

Inkslingers Blended Session

4th May 2024

The Prompt from The Bag Was:

**“I Can’t Believe I Was Fired From The Calendar Factory. All I did Was
Take a Day Off ”**

And the Visual



Juliette's Balcony

Juliette's Balcony

Angelina Kelly

When I got the job in the calendar factory I was thrilled. I loved working with numbers and pictures so here was a job that gave me both – two birds with the one stone – as it were.

It was fun deciding which picture was going to be used for each month. When there was a competition for any entry by the public it was interesting seeing what contributions were submitted and which ones would actually be chosen. The delight by the winners was infectious and we celebrated their sense of joy and achievement with them.

The picture we chose for the month of July was an ornate balcony, viewed from below, and was entitled “Juliette’s Balcony.” The entrant apparently had queued for two hours on their recent holiday in Verona to get the shot. There was a real sense of warmth about the scene so our editor decided it would be perfect.

I had worked in many jobs before this one, but this was the most enjoyable and it paid well too. I worked my way up from Copy Typist to Production Manager and was proud of myself and my achievements. I knew everyone and was on great terms with them all.

One morning I woke up to discover a leak in my washing machine. I immediately rang the Service Man and he promised he’d be with me by noon. I rang my boss and explained the situation to him, and he readily agreed that I could take the day off, attend to my needs and return to work the next day. Happy that everything was in order I relaxed with a big mug of coffee and waited. The Service Man arrived as promised and had the machine fixed and working in no time at all.

On arrival into the office the next day I discovered a typed letter, in an envelope, sitting on my desk, it was from the CEO of the company. With interest I open it – it read – “You’re fired.”

I sat in my chair staring at the letter in disbelief and shock and remarked to my secretary, who had just come in, “I can’t believe I just got fired, all I did was take a day off.”

“He hand delivered it himself just before he went home last night.”
Maria informed me.

“Well, I’m going to have this out with him and find out what he’s up to.”
I replied, with determination.

With that I stood up and, with the letter firmly grasped in my right hand, I marched into Jeremy’s office. He was sitting at his desk, his attention focused on a pile of photos. Waving the letter in the air I demanded “What is the meaning of this?”

He placed his pen down on the photos and raised his head slowly, there was a cheeky grin on his face.

“Happy April Fools’ Day.” He replied, cheerily.

I looked at the calendar behind his head and saw that the date was indeed the first of April. “Damn you, Jeremy. I thought you were serious.”

“Nah, I just wanted to see how you would react. It was worth it. Want a coffee?”

“I need more than a coffee after that shock.”

“A Caribbean Coffee then – with lots of rum in it.” He smiled.

“That might work.” I nodded with relief.

He stood up, went over to his coffee table and set the kettle to boil, while he was waiting he opened the bottom drawer and took out a bottle of Jamaican Rum. He poured a generous shot into a cup and measured out a big scoop of coffee, filled it with hot water and handed it to me smiling.

“Welcome back, glad you could join us today.”

Taking the cup of steaming liquid in my right hand I looked into his eyes, shaking my head, and said, “Don’t you ever do that to me again.”

He smiled and replied, “I can’t promise that - your reaction was classic.”

We drank our coffees and returned to our desks. When I told Maria she cracked up laughing. The phone rang and I was immediately returned to reality. Life continued as normal after that.

The Fable of the Fallen Flowers

Heloisa Prieto & Victor Scatolin

Chapter 2

Esther worried about her daughters, she did all she could possibly do, to make their healing time comfortable and safe. But maybe their broken bones thought differently. Even with intense physiotherapy, medication, a long period of rest was mandatory.

“How can we mend our broken bones faster?” asked Mary Anne.

“All I want is to get rid of this cast. I have so much to do!” added Mary Claire.

“Oh, my girls! Make no bones about it... You will have to do your time in bed...”

Girls hated her silly jokes, Esther was growing tired of trying to soothe her daughters, she hated seeing them suffering so much, feeling useless and helpless herself.

To make their bedridden days more enjoyable, Esther changed the curtains, hoping the girls would enjoy a lighter and more beautiful atmosphere.

And the girls actually did like the change.

Esther always kept the windows open, because summer heat was hard to cope with, if you have your arms and legs in a cast.

She bought brand new fans, changed the lampshades, and lled their beds with colorful cushions.

Nope. Her girls hardly noticed her efforts.

As their fractured bones pain diminished, restlessness seemed to take hold of them.

Esther had teary eyes every sunny, lovely, summer day. Girls couldn't stop looking out of the window and she could sense how much they missed the beach, volley practices, the fresh sea breeze and, more importantly, their friends.

On a lovely Sunday, she brought the breakfast tray to her daughters. Then she sat at the armchair to watch them eat their meals. She said:

“When your Dad comes home from the US, he will surely bring so many gifts to both of you. He is so worried about your health and wellbeing. But I just couldn’t let him get on a plane and cancel all his business meetings. I can take good care of you, right? He is on a very important business trip. If he closes this deal, he promised he would take us all to meet our relatives in New Orleans. You girls, also have a cousin your own age living in Lagos, Nigeria. She can speak English fluently, besides other languages, of course...”

“No worries, Mom” , said Mary Claire

“It's okay, Mom, we're practicing our English by watching series all the time.”

Esther knew her daughters very well. In fact, she realized that the absence of their father could increase the girls’ sense of isolation. She had to find a way to cheer her girls up.

The idea of calling the class to watch the opening ceremony of the Olympic games seemed great to her at first. The twins were so happy that they didn't know what to say.

And when the party took place, everything seemed ne at first.

