

Home

By: Erin H.

The plane tickets had been bought, the bags had been packed, and we were going “home.” Since I was very young whenever I would complain about the bizarre habits of my family including treating the entire month of March as St. Patrick’s Month my father would tell me, “Wait till you go home to Ireland then you’ll understand what we’re all about.” For as long as I can remember my dad had referred to this place as home. I was always greatly perplexed because this place happened to be an ocean away from our physical house.

The trip not so coincidentally had been planned following the death of my grandfather. My father's sudden need to go “home” both excited and scared me. I wanted to understand why my family still clung to their European roots, while all of my friends family’s seemed quiet content to be Americans. I wanted to understand the summers my father had spent in Ireland with his brother’s that had been the source of so many ridiculous stories that I heard countless times every holiday.

For years my father had shared stories about Ireland, but every time a trip was planned, it would be cancelled due to a scheduling conflict with his siblings. His father's death had placed a newfound urgency on this matter; the need to pass down our history to his children had become my father's number one priority. My priorities in Ireland included taking advantage of the eighteen-year old drinking age, climbing Croagh Patrick, and seeing the Cliffs of Moher. Our family vacations typically consisted of a week and half stay in the happiest place on earth, but by the time I was ten Mickey Mouse had lost all of his charm. I was thrilled at the idea of bragging to my friends about my trip abroad, and I would certainly say abroad, as opposed to Ireland, because it sounded so much more cultured. My father felt destined to have a spiritual awakening, I was prepared to finally have travel stories worth bragging over. And together we were hell bent on having a memorable family vacation.

Upon arriving in Ireland we were met with the musky smell of mud and dew and the pollution of any major city. We boarded up into a ridiculous pink minivan that made us look like the partridge family. The notion of driving on the other side of the road that had been so amusing in movies had lost all of its charm, and for nearly five hours my father struggled to control the car

with the shrill screams of his family following his every turn. Much to my chagrin, we would not be spending the first half of our trip in Dublin, rather we would be driving to the opposite end of the island, the part of this country that no tourist guide bothered to even mention. We would be staying in the inn that my grandfather's family had owned. As we drew nearer to county Mayo, my father's face grew bright and his eyes glistened. He began talking about this place, except he no longer had the old nostalgic feel to his voice, rather he spoke rapidly like a boy trying to explain something he learned in school to his mother. My father was youthful and glowing. As the roads got more and more narrow, my father spotted the sign "county mayo," and in a voice and tone that would have normally shocked and embarrassed me he shouted, "home to mayooo." My father seemed nearly as shocked by his outburst as we were and the entire car bust out laughing. No sooner had these words been said, my father drove into a pothole and got a flat tire.

This journey home would be far more difficult than we had anticipated.

Two hours later, spare tire assembled, we arrived in County Mayo. This was the Ireland that I had read about and seen in

movies. The town was in a time warp, the rows of quaint cottages and the vast green hills spanning infinity were exactly the way I had envisioned them. As we unloaded, a group of people busted out of the inn, exclaiming, "The Henry's are here!" They were not my family; they were the family that bought the inn when my Grandfather had immigrated to America. Their excitement and passion was contagious, and a Guinness later my father had forgotten his tire woes, and once again took on the voice and excitement of a teenager. My original idea that this trip would be a great opportunity to abuse the drinking age had faded, I was intoxicated by the culture the stories of my families history. As we retired for the night I was informed that I would be sleeping in my Grandfather's old room. An idea that at first seemed slightly disturbing, but upon entering the tiny room I was surprised at the wave of peace that came over me. The creamy white room featured outdated floral curtains and a tiny bed with a faded blue comforter. This room was not haunted, but it had a surreal quality that I could never properly depict. The following days were a blur of visiting old family friends, and becoming familiar with the town that my family had called home. On our final day in this town, we decided to visit the graveyard. Once again, I was surprised at how something I would have considered extremely bizarre and morbid,

suddenly seemed quiet normal and cathartic. The graveyard was breathtaking. There was this bizarre juxtaposition of the slightly unruly gravestones and the beautifully cared for grass and flowers. The cite of countless gravestones with the name “Henry” was slightly jarring, but also an amazing segue to wonderful stories about my ancestors.

