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WHAT CRISP WATER

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In the 1990s, my dad travelled often through Ireland for his work in the quarries. If the Gardaí, from another piece of the island, ever caught him slightly erring in his driving, he'd look all innocent and feign ignorance in his most rural Northerly voice. 'Oh I'm sorry. I'm not from here and don't know the ways.'

During long summers, we'd gallivant by car over a border, across water: at least once with Antrim cousins to Bantry Bay, where in a borrowed wetsuit I learnt to sail those flimsy boats which require you, while changing direction, to duck under a sweeping boom and plant your weight on the other side to create a balance against the wind; on a different occasion, in caravans accompanied by a Ballyronan family along the west coast of Ireland on what we called the 'route de Dingle'; by a ferry from Belfast to Birkenhead on the 'mainland', then a good drive north for a tour of the Lake District; or by boat from Dublin to Cherbourg and descending to a Eurocamp site near Bordeaux, where we bumped into a Tyrone cousin in the showers.

My first solitary voyage was at about twelve when I flew on an exchange to Madrid. With me, I carried a hardback omnibus volume of *All Creatures Great and Small* by James Herriot. I stayed in the home of a Spanish girl Mandy. At the supermarket, I discovered a brain, bright on a Styrofoam tray under cling film. They dined at 10PM.

My second journey alone was as part of the Ocean Youth Club, now Ocean Youth Trust, a charitable organisation which immersed young ones from ‘all walks’ in communal living and collaborative sail training. Alongside a skeleton crew and a group of teens I didn’t know, from north and south, I sailed away for a week from Carrickfergus through light and mist to wherever our yacht was blown, in this case up the North Channel through the Hebrides and east along the Sound of Mull as far as Oban in the West Highlands.

It’s true that I haven’t flowed much to the west of where I was reared, and I barely know Derry City. My partner comes from there, over the Glenshane Pass. In future, the city and I may be intricately acquainted. According to an inquisitive aunt, the family of a great-granny-on-my-mother’s-side hailed from Horn Head, a peninsula next to Dunfanaghy, a fishing port on the north-western coast of the island. I’ve never been to Horn Head. My partner tells me those cliffs are magnificent, harrowing. The plunge from road to water so appalled his mother that she leapt from the car and walked, only trusting her feet. Though north even of where I lived in the North, Horn Head belongs to the South, the Republic. This makes no sense and has its own logic. My great-granny would’ve been born there prior to the births of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, before separation.

All this is to say that while wading and bobbing through early life, perhaps because I lived a mere half-hour from the rim of the ocean on a brief island enclosed in a rolling, shining, opaque expanse of brave indefatigable salt water, I had a tingling awareness of being surrounded by numerous energies, many angles I might explore, real immaculate offerings. I could glide east to Belfast, England, Denmark, Lithuania, and all that Russia is; spill down through the Republic to Spain and Africa, where I’d already spent a while; turn west to Doire or Donegal, through which veins of my family had passed, as far as America and Canada, where currents of this blood have reached, evaporated; drift north to the Hebrides, Faroe

Islands, Iceland, Greenland, Svalbard, the withering Arctic where I'd never survive; pitch off an end of land into edgeless sea; rise through ether to outer space.

From primary age, I attended a swimming club in Magherafelt where I went to school and where my grandparents-on-my-mother's-side lived. We trained on Tuesday early morning and on Thursday evening.

After school on Thursdays, between hockey and swimming, my sister and I would go to the home of family friends. They lived on an old farm on the outskirts of town, opposite a field of horses, and were the only Protestant Nationalist family of which I was aware (you don't always know). The children were fun, sporty, widely-travelled, well-educated, lovely, devout. For them, it wasn't even okay to say 'sugar!' instead of 'shit!' or 'Christ!' though they didn't insist I'd be damned for not believing as they did. We devoured heaps of toast with Panda Two Tone chocolate spread. We devoured warm potato bread with corn beef and cheddar cheese, melted in the microwave. We played Super Mario on the Nintendo. We played football on the crop of green in front of the ha-ha, which invisibly divided the lawn from the meadow, where they cut hay and grazed animals. We watched WWF matches on TV. The middle son, my age, had a pet snake. In their cabinet freezer, they stored frozen mice to feed it.

Their parents scarcely seemed to be there, always at work in the hospital that long ago served as the workhouse, where someone in my family had once lived and dissolved too young. There's a story here. We only know pieces. My inquisitive aunt wonders if this someone might've been a Catholic. In that place for the desperate and ashamed, dear ruined mother of the mother of my mother was submerged alone forever. That knowledge scalds my heart with a certain coldness. It popples through my stomach, lingers in the inability to trust utterly, in my refusal to allow bleak things to stifle the pleasure and freshness of being alive.

