

Inkslingers Blended Session

23rd March 2024

The Prompt from The Bag Was:

“In Politics, Stupidity is not a Handicap ”

Napoleon Bonaparte

And the Visual



*Are Male and Female Brains
Different?*

A Poem for Me

Hannah Stern

This poem goes out to little old me,
Not myself that still smiles, not myself that you see.
The me that can't smile, who feels old and lost,
Who chose to live here, maybe not counting the cost.
I learned how to make chip butties and brac,
I learned it's not drugs when they ask "what's the craic?"
And my boys will learn Irish and shout "up the Dubs!"
But I'm left with the feeling that it's never enough.
Neighbours come for tea, cuz that's just what you do,
When lifelong friends block you and shout "bloodthirsty Jew."
"October 7th, you say? Well that wasn't sufficient,
We'll call you a cancer and say you're malignant.
The scalpels will come and they'll cut you away,
And we'll all learn to dance on that bright joyous day."
So oh what a joy to be one of the chosen,
To have half your soul burn, and half of it frozen.
The fiery rage at injustice around me,
The icy stone hurt to know few mourn my family.
Because they play it and gamble like the world's a sports match,
Like the fires they light cannot possibly catch.
Like there weren't lives lost on both sides of the line,
Like empathy is something that grows thinner with time.
As I stand here and watch my little boys sleep,
All the stories I heard in my childhood creep
Under the door frame and into my head:
Can I watch them grow old?
Are we already dead?
Will my Irish neighbours continue to see
A human, a person, just little old me?
Or am I the monster under their beds,
Stealing money and morals, baking blood into bread?
Like vintage dresses and styles updated for new,
How long til my Irish friends just see a Jew?
How long am I safe? 'Til the government turns?

'Til I get to watch everything that I built burn?
Now I'm frayed at the seams and I'm worn in the middle,

There's a man on my rooftop, stringing his fiddle.
You say that this year is sponsored by King?
But if he wrote this, then look, here's the thing:
It would take 5 teen kids to fix all of this mess,
Or one righteous man and he'd handle the rest.
But I don't much believe in heroes these days,
in battling dragons and saving the day
So I pick up myself and I wrap her around me,
I've kids' parties to plan, and to cook for my family.
Meatballs for Max, and for Aedan, fish fingers,
And I pretend not to hear the sound as it lingers
Of the fiddler now playing his strings nice and tight
Of my heartbeat pounding louder at night.
Of the chants in the streets, because none of it's new,
And I grip my boys tightly, what else can I do?
The noose grows tighter on my neck these days,
The hope and the fear never going away.
So I carefully put a smile back on my face,
and I poke it and prod it 'til it's in the right place.
And I tell my little boys that they'll always be free,
Maybe a lie from myself, but never from me.

End of Days

Greg Fields

When the body had been dispatched to the morgue, when the blood on the floor of the store had been swabbed, when the camera tapes had been secured, when the triggerman, the poor clerk reacting to the panic of the moment, had been thoroughly debriefed, when the thousand details of cleaning and closing a crime scene had finally been logged, and when the tedious report of all of this had been drafted, Tom Rojas at last could end this wretched day.

It had started with a promise of routine, the safety of predictable boredom that would bridge his shift to time when he could quit it. It had ended in the confusion of a shooting, the raw voices of neighbors on the sidewalks shouting their disapproval – of the loss of life, of the demise of a young black boy brought down by a single shot fired by an older white man, of the shattered illusion that their piece of this city might be insulated from the meaningless violence wrought by all the things that have gone wrong. They were safe no longer, none of them, and they screamed at the injustice of it.

Rojas closed his desk at the precinct, then walked through the entryway to the lot where his car sat in the darkness of this dark night. He had phoned home earlier, when the call had come in, letting Carla know that he would be late. “No telling when I’ll be done with it.” No. No telling that at all. And when would he ever really be done with it?

When he unlocked the door to their place and walked in, Carla rose from the couch where she had been sleeping. Tom went to her, leaned over and kissed her cheek. “Why aren’t you in bed?”, he whispered.

