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Irish Enough?

Jordan Marie Abbruzzese

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Preface

When I was a junior in high school, my AP English teacher decided to distribute a “different type of essay” for my class to read and discuss. Looking skeptically at the piece, titled “Behind the Formaldehyde Curtain” by Jessica Mitford, I wondered what type of strange and gross essay I was about to be exposed to, and how it related to the literary techniques essays we had been religiously reading in preparation for the infamous AP English Test. I hesitantly began scanning the prose, and learned that this essay varied from anything that I had previously read. The work, while describing the process of embalming the deceased, also explored the bizarreness of America’s funeral culture and the elaborate ways that we prepare our dead.

“The embalmer...he brings into play the skill and equipment of sculptor and cosmetician. Is a hand missing? Casting one in plaster of Paris is a simple matter...If a lip or two, a nose or an ear should be missing, the embalmer has at hand a variety of restorative waxes with which to model replacements...Head off? Decapitation cases are rather routinely handled. Ragged edges are trimmed, and head joined to torso with a series of splints, wires and sutures. It is a good idea to have a little something at the neck-a scarf or high collar-when time for viewing comes.”
(Mitford)

Despite the morbid content, I found myself chuckling at the dry humor and sarcastic tone of the piece. I looked around at my classmates, to see if they appreciated this new type of writing as much as I did. We all turned our heads, amused by an “essay” that was actually entertaining! The idea of a deceased person missing an appendage was described in a slightly funny way, though unsettling, of course. I thought that maybe I could write something like *that*, an informative nonfiction piece with a humorous touch if I ever got the chance. Before reading

“Behind the Formaldehyde Curtain”, my English classes had only focused on Shakespeare, Holocaust memoirs, and various selections that were once on the Banned Book List. As much as I loved Fahrenheit 451 and The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, I felt cheated that I had never been exposed to such work before. How long has this art form existed? I had no idea that an “essay” could be an exploration or a narrative—or really anything beyond the introduction-three informational paragraphs-conclusion “sandwich” formula that had been drilled into us since fifth grade. I was intrigued, and in awe, of the possible outlet that had been laid before me. However, although I was extremely attracted to the style that the work presented, I figured that this type of essay writing was not very popular, for I had never really experienced it before.

That same year, a few months later, my French teacher also passed out an essay for us to read in class. I was excited, remembering the secrets of the morgue, and wondering what we could possibly be reading about that applied to our study of Paris. To my glee, this next essay, “Three Kinds of Deception” by David Sedaris, told of an experience that the persona had on the subway while living in France with his partner, Hugh. In the piece, Sedaris was standing by two American tourists that assumed he was a French pickpocket, and wrote of their hilarious conversation and his reactions. I read the selection voraciously, laughing out loud in class, barely processing each word fast enough for the hunger that it had given me. I turned the stapled packet over to find that the piece had ended, and I knew instantly that I wanted more. I was amazed by David Sedaris, unaware that writing could be so, well—funny. I searched for more of his work on the internet when I got home, and laughed crazily in my swivel office chair as I found more of his selections online, and learned that he had even published books of his essays. I knew that someday, I wanted so desperately to write like him. I fell in love with creative nonfiction at age

seventeen, and that love has only grown throughout the entire process of my Senior Writing Project.

The moment that I decided that I would be centering my project on my grandmother and my own travels to Ireland, I knew that I had to create an essay collection. After taking multiple creative writing classes throughout my years at Otterbein, I felt the most connected with creative nonfiction and poetry. I struggled with the possibility of doing a poetry collection, knowing that I could capture the musicality and the beauty that I experienced in Ireland with each poem. However, a story-teller is how I have always seen myself, gesticulating with friends, my speech rising and falling with intonation and imitated voices. Almost everything that I experience is exaggerated in my mind, as a result of my odd sense of humor, extreme emotional sensitivity, and general anxiety. The poet that lives inside me is different than the essayist, which focuses more on these little details and lived experiences. Since my junior year in high school, I have loved reading essays, often laughing and crying at other people's stories and memories. I knew that I had my own story to tell, with multiple layers and descriptions--and it had to be through creative nonfiction.

My essay work feels natural to me, both in writing and when being read out loud. As I write each draft, I can hear myself in my head retelling the story, reflecting on things said to me or places that I have been. I identify most with this genre of creative writing because I feel that it is the best reflection of my work and thoughts. In a 2013 NPR interview, David Sedaris states:

“There's the you that you present to the world, and then there's, you know, of course the real one and, if you're lucky, there's not a huge difference between those two people.”

Like Sedaris, I focus to be “real” in my writing. I aim to be honest and raw, because the truth is what makes an essay theme affective, or humorous. If I am in the middle of an uncomfortable moment, and I think of something that is abnormal or weird, then I am going to write about it, word for word. Honesty is what creates the stories and connections for me, along with small details. My trip to Ireland was filled with multiple moments and experiences that all came down to my (sometimes irrational) thoughts, reactions, and physical aspects of the moment. *Irish Enough?* simply had to be an essay collection, because it acts as a group of stories, or experiences, that need to be told through multiple, specific details that are dissected and explained over and over again. In the travel essay portion of my collection, the persona is consistent throughout. She is searching for an identity in another country, obsessed by her want to be fulfilled by Irish tradition and culture, but instead is thrown into other situations that could have happened to her in any part of the world. She relishes in the magic and wonder of the Irish culture, but also deconstructs the romance of traveling abroad, removing the previous enchantment that she had built around the place while tackling what it really means to be an American with Irish heritage.

When writing, the most pressing issue that I struggle with (and that also plays a role in the theory of Creative Nonfiction in general) is the matter of what holds the most importance in my work: the actual truth or my personal truth? As I mentioned previously, to me essay writing is story-telling, a blend of truth and slight fiction, because we hardly ever remember anything completely accurate to how it happened. These small, personal liberties are allowed in the creative nonfiction format, for they enhance the essay and the author’s experiences. In Nicole Brossard’s work, *The Ariel Letter*, she mentions this intriguing dilemma:

“It is thus at the border between what’s real and what’s fictive, between what it seems possible to say, to write, but which often proves to be, at the moment of writing, unthinkable, and that which seems obvious but appears, at the last second, inexpressible, that this elusive derived writing, writing adrift, begins to make its mark.” (Brossard)

Within my essay collection, the real truth relies between what is real and what I know to be true in my mind. In my last essay, “On Identity: An Odyssey In Four Scenes”, did Jack and Robert actually harshly ask, “Aren’t you American?” with a vindictive sneer? I have accepted the reality that perhaps no, they did not question as maliciously as I remember. But in my memory, in that moment, that is how the question presented itself. I can still see the twist of Jack’s face as his question accompanied his skeptical and mocking tone. Whether or not his cutting words were as I remember them exactly, that defining moment lead to a personal truth, and therefore was as real as the actual moment itself. In my essay, this moment leads me to realize my own identity and place in Ireland *and* America. My realization was a pivoting moment in “On Identity: An Odyssey In Four Scenes”, *Irish Enough?* as a whole, and my physical life outside of my essay collection.

When I had to focus on writing about my grandmother’s immediate family in “Irish Toast (A Brief History)” and “Pennies”, I looked to author Tony Earley for inspiration. His memoir, *Somehow Form A Family: Stories That Are Mostly True* offered great story-telling techniques within his family dynamic, serving both his memories and things that had been told to him about people that he never met. In the preface to Earley’s book, he addresses my same issue:

“On the night of July 20th, 1969, my little sister and I followed our father into the backyard, where we studied the moon through a surveyor’s transit owned by a neighbor...It’s

one of the most vivid memories of my childhood. When I wrote about that night almost thirty years later, I described the full moon in detail, how, once magnified, it had become almost too bright to look at. When a fact checker in *Harper's* magazine informed me that the moon on the night of July 20th, 1969, had not been full...I refused at first to believe her. When I looked it up myself and discovered she was right...I came to understand, if not embrace, the true nature of the phrase *creative nonfiction*.” (Earley)

Through his preface, Earley explores the theory of the essay: That we sometimes have to blend the lines between fiction and reality to accurately portray our memories. This act of limited fiction is where the “creative” in the genre title comes from. While re-reading and editing my collection, I often second-guessed myself (mostly out of nervousness), wondering “Did that actually happen? Did I remember this correctly?” The answer, after much stressful contemplation, was always *yes*. The memories and experiences that I write about in my senior project are all true, because that is how I absolutely remember them, and how they felt to me at the time. Still concerned about my portrayal, I gave my “Kissing The Blarney Stone” essay to Christina, my friend and constant character throughout my collection. She reported that it made her laugh, because it described how she felt at the time as well, without actually realizing it. I had accomplished a goal of giving someone words to explain how they felt through a similar experience, forming a connection with my reader. In the essay, we are allowed to blend our actual truths to become our own personal truths, because don’t we all remember things with a fictitious flair? We recollect events differently than how they actually occurred to some degree, and when telling my stories, I describe my memories exactly how they exist in my head.

However, this theory does seem potentially problematic. As an essayist, I also recognize that I am ethically bound to the truth, like a journalist (this is where the “nonfiction” part rings

true). When drafting my travel essay portion of *Irish Enough?* I often had multiple internet tabs open, along with my tour's travel itinerary and any brochures that I picked up along the way sprawled across my bed. I wanted to double and triple check any facts that I utilized throughout my pieces, for I often gave historical information and legends surrounding the places that I visited. I knew that I could not possibly remember every single fact that Irwin, my beloved tour guide, told us on our bumpy bus, and did not want to retell inaccurate information. The historical significance and small stories that surrounded the places that I visited made my experience all the richer and I wanted to do that for any of my readers as well. If I guessed at dates and names, then I would have been doing the physical places, people, and Ireland an injustice.

While writing, I often also asked myself “Would an Irish person approve of this? Would they agree with what I am saying?” For example, when fact checking for my spooky short on Dame Alice, “The Thing About Alice”, I visited Kilkenny's actual city website. My theoretical questions helped me stay rooted in fact and reality. They also helped me to not be offensive—not that it was ever my aim, but it is always a danger when writing about a different culture as an outsider. “Would this offend an Irish person?” was another common question that ran through my brain on multiple occasions.

In fact, my reading and research changed my original view of my project to what it is now. I was reminded of all of the incredible things that I learned and experienced, and realized that I had to recreate as many of them as possible. I previously knew that I wanted to include a family history, a memoir of my experiences with my grandmother, and retellings of my experiences while abroad. I did accomplish these goals, but in a more expansive way than I originally planned. I first thought that I would primarily include longer essays, and there are some in this collection, but that I would struggle with reaching the forty page minimum. When I

began to draft new essays each week, and fully enjoy every moment that I was able to work on my project, I realized that I would exceed the minimum and actually run out of time for everything that I wanted to say. My collection is now composed of nine different pieces, including my Dame Alice short and a poem that I use to conclude the collection. I chose to end with the poem because I felt that it encompassed a bit of Irish culture that has been with me and my family all along, without us even knowing. The poem worked because a mere description would not have given the moments of when I saw candles in the country home's windows, or plugged in my own electric candle the beauty and justice that they deserved. It was a magical moment that I needed rhythm and musicality to portray.

I also originally thought that my largest piece would be about Dingle, Ireland, a small coastal town to the west of the country. Dingle is the part of Ireland that inspired me the most, through its beauty, simplicity, and an unforgettable concert that we gave for its locals. While writing, I soon learned that I did not yet have the words and the coherence to speak about Dingle in an essay format, although it is a definite goal for the future. Instead, I surprised myself with my final essay focusing on my trip to the Glenstal Abbey's School for Boys, my longest and most informative work in the collection. Visiting the abbey was a special part of my trip, for it involved our last concert on our final night in the country, and one of the only times that I was able to speak to any locals outside of a pub setting (besides my first thrilling experience on the international flight). I did not realize its impact until I began reflecting on my time at the abbey, my conversations with Jack and Robert, and my thoughts while on the bus ride back to the hotel afterward. I also originally thought that my project as a whole would offer a critique of our American culture compared to Ireland's culture, and in some parts it definitely did, but mostly I found an appreciation for my own place and identity through dissecting the moments I

experienced in my final essay. I was able to connect my last essay and my thoughts on the bus to my first piece about my grandmother's family. My connection is what drew the project into a complete circle for me. I felt a sense of peace and happiness when that point was reached, because my own personal truth and history as it pertains to this collection had been figured out and told at last.

I believe that *Irish Enough?* is significant because it tackles themes that are common and relevant to our country and my generation, right now. We glamorize traveling abroad, and also romanticize people that are ethnically or culturally different from us. People say that they feel “wanderlust”, a need to travel and see various wonders of the world, or “find themselves” in a different country. Admittedly, I was hoping that I would “find myself” in Ireland. I was hoping that after stepping out of the airport and onto Ireland soil, that I would recognize the air. I would be able to close my eyes and tilt back my head, being filled with memories from my family members before me, and feel a general sense of belonging. That did *not* happen, as many times as I awkwardly stood on the country side slowly breathing, grasping at mystical forces that simply just were not there for me. I do not think that I am alone in this strange want, and my collection lets readers know that it is perfectly fine to not feel deeply connected in every way to a place, no matter how much we build it up in our minds.

