

Fillin' Holes and Floggin' Fenians

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I pull the stool over so I can sit closer to the fireplace and push me feet nearer the heat. The right foot is still cold and wet. I look down at me boots. When I bought them a year ago they were a bit small. I thought they'd stretch. They were a good deal as it was and I forgot me doubts within hours of wearin' them. But over the hours, days, weeks, and months me big toe wore out the leather on the right one. The hole lets in water everytime it rains. I tried sellotapin' it on the inside but that didn't work. I take the boot off to let me sock dry.

- That's some stink Tony! someone says.

I turn. It's Janice. She's just in, hair plastered down, her coat heavy and wet. She says she hasn't seen me in ages. I've been around, I says. She asks me if I'll stay for another. Thanks, I says, I will. She goes to the bar, orders, returns and asks me if I want a toasted sandwich as she's havin' one. Thanks, I says, I will. There's somethin' else in the look she gives me, concern maybe. She orders the toasties, then recognises someone she knows and goes to talk to him at the other end of the bar. As I wait for me pint and toastie

I wonder why Janice looked at me the way she did. She's no better off than me. We're both goin' grey, in our late-thirties, and strapped for cash. Then me thoughts turn to money and the lack of it. I have enough food in the flat alright. Tuesday is doleday, and Thursday rent allowance day. I've thirty two pound fifty in me pocket from the mornin's take, which isn't bad. But then it rained the whole evenin'. Once it started rainin' half the people, tourists or otherwise, disappeared off the streets and the one's that passed didn't so much as glance at me display of prints. A wasted evenin', that's what it was, eventually I packed up, ran for shelter and ended up here.

I have to give the landlord his rent this week so I can't blow me take . . . shite. What a life. It's late Saturday evenin', I wonder will the night go to waste as well. How can I enjoy anythin' when -

- They executed all the rebel leaders, says a voice from the next table - Shot them. One after another.

An American accent.

- One of them, he says - I forget his name, was so badly wounded they had to carry him out, sit him on a chair and then shoot him . . .

I turn and glance. A young fella, cropped hair, student type.

- And, according to the guide, that atrocity was what got the people behind the 1916 rebels.

I turn again. Four of them. Himself, a girl, and two older people. Wealthy lookin', and about a dozen empty glasses on their table. I tell meself lady luck is knockin' and I pull me boot back on. I open me folder where I keep the prints. I select a few and lay them on the table. I pick one showin' a portrait of a man, turn to their table, hold it up in me right hand, and point to it with me left.

- The war of independence followed, continued the young fella - It's amazing that the most powerful empire the world had -

He stops dead and stares at me, then at me print. I have his full attention.

- James Connelly, I says - Foundin' leader of the Irish Labour movement, hero of the 1916 risin'.

- That's the guy I was talking about! the young fella says. The others turn and stare first at me and then at the portrait. I've got them. Without delay I pick a second print, another portrait, and place it over the first.

- Padraig Pearse, I says - Leader of the risin', a poet, a teacher . . .

I pick a third, a poster. I place it over the others and continue.

- And author of this proclamation. He read it out loud outside the G.P.O on the mornin' of Good Friday 1916 and it was posted up around the city.

- This is interesting, the oul' fella says. His accent is like the young fellas.



I pick up a forth showin' the G.P.O in bits, and place it over the other three.

- The G.P.O. After the risin'.
- How did any of those guys get out of that alive ? the girl asks.
- And we were in there today, the oul' one says, it looks very well now.
- But did you see the bullet holes ? I ask and glance at each of them in turn. They stare at me shakin' their heads seriously. I can smell their money now and see pints for meself and Janice.
- If you look carefully, I says - around the pillars you'll see the bullet holes, some have been filled but most are still there. Servin' as a reminder of them heroic times.
- Do you have any more of those ? The oul' one says pointin' at the prints.
- I do, and each is goin' for -

And what exactly do you do yourself ? asks the oul' fella, cuttin' in just as I'm settin' me price.

- I'm an archivist, I says - I collect and restore stuff from that period of our history. I have a professional interest in it.
- Very good, he replies.
- This one's interesting, the young fella says holdin' up the proclamation - the original must have been printed on letterpress, look at the typeface used on the heading, so idiosyncratic and quaint.
- That's the graphic design student in you talking, the girl says.
- It's yours for a tenner, I says to the young fella. The know-all. He glances at me, then looks back at the proclamation mumbling to himself about late 19th century slab-serifs and shite like that.

Then Janice returns, she lays the pints and toasted sandwiches on the table and the smell of them brings on me hunger. Janice pulls up a stool to join us and I wonder what she'll think if I make a few sales. I take out some more prints from the folder and display one showin' a gang of black and tans roundin' up some passers-by on a street. Then one showin' a photo of a group of armed volunteers. In the background are mountains, not a summer chalet in sight.

- Do you hold the originals ? the oul' fella asks me quizzically.
- Yeh, I says. - Not here of course.

He doesn't reply.

- These sure don't look like copies of originals to me, says the know-all. The smart-arse.

I ask him is he callin' me a fake.

- No. I'm saying these are copied from a printed source. I can see a coarse dot screen on this one, he says, holdin' up the one of the black and tans. Then he drops that print and picks up the proclamation again. He says he'll give me two pounds for it. It had cost me three to get it enlarged from the postcard and copied.
- No way, I tell him, irritated at his stingy offer. - These prints are part of our culture. You can't get them anywhere else. I'll let you have it for eight. He shakes his head, the woman and girl stare into space, the older man doesn't reply.
- Okay, the know-all says - I'll give you three pounds for it.

This is tempting but I don't take it. I deserve some profit for work done. But the smile has left me face and the disappointments of the day are leakin' out. Yet still I try.

- Listen. These prints are taken from valuable original documents, I'll give it to you for five.
- Prints! says the know-all still holdin' the proclamation - These are just bad colour photocopies. He laughs, the others laugh too.
- What kind of assholes do you think we are man ? he says dropping the print onto the table - Crummy copies of bad copies of copies . . . The girl pulls at his arm to quieten him, no one is laughin' now. If Janice wasn't here I'd put me boot in it for him. But I know her and she'd hate me if I did. I gather me stuff and put it back into the folder without sayin' a word.
- I'm sorry, the oul' fella says to me as the others start puttin' on their coats to leave - Don't mind him, it's the drink talking, right. Then he offers me eight pounds for the proclamation but I just turn away.
- Thanks, I says bitin' into the toasted sandwich and pretendin' nothin' happened. I don't want to look at Janice so I stare into the fire. We sit in silence as I finish the toastie and sup me pint. I'm thinkin' that I'll be worn out if things go on like this.
- You can't win them all Tony, Janice says.

Then I remember the mornin's take and I think to hell with them; tourist arseholes, landlord, holes in the pillars of the G.P.O, me boot, pocket, whatever. I'll make somethin' of this night.

- Not to worry, I says to Janice, - You'll have another ? I glance at her then, and she smiles.
- Thanks, she says, I will.