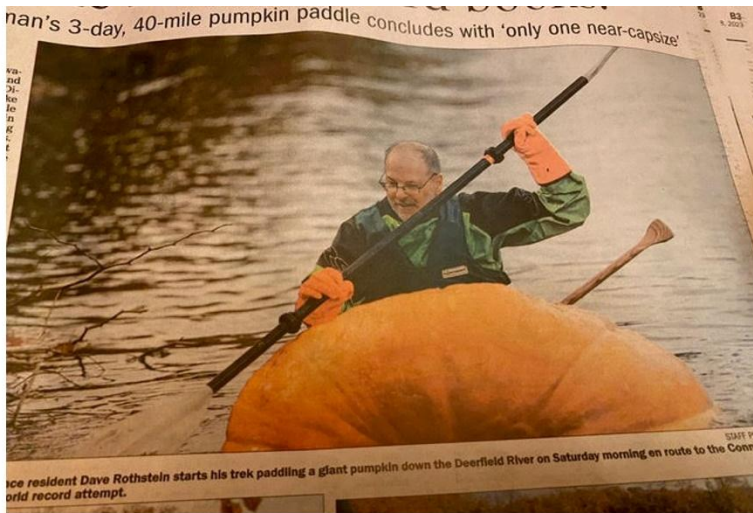


Inkslingers Session

30th November 2024



40 Mile Pumpkin Paddle

*I really can't fault myself for
being a narcissist*

A Beast from the East

Gerard Keogh

(Part 1 Don't Poke the Bear)

It began as a St. Patrick's Day like any other St. Patrick's Day. There was a strong wind from the east that made the day seem even colder than the temperature displayed on people's smartphones. Some of the participants in the forthcoming annual parade through the streets of Dublin pondered whether to don thermal underwear beneath their leprechaun costumes. St. Patrick was watching all this from another location and thinking to himself, "They've turned my day into an entire freaking four-day festival. And they call it Paddy's Day now. Somehow, they've managed to turn a religious feast day into a secular festival that's fuelled by alcohol. Unbelievable." Oblivious to the disapproval from on high, the organisers continued putting the finishing touches to their creation designed to display to the world that Ireland can make a real show of itself at least once a year.

Somewhere over the Irish Sea, an Antonov Airlines An-124 cargo aircraft was on initial approach to Dublin Airport. The familiar blue and yellow colours of the flag of Ukraine ran around the middle of the fuselage, a reassuring symbol of the fight against Russian aggression on Europe's eastern flank. At roughly the same time, another Antonov Airlines An-124 was about to land at Shannon Airport, in the south-west of the country. Both heavylift cargo aircraft had been chartered to fly vital electrical grid equipment to Ukraine, in response to Russia's sustained campaign of attacks on its neighbour's energy infrastructure. Aviation enthusiasts from all over the island, as well as some who had made the trip from Britain, had their binoculars, cameras and radio scanners at the ready, in anticipation of the arrival of these flying beasts from the East.

Cameras clicked and whirred as the planespotters took note of the aircraft's registration number from their vantage point on one of the roads that borders Dublin Airport. The An-124 filled the camera viewfinders of the enthusiasts; they couldn't believe their luck at witnessing such a spectacle. The main undercarriage made contact with the runway, followed by the nosewheel. The aircraft taxied to its designated parking spot on the airport apron, where it came to a halt and its engines were shut down. Like the mouth of a feeding basking shark, the nose of the aeroplane slowly opened upwards to enable the loading of the cargo; at the same time, the rear ramp was lowered to the ground.

Specialist cargo-handlers prepared to load the pallets of electrical equipment onto the plane. To everyone's surprise, however, a vehicle emerged from the forward cargo opening and drove down the ramp, followed by a second one; another vehicle drove down the loading ramp at the rear of the aircraft. In no time at all, there were several of them parked on the apron in front of the Antonov in a herringbone formation. They were painted in a camouflage pattern, and each of them appeared to have a machine gun mounted on the roof towards the front. The cargo-handlers looked at each other, as if to say, "WTF?"

Maybe this was some kind of Ukrainian participation in the St. Patrick's Day festivities, they speculated. It was probably a way of saying thank you for having taken in 100,000 people from the embattled country following Russia's full-scale invasion in February, 2022. Boy, how wrong can you be? The doors of the armoured vehicles opened and soldiers wearing green combat uniforms poured out, yelling in Russian to the Irish ground staff, ordering them to lie face-down on the ground with their hands behind their head. The language barrier was overcome with the aid of gestures; the business end of multiple AK-74 assault rifles also helped get the message across. One of the workers tried to run away, only to be shot in the back and killed. Everyone else lay frozen in fear.