Sort of...

All the school guests enjoyed the menu which consisted of popcorn, cheese rolls, juices and homemade cookies.

They also missed their two friends after their long absence.

It was only when the class really started celebrating, laughing and making jokes, that they realized how much the immobility affected the girls. Used to leading the games and dances, the twins could only stand there, silently smiling.

The twins' party ended before the opening ceremony.

Someone said:

“Guys, I've got to get home!”

Someone else added, looking at their cell phone:

“Oh, my mom called me for dinner!”

And so, one by one, the room got empty in a minute, the girls seemed to be terribly disappointed and had tears in their eyes. Esther was tired just thinking of having to collect the glasses, the plates of cakes and candies, all the popcorn that had spread across the floor as if it had a life of its own.

As soon as Esther had tucked her daughters in their beds, she sighed deeply and asked herself:

“What else can I do?”

Esther sat down in the armchair and tried to decide whether she would fall asleep right there or if she would have the strength to go to her room. Just then her cell phone rang.

“You sound terrible!!”

Hortência, her younger sister, the girl's favorite aunt and of all their friends who were regulars at their house, had a habit of being too blunt. But the good side was that Esther could always be as honest:

“I can't take it any longer! The girls can't stand sitting still and there's such a long way to go before the doctor releases them into their usual routine.” “Leave it to me!” - said Hortência.

The following afternoon, the twins were happy to hear the news of their aunt's visit, and even happier when she came into the room carrying two bouquets of flowers and several vases.

“How are you, my beautiful fallen flowers?” - she asked her nieces.

The list of complaints was huge.

“I hate being in bed!” said Mary Anne.

“I hate taking so much medicine,” said Mary Claire.

“I can't use my cell phone,” said Mary Anne.

“Yeah, and then she keeps asking me to log on to her social media all the time! It's so annoying! I need to deal with my own stuff !” said Mary Claire.

“Not to mention taking a shower... It's so complicated now!” said Mary Claire.

“And when I finally go to sleep, my leg gets heavy and really hurts! ” said Mary Claire.

While arranging the flower pots, Aunt Hortência just sighed quietly. She seemed so happy and focused on putting the violets next to the girls' computer, the roses in a vase by the window, the bright red primroses on the bedside table between the two beds, that she didn't seem to hear them. But suddenly she faced her nieces, took a deep breath and stood in the middle of the room. Then, as if on stage, she recited a poem. The twins had already seen their beloved aunt's talent on stage. As well as being a drama teacher, their aunt was also a gifted actress. But seeing her from afar was very different from hearing her there, in the middle of the room, in the middle of the day, without the lights, the stage costumes or the soundtrack. Standing in front of her nieces' beds and the large TV turned off, Hortência looked at a distant point, spoke slowly, emphasizing each verse and the words seemed to generate a kind of enchantment. It was as if the poem made time stand still, the pain and boredom disappear.

Julietta

Miguel A. Rivera, Jr.

Just like Romeo in Shakespeare's classic story, I fell for a girl in my town. One who was forbidden fruit. My name is Jose, and her name was Julietta. Only this ain't England and I was a Puerto Rican boy from Newark, New Jersey. Julietta was the hot girl, fresh off the boat from The Island. Every Dude on the block wanted her number but her Viejita would not let her out of the house, not even on the front stoop of the tenement where we lived. Her Abuelita watched her day and night like a jealous pit-bull guarding a porkchop. And so it was, that in my ingenious, inventive, and desperate young mind, I hatched a plot to free said hottie-hostage.

My Dad is a military man and I'd seen his climbing gear sitting in his closet, just begging to be used. My parents were out, and I knew that Julietta, who lived two floors below me, would be home and on her balcony just as every day. A flower, a jewel out of reach, a goddess in the hood. I secured my lines just as the YouTube video had explained and began looking over the railing of my own balcony, some eight stories above the very hard sidewalk below. It was a long way down and I had to dig deep to convince myself that the combination of Julietta's excessive hotness and my pathetic loneliness were just enough motivation to try and defy gravity.

A brief image of a newscast flashed in my mind. A reporter speaking, "A tragedy unfolded today when a sixteen-year-old youth plummeted to his death while attempting to stalk a fellow teenage neighbor whom he found attractive. Presently, the building's super is scraping his brains off the sidewalk."

I ignored that disturbing mental sequence and began picturing a wedding, Julietta and I walking down the aisle, a house, a dog, two kids. The ideal American life.

Willing to die for love, I made up my mind and launched myself over the side of the railing! The ropes were taught but I immediately discovered that the harness was ill-fitting and misplaced with one of the straps riding up my backside deep enough to touch my liver. I then found

myself hanging upside down with my shorts sliding to my ankles, while at the same time face to face with the lovely angel for whom I'd risked life and limb.

Sadly, she seemed to be ignoring me. It was then that I caught a glimpse of the walking stick next to her chair. The kind that blind people use.

I was undaunted and all the more enamored with her. That romantic moment was dashed to pieces by the broom of her Abuelita, who began using that kitchen broom to beat me without restraint while bathing me in a tide of very unfriendly words in Spanish. I began using the counter line to lower myself, thanking God that I'd taken the time to calculate the distance to the ground and not run out of line. As I lowered myself I looked up to see Abuelita, now with a very sharp kitchen knife in hand. She began sawing at my lifeline with a vigor that belied her advanced age. It was now a race to see if I could lower myself before she could complete her task.

