

MAGPIES, MOVIES, AND TAYLOR SWIFT

This issue of *The Metuchen Times* is arriving a little late because Lynn and I spent the last two weeks in Ireland where a movie is being filmed from a screenplay I wrote. We stayed in a seaside town on the east coast called Sandymount—and each afternoon I took the DART (Dublin Area Rapid Transit: a coastal electric train) down to Bray, another seaside town about thirty minutes south. There a driver took me down Herbert Road to Ardmore Studios where, as in *Sunset Boulevard*, the gates rose to admit us. Ardmore is a large campus consisting of anonymous-looking production offices (photocopied door signs change weekly) and four barn-like soundstages. At one soundstage they were shooting a new season of *Wednesday* (the Addams family comedy); at another they were filming a game show featuring Jamie Foxx.

I found myself each afternoon (from 1-6 PM) on soundstage B, sitting a few feet away from the actors, director, and set decorators, listening to dialogue being rehearsed; my script and my accountant's black fine-point pen in hand. I had written the first draft of this script more than a decade earlier, had been tinkering with it ever since, and now—in a moment whose sense of rare good fortune never left me for even a second—I sat editing my script as it was being read. A line excised. A line restored. A line assigned to another character. A better joke. A cleaner phrasing. Deleting a redundancy. Everyone debated. The final say was mine.

Lunches were delivered from the Red Bird Café. I usually ate my Red Bird salad (with chicken) sitting alone at a picnic table on the lawn outside the main office building that was filled with *Braveheart* posters—which was filmed here. I liked being alone for a half hour—juxtaposing that clangorous invented world we were creating on soundstage B with the 60-degree light drizzle of rain, the stagehands checking their phones, the assistant-assistants eating in their cars. And always the magpies. I had never seen a magpie until coming to Ireland: they look like crows with a large splash of white across their chests. A cab driver explained to me: You have to cross yourself if you see one (to ward off bad luck,) but if you see *two*—good luck will arrive shortly.

By 6 PM I was hungry and exhausted. I could usually get a lift home from Matt, the studio driver, who dropped me off after the others. The actors lived in Bray or Dalkey (“Bono lives behind that fence.”)

Lynn arrived the second week, and we spent the mornings together, walking down Park Avenue into downtown Sandymount. The walk curved along picturesque streets that Lynn said belonged in a British mini-series: red-brick townhouses with geraniums blooming outside the windows, mailboxes with *No Junk Mail* embossed on them, oldsters with kerchiefs waiting for the C1 and C2 busses, men and women walking leashless dogs, holding coffee cups.

Women emerged from Sandymount Veterinary holding their beloved cats in carrying boxes. At Brownes of Sandymount people ate outside despite the rain; nearly every day for lunch I bought a Caprese panini and a green smoothie. Put a few euros on my Leap card (for the train and bus). Bought two more Cadbury bars to get me through the afternoon. Visited a health food store, Nourish, where they never heard of SAM-e. We had dinner almost every night at an Italian restaurant, Crudo. “Roberto!” the manager announced when we entered, and brought a bottle of sparkling water to the table without our asking.

The seashore of Sandymount was moody, expansive, and gray under the rainy skies. Across the bay stood the tall tower of an incinerator. We watched a group of school children in matching cranberry-colored uniforms taking an excursion to the beach.

Our sightseeing pushed further afield: Sandycove Beach where a dozen swimmers bobbed in the water, despite the cold. Fifty feet away was the James Joyce Museum—in the squat Martello tower where Joyce's friend Gogarty once lived. (Joyce crashed there for six days in the round upstairs room.) The tower would be the setting for the opening of *Ulysses*. Some dialogue from a Tom Stoppard play was printed on a wall:

CARR: What did you do during the Great War?

JOYCE: I wrote *Ulysses*. What did you do?

One morning, as we walk back to Aberdeen Lodge, I stop to tell a passing Irishman: “You have the happiest looking dog.”

“Ay. He enjoys himself.”

Of course, I am thinking of Nellie whom we left in New Jersey with great anxiety.

And I look at the roses growing straight out of mossy walls, and the ten magpies walking along the top of the same walls, and I think of the thousand variables that could have prevented this moment: the movie derailed for financial reasons; my Aer Lingus flight cancelled (they're on partial strike); my plane spinning into the sea ("We found a film script with his name on it..."); Lynn not being here to share the shores of Ireland ("I couldn't find *anybody* to take care of Nellie.") But here we are: breathing, happy, the taste of a dairy Cadbury chocolate on my tongue. I smile at a dog clean-up sign: *Bin the Poo*—the words repeated in Gaelic.

All of Dublin is a little crazy because Taylor Swift is playing three concerts on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday nights. 88,000 people per performance. As I ride the DART up from Bray that Friday night, at every stop teenage girls enter dressed as Taylor Swift: face glitter, glittered cowboy boots, glittered cowboy hats, two dozen friendship bracelets. It really is astounding—as if the entire country is dressed for Halloween—and they're all wearing the same costume. Do they even *have* Halloween in Ireland? The next morning at breakfast I see two fellow lodgers, mother and daughter, who had dressed up in matching Taylor outfits the night before. "How was the concert?" I ask.

"Unbelievable," says the mother. She explains that they got there at ten in the morning with standing room tickets, and stood all day until the concert started at 7:30. "She sang for three and a half hours," says the daughter.

"Was she good?"

"Unbelievable," they say together.

Unbelievable. Indeed, that's the word of the week for me, too. I pack my scribbled-on script into my leather portfolio, and head out, walking towards the Sydney Parade DART station, ready for the afternoon's work. I feel like a man with a wonderful secret tucked in his heart.