McCarthy's Bar

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Published by Sceptre

Extract

Prologue

The harp player had just fallen off the stage and cracked his head on an Italian tourist's pint. There was a big cheer, and Con the barman rang a bell on the counter.

St Patrick's Day, and McCarthy's Bar was heaving.

The Eighth Rule of Travel states: *Never Pass a Bar That Has Your Name On It.* Other rules include: No. 7, *Never Eat in a Restaurant with Laminated Menus*; No. 13, *Never Ask a British Airways Stewardess for Another Glass of Wine Until She's Good and Ready*; and No. 17, *Never Try and Score Dope From Hassidic Jews While Under the Impression They're Rastafarians*, as someone I know once did on a Sunday afternoon in Central Park.

There's an excellent P. McCarthy's at the top of the main street in Westport, County Mayo, where they once made seventeen cheese-and-onion toasties for five of us, all on the same toaster, and never grumbled. I also like Pete's Pub in Boston, Massachusetts, full of second-generation Irish postal workers still arguing about JFK and Nixon; or at least they were the day I spent the afternoon there and the barman gave me his shirt – a very selfless gesture, I thought, especially for such a fat bloke.

But I'd chosen this McCarthy's to spend St Patrick's Day in, even though it was just a plain surname, with no P in front of it. I'd invested £149 in a three-day, two-night St Patrick's

Day package from Gatwick to be here, tempted back by hazy memories of my first visit, when I really had just spotted the sign, obeyed the rule, and walked in off the street.

Turned out Con the barman was from Skibbereen, just eight miles from where my mother grew up. There was a comprehensive collection of Irish matchboxes from the 1930s and 1940s, and one of Roy Keane's Manchester United shirts in a glass case behind the bar. The grainy old wood and dusty stained glass were full of character, and that was just the harp player's spectacles.

I'd been lured here this time by the dread of spending another St Patrick's night in the Home Counties of England. Each 17 March brings to a head the inability of the English middle classes to deal with the Irish Problem, in the sense that Ireland is a problem because it exists. This is when the radio phone-ins, and the letter columns of local newspapers, are taken over by the Knights of St George, the League of Anti-European Loyalists, and other assorted flag-fetishists and embittered headcases.

The gist of their bile is that, despite a glorious empire, two World Wars, the Falklands, Margaret Thatcher and a Queen Mother who has retained an impressive capacity for gin and Dubonnet well into her nineties, the English refuse to celebrate St George's Day. No one knows when it is; and in any case, St George is also claimed as celestial patron by Alsace. So it's just not fair that we let all these paddies make such a fuss for the Irish saint, who was Welsh anyway; and while we're at it, how come we let Irish people who live over here vote, instead of locking them up? After all, it's not as if the Irish are just Catholic. They're Catholic *and* pagan, and that's just not on.

So some time in February – the worst of all months in England, when the desire to hibernate or flee is almost uncontrollable, and feelings of deepest malice towards Aus-

tralians and their weather well up whenever the cricket highlights appear on the telly – the thought struck me. Why not get away this year for Paddy's Day? Why spend a feast-day – one that carries echoes of my earliest childhood memories – in an English pub, drinking overpriced Guinness and listening to Van Morrison's *Greatest Hits*, when for just £149, according to the weekend papers, I could do exactly the same thing in an Irish pub, only in more convivial company?

I briefly considered New York, with its green beer and good-natured, ruddy-cheeked, homophobic Irish policemen; or Dublin, with its rich literary heritage, and its scores of English stag parties throwing up on the streets of Temple Bar. But, deep down, I knew it had to be McCarthy's. After all, it had my name on it.

Well, it was a fine evening. At one point the harp player fell off again, only backwards. And what a cosmopolitan crowd we were. As well as the Irish and the English, there were Americans, Italians, French and Scots, some sinister, well-heeled Russians, and even a couple of Hungarians – all agreeing loudly in half a dozen languages that the craic was indeed mighty.

It must have been some time after eleven when I realised that, in a profound and very real way, Con the barman was my best friend, and quite probably a close relative. It was important he should know what I really felt. So I told him I didn't feel English.

'You sound English to me, sorr.'

