

The Yank

by Rosalyn St Pierre

On this bright sunny and therefore a most unusual day, we see the tourist bus deviating from the Dublin to Cork motorway. There are 20 passengers, mainly portly Americans, a weary driver and a guide who, sitting at the front with the driver, says in a kindly but false folkey voice,

‘The top of the morning to you all’ (Nobody says Top of the Morning as dreamt of in Hollywood films) ‘we can even see the tops of the mountains that are normally covered in clouds. We have a request to stop for 30 minutes in the small town of Ballysullivan. There will be time for a coffee and a quick look at the castle...’

Comments are quickly offered,

‘Oh geez not another castle!’

‘Are there any shops?’

‘Can I stay on the coach?’

They are distracted by Jim, who is staring out the bus window with mounting excitement, pointing at a prosperous farm, then standing to look at massive iron gates, the entrance to the ruins of a country house. As the bus enters the carpark he is at the door leaping out, dragging his reluctant wife with him.

‘I’m back,’ he shouts, ‘the land of my family.’

Passersby smile with sympathy they have seen it all before, weekly during the summer season.

Looking around Jim sees a pub, ‘My god,’ he breathes, ‘O’Sullivan’s Bar, we’ll start there.’

In the Bar a few have gathered for a quiet beer or more likely these days a pot of tea.

‘I’ve just flown in from the Ol’US of A,’ he starts confidentially,

‘Yes we could tell,’ says one kindly, noticing Jim’s bright green jacket and his tie covered in shamrocks.

‘Are you trying to trace your family?’

‘How did you know?’ Jim is more than pleased with obvious intelligence of these simple men.

‘You know the records office was burned down in 1916, so you’ll have your work cut out.’

‘I’m a Sullivan, so I guess my family must come from here. think my great great grandfather left as a young man

The men look at him with sympathy and offer help,

‘Are you a Sullivan or a O’Sullivan or a Súileabhán? There must be hundreds from these parts.’

‘Was your ancestor a James? My wife’s second cousin married an Edmund.’

Did he leave in the famine, or later?
Was your man married?

Six months later a car laden with luggage parks with much difficulty into the car park. The driver looks anxiously at the grey skies. It is Jim, now struggling to exit from a car far smaller than anything he drove in the States, but the largest the hire company had on their books.

‘Come on,’ he encourages his wife Moira. We’ll go to the Bar where it all started.’

She follows resigned but bolstered with a promise to herself.

‘I’ll give it six months.’

Jim walks in and is about to speak when the barman looks up,

‘So you’re the yank that bought the Toomey place?’

Before Jim could answer, ‘Well you’re welcome and I believe old Toomey was delighted at the sale.’

Moira notices the smiles hidden behind hands that are exchanged with the men standing at the bar.

‘My family came from here and I am writing up the history,’ Jim announces.

‘I am planning to settle here for good, we’ve applied for Irish passports.’

An elderly man sitting on a stool propped up by a wall and the bar itself says,

‘I know all the families from around here and I dug the graves up in the churchyard for years.’

‘Let me buy you a drink and I can tell you about the Sullivans.’

Four hours later they emerge from the Bar. It is Moira that has to register them into the local hotel, all thoughts of unpacking the car abandoned.

Eight years later his mission is complete despite difficulties. The refurbishment of the Toomey house took more than he calculated. He was insistent on a traditional kitchen, he had photos from museums although Moira argued for a new American style of appliances at half the cost. He recently admitted his refusal to have central heating was a mistake, especially when the environment restrictions were imposed on wood burners and turf fires. He had to get rid of his car, now far too wide for the country roads and his wife loathed the old pick up sold to him by old Toomey’s grandson with a guarantee of being good for years. The final blow came when Moira said she could understand why the TV news was no longer in American but in incomprehensible Irish and left for Florida.

He is recognised in town, a cheerful nod, acceptance marked when someone stood him a beer. He sighs when he hears someone say, ‘There’s the Yank, bought the place up the road and secured old Toomey luxury for his remaining days.’

He’s never reached his heart’s desire of being a real Irish man, a Jim O’Sullivan or even better a Seamus O’Súilleabhán. Despite abandoning the green jackets the shamrock ties, he is always known as the lost Yank whose family records were lost for all eternity and which perhaps, we shudder to contemplate, never existed.