

ch. 4 ireland: returning at eighteen

a real story — not a hollywood film

2nd edition

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chapter 4

ireland: returning at eighteen

When at eighteen I broach the subject of going to Ireland for a holiday with my girlfriend Kathleen, my mother makes it absolutely clear how things are with my grandparents: poverty; no money; poverty.

We must be independent. Provided we take that on board, she does not object to the visit. It is just as well that my mother puts me straight about my grandparents' situation. I know she sends Katie money from time to time from London and has always done so, but I have never really appreciated the extent of their poverty. I had no idea that my mother paid for everything everytime we went over.

Why ...

Slowly the penny drops: on our past visits, why my grandparents ate separately to us; why they had pig's trotters soup; why they wore the same clothes ; why ... It wasn't just my grandparent's poverty that I was unaware of. As a youngster I never appreciated a fraction of what went on

in the Sargents' house or in the lane. On my return seven years later, I start some adult learning — but quick.

It's so obvious some things have changed dramatically and irrevocably. The wall by the river has been lowered to just above knee height and the lane narrowed; the houses are smaller and the doorways have sunk into the ground; I have to stoop to enter. The high street has shortened. The river is shallower at the high tide and the flow, slower. The swans, surely, have been superseded by a smaller species. Ageing has shrunk Katie and Tommy and the other adults in the lane; apart from that, they look no different. Everything has been miniaturized — by waving a wand?

Thanks to my mother's intervention, circumstances in Johnstown are much more apparent to me. The situation for the people in the lane doesn't seem to have changed much. My eyes are open as before but I can see better; the poverty hits me now. At eighteen my awareness of some aspects of reality has emerged. Everyone is telling me how much I have changed and how much I have grown and grown up.

Yet I confuse intelligence and experience. I know Katie is clever and that she will appreciate that I am getting on well. So, early on in the visit, I talk to her about staying on in the sixth form at my school. She looks unenthusiastic, slightly puzzled, and I have a sneaky feeling she is humouring me. Later I find out that she has sympathized with my mother, "That David had to stay on at school past any decent age to have extra lessons to catch up." And she had assumed I was clever. Why had I assumed she was familiar with the English Education system?

The Wheels that Turn

I feel at once curious and crowded out, when the women get together around the conspiratorial pot of tea on the kitchen table: Katie; great-auntie Mary down from the square in Johnstown where great Nanny “Oregon” had lived; and the women, like Bid, Sally or Molly who live close by; Maggie, a tiny woman with a dark complexion peeping out of her shawl, no teeth and sixteen children, from down the lane at number twelve.

Women popping in and out of the open door at number eighteen where tea is forever on the go. What I haven’t clued into is how and why the women meet. I am fascinated by the dynamics of their getting together around the kitchen table to break the news, spill the gossip and speculate and scandalize about this one and that one over their cups of tea.

Sometimes it is very funny; laugh till you cry, especially, the stories about the kids, the mishaps, and the misfortunes of those who put on airs and graces — a guaranteed source of amusement.

They have an eye out and a lyrical word or two for the ridiculous and the pretentious. They delight in telling us, the visitors, some golden oldie stories — one about uncle John: dressed up for a wedding in his new suit, making out he was some sort of acrobat, while fooling about on the low wall, he tumbled headlong, new suit and all, into the river at high tide.

They have the lowdown on just about everyone and they can lay the judgements and rejoice when sinners get their just deserts — as they surely must — if there is a God in

heaven.

Maybe it is just talk. It feels heavier than that to me. Maybe it's because as a young man I feel in my bones that I will never be fully included in the kernel of life around the kitchen table — the buzz around the table goes quiet too often, when I appear; the more so now that I am older. The agendas are censored when both Kathleen and I are present. I can speculate all I like for the reasons but I hadn't reckoned that Katie would be so worried about my being accompanied by Kathleen. My mother hadn't warned me.

The Conspiratorial Tea Pot

Nothing is said. Katie's face, manner and demeanour say it all. She feels responsible for me and Kathleen to my mother. I am so naive but I am learning quickly, and we resolve to try not to give Katie any grief on our account. But that won't relieve her of the burden. If I had to guess, I think that Katie would find her own counsel and keep her worries to herself.

I also sense, from the inhibited flow of the tea from the conspiratorial pot whenever we are present, that my being with Kathleen presents the rest of them with problems. Unmarried couples on holiday together, sleeping (what else would you do?) in separate rooms — Kathleen is staying in the loft, for God's sake — is a mite too progressive for Waterford City in this era. And a tad too hot to let go by without comment.

I don't want to be selected in my absence as a 'this one' or a 'that one' and I can't be sure if Kathleen and I avoid the hot-seat of their dealings. I suspect not. I will never know

because they won't raise the subject while I'm present.

