

Preface

Every day is a journey, and the journey itself is home.

Basho

On the last day of 1986, I became an Irish citizen. My newfound status as a European has not yet ceased to bemuse me – my purple passport with its golden harp seems less like a birthright than a slim book on the mythologies of blood, heritage, and emigration. And so a few summers ago I went to this foreign country that claims me to think about these things. This is not a book about Ireland so much as it is a book about a journey through Ireland. I hasten to disclaim any great authority on the subjects of Irish history and culture, though my literal, geographical journey was overtaken by two longer journeys: through readings in Irish history and literature and through the writing itself (to say nothing of a follow-up trip to round out my researches). This is likewise no core sample of contemporary Ireland; in the same spirit Irish tourists may head straight for Graceland, I took off for the places that appealed to me and let attraction and invitations stitch together the rest of my route.

Ireland delighted me by offering so many stories and circumstances in which individuals and populations were fluid rather than ossified, undermining the usual travelers' dichotomy of a mobile figure in an immobile landscape. It was this play between memory, identity, movement, and landscape that I wanted to explore, and the ebb and flow of populations that constitutes invasion, exile, colonization, emigration, tourism, and nomadism. In other terms, this excursion offered me a whole set of linked possibilities: to muse about the identity politics raised by my American activism and my Irish passport; to rethink my education in English literature – to separate the status of great literary works from that of great landmarks of civilization, for which Ireland as a kind of backstage to the drama of imperial Britain is ideal; to look at a place where the tidy phrases of contemporary conversation – terms like *native* and *white* and *Europe* and *first world* – begin to fray and come apart.

Travel is also a psychic experiment. In different places, different thoughts emerge, and this too I wanted to trace. I tried to use the subjective and personal not to glorify my mundane autobiography but as a case study in how one can explore the remoter reaches of the psyche by wandering across literal terrain. This book is itself not a travel book in the usual sense, but a book of essays sequenced and shaped by my journey. That journey is the continuous thread running through the chapters, which can be regarded as variously faceted beads, each one made differently from the raw materials of landscape and identity, remembering and forgetting, the fixed and the fluctuant, and out of travel itself – out of my own modest passage and all the great tides any such journey echoes.

16 Travellers

I couldn't tell when my ride was supposed to come to an end. I had been keeping an eye on a young woman with heavy gold hoops in her ears I thought might be a Traveller, but she got off before we came to anything that looked like a prison, and so I asked the bus driver where Wheatfields Prison was. When he found out I was looking for the Clondalkin Traveller site at the walls of the prison his middleaged face hitherto as bland as a sofa cushion bunched up in fury. "Why are you interested in *them*?" he demanded, and I said noncommittal things. His rage increased and he said that they had killed the son of his friend "and the boy was just going on fifteen, he was a lovely lad. And they sat outside the courthouse laughing and drinking. Him as did it got only nine months but the boy's gone forever. As far as I'm concerned, they're the scum of the earth." All of them, I asked, and he said yes. I asked him if he'd ever spoken to any of them, and he said he didn't need to, and why was I going to? I'd been invited to visit, I said, and thought I'd see for myself. Not for nothing was I raised by a fair-housing activist, and I threw in a few platitudes about not judging a whole population by the actions of an individual.

Hate had entered my holiday, along with nomads. My travels up the west coast of Ireland had come to an end with a question about Travellers, a question only Dublin seemed capable of answering, and Dublin had answered it with a swarm of facts, a few encounters, and an invitation to visit a Traveller family. We had come to the end of the line on this bus route from downtown Dublin, and the bus driver insisted that I stand up and hold onto the pole next to his seat so he could give me a private tour of the suburban tragedy he was so bitter about. With an angry sweep of the arm he showed me the bare earth rectangle full of bare new blocks of houses where his friend lived. And as he turned around on his route on this muggy afternoon, he showed me the cemetery where the boy was buried and the camp where the killer – an inadvertent killer by means of drunk driving – lived; I wondered if the driver had done his time in Wheatfields Prison so that the whole story was all at the end of this bus line.

The bus driver also wanted to show me where they – some Travellers, but to him all Travellers – had broken into a waterpipe, "and if you or I did it we'd be punished for it." He seemed as furious that they weren't paying for the water as that his friend's son had died. We passed a wide lawn with a row

of little concrete plugs along its perimeter to prevent any Travellers from pulling over to camp and, on the other side of the road, a pipe pointing straight up and trickling water and an encampment of a few trailers with debris scattered around them. If this is what freeloading looked like, it didn't look very luxurious. He finally let me go on a nondescript road with directions to walk down it until I saw the prison – and the admonition, Be careful, it's a mugger's paradise. With its weedy bulldozer heaps and brand new rows of identical houses, it looked more like the road to nowhere, and I set off down it with my offering of peaches and cherries weighing heavier and heavier on this hot June day.

