

## The Blarney Stone (a true story)

Our yard stretches out in front of an old bungalow on a shady street in one of Nashville's few historic districts. There's a plaque on the five-point junction around the corner, which tells you that the trolley cars used to run here back in the twenties. I'm not sure how long our house has been there, but there are huge elm trees in the front yard that are very close to the porch and rise up to pass the upstairs window, right past our attic, higher and higher, "up to the moon," as I tell my son.

Just the other night I spent a lot of time running around those trees, going in circles. It was a beautiful summer evening, about seven p.m., with a little bit of dusk falling in the sky and a soft breeze blowing across the yard. My little boy and I were having a good time of it, playing "throw the ball," and "peekaboo." "More Daddy, Daddy funny" Jude shouted and laughed, as I ran around one tree, across the sidewalk, around the other and up on the porch. Huffing and puffing, on it went, I had to pace myself, but in the end, I knew I'd die to make his life better than mine. But, as the sweat running down my back cooled me, I reminded myself that this fatherhood thing was a marathon, not a sprint, and as fun as this was, there were lots more to come.

Jude must have sensed my thoughts, for as I jumped, dashed, and bolted one last time, he stood up and got off the front steps, feet first, as we've taught him. Then, his legs worked it, small steps catapulted with great speed, waddling forward as he pointed his finger into the air. He held a small letter "j" in the other hand and shouted, "J goes Jah." He was 18 months old, but already with a firm mind of his own, and as I watched him, I realized he was running off to make "weeshes." Through the grass he went,

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"grassy grass," he said, pointing at his shoes, "big boy shoes," came the utterance, and finally, he reached a dandelion worthy of a weesh. He reached down to pick it up and snatched it from the ground. Then, he handed it to me, saying "weeshes." This is the signal that I'm supposed to blow the seeds into the air. But, first I asked, "what do you want to wish for, Jude?" And, he said "Daddy." And so, I blew, he laughed, and the seeds shot into the still air, falling lightly on the grass, where they will take root again, and ultimately, turn into more wishes. "More weeshes," he shouted, "more weeshes."

Later that night, I ventured into the junk room for some clean-up work. The junk room is one of two low-ceilinged loft rooms upstairs. Sometimes the junk room is also called the music room or the writing room, depending on how I'm trying to feed my ego and make a few extra bucks that particular week. If you head up our cat-fur-infested stairs and turn left, you'll find a jumbled array of stuff worthy of any good pack rat. There's my portable recording studio, an old Wurlitzer piano, and an electric guitar in the corner. A picnic basket my parents used to use when they were courting sits under the piano and is filled with an array of cords and microphones. A shelf full of old LPs and 45s sits against the opposite wall, covered with Beatles memorabilia given to me over the years. Next to it, a wooden cabinet full of cassettes and DAT tapes of old gigs, and next to that, our back-up computer, which sits on a hassock that is filled with old Chicago Cubs programs. Throughout the room there are filing cabinets—they are filled with tax receipts, old writings, press clips, playbills, school diplomas and transcripts, and the like. And, in the remaining corner, there are about ten boxes of junk I've been meaning to clear out of there ever since we moved in. Junk in neat little black and white boxes, that fold-up kind you buy at Office Max, each one labeled with a sharpie pen, junk preceded by the appropriate adjective.

Four of them read "Photo Junk."

I don't know how I got to be such a picture taker, I guess it goes back to my family roots, my dad's cameras and home movie projectors. Christmas morning with flood-lights felt like Hollywood sometimes and heated us up enough to catch a tan and I'm exaggerating, but only slightly. Each year, kodachrome shots of the birthday cake, the opening of the gifts, and my brother's latest girlfriend in the background, you could bind them all and make a flipbook. Since then, technology has improved and the video cam and the

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APS pocket camera are so lightweight and portable, I suppose that only contributes to the abundance of documentation. As a photographer, I never really get too technical; I just snap away and try to treat my subject in an interesting fashion. Turn the camera a little, get a vibe, put the subject at the side and frame something interesting going on behind—nothing fancy, really. I used to be very diligent about getting our still prints developed and into photo albums immediately, arranging them along with ticket stubs and program stubs, and clippings from the newspaper, little bound collages, personal works of art, to be viewed at some later date, by me, Molly, or, someday, our child. Sometimes I'd romanticize about whose eyes would see those books.

As time went on, however, and particularly after we got married, our busy lives got busier, and the memories piled up and didn't get into the albums and before you knew it, I couldn't be bothered, I was too far behind. From time to time, I'd think about catching up but always put it off. This was symbolic, in a sense, as if we were living a life where our past had some meaning, the present was everything and the future, well, who knew? Several people told me our lives would change forever once our child came onto the scene, and they were so right, in so many ways, all positive, many that I could have never imagined. As the future took shape, its significance was reinforced, and underscored.

