

RICHARD MILLS

## *Money from Home*

When I was ten years old, someone in Ireland died and, in dying, left my mother a hundred pounds. I don't know how much that was in dollars, or who the doer of the good deed had been, but the excitement in the house meant that it was someone of middling to lesser importance. (This was towards the end of the sixties when a hundred pounds was enough to make us show our true natures.)

Though I have a memory of the money coming in the mail in a brown paper envelope—my mother laying it on the kitchen table and saying nothing—I suspect that isn't the way it happened. Even with village naiveté and the currency controls at the time, I doubt that anyone in Ireland would've put cash in an envelope and mailed it overseas. It's odd the way we remember. Five years before, we'd emigrated with boxes and shellacked cardboard suitcases—and it would have been impossible to change Irish pounds to dollars in the town we'd ended up in in Canada—so I may be confusing this envelope with the telegram that announced the news, or the letters that came afterwards with a photograph of the wreaths and the mourners at the wake, proving who was and wasn't there. In any case, after delays and false

starts, the money came and it was a windfall and my father set aside some to pay bills and then took us on the only holiday that we had while I was growing up.

The brown envelope might well be my invention, but I have a much more real memory of sitting on the train all day and night, through the Caribou Country and mountains and the Fraser Canyon. Early on the morning of the second day we came into Vancouver. I slept off and on but, each time I woke up, I saw my mother across from me at the window—though there's nothing to see in the mountains at night and no horizon and no light to reflect from the creeks and the lakes beside the tracks. Twice she turned to me to say, "Go to sleep, Gray. You'll need it all when we get there. You'll need it in the morning."

We had to travel a long way, but the world became softer and greener and more foreign as we came south and west, seven hundred miles down the length of the province.

She had told us we were going to the seaside, but there wasn't much evidence as we came closer. There were only interminable stretches of trees and rocks, and interminable stops where we would sit looking out on sheer walls of damp

stone. Yes, there was the wide river when we finally arrived on the coast—and log booms that floated out on the Fraser to the Pacific—but there wasn't the wide, open water that I'd expected. (Every year at home in Ireland—this was before she was married, she told us—her family had rented a house at Warrenpoint as a genteel end to the summer. That had stopped after the War in the fifties when things turned bad.) But now she would have the seaside again.

This finally and forever might be the reawakening. But, as we came out of the Fraser Valley and into the city itself, and we arrived and began collecting the bags together, she was disappointed and abrupt, not saying anything to my brother when he asked, "Where is it? Which way?" harping at her and holding her hand. Though he was nearly fifteen, he said, "Silly, slutty, smutty seaside," repeating it over and over. Years later I discovered that you see the ocean only when you fly out of the mountains at Vancouver and turn across the bay to come in to the airport.

The three of us stayed in the station while my father found a hotel that we could afford. This was July or August and he hadn't reserved anything. The thought hadn't occurred or the cost of a long distance call had put him off—making a reservation was the kind of ceremony he avoided, though he may well not have known

what to do; it wasn't the kind of operation he'd ever been in charge of.

We were to sit in the station and wait, not to move on jot or iota. She stayed on a wooden bench reading a Harlequin she'd brought with her, then reading the back of the tickets and the timetables, then looking at her nails and holding up her hands to her cheek. Eventually she said that, yes, she could smell the ocean, now that she had time to think about it. She said, "You know I can just make it out, Gray. We've arrive and, to prove it, we're here." That was the joke about Irish wisdom that she always made. We have arrived, and to prove it we are here. We were in a train station, after all, and it was the beginning of the adventure and she gave us enough money to buy Cokes in the cafeteria at the end of the platforms and to bring her back something to drink—lemonade from one of the huge plastic dispensers that shot jets of liquid inside the globe. "It's very early in the morning but we're on holiday, after all," she said.

After all.

