THE EVOLUTION OF NORA O'BRIEN PACHECO

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Theses stories are based on real places using imaginary characters.

Like the internet, Artificial Intelligence will play a bigger role in our daily life. With regards to literature, I see it as a tool, but I haven't used it yet.

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Created with Vellum

For Tommy

Quo Vadis?

There are many roads to travel.

What will you do if you choose the wrong path?

Will you sit still and give up?

Or will you get up to overcome your challenges?

If you get lost, remember a lesson that I have eventually learned.

The universal values are more important than ever.

Let them guide you to overcome your fear.

There is only one constant in life:

I love you forever.

Which way will you go?

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PART I

Bilbao, Spain. Nora stopped at her front door to dry the tears. She waved her hand in front of her face to cool her red, puffy eyes and took a deep breath before walking into the kitchen. It was small and clean with walls generously decorated with inexpensive artwork bought from local artists or found in second-hand shops.

Her mother jerked her head backwards at Nora's appearance. ‘What’s the matter, honey? You look defeated. Are they still picking on you at school?’

Nora frowned and hung her head lower. ‘Yeah, there are a few classmates who bother me.’

Her mother sighed. ‘You get along well with most of your classmates and your teachers like you. Why do you let the opinions of classmates that you don’t like bother you so much? Their opinions should not matter. We all go through difficult times, even though you think it’s only you who is having a stressful situation. Most of the time,

they bully because they are immature. If what they say bothers you, they'll keep it up.'

She put her hand on Nora's shoulder. 'Some of them may be jealous of you, because you get high marks and have good friends.* Others are not happy with themselves, or have a terrible home life, so it makes them feel good to see others in pain. As you know, emotionally hurt people like to see others hurt.'

Her mother reached out and pulled her into a hug. 'Don't worry! School is ending soon, and the summer holiday will start. Do you remember the holiday in Wales last year? We explored all the castles and discovered that boarding school by chance. The three of us took a tour and found out the school was built on old church grounds. We talked about you studying there for the summer to improve your English and become more independent. When we got back home, we filled out the online application. Well, you have been accepted!' Wrinkles appeared in deep furrows around her eyes and mouth as she grinned.

Seventeen-year-old Nora's eyes widened, and her body stiffened at the news. She was almost as tall as her mother when she stood straight. Side by side, there was no doubting their relationship. They both had the same large brown eyes and the same brown hair, which was separated only by the style and the streaks of grey that ran through her mother's chignon bun. Nora ran her fingers through her shoulder-length hair, letting it fall back into its regular middle parting.

'When are we going?'

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* High marks are good grades in American English

Her mother put her arm on her shoulder. 'You are going by yourself. Your father and I plan to make some adjustments to the house in the coming months. The school staff will watch over everything.'

Her mother turned off the oven and looked at Nora.

'As I said, your father and I thought about something different this summer.'

Her father was older than her mother and his hair was losing its brown hue. With age, it had taken on a new personality and now never looked combed, always pointing upwards in spikes of grey and white.

'He wanted to tell you too, but he went to an appointment. The boarding school offers a two-month course. You and your father loved to explore and look at the architecture of the place. He thinks of himself as a world adventurer, but he is just an old chubby dreamer!' she said with laughter. 'Anyway, you'll find the school absolutely brilliant.'

Her mother's confidence and warm smile made Nora feel better. She loved the chance to practise English and explore different places and often drew sketches of the buildings in her notebook with her parents. She went to her bedroom to think about what she would take, but alone in her room her stomach churned. Nora tried to push away her anxiety by turning her attention to what she should pack. She pulled a medium size suitcase and a backpack out from under her bed and opened them up ready to pack in her treasured belongings and a few outfits to wear. Clothes were not too important to her, so as her parents often did while travelling, she wanted to pack lightly. Looking around her small, tidy room deciding what to

pack, her eyes were drawn to the many historical oil paintings arranged with precision on the walls and the large world map above her desk. The map was dotted with tiny flags showing the places she had visited or wanted to visit. On her desk, there was her bug and rock collection, a retro digital camera and a travel journal packed with architectural drawings and sketches on each of the pages. She picked up the journal and flicked through the pages, a smile crossing her lips. She loved her few belongings.

