

Randall Curb

Liam

“The Soul selects her own Society—
Then shuts the Door—”
Emily Dickinson

Liam is a County Wicklow man. He did not introduce himself to me as such, and when he boarded the train at Arklow I didn't know which Irish county I was travelling through. But in a pub in Galway I had met a “Limerick man” and in Killarney a “County Clare” man, the geography immediately following their Christian names in the hail-fellow handshakes we exchanged. There was no initial handshake between Liam and me, no formal camaraderie. I didn't even learn his name until shortly before we parted, a little over an hour after we had met. As the train pulled into the Dublin station, I fished a scrap of paper out of my shirt pocket, handed him a pen, and asked for his address. In a heavy, child-like scrawl, he wrote “Liam Hayes,” a street and number, and the lovely words “Arklow, Co. Wicklow, Eire.”

That was in the summer of 1993. I have not heard from Liam since, and there is little reason I should. I wrote him several times that year, from England and my home in Alabama, but it was evident from early in our conversation that he would not turn out to be a letter writer. I didn't mind. I might still be writing to him today—about ordinary things like the weather and holidays and the deaths of relatives—but I suspect he is no longer in Arklow. That, at least, is my intuition. But wherever he is, he is still a County Wicklow man. Some people wear place like a birthmark. Of no race is this more true than the Irish.

No longer writing Liam does not mean I have stopped thinking of him. No, hardly a week goes by that I don't write him a few sentences in my head. His name will bubble into conscious thought without the merest cue, and I will hear again the soft way he pronounced it: “Lee-uhm Hace.” I have forgotten the names of the Limerick man and the man from County Clare, though both were friendly and engaging, as Irishmen in pubs usually are. The Limerick man, who liked to dance, was

a bit mad I think, and the Clare man adamantly preferred Murphy's stout to Guinness. Their faces are lost to me now, and the timbre of their voices, and one day they will slip out of my memory altogether, and I won't know they were ever there at all.

About Liam, there are many things I remember: his solitary self-containment on that bustling morning train, his furrowed brow, his liquid eyes, his bashfulness. When he took the seat directly across from me and said "Good morning" in a rusty voice that I imagined, wrongly, he was using for the first time that day, I sensed immediately that he was kind. If I had discovered later that he had picked my pocket, or learned that he had killed a man, I would still tell you he was kind.

I was concluding a near circular tour of Ireland, begun three weeks before in Dublin and now returning there. I had met the train in Enniscorthy, in County Wexford, where I'd spent one disappointing day and night. I'd had to take a taxi to catch the early train. At the station platform I encountered a woman with shabby clothes, bad teeth, a facial tic, and thick, rolled-down stockings. She looked me over (perhaps she'd heard me speak inside the station) and said, "You're an Amerikene, aren't ye?"

I told her yes, I was, and I lived in the South.

"Oh darlin'," she said "Can ye tell me about Graceland?"

I was too sleepy to lie—I've never even been to Memphis—though I think I know enough about the place to have given her some satisfaction. After that I sensed she was a bit disgusted with me. Her silent indictment was that I was a fool to have flown all the way to Ireland when the shrine of Elvis was practically in my backyard. Still, she let me take her picture, seemed flattered to be asked. She was traveling to Dublin too, to visit her daughter, who was having a birthday. In a torn shopping bag she carried a large gift-wrapped package. She had no luggage. Once we got on the train I never saw her again; I knew she had disappeared into a smoking car. A burning cigarette dangles from her hand in the picture of her I took.

I have a photograph of Liam as well. I took it from three feet away, with him directly facing me, just before the train pulled into the Dublin

station. Every few months I take down the album of this journey and look at it. His right arm rests at the elbow on the little table between us. His right cheek rests on the closed hand, the knuckles, of that arm. He is leaning slightly forward and looking directly into the camera. He wears a blue, heavy cotton shirt with two placketed breast pockets. A fringe of white undershirt shows at the base of his neck. He has a large Adam's apple, and his ears seem unusually big also. His oiled hair is more red than brown and is brushed away from his forehead in a kind of unconsidered pompadour. His thickish eyebrows are exactly the color of his hair. His face is long and narrow, his chin coming to a point indicating, arrow-like, the Adam's apple in his slender throat. He is unshaven, and his sprouting mustache is redder than his hair. His eyes are filmy and pensive and blue—the color not of the gray-green Irish Sea so close to us but of Galway Bay. They give him a somber look, and he does not smile. I feel that if I continued to stare at those eyes I would soon fall asleep.

