

Walking with Beckett

**A self-guided audio walking tour through Belfast's University Quarter
You will need a smart phone and your own headphones**

The route is inspired by the works of Samuel Beckett

TRACK 1 / LOCATION 1 OUTSIDE CRESCENT ARTS CENTRE, UNIVERSITY ROAD

Imagine a young woman sitting alone in a café. On the table in front of her is an empty espresso cup and saucer. She looks through the window into the street, watching the world go by.

Look and listen with her as you wind your way through this fascinating corner of the city, spotting scenes straight out of Beckett as you go.

An espresso, please!
The second of the morning.
There will be more.
They mark the time passing.
I come here when I can.
It makes life seem more ... normal.
They hardly notice me now.
But they are polite.
They ask me for my order.
They do not presume.
Even though I am young - though not as young as I look -
They treat me with respect.
They know not to clear the cups.
I like to see them clustered around the table, counting down the hours.

Have I enough to pay my bill?
Yes. It was a good week.

From this table, always the same table, I watch the world turning.
Those men are still there, under that tall tree.
In spring, it is frothing with pale blossoms
Until the April winds bring them cascading down
Like snow in sunshine.
I cannot think they are there to admire its beauty.
They were there when I first came here,

When the branches were gnarled and grey.
Will they still be there when winter strips them bare again?

TRACK 2 / LOCATION 2
LOWER CRESCENT/BOTANIC AVENUE

Lower Crescent is the street alongside the Crescent Arts Centre.
Pause.

Look up and down street as though seeing it through the girl's eyes.

What *are* they waiting for?
Watching for? Who?
They shift from foot to foot, they look up and down the street.
People come and go, but not, it seems, the right people.
They exchange a few words
And they laugh, but not with happiness - or so it appears to me.
They glance at the building across the way –
It's a church – of course.

This place is coming down with churches.
It's a God-fearing place, they say.
Me, I'd prefer it were Godot-fearing.
Just stand here and count.
One, two, three –
All shapes and sizes and denominations,
Even a Moravian Church, over there.
God help us.

The men wait.
The street goes about its business.
Nobody comes. Nothing happens.
A clock chimes in the distance.
Ten unhurried single notes.

Proceed along Lower Crescent with the Crescent Gardens on the right hand side.

The Crescent.
Back in Victorian times
This building was a girls' school –
One of the first in Ireland.
It was called, wait for it,
The Ladies' Collegiate School.
That counts me out, then.

I come and sit here in the gardens on sunny days.
The view is pretty, the company ... not so pretty.
People drowning their sorrows.
I know the feeling.

This is a city of writers.
Seamus Heaney the most famous.
He taught here, at the university.
Others too – poets and playwrights,
Saints and scholars.

Look to the left while walking down Lower Crescent.

See, they even call that bar The Playwright.
Poetic inspiration over a pint of Guinness.

Continue to the bottom of Lower Crescent and pause at junction with Botanic Avenue. Look across the street to Empire Bar.

The Empire.
A watering hole for comedy shows and music.
If you sit on the steps you can hear the music inside –
For free.
Which suits me.
Oh yes, and what was it in a former life?
You got it ... a church!

**TRACK 3 / LOCATION 3
BOTANIC AVENUE / VINTAGE & RETRO / CHARITY SHOPS**

Turn left onto Botanic Avenue. Walk down street to Vintage & Retro on opposite side of street.

On the stroke of ten, old Mr. Maguire opens up his shop.
In the windows are mannequins wearing heavy coats, silk scarves, leather handbags.
Not fashionable. Faded, dowdy.
The display never changes.
One of the mannequin's wigs has slipped.
She looks drunk.
He surveys his window and seems satisfied.
He pulls down a yellow plastic blind against the sun.
It turns the mannequins' complexions jaundiced and unhealthy.

He crosses to this boarded-up restaurant.
Terrible things happened around here years ago.
In the dead of night, you can still hear the echoes.
I know.
This was my patch.
A woman and her children sleep in that doorway every night.
The children are so small, one only a toddler.
They are so trusting of their mother.
He hands her a fistful of coins.
They exchange not a word.
Soon the oldest boy - is he eight, perhaps? –
Will take the money and go to the shop .
He will come back with bread and cheese and milk.
She is sad and worn but does she not realise that she is lucky -
To have Mr. Maguire save her life every day?

