

A Decent Cuppa

The door to the liquor cupboard stood ajar, a thumb's width, no more, though wide enough for the beckoning whispers within to lure Conal Larkin into their web.

He brushed the enticement aside, focused instead on his laptop, a manuscript opened on its display.

*Too early. No, more like too late. Call me a lush but I'm no bloody alkie.
Bugger-all, my chin itches.*

Conal scratched at his stubble, a fortnight long, the length of time since the little skiver's disappearance.

No--his abandonment.

He combed his fingers across his scalp of thinning hair, the once dark locks transformed over the years as if through magic, a kind of Gray Magic, into salt-and-pepper strands. The wizardry complemented the streaks in his near-beard.

A cup of cha, Darjeeling tea, Conal's sixth or seventh, he'd lost count, stood at-ready next to his laptop. His "office" occupied a corner nook of the sitting-room, currently a storm-tossed chaos of printouts and discarded fast-food containers dusted with cigarette ash. The half-consumed contents from several of the boxes had morphed into a mycologist's garden of delights.

The window at his back overlooked the nearby Hudson River waterfront, the downtown Manhattan version. The vista was partially blocked by taller buildings, mostly condos for the Wall Street types, the newer construction part of the recent

gentrification of Conal's once working class neighborhood.

To the west along the opposite river bank a mile or so distant, Jersey City glowed a sleepy-eyed, golden orange, compliments of the sunrise cresting sight unseen east of Conal's apartment building.

Another all-nighter had tiptoed past him. No complaint; the time was well spent, fruitful. His newfound progress on the overdue rewrite had broken through a near hopeless standstill--not so coincidentally, a fortnight old.

Ha! You little bugger, go ahead, run off then. Useless as diddies on a bull, anyway.

The cup of Darjeeling, a heretofore undiscovered relief, ex-lax so to speak for his literary constipation, was far from his standard remedy: the little green man.

Conal smiled; the bottle of Jameson whiskey, "need not apply." The thought conjured-up memories of his student days in London, of the flats in Earls Court and their rental signs with much the same advice for the Irish.

He reached once again for the magical elixir.

A snigger stopped him mid-stretch. He glanced over the top of the laptop display at the source of the sound.

Conal's Muse.

The Fey, one of the race of Sprites, had reappeared as usual without fanfare or pre-announcement. He stood beneath the narrow, arched opening to the kitchenette, his shoulder leaning less than halfway-up the height of the entranceway. He sipped from a fine china teacup, his pinky-finger raised high, a matching saucer held in his other hand.

Black gear clad the Muse head to foot, "Gangsta" the apparent theme of his latest outfit: a flat-brimmed baseball cap turned sidewise, loose baggy pants, though not too deep of a hang to the crotch, his short stature being a limiting factor.

A silk-screened icon of a smoking handgun graced his oversized T-shirt; the weapon pointed straight at the viewer, the words "Blow me" scrawled below the image.

A swell of relief caught Conal off-guard. Sarcasm rushed to his rescue. "What's with the gear? And isn't that a classy T-shirt, now--and your muttonchops, they don't exactly shout gangsta, you know?"

The Muse smiled. "Enjoyin' yerself, eh? How's the cha?" Only Conal's silence answered. "And yer thought the Darjeelin' would work some kind of Magic, eh? Eejit. Without me, yer hopeless."

"Dry up."

"Me? Me, dry up? Isn't that what yer've done? But seems yer don't need me now, what with yer--Darjeelin' and all." He finished the tea, smacked his lips. "Ah, indeed, a decent cuppa cha." He tossed the cup over his shoulder. The china sparkled, vanished without shattering on the tiled floor. "I'm off. And don't yer expect any return visits...."

"No, stop. Stop!" Conal leapt to his feet, collided with the desk. "Don't go." He rubbed at his thigh.

The Muse frowned, cupped his hand to his ear. "Do I hear an apology stumblin' its way toward me?"

"Yes, fine. I apologize. Damn it, I tried to be reasonable, I...."

"No mind, then," said the Muse. "All is fergiven fer yer gettin' notions." He

smiled, approached the desk. "Sit yerself back down, now."

Like most Sprites, the Muse was mercurial by nature. Still, the sincerity of the Fey's grin surprised Conal.