I also examine the hierarchy in our society that stems from those of us who are closely related to our immigrant ancestors. Although my family dynamic and culture may vary from other American families, we are not any better or more interesting. I am guilty of this mindset, and it took writing my essay collection for me to realize and admit it. My collection also sheds some positive light on our American society, showing the ways that we are positively different than other homogenous areas of the world. While we are not perfect, I learned to see our culture

through a new lens, knowing now that we mostly celebrate different ethnicities and traditions instead of questioning them. It honestly took me traveling abroad, in a time when I am frustrated with society along with many of my peers, to see the beauty that is still here if we look hard enough.

Irish Enough? allowed me to experiment and improve the humorous persona that I wanted to emulate for the past five years. It also gave me a chance to improve my approach to creative nonfiction, and better understand the challenges and liberties that arise within that genre. As I previously mentioned, I have loved every moment that I got to spend working on my collection, for I feel as though I have completed a part of myself along with completing my project. I know that my project has its significance and value, especially when traveling is currently trendy and especially encouraged. It is important to know where we came from, and how we currently exist in the world. Through my investigation of my family history, my reflections on how Irish culture influenced my life, and my tour through Ireland, I have realized that perhaps I finally am Irish enough.

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Irish Enough?

An Essay Collection by Jordan Abbruzzese
Completed April 13th, 2015

Table of Contents:

Irish Toast (A Brief History)	page 15
Pennies	page 20
Strangers on Airplanes	page 27
Dublin, 12:00 a.m.	page 35
Kyteler's Inn: There Is Nothing Like a Dame	page 47
The Thing About Alice	page 54
Kissing The Blarney Stone	page 56
On Identity: An Odyssey In Four Scenes	page 65
The Traveler	page 78

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This project is dedicated to my grandmother, Meme, and in memory of Johnny McGrath (1922-1929).

Irish Toast (A Brief History)

In 1912, Marie Agnes Meehan boarded a ship to America at age 17, leaving her parents and three siblings in County Mayo, Ireland. Her Aunt May had previously emigrated from Ireland as well, and had saved money and sent for Marie to come live with her in the states. Marie journeyed across the Atlantic, landed at Ellis Island, and made her way to Columbus, Ohio to live with May. Marie soon found work at a Butterine in Columbus, wrapping butter in a warehouse close to the city.

Marie was unaware that three years prior, in 1909, Dennis Bernard McGrath had left his home in Tipperary, Ireland, to also come to America. Once he had emigrated, Dennis also made his way to Columbus to live with his already emigrated cousin, Mary McGrath. While the rural parts of Ireland still experienced the effects of the Potato Famine, John wished to find a better job in the states and had hoped for more opportunities. He had decided to depart from his parents and nine other brothers and sisters that still resided at the Tipperary family farm in order to make the journey. It would be a difficult process, but with the general struggling economy in Ireland, he decided it best to start anew. His brother Jim eventually joined him in the states, but chose to live in Boston, never actually seeing Dennis in person again. They communicated through letters, and continued to speak to their remaining immediate family in Ireland the same way. After a few years of working odd jobs, Dennis gained United States Citizenship and enrolled in the military. He fought in the First World War, and then returned to Columbus to attempt to finally find a steady American job.

My grandmother tells me that her parents eventually met through “Red Marty”, a mutual friend. She had never actually met Red Marty, but laughs whenever she says his name, filled with traces of stories from her parents that she can’t necessarily remember except for that they

were happy. Without photographic evidence, Red Marty was the best man at Dennis and Marie's St. Francis of Assisi Church wedding in 1922. Marie was 27 at the time, and Dennis was 33. Seven years later, Marie had given birth to sons John and Dennis (Mickey), and daughters Alice and Ellen. She was pregnant with my grandmother, Catherine, when John was killed in a traffic accident while coming home from school. While walking on the roadside beside an ice truck, an ice pick hanging off the side of the truck caught his coat and swung him under the tires. He died slowly in the hospital that night, and was the first child to ever be buried through Egan and Ryan's Irish-owned Broad Street funeral home. Every person that has died in my family since has also been buried with Egan and Ryan.

John's death caused Marie to have a mental breakdown that she never recovered from. She gave birth to my grandmother on her kitchen table, two months prematurely. My grandmother weighed two and a half pounds, but was healthy nonetheless. I have often imagined Marie sitting alone at the kitchen table, holding my tiny grandmother close to her chest while her other children ran through the house playing with marbles and cloth dolls. Being a devout Catholic that did not believe in any form of birth control, she had quickly given birth to five children, but would forever mourn the loss of her first. The experience of him dying young and tragically would never leave her mind, no matter how many more children she birthed, or how often the McGraths would move locations.

Dennis worked for a railroad at the time, but had difficulty keeping a job because of his alcoholism. He struggled to find work anywhere else as an immigrant, and the country was in the beginnings of The Great Depression. Their family struggled monetarily, with Marie doing neighborhood clothes washings and mending to help contribute. My grandmother was often set on the open door of the oven in a basket, just to stay warm. Marie later became pregnant with her

last child, Jimmy. Before she would drop out of high school during the Second World War (she had to help out at home when Mickey was drafted during his senior year), my grandmother would have moved around Columbus thirteen different times due to financial trouble.

My grandmother hardly remembers the struggles of her poverty stricken childhood, for she has blocked out details of waiting in line at the soup kitchen or carrying her lunch to school wrapped in newspaper. She also now sees each problem her family faced as an endearment. She loved her parents and siblings unconditionally, and idolized Dennis, despite his harsh nature. She fondly remembers his thick Irish accent, and his fair sprinkling of Gaelic vocabulary.

“We was always proud of being Irish. Daddy was.” She says to me with a closed mouth smile.

All of the children attended Holy Family Catholic School, and went to mass with the entire family every single morning. My grandmother’s favorite day to go to church was on Saint Patrick’s Day, when afterwards she would help her Daddy pick out a green sweater to wear to the bars. He would go out, where locals teased him about being Irish and bought him multiple drinks. He never took offense to the teasing, brushing off his company’s words with beverages that they provided him. Dennis would stumble home later with his cap covered in Irish pins and shamrocks, while the children laughed and pointed at his decorative spoils.

Saint Patrick’s Day was the one day of the year when Marie would dance. She would perform the Irish Jig, in their home, teaching it to her children. Saint Patrick’s Day was special, a day just for them, and perhaps the only day that Marie would allow herself to feel any joy or movement without apology or regret. She might have wished to distract herself and her children from the other days of the year that exhausted them by dancing in the kitchen, hair falling around

her face from her bun, hugging her sons and daughters that she now watched too closely. They ignored the fact that Dennis should have been home, or not spending any money on booze that wasn't given to him. My grandmother doesn't speak of any resentment, or hides it well every time she smiles when she talks about "Daddy". I see Marie, although mentally strained, as truly keeping the McGrath family together. Although she ceased to take pictures of her children after John's death, or never let her youngest Jimmy out of her sight, Marie's kindness was hardly hindered.

For nearly 17 years, the McGrath family rented a house by the railroad, where the trains would bring hobos throughout the night. The hobos would mark trees by the houses that had shown generosity, and my grandmother's house was always marked justly as a stop. Marie would give the hobos sandwiches that her family could barely afford to lose, never turning a stranger away. She made Irish soda bread weekly, for they never had enough money to purchase store-bought white bread. My grandmother has had bread and tea every morning all of her life. Her late brother Jimmy teased her for years, saying "You can't live off of bread and toast, Katie."

"Jimmy," she'd laugh, "I've done it for over eighty years."

In remembrance of her father, or perhaps of a simpler time, my grandmother's favorite way to toast her bread is to light her gas stove with the blue flame licking hungrily through the black metal burner. She then places a piece of store bought bread on top of the fire, so that it is practically engulfed in the flame. My grandmother can cook, but never does. For her entire childhood she had to do with baskets of food donated by the church, or scarce homemade meals, and now buys items that are quick to make. After a few seconds of leaving the bread faced down

on the flame, she shakily flips the piece over, equally burning the other side. Turning off the stove, a haze will fill her kitchen as she quickly butters the blackened crusts and takes her reheated tea out of her microwave.

“Daddy would always make it like this.” She laughs. “It’s called Irish Toast”.

Pennies

At the age of three, I watched my mother pull away from the visitors' parking spot outside of my grandmother's condominium. The mini-van backed out and drove to the left while my grandma urged me to wave 'goodbye' with my pudgy, short fingers. I watched her slim hands move back and forth, catching a glimpse of gold on her left ring finger. I pulled her arm down to me and touched the jewelry, a heart encircled by two hands, with a crown on top.

"It's an Irish ring." She told me lovingly. "It means love, loyalty, and friendship." I knew instantly that I wanted one, pressing my face against the screen door, steaming the lower half of my face with my excited breaths. My small toes curled around the metal insert between the kitchen flooring and the door frame, and I realized that I was content with being left while my mother drove away.

During my early trials of learning to speak, my mother had a romantic notion that it would be adorable and endearing to refer to my grandmother as "Granny". My mom was always trying to do things like that, convinced that she was a modern day June Cleaver. A very young me, troubled with a somewhat charming speech impediment, had great difficulty pronouncing a title so unfamiliar. My attempts at saying "Granny" were reduced to the close sounding Meme (pronounced like Mee-mee), which my mother accepted happily, for it was also very cute for a small child. The name has stuck, and I still refer to my maternal grandmother as Meme today, even though I can now proudly say Granny or Grandmother or Nanny, or whatever other odd thing my mother would want without hesitation. *Meme* is how she signs birthday cards, how my close friends refer to her. Her Catholic name is Catherine Cecelia, but Meme has always been more fitting to her stature and energy.

Meme has white, swirling hair framing her face with traces of rust that glow only in the light. She was a fiery red-head in her youth, with apparent remnants. She is underweight, and often wearing elastic jeans and a crew neck sweatshirt with various versions of “World’s Number One Grandma” embroidered on the front, adorned with blushing teddy bears and hearts around each letter. Similar catch phrases appear on her coffee mugs that are never filled with coffee. Meme has always been an avid Lipton tea drinker, often averaging at four cups a day. To accompany her hot tea, she often enjoys a wrapped Little Debby’s treat, or a piece of Irish Toast, cut diagonally.

Convinced that the burnt toast and tea is the cure for all stomach ailments, I would often eat it when I was younger and feeling ill. I have memories of lying on her floor in my mother’s old dress-up clothes that I acquired from her toy chest, sprawled across an emerald green blanket with black lace trimmings. On the blanket, teddy bears dressed as leprechauns smile gleefully among thick, black letters that spell “Love Me I’m Irish”. Before Meme retired from working at a nursing home, one of her younger co-workers stitched the blanket as a present. I still love to cover with it today, when it isn’t draped over the back of her crème and tan couch, running my fingertips over the little brown bear’s pink smiles.

Meme’s whole condo is decorated with similar décor, with small statues of leprechauns on coffee tables and kitchen counters. She has laminated four leaf clovers lying upon decorative dishes painted with Irish blessings, and ceramic rainbows with Celtic knots sitting on green shelves. Her kitchen and living room look like a Saint Patrick’s Day gift shop, but there is nothing cheap or superficial about it. She adoringly touches each leprechaun, or whispers the blessings to me when I visit. She sings *Danny Boy* at night when she is alone, telling the framed pictures of her siblings that she loves them and to look out for me and my sister from heaven.

I always acknowledge her knick knacks, or any new decoration that my extended family brings her during their visits. I would do anything to please her, for my grandmother has only been mad at me one time (that I will never forget). At the ages of seven and two, I frequently fought with my younger sister, Andi. We often built with blocks together in Meme's upstairs play room when we visited. This one time in particular, I had built a utopia, with towering turrets and intricate bridges, while Andi merely stacked the blocks in a juvenile attempt to make what seemed to be nothing more than a small hut. Andi, wearing only a diaper and a tee-shirt, decided to stand up and walk through my city, knocking down my labored creation with her uncoordinated legs. She said sorry, and that she was walking, but even as a toddler I could sense her glint of mischief that she often camouflaged by her dimples and ringlet hair. In a fury, I stomped over to Andi's block stacks and kicked them over with an incredible amount of force.

"If you knocked mine down, then I will knock yours down!" I cried with anguish, feeling my blood heat in a way that you only can experience when your little sister knocks down your block-town. Andi pouted out her wet, bottom lip, as she was so trained to do, and loudly cried. Meme rushed up the stairs, taking in the scene. I stood, heavily breathing and looking at the mess of multi-colored blocks spread throughout the carpet while Andi screamed. Meme began to scold me, "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph", while telling me what a rotten thing I had done as the bigger sister. She told me that Andi was just a baby, and I acted meanly. I ran down the stairs and away from them, now also crying, realizing that my grandmother had never corrected me before. Fifteen years later, Andi will still smirk and reminisce on this moment where she triumphed over me and my block metropolis, and teetered away without any punishment. She claims that it truly was an accident, and I overreacted, but relishes in the only time that Meme has gotten angry with me. In these moments I breathe thickly out of my nose, never fooled by her version of the story.

