

*Good Friday*

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The bridge crossing the dull waters of Lough Erne from the Republic into County Fermanagh, Northern Ireland stretched for less than two-hundred meters. It was built low and flat, the arches beneath allowing room for little more than a rowboat to pass. A vibrant green hill climbed up from the southern base of the bridge. At the top stood an aged stone edifice, only a small portion of the former building still enclosed by a roof, the remainder merely an intersection of broken walls. Farther west along the bank of the river, another fractured stone structure was tucked inside a cluster of greenery, dotted with bright yellow bursts of thorny gorse. It, too, had little cover left, but retained three slender chimneys, one missing a section of its upper end.

Opposite the decimated buildings, the fresh limestone of the stately Belleek Pottery factory gleamed for five stories into the dreary sky. A tour bus passed over the bridge and parked in front of the factory amongst several others. The passengers filed down the bus's narrow staircase and formed a circle around a woman in a black pantsuit with a clipboard and nametag advertising the same logo as the bus.

“Sacred sausages, those coaches are making such a noise I can't hear my ears,” the guide shouted over the motors of the other buses. “You must all be back on the bus by two o'clock. It is half-twelve now, so that should be plenty of time for you to look about and pick up whatever trinkets you like.”

Near the back of the group was a young American couple. The woman was petite, with short blond hair, wearing an off-white, wool sweater patterned with thick cable designs and a large backpack. The man stood nearly a foot and a half taller than the

woman, sporting a similar sweater and a camera hanging from a thick strap around his neck.

“Do you really want to even bother going in there?” the man asked the woman.

“Why not?” said the woman. “We came here to learn about our heritage. I don’t think we should skip anything.”

“I doubt there is anything about pottery in my heritage. And if there is, I don’t need to know about it.”

“We have to at least go in,” the woman said, grabbing the man by the hand and following the rest of the group up a narrow cement path towards the factory.

A tiny woman in a fitted blue dress had positioned herself in the entryway to the building.

“In the next few minutes, just down the hall to your right, we will be showing a short film about the fascinating history of the Belleek Pottery Company,” she said with an airy brogue. Her arm was raised, directing the group’s attention down a hallway lined with lush, potted greenery. A skylight above allowed natural light to flood into the corridor.

“If you don’t care to watch the film,” the greeter continued, “or just can’t wait to see our products *in the flesh*, please feel free to amble around our showroom.” She then pointed towards another hallway, devoid of decoration on stark white walls with fluorescent lighting lining the ceiling.

“Don’t forget that all our fine items can be shipped back to the States, or wherever else you may be visiting from. For a small fee, of course.”

The man leaned down and spoke into the ear of the woman. "I am not watching that movie," he said.

"Why not?" she asked. "You might learn something."

"I'll pass."

"Fine," she said, lowering her head, taking in a deep breath and releasing it in one quick, quiet burst. "I would still like to look at the pottery."

The man shrugged his shoulders and started down the hallway to the left.

They wandered through the showroom, the woman picking up various pieces and commenting, while the man stared blankly and nodded.

"I like this pattern the best," the woman said, holding out an ivory dinner plate with a delicate vine of knots traced in gold around the edge.

"What would you ever need this stuff for," the man said. "You can't fit more than two people at your kitchen table."

"I don't mean for now, but eventually – I don't know."

"Well, you can keep looking if you want. I'm going outside to take some pictures."

The man walked away from the factory, down an unpaved path along the river. He turned to face the bridge, raised the camera to his face and walked backward until both ends fit into the frame. He then pointed the camera upward until the crumbling building on the other side came into view and clicked a picture. Keeping his eye close to the camera, he turned in a semi-circle until the factory came into view then pressed the

button again. Through the lens he could see the woman coming toward him. He lowered the camera to his chest and waited.

“Mrs. Bixby and I are going to take a quick walk up the street to the main part of town. Do you want to come?” the woman yelled as she approached.

“Who?” the man said, when she had arrived in front of him.