All along my meander up the west coast the people I met had been murmuring stray facts and opinions about Travellers, as Ireland's indigenous nomadic people are currently called. A woman who apparently lived in a trailer herself, outside one of the hostels in Bantry, had told me that they were grand people if you got to know them, though few enough did. While I was walking with the giantess in Ennis a sandyhaired boy of nine or ten had begged change from us and acknowledged he was a Traveller when I gave him a coin, but he was too cringing to tell me more. When the man who drove me to Galway had exhausted the subject of stone walls I'd asked him about Travellers. He told me a story about how Galway is divided into four quadrants, and each quadrant had been shirking responsibility for building a halting site for Travellers for so long that the bishop of Galway had offered the land next to his palace. I had seen Travellers' big black and white carhorses grazing by the dump near Portumna and a long row of trailers on the narrow shoulder of the road back to Galway. Sister Kathleen had said her family always had a load of turf or a can of milk for the Travellers who came by the farm when she was a girl and they were called Tinkers. Bride in Westport had amplified that, saying the primitiveness of the Travellers' lifestyle was only contextual and recent; she herself had grown up in a farmhouse without running water, and they got along well with the Travellers who came along then. Later on, Lee in Ballydehob wrote me a letter about encountering a Travelling man who was standing up in his cart and driving his team of heavy horses at a full gallop, with a gleam of joy and sense of power in his face, and their eyes met in a moment of camaraderie and recognition. Hated, isolated, and sometimes admired, but why?

Finding out in Dublin wasn't as easy as I thought. Although everyone in Ireland and Great Britain seems to know about Travellers – know at least more than I did, and as much as they thought necessary – no one seems to think the subject is interesting, and little has been written on them. They

seem neither exotic enough to garner much anthropological attention nor homogeneous enough to be included in national folklore researches; and virtually no books had been written about them before the 1970s, and few enough after that. My first foray in Dublin was instead an education in how the nonnomadic community responds to them. None of the major libraries seemed to have useful books, and the Irish newspapers were not indexed or microfilmed. After I found the one book available on Travellers in the biggest bookstore downtown – a vivid oral history by a Traveller woman, Nan Joyce, who's become a Travellers' rights advocate – I talked my way into the archives of *The Irish Times*.

The Irish Times is the weightiest, most official-seeming national newspaper, like *The Times* of London and *The New York Times*. The head archivist was very obliging on the telephone and invited me to come up to the clipping room. He sighed when I got there, and told me how behind the times Ireland was technologically – You wouldn't believe how recently the paper stopped using hot type he said, then showed me how they kept track of stories. A few people with big shears sat at cluttered desks, dissecting each day's newspaper and pasting the sorted-out stories into a whole library of colossal scrapbooks with their subjects handwritten along the spine, and bits of newspaper lay everywhere like autumn leaves. I sat down to read the last year in the public lives of the Irish Travellers, and as stiff page after page of clippings went by like entries in a national diary, a picture of a civil rights war formed.

On 13 July 1993, a shop on Grafton Street had refused to sell ice cream to a Traveller boy. On 13 October, fourteen windows were smashed and two vans overturned at Four Roads Pub in Glenmaddy, County Galway, by a crowd of more than a hundred people angry about the presence of Travellers. On 23 October, *The Irish Times* declared there were, according to 1992 figures, about 23,000 Travellers in Ireland in 3,828 families, and more than 1,100 lived on the roadside – that is, as nomads. "There are also believed to be about 15,000 Irish-born Travellers living in Britain and 10,000 Travellers of Irish descent in the U.S." On 6 November, the news was that "Clubs, public houses, and shops will be barred from discriminating against Travellers under legislation being prepared by the Department of Equality and Law Reform," which told me in a round-about way that such discrimination existed and was legal.

On 15 November, "The dumping of dozens of mounds of a foul-smelling fertilizer beside Travellers' caravans on the Fonthill road in North Clondalkin last week has aroused anger among the Travellers there, who claim the dumping is a thinly disguised attempt by Dublin County Council to force them to move." This, I would find, was a common story; roadside Ireland's landscape

was being redesigned with barriers of stone and earth to eliminate the Travellers who hadn't been eliminated by regulations; a whole zone between those in motion and those in homes was being eliminated. On 18 January 1994, *The Irish Times* noted, "Tension, and sometimes open conflict, between the travelling and settled communities have been long-standing blemishes on society in this State." The following day provided an example: "Publican Threatened with Loss of Her License for Serving Travellers," said the headline. On 8 February, the bishop of Galway had donated land beside his residence for six families' halting site. On 28 February, the Irish Traveller Movement itself became embroiled in controversy "over one of its key policies, that Travellers should be regarded as a distinct ethnic group."