Andi and I often stayed the night at Meme's house, sleeping on her carpeted living room floor. Instead of sleeping bags, we utilized the "Love Me I'm Irish" blanket as a play space and a bed. The blanket had the comfort of a quilt, and was wonderful to roll around on with my animal figurines. When bedtime approached, Meme would put in a Shirley Temple film in the VCR while my sister and I laughed at the songs and sometimes alarming situations that the little girl would get herself into. Meme had purchased a special Shirley Temple movie collection for me, with restored color, all in a box. I have watched *Baby Take a Bow* more times than I can recall, with it being my favorite. We also commonly watched a tape of the Irish Rovers singing songs with puppets. Andi and I would dance and roll along on the blanket, while Meme would quietly sit on the couch adjacent, chuckling with the films, humming the Irish Rover's *The Unicorn Song*, or quietly listening to the radio on her wooden side table.

While playing at Meme's condo, I learned multiple things. I realized that I loved pickles with my grilled cheese, that metal slides at neighborhood parks are painfully hot on a sunny day, and that I shouldn't eat birdseed mixed with peanut butter even though it smells good. I used to religiously ride my tricycle around Meme's basement in small circles, when I was first learning. The floor was smoothed cement, and my small vehicle flew without hardly any friction while she folded flowery smelling laundry in the next room over. I practiced dutifully until the day that she walked me to the doctor's office parking lot behind her building. I began to practice riding a bike without training wheels there, still in circles, and often falling. She encouraged me, with "Good job, Jordan!"s, and applauding her thin hands. I smiled, and continued to glide across the black pavement, only falling over the yellow parking spaces.

Meme has always liked to tell me that I am like my grandfather. Her husband had passed away when my mom was fourteen, and all I know about him are the stories that she has told; about the pet goat he used to keep in the house, and his love for Patsy Cline. I too, love Patsy, and I suppose that makes me like him in some sort of way. All in all, I realize that I am not like my grandfather, but it makes Meme happy to say so when she misses him on his birthday every October. As for Meme, I also bear little physical resemblance to her. I adore and admire her strength and sense of humor, but we are alike in very few ways. We both like to laugh, sing, and dance. For her 75th birthday, I bought her shiny black tap shoes that she could wear on Saint Patrick's Day. Thanks to her mother, she fully knew the Irish Jig, and loved to dance on the holiday.

Each Saint Patrick's Day, my mother, sister, and I pick up my grandmother and take her to an Irish restaurant in Columbus, eating traditional food. We then go to the Veteran's Memorial Building downtown to visit The Family Reunion. This celebration invites all Irish people, or anyone that wants to be Irish for that day, to be together while Irish bands and dance troops perform. Meme loves to listen to the music, and still do the jig the best that she can. She brags that she used to dance on table tops when she worked at the nursing home, and would still do it now if she could. I look at her black shoes, tapping on the floor, and know that she absolutely would.

Knowing that Meme is inspired and elated by Irish Step Dancing, I entered a class with Andi in my early teenage years, determined to learn. The woman that started the troop was successful in Ireland, but moved to a low-income area outside of Columbus and decided that she would work best out of an old YMCA building. I attended class every week with my sister for a little over a year, putting on little shows every couple of months on the basketball courts. Andi

and I would step fiercely, in green shirts and tight black pants, secretly wishing that we had the colorful, expensive sequenced dresses and curled wigs instead. Meme would lean against the gymnasium wall, clapping her hands to the music and smiling while my mother took countless pictures of our routines. Eventually our instructor had to move locations, and Andi and I decided that our Irish dancing days had ran their course, but we would still dance upon request for my Great-Uncle Mick until he passed away in the summer of 2013.

From my grandmother, I have also inherited Irish superstition. The summer before I had started college, I went to visit Meme during an afternoon. Her condominium complex has a community pool that I have always frequented during the warmer weather with Andi. I walked into her cool kitchen, and noticed a pile of multiple pennies under her table as I kicked off my flip flops.

“Meme? You have pennies all under your table. Did you know that?” I asked, turning my head at the bizarre sight. The pennies had an alluring quality, almost like they had been arranged in such a way ceremoniously, and did not wish to be disturbed. The sun poked through the blind slits and danced on the bronze tops, as the lights glinted from the tiny Lincoln Memorials.

“Oh, yes. I dropped all my change a couple days ago,” she called from the other room, “and did not pick up the pennies that didn’t land heads up. That is bad luck.”

I smiled, looking at the small shrine of bad luck, before I walked down the hallway to join her in the living room. A couple of weeks later, I came back to find the pennies had been picked up. Upon walking through Meme’s door and seeing the clean floor under her table, I felt an instant, almost devastating disappointment. I did not even ask her about the pennies, or whether or not she had been the one to pick them up. At the same time, I hoped that whoever did

would experience a small bit of misfortune for disturbing the pile. It could have been my mother, who always tidies everything she sees, or Meme's eccentric neighbor Donna that visits her almost daily (whenever she isn't distracted by her nine cats).

I still have not asked about the pennies, but think of them from time to time. Seeing the coins under her kitchen table stirred feelings of adoration towards my grandmother, for I would have done the same thing. She believes in another world and that we are never alone. She talks to angels, looks to praying on her rosary, and she believes in four leaf clovers. I have been taught to look at the world in this way also, but perhaps that is just my Irish luck. My superstition remains innate, buried deep, and noticing every overturned coin that I come across on the sidewalk.

Strangers on Airplanes

I had finally finished shuffling down the aisle of our crowded international flight. I turned to shimmy into my seat, my carry on catching onto arm rests and other passengers in the process. It was my University Concert Choir's third flight in the past twenty four hours, and also my third time that day with a window seat. I sighed, staring at the wing outside the tiny smeared glass, and shoved my grey floral bag under the seat in front of me with my feet. It stuck out some, and I quietly hoped that a flight attendant wouldn't notice. Our tickets had been bought in bulk, but also at random, so I had been sitting next to strangers all day. So far, I had the privilege of being by an elderly couple that were making floor plans of how they theoretically wanted to reorganize their house, and a younger athletic woman that was tapping her smart phone with her acrylic nails all through the flight.

I really wanted the seat next to me to remain empty. After we left New York, the journey to Dublin would take around five hours, and I was not sure that I could handle any more awkward new plane friends. To top it off, I also *hated* the window seat. Flying generally makes me nervous, and the constant reminder of just how high in the air we were barely helped. Sensing someone walking towards me, I looked up to see a thin, middle aged man with fair skin and wisps of red hair pausing by my seat. He moved in to sit beside me. His eyes were a grey blue, sitting in a face that looked like it had not received proper rest in days.

I stared at him, figuring I should initiate a conversation if we were going to be in close proximity for the next few hours.

"Hello," I began—casually, I thought. "How're you?"

"Good." He sighed back, "You?"

“I’m doing fine!” I smiled largely, embarrassingly. The man was Irish, with a thick accent. I was ecstatic and could barely keep myself from grinning. It was the first Irish accent that I had heard besides Gerard Butler’s character in *P.S. I Love You*. I was suddenly very nervous. This would be my first time spent with an actual Irish native, and I had no idea what to say. I wanted him to like me, to think *What a lovely young woman. I am so glad that she is coming to visit my country. She is a representation of everything charming and good.*

“Where are you going?” I continued the conversation. I wanted to seem interested, and I also waited in anticipation for him to speak again.

“Dublin for my niece’s wedding.” He replied, with a hint of resentment. “I have lived in New York for twelve years and hardly ever go home.”

I was taken aback. Of course people still immigrated to America from Ireland. But why would he choose New York over Dublin? I hadn’t yet been to Ireland—but it seemed so green and calm. The essence of tranquility and beauty sprinkled with sheep. I enjoyed New York on a basic level, but—

“New York is a fun place.” I decided to say. “Do you like it?”

“Busy, but I love it.” He finally smiled, his eyes creasing around the corners. I could sense his adoration of New York, for it reflected mine for Columbus. Fine, perhaps he was crazy for wanting to leave Ireland for America’s busiest city, but at least he was happy and had made a home. I realized that I was weirdly over-analyzing this man, and was going to make things uncomfortable if I didn’t stop interviewing him. I didn’t want to ruin my first interaction with an Irish person by being creepy, so I turned back to look out of my window while we were still standing on the runway.

I soon heard another male Irish voice in a close proximity. I turned my head to the right to see an older gentleman passing out small chocolates wrapped in pink and blue foil. He gave a handful to my new partner in flight, who turned and offered me some. *How sweet*, I thought, smiling cherubically, *I would never be as kind as to buy chocolate and give it away. I would definitely eat it all because I have a problem.*

I wondered if this was an example of the famous Irish hospitality and friendliness that I had heard about. If it was an American man in tube socks, jean shorts, and a button-up shirt with hibiscus flowers on it, I probably would have been freaked out and declined even the most delicious of candies. I unwrapped the chocolate and set it on my tongue, letting it melt slowly in my mouth, suddenly fearing that the gesture could have been a façade. What if the chocolate was poisoned and the man used his Irish charm to get away with mass murder? *Oh God*, I contemplated spitting the chocolate out. I turned to look at the man next to me wondering if he would notice, only to decide that I was being insane and the chocolate was already in my system anyway. If it was foul play, I was already done for, and might as well eat the other piece to make sure that the job was done right.

“Why are you going to Dublin?” my seat partner asked me. I felt a shock move through my abdomen. He spoke to me without being provoked! He didn’t sense my paranoia and alarming fascination with his accent.

“I am traveling with my University’s Concert Choir,” I started, hoping that it sounded impressive and not juvenile because I was still a college student. “We are touring the country to give multiple performances over our winter break.” I then realized that it perhaps sounded pretentious. He probably wondered if there was a need to spend thousands of dollars and fly

across an ocean to sing to strangers. I wanted to tell him that it was more than that. That we wanted to build a cultural bridge with our music, and bare our souls to a whole group of people that we hope would be touched by our art. We wanted to change lives, even if for an instant, and maybe change our own as well. I decided that the background explanation was a little too deep for plane talk, so I bit my tongue and hoped that he would get it.

“Ah, very good.” He gave me a small smile and nod, but otherwise looked unaffected.

Thankfully, we were interrupted by a cheery flight attendant standing in the aisle by our seat.

“Excuse me,” she began, “You two are seated by an exit.” She pointed to the glowing red “Exit” sign to our top left. “I must ask you, in case of a crash, are you willing to help assist people out of the plane?”

The man next to me said nothing, but nodded. I panicked. I wasn’t sure that I was qualified for escaping a crashed plane myself, yet alone able to help other people. Was I strong enough? Quick enough? Rational enough? Did I even want to exert the effort? I realized she was waiting for my answer. If I said no, I would have to move seats—which would be an ordeal by itself. Plus, I wanted the man next to me to like me and think I was brave. I wanted to flight attendant to think I was fearless.

“Of course.” I said, probably too confidently. Great, I had made it sound like helping rescue people from burning aircrafts was something I did regularly. Now I had given the man and the flight attendant large expectations of what I was really capable of. I made a mental note to make sure to read the airline safety pamphlet very carefully once we took off.

The flight attendant smiled and walked to her seat, buckling herself in. I held my breath as the plane started to move, quickly reaching the point in the sky where we were free to walk around and utilize electronics. The backs of the seats in front of us had small, individual screens where we could watch television shows, movies, read books, or play games. I fumbled in my pocket for my headphones and decided that I would distract myself with a movie. I shifted through the selections, suddenly very conscious of what the man next to me would think. Would he scoff at me for watching *Tommy Boy* twice in a row? I knew he wasn't paying attention at the moment, but worried that he would shift his eyes to see which movie I selected, or would nonchalantly turn to see Chris Farley ripping David Spade's coat in a motel room. I slyly turned my eyeballs to look at his screen, while keeping my head forward. He had a small map of the world showing, with a tiny plane flying over the Atlantic Ocean, headed towards Ireland. How did he know how to find that? No movies for the flight? The Irish were probably too intelligent to bother with silly in-flight movies. He had his mind to entertain him. I scrolled through the documentaries, thinking that perhaps an educational film would look more impressive if he happened to look my way. After a few minutes of internally battling which movie I should settle with, I gave in and selected *Tommy Boy*.

A little while later, a flight attendant came by to give us complimentary drinks. I hesitantly asked for an apple juice, knowing that I would have to use the restroom a shortly after. We hadn't spoken since our brief introductions, and any time I looked over to see how he was doing, he was either staring at the screen or resting his eyes. I gave him his space. Inevitably by the end of the movie, I definitely had to use the facilities, but realized that the man was now fast asleep with his head tilted back, slightly snoring. I did not want to wake him, and decided to try to hold off going to the bathroom for a little while longer. On a normal day, I tend to use the

restroom about every hour because I hydrate incessantly, as a singer. I knew that I would drive this guy crazy if I actually used the bathroom five times.

