

## *Margaret of Achill*

You are driving, alone, to Achill Island, Ireland. You've come, an American woman, to do the roots thing—the old story, so banal, the American cousin eager to discover the mystery of her origins. As if there is anything to discover, as if such a discovery would change anything. You would like to think your story will be different; you would like to think you will find some piece to the puzzle that is your life. You would like to think you are above the ordinary horde.

Your little rented car tootles along, up hill and down, along narrow streets, sometimes almost scraping the stone walls that occasionally border the road. Everything is green. It is spring, and bright and cold. You've driven through tiny villages and past open fields and now the road opens up, you are poised at the top of a hill, and below you floats, like meringue in custard, a mountainous, bleached rocky island in a deep blue sea. You shake your head, disbelieving. Except for the sea, it feels as if you've driven through Ireland to New Mexico.

Your car descends now, and the closer you get to the small bridge, the larger the island looms, so that by the time you are on the island, you are dwarfed by the arid windswept hills, the road before you swallowed up by them, the few cars you can see up ahead smaller than ants on a ribbon of popsicle juice. For a moment, it feels as if you too are floating. There is nothing but sky, rock, water, and a vast loneliness. You feel light-headed, disoriented. You consult your maps. You decide on the coast road first. You turn left and find yourself in a valley between two large hills littered with pale ocher rocks.

You are startled when some of the rocks get up and amble—they are sheep, dusty and shaggy. There are no signs of people, but your travel literature describes a small settlement on the coast. You drive and drive, and then, just when you are wondering if you've taken a wrong turn, the road swerves and a small clutch of thatched cottages comes into view, and beyond them, the inky sea.

You drive more slowly now, admiring the mammoth hollyhocks against the whitewashed walls, the cabbages so large babies must surely be hidden under them. There are lace curtains in the windows, the cottages have brightly colored doors, but there are no people. Then you see a man working on a house. Surprised at your own relief, you pull over and lower your window. He gets down off his ladder and ambles over, a bright open smile on his face. You open your window and ask him where you are on the map and where the road goes. You notice his eyes are the same color as the sea, and his face is pleasantly sun burnished. But it is his voice with its gentle cadences that triggers a momentary fantasy of staying there by the sea, as if your soul might expand in the unhurried emptiness of the place, as if some ancient rhythm might be restored.

But you drive on, pulling finally up to a shingle beach and get out, the wind tugging at your sweater, your hair whipping around, lashing your face. You feel giddy, exhilarated, the way you always feel at the beach, only more so, because of the emptiness and savagery of the landscape.

You get back in your car and eventually, after a few wrong turns, you find yourself back on the main road, crossing the midline of the island. Here it is flat, dry, and dusty, and you are reminded again of the American West. There is even half-hearted

barbed wire fencing strung across the emptiness, with weeds tumbled in it, and the ubiquitous sheep.

Hungry, you search for some sign of a place to stop and eat. Before too long, there is a sign for a B & B, and relieved again, you turn and drive another long way until you find an improbable stucco two story house with one car parked in front. You pull in beside a Jeep and go up the steps, but there is a sign that says “Closed.” There is no other habitation in sight, and desperate now, you go up another flight of stairs and bang on the door until a middle-aged woman who looks as if she might have been having a nap, answers it. You explain your situation, hoping she will realize your desperation, and she thinks a moment before pointing down the road. There is a tea shop not too far, she says, and gives you directions. A tea shop, just the thing, you think, how civilized, and you are off again.

You go to the second stop sign and turn right, then drive down a dirt road, past more empty pastures. You go and go and there is nothing but the lunar landscape, and you imagine you will drive forever, hungry and alone. Finally, miraculously, you pass a little house and see, out of the corner of your eye, a sign propped in a window. Dust billows where you brake and turn the car. You pull up beside an old beat-up faded red Camero, as improbable a car as you can imagine in this landscape. The house looks like a tract house, except for the bay window in the front, with the small sign of careful letters reading “Tea Shop.” Hesitantly, you knock on the door, and wait, which you repeat three times.

