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Green Shadows,
White Whale

Ray Bradbury

Green Shadows, White Whale

A NOVEL OF RAY BRADBURY'S ADVENTURES MAKING *MOBY DICK* WITH JOHN HUSTON IN IRELAND

Ray Bradbury


WILLIAM MORROW

Dedication

WITH LOVE AND GRATITUDE
TO KATHY HOURIGAN,
WHO HELPED MAP DUBLIN
AND BEYOND

AND TO REGINA FERGUSON,
WHO SHEPHERDED MY FAMILY
THROUGH THAT COLD IRISH WINTER

AND TO THE MEMORY OF
HEEBER FINN, NICK (MIKE) MY TAXI
DRIVER, AND ALL THE BOYOS IN THE PUB,
AND TO THE PROPRIETOR OF THE
ROYAL HIBERNIAN HOTEL, HECTOR FABRON,
AND PADDY THE MAÎTRE D'
AND ALL THE HOTEL STAFF,
THIS BOUQUET
LONG IN COMING

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Dublin Revisited

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Chapter 1

I looked out from the deck of the Dún Laoghaire ferry and saw Ireland.

The land was green.

Not just one ordinary sort of green, but every shade and variation. Even the shadows were green and the light that played on the Dún Laoghaire wharf and on the faces of the customs inspectors. Down into the green I stepped, an American young man, just beyond thirty, suffering two sorts of depression, lugging a typewriter and little else.

Noticing the light, the grass, the hills, the shadows, I cried out: “Green! Just like the travel poster. Ireland is green. I’ll be damned! Green!”

Lightning! Thunder! The sun hid. The green vanished. Shadow-rains curtained the vast sky. Bewildered, I felt my smile collapse. A gray and bristly customs official beckoned.

“Here! Customs inspection!”

“Where did it go?” I cried. “The green! It was just here! Now it’s—”

“The green, you say?”

The inspector stared at his watch. “It’ll be along when the sun comes out!” he said.

“When will that be?”

The old man riffled a customs index. “Well, there’s nothing in the damn government pamphlets to show when, where, or *if* the sun comes out in Ireland!” He pointed with his nose. “There’s a church down there—you might ask!”

“I’ll be here six months. Maybe—”

“—you’ll see the sun and the green again? Chances are. But in ’28, two hundred days of rain. It was the year we raised more mushrooms than children.”

“Is that a fact?”

“No, hearsay. But that’s all you need in Ireland, someone to hear, someone to say, and you’re in business! Is that *all* your luggage?”

I set my typewriter forth, along with the flimsiest suitcase. “I’m traveling light. This all came up fast. My big luggage comes next week.”

“Is this your first trip here?”

“No. I was here, poor and unpublished, off a freighter in 1939, just eighteen.”

“Your reason for being in Ireland?” The inspector licked his pencil and indelible his pad.

“Reason has nothing to do with it,” I blurted.

His pencil stayed, while his gaze lifted.

“That’s a grand start, but what does it mean?”

“Madness.”

He leaned forward, pleased, as if a riot had surfed at his feet.

“What kind would that be?” he asked politely.

“Two kinds. Literary and psychological. I am here to flense and render down the White Whale.”

“Flense.” He scribbled. “Render down. White Whale. That would be *Moby Dick*, then?”

“You read!” I cried, taking that same book from under my arm.

“When the mood is on me.” He underlined his scribbles. “We’ve had the Beast in the house some twenty years. I fought it twice. It is overweight in pages and the author’s intent.”

“It is,” I agreed. “I picked it up and laid it down ten times until last month, when a movie studio signed me to it. Now I must win out for keeps.”

The customs inspector nodded, took my measurements, and declared: “So you’re here to write *screenplay*! There’s only *one* other cinema fellow in all Ireland. *Whatsisname*. Tall, with a kind of beat-up monkey face, talked fine. Said ‘Never again.’ Took the ferry to find what the Irish Sea was like. Found out and delivered forth both lunch and breakfast. Pale he was. Barely able to lug the *Whale* book under one arm. ‘Never again,’ he yelled. And you, lad. Will you ever lick the book?”

“Haven’t you?”

“The *Whale* has not docked here, no. So much for literature. What’s the *psychological* thing you said? Are you here to observe the Catholics lying about everything and the Unitarians baring the breasts?”

“No, no,” I said hastily, remembering my one visit here, when the weather was dreadful. “Not between lowerings for the *Whale*, I will study the *Irish*.”

“God has gone blind at that. Can you outlast Him? Why try?” He poised his pencil.

“Well ...,” I said, putting the black sack over my head, fastening the noose about my neck, and yanking the lever to drop the trapdoor, “excuse me, but this is the last place in the world I’d dream of landing. It’s all such a mystery. When I was a kid and passed the Irish neighborhood on one side of town, the Micks beat the hell out of me. And when they ran through *our* neighborhood, we beat *them*. It has bothered me half a lifetime why we did what we did. I grew up nonplussed—”

“Nonplussed? Is *that* all?” cried the Official.

“—with the Irish. I do not dislike them so much as I am uncomfortable with my past. I do not care much for Irish whiskey or Irish tenors. Irish coffee, too, is not my cup of tea. The list is long. Having lived with these terrible prejudices, I must fight free of them. And since the studio assigned me to chase the *Whale* in Ireland, my God, I thought, I’ll compare reality with my hand-me-down suspicions. I must lay the ghost forever. You might say,” I ended lamely, “I’ve come to *see* the Irish.”

“No! *Hear* us, yes. But our tongue’s not connected to our brain. *See* us? Why, lad, we’re not *here*. We’re over there or just beyond. Lend me those glasses.”

He reached gently to take the spectacles from my nose.

“Ah, God.” He slipped them on. “These are twenty-twenty!”

“Yes.”

“No, no! The focus is too exact. You want something that bends the light and makes a kind of mist or fog, not quite rain. It’s then you’ll see us floating, almost drowned, on our backs, like that *Hamlet* girl ...?”

