



The Anthem Sprinters, Ray Bradbury

The Anthem Sprinters

"There's no doubt of it Doone's the best."

"Devil take Doone!"

"His reflex is uncanny, his lope on the incline extraordinary, he's off and gone before you reach for your hat."

"Hoolihan's, better, any day!"

"Day, hell. Why not now?"

I was at the far end of the bar at the top of Grafton Street listening to the tenors singing, the concertinas dying hard, and the arguments prowling the smoke, looking for opposition. The pub was the Four Provinces and it was getting on late at night, for Dublin.

So there was the sure threat of everything shutting at once, meaning spigots, accordions, piano lids, soloists, trios, quartets, pubs, sweet shops and cinemas. In a great heave like the Day of Judgment, half Dublin's population would be thrown out into raw lamp light, there to find themselves wanting in gum-machine mirrors. Numbed, their moral and physical sustenance plucked from them, these souls would wander like battered moths for a moment, then wheel about for home.

But now here I was listening to a discussion the heat of which, if not the light, reached me at fifty paces. "Doone!" "Hoolihan!" Then the smallest man at the far end of the bar, turning, saw the curiosity enshrined in my all too open face and cried, "You're American, of course!"

And wondering what we're up to? Do you trust my looks? Would you bet as I told you on a sporting event of great local consequence? If 'Yes' is your answer, come here!"

I strolled with my Guinness the length of the Four Provinces to join the shouting men, as one violinist gave up destroying a tune and the pianist hurried over, bringing his chorus with him

"Name's Timulty." The little man took my hand.

"Douglas," I said. "I write for the cinema."

"Fillums!" cried everyone.

"Films," I admitted modestly.

"What luck! Beyond belief!"

Timulty seized me tighter. "You'll be the best judge ever, as well as bet! Are you much for sports? Do you know, for instance, the cross-country, the four-forty, and such man-on-foot excursions?"

"I've witnessed two Olympic Games."

"Not just fillums, but the world competition!" Timulty gasped. "You're the rare one. Well, now what do you know of the special all-Ireland decathlon event which has to do with picture theaters?"

"What event is that?"

"What indeed! Hoolihan!"

An even littler fellow, pocketing his harmonics, leaped forward, smiling.

"Hoolihan, that's me. I'm the best Anthem Sprinter in all Ireland!"

"What sprinter?" I asked. "A-n-t-," spelled Hoolihan, much too carefully, "-h-e-m. Anthem. Sprinter. The fastest."

"Since you been in Dublin," Timulty cut in, "have you attended the cinema?"

"Last night," I said, "I saw a Clark Gable film. Night before, an old Charles Laughton-

"Enough! You're a fanatic, as are all the Irish. If it weren't for cinemas and pubs to keep the poor and workless off the street or in their caps, we'd have pulled the cork and let the isle sink long ago. Well." He clapped his hands. "When the picture ends each night, have you observed a peculiarity of the breed?"

"End of the picture," I mused. "Hold on!" You can't mean the national anthem, can you?"

"Can we, boys?" cried Timulty. "We can!" cried all.

"Any night, every night, for tens of dreadful years at the end of each damn fillum, as if you'd never heard the baleful tune before," grieved Timulty, "the orchestra strikes up for Ireland. And what happens then?"

"Why," said I, falling in with it, "if you're any man at all you try to get out of the theater in those few precious moments between the end of the film and the start of the anthem."

"You've nailed it!" "Buy the Yank a drink!"

"After all," I said casually, "I'm in Dublin four months now. The anthem has begun to pale. No disrespect meant," I added hastily.

"And none taken!" said Timulty. "Or given by any of us patriotic I.R.A. veterans, survivors of the Troubles and lovers of country. Still, breathing the same air ten thousand times makes the senses reel.

So, as you've noted, in that God-sent three- or four-second interval any audience in its right mind beats it the hell out. And the best of the crowd is--" "Doone," I said. "Or Hoolihan. Your Anthem Sprinters!"

They smiled at me. I smiled at them. We were all so proud of my intuition that I bought them a round of Guinness.

Licking the suds from our lips, we regarded each other with benevolence. "Now," said Timulty, his voice husky with emotion, his eyes squinted off at the scene, "at this very moment, not one hundred yards down the slight hill, in the comfortable dark of the Grafton Street Theatre, seated on the aisle of the fourth row center is--"

"Doone," said I. "The man's eerie," said Hoolihan, lifting his cap to me. "Well---" Timulty swallowed his disbelief, "Doone's there a'right. He's not seen the fillum before, it's a Deanna Durbin brought back by the asking, and the time is now..."

Everyone glanced at the wall clock. "Ten o'clock!" said the crowd.

"And in just fifteen minutes the cinema will be letting the customers out for good and all."