I decided to wait until he woke up to use the restroom, and then I would get out too. I did not have to inconvenience him by waking him up now. He would think, *How thoughtful of her. She waited until I had to go instead of climbing over my lap to get to the aisle.* It was a decent plan. Although I could feel the need to relieve myself getting stronger, I continued to wait.

The man woke up not too long afterwards to visit the restroom, and I eagerly followed. I struggled to retain my balance in the cramped bathroom stall, and was equally challenged to find out how to flush the toilet. I had flown quite a few times before, but was having trouble navigating through this international plane's restroom. The button to flush wasn't where I thought it would be, and I was soon lifting up lotion and soap packets looking for any sort of clue. I finally found a grey button by physically rubbing my hands all along the outside of the toilet and the wall and pushed it, only to hear the loudest flush that I could ever imagine. I jumped backwards, hitting the locked restroom door, covering my ears. My face reddened with hints of tears in my eyes, for I have always had an irrational fear of loud noises and often cry on the spot if I am not prepared for them. I looked at myself in the mirror, realizing that I looked ridiculous. I couldn't go back down the aisle looking like I had been crying in the restroom. I wiped my eyes and ran my fingers through my tangled hair, while giving my reflection a few exaggerated smiles. Good. No one would notice that the toilet almost gave me a heart attack.

I got back to my seat before the man next to me did, and I decided not to drink any more beverages for the remainder of the flight. I glanced at the little map on his screen and realized that we were practically halfway there. He came back, and we smiled at each other, still saying

nothing. It would be weird to start a conversation now. “How was the bathroom? I barely made it out alive, ha-ha-ha.” Feeling suddenly sleepy, for my whole choir group had hardly slept in a day’s time, I decided to lean against the window and try to sleep. I positioned myself as close to the wall of the airplane that I could, terrified that I would wake up on the man’s shoulder. Even if I did, he would probably just let me sleep there. He seemed like the type, too nice and Irish to move a sleeping girl.

When I woke, the flight attendants were busy handing out meals that resembled breakfast food. Because of my Celiac Disease, I was given a special gluten free meal that consisted of a rice cake with honey, and an apple. I turned to see the man next to me eating eggs and a biscuit voraciously. I dipped a piece of the clumped dried rice into the honey packet and stuck it in my mouth, trying to convince myself that it couldn’t be that bad or else they wouldn’t serve it. It was.

The attendants quickly came back to gather our trash, and I faced my fears to use the restroom once more before we landed. I nervously asked the gentleman if I could get out, and he let me through without any embarrassing complications. I plugged my ears before I pushed the grey button this time, and glided back to my seat flawlessly. I celebrated silently that I didn’t trip and fall on his lap or do anything else weird.

“We’re almost there.” He turned to me, looking a little relieved. Either he was happy to finally be off the plane, or actually missed his country a little bit. I figured it was a mixture of both.

“I’m excited!” I responded, for I definitely was, no matter how tired and cramped I felt.

The plane landed roughly, bouncing all of its passengers from side to side when the wheels hit the pavement. We raced down the runway as I finally willingly looked out of my window to see grey sky and green grasses surrounding the terminal. We were here. I was about to breath Irish air for the first time.

The plane finished taxiing and we all stood up to stretch and grab our belongings. We began to form a line in the aisle to get off of the plane, and I watched the man next to me move forward while the other passengers in front of us took their time to organize their bags. I had said nothing to him, or he to me as he left. I knew that I would never see this man again. I contemplated yelling for him, telling him to have fun at the wedding but decided against it.

I held the handles of my carry on in my hand as I made my way into the airport to go through customs. I was finally in Ireland, and had successfully had three thrilling conversations with an Irish person (he even initiated the last one). He had given me the little bit of confidence that I needed to walk the Dublin streets and converse with locals, and I was thankful for that. I smiled to myself, moving slowly through the airport, realizing that I never even asked his name.

Dublin, 12:00 a.m.

Looking out from behind the dusty beige curtains in our hotel room, I could see that the streets of Dublin were increasingly becoming more crowded with people as the sky became greyer. I moved the curtain back and forth between my finger tips, a small smile playing on my lips as I felt the fabric and looked at the wet pavement below the cold window. My hotel roommate Christina and I giggled together as we planned our outfits for celebrating New Years Eve in Dublin, Ireland. We were brimming with excitement at the possibility of drunkenly stumbling along the uneven sidewalks amidst the hub of cheering locals and tourists helping us celebrate the holiday. Ever since we found out that we would be touring Ireland with our choir, Christina and I had been theoretically planning a crazy New Year's Eve that we knew we would never forget.

Before the real fun started, we first were scheduled to perform during the "Torch-Lit Ceremonial Parade" at Dublin Castle. We had given an afternoon concert at Saint Patrick's Cathedral the day before, and had gotten most of the singing-abroad jitters out of our system. Our current problem was determining what to wear for our big night. Would Irish people be dressed scandalously? Conservatively? After practically emptying my suitcase of every clothing item that I packed, I decided on a modest pink dress with thin black stripes to wear for the evening. Christina leaned into the bathroom mirror; applying lipstick as I pulled on my tights under my dress, realizing that the rain outside was beginning to hit the building with a greater force. According to Irwin, our charming middle-aged tour guide, we would have a fifteen minute walk to Dublin Castle. I also knew that we would be performing outside, but did not want the burden of carrying an umbrella. My winter coat was water repellant and had a hood, so I put my faith in its capabilities and headed down to the lobby with Christina, ready to brave through the

weather that would hopefully not last through the night. We were about to celebrate New Year's Eve in *Ireland*, and circumstances would not be as cruel as to rain through the whole evening.

While making our way to the Dublin Castle in a long line, I imagined that we would soon experience a completely dry night running through the streets with pints of Guinness and cider sloshing over the sides of our glasses, while various Europeans cheered and danced around us wearing party hats. We would be laughing and spinning, our faces illuminated by the streetlights, a swirl of color surrounding our party. My visions all seemed very cinematic, and perhaps would make a fine scene in a chick-flick about college girls going abroad, but I had the highest hopes that they would happen, nonetheless. I thought of myself jumping up in down on the sidewalks in slow motion with Christina while Irish college students clapped along, chuckling at our outgoing American nature. I pulled my wet hood tighter to my face and continued our walk feeling cool and confident. Things were going to be perfect.

Once we arrived at the celebration, I stepped onto the black platforms outside of Dublin Castle with the rest of the choir, squinting through the massive amounts of water that were now blurring my eyes. The hood was hardly doing the trick, in fact, with the front parts of my hair dripping onto the bridge of my nose and running down to my lips. I had carefully applied my make-up for the evening and could feel it washing away. I smiled tightly at the public, who were anticipating our joyous hymns, my face now looking like a damn Monet painting.

We awkwardly began our set, struggling to watch our conductor in the rain and hear one another over the continuous patter of water on the cobblestone and platform. We quickly finished, with the crowd's excited and appreciative response of hollers and claps *almost* making getting soaked in the rain while singing *Angels We Have Heard on High* worth it. My new dress

was wet and pressed to my skin under my coat, and I could feel the water that had been stagnant in my boots for too long hotly pushing through the spaces in between my toes every time I took a step. We were then ushered off of the platforms by an overly nervous woman with a clipboard, pushing us off to the side while telling us repeatedly that “The parade is coming!”

I looked at my friends’ faces in confusion, suddenly alarmed at what type of parade could induce such panic and haste. Suddenly, the courtyard was filled with an array of cirque de soleil styled performers. Men and women in colorful costumes rode tall, oversized bikes or flexibly danced with streamers. A contraption that looked like two thirds of a circle was being pushed on wheels while a woman in a bright leotard hung upside down from the top, flipping and contorting her body. Men followed behind her juggling fire, with a band playing enchanting circus music with a sensual flare marched towards the back.

It was all breathtaking, and I suddenly felt like I was in an animated Tim Burton film. The whimsical spectacle was unlike anything I had ever seen before, however, it was still raining, and I could feel my spirits sinking. The night was young, and I was very, very wet. Christina whispered to me that her stomach suddenly hurt badly, scrunching her face. She wanted to try to tough it out, but also wished to go back to the hotel to see if she would feel better after some rest. I sighed, also wanting to go back to the hotel, my patience for the night thinning. We decided to trek through the streets all the way back to our room, and then reconvene with two other girls later to find a pub. Concerned about all of the pubs closing early, I approached our tour guide before we made any final decisions.

“Irwin? How late do you think the pubs will be open tonight?” I started, trying not to sound like an alcoholic. It was only 8:00 p.m., and most of our group was expected to start

drinking very soon. “Christina doesn’t feel well, so we were going to go back to the hotel and then go out later.” I defended myself.

“The pubs will mostly be open until midnight,” Irwin answered, “with some staying open until 1:30 in the morning”.

“Perfect!” I exclaimed, grinning with Christina and then turning to see one of our chaperone’s worried face.

She walked towards us quickly, apparently overhearing our little inquiry. “Jordan, Christina?” she began, “Seriously. If you are going to be out after midnight, you need a male guide. You will look like easy Americans, and anyone out after midnight is going to be very, *very* drunk” she concluded.

I drew my lips into a line and nodded before walking away. Christina and I had both been to Europe before, and did not planning on doing anything unsafe. Plus, her warning definitely stunk of victim-blaming, and I was insulted. She seemed to be insinuating that if we chose to walk the streets drunk at a late hour, then we would deserve anything that happened to us because we knew the consequences and were choosing to be unsafe by walking without a “male guide”. I thought of all the times that I had been out with my friends at school until 4:00 in the morning, and laughed. Yes, anyone out after midnight would be very drunk—and I would be joining them. Dublin also seemed quite harmless, although I suppose that some of it could have been the European charm. Admittedly, a few of the buildings were run down, with some not so welcoming alley ways, but being in another country made me feel invincible. The novelty of the place made it all seem flawless and magical. I could not fathom anything unfortunate happening to us in the Irish streets. I knew that Dublin was entirely different from our quaint college town

in Ohio, which mostly consisted of cookie cutter families and elderly people. Our campus police also kept themselves busy by surveying the area at night, so I was not used to feeling threatened while returning from a bar. Furthermore, I was not going to be frightened by a concerned warning implying that I give off an ignorant, happy-go-lucky vibe. I would put on a hard shell. My New Year's Eve Game Face. Besides, the unrelenting rain had been enough of a downer. The night was going to be wonderful...as soon as it got started.

Once we made it back to the hotel, I hastily threw open our room door and peeled off my clothes to hear them thump on the carpet, heavy from the wetness. I rummaged my already messy suitcase for leggings and a large sweater (far less fancy than my previous outfit) and pulled on my rain boots. It was still pouring, I was irritated, and things were going to be comfortable from here on out. I flopped backwards on the floral bed comforter, letting out an exaggerated sigh. After Christina rested for a bit, we decided to leave the hotel room again. I grabbed my umbrella, still annoyed, but was officially armed and ready for the rest of the evening.

Christina and I met our two other friends, Lexi and Kayleigh, in the lobby. We decided to walk towards Temple Bar to begin our night. The Temple Bar area was well known, and also a busy place for locals, tourists, and students alike. We figured it would be exciting, and made our way through the streets with a small amount of optimism. I made sure to step in every puddle, merely for the satisfaction of knowing that my feet would stay dry.

Halfway through our walk, we spotted a pub that hardly seemed crowded and figured that we could have a couple of drinks before going to Temple Bar. We entered, walked towards the back, and threw our wet coats and umbrellas on the floor by a few stools. I ordered a pint of

cider, and we began chatting and laughing. My hopes were rising in my chest, warm from the alcohol. Perhaps tonight could be salvaged, after all. How could spending New Years in Ireland not be? I was losing perspective. I had to realize how lucky I was to be abroad, what I was getting to experience.

After my second pint of cider, the bartender looked at me skeptically as I approached the bar for a third drink. I was completely fine, and assumed that he was not used to seeing a small woman want multiple drinks. I remembered that I had previously read online under a *Yahoo Answers* tab for “Irish pub etiquette” that women in Ireland did not drink that much in public. In fact, hardly anyone did. I mentally prepared myself for the bartender to question me, deciding that I would say “*Please*, I am an American with Irish blood. I can *definitely* drink.” (Only a few days afterwards upon some reflection did I realize how embarrassing that would have been for me. What does that even mean?) He handed me my third drink with a shrug, and I was saved from having to say anything suave.

After leaving the pub and eventually making it towards the general area of the Temple Bar, our luck hardly improved. It was still raining heavily, and most of the pubs were completely closing themselves off to new company because they were overly crowded. Large men in suits were standing outside of the doors, not letting anyone new in. It was bizarre, and also kept us from finding anywhere else to hang out. By this time, I desperately had to use the restroom.

We checked our phones, wiping the rain from our screens, realizing that it was almost midnight. We knew that we would not find another pub by the time the New Year struck, and decided to wait out in the streets and see what would happen. We were easily surrounded by a few hundred people, all drunk and swaying back and forth. It was like I had previously

imagined—except it was still raining and I was not having that much fun. If I was moving in slow motion now, it was because I felt like I was going to pee myself if I walked too quickly.

