

# **Abandoned in Ireland – Photography & Blog**

When I started writing this article a couple of months ago, I didn't know that all the touristic sites of Ireland were going to be literally abandoned due to a pandemic. I picked the title with something completely different in my mind. Places which were abandoned for good. Decaying. Incomplete. Mysterious. A husk of a building. Ruins. Walls.

That hasn't changed and this post is still going to be a journey to a few of my favourite abandoned places in Ireland. Whilst I didn't wish for the tourism industry to come to a complete hold, I have been thinking for a while that it could do with some mitigation of the boom excesses which had been returning. So I will also give a brief explanation in this post of why I prefer some sites to stay abandoned.

**Photographs © Sylvia & John Payne, Hartmut Wallburg**



## WHAT'S THE STORY?

I like old things. My husband is always teasing me that this

is why [I married him](#). Whereas this is partly true, I was more referring to old buildings. Both have a story and because of these stories I am drawn to them. (I will leave my husband's story aside here.) I like to feel the energy that comes off an abandoned place. A ruin that has been sitting there for centuries. Decaying and overgrown. I like to imagine what it must have been like during its heyday. Why and under what circumstances has it been abandoned?





## LAYING FOUNDATIONS

When I was a child my parents brought my sister and me to a



lot of historic places. Archaeological sites mostly in Greece and Turkey. Some of them were very popular amongst tourists. Others barely had an infrastructure and hence hardly any visitors. These I enjoyed the most. They had been abandoned despite their historical value to mankind. That didn't make them less interesting. My parents and especially my dad showing them to us laid the foundations for my interest in abandoned places.





## **A CHILD'S IMAGINATION**

My mind kept wandering off while I was walking through these



sites, inspired by books and my own very vivid, child's imagination. I pictured the people that had walked the very same grounds thousands of years ago. Sensing the same heat burning on their skin and hearing the overpowering sound of the cicadas the way I was now. Does it play a role if I imagined them in their historically correct clothing? Not to me. What I remember until today is the special atmosphere rather than historical facts that can be looked up any time.





## LESS IS MORE

I sometimes like to fill in the blanks myself. Reconstructions

and visitor centres often take away the fun of exploring a site with all its missing pieces. Abandoned buildings speak for themselves although the story perceived is not the same for everyone. There are a good few highly frequented touristic sites in Ireland that have kept the place's spirit and leave room for imagination. Sadly there are many tourist traps too whose interest at heart is not to purely inform, but make people spend money.





## SUSTAINABLE

As much as grazing sheep on green hills belong to

Ireland, ruins of mansions or abbeys are a familiar sight in the Irish landscape too. Some people visiting Ireland get downright excited about abandoned castles they spot on the roadside, without a coffee shop or souvenir stall attached to it. One might call it wasted potential, I call it sustainable tourism. Sometimes all you need is some simple facilities and a signpost.





## **CURSE...**

The pictures in this post have all been taken in abandoned

places. Most of them don't have a visitor infrastructure which makes them even more attractive in my eyes. Imagination works better for me without coach loads of tourists around. Not too long ago I myself earned my money in the tourism industry, bringing thousands of tourists to Ireland every year. Long before I stayed at home as [full-time mammy](#), I had a problem with [cut price and mass marketed packages in Irish tourism](#).





## ...& BLESSING

Appropriately done, tourism is an important income source for



Ireland, especially in less favoured regions. But I feel that the concept of slow, sustainable growth is absent and unsupportable increase reigns instead. I also think that visitor centres should not be turned into the main attraction by covering up the more beautiful, natural site behind it. How can it not backfire in the long run when the attributes people were originally drawn to, disappear? Like tranquility, unspoilt nature and above all authenticity. Keeping (abandoned) sites real will create a valuable resource for Irish people and visitors alike.





## DILEMMA

I should be happy that most tourists are sticking to a handful

of iconic sites promoted in travel brochures. Don't get me wrong, I went to see them all myself, the first time I came to Ireland. However after getting to know Ireland better, I feel obliged to show people other places that – for whatever reason – haven't turned into a tourism magnet yet. Places too beautiful to keep them a secret. Yet too precious to turn them into a hot spot during high season. That is my personal dilemma I guess. Luckily I don't have the power to do either.





## TALKING WALLS

The ruins that I chose to introduce in this article were all

random finds. I didn't read about them in guide books beforehand nor did anyone recommend them to me as a must-see. Accordingly my expectations were low to non-existent. In each one of them I could totally immerse into my unbiased imagination regarding their history, be it true or not. No reconstructed walls, no fake interior. Just stones the way they were put on top of each other by the people who once built them. And I wonder – what makes them less popular than some of the most visited sites in Ireland in a similar state?





## GRAVEYARDS

Old graveyards have always fascinated me the most. In Ireland



they are particularly beautiful because of their Celtic high crosses. I am a big fan of [Glasnevin](#) and [Monasterboice](#) as cemeteries and 'tourism attractions' alike. As well as the [Rock of Cashel](#) and [Clonmacnoise](#) as historic sites featuring an ancient graveyard. In my eyes they are all doing a great job of preserving the place for what it is, despite large visitor numbers. Two 'hidden' graveyards that impressed me as much are the [Hill of Slane](#), Co. Meath and the [Old Burial Ground](#) in Delgany, Co. Wicklow.





## HILL OF SLANE

The Hill of Slane struck me as surreal. A quite big complex of

ruins overlooking a green landscape. Cows grazing in the field beside it and a farmer dropping in to check on them just when we were visiting. The only creatures we encountered during our two hour stay. Both were obviously rather unimpressed by the historical value in their vicinity. To me a great example of something historically remarkable blended in with ordinary life. *That* to me makes an iconic site I would call [typically Irish](#).





## DELGANY

Stepping into the Old Burial Ground off a busy road, my

husband and I found ourselves in a secret-garden-like environment, only meters from our home. We were the only people there and took our time reading the headstones dating back to the 1700's. Instead of neatly cut edges, the grass was lush and dotted with wild flowers. Tilted, ancient gravestones with engravings barely visible and overgrown. A bench underneath a huge tree providing shade. Could a cemetery be more authentic and a better resting place for the deceased *and* visitors?





