Before we begin, let me share an excerpt from a journal I wrote a few years ago.

“Another thing about growing up I find very, very scary: not being able to do exactly what I want, exactly when I want it, because I have to have a job and make a living. I’m afraid of losing my dreams and aspirations in a cloud of term papers and job searches and car payments. I want to be something, not get lost on the incredibly confusing roadmap of life.”

Passion causes pain. That passage is one of the few fears that have stayed with me over the years. Having passions strong enough to demand your attention is simultaneously a blessing and a curse. A blessing, because every moment you spent indulging them brings you rushing torrents of joy, and a curse, because every moment you spend away from them creates an escalating tantrum in your soul, screaming for your attention like a neglected toddler. Symptoms such as this should be more than enough to encourage people to drop everything to attend that yowling need inside. Yet reality is not kind to the starving artist. It demands gas in the car and shoes on your feet and food on the table, needs which fits of passion are sadly inept at filling. So, the ultimate struggle becomes whether it is possible to keep ourselves in stable physical and social condition while still nurturing the screaming toddlers in our souls.

This is not the first time I have kept myself awake with this dilemma, and what I have concluded is this. There are two options, and neither of them are perfect. You can let your sensible mind and your impassioned soul have a custody battle over your life, giving one your nine-to-five and the other one evenings and weekends, or whatever combination you can manage to arbitrate. The other is to make your passion serve your practical needs. There’s a career for everything nowadays, if you’re willing to go out and find it, and chances are that you can make it work. There are ups and downs to both options, and knowing which one to choose requires a deep, conscious knowledge of who you are.
When one looks at the Internet and marketing worlds, it becomes clear that compromising between passion and practicality is the path most people choose. It’s why the Internet has proliferated with how-to videos and hobby sites. It’s why companies like L.L. Bean and A. C. Moore make a killing on adventure equipment and art supplies. It’s a solid, secure way to make sure you can provide for yourself while still keeping that little life-giving fire alive. It provides you with a cushion, in a way, so that if that hope of pursuing your passion fails, you aren’t left destitute. This, however, is a self-fulfilling prophecy, and the great drawback of the compromise. Making your passion into a hobby means that it will never become more than that. You cannot maintain a failsafe and still hold onto the dream of “eventually” doing what you love; there simply isn’t enough time left to nurture those skills.

If you can accept that, you’ve found your balance. But if you can’t, if you know that you will look at Olympic athletes and professional artist and concert pianists and say to yourself, *that could have been me,* then finding happiness with a compromise will be your daily challenge.

People who manage to fuse passion and practicality are the ones we all envy. Think of people like Paul McCartney and Michael Phelps and Stephen King. These are people who absolutely love what they do, and, to put the icing on the cake, they get paid to do it. They feel larger than life, but to live like this is not beyond reach. A discerning and creative mind can see the career inside the passion, however hidden it might be. You don’t have to have a showy, popular skill in order to turn it into a living; there are thousands of people-teachers, writers, designers—who managed to wrangle an ethereal passion into a professional box. The drawback is this. Being possible makes it neither easy nor a guarantee. You will probably be poor, sleep deprived and disillusioned for at least a little while, and you have to decide if you are willing to weather disappointment, unpredictability and the potential for failure. It takes grit, and a lot of it. Aiming for a passion-driven career is often a leap of faith, with no promise of a safe landing, and not everyone can bring themselves to take that chance.
The question of which path to take is, in essence, a self-searching question, and neither option is inherently better than the other. People who thrive on adventure, who have that burning desire inside of them, and who have the grit to stick it out can handle a passion-driven career. People who are pragmatists, who need structure and stability, and who have the humility to accept failing to reach the top may not feel the need for one. There are those who will be torn—not only between practicality and passion, but between multiple passions, between their own desires and the needs of others, between their goals and their circumstances. Reaching either solution is a commendable feat, and simply keeping on long enough to do so requires all one’s strength of passion and power of will.
An Unexpected Journey

I am tired of sitting next to the fat man who smells like roasted red peppers. I have been sitting next to him for ten long hours, ever since my flight left from Los Angeles. So far, he has slept for two hours and sixteen minutes, scratched his armpits, and burped twice.

I am pretending the red pepper man is my only problem so that I don’t have to think about the real problems in my life at the moment. I imagine that when I stand up and step off the plane, I will see my parents waiting for me and I will be on my way home again. But as I look out my window at the endless sea outside my window, California seems very far away.

