O'Rourke should have just kept his fucking trap shut. But back then, he thought he had saved the world. Little did he know he had set in motion the first major hemorrhage of his soul. There were ghosts here, all right, but they were not talking to O'Rourke right now. They were letting him stew.

"Too bad about Hogan," he said, coming back to the bar.

"The lung cancer," said Shipman, lighting up another unfiltered Camel in defiance of the city's anti-smoking law, "actually metastasized into his testicles."

"Jesus," said O'Rourke.

"They had to snip them off."

"What happened to Barney?"

"You won't believe this," said Shipman. "The dog got cancer of the balls, too."

"Sounds like sympathy balls."

Shipman looked at O'Rourke for a second, then began to laugh. "You still have that vicious sense of humor, I see."

"Did they snip Barney?"

"No," said Shipman, "they put him to sleep. But they buried them together in Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn, within a stone's throw of mobster Albert Anastasia. The mayor himself cut through the red tape to get the dog in."

"You're shitting me."

"It's the truth," said Shipman, pointing to the framed Cyclops Reilly article on the wall. O'Rourke got up to take a closer look at Reilly's "Eye on New York" *Daily News* column: DRUG BUSTING DUO REUNITED IN DEATH. There was a photo of a big coffin and a little coffin about to be lowered into the ground. A priest stood to the side, sprinkling the boxes with holy water. Reilly's piece started out, "I don't care if it rains or freezes, Hogan and Barney will be safe in the arms of Jesus." O'Rourke started to laugh. "Cyclops doing okay?"

"He's the best," said Shipman. "You made him a star. He won that Pulitzer covering your campaign, and now he's on TV all the time."

Yeah,” he said, laughing at the thought, “you made him a pundit.”

O’Rourke laughed, too. “Who would have thought it?” he said. “The pervasive and invasive power of television. The instrument that turns American minds to dust.”

They both looked up at the TV, which was muted. Stock prices ran on a grid on the bottom; above it a generic blond news jockey was yakking away.

“Where do they find them?” said O’Rourke, gesturing toward the TV anchorman. “If he was any blonder, he’d be transparent.”

“They miss you,” said Shipman. O’Rourke shook his head. “The cable networks.”

O’Rourke laughed, thinking about the summer of his infamy eight years ago. It wasn’t that long ago, but it seemed a century or more to O’Rourke. “You know, the cable networks still call me in Wexford.”

“What do you do?” asked Shipman.

“I hang up.”

There was silence broken only by the ship’s clock striking the hour. Finally, Shipman asked the hard question. “Was it worth it?”

O’Rourke reflected back to the late winter of 2000 and thought about what he had gotten out of it. “Yes, Saul,” he said slowly, “I think it was.”

THEN

Greenwich Village
Winter, 2000





2.

At 1:15 a.m. the telephone rang at the City Desk of the *New York Daily News*. “Henry Fogarty?” the voice asked.

“Yeah,” said Fogarty, “this is he.”

“Fogarty, this is Officer Tessa of the Sixth Precinct. I’m in St. Vincent’s Hospital in the Village.”

Fogarty began scribbling the information. “Yeah?”

“I was told by Cyclops Reilly that if I ever got a hot tip, I should call you.”

“Cyclops told you that?”

“Yeah.”

“So?”

There was silence on the wire. Tessa was getting impatient. He didn’t realize that Fogarty was already negotiating. “You want to listen to me, or do I call the *Post*?” asked Tessa. More silence.

“What you got?”

“I just got bribed three hundred dollars by Georgie Drumgoole, Congressman Swift’s press secretary, and—”

Fogarty interrupted: “You don’t have to tell me that. You are protected by the Fifth Amendment.”

“Don’t be such a smart ass, Fogarty. I might have a bit of a scoop for you,” retorted Tessa.

“You mentioned Jackie Swift, I believe.”

“Yes, he’s here,” said Tessa.

“Why?”

“Heart attack.”

“What the big deal? Lots of folks, including congressmen, have heart attacks.”

“Apparently he had it while ballin’ his chief of staff. There’s a cover-up going on here. Could be another Bill and Monica.”

Cover-up, thought Fogarty. Since Watergate, everything was a fucking cover-up. It had gotten to the point that the media was making up stories so some dumb politician could try to cover them up.