

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/1

D. E. Kern

The Arrival

Chapter 1

June 6, 1916

I stand on the deck of the Adriatic and study the ocean, spread out and undulating like the hand of opportunity. We steamed out of Liverpool three days ago with the shirts on our backs and a single leather bag mum packed for Jimmy and me. He is off in the bowels of the ship, probably playing cards for an extra draw on the bottle or a hat to add to his collection, one of his few frills in life.

I, on the other hand, require sunlight and solitude. There is a certain appeal to watching the ship cut through the water and easing my spirit into the roll of things that makes it easier to digest what we have been through the past few weeks. After Stephen, our next-oldest brother, got caught up in the Easter Rising disaster, mum decided to send her baby boys off to America.

Jimmy actually had eyes on being at the post office with the rest of the boys, but Stephen kept him out of it by taking off on the motorcycle before we got home from school. Three days later we got word from Tommy O'Malley: Stephen took a fragment to the arm and was rounded up with the republicans forced to surrender. Mum declared he'd hang for sure, but as the luck of the Irish would have it, he was sent off to Frongoch with Michael Collins and the others.

At that news, mum borrowed the money for our passage and made us swear on the graves of every saint and several others we would never look back. But I would bet a day's wages or a bottle cap that Jimmy had his fingers crossed.

He is older than me by sixteen months—quite a gap for my folks—and has droned on about ousting the British since the first time he picked up a hurley. Stephen, with his equally Gaelic notions, is his hero. "He's gonna get out in a tick, you know. Asquith knows it's suicide to keep them. Otherwise, he'd have buried them all at gaol."

"Perhaps," I reply whenever he engages in this line of reasoning. "Or he could be biding his time, figuring folks cool to their ideas and forget them."

"Andy, are you fecking mad? They dropped bloody 12-pounders on their heads!"

"It's Andrew." I give him the hardest look I can manage. "Besides, we made mum a promise."

"Oh hell, you lass." He waves his hand whenever I make this point. "That's the biggest fool's gold since your last confession."

Each time he says this, I smile in spite of myself. "Who's talking about hell now?"



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We are a typical Irish family in most regards. Mum birthed nine kids in all with just the requisite amount of assistance from da who had the good sense to die before the Great War. That left her to tend to the needs of Thomas, Patrick, Mary, Sean, Stephen, Catherine, Jimmy, myself and Abby—the youngest and my charge for as long as I can remember.

Thomas and Patrick fared well in school at St. Phillips, the only school in Galway we could afford. By the time I came along, the Brothers earmarked both of them for university and promised to foot the bill as long as one of them joined the Order. They flipped to decide their fates, and Pat got the bum end of the deal, a collar for a noose. Thomas is a barrister in London and sends funds when he can, though mum says he must work at the scantest firm in the history of law.

Mary, like the rest of the older girls, left school after sixth class and took a job at Miss Fleischmann's bakery running errands and watching the till. Mum does not like the idea of her working for Jews, but the money spends as well as any. Sean is off somewhere on the Western Front, and we have not heard from him in months though a good deal of rosaries are said in his name—with varying degrees of faith. Stephen left school for life on the docks where politics were loaded on him. Mum thinks they will force him into the war now, but I figure conscripting republicans is a good way for the British to lose their best officers fast.

Catherine cleans glasses at a seamy pub down by the docks and trades in secrets for the Feiners. She is close to Stephen and Jimmy, by turns, and I cannot figure if it is her or me who holds the other at a distance.

Then there is precious Abby, the smartest of the lot from where I stand. As I packed for America, I made mum promise she would let the pip finish school. And I think I got the next thing to an oath in return. Abby deserves a chance to stand the world on its head, if for no other reason than the way she lights up a room. She is a wide-smiler with loose red ringlets that bounce when she runs in the narrow street in front of our house. Her eyes are blue, deep with trust and openness. I miss the way she hung a hug and kiss on me every morning as I slogged through a bit of white pudding and potatoes with a hunk of brown bread. If rashers were in the offing, they never made it to my face as her smile was enough to get me to push them on her plate.

She is a typical kid, dashing off to play plainy clappy with any sprog she can find in the huddled houses that define her foggy existence. But her favorite pastime by far is getting a story after dinner. I think it must be about time for her to hop up on my lap and ask me to spin a tale full of talking animals and charms that grant wishes to poor girls with rich hearts. I know she will miss me plenty because mum has little time for stories. Honestly, expecting her to make good on her promise of school is asking for an awful lot.