But the biggest and nastiest story in *The Irish Times* was the most recent. In Navan, County Meath, I gathered from the spotty coverage, a group of twenty-six Traveller families had camped next to a school and attempted to enroll their children in it. On 27 April, the paper reported, "Mrs Nell McDonagh sat in her car yesterday morning, crying. She came to remove her child Steven (15). . . . on the day people are getting the vote in South Africa, why should we have to take our children out of a school? You cannot force your child into a situation where they are not wanted." The following day the news was that "about 350 students not taking exams have been withdrawn from the school in protest at the continuing presence of the 26 Travelling families outside the school gates," apparently in a bid to shut the school down or at least keep it segregated. On 2 May, the news got rougher. "Some 40 local residents protested at the Travellers' move into the town's one official site on the Athboy Road, and while there was no violence, gardai [Ireland's police] said the protest was 'pretty tense' at times. . . . The chairman of the Combined Residents Association, Mr. Andrew Brennan, said the situation with the Travellers was a 'powder keg,' adding that the Travellers were claiming to be law-abiding citizens, overlooking the torment and harassment they had forced on people living near them. At Mass yesterday, priests around Navan called for 'restraint, compassion and tolerance' within the community and condemned the petrol bomb attack in Mr. Stokes' caravan. A number of people left the churches in protest." They were minor stories, not front-page news or features or exposés, just chronicles of everyday conflict, and in my later readings I found that such incidents had been common since at least the sixties. In the early seventies four hundred people had marched to keep a Mrs Furey and her three children out of the Shantalla suburb of Galway, while locals had burned down a house in Moate, County Westmeath, to keep another Travelling family from moving in.

All this news did something to the Irish charm and hospitality I'd met with and all the Irish charity evident in the public concern and relief efforts for

exotic crises – didn't undo it but complicated it, like a seam of glittering quartz running through soft granite. To me it was puzzling that the conflict was so widely regarded as insignificant, because it recalled the American civil rights issues of the 1950s and 1960s, when the relationship between races became a national test of values and identity. I wondered whether the Irish have been so used to being history's victims that they can't imagine themselves as the victors, whether the conflict in the North has been so emblematic for many Irish and Irish Americans because it allows them to continue to imagine themselves as the persecuted minority seventy years after Irish Catholics became the ruling majority in the other twenty-six counties. Within those counties it's the realm of sexual morality – a sad parade in recent years of priests' mistresses and molestees, farmgirls strangling illegitimate babies, incest and arguments about divorce and abortion – that brings on national soul-searching, as though the Republic were a postpolitical realm in which only private life remained for the public conscience to address. But the conflict over Travellers' rights is about public space and institutions.

All over Europe, similar versions of the conflict between nomads and the sedentary majority are taking place, and though nomad sympathizers and supporters exist, they are themselves often a minority. Nomads are literally unsettling for sedentary populations, or at least those intent on ethnic nationalism. They move through the continuous landscape of roads rather than within the closed loop of borders, stitching the distances together with their circuits. If nomads are indigenous they disturb the idea of a homogeneous folk with roots in the native soil; if they're not, they're considered invaders – and in many places, several centuries of residence haven't qualified Gypsies as natives in the eyes of their neighbors and sometimes their governments. "Their very existence constituted dissidence," Jean-Pierre Liégeois says of Gypsies, and death, imprisonment, expulsion, enslavement, and forced settlement are among the punishments that have been meted out for nomadism in Europe.

From *The Irish Times* I also garnered the addresses of the principal Travellers' rights organizations in the country. There I finally began to see something of the culture that was eliciting this upheaval. At the Dublin Travellers Education and Development Group, on a seedy square outside the center of town, the organizers showed me slides and sold me books and introduced me to the shy Traveller girl who worked downstairs with her brother, gathering and redistributing scraps and remnants the schools used as art supplies. She replied reluctantly to my questions and then suddenly proffered the statement that Traveller society was like Moslem society in its constraints upon women. At the Parish of the Travelling People on Cook Street – a parish without borders, founded because the geographically

defined parishes didn't serve Travellers' needs – back near the Liffey and the center of town, they ushered me into their library and let me photocopy away.