The ‘fasten seatbelt’ light blinks on above my head, and a calm voice comes over the intercom, reminding everyone to fasten their seatbelts and turn off all electronic devices before landing. I look out my fingerprint-smudged window at the landscape that is beginning to emerge out of the fuzzy layer of clouds. I pictured Ireland as a medieval village, complete with leprechauns in coattails dancing around one of those fairy rings. For the most part, all I see is a familiar cityscape, blanketed in heavy fog, but in the distance there are huge rolling fields, green as lime popsicles, that you never see in Los Angeles.

As the plane descends, I press my head against the back of my seat and close my eyes. “Please, God, when I open my eyes, let me be back in California and all this be a nasty dream.”

I repeat this to myself as the plane bounces along pockets of turbulence. I hardly notice when we hit the runway with a thump. Next to me, someone gently taps my arm.

“Time to get off, girly.”

I open my eyes. Red pepper man is standing over me, holding my suitcase and smiling. His belly, spilling over the edge of his belt, wobbles a quarter inch from my knee.

“Thank you,” I say, trying to get out of my seat without touching him. Red pepper smell could be contagious. I reach out to take my bags.
“Don’t bother,” he says. “I’ll carry it off fer you.”

I cast red pepper man a grateful look. Maybe I can forgive him for the way he smells.

“What’s a little girl like you doin’ in Ireland all by yerself?” He asks me. He speaks with a heavy Irish accent, all mangled vowels and sharp consonants.

“Nothing. Visiting my grandmother.” I pretend to adjust my backpack, dodging the question, but he keeps going.

“Yer mum and da send ya on a holiday, did they?” He smiles and shoulders my bag.

“Um, not exactly.” I don’t turn to look at red pepper man as I walk down the long metal hallway from the plane, but he doesn’t ask any more questions.

The terminal is busy, but not really crowded. I look around for my attendant, and red pepper man stands beside me, holding my suitcase.

“Thank you.” I take the suitcase from him. He stands next to me, an uncomfortable expression on his face.

“Yes?” I ask politely. Go away, red pepper man.

“Nuthin’.” He presses a hand to the back of his sweaty neck. “Just…give the place a chance, girl. And yer gran, too.” He turns quickly and walks away, leaving me standing alone and dumbfounded in the terminal.

Apparently the Irish do not think much of adult supervision, because no attendant comes to meet me. I sit alone in the waiting area, ensconced in a very hard puke-yellow chair and listening to the myriad of accents. I count at least six different varieties of Irish in the first ten minutes, mostly at the bar. The bar. In the airport. Most of the people are drunk and shouting curse words I’ve never even heard before. Why, why had my parents done this to me? There was the fight at school, obviously, but that wasn’t even my fault. Not really. More than that was Jacob. Jacob. If I close my eyes I can still see him, his little smile when he said “Would you do anything for me, Brigid,” and I said, yes.
“BRIGID KENNEDY?”

I start so suddenly I smack my head against the wall. I look around, thinking fleetingly of killing whoever was yelling my name, when I see her. She’s a tiny, dried-out old woman, standing in the middle of the floor with her hands cupped around her mouth, oblivious to the stares she gets as she bellows my name. Oh God, this must be Gran.

“I’m right here!” My face begins to burn as I make my way across the long room. Even the drunks at the bar quiet long enough to pity me. I feel everyone’s eyes following me, saying, “Who is that poor girl?”

“It’s me, Brigid,” Up close, I see that she is even older than I thought, probably eighty, with papery skin and wrinkles that have layered in on wrinkles. The lines around her eyes deepen as she frowns, evaluating me, wondering what kind of kid I am. Her gaze is piercing.

“Hello, dear!” she says, pulling me into a rough hug, sending me stumbling back a few steps with surprising strength. Her voice is strong and her tone welcoming, but when she pulls me back and holds me at arms’ length, I see that her mouth is straight, her eyes cold and hard. My heart begins to palpitate. Did I do something wrong? Break some sacred Irish code of conduct?

When she speaks, her voice is jolly again. “Do ye have all yer tings? How was your flight? How air ye?”

Her accent is so thick and she is speaking so fast that I barely understand her, but she doesn’t seem to care, since she keeps talking without waiting for answers. She shoulders one of my bags and walks away, talking over her shoulder at me. We practically run across two terminals, three baggage claims and a food court. I am breathless by the time we reach the parking lot.
One step outside and I taste the difference in the air. LA is humid, but here I feel like I’m underwater, the air so heavy and damp I feel like I’m drowning in it. If I stay here too long, I’ll probably die of pneumonia.