Just as I was about ten feet from the ground, I felt the rope snap and then myself falling. I was caught and prevented from injury by a large, burly fellow and his Asian female friend. Unfortunately, my rescuers were wearing badges, guns, and Cop uniforms. "Hey Spider-man, you're under arrest!", Was the big Cop's sarcastic greeting.

A few hours later, my mom and dad picked me up at the local precinct. Seeing them through the bars of my cell, I mentally tried to prepare my teenage buns for the swift and certain Puerto Rican justice that was sure to follow. As the Desk Sergeant explained the situation, my mom was red as a beet while my Dad seemed strangely relaxed. When we got home I was sent to my room pending discipline. After speaking to my Mom, my Dad laughed about the whole thing, which infuriated my mom even more. What followed was one of Momma's epic beatings. The kind that had you sitting gingerly for a week.

Twenty-four years have come and gone since that day. Julietta and I are now happily married. I'm a lawyer, she's a teacher for the blind, we have a house and a dog. And yes, once in a while we still go mountain climbing.

Under a Balcony

Greg Fields

Flynn Murphy turned the key and heard the bolt click defiantly behind him. Secure, it was, this store, on this night. Tightly locked, secure and safe. At least something in his life could not readily be violated.

Tired beyond all reckoning, Murphy stepped to the sidewalk, uncommonly clean now after a recent scrubbing. There had been graffiti on the sidewalk, and on the store itself for that matter, and it had taken hours of lye and bleach to make it disappear. “Enter at your own risk.” “This store protected by a gunslinger.” “Young boys die here.” Clean now, but likely to happen again. His store had become a target.

The neighborhood no longer raged, but there was a pervasive simmering boil that could easily explode. A misplaced word, an innuendo, something that could be misinterpreted could bring back the gatherings, the signs, the loud voices, the angry calls. Murphy wished he could disappear altogether, and no doubt there were those around him who wished the same, that this tired old man who pulled the trigger and in doing so extinguished Dashawn Roberson might go away, might suffer some divine punishment for the underlying fears that caused his finger to twitch.

He rarely spoke to anyone these days. Customers who had come to his counter for years had not come back, and the newcomers, mostly oblivious to what had happened here, didn’t merit the risk of engagement. When he did speak, he kept to business. No more of the friendly banter that he had used to create a sense of welcome, that underscored what he saw as community. No. Now he spoke in measured, cadenced sentences.

A few days following the shooting, when he had thought that, if he remained quiet and small things might fall back to normality, a reporter had shown up in the late afternoon. A kid, really. Young woman from the Post who wanted to make her journalistic bones on his sorrow. She had asked him about the shooting, as had so many others before - police, reporters, family and the decreasing few who passed for friends - and he had answered in the same prepared responses, the ones that

had confirmed his innocence and lack of intent in taking the young man's life. He had merely reacted to what he saw as a threat to his own person, as any man would do. That should be enough.

But this reporter, this whelp, had gone down new roads, and he had been thrown by it. Beneath her youthful sparkle growled a bulldog, and she did not let go.

"Tell me about the White Knights."

Murphy scrounged his face and sought to find the right words as he stalled a reply. "The White Knights?"

"You were part of a group in high school called the White Knights. The Carroll High School White Knights. Who were they?"

"What does it matter? That was a long time ago."

"I know. But it's a peculiar name, don't you think? And the fact that its membership was only white young men like yourself raises the question. What did you fellas do? Were you a social service group?"

"Sometimes. We had food drives during the holidays, but mostly we hung out on the weekends, raced our cars and chased after the girls."

"Do you recall your motto?" Here she paused, then looked Murphy squarely in the eye. "'White guys doing white things.'"

Murphy groaned. "Ah, we didn't mean anything by that. Look, it was the 60s, and there were all these civil rights things going on. We didn't understand any of it. The neighborhood was just starting to change, so maybe we felt a little threatened."

"Did the White Knights ever do anything violent? Anything intimidating?"

"Ah, hell no. We were just standing up for ourselves, for our friends. That's all it was. An excuse to get together and raise a little hell on the weekends."

"And if one of the new black students at your school wanted to join, would you have let him become a White Knight?"

"Probably. But no one asked."

“No, I don’t suppose they did.”

The story she wrote did nothing to enlighten, did nothing to quiet the flames. Just the opposite. Two days after it appeared a stranger entered the store and called him a racist murderer, then another, then another after that. One of his longstanding customers came in, shook his hand and thanked him. Wounds split open, and there was new blood shed. The graffiti appeared shortly thereafter.

The White Knights. After all these years, Flynn Murphy was still identified as a White Knight. Jesus.

Murphy walked the few blocks through the night to his apartment, where he knew Ellen would be waiting, Juliet on her balcony waiting for the broken Romeo, and there would be no accusations, no innuendos, no questions asked. He could go back to being Flynn Murphy there. Just Flynn Murphy, and no one else.

Money isn't Everything

Mark L'estrange

The nightclub was closing, and Simon thanked Susan for sharing a great evening with him. He managed to avoid bumping into Mary and Bernard for the whole evening, he said to Susan "thankfully Mary didn't see me in the club you wouldn't know what lies she is capable of making up about me" "Susan said forget about her for tonight just be happy for what you have won, and the fun we have had together, if you like I can stay in the hotel with you tonight?" Simon said, "as much as I would love you to stay, it's too soon and I'm still married, and I wouldn't do that."

Susan said "I respect you for that, you might just bring me home" so they got a taxi back to her place and dropped her off, and Simon headed back to the hotel.

