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Bad Catholics

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Extract

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Chapter 1

Kilburn, December 1994

THE WEATHER, AS usual, was trying its best to fit in with the general mood, cold and overcast, the rain driven by a sharp east wind. Traffic moved sullenly on the wet road and people huddled into their coats and averted their eyes from the shop windows. They were the unlucky ones who hadn't been able to flee the season of goodwill and enjoy warmth and winter sun.

The man on the pavement of Kilburn High Road had seen some of the lucky ones arriving at Malaga Airport that morning as he waited to board his flight for Heathrow. Now he stood in the rain looking across at a large Edwardian pub on the opposite side of the road. It was a beautiful façade, elaborate but not fussy or overdone, a London classic in its way, and fortunately never 'improved'.

But the name was wrong.

No one would have called a pub The Liffey Lad when that pub was built. If Kilburn was Irish in those days it wouldn't have wanted to advertise the fact. You might as well have come straight out with it and called it The Fenian Bastard.

He was middle-aged and carried a black holdall. An anonymous man, wearing a grey, lightweight suit. He held the collar of his jacket tight around his throat, a useless

gesture given the thinness of the material.

Suddenly he stopped looking at the pub and seemed to become aware he was getting wet. He looked up and down the street. Three doors up was a charity shop. He walked towards it and stopped, the display in the window told him there was a considerable choice of ill-matched crockery, hideous ornaments and improbable items of glass and kitchenware, but he went in.

It wasn't much warmer inside but at least the wind wasn't blowing and there was no rain, that was something. An elderly black woman was sitting reading a book behind the counter. She didn't look up as he went to the men's rail and put down his holdall. There were shirts, lots of shirts, a few cheap suits and a concise history of the polyester tie. The rail had three coats but they didn't look promising. He took the only overcoat and held it up. It had belonged to someone who had been seven feet tall, weighed twenty-five stone and had worn it every day for fifteen years. He put it back and took the next one, an imitation sheepskin, which he tried on over his damp jacket. It had belonged to a human pipe-cleaner and the buttons wouldn't touch, never mind fasten. He took it off and put it back. The only remaining coat was a blue anorak with a fur-fringed hood. He hoped for the best but when he tried it, it fitted. He kept it on, picked up his holdall and walked to the counter. The woman looked up.

'You really want that?' It was a genuine enquiry. 'Man, you must really need a coat.'

The man smiled.

'You don't have much to choose from and it's cold and wet out there. It was warm and sunny where I started from this morning. What's the price tag say?'

'One pound. You goin' to wear it or shall I put it in a bag for you?'

'I'll wear it.'

He handed over a ten pound note from his wallet. The woman gave him nine pound coins.

'We ain't got no fives.'

She took up her book again and continued with her reading, *The Christian Doctrine of God* by Emil Brunner.

The man pulled up the zipper on the anorak.

'Is it any good, your book?'

'I don't know, I just read it to keep warm.'

He went and looked out of the window across the street. The rain on the glass blurred the people and traffic.

'That pub across the street, when did it change its name?'

'What pub?'

'The one across the road, The Liffey Lad.'

'I'm from Antigua. Ask somebody else.'

It was the way she turned the page that told him their conversation was over.

The nine coins in his hand would be a real pain in the pocket of a lightweight suit. He thought about it. A couple of pints at London prices would lighten the load. It was just past twelve o'clock.

Outside he pulled up the hood of his anorak and crossed the road.

The pub was warmer than the charity shop had been. He pulled down the hood of his anorak. Why was it so empty? It always used to be a busy place. He stood just inside the door, feeling nervous. Kilburn was a bad place for him to be, and maybe the worst place in the whole of Kilburn was inside this pub.

He looked round. It was different, it had all been changed. They had knocked the old lounge and public bar into one big room that was set up for eating rather than drinking. And it was Irish, not the cheap comic Irish of the theme pubs, but as if you were in a good class Dublin pub. It had

been very well done.

A voice called from the far end of the bar.