A garrulous priest's assistant kept interrupting my reading with stories of his own about working with Travellers. They were, he told me, devout, but magical in their beliefs: more interested in the sacraments and miracles of the church than in the morality, and they often sent their children to school only long enough to receive the instructions necessary for first communion (which is provided by the schools, in this nation of linked church and state). He had seen schools in which the Traveller children were sequestered in rooms with heavy curtains and given different schedules from the rest, and less rigorous classes, lest other parents withdraw their children as they had in Navan. And he told me more, about the tradition of first-cousin marriage and of marrying very young – fifteen or sixteen for the girls – and of the way the parish was trying to discourage these customs. He spoke of Travellers fondly, as though they were children, good but in need of guidance. And the efficient women behind the desks in the other room sent in Cathleen McDonagh, a Travelling woman of about my age, from whom I learned the most, the one who invited me to Clondalkin in the Dublin suburbs.

The background that came to me piecemeal, through all my hunting in Dublin and long afterward at home, looks something like this: no one knows exactly at what point Travellers emerged from the rest of Irish society. The term *Traveller* itself has been accepted in the last few decades as the Travellers' own more civil alternative to *Tinker*, a word which like *Negro* has become derogatory, and to *itinerant*, with its social-worker overtones. Too, Travelling, as it is sometimes capitalized, is foundational to the group's distinct identity, unlike the fading craft of tinsmithing or tinkering. Those who consider nomadism a deviant or dissolute way of life often suggest that Travellers are nothing more than refugees from the economic crises of the potato Famine and perhaps of Cromwell, people who took to the road as beggars and don't know how to get off the road. The idea that it is a very recent way of life or not a way of life, a culture, at all, that it is only a crisis condition of marginal and subnormal people, accords well with the idea that Travelling is a problem to which integration into sedentary life is the solution. A group of Travellers emigrated to the United States during the Famine and remains a distinct group in Georgia, retaining some of the nomadism, language, and other ethnic hallmarks, making it clear that the culture or ethnicity was fully developed a century and a half ago.

Travellers themselves sometimes tell a story akin to that of the Wandering

Jew, in which they are the descendants of the metalworker who made the nails for the Crucifixion and for that deed were sentenced to wander the earth until the end of time. In her study of Travellers, Artelia Court proposes possible links to the outcasts and wandering craftspeople of pre-Christian Celtic society in Ireland. External evidence suggests that some version of the Travellers existed as far back as the twelfth century, when references to "tinklers" and "tynkers" appear; an English law against "wandering Irish" was passed in 1243. Travellers have a language or dialect of their own called *cant*, *shelta*, or *gammon*, which scrambles words of Irish and English derivation, and one of the strongest arguments for the ancientness of the culture is that their word for priest, *cuinne*, is an old term for druids, otherwise known only from ancient manuscripts. Other linguistic elements suggest roots before the twelfth century. But all the evidence is slight: there are clearly wandering craftspeople and beggars and references that mingle Gypsies and Tinkers from the sixteenth century onward, but there are few details. Tinkers are not Gypsies; they are as fair-skinned and Catholic as anyone in Ireland, and it has been proposed that though Gypsies spread all the way from their origins in India to England, they never reached Ireland because their commercial-nomad niche was already filled by Tinkers. At the turn of the twentieth century, Synge wrote of Tinkers along with all other denizens of the road, but the distinctions are blurred. It seems as though so many groups were wandering the roads for so many reasons that Travellers didn't stand out very dramatically, until everyone else stopped moving.

It is now a matter of debate whether they constitute a distinct ethnic group. Some Travellers seem to want the legal protection and cultural recognition such an identity would confer; others, to think that such status would further alienate them from the mainstream of Irish life. In their report on the ethnic issue, the National Federation of the Irish Travelling People declared, "In their deep religious feeling, generosity and attachment to the family, Travellers have clung to aspects of Irish life to a far greater extent than the settled community." Much of what the sedentary Irish say about the Travellers is what the English and Anglo-Americans once said about the Irish: they drink, they brawl, they have too many children and too little work ethic, they're improvident, dirty, and lawless. The very terms in which the sedentary speak suggest that the Travellers have preserved the tribal and not yet European culture of an earlier Ireland.