Regardless, we huddled together in anticipation in the final minutes before midnight hit. A street-wide countdown began with ten seconds left as we became more excited despite the situation.

“3...2...1!” We all yelled in unison. “Happy New Year!” I lifted my face to the black sky, still spitting rain. The crowd jumped and laughed, creating an overall cheeriness that couldn’t be ignored. I smiled anyway and hugged all of my friends, cheering loudly, until I decided that I needed to find a bathroom as soon as possible.

We continued to walk towards the Temple Bar area, but were suddenly blocked by the emergence of a group of about fifteen young adult men, dressed in rugby uniforms. They formed a circle that took up most of the street, arms around each other’s shoulders, rocking from side to side. They began to chant loudly in unison.

“They are chanting U.S.A.! Do you hear them?” Christina laughed in confusion.

Surely enough, the group of Irish men were indeed repeatedly chanting “U.S.A.! U.S.A.!” over and over again in thick accents while rocking back and forth. It was odd, slightly flattering I suppose, but mostly odd.

“Why are they doing that?” I asked, completely weirded out. “They know that means United States of America, right? I guess they must be big fans.” I shrugged.

We spotted a McDonalds ahead, and forcefully navigated our way around the rugby men, leaving their chanting echoing behind us. We entered the McDonald’s, figuring that we would be

able to use the toilets quickly. Naturally, a similar suited man stood in front of the bathrooms, telling us that we had to buy something before being allowed to use the facilities.

“Please sir,” I begged, “I really have to go. It’s practically an emergency”. The man shook his head and we left, hoping to find an open pub with a usable restroom. We walked up and down the street through crowds of intoxicated screaming people (thankfully the rugby team had since left), the pain in my bladder worsening. We looped back around and ended outside of the McDonald’s yet again, its golden arches beckoning. I was going to wet myself. *My destiny is here*, I thought, *laying in the middle of the Dublin streets, peeing my pants in the rain*. My friends could leave me, I would have found peace. It was what I was meant to do.

“Ugh, whatever!” I huffed, opening the doors of the McDonald’s and making my way to the line of twenty people. I crossed my legs, my rain boots squeaking on the white tiled floor. I moved back and forth, clenching my teeth, as I waited my turn. I was finally able to order a small fry and walked away from the cashier, painfully waddling up to the suited man.

I held up the fries triumphantly, a trophy of my persistence, as the man nodded and stepped aside. I miraculously made it to the bathroom, shivering when the cold toilet touched my skin. Tears formed in my eyes with relief, *Thank you God*, I cried while swinging my feet. I stared at the stall door in front of me while shoving the limp fries into my mouth. I had overcome all adversity in that moment.

After I reemerged, my group concluded that it was nearly impossible to find a pub, and decided to walk back to the hotel, discouraged. We made our way in silence, the taste of fries still in my mouth, wondering what we had done wrong. This was supposed to be the best night of our lives. I had anticipated spending the New Year in Dublin for months, all for it to come down

to us not being able to enjoy ourselves. Perhaps I was not trying hard enough, or I actually should have peed in the street because it would have made a better story than giving into the suited McDonald's man that guarded the restroom.

We made it back to the hotel and decided to try The Bleeding Horse pub that was attached to our building as a last resort. We walked Lexi to the front lobby door, and made our way into the dark bar. Happily enough, there was an open table that we were able to occupy while having a couple more drinks and socializing. The atmosphere was friendly, so we decided, once again, to give the evening another try. I grabbed a cider and joined our friend Kayleigh at a corner table. Christina walked over a few minutes later, completely irritated at her gin and tonic that had cost seven Euros.

"This would literally be four dollars in the states. I just practically paid nine dollars for a freaking gin and tonic" she rolled her eyes. I winced, the price of the drinks not aiding our defeated mood.

We began talking and quickly drinking to make up for time lost, and eventually started to joke and reflect on the absurdity of the evening with a sense of humor. We knew that we would have other nights to go out, and other places to see, so we could just pretend and re-do New Years another day. The positivity was forced and not completely sincere, but our attempts to cheer ourselves up were somewhat working, regardless. We would probably never get another New Year's in Dublin, Ireland, but we couldn't let it ruin the rest of our tour.

Our musings were quickly interrupted by an intoxicated, gruff middle-aged man to our right. He wore a stylish grey coat and a dark cap, his face outlined by greasy curly hair and rough stubble. Next to him was a younger man in similar attire, quietly sipping his beer.

“Hey, I want to tell you something,” he started, sloppily pointing at Kayleigh. “In this life, you only get one set of legs.”

Kayleigh abruptly laughed, “What?” she yelled back.

“You aren’t even listening to me!” the man threw up his hands, getting somewhat angry. *“In this life, you only get one set of legs.”*

The three of us looked at each other, slightly cocking our heads. Either I had drunk more than I thought, I wasn’t picking up on some deep Irish philosophy, or this man was loony and we were trapped with him in a crowded corner of the bar.

“I don’t know what you are saying. You aren’t making any sense.” Kayleigh tried again, giggling.

“Come over here.” He called to us, patting empty seats beside him. “Come on now.” He grossly smiled. His friend laughed to himself, looking into the foam of his drink and shaking his head slowly. Wasn’t he going to say anything or help us out?

I too, shook my head, in an attempt to get Kayleigh to stop talking to the weirdo. “Just ignore him.” I whispered, our chaperone’s warnings going through my head like a scroll at the bottom of a news screen. What if he came over to us? Or waited until we left and followed us out? Yes, our hotel was ten feet away—but a lot can happen in ten feet.

“No.” Kayleigh continued. “We are fine over here, thanks”.

“Then you are stupid! So stupid!” The man yelled, pounding his beer glass on the table.

“Stupid because I don’t want to sit by you? Okay.” Kayleigh laughed harder. “Dude, I am drunk, just stop talking to us.” Christina and I began laughing too, at her honesty, and ignored the man’s continued attempts at waving his arm in a beckoning way and patting the seats around his table until he finally left a while later. There was power in numbers, and no one was going to take advantage of my friends and me after the obstacles we had already overcome in a few short hours. We continued talking and eventually had a great time, determining that despite a string of disappointments, the night ended on a somewhat positive note. We were together, in a calm setting, celebrating the New Year among locals, like we originally wanted. The optimism was no longer totally forced.

We had high expectations for the holiday, imagining pub hopping and celebrating in Dublin to be far grander than anything that we had experienced before. Instead, we walked about three miles in total, in the rain, and purchased fast food in order to relieve ourselves in a public restroom. I had better New Years Eve celebrations in high school watching movies at home, or the one time I went to a bowling alley with an overzealous church youth group that my best friend was a part of.

Our expectations of the place had hyped up the holiday so much that I had forgotten what I enjoy the most—spending time laughing with my friends. Being in Ireland, no matter how romantic, should not have changed that. We ended up at a less crowded pub where we were able to talk and joke, while discussing our hopes for the New Year and our futures. Sure, we could have stayed home and had a similar type of New Year, but being in a beautiful city sharing music with people that I cared about made it that much better. The parties, bars, and copious amounts of alcohol really had nothing to do with the spirit of possibility that the New Year brought. We ended up celebrating the holiday, and each other, correctly. It just took us some

rain, multiple closed pubs, an America-loving rugby team, a McDonald's bathroom, and an unruly drunk man to figure it out.

Kyteler's Inn: There is Nothing Like a Dame

In the south-east part of Ireland stands the cultured, crafted city of Kilkenny. Kilkenny is the county capital, and statistically has a steady number of tourists throughout the year. It was our second destination after Dublin, and I had taken an instant liking to the name from the first time that I saw it printed in our tour itinerary. I enjoyed that I could say “Kilkenny” in my American accent, and still sound like I could be a native Irish person, without even trying. There was something about saying “Kilkenny” that did not seem forced or artificial.

As we neared Kilkenny, our tour bus bouncing down the streets on the outskirts of the city, I first noticed how clean the architecture was. The buildings were mostly white, occasionally painted a pastel blue or pink, all rectangular in shape and relatively the same size. White lights hung across the streets from rooftop to rooftop, creating a festive imagery that made me imagine the city in a snow globe.

(Ireland rarely receives snow because of the temporal climate, and when they do have a heavy snow they borrow equipment from Sweden, but nonetheless—I saw Kilkenny as a snow globe town.)

After we had arrived at the Kilkenny Ormonde Hotel (I thought it was the Kilkenny Almond Hotel for a full day before my friends corrected me after I told a local that we were staying at The Almond Hotel—however, she did not notice because it sounded like I was saying Ormonde with an Irish accent), I quickly changed and met up with my friends that wished to venture into the dark cobble stone streets and find a pub. From Dublin, we had learned that pub-searching proved to be challenging any night of the week because most pubs in Ireland closed at 11:30pm. Considering American night life typically begins around that time, we always felt like we were barely getting acquainted with our surroundings before having to head back to our hotel.

We had noticed that Irish natives valued their leisure, drinking slowly in a relaxed manner until they were ready to return home to see their families or have some quiet time alone. We were visiting on their Holiday, which began a few days before Christmas and stretched until after New Year's Day. Holiday was a time for the locals to unwind, and I admired that mentality since the holidays in America are the busiest time of our year, but I also swelled with a desire for adventure and memorable nights during our tour. I wanted to return home with stories to tell, or maybe even find a potential pen-pal. Who knew, maybe we would really hit it off with someone we met while out at the pubs?

We wandered a few blocks, and stumbled upon an inn with a medieval vibe. It was called "Kyteler's Inn", and was a small stone building that had been constructed around the original infrastructure of an actual medieval pub. The pub had once been home to a woman called Dame Alice Kyteler, the earliest woman in Ireland accused of witchcraft. After being condemned and sentenced to be executed, Dame Alice successfully fled the country, never to be heard from again. However, her lady servant, Petronella, was flogged and burned at the stake. Dame Alice had been tried for killing all three of her husbands (and perhaps more men) with poison and sorcery, allegedly. We did not previously realize Kyteler's Inn's historical significance until we read a shiny, informational plaque inside of the bar—perhaps they did not want to scare away visitors from displaying it on the outside. All in all, with an air of mischievous mystery, this pub definitely seemed like the type of place that I wanted to drink in.

I entered with my small group of five girls, and we headed toward the back of the right-side seating area, realizing how crowded this particular pub actually was. We were barely ten feet in when an intoxicated, older Irish woman yelled "Dumb Americans!" at us with a surprising amount of aggression. I suppose we had given ourselves away by hesitating at the entrance,

scouting out potential places to sit. We didn't naturally walk in and take a table, but instead were like small, well-dressed deer in headlights by the front door. Giggling awkwardly, we shrugged, because yes, we supposed we did look like dumb Americans, creating a scene while we tried to find somewhere to sit where we would all be together. I was admittedly frazzled and embarrassed that we had stood out so quickly that I wrangled one of my friends to walk up to the bar with me, for I was incredibly nervous to get a drink alone. I had wanted to meet Irish people, but was worried that no one would want to talk with "Dumb Americans".

The bar was crowded, and my friend Sadie and I were pushed to the side while we waited in a line to order. I soon noticed that in front of the seating area surrounding the bar were two older men performing live music. After a few minutes of waiting and listening to their Irish Rover cover songs, I decided that the men were talented, and I wanted to remember their vocal quality. I took out my phone and began taking a video, only to be met with harsh faces of the crowd, turning completely around to look at me in disgust. One of the singers caught my eye and also stared at me like I was insanely rude, so I quickly put my phone down and turned off the video. I was visibly shaking now, very embarrassed and confused, because I had meant my recording to be a compliment. In America, we often take pictures or videos of things that we enjoy so that we can remember them when our actual memories fail to recall what we had seen.

In Ireland, I had noticed that there was a lesser dependency on technology. People actually looked up while walking down the streets instead of brushing past each other, faces buried in their touch screen cell phones. I also had not seen many tablets or laptops in any small restaurants or cafes that we had visited thus far. The Irish were quiet, and more personal in presence. If I had just watched the men intently myself, without the shield of my phone, perhaps I could have remembered it just fine—but I also wanted to show Meme what an actual Irish band

sounded like and had the best intentions by videoing their song. Nonetheless, it was apparently unwelcome and I felt very foolish, deciding whether I should pretend like nothing happened or casually toss my phone behind my shoulder to show them that I had no intention of re-visiting the short recording. Sadie, staring intently at the bar, hadn't even noticed. I didn't bring it up to her.

Still embarrassed, I eventually made it to the actual bar to get drinks, and as the older crowd trickled out, we moved to the front of the pub to a larger table that was pushed against another table with four vacant seats. We uncomfortably sipped our Bulmer's cider (it had become my drink of choice) and Guinness, feeling less welcome than we did in Dublin just the day before. Shortly after we had all mustered up the courage to get a second drink, four very attractive European people claimed the empty seats next to us. The group consisted of two guys and their girlfriends from other parts of the continent, all around our age.

