

## Arch Parkway by Tom Doona

The Mayor of Arch Parkway looked overwhelmed as he stood in front of the town's patriots with their platinum-plated plaque in hand. 'Safest Place In The Nation'. A billboard writer's dream. There haven't often been certainties within Arch Parkway, as it's way too effervescent a place for anything to ever be certain, but there was no doubt within the minds of all those currently crammed into the chalk white town hall that this was a revelation, and a thoroughly deserved one at that.

The two short days it took for the bunting to hang and the banners to bridge across the streets was still too long for most; what is the statute of limitations on jubilation? Those in Arch Parkway, or 'Archies' as they call themselves, are not often the complaining type. But even the most tongue-tied among them struggled to stay completely silent on the fact that the national postal service really didn't give their town enough prioritisation. Especially not considering its heritage and prestige. Where neighbouring towns may send and receive post in days, the Archies can go weeks without a letter or a parcel. Though their complaints, infrequent yet earnest, tend to be short-lived. Because to the Archies' bittersweet pleasure those very complaints die out way before they have climbed the towering valleys that surround their town. No echoed complaint has the lifespan to succeed in even the onset of its journey up the grassy verges that frame their home like waymarking monoliths. Arch Parkway's complete disconnect from the rest of the nation, both for distance and for depth, brings great pride to the Archies and great issue to cartographers alike. As the old Parkway adage goes: *There's a way, and there's an Arch Parkway*. They are disconnected, not entirely, for they are still a firm and formative holder of the civilised way of modern living, but enough for the Archies to stake claim in their differences and disconnection. For the older populace that was no problem at all, because a lack of connectivity never irked them back in the day, so why should they feel hard done by when they don't receive the same one-day-delivery privileges as the rest of the country? But to those.. let's say, fresher.. members of the town, the joys of living in The Safest Place In The Nation were suddenly being challenged by their frustration at not being able to break their new shoes in twenty four hours after their online purchase. Technological advancement had rendered the demand of immediacy unavoidable, and the younger generation were starting to show signs of its effect. But, in true Archie fashion, where a problem lay, the town saw opportunity. So the Mayor announced a pedagogical review and revisiting of the town's unique educational curriculum – to add lessons on the appreciation of heritage, the dangers of internet usage and, for good measure, the recital of a few more age-old Archie folklore songs. And so upon the town receiving the accolade of *Safest Place In The Nation*, along with jubilation came an opportunity to witness the younger generation harnessing their newly-taught qualities of old by holding off on a full celebration until they had the plaque in their hands and the decorations worthy to commemorate it. But this waiting was not dull. Not in the faintest of senses. The two days in waiting for the celebratory decorations were filled with celebratory facets of other kinds: markets, parties, dinners. But despite the delight of such events, none were more prominent and eagerly anticipated than that of the town fete.

A town fete in the Safest Place In The Nation is a peculiar one. It isn't a carnival, nor a festival, nor a street party; it is simply just an opening of doors. An extending of households. From the call to the wrap, everything becomes everyone's. Too much liquid intake doesn't lead to a panic back to the comfort of your own lavatory: this is the Safest Place In The Nation, relieve yourself within the nearest possible facility! *Mi casa es su casa!* It is not even a case of trust – trust is only necessary when it runs alongside doubt. And those who have doubt in Arch Parkway are simply yet to nestle their feet. Anyone who has lived in the town for more than a year or so doesn't think twice before walking into their neighbour's living room or deferring payment on a pint of milk from Wiley's Convenience Store. Becoming an Archie is as straightforward as shaking off the distrust and pessimism that the rest of the world wraps you in. Arch Parkway is the Olympus of safe havens, which is why town fetes here are the envy of the world. Decades have since passed undisturbed

since the town governors decided that enforcing safety measures in such events was nothing but a severe waste of town resources. No safety means no danger, no crimes, no disturbances. If there is still any doubt about the serenity of Arch Parkway then hear this: as the Archies swayed and conga'd the night away, whenever they felt a little peckish they could two-foot their way over to the buffet and finger pick themselves some vol-au-vents. And atop what was that buffet set out? Nothing other than that which was once the front desk of the Arch Parkway Penitentiary, built one hundred and thirty years ago by the commoners whom first sewed the turf of the town, and closed permanently one hundred and eleven years later by the established elite that had long since displaced them. Yes, the pride in the town is of the utmost. But that pride doesn't haze reality in the Safest Place In The Nation. No one here has grown ignorant to the fact that the town stands on the foundations of a rich past and of the great people who built it. Archies still give mind to the people who put them here, those who broke their backs to make this valley a home, those who risked their livelihoods to better that of others after them. Their descendants and ancestors built this town into a town, and gave the Archies the chance to turn it into the Safest Place In The Nation. And it is with celebrations such as the one currently carpeting across the town, and with each subsequent rendition of *The Echo*, that this mindful appreciation is at its most clear.