The next morning when Simon woke up it had sunk in how much money he had won, so he decided to visit the same bank that had thrown him out of his house only a few weeks previously, because he couldn't afford the mortgage and asked for the same bank manager. He came out as smug as ever saying to Simon "not you again I told you we are not a charity you can't have your home back!" Simon continued to play the pour mouth saying. "Please can I come to some agreement with the bank to pay instalments, on till I get back on my feet." "I told you no so please can you leave the bank" said the snotty bank manager"

Then Simon said under his breath "You are making a big mistake can I talk to your boss please? I have won the Euro Millions. Because of your attitude I want to close all my accounts down in your bank and move to a new one who respects their staff." well you want to see the look on the manager's face he looked like he had swallowed five wasps without a break. He was speechless. He eventually stuttered "I I didn't know Simon I'm really sorry" his boss heard what was going on and he ran over and said to the manager. "Can you go home I can't believe the way you treat our customers."

The manager then said to his boss and Simon "I don't even believe you have won the money you better have trying to get me in trouble I will

be going to my solicitor.” Simon smiled and showed him his check. The manager with his head down and tears in his eyes, begged his boss and Simon to forgive him.

“I have arrived at a point in my life where I realise, I’m rich now but money isn’t everything” He felt sorry for the manager and realised he was envious of him. And gave him money for a taxi home.

The head of the bank said. “I am so sorry for how you have been treated by him; can you please reconsider I will make it worth your while with a high interest rate on your money//”

“No thanks, I wouldn’t touch your bank with a barge pole. I am going elsewhere good luck. He left them to lick their wounds. On his way home he met the man who sold him the lucky ticket, The man congratulated Simon and thanked him for making his shop the most popular shop in Dalkey. Simon said “Thank you for selling me the luckiest ticket. They were about to go their separate ways when they saw the manager of the bank on a balcony shouting abuse at Simon saying, “you have wrecked my life where I am going to work now.” I don’t know, try the calendar factory see how many days you can last there with that attitude.

Young Love

Ciaran O'Melia

"I can't believe he left her standing on the balcony. I mean, he was the love of her life." Oh, she was a young thing, alright, but so was he.

He was from Mayo, a fine, handsome fellow with a full head of dark hair. He must be Spanish-Irish. They say he was from Achill; of course. It was not connected to the mainland then; no, that came later; here I am talking about the causeway out to the island. I think his name was Padder, or Micheal, or Sheamus. But in any way, he comes with a ladder and a bucket tied to it.

"Oh, Padder, whatever your name is, what's in the bucket." She said alluringly.

"Just a trowel and some mortar." He replied.

"What do you want with that." She continued with a soft-spoken, almost flirting softness.

"Well, you see, your father said, 'If you plaster the cracks in the wall, you can have anything you want, and that is not easy to pass up.'

"Oh," she cried out. I can't believe I got fired from the factory calendar. All I did was take a day off."

"Well, let me get on with my work."

"But Padder, I have a warm bed and a heart beating so much I am surprised you do not hear it?"

"Jesus, I thought that was the timekeeper, him with time and motion study." "But Padder, please come up on the ladder." She pleaded.

"But the house is falling apart, and it must be Mica."

For those for whom Mica is a mystery, is it used extensively in the west of Ireland? As it is a cheap way to create mortar, many houses had to be modified or changed.

Sea sand was used.

Max McCoubrey

Juliette's Balcony

It dominated the stage. So it should. It was an integral part of the plot.

Arriving early for the performance in the grounds of Ashford Castle, Co Mayo, I looked out at the stillness of Lough Corrib and breathed in the silken air.

Here to meet with my cousin Ambrose who was visiting from Colorado, I had decided to treat myself to an extra day before he arrived with his demands for Danny boy and leprechauns. I booked a seat for the afternoon outdoor performance of a play by the dramatic society. I knew it was Shakespeare but I had not realized today was the day for 'Romeo and Juliet'

So, here I was, wrapped in a fun fur coat in case the weather changed with a glass of Irish coffee in my hand and a look of shock on my face, the cause of which had been the Balcony.

The memory that was now surging through me had been tucked away for many years because I had found it as useful as one roller skate.

It brought me to a chance meeting in a bar in Toronto. I had been booked to sing for the customers, and it had led to open eye contact with a tall thin Italian dressed in an expensive suit and accessories. It has led to many dinners for two, walks on the beach, candlelight conversations and lovemaking till dawn.

'Marry me' he had said one afternoon as we sat by a waterfall. 'Move here and live with me'

'I'm on a contract' I answered noting that the thought that had made him shine with an inner light had introduced a bucket of cement to my stomach.

'I can fix that, I will get my people to talk to yours, I can fix your status here too, it's all sorted'

I tried to explain that I was twenty and had my life planned. I loved my folks and my homeland and did not intend to leave either.

He answered by ignoring me.

And so the truth seared into my brain. I was a trophy, something exotic to show off, not to be listened to and definitely not to be supported in my career.

So, I caught the next available Greyhound bus out of town and let the silence hang

Sometimes, I thought as I noticed that Lough Corrib, resembled a mirror, when you allow nature to still the water, it's easier to take in the surroundings.

It would be a long time before we met again.

O'Meallaigh's Nightmare

Declan Cosson

It was February 2025, and Ruairc was having a stressful time as Taoiseach. When one looked at him, one could tell that he clearly felt stupid with himself as he had just recoiled from a major political defeat. Introducing conscription into Ireland? Mobilizing men against their will into uniform? The last men to do that in Ireland were the British, and like Ruairc they were soundly defeated politically. Even his closest supporters and the president's daughter opposed him so he had to accept defeat in order to maintain his power. Thus, Ruairc had to accept that his army was to be made of volunteers because even if war with Russia was coming, the Irish were a free people who weren't so ready to give up their freedom so soon after lockdown. At some point next week, Ruairc was due to go to London to meet with the British prime minister Joshua Schutz so he focused on preparing for that for now.

