

A Golden Drop of Irish Whiskey can change your Life

Margaret sat in the third row back from the front of the bus, in the seat by the window. The scenery passing by was shades of green rolling hills, patchwork fields and flocks of sheep. She was happy and excited in a “Pinch me is this a dream?” kind of way. She was in Ireland, on a bus trip travelling by herself for the first time in her life. She’d taken this trip to prove she wasn’t old. Her kids thought she was old, and tried to talk her out of going on the trip. If she looked in the mirror she looked old with grey hair and glasses. If she listened to the creaking of her knees she felt old, but deep inside she felt sixteen with excitement. Her mind was as active as it was when she was a mother of forty. She wasn’t old and she desperately wanted to prove it to herself and to her children. She needed this trip. She needed to get out to the turquoise Formica 1960’s kitchen at home where she’d cooked a thousand meals. Now that her beloved Ronny was gone, she desperately wanted to see the world. She needed to live and to be young again.

Three months after Ronny passed she found herself wandering the house room by room feeling trapped and frustrated. Yes, she was grieving. She would grieve every day for the rest of her life. But her life needed a new purpose, something to live for. She dreamed of seeing new places, of getting away from the grief and away from the house that held that grief. When she just couldn’t take it anymore she put on her coat and scarf and walked downtown to the travel agents. She walked in and sat down in front of the girl and said, “I want to go on a trip”. She had no idea where she wanted to go, or when, or how much it would cost. She just knew in her heart that her salvation lay in one of the colorful brochures hanging on the wall.

As luck would have it the agency had a tour going to Ireland and they were trying to fill the last few seats. Ireland was the perfect place to start. Margaret’s great grandfather was from Ireland. What better place to start than the place where her ancestors came from. The whole thing sounded perfect, so she signed up for the eight day group bus tour around southern Ireland and here she was in row three beside the window.

The tour company had matched her with a roommate named Elaine, now seated beside her. Elaine was a wonderful woman and they had so much in common. They had stayed up for hours the first night talking, getting to know each other. Both about the same age with grown children and husbands long gone, Elaine’s by divorce and Margaret’s in the grave. Elaine was so well travelled having taken three bus tours already, Ireland being her forth and she promised

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to show Margaret the ropes, teach her the ins and outs of how to make the most of the buffet meals, how to get good seats at the front of the bus, and which souvenirs to buy.

Margaret was having the time of her life. Ireland was like a fairy land. She couldn't get over the way the people talked. It was as if they all swallowed a Disney character. The lilt and phrasing was enchanting, she could listen to the Tour Guide forever. The scenery was breathtaking and the history was tragic and fascinating at the same time. Then there was the food. Last night they had dinner on a farm and Margaret thought she had died and gone to heaven. The three course meal was the best she had ever eaten. The main course was a simple beef stew that tasted better than any stew she had ever made. She asked the waitress what was in it and the girl replied, "Aye, it would be the Guinness that makes it special." The Guinness? The beer? Have you ever heard of such a thing? Margaret was stunned and promised herself to get the recipe before she went home.

Today they were stopping at a whiskey distillery. Apparently they were all over Ireland and every tour had a stop at a distillery. Margaret wasn't much of a drinker. She enjoyed the odd glass of wine on a special occasion, and Ronny had enjoyed a beer now and again, but theirs wasn't a drinking home. It seemed that's all they did in Ireland. The drink was everywhere, in the coffee, in the stew, in the jokes. The Tour Guide had said they would be having a tasting. Margaret wasn't sure what that was, but she was willing to try. If it was as good as the beer in the stew last night, she was looking forward to it.

The bus pulled up in front of a century's old mill, made of stone and wooden beams. It sat next to a creek that ran off to the side, still turning the giant mill wheel. Everyone got off the bus and was welcomed inside by the Distillery Manager who was to conduct the tour. Inside, the Distillery was dark and cold with a concrete floor, wooden walls and two storey tall steel frame ceiling. The Whiskey Master gathered everyone around and talked of the colorful history of the family who owned the Distillery for generations. He explained the process of how the Whiskey is made and the changes to the process over the generations.

He walked as he talked and showed them massive metal vats, climate controlled rooms, and large storage warehouses. Margaret was fascinated. It reminded her of a giant recipe. Of ingredients and measurements put together carefully to make just the right combination for a successful outcome, just as she had done a thousand times in her own kitchen.

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By the time they made it to the tasting room she was watering at the mouth. Margaret couldn't wait to taste the delicious Whiskey. She imagined it tasting something like a brown sugar syrup.

Everyone sat in comfortable chairs that lined the room as the Whiskey Master talked about the different varieties the Distillery offered. There were three flavors a pale, a medium and a dark. The dark being the oldest and most prized of the three and the one Margaret was waiting for.

Small plastic shot glasses were passed around followed by half shots of the pale whiskey for everyone. The Whiskey Master had instructed everyone not to swallow it whole but to wait for everyone to be served. Then instructions were given to smell the Whiskey for hints of fruits or oak and when ready to slowly take a sip and hold the whiskey on your tongue. Letting it coat your mouth before you swallow to truly get the full flavor of the Whiskey and all its notes.

Margaret did as instructed and put the cup up to her nose. To her disappointment she couldn't smell anything but alcohol. She breathed deeper, thinking she must be doing it wrong. She saw others swirling it so she tried that and almost spilled it all down her thumb. She stopped that in a hurry. Carefully she watched the others and the Master and when it was time she tipped the cup to her lips and took a sip.

