

Take me back to
Inisheer

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Brave New Books

To all the brave cowards:

I see you, I know you,

I am you

Chapter 1 The anxious Dutchess

There were worse fates than getting eaten by fish, I told myself as I printed out the itinerary for my trip to Ireland. A lifelong wish, one I had never let myself have. But it was time. I'd been enchanted by Ireland ever since I was a young girl of about eight. The beauty of its music, with its lively jigs and soulful ballads, captured my heart. The countryside, with its rolling green hills and ancient castles, painted a landscape that felt both mythical and inviting. The cultural richness, filled with history and legends, added layers of intrigue to my fascination. And then there was the accent, the most harmonious of sounds, a musical lilt that danced on the ears. Nothing would ever beat the sound of someone speaking with an Irish accent, to me that was a turn on, always had been.

After finally feeling better, finalising years of therapy fighting my depression and my anxieties, I thought it was time to make my dream come true. My friend Mireille was the first to say: "Not without me you're not." So there I was, packing my suitcase while waiting for the printer to cough up the itinerary, going on my first vacation in years. To the place I wanted to see the most. I only hoped my head would co-operate.

Because I wanted to see the most of the country we decided to take a bus trip. I still didn't know if that was a good idea because of all the strangers that would be there. I'd never been really

good with strangers, or people in general. I was usually awkward, said the wrong things, if I said anything at all. I scared easily, which sucked. My list of things that caused my anxiety was pretty long, top of that list was a phobia for fish and fish-like mammals. Those creatures scared the living shit out of me, giving my friends something to laugh about, apparently it was funny. The list continued with people, well spaces with more than four people in it, phone calls. But the fish, definitely the top of the list. My best friend Mireille often considered it more of a quirk, she never knew the anxious sweat I broke into whenever she tried to "help" me by exposing me to those creatures. And I took it because one of my other fears was disappointing people, often pulling me out of my comfort zone and breaking my own boundaries, which was basically ruining my mental health. I guessed I let people run over me most of my life. The printer finally spat out the last page. I read over the document again, why did I decide to go all the way with the bus? Why couldn't we just fly? Because Mireille had other ideas, she said it would be good for me to face my fears and being on a boat not once, not twice but, six times, long-ass times I might add, it seemed like the perfect therapy according to her. Crossing the English channel and the Irish sea. But also an excursion to the Aran islands, unless the weather was bad. Well, I had my fingers crossed that it would storm. It was Ireland in September so there was a good chance that might happen, right? With my luck it would not of course.

I returned to my suitcase, carefully selecting each item I thought I might need. My hand hovered over the row of neatly folded clothes—skirts, dresses, blouses—each piece a part of the vintage-inspired wardrobe that I adored. My mum always said I should dress more practically for trips like this, but practicality had never been my style. I added my makeup bag, a small treasure chest of confidence boosters. Lipsticks in shades of red and pink, a compact mirror, and my trusty black eyeliner—for my signature winged look. My hair essentials followed, nestled next to the clothes. Curling irons, combs, and pins, all tools to craft the perfect victory rolls that made me feel a bit like a forties film star, for me the ultimate way of keeping people at a

distance. The next morning, Mireille and her husband, Joris, were picking me up. He was driving us to the terminal so we did not have to leave a car in Utrecht. The parking fees were nuts. Just call me Dutch. I lived in a small town near the city of Utrecht, in a small apartment. It wasn't much, but it was a place I called my own. Wood-like kitchen cabinets, a floor that was always cold. Books everywhere. In most rooms it was hard to tell which was the decoration—the spines, or the dust. I liked it that way. It kept people from staying too long. Mireille would walk in the next morning and start talking about how she was going to Marie Kondo my “library” when we got back from Ireland, but we both knew she'd just move the stacks around by colour and then get distracted by something. Then I got to put them back in the order I liked them in. Just near the living room window sat my only house plant, a fern the colour of blackboard dust, and I dutifully doused it with the last of my coffee. Not that it needed it because that thing was probably dead anyway. I had an entire checklist of jobs to do before the next day at six—laundry, double-check the times, water my sad excuse for greenery—but all I could think of was the way my stomach had been doing slow cartwheels all morning. I was nervous about the trip, and the thought of Mireille's relentless optimism was not helping. I wasn't sure if we were best friends, or if that's just the category I'd landed in because not a lot of people were willing to play the long game with my brand of awkward. On most days, it was a good deal. Mireille talked enough for both of us, and never let my silences go stale. She said I had an old soul, but I think she just meant I was a reliable buzzkill. On the other hand, maybe she felt I had an old soul because I'd never learned to skate over the surface of things. If I felt nervous, the world felt nervous with me; if I was sad, even the lamp seemed dimmer. I liked retro clothes, not because I was nostalgic, but because I mistrusted the present. I spent most days reading books, pecking at them in the back of the theatre between shifting playbills and answering the same questions about showtimes and hidden toilets. At night, I wrote, or at least I tried, but mostly I collected phrases like beads, hoping they'd arrange themselves into a story worth telling.