That evening at the Dáil, everyone else with the exception of a few guards and janitors had all gone home. But so focused on his profession and having nothing else in his life, O'Meallaigh stayed in his office, he often did as he continued to work well into the night. However, as he tried to scrutinize the budget for the new month of the year, Ruairc began to doze off to sleep at his desk. In an attempt to make himself sleep easier, Ruairc tried to think of all the achievements he had made since he was elected in 2022. After all, he had practically eradicated the housing crisis by giving power back to the county councils, his administration had dramatically reduced the rate of violent crime and sexual assault (especially in the streets) with robust policing and he had raised a big, powerful and well-equipped army that through volunteers alone had grown up to 100,000 strong. He had brought Ireland into NATO and his army had proven itself successfully in peace keeping missions worldwide, even taking on Isis and Boko Haram and winning.

But yet, the stress continued, for only this afternoon, a Russian bomber flew off Donegal. Irish jets were able to see the bomber off but the fact that this was happening was enough to haunt O'Meallaigh. Ruairc tried to sleep but then in the middle of the night, he woke up to the sound of a chorus of feminine wails which caused him to jolt upright in his seat.

Taking off his suit jacket, O'Meallaigh rolled up his sleeves and plucked a torch, flicking it on to illuminate the dark corridors. For though instinct told him that he should have stayed in his office, his curiosity overwhelmed him and he seemed to be determined to find out why he could hear what sounded like women wailing in the middle of the night. Thus, he wandered through the corridors of the Dáil. Deserted of its personnel, the Dáil felt like a dark, desolate and lonely place, even for Ruairc who expected to see a janitor by now on his or her night shift. As he came to the grand staircase, he looked briefly to see the grand portrait of Michael Collins standing in his military uniform before suddenly hearing the wails again.

Ruairc started to feel chills down his spine and he felt his body become itchy for as he looked down at the bottom of the grand Georgian staircase, his eyes widened in disbelief at what he saw. Kneeling around a bucket were what looked like three women in white funeral shrouds whose faces seemed covered by the long dark messy hair that went down their back and shoulders. As Ruairc saw the bucket, he realized that it was full of blood and that the women were washing a suit in it. Seeing the suit and beginning to figure out what these women were, Ruairc just gasped as he muttered. "No...oh God, this can't be really happening?", but as soon as he rubbed his eyes one of the figures turned to face him in the eyes. Her hair fell back revealing a disfigured hag like face that seemed to glare at Ruairc. As she raised her arms and floated towards him, the blue eyed, stocky and grey-haired Taoiseach, the most powerful man in Ireland seemed to be as terrified as a young boy as he ran back up the stairs, followed by the three ghoulish women who seemed to float after him. Ruairc bolted back like a hare to his office, dropping his torch as he slammed the door shut.

Slumping down at his desk once more, Ruairc was certain that he was having a nightmare as he heard the door rattle. He never felt so powerless as he desperately tried to close his eyes. But then just as he did, he heard a terrible scream which caused him to open his eyes wide open in horror as floating between him and the painting Origin of the Harp that was on the wall were the three ghoulish women facing right at him. It was more than fear that he felt as the leading spirit came closer and closer. He asked in a horrified tone.

“What, who are ye? What do you want??”

But all the women did was wail which made Ruairc feel much more fear, it was pure horror. It was a horror that came from the reality that he was completely at these spirit’s mercy, no dictator or jihadi could instil this fear in him, for it was a fear that came from the fact there was nothing his political power, his police or even his 100,000 strong army could do to save him. He was now a mortal man like any other and thus he closed his eyes, shielding them with his arms as the woman floated closer and closer, as he blurted out “The Our Father” desperately till suddenly everything faded to black.

The following morning, Ruairc awoke to the sound of traffic and could hear the sound of Buck Finnegan knocking on the door asking. “Mr. O’Meallaigh? Mr. O’Meallaigh, are you in there?” O’Meallaigh stood up from his desk, noticing that the sky was greyish white outside. Traffic such as the yellowish green Dublin bus darted past the Dail. His eyes stung as he opened the door and Finnegan asked in a concerned tone.

“Did you get much sleep last night, Mr. O’Meallaigh?”

“I can’t say I did. But that’s to be expected, it comes with being Taoiseach.”

“Well, I just came to say that President Connelly requests that you come to Aras an Uchtaráin immediately.”

“Oh no, has something happened?”

“He has important information to relay to you, Mr. O’Meallaigh.”

“Right, thank you for telling me, Mr. Finnegan.”

Straightening his suit jacket, Ruairc left to take a taxi, not speaking to anyone about the weird experience he had last night, fearing that believing in superstitions would undermine the authority of him or his cabinet. That morning, Ruairc sat in the taxi thinking to himself as he heard the radio announce.

“Yesterday was a bleak day for Ukraine as Odesa fell to the Russian advance and now Russian forces are advancing on Kyiv. Despite the growing unpopularity of the war in Russia, the Russian leader Vlad

Trotsky is confident in victory. Yet the Ukrainians continue to resist even as America reduces the aid sent....”

Ruairc sighed as he heard that. It was a good thing that he bolstered the Irish army and strengthened the alliance with Britain and the rest of Europe, for it seemed that war with Russia was just around the corner. For now, he thought about the Connelys, a family he was well acquainted with and how their daughter was married to that famous young captain McDonagh. There was no question about whether McDonagh was going to Odesa or not, if it came down to it, McDonagh was certainly going there. And the knowledge that that would be O’Meallaigh’s decision did not make the chance of meeting the President’s daughter along the way easy to think about.

