

## The verb *to be*

Brian Collins

Last night I lived in Madrid; tonight I live in Waterford. I have moved back to my mother's house, a house I have not lived in for a year and a half, and then it was only a short stint. All the times I have lived in my mother's house over the last decade have been short stints. I never foresee making my decision to move home – it always seems to occur in a moment.

I lie on my bed and look at the things left over from my youth. Some books, a portable television, a Playstation, videos, tapes, CDs, a stereo, and a few shelves filled with knickknacks. There are little replicas around the room of places my brother visited. One is of the Coliseum; another of the Leaning Tower of Pisa. When I opened the wardrobe I noticed two Liverpool football jerseys, the football team I supported as a child. On the wall there is a *Taxi Driver* poster with a caption stating: "On every street there's a nobody who dreams of being a somebody. He's a lonely and forgotten man desperate to prove

he's alive." On the back of the door there is a *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* poster. As soon as I walked into the room it reminded me of someone I knew, not someone I was.

At the end of the bed is my rucksack, and in it are the things I took from Madrid. I can picture every object and the way they are situated even though the bag is not unpacked. On the desk are the remains of a day spent travelling. Torn boarding pass, duty-free bag, two hundred cigarettes, a tub of rollie tobacco, bus ticket, metro ticket, passport, coins, and a few receipts. I want to be excited about being back in Ireland, but since I stepped off the plane I have only been able to focus on the aesthetic changes of the places I have passed through, and my memories of the last day I was here when travelling to the airport. I hope this time I can become comfortable in the town I grew up, something I was unable to manage the last few times I stayed here.

I light a cigarette and think of the thought I always plan to have before I go travelling. I look at the carpet in the middle of the room. This is where I stopped myself a year and a half ago with my rucksack in hand, just before I said my goodbyes and left. "Remember now, how I feel and what I want to do."

In April of 2008, I moved into a house in Sandyford. A Spanish girl was living there. Within a couple of months we started seeing each other. Shortly after she moved back to Madrid, I moved to Rathmines, but we talked most nights online. In November she

invited me over for a holiday, and while I was there I noticed there were lots of English teaching jobs for native speakers. Immediately I decided to move. It was not a difficult decision; I had wanted to live abroad for years.

On my return after this first visit to Madrid, I got the bus from the airport to O'Connell Street. It was cold, so I walked to Rathmines with my hood up. I felt wonderful moving between the people all the way up Grafton Street and across to Wexford Street. I was walking with my head down, something I notice myself doing a lot when I am walking on my own, looking at the movement of my feet and partly trusting my instincts so as not to crash into someone. When I got to my front door, I wanted to keep walking, so I went back down to the canal, exhilarated by the idea of moving to Madrid and the opportunity teaching offered me.

I had, at the time, very bad grammar. I had never been taught grammar, and I never seemed to need it: I studied journalism. The reader will soon come to realize that the present essay concerns a personal struggle with bad grammar, and a victory over it, that few would have believed possible. You may consider the subject too whimsical for an essay, but a battle with bad grammar, to the victor, always seems more profound than it really is.

A few months before I moved to Madrid, my mother suggested grinds. I was delighted with the idea and surprised I had not thought of it. I got some old issues of *The Munster Express* from the log box

in my living room and looked through the classifieds. I found a number and phoned. A woman answered.

“Hello.”

“Hello, my name is Brian Collins. I'm inquiring about grammar grinds advertised in *The Munster Express*.”

“Oh yes, what year is your child in?” she asked.

“I don't have a child. I'm not in school. I'm twenty-seven.”

“Oh, right, I usually prepare students for their junior and leaving cert.”

I assured her I was serious and that I needed the help.

“Ok, what is it you would like to work on?” she asked.

“I think I need to start from the very beginning.”

I went on Saturday and rang the bell of an old three-storey townhouse on Claremont Road that was turned into flats. I have been in many of these renovated houses and they all look the same. As soon as the front door is opened the disgust of the house spills out. The hall, painted in two tones – the tones separated by a beam on the walls – has bedroom doors that look as though they lead into confinement chambers. In the middle of the hall there is a bike or trolley or something that disrupts the passageway. The wall beside the stairs has numerous timer switches for the lights, but when pressed, they rarely do anything. When they do function, the light they emit is weaker than a candleflame's, and it turns off when you are halfway up the stairs and your eyes have barely adjusted. The carpet has been

down for so long, it seems – because of the damp – to have soaked into the concrete underneath, and there are food flyers, and piles of bills for people who do not live in the building anymore on a table, or thrown over the ground by the front door.

