

**Excerpt from *Friend of Mankind and Other Stories* by Julian Mazor.
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Gray Skies

"Oh, the living hell with it!" I said, slumped over the rail, looking into the Irish Sea.

Wanda's face came pink out of the mist. She said, "Yes, and don't start telling me about the girl from Texas, Harry. It's too boring for words. Don't tell me about how great she was and how you should have married her. God, she sounds stupid. Like some awful, pathetic little hick. You really deserved one another."

She was talking about a girl from El Paso whom I knew when I was stationed at Fort Bliss, in the late fifties. She was a wonderful girl, sensitive and kind and very pretty, with brown hair and green eyes that really had a light in them. I would have married her, but I felt we were from two different worlds, and I was only twenty-one and didn't feel I'd seen enough of life. Years after I got out of the Army, I got involved with Wanda, and we were married in the spring of the year. We were from the same world, and almost from the start we didn't get along. As I often said, she made me feel a certain way—not too well.

It was a gray Sunday morning. The ferry sailed slowly into Cork, and the city looked altogether beautiful and mysterious—so calm and quiet and a little poor. Wanda, a red shawl around her head, smoked a Player's cigarette. She had a hurt expression on her face. Our son, Edward, wore a gray coat with a hood that was pulled up over his head. He was two and a half years old. The three of us huddled together on the deck. It was damp and cold.

Later, in our blue Volkswagen, a used car we had bought in London, we traveled along the southern coast through Kinsale and Skibbereen, and then moved north through Bantry and Glengariff. On the same day, we went around the Ring of Kerry, and we stayed the night in Killarney. On the following day, we saw some of the Dingle Peninsula and reached the River Shannon. We spent the night in a Limerick hotel. It inspired Wanda to recite a little jingle of her girlhood in Providence. "Did you know this one, Harry?" she asked. "'The Irish are so dirty / They never wash their clothes / There are no Chinese laundries / Where the River Shannon flows.'"

"No, Wanda, I hadn't heard that one," I said.

During the early time in Ireland, we got along fairly well. There were, of course, the pained expressions, the sarcasm, and the withholding of support.

Perhaps we were fundamentally incompatible. For example, I liked to take life slowly, and she preferred it quick and frantic. She was always telling me to hurry up, and my favorite advice to her was "Take it easy, Wanda. Relax, if you can."

It was in the west of Ireland, in County Galway, that we finally settled down. We lived in a whitewashed cottage with a sloping corrugated roof and modern conveniences—good plumbing, electricity, and a stove that worked on a cylinder of gas. Through our bedroom window we could see pastureland and gentle hills and, far off on a rise, the tower and battlement of a ruined castle. Pink and blue flowers grew along the base of the cottage walls. It was quite a tranquil setting, and different from anything I had ever known. When we were under clouds, there were nights of pitch-black darkness, with no distraction of city lights or signs of habitation. On some evenings, we could see the moon drifting through the mist as we stood outside our cottage door, or there might be the rich, deep-blue surprise of a starry night. And there was this great quiet, with only the pastoral sounds and the wind and rain and our own voices to break the silence. Once in a while, you could hear a motorcar—usually an old black Austin moving slowly in the distance, or our own car starting out on a trip to Galway for groceries or up to the lay-by on the Limerick road to dispose of our garbage.

We burned turf in our grate to take the chill off in the morning and at night. It was a simple country life; we took little trips and got to know the Irish. If Wanda and I had got along, it would have been a Celtic idyll; but even with things as they were—and they got worse—it was for me quite wonderful.

We had said "so long" to the U.S.A., had bade farewell to the discourtesy and peevishness, the want of dignity, the lack of kindness, the absence of brotherhood, to the nervous hysteria and mental unbalance, to the hostility, to the growing strain of insanity and the war—in short, to the obscenity of American life in our time.

Still, it was not that easy to say goodbye. I had a lot of friends back there, and there were our families to consider. We were rather fond of our own, though not of each other's. Our time abroad was made possible by a bequest I'd received from an aunt in Philadelphia.

We went over in the winter of 1969 and lived in London for a while before going to Ireland, in the early spring. I was thirty-four, not at my physical peak.

A year passed.

"I had another Yank come in here a few days ago, and I still have not got over it," the gas-station man said, taking out the gas-pump nozzle and placing the cap on my tank. He was a thin man in his fifties, with blue, watery eyes and a ruddy

complexion. I offered him several pound notes, but he did not seem interested in concluding the sale.

There was a light, misty rain. I looked toward the station office and saw Wanda standing inside. She had just lit a cigarette and was trying to compose herself. We'd had a terrible argument before we'd pulled in for gas. When I stopped the car, she had said that she felt "a great need" to get away from me.

"May I fall over dead if I'm a liar, but I put ninety gallons of gas in his car," the man said. "He had a big car, a Cadillac, but God knows it was not an airplane. I thought there was something wrong with the gauge or pump. When it said thirty-seven gallons, I remember looking under the car to see if a leak was spreading out on the ground, but it was dry. And finally, when the gauge said sixty-four gallons, I said to him, 'I think there's something wrong, sir,' and he said, 'No, everything's fine.' I remember the chill went up me. I kept pumping the gas until I'd put in ninety gallons, and the tank overflowed. It was fantastic. The price of the sale was thirty-four pounds nineteen shillings and seven pence. I said to the Yank, 'I've never seen anything like this,' and it was then that he told me that he'd had a custom-made tank put in his car. He explained how he'd been living up in the American state of Michigan, in the northern part, where it's so wild and lonely, and there are only a few gas stations, and he wanted to be able to drive for weeks on end without worrying about running low and finding himself stuck in the wilderness. So he had this special tank built by an engineer in Detroit. It held a hundred gallons. If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I would have called the man who told me this a dirty liar. The car appeared normal in every way, except it was low-slung and heavy in the middle; but it was not something you noticed right away. It came with knowing about the tank. You see, it was welded onto the bottom and covered the entire underside of the car. When I took the money into the office and told the manager that it came from the sale of gas to an American with a Cadillac, he started to laugh so loud that I thought he was going to keel over, but when I took him out and showed him the car and the gauge, with the numbers still showing, he became very sober, very quiet, and he said very little for the rest of the day."

