

I sat in the smoking room at O'Neills. Marlboro Lites. We settled with our drinks, our feet kicked up on a short barrel. A net was cast over the room, allowing the late day sun to come in. I stared at the photo of a dying man on the operating table on the box of Marlboro cigarettes.

“Eric, stall the ball will ya?” Nathan gestured at Eric’s plate of fries and pint of cider. “Insulin won’t be free for much longer, now will it?”

“Nice one, yeah? It’s St.Patrick’s day, I got me insulin, I’m with comrades, I’m having chips!”

I was listening to a Boston accent over the Irish covers of American music. Dublin life suited me. What wasn’t to like about walkability, trams, pubs, and *smoking rooms*? Not to mention Irish art, history, and beautiful park scenery a mere walk away! I dreamed of Dublin my whole life, but I’d be lying if I said that was the only reason why.

Shit was getting real in America. Most people lost their savings, some lost their homes. Soup kitchens were in full swing, mail took weeks to months to arrive, society was in disrepair. My own family was housing with a family friend, to save on housing costs. As the American comrades and I had expected, we saw an immense influx of join requests to the communist party.

I’d bailed, like a coward. I’d lived my whole life in the belly of the beast. The only struggle I knew was blatant or with a flashy veneer. I couldn’t do it anymore, couldn’t work until my knees wobbled and my brain fogged up. I took a long drag. The Irish communist party saw a resurgence too, since Ireland increased defence spending by tenfold. Nathan was right about insulin – with all the cuts to social services, Dublin’s renowned healthcare would be no more. It was only a matter of time.

“Miss America, do you?” Nathan snagged a cigarette off me. I must have my thinking face on.

“Of course I miss it. I miss the seven lane highways, the smog, the gunshots, the shitty cigarettes. Yeah, all of it. I miss it. Everyday I’d walk past the same struggling faces, human shit on the floor, the beaten and the damned. It was great.”

But they’re everywhere, really. Just on the way to O’Neills, a homeless woman was resting against a trash can and asked for a cigarette, and I couldn’t say no.

“I might even miss the blinding skyscrapers.” I add.

Those glass giants bribed me, whispered that if I can make it there alive and safe, I would’ve finally reached my life’s purpose. I’d be one of them, smoking Export A’s instead of cowboy killers.

“What about the poke bowls? Isn’t you always bitching about that?” Eric interjected.

“You guys have plenty of fish, there’s no reason there shouldn’t be a Poke Bar on every street.” I retorted.

“The last thing we need is more American chains infringing on our sovereignty!” Nathan slammed his fist on the table. Our drinks shook, and he spilled Paul’s glass of black Guinness on my cigarette box. Luckily I had more in my bag.

“Look what you’ve done! I’m still an American at the end of the day,” I gave him the finger gun.

“Me poor Guinness!” Paul exclaimed.

“Paul, you heard the story of the man being killed?” Eric asked.

Oh, so we’ve reached this part of the night?

“You guys treat gun violence like a scary bedtime story,” I lit another cigarette. “Paul, you don’t need any more scary stories. Remember earlier?”

We had been stationed outside the General Post Office. The man hadn't appreciated the communist newspapers we were selling, and he pushed Paul after trying to bully us off the walkway. Paul was irate, understandably so, but the rest of us laughed as the man burned red, seething, spitting and screaming, *ye fucking commies* before tripping over his own feet.

"Tell me, I'm a gurrer," Paul clutched his chest. His face was flushed. He was already a couple drinks in.

"Start with the line – you know the one." Nathan nudged me.

I rolled my eyes but obliged.

"In America, I was overly familiar with the stench of disaster. Nowadays I think I smell it coming and freeze in the expectation of calamity."

"Calamity's here enough, comrade." Nathan said.

It was true. Things weren't going to be better in Dublin, but Dublin suffering was tolerable for me.

"Rotten things still happen. You stubbed your toe not an hour ago" Paul added.

"Not like how things were before. It seemed like only bad things happened. And not like stubbing my toe." I continued my speech.

"There are decades where nothing happens – think Post War Boom, or Edo period in Japan if you like – and days where decades happen – think Normandy, or Hiroshima. Being in America, learning about the destructive and devastating history feels like –" I paused.

An orange and pink illuminated us. A chilling breeze blew my cigarette smoke into my face.

"I might as well have been a witness to Fat Man myself. I might as well have been an accomplice."

A thick plume of smoke left my mouth.

“You were not even born yet.” Nathan pointed at me.