But being present doesn't save me from other subjects that I don't want to listen to.

Great-Auntie Mary

My grandfather's shortcomings for a start. When he is at home, the concert of nods, winks, looks and barely concealed asides makes me feel very uncomfortable. It is treated as local sport; I am invited to take part — some of the gestures are directed so as to include me. I drop my head, and do not accept or respond to what I see as slights on my grandfather. When Tommy is out, they are scathing about him; even directly to me, his grandson.

"He isn't worth listening to; can't be trusted with money and can't hold his drink. Don't buy him drink. Or give him any money, he'll be sure to spend it on drink ... Now, you won't listen to him?" Great-auntie Mary, the undisputed family matriarch, rails at me. Her tone, confidential manner and the hint of a question in her final flourish, invite me to agree and thereby freely join the ranks of the righteous. A thin, unconvincing disguise for the unmistakable command in her voice to obey her; the others around the table nod ruefully in agreement. A formidable assembly to disagree with.

I feel mixed up; unassertive; disloyal to my grandfather for not protesting at the total slating of him; but I can't deny the truth about money and drink. I can't pick and choose different strands in the argument. I sense that the conviction and the depth of the feeling underlying the onslaught would brook no disagreement. I am silent. My mother, at least,

would know that my silence does not presume consent. But she's not here. I am not tuned in to how Katie and great-auntie Mary see me.

The Y-Chromosome

I feel ill-at-ease and I am scared to give voice to my feelings. I don't have a clue what else to do or say. By not endorsing their sentiments about my grandfather, I haven't recommended myself. Generally, they are kind to us and I sense that in regard to my grandfather, they are trying to protect me; on the other hand everything that emanates from my 'Y' chromosome is yelling, "Betrayal." My gut feeling is that this is "payback time" for all the women there. Not just for Tommy but for all the men they are related to and their wrongdoings.

Tommy is here and an accessible target. Having listened to my mother's account of her life as a child, it is difficult to judge and decide where to go with all this. How am I to know? Is it fair? An underlying common element of bitterness rankles with them, suppurating like a festered wound, and finds its expression in a relentless put down on Tommy.

Instinctively for me the berating goes against the grain and I find it hard to deal with. Reflection leads me to one conclusion anyway, perhaps a defensive one in the circumstances: the bar to membership of the teapot club, which I would like to join for the mirth, is not a personal one; simply, that I am, or about to become, a man.

Tommy is the only man I know in Ireland; the only one who is related to me. And, alive and here, he is, when all's said and done, my grandfather. On his own in the mornings

as usual, he sits on the waist-high wall at the crest of the bridge, still waving his feet. Over-eager to see me *outside* of the house away from the women, he tries to involve me in his own ‘men’s conspiracy’. His eyes twinkling, he plays the rogue grandfather — but he is so transparent. It is all about drinking and the sentimentally-spun talk it engenders; I have heard it one time too many, and I don’t want to be drawn again.

I give him some money for a half pint of stout and that is as far as I will go. He takes it, but I can tell by his disappointed, disgruntled look that he expects more from his grandson. I tread the tightrope of being dismissed as a tightwad by Tommy, while at the same time keeping on side the womens’ cabal by not flouting great-auntie Mary’s warnings too outrageously. I want to respond to him on terms that he will appreciate. He is isolated in the family and among the neighbours — that I know.

Above all, I don’t want to contribute to his isolation; but I have memories that make it difficult for me. I guess that the cabal can see that I may need to be loyal (albeit misguidedly in their eyes) to my grandfather so I haven’t alienated myself from them. Just as well. They are the wheels that turn.

The Other Side of the Water

Memories make it difficult: After returning from school at the Dolours, when I am about ten, as I climb the stairs I can hear a man’s deep voice from the kitchen. That is an unusual event in itself. It isn’t Uncle Jim — he never comes upstairs — and as I get closer I detect an Irish accent,

‘It sounds like Uncle John!’ I race the last few steps and eagerly open the kitchen door.

Directly in front of me, sitting in the kitchen armchair sipping a cup of tea is a huge Irishman, who makes our small kitchen appear tiny; he fills it up, hardly room for anyone else — but it’s *not* Uncle John. Unshaven, unkempt, wearing a dirty, grey, polo-neck jumper, the stranger reeks of a musky staleness and alcohol which hits me as I enter slowly. Shocked and scared at first by his appearance, I am immediately reassured by my mother’s presence at the sink in the corner.

I am wary as he tries to engage me brightly in conversation,

“It’s the man himself! Well, David do you know who I am?”

I notice as soon as I enter that he is not drinking his tea from my mother’s distinctive best bone china set: daintily decorated in orange and dark blue flowers. Which means that he is not royalty, or one of our honoured or favoured guests like uncle Fred and auntie Madge. My mother, meanwhile, is in the opposite corner, determinedly and unassailably busy, washing smalls in the sink. Her very busy-ness means something is up — something is going on for her.

