

Views · *Denny Hoberman*

ONE

ONE OF THEM WAS HOME. The American, squinting through the view finder at the setting sun, tried to make a photograph of that.

I tell you, she said to the young German woman with whom she shared the house, things are never what you take them for. She placed the camera beside the Irish Sunday paper, sat down herself on the rattan sofa facing the fireplace. You know? she asked. She held up a bottle of inexpensive sherry. More? she asked. She poured a drop for each of them. Lifting the glass to the fire, the damp turf spitting like burning hair, she uncrossed her legs. Do you think it matters what you talk about, she asked the German, on your last day?

The house, vacation pre-fab, sat on a spit of high land between two bays, thin limbs of the gray-backed Atlantic, as if the ocean had been stunned and now lay sprawled like a sheepskin rug, the house an end table between forelocks. Through the open window gulls bickered at the ocean. The ocean slapped the shore. These were the sounds they slept to, dreamed of, a staccato made visible by the lighthouse beam crossing section by section the chopped waves, again crossing, its rhythm never quite regular, the American each night trying to predict its cycle against her breathing, *out, around, in, and around*, but always anticipating it too soon. Eager, the American. And the German, who had rented the house from a red-haired man with aquamarine-colored eyes before she'd found out that there was no central heating, the fireplace flue was so poorly constructed that the house filled with smoke at the slightest breeze, that the red-haired man's cattle grazed the garden. They had moved in together, the American renting her room from the German, the German leaving her fiancé's uncle's house and its monotonous hold over cabbage crops, rain, the rituals of an expected marriage, the American having left not her boyfriend, she announced, but her country and her country's wars. Was there a difference? the German asked.

Weeks passed. In this house, waking and sleeping to the ocean, they were both, willfully, away from home.

Two

They stood in front of the school headmaster's bay window. Steps leading up to the front door were covered with potted leafy plants, all flowering. Which one would you take, the German asked, if you were pinching?

The north bay, just down the hill in the direction of the telephone lines, they saw each evening as they drove past the headmaster's house up the little gravel slope in the German's washed-out-blue Opel Cadet, stopping for the hollow aluminum gate. The American — if she hadn't already walked back from town — would jump out, leaving the groceries on the seat, to drag open the gate. The sound the gate made, she would have liked to record that. At least to find its approximation, in words. She would have come closer, she knew, with her fingers and a blade of grass.

The shopping, the German told her, not the groceries. The parking, not the driveway for the car.

Everything in that direction, the headmaster's house, the rock-strewn fields, the bay, was a flourish of brilliant close-of-day light — as if even the sound of water could germinate and grow leafy and make shade. Across the bay they could see the small town where the German worked and where the American had first arrived, dragging her boyfriend's father's suitcase to a glass-walled telephone booth, flipping through the torn-out pages of a travel guide to find the number of a place to sleep. The row houses, painted shades of peach and blue, were hemmed in on one side by the main street, and at either end by a single stone spire. The backs of the houses hovered above the bay's edge, unpainted, gray, backed up by tiny, salt-bleached gardens.

Beds, the German told the American, not gardens. Raised beds for beets, and row cabbages.

THREE

Although trained as a nurse, the German chose work in the town's one jewelry store. She wouldn't put up with it, she told the American, working in the hospital. At home for a fever you'd wring out damp cloths and place them on the forehead. Or on the soft flesh of the inner thigh. Here

you dosed this medicine or that one. Here they were happier, said the German, standing around. She straightened a row of displayed aperitif glasses etched with shamrocks.