“No, but I might as well have been.” I drank. “Regardless, you know what they say, if you wanted to be alive during peaceful times, you chose the wrong time to be alive.”

Just a few months ago, Britain and Germany got directly involved in the Russian war.

“True, is it?” Paul said.

“You can feel it anywhere, at any time. You can’t escape it, you have to breathe it against your will.”

Sometimes I thought I could feel the bombs drop in Europe. I’d be in the shower, or in the middle of doing dishes, and I’d have to run out, water still running, to check a window, and make sure that it wasn’t raining bullets.

“The chaos consumes.”

“A bard, is she?” Eric grinned.

“I’m getting off topic... on the shooting... It was some years ago. We had a full time comrade come down from New York, when we were still newbies. He was helping us in Atlanta get sorted out. People have this conception that the south is all cow farms and peach fuzz, but in a concrete jungle like Atlanta, it’s much different. On his first papersale in Atlanta, down by a strip called Little Five Points, we witnessed a homeless man get shot in broad daylight. What a way to welcome a man into Atlanta, right?” I grinned and raised a glass.

Remembering the day gave me chills, actually. “I and two other comrades had split up from Stanton and Abigail, and when we came back to the initial meeting spot, we were on opposite sides of what would soon be a crime scene.”

I shook my head to clear the goosebumps.

“All he did was ask for money. Sure, he was persistent. But that’s all he did. He was just an old man, down on his luck. I saw him before it happened. I didn’t have any change.”

Would he have died if I had some change...

“Anyway. Well, he asked the wrong guy, and he was persistent. The guy got spooked or something, and shot him right there on the spot. He died quickly, and as he laid there, bleeding out, people walked back and forth, to and fro, without a care. No one was phased, it was normal.”

Eric, Paul, and Nathan put their glass to rest.

“The shooter got away,” My own eyes became glassy. “That man died there on the street like a dog. They took their sweet time getting him off the street, like he was roadkill.”

Silence filled the space between us in our booth, but the world around us went on. Laughter, glass clinking, and lively music. On St.Patrick's the pub was especially crowded and loud. Burnt oranges and reds shone over us. I was stricken with grief in a single moment. Grief of the homeless man, grief of my home, grief of times before war. I chugged.

“Not a great way to end St.Patty’s, eh?” Paul chimed. Nathan disagreed.

“Says who? What’s better t’an being completely honest? There is an honest, corrupt state of the world. No sugarcoating it.”

“None at all. It’s the bitter truth of it that creates us, isn’t it?” I chugged the one guinness I ordered, even though it tasted like shit. “Let’s beat it. Too many Americans here, reminds me of home.”

We head out of the pub, into the equally crowded streets of Dublin.

“I’d moyder for anot’er pint,” Paul leaned on Nathan. “Mary’s! Bleeding fine Irish pub!”

“No Paul, you’re goin home.” Nathan hailed a taxi.

“But the night is still young!”

“f Or we tell the missus,” Eric threatened.

“What a sack of consequences, ye all,” Paul pointed at each of us as Nathan closed the door, and paying the driver.

Paul had a drinking problem, truth be told. He missed his lady, she was living down in Thailand. He’d been there for a year with her, only to be dragged back home. His people needed help with the bills. He’s saving up to leave again, but she reminds him time and again, *you can’t run away forever!*

We walked aimless, anywhere away from the puking drunks on the walkway. A beggar sits outside the spar. I gave him some euro.

The story of the homeless man sticks to me. No human being should have to be in that scenario, however crude the jokes we tell to cope. That homeless man was someone’s family.

“The dead man reminded me of my stepfather actually. They had the same smile.”

“Is he still with us?” Nathan asked.

“He died in his 50’s, a few years ago, missing all but a couple of teeth and nearly doubled over. Arthritis and alcoholism had taken its toll on him. My brothers, that was their real dad, hated him to be honest. They were tired of his get-rich-quick schemes. A vending machine business, a car wash service, bitcoin, and a drug deal here and there. My brothers said fuck it, and went for dirty money.”

“Drugs?” Eric asked. I nodded.

“All this because they had taken his social benefits when we were children. A Private Investigator saw him carrying a jug of milk with his thumb, meaning he couldn’t possibly have

joint pain. Newsflash, he did indeed have arthritis. Dozens of odd jobs later, he died of kidney failure in the hospital.”

“Did you see ‘im?” Eric asked.

“No. I didn’t have much contact with him. I had grown tired of his schemes too, and his opioid habit. It wasn’t his fault.”