I looked at the man without quite knowing what to say, though I'd enjoyed the story very much; and then I said, finally, "Well, that's very interesting. Thanks for telling me about it."

I gave him the pound notes, and then signaled to Wanda that we were ready. She opened up her raincoat and drew it over her head, then stepped out of the office and ran quickly to the car. It was raining hard again.

"There's one more thing," he said, as he handed me my change through the window. "The gas tank was a failure. The American was inclined to get overconfident,

and he ran out of gas up in Michigan, just as he feared he would before he went to all the trouble. You can't escape your destiny. Well, don't get too wet, now."

I said goodbye to him and pulled out on the road.

"What was that all about?" Wanda said.

"Just a little story."

"You certainly took your time."

"I didn't want to be rude and cut him short," I said.

"Not you, certainly not. You probably dragged it out."

"No, I was just listening, Wanda. He only wanted to tell me something, and I listened to him."

"God, you're really perfect for this country," she said.

The rain stopped when we were a few miles out of Galway, and I turned off the windshield wipers. There were light streaks in the gray sky, and it appeared that the sun was about to break through.

"It's clearing up," I said.

"I think you're the most selfish and irresponsible person I've ever known."

"Oh, come on, Wanda."

"Why do you force me to be a nag! Harry, I want to turn around right now. I mean it. I'm getting very worried. Will you please turn around?"

I kept going straight ahead. We were on our way to the Galway Meeting.

She was close to tears again. "I ask you, will you please turn around?"

"Relax. Everything's all right," I said.

"It's not all right. Nothing's all right. If anything happens to Edward, if he gets hurt, or worse, if—"

"That's enough. Now, for the hundredth time, Edward's in good hands. Nancy's a greathearted person, and there's nothing to worry about," I said.

"Oh, please shut up. You know she's just a negligent Irish girl. My god, Harry, she lets her own little boy run out on the road. I don't know why I ever let you talk me into it, but you put so much pressure on me—and God help me if I were to thwart you in any way, if I interfered with your day at the races. It's no great pleasure to listen to you go on about how I ruin your life with my joyless temperament. The problem is that you have no respect for me."

"I do respect you. I only said that sometimes you get so nervous where Edward is concerned that it makes you a little joyless, and that's practically all I said."

She wiped the corners of her eyes with a handkerchief.

"You know, it's very depressing to have another person always make you feel that you're a little sickening," she said.

"I'm sorry I make you feel that way."

"Oh, you're not sorry. It's the pleasure of your life."

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Look, Wanda, let's start over. Say, did I tell you what Nancy said to me when I told her I was going to pay her for her trouble? She said, 'Harry, we're friends, and that's all that matters, so don't be thinking of giving me any money. I wouldn't take it if you held a gun to me.' "

"God, Harry, all that banter goes to your head. But I'm telling you one thing. If anything happens to Edward, I'll never talk to you again. Never, never, never—"

"Will you please shut up?" I said.

"I will not shut up!"

A light rain began to fall again. The wipers went back and forth. They made a pleasant sound and along with the rain helped create in the car a feeling of warm coziness. I turned on the radio and listened to a program of old Gaelic songs. Wanda was slouched low in her seat, her arms folded across her chest. After a while, I turned off the radio. It occurred to me that I might cheer her up by telling her the story that I had heard in the gas station. I should have merely reported it as it was told, but I made the mistake of saying that it sounded plausible.

She leaned forward in her seat and laughed. "Oh, they must be laughing at you now, and no wonder, you're so incredibly naïve. Do you really think it would fit under a car? One thing's for sure, Harry, your strong point never was a sense of reality. It falls apart at the slightest provocation. I watched your face as he talked to you, and it was so rapt and respectful. Do you realize that he made a complete fool out of you, Harry? He'll be telling his friends about this tonight in the local pub, about this naïve American, and they'll be laughing themselves sick."

"Jesus, but you're irritating," I said.

"Irish fancy—that's what they call it, Harry."

"No, you're wrong. I talked to the man. I watched him, sensed his sincerity. He seemed truly mystified himself," I said.

She broke into laughter again, and I went on. "Look, maybe the tank took up all the trunk space as well as the underside. You see, it was welded onto the bottom. I don't know if I told you that."

"I'm going to write my father this little story," she said. "It merely confirms everything he ever felt about you. I'm going to write him tonight."

"You do that. And while you're at it, would you tell him for me to take a flying leap?" I said.

She took a pained, spasmodic breath. "Oh, God, I hate you, Harry. I hate your dirty guts."

I slowed at a curve and shifted down into third. The gear stick collided with her leg.

"Move your bloody knee," I said. I gave a slapping push to her thigh, and then heard her groan and whimper, and before I knew what was happening she threw herself on me and started hitting me on the shoulders and the top of my head. The car lurched to the right, and I managed to push her against the opposite side, while quickly turning the wheel with my free hand, and I applied the brakes. I pulled over to the soft shoulder of the road, near a fence of piled stones. Beyond the fence was a green and rocky field.

She slumped against the car door and began to cry.

I was out of breath and angry, and I lit a cigarette and tried to calm down.

"Oh, I'm so unhappy. I can't stand it anymore," she said.

She rose and leaned out the window, as though she were about to be sick, and then she fell back in her seat.