A short while later, Nora went to meet her best friend Ainhoa to tell her the good news. They hugged as they met.

'Do you remember I told you about the boarding school in Wales last year?' Nora spoke quickly, the excitement in her voice impossible to ignore. 'My parents applied for me to study there this summer. Well, the school has accepted me!'

'Wow! That's so exciting,' Ainhoa said, while she adjusted her thick, black-rimmed glasses. 'I wish I could go too.'

Ainhoa put on her trainers and wiggled her feet, admiring the three-inch platform soles of her new shoes. Her dog, noticing the movement, banged its tail on the floor before stretching and making its way to sit by the door in readiness for its walk. Ainhoa ignored the dog's growing impatience and stepped forward to straighten the frame of her large bug collection displayed on the wall.

'We're going to visit our family for a few weeks in the summer.' She looked disappointed as they walked out of the house. 'It's nice, but not exciting. Olatz is also going

on holiday, so I'll be here on my own. What am I going to do without you two?'

'Ainhoa, you'll be ok. I'll write and send photos to you.'

A month later. Wales, the United Kingdom. The Cambrian School was built in typical English architecture style, with buildings made of red brick or square blocks. The spacious grounds held a museum, a church and a large sports pitch. The rest of the area was left to open grass fields. An old stone wall, almost two metres high, encircled the campus and separated it from the surrounding dense woodland and the bubbling waters of the River Towy.

History has it that the native Britons inhabited the area. Then the Romans conquered the region and built their villas and left an imprint of their customs and language. After they left, monks built on the old Briton settlement. Like any successful group, the well-organised monks were hard-working and persistent and made the area prosperous. Centuries later, the kings of England, looking for wealth and land, took control of the property. Time marched on and they eventually sold the land to private owners who made it into a school.

The school's main office was sparsely furnished with only a simple pedestal desk resting on a polished wooden floor. Above the desk, a large white and green Welsh flag, with a red dragon in its centre hung on the wall, glaring out at all the visitors who entered the room.

Llewellyn, a teacher, walked into the director's office.

Despite its thickness, the beard didn't hide his youthfulness. 'Have you finished choosing the final student candidates for the summer?'

The school director, Gwynfor, had a look of great pressure on his face. 'Yes,' he said, 'I have their class assignments ready. More than half of the candidates will get some type of scholarship to lower the cost.'

Llewellyn shrugged. 'Why do you always have a weak spot for students who cannot pay their full tuition fees?'

Gwynfor put down the paperwork he'd been clutching and stood up. 'Because they deserve it. They are bright and inquisitive but lack financial means to study.'

'You know we will be better off financially by only allowing the ones who can pay full tuition. We have spent a lot of money on the museum's renovations.'

'I am well aware of our finances,' Gwynfor grunted in frustration. 'Many students who pay full room and board deserve to study here. Their families understand the value of education and are willing and able to pay for it, but others still deserve the chance. The ones without the means to pay for it. Those who have been in stressful situations in their country or even suffered bullying. We know that given the chance they too can excel academically. We have seen the effects unstable countries or bullying can have on a student and now we are the administrators and teachers at this school, we have a duty to allow more diverse students in.'

Llewellyn persisted. 'Yes, that is good of you, but it puts pressure on the school's finances. We are going to have to raise tuition fees and accept more students who can pay full room and board soon.'

'I have already sent the notices to the students´

houses that we have accepted them.' He returned to his chair. 'By the way, we have the replicas of paintings arriving at the museum this week. I'll need a hand receiving the shipment. Although they are replicas, they are expensive, because of the artist who painted them. The other teachers agree that having replicas of well-known art in our art classes is helpful. Also, the ongoing construction of the two new sections of the museum, during the summer months, makes it more complicated.'

