

The Loveable West

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Bayonets of grass swayed at the base of the giant white crucifix, and Mazie DeWire passed around a joint, right there at the foot of Jesus, as the boys hollered so damn loud, glad to be far away from cities and people, from the bombings and the riots and the killings they only half understood. Table manners did not apply here, with cigarettes and profanity and sleazy alcohol — the cheapest you can buy, Stella Artois has long been called “wife-beater beer.” The dark clouds added to the rebellion of this ritual, this well-to-do thing, of teenagers moseying weed and slugging cheap Belgian beers down to the spume. It had been nearly a week since Easter. People considered this the safe part of the country, the pastoral backlands free of Protestants and Royalty. Catholicism was the religion. Hurling was, and still is, the sport. Guinness, the drink —lemonade for the young lads. This was Ireland. And the teenagers had come to the highest place they knew, a mile outside Thurles in Tipperary County, two backroad-hours southwest of Dublin. Past farms, meadows, hillsides, tractors, and occasionally some undiscoverable village. The houses extended right to the curb in Thurles, all painted the colors of the Tipperary flag, stitched rows of blue and gold. To the boys, it was all so religious, and they were The Ramones. They scowled down at the countryside from the hilltop. Yes, yes, said the girls, who rolled their eyes at romance of this sort. Life had enough needless combat, why pick a fight with institutions and towns and loyalties and God?

The boys coughed one by one as the girls charmed looks down their noses. It was a matter of ladylike obligations for these unerring late-teens. Most of them had jobs, had a car, had the secret drawer or the hidden rosary beads. Most had been to a

funeral or even seen someone die. Most — most, but not every single one of them — peeled into the pond water with feigned boredom and floated and were immune to the boys' catcalling and stare.

“Tell you what,” said the sadder-looking boy with his blonde hair always swept, “if you, if any of you, can swim from here to down there downstream before me, I'll hand you my hurley.” He hoisted the proud wooden hook above his head, gripping it at the electrical tape around the handle. “I've scored more goals and points with this magic rod, ahbejesus, so I have.”

Tremendous and motor-like, the sky cracked with a grumble.

“Look for lightning!” said the girl in the sleeveless purple shirt.

Shillyshallying and legless, the group of them waded, patient and nervous to be so close to one another. “Is that it?” asked a girl. “There, over there,” and the group of the eyes took full darting. Meridian gazes, the way you look around, the way you gaze in a crowd of hurrying people.

All at once, they remembered where they were. Who, they wondered, would clue in the new girl who arrived a month ago from Montana or Indiana or somewhere boring like that? The storm still far away, far enough away not to inhibit the story. Tremendous, flower-jacketed, the youngest girl speaks up. “This hill is called The Devil's Bit. The story is that the devil bit the mountain — see the curve there, looks like the size of a water tower missing from the mountain. The devil he bit out the mountain and spat it so hard and far that it landed in Cashel and that's how the Rock of Cashel was made.”

“Well we have craters like that everywhere missing out of mountains in Colorado. The devil must've been hungry when he passed along the Rockies.”

“Colorado,” mumbled the youngest boy, doe-eyed and square jaw.

“Christ!” shouts one of the twins — a boy and the other a girl — who sat on some thistle which pecked a bite of ass.

“What happened after that,” asks Colorado girl, “what happened after the devil spat out the rock and made it to a castle?”

Muttering, the oldest girl: “Nothing — nothing at all, because that shit isn’t real.”

“This weather is getting nasty, lads.”

“Right! Time for us to fuck off out of here!”

They sprinted down the hillside, leaping over the muddier parts. None of them minded the rain, really, sliding down along mud past the old bathtub by their cars. The car lights primmed on and all the cars — five or so — scummed down the gravel road. They didn’t notice that Mazie DeWire’s car flickered and grunted but wouldn’t start.

“Well fuck if this is what’s supposed to happen.”

The two girls and the boy were quiet in the backseat. The oldest girl mumbled to herself from the rear of the car, frowning at her reflection in the lug wrench. Muddied rain smeared the car hood and windows. Someone forgot a bag of towels in the parking area, and it ripped into the wind, and the towels went sawing into the downpour like bastard ghosts.

“What do we do?”

The boy knelt his head.

“Put on the radio, won’t you,” asked the youngest girl. “Maybe they’ll play that Serge Gainsbourg song, the dirty one.”

“Yes yes yes okay okay okay.”

From the back of the car: “They can’t play that song, remember? The Pope has outlawed it. Took issue with all the moanin’ and *je t’aime, je t’aime, je t’aime.*”

“Right,” said the older girl, the driver, jamming at the radio. Elvis. “The Wonder of You.”

The boy brimmed: “The Wonder of You! It’s the Vale! Up the Vale! Up the Vale!”

One of the backseat girls scowled in confusion, then looked at her friend.

“Port Vale,” the girl replied, “it’s his favorite football team.”

The older girl, without losing the song, tore up on the handbrake and smacked at the ignition. *Your kiss to me is worth a fortune / Your love for me is everything.* The Volkswagen clacked and the lights came on and the car started moving.