When we arrived at the Galway Meeting, the first race was over. The rain had stopped and the sky had partially cleared. Broken dark clouds were moving eastward. I parked the car on a grassy field, and we walked toward the grandstand. Wanda remained a little to the rear. We had not spoken for twenty minutes.

I had looked forward to seeing the Meeting, and I started to feel good again. The horses had not yet come out for the second race. We went through a gate and crossed the grass track, then passed through another gate to the grandstand section. I felt this tremendous happiness. I liked the track in its pastoral setting, the Irish crowd, and the changing sky, and the air, which was a little cold and wet.

Wanda looked despondent and halfheartedly regarded her program. She finally spoke. "Where are the betting windows?" she asked.

I tried to explain it to her—how there were no betting windows, no pari-mutuel system, that you placed your bet with the bookmaker who gave you the most attractive odds, and that the bookmakers were in a special area.

"I don't need a lecture, Harry. I'll figure it out for myself," she said. "Look, I think I'd like to watch the races alone, so why don't you go somewhere?"

"What do you mean by that?" I said.

"I think I made it very clear," she said, looking remote and tired. She turned and walked away toward the grandstand.

"You'll find me on the rail," I yelled after her, and then I walked across the track again, just as the horses were coming out from the paddock. I entered the infield and took up a position beside the rail. The second race was coming up, and I thought of going across again and placing a bet with a bookmaker on the other side,

but I didn't want to take a chance of running into Wanda. I was disappointed not to see the betting area. The bookmakers were a colorful and dedicated lot. I'd seen them in Kildare at the Curragh, one afternoon, while Wanda stayed with Edward at the hotel. Each bookmaker seemed to have his own following of loyal patrons. It was an interesting profession, the way it was practiced in Ireland, and it appealed to me. I wouldn't have minded being a member of their little fraternity. It was a healthy life in the out-of-doors.

The sun came out briefly, and the lovely colors of the jockey silks took me by surprise. Then the sun went behind gray clouds again. The horses moved in a tightly reined trot, and then the jockeys, up a little in their saddles, broke them into a gallop that took them past the grandstand and around the turn.

A couple of Irish boys climbed up on the rail. I judged them to be about fifteen. One was small, slight, and dark-haired, with green-blue eyes. The other boy was of a larger, more husky build, with broad sloping shoulders and red hair. They began talking about the horses with great cheerfulness. The dark-haired boy spoke rapidly, rubbing the knuckles of his hand along his cheek.

Then the race started. It was a handicap for three-year-olds, at six furlongs.

The boys began screaming at one of the riders as the horses moved around the turn, and then the smaller boy said to his friend, "He's going to make it, Martin, and remember that I said it." Shortly, a great roar went up, and then the race was over.

"Was I right now, Martin? Can you say it clearly now?" the smaller boy said.

"Oh, you were right, Jerry. I can't deny it."

I couldn't help smiling at the exchange, and almost immediately got into conversation with them. The slight boy, called Jerry, looked down at me from the rail.

"The jockey Curran on Destiny's Child, he takes out my sister," he said.

"He rode a good race," I said. Destiny's Child had won by three lengths.

"Oh, he isn't bad for an apprentice rider," he said, and then he paused. "You're an American, aren't you?"

I said that I was.

"I have an uncle in Boston and another in Chicago," he said. "And they've sent us no money in five years."

His friend laughed. "Jerry's an awful person. He's worse than a Belfast Protestant on a holiday in Rome."

"Oh, God, Martin, that's good, that's very good, but you said it yesterday as well," Jerry said.

"Did I, now!"

"And I expect it tomorrow, too—if I happen to see you then," he said. He looked at me. "My name's Jerry O'Neill, and this sad person is Martin Leary."

I introduced myself, and we shook hands all around.

"Do you like the horses?" Jerry asked.

I said that I did.

"I plan to be a trainer someday, after my career as a jockey is over," he said.

Martin shook his head. "It's over already, Jerry. I'm afraid it was over before it started."

Jerry laughed. He pulled out a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket and offered one to me, and then he took one for himself.

"None for you, Martin," he said.

"I don't want another today. You're just stunting your growth, Jerry, which is a poor thing as it is."

"Well, that's good. There'll be no trouble making the weight."

"Oh, you'll be lucky to get a horse, unless an owner has lost his mind. Now give me a fag, will you?" Martin said.

Jerry handed him the pack, and Martin took out two cigarettes. "I'll keep one for later," he said.

The horses for the next race came out on the track. We smoked and looked them over. The race coming up was for three-year-old fillies at a mile and a quarter.

"Harry, put a few pounds on Broken Heart, and I think you'll do well," Jerry said.

I said that I was thinking of Gray Lady, that she had placed second in her last two races and Curran was riding her.

"Oh, don't think of him. He may fall off his horse this race," Jerry said. Martin agreed.

While we were talking it over, I noticed Wanda coming toward us. It did not appear that she had been having a pleasant time.

"Now, she is good-looking," Martin said.

And then Jerry said, "She's a little haughty and angry. Do I like her? I'm not sure that I do."

"She's coming this way. She seems to be looking at us," Martin said.

I felt that it had gone far enough, and I told them that she was my wife. They broke into a wild laughter and had scarcely suppressed it as Wanda walked up to us. I introduced them to her. They could not quite look at her, out of embarrassment, and remained seated up on the rail.

"Thank you, I'm glad I provided a good laugh," she said.

Jerry, who wore the trace of a smile, got down from the rail. "It was not at you we were laughing but ourselves," he said. He held his cigarette cupped in his hand, as though this were somehow an act of respect. His face took on a look of sobriety. "It was only our natural surprise at finding you were Harry's wife, after our saying, 'Now, there's an attractive woman.' "

"That's true," Martin said, only half looking at her.