Of course, to move into the future, you've got to clean up your past. I picked a photo box at random, opened the lid and sifted through some papers and programs and itineraries that covered the pictures below. It was Photo Junk Box 2 and it didn't take me long to identify it as the box belonging to a European tour I did in the fall of 2001. This was a five-week jaunt to promote a new record released on a Dutch label. I left out of Chicago O'Hare on October 11<sup>th</sup> (amidst National Guard reserves in the airports and national terrorist paranoia in full-force) and landed across the pond, in Amsterdam Schiphol (amidst a nation riding around on bicycles, well-oiled, and relaxed). After the Netherlands, the itinerary took me by train to London, by car up to Scotland, and on the ferry over to Ireland. It was rough being away from Molly for that long, but fortunately she was embroiled in student teaching at the time, very busy, and the timing for us and opportunities for the new record looked good. As I sorted through maps of London and Edinburgh and Dublin, tube tickets, and handbills for my shows, I remembered the anticipation mixed with the dread, and the successes mea-

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sured with the occasional disappointments. All my tours have been like that, really.

After digging past the souvenir papers, I reached the first sheaf of photos, opened up the "24-hour processing" envelope and looked inside. Shuffling through the stack, I saw shots of Ireland, the Blarney Castle, me kissing the Blarney Stone, the wishing pond, the stairs leading down from the castle, and the destinations that followed—Cobh, Clonakilty Cork, and Dublin. Ireland was the least enjoyable part of that particular tour, only because it was at the end of a very busy and tiring itinerary. The Irish leg was short and there was very little time to sightsee, the Blarney Castle being one of the exceptions. It was located right off the N20 between Limerick and Cobh, which gave me enough time for a quick looksee on my drive down, before my soundcheck at the Sirius Arts Centre.

My anticipation for this Castle visit had been great, not only because it was a rare chance to do something on my own time, but because the drive from Limerick took an inordinate amount of that precious time, roads twisting and turning and winding, speed limits going up and down like hummingbirds. Nothing like the M1 in England or Autobahn of Germany, Irish roads are like the backroads that take one through the small towns of Wisconsin or Iowa once you venture away from the neverland of the U.S. Interstate. When I was growing up in Chicago, I used to romanticize over the loss of the back roads in the states, but then I started playing music and became enamored of getting places quicker. Lately, I've been taking my time again, but that's another story.

Most folks have heard of the Blarney Stone, but whenever I talk about it with someone, I've found that there's some difference of opinion as to what can be had from kissing the fabled rock. Some say you get a wish; others say it makes you more eloquent. In modern lingo, it can give the kisser the "gift of gab" or if you go back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a French consul said you "gain the privilege of telling lies for seven years." And, one must check in with Queen Elizabeth I, who reportedly coined the phrase "blarney" due to her frustration at Lord Blarney's ability to talk endlessly without ever actually agreeing to her demands. My feeling is that in the end, kissing the Blarney Stone is like a lot of things—the kisser is the judge, it is your experience, and you get out of it what you put into it.

After bearing with the N20 through all the twists and turns, I made it to Blarney Castle around 3:30 in the after-

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noon on a brisk November afternoon. The seasons were changing, and the airs were getting cooler, and the days were getting shorter. Leaving my "motor in a car park," I walked past the souvenir shop and paid my admission. Then, I passed through the gate and onto the grounds of the castle, which are deeply green, picturesque, and tranquil. The River Martin winds through the quiet, past pear, beech, and ever-green oaks. Over yonder I saw a druid circle of stones called the Rock Close, which included a sacrificial altar and a witches kitchen, conjuring up visions of Macbeth. But darkness wasn't far from coming on and the grounds would be closing soon, so I skipped the brew and hurried over the wooden bridge and up the grassy hill, to the entrance of the castle. I walked with big paces, and then ran a little bit, and soon I was there.

The Blarney Castle began life as a hunting lodge in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the castle itself being a tower house that was built five centuries later. The Blarney Stone is believed to be half of the Stone of Scone, which was originally a possession of the Scots. The other half is in Edinburgh Castle, where coincidentally or not, I'd visited just before taking the ferry to Ireland. Robert the Bruce gave the stone to Cormac McCarthy in return for his support in the Battle of Bannockburn. Legend has it that Scottish Kings were crowned over the stone because it was believed to have special powers.