I pull a fag out of my pea coat and, using the lapel for a wind break, manage to light it on my second try. The first drag hits me fairly well, and I close my eyes while I hold the cloud inside me for a

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spell. Jimmy says fags are for dandies and parlor girls, but I figure a feller whose hand moves from bottle to pipe so effortlessly needs to shut down.

I toss the glowing nub in the water and decide to look for him in the saloon. I'm not much for cards, but if he can win enough to buy us a bit of supper, I'm happy to cheer him on. With the help of whiskey, he has made a friend or two on the trip—the sort we might be willing to trust given our rather fragile circumstances. For the time being, I identify them by land of origin: a Spaniard, Italian, two Swedes, and a Pollock who had to produce his papers to prove he was not German.

I find them crouched under a haze of smoke in the most-distant corner of the room. Unlike the first- and second-class passengers, they have no table, just a spot on the tatty floor roughly defined by their rumpled coats. They are getting along famously and only half-devoted to their game. The majority of their attention is given to a serving girl from the Low Countries, a tall one with chestnut hair tied into a braid dividing her slender back.

She smiles as she glides from table to table filling glasses and clearing the dirty dishes. But this expression fades measurably as she nears Jimmy's group of louts who have been niggling her without relent. It appears my brother has been leading the charge.

"Hey, lassie." He casts a trifling glance in her direction and adjusts his page boy. "How about another round of pints for my friends? And tend to my brother here while you're at it."

The girl dries her hands on the towel hanging from her waist and stares his way without a word.

"Would it help if I said please?" Jimmy discards and lifts his eyes to hers. His generous brows are uneven and cut his forehead in half.

"Perhaps." She turns to me and warms a bit. "What will you have?"

"Porter, ma'am," I reply with a nod. "Please."

She turns and leaves, apparently without noting my good manners, but the gamblers have. The Italian purses his lips and smacks them quickly, and the Spaniard coos like a Morning Dove.

"Get off," I say curtly.

"What's the matter, brother? We wish you all the luck in the world with her. She's not giving this lot the time of day." Jimmy slides over and motions for me to sit on his right. "She's mighty easy on the eyes besides."

I ease myself onto the floor. "I'm just being nice."

"Nice indeed! And I'm Cuchulainn resurrected." My brother tosses his head back a bit and giggles then pats my shoulder. "There's no shame in putting eyes on a girl like that, Andy. To be straight, it puts away some worries."

I shake my head because arguing with him is useless. "Someone needs to be nice to her," I mutter after a long pause.

Jimmy shrugs. "Maybe—but niceties have gotten so rare you can scarcely blame a soul for forgetting."



I lie in bed and study the way Jimmy's bunk strains against the battered frame. It takes some work to convince myself it will not come crashing down on me. But, as he put it earlier, assurances are in short supply these days. Sometimes you just need to live.

This is difficult with the war. I imagine there is a chance the whole thing will put King Whoever and Archduke Whatever you call him in their rightful place. But, if you toss them on their heads, what comes next? The British are royalists in about the same way auks are birds. But our reasons for distrusting them are infamous by now. I suppose there is a chance for fairness in the ideas of Marx. Yet I fear he leaves no way for cream to rise to the top.

The Germans strike me as bloodthirsty. I know Jimmy and his republican friends see them as a lifeline—the motivation is there—but an ally today can be an enemy tomorrow. That's the trouble with a Great War, as bloody stupid as it sounds.

The Americans claim to be neutral, as do I, for now. It's not that I lack conviction, no matter what Jimmy says. I just do not believe the Irish have a friend at this point in the mess. We've just too little to offer. Freedom needs to come from within—from our bowels—through a leader who understands the fusty nature of our lives. I will know him when I see him; then I will fight. But, in the meantime, I need to keep Jimmy from running a fool's errand.

I turn on my side just as the ship pitches and nearly land on the floor. This is a grim prospect given our steerage accommodations, a square scarcely longer than our beds and not wide enough to fit them twice. There is a table big enough for a lamp and a book or so, though it is too rickety to risk a flame. Our one bag sits on the floor beside it, and I hear the rats climbing on it, looking to flee the icy floor. The quarters reek of whiskey and piss, and the lice jump about so they make a curtain as thick as our bedding.