I sipped my tea and decided to handwrite in my journal instead of mindlessly doomscrolling on social media. There had been no plan for what I had wanted to write, only that it should have been something real. "Tomorrow I leave for Ireland," I wrote, the words wobbling. "I hope I come back." Why wouldn't I come back? The next day, my story included a twelve-hour bus ride with Mireille's playlist and a pack of strangers. Which meant that tonight, I had to layer on enough courage to not only step out of my shell, but to willingly board a vessel where, beneath the surface, the waters were swarmed with the terrors of my childhood. I wished for more rain, more wind, anything to keep the ferries in port. But the forecast predicted "changeable but mostly fine," which in Dutch meant "you're not getting out of this." I did not really want to get out of this, but I would have liked to get the ferry rides over and done with. That night I tried to sleep but there was a sort of thrum in the apartment that kept me from sinking under. Not much else outside, except the hush of central heating; the occasional gust ruffling the blinds; time, slipping its digits around the last free hours before this trip became a fact I could not change. The digital clock glowed in the silence, 02:42 in slanted numerals, a useless oracle mocking me from the nightstand. I watched the numbers shift and tried to find an auspicious pattern in their symmetry, maybe a good omen for the journey. All I got was the crawling of time and a restlessness that climbed the mattress into my limbs. The interior monologue refused to quit. Even the old radiator seemed in on the insomnia, hissing steam in irregular fits, punctuated by the hollow thump of pipes I never bothered to bleed properly last autumn. After tossing, turning and counting sheep, finally, at five I gave up and flicked the kitchen light on. It was a cold blue bulb, and it was stupid how little I recognised my own reflection in the oven glass. Was it possible to be thirty and still be surprised by the face that came with your memories? I boiled water for tea, loading it in my special travel mug. Fifty-three and I was already half-dressed, hair shellacked with product and pinned into a precarious victory roll. Next, I dragged out my suitcase from beneath the coat hooks to check it one last time. I overpacked off course, but one never knew when a worst case scenario hits, so it was best to be prepared. I

brushed my teeth, put on my shoes and checked my eyeliner, deciding it looked as good as it was going to get. I started pacing, checked the clock and my phone for the millionth time, as if it would make time go faster. I tried to kill the last thirty minutes rearranging things, not that anything needed it, but just to give my hands something to do. I did one final check, balcony door was locked, windows were closed. Now all I had to do was wait the last couple of minutes for Mireille to arrive.

The itinerary rested on the table, sandwiched between a battered copy of "Northanger Abbey" and my notebook full of scribbled writing, sticky notes and loose chapters of never finished stories. Ferry crossing, bus, night in Birmingham, bus, ferry, bus, hotel, repeat. I tried not to think about the fish in the Channel. Instead, I imagined Ireland in the rain: the sound of it on city streets, the way it might muffle noise, the way a veil of mist could make a ruin look like something blooming. Hoping it was all I ever imagined it to be. I checked everything one last time, almost unknowingly and at promptly six the doorbell rang. Mireille barged in, balancing a reusable coffee cup and a tote bag, bangs already frizzing around her face like static.

"Joris double-parked so we have to hurry. Did you even sleep?" Her eyes flicked to my hair, my make-up, my outfit—green cardigan, black pencil skirt, eyeliner winged sharp at the temples. "You look like you're about to interview James Joyce, or seduce him."

"Maybe both, although we would first have to dig him up, did you bring a shovel?" I said, and it almost felt true; dressing felt like prepping for an existential test. She set down her coffee and peeled my suitcase away from the door.

"Did you bring rain gear? You know it's not just the ferries that'll get you."