The Echo, a tradition that is tried and tested every time an Archie has the slightest of positive news to celebrate, is a ballad that is sung in harmony by everyone in the town. Nobody leads, there are no falsettos nor baritones. Everyone sings with the idiosyncrasies they speak with. Nobody strains to be loudest, nobody mouths out air at the fear of being mocked for their voice – The Echo is a vocal togetherness, a community of communication. If you were to stand inside a house, though you would be the only one doing so, while The Echo was happening out on the street, then all it would take is the closing of your eyes to give the impression that your house was ascending and was about to break through the still waters of heaven. Do not get me wrong, that is not because The Echo is anything to rave about chorally. But it is something that no well-versed choir can be: it is an amalgamation of living and remembering. Those who partake in The Echo are not singing to escape, nor singing to impress. They are singing to amplify whispers of fleeting success. Not every day gifts us a reason to celebrate, so why should such be dampened by exactly that – the everyday? The Echo is sung because it makes permanent the memory and joy that comes with success. And despite the richness of its ancestry, Arch Parkway has never seen a shift of success quite as seismic as that of their newly garnered title. Which is why, when this rendition of The Echo began, the clouds parted and Arch Parkway took over the sky.

There is no better time to see the faces of Arch Parkway than during The Echo. Every Archie stands in the centre of the road in such a multitude that from above the tops of their heads must look like a peculiar new road surfacing. The clock tower chimes for six in the evening and there is a momentary silence, only long enough for those with the healthiest lungs to drain the air, before the first verse begins:

*Oh, the graves of mountains fallen,  
Give the grace of valleys deep.  
Oh, the long-passed years of heartache,  
Offer us unbroken sleep.  
When we rest and fear no morrow,  
When we wake and fear no dreams,  
When we work and count the hours,  
It's those no more from whom we reap.*

Of course, it would be impossible – and borderline immoral – to partake in the vocalising of such a verse without doing so with the gratitude and graciousness for which the lyrics beg. So the calling of The Echo is met by the closing of eyes and the gripping of fists. Anyone unable to hear the

song would sure enough gather its heart from the attentiveness and physical devotion of all those who sing it. As the Archies pass The Echo off to the heavens, the whole town becomes one. There materialises something very shared and universal: a vulnerability which, when present in so many individuals at once, appears as such a strength. To look down upon the Archies as they bask in the catharsis of The Echo would be akin to witnessing a millions births. They are given new life in those moments, because they are given the platform to accept the beauty of their own. Not one person stands out as different, because they have each been stripped down to their bare humanity, and in that state they are each a replica of one another. There are no Mothers, no Fathers, no friends and no enemies. There are simply those whom are appreciative of what they have and what came before them. Try to pick out one person during The Echo and you'll come away either empty handed, or you'll leave no one behind. That is not to say The Echo is sung as though coming from one voice. Audibly, it pays dividends to the differences that thread the bow of connection. Before long, it becomes very striking that the voices that project The Echo are actually the most diverse part of the event. If you listen closely you can hear the weathered tone of the older generation and the piercing vocals of the pre-pubescent. You can differentiate the voice of someone who has lived a life of pain from one who has never had to raise their voice. You can hear the difference between a believer and a non-believer, a smoker and a non-smoker, someone loved and someone lonely. So many stories come from the same words, from the same face. So maybe you would be able to pick someone out during the Echo; you'd just have to close your eyes first.

---

Is the Echo draining these faces of beauty, or has there always been such a lack? I do not mean the sort of beauty that triggers careers and lines supermarket aisles. I mean the sort of beauty that is shaped by difference. With no comparison point, there is no concept of beauty. Just as without dark there is no concept of light; without hatred no love; without pain no peace. But when given a counterpart, a point for comparison, everything becomes a thing of beauty based solely on the fact that it stands apart. Those faces; the closed eyes, the shiny foreheads, the convulsing lips. That's not beauty. Beauty doesn't travel that far. There's a reason lust and love are so disparate: beauty lasts but a glance. A town full of the same person isn't beautiful. It's got the zest of water. How can there be anything but static when everything is the same? How can things move? How can things change? This is not beauty. This is..

The Safest Place In The Nation.