Why, yet, this love or pain on her behalf? It's impossible and real. Pieces of her life are tragic, revolting. I'm not ashamed but indebted, indignant. My comrade! I'd butterfly back against the tide of time to rescue her if I could, but she crossed the brink and there is no returning.

On Saturdays, our swimming club participated in galas. Another club would travel to us at the Greenvale Leisure Centre, or we'd coach to them to compete in races, individual and relay. Sometimes we descended as far as Monaghan, over the border. No big deal. At the time I'd have called it 'down south'; it's part of Ulster but not part of Northern Ireland. I wouldn't have said simply 'Ireland'. We were Ireland, too. I was as Irish as anybody while also Northern Irish, of the UK, and to be precise a country and border-county girl. This is intimate, particular. To each their own.

My granny-on-my-mother's-side called the South of Ireland 'the Free State', a surprise to me since we were of the sect that reflexively favoured Great Britain and feared being sundered, so I couldn't imagine why she used that glamorous name for the land over the crooked split, where life was supposed to be different. Sure, these distinctions weren't much more pronounced than those between village and village, five minutes apart, where accent and rituals might contrast. As a youngster, I didn't realise that once upon a time there was no crooked split. It was nearly as young as my granny.

In memories, I can't picture the Army at the border between North and South. I see armed checkpoints *within* the North. Up our road toward the Glenshane Pass—an escape route in my imagination. At another edge of my hometown of Maghera. On the pinnacle of the mountain pass near The Ponderosa bar and restaurant. Was it? Into Tobermore, a Protestant village from which a portion of my family came. In the middle of Cookstown, where cousins lived. On the rural approach to Aldergrove Airport, now Belfast International. And elsewhere. Oh yes, in Toome, Coleraine, Randalstown, Kilrea, Holywood, Limavady ...

I recall men with machine guns outside school and up Queen Street in front of Mary's Bar, at the Diamond where the weekly market was. I feel cryptic and sinister bodies streaming through private gardens in darkness. 'Close them blinds or extinguish the light if you're at the loo in case the soldiers might be fit to gawk. Use a nice smelly candle if you're having a soak.' That was usual and has been recounted by those who were more exposed and who pre-date me.

Why then can I no longer see the border checkpoints from North to South? They were very much there. They've dispersed. Accidentally and intentionally, for good and ill, I've tended not to dwell on minutiae of present or past. In that way, I'm freer. There's been enough dwelling, I've often thought. Other times, I reckon we could do with listening and absorbing every detail, together paying attention once and for all in an attempt to let it pour out, perform a cleansing. It won't happen, not in my life. The freeze is overwhelming. There's deep peril in releasing such splashy evils. You could be towed under. People do, see, hear and believe what they need. That's the height of it.

One border control that resides clearly in me was from 1996, my third trip without my parents. It was not within the island of Ireland. In my memory, we are in Strasbourg Airport. We've travelled here as a class with several teachers to visit institutions, such as the European Court of Human Rights. We are in Lower Sixth at a rare mixed-denomination school in the North, a Grammar, and we're undertaking European Studies. So far, we've learnt about the foundation of the EU and EU citizenship, about the pioneers who inspired the EU project, and about its predecessors the ESCS and the EEC. Though we're young Europeans, the border police won't let us through to start our adventure, our research.

We sprawl on the floor or wobble on luggage in an unsoft customs hall for what seems hours while armed Frenchmen grope through the contents of every bag. This is because we're

from Northern Ireland. We, a muddled bunch of impatient rural schoolchildren, are a menace. It's silly and annoying. We get it.

I'm hosted by Nadège, a Black teenager from Strasbourg who lives with her mother and siblings in a flat within a large block. I've never been in a flat. We eat Ivorian food for supper, and they laugh when I make the typical error of refusing another helping by saying I'm *pleine*, pregnant.

While in Strasbourg, my slightly-magical French teacher, a Southerner, suggests I consider applying to a famous English university. A poet, whose brother lives on our road and who comes from a village ten minutes away, has recently occupied the role of Professor of Poetry there. I'm no genius, not even best in the year, but with him in mind I decide it mightn't be impossible if I toil and am lucky. I don't expect it to be a simple endeavour. I've read *Jude the Obscure*.