Wanda ignored them.

"How long do you intend to stay?" she asked.

"Until it's over," I said. I looked up at the cloudy sky.

"I'm wondering about Edward," she said.

"He's all right," I said.

"How do you know?"

"Well, why shouldn't he be?" I said, feeling helpless before a rising anger.

I looked out at the track. Jerry pointed to the No. 4 horse, Gray Lady, who was galloping in front of us.

"There goes Curran," he said. Curran, leaning forward and slightly up in the saddle, had a long face with a wide mouth, and there was dark hair coming out from under his cap.

"Wanda, that jockey takes out Jerry's sister," I said.

"Oh, how good for her."

"I'm not sure it is," Jerry said.

Martin laughed. "She's daft anyway. It runs in the family," he said.

Wanda sighed. "Harry, I want to leave right now," she said.

I gripped the rail and said nothing for a few moments, and then I said, "Go down that road and turn left. It's about fifteen miles."

I should never have said it. Wanda's lower lip trembled and tears welled up in her eyes. The boys regarded her with a kind of wonder.

"Oh, how could you, Harry?" she said, turning her back on them.

"Well, boys, I guess I'll have to leave," I said. I shook hands with them and gave them what was left of a pack of cigarettes.

"Thank you, Harry, and good luck," Martin said.

"We hope to see you before it's all over," Jerry said. He climbed back up on the rail and smiled. "Goodbye. And goodbye to your wife, Harry," he said.

"Yes, goodbye to her, too," Martin said.

I could hardly look at Wanda. We walked without speaking to the parking lot and got into the car. As soon as she sat down, she began to cry. "I'll never forget how you humiliated me before those boys," she said. "I hope you're happy now."

I felt that it was getting hard to breathe, that the oxygen was leaving the air. As I put the key in the ignition, I thought that I had been a kinder, more compassionate person in my twenties, when I seemed to have more hope as a human being. In all fairness, though, I'd also been happier then.

In a drizzling rain, Edward was running across a field with Nancy's four-year-old son, Jack. Several brown-and-white cows and a horse were grazing there. A large dog ran between them and the boys, who ran and screamed with their arms stretched out. Nancy sat on the steps of her cottage, nursing her infant daughter. When she saw us, she rose slowly and covered her breast. "You're back early. Who won the Guinness Hurdle?" she said.

"We did not stay for it," I said. "We thought we'd go on a picnic out in Connemara." This had just occurred to me.

She laughed. She was a slim, attractive, and cheerful girl of about twenty-eight. "Oh, Harry, you're going out there again, are you?" she said. "I'm sure you'll end up herding sheep." She looked out at the field. "Edward was lovely. He is great company for Jack." The boys came over. They were flushed and sweaty with excitement. Edward grasped me around my legs and then ran to his mother, who picked him up.

"I no' 'fraid of cows," he said excitedly. He had large brown eyes and brown hair and wore a blue sweater. Young Jack, with his open, ruddy face, was big and husky for his age. He wore only a thin yellow polo shirt.

I tried to give Nancy some money, and she refused me again.

"Please don't think of it, Harry," she said. "Have yourselves a lovely time, now. Are you going as far as Clifden?"

"I don't know," I said.

Nancy laughed. "What a terrible man you are," she said. Edward came over, and she knelt down and put a hand on his shoulder. "The sooner you're leaving me, the sooner I'll see you again." He put his arms around her neck. "Oh, you're a great man, Edward," she said.

She stood up and turned to me. "Matt's out in the river. I think he'll be bringing in some salmon. Do you want a fish?"

"That would be fine," I said.

"Good, I'll send him over tonight. Well, goodbye now, Harry—goodbye, Wanda."

"Goodbye," Wanda said, getting into the car. "And thank you."

Jack ran out on the road and waved to us as we pulled away.

It was hard to tell about the weather. Overhead, the sky was gray, and a light rain was falling, but farther west it was brighter, with blue openings in the clouds.

"I think it's clearing out in Connemara," I said. "I've got all the gear in the trunk, the stove and some canned goods in the knapsack, and we can pick up some other things in Galway."

Wanda lit a cigarette and said nothing for a few moments, and then she said, "It's a shame you can't take Nancy. She's so much fun, isn't she?"

"What are you talking about now, Wanda?" I said.

"You're both so chummy, that's all. It's always Harry this and Harry that, and she hardly even looks my way. I think she hates me for some Irish reason of her own."

"She doesn't hate you, Wanda. I'm sure she feels that you don't like her much. That's all there is to it. I genuinely like her, and she knows it, and she responds to me."

"Please shut up, Harry," she said. "You're so pompous and smug. I mean, smugness is really a secret disease with you."

After we drove into Galway, Wanda went into the Five Star Market with a cloth shopping bag that we always kept in the car, and she came out with some bread and milk. At another place, we picked up four bottles of Guinness. We put it all in a Styrofoam box in the trunk.

I drove down to the waterfront and maneuvered the car for the sheer joy of it through the Spanish Arch, an old and beautifully weathered archway of stone, and then I turned the car around and drove through it again and started off for Connemara.

As we passed through Salthill, we stopped to look out at the nearly deserted beach. Three young girls, having been not long out of the water, stood smiling and shivering in their towels, with their wet hair matted to their foreheads, their lips blue with cold. Then one shouted gaily, "It's now or never, Kathleen!" They dropped their towels and went running toward the water again just as we pulled away.

Wanda shook her head. "What idiots."

The sky was darker, and it began to rain harder again. I told Wanda not to get disheartened, as it was obviously clearing in the west.

I turned on the radio. A theatre group was doing "The Shadow of a Gunman," and I felt wonderful listening to it.

