

## **The Marker**

**by Raymond Abbott**

It was Donal's parents who first opened the store in Spiddal. It was kind of a variety store but among the items sold there were caskets.

When Donal's time came to take over the business he did things pretty much as his folks had, except he got rid of the caskets. He'd be damned, he said, if he were going to sell caskets in any store he owned. He admitted it was a part of life, but it wasn't a part he wished to be reminded of all the time.

Donal was more than a little superstitious, everyone agreed. He was also a hypochondriac, plus he possessed considerable fear of doctors and hospitals. Practically anything medical frightened him. The subject—medicine—made him queasy, was about all he said to explain his fears.

Donal was tall with dark hair and a dark complexion, which for an Irishman was a bit out of the ordinary. He looked more Spanish than Irish. As he got older he put on weight, including a paunch in the middle. This recent weight gain, he maintained, aggravated a chronic back problem. But he wouldn't go to see a doctor about this problem. Indeed, he began to wonder lately if this nagging pain might be a symptom of something more serious. Perhaps a cancer of one kind or another. He was a big worrier.

Under Donal's supervision the business in Spiddal prospered. In his father's time the store had been open year-round. Now it was seasonal. He catered almost entirely to tourists, eventually dropping the line of groceries and sweets and, of course, caskets. Tourism was the future, he told everyone. He made a tidy sum selling Aran sweaters (the Aran Islands were only miles away across the Galway Bay). Then it became pottery, and soon thereafter, glassware. Waterford was a big seller for him. Galway glass also was popular. He even made room for a few books.

In the beginning it was American tourists to whom he sold most of his wares, but some years the Americans just didn't come and so he branched out his operation—his promotions—to attract the "Continental," as the Germans, French and Dutch were known in Ireland. He very much appreciated the steady business he got from the Continent, but he believed nobody spent like the Americans when times were decent in America. Everywhere in his shop were reminders of American visitors, but not so for the Continentals. Business cards plastered a large bulletin board in the coffee shop at the back of the store and on yet another there was a display of police insignias, mostly from U.S. police departments in the northeast part of the United States. He joked that if ever he got into trouble with the law in New York or Massachusetts he would have little to worry about, such were the fine connections he had made in his shop with

U.S. police officials—often of the highest ranks. Many were Irish, of course (or they wouldn't be there).

There appeared one summer in Spiddal, eventually at Donal's store as well, an American woman from Vermont. It was not a year when a lot of Yanks came from America. The dollar was weak and the economy in the U.S. slack. But this New England woman rented, and for about six weeks, a small house just up the street from Donal's shop. She quickly established a routine of visiting his store while she was out for a morning walk. Usually she came in for coffee which he sometimes gave away to strangers, tourists he hoped would buy a sweater or glassware, but anyone could have the coffee or tea. When buses unloaded at his door filled with visitors—strangers—the coffee and scones always were on the house. It was a smart practice, he quickly determined. But this woman, this stranger, seldom bought anything other than a daily newspaper, the *Irish Times* at that. Still, he grew increasingly aware of her presence in his shop and virtually every workday morning at that. Always one for a bit of chatter, a little gossip, it wasn't long before Donal was talking to this lady from Vermont. Trudy was her name. An odd name, he thought. She certainly was not Irish. At least he didn't know anybody Irish named Trudy.

And she wasn't Irish-American, he decided, although with her flaming red hair somebody might well have thought she was. She looked a bit messy to him, poorly groomed would be the best way to say it, although not dirty as would be a person who does not bathe. Just kind of sloppy looking. She had the look of a leftover hippie from the sixties. She turned out to be old enough to have been a hippie too for she told him one day she was fifty years old. She just blurted it out. He didn't ask her age. He asked few questions of Trudy and often he was quite curious about people who came into the store and how they lived. With Trudy, though, not so. He just didn't want to know what she was about.

She seemed to prefer to dress in loose-fitting clothing, probably to cover up her size which was not enormous but she was not slim either. About every time he caught a glimpse of his own stout figure in a mirror he decided that he ought to be doing the same thing, dressing in looser clothing. It would be easy enough to do for he had a store full of men's apparel, some of it quite pricey.