As Conal sat, the whispers across the room grew more insistent. He glanced nervously at the liquor cupboard.

Was the door wider ajar? No booze! I can do this.

Another cup, sans saucer, materialized in the Muse's hand. With his free hand, he guided Conal's clenched fist to the unfinished Darjeeling next to the laptop.

Conal hesitated before grasping it. The Muse and he toasted one another and he drained the tea, no longer steaming, the warmth replaced with a burning bite all the way to his gut. Conal began to type, fingers soon racing across the keys.

The sunrise behind him slipped into mid-morning and in-turn, high-noon, the passing hours barely noticed. Only the glow of Conal's desk lamp acknowledged the sunset's surrender to the dark, flecked with the rekindled, ersatz suns of urban civilization.

A teacup guarded the right flank of the laptop keyboard. A mound of cigarette butts, a mini Mt. Vesuvius, teetered in an ash tray at the opposite flank.

"Another one then?" The Muse tilted a teapot, refilled the half-empty cup. He glanced at the display. "Yer know, my Darjeelin' dodge wasn't such a bad idea after all. Just look at the progress. Impressive, quite impressive."

Conal stopped typing. "Dodge?" He looked up from the display. "What are you talking...?"

The Muse scoffed, "Come on now. Just how long are yer goin' to muck about in yer tripe? Deny all yer want but take another sip. Go on, taste it."

"Tripe? What...?"

His Muse insisted, "Go on, taste it."

Conal reached for the cup, raised it. The aroma of the Jameson Irish whiskey brushed his nostrils before the water of life could moisten his lips.

He replaced the teacup on the desk, in his hurry sloshing whiskey onto the surface. "What the feck? What did you do, when...?"

"What did I do? Me? Opened yer eyes is all. Who begged for my return, eh? So, return I did--at yer service with a quick cure. The DTs do have a way of getting in the way."

"Delirium Tremors? What kind of BS...?"

"My, how like a Yank you sound. Thirty-years, you've been here, eh?"

"I can stop any time. I did, I...."

"Oh, indeed--stopped writin', stopped sleepin', stopped thinkin' straight. Look around. Look at this pigsty of a flat. Since when did yer ever let yerself descend into the muck like this?"

"Shag-off, you little bugger."

"Bull-headed and bat-blind as ever. Even after she left yer. What does it take, yer eejit? What does it...?"

"Keep Rose out of this, you black-hearted bastard."

"Seems more to me, she left herself out of it. Out of the door and out of yer life."

Twenty-five years of marriage. Poof, gone. What does it take? Yer daughter to give up on yer, too, eh? She's close to it, yer know."

"Stuff it!"

Conal grabbed the tea cup, hurled it at the Sprite. The cup passed through the Muse, struck the floor, the shattered pieces of china skittering into the far corner. Enraged, Conal rushed toward the embodiment of his id, the truth he refused to acknowledge.

The Muse vanished, reappeared behind him. "Ah, now that's really actin' the grownup, very mature. Kill the messenger."

Conal turned, raced here and there, stomping about the sitting room, each time the outcome unchanged with the muffled exception of the shouted complaints from his neighbor downstairs.

Exhausted, bent over from the exertion of chasing after phantoms, he straightened, lunged one more time, passed through the Muse. Off balance, Conal grabbed for but missed the desk and crashed face first to the floor.

Someone pounded on the apartment door. "What the hell's goin' on in there? I'm a cop, damn it. Cut the shit out or I'll haul your ass over to the 1st!"

Conal's breaths came with increasing difficulty, the pain in his shoulder unbearable. He mustered the strength to crawl to the door and rapped his knuckles against its metal surface before he collapsed in agony.

"Help me, help," he groaned through gritted teeth. "Sweet Jaysus, help me."

Conal stirred, still under the effects of post-surgery anesthesia.

He coughed, grimaced. The pain opened his eyes.

Tubes snaked into him. Fluids dripped. A web of electrical leads caressed him amid a background of hisses, chirps, and beeps, the mindless symphony of the medical monitors.

Meghan stopped texting, hurried from her chair nearby his bedside. "Dad? You okay? Dad?"

