

“The Islanders”, a short story by Andrew Sean Greer

Later in their travels, of course, they will not go out in rain like this. A heavy, silencing kind of rain, a hand over the sky's mouth, a car door shut upon a hostage. They will be patient travellers by then; they will sit comfortably in Victorian tea shops and watch the soaked pedestrians running by, or they will shop for sheets or sweaters or anything else that they desire. But to take a day off at the very start of a trip, to tear up plans; that is impossible to do. It would be like spending a honeymoon apart.

So they are out in the rain, driving past what the guidebook calls a “Bronze Age fort.” Low hills rise behind them, shaded down to gray by the rain, and to their left lies a loop of stones and the sea. The sea is nothing but a blind spot in the downpour. They are in Ireland.

Maddy is reading the guidebook as they pass the fort. She is nearly forty, a small, kind woman on vacation with her oldest friend; she is a linguistics professor at a college in California and is used to being in charge of things, of people. But she is not in charge here; her friend Cat is driving. They hit a rock and Maddy flinches. They ford a stream and she reads aloud from her book as if it were something she knew: “There has never been a bridge on this spot.”

“Jesus Christ, where did you find that guidebook?” Cat says, laughing, driving with a wild flair.

Cat is a year older than Maddy, a New Yorker in a black trenchcoat, thick black-framed glasses, and short blond hair; by now, she has managed to erase all signs of her poor Midwestern childhood. She has done well importing sunglasses from China, a business that she herself finds ridiculous. She is nearly six feet tall. The trenchcoat, magnificently striped inside, came out of a giant leather bag that is, to Maddy, a source of endless wonders. From it, Cat produced, on the plane, homeopathic travel remedies and blow-up pillows. Just last night: an enormous orange scarf (now worn as a sash). In a few weeks, of course, like any assistant travelling with a magic show, Maddy will learn the tricks and limits of the bag. But today her old friend can still astound her.

“There has never been a bridge on this spot,” Cat repeats. “What kind of guidebook would mention what isn't there?”

“The woman at the store recommended it.” There is a whir of irritation inside Maddy, like the rising summer sound of insects. This trip is a kind of reunion, a sudden, special trip after years of living far apart, and perhaps, unlike when they were young, the old friends aren't quite used to each other. Jokes that fall flat. Cat's shifting tempers. Maddy's sudden silences.

“Note this field,” Cat suggests. “It is not a battlefield of any kind.”

Her coarse laughter is too loud for the car, and Maddy is not in the mood. She looks back at her flawed guidebook. She has read as far as the chapter on the Blasket Islands. A few chapters later, there is a bit on the Tinkers, the mysterious group of people who travel around Ireland pulling small scams, or sometimes committing bloodier crimes: luring tourists to be mugged or beaten or worse. But she has not reached that section yet.

It was Cat who first told her about the Blaskets; she had learned about them years ago and became obsessed with them. Maddy fears that they are also a flimsy motive for this trip, which has no obvious purpose except that Cat called early one morning from New York, forgetting the time difference in California, as ever, to announce that she was taking Maddy to Ireland. Not Maddy and her husband, Jason; just Maddy. “Why Ireland?” Maddy asked, half asleep, trying not to wake Jason, who looked so angry as he slept, as if burning off his doubt at night so that in the morning he could be a husband to her; Maddy was unaware that simply by asking this she was already on her way to Ireland, already drawn into Cat's plans.

“Well, who doesn't want to go to Ireland?” she answered.

As always, any version of the world other than her own was unthinkable. Maddy remembers it now, that persistent, childish trait of hers. Full of stubborn joy.

All Cat seems to know for sure about the Blaskets is that they are a cluster of small, green, hilly islands just a few miles off the Dingle Peninsula—with its rising shroud of mist—where villagers with ancient ways lived until recently. She believes that they were pagan Celts who worshipped fertility gods; Maddy tells her she has got this idea from the film “The Wicker Man,” and that the guidebook doesn't mention anything. Cat crossly says that she is nonetheless “really into them,” and,

moments later, here they are: the Blasket Islands, humpbacked mounds scattered with rocks and furred with grass. A long way off across a choppy sea. Some small white specks are visible: the abandoned houses of the islanders. A ghost town off the shore of Ireland.

“Now, that’s worth coming for. That’s worth coming all this way,” Cat says, stopping the car and rolling down the window. A mizzle of rain and sea air comes in. She chuckles, and adds, “Hey, Maddy. On this spot, no one ever died from love.”