“I wanted to wait for you. Besides, the bed doesn’t feel right when you’re not in it.”

Tom went to the kitchen for some juice. His throat had been dry all night. When he returned with his glass, Carla motioned for him to sit next to her.

“And I was worried, Tom.”

“Worried. What about?”

“You know what about. I always worry when you’re on a special call. And this was a shooting. Those make me worry more than anything else. Too many guns, and too many people willing to shoot a cop.”

He sipped his juice slowly, then finished his drink with a sigh. “This was nothing risky, Carla. Christ, the guy who pulled the trigger was the one who made the call. No risk. Just a robbery that went wrong, that’s all. I was on clean-up duty.”

Carla leaned into Tom’s shoulder. “Doesn’t matter,” she whispered to him. “You’re out there, and sometimes I think that badge is almost a target. I worry every day.”

He kissed the top of her head. “I promise not to get shot,” he said with a small laugh.

With that, Carla pushed away from him, and in a raised voice said, “Stop it, Tom. You can’t promise that. You can’t promise me that you’ll walk through that door at the end of every day you walk out of it. And I live with that. Every day I ask myself if I’ll go to bed with a husband in the hospital, or worse. If I’ll go to bed a widow because some drugged-up punk wanted to take down a cop, or you wander into the wrong place at the wrong time, or you just get careless. Those are my days, Tom.”

Tom reached for her and pulled her to her. He said nothing as he stroked her hair and felt her breath rise and fall through the first teardrops. Carla, who waited up for him on nights like this. Carla, whom he hurt in ways he couldn’t begin to fathom.

“What can we do, love?”, he said at last. “It’s all I know.”

Carla sniffled into his shoulder, then looked up at his face, lined now with concern, and sorrow, and the overwhelming fatigue of a day so wrong. She kissed his chin, then shook her head and chucked his shoulder. “Oh, you are the damndest man, Tom Rojas,” and she laughed.

“So I am, Carla Rojas. And you’re the most lovely woman I’ve ever known.”

“I’ll live with the worry, Tom. It’s worth it.”

“Further evidence that our brains work in different ways, Miss Carla. Me, the strong, brave, protector of the innocent, and you a jumble of fleeting emotions.”

With that Carla laughed, then pulled her man to his feet. She drew him to the bedroom, pulled the curtains down, and Tom Rojas thought no more of the streets.

Stupidity isn't Always a Handicap

Catriona Murphy

Dr. Murray's eyes were sad inside the patients room of St. Margaret's hospital.

Alarm rose in Madison as she sat in a paper hospital gown on the surgical bed.

Sad doctor eyes was never good.

'We've found,' he hesitated, 'a growth at the back of your left hemisphere in the brain. You're at risk of an aneurysm if we don't operate immediately.'

Madison swallowed and studied the white paint peeling on the back wall.

A car noise outside came and went.

A nurse's heels click clacked past the door.

Her senses zoned in and out as the surgeon explained the diagnosis.

Her father, in his usual dark blue Aramani suit, stood next to her holding her hand.

My brain is going to kill me, she thought.

The irony, of the one thing that helped her live, could potentially end her.

The conundrum had her stuck on it like a computer that couldn't process, for the rest of the afternoon.

They drove past protesters at the gates, picket signs that read 'End the genocide' and

'Shame on our PM' were thrust at the car windows.

Madison closed her eyes to the jeering and shouting, feeling her world upturn, thinking of the new journey yawning open in front of her, ready to swallow her.

Strange, how that path was chosen for her, she was so used to picking her own destiny.

Her plans for college would have to wait.

If she even made it there.

A few weeks later, she sat at the back parlour window, watching the sprinklers go on and off.

When her father came out of his cabinet meeting, he sat quietly next to her, placing a hand on hers.

'Maddie, you've another trial of chemo tomorrow. You should get some rest,' he said.

'Y'know what they're saying?'" She asked, watching one of the house staff clip the hedges.

'Where's Maddie? What did they do to poor Maddie? I should just tell them dad.'

'My advisors say it'll give the media more fuel. Right now, it's best to sit tight and keep watch. It'll be stupid to make a statement right now.'

