

IRISH BLOOD, ENGLISH HEART, ULSTER FRY (extract)

I was four when we moved from Northern Ireland. I was too young to think anything much about leaving, but England was a disappointment. For one thing, talk of England had all been a trick, because we seemed to be in Wales.

Geography was one of many weak areas in my head when I was four years old, but I could tell the words weren't the same: England, Wales.

So they needn't think I was fooled.

I'd been hopeful of England because I had worked out that England was where cartoons happened. I knew cartoons didn't happen in Northern Ireland, I could see that looking out the window, so I was sure that they must happen in that other place, the only other place I'd heard of, England.

England would be bright coloured, teeming with talking bears, rabbits and exploding cats. Looking out of the window in England would be as good as watching television.

But North Wales looked like Northern Ireland. And cartoons, my father informed me, as I wept on our new kitchen floor, happened in a place that 'wasn't real'. Whatever that meant. Not only had we pitched up in a profoundly disappointing place, I had to start school among unintelligible children and learn songs in a whole new language. Songs about birds

sitting on the roof of a house. To this day I know the Welsh for 'the bird is on the roof of the house'. I can't say it's stood me in good stead.

My interest in the place rallied when new neighbours moved on to the base. Black Americans. I immediately started stalking them.

Despite me, the new neighbours became very friendly with my mother.

My mother and I started using American words for things -candies, the movies, the trunk of the car...The Americans gleefully copied my mother's reverse Irish/ English: 'Would you not have a cup of tea?'

We were always calling in and out of each other's houses, swapping dishes of food and not behaving like the other officers' politely boxed-in families.

Too soon, the Americans were posted away. This was worse than the whole trick about cartoons. Something of a drama queen as a child, I was again disappointed to learn that lying on the kitchen floor and weeping loudly didn't change the harsh realities of life.

I persisted with the floor tantrums anyway, just to have something to do now the Americans were gone. Close to the moment when I was going to drive her to have her own floor tantrums, my mother had a reprieve.

We had replacement neighbours. New Americans. We were heading round with home-baked soda bread and welcomes right away...

I balked at the sight of them and howled with rage. My mother had lied. These weren't real Americans. They were putting on the accent but I could do that. Did they think I wouldn't notice they were the wrong colour?

As she apologised to the shocked couple from Texas and hauled me wailing home to bed, my mother told me that most Americans were white.

I couldn't understand why she was siding with the new neighbours in the plot against me. But there it was, leaving Northern Ireland meant your father started raving about things being 'not real' and your own mother turned against you.

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