'But it's what you feel inside that counts, Con. In here! And I . . .'

I knew it was important somehow to convey that this wasn't the drink talking; that I meant it, and what's more, I'd still mean it the next day. So I grabbed him and shouted.

'I . . . inside I feel Irish. I know where I belong!'

To emphasise my sincerity, I knocked a drink over.

'Ah, that's great, sorr. Good luck to ye now.'

Outside, I stood under the green neon shamrock and looked up at the sign. 'McCarthy's,' it said. 'Hungary's Top Irish Pub.'

I turned up my collar. Budapest can still be quite chilly in March.

Sod this, I thought. Next year I'll go to Ireland.

Chapter One

The Whiff

A year later, and I'm on the plane to Cork.

In a cold sweat.

The man across the aisle from me has a menacing aura, and a dog-collar. He may be a priest, but something about him – the way he seems to threaten violence even while asleep, perhaps – makes me suspect him of being a Christian Brother.

From the age of ten, I was taught by the Christian Brothers: the carrot and stick method of education, but without the carrot. My first school report said: 'Peter is an unpleasant and frivolous boy who talks too much and will never make anything of himself, but he does take a punch well.'

At primary school, before the Brothers, it had been the Sisters: six impressionable years trying to work out whether nuns had hair. Curiously, both the convent primary schools I attended have now been turned into pubs. And the Christian Brothers, for their part, have a make of brandy named after them. God moves in mysterious ways, especially after a few drinks.

From an early age it was taken for granted that Jesus was

Catholic, God himself was Irish, and I had been born into a wicked, pagan country. On St Patrick's Day you could spot all the kids from Irish families wearing huge bunches of shamrock on their blazers, in a proud display of religious and cultural heritage that also made fights much easier to start. Though my dad was English, half-Irish counted as Irish when the insults were flying.

We lived in the industrial north-west, in Warrington, where the air tasted of detergent from the soap-powder factory, so at least you knew it was clean. The rugby league team was called the Wire, after the town's main product. The Brothers' school was eight miles away, in St Helens; a town so devastated by heavy industry it made Warrington look like an area of outstanding natural beauty.

I went abroad for the first time when I was twelve.

We'd been going to Ireland every year since I'd been born, but Ireland didn't count as abroad. It was much nearer than London, or Bristol or Newcastle or Edinburgh for that matter, and was regarded simply as an extension of home. But in my second year at the Brothers' school we went on a school trip to proper abroad. To our twin town.

To Stuttgart.

I've never really approved of the idea of twinning, because places are invariably matched with other places just like them. So if you live in, say, a stunningly beautiful medieval town with a perfectly preserved castle, or a glamorous seaside resort with a fishing harbour and miles of sandy beach, then you'll be twinned with your exquisite European equivalent. And if you live in Warrington, or St Helens, then you'll be twinned with another industrial casualty.

Like Stuttgart.

So having spent the first dozen years of my life surrounded by wireworks, glass factories and chemical plants, I found myself transported to a place where the high spot of the visit

was a trip to a ball-bearing factory. To make matters worse, I contracted hepatitis. I lost a stone in a week and turned yellow, which is quite interesting when you're twelve. So the doctor arrived – a rather severe-looking elderly German gentleman in wire-framed glasses: not the most reassuring sight in the world when you've spent the last term doing a project on Josef Mengele, the Angel of Death.

I'd led a sheltered life till this point, and so far was unaware of the existence of suppositories. The news came as a terrible shock. The doctor explained in schoolboy German what had to be done; when my custard-coloured eyes glazed over in disbelief, he mimed it, but it was still difficult to comprehend.

Surely not? Not with those big tablets? After all, if my parents had wanted me to have foreign objects pushed up my bottom, they could have sent me to public school.

Finally, though, the message got through. The course of medication lasted a week. The first couple of days were the worst. After that, the doctor came back and mimed taking the tinfoil wrapper off, and things got much easier.

It didn't half put me off going abroad, though.

