

## **The Tigers Stripes**

### **By Ray Aumack**

Leveegee is a small town in county Monahan near the Northern Ireland border. The town exists as a market center for the many local farmers. Every weekend crowds of, protestants and catholics, loyalists and republicans, young and old gathered in Leveegee to sample and purchase vegetable and meat products. Horses, cattle, sheep, and pigs were also sold alongside the various tools required for farming.

Every Saturday there was great craic with pickup hurling games, Gaelic football, and local soccer leagues, wandering musicians, and the 1973 equivalent of boy and garage bands. Rock and Roll and the persistent country western music mixed well with runes, jigs, and reels. Much to the chagrin of the local priests, in the evening, young people would gather at the local dance hall to meet, mix, and mate. Alcohol was not sold but was available in abundance since every swarthy male carried a flask filled with the water of life.

My name is Katie O'Bierne and I am here to tell the story of the young people who were baptized into the culture of the Celtic Tiger. The times were changing and we were sucked up into a cultural vortex for which we were not prepared. And the Tiger was only a cub in those days

Most of us were upper school students, sixteen to eighteen years of age. We were preparing to take the exams for our leaving certificates which would qualify us for university. Most of the guys in my group were the children of farmers. They worked their parent's farms, knew farming, and were prepared to work the fields they grew up on for the rest of their lives. What none of us knew at the time was the Tiger would introduce a caste system and that farming, still a noble profession, would be on the bottom of that system. Most of the boys who would ultimately become farmers by the inheritance of their family farmsteads had no interest in qualifying for university and during these years spent most of their time in the serious business of sowing their wild oats.

The ringleader of our crowd was Tommy Nolan. I still salivate when I think about him. He was extremely good looking, tall with a shock of black curly hair, and muscles that were incredibly honed from working his father's fields. He did not wear a shirt from April to September and all the girls knew every muscle of his body, some a lot better than others. He was the best athlete and the fantasy heart throb of every girl in our class. Tommy's personal charm and good looks easily covered up the fact that he was a first class amadon. He was the class bully and if they gave leaving certificates for drinking and fighting, he would be a university scholarship student. Of course, he would only fight with those he knew he could beat. It was his athletic and fighting skills that attracted a male entourage the envy of most politicians.

Mark McGuire, Sean O'Leary, Jimbo McKeigh, Myles Leahy, Mickey McHugh, Seamus Quinn, Pat Leonard, Bertie O'Toole, Packy O'Brian, and Jack Gallagher followed at Tommy's heels like a pack of dogs. They were mostly nice kids and all of them were my friends. They just maintained a popularity and sense of belonging by trailing after Tommy, and behaving just like him.

His parents thought that the sun rose and set on Tommy. After all, he was now doing all the heavy work on the farm but they were also impressed by his wonderful friends. His teachers knew better and were frustrated that Tommy had no inclination for schoolwork. He was disruptive in class every day, disrespectful to the teachers, and crushed the heart of Brother Boyle, the principal.

When something went wrong in town, the gardai would instantly focus on Tommy Nolan and his friends. One evening after imbibing much too much alcohol, the boys walked down to Mr. O'Rourke's field to tip the cows. Cows sleep on their feet. The guys would come up to the cow and tip her over. The poor cow wouldn't be able to get up and would start to bray. When forty cows are tipped their braying can be heard for miles. Mr. O'Rourke had to get the help of several neighbors, including the fathers of some of Tommy's boys, to get the cows upright again. The guards were called and immediately identified Tommy and his friends as the culprits. When the guards went to each home, there was an alibi that protected each culprit. They were all home studying. It just wasn't fair that the boys laughed about that for months.

Another time, the boys broke into the brother's residence while they were at Mass and put small salmon in their toilets. Each of the brothers was frightened to death when they heard the fish splashing around their bathrooms.

Another trick was to switch the brother's lecture notes on the podium and leave something salacious in their place. The poor brother would turn to read from his notes and before he knew it, he was reading things he would never utter in public. One of the innocent kids was accused and beaten by the Brothers while the guilty laughed.

As time went on, the behavior was no longer cute. They got into stealing turf, stampeding sheep, and even stealing crops to sell them at deep discounts.

The worse behavior was at school. They bullied the non athletes, the smarter kids, and tortured a gay kid to near suicide. They were a randy bunch as well. I remember that Tommy once pulled me into a storage closet with him. There was a time I might have been delighted but how can you make love with someone when you can't even speak with them. Nothing happened.

Time went on and the world around us changed. We did not understand the Celtic Tiger but all of a sudden, Ireland was a rich country. This was only the beginning of the new time. The sleepy town of Leveegee almost suddenly became a city. Buildings were being built for offices and for foreign companies establishing a presence in Ireland. Farms were being sold to make room for condominium communities. Banks were rising up all over

the place. After receiving our leaving certs many of us went on to university. When the farms were sold, many farmers found work in the construction industry. The Nolan family farm was among the farms sold. His parents retired and Tommy went to America to find his future. Most of his crew preceded him to America. Without a university education, there was little opportunity in the employment market in Ireland. We were now part of the dot com boom. Ireland was considered to have the best educated workforce in Europe. The guys in our class whom Tommy used to bully and many of the girls graduated university into the professional ranks of bankers, investment bankers, barristers, accountants, and computer programmers. Many blended a career with marriage and raising a family. I am still single, pursuing a doctoral degree in Literature, and work as an assistant professor at University College at Galway. If you did not have the level of education required there was no place to work. Ireland was now the back office boiler room for the rest of the world.

Fast forward twenty years. In 1994, Tommy Nolan was shot dead in a fight in Brooklyn, NY. The family was going to bring his body home for burial in Ireland.

