

## ESSAY



# Pretty Red On the Emerald Isle

Just in time for St. Patrick's Day, our writer takes us on her journey to Ireland and back to rediscover a love for her **REDHEAD ROOTS** — even if the only authentic ones exist on her head.

**C**ARROTOP. RUSTY. GINGER. PIPPI LONG-stocking. “How original. I’ve never heard that one before,” I want to respond. “Connect the dots with my freckles? What a clever idea. Yes, that’s right, someone did leave me outside in the rain, and my hair rusted.”

As a redhead, I’ve heard all the jokes and jeers.

The only tag that didn’t make me wince was the pet name my grandfather coined. “How’s my Pretty Red?” I can still hear his sonorous voice ask, employing the tender name he’d used for me all his life. It was always “my” Pretty Red. I was always his.

I’m the sole redhead on a family tree of dark-haired relatives (including a twin brother) whose roots sink four generations in the United States. Beyond that, the branches get a little blurry. I’m often asked where my red

hair comes from and whether I’m Irish. “I don’t think so,” is my normal response.

But on a recent trip to the Emerald Isle, I began to wonder if a homeland could only be defined by ancestral roots. Could feeling at home tether me to the land too?

**Growing up in Los Angeles**, I felt there was a certain circus-freak fascination with my hair. Step right up, folks, and get your tickets to see The Bearded Lady, test your arm-wrestling skills against The World’s Strongest Man and don’t forget to feed a nickname to The Redhead before you go.

The authenticity of my hair color — a nutmeg/cinnamon/ginger blend — also provoked prolific questioning throughout the years, an inquiry my mother says would send her into orbit when strangers asked whether

her infant daughter's locks were "natural."  
 "Why would I dye a baby's hair?" was her frustrated response.

I spent my teens rubbing lemon juice onto my tresses to lighten them up, and in an attempt to obliterate my freckles, I slathered "fade-out" cream on my face, hoping the dots, and the attention to them, would obey. Dating was hell, especially in L.A., where blondes were bombshells, brunettes were sultry and redheads had "great personalities," the kiss of death in courting jargon.

I remember during college, a friend set me up with her boyfriend's roommate. On the night of the double date, while we primped at her place, the guy left a message on the answering machine.

"I'm looking forward to meeting your friend. She's cute, right? Not some red-haired, freckle-faced girl. Ha ha ha ..."

I went on the date anyway, but the remark really stung, joke or not.

When I was a kid, my mom or grandmother tended to my wounds, braiding my hair with ribbons and soothing me with verbal Band-Aids like "special" and "unique."

As I got older, however, it was my grandfather's advice that got me through. "Pretty Red," he said during one of our yearly visits, "pay no attention to boys who are colorblind."

The first time I went to Ireland was nearly 20 years later. I was in my early 40s, and once there, I wished I had visited decades earlier. Though still a minority, redheads are found in more concentration there than anywhere else in the world, and I read recently that an estimated 10 percent of the population of Ireland has red hair. At social events back home, I often felt like a zebra at the horse farm, but in Ireland there were always three or more members of my homogeneous herd roaming about.

Being a redhead anywhere is a bit like being in a club whose secret handshake blazes atop our heads. In a hotel, at a restaurant, on the street, whenever I cross paths with another redhead, there is an unspoken connection — an eye lock that I perceive to mean, "Yeah, I know what it's like."

On a more recent trip, it was instant kinship with redheaded Olive, whose fine features, fitted heels and contagious spirit seemed cut from quintessentially Irish-literary-heroine cloth. I'd met her on the vast and idyllic Liss Ard Estate in the countryside near Skibbereen, County Cork, and when I saw her at our communal dinner table, I immediately planted myself next to her. She

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told me something I didn't expect to hear: "Even though redheads are more popular here in Ireland, we were still made to feel different and awkward." Garfield, Marmalade Head, Freckles, Ginger Nut and Carrotopp were all names hurled her way.