What I didn't know until I entered the castle was that the stone itself sits high up in the battlements, and I'd need to draw on some of those special powers to get to the top. I'm terribly afraid of heights, particularly on staircases or ledges with open spaces. Once I entered the castle, the dusky light that had been blanketing the grounds vanished, replaced by an abrupt blackness. I stopped for a second to let my eyes adjust and my dark glasses lighten. I looked up and realized it was going to be tough going; in front of me was an endless row of narrow stone steps heading up, up, up. The staircases in this castle were built to be intentionally narrow and steep so only one invader at a time could come up the steps. And the windows were very narrow, which darkened the interior but also provided defense, so arrows couldn't come in from the outside.

On the other hand, windows helped close in the space a bit, which gave me a little psychological security and a boost to continue upward and into the black. I thought back to the time I'd been to the Statue of Liberty in New York and hung out at the base of the structure, stopped by fear

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from venturing up to the torch. Or the time my family visited the Gateway Arch in St. Louis and my mother started telling all the other tourists in the observation deck that the structure was swaying. Or the time I was supposed to go to the top of the Sears Tower in Chicago while my brother went to the top of the Hancock Center, the plan being to get on the observation decks and wave to each other through the quarter-run telescopes. I never made it off the elevator. This time, however, my plan wouldn't fail. Destiny was nebulous to me, yet I felt strangely destined to make it up those rickety stairs to the top, to rise up, so to speak, and kiss the fabled stone. It was a mission, something greater than a much welcome break from my incessant tour movements. So, I wet my lips, put my head down, and raced up those stairs as fast as my knees could take me, slight flashes of light piercing the darkness whenever a window passed me by.

Magic or coincidence, I don't know, but all these thoughts rifled through my head like a deck of cards and the next thing I knew I'd made it to the top of the castle without fainting, throwing up, or retreating. As the staircase ended, I stumbled into the open air, a stone clearing of sorts, with no ceiling or high walls to hold me in. Catching my breath, I stopped still and saw green fields below stretched out across the land and to the gate from whence I came. Beyond that, the village of Blarney was visible on the distant horizon. And, directly across from where I was standing, two men were congregating around what appeared to be the stone itself. One fellow looked to be a tourist; he stood up, dusted himself off, and adjusted his fanny pack, moving his butt back and forth, tugging on his shorts. He was a bit overweight and sure enough, as I moved closer, I could see his T-shirt read "University of Indiana." He handed an attendee a couple of coins and walked towards my direction, following a path laid out along the edge of the castle roof. The walkway was very narrow, so I waited for him to pass me and start heading down the stairway before I slowly moved towards the stone, staying as far inside as I possibly could.

Now, for those of you who haven't been, once you reach the stone, you notice that there is a sizeable gap between where the surface ends and the top of the wall begins, and the stone is embedded at the top of that wall. The stone is also a little bit below the surface, so what you do is, you lay down on your back, grab two iron bars that run parallel to the wall, lean your head backwards, upside

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down, in order to kiss the stone. In other words, you're literally bending over backwards, and lowering yourself about two feet below floor level. If you open your eyes (which I wasn't about to do), you see straight through the space to the fields below. And, if this doesn't make you nervous enough, before getting in position, you're instructed to remove all beads, bracelets, glasses, and bodily decorations, lest they go flying off into space.

The other fellow I'd seen turned out to be the attendant, a middle-aged man with sandy hair, blue jeans and a tan work jacket. He could've been the ticket taker or he could've been the maintenance man or he could've been the tour guide. Yet, today, he was the keeper of the stone. He welcomed me, smiling ever so slightly as I handed him my glasses and my camera. I wondered if my face was white, and I thought about what a terrible bungee jumper I'd be if I ever wound up touring New Zealand, and I formed a wish in my head to hold onto before and during my kiss. I knew about the eloquence bit, but I figured I'd better have a wish handy, just in case, why waste it, right? And, if you're wondering, well, I wasn't casting my lot with a wish for a bungee-free future, a safe walk back down the staircase, or a return trip to the Gateway Arch. Boring wishes, those would be. And, for those who really know me, I wasn't going to wish that the Cubs would win the World Series the following year, though I must admit that one crossed my mind briefly.

My wish actually came to me quickly, so I dropped down on the mat that's laid out on the stone floor, grabbed the bars, and felt the attendant's hands hold onto my mid-section as I lowered my head. He held me firmly in place as I smacked the stone with my lips. He pulled one hand off right as I did so, which gave me a start, until the flash on my camera went off. He's got to be good at this, and that's why we tip him—he's responsible for our jewelry, lives, and photographic memories. He's not only the keeper of the stone; he's the keeper of the stories. If I'd fallen, there would've been perfect documentation for family and friends back home. Feeling powerful and brave, but also thankful it was over, I shook his hand and dropped a fiver in his tip jar. He nodded a thank you, took a rag from a little doctor's bag he had with him, and began wiping the stone clean.