“Ophelia?”

“*That’s* her, poor lass. Well!” He perched the glasses on my nose. “When you want a fix on the mob, take these off or you’ll see us marching left when we should be lurching right. Still, you will never probe, find, discover, or in any way solve the Irish. We are not so much a race as a weather. X-ray us, yank our skeletons out by the roots, and by morn we’ve regrown the lot. You’re right, with a vengeance you’ve said!”

“*Am I?*” I said, astonished.

The inspector drew up his own list behind his eyelids:

“Coffee? We do not roast the bean—we set fire to it! Economics? Music? They go *together* here. For there are beggars playing unstrung banjos on O’Connell Bridge; beggars trudging Pianolas about St. Stephen’s Green, sounding like cement mixers full of razor blades. Irish women? All three features high, with runty legs and pig noses. Lean on them, sure, use them for cover against the rain, but you

wouldn't seriously chase them through the bog. And Ireland itself? Is the largest open-air penal colony in history ... a great racetrack where the priests lay odds, take bets, and pay off on Doomsday. Come home, lad. You'll dislike the lot of us!"

"I don't dislike *you*—"

"But you *will!* Listen!" The old man whispered. "See that clump of Irishmen hurrying to get off the island before it sinks? They're bound for Paris, Australia, Boston, until the Second Coming.

"Why all the riot to get out of Eire, you ask? Well, if you got your choice Saturday night of, one, seeing a 1931 Greta Garbo fillum at the Joyous Cinema; or, two, making water off the poet's statue near the Gate Theatre; or, three, throwing yourself in the River Liffey for entertainment, with the happy thought of drowning uppermost, you might as well get out of Ireland, which people have done at the rate of a mob a day since Lincoln was shot. The population has dropped from eight million to less than three. One more potato famine or one more heavy fog that lasts long enough for everyone to pack up and tiptoe across the channel to disguise themselves as Philadelphia police, and Ireland is a desert. You've told me *nothing* about Ireland I don't already *know!*"

I hesitated. "I hope I haven't offended you."

"It's been a pleasure, hearing your mind! Now, this book you'll be writing. It's ... pornographic?"

"I will not study the sex habits of the Irish, no."

"Pity. They are in dire need. Well, there's Dublin, straight on! Good luck, lad!"

"Goodbye ... and thanks!"

The old man, incredulous, stared at the sky. "Did you *hear* him? Thanks! he said."

I ran to vanish in lightning, thunder, darkness. Somewhere in the noon twilight, a harp played on a broken key.

Chapter 2

On and off the boat train and along the rainy streets by taxi, I finally signed in at the Royal Hibernian Hotel and telephoned Kilcock to see how I might find the Devil Himself, as the reception clerk put it while handing my luggage to the bellboy, who shuddered me by elevator up to my room to plant my luggage where it wouldn't take root, as he said, and backed off from me as if he had searched a mirror and found no image.

"Sir," he said. "Well, are you some sort of famous author?"

"Sort of," I said.

"Well." The bellboy scratched his head. "I been asking around the pub and the lobby and the kitchen, and no one ever *heard* of you."

At the door, he turned.

"But don't worry," he said. "Your secret's safe with *me*."

The door shut quietly.

I was suddenly mad for Ireland or the Whale. Not knowing which, I grabbed a cab that veered through streets filled with tens of thousands of bicycles. We headed west along the Liffey.

"Is it the long or short you'd want?" asked my driver. "The long way around or the short arrival?"

"Short—"

"*That's* expensive," interrupted my driver. "Long is cheaper. Conversation! Do you *talk*? By trip's end, I am so relaxed I forget the tip. Besides, it's a map, chart, and atlas of Liffey and beyond that am. Well?"

"The *long* way around."

"Long it *is*!" He kicked the gas as if it needed awakening, skinned a dozen bicyclists, and sailed on to snake the Liffey and mind the air. Only to hear the motor cough and roll over dead, just short of Kilcock.

We peered in at an engine long gone in mystery and leaning toward the tomb. My driver hefted a large hammer, decided against giving the engine a coup de grace, slung the hammer aside, and walked to the rear of the taxi to detach a bike and hand it over. I let it fall.

"Now, now." He reinstalled the vehicle in my hands. "Your destination's but a short drive down this road." He shook the bike. "Climb on."

"It's been a few years ..."

"Your hands will remember and your ass will learn. Hop."

I hopped to straddle and stare at the dead car and the easy man. "You don't seem upset ..."

"Cars are like women, once you learn their starters. Off with you. Downhill. Careful. There's few brakes on the vehicle."

"Thanks," I yelled as the vehicle rolled me away.

Chapter 3

Ten minutes later, I stopped at the top of a rise, listening.

Someone was whistling and singing “Molly Malone.” Up the hill, wobbling badly, pedaled an old man on a bike no better than mine. At the top he fell off and let it lie at his feet.

“Old man, you’re not what you once was!” he cried, and kicked the tires. “Ah, lay there, beast that you are!”

Ignoring me, he took out a bottle. He downed it philosophically, then held it up to let the last drop fall on his tongue.

I spoke at last. “We both seem to be having trouble. Is anything wrong?”

The old man blinked. “Is that an American voice I hear?”

“Yes. May I be of assistance ...?”

The old man showed his empty bottle.

“Well, there’s assistance *and* assistance. It came over me as I pumped up the hill, me and this damned vehicle”—here he kicked the bike gently—“is both seventy years old.”

“Congratulations.”

“For what? Breathing? That’s a habit, not a virtue. Why, may I ask, are you *staring* at me like that?”

I pulled back. “Well ... do you have a relative in customs down at the docks?”

“Which of us hasn’t?” Gasping, he reached for his bike. “Ah, well, a moment’s rest, and me and this brute will be on our way. We don’t know where we’re going, Sally and me—that’s the damn bike’s name, ya see—but we pick a road each day and give it a try.”