The whole town was stunned by the news. Most of Tommy's friends in America would be making the trip with him back to Ireland. It would be a sad but significant reunion. I lived within an hour's drive from Leveegee. Even though I was a little conflicted, I phoned the Nolans and volunteered to help them with their arrangements. They were grateful that I called and graciously accepted my help.

The funeral Mass was scheduled for the following Saturday so we had six days to receive Tommy's body and prepare for a wake. I met with the funeral director and conveyed the requests and wishes of the family. At this point I knew no details about Tommy's life and death in America.

The first to arrive was Myles Leahy. It was startling to see him because the twenty years had changed him considerably. He was balding and a little paunchy. What struck me was the change in attitude. When he hung around with Tommy he was brash and sarcastic. The world owed him a living then. Myles was now humble and kind of shy. We had a chance to talk during breakfast at a local coffee shop. Tommy told me a tale of his life that could probably become a novel someday. When he arrived in New York, a relative set him up with a job as a bartender in Queens, NY. He tried to carry himself the way he did in Leveegee and it didn't work. He earned more money in a week than his father did in a month and he got caught up in a lifestyle that almost did him in. His cousin intervened and got him into an alcohol rehab program supported by Alcoholics Anonymous. It took two years of success and failure before he finally became totally sober. He got a job as a hospital orderly, quite a comedown from the lifestyle and discretionary money from bartending, but a job benefit was college tuition. He attended a state university for ten years and now had a Masters degree and worked as a social worker at his hospital. He was married and had two young children and his whole life had changed along with his appearance. We talked about the old days and I found out about some of the more sadistic activities of Tommy and his friends before they left Ireland. He

had not seen Tommy in several years in America. They just went in separate directions. He did not say why and I knew there was another story that was not being told.

The week was a blur. Seven of Tommy's old gang crossed the pond for the funeral. I did not have an opportunity to speak with any of them in the same way that I spoke with Myles.

On Thursday, the day before the wake, Mrs. Nolan asked me to bring Tommy's burial clothes to the funeral home. George Ryan was the funeral director and he was older than us, a couple of years ahead of us in school. I started to talk with George about the tragedy of the Tommy's death and how a single bullet could end a life like Tommy's. "Katie Darlin," he said, "Tommy wasn't killed by a single bullet. He was killed by forty-seven of them. Tommy was killed in a gangland style assassination, and they slaughtered him to make sure they were successful." My mouth must have hung open for a half hour. I couldn't fathom what I was hearing. I started to cry for the first time since the news of his death became known.

Later on, Mark McGuire, Tommy's closest friend, called and invited me to join him for a pint at the local pub. Mark had become a policeman in New York and was now a detective. Mark looked good. He appeared physically fit. His jet black hair was now flecked with grey and his temples were all grey. He, like Myles, had obtained a college education, which was necessary for his rank of Lieutenant, with the help of the New York Police Force.

I couldn't hold back what I learned earlier in the day. "Mark, tell me the truth about Tommy's life in New York and about his death."

"Ah Katie," he said, "it is a long and sad story." I heard myself saying that it was a long night and we both have the time.

He told me how Tommy had fallen in with many other entrepreneurial Irish immigrants, except that the business they started was all illegal and highly profitable. Tommy's leadership skills and natural charm put him in charge of several of their operations including gambling, prostitution, and drugs. He had made a name for himself on the street, was never indicted for a crime, and had political advantages that set him up well. Tommy got greedy and started invading the territories of his Russian competition. One night, he was leaving a neighborhood restaurant after dining alone. He never noticed the cars parked directly in front of the door. Three gunmen emptied the entire clips of their automatic weapons into his body and simply drove off. "That is the abridged version and, I swear to God, that it is absolutely true. You don't need to hear anything more. Fill in the blanks from your own imagination and you have the entire story."

I asked him about the others. Sean and Jimbo were partners in an import export firm doing most of their business in Ireland. Mickey had also gotten his degree and was a teacher in a Catholic high school in New Jersey. I hope he did not have to ask Brother Boyle for a reference. Mark lost track of Jack Gallagher and heard that he emigrated to

Canada. Packy O'Brian was now a Colonel in the US Army. Seamus Quinn was a skilled carpenter in New York. Pat Leonard moved to the west coast and was active in TV productions. Bertie O'Toole became a priest. Mark said they were all there for his First Mass. Seamus, Pat, and Bertie were not able to come in for the funeral.

I was stunned to hear about my old friends. They all established and achieved their goals, something that was not predictable twenty years ago. They had all paid their dues to achieve the status they had.

Later that night, my thoughts were lost in memories of Tommy. The path he chose was living on the edge, something he had done all through high school. I wondered what he would have done if he had stayed to work his parent's farm. The ultimate outcome was far, far from the expectations.

The wake and the funeral Mass are a blur to me. I was busy looking after the Nolans and introducing them to the many mourners who came to pay respects. The music at the Mass was beautiful. Our classmates, Margie Flaherty and Nigel O'Dea, both in the theatre now, sang *Pie Jesu* as an offertory hymn and Nigel sang *Bring Him Home* for a meditation hymn. I don't remember the sermon and the eulogies did not mean anything to me because now I knew the truth. Tommy's parents thought he was in sales. In a way, he was. I was content to let that be.

I drove home on Sunday, after Mass. I had to teach two classes on Monday. That quiet hour gave me the opportunity to reflect on the events of the week. Twenty years ago, we were teenagers and the world revolved around us, and especially around Tommy. The Tiger changed everyone's destiny and altered our world. Tommy's destiny ended on a blood soaked sidewalk on another continent, in Brooklyn, NY. He is still a part of our lives and our history. I can't help but wonder if life would be different if Tommy could have stayed behind and work the land according to his life long plan. Then again, maybe we are all painted with the Tiger's stripes at birth and march relentlessly to our destiny in spite of the world's changes.