To Cat’s obvious delight, there is a sign pointing them through long, rustling grass to something called the Blasket Center. It’s unbelievable; after days of seeing small stone or half-timber houses, nothing could be less Irish than what rises before them: a great glass-and-wood structure, like a Scandinavian hotel, set out on a cliff with a direct view of the lost islands. Someone has planned parking for dozens, though there are only a few cars in the lots, and no buses. There is something patient, hopeful in the sound of the waving grass now that the rain is ending. Somewhere off to the left, Cat and Maddy hear the radio static of the sea.

The men behind the ticket counter are young and handsome. When asked, though, they claim not to have any Blasket blood. “Did I insult them?” Cat whispers as she and Maddy make their way down an echoing gallery. At the far end, they can see a framed and glorious view of the Blaskets; side arches hint at additional galleries, exhibits, but there is no trace of other visitors. They have been informed that the restaurant’s special today is Thai Fish Cakes—rather a surprise—and that the video presentation has already begun. But only just; they can make it if they scurry. That is the word the handsome men use: “scurry.” The sound of Cat’s and Maddy’s running feet echoes up to the skylights.

The Audio-Visual Theatre smells of new upholstery and glue; as their eyes adjust to the darkness, Cat and Maddy can see seating for more than a hundred. But they are utterly alone; the video presentation has begun in an empty room. Perhaps a computer is in charge. With the whispered chatter of adolescents, they take seats near the rear and Cat brings out a package of something from her magic bag. “What are these?” Maddy asks, but she cannot hear Cat’s response, so as an act of faith she takes some.

They seem to have missed some crucial piece of information, because for a little while the video is confusing. An old man pokes through a leaf pile with a stick while an even older voice reads stilted poetry about a sinner; also, it takes some time for Cat and Maddy to get used to the accents. Eventually, some blotchy black-and-white footage shows Blasket Islanders (or “Blasketees,” as Cat has begun to call them) moving in that jerky, silent-movie way around their houses, herding sheep, blinking suspiciously at the cameraman. There are some thirty kinds of flowers on the islands, and several kinds of butterflies. Maddy decides that what she is eating is Raisinets. Elegant violin music plays during intercuts of birds and the sea; a voice tells them that people were sighted on the islands in the nineteenth century. The video shows a priest arriving by boat to read Mass; they were not pagans, after all.

In the darkness, Cat whispers, “I’m sort of not into them anymore.”

Back to the black-and-white; maybe a dozen men at a prayer service. It seems that they ran out of women, and the men grew too old, and the very youngest fled to the mainland for some other kind of life. In 1953, the remaining Blasketees had to be evacuated by the Irish government. There is footage of this also: humiliated old men being boated over to the mainland, to a world utterly foreign to them—in fact, to the very spot where Cat and Maddy are sitting. The old man with the stick turns out to be the son of one of these men, living in Springfield, Massachusetts. Apparently, there is a whole Blasket community in Springfield. Unceremoniously, the video presentation ends; perhaps the computer has decided to stop things early.

Out in the bright gallery again, the two women are dumbfounded. “That’s it?” Cat whispers, staring at the photographs of the last Blasketees. “That’s it? A whole museum about these pathetic people?” Something metallic is rising in her voice.

“And Thai fish cakes, too,” Maddy adds.

“No wonder nobody’s here!” Cat says. Maddy recognizes the tone; it’s laughter—a new kind, pleased and ruthless. “I mean, they present it like it’s the Holocaust, all that violin music and poetry and sad people. But they were only there for, like, eighty years. And let’s face it: they had to be evacuated because they simply couldn’t hack it!”

Cat’s face is wide open with joy; Maddy is drawn in at last, just as when they were young. Maddy imitates the video, the slightly American brogue of the narrator: “Let us consider the mystery of the Blasket Islanders. Why were they so dumb?”

Cat joins in: "Was it the sheep? The bad poetry?"

"Was it the butterflies?"

Down at the other end of the gallery, the attendants stare with their pale faces, concerned by the echoing laughter. At this end, as in an old portrait, the Great Blasket Island itself sits framed behind glass: solemn, its green hills buxom, its head veiled by a private rain.

There were times in Maddy's youth when she wondered if she was unlovable. It was a stupid, indulgent thought, a furtive hate she saved for hot May afternoons when she lay alone in bed. There, too, lay the vague, halfhearted thought of suicide. At twenty-two, no man had ever loved her; none had ever seemed to care about her for very long; her last boyfriend had ended things after two months, without ever having slept with her. When she asked why, he had answered (with that cruel plainness that comes with innocence, with youth), "I wasn't sure I was attracted to you." Wasn't sure. He had been waiting for two months to be sure, had looked at her from all sides, and had found his answer at last: No.

