

CLACHNACARA MEADE

BY STRUAN HAMILTON

CHAPTER ONE

‘JUST HUMOUR HER, BOYS.’

‘Well, she nearly let the tubes from her saline drip slip out. She was so excited on hearing you had landed a job at Clachnacara Meade,’ said Sally Stewart, Gary’s mother, a district nurse.

‘Why would old Maisie Cranston get so excited about me getting a summer job there? Does she miss the place so badly?’ asked Gary, as he tucked into a broccoli and cheddar pie he had made that afternoon.

‘When did she retire from there?’

‘Oh, a year or two ago. Worked there over 40 years. In the bottling factory. Most workers stay decades. They’re good employers it seems. I said Hammy had also got a job there, but in the factory. It was when I said you were in the office, temporary of course, that she really got worked up. ‘Oh, he’ll find out much more there. Nearer the seat of power,’ she said cryptically. She really thinks there’s something malevolent afoot.’

‘Is she alright in the head, mum?’ Gary asked as Sally faced him across the kitchen table. Her look told him he’d been a little disrespectful. ‘Sorry, but... really mum. Find out what? It’s a small operation, under 100 workers, privately owned for over 100 years. Never been any scandals or headlines about it. Some of my classmates’ parents work there. Nothing special.’

‘Yes, Miss Cranston said she’d no gripes and still keeps in touch with old pals from there. But they’re getting thinner on the ground. Some retiring but some are voting with their feet. Or even been made redundant. A new director, a young thing fresh from university with a masters business degree, is putting on the pressure. She happens to be the daughter of the sole owner, a Mrs Moira Raeburn. She’s ill at the moment and takes a bit of a back seat. So the daughter’s got almost a free hand. She has a twin brother.’

‘Yeah, alright, but that’s life, isn’t it? Rationalization of resources and all that. Out with the old and in with the new, or something like that. I’m only going to be there for seven weeks. Their Bond clerk, sounds quaint, left suddenly and so the guy, a director, who interviewed me, asked if I would do that job for the summer while they looked for a replacement. It’s urgent. When he saw my qualifications and all that he seemed to think it would be a waste to go on the factory floor. He offered Hammy and Derry factory and shipping department jobs. Less stress I suppose.’

‘When’s Hammy coming round?’ asked Sally as she spooned tea into a William Morris teapot. He was Gary’s soul mate and they’d been together in many scrapes, trials of life kind of thing. Very different in nature but somehow the partnership worked.

‘He’s due about now.’ And Sally put in an extra spoonful. A constant visitor was Hammy. He still had difficulty in calling Sally by her first name but at 17, and a very well-mannered lad, Sally thought he could use just her first name. But he alternated between that and Mrs Stewart.

‘So you can put him in the picture about Maisie and her coming here in half an hour to have a chat,’ said Sally, fully expecting a reaction from Gary. It wasn’t long in coming.

‘Oh, mum, do we have to listen to the old dear nostalgising and reminiscing over past glories in her Clachnacara days? It sounds to me as if she just wants to pump me for information on the current state of

affairs. I'll be in the office but I don't think I'll be of much use to her in getting any gossip. I'll still be the newbie even after my seven weeks.'

Squeezing Gary's boney shoulder Sally said, 'Just humour her Gary. I think you're a little unhelpful about her wanting to get info from you on the company. Forty years is a long time. It's natural to want to keep 'informed' shall we say. If not for my sake then for her's. She's maybe only got 6 months to live. She's got the highest blood pressure I've ever seen in my life. Critical. I'm on call most of the week if something untoward happens.' She looked at Gary, the pride of her life. She'd done a fine job with him. Kind, considerate, always trying to do the right thing. Really trying to. Intelligent and academically inclined as well. Not that she put much store by that. 'I'm not a snob for brains,' she would say. 'It's character that really counts.' Gary saw his mother's look and thought it was a little unfair to bring up the fact she was terminally ill. But he let it pass.

'For both your sakes then. I can't vouch for Hammy. He's just got over being relegated to the shop floor but said, all the same, it was right to take the offer of the office job. I was too weak and scrawny to lift any cases of booze he said in his usual brittle style. But he winked.'

'Fine. I'll heat up this toastie for him. Tuna and pineapple, his favourite.' And as she opened the microwave there was his iconic knock on the door. Gary got up and said he'd prepare Hammy mentally for Miss Cranston.

He entered the familiar kitchen, the heart of the Stewart household, and said in a halting Irish accent, 'Top of the evenin' to ye Mrs S.' Not quite so formal as the full surname. 'Never get the accent right, do I? There are lesser sins I suppose.' He sat on the corner chair and combed back his soft fair hair. His hoodie looked as if he'd slept in it. 'How was Jogrify today? I think I scraped through.'