“Mrs. Bixby, that nice woman from Kansas who’s traveling by herself.”

“No,” he said.

“No – what?”

“I don’t want to go with you.”

“Oh. Then, can I have the camera? In case I see anything interesting.”

The man grasped the camera tighter. “I wasn’t really done with it.”

“But what if I see something connected to us? Your mother told me that she had some relatives from the north.”

“Fine,” the man said and lifted the camera over his head.

“I won’t take it if it’s that big a deal to you,” the woman said.

“It’s not that big a deal. Just take it.”

The woman took the camera and walked back to Mrs. Bixby, who was still standing in front of the factory. The man watched as the two women climbed a steep road and disappeared around a corner. He then turned and sat down at a picnic table, laid his head on his arms and fell asleep.

A half-hour later he woke. The woman was walking toward him and yelling again, louder and more frantic than before.

“You are never going to believe what we just saw,” she panted as she dropped down on the bench beside the man.

“What did you see,” he asked rubbing his eyes with the back of his hands.

“There were soldiers – armed soldiers walking up and down the street – on both sides. One after another, they just marched down the street.”

“The British Army,” said the man.

“And they had guns,” the woman continued. “Not just regular guns, but big machine guns. And they weren’t just hanging over their shoulder or anything. They were in their hands, ready to shoot at any second.”

“Did they say anything to you?” the man asked.

“No. They didn’t even look at us. Just turned their heads from side to side, like they were looking for someone. Good thing I took the camera.”

“You took pictures of them?” the man said in amazement.

“Yes, I took pictures. That is *not* something you see every day.”

“I can’t believe you took pictures of armed soldiers. Don’t you realize where you are?”

“Yes, I realize where I am, thank you. I’m on a trip – that is supposed to bring us closer, as a matter of fact – and all you can do is start fights.”

“I wasn’t starting anything. We’re just – not in the most stable country in the world. This isn’t like home. And it’s Good Friday, for Christ’s sake.”

“I know this isn’t like home. I can figure that out by the damn soldiers in the road pointing guns everywhere. And, so what – it’s Easter.”

“Not Easter, Good Friday – that agreement they signed up here like – three years ago.”

“What agreement?”

“That peace-keeping thing. Clinton came over here in – ninety-eight, I think – and got all the different groups fighting against each other to talk and sign this Good Friday peace thing – a treaty or something.”

“Well, whatever. You didn’t need to talk to me like that. This is exactly what I’m always telling you about. All you had to do was explain it to me. Just like that. There was no reason to treat me like a moron.”

The man looked away from the woman, towards the bridge. The murky water beneath it was shallow, barely moving aside from gentle ripples caused by the wind.

“I just wanted you to be more aware of your surroundings,” he said.

“I thought we were going to make an effort this time, *you* were going to make an effort,” the woman answered.

“I didn’t do anything,” he said flatly. “I was letting you look at your pottery. I just came down here to take some pictures. Then you took my camera and now you’re all hysterical.”

“*I’m* hysterical? You’re the one crying about your damn camera. Here,” she said, shoving the camera into his lap, “take the stupid thing if it’s so important to you.”

The man wrapped his hands around the camera and lowered his head. “It’s not that important,” he said quietly. “It’s just – I don’t want to argue. I just want you to see that I was enjoying myself taking pictures.”

“And I didn’t want to miss documenting anything important, which I would have if I didn’t take the camera with me.”

The pair stood in silence for a moment until the woman turned and, without another word, walked back to the tour bus.

The man stood, raised the camera to his eye and began walking backwards again. He paused when both sides of the bridge, the broken building in the south and the shining factory in the north, were in the frame. He pressed the button, but heard no click. The role of film had run out.

He walked back to the bus and took his seat beside the woman.

“Do we have anymore new film left?” he asked her.

“No,” she said, her head turned away, looking out the window. “We can get more in the next town.”

The man put the camera away in his bag then reached over and took hold of the woman’s hand.

The bus pulled away from the factory and drove back over the bridge.

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