Turning to greet us, we quickly learned that one of the girlfriends was from Sweden, and was exceedingly gorgeous. We chatted for a while about the states; for she had been to New York numerous times and expressed her desire to someday reside there. Almost every local that we had met had either been to New York City, or inquired about New York City with a great amount of curiosity (I thought of the man on the plane—what was with Europeans and New York, honestly?). Locals had asked the same about Hollywood, making sure that Hollywood was “still there” (we assured them it was, to their relief), and also about Cleveland when we told them that we were from Ohio. For whatever reason, no one had heard of Columbus, even though it is our state's capital and close to Cleveland's size.

We talked to the lovely woman for a while with ease, until her intoxicated boyfriend decided to chime in. He began his impromptu speech by telling us that he thought we (my group

of friends) should all find an Irishman to have romantic relations with. Wide-eyed, my friends and I stared at each other with slightly gaping mouths, with small laughs escaping from our throats. Many Americans fantasize about being involved with a heavily-accented European, but we were perfectly content enjoying each other's company and trying not to be the obnoxious Americans that couldn't find seating or that videotape people while they sang. We said we were not particularly interested in his bold suggestion, and quickly attempted to change the subject. However, he saw our objection as an excuse to be more adamant, and continued to speak with us, ignoring our efforts to revisit the conversation about New York with his girlfriend.

"You need a red-headed Irishman." He continued with a sly smile, "They are the best. Due to unfortunate circumstances," he said, nodding at the ladies across the table from him and his friend, "my chap and I cannot go home with anyone. But, you all can".

We awkwardly winced at his persistent effort and looked at the man's girlfriend, unsure of how to respond. Did he just indirectly say that he would be interested in going home with us if his girlfriend was not present? She was obviously beautiful and sweet, and he would be crazy to jeopardize his relationship with her. We forcefully laughed, staring into the foam and bubbles of our drinks, and tried to engage in our own conversation, completely ignoring our new friends, hoping to discourage him.

"No, listen to me, ladies." He began again. "You need to find a red-haired Irishman, so that he can get into your knickers and he can show you his *mickey*." He concluded with, feeling quite proud.

I turned to his drunken face. His *mickey*?! There was nothing intriguing or endearing about his use of colloquial language. In fact I was scared, definitely not wishing to see anyone's *mickey*, because I was not even sure what that entailed. Genitals should hardly ever be

given pet names, especially not one after a famous childhood icon. My mind started wandering to pictures of Abercrombie models with cartoon Mickey Mouses photoshopped over their crotches, smiling among the denim stitches. What came first, the mouse or the Irish penis?

The conversation completely ended then, with Mickey Man's girlfriend abruptly rising from the table, asking, "Do you want me to extend my stay, or not?" and storming out of the pub. The other three quickly gathered their things as well, and sloppily stumbled out after her. My friends and I laughed with much relief, partially because we all agreed without saying that the kind Swedish woman could do better than Mickey Man and also over the shared absurdity of the situation.

I continued sipping my carbonated cider, letting its crisp apple taste sting my throat all the way down to my chest. We quietly stared into the darkness of the pub, confused about what exactly just happened. It was then that we collectively noticed a replicated statue of Dame Alice standing under the dim lighting, while the live band played (an American song, I mind you) "I've Got Friends In Low Places" in the background.

"Do you guys see that statue? Is that *her*?" I asked, referring to Dame Alice.

"Oh, well that's scary. It's like she is looking at us." My friend Teagan answered.

It did indeed seem as though she was watching us, probably rolling her stone eyes at the ridiculousness of Mickey Man's obscene conversational tactics. She was completely grey in color, with a delicate face, covered in wrinkled lines and moles. The artist had given the statue hair, bright red that was braided thick down over her left shoulder. She had on a brown cloak that completely covered her small frame, with the hood pulled up around her head.

The moles and wrinkles were probably drawn on for effect to make her look less friendly, and more witch-like. They were out of place and too dark on her searching face. It didn't seem

like she deserved them. What all had this statue seen at this pub? How many Mickey Men? And what did the real Dame Alice see in her life? We had read the fantastical story of a witch that had murdered three husbands and then fled the country. It was eerie and fascinating, but we had only learned one side of the tale. Perhaps the men were violent, awful people, and she was merely taking a stand to protect herself and future women, like our Swedish friend that was probably now crying in the Kilkenny streets.

We finished our drinks and got up to leave, pushing in our barstools and shoving our arms into coat sleeves. I looked around at the pub one last time, as we all walked slowly towards the statue. We hadn't verbally declared that we wanted to be closer to her, but we all had the same notion and desire to get a closer look. The lights were being turned off in certain nooks of the building as the staff prepared to close for the night.

We stood around the statue, tilting our heads, wondering if her very spirit was still lingering around us. Questioning what she would have done in our situation, how she would have most likely defended the Swedish girl without a second thought. We turned to leave and I touched the cloak of the statue, feeling the cold stone underneath the material. Smiling to myself, identifying with her ominous eyes, I realized that just maybe, Dame Alice was not so wrong after all.

The Thing About Alice

In 2008, Kilkenny woman Claire Nolan published a book on Alice Kyteler, intrigued by the mysterious woman condemned of witch craft in 1324. Dame Alice was thought to have had supernatural powers, but had successfully disappeared before she was to be burned at the stake. Five years prior, in 2003, a Midwest American man by the name of Paddy Shaw painted a picture of Dame Alice after he came across her story on the internet. He found her interesting, and tried to recreate what he thought she would have looked like, for no actual pictures of her exist.

In 2009, Shaw was cleaning out his studio and decided that the picture of Dame Alice made him feel uneasy. He felt that she should be in Kilkenny, so without charge, Shaw mailed his painting to Kyteler's Inn, telling its owner Nicky Flynn to give her a good home.

Soon after Flynn received the gift, it was brought to the attention of Nolan's father, who was a well known Kilkenny genealogist. He was taken aback when he saw it, for the portrayal of Dame Alice in the painting had an uncanny resemblance to his daughter that had written her book on Dame Alice the previous year. He told his daughter right away, and she too was shocked when she saw the artwork. She claimed that the facial structure, posture, and body shape were all similar to her own—except for the malevolent look in Dame Alice's eyes. Furthermore, the dress that Dame Alice was painted in was almost identical to the dress that Nolan wore when she gave public readings from her book.

Before you think that this is perhaps a coincidence entertained and exaggerated by the imagination, remember that Shaw had painted his piece five years prior to Nolan's book publishing. Shaw, an American, had never met or even heard of Nolan, an Irish woman. Could

Dame Alice still be at work today, full of trickery? The painted picture and a portrait of Claire Nolan currently both reside at Kyteler's Inn, St. Kieran Street, in Kilkenny, Ireland.

Kissing The Blarney Stone

“Do you want the gift of *Eloquence*?” our tour guide asked our eager bus over the microphone. “Winston Churchill kissed the Blarney Stone, and he was completely filled with wit!” I had figured that Irwin had most likely had his fair share of kissing the Blarney Stone as well. He spoke like velvet, the facts and sights dancing with intonation on our ears, lifting the corners of our lips. Naturally I had learned of Churchill’s legacy of being a great orator during the Second World War. If kissing the Blarney Stone could do that to a former British Prime Minister and charismatic Irwin, it was worth a shot.

As our bus bumped and turned alongside the lush green fields lining the roads, my eyes glazed as I stared out the window at the serenity of it all. Irwin went on, giving us examples of how clever Winston Churchill really was, but I mentally prepared myself for the tourism horror that we were about to witness. Over the past few hundred years, the stone has attracted millions of people. It is regarded as a world landmark and the most popular spot in Ireland. I figured that there would be an incredibly long line weaving its way through a run-down castle, infected by many obnoxious visitors taking copious amounts of pictures that would slow the process even more. I imagined a person dressed up like a giant rock mascot, posing to take pictures with visitors for a Euro, signing its autograph “*The Blarney Stone*” while its assistant (in a Blarney Stone graphic tee shirt and visor) handed out candid Polaroid shots of the moment.

I was also troubled with some concerns about how I was actually going to kiss the stone. What if I did it wrong? I knew that the Stone of Eloquence was embedded in a wall at the top of the Blarney Castle, and had heard that you have to tilt your head backwards to kiss it. The task seemed slightly daunting, but I assumed that a little lean back while up on my toes would do the

trick sufficiently. It couldn't have been *too* difficult if millions of other people have done it already.

We pulled up to a touristy plaza with multiple gift shops, a cafeteria, and a chain coffee shop *Insomnia* that we had seen in other urban places around the country. *Oh great*, I thought, *This seems to be the equivalent of a Starbucks next to Floridian gift shops that sell alligator heads and hermit crabs*. I climbed out of the bus, scoffing, when our driver Tommy caught my eye.

"Do you want to know how they clean the stone?" he asked me, crinkling at the eyes. I sensed his mischievous tone.

"How do they clean it, Tommy?" I humored him, with the slightest bit of curiosity.

"I will tell you when you get back." Tommy laughed, his face reddening at the cheeks.

I nodded, playfully rolling my eyes, and continued to walk towards the tourist trap. We formed a line by the entrance and presented our tickets one by one while going through a revolving gate. I was relieved thus far, for there did not seem to be very many people except for our choir group, and no giant Rock Person in sight. However, I squinted my eyes skeptically through the entire entrance process, feeling now as though I was going to a local amusement park, or the state fair each time the revolving gate clicked. Those types of events took on a completely different type of corny, often accompanied with "Guess My Weight" and "Pop These Balloons with Darts" games. Would a creaky roller coaster take us up to the castle? Does Ireland even *have* cotton candy?

I readied myself for the zoo of people and festivity that was bound to be on the other side of the gate, and finally went through the line only to walk into a beautiful green park. Grass and trees stretched for what looked like a mile, while a rushing creek ran its way down the middle. A modest wooden bridge went over the creek and lead to a dirt path that would eventually take us to the stone. From the entrance, we could see the grey stone tops of the castle peaking from behind the tall tree leaves. Irish locals casually walked their babies in strollers, or calmly jogged around the dirt path. It was all very lovely, and took me by surprise, considering the over-the-top disaster I was anticipating. I looked around to see my group of fifty members and blushed with the realization that *we* were the obnoxious tourists that I feared, wandering through the park practically clueless. Certainly the locals were used to seeing a tourist group every once in a while, but oh God, there were *so* many of us. Why didn't I think that this was odd before? If anything, we would make the line that wound through the castle and held up the other innocent visitors.

I started to walk towards the castle, still feeling ultimately humbled, but also incredibly excited. Was it not every Irish American's dream to kiss the Blarney Stone? I pictured fireworks the second that my lips touched the rock. I relished in my anticipation figuring that after I was finished, I would feel *different*. I had to remember how I felt now. There was bound to be a "Before-Jordan-Kissed-The-Blarney-Stone" and an "After-Jordan-Kissed-The-Blarney-Stone". I would be noticeably more, well—*eloquent*. I was about to put my mouth where probably a million people had placed their lips before mine, and I was elated. Tommy did say that the stone was cleaned, so I had nothing to really worry about, communicable disease-wise. Maybe I would even do something weird to leave my mark, like lick it.

Completely lost in my musings, I looked up to realize that we now stood in front of the Blarney Castle. Looming in front of me was the five story beast that was built six hundred years earlier. The stone crumbled in parts around the large tower in the front, with bits of green growing in between. A sign pointed out small steps to a tunnel and basement-like dungeon around the side that was open for exploring. Various open windows throughout the structure gave insight to the turning staircases and balconies on the inside. It was breathtakingly majestic, and...tall. I did not realize it would be so, tall.

I continued to walk along a ramp that circled to the side of the castle, where we would enter. The base of the building was decorated with fine landscaped bushes and blooming flowers in pinks, oranges, and blues. Irwin had warned us that we would need to climb one hundred steps to reach the top, and although I was slightly daunted by the current shape (or lack of) of my cardiovascular endurance, I figured that I was up for the challenge. *I climbed to the top of Eiffel Tower*, I thought pretentiously, *I can handle some castle steps*.

We finally entered the castle and I went up a small flight in the first room. *This is not so bad*, I reassured myself. I breathed in the musty smell of old, dusted rock and tried to imagine the battles or gallant parties that once took place in these halls. It was all very chilling and enchanting, until I reached the actual spiral staircase that would take me to the top of the castle. As aesthetically pleasing as winding staircases may be, for myself, they always tend to create some sort of impromptu vertigo. I ceased my breath sharply, drawing my fingers into my palms. My eyes continued to move upwards as I observed that the steps were quite small, and in close quarter. I remembered that Irwin also told us that they might be slippery because they were originally crafted from limestone. The meaning of his words sank in as I realized that I was about to climb a spiraling staircase made of six hundred year old rocks that also happened to be wet.

Determined not to turn back because of treacherous stairs, I mentally told myself in a matter of seconds that I would survive the climb, like many had before me, by going slowly and holding onto the railing. I took my first step looking to grasp my metal savior, only to notice that it was non-existent. The wall that turned to my right was smooth with nothing to hold on to. My left side was completely open with the exception of a thick rope that stretched vertically from what I imagined to be the top of the castle all the way the where I was standing. Elderly people had made this climb? *Children?* I thought of turning back to the remainder of my group, waving my arms above my head shouting, “It is a dangerous death trap! Come no farther if you value your life!” but I decided to climb the stairs in a natural, fool proof way. I turned my back against the right side wall, leaned over to grasp the rope with both hands firmly, and began my way up, walking sideways.