So for the next five years – until I was seventeen, when I went to Stuttgart again, out of force of habit – I gave up on abroad, and stuck with Ireland. West Cork, to be precise. Today, it's a glamorous destination, a haven for upmarket tourists, English expats, and Dutch cannabis importers, but in the 1950s and 1960s it was the arse end of the back of beyond, and that may be talking it up.

We stayed at Butlersgift, the small farm where my mother grew up. One of my earliest childhood memories is of standing near an open gate by a muddy boreen when an enormous sow came through it, grunting and snuffling, the terrifying ring through her nose glinting in the sunlight as she looked down on me. I burst into tears, and ran back towards the farmhouse, screaming for help. The sow trundled along

behind, as far as I was concerned, in pursuit, but probably just joining in the fun.

Twenty or thirty yards away my grandfather stood by the back door of the house, roaring with laughter as I approached. I could only have been two or three at the time, because he died when I was four.

I went over with my mum for the funeral. Dad had to stay in England and make wire. After much umming and ahhing between my uncles on the upstairs landing, I was taken in to view the body. To this day the family all deny it happened; but I remember him, laid out in a brown suit and a gold sash, as clearly as I remember not being allowed to go to the funeral itself. I spent that afternoon at an auntie's house near a remote bog, by a lake. I remember hearing the sound of my mother's footsteps on the gravel outside when she returned. Although in your memories your parents are always more or less the same age, I have a vivid picture of her being younger then – younger than I am now – and I know she was attentive to me, though she'd just buried her father.

During the summer holidays we made hay with pitchforks, drew water from the well with an enamel bucket, and went to market by horse and cart. Work stopped in the fields for the angelus. Mass was in Latin. We searched fuchsia hedgerows for leprechauns, with a net and a jar. And although it's statistically impossible in a country as moist as Ireland, I'm certain that the sun always shone.

But these golden childhood memories have become a problem; for now, when I return to Ireland, I feel that I belong, in a way that I have never belonged in the land of my birth. Even though I loved growing up in the north, England leaves me feeling detached: an outsider, an observer, in some way passing through. But as soon as I hit the tarmac or the quayside over there, I feel involved, engaged – as if I've come home, even though I've never actually lived there.

So what I'm wondering is this. Is it possible to have some kind of genetic memory of a place where you've never lived, but your ancestors have? Or am I just a sentimental fool, my judgement fuddled by nostalgia, Guinness, and the romance of the diaspora?

Across the aisle, the Christian Brother is still asleep. I'd wake him and ask him his opinion, if experience hadn't taught me that the clergy can be lethal if riled in a confined space.

I'd briefly considered spending the holiday in Dublin, but I find I like it less since the ruthless redevelopment and marketing of Temple Bar.

Continental café culture has arrived, a forced planting of non-indigenous chrome counters, almond-flavoured latte, and seared yellowfin tuna in balsamic lemongrass and rhubarb jus. Japanese-besuited media ponces sit in windows sipping bottles of overpriced cooking lager, imported from Mexico, and other top brewing spots, to the banks of the Liffey. Plain, unadorned, authentic pubs, previously unchanged for decades, now reek of new wood and paint, as they're gutted and refurbished to conform to the notion of Irishness demanded by the stag nights from Northampton and conference delegates from Frankfurt who fill the streets, interchangeable in their smug fat smiles and Manchester United replica shirts.

Last time I was in Dublin I met a German who actually believed that 'Manchester United' was a place in Ireland. Mind you, in Germany once, in the military garrison town of Erlangen, I had a few drinks with three American GIs who were planning to visit England 'because it would be neat to see where John Lennon and Elvis grew up'. They also wanted to know if they could use dollars, and would the street signs be in English? I tried to tell them about Elvis coming from Tennessee, but it seemed to make them want to kill me. The Twenty-eighth Rule states: *Never Get Drunk with Soldiers*

(particularly in countries where the streets are named after dates).

What finally decided me against Dublin was reading that they were bringing some expert over from the States to dye the Liffey green. And anyway, Cork seemed the natural choice. Though it's Ireland's second city, a population of 180,000 compared to Dublin's one million, it's still just a small town; and only forty-five miles to the west is Butlersgift, where my mother grew up, my grandfather died, and my cousin still farms.