"And?" I asked. "And," said Timulty. "And! If we should send Hoolihan here in for a test of speed and agility, Doone would be ready to meet the challenge."

"He didn't go to the show just for an Anthem Sprint, did he?"

"Good grief, no. He went for the Deanna Durbin songs and all. Doone plays the piano here, for sustenance. But if he should casually note the entrance of Hoolihan here, who would make himself conspicuous by his late arrival just across from Doone, well, Doone would know what was up. They would salute each other and both sit listening to dear music until Finis hove in sight."

"Sure." Hoolihan danced lightly on his elbows. "Let me at him, let me at him!"

Timulty peered close at me. "Mr. Douglas, I observe your disbelief. The details of the sport have bewildered you. How is it, you ask, that full-grown men have time for such as this? Well, time is the one thing the Irish have plenty of lying about. With no jobs at hand, what's minor in your country must be made to look major in ours.

We have never seen the elephant, but we've learned a bug under a microscope is the greatest beast on earth. So while it hasn't passed the border, the Anthem Sprint's a high-blooded sport once you're in it. Let me nail down the rules!"

"First," said Hoolihan reasonably, "knowing what he knows now, find out if the man wants to bet."

Everyone looked at me to see if their reasoning had been wasted.

"Yes," I said.

All agreed I was better than a human being. "Introductions are in order," said Timulty. "Here's Fogarty, exit-watcher supreme. Nolan and Clannery, aisle-superintendent judges. Clang, timekeeper. And general spectators O'Neil, Bannion and the Kelly boys, count 'em! Come on!"

I felt as if a vast street-cleaning machine, one of those brambled monsters all mustache and scouring brush, had seized me. The amiable mob boated me down the hill toward the multiplicity of little blinking lights where the cinema lured us on. Hustling, Timulty shouted the essential rules: "Much depends on the character of the theater, of course!"

"Of course!" I yelled back.

"There be the liberal free thinking theaters with grand aisles, grand exits and even grander, more spacious latrines. Some with so much porcelain, the echoes alone put you in shock. Then there's the parsimonious mousetrap cinemas with aisles that squeeze the breath from you, seats that knock your knees, and doors best sidled out of on your way to the men's lounge in the sweet shop across the alley.

Each theater is carefully assessed, before, during and after a sprint, the facts set down. A man is judged then, and his time reckoned good or inglorious, by whether he had to fight his way through men and women en masse, or mostly men, mostly women, or, the worst, children at the daytime matinees.

The temptation with children, of course, is lay into them as you'd harvest hay, tossing them in windrows to left and right, so we've stopped that. Now mostly we've nights here at the Grafton!"

The mob stopped. The twinkling theater lights sparkled in our eyes and flushed our cheeks. "The ideal cinema," said Fogarty.

"Why?" I asked.

"Its aisles," said Clannery, "are neither too wide nor too narrow, its exits well placed, the door hinges oiled, the crowds a proper mixture of sporting bloods and folks who mind enough to leap aside should a Sprinter, squandering his energy, come dashing up the aisle."

I had a sudden thought. "Do you-- handicap your runners?"

"We do!"

Sometimes by shifting exits when the old are known too well. Or we put a summer coat on one, a winter coat on another. Or seat one chap in the sixth row, while the other takes the third. And if a man turns terrible feverish swift, we add the greatest known burden of.

"Drink?" I said.

"What else? Now, Doone, being fleet, is a two-handicap man. Nolan!" Timulty held forth a flask. "Run this in. Make Doone take two swigs, big ones."

Nolan ran. Timulty pointed. "While Hoolihan here, having already been through all Four Provinces of the pub this night, is simply weighted. Even all!"

"Go now, Hoolihan," said Fogarty. "Let our money be a light burden on you. We'll see you bursting out that exit five minutes from now, victorious and first."

"Let's synchronize watches!" said Clancy.

"Synchronize my back-behind," said Timulty. "Which of us has more than dirty wrists to stage at? It's you alone, Clancy, has the time. Hoolihan, inside!" Hoolihan shook hands with us all, as if leaving for a trip around the world. Then, waving, he vanished into the cinema darkness.

At which moment, Nolan burst back out, holding high the half-empty flask. "Doone's handicapped!"

"Handicapped! Fine! Clannery, go check the contestants, be sure they sit opposite each other in the fourth row, as agreed, caps on, coats half buttoned, scarves properly furled. Report back to me."

Clannery ran into the dark.

"The ticket takers?" I said.

"They're inside, watching the fillum," said Timulty. "So much standing is hard on the feet. They won't interfere"

"It's ten-thirteen," announced Clancy. "In two more minutes to-- "

"Post time," I said.

"You're a dear lad," admitted Timulty.

Clannery came hot-footing out. "All set! In the right seats and everything!"