I looked at Edward through the rearview mirror. He was strapped in his elevated safety seat, looking out at the passing country. He looked so honest and openhearted. I felt a fresh surge of love for him.

Wanda opened her window slightly and flipped her cigarette out on the road. "This country makes me nervous," she said. "The weather's so changeable. It makes me changeable."

"Don't blame your moods on the weather," I said. "The truth is, you're always the same. Impossible." I laughed.

"You're so witty, Harry. May I thank you for everything?" she said.

We were on the road to Clifden. On the outskirts of Moycullen, the rain was pouring against the windshield so hard that we couldn't see out. I had to pull over to the side of the road.

"Only you could pick a day like this for a picnic," Wanda said, shaking her head.

"It will definitely let up. You can see that it's clearing in the west," I said. "And besides, Wanda, try to be a little accepting. Why don't you try to enjoy the rain instead of resenting the fact that the sun isn't shining?"

"Please don't lecture me on how to behave, and don't patronize me, Harry. I'm not one of those stupid girls who think you're so marvelous."

"No, but you're lovely all the same," I said.

"You're so pompous. You're so sickening."

"Thank you very much."

"I hate you. God, I hate you."

I looked back at Edward to see how he was taking it, to see the expression on his face. It was unsmiling and inscrutable. "I don't think we're doing him any good, Wanda. I've told you that before."

She began to scream at me. "You bastard, I'm going to express myself, so don't use Edward as an excuse to stifle me!" She took a halting breath, and then started breathing rapidly and blinking. "And besides, you're the one who goes berserk and has tantrums and says all the hateful things, and then afterward has the gall to pretend he's so balanced and fair, when all the time—" She began to cry into her hands. Edward misunderstood. Thinking that his mother was laughing, he commenced in a high, screechy monotone to laugh as well.

We continued westward, passing through Oughterard, and drove along the edge of some small lakes. It was very beautiful. The rain had let up, and fog and mist lay over the water.

I pulled to the side of the road and turned off the engine. I wanted to experience it all in the quiet. I persuaded Wanda to get out of the car, and then I unstrapped Edward from his seat and lifted him up on my shoulders.

There was a deep stillness. It made all the difference in the world without the distraction of the motor. I tried to catch Wanda's eye, to get her to look my way and

smile and forgive me and forgive herself. She stood there in her British raincoat as though she were enduring a punishment, her arms folded across her chest, her eyes slightly squinting at the fine mist. If it had not been for the unhappiness around her mouth, accented by a faint vertical line dropping from one corner, she would have been one of those girls I fell in love with at first sight. She was quite good-looking for thirty—for any age, really—with her faintly rosy face and auburn hair and blue, unhappy eyes.

I walked slowly around the car with Edward on my back. A breeze came up, and the clouds and fog started to drift away. Some mountains could be seen vaguely in the distance. "Can you see those hills?" I said to Edward.

Wanda opened the car door. "Let's get back inside. We're all going to get the flu," she said.

I strapped Edward back in his seat, then dried his face and hair with a handkerchief. His sweater was a little damp. I made a mental note to get him a poncho at the first opportunity. We started out again.

"You're incredibly inconsiderate," Wanda said. "Just plain selfish. For your aesthetic pleasure, everyone has to get soaked through."

"You'll live," I said.

"No thanks to you, Harry. I want you to know that I still remember how you treated me at the race track—"

"Racecourse," I amended.

"Don't think I've forgotten how you and those Irish boys humiliated me—"

"I know you have perfect recall, Wanda, but the thing is, you get everything wrong, because you have no judgment," I said.

An expression of utter disgust came over her face. "Oh, I wish you'd shut up. I'm sick to death of how you go on in that smug, critical way of yours, killing me a little bit at a time. Why don't you just come out and say you hate me, Harry? I did a terrible thing. I took away a little of your precious freedom and forced you to accept some responsibility. I married you and gave you a child. I committed an awful crime. Poor Harry! You hate me constantly and with a passion. God, why don't you be a man and admit it?"

"I don't hate you, Wanda," I said. I turned around, looking back at Edward. "How are you, Ed? Here, give me a shake," I said, extending my hand. Edward smiled and took a few fingers and shook them.

"Can you honestly say you love me, Harry?" she said.

I didn't say anything, as at that moment I really despised her.

"It's a simple question. I ask you now," she said.

I kept my eyes on the road and did not reply.

"Oh, God, I've really had it with you, Harry."

"Well, there's always a way out."

"Yes, and I'll get Edward," she said.

"Like hell you will," I said.

We were approaching Recess. The small mountain ranges, the Maamturks and the Twelve Bens, came into view, looking gray in the mist. The rain was letting up again, and there were seams of light in the sky overhead. Farther west there were great splits in the clouds.

Near Ballynahinch, an old deserted castle rose up from a small island in the middle of a lake. It was an ancient fortress of the O'Flaherty family. I pulled over to the side of the road and got out of the car by myself. It was lovely there, with the lake and the ruined castle and the mountains and the wooded hills on the far side of the lake, and nearby there were purple wild flowers growing in the rocks. The rain was light and a little cold. In the west, rays of sunlight appeared between the clouds, and there was some pale-blue sky.

It wasn't long before we could see the spires of Clifden. We had reached the western coast, and I felt suddenly elated at being near the North Atlantic.

"Shall we stop for some tea?" I asked.

Wanda rubbed her eyes. "Yes, I guess so."

I parked the car. I picked up Edward, who had fallen asleep. He woke up as I carried him through the rain to an old hotel on the main street. We entered a small room off the lobby and sat down in a couple of soft chairs near a small, round tea table. It was cozy and warm in the room, with a dismal gray light coming in through the windows. We ordered tea, some milk and cookies for Edward, and some bread-and-butter sandwiches. We ate all the sandwiches and finished off the pot of tea and the milk. Then I took Edward to the bathroom. When we got back to the table, Edward climbed up on his mother's lap and fell asleep. Wanda had put on her dark glasses and was smoking a cigarette. I put an empty teacup to my lips from time to time.

