



Niall Williams | Notebook

Four Letters of Love

Characters

Muiris Gore

Margaret Looney Gore

Isabel and Sean

Isabel falls in love with and marries Peadar O'Luing. He picks her up from the school/convent acting as though they are cousins. "I failed three of my exams. They found out I've no uncle in Galway. I'm to go home on the ferry on Thursday." (93)

"But something had changed. If Margaret Gore had spoken to her daughter she could have told her. In love everything changes, and continues changing all the time." (152)

When Margaret visits Isabel in Galway, Isabel tells her almost everything:

"She had told her mother so much, but not the one secret thing, not the knotted connection in her mind between Peadar and a vivid moment in her past; for when Peadar turned his love cold and walked out of the shop, Isabel felt it was what she deserved; it was the inescapable payback for what she had caused her brother all those years earlier; it was the judgement of God. / When her mother left, she lowered her eyes to the floor beneath the weight of that guilt, swept hard with the brush, and watched as it lifted into the air the inexorable dust of her life, which would still be falling three years and twenty-eight day later when the stranger would arrive at the door." (171)

John Flannery, an old colleague from civil service days, wants to buy one of the paintings from William Coughlan. (178)

Muiris, when he learns of the marriage plans of Isabel and Peadar, "snapped like a wafer." (206)

William Coughlan, the painter

Eventually he convinces Bette to marry him. "He was four years older than she, and had already begun his ill-fated career in the civil service." (39) "In her small white bag, clutched before her, my mother carried the letter like the absolute certification of love." (45)

Nicholas goes into the civil service as well, and like his father, grows weary with it: "The light faded at the window, I looked at the file in front of me, and when I looked up again suddenly realised that three years of my life seemed to have passed." (187)

After WC dies in fire, Nicholas asks John Flannery for a thousand pounds ... in part to find and buy the painting his father had sold for 0.

Plot / Story

His wife dies after WC's second sojourn painting. Eventually "sells" a painting handled by Flannery, which turns out to be the prize in a poetry contest won by Muiris Gore.

"All dishes had been used, first filling the sink and then piling over along the counter in a sprawling souvenir of our months of boiled or burned dinners. Pots were universally blackened, their inside bottoms developing a thick rind of burn that soapless cold water failed to remove and which in turn thickened into the soup or sauce of the next day's dinner, building up like sins on the bottom of a soul. You dove your hand in for cutlery, fishing it up out of the cold odoriferous mess of the sink and rinsing what could be rinsed." (107)

I thought for most of the book that there would be actually four letters — from one to another — but by the end I learned that l-o-v-e are the four letters.

Ovid: "Lovers pave the way with letters." William writes the first letter (43).

"... Muiris Gore saw with amazement the hopeless inadequacy of the human mind to fathom the miracle of love." (33)

"Margaret Looney knew what love was ... she wrote Muiris Gore the only love-letter of her life ..." (145) But her love grew fast, then came "the slow drop by drop bleeding back of it all. It would all have to be given back, and day after day as the hardship of their life dulled into routine ... (147)

Beginning on 248, Nora Liathain, the Gore neighbor, hilariously supposes that Nicholas has come as a previous lover to find Isabel.

"Margaret Gore stepped into her kitchen as if she were coming to rescue her life from ruin. She walked forward in her dressing-gown and took the paused kettle from her husband's fingers without a glance at the stranger. First things first; firstly she had to keep the world turning, to prop up her husband and usher away the winged shadows of despair she saw beating about his shoulders." (253)

Nicholas, without knowing what or how, "cures" Sean. They travel together to Galway so Sean can share his miracle with Isabel, just back from her honeymoon. (293) Returning in love with Isabel, Nicholas writes his three letters (the first on 304). But Margaret destroys all of them. She feels guilty, but believes she's doing the right thing. Hearing nothing back from Isabel, Nicholas' love sickness makes him bedridden for weeks. "When Muiris suggested maybe Nicholas should be moved to the regional hospital in Galway, [Margaret] looked at him as if he had seven eyes and she could not figure out on which to focus." (321).