I tried a small joke.

“Does your mother know you’re out?”

The old man seemed stunned.

“Strange you say that! She *does!* Ninety-five she is, back there in the cot! Mother, I said, I’ll be gone the day; leave the whiskey alone. I never married, you know.”

“I’m sorry.

“First you congratulate me for being old, and now you’re sorry I’ve no wife. It’s sure you don’t know Ireland. Being old and having no wives is one of our principal industries! You see, a man can marry without property. You bide your time till your mother and father are called Beyond. Then, when their property’s yours, you look for a wife. It’s a waiting game. I’ll marry yet.”

“At *seventy!*”

The old man stiffened.

“I’d get twenty good years of marriage out of a fine woman even this late—do you *doubt* it?!” He glared.

“I do not.”

The old man relaxed.

“Well, then. What are *you* up to in Ireland?”

I was suddenly all flame and fire.

“I’ve been advised at customs to look sharp at this poverty-stricken, priest-ridden, rain-filled, sleet-worn country, this—”

“Good God,” the old man interjected. “You’re a writer!”

“How did you guess?”

The old man snorted, gesturing.

“The country’s overrun. There’s writers turning over rocks in Cork and writers trudging through bogs at Killashandra. The day will come, mark me, when there will be five writers for every human being in the world!”

“Well, writer I am. I’ve been here only a few hours now and it feels like a thousand years of rain, sun, only rain, cold, and getting lost on roads. My director will be waiting for me somewhere if I can find the place, but my legs are dead.”

The old man leaned at me.

“Have you begun to dislike your visit? Look *down* on?”

“Well ...”

The old man patted the air.

“Why not? Every man needs to look down on someone. You look down on the Irish, the Irish look down on the English, and the English look down on everyone else in the world. It all comes right in the end. Do you think I’m bothered by the look on your face, you’ve come to weigh our breath and find it sour, measure our shadows and find us short? *No!* In fact, I’ll help you solve this dreadful place. Come along where you can witness an awful event. A dread scene. A meeting of Fates, *that’s* the true birth-place of the Irish ... Ah, God, how you’ll *hate* it! And yet ...”

“Yet?”

“Before you leave us, you’ll love us all. We’re irresistible. And we know it, More’s the pity. For knowing it makes us all the more deplorable, which means we must work harder to become irresistible again. So we chase our own behinds about the country, never winning and never quite losing. There! Do you see that parade of unemployed men marching on the road in holes and tatters?”

“Yes!”

“That’s the First Ring of Hell! Do you see them young fellows on bikes with flat tires and no spokes, pumping barefoot in the rain?”

“Yes!”

“That’s the Second Ring of Hell!”

The old man stopped. “And here ... can you read? The Third Ring!”

I read the sign. “‘Heeber Finn’s’ ... why, it’s a *pub*.”

The old man pretended surprise. “By God, now, I think you’re right. Come meet my ... family!”

“Family? You said you weren’t *married!*”

“I’m not. But—in we go!”

The old man gave a great knock on the backside of the door. And there was the bar, all bright spigots and alarmed faces as the dozen or so customers whirled.

“It’s *me*, boys!” the old man cried.

“Mike! Ya gave us a start!” said one.

“We thought it was—a crisis!” said another.

“Well, maybe it is ... for *him* anyway.” He jabbed my elbow. “What’ll ya have, lad?”

I scanned the lot, tried to say wine, but quit.

“A whiskey, please,” I said.

“Make mine a Guinness,” said Mike. “Now, introductions all around. That there is Heeber Finn who owns the pub.”

Finn handed over the whiskey. “The third and fourth mortgage, that is.”

Mike moved on, pointing.

~~“This is O’Gavin, who has the finest bogs in all Kilcock and cuts peat turf out of it to stoke the hearths of Ireland. Also a fine hunter and fisher, in or out of season!”~~

O’Gavin nodded. “I poach game and steal fish.”

“You’re an honest man, Mr. O’Gavin,” I said.

“No. As soon as I find a job,” said O’Gavin, “I’ll deny the whole thing.”

Mike led me along. “This next is Casey, who will fix the hoof of your horse.”

“Blacksmith,” said Casey.

“The spokes of your bike.”

“Velocipede repair,” said Casey.

“Or the spark plugs on any damn car.”

“Auto-moe-beel renovation,” said Casey.

Mike moved again. “Now, this is Kelly, our turf accountant!”

“Mr. Kelly,” I said, “do you count the turf that Mr. O’Gavin cuts out of his bog?”

As everyone laughed, Kelly said: “That is a common tourist’s error. I am an expert on the races. I breed a few horses—”

“He sells Irish Sweepstakes tickets,” said someone.

“A bookie,” said Finn.

“But ‘turf accountant’ has a gentler air, does it not?” said Kelly.

“It does!” I said.

“And here’s Timulty, our art connoisseur.”

I shook hands with Timulty. “Art connoisseur?”

“It’s from looking at the *stamps* I have the eye for paintings,” Timulty explained. “If it goes at all, I run the post office.”

“And this is Carmichael, who took over the village telephone exchange last year.”

Carmichael, who knitted as he spoke, replied: “My wife got the uneasies and she ain’t come right since, God help her. I’m on duty next door.”

“But now tell us, lad,” said Finn, “what’s your crisis?”

“A whale. And ... ” I paused. “Ireland!”

“Ireland?!” everyone cried.

Mike explained. “He’s a writer who’s trapped in Ireland and misunderstands the Irish.”

After a beat of silence someone said: “Don’t we *all*!”

To much laughter, Mr. O’Gavin leaned forward. “What do you misunderstand, specific like?”

Mike intervened to prevent chaos. “Underestimates is more the word. Confused might be the sum. So I’m taking him on a Grand Tour of the Worst Sights and the Most Dreadful Truths.” He stopped and turned. “Well, that’s the lot, lad.”