Kerby Miller, in his history of Irish emigration to North America, writes about the ways in which the Catholic Irish were at odds with the industrial and Protestant-dominated societies they found themselves in: they "seemed so premodern that to bourgeois observers from business-minded cultures, the native Irish often appeared 'feckless,' 'childlike' and 'irresponsible' . . . The

shrewdest recognized that ancient communal values and work habits persisted despite commercialization. . . . In addition, the Catholic lower classes seemed to lack bourgeois concepts of time and deferred gratification. . . .” Court writes of the “antiquated traditions and artifacts that had vanished elsewhere but which Ireland possessed in abundance” after the Second World War, adding, “And even among these countrymen the Tinkers were conspicuous for remaining doggedly true to themselves.” “We are Irish,” insisted placards at some Travellers’ rights demonstrations in the 1980s, since their differences from the mainstream were regarded as alien rather than anachronistic. It may be that the Travellers stand out for not having changed enough in a society that has transformed itself radically in the last several decades.

Though possessing ancient origins may, for the sedentary scholars of Travellers, confer greater legitimacy on them, it is apparently of less interest to the subjects themselves. The authenticity of origins, the historical basis for identity, may not be their method. That notion more than almost anything convinced me that they did constitute a distinct culture or subculture in this history-haunted place. The anthropologist Sinéad Ní Shuinear writes, “Some nomadic peoples – the Jews of the Old Testament spring immediately to mind – cultivate both literacy and historical memory. Others, even without literacy, enshrine genealogy and significant events into formal litanies to be memorised and passed on verbatim by specialists. But others still – and this includes most commercial nomadic groups – treat the past itself as a sort of baggage which would tie them down in the present. Instead, they cultivate an intense present-time orientation, living in a perpetual now, deriving their sense of identity not from taproots deep into the past, but from vast networks of living kin. The essence of Gypsy and Traveller culture is its fluidity. Gypsies and Travellers everywhere are supremely indifferent to their own origins.” She cites the Italian anthropologist, Leonardo Piasere, who “argues that Gypsies and Travellers are not ignorant illiterates, but have very deliberately rejected literacy, knowing that it would solidify the past, thus imposing a baggage of precedent curtailing flexibility in the present.” Like the Western Shoshone and other nomads, Travellers traditionally destroy all the belongings of a person who has died, a process that tends to rule out heirlooms and vast accumulation, a means of keeping its practitioners even materially in the present.

The French theorists and nomad enthusiasts Deleuze and Guattari declare that the hierarchical model of the tree has dominated too much of Western thought and offer in its place the rhizome, the loosely structured, horizontally spreading root system of plants such as strawberries; Ní Shuinear’s proposal that Travellers are organized socially and imaginatively around contemporary networks rather than historical taproots echoes their metaphor.

The intimation of such a radically divergent sense of time, space, and society electrified me, but other information and conversation tempered my romanticism. The enormous contemporary enthusiasm for nomads – the romanticism that has brought into being so many boutiques, tattoo parlors, artists’ projects, pseudoethnic recordings, and books with “nomad” in their names – is premised on the dubious idea that nomads embody on a mass scale the freedom of the solitary traveler, that romantic figure silhouetted against an exotic landscape like the individualist tree. For those of us who are largely sedentary, travel is a way out of the world that surrounds us, but nomads rarely if ever leave their world: it moves with them. The Traveller activist Michael McDonagh explains that “for Travellers, the physical fact of moving is just one aspect of a nomadic mind-set that permeates every aspect of our lives. Nomadism entails a way of looking at the world, a different way of perceiving things, a different attitude to accommodation, to work, and life in general. Just as settled people remain settled people even when they travel, Travellers remain Travellers even when they are not travelling.”

The spatial freedom that might otherwise dissolve their society and identity altogether as it does for us temporarily, as respite, vacation, and escape, is counterbalanced by a greater rigidity of social structure. Architecture and geography hold our lives in place – identities built into the layout of the house, the status of the address, and the routine of the day – but custom alone must hold theirs in lieu of place and therefore must surround them as surely and solidly as a locale. The nomad’s fluidity of time and space and work and property all occur within a stubbornly conservative culture perpetuated in tightly knit families. Likewise extreme feats of travel have little to do with nomads. It is exhilarating that individuals should walk the length of a continent or carry a sixty-pound pack over the remote mountains, but such feats are for solitary adventurers in their prime, not for groups for whom travel is a permanent condition including all the goods and generations, and certainly not for commercial nomads like the Travellers and Gypsies who earn their living from interactions with the sedentary community. Still, one romantic attribute remains, that of movement itself, of the constantly shifting scene, the unpredictable life lived closer to the bone of those in motion, uninsulated by the buildings and goods and familiarity of settled life: that is a romanticism Travellers and sedentary people seem to share.

