

A RELATIVE BOUNTY

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“What’s a biro?”

I stopped wiping the bar and stared at the new bartender for a couple of blinks.

“Sorry?”

“The guy over there wants a biro. Is that a drink?”

“No,” I said. “It’s a pen.”

“A biro is a pen?”

“Yeah.”

“He also wants me to put this in the bin.” He held up a stack of mail. “What’s a bin?”

“A bin is the garbage. He wants you to throw it out.”

“That’s it? I thought he had a file someplace.”

“What, Like this is his office?”

“Well, it could be. A lot of them get their mail here. Look at these guys.”

I turned to look over into the lounge. Some got their mail sent here thinking it would outsmart immigration. Each table had a lone man whose face was lit by the glow of a phone. A full pint of Guinness off to the side. Not a sound coming out of any of them.

“You’re going to have to start getting used to Irish expressions. This is an Irish bar like. When Pat said you were his nephew, I thought you’d have a little more cop-on.”

“I am his nephew but I’ve never even been to Ireland.”

“Well, you’re going to have to channel your genetics through your brain and start thinking in Irish.”

He dumped the letters in the can and headed back up the bar.

“What’s the story with Biro Boy?”

I turned to see Bruce. I didn’t hear him sit down.

“He’s the boss’s nephew,” I said, “Just got the start today. It’s not looking good.”

“He’s not too wrong about it being like an office in here with all these ‘Aye Paddies’ on

their phones. “Aye Paddy, I’ll wait for you.”

Each of these guys has a girl at home. They want to think this is a temporary lay-by till they make some money and then can return and start their life with a few Bob in their pocket. Come back 10 years from now and they’ll still be here but without the phone. Is a dream a lie if it don’t come true or is it something worse.”

He was called Bruce because he was always dropping Springsteen quotes into every conversation. He was the closest to an intellectual this bar had. His real name was Anthony McKeon but I bet no one else knew that and he’d bet I didn’t. I only know ‘cause I got a glance at his paycheck once. He calls me ‘The Big Man’. Of course he does. I supplied his drinks.

I poured him a pint of Bud and took the price out of his money on the bar.

“The lads are going to think he’s an agent,” he said. “Boss or no boss.”

“Balls,” I said. “They couldn’t confuse this bollox for an agent. He’s an eejit.”

“Eejits make the best agents. The lads don’t like anything new or strange. Makes them suspicious. “The black and whites they cruise by and they watch us from the corner of their eye.”

He took a long sip of his pint. “They’re still not too sure about you.”

I wasn’t offended. I knew what he meant. Even though I’ve worked here for 10 years I still felt a barrier. My accent was a mishmash of Bronx and Irish. No matter how I sounded. I was born here and that was that.

“I see you’re planning another trip.” He nodded toward a stack of papers in the corner behind the bar. “Will you ever get any sense.”

I’ve made over 30 trips to Ireland. Every year I’d vanish for 3 weeks or a month. I rent a car and just meander all over. I’d visit my

aunt and uncles and hang out with cousins. This was a bone that Bruce and I chewed over every year. I loved Ireland and I loved to immerse myself in every aspect. I was proud of being Irish. I was also proud of my family. I’d heard all the legends about backstabbing and betrayals. We were still close and different from other families.

From what I know of Bruce, he came to this country from Ireland 20 years ago and never went back. He washed his hands of the place. He was American. If you listened to him long enough you would think he hated the place.

“You mean you’re not going over? This is the year of The Gathering.” I said with false surprise. It was the latest gimmick that the Irish Tourist Board had hatched up. Ads were in the Irish American papers and the liquor salesman had banners in all the bars.

“Huh”, he grunted. “I’ll not be gathered.”

“Tell us this, Big Man” he said after another sip. “Is the Irish government paying people to come to this ‘gathering?’”

Here we go. I knew where we were heading.

“No, they’re not.”

“Have you ever got a discount?”

“No.”

“And you go over every year! You’re almost an ambassador. Have you ever got on an Aer Lingus flight that wasn’t booked solid?”

“No.”

“It’s all take and no give. That’s Ireland. The hand is always out”

I realised then that this wasn’t his first stop. He seemed a little more bleary eyed than usual. He never seemed drunk. Occasionally a mood would come over him. I’d seen it before. One night a woman came in I’d never seen before. She was with a few friends and on her way back from the ladies room she spotted Bruce.

“Tony!” she shouted.

He looked up and for once, I noticed he was happy to see someone. Since I knew next to nothing about him, I moved closer to listen. They were having a great little chat about who was married and who died and who was

left when she called over to her friends and shouted "Look who I found. Tony McKeoney." She rhymed it with macaroni.

