

A Sort of Homecoming

“I had it first!” Sarah, the little one, who has been asserting her will lately, presently four, stands with her hands on her hips, demanding a thumb-sized doll back from her sister, Lily. The eldest, in turn, launches into a tirade of defences, reasons, explanations, and, when nothing else works, a brisk tugging at said doll.

“Let them try and sort it out themselves.” That is my first instinct as I stand at the front door, bag in hand, already carefully checked for tickets, money and of course the all-important hat and t-shirt. Maybe I’ll get away with it. Maybe they’ll stop, hug, and then, of their own accord, and with the words “Oh, come on, Sarah, this is silly, let’s not fight, I’m sure we can work it out!”, they then decide to take it in turns playing with the doll. But alas, no Mum is ever that lucky, and with a heavy sigh and a resigned “Now, girls...” I set down my bag and advance towards them. Almost made it. Almost managed to be out the door on time. Now I might miss my train and be rushing to get there before it starts. So close...

“Leave them to me.” Tom steps between me and the feisty sisters and I smile at him gratefully. “You go. Go! Your train is in twenty minutes, and it’ll take you at least fifteen to get there. GO!”

Kisses all round and I shut the door behind me. Right, check the bag (again!) for the tickets, the train reference number, the right change for the car park. After one more trip inside to disconnect the forgotten mobile phone from its charger and another blown kiss to those I’m leaving behind I shut the door,

Tom's "Right, girls, who's hungry?" echoing in my ear. Now why didn't I think of that?

And as I pull out of the driveway I am free. Free and twenty years younger, a care-free rock-chick in a short denim skirt ready to take on the night. I get out my baseball cap and put it on. Sunglasses, radio, and I'm on my way. I feel like a teenager again, remembering that very first gig all those years ago, and feeling those brilliant fluttery butterflies in that area where my stomach used to be all over again. The anticipation is too much, and I change channels to sing away some of those bubbles that are building up inside of me. The evening news is not going to do it. I need music and I need it now. There is bound to be something on the radio that I can belt along to, maybe even one of the classics. Or one of their more recent offerings wouldn't be too shabby either. And sure enough, after trying three disappointing channels the fourth hands it to me in spades. I stumble half-way into "I'll go crazy if I don't go crazy tonight". I know how they feel! I smile as I cast a distant thought to Tom, hoping that he is not going crazy with his dissenting daughters at this very moment. Should have warned him not to give them too much sugar before bedtime. Ah well. He'll work it out, he's a big boy!

When I have returned with my pay-and-display ticket I have only about four minutes to spare before the train leaves. Oh, how I hate the rush. But once I've picked up my train ticket I realise the train isn't even there yet so I have time to buy myself a coffee and a magazine. Hot Press it isn't, but who cares? The train pulls in and I am finally on my way.

First things first. I balance my coffee and sandwich on the tray in front of me and pull my prized t-shirt – Vertigo Tour! - over my long-sleeved top – you never know what the weather will be like in this country! I settle down to make final arrangements to meet Ger. How would I have managed if I had left my phone behind? How dependent we are on modern technology, everything is so last minute! Ger is working till six, so we have to organise where to meet, what to do with her car, if we'll have time for food and a drink or three. All essentials for the seasoned concert goer. Like us two.

Of course U2 know nothing about this. They know nothing about the way I saved for my first U2 ticket, my first ever concert ticket, at the tender age of fifteen, washing the neighbours' cars, and many of them, taking out the rubbish, running errands for Mrs Murphy up the road which included walking her three-legged dog – he lost the appendage in a self-induced hit and run when he was chasing a rather unfortunate Fiat Punto. Those dog-walking duties regularly earned me reproachful looks from disapproving passers-by, as if I was personally accountable for the ill-fated creature's condition. If they only knew how fortunate he was to have survived the incident, the unfortunate Punto did not.

When I had finally saved enough money I managed to buy a ticket to go to see U2 in Cork, when savvy promoters still waved their wondrous magic wands and attracted such names to our real capital. A friend of my cousin's, who was there with a large group, had raised an eyebrow with what I can only call "Respect!" when he had overheard me say that I was hoping to see them again in Dublin some weeks later, and wondered was I one of those groupies who followed the band around the world. "I wish!" I had sighed, thinking of my

ever-dire and dwindling bank balance. Of course U2 knew nothing about this, either!

I carefully and inconspicuously, or so I think, observe my fellow passengers. A group of men laugh heartily about one of their buddy-in-crime's apparently excruciatingly funny tales which, as far as I can tell, involved his mother, and a chicken of some sort. Some of them have t-shirts from some of the last tours, others don't; it's a casual group. They're definitely going to the gig. An older couple sip their coffees and cellophane-wrapped muffins as they chat. Too old, I think, glancing at the couple, and the muffins, too. I spot two middle-aged women who are dressed in what I deem to be office wear and have obviously just finished work. No, I think, they're not going to the concert either, and sure enough, they get off at the next stop. Three young guys get on, clad in various memorabilia from the band's earlier years, and show keen interest in four what I assume to be foreign exchange students, all naively clad in high heels. They all settle down at two parallel tables. It turns out they are all going to the concert and before long they are making arrangements to meet up while they are there. "Good luck to you!" I think, having been to Croke Park before. Take the entire population of your average Irish country village. Put them onto a very large football pitch. Double that number. Then multiply. By about 400! Add your general murmur of tens of thousands of voices. Season with a guitar riff, heavy drum, base, amplified a hundred-fold. Mix in stewards, police men, ticket touts, merchandisers, local residents. Add larger-than-life information signs with numbering that may as well not be there; it doesn't

match the figures we have on our tickets. One needle and an infinite number of haystacks. Stir, and voilà: the melting pot that is Croke Park.

