

## Taking my Time

*Colm Tóibín*

I have come back here. I can look out and see the soft sky and the faint line of the horizon and the way the light changes over the sea. It is threatening rain. I can sit on this old high chair that I had shipped from a junk store on Market Street and watch the calmness of the sea against the misting sky.

I have come back here. In all the years I made sure that the electricity bill was paid and the phone remained connected and the place cleaned and dusted. And the neighbour who took care of things, Peggy's daughter, opened the house for the postman or the courier when I sent books or paintings or photographs I bought, sometimes by Fedex as though it were urgent they would arrive since I could not.

Since I would not.

This space I walk in now has been my dream space; the sound of the wind on days like this has been my dream sound.

You must know that I am back here.

The mountain bike that came free with the washing machine just needed the tyres pumped. Unlike the washing machine itself, it worked as though I had never been away. I could make the slow

dream journey into the village, down the hill towards the sand quarry and then past the ball alley with all the new caravans and mobile homes in the distance.

At end of that journey I met your sister on a Sunday morning. She must have told you. We were both studying the massive array of Sunday newspapers in the supermarket in the village, wondering which of them to buy. She turned and our eyes locked. I had not seen her for years; I did not even know that she and Bill still had the house. She must have told you I am here.

Or maybe not yet.

Maybe she has not seen you. Maybe she does not tell you every bit of news as soon as she knows it. But soon, soon you both must speak and she will tell you then, maybe even as an afterthought, a curiosity, or maybe even as a fresh piece of news. Guess who I saw? Guess who has come back?

I told her I had come back.

Later, when I went down to the strand, using the old path, the old way down, when I was wondering if I would swim, or if the water would be too cold, I saw them coming towards me. They were wearing beautiful clothes. Your sister has not aged, but Bill was slower, more red-faced. I shook hands with him. And there was nothing else to say except the usual, what you often say down here: you look out at the sea and say that no one ever comes here, how empty it is, and how strange and lovely it is to be here on a bright and blustery June day with no one else in sight, despite all the tourism and the new houses and the money. This stretch of strand has remained a secret.

In strange, stray moments I have come here all the years every day. I have imagined this encounter and the sounds we make against the sound of the wind and the waves. Mild sounds today.

And then Bill told me about the telescope. Surely, he said, I must have bought one in the States? They are cheaper there, much cheaper. He told me then about the room he had built with the Velux window and the view it had and how he had nothing there except a chair and a telescope.

Years ago, as you know, I had shown them this house, and I knew that he remembered this room, the tiny room full of shifting light, like something on a ship, where I am sitting now. I had cheap binoculars to watch the ferry from Rosslare and the lighthouse and the odd sailing boat. I cannot find them now, although I looked as soon as I came back. But I always thought a telescope would be too unwieldy, too hard to use and work. But Bill told me no, his was simple.

And then he said that I should stop by and check for myself, anytime, but they would be there all day. Your sister looked at me warily, as though I would be needing her for something, as though I would come calling in the night. I hesitated.

'Come and have a drink with us,' she said. I knew that she meant next week, or some week; I knew that she wanted to sound distant.

I said no, but I would come and see the telescope, just for a second if that was all right, maybe later, just the telescope. I was interested in the telescope and did not care whether she wanted me to come that day or some other day. We parted and I walked on north, towards Knocknasilloge, and they made their way to the gap. I did not swim that day. Enough had happened. That meeting was enough.

Later, it became calm, as it often does, and there was no wind and the sun shone its dying slanted rays into the back windows of the house and I thought that I would walk down and see the telescope.

She had the fire lighting which was strange, and I remember that she had said their son would be there, I cannot remember his name, but I was shocked when he stood up in the long open-plan room with windows on two sides that gave on to the sea. In a certain light he could have been you, or you when I knew you first, the same hair, the same height and frame and the same charm which must have been there in your grandmother or grandfather or even before, the sweet smile, the concentrated gaze. I turned away from him and went with his father to the small stairs, towards the room with the telescope.