When my father came back two hours later, he said, "Give me a minute, will you?" and sat down to have a cigarette, leaning over and resting his elbows on his knees, and finally saying that yes, it was done all right—but the trouble he'd had arranging it. And the cost. "And wait," he said, "you haven't heard the half of it." Listen to this. Here. It was nine o'clock

in the morning and yer man at the desk wouldn't let us into the room until three in the afternoon, when the people from the night before had checked out and the linen had been changed and the beds made. (This was part of the trick and they were cheating us, he said. How long could it take to clean a room, if they really did change the beds, and what time is it that they make you get out the next morning?)

The dirty sod wanted him to pay the whole thing while he was standing there, but he refused and said that, all right, if yer man insisted he'd put money down—no more than half—and the bastard was to use that to hold the room. The other half would come tomorrow when we were satisfied, when we were out through the door. "He was a dirty bugger about it," he told us and gave the envelope with the rest of the money back to my mother. He wasn't going to pay for the time we'd sat waiting. Imagine, expected to pay for twenty-four hours in the room and us not even in it. But my mother told him that, having started this whole blessed thing, we now had to be somewhere. She said, "Whsst," when he started to bring it up again later—the sound that means *be quiet* or *I've had enough* or *listen to me*. "You don't pay for a meal until you've ate it," he said. And it didn't stop him from telling us about London in the thirties when he worked there and the signs that said "No Irish Served" and "No Irish

Need Apply." And the "DIs"—the dirty Irish that, in all the stories, slept six in a room.

And there were hours to wait.

My mother stood up and said that, having come so far, the last thing we would do was sit in a station after we've only just spent twenty hours on a train. Imagine. Though she was sure she could smell the ocean, underneath everything else, the depot was overpowering it with the dust and the hot smell of people travelling.

And there was "something I don't want to tell you about," she said, looking at each of the three of us in turn. That meant a migraine was coming on. If it started now, she wouldn't be any good for the rest of the day, just waiting to get into the room to lie down in the dark with a damp face cloth across her forehead. But we could nip it in the bud if we got out this minute. Tout. De. Sweet. And we took the suitcase and left the station, carrying it out with us into a warm and marvelous city. Still she turned back and said that we looked like DP's, the four of us walking behind each other in a single line. My brother said, "DI's, DP's, DI's," running them together until the words became a long, steady stream that the two of us walked in time to.

When I got to know Vancouver years later, I was surprised by how far we must have wandered that morning, heads down and

walking steadily. We went through Chinatown, into the center of the city itself, and past the old Law Courts. There were an enormous number of streets and taxis and stores, and I realized that the breeze that was meeting us at every corner must be the wind coming in from the ocean. It was only a sour, damp smell, and hardly anything to get her up about. To the north—on the streets that opened down to Burrard Inlet—there were houses on the side of the mountains and my brother looked for “The Lions,” a long, high ridge above West Vancouver that we had both read about in school. Above Lion’s Gate. In the long run, we weren’t sure which direction they were in and they could’ve been any one of the mountains around the city.

When we stopped at the intersections and traffic lights, I turned around to look behind me—and down the side streets and along the avenues that led away from us. There were strings of Orientals, of Asian faces—other than the Mahs who had a grocery store and a restaurant, there weren’t any Chinese at home—and we passed stores that had ivory carvings and Buddha incense holders from Taiwan, and English shoe stores, and shops with woolen tartans. And there was a store that was done up to look like an old fashioned butcher shop and that had ham and meat imported from the U.K. and a row of Bird’s Custard Powder in the window. My father said, “We’ll have to come

back here tomorrow. I haven’t had a good piece of bacon since we left home”—home, Ireland—but my mother looked in and saw what they were charging and said my god, it was expensive. “It’s shocking,” she said, “though wouldn’t it be marvelous?”