'Me too. You'll be OK. It's your best subject.' Gary would pass with the proverbial flying colours but never dwelt on it with Hammy who was more 'relaxed' about exams. It was not final year so there would be time to catch up. Hammy's eternal motto. 'Just maths purgatory tomorrow.' Hammy groaned.

As Hammy chewed at the toastie and Gary filled him in on the visit from Miss Cranston he showed little emotion. But he was cogitating all the same. 'It's mead with an 'E' at the end. Makes it sound more medieval and well... wholesome, I suppose.' After downing a huge mug of tea he had gratefully accepted from Sally he wiped his mouth and spade-like hands. 'Sounds ideal. We cover both bases. Me, the shop floor and get the gen on illicit activities from the blue collars. You, the underhandedness of the nefarious white collars. We'll dish it out in dribs and drabs to the old dear weekly. It may even get into the papers.'

'You don't really believe there's anything in it, do you?' asked Gary a little intensely. As usual, Hammy had surprised him with his acceptance of the situation. Not at all annoyed and actually looking forward to meeting Miss Cranston.

'Just be nice to her, Hammy,' said Sally as she passed him the Hobnobs.

He smirked and said, 'Amn't I always?' Then he turned serious. 'Actually, for what it's worth, and I do think it's worth something... coming as it did from Snedders himself...' He was succeeding in intriguing them. 'Snedders' was the name of their English teacher. Actually an uncle of Hammy's, a 'distant' uncle as he called him. Knowing he was keeping them hanging, he carried on after another gulp of tea, 'When I told him today about us getting the summer jobs in Clachnacara he looked firstly amused, then thoughtful and said that if you were to be in the office that you'd need to 'watch your back', his very words.'

Gary's spine tingled on hearing that. Sally looked grave for the first time. 'I wonder what he meant,' Gary said quietly. Maybe Miss Cranston was no fool after all.

Sally disliked atmospheres so spoke cheerfully. 'Ocht, there's nothing in it. You'll see.' She sounded quite good considering what her thoughts were doing. Flying around her head. 'She said that the new manager, the daughter, had stopped the free lunches at the canteen. Now the workers have to pay for it. Maisie was up in arms. A Clachnacara tradition gone.'

'Well, slap my thigh and hope to die!' said Hammy. 'This looks like an investigative journalism assignment for young Gary Stewart as he uncovers evil goings on in the kitchen and canteen at Scotland's only heather honey mead factory. No more chicken au gratis and fromage free.'

'Yes, well, just keep your wit under wraps Hammy. She's an ill woman, very ill, but she's determined to come here to talk to you. Just humour her, boys, if you like, but keep it nice.'

The boys nodded their agreement and started to tidy up the crumbs and plates. 'We've to entertain her in the living room,' said Gary and Hammy looked a little surprised. 'Yes, she's that kind of visitor.'

Dainty little sandwiches appeared from the fridge and a large slab of home made madeira cake and they were put on the coffee table. Best china and even doilies were placed around. After a few minutes of waiting around and small talk the bell rang feebly. Sally jumped up, flattened her wrinkled dress and went out to greet Maisie.

The boys were polite as can be and even shook her slightly plump hand as she came in. Dressed in a flowery frock, a little light for even this summer evening, thought Gary. She wasn't as fragile as they'd imagined but sat down slowly and Sally left to heat up the tea. Her eyes were bright and sparkling and roved about the room, taking things in.

'So,' she started, with no preamble, 'you've got jobs in my old workplace. Clachnacara Meade. It was great news to hear. I retired two years ago. Over 40 years I was there. In the labeling department, in the stenciling and wherever we were needed. A great atmosphere. The comradeship. The way everyone looked out for one another.' Her smile said it all. 'There were little fallouts, naturally. A little bit of trouble, now and then, with pilfering but overall it was great. Like a family.'

The boys were unsure what to say next but the short silence was soon filled in by Maisie. 'Of course, nothing good lasts forever.' There was a pause while she looked warmly to them. 'That's a life lesson to learn, lads. I don't want to patronize you but when things are going well, treasure it. Value each and every moment.' Sally entered with the teapot and put it down on the coffee table. The living room was large and sunny and the atmosphere matched it. Taking a dainty china cup in her hand Maisie carried on. 'There's one thing that's been stopped. Another tradition dropped. Because Clachnacara is a good bit thicker than just plain mead, owing to the added heather honey and spices, it takes a while for the tanks to empty fully.'