Perhaps Liam chose to sit with me because I too looked pensive. Maybe he thought I was the kind of person who wouldn't bother him by talking too much, because maybe, in the beginning, he had not planned to talk beyond his "Good morning." Did he suspect I was an American before I spoke? There were other vacant seats nearby. Did he think it might be interesting to sit with an American? No, I don't think he was as deliberate as that. He simply sat where he sat, next to a window, opposite a stranger.

I don't remember who spoke first after we'd exchanged hellos. I believe I did. Since it was early, I believe I asked him if he'd had a good night's sleep. He looked so rumpled and tired. He said he'd slept all right but his children had wakened him before six, running into his bedroom and flinging themselves on top of him and the bedclothes because they knew he would be leaving by seven. There were five children altogether, I learned. He was twenty-six and had married at seventeen. He was a house painter and handy man who hadn't worked for a while. He was going to a government office in the capital to discuss a renewal of his unemployment compensation. He looked care-worn and hungry, and I found myself wondering if he'd had any breakfast.

He did not ask me where I was from, nor why I had come to Ireland, nor where I was going. He didn't comment on the chill or the mist of the foggy morning, so bleak, to my mind, for July. Instead he looked at the monocular I always wear around my neck when I am traveling and asked, "Do you use that to help you see?"

I am legally blind, but I had not told him anything about myself, and few people notice my limited vision at the beginning of a casual meeting. Sometimes the device I wear like a necklace is mistaken for a tiny camera, and I have been stopped for questioning by security watchers in museums and galleries. Liam, however, had asked the right, perceptive thing; I can't see so much as a traffic light without holding my little telescope up to my right eye. So I answered, "Yes, I'm partially sighted," a phrase I'd found more commonly used in England and Ireland than our "legally blind" or "visually impaired."

"My dad was completely blind in his last years," Liam said. "I stayed with him, the two of us, after my mother died. Until I got married, that is. Then he went to a home. He died last year, my dad." I said I was sorry, and he was silent for a moment. Then he said, "Are you losing your eyesight or are you . . . ?"

"My condition is pretty stable," I told him. "I have lost only a little additional sight since I was born. The problem is inherited and occurs in the optic nerve. It comes down through my mother's side of the family."

"Do you have any children of your own?"

"No," I said. "I've never married. I have a sister whose eyesight is perfect, 20/20. It skips around. But she has no children either."

I figured he was wondering if I were afraid to marry and have children, but he didn't ask and I didn't tell him. Instead he went back to talking about his father, whom he spoke of with devotion and reverence. It was clear to me he was still grieving. Then he said:

"It's hard to find work in my little town. It's hard everywhere in Ireland. Some of my cousins have emigrated. One is in the States, I'm not sure where."

"Have you ever thought of leaving?" I asked.

"Did leave. Two years ago. Went to London. A mate had some work for me there. It's a terrible, unfriendly city. Dirty. Too many people. I had to live with squatters in a place called Brixton. I couldn't bear it. I came home a couple of months later. I don't ever want to go back there. I was miserable."

I decided not to tell him how much I love London. My London—the National Gallery, the theatre, the parks, friends in Kensington and Chelsea—is on another planet from a squat in Brixton. I had been there once and knew.

"So you came home."

"I came home. I don't want to leave Ireland. I love my country, my wife, my family. But it's hard."

I asked him for his children's names, and he gave them to me in order of their births. I can't recall all five, though I believe one was Kathleen and another Tom. I wish I did know them, all of them. His wife's name, he said, was Mary.

He talked a bit more about his father and the pain he had endured from arthritis and other ailments. The memory of that pain made his words come more slowly. Eventually he came to the funeral, and the Church. He told me he still went to Mass, though not so often as he once had. He said his mother had almost become a nun. I said, "You believe in God," in a way that was part observation, part question.

"Yes," he said. Nothing more. No qualification, no lament against the Vatican, no disclaimer. No "Do you?" Although I do not believe, not any more, I didn't answer the question he didn't ask. I said, "Good. That's good. Faith can be difficult these days."

"I want my children to grow up the way I did. Mary takes them on Sundays when I don't go. Mary loves the Church. She loves taking them there, even the littlest ones."

And so he talked of Mary, and I told him a little bit about my family, my hometown, Alabama. I asked him if he would like to visit America someday.

"Maybe," he said. "I'm not sure. It's so big. I wouldn't know where to start. New York scares me."

He listened as I made suggestions, places that might appeal to his wife and children. He nodded, but we both knew he couldn't afford such a trip, not for seven people. I felt that his mind couldn't really light on something as vast and foreign as America, not on this drizzly morning in a train bound for Dublin. He had more pressing concerns.

