



A Woman Is a Fast-Moving Picnic, Ray Bradbury

A Woman Is a Fast-Moving Picnic

The subject was women, by the singles and in the mobs.

The place was Heeber Finn's not-always-open but always-talking pub in the town of Kilcock, if you'll forgive the implication, in the county of Kildare, out along the River Liffey somewhat north and certainly beyond the reach of Dublin.

And in the pub, if only half full of men but bursting with talk, the subject was indeed women. They had exhausted all other subjects, hounds, horses, foxes, beers as against the hard stuff, lunatic mother-in-laws out of the bin and into your lives, and now the chat had arrived back to women in the pure state: unavailable. Or if available, fully dressed.

Each man echoed the other and the next agreed with the first.

"The dreadful fact is," said Finn, to keep the converse aroar, "there is no single plot of land in all Ireland which is firm or dry enough to lie down with purpose and arise with joy."

"You've touched the bull's-eye and pierced the target," said Timulty, the local postmaster, in for a quick one, there being only ten people waiting at the post-office. "There's no acre off the road, out of sight of the priest or out of mind of the wife, where physical education can be pursued without critical attention."

"The land is all bog," Nolan nailed it, "and no relief."

"There's no place to cavort," said Riordan, simply.

"Ah, that's been said a thousand times this night," protested Finn. "The thing is, what do wedoabout it?"

"If someone would only stop the rain and fire the priests," suggested Nolan.

"That'll be the day," cried all, and emptied their drinks.

"It reminds me of that Hoolihan tragedy," said Finn, refilling each glass.

"Is that remembered?"

"Sayit, Finn."

"Well, Hoolihan wandered this woman who was no Madonna, but neither was she last year's potatoes, and they passed a likely turf which seemed more flatland than swamp and Hoolihan said, Trot on out on that bog. If it holds, I'll follow. Well, she trotted out and turns around and—sinks! Never laid a hand on her. Before he could shout: No! she was gone!"

"The truth is," Nolan obtruded, "Hoolihan threw her a rope. But she slung it round her neck instead of her waist and all but strangled in the pulling out. But I like your version best, Finn. Anyways, they made a song of it!"

And here Nolan began, but everyone put in to finish the verse:

"The sinking of Molly in old Kelly's bog

Is writ in the Lord Mayor's roll call and a log

Poor Molly went there with the Hoolihan boy

And sank out of sight with one last shriek of joy.

He took her out there for what do you suppose?

And was busy at ridding the lass of her clothes,

But no sooner deprived of each last seam and stitch

Than she wallowed and sank and was lost in the ditch.

The ducks they all gaggled and even the hog

Wept Christian salt-tears for Moll sunk in the bog—"

"It goes on from there," said Nolan. "Needless to say the Hoolihan boy was distraught. When you're thinking one thing and another occurs, it fair turns the mind. He's feared to cross a brick road since without testing for quicksand. Shall I go on?"

"No use," cried Doone, suddenly, no more than four foot ten inches high but terrible fast plummeting out of theaters ahead of the national anthem, the local Anthem Sprinter, as everyone knows. Now, on tiptoe, he boxed the air around the pub and voiced his protest. "What's the use of all this palaver the last thousand nights when it's time to act? Even if there was a sudden flood of femininity in the provinces with no lint on them and their seams straight, what would we do with them?"

"True," admitted Finn. "God in Ireland just tempts man but to disown him."

"God's griefs and torments," added Riordan. "I haven't even wrestled Adam's old friend Eve late nights in the last row of the Gayety Cinema!"

"The Gayety Cinema?" cried Nolan in dread remorse. "Gah! I crept through the dark there once and found me a lass who seemed a salmon frolicking upstream. When the lights came on, I saw I had taken communion with a troll from the Liffey bridge. I ran to commit suicide with drink. To hell with the Gayety and all men who prowl there with dreams and slink forth with nightmare!"

"Which leaves only the bogs for criminal relief and drowned in the bargain. Doone," said Finn, "do you have a plan, you with that big mouth in the tiny body?"

"I have!" said Doone, not standing still, sketching the air with his fists and fingers as he danced to his own tune. "You must admit that the various bogs are the one place the Church puts no dainty toe. But also a place where a girl, representing the needy, and out of her mind, might

test her will to defy the sinkage. For it's true, one grand plunge if you're not careful and no place to put her tombstone. Now hear this!"

Doone stopped so all might lean at him, eyes wide, and ears acock.

"What we need is a military strategist, a genius for scientific research, in order to recreate the Universe and undo the maid. One word says it all. Me!"

"You!" cried all, as if struck in a collective stomach.

"I have the hammer," said Doone. "Will you hand me the nails?"

"Hang the picture," said Finn, "and fix it straight."