'Or it might help distract! I've seen the polls dad, your approval is pretty low. Besides, stupidity isn't always a handicap in politics.'

Her dad smiled and kissed her head in that annoying condensing way she always hated.

'Go to bed Maddie.'

Maddie's bedroom walls were plastered with Van Gogh works, including a print of Starry

Night. Art school was something she fought tooth, nail and claw with her father to get into.

Now, it was disappearing into the distance.

She sat on her bed and pulled out her phone.

She realised the human brain wasn't too dissimilar to the universe. Electricity and vibrancy sitting in a pool of nurturing darkness.

After weeks of being hounded by the media, calls from the public to know what had happened to the people's beloved prime minister's daughter, and as much as the notion of recording a video to explain her diagnosis for millions to digest, judge and discuss on various media outlets was daunting, it may at least shut the conversation that had been festering for weeks in the newspapers and talk shows.

'What's happened to Madison Blake?'

Fuck your Madison Blake she thought.

She pulled out her phone and hit record.

Male and female Brains

Miguel A. Rivera, Jr.

As eons roll by, the question remains. Is there a difference between “his n her” brains?

Oh, it’s not just who’s strong, who’s good or bad, who pees sitting down or who wears maxi-pads.

No, much more profound rooted down in the ground, in the deep DNA where the answers abound.

See, we know who weaves blankets and who swings a sword, who floods the malls for things none can afford. Who takes Viagra and buys Harley bikes. We know the Bettys, the Suzy’s, the Bob’s and the Mikes. But what sets us apart from the time we are pups? What causes the fights when the toilet seat’s up?

From the dawn of time, conflict without stopping. Like When Adam was out, and Eve went apple-shopping.

Attracted we are in the night without care, these opposite creatures like magnets with hair.

These contrary minds that must cohabit and change all sorts of habits before it’s too late.

Before the divorce, the lawyers, the failure. Before eating cat-food in the back of a trailer.

Before the rug-rats are caught in the middle, perhaps AI can clear up this riddle.

This puzzle of Male and female brains, perhaps Sigmond Freud can make it more plain.

Oh, those male and female brains.

In Politics stupidity is not a handicap

Mark L'estrange

Stephen and Paddy got out of the jeep and reluctantly walked up the steps to meet the president. He greeted them warmly saying "It's so nice to finally meet you both this case as you can imagine has been fairly high profile because there where members of our police force involved, I can't apologise enough to you and your family for what you have been through." Paddy said. "You have nothing to be sorry for you can't control these individuals."

He invited them into the building and they were treated to a four course meal, and complementary drinks too. The president explained "One of my opposition who is trying to get into office is very corrupt and my sources say he may have been involved with the gang that have caused you so much trouble, would you be able to identify him if I showed you a picture please?" when he showed Stephen the picture he did remember the first time he came into contact with them he was the one who spiked his drink.

Paddy asked "Why did they involve Stephen in the first place?" "Because they were trying to use someone to blame the whole thing on, that wasn't from our country so the attention would be off them, by saying he created the cloning machine and got them to carry out all sorts of crimes for you in your name, but thankfully they failed and I hope most of them are behind bars." "What made the politician who is your opposition think he could get away with this?" "Well like the saying goes in politics stupidity is not a handicap."

They had a great evening and they both thanked the president for a nice time who said. "You are more than welcome anytime now you can go home and not have to worry about all this again." He even gave them three thousand euro each saying. "Go and have a well-earned vacation on me." Stephen couldn't believe it saying as he walked back down the steps to Paddy. "Wow don't know why I was worried about going to see him." "I know holidays here we come."

To be contiuned

The Male And Female Brains Differ

Bernadette O'Reilly

I have heard
Women are from Venus
Men are from Mars
I have heard
Men focus on one particular task
Women multitask
Maybe this is all a myth
Either way
Don't we all get the task
In hand completed
Don't we all help each other
Except maybe in a
Competitive environment
Don't we all have goals
And dreams.