It turned out Trudy was a stone cutter in Vermont. She said she preferred to work with highly polished black marble. It was the kind of marble suitable for gravestones and other such memorials she told him one day without his having asked. She spoke of elaborate, sometimes bizarre, designs and scenes she was commissioned to put on these markers. He didn't ask or want to know the details of her occupation but he was a polite Irishman and, well, she was a stranger and a customer, if only for the *Irish Times* each day, and so the conversation, and in considerable detail, unfolded little by little, day by day.

One day she found him alone at a table as he sat having his morning coffee. "You know, I can't very well bring my work with me because of its size," she told him straightaway for no reason that he could determine.

Well, that's pretty obvious, he thought.

"I guess I will have to be content with my sketches and plans for future work."

He didn't say anything but he wished like hell she would not make plans for her gravestones in his coffee shop. Never would he have been so rude as to say such a thing to her, however. Nevertheless, he was spooked that a sketch of somebody's gravestone was being penned in his place of business. He knew it sounded silly to feel as he did, but that was just how he felt.

Maybe because he was not as busy as he would have liked to have been at this par-

ticular time of year, July it was, but the thought kept creeping into his mind that Trudy could well be sketching him and not a gravestone design. For what purpose, of course, he did not ask her. All the same he began to believe she was studying him when she sat for long stretches of time sipping what had to be by then cold coffee. He never understood how people drank cold coffee or cold tea. She didn't stare in the same way when she was sitting with him, but if she came in and he was at another table perhaps with a customer, she would sit across the room and watch him, almost study him and sketch something on her pad. It got so distracting for him that when she came into the coffee shop and he was there with someone else he would wait a moment or two, so that it didn't look too obvious, make an excuse to leave, and then escape to the front of the store and busy himself with other work, even when there was no other work that needed doing.

He felt somewhat better when he was told that Trudy was also a fairly good water color artist and had completed already several landscapes of Spiddal. One of her works, he had heard, was even in a small gallery next to Hughes' Bar.

Soon enough he found himself quite relaxed around Trudy, as much as he relaxed around any Americans. He had lived several summers in New York City and had many American friends. Yet he wasn't totally easy with Americans. They were somewhat too intense for him often as not. Not all of them, of course, but many, even those who were part Irish or for that matter all Irish.

He decided Trudy was nice. That was the word too, nice. Troubled, yes, but nice. He knew all too soon much more about her personal life. For example, she told him there was a divorce in process. He said nothing in reply. Traveling with her in Ireland was her mother, although he never once got to meet her.

Then there was this morning when she came in and he had laid out on several tables blueprints for a planned renovation and expansion of the shop. Business had been that good (if not this particular summer).

It was a major undertaking for Donal, involving considerable change in the outside facade of the store. He was waiting for an architect to arrive from Galway City.

"What have we here?" she asked immediately. She quickly scanned the sketches.

"Not too bad," she said in a low voice before Donal could explain the purpose of the project. She seemed to see what it was right away without an explanation.

"Maybe lacking a bit in imagination," she said. "But I suppose it will serve you well."

He was at first a bit offended by the remark—the criticism—but then he realized she was holding back, perhaps feeling the need to be polite, something he often did in life.

"Kind of square, isn't it?" he said to her to try to flush out her real feelings about the design, and it worked.

"Well, now that you mention it. Yes, it is very square."

He was beginning to believe architects must find right angles a good deal easier to work with because the drawings he was looking at all the time, and he had seen several sets before these, were heavy with right angles and straight lines. He would wager straight lines were cheaper. But doing this project on the cheap had not been his intention. He had a budget, of course, but he didn't wish to sacrifice design and good taste for expediency. If he had he would have forgone hiring an architect, which had been his father's recommendation. His father couldn't see the point of the additional costs. But his father and Donal were entirely different creatures.

"You got a sheet of paper?" Trudy asked. Of course he did. He quickly put one before her.

"I'd do it kind of like this," she said, then sketched a brand new design for his storefront. He thought it a good one. It departed considerably from what he had been looking at up to this time. He could see it as feasible and affordable. Convincing the architect might be another matter, he knew.

"I like this a lot," he told Trudy. She was obviously pleased with his response.

"May I suggest this to my architect?" he asked next. "Also I want to pay you for this design." Donal was not at all a cheapskate. Anything but. He could be quite generous.

