

Berries in Winter

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The straps from our cameras were burned into our skin in wide white lines amongst the red, sun-damaged skin. We looked every bit of a tourist as we walked across Dublin next to the Liffy to the bus stop. I was braced from the cold in my navy raincoat purchased by my mom for me before the trip.

A giant green double decker bus pulled up to our stop, sporting an advertisement that merely said BLOW ME in large blue letters. It looked like a large whale out of water, all forehead and no distinct face. My fifteen classmates and I shoved through the Dubliners to sit on the upper deck.

Just as we sat on the dark purple seats, the bus took off with a roar that put Moby Dick to shame. The city flew by us as we saw beggars with their paper cups, artists displaying their work in chalk on the sidewalks, pubs with the scent of food and Guinness wafting out, and the River Liffy flowing through the heart of the city on our right.

We veered left and clutched the seats in front of us as the bus driver stomped his foot on the break for an old woman crossing directly in the path of the layered bus. A chipped wooden cane provided her a third leg as she slowly paraded before us. Her other hand clutched a dingy red shawl about her hunched shoulders.

The driver honked impatiently and she shuffled her body a little to her left. Her gaze traveled from the driver to the second story and immediately found my eyes.

I sucked in my breath. Beneath her gray hair were eyes that were such a light blue, they almost blended in with the whites of her eyes. She grinned at me then like an old friend who had just found a lost childhood playmate, and I noted she was missing several teeth, the rest were black with rot. The bus driver gave a feeble honk and she dropped her hold and moved to the sidewalk.

I released my breath.

Later when walking back to my place, I saw a bright red jacket dangling from a swing swaying gently back and forth in the wind. One sleeve dragging across the grass picking up bits of Ireland as it moves. The owner long gone home for supper with her parents, a beautiful spread of potatoes, carrots, and beef stew, leaving the jacket alone and forgotten on

the playground. It slammed me back in the moment with the old woman and her red shawl, and I was left perturbed and musing about the incident. I shivered and kept walking.

Ireland 1916- She picked at the tattered red material of her clothes. String of red were pulled away and danced merrily in the chilling wind. Her skin, pink with cold, added another hue through her threadbare clothes. Her body was curled as tight as she possibly could into a little ball to seal in what body heat her scrawny eight year old frame could hold.

The lanky mass of dark blonde hair did little to bolster her from the cold as it spun around her petite, heart-shaped face in scraggly clumps that slapped her already stinging skin. Her thin nose ran, but she lacked the ambition to move to wipe it away. She was nothing but a tiny dot amongst the grey cobblestones of Dublin, an invisible mass that people instinctively stepped around.

The chatter of her teeth was drowned by the wail of her stomach as her toes curled for warmth by the edge of a puddle.

She drew deeper into herself as she waited for the sun to come out and warm her.

I walked past the playground with the music of children's laughter tickling my ears. The little red jacket had been claimed by its owner, a blonde girl around seven. Her curly pigtails shook and wiggled with each bouncy step she took as she chased the other kids around the plastic swing set. She paused in her play to pick one of the tiny white daisies growing in the grass-the dandelion of Ireland. She tucked it behind her ear and proudly went to show her friends with a giggling flourish.

I continued on my walk down the gravel lane that led to the boarding house in Dublin that we were staying in for a week. The giant cream colored house was once a school for girls and had been converted into a friendly home for travelers.

The cement steps echoed under my feet as I stepped on each one up to the cherry yellow door and twisted the brass doorknob in the center of the door and pushed it open.

"Patty."

"Patty dear."

"Wake up Patty for God's sake!"

She opened her crusty eyes to her friend Amir's concerned face in front of her. His big brown eyes were mere inches from her face.

"Amir, what are you doing?"

"You wouldn't wake up Patty. I thought you were dead."

His brown eyes filled with tears, and he blinked them back bashfully as he sat back on his haunches. Street kids didn't show emotion, they kept them close and safe. They had nothing but heartache and laughter, and those were their only possessions in the world besides what they wore on their backs.

The rips in the knees of his trousers creaked in protest and threatened to rip further. They were once green, but had turned a dull, dingy brown, darker than his eyes.

"Why wouldn't I wake up?" She asked while she flexed frozen fingers and shook the sleep from her mind.