The night sky began to fall upon us. The moon shone bright and full. We hopped over the tall fence with the help of a nearby trash can into Stephen's green garden. We walked past James Joyce’s head and towards the center, as far from the streets as possible.

It was unbelievably dark. We sat on our jackets, near the edge of the pond, under a bridge. It was chilly there, near the water, but nice and quiet. I could see the spaghetti junction of Atlanta in the ripples of the water. Jesus, I was stuck again. Thousands of miles away, and my mind was still in Atlanta. We’re all Dubliners, glued to the places we hate the most. The skyline was burned into my mind – those mile-high ghosts that still taunted me. I’d always be an outsider in my own home. Eric skipped pebbles on the surface.

“I could not imagine it. How do Americans put up with it every bleeding day?” Nathan stated, eyebrows scrunched in disbelief.

“With one of these,” I pulled out a silver flask, and drank before passing it to Eric.

“Cheers!” Eric exclaimed.

“Man can’t even hold a jug of milk without being scrutinized, can he?”

“America would do me in by now, with t’ose insulin prices.” Eric held the flask up, waving it around as he spoke. . “Not to mention, my mot’er. She’s schizophrenic. A lovely woman, fierce bright woman, headstrong. A woman with t’e essence of a boulder. None more solid, none with a stronger, ironclad will. But even a boulder can be done in.”

He went on.

“The ot’er day, a woman stood on t’e road, away with t’e fairies, and giving out hell. Screaming and screaming, about voices and demons. Everyone, even me, looked at ‘er with disdain. Like, *stay the fuck away from me woman*. She was manky, an absolute melt,”

He passed the flask to Nathan.

“Then I t’ought – t’is could be my mother anyday. Any old accident, anyt’ing happened to me. God forbid, more austerity cuts, herself could be on t’e road too. T’en I wondered if that’s how the state workers saw my mother – as a bleeding crazy woman, a melt to be dealt wit’.”

A heron stood on the other side of the pond. I used to see blue herons like that one back home, in the pond beyond the sage, wooded backyard of the townhouse. During COVID, it was the only place I could be without catching the plague.

Back home, there were dozens of trails, spanning from Chattahoochee river to Arabia Mountain. The subtropical green scenery was something I did miss about the Metro Atlanta suburbs. Beige mushrooms across the forest floor, thick ferns, starlet flowers here and there, a family of deer if you were lucky.

Suddenly, the heron jolted its head. Despite our efforts, we heard the yelling and laughter of drunks somewhere in the park.

“Jesus, they’ve infested the city.” Nathan said.

I pulled out another cigarette.

“Want one?”

Nathan obliged, Eric declined.

“My sister back home is schizophrenic.”

“Yeah? What was t’at like?”

“A fucking nightmare. I remember she busted open a sprinkler because she thought it was a camera and spent a few weeks on and off at the state psych ward for a couple years. But – it’s not her fault.”

The wards made her worse every time, I fucking swear. She lives with her boyfriend now, unemployed and coloring all day last I heard. Peaceful at least. God, how I miss her. Not the new her, but the old her, as bad as it sounds.

“What’s yer fondest memory of her?”

I had to ponder. It had been a lifetime since I’d seen her.

“Sometimes I only remember the chaos and I forget once upon a time, she was just a little girl. One time, she bawled until her face was blue because she couldn’t keep wearing her Cinderella princess dress every friday. It made the other girls jealous.”

I grinned. She’d loved that baby blue dress. The water shone like the glitter of her skirt.

“She’d been my best friend for a long time. We’d been through it all. Days home alone, TV dinners every night, a cultish church, abusive boyfriends, drugs and alcohol. And then there was the pandemic. That’s when I lost her. ”

I remembered my sister’s demise too well. The stacked factors finally shattered her fragile mind into a million shards. I tried to reach in, repair her with Loctite hands but some pieces would always be missing. Eric broke the surface of the pond with another stone.

The heron stood on one leg, and then the other, slowly wading deeper into the water. In my last semester of senior year – when I crashed my car, worked at BurgerKing, dodged glass vases from a crazy sister – I fumbled my bright future harder than an amateur football player. High up in the clouds during the day, drinking myself into the ground at night. It cost me my ticket outta poverty. At least I escaped home. I drank from the flask.

“What about your mother?” I gestured towards Eric.