The sun had risen into the sky as Ruairc was pacing the beautifully decorated gardens that ringed the elegant palace that was Aras an Uchtaráin. Despite only a few gardeners here and there, the gardens felt full of life as Spring was on the horizon and thus Ruairc briefly forgot about his nightmare which allowed him to be at ease. As he got closer to the pillars of the palace, he saw two boys playing about but the eldest boy who notably shared McDonagh’s blue eyes and tidy black hair stood up as if embarrassed by the sight of O’Meallaigh looking down at him. As if nervous, the boy asked. “Eh hello, Mr. O’Meallaigh, we’re just...”

“It’s okay, Fintan, I’m simply here to discuss matters of business with your grandfather. He’s the one who’s summoned me here.”

“Why does not Mommy not like you?”

Ruairc solemnly stared into the distance as he said solemnly.

“Your mother? Your mother hates me because she knows that I have the power to send your father to that place called war where men might not come back and she lives her life knowing that your father could not come back at any moment. What she doesn’t seem to understand is that I don’t want to use that power and that I might be forced to use it because in a far away land called Russia lives a very bad man who wants our island.”

Before Fintan or his younger brother could ask Ruairc any more questions, Ruairc could hear a young woman's voice call. "Fintan, Connor, come here."

For now, Ruairc just looked on as he saw the boys run over to a pale but beautiful young woman with blue eyes. She had a dark blue blouse on and had thick curly greyish brown hair that fell past her shoulders and her back. While she seemed to smile as she wrapped her arms close around her boys, her smile broke when she saw Ruairc. She seemed to hold her boys protectively close to her as she asked solemnly.

"Ruairc?"

"Lianne, please don't start a war with me. I'm not here to justify my conscription move, I'm simply here to receive information from your father."

"Oh...good to know, well he's waiting for you in his office."

"Thank you, Lianne, I guess that I'd better be on my way."

Once Ruairc headed off into the office, Lianne seemed to become more relaxed. Fintan asked.

"Mom, why do you not like him? He seems nice."

"Those kind of gentlemen always seem nice...but that doesn't mean they are."

"But..."

"Come on, boys, you'll both understand when they are older."

In the office, sitting at his desk was a sharply suited and well-built old man with white hair and a well chiselled beardless face. He almost looked like a gentleman from a previous century as he studied and read a book on Irish myth. Behind his desk was book shelf that arrayed a vast variety of books from books on mythology to psychology and vast tomes of European history from the Indo-Europeans to the Troubles and the Cold War. Also decorating the book shelves were classics like War and Peace, Les Misérables and Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy. When the old man heard a knock on the door, he asked. "Come in?"

The door slowly opened and Ruairc came in nervously as he asked.

“You wanted to see me, Mr. Connelly?”

“Ah, Mr. O’Meallaigh, you look drained. Come! Sit down.”

As Ruairc sat down, he remarked.

“I wouldn’t say I had an easy sleep...am I allowed to discuss my nightmares with you?”

“Nightmares? You mean the one about the three banshees?”

Suddenly Ruairc felt an icy chill creep up his spine again as he asked in horror, blurting out in pure disbelief. “What? You know...did you have this dream too?”

“Yes, it’s why I was reading up on Irish myths before this meeting. My whole family had the same nightmare.”

“Even the boys?”

“Yes, even my grandsons had it. Now as a former psychologist, I believed that the whole ordeal was simply a manifestation of our stress about what is happening now and our dreams took the form of a superstition those from the Irish countryside are all too aware of. But then, earlier this morning, I got news from the British government.”

“Eh...what have banshees got to do with the British government, Mr. Connelly?”

Ruairc looked as Connelly stated in a very stern voice.

“It’s the same reason I summoned you to come here...Joshua Schutz, the British Prime Minister is dead. A terrorist attack from an unknown group has blown up the Houses of Parliament. And what I do now from folklore is that when more than one banshee appears, it signifies that someone holy or important has died...”

“Joshua Schutz, no...but he was one of the greatest British prime ministers since Lord Sailsbury, he basically saved the United Kingdom from social collapse! And if we all had that dream of the banshees, does that mean...”

“I don’t know, but there are a lot of old certainties and easy sources of confidence that we both grew up that are being unravelled as we speak.

I wouldn't be so dismissive of the existence of the otherworld, Mr. O'Meallaigh."

Later on, after business was done, Ruairc returned to the Dail but he said nothing about the nightmare to his colleagues and he kept it well closeted from RTE. Ruairc feared that a belief in the little people and a fear of wailing fairy women would ruin the respectability of his government in the eyes of a mostly secular West. But he was still disturbed by what happened last night and still wondered if it was really a dream. After all, it all felt very real and it did precede the death of a very important man.

Vive la France!

Deirdre Powell.

After I got fired from the calendar factory, I found it difficult to make ends meet and to adjust to my new situation. The previous year, I had enjoyed a beautiful holiday to Verona and thought that life couldn't change – at least not for the worse. I was in my element, working hard and looking upward toward the future.

I applied for every job I could under the sun, and for six months, there was no success. And then, one blessed day, I received a call from a former colleague who said he knew someone who was looking for an archaeological assistant. I wondered why he was recommending this position to me as I had no training in archaeology, but my colleague said it was a junior position that basically involved being a “gopher.” It wasn't exactly what I was looking for and was very different from working in a calendar factory, but I said that I would give it a go.

