

He found me on Yelp, he told me. I'm not sure why, but I always found this fact hilarious. A man with his credentials in the scientific community, all the credits after his name on Wikipedia, a real author of real books, and he chooses me as a dentist.

He liked how conservative I was, he told me. Yelp told him that I was conservative. It was my Irish training at the Dublin Dental Hospital that made me conservative, taught me the philosophy of – If it ain't broke don't fix it – and – the first option is always do nothing – School of Dental Science. He and Yelp were right – this would be the key component in the decision to attempt a Hail Mary for the failing bridge on the upper right quadrant of his mouth.

Funny, despite intimate knowledge of our dear Sweet Mother of Jesus, millions of Hail Marys dutifully recited, whether in the service of praise or penance, we never used the Mother of God's name to refer to a last ditch effort to tie or win in a football game. But that's how Hail Mary would pass the lips of many Americans in this country, including this old Jewish scientist.

I wonder if The Convent School of St. Mary's conservative education of fine young women would have condoned the bridge I would go on to make with the old scientist myself, not as a dentist, but as a woman. And I bet when he and his fucked up bridge walked in the door of my practice it wasn't that kind of conservative he was considering. Cause he never thought he'd have to think a little farther south of his upper and lower jaw, down as far as his heart and soul. No – he didn't type Conservative in heart and soul into the Yelp Dentist search. That was just a bonus. Or if we wanna stay on the Hail Mary theme – friggin miracle.

I had never fully adopted the less conservative approach of American dental training. Well, maybe I had, somewhat, but if the patient requested it, I was never averse to ignoring the Treatment Plan for Perfection protocol and using a bitta glue and masking tape to hold together the crumbling pieces of a collapsing bridge. No, I exaggerate, just like my teenagers accuse me of. It's true. I do. But I'm Irish, so it's tolerated. As well as the odd fucks I throw into sentences. But I am conservative, and I'll give anything a go. Like fixing an ailing bridge on shaky roots for a smart octogenarian scientist, cause he's up for the gamble. And venturing out on a vulnerable personal limb to make my own kinda bridge with an old slightly odd genius. Even if it is a gamble.

I wouldn't have dared step onto this shaky bridge a few years ago. Why? Dunno. I was still bringing ice hockey skates to get sharpened and trying to fit in at high school hockey games and speak hockey. I coulda have the requisite extra large iced coffee from Dunkin Donuts to fit in better but I'm not sure I could ever handle iced drinks in the winter thing, like is perfectly normal here. I'm not sure they get that the cup of tea for us is less about the cup of tea, and more like a pacifier or a cigarette or a shot of heroin.

And then Covid hit. And other Stuff.

The going sober, or like they call it now, adopting an alcohol-free curious lifestyle- was a kick in the teeth. I knew how to talk all the talks, speak all the tongues required, after a drink or two. Not very different from coming from the bog and holding a pint of cheap cider in the Pav by the Cricket pitch in Trinity on a Friday night. Like the hockey rink n the ice coffee, that also needed some liquid courage to loosen tongues, find the right words, talk the right talk.

So instead, I plugged an audiobook in my ears at the rink, stayed in the car, brought the dog for a walk in the cemetery, ate cake and watched Scandidramas. Like my favorite epitaph says – She did what she could.

I remember my crying mother staring out her bedroom window when I was about to leave for Boston. Or her final Hail Mary over a ploughman's sandwich in The Davenport in Dublin begging me to stay, explaining to me how one day I'd understand how hard it would be to be away from family, from the river, the pier, the bog, my heron, the Sunshade painting in the gallery next door.

So, sober and lonely with kids leaving home and no skates to sharpen, no bottles of cabernet to open, no friends who wanted to go out for ice cream instead of dinner, and the other Stuff, it was a quiet few years of drilling and filling and reading and listening and watching and following and asking and begging for the universe to send me what I needed.

It took a while, but when the universe delivers, dear Hail Mary, holy St Joseph and our dear reliable Brigid – for Imbolc I musta placed the piece of cloth on the windowsill exactly how sister-in-law Aoife told me to, in her perfect teacher's hand written instructions. Cause good ol BadAss Bríge' came through and provided exactly the harvest I needed.

I'll give myself some credit here, and not a million miles away from the good saint herself – my new religion had become a cross somewhere between lighting a candle and spotting a hawk. And I had full faith in Brigid and the cloth and the harvest, even if I couldn't quite envision the crop.