At the top of the stairs my teacher greeted me. Her face was round and pale, with no makeup, which gave it a slight first-thing-in-the-morning attractiveness. She wore a woollen jumper, with black trousers and brown shoes, and she had glasses hanging by a string around her neck. She talked softly; the type of tone that makes you aware the person speaking is a good listener. I imagined her reading romance novels all of her life, but never falling in love.

We walked into a room. It was what I expected. The only things worse than the halls in these buildings are the bedsits. In the middle of it, a table with two chairs stood. The chairs faced the kitchen, which had a small fridge, two presses at head level, a tube running through the top of the presses, a sink, a boiler over the sink, and one hob on which to cook. Everything was greased over and turning yellow. A breakfast bar separated the living area from the kitchen, and the window looked out onto a backyard with a broken path between two patches of grass and weeds. In the four corners of the square room, black mould had collected. The only thing that could be considered in any way modern was the television. There was an armchair facing it. A sickening feeling ran through me when I thought about the previous person who must have lived there, buckled up

in that grotesque armchair, watching an endless loop of shit, while hearing barely distinguishable noise from other bedsits.

We sat down, shoulder to shoulder, on the chairs.

“Why are you here, Brian? I don’t usually get students your age looking to learn grammar.”

I repeated in more detail what I had said on the phone. She started to sympathize with me. I was surprised by her reaction. I also told her about my plan to move to Madrid to teach English. She opened one of the books and said, “We’ll do some work so I can really get an idea of what you know.”

“Grand,” I said.

We completed a number of verb exercises going from the *present simple* to the *past simple*. Of course, I knew all the answers, but I did not know what the terms present simple and past simple meant. She asked me how I got into college to study journalism if I had problems with grammar. I told her I was accepted on the basis of an interview, not on points.

For homework she gave me a leaving certificate examination paper and asked me to write a story about one of the topics. When we next met, I showed her the story. Her reaction was the same reaction everyone had when reading something I wrote. She was silent while reading it, and after a couple of minutes she told me she was rereading it. Every aspiring writer – yes, this is what I really was, an aspiring writer who could not string a sentence together – knows

these minutes. You want to look anywhere except at the reader, yet you cannot help but analyze his or her face. She finished reading and said, "Right."

We went over the piece for most of the class. At the end she gave me the same paper for homework, and asked me to write another article. I paid her and never returned. I had come to the conclusion that I would learn grammar in Madrid. If I got a job teaching I would have to check grammar daily, and over time the information would seep in.

Walking down the canal, just after making the decision to move to Madrid, I knew I would have to live in my mother's house in order to save. I was not working. I calculated that if I saved the majority of five months' dole, I would have enough. I had about €1,500 in a credit union account, but the money was locked into a loan of the same amount.

Moving back to Waterford always makes me anxious. I cannot control myself there. In other cities, if I am unemployed, I can pass time without meeting anyone; I can use up energy walking around and not encounter anyone I know. But in my hometown, where I cannot go for a walk in the city centre without bumping into an old friend, it is difficult not to waste time in pubs, get into bad sleeping patterns, and fuck up any plans that require considerable thought and preparation. My only protection against the *twenty-four-hour-*

*party-people* mentality in which my generation has immersed itself is to lock myself away, stay in the suburbs around my mother's house, and rarely make social arrangements.

On my last day in Dublin I had bought *Ulysses*, *War and Peace*, and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. I wanted to read every morning after breakfast while in Waterford. It was my work. It would get me up in the morning, and I could arrange my free time around it. When I got on the bus I put *Ulysses* on the seat beside me. It was the book I would read first. I did not open it during the journey; I just looked at it and read the back over and over. It felt heavy, partly because of its reputation, partly because it is literally a heavy book, and partly because it was littering my timetable for the next few months.

The next morning, in Waterford, I got up at ten o'clock. I was the only one in my mother's house until seven in the evening every weekday. I walked down to the shop and bought my breakfast – hot dogs, which I would cook at home. After breakfast I sat down and read *Ulysses* for two hours. At lunchtime I walked up to Tesco, which is half an hour from my house, to buy lunch. After lunch I read some more and watched a DVD. For a few weeks I repeated the same everyday, then I bought a pushbike. I kept to the same routine, except I cycled everywhere. This continued for about six months, though I broke the routine by travelling abroad for short holidays at the end of most months. I met my girlfriend in Paris, Venice, and I went to Madrid twice.