I had thought that I would have to spend my days at an excavation site, and part of me hoped that I would get the change to return maybe to Verona or Rome for a dig, but I soon realized that these hopes were the glamour end of archaeology and my job was far more mundane. My boss was a lady called Vera, and she insisted that I do some much-needed paperwork for the firm. The so-called paperwork involved going to the cellar to retrieve chests of documents that related to the next archaeological dig that was to take place in the south of France, near Carcassonne. I then had to source documentation from a variety of files that was relevant to the history of the area, together with previous evidence of archaeological excavations. The work was, to be honest, rather repetitive and tedious. Vera and her team got to do all the interesting stuff, whereas all I had to do was source the documentation. The chests of archaeological paperwork were heavy and my back soon got tired – but such is life.

Vera had a dog called Juliette that she brought to work, and it soon became my responsibility to walk the creature twice a day. This was no mean feat as the dog was a large, golden retriever and had a mind of her own. Now, as it happens, I like dogs and I'm quite good with them, so when the time came for my break in the morning and the afternoon,

I would take Juliette for a walk around the block. I felt sorry for the animal – Vera had a large cage in which she kept the dog at work and Juliette used to keen with loneliness until she got some attention, usually from me.

And so, the hours at the archaeology firm turned into days of documentation, walking the dog and procuring any necessities that were required by my coworkers. Before I knew it, I had been at the firm three months, when Vera called me into her office. And you'll never guess what happened next – I was placed on assignment, admittedly as Vera's gopher, to the archaeological dig near Carcassonne. I had never expected such luck. As the saying goes, "Vive la France" and "Allez les bleus."

The World Wide Webb (telescope)

Gerard Keogh

Chapter 1

Surveillance

The James Webb Space Telescope is a marvel of science, engineering, and human ingenuity. But by the time it was finally launched on Christmas Day, 2021, the project was years late, and its cost had risen to \$10 billion. In addition to the high cost, the chosen orbit for the telescope also gave those working on it many sleepless nights. Unlike the Hubble Space Telescope, which operates in low Earth orbit, the JWST orbits the sun at a distance of 1.5 million kilometres from Earth, at a position close to the second Sun-Earth Lagrange point (L2). This orbit keeps our planet between the telescope and the sun at all times, allowing its heat-sensitive instruments to operate at very low temperatures. The big downside is that any manned repair missions (of the kind that were needed for Hubble, using the now-defunct space shuttle) would be impossible. So, if anything major goes wrong with it, then NASA just blew a squillion dollars on a big mirror.

For now, though, the return on the investment in Webb has met or exceeded expectations. As it observes galaxies and galaxy clusters at enormous distances from Earth, it is seeing the light from these sources billions of years after it was emitted. (Because of the finite speed of light, it takes photons from our own sun eight minutes to reach Earth. A particle of light travels at a speed of 300,000 kilometres per second in vacuum; a light-year is the distance a photon will travel in a year, which is roughly 9.5 trillion kilometres.) When JWST sees a galaxy that is 13.4 billion light-years away from us, it is seeing back in time to just a few hundred million years after the Big Bang.

Webb has confirmed Hubble's measurement of the accelerating expansion of the Universe; it has observed supermassive black holes at extreme distances from us; it has provided us with spectacular images of nebulae, supernovae, galaxy clusters, and of the planets and moons beyond Earth's orbit in our own solar system. It has also taken a direct image of HIP 65426 b – an exoplanet orbiting the star HIP 65426, which

is 355 light-years from Earth. This begs the question: If humans can see a planet from such a distance, is it possible that some other intelligent species is observing us through a similar or more powerful telescope? If so, how would we know we are being watched? Perhaps someone has been closely monitoring us for a very long time. If so, to what end?

At this very moment, we cannot say whether there is life anywhere in the Universe other than right here on our own planet. It seems implausible that ours could be the only inhabited world in the great vastness of outer space; but as things stand today, it's just us.

There's a planet somewhere out there that says otherwise. It is a relative stone's throw from Earth, at a distance of "only" 41 light-years. For us humans, such a distance is an insurmountable barrier, given the current limits of our rocket-propulsion technology. Even if we could propel a spaceship at a velocity of 10 per cent of the speed of light (which we are not even remotely capable of doing right now; the amount of energy required would be enormous), it would take us 410 years to travel a distance of 41 light-years. But what if a more technologically advanced civilisation had already figured out a way to contract spacetime in front of a spaceship and expand it behind the vessel, thereby neatly sidestepping the limits imposed by Albert Einstein's special theory of relativity? (For the crew of this notional spacecraft, they do not travel faster than light in their local frame of reference, while still traversing great distances at speeds that appear to violate special relativity.) Such a civilisation could exert its influence over a wide area of the Galaxy beyond its immediate backyard. Any potential threat to this hegemony could be dealt with swiftly. A hitherto silent world could announce its arrival into the realm of the electromagnetic spectrum: Earth, for instance.

Radio and television broadcasts, as well as radar signals, travel through space at the speed of light. It would be easy for a distant observer to work out that the early news bulletins on BBC radio had originated from an unnatural source. That would have been the start of the surveillance effort by this mystery civilisation. They would have paid special attention to events in Europe and the Pacific in the 1930s. The practice of conducting atmospheric nuclear tests would have rung alarm bells. The final straw would have been the intentional broadcast of signals

into space that announced our presence to anyone who might be listening.

Their reaction? “Yeah, we know. You’ll be hearing from us real soon.”