"I brought two umbrellas," I said, and Mireille grinned, like that was proof I was ready for anything. I picked up my bag and wheeled my suitcase out the door. Locked it and followed Mireille to Joris. In the parking lot, Joris had the engine running

and his phone wedged onto the dash. He hoisted my suitcase into the boot with the fatalism of a man long resigned to Mireille's projects. Always following Mireille with whatever scheme she came up with.

"Good morning, Nila," he said, and it was so calm and normal that I wished he could bottle it for me. The drive to Utrecht was short, the weather still a bit cold and the city refused to wake up. Mireille narrated every turn—"Look at that new Greek place," "That statue's always looked like a butt, right?"—and quizzed me in bursts about the itinerary. I answered when I could, and when I couldn't, I watched the world smear by through the car window. The hum of the tyres was hypnotic. Utrecht at that hour was underpopulated, the cyclists were minimal and mostly only delivery vans tried to find their way in the city. Joris had on some news podcast often discussing Dutch politics on a low volume.

At the bus terminal we were early enough for the bus to still be snoozing, its windows fogged up a little and doors closed. Mireille and Joris took their time saying their goodbyes. That made me look the other way.

After he left, Mireille suggested we stretch our legs, so we wandered through the terminal in search of good coffee. It was mostly vending machines and the hopeful scent of other travellers' thermoses. The other travellers on the platform all seemed sleep deprived, however Mireille instantly made friends among the other waiting passengers: a couple also going on this trip and they instantly connected over a smoke. Also in line was a wiry Dutch guy in shorts and flip-flops who was already reading a guidebook about whisky distilleries, he reminded me of a teacher I had in school who taught German, his wife seemed nice though. I stayed close to Mireille and stayed silent, and kept an eye on everyone around me, as to memorize all their faces before we entered the bus.

When it was time to board, the queue was a rope of sleep-starved people and hard-shell suitcases. I clutched my overused

paperback and let Mireille do all the talking, telling people I was 'the writer'. I hated being the centre of attention, but I also loved her for outing me there. Nobody had ever introduced me as a writer before and I knew she did it because of a sense of pride.

Inside, the bus was warm, too warm, and smelt like hot microfibre and coffee. Mireille grabbed us a pair of seats, window on the right, second row. My nerves were a wind-up toy in my chest, ticking louder with every new passenger who thudded a suitcase into the overhead racks. The seat fabric was a cheery blue, speckled with small yellow dots, and as I wedged my bag between my ankles, I started a mental tally of how many times I would need to pee before we reached Dunkirk. My guess was two. Four if I counted the phantom pee that always materialised as soon as a bathroom was no longer available. Thank goodness the first stop was in Belgium just after we passed the border.

Eric, our driver, welcomed us all with a broad smile that crinkled the corners of his eyes. He was tall and lanky with a tuft of prematurely silver hair, dressed in crisp blue, almost uniform-like clothes, that seemed at odds with his relaxed demeanour. As he went over the itinerary, details of rest stops and photo opportunities as well as our overnight stays were mentioned. He spoke quickly, gesturing with weathered hands that gripped and released the microphone, he occasionally paused to chuckle at his own jokes that only half the bus seemed to understand. He started the engine and we were on our way. At the first stop we exited the bus, and headed straight to the lavatories. And of course we needed to find something to eat and drink. Outside of the bus everyone started talking to each other. I stayed quiet. Never knowing what to say to strangers. I stood with Mireille who lit a smoke, a bit to the side of the others, we were joined by Femke and Lars. I guessed smoking did wonders for your social life. We made introductions, and shared a bit of small talk. They were a nice couple and had a way of making even me feel a bit comfortable.

"So, what are your impressions of the others?" Femke asked me. "Oh, I don't know yet."

“Don’t believe her, she is a writer she will create characters in her head about everyone here.” Mireille interrupted.

“Really? Anything I might have ever read?” Lars enquired

“No, I write for fun, I don’t even know if I am any good.”

“Well be sure to let us know once you publish so we can check if you write about us as the villains. And remember terrible books also sell.”