At the Anglican cathedral at the edge of the West End, near Granville or Davie, we set our bags on the stairs that led up to the main door while they had a cigarette. Inside, the church was grand, and the aisles were two or three times as long as the whole church that we used to go to at home—home, Canada—before we’d had a run in with the minister and stopped attending.

When I saw the names of men who died in the First World War, I understood the age of it—the cathedral, the baptistery and its font, and the city around us. It had stood on this corner and under these trees for fifty years. This was a marvelous, incomprehensible thought because Saint Martin—where we settled when we came to Canada and where I grew up—had been built by the American army only twenty years before we arrived there. They built it on their way to save Alaska from the Japanese. (It’d seemed a threat at the time.) Before the Army came there was nothing on the flat plain between the hills but a few homesteads. When they left—four years later—there was a town, a highway that ran north and south, and a cement swimming pool that we were still using and

where my brother and I each took lessons. "We've been as good to the Canucks as they've been to us," the soldiers were supposed to have said. None of them stayed after the War (was there the possibility?), but every summer some still came through town with campers and Airstream trailers, taking the Alaska Highway and stopping in town and talking about the building of the road, the thousand miles of gravel and dust and dirt that became impassable in the spring. They were becoming increasingly older tourists to a town that was neither colonial nor frontier nor particularly interesting. It was northern, and there were thin bog pines and short alders and birch, and the buildings were small and low. There were foxtails and Indian paintbrush growing in the empty lots. There were sheds made out of corrugated iron, a curling rink, an air horn that went off every night at nine o'clock, and streets that were wide and straight. But this Vancouver, where we'd gotten off the train and found ourselves, this Vancouver was a markedly different world. My mother stood at the foot of the nave and said wouldn't it be marvelous if we heard music, just as we were standing here. "It would be perfect, wouldn't it, Eamon?" she said to my father, but, other than an old woman arranging flowers on a folding table in the narthex, there was no one in the building this early in the morning. (I remembered all this one Sunday

morning when I was at an English Protestant church in Geneva: I saw the same kind of old woman walking down the aisle past where I was sitting, coming towards me and continuing on. The memory suddenly came back, brought by a pious, older woman and the sound of her heels on the floor—and then the carpet—and watching her put her feet down gingerly so as not to make noise. Aware of the sanctity.) My mother said good morning to her and said not to bother with us, please don't, that we'd only stopped in to look.

She said to the woman, "My mother used to play the organ in the church at home in Ireland. And sing in the choir. In Killaloy, it's a little town near Armagh where the cathedral is—where both the cathedrals are. But you wouldn't know Killaloy." And when the woman had gone she said to me, "You don't remember your grandmother, Gray. You were too young when she died. And then we left," she said.

Yes.

"When she was your age—or your brother's—someone wanted to take her to a school in Belfast, or to some conservatory in London. Or some place or other, anyway. But her mother wouldn't let her, and she ended up in the choir on Sundays. Your great-grandmother," she said, putting the suitcase down and sitting in one of the pews to rest, stretching out her leg and massaging the calf.

It was a quiet day, warm in the morning and hotter by noon, and we took off our jackets and put them in the pockets of the suitcase. From the cathedral, we walked down the slope of a wide green street towards English Bay and, while my father took my brother and me into Stanley Park—onto the path that winds around the promontory and past Siwash Rock—she stayed on a bench in the middle of the beach and looked out at the sea, the bag beside her. This, then, was the ocean. These were the birds that flew without touching land and slept on the waves if they needed to. This was where Pauline Johnson sat. The song my paddle sings. The totem poles.

It was quiet—like a wide, pacific lake. There were no waves against rocks and hardly any movement in the tide line along the sand, and the wind that came off the water was still and cool and sour. My mother said you don't realize how much you miss the ocean until you see it again, though with the mountains and the trees and the apartment towers behind her there was no resemblance to Ireland. But it was a temperate city and it had such a feeling, she said.