## BALTINGLASS

Abbeys to me have something majestic. Like graveyards they are



places of devotion and contemplation or at least were in their heyday. Ireland is full of them and even as ruins they don't lose their aura. When we took the scenic drive from our home in North Wicklow to [Baltinglass](#) in West Wicklow, it took us longer than expected. We were hungry and cranky when we got there. Maybe that is why I wasn't straight away baffled by this 12<sup>th</sup> century Cistercian Abbey. Taking a closer look though, the most stunning details revealed to me. Some of them even just after looking at the photographs. These very elaborate stone carvings belong to the finest examples of Romanesque architecture in Ireland. And still no sinner there to admire them.



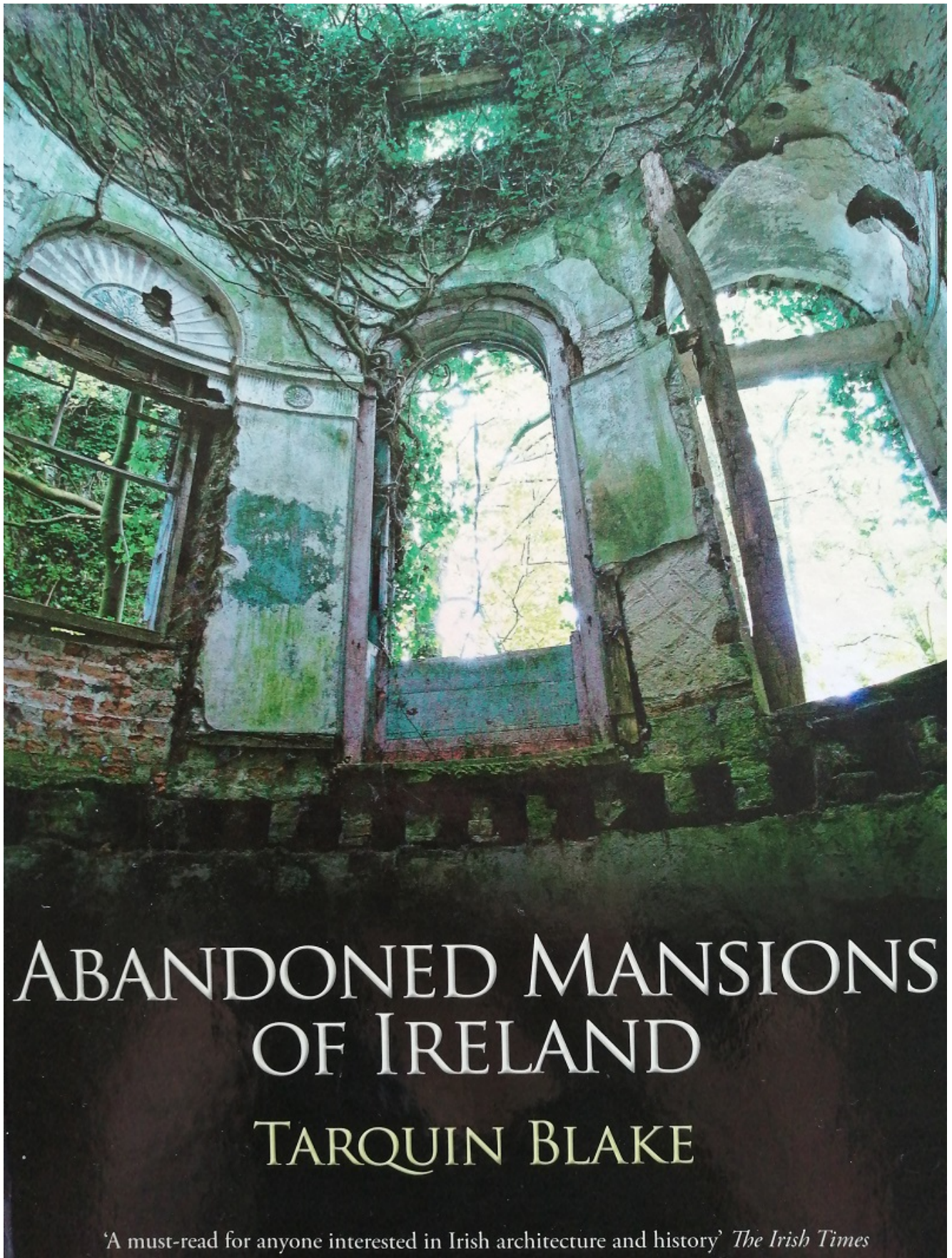


## FANCY A RUIN?

Whenever I fancy a ruin, I just step outside my door and watch

the sun set at [Kindlestown Castle](#). On the meadow in front of it our toddler is occasionally kicking a ball or people are walking their dogs. That doesn't take away from the fact that we are looking at a historic hall house from the 9<sup>th</sup> century that is considered a National Monument and part of the [Delgany Heritage Trail](#). Only a few minutes drive from us is [Belmont Demesne](#) as part of a walking trail area. The ruins themselves are from 18<sup>th</sup> century Belmont House. Pretty unspectacular nestled in between the green parklands which have a rich film pedigree including Vikings and King Arthur. The enclosed Café Bak'd at Arthur's Barn including a local Design Store even got its name from it.





## BOOK TIP

Last but not least I would like to recommend a book of someone

that I share my obsession of abandoned mansions with. Tarquin Blake wrote it. My husband gave it to me with the following words written into it: „*To my beautiful wife. On her first birthday as my wife. One day we will build a [home of our own](#). Your husband.*“ These words were not only touching on a personal level, they also made me think that these [Abandoned Mansions of Ireland](#) captured in the book had indeed been a home to someone once. As fascinating as it is to see an abandoned building being re-captured by nature, is the (hi)story behind it. Before I read it I let the pictures speak for themselves first, exactly the way I had done it as a child.