Just then I saw the smile leave his face. A hard look came into his eyes. He finished his drink, left his tip and walked out leaving her standing there. He stayed away for a week or so. I never mentioned it. A good bartender keeps his mouth shut.

A young fella came in and ordered a pint and sat down by himself. He pulled out his phone.

"Another 'Aye-Paddy'" said Bruce. "He's so happy when he sees he has an email. Watch his face when he finishes reading it. Reminds me of a buck goat at home I called Clarence. I'd leave in the morning peeling a banana. I'd give him the peels. He'd start climbing the fence with joy when he'd see me. One morning I dropped the banana and stepped on it. I gave him the whole thing. The look of joy on his face! I stayed to watch him eat it. When he was done he looked kind of shook. It was like he realized he'd been deceived all this time. After that, he never seemed to have any use for bananas. Yer man there has that same look."

There was a sad look about him alright. Like the big lie was exposed.

"He looks like a man set to be gathered," laughed Bruce. "God have mercy on the man who doubts what he's sure of."

"Haven't you ever felt like going back home? I said. "Even just to look around?" I was fishing now. I gave him a buyback.

"I did go home once. When my Da died. I was only over here for three years then. I used to send money home to him every month. I'd call too. All the time. I knew he was sick. He wasn't one to talk much. I never mentioned the money. Never asked if he got it or what he did with it. It was a comfort to me knowing it he could have a pint now and then or buy a bullock...Anyway, he died. I went over for the funeral and did the flash Yank. Rented a car and drove to Leitrim from Shannon. I didn't recognise anything. The house was all scaffolding, blocks and sand. My brother came out to the yard to meet me and we went back

into the kitchen. In the short while that I was there, I surmised that my brother had been using the money I sent over to rebuild the house. Not only that but he gave the impression that there was no need for me to stop sending it! What put the tin hat on it was that he told me that he had made a reservation for me at a B+B in town. Not that he had paid for it, mind you, It wasn't enough that he had used my money to redo the house but that I couldn't stay there. I turned on my heel and walked out. I drove back to Shannon. Never even went to the funeral. That's the last taste I had of Ireland. The hands are always out. All take and no give. And now they are living off the bones of the dead to entertain Yanks like you".

This was the most I'd heard him speak about himself since I'd met him. It answered a lot of questions. Whenever anyone asked him where he was from he always said: "Ballypizzle in Breifne". None of the Americans understood that there was no such county as Breifne, never mind what a pizzle was. Now I knew he was from Leitrim. The same place my people were from. A smug Dublin girl once told me, "Did you know that Leitrim is the poorest county in Ireland. Something like Appalachia here in the States." I told her wherever she was from could not be that much better or she wouldn't be here. It got a laugh out of Bruce. Now I know why.

Bruce shook himself out of it and I think he realized how bitter he sounded. He changed the subject. "How does this 'Gathering' thing work?"

I reached over and picked up the folder and laid it out on the bar. There were brochures and lists of plane fares.

"They are making a big show of welcoming people over for family reunions." I said. "People who have always wanted to go and research their history can meet long lost cousins and trace their geneology."

"Is your family having a reunion?"

"Yeah. On my Mother's side."

"There's a fiddle in this somewhere."

"No there isn't. How could there be?"

One of the 'Aye Paddies' moved up to the

bar and ordered a pint.

"How's it going?" said Bruce.

"Not so bad." said the man.

"Know anything about this gathering thing?" he asked, nodding toward my papers.

"I do. My cousin will be coming over because of it."

"He's coming over here? Sure he's heading the wrong way. Aren't they gathering in Ireland?"

"They are. He's coming over on the bounty money."

"What's that?"

"It's on the website."

"What website?"

"www.thegatheringireland.com—On the homepage, it tells how to get local funding for your event. If you get 10 to come to your reunion you get 500 euros, 20 gets you 1000. If you can get 50, you get 2500 euros. He only got 20, so he got 1000. All he did was put out a couple of emails and set up a website and all the Yanks did the rest." He started to laugh. "They were coming from all over the world. My brother owns the hotel in town and they were rolling in money. They got a cut of everything they ate. Everything they drank. Some cousins put a band together and got paid for that. It was hard to get rid of them when it was over though. They wanted to trace their roots and all that shite. It's a pity we didn't have any genealogists in the family. We could have spun some stories and charged them for that too."

He grabbed his pint and went back to his table. I took out my phone and looked up the website. It was all true. I could feel Bruce looking at me. He finished the last of his pint and stood up.

"I'm off. Good luck...Clarence," he said.

Was I that wrong? Was I just another tourist? Were the familial smiles out of affection or were they all in on the cod? I can see my cousins laughing at me over their pints. Pints that I bought. Maybe we weren't special. Legends exist for a reason.

I picked up the folder and dropped it in the garbage.