I hate being shown how to do things, you know that. Connecting a plug, or starting a rented car, or understanding a new cell phone, add years to me, bring out frustration and an almost frantic urge to get away and curl up on my own. Now I was in a confined space being shown how to look through a telescope, my hands being guided as Bill showed me how to turn it and lift it and focus it. I was patient with him, I forgot myself for a minute. He focused on the waves far out. And then he stood back.

I knew he wanted me to move the telescope, to focus now on Rosslare Harbor, on Tuskar Rock, on Raven's Point, on the strand at Curraclloe, agree with him that they could be seen so clearly even in this faded evening light. But what he showed me first had amazed me. The sight of the waves miles out, their dutiful and frenetic solitude, their dull indifference to their fate, made me want to cry out, made me want to ask him if he could leave me alone for some time to take this in. I could hear him breathing behind me. It came to me then that the sea is not a pattern, it is a struggle. Nothing matters against the fact of this. The waves were like people battling out there, full of consciousness and will and destiny and an abiding sense of their own beauty.

I knew as I held my breath and watched that it would be wrong to stay too long. I asked him if he would mind if I looked for one more minute. He smiled as though this was what he had wanted. He is a man who likes his own property. I turned and moved fast, focussing swiftly, like an expert, on a wave I had selected for no reason. There was whiteness and greyness in it and a sort of blue and green. It was a line. It did not toss, nor did it stay still. It was all movement, all spillage, but it was pure containment as well, utterly focussed just as I was watching it. It had an elemental hold, something coming towards us as though to save us but do nothing instead, withdraw in a shrugging irony, as if to suggest that this is what the world is, and our time in it, all lifted possibility, all complexity and rushing fervor, to end in nothing on a small strand, and go back out.

I smiled for a moment before I turned. I could have told him that the wave I had watched was as capable of love as we are in our lives. He would have told your sister that I had gone slightly bonkers in California and she would, in turn, have told you; and you would have smiled softly and tolerantly, like your nephew had smiled when I met him earlier, as though there was nothing wrong with that. You had, after all, gone bonkers yourself in your own time.

On Saturdays before I came back, through the winter and right into early June, I would drive out from the city to Point Reyes, my GPS with its Australian accent instructing me which way to turn, lanes I should be in, numbers of miles left. They knew me by now in the station, as the GPS called it, in the cheese shop there, where I also bought bread and eggs, in the book shop, where I bought books of poems by Robert Hass and Louise Gluck, and one day found William's Gass's book 'On Being Blue' which I also bought. I bought the week's fruit and then, when the weather grew warm, sat outside the post office eating barbequed oysters which a family of Mexicans had cooked on a stall beside the supermarket.

All this was mere preparation for the drive to the South Beach and the lighthouse. It was like driving towards here, where I am now. Always, you make a single turn and you know that you are approaching one of the ends of the earth. It has the same desolate aura as a poet's last few poems, or Beethoven's last string quartets, or the last songs that Schubert managed. The air is different, and the ways things grow is strained and gnarled and windblown. The horizon is whiteness, blankness; there are hardly any houses. You are moving towards the border between the land and sea which does not have hospitable beaches, or guest houses painted in welcoming stripes, or merry-go-rounds, or ice cream for sale, but instead has warnings of danger, steep cliffs.

At Point Reyes there was a long beach and some dunes and then the passionate and merciless sea, too rough and unpredictable for surfers or swimmers or even paddlers. The warnings told you not to move too close, that a wave could come from nowhere with a massive undertow. There were no life guards. This was the Pacific Ocean at its most relentless and stark, and I stood there Saturday after Saturday, putting up with the wind, moving as best I could on the edges of the shore, watching each wave crash towards me and dissolve in a slurp of undertow. I missed home.

I missed home. I went out to Point Reyes every Saturday so I could miss home.

Home was this empty house back from the cliff at Ballyconigar, a house half full of objects still in their packages, small paintings and drawings from the Bay Area, some photographs of bridges and water, some easy chairs, some patterned rugs. Home was a roomful of books at the back of this house, two bedrooms and bathrooms on either side of that room. Home was a huge high room at the front with a concrete floor and a massive fireplace, a

sofa, two tables, some paintings still resting against the walls, pieces I bought years ago still waiting for hooks and string. Home also was this room at the top of the house, cut into the roof, a room with a glass door opening onto a tiny balcony where I can stand on a clear night and look up at the stars and see the lights of Rosslare Harbor and the single flashes of Tuskar Rock Lighthouse and the faint, soft, comforting line where the night sky becomes the dark sea.