"I am just happy to help," she said. She was in truth thrilled. She wished there were other things she could do with and for Donal, but she knew this was quite impossible, he being a married man with children. Still she could wish. No harm in that, she thought.

"I just have some talent for lines. I am no professional."

Soon the architect arrived and Donal took Trudy's advice and said to the man from Galway that the changes were his own idea. She moved to a nearby table to watch what was to happen next. She smiled when she saw the expected concern on the fellow's face. He was not happy with the unexpected alterations. Clearly, that was the case. Changes such as he was looking at represented a lot of additional work. He appeared almost to be arguing, sometimes vigorously, with Donal about the changes being proposed. Finally, in desperation, the man resorted to another tact. He said to Donal the makeover in design would cost a lot more money. Donal didn't flinch. He didn't know precisely what he wanted but he was getting to know fairly well what he did not want, and that was the boxy-looking sketch he was being sold. He wanted something closer to what Trudy drew up. After a while the architect gave in and promised to have another go at it, keeping in mind the sketches he had just seen. Donal looked in Trudy's direction and smiled. He nodded his head in a way that she took as a thank you. He thought at that moment that Trudy could be attractive if she lost a few pounds and did something with her wild-looking hair. The bohemian look didn't fit her, not at age 50. Maybe when she was younger, well, no matter, he thought. He wasn't interested in her in a romantic way being that he had a wife and family. Still he recognized her assets and had to acknowledge them if only to himself. He also noticed that for a woman who was going through a messy divorce, she was quite upbeat, not bitter as many women would be in similar circumstances. Then he thought: maybe she is a good actress, not that it made any difference that he could determine. Or perhaps it was her work with grave markers that gave her a cheerful countenance. He almost laughed out loud at such a ridiculous notion. Why, who could be cheerful about putting designs on gravestones, no matter how ornate the work or how substantial the payment? Then too he thought, maybe she was cheered by the thought that the stone was not for her or anyone she knew.

Trudy left Ireland that year about mid-August, but before she left, Donal again offered to pay her for her designs, which he thought were working out fabulously. He believed that together he and Trudy had pushed his architect to new heights, to unheard of levels of imagination, at least for Ireland anyway.

Trudy would take no payment. She said she wanted nothing in way of compensation and she played down her part in the store front design.

Earlier that summer, however, she had in front of Donal admired a large Waterford crystal bowl. She said she didn't feel she could afford such a purchase this year, the price being over three-hundred pounds. He recalled the conversation and offered the bowl to her as a gift. She refused him. She said though, "I will entertain buying it at a discount."

He smiled, thinking, I got you now, Trudy. "Of course, by all means," he said next. Then he lied to her. He told her his cost was just above one hundred pounds for the

Waterford piece and that he would sell it to her for 130 pounds, shipped to her home in Vermont. He was even making a tiny profit at this price, he said.

“There is a large mark-up in this crystal, isn’t there? One-hundred pounds sounds cheap,” she said, suspicious already. She was no fool but he was convincing, persuasive even.

“Yes, but only in a few of the larger items,” he said in reply, almost absently as if he hadn’t heard her. He had of course. It was difficult for him to keep from smiling. She wasn’t very easy to lie to. It was much easier to lie to his wife. The fact was that he couldn’t possibly have bought that piece at wholesale for much less than two-hundred pounds.

“I will just have to think of something to give you in return,” she said next.

“Oh, no, not at all,” he said with great emphasis. He knew very well what she made and wanted no part of such items. “You have already given me enough,” he said. “My new storefront. It is plenty. What more could I ask for? I will always think of you when I drive up in the morning.”

He was laying it on a bit thick, he realized, so he said no more.

Two weeks later he had a note from Trudy from Vermont. She said how a woman at the duty-free shop at Shannon Airport told her that she could not possibly have bought a Waterford crystal bowl such as she described and picked out in a catalogue for a mere one-hundred pounds. “Not Waterford!” the woman at Shannon had said to Trudy.

So he had been found out, he thought. So what! No harm done. She deserved the crystal bowl at the price he gave it to her for. He put the matter out of his mind entirely until the next spring when shortly before the store opened for the season a delivery truck pulled up with a very large and especially heavy box from America. Two men struggled with that container noting that it was as heavy as a large rock. Donal was not there to see the arrival of this unusual package from the United States. He was on a sweater-buying trip in the north of Ireland.