'Clear off, we're not open.'

The barman was young and big and as well done out as the lounge but his voice wasn't Irish, it was London, south of the river. The man looked at his watch, then he realised he hadn't re-set it for English time. It wasn't just past twelve, it was just past eleven.

'The door was open.'

The barman looked up from his paper, gave the visitor a steady, hostile look and then grinned.

'What are you supposed to be then, a fucking trainspotter?' Then the grin was switched off. 'Now fuck off, we're closed,' and he returned to his paper.

The man moved towards the bar, looking around him.

'This used to be The Hind, didn't it?' He carried on talking as he approached the bar. 'I liked it better as it was.'

The barman leaned forward with his hands on the bar.

'You fucking deaf or something, didn't you hear me? I said fuck off, we're closed.'

The man reached the bar, he put his holdall down and looked towards the range of beers and lagers which all came from a fancy continental-style set of taps, except for one black beer handle which was labelled Courage Directors. The man went and looked at the shiny brass array of taps then came back.

'What's Callaghan's Shamrock Ale? I've never heard of it. Is it any good?'

There was no reply; the barman was thinking, you could tell by the strain in his eyes.

'Anyway, I'll stick with Directors. A pint of Directors please.'

The man pulled the nine pound coins from his pocket and looked at them cupped in his right hand, when a new voice

cut in from the end of the bar.

'Something the matter, Billy? Got a problem?'

A heavy-set man had come through the staff door behind the bar.

'Only I've told you before about your language, Billy, so I thought there must be a problem.'

'This bloke's making a nuisance of himself, Mr Doyle.'

'Well, if he's a nuisance throw him out.'

The man's hand closed tightly on the coins.

'No need, I'll go.'

'No you won't, you'll get thrown out, I want to see you fucking well bounce.'

The barman moved fast for his size and vaulted onto the bar, but the man stepped back and ducked low and his fist came up hard between the barman's legs as he jumped down and there was a howl of pain as they collapsed together onto the carpet. The man pushed the barman off him, got to his feet and dusted off his anorak. The barman struggled to his knees, bent forward clutching himself, barely able to breathe because of the pain. It was a simple matter to finish it by kicking him hard in the face.

Doyle looked over the bar to where Billy was lying on his back, bleeding heavily from his mouth and nose. He turned to the man.

'Have you killed him, Jimmy?'

'No, George, he'll live.'

Jimmy opened his fist, tipped the nine heavy coins into his left hand and flexed his fingers.

'Pint of Directors.'

Doyle pulled the pint and put it on the bar.

'On the house.'

'No thanks, I'll pay.'

'Come on, just to say welcome back.'

Jimmy paused for a moment and then poured the coins

back into his right hand, slipped them into his pocket and picked up the pint.

Doyle waited until he had taken a drink.

'Been back long?'

'Arrived today.'

'Back for any special reason?'

'Just a short visit to see a man about a dog.'

'You're not here to cause trouble are you? We wouldn't want any trouble.'

'You know me, George, I never cause any trouble.'

'No, Jimmy, what gave me that idea? We all stood and waved you goodbye with tears in our eyes, as I remember, all so sad to see you go.'

'That was different.'

'Too true it was different. Everyone had to run for cover, no one wants that sort of trouble again, no one.'

They paused as the young man sat up, blood from his mouth and nose spreading across the lower part of his face, staining his white shirt.

'You were right, Jimmy, he'll live. I'd have got rid of him anyway though, even if you hadn't given me a good reason. He couldn't control his fucking language, always fucking swearing in front of the punters. It's not the sort of image we want.'

Doyle looked over the bar.

'And look at that carpet. I can't have blood about the place can I, not real blood anyway? You're not back five minutes, and you're already costing me money.'

'This place yours then?'

'It's in my name.'

'It said Eamon Doyle over the door when I came in.'

'That's right, Eamon Doyle, that's me.'

'Suit yourself, it's a free country. What trade do you get in here now?'