The third letter is merely "a single word on the page, this despairing and inaudible cry that was both a question and a statement, an expression of fact and of aspiration, of present and future melted together in the one note, the four letters of Love. (328)

"So the days ran on like a ragged wool, neither loosening nor gathering. They became nothing; they were waiting days between the hitch and stitch of the plot." (322)

Muiris tells Margaret that he knows Nicholas' problem is lovesickness. "Well, he thought, she is even more hurt than I imagined she would be. And then, settling himself further into the chair, he let his eyes dream and wondered how many years ago it had been and just who it was his wife had secretly love and not left him for." (330)

He writes and writes and writes a book-length something ...

[The postmistress] "looked at him as if he were the newest species of Martian to arrive on the island ..." because he asks if it can be delivered the next day (336) and decides to have it delivered by boat, but a storm upends the passage.

"He looked out and saw the boat now small in the distance taking the letter to Isabel. It was the fourth letter of love. '*Amor*,' he said, sounding the air with it, thinking of the journey of that love letter and not knowing that the other three had burned ..."

... "my personal revelation that the writing changes from the first person to the third person when Nicholas arrives on the island because everything up to that point is the final letter to Isabel." — from John Hurt's introduction (xi)

History of the Rain (2014). Paperback.

"Irish people will read anything as long as it's about them." (21)

| What the Reverend bequeaths to our story is the Swain Philosophy of Impossible Standard. In the year eighteen hundred and ninety-five he leaves it to his son at the christening, dipping the boy into the large cold name Abraham, and stepping back from the wailing, jutting jaw. He wants his son to aspire. He wants him to outreach the ordinary and be a proof to God of the excellence of His Creation. That is how I think of it. The basis of the Philosophy of Impossible Standard is that no matter how hard you try you can't ever be good enough. The Standard raises as you do. You have to keep polishing your soul ahead of Entering the Presence. Something like that. (7)

"Fecund" — producing abundance, many offspring or vegetation. This word appears often.

I'm not great on the Bible, though we have a nice one (Book 1 001 King

| I'm not great on the Bible, though we have a nice one (BOOK 1,001, King James Edition), black and soft with the kind of feather-light pages they only use in bibles, as if paper for bibles can only come from this one place, and the pages are thinned down to a fineness that feels holy somehow so that even turning them is kind of sanctifying. (60)

| I was thinking about being Gone and wondering where Gone was and what it would be like and what the weather there would be. It's a thing you just never hear, the weather in the next life." (77) But, also as in TIH, weather — esp rain — is everywhere here.

Uncle Noel had two moral fears. "The first was Not Being Found, of Mouldering Away, Sean Hayes says ...How long you would be mouldering would depend on whether you went to Mass or not.... The second fear was Being Found. If you were taken unawares, if you were found in what Nan calls your All Together, then the shame of that ... would be enough to ruin the first several weeks of your time in Heaven." (76)

| Men are private. This I have learned. They are whole continents of privacy; you can only go to the borders; you can look in but you cannot enter. (98)

"My father visited *Moby* a lot. / Maybe it's because there's no other novel in the whole world that better captures the Impossible Standard." (151)

"When I call my father Virgil Swain I think he's a story. I think I invented him. I think maybe I never had a father and in the gap where he should be I have put a story ... human beings are not seamless smooth creations, they have insoluble parts, and the closer you look the more mysterious they become." (169) "We tell stories. We tell stories to pass the time, to leave the world for a while, or go more deeply into it. We tell stories to heal the pain of living." (176)

| Somehow the worm-ruined potatoes had become this happiness, somehow the years-ago hurt had transformed, and I think maybe I had a first sense then of the power of story, and realised that time had done what Time sometimes does to hardship, turn it into a fairy tale. (237)

| [Mam] doesn't get up for a moment. For a moment there's something silent sitting between us and I know it's the untold story of our family and it's like this sea-mist has come up the Shannon and into the room and hangs nebulous and opaque and tastes of salt. Then Mam pats myles under the duvet two gentle pats and she rises and goes. (250)

| What none of us realised and what at first of course Virgil didn't realise either was that the library he was building would in fact become a working tool, a consultancy, and the it was leading somewhere. / He had no intention of writing. / He loved reading, that was all. And he read books that he thought so far beyond anything that he himself could dream of achieving that any thought of writing instantly evaporated into the certainty of failure. / How could you even start? Read Dickens, read Dostoevsky. Read Thomas Hardy. Read any page in any story by Chekhov, and any responsible person would *ah, lads*, put down their pencil and walk away. (260)