Sally and the boys were a little puzzled and so she elaborated. 'When they empty a tank of it for bottling purposes that day, they open the stopcock at the bottom and after 15 minutes or so it is practically empty. But a sticky residue clings to the walls of the tank inside. The Customs and Excise officers officiate and when the stopcock is turned to close the tank they don't calculate the excess alcohol that slowly drips down during the working day. Duty is only paid on that which was siphoned off for bottling.'

'How much of the mead trickles down in the next few hours? And what happens to it?' asked Gary as he licked his lips symbolically.

'Well, they put a bucket underneath it. It's not a taxable substance and it can't be sold so it is collected at the end of the working day and they open the stopcock and let it dribble out. It's given to the men at five o'clock each day and they all get a dram's worth of it, buckshee. They've been doing it nye on 100 years

or more.' Everyone smiled at this little story. Hammy was imagining the faces of the blue overalled men, their cheery mood as they all looked forward to their daily imbibement.

'There's usually enough for about 40 of the men to have their daily ration,' said Maisie, looking nostalgic. Then she almost banged down her teacup on the table and said, 'But that's all gone now! Thanks to her. To the new lassie who's been put in charge, Heather Raeburn. Newly qualified at some business college. Her mother, Moira, has only just become owner after her husband, Struan Raeburn, died last year. Aged 54 he was. Thankfully he never knew about his wife's cancer. Such a gent. But Heather, wants us to call her Ms Raeburn indeed, has destroyed all the old traditions. No more August garden party in the Walled Garden. A new broom sweeping clean and merciless with it too. And another thing too. She wants to do away with the old time-honoured bottle. No more the brown, hive-shaped one with little bees on the glass. Oh, no. She believes people should see the colour of the mead and it's to be clear and sort of bell-shaped. Thinks the old one is too twee.' She was getting a little worked up.

Sally looked concerned. 'I'm going to give you a cardigan to put on. 'Ne'r cast a clout till may is oot,' the old Scottish saying says. The may flower doesn't come 'oot' till July.'

'I scarcely think a cardigan will make any difference,' Maisie retorted to the boys' amusement.

'It's mohair and it almost matches your skin tone which is almost blue with the chill.' Maisie acquiesced with a haughty look. She hadn't lost her train of thought though. 'And Heather Raeburn is trying to expand the brand to include a cherry version, blackcurrant and coconut. Cocktail editions they're going to advertise them as. What a comedown.'

It was clear where Maisie's loyalties lay. With the old, time-honoured rituals and formalities. If that was all that this was about it didn't seem to be too drastic. 'I'll just ride out the storm. I'll be away in 6 or 7 weeks,' thought Gary.

'What about the women workers? Did they not get a wee snifter at the end of the day? Or was the company a little too chauvinistic?' asked Sally not really seriously.

Looking puzzled, Maisie replied, 'Well, the women workers somehow had never really made a fuss about it and it was felt they they'd be a little brazen to have asked for it in public.'

'And in private?' asked Hammy raising his eyebrows cheekily.

'Well, those who wanted a wee dram went to a side room and drank theirs there. Brought in on a tray by the foreman, usually. They were thought to be more genteel that way.'

'And this went on until recently?' asked Sally. 'I can see that Clachnacara is a world of its own...'
Maisie looked a little annoyed and Sally added, 'And a good thing too. I would want to imbibe the mead in the company of the ladies, away from the rabble of the men.'

Maisie chortled. 'You'd have fitted in just fine, hen.' She looked at the boys and to Hammy who seemed about to speak. Gary, always the more reticent one of the pair, looked slightly worried. 'Will he put his foot in it?' Gary was thinking.

'It's a really cozy picture you're giving. Nice,' said Hammy amiably. 'So far, so good,' thought Gary. 'I was wondering if while we're there we'll maybe see some more of these changes and the like. Or anything more, well, sinister.' He left his words hanging in the air but Maisie was quick to catch on.

'I don't want to be unkind but if you're on the factory floor you'll not get much of a... shall I say a flavour, of the nature of what's going on. It's what's going on in the office, in the old house across the courtyard. The nerve centre of the operation. Where they work, the office staff, the directors and Ms

Raeburn herself. The hussy.’ If she was trying to create drama she wasn’t exactly doing it well. Sally and the boys all thought they’d humour her until something solid came out.

‘Take Miss Tully, the company accountant. Been there 60 years.’ Sally almost gasped. ‘Yes, 60 years. Since she left school. She’s 74 now. Joked about by one and all, yet I never saw anything terrible about her. Very precise and schoolmarmish. Twinset and pearls. Never did me any harm. She’s been a friend of the family for yonks. It’s her child, her mother and father, it’s her lover. If you know what I mean.’