The American, waiting for the postmaster at the *Oifig Phoist* to sort the day's mail, leaned against the glass case, staring absently out the front window, the air grainy and wet and gray. She listened as the German scrolled through the town's inhabitants: Thomas, who professed his love for the German woman and for her alone, flirted with every pretty tourist, eager for news of recording groups and musical trends—he would surely be holding the American's hand before week's end. Not mine, said the American. Not if you mean mine. Colleen, the German continued, who had married Geoffrey after a seven week courtship, was with no money planning to build their home on her family's land—with Geoffrey now on the dole they had laid only the first stone. And Quentin who, since a divorce, found work as a stunt man to support his obsession, writing scripts. He'd give up everything to be back with his wife. Why did he leave her? the American asked. He didn't, the German said. She did. His drinking, he never came home.

And Thomas, said the American, how did you meet him?

On holiday. I came looking for William B.'s grave. She held up a tiny porcelain lamp. Everyone meets him on holiday.

Just looking, the American said loudly when an elderly man walked into the store, devoting herself then to the shamrock earrings, marble stick-pins and little enameled clocks behind glass cases. Is this the American girl? the man asked. From America? What are you doing here? he asked. Recovering, she said. The man looked alarmed. Traveling, she said. Just looking.

FOUR

On her day off, the German took the American to visit a woman who lived on the Beach Road, across the north bay. They telephoned first from the post office. Come right down, the woman said, she would be at the gate. The small white house, seeming to tilt half asleep in its little yard, was surrounded by tall trees and yellow flowers that grew unevenly at either side of a blue gate. A short woman with gray eyes and thick gray

curls, wearing three sweaters pulled over a wool skirt, and sturdy shoes, welcomed them. Walking them to the house, she asked questions about America, about Chicago where she'd lived with her second husband for six years, about a religious group that had taken her son from the church. These people, she said. Where did they come from? When the American asked, she tried to identify the yellow flowers, but couldn't recall their names from all the names of flowers: daisies, dandelions, daffodils. Young I'm not, she said. I don't remember things. They picked rose hips, carrying them indoors where the old woman boiled them up for a rose hip jam that somehow wouldn't thicken. They cooked potatoes and cabbage and made a parsley-onion salad. They opened a box of marshmallow cookies for dessert. She pulled out a yellowed newspaper clipping of a man who retrieved children from religious groups for their families. I've written to him, she said. But I don't think he can help me. I see my son all the time. Wiping the crumbs off the unironed lace tablecloth, turned over so that the seam down the center showed, she told them about a young friend of hers, the same age as her son. This young man wears a single pair of khaki pants, she said, washing them with his single pair of socks and a single shirt in boiling water on her stove, wrapped in a single towel. The stories those pants could tell, she said. They've been to your world and come back.

FIVE

Heating water for tea, in the kitchen, the view was variable: a hill, close up: four heathers and gorse. Ling heather, Bell and False heathers, St. Dabeoc's heath. Growing beneath the clothesline and into the rocks, flattened underfoot when they gathered the laundry or cabbage leaves from the garden. In the morning they would watch the smoke settle into the heathers, or rise above the hill. If it rose: fair weather. If close to the ground: foul and would not improve.

The American mistakenly caught her foot in a gorse bush. While the German spread white cream from a blue tin on the tiny white swells, the American described how, arriving that first day by bus, she'd glimpsed the town's stone walls, and the spires above those walls, her breath fogging the cold windows of the rickety bus, and had asked a woman the name for

the yellow flowers growing along the sides of the road. They were what made for Him, the woman had said, the crown of thorns.

They were sitting in the damp bathroom, both young women on the edge of the cold green porcelain tub.

My sister grows those in pots, said the German. Red flowers. Bloody red.

These were piss yellow, emphasized the American. She asked the German whether she had other siblings.

One sister, the German answered, just one, twenty-two years older than herself, born during the war. Her father had been in the fire brigade, having refused to join the Party. He had played the tuba; the brigade, until the war, had sponsored a band. Growing up she'd been convinced, in spite of her father's vigor practicing and polishing the enormous brass instrument, that she was her sister's child given to her parents to raise. Years she'd believed this, telling no one. She'd often eyed her mother late at night and in the morning, trying to ferret out the truth. Her father, she could get nothing from: he loved her openly. She had never confronted her sister.