"'Tis almost over! You can tell--toward the end of any fillum the music has a way of getting out of hand."

"It's loud, all right," agreed Clannery. "Pull orchestra and chorus behind the singing maid now. I must come tomorrow for the entirety. Lovely."

"Is it?" sad Clancy, and the others laughed. "What's the tune?"

"Ah, off with the tune!" said Timulty. "One minute to go and you ask the tune! Lay the bets. Who's for Doom? Who's for Hoolihan?"

There was a multitudinous jabbering and passing back and forth of money, mostly shillings.
I held out four shillings.

"Doone," I said.

"Without having seen him?"

"A dark horse," I whispered.

"Well said!" Timulty spun about. "Clannery, Nolan, inside, as aisle judges! Watch sharp there's no jumping before time." In went Clannery and Nalan, happy as boys. "Make an aisle, now. Mr. Douglas, you over here with me."

The men rushed to form an aisle on each side of the two closed main entrance-exit doom "Fogarty, lay your ear to the door!" This Fogarty did. His eyes widened. "The damn music is extra loud."

One of the Kelly boys nudged his brother. "It will be over soon. Whoever is to die is dying this moment. Whoever is to live is bending over him."

"Louder still!" announced Fogarty, head up against the door pond, hand twitching as if he were adjusting a radio.

"There! That's the grand to-to for sure that comes just as FINIS or THE END jumps on the screen."

"They're off," I murmured.

"Steady!" said Timulty. We all stared at the door. "There's the anthem!"

"Tenshun!" We all stood erect. Someone saluted. But still we stared at the door.

"I hear feet running," said Fogarty. "Whoever it is had a good start before the anthem--"

The door burst wide.

Hoolihan plunged to view, smiling such a smile as only breathless victors know.

"Hoolihan!" cried the winners. "Doone!" cried the losers. "Where's Doone?"

For, while Hoolihan was first, a competitor was lacking. The crowd was dispersing into the street now. "The idiot didn't come out the wrong door?" We waited. The crowd was soon gone. Timulty ventured first into the empty lobby. "Doone!" No one there. "Could it be he's in there?"

Someone flung the men's room door wide. "Doone?" No echo, no answer. "Good grief," cried Timulty, "it can't be he's broken a leg and lies on the slope somewhere with the mortal agonies?"

"That's it!" The island of men, heaving one way, changed gravities and heaved the other, toward the inner door, through it, and down the aisle, myself following.

"Doone!" Clannery and Nolan were there to meet us and pointed silently down. I jumped into the air twice to see over the mob's head. It was dim in the vast theater. I saw nothing.

"Doone!" Then at last we were bunched together near the fourth row on the aisle. I heard their boggled exclamations as they saw what I saw: Doone, still seated in the fourth row on the aisle, his hands folded, his eyes shut.

Dead? None of that. A tear, large, luminous and beautiful, fell on his cheek. Another tear, larger and more lustrous, emerged from his other eye. His chin was wet. It was certain he had been crying for some minutes.

The men peered into his face, circling, leaning. "Doone, are ya sick?" "Is it fearful news?"

"Ah, God," cried Doone. He shook himself to find the strength, somehow, to speak. "Ah, God," he said at last, "she has the voice of an angel.

"Angel?"

"That one up there." He nodded. They turned to stare at the empty silver screen.

"Is it Deanna Durbin?"

Doone sobbed. "The dear dead voice of my grandmother come back-"

"Your grandma's behind!" exclaimed Timulty. "She had no such voice as that!"

"And who's to know, save me?" Doone blew his nose, dabbed at his eyes.

"You mean to say it was just the Durbin lass kept you from the sprint?"

"Just!" said Doone. "Just! Why, it would be sacrilege to bound from a cinema after a recital like that. You might also then jump full tilt across the altar during a wedding, or waltz about at a funeral."

"You could've at least warned us it was no contest." Timulty glared.

"How could I? It just crept over me in a divine sickness. That last bit she sang, "The Lovely Isle of Innisfree", was it not, Clannery?"

"What else did she sing?" asked Fogarty.

"What else did she sing?" cried Timulty. "He's just lost half of us our day's wages and you ask what else she sang! Get off!"

"Sure, it's money runs the world," Doone agreed, seated there, closing up his eyes. "But it is music that holds down the friction."

"What's going on there?" cried someone above. A man leaned down from the balcony, puffing a cigarette. "What's all the rouse?"

"It's the projectionist," whispered Timulty. Aloud: "Hello, Phil, darling! It's only the Team! We've a bit of a problem here, Phil, in ethics, not to say aesthetics. Now, we wonder if, well, could it be possible to run the anthem over."

"Run it over?" There was a rumble from the winners, a mixing and shoving of elbows.

"A lovely idea," said Doone.

"It is," said Timulty, all guile. "An act of God incapacitated Doone."

