

## The Inevitable Question By Jeremy Taylor

Being English and living in Dublin is a strange experience. It is rare to be hated as an individual but 'England' is a very popular bogey man in Ireland. If England is playing Azerbaijan at football then the pubs are full of fanatic Azerbaijani supporters, cheering their every pass and groaning with resignation if Beckham or Owen manage to put the ball in the back of the Azerbaijani net. This is particularly strange as English club sides are supported with religious zeal – chartered aircraft flying Manchester United fans from Dublin to Old Trafford every week. True, Irish football is not much to write home about, but I can't imagine a French football fan supporting an English club, just because his or her local club doesn't happen to be the best in Europe.

“Where're ya from?”

“Bristol,” I answer, choosing to avoid the word 'England'. Almost everyone in Ireland has a relative working in England, over 300,000 in London and quite a lot in Bristol. Bristol is an average city where Irish people work. England is an evil, oppressive country, led by despotic fascists since the time of Cromwell and probably a long time before him. I think you can understand my answer.

I wasn't looking for love in Ireland when I went there but love has a strange habit of creeping up on you when you are least expecting it. Adele has the most beautiful voice I have ever heard. She has a lovely warm and caring personality. She is amazingly good looking. She even likes me. What more could a man ask for? Well, things would be very different if she were from Sheffield, or Paris, or Addis Abababa – Adele comes from Derry, not Londonderry. Derry, with a very large capital D.

Adele is a very intelligent woman and does not hold me personally responsible for the actions of the British government, past or present. She can cope with my lapsed

Methodism. She can even cope with my untidy flat. (That really shows what a wonderful woman she is). But Adele is just one person. She lives in Dublin, away from all the excitement of ‘the sterling area’ as the Irish Times euphemistically calls the North. Our relationship grew: meals together, days out, sleepovers, weekends away, talk of moving in together. I was enjoying her company immensely, just taking one day at a time, not thinking of the future then came, “My parents would like to meet you.”

This statement ranks up with, “Would you like to come up for coffee?” as one of the great euphemisms of our time. Seven simple words. Adele’s parents wanted to check out their future son-in-law. Adele deemed me suitable marriage material. Adele wanted to spend the rest of her life with me.

Of course, I agreed. What could be more innocent than a cup of tea and few sandwiches? Perhaps disappearing off to the pub for a pint or two with her dad to sort out the problems Manchester United were having with their defence this season. Bonding - father and son-in-law, nothing to it...

I was physically trembling as I approached Derry. I had been to the North before - a hiking trip in the beautiful Mourne Mountains with Adele. We had stopped one night in a B+B though I admit I didn’t sleep very well. Not because of the twenty kilometres we had hiked across the Mournes, not because of Adele’s passion, but because I was paranoid. Our landlord made three phonecalls that evening. I was certain that each call was to a hitman who would come round and pump our bed – and us - full of holes. However my body was still intact when I woke up. The breakfast orange juice was not laced with Rohypnol. I had clearly been a lucky man.

The landlord in the Mournes had had just a few hours, perhaps not enough time to rustle up a suitable man with a suitable weapon. Adele’s parents had had three weeks’ notice. I don’t know what Adele had told her parents about me but we wouldn’t be able to hide the fact that I am not a good Irish Catholic boy. Should I

play up my Methodist family? I did go to Sunday school for about 8 years. Or perhaps I should play *down* my Methodist family and express an interest in Catholicism? I remember being in Egypt during the Gulf war. I had my hair cut in a barber's. The guy offered to shave me as well. I had never been shaved by someone else, so I agreed. He lathered me up, then took out a cut-throat razor. (Even remembering the name for it made me nervous). But the man started expertly scraping away my stubble, then he paused, the blade resting against my jugular vein, "Saddam Hussein is good man?"

Everyone in the barber shop stopped. What would the *agnabi* reply? Would it be the right answer? What *was* the right answer? Half the population of Egypt hated Saddam as he had invaded their Muslim brothers in Kuwait. The other half loved Saddam as he was standing up to those American infidels. Which side was my barber on? "Peace," I replied. "I wish we could all live in peace. I don't like war. War is terrible."

Those who had understood nodded in agreement. War definitely is terrible. His actual question remained unanswered but more importantly, my throat remained uncut.

I was confident that Adele's father would not offer to shave me. But I was equally sure that I would not be welcomed into the bosom of his family without a thorough interrogation. What would the right answers be this time? I wouldn't be able to fob him off with, "Peace, I wish we could all live in peace...."

Adele met me at the coach station. She had driven up a couple of days before for a business meeting. I have to confess there was a fleeting moment when I thought Adele could be involved in an elaborate plot. Being a single, footloose English male in Ireland, you are always likely to come under suspicion from certain people. But no, I knew Adele and her politics, politics I agreed with, but while Adele was a pussy cat, there were plenty of lions in the den and I was certain they were hungry for a taste of lapsed Methodist.

Her parents live in a suburb of Derry, a quiet street, lots of shrubs, manicured lawns, even gnomes. Her mother, still wearing her apron, greeted me at the doorstep, shook my hand and beamed a happy smile. A very warm welcome. I was ushered into the living room where her father sat in a large armchair. He had a small grey beard and was wearing a suit making me feel underdressed in my jacket and shirt. I sat down on the long sofa next to him, my mind suddenly empty of the usual linguistic padding of social chit chat: Lovely place you've got here. Terrible weather at the moment, but they said it should brighten up later...

Adele's father arranged the tea cups on the table. He picked up the large teapot and then looked directly at me for the first time, "Are you a MIF or a TIF?"

I had understood the words, but I still didn't understand - a MIF? A TIF? Where was Adele? Gone to help her mum in the kitchen? Just when I needed her next to me, a hand to hold, a lifebelt in my sea of insecurity... MIF or TIF? Were they political parties? Religious groups? Perhaps subgroups within MI6? The closest I've got to the Secret Service is watching James Bond films. My mind was racing. Those pale blue eyes demanded an answer. "I, I, I'm a lapsed Methodist, but I have great respect for the Catholic Church and the Pope and... and... everything..."

The pale blue eyes continued to look at me. He clearly wasn't satisfied with my answer. "Peace," I blurted. "I wish we could all live in peace. I don't like war. War is terrible."

"That it is," he said at last. "But would you like your milk in first or your tea in first?"

Jeremy Taylor October 28<sup>th</sup> 2002

<http://www.jeremytaylor.eu>