5887 words Sally Shivnan

Walls to Nowhere

Frank and I are staring up at a bunch of immense stone arches stacked artfully together. The same way gymnasts climb onto each other's shoulders and make a human pyramid of themselves is how these arches are arranged. Out of the top of them rises a single, tall stone spire (like a flagpole the gymnasts might hold up). The arches are a lot bigger than gymnasts unless those gymnasts are giants—together the whole structure is 140 feet high and 100 feet wide. Frank asks me, with absolute puzzlement in his voice, "What is it built for?"

"Nothing," I reply.

Frank is a trim, middle-aged guy in a nice grey suit, with shiny black shoes. Powder blue shirt and dark blue tie. I'm in pants slopped with stains from two weeks of traveling, and beat-up hiking shoes. Frank and I have only just met, an hour before. "Built for no purpose!" he exclaims. He gets it. I smile at him.

I don't know much about Frank, except that he is a married father of four, a former investment broker who, since Ireland's economy tanked, now supports himself driving foreign businessmen to and from the Dublin airport in his small black Mercedes sedan. Traipsing about the countryside in my employ, in search of purposeless buildings, the more purposeless the better for my purposes, is a significant departure from his routine.

I'd already explained about them, when he picked me up at my hotel and asked me what exactly these things were. I gave him a basic definition—odd, sort of pointless structures erected for fun by people who could afford them, often as famine-relief projects to provide work for their tenant farmers. I offered a list—towers, temples, sham castles, obelisks, fake caves; the fake caves were sometimes staffed by fake hermits whose job was to jump out and frighten the party-goers. But a folly in the flesh is worth a thousand words, and standing now before the one called Conolly's Folly—the massive arrangement of arches and its single, soaring obelisk—Frank is enchanted. He's hooked.

We are folly hunters. We take off in hot pursuit, Frank refusing to use the SatNav, determined to sniff them out without any help. I explain further, about how they were all the rage in the 18th and 19th centuries among the Irish grand-country-house set, and how I am interested in not just those folks, but in the people who physically built the follies, especially during famine times. I say to Frank, think how they must have felt, building these crazy absurd structures for their uber-wealthy landlords while trying to ignore the hollow gnawing in their stomachs—they would have been grateful for the work, I suppose, but at the same time… Your ancestors and mine, I want to say to Frank but don't. Not sure why I don't—a little self-conscious about playing the Irish heritage card, I suppose. We chat about sports, the economy—Frank resents that he's lost his business despite never doing anything stupid or irresponsible, unlike the high-rolling greedy people who brought Ireland, and the world, to the state it's in. He talks about his kids, the eldest just out of college with a degree in marketing, about to emigrate in search of work. These are hungry times again, in their way. We float along in the car, through the green interior of Ireland, past pastures and golf courses, cottages, villages. I notice that the cream-colored leather upholstery of the armrest below my window is scuffed, grubby.

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The largest folly in Ireland is the Jealous Wall, and the story behind it is as marvelous and creepy as its name. It starts in 1740 with Robert Rochfort building a big house on a lake. He suspects his wife of cheating on him with his brother, so he confines her to his other house where she has no contact with the outside world for 31 years. She has to walk around with a servant ringing a bell when her husband visits so he can avoid running into her. But these visits are rare, as he spends most of his time at his estate on the lake, where another of his brothers—by all accounts an instigator of the adultery rumors and by this time not someone Robert is fond of—starts building an even bigger house of his own just half a mile from Robert's property line. It's situated to block Robert's best view, and, as a final snub, it is turned away from Robert's house, its rear end, so to speak, in Robert's face.

So Robert builds a wall. A freestanding, three-story, 180-foot-long pseudo-crumbling Gothic wall-to-nowhere incorporating curves, corners, a half-turret at one end, and numerous arched, rounded, and square window openings and doorways. Now when he looks out from his house, he sees this wall, rather than his brother's place. It's a compromise. It has its parallel in the way he imprisons his wife since he cannot go back in time with her to the way things were before.