Small pictures, left to right, horizontal: Glen of the Downs (Co. Wicklow); Baltinglass Abbey (Co. Wicklow), Belmont Demesne (Co. Wicklow); Hill of Slane (Co. Meath); Cathedral of St. Peter & St. Paul, Glendalough (Co. Wicklow), Monasterboice (Co. Louth); Selskar Abbey (Co. Wexford); Cathedral of St. Peter & St. Paul, Glendalough (Co. Wicklow), Famine Wall, Ballina (Co. Mayo); Old Burial Ground, Delgany (Co. Wicklow); Hill of Slane (Co. Meath); Old Burial Ground, Delgany (Co. Wicklow); Baltinglass Abbey (Co. Wicklow); Kindlestown Castle (Co. Wicklow)

Photographs © Sylvia & John Payne, Hartmut Wallburg

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**If      Trees      could      talk      –**



# Photography & Blog

## ...what would they say?

Would they give away that they are home and hiding place to the "wee folk"? The fairies and creatures that Irish legends and folklore is made of? Would they be able to tell the original tales that have been handed down and adapted by people from generation to generation instead? Who knows. I am going to lend my voice to the trees and give you a little insight into Ireland's mythology in which trees have always played a vital role.

**Tree & Forest Photography © Sylvia & John Payne**





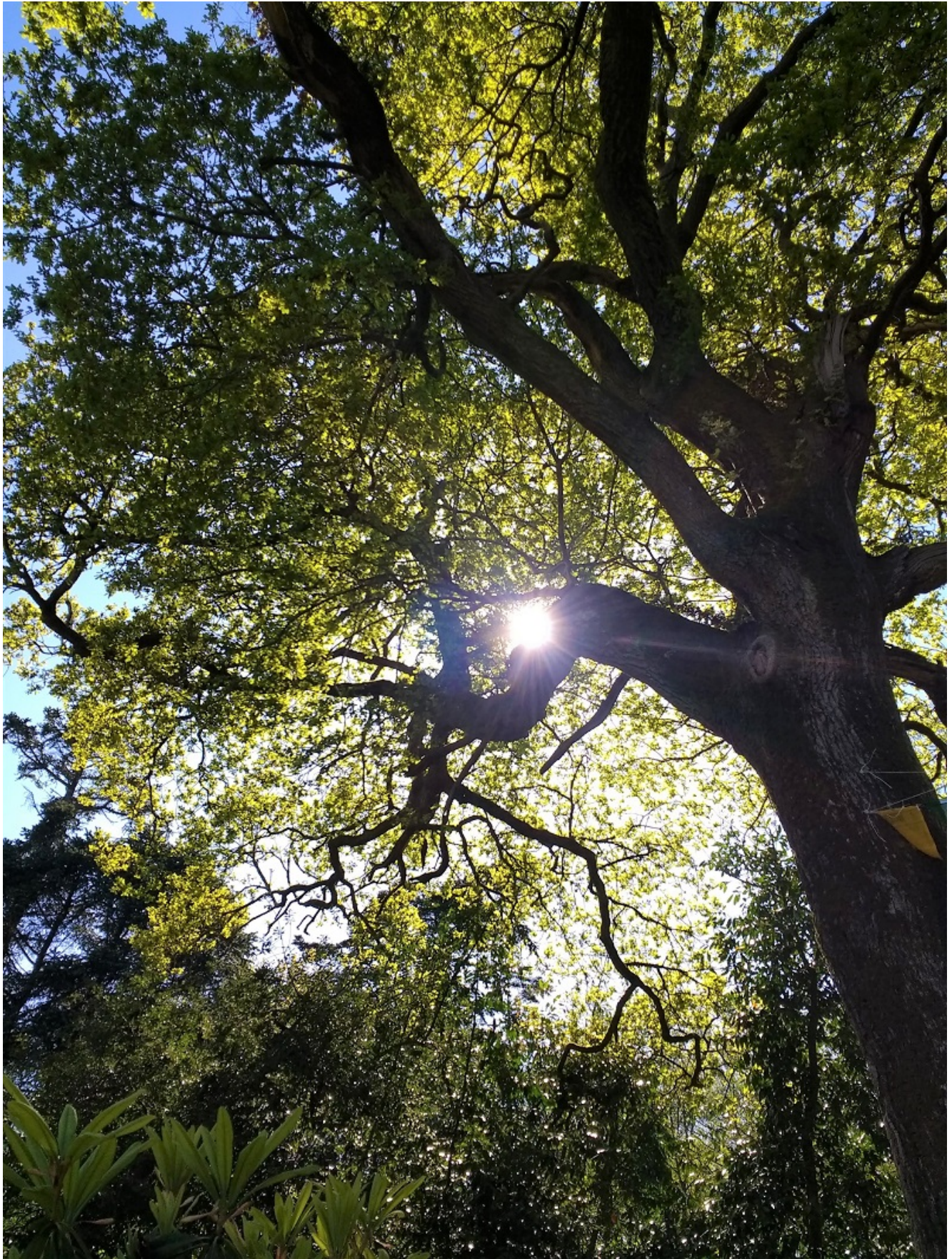
## HEART OVER MIND

Before I do so, a few words why trees are vital to *me* (not



just in a biological sense of course). If you had asked me a couple of years ago where I would like to live, I probably would have said [by the sea](#). And in my head I still think 'by the sea' with lovely sandy beaches as it sounds like something people would say. Especially people like me, who didn't grow up anywhere near the sea. I actually *do* have it at my doorstep now, but that was more or less a [coincidence](#). When I go by my emotions, my heart beats for the forest. For old, gnarly, mossy trees. Sun beams making their way through a canopy of green leaves. The smell of damp soil buffering the sound of your footsteps. I wouldn't call myself an outdoor or nature person, but my parents succeeded in making me a forest-lover.





## **BORN IN THE WOODS**

I feel that when you are young you always want to get away



from what you have. So for a while I was crazy about being by the sea. Whereas when you get older you return to what you know and like. My name Sylvia means "born in the forest" which I was. My first year of life I spent living remotely with my family in a house on the edge of a forest. The next village was ca. 1.5 km away. The address was "By the Woods". Sounds adventurous, but obviously not something I consciously remember being only 1. However my mam keeps telling me that she used to walk me in the pram along the forest paths. Me looking up into the sky seeing the treetops flying past. She said I was taking it all in until I got too tired to keep my eyes open.