For the duration of our visit, Nadège lends me her bed and sleeps elsewhere. I look out a small high window at a rain-lashed city that's shifted nationality so many times and think how refreshing this France and these French are. Kids smoke in school. They don't wear a uniform. You call someone *spécial* to convey that they're weird. I wish everyone in the North and South could have this chance to come away from home to another place and begin to know it. Soon they'd realise how alike we, who live on this island, are despite our tiny variations. That's detritus and ephemera, unworthy of apocalypses.

In the last few years of being home, I studied three languages and forms of literature: English, French and Spanish. I was fascinated by language, how it reflected and pinned us while continuing to metamorphose, piece by piece.

At school, we were taught Castilian Spanish. I didn't yet know the myriad versions of Spanish spoken in Spain and across the planet, but I knew that in the Basque country they spoke

the Basque language and that in an eastern bit of Spain, containing Barcelona, they spoke Catalan.

We analysed a play by Federico del Sagrado Corazón de Jesús García Lorca. That name was gorgeous, pious, sensual, excessive. I perceived in it the idealistic yearning of adoring, fresh parents; later I found gullible devotion to an unnerved ideology that would find abomination in their son's manner of desiring, his reach for freedom and abundance.

In our small Spanish class, I sat beside a friend from my town, the only other girl. We attended the same church. I was more relaxed and unreliable about churchgoing. My parents gave me a choice, and nobody had offered good answers to questions that arose when I, a why child, had asked. Why are the elders boys while wives only get to bake and decorate the church? How's it fair for somebody to go to hell if they've never had a chance to even hear of God and Jesus, never mind choose Christianity and be born again? Why can't others go to paradise if they're excellent: Mother Theresa, Freddie Mercury, the Japanese or the Māori who might worship alternate notions of the sacred? Isn't it vain to insist on being worshipped?

By the time I came to Lorca, my quandary had already been resolved when the Reverend said in Sunday School that it was sinful to go to Nero's Disco in Portstewart during the summer. Was it the alcohol, kissing, commingling of all sorts, or our dancing to alive, rude music when 'Born Slippy' and 'Rearviewmirror' were the thing? I couldn't tell you. He lost me for good if I wasn't lost already.

Something must've happened one day, a violent event. My friend and I were discussing it while listening to 'The Whole of the Moon', one earbud each, and my friend acknowledged that she was terrified because of where she lived on the other half of town from where I lived. 'But you'll be okay,' she said. 'You live up among them.'

This confounded me. I didn't understand how on earth she thought that and felt easy in confessing. Was it because she went to a Protestant primary; division first? Apart from at church, my experience had always been mixed.

In secret *that* was always present, even here in big school where we were juxtaposed and intertwined. It's hard to displace a vigilance inserted at the beginning. How the heck could you have read Lorca and still think 'up among them'? Defining oneself by negation felt so insecure, parching; you had to fend off each imagined threat. I'd rather open wide, take everything. Opening too far was better than living in a nervy paralysis, praying I alone was right. Freedom's precious when you've watched others choose not to be free. I was practical, young, harsh, and my spirit wasn't in it anymore.

My friend didn't see as I saw but didn't mean harm. Had she any mates who weren't like her, weren't like *us* in her view? I could've talked with her; I didn't. It turned me off. I went cold, floated away. What if she didn't know then what she'd later grow to understand? What if I'd misinterpreted her, or not understood what would later surface? Not knowing isn't evil. Maybe I ought to have been more forgiving, to have paused. I feared that if I raised it, she might admit what I couldn't bear to hear. I judged her alarm, withdrew from her and anyone who maintained that affinity, that anxiety. I so ached to elude the spiteful differentiation, stretching to live a broad exciting life, to let mingle and keep flowing and include only the loving, the harm-free. Without noting a contradiction, I gave up on my friend, viewing her as a lost cause, a narrow one. I had to distance myself from them.

But I'm an heir of people who once played instruments in the marching band. To them it wasn't wrong. They didn't hate; I've asked. Not that I speak for them all. To some, the march was a festival, while the village band was moments of togetherness, a common gesture, the link to time and ancestors, their path to music—a touch of craic. I'll go on if you remain open.

My granda-on-my-mother's-side began playing the accordion as a boy when it was donated to him by an old man in the village. Being entrusted with this beautiful instrument was a rite of passage. He grew accomplished. As well as playing in parades, he performed as part of a group at a social dance in Maghera, at the bottom of the Fair Hill. This small band consisted of two Catholics and two Protestants. Later, the accordion was passed to my inquisitive aunt, who played until international table-tennis took precedence. The accordion was retired. My generation of the family are not into that. There's loss there as well as gain.

