

Extract from An Irish Book of Living and Dying – A Migrant’s Tale

Who Do We Think We Are?

Any fool can turn the blind eye, but who knows what the ostrich sees in the sand?

— Samuel Beckett, *Murphy*

Leaving Ireland for Australia heightened my perception of myself and surrounded me with people who were less able to perceive me at all. As an exile, I had to reinvent myself. This made work for me. I could no longer rely on people to know who I was just from the way I spoke, dressed and the company I kept. I had to explain who I was without blowing my own trumpet. But no one wanted to hear my whole story, so I had to distil it for them. How much was deliberate editing and how much was convenient amnesia, I cannot honestly say.

Migrants have to shuffle out of their shell to find their place in their new world. America is the biggest migrant experiment. Perhaps for that reason, they are not ashamed to ask for what they want. While connecting with a flight home at Los Angeles airport, I took a courtesy bus from one terminal to another. My destination was four stops away but I stared out the window clutching my bags thinking of gangsta drive-by killings and hoping no one would speak to me and ask me where I was from. A straight-shooting American tourist on the bus who was sitting between me and the aisle frightened the life out of me by looking me straight in the face and shouting over the sound of the engine, “IS THIS YOU?” I wanted to celebrate my integrity and shout back, “YES, THIS IS ME.” But it was not my stop, and that was what he was getting at: he wanted to know if he was required to move in order for me to get out. As my answer was negative he knew he could relax until at least the next stop. He

did not have to waste any more energy thinking about it. I reflected on the anxiety I allowed to build by thinking, ‘Oh no, I bet this person wants to get out and I am going to have to move and ask the person beside me to move so I can get my bag and I hope they are not disabled and can move in time without giving me a dirty look’. What a waste of my time.

It is not just me. My sister Deirdre was in San Francisco for uni in the summer of 1990 and stayed in the cheap part of town, as you do. As her bus from the city got closer to her stop, she was often the only white passenger. One day she drifted off into a daydream and when the bus stopped at an unfamiliar corner and pulled away into even more unrecognisable streets, she had to conquer her fear to shout, “BACK DOOR PLEASE,” repeating it with almost a sob. Her mind raced further than the bus into the badlands where she had been warned not to go. “Relax lady, I have to stop at stop lights,” said the driver as they approached her usual stop.

It was one thing presenting in a work context to an audience who are there, in theory, to see me. Shouting, “BACK DOOR,” to the driver on a bus was a different story. As a migrant, there are lots of stop-the-bus-I-want-to-get-off moments, so I needed to brush up on my public speaking skills or continue to suffer ‘redners’. I wanted more than plucky squeegee, 60-second confidence at a traffic light. I was uneasy in myself and wanted genuine self-confidence. I found this was easier to work on among strangers and I am still pleased with myself for allowing the Toastmasters organisation to finally cure me of my fear of public speaking. Even though we were all terrible in my chapter, some were worse than me. There was an Indian couple, nervous about their wedding speech the next year. Every Monday night of the course they asked, “How lovely do the flower girls look?” And every week, I roared, “Only gorgeous,” echoing Stephen Rea in *Prêt-à-Porter*, and nodded to my fellow guests to show agreement.

I learned that positive change, even when based on shaky skills, was possible and, through the power of some good habits, have been lucky enough to face down some of my anxieties. If change is not easy for us, we should, in the way of Woody Allen, make it part of our act as early as possible. Being a bit scared is part of who I am. I have mentally shredded the numerous times I failed to speak up about injustices taking place in front of me. We all struggle with what to do when we see a child with clearly drugged-up parents and end up doing nothing. I carry the shame with me. In my defence, life corrupts us all. In Ireland, I got 100 percent in my legal ethics exam, but by the time I came to sit the equivalent exam in Australia, I only got 76 percent.

Leaving so much behind meant there was a big gap of displaced space that had to be filled with something. The double bonus of running away from things is that we get another opportunity to decide what we stuff that space with. Reinvention could be lying, but only in the way that dressing up is seen as a deception. No one believes that you always look that good, but you feel better about yourself: it's a version of you that you like and that others buy. I find it easier to care less about what people think of me when I know they couldn't possibly guess anything about previous incarnations of my life. There is no 'before shot', just this one. The earlier chapters are kept, in the same way as the portrait of Dorian Gray, in my attic. Migration, in my case, made me feel more things, and perhaps more deeply. Australia would not have had the same effect on me if I was born here. The adventure added experience without me having to age. Like letting wine breathe, it helped me reach my potential.

I look back at Ireland and think about what I learned there, but also what wisdom I ignored. I can see why people from the rest of the world sometimes seek cultural, philosophical or artistic insight in our country. Along with many other foreigners, Australian writer DBC Pierre found a solitude in Ireland. He wrote, "This is a good place to come back

to, to leave everything behind and just let the ideas distil. The whole story of my life is about not belonging and trying to figure out how to deal with that. That's why, for the time being, this is a very interesting place for me. And anyway ... I'm what they call an official blow-in now. Someone once asked Joan (the publican), God rest her, where I was from, was I Australian, American, Mexican or what? She told them, 'He's one of ours now'. For the time being, that's good enough for me."