"I don't know. I shook you and yelled your name, but your eyes wouldn't open. I thought you were dead," he stated again.

He glared at her accusingly as if it were all her fault that he had been scared to lose his best friend, but forgave her almost immediately as his stomach rumbled and reminded him of its neglect.

"Come on, let's go find some food. It's nearly half three."

He pulled her up from the cobblestones that had served as her napping place. His hands barely warmed her frozen ones since his were nearly as cold.

"Want to visit the fat man's stand today?"

"Yes, let's do. Bread sounds delicious." She grinned at her friend to reveal two gaps where she had lost her baby teeth.

They chattered together as they wove through the crowded streets of Dublin while dodging horse and carriages and a few automobiles.

It was a sunny Thursday morning as I cracked my eyes to the light streaming through the open screenless window. The five other girls, who shared my room, rustled their blankets as they were touched by the light and bid good morning by the sun. One girl moaned and

pulled the blankets back over her head while the rest and I dutifully began the morning routines of showering and brushing teeth. We were still attempting to recover from the six hour time difference between the States and Ireland.

After battling for mirror space we headed downstairs to get some breakfast. The friendly man, Bernard, who ran the house, stopped us on our way down the creaky stairs to the basement where the kitchen was located to see how we were all doing. In his lilting Irish accent, he told us about the 365ers.

"The what?"

He rubbed his beard with a glint in his eye, "The 365ers. It's a group of elderly that jump in the ocean at daybreak every day, no matter the weather."

Through his thick accent I could only hear the "tree sixty-fivers" and was horribly confused as to what trees and sixty-five had to do with one another, but was still intrigued by the idea of doing such a crazy thing with the old folks.

Still contemplating the idea, we continued on to our breakfast of cereal, yogurt, fruit, and tea, and to find out what we were going to do today on our tour of Ireland.

The fat man guarded his expanse of bakery goods with the giant rolls of his stomach looming over the muffins and breads, blending in with the wares themselves. The two children stood in the busy marketplace watching at a distance as he glared suspiciously with his eyes that could just barely be seen above his bushy black beard.

They were waiting for their moment.

However, Patty's stomach rumbled in warning to hurry up, and it was the push of those rumbles that drove them to make their move.

Amir darted out quick as a rabbit and slapped the rear of a dingy grey mare pulling a cart right as it was passing the stand and he quickly disappeared into the crowd. The poor ole grey girl started in protest and leapt forward to the left, dangerously close to the fat man's stand.

"Now Patty!"

The shout came from Amir somewhere in the crowd. Her heart leapt forward before her feet as she dodged behind the cart and nabbed two pieces of bread, both bigger than her two fists put together. The fat man's attention was on the poor farmer, who was being profoundly cursed

at for nearly damaging his stand.

She giggled with her bread and met back up with Amir further down the street, all perfectly orchestrated like the professional kifers they were.

Patty handed Amir his piece of bread as he ruffled her hair in comradeship.

"Did you see his face?"

"Did you hear him curse at that cart man?" Amir dropped his chin to his chest to deepen his voice. "You old blinkin' fool! Don't ya know how to drive? Swear the whole lot of ya haven't the brains to grow a potato!"

They laugh around mouthfuls of bread while continuing down the road, arms linked.

My alarm buzzed so violently it fell off the little ledge above the head of my bed and smacked me in the face. I rolled over with a groan and shut off the offense with a forceful push on the button. Four-thirty in the morning comes faster than a person would believe.

My eyes kept trying to close and be lulled back to sleep. The thought was so tempting that I succumbed to their wishes for just a few seconds. But everyone else was counting on me to wake them. So I dutifully pushed myself up and padded out of my room to wake the others.

Twenty minutes later, armed with towels and swimsuits on, we pranced down the sleepy streets as the sun began to rise.

The sun crested over the ocean in a mass of pink and yellow sparkles to our right.

It greeted us as we stepped to the water. I shakily took off my grey sweatpants and t-shirt and stood with the others on the edge of the ocean in my yellow polk-a-dot swimsuit.

"On three, okay?" one of the guys said.

We nodded, too scared and excited to find our voices.

"One."

"Two."

A pause.

"Three!"