“Mike, there’s one you missed.” I nodded to a partition at the far end of the bar. “You didn’t introduce me to ... *him*.”

Mike peered and said, “O’Gavin, Timulty, Kelly, do you *see* someone there?”

Kelly glanced down the line. “We do not.”

I pointed. “Why, it’s plain as my nose! A man—”

Timulty cut in. “Now, Yank, don’t go upsetting the order of the universe. Do you see that partition? It is an irrevocable law that any man seeking a bit of peace and quiet is automatically gone, invisible, null and void when he steps into that cubby.”

“Is that a fact?”

“Or as close as you’ll ever get to one in Ireland. That area, no more than two feet wide by one deep, is more private than the confessional. It’s where a man can duck, in need of feeding his soul without converse or commotion. So for all intents and purposes, that space, until he breaks the spell of silence on himself, is uninhabited and *no one’s there!*”

Everyone nodded, proud of Timulty.

“Fine, Timulty, and now—drink your drink, lad, stand alert, be ready, watch!” said Mike.

I looked at the mist curling through the door. “Alert for what?”

“Why, there’s always Great Events preparing themselves out in that fog.” Mike became mysterious. “As a student of Ireland, let nothing pass unquestioned.” He peered out at the night. “*Anything* can happen ... and always *does*.” He inhaled the fog, then froze. “Ssst! Did you *hear?*”

Beyond, there was a blind stagger of feet, heavy panting coming near, near, near!

“What ...?” I said.

Mike shut his eyes. “Sssst! Listen! ... Yes!”

Chapter 4

Shoes pounded the outside steps, drunkenly. The double wing doors slammed wide. A battered man lunged in, reeling, holding his bloody head with bloody hands. His moan froze every customer at the bar. For a time you heard only the soft foam popping in the lacy mugs, as the customers turned, some faces pale, some pink, some veined and wattle red. Every eyelid down the line gave a blink.

The stranger swayed in his ruined clothes, eyes wide, lips trembling. The drinkers clenched their fists. Yes! they cried silently. Go on, man! What *happened*?

The stranger leaned far out on the air.

“Collision,” he cried. “Collision on the road.”

Then, chopped at the knees, he fell.

“Collision!” A dozen men rushed at the body.

“Kelly!” Heeber Finn vaulted the bar. “Get to the road! Mind the victim—easy does it! Joe, run for the Doc!”

“Wait!” said a quiet voice.

From the private stall at the end of the pub, the cubby where a philosopher might brood, a dark man blinked out at the crowd.

“Doc!” cried Heeber Finn. “Was you there all the *time*?”

“Ah, shut up!” cried the Doc as he and the men hustled out into the night.

“Collision ...” The man on the floor twitched his lips.

“Softly, boys.” Heeber Finn and two others gentled the victim atop the bar. He looked handsome a death on the fine inlaid wood, with the prised mirror making him two dread calamities for the price of one.

Outside on the steps, the crowd halted, shocked as if an ocean had sunk Ireland in the dusk and no bulked all about them. Fog in fifty-foot rollers and breakers put out the moon and stars. Blinking cursing, the men leaped out, to vanish in the deeps.

Behind, in the bright doorway, I stood, dreading to interfere with what seemed village ritual. Since arriving in Ireland, I could not shake the feeling that at all times I was living stage center of the Abbey Theatre. Now, not knowing my lines, I could only stare after the rushing men.

“But,” I protested weakly, “I didn’t hear any cars on the road.”

“You did not!” said Mike, almost pride fully. Arthritis limited him to the top step, where he teetered, shouting at the white tides where his friends had submerged. “Try the crossroad, boys! That’s where it most often does!”

“The crossroad!” Far and near, footsteps rang.

“Nor,” I said, “did I hear a collision.”

Mike snorted with contempt. “Ah, we’re not great ones for commotion, or great crashing sounds. But collision you’ll see if you step on out there. Walk, now, don’t run! It’s the devil’s own night. Running blind you might hit into Kelly, beyond, who’s fevered up with pumping just to squash his lungs. Or you might head-on with Feeney, too drunk to find any road, never mind what’s *on* it! Finn, you got a torch, a flash? Blind you’ll be, lad, but use it. Walk now, you *hear*?”

I groped through the fog and, immersed in the night beyond Heeber Finn’s, made direction by the heavy clubbing of shoes and a rally of voices ahead. A hundred yards off in eternity, the me

approached, grunting whispers: "Easy now!" "Ah, the shameful blight!" "Hold on, don't jiggle him!"

I was flung aside by a steaming lump of men who swept suddenly from the fog, bearing at themselves a crumpled object. I glimpsed a bloodstained and livid face high up there, then someone cracked my flashlight down.

By instinct, sensing the far whiskey-colored light of Heeber Finn's, the catafalque surged toward that fixed and familiar harbor.

Behind came dim shapes and a chilling insect rattle.

"Who's that!" I cried.

"Us, with the vehicles," someone husked. "You might say we got the collision."

The flashlight fixed them. I gasped. A moment later, the battery failed.

But not before I had seen two village lads jogging along with no trouble at all, easily, lightly, tottering under their arms two ancient black bicycles minus front and tail lights.

"What ...?" I said.

But the lads trotted off, the accident with them. The fog closed in. I stood abandoned on an empty road, my flashlight dead in my hand.

By the time I opened the door at Heeber Finn's, both "bodies," as they called them, had been stretched on the bar.

And there was the crowd lined up, not for drinks, but blocking the way so the Doc had to show sidewise from one to another of these relics of blind driving by night on the misty roads.

"One's Pat Nolan," whispered Mike. "Not working at the moment. The other's Mr. Peevey from Maynooth, in candy and cigarettes mostly." Raising his voice: "Are they dead, now, Doc?"