"It's still the time when dogs are allowed to run free on beaches. The Minister of Poo hasn't been elected yet." (273)

| There are two thing, Tommy Devlin says, that are the mark of genius: one is non-stop buzzing in the brain, the other seeing the next move when there is no next move. (278)

| [Vincent Cunningham's] mother died when he was eight, about six months before he proposed to me for the first time, and, like The Monkeys, he's a Believer. He has Heaven the Standard version that we learned in school pretty much tattooed on his soul." (305)

| I had a season to grieve, and then had to go to the Tech on my own. But the fact is grief doesn't know we invented time. Grief has its own tide and comes and goes in waves. (311)

| In the white paperback of Yeats's *Selected Poems*, beside 'The Song of Wandering Aengus,' I read the two lines my father had written. *Why did you take him? And Why does everything I do fail?* And from those questions I understood Virgil Swain was applying the Impossible Standard to God. (349)

| Because here is what I know: the rain becomes the river that goes to the sea and becomes the rain that becomes the river. Each book is the sum of all the others the writer has read. Charles Dickens was a writer because his father had a small library and because solitude was not lonely with Robinson Crusoe and Don Quixote. Each book a writer writes has all the others in it, so there's a library that's like a river and keeps on going. My book has in it all the books my father read, and in that way his spirit survives, as mind does, because although impossible there is a communion between readers and writers, and that though writers write and fail and write and fail again the failing is what counts, being against the current and making the leap, and his leap and mine lands him impossibly here now where he walks towards a sparkling river, and where a man with flowing hair and vivid eyes comes to meet him.... (353)

This Is Happiness

Completed 052624. Rereading for Blue Ridge Saloon, May 2025

Set in Faha, Ireland

Noe (Noel) Crowe

Doady and Ganga

Christy McMahon

Annie Mooney / Mrs. Gaffney

Doctor Troy and his three daughters: Charlie (Charlotte), Ronnie (Veronica), Sophie

"There was nothing of the lamb in **Mother Acquin**." (25)

"Nobody in Faha could remember when [the rain] started.... It came in sweeps, in waves, sometimes in veils. It came dressed as drizzle, as mizzle, as mist, as showers, frequent and widespread, as a wet fog, as a damp day, a drop, a dripping, and an out-and-out downpour. It came the fine day, the bright day, and the day promised dry. It came at any time of the day and night, and in all seasons, regardless of calendar and forecast, until in Faha your clothes were rain with a fireplace. It came off the grey vastness of an Atlantic that threw itself against the land like a lover once spurned and resolved not to be so again. It came accompanied by seagulls and smells of salt and seaweed. It came like a judgment, or, in benign version, like a blessing God had forgotten he had left on." (4)

"You knew that Mrs Pender, who kept the cleanest house in the parish (her Sean now dust), sat with seven dangling Penders beside Kathleen Connor who was already thrice anointed, but would not depart for Heaven, it was said, until she knew her husband Tom was in the other place ..." (7)

| My father ... was very careful in everything. He had few words, short dense eyebrows like dashes of Morse that lent him a look indecipherable. Your father is a mystery it takes your whole life to unravel. (12)

Ganga sells a cow "and secretly ordered the installation of a telephone." (18)

"Rain was falling, though not exactly. Rain in Clare chose intercourse with wind, all kinds, without discrimination, and came any way it could, wantonly." (28)

| Because this was sixty years ago some details are imagined. Nobody who's lived as long doesn't forget a life's worth of things. (37)

lived an anyway decent amount of life remembers everything. (37)

| The planet was not yet so full that another human being coming to the door was not cause for curiosity and interest, and because the ordinary orbit of one life then was smaller the stranger brought a sense of a curtain drawn aside. (38)

| I knew there was something interesting about him. Everybody carries a world. But certain people change the air about them. That's the best I can say. It can't be explained, only felt. He was easy in himself. (41)

"I thought he [Christy] must be a traveling man, there were many at the time ... There was little threat and only a measured distrust of them. The planet was not yet so full that another human being coming to the door was not cause for curiosity and interest, and because the ordinary orbit of one life then was smaller the stranger brought a sense of a curtain drawn aside. Their manner and stories, phrasing, the cut of their clothes, a travelled quality in the very creases of their skin, all carried an air of elsewhere to those who would not venture out of the county in their lifetime." (39)

