

ONE

Cornelius Michael Tully, aged 60, called Con by his friends and The Con by his critics, was not a man to hear voices in rocks.

Con was not sentimental. Certainly his father was, and his dimly remembered grandfather enough of a romantic to insist that his casket be draped in the Irish flag for his funeral in Brooklyn. What Con mainly remembered of that occasion was the Irish pipes and the row of old men. Six of them, balding and baggy-trousered, with wattled thin necks lost in gaping collars, their pipe-thin calves and ankles tightly laced into high black shoes. Each with his medals, and a ribbon or sash in green and orange and white, with Gaelic lettering that neither Con nor his father could read. The Great Irreconcilables, Mick Tully told his son: They drag the past with them everywhere they go.

It was the sense of a past that brought Con back to Ireland each year. He came to County Mayo as a guest, though he could certainly pay his own way, and while he told himself he came to golf and fish and drink good whisky, he could do all of those things at home. Many resorts replicated the Irish experience, but a theme-park past was not what drew Con.

On the grounds of the Massport Castle Hotel, overlooking Lough Conn, stood the ruin of a monastery. Two tall adjoining walls gave a sense of the high sanctuary, and the other

dimensions could be inferred from the remaining wall fragments and scattered stones. Otherwise it was all meadow, scents of rosemary and timothy grass and flashes of hawkweed. Con walked there early each morning and bent his ear to listen for chant, for the grunts of livestock, and the scrape of pen nubs on coarse paper, but he heard only the eternal silence. Looking across the lake from the hotel's terrace as he nursed his evening whisky, Con saw mounds in the distance that he knew to be Famine graves. Perhaps he would take the hotel launch across the lake and walk among the mounds and listen to them as well.

Alert as Con was to the call of the past, the call of the great rock surprised him. The near-sphere of ruby-red sandstone, perhaps fifteen feet in diameter, straddled the out-of-bounds line to the right of the eighth hole of the hotel's Lake Course, squarely between Con and the green. To his right was an untended yard behind a low, flat-topped stone wall. On the wall rested a wicker basket full of golf balls and a hand-lettered sign offering them at three for a euro. Farther off, a squat house with a tiny patio, where a large, chained dog stirred and began to bark.

"Where in the world did this come from?" Con said, mostly to himself.

"The glacier," a voice answered. Father Cavanagh, the local pastor, recruited by the hotel to fill out their foursome, stood by his own ball in the fairway a few yards off. He was a congenial, good humored younger man, and a suspiciously excellent golfer.

The priest pointed. "You can see any number of smaller boulders, all over the course," he said, "all dropped here by a receding glacier ten thousand years ago."

"And it has waited all this time just for me," Con said. He approached the great stone. Overhead the ubiquitous County Mayo clouds skidded by, and their shadows slid across the grass. Then a burst of sunlight hit the rock and set it afire.

The rock shimmered through the entire indigo-violet spectrum, and the surface seemed to have depth, as though he could step into it, as though if he touched it, he would feel a pulse. Con thought, There is no sunlight anywhere like the sunlight in Ireland.

He marveled at the fine layers of white, of quartz, perhaps, or talc, woven into the rock's surface and at the jagged edges that could still cut a finger though they were thousands of years old.

"I'd play back to the fairway," the priest counseled. "You can still get on in three." Between them, at the edge of the rough, stood Finbar, their caddy, already holding out Con's six-iron.

"I'm with the padre," Finbar said, nodding. Then he glanced at the priest and smiled, showing implausibly white and even teeth. He was a small man, his body twisted as though by some childhood disease. Yet he carried both their bags and never fell behind. "Of course, I'd say that anyway. Always agree with the padre, is my rule."

It struck Con that they had played this little act before, Finbar and the padre. Cavanagh was sociable enough, but he was probably the hotel's first call when an unexpected gap had to be filled. He arrived the previous day with a very expensive set of clubs in the trunk of a shabby Toyota. He had a rich fund of golfing-priest jokes, and apparently a hollow leg where the Jameson's was concerned.