---

The day after the town fete, when the bunting and banners had been carefully dethroned in assumable preparation for their inevitable residence in the town's heritage museum, Arch Parkway found itself in the face of unprecedented change. And not the sort of change that one may assume follows a holistic gathering of celebration and joy; but the type of sudden, abrupt change that can only happen by force. A force here carried by a miniscule dot sighted on the upper slant of the town's North-facing valley wall, next to a leaning birch tree which, forty years prior, had been named as the now-iconic *Sloping Sin*, for reasons unknown to everyone who had ever been asked. The Mayor was first to sight the dot, as he flattened his deck chair on the roof of what was once the town's courthouse, still basking in the glory of the last few days. At first he assumed it a mere trick of the eye, an optic floater in his sun-baked vision. But then it moved. And it moved in a way that could only be later described by the Mayor as "*indescribably human*". There were about two hundred vertical feet and four hundred horizontal feet between the courthouse and the *Sloping Sin*, so there was no doubt in the Mayor's mind that for something to appear "*indescribably human*" from such a distance, it must certainly be exactly that. Human.

The Mayor ordered the whole town out of their houses and into the middle of the street that runs in front of the courthouse. He did so without declaring a reason; so, naturally, assumptions were

made unanimously that there had been another cause for jubilation and The Echo was again about to be beckoned. But the opposite was to be true. The Mayor, now carrying a weathered megaphone by his side, raised a finger to his lips, silencing the entire town in vein of a deity. The Archies watched him, their eyes squinting in the blistering sunlight. His finger, still raised, moved from his lips – upwards, North-wards, his finger tip pointing straight towards the Sloping Sin. One by one, eyes followed suit. Focus pushed outwards, squints tightened; and ever so gradually, the whole town gasped. They all saw it now – the dot, still sitting unfamiliarly beside the *Sloping Sin*.

The biggest difference between this town-wide gathering and that of The Echo was simple. Here, everyone's eyes stayed open, staring unbreakably up towards the *Sloping Sin*. Hands were again clenched shut, but this time for a much different reason. The sun shone down on the reddening faces of the Archies as the Mayor cleaned off the lip valve of his megaphone and lifted it up to his mouth, taking with it the silence of the whole valley. Never have the Archies appreciated their Mayor more than right now, for he was the only one who seemed to know what to do. Or, at least, the confidence to pretend he did. Old habits die hard – new habits are born much harder.

Writing himself into Arch Parkway folklore, the Mayor spoke.

*"I am sure you can see us infinitely clearer than we can see you, so our numbers must be clear as day. We do not want any problems, nor anything else which may have any negative detriment upon anyone involved. So, please, turn away and leave. This is the Safest Place In The Nation and we will stop at nothing to keep it that way".*

There followed a moment of tranquillity, during which the Archies shared silent yet equal approval about the Mayor's choice of words, thankful that something had been said. Each looked around and met as many eyes as possible – eyes now framed by the red vignette of the sun's rays. Staring upwards on such a sun-drenched day was certainly taking its toll. As the Archies exchanged glances, not one will have done so with a face that hadn't been noticeably sun kissed. The only thing wider than the reach of the sun is the hand of God, but right now the sun need not reach so wide. It suddenly became very obvious that The Echo wasn't the only instrument that could demonstrate the sameness of Arch Parkway. The sun did not need to reach far because to touch one face in Arch Parkway is to touch them all.

The dot moves. All else stands still; including, it seems, the hands of the East Parkway clock tower. The dot disappears behind the *Sloping Sin* for a moment and the town holds its breath. In a place surrounded by panoramic valley walls and lines of sight enough to cover every cranny, most Archies had until now had little reason to exercise the fact that something requires twice as much attention when it moves out of view. There is here a lull; a lingering beat; a dragging moment of held inhalations where hands rise to wipe sweaty foreheads and give eyes a shadowed veil to see through. Until the *Sloping Sin* shakes. And then bends. And then, as though lassoed by the collective exhalation of the town, topples forward. The true grandeur of the valley was here revealed to the Archies, who had never measured its scale, as the *Sloping Sin*, which until now had been assumed to be of some size itself, began sliding down its wall as unscathingly as a fly on a horse's back. A thin trail where the trunk slit through the grass was its descents only mark, and following along that trail, caught in its slip stream, was the dot. Although, as it fell further and further, the dot became more and more discernible. As the *Sloping Sin*, until now hopefully assumed by all to be colossal, had descended the valley and been revealed as a mere tree – and alongside it, the dot had been revealed as a woman. She rolled down the side of the valley without the vaguest shred of control, and disappeared behind the library building. Silence again struck the town, much more noticeably than the chimes of the clock tower every had. But this silence was different. This one was defined by fear. The sun-stained faces held on the library as though sandwiched between fight and flight. The Mayor lowered his megaphone and, no longer obscured by the device, his face again fell victim the monotony of the Archies. They stared towards the library with a single set of eyes.

