

Finding Ireland

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I am in the city of two identities. On the one hand, Dublin masks itself in historic righteousness. The facades are pale and Gothic, reminding visitors that it is indeed a viable part of European history. The streets are perpetually damp with the precipitation of longing and reification. They are like tears on a subaltern face. Alternatively, young people pound this pavement with vehemence and vim. The record shops of Temple Bar shout an eccentric mix of melodies, from Bob Marley to House, Techno and Garage music. There are taco stands, tobacco shops, and tea houses. The echo of timeless Irish ballads, songs of war and rebellion ejaculate themselves from open pub doors, then wash away like sand as the swinging portals close behind loyal patrons. Dubliners today sit transfixed in an epoch of uncertainty, but believing all the same that the metropolis will one day rise up, like the fabled phoenix, and dominate the world. Dublin contains a strange power, and unidentifiable mystique, as if it were trapped between two worlds, one old, and one very new.

I have finally arrived here, after an uninspired stay in Manchester via London, and a tumultuous ferry ride across the North Sea that lasted upwards around seventeen hours. The North Sea is one of the most turbulent in the world. After a quick ride on the DART I am in the outskirts of a beautiful, bifurcated city. A popular saying among locals about the famed Guinness brew is that it gets its excellent taste from the magical waters of the Liffey. I cross one of its many bridges and look down at the murky, opaque waters. I carry a large backpack, popular with many American travelers. It contains everything that I own for the next several months, and much more than I will ever need. It is heavy, to say the least, and a

lesson in efficiency that I have yet to learn. The small commuter train is clean though, and quickly takes me to the city centre.

I am in the street, and confused as to the reason why am I am here. It is this type of metaphysical haunting that has plagued my tour thus far. I know *why* I am on this street in Dublin. I must find lodging for one or more nights. I repeat this mantra to myself to assuage the sense, however slight, of panic I always receive when visiting a new city. The cars, pedestrian traffic, smells and commerce penetrate me, and I am once again walking, searching.

After several “sorries”, “no, luvs”, “not tonights”, etc., I am somewhat resigned to the fact that I will be sleeping with the beggar I see lounging on the street corner. He has a jug of red wine and his face looks like hamburger. My pack is beginning to rub a raw spot into my shoulder. It is unseasonably cold for November.

I left Manchester not really knowing why. I had just spent several days with a woman there that I had met on the train from London. As luck would have it, I had sat in the wrong chair, next to the very attractive Britton. We bought some wine form the food cart, chatted casually about this and that, told jokes to each other that weren't really funny, lied about several things in our lives in order to seem more appealing to the other, and I awoke three days later in her bed, her very gentle kisses caressing my forehead. I already felt trapped, and left while she was at work, without a word, on the fourth day without saying goodbye. Perhaps it was because I could feel her needing me, using me to replete some vacuum left by a former lover. Maybe. Maybe is always better.

The rain started, her daily visit, and I was forced off of the street into a small alley, just off of Temple Bar. I found a lone hallway stretching from a narrow doorway, just feet

away from the main boulevard. Inside, a pleasant Irish woman sat at a long mahogany desk. She was sleeping. I rapped lightly on the counter, and she woke, alarmed.

“Excuse me,” I implored, “have you any vacancy here?” She thought for a moment.

“Sorry, dear. We’re completely booked. Dublin’s a mad city these days.”

“Well, do you know of anyplace else that might have a room?” She thought silently for a second.

“Let me make a call for you, hun.” She held the receiver, dialed some numbers.

This went on for several minutes, then her reply, “Sorry. The town is just plain full at the moment. Tons of backpackers, really. You can see there.”

She pointed at the wall that ran the length of the hallway, entering from the alley. There were about a hundred or so tourist backpacks, not unlike mine, strewn about the walkway. It was interesting to see all of the earthly belongings of so many people concentrated in one space. There were flag patches sewn on them from different countries, each struggling to evoke a sense of pride about a given nation. I sighed the exasperated breath of the recently defeated, and prepared to make my leave.

“Hold on a sec, luv. Let me get us some tea so ya don’t drown out there.” She smiled and retreated to a small room in the back of the entryway.

The tea was pleasant, a surprise that I am still unable to fathom since coming to Europe. I have long since been a devout coffee drinker, penitent at least three cups daily. I was beginning to like the way the sweet taste of tea uplifted me in ways that coffee cannot. Our conversation was much the same. She was a poor girl, raised in the south of Ireland, until she came to Dublin looking for work. She, like many of the young Irish, wondered about America, all of the tall buildings, tons of space, and beautiful people.

“I must warn ya though, hun, and don’t take offense. If I fall asleep here at this very counter while yer talkin’, it ain’t because I’m not interested. It’s cause I’ve got the ‘narcolepresy’.”

“Do you mean ‘narcolepsy?’

“Ay, tis it. Awful sometimes, ya know? But, I manage. Anyway, luv. You seem like a nice lad. I’m always partial to young American boys like yourself. I’ll let ya sleep in the billiard room for ten quid. How’s that?” Shee took a small key from her ring and placed it into my hand. “It’s just down the hall, there. You’ll have to use the WC across the way.”

At this point, I would have settled for anything. Although the warm tea was somewhat of a comfort, the nagging reality of not having a place to stay was beginning to make me nervous. That problem was now solved thanks to...

“What did you say your name was,” I asked. She did not respond because she was face down on her desk, snoring lightly. I had found a room.

Before I left for Europe, I made several pacts with myself: the first being that I would meet as many new people as I could. Taciturn by nature, the trip would provide me an opportunity to reach out to my fellow human.