Whether she had the affair she was accused of has been debated and will never be known. When Robert died, age 66, they came to let her go. The first words of the poor half-mad woman, who at this point couldn't speak above a shrill whisper, were "Is the tyrant dead?"

The Jealous Wall was not built for famine-relief but for rage relief. Many follies were built during periods of famine, though, including that huge pile of arches, Conolly's Folly. In some places you can find follies built during the Great Famine of the 1840s standing alongside others built during the less well known but equally devastating famine of the 1740s, which killed nearly 40% of the Irish population. At these sites you might find no follies from the intervening hundred years, however, as if the folly-building urge hit only once a century, triggered by tragedy. The whimsical nature of follies, under the circumstances, seems more than a little bizarre, and this incongruity is, I know, a big part of what drives my curiosity.

One such place, with follies separated by the century between the two famines, is Killiney, half an hour south of Dublin. I took the train there, much of the way running right along the strand around Dublin Bay, the fishing boats and pleasure boats like toys bobbing on the glittery blue water. When I stepped from the train and looked up to the hilltop above the village, I saw the funny, pointy cone of the oldest of the Killiney follies—a white-cement dunce-cap sticking out of a blocky little building, crowning the steep, wooded hill. I started walking up, along lanes that snaked between high stone walls concealing the country homes of the new gentry—Irish celebrities of the sort who go by one name, Bono, Enya—and after a half-hour climb I stepped from the shade of oaks and beeches into sunlight and a wide expanse of grass, and I beheld the folly's weird white cone poking up into a blue-and-cloudy sky. A marble plaque embedded in the wall beneath the cone reads:

> LAST year being
> hard with the POOR
> the Walls about these
> HILLS and THIS
> erected by
> JOHN MAPAS
> Esq. June 1742

Mr. Mapas seems not to have known what to call the thing he'd built and the best he could come up with was "THIS." His THIS commands a view to the east of the Irish Sea, and to the south the picture-postcard sweep of Killiney Bay and beyond it the Wicklow mountains, friendly and pastoral-looking. Other follies share the hilltop: a second, smaller cone-topped structure called the Witch's Hat, a miniature stepped pyramid about 15 feet tall that kids can clamber up, and a couple of spooky stone-slab structures that look like ancient sarcophagi, these all built a hundred years later, during the next terrible famine. Even though I should have known better, I acted just like Frank when I saw those pseudo-sarcophagi—I couldn't help myself, I had to ask what they were for. Seriously—a pair of austere, somber, fake stone tombs sitting in the middle of the grass all by themselves? I stopped a guy who looked like he'd know; he was riding around in a golf-cart spearing rubbish on a stick. A cigarette dangled from his lip as he worked, and he looked gruff and Irish.

"They're follies," he said.

I knew that. "What were these *for*?"

"Place to 'ave their tea on!" he called out, spearing a Fanta bottle. "They're all follies! Buildings built for no purpose!" And he hopped in his buggy and putt-putted away.

John Mapas's estate, where he built the cone he called THIS in 1742, belonged to a different owner just thirteen years later, and it changed hands three more times before the Great Famine of the 1840s spurred the second round of folly-building there. Today, the mansion that Mapas built, and which later owners expanded, is a four-star hotel that showed a modest operating profit in 2010 but had a loss of €340,000, mostly in bank loan payments. Its total loss on paper for the year, however, was €8 million, the result of writing down the value of the property by €7.9 million. Irish real estate is not doing well. The word *folly* has many shades of meaning.

It was typical for these houses to change hands a lot, as the Killiney estate did. And Ireland is littered with the ruins of abandoned grand country homes—roofless shells overrun with ivy, gardens gone to grass and thistle. These greatly outnumber the ones that survived as hotels, golf courses, and public parks. Their owners went bankrupt, or simply fled, many impoverished by famine along with their tenants. Famine meant the collapse of the rural economy, on which the landlords depended; they lost the rents from their tenants, the basis of their wealth. There's a certain ironic karma in the ruin of these landowners by famine, though, since famine was largely the result of poverty, and poverty was caused by injustice and inequality, and injustice and inequality were the products of the feudal system that put Irish land in the hands of the privileged few. In 1849, during the Great Famine, the Encumbered Estates Court was established to deal with all the bankruptcies, and in the decade that followed, 8000 of these properties changed hands. Other landlords moved on when land reform broke up the large estates around the end of the 19th century, or a few years later during the Irish War of Independence. In some cases, the formerly landless farmers were content to stand back and watch the huge, empty houses rot, while in other cases, they burned the places down.