As we began to view the dismal south Dublin environs from our shared window, I asked him if I could take his picture. He answered, very matter-of-factly, "Okay." He didn't change expressions, lift his shoulders, adjust his collar, put a hand to his hair. So when I look at the photograph today I know I am seeing Liam plain.

He had only a duffel bag with him, sitting at his feet, probably containing a sack lunch. But once we were ready to leave the train I had to collect two suitcases from the baggage compartment. Before we stepped down to the platform he took one of them, the larger and heavier. I told him the guest house to which I was returning was only a few blocks away, and though the case he held was stuffed with books and sweaters I'd bought in Killarney and Cork I assured him I could manage. But he noted that I wouldn't have a free hand for my monocular, which I might need for crossing streets. And so he kept a firm grip on the heavy bag as I walked beside him, directing our route.

We didn't talk as we walked to the guest house. There was little traffic, and I probably wouldn't have needed my spyglass after all. But he told me if a car was approaching. We both have long legs, strode briskly, and got there in a matter of minutes.

Outside the door we met the proprietor, who welcomed me back and took the suitcase I was carrying. I took the other from Liam and in the next moments asked him to write his address on the piece of paper I'd found. Afterwards I thanked him and wished him luck. I said I would send him a postcard from England; I was flying into Heathrow in two days. He smiled and said, "That'll be nice." Going down the steps from the hotel door to the pavement he said, "So. Goodbye. It was good to meet you. Take care."

As soon as I responded in kind he began to walk toward O'Connell Street. In a moment he would be out of sight. I held the monocular

up to my eye to get a last look at him, one which, otherwise, would have been beyond my ken. Then I looked at the paper and discovered his name.

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Twenty years ago, when I was a graduate student in Alabama, I walked each morning from my apartment to the small local post office half a mile away. One hot day in early summer, after I gratefully entered the air-conditioned building, I saw an elderly black lady, gnarled and stooped, who was standing at a counter with what I came to see was her checkbook. She was obviously having trouble writing. Her fingers were stiff and swollen as they clutched a ball-point pen.

"Young man," she said to me. "Could you he'p me a minute?"

I approached her and asked what I could do. She wanted me to fill out the check, to a utility company, as she instructed me; then, she said, she would sign it herself. I did as I was told, and she thanked me. When she wrote her name, with a halting, palsied hand, the letters were printed and large. "Cora Pankey" were the two words. She straightened up slowly, clearly pleased to have this task accomplished. I put the check in the envelope for her, sealed it, and dropped it in the drop-slot nearby. Again she thanked me, and I went to check my box.

When I started toward the door a moment later, I saw that she was again bent over the counter, fumbling with some papers. I asked if I could assist her in any way. She looked up and said, "Honey, could you open these two pieces of mail for me?"

"Sure," I said, taking them from her and slitting each one open with the tip of my pen. They appeared to be bills or advertisements. I handed them back to her, and without looking at their contents she put them into her big navy-blue purse. Then she looked at me again.

"Thank you. You're a nice young man," she said. "You must be a student at the college. Well, I hope you're happy."

At the time I was deeply unhappy, but I said, "Yes, ma'am, I'm doing fine. Looks like hot summertime's here already, doesn't it?"

I pushed open the heavy glass door for her. She became more erect and stepped out, her right hand holding onto her walking stick for dear life, her left clutching the purse. "Thank you," she said, and began to turn to the left; my route was in the opposite direction. I stopped and said, "Before I go back towards campus, is there anything else I could do for you?"

"Yes," she said, without hesitation. She turned her head slightly to address me more directly. Her stick was planted firmly on the sidewalk. "Every once in a while, you pray for Miz Pankey."

"Yes ma'am, I will," I told her, and she said, "I thank you."

We turned our backs to each other and walked home.

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I now find I cannot easily call on the God both Mrs. Pankey and I believed in back then. What passes, perhaps, for prayer, as I lie in bed at night waiting for sleep, is a litany without preface or amen. The words are never exactly the same from night to night as I haven't committed the list to memory. Whatever follows, however, "Mother" and "Daddy" are first, though my father is gone from me now. The other names include both the living and the dead, and some who could, for all I know, be either. "Janice," I say. "Andrew." "Sarah . . . Benjamin . . . Norman . . . Joan . . . Rob . . . Evelyn . . . Aunt Grace . . . Nancy . . . Amelia . . . Grandmamma . . . Joe . . . Fern . . . Tim . . . Diana . . . Julyan . . . Madeleine . . . Kenneth . . . Derrick . . . Delphine . . . Gérard . . . Mrs. Pankey . . . Adelaide . . . Mary . . . Liam . . ."