The World will hold its Breath

Gerard Keogh

Chapter 5

II SS-Panzerkorps

In what is described as Germany's last victory on the Eastern Front, Field Marshal Erich von Manstein executed a textbook example of manoeuvre warfare to retake the city of Kharkov from the Soviets in early 1943. Still reeling from the destruction of the Sixth Army at Stalingrad, the Germans were in danger of having their remaining forces in the southern USSR cut off by the advancing Red Army. Von Manstein employed the II SS-Panzerkorps (redesignated as such later in 1943) to devastating effect, as the Leibstandarte, Das Reich, and Totenkopf divisions tore through overstretched Soviet lines and set the table for Operation Citadel – the attack by the Germans on the Soviet salient centred around the Russian city of Kursk, in July, 1943. When it seemed as if German forces would suffer a strategic defeat following the disaster at Stalingrad, the operational skill of Field Marshal von Manstein regained the initiative for the Germans.

The fact that Operation Citadel did not succeed in its aim of encircling the Soviets is not relevant to the continuing premise of equating the campaign on the Eastern Front with Anthony Armstrong's great struggle to overcome the many problems he encountered as a civil servant in the Department of Education. He regarded his time in Youth Affairs as something akin to a four-year prison sentence; of course, he was paid a salary and he was free to go home at the end of the working day, but the damage done to his mental well-being was real and long-lasting. A succession of horrible bosses set the tone for all of those four years. They included the literary one who would smoke cigars in his office, and disappear for hours on end to his "other" office ("If anyone is looking for me, I'll be over in the pub."). At one point, he invented a new form of sick leave. Every day, for about two or three weeks, he would show up, close his office door behind him, and then go home in the evening. All the staff were told not to bother him with work; he was depressed and should be left alone. "Welcome to the club," was the general reaction to that news. The other main response was, "Why the hell shouldn't he

be obliged to take certified sick leave, like anybody else would?" Eventually, he was shunted off to some backwater in the Civil Service, where he could spend the remaining few years before his retirement without doing too much damage. He may very well have written a play or a short story about his career and the role he played in furthering the goals of the education sector. If so, you will find it under "Fiction."

Then there was the one who would attend meetings without wearing any shoes. (Like a scene from a Monty Python Ministry of Silly Walks sketch, he once surprised a group of visitors by plonking a foot on the conference table and asking them, "Do you like my socks?" These extra-thick socks had been knitted by refugees from the war in Bosnia, so you could say he was virtue signalling before anyone had thought of calling it by that name.) This same person who was so virtuous in his dealings with people fleeing the war in the Balkans, treated the staff who were at the bottom of the Civil Service totem pole as if they were his own personal little helpers, whose primary function was to do whatever the hell he told them to do. He would order a messenger to collect a file from his office (A) and bring it to Anthony in another office (B) just a few feet away from his, with instructions for Anthony to bring it back to his office (A) and put it in the relevant filing cabinet. It would have taken him a few seconds to do it, but his time was too valuable to waste on such menial tasks.

This constant drip, drip, drip of humiliation upon insult upon resentment, wore down Anthony's spirit over time, as a river carves a path through solid rock over millions of years. He was finally released from captivity in that forced-labour camp in Hawkins House, but the damage had been done. The end of his nine-year Department of Education nightmare was in sight, although he didn't know that at the time of his latest internal transfer, to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, or NCCA, located in Dublin Castle. The less said about that place the better, except for a dishonourable mention that must go to an official from one of the teachers' unions. She was the very definition of a word that begins with B and rhymes with "witch." Every time Anthony had the bad luck of answering one of her calls to the NCCA, she would go into attack mode if the person she wanted to speak to wasn't there. Her behaviour was entirely

unreasonable and extremely hostile, to the point where a ringing phone would leave Anthony in fear of yet another earbashing from this madwoman. If he had one overriding regret from his time in Dublin Castle, it was that he had not filed a formal complaint about this woman when he had the opportunity to do so. On the other hand, what goes around comes around.

Nine long, miserable years in the Department of Education finally came to an end when he managed to arrange a swap with someone in the Department of Public Enterprise (later to become the Department of Transport). Anthony had channelled his inner Erich von Manstein, and employed his own version of the II SS-Panzerkorps to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. Good riddance, Dublin Castle; hello, Nuclear Safety Division.