'Tourists mostly, American, Oriental, all sorts. They bus them here to drink Guinness in a genuine London Irish pub. The Guinness and the others are all £4.50 a pint but they love it.'

'No local would pay £4.50 a pint in my time for Guinness or anything else. Isn't there any ordinary trade any more? This was always a busy pub.'

'There's a special rate for some of the locals, £1 a pint.'

'I'll drink here for £1 a pint, that's the cheapest beer in London.'

Doyle's accent changed.

'Can you do the accent, boyo?'

'Only North London, George. Pure Kilburn.'

'Do you know any Shaw, Yeats or Wilde?'

Jimmy shook his head.

'Can you look a bit literary? Can you be local colour?'

'No, George. I'm no colour at all.'

The voice was North London again. 'Then you'll pay £4.50 a pint like the other punters. We have a string of local talent who come and argue literature, the Troubles and religion. They know how to talk and dress. It's all very well done.'

'Religion and politics? Does it ever come to blows?'

'Nearly.' Doyle's London accent gave way again to the stage brogue. 'Ah God, Jimmy, doesn't myself put a stop to that? It's me, Eamon Doyle, you'll have to reckon with if you can't sort out your differences like gintl'min.'

They both laughed.

'I like the accent, very Victor McClaglan. And Eamon's a nice touch.'

'You know how it is, Nat always likes to give value for money.'

'Nat's still in charge is he?'

'Oh yes, Nat's still very much in charge. Hang on.'

The young man was now on his feet.

Doyle spoke with genuine concern in his voice. 'Alright, Billy?'

Billy wiped the back of his hand across his mouth.

'Yes Mr Doyle.'

'Right, then fuck off and don't let me see you near here again.'

The ex-barman looked as if he might do something but then thought better of it. He didn't look back as he left.

'You know, for a moment I really thought you were going to leave when I told Billy to throw you out.'

'I told you, I don't cause trouble.'

'Come off it, Jimmy, you wouldn't leave for the likes of him, I've seen you at work too often.'

'Suit yourself. Maybe people change.'

'People don't change, except maybe their underwear. You're the same alright, look what you did to Billy. He's not a mug but you made him look like one.'

Doyle folded away the newspaper and gave the bar a casual and unnecessary wipe. He had a question that needed an answer.

'Does Nat know you're back?'

'I told you, I just arrived, there's only you knows I'm here.'

'It won't stay that way long, you know how things work.'

Jimmy took a long pull at his beer.

'This is a private visit, I don't want trouble.'

'If you say so. Are you staying locally?'

'In London.' He finished his pint and put the empty glass on the bar.

'Well, I'll know just where to come and visit you, won't I?'

'That's right. Can't miss me in London, can you? Another pint of Directors.'

Jimmy pulled out the pound coins again and counted out five.

'Sorry, no more. One pint to find out why you're back and where you're staying will stand up with Nat but that information doesn't need two pints. I don't know what you're up to but whatever it is I don't want any part of it. A second pint and more chat puts me too close to you for real comfort.'

'How do you mean, too close?'

'The first thing you do when you get back to London is walk in here, which is bad enough, then you break up the staff, which is not a nice thing to do. It's very violent. If I have a heart to heart with you after that, certain people will start asking are we still close, like in the old days. Tell me, why do I feel that close to you is not a good place to be?'

'Have it your way, George. It's not a very good pint anyway, not like it used to be.'

'We don't sell enough to keep it really. We should take it off and put in another joke beer with a name like Kilkenny Cats' Piss.' Doyle brightened. 'In fact that's what I'll do, as soon as this barrel is finished. We'll get something cheap and fizzy, give it a real fancy name and ask £5 a pint for it. There you are, see what you can do when you try? You can still help people make a few bob as well as cost them money.'

'Always glad to help out, George. See you.'

Jimmy picked up his holdall, turned and walked towards the door.

'By the way, have you taken up trainspotting or what?'

Jimmy stopped.

'It does make a sort of statement, doesn't it?'

They both grinned.