“I miss when she would paint. She’d be an artist in anot’er life. Oil, acrylic, watercolor. Meadows and mountains, lilies underneath a rising sun, a blue heron reflected in t’e water. She taught me some, but I was no good at it. It was her comfort.”

“Just you two?” I asked.

“Yeah. Father ran out on us, t’e bastard. She suffered a long time. 2008 did us in, we were steeling our t’ings ‘cross t’e city. I don’t t’ink she ever knew peace after t’at. T’at was ‘er home, she worked hard for it. Her eyes were almost foggy t’en, like a filter she needed in order to live. She’d stare off, sometimes into beautiful t’ings like birds and sunsets, but other times into mundane things like t’e fridge or ceiling.”

My sister was an artist too. She lost her mind before she got any good at it though.

“My mot’er’s sound most days. For now. I made ‘er stop working. Wit’ my new job working for t’e most bourgeois paper in t’e country, she doesn’t have to step foot in another job, long as I have a say,.”

“We oughta hang t’is fellow, for being a traitor.” Nathan grinned.

“Yer one to talk. You’ve been awfully quiet, Nathan.” Eric nudged him.

“I’m flat out,” He shook his head.

“What’s on your mind?” I asked as I watched the heron wading in the water, hunting for fish.

“To be quite honest, I’m still t’inking about t’e man you spoke about before. Reminded me of Scrap Alley John. When I take my bus home, I noticed tere was t’e same homeless man near t’e bus station. I noticed him but never spoke to him at t’at point. One day, I’m gallivanting about, and I see him near KFC. I go, oh t’ere’s t’e same man from t’e station. He asked me for

some change, I'd not have any but I'd gladly buy him some food. He just wanted a biscuit and tea. He gave me his story, wit' nervous laughter, you know when someone is embarrassed to share how t'ey came to be in t'eir situation. All he wanted was enough money to catch a bus back to his town. T'at's why he begged at the station. I bought him a ticket, on the spot. T'ere's some good news, isn't it? I've done good."

As Nathan spoke, I wondered if my stepfather ever begged at a bus station before he died.

"I'm catching t'e bus to Dublin from Naavan, and guess who I saw? It was Scrap Alley John! He was looking rougher than ever. He came up to me again, didn't even recognize me, I t'ink he was out of it, to be completely honest. He gave t'e same spiel, t'e same embarrassment, 'cept he needed money to save up to get some new, clean clothes for a job interview."

He blew smoke.

"Here was a grown man, maybe under 65 kg, at rock bottom, still trying to fight, still trying to pull himself up. I bought him a new shirt and pants on t'e spot. He cried. A grown man crying."

I bounced my leg. Nathan's voice began to crack, he teared up himself.

"A mont' later, come to find out. T'e man had been hospitalized, according to t'e local coffee shop he'd get free tea from. It'd been bleeding cold out, he'd been hungry, you know. T'at was two winters ago. I haven't seen him since. It's either for better, or for worse."

Silence crept up once again. What was there to say? There were a million other stories we could all share, a million other ways to further depress the night. In Atlanta, I abhorred the sight of the homeless people on campus and on the train. I shouldn't have. It wasn't their fault.

The last time I saw them was when I left for Dublin. It was particularly ugly outside when I caught the train to the airport, and the beaten and broken snored, hitting their heads on the

window or seat without waking. It was the closest thing to home for them, or a bed. They reminded the poor what it meant to be classless in a class society. It made you feel grateful to be exploited. It made you remember, constantly, that you were an industrial reserve. I couldn't help but hate the sight of them most days. It wasn't their fault.

In the distance, we heard more and more commotion. More American idiots had jumped the fence as we had. Under the bridge, at least we'd be somewhat hidden.

"How long until they find us?" Eric asked.

"Hopefully never."

Their footsteps began to come over us, their voices audible. I singled out a few conversations. They talked about flight schedules, pets they missed, and hookups they'd have to say bye to forever. They had names like Michael, Kaitlyn, and Avery. I felt like the grinch on Christmas Eve, my heart growing smaller and smaller into the cavity of my chest. Their happiness, their oblivion, it was enviable. Eric kept skipping rocks. Nathan kept smoking.

"I'll really miss you guys, we might never see each other again--"

A shot rang through the air and the heron went flying across the pond, past the trees. Screams echoed through the park. Eric and I scrambled up. More and more shots. The bullets gleamed under the light like thick droplets of water defying gravity.

"Shit!" Eric shouted.

"Quiet, ya bleeding spanner," Nathan whisper-shouted and tugged us downward. "Get down!"