Turn around and walk back up Botanic Avenue, passing a string of charity shops.

You can get good clothes here
Really cheap.
Offcasts. Unwanted. Discarded.
Sounds familiar.

I must get some winter shoes,
Lord knows I need them.
The pavements are cold and damp.

I'm sure that woman doesn't buy her clothes here.
Not that long grey coat, with the green velvet collar.
That's quality.
She is elegant, with a well-turned ankle, as my mother would say -
Would have said.
Beautiful shoes, perfect make-up.
I see her often.
I call her Marianne.
So long, Marianne - my favourite song.
Sister of Mercy or Daughter of Christ.
Or just ... a sister, a daughter?
Yes, a daughter ... like me.

**TRACK 4 / LOCATION 4
BOTANIC AVENUE / DR. YANG'S CHINESE MEDICAL CLINIC**

Stop at the Chinese medicine shop on left hand side of Botanic Avenue.

She goes into this door, always the same door.
Dr. Yang's Chinese Medical Clinic.
Then into the pharmacy next door.
As usual, she emerges weighted down with boxes and packages.
She crosses the street towards me.
Is she coming to speak to me?
I panic.
Why me?
But no ...

A gust of wind catches her coat and blows it up and open.
Underneath I see clearly, a nightgown, stained and torn.
No underwear.
And her make-up, thick, clogged, layered upon layer.
A crimson gash of lipstick.
She drops the packages. They scatter everywhere across the pavement.
She scrambles to pick them up.
I watch, paralysed.
She clutches them to her and scurries away.
She disappears into a once-grand Victorian building.
Shabby, run down now - like her.
And me.

Continue walking along Botanic Avenue.

The waiter in the café told me that she lives with her invalid mother,
Who is sick and mute.
She cares for her alone.
The old woman is a tyrant; she allows her daughter no sleep, night or day.
She paces the floor, exhausted.
At least, she has a mother.
Hers is a solitary life.
Nobody comes. Nothing happens
I recognise that feeling
In her former life, she was an actress, he says.
She appeared at the Arts Theatre back down the street –
It's a bingo hall now.
She was famous, celebrated.
Her stage name was Gabriella.
He does not know her real name.
Does anyone, any more?

THEOLOGICAL COLLEGE

Continue walking along Botanic Avenue.

We call this street the United Nations.
There's food from all around the world.
My mouth waters.
Mexican, Indian, Japanese, Chinese,
Italian, Cuban, Egyptian, Nordic, Turkish,
Lebanese, American, Nepalese,
My favourite, The French Village.
And a new one – the Sahara Shi Sha Café.

Continue along Botanic Avenue, crossing the junction with University Street.

Proceed to College Green on left.

**Union Theological College, College Green
Colonnaded stone building on left hand side.**

On your left.
Now that's some building.
A serious building.
It should be.
It's a college ... for ministers ...
Of religion.
All that God-fearing stuff again.
And people wonder why this country is so ... weird.
Religion is everywhere.
Too much of it.
Much too much.

TRACK 6 / LOCATION 6 QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY LIBRARY – MAIN ENTRANCE

**Cross the university car park to Queen's University Library
A modern red brick building on left hand side.
In front courtyard is a bronze statue – Eco.**

Now, this is interesting.
Intriguing.
A hunched figure - hard to tell if it is male or female -
Appears out of nowhere, pushing a wheelchair.
His - or her - passenger, such a sight!

He looks like an emperor.
He is wearing an embroidered dressing gown, a filthy fez
And dark glasses, taped in place.
He shouts commands in a loud, imperious voice
And addresses his carer as 'Dog'.
'Dog'? How dare he!
Yet beneath the bravado, he seems fearful,
Covering his face when people approach,
Begging his servant to turn back.
But his servant will not turn back and carries on defiantly ...
In the direction of two tall red bins outside a toy shop.
They stop at the bins.
The servant starts to lift the lids - one handle in each hand.
The master's voice rises ... and rises.
He's hysterical now, screaming with ... with what - terror, disgust, loathing?