“He’ll want to know who you are, I’m sure.”

my mother intervenes acidly, pre-empting any reply I may make.

Feeling awkward, I glance at my mother for a clue, not knowing what to do next, although I am curious about the identity of this stranger and what is going on between him and my mother. Turning to me, with an eloquent roll of ‘eyes-to-the-skies’ she resumes:

“It’s your uncle Billy.”

Uncle Billy

Her sarcastic, scornful tone in those two short sentences has answered both parts of my own unspoken question, warning me not to engage with my uncle; this-very-instant-dubbed ‘family outcast’. My mother has cut him dead. I pick up the plain drift, instantly.

I have no idea what, if anything, has gone before to account for my mother’s cold hostility to her brother. Nevertheless, to my amazement, he seems oblivious to my mother’s dismissive, hostile response. I have never seen anyone before or since come so close to impending disaster with my mother without recognizing the danger signs. He carries on his side of the conversation; in her present mood — it is destined to be his *final* soliloquy; even so, he seems to expect his charm to work.

Now that I have got over my initial reaction to the state he is in, I can see some of the family resemblances to Uncle John and my mother. For all the filling of the armchair and the room, he isn’t as big as John. He is the the spit of Tommy and I can’t help noticing that his eyes have grandad’s pronounced twinkle, are almond-shaped and light blue like my mother’s, and they light up the whole of the dark surround of his face. I can see now the attractive man underneath and, without doubt, he has the gift of the gab.

‘But is he really playing the charm card?’ I think to myself as I watch him intently. He excuses himself for not having seen her since the war, promising to help her out, when he gets himself straight — all the while presenting a hard luck story plausibly as a tale of woe. I have a chance to look at him closely as he carries on talking. He winks at me, looking

at me every now and then.

However, he wanders hopelessly into the mire, when he asks my mother for money, “I’m a bit short, can you see your way to ... ” he looks hopeful as he delivers the final prod, “just a bob or two? ...” His words tail off. ‘Perhaps my mother had wind of this before I came in?’ I surmise. It would explain my mother’s dismissive hostility. I feel affronted that he is asking my mother for money. I can scarcely believe that he is confident his charm, overplayed by the influence of alcohol, (or is it just overplayed?) will prove effective on her. Whichever it is, instinctively, by the way the hairs on my neck are standing up, I sense it cuts no ice with my mother; and worse still, she is building up a head of steam. Taking up her time is one thing, blood thicker than water and all that; but asking her for money? He must have lost it completely, or he’s desperate? Has he no idea of his sister’s current situation? I look across at my mother. No way back for uncle Billy. Impervious to his obvious charm, she blows, “Bad look to ye! Don’t come here promising me help. Get yourself home to your family. And look after them!” The end is abrupt.

The re-uniting of sister and long lost brother is over before it’s begun. I am surprised that he looks surprised when she loses it. Short shrift he gets from her, his feet hardly touch the ground as he retreats swiftly, rocking unsteadily on his heels and sounding plaintive and misunderstood in his life like the robot C 3p0 in the film “Star Wars”. Halfway down the stairs, descending backwards and amplifying his lament to my mother, who was standing, steaming, arms crossed, on the landing at the top of the stairs, he slips, ending in a complaining heap by auntie Mary’s door, where,

once inside, I guess, he fares better.

Uncle Billy, my mother's other brother, to my knowledge, paid just the one visit to our home in Lydford Road. I felt sorry for him afterwards, whatever else, he was down on his luck. My mother was able to offer tea, not much sympathy and not a penny.

Nell's Son

On both sides of the water, at weddings, funerals and christenings, occasions when drinking too much alcohol is sanctioned, adult relatives or friends of the family I haven't met before, who wouldn't normally talk to me as a kid, suddenly find a tongue which they mistakenly believe is silver garnished with pearls of wisdom. Some go so far as to think they can be entertaining or humorous. Others, maudlin in drink, become argumentative, or embarrassingly sentimental, say things that later in the same sitting they will claim not to remember or apologize for insincerely.

In the Church Hall late in the evening, when the wedding reception is all but over, most people have left, I am stacking chairs by the door, with my friend Patrick, waiting for my mother, who is helping to clear up. I can hear her singing at the top of her voice with the stalwarts who won't leave until they are thrown out.

Noel, a man who claims to know my mother and has bored me to death once before, heads towards me. His ap-

proach appears unruffled yet displays that subtle conscious effort required to overcome the rule of alcohol, keep a mask of bonhomie on his face — the life and soul of the party — and keep him moving in an approximation to a direct course. He has already caught my eye and my heart sinks. I nudge Patrick to let him know to expect an imminent invasion. Patrick spots him and turns back to continue stacking the chairs.