"Ah, be still, won't you?" The Doc resembled a sculptor troubled at finding some way to finish up two full-length marble statues at once. "Here, let's put one victim on the floor!"

"The floor's a tomb," said Heeber Finn. "He'll catch his death down there. Best leave him up where the warm air gathers from our talk."

"But," I said quietly, confused, "I've never heard of an accident like this in all my life. Are you sure there were absolutely no cars? Only these two men on their *bikes*?"

"Only?" Mike shouted. "Great God, man, a fellow working up a drizzling sweat can pump along sixty kilometers. With a long downhill glide his bike hits ninety or ninety-five! So here they come these two, no front or tail lights—"

"Isn't there a law against that?"

"To hell with government interference! So here the two come, no lights, flying home from one town to the next. Thrashing like Sin Himself's at their behinds! Both going opposite ways but both on the same side of the road. Always ride the wrong side of the road, it's safer, they say. But look at these lads, fair destroyed by all that official palaver. Why? Don't you see? One remembered it, but the other didn't! Better if the officials kept their mouths shut! For here the two be, dying."

"Dying?" I stared.

"Well, think on it, man! What stands between two able-bodied hell-bent fellas jumping along the path from Kilcock to Maynooth? Fog! Fog is all! Only fog to keep their skulls from bashing together. Why, look, when two chaps hit at a cross like that, it's like a strike in bowling alleys, tenpins flying. Bang! There go your friends, nine feet up, heads together like dear chums met, flailing the air, the bikes clenched like two tomcats. Then they all fall down and just lay there, feeling around for the *Damn* Angel."

"Surely these men won't ..."

“Oh, won’t they? Why, last year alone in all the Free State no night passed some soul did not meet in fatal collision with another!”

“You mean to say over three hundred Irish bicyclists die every year, hitting each other?”

“God’s truth and a pity.”

“I never ride my bike nights.” Heeber Finn eyed the bodies. “I walk.”

“But still then the damn bikes run you down!” said Mike. “A wheel or a foot, some idiot’s always panting up doom the other way. They’d sooner split you down the seam than wave hello. Oh, the brave men I’ve seen ruined or half ruined or worse, and headaches their lifetimes after.” Mike trembled but his eyelids shut. “You might almost think, mightn’t you, that human beings was not made to handle such delicate instruments of power.”

“Three hundred dead each *year*?” I was dazed.

“And that don’t count the ‘walking wounded’ by the thousands every fortnight who, cursing, throw their bikes in the bog forever and take government pensions to salve their all-but-murdered bodies.”

“Should we stand here talking?” I gestured helplessly toward the victims. “Is there a hospital?”

“On a night with no moon,” Heeber Finn continued, “best walk out through the middle of fields and be damned to the evil roads! That’s how I have survived into this my fifth decade.”

“Ah ...” The men stirred restlessly.

The Doc, sensing he had withheld information too long, feeling his audience drift away, now snatched their attention back by straightening up briskly and exhaling.

“Well!”

The pub quickened into silence.

“This chap here ...” The Doc pointed. “Bruises, lacerations, and agonizing backaches for two weeks running. As for the other lad, however ...” And here the Doc let himself scowl for a long moment at the paler one there, looking rouged, waxed, and ready for final rites. “Concussion.”

“Concussion!”

The quiet wind rose and fell in the silence.

“He’ll survive if we run him quick now to Maynooth Clinic. So whose car will volunteer?”

The crowd turned as a body toward Timulty. I stared, remembering the front of Heeber Finn’s pub where seventeen bicycles and one automobile were parked. “Mine!” cried Timulty. “Since it’s the only vehicle!”

“There! A volunteer! Quick now, hustle this victim—gently!—to Timulty’s wreck!”

The men reached out to lift the body, but froze when I coughed. I circled my hand to all and tipped my cupped fingers to my lips. All gasped in soft surprise. The gesture was hardly done when drink foamed down the bar.

“For the road!”

And now even the luckier victim, suddenly revived, face like cheese, found a mug gentled to his hand with whispers.

“Here, lad, here. Tell us ...”

“What happened, eh? Eh?”

“Send,” gasped the victim. “Send for Father Leary. I need the Extreme Unction!”

“Father Leary it is!” Nolan jumped and ran.

“Get my wife,” husked the victim, “to call me three uncles and four nephews and my grandfather and Timothy Doolin, and you’re *all* invited to my wake!”

“You was always a good sort, Peevey!”

“There’s two gold coins put by in my best shoes at home. For me eyelids! There’s a third gold

coin; buy me a fine black suit!”

“It’s good as done!”

“Be sure there’s plenty of whiskey. I’ll buy it meself!”

There was a stir at the door.

“Thank God,” cried Timulty. “It’s you, Father Leary. Father, quickly, you must give the Extremes form of Unction you ever gave!”

“Don’t tell me my business!” said the priest in the door. “I got the Unctions, you provide the victim! On the double!”

There was a cheer from the men as the victim was held high and run for the door where the priest directed traffic, then fled.

With one body gone off the bar, the potential wake was over, the room empty save for myself, the Doc, the revived lad, and two softly cudgeling friends. Outside, you could hear the crowd putting the one serious result of the great collision into Timulty’s car.

“Finish your drink,” the Doc advised.

But I stood, looking numbly around at the pub: at the recovered bicyclist, seated, waiting for the crowd to come back and mill about him; seeing the blood-spotted floor, the two bicycles tilted near the door like props from a vaudeville turn, the dark night waiting outside with its improbable fog; listening to the roll and cadence and gentle equilibrium of these voices, balanced each in its own throat and environment.

“Doctor,” I heard myself say as I placed the money on the bar, “do you often have auto wrecks—collisions between people in *cars*?”

“Not in our town!” The Doc nodded scornfully east. “If you like that sort of thing, now, Dublin is the very place!”

Crossing the pub, the Doc took my arm as if to impart some secret which would change my fate. Thus steered, I found the stout inside me a shifting weight I must accommodate from side to side. The Doc breathed softly in my ear.