The servant winks and lifts the lids wide open.
Out pop two people. People?
Old, toothless, grinning - or grimacing - it's hard to tell.
'Surprise!' shouts the servant.
The wrinkled faces grin on, as the screams reach a crescendo.
The owner of the shop rushes out.
He sees the puppets staring out from their bins.

The emperor is screeching at one of them.
I can just make out the words.
"Eco! Eco!
How dare you laugh!
Mama! Papa! Dog! Dead! Dead!
Dog!"
But Dog has departed, perhaps in search of another, less demanding master.
Eco grins on.
The man is left alone, slumped in his wheelchair.
Another person abandoned to the Belfast streets.
Nobody takes notice.
Silent now, he puts his head on his chest and falls asleep.
I think he is asleep. He is not moving.

TRACK 7 / LOCATION 7
BOTANIC GARDENS / PALM HOUSE - TROPICAL RAVINE

**Turn left at front of University Library and walk through pillars and gates
into the
Botanic Gardens.**

An oasis in the heart of the city.
A man on a bench.
Sad, lonely.
Staring into space.
Homeless, I think.
I can read the signs.
Three schoolboys are taunting him,
Resplendent in their blazers and striped ties..
Throwing coins for him to pick up off the ground.
Wee scumbags.
Little rich boys.
I know their type too.
I shout at them.
And they start throwing stones at me,
Calling me names –
Hey, Ginger! Ginger Pussy!
So ... I have red hair.
They chase me.
I stand my ground and, for a moment, they retreat.
The man sits on, staring into space.
An everyday occurrence.
They start to walk my way again.
How dare a mere woman confront their adolescent masculinity.

Enter the Victorian Palm House.

I run into The Palm House,
Perennially calm, soothing, full of life.
I raise my face towards the rich greenery.
I drink in its rampant growth.
It's warm.
It's free.
They've gone.
Game over.

Follow signposts to the Tropical Ravine. Enter Tropical Ravine and explore interior.

Another place of refuge.
My, those Victorians, they sure knew how to grow plants.
Ferns, palms, banana trees.
Such beauty in the flowers ...
Hibiscus, orchids, water lilies.
Tropical and temperate,
Another world,
Other worlds.

TRACK 8 / LOCATION 8**ULSTER MUSEUM ATRIUM / GATES OF QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY**

Walk across the lawn and into the glass-fronted main entrance of the Ulster Museum.

Now, this building is my cup of tea.
Others hate it.
A mixture of old and new.
A Victorian architectural treasure -
Or a Brutalist horror, depending on your taste.

Walk into the Atrium.

They call this the Window on the World
All the museum laid out in a single place.
Meet our dinosaurs.
You'll find plenty of them here -
Mostly human.
Many political.

Exit Ulster Museum onto Stranmillis Road.

Turn right and walk short distance to traffic lights on University Road.

Turn right, walk along University Road to main gates of Queen's University.

There's no sign of the old mad woman today.
They call her Maddy – and so she is.
That man who sweeps the street is so good to her.
Bless her, she is always weeping.
One day I heard her tell him that it had all come back to her.
What had come back?
Who *is* Minnie?
She murmurs the name quietly all the time, as though searching for her.
“Minnie. Minnie. Minnie. Minnie ...”
On a bad day, she will suddenly screech “Dan!
Come back here to your old wife!”
I long to help her.
I know what it is to lose, to search, not to find.
Children lose parents.
Parents lose children.
Sometimes ... deliberately.

**TRACK 9 / LOCATION 9
INTERIOR QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY / CLOISTERS / UNIVERSITY SQUARE/
QUEEN'S FILM THEATRE (QFT)/BRIAN FRIEL THEATRE**

Enter gates of Queen's University, Belfast , passing statue of Queen Victoria.