As it turned out, no one else was waiting behind me, so I must have been the last kisser of the day, which no doubt would lend extra value to my wish. Indeed, he could wipe the stone off, but unless vandals snuck onto the ground, there wouldn't be another wish until the next morning. And

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so I retraced my steps, heading down to the castle base and out onto the grounds with a spring in my heart. Stopping for a second on the footbridge over the river, I looked into the water and saw dozens of coins lying at the bottom. I fished a two pence coin out of my pocket, wound up, and threw it a little further behind where most of the coins congregated. Up high in the air it went, arcing almost to the point where the moon was beginning to glimmer through the trees, low in the sky. It splashed into the water, rippling over my meditation.

It was the same wish on this coin that I'd laid on the stone, and if you're wondering, well, no, I wasn't about to put my wish around a million bucks, that just wasn't in me. And, I didn't go for my own reality show, world peace, or eternal life. No, instead I settled on something that I hoped would be as real as any wish could be, a wish that while not a trick wish, could still bring even more wishes. It was also a wish that would probably take a little time to come true, once I got back to the States and help put events in motion, which would be part of the fun of it all. So, I filed that wish for future reference.

As I was reliving all these thoughts with pictures in hand, my son woke from his nap in the next room, and came waddling in, tousled hair, and a slightly confused look on his face. "Hi Daddy," he said, and then began pointing again. "Daddy guitar," he said, directing his finger at the electric in the corner. "Boogaloo."

"Okay, Jude," I replied, putting the photos away and picking up the instrument. I started to play a little 12-bar deal with poorly improvised lyrics centering around, you guessed it, the hook phrase "do the boogaloo." He rocked up and down, in what he calls a "dancing break."

Of course he'd like to dance. After all, my son's full name is Jude Aaron Hoekstra. I must let you know, however, that the Jude bit did not come from the Beatles song, so don't start singing it, like everyone who meets him does. Ironically, when he was about three months old, after listening to a friend give us our 3,762<sup>nd</sup> accapella version of "Hey Jude," I suddenly remembered that was the first song I'd ever performed in front of an audience, back at my eighth grade talent show. But, who would name their son after that? Certainly not me.

And, before you ask the second question everyone asks, I must tell you that the Jude bit did not come from St. Jude, the patron saint of lost causes. That said, I've been in more than my share of taxis in my day, and it seems I see St.

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Jude on the dash as much as Jesus or St. Christopher. And, dig this, when my son was five months old, I was strumming my guitar, running through some old material for a show, and remembered an old song I wrote called "Slipping Through the Cracks," where I sing "St. Jude be my patron saint, deliver me while I wait." But who would name their son after one of his own song lyrics? Certainly not me. But I have thought about these signposts after the fact. Were they magic or coincidence? I wondered, and I pass that query along to you.

In the end, Molly and I sum it all up by saying that he was named Jude because we liked the way it sounded, it's a classic name, and it sounded good with Hoekstra. As for Aaron, well, that's a nod to our favorite king, the one that used to live in Memphis, and if you throw in the fact that the initials spell Jah and Jah is high praise in both Germany and Jamaica, well, it all comes together, doesn't it? J goes Jah. As anyone with children will tell you, once they are born and named, you can't imagine them being anything else. He is a perfect Jude, and I thought that from the moment he made it onto the scene.

Jude was expected to come in late October and so we figured he'd be a Libra boy. But, he had his own ideas about things, and as the leaves began to fall and the World Series came and went, we started to get into Scorpio territory with still no sign of his arrival. Our doctor, who looks and acts weirdly like David Letterman, had set a date for an appointment with us to decide whether he needed to go in and get him, so to speak. But, on the day before that appointment, at 6 a.m. on a cool autumn morning, Molly woke me and showed me where our futon had been soaked through, as if someone had emptied a gallon drum of water on it. The moment had come. She called the hospital and they told us to wait about four hours, and then come on in. We set the alarm and went back to sleep on the floor.

Around 10 a.m., we set out for the hospital, stopping at the Mapco down the street for the Sunday paper and some snacks. Looking back, it's strange how it was all so mellow and methodical. I guess I'd expected something more like an old Dick Van Dyke or Fred Flintstone episode where, as the man in the family, I'd be running around shouting like a crazy person, stuffing nightgowns and slippers into overnight bags, while my wife sat calmly waiting for me to escort her to the car. It wasn't like that at all. It was all measured, and after all, the hospital was only five blocks away, so once we got there and checked in, we began the

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rest of what would be the 24-hour show of a lifetime. All I can say about that is I don't know how women do it; if it were up to men, we'd never repopulate this world—we simply couldn't take it. Molly was amazingly focused, physically and mentally, as slowly the past burned away and the future came upon us as our little boy inched his way into the world.

