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Living the Dream

The sound of the wind wakes me, as it does almost every day. Here on Sheep's Head Peninsula in the southwestern part of Ireland, the wind is one of my most constant companions; it comes whipping in from the Atlantic, up the bay, and roars down the chimney. A lack of that strange, sea-borne music is notably eerie. When quiet descends from the air in West Cork, you can easily fancy yourself deaf.

This morning the wind's song is mild. A storm has blown itself out overnight; the white spray of crashing waves on the far shore of the bay can be seen from my sitting room window. The eastern sky is pink behind Mount Gabriel, and it looks to be a fine day. A glance to the clock reveals it is only half-eight; too early to call Rural Transport and request a pickup to get into Bantry. I head to the kitchen for breakfast.

Soon the kettle is boiling, the espresso pot is brewing my favourite Italian roast, and my porridge is bubbling away on the gas hob. Breakfast is a time of organization for me; a pad of paper and pen are on hand to make my notes for the day. It is a Thursday, one of two days the county council subsidizes a rural bus run from Kilcrohane, where I live, to Bantry. For six euro anyone along the route can be picked up at their doorstep, taken into Bantry for three hours of shopping time, and returned home by 3 p.m. Taking care of all the business of a household in only two days each week takes planning, and I spend half an hour checking the cupboards to see what needs to be purchased.

By now the Rural Transport secretary has opened the office, and a phone call is in order. The secretary greets me with familiarity; I have no auto of my own and rely on the bus to get my errands done. Would the driver be so kind as to pick me up at Caher Cross, the crossroads outside my front drive? Of course he will; she'll make the call to him right now.

There is just enough time before the bus arrives to tidy up the kitchen and prepare for my trip into Bantry. Dressing in several layers is always a good idea; though West Cork rarely gets snow it can be very frigid, and it is late January. I stuff several tough bags into my backpack for my shopping, grab my cooler pack, and take up my position at the doorway, watching for a sign of the bus.

At 10 a.m., the white top of the bus can be seen far down the road. Locking the door is unnecessary; burglary is not a problem in this rural section of Ireland. The driver pulls up with a smile and a wave, and hops out to open the door and help me in. The rural bus is really just a converted van, holding up to 16 people. I greet my fellow travelers; the German husband and wife who live on Goat's Path are always the first to board. A seat near the back is open, and the other people who will be getting on the bus are elderly. It would be considered the height of rudeness here for a young person to sit in the front of the bus and force elderly travelers, many with health problems, to make their way to the back. Not a problem; the back seat suits me fine.

The driver turns around and heads through Kilcrohane, stopping at the shop cum post office to deliver a batch of freshly baked bread. The rural bus is often an easy place to start a conversation, but this morning we are all quiet with our own thoughts. I drift to the music on my iPod as we drive along the rocky shoreline. The sun is out and gracing the hills and water, and the scenery is stunning.

We continue through Ahakista, and pick up Margaret who drives herself to the crossroads to meet us. A few more stops, including one for an elderly gentleman who gets into the front passenger seat by the

driver, and then we are outside of Durrus where we pick up Jenny at the gate of her farm. She asks, as she does almost every time, to stop at the Durrus post office to post some letters. The driver obliges, and by the time he's turned the bus around Jenny is done and we're back on our way.

We are almost at Bantry now, passing Barry's Motors on the N71 just before town. I check my bags and gather enough one and two euro coins from my pocketbook to pay for my trip. The driver pulls up in front of Bantry Bay Hotel to let us disembark. He doesn't have any tickets, and asks me to pay the six euro to the driver on the return bus. I smile and pocket the money. The simple trust offered in rural Ireland never ceases to amaze me.

Across the road is Wolfe Tone Square, a concrete covered park area in the centre of town boasting a few small inset trees, a fountain, and a statue of Wolfe Tone himself. The sun is out and warm, and a nearby bench seems the perfect place to pause for a few moments and check my list of errands. A dozen or so people are out on the square; we nod greetings to each other. A toot from a car horn captures my attention. My friend Rowena is waving frantically from the passenger side of a passing vehicle. There's plenty of time today for a visit, and we meet in front of Julie's Diner.

Rowena is my best friend, and a pastry chef at the Maritime Hotel. Her boyfriend has dropped her in town early; he is headed out fishing today and hopes for a good catch. I wish him success, and tell him to drop by the house for a visit. He promises to within the next week, and heads down to the bay. Rowena begins her trademark nonstop chattering as we walk along the quay, filling me in on every little tidbit of town gossip and news that's happened since she saw me last. We stop at Spar, a small convenience shop with a deli, and Rowena orders a sandwich to go. We cross back to the benches in the square and take a seat. I update Rowena on my writing and music while she munches away. In too short a time, she stands and tells me she must head off to work. We say our goodbyes, with promises to visit each other soon.