Jimmy grunts at the lurching. I thought he was too piss drunk to be uncomfortable per say, and I take some comfort in the thought things are not too perfect for him. I am weary of this dungeon and pleased at the idea of reaching New York in two days if the weather holds.



June 8, 1916

The liner mounts a wave and crashes violently into the trough that follows. It has been rough weather for two days, and when I ask a sailor about our prospects of making New York today or the next he merely shrugs. I toss my eggs over the rail then make for a deckchair at the middle of the ship where I suppose the ride will be tamer.

I pull a book from the breast pocket of my coat, Conrad's *Lord Jim*, and struggle to set my eyes to the page. Reading tends to comfort me, and

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providing I can do it without going lightheaded, I may just make something of this day yet. I took after Thomas and Patrick and sailed through primary school with Jimmy by my side. But his struggles with the finer points of school—put together with his skill for finding a good fight—made us undesirables in the eyes of those in charge. When it came time for transition year, mother said we had no use for a school where we were not wanted. But I always had trouble with her use of the word *we*.

I never told Jimmy I blame him for blowing my chance at senior cycle and an eventual university education—it would be outright cruel—but I think he knows. Sometimes he calls me the scholar. And when he's not with the sort of ruffians he tends to pull in like a magnet, he asks me what I make of things.

His latest questions concern what we are to do upon reaching America. I find this odd because he has never been the sort to linger much over a fork in the road. But I credit it to the fact he has barely been outside Galway let alone Ireland. He's out of sorts without mum in sight as well, another thing I choose to keep to myself.

To ease his fears I use the notion of New York, a city teeming with tenderfeet like us, eager to make their life into something of consequence. With so many striving, there is bound to be someone open to the idea of us swimming alongside them, cutting the path so there's half the work. I leave out some of the other things I have heard—about windows pasted with signs that say *No Irish Need Apply*. Even if there is hate for us there, I suppose it can only be so bad in a country barely a century old compared to a place where we've been dogged for four hundred years.

We have heard Irish are welcome in Manhattan, especially in a purlieu near the Hudson River some call Hell's Kitchen. The name does not really give us reason for pause. As Jimmy puts it "at least it sounds as if there's food."



June 9, 1916

I stand on the starboard side of the ship sipping tea from a tin cup mum packed for the pair of us. In my opposite hand there's a fag, its glowing tip working its way toward my index finger. The smoke it yields is notable for no more than a second before blending into a fog one could chew.

I listen to the invisible water lap against the hull. This pea soup notwithstanding, the weather is better than it has been the past two days. The ship sways rather than lurches, and the wind is merely steady—not a gale.

As I mull the conditions, I note the captain has cut back on the engines and banked Adriatic by several degrees, though I would be lying to say I know the direction of our course. But we are making for something, someplace in particular, for the first time in days, and my heart beats faster at the thought.

Soon, the sounds of ships—their horns and humming engines—tell me we are in a channel or harbor. Just as I'm making to run for him, I feel

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Jimmy settle along the rail by my side. He's felt the turn and decided to join me as we wait for our first glimpse of American soil.

"Cross the ocean and there's still fog thick as the hair on the lip of a cheap whore," he says with his tongue half-planted in his cheek. "I suppose the best thing is our luggage won't break our backs."

"It's a new start." I tap my fag on the rail and watch the ash twist away on the wind. "Besides, we have each other."

Jimmy rolls his eyes toward his thick, ruddy brows. I don't see this, but it's something I feel in my bones. "Oh goodie."

I am about to tell him to get off when I notice the fog breaking up, ever so slightly, around an object in the distance. I try to get a fix on it, squinting, leaning over the rail as if six inches will make a difference. "What's that?"

"What's what—I don't see a thing." He pauses for a second. "Well, now ..."

At this point, there is obviously an object—a little more than a mile off—rising out of the water. It becomes visible in portions, nothing clear enough to recognize. Suddenly, it takes shape; an edge materializes out of the firmament. I spy an arm, barbs arrayed like Jesus' thorny crown, a raised hand, a faint light fighting the clotted air.

Our eyes rise in tandem. And, for the first time I can remember, my brother is in my arms.