

Secession.

Se•ces•sion noun \si-se-shən\

Definition of SECESSION

1: withdrawal into privacy or solitude: retirement

2: formal withdrawal from an organization

A series of photographs taken in 2010 by Evan Van Reekum in Galway, Ireland and surrounding area.

2008

My first trip to Ireland in 2008 included Castletown-Bere and Galway.

Castletown-Bere

The first three months of this trip was spent boarding with the O'Sullivan family in Castletown-Bere, a very small town on the southern-most tip of Ireland. Aside from my dear friend and traveling partner, Ben, I felt totally isolated.

The O'Sullivan family owned the town's large fish processing factory. The factory was an important part of the community's economy. Peter and Maureen O'Sullivan were distant relatives of Ben. We found them to be very kind people. They graciously offered us a job at the factory. We accepted eagerly as we were broke.

We had no idea, at the time that our factory work meant spending the next four months of our European journey in coveralls, wellington boots, and ridiculous-looking hair and beard nets. We spent our workday standing in front of a table cracking open trays of crab claws to pull out the meat in preparation for processing in a gigantic machine, canning and distributing for consumption by people all over the country.

Six Euros were paid out to employees for each five kilograms of crab meat that were pulled. To that end, either ten to fifteen enormous crab claws or hundreds of smaller crab claws no bigger than the size of a quarter were placed on a tray for the employees to pull five kilograms of meat. Obviously, the trays with the fewer, larger claws made it easier for an employee to more quickly and easily make money. Being new, we were given the trays with the smaller claws. We were lucky if we got through four trays in a day. The seniors would grunt angrily at us if we went anywhere near their trays of larger claws.

This painstaking work took place under the harsh dictatorship of a terrifying and gigantic Russian boss, Zita. She laughed away her darkest days, while barking orders at us in Russian. She sprayed us with a hose if we strayed from our monotonous duties — she was such a bitch.

After leaving the factory, Ben and I said our goodbyes to the O'Sullivan family.

Galway

We got on a bus to Galway. Galway is the fifth largest, fastest-growing city in Ireland. Located on the west coast, Galway sits on the River Corrib between Lough Corrib and Galway Bay. The 2006 census puts the population of Galway city and its environs at 72,729.

Our first night was spent at Kinlay House, a small hostel just off of Eyre Square. A late night employee was an incredibly gorgeous Austrian girl named Teneal Solinas. She was very friendly and we hit immediately it off. We mutually loved the music of Jason Molina (Songs: Ohia / Magnolia Electric Co.). Teneal kindly "invited me out" to watch some live music the following night. We made plans to meet for a drink and enjoy some traditional Irish tunes at her favourite pub, Neactain's on Shop Street for what I thought was a date. I had never dated a girl in my life before, so went through a day of excitement and "pro-tips" from Ben. I worked through my nervousness and built up my courage for a night out with Teneal. Adorned in my best wrinkled, ugly, brown-collared shirt that had not left my backpack in five months; I set out to meet the girl of my dreams.

Everything seemed perfect. Ben and our friend, Steve had made a plan to leave twenty-five minutes after I left. They were going to sit at a different table to witness a great spectacle. They were going to encourage me from afar.

I was so lost on my way to the pub that even after my thirty-minute head start, Ben and Steve arrived before me. They worried when they saw the beautiful Australian sitting alone at a table drinking a bottle of red wine that she was upset about being stood up by this nervous Canadian *beardo*. They must have found it hilarious when I burst through the pub's kitchen, soaking wet from the rain. I had been so turned around that I entered through the back-door. I made brief eye contact with them, seeing them literally fall on the floor laughing at my predicament.

I managed to ignore them, setting my sights on Teneal. I found her alone at the promising table for two. With no idea what I was going to say, I sat down, fumbling my way with a few silly sentences. Soon, she directed my attention to the stage. To my surprise, the music was traditional Swedish music, not the traditional Irish music that I expected. The music was lovely. My disappointment came when she leaned in to tell me that the tall, skinny, blonde, Scandinavian, guitar-playing, dreamboat was her long-time boyfriend, Ola.

Teneal and I eventually became close friends while Teneal and Ola remained a worldly, super-couple. They lived in a small flat across the river and invited Ben and I to stay with them for the rest of our trip. Rent was cheaper and she cooked incredible vegan, hippie-food for us almost every night. This time was so much better than our time at the factory, but both experiences added up to be the most memorable time I have ever had in my life.

Thus, my expectations of Ireland were high as I planned returning in the summer of 2010.

2010

When I returned to Ireland in 2010, nothing was the same. The group of friends of 2008 that I missed so much had slowly dissolved into other parts of the continent. Remaining friends had succumbed to a boring, non-eventful life of drinking and drugs. Since it is a lifestyle that I have no interest in, for the most part, I stayed away from them.

As a result, I spent three weeks alone. I walked around Galway, reminiscing about my 2008 experiences. It became clear just how much I had matured since then. I set out to find a deeper, more interesting experience. I talked to Irish people about their country, engaging in many long and heated discussions that ate up nights I spent at the pub. I interviewed old friends about the current state of Galway; I read as much news as I could, trying to gain some insight into what was really going on. I was saddened by the state of the country. I saw a side of Galway that I had not cared to see.

The city quickly began to look like an expensive tourist trap where people came from all around the world to exploit Ireland's rich and beautiful tradition. Furthermore, the tradition that people were going to *take in*, was not much more than a handful of brightly coloured shop-fronts, old men that make a living playing "trad" music and fleets of busses that pour out every morning at 7 am to take excited travellers on an expensive journey to witness the beauty of the Irish country side. In reality, tradition is being lost. In a desperate attempt to entice younger generations to learn how to speak Gaelic, payment incentive plans have been unsuccessfully put forth that the majority of youth decline. I saw a dying Galway. The Irish tradition that tourists witness is simply a last-ditch effort to keep the country's ever-fragile economy afloat.

I understand that tourism is very important for the country to bounce back from one of the most devastating famines in history. However, it is not easy to witness longstanding traditions like their language slip away as surface-level visual ephemera becomes the daily nourishment for thousands of people.

All of the pictures I have chosen for this series of photographs were taken in the last two days I spent in Ireland. I spent many days capturing picturesque, coffee-table book quality photographs that Ireland is full of such as swans frolicking in the Claddagh or beautiful restored fishing boats. However, I felt the need to address this subject in a series of photographs. I decided to focus on the unique neutrality that exists in the midst of a thriving tourism in a weakened country that has spent the last fifty years trying to bounce back from tragedy and disarray.

- Evan Van Reekum