"You go on ahead with the boys. You take them. All I want to do is sit here, Eamon," she said to my father. "I could stay here for the rest of my life." And when we came back at three o'clock, she was eating ice cream that she'd

bought from one of the vendors along the sidewalk. She said, "I've sat here just watching all the people going past. And your man here, sitting beside me until you came back, showed me Vancouver Island. There on the horizon, can you see it?" she asked.

Yes, it seemed that the island was there—or other islands between here and there—and I stared at the line of blue above the water (there's a fascination with islands when you've grown up at the north end of the prairies). She said, "I've had the funniest thought. I could do with fish and chips tonight, do you know how long it's been since we've had that? Even thought about it? Fish and chips and malt vinegar—I'm sure you can get them with all the English that there are here. I should've asked your man when he was here."

We stood for a few minutes and then walked back up the wide avenue, trying to find the hotel that was holding the money. From time to time my father had to stop and ask the way through the quiet green neighbourhoods, though it was hard without the name. He remembered it all right and had written it down on the back of his pack of cigarettes, he said, but he'd searched every pocket and said that he must have thrown it away. Still, the hotel would be easy enough to find. It was on a street that looked very like this. While he was asking in one of the small shops and we were standing in

the sun outside, my mother found a chestnut that had fallen onto the path and picked it up, slipping it into her purse. And she bought lunch for us—sandwiches and ice cream in a café very near a street that overlooked the ocean—and she hardly argued at all when, at five o'clock, we had to go into another place on the corner of a narrow lane and make enquiries at the front desk.

In the room they talked about what we would do for dinner, and Rory and I looked through the list beside the phone for all the fish restaurants. My mother was afraid we'd end up some place where they expected a tip. The thought of tipping flustered her and, with four of us, it would all be very extravagant. Vancouver was turning out to be expensive and the money in the envelope had disappeared; as simple as that. The quiet look between the two of them. There was an intimation that my father—as old as he was and as tall as he was, and as much business as he'd done in the world—hadn't understood how it'd happened. In the end, we had ham and salad sandwiches that she'd made at home just in case and packed in one of the bags in tinfoil to keep cool. We washed out the knives in the bathroom sink when we were through with them. And, after dinner, she gave Rory and me each a dollar to buy comic books or a *Mad* magazine and chocolate bars in the lobby—though we were

not to go out on the street. We rode up and down in the elevator until we thought someone had seen us and reported us to the front desk. Great, illicit excitement. This was, after all, a holiday and the buildings at home were low and wide. With the exception of the Post Office, which had broad flights of stairs to the second and a narrow flight to the third floor, there weren't any tall buildings and certainly no elevators.

When we came back to the room three-quarters of an hour later, she was in the bathroom washing her face. The envelope was torn in two and lying on the pillow, and my father was sitting in the chair between the beds, watching the news on television. The troubles had started again in Ireland and this was the beginning of Ian Paisley and Bernadette Devlin and the confrontations of the marching season. Though I don't know what made me think it, I assumed my mother had been crying—a thing I don't remember her often doing. We'd have to get some sleep, she said. I ought to have done something, but concerns—however real they are—are sometimes shifting and momentary.

She said that tomorrow would be a long day, and maybe we'd go back to English Bay to look for shells—or there was a Queen Elizabeth Park where there was an arboretum or something or other—before we took the train tomorrow night. "It's a good thing I have the tickets here

in my purse. It's a long way to come," she said. Back again to a town with no hope of chestnuts or plates of fresh fish or mussels, or apples on the trees at the end of summer. Later of course. Later I understood how embarrassed she was when she had run us quickly across the lobby, the suitcase in her hand.

I remember her coming out of the bathroom,

folding the face cloth that she brought in case there was none in the hotel, lifting the suitcase onto the bed to unpack her nightgown and wiping her face with her hand. And I remember the next night on the train, watching her lift the suitcase onto the luggage rack above us herself and leaning her head back, trying to sleep on a pillow that she'd made from a sweater. 