

Tinkers

Once upon a time, I lived in Ireland — not in cosmopolitan Dublin or the picturesque Ring of Kerry, but in rural, isolated Donegal. County Donegal is to the Republic of Ireland as Alaska is to the United States. Separated from the rest of the country by Northern Ireland, the roads, television signals, even the mail arrived via the foreign towns of Derry and Strabane. At least they did before “the troubles.”

The population of the town of Letterkenny was less than four thousand souls. Gaelic could be heard in the pubs and *sha nos* singers in the streets on market day. The biggest industry in town was the Donnelly sausage plant on the port road. The squeals of slaughtered pigs traveled through the still, Irish air to almost every home, including ours.

We lived on Crieve hill, overlooking the town. In front of our bungalow were three others. Below them were the council estates. We, who lived on Crieve hill, were teachers, doctors and business professionals. They, who lived in the council estates, were shop assistants, manual laborers and the chronically unemployed. Crieve itself was surrounded by pastures dotted with cattle and a few sheep.

Shortly after our arrival, a group of tinkers set up camp between the hill and council estates. These remnants of tenant farmers who took to the roads during the clearances of the potato famine are called tinkers because they repair broken items, particularly those made of metal. In the days before public assistance programs, this — together with cock-fighting, ratting and horse-breaking — was their primary means of subsistence. Now, they collect the dole and beg tourists for money. They beg from tourists because the locals will not tolerate them. Which brings me to my story.

The Crieve tinkers kept mostly to themselves, except for the children. One of the tasks assigned to the youngest members of the clan was to fetch each day’s supply of water. The smallest tots rode with the water jugs in a homemade wagon with mismatched wheels. They were pushed along by siblings one size larger. The woman in the first bungalow refused the ragged tribe access to her outside spigot. The housewife at the second house went along with the scheme for a few weeks before she



Bridget & her brothers

banished the small travelers from her flower beds. The third house passed. And that left me, the crazy American lady.

For the next two years, the tinker children rattled up the gravel drive each morning and made their way to the rear of our house, where they filled their containers with water. Over time, the oldest boy was reassigned to other work and a new infant replaced the one in the wagon. But Bridget was a constant.

I loved her at first sight. Bridget's blue eyes were not crossed like her brothers. Maybe her mother dipped into a different gene pool to come up with her delicate features and tangled brown hair. Bridget liked to slip through the open door into my kitchen where she would stare at the cooker and fridge as if they were objects from outer space. She'd wrap her arms around our Irish Wolfhound and shower his muzzle with kisses. And she was always, always touching me — my arms, hands, my face. Eventually, Bridget started splashing around at the spigot when the jugs were full, rinsing the grime from her hands. Then she'd rub her ruddy cheeks. Clearly, Bridget had dreams for herself that were bigger, or at least cleaner, than the caravan camp at Crieve.

The children played with our hurley sticks and the tiny ones sometimes rode the wolfhound like a pony. On the weekends, my husband would give them pennies or packets of crisps. We warned them not to tell, but I think the lucky children suffered some unlucky bruises when their booty was discovered. In short, we broke the rules of the community. And for Bridget, vital lines of demarcation became blurred.

The day arrived when we had to leave Ireland and return to the United States. Our neighbors and friends gave us books, Beleek china and lovely farewell dinners. We gave them drawings we'd done of local landmarks and our home-cured sheepskin rugs. We were packing the rental car when Bridget slipped through the gate. No brothers. No wagon. No water jugs.

She was wearing the discarded Communion dress of a daughter of one of Letterkenny's more affluent families. It was torn and filthy, bits of tattered lace trailing from the hem and sleeves. Wild daisies poked from barrettes in her finger-combed hair. And she had not only washed her face and hands, but both knees. Standing beside the car with the biggest, most hopeful smile I had ever seen, Bridget coaxed, "Please take me to America with you."

I cried all the way to Sligo.

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