On the first day of school, Gwynfor and the other teachers waited in Cymru Hall, the principal building on campus, to welcome the students. A teacher stood at the head of the auditorium, facing everybody.

'Good morning, students. I am Seren. Welcome to the Cambrian School and Wales!'

Everyone's eyes focussed on Seren. Despite her advancing age, signs of beauty were still very clear. Her skin was olive and distinct facial features that set her apart from others were framed by her long wavy dark hair. Seren was atypical for a Welsh woman, but she wore a daffodil pin on her jacket and spoke with a strong Welsh accent as her commanding voice rang through the room.* Her direct approach and command of her audience made Nora have no doubt that Seren was highly competent and could handle a crowd of teenagers in an orderly fashion without being too nice or nervous.

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* Daffodil is the national flower of Wales

She explained to the students, 'We are going to put you in your groups for classes and also assign your roommates.'

At the initial gathering of the groups, Nora met her two roommates, Gwendolyn and Elsi. Nora liked Gwendolyn instantly. She was open and straightforward, with a friendly smile and a curious spirit. She had fair skin, hair and eyes.

'Everybody calls me Gwen,' Nora's new roommate said. 'My family is from a mining town. My grandparents were miners. I speak Welsh with my father, but my mum mostly speaks English. We say bore da for good morning, diolch for thanks, hwly fawr to say goodbye.' She looked at Nora. 'How do you say a few words in Basque?'

Nora held her head high. 'We say kaixo to say hello, agur to say goodbye and eskerrik asko for thank you.'

'Wow!' said Gwen, 'my language teacher told us that Basque is the oldest language in Europe and Welsh is the oldest language in the United Kingdom. What about you, Elsi? What language is spoken in Peru?'

Elsi's dark black hair shined in the light. 'I'm from Lima and most people speak Spanish, but we also speak Quechua, the language the Incas spoke. My elderly neighbour speaks it. In Quechua, kawsaypac means to live, munay to love and allianchu for hello.'

Gwen smiled. 'So, we have something in common with ancient languages.'

There were three enormous suitcases next to Gwen's bed, and Nora pointed at them. 'Who brought all this luggage for two months?'

'Well, I did,' Gwen said, looking down. 'I prepared for any emergency.'

She asked Nora and Elsi with a look of doubt, 'You brought a small suitcase and a backpack?'

Elsi pointed to her two small bags as well and they all laughed together.

On the first day of class, the teacher Seren greeted them. 'Ok, quiet down, class,' she said, her voice calm and confident. 'This is Art History. The goals are researching works of art and writing papers, but the overall goal is discovery. Discovery of yourselves. You need to develop a strong sense of finding your place in the world. What do you believe in? How will you overcome challenges in life? Will you stand up for something that you believe is right or stay quiet and later regret it?'

She walked in front of the class, looking directly at each and every student as she spoke. 'Along the way, you'll face obstacles. They come in all shapes and sizes. They can come from the always-changing technology and the lack of knowledge to adapt to it. More often, obstacles come from the people that you meet. I believe working with people is the key to getting goals accomplished. I also believe working with people could be very frustrating as you accomplish those goals. When you do something that they don't like, they usually insult you behind your back. If you report it, they deflect blame and tell another version.'

She stopped walking around the room and paused, her head down as if in thought. She raised her head to look directly at the students. 'We are going to do group projects. Sometimes you will find working in groups

stressful, so you'll need to work it out between yourselves to finish the assignments. The first project is this...' She began writing something on the chalkboard. 'I want you to learn the history of the school and write an essay. You can look up information on a computer, but I prefer going to the library and checking out well-written books on the subject. There are a few good books, especially an old leather book that was written by the founder of the school. We will review the assignment in more detail on Monday.'

After class, Nora had a question to ask Seren about the topic. Seren smiled at her and asked, 'What's an Irish girl doing coming here to study for the summer?'

'I am not Irish. I am from Bilbao, the Basque country, in Spain.'

'Ahhh,' said Seren. 'I do hear a slight accent. You speak English well. Is your father Irish?'