I did not know that those solitary trips to Point Reyes in January, February, March, April, May, and the return to the city with a car laden down with provisions as though there were shortages in the city, I did not know that this was a way of telling myself that I was going home to my own forgiving sea, a much softer, more domesticated beach, and my own lighthouse, less dramatic and less long suffering.

I kept home at bay because home was not just this house I am in now or this landscape of endings. On some of those days as I drove towards the lighthouse at Point Reyes I had to face what home also was. I had picked up some stones and put them on the front passenger seat and I thought that I might take them to Ireland.

Home were some graves where my dead lay just outside the town of Enniscorthy, just off the Dublin Road. This was a place where I could send no parcels or paintings, no signed lithographs doubled wrapped in bubble paper, with the address of the sender on the reverse side of the package. Nothing like that would be of any use. This home filled my dreams and my waking time more than any other version of home. I dreamed that I would leave a stone on each of those graves, as Jewish people do, as Catholics leave flowers. I smiled at the thought that in the future some archaeologists would come to those graves and study the bones and the earth around them and write papers on the presence of these

stray stones, stones that had been washed by the waves of the Pacific, and the archaeologist would speculate what madness, what motives, what tender needs, caused someone to haul them so far.

I did not, in the end, bring those stones to Ireland; I left them there. They would not have helped.

I wish I knew how colors came to be made. Some days when I was teaching I looked out the window and thought that everything I am saying is easy to find out and has already been surmised. But there is a small oblong stone that I have carried up from the strand and I am looking at it now after a night of mild thunder and a day of grey skies over the sea. It is the early morning here in a house where the phone does not ring and the only post which comes brings bills. I have still told no one that I have come back.

I noticed the stone because of the mildness and subtlety of its color against the sand, its light green with veins of white. Of all the stones I saw it seemed to carry most the message that it had been washed by the waves, its color dissolved by water, yet all the more alive for that, as though the battle between what color it once had been and the salt water had offered it a mute strength.

I have it on the desk here now. Surely the sea should be strong enough to get all the stones and make them white, or make them uniform, like the grains of sand are uniform? I do not know how the stones withstand the sea. As I walked yesterday in the humid late afternoon the waves came gently to rattle the stones at the shore, stones larger than pebbles, all different colors. I can turn this green stone around, the one that I carried home, and see that at one end it is less than smooth as though this is a join, a break, and it was once part of a larger mass.

I do not know how long it would have lasted down there, had I not rescued it; I have no idea what the life span is of a stone on a

Wexford beach. I know what books George Eliot was reading in 1876, and what letters she was writing and what sentences she was composing and maybe that is enough for me to know. The rest is science and I do not do science. It is possible then that I miss the point of most things – the mild, windlessness of the day, the swallows' flight, how these words appear on the screen as I key them in, the greenness of the stone.

Soon I will have to decide. I will have to call the car hire company in Dublin Airport and extend the time I am going to keep the car. Or I will have to leave the car back. Maybe get another car. Or return here with no car, just the mountain bike and some telephone numbers for taxis. Or leave altogether. Late last night when the thunder had died down and there was no sound, I went online to look for telescopes, looking at prices, trying to find the one which Bill had shown me which I found so easy to manipulate. I studied the length of time delivery would take and thought of waiting for this new key to the distant waves for a week or two weeks or six weeks, watching out from my dream house for a new dream to be delivered, for a van to come up this lane with a large package. I dreamed of setting it up out here in front of where I am sitting now, on the tripod that I would have ordered too, and starting, taking my time, to focus on a curling line of water, a piece of the world indifferent in its struggle to the fact that there is language in the world, names to describe things and grammar and verbs. My eye, solitary, filled with its own history, is desperate to evade, erase, forget; it is watching now, watching fiercely, like a scientist looking for a cure, deciding for some days to forget about words, to know at last that the words for colors, the blue-grey-green of the sea, the whiteness of the waves, will not work against the fullness of watching the rich chaos they yield and carry.