



## HOMECOMING I

I wake to the overhead luggage bins snapping open above my head. My seat neighbor is sitting there with his coat on, his carry-on already propped on his lap as our plane taxis home.

I push up the plastic window blind for my first glimpse of Shannon Airport. All these years and journeys later, I still love this time-travel trick in which a Boston night fast forwards to an Irish morning.

In the early days, I was one of those transatlantic passengers who pre-gathered her coat and carry-ons and then queued in the aisle, impatient for those airplane doors to open. But this morning, my head lolls back and I doze off to sleep again.

"You might want to get off the plane now," my seat neighbor says, and the raised, impatient voice tells me he's been trying to wake me for a while.

In the airport I am listening for all the slip-ups I might make; all the wrong things I might say, like calling the car park a parking lot. The young man at the rental car counter is snappish and assumes that I want an automatic car. He looks askance when I say that a standard economy—just like I booked online—is fine. Of course, he thinks I'm American, so I flatten my 'a' sounds, insert some 'h's' after the 's' sounds because, in this part of the country, they might still belong. Now he turns chatty and patronizing as he inquires how long I'm back home for and what the weather was like "over there." I ask if he's been busy and he rolls his eyes and says, "Ah now, you know yourself."

Outside the air smells damp and, even in this streetlights-and-concrete place, there is a whiff of turf smoke. From the airport I drive the dark, north-bound motorway, the opposite way to all those early morning commuters. The motorway gives way to narrow roads and water-logged fields where the cattle shelter under bare trees. The leaden skies. The roadside church. The woman in her blue mackintosh trotting between a village shop and her house.