What the hell was going on? What was all this about? The people who were getting to know the concrete couldn't see what was happening in the sky above them, but their day was about to get a whole lot worse. Hundreds of Russian paratroopers descended from Ilyushin Il-76 military transports, floating silently to the surface at various locations within the perimeter of Dublin Airport. Radar jamming and other electronic countermeasures left the air traffic controllers deaf and blind to the events that were taking place in the airspace over the entire country. Incoming commercial airliners had their GPS and instrument landing system equipment interfered with, and they had no communication with ATC, forcing them to divert to Belfast. Meanwhile, down in Shannon, a similar scene was playing out, with hundreds of Russian troops taking control of the airport.

Ireland was being invaded. There's a feature of our nation-state that probably makes us unique in the international community: every year, to celebrate our national day, our political leaders leave the country. The Kremlin took note of this little fact and chose March 17 as the date on which to establish a bridgehead on NATO's western flank; our much-valued neutrality had come back

to bite us on the ass. As non-members, we could not invoke Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty and expect the Alliance to come to our defence.

Our army put up token resistance, but the fighting was over within hours; our navy was not even worth talking about when the Russian generals were planning the operation; and the Irish Air Corps could have used some of those F-16s that other countries had sent to Ukraine. Decades of chronic underinvestment in even the most basic level of national defence capabilities were coming home to roost. As much as we liked to criticise the British armed forces (for obvious historical reasons) and the American military-industrial complex (coming especially from those on the political Left), the unspoken assumption was that in the event of little old Ireland being attacked by a hostile country, NATO member states would somehow come to our rescue and save us from a fate worse than death. During the Cold War, the British saw the problem from a different angle: neutral, defenceless Ireland was a potential wide-open back door to the NATO house, if the Soviet Union ever decided to take advantage of this glaring weakness on the Alliance's western flank. In the event, it was post-Soviet Russia that attacked on this bitterly cold day in March, and there was no sign of the cavalry riding over the Wicklow Mountains to bail us out.

Like a tiny chihuahua that barks at all the big dogs in the neighbourhood, we had been mouthing off about various topics on the international stage, usually concerning matters that were none of our business. And like that little lapdog, we had no means of defending ourselves if one of the world's Rottweilers decided they had had enough of our yapping. We cheered on our fishermen when they chased away those Russian vessels off our coast; the icing on the cake was the cancellation of a planned Russian naval exercise in the same area. Victory. The Russian ambassador was grilled on Irish television following the initial advance into Ukraine. "You'll never beat the Irish," we sang to ourselves. An Irish man drove his truck into the gates of the Russian Embassy in Dublin in protest against the war (the man's full name was on the side of the truck in big, blue lettering, so he couldn't deny doing it). Two years later, he was acquitted on the charge of dangerous driving. That'll teach them.

At some point, Vlad just said, "Screw it. We go in and see how NATO responds. We establish a bridgehead and then we deploy tactical nuclear weapons along the East Coast. The Irish will soon discover that this Russian bear has claws." Help.

The pumpkin race

Ciaran O'Melia

The problem is we are surrounded by water, which is an island. But that being said. We try to get off the island, fair means or foul.

But a lot of men and women are on an island, and we watch them descend to try and get off the island.

Did I read in the Bulawayo newspaper a reference 'to with' they tried to get away from sand? You see, they had a lot of sand over there, and when the wind blows, it gets into everything. I heard of a man who packed his suitcase and went to the airport. Well, this is a country terrorised by the wind and sand when he got to the airport. He failed the security x-ray machine and they picked up on the sand.

"Are you bringing the whole effin country with you" the officer said, and he was sent to prison. Ye see, there is no cursing. Otherwise, he would have said, "Are you bringing the whole - - - king country with you." And he would have a longer sentence.

Not for us the unusual hash treatment, no, they want the mischief makers to get off the Island.

This reminds me of the time we built a raft; it was down in Ringsend, ye know the barber's poles, the two chimneys sticking up on reclaimed land, yes, it was sand and the power station was built on it.

Well, we got Barrells and boards, and in a hurry, we strung it all together, it was time to try to float the thing.

Not of us the Liffey side of the site, the other side of it, the bay, so we set off. It is amazingly, it worked; I could see us ordering pints in Wales.

You do know there is a channel in the bay, and what goes out must come in and in it did. Well, this was on overtime, and poor supervisors were down and waving to us to come; we thought they were offering good luck on our voyage. As we tried manfully to beat the incoming tide but failed.