Queen's University.
Our great seat of learning.
My mother – my ex-mother – would have loved me to come here.
Me too.
To study literature.
But she would have a view on that.
She dismisses his achievements:
“Literature, books, writing?
He went to the other place – the one in Dublin.
The *crème de la crème*, he called the students there.
Rich and thick.
He's a scream, isn't he?
That's where he came by his crazy scribblings and oddball characters.
They'll get you nowhere, mark my words.
Do something useful, accountancy, law,
Something that lands you a proper job.
Not just learning for the sake of learning.
Or to be famous, for five minutes.”

Walk through great door at main entrance and enter the Black and White Hall past the statue of Galileo.

Well, Gallileo, what do you think of that?
Learning for the sake of learning?
Shocking idea.

**Left out Black and White Hall and into the cloisters.
Walk along the covered way on the left hand side of the quad.**

The students call this the Wailing Wall,
It's where they go to find their exam results.
Lifetime pathways plotted, in a single moment.

Exit quad on left hand side and onto University Square, a long terrace of Georgian red brick houses.

Turn right along University Square, passing (No. 20) Queen's Film Theatre & Brian Friel Theatre

No 20.
A theatre and a cinema all rolled into one.
“He’d be in his cabbage patch here.
Right at home.
In his element,” my mother would say.
They train people to be actors,
Pretending to be other people,
Invading other lives,
Real lives. Imaginary lives.
And those people who tell the actors what do -
Directors?
How to dress, what to say,
How to say it.
Even how to move around –
Without bumping into the furniture.
“He’s like God in there”, she says.
“They repeat his words
“Fail better’. “We must go on’ ...
Those stale old lines.
One day one of them will rise up
And defy those words.
A silent defiance.
The best kind.

TRACK 10 / LOCATION 10
UNIVERSITY SQUARE, BOTANIC AVENUE / NO ALIBIS BOOKSHOP

Walk down University Square.
Turn left, onto Botanic Avenue.
Cross the junction with University Street.
Continue walking on left hand side of street

Listen, there’s something I need to tell you.
Last week in the café, I heard a voice.
“This one’s on me”.

I hadn’t noticed him come in,
Take a seat at the next table.
I’d seen him before - of course.
Many times.
But never any contact.
Until then.

He has a thatch of grey hair, a hard yet sweet face,
Pale, far-seeing eyes.
I admire the cut of his worn tweed jacket and the soft twill of his shirt.

There was a time when I was pretty and wore good clothes.
That was before ...
Before.

He always has a notebook in front of him,
Sketching and 'scribbling',
As my mother calls it.
He retreats to his own space - and I to mine.
He orders a cheese toasty.
I wish my coins would stretch to one.
I think about asking him.
But no. Absolutely not.
When it arrives, he eats it absently, while reading his newspaper.
I take out a half eaten biscuit, dropped by a passing child.

His chair scrapes back.
He gets up, gathers his papers and packs them carefully into his leather satchel.
Except one.
He looks directly at me.
Unnerving.
Then he smiles - just about -
Low wattage.
A faint twinge of familiarity.
No.
Ridiculous.
He leans over, places the paper in front of me
And walks out.

It's a pencil drawing - of me.
Unmistakably me - at home.
He knows?
What does he know?
Does he know where she is, the disappeared?
He must have seen me, outside the Empire.
I live - I have lived there, ever since ... that day.
I have my reasons.

I have come to know the ways of the street.
I have my own survival routes.
I know places to go to be warm and safe.
At night, different, scary.
Friends are few, but trusted.
I lay my blankets over the grills in the pavement -
To keep them warm in the hot air rising.
When I go out, nobody disturbs them.
I try to keep myself decent.

Perhaps he has dropped a few coins into my cup,
Perhaps he has left me a sandwich for my breakfast,
A worn-out coat, an old pair of shoes.
Perhaps ...
People are kind.
Yes, he knows.
There's a title across the drawing -
Me Here, Me.
What else might he write?

Arrive at No Alibis bookstore on left hand side of Botanic Avenue.

He comes in here often.
Probably in pursuit of himself.
His name is on so many covers.
Maybe I'll find myself there,
On one of those shelves.
I have no alibis.
No place to hide.
So ... is that it?
Am I next?
Is it me here,
Me?

Enter No Alibis Bookstore

Present your booking confirmation to the staff and receive a 10% discount on your purchase.

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