Margaret, expecting a sugary treat, tipped the glass up and took a large sip. The golden liquid poured most of the way over her tongue before it registered with her that it wasn't sweet but fiery. Hot and fiery, burning like liquid molten lava. To her horror it burned her lips and her tongue. This was not the sugary treat that she was expecting. Her eyes widened, she sat up straight. She almost spit it back in the cup before her manners kicked in with the realization that everyone around her was calm and seemed to be enjoying the drink. She had no choice but the shallow. So shallow she did and the golden lava ran down her throat. She felt it go inch by inch. Felt it coat ever last bit of her throat and hit the bottom of her stomach with a thud.

Margaret gasped. Her eyes started to water and her nose to run. She scrambled for a Kleenex and took several moments to compose herself as she sputtered and coughed. When offered the next sample, she politely declined. Some experiences in life, good or bad, were only needed once. Margaret swore she would never do that again. She'd left home to experience the world but that was one experience she could have done without.

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When the tasting was over the group was lead to a gift shop where several of the group purchased bottles to take home. Margaret was shocked. Can you imagine? What on earth would she do with it at home? Oh well, to each his own.

The tour stopped that night at a quaint Inn in a seaside Village. She and Elaine simply loved their room with its sea view and lavender bedspreads, and décor, even the soap in the bathroom smelled of lavender. Dinner that night was at the Inn and served downstairs at 6:30 pm. Elaine wanted to take a bath and soak in the lavender scented soap so Margaret went down to supper early to let her roommate have some privacy.

In the lobby Margaret wandered and looked at the photos on the walls, picturing the history of the Inn. She could hear Irish music and was pulled by it to the next room. She ducked her head through a low, narrow wooden door, and wandered into an old fashioned pub. Margaret looked around and took a seat at the bar right near the door, too shy to go too far in on her own. The room was dark and dimly light with lamps that glowed off the polished wooden beams. The low ceiling had hanging copper pots and beer mugs giving the room an authentic lived in atmosphere. There was a peat fire in the fireplace that smelled very romantic. The scent was not that of wood smoke, but very earthy. The music that had lured Margaret in was Irish Flute folk music that was so haunting it would steal your heart.

Margaret sat on the stool at the bar and simply took in the entire room. This was why she had come to Ireland, for this experience. For once in her lifetime to say to herself that she had been away from home, had been somewhere new, somewhere different. That she had made a memory to carry with her in her heart.

The bar tender approached and broke her thoughts. "Can I offer ya' som'in darlin'" He asked.

Margaret smiled back at the man, hardly understanding what he was saying, but assuming that if he was a bar tender he must be offering her a drink. "Oh, no thank you. I had one Whiskey today and one was enough." She told him.

The man chuckled. "I bet they took you to the Distillery, by the stream." He laughed.

Margaret looked at him surprised. Was he psychic, or Fey, as the Irish say? "Why yes they did. How did you know?" She asked.

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"I could tell by the look in your eye." He answered. "They haven't a clue how to serve a lady a proper whiskey. Now me, I's know the proper way to serve Whiskey to a Lady" He boosted with his thumb to his chest. "Let me show you. You just trust old Shamus."

Before Margaret could protest, the bartender was bustling around behind the bar getting a Whiskey glass and a dusty bottle from the top shelf.

He put the glass down behind the bar, putting two ice cubes in it. He opened the bottle with a twist and a pop and poured a perfect shot into the glass measured by his heart not a glass.

He ceremoniously picked up the glass and placed it on a coaster in front of Margaret. "Don't touch it yet." He told her in a hush. "You have to wait until the fairies have had their taste first." He said. Then he slowly swirled the glass moving the whiskey over and over the ice. Just when the ice started to melt, he pushed the glass over to Margaret and nodded his head. "Go ahead, nice and slow". He instructed.

Margaret was afraid and fascinated at the same time. She was afraid because of the horrible experience she'd had that afternoon, and fascinated by the production this man had put on for her. She wasn't sure what to do, but when she looked up into the man's kind eyes, she knew she could trust him.

She picked up the glass, and this time knowing that there would be a burning shock she took a smaller, gentler sip. To her surprise, there was no burn. The liquid was warm, and spicy. She closed her eyes and the scent filled her nose. It smelled just like the spices that were in her spice cupboard back home. The liquid slithered down her throat and warmed her making her feel a glow from the inside out. Opening her eyes she looked at the bar tender with shock and wonder.

"How did you do that?" she asked "This afternoon, it was truly awful, and now it's wonderful".

The Bar Tender smiled and put his finger to his nose. "The magic of the Irish" was all he said and he walked away leaving Margaret to enjoy the rest of her drink.

That night Margaret dreamt of faraway lands, of sheiks on camels, of gondolas in Venice, and drinking wine in Paris. She woke believing that the magic of Ireland had given her

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a great desire to see as much of the world as she possible could and that her journey had just begun. She wasn't old, she was as young as she felt and the next phase of her life had just begun. Ireland was just the beginning. Over the next few days, she and Elaine made plans to travel together. They would keep in touch when they got home and begin planning their next adventure. Margaret had found a way to fill the empty space inside her. She would fill it with sights and sounds, tastes and smells. All the experiences the world had to offer.