We think of the conflict as between the Irish Protestant ruling class and the Catholic majority, but this oversimplifies it, because there were "dissenter" Protestants in sects that were discriminated against just as Catholics were, and there were Catholic landowners who acquired Protestant holdings during certain periods, and there were Catholics who had once been Protestants but who changed religious affiliation hundreds of years back. There were, as well, Irish Protestant aristocrats who were as passionate about the cause of Irish independence as any Catholic. The lines get blurred, even if you leave out the occasional, inevitable unsanctioned encounter between wealthy landlord and peasant serving girl. Anywhere you go in the Republic of Ireland you find both Gaelic and Anglo surnames, though all these folks are Irish, and mostly Catholic. Irish people's ancestry is a complicated mix, as is true for all humans, and the Irish are walking around with the DNA of the colonizers, as well as the colonized, inside them.

I am no exception—the man who would become my father left Ireland still in his mother's womb; she had a thoroughly Irish last name while the man who had sired her unborn child had an Anglo last name. That Anglo surname appears fourteen times in *A Genealogical and Heraldic History of the Landed Gentry of Ireland* by Sir Bernard Burke (1899), the Gaelic name not once. If the two had married, and they didn't—but that's another whole story—I would not be sitting here in America with my Gaelic name, writing about Irish folly buildings.

But back to famine times, and landlords building follies, and the curious question, why. Why did they do it? What made them think this was an appropriate use of resources? Imagine one: let's say he's not an absentee landlord but a man who lives most of the time on his land, and a little in Dublin; he is well aware of the famine ravaging the country but was not bred to see himself as a cause of it, and he never will. In his drawing room, he moves the curtain at the window just enough to see, huddled around the back of the house, the men and women and children come to beg—hollow-eyed and gaunt, the walking dead—and he thinks, *I am being bankrupted*, but it's not a selfish thought, because even as the words unfold in his mind what he's seeing is that his starving tenants cannot possibly care about his situation. The thought—*I am being bankrupted*—feels detached, unreal. Irrelevant. And he thinks, *Well. We must build something.* And as long as he's at it, it might as well be something very large and very silly.

It's hard for us, today, to understand those people and why they built follies instead of, say, schools or housing for their tenants. I find their world, and their worldview, so alien that it's a major imaginative stretch for me to concoct scenarios of what went through their heads. I can offer the rationalizations that they might have offered for making their tenants toil, instead of just feeding them—they would have said that charity in the form of hand-outs was a bad idea, bad for character. Inevitably, though, there was plenty of that kind of charity too; with the vast numbers of hungry people, building projects could not put all of them to work. This may be why some follies are so ambitious and massive—Conolly's Folly, for instance, took hundreds of men to build.

But why frivolous follies instead of schools and housing? The answer hangs, floating, in the immense gulf between the rulers and the ruled in that time and place. The landlords were magnificently clueless, it seems to me—it's as if it just didn't occur to them that building, for example, sturdy houses for their tenants might be a good idea. There was of course the risk that if the tenants got very much they would want more. And follies were fashionable, and grand, and building them was an affirmation of fashion and grandeur, at a time when the social order was powerfully under threat. Call it denial, a stubborn insistence that nothing had changed, that nothing would change. The building of follies seems, at some level, desperate. Extreme, baffling times call for extreme, baffling buildings.

