CURSED

 "You know, Hyland, there are times I wish you weren't my brother."

 "What do you mean, Carol? What did I ever do that makes you say such a thing?"

 "We grew up in the same shitty family, yet you emerged intact, while I have been miserable my whole life. You're happily married with a successful career and an accomplished son, while I'm divorced with a drinking problem and three messed-up daughters. You're the perfect one, Hyland. I'm the failure. It's probably better that our parents are both dead so I don't have to be reminded of that fact every time. I can't stand being around you anymore. Your lucky life further depresses me, to be honest."

 "Look, Carol, I'm sorry you feel that way. But it doesn't change the fact that I'll always love you, baby sister. It's just you and me, now that our older sister is gone too. We still need to support and care for each other, Sis, don't you see?"

 "No, no...It's too painful, Hyland. Let's just cut it off. No more visits, no more holiday greetings, emails, phone calls, or birthday cards. I just don't care anymore. You can stay in sunny Arizona, and I'll stay here in miserable Buffalo, New York. Now I want you to please leave."

 So, sadly, I did what she wished. I didn't see my sister after that tragic day for more than twenty years. Then I got a message from one of her daughters, Connie, the one who struggled with substance abuse and had been in and out of rehab more than once. My other two nieces, Clara and Courtney, were likewise troubled. Clara was an unemployed alcoholic who lived on the street, while Courtney had been horribly disfigured in an automobile accident, which left her face in such a condition that no man would probably ever marry her.

 "Uncle Hyland, Mom is dying. She has terminal lung cancer, just like what killed Grandma and Aunt Lisa. I wish you would come and see her soon. It has been so long, and it might make sense to at least say good-bye to her before it's too late."

 I thanked Connie, and got on the next plane from Phoenix to Buffalo, after explaining the situation to my wife, Jill.

 Seeing as it was early December, the change to East Coast weather was no surprise. My flight was late because of yet another area snow storm. Once on the ground, I collected my luggage and took a cab to Erie County Medical Center.

 Carol looked terrible. She had lost a lot of weight, her face was sallow, and my baby sister was clearly in her waning last days. She was hooked up to various tubes and necessary medical monitors. She stared weakly at me when she noticed I had come.

 "You needn't have bothered, Big Brother. But it's just as well, I suppose. I wanted to tell you something -- actually, two things. First, I was stupid for cutting you out of our family's lives. I was jealous of you, Hyland, that's all. I unfairly hated you. Why were you lucky, while me and my girls were miserable? I couldn't figure it out. But then I remembered something odd. Maybe it'll explain everything."

 I held my sister's limp hand. "What was it, Sis?"

 "When our mother was dying -- just like I am now -- she told me a weird story that both her mother and grandmother told her when she was a little girl. A story about a curse. She said that a relative of ours killed another man back in Ireland about two hundred years ago, and that his widow put a curse on all women born into or even married into the Frazier family line from that day forward."

 "Yes, Carol, but my amateur genealogical research traces our family back to England, not to Ireland."

 "I know that, but Mom told me our distant relative Hugh Frazier killed a man named Shamus McDavit during the Irish Potato Famine back in the 1840's. His wife was named Shauna. She's the one that -- with the help of some witch --hexed all the women connected with the Frazier line."

 "That's incredible, Carol. It can't possibly be true."

 "Maybe, maybe not..." My sister began to roughly cough, so I gave her the water cup with its straw by her bedside, and she sipped a little as I held it steady while supporting her back. Carol nodded when she was finished drinking, then continued.

 "But if you examine the female line of our father's side of the family, it is filled with nothing but depression, misery, alcoholism, drug addiction, suicide, divorce, bizarre accidents, and other tragedies. Yet the Frazier boys and men are strangely unaffected. I have been thinking about this theory of some kind of terrible curse, Hyland, and I now believe it's true."

 "Well, if it is real, what could be done about it -- I mean, seeing as it might have been placed on the Fraziers almost two hundred years ago?"

 "Maybe...but I need to ask you to do something very important for me, Big Brother. I know I rejected you for most of our lives, but I'm pleading with you now for the sake of my three wayward daughters. Go to Ireland. Do some research. See if there are any living relatives of a Shamus or a Shauna McDavit. Track them down. Meet and talk with them. Find out the full story of the ancient killing if possible. And then beg them to lift this God awful curse!"

 A Hispanic intensive care nurse named Soledad suddenly joined them, and gently informed Hyland that, unfortunately, visiting hours were now over, and that his exhausted sister needed her medications and some sleep.

 Carol looked at her brother -- each knowing it was certainly for the last time -- and she murmured the words, "Please do this, Hyland...I love you...and I'm so sorry for how I treated you for so long. And you need to know that I'm not having any funeral because I'm being cremated. Goodbye, Hyland." Her eyes were filled with tears as he tenderly squeezed her hand and kissed her forehead, then slowly left the room. It was eerie how his older sister, Lisa, had died the same way as Carol was about to, as did his mother. Maybe this Frazier curse legend was true?