## CHILDHOOD MEMORIES

We moved into a nearby town when I was a year old. Ever since



I can remember we used to go back for family walks in the forest near our old house. Having grown up there, my mam had a very strong bond with the place and had gathered a lot of memories over the years. So did we even after we moved away. Like one winter when we brought the sleigh. My dad had the idea to tie it to the back of the car and we had the time of our lives dashing through the snow at such speed. For Easter my parents would hide little chocolate eggs in the grass along the way. Naive as we were my sister and I always brought them back to my parents to carry them for us. Not knowing that we were hunting the same Easter eggs over and over again.





## CONSISTENT

I have always enjoyed our family forest walks. Whilst I still



joined them I would ridicule them as a teenager. Getting up after a late night to go for „fresh air“ wasn't exactly a teenage dream. Anyway this forest in particular has been a constant in my life and maybe subconsciously instilled a positive response to trees in me.





## ESSENTIAL

Maybe this is all sentimental drivel and I just like trees.



Either way I ended up living in a country where trees are considered sacred. At least by the mythical creatures who are supposed to live in them. Trees play a vital role in Irish folklore and mythology. Even people back then knew how essential they were for the survival of mankind.





## ETHYMOLOGY

You can find proof for that all over Ireland. A lot of Irish



places feature tree names such as “cullen” which means holly or “deagh” for a birchy place. Places with the prefix “kil” or “kyle” refer to the Irish word “coill” for wood. The town Youghal (Co. Cork) for example means *yew wood* and Derry *oak wood* (Source: [forestryfocus.ie](http://forestryfocus.ie))





## **SYMBOLISM**

There are three trees prevalent in Irish folklore: oak, birch



and ash trees. The oak stands for kingship because of its strength and fertility. It is therefore often found near ancient royal burial sites. Birches were a Celtic symbol of love and people used to put its branches over cradles to protect their babies. Ash trees with their strong and flexible timber were symbolic of a place's wellbeing and associated with healing, closely linked to water and wells (Source: Niall Mac Coitir "Irish Trees", Gill Books)





## SUPERSTITION

I am not sure if it is just a cliché that Irish people are



particularly superstitious. But they take their fairy trees seriously and protect them under any circumstances. A fairy tree is usually an ash tree or hawthorn standing by itself in the middle of a field or on the side of the road. The blossoms of hawthorn trees stand for misfortune. Long after the tree's 'branding', science discovered that it contains the same chemical found in early stages of human tissue decay. Enough reason for misfortune, isn't it? (Source: [YourIrish.com](http://YourIrish.com))



## LEGENDS

In the old times when people couldn't explain certain things



scientifically, they invented stories to make sense of natural phenomena. Did St. Patrick really drive the snakes out of Ireland? Was it a giant who built the Giant's Causeway in Northern Ireland? Probably not, but the (fairy) tales survived until today. Despite their supernatural elements, they reflect people's deepest emotions and concerns. That makes them such a valuable cultural asset. (Source: Fiona Biggs „Pocket Irish Legends“, Gill Books)





## POSTER FAIRY

Nowadays they rather contribute to the merchandise industry



selling Ireland as the country of storytellers and Leprechauns. Whereas this is true, the leprechaun, on the other hand, has been adapted to fit the country's national colours. Instead of brown trousers and a red hat he is now wearing a bright green costume and a large green hat which sticks out in every souvenir shop. Originally Leprechauns were mischievous spirits and are quite nasty rather than friendly „tourism boosters“. However they know where the pot of gold is and if someone manages to catch a Leprechaun he becomes the righteous owner of the treasure. According to the legend Leprechauns are too smart to be captured. Hence the pot of gold is still hidden at the end of some rainbow.





## WHO IS BAN(SHE)E?

...Is probably the question to ask if a female, ghostlike spirit



appeared outside your house screaming. The name Banshee derives from the Irish Bean-Sidhe and means *Faerie Woman*. Before she is seen, she is usually heard. People say her own death was so horrible that she is now watching over families and preparing them for their imminent bereavement of a loved one. She does that by a high-pitched wail. Some say the Banshee even helps the dying person to safely pass over to the other side. It sounds like a comforting way to leave this world (provided she has stopped shrieking by then). Without doubt a fascinating creature, but I would still prefer holding off on meeting her for another while. (Source: [YourIrish.com](http://YourIrish.com))





## FAKE NEWS

Having read and heard a few Irish legends, in my time in



Ireland, I see parallels to the Brothers Grimm's fairy tales or other traditional folk tales. They are often quite harsh and brutal. However they always have a deeper sense or carry an enlightening message. I think that a story, no matter how much truth is in it, needs an element of drama or even a shocking eye-opener in order to educate people or make them listen. Irish legends weren't purely invented to entertain people after all. This is how people learned about heroic deeds, things to avoid and how to respect nature. I guess I wouldn't be too far off comparing them to our modern daily news in regard to their truthfulness. Not everything is 100% true, but they resonate with people. What do you think?

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## How child-friendly is Ireland?

*(This article is neither referring nor in any way related to the abortion debate. Please check out my blog post [Life is Life](#) on that topic.)*

When I moved to Ireland about 4 1/2 years ago this question wasn't relevant to me. Now it is. Though it can no longer affect my decisions, as my little one runs around my feet as I write this. However I am still interested in the topic. In the following article I share my personal experience throughout and after my first pregnancy in Ireland. Starting with the medical care up to child-minding options. Hopefully my evaluation can be of use to those considering having children here. As well as for people with kids thinking about emigrating to Ireland. I am also interested to hear how others feel about parenthood in Ireland.



## **Medical Care during Pregnancy**

The first thing that came to my mind when we were about to have a baby were child-minding costs. When I did a bit of research on that I was shocked. I knew straight away that having a child and pursuing my career at the same time were close to impossible. However I was only at the beginning of my pregnancy at that stage. All that mattered to me then was proper medical care.