I avoided most thoughts of tumbling down the stairs while holding my breath and grinding my back molars. I could feel my heart pulsing in my hands that grasped the rope, and it motivated me to continue crab walking to the top, no matter how insane I looked. I had become the tourist nightmare that I so feared. Tears formed in my eyes partially from embarrassment and also because I was completely terrified that I would never reach an end to my climb. Most of my group had already bounded quickly up the stairs and were now waiting at the top. I was thankful to not be completely alone, for my friend Christina that had previously broken her foot was also slowly venturing upward in front of me, worried about the possibility of reinjuring herself. She had an excuse to be climbing cautiously; I did not, and was also concerned that she would take a wrong step and backward somersault into me, sending us both down the slick limestone. When I finally saw blue-grey sky and felt a chilled wind, I stumbled onto the top floor of the castle, triumphant. I was on an open floor, five stories above the ground, but had never felt safer.

Catching my breath, I joined the line and began to calm myself down by looking at the view of the park below. My eyes sailed across the vast green reaching its fingertips to the sky, as I searched for any words that I could use to describe such a view. I hoped that after kissing the Blarney Stone, I would have acquired every descriptor necessary for orally replicating the sights that I could see from the fifth story of the castle.

Looking around, I also saw that my group was the only visitors waiting to kiss the stone. We practically took up the whole fifth floor, laughing and breathing in the air that had gotten colder with height. Again, I felt ridiculous that I had spent time worrying about being a part of an overdone site seeing adventure, only to recognize that we were the only tourists present at this time. My part of the line continued near the stone, and the process of others kissing it was actually in view. Before me I saw man that looked like he was close to seventy years old casually sitting by the edge of a large window that opened to reveal the ground below. He was wearing jeans and a winter jacket, with his legs dangling in the air without any sort of safety belt or rope keeping him from slipping and falling all five stories. To the side of his left hip was a black rubber mat that each person took turns laying their backs on once they were called forward. From there, the Blarney Stone kissees would scoot back and grab two black rails that were attached to the castle wall above the window opening while the decrepit looking man put his left arm around their waste for extra support as they climbed to hang upside down and kiss the smoother of the stones. This is what “tilting your head backwards to kiss the stone” actually entailed.

I looked from side to side at my friends who were in line beside me. “*That* is the man that is supposed to hold us up as we go *upside down*?!” I whispered, my voice rising in panic. “Does he even work here?” I couldn’t see a name tag or a uniform polo. As far as I knew, he was some

random Irish gentleman that thought it would be nice to help out. He could have been a psychopath that decided to let random people go and fall to their deaths. Couldn't they have at least given him a neon orange vest or something?

"How many people have died here each year?" I continue, equally scaring my friends who blinked and shrugged. "There should be a plaque with a number—we have the right to know what we are getting ourselves into, don't we?" They nervously giggled, as we all began to move forward while second guessing if we actually wanted to kiss the stone. I mean, we *saw* it. We had made it to the top together, which had to count for something in the eloquence-department. I was shaking now, far worse than when I side stepped up the hundred stairs. It was finally my turn.

I walked forward and sat down on the mat, my back to the window. I lied down and smiled at the man as I felt his arm go across my lower stomach and around my back, bending his fingers to hold my other side. I scooted back carefully and reached up to firmly grasp the handles while I was continuously lowered downward. I was going to kiss the Blarney Stone. I had been waiting, and the moment was here. If I were to plummet to my death, it would be bold, heroic even, I just had to—

"I'm too short!" I yelled, not able to reach the stone and feeling like I was completely upside down. At five feet tall, it was quite a stretch that I was not sure I was going to make.

"No," the old man chuckled, "you are beautiful!"

What? I thought frantically, the blood completely rushing to my head. Does he always compliment people before he drops them to their death? My hands were ice cold now, yet somehow sweating at the same time, slipping on the bars. "Is this it?" I asked shrilly, as I kissed

the smoother part of the stone. Suddenly, I was sitting up on the mat with pieces of light dancing in my eyes, my cheeks burning pink. My friends were cheering for me while a young man to my right took a picture with a tripod and large flashing light that was similar to what photographers used to use when taking our elementary school pictures. I had blacked out. Did I only imagine kissing the stone? The man behind the camera bent down and handed me a white ticket with a number written on it. “Take that to the front, and you can view your picture and decide if you want to purchase it”, he said emotionless.

I was in a daze as I walked the rest of the way around the top floor, realizing that I would have to take a similar winding staircase back to the ground. I sighed, turning my back to the wall, and walked back down sideways, my knee caps still feeling like they were floating in water. After safely making it to the ground, my friends and I laughed in shock as we made our way back to the bus. We had each bought the pictures of our selves, and were amazed by how horrifically different the experience had been from what we originally thought.

“I literally cried,” my friend Christina stammered wide eyed, her face blanched. “The man laughed at me. I think I screamed too. But this picture is perfect because you can see how scared I am.”

I opened the booklet to look at my souvenir, surprised to see that my face was capable of being such an alarming color of red. My eyes were shut tight and I was smiling—when did that happen? Well, I could barely remember the experience, but I guess I was passing as being joyful for at least the couple of seconds it took to snap the picture. The camera angle was also completely unflattering. The picture was practically all hips, no stone.

Still walking in disbelief, our other friend Lexi ran behind us with her picture. She opened it up to show us a candid shot of her gracefully arching backwards, black hair cascading in waves through the open window while a genuine, not terrified smile touched the tops of her naturally blushing cheeks. She was even slightly angled towards the camera, like she had talked about picture taking strategies beforehand with the photographer. *Great, I thought, I look like a lumpy tomato that someone drew a crooked smiley face on and Lexi could be Ireland's Rapunzel.*

At a loss for words, I shook my head with a breathy laugh. Perhaps the eloquence took a couple of hours to set in. When we arrived at the bus, I caught Tommy's stare, and could tell that he was anxiously awaiting our return.

"Do you want to know how they clean the stone?" he questioned again, raised his eyebrows.

"Sure, how do they clean the stone?" I asked.

"Recycled Guinness" Tommy answered. "Think about it".

On Identity: An Odyssey In Four Scenes

The Monk

Exhausted from the day that we had spent touring historic Galway, I climbed aboard the tour bus in my black choir gown, even more lethargic after our three course dinner. I slowly walked up the steep bus steps, holding the dress above my ankles so that I would not trip and start a domino effect with the thirty people behind me. It was already dark, for the sun mostly tended to show itself between the hours of 9:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. on a normal day, which contributed to our sleepy state. I had curled my hair and put on lipstick in an effort to feel empowered and excited about our last performance, but I honestly just wanted to lie in the hotel bed and stare at the ceiling until I fell asleep.

I felt guilty about this, for it was our very last concert, and I wanted to feel sentimental. I wanted to cherish every note and each face of our audience as they clapped and smiled at us. We were going home the next day, and as much I wanted sleep, I was not ready to leave the country yet. This last concert, at The Glenstal Abbey All Male Boarding School, was supposed to make me feel celebratory—but it didn't. I wanted to be excited, and take in every moment, but my eyes were swollen from lack of rest, and I was wearing the same dress that I had worn five times previously without washing it. Furthermore, the drive to the boarding school was an hour from our hotel.

The bus pulled away, and I sat in silence, rhythmically bouncing along with the uneven roads. Did boarding schools actually exist? I always thought of boarding schools exclusively being in old literary worlds, or popular British shows for teens that sometimes aired on Nick at

Night. Were there boarding schools in America that I was not rich enough to know about? My mouth scrunched and twitched with thought, interrupted by Irwin on the microphone.

He explained that the Glenstal Abbey was Benedictine, and constructed in 1839. The school was a Norman Revivalist Castle, originally occupied by the wealthy English Barrington family after it was built. Unfortunately, Sir Charles and Lady Barrington had a young daughter that died tragically while riding with a military fellow on castle grounds. The girl jokingly put on his uniform hat while riding, and was shot by an enemy of his hiding in the bushes. Because of the hat, they had mistaken the young Barrington woman for him. The family could no longer bear the sorrow of losing their daughter at their own home, and decided to leave Ireland permanently and return to England in 1925. Benedictine monks moved in a while later, and started the school for boys.

Oh, how sobering, I thought. The story had made my mood worse if anything. I also felt even more idiotic because I did not realize that monks still existed either. Well, I knew that monks were real, but I assumed that they were tucked away, deep in the mountains of select European and Asian parts, sworn to silence. I pictured them still writing with feathered quills and ink in a bottle, wandering the cliff sides with Gregorian chant. I had no idea that monks were so common place, and that we were about to see them. I suddenly became anxious. Were we dressed for monks? Did I look conservative enough? I looked down again, to see my black dress that goes just below my neck and completely covers the tops of my feet. It seemed appropriate.

Eventually, the bus drove into a heavily wooded area, and we were told that the school was just a few minutes back into the woods. Oh great, an elaborate plan to kill us, I joked with the other choir members. We nervously struggled to see any signs of human activity through the

large window in the front of the bus. The forest was completely dark, and we were rigorously bouncing, nearly missing trees on either side. For the first time on the trip, I felt completely nauseous, gripping the plastic seat in front of me until the backs of my hands were marbled ivory and red. *Fantastic*, I thought, *we would stand up to sing in this beautiful abbey and I will puke in front of all of the children.*

The bus finally stopped in a stone courtyard in front of the boarding school. The building was also stone, with small turrets and decorative roofing. It was breathtaking, and I momentarily desperately wished that I could be a fifteen year old boy so that I could attend somewhere so beautiful. We got off of the bus and quietly shuffled inside, scared that if we spoke, the whole building would vanish into thin air. There was something ethereal about the structure, being nestled in the woods. Once we crossed under the stone archway, we entered a foyer with grey marble floors, and a winding white staircase to the left. The walls were adorned with framed, religious paintings with eyes that followed us down the hallway and past the stairs.

We entered a room that was painted salmon, with wooden flooring and large windows that took up most of the walls. Standing in the middle, waiting to greet us, was an average sized solemn man with kind eyes. I instantly inferred that he must be a monk. His grey hair was like a thinning bird's nest, and his wired glasses sat directly on the top of the bridge of his nose. He wore a black robe that went down to his ankles to reveal that he was wearing pants and white tennis shoes underneath. I smiled at the denim peeking out at me from his robe hem. He was a cool, jean-wearing monk, if anything.

He greeted us quickly and ushered us, yet again, to the left through large, wooden doors. This room had the same flooring and vibrant colored walls as the previous room, but also

multiple crystal chandeliers that lit a grand piano in the far corner, and more religious paintings on the wall. We slowly took off our coats and smiled in wonder, each imagining that we had been brought to a wizarding school. The large windows on the far wall were covered by thick, maroon curtains that made the room seem all the more private. The monk stood by the door, curiously watching as we began to warm up our voices for the concert.

The Woman In Fur

As we began singing scales and tuning chords, I actually started to anticipate the concert with joy. I felt less guilty now, and reveled in my sudden cheerfulness. Our warm ups soon ended, and we grabbed our coats for the short walk across the courtyard to the abbey. We only had five minutes to make the transition, and collectively decided to run across the courtyard and parking lot area to save time. Once we made it outside the school, I began jogging in my black flats and long dress, only to trip and almost slide face first across the asphalt. My optimism was gone as I looked side to side to make sure that no high school aged boys had seen me. I had not spotted any yet, but young boys were crafty. They could have been lurking underground, or hiding in the castle walls. We wanted to be the “cool college” Americans, giving them a concert and mingling afterward, and I was not trying to blow my cover before the festivities even began. I suppose that singing in the front row of our ensemble with pieces of black rubble in my forehead and blood seeping through my teeth could be impressive to teenage boys, but I did not want to chance it.

Upon entering the stone abbey, we ushered to the front and into our formation. The concert began quickly, with our voices filling the space and reverberating through the arched ceilings. Many locals had decided to attend, with the boys sitting in the back few rows. Making it through the performance unscathed, I sang from my soul, soaking in every moment that I

possibly could. I remember the woman sitting in front of me, in the second pew on my left, with curled blonde hair and a dusty brown fur coat. Although the audience was crowded, I kept looking at this woman to see her reaction. She had big, blue eyes, and a round blushed face. She never took her furs off, even though it was not cold. She smiled without teeth at our sacred pieces, and cried during *Danny Boy*. I never made eye contact with this woman, for she never looked directly at me during the performance. I also did not make an effort to talk to her after the concert ended, but I will remember her. I wanted her approval, for us to know that we changed her life, even for forty minutes. Perhaps it was her location, or her look of loneliness, but she stood out to me more than any other audience member. I assumed that she was single. I imagined that she had a boy that attended the school, but he was too embarrassed to want to sit with her. She overcompensated for her sadness with buying expensive furs, but wanted to feel something that money couldn't give her. I watched her face to see the reactions that we craved from our music, and was pleased when she was one of the first to her feet to give us a standing ovation. We wanted to tour Ireland to bridge the cultural gap and geographical distance through song. We brought them European hymns and traditional Irish music, while sharing some American pieces as well. We hoped to distract our audiences from whatever sorrows they had experienced and transform the space completely; connecting them to whichever otherworldly realm they knew to be true. Because of the reaction of the Woman in Fur, I felt deeply that we had given an excellent last concert. We would never again sing as a group in Ireland, but our journey and mission had been fulfilled. I could see it in her eyes, the whites glistening in the dimly light church.