Because of the weight of the package and unusual shape there was speculation immediately in the village as to what it might contain. The address was Donal Harty, Spiddal, County Galway, Ireland. Nobody touched the box which was somewhat unusual in that boxes for the store arrived just about every day, especially at the beginning of the tourist season. But there was a consensus that developed quickly that whatever was in that box was the business of Donal Harty “in person.” So it sat in the front of the store under the overhang and for several days. There was something about it, the bulk or its weight, or its careful packaging, something, that brought people to the store regularly to view it, as if it were from outer space and not America. There might well have been wagers as to its contents, although none were spoken of. Such was the fierce level of interest in Spiddal for what had arrived from Vermont, and like a Christmas gift. The strange behavior of the community says a lot about just how dull things get in an Irish village after a long, cold and uneventful winter.

When Donal returned to Spiddal there was damn near a crowd waiting for him to open that box. They even knew the time of day he was expected to arrive. He didn’t disappoint. He arrived right on time and without thinking very much about what he was doing and who was there to witness him, the entire town just about, he opened the box immediately.

Inside he found a highly polished and very large slab of black marble. It was extremely heavy of course. It looked powerfully like somebody’s grave marker but there was no writing on the stone. There was something else, however, something much worse as far as Donal was concerned. His picture had been very carefully carved, and with great

detail, into the marble surface. It was himself all right, smiling and seated in his coffee shop, bigger than life, and if he were not mistaken, reading a newspaper. It was the *Irish Times*. He could even see that detail. He thought it all pretty spooky but everybody had a good laugh. Donal tried to laugh too but it wasn't so easy. Right away someone called the stone "Donal Harty smiling for the ages," or words to that effect. Soon people from beyond Spiddal were coming to view the black marble likeness of Donal Harty for the ages. But not for long did Donal allow this to continue.

His father, Eugene, knowing how superstitious his son could be said to him the next day, "You should just accept this gift in the spirit in which it was offered. Don't make anything more of it." He spoke to Donal in "Irish" which he did not do often lately. It was only when he wished to communicate something important that he resorted to the Gaelic. Donal looked hard at his father, thinking for a moment how much he had aged. He was not at all pleased with what his father was telling him, but he said nothing in way of reply, good son that he was. But Donal could well have been thinking, "What the hell are you talking about, old man? Are you nuts or something? This crazy American woman sends me my gravestone early, at least I hope it is early, and not a sign, a warning, of what is coming soon. Now am I expected to put it away for the right time? Is that what you are saying, Father? Or maybe I should store it in the attic and keep it out of sight. Perhaps tell my children it is there in case they need it one day?"

For several days Donal looked at that sculpture just about every which way he could, almost making a study of it. It was as if he were trying to decide what it really was all about, and then what he should do with it. Finally he asked someone nearby to cover up the stone, mumbling inaudibly almost, "I don't take this as a good omen. Not a good omen at all."

He had not read the note Trudy attached inside the box. His dad had, but decided not to show it to Donal. It was a simple enough letter. "Please note," Trudy wrote, "that I did not engrave your name on this in case you should wish to display my work in front of your store, which of course I hope you will." That was all there was to the note. It was signed "Fondly, Trudy."

Donal's father admittedly was a bit puzzled by the message. What difference would it have made had she engraved Donal's name in the marble? With or without a name everybody in Spiddal knew who it was, so why not a name? There was just no mistaking the likeness. It was pretty eerie.

After a couple of days a visibly shaken Donal Harty suddenly ordered the stone out of his shop and forever. He had had enough of it, he said.

"Where should we put it?" a workman asked him in a quiet voice, not wishing to further upset his already agitated boss.

"I don't give a damn what you do with it but it is not to be here any more. Whatever else happens with it, well, I just don't care."

At this point Donal's father Eugene took over the removal and disposal of the stone. To this day Donal claims he has not been informed as to the marble slab's final destination (although he must have his suspicions). There is, however, a story that circulates in Spiddal, often in the summer months. Sometimes it begins at Hughes' Bar, other times at the new pastry shop in the strip mall. It is simply that under the cover of darkness the stone was moved from Donal's shop, put on a vessel in Galway Bay, and carried miles from shore where it was given the deep six,