As we cross the tarmac at Cork airport and head for the terminal, we are greeted by someone dressed as St Patrick. He has a sidekick who is wearing, and I promise I'm not making this up, a rubber Celtic cross costume. They are lampooning the priests and the religion that held total sway in this country from the seventh century till, oh, about a week last Wednesday. Midgets in leprechaun costumes are running amok in the baggage hall, but luckily I've only brought hand luggage.

I've come for the big parade tonight, but my gracious, silver-haired taxi driver tells me it started at two o'clock, about an hour ago. Never mind. I ask him to take me to the Ambassador's Hotel, if he knows it.

'Ah, yes. Used to be the Hospital for Incurable Diseases. I'm told it's very nice inside. Now, see this now. That no right turn sign. Well, they're very strict on that sorta thing these days.'

Then he asks me to watch out left, because this junction's a bastard, and, like the three cars in front of us, we turn right.

'Very strict, they are.'

We turn into a street with a sign saying: 'This Way To Hospice'. The first building you see is the morgue, which must be a great comfort to people on their way to the hospice. Once inside my comfortably appointed Room with Trouser Press in the former Hospital for Incurable Diseases, there's just

time to calculate how many people must have died in here during the hospital's eighty-year lifetime – about 4,000, I reckon – before hitting the streets. As I pass through the lobby I notice, almost subliminally, that lots of overdressed families are sitting round eating salmon, while a priest plays the piano. I pretend this is normal, and smile.

Outside, people are streaming back up the hill from the direction of Patrick's Bridge, carrying tricolour flags and balloons. It only takes me five or ten minutes to twig that the parade's already over. There are lots of cheeky kids with freckles and rosy cheeks, watery eyes and a slightly pinched look, as if they've been standing in a cold breeze. Despite the much-vaunted Celtic Tiger economy, these people dress and look poorer than people where I live.

In the space of 100 yards I pass two newsagents, three antique shops, four restaurants, and more pubs than all of them put together. In the absence of a parade, there's nothing else for it but to observe the First Rule of Travel: *On Arrival, Buy a Local Paper and Go for a Drink*. The court cases, property prices and obituaries will tell you more than any guidebook, and the drink will help you feel you understand things that in reality are beyond your comprehension. The Greyhound, on the north side of Patrick's Bridge, will do for starters. I need to ease myself gently back into the seductive mêlée of Irish pub life, and it's reasonably quiet in here, despite the fact that Cheltenham Races (TV) and Van Morrison (CD) are on simultaneously.

It's quite extraordinary how often Van Morrison is playing when you walk into an Irish pub. Maybe the breweries pipe him in at the entrance, like supermarkets do with the smell of baking bread; or perhaps the government imposes some sort of Morrison Quota, which is rigidly enforced. I order a pint of Guinness and a packet of plain crisps, which in Ireland are cheese and onion flavoured, and once the Irish horse has won

the Champions' Hurdle at Cheltenham, I settle down with the paper.

On the front page is a big colour photo of someone I know. All right, vaguely know. Well, at any rate, I interviewed him once. Dan Costello, proprietor of the resort on Beachcomber Island, Fiji. The picture shows him raising a pint of Guinness to the camera, while behind him two languid Fijians unload barrels from a canoe on to a brochure-quality, palm-fringed white sand beach. Dan, whose grandfather was Irish, is bringing St Patrick's Day to the South Pacific for the first time. The global hype about all things Irish shows no sign of burning out yet.

To be Irish today is to be welcome almost anywhere. Grape-pip brandy will be uncorked, daughters unveiled, tables danced upon. People will line up to show you a Portuguese edition of Seamus Heaney or a Romanian Betamax pirate video of *Riverdance*. The Irish are perceived as young, eloquent, romantic, tuneful, mystical, funny, and expert havers-of-a-good-time. And, as a bonus, in the same way that the English abroad are made doubly welcome once people realise they're not German, so the Irish are welcomed for not being English.

As well as St Patrick's Day in Fiji, the paper carries some top local stories. INVALID SPAT IN FACES OF GARDAI, goes the eye-catching headline. 'A man who was wheelchair-bound spat repeatedly in the faces of gardai when he was arrested for creating a city centre disturbance, and he threw himself out of his chair several times when he was brought to the Bridewell garda station . . . Paul O'Mahoney drank from a bottle of Lucozade as his case was brought before Cork District Court.'