Sadly, David Letterman hadn't been on duty that morning, so we were left with his colleague, a younger doctor who was extremely efficient and businesslike, albeit less jovial. Every hour, he'd come in, ask the nurse on duty about the epidural, check the clipboard at the foot of the bed, and make a notation. Then he'd stand silently, with one hand on his hip and the other extended, like a modern dancer in scrubs. And, like a partner in the dance, the nurse would run over and put a surgical glove on the free hand, pulling it tight upon his wrist. All spruced up, in he'd go, checking things out, and making sure Jude was on schedule, descending a little bit each hour. Then he'd pull out, hold up his hand, and the nurse would remove the glove. He'd make another notation and leave the nurse to continue with the coaching, checking and mopping up of the amniotic fluid, which by early morning, was literally pouring onto the floor.

It wasn't until about 5 a.m. that Jude, in the last possible hour of delivery before we'd still have to go in and get him, with a mind of his own even then, was finally, truly ready to come on down. There was a small crowd on hand by now, an extra nurse helping with the pushing, two nurses setting up the incubator, the anesthesiologist checking in and finally, the doctor, here to stay this time. He pulled up his stool and got ready to grab the glory, so to speak. Basically, throughout the evening and early morning, things like "good job" came out of my mouth in shades of regularity while I held Molly's hand and lent my moral support. But the truth was I was in awe, dumbstruck by her grace under pressure and the whole experience of seeing something happen that's never happened to you before, overwhelming to the point where it instantly becomes one of the things you'll think about on your deathbed. And all my words stopped as I saw the top of his head poke into view, all words subdued by a laugh that was equally tears of joy. He had a good head of hair for a newborn and the nurse suggested we reach down and feel it. I did so, but Molly passed, because true to form, she just wanted to keep on pushing. The doctor thought Jude might need a little help, so got out the vacuum and told us that on the next push he was going

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to give a little tug. Here we go, get ready, he timed it, 1,2,3, Molly pushed hard and out he came in one big motion, all arms and legs, POOF, Jude was here. The doctor held him up, he looked straight at me, seemingly clear and focused, as if to say, "Hello, Dad."

The cord was cut, and he was carried to his mother, where he latched on immediately and began feeding. In five seconds, my entire perception of the world had changed, for when I saw my son's face, an old proverb popped into my head. "There was never a time when you or I did not exist. Nor will there be any future when we shall cease to be." I couldn't remember where I'd heard that, but it perfectly summed what I had seen in my son's eyes. Later, I looked up the quote and it turned out to be from the Bhagavad-Gita, a long way from our little hospital room to my heart, but it was also indicative of how great distances had suddenly now become much closer.

The next day I made a few calls from the hospital. After family, I got in touch with the folks at Hatch Show Print, who were in the process of putting together a stylish ink-pressed birth announcement for us. We'd already talked about specs, and I'd given them his name ahead of time, but now the details needed to be filled in. Congratulations came upon answer, and I continued with 5:49 a.m., 8 lb., 15 oz., 22 inches. Then, the girl at the shop asked me, "and what date was it, today?"

"Oh yes, of course, how could I forget," I said, elated but sleep deprived. "This morning, so that's November 4, 2002."

After I hung up the phone, I thought about that.

Throughout our years together, I've fallen into a strange habit of commenting to Molly on things from the calendar, like "hey, a week ago today we went to Cheekwood" or "a month ago today my folks were in town," or "six months ago we were on our way to New Mexico." She humors me, but I must say in some simple way, it fascinates me, as if time doesn't really move from here to there, but around us, because often memories are so vivid they feel as if they are recurring like so many points of a circle, revolving endlessly. And, so those numbers, with that year, lingered with me. I pulled open the journal I'd brought with me to take notes on the delivery and I paged backward, and as I did so, the focus became sharper and I remembered something that happened exactly a year before, flat on my back on the top of the Blarney Castle.

Magic or coincidence?

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I'll leave that for you to decide. But I've got my answer.

That's the thing about Jude, he always asks for more wishes, and who can argue with that? He came on a wish and brought wishes back into our lives. Someday we'll all go to the Blarney Stone together, and I'll show him where I walked, and I'll pass my wish along to him. I know he'll use it well.