 Hyland called his supervisor at work, and got some extended time off, telephoning Jill afterward with an update of what he needed to do. He also asked his wife to fax him a copy of the genealogy chart of the Frazier side of the family that he had worked on as a hobby years ago, telling her to send it to his hotel's business center number. The next day, he flew the short hop from Buffalo to Boston, then boarded an overnight Aer Lingus flight for Shannon, Ireland. During the six-hour flight, Hyland studied his Frazier family tree copy before catching some sleep. He had traced his father's line back to the year 1543, when any surviving records in England had vanished. Sure enough, he saw the name of his ancestor in question, Hugh Frazier: b.1804 - d.1867.

 After exiting immigration, renting a car, moving his wristwatch five hours ahead, and adjusting himself to driving on the opposite side of the road in the early morning, Hyland drove to Limerick, the nearest large city from the airport. At the City Hall there, he inquired about tracing the genealogy of the McDavit family. He came up short, but was directed to the nearby smaller town of Ennis, a quick drive northwest. Once there, he found out that a family named McDavit was still living in the village of Kiltimagh -- population 1069 -- in County Mayo, to the north. The town's civil clerk, Mr. Feeney, proudly added, "The parents of your famous Irish-American boxer, Gene Tunney, were born there, don't you know?"

 This being his first time in Ireland, Hyland was struck with the many varieties of green in the landscape of the countryside, visible even in the cold and damp dim daylight.

 Hyland stayed at the only inn in Kiltimagh once he arrived -- The Rambles -- and slept off most of his jet lag after a simple dinner and then to bed that evening. In the morning, after a hearty breakfast, though under cold, rainy skies, he asked the matronly innkeeper, Mrs. Monaghan, if she knew the whereabouts of the McDavit family. She put extra peat chunks in the fireplace to warm up the place a bit more, then directed him to the attractive small cottage of the elderly widow Sybil McDavit, who lived alone down past Emerald Street.

 The American sleuth easily found the house and knocked on its bright red door. He introduced himself to Sybil, and was kindly invited in for tea. Hyland came quickly to the point: Did Sybil have any knowledge of an ancient feud between the Frazier family and the McDavit family? And was it related to some kind of tragic killing?

 "Well, Mr. Frazier, I recall my Mum and Grandmum telling me that tale when I was young. It seemed that your ancestor, Hugh Frazier, was an Englishman working out of Westport, not very far from here. He was the senior of two officials in charge of the Poor Law Union, which provided a paltry relief to the starving Irish people during the Potato Famine. The Great Famine, as we call it, lasted from 1845-1852. Due to a ruinous blight on the potato crop -- which was the only food for most of the Irish people for every breakfast, lunch, and dinner -- more than a million people died, while another million who could fled the country in despair. Some claim that the British committed a deliberate genocide by offering such little relief, so as to eliminate as many of their impoverished Irish subjects as possible and steal the rest of their lands. But that is speculation.

 Now, the date in question, as I recall, was 30 March, 1849. The official pair arrived in Louisburg, but then unexpectedly left and went twelve miles to Delphi instead, leaving hasty word for the starving people to meet them there the following morning at 7 a.m. or be denied any future relief. The weather was very bad that day, yet hundreds of the starving weak men, the aged, the sick, and the women with their children trudged all night through a mountain pass at Doolough Lake to arrive at their destination on time. There is a memorial Celtic stone cross as a historic marker there today, if you wish to see it, sir. It even has an inscription quote from Mahatma Gandhi on it: 'How can men feel themselves honoured by the humiliation of their fellow human beings?' The tragic route is still recreated every year. We call it The Famine Walk.

 It was probably no surprise that at least twenty people died on that merciless forced trek, Mr. Frazier. And my poor ancestor, Shamus McDavit, was one of the corpses later found left behind in that forlorn rocky pass."

 "How dreadful!" Hyland sincerely sympathized. "I'm so very sorry...I had no idea."

 "When Shamus' wife, Shauna -- who had stayed home waiting, as her husband directed -- found out about her husband's death -- she placed a curse on the Frazier family with the help of a local witch, calling for all female descendents and also those marrying into the family to forever suffer lives of misery for what they had done to her and her family, like she was made to suffer. This was a worst and more lasting punishment than simply placing a lone curse on Hugh Frazier, she figured. So that is the whole story as I heard it, Mr. Frazier."

 Sybil briefly paused and offered her anguished guest some more hot tea and a small plate with two fresh scones, a dab of butter, and some blackberry jam.

 "The point, Mr. Frazier, is that all of this could have been completely avoided, had Hugh Frazier simply kept his appointment gathering in Louisburg, as scheduled. And you should also know that neither he nor his partner were ever reprimanded or held to account for those senseless deaths -- such was the low regard the English had for the Irish people, back in those dark days."

 Hyland spoke next. He explained what his sister, Carol, had asked on her deathbed, for the sake of her three troubled daughters.