"We'll go over," Con said. He glanced again at the rock and said, "nine iron."

In the silent act of swapping clubs, Finbar conveyed a rich blend of stoic amusement and class resentment. Con took the club and glanced at the agitated dog, then said to Finbar, "The dog seems to agree with you."

"He's seen it all, sir."

Con took his stance and looked up one last time, reminding himself of all the little keys to hitting it extra high. After impact he raised his head and followed the ball as it rose against the deep red of the stone, certain to hit and rebound who-knew-where, and then suddenly it was clear against the cloud-dotted sky.

Finbar was already running to the fairway, watching, squinting, then laughing and calling out, “A pretty shot, sir, a fine, pretty shot.”

But Con did not rush. The stone drew him back. He had heard a voice—no, not a voice, surely, rocks didn't talk even in this land of folk tales. But a message had been sent and received all the same. Con approached the rock, paused, came closer. The deep red-black depths embraced him until the rock filled his vision, and he heard it again. Surely not a voice, he thought. Perhaps a sympathetic vibration, an over- or undertone to some ambient sound. Was there a power line nearby? A subterranean river? He touched the stone again; the surface was warm, though the air was chilly and a steady breeze rustled the meadow grasses.

He heard behind him the sound of the priest's shot, like a fingernail flicked at fine crystal. He began to move uncertainly to catch up, and felt the sleeves of his light sweater flatten against his forearms. It was hard to keep his feet moving. He thought he was walking into a stiff wind, yet the grasses bent the opposite way. He tugged at his belt, hitched up his pants, walked more briskly, and finally was free of the tow, as though he had swum past the surf line at the beach.

Father Cavanagh carried his mallet putter in the crook of his arm and complimented Con on his shot as they neared the green. Their opponents, who had mostly kept to themselves all morning, were hunched in concentration over the longer of their putts. They were venture capitalists who first invited Con on this dozen-man annual outing five years before. He had yet to do any business with them, but he saw the dollar signs in their eyes when they looked at him.

“Extraordinary piece of stone,” Con said. “I almost feel I offended it.”

Cavanagh laughed. “Now, friend,” he said, “think in that direction and you’ll be hearing the banshee next.”

They putted out; he and Cavanagh won the hole. They walked toward the next tee, turning away from the lake, putting the huge stone well behind them, and the priest said, “Mind you, the organization I work for discourages that sort of thing, belief in banshees and selkies and leprechauns. But long after Saint Pat, this land was still full of people who worshipped rocks and trees and thought nature was a conscious, willful thing. Even malevolent. Still some around today, I’m sure. And sometimes I wonder if there isn’t something to it.”

They said no more. They won their match, though no cash changed hands. The reckoning would come at the end of the trip, and Con knew anything he might lose would be forgiven. The venture capitalists weren't fools, after all.

Con spent the late afternoon in his room, reading through a small stack of business papers. He returned phone calls and answered e-mails. He looked, yet again, at the architectural renderings of his latest, most urgent project. The Dermot Tully Center for the Performing Arts in Saint Mary’s County, Maryland: Concert hall, theater, classrooms, lecture halls, practice studios, a restaurant, a picnic grove, all overlooking the Wicomico River.

The property purchases, a half dozen homes and three other empty sites of varying acreage, had been completed six months ago, and today’s email brought news that the last owner had vacated. The site, a gently sloping, mostly open hillside, was ready for demolition to begin, with the ground-breaking for the new facility to follow.

Con smiled. He had earned a lot of money, and inherited a lot more, and for years had grappled with the unexpressed question, What now? Every day reminded him that he was no

longer young. He had no children, and although he would bestow hefty legacies on his gaggle of nephews and nieces, the bulk of his substantial estate just sat in the back of his mind, nagging him to do something. Something important, worthy, meaningful. The conventional charities—churches, diseases, disaster relief—did not move him, and besides, all they wanted from him was a large check. The Dermot Tully Center would be so much more.