Many Irish papers also now seem to have a separate section for sexual abuse cases against the Church. ALTAR BOY ON RAPE CHARGE [of other altar boy] goes this one; and TWO CHRISTIAN BROTHERS WANT DPP TO DROP CHARGES OF SEX ASSAULTS ON BOYS.

I have to say that, whatever their other faults, the Christian Brothers at our school never tried to grope us. There was a fair bit of random brutality, and the occasional show of blood, but nobody was too shocked by that. I think it was on the curriculum. They were hard men, but strangely sexless.

The lurid combination of sex, religion and alcohol is making me feel hungry.

Out on the street, two pints to the good, I look in the window of a traditional 1960s Chinese, the kind of place that people in England used to visit to abuse the staff before the Bengalis and Bangladeshis turned up and got that job. The best gauge as to whether or not a country is expensive is the price of food in its Chinese restaurants. A complex calculation based on the cost of a plate of Singapore noodles will tell you the current rate of economic growth. 'Singapore Noodles,' said the menu, just below an embalmed bluebottle, '£7.80'.

Seven pounds eighty? For a plate of noodles? England's best Chinese restaurant, just off Leicester Square in London, does them for £3.30, and they have to pay London rents, rates and the Triads. There's another one across the street: £7.20. The Thai wine bar wants £8.95 for Pad Thai. This is a country-wide phenomenon in Ireland, and frankly, I'm baffled. Last year, in Galway City, in a poky little place up a stairway above a shop, staffed by one stern Chinese matron and four freckly ginger teenagers in Suzie Wong dresses, a film crew and I were charged £9 for noodles. It's a national scandal. What's going on? Is there an import surcharge on noodles from which we in England are immune? Or a starch tax on all carbohydrates that aren't potatoes?

On a wall up the street a chalked sign outside a pub called An Siol Broin says: 'Traditional Session – 2.30–?'. Fine. A couple more pints, then a Chinese takeaway. Given its price, perhaps

I should book Securicor to deliver it to the Hospital for Incurable Diseases.

It's a small, one-room, nicotine-stained place, the bar itself on the wall to the left as you go in. It's packed. Music's playing at a table across to the right. There are kids weaving between the tables, to the sound of authentic-sounding diddly-di.

But the thing that hits you smack between the nostrils as you walk in is the fusty, fungal smell. I've breathed fresher air in a beer tent full of damp dogs at Glastonbury. This is the strong whiff that goes with the tougher end of the hippie spectrum, the ones who regard incense and patchouli and essential oils as hopelessly effete. For years I thought that the earthy odour that emanated from them in tepees and at festivals and street markets was some sort of, well, earthy odour that was applied from a bottle or jar because they find it attractive. Though I have no conclusive proof, the balance of probabilities now suggests it indicates an aversion to showering.

At the heart of the whiff, five musicians on fiddles and guitars are playing a low-octane traditional tune, half-heartedly accompanied by two spaced-out fellow travellers on bodhrans, which is a hard word to spell, especially in smoke this thick.

You often get a diversity of social types, and sexes, at a traditional Irish session. Young players will watch and learn from their elders; but this group seems strangely uniform. The musicians are all men, for a start – thirty-something, dreadlocked, bearded with varying degrees of success. At either end of the table, on the fringes of the men, sits a tribe of hennaed, multiply pierced, tattooed women with children in psychedelic face paints teetering on their laps. Other children play between legs and furniture, as is only right and appropriate in an Irish pub. The women are wearing loose-fitting Indian prints, and things with soil on, while the men are in matted

jumpers and dead men's waistcoats. One guy has had his beard braided. Everyone, of both sexes, is wearing chunky high-laced industrial boots.

And always, the whiff. Not the BO that surges down the airline cabin at you when British businessmen take their suit jackets off; not offensive, like that. But distinctive, certainly; as if unusual mushrooms were growing in rich compost in hidden crevices about their persons. It's enhanced by the Samson roll-ups everyone is smoking. Drinks are mostly Scrumpy Jack, Diamond White, Pils: welcome to the Oblivion Express.