"I came here tonight with Victory in mind," said Doone, having slept late till noon and gone back to bed at three to adjust the sights and rearrange our future. "Now, as we waste our tongues and ruin our nervous complexions, the moon is about to rise and the empty lands and hungry bogs await. Outside this pub, in boneyards of handlebars and spokes, lie our bikes.

In a grand inquest, should we not bike on out to peg and string the bogs for once and all, full of brave blood and booze, to make a permanent chart, map the hostile and innocent-looking flats, test the sinkages, and come back with the sure knowledge that behind Dooley's farm is a field in which if you do not move fast, you sink at the rate of two or three inches per minute?

Then beyond, Leary's pasture in which his own cows have the devil's time grazing quick enough to survive the unsteady turf and live on the road. Would that not be a good thing to know for the rest of our lives so we can shun it and move to more substantial grounds?"

"My God," said all in admiration. "It would!"

"Then what are we waiting for?" Doone ran to the door. "Finish your drinks and mount your bikes. Do we live in ignorance or at last play in the fields, as it 'twere, of the Lord?"

"The fields!" The men drank.

"Of the Lord!" they finished, plummeting Doone out the door.

"Time!" cried Finn, since the pub was empty. "Time!"

No sooner on the road, with coattails flying as if heaven lay ahead and Lucifer behind, than Doone pointed now here, now there with his surveyor's nose:

"There's Flaherty's. Terrible quick. You're out of sight, a foot a minute and no one the wiser if they look the other way."

"Why, Christ himself," said someone in the sweating biking mob, "might not make it across!"

"He'd be the first and last and no one between!" Finn admitted, catching up with the team.

"Where are you taking us, Doone?" gasped Nolan.

"You'll see soon enough!" Doone churned his sprockets.

"And when we get there," asked Riordan, suddenly struck with the notion, "in the penultimate or final sinkage tests who will be the woman?"

"True!" gasped all, as Doone veered the path and sparked his wheels, "there's only us."

"Never fear!" said Doone. "One of us will pretend to be the poor put-upon maid, maiden, courtesan—"

"Hoor of Babylon?" volunteered Finn.

"And who would that be?"

"You're looking at his backside!" cried Doone, all elusive speed. "Me!"

"You!"

That almost swerved them into multiple collisions. But Doone, fearing this, cried, "And more surprises, if all goes well. Now, by God, on with the brakes. We're here!"

It had been raining, but since it rained all the while, no one had noticed. Now the rain cleared away like a theater curtain, to reveal:

Brannagan's off-the-road-and-into-the-woods pasture, which started in mist, to be lost in fog. "Brannagan's!" Everyone braked to a stillness. "Does it not have an air of the mysterious?" whispered Doone.

"It does," someone murmured. "Do you dare me to be brave?"
"Do that," was the vote. "But are you serious, Doone?"

"Jesus," said Doone. "It'll be no test for judgments and sinkage tests if someone for starters doesn't do more than jog about the territory like mindless bulls. There must be two people making tracks, beyond. Me, playing the woman for sure. And some volunteer amongst you."

The men inched back on their bike-seats. "Ah, you and your scientific logic will be the death of brewing and the burial of gin," said Finn. "But Doone, your verisimilitude, if there is such a word. It'll be hard for us to conjure you up as a female."

"Why not," offered Riordan, "go fetch a real lass here? A gal from the nunnery—"
"Nunnery!" cried all, shocked.
"Or one of the wives?" said Doone.
"Wives?" cried all, in worse shock.

And they would have driven him like a spike into the earth, had they not realized he was yanking their legs to steer them crooked. "Enough!" Finn interjected. "Do we have pencils and paper at hand to align the sums and recall the burial sinks, plot on plot?"
The men muttered.

No one had thought to bring pencil and paper. "Ah, hell," grouched Riordan. "We'll recall the numerals, back at the pub. Out with you, Doone. In time, a volunteer, playing the male counterpart, will follow."

"Out it is!" Doone threw down his bike, doused his throat with gargle, and trotted, elbows in a grand rhythm, over the endlessly waiting and terribly damp boneyard of sexual beasts.

"This is the silliest damn thing we ever tried," said Nolan, tears in his eyes for fear of never seeing Doone again.

"But what ahero!" reasoned Finn. "For would we dare come here with a real crazed female if we did not know the logistics of tug and pull, devastation or survival, love-at-last as against another night of being strangled by our underwear?"

"Aw, put a sock in it!" shouted Doone, far out now, beyond rescue.

"Here I go!"

"Furtherout, Doone!" suggested Nolan.

"Gripes!" cried Doone. "First you say it's a silly damn thing we do, then you instruct me to the land mines! I'm furthering by fits and starts." Then suddenly Doone shrieked. "It's an elevator I'm in! I'm goingdown!"