Calendar Factory
Bernadette O'Reilly

It was the mid seventies
I started work on the factory floor
Watching as welding machines
Coughed out
Plastic pockets
Leather keyrings
Leather bookmarks
Binders
Calendars
One of our floor managers would
Walk the floor singing
10cc's I'm Not In Love repeatedly
Before the Christmas break
The welding machines would churn out
The next years calendars
While myself and a pal would sing
I love, I love my little calendar girl
As we worked
Two and a half years later I did not get fired
I quit.

Literally speaking...

Bridin Mary Harnett

It was the demonstration really. Indescript skies to the extent that I didn't know what to wear.

I left the house in sneakers and rather taken by a pair of denim summer shoes rather than brogues, I wooed myself into a purchase – a pay and wear kind of transaction in a variant sort of impulsive feel good mode. I traipsed down Henry Street somewhat stilted in a slink in comfort but I had no real intention in my wanderings. In fact, I had left the house without an intention at all except to write as is my wont at most weekends. Subconsciously, I had made the decision to see what the day would bring me, rather than to search it out. Yes, searching out the day is an excessively mindful activity which sometimes causes me great anxiety. I admire those who have the confidence to sit back in a chair with arms and elbows behind head in the knowledge that the world will approach at some juncture, given time. In the event that a facial expression is sufficiently relaxed, then the world in curiosity comes to examine the reason for such an exudate calm characteristic and at that, I am in wonder.

How he is so relaxed - such people might note in the face of such a man.

I consider flags, the flags of certain nations in overwhelming awe. Yes, I reflect on such semiotic symbols of imbued meaning in accordance with the minds and aspirations of the bearers of such standards. Yes, flags are standards and they fly in front of heaven and in front of God, the Almighty. We speak about the bearers of standards and the weight of meaning of such expressions of identity. Flag-inspiring loyalty to the ideals of belief, language and culture fly to the wind in yearning acceptance of a conceptualisation in godly decrees per populous.

Indeed flags are not waved very often now, not even in the face of war. However, flags and banners lead every demonstration here catching the eyes of passersby to appeal to the overt and wilful intellect of any given individual who may stop, stand, or even stare to consider their stance on an issue – the blessing of living in such an imbibed democracy.

There are bones of contention however, in the tonality of voices that shout against oppression, grief and despair. Volatile voices do not inspire trust. Adverse, insensitive slogans are causative and offensive. In fact, I am of the opinion that there should be no enemies, only those who choose to love less. The reason for this is simple indeed. You see, enemies are not beneficial to the psyche, or to the feeling thinking heart of a given individual. Perhaps, my instincts and reflex actions sharpen to meet adversity, but I deride the idea of ensuing negativity of such encounters in remembrance that to experience such negativity in itself is a form of defeat.

In fact, unlike Cú Chulainn, I shall not tie myself down to resist meeting enemies head on at all. I rather believe that the Irish have a wilful adaptability to negotiate and are gifted with the propensity to mediate any conflict which might present itself, not given in hope to take any stance whatsoever in adversity which does not interfere with the Irish sense of being – of course.

Yes, if something is not my business, then it isn't.

Of course, there are such feelings such as empathy at play and indeed the exhibition of varied degrees of humaneness appropriate to our capacity to do so, regarding fiscal resources we may possess, given the courses of action we choose to take – given the officiate that there is no compulsion in donning any given singularity of a point of view at all, albeit anti-warring rhetoric which I assume here, unless subsequent backhanders in mercenary trails of destruction prioritize the given political field of astuteness - or otherwise.

Are you a defeatist, someone might ask?

Indeed, I am not, is my response. I seek not to be defeated even as I waiver in hesitancy until a way to certainty is cleared.

Am I the bearer of a standard, I ask myself? What feelings, aspirations, and ideas do I emanate or refute in the representation of myself – the self. Am I as moveable as a fluid liquid would take the shape of any suggested container that I might recognize?

Is the quality of my waiving as such, I ask myself?

Rhetorically not, I proffer.

The Wake

Michael O'Brien

There is something alluring about the little cottage by the sea, the breeze seems to ease me toward it, as I get closer I am more coaxed inside by music and laughter. The tiny house is crowded with people who are drinking and loud, there is a young Irish dancer with hard shoes doing a hornpipe on a sheet of hardwood, her toe tapping has a primeval drive to it.

But why are they singing and dancing? What's the reason for this strange bawdy gathering?.

Further into the cottage there's crying, a heaviness in the air and people are gathered near a corner slightly bent looking into something, some bend a little deeper and are touching their face against something prostrate in a box, I'm drawn closer to the scene and no one reacts as I approach, as I gaze down I see a person lying hands clasped together on his chest with rosary beads between the fingers.

The sight of the body in the box along with the crying is having an unsettling effect, I feel a heaviness drawing me toward the body almost pushing me down, but I have a strange bouncing feeling as I attempt to touch it, yet as I'm deflected off the body I'm again drawn back down to it, frightening. I feel a gaze fall upon me and I turn to see an old woman staring straight into me, she is the only one in the room not ignoring me, she sees me clearly. I don't know up from down, I'm trying to walk on air as I fall from a cliff.

"Its ok son you can leave now, its all perfectly natural, you can go now, to the next place", the crowd completely ignore her, she seems to be talking only to me and her words have a soothing effect, I find I'm being carried back through the cottage by a beautiful softness, the old woman's gentle smile soothing me on my way. I feel unburdened and not weighed down by that thing in the box that in recent times had

been nothing more than heaviness and pain. I am settled now, she is right, this is all perfectly natural, and everything is as it should be.