 "Can this horrible curse somehow be lifted, Sybil? Or are the female descendents of the murdering Hugh Frazier forever doomed?" he pleaded.

 Sybil McDavit thought for a moment.

 "I seem to remember that there is an old woman named Aine O'Morchain, living in Castlebar. She is supposedly an adept of the Celtic magick arts, passed down for centuries through the women in her family. Maybe she can help you, sir. Certainly, I wish you luck and safe travels, Mr. Frazier. What happened almost two hundred years ago surely has little bearing on our lives today, and such harsh suffering should not be linked to any kind of curse indefinitely."

 Hyland thanked Sybil for her time and warm hospitality, and returned to the cold early December weather as he drove back to The Rambles and Mrs. Monaghan for another night's rest at her inn. She showed him the simple directions to Castlebar the following morning after breakfast, and bid him safe travels and good luck.

 By now the rain had stopped, but the roads were still damp and slippery under cloudy, wind-whipped skies -- typical western Ireland conditions, he soon learned, for this time of year. Inquiring at a local mini-mart in Castlebar the whereabouts of Aine O'Morchain, he soon found her rather unusual house. (You'll na miss it...T'is the craziest-looking place in town!" the red-haired, freckled-faced teen cashier admitted.) Once there, Hyland saw arrayed in the front area of the home several assorted Celtic stone crosses, a collection of castoff broken gravestones, several mobiles of clanging metal wind chimes, and some garishly-painted gnome statues.

 Aine answered the door, with a trio of cats at her feet, peering out at their new visitor. She was a robust, full-sized woman in her late 40s, dressed in layers of colorful gypsy-style clothes, her long grey hair thick and somewhat unruly, her violet eyes sparkling yet curious. She had four necklaces with different-sized amulets hanging from her neck, while her wrists were adorned with a cluster of bracelets, and her thick fingers sported various-sized rings.

 "Come on in out of the cold...you fancy a cuppa?" Aine offered, after Hyland introduced himself and told why he had come. She had him seated on a dusty, sagging couch while she excused herself to put on the kettle. The three cats purred around Hyland's ankles, marking their new possession. The room he was sharing smelled faintly of lavender and sage, the latter odor he recalled from his Native American friends' homes back in Arizona. There were striking purple and pink crystals and even some split geodes arranged on the fireplace mantel and on two end tables. Aine returned with the tea tray and some shortbread cookies. ("Organic, don't ya know? I make 'em myself," she proudly declared.) Then she got down to business.

 "Yes, Mr. Frazier...or may I call you Hyland? That Doolough Tragedy was truly awful. Did you know that every year there is a memorial trek by the local people to help commemorate the victims?"

 " Sybil McDavit recently told me about that...yes," the American replied.

 "The spirits of the dead there are still very much alive, I can assure you of that, Hyland. Anyway, such a curse as your Frazier ladies are suffering can likely be broken. There is an ancient ritual we can try together, if you can trust me and believe in the power of white magick."

 "What exactly needs to be done, Aine?"

 "First, I'll get my medium-sized glass bowl and a black tapered candle. We'll fill the bowl with water, leaving 2.5 centimeters -- about an inch, that is, in your measurements -- of the unlit candle above the water line. Next, you must sprinkle a handful of sea salt into the water around the candle. Then you close your eyes and visualize a purifying white light of positive energy entering the water. Next, we light the black candle. Then I say aloud:

 'Earth, Fire, Water, and Air,

 Be the answer to my prayer,

 Banish this curse and leave me pure,

 Tonight I claim a blessed cure.'

 We leave the candle burning until it goes out by itself when it hits the water level. Then we remove the candle from the bowl and gently bend it in half until it breaks. Lastly, we bury the candle in my backyard, pouring the remaining salt water from the bowl in a circle around the burial spot. This final act seals the breaking of the curse."

 His mind felt that logically, such theatrics were merely for superstitious show...but he had come all this way, so why not do as Aine directed? So together, they did the ritual -- beginning by using the small table in front of the couch where he was already seated, and later moving to his host's backyard for the broken candle's burial.

 When all was said and done, Hyland gifted the magick woman a modest amount of money for her trouble, greatly thanked her, left, and drove back to Shannon airport. He easily found nearby lodging there, ate a pleasant dinner, and booked the early morning flight back to Boston, with a later connection home to Phoenix. He texted his wife, Jill, of his safe arrival, once back in the States. He would share the full story of his unusual adventure with her later.

 Two weeks later, Hyland Frazier got a remarkable text from Connie, his niece, in Buffalo.

 She reported that she was enrolling in community college to study for a nursing assistant's degree, and announced that she was also finally off any harmful drugs. She also reported that her two sisters, Clara and Courtney, were also doing much better, and that -- amazingly -- better days seemed to lay ahead for each of them.

 Hyland Frazier could only wonder if the family curse had finally been lifted, or if it was all merely a coincidence.

 Time alone would tell...

 THE END

 by Jack Karolewski

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