Travellers have traditionally been self-employed or temporarily employed, surviving on a plethora of skills and talents, and often shifting roles and images to accord with the work – abjection for begging, an air of responsibility for contract labor. Indeed much of what seems to be considered Traveller and Gypsy dishonesty is the art of saying what works or pleases in

wildly varying and often hostile circumstances. Taking permanent jobs conflicts with the fluid autonomy of their identity, argue some of the sociologists of Travelling. They may be the last people in the industrialized world to have collectively escaped wage labor, escaped selling their time and setting their lives to someone else's schedule, but the price of their social redemption seems to be the surrender of the fluidity of their labor, spatial, and temporal structures via the taking of jobs. By many accounts and oral histories, Travellers who get ahead often take it as an opportunity to take time off or travel, disregarding the longterm security to which the wage earner aspires. Freya Stark, the travel writer who spent years among the pastoralist nomads of the Muslim world, writes, "The life of insecurity is the nomad's achievement. He does not try, like our building world, to believe in a stability which is non-existent; and in his constant movement with the seasons, in the lightness of his hold, puts something right, about which we are constantly wrong. His is in fact the reality, to which the most solid of our structures are illusion; and the ramshackle tents in their crooked gaiety, with cooking pots propped up before them and animals about, show what a current flows round all the stone erections of the ages."

In the picture most accounts paint, Travellers throughout the first half of the twentieth century continued their professions of tinsmithing (from which the term *tinker* comes – the tinkers or tinsmiths made many of the milking cans, buckets, pots, and pans farm families used), horsetraining and trading, begging, fortunetelling, selling balladsheets, handicrafts, and other small items, and working as migrant agricultural and manual labor, encountering hostility and some brutality but at levels that allowed them to continue to be nomadic. They Travelled mostly on backroads and consorted mostly with rural people – one Traveller term for the sedentary is *country people* – though they found work in English cities and the outskirts of Irish towns from time to time. They were appreciated for their skills, wares, and the news and novelty they brought to isolated communities. They were disliked for begging, for sometimes sneaking their horses into farmers' fields and crops to graze, for the dishonesty with which nomads often deal with sedentary people, for theft and suspected theft, and maybe for being an unfamiliar intrusion into familiar landscapes. It isn't clear when they began using barreltop wagons, but they seem to have pitched roadside tents made of hazel branches and some kind of tarp beforehand. Anyone who has encountered the wet Irish land and sky can appreciate how strong the nomadic impulse must be to survive in those circumstances (partially settled Travellers now often say they yearn to roam in the summertime, when the weather is fine).

In the 1950s and 1960s horsedrawn wagons began to be replaced by cars pulling trailers, and horses are now kept more for pleasure than for use (though tourists can rent facsimiles of the wagons, complete with horse, and play Gypsy on the backroads; I had seen such a rental site in Westport). It may have been cars and the concomitant shrinkage of distance and access to manufactured goods that doomed their symbiosis with the countryside; it is often said that plastic did in their way of life. Handmade tinware was replaced by mass-manufactured goods, and as distances shrank and cars replaced horses Travellers' functions as pedlars and horsetraders also eroded. Roadsides were relandscaped to make roadside camping difficult or impossible across the country, unregulated space dried up, and they began to stay longer wherever they were, however unwelcome, since finding another halting site would be hard. Ironically, hostility seems to make them stay rather than go. There are regulations that halting sites and housing must be built for them, but many projects have been delayed by opposition and many that do exist are inadequate or inappropriate in their design. In the 1970s a Traveller told an oral historian, "For a woman a house is a grand thing for her to put the children in. But for a man a house is only a payment of rents. . . . Lots of travellers have houses in the winter and they leaves them lonely when they take to the roads in the summer. It's only a bother having the house and it's not healthy to be shut inside them four walls with no trees in sight and only the windys to keep you half breathing. No, I'd sleep in a stables before I'd sleep in a house. . . ."

Travellers now appear to be something of a displaced population, in flight from the destruction of rural life as much as any farm people, but they are seen less as refugees than intruders wherever they go. Many have ended up on the periphery of towns and cities, and some have gone to England. The programs of forcing them to settle into fixed houses are over, but the elimination of the necessary sites and circumstances for Travelling continues, as do some voluntary housing programs. Though Travellers are central to the scrap metal and car parts industries in Ireland, and a few Travelling families have become wealthy antique dealers (and, because of their wealth, are seldom counted as Travellers), a high percentage are on the dole. In a country with more than 20 percent unemployment overall and intense exclusion of Travellers from all institutions, welfare dependency is not surprising. But in addition to the suspicion nomads and minorities usually attract, the Travellers are now hated with the peculiar fury taxpayers reserve for those they consider freeloaders.