As outrageous as the follies seem, they start to come a bit more into proportion when viewed in the context of the estates they belonged to, which were like little countries unto themselves. The household at Castletown—home of Conolly's folly—regularly fed over 80 people a night, between servants and family. The house and its outbuildings had more than 90 hearths which burned 300 tons of coal per year; lighting Castletown used about 2400 pounds of candles each year. The estate's dairy produced roughly 8000 gallons of milk annually, and the chickens produced over 10,000 eggs, although this wasn't enough and they had to buy 6000 more. The staff at a typical Irish country house had, at the top, the steward, butler, and housekeeper, and beneath them were valets, footmen, pantry boys, the gentleman of the horse, an army of maids, a full-time wet nurse. There were also the servants who worked outside—laborers, lodgekeepers, the brewer, the miller, the shepherd, the grooms and stablehands, wheelwrights, smiths, etc. The numbers employed would swell during periods of hardship—time, then, for a new folly or two.

The aristocracy saw class distinctions as ordained, and crucial. And they would never have wondered, as we do, what the laboring classes thought of the folly-building schemes their superiors cooked up. The story of Emily Lennox Fitzgerald, aka Lady Kildare, whose family built Conolly's Folly, illustrates this reality. In 1767, she decided to hire a tutor for her children, a well-educated, bright young Scotsman called William Ogilvie. She'd never employed such a person before—he was not an ordinary servant, but what was he?—and Emily struggled, wretchedly, to decide which would be appropriate to provide him, tallow candles or beeswax candles. Oh dilemma! She fretted, she wrote letters to her relatives, she begged for advice. Such were the kinds of things these people worried about—small wonder they didn't see anything incongruous, or untoward, about commissioning follies. (Emily settled on starting Ogilvie with tallow candles, but later had an affair with him and after her husband's death she went on, somewhat scandalously, to marry him; presumably he moved up to beeswax.)

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Driving around Ireland with Frank, this is what I see. Chinese take-away in a village high street, between the butcher and the pub. Treeless new suburban housing estates built on former pastures. Wind turbines, motorways, billboards advertising "sliding wardrobes" to storage-craving homeowners. Satellite dishes, sprouting from the sides of cottages. It would be crass and patronizing of me to resent, in the least, Ireland's right to be its ordinary, modern self, and I don't. But as an outsider, I bring with me certain pictures of the place that I have to admit, if I'm truthful, include impressionistic brushstrokes, blurry-soft, pleasantly colored. Maybe being a good traveler does not mean denying those pictures, but being open enough to see them in a new light.

One sight in modern Ireland saddens me, though, and I can't get around it. During the Celtic Tiger years—that decade before the economy crashed, when Ireland was the Silicon Valley of Europe and Irish young professionals who had left came flocking back—some people built themselves new houses. These stand on plain green lawns with bright black asphalt driveways, and though neither house nor lawn nor driveway is large by American standards, the houses seem big, and disturbing in the way they violate the Irish architectural vernacular. Some violate it subtly, others more blatantly. They are like pebble-stucco, lace-curtain cottages on steroids. Many have For Sale signs. Even when they don't, they have an embarrassed look about them. They are often unoccupied, and the saddest of all are half-built, with scaffolding in place and piles of block and sand lying around but no one working on them.

Frank does not live in one of these, but in Howth, where he grew up, close enough to Dublin that it is now a busy suburb but still feels rural and pretty, which it owes to its seaside location on a peninsula at the head of Dublin Bay. As we drive around looking for follies, I tease him that with his nascent chauffeuring career he is giving new meaning to the investment term "diversification," and he laughs. He is remarkably good-natured, seems naturally unflappable. He shrugs, says he's waiting, looking ahead, that it's the only thing to do. We talk about resilience and resourcefulness, how these are the qualities that serve us most crucially, no matter our life or situation.

In the car, I sit behind him, with a view of the back of his head, which bops in a jaunty way as he talks. His hair is sandy-brown and clipped short to minimize the fact that there isn't much of it, and his neck has a touch of pink from razor-burn. He says he never uses the SatNav except when lost; instead, as we drive along, he pretends to *be* the SatNav, imitating its nasally-robotic but distinctly female, American voice—Irish people love doing American accents—"Turrrn right at the traaaffic cirrrcle," he drones, and he's cracking himself up because *traffic circle* seems so peculiar if you've always called them roundabouts. As we strike out on foot in search of this or that folly, he's a great sport, stomping through long grass in his good shoes. He could stay in the car, but he doesn't want to. He wants to see these crazy things.