The extra concentration Noel needs to carry a full pint, overtaxes his precarious vestige of control; his mask slips for an instant — he spills guinness down his trousers. We turn aside and smirk. He half-stops to brush his trousers with his handkerchief, inevitably causing him to spill more of his drink. We are giggling at him now, our heads down.

The penny has finally dropped for Noel, he comes to a halt, gulps a huge mouthful of guinness, steadies himself — another dead giveaway — and resumes his very own version of a learning-to-walk gait.

“So this is Nell’s son.”

‘Is he talking to someone else to confirm my identity’ I wonder, ‘or is it a rhetorical statement which heralds a conversation to come, in which he does all the talking and others have non-speaking bit parts?’ I nod regardless and carry on stacking. He comes closer, catches hold of my arm to gain my attention and leans heavily on me. I am now propping him up. Patrick laughs as I throw across to him a fair imitation of one of my mother’s Irish looks. And I crack,

“I seem to have got a new job as a PLP!”

(It’s a common current abbreviation kids use for “public leaning post”.) Noel doesn’t get it — he probably wouldn’t even if he were sober. Pointedly, I ask Patrick,

“Do you want a hand stacking the chairs?”

Patrick hoots with laughter as I try to escape my new role.

Man of the House

Noel doesn't get it at all. He props himself up on my arm staring vacantly at me, his laboured breath redolent of beer, his round face a dark red, threaded with blotches of purple vein, cultivated through years of heavy drinking. He is taking an age to get his act together to carry on the conversation. Meanwhile, I can't escape his presence — he still has a grip on my arm. I look into his light blue eyes which give me the impression that they are floating in guinness. I put him right that we have spoken previously. It is a waste of time. I suspect, correctly, that we are about to have a repeat conversation or at best a variation on it. He doesn't show any sign that he has heard me, and even if he has, his follow up confirms that he is not acting on my reminder:

“Your mother's a fine woman. You're the man of the house now — you be sure to take care of her, and your sisters too? ...” I don't reply, instead I look away.

“You're up to the job?” he presses me. I am uneasy at the assumed familiarity. I'm put out that he acts as if he has the right to give advice or the duty to put me right on life — my life of course, not his.

‘Am I being cynical, or is he trying to ingratiate himself with my mother, by being overly friendly to me? I grunt an, “Uh-huh” to satisfy his attention, and pull a chair over for him. In the end, I manage to get him to sit in the chair, and escape hastily with Patrick, ostensibly in search of more

chairs to stack.

I am quickly fed up with the banal conversation that characterizes these encounters. Few can carry off the charade that drink creates, although many are confident they can get away with it. Noel doesn't — perhaps he's too far gone to care.

Waving My Feet Too

Forewarned and toughened by these experiences, grudgingly and reluctantly, I can see what the women mean about Tommy. I desperately want it to be not the case. As a young man I am keen to find some real connection with him. It's not entirely fair on him but I have difficulty communicating with those who are evidently under the influence. Despite my wanting to be kind to him, try as he might, grandad doesn't get away with it, when he has had a drink. So drink gets in my way. So drink gets in our way, my grandad and I.

Kathleen and I tend to spend our day time out touring or visiting Tramore or Dunmore East — out of Tommy's reach and the deliberations exchanged and chewed over on the kitchen table.

Thankfully, in the mornings, en route to the quay or shops around the corner, I spend some good moments with my grandfather before the pubs open, talking about him and the past, about me and the future, sitting on the bridge, and for inspiration — waving my feet too.

Mystery or Taboo?

Perhaps had I been older or more mature I would have been tolerant or able to handle the situation with my grandparents, particularly, with my grandfather.

Did my father ever meet my grandparents? I didn't ever ask my mother. She did say that Katie left Ireland once to come over to England for a month to stay with us, but that was after the war. Understandably, Katie and Tommy didn't attend my parents' wedding during the war. I don't know if my mother ever took my father home — presumably it would have had to be before the war. On balance, I don't think so. So perhaps they didn't meet him at all?

Whatever the truth, visit or no, blarney or no, despite the talk about men; no mention of my father in Ireland.

Looking back, it now seems a stunning omission on both sides of the Irish Sea. I can only assume that an agreement was struck, perhaps tacitly: that since my sisters and I were too young at the time of my father's death to be aware of what happened that it was best not to introduce the subject. Perhaps, in the early days, others thought that it would have upset my mother if we were to raise the subject with her as a result of somebody talking about our father. I didn't ask any questions of auntie Mary or any of my relations. Somewhere along the line, I had picked up that it was not something that was talked about in our presence, like something that would be bad for us. I can't remember my father ever referred to in conversation, nor was I explicitly aware of the avoidance. At that time, I suppose, as young children do, I went along with the way things were, without questioning ...