To remember that phrase of his, to repeat it in her head—"I wasn't sure . . ."—what a satisfying agony. Maddy used to bring it out in her worst moments, like a miser with a precious jewel.

It turned out, of course, that she had merely had a run of bad luck. Any older person could have told her this. She was not worthless, or chemically depressed; that awful doubt disappeared by her late twenties, when the kinds of men she'd dated before—rich, dull, and sexy, always girl-watching with drinks in their hands—held no appeal for her at all. Instead, she found grinning, eager men who acted as if she were the cause of all their joy, kind and loyal men like Jason; men who could not keep their hands off her, who missed her when she was gone. She forgot all about that unlovable girl.

But back then, in the bad times, Cat had been her great ally. Cat, whom she had met at Brown, in a playwriting class, where they were assigned as partners. They began to spend all their time together, working on a play that began, according to Cat's vision, with a dozen women at a costume ball who all come dressed as Scarlett O'Hara. Cat was an inconsistent girl, often calling Maddy to persuade her to come to the movies, but snapping in irritation if Maddy tried to invade her own solitude. She taught Maddy to sing in Portuguese, to shoplift mascara, to play a drinking game called Spoons; Maddy told Cat the secrets of her love life, her ambitions, and she gave to Cat her smiling patience, her fascination, and her fierce devotion. For two years after college, they shared a West Village apartment. There Maddy confided her fears while Cat sat smoking beneath a Blondie poster. "That's stupid" was all she said, then stubbed out her cigarette. Cat, who had no man, no history of love. Who could have met or trumped Maddy's woes with a lonely full house of her own, as any other female friend would have, arguing over who was uglier, less loved. Instead, Cat said what she believed to be true. That it was stupid. That Maddy was intensely lovable. Cat loved her, after all, and it was inconceivable to her that anyone would not share her opinion. On films, books, people. It irritated her to think otherwise.

"That's stupid. Pass me the lighter."

Had she meant to save Maddy's life?

They visit another miserable church shaped like an upturned boat, an ogham stone in a mystically deserted cemetery, a saint's house, and then stop for lunch at a dark café that must have changed hands recently, since the owner seems flustered by everything on the menu and finally, smiling, offers only beef stew. The view is of cows and low stone walls and blurred water. Maddy is starved, but Cat is in some kind of trance, and proceeds to relate the entire plot of a science-fiction book she had just finished and didn't really like. She tells the story while holding a spoonful of stew three inches from her mouth, but she is so involved in the telling that she keeps bringing the spoon close to her lips, and then taking it away as she remembers some new twist of the plot; this lasts for almost forty minutes before she finally takes a bite. Maddy is fascinated and slightly annoyed by this oddity. Cat, unaware, buys a rhubarb pie for the road.

Out of the Dingle Peninsula, over Connor Pass, and the view is spectacular; it is the fourteen shades of green the guidebook promises. The road gets narrower, rockier, but Cat, still driving, does not seem to mind. Their destination is Ballyvaughan and the guesthouse of Mrs. Moore. Cat made these arrangements and now reveals that Mrs. Moore offers massage and aromatherapy in the room. She imagines Mrs. Moore to be a local witch and a nudist; she makes this joke almost to herself, staring out at the view. The rain is over, at least for now; the sun is out. A cold stream flows down from the rocks and across the road. Below, on the bay, the water is as blue as a glass eye. Every field is alive with grass. It is unbearably beautiful.

Maddy awakens to very similar surroundings under a more hostile sky. She is surprised to find herself alone, the car stopped; it is parked in a gravel lot across from a moss-hidged castle. The sky beyond it shows no sun at all anymore. As she sits up, she hears a voice; it's Cat, in a nearby phone booth.

"No," Cat says bitterly into the phone. Through the rain-beaded glass, Maddy can see her friend's face, her lips curled in some kind of disgust. She is clutching the orange scarf in her free hand. "No, we got lost. We got delayed." Another long pause, and Cat says firmly, "We will make it, Mrs. Moore."

Maddy looks at the dashboard clock; two hours have passed. Something has changed. The barometer inside her senses it; she can feel it through the door of the car, through the phone-booth enclosure. She braces herself. Something has changed in Cat; something has happened.