[Mrs Blackall] "Her mind was like a bookcase whose shelves had been pulled away, leaving the books pell-mell. All the stories of her life were in there, only confounded one into the other." (92)

"Women enjoy watching men work, the same way men enjoy watching men dance." (93)

More weather: "In keeping with the local phenomenon of rain-denying, whereby whole parishes refuted claims that it ever rained in them — *Was it raining over in Faha? Really? We only had a drop* — now an equal competition for the sun had begun." (104)

About Christy: "That was one of the things about him. He walked this line between the comic and the poignant, between the certainly doomed and the hopelessly hopeful. In time I came to think it the common ground of all humanity." (122)

"It is a dolorous fact that a meal, months in the dreaming, weeks in the planning and days in the preparation is eaten in minutes." (140)

"Bat [Considine] was a man who tried in vain to make himself look believable. He often looked like he was in mid-sum and realising he had forgotten to carry the one. Keeping his eyes on the floor he shook his head slowly and said, 'If only Napoleon had invaded.'" (240)

Communion scene 250 ff.

"In those next few days I didn't tell Christy I had seen Annie Mooney again, and I didn't see Sophie Troy, but lived with the blocked arteries of both stories. To keep the pressure and the pain up, in secret I'd tour the memory of Sophie. I'd find some detail I hadn't realised I'd noticed, the golden almost-down on her face say, and the wonder of that would make a nice agony to be going on with. // Those nights Christy and I resumed our quest for Junior, knowing that he was likely five miles further than the reach of a cycling handicapped by having to stop every so often to slake an onerous thirst. On those night-journeys, he would enquirer of my lover's progress, and I'd tell him the none I was making and he'd say *That's not good* and add breathy bicycle-counsels, most of which were versions of the earlier precise of: *Your love is doomed, you must give it everything you've got*. That he wasn't adhering to his own advice I let slip for now, the state of in-love granting all its citizens visas of self-centeredness. // When I did think of it, I was surprised that Christy was not more downtrodden by the impasse with Annie, and one evening approaching the village of Kilmihil, where Michael the Archangel himself had stopped, and where every man we met was called some version of Michael, I asked him why. He explained himself in a single sentence. 'Noe,' he said, and took a theatrical breath, 'this is happiness.' // I gave him back the look you give those a few shillings short of a pound. // 'I

know,' he said. 'Whenever I said that it used to drive my wife mad.' // 'You were married.' // 'I was. She left me for a better man. God bless her,' he said, and nodded down the valley after the memory of her. He smiled, quoting himself: 'This is happiness.' // It was a condensed explanation, but I came to understand him to mean you could stop at, not all, but most of the moments of your life, stop for one heartbeat and, no matter what the state of your head or heart, say *This is happiness*, because of the simple truth that you were alive to say it." (283-284)

After learning about Charlie's beau's return ...

"Maybe I didn't know it then, I'm pretty sure I didn't. Didn't know that there are times in a life that pass but retain a gleaming, which means they never die, and the light of them is in you still.... Some of it too was that a shift had taken place inside me. I understood that I would not be marrying Sophie, Charlie or Ronnie Troy, but could love them all the same, and be happy in the misery of that." (329)

"In the same way the illness had come, I believed it could go. Mystery is in everything. What I did then I think any boy with a dying mother would have done, I negotiated with God. I started praying all the prayers I knew. When they made no difference, I looked up other ones, as though there was a combination I needed to crack...." (334)

For Annie, "I made tea, I made toast, of which she ate a bird's portion. I helped her move from the bed to the chair when, with an unfairness God must answer for, the bones of her ached from doing nothing." (339)

Bill Walton died. When he returned to Portland for a visit, he, much like Christy, wanted to make amends for things he'd done earlier: "I'm here to try and make amends for the mistakes and errors of the past," Walton said. "I regret that I wasn't a better person. A better player. I regret that I got hurt. I regret the circumstances in which I left the Portland Trail Blazers' family. I just wish I could do a lot of things over, but I can't. So I'm here to apologize, to try and make amends, and to try and start over and make it better." — from an [obit in The Athletic](#).

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