And then, as I listen, I start to catch the accents: Manchester; West Country; south London; Manchester again; West Midlands. Christ, what's going on? They're all *English*.

The women all have pierced noses, but there is only one with dreadlocks. She has a non-English accent that I can't quite identify through the music and the whiff. Maybe she's Irish. Dublin, perhaps; or maybe Belfast? She's in leggings, like the pregnant twenty-year-old in the tie-dyed vest next to her. Leggings. Bloody hell. Imagined by fatties everywhere to create a slimming effect, they make the average body look like a sackful of hammers. The music stops for a moment, and I catch her accent. She's Dutch. Probably brings an old school bus full of Samson over on the ferry every time she goes home.

I notice how kind she and her friend are being to the children, who are having a great time. But I find myself wondering if, in their way, these kids are growing up with just as blinkered a view of reality as we did; and also, whether it isn't a tad dark and smoky in here for them? I have to remind myself that I'm an inveterate, possibly prosecutable, taker of kids into pubs. Suitably chastened, I head for the bar.

Because of the time and care lavished on the pouring of a pint of stout, the trick in Ireland is to order your next one five

minutes before the previous one is at an end. That way there'll be no uncomfortable drinking hiatus; but it takes a day or two to become reacclimatised to this. While I wait for the half-poured pint to settle, I get talking to the guy next to me. Mancunian hard knock; two ear studs; powder-blue eyes; feathered hair longer at the back than on top, in the manner of rural New Zealand, or vintage Ian Botham. A mullet, I believe it's called, which seems hard on the fish.

He tells me he's an ex-roadie for Manchester bands, and asks me do I know the roadies' mantra? No, I don't.

> If it's wet, drink it; if it's dry, smoke it;
> if it moves, screw it; if it don't move,
> sling it in the back of the van.

He's gone before I can ask him how they come to be here. Were they hounded out by Thatcher? By police, after one of the Stonehenge set-tos? Are they just music fanatics? Inheritors of the bucolic English Wordsworthian rural tradition?

Or is it just easier to get the dole over here, as Bridie, the Irish mother of a friend of mine, insists, from her position somewhere to the right of those nuns who keep putting crosses up outside Auschwitz? 'Peter, the lanes behind Dunmanway are full of them! Dirty, filthy creatures, living like tinkers, growing drugs! Sure, the country's being ruined by the English, going over there to collect the dole and get drunk! They should stay in their own country.'

She tugged her beard aggressively, clearly unaware that this was what the English had been saying about her and the rest of the immigrant Irish for the last fifty years. She is an unreconstructed Vatican literalist, with a pinched little mouth like a cat's arsehole, who considers every post-De Valera Irish politician to be a pagan reformer more deserving of hellfire than Boy George, but I can't help liking her.

A few years ago, I'd had cause to visit the lanes at the back of Dunmanway, in West Cork. I was taking gifts from friends of mine in Brighton to their mate Dominic, who had turned Crusty and gone to live in an old gypsy caravan by the side of the road in the middle of nowhere, with a baby son called Merry. We drank poteen from a Tizer bottle hidden in the ditch. I've got some photos, but I haven't shown them to Bridie. I'll wait for the right moment; like when she's pinned to the ground by a heavy object and the emergency services haven't arrived yet.

I drain my pint, and think I might try and spend some time with the hairy men, and women, of Dunmanway in a few days' time, when I'll be over that way. Perhaps they'll be able to shed some light on why the English Crusties have moved into Ireland in such a big way. Is it cultural homage to the Irish way of life? Or Cromwell's last revenge?

I take one last look round before I go. Perhaps this is what it's like now. Perhaps middle-aged baldie men in tweed jackets don't play traditional music any more. Ireland's modern now. Maybe I'm out of touch. I'm certainly almost out of cash. Only £15 left in my wallet. Just enough to have some prawn crackers with the noodles, if I'm lucky.

As I go through the door, a bloke from Bristol starts singing 'Kevin Barry'.

The Whiff.

It'd be a good name for a band.