I never had any worries about Ireland in regard to medical care. I also didn't know what to expect. I wasn't familiar with the health care for mothers-to-be in my home country Germany either. Coincidentally a friend of mine in Germany was pregnant at the same time. Not only could we exchange our joys and fears, but also compare the quite different health systems.

## **Shared Maternity Care**

Compared to Germany where your GP (gynaecologist) would look after you throughout the whole pregnancy, the maternity care in Ireland is divided between the GP and a maternity clinic of your choice. This has the upside that come D-day (delivery day), you are already familiar with the place where you are going to have your baby. Instead of just getting a show-around, you are in touch with the medical staff in the hospital and know where everything is. No harm in getting a hang of the "labyrinthal" floor plan well before the big day.

## **Well prepared, theoretically**

At the time of my pregnancy I didn't have private health insurance. I could still avail of several public healthcare courses in preparation of birth and parenthood. Apart from the classic Antenatal Class (including a funny nappy challenge for the daddies-to-be), I took part in a physiotherapy course to hear all about the physical joys of childbirth. I felt like an expert myself afterwards. Well, in theory at least.

I was an absolute newbie when it came to small babies. I had never changed a nappy in my life nor minded kids when I was younger. My husband used to mind his nephews and had a clear advantage over me. Anyway, we both attended as many courses as we could. Why not take the opportunity when given.

I am not going to go into much more detail here. But I would like to point out how pleasantly surprised I was about the variety of classes provided by the hospital. From baby safety to alternative birth methods there was not a thing that wasn't covered in the programmes.

## **The Midwife is Part of the Deal**

The midwife owns a huge part of the prenatal care in Ireland. I didn't have to find one myself (like in Germany) nor did I have to pay extra for her service. During the check-ups in the hospital everything discussed was neatly recorded and there was always enough time for questions to be answered. So even if it wasn't the same midwife every time, I always felt well looked after. I can't really say much about the midwife that was on duty the night I had our son. I am sure she was great, but my mind was kind of focussed on something else I am afraid.

## **Why reinvent the Wheel...**

As soon as I was discharged from hospital, the regional health nurse was informed. She came to the house a couple of days later to check that the baby and I were doing well. She was very supportive. Easing our worries and helping us with questions. In addition to the home visits and being available over the phone, she held a weekly clinic. I proudly told my parents about this great institution they invented in Ireland. My mam smiled and said that they used to have exactly the same service in the GDR and she gladly availed of it as well when I was born. Unfortunately it is not available as standard in Germany anymore. I think this is something which should be reconsidered.



## **Support when needed**

When I heard about a breastfeeding support group for the first time, I thought the name was a bit inappropriate. Support group to me sounded like something you need when you are in trouble. I couldn't possibly think how these two could go together. I know now. Though I was one of the lucky ones who didn't have any difficulties at all with breastfeeding.

I was also lucky that people made it easy for me and even in public I never felt uncomfortable breastfeeding or looked at in a strange way. One time I had to feed in a mall and one of the shop owners brought me a glass of water. I still tell people about this thoughtful and kind gesture.

## **First Child, what now**

I was convinced I wasn't the type for "mammy friendships". And for sure I wasn't going to have coffees after going for a walk in a convoy of baby buggies. Sure as hell I was never ever going to exchange recipes for sugar free baby muffins. I was wrong. I am now part of a nice and small group of mummies and their cute little babies. And yes, we do talk about healthy cooking and all the other stuff I thought I never would be interested in. As a stay-at-home parent our weekly meetings have become an important part of my life. And the same way it was recommended to me, I am going to pass it on to other mothers-to-be: Get out and build yourself a "mammy-network".

## **Clap Hands till Grumpy is gone...**

I am not a morning person. I like to start my day slowly and above all quietly. Why on earth do all musical playgroups start before 10 in the morning? I should probably mention that our little one is not exactly a morning person either. We don't know if it is genetic or just rubbed off. Anyway, when I open the blinds before 8 a.m. all I get is a dissatisfied grunt. With the cuddly toy on his face to shield it from the incoming light, he rolls over in disbelief wondering what made

me come in so early. He should know by now though that Thursday is playgroup time and we all have to make sacrifices to attend. At the latest when my mammy-friend and her always smiling daughter are waiting for us at the gate, we both overcome our morning grumpiness and are ready to clap along.

## **Let me entertain you**

There are a good few playgroups and activities for kids of several age groups in our area. They are all focussed on community, meeting new people (and the kids each other of course) as well as exchange of information (such as healthy cooking recipes). The organisers – some of them volunteers – are very enthusiastic and welcoming. I cannot speak for all of Ireland, but for what I know there is no shortage of mother and toddler activities. Not all of them are for free. Some of them can be rather expensive. In our neighbourhood it is the Church Parish and the town library that host activities for small or no money. Social media is probably the easiest way to find out what's on in which area. Alternatively, word of mouth (or should I say mothers) has never failed.

## **Horrendous Childcare Costs**

Childcare is probably the most delicate topic when it comes to my initial question “How child-friendly is Ireland?” Only recently I read an article in The Irish Times titled [“High childcare costs keeping women out of workplace.”](#) Indeed it is not worthwhile going back to work when the costs for full-time crèche are approximately €1000 per month. When I enquired about childcare when I was still pregnant the lowest offer I got was €950 a month. It came with a significant wait list. The most expensive one was €1650. Another 2 or 3 crèches were somewhere in between.

## **Career vs. Full-time Parenting**

To us it became clear very quickly that I would put my career on hold whilst minding the baby. Apart from personal reasons



it was financially and logistically absolutely not viable for me to go back to work. I think I am not an exception among women with a low or medium income. In order to drop off my child at the crèche and pick him up on time I would have needed to work less than full-time. The monthly ticket for the commute would come out of my already reduced salary. To be able to spend the little time left with my son, we might have hired a cleaner for the house – extra costs again. At the end of the month I would have worked for the childcare costs and some pocket money at the cost of being away from my son for over 40 hours a week. To us this was a quite simple equation.