So when the old scientist with his exact enunciations and his direct no messin no plámásing 'How should we fix the bridge, I trust you, Dr.' walked in – I knew it was him. Something deep in my Irish waters stirred a faith that had been somehow lost with my forgotten poems and prayers. A faith as deep and as perfect as the fascia my surgeon complimented during C sections. I knew it was him. I knew he was going to change my life.

I didn't know how. I didn't need to know. I just followed the call. Not the call like the missionary nuns had marketed to our 3rd class around Trócaire boxes. No, this call came from my brain, my heart, my soul, the core of my core.

And it was all tied to words. I recited The Fiddler of Dooney over his head early on as I banged away on his bridge. We discussed the cousin and the brother, the books of songs and prayer. I don't recite this poem normally, but this time I recited it with no self-consciousness or shame. He didn't listen with a charmed ear or a tweedy – I'd love to visit Ireland sometime or an uber-intellectual – Let's discuss Yeats. No - the smart man was somehow aware he was witnessing the shucking of many layers of woman sadness accrued over the years. I was ripping off all the masks that had consciously and unconsciously been fashioned and fitted over the two and a half decades here.

I read his words, his books, his stories, his emails. I became addicted. Addicted to receiving his words, reading them, responding to them. I wanted to find him in the stories, in the characters. That was as challenging as digging in his complicated roots under the rickety bridge. Although I did relish having him in my chair, because he made my heart beat a little faster and made my soul a little calmer. An intoxicating combination.

I wrote him stories. I poured out my soul from the teapot I gifted him for his birthday. And he told me I could write. But as we became closer, he'd change his mind and say – No! This is not good writing. Write better! So I'd write better. And write more.

I stand constantly on a bridge between home and here. I long to snuggle with my nieces and nephews. I long to drink tea with dad and help finish the crossword and have him pass me over Roisin Ingle and tell me I should really write her a line. I long to jump off the pier in Enniscrone with Mam at high tide. I long to go down to the bend of the river to visit my heron. I long to join my sister and her friends to dip in Galway Bay at Blackrock and run back to hot water bottles n tea.

I spend a lot of drilling, longing. Everyone knows a longing. Remember that feeling of peering in a window at a loved one during Covid, but not being able to reach out and touch them? Or Zooming, and then reverting to just telephoning cause seeing without touching gets too hard? That's what it can be like sometimes. I take the note dad writes to me that he tucks between the magazine sections of the Irish Times that he posts every week. Sometimes I don't read it. It can be like the deep longing where you press audio call instead of video call, where you don't read the note; you just hold it.

This strange man and his words and stories and questions and answers and mutual magnet-like pull to make a connection with me is the opposite of that longing. What is it? I don't know. Cause it doesn't make any sense, for all the reasons that are glaringly obvious on the outside.

Is everyone else accepting it? I don't know. A few are. Our life partners are, cause they know we both needed this like a parched soul needs rain. And they see us happy. And they trust us.

Some people raise an eyebrow in a kinda judgement or suspicion that might just be more jealousy or confusion or lack of understanding. It's ok. I coulda been them once. I'd probably be them if the old man were my dad, and the young woman was his dentist.

Imagine a book that you open and read cause you want to enter another world. After wading through the first chapter meeting the new setting and characters, all of a sudden you are fully immersed in the pages. When you put the book down, you return to real life: taking out the rubbish and watching your daughter's disappointment with exam results and worse, you get the scary phone call from home you've long been dreading.

And you know that bedtime feeling where you rush to wash your face and and slip under the covers where the story is waiting, ready to invite you in again? Imagine that feeling, and any reader knows well what I am talking about. Imagine that feeling, but you have it both when you open the book and put it down. Reality and fantasy entangle.

And I haven't brought him Trasna na dTonnta – that might be a bridge too far for both of us. I keep my expectations realistic, like I do for his bridge. But last time I was there, I sent him stories and poems about the fields and forests behind my house. And so I kinda did bring him there.

The bridge still miraculously holds, ours and his. Despite the scientist's constant reminders about the inevitability of Entropy and Chaos and Disorder. And there have been troubled waters under our bridge. That's for sure. And no doubt there will continue to be.

He'll never build a bridge to his lost youth. I'll never build a bridge from Boston to Ballina. But me, I believe in order, in hope, in possibility, despite all appearances.

And let me tell ya somethin for nothin. I'll give everything I have in this life to hold this bridge together.