There are days like these

Bridin Mary Harnett

I had in fact thought about the receipt of what I call shut-up money, usually received referent to occasions and presented inside any given card with a gift of layered notes of the browner kind. In fact such a phenomenon has been my experience to date in receipt of such monies from a relative at family events and the like. Receiving such a dividend from a certain party usually indicates an attitudinal mea culpa of, 'I'm sorry I hurt you,' so please take this little token of penitence to shut up. The shut-up function might be as simple as the shut-up incurred on the occasion of clothes borrowing, re-sizing of clothing, incidences of clothing amiss and such like. In fact, shut-up money as termed cannot be construed as outright bribery, but rather functions in the way of a subsequent gentle apology from time to time, intermittent as the religious or non-religious occasion might lend itself to be so. Yes, the inkling of a shut-up, so to speak. I have to admit that I enjoy receiving such shut-up money, and I smile almost in relief at the prospect of an extra few bob, albeit the brown paper variety. My heart leaps as these gifted notes have a propensity to fan out once a given card is open and of course after the card greeting is read - and lauded. I pretend to ogle the card and the 'nice' design, but I know from the thickness of the envelope that there is reparation inside for cutting instances of apparency, and I think about what I might buy with the extra money. Yes, it's easy to gift money when you have lots of it.

Then, I think about my daughter. Yes, I shall give her a hundred Euros – spending money. Indeed, the aforesaid shut-up money will be well spent.

Then I remember that I have a gas bill to pay. At least my intention to donate money to the life of another is noble if not enacted.

It is an arduous task to exert pleasing appearances in trying moments of the latter third of my career and my effort is almost spent. However, theatrically speaking, the receipt of such shut-up money is sometimes experienced as the emotional relief one might internalize in a given cathartic, tragic moment of a protagonist's demise, or some such likely theatrical incident in the genre of tragedy.

I put the card into my bag somewhat elated.

Then, I peer out of the window thinking about the 70, 000 angels that might consider me worth redeeming on the merit of visiting a sick person in the evening. I am visiting my uncle of nearly ninety years old, with prune-like skin and not a prudish bone in his body. Well-met, I sit on his bed with my father close by and my rather burlesque cousin pontificates facts about eating and food intake and other such subjects. A trough of a valley of the Dublin Mountains frames the local golf course through the window. I find it difficult to sustain concentration in such social visits and I look out of the window at players of a game that I don't really understand.

It's golf.

I focus on the cross walks, the caddies, the independent surmise of players after a hole in one. It appears that one does not laugh too much when playing golf. It's a rather serious game. After all, the ball is stippled as a given player might decipher the quality and speed of the given whack and the angle of the club in use. Yes, the swing of the arm, the bend of the knee. I decide that it is a game full of intent and measurement. The problem is that in swinging too hard which may be an occurrence in venting one's sense of golf style, the ball in its entirety tends to go amiss – the reason for the cross-walks as players vary in degrees of motivation to retrieve the nasty little spherical pieces of round hardness. The frustration in losing such balls - and they are not cheap at the packet. Up and down hilly banks we go and in a state of infuriation to find that a given ball has slinked into the wetness of the rushes. Yes, in David Bellamy style, players forage balls in all kinds of advertent circumstances in a 'save the life of a ball' repartee. Using an exploratory bottom-up approach, these players usually manage to retrieve the prodigal ball, or balls. Apparently there are more advanced golf balls constructed with honing devices or inbuilt trackers for retrieval.

I think that is rather a good idea.

It is all in the retrieval of the ball after which the prodigal ball is held up to the sunlight given the Irish climate in mind, and held between the forefinger and the thumb. A given player might resound such

conversational titbits, like 'I found you, where were you,' sort of rhetoric.

And then there are caddies with golf pocket slots for safe-keeping, protective as we are of the tools of the game.

My uncle looks at the remaining egg sandwich. He simply cannot stomach the idea of consuming it.

My cousin looks disapprovingly.

'Drink your milk,' He says.

It's fortified with vitamins.