We Irish like to take in strays who visit. People have been coming to Ireland to get a fillip for a long time, and we can almost sense their need. Like living in Tuscany, Provence or on Mars, Ireland is more of an idea than a reality for many people. In 1953, Laurel and Hardy came to Europe on a tour to reignite their careers. They arrived by ship, initially into Cobh Harbour in Cork. According to Laurel, "The love and affection we found that day at Cobh was simply unbelievable. There were hundreds of boats blowing whistles, and mobs of people screaming on the docks. And then something happened that I would never forget. All the church bells in Cobh began ringing out our theme song, "Dance of the Cuckoos." 'Babe' looked at me and we both cried." Like a holiday romance with no expectations, each person used the other and was happy to be used.

Not everyone who visits gets it. We are not who people often think we are. Ruby Wax, in the middle of her book, *A Mindfulness Guide for the Frazzled*, writes, "Everyone in there [a pub in the west of Ireland] was dancing — old, young, totally plastered — and everyone was completely happy ... how much would I love to live there in my next life!" Ruby, that is racist and wrong: most of the people born in that place probably felt stuck and could not wait to leave. We feel a bit sorry for those who want to live forever. The Irish treat life a bit more gently because we know death is the first truth. Dylan Moran asks audiences at the beginning of his shows to lower their expectations so that they might enjoy the experience. Life is an anticlimax; failure should be expected.

We are friendly but often this hides a more reserved disposition. I am always impressed by someone just living their life, ignoring the expectations of others and dancing as if no one is watching. Irish dancing, as the world knows it, is dancing with *everyone* watching. Someone decided that we should keep our arms by our sides to counteract our instinctive need to cover our eyes and avoid the attention we are drawing.

The late broadcaster Terry Wogan (I cannot bring myself to call him Sir Terry) tells a story about scoring a try in a school rugby game. As soon as he realised what he had done (i.e., got everyone to look at him), he wanted to die and crawled through the mud to rejoin his disgusted teammates on the other side of the pitch. Even our best sportspeople are expected not to draw attention to themselves. Our most successful sports on the international stage are amateur boxing and golf, both of which demand a quiet and self-deprecating confidence. No one told the millionaire UFC fighter Conor McGregor, who came from Drimnagh so, in truth, we feel a bit sorry for him.

We like that people get a buzz out of coming to Ireland but Irish people struggle to get the same effect from a safe dose. You could say being Irish is wasted on the Irish but we love it in a different way. The Irish experience, more than alcohol, is metabolised by us on a daily basis so our capacity for it grows. We often craved it more than external experience. Before I left, it felt like Stockholm Syndrome but I had fallen out of love with my captor. Conor Cruise O'Brien proposed that Irishness "... is not primarily a question of birth or blood or language. It is the condition of being involved in the Irish situation, and usually of being mauled by it." As I went back each year and my tolerance waned, I started to feel a bit of what visitors do.

It is curious that the Irish are now closely associated with the right-brain IT industry. I secretly resent technology, particularly for its snitching on the number of chargeable hours I

work in a day. Irish people may or may not have designed these policing systems, but they certainly fix them when they break down and help your boss know when you are not being as productive as she wants. Think about that before you talk about the Irish kids in the office being great ‘craic’. A friend told me he never met an Irish person he didn’t like. I said I know plenty. But even those, I must admit, usually have some veneer of charm.

Growing up in Ireland gave me several layers, not all of which serve me. Looking outwards to other countries was vaguely unpatriotic. Looking inwards led me to see beyond being Irish. Our thoroughbred genes and environment kept us isolated from the world. There is no point in me pretending to be someone else unless I am convinced. I am conscious that I must live my authentic life, not the life of someone in a magazine or even that desired by my parents. I would hate to find myself out as a complete fraud. Mum forbade us to tell stories against ourselves on the basis that there would always be someone else willing to speak ill of us. “Why join in?” she would ask, “Why would you say that? There are plenty of people who can knock you. Why do the job for them?” Caring less about what others think of me is something I have to keep an eye on. But I need to have a sense of what I am good at and what I am not so good at, in order to develop into the main character I already am. That way, I can discard the right layers.

Mum knitted an Aran jumper for me. She told me the wool cost a fortune but that I was worth it. It is a beast of a thing. I would love to bring it back on trips so she can see me wearing it but it takes up most of my baggage room. Irish culture and society clings to me like an Aran jumper: it can be comforting but sometimes I bring it out on the town mistakenly thinking it might be needed if it gets cold later. Then, I have to carry it in the heat of the pubs, remember not to leave it somewhere and hope no one spills something on it.

After he saw Leonardo DiCaprio in *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?*, my cousin Brian O'Neill said, "Man, I still don't know what's eating him." I think what is still eating *me* is a desire to know what is true. As I get older, I feel my spidey senses on this getting stronger naturally.

Do Ya Have the Time?

It's very important to go home if you want your work to be whole ... you need to claim where you come from and look deep into it. But don't go home so you can stay there. You go home so you can be free, so you are not avoiding anything of who you are.

— Natalie Goldberg, *Writing down the Bones*

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