“Look here now, son, admit it, you’ve traveled little in Ireland, right? Then listen! Biking near Maynooth, fog and ail, you’d best take it fast! Raise a din! Why? Scare the other cyclists and cows off the path, both sides! If you pump slow, why, you’ll creep up on and do away with dozens before they know what took them off! And another thing: when a bike approaches, douse your light—that is, if it’s working. Pass each other, lights out, in safety. Them devil’s own lights have put out more eyes and demolished more innocents than all of seeing’s worth. Is it clear now? Two things: speed, and douse your lights when bikes loom up!”

At the door, I nodded. Behind me I heard the one victim, settled easy in his chair, working the story around on his tongue, thinking, preparing, beginning his tale:

“Well, I’m on me way home, blithe as you please, assailing downhill near the cross, when ...”

Outside, the Doc offered final advice.

“Always wear a cap, lad, if you want to walk nights ever—on the roads, that is. A cap’ll save you from the frightful migraines should you meet Kelly or Moran or anyone else hurtling full tilt the other way, full of fiery moss and hard-skulled from birth. Even on foot, these men are dangerous. So you see there’s rules for pedestrians, too, in Ireland, and wear a cap at night is number one!” He handed me a cap.

Without thinking, I took the brown tweed cap and put it on. Adjusting it, I looked out at the dark mist boiling across the night. I listened to the empty highway waiting for me ahead, quiet, quiet, quiet but not quiet somehow. For hundreds of long strange miles up and down all of Ireland, I saw

thousand crossroads covered with a thousand fogs through which one thousand tweed-capped, gray, muffled phantoms wheeled along in midair, singing, shouting, and smelling of Guinness stout.

I blinked. The phantoms shadowed off. The road lay empty and dark and waiting.

Taking a deep breath, I straddled my bike, pulled my cap down over my ears, shut my eyes, and pumped down the wrong side of the road toward some sanity never to be found.

Chapter 5

The door swung wide at my knock.

My director stood there in boots and riding pants and a silk shirt open at the neck to reveal an ascot tie. His eyes bulged like eggs to see me here. His chimpanzee mouth fell down a few inches, and the air came out of his lungs in an alcohol-tinged rush.

“I’ll be damned!” he cried. “It’s you!”

“Me,” I admitted meekly.

“You’re late! You okay? What delayed you?”

I waved behind me, up the road.

“Ireland,” I said.

“Christ, that explains it. Welcome!”

He pulled me in. The door slammed.

“You need a drink?”

“Ah, God,” I said. Then hearing my newly acquired brogue, I spoke meticulously.

“Yes, sir,” I said.

As John, his wife Ricki, and I sat down to dinner, I gazed long and hard at the wee dead birds on the warm plate, their heads awry, their beady eyes half shut, and said:

“Can I make a suggestion?”

“Make it, kid.”

“It’s about the Parsee Fedallah who runs as a character through the whole book. He ruins *Moby Dick*.”

“Fedallah? *That* one? Well?”

“Do you mind if right now, over our wine, we give all the best lines and acts to Ahab? And throw Fedallah overboard?”

My director lifted his glass. “He’s *thrown!*”

The weather outside was beginning to clear, the grass was lush and green in the dark beyond the French windows, and I was blushing warmly all over to think I was really here, doing this work, beholding my hero, imagining an incredible future as screen-writer for a genius.

Somewhere along in the dinner the subject of Spain came up, almost casually, or perhaps John brought it up himself.

I saw Ricki stiffen and pause in her eating, and then continue picking at her food as John went on about Hemingway and the bullfights and Franco and traveling to and from Madrid and Barcelona.

“We were there just a month ago,” said John. “You really ought to go there sometime, kid,” he said. “Beautiful country. Wonderful people, it’s been a bad twenty years, but they’re getting back on their feet. Anyway, we had a little event there, didn’t we, Ricki? A small thing got out of hand.”

Ricki started to rise, her plate in her hand, and the knife fell clattering to the table.

“Why don’t you tell us about it, dear,” said John.

“No, I—” said Ricki.

“Tell us what happened at the border,” said John.

His words were so heavy that, weighted, Ricki sat back down and after a pause to regain her breath held for a long moment, let it out, “We were driving back up from Barcelona and there was the

Spaniard wanted to get into France without papers and John wanted us to smuggle him across the border in our car under a rug in the back seat and John said it was okay and the Spaniard said please and I said my God, if they found out, the border guards, if they caught us we'd be held, put in jail maybe, and you know what Spanish jails are like, in there for days or weeks or forever, so I said no, no way, and the Spaniard pleaded and John said it was a matter of honor, we had to do it, we had to help this poor man and I said I was sorry but I wouldn't endanger the children. What if I was in jail and the kids would be in the hands of others too many hours and days and who would explain to them and John insisted and there was a big row—"

"Very simply," said John, "you were a coward."

"No, I wasn't," said Ricki, looking up from her food.

"You were yellow," said John, "pure yellow, and we had to leave the poor son of a bitch behind because my wife didn't have enough guts to let us get him across."

"How do we know he wasn't a criminal, John," said Ricki. "Some sort of political fugitive, and then we would have been in jail forever—"

"Just yellow is all." John lit a cigarillo and leaned forward to stare at his wife at the far end, miles away down the table. "I really hate to think I am married to a woman with no guts, who wears a yellow stripe down her back. Wouldn't you hate to be married to that kind of woman, kid?"

I sat back in my chair, my mouth full of food I could not chew nor swallow.

I looked at my genius employer and then at his wife then back to John and then back to Ricki.

Her head was bent.

"Yellow," said John, a final time, and blew smoke.

As I looked down at the dead bird on my plate, I recalled a scene that now seemed so long ago.

