

THE BLUE DOOR

John-Patrick Bell

THE NARROW road twisted and turned, its high hedging obscuring our views, the few breaks in the hedge of little help with darkness fallen and the driven rain. Rain chased by the westerly winds of the wild Atlantic that lay to the west of us. No sign posts at the junctions and crossroads that came our way for these were minor roads, winding boreens created for local usage. Now roughly tarmacd their surfaces more familiar with the tyres of a tractor than our modern conveyance designed for city traffic.

The last legible sign was one of those quaint old finger signs much beloved by tourists but being subject to a strong wind totally unreliable. On reflection probably the reason for the present predicament of my wife and I getting lost.

Driving rain and darkness not the best companions for two lost souls visiting an unfamiliar part of the 'Old Country', our own County Leitrim, that we had left, like thousands before us and thousands would again. 'Economic émigrés', the modern term for those whose sole purpose was to find work and to feed their families. The years pass, hardships forgotten, the soft memories of younger days making that call to return, a call that grows stronger with the spent years and the longing to fill that empty space that dwells in the heart of all emigrants. A permanent return? That hope

had now gone; however with our children grown and flown, the yearly visit had become not just a joy but a necessity.

Much had changed, new roads vast housing estates and shopping malls but out towards the west with fewer people a more settled way of life still prevailed. Small farms struggled on as they had always done for generations, the pull of the land keeping them alive, if only just.

Rural life had suffered with the economic downturn, the old people that remained had become even more isolated and lonely. The country public house-cum-shop-cum-bar once a place of warmth and friendship had closed in many places, for most now just a memory. The city made laws of no smoking and no drink driving, logical and rational and unarguable as they were, had only added to the isolation. Laws that made sense to protect modern man in crowded pubs and fast traffic had little relevance in these quiet boreens.

Alas, these thoughts only added to our own dilemma as I squinted through the frantic arms of the windscreen wipers struggling against wind and rain. My anxious wife with torch yet again studying the road map trying to venture an opinion of our whereabouts. Her question came again for the umpteenth time, "Where in the name of all that's holy are we going to rest our heads tonight?—you

should've booked us into a hotel or B&B before setting off—but Oh No!—'Ah sure we'll find somewhere on the road' do you not realise that not only are we lost but homeless—roofless"

I reminded my dear wife that even if I had made reservations, taking the wrong road made that criticism totally irrelevant. I confess I preferred the more 'Laissez faire' approach in travelling looking for accommodation when we got there. Not always the most practical approach but it being late autumn and the 'vacancies' many I couldn't foresee any problem occurring, unfortunately until now. To me part of the excitement is in the journey, what would we find around the next bend?

At the moment we would gladly have settled for the scruffiest or noisiest board and of those we've had our share. Tonight my '*Modus operandi*' had failed me, it seemed like we would have to pull in and spend a cold restless night sleeping in the car. Adding to my furrowed brow was the petrol gauge, hopefully hidden from my wife's gaze, the needle now in the red. Our situation seemed hopeless. Every fork in the road bereft of signage. Was it left or was it right? I was becoming convinced that I was driving in mile wide circles. A compass would have helped but the last time I held a compass I was in the Boy-Scouts!

"Look a light ahead" my wife was the first to notice the glow

of a light, a bluish light, perhaps a local Garda station? But surely not here in the middle of nowhere.

I pulled into a large pebbled space in front of a neatly kept cottage, hopefully that light from a living area would be a welcome one. The crunch of our tyres on the drive drew a white haired old gent to the door. A bluish door; was that the cause of the bluish glow? He held the door open with one hand and with the other bid us to enter in a welcome gesture. Strange! it was as if he expected us and we were well known friends paying a visit.

“What a relief” gasped my tired wife as she stood in the warm kitchen, a country kitchen with its old fashioned presses and the ubiquitous large black metal range well stoked with a black kettle boiling on the heated hob. Mugs were taken off the shelf, thick slices of farmhouse bread with lashings of butter, to be joined by the strong sweet tea, all for our convenience.

It was as if he expected visitors on this stormy windswept night but surely not us?

The old gent hardly spoke just making gestures towards the table and the freshly made tea. I explained that we were lost and where could I get fuel tonight? When he did speak it was to explain that the town further on had no hotels and the only garage and petrol station would be long closed, but you are welcome to spend the night and he pointed to a room just off the warm kitchen with a large double bed.

He appeared to be a harmless old man and accepting his kind offer; well we had little choice I offered to pay for our board.

He shook his head vigorously and looked genuinely offended by such a suggestion. We were not the first to get lost and smiling said probably not the last either. After our simple, but oh how nourishing fare, the weariness of uncertainty had lifted from our shoulders but tiredness had drifted in and that bed beckoned us both.

