



Lost in KINSALE

How a side trip to a tiny
Irish village helped an American
couple get reacquainted

BY DAVID LANSING

And why shouldn't I go to Kinsale? says Jan as we cross over the River Liffey for the third, maybe the fourth time, muddling our way out of Dublin in our wee rental car. What occurred there was years ago, says she. I don't ever think about it.

I'm just saying we don't have to go there, says I. We could go to Cork. Or Galway.

Worst idea I've ever had, this side trip to Kinsale. A lovely week in Dublin, getting things between us back on track, and then this idjit – me – suggests renting a car and driving down to Kinsale. You'll love it, says I. Very romantic. Gawd, what an arse.

Watch the road now! yells Jan. You're crossing the line again!

I will yeah, thanks, says I sarcastically.

Silence the rest of the way.

We pull into Kinsale five hours later, eventually find our hotel, and, though worn out, decide before dinner to go for a walk just to get out of the room. It's a fine summer evening. Calm, brisk, moist. Seagulls swoop through a pale blue sky. Children play along the low wall of the harbor. An older gent sitting in a sunken lawn chair on the bow of his decrepit sailboat sips a whiskey. Red face, purple nose, threadbare sweater the color of new hay. Drinking by himself. Still. Not a half-bad life.

I wouldn't mind doing something like that, I say, trying to make peace.

Not with me, says Jan. I could never live on a boat. Everything damp, wet. Closed quarters.

Anyway, the drink looks inviting, I say. Shall we find a bar before dinner? Jan shrugs.

On the corner is a white building with a little mural of

a waiter in black vest and bow tie carrying a glass of wine. Apéritif, says the sign. Pop in. Nice-looking place. But nobody here. What time is it, anyway? After five. When do they start drinking in Kinsale?

The lone woman inside, standing behind the bar holding a glass of white wine, has the most shocking bright red hair I've ever seen. The color of a candy apple. Pale, freckled skin. Maybe 40. Maybe 50. Never good at guessing women's ages. Twinkle in her green eyes.

Do you serve wine by the glass? I ask.

We'd better; we're a wine bar, she says, laughing. Sticks her thin, pale hand out. Kate, she says. I run the place, although there's not much to run at the moment. Laughs at her own joke, takes a sip of wine.

What is it you're drinking? I ask her.

Pinot gris. It's not much but it's all right. Fancy a glass? Why not.

Kate grabs a bottle stuck in a tub of ice and gives us hefty pours.

Awfully quiet in town, I say.

It's a bit early, says Kate. Not for me, of course, she says, sipping her wine. Where are you from then?

California, says Jan.

I love California, says Kate. Palm Springs! Lived there for a year with husband No. 2. Or maybe it was No. 3. Doesn't matter, does it!

This brings a smile to Jan's face. The three of us get to talking and suddenly Jan is telling stories about how I got us lost today just looking for our hotel in town, even though you could walk the whole thing from one end to the other in 10 minutes. Kate laughs and slaps the bar. Says, I don't believe you! Lost in Kinsale?

It's true, it's true, says Jan and the two of them look at me and laugh, conspirators already. We finish our drinks

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and I ask for the bill. Kate grabs the bottle of wine from behind the bar and says, Let me just top this off a bit – on the house. What are you doing in Kinsale, then?

We came to Dublin to celebrate our anniversary, says Jan. Then this one decided we should come to Kinsale because he once met a girl here.

No! says Kate. I don't believe you!

It's true, says Jan. Kate makes a horrified face and shakes her head. Oh, I don't mind, says Jan. It's nothing to me.

I tell Jan we should probably be going. Kate puts a hand on top of Jan's arm and tops off both of our glasses again.

More stories pass between Jan and Kate. More wine. An hour later I tell Kate we really do have to go or I'll never make it through dinner since I'm already half-sozzled.

Oh, that's a good one, isn't it? says Kate. Sozzled! Haven't heard that in ages! Listen, she says, giving Jan a long hug, if you haven't anything to do after dinner, there's a trad session at Daltons tonight. Good craic. You might even find me there.

What's a trad session? asks Jan.

Traditional Irish music. The real thing. Not something brought in for tourists. Good craic, she says again.

Damn if I can understand how it is I keep getting us lost in a small town where I spent an entire summer. We walk up a hill over the harbor, neighbors sitting on their stoops smoking a fag or just enjoying the fine evening. I ask one old gent taking the air how to get to Max's restaurant. Down them stoney steps, he says. Pass that house there.

I thought you knew this town? says Jan.

I did then, says I. Now I'm a bit lost.

Jan takes my hand.

Down the stoney steps and sure enough, there's the restaurant, blackboard in front with pink chalk listing the "Catches": lobster, John Dory, hake, lingcod, salmon. Busy inside. Only table left is the one by the fireplace reserved for us. Have you any oysters? I ask the waitress. We do, says she. Local. Give us a dozen then while we look at the menu. And a bottle of the Entre-deux-Mers.

You didn't even look at the wine list, says Jan, eyes on her menu.