Frank knew nothing about follies before I introduced him, although he knew some of the estates on my list because they are places he plays golf. It's a Sunday, and we see lots of golfers; I tell him I hope I'm not keeping him from what he would normally be doing on a Sunday, meaning church and family, and maybe golf too. He tells me he's Catholic but mostly non-observant, repulsed by the abuse scandals that have rocked the Church in Ireland. He seems anxious to explain, and he glances up at me frequently in the rearview mirror, his warm eyes twinkling. The abuse scandals have made him think about other things—the way priests can't marry, and the way women's roles are limited. He lets go of the steering wheel and waves his hands around, gesture of frustration, disenchantment. As his hand settles on the wheel again, I see, for a moment, his wedding band, glinting gold. The ring is tight, in that middle-aged-man way—his fingers have filled out a little, while the band has stayed the same size.

Frank has been to the U.S. a couple of times, once with his college rugby team all the way to California. He'd like to go again, and he spins his dream itinerary for me in the rearview mirror—it's ambitious, it's got everything from the Canadian Rockies to New Orleans to San Francisco, it involves a lot of trains (Europeans, of course they think in terms of trains), but I'm most struck by the fact that it starts with a nice long visit to Boston, and that to Frank, this is possibly the most exciting destination of all. Boston—not that it isn't a fine city, but no one, apart from the Irish, would see it the way Frank is seeing it, right up there with, say, Provence in springtime. Even philosophical Frank, who makes a science, in his daily life, of moving on and letting go, looks to the past—longs to visit the city the Irish made when they left their homeland long ago.

He would be warmly welcomed, if he found his way to the right bar in the right corner of Boston. Maybe there's a guidebook—or ought to be—*The Irishman's Boston*. With luck, he'd get the same sort of reception that Irish-Americans look for and often find when they visit Ireland. But even as the visiting American embraces his ultra-distant cousin in Cork, or Clare, or Mayo, and looks him in the eye, seeking that flicker of true connection, I wonder if he sees what's really there, all the history in those eyes. Irish-Americans visiting Ireland bring pride, nostalgia, and curiosity about their heritage, while the Irish they encounter there carry around something much more complicated.

Grudges, for instance. Grudges as old and deep as bog oak, the 5600-year-old wood that lies buried all over Ireland, from a time when the place was covered in trees. It ended up submerged in the peat bogs, where it was preserved by that acidic, oxygen-poor environment, and turned up again as the peat was cut for fuel, and continues to. Artist Helen Conneely has been making sculpture and jewelry out of it for over twenty years in a tiny village in County Westmeath, which sounds like a nice idea except that the Irish have traditionally viewed bog oak with a mixture of bitterness and anger and mostly shame. This was because the poor were forced to turn to it for lumber and fuel since the landlords reserved the standing timber for themselves. Along the edges of the bogs today, waiting for Helen Conneely to come along, loom great dark tangles of twisted bogwood stumps and roots and branches. She drags pieces of it into her old greenhouse-turned-studio, piles it all over the broad shelves that in an ordinary greenhouse would be loaded with plants. The day I stopped there it was raining, and the light was diffuse and lovely, the sound of the rain on the glass soothing and cool. Helen moves with a hopping, bird-like energy except when she's grinding away with a rasp at a hunk of bogwood, looking for the shape inside it. Her soft brown hair hides her face as she works, her whole body shakes with the motion of her sawing, she is a picture of determination. She has no small task ahead, turning shame into pride. Her website has optimistic copy aimed at an Irish "woman of the modern world, untouched by its worldly ways" who is "effortlessly engaging in her confident freckled beauty" and who is "home again… under a billowing sky, against a wooded horizon, on a carpet of peat bog stretching into the distance."