He blinked, squinted at her, and reached to rub his eyes. Pain stopped him midway. "Oy, dear God Almighty."

His daughter frowned, leaning over him. "You need a nurse? Pain killers?"

He tried his charming best to smile. "Be a dear? How about a fag?"

She straightened. "Oh, a fag? Oh, yeah, of course, a fag. Great idea after a triple bypass. Sure, I'll head out, get you a pack right now."

"That's my darling daughter."

Meghan's smile may have answered a sweet "yes" but the accompanying bird she flipped him, indicated otherwise. Definitely otherwise.

Another grimace choked-off Conal's attempt at a laugh. Meghan and he shared the same sense of humor. His Ex would often smile, if mostly out of bafflement, at their shenanigans.

He refrained from reciprocating with a dirty-birdie, too much pain for the effort. He abhorred pain, could never understand marathoners, as mad as hatters.

"Only joking. Truly. Cross whatever's left of my heart."

"Right. But you do know jokes hide our underlying intentions."

"The Good Doctor Freud. Penis envy was also his Austrian shtick, eh? Oy.

Sending you off to Rutgers was a mistake. Educated female, ha. It's all come back to bite me on the arse. Should've married you off at sixteen. Barefoot and pregnant, that's the way."

"Nice try but your Neanderthal routine's old. I've watched you push people's buttons way too often so you could avoid...."

"Oy, not now...."

"Oy, yes now. The drinking's as bad as the smoking. Worse. You've got to deal with it. Really. The doctors aren't idiots...."

"Beg to differ. The whole lot are eejits."

"Look, that's all I'm going to say for now. No more--for now."

Conal's heart skipped and twirled a tiny fandango. "Fine, then. Fine." To calm his anxiety, he changed the topic. "Your mother, she ask about me?"

"She's in Dubai. Big meeting, energy policy or something."

"Dubai, eh? See what a Ph.D. does to your family life. Save yourself. Escape from that bloody Piled Higher and Deeper program. You're a writer, a natural born writer. So gifted! Are you listening to me? Just listen, this once, just...."

"Thanks, Dad. Really, I mean it. Promise, I'm not abandoning my writing. Just got too much on my plate right now. Okay? I'll drop with the drinking complaints; you drop with the writing. For now, okay? Anyway, Mom said to wish you a speedy recovery."

A nurse entered the room. "Mr. Larkin, glad to see you're awake. Right on schedule, too. Let's check those dressings, your vitals."

Meghan said, "Good time for me to grab a latté downstairs while your nice nurse performs his miracles."

"Miracles?" the nurse said, "If only."

"Trust me. Getting my father to do anything you ask will be a miracle."

"You're coming back?" said Conal.

Meghan paused in the doorway. "Sure. Don't I always?" She turned to go, calling over her shoulder, 'Hope springs eternal' quoth my inner facilitator."

He called after her, his attempt at a shout sounding withered, more like a weary crone's. "Consider your Da's hopes for you, too, then."

The nurse reached Conal's bedside. "Mr. Larkin, I need you to roll a bit to your left, if possible."

"I couldn't bribe you to fill one of those IV thingies with a bit of Jameson, could I?"

"Don't think so, Mr. Larkin. I've kind of grown fond of a steady paycheck."

"Just confronting my demons head-on, so to speak. Say, you haven't seen a little person around here, have you? A bit under chest high, auburn mutton chops, dressed in gangsta gear and all?"

"I don't really think so. Hard to miss."

"Yeah. Hope the little bugger hasn't walked-off on me again."

"Uh, huh. Okay. Now, if you could please roll to your left side. Easy. I'll assist."

"I'm fine, just let me--oh, shite." The level of pain exceeded Conal's expectation. "Okay. Okay then, a bit of a hand if you would."

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Now, this is one hell of a dream.

Conal's arse defied the attempts of his hospital gown to maintain modesty. He pressed his hip against the desk in his flat, the last page of the completed manuscript in his hands.

The ending, the whole story felt wrong, somehow. *Why not? The damned thing reads fine enough.*

The Muse's voice floated out of thin air. "Yer dead-on, lad. It's shite."

"Where the hell are...?"

"Over here yer git."

