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## The Wee Cottage

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# TOO MUCH PAST

By Amanda Stessen

**T**he name on the itinerary sounded perfect: “Lunch at the Wee Cottage, lovingly prepared by Avril.” I tried not to look forward to it all week. I felt uncomfortable and unsafe in Belfast. People on edge. Not wanting foreigners in their city. The Peace Wall was terrifyingly ugly. I forced myself to believe that the countryside of Northern Ireland would be the same. I couldn’t get my hopes up.

From Belfast in the east to Bushmills in the north, the bus ride took an hour and a half. Our professor prefaced the trip by telling us that the drive was considered to be one of the most beautiful in the world. But everyone slept.

The cottage looked minuscule in comparison to the mammoth main attraction, Dunluce Castle. If not for the parking lot, a person could be missed altogether. The wind made my eyes water. No point in trying to fix your hair. The sky made everything gray, but still beautiful. *You caught us on a warm day.* My teeth were chattering.

No one listened while the tour guide spoke. People were taking pictures and worrying about the pub for the night. Standing close

Illustration by Rebecca Bennett

to acquaintances that would be close friends in three months. Body heat works best when you’re the smallest in the group. Perhaps the Wee Cottage has hot tea. But it is next to a commercialized tourist attraction.

Pose, smile. Pose, goofy face. Pose, smile. My camera ran out of batteries days ago. I planned to send pictures to my parents from my friend’s camera, anyway. People always ask that you send them pictures. They seem to think that they can see what you saw in a photograph. They can’t. Even if they were with you, they wouldn’t see exactly what you saw. People spend too much time behind a camera lens—too much purpose. People spend too much time looking at pictures—too much past.

Reaching the Wee Cottage out of breath, I only saw a little elderly man inside. Not like the young waiters you would see in a big city. A couple of us walked in.

Just one room was all that was needed. Small replace at the far left wall with welcoming couch cushions facing the warmth. Tables were set all around the room, each with its own set of four place settings on top of four placemats. Large mugs my mother might use for coffee. Intricate teacups my great-grand

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mother might have used for tea. It was wonderfully—stereotypically—European.

My companions and I sat closest to the replace as others trickled in. Teakettles on windowsills. Fishing poles attached to walls. Old family photographs hung sporadically at sitting eye level. We were told to get our own bread. Homemade. Not your typical Hard Rock.

The man we saw when we first came in delicately delivered our soup with his shaking hands. The steam warmed my face immediately. You can't get soup like this in the States. It's much more like a meal. It, too, seemed homemade. Probably, by the woman who could be seen running around the back kitchen. Whose name was probably Avril.

Sandwiches complemented the soup. The sandwiches were simple. Not much on them. Placed in little sandwich bags like Dad used to pack in my brown bag lunch. The details make things interesting. A tea pot was being passed around. My friends made me pour. It's difficult to master pouring a full teapot. Perhaps it was because I was still cold, perhaps it was because I was already in love with the Wee Cottage, but the tea tasted better than usual.

Finally, scones were passed around for dessert. A heap of real cream sat on top. A crumb was not left. The man who delivered the soup asked about the re. We all looked at it, but he was already putting another log on. I barely noticed that the

front door was left open.

The probably-Avril and the man-who-put-a-log-on-the-re posed in a picture with all of us; all 25 of us. I don't know how we managed to squeeze in front of the re place, but I wasn't paying too much attention. I was still fascinated by the cottage. White and cream colored porcelain dishes. Boating oars. Fake owers. The only theme seemed to be kitsch.

I nished my soup last. I nished my sandwich last. I nished my scone last. I nished my tea last. I hate being a tourist. But I didn't want to leave.

Good thing I have the pictures.