By contrast, the visiting Irish-American tourists have short memories. They have histories just as dramatic, ancestors every bit as traumatized, as the Irish who never left, yet their families long ago let go, in that American way. Bitterness, arriving in the huge, new land, was able to spread out, spread thin, until its atoms had so much space between them it could not be seen or felt. The newcomers joined the other immigrants in the collective amnesia of becoming American. The Irish in Ireland stayed behind, with all their memories. They work now to decide what to keep, what to let go. Frank doesn't seem like someone who would let a grudge against bog oak bog him down, but he also doesn't seem as if he'd have much interest in bogwood jewelry. He has too much on his mind in the present to worry about the past, though it would be a mistake to think he's necessarily typical.

Were the Celtic Tiger houses, those outsized, flashy, brand new pomposities—those modern-day follies—an attempt to forget?

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Ballyfin is a grand Irish country mansion, up to its Georgian cornices in first-class follies—an outstanding tower, an outrageous grotto, a pristine, small Greek temple made of blond marble. The house was falling apart when its new owner bought it in 2002, with the intent of turning it into a unique, small hotel. He spent nine years restoring it, from the impossibly delicate flowers and tendrils of the plasterwork across its ceilings, to the 2000-year-old Roman mosaic floor that fills its entry hall, to the soaring wrought-iron-and-glass conservatory that was dismantled, sent to England for restoration, returned two years later, reassembled. How much it cost no one will say, but the fact that they constructed a tunnel connecting the house to a distant corner of the property, so that guests would never see staff arriving or delivery vans pulling up, says a lot about the owner's attitude toward the budget.

The follies, too, were restored. The folly tower is one of the best anywhere, complete with moat, a twisting staircase that stops at four different landings each with its own little fireplace, and at the top, a glass-enclosed observation deck with sweeping views of the house, the walled gardens, the lake, the distant hills. The grotto, too, was made safe again for frolickers, who can duck in and out through its elaborate rustic portico—think of an impressive porch with columns, if Fred Flintstone were the architect—or they can slip out the back way down the curving tunnel to the secret rear entrance. James Howley, in his definitive *The Follies and Garden Buildings of Ireland*, declares it "the finest of all Irish grottoes."

But Ballyfin, for me, was about something else. I was there at a dinner for some writers. I don't remember much about the piece of fish they served me except that it was perfect, but I do remember Eileen, the woman who sat next to me. She lives in New York, in Queens, but grew up in a small town in County Waterford, near an Irish-speaking area although her own Irish from school, she says, is shaky. She claims to understand it better than she can speak it. Still, when her sister visits they speak Irish on the subway to make fun of, and baffle, the people around them. I'd say she was around forty, based on the fact she's been in New York for twenty years, but she looks younger. She has fine dark hair she wears up in a clip, and Irish skin—the faintest bloom to it, like a capful of fabric softener in a washtub of water. She's a jeans-and-pearls-and-strappy-high-heeled-sandals kind of girl; she's fun and funny and has her Irish-birthright share of quick, dry wit. She was a little subdued at this dinner, under the huge chandelier and high, gold-gilt ceiling. The immense mirror over the fireplace reflected the chandelier's glow, the china and silver and crystal were all a-twinkle, the light was flattering and we all looked good. The topic of conversation at the table, as is inevitable at Ballyfin, was Ballyfin itself, because it is such an extraordinary restoration, the ultimate restoration, absolute museum quality down to the last detail. So we were talking about it—isn't it astonishing? isn't it beautiful?—and what I remember most is what Eileen said. She turned and directed it to me, but anyone at the table could have heard. She said, softly, looking amazed and sober at the same time, her words carefully considered yet full of surprise: "Isn't it wonderful that we're at a point, now, that we can enjoy this place as art?"

Epiphany crackled through my head like lightning. The sudden grasping of something huge that I'd had not even a clue was out there in need of grasping. Her "we" was the Irish, and she was talking about her discovery that she could admire Ballyfin on its own terms, enjoy it "as art" as she put it, and not have to see it through the lens of Irish oppression. There was wonder in her voice. She was as surprised as I was, for her own reasons.