Conal turned toward the liquor cabinet. The Muse's arm was draped around the neck of the Jameson bottle, the "little green man," now as tall as the Sprite.

"Me mate and I, we had a long talk, waiting for yer to come to yer senses. Yer right, the manuscript's shite, pure shite."

Now shrunken down to normal size, the Jameson wobbled across the room and sprang onto the desktop to rock to stand still by a crystal glass, its ice cubes wet and glistening.

"Go on," the Muse insisted. He poured whiskey into the glass, the ice stirring,

tinkling against the crystal like fairy bells. "Here, take it."

Conal's gut tightened. "No. No, the sun's barely up. I'm no alkie. No alkie!" He knocked the glass away.

He awoke, drenched in sweat, still as a cadaver. He struggled, unable to move beneath the hospital bed covers. Illumination from the hospital corridor, the more subdued lighting of the graveyard shift, seeped from beneath the closed hospital door, the nearby gray twilight in the room fading into deeper shadows furthest from his bed.

Despite the IV painkillers, Conal's head throbbed, an agony beyond belief, beyond anything he ever experienced.

Dear, sweet Jaysus, please stop it, stop it.

Like the glare of an unending camera flash, a burst of illumination evaporated the mix of shadow and twilight. The relentless brilliance grew brighter and brighter.

Conal groaned, "My eyes...."

Some kind of movement rippled within the glare. Washed-out at first, a figure emerged, "You rang?"

He resolved into a slender, young male, goateed and bearing more than a passing resemblance to Bob Denver, the golden age of TV actor, dressed in jeans and scuffed canvas tennis shoes. An ill-fitting, oversized sweatshirt topped off his Beatnik gear, the precursor to Hippy.

Maynard G. Krebs? Bloody Maynard G. Krebs?

The Denver look-alike approached Conal's bedside. "Yeah, I loved the Dobie Gillis series, way better than Gilligan's Island. Then again, if Maynard's not your cup of

tea--hey, you like fire?" Krebs melted, flowed to the floor to erupt into a perfect flame, a shimmering man-sized version of a burning candle tip minus the heat. "Crazy cool, huh? A Zoroastrian flame, a freestanding plasma, the purifier of sin and corruption."

"You can't be Jesus. You can't...."

"Busy Guy. Think of me as one of His East-Coast, under-assistants. People lay other titles on me. Grim Reaper's a popular one. Death's another. Kind of a bad vibe though, a bummer whatever the language, right? But hey, man, who am I to say."

Conal rubbed at his eyes with his knuckles. "I'm still dreaming, got to be dreaming."

"Yoohoo. Take a look, now. This better?"

A hooded figure, robed from skeletal head to skeletal foot, a scythe in its bony grip, loomed next to Conal. The tip of its pointed cowl brushed the ceiling.

Maynard G. Krebs's voice drifted from the depths of the cowl. "The scythe--Gabe's idea. A good one, I hate to admit. Well, time to reap. Ready? Sorry, a dumb question. Hardly any of you are ever ready."

A skeletal arm emerged from the robe, bony index finger pointing at Conal.

No longer hindered with pain, he raised his forearms to his face. "No, no, I...."

A baritone replaced the Grim Reaper's Maynard G. Krebs's tenor, "Yes, yes. Indeed, you."

The tips of Death's flanges, cold and rigid, brushed Conal's forehead. A mind numbing chill flowed through his body, spreading through every atom, one-by-one, each atom winding down, slowing the essence of his soul almost to a standstill.

A voice shouted, "Stop!" The progress of the chilling paused. Conal's Muse insisted, "Hey, Big Feller. There's a little matter of the contract, yer know."

Death turned toward the source of the interruption. Its floor length robe billowed despite the sealed hospital windows.

The Muse still wore his gangsta gear, "Blow Me" T-shirt and all. His arms were crossed; the fingers of one hand drumming Laurel and Hardy style against a forearm as he leaned with his back pressed against the wall opposite the foot of Conal's bed. A tight-lipped grin stretched across his face.

Death thundered. "How dare you, a mere Sprite, interfere...."

Conal could only stare unmoving, a stiff witness to the opening salvos of the David and Goliath battle to determine the permanency of his current state of stiffness.

Please, let this be the medication. A delusion, a hallucination. Make it a hallucination.