Dear reader, I opened this essay saying that I only returned home for short stints, but these short stints could last up to a year, and at times included full-time employment. In 2005 I graduated from college, and my plan was to move abroad as soon as I saved enough money. It took me four years to achieve that, not because I did not have any money, but because I spent whatever I earned. During those four years I moved up to Dublin and back down to Waterford many times, because I kept quitting jobs. I had around ten jobs over the four-year period. My movement between the two counties was out of necessity when I went back to Waterford, and the desire to get away from home when I moved up to Dublin. I was stuck between the two places, without realising at the time I was stuck, and now, looking back, I feel I could have easily fixed it; I could have easily saved enough money to go abroad. At one time I was earning €2,500 a month, but I was a twenty-five-year-old with many plans but not enough determination or maturity to make my plans materialize. I used the term *short stint* because I always knew my stays in Waterford were temporary, but the people close to me probably thought differently.

Many times I heard my family and friends say, “He’s settling now, he’s found a job he’s happy with.” And they would congratulate me saying, “Well done, you seem happy in this job.” And then they would ask, “Do you think you’ll stick with this one?”

When I did not have a job they would give advice on how to get a job: “Well, you may as well apply for it, even if you don’t think you’d like the job; you don’t have to go to the interview if you get one.” Then I would get an interview and the same would happen: “Sure you may as well go for the interview, what harm would it do?” And then I would be stuck with a job that I did not want in the first place and knew I would never keep doing.

Two months after I arrived in Madrid, I started working as an English teacher. I had no TEFL qualification; they are expensive courses and I did not have the money. I highlighted my experience as a journalist in interviews.

My first assignment was a one-to-one course with an engineer for a train company. I took a bus to the train yard at the back of Atocha station, close to where the bombs blew up the trains in 2004. To get to my student’s office I had to walk over and down some train tracks. I crossed and followed the same train tracks most Monday and Friday mornings for the next nine months. As a child I had a train set, and I have always loved walking on train tracks. It is a very simple pleasure.

The office was at the back of the train yard in a building that must have been over two hundred metres long. The building resembled a barn. My student, on that first morning, was waiting in his office when I arrived. We introduced ourselves and then we sat down. I

pulled out a folder from my bag, the folder I had bought the day before to give an air of professionalism, and took the papers for the class from it. The school had given me no material, so I printed off exercises from the internet. I had also talked to experienced teachers over the summer months, and they gave me books and advice on how to prepare classes. I had a short examination that would allow me to assess his level of English, a translation list (a list of sentences in Spanish and English; I showed my student the sentences in Spanish, and he had to translate them into English), some questions that would help us talk about the past simple case, and, if I needed it, an article about trains. I typed up my lesson plan the day before, detailing exactly what to do for the hour and a half in ten-minute intervals. The class was timed to the minute. The worst scenario was to run out of things to do or say.

I sat across the table from my student, holding my papers like a newsreader, and started asking him questions. “What is your name?”

“Fernando.”

“What are you employed as?”

“Engineer.”

“Fernando, I need you to answer the questions with a full sentence,” I said.

“Okay.”

“What is your name?”

“My name is Fernando Rodrigo Espinosa.”

“What are you employed as?”

“I am employed as an engineer.”

“How long have you worked here?”

“I have worked here for sixteen years.”

Sixteen years, I thought, coming to this barn. I admired the routine.

Just before I left, I asked him, “Is there anything specific you would like to revise or learn?”

“Not really, whatever you think,” he replied, “But maybe some vocabulary about trains.”

I had come monumentally prepared for that first class, but from then on our interaction became more casual. Our meetings turned into conversations. We discussed most everything – his family, history, politics, trains, Irish culture, Spanish culture, languages, computers, soccer, hurling, geography, travelling, literature, films, food, the construction business, the economy, education, the World Cup, and Atletico Madrid – the football team he supported. He wanted to talk and be corrected on pronunciation. He did not care about grammar. He learned it in school and had no interest relearning it. I was delighted: I quickly realized that the man sitting across from me had a much better understanding of grammar than I did. All the students I taught – as I began to increase my workload at several schools – had a better understanding of grammar than I did. Sometimes, when asked difficult questions, I had to put my hands up. It

is not a nice feeling when this happens. You see the students looking at you in amazement, and then they start whispering to each other.

