

## Irish Music

Back home his paints were mixed in a twelve-muffin muffin pan. He drove mostly in the right lane but would sight along the center stripes by a piece of matter on the windshield, a moth maybe. The clean white lines shone unending in his headlights.

The musician he had watched most was the button accordionist, whose teeth were missing just right and, who, also missing a shave, was just the part. He grinned at Mill all through the concert, showing off. He was filling in for the regular button accordionist, who had just returned home for an Irish funeral. Mill was now asleep with her head against the cool passenger window.

Such horrors on the road as a large dog severed clean, a wide, red, smooth plane of muscle so easily human. How can such surgery be done by tires and fenders? There was a long way to go. It had been too far for a concert like this, six Irishmen, but good ones, known extraordinarily far, preternaturally wide. And an Irishwoman of course, the vocalist. Songs of Eire. She would appear for sets of two or three songs, then march offstage with her fists swinging. A proud woman who would shake red (of course) hair just once from her face and step boldly into the microphone as for countless Irish generations her foremothers had stepped into their microphones with a single shake of their fiery hair and deliver cocky loud ballads to men emptying jugs. She had looked clearly at him, matching gaze for gaze the button accordionist at Mill. The singer so proud at her song, her breasts out, chin high, like never another had delivered it so brilliant.

The engine would occasionally miss. He had just tuned it, his first try with the new Sears timing light, but used quite perfectly, the instructions very clear. It all had come neatly into place, more satisfying than regulating the speed of the turntable, but the same thing. New spark plugs had been gapped with exceeding precision and were certainly correct. The points were also precise, within the new distributor. It had all gone so well. Still, the engine did miss a few times before it warmed.

Likewise, the paints were so nicely done, one of the colors rather exciting, just as right as violet could be for those still-life violet buds – the color, he knew it, of Elizabeth Taylor's violet eyes. Like a child he had left them all to dry in the twelve-muffin muffin pan. He could have used the little cups with their tight lids, but Mill was such an

anxious shit to leave. Now the paint would be crusty in the muffin pan and Mill was asleep against the window. Mill who wanted so much to be Irish.

The piece of bug on the windshield had changed somewhat. Particles had blown away and no filmy pieces were there to be whipped by the wind, but a bit of material remained in the insect's juices. Still he sighted by it along the very white lane lines. He saw almost no other cars, certainly not like his, so obsolete now, out of fashion, a brontosaurus. His car angered people, the way it filled completely any parking space or moved with such linearity into their lane. The heavy doors fit wrong, and the fraying upholstery was fitted with plastic seat covers, front and back.

But warm now and not missing, it was quiet and fast on a road like this with a positive direction and such white lines and a moth to guide it. The music for such a car on this road was obviously a syncopated jazz of some kind, certainly not Irish strings, but the Irish music, so much of it, had saturated his tissues and he couldn't wring it out. How must it be for the red-haired woman to travel with such men?

He pulled open his vent duct for the truest smell of the car, a Chrysler smell now lingering only in the recesses passed by the wind in its way through the vents. It was the smell of the drivers'-training car, of course, that new car then, stripped, no AM even, that allowed emaciated Jerry and embittered Veronica to take turns with him on roads that led through very nearby townships whose names were completely new to the three student drivers. *That* Chrysler had been a Plymouth, accounting for the smell identical to the one hidden away somewhere within the dashboard and engine compartment of this shitbox LeBaron, by no means stripped, but whose luxuries had long since ceased operation (the clock), worn and ripped (the leatherette seat covers) or even now hung loosely to blow in the wind (rusty chrome strips, vinyl on the roof). The student Plymouth had been driven, as the three-on-the-column and braking for curves was so slowly learned, on the stretches of shattered macadam at the old airport, starting with horrible jerks as the clutch was shyly engaged, then roaring in first and sometimes, inexplicably, an even worse shudder going to second, but then over-revving even in this more-friendly gear until, another shift, lever downward, elicited nothing but confident speed that only could have come on these fine stretches, bits of grass in every crack too fast to see, a velocity achieved with majesty, a few moments of grace and smiling pride before the hard stopping at the end of the runway. The instructor's side had its own brake pedal.

Mill remained asleep; it made the driving easier. There were four lanes every inch of the way, and, every fifty feet or so, there began another very crisp white lane line, its precise edge and angle laid down by the most modern mechanical line painter,

a machine whose cold efficiency could have no human equal. At an unvarying speed, as drivers hurried by, strictly self-governed, it would hiss down some exactly timed spray of perfect white at the turn of a particular cam or cog, the brilliance of the paint absolute on the new blacktop. He or any other painter, like John Henry the steel-drivin' man, would always lose in a contest with such a monster.

Tree trunks shone in the headlights, but he could not distinguish individual branches within the blackness at the sides of the new interstate. It was an unspoiled roadway, almost a proclaimable wilderness area, billboards not yet erected, the green-and-white road signs not yet patterned with buckshot. His was not the car for this road. Something Swedish would be nice, make for a good ad against this unspoiled expanse, blurring by.

For Mill to sleep this way would in no way jeopardize her solid rest when they finally got home. To fall right out under any circumstance was one valid way of being good in bed. Sleep the sleep of the guilty, dream of the button man. Not everyone can drop off so easily. Some set up lights and go back to the easel. Perhaps less a hobby if oils, not acrylics, were used, as if real work to be accomplished must dry slowly. With a Grumbacher double zero he could match in precision the finest detail on any highway line, shot down by the most exacting paint sprayer. But speed would be a problem.

Red, white and black. Lined asphalt, leaves and starry sky, bloody bones of a black and white dog, black and white air funneled through the vent. Red red hair.

He came to the next-to-last brilliantly lit green sign, edged in tiny, perfectly round white reflectors. He let the car slow by itself and edged onto the emergency lane, its loose stones floating into the car's underbody to let Mill stir a bit. He drifted like this before the car became dead still, just at the overpass. He killed the engine and pushed down the button for his window, and hers halfway. Sleepy Mill, awakening, wanted to know if something was the matter. He told her he just could not wait the few miles before home, and he opened the door. The interior light had not worked in years. The headlights he let shine toward the abutment of the next overpass, where the exit would take them home. He gently closed the heavy door and walked carefully along the solid white line at the edge of the highway.

Mill. She watched him stoop at the line, touch it with his finger, and bring the finger to his eye. She saw him rise and walk across to one of the lane lines, where he stooped there too, for just a moment. He rose and continued away from the car toward the abutment, then turned slowly and faced her, just at the far reach of the LeBaron's low beams. From out of his pocket, from out of his *pocket*, he brought something that caught a speck of light as he lifted it to his mouth.

He played it loud, and she could hear the harmonica over the insects in the thick new grass on the artificial hill to her right. Played faster, it would be a reel. Slow, as it came to her now, it was a lament. She did not know that he could play this song, or any good song. Maybe he was sounding it out while he played; it seemed improbably easy.

Finally a car sped by. Did they see the tall, scrawny man at the edge line with the mouth harp? He didn't seem to see *them*. The roar past – less of a roar than a sports car whine – she heard him still playing, then saw him finish his tune and put the thing back in his pocket. He was close enough that she could make out his smile as he approached into the low beams, and she could remember it now, remember the first time it happened to her, that lopsided smile of his, with – what was it? – a little smear of green paint on his chin, a smile as sweet back then as any bloom on heather.

Before he opened the door, she was able to lean back to the headrest and seem asleep.