Finally, an old woman with died black hair cut in a fringe and a dowager’s hump, opens the door. You are reminded of witches, and yet she seems pleasant enough—more

than that—thrilled to have a customer. She welcomes you and seats you ceremoniously in the “tea room,” at a tiny table in a small space inside the bay window. She takes your order—Earl Grey, cake and scones—and disappears. You are ravenous, you can never remember being so hungry. You look around at the plastic flowers stuck into a small Waterford vase, at the plastic lace tablecloth. The adjacent room is dimly lit, but it looks overstuffed with a giant couch over which looms a large painting of The Sacred Heart of Jesus, His finger pointing dolefully at His exposed heart. It looks like something your grandmother would have had in her house. You can hear a TV, and a game show blaring loudly. The smell of stale tobacco smoke permeates the air.

Your hostess comes bustling back with a tray. The tea is served in fine porcelain cups painted with roses with thin lines of gold on the rim. These too remind you of your grandmother, of her collection of porcelain cups, which she prized, but you hated because they were hers, and she never had a nice word to say to you. The woman cuts the lemon cake and places scones on your plate. She hovers, asks if there is anything else, and you ask if she has fruit, quickly darting out and reappearing, placing a bowl of bruised bananas and doubtful apples on the table. She stands next to you, fretting about the cake. You assure her it is fine. You ask her to sit down, to join you. She demurs, but then you ask again, coaxingly, because you are hungry too for another human face, another human voice.

She sits, and you can see it is the right thing—she can barely contain her eagerness. Now you are two women anticipating a chat. Two women who might have been on a plane together and just struck up a casual conversation, something to pass the time. She asks shyly about your visit to Ireland, and about America, which she seems to

know from celebrity and fashion magazines to be a place where everyone has beautiful straight white teeth and no one worries about their next meal. You are about to contradict her when you are suddenly self-conscious about your own blazing white straightened teeth.

Slowly the conversation meanders toward its true course. Just as you would have no problem sharing the story of a difficult childbirth with a woman on the plane, so too there is an intimacy in the fact that you will never see each other again, that you are not bound by social contracts. You know this and feel the freedom of it, as you suspect she does.

Her name is Margaret. She sits primly across from you and you realize that in one of her trips to the kitchen she has hastily rouged her wrinkled cheeks, slashed on bright red lipstick. She is slight but lumpy, and her hands crossed in front of her as if in prayer are knobby with arthritis and the nails are ragged.

—You live here alone? you ask.

—Yes, alone, she answers. But I wasn't always alone. I have a daughter. Grown now.

—I have a grown daughter as well.

—My daughter lives in London now.

Margaret looks out the window and you follow her gaze. A lone car passes, kicking up dust. It hasn't rained in days; so unusual, she says, but she is glad for the rare sunshine. She turns her gaze back to you and continues.

—My daughter's too good for me now, she is. With her fancy London flat and her fancy husband. She hardly talks to me, treats me like rubbish.

You are taken aback by her vehemence, which you put down to isolation, to long pent-up feelings.

—Oh, yes, you commiserate, daughters can be callous towards their mothers.

You make clucking sounds, and offer a few stories of your own, although you exaggerate for sympathy's sake, mentally apologizing to your daughter, whose sins are in the realm of venial, not mortal.

—Do you see her much?

She asks avidly, and her eyes are intent, as if she is looking for more kindling to feed her bitter fire.

—No, not often. She lives in California, and I live in Massachusetts. I enjoy visiting her, getting away from the cold.

You can read the disappointment in her face.

—We get along, you say, guilty now for casting your daughter in a bad light. We get along.

Although what bothers you isn't that you fight, it is that you seem to have little to do with each other anymore. She was the white-hot center of your life, and now you chat twice a month about superficial things. You have no idea who she is, now. She could be anyone, any casual acquaintance. You do not recognize the grief that wells up with this thought.

—You love them, you open your veins for them, and then they leave you as soon as they can. Just like her father.

—Her father? you ask.

—Me mam was dying, don't ya know, and that bastard was foolin' around on me.  
I got me mam in one room, the kid in the other, and he's carrying on with me best friend.

Her slightly jaundiced face pales, and the thin reddened lips purse tightly.

—I'm sorry.

She looks at you and laughs, a short harsh laugh.

—Don't be, she says. I made him pay. He paid for this tea shop—and other things. My car. Besides, I was glad to get rid of him. He was nothing but trouble, drinking and pushing me around. I'm glad for the quiet.

