

Unplanned Destination

Sweta Srivastava Vikram

Whenever I take a trip, my cynical attitude boards the flight before I do. I am not exactly a friendly or trusting traveler. My boarding school upbringing, over a decade of living in NYC and watching innumerable episodes of “Criminal Minds”, has made me a little too cautious.

I like to travel in a bubble where I can hear nothing but the stewardess’ voice when she asks: “Something to drink?” or “Chicken or fish?” Fellow passengers trying to unnecessarily strike a conversation reminds of those persistent Facebook stalkers with questionable life outside of the online world.

When I boarded Aer Lingus, headed towards Dublin, Ireland, on April 2, 2010, on my way to Portugal, I saw a middle-aged woman sitting in my assigned window seat. I looked at her, hoping she would telepathically understand my plight. But she didn’t. Not rudely but protectively, I asserted: “You are in my seat.” She looked at me and used the G-words: gorgeous and grand, as she changed seats. I tried to place my hand luggage in the overhead locker above my seat. It was heavy, but I didn’t ask for help. New Yorkers are self-sufficient. But the same lady offered help without saying a word. I felt sheepish.

I spent the next day in the Irish capital soaking in the works of its literary geniuses. The Irish, overall, are very welcoming, like the Indians. I know it’s wrong to stereotype, but that was my first take on it. Two people, whom I’d asked directions to the Dublin Writers Museum, actually crossed the street with me until I was at the entrance. I freaked

out and clutched my handbag. Were they going to mug me? But no; I met with munificence repeatedly. Be it directions or suggestions, the locals were gracious.

The following day, I left for Portugal. It was for a weeklong writer’s residency program. I had a great time and got a lot of writing done. But the real-world experience started when I returned to Ireland for my writer’s retreat.

Here was the plan: I was going to fly from Lisbon, Portugal to Dublin (east of Ireland), and then into Cork (south west). Then take a bus from Cork into the Eyeries, a village on the Beara Peninsula. I wouldn’t exactly call my retreat the most accessible place unless you had a car. But that’s typical of residencies – the farther they are from civilization, the easier it is to abandon the distractions of the materialistic world.

Anyway, my flight from Dublin to Cork got canceled, so my world fell apart. Let’s just say I am not the most adventurous person. Enterprising, sure; but also an obsessive planner. I reached out to the residency director and enquired about alternatives. She put me in touch with a novelist, Cauvery Madhavan (Author of “The Uncoupling” and “Paddy Indian”), who lives in the suburbs of Dublin with her husband and three children. Coincidentally, Cauvery was scheduled to be at the retreat, at the same time as I was, to work on her third novel.

Cauvery suggested picking me up from Dublin airport and driving to the Eyeries directly. On hearing the arrangement, my husband’s sister sounded concerned. “Wouldn’t it be odd to travel with a stranger? What if



you don't get along?" Valid point, considering I normally don't sit in a subway car that has less than five people.

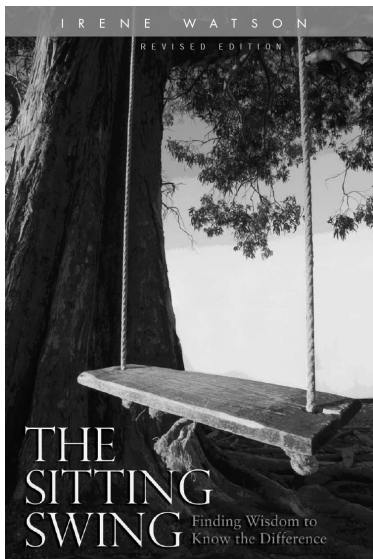
Cauvery was like the perfect hostess from the minute I met her. She told me about the history and geography of Ireland as we drove through the gorgeous countryside. Monosyllables of appreciation, still stuck inside my mouth, can't even begin to describe how stunning the shades of green are in that country. It's fascinating how rapidly the landscape changes along with the accent of the dwellers.

On our way, we stopped at Cauvery's holiday home – a cottage about an hour away from the Eyerics. What a grand place, as the Irish would say. Picturesque and tranquil. But what was "grander" were Cauvery's next few sentences.

She knew my husband was going to join me in Ireland once I was done with my writing commitments. She said, "Sweta, don't bother with a hotel. You both can stay in my cottage. Just write without any disturbance." Of course, she expressed her generosity using stylish, Irish idioms, but you get the gist. I was stunned. She'd barely known me for three hours; yet she was willing to entrust me with her cottage. And here my skepticism wouldn't even allow me to stop for a stranger, in a pick-up truck, looking for directions.