Did you want something else?

No, that's fine, I'm sure.

I get the lingcod and Jan orders seafood soup with mussels and scallops and big chunks of whitefish in a light broth. Lovely.

Cheese plate and port to finish. Older couple, all dressed up, sitting next to us. They've been listening to our conversation. About how the menu here lists who and what caught all the food. It's John O'Brien, license No. C362, who



brought in the lobsters and crab today, and Jamie O'Dwyer, who produced the oysters, mussels, and scallops. We've the Quayford Company on Market Street to thank for the fine creamy Cashel Blue cheese we're eating.

I've been lusting over your Cashel, says the dark-haired woman in a red dress. You can never get that back home. Where's home?

Boston, she says. Though I was born in Ireland. Right here in Kinsale, if you believe it. Left when I was 18, like a lot of them do. Came back to celebrate my 60th birthday, she says, holding up a glass of red wine in front of her.

Oh, my ... well, congratulations, says Jan. That's a fine accomplishment, 60 years.

Gawd yes, says the woman. She turns her chair toward Jan and tells her stories of growing up in this little fishing town. I thought it was absolutely awful at the time, she says. Couldn't wait until I was old enough to leave. Now I miss it fiercely. Fiercely!

A toast to Ireland ... and to Kinsale ... and to your birthday! says Jan. Much toasting and more stories. Everyone in the restaurant except the four of us has left. Our waitress, her head resting on her folded arms, sits at the bar, waiting. We pay. I shake hands with the husband. The women hug. So very lovely to meet you both! Yes, and you too!

Fine evening. Now if we can just find our way in the dark back to our hotel without getting lost.

Maybe we should stop in at Daltons, says Jan. Do you know where it is?

I think so. But it's awfully late.

Oh come on, says Jan. We're in Ireland ... in Kinsale. We'll probably never be back ... I'm sure I won't. Let's go listen to some music.



From left: Empty beer kegs in front of Daltons pub in Kinsale mark another successful Monday night of traditional Irish folk music; red-haired Kate Sloyan, who runs the wine bar Apéritif, loves a good story; colorful shops, featuring local artisans and restaurants, line a curving Main Street.



It's well-past midnight as we stumble into Daltons. Jammed. One of those wee places that looks exactly the way an Irish pub should look with paneled walls and dark little nooks where a young man might try to get fresh with a colleen.

Spread around a horseshoe-shaped brown leatherette booth in the corner is a collection of musicians. Eight, maybe nine players, from 20 to 80, some with long beards, others almost bald, suspenders here, a red tie there, playing button accordion, tin whistle, violin, flute, the bodhrán, even a banjo.

A plain-looking farmer's wife, her red hair pulled back behind her head, stands up and sings an a cappella version of No Place Like Home. Slow, mournful. Like a dirge. Hard to believe such a sappy song could bring tears to everyone's eyes, including mine. Jan squeezes my arm. Then the banjo player recites a limerick, followed by a roundabout singing of the Sloop John B, which sounds so much richer and thicker than anything the Beach Boys ever sang.

When the waitress brings us a couple of pints of the black stuff, I ask her if the group has a name. Naw, she says. They're just locals. But we do get some famous ones in here once in awhile.

Like who? I ask.

Micho Russell and his brothers, Packie and Gussie, have played here. And Sharon Shannon.

No doubt she can tell by the look on our faces that we have no idea who these people are.

What about Stevie Wickham? she says. Certainly you've heard of The Waterboys. I sadly shake my head. The waitress puts her hands on her hips and turns toward two old gents sitting in the corner nursing their pints. Can you believe it, she says, these two have never heard of The Waterboys? The two old gents don't say a word although

one of them raises his eyebrows.

Twenty minutes later the waitress is back with two fresh pints, although we didn't order them. She says, Them's from Kate. She tilts her head to the woman from Apéritif, the one with candy-apple red hair, who is sitting at the end of the bar, her arm locked to that of a man young enough to be her son. Kate smiles and waves us over.

We make our way through the crowded bar and join them. We sip our pints, listening to the fisherman in suspenders and a long white beard who appears to be the chairman emeritus of the trad musicians, giving a nod here and there to determine who gets to perform next.

An older gent on the other side of me is getting upset as he watches Kate whisper in the ear of her young man. Relax de cacks, Tommy, says his mate, holding him back by the shoulder. I'm gonta bayte de head offa dat young one, says the older man. When he stands up, his mate shoves him in the shoulder and he collapses back on his stool.

My ex, Kate whispers. One of 'em, anyway.

We swallow the last of our beers just as the old man throws the first punch at his young rival. Time to leave.

As we fling ourselves out into the cold misty night, Jan laughs like she hasn't in years, and I laugh too, the both of us surprised to find ourselves so happy. I give her a peck on the cheek and she grabs my face with both hands, turns to face me, us standing there like two idjits in the middle of the cobblestone street, and gives me a long, hard kiss, which I gladly return. Oh, Davey, she whispers, holding me tight, the night, the music ... everything was just grand, wasn't it?

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