

# An Empty Bar in Belfast

By Greg Geyer

When Mary and I walked into that pub, I didn't know what to expect.

I sauntered in the same way I always enter a bar, with the swagger of someone who is confident and never fears a new situation. The bar wasn't crowded. In fact, there were only six men, all sitting around one table, their ages varying from about 35 to maybe 60. I shouted my usual, boisterous greeting, "Hey guys, how's everybody doing?" not realizing that I should be afraid. They never returned my greeting, only stared at us intensely. Mary grabbed hold of my arm and clung to me. I felt naked under their unrelenting gaze. One of them finally spoke, asking where Mary and I lived. "Seattle!" I said, but that wasn't the question they were asking. No, they wanted to know in what part of Belfast the two of us were staying.

This is a tricky question, because Belfast is such a highly segregated city. Where you reside tells your religious and political persuasion. A massive wall separates the most extreme Nationalist communities from the strongest and most patriotic Unionist communities. Catholic and Protestant are still umbrella terms used to differentiate the two groups. The Catholics, who want a united Ireland, are the Nationalists, and the Protestants, who wish to remain under British rule, are the Unionists. It's easy to figure out which side somebody is on; just look at their neighborhood. If curbs are painted red, white and blue, the community is Protestant Unionist. If there is IRA graffiti on the walls, you are in a Catholic Nationalist area. We were in an interface area, where nothing separates the opposing communities, and there were no such visual cues. Residents in these areas of Northern Ireland are understandably suspicious of strangers.

We didn't know who these men were, so our answers were intentionally ambiguous. "We're staying near the city center," I answered vaguely. It did not work, because they sensed we were trying to hide something. My world was shaking, and I had to

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concentrate to maintain focus. Their words jumbled together. I heard them, but nothing made sense. I didn't make out what the eldest man had said to Mary, but I would soon find out. She never lost her composure, but her face went pale and I knew it had frightened her. Fighting our instinct to turn and run, we answered their questions, or dodged them as best we could.

The youngest of the group cornered us, and before I knew it, we had been ushered up to the bar and seated along side him. He was called Red, which was more of a description than a name, and he was very drunk for only two in the afternoon. He began telling us about the others he was with and he kept the conversation going so we would focus on him.

"A bunch of bloodthirsty fucking killers," he called them. "That guy there," he said, indicating the eldest man, "was in jail for murder. He's killed nine people."

As Mary's grip on my arm tightened, it was obvious that this confirmed what the old man had said to her: "My name is Gerry. I'm a hit man. I've killed nine people." Later, Mary described to me how those words had rolled off of his tongue with unbelievable ease. I knew she wanted to go, but I didn't want to leave, and besides, I didn't even know if they would let us.

Belfast defies definition. Years of violence and bloodshed have created two worlds within the city, two fronts on which they perpetuate the conflict. On the surface, you see the visible representations of the Troubles - the murals, the Peace Line, the impossibility of flagging down a taxi, the devastating unemployment. Then there is a world that lies beneath it all. The world they warn you about. The world controlled by paramilitaries. No maps show you how to avoid it. The only clues you get are the whispered warnings of cabdrivers as you pass certain bars. "Don't go in there," or, "You don't want to go in that place!" When we'd ask why, the answer was always the same: "because of the paramilitaries."

We'd been warned. We had to have fun though; it was practically a course requirement. I thought I had a pretty good handle on things. I thought I could handle any situation that came up. I thought I had the street-smarts to perceive the threats and know when I was going too far. So how the hell did I get myself into this situation? I was overextended with my neck on the line, and worse, I dragged Mary here with me.

We had two drinks put in front of us. I don't know how, the world was still whirring. I had to concentrate on what Red was saying. "But they never caught me!" was all I could make out from his heavily cidered, thick Irish brogue. I've never drunk a Guinness faster - leaving before we had finished would have been rude. My plan failed, as another cold pint quickly found its way into my hand. It's funny how that always happens.

As the beers went down, the haziness began wearing off, the spinning

slowed down, and I became less disoriented. Red told me he had a son with the same name as me. He kept grabbing my beard and saying I look like Jeremiah Johnson, and occasionally he started singing title lines to Lynyrd Skynyrd songs. We sang along, waiting for the right opportunity to get the hell out. When one of his compatriots, a toothless man, came up behind us to order a drink, Red started cracking wise about his sexual preference. I sensed the mood had shifted. It was getting lighter, and this was a perfect time for us to finish our drinks and make our exit. I finished my second pint as quickly as I could, and when Mary motioned to me that it was time to leave, I gladly took the opportunity.

We waited outside for what seemed like an eternity until our cab arrived, all the while praying that the door wouldn't open behind us. When a cab finally showed up, we instructed him to take us back to Stranmillis, the college where we were staying. It was located in South Belfast, and while it was a Protestant area, it was also very affluent, meaning the extremists didn't reside there. The Troubles, as they have become known, are mostly an economic issue affecting lower income areas.

We were glad to get back to a more predictable place. On the way home, we passed the "Bot," a pub close to Stranmillis, and decided to get out of the cab and have a quick whisky to calm our nerves. As we sat there, still shaking, I struggled to put all the pieces into order. It hit me all of a sudden when I remembered the newspaper article from the day before. A parade commission had refused to allow a Protestant Orange march to follow its intended course past the bar we had just left. The Protestant leaders threatened violence if anyone tried to change their route.

Now it all made sense. How could I have missed the clues?

- An empty bar in Belfast
- Our hostile reception
- The way Red ushered us to the bar and kept us away from their conversation

It was obvious. They were planning the defense of their community. They were IRA. Mary and I were lucky to get out of there with our kneecaps still in place.