My wife as usual was apprehensive whispering to me that I was too trusting. We didn't know who this old gent was. Why such hospitality to complete strangers? Now a rarity in this cynically modern age of ours. I reminded her of all the strange B&B's we had stayed in over the years, did we not put our trust in the owners of those establishments? Besides darling dear, there is a very robust bolt on the inside of the bedroom door and the small cottage window appeared very secure.

After our stressful journey we slept way past a sunlit dawn and would and could have slept even longer, but despite the heavy duvet on the bed it was the cold and damp that awakened us both.

We hurriedly dressed, packing our night bags expecting to meet the old gent as we opened the bedroom door but there was neither sight nor sound of him.

“Must be out feeding the animals”, my wife suggested.

That seemed a plausible explanation but we still had a long drive to the Ferry Port and the car needed petrol so we couldn't hang around. Should we leave him some money or a note? I thought, for we were always a couple that paid our way, but then I remembered how offended he looked when I offered before.

This was despite my wife's initial reservations—just offering old fashioned hospitality.

“That's strange?”

“What is?” I asked.

“Look at the kitchen range its covered in dust and stone cold, those things are never allowed to go out.”

“Perhaps he let it go out and has gone away for the day.” but my reply neither convinced her or myself.

A sudden thought sent a shiver down my spine.

“We better have a look around the old fellow may have collapsed somewhere and that's why the fire has gone out.”

We quickly checked the cottage rooms and the grounds but no sign of him.

“We better notify someone at the next village, he could be lying out in the fields in a flooded ditch and at our age we are not able to carry out that kind of search.”

A few more miles past the cottage and sure enough a small town nestled down in the glen and as luck would have it the car running on empty just made it to the local garage. After enquiries we were directed to the Priests house and that was our next urgent stop, for if anyone knows the old gent the local clergy should and will raise the alarm if necessary. The Priest was leaving the parochial house as we approached.

“Excuse us Father could you help us?”

“Of course—are you lost?”

“Not tonight but we were last night and thankfully found shelter in a cottage back up in the hills by a kindly old gent who took us in fed us and gave us a bed for the night. This

morning no sign of him and apart from wanting to thank him we became worried as he couldn't be found. My wife and I are concerned as he may have fallen out in the fields feeding his animals, although having searched around we couldn't even see any animals!"

"I see", pondered the Priest, "Could you describe this cottage?"

"Pretty cottage very ordinary the only distinguishing feature I recall was a brightly painted blue front door that at night seemed to glow".

The clergyman looked at his watch.

"I've still got a few minutes you and your wife better come inside and I'll get my housekeeper to put the kettle on".

The lady housekeeper soon brought us cups of tea as the

Priest obviously prepared us for some harrowing news. He asked us again to fully explain our visit to the cottage, the reception we had and to give again a description of the old gent. He took me aside and confusingly asked me about my health and my wife's disposition. What he was about to relate would shock us both.

"That cottage has been empty for over a year since old Jimmy Clancy was found dead in it last autumn."

We both gasped, my wife's hand rattling the cup in her saucer.

"How did he die?" I asked when I had gained my composure, "Not violently I hope."

"No! on the contrary, quite a peaceful death actually—carbon monoxide poisoning—probably from that old kitchen range he

kept. Lack of proper ventilation not so uncommon with old heating ranges and old cottages with blocked chimneys. Yes! Carbon-monoxide poisoning, the silent killer or as our local town wit put it, 'So silent and quick that when you awake you don't realise your dead.'

As we left I slipped a few pounds into the Priest's hand.

"Say a prayer for the old gent, it's our thanks."

"Oh I will surely and later I will go up and say prayers at the cottage to lay his soul to rest, for he was a good gentle creature that lived a quiet isolated life on his own but loved to meet people"

'So silent and quick that when you awake you don't realise your dead.'

Words that would haunt us for the rest of our mortal days.

SNIPPET

Crossing the great divide or Padraig Potts' Guide to Walking or is it something else?

Seamus O'Rourke

'I'm going to walk to Tullaghan' says Lamps McGovern... one of the central characters from this play I'm at, at the minute... 'I'm going to walk all the way down to Tullaghan... north Leitrim, I had a girlfriend there once... up against the ocean'. Lamps, of course never gets there, because Tullaghan is too far away from Drumnamee in the south of the county, fifty seven miles and there's a huge big lake in between, full of water... 'a man'd get drowned if he wasn't careful'.

Lamps McGovern is fictional, by the way, as is Drumnamee, but the journey is real... the journey you have to make when you decide to chase after your dreams and for us Irish, there's usually water in the way. The main character in the play, Padraig Potts, has a girlfriend too... way over in America, three thousand miles away and more water, an ocean, a bigger version of Lough Allen and ya could drowned in it too. Maybe I should have called it, 'Padraig Potts' Guide to Swimming', but this play is not about swimming or walking... really, it's just about the journey, the journey that we all have to make... if you're going to chase your dreams and there's always going to be something in the way.