We took off with a dash into the ocean that was immediately followed by our screams from the feel of the cold blue water on our bodies.

A thousand tiny piranhas seemed to be attacking my skin at once. They devoured my skin until I had no feeling left and the water seemed to

feel a little less shocking.

Another countdown led to all of us dunking our heads under the frigid water. It slid down my hair like Death's icy fingers trailing through my brown curls. A piranha grinned at me from the murky ocean and I rose with a scream of terror and cold.

I slipped on the slick green algae growing on the cement boat ramp we were standing on and almost went down. We created a human ladder. Those with sure footing turned and reached a hand back to help with the last.

Our teeth chattered together uncontrollably as we wrapped ourselves in the dry white towels from the boarding house.

Satisfied little smiles sat on all our faces.

"Race you to the top!"

"You won't win," Patty said.

"You can't catch me."

"I'll whoop you," said Amir as he gave her a playful shove to throw her balance and took off. Patty squealed in protest and ran after him.

"Last one to the top owes the other a kiss," he shouted back.

Together they ran through the field. The sheep bleated angrily at the two children barging in to their grazing.

The old cairn they were running toward was a circular mound of rocks with grass at the top. The rocks were no trouble for their callused bare feet, and they scrambled amongst them like billygoats.

Patty reached the top seconds after Amir. His dirty brown hair tossed about in the wind while he grinned triumphantly.

"Now you owe me a kiss."

"I don't owe you a blinkin' thing Amir. You cheated."

"Aye, could be true, but at least look at the view."

They found a patch of grass and a rock to lean against comfortably. Amir put his arm around Patty and she leaned against his bony shoulder. He leaned his head back against the rock and looked out at the view before them.

The landscape appeared to be a giant quilt of green material with grey stones for the borders. Fields of golden gorse plants added patches of yellow to the scenery before them.

And they forget about their empty stomachs as they drifted to sleep listening to the music of the sheep's song.

Saint Michan's church loomed above our heads big, grey, and full of promises. Here was the resting place of the crusader. His tomb lay directly beneath the ornately carved organ of the church. For eight hundred years the chords have resonated in his bones with the reverberating echoes of eternity.

The small group of us followed the short, eccentric tour guide below the outside of the church through what appeared to be a storm cellar. The uneven cement steps were deceiving in the dim light and the last step to the floor was so high I had to jump down.

The crypt's hallway extended about twenty feet back into the rough stone into which it was carved. Three iron-wrought doors lined each of the walls. Except for the last one on the left, this was lit from within.

We were immediately drawn to the light and their lie our friend.

Through a concoction of the rocks and gases in the air, the bodies in these tombs had been preserved in their mummy-like state.

I leaned over the rail to peer at the six foot tall man. The skin stretched tight over his face, giving his cheekbones a sunken appearance. His lips had shriveled to nothing and mouth gaped open, almost as if in protest of his death. Eight hundred years had turned his remains into the same dusty yellow-tan of the rock-the tomb's price of eternity.

His hands were folded across his chest and each fingernail sat perfectly preserved. Because of his giant six foot frame, they had to lob off his legs at the knee and place his shins beneath his thighs that were placed in a crossed position.

While the guide recited his bit of history, I felt drawn to the mummy through the dusty layers of time. The crusader didn't know me, and I didn't know him, but somehow we became linked. I longed for him to unfold his hands and sit up to tell us his tale.

The guide finished and pulled aside the false fence.

"You may touch his hand, BUT only his hand, with only one finger. A light touch should do it. Touch the crusader for luck."

Allowed to be the first, I ducked my head under the stone door and walked across the uneven gravel floor. I paused just before his open wooden coffin to marvel at his preserved body.

"Hello old friend," I whispered while leaning over him.

My hand stretched out and touched his smooth, wooden-like finger. I stared directly into his eyes while we broke barriers of time and shook hands.

Amir had gone for the day to see what he could find for food, leaving Patty on duty to see what purses she could pick-pocket in the crowded atmosphere of Connolly Street.

It was an art that had to be specifically crafted, or else you were caught and sent to the prison. The air was frigid but no one notice a little eight year old girl scampering in a dingy red shift amongst the crowd.