Cat hangs up the phone and stares at it for a moment. She looks bright and cold and lonely. Then she turns to Maddy, who has rolled down the window.

"Hi there," Maddy says, feigning drowsiness. "Where are we?"

Cat says nothing. Maddy has pretended to herself that this is a natural, easygoing question, but of course it isn't. She knows very well that they are lost. So it is a needling question; it blames.

But she cannot help herself: "I guess we're lost."

"You were asleep," Cat says suddenly, accusingly. Her hair has curled in the rain and parted, showing dark roots that Maddy has never noticed before.

"You should have woken me up. I'm good with maps."

"I'm sure you are."

A slight shift in subject: "That was Mrs. Moore?"

"Yes, it was. I took care of it."

Maddy cannot resist another dig: "You want me to drive?"

Cat gives her a sour glance; she looks like a person on the edge of hatred. Maddy recognizes this look from their youth, tries and fails to remember what she used to do with it. "I'm going over there," Cat says to her, and where she points a little store has magically appeared. "I'll be back."

While Maddy was asleep, Cat must have followed some Irish will-o'-the-wisp—a sign for an abbey, a grotto, a mermaid's lair—and gone off on an adventure that led nowhere, merely stranded them here beside this castle; she must be embarrassed, frustrated, jealous of Maddy's selfish sleep. Maddy could understand this and be kind, but for some reason she is not willing. She is too tired of it. It's not my job to make her happy, she thinks. She gets out and shuts the door; the air is rainless, absolutely neutral. She leans back against the car, closes her eyes, enjoying the last waves of sleep as they leave her, briefly imagining the friendship fading.

She thinks of Jason and the ease with which she moves with him; he never does this, is never so childish as to escalate a minor moment. At the very worst, he has to step out of the room and when she follows him he tells her to stay away, to give him a minute; sometimes he locks himself in the bathroom. When he emerges, one hand spread out on his chest as if he were pledging an oath, he is always contrite: "You were talking too fast; I can't keep up, but I've thought it through and I want you to be happy." His loyalty to her happiness is sublime, unending; it would take a bolt of madness to undo him. He never looks as if he hates her. She never thinks she is going to lose him.

Someone touches her arm; she starts.

Not Cat, but some chubby blond woman with a bad perm, holding a baby. She is dressed in a long shirt of faded flowers, slacks, and sandals whose clear plastic has dulled from dust. Her soft face is fixed and immobile, concentrated. She is as

bland as butter. Maddy takes a step away. The woman approaches again and asks in a stern voice, "Miss, do you know how far to Dunquin?" She is Irish.

Maddy wishes she knew the answer; she loves being an expert. She considers it, looks around at the gashes of stone walls among the hills. But of course she does not know where she is. "I'm sorry, I'm not from here."

"You see, we've run out of petrol, miss, and I've got my child." On second glance, it is not quite a baby. Maybe two years old, but small and dirty, staring everywhere but at Maddy. A cold wind has begun to blow in from the sea, and it smells like leaves, like living things.

"That's a shame, maybe at that store—"

"Could you help me with our map?" the woman asks. Her expression is still focussed on Maddy, as intense and plain as ever. "It's back at the car."

There is a murmur like a mosquito in the back of Maddy's mind. But perhaps she does know; it's Cat who got them lost, after all. Maddy has always been good with a map. "Of course. I'm a tourist, though." Well, surely the woman would have guessed that.

As she follows the woman into the car park, she notices a little monument by the side of the road. A sculpture of a woman among the waves. "The Colleen Bawn," a sign reads. "A fabled maid tricked into marriage and drowned." Well, Maddy thinks, if there were a monument to every one of those . . .

"We're so low on petrol, you see," the woman says. She has skin as pale and thick as bond paper; smoker's skin, Maddy thinks.

"And we've got no money of our own." A toneless, monotonous voice; nothing pleading or sad in it.

They're at the car now, some make of car that Maddy has never heard of, small and rusted, a decade old or more. Her instinct tells her to walk away; she stifles it. There are clothes heaped in the back of the car, and a McDonald's bag. It looks as if the woman and her child live in there. But where did they find a McDonald's?

"I don't see a map," Maddy says. The wind picks up; it is pulling at her hair, and she raises a hand to stop it.

"It's in there, under my coat," the woman says, hoisting the child onto her other hip with a slight wince to her eyes. The child stares out at the castle; Maddy notices—strange how the mind works so constantly, uselessly—that the castle is for sale. She pulls herself back to the car, watching, sensing that she should be watching. With one free hand, the woman opens the driver's-side door.