I thought surely that red hair would be more celebrated in a land where the trait is embedded in common Irish surnames such as Flannery, meaning "descendant of the red warrior," and Flynn, meaning "son of



*"Pretty Red, you'll spend your school years trying to fit in — and the rest of your life trying to stand out. **CONSIDER YOUR HAIR A HEAD START.**"*

red-haired man." Someone took a photo of me with Olive, and when I viewed it later, I thought we looked like sisters. In a way we are, connected by recessive genes and shared experiences. As redheads do, Olive and I eventually moved on to discuss curious superstitions linked to our kind.

"Ya know, some of my cousins were involved in building the Dunbrody replica ship moored in New Ross [the homestead of John F. Kennedy]," Olive said. "They told me they had heard stories that red-haired women should not be allowed near the ship when it takes her maiden voyage. Bad luck."

Another Irish woman told me that it's considered bad luck if the first person to enter a house on New Year's Day is a redhead.

And still more. During the Middle Ages, people with red hair were sometimes thought to be witches, and even Shakespeare, I'd heard, used red wigs on his most dastardly characters. The list goes on.

During the two weeks of my most recent visit to Ireland, I'd been quizzing redheads and non alike to see if I could turn up any charms or folklore beyond banal nicknames

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and typical omens of bad luck, witchery, and hellfire and brimstone. I wasn't sure what I was looking for, but in Ireland, there's a good chance you'll find an answer — or at least have a late-night epiphany at the local pub.

Pubs are the epicenter and social glue of any Irish town — and certainly they are in tiny Portmagee, a Crayola-colored fishing

village on a rocky stretch of coast in southwest Ireland, where I'd landed for a night. Its pint-size bar with beer-sticky floors was packed with young and old, couples and singles, working and retired, all of whom had gathered like members of an extended family. Cheers and backslaps greeted new arrivals while local musicians sat on wooden stools

in the corner and jammed on odd-looking instruments. I'd struck up a conversation with the fleshy-faced, red-bearded man next to me who belted out spirited lyrics of cultural anthems I wanted to know. During a lull, I acknowledged our shared "gingerness" and asked him what wacky stories and names he's heard all his life.

"Ay, don't ya worry about dat," he said, tugging on the ends of my hair. "I always tell people that red is the color of lust and sensuality, of power, of candied apples and strawberries, of wine and of love. All things we enjoy and can't resist."

Forehead smack. I had really never heard that one before.

And until that moment, I'd forgotten something else my grandfather had once said: "Pretty Red, you'll spend your school years trying to fit in — and the rest of your life trying to stand out. Consider your hair a head start."

He was right. The whole freckle-face, carrottop thing works a little like the story of the ugly duckling. At a certain point in my late 20s, I, like most redheads, began to feel more like the swan. The splintered debris of a taunted youth eventually transformed into thick protective plumes, billowed by confidence and teeth-grit determination. And eventually, like most redheads, I learned to love my fiery hair and embrace the attention and distinctness I had once shunned.

**In a taxi on the way** to the airport on my final day in Ireland, the chatty driver looked at me in the rearview mirror.

"I can hear ya are American, but ya must have a little Irish in ya there, eh, pretty red?"

There's something about the Irish lilt that makes my knees weak and my eyes pinwheel. It took away some of the sting of hearing the beloved nickname I hadn't heard for a while.

My grandfather had died the November before my last trip to Ireland. I sat with him on the couch, holding his hand, teary-eyed, anticipating the goodbye.

"Well, Pretty Red, it looks like I won't make it until Thanksgiving," he said.

He didn't.

But in Ireland, surrounded by a coterie of Carrottops, Marmalade Heads and Ginger Nuts, I felt like I belonged. I felt my grandfather near again.

I felt like Pretty Red. ❧

**KIMBERLEY LOVATO** is a freelance writer and author from San Francisco who takes any chance she gets to celebrate her inner and outer redhead.

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