## **Demand for Cheaper Alternatives**

However, some people might not want to give up their careers or simply need the extra money, no matter how little it may be. And obviously they want to know their child is in safe hands while they are working. I have heard quite a lot of grandparents or other family members taking over the role of a full-time carer for the child. Also au pairs and private childminders are a more reasonable alternative compared to a crèche. Nevertheless, it seems to become more and more obvious that women drop out of the workforce due to the above mentioned reasons.

## **It's getting (slightly) better**

With older children, the financial outlook regarding childcare is slightly more positive. From 3 years of age children are entitled to a state-funded preschool place with the [ECCE programme](#). However it doesn't help the mother to re-integrate into work life since it only covers mornings from 9 am – 12. Whilst primary education starting at 4 or 5 years of age is free, there are costs that parents have to face during that time. The average cost for a primary school kid in 2018 is €830 per year (Source: [Zurich.ie](#)). For a child in secondary school an average annual cost of €1,495 has to be covered by the parents (Source: [Zurich.ie](#)).

## **Childcare or Caring for your Child?**

I think we can all agree that the maternity support in Ireland is pretty decent. So Ireland ticks the box regarding child-friendliness in that regard. It looks slightly different when it comes to costs for childcare. Does that mean affordable childcare would make Ireland more child-friendly? I disagree. Me staying at home with our little one only has upsides for both of us. We get to spend precious time together. I am there for his first big milestones. I can teach him things the way I want to. I can comfort him when he is upset. I think this is the best for our son. The first 3 years of his life, that are financially not worthwhile for me going back to work, are also the most significant in our child's development. To be there for him 100% during that time is pretty child-friendly, isn't it?

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## **Dublin's Beautiful Beaches...**

### **...and what they mean to me**

Well before I was roaming Dublin's beautiful beaches, I ended up living by the water many times. Growing up over four hours away from the nearest sea, it was a privilege attending university with the Baltic Sea at my doorstep. Living in Hamburg afterwards, by the mouth of the river Elbe, and so close to the North Sea was another significant period in my life. A coincidence each time, like my journey that eventually brought me to Ireland.

### **The Beach that changed my Life**

I remember sitting in a hotel room in Dublin on the October bank holiday weekend. That was usually reserved for meeting up



with my Dublin girls who I had met when I came to Ireland for the first time in 2008 for a 6-months internship. The five of us had hit it off straight away and had spent the time of our lives together in Dublin. What would have been the fifth anniversary of our reunion, didn't happen for various reasons.



But I needed my annual Ireland fix and had taken the trip on my own. That morning in the hotel room I hit a low, wallowing in self-pity over our busted get-together. I had wandered the city plenty over the past few days and didn't fancy another stroll through drizzly Dublin.

But I certainly did not want to waste my precious last hours in Ireland in a hotel room. Hence I gave myself a kick in the butt and jumped on the Dart before I could talk myself out of it.

## **No turning back**

It only took minutes on the train before the scenery changed from busy office fronts to the most amazing beach promenade. Even in the mist and with the rain drumming against the window, it was beautiful. The last time I had been to Killiney Beach, it was warm and sunny, nothing like this day. But still, the prospect of the fresh sea breeze lifted my spirit.

I was a bit reluctant to step off the train and into the dampness, but I was here now and nobody else seemed to be. The beach was absolutely deserted and I stood sheltered for a moment, watching the choppy ocean. 'No turning back now', I thought to myself, not knowing how symbolic this would become for the walk.



For by the end of it the seed of moving to Ireland had been planted. It didn't need a pleasant, lighthearted experience surrounded by friends. Just me, out there in inhospitable conditions, on the verge of loneliness, to show me that I can do it. I could emigrate to Ireland and be happy, despite rough waters and in the pourings of rain. All I needed was a kick in the butt.

## **Collecting Shells and Memories**

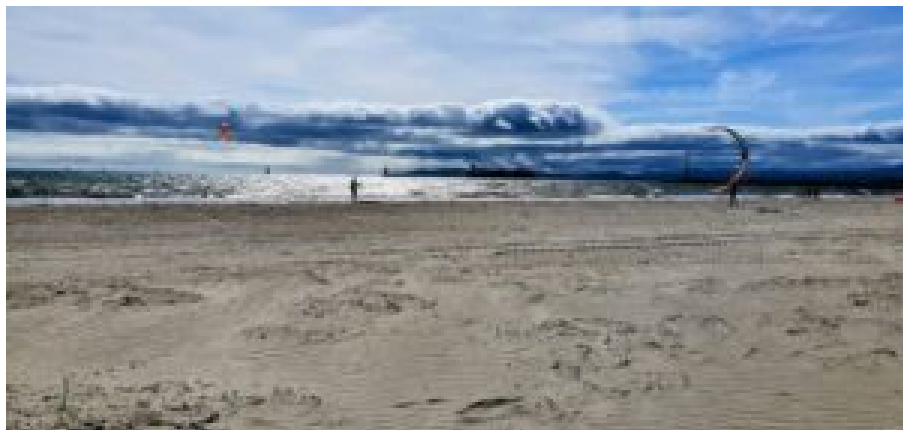
It didn't take me long to put my plan into action. Back home I applied for just one job in Dublin. Two weeks later I flew over for an interview. And by November I had decided that I was going to leave Germany for good and follow my heart to Ireland. As all new beginnings it was challenging. But once I was in Ireland, everything fell into place. And here I was again, exploring Dublin's beautiful beaches once more.





One of the first beach memories I made as an expat in Ireland was my visit to North Bull Island. Together with a friend I met on my first day in work, I walked the small peninsula in the north of Dublin City. Wrapped up against the icy wind, it was one of those autumn walks that I will treasure forever. And North Bull is a true treasure island indeed. Never in my life have I seen more, bigger and prettier shells than there. I just couldn't resist stuffing my pockets until they were hanging down, heavy with shells and dripping wet. Against the

backdrop of the ferry slowly pulling into the harbour, surfers on the water, and kites in the sky, one of my favourites amongst Dublin's beautiful beaches.