"Oy," said the Muse, "Don't you Grim Reaper gobs just love to throw yer weight around."

He reached into the pocket of his baggy pants and retrieved a papyrus scroll. Muttering to himself, he read line-after-line, the scroll unfurling, snaking across the floor and flowing around obstacles to twist into a deeper and deeper pile.

The grinding sound of Death's two perfect rows of teeth ceased. "You twerp," it shouted. "Do you really think I didn't clear my itinerary with Legal."

"Ask me arse, yer mollie wanker." The Muse's hands blurred as he read faster and faster; his mumbling, already high-pitched, rose in tone, transformed into a near

continuous drone, the sound of a bumble bee on amphetamines.

"Sawed-off idiot." Death turned, leaned over Conal, its tombstone grin lipless, the gleaming rows of white teeth inches from his face.

Strange, Conal thought. Gingerbread. Its breath smells of gingerbread.

Death cupped either side of Conal's head. "Time's awasting, youngster, not that I haven't plenty to waste. Ha! Say goodnight, Gracie."

Too taken aback to react to the Burns and Allen reference, a wide-eyed Conal could bid no other mortal any final farewell.

The high pitched drone in the background abruptly ended, followed by the last word he ever heard in his life, "Found..."

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The first-time-ever father, a slender fellow, tapped the plate-glass window and turned to his fellow, newfound father-in-arms. "There. There is mine, my son, over there. Two rows in, third bassinette from the right. Look at all his hair. What an amazing head of hair for a newborn."

The other new father towered over the first. He pointed and said "That one's mine. My daughter. Over there, last row, dead center. Real pretty in pink, right?"

"Oh, yes. She certainly is. Yes."

Every bundle-of-joy, poop and assorted other semi-fluids and fluids in the hospital ward hadn't a clue about the two figures gawking from the other side of the glass; the

infants either slept or lay mesmerized in their newborn world of sounds, light, movement and touch, pure chaos to their underdeveloped senses.

The hairy headed, little guy in the bassinette scrunched his wrinkled face, randomly moved his limbs. A few infants, those awake, whimpered. None wailed, all of them satiated from their recent feeding.

A pediatric nurse entered the ward. She motioned to the fathers, held her forearm up and tapped where a wristwatch would have been if not for the wonder of the smart phones of the world. Visiting-hours were long past. The two men nodded. They waved one last time at their darlings and walked-off. The nurse completed a quick round of the bassinets. On the way out from the ward, she dimmed the lighting.

Half-shadows embraced the swaddled shapes and from the spaces betwixt and between one place or the other, unnoticed by modern science much like the infants' view of the world, a short figure slipped into the mortal coil of humans and cell phones. The Muse strode straight to the bassinette of the little guy' with all the hair He stared through the clear plastic siding.

"Well, lad, it was quite the row, I tell yer."

At the sound of the Muse's voice, the infant stopped squirming, paused to focus every newborn resource available, in truth not all that much less than the ostensible grownups of his world.

"We Sprites really dug our heels in on this one. Matter of principal and all. The exception was, indeed, in the contract. Death and the rest of the high almighty Gobs argued you were no Hindu, not even Buddhist. Yer Catholic background was our biggest

hurdle--the R. C. Church and reincarnation, the old oil and water thing. Little mattered to them whether yer strictly followed the Pope or not. You were born a Papist and that was that. Oh, what a merry bollix. They claimed 'no matter the contract, what's done is done and be done with it.' Ha, not on my watch, bucko, not on my watch."

The infant smiled. A frown quickly followed, perhaps a reaction to a momentary, intestinal blockage in his immature bowels.

"Well now, another assignment awaits, a flutist up in Derry. Not to worry. My replacement will soon enough be visitin'. Oh, and this time around, try not goin' on the piss so much with the little green man. Will yer, young Mr. Veejay Alagappan? Ha! Just let them try to bypass the reincarnation clause now."

The Muse winked at the babe, stepped sideways in-between and disappeared, a Fey Sprite on a mission.

The infant, once the well regarded author Conal Larkin, strained and let lose several high-pitched farts, melodious if short in duration. He smiled again.

Indeed. Perhaps a musician or composer this time around.

Chun Saoil