

GIVE IT A WHIRL

By Mark Cornell

So far, so good, the roads around this part of Ireland are perfectly flat or downhill. Stephen and I hired a couple of bikes back in Wicklow and are making our way to Glendalough. After flying down a weaving road and getting our bearings over a stone bridge we decide to have morning tea at Rathdrum.

I love the way the locals pronounce the name of this tiny town, *Ruttrum*. When we ask for directions “ *Ruttrum’s hill down* ” so many miles. We’re told to be careful about the Devil’s Glen on our way back. Just exactly what the Devil’s Glen is I’m not sure. Maybe these people think we’re Yankee tourist and are having a lend of us.

As we slurp our tea, I realize that I haven’t been on a bike for over a decade. My last ride was when Stephen and I were teenagers. We used to love cycling out into the bush. Until today, I’d forgotten all about the freedom of pedaling along an open road and of being miles away from the noisy madness of the suburbs. That’s one thing I’ve loved about my mate; he’s always open to the idea of getting away from it all. When we were twenty we quit our dead end jobs, hitch hiked around Tasmania to then end up on a hippie farm. Stephen gets up from the table and studies the overcast sky; the clouds are high so we should be right.

The road gets smaller once we’re out of town, it’s more like a lane and we’re starting to go uphill. But we don’t mind because we’ve just entered into our first European forest. The trees are so thick and lush; they bulge over the road. It’s so silent here; the only thing you can hear is the whir of our wheels and crackle of our tyres on the road. Stephen says it’s like we’ve stepped into something out of King Arthur. Huge elm, oak, beech, pine and ash trees blot out the sky, our tiny road is bordered by endless hedgerows. As we cycle through this shadow land the occasional jackdaw croaks on a high branch somewhere. When we first came across these birds at the ancient capital of Tara, Stephen said they were guardians of the old ways.

It's starting to drizzle but being Melbourne boys we're prepared with beanies and raincoats. Our tyres hiss as we weave through the Wicklow Mountains. Droplets of rain plop on my hood, my panting breath turns to mist. I turn around to see Stephen. With the huge blue raincoat his Mum has bought him he looks like a monk. I stand up on the pedals and flex every muscle in my body. There's not another soul on the road. Any minute now I expect to see a cloaked Druid making his way through the shades with his oak staff. We come to the tiny village of Laragh around midday. Stephen and I get a spring in our heel when we spot a pub. We order a pot of tea each and toasted sandwiches then stand beside the open fire to thaw our limbs. The publican tells us that Glendalough is just down the road. We gobble down our sandwiches, polish off our tea then order another pot while waiting for the rain to clear. As we lounge around I notice how we've both developed a healthy gold sheen to our skin.

The first thing I see when back on the road is a giant dark green mountain with a sheer wall plunging down into a valley. Large trees dot the spine of the mountain they look like a long column of cavalry. I spot a graveyard up ahead full of Celtic Crosses and leaning tombstones. A round tower suddenly looms out of the landscape together with the ruins of a several medieval churches. Stephen and I get off our bikes to investigate.

We learn that St. Kevin lived in this area in the sixth century. He came from the royal house of Leinster, and as a boy while being tutored by three holy men came to Glendalough to live inside a tree. I look at the misty wilderness surrounding me and imagine a fair-haired boy cautiously poking his head out of a crack in a trunk. Kevin left but later returned to spend his days as a hermit in a cave. When news spread that a holy man lived in this neck of the woods his isolation came to an end. We walk towards his tiny stone church behind the graveyard, unlike the others it's still intact. It's about the size of a small house with a steep stone roof and a round tower like belfry. A nearby forest stretches up a hill.

The combination of natural and man made beauty strikes me. Back home, buildings in a wilderness area are merely functional. I love the idea that this simple structure was

dedicated to a man that strove for communion with his maker through nature's silence. Stephen tells me St. Kevin's steep roof reminds him of the shape of the mountains around us. We chat about being surprised by the humility of this little church; the way it was designed to blend in rather than dominate the landscape. In Melbourne our churches always seem to scramble for the most prominent location.

Stephen and I explore the round tower before getting back onto our bikes. It was built as a look out and defense against the Vikings and had a door high up into which a ladder could be pulled once everyone was safe inside. It saddens me to think those bastards made it all they way up here to sack the place. Stephen reckons Vikings were the yobbos of the Middle Age.

As we cycle further down into the valley a brown lake appears on our left-hand side. My cheeks and fingers sting in the cold air. The surrounding mountains are thickly carpeted in forest. Clouds of mist slowly drift over the water. The sky looks threatening but we've been lucky since we left the pub. The lake expands as we glide down the road. We weave around the final bend to be greeted by a magical view. A vast brown body of water overshadowed by the steep shoulders of three dark mountains. I follow Stephen's pointing arm to the other side of the lake to make out a silver waterfall below a strand of mist. Grey sky and shadowed mountains reflect in the calm waters of Glendalough.

Stephen and I park our bikes then take a few swigs of water. He starts cracking jokes about the place being "picturesquesky." It was a word we made up down in Tasmania. Whenever we came across a beautiful view, we'd say it was "picturesquesky," which means it's a great place to pitch your esky. My mate and I cack ourselves silly then decide to head for the waterfall.

We see an ancient stone cross and stone circle. The green tourist plaque tells us they're the remains of an early Christian fort. Stephen and I walk along the edge of the lake and discover a pine forest. I look above the trees to notice the crest of the mountain is rust brown and completely exposed. Stephen starts pretending he's Merlin

and tells me he can see into the future. I ask him that if this is so, then why did he decide to barrack for such a crap team as St.Kilda ? He replies that adversity is character forming.