She searched for the little brown bags of money and slipped her small hands inside. With deft fingers she pulled a few coins from each purse she found. Patty never took all the coins; however, it was her and Amir's rule: don't leave those with nothing who were so kind as to give them a few coins. The only exception was those who were big, fat, and well-dressed. Those were the best to rob because it was clear they would not go hungry.

The crowd jostled to leave way for three guards to pass through. Some of the crowd spit in their direction, but only after the British soldiers were well passed.

Someone trod on Patty's foot and she stepped back with a curse.

She looked up to find herself at Saint Michan's church and quickly sent an apology for her language.

Patty decided it was time to find Amir and show him the few bronze and silver coins she had gathered for the day. It was enough to at least get them food to stretch over the next two days plus along with whatever Amir had managed to nick.

Amir will be happy, she thought as she skipped to their meeting place. I hope he managed to steal some sweets. I do love those yallowmallows.

A flash of dark green caught her attention as a beautiful red haired woman passed her traveling briskly in the opposite direction. Her cloak was the prettiest green Patty had ever seen. It was the color of springtime in Ireland after a dense rainfall. In the deep of winter, she missed that green and felt its tug.

She turned mid-step and followed the woman from a distance. Her cloak was held tightly about her shoulders and brown skirt clung to little of the muck in the streets. Her brown shoes were in splendid condition and had no holes Patty could see. Patty drew in closer and realized the cloak had been woven with flowers and leaf patterns along the edges. She had never seen anything so pretty in her life and longed to be wrapped in the

dark green springtime like the red haired woman.

The woman stopped ahead of her and went into the pub, The Brazen Head. Patty was curious, but realized Amir would be waiting impatiently for her arrival. She turned and headed back down the street.

The five dragons danced forever above the gloomy doors of Kilmainham Jail. Their stern faces glaring through the harsh bronze of their eternal guardianship. I stared back at them, blue versus bronze, until our tour group ushered forward and was forced to allow them to win. Their eyes followed me until I was under their claws and out of sight.

Our tour guide was a woman about my height with short brown hair and a bored face. She guided us to the right where the West Wing lay.

In a droning voice she recited, "Now this is the oldest section of the prison. It was thought that fresh air was the best way to redirect prisoners' lives in the correct direction, including the fresh air of the frigid winter months..."

Her voice became a drone as my eyes trailed the grey stone walls. In my mind I imagined peeling back their old dreary skin to find the secrets underneath that they couldn't tell me themselves. But instead, they sat with lifeless lips, forever sealed from the prying eyes of the world.

I bounced back to the guide's tour. She was talking about the youngest children to have been imprisoned in the goal. A five year old boy was thrown in after stealing a bit of food, while an eight year old girl was jailed after stealing a cloak. I peered through the little barred window on the heavy wooden door of the cells. They were tiny, dark, and cold, but would look huge to a tiny child curled in the corner.

I stuck my camera through the bars and clicked a photo.

A flash of red caught my eye as it went around the corner, but it was gone. I walked across the uneven floor over to the intersecting hallway, and peered around the corner, but found only more grey. I looked to the stones, but they gave me only a tightlipped blank stare.

"Patty, what were you thinking?"

"I don't know Amir. I don't know. It was just so pretty."

"She saw you. She watched you take it. The guards are going to find you. You have to get rid of it."

"But Amir, it's just been so cold lately and I thought maybe we could use a bit of spring to keep us warm at night."

He sighed. "I know Patty, but it's for the best to do away with it."

They both looked at the offensive green cloak that Patty had just stolen. She had been so sneaky too. Tiptoeing in the pub right after the woman and waiting until she had taken off her cloak and set it on a chair. When her back was turned, Patty dashed across the room to nab it, at the same time the woman turned back around. Patty froze at the surprised expression on the woman's face, but ran as it melted into anger.

"Stop, thief!"

Her cry raked Patty's ears as she clutched the material close to her belly in a waded mass of green. Run, run, run, repeated in her head in a frantic chant that escalated with every breath she took. She dashed past the fat man's stand, past the old church she slept at sometimes, past the surprised expressions of the people in the crowded street, and didn't stop until she ran headlong into the lanky frame of Amir.

He caught her in surprise while she fought to free from his grip, not realizing it was him.