Time near passed its expiration date before the Archies took it upon themselves to do something. They would have stood there all day. Because in the Safest Place In The Nation, when the Mayor puts down his megaphone, the brain of the town falls with it. Where strength would expectedly be found in such numbers as those lining the streets, here stood indiscernible weakness.

A tepidness. The Archies can always count on being found in numbers; but as with any, when you divide that number by the sum of its parts, you only ever get one. So, there they stood, together and apart. Waiting on a reason to move. Or waiting on a reason for anyone else to move. Maybe beggars can't be choosers, but beggars who wait long enough certainly can.

Their choice was made for them. From behind the library appeared the woman. Long strands of her blonde hair gripped to her glistening face. Her clothes, as though put on drunk and in the dark, were dishevelled and torn. Her arms were tightly crossed around her chest. She looked out towards the Archies from a distance and met someone's eyes, and in doing so was at once made acquainted with the entire town. She opened her mouth; either involuntarily, or in attempt to speak. Her protruding tongue was brown with dirt and blood trickled down from her hairline, forcing her right eye shut. She was hurt, but it was unclear as to whether she was in pain. She was "*indescribably human*", and with this comes with the tendency to forget pain when in the face of something greater. Often grief, often heartache, often euphoria – but in this case, a gaze. As most do when unsure of what other options they have, she moved. She walked slowly, her left foot dragging behind offering nothing but a dead weight. Her right arm was only good for holding her left up so that it didn't swing at her side as she moved. In making it a few feet forward, she stopped. Panning her eyes across the street she got her first real look at the Safest Place In The Nation. There it was, the fact, plastered on the face of the town's new welcome sign: *Arch Parkway: The Safest Place In The Nation – Everything About Us Is First Rate, Other Than Our Crime!* Surely that makes it objective? Surely she was safe, in the Safest Place In The Nation? Surely...

Safety is interior. Safety is the stability of that which isn't meant to move from where it is; inside. Safety is decided by those who are kept safe. Safety is simply distance from that which is considered unsafe.

The woman felt she couldn't move any further, and not just at the fault of her failing feet. How can you move further when the only step in front of you is one across such a distance? The Archies stood, their eyes locked as if pre-programmed. From where she had stopped, the town folk seemed on the far side of a gaping canyon, watching her balance along a thin wire that they held in their own hands. Make a noise and they would all hear it. Make a move and they would all see. None of them are lacking because they all share exactly what they have. The expanding of households. The Archies pride themselves in the security of their community, in the protection of that which they at once both are, and are surrounded by. They thrived in the face of familiarity. That was, until now. Until the *Sloping Sin* fell into the town, bringing the unfamiliar in its path. As she stood in the shadow of the town's new welcome sign, the woman had a moment to think, a moment to realise – that this was the Safest Place In The Nation, and that she had never been further from safe. She was the moon, she was the space-time continuum, she was the villain of every 1600 Russian novel. She was everything the Archies knew nothing about, everything outside of their finely tuned curriculum and age-old tales of heritage and antiquity. And she was unsafe. Staring out at the sea of red, pale faces with a look of beseechment and receiving nothing back but the distinct feeling of being apart, this fact felt undeniable. In the clear, still waters of Arch Parkway her reflection was nothing but the sky. The antithesis of reflection. These buildings weren't built for her, these shadows were never meant to be cast across her. She glanced one last time across the face of the town. How else could she project her pleas when her eyes seem opaque and her mouth seems stapled shut? She mets eyes, after eyes, after eyes, never seeing anything beyond their colour. The sun, though most of its damage looks weary and draining, does do justice to one part of the face: the colour of the eyes. And in the high noon beams the pupils of the Archie's eyes had been drowned by such colour, as though the pupil was the nucleus of the Archie's very being and with it was lost any semblance of individuality. The woman saw nothing in those eyes but the territorial stare of bodies stood at the edge of their own kingdom. She looked down at her hands, and then across at those of the Archies. Their hands were different. All of them. She felt such a deprivation of belonging that she yearned to again be toppling down the side of the valley, only this time towards a place where the pain would be more direct, where in hitting the ground she would go through it. She felt she would belong more at the core of the earth than here in the Safest Place In The Nation.

