



## Los San Patricios

By Roddy Doyle

The writer had a new book out and he was touring America, a city a day, a reading a night. He'd fly to a different city and hear the same questions – ‘Do you use a laptop?’, ‘What other Irish writers do you like?’, ‘Why do you think the Irish punch above their weight, literature-wise?’ But then there was a new question that quickly became one of the same questions: ‘Have you heard about the San Patricios?’

He had, in fact, heard about the San Patricios. The Chieftains and Ry Cooder had a new record, called *San Patricio*. There'd been an article in the *Irish Times* about it and he'd read the first paragraph. The San Patricios were a group of Irishmen who'd changed sides during the Mexican-American War of 1846 and '47. That was as much as he knew. But it was enough, he thought, to let him answer, ‘Yes’. One delighted man stood up and said, ‘Can you believe those guys?’ A woman in a different city spoke about the Irishmen who'd decided to fight with ‘their Mexican brethren’. Had the writer, she asked, ever considered writing about those men?

-Fuck sake, man.

Rex had no idea where he was. He wasn't even sure he'd woken up. It was hot, and he was outside. But they'd been inside, under a ceiling, when his eyes had started closing. He wasn't sure but. Nothing was clear or coming back to him.

-Clueless?

He put his hand over his eyes, to block the sun. Clueless – real name Trevor – was lying beside him, just starting to move. He was covered in red dust – everything was red. The ground shook. The noise was unbelievable, some kind of explosion.

-Clueless?

-Wha'sup?

-Where are we?

-Haven't a fuckin' clue, man.

Clueless sat up and looked around him. New dust blew into their faces.

-We're hallucinatin', said Rex.

-That's it, said Clueless.

Several men ran past. Their boots threw more dust and grit back at them. The men were carrying rifles.

-They're all dressed the same, like. Look.

-Cunts.

One of the men fell like he'd just been thumped. He hit the ground as they heard the gunshot and saw the quick spurt of blood slap the earth.

-Did you see that?

-Yeah.

-We're havin' the same hallucination.

-Brilliant.

-That stuff is ace, man.

Rex remembered now. He'd been smoking the stuff, Smoke XXXX, with Clueless and Clueless's brother, in their bedroom. The brother, Eliot, had got the Smoke – 'Warning: Not For Human Consumption' – in the local head shop, three days before the law had shut it down.

-Where's Eliot?

-Over there, said Clueless. -Look it.

Eliot was lying dead a few yards away. His body was partly hidden behind a red boulder. They couldn't see his head but the Converses were definitely his.

-Fuckin' amazin', said Rex.

-How come he's not seein' the same things as us? said Clueless. -He smoked the four Xs too.

-Yeah, said Rex. -But he didn't drink any of the hand-gel. He spat it out the window. 'Member?

-That's righ', said Clueless.

A bullet nipped his ear and whacked a stone just in front of them.

-Fuck!

Rex was laughing.

-Brilliant, he said. -Well worth the money.

-Fuck off, said Clueless. -It's fuckin' sore. Blood, look! It's pourin' out o' me!

-Coolio.

The ground shook again. The explosion roared and shook their clothes like heavy hands going all over them.

A man in a uniform ran past. He stopped and turned – he had one of those mad black moustaches – and shouted at them. Then he ran off again.

-What fuckin' language was tha'?

-Paki or somethin'.

-We must be in Iraq.

-Yeah, said Clueless. -Come here but. Hallucinations aren't supposed to be sore, are they? My ear's fuckin' killin' me.

-Mine's grand, said Rex.

He checked his ear.

-Yeah, no blood.

He shouted after the running man.

-Here! Bud!

But he'd gone.

-Dopey cunt.

Another man came running at them. He was carrying a pile of rifles, trying to hold them all in his arms. He fell – he dived – right beside the lads.

-Sound men, he said in a bogger accent. -You've arrived.

-S'pose, said Rex.

-You're Dublin boyos.

-That's righ'.

-Well, you're great men and welcome, said the bogger.

He handed them a rifle each.

-There now.

-Coolio, said Rex.

-Where are we, bud? said Clueless.

-Where are you?

The bogger stared at them, until fresh dust made him shut his eyes.

-Lads, he said. -You're slap dab in the middle of the Battle of Buena Vista.

-Serious?

-Fighting for Mexico and the Catholic faith.

-Fuckin' Mexico?

-The Catholic faith? said Rex. -Mind your arse, Clueless.

-And boys, said the bogger. -You're facing the wrong way.

Rex turned and saw a line of soldiers walking towards him. The dust rose and drifted and some of the men fell, shot. But most of them kept moving, steadily getting nearer.

-I wouldn't mind wakin' up now, said Clueless.

-Yeah, said Rex. -It's borin'.

-Make sure those bayonets are fixed, boys, said the bogger. -The signal to charge will come any minute.

-I'm firing mine, said Rex.

He aimed at one of the advancing soldiers.

-Are they Americans, are they?

-Oh, they are surely, said the bogger.

Rex pulled the trigger and his shoulder fell off, the whole side of his head.

-For fuck sake!

-Yeh hit one.

-Can't hear yeh!

-Yeh hit one!

-Ace.

Rex aimed again, and pulled the trigger. But nothing happened.

-It's empty, he said. -Should there not be six bullets in it or somethin'?

-Hang on, said Clueless. -It's one o' them really old ones. You have to reload it every time yeh shoot. I seen one o' them in a film in me Da's Henry Fonda box set.

-Who's Henry Fonda?

-Jane Fonda's husband.

-Who's Jane Fonda?

-Don't know, said Clueless. -Some oul' one. You can only fire one bullet at a time.

-That's shite, that is, said Rex. -Is there not an app or somethin'? Here, pal! he shouted at the bogger. -What year is it?

-It's 1847, boys.

-It is in its hole.

But the bogger wasn't listening.

-At the ready, boys, he shouted, crouched.

They saw more men now, lining up beside them, their rifles – their bayonets – held out in front of them.

-Did you do history in school, Clueless?

-Sometimes, yeah.

-Who won the Battle of Buena whatever the fuck?

-Haven't a clue.

Rex looked at his new comrades, the line of thin, tired, ragged men.

-I don't think it was us, said Rex.

-No, Clueless agreed.

-We'll change sides if we don't wake up first, alrigh?

-Okay.

-But we'll stab a few Yanks first, alrigh'?

-Okay.

-Bit o' buzz.

-Ah yeah.

The bogger beside them lifted a rifle into the air.

-Men! he yelled. -For Mexico and Pope Pius!

-Fuck sake. And Jennifer Lopez.

-Here we go.

*-Erin go bragh!*

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