“Here we are,” Gran says. We’ve dashed halfway across the parking lot and she isn’t even winded. “This,” she says, patting the fender of her car, “is Daisy.”

Daisy must be a hundred years old. Her paintjob is worn most of the way off. What’s left of it is a sickly pale green. Her fenders are dented like she’s been in a thousand accidents, a crack runs across the windshield, and one of the rearview mirrors is swinging from a wire.

“It’s…nice,” I say. “It has a lot of-character.”

The cold look returns to Gran’s eyes. She gets into the car, hugging the steering wheel in defense.

“I got this car in nineteen-fifty five,” she says, “when I was a little girl of seventeen.”

She motions impatiently for me to get in,

I nod. “I see.”

Gran smiles tightly. “Nobody knows a good thing when they see it anymore,” she says, and gives me a look that lets me know that I am a member of that sorry lot. I bite my tongue hard to hold back remarks about several things better than her junk-bucket-friendly grandparents, for example. I don’t need to get on her bad side just yet. As the hard silence stretches out, though, I begin to wonder if I am already there.

“So, do you live in town?” I ask cautiously.

“Outside of town on a bit of land.” She says, drumming the steering wheel

“That must be nice and quiet.” I say, grasping at straws. “Do you have any neighbors?”

“Mr. Flannery,” she says. “He comes over for tea.”
I am going to live with a peppery old lady on a farm, with only an old man for company. Mom, dad, what have you done to me?

“Is it the same house my mom grew up in?” I ask. Right away, I know I’ve struck a nerve. Gran’s back stiffens; her hands clutch hard at the steering wheel. I’m afraid she’s going to have a heart attack right here on the road, but she just says, “Yes. It’s the house your mum grew up in.”

I don’t know much about my mother’s childhood. The story always starts with her meeting my father at eighteen. I asked her about it once, years ago. She was standing at the counter, washing dishes or cutting vegetables or something, and her back stiffened and her hands tightened just the way Gran’s did, and she was silent for a long time before she finally said, “Nothing special, I suppose, though growing up in Ireland was a mite different from growing up here.”

I left it at that.

“Almost there,” Gran says. “Just a ways up the little road.”

I just sat there, staring at the foggy, tree-lined pebble road before me. Gran has returned to her stony silence. I wonder if she is naturally taciturn, or if she is doing it especially for me.

The house comes into view through the thick fog. It is too dark to see much, but I can tell even through the blackness that it is tiny, maybe four rooms, and there are no lights on. Maybe it’s silly, but the house looks lonely all the way up here, on this tiny road.

Gran parks the car in a space next to the door. There is no garage. I see a stack of firewood sitting next to a chopping block, and I wonder at how this tiny old lady manages to chop all the wood herself.

“Is the door unlocked?” I ask. Gran nods and swings a suitcase out of the trunk. “No need to lock anything up out here.”
I marvel at that. In LA, you didn’t go out to get the paper without locking the door.

“I can carry my suitcase,” I offer, but Gran just shakes her head. “Get on in, girl.”

I swing my backpack over my shoulder and go up the two creaky steps and into the spare little cottage. Inside is dark, and the light switch produces a thin, forty-watt glow that reveals a tiny living room, with old-fashioned flowered furniture and unvarnished wood floors. The walls are white, with thin muslin curtains at the little window. I feel as if I have stepped into a Norman Rockwell painting.

“Quaint,” I murmur to myself.

“Thank ye.” Gran lugs my suitcase into the living room and plops it on the floor. She gives me a look that borders on angry. What the heck is wrong with this woman?

“Down that way.” She makes another motion with her hand. I look down the dark little hall, and suddenly I don’t want to go down there. After everything that has happened to me in the last couple of hours, the last couple of weeks, last couple of months, I simply do not want to do one more unpleasant thing.

Gran must have noticed the look on my face, because her hard expression warms a fraction. Still granite, yes, but sun-warmed granite.

“Ah, go on, little dove.” She says, “The switch is on the left. I put clean sheets on the bed for ya.”

Somehow that small kindness from this hard little woman makes my eyes burn.

“G’night.” I mutter.

The sheets smell like must and detergent. I’m tired, and hollow, and scared. I pull out my phone to call my mom, but at the top of the screen a single bar blinks, searching for a signal. I feel my heart beating in time.