## My Slightly Different Hen Party

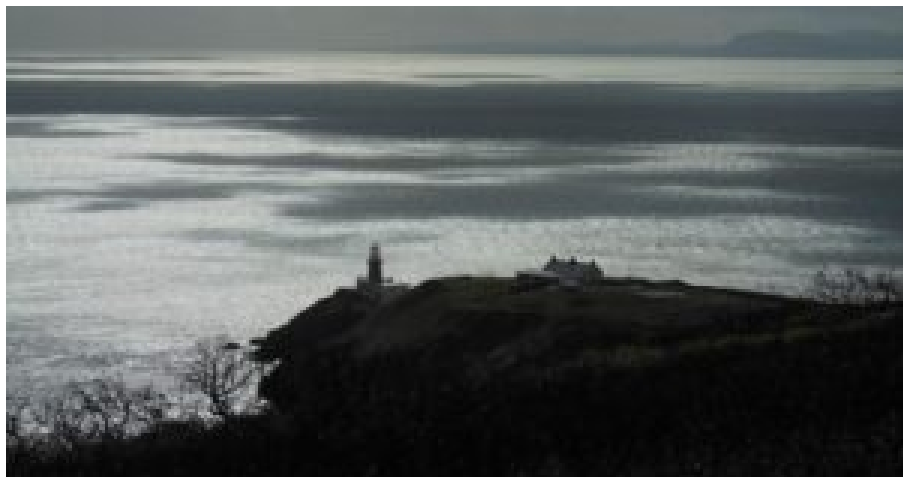
Within the first year in Ireland, I found happiness. An unexpected step up the career ladder secured my future in expensive Dublin. And even before that I met my soon-to-be husband. We got engaged on our first anniversary and started [planning our wedding](#) soon after. With friends and family coming over from Germany and America, we wanted to show them some of our favourite spots, including Dublin's beautiful beaches. [Howth](#) already held a good few memories for me from previous visits. So we picked the peninsula with its gorgeous seafood restaurants for our rehearsal dinner. Up to then nothing had gone according to plan with our wedding. But the lovely meal in Howth, surrounded by our dearest, helped us to centre ourselves for the big day ahead.







After dinner we rushed up to the Summit with its lighthouse at the tip of the headland, before it disappeared in the dusk. Enjoying one of the most scenic views in Ireland with a good friend by my side was a worthy ending to a wonderful evening. I was bursting with emotions. Excited about getting married the very next day. Nervous what else might go wrong. Proud to have family and friends over to show them my home of choice. And joyful over the turn my life had taken within a few months. "Welcome to your belated hen party, my dear", my friend said as she was giving me a tight hug.



## A New Year's Day Tradition

Sandymount is another one of Dublin's beautiful beaches and an iconic one too. At least its two [red and white chimneys](#) are as a substantial part of Dublin's skyline and landmark. Ever since my husband John and I got our feet soaked in ice-cold water on New Year's Day, Sandymount found a place in our memory lane. It was great fun walking through squishy sand, jumping puddles and trickles once the tide was out. But we didn't notice the water slowly creeping up on us. Reluctantly I took off my winter boots and cosy socks as John was already wading through freezing water, laughing.







The photograph of our bare feet on Sandymount Beach on our first New Year's Day together became a well treasured one. So much that we went back on 1st January 2024, re-creating it with the additional feet we had grown in the meantime. Not surrounded by water this time, I was even more hesitant to expose my feet to the wet and cold. But it was worth it for having a keepsake of *that* day on Sandymount Beach too. More aware of the danger of the incoming tide this time, we safely got off the beach. Just in time to watch a coast guard helicopter coming in, and scooping up a family who had not been that lucky.



## **An Abundance of Beaches**

Of course there are many more beautiful beaches in and around Dublin. Portmarnock for example where I have watched spectacular sunsets. Forty Foot in Sandycove is probably the most popular spot for swimming in the Dublin Bay, and the Martello Tower with the James Joyce Museum worth a visit. Skerries in the north of Dublin is great for walks along the promenade, with its little harbour and plenty of cafes and restaurants.

We live in Wicklow now and I can't wait to write about my favourite beaches there. Email me or leave a comment about your favourite beach in Dublin. And subscribe to my Blog for



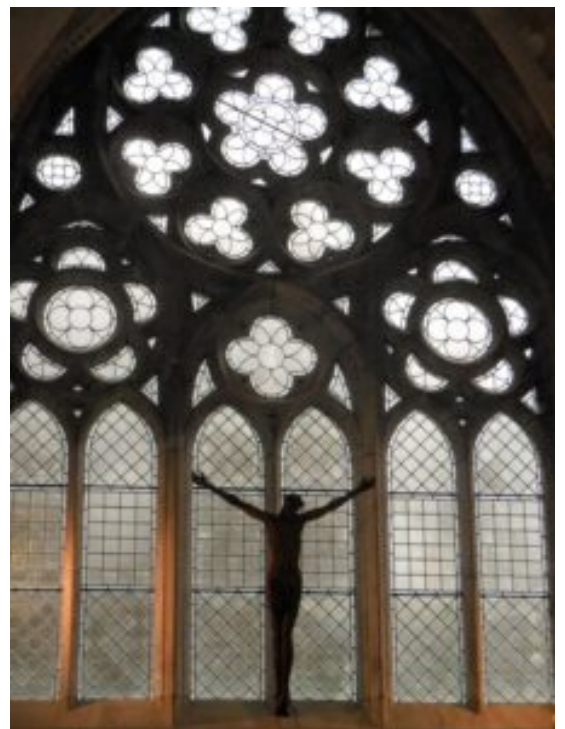
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## Considering Faith

I am not a person of faith. Or am I? Is there not a bit of spirituality or the longing for something deeper and more meaningful in all of us? But it is safe to say that I am not a religious person. Born in the communist GDR, my parents raised my sister and me as cultural Christians at most. Whilst they were baptised Lutherans themselves, they didn't raise us as such. We only learned about religion from a historic point of view and during the annual visit to Christmas mass.