Another student I worked with on a one-to-one basis, also an engineer, ran a company that designed airports, and he had hundreds of people working for him. His office was on the top floor of an eight-storey, high-tech office block, and it had a great view of the mountains outside Madrid. The office was like a rich kid's bedroom: expensive model aeroplanes, three-dimensional wall maps, a desk full of computers and computer components, a mini-fridge, and top-quality furniture. The airport engineer's classes were similar to the train engineer's, mainly conversational. One morning in December I noticed the tops of the mountains were covered in snow. The morning I noticed the snow, I started questioning him about it as soon as I walked into the office. We usually sat down at a table in the middle of the room, but on this day we stood looking out of the floor-to-ceiling windows at the mountains.

"When does the snow usually melt?" I asked.

"What is *melt*, Brian?"

"When something is frozen and then it turns to liquid. It melts. Ice, for example, melts when it gets warmer. We also use 'to thaw' or 'to defrost.' We use 'to defrost' when we are unfreezing food. Example, 'I have to take the chicken out of the freezer and defrost it.'

"Are melt, thaw and defrost regular or irregular verbs?" he asked.

"They're all regular."

"Okay, the snow usually melts in March April," he said.

"Late March, early April," I confirmed.

"When is late March, early April?"

"Late March is the 24th, 25th, 26th, coming to the end of the month. Early April is the 5th, 6th, 7th, just after the start of the month. We can use this description of time for all months."

"Yes, the snow usually melts in late March or early April," he said.

"In the spring?" I asked by intonation.

"Yes, in the spring," he said.

I asked him if there was a drainage system at the end of the mountains to collect drinking water from the melting snow. Spain, I knew, has a problem with water shortage in the summer months, but I did not know anything about how it was collected – apart from the obvious. I did not know if mountains even have drainage systems for water collection; it was just a question that jumped into my head at the moment and could keep the conversation going, and the aim was to keep the conversation going no matter how strange the topic became.

A few weeks before this class I asked him what he liked to drink when he went out to restaurants. He said champagne. He had two children, a beautiful wife, a house in the mountains, and a yacht in Cadiz. He wore tailored suits. He was a little bit fat, which only gave the appearance of adding to his success. I imagined him smoking cigars and drinking champagne everywhere he went.

We stood for the whole hour looking out at the mountains, and

it thrilled me to know that I was able to have such an effect on this man's mood. I used to go to the class with the intention of "waking him up"; our classes were at the start of his day – half eight in the morning, pushing him into conversations that he would never have otherwise. After some of our one-hour classes I was physically exhausted from the speed I was thinking up and asking questions, and I knew he went to his multimillion-euro meetings all the better for talking to me first thing in the morning.

After that class we talked a lot about the mountains. I photocopied the first chapter of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, and we read it for the last ten minutes of every class. The novel is set during the Spanish Civil War, in the Sierra de Guadarramas – the mountains that could be seen from his office. One of my bosses told me never to talk about the civil war in class, but I used *For Whom the Bell Tolls* many times. On some occasions the sentences were a bit hard for my students to understand, but the novel always went down well and led to good discussions. I carried on in the same way for the rest of my first year teaching – using conversation to hide my inability to teach grammar.

My girlfriend has a good understanding of grammar, and while I was preparing classes I would phone and ask her questions. I had to phone her because I never wanted my girlfriend to stay in my apartment on the days I was working. I prefer to be alone on days I have to work. I enjoy working, but I have always hated waiting around the house if I am not on the morning shift. The closer the time gets to the

starting hour, the more quiet and introverted I become. I prefer not to be around people I am comfortable with, because I will inevitably piss them off.

One day I rang her up and asked about the verb *to be*. I must not have phrased my question well, as we started arguing about Spanish and English verbs. I was picking up a little bit of Spanish at this stage and understood some basics, and the way she phrased her answer completely confused me. During my time in Madrid we had numerous arguments because of grammar. We arranged for her to teach me Spanish every Thursday evening, but we did not get through many classes, and the ones we did have finished with her slamming the door and leaving. Without moving I would stay on the couch looking at the table with her notes on it, and stay annoyed for about an hour. Then I would ring her and apologize.