Maddy looks into the car, where a red Windbreaker lies crumpled on the passenger seat. So red. A murmur of warning.

She begins to turn away, toward some bushes rustling in the wind, but the woman points, directing her attention back to the car: "We're just worried about petrol. So we can eat."

"I can't give you any money," Maddy finds herself saying. It takes everything she has to say it.

"I just need help with the map," the woman says, clearly affronted.

"I don't mean—"

The woman gestures toward the car. "Miss, if you could get the map for me, just climb in there for me—"

Maddy looks into the filthy car, the open door. The wind has stopped, yet she still hears the bushes rustling. "Perhaps I—"

The woman says, "Just in there."

"It's not that I—"

“All right, then, take her for me.” The woman lifts up the child, and Maddy knows this is wrong, for though she cannot possibly see the man’s shadow moving in the bushes, she knows at once it is a trick. If she takes the child she will be burdened, helpless, vulnerable.

For the first time, the child—a girl, apparently—looks straight at Maddy with an expression of blank appraisal. As if she had seen her type before: These overeducated women who now live in California and cannot tell anyone, not even their husbands, how much they miss New York, because in New York everything might change at any moment—you could have an affair, or bump into an old friend, or lose your life. These women who talk about breeds of dogs, varietals of wine, faucets and tile and hardwood floors. These women who come to Ireland because it is neither obvious nor unexpected, neither strange nor familiar; it is like everything else they choose; it is their life; it is probably what they expect of death.

The woman holds the child out to Maddy; the child reaches out her hands to be held. And there is nothing Maddy can do but lift her own hands to accept her. Nothing she can do but this. No way to untie this knot, no way to change things, not even if she hears the boot scraping on gravel, or notices, in the sun’s brief reappearance, the glint in the bushes that anyone would know is a knife.

But from somewhere beyond the shock of weeds it comes: the piercing call of a whistle.

Years from now, Maddy’s life will need saving again. She will be old; Jason will be old. She will be sitting in the waiting room of the hospital while the nurses ready her husband to see her. It will be early in the morning, the nurses having called to tell her that he has awoken from his short coma—just a few terrifying days—the result of an unexpected, devastating virus. It is common for coma patients to have very little recall; for instance, he will not remember anyone named Maddy. But he will have been told that she is his wife, and that she is arriving today. A nurse in clogs will come out and whisper that she can see him now. In Maddy’s hands: flowers, bright-red dahlias, perhaps to jolt something, to be so bright and sudden that his brain will come alive with love. She will walk into his room, a pale-green sunlit room, to find him sitting up stiffly in bed, his gray hair combed oddly across his forehead, his faithful smile aimed at the nurse. “Mr. Dean, your wife is here.” He will look over, and she will see it in his eyes. “Hello,” he’ll say. “Hello, and you’re my wife?”

But she will know what he is thinking. There must be some mistake, his eyes will say to her. I don’t think I would marry a woman like you.

It will take a visit to Cat in New York, a week of drinks and dinners and long talks in Cat’s darkened living room, to survive it. But it will be Cat who saves her, as always. Cat, old herself, round and grumpy in a large apartment filled with Caribbean art, her white hair done up in a kerchief, still stubborn in her belief that Maddy should be cherished, a belief that does not come from mere loyalty. She will be pompous, moody, and worn out by solitude. She will change the subject; she will say, “Remember in Ireland? When we were lost? I was so mad at you, you were always so impossible. Remember how I saved your life? I was out at the store and I bought those green whistles; I came out and the car was empty. But then I saw you, with that man coming up, and I blew my whistle. And you came running to me. Remember?”

“I do.”

“Oh, and remember! ‘The mystery of the Blaskets. Why were they so dumb?’ ” The unexpected summoning of a decades-old voice: “And on this spot no one ever died from love.” Sharp, familiar laughter.

But what Maddy will recall is the wet, smoky scent of the air that day, the cigarette butts in the gravel, the red Windbreaker. The child’s eyes, the waiting shadow inside the bushes. The spell-breaking sound of Cat’s awful whistle and how it took the bottom out of everything, let it all spill out onto the ground, and how somehow Maddy was running, pushing through the wet weeds to find her friend waiting, blowing on her whistle with a child’s concentration, the trenchcoat splattered with mud, the orange scarf wrapped around her head. Strange to know, to name your protector. Her face as she glances Maddy’s way, and that one eyebrow lifted like a fermata, like the very sign of love. ♦