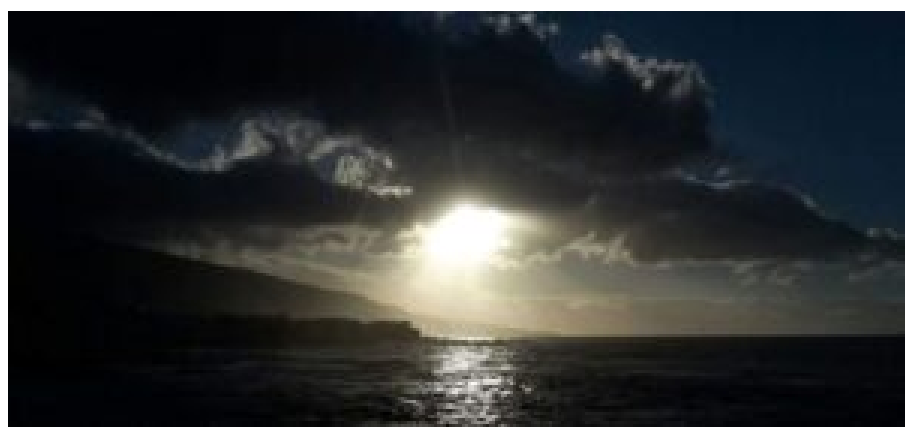
It was somewhat acceptable to talk about 'fate', or 'things that were meant to be'. But considering a God, who guides us on our path, remained an alien concept to me. As a teenager I even directed my anger over things that were wrong with the world at the church and God, who I didn't believe in. Why wasn't He able to fix everything if this was all true?

### Faith vs. Doubt

But wouldn't it be easier to know that there was a path you are meant to follow, and someone you can give your sorrows to rather than resentfully holding on to them yourself? Is it delusional wanting to rely on a Higher Power instead of doing

everything by your own strength? What if there was a God you could turn to for hope and guidance? Or to thank for achievements and positive turns in your life?

I have been pondering that a lot lately, looking back on struggles in my life that had me desperate, but were ultimately for my own good. On things that fell into place effortlessly, and others that were prevented despite my hard trying. Has there been a plan for me all along and the closer I follow it, the happier I am? And the further I stray the more it hurts me?



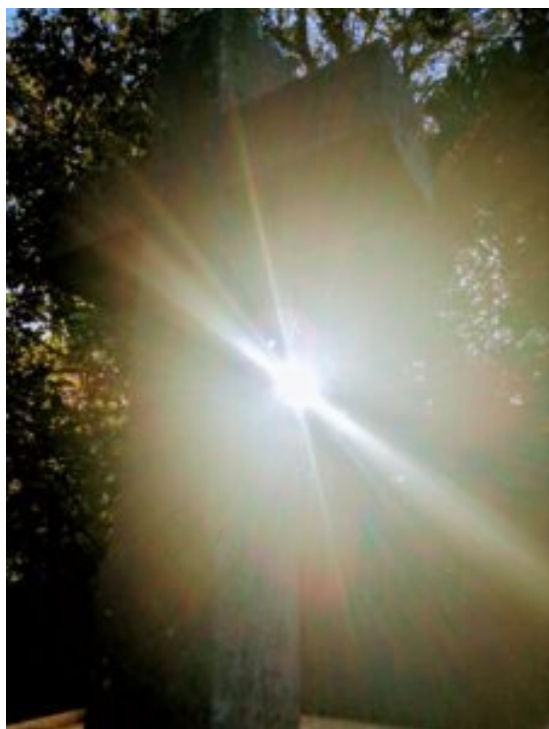
## **Believe or not?**

An atheist friend of mine once implied that relying on God is a weakness. She says it somehow makes you a bystander to your own life, not taking matters into your own hands. But the more I think about it, the more I disagree. The existence of God doesn't take away from the fact that I followed through with [emigrating to Ireland](#). That I happened to decide for the right apartment where I would soon after meet my future husband. It doesn't diminish my success of moving on to a better paid job within a few months of getting to Ireland. Only because God puts the right players on the board at the right time, doesn't make me a puppet to my fate. I am still the one who sits at the steering wheel.



I am beginning to think I must have some divine intervention considering how well things are going for me in Ireland. And whilst I am not there yet to say I believe in God, I am also starting to doubt it is me alone who makes things add up.

## **Spiritual Beginner meets devout Catholic**



Me considering faith didn't just start out of the blue. Religion slipped into my day-to-day life when I miraculously met my now husband shortly after I moved to Dublin. Or was that part of 'the plan' too? Anyway, he is a devout Catholic and openly practices his faith. We started going to weekly mass together which was more like Sunday school to me, learning the basics of religion.

I envy him for how much he is getting out of his faith. For the strength he draws from it and the peace that comes with it. He on the other hand envies me for my natural spirituality, as he calls it, that has led me up to the point in my life where I am now. It helped me overcome the worst crisis in my life, make life-altering decisions, and trust my instinct during times of little support. I would have called it following my gut feeling, female intuition, listening to my

conscience – anything, but God.

## **Faith doesn't come over night**

What started out as spending more time with my husband going to church has become a spiritual journey for me. Being open to his faith for the sake of our relationship made me query my prejudices towards faith in general. The exposure to religion in such an organic way was what I needed to slowly approach it on my own terms. Away from my preconceived ideas and with a physical distance to the non-religious environment of my upbringing. With each mass comes more clarity, but also many more questions that I yet have to find answers to. It leads my husband and me into a religious discourse every time, leaving both of us spiritually richer than before.



## **Half way there**

[Our wedding](#) took place in a Catholic church. The [Three Patrons Church in Rathgar](#) where my spiritual journey started, so to speak. When we decided to get married, there was no doubt that the ceremony was going to be Catholic. Partly because I knew how important it was to my soon-to-be husband. And partly because my 'gut feeling' told me it was the right thing to do. Maybe I am further along on my spiritual path than I am aware of. And maybe it is time to abandon my old ways of thinking and replace them with new ones. They might turn out to be in



line with the Catholic faith. God knows...

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