"A tenth-run flicker from the year 1937 caught him by the short hairs is all," said Fogarty.

"So the fair thing is-" here Timulty, unperturbed, looked to heaven. "Phil, dear boy, also is the last reel of the Deanna Durbin fillum still there?"

"It ain't in the ladies' room," said Phil, smoking steadily.

"What a wit the boy has. Now, Phil, do you think you could just thread it back through the machine there and give us the FINIS again?"

"Is that what you all want?" asked Phil.

There was a hard moment of indecision. But the thought of another contest was too good to be passed, even though already-won money was at stake. Slowly everyone nodded.

"I'll bet myself, then," Phil called down. "A shilling on Hoolihan!"

The winners laughed and hooted; they looked to win again. Hoolihan waved graciously. The losers turned on their man, "Do you hear the insult, Doone? Stay awake, man!" "When the girl sings, damn it, go deafly!"

"Places, everyone!" Timulty jostled about. "There's no audience," said Hoolihan. "And without them there's no obstacles, no real contest."

"Why," Fogarty blinked around, "let's all of us be the audience."

"Fine!" Beaming, everyone threw himself into a seat.

"Better yet," announced Timulty, up front, "Why not make it teams? Doone and Hoolihan, sure, but for every Doone man or Hoolihan man that makes it out before the anthem him on his hobnails, an extra point, right?"

"Right!" cried everyone.

"Pardon," I said. "There's no one outside to judge."

Everyone turned to look at me.

"Ah," said Timulty. "Well. Nolan, outside!" Nolan trudged up the aisle, cursing.

Phil stuck his head from the projection booth above. "Are ya clods down there ready?"

"If the girl is and the anthem is!"

And the lights went out. I found myself seated next in from Doone, who whispered fervently, "Poke me, lad, keep me alert to practicalities instead of ornamentation, eh?"

"Shut up!" said someone.

"There's the mystery."

And there indeed it was, the mystery of song and art and life, if you will, the young girl singing on the timehaunted screen. "We lean on you, Doone," I whispered. "Eh?" he replied. He smiled ahead. "Ah, look, ain't she lovely? Do you hear?"

"The bet, Doone," I said. "Get ready."

"All right," he grouched. "Let me stir my bones. Jesus save me."

"What?"

"I never thought to test. My right leg. Feel. Now, you can't. It's dead, it is!"

"Asleep, you mean?" I said, appalled.

"Dead or asleep, hell, I'm sunk! Lad, lad, you must run for me! Here's my cap and scarf!"

"Your cap-"

"When victory is yours, show them, and we'll explain you ran to replace this fool leg of mine!" He clapped the cap on, tied the scarf. "But look here-" I protested. "You'll do great! Just remember, it's FINIS and no sooner! The song's almost up. Are you tensed?"

"God am I!" I said.

"It's blind passions that win, boy. Plunge straight. If you step on someone, do not look back. There!" Doone held his legs to one side to give clearance. "The song's done. He's kissing her-"

"The FINIS!" I cried.

I leaped into the aisle. I ran up the slope. I'm first, that I thought. I'm ahead! It can't be! There's the door!

I hit the door as the anthem began. I dammed into the lobby safe. I won! I thought, incredulous, with Doone's cap and scarf like victory laurels upon and about me. Won! Won for the Team! Who's second, third, fourth? I turned to the door as it swung shut. Only then did I hear the shouts and yells inside.

"Good Lord!" I thought, six men have tried the wrong exit at once, someone tripped, fell, someone else piled on. Otherwise, why am I the first and only? There's a fierce silent combat in there this second, the two teams locked in mortal wrestling attitudes, asprawl, akimbo, above and below the seats, that must be it!

I've won! I wanted to yell, to break it up. I threw the doors wide. I stared into an abyss where nothing stirred. Nolan came to peer over my

shoulder. "That's the Irish for you," he said, nodding. "Even more than the race, the music they like."

For what were the voices yelling in the dark?

"Run it again over. That last song! Phil!" "No. No one move. I'm in heaven. Doone, how right you were!"

Nolan passed me, going in to sit. I stood for a long moment looking down along at all the rows where the teams of Anthem Sprinters sat, none having stirred, wiping their eyes.

"Phil, darling?" called Timulty, somewhere up front.

"It's done!" said Phil.

"And this time," added Timulty, "without the anthem." Applause for this.

The dim lights flashed off. The screen glowed like a great warm hearth.

I looked back out at the bright sane world of Grafton Street, the Four Provinces pub, the hotels, shops and nightwandering folk. I hesitated.

Then, to the tune of "The Lovely Isle of Innisfree," I took off the cap and scarf, hid these laurels under a seat, and slowly, luxuriously, with all the time in the world, sat myself down...

1963

The end