The Boys

After we finished singing the *Otterbein Love Song* as a choir, we tearfully made our way back to the school for refreshments with the students. The success of our tour was

overwhelming, and the *Otterbein Love Song* represented our community and love of music. Our school song allowed our university's pride to be represented in Ireland, and we were thrilled to let our audience know where we came from. Our comradery floated us back to through the school's doors and into our small celebration. We entered the first salmon colored room with the brown flooring yet again; this time to see that long tables filled with tea, coffee, and cookies had been set up in our honor. I took some black tea in a plastic cup, adding cream and sugar while avoiding the nervous glances of the young boys that had come to speak with us. I noticed two students in the far corner from the refreshment tables, laughing sneakily, faces crinkled with mischief. I walked towards them with Christina in hopes of starting up a conversation.

"Hello, I'm Jordan" I started, shaking both boys' hands.

"My name is Jack," answered the taller one, the leader of the two. "Grand to meet you." he smiled.

The other one introduced himself as well, but he was quiet with an incredibly thick accent. I do not remember his name, but I want to say that it was Robert. His eyebrows were forested, with his curly brown hair hanging over his too small forehead. His mouth was slightly crooked, and his teeth too big. Not saying that all Roberts are unattractive at all, but there was a certain Robert-ness about him.

"How do you find the biscuits?" Jack asked Christina who was nibbling on what looked to be a short bread cookie.

"Did I find what?" she questioned, confused.

"No, how do you like the cookie?" I quickly said to her, slightly embarrassed and irritated that she did not understand his colloquial phrase. I did not want the boys to think that we

were dense or phrased things differently in America, even though her confusion gave away that we obviously did. I wanted the differences between Ireland and America to seem minimal, to show the boys that we hardly varied from one another. At the very least, I did not want them to think that I was confused by basic Irish phrases, or any less intelligent and socially comfortable than they were. I was seven years their elder and did not wish to come off as being ignorant. I had not cared what a fifteen year old boy thought about me since I was fifteen, but for some reason, this mattered.

These boys were Irish, and seemed eager to talk to us about what it was like being a college student in America. They wanted to know what we planned on doing with our lives career-wise, or which types of classes we had to take at our university thus far. They were interested in us, but I was interested in them. I wanted to know why we were different from them? What set apart me, a young, American woman, from these teenage Irish boys? Was it the way we talked? What we had learned in school? Were our values and ways that we saw the world similar in any way? I tried to see how they felt by the shifts in their weight, the way they moved their hands or arched their eyebrows. I looked at them for recognition of a life that I could have had if Marie and Dennis didn't take a ship to New York. I could have been a fifteen year old in Ireland. I identified with Jack and Robert, yet looked at them with an ounce of jealousy. If given the choice, would they have chosen to be Irish?

Despite my internal and constant observations of every small gesture that Jack and Robert made, we continued chatting easily. They eventually asked us what we liked most about Ireland. Christina and I smiled at each other, both knowing that we had been enchanted thus far by the rich history and preservation of castles and monasteries.

“The history.” I answered confidently. “America is not very old, so we do not have the beautiful architecture and past that Europe does. I love that we can drive down the road and see remnants of a church or castle tower. In America, even if we did have those things, they would probably be vandalized or torn down.”

“Beautiful?” Jack laughed. “More like shit. The pieces of buildings are so old and shitty and no one cares enough to do anything about them. We just leave them lying around.”

I laughed too, for his answer was humorous, but I was also surprised. Did he feel this way because he was young, or did more Irish people not appreciate the history that they had around them? Did they not realize how wonderful that was? And if they did not care, then why should I?

The boys next asked us where else we had been on our tour, and we listed off every place that we had gone through or stayed in. Dublin, Glendalough, Blarney, Kilkenny, Cork, Dingle, Tipperary, Galway, Limerick. We felt proud, for we had seen a decent amount of the country in just eleven days.

“Oh, Tipperary?” Jacked winced. “Sorry you had to go through that. Not much to see there.”

“Ha, but my great grandfather is from Tipperary!” I stated, feeling superior. If anything, that alone should impress Jack and Robert. I was Irish. I knew where my family had come from, and I had waited an appropriate amount of time in the conversation to make it known. I was not obnoxious about it, but just casually brought it up because he happened to mention something about Tipperary. I was smooth, credible.

“Every American says that they have a great, great grandfather’s cousin twice removed from Tipperary” Jack was laughing harder now, “That is our stereotype of you!”

My face flushed, embarrassed. *Oh yeah*, I wanted to retort, *well our stereotype of Irish men is that they have small penises and can’t hold their liquor*. I blinked. I obviously could not say that to a kid. Not without sounding perverse or getting thrown out by monks. What the hell was wrong with me, and why was I so offended? I wanted the boys to believe me! Was I not Irish enough? Could they not see it in my face? Some hint of recognition of their own? The boys knew that I was from the United States, but I wanted to be accepted. I wanted to be welcomed home.

Instead I calmly said, “No, really! He was. He came to America in the early 1900s where he met my grandmother. She was from Mayo.” I figured I had saved myself. I could not just make something like that up. It was too specific.

“I still have family here. I just haven’t met them.” I continued, figuring that I had their attention.

“Yeah, and I have family in Italy!” Christina chimed in. “I visited them a couple of summers ago. I’m Italian.”

Jack looked at us, lowering his eyebrows into a line, skeptically. “Aren’t you... American?”

American?! Well yeah, of course we were American. We were born in America; we have lived there our whole lives. But calling ourselves American that seemed— different. It was less special, or boring perhaps, although it was the absolute truth.

“Yeah we are American,” I started, “But no one really says that!”

“—Unless you are like, bigoted or something” my friend Teagan had walked over to join the conversation. I thought of a burly white man wearing a polo and khaki shorts with a beer in his hand and the American flag in the other, waving it while rocking from foot to foot yelling “For ‘Murica!” repeatedly. Oh God, is that what they thought of us? Is that what I thought of us? Our country is made up of multiple cultures and ethnicities. Americans that deny or did not want to understand this mere fact are seen as ignorant, because we all came from somewhere. At one point in time, almost all of our families were immigrants. We weren’t all blind nationalists, running around lighting fireworks and carrying life-sized poster board cut outs of Uncle Sam.

“I mean, we are a melting pot! Yeah, a melting pot.” I jumped in. “We are made of all different cultures and do not really feel right calling ourselves American unless we are like, Native Americans or something.” I tried to explain. Somehow, defining our seventh grade Social Studies vocabulary words did not make me feel more intelligent, or convincing. Jack and Robert did not comprehend our explanation, and instead barely smiled while shoving their hands in their pockets and minimally nodding. To them, I was definitely American enough.

The Truth

We took a picture with Jack and Robert before we left, told them how nice it was to talk with them, and gathered our things to board the bus back to the hotel. We started the drive, quietly reminiscing about the night and our final concert. I shifted uncomfortably in my seat, trying to find a place to rest my feet. Sighing, I squinted into the dark bus aisle. Why did Jack’s simple question of, “Aren’t you American?” fluster me so much?

I had always been proud of my family's history. I am the fourth generation of women to be born in America on my mother's side, while my father's family proudly embraces our Italian heritage. Nationalities and ethnicities have always fascinated me, often being a conversation starter when I first meet someone. Unless a person is a Native American, they are a mix of ethnicities or from a completely different culture all together if they live in the United States. We also have citizens that are of Native American heritage mixed with other ethnicities. Hardly any ethnicity's culture is uniform and consistent in our country, and being called an American acknowledges that I support and recognize this. So shouldn't I be proud?

I was not alone in glorifying European countries. College students study abroad, while other people spend a decent portion of their lives saving up money to travel to Paris or London. I had always felt a small twinge of pride by telling others that I am European. It had often made me feel special or different, because I was not so far removed from Ireland. There is an unspoken hierarchy among Americans who can trace their family tree a short distance to another country. Those who are closer to said origins become culturally different, more interesting, perhaps even desired, or exotic. We romanticize them, like we do their ethnicity and country. A type of magic is often created and upheld by these types of Americans, creating unrealistic expectations for if they actually get to visit their mother-country. I expected to feel a stir inside of me from the moment that I first breathed Irish air. I thought I would recognize the sea, the grasses, the wind. I had closed my eyes while standing in the countryside, meditated while driving through Tipperary, turned my face towards the grey sky on multiple occasions to feel the Irish rain on my lips. I felt a deep sense of appreciation and wonder, but anything other than that was imagined and most likely psychological. The mystic fog and enchanting light weren't there for me. I

shared most of the same blood as my family that still live on small farms in Mayo and Tipperary, but did not have the great spiritual awakening that I had anticipated.

Why is it that we so desperately want to identify with a country that is not our own? Are we embarrassed to be American, or do we simply enjoy being glamorized as much as the various physical locations? Admitting that I am an American in a different country made me feel unimportant, like everything that I came from didn't matter because I am only classified by my geography. I am also aware of the privilege that comes with being American, and did not want them to assume that I was spoiled or high maintenance. Jack and Robert did not know of my great grandparents' journeys to the states, or how my family's Irish and Italian cultures and traditions have greatly influenced my life. They didn't know of the sacrifices Marie made or the tragic death of a son that she suffered until the day she met death herself.

The way that Jack said American had a hint of confusion, but also something else. Perhaps even mockery, like I was less than he was, and foolish for trying to be something more. Of course I was not really Irish, for I wasn't born in Ireland. I realized that the boys are so swallowed in homogeny that they might not be able to realize what Americans are actually made of. Yes, we have problematic militarism, consumerism, and are over-worked. But, we have something else that is beautiful.

While in Ireland, I originally wanted to be seen as distinct from the rest of my choir group. I wanted the locals to think that I was theirs, and to keep my American nationality a secret. I wanted to feel a welcoming pull from the Irish people and for them to see my face, and just know. But even if I have Irish genetics, and a proud heritage, I will always be American. I will always be a part of a varied culture that welcomes and celebrates ethnicities from all over

the world. We do not have to be confused when people explain their nationality, but instead excited, because we have all come together to make a country that is new and different. Being American is nothing to be ashamed of, because it is a fact that is just as real as my great grandparents actually being Irish. And hey, they wanted to come to the states.

Ireland is where my family comes from, but it will never be my home. The locals would not recognize me as their own because well, I simply wasn't. I had built my life in Columbus, and couldn't forget that in the excitement of visiting my "homeland". Just because I loved visiting the country and experiencing a culture that could have been mine does not mean that I had to be weary of where I actually exist and live my life. Appreciating a different culture did not make my own worth any less. There is also no shame in appreciating the ethnicities and traditions that surround me in the United States, every day. The grass may have literally been greener in Ireland (it can rain up to 225 days a year on the east and west coasts), but I liked my suburban Ohioan yard just fine.

The bus continued to drive down the thin road quietly as we each reflected on what would be our last evening together in Ireland. Looking out the dark window at blurred whites of streetlights, I could faintly hear folk music from Christina's headphones next to me. I leaned back in my seat and thought of my grandmother.

"We was always proud of being Irish." Me-me had told me. Yes, I smiled, we still are. I twisted the Claddagh ring that she had given me around my finger. *I was proud of where I came from too.*

The Traveler

We always had candles in the windows—
 Electric candles, continuously casting light.
 My mother liked it that way,
 One for each window.
 I thought she was satisfied by the symmetry,
 How our house looked like a Christmas card,
 Even in the spring.

I liked the light it provided at night,
 An orb from behind my curtains dark
 Painting a glow on my ceiling.
 When I couldn't sleep, I made finger puppets.

Then one fall,
 My mom didn't want the candles anymore.
 "Candles in the windows mean travelers welcome" she said,
 "We don't want any travelers" she laughed.
 We unplugged each one,
 Leaving skeletons on the panes
 To collect night's dust.

*When I drove through the Irish countryside,
 We passed a square house.
 It was white with black shutters,
 A shadow in the setting sun,
 And I smiled—my lips tight to teeth.
 For in each window burned a candle.
 The flames danced in the blacks of my eyes
 As I felt a recognition.
 This was why, it had always been why.*

I opened my room's door and stumbled inside,
 Toes gripping the carpet.
 I navigated through dark space,
 Around dresser and bed,
 Towards my center window.

My fingers unwrapped from my luggage
As I bent, knees cracking,
Sweeping away curtain with fingertips.

My breath steamed cold glass,
As my palm searched for electrical cord.
I smiled the same tight lipped smile,
Plugging it in,
Blinking in the returned light.
I had lit my own candle,
A traveler welcomed home.