She looks down, her hands spread on the tablecloth, smoothing it. And then looks up, her small dark eyes boring into yours.

—But did he have to do it then? When I buried her up on the hill that day, I thought, I am truly alone. Ah, she loved me. No one ever loves you like your mam; no one ever will again.

Her eyes filled, threatened to spill over.

—Can I get you more cake?

—Yes, please, that would be lovely.

She gets up and disappears, although her anguish remains seated there, inert. You think her story is primitive; you think of your own civilized divorce, how it wasn't a matter of fire, but of ice, how the two of you finally, simply had nothing to say to each other. How you never raised your voices, how you never threw things. No, your husband didn't drink or beat you like Margaret's did. Poor thing, you think.

Margaret comes back with more of the lemon cake and you eat another piece like it is your last meal, even though as a rule you never eat sweets, never eat cake. She pours you more tea, which is thick and stewed now.

—Do you still have your mother? she asks, sitting down heavily.

You are startled by the question, the idea that a mother is something you have.

—Oh, yes, I suppose you could say so. We don't live very near each other, though. And I work, so I don't get to see her often.

You dissemble. You don't say, we've never gotten along, that as soon as you could you got away from her, from her bitter, biting sarcasm, from her manipulative, crazy ways. No, no one ever loves you like your mother. Thank god.

—What kind of work? she asks. Do you own a business like me? Her eyes glitter, as if she's delighted that she has caught a real American career woman in her net.

—I'm a lawyer.

—Ah, a professional. A woman lawyer. My goodness.

You are not quite sure whether she is impressed or miffed.

—It's not all that great. A lot of work. Pushing paper around.

As soon as you say it, you realize it is true. It isn't all that great, and yet that is what you've staked your identity on. This comes as a shock.

She pours herself another cup and slices herself some cake.

—Do you have grandchildren? she asks.

You shake your head, no. It hasn't even occurred to you that you should want them, either.

—I do, she says, and her homely long face with its underbite and hooked nose lifts, transformed by the light in her eyes. I have a granddaughter.

—How old is she?

You ask, because you have to ask.

—Daria is four now. Ah, she is so beautiful and smart. She's the light of my life—here, I'll get a picture.

She bustles off and comes back with a professional photograph of a homely thin child with scraggly dark hair and her own weak chin.

—Beautiful.

Margaret beams at the photograph with such raw adoration you have to avert your eyes.

—I have to beg to see her; my daughter is such a bitch. Mean like her da. But I make sure I see Daria every chance I get; that's where the money for this shop goes, and the egg money and the baking money, to fly over to London. She loves me; when she sees me she comes running and throws herself into my arms. We don't let go till I have to come back, she sighs.

—How nice for you.

—Daria, she says, drawing out the name. She makes up for everything.

You feel suddenly the need to get some space. You excuse yourself, asking where the bathroom is. She directs you to the back of the house, through a warren of rooms, up and down uneven doorsills, as if the house had been cobbled together from several dwellings. Each room is crammed with stuffed animals, crocheted afghans, photographs, and plaster Marys looking demurely down at their praying hands. On one shelf an Infant

of Prague is prominently displayed. You stop before it, remembering how, as a small child, you took your grandmother's Infant of Prague, coveting its pretty lace dress, not understanding it wasn't a doll to be played with. How she shamed you for it. You shake your head. This Irish house is both familiar and strange.

The bathroom is a shock, though, not at all what you expect. It is large and has a huge red Jacuzzi surrounded by shelves arrayed with perfumes and cosmetics. Small lights are strung from the ceiling. You look at the perfumes—Channel #5, Anais Anais, and cosmetics from Lancôme and Mac. You look at the scented candles set around the bathroom, at the radio, at the ashtray full of cigarette butts, at the fashion magazines stacked by the spa. Who does she think she is? Some movie star? You almost laugh out loud, imagining Margaret's crooked back and badly dyed hair. It is almost indecent, this luxury, you think, and then you think that you haven't had a bath in years, that you haven't had time.

Poor thing, you think again, looking in the shadowy mirror at your white teeth. Poor thing, you say out loud, and you are not sure whom you mean.

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