Do you think it could happen again? the American asked the German.

What? the German asked. War? I don't give a shit, she said, not meaning she didn't care.

SIX

One boy says to another boy, my father can beat up your father. This father says to that father, my son will fight your son. You know what I mean, said the American. You can no more take your country with you than you can leave it behind.

I'm getting a varicose vein, the German said lifting the hem of the brown dress her fiancé said would bring her to the nunnery. I can feel my leg dragging. She let the dress fall. You can't stop them, she said. They've been at it for years.

At night, talking in front of the fire—the windows open, the ocean pedaling the shore—the German sketched with a pencil designs for a house of her own. What pleased her most was arranging the wardrobe in the center of the master bedroom, making it two rooms. That way, she ex-

plained, there would always be two lives, the one waking, the one sleeping. Her life, and theirs. You can't stop them, she said again. You can only live as you would behind your own front door.

No wars indoors? the American said. Ha.

The American wrote letters home: her reasons for leaving, her reasons for remaining where she was. As numerous, these were, as the clouds passing overhead—even in the dark she could see their white bellies hazarding the sky. She would tear up the thin sheets of paper before addressing the envelope to her boyfriend.

Well not between women, said the German. My grandmother, for one. All the women in my grandmother's town baked bread in one oven. They kneaded their loaves. They rolled their initials out of bread dough. They pressed the letters on top of the loaves. They baked them, they took them home.

But they married the men, said the American. We keep marrying the men.

There are good ones, said the German. My father was a good man.

But did he have a son?

When smoke from the damp turf filled the room the German opened the windows. The American waved pillows to stir up the air.

SEVEN

One evening, seated at the bar of the hotel pub, they drank two glasses of warm stout. A man who was training at the bank, a friend of the German woman's fiancé, walked by them without glancing in their direction. Oh look, she said, he doesn't want to know me. The other night when I sat with Thomas he couldn't praise me enough.

The bartender asked if they were ready for another stout. They declined, not yet halfway finished with their first. He asked if they'd seen the telly, heard what had happened that day. No, they said, they hadn't been watching. There'd been an attack, he said, on the officials seated for an inaugural ceremony. The foreign minister had picked a piece of shrapnel from his mouth the size of a shilling. Six stitches he'd had on the inside of his mouth, six on the outside. The American sighed. The German rubbed her thumb back and forth on the lip of her glass. Terrorists, the bartender said.

Louses, said the German.

Terrorists? said the American.

Americans, said the German.

Germans, said the American, Germans too. You haven't done so well by the world either.

Come now, said the bartender, come. I've other bits of news as well. Shouldn't have you solemn faced on your night out now, should I. Your old man's uncle's got a new pair of wellingtons, he said to the German. They were down here two days past. He laughed. Took close to a year, your old man did, to persuade him.

The German woman explained to the American that her fiancé's uncle wore his boots so close to the fire his boots were in it, that the boots were rotted with holes.

Your old man tells me this morning, the bartender continued, that he says to his uncle, okay Jack you have a new pair of boots now, maybe you should take them off, wear slippers by the fire. Instead, your blessed Jack takes off his new boots, pushes them under the chair, puts on his old pair of wellingtons, stretches himself out, matter of fact as can be, with his feet in the fire. Now you will have another drink, will you?

EIGHT

The woman who lived on the Beach Road invited them back to share a barmbrack with her on All Hallow's Eve. Whichever one of us that finds the ring, she admonished, that's who's to marry next. You see if it doesn't come to pass.

The American, walking home between the bays that afternoon, had stood for a long while above the school field where the marching band practiced. She had listened to the notes catching up with each other, the headmaster, conducting with a white stick, shouting encouragement. She watched until the last child had trailed back into the school's gymnasium before she too walked home.