It was dark before we made it back; there was not a word said about the night we built the raft, as there is not a word said about the power station and the two chimneys except bring a bill to the narcissist government.

The View of Narcissus

Greg Fields

Water light. Cloud light daubed with the half-moon. Shimmers from the lights in the small homes across the moorings. On foreign walls the lights capture strange forms to create shadows that mimic in their movements the dancing of the waves, splashing gently and without hurry against the pilings.

Conor held Adrienne then, there in this small wooden room at day's end, a day spent with sand and water.

Earlier that day they had made their way to the beach. The New England beaches carried a far different character than the California sands where Conor spent so many of his young summer days. No broad and sweeping dunes, not the pound of a strong surf that seemed to have ridden all the way from Japan, the beaches unframed by the cresting highlands of Malibu or Laguna. The New England beaches lay quieter with their small rocks strewn across the narrow swaths of sand. There was beauty in these beaches, but it was a beauty that whispered rather than yelled, a contemplative loveliness that tinged even the hottest summer day with reflections of time and distance.

Conor and Adrienne set their chairs into the sands of Good Harbor Beach, a crescent wedged from the sea north of Gloucester. Because it was a weekday the beach was uncrowded. Neither spoke for the first half hour. Conor gazed at the ocean, calm and flat, and thought of Europe on the other end of it, thought of the small ships that had first crossed it, thought of 400 years of exploration and adventure and loss. Thought of the Irish coast his grandfather had left behind, and considered the mysteries of his own blood. Thought of the Gloucester fisherman, and regarded they that go down to the sea in ships, and what made them do it. And as he considered the life force that compelled their commitment to the waters, he recognized a courage he no longer felt, that exhilaration of pushing forward into unknown seas. The ocean and this beach told him that he had become too timid.

"Hey," he said at length. "I'm heading in. Do you want to join me?"

Adrienne pulled down her sunglasses and looked up from the book she was reading to regard the sea. "Not yet," she said softly. "It's so relaxing here, don't you think?"

"Yes. But the water is calling my name. You stay here and read. I'll watch you from the waves." Conor leaned over and kissed Adrienne's cheek, warm from the late morning sun.

"What was that for?"

“A man can kiss his wife goodbye when he goes to sea, lass. He must, in fact. And if I don’t come back, light a candle for me in a seafarers chapel.”

Conor stood at water’s edge and allowed the first wave to wrap around his ankles, then took two more steps to bring the second wave to his knees. The ocean’s interminable call pulled him in, and he swam out as deep as he felt he could safely go, his legs not touching bottom, the waves forming now in front of him. Conor turned to look toward the shore. To look toward Adrienne. She sat there on her low chair reading her book, sunglasses covering her amazing eyes, her hair swirling behind her ears, the gentle delicacy of her petite body clear to him despite the sun, and the salt, and the obscurity of a watery distance.

‘My God,’ he thought to himself. ‘My dear God.’ He saw neither sand nor seabird. Just her.

When he returned Adrienne’s book was by her side and her eyes were closed. Conor stood above her, then knelt into the sand and leaned forward to kiss her cheek. The surprise of the kiss and the cold water that dripped from Conor’s hair startled her awake. “Hey!”

“Sorry, lass. Couldn’t resist.”

She smiled up at him. “You never could resist me, could you?”

“Resistance to Adrienne Finnegan falls outside the powers of even the strongest men.”

“Oh yeah,” she laughed again. “Men don’t even see me anymore.”

“This one does,” Conor whispered.

“A bit narcissistic, Conor, to think that what you see is all that there is.”

“Maybe so. But I will not fault myself.”

Later they walked the beach, holding hands, not talking. The sun drew low and the small crowd of people that day dissipated with the fading light. Seagulls swooped and dive-bombed the sand for the bits they left behind. The lighthouses on Thatchers Island flickered to an early glow, then grew brighter. Laughter floated down from the deck of one of the huge houses adjoining the beach, and two flimsy fishing boats tottered their way back to Gloucester harbor.

Conor and Adrienne stopped to look out at it all, to note the peculiar scent and sense of this day’s ending. To breathe the sea; to carry the dimming sun into the cradle of the soul; to feel the warmth of a cautious lover’s hand, a bruised lover’s heart.

Conor nodded, then pulled her into an embrace. He looked back out to the sea, darkening and immense. “We should go,” he said softly. Adrienne nodded silently. They turned to walk back to their spot in the now deserted sands,

gathered the chairs and the towels and the bags. Silently then, back to the car and the short drive down the coast to Gloucester to eat lobsters for their dinner.