And I sat there, just another silly American in Ireland. Strolling around Ballyfin house—the silk wallpapers! the marble columns! the chandelier that belonged to Napoleon's sister! the indescribably gigantic antler rack of the extinct Irish elk!—I had been enthralled, nothing more or less. It was a shockingly beautiful house, and that's all it was to me. I'm an American. I'm impressed by beautiful houses.

Eileen's words let me peek through the peephole into that other world in which Irish people live, and of which we the children of the Irish diaspora are so ignorant. In the abstract, we may get it—the history, the legacy, the baggage—but the raw wounds inside Irish people, the visceral thing, that's not a matter of knowledge or understanding but of feeling.

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There are many varieties of forgetting. The human urge to forget is as natural as the need to remember. Like many human urges, it can be healthy or unhealthy. There is the sort of letting go that Eileen, and Frank, are committed to. There is the forgetting of Irish immigrants in America, born of necessity. My own father, snug and oblivious in his mother's womb as she fled her village in Ireland for a new life, was a reminder to her of what she was trying to leave behind. When she gave him over to the orphanage, he was by then the baby she could not forget after all; he would grow up knowing her, visiting her, spending time with the family she went on to make, playing with her other sons, without ever knowing who she was, who they were, putting the puzzle together only when he reached adulthood.

And there is forgetting as practiced by the Irish aristocrats of old, who had an approach all their own. They were determined to forget—negate—the actual state of things around them: hunger, inequity, a social order that was doomed. They did this by building whimsical, escapist follies, "foolish monuments to greatness and great monuments to foolishness" as the writer Stuart Barton called them. These are strewn all over the countryside, many of them now crumbling—fake ruins falling to ruin—so that the Irish people are stuck figuring out what to do with them. If the Irish chose to let them decay and fade away, who could blame them, except that the follies are a part of their heritage, their history, too. There is an art to letting go, and holding on, at the same time.

Follies are disturbing, follies make me uncomfortable. Sometimes I feel that all the fun has been sucked out of them. But isn't there something to celebrate there—their glorious uselessness? They make a statement: there is value in flights of fancy; the act of creation doesn't have to be about utility, or even art—sometimes it can just let you scratch the itch of silliness. It's true there's some difficult history connected to follies, but just like embracing your beyond-distant cousin in Boston or Ballynahinch, you can see what you want to see. Follies are *fun*, damn it. I've seen it with my own eyes—Frank's face lighting up, his first time, when he got it.

Back in the car with Frank, late afternoon, we are kind of giddy by now with folly-hunting but we've got to find one more, just one more. We're looking for the Bottle Tower, but it's a lot like the Wonderful Barn which we've already seen—crazy cone-shaped thing with a spiral staircase wrapped around its outside—so we opt instead to try to find an estate called St. Enda's. Frank still won't use the SatNav, just wants to keep making fun of its American-twangy lady-voice—"aaand here comes a trraaafic cirrrcle!"—until he has to give up and turn it on, because he has no idea where he's going. It sends us left, right, through congested suburban streets, around roundabouts and surprising curves. We see, suddenly, this must be it, we're here—on our left we're traveling along the stone wall that separates St. Enda's from the road, all we need is to find a turn in—and SatNav lady is saying "Turrrn right into the Priory" but we never said we wanted to go to the Priory, whatever that is, and we want to go left. "Turrrn right," she insists and I swear she sounds like she's getting peeved. Frank is imitating her under his breath, looking for a turn. Then he shuts her off—"Turrrn ri—" and he spins the wheel, swings the Mercedes left and tucks it deftly through an open gate in the wall, and we're in.

A hermit's cave, a lookout tower, a tiny fort, a fake portal tomb, a fake Ogham stone, a fake Druid's Glen, this place, they say, has it all. Frank parks the car. We scramble out. And the folly hunt is on.

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Conolly's Folly

THIS

The Jealous Wall, and Frank