“The window cracked.”

“So be it so be it.”

“Turn it up, now will you?”

Everybody singing together like Iggy Pop, in a wreckage or a standstill or a nation torn to shreds, where lovely silences color grave moments, moments when God has hands in the upsilon.

Two hours north, a sequence of bombs. The IRA always called before an explosion. Get everyone out. They didn’t want death, certainly not the death of innocents, they wanted statements and notoriety. Sometimes, they got death, killed their own people. It was a sickening part of a dangerous fight. They knew that, if they got caught, the Black and Tans would rip their fingernails out one by one with pliers. Remnants of the storm hung overhead, but a limbo of daylight peeked out from the edge of grey. By evening, the storm had passed, and, drinking cans of Stella Artois, the

boys and girls found a vacant camper owned by somebody's uncle, who was off in London. Outside the camper was nothing but meadow. Sheep wandered lazily, cows napped, farting.

"Your uncle has spent the whole lot on land and had to settle for this rubbish camper, hasn't he?"

The boy shrugged, almost ashamed.

A kingfisher plodded down onto the fence gate, scouring for something to kill. There was sun. As much daylight as ever shines in this dreary country, except for all the green. The twins, the boy and the girl, balked at the rest of the teenagers, who were in various poses of drunk. "All langers, every one of ye."

Around 10:00 PM, they shoved into a few cars and got drunker somewhere else. Mazie DeWire had a bag of hashish that she stole from her brother and she got everyone nice and stoned and they all stumbled down to the cinema, which only had one screen. Either a Western or a horror. John Wayne or Michael Myers. Walking to the theater, one of the twins mentioned America and films. In America they must live in theaters, with all the movies in the world. Nobody else has that Coca-Cola bravado. The Yanks alone have that James Dean indifference, that Jackie Kennedy glamor. About midnight, they walked to the disco. Mazie DeWire and her magic hash had everybody giggling and bleary.

All day, without ever saying it aloud, each of the boys thought about Father O'Grady, the grammar teacher who'd killed himself a few days prior. Hanged himself with a towel tied to a pull-up machine. Why ruin a day with depressing shit like that? Yet it pecked at them, each. They could almost see him hanging, tongue out and eyes

bulging. Big dumb face and piss trailing down his trousers. Was it really so bad? He drank like hell, just like everyone else. But his laugh, the shiny tenor of it — somehow, it was the worst part. That a charming lad like O’Grady could give up and go with the rope. It was three days before anyone found him and he stank like shit and his neck was collared black. He’d been looking out at geese as he writhed out the last of his life. All of it was pure horror, to the boys. Give us Westerns, they said. We like gun fights and one-liners and whore houses and Indians. We like it when cowboys kill shit-slicking bad guys.

To the girls, the world was a chaotic agreement between the real and the imagined, something they played out as they put and cheap lipstick and smacked at the mirror. Each day brought an attenuation of the life’s more obvious tragedies — getting dumped or menstruation or hangovers at Mass. While the boys saw themselves as radicals, helmeted with impulses that brought predictable routs of chaos, the girls saw the boys as, well, boys, clueless in all that swagger. (Divorce was not an option at the time, so it benefited the girls to intuit correctly.) The girls saw themselves as unflappable but kind, maidens of sex and austerity and home. The disco stank of whiskey, watered down as usual. A few of the boys snuck off with a few of the girls. A clumsy tangle of arms and touching, bereft of the refinement and pageantry of flamingos or poison dart frogs.

At 3:20 AM, they found themselves at the bridge looking down at the river. The waterfall was loud in the silence of morning. There they were, gaping down from the stone bridge. Even the birds were asleep, even the spiders. The whole town. One of the girls hurled a stone into the water, but it was too light and vanished soundlessly. She

pecked around for something better to throw. A few of the boys pissed into the river, singing “The Ferryman.” Mazie DeWire stared down at the churning river like it was a scary movie. Feet dangling over the bridge, the mopey boy smoked cigarettes. Church bells clanged at half past three. The new girl, from Colorado, played with a stranded duck feather she found on the sidewalk. She liked it, it was pretty. She gasped at its spine-like resplendence and order. She wanted to keep it. Yet for some reason, she darted it into the air without thinking. From there, it swayed — and everyone realized it would sway gently down till it landed on land or sunk into the river. Hopefully land, was the consensus. Because it was a nice duck feather with three different colors and no bugs. Teal, grey, blue. Maybe even maroon. It took a slow descent. Someone tossed a pebble at it, missed.

“Tough feather, that.”

They all gathered to watch the feather’s downward passage, making bets about the outcome, stakes getting higher by the instant. 50/50 chance, judging by the feather’s trajectory. “It may find land yet!”

The milk truck passed over the bridge right as the boys and girls slumped down, looking away from the water. It was quiet again. Only river sounds. The youngest boy turned around, corked his square jaw and pointed, “Hey, Colorado girl, see that water there? That’s a primo destination for suicides. They come from all over to shove their head into that water. They say there’s something redemptive.”