I smiled at the comment. I guessed he had a point: I read many a bad book. However, I did not wish to be one of those. Eric’s voice rang out above the clatter and shuffle of people queued for the bus, somehow both gentle and insistent at the same time. He had a way of shepherding that made you feel like complying was an act of kindness to him, rather than an obligation. The cluster of travellers, now a little more awake thanks to the coffee and the first cold air of morning, shuffled back on board with a collective sigh. Mireille was the last to stub out her cigarette, and she waved it like a conductor’s baton as she herded me up the steps behind her. The cabin’s heat hit me like a duvet, and I could tell already that by tonight we would all reek of musty upholstery and travel sweat. Next stop was to be Dunkirk. I wanted to write, so I opened my notebook to a blank page but nothing came out of my hands, the jumble of words in my head would not form coherent sentences, so I gave up for now. I listened to the others, their quiet conversations a hum in the background. As we drove into Dunkirk, I knew the first ferry would await us to take us to Dover, England. And somehow, I got “the White Cliffs of Dover” stuck in my head. But that sure beat the fear that would definitely rise as soon as we reached the shore.

The stretch to Dunkirk was pretty uneventful. Most of the passengers fell back to sleep, others kept mostly to themselves, occasionally speaking amongst themselves. I was wide awake, feigning to read, my mind working in overdrive. I knew what my therapist used to say: “Your anticipation is where you imagine the worst so it is important not to listen to that.” I knew it, but how can you shut off your brain? I never really learnt to do that. Sure, there were breathing exercises and such but when you were working your way into a frenzy it was hard to stop.

Reaching the port in Dunkirk with some time to spare, we were let off the bus again. It felt great to stretch our legs. However, the smell of the English Channel was unmistakable in the morning breeze and it made me anxious. Mireille was the first to light a cigarette, quickly joined by Lars and Femke. I moved away a little, not in the mood for lighthearted small talk. I wrapped my arms around my chest while telling myself that it wouldn't be that bad, unfortunately fear does not listen to rational thinking.

The boat was big enough, it would not sink, and the monsters I was afraid of could not survive out of the water, and so there was really no reason for fear. And yet it was there, lurking in the pit of my stomach, always just in the back of my mind. I tried some calming exercises, because why not, but they did not really work.

After about twenty minutes of wandering around, Mireille smoking and me just trying to keep it together, Eric called us back to the bus. We were about to set sail. Once on the bus, Mireille made sure I had the window seat, because it would be better for me.

"It'll make you face your fears more." And I supposed she was right, however, that did not mean I was comfortable in the least. The bus crossed the ferry ramp, and my hands clutched to the armrests of my seat. My heartbeat spiked but I refused to close my eyes. I really needed to face this. As soon as we were aboard the ferry I relaxed slightly, something I did not expect.

"We will all leave the bus and you are all welcome on the decks above." Eric announced. "There are plenty of restaurants and some shops to entertain yourself with. When we are safe to board the bus again they will let you know. There are smoking areas on the outside deck. See you in about two hours. Enjoy."

"You are going to love this!" Mireille smiled at me, with me thinking I that I would sincerely doubt that.

Slowly we got off and all of us filed to the upper decks. We had to walk outside on the deck to get inside and I tended to hurry through the doors, so I did not have to look out over the water.

As soon as we found a place to sit, somewhere in the middle of the boat, I relaxed a little more. This wouldn't be that bad. And off we went. The boat was keeping a steady pace and after a few minutes I was ready to walk about, much to the glee of Mireille. "Let's get something to eat first and then go shopping." "Sure" I replied, not willing to let the minor sway of the boat distract me.

We went to one of the restaurants and we had something to eat. For which I'm glad because it made the nausea, I was beginning to feel, subside a little. After our lunch we went shopping. The duty-free shops were of little interest to me, but it gave us something to do for the two hours we were supposed to be on board. We explored the boat some more, seeing all the features and of course, the view. I tried not to let the water bother me, but that was a little easier said than done.

"You ready?" Mireille asked.

"Ready for what?"

"I need a smoke. Let's go." With that she pulled me to the doors leading to the outside. The smoke sections were on the side of the boat. That turned out to be a bit much for my nerves.

"I'll just stay here." I said gesturing to a bench on the outer deck but in the middle, so I would not be that close to the water. How I hated this fear. Mireille smiled at me, understanding and went to have her smoke. Being joined by Lars and Femke. I was alone, with my thoughts. Not always the best place to be but it was a good thing. I had needed to know that I could do this, that I could have been on a boat even though my fear had been nagging at me, always just beneath the surface. The panic attacks not far away but here on the boat I could manage... I thought. When the two hours were almost up, we met with the White Cliffs of Dover. An amazing sight. From afar anyway, up close they were not so white.

We were called to go downstairs again and find our bus. Slowly we all filed in again and drove off the ferry to our next stop: Birmingham. Well, a hotel outside of Birmingham anyway. I didn't know much about Birmingham, having never been there.