I hear a strange voice in the distance. We stop to listen. Stephen squints as we slowly make out the sound of a woman's voice singing. Merlin turns to me and says it's the Lady of the Lake come to bequeath Excalibur. I nervously laugh when he tells me to be on the lookout for a woman's arm extending out of the water with a sword in her hand.

We step out of the forest into a land of brown heath strewn with grey boulders. As I start to hear the hiss of the waterfall, the woman's voice becomes louder. Well, she ain't no woodland sprite; she's a chubby little woman with a mop of blond curly hair. Without any prompting, she proceeds to tell us her name, her town and which state she comes from in America. We learn that she wants to be an opera singer and loves practicing outside. I sit down on a rock and attempt to take in the view of Glendalough while she small talks to Stephen. I marvel at the way this valley was carved out by a glacier during the Ice Age. It's like a giant has hacked away with his chisel at the side of the mountains and left his trailings scattered around this side of the lake.

The water darkens and I look up to see a black peninsula of cloud heading our way. The afternoon's getting on and I suggest that it's time to make tracks, Stephen and Madame Butterball agree. It rains as we head back through the pine forest. I pull my beanie down over my ears and button up my raincoat while Madame Butterball caterwauls away. My legs start to hurt as I think of various tortures I could subject her to.

We mercifully part ways at the car park then Stephen and I take shelter to consult our map. He tells me he's totally rooted, I respond likewise and we agree to head home for Wicklow before it gets dark. We single out a road that looks shorter and more direct than the one we used earlier on, then console ourselves that it'll probably be hill

down for most of the way. As Stephen and I struggle uphill on our bikes past St. Kevin's, I make a vow to return to this place before we leave Ireland. I turn around to take one last view of the valley and make out the silhouette of the round tower against the dimming sky.

We cruise past the inviting lights of the pub in Laragh. The roads are hill down and straight. I look up into the twilight sky and decide to let her rip. I pedal furiously for a wee bit and then fly down the mountain road. *Whee ! I'm approach warp speed!* Stephen rapidly disappears behind me. *Zoom!* Another tiny village flies past and I notice that all the sensible people are inside out of the bucketing rain.

It's getting dark on the road but at least there are no cars about. The spray from the road leaks into my feet, I feel this bone aching weariness slowly spread from my legs to the rest of my body. I'm thankful that I don't have to pedal now and only have to cling to the handle bar for dear life. I wonder how my mate's getting on ? There's a sign up ahead. *The Devil's Glen ! So it's a real place !* Now why the bloody hell do I have to be careful around here ? Ok the road's dipping, Jesus Harry it's really steep ! Hmm... there are some hairy corners around here, that last one was a doozey. The wheels creak while I try to struggle to slow down. It suddenly becomes jet black. I look around me to realize that I'm in the middle of a heavily wooded forest ! I take my frozen hand off the brake.

All the shops in the small town of Ashford are closed, I chuck a right and when I when I come over a hill I see the lights of Wicklow ! I pedal like a lunatic for a short spurt and then scream down the lovely straight stretch of road before me. Zoom goes another village ! It's rains cats and dogs as I'm transformed into a speeding cloud of drizzle. Water pours off my forehead and drips off my nose. I can hardly see. I'm beyond care by the time I reach the outskirts of the town. I thread through the light traffic to behold the wondrous sight of our double story Bed and Breakfast. I park my bike out the back and stagger upstairs for a shower.

I feel like an iceberg but the warm water slowly restores feeling to my body. I drape my dripping clothes over the oil heater then fall onto my bed and stare out through the moisture on my window at the glistening street lights. I doze off for a bit, then hear Stephen ringing his bike bell to announce he's made it home. He sticks his round face through the doorway and stares at me. I see that my friend's face is devoid of any spark of life, his saggy features remind me of a bloodhound.

'Do I look as shithouse as you do?' Stephen asks with a groan.

'Yes!' I feebly reply as the poor bugger shuffles off like a Frankenstein monster to the shower. He showers long, close to an hour in fact, then collapses on to his bed. Stephen and I moan to each other. We're both ravenous but are too exhausted to do anything about it.

Austin, the owner of the Bed and Breakfast sticks his bespectacled head around our door.

'Are you fellahs all right there?'

'We've just got back from Glendalough, we're knackered.' I feel like a tortoise stuck on his back as I try to lean up.

'That's grand. Do you Aussies feel like some craic tonight? I've organized a Set Dance down at the local hall.'

'Umm...no thanks, we've had a big day and decided to stay in for the night, thanks for asking Austin.' Stephen gasps while he rubs his legs.

'There'll be lots of local lasses coming, we need a few fellahs to make up the numbers. We're off to the Grand Hotel afterwards.' Austin raises his silver eyebrows. Stephen and I pause to think for a second.

'I suppose we could give it a whirl. What do you reckon?' I finally manage to get myself upright.

'A short and merry life.' Stephen chuckles as he hauls his weary bones up.

Austin gets up on the stage and explains the moves to everyone in between songs. I never knew dancing could be so complicated and have discovered that traditional Irish songs can go on forever. To get the Set Dancing right, you have to move every fibre in your ankle and legs. The lower half of my body feels like it's

been immersed in the flames of hell. The fiddles and accordion start up once more and I stare across the dance floor to notice that Stephen has a look of sheer agony on his face. After a few pints at the Grand later on, and in the company of some rather spunky Irish women, we manage to overcome our pain.

Bio

Mark is of Irish ancestry. As a child he grew up listening to stories; either in the form of tall tales told by his extended family or the lyrics of his favorite songs on the radio. He started writing poetry when he was seventeen. He has traveled to Ireland twice and during one of these visits was married to Kimberly in a Registry Office in Dublin. Mark has been writing Short Stories and Novels for a number of years. He took family leave for three years to look after his son Thomas. He now works as a Conciliator with Consumer Affairs.