Secondly, I decided that I would begin writing again. Several instances, I had told myself, had been preventing me from creating freely as I had done with amazing frequency in college. I blamed it on jobs, lack of inspiration, the girlfriend, or anything else that seemed a sound argument against my own negligence. So, I bought a leatherbound journal to take along to document my adventures.

Thirdly, I told myself that I would find whatever it was that I was looking for. It seemed as if I had been a member of the living dead for the past several years, moving from job to job, woman to woman, apartment to apartment. I was nagged by ennui, and a sense

of uselessness. I wanted to think that it was because of the death of my grandfather, or a busy schedule. I wished for the memory of a dysfunctional family that was not there. I was living a very sad and tired cliché.

I remember speaking with my father before the trip. He was always a busy man, but took the time out of his day to take me to the airport. He had never been to Europe himself, although a tour in Vietnam did allow him to see parts of Asia, and he was generally enthused about my trip. I can't say that I was. I mean, I knew that I was going, where, the things I wanted to see, but I didn't know why. It just seemed glamorous to travel. I was already several years out of the university, but still was wandering aimlessly in the doldrums of life. So, I booked my trip hastily over the internet one night, pretty well drunk on wine. Several months later I was at the Bradley terminal at LAX talking with my father, before boarding.

The conversation itself was uneventful, common banter between a father and son that are relatively close. The one remarkable thing about my departure was when, while I self-consciously fiddled with a cocktail straw from a vodka on the rocks I had ordered to quell my macabre fear of flying, it was after all, only seven a.m., my father opened his mouth, as if to emit some sort of patriarchal advice. He didn't. He instead, folded a crisp one hundred dollar bill and placed it into my front pocket. He then smiled and went to his car, I to my plane. He didn't need to say anything, but I question whether he knew that or not. Five years later, I would board a plane in this same terminal, destined for the same location, to deposit a portion of my father's ashes over the land of our ancestors, the place he had never been.

I am in Dublin, Ireland for my first time. I am enchanted by the city. I got drunk at several famous pubs, saw many famous houses, and saw a great many people that did not

seem overly happy as I had envisioned Ireland. I guess I was expecting too much from a tiny island in the north Atlantic. I put too much pressure on this lonely place, the place of poets. I empathize with Joyce, fear for Wilde. I walked past the million colorful backpacks, looked at all of the flag patches, wondered about the dirty laundry inside, and leave my little paradise in the billiard room to the next poor bastard that comes to Europe with tons more luggage than just a black backpack filled with dirty socks.

I headed west.

The trains within Ireland are, let's say, provincial. They are quaint little machines, the stuff you might see in a ragged cardboard box in your attic. They move along nicely enough though, and aren't very crowded. I am constantly renewed by traveling in trains. I appreciate the proximity to the ground, the visceral grind of the metal on the track, the gentle sway and bob as each car struggles to keep up with the one in front. I appreciate the view that trains afford. They are sedatives, meditative gurus that purposefully induce thought and introspection. The cadence of the *rat-tat, rat-tat, rat-tat*.

I find myself now in a smoking car, leaving Dublin's main terminal. The sky is Irish gray, a sister to the traditional Kelly green. Very large drops plop onto the window of my car, although without much frequency. It is as if the rain here has been going about his business for so long, he has become fat and lazy, just a few drops here and there, that ought to be enough. The train is sluggish, but I like it that way. We pass over the famous Liffey and her magical beer making waters. The shadow of Old Dublin is behind us, the brewery in the distance. Its toucan delivering bottles of stout like they were babies, my goodness! We are finally out of the city centre, Dublin swaying in the rear. The air becomes richer, houses less mingled, the cracked looking glass less fortunate.

I am leaving. I am leaving Dublin, the filth of the city. I am leaving my own home, the land of ravenous prosperity, bombastic haranguing, and unmitigated use of everything. I am running away from my own failures in life, and for the first time I am scared. I feel mortal, vulnerable. I escape. I run. The train cannot move quickly enough. I can see my demons racing towards me on the tracks. I am exhausted.

I am awakened and on a moving train. I have missed many stops, two, three, I cannot tell. The car is empty save for me and two very old priests in a bench a few spaces away. The car smells of one thousand years of cigarette smoking, and is colored in the same vein. The rain has stopped, and a bright sun peaks through a small opening in the clouds. We are somewhere in the middle of Ireland, between Dublin and Galway. The terrain is beautiful, jades, emeralds rising and falling in verdant asymmetry. Once and awhile, a few sheep graze in the open fields. The windows are still wet from the rain. The train moves slowly, consistently. *Rat-tat, rat-tat, rat-tat.* I take out my leather-bound journal and begin to write. The train rides unevenly, and it is difficult to pen the words, but I go on.

Across the aisle, a few seats in front are the two priests. They are white hair octogenarians in the middle of a conversation. They genuflect intensely. They smile, brood, condescend one another. They stop awhile and rest, one of the priests taking out a thermos filled with tea. He pours three cups, hands one to his companion, rises, and makes his way down the aisle toward me. His eyes are gentle.

“Here you are, my son. It isn’t proper to have tea and not share it.”

“Thank you, father.”

I don’t know if I should bow or kiss his hand or what, but it is not important. He walks back down the aisle to his friend. They begin talking, but I cannot understand what they say. They are speaking Gaelic. Their voices wash away among the *rat-tat, rat-tat, rat-tat*

of the rails. I can taste the sweetness of the tea, the warmth in my belly. I smell the faint hint of wax from the small paper cup. A rainbow catches flight for an instant, then disappears. The sun creeps back behind the clouds, the rain begins unceremoniously, and Ireland is Ireland again.