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## Old gents and lucky stars

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PITTSFIELD

The idea was hatched over a pint, of course.

"Shirts, take us to Ireland?" asked Steve Young one autumn evening decades ago at LaCocina.

"Just for a week," chimed Tom Cole.

"You have a car there and everything," coaxed Gary Donovan.

All three were good friends at the hospital, who had goaded me time and again to take them to Ireland. I slowly sipped my pint, wishing to please. "Okay, one week." "Road Trip!" the three yelled in unison.

I arrived in Ireland a few days earlier to ready my old Fiat, and picked up my groggy-headed buddies at Shannon Airport. They piled happily into the vehicle: "Where to, Shirts?"

I fastened my seat belt and grinned: "Ireland."

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So it began, four rollicking Irish-Yanks with a yearning to become wild colonial boys. We cut a swath into Ireland's southwest corner — Skibbereen to Cahirciveen — draining pints, playing darts, and chatting up the colleens. All was grand until a mutiny arose on Day Three.

"Shirts, we need to eat," grumbled Tom. "Cheese toasties aren't cutting it."

"And how about a hotel," demanded Gary. "Nothing against your B&B's, but they're all named after saints with rooms filled with holy pictures. Hell, I feel guilty if I don't genuflect before crawling into bed."

Next morning, after a bountiful supper and hotel stay, we ventured to Dunquin on the Dingle Peninsula to walk its golden strand. "Who's up for a morning swim," I mistakenly joked, looking out at killer waves that banged up against jagged black cliffs like cannon shots. Before I could blink, my three blooming *idjuts* were skinny-dipping in the crashing surf. Not to lose rank, I waded into the icy waters to join them, but the undertow pulled me out, and the bashing waves hurled me in again — the strong tides tossing us around like bits of flotsam.

Exhausted, we crawled back to shore and dressed in a shiver, whereupon a lone witness to our morning dip approached.

"That, me laddies, was a most foolish enterprise," the old man remarked. "Do you know a ship from the Armada sank here, and scores of fishermen have drowned. If that current had shifted toward the rocks, as it does on a whim, ye'd be little more than bags of broken bones. Best thank your lucky stars, the lot of ye."

"Cheerful chap, hey," I dismissed him as an old crank as he limped away.

At noontime, following pints and mutton stew, I cradled my head in my hands.

"What's wrong, Shirts?"

I had been battering my brain to make this sojourn memorable, and lifted my head with a bright idea for a quest. "We have to reach Slieve League in Donegal by sundown. If not, Ireland will slip away and be lost forever, like Brigadoon."

My eager threesome were all ears. "Can we make it?"

I pulled out my map: "It's roughly 300 miles north via the coast road, and sunset is around 8. Everything has to go our way. . . or Ireland perishes."

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So it began — Slieve League or Bust! — an adventure that could have earned me a hundred traffic violations. We crossed the Shannon on the ferry, and tore up the western seaboard of Clare, stopping for a quick glance of the breathtaking Cliffs of Moher.

"Magnificent, boys, but the cliffs of Slieve League is three times their height. C'mon, let's go!"

We barreled over the rocky landscape of the Burren, and into the province of Connaught, hugging the coastal roads that twisted like penny licorice, leading us in and out of quaint villages — Salthill, Spiddal, Screeb — the sun glowing majestically over Galway Bay. Tom suggested we cut inland through Connemara to save time.

"Not yet," I said. "We have to cling to the coast and keep our mother star at our left shoulder, like the old chieftains on their royal circuits long ago."

Colossal cloud banks hovered above the splendid peaks of the Twelve Pins and Maamturks, the brown bog below dappled in deep shadows of sun and cloud. We sped across this magical tableland, each turn offering an exhilarating vista — my three charges agog at its unfolding beauty. Like a whirlwind, we passed Croagh Patrick and Yeat's Ben Bulben, and careened inland from Westport to Ballina, and out again through Sligo. I pointed out the gigantic cairn atop Knocknarea.

"That's Maeve's grave. A pagan queen who lustfully boasted, 'I never was without one man in the shadow of another!'"

"Why didn't we meet *her* in our travels," came the lament from the back seat.

We hit snags in the congested towns of Bundoran and Ballyshannon, but soon hotfooted it again, stopping only for refreshments to further fuel our fervor. Off again, wending along narrow roads where we scattered sheep, bowled over jackasses — two and four-legged alike — ditched bicyclists and rattled postmen, as the sun, a perfect fireball, lowered languidly on the horizon, casting its lengthening shadow across verdant fields.

In our seventh and final hour, we rifled past the fishing port of Killybegs toward Kilcar, catching sight of looming Malinmore Head, from whose vantage Slieve League would be seen.

"We're closing in," I shouted, gunning it. Up, up the steep winding incline in low gear, the sun sinking low, dipping its hot feet into the cool sea, my three mates holding on for dear life.

My Fiat heaved over undulating roads, the hilly terrain giving no hint of what lay over each rise. At the crest of one hill walked a lone shepherd who, seeing our speedy approach, flagged his arms frantically, motioning us to slow down.

I shifted from third gear to first, and hit the brakes where the road turned abruptly to the right. The car screeched around this bend on two wheels, as we caught a harrowing sight of the deep precipice below.

Miraculously, the car held the pavement, as I brought it to a staggering halt. We fell out of its four doors, tumbling thankfully in the short grass.

Righting ourselves, we let out a great hurrah and watched dizzily as the setting sun glinted off the titanic seawall in a dazzling display of color.

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Still breathless, we continued to look out at the stupendous view, and nodded at each other in knowledge of our brush with mortality. If that lone shepherd hadn't been there, we would've been goners — flying over the cliff without my ever touching the brakes.

Gary spoke of it first, the question on all our minds. "Did any of you get a good look at that guy?"

"I did," said Tom. "He looked a lot like that old man on the Dingle."

"No, you're wrong," Steve interjected. "He was *that* old man on the Dingle."

I sat up on my elbows, blankly watching the brilliant colors of Slieve League fade to deep purple, my mind a whirl of road and silent blessings. I had learned to expect the inexplicable in Ireland, but rather than riding into the mystic that beckoned, I tended — right or wrong — to dismiss these puzzling events as mere coincidences, lest I end up grandiose, or crazed by spirits tugging at my sleeves.

They turned to me. "How about you, Shirts. What did you see?"

"I saw the old gent waving at us to slow down. And, yes, he looked like the old crank this morning, limp and all. But there's a lot of old-timers in Ireland and, fortunately, just as many lucky stars."

"Thank the heavens for that," the three murmured as one, casting their eyes skyward.

Kevin O'Hara writes an annual St. Patrick's Day column for The Berkshire Eagle.

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