"Patty, stop. Ouch. You elbowed by eye you eegit! Stop, stop, stop!"

He gave her a little shake and she opened her eyes in surprise, blinking frantically until the tears forming had stopped.

Patty broke her reverie and looked on Amir in the present. He took the cloak and stuffed it in a sewer drain. She could see it down there, and watched as it filled with muck until her eyes were too full of tears to see. Amir pulled her in a one armed hug, she fit snug in his shoulder, and walked her away.

The floors creaked beneath my feet in aged complaints. They were exhausted from holding the bodies of almost two hundred years. The weight of the sorrows in the prison rested on my shoulders like a thick blanket. I stumbled a few steps forward, the floors protested further with the added weight, but held steady. My mind tried to shrug the blanket away, but failed as we followed our guide outside of the main building to the Stonebreaker's Yard.

Here men were forced to sit in little individual huts and break stones as penance for their crimes. Only the crack of stones broke the enforced silence. Here also, fourteen men were executed over the next week for their participation and leadership in the Easter Rising of 1916

revolt. One by one they were brought before men with loaded rifles, a piece of white paper pinned over their hearts that bled red after the shots cracked through the early daybreak air.

Two white crosses sat at each opposite end of the small yard with a green, white, and orange Irish flag snapping in the center over the high stone walls. The blanket pulled me to the ground in front of a cross where I sat on top my legs, struggling for breath through the heavy stillness.

The tour guide's words became a lulling background noise that broke briefly in silence for the men who had bleed and died in this small square.

A tiny sob erupted from the air, but quick inspection showed it came from no one with me. I strained to hear it again but my gasping breaths were the only sound in the tiny square.

The voice of judgment rang in Patty's ears until it became her only focus.

"Patty O'Connell, you are hereby charged with the theft of the property of a Miss Alicia Kelly. You have been sentenced to five months of penance in Kilmainham Goal as punishment for your crimes. Thievery is a wrongful sin and will not be tolerated young lady."

She couldn't bring her eyes to meet the voice and was dragged away from it by two guards. They took her through several sets of doors. She could only stare at the uneven, stone floor. No sound escaped her, even when the guards tugged hard on her arm. They stopped in an old part of the fortress in front of a door that Patty could almost reach the top if she stood on her tiptoes. One guard bent down to unlock it with the key, and the door gave a heavy sigh as he pushed the door inward. They unceremoniously shoved Patty into the blackness and slammed the door. She tripped and fell on something and tore her red shirt further on the tear on her elbow. The cold immediately seeped in and began to freeze her skin bit by bit as a cold wind blew in through the small barred window on the door.

A small sob popped out of Patty's mouth and she clapped her hand over her lips in surprise at the noise.

"Eh, who's the new little one?" A faraway voice asked through the black.

Another cry slipped out. Tears were now cascading down her face in a silent torrent of regrets and fears. They dripped on her hand and made it slippery as she tried to hold her cries in tighter.

"It's okay. Ouch. Where are you? What's your name?"

Patty skittered back across the floor with one hand and two feet until her back hit the cold stone. A light flickered in the distance and suddenly a candle brought a small dome of day into the unforgiving night.

A boy that looked older than her stuck his face into the circle of light and grinned. His dark hair was long and tied back with a piece of leather. His eyes flickered in the light like a cat's as he slowly came closer. He set the candle on the ground, and bowed with a flourish.

"Christopher Toole at your service."

Ghosts guarded the ancient tombs of this place. I searched vainly for them, but could only see them with the sides of my eyes. I would twirl quickly in an attempt to see them but could only find fuzzy outlines of men fleeing from sight in my peripherals.

We entered the wedding chapel of the prison following the guide like ducklings followed their mother duck. A large white altar the length of a coffin commanded attention. It was inlaid with gold and had tall candelabras on either side of a bronze cross. We sat on one of the fifteen or so long wooden pews as the guide unfolded a story about Grace Gifford and Joseph Plunkett.

"Joseph was due to be executed at dawn the next day of May 1916, but requested to be married to his fiancée, Grace, before he faced the long barrels. Together they knelt before this altar," she gestured with her hands to the white structure behind her, "and were wed. They were not permitted to speak to one another except to say their vows. Then they were immediately taken apart and Grace left the prison knowing she would never see her husband again."