In August, I had wandered, stunned, into a bookstore in Beverly Hills looking for a small, comfortable-sized copy of *Moby Dick*. The copy I had at home was too large to travel. I needed something compact. I shared with the proprietor my excitement about writing the screenplay and traveling overseas.

Even as I spoke, astonished, a woman in the far corner of the shop turned and said, very clearly:

"Don't go on that journey."

It was Elijah, at the foot of the *Pequod's* gangplank, warning Queequeg and Ishmael not to follow Ahab off 'round the world: it was a dread mission and a lost cause from which no man might return.

"Don't go," said the strange woman again.

I recovered and said, "Who *are* you?"

"A former friend of the director's and the former wife of one of his screenwriters. I know the both. God, I wish I didn't. They're *both* monsters, but your director's the worst. He'll eat you and spit out your bones. So—"

She stared at me.

"—whatever you do, *don't* go."

Ricki's eyes were shut, but tears were leaking out of the lashes and running down to the tip of her nose where they fell, one by one, onto her plate.

My God, I thought, this is my first day in Ireland, my first day at work for my hero.

Chapter 6

The next day after lunch, we circled Courtown House, the old mansion where my director stayed. There was a large meadow and a forest beyond and another meadow and forest beyond that.

In the middle of the meadow we met a rather large black bull.

“Huh!” cried John, and whipped off his coat.

He charged the bull, shouting:

“Ha, *Toro! Toro*, ha!”

One minute from now, I thought, *one of us will be dead. Me?*

“John!” I cried quietly, if such is possible, “please, put on your coat!”

“Huh, *Toro!*” my director yelled. “Ho!”

The bull stared at us, motionless.

John shrugged his coat back on.

I ran ahead of him to toss Fedallah overboard, assemble the crew, bid Elijah to warn Ishmael not to go, then launch the *Pequod* to sail off and around the world.

So it went, day on day, week on week, as I killed the Whale each night, but to see him reborn each dawn, while I was lost in Dublin, where the weather struck from its bleak quarters in the sea and came searching with sheets of rain and gusts of cold and still more sheets of rain.

I went to bed and woke in the middle of the night thinking I heard someone cry, thinking I myself was weeping, and I felt my face and found it dry.

Then I looked at the window and thought: Why, yes, it’s just the rain, the rain, always the rain, and I turned over, sadder still, and fumbled about for my dripping sleep and tried to slip it back on.

Then, late each afternoon, I taxied out amidst Kilcock’s gray stone with green beards on it, a road to town, and the rain falling down for weeks as I worked on a script that was to be shot in the hot sun of the Canary Isles sometime next year. The pages of the script were full of hot suns and burning days. I typed in Dublin or Kilcock, with the weather a beast at the windows.

On the thirty-first night, a knock at the door of my hotel room revealed Mike, shuffling.

“There you are!” he exclaimed. “I been thinking on what you said. You to find the Irish, me to get help. I got me a car! So would you get the hell out to find some wild life in our land? And forget the damn rain on the double?”

“Double!” I said gladly.

And we blew along the road to Kilcock in a dark that rocked us like a boat on a black flood until, sweating rain, faces pearly, we struck through the pub doors and it was warm as a sheepfold because there were the townsmen pressed in a great compost heap at the bar and Heeber Finn yelling jokes and foaming up drinks.

“Heeber!” cried Mike. “We’re here for that wild night!”

“A wild night it is!”

Whereupon Heeber whipped off his apron, shrugged his meat-cleaver shoulders into a tweed coat, jumped up in the air and slid down inside his raincoat, slung on his beardy cap, and thrust us at the door.

“Nail everything down till I get back!” he advised his crew. “I’m taking these gents to the damnedest evening ever! Little do they know what waits for them beyond!”

He opened the door. The wind threw half a ton of ice water on him. Taking this as a spur to his rhetoric, Heeber added in a roar, "Out with you! On!"

"Do you think we should?" I wondered.

"What do you mean?" cried Mike. "Would you freeze in your room? Rewrite the dead Whale?"

"Well ...," I said, and slung on my cap.

Then, like Ahab, I thought on my bed, a damp box with its pale cool winding sheets and the window dripping next to it like a conscience all night through. I groaned. I opened the door of Mike's car, took my legs apart to get in, and in no time we shot down the town like a ball in a bowling alley.

Finn at the wheel talked fierce, half hilarity, half sobering King Lear.

"A wild night? Ahead! You'd never guess, would you, to walk through Ireland, so much could go on under the skin?"

"I knew there must be an outlet somewhere," I yelled.

The speedometer was up to one hundred kilometers. Stone walls raced by on the right, stone walls raced by on the left. It was raining the entire dark sky down on the entire dark land.

"Outlet indeed!" said Finn. "If the Church only knew, or maybe it figures: The poor buggers! and lets us be!"

"Where?"

"There!" cried Finn.

The speedometer read 110. My stomach was stone like the stone walls rushing left and right. Up over a hill, down into a valley. "Can't we go a bit faster?" I asked, hoping for the opposite.

"Done!" said Finn, and made it 120.

"That will do it nicely," I said, in a faint voice, wondering what lay ahead. Behind all the slate and stone weeping walls of Ireland, what happened? Somewhere in this drizzling land were there heart-fleshed peach-fuzz Renoir women bright as lamps you could hold your hands out to and warm your palms? Beneath the rain-drenched sod, the flinty rock, at the numbed core of living, was there or was there a small seed of fire which, fanned, might break volcanoes free and boil the rains to steam? Was there then somewhere a Baghdad harem, nests awriggle and aslither with silk and tassel, the absolute perfection of women unadorned? We passed a church. No. We passed a convent. No. We passed a village slouched under its old-men's thatch. No. Yet ...

I glanced over at Heeber Finn. We could have switched off the lights and driven by the steady, piercing beams of his forward-directed eyes snatching at the dark, flicking away the rain.

Wife, I thought to myself, children, forgive me for what I do this night, terrible as it may be, for this is Ireland in the rain of an ungodly time and way out in Galway, where the dead must go to die.