"What do you think, Harry?" she finally said.

"About what?"

"Us."

"Not very much," I said.

"You don't even think it's worth the effort, do you?" she said.

"Well, it certainly has been an effort, hasn't it?"

She took off her glasses and wiped her eyes with her napkin, and then she put them back on. "That's what I mean. I'm making an effort, taking certain emotional risks, and you respond with sarcasm. It's very cheap, Harry." She took a

shaky breath and absently rubbed Edward's shoulder. "I'm sure now we're going to divorce. Oh, God, you've told me often enough how you need your freedom. May I tell you something? What you're craving is a little license to go berserk. You want the freedom to wreck your life. I guess you need to be adored by some boring, stupid little English girl. Like that awful Cynthia in London, who pretended she was my friend."

"Leave her out of it," I said.

"Do you miss her, Harry? She was nothing much, just young and pretty, and she knew how to flatter you. Harry, I've never known anyone more vulnerable and less gracious about compliments than you. And do you know why? Because you *believe* them. Oh, Jesus, you deserve a girl like her. I can still hear her clapping her hands and saying, 'Oh, well done!' after you had made some perfectly banal observation. It was sickening. And do you remember her awful habit of saying 'super' at least forty times an hour? I know you felt that indicated she had enthusiasm for life. You're so blind and indiscriminating when it comes to women. Why don't you live in the real world? You're always somewhere over there, over the rainbow someplace. Why don't you grow up! It's about time, don't you think?"

I said nothing.

"I'm asking you, Harry. Isn't it about time?"

"Wanda, you're an intelligent girl, but you have a lot of problems."

"You won't intimidate me, Harry. You're in such sad, awful, pathetic shape. I mean, I'd feel sorry for you if you weren't such a bastard."

"Yeah, I'm pretty terrible," I said.

"Did you ever once care about my needs? Or show me any kindness? No, I'm just a bit player in your life that you can neglect and look down on. That's all you think I'm good for. Do you know the warmest response you ever show me? Sad resignation. That's right, Harry. And, oh, yes, I don't want to leave out cold formality. You know how to do your duty, Harry. You're good at that, but you always let me know how much it costs you. You make it plain how bravely you're restraining your true feelings."

"What in the hell are you talking about?" I said.

"Are you ever affectionate? Do you ever put your arms around me anymore? I need affection, Harry. There's more to love than lovemaking, than sex in bed—"

"Oh, Jesus."

"Well, it's true."

"I'm not affectionate. That's true. But you don't make me feel affectionate."

"You're always angry," she said.

"No, that's not it. I often wake up feeling fine, and *then* you make me angry. You get on my nerves, Wanda."

She shook her head and sighed. "Do you know what's wrong with you? You're having a middle-age crisis. And you've got it bad, Harry."

"Wanda, let's end this comedy."

"Yes, it's a comedy, all right, living over here, playing the role of an expatriate. I find it amusing myself. Do you know the only true pleasure you get out of life? It's going into Galway and buying *Time* magazine. I see the feverish look in your eyes when you read the news of America. I tell you, Harry, when you read the *Irish Times*, it's a pose. Your heart isn't in it."

"No, you're quite wrong. It's true I'm curious about life back there, but I love it in Ireland."

"Oh yes, you love it here. That's true enough," she said. She took a deep breath. "You know, I've just figured out your fascination with Ireland. It's behind the times, like you. Over here, the *déjà vu* gives you a sense of security, and you don't have all the terrible anxiety of social change, women's liberation—of contemporary life in general."

"Wanda," I said, "I'm a little sick of this."

"Well, I'm sick of you, Harry."

I felt quite exhausted. My mind wandered to the time we were in Dublin and stayed at the Shelbourne Hotel, across from St. Stephen's Green. I had taken Edward to Trinity College to see the Book of Kells. It was a lovely, cool sunny day. Afterward, we were standing on Grafton Street, and I was admiring the great Palladian façade of Trinity, when a lovely young Irish girl of about nineteen stopped and began to admire Edward. "Oh, he's gorgeous. He's the playboy of the western world," she said.

We exchanged a few pleasantries, and then Edward suddenly hugged her around the legs. "Oh, I'm so flattered," she said. We all laughed, and then she went on her way.

Back at the hotel, I told Wanda of our little encounter. "I can imagine how it really was," she said. "She thought *you* were the playboy. Did you get her phone number? Oh, I bet you tried so hard to please her, and she thought you were wonderful. Of course, she doesn't know you like I do, Harry."

"You're absolutely wrong. She didn't notice me at all. It was Edward she was interested in," I said.

"But I imagine you were quite interested in her," Wanda said. "You're not terribly observant, Harry, but one thing you do notice is a pretty girl, unless she

happens to be your wife. Well, I'm very attractive, Harry, and I'm damned sexy, and there are plenty of men who think so."

I left the room, feeling nauseated and hollow inside. I felt like throwing myself in the River Liffey, but I merely took a walk down Lower Baggott Street. When I returned to the hotel, a few hours later, the door was locked, and Wanda refused to let me inside. As I saw it, I had no alternative but to stay out all night. It was far less unseemly than begging someone to open a door. I went to various pubs, and really enjoyed myself talking to the people there. When the pubs closed, I wandered around, waiting for morning. I walked along the river, as far west as the Kilmainham Jail; and then I strolled across the Island Bridge to Phoenix Park. It was a beautiful night, sort of balmy for Dublin, and the stars were out. I slowly walked east again, just taking my time, drawing clear, free breaths. Outside the Customs House, I saw the sun rise. It had been one of the happiest experiences of my life.