Not a single word had been spoken since she got into the town, but enough had been said. The woman turned around with every intention to run but her body had but half its strength and her mind even less than that. Though she turned none the less and did her best to move away. Slowly but surely. Back past the library and to the hill of the Northern-facing valley, where lay the carcass of the *Sloping Sin*. She grabbed the grass at the valley's foot and looked up towards where she wanted to be. She could see the green of the peak and the blue of the sky, and right then she cared little about in which of those two places she ended up, as long as it was one of them. She started to climb, making it but ten feet before fighting the urge to look back. Back towards the road where the Archies stood. But she fought it well, and she didn't look back. She carried on climbing as quickly and painlessly as she could.

*Oh, the graves of mountains fallen,  
Give the grace of valleys deep.*

She stopped. A single voice echoed past her and climbed the valley at a speed she envied. It disappeared into the distance.

*Oh, the long-passed years of heartache,  
Offer us unbroken sleep.*

She looked back. Even from the mere height she had climbed she could see the road clearly, and only now did she realise quite how many Archies were stood there. At the front stood the Mayor, again distinguishable by his megaphone, through which he called The Echo at the top of his voice. By the time he got to the fifth line, the entirety of the gathering had joined him. Their voices shot towards the woman; not as an army of bullets, but as a singular spear. Their voices rooted her where she stood.

*When we rest and fear no morrow,  
When we wake and fear no dreams,  
When we work and count the hours,  
It's those no more from whom we reap.*

Instinct kicked in. She began to climb. Her arms and legs clambered tirelessly, making the most of her mind's complete numbing of pain. She didn't again look back towards the Archies, because she didn't need to. When they came to the end of the Echo they immediately restarted it. And with every passing line she could feel them getting closer. Their voice getting louder, the feeling of their eyes in the back of her head growing ever more piercing. On reaching out for a mound of grass ahead of her, the surface moved and she fell flat, her face hitting the ground. Against her will her body relaxed, and was washed over by the overwhelming tiredness and searing pain that it had somehow been masking. She closed her eyes, and let all her senses succumb to sound. She listened. To nothing but her own heavy breathing, which she inhaled and held. With the smell of grass and turf she was met by a sudden calm. She listened to The Echo, not as herself, but as someone far away. Someone listening to the distant voices as they were carried by in the whisper of the wind. Someone without this pain and this fatigue. Without the fear, without the knowledge that she was lay flat out and lost. And there, The Echo spoke to her. She listened to every word, every syllable, she pinpointed every singular voice and every story that they told. She gave The Echo the thought it deserved – and saw it for what it was. A congratulatory war chant, which gave licence to the Safest Place In The Nation to *stop at nothing* to keep themselves safe. They thanked their history for getting them to where they are and for laying the path to their flourishing future. Why would the Safest Place In The Nation want to change anything? Why would the Archies want to distance themselves from each other, when that would be akin to tearing themselves apart? Why would they let a dot topple their precious *Sloping Sin* and then leave without getting caught in the safety net of the Safest Place In The

Nation? She listened as someone other than herself, and then realised that that someone was one of them.

She exhaled and tried to continue her ascent, fighting away from the voices, but they moved much faster than her. They got louder and louder as the postal stamp sky above her remained the same size. She accepted. She couldn't move any further. Her body had grown tired of even its own numbing.

Still standing, she again closed her eyes. She raised her arms outwards as though sizing up a crucifix. Her chin lifted. The voices became more than sound. They became warm air on the back of her legs. Their words echoed around her head. Morphed around her body. Losing all sense of herself and the world from which she came, she joined in.

*When we rest and fear no morrow,  
When we wake and fear no dreams.*

She dug her heels into the ground and pointed her toes. She retired her knees and gave up the weight of her body. She fell backwards. And before she could feel the rush of falling she felt hands on her back, and on her arms, and on her head. She felt her weight adopted by a surface area bigger than her own. She felt herself being lifted. She felt herself being carried. She felt herself being passed along, as though the surface below was moving and she was staying still. Her pain had gone, numbness turned to nothingness. When she lost hope, she had lost care, she had lost control. She opened her eyes. Above her, standing tall before the blue sky, was the town's new welcome sign. It filled her hazy vision, its lettering unreadable. That sign meant nothing from where she lay, upside down, her vision flipped. She wasn't in the position for it to make sense. As she never had been. And, just as her focus moved to the blue beyond it; she dropped. The sky was reddened by blood-drained palms and in a split second they were on her. Hands grasping clothes. Skin grabbing skin. The Archies did what they had to do. They had no choice. After all, this is the Safest Place In The Nation.

*When we work and count the hours,  
It's those no more from whom we reap.*

-----