We talked some more about our families, books, and authors. There was never a moment of awkward silence. Upon reaching the retreat, I found that the residency director, due to a family emergency, had to leave for the United States overnight. I moaned at my

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misfortune but not for long. Cauvery made sure I was comfortable. She showed me around the place since she'd been there several times.

When we went for long walks, everyday, to fight off the side effects of indulgent Irish meals, she was cordial to every pedestrian and driver. Not just that. Cauvery, about fifteen years my senior, has a range of interesting writing experiences. She shared some of those extraordinary professional tips with me.

The world has always known writers to be competitive, loners, and self-centered. What can you do when the pie of prospect is small and every writer wants a slice of it? But not this lady. One of the housekeepers at the retreat said to me, "Cauvery is the kind of person who would give shelter to a homeless person." She couldn't be closer to the truth.

Due to the volcanic ash from Iceland, I was stranded in Ireland, and my husband couldn't travel outside of the United States. We were both extremely disappointed. But the second stage of grieving, after letdown, was dealing with the repercussions of the closed airspace.

My residency was over. I couldn't fly back to New York. For how long could I stay in a hotel? And would there be room in Dublin hotels? As I sorted through the ambiguity of the moment, Cauvery came to my rescue. She insisted I stay with her until I had figured out my situation.

People's destinations change in matter of seconds for reasons out of their control. And it takes trust to get through those difficult moments. I am glad my flight from Dublin to Cork got canceled. I got to know the most kind-hearted and trusting writer, ever. Someone who has revived my faith in humanity. So, next time an unfamiliar person waves at me on airplane, I won't shrug him

off as a "creepy dude."

About the Author

A graduate of Columbia University, Sweta Srivastava Vikram is a multi-genre writer and marketing professional living in New York City. She is the author of an upcoming chapbook of poetry from Modern History Press, *Kaleidoscope: An Asian Journey of Colors*. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in literary journals, online publications, and anthologies across the United States and abroad. She was recently offered a part scholarship for a workshop with the Voices of Our Nations Arts Foundation at University of San Francisco in the summer of 2010. Sweta is also an avid blogger. Visit her website www.swetavikram.com to read some of her work.

Exercise: A Vital Part of Your Day

Jim Kelly

What we commonly call “exercise” should be termed “motion” because it deals with how much we keep our bodies moving. The bottom line is that the more we move our joints, the better it is for our bodies, and the less we move our joints, the worse our physical condition gets. We were designed by the Creator to walk, run, climb, lift, stretch, and bend with ease until we pass on. We are born with all of the right equipment to continuously move 18 hours a day. Unfortunately, we have figured out how to move less. Our transition from roadrunner to couch potato is an important part of our history, but let’s start at the Garden.

Ever since Adam and Eve were asked to leave the Garden of Eden, men and women, and sometimes children, hunted, fished, and worked the fields for survival. For centuries we had to work hard physically to accomplish almost anything productive. When we moved out of the caves and built our homes and shelters from the wood and rock, we did all of this construction with our hands and our sweat. We figured out how to fashion tools to make some jobs a little easier, but for the most part, we still had to put in a lot of muscle power to get the job done.

Sometime after the Garden incident, humankind figured out how to turn a square stone into a round wheel. Instead of loading up our animals’ backs, and I assume our own backs, we were now able to get stuff around easier and more efficiently. The invention of the wheel was without question the beginning of great things to come. Almost every major advancement since the first wheel had a wheel directly related to it. We even used the wheels to beef up the

horsepower of our beasts of burden. The wheel was and is a good thing for all mankind to enjoy.

When our American forefathers came over on the Niña, Pinta, Santa Maria, and Mayflower, everyone had to chip in physically to provide a habitat for their existence. If you had a home and barn, it took you and your closest friends a long time to build. It’s amazing that much of the construction around us has actually happened out of tree-filled fields. What a monumental task it must have been for the early settlers to clear enough land to put their buildings on. Just the thought of removing trees, rocks, and underbrush by hand is overwhelming. Even with today’s machinery, clearing a small lot for an average home is a major task. We have always had the ability to use the strength of our muscles to get difficult projects completed. For centuries, we added a portion of sweat to accomplish most of our goals. We are builders by nature. Our skyscrapers, homes, cars, furniture, and fixtures required a lot of manual labor to complete.

The farmer and the rancher knew, and know, all about hard work. From dawn to dusk, they worked the fields and livestock to carve out an existence for their families and communities. Even the modern farmer will tell you that there is still plenty of physical work to do on the average farm. I have a friend of mine who has horses for his pleasure, and he is constantly working his body on their behalf. He has all of the latest mechanized gadgets on his farm to help him with most of his tasks, but sooner or later, he has to use his body for some things. Almost every day, you can see him picking up what horses naturally leave behind them. After an