'No. He's American, but his parents were from Ireland. He speaks English to me, but I usually speak Spanish at home with my mum and Spanish or Basque with my friends. I learn the Basque language at school, so I rarely speak academic English. My parents thought I should practise more. We often go on holidays abroad and we like architecture, history and photography. That's how we found Cambrian last year.'

Nora and most of her classmates went to the next class. The teacher, Llewellyn, was also comfortable and direct. As the students walked into his applied mathematics classroom, they noticed a lever and fulcrum, a pulley, wheel and screw on his table.

'We are going to solve maths equations using practical hands-on methods,' he said. 'I want you to bring

maths to life so that you can better understand it. You know that machines help us work in a faster and easier way. We usually see machines as beyond our comprehension, but they are made up of simple parts. Most people just want to finish the job and move on.'

He walked closer to the table where the tools were and continued talking. 'Look at this lever and fulcrum. It's used for lifting heavy loads. The mathematician Archimedes once said that if he had a long enough lever, he could lift the world.'*

He put down the tools and walked to the middle of the class. 'We will have an exam next month. It is practical hands-on work using these tools to figure out equation problems.'

Nora liked the way he taught. It was obvious he had experience and was enthusiastic about his subject. In contrast to new teachers, who tried being too nice to the students so that everybody liked them, he was direct and firm and controlled his class, so they were never too loud or disrespectful.

After classes were finished, Seren met Llewellyn in the staff room. She was keen to discuss her first observations about the new students. 'We sometimes get letters of recommendation from teachers about a particular student telling us why they think their student deserves a chance to study here.' Seren walked to the window as she was speaking. 'We got five letters from Nora's teachers who think very highly of her.' She paused and pointed to the field. 'Look outside. What do you see?'

Llewellyn crossed to the window. The primary group

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* Greek inventor from the ancient city of Syracuse, Sicily.

of students were in a big circle and there at the edge of the group Nora stood with her friend looking at the different trees.

He wasn't interested and changed the topic. 'Have you heard about the museum remodelling? I would rather get a pay rise than refurbish an old building.' He tugged at a thread on the cuff of his jacket as if to emphasise his point. Seren ignored the action.

'I don't mind,' Seren said. 'The paintings and sculpture classes help them understand art better.'

'That's fine coming from an art teacher. However, a bigger pay cheque would do me better.'

Nora was with Gwen, walking around the campus. 'I want to go to the library to check out the old book that Seren told us about,' Nora said.

Gwen nodded. 'Let's get Elsi first, then go to the library. I can see the other students are returning to their dormitory.'

As the three girls entered the library, they saw a boy named Owain from their class. He smiled at them as he walked past them towards the exit.

'I saw him going towards his building before,' Elsi said in a surprised tone. 'That is farther away than ours. How did he get there and back here so fast?'

They stopped and all three frowned when Gwen whispered, 'He's a troublemaker by the way he looks.'

They asked the librarian about the old leather book. She said one of their classmates had already checked it out.

'He got the leather book already,' Gwen gasped.

'Don't worry. There are others we can check out,' Nora assured her friends. With a look of disappointment, they headed further inside the library. The library was a wonderful place, with wooden bookshelves with loads of old books, large plants and historic oil paintings in each room. Nora loved the idea of researching by reading old books because that reminded her of her collection of books back home.

As the first few weeks passed, one evening after dinner, Nora went to meet Gwen and Elsi. Her two friends had already left and were talking to a group of girls outside the front entrance of their residence hall.

One girl said to Gwen and Elsi, 'Nora's notebook is full of architectural drawings and she talks about her prehistoric sharks' teeth and bug collections. It's so weird! How do you put up with her in your dorm room?'

As Nora approached, the girl whispered, 'Oh look, she's coming. Come on, let's not wait for her!'

Elsi and Gwen looked at the girl and then at each other. Neither looked friendly towards her.

'Hey, Jane,' Gwen said. 'Do me a favour and stop talking about Nora like that. She's our friend.'

Jane's face turned red. 'Oh, ok,' came her weak response. She turned and joined the other girls.