She let this sink into us and allowed the stillness of the chapel to shiver and permit us to almost see the two kneeling forms of the two lovers.

My mind filled in the murky outlines and a battered and beaten man wearing glasses knelt next to a slim auburn haired woman. Together they finished their lines and shared a look between them that sent electric shocks to the hair on the back of my neck. Then he was hauled to his feet and taken away by the prison guards. He craned his neck behind him to see her one last time, kneeling before the altar on her wedding day.

The ghosts faded from sight and the tour concluded.

Patty gaped at Christopher, who looked about sixteen, for a few seconds before gulping back her tears and squeaking out her name.

"All right Pattycakes, it will be okay. Is this your first time in here? This is my second time. I'm in here now for stealing grass. I do not know how one can steal grass, but I just thought that if the rabbits like it so much, maybe it could fill my stomach as well."

He cheerfully chattered on and stopped expectantly waiting for her to answer his torrent of questions. Patty was so taken aback by this strange boy that she forgot her tears.

"Ya it's my first time. They said I have to do laundry for five months. I've never done laundry in my life. And I don't think you look much like a rabbit."

He laughed and knelt next to the squatty candle.

"How old are you then Miss Patty and why are you here?"

"I'm eight years old," She proudly told him, "and I stole a cloak."

"Ah, a cloak. It does get a bit brisk in here. Whelp, come on then."

He walked to the door and pushed it open with a shove, and grinned at Patty's astonishment.

"We have friends here."

Together, they left the freezing cell and walked down the long hall to a cell three doors down where they found a young, auburn haired woman. Her nose was big for her face but her expression lit in the candlelight into a warm smile.

"Christopher, how are you? And who is this?"

He pushed Patty forward with a little shove, "this is Patty, she arrived just a few hours ago."

"Patty dear, welcome." She pushed her hair back and a plain gold band glinted in the dim light, "My name is Grace. We like to help out anyone new so if you have any questions or needs, come here."

Christopher interjected, "She is like the mother goose for all of us."

Patty and Christopher sat cross legged on the floor around her as she began her tale of her part in the rebellion and her husband, "God rest his soul."

The walls whispered ahead and behind of us as we walked out of the old prison. They became silent as we approached and began frantic murmurs as soon as we were passed. I glanced quickly ahead and behind me, but found the stones to look as unmoving as before. I glimpsed behind me once again, and saw that flash of red disappearing out of the corner of my eye. Entranced and curious, I left the group and ran after the retreating color. It flew on invisible wings, coursing through the stale, cool air just

out of complete sight.

I flew too behind it through the whispering halls and came out below the fierce dragon's stare. Their disapproving eyes followed me once more. I looked back from their eyes to find the red again, but it was nowhere to be found.

Instead through the iron wrought gate of the prison, across the road sat the old woman with bright blue eyes. She nodded towards me in a slow, easy manner. I started across the street to her, but one of the large double decker buses blew passed me and cut off my sight of her.

As my hair settled back down on my shoulders, I looked to the spot only to find an empty bench where the red cloaked woman had once been.

It had been two months now that Patty had been sentenced to her punishment by the voice. She spent her days doing laundry and nights in Grace's room with Christopher. There Grace taught the two children to read and write on the floors of her tiny prison room. Some nights they spent listening to her tales. Others they watched her paint a picture of a woman with a child on one of the walls. They would stay until the flickering candlelight became part of Patty's dreams and Christopher would carry her back to their cell, and it would become locked once more by morning.

One morning Patty opened her blue eyes to snow blowing through their window, eyes so light blue, they almost matched the flakes floating down and melting on Christopher's face. She wished Amir were with her so they could catch them on their tongues together. She thought vainly that if he were here, she would give the eegit his blinking kiss. Aye, she missed him a great deal. She imagined him sitting in their favorite spot by the sheep with the stars winking above him.

She quietly sang a song that her mother sang to her long ago to get her settled for sleep.

*I would I were on yonder hill,
'Tis there I'd sit and cry my fill,
And every tear would turn a mill,*

She drifted off in forgotten memories, and absently coughed into her hand. She didn't notice the specks of blood on her hand as she gathered snow together in a pile, leaving drops that looked like bright red berries lying in the white.