At the start of my second year I got an eight-week contract to teach soldiers from the Spanish army. The classrooms were in a barracks that resembled a primary school – long narrow corridors over two levels. The floors had brown tiles, and every time a soldier walked on them, the noise from his shoes would sound through the building. The walls were all the same colour and style, a dull yellow with wood-chip. There was very little sunlight getting into the building, which made the air cold – a stagnant, cold air that seemed as though it had not been warmed up in years. All the windows were tiny and had metal bars crossing them. My classroom looked out onto the street,

but it was halfway under footpath level, so you could only see the shoes and trouser-ends of passersby.

Each morning I had to walk through security and show my passport to one of the few women I saw in the place. The women mainly worked in security, and there were always male soldiers grazing around the area like cattle. They chewed their gum and held their guns religiously.

In my class I had seven middle-aged students. Two of them had fought in wars: one had been in Iraq; another had been in Kosovo. The students were, for the most part, overly polite, but it was not real; it was not their natural character. Most had entered the army by eighteen, and I imagine most were thought of as troublesome teenagers before that. When they started their training they were drilled on how to behave properly. I was teaching grown men, men whose children were adults, but I found it hard to see anything past a teenage personality. The individuality that evolves in the late teens and twenties was suppressed in them. When their natural character did come out, it reverted to an over-stimulated childishness.

During the third week, in the middle of class, the general of the school walked into my room. He was stereotypical – mean, serious, spoke loudly, never smiled, constantly aware eyes were looking at him, and he knew the power he had over in other people. The seven students stood to attention immediately, and there was a thud from the stamping of their feet. I was sitting at my desk and was surprised,

even shocked. This had not happened before, and I half stood up off my chair. I never fully straightened my legs. I lifted myself but continued to hold the armrests of my chair. It was a gesture toward standing, not standing, the way people lift themselves reluctantly from a seat when someone walks into a room in order to give the impression of standing. The general stared at me for the class, without speaking. I was angry with myself for feeling the need to make such a gesture. The students found my attempt to stand up amusing, and I laughed with them. Two weeks later, the general walked into my class again. Again, I partly stood up. Again I felt humiliated. He walked in one final time during the last week, and I did not move; I just said hello. But I was still disturbed by the fact that I had stood up twice. I could not help but realize that something in me, a part of my identity, felt obliged to stand to attention when a man with that kind of status walked into the room.

During my second year in Madrid, I had more money, I had an easier schedule, and I was working for a good school. I knew the streets, my apartment looked like my own, and things were going well with my girlfriend. Then, out of nowhere, I decided to move back to Waterford, and within a month I had packed up and left. I created a multitude of reasons to convince myself to go home, and they are all strong, but I am not sure if I trust any of them, or maybe I trust them all, but because there are so many I cannot commit to one when someone asks me why I moved home. And everyone asks.

As soon as I decided to move home, I felt like a tourist in Madrid. I had never felt like a tourist before, even when I first arrived. I met one of my friends for a drink the weekend after, and told him my plans. He is also from Waterford, and moved to Madrid a few months before me. He was surprised. I described to him that I felt like a tourist, that the city seemed to be passing through me, that all my previous independent memories of Madrid were melting into one big memory, that I was memorizing the layout of the city and connecting all the little streets to their closest landmark, and then I would create a great image of the landmark. Drunk, at about five in the morning, we bought some cans from a Chinese street seller and went up to my apartment. I was living ten minutes from the city centre on the fourth floor of a five-storey building. The majority of people live in apartments in Madrid, and at every opportunity I would ask the residents if they sat out on their rooftops. Most said they had never even tried to get up on them. I love being on a rooftop overlooking a city. Another very simple pleasure.

The first night I moved into my apartment, I had gone to the top of the stairs to see if there was a door to the roof. I could not find one, but I noticed a small rectangular opening. The opening – a sort of glassless window – was about ten feet off the ground. On the night my friend and I had bought the cans from the Chinese street seller, my friend asked me if there was a door to the rooftop. We walked up to the fifth floor and I showed him the opening. He asked me for a leg

up, and within a second he was pulling himself through it. He went for a walk on the roof and then came back and started talking to me from above. The only part of his body I could see was his head, which was a few feet above mine, looking down and instructing me on how to get up. I went into my apartment, got a chair, placed it under the window, handed my friend the cans, and pulled myself up. We are both tall and skinny. If we were any fatter we would not have been able to get through.

The rooftop was attached to the rooftops of other buildings. It was possible to walk across four buildings between two apexes with drops to different buildings at the back of the second apex. There was a flat part to the side of the first apex. We sat down after walking around for twenty minutes. We could see miles across the skyline of the city.

*Brian Collins is working on a collection of essays*