When I saw Wanda later that morning, she was in tears; she probably thought I'd met with a bad accident or, worse, deserted her, but when she finally realized I was standing before her in one piece, intact, with all my faults, both real and imagined, she began to accuse me of infidelity. It was so pathetic and sad that I felt no anger at all.

Other women were always a sore point with Wanda, for despite all her flash and sparkle and genuine quality, she basically had no confidence in herself. Or perhaps she had none in me.

"Shall we order another pot of tea?" I asked, watching the rain fall in Clifden.

"If you want, Harry. It's up to you."

I ordered the tea.

"I guess we're through," I said, finally.

"I did my best. I honestly did," she said.

I lit a cigarette. I wasn't quite ready to call it a day with Wanda. The thought of floating around without responsibility gave me a pleasant but uneasy feeling, and leaving Edward was out of the question. I would try to stick it out a little longer—at least, until the fall of the year.

A group of Americans, consisting of two married couples in their mid- or late fifties, entered the room and sat down. By their general demeanor, they appeared to be Midwestern, and they seemed to be having an awful time. One of them, a stout man in a brown suit, was complaining about the weather. He said that he was disappointed in Ireland—in the entire British Isles, for that matter. His wife said that they should definitely have gone to a Mediterranean country and had some fun, for this was definitely a waste of money and time.

"It's so gloomy, and I'm sick of it," she said. She was a large-boned, hefty woman, and wore white powder on her face.

The other man, a thin figure in a red plaid coat, said, "They can all go to hell, as far as I'm concerned."

I supposed that he meant the Irish.

Shortly after a young girl brought in a tray with four glasses of whiskey, the heavier man shook his head and said, "This is the damn last straw. Did she put Irish whiskey in your glass, that Paddy junk? We asked for Scotch."

The others tasted their whiskey. It wasn't what they had ordered.

"And where's the ice, Frank? She didn't bring the ice," his wife said. "Will you get her over here and change the order right now?"

The waitress came into the room, carrying an empty tray. She was a pale, slight girl of about sixteen, with a pleasant face and a distracted manner. When she appeared, the heavier man took the initiative.

"What did we order?" he said to her.

"Whiskey, sir," she said, reddening slightly.

"You're God-damned right we ordered whiskey, but not this Irish stuff. We asked for Scotch," he said.

"I'll speak to the barman, sir," she said, putting their glasses on the tray. "It's my mistake."

"And the ice, Frank," his wife said.

"Bring some ice. Do you think you can remember all that?" he said.

"Yes, sir."

I was surprised he didn't order her to bring them some sunny weather and an interesting life.

"Maybe he'll send in the Strategic Air Command and bomb her back to the Stone Age," Wanda said. "God, they're ridiculous, Harry. They're why we left America."

"Sure, that and a thousand other things," I said.

She shook her head.

"I hate that sort of brutality," she said.

"Yeah, it wasn't too pleasant," I said.

"Look at the little fat man. He's just so contemptuous of everything—and so stupid and vile—and why must he come over here and ruin it for everybody else? Oh, I loathe them."

"It's a sad little spectacle," I observed.

"I hate it when you get so detached. It's just an affectation," she said. "It's more than a 'sad little spectacle.' "

"You're right, I'm terribly affected," I said.

"You hate them as much as I do, but you have to be above it all. I feel what I feel, and that's that."

"That's not that, Wanda. You said that they 'come over here and ruin it for everybody else,' but let me remind you of one thing. We've ruined it for each other."

"I'm not talking about that, Harry, and you know what I mean," she said. "I just hate them, and I know you hate them. So why don't you admit it?"

"I refuse to hate them, Wanda. I'm sorry to disappoint you."

"You're such a bloody fraud," she said. "But I know to what lengths you'll go just to turn the knife in me a little and play the saint."

Edward woke up. He lay there for some time, breathing evenly, with his eyes open. Then he sat up and yawned. Wanda leaned over and kissed him on the cheek, and he suddenly hugged her. I looked at the Americans across the room, and I saw that they were looking at us. I gave Wanda a slight nudge. The thin man's wife, a gaunt-faced woman wearing a blue satin turban and a dress of the same material, suddenly exclaimed, in a loud, confident voice, "Why do the Irish raise such fat children?" And then the other woman said, "He's not very cute, either. He's bloated-looking."

"A little beer belly!" said the man in the red plaid coat.

General laughter followed. We were stunned. I never saw Wanda look so stricken. "Did you hear that, Harry?" she said in a heavy whisper. "Those filthy peasants don't even think we can understand English. Oh, those stupid bastards! Edward is a lovely, beautiful, robust boy, and they called him fat and bloated."

"Forget it, Wanda. They just can't see very well," I said.

"What is it with them? Do they think we speak only in Gaelic? They won't get away with this," she said.

She was at a high pitch, even for her, and I knew we would not get out without an incident. Her one great talent was telling people off. I called for the check and left the young waitress, as a form of consolation, a sizable tip.

As we rose to leave, the Americans regarded us with a kind of dumb hostility. On the way out, Edward took my hand, and Wanda said, "Excuse me for one moment."

She walked over to their table, with a vague, frozen smile on her face, and she said, "I want you to know that my mother tongue is English and I think you're disgusting and a disgrace, and I hate you. I hate everything about you. I hate the clothes you wear and the things you talk about and the stupid expressions on your faces. I hate the sounds of your voices and your dirty mean little souls, and most of

all I hate that you're Americans and that we share the same country, and that you can make me feel so mortified."

As we walked out to the small lobby, we could hear fragments of conversation.

"Did you ever!"

"What the hell's the matter with her?"

Then the stout man's voice came through clearly. "I'll tell you what's wrong. That crazy bitch has got more nerve than brains."