The following week was followed by the cliché tourist activities that my father scorned. The Cliffs of Moher were truly breath taking, but I could not help but be conflicted that one of the ranked most beautiful places in the world was cluttered by vendors and visitor apparel. This place was a natural institution, and yet the influx of modern technology tainted its beauty. I began to understand my father's resentment. Kissing the Blarney Stone was what I had been looking forward to since I first learned of the legend years before. The castle was breathtaking with its spiral staircases and post-card worthy views. And yet actually kissing the blarney stone was far more awkward than I had anticipated. An old man simply grabbed my waist and leaned me backwards. I was too busy being uncomfortable to enjoy my newfound luck.

A physical challenge quickly presented itself, climbing Crough Patrick is considered to be a form of penance in Ireland,

and a task that my grandmother had taken on at the age of forty. My father and I readily accepted the challenge, without a single doubt that we would fail. With our climbing sticks in hand we slowly began the steep path up, this was not as easy as we had anticipated. Apparently my, then forty, grandmother had been in tip-top shape because not even halfway through this journey, we stopped.

My father's knees gave out and I was on the verge of an asthma attack. This was not what was supposed to happen! We were supposed to triumphantly reach the top, feel more connected to my Grandmother than ever, and then finally depart from the mountain gloating in our victory. Mortified, we began the journey down, which coupled with having to swallow our pride, proved to be a more difficult journey than the one up.

Upon entering Dublin the cottages disappeared, the time warp was over, and we were back in the 21st century. Stylish women paraded down the streets, homeless people asked for money, and drunks stumbled down allies; I sometimes thought I was back in Chicago. The city was beautiful and we spent out time visiting cousins, aunts and uncles. The stories about my grandparents hay days were so interesting, that one day I could not

help but naively inquire, “Why would they ever leave Ireland?” Conversations abruptly ceased, my father suddenly was back to fifty years old, until my great uncle simply replied, “Well dear, green and Guinness gets old, that was a hard time, and they knew they wanted more.” And with that my uncle winked at me, conversations resumed, and my father grew young again.

My father saved the final part of the journey, because it would be the hardest. We would be visiting my Grandmother's old home. My father prefaced the final part of our journey as the most important, but I did not believe him. We had already been to my Grandfather's home, and my Grandmother was still alive and well. We had been to the most beautiful places in the world, kissed a dirty old rock, and been in pubs that no movie could give proper credit to. What other challenges could this Island possess? We knew we were out of the city when the roads became more and more narrow. My father struggled to steer these roads, and as the hills and green became more repetitive I grew anxious. My father abruptly stopped in the middle of a fragile bridge. For an instant I questioned his sanity, he jumped out of the car overwhelmed with emotion. I quickly followed him desperate for an explanation. He exclaimed, “This is it! This is the bridge that my mother took to school everyday, this is the one...” Flabbergasted I examined the

shaky structure, noting that there was nothing for miles except this tiny bridge. My father took pictures and finally said, “Okay, we're ready for home.”

He drove for another few miles until stopping at what looked like a tiny shed. He looked at me his eyes glistening, and suddenly it clicked, this was my grandmother's home. While my grandfather had grown up in large well-off family, my grandmother an orphan had lived with her aunt in this tiny shack until she was twenty. After climbing a grassy we reached my grandmother's home. Upon inspection I realized that the structure I had confused with a shack was without a doubt my grandmother's home. The entire structure was smaller than my bedroom in Chicago, the walls were covered with mud, the roof had long been gone, and the entire structure made me ache. Of course this was home. This was how far my family had come, home was the sacrifices my family had made, home was the place that made you hurt simply by touching it.

My father and I spent our entire last day in Ireland basking in home.