'Jimmy, don't ever come in here again,' Doyle said. 'In half an hour I'll have somebody else behind this bar, somebody who could do more than just throw you out and make you bounce.'

'I know you will, George. Nice to see you again.'

'And you. Take care.'

Jimmy stepped into Kilburn High Road. It was still cold, windy and wet, but now there were white flecks of sleet among the rain. He zipped up his anorak and pulled up the hood. The coins felt heavy in his pocket.

It didn't use to be so hard to spend money in London. Things must have changed in three years. He paused for a moment then headed towards the nearest Underground Station.

In the pub George was on the phone.

'Yes, Mr Desmond, Jimmy Costello. I thought you'd want to know… By the way, Billy's given in his notice, can you get me someone over here? We'll have our first coach-load for lunch soon. I'd prefer Vic. I don't think there'll be any trouble but you never know, Costello making this pub his first port of call. It's not as if it makes any sense, not unless he wants people to know he's back… Yes, that's what I thought, so I'd be happier with Vic here until we know what's going on. No sense in taking any chances.'

George put down the phone and stood for a while. He was beginning to get worried about the health of his old mum. He worried about her sometimes. He didn't visit her as often as he should and right now he was getting a strong feeling that this was a good time to think about going away and asking after her health.

Kilburn, December 1952

In the pre-dawn dark of a cold December day two figures hurried along the empty Kilburn streets, a woman and a young boy. The boy's skinny legs poked out from the bottom of a long, belted navy blue mac and on his head was a school cap. The woman also wore a long mac and had a headscarf tied tightly under her chin. The boy had to hop and skip

every few steps to keep up with her.

'Mum, if the Jews don't believe in Jesus, why won't they eat pork?'

The woman sighed. Sometimes she just couldn't make him out, he said the strangest things.

'Jimmy, what has believing in Jesus got to do with not eating pork?'

'Well, yesterday at Sunday Mass Father McGinty was telling us about Jesus putting the demons into the pigs. But if it was Jesus put demons in pigs, then only people who believe in Him wouldn't eat pigs, and if the Jews don't believe in Jesus they could eat pork if they wanted, couldn't they?'

He was a strange child.

'Did you work that out for yourself?'

'Yes, Mum,' Jimmy said proudly. 'It means the Jews are wrong, doesn't it?'

'Not really. I think Jews didn't eat pork for a long time before Jesus. It wasn't because of the pigs in that story. I don't think Jesus Himself would have eaten pork.'

'Why not?'

'Because Jesus was a Jew and the Jews don't eat pork.'

'But I thought Jesus was a Catholic, like us.'

'No, Jesus was a Jew. So were Mary and Joseph.'

They hurried on in silence. Jimmy thought about it. He didn't for one minute believe that Jesus was a Jew, or Mary and Joseph. If God was a Catholic then Mary and Joseph had to be Catholics and Jesus was God's Son so He had to be a Catholic. But he couldn't accept that his mum could have got things so wrong. That would be just as threatening as the Holy Family not being Catholic. So he did what he always did, he put it away for the time being.

'When will I be a proper altar server, Mum?'

'When Mr Slavin says so.'

'Will it be soon?'

'It'll be when Mr Slavin thinks you're ready.'

'I nearly know what to do, and I can say a lot of the Latin.'

His mother intoned the priest's opening words of the Mass, '*Introibo ad altare Dei*.' Jimmy parroted the server's response, running the meaningless sounds together. '*Ad Deum qui laetificat juventutem meam*.'

They smiled at each other.

'Well done, that was very good.'

'What did we just say, Mum?'

'I will go into the altar of God. To God who giveth joy to my youth.'

He thought about it. Into the altar? The priest didn't go into the altar, how could he? And Mum wasn't young, she was old, so what was that about youth? Faith was full of mysteries, he knew that, so he put away the deep mystery of the Mass and moved on.

'How much longer, Mum? Maybe soon?'