"They ought to lock her up—"

"And throw away the key."

In a little while, we were driving south along the western coast toward Ballinaboy. The sea was on our right, and on the left were low walls of piled stones and grassland strewn with large boulders. In the fields, sheep were grazing. The sun broke through and the fields brightened into greenness. White gulls flew over the water, which was blue in the sunlight. It was turning out to be a fine day.

"We can still have our picnic, Wanda. It's seven o'clock, but there'll be light for another two hours, and it should be great to get out on the beach—or on the strand, as we say in London. That is, if it's all right with you. I don't want to selfishly impose my will on our little party."

She laughed, "You're so thoughtful, Harry."

We passed through Ballyconneely and continued southeast down the western coast. Then we left the water and moved southeastward on the way to Roundstone. I remembered a wonderful beach in Dog's Bay from a previous trip. We'd looked down on it from high up on the road, and there'd been no one there.

Our blue Volkswagen appeared on the southern coast just as the sky clouded over again, and a light rain began to fall.

I turned right on a bumpy dirt road, drove a little way, then stopped by a huge boulder. We were up on a small hill, and down below, in the shape of a crescent, was a beautiful white beach. It was deserted.

We sat there for a while, looking out. I thought of the Spanish Armada. Many of their ships had cracked up off the western coast of Ireland in a terrible storm nearly four hundred years before, and I wondered if it was in those very waters that the ships went down. The rain had let up to a drizzling mist. I suggested that we go down the hill and set up our campsite behind some large rocks, as shelter against the breeze.

We unloaded the car. I handed Wanda the knapsack filled with canned goods—tins of beef stew, tuna fish, and kidney beans. I picked up the folded ground

cloth, the camper's stove, and the Styrofoam box that contained the bottles of Guinness, the milk, and the loaf of white bread. With Edward holding on to my pants leg, we walked to the edge of the hill overlooking the beach. Then I stooped down and Edward climbed up on my back. In this way, we slowly walked down a sandy path to the shore.

I turned on the gas cylinder of the camp stove, lighting it with a match. After I opened a can of beans, I poured the contents into a tin pot, which I put on the stove.

"Daddy cook," Edward said, getting to his feet and looking down at the beans.

I made some tuna-fish sandwiches, and then I put the pot of beans on the lid of the Styrofoam box that rested on the ground cloth. After the beans cooled, we dipped our spoons in the pot and ate communally.

Wanda sat cross-legged on the ground cloth and smoked. "Harry, when are we going back?" she asked.

"It's hardly raining, and it's early enough," I said.

"Oh, I don't mean to the cottage. I mean back to America," she said.

I poured some Guinness into a tin cup and drank a little. "I'm having a grand time," I said, at last.

She put her head in her hands and rubbed her eyes with the heels of her palms, and then she regarded me with a look of urgency.

"Harry, I know it's terrible, but I want to go home. At least, I understand it there. I don't want to go to the Aran Islands anymore, or to County Donegal. I'm tired of all this pastoral beauty. I want to get on with my life. It's passing fast enough. I know it's terrible back there. God knows, I remember what it was like, but we're Americans, aren't we? I mean, apart from everything else, don't we have an obligation to return, to improve the situation, instead of turning our backs? I'm awfully homesick, Harry."

I drank and looked out at the water and the sky. Westward, below the dark clouds, the sky was pale orange, with a line of red at the horizon. The sea was gray, and small frothy waves were coming into shore. Edward kept holding his sandwich up to the rain. He enjoyed making the bread soggy before he ate it.

Wanda drank from a bottle of Guinness. Though our marriage was quite shaky, possibly doomed, and my hopes had more or less collapsed, I felt a sudden rush of warmth for her and a terrible remorse for the way I'd treated her, for having been so critical and intolerant of her faults. I felt a great sympathy for the sincerity of her unhappiness. I walked over to her and put an arm around her shoulders and kissed her on the side of the face. She responded with a look of pleasant surprise and gratefully took my hand. "We're going back to the States, Wanda," I said.

She looked startled, and pulled Edward to her.

"It was just a matter of time," I said. "We're running out of money. I guess I'll have to get a job, you know."

We had enough money left over from the inheritance for a few months' rent on an apartment in Boston, with something left for food and necessities.

"Harry, I wasn't going to force you to return. I know you like it here, but if we have to go, then please don't worry about anything. It could be wonderful. We'll go back and start a new life. It could be the making of us."

The thing is, my favorite way of being an American was at a distance of three thousand miles.

While Wanda wrapped the trash in a copy of the *Irish Times*, I took Edward for a walk down the beach on the smooth, wet part of the sand near the water. I picked up some broken shells and seaweed, and I gave the shells to Edward. He regarded them with interest, then dropped them on the sand.

We drove home by way of Roundstone and Toombeola and Ballinacorney, and then, a few miles from Recess, we entered on the main road to Galway. Wanda was asleep, slumped against the side of the door, with her arms covering her head, as though she were protecting herself.

Edward was awake in the back seat. "All dark out. I can't see no sheeps, Daddy," he said.

I started saying farewell to Ireland.

In a week's time, we drove down to Cork in the evening, and on the following day boarded the ferry to Swansea.

It was a beautiful morning, crystal clear, with the sky deep blue and a sparkling sunlight on the little houses on the banks of the hills of Cobh Harbor. We stood on the deck as the ship pulled out. I smoked and watched the Irish coast grow smaller until it was a fading line.

All the way to Swansea, I thought about entering the mainstream of American life.

And I considered the matter during our brief stay in London, where we saw friends and sold our car.

And when the plane touched down at Kennedy Airport, with Edward on my lap, and Wanda smiling and saying, "Oh, God, we're home!" I was feeling fairly apprehensive about it all