That night rain battered the windows, gusts catching on all corners of the old woman's house. It sounds like an army of ghosts, said the German. Shall we let them in? The American told of a child she'd seen in town that afternoon, pointing his mother's hand toward the market window.

Those? the mother had asked. False faces. The American described the masks: Batman and day-glo witches, goblins and blond-haired, black-lashed fairy queens. Who says that's what they look like? she asked. But they always do, each year they always look just like that.

Do you know who else has come back to us? asked the old woman. The swallow that nests in my elder tree. It flies all the thousands of miles from southern Africa to my yard. Think of it, she said, a tiny swallow flying a thousand miles a day.

Wouldn't we all, said the German, if we could. She sighed. At night when I put on my Batman cape I can only do two hundred miles.

That's some journey, said the American.

Yes, said the old woman, not coming by Aer Lingus that's some journey.

She cut the barmbrack in thick slices, poured mugs of hot tea. The American bit into the soft metal ring. What do I do with this? she asked. Put it on, said the old woman. Swallow it, said the German.

NINE

In the jewelry store the German told the American, You should go back to the house now, you should be looking at the ocean instead of colored glass. The American, having collected her mail, and having read each letter until she could feel the water swell up again between herself and the writer, nodded, ready for the several mile winding walk back to the house they shared. those were pleasant miles, lingering past fuchsia hedges and sleepy cows, past the old coast guard's quarters, a long abandoned stone mansion in a very green field, along the spit of land between the two bays, the light on each bay changing like the nap of velvet when you looked ahead and then behind you, the great rust-colored grasses and water glinting through the grass like mirrors, or like brass instruments hidden in the earth.

She dreamed of herself in a kind of convent: last year's garden surrounded by glass walls. She wondered who she should write to, with only one postage stamp allowed per month. She wondered how she could hide letters on the heels of her hands, and on her ankles.

The headmaster came to this country from Poland, the German said to the American in front of his house. He's an Irishman now. Irish? said the American. A man, said the German.

They had borrowed bicycles from the woman on the Beach Road. Old bikes with one gear and pedals missing, but the wheels turned easily on the paved hills. At the top of one rise the German stopped. This is where the first plane to cross the Atlantic came down, she said. They stood in front of a large stone monument, propped the bicycles up against the base.

My father wanted to be a pilot, said the German.

She opened her wallet, pulled out a photograph of a lightly bearded man sitting in a yard. The grass, yellowed with the photograph's age, came up over the man's boots. His arm was around the waist of a little girl. He was smiling, she was looking at the grass.

Instead he put out fires.

Is that you? asked the American.

That's me, said the German. My mother says we were at my grandmother's. My father says it's from after that, after she died. Either way I was four years old. I don't remember who took the picture. I suppose it was my mother.

The American took the picture in her hands. She imagined the mother, camera to her eye, telling her husband to smile, the effort it must have taken to keep her daughter at play in the grass. But in spite of this the moment lulled, the horseplay before, the dispersing afterwards, a whole childhood relinquished to that single moment's configuration.

When they returned the bicycles to the old woman, the American made the German show the photograph. Ah, said the older woman, just look at you now.

That's my father, said the German. I think that's my father.

Your father, she said. Your true Father is in heaven. And, she said, for as long as we have you here, your true mother is Ireland.

ELEVEN

One afternoon, the American walking home from town, three broad-winged geese flew in formation not three feet above her head. The sound, so close to her own heartbeat, of their wings slapping the air, stunned her. For many minutes she stood still, looking at the place they had been. It was not until that night, in front of the fire, that she remembered she'd had her camera with her, that she'd forgotten to shoot.

TWELVE

On the American's last morning the two women ate breakfast facing south, looking across the other bay. Gulls, flying below them, made in the sun cut-back shadows, like white knives, which in the fog had been but bleached boomerangs.

In the dark they'd made answers of questions. In the light they let these remain. Cereal or muesli. Pissing rain or pouring. House here or home there.

They knew they meant more than that. They knew they would have to return.