'Maybe, but serving at Mass is a very great honour, you represent all the people who'd like to be up there with the priest but can't be. It has to be done well, because you're not just serving the priest, you're serving God.'

They walked on through the wet Monday streets towards the church and the first weekday morning Mass. The dark sky still showed no signs of dawn and the street lamps gave out a comfortless light. Christmas was only three weeks away but this was where the Irish working-class lived and when daylight came and curtains were pulled back there would be very little show in the windows to welcome the great Feast. Money was too scarce to spend it on entertaining passers-by.

Eventually they arrived at the parish church. Two other people arrived at the same time and they smiled acknowledgment at each other as they made their way out

of the darkness into the light of the church. This six o'clock Monday Mass would last no more than twenty minutes. Other weekday Masses were more leisurely and began at the more comfortable time of eight o'clock, too late for most workers but as early as the new parish priest would permit. He liked the sound of his own voice and a quick Mass with no sermon was not something he approved of. The Monday congregation was always quite considerable, about forty to fifty people.

The brightly lit church was warm and welcoming after the wet, dark streets. Jimmy and his mother blessed themselves at the holy water font just inside the door and Jimmy snatched off his cap, tucked it in his mac pocket and ran up the aisle and into the sacristy.

A harsh voice met him.

'Don't you know better than to run in church? Have you no respect for God's house? Get out of here and go back and walk like a good Catholic and don't run like some wild animal.'

Jimmy turned and slowly left the sacristy. Father McGinty had shouted at him loud enough for everyone in church to hear. He walked slowly down the aisle, his head bent in shame. Those already in the church, sitting or kneeling, avoided looking at him and embarrassing him further.

He wasn't ashamed so much for himself, it was his mum he felt for. Everyone would see him walk down the aisle and then go back to the sacristy and know that Father McGinty had said he was a bad Catholic, no better than an animal. And Father McGinty was a clever and important man, a priest, so he must always be in the right. Jimmy added the shame his thoughtlessness had brought on his mother to his growing store of Catholic guilt.

Suddenly she was at his side, taking his hand.

'Come on,' she said in a voice unnaturally loud for the

inside of the church, as if she was making an announcement, 'We're going home.'

Jimmy's brain turned slowly all the way home. This was a completely new thing, a new and totally unexpected star in his private sky. He couldn't be sure, of course, but he had got the idea that his mum had defied Father McGinty, defied the priest, the parish priest, who had been to Rome and seen the Pope.

The only other person he had ever heard of who had done something as terrible as that was Tim Folan's father. He had heard his dad tell his mum that Mr Folan had sworn at old Father Shillitoe one night in the parish club and had never set foot in the club or the church since. Tim Folan and his mum now arrived just after Sunday Mass began and left just before it finished and always sat at the very back. Would that happen to him and his mum now, he wondered? Had his mum really defied the priest and would they have to sit right at the back of church on Sundays? And what about his altar serving, would he ever get to be a server? It took some thinking about. The seven years, eleven months and twenty-eight days of Jimmy's life had not prepared him for this.

'What will you tell Dad?'

'I'll tell him you weren't well so I decided you should come home.'

So that was it, he was right, his mum had defied the parish priest and now she was going to have to tell Dad a lie. Now she would have to go to Confession and if anything happened to her before she could get to Confession she would go to Hell for ever and ever and never see God. And it was all his fault because he had run like an animal in God's house. Jimmy's sense of horror, sin and guilt moved into an entirely new gear. Then his mind suddenly retrieved an earlier piece of information which was now ready to be dealt with. God had to be a Catholic or how could He forgive these terrible

sins when you went to Confession, especially the mortal sins which closed the gates of Heaven and sent you to Hell for all eternity. And Jesus had to be a Catholic to be on the altar at Mass, because it was only Catholics who went to Mass. If Jesus and God weren't Catholics then none of the rest could work, could it? So God and Jesus were Catholics after all. Of course they were, and that meant that Mary and Joseph must be Catholics as well because they were Jesus's family, the Holy Family. Well, that was alright then.