"What do we do?" I asked.

The bullets kept coming and coming. They were rapid. We weren't near the exits at all. We huddled near the center of the underbridge. More screams traveled through the park. Were

they scared, or getting shot too? Our shaky breaths filled the space under the bridge. My hands shook and my heart beat viciously.

“What the fuck,” I dug my nails into my palms.

Nathan held up a finger to his mouth. The bullets stopped but we felt nowhere near safe.

I had flashes of a life I hadn't lived yet. In the future, for once, *I* would be the backwards one, with only memories of what my generation had been through: scorched skies and buildings, flaming fields, and starving cities. In a world of forward-thinking and creative youth, I would be the dusty demolitionist, clinging to the surfaces of a gone-by turbulent time. I could try to leave my dated mind behind but I'd myself staggering in the dust of the builder's race before I could separate my memories from my nerves. The old ways would die with me, with my memory.

“I need you to snap out of it,” Nathan snapped his fingers in front me and tugged me along.

I had flashes of my old life, up from childhood. Days of bike riding in car centric neighborhoods, laughing with school friends, and going to the movies for the summer blockbuster. But these memories were half truths. Nostalgia always was.

“Fuck!” Eric whispered.

“What is it?” Nathan scolded.

“I dropped my insulin needle in t'e water.”

“Jesus.” I rubbed my temples. “No extras?”

He shook his head. His hands were shaking, forehead was sweaty.

“We've got to go—” I said, but Nathan shook his head immediately.

“We can't. Absolutely not.”

“It's fine, I don't feel ill. Yet.”

“Shh!”

Loud footsteps approached until they were on the bridge overhead.

“How many did you hit?”

“Least half a dozen.”

“Not nearly as much as you promised.”

“Yeah? And you?”

“I reckon at least ten.”

“We’ve fallen short. Way short.”

“We still have time before the police arrive. We can go out with a bang.”

“God Save the Queen.”

“Amen.”

The shooters were Irish, but why’d they do it? I breathed into my hands to stifle the sound. Nathan steadied Eric, whose high blood sugar was making him dizzy. Eric’s cheeks swelled, and before he could hurl the greasy fries from earlier, Nathan held his hand over his mouth. At this rate, he might choke before he faints. Death stood right above us. Screams continued to echo throughout the park.

“See anyt’ing?”

“Over t’ere. Near the fence.”

Bullets fired, followed by thumps in the distance. Finally, innumerable sirens sounded in the distance.

“Hurry, quick.”

More shots. Whether they hit anyone, I couldn’t be sure. The sirens were immediate, militant shouting was barely audible, and the garden gates opened to release its victims. Bullets

went back and forth, until thumps right above us could be heard. Nathan let go of Eric's mouth and he threw up a gallon of bile. He gasped for air, choking, and spitting. I cursed myself for only having a flask of alcohol in a time like this.

"Drink the river water, just do it!" Nathan urged.

Eric heaved, and obliged. After a few gulps and heavy breathing, he stabilized.

"Let's fucking go."

We ran from beneath the bridge, not once looking back towards the bridge. An officer stopped us for witness statements.

"We haven't much time, he's sick."

We were able to leave if we provided our contact information. We hurried along the street until we hailed down a taxi, the last one left. Two Irish girls begged us to let them in. Much to the distaste of the driver, we made it work. I tried to calm the girls down, but even I found my assurance hard to believe. Shots in the US were one thing, in Dublin, it was another.

"There were so many dead," One girl broke out into tears.

"That was the first time I ever heard a gun," Nathan said.

"Me too."

"What do you think it was?"

"Impossible to say."

"Probably some drunk Americans." I half joked, to make the mood better.

"Now isn't the time, pox."

We had to head to Eric's for his insulin. He'd been stumbling by the time we got there. As soon as my head hit the couch cushion, I dreamt first of spinning blackness. Then I dreamt that I had to go back home.

I knew if I did leave, Dublin wouldn't be too sad to lose me. It gleamed with its usual coziness, its usual liveliness, not yet tainted by the incoming struggles. Even then, I'd always be wearing rose-tinted glasses.

Could I learn to tint Atlanta too? Or would it always be stained, as I remembered? *Could it be worse?*

When the plane landed, I took the train and bus to Piedmont park. They'd certainly done their part to 'clean the city up', but we knew that meant sweeping the dirt under the bed. In the dawn of day, I caught up with the city, observing and listening. I laid my head upon my suitcase as I watched a blue heron spread its wings and fly.