He gesticulated wildly for balance.

"Off with your coat!" Finn yelled.

"What?"

"Eliminate the handicaps, man!"

"What?"

"Tear off yourcap!"

"My cap? Nitwit! What good wouldthatdo?"

"Your pants then! Your shoes! You must pretend to get ready for the Grand Affair, with or without rain."

Doone kept his cap on but yanked his shoes and belabored his coat.

"Thetest,Doone!" Nolan shouted. "If you do not writhe to remove your shoelaces and untie your tie, we will not know just how fast a maid in the undressing or a man at his mating dance will slide from view. Now we must find is there or is therenotime for a consummation devoutly to be wished?"

"Consummation—devoutly—damn!" cried Doone.

And grousing epithets and firing nouns to smoke the air, Doone danced about, flinging off his coat and then his shirt and tie and was on his way

to a dropping of the pants and the rising of the moon when a thunderous voice from Heaven or an echo from the mount banged the air like a great anvil somehow fallen to earth.

"What goes on there?" the voice thundered.

They froze, a riot iced by sin.

Doone froze, an art statue on its way to potato deeps.

All time froze and again the pile-driver voice was lifted and plunged to crack their ears. The moon fled behind a fog.

"Just what in hell is going on here?" thundered the voice of Kingdom Come and the Last Judgment.

A dozen heads spun on a dozen necks.

For Father O'Malley stood on a rise in the road, his bike clenched in his vengeful fists, so it looked like his skinny sister, straddled and lost.

For a third time, Father O'Malley tossed the bolt and split the air. "You and you and you! What are you up to?"

"It's not so much up as down to my smalls," piped Doone in a wee piccolo voice, and added, meekly, "Father—"

"Out, out!" shouted the priest, waving one arm like a scythe. "Away!" he blathered. "Go, go, go. Damn, damn, damn."

And he harvested the men with maniac gesticulations and eruptions of lava enough to lay a village and bury a blight.

"Out of my sight. Away, the mangy lot of you! Go search your souls, and get your asses to confession six Sundays running and ten years beyond. It's lucky 'twas me came on this calamity and not the Bishop, me and not the sweet morsel nuns from just beyond Meynooth, me and not the child innocents from yonder school. Doone, pull up your socks!"

"They're pulled!" said Doone.

"For one last time, out!" And the men might have scattered but they held to their bikes in deliriums of terror and could only listen.

"Will you tell me now," intoned the priest, one eye shut to take aim, the other wide to fix the target, "what, what in hell are you up to?"

"Drowning, your lordship, your honor, your reverence."

And this Doone almost did.

Until the monsignor was gone, that is.

When he heard the holy bike ricket away over the hill, Doone still stood like a chopfallen Lazarus to survey his possible ruination.

But at last he called across the boggy field with a strange frail but growing-more-triumphant-by-the-minute voice:

"Is he gone?"

"He is, Doone," said Finn.

"Then look upon me," said Doone.

All looked, then stared, then gaped their mouths.

"You are not sinking," gasped Nolan. "You have not sunk," added Riordan.

"I havenot!" Doone stomped his foot as if to test, then, secure, he lowered his voice for fear that the priest, though gone, might catch the echo.

"And why not?" he asked the heavens.

"Why, Doone?" was the chorus.

"Because I distilled the rumors and cadged the notions that once onatime, a hundred years back, on this very spot once stood—"

He paused for the drama, then finished the act:

"A church!"

"A church?"

"Good Roman rock on uncertain Irish soil! The beauty of it distilled faith. But the weight of it sank its cornerstone. The priests fled and left the structure, altar and all, so it's on that firm foundation that Doone, your sprinter, holds still. I stand aboveground!"

"It's a revelation you've made!" Finn exclaimed.

"I have! And it is here we shall conjugate our verbs and revive our faith in women in all futures, near and far," announced Doone, way out there on the rainy moss. "But just in case ... "

"In case?"

Doone waved over beyond them.

The men, straddling their bikes, turned.

And on a rise, unseen heretofore, but now half revealed to the sight, some hundred feet away, there appeared two women, not transfigured rose gardens, no, but their homely glances somehow turned fine by night and circumstance.

Short women they were. Not Irish-short but circus-short, carnival-size.

"Midgets!" exclaimed Finn.

"From the vaudeville in Dublin last week!" admitted Doone, out in the bog. "And both weighing half again less than me, should the church roof below suddenly lose its architectural roots and douse the bunch!"

Doone whistled and waved. The tiny maids, the little women, came on the run.

When they reached Doone and did not vanish, Doone called to the mob, "Will you give up your bikes and join the dance?"

There was a mass movement.

"Hold it!" cried Doone. "One at a time. We don't want to meet back at the pub at midnight—"

"And find someone missing?" asked Finn.

The end