The train has arrived and twenty minutes later Ger and I meet in town. Her car is parked, the LUAS negotiated, and the walk to Croker begins, the soles of our comfortable shoes (practical Mummies!) wearing thinner. We Hoover up a gold-plated burger and some platinum-sprinkled fries – well, they may as well be, judging by the price they charge us. But it doesn't matter, it's all part of the experience, how often do we do this?

We are guided up the stone steps by the steward who effortlessly interprets the obscure symbols on our tickets. Once we get to the top we don't have time to marvel at the famous claw which majestically embraces the four corners of the stage, as another eager man in efflorescent clothing ushers us down the next flight of steps to a row about halfway down. As we find our seats we can finally breathe. We stow our bags under our seats and then it hits us. We are here and it is amazing. The claw looms ahead of us and fantastic stage is in full view. Yes, it is magnificent! Bono knows what he is singing about. As if the weather agrees with me the sun decides at that very moment to confidently show its face and warm the onlookers.

I look around. There are a good few couples, many groups of friends, and the unexpected little gems of groups. Like the family of four in front of us, their brood no older than eight or ten respectively. I can't wait until ours are big enough to bring along to these concerts. A little old couple no younger than my Granny are enjoying home-made sandwiches to our right. I saw the old man put on a bright yellow mac when the drizzling rain started and then

stopped just a few short minutes later. He is still wearing it. Like a beacon in the night. To our left a large group of what Ger believes to be Scandinavian fans with high-tech cameras laugh raucously every few seconds. It is for the obvious benefit of and a blonde bombshell who is the only girl in the group. They were probably sent here by IKEA, as a bonus for the astronomical takings on their first day of business, of course it is no coincidence this day was to take place the same day Ireland's most famous export – apart from the liquid variety, that is – is playing at home. Or maybe they have come to conduct a kind of market research, to find out what stuff we Irish are really made of. They couldn't have come to a better place.

The first support band is good, but the band members seem a little in awe of their surroundings. It is the famous Croke Park after all, this is as big as it gets. They have gotten the crowd in the standing area going at least, though the wave of excitement has not yet spilled onto the stands where we and our mainly middle-aged friends are sitting. Including our senior little friend still clad in his Mac. A few Mexican waves, coupled with generous gallons of alcohol in all shapes and sizes start to loosen up the collars.

A keen photographer in our row bumps in and out, and we have to get up every time he passes. Enjoying the concert through a lens isn't my idea of fun, I might get some footage on my mobile but won't be glued to the thing for the night.

The second band is more brash and flows in and out with the crowd. They are gaining confidence as their songs are received to more and more rapturous applause. On the big screen we catch the lead singer on more than one occasion wearing a broad grin between songs, shaking his head in

disbelief as he surfs the crowd with his eyes. But he is not put off by it; it spurs him on and makes them better. By the end of their performance half the stand is on its feet, hands raw and throats rasping; a sea of waving arms flood the pit. Wait, conserve your energy, I want to cry, the best is yet to come.

The buzz is building, and so are the roadies, were those two swivel bridges there a second ago? Ger and I compare pictures on our phones that we took at the start and agree that they have only just been erected, it must be close now, so close, before our four ambassadors of Irish music are on their way.

The sun finally sinks behind a thick layer of dark clouds and layers are pulled on again. When the first drops fall rain-proof clothes are hastily donned, we are not under the cover of the stand and could be very wet before our boys even reach the stage. Maybe Mr Mac was right to keep his rain cape on after all. Luckily the rain doesn't pelt down too hard and soon we can watch the sun emerge one last time and set over a waiting crowd at Croker, who are chanting for their heroes to begin.

And then they do.

It is amazing.

Incredible.

A truly beautiful day!

Our funny little elderly couple has been seated for almost the entire gig. The old lady got up and swayed for about two songs from a bygone age and then sat down again. The family of four kept swapping places but spent the whole time singing. Mr Paparazzi should have requested a press pass, judging by

the amount of pictures he took. Funny how people enjoy a concert in such different ways. Ger and I were on our feet the whole time singing with our arms in the air. Maybe it's younger we're getting. Maybe we are groupies after all, I smile as I dive into the chorus of "With or Without You."

And then it is all over. The line of stewards at the gates. The residents gathered round with their doors open, letting in the sound. The mad rush for the LUAS. When we've crossed the city I walk Ger to the car and after skimming various burger bars, mobbed with U2 fans in various stages of euphoria and blind stupor we ditch the idea of food and finally find a pub and toast each other and our heroes on a spectacular night.

What a night.

It's a shame it's all over but I am so glad I was there.

I turn the key in the door. All is quiet. I poke my head into the girls' room and step on an abandoned doll which looks vaguely familiar. As I hang up my coat I am Mummy again, thirty-something, married, 2.0 children. The rock chick extraordinaire only comes out at night. Or on special occasions. During the day I am just another Mummy who hums along to the tunes on the radio, plays referee to her children, and tries not to raise her voice too much. And tries not to throw her hands up in the air whilst stamping her feet. The latter is only permitted for larger-than life rock-chicks, practical Mac-wearers, over-

zealous photographers and any other toe-tapping concert-goers on very special occasions.