I stroll up the centre of town for two blocks to reach Bantry Library. There's a waterwheel turning outside the small, circular building. The lobby is a posting area for every event, opportunity, and writing workshop in the area. A table is filled with pamphlets and the walls with posters, but there is nothing new since my last visit.

A library is a library, no matter where you are. They all have that book smell, and Bantry library is no exception. There are rows of donated books—novels, mostly—and a small collection of reference material for writers in the back of the building. A seat is available at a low table, and I remove my pad of paper from my backpack to take notes on.

A little over an hour later and it is approaching 1 p.m., the Irish lunch hour. It's time to return the reference material to the shelves and head back into town to do my shopping.

The streets are full of children in school uniforms. They walk in packs of ten to twenty, a solid mass of red (secondary school) and blue (primary school) sweaters. Most are headed to Mace to buy a sausage roll or chicken piece for their lunch. I shamble behind a group of them; my first stop is the butcher's two doors down from their lunchtime stop.

I enter the butcher's and am greeted warmly by Paddy, one of the owners. He is cutting away at the hindquarter of a lamb for another customer. The shop display has several cuts available; there are always two or three kinds of fresh homemade sausages, juicy hamburger patties, stewing meats, and pork chops.



Paddy returns to the counter with the other customer's meat cut to order. It's a little over a kilo, is that all right? He chats away, asking after the woman's family, and the transaction takes a little longer than necessary. That's fine with me; Paddy runs the best butcher shop in town. He doesn't just cut the meat up; he raises it himself. If you ask him where his meat comes from, he can take you straight to the field it was raised in.

Paddy takes my order for some of his signature leek sausages and a kilo of pork mince. We chat away as he cuts the pork and grinds it on the spot for me. On impulse, I reach into the open display on my left and choose a beautiful smoked ham. Paddy reminds me a free cabbage or swede (rutabaga) comes with the ham, and points me to his selection of fresh vegetables. I choose a firm swede for a soup, pay him the few euro he asks me for, and leave the shop with a heavy, bulging bag of meat in my cooler pack.

Halfway down New Street is an alley that takes me to Bantry Wholefoods, one of two organic shops in town. I greet Simon, the owner, and his toy dog Lola jumps frantically at my feet. A little attention is all she needs to calm down and return to her dog bed. I ask if Simon has the Madagascar Vanilla I ordered last week. Yes, it's come in and he's held it for me as promised. I add a half-kilo bag of organic cane sugar and some recycled toilet paper to my purchase. The rack of vegetables Simon keeps near the front door has some plump looking fresh sweet potatoes. They are expensive, but nothing beats organic sweet potatoes with ham, and two of them won't overload my bags. Simon asks how my work is going, and we chat for a few moments about my new poetry.

I rarely mention my novel or short story work to the locals in town. It was evident early on the Irish were not big fans of my chosen genre. Telling an Irish person you write science fiction/fantasy is akin to telling someone you write jingles for toilet bowl cleansers--they'll get a slightly bemused look on their face, like they can't for the life of them figure out why anyone would choose to do that. But poetry, ah! Now that is a different story.

Poetry is alive here; they study it in school, they hear recitations in pubs, and almost everyone can quote some famous poem or another. Unlike mentioning the undistinguished (and nearly unmentionable) genre of science fiction/fantasy, saying you're a poet in Ireland will get you a level of respect rarely experienced within one's lifetime. Immediately you'll be elevated to a lord or lady's status: the person will draw back slightly, their eyes a bit wide as if you've just revealed some hidden power to them. They will all ask for a bit of your poetry on the spot, and politely enquire if you have a book for sale.

The questions come as I expect them to. When is my next performance? Will a book of my poetry be coming out? Soon, I tell him. We discuss my current work on a complete poetry show, including musical backing and stage blocking. He is very excited for me and wishes me the best.

Back in the street, it's hard not to notice the dark clouds streaming in. The rain begins before I reach the square. Luckily, Crowley's is just across the intersection.

Crowley's is a Bantry landmark, one of the old pubs in town that got remodeled during the building boom a few years ago. It sits at one corner of Wolfe Tone Square, a large golden building impossible to miss. The inside is done tastefully with warm tones and wood. Mary takes my order for half a pint. My favourite spot by the fire that is always burning in the grate is empty, and offers a welcome retreat. The regulars are already at the bar, drinking full pints and set in for the day. They leave me alone in peace and I am grateful for a few moments to myself. I take out my notepad and scribble away, sipping at my glass of dark, bitter brew.