The brakes were hit. We slid a good ninety feet; my nose mashed on the windshield. Heeber Finn was out of the car.

"We're here!" He sounded like a man drowned deep in rain.

I saw a hole in the wall, a tiny gate flung wide.

Mike and I followed at a plunge. I saw other cars in the dark and many bikes. But not a light. Oh, *must* be wild to be *this* secret, I thought. I yanked my cap tight, as rain crawled down my neck.

Through the hole in the wall we stumbled, Heeber clenching our elbows. "Here!" he husked. "Hold on. Swig on this to keep your blood high!"

I felt a flask knock my fingers. I poured its contents into my boilers to let the steam up my flues.

"It's a lovely rain," I said.

"The man's mad." Finn drank after Mike, a shadow among shadows.

I squinted about. I had an impression of midnight sea upon which men like little boats passed

the murmurous tides, heads down, muttering, in twos and threes.

Good God, what's it all mean? I asked myself, incredibly curious now.

"Wait!" whispered Heeber. "This is *it!*"

What did I expect? Perhaps some scene like those old movies where innocent sailing ships suddenly flap down their cabin walls and guns appear like magic to fire on the foe. Or a farmhouse falls apart like a cereal box, Long Tom rears up to blast a projectile five hundred miles to crack Paris. So here, I thought, will these stones spill away, that house open wide, rosy lights flash on, so that from a monstrous cannon ten dozen pink women, not dwarf Irish but willowy French, will be shot out and down into the waving arms of this grateful multitude?

The lights came on.

I blinked.

For there was the entire unholy thing, laid out for me in the drizzle.

The lights flickered. The men quickened.

A mechanical rabbit popped out of a little box at the far end of the stony yard and ran.

Eight dogs, let free from gates, yelping, ran after in a great circle. There was not one yell or murmur from the crowd of men. Their heads turned slowly, watching. The rain rained down on the half-lit scene. The rain fell on tweed caps and thin cloth coats. The rain dripped off thick eyebrows and sharp noses. The rain hammered hunched shoulders. The rabbit ran. The dogs loped. The rabbit popped into its electric kennel. The dogs collided, yiping. The lights went out.

In the dark I turned to stare at Heeber Finn, stunned.

"Now!" he shouted. "Place your bets!"

We were back in Kilcock, speeding, at ten o'clock.

The rain was still raining, like an ocean smashing the road with titanic fists, as we drew up in great tidal spray before the pub.

"Well, now!" said Heeber Finn, looking not at us but at the windshield wiper palpitating before us. "Well!"

Mike and I had bet on five races and had lost, between us, two or three pounds.

"I won," Finn said, "and some of it I put down in your names, both of you. That last race, I swear God, won for all of us. Let me pay!"

"It's all right, Heeber," I said, my numb lips moving.

Finn pressed two shillings into my hand. I didn't fight him. "That's better!" he said. "Now, one la drink on me!"

Mike drove me back to Dublin.

Wringing out his cap in the hotel lobby he looked at me and said, "It *was* a wild Irish night for sure!"

"A wild night," I said.

I hated to go up to my room. So I sat for another hour in the reading lounge of the damp hotel and took the traveler's privilege, a glass and a bottle provided by the dazed hall porter. I sat alone listening to the rain and the rain on the cold hotel roof, thinking of Ahab's coffin-bed waiting for me up there under the drumbeat weather. I thought of the only warm thing in the hotel, in the town, in all the land of Eire this night, the script in my typewriter with its sun of the South Pacific, its hot winds blowing the *Pequod* toward its doom, but along the way fiery sands and its women with dark charcoal-burning eyes.

And I thought of the darkness beyond the city, the lights flashing, the electric rabbit running, the

dogs yiping, the rabbit gone, the lights out, and the rain flailing the dank shoulders and soaked cap and ice-watering the noses and seeping through the sheep-smelling tweeds.

Going upstairs, I glanced out a streaming window. There, on the street, riding by under a lamp, was a man on a bike. He was terribly drunk. The bike weaved back and forth across the bricks, as the man vomited. He did not stop the bike to do this. He kept pumping unsteadily, blearily, as he threw up. I watched him go off in the dark rain.

Then I groped up to find and die in my room.

Chapter 7

On Grafton Street just halfway between The Four Provinces pub and the cinema stood the best, or so John said, Gentleman Riders to Hound emporium in all Dublin, if not Ireland, and perhaps one half Bond Street in London.

It was Tyson's, and to speak the name was to see the front windows with their hacking coats and foulards and pale yellow silk shirts and velvet hunting caps and twill pants and shining boots. If you stood there long enough you could hear the horses fribbling their lips and snorting their laughter and twitching their skin to jerk the flies off, and you could hear the hounds whining and barking and running in happy circles (dogs are always happy and thus their smiles, unless they are miserable because their master crossed his eyes at them); but as I say, if you stood there long enough waiting for someone to hand you the reins, the owner of the shop, seeing you as one of the blindfolded hypnotists who wandered out of Huston's Barn, might come out and lead-kindly-light your way into the smell of leather and boot cream and wool; and buckle on your new trenchcoat for you and fit on a tweed cap that abristle for a thousand rains within the month and measure your pigfoot and wonder how in hell you shove it into a boot and all the while around you Anglo-Irish gents being similarly whisper-murmured at by lilting tongues; and the weather turned bad outside within thirty seconds after you set foot within, that you linger and buy more than your intent.

Where was I? Oh, yes. I stood out in front of Tyson's on three separate nights.

Looking at the wax model, as tall as Huston and as strideful and arrogant in all his Kilcock Huston finery, I thought: How long before I dress like that?

"How do I look, John?" I cried, three days later.

I spun about on the front steps of Courtown House smelling of wool, boot leather, and silk.

John stared at my tweed cap and twill pants.

"I'll be goddamned," he gasped.

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