By my time, these celebrations appeared hostile, provoking; the existence of one was interpreted or intended as an assault on the other. Once, in patches, there'd been a softer coexistence. My inquisitive aunt says, as children, her Catholic mates celebrated the 12th of July and she street-partied on St Patrick's Day. These holidays were there for everybody. I've never known that. I shirk most customs.

During my childhood, there were towns for one and not for the other. I'd like to think that's altered. Until recently, an old buddy from swimming lived in Swatragh, a Catholic village. A time or two on the way to hers, I've driven in error to Gulladuff. Each is several miles out the road from Maghera. I confuse them because they feel akin. I'd assumed Gulladuff was a Protestant village. Having looked, I see that's not so.

A horse-riding pal used to live in Castledawson (half-and-half) near Knockloughrim (more Protestant, I think, but I'm not sure) and Bellaghy (more Catholic), where water-skiing friends were.

A choir mate came from Ballyronan, an uneven combination, where there's a pretty marina on the brink of Lough Neagh. A brainy girl in English class was close to the lough in the South Derry parish of Ballinderry, mostly Catholic. Slightly further inland, you'd find Coagh, mostly Protestant, the village of a daunting tennis-opponent.

My biology teacher received intimidating instructions to move house because her family was the sole of that kind left in the area. This happened both ways. As kids we laughed. We laugh often. It disperses the poison, nods at absurdity.

Maghera was a fusion. The main shopping street was roughly bisected. No doubt some individuals frequented only one piece of the town, never crossing the threshold of the other. At random, we lived in both.

In the eastern half, Protestant-owned shops and bars proliferated. Ulster Bank was there, the medical centre, garden centre, the library. You'd find the Protestant primary school, a vanished Protestant comprehensive, the Presbyterian church and St. Lurach's, the Church of Ireland. Adjacent to the new churches were the ruins of old St. Lurach's. Morsels of this ancient church—a carving of the crucifixion—date back to the tenth century. According to the *Annals of Ulster*, it was ransacked the century before by seafarers, the Vikings.

In the western half, mostly Catholic-owned shops and bars were located. Here, among other properties, you'd find the chapel, the Gaelic Athletic Association club (named after an executed Presbyterian United Irishman, incidentally), and the Catholic primary school. Well out the Tirkane Road, if you parked, wandered slightly along, hopped a stile, took a grass track up the hill, and climbed at an angle via a twisty stone-and-mud path, you'd reach the Emigrants' Cairn. From Carntogher's summit, through wind-yanked tears or a mesh of brilliance, you might look in a circle around you at almost the whole of the North. I didn't know names. My elders would speculate which hills, vales, great and little waterways were which.

The approximate boundary between the two halves of Maghera was the intersection of Main Street with Coleraine Road, which shoots north to the coast. The Credit Union and St. Patrick's College live along Coleraine Road, so too the police station and a new recreation centre. At the aforementioned crossroads, you'd find an estate agency, Walsh's Hotel, the Northern Bank, and a draper's, owned by my family and named after my granda-on-my-

father's-side. He died before I was born. Still, he was instrumental in the life I occupy, as were all who came before. They passed me things. Until last year, my family inhabited the house and garden these grandparents designed and built, which lies south-west of the town centre, on Glen Road.

This beloved road of a mile and a half ripples between the chapel on Main Street and another more rural chapel, close to where Glen Road meets Glenshane Road, a dual carriageway that rushes through Glenshane mountain. I couldn't tell you the precise composition of Glen Road now or then. Various families, known and unknown, lived here and there, including schoolmates of Chinese heritage. The road accommodated the Catholic primary, two Parochial houses and St. Mary's Annexe, the first-year building for the Catholic comprehensive. It was regarded as a Catholic road. We lived 'up among them'.

What I couldn't tolerate was the splitting that my friend from Spanish class accepted, apparently without a bead of doubt. Was that already how life appeared to her—static? The idea drained me. I wasn't shaped so. I felt I was spacious, energetic, light on my toes, a chameleon sometimes, fit to burst with maybes. Even with an accidental inevitable line through the centre of my awareness, both sects lived within. I was 'them' as much as 'her'. I wouldn't've known how to be otherwise.

Today, I find this state easier to hold and balance in language because I possess a term I didn't have when young. I've long been aware, without knowing how to explain, that having formed in a subtle, motley atmosphere, I embodied not one or the other but both and more. I am, have always been, adamantly *fluid*. What crisp water that is. It's a relief to almost catch it.

'Yo deajo que el agua corra'

(I let the water flow)

Federico García Lorca, *La Casa de Bernarda Alba*