In half an hour, it is time to catch the bus back home. I return my glass to the bar and say goodbye to Mary and the regulars, who wave me out the door. The brief showers have passed on, and it is only a short walk to wait for the bus. The other passengers waiting in front of the Bantry Bay Hotel nod to me. We chat about the rain shower, and our shopping.

When the clock on the Protestant church across the square reads 1:55, the rural bus pulls up. The driver helps the older women with their bags, and I wait to give him my fare. He takes it with a nod and offers me a receipt. The bus is almost full and I match the smiles of my fellow passengers with one of my own. The sun has returned, and everyone is happy and feeling good. Conversation is lively on the way back, and I leave my iPod off to participate.

We take the Goat's Path back, up and over the mountains. It is a narrow, tiny road with some of the most spectacular views of Bantry Bay you'll ever see. The mussel and crab beds are easy to spot in the bright blue water, and I wonder how the fishing has been today for Rowena's boyfriend. We drop the German couple off at the end of their long drive, and Jenny shakes her head and comments on how lonely it must be to live at their house. We all nod, and the conversation begins to break up into smaller groups to chat.

The bus crests the mountain and Dunmanus Bay is spread out before our eyes. We begin our zigzag path down to Kilcrohane. I speak up from the back and ask the driver to wait for me at the shop; some of their apples are just what's needed for my ham. It's not a problem, and in a few moments, we pull up outside the shop to let me disembark.

The Kilcrohane shop is a tiny space that holds an amazing variety of goods. Imported cheeses and canned goods, staples, fresh baked goods, vegetables, and dairy products are all available, and if you get your order in by Tuesday for a fresh chicken or duck one will be ready for you on Thursday. To the right is a small window where the postmistress will sell you stamps and take packages for mailing. The fruit and vegetable stand is down a short aisle to the left. I choose four large, ugly apples, pay with small change, and return to the bus, thanking everyone for waiting.

The driver heads down the peninsula towards Caher Cross, right outside my front drive. In five minutes, we are there and everyone says goodbye to me as I leave. The driver helps me down with my bags and wishes me well. Promising to see him soon I head into the house.

My unpacking is interrupted by my cat, which insists on being let outside for his afternoon romp in the fields. There are footsteps on the stairs; my brother bounds into the kitchen to help with the food. He grabs a pot and fills it with water to boil the ham for an hour and remove the excess salt. The sweet potatoes need peeling and slicing before roasting. My brother tells me to leave the pan in my hand on the countertop and go relax. Dinner won't be ready before 6 p.m., so I head to my computer to access the Internet.

My broadband connection is my lifeline to the world. It takes me several hours to go through my e-mails and messages on social networks. By then the ham is roasting in a Dutch oven surrounded by apple slices, and my brother has added a healthy dab of butter and a whisper of brown sugar to the sweet potatoes. My stomach grumbles as I type away on my keyboard. Before my work is done, my brother tells me dinner is ready.

We sit down to a delicious meal and catch up with each other. My cat hears us and demands to be let back in for some food. I give him some chicken flavored cat food and return to the table, noting with a laugh that even the cat wants to be involved in our family dinners.

After the meal, there's time to return to my computer for some writing. My brother heads upstairs to work on his own projects, and my cat jumps into the chair next to mine to keep me company as I type away. My work keeps me absorbed and ignorant of the growing darkness in the room. By the time I take a break, the only light downstairs is coming from my computer screen. I turn on the overhead and save my file before turning off my computer. It's half eight, time to unwind and enjoy a film.

My cat jumps down from his chair and stretches. He has taught me patience; he spooks easy but his habits are as timely as a clock. Sure enough, he heads to the door for an evening check on his domain. I let him out and pause in the doorway, struck by the sight of the quarter moon casting liquid silver on the water and the dazzling array of stars overhead. The Milky Way is clearly visible to the naked eye, and my stargazing lets more cold air into the house than I intend. My brother joins me at the door, our breaths frosty in the night air. We shiver and go inside.

We choose a film we both like from our shelf of DVDs and turn the telly on. Before the opening trailers are over my cat leaps to the window behind my chair and demands to be let back in. He scoots through the open doorway and brings the fresh scent of outside with him. I return to my chair and he jumps in my lap, turning around like a dog before settling down for the night.

At half ten the film is over, and goodnights are said. My cat waits for me as I brush my teeth. Under the duvet, the bed warms quickly with the heat from my body. I turn off the light and my cat joins me.

In the darkness, I listen to the wind blowing outside. It lulls me to sleep, and whispers to me dreams of hills, of sea, and of Ireland.