‘We do,’ said Sally sadly. ‘It’s her world and she no doubt hates seeing all the things she’s cherished going up in smoke.’

Maisie then cast her eye about as if anyone could possibly be eavesdropping. She sat forward and was almost pushing the coffee table forward. ‘My friend Margaret, labeling department, said she’s heard furious rows several times between Miss Tully and Ms Raeburn. Vicious. Margaret goes to the office daily to give reports and get stationary from Miss Tully so she’s there often. The other day she went to see her. There was no row going on but she came into her room and caught Miss Tully crying. That was quite a spectacle. ‘Tough Tully’ in tears? Unheard of.’ Maisie folded her arms and raised her eyebrows as if to emphasize a point.

Gary and Hammy were unsure how to react. It did sound just a little bit like workplace tittle tattle and nothing more was what they thought. Sally’s demeanor revealed little but it was clear to her that there was nothing much to go on. ‘Small minded parochialism, perhaps,’ she thought but chided herself for putting it that way. Sally asked if anyone wanted a refill. Maisie held up her hand dismissively.

‘There’s more. And that’s why, if Gary gets into the upper echelons, he may be able to get to the bottom of it.’ She paused for effect. Gary was uncertain if anything really substantial would emerge. Hammy certainly thought not. ‘There’s Heather Raeburn’s twin brother, Adam. Five minutes younger and, oh boy, she never lets him forget it. She’s next to inherit the company, along with her brother. There’s those who think... well... you can guess...’

After a pause Sally, ever so softly, said. ‘Maisie, I think I’ll take you home in my car. But only after you’ve tried my madeira cake and I’ll give you a hunk of it before these two guzzlers get their hands on it.’

Maisie acknowledged the kindness and then said. ‘I know I sound like a rambling old lady. Lost her marbles and all that. Two more things, then I’ll be done. Adam is an invalid. Well, to be more exact, he’s profoundly deaf. Do you know... his sister hasn’t even bothered to learn sign language. Grew up with him and just mouthed her speech to him. A disgrace. A total disgrace. Anyway, the chargehand, the women’s one, Mrs Liston, goes over twice a day with the bottling figures and tank measurements, to the office. She’s a good woman... at heart. Not gossipy and a bit aloof from the women. I suppose she has to be. Anyway, one day she went to the office and saw Heather in a rage and she was shoving Adam into a corner of a corridor and shouting at him. She had a piece of paper in her hand and was shouting at him, ‘Sign it! Sign it!’ She was physically pushing him while he took it but he crumpled the paper up and made a few moaning sounds. Gentle as a lamb he is. Mrs Liston didn’t let on she had witnessed it. It had been only a few seconds anyway and she fled to a toilet and hid herself but she heard Adam go into the men’s loo and quietly sob away. It was heart-wrenching, she said. A woman from the office came out of a room and went quickly back in again in horror.’ She looked around at the boys and Sally who now began to realize that something was afoot. They were perplexed and would need time to digest all this. Maisie looked satisfied and said she would now try the cake.

Sally leaned over and cut a slice. Gary thought his mother was shaking slightly, but maybe he was imagining it he told himself. Hammy, looking grim broke the silence as Maisie tucked into the cake, ‘I

can sort of do sign language. At the scouts we did it, a few years ago.' He reached over and took a surprisingly thin slice of madeira and Gary noticed and smiled at him. Hammy was in cogitating mode. Trying to work things out. Planning tactics maybe. A mere factory worker, temporary, but somehow... somehow, he'd think of some way to... whatever. Neither of the boys knew what but were certainly keener to find out something, however unpleasant or inconsequential it might turn out to be.

As a final tour de force Maisie added, 'I know this because Mrs Liston, a loyal company member for decades told her assistant, Isa, who told others and now lots of people know about the incident. Miss Tully was quoted as saying to Isa that Heather would never get away with it and that she'd stand by Mr Adam. He's Miss Tully's godson after all. She always calls him that. Very quaint, isn't it?'

This did seem to be something substantive and Sally, knowing that the boys would want to talk about it and analyse it to distraction then said, 'Maisie, it's time to go. Your tablets are all set out so I'll take you back.' Then, to draw a line under everything for the moment, she said that nobody was to say anything to anyone and the boys agreed solemnly. Maisie looked tired, drawn out but smiled wanly as she patted the boys on their shoulders and left. Sally turned to them and said she'd not be long and that she'd expect the room to be crumbless and plateless when she came back. The boys meekly acquiesced, already gathering things up.