Nora walked up to them. 'Hey, what's up? Was that Jane?'

Gwen smiled and grabbed Nora's and Elsi's arm gently and said, 'Let's go for a walk and talk about

tomorrow. Have you tried our Welsh cakes or bara brith?* I'll bring some tomorrow from the local bakery.' As they walked, Gwen looked around before she spoke. 'Some girls like Owain.'

'He stays mostly by himself,' Elsi added.

Nora listened to her friends and smiled.

It was getting late. They saw the director Gwynfor walking fast towards the museum. Nora turned to her friends. 'What do you think about the teachers?'

'I like them,' answered Elsi. They all seem to be interested in teaching. Even the director is nice. They say he was a student here.'

Gwen nodded in agreement.

While returning to their residence hall, there stood Owain, the boy from the library, talking to an adult at the corner of the building. He turned away from the adult and walked towards the residence entrance. He was red-faced. He walked past the girls, but this time, he didn't greet them. He was carrying a backpack with a long cylinder tube poking out from inside and hurried inside the residence. Nora thought about her art classes and using a similar tube to carry paintings.

'Wow!' said Gwen. 'Did you see him? His face was bright red.'

Elsi looked at the man walking away. 'Was he talking to a teacher?'

Nora shrugged. 'No, I don't think so, but it was too dark to tell.'

'Come on,' commanded Gwen. 'It's getting late. Let's

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* Welsh cakes, a sweet flat bread baked on a griddle. Bara brith is a traditional bread flavoured with dried fruits.

go back in.' The three girls continued chatting as they walked back to their dormitory.

The following day, a group of students went to hang out in a small park close to town. In the centre of the park, there was a water fountain with a colourful flower bed surrounding it. Along the edges of the square, there were wooden benches for sitting. The three girls had brought juice and bara brith. They found an empty bench underneath a tree that would give them shade to escape the afternoon sun. Owain came with his two roommates to hang out with the girls.

On a bench close by, a man sat down wearing a wool jacket and a tattered hat. He took off his hat and placed it next to him, letting his long, unwashed hair fall to his shoulders. When a smell reached the students´ bench, they looked across at him and he stared back at them with a look of defiance, waiting for them to walk away, as he had seen happen many times before. He lay down and began muttering to himself. The students could not understand the incomprehensible words and smirked at each other. He couldn't have noticed them but even so, he sat up suddenly and turned to stare. He tilted his head as he did so, and a flutter of recognition passed his face as he looked at their uniforms. They quickly diverted their eyes to avoid his stare. One student whispered that the man was once a student at the school many years ago. The man continued to mumble, seemingly incoherently, as he lay back down, and they grinned, thinking it was funny.

Nora took a few remaining fruit juices and the rest of the bara brith bread and approached the homeless man.

She spoke to him in English. 'Hi.'

The man sat up and looked at her suspiciously.

'We have extra fruit punch and bara brith. Would you like them?' she asked hesitantly.

Her friends had stopped in surprise to watch her. The man's face slightly changed. His eyes relaxed and his face became less tense. A small smile crossed his lips, exposing missing teeth.

'Yes,' he said as he lifted his dirty hands to take them. He had had a long, hard night, and he tore at the bara brith in large bites. Nora smiled gently and handed him the juice before turning back towards her friends again.

A short while later, the three girls returned to campus, Gwen said, 'You know, that was a friendly gesture that you made to the homeless man.'

Nora nodded. 'Well, we had finished eating and we had leftovers, and he seemed to be hungry.'

'I know, but It's better to stay away from him.'

'Yeah, ok.'

Elsi looked down the hall and pointed. 'What's all that noise about?' The three looked down the hall. They saw Owain walking away from the group of boys and girls who had gathered at the entrance. He was wearing a backpack. The three girls approached the group of students, who were talking excitedly and fast.

One girl repeated what the group had said.

'Someone stole from the museum last night. They found a few paintings in the office of Director Gwynfor.' The girl continued speaking fast. 'He has not been