He also looked, once again, at his accountant's latest projections, which told him just how close to the edge he was walking. The Tully Center would be a paying business, Con was determined. It would host enough events and do enough ancillary business to stay in the black, and parts of it would qualify for tax exemptions. In the long run, all would be well. But right now there was the mortgage on the land, plus the construction loan, the architect's fees...

In the long northern twilight the group gathered on a patio for drinks and then in the private dining room for a supper of lake trout, potatoes, and vegetables from the castle garden. After another hour of frivolities he pleaded exhaustion and excused himself. He took a snifter of cognac up to his room, where he slipped off his shoes, opened his window, and stared into the darkening night, across the lake, across the famine graves, into the even darker sky to the east. He stared and thought, for it called for some thought, this new notion that had struck him.

Con Tully was not a naïve man, nor credulous. One did not get to a nine-figure net worth by being gullible. He did not believe in the Loch Ness Monster, nor Bigfoot, nor chupacabras nor little green men from outer space. He did not believe in the free lunch, cold fusion, or trickle-down economics.

But apparently, he believed he had been personally addressed by a big rock.

He slept well and woke wonderful, glad to have forgone a late night. He dressed quickly in his walking clothes, carrying his shoes down the stairs to preserve the silence. He saw no one,

though he heard the kitchen staff at work. On the front steps he pulled on the shoes and set off at a quick pace, the sky just beginning to brighten and cool air filling his lungs. Five minutes' walk brought him to the first tee of the Lake Course, where he picked up the cart path and made his way through the thin woods, then across the gently undulating fields. He found the lake swathed in mist, glimmering in the low-angled light of the rising sun. Silence surrounded him. He saw the hills across the lake come slowly into their outlines, moving through shades of gray to mottled dark green.

A suggestive land, he thought, insinuating, seducing, peopled by semi-visible helpers and tricksters. A man in such a place could be brought to believe almost anything. Of course he can worship a tree. At home Con had seen trees a thousand years old, trees already vastly old when Lewis and Clark trekked up the Missouri. He had stared into a volcano and felt the barest tip of inconceivable power.

Sunlight made the dew glitter as Con walked. His shoes were wet but he felt rising warmth on the side of his face. He returned, of course, to the rock. The light had just begun to touch the rough surface, creating a fine lace of shadows. The rock was softer now, less radiant, but still he felt its pull. He paused, finally, ten feet from the stone. A clutch of small birds burst from the tall grass nearby.

"I heard you, yesterday," Con said to the rock. "For now, let's keep this between ourselves, okay?"

The outing group headed for home on Friday morning, but Con extended his stay. He lingered through the quiet, warm midday, wandering the hotel's public rooms, exchanging nods with the few remaining guests. He walked the road for an hour and was passed by only a handful

of cars. At four o'clock he was in the hotel bar when Father Cavanagh arrived. On the golf course, in sweater, gray slacks and peaked cap, Cavanagh could be any glad-handing salesman. Today, though, he was in uniform, black suit and Roman collar, and could never be anything but an Irish parish priest. They were alone in the bar and took their pints to a table overlooking the front garden.

"It's grown quiet," Cavanagh observed.

"It always was," Con replied. "Our group might have been two-thirds of the hotel's trade while we were all here."

"I marvel they can stay in business, sometimes," the priest said, sipping his stout. Con did not reply, but he had marveled too. More than that, he had explored the premises, counted the accommodations and staff, examined the room rates, menu prices and greens fees, looked up the tax account online, and covered several pages with penciled arithmetic. His conclusion was that unless the hotel was the love of someone's life, it would not be in business much longer. Yet it could be made to pay, he thought, with more astute management, selective modernization, a timely injection of cash...

That, however, was tomorrow's business, and today's remained to be done.

"I appreciate your help with this," Con said.

"Glad to do it. Mr. Nolan is a regular communicant at St. Brigid's, and a donor as well, in a small way, but my sense of it is, he is harder pressed than he wishes to appear."

"Well, perhaps I can help."

"And what is it you propose to do for Mr. Nolan?"

"I want to buy his rock," Con said, and finally sampled his beer.