Most recently the authorities have become better at navigating a middle ground, of providing housing adapted to the needs and customs of these

increasingly immobilized nomads. In such a housing complex did Cathleen McDonagh and her family live, up against the walls of Wheatfield Prison. I recognized it from the Travellers' parish worker's description: a double row of diminutive houses with wide driveways, arranged in two lines flanking a central green, with a high gray prison wall behind looking like the back of a stage set. When I reached the grass a group of little boys ran up to greet me and inspect me. They were tough, scruffy, but polite, and I could tell I wouldn't get far without their cooperation. So I told the one who seemed to be the leader, a stout, chestnut-haired boy of about ten in an undershirt, who I was looking for. She's my cousin, he said, and began to lead me to her trailer. The boys asked if I was a social worker, and I told them that I was a writer from America. I knew that would keep them busy for a while and it did; they too had to know who I'd back in the World Cup. A middleaged man came up to us, another inspector; I introduced myself and we shook hands. It was John McDonagh, Cathleen's father, a powerful-looking, big-bellied man whose mild face gave him a horse's air of harmless power. Cathleen, he told me, was in her sister's house, and so we doubled back the way the boys had led me, and he took me into a kitchen with a plump woman – the sister – washing lettuce, a child in a high chair and another one roaming around the tiny room, and Cathleen sitting and talking. She showed me around the tidy house, which was bigger than it looked from outside, showed me her nieces sitting on the edge of their bed knitting and looking very diligent for girls of twelve or so, and took me into the parlor. I perched among the fat lace pillows of the sofa, facing the corner cabinet of richly colored dishes, the mantelpiece's two plates depicting a horse fair, and my hostess.

In her cut-off jeans and black t-shirt, she looked much much more at ease than in the long patterned skirt in the Dublin office. I had met her at the Travellers' Parish, where she was studying to advance her education beyond the primary-school level where she had left off, and to gain the skills to become a Travellers' rights advocate. She was a bigboned, broadshouldered woman of my own age – early thirties – with high cheekbones and powerful pale blue eyes beneath her thick brown hair. In the parlor, amid the lace and china, she continued to talk of prejudice in the low, flat voice she'd used before, a voice that sounded both cowed and resistant. She spoke in examples rather than abstractions. She spoke of how every Traveller is held accountable for the acts of any one of them. Of how when Travellers misbehave, they tend to do so in public – almost every aspect of their lives is much more visible, outdoors and by the roadside – and thus gain an exaggerated reputation for drinking and brawling. Of how they don't want special treatment, only the rights of the rest of the citizenry: access to the same education, entry to the same places, housing or at least halting sites. She told me about last

Christmas when her brother came over from England. It's customary, she said, to do a good deal of celebrating around Christmas, and so she spent all she had on a disco outfit. But when they got to the club in Dundalk, they were told they would have to wait because there were too many already inside. But there were people all around them pouring in. Apartheid Irish style. You get very guarded after experiences like that, which is why Travellers might not be easy to get to know. People think they're rich because of their vans and jewelry, but they buy the vans on credit and need them for their work, just as settled people do their houses, and the jewelry is akin to savings. All her own jewelry, she told me, was gifts – the three gold bangles from her parents, the big gold hoop earrings from her brother in England. She frequently ended her sentences Please God, to indicate that her desire or ambition was tempered by God's approval, and her religion was an important part of her life.

The ice broken or at least a little thawed, we went into her trailer – her parents, she said, had allowed her to remain unmarried, and she had a trailer of her own – and she began to have real conversation with me in a different, more natural voice. Her brother and other men kept dropping by to say hello and inspect me, and I met her younger brother William and inspected the dagger tattooed on his forearm in return. The trailer, the kind that hitches to the back of a car, was the size of a small room, and everything in it was neatly arranged, the bed folded back into a couch. The clock she had broken that morning, however, was lying on a counter all in pieces. She had beautiful dishes arrayed on narrow shelves above the windows and two books on another counter: Bruce Chatwin's *The Songlines* and Peter Matthiessen's *Indian Country*.

It turned out she was interested in Native Americans and identified with them, with better grounds than most who do. She had acutely picked out their nomadism as one of the reasons why Euro-Americans considered them barbaric and one of the grounds for persecuting them. Civilizing Indians usually entailed transforming them from nomads into agriculturalists, tied to the success or failure of individual labor on a small piece of land. The sedentary toil of agriculture was usually considered inseparable from or foundational for culture itself by the nineteenth-century Americans who made Indian policy; what they would think of the present's postagricultural societies is hard to imagine. Turning Native American nomads into agriculturalists largely failed, but it did succeed in justifying a drastically reduced land base for them and thereby freeing up much of their land for others. My hostess also pointed out that what the Jews and Gypsies killed in the Nazi holocaust had in common was nomadism, and I was glad I'd introduced myself as a Jew and might thereby be considered an honorary nomad. (I had

somewhere around Galway stopped telling people of my mixed ancestry, because it was clear I wasn't Irish in the way the Irish were, because trying to explain that being mixed didn't mean being nothing was getting tiresome, and because declaring Jewishness dried up any further questions. I thought I'd probably only really ever feel Irish Catholic if I went to Israel.)

Each door Cathleen led me through seemed to take me into a more personal sphere; we had moved from the formal interview on her sister's sofa to the conversation in her trailer to the festive visit in her parents' trailer next door. I seemed to have been accepted, at least as a guest. In her parents' trailer Cathleen laid out thinly cut fresh bread, cold meats, and tomatoes and began to make cup after cup of strong tea for us all, washing the cups thoroughly between each round. Her parents' trailer was airy and comfortable, a spotless salon of windows, couches, kitchenette, and a central table. What do you call them, they asked me, and I said, Trailers. They looked satisfied and said that Travellers too called them trailers; only country people called them caravans. And they asked me about American rest stops; they had heard wondrous stories that the US government built them copiously along the highways and anyone was allowed to halt at them unharassed.

My own country took on new enchantment for me as I told them of the western American infrastructure of rest stops and camp grounds and trailer parks and interstate highways. Of the quite respectable middle-class retirees who sold their houses and took to the road in trailers, migrating like birds alone and in flocks, south in the winter and anywhere in the summer. Of how much of the populace was, if not nomadic, at least restless and rootless, moving on an average of once every five and a half years. Of states where the majority of homes seemed to be prefab trailers that could be trucked to the next location. Of how many fine gradations there are between the absolutely fixed and the fluid in the US, rather than Ireland's stark gap. Of my own adventures in my pickup truck with the shell on the back, traveling around the West, living out of the truck for weeks on end sometimes, traveling sometimes with my younger brother in his pickup when we went to political actions together. As I spoke of days of driving five hundred miles or so alone, of driving a hundred miles down Nevada's secondary highways without seeing another soul, I became homesick for my own roadscapes. Any doubts I'd had about disconnectedness, rootlessness, and fossil fuel economies were bowled over by our collective evocation of the lure of the open road.

I swapped my tales with road stories of theirs, mostly of Mrs McDonagh's. Mrs McDonagh, Cathleen's mother, impressed me as a remarkable woman. Stout and weathered, with her shapeless dress and her graybrown hair pulled back casually, she had made no efforts at beautification but she radiated a

calm joy in her expressions and her sweetvoiced stories. Though one might expect a nomad to flicker like a flame, she gave instead the impression of enormous earthy solidity and complete participation in the present. Life seemed to delight her. She told me they could see the mountains from where they were, the Dublin mountains. That her mother was from County Meath, and there was always a town you'd go back to. That home was where your people were buried. And one of the great pleasures of travel was going back to a place in which a significant passage of your life had occurred, revisiting experiences inextricably linked to a distinct locale (unlike, she implied, the sedentary, whose different dramas may all occur on the same thereby unvocative home front). She grew up in the wattle tents – the tents made of tarps and hazel wands – and there would be a big tent with a fire to cook on and sing around. There was a wagon to sleep in (though she didn't make it clear if it was always there along with the wattle tents). She hadn't learned to read or write, which was inconvenient, because you had to ask people to help with your letters, so they always knew your business. When a white moth came and fluttered between us on the couch where we sat, she said, A little moth. That means a letter's coming.

Now it was ten years since they had Travelled, she said, but they went off all the time in vans. And she spoke of their journeys. She had wanted to emigrate to Australia once in the 1960s when visas and jobs were easy to come by, but at the last minute her husband had backed out. He was a less enthusiastic adventurer. She wanted someday to see Russia and Germany, and they had gone on pilgrimages to Knock in Ireland and Lourdes in France. She deplored the long hours of waiting and the poor organization at Lourdes, but they had gone there all along the backroads of France, and the French people they met had been so friendly – a report which was itself testimony to their talent for travel. They were very devout; Cathleen had told me of a pilgrimage to Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer near Arles in southern France, a place of great Gypsy pilgrimage as well. When her mother recited the places she'd like to go, Cathleen added, Please God, Jerusalem. "Narrow and wide," concluded my notes, "Muslim. Freedom. Change," and I never could make sense of them. Darkness had fallen while we had been swapping stories, and darkness fell